

Roadkill

Chester didn't know how much he had left in him. His stride was starting to break, just a little hitch in his gait, but the beginnings, he knew, of a turn in a bad direction. His right Achilles' tendon was an iron band, something sharp was chewing at his stomach, and he swore that the sole of one sneaker (performance cross-training shoe, the kid at the sporting goods store had told him) was starting to loosen and flap against the ground. Lightly, just an indistinct "whappita whappita whappita," but not what he needed right now.

He decided to chance a glance behind him, up the dirt track. Nothing at first, but then he saw a mangy yellow head crest the ridge. Of course. The little one, with the tattered bandana hanging from his scrawny shoulders. Only the one, it seemed. Maybe he'd find his way out of this after all. But a few seconds later he realized that he'd been too optimistic. Another pair of ears appeared. Then a snout. Then a body.

The rest of them followed, one by one. Most stuck to the road, but he noticed a few darting among the trees and bushes on either side. They were still there, the entire pack, so he kept running.

He wasn't sure that "pack" was exactly the right word. A pack implied some uniformity, like a pack of wolves, all sleek and grey, or a pack of lions, all muscles rippling in the sun. This, instead, was a motley mix of all shapes and sizes. Not many pure-breeds, but he noticed some heavy influences of shepherd, of pit bull, of good old hound, and of who knew what else.

It struck him though that they did have one aspect that drew them all together. An instinct for hunting borne of deep primeval necessity. They could all smell him. He was sure that they were all salivating as they pursued him. He imagined as well that they could all sense the pain in his body and the slow collapse of his will. Maybe they qualified as a pack after all.

Not much different from the pack at work, come to think about it. Each of them looked different too. Steve, serious, tall, thin and always dressed in a blue pin stripe (*Just get me the numbers, Chester*). Marge, shorter, fake blonde curls, and on the overcooked side of bubbly (*Oh, don't those new sneakers look cu-uute*). Even Bric (*That's Bric with a 'C,' and please don't call me Mr. Hawley*), with his constant barrage of jokes, his corny stories, and his firm handshake. But a boss needed a firm

handshake, didn't he? All so different, but all pursuing him, sensing his weakness. A pack too, for sure.

If that's what this bunch was, though, it wasn't the mangy yellow cur that was the leader. True, he'd nicknamed him "Scout," because he was always at the front. His job though seemed to be tracking, and maintaining the right distance. Wearing him down. And he never seemed to tire. Just looked at him as he trotted along - a bundle of malice and resentment and a little something else, perhaps a dose of wry derision at his predicament.

But he wasn't the leader. That role belonged to a larger grey animal of indistinct breed, who loped straight down the middle of the track, almost diffident. The tip of an ear tilted to one side, and would have been comic if not for two things. The first was the patch of exposed skin that ran the length of one flank, a jagged old scar from some distant fight. The second was the mass of rust colored-stains around his mouth, which barely concealed his long incisors. At the time Chester wasn't sure yet where those stains had come from, but even then he must have had a hint, and all doubt was completely erased later when he saw the identical color smeared all over a shredded blue flannel

shirt. That particular shade of rust was a color he would never forget again.

The one he called Scout slowed for a second (he never really stopped), lifted his snout as if he'd picked up the faint hint of something in the air, and then continued on. *Scout. Too nice a name,* now that he'd followed him all these hours, sneering throughout. But once named, you're stuck with it, right? Isn't that what had gotten him into this?

Bric had decided on a retreat, which he would be gracious enough to host *himself*, at his second home *out in the country*. Chester found it hard to believe that the word "retreat" even existed in Bric's vocabulary. He knew offense only, and that at one setting, "one hundred and ten percent." Dipweed didn't even know that you can't have anything at 110%. Just typical sales guy exaggeration. "The Team needs to get away, work on our strategy, adjust to the changes in the market, make plans for the new season." So, a retreat it was.

Chester had arrived yesterday as late as he could. No sense hanging around any more than he had to. He didn't see the "team" in the front of the cottage, but he did see the For Sale sign ("Hawley Real Estate - Serving you for Over 30 years") and

deduced why Bric had invited them over. Find one of his employees who's anxious for a promotion, see if he can't make a sale, and make a brother or uncle or cousin a commission in the process, probably with a nice kickback to him.

