They Called Him King

by Hal Stemmler

My brother-in-law was always a very funny guy. He and my sister were with us one time, visiting the parental units at their home in Leisure World in Mesa, Arizona. After dodging a flashing, siren-wailing emergency vehicle for a third time in a single afternoon on the four-lane thoroughfares boxing in the senior enclave, he renamed the place "Seizure World."

The next morning we all were seated around a table for breakfast at a local diner when the waitress asked, a bit too briskly, how the food was.

"Fit for a king," Jonny said. He then grabbed his plate, held it down below the table's surface beside his chair, and gave a quick whistle.

"Here King!"

Whenever I think of that joke, I think of that dog who wasn't there.

I discovered dogs while watching early television programs in the 1950s, but I saw no pattern in their personalities. Rin Tin Tin was heroic enough: a big stud German shepherd hanging out with white soldiers on the western frontier. *Lassie*, however, was disturbing, and I stopped watching the show because of all the nightmarish situations Jeff, and then tow-headed Timmy, had to be saved from by the elegant collie. How could something that bad or dangerous happen every single week? Was it the dog's fault—some weird canine karma?

My parents never allowed their four children to have a dog, so my canine faculty has been developed by those of others. What many dogs reveal about their "owners" is often far from flattering. Dogs rarely rise above the groupthink, the primal urges, the disregard for hygiene and manners, and the general myopia of their human counterparts. Even virtues like love and devotion take a deviant turn. How often have we heard pundits advise that if you want a friend in this town, get a dog—a back-handed endorsement, at best.

So no, I'm not exactly a dog-lover. Now, I don't jump up on a bench or car hood whenever a dog goes by, and—like everybody else—I view those who do with some suspicion. Such behavior suggests a guilty conscience and, quite possibly, anti-social, even criminal thoughts. But, as a good friend used to say, "Sure, I like dogs, but my freezer's full!"

Still, over the years I have met three dogs who have broken through that strange, porous membrane that divides the canine and human species. Not only do I remember them with affection, but they now seem to me as much a part of history as the very place we lived, the people who surrounded us, and the times that shaped us. None of them "belonged" to me; I was no dog "owner." In different ways, each was a partner, and each of these canine Buddhas taught me something about purpose, about destiny, and about time's arbitrary arc.

Veracho

Like eyebrows, a pair of thin, low-lying clouds hugged the eastern horizon as the sun crept out of the darkness between them. The morning face looked sleepy at first, and then the brows seemed to leap with surprise as brilliant beams of red and gold shot out across the waves. I strolled along the soft stone and sand beach into ankle-deep water and relieved myself. After brushing my hair I rolled up my sleeping bag and stowed it in the sand beneath the overhanging boulder that had protected me while I slept. I was ready for breakfast.

I walked up the long, gentle slope of the beach and as I neared the last rock formation separating the beach front from a gravel trail into the tiny, white adobe village, Veracho dropped into escort formation, cruising alongside my right foot, matching my long strides with an effortless prance, chest out, head held high, his tail wagging like a metronome. Even erect, his head barely reached my knee. His short, golden brown coat was a little longer at the chest and shoulders. He was still a young dog. But for his size, he looked almost like a sled dog, and medallions of white swelled his chest and decorated his forehead. His step was light, and his movements seemed cheerful, an impression confirmed by the satisfied smile that shaped his muzzle. I had already heard of Veracho when he first took me under his wing, and I felt an awkward blush of pride at the realization that he was escorting me. Unlike most other dogs I've been around, Veracho never looked up for acknowledgment or affirmation while accompanying his charges. He was doing his job, and that job was flying escort missions, eyes focused forward, making certain the aircraft reached its target unmolested.

In the afternoon several of us headed into town for a dinner of quartered green tomatoes, fried octopus, and shots of white rum at the only bar and restaurant in the village. Naturally, Veracho escorted us, and it was no surprise, when we finally left the bar and stumbled into the gravel street, that Veracho was there waiting for us. Flattered by his attention, we made our way past the white stucco buildings back toward the beach. We passed a group of three women, and one clucked, "Ay, Veracho!" Everyone in town, it seemed, knew this dog. We didn't know who his owner was, but we began regarding Veracho as '*el alcalde,*' the

town mayor.

