

DOGWALKING

A short story by William Hrdina

Jerry knew the look when he saw it. He got it every day around dusk. It was time to walk. Dogs were creatures of habit- and Jerry's was no exception. As much as he didn't want to do it- Jerry knew he would have to get up- it wasn't smart to ignore Crunchy. Doing so pretty much guaranteed a poop on the living room rug- at best. Crunchy was a small white Shih Tzu with black spots who seemed to live under the delusion she was a much larger dog than she actually was. The fur around her mouth was always brown and crusted with a substance Jerry was never really able to identify.

With a groan and a small fart- Jerry got up off of the sofa and went to get the dog's leash from its hook by the back door. As he stood above the dog, staring at its dirty muzzle and trying to untangle the small body harness- he cursed his ex-wife Sheila for the millionth time. The stupid name- and the stupid dog- were both her handiwork.

"It isn't your fault that you're stupid." He told the dog.

Crunchy only knew she was being addressed- and was happy for the attention. Her little stubby tail wagged a mile a minute and she let rip the dog equivalent of Fran Drescher's voice- a high yipping capable of instantly putting Jerry on edge.

Dusk rapidly faded into darkness- the day had already been gloomy due to a heavy cloud cover. By the time Jerry walked Crunchy the half a block to the dog trail, it was dark enough to cause him to turn on the flashlight on his cell phone. The flashlight helped him identify potential snacks Crunchy might want to snag from the ground- snacks like discarded Cheetos and cat poop- the ultimate delicacy to the nasty little rat-dog. It made him more visible too- which prevented people from crashing into him in the darkness.

The dog trail was one of the things that led Jerry and Sheila to buy their house, back before she decided she'd rather be living with Thomas, the guy who taught her poetry class at the junior college. The full trail was twenty miles long, but the length and breadth of their daily journey was well established by habit and tradition. The whole trip was 0.97 miles. Jerry measured it once by wearing a pedometer.

The trail itself was a narrow paved strip lined closely on both sides by alternating patches of trees and weeds so thick they effectively created a wall on either side. This mini-wilderness lasted for about 50 yards in either direction before giving way to the suburbs that surrounded the trail.

When Jerry saw the dog trail for the first time, he pictured himself walking with a Labrador or a golden retriever. He never pictured himself with a Shih Tzu. Jerry had never liked little dogs. But Sheila threw a fit when they went to the animal shelter, literally falling down on her knees in tears in front of the dog who would eventually bear the moniker Crunchy. Jerry gave in just to stop her desperate sobbing- right in front of the big-haired lady whose name tag was so festooned with animal stickers- you couldn't actually read her name. Then, when she left him for her stupid teacher, Sheila didn't bring Crunchy with her because her new boyfriend wasn't allowed to have dogs in his apartment building.

"Crunchy's always loved you more anyway." Sheila lied.

He didn't like the dog- but neither did he have the heart to throw the dog out into the wild or give him back to the shelter. He was stuck with the stinky little thing- whether he liked it or not.

The moon was large in the sky behind the clouds. The wind blew strong, whipping the leaves on the trees and ripping holes in the cloud cover, allowing intermittent streams of moonlight to get through and creating bizarre moving shadows on the sidewalk. Jerry was just grateful the fall weather had yet to grow its icy teeth. The breeze was actually quite pleasant.

The halfway point for the walk was a small creek that eventually fed into a river four miles to the south. The creek ran underneath the trail and was covered by a small, not entirely safe, rickety wooden

bridge unadorned with any kind of railing. The bridge was where they always headed back. Jerry was just walking and looking up at clouds as they rushed past the moon. It was the sound of splashing that drew his attention back to the world. The splashing, and Crunchy's sudden fit of ferocious barking.

"Shuddup." Jerry grumbled at the dog. He was looking down from the bridge and into the creek, trying to figure out the origin of the splashing. A sustained break in the clouds brought out the answer- and as soon as it did, Jerry found himself not only wishing he'd skipped Crunchy's walk- but skipped moving to the neighborhood- or even the state.