He smelled franks and burgers cooking, heard a sudden punctuation of laughter from the backyard, and sidled his way around the corner of the house.

He found them all there already, huddled on the deck around a wrought iron concoction that looked something like a patio table, drinking beers and 'ritas. Steve (in a blue striped polo shirt, since no suits were allowed at a retreat - business casual only). Marge (*This cottage is so ad-orrrr-able!*). Stan, Tanisha, Jock, Carol. Ahh, Carol. At least she looked good in a soft white sundress.

Bric was working the grill, a great big chef's hat on his head. As Chester approached, Bric turned, looked over Chester's shoulder, and grinned. Chester registered "Watch out, Chet!" from Carol, but didn't hear her in time. Instead, he heard a low growl behind him, and twisted back to see a mastiff lunge at him, teeth bared, snarling and barking at the top of his lungs. Chester drew back against the side of the house, pulling his

overnight bag up in front of him, just as the dog's chain reached its limit and his fangs snapped empty a few inches in front of him.

Bric cackled in glee. "Don't let old Nitro bother you, son. Come up here and join us." Chester tiptoed up onto the deck, and they took him in, looked at him for a second, and turned back to their conversations. Carol cast him a shy smile. He could read Bric's apron now. It bore a picture of an apparently drunken habanero pepper, with the words "Too Hot To Handle" underneath.

Bric took a swig of his beer, looked up at Chester, and said "Well look who finally decided to show up. You're in the basement, first door on the left as you go in through the slider. Welcome to the party Cheese-ster."

Even here, the thing with the name. They couldn't let it go, especially since he had started asking them to call him "Chet." They seemed to laugh in unison, all except Carol, who rested her hands crossed on her knees, and looked out over the yard. He stewed for a minute, decided not to take the bait, turned to head inside, and muttered over his shoulder that he was going for a run.

He blamed his grandparents. They'd raised his Dad to know all of the Presidents, in order. When he in turn had sired children of his own, they were named accordingly. His brother Zachary didn't have it so bad. His friends called him Z. His sister Teddy, she'd been stuck with a tough one, but somehow had managed through it with grace. But he had always had problems with Chester (no offense, Mr. A. Arthur). Even in grade school, he'd been bombarded with Jester, Cheesy, Chesty, Chudsky. In ninth grade, when the class read *The Scarlet Letter*, he was even Hester.

If he ever met a woman and fell in love (Carol wouldn't be bad, he mused), and had a kid of his own, then he wouldn't burden him (or her) with a name like Chester, or even John, or Buford, or Wally, or Willy, or anything else that could be used against him. No. He had names picked out, but they were tough names. Nick. Dirk. Or even just plain Bill.

Though he had wished many times that he'd had the same good fortune as Bric, to be blessed with parents with foresight, even if they didn't know the names of the Presidents, that was a name he would never have picked for his child, especially after he'd tried to put the moves on Carol.

In fact, it was thinking of Carol that had gotten him into running. Here he was, 37, and still a junior accountant. Not even a full accountant, and not even working on real accounting problems - just special projects. And special projects usually meant you were on the way out, not on the way up. He was starting to lose his hair, had glasses thicker than the Hubble Telescope, and ate way too many double chocolate doughnuts.

So, he got contacts, started using Rogaine, and asked everyone to call him Chet. And, he began to run.

The Rogaine hadn't really seemed to do much, and the contacts were a hassle that he didn't like, so he just went to a more up-to-date style of glasses, but the running had worked miracles. It took him a while to build up to decent mileage, but now he'd run two marathons, and covered over forty miles a week. He'd lost over 30 pounds (the equivalent of a leg, he'd calculated), and cut his cholesterol in half.

Carol had finally noticed him, and even talked to him a little. He liked her, thought he might even want to take her on a date sometime. He'd meditated on it for months, planned his approach, finally worked up the nerve, and isolated her in the

coffee room one afternoon. The words were on the tip of his tongue, when a pair of brown wingtips poked around the corner.

