

PLOTS WITH GUNS

FALL 2011

JUNKYARD DOG BY THOMAS PLUCK

I LIKE HARD WORK. IT KEEPS MY MIND RIGHT. A COOL DAY'S BEST FOR IT. IT'S COOL THIS MORNING AND STILL DARK WHEN I PARK BY EARL'S HOUSE. HE'S GOT A PLACE ON FRELINGHUYSEN. HE'S NOT ON THE PORCH LIKE HE USUALLY IS, WAITING TO WADDLE TO MY TRUCK IN HIS OVERALLS, WITH A LIST OF JOBS ON A SCRAP OF YELLOW PAPER. NOT TODAY.



I like hard work. It keeps my mind right. A cool day's best for it.

It's cool this morning and still dark when I park by Earl's house. He's got a place on Frelinghuysen. He's not on the porch like he usually is, waiting to waddle to my truck in his overalls, with a list of jobs on a scrap of yellow paper. Not today.

I eyeball up and down the street. It's quiet, barely dawn. I like this hour, have since I was a boy. Feels like it's just me in the world, and nothing hurts. I climb out, and a lady hurries into her car, fear in her eyes.

I don't blame her none. I know how I look. Six and a half. Three fifty. And I got a dent in the side of my head like a bruised apple. But I never hurt no woman.

I walk up Earl's driveway slow. Maybe he'll come out, tell her I'm good. I slap his front door, her car squeals off. It needs a fan belt. I could fix it. She won't let me.

"That you, Denny?"

"Yeah." I put my face by the little hole he looks through.

His locks open, sound like a good break in pool.

Earl's a head shorter than me. Big belly fills his overalls. Horseshoe of gray hair on his shiny brown head, and a beard to match. I shave everything clean; probation officer said it made me less scary. I been with Earl six months now, moving junk and scrap. Officer Fiore was right.

"How you doing?" Earl says. "Come in. Got a surprise."

I hear scratching and whimpering. I draw back. Last dog I met, some banger's Rottweiler, wouldn't let go my leg. Had to twist its head off. The banger's too. I wonder if this dog can smell that on me.

"She's just a puppy, big man."

Earl reaches down, pulls up a squirming white mess of paws and tail. "Her name's Remy," he says. Holds her to my face.

She's a pit bull with a brown splotch across the eyes. Won't stay still. Wiggles, licks my face.

"See?"

"Good dog," I say. Ruffle her ears. They're long. So's her tail. Not like most pits I see in Newark.

Earl sets her on the cracked checkered floor. She rolls on her back between my boots, shows me her belly.

"She likes you. Got her from Hazeldeen, lady we cleaned the house for in Irvington. She takes in a lot of women and kids who got dogs. She finds homes for 'em."

I reach down and scratch Remy's belly. She likes that.

"Got a scar on her nose."

"And you got a dent in your head," he says, smiles. "Someone tried to toughen her up. But you too sweet for that, ain't you, missy?" Earl scoops her up again, scratches her ears.

"Got long ears."

"They crop the ears sometimes," he says. "I'm gonna leave hers be."

I rub the scar behind my left ear. "What's the job today?"

"Emptying out a house in Elizabeth. Okay we use your truck? My alternator's shot." Last week it was the clutch. Run of bad luck.

When we head out, he's still got the dog.

"Okay if she stays in your truck? I got paper to put down," Earl says, looking down.

I scratch the scar on her nose. "kay. Let's get breakfast."

"All that boy do is eat," the woman who's not my momma said. "Just cause you burned your mother up, doesn't mean you can eat us out of house and home."

Her name was Alice. She was big and cruel. Liked to pinch you where it's tender.

And I didn't light that fire. Horace's friends did.

"Got nothing to say? Or did your brains get knocked in when your whore momma dropped you on your head?" That was Milton. He had yellow teeth. Always frowned. Slouched in his chair, pointed his fork at me.

Momma wasn't no whore. Horace made her do those things. Didn't drop me on my head, neither. That was the doctor, when I was born. With the four seps, Momma said.

"Horace made my Momma do that." I finished my bite, then pushed my plate to Kaycee and Randy. They were six and four, needed it more than I did. They ate, quiet. They'd been here longer than me.