I soon realized Veracho's mission was more nuanced than I first surmised. More than simply escorting foreigners into town, he served as a discreet liaison between the two communities occupying the island of Gomera. On the beach were perhaps twenty young people practicing the art of low-overhead tourism. There were Swedes, Canadians, Americans, Brits, Germans, and even the occasional Spaniard. In the town were the native Canary Islanders who ran the shops, the bar, and a pensión or two. The terrain on Gomera was so rugged that it was not possible to build an airport, and it took an hours-long bus ride on the switchbacks of the coastal road and an overnight trip on a subsidized ship to go anywhere off the island. These isolated villagers were dependent on what little tourism washed up on their shores, but the hippie commune that aggregated on the beach did not spend lavishly. There to promote cordial relations between these two disparate communities was the trusty Veracho.

At the center of beach life was the Moroccan road workers tent that belonged to two guys from Canada. It looked like a huge white mushroom freshly sprouted from the dunes. It hung from a single, ten-foot wooden pole at its center, from which a white canvas cone stretched out and dropped a six-foot white canvas wall to the sand along its circumference. Inside was a huge space, and one evening I counted seventeen people at one time sitting in a circle, playing music, telling stories, and sharing whatever they had to eat, drink, or smoke. Beside the canvas flap that was the tent's door sat Veracho, ever vigilant.

The only Spanish person living on the beach at this time was a boy of no more than 15 with the sad appearance of an impoverished pilgrim. He was barefoot, his shirt and pants were ragged, his light brown, shoulder-length hair was unwashed and stringy, his mouth was missing a front tooth, and his beat-up old guitar was missing two strings. I don't really remember his name, but I think it was something like "Evan," with an artsy accent on the second syllable—European style. It bothered me how he could live like that, and I totally could not understand why people kept giving him food, drink, and hits off their chillum. For no reason, his presence irked me for several days—until one evening I heard Evan play his guitar. His jazz-classical style was like nothing I had heard before, and he played with a guileless innocence, free of all affectation, reconciled to his destiny as a channel of the Spirit. His music filled the tent with passion and beauty and tears. Who can question which vessels God chooses to deliver beauty to the shores of his creation? I was instantly transformed into one of his patrons, asking myself what I could spare that he might need. As guitars moved around the circle, I played a short riff I had made up and then muttered I was not really a guitar player. Evan looked at me with his peaceful blue eyes and said simply, "Yes, you are."

At the other end of the mystical traveler spectrum was Peter the German. His name likely was something more guttural, like Horst or Heinrich, but Peter sounds good in German, and his self-esteem could have used the boost. He had arrived on Gomera with his beautiful BMW motorcycle, and a tailored, two-piece black leather riding suit that hinted at SS design, and that I never saw him without. He clearly liked his world set and orderly, from his clothing and equipment to his food, shelter, and topics of conversation. Travel, with all its vagaries and elements of surprise, seemed to frustrate him at every turn. One evening I postulated that children must be smarter than their parents, and I offered as evidence the difference in the television shows shown to children today, as compared with the primitive and childish shows watched by their parents back when they were their children's age.

"Yes, this is so," nodded Evan.

"Nein! Nein! Nein!" blurted Peter with a noticeable lisp. "That makes no sense!" So unable or unwilling was he to entertain the concept that children could be smarter than their parents that he could not find a way to end his rant. Like an unmanned motorcycle on cruise control, his vociferous tirade fed on itself until he finally careened off a figurative cliff. Every member of the community in the circle was staring at him, and the immense white tent swelled with awkward silence.

The more the beach group bonded and grew, the more active Veracho became in facilitating relations between the island's communities. His role expanded from simple escort missions into town to monitoring the townspeople's visits to the beach. He became a very effective guard dog, stationed at the tent, barking whenever anybody from outside the community approached. Young men from the village, doubtless interested in the pretty young women in our group, tried on several occasions to check out the parties in the tent, but they were intercepted by Veracho and one of the Canadian guys long before they reached the door.

