

A Sense of Something Lost

by Crisman Strunk

I.

In Jed's opinion, nothing tasted better than a bottle of Coke. He sat on the pop cooler, letting his feet dangle over the side. He took a long swig and brought the bottle down with a contented sigh. He'd bought the Coke himself and removed the cap with the opener on the side of the cooler. He didn't know why, but buying it with his own money made it taste even sweeter.

He tapped out a tune against the metal of the cooler with his heels and listened to the men talk. Sometimes, if the talk turned to politics or women, Jed didn't bother to listen. He couldn't understand the men's fascination with these subjects. Instead, he would let his mind wander and look around the store.

The store was a long rectangle, two bare bulbs overhead alternately bathing the store in warm light and deep shadows. Jed's eyes would roam over the glass cases and wooden counters that stood against either of the long side walls, at the cans and boxes stacked three high on shelves above the counter—tomatoes, corn, mixed vegetables, tobacco, Ajax. Parallel to the short back wall was a white, metal cooler with a glass top where Blue kept the meats. A large roll of twine was fixed to the wall at one side, and Blue had fed the twine through a series of hooks so that it hung directly above the meat counter. Whenever someone asked Blue for a pound of baloney or a pound of cheese, he would wrap it in white paper, grab the twine, and start rolling it around the package until it looked like a mummified lunch pulled out of some pharaoh's tomb.

Today, though, the talk was of hunting, and Jed listened with rapt interest, sometimes forgetting to tap his feet and leaning out a little from the cooler if the story was particularly good. Jed loved to hunt. He had gotten his first shotgun when he was six—a battered old .410 that had belonged to his grandpa. And he would get his grandpa's twelve gauge when he turned thirteen in five years. But his greatest treasure was the dog that his dad had gotten him at the beginning of summer: a little mountain feist that Jed had named Biscuit. The dog was white with black patches, the soft hair growing wavy at the ends, and eyes that almost appeared human. Even Jed's dad said that Biscuit had the most intelligent eyes he'd ever seen on a dog. Sometimes, when Jed looked at her, he swore she was going to start talking to him any second. Jed knew, deep in his heart, that Biscuit would one day be the best hunting dog in all of Gaol County.

“So old Perch was making this horrible sound. It was like he was trying to bark and whimper all at the same time. I'm here to tell you, the hair on my neck was standing straight out.” Blue grabbed a piece of pine from the small pile and threw it into the

pot-bellied stove that sat in the middle of the store. The day was a cool one, even for October, and Blue always said he could stand anything but the cold. The wood cracked and popped, and Jed could see the orange tongues of flame dance behind the grate.

Blue walked behind the counter and laid his large hands flat on the worn top. "So I go tearing through the woods, wondering what in the world's wrong with my dog. I hit this little clearing and there's Perch looking up a poplar and making that horrible noise. As soon as he sees me, Perch comes up and sits by my feet, whimpering to beat the band. And you all know Perch ain't afraid of nothing."

The men all nodded. Perch was renowned all over the ridge for his bravery. The dog bore a long, white scar along its shoulder for trying to jump a wildcat.

"So I take my carbide and shine it up at the top of that poplar and see the biggest coon God's ever seen fit to have walk this earth. Big as a fox. Shoot, the thing had claws as long as .30-.30 shells.

Out of the shadows of the far corner, Rastus Jones made a loud snorting sound. "C'mon now, Blue. I've been hunting these woods a long time, and I've never come across no coon that big."

"Now Rastus, you wouldn't be calling me a liar, would you?" Blue smiled good-naturedly, but Jed caught the hint of steel in his voice. Everyone else caught it too. Jed could feel the tension go around the room like electricity. The air hushed, and muscles tightened under the skin.

Rastus moved forward into the dim light. He fixed a smile on his face. "No, I'm not saying you're lying Blue. I'm saying that you saw an awful big coon, but it's gotten a little bigger in the telling."