"At least the whore taught you manners, Denty." Milton laughed.

Alice laughed at his name for me. Her big breasts and belly shook.

"You hate me, don't you?" Milton said. "You wanna burn me up? No, you're a good boy now. Like one of the retards who bag groceries at the store."

I don't say much. Never did. But I listen good. I'm big for my age. Horace made me lift weights, got me strong. Strong enough to crush his throat for him. I got away with that but got five years in juvenile for the fire his boys lit in revenge.

The State placed me with Milton and Alice because they don't smoke. I got cracked any time I walked past the stove. I wished I was still inside. Milton wasn't much bigger than me. Taller by a head. I was thick like a barrel, and pain was always far away, like Momma. I used to fight back. Then Alice made me watch her put a red hot bobby pin in Kaycee's privates.

After that, I just took it.

I got up and went to our room, laid down on the mattress. It smelled like Randy's piss.

"Gotta toughen up, boy," Milton called. "You'll be a man soon."

Alice pushed Randy and Kaycee in and locked the door.

"It's okay, Denny," Kaycee said. She came over, stroked my head. Her little thumb traced my dent.

Randy was watching cars by the window. It was nailed shut.

"I'm hungry," he said.

We all were.

"Look at her eat that up," Earl says.

We have four sandwiches from the Portuguese truck. Eggs and ham for Earl and Remy. Two with sausage, ham, eggs, bacon, cheese and hot sauce for me.

Her tail wags like a whip. Looks up with egg on her nose. Licks it, dives in again.

Earl puts the paper down on the floorboards and I open the vent windows on my old green Ford.

Remy watches us through the windows as we empty out the basement for Abelardo. It used to be a plumber's. Old cracked toilets, odd lengths of pipe, buckets of rusted bolts. Two sheets of plywood make walls for the truck bed. We stack the trash up high between them. Earl sits on the tailgate and mops his forehead. I lug an old hot water heater up the concrete steps.

"The old ladies feed me too much," he says.

He makes room for the heater, we slide it in. Just fits.

Abelardo comes out the front, talking to himself. No, he's got a silver earpiece, for his phone. He's a lean man with slick hair and a suit. Got sunglasses on in the shade. He peels two bills off his money clip, holds them out to Earl.

Earl takes one, hands me the other. I shut the tailgate.

"Whoa, fellas," Abelardo says. "Get the fridge and the anvil out the garage. Then you're done."

"There's more? We gotta rearrange the load now, Mr. Gutierrez," Earl says.

"Get to it. And don't leave no mess, you want my business." He struts to his Lexus. Won't look us in the eye.

"Abelardo," Earl calls to his back.

"I got a call," he says, and drives away.

"When a customer does us like that, try to look mean," Earl says.

The fridge is so old it has a radio built on top. It's rusted and heavy. Earl drops his side twice. We get the straps, and I carry it up on my back.

"Sorry," he says. "Back ain't what it used to be."

The anvil must weigh three hundred. I can do twice that at the gym, straight deadlift. I straddle it and go wide, stretch my sweatshirt. It comes off the ground, and I walk it to the truck. It hits the blacktop like a shot.

"Damn, son," Earl says.

"That was heavy," I say.

I rest awhile, then heave it in the bed.

"Don't dent your truck," Earl says. "One dent's bad enough."

I look at him until he smiles.

"What about the fridge?" Earl asks.

"Let's hit the scrap yard. I'll finish later, after I drop you home."

I was dreaming about crushing up Horace's buddies in a garbage truck when someone slapped me awake.

"Wake up, Denny."

It was Milton. "Get some shoes on, and be quiet."

My clothes were tight. I needed new. "You need to stop growing so much," Alice had said.

I followed Milton out to the apartment's dirty hallway. Careful not to wake Randy or Kaycee.

"We're doing man things," he said. "Don't say I never did nothing for you."

It was nice and cool out for a summer night. Folks sat on stoops drinking beer. NWA on the radio. We walked down the block. Milton frowned the whole way to the yard with the dogs. We always heard them walking home from school. Never saw them. Would've been nice to play with them. The yard had a rusty chain link fence around a few cars with flat tires and busted out windows. They were stuffed with buckets of old tools.

