

POLICE DOOG



JONATHAN

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June 1, 1988

17:47 Hours

Outside of West Woodburn, Northumberland, North East England

I found the boy.

He lay still and peaceful, skin having turned blue and begun to bloat. He was face down, floating buck naked in the River Read.

The child's parents had reported him missing this afternoon. He'd last been seen walking into town, West Woodburn, yesterday evening from their family's home in the countryside. The child was young, no more than ten. His name was Jonathan Hyatt.

It was fairly obvious what must have occurred. The River Read ran through the heart of West Woodburn, beside the road that he would have walked upon. With all his clothing missing, it was more than likely he had gone for a late evening swim and been somehow caught up in the gentle currents to find his death.

I turned and looked upstream. The thick covering of trees and riverside vegetation made this small tributary all but invisible from town. It seemed likely he had entered the river somewhere upstream, drowned, then his body had been carried here by the current.

I reached into my policeman's belt and gently withdrew a pair of specially formed latex gloves, careful not to nick or break them. This part always frightened me so. I had to be watchful that my thick nails didn't rip any holes in the material. My mind shied away at the very thought of what that might set into motion.

Gloves firmly in place and double checked, I reached out to the small body that bobbed in the water a fathom from me. I had to stretch out one hand while grasping the low hanging branch of a tree behind me to slowly pull him to shore.

There is always that singular moment when one finds a body lying face down. That short time when no matter how firm you believe your identification is you still wonder who you'll find when you gently turn them over.

I stared into the still eyes of young Jonathan's face. There was no mistaking him now, the decomposition had not yet progressed so far as to make him unrecognizable. I knew him well. He was one of the few in West Woodburn who would stop to speak to me.

I sighed, not disturbed at all by the strong smell that already emanated from the body. I'd been trained to withstand far more alarming odours. It was the scent, in fact, that had drawn me here.

His parents had mounted a search of their own for him last night. I had enquired about it during my evening rounds, but they had refused my assistance. It wasn't until this afternoon that they had come to me, somewhat unwillingly, to file a formal report of their missing child.

The paperwork for such a request had been short and to the point. Time is obviously of the essence in such a situation. Well, it was of no consequence now. The child had likely been dead before his parents even suspected anything was wrong, it didn't matter much at what point they had involved me. Pity.

It had only taken me a short time to find the boy once I'd set out to do so. They had reported when and where he had last been seen, and I had simply put my nose to the ground and followed until his footsteps had disappeared into the river.

A single snatch of the trail was all it took to track him. That was when my training had kicked in. That, and my genetically modified physiology.

I'm a Police Dog. Male. Registration number K-9-78081842. The product of current top of the line breeding and genetic modification programs. German Shepherd line. My body and mind cost the UK tax payers approximately one hundred thousand pounds sterling. And I'm assigned to West Woodburn, a town a stone's throw south of the Scottish border with a population of less than a thousand souls.

Reaching down, I hefted the corpse from the water. My tail stood out perpendicular to my body in an effort to counterbalance me, poking out through a hole in my standard issue uniform trousers.

Fat drops fell from its skin as I lifted. The body was lighter than I'd expected. Perhaps a dry drowning? Odd, but not unheard of.

I set the corpse down on a sheet of white plastic that I had brought expressly for the purpose. This was not strictly standard police issue, but I couldn't take the chance of any blood contact. Neither from the water or the body itself.

I gently wrapped the body in the plastic covering alongside my now contaminated gloves. Moving slowly and carefully, I did my best to show the young boy all the care and humane treatment I could. He had been kind to me, I was sorry to see him gone.

The Hyatt household was located just off the country road on my walk back to town. The current of the River Read had carried the body down and away from West Woodburn. It was a long walk back.

It wasn't proper police procedure, but West Woodburn was too small for a morgue. I may as well have them identify the body now. It would only make things more difficult for us if I waited until it deteriorated any further.

The home was a small two story white stone structure surrounded by fields on three sides, the river and road on the fourth. I placed the tightly wrapped package out of sight before I let my brown furred knuckles rap on the worn, red wooden door.