Blue looked at him, his own smile never leaving his face but never reaching his eyes. Then he laughed. "Aw hell, Rastus. It was a mighty big coon. I don't expect you'll ever see it though. If you was to come home and find a coon in your kitchen, you'd just think it was your wife and ask it when supper was going to be ready." Everybody had a good laugh at that, and the tension fled out of the store like an exhaled breath. Rastus kept the smile on his face and stared at the floor. Jed could tell he didn't like the joke, not one little bit. But what could Rastus do but take it? It was Blue's store.

Jed laughed, himself, laughed until his ribs hurt, his feet pounding the cooler so hard that his dad looked at him and shook his head. Jed laughed partially because the joke had been a good one and partially because he didn't like Rastus Jones. The man had a glint in his eye that made Jed's skin crawl whenever Rastus looked at him, and Jed hated the way Rastus's mouth always hung open as if that was the only way he would ever catch what anyone was saying. But the real reason Jed didn't like him was that everyone talked about how Rastus beat his dogs. Rastus had enough money to buy some of the best dogs in the county, but he would beat them for no good reason like they were strays he found rooting in his garbage.

"So I got my shotgun and aimed it at that feller." Blue held his arms like he was holding his gun, drawing a bead on a coon that was as big as a fox. "I mean I had it dead to rights and, I swear, that coon looked me right in the eye and hissed like a damn cat. That was about the last straw for old Perch. He jumped up and bumped me and caused my shot to go wide. That old coon jumped twenty feet to the ground and took off like a streak.

"I'll find that rascal again though. That's the only place I'm gonna hunt 'til I get him. I've already got a spot reserved for him." Blue pointed to an empty place on the wall between tin signs for Coca Cola and Twenty Mule Team Borax.

Rastus had faded back into the shadows of the corner. He lit a cigarette and took deep pulls on it, the tip flaring into orange, catching the waxy skin pulled taut over his cheek bones. His eyes flicked at Jed, causing Jed to duck his head. He wondered if Rastus wanted to hurt him for laughing so hard.

“Ol’ Jed there has got himself a fine hunting dog.” The men all turned to look at Jed’s dad. They liked and respected him and, since he hardly ever spoke, they paid a lot of attention when he did.

“So the boy’s got a real hunting dog, does he?” Blue asked.

“An A-number-one dog by the look of things. That little mountain feist I traded for awhile back.”

Jed felt a warmth flush through him. His dad must’ve thought a lot of Biscuit to brag about her in front of all the men.

“I’ve heard those mountain feists are good for squirrel hunting,” Hobe Perry said.

“Rabbits too.”

“I’d heard what good dogs they were,” Jed’s dad said. “But I never dreamed they’d be as good as she is. I’ve seen her walking a fallen tree over the creek after a squirrel and she ain’t been trained a lick yet. I keep her penned at night and all I got to do is point and she’ll run right in her lot, pretty as you please.”

“My cousin, Randle, had one of those feists,” Blue said. “He said it was a helluva good, little dog.”

Jed felt a warmth settle into his bones. His dad looked at him and winked and then sent a glob of tobacco juice dead center of the spittoon that sat near the stove.

II.

The rusty spring slammed the wooden screen door of Blue’s store closed. Jed and his dad stood on the porch, buttoning up their coats and adjusting their collars.

“Blue keeps that store so hot, you could fry eggs on the floor,” his dad said. “Makes this cool air really have a bite when you walk into it.”

“I wish the winter wasn’t coming this year,” Jed said.

“I’d say we’ll get one more little warm spell before the winter sets in for good.”

His dad stepped off the porch and started up the dirt road that led to their farm. Jed gave his collar a tug and took off after him. He caught up with his dad and walked beside him, sometimes breaking into a little jog for a few seconds to keep pace. A question weighed on him, but he hated to ask it. Sometimes, the silence that gathered around his dad was so profound, it seemed blasphemous to disturb it.

“Dad?”

His dad jerked his head as if coming out of deep thought. “Yeah?”

“Did you mean what you said in the store— ’bout Biscuit being such a good dog?”

