Looking for Dogs

A Short Story by

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LOOKING FOR DOGS
by Christopher Gronlund

"Let's go get us some dogs!"

Dicky stood at his open bedroom window, watching his father's breath in the chilly morning air. His father, Richie, never knocked on the front door or rang the doorbell like a normal person. For reasons known only to him, Richie preferred walking around back and knocking on the bedroom window when he wanted his son. It didn't matter if Dicky was sound asleep, making love to his wife, Tina, or just trying to get away from it all—when Richie Wingfeld wanted something, he knocked on windows.

"What are you talking about, Dad?" Dicky said. "What dogs?"

"There's a couple Great Danes running around in a field. Let's go get 'em."

Dicky looked back at his bed—at Tina, tangled in the sheets. The impression of his body in the mattress formed from a good night's sleep called to him; he wanted to climb back in, knowing it was still warm and waiting.

"Dad. Why can't you go get them yourself?" he said, wondering why he was having the conversation at all. He wondered what made a grown man see two stray Danes in a field and think, "Hey, look—FREE DOGS!!!"

"I ain't puttin' two strange dogs in my car. Hell, they wouldn't fit anyways!" Richie said. "You've got a truck."

"And I'm not putting two strange dogs in my truck!"

"Won't have to," Richie said, having figured it all out before knocking on his son's bedroom window. "They'll ride in the back."

"They'll jump out!"

"Nah, they're big dogs. Big dogs know how to ride in pickup beds."

"If they'll ride in the bed, that means they're trained. If they're trained, that means they belong to somebody." Dicky thought he'd win with logic, but his approach to reasoning differed greatly from his father's.

“Nah, no one’s gonna let two gorgeous Danes like that run loose. Nobody owns them.”

“You can borrow my truck to go get them, Dad. I’ll give you my keys—“

“I don’t want your keys, Son,” Richie said, dropping his eyes to the windowpane. “I want your help.”

Dicky knew what Richie really wanted was company.

“Okay, Dad…I’ll go. Give me a minute to get dressed and I’ll be out.”

The heat kicked on as he closed the window; all Dicky wanted was to fall back asleep before the sun had fully risen. He wanted to slide back into bed, cuddle up against Tina, and never wake up. That’s what chilly Saturday mornings were made for, not running around a field with his father, chasing two strange dogs with heads the size of cinderblocks and jaws that worked like bear traps.

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Richie lit a Lucky Strike as soon as he climbed into Dicky’s truck.

“Dad, please don’t smoke in my truck.”

“It relaxes me.”

“It stinks!”

Richie opened the door, carefully snubbed the cigarette out on the sole of his dirty work boots, and put it back in the pack for later.

“Better?”

“Yes, thank you.” Dicky felt the need to defend his decision to not allow smoking in his vehicle. “It’s just…it’s a new truck, you know?”

Everything in Dicky’s life was new: his truck, his house, his wife, and if his father had any say in the matter, soon he’d probably end up with a new dog because Richie didn’t have room for one Great Dane, let alone a pair.

“I know,” Richie said. “I forgot how you are about smoking, even with the windows down."

“That’s all right.” Dicky put the truck in gear and headed down the driveway.

Richie looked out the window. “Ya know, out at the house, the sun’s already up,” He pointed at all the tall houses in Dicky’s neighborhood. “But these houses are all so tall, it’s still back behind the rooftops. You rich guys even get more time to sleep before the sun comes up than the rest of us. Ya ever think about that?”

“No, Dad—I hadn’t.”

“You should. You need to appreciate little things like that.”

“I do. I just hadn’t thought about that particular little thing.”

It bothered Dicky when his father talked about money. All his life, he was told to make something of himself, to make sure he didn’t have to earn a living with his hands, like his father. Now that he had done everything he was told to do, it still wasn’t enough for Richie.

Richie constantly reminded him he had forgotten his roots. But when Dicky went back to his roots and hung out with old friends, or worked hard with his hands, Richie reminded him he was better than that. He couldn't win, and he couldn't simply avoid his father.

The two worked for the same company—Bender Brick—only Richie still worked in the heat of the yard, loading flatbeds, while Dicky owned the whole operation and watched people work from the comfort of his air-conditioned office. Dicky started working for Bender in high school during his summer breaks, helping his dad in the yard. He learned how to drive a forklift; then Richie taught him how to operate a boom truck and crane, always reminding him that back when he started, "we did it all by hand." Dicky had offered his father the chance to move into the office many times, but he always refused, saying, "Nah, I'm made to work out here in the yard. I'm not fancy enough for an office gig."

As he drove alongk, Dicky stared at his hands on the steering wheel. His fingers were long, slender, and smooth; his nails manicured and strong. He had his mother's hands—he could have been a hand model, featured in catalogs holding golf clubs, wearing wedding rings, or spreading margarine on bread. Quite a contrast were Richie's hands, with his knotted knuckles, cracked nails, and skin like sandpaper. His hands could have been featured in medical journals: they were gnarled and scarred, made for holding wrenches, chains, welding torches, and bricks.

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"Hey, slow down a sec," Richie said.

"Do you see the dogs?"

"Nah, they're farther down, but look there." He pointed to an old sink dumped on the side of the road.