Bric pushed past Chet, stepping on his toes, jostling him and spilling the top half of a lukewarm cup of Colombian Rainforest Blend all over his new shirt. Bric seemed not to see it, or not to care. Just ogled Carol, his caveman brain calculating (and imagining a lot more, Chet was sure). "Carol, Carol, Carol - just who I was looking for," and Chet realized that he was about to be scooped again.

Bric had done it repeatedly. Chet had saved up for a year and a half for a car to replace his Chevette, had driven past Sam Hill's lot every day for over a month eying a silver Honda coupe, and finally showed up on the big day only to spot Bric driving off in it. Two weeks later, the idiot had rammed the car idling in front of him at a stoplight, and cashed in on the insurance and sold it.

The same thing had happened when Chet found a half million dollar accounting error that would have dropped to the bottom line and put the division over the top for quarterly earnings. Chet managed to get time with the Senior VP of Finance, waited outside her office well past lunchtime, and discovered her

returning from a full meal, joking with Bric, and congratulating him on Chet's own discovery. Bric ended up in a new corner office (with a side chair!), and Chet languished in the windowless basement in a cubicle next to the ladies room door.

Even when Chet's final-inning home run had put the Tabulators over the top at the Finance picnic, Bric chided him for not having real competition because he hadn't been there to stop him, and it was just a bunch of finance geeks anyway.

"Carol, we're having a retreat up at my place this Thursday and Friday. Come on up. Cheesey - you can join us too."

While he had been busy maintaining his composure, Bric took it a step further. "Hey Carol - maybe we can grab dinner or something while we're up there. My brother-in-law runs a great little Italian place." While she'd just replied "Hmm" and walked away, it hadn't helped Chester's confidence any.

That day, when Chet had gotten home, he ran the loop up the hill and around the reservoir twice, almost seventeen miles. And today, when Bric had insulted him on the deck, he'd decided to run too.

He'd started middling to late in the afternoon, early enough to get in a long run and still be back well before dark. At first he made his way through some hilly back roads, and finally found one called Riverside Loop. Figured that showed promise, but the tarred road, bumpy to begin with, turned at first to a mess of frost heaves and potholes, and then into a dirt road, and finally something more akin to a dirt path. There were tire tracks, but on something this size they were probably an ATV's rather than a car's or truck's. Still, he needed to burn off some anger, and he kept going.

A mile or two after the track had narrowed, he spotted Scout. Noticed him off to his side, jogging along with him.

"Hey boy, going to join me for a run?"

As Chester had clicked through the miles, the dog kept pace with him, never much ahead or behind. At first, the company had been good. But after a while, it got a little unnerving. The thing didn't seem to breathe hard, and had a sneakiness and patience to him that made the few hairs on the back of his head itch and stand up. Just something deep in his brain, but a warning.

Then, when the second one showed up, something that looked part Doberman and part something much smaller, he got a little nervous. One companion wasn't unusual, even if it kept up with him for miles, but two was not a coincidence.

By the time the third one arrived, a baleful blue hound, Chester knew that he was in trouble. He had sped up to put some distance between them, but they matched his every step. Eventually he slowed to a more reasonable pace, one that he could maintain all the way back to Bric's cottage, and they did as well. That gave him some confidence, until three things happened.

First, more dogs showed up. Dog Four was one of those tall skinny ones that looks like its hair is made of wire, and Dog Five was an emaciated greyhound. Six and Seven were some kind of mutt, and the last was the one he now thought of as Chief, the haughty leader.

Second, he realized that he no longer knew where he was, and just how far back it was to his suitcase, to Carol, and to his name-calling "team."

Finally, he saw something that really bothered him. One of the mutts bounded out of the woods excited to have found a rabbit,

which he now held between his jaws. Chief snarled, and the mutt snarled back. With calm indifference, Chief clamped his mouth over the smaller dog's forepaw, and Chester heard something snap, and a yip. The mutt dropped the rabbit, and limped off into the woods. Chief picked it up, threw it into the brush on the side of the road, and stared at Chester, who, finding that he had stopped, turned and ran again.

