

Come To Roost

By S. Craig Renfroe, Jr.

I'm scraping the insides of banana peels when Dee comes in. She steps over Roost, my mostly mutt bulldog, the dog raising its massive head slightly but drooping when it's clear she has no food.

"Bananas?" She takes one of the naked fruit from a platter stacked high and begins eating.

"They have a psychedelic in small amounts, so you clean out sixteen pounds of peels, roll it out, and bake. Then smoke up." I got the recipe from *The Anarchist Cookbook*.

"Wouldn't it be easier to score some pot? Though you know how I feel about that."

"I actually have a work ethic."

"And you want to say you've gotten high off bananas."

"Sure, that too." Dee and I dated, but she has ambition—wants a nice car and suburban house while I want to never have to sell my life off by the hour. She broke it off only to stalk me afterward, demanding to be friends though I don't do that sort of thing. She has yet to take no for an answer.

"I've decided something," she says.

Busying scraping, I hope she'll go away.

"I've decided to kill you."

"The bananas may beat you to it."

"I'm not kidding."

"Why? What'd I do?"

"Nothing. I'm bored. I've done everything I can think of. I was actually at home tonight arranging the accounts for my mutual funds based on rate of return. I've done everything to ease this. Except kill someone. Might as well be you."

"Might as well." I throw the peel away and take up another.

"I'm actually thinking of killing many people. But the fun part is that since you're first I can tell you."

"That's not very smart. Wouldn't I stop you if I knew?"

"You don't really believe me."

"Still not smart. What if I tell someone you were joking about killing me and then I die? Wouldn't that make you a strong suspect?"

"Maybe I'll kill you tonight before you have a chance to tell anyone."

Something in the way she says this makes me look up from the peel. Her intense stare pulls up her lips into a stern grin, an expression of anticipation a beginning actor might affect.

"My brother is upstairs."

"No, he's not," she says.

He's not upstairs, probably still out with his Latino workers, dancing. "Women don't normally kill people for no reason."

"All the better for me."

"You're almost creeping me out."

She walks toward me but stoops over to run her fingers over Roost's head. "Just kidding. You're so easy."

I go back to my peels and barely notice she lets herself out.

I wake up with my head muffled not from the banana extract, but from getting drunk after I baked the paste spread over a cookie sheet – not to a fine black powder but to a scorched glue that wouldn't come off the pan even when I stabbed at it with the peeler. I could see Roost has gone in search of food or maybe Sean let him out.

I find my brother eating a bowl of bran. Is Sean late for work? He did all the dishes, except for the cookie sheet with caked on banana hallucinogen, which he put in the sink to soak.

"Why are you up so early?" he asks.

"Am I?" The clock says eight-thirty. Sean has another thirty minutes to get to his job at the irrigation company. "It's my new regime. I'm going to make a real breakfast: bacon, eggs, waffles, peaches, orange juice, and coffee."

"We don't have any of that stuff."

"Any doughnuts left?"

"Over the microwave."

"Where's Roost?"

"I haven't let him in yet."

I go to get him, see his slobbery face while I snack on a doughnut. The yard has a thick carpet of grass with a funny name that Sean personally maintains, what with his business being irrigation. Usually, the mutt would be waiting at the glass sliding door, but even after I open it wide and call his name, he doesn't show. Starting to breathe heavily, I dash out, my toes rustling thick blades of grass. No Roost. I run to the gate, but it's closed and locked. Desperate, I walk the wooden fence calling his name and checking for tunnels though he has never dug a hole in his life.

"Stop screaming," Sean says. He's in the doorway.

"He's gone. Roost's gone."

We search the yard again—examine the locked gate. We ransack the house, upending the couch just in case. He's gone.

"Have you seen Dee?" I ask Sean.

"Today? No. Why?"

"She was weird last night."

"Kidnap-your-dog weird?"

"I don't know."

"You can post some flyers, but I have to get to work."

With no pictures of him, I try to describe Roost on some sheets of printer paper: *Sort of Brown Bulldog Mix, Answers to Roost, Droopy Lower Lip, Reward for Return*. I walk the neighborhood until it ends in the highway, stapling some of the signs to power poles. Too sad to go on, I go back to the house and drink myself to a nap.

I wake to a dark room with the phone going off. "Yeah?"

"Is Sean there?" Luis asks.