“I said it, didn’t I?”

“Yeah. I was just wondering, ’cause I think she’s a real good dog too.”

“I probably shouldn’t have went on about her like that, but I wanted to give Blue something to chew on. The way he goes on and on about Perch wears a little thin. I think that’s probably the only thing that me and Rastus agree on. But you take care of Biscuit and train her right, and she’ll be the envy of the ridge before it’s over. Make old Perch look like a sorry excuse for a hunting dog.”

Jed smiled. He wondered what Blue would think of that. To hear Blue tell it, a finer dog than Perch had yet to be born.

“Ben, Ben!” Someone yelled his dad’s name from behind. Jed and his dad both turned to see who it was. Rastus Jones came up the road after them with that peculiar, hopping gait he had. Jed stiffened at the sight of him. The temperature seemed to drop a few degrees.

“’lo Rastus,” his dad said. “What do you need?”

Rastus shuffled up and stopped before them. He took off his hat and wiped the oily sheen of sweat from his forehead. When he breathed, it was as if someone were shaking a paper poke filled with tiny stones.

“Lord God, Ben. You and the boy trying to win a race?”

“No, we were just in a hurry to get on home. It’s a mite cold when that wind whips up.”

“H’it is a cold day, that’s a fact. Old Man Winter’s breathing down our necks.” Rastus pulled a cigarette from a pack and lit it with a kitchen match. He stared at them through the smoke with eyes that seemed a size too small. Jed noticed that the hand that held the cigarette shook.

His dad cleared his throat. “Well, it’s not getting warmer with us out here stomping our feet. What can I do for you?”

Rastus smiled, showing an uneven line of yellow teeth. “Always right to the point, Ben. That’s why the men like you so much. There’s no beating around the bush with you.” He took a deep drag on his cigarette and exhaled. Smoke bloomed, only to be torn apart by the wind. “All right then. No beating around the bush. I’d like to buy that mountain feist off you.”

Jed started to step forward and tell Rastus no but caught himself in time. It wasn’t his place to speak. A hot fire gathered itself around his heart and began to drip into his stomach.

“Rastus, that dog ain’t for sale.”

“Just name your price, Ben. I’ll pay it.”

“There ain’t no price.”

“C’mon Ben.” Rastus opened his arms, smiling, his teeth like dried nubs of field corn. “Every man’s got his price. Every man.”

Jed’s dad looked at the ground and shook his head. “That may be. I’m won’t debate that with you. But my price ain’t money. I got that little dog for hunting, not for selling.”

Rastus took another draw off his cigarette and then threw it, half-smoked, on the ground. He stubbed it into a black smear with the toe of his boot.

“And there’s nothing that’ll change your mind?” he asked.

“Nothing that comes to mind.”

“All right then. You let me know if something does.” Rastus turned on his heels and started back down the road in his strange walk, the sounds of his boots on the cold earth like the sounds of a lame horse.

Jed’s dad watched Rastus until he reached Blue’s store. His dad started back toward their house, shaking his head. “I should’ve known better than to brag about a hunting dog with Rastus Jones listening. He thinks he’s got to own every good dog in the country.”

Jed felt a love for his dad that he wondered if he could hold. Rastus had offered to pay his dad any amount of money he asked for, and his dad had refused because Biscuit was Jed’s dog.

“Thank you for not selling Biscuit,” Jed said.

His dad looked at him. “Did you think I would?”

“No. He just said to name your price. That would be hard to turn down.” His dad laughed and the air grew a little warmer. “Well, first of all, Rastus didn’t mean a word of it. He thinks he’s gotta have every good dog in the country and not pay what they’re worth.”

“Still, he would’ve paid you.”

“Biscuit’s your dog. I don’t aim to sell him out from under you. That and I try not to let money hold that much influence on what I decide.”

“Cause money’s the root of all evil. Like Nana says.”

“It does seem to have a hold on people. Makes them do strange things. Those that don’t have enough can get bitter and mean trying to get it. That or get lazy and not be much account for nothing. And those that get a lot can’t seem to get their fill

of it. They're always trying to snatch up more. Seems to me, it's best to have just enough."