Dicky kept driving. "Dad, I'm not stopping for a sink. You have enough crap in your yard…"

In the last year, Richie had taken to collecting junk. Broken lawn mowers, old tires, splintered fenceposts, and tangled chickenwire littered his yard. He pulled scrap lumber and damaged chairs from people's garbage and combed junkyards for car parts he'd never use. On more than a few occasions, people pulled into his driveway with pickup beds full of trash, assuming it was the county dump.

It started with old bathtubs—the freestanding, cast iron and porcelain kinds yuppies killed for. Dicky planted flowers in them, hoping to pawn off the growing mess in his father's front yard as quaint, country decorating. When all the old, porcelain tubs in the area were had, Richie moved on to cheap, fiberglass bathtubs manufactured in the 70s. Soon his yard was littered with a sick collection of green, pink, and powder blue ready-made tubs. Sunflowers didn't even look good in them.

When bathtubs ran out, Richie moved on to old boat hulls. One day he rushed over to Dicky's, excited.

"I found an old boat body out in a field, Son." In Richie's mind, if something was abandoned, blew into, or—in the case of Great Danes, ran into a vacant field—it was finder's keepers. "All we gotta do is put some supports in, build a deck, find a motor, and we're ready to go!" Nevermind the hull was discarded because it had a three-foot long crack running down the starboard side, punctuated by a hole the size of a cantaloupe. When Dicky pointed this out to Richie, he said, "We get some bondo, patch it up, and we're good!"

When rusty car bodies, old farm machinery, and refrigerators started piling up, the neighbors complained. Dicky hoped Richie had a plan for all the things he brought home, but he knew it would all just pile up and be a big mess to clean come the day Richie drew his final breath. The responsible thing would have been telling his father he had to do something with all the junk, but Dicky knew it meant something more to Richie

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“Slow down…I saw them around here,” Richie told Dicky.

They drove along the edge of the road, looking for dogs, but all they saw was prairie.

“It looks like they’re gone, Dad.”

“Keep going, they’ve gotta be ‘round here somewhere.”

They drove up and down the road for fifteen minutes, but the dogs were nowhere to be found.

“Maybe their owners found them.”

“Nah, they didn’t belong to anyone. Pull over.”

Dicky stopped the truck, and his father climbed out from the cab. He lit the cigarette he snubbed out on his boot when he got into the truck and headed into the field. Dicky cut the engine and followed.

They walked along an old cow path running through the high grass.

“What were you doing out this far?” Dicky said.

“Just driving around. Thinking.”

Dicky got quiet, knowing what was next. When Richie turned to face his son, his eyes filled with tears.

“I miss her, Son…”

“I know, Dad. I do too…”

Breast cancer took Laura Wingfeld from her son and husband the previous year, leaving them both lost and alone. Dicky handled it better than his father, but a year’s time hardlyhealed the wounds.

Months after his mother died, Dicky went by to check on Richie. Prior to Laura’s death, Richie had only missed two days of work in his thirty-seven years with Bender, but he was now regularly skipping out. Richie's front yard was already beginning to give way to piles of junk. Dicky knocked on the door, but there was no answer. He knocked on the kitchen window, figuring if it was Richie’s preferred way of letting people know he’d arrived, maybe it was the best way to get his attention.

Nothing.

He tried the door; it was unlocked, so he went inside.

The kitchen hadn’t been cleaned since shortly after his mother died: dishes were piled in the sink, boxes and garbage had not been taken out. The only company Richie had were the cockroaches that had found paradise on his countertops.

Dicky made his way down the hallway, walking toward the front room. The rest of the house was a mess, too, reeking of garbage and vermin. The stench changed to something more familiar as he neared the living room, though—he smelled the lemon wood oil his mother used to clean her shelves.

“Dad?”

Richie didn’t answer.

The smell brought back good memories.

“Mom?”

He entered the living room; it was immaculate, the way his mother always kept it. It was Laura’s favorite room in the house and Richie kept it spotless—in memory—while letting the rest of the house crumble down around him. Dicky watched his father clean the shelves where his mother kept her menagerie of ceramic birds. Oblivious to his son’s presence, Richie took each bird down, polished the shelf, then carefully put them back exactly the way his wife left them. He reached Laura’s favorite piece: a smooth, white porcelain dove. He set his cloth down beside it and ran his hand over the bird’s surface, gently stroking it like he stroked the back of her smooth hands all those years.

Dicky turned and left without saying another word, leaving his father to his thoughts.

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Ten minutes after breaking down, Richie Wingfeld finally let go of his son. In those moments, it finally made sense to Dicky: the trash his father collected was his own twisted menagerie. His mother’s beauty was reflected in her collection; his father’s loss reflected in his. His mother was smooth, like porcelain; his father was hard, like steel. Dicky now understood why searching for two dogs in a vacant field was so important to Richie. Looking for things offered hope.

He clapped his hand on his father’s shoulder. “Why don’t we head home, Dad?”

“Yeah…good idea.” Richie scanned the field one last time—not hoping to see two Great Danes, but somebody else that would never be there again.

They drove along, not saying a word to one another. Dicky let his dad smoke Luckys the whole way home. He got to the end of Richie’s driveway and let him out.

“Hey, Son. Tomorrow, you think you can take me to the junkyard? There’s a tranny I wanna pull from an old Buick—I’ll need some help.”

Dicky now understood why a man who drove an ’84 Honda Civic needed a transmission from a ’72 Buick Skylark. “Sure, Dad. Of course.”

“Thanks! I’ll come to your window around eight…”