"No, I guess he stayed late for being late this morning. We lost Roost, Luis."

"He didn't show up to work."

I jump. “Why didn’t you call sooner?”

“I called his cell phone but didn’t get an answer. I’ve been trying your place for a couple hours. Where have you been?”

“It’s fine, it’s all going to be fine.”

“Who said it wasn’t? I just need to talk to Sean.”

I hang up. I need to think. I try Sean’s cell, but it goes straight to voice mail. Dee doesn’t pick up until the fifth ring when I am already composing the message I’ll leave.

“Walter?” she asks.

“Where is my dog? And my brother?”

“How would I know?” Her voice has that mischievous tone I remembered from the times she’d hide my clothes when I stayed over at her apartment—claiming ignorance and suggesting I go home naked or perhaps wearing some of hers.

“So it’s a coincidence?”

“Maybe Sean took Roost.”

“I meant it’s a coincidence you threaten me and then everyone disappears.”

“Things like that happen all the time.”

I notice she doesn’t deny threatening me. “I notice you don’t deny threatening me.”

“Some people just can’t take a joke.”

“Is my missing dog and brother a joke?”

“Life’s a joke, darling, with a terrible punch line. Go to sleep—I’m sure they’ll turn up.”

I compose a retort, but the phone’s gone silent. I couldn’t possibly go to sleep, so I find what Jack Daniels I’ve got left.

Day two goes by slowly. I know from TV that there’s no use calling the cops until forty-eight hours to report a missing brother, and they probably don’t even care about a dog. I call Sean every hour and always straight to voice mail. I’ve locked all the doors and carry a kitchen knife from room to room. I go over in my head places he could go. Maybe he met someone, but he would have told me. His ex lives in California. Luis calls again, but I let the machine get it. He asks for Sean. Truth be told, Sean’s a bit of an ass, yelling at me when I don’t keep the place clean or demanding I go out so he can bring people over, as if I can’t entertain his friends and prospective mates. But we always watch some stupid old sci-fi movie on Thursday nights, and I don’t want to watch the ridiculous suffering of earthlings when mine’s so present.

I wake up terribly sober. I take all of the aspirin that’s left. I walk the house dialing Sean over and over. I know what I have to do, but I want more than anything not to. We haven’t talked in three years. And when he answers, he only says he’s coming over. He was never one for talking on the phone. When Mom was alive, he would let her get it and talk through her, wouldn’t even answer it if she wasn’t there.

The hours pass and the only thing I can account for is standing over the sink and making patterns in the blackened cookie pan with the kitchen knife, quick lines and curved strokes like Chinese calligraphy.

Dad has only recently lost his steely build, the fat slowly overtaking him, pillowing his sides, dulling the machine man who raised me. He could almost be cuddly, except his face and the pained pull of his cheeks as if he were perpetually disappointed by the world, a bad show he couldn't walk out on or get cancelled. He paced around, and I knew he wanted to search each room of the house, not taking my word for it that Sean had disappeared.

"Look here." He points his finger at my chest as if I were to look at myself or inside my heart or guts. "I'm not surprised. He probably just got fed up with taking care of you."

"And took Roost?"

"Some people like dogs." Dad does not. "You know what you need to do? You need to take care of this place till he gets back."

"He's the responsible one, right? Luis at his job says the company is going to fire him if he doesn't come back soon. They can't keep covering for him. I'm calling the police. My ex-girlfriend killed him."

"So you're not gay?"

We take turns looking away from one another and this is when I miss Roost the most. I almost bend down and make a baby noise out of reflex. His slack-jaw face would've protected me.

"You two haven't needed me in long time," Dad says.

"So that excuses you from caring now?"

He crosses his arms like he used to, high on his chest and tight as if he were keeping his ribcage from exploding. "Look here, tell Sean not to call me when he gets back. I'm through babysitting."

"He's not coming back," I say. Dad stalks out, back to whatever life he'd cobbled together without anyone.

The police are as helpful as I expect. They take the information. They send someone out. They tell me people leave their lives all the time, and when they do, they're rarely found. I don't tell them I suspect Dee. I try to get them interested first in the idea of foul play, but they say that's not likely. There has been no robbery, his car has not been found abandoned, there is no reason for suspicion. Just like Dee said.

I ask about my dog. Like Dad, they jump on my loss as a sign, proof that Sean's alive and off some place enjoying Roost all to himself.