"Do we have just enough?" Jed asked.

"We do right now, so let's not worry about it anymore." His dad reached out and scuffled his head and they walked toward home, the tread of their feet on the hard soil sounding in time.

III.

Jed sat under the old, oak tree in the field, catching his breath and sweating under the warm air of Indian summer. Biscuit sat beside him, taking in everything with her sharp eyes and snapping at any black flies, their bodies fat in the last warm days before winter claimed them, that dared to fly past. The sun fell below the trees and painted the air in streaks of pale pink and orange.

Jed watched his dad as he led their cow, Flossie, into the barn to milk. She moved slowly as if it took a great deal of concentration to place one hoof in front of the other. His dad would stop and wait on her, cupping one hand under the scruffy chin and talking gently into her ear.

Jed got up and began to walk toward the barn, wading through the Frost Weed Asters that grew so thick in the upper field it appeared that there was a light snow. Biscuit bounced behind him, stopping to see if she had disturbed anything that needed chasing. Her bushy tail cut a wide swath through the Asters. Jed reached down and scratched behind her ears and let her lick his fingers.

"Now, you stay." He started again to the barn. Biscuit bounded after him.

"I told you to stay," he said, more loudly.

Biscuit jumped back and flopped in the grass, her ears alert, a hurt look in her eyes. Jed hated to hurt her feelings like that, but Biscuit was too much of a live wire, always running and jumping. She made Flossie nervous and his dad wouldn't stand for that. He said a nervous cow gave soured milk.

Jed crept into the stall. Flossie lolled her eyes at him and then, deciding he wasn't a threat, turned away and began chewing thoughtfully on her cud. Jed's dad was framed by hard slats of light falling through the walls of the barn. He pulled the udders and squeezed them at the same time. The spray of milk struck the bucket with a tinny, metallic sound.

"What's wrong with Flossie, Dad?"

"Nothing I don't guess. What're you talking about?"

"She doesn't seem to be getting around too good."

"She's just getting old. Aren't you girl?" His dad reached up and patted her flank, sending up dust that seemed to solidify the rays of light.

"You don't think she's getting worse though? She seems to be worse than last week."

"Well, I don't know, Jed." His dad stood up slowly. "Maybe her age is catching up with her all at once. She's nearly nine years old. That's pretty long in the tooth for a cow."

He walked up to Jed, holding the bucket away from him so he didn't spill any milk. He laid his other hand on Jed's shoulder.

"Why don't you turn her into the upper field, while I throw the chickens out some food?"

Jed eased his way toward Flossie's head, keeping close to the wall. He locked his eyes on Flossie's feet. A cow had stove in his Uncle Nate's head, and Jed always had an uneasy feeling around them, even one as gentle and old as Flossie. The fact that his Uncle Nate had been drunk and wouldn't quit tormenting the cow didn't help Jed feel any safer.

He gripped the thin rope that held Flossie's bell around her neck and led her out. They walked to the upper field, the smell of dust and animal so strong that Jed's eyes watered. When he let go of the rope, Flossie took a few steps and began to feed, pulling at the thick grass with a sound like cloth tearing. Her legs looked bony and splayed. Jed looked at Biscuit. She was digging after something near the oak tree.

Jed walked back toward the barn. He could hear sounds from the chicken lot: the clucks as his dad fed them, the cackles as two of the chickens got into an argument over a bit of corn. His dad put the old gourd back in the feed sack and picked up the bucket of milk.

"You get her turned out?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

"That ought to help her some. Lots of good grass to make her feel spry again." He nodded toward the chicken lot. "We've got some fat hens waddling around there. Maybe we can talk your Mom into making us up a big pot of chicken and dumplings. You like that?"

"Yes sir."

"We'll see what we can do then." His dad looked toward the oak tree where Biscuit was yapping at whatever she had found. "How'd Biscuit do?"