There was a man, of sorts, wading knee deep in the water. He appeared to be wearing a tuxedo and a top hat. Jerry tried to use the small flashlight to get a better look, but the beam wasn't strong enough. Jerry had no choice but to rely on the moon's light.

"Are you okay buddy?" Jerry asked the man.

He got no answer. He didn't really expect one. Some small, rigidly rational part of Jerry's mind wanted to believe the guy was going to say something in a sane, even toned English accent, explaining how he came to be in the creek. The story would be wacky, but plausible.

It would, for instance, explain why there were two gaping black holes where his eyes were supposed to be.

But that hope was just a glimmer. The remaining 98% of Jerry's brain, including all of the outdated monkey parts, were demanding he run like his knickers were on fire. Crunchy, never a very bright dog- pulled the leash *toward* the eyeless thing in the river. Jerry was easily able to hold the dog back, but he would've given twenty bucks to stop the dog's panicked yapping.

The thing in the river paid little attention to Jerry or the dog. Its gaze remained pointed at the black water swirling around its knees.

Jerry's initial feeling was that he'd walked into the middle into someone's very elaborate practical joke. Either that- or one of the hits of LSD he'd taken when he was in his early 20's had just come roaring back with a vengeance. Things without eyes were fun to think about- fun to imagine. But they weren't fun to actually see. When you actually see a man with no eyes wading through a creek only partially visible in the moonlight- while wearing eveningwear- it's anything, but a hoot. It was testicle-shriveling terrifying. There was a noise coming from the back of Jerry's throat he knew was originating from him- but it wasn't a noise he could place- somewhere between a whimper and a growl.

The familiar trees along the trail now looked menacing, cloying, closing in. The dark emptiness of the path looked like one of the creature's black empty eye sockets.

Jerry felt like his feet were nailed into the ground. By the time the creature was a mere 10 feet away- close enough to be lit up by the small LED's in the cell phone, every fiber in Jerry's being screamed for him to run. Yet he just stood there.

The paralysis was finally broken when the creature noticed Jerry for the first time. Its orientation shifted abruptly from the water to Jerry. Even without visible eyes- the empty hollows of the sockets seemed to be peering straight through him- the light of the cell phone lit the creature's face- but the light seemed to disappear into the empty sockets.

"I'd say old boy, I'm afraid I'm going to have to have a word with you." The thing said, in a perfectly crisp and reasonable sounding British accent.

All at once, he found his paralysis broken. Jerry turned on his heels and started to run. Crunchy saw the writing on the wall and took off as well. Within five strides Jerry knew the dog wasn't going to be fast enough. He snatched up the leash like someone snapping back a yo-yo from a stall. Crunchy let out a protesting howl as she shot through the air and into Jerry's arms- but she was otherwise unharmed by the maneuver.

Thirty-eight- an overweight tax adjuster- Jerry wasn't in shape. In spite of many promises to get his ass back into the gym- he somehow never ended up there. He did, however, often end up in front of the refrigerator late at night- scarfing down some high-calorie idiocy he should've been smart enough not to

bring into the house in the first place. None of that mattered. Jerry ran like the wind. There were no men with stopwatches to do the technical calculations- but Jerry paced a four minute mile all the way back to his front door.

He burst inside, closed and locked the door and then began frantically going through the house- locking each and every door and window with Crunchy racing in and out from between his legs barking her annoying bark. For once- Jerry was so preoccupied- he barely even noticed the noise. It was the silver lining- albeit a rather flimsy one. Once the first floor was done- he did the second floor as well- just in case. For the first time, he wished he'd installed an alarm system on the house.

Once Jerry was satisfied every door and window was locked, he took his cell phone, his laptop and even the accursed Crunchy into his bedroom. He locked the door, and after a moment's thought- grabbed a chair from by the window and lodged it underneath the doorknob. Feeling safe for the moment- he reached up to the top shelf of his closet and took down the .38 he kept there in a shoebox. It only took a few seconds for him to remember how to use the gun. It was already loaded. He double checked to make sure there was a bullet in the chamber and then he went to his bed and sat down. After a few minutes, he dialed 9-1-1- but he didn't hit send. He just left it cued up.