It was opened a moment later by Richard Hyatt, the boy's father. He was a man of some stature, but he still had to look up to meet my eyes. His voice was gruff and rushed as he spoke. He smelt of

farm work... and worry. The scent of fear for his son cut through the air.

"Where is he, Dog? You didn't come back without my son, did you? I don't know why the government even breeds you useless freaks of nature."

I let my eyes drift closed. It wasn't what he had said, I was long used to such things, it was what I was about to tell him.

"Yes, Sir. I've located your son."

The look of surprise was plain on his face when I opened my eyes again. "Well, where is he?" A smile was just starting to creep to his lips when it froze mid motion. "No..." He'd figured it out.

He shut the door softly behind himself and followed me meekly down the cobblestone steps, towards the nearby wooden barn.

"I'm sorry, Sir," My voice was rough. They had taught us exactly what to say in these situations. 'Compassion training' they had called it, but it hardly seemed compassionate to lead a father to the body of his dead son, no matter what the circumstances. "I found him drowned in the River Reid." I wanted to reach out a hand to the man, but fought back the silly impulse. "We will need to wait for a coroner's report, but he was likely long dead by the time anyone even knew he was missing."

"Jonathan..." The man's voice was high and pained as he knelt down next to the plastic wrapped body, still not having seen the corpse directly.

"Richard? Where are you?" The soft voice of Mary, the boy's mother, came from behind me, back towards the home.

"Mary, no!" Richard turned towards her just a moment before she came within sight of the body.

A single piercing scream ripped the clear country air. It left my teeth on edge and my whiskers tingling.

She ran towards the body. From behind her I could hear Richard calling out, "Stop her, Dog!"

I reached out a single hand to the woman, curling it around to draw her smaller body to my chest as she tried to run past. Feeling an illicit thrill, I gently cradled her head into the cloth of my shirt, not to mention the thick bushy pelt that lay beneath it.

She sobbed in my arms for a moment. This was a rare treat for me. It was almost unheard of that I should touch a human being. It wasn't that there were any laws against it, it was quite common in some parts of the country. Some places such as London where Dogs are more respected, but not here. Never here. I could count on one hand how many times I'd felt the warmth of someone else since earning my commission.

She looked up into my face for a moment before startling and gently pulling from my grasp.

"Um, thank-you..."

"Forty-Two," I offered helpfully. That was my name.

"Yes," She paused, "Thank-you, Constable." She turned and walked slowly back towards the house. The moment she rounded the edge of the barn I could hear her begin crying again. It was soft and quiet, but my ears still twitched at the sound. The wet stains of her tears were still fresh on the front of my uniform.

I turned to Richard, his face was far more stoic than hers had been. He had that bruised and weathered hangdog look that seemed only to come to a man who is held under a great sadness but unable to cry it out.

"Let's do this, Dog," His voice had softened a half-measure. "Let me see my son."

I pulled a fresh set of gloves on my hands, careful as always to check for the tiniest of holes that might let blood through to my flesh. He watched me as I made my checks and double-checks, never saying a word.

At long last I pulled the white plastic sheet back to expose the child's naked body. He was lying face up, arms crossed before him and eyes now closed. I had made sure to do at least that much. For his expression I could do nothing. I was no mortician, and feared spending too much time tampering with the body.

Tears welled at the edges of Richard's eyes. The dams he had erected were slowly breaking as his carefully constructed weathered appearance began to dissolve.

"That's my son." He covered his face, turning his back to the body. "God, that's Jonathan. That's my son."

"Thank-you, Sir. That is all I need." I moved to cover the corpse back up. "I'm sorry for having distressed you and your wife so." I paused, but he didn't say anything, so I continued, "I'll have to take the body back with me for transport to Hexham, you understand. While this is likely no more than an unfortunate accident, an investigation will need to be performed."

He turned on me, undirected anger alight in his eyes as he stormed a step closer, likely thinking himself an intimidating sight. I stood impassively. Richard Hyatt may be a large man, but I out massed him by the better part of ten stone and stood a good two feet taller. Not that either truly mattered.

