

Bobby and the Mutt

by Chris Castle

Bobby walked until he was out of the door and into the street, the cold air hitting him like a shot to the gut. He sneezed and shivered with the cold. He was coming down with something. He turned left and walked down Main Street, into the crowds and the brightly lit shops. He tried to remember why he became a cop. No family ties, no friends on the force. His father was a baker, his mother a housewife. For the first time in his life he was glad they were both gone now and not here to see him fall so hard. He smacked himself on the side of the head for no other reason than the fact that hurting was the only thing he could still seem to feel.

He turned down the long path to his road when he saw it. At first he thought it was an old toy, thrown out to make space for the new Christmas toys, but then he saw it twitch, then hop onto one leg. The closest thing to a dead dog he'd ever seen. Bobby walked towards it for no better reason than he couldn't quite believe how bad it looked.

Its paw was raised from the concrete, so it was hopping constantly. What fur he had, was in tufts, so there were long hard streaks where his skin was visible. Then there was the face. The crown of its head had dry squares of skin, like it was built from clay, down to its eyes. They were bloodshot, red the way Bobby's used to be after a three day drunk. Except he was pretty sure, this poor son of a bitch had never even come close to a good time at any time recently. Bobby crouched down and peered into its face, the way he did at crime scenes.

"You come to take away that mutt?" Came a voice from above. Bobby didn't look up, but saw the dog flinch. "You take it away or put a bullet in it or something. It's been round here for days, limping along, eating our trash! It's a goddamn vermin!"

Bobby finally looked up; saw a fat man in a small vest looking down at him. He didn't like the way the man was smiling as he was talking, like he was enjoying the dog suffering. Bobby looked at him long and hard and the man didn't look away. In fact, he looked like he was looking to start something.

"No-one's putting a bullet in him," Bobby called back, lifting his badge out of his pocket. He nearly fumbled it, after not carrying it for the two weeks. He held it out high and wide, letting the fat man get a good eye of it. He came as close to shrinking back when he saw it and Bobby drew up to stand, sensing the fear.

"I figure someone in the neighborhood might have called animal services or something, rather than just peering down on it for days." Bobby flipped the badge back into his pocket,

watching the fat man trying to edge behind the curtain; it didn't work. Instead he just waved Bobby off and turned back to his room. He knelt back down to the dog.

"Just you and me, huh, mutt?" he said. The dog looked at him shivering. He'd be dead before the end of the week with the cold, he figured. There were numbers he knew, a friend he had at the pound who owed him a favour for turning a blind eye once or twice. He had people he could call, he knew, even as he pulled the jacket from his back. There were people who could handle this, he almost said out loud as he wrapped the dog in the coat, letting himself be lifted the way a baby would. This is a mistake, he whispered up to the building, the curtains of the fat man's apartment shut now and dark.

"Yep," was all Bobby actually said, as he started to walk home, with the shivering mutt in his arms.

That night he set the dog down on the floor of his apartment. He laid down a blanket which the dog took to straight-away, sparking into sleep almost immediately. Bobby sat a few feet away from him, watching his ribs rise with each breath, the sound of his wheezing breath. Even that was something. Even that was a comfort. He sat resting against the wall for a long time, watching him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the red lights of his answering machine flickering in and out of life. He didn't get up to eat; he didn't get up to make coffee. Instead he reached down for the other blanket and wrapped himself in it, until he slipped away into sleep, slowly tumbling onto the floor, a few feet from the dog.

He woke up stiff and pulled himself up; the dog was still out for the count. His head felt heavy with the cold and his nose was starting to block. He went to the fridge and began to make himself food, flicking the answer machine button down as he walked past. There were two from Jenny, the first hurried and uncomfortable, the second slow and simple, like the way she used to talk when they were getting ready to get out of bed on weekend mornings. He listened to her explain things, the papers, the amount of signatures needed on which set of forms. By the time she had finished explaining he had a cup in his hand and was drinking. He saved the message, like he did all of them, working out he could keep this one for twenty three days before he lost her.

After he made breakfast, he walked over to the dog, patted its ear as gently as he could. Even that made him jump into life. Jesus, some asshole had really done a number on him. Bobby put his hands out flat and peaceful like he did with any victim and gently talked to it. He put down a plate of food, not too rich so as to make it puke, but something that might at least help repair some of the damage. The dog carefully went at it, eating more as he went on, until

the plate was clean. Bobby took it away and then patted his leg, trying to lead him towards the bathroom, as he turned on the tap of the bath.