"You should've seen her. At first, she ran back and forth like she didn't know what to do. Too many smells, I guess. Then she caught the scent of a squirrel and wouldn't let it go. She treed that squirrel in the top of a big hickory."

"Where's it at?"

Jed dropped his eyes. The tips of his ears burned. "I missed it."

His dad gave a gentle smile and laid his hand on Jed's shoulder. "I wouldn't worry about that. There's not a hunter one that's not had an animal dead to rights and missed. Once, I had this squirrel sitting on a branch that jutted way out from the tree. Nothing but that squirrel and clear sky beyond it. Shot at the thing and missed it clean as a whistle."

"What'd you do?" Jed asked.

"Well, old Watch wasn't one to let a squirrel get away. So he just looked at me for a second like he couldn't believe that I'd missed it either, and then he took off. Wasn't long before he treed that thing again."

"You got it the second time, I bet."

His dad smiled. "I got it the second time." He gave Jed's shoulder a squeeze. Jed didn't know how he could fear anything knowing that his dad was there to protect him.

"Let's go and see what your Mom's got laid out for supper," his dad said.

IV.

Flossie died two weeks later, just as winter hit cold and damp. Jed's dad went to milk her that morning and found her lying in the field, one eye trained at the sky. His dad hooked Maggie, their mule, to the body and dragged it to the edge of the field. With Jed helping as best he could, it took his dad five hours to dig a hole deep enough. When the hole was ready, Jed's dad took a piece of lumber to tip Flossie inside. It took another hour to throw the dark, rich soil back on her. Jed thought that the first shovel full of dirt that hit her looked like pepper spilling onto salt.

His dad tamped the mound of earth and stepped back. Jed suddenly noticed how much older his dad looked. He didn't speak much for the rest of the day, only to tell Jed's mom how he liked the dumplings she'd fixed. He went outside after dinner and walked the fields in the gathering dusk. Jed went to his room and, from his window, watched his dad walk. The orange light from his dad's pipe glowed like a small signal flare.

His dad was gone when Jed got up, coming back when Jed was finishing up his breakfast. He handed Jed some money and told him to get a pound of baloney from the store and to get himself a pack of gum. The skin across his dad's cheeks was pale and waxy, and dark smudges pooled under his eyes. Jed wondered briefly what was wrong but then forgot about it in his excitement. It wasn't often that he got to go to the store by himself and even more rare for him to have some money to spend burning a hole in his pocket.

But the way his dad had acted came back to him as he walked back from Blue's store, switching the packet of baloney from hand to hand as they grew tired. He had never seen his dad act like that before. And there was something else that only came to Jed as he neared his house. His dad had barely met his eyes that morning. Normally, his dad looked someone square in the face with that easy smile of his. But that morning, his dad had hardly looked at him and, when he did, his eyes were troubled as if he had seen something he'd hoped never to see.

Jed pushed the thoughts from his mind. It seemed to him that grown-ups were always looking for some reason to be upset. There was no telling what was troubling his dad. He worked again at trying to blow a bubble. He only got a small one to form before it popped. One stick of gum wasn't enough to get a decent bubble, but he hated to add another stick. He wasn't sure when he would be allowed to buy more, so he had to make this pack last.

He crested the hill, and the valley that held his family's farm opened before him. A strange truck backed up from the house and started up the dirt road toward him. Jed moved to the side of the road and waited. The truck inched toward him with a cacophony of squeaks and groans as it traversed the ruts in the road. As the truck neared him, Jed saw that Rastus Jones was behind the wheel. What in the world would Rastus Jones be doing at his house? The top of a wire cage peaked above the bed of the truck. Maybe his dad had sold some of his chickens.

The truck pulled even with Jed, and Rastus waved, a cigarette projecting between two fingers. That was when Biscuit raised on her hind legs; her front paws pressed against the wire and began barking for all she was worth.

"Hey? What're you doing with my dog?"

Rastus floored the gas. The back tires spun, then caught traction, throwing the truck forward. The cage slid toward the tailgate, and Biscuit fell to the bottom.