"Why! Why couldn't you have just found him like you were supposed to, you useless mongrel! He's dead! My oldest son is dead because of you." He pulled back his fist for a swing at me before thinking better of it at the last moment. Dejected, he fell back against the wall of the barn, the fight having fled from him as quickly as it had come. "I'm sorry, uh, Forty-Two. You're just doing what you were brought into this world for." He turned from me, gazing off into the empty horizon, "Do you know what it's like to lose a son?"

I cleared my throat behind him, not quite sure how to answer. This particular question hadn't been covered in my training. "No, Sir. I haven't any offspring. Only the breeding pairs are permitted to mate, and they don't leave the Kennel back in London."

My response must have sent him for a loop. He sputtered for a moment, almost seeming to forget what lay at our feet. "Ah... well... they don't, uh, geld you fellas, uh, do they?" He turned and stared openly at me for a moment.

I shifted slightly, nervously rocking on my toes. People normally stared at my face, even my hands, not generally... there.

"No, Sir. I am fully, how shall we say... intact. It is, however, an offence punishable by termination for me to attempt to procreate without the express permission of the Police Canine Authority." When a human used the word 'terminate' it generally meant losing their employment. I suppose it did with me as well.

The difference was that my kind were born and bred for our duty. We were the property of the

government, just like any other animal in its service. If we lost our commission we were disposed of in the same way that any other genetic reject would be. Euthanasia.

I cleared my throat again, redirecting his attention back to the matter at hand and away from my nether regions.

"If there is nothing more to be done here, I'm sorry to say I must take the body in for storage and transport. The mortician in Hexham will contact you shortly with instructions for proceeding with the funeral. That is, of course, if that is your desire."

Richard waved his hand in my general direction as he looked down to his fallen son again, eyes beginning to redden.

"You'll be gentle with him, won't you?" He didn't look up at me, "He always liked you. I never knew why, but he was always talking about 'that Dog in town' every time he came home."

I felt my gut flip. I'd hardly spoken to the child a half-dozen times. I'd had no idea.

"Of course, Sir." I tried to soften my voice, but my rubbery lips were ill-suited for it, "I will show him every compassion I am able." I paused for a moment, "And I would bring him back if I could. He was a good boy."

"Ay, that he was." A slight Scottish clip slipped into the man's voice, "He was a good boy." He turned and began to walk away from me, "And, please, don't tell my other son, Trevor. He idolized Jonathan. I don't know how I'm going to handle this."

The walk back to West Woodburn was slow and labourers. But I was good to my word, I made sure of it. While it would not be as though the child would complain, I still carried him as if he were asleep. As if the slightest bump would wake him from his peaceful, dreamless slumber.

I trudged east, down the road. Perfect calm green farmland over my left shoulder, the River Read flowing to my right. I'd gotten about halfway, a good twenty minutes' walk, when I paused and leaned on the old rickety wooden fence that separated the road from the river.

The road was a small two lane carriageway, last paved about a decade ago. It was five or ten paces past the fence beside it to the river, and a drop down of a few feet as well. There was no way the child could ever have fallen into the river from here, he would have gotten caught up in the brambles. And, in any event, he had obviously disrobed first.

I sighed and looked out over the water. The river was neither wide nor deep, and certainly not fast. Jonathan had lived here his entire life, longer than I, and had gone swimming regularly. How could he have drowned?

The fence creaked under my weight, urging me off and onward. I normally found this walk restful, a calming breeze in my face and the scents of nature, but now the river had taken on an ugly cast, as though its waters were still stained with blood. Still contaminated with things that I strictly could not touch.

I reflexively wiped my hands down the side of my trousers, searching for even the slightest hint of a red stain. As always, there was nothing. My hands were as spotless as the rest of me. Spotless, but not clean. Not at all.

West Woodburn was not a large place. It consisted of little more than a cluster of buildings along the A68, Hillcrest road. There were only a couple of side streets in the entire village. It was the smallest municipality in the entire country to have its own Police Dog.