It was his sole perk; a bath. Not a kid's bath, not a midget's bath, a bath he could rest in. After Jenny had gone and the house was nothing more than photo's, he had to get a place; it was a crash pad, little more than a hostel room, he knew that, but he had his one luxury: this bath. He had it three quarters to the top and then lifted the dog in. He had braced himself for a fight, but the dog just let himself be lifted in. Slowly Bobby massaged in the shampoo, the soap, cleaning away as best he could, careful not to cause anymore damage. This bath should be in a house. This creature should be a child. This life is a mistake and the real one is lost. Bobby thought these things and watched his hands shiver for a while. He pulled the dog down onto the floor and padded him down with a towel.

"It's a start," Bobby said, wondering if he had somehow made the dog looked even thinner by washing all the dirt out of him.

He went to the local shop and bought more food. Not dog food, but just more of what he already had; what the hell; if I like it, the mutt should, too, right? He thought as he put things in the basket. That night he fed him and put him in the blanket, setting a box by his side for his business that he took too straight away. Someone, somewhere, had once trained him; Bobby thought and wondered how it had come to be left in that state, abandoned. He patted him once on the head and then headed for the door, looking back once and waving, before he closed the door.

"So you just took it in? What about rabies and disease? That thing could be carrying anything, man." Bobby looked back to his partner. His eyes were wide open, waiting for an answer.

"He's got no more filth in him than who we meet every day out here." Bobby said, looking back out the window. The streets were quiet now, the cold taking people off the street and free to carry out god knows what behind closed doors.

"People are gonna think you're crazy, Bobby. Don't go telling anyone else that, okay?" his partner jabbed a finger onto Bobby's arm, just the way he hated.

Someone had sprayed fresh graffiti on the wall; 'merry crisis and a happy new fear.'

His partner reached across him and took his paper cup of coffee.

"Maybe," Bobby said, bringing his eyes back to the car. He looked at the clock on the dash. He took a couple of painkillers for the cold, feeling his throat tightening up with each breath he took.

“Happy Christmas eve, Bobby,” the other man said, as he sipped his coffee. Bobby took his own and raised it in a toast. And the two managed to laugh, as the cold dipped again and they started to see their breath in-front of him.

Bobby’s soon to be ex wife turned up on his doorstep just as he was showering the mutt down. He was starting to look half-way close to living. Bobby opened the door smiling and nearly fell back when he saw her standing there.

“Good to see you smiling again, Bobby,” she said, taking a step back. She held out a box, with a big red ribbon tied round it. He took it and invited her in, standing to one side to let her get by. He caught a trace of orange in her hair, maybe strawberry too.

They sat in the kitchen with the dog between them. When he was done telling the story she put her hand up to her mouth, smiling again. He shook his head, patted down the mutt’s head.

“You got a name for him yet?” She asked, pushing her cup to the side.

“I figure Hendrix.” He said, waiting to see what she thought.

“It was only ever going to be that or Dylan, right?”

“I like those names,” he said, feeling foolish.

“I know,” she said and the two of them looked away from each other. Baby names, play fights in bed. All gone now.

“Thanks for stopping by,” he said, standing after her, feeling his heart sink.

“It’s not anything to get excited about, Bobby,” she said, winking. He had already posted the book to her new apartment. “And thank you for my gift. And take something for that cold, okay?”

“Next year, it’ll be a chandelier, like we promised,” he said and smiled. But he knew how sad his smile was, how it must have looked to her and before he could control anything, she was already at the door. For a second he saw things, a year from now and she was gone, out of reach and out of his life. He coughed into his fist, allowing himself a few seconds to settle before he spoke.

“I’ll call you,” she said. He nodded. She backed out into the hallway and poked her head round the door for a second, calling out to Hendrix. It felt like they were at the start of something for a second, like it was all new, and not at the end. He raised his hand as she walked down the hallway and disappeared round the corner. He walked back inside and closed the door, not thinking about the box, the big red bow, but just closing his eyes and imaging she was still inside, the bathroom taking a shower, or someplace close. He felt his head pound as he tilted

down and took the dog in his arms. He hugged it tight and then let it go. He pushed himself away and sat a few feet from it. He took a few more pills, swallowed some orange juice. He couldn't breathe out of his nose anymore.