After they leave, I call Sean and leave another message—this one warning him I'll kill him if he doesn't get back here. Then, I wander the house. What do I do with this place if he never comes back? I open his bedroom door. There's nothing under his bed except an old rowing machine he never used. But there are boxes in his closet. I take the first down and break the tape. Inside I find annuals, high school, college, even elementary. I find a picture of him in second grade, and ominously, he has a black eye.

It takes me the rest of the day, most of the night, and into the afternoon of the next day once I've woken up to go through everything in the house. Nothing offers any insight into why Sean might have left of his own volition. It leaves me only one option: Dee.

To give me the strength for my mission, I eat what's left of some chicken in the freezer Sean had barbecued. Leaving the plate with its brothers in the sink, I notice the cookie sheet is all but invisible, concealed, disappeared. I gather a flashlight, binoculars, a note pad, a golf club, and my trusty kitchen knife.

My car takes some time to warm up, and I wonder what she did with Sean's truck. There's the clay pits, deep holes of water we used to joke you could throw dead bodies in. How do you dredge something? Are there freelance dredgers?

Only stopping for some doughnuts with my last five dollars, I stake out Dee's place. I pick a parking space away from but pointing at her apartment building, her second floor apartment windows visible. With about fifty units, I expect to remain discreet. Dee's car is nowhere in sight. My plan: wait for Dee to show up and catch her unawares. Or maybe I should wait for her to show and then wait for her to leave again and shadow her, hoping she'll lead me to Sean. Either way I wait.

Three hours go away and so does the daylight. I hope I haven't missed her because I realize I've been napping on and off. A knock on the driver's side window—right next to my head—makes me jerk up, jabbing the steering wheel into my gut. Before I can scramble for the kitchen knife, I realize it's not Dee but Jamie, her roommate.

I roll down the window. "Hey, how are you?"

"What you doing out here?" she asks.

"Waiting for Dee."

"You'll be waiting a long time. She doesn't live here anymore. She moved out a couple weeks ago."

Would that be enough evidence for the police? "That jokester. She told me to meet her here."

"Is she coming by?"

"No, I guess she's just playing with me."

"Don't take it personal. You know how she is."

"Yep." Not really. Murderous?

"Since you're here, you want to come in?"

Jamie and I had flirted before, but out of respect for Dee, I never pursued it. But if she's possibly killing everything I love, I don't see any point in being the gentleman. "That would be wonderful."

The apartment is messy—messier than Dee would have allowed: piles of shoes mysteriously in the middle of the kitchen, a broken chair upside down as if to remind Jamie not to sit in it, a collection of phone books past and present stacked to form end tables. I guide the conversation for information on Dee. She moved without warning and without giving Jamie her new address, except to say it was out in the country. She only told Jamie that she had come into money and wanted a house. Wanted to start over somewhere else. Other than that, Jamie claimed Dee wasn't acting funny, though Jamie admitted not inviting her to her new place or even giving her a forwarding address was strange. By this time, we had gone from closely sitting to touching to convening to the bedroom, and perhaps to get me to shut up about Dee, Jamie takes my clothes off. It has been months—God, months—but I acquit myself well enough.

I wake up to an empty room and the sound of my cell phone. I can't find my pants. Pulling myself from under a clinging quilt, I can't get to the phone sitting on top of Jamie's dresser before the chug of my train engine ring stops. Was it Sean? Did I miss Sean? I check the missed call and the I.D. reads unavailable. Sean? The train comes to life in my hand. The same unavailable number. "Hello?"

"You actually slept with my old roommate?"

"Did you disappear her, too?"

"She's just gone to work. Some people have jobs."

"So you admit that you had something to do with Sean?"

"Was she good? Did you enjoy her?"

"You dumped me, for God's sake."

"You didn't give me any choice. Maybe if you'd have loved me enough."

"I never loved you"

There's a pause, and I can hear background noise and in it a note that is achingly familiar.

"If that's true," she says, "why do you still have that toy ship I gave you hanging from your rearview?"

"Are you looking in my car?"

"Not anymore. But I left it unlocked for you. Keys in the glove box."

After searching while talking, it dawns on me that she's not only been in my car but she's been in this room, too. "Where are my clothes?"

"For old time's sake."