Veracho's solicitude became even more crucial when the brothers arrived. I was walking the perimeter of the beach zone one morning after my ablutions when I spotted two figures lying in the open on an exposed dune. They were wrapped in full djellabas and looked like a pair of big cocoons dropped on the sand from a helicopter.

I met them later that day. The older brother, more so than the younger, taller one, emanated a whiff of incarceration. He was a bit older, and more serious in demeanor, than the other members of our foreign community. He was solidly built, and the stubble on his sun-tanned head matched the stubble on his sun-tanned face. He would be equally at home, I thought, in prison or on the beach. Given the limited transportation options, it was unclear how they had arrived in the middle of the night, but they soon made it known they were there on business. They were selling hashish.

That was a daring endeavor in the late years of Franco's Spain, when the *Guardia Nacional*, in their odd black helmets,

ruthlessly preserved public order by throwing naive foreign drug dealers and users behind bars for decades. While the brothers found their customers, the community as a whole was uncomfortable with these latest arrivals. At Veracho's slightest bark, people were outside immediately, checking on visitors to the beach. On the weekend, entire families from the town would come down to the boulders by the gravel trail, ostensibly to picnic, but really to watch the hippies on the beach.

The brothers didn't stay long, but even after they left their impact was felt. The parties may have been a bit wilder, but the beauty and happiness had been darkened a bit as well. Without meaning to hurt my feelings, I'm sure, a friend let it slip that the word "veracho" in Spanish means "drunk." So, were those Spanish women calling the dog's name, or were they talking about *us* when we walked by? It was funny, but confusing at the same time.

After another week, I decided to move on. I felt some regret, and still do to this day. That beach on Gomera, for a while at least, was Eden, but just as Adam and Eve were commanded to leave their garden, a voice whispered to me that I couldn't stay on Gomera forever.

Veracho could, however. He was not plagued by imaginary voices or foggy memories of Bible stories. He had a role to play and a job to do. That role may have been far more complex than I thought. Was he really protecting fun-loving foreigners, or was he a double agent assigned by the *Guardia Nacional* to watch us and collect evidence? Was Veracho a code name? Who actually named him?

I ran into a Swedish friend from the community several years later in Berkeley's Sproul Plaza, and he told me the *Guardia Nacional* cleared out the beach not long after I left. Did that mean Veracho was without a job, unemployed with no prospects? It's hard to imagine. I doubt his tenure as *'alcalde'* was in any way subject to the comings and goings of transient, youthful seekers of enlightenment, and I'm sure he ruled until he no longer cared to.

Of all the characters I met on Gomera, there's only one name I still remember to this day.

Veracho!

Hans

Drive a car up to the Pinnacles National Monument—now a national park—from Soledad on the Salinas Valley floor in April, and you will pass thousands of acres of dewy green shoots emerging from the splayed arms of grape vines stretching in an undulating carpet to the foothills of the Chalone Bench of the Gabilan Mountain range. The hills have not yet been roasted to golden perfection by California's hot, dry summer. In this surreal season, made magical by the same light that maddened poor Vincent at Arles in Southern France, the pastel verdure of fresh grape leaves gives way in the distance to brilliant green grasses sprinkled with hallucinogenic splashes of wildflowers so diverse they defy catalog.

Once the valley disappears behind a mountainous crag, a road appears at the left. Make that turn, climb a gradual slope, and a much smaller valley opens up below. A gravel driveway splits a field of old, gnarled grape stumps also sprouting fresh leaves. The road cuts in a straight line to a small white hut on a mound at the other end of the swale. Head down this road and you are suddenly intercepted by Hans, a full-sized male German short hair who abruptly pivots and races your truck all the way down through the vineyard and up to the house.

Hans at full gallop is a flash of gorgeous athleticism. His hind legs kick forward in unison and plant themselves between the more widely spaced front paws. As his body shoots forward over the rear feet they catapult his chest into space, his front legs now stretched out as far as his body will allow. He is airborne for a timeless moment, until his front paws reestablish contact with the earth and the cycle is repeated. Above this tornado of movement floats his head