Milton slapped me up the head. "Pay attention."

Around back, a man with big arms sat on a bucket, smoking a thin cigar. He stood when he saw us coming.

"This your boy?"

"Sure is, Stanley."

Stanley puffed his cigar. He looked all puffy. "Big boy. What's his name?"

"Dennis. We call him Denny."

He reached for my face and I flinched. Milton smacked the back of my head. "Let Stan check you out, retard."

He thumbed my cheeks near the eye, squeezed my hands, slapped my flat belly. "Won't cut easy. But not much padding on him." He bent down, looked me in the eye.

"You know how to fight, Denny?"

"Fought in juvie," I said.

"You ever shit blood?"

"No."

"Then you didn't lose much, huh?"

"Nope."

"What about the bigger boys?"

Stan's eyes looked like one of Kaycee's dolls.

"Answer him," Milton said, smacked me.

I launched at Stanley, barrelled him over. He was bigger but wasn't expecting it. I grabbed for his nuts. He laughed and threw me into some old paint cans and dirt. The dogs came from round the back, two fast black shapes.

Stan was laughing. Milton held his hands up, looked ready to pee.

"Don't move none," Stan said.

Two big pit bulls circled and snarled at us, heads like basketballs. They were covered in scars. Brown and white, three eyes between them.

I held still like I had in juvie, when one of the bigger boys came looking for something. Emptied my heart. The dogs sniffed me, chuffed, then went after Milton.

"Said don't move. Quit squirming," Stan said.

Maybe they smelled fear. Milton looked like he wanted to smack them dogs upside the head but knew they'd take that hand and eat it later.

Stan whistled, and the dogs took off toward the back.

"Milton, thought you were gonna shit yourself," Stan laughed. He slapped me on the shoulder. You got heart, boy. Let's go inside. Get you a fight."

The anvil fetches a good price. We divvy up, and I drop Earl home with Remy.

"Keep what you get for the fridge. Gas money," he says.

That woman's car is parked up the block. I point. "She's got a bad fan belt," I say.

Then I go back for the fridge.

It's hardly worth the trip. But I don't want trouble with Abelardo. We need the work. I get ten bucks for it. Fuel gauge says quarter tank. Earl knows a lot of old ladies who like to cook, though. Maybe we'll eat. I drive back to his place.

When I roll up, he's out front with some bangers around an old BMW. It's got flat looking tires. I kill the engine, roll my shoulders. There's three of them. Skinny boy talking loud, footballer backing him up, another one in back of the car, holding Remy.

"This ain't right. That's my dog," Earl says.

"Dog ran out and made me ding up my Beemer, old man. You got insurance?" Skinny says.

"Not my fault you hit the curb, son. I can pay for it."

"You know how much these dubs cost?"

"They ain't dubs, Cee," the hefty one says. "They eighteens."

"We'll pay," I say, walk over slow. I don't want them to freak. They do anyway.

Skinny waves a gun from his waistband like a flag. "Whoa, back off!"

I hold out my pay. "Give him the dog."

The gun gives his eyes some fire. He aims at my chest. "Listen, you squeaky voiced motherfucker. We takin' the dog. Maybe your money too. You like that?"

"No," I say. He's close enough to finish off. I let him work off steam. Maybe I won't have to shove the gun down his throat, kick his jaw shut. I don't want to. But I will.

"C'mon, son. She's my dog," Earl says.

"Jello give you five hundred for that dog, Cee," the fat footballer says.

"You got five yards, old man?"

"Not right now."

"Then fuck you," the kid says. Keeps the gun on me. "You move, big man, you dead."

They peel off in the Beemer. I feel bad, but would feel worse if Earl or Remy got killed.

"Thought you were tough," Earl says. "Why'd you let 'em take Remy?"

"We'll get her."

"How we gonna do that?"

"Let's eat."

"That's all you think about. You just had two cheese steaks for lunch."

Milton pushed the needle through the ragged skin of my ear. I'm still panting. In my quiet place.

"You knocked that boy's eye out."