Throughout the long night- Jerry went round and round about what he should do. He wasn't going to call the cops. If he did- he thought it pretty likely, he'd be the one who ended up in custody. After all, there was no such thing as monsters- so it wasn't like they were going to find one. He'd end up in the booby-hatch. Just like his sister when she was 22.

By the time the sun came up in the morning- Jerry was feeling a little stupid. As the comforting disk rose up above the horizon- Jerry convinced himself the night before had been some kind of ridiculous misunderstanding. Maybe it was a trick of the light- something to do with the water and the moonlight reflecting- maybe the guy had an accident or something. But an eyeless monster in a top hat and tails? How could that possibly be real? Maybe it really was just a crazy acid flashback.

Exhausted- Jerry decided to stop being ridiculous and go to sleep. He called into work and told them he was going to take a personal day. Responsibilities covered, Jerry was about to call it a night when Crunchy went to the door and started whining insistently. He had one more thing he had to do before he could turn in.

"Damn." Jerry muttered. "Okay- but we're going close."

In the mornings- Jerry didn't walk to the trail. He stayed within a block of the house. As he did every morning, Crunchy took his dump on the neighbor's lawn. And as was his habit- Jerry did not pick it up. He just led the dog back to his house.

There was no sign of monsters- at least until Jerry walked back into his house and came face to face with the thing he'd seen the night before. Even in broad daylight- the thing's hollow sockets were as empty and bleak and hopeless as a black hole.

Jerry didn't have his gun- it was sitting on his nightstand. Jerry thought about bringing it on his walk- but by that time- he'd gone most of the way to convincing himself he'd misread what happened the night before. He didn't want to bring it along because that would be inviting the crazy back in.

It didn't really matter anyway- Jerry could've shot the creature all day long and twice on Sunday- the gun would've had no effect.

Jerry was grateful it was over quickly. In one motion- faster than he could believe possible- the creature crossed the living room and was inches in front of Jerry's face.

"What do you want?" Jerry asked, terrified.

"Civics- my boy- simple, old fashioned civics." The thing with the empty sockets said in a chilly- yet perfectly mannered whisper.

The creature's hand dissolved into a thick soup of smoke that rose up to Jerry's face. The tendrils forced their way between his lips and up his nostrils. His hands went to his face and pawed ineffectually at the smoke. He could feel it solidifying- becoming too thick to breath- like a the insulation foam you

spray in the attic. With a rapid determination the vapor spread out and hardened until it completely cut off both of his sources of oxygen. Like dying butterflies, his fingers tried to get ahold of whatever was covering his nose and mouth- but he couldn't. It was like trying to grab smoke and bend iron at the same time. No matter how hard he tried- he couldn't budge it- and how hard he could try was ebbing away second by second as his brain began to shut down from lack of oxygen.

When Jerry was good and dead, the creature dissolved back into whatever dimension it had emerged from. All that was left of it was an acrid smell the police would note in their reports- but never explain. When the ex-wife and her new boyfriend were easily able to provide an alibi- the case went cold- and stayed that way.

On the morning of the attack- there was a car parked in the driveway across from Jerry's house. The house was unoccupied, a 'For Sale' sign hung on the lawn. The occupant of the car was a woman. She was wearing a very expensive pair of infrared goggles she'd purchased on the internet. They allowed her to see through walls- even in the early light of the day.

"That's what you get- you son of a bitch." She growled.

From the point of view of the police- no credible motive for Jerry's death was ever discovered. Everyone who was interviewed in Jerry's neighborhood described him as a quiet guy- not especially friendly- but not averse to a wave and a smile. Many people did mention one fact though. Apparently- little Crunchy liked to poop on people's lawns- and Jerry never felt the need to pick it up.

They never had an inkling of it- but the police actually interviewed the woman who'd conjured the creature that killed Jerry.

A 70 year old lady in her housecoat- her hair in curlers- a woman who spoke passionately about the need for young people to learn civics so they could understand that simple human decency was what kept society running its course.

What would a woman like that know of murder?

When the cops walked from her house, their stomachs full of the milk and cookies she'd fed them, she'd closed the door and muttered,

"Nobody shits on my lawn motherfucker."