"She was the one, Hendrix. She used to make lemonade. Fresh lemonade. And the lemon rind would stay stuck under her fingernails for days afterwards. She'd always smell of lemons for days after." He sat looking at the dog and then closed his eye, letting himself slip to the floor, there and then. He reached over and dragged the blanket over himself. Then he felt the dog nudge forward and slip under the blanket with him. And Bobby let himself sleep, feeling the animals warmth, keeping the shivering at bay for a little while.

When he woke up the dog was gone. He pulled himself up from the floor and looked around for him. He was only a few feet away, drinking from the water bowl. Bobby smiled, but felt his face tense up. He put a hand to his face and felt the sweat and the heat. He pulled himself up, felt his clothes sticking to himself and staggered to the bathroom. He was pale, his eyes rheumy and red. He almost laughed; it was like him and the dog had switched places. He pulled the phone out of his pocket and called in sick. The receptionist said there was something sweeping through the precinct. He put the phone down and washed himself, forced water into the stove, soup into a pan. He looked at the clock on the wall. It was an hour until Christmas day.

He sat and ate, drank tea, took more painkillers. His body seemed to be undecided, switching from hot to cold sometimes within seconds. He nudged the window ajar, aware of the humid smell of sickness starting to move into the room. He pulled the blanket around his shoulders and sat back down on the floor, watching the dog flop down close to him. Outside people were singing carols, calling out to each other. People were saying they were in love, that they were crazy and excited. Bobby listened to all these voices, all the commotion and tried to stand up to look outside, but his legs buckled. Instead he slipped back down and listened to them all.

The fever tore through him just as the clock struck twelve; there was cheering from someplace, making the dog bark. He barked and barked, bucking up; his paws slipping on the slippery floor, trying to scare them all away from the room. Bobby reached out and calmed him down after a while, patting his head, petting him, until the dog settled back down. The crowds broke up and all that was left was the sounds of the bars and the clubs, where all the music slips into one beat and nothing is recognizable. Bobby made to his feet long enough to close the window, to shut them all out, and then slipped back down to the floor. He held onto his mug and

edged closer to the dog, whose eyes seemed more alert now, not scared, exactly, but something else. Watchful, almost. Bobby figured it out as he finished the last sips of his drink; the dog was protecting him.

Bobby pushed the cup away with his fingers, heard it topple over and smash onto the floor. He looked round but he couldn't see clearly; it was like his eyes were smeared with butter. He felt the stings where the shards of china cut into his fingers, until he swept them away with his fist and turned back to the dog. It was just the two of them. It was still alert, watching, as Bobby petted him some more, trying to calm him down. The fever was peaking now, he could feel it edging to the top of his skin, and somehow, he knew it was important the dog stay with him, guide him through it. He put his fingertip to the dog's forehead and the two stilled, almost together.

Bobby started to talk. At first he started talking about Christmas, how it was for him growing up, his parents, but after a while he trailed off from that. Instead he talked about other things; the way his mother used to press flowers between the pages of her recipe book, the way he used to walk under the pylons in the park with his father. He talked about his love and how she used to link her feet with his on the cold mornings. How his brother used to dangle him from the railings and how he once broke a window with a rock just to see it shatter. He talked as the fever pitched high in his head, making his forehead burn and his tongue swell.

But instead he kept talking. He talked of so many things; he began to wonder if they had really happened or if he was pulling them out of his head just to fill the quiet. He talked, resting back against the cool wall, the blanket at his waist, keeping his legs covered. He would reach out from time to time and the dog would be close in his palm, or just out of reach and at his feet. But he was always there. He talked as the fever broke, and the sweat that seeped onto the blanket began to dry and the room, the air began to thin out and steady. He talked until the darkness peeled away from the walls and was replaced by a lightness Bobby couldn't remember seeing for a long time; just the simple sight of the breaking morning. The dog settled as his breath ran dry and he had finished what he had to say. And then he rested against the blanket, the pillow and it was Christmas day somehow, some hour, and light.

Bobby woke up expecting it to be dark, the next day maybe. But he looked around, checked the clock. It was still Christmas day. It was barely noon. He pulled himself up off the floor and made his way to the bathroom. He washed and changed. He cracked the window and let the fresh air in, outside the city was quiet. He ran his hand across his head; the fever was slipping away he felt light now, as if he was finishing a journey. He turned round and made

coffee, pulled on his coat. The answering machine dot flashed and he listened to the message Jenny had left for him. Then he crouched down, not wanting to shake the feeling of lightness he had now and looped the collar over the dog's neck. He saved the message and took his keys off the hook. The park, Bobby thought, as the two of them stepped out of the door and into the sunlight of Christmas day.

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