Following the street up behind one of the outlier buildings, I stopped for a moment to sniff the flowers that one of the families in the town had placed out in a box by the road. They were a striking violet colour with delicate white centres. I held my wet black nose out to them, breathing in gingerly so as not to disturb the blossoms.

I'm not sure how long I stood there. I didn't seem to notice the weight that still bore down on my shoulders. I simply stared at the flowers, watching as they slowly closed for the night, ever so slightly pulling away from me.

Looking up at the sky, I could see that dusk had come. The blue above me had stained to dark red, like a fine wine...

I shook my head and began walking again. I needed to get the body into cold storage and call the morgue as soon as possible.

I had a key to the cellars beneath the local pub, the Duck and the Crown. Despite what its owner might prefer. It was the only cold storage in town, and this was exactly why I needed access to it.

I placed Jonathan's small, still wrapped body in a locked police cupboard within the icebox and left as quietly as I'd come. I could hear patrons moving on the aged wooden floors above me. Ducking, I scuttled out the exterior door and back onto the street.

Even the few small whiffs of food that I'd gotten from the pub had scent me drooling. It was a bad habit that had earned me more than a fair share of bruises when I'd been back in training, and it had returned full force after I'd arrived out here. I cuffed myself about the ears and wiped my mouth on a shirt sleeve. It left an unsightly wet mark.

They had been breeding us, Dogs, ever since the early years of the Second World War, back in the late thirties. That made for almost fifty years of forced evolution in my body. The discovery of DNA in the fifties by Crick and Watson had moved things in an entirely new direction... Up until then we had been dogs, not Dogs. We had been smarter, larger, we had been more capable and devoted, but we still traced our ancestry directly back to the venerable Canis Lupus. That had changed.

I held a hand up before my eyes, it was becoming harder to see in the failing light but my unnatural night vision was already washing away the colours from the world to show me vivid detail in shades of grey. I still had fur and pads on my fingers, I even had black claws that sprang forth, but it was a hand that I commanded, not a paw. I had four fingers and a thumb, along with the same number of joints and muscles as a human. My range of motion was different than man, I could run on all fours if needed, but we were closer than any other creature to our creators. Closer even than the great apes.

I let that same hand trace along the stone wall of the building as I walked north, home. Those black claws skittered on the hard surface, leaving just the faintest of scratches behind. Off in the distance I heard a farm dog howl, a rare, real dog. It sent a chill up my fur covered spine.

As I had mentioned, West Woodburn is not a large community, and as such it took me only moments to return home. Home. That was an odd name for it, but that's what it was. I was assigned here, and here in West Woodburn I would likely stay until my dying day.

Home was a police box. It looked similar to the classic British red phone booth, but slightly larger and in blue. If you've ever tuned in to the old BBC serial 'Dr. Who' then you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. They've been using a prop of one of these things to send actors back in time for decades.

My box was towards the north end of the village, pressed into a narrow space between the A68 road and the church yard. But not in the church yard. No. No, that would never do. Not in the church yard.

One always had to be careful when walking the last few steps to my box. The pavement was narrow here, and it would be an unfortunate end to an ignorable career if I were to be hit by a careless driver.

It took a few moments for my eyes to focus on the familiar faded blue walls and the neon red writing that was now scrawled across them in a ragged hand.

'BaD DOg VaRY BAD doG' Beneath the words sat a crude caricature of a drooling Dog with a badge between his oversized fangs.

Well. That was more polite than what I've returned home to find in the past.

Stepping up to the door, I stooped to inspect the lock. The hooligans had deposited half a can of spray paint into the keyhole. That was annoying.

I took a deep breath and pulled the key from my pocket to unlock the door. Thankfully, it clicked home without so much as a scrape. Bad dog, but good box. These things were made of sterner stuff than any mere vandal was likely to overcome. The structure could withstand anything up to, and possibly including, a bomb blast. I had inherited this one from my predecessor, and it had been in far worse shape back then than it was now.

I stepped through the door with a quick glance over my shoulder. Hoping, but not expecting, to see a face in the graveyard across the street watching me in disappointment. No such luck today.

I would have to make a note to myself to purchase some paint cleaner next time I had funds in the miscellaneous budget for anything beyond the bare essentials.