"Come back here with my dog. What do you think you're doing?"

Jed started after the truck, but he couldn't catch it. Rastus kept the gas floored, the truck bouncing over the gullies washed by rain. The cage bounced around the truck bed. Biscuit tried to look back at him but her feet couldn't find purchase. She never quit barking.

His dad. Jed had to get his dad. They could catch Rastus in his dad's Chevy. His dad would teach Rastus a lesson about stealing other people's dogs.

He turned around and ran toward his house. The packet of baloney slipped from his hand and hit the ground with a dull thud. Jed didn't slow, running as hard as he could, yelling with every spare breath. He saw his dad sitting on the porch, staring at his hands. Why didn't he get up to see what was wrong? Didn't he hear him?

Jed stopped before him, his hands grabbing his knees as he tried to catch his breath. "Dad—Dad. Rastus—he's stole Biscuit. We gotta go get her."

"He didn't steal her, Jed."

"Yes, he did. I just saw him. He's got her in the back of his truck. We gotta go and catch him."

"He didn't steal her." His dad slowly moved his eyes up to meet Jed's. "I traded her to him."

“Traded her? Traded her for what?”

“A milking cow.”

Jed stepped back as if he had been punched squarely in the chest. “A milking cow? How could you trade her?”

“I had to, son. With Flossie dead, we wouldn’t have any way to get milk.”

“We don’t need milk. We can just drink water.”

“We gotta have milk. Your Mom uses it to make all kinds of things.”

“But you said you’d never get rid of her. You said that you didn’t have a price.”

“I said I’d never sell her. And I didn’t. I traded her for something that we had to have. I said my price wasn’t money, and it wasn’t. A man wants to have a prize hunting dog, but he needs to have milk for his family.”

“You stole her. You said she was my dog and then you stole her.” The tears began to stream down Jed’s cheeks, the rims of his eyes burning.

“I know this is hard, Jed. I hated to do it more than anything. But you’ve got to try to be a man about it.”

“I don’t want to be a man about it. Not a man like you—a liar and a thief.”

His dad half rose to his feet, the anger flashing in his eyes. “I know you’re hurting son, but you don’t talk to me like that.”

The look his dad gave him would normally have cowed Jed. Even now, he wanted to drop his eyes and say he was sorry. But he wouldn’t. He was in the right. His dad had lied to him and stole his dog. What kind of father was that?

Jed began to back away. “I’m going to get her back. She wasn’t your dog to trade. You had no right to give her away.”

“Jed, you’re gonna have to get a hold of yourself.”

Jed turned and began running up the road. He heard his dad’s shouts behind him, but they were quickly lost as the wind whistled in his ears. A thousand thoughts flooded his head. Maybe Rastus stopped at Blue’s store. Maybe he could buy Biscuit back. Or maybe he could just take her out of the back of Rastus’s truck. That wouldn’t be stealing, because Biscuit was his dog and he hadn’t given her away.

The cold air hurt Jed’s lungs. It blew out in a thick smoke that quickly vanished. The sound of his feet hitting the earth was cold and hard.

Rastus’s truck wasn’t at Blue’s. The parking lot was empty except for a beat-up ’44 Ford. Jed collapsed against one of the porch posts. He drank in great draughts of air, shivering as his sweat chilled his skin. He couldn’t run anymore. Not that it mattered. He didn’t know where Rastus lived. Even if he found him, that didn’t matter either. He couldn’t buy Biscuit back. He had a dime in the piggy bank he kept under his bed. Everyone knew that Rastus wanted a hundred times what something was worth. And he couldn’t just take her. Where would he go? He’d have to go home sooner or later, and his dad would just make him take her back.

A rain began to fall—a few, cold drops divoting the sand of the parking lot. One struck Jed’s shoe with a loud pop, spreading out into a ragged circle like a child’s drawing of the sun.

Jed wiped his eyes and then hugged his knees to his chest. He wondered how he’d ever find the will to be happy again.