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The Dogcatchers of Portimao

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The Dogcatchers of Portimao

I

From late spring to early fall the beaches of the southern coast of Portugal are a haven for tourists. The beaches of Portimao are ravaged by sunbathers, shell collectors and sand castle architects. But during the off season, these same beaches belong to the dogs. Packs of mongrels stake their claims to the desolate stretches of sand; they run with the wind that blows off the sea; and when the weather is particularly foul, they take shelter in the caves of the red cliffs that rise above the sands.

They usually run in packs of six or seven -- some large, some small, some with long, thick caramel colored coats, others black and stubby. All of them are characteristically mongrels -- gaunt, spirited, and basically harmless. We would watch them at their games for hours, in wonder and in awe.

II

The digital clock on the dashboard clicked as the numbers changed -- 2:00 A.M. -- and I suppressed a yawn, as I guided my father's new Buick by the yellow lines and traffic lights. We rode in silence, up and down the dark, deserted streets of suburbia that led us home, to bed. Occasionally Maureen would break the silence with some chatter about the party: Did you see So and So with So and So? Wasn't that one of the best times you've had all summer? So and So was so drunk, or So and So was so stoned. And I nodded or laughed in response. We were almost home now, and I could already feel the cool sheets and soft pillow that were awaiting me.

"You wanna smoke one more bowl?" asked Maureen.

"We're just two blocks from your house..."

"Well, just drive around a little and we'll light up one more. A little one to help us sleep."

"All right."

I turned the corner, then another one, and another one while Maureen pressed a tiny bud into the bowl of the pipe. The entire process was a ritual to her; she raised the pipe to her lips, struck a match, lit the bowl and took a deep long draw. Then she held the smoke a long count, and let it seep out from slightly parted lips. Approaching the intersection as the light turned red, I brought the car to rest at the pedestrian walk-way.

Maureen passed me the pipe and a match. I brought the pipe to my mouth and turned to glance out my side window.

"Oh Shit!"

I was face to face with a hunter's eyes and a smile that said I was trapped -- no way out of this one. I sat paralyzed, the pipe, half way to its destination, dangled before me, and my eyes were set on the figure in blue with the silver badge. The light atop the black and white car suddenly beamed, flooding the street with red, and the figure within was signalling me to pull over.

"Shit, Maureen! We're nailed -- I mean really nailed! What are we going to do? How are we gonna get out of this one?"

"I don't know Karen! Damn, my parents will shoot me. I can't believe this is happening, I just can't believe it."

I pulled the car over to the side, and watched through the rear view mirror, as the man in blue emerged from his chariot and slowly made his way to my window.

"Good evening young ladies", he said mockingly.

"Officer..." I choked on the rest of my sentence.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you two girls to step out of your car."

"Certainly, certainly."

"Sure, oh yeah sure", added Maureen.

He searched us both, and found the remainder of the ounce in Maureen's purse. Then he searched the car and found nothing.

"Well young ladies, why don't you just hop back into your car, and follow me on down to the station. Okay?"

I nodded and Maureen swallowed and gulped in an attempt to hold back the tears. We both dropped back into the car, I turned the key in the ignition, and we were on our way, floating behind the black and white. Neither of us said anything; both sniffing and suppressing sobs. He turned into the parking lot beside the lighted red brick station and my car automatically followed.

"Karen what's he going to do to us? Oh I wish I were dead -- I mean I may as well be. Oh God!"

"Shut up Maureen! Just shut up, and do whatever he says."

"Okay, all right...I know, I know!"

The man in blue -- his name plate read Sherman -- escorted us into the station, pointed to an office and the end of the corridor, and told us to go in and wait. We obeyed. The office was tiny, with bare green walls, an oversized battered desk, and two wooden arm chairs. It looked straight out of a T.V. police story -- there was even one of those bright tin lamps dangling on a long cord from the center of the ceiling --the kind they use for intensive questioning of suspects. Maureen and I sank into the two wooden chairs and waited anxiously for what was to come.