Closing the door behind me, I reached up to pull the chain that snapped on a single dull incandescent bulb in the ceiling of the box. It took almost a minute to slowly warm up before coming on with a dim but warm yellow glow. Yet another purchase to put on my list of eventualities.

The tightly designed space with a small desk, stool, and fold out commode, would have been cramped but serviceable for a human, obviously the ones who had designed it. But for one such as I? It was far too small, not to mention how it always caught and jammed my tail that thrust straight out behind me.

I took a moment to remove my clothing, trousers and shirt was all there was, and carefully fold them away in a vain attempt to keep them clean. But not before first doing my darnedest to blot out what drool I could from the sleeve of course. I only had two sets of my duty uniform left and I couldn't afford to let any additional wear and tear land upon them.

I held my badge firm in one hand, running the pad of my thumb over its raised lettering and insignia. Of that I only had one. Pulling out a well-used buffing cloth, I gave it a slow and careful shine. It wasn't as though there was a speck of dust upon it, but old habits die hard. I set it to the side of my desk, always in sight, in reach, and never more than a second away.

Now it was on to the next part of my assignment. The paperwork.

Unlike some, I never thought of the paperwork as the worst part of my job. It was simple, predictable, never held any surprises, and never, never spat in one's face. When I was doing paperwork I never had to swallow my smile... nor a growl.

I reached out and pulled open my folder of forms. It was as thick as both of my arms held together and smelt of musty age, like a small library. Now... I'd already filled out a missing child report... I'd have to close that... and open an accidental death report...

Oh. And call the morgue. I glanced over at the police standard digital clock on my wall, it threw a dim red light from its illuminated digits as the seconds ticked by. Drat, it was already after five in the evening. The morgue in Hexham would be closed for all but emergency calls. It wasn't manned by Police Dogs, they still used humans for positions like those as far as I knew.

So be it. I would have to fill out the proper forms tonight and then contact the morgue first thing in the morning when they reopened. They could send an ambulance or hearse up here then. It wasn't as though the child would be going anywhere in the next few hours.

The forms seemed to stretch out forever before me, so many of them having to be filled in triplicate that I wore out my sheets of carbon paper that I had to lay between them. Now I had to fill out each and every copy individually.

I suppose that's the number one thing that the public doesn't know about police work. For every minute of excitement – and I use that term loosely – one needs to wade through a dozen hours of tedium. Paperwork and reports, policies and procedures. Everything must be done right. A single slip up in procedure, no matter how slight, and it may produce the loophole that a guilty man can use to escape.

That was one of the many things that the remaining human police officers were only too happy to relegate away. They could hand off any aspects of the service they didn't like to us Dogs and spend the balance of their days tracking down hardened murderers and drug runners. Right up until their investigations became too dangerous or physically demanding – then it became our job again.

My hand was beginning to cramp as I pulled out yet another form. Whoever designed our digits had never planned for us to spend quite so much time hunched over our desks in toil. The pens and pencils of human manufacture were all too small for my grasp and I had to clench far too tightly to try and keep my writing clear. I didn't want the forms to be rejected because my penmanship was afflicted with 'hound's scrawl'.

When I looked up at the clock again it was nearing six PM. I'd have to move quickly if I wanted to make my final errand of the day before the shops closed for the night. This wasn't London, the entire town, save the pub of course, tended to roll up once the sun dipped beyond the hills.

I dressed quickly, pulling the uniform back over my broad brown furred shoulders and reached a questing hand up towards the shelves near the top of my box. The breath caught in my throat for a moment as I feared it wasn't there. I almost thought it was gone as my fingers scraped only rough, unvarnished, well clawed wood. But it was there. Pushed back into a corner, likely in an uncharacteristic fit of annoyance after I'd last counted its contents.

'It' was a large sea-green canvas wallet, my miscellaneous fund. The loose cash was provided to help pay for whatever day to day expenses were incurred during the operation of my post. It was supposed to be refilled once every year. I had last seen it topped up just shortly after I'd first started

here sixteen months ago.