I don't bother replying, silence on the other end. I do bother scanning the rest of the apartment but, as expected, no sign of jeans, t-shirt, or boxers. Jamie's clothes are laughably small, a person in miniature. Not even a housecoat in her closet. It comes down to a sheet or towel. Her sheets annoyingly floral, I shower, and wrap a brown, fluffy towel around my waist. I get to the parking lot before having to pass anyone. He's older, balding, probably a loser teacher who can only afford these starter apartments. Or a drunk. He raises a graying eyebrow.

"Locked myself out." I don't wait to see if that satisfies him.

The officer paces Sean's empty bedroom, as if he were measuring it with his unbearably shiny shoes. "So your ex ran off with your brother?"

"No. I told you she killed my dog and then my brother and now has robbed the place."

"There's no forced entry."

"She got Sean's key or used mine."

"Why would she only steal your brother's things," he says, "everything of his, furniture, photos, clothes, and nothing else?"

"And the dog's. Roost. She took all his stuff."

"Have you heard of Occam's razor? The simplest answer is ninety-nine percent of the time the right answer. So we have a missing brother who took his stuff and your dog and who may or may not be shacking up with your old girlfriend. I'm afraid that's the simplest answer. But tough on you, sir. I can understand you don't want face up to it."

"You have no idea."

He makes a note on his pad, perhaps writing that down as my final statement. “I’ll put in a report and send you a copy.”

“Are you leaving?”

He nods and makes his niceties out the door. Trying not to run, I go straight from the door to the remote. The TV relieving the silence. But even so, I can feel it under the drone, a stillness.

It’s days before I move from the living room—sleeping on the couch. No one comes. No one calls. Do I not have any friends? I thought that I did, that I had lots of friends, that I was popular. On the couch, staring at a show selling me a table full of knives, I realize I only talked to Sean and Dee. And Roost, if he counts. I had friends in college before I quit or was politely asked to leave, due to my preference for online video games over accent-thick lectures. How does one become completely disconnected from the world? And it’s as if Dee has even made my small slice of the world disappear. Or has made me realize I disappeared from the world long before Sean did.

Except for these clowns on the infomercial in some far outpost, selling me bowie knives and throwing in a samurai sword for free. Should I get a sword? I should really get a gun. But I don’t have enough money for food, much less bullets.

For no clear reason, I get up and begin to sweep. I sweep the whole place. There’s not as much fur as I expected—Sean demanded I sweep up after Roost. I feel a sharp pain when I empty the dustpan, as if I could fashion another dog out of the few sheddings.

Then, I dust. With the rag pushing the dust into the air, I remember Mom, long gone, instructing me in chore order and how you dust first and sweep last—what with the dust settling to the floor. Damn. I sweep again.

The phone rings. Unavailable, like before. “Hello?” Nothing. “Dee?” Gone.

I fight the urge to go to bed and sit down at the kitchen table. It’s covered in mail. I’ve been stacking it here, sure Sean would want to go through it. Then, when I wasn’t sure he’d get the chance, I tossed it here to ignore it. I get back up and drag the trash can over, taking the lid off. I sort. Coupon books and packs and flyers, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, really, how many of them? I throw them all away. *Sports Illustrated* (Sean’s). Bill, electricity. Bill, phone (Sean’s cell). I put those both in a pay right away pile. Bill, my school loan. Into the trash. Bill, mortgage. I open it. I am screwed. More flyers, more trash. A plain manila envelop with no return address. It’s taped, so I have to tear it open.

Inside, covered with bits of shredded paper, I find a set of laminated pieces of newspaper, classified ads, help-wanted ads. Flipping through them, they’re all ones I could qualify for, meaning little education needed, unskilled, a living body. And they’re all in Sumerville, a little town an hour away that I’ve driven through on my way to the mountains. I consider calling the police with the new clues. Search Sumerville. Dust these laminated ads for DNA. Who laminates newspaper?

I haven’t worn a tie since my mom’s funeral—it constricts my breathing, though that probably has more to do with the top button of my dress shirt. How depressing to gain weight in your neck.

After applying to all the ads, I get two interviews. The drive into Sumerville takes longer than I remember, and I get lost finding the actual town off the interstate. The first interview goes well with the lawn maintenance company—he seems impressed by having a brother in the biz and my smattering of Spanish picked up thanks to Sean and Luis. Waiting for the next one, I cruise the town, looking.