What came was a tall, middle-aged red-head, in a blue uniform. She had Sherman's sharp eyes and that same mocking smile -- it must have come with the uniform. She sat down opposite us, dropped a stack of forms on the desk, and introduced herself as Sgt. Elston.

"Girls, Officer Sherman tells me he brought you in on a marijuana charge. Is that correct?"

No answer.

"Well girls, let me get your names, addresses, etc. first, and then we'll answer a few questions."

She pulled out two pink forms from the stack that looked in front of her. She pointed to me:

"Name please."

"Karen Sunter."

"Parent's or guardian's name?"

"Jonathan and Margaret Sunter."

"Address please..."

Then she extracted the same information from Maureen. Satisfied with the preliminaries, she pressed a button on the intercom in front of her, and asked Officer Sherman to come in. He entered the room, she handed him the pink forms, and he turned on his heels.

"Officer Sherman will telephone your parents while I investigate a bit further."

Neither Maureen nor I dared look at each other -- out of fear or embarrassment -- sheer terror. I sat bolt upright, staring straight ahead and I saw that the knuckles on my right hand were bright red, where it clung to the wooden arm of the chair. My mind was racing and I could barely decipher the words that poured from Sgt. Elston's full, red lips. What was going to happen? What were they going to do to us? Suddenly a knock came at the door, and I was jolted back into consciousness. A younger version of Sgt. Elston stepped into the green room.

"Girls, this is Officer Logan. Officer Logan, this is Maureen Callahan, and this is Karen Sunter. You girls will please accompany Officer Logan. She will perform a routine search and return you to this room for further questioning."

Maureen sighed, and our eyes finally met, in a tangle of confusion and fear. We both rose at Elston's command, and followed Logan out of the room, and down the hall. More green walls, and then an open door. She ushered us into a small white room with no desk, no chairs -- no nothing.

"Okay...Sunter over there, Callahan over here. Both of you strip down."

"Everything?" inquired Maureen, meekly.

"Now, now don't be modest -- of course everything."

III

I began to fumble with the buttons on my blouse as I took in everything about the room: barren and cold; chipped white walls -- actually tinged gray from time -- and a single window, encased by thick, black bars. I slipped off my blouse and a chill went up my back. Officer Logan kept talking -- her voice echoing monotone -- but I couldn't listen. My thoughts were wandering further and further from that cage, and suddenly I remembered the dogs -- the dogs on the beach in Portimao.

They were running along the beach, playfully snapping at one another, and yelping. It had been such a strange sight: a dozen dogs thrashing in the sand -- overrunning the beach, which in a different season, belonged to throngs of people with beach towels, parasols, and suntan oil.

As we sat on the rocks watching the dogs, a truck bearing a large wooden crate pulled up on the sand. Three men, dressed in white, emerged from the cab and from the back end of the truck they extracted three large nets attached to long poles. We watched, intrigued, as they motioned to one another and silently fanned out in a different direction, holding the large nets high above their heads. They each chose a mark and crept steadily, stealthily after it. When they were directly behind the mongrels,

the men in white swooped the nets down over the flash of fur and limbs, knocking the dogs to the ground. Yelps of terror echoed down the beach; the dogs tossed and turned frantically, trying to escape, but all of their efforts were in vain, for the more they struggled, the more entangled they became. The men in white, secure with their catch, then swung the nets over their shoulders and marched back to the truck, like proud hunters toting a kill. The swinging door in the wooden crate was raised and each of the men emptied the contents of his net into the crate. The dogs yelped louder and louder -- shrill and desperate.

The men paid no heed. They quickly piled back into the truck and drove off to the next stretch of beach and the next pack of dogs. As the truck drove away, and the wooden crate rattled behind it, I wondered what they had planned for those poor animals.

"Let's go Sunter...off with the panties...don't go turning shy on me," Logan ordered.

I was back in that cold, white cage, and Maureen was standing in front of me, stark naked and shivering. Logan called my name again. I peeled off my polka-dot panties, and felt her cold clammy hands on my ankles, prying them apart. For the first time since this nightmare had begun, tears welled in my eyes, I was no longer in control.

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