Pulling it down, I carefully unzipped the pouch and peered inside. The familiar twinge of annoyance with an undercurrent of fear, and perhaps even shame, came back. It'd started off with one thousand pounds. Now I was down to less than fifty and six pence.

I pulled out a ten spot and slowly folded it in half, sliding the old and wrinkled note into my trouser pocket while safely returning the rest. The bill rustled slightly against the glass tube pressed in beside it as I moved.

Clicking off the overhead light, I stepped out into the world again, carefully locking the door behind me and double checking it to make sure that the bolts had caught tight and secure.

The greengrocer was but a few steps away, the only one in the village. He was just starting to pack up for the night as I walked towards him. The sickly leftovers of what produce he'd been unable to sell during the day were all that remained at his stall, bruised apples, moulding strawberries, and withered carrots.

The man himself looked like he would be more at home in a seaward community than a land locked one such as West Woodburn. He was a stout fellow, coming little above my waist, but yet nearly as wide as I. He possessed a faded grey, bushy, bristly beard that stood out from his chin and covered almost all of his face that the generous mutton chops and moustache had left untouched. I'm sure he had eyes in there somewhere, but I couldn't see them, held in shadow as they were beneath a tightly pulled down sailing cap.

He looked up from cleaning as I came forward, acknowledging me with nothing more than a grunt before turning back. I was used to it by now – I was a semi-frequent customer. I would come more often, but my funds simply did not permit. And I doubted a larger budget would result in better service anyway.

I looked down, peering about his mostly empty stall. We both knew my motions were little more than a scripted act. I only ever purchased the same thing every time.

The handwritten sign in front of me read: Carrots' 1 £ a pound

I stooped over, my tail counterbalancing out behind me as I gently scooped up what few dried and withered vegetables remained. They came out to eleven ounces as I placed them on the nearby scale.

The old man looked up at me, then over to the scale. "That'll be a pound twenty five sterling."

My eyes widened slightly. "Pardon?" I motioned one of my hands towards the sign that sat in plain sight not a foot away.

He didn't even bother to look abashed. "That was a sale during the day. The price is a pound twenty five." He reached out and took hold of the offending sign, tossing it over his shoulder into the back of the stall where it clattered to the ground amongst the boxes and cans.

Pulling the ten spot from my pocket, I reached out to remove some of the vegetables from the scale. I'd seen the sign earlier in the day and had only budgeted for a single pound sterling – I couldn't afford any more.

"Minimum one pound weight." The grocer's gap toothed grin beamed up at me humourlessly. I could feel a whine working its way up from the back of my throat. I'd been looking forward to these all

day, all week. I couldn't let myself down now by not buying them after the day I'd just had.

"Isn't there an end of day sale?" I had to fight to keep my voice level, "You'll just be throwing them in to the compost after you close up."

He spat on the floor before me, just narrowly missing my bare foot. "Are you disparaging my produce?" He took a step closer. We would have been nose to nose if it were not for the simple fact that I was three feet taller than he. From this angle I wasn't sure if he was grinning or growling. His face was pulled back in a sneer, but I could hear an undercurrent of amusement in his voice. He was enjoying this. He was baiting me, toying with me. He knew I couldn't turn away.

"No, Sir." I had to fight my ears as they tried to pull flat against my skull. At that moment I couldn't have told you if it was due to anger or shame.

"Good." He turned from me to scoop my treat into a ripped paper bag. There were a dozen perfectly good bags on hand, but he'd paused to pull the ripped one from under the counter. "A pound twenty five sterling, then move along. It's a waste of our tax money," He continued under his breath, muttering in a voice he likely thought too low for me to hear, "We pay good money just to have it pissed away by you stupid Dogs."

I decided not to mention that I was pissing away the money in his store.

I took the long way back from the grocer's, not that there really was much of a long way. The church that bordered my box was the largest structure in town. I walked back around the edge of the churchyard, stretching my legs after having them cramp up on me as they always do when I'm coped up with paperwork.

