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DOG

"Mister, maybe that dog just don't like Jews."

I can't stop this line from repeating itself. I'm jogging, and fantasizing like mad. I've gone well past the house where the dog had come after me, and I realize that no matter how long I keep running, eventually I'll have to retrace my steps.

I scan the dirt road for sticks. I find one, about eight inches long, with a sharp end. I like its feel, and I imagine what I'll have to do with it. I put it in my right hand since, when I return, the house will be on my left. Perhaps the dog can recognize a weapon when he sees one. Perhaps he has seen many.

I'm preparing to fight. Will my stick be able to puncture the dog's skin? Do dogs have skin tougher than ours? Do they even have skin, or is theirs hide? Should I kick him? What if he sinks his teeth into my leg? Are my hands strong enough to pry open his jaws? Is that how you fight a dog? Is there any way of avoiding the house? Maybe I should walk, and not run, past it. Maybe I should get off the road, walk through the high grass instead. On my tippy toes, gently and very slow. I know now that my standard response to dogs, being quiet and unthreatening, slow-moving and confident, will not work. This is a vicious, stupid dog, and I'm far from home.

I'm in rural Michigan, visiting my wife's brother who has a summer cottage on a lake. But I'm more than two miles from that lake. I've gone jogging and the houses on both sides of the road aren't for vacations. Some are well maintained, and none are squalid, but not they're not lived in by people like me. A few were once trailers. All of the cars in the driveways are American, and some are wrecks. There's rust and machinery in the front yards.

Where do these people work? There are farms around here, but they're not big. There's a town about fifteen miles away. Maybe they work there. But what do they do? Janitors in the school, auto mechanics, road crew? Who are these people? I don't see any of them on my run except when they kick up an enormous amount of dust as they speed past me in their trucks and cars.

I'm in foreign territory. This isn't Vermont, not Connecticut, and it's not the beach. Even if this part of Michigan is green and lush, it's not picturesque. It's scrubby and rough. People actually live here and they do things I don't understand.

Who are these people and why do they hate me?

The dog had run across the large front yard of a nondescript house and come right at me. It wasn't big and so at first I wasn't scared. I just stopped running and expected him to go away. Instead, he came across the road, and began to follow me. A squat, cruel dog like none I've ever seen. I don't know what

breed. Terrier, as in pit bull terrier? I guess not; it didn't actually attack me. It was covered with red blotches. They didn't look real. Could they have been painted by a demented child whose parents had no paper to give? Could they have been blood? Did my fear conjure them? One eye was surrounded by a red blotch as well. A terrible dog.

At first, I walked silently and steadily away. But the dog kept coming at me, screaming at me, mad with anger for no good reason. I meant no harm. I was on the other side of the road, just jogging. With each step I took away from him, the dog braved a few inches closer to me. I didn't understand. Dogs are friendly, they like children, and even the barking ones are content with making enough noise to send the stranger away. But this dog got closer and closer, its little blotched face ugly in stupid fury.

I didn't know what to do. I've never been attacked before, by man or beast. I'm not a fighter, I'm a teacher, that's all. I've avoided fights my whole life, usually by understanding enough about a conflict to be able to defuse or escape it. I don't know how to fight a mad dog.

My silent walking had not worked, so I tried gentle suasion, soothing words. "Nice dog, nice dog...go home." But the dog only became bolder and more furious. My stomach clenched, my mind fogged. This shouldn't be happening. I'm a teacher on vacation. I belong in Vermont or on the beach, not in rural Michigan, running past the hulks of American cars and small

houses occupied by men who tried but failed to fix those cars and who like to hunt.

This was my third visit to the lake. I had actually been enjoying myself, for this time I knew exactly what to expect. I understood that the lake was really just an excuse for the exercise of powerful machines: jet skies and speedboats. The idea of canoeing or swimming, the prospect of tranquility and reflection, simply didn't occur to anybody here. I was in Michigan, the soul of engine mad America. My brother-in-law, a wizard of a mechanic who owns a flourishing body shop, has three jet skies, the fastest boat on the lake, and a pontoon boat. There would never be a wrecked car in front of his house, for he can fix anything. On this visit, unlike the first two, I did not foist my own expectations on the environment. I knew the television would be on continually and that the roar of the engines would form the background of all our conversations. This time I brought several novels, instead of just one, and my running shoes: I'd go exploring, exhaust myself, rest in the hot tub, drink the icy sweet drinks, play with my children, speed around on the jet ski. That's what I had done for two days, and it was working: I felt okay. My first two runs had been on the dirt road around the lake and, even though there was distant barking, I had no problem. My third run was out, beyond the lake, into the country.

The dog had edged closer to me. Why would he do that? What did he want? I gave up on smooth talk and went back to silence.