The next job has all the appeal of killing chickens, which apparently I'm not qualified to do since they haven't responded to my application or follow-up. The interviewer has on a purple suit, and she keeps adjusting her matching hair clip.

"The job is sales, mostly," she says.

"Door-to-door, cold call stuff?" I ask.

"No, no. We're a marketing firm, and you'll be on a sales team who solicit business."

"How will we be doing this soliciting?"

"I've already set you up to shadow one of our most successful salespersons who makes hundreds of dollars a week in bonuses."

My cell phone rings. I expect Unavailable, but it's the lawn care people. I answer though the purple woman protests. They offer me the job. "Thank God," I say, "You have no idea what I was about to do."

Her face turns the shade of her suit. I stay on the phone with my new job but hurry out.

Edging has a calming precision, and occasionally I'll let the weed eater strike the sidewalk and send up a shower of sparks. Howard, my boss, likes my single-purposeness, my blind obedience, though all he says is "Good job, sweaty." I sweat nonstop—even as Fall drops the leaves in our plastic bags, I drench my t-shirt before lunch. Finishing the walks, I pack up the truck. I let the rest of my crew go because I like to end the day wondering about absences, how they make things so present.

And before I know it, I've daydreamed my way to the shop, the truck keys hung up on their board. Expecting my decrepit car, dying as it is before my eyes from the long commutes, I instead find the lot empty but for a new yellow Mini Cooper. When Dee opens the door, I don't know if I should run or yell for help as she walks around from the driver's side. Dressed more soccer mom medical internist than serial killer, she smiles. Has she gotten her teeth whitened?

"How's work?" she asks.

"Where's Sean?"

"You've really impressed me." She runs her thumbnail across her lower lip.

"That I'm breathing?"

"I got rid of your car. That thing's a death trap."

I don't acknowledge her possible attempt at humor, but grip my keys in my pocket, lacing some through my fingers, makeshift brass knuckles.

"Will you go for a ride with me?" she asks.

"Like an unwanted puppy?"

"What do you have to worry about? I think you could take me." She opens the passenger door and stands back mock chivalrous.

I shrug and get in. She slams the door. The interior has the remembered quality of her room when we dated, so clean and ordered, as if no one had been here before, an

environment of a mind that thought nothing was beyond its control. All sanitized, except a small brightly wrapped gift box, rectangular, big enough to hold a finger.

Once in the driver's seat, Dee turns to me. "Buckle up."

We shoot out of the parking lot, the little car amplifying every bump and shift. I try to focus on the passing streets, memorize the directions, but I keep catching sight of her playing two fingers through the hair over her ear, and my body memory wants my hand there at the base of her neck, my thumb rubbing to her earlobe. I have to pay attention—I have to collect clues. We're in the old town center, long abandoned but now back from the dead, a zombie place of craft stores, the local paper, oddly named restaurants, empty lots, and government offices. She cuts the town square and heads down one of the main streets.

"Open the box," she says.

I don't touch it, but she forces it into my lap, calling me a baby. The top and bottom are individually wrapped so it comes apart without unwrapping, no stray paper, no loose mess. Inside, a silver ring links three keys.

"The top one's for the car. And the other two," we pull up into a driveway, "are for this."

The house, a two-story monster, probably as old as the street, has turrets and a tower up one side. The porch hugs it for a reach around. The place has been painted a yellow eerily similar to the Mini. The lawn, immaculate, is surrounded by a black wrought-iron fence.

"Go on," she says.

She stays behind me, with no apparent weapon, urging me on, to the walkway, up the steps. Once inside, I'll knock her down and run, steal the car, get the police, search the whole place, the trunk, there will be evidence, there will be a jury of her peers. I try the keys at the door but get the wrong order. Finally pushing it open, I hear the pounding paws before Roost bursts from a hallway. In mid-stride he turns but too late and slams into my legs. I grab him. My fingers fan his sides and back up his neck. His jowls and tongue cover me in drool. He smells freshly bathed. I'm crying and push my eyes into his fur to dry them off. When I stand, he collapses—exhausted from the excitement—on my boots.

"Is Sean upstairs?" I ask.

She laces her arms around me and pushes her lips right to my ear for a whisper. "You'll always know I don't bluff."

To all the world, as several cars pass down that historic main street, we look the model couple, a funny-faced dog at our feet, our arms entwined, in the maw of a remodeled Queen Anne home. Until she closes the door.

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