A small, moss covered stone wall stood to my left, hardly raising above my waist. It was constructed of worn feldspar, ill-fitting stones that were held together with copious amounts of long yellowed mortar. It was a thousand years old if it was a day. For all I knew it could have been constructed by the same hands that had once risen the long gone Roman fort that's ruins lay out to the west.

I gingerly slipped a hand into my bag, withdrawing a single withered carrot. The thing was thin and dry, long willowy silver hairs growing from it as it tried vainly to go to ground. I raised it to my lips and took a tentative bite, nipping off the first few inches of its thin end.

I felt a crunch as I gripped it with the small teeth between my large canines. This was one of my few worldly vices, one of the essentials that I simply could not do without. I suppose that was the domestic dog in me. I'd once heard that all dogs like carrots – though I'm not sure why. I was no exception.

There was only one other type of food I ever consumed, though I would hesitate to call it 'eat'. To 'eat' implied some level of enjoyment to the action, to that there was none. Specially produced kibble was shipped to my door once a month, formulated explicitly to meet my kind's dietary requirements.

They would often neglect to provide for our monetary needs, even our clothing, but never our food. There had been frightening reports of what had happened in parishes where the local Police Dog had gone from hungry to starving. An involuntary shudder wracked through my body. It was incidents like those that cast the entire Police Dog initiative in doubt with the general public.

They let us live in bondage, survive like paupers, exist in abject squalor, but never, never let us go hungry.

I crunched another small bite of carrot, eating the fresh vegetables always made me feel more at ease, clearer and alert. They were so unlike the kibble that I otherwise subsisted upon. The kibble was dry, brown, and granulated in chunks approximating the size of large jellybeans.

I still had a half-full bag laying open back in my box. The stuff was so highly preserved that I never needed to worry about spoilage. I could just as well leave it out in the rain without its flavour deteriorating... or improving any for that matter.

The kibble came in simple, unmarked ten pound wax paper bags. Always arriving by special courier, prompt and on time from some undisclosed location in south London. They even had an emergency number I could call if my supply ran low. I'd only had to ring them once, when a storm had delayed my normal shipment. They had arrived four hours later. Soaking wet in the dead of night, a truck had hove from the darkness to deliver my food from the hands of a nervous looking driver and his heavily armed accompaniment.

The availability of the food, however, was no sympathetic indication of its palatability. The theory that had echoed around the Kennel when I'd been young suggested that it tasted as it did in an insidious effort to control our weight. No one appreciated its rather... unique taste. Take month old sawdust and mix liberally with hot mustard, then add the tangy after-taste of chemicals and you might have the general idea of what I subsisted off of.

In a word, the concoction was rancid. We all knew it, but this was what we'd grown up on. It was 'food'. It wasn't until I'd left the Kennel to travel to West Woodburn that I'd had the opportunity to experience anything else.

In any event, I took another small bite of my prize and carefully slipped the remaining half of the carrot back away for later. A few steps further and I could hear voices drifting through the still air, wafting from the church; they often left the large wooden double doors ajar in the warm summer months. At night I could clearly hear pastor Benson's sermons from my box if I cared to listen.

He never invited me to sit in on them.

"And did the lord say that you will worship no god before me, for I alone am God in heaven, your one lord and master above all else."

I took a few more steps forward before stopping to lay a hand on the ragged stone fence next to the small wooden gate that led into the churchyard. Just out of reach were a pair of stately oak trees growing on either side of the path that the faithful walked. I could smell the heady scents of fresh cooking drifting towards me on the breeze.

Reverend Benson always encouraged his flock to bring food and treats to his sermons. They partook of them afterwards, sitting out together on the finely manicured front lawn of the church. They often picnicked beneath the shifting shadows cast by the trees, no more than a stones throw from my box.

"It is an abomination, a sin, to take upon yourself what is of his eminent domain. Life is the provident of the almighty alone, and none shall infringe."

He paused for a moment. I could almost see him thrusting a hand out, towards my box.

"It is the pride of man that shall cause our downfall, pride and hubris that casts us from good

God's grace and love."

I walked on, not bothering to listen over my shoulder as he continued. This was a normal occurrence. I'd heard most of his sermons over and over again as he preached to the flock until I could repeat them almost as well as he could. His words rarely changed much.