He sewed my ear up sloppy. Stan was shaking his head, counting out bills.

"Denny, you gonna make some money. Just don't be so hard. No one'll want to fight you."

The older boy had tried to tear my ear off. So I body slammed him, kneed his face until it looked like a muskrat hit by a dump truck.

"Should a doctor sew me up?"

*"You're scarred up already, those burns on your arms, that hole in your head. What's one more?"
They laughed and dabbed my face with an iodine-soaked rag. It stung.
"What do I tell my teacher?"
"Tell 'em you got in a fight, retard," Milton laughed, pulled the stitches tight.*

I take Earl to Sandy's Sho-Nuff Chicken Shack, out on 1&9.

Sandy's got strong arms and a behind like two hams in the chiller at the grocery store. She works the stove behind the counter, never stops. Got her natural hair tied back, and a big smile for hungry men. She's the color of root beer. She pops the cap off my second bottle.

"Sandy, you whup the Colonel's ass," Earl says.

"You'll make me blush," she says, filling a foil to-go plate with greens and yams. Two Southern truckers with beards, white boys, wait by the screen door.

I work my second plate clockwise. "You got any Jello, Sandy?"

"Just sweet potato and pecan pies, baby."

"I heard sometimes you got Jello," I say again.

She rings up the truckers. "Y'all enjoy this now."

"I know we will, ma'am," the younger one says.

Sandy watches them take their plates to their trucks, then leans over. "Denny, why you asking about the junkman?"

"Took my dog," Earl says.

Sandy shakes her head.

"She's a pup. Ain't more than a few months old."

She sighs. "She'll be bait, then. Or he'll knock her teeth out, make her a breeder."

"What's bait?" I ask.

Sandy wrinkles her little nose. "Dogs they hurt, to get the fighters worked up."

"That's a damn shame to do to a sweet thing," Earl says.

"He fights them in the junkyard on Doremus. The dogs guard it at night," Sandy says, wiping the counter. "They say no one but the trainers can get in there without getting torn up."

"He pays five hundred for a dog. I can't afford to buy her back." Earl looks down.

"He makes a lot more than that on a fight. Had to kick out my man Caesar, he was betting there. I don't have no truck with a gambler."

"When they fight?" I ask.

"Friday nights," Sandy says.

I start on my second slice of sweet potato pie. We leave Sandy a good tip.

The teachers shook their heads when I said I got in fights. Sent me to the nurse's office. The nurse shined light in my eyes. "You can play gym. Anything you want to tell me, Dennis?"

"No," I said.

In the weeks that passed, Milton's cigar box got swollen with bills. I think about taking it, buying a moving truck. Helping people move. But I can't leave Randy and Kaycee.

"Feed that boy something good," Milton told Alice.

"Boy can eat what I give him." She slopped some Hamburger Helper on my plate.

Randy and Kaycee each get a little.

"Give them more," I said.

Randy and Kaycee looked at me, frightened.

"What did that boy say?"

"We don't want more, Miss Alice."

"Hear that, Denty? They don't want more," Alice said, her back to me. "Shut your mouth and eat."

Earl says, "This Jello sounds like a bad man, Denny."

It's Thursday. Tomorrow, Remy might be torn up. Or have her teeth yanked out with pliers, by the time we're done working. I park my Ford in front of Kieslowski's Auto Salvage, by the port. Big cranes salute the bay on the other side of the road. I see rusty cars stacked through the razor wired fence. The office lights are on.

Earl stays in the truck until I go through the gate, then hurries after.

"We can work it off. Five hundred. Bring him some wrecks. We can tow 'em with a rope," Earl says.

Men lounge in chairs, behind the yellow windows. I slap the steel door.

Skinny boy answers.

"Shit, it's the old man and the Shaq-lookin' motherfucker I was telling you about."

"Send him in." Deep voice.

I step in, Earl in tow. Football boy and a man wearing a do-rag and gray worksuit sit in folding chairs. There's a dirty counter with a register, shelves full of auto parts.

"Damn, Cecil. He is bigger'n me," says a man with pecs like pumpkin halves and a gut like a barrel. Meaty arms covered in jailhouse ink.