He'd begun to calculate how he might get out of this situation. His natural instinct was simply to keep doing what he was doing, running. He was in great shape now. Even if he turned out of his way, he could make a marathon distance, probably longer. These dogs hadn't been training (what were there now, nine or ten?). They couldn't possibly stay with him.

But, he began to tire. That Achilles' started to nag at him, and the cramp, and now the loose shoe. Of course, that's what he got for getting suckered by a college (high-school?) sales clerk, some young kid with blond hair, blue eyes, muscles (probably didn't even work out), and Bric's humor and vice-grip handshake.

He'd liked being called "Sir." It got him to listen to why it was worth over a hundred bucks to buy a performance cross-training shoe. For the air-cushioned insole, the special shock

absorption panel, and let's not forget the style. He'd felt good about the purchase, until the damned clerk had messed up his name on the way out. Not on purpose, but still, how hard was it to get the letters in the right order? "Thank you, Chetser."

He'd almost turned around and demanded his money back, but didn't want the hassle. So now, they were starting to fall apart. Every step sent a little jolt up through his legs, and the slapping of the shoes on the dirt made him think of some great St. Bernard licking and sucking on a bone. He put all that with the fading light, getting closer and closer to dark, and he knew he was in some trouble.

He imagined where that trouble might lead. If one dog by himself could snap a limb like a twig, what might a pack do to a tired runner? He could picture the Dobie or the greyhound taking the first bite, a nice big chunk of thigh. The others would surround him, and jump in from behind, one piece at a time, first pieces of arm and chest and stomach, and then his extremities one at a time, and then finally the little one tearing at his nose once he was down and immobile. Finally, Chief would lope forward and stand over him, waiting for his throat to bare itself, and then...

He needed to find a way out of this before he got ripped apart.

He began to take inventory. What did he have that he could use as a weapon? No knife. No gun. No baseball bat.

Let's see. Sneakers (no, cross-training shoes). Shorts. A t-shirt (*Puerto Lindo - Where chili is an art form*). Laces. One PowerBar and three wrappers. OH - and a mini CamelPak with about a cup and a half of water left in it. Not much.

What did they have on their side of the ledger? Smell that was a couple of orders of magnitude better than his. The instinct of hunters. A lot more legs. Very sharp teeth. And maybe some practice.

Not very balanced. If he were a quarterly earnings statement, he'd be deep in the red. Well, he did have one other thing, though he wasn't sure it was much of an advantage with this...this pack. He had a human brain. Highly advanced. Adaptable. Perhaps he could use it to acquire some additional assets, and defeat them that way. He'd have to keep his eyes open for tools he could use, and looking ahead, saw one that had potential.

In the thinning light, he saw an old Ford flatbed rusting by the side of the road. He squinted into the sun (somewhere in the back of his head he now realized that was WEST, and his brain

was already calculating that if he got out of this he now had a basis for figuring out how to get back), and saw, yes, some sort of a building framing the truck. He made his way toward them, and on the way stopped to pick up a good-sized stick.

He reached the Ford and the shadow of the building, and stopped. The dogs stopped as well, Scout pacing back and forth in front of them, licking his lips and eyeing him and the stick warily. He looked around, and read a faded "Brinnie Hawley & Sons, Lumber, Milling" on the side of the barn (no, he corrected himself, probably, "mill"). The dogs seemed to hold their distance, as if waiting for a signal, and he took a few seconds to look around him some more.

One of the flatbed's headlights was busted, and the driver's side door hung off its hinges. The other door was missing entirely. None of the windows were broken, but the windshield was peeled away from its rubber gasket. A few scraps of 2 by 4 and fence post lay in the truckbed.

Then he noticed something between the truck and the mill that made him realize why the pack was waiting. Shreds of checked shirt, blue jeans, and a well-chewed workboot littered the area,

all discolored in a dark rusty shade he had seen before that day, where Chief had sported it on his mouth.

What really caught his eye though was the human skull, picked completely clean (give a dog a bone, he laughed to himself). As he cast his glance wider, he saw more debris, soaked in the same rust coloration, and another skull, and he realized where he was.

All this time he thought that he'd been deciding where to run. No. They'd driven him right where they wanted, so that he'd be the next skull in the collection. This was home (den?). Killing field. Dinner table.