I passed a corroded bronze sign bolted roughly onto the stone fence: 'The Anglican church of our most merciful God, saviour to all.'

I'd barely made it more than a few steps further before encountering a member of the flock who hadn't quite made it to the congregation.

"Zack..." I whispered to him as I knelt down, extending a hand to steady his frail form as he swayed, sitting on the pavement. He blinked groggily up at me for a moment before opening his mouth, the stench of alcohol heavy on his breath.

"Hey, buddy. Fancy seeing you again, just the fella I was lookn' for..."

I shook my head and pulled a handkerchief from my breast pocket to gingerly wipe the yellow vomit off his face. The cloth was stained beyond reform in seconds. And it was my last one.

"Am I going to have to book you for public drunkenness again, Zack?" A smile fought its way to my lips. We'd gone through this routine more times than I could count. I'd only ever written him up once, and that had been because of the hedgehog...

"Drunk? No, officer. I am not... drunk." He had to hold himself down at that last word, nearly puking all over me.

"Come on, Sir. Let's get you home." I pulled one of his arms over my shoulder and raised him slowly from the ground where he sat next to my box. "Are you still staying at the Duck and Crown?"

He shivered in my grip as I lifted him. Despite the warm summer evening he wore a heavy greatcoat. It seemed to do little to ward away his chill.

He mumbled something incoherent as I led him on, all I could make out was 'need to talk to you' before he fell silent. We weaved all over the pavement, only just avoiding stumbling into the road. There was no traffic at this time of the night, but my luck would have us run over by a careless motorist the moment we set toe on the street.

The lady running the front desk of the 'Crown hardly even looked up from her magazine when we staggered through the door a few moments later. Her name was Jan, I think, a stunning red head.

I would have thought more about it, but Zack chose that moment to begin heaving again. I had to rush us to the nearest dustbin in an effort to keep the threadbare carpet from collecting yet another unidentifiable stain.

"What room is he in tonight, Ma'am?" I looked up at Jan as I spoke. Zack was otherwise occupied.

"Room four, Doggie." She never even glanced our way.

"Thank-you."

A few moments later we were moving towards the stairwell, and I was once again troubled with the problem of how, exactly, I was going to get this man up that flight of stairs.

Zack wasn't exactly a small man, the booze hadn't worked off the generous meals he plied to himself. And I, despite what some people think, wasn't some sort of super-human that could carry him up with one hand. I wasn't weak mind you, far from it, just not super-human.

We took it the same way as we did almost every night. One step at a time. Up I moved a single stair before dragging his limp and unresisting body up the rung behind me. Hardly more than twelve steps, but it still took a good ten minutes and felt much longer.

The second floor of the 'Crown was little different from the lobby. Its simple clap-board walls were painted a bruised pink that may have at sometime in the distant past been fashionable. Now it was just an eyesore.

"Zack, Sir, where's your key?" I tapped his cheeks, hoping to raise enough from him to avoid having to go through his pockets. What a surprise, he was out cold. He must have given up the ghost while I'd been hauling him upwards.

I sighed and began rummaging through his clothing, hoping not to run across another overused tissue again.

Zack was safe now, or as safe as he'll ever be, tucked in bed, in his room. He'd been staying in different rooms at the 'Crown every night since before I'd started here. I hadn't the slightest how he managed to pay for it – likely so much as the booze he consumed nightly. The management must have a soft spot for him.

The sun was little more than an afterglow as I stepped onto the street again. I'd gotten a polite "Night, Doggie," from Jan. How she could see everything without ever raising her eyes from that magazine I would never know.

I pulled the remainder of my half-eaten carrot from its bag as I made my way back to my box. This time it went down in a single gulp, my teeth hardly even so much as scraping its skin. A long, drawn out sigh escaped my lips. I normally savoured my treats, but this had been a bear of a day. The magic worked as it always did, it wasn't three strides later that a small spring crept its way into my step.

The walk back to my box was little more than a few minutes, but at least for that short time I felt something approximating peace.