I got three inches on him. He reaches out to shake. My hand's lost in his.

"Like catcher's mitts, Moms used to say," he chuckles and puts the crush on.

I stare at him, don't squeeze back. My bones grind.

"You don't say much, do you?"

"Mister Jello, sir," Earl says from behind me. "I just want my dog back please."

Jello lets go, and pats my arm. "What's your name, old man?"

"Earl."

"No one calls me that to my face, Earl." Jello sucker punches Earl in the ribs. He yelps and goes down.

It's on.

I grab Skinny boy's arm and send him flying over the counter. Jello tackles me, crushes me with his weight. Floorboards crack as we land. I sit up and grip his face, thumbs going for the eyes. A thick neck's hard to snap. I figure to jam my fingers to the last knuckle, get his brain. He roars.

I hear a shotgun get racked. I keep going. Do-rag man cracks my head with the butt, then puts the barrel to Earl's knee.

"Let go."

I slide my thumbs away. Jello clambers up, panting.

"Now you get to see the dogs," he says, boots me in the crotch.
I let the pain fill me up. For later.

"A boxing ring," Milton said. "This is the big time."

We were in a gym that night, with lots of people. Italians in suits. Bangers in 8-Ball jackets and throwback jerseys. Room full of smoke.

"Where's your cut man?" A swarthy old guy in a tracksuit looked me over. Pushed a finger in my dent.

"It's all me," Milton laughed. "Trainer, manager, cut man, all that shit."

"It's your funeral, kid." He checked my hands, patted me on the back. "Watch that ear."

My opponent was a big tan-skinned man who looked swollen, mapped with green tattoos. Had a thin mustache and the dead eyes I see in the mirror every morning.

"Oh, shit," Milton said.

"Get in the ring," the ref said.

I bent under the ropes.

"Where's the bet man?" Milton said.

I let all the fear drain out. He couldn't throw me into a wall. Or flick cigarettes in my crib. Couldn't rape my dead Momma or burn her alive. All he could do was break my body, and that pain's far away, like another country.

The bell rang. He circled. I charged. It was over quick.

Left eye was swollen shut. I spat pieces of teeth, like the hard beans in Alice's soup. I cradled the tan man's limp body over my knee. I'd slammed it there, just before.

"Broke his fuckin' back," said an Italian with slicked gray hair.

The ref checked for a pulse. "Get him to St. Michael's, Mr. Dellamorte," he said.

Italian boys in sweatsuits jumped in the ring. One patted my shoulder. "You got heart, bro."

They carried tan man out.

I found Milton arguing with the bookie.

"I didn't bet it all on him," he said. "I was covering my bets!"

"You lost. Now fuck off."

We walked home. I held a beer to my eye. Rolled it over the squishy flesh. Milton drank from his.

"Why'd you do that? Should've been disqualified. Cost me a lot of money, retard."

We passed the dog yard. Stan wasn't out front.

"Milton," I said.

"What, you dumb hunk of shit?"

Felt good when the bottle broke on his head. Better when I dragged the shards back and forth over his face. He made a lot of noise. The dogs came running. I heaved him over the fence into Stan's yard. He groped blindly. I felt bad, throwing the other bottle at him. It hit one of the dogs attached to his face.

I hopped over, went to the tool bucket. Found what I needed.

The dogs howl and yap behind us. I pull Earl by the back of his overalls through the maze of cars.

"Cracked my ribs. Can't breathe," Earl wheezes.

Can't see much in the yellow glow of the streetlights. I look for something we can climb. Heave Earl up on the hood of a burned out taxi.

"Up," I say.

Dozen dogs home in on us. I see a stack of three flattened cars, pretty close. I can jump it, but Earl can't.

"They're like meat-seeking missiles," Earl gasps.

I grab his collar and the seat of his pants. "Gonna throw you."

"You crazy?"

I spin like playing airplane, then heave him at the stack.

He grabs on, legs flailing. I see the black shapes swarm in. Earl starts kicking.

My boots dent the roof as I leap over. The metal cuts my hands deep, but I get up. I grab Earl's arms. They bite his legs, one on each. He shrieks like a girl.