He looked up and could swear that the pack had moved in a little while he'd been calculating. He raised the stick instinctively, and they stiffened, and poised, ready to attack. It struck him that it was useless. He might be able to out-think any one of them individually (toe-to-toe, no, paw to toe, no, brain-to-brain), but he wouldn't out-think them collectively. The pack itself was a living, breathing animal, and he would have to rely on other weapons, and it wasn't going to be here.

He lowered the stick, and, as if controlled by a switch, the pack relaxed. He paced, and thought. The pack seemed to bide their time while he did, still watching, still waiting. A shepherd-cross yawned and lay down, gnawing on something. Some of the others would close in a foot or two if he looked down, and he knew he had to come up with something soon, or he'd be dog food.

He looked at every set of eyes following his moves, like cats watching goldfish. He noticed the big one in the back scratching his paws on the ground, as if to sharpen the nails. He noticed how long the teeth were on the half-shepherd, and despite his resulting fear, these same observations began to organize themselves in his head into the semblance of a plan.

He snatched up a scrap of torn denim jeans leg, and then moved to the back of the truck and grabbed a half-inch thick piece of metal binding strip for a bundle of lumber. He also picked up a small rock.

If he was going to be successful, he had to move now, and he did. Casually, as if it were no big deal, he threw the stick. Several of the heads followed its progress, and when they did, he began running again, in what he thought was the right

direction. If the dogs were taken aback, they didn't show it. Scout merely tipped his head to one side, and began after him, with the same trotting gait as before.

Chester ran for a while, and thought. He had become aware in his moment of insight that although he couldn't out-think these dogs, there was one human trait that he could employ that could work - deceit.

He thought back to when he had been training his own puppy, a terrier named Clancy (good name for a terrier, he thought). When the dog would grab the other end of his leash, and they started a tug of war, the harder Chester pulled, the harder the dog did too. Even if he yanked so hard that the dog's feet moved, and he was pulling him across the lawn, Clancy wouldn't let go of the leash. The only way to get it back was to relax. Then when the dog mirrored him by loosening his own grip, to pull suddenly and have control. Something about that back and forth with the puppy was important, but he couldn't place it.

His thoughts were interrupted by what he thought was good news. He couldn't believe it, but up ahead, he spotted the dirt track turning back into blacktop. Maybe he'd be able to make it back after all. He decided to take his last PowerBar out of his pack

to celebrate, but picked the wrong time to do it. Fumbling for the PowerBar, and with everything he was carrying, he failed to notice a dead possum splayed across the road. He slipped, almost fell, but dropped the PowerBar when he stumbled. Scout took that moment to attack, to run straight at him. He tensed, prepared for the worst, but the dog just scooped up the dropped treat and ran back to where he had been.

Chester had been amazed by his agility though, and knew that he must act soon. The cramp in his side was becoming a sharp spear, his Achilles' was still tight as a steel cable, and the shoe had moved from whappita whappita to "whuppoppa-poppa-poppa" and was ready to fall off. He was slowing too, and wasn't sure how much farther he could run.

Again, something poked at him about how instinctive the dog's reaction had been when he dropped the food, how they'd watched the stick when he tossed it in the lumberyard, how when he had stopped, so had the pack, and when he'd lowered the stick, how the pack had relaxed. How they watched everything, and reacted accordingly. Now his plan leapt more fully-formed to the front of his superior human brain, and he had a path forward. He made a mental checklist of how he'd do it, in what order, and started.

He began by turning and running back toward the lumber yard, the way that he'd come. As expected, the pack let him, continuing to be patient until he collapsed, maybe just thinking him disoriented. As he ran, he crimped the baling strip back and forth until it broke into three smaller sections. With the rock, he sharpened both ends of each into points, and tossed the rock when he no longer needed it. He snuck one between the fingers of each hand, with the honed points sticking out like claws, and the other in his mouth.

He pulled the rubber tubing from his CamelPak and wrapped it around his forearm in the denim pants leg, then took his mini-pack itself and wrapped it around his neck. He had to slow a little as he did, and the dogs slowed with him, and he began to think this would work. He accelerated once more, and so did they.