The dog came closer, and then even closer, with its hysterical barking, furious eyes, crazy red blotches. What sort of master had shaped such a vile creature? Whoever he was, he was absent. Finally, the dog jumped at me. Didn't bite me, but got its filthy paws on my leg. On my leg! I'd been violated by an animal. This never happened to me before. Things like this don't happen on the beach to people like me who own Toyotas.

I surprised myself, for I yelled at the dog, "Get the fuck outa here!" He retreated a bit, but didn't stop barking. Started to edge closer to me again. I yelled again, and again the dog backed down a little. I had been walking during this entire episode and had reached a curve in the road. This seemed to be a tangible boundary for the dog, for when I started on the curve he gave up on me and headed home.

The fear is fueling me and I'm running faster than usual. I want to keep going and not turn back. But turn back I will have to, and reasonably soon: I'm already three miles or so past the lake, and I can't go much further. My stick gives me small comfort. I'm no fighter. Just a Jewish kid from New Jersey. I feel myself small and bespectacled. I keep hearing the words from Fiddler on the Roof, "But Reb Tevye, even a poor tailor deserves a little happiness." That's all, just a little. I'm wearing an old, black coat, frayed and without shape, a yamulke instead of a baseball cap. My hands are meant, not for tools or oil stains or knives, but for turning pages. My face is thin and pale but behind my flimsy wire glasses my eyes are alive with

inquiry. Am I a coward to boot? Alan Dershowitz wrote a book called Chutzpah about tough Jews like himself, but I don't feel that way. Just a tailor, living in a shetl, afraid of Cossacks, of thick blonde men who know how to fix cars and want to smack me. They hate Jews here. I don't like loud machines. I need quiet and calm so I can think. My thoughts end in questions, not in answers, and I love to walk and hear only my own voice. I'm timid. If I had been born in late 19th century Russia I would have been a rabbi or a socialist theoretician. As it is, I'm a teacher from New Jersey who came to Michigan to visit the relatives of his non-Jewish wife. They're very nice to me but there's a chasm between us.

I don't want to turn around and go past the house again. I imagine the dog mauling me. Yes, I could finally fend it off, perhaps even hurt it, by using my stick to tear its ugly flank, but not before it ripped my flesh with its awful teeth. My leg would be gashed with deep, asymmetric wounds; blood would drip steadily down my legs. I'd return to the cottage and everyone would gasp. My sister-in-law had been a nurse and she'd tend to me efficiently and without panic. I'd do my best to be brave. "A dog bit me while I was jogging; I think I should go the hospital."

I'm already imagining doctors, already longing for their white-cloaked knowledge to heal my wounds. My relatives don't care much for doctors and they avoid hospitals.

My wounds are cleansed and bandaged. There's no need for

stitches. But what if the dog had rabies or some other infectious disease? We'll have to visit the house and speak to the owner. We get into the pick-up truck; my wife and her father come with me, and her brother drives. We reach the house. It's small and red, cheap but not untidy. The dog is nowhere to be seen. We knock at the door, and the barking erupts violently from inside.

"Yeah." The man, about forty, is wearing a dirty white tee-shirt and jeans. His brown hair is cut short, his stomach, which seems hard, hangs over his belt. His skin is dark from the sun. He's not tall but his blackened hands are huge. He's wearing work boots and has some sort of buckle in his belt. His face is blank.

"Your dog bit me."

"Yeah," he says as he tries to incorporate the information.

"I was jogging on the road, he came out and he bit me. I want to know if he's had his shots."

All the while the dog, whom I can't see, is screaming.

"Put the dog in the bedroom," he yells to his wife.

Apparently she complies, for the barking ceases. The man doesn't invite us in.

"I want to know if your dog has had its shots?"

"Yeah, he's had them." The man's voice doesn't waver, and his eyes look me over closely.

"Well," I say, "I want to see some documentation of that."

The man squints, but doesn't say anything. He's looking me

over.

"Mister, maybe that dog just don't like Jews."

How does he know I'm Jewish? He's from rural Michigan, he's probably never seen a Jew. Maybe he goes into town, to the local hall where secret meetings are held. Here they show pictures of Jews on a big screen and, while the audience is drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, tell them that these Jews shut down their factories and own the banks which repossessed their farms. These Jews on the screen don't live in rural Michigan. They're from the city, where life is corrupt, color is rampant, and money rules.

I'm going to have to confront an anti-semite, a hunter, a cruel and stupid man whose car is rusting away and whose fascist dog has been trained to attack Jews. After recovering from my initial shock, I'm going to have to fight this man.

I'm about two miles past the dog's house, and that means I'm in for 8 miles of total running, and so I finally muster the resolve to make the 180 degree turn in order to get back to the lake. When I turn around, so does my fantasy. Instead of fighting I now threaten the man with the tools a Jew boy from New Jersey knows best.

"Mister," I say, deliberately echoing him, "is this house yours?" He says it is.

"Is that car in the driveway yours?"