"Stop kicking," I tell him.

Another dog jumps between the other two and bites down. He looks like Kaycee did, with the bobby pin.

I roar and throw him and the dogs on the top of the wreck. One dog twists, falls off with a mouthful. I heard that their jaws lock. That you gotta kill them to make them let go.

I go for the eyes of the dog on his crotch first.

It yelps and lets go. I throw it off the car.

Earl starts pounding the other dog. It grabs on harder.

I grab its back legs and lift. It lets go. Earl kicks, and it lunges for him. Claws scabble at the roof. I toss it down to the pack.

I tie off his bad leg with my belt.

"You'll have to carry me, son," Earl says.

I hold him awhile, listen to the dogs howl. He mumbles a while, then stops breathing.

I opened the door with Milton's keys real quiet. Alice is watching TV, eating ice cream. Didn't know we had ice cream.

I turned the hammer over in my hands. Bring the flat end down hard a few times. Until she stopped twitching. I pulled her afghan blanket over her head.

"Why you wake us up, Denny?" Randy rubbed his eyes.

Kaycee hugged my leg. I bent down, she kissed my cheek.

"We're having ice cream."

Went back to juvie 'til I was 18, after they figured Alice probably didn't fall down the apartment stairs the same night Milton got torn up. I let her tumble, and Mrs. Forrest from downstairs opened her door.

"She fell," I'd said. Mrs. Forrest saw my eye and called the police.

I never had a dog as a kid. But I could have Remy now. I could take care of her for Earl, if I could make it through the pack. Maybe if I had Remy when I was little, she would've protected Momma and me. I close my eyes, think about her nosing into my shirt like she had at lunchtime.

And I slide down the hood, put my boots among the pack.

They sniff and snarl. Tug my laces. Bark a lot. I see fear in their eyes. They see none in mine. They're the bait dogs. The fighters must be locked up. Otherwise they'd fight.

Two big squat pit bulls part the pack, sniff my knees. I keep my hands low, eyes up. The other dogs bark. These two are quiet. The biggest, a black and white one striped with scars, huffs at me, then walks away.

The rest follow. A few linger, whimpering like Remy had. Then I hear someone bang on a garbage can, and the pack lopes toward the office.

I watch the do-rag man bang a 55 gallon drum with his shotgun until all the bait dogs are in their cage. He dumps food, then shuts the gate. He sweeps back and forth with a flashlight, and walks past my hiding spot.

"Heard you screaming," he hollers out. "You want help?"

I land behind him, drop my elbows on his shoulders. He gets my full three-fifty, crumples. I snug an arm round his throat and squeeze. He fires over my head. My ears ring. I snap his trigger finger back, twist and tug it like a ten penny nail that won't come loose. He stomps my steel toe boots, elbows me, then goes slack.

I whisper in his ear. "I done this before. You ain't dead 'til you shit yourself."

He struggles, thrashes. After he slumps and wets himself, I twist his head around twice. Push him away, so I don't get his mess on me.

I take the shotgun.

I pass the fight dog cages as I get to the office. See them all chewed up. One's got no nose. Another got no ears, no tail, looks like candle wax. One got three legs. They sniff at the cage and whimper. I wanna set them free, but I got work to do.

Jello's looking out the back window, holding a pistol in one hand. Got Remy in the crook of the other arm. I lower the shotgun and wait.

I put the barrel through the cage of the waxy white dog. Got one eye, too. But I can't pull the trigger.

I fire into the air, stay in the dark and close in.

Fire again. Then wait. Soon enough, he comes out.

The junkman's belly looks like Jello as he fast-walks, calling, "Terrell?"

When he's close, I put one in his belly.

He moans, falls flat. Next, I blow his gun hand off.

Dogs are going wild. I wipe down the gun with my shirt, toss it. Jello's saying stuff as I drag him by the boot to the bait dog cage. His guts trail behind us in the dirt like spaghetti. I kick the gate open.

Inside, I pick up Remy, stroke her soft white fur. She whimpers, licks my face. We watch the dogs play tug of war with the junkman's insides, until the screaming stops.

She'll be a good dog.