Finally, he reached the spot where the ugly possum lay, its blind eyes staring up at nothing. He closed his own eyes for a half-second, breathed deeply, knelt down, picked it up in his mouth, and waited.

As expected, they all stopped with him. With head bowed, he crawled on all fours toward the big one that looked part wolf, presenting the possum forward as a gift. As he inched closer, he wondered if Chief would snap his leg in two when he got in range, just like he had with the dog that had caught the rabbit.

He kept his head down, and crawled in a few more steps, and a few more, every second imagining the power of those jaws biting into the flesh of his neck. Finally, he edged right up to Chief, who snarled low, and dropped the possum at his feet, and counted to three. As the dog reached down to accept the offering, Chester sprang up, forearm first.

The dog dropped the dead roadkill, and wrapped his teeth around the proffered denim-cloaked arm. Chester could feel some of the teeth penetrate, but the makeshift protection had stopped the worst of it. Holding his arm tense to keep the dog locked onto it, he brought up his other hand, and swiped at his haunches, exactly in the same spot where the old scar pulsed. The dog let out a muffled yelp at this reminder of some old injury, but didn't let go of the arm.

Chester came up under the dog's neck with the baling strip in his teeth, and simultaneously went for the snout with his free

hand. Both hit home, and this time when the wolf-hound-dog yelped, it did let go of the arm. It came after his neck now, but found only the pack that Chester had left there to protect himself.

With both hands at once, Chester drove up into the dog's own neck deep with the hand-fashioned weapons, and held. The animal squirmed, and whimpered, and finally rolled over and lay still.

Chester worked at the neck as if chewing, but really just toggled the last binding strip back and forth to spill more blood. He smeared it over his face and hands, and finally, mouth bloody, staggered to his feet and raised both hands over his head, and let out a primal scream.

The rest of the pack stared at him for a moment, and then slunk back toward the mill, and Chester knew that they wouldn't bother him again.

He continued on in the direction he now knew was East, walking this time, not running. Within only a few miles, he recognized where he was, and at last made his way to Bric's house.

As he walked, he thought, and remembered. He had been terrified at the thought of confronting the head dog. But even that beast had weaknesses, and old scars, and in the end, Chester had brought him down. The people at work, especially Bric, weren't all that different. And based on one other thing he'd seen at the lumberyard, he now knew how he'd handle him as well.

He approached the house, and still heard the noise of a party on the back deck. He turned the corner. Nitro started to stir and get up from his spot, and triggered a back-yard motion detected spotlight. Chester turned to him, stared, and growled, a deep throaty growl that let out all of his pent up anger as well as his newfound confidence, and Nitro whimpered and sat back down.

Chester turned to see all eyes on him. The laughter had ceased, and he climbed up on to the deck. Their jaws dropped in amazement at his bloody clothes and mouth, and Bric, less jovial than usual, finally asked "Wha . . . what happened?"

"What happened, is that I finally figured out how to deal with a pack of dogs, and you in particular, . . . Brinnie."

Bric dropped his glass, and it shattered on the deck.

"How...?"

"I visited the lumber yard today, Brinster, though not as a tourist. I saw your name plastered on the side of a barn. But I didn't put it together until I saw the rusting vanity plate on the back of the flatbed Ford, 'BRIC2' spelled out for all to see."

Bric looked ready to deny, then to argue or fight, but something about Chester's new demeanor (not to mention his appearance), must have tamed him, because he simply gulped.

"Now, I'm going inside to get changed and cleaned up. When I come back, you're going to call me by my right name."

He went in, had the best shower of his life, tossed the old bloody clothes into Bric's kitchen trash under the sink, and walked back onto the deck.

"Well?"

Bric looked up, and finally said simply, "Ok, Chet."

Chester tipped his head in acknowledgement, turned to Carol, and said "C'mon. We're going out."

She smiled, came over to him and took his arm, and they started to walk to his car.

"Bric - We might see you later tonight, or maybe tomorrow, or maybe Monday. I'll let you know. But I have a feeling that a lot of good things are going to happen from now on."

Bric gulped again, and nodded.

"And Bric, one more thing." He smiled.

"Call me Chester."