"Yeah." He's hasn't figured out where I'm headed and so his guard is down.

"Well, soon they're going to be mine, because I'm going to sue your ass off. My leg is injured, I can't enjoy my vacation, I'm going to the hospital, and if there's the slightest infection you're going to be in debt to me for the rest of your life. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He doesn't reply, only looks down briefly.

"Do you understand what a lawsuit is?" I ask again. "All your possessions will belong to me. Your house, your car, your money, your chainsaw, everything, because there's no question that I will win this lawsuit. So you'd better cooperate fully with me, and show me the paper documenting your dog's shots."

His face caves in, victim of the massive assault I've launched against him. His once proud belly now seems to sag. He wants to apologize, but doesn't know how. He's scared.

I veto this fantasy, for with it I've become the kind of Jew they think I am, a frightened mouse, capable only of lawsuits and arguments, contracts and receipts. Somebody so different from themselves, somebody who drives a foreign car and lives in the city, in a world of money and words.

I check my stick yet again: yes, the end really is quite sharp. But maybe I should find a rock as well. With it I could pound the dog's head while I'm jabbing its ribs. I pick one up. Is this how you fight a dog? I don't know and I'm scared but, as I get closer to the house, I start to run faster. After all, I have no choice, there's no alternate route. I'm forced into a crisis I would otherwise avoid. I'm strangely cheered by this

thought: this is the moment the Jew boy has been waiting for. Does he have what it takes? Can he get out of the shetl, take off his black coat, arm himself with an Uzi, become a Sabra, a fighter, a member of the Mossad who travels the world assassinating the enemies of Israel?

"Mister," he says, "maybe that dog just don't like Jews."

My eyes squint in fury. I've become a Jewish Clint Eastwood. My body is still. I stare straight into his Nazi face, my glare makes him flinch. I take two steps towards him, grab him by his dirty shirt, pin him against the wall, lift him slightly off the ground, pull his face closer to mine. His breath stinks of beer and gasoline. My wife and in-laws are a silent audience, amazed at my strength.

"What did you say?" I ask him slowly.

My subtext is clear: don't fuck with Jews. Even if we're smart and rich, even if we wear glasses and play the violin, we're tougher than you can possibly imagine. We carved a home for ourselves in an inhospitable desert and fought off wave after wave of vicious Arabs. We know what it is to see our loved ones die. We survived Hitler's ovens and our faces are sketched with a suffering that has made us harder, and wiser, than you'll ever be.

My pose is so compelling that this fantasy need not continue.

I'm jogging even faster. My usual run is only 3 or 4 miles, and I've already covered 6. But I feel no fatigue.

Extraordinary, maybe even a good thing is this fear. I'm getting a hell of a workout even if the end result is a mangled leg.

Maybe I should run through the grass. Maybe I should walk. I do neither, but I do hug the furthest edge of the dirt road. I can now see the house. I fiddle with the stick in my hand. The fantasies are over, my resolution is high, I'm ready for whatever the good Lord has in store for me. I'm on the mountain of Masada preparing to die. I'm in the Warsaw ghetto, running through the sewers, shooting Nazis. I'm kissing the wailing wall after I've fought my way through the Jordanians and made them flee from Jerusalem. I'm a Maccabee in front of a large blonde audience of academic administrators: I speak in eloquent, unhurried language about my refusal to support the new language code in our school. I have a beard and an aquiline nose. With thin taut muscles, I'm sharp-eyed, with an extraordinary wing-span, ready to pounce on my prey. But only if my prey deserves it, for I am capable also of justice, which I love more dearly than life itself.

"But Reb Tevye, even a poor tailor deserves a little happiness."

God, I hope that dog doesn't attack me.

I'm very near the house. No sign or sound of the dog! My pace quickens. Now I'm in front of the yard, now past the driveway, now 50 yards further down the road. I'm safe, I drop my stick and my rock, and for the first time I feel tired. I slow down: two miles to go. I pass a poorly lettered sign advertising eggs for sale at 75 cents a dozen and turn into the

road to the lake. I feel comforted by the announcement, "Dead End-- Private Road." Soon I'll be back with my relatives, sitting in the hot tub.

I'm amazed at my fear and fantasies. My legs feel heavy with a vague sense of shame. After another mile or so I stop running and when I do so I hear a distant bark that threatens not at all. I walk the last stretch to the lake. As I get closer, I can hear the low roar of the engines on the lake. This too is comforting. I won't tell say anything except that I've run 8 miles and met a bothersome dog. They'll be impressed with my distance, and I'll be glad.

I have only a bit of energy left for fantasies. The line is reissued a final time:

"Mister, maybe that dog just don't like Jews."

I pause, look at the man carefully, confidently, gently. I take one step towards him and meet his eyes.

"Mister," I say, deliberately echoing his words, "maybe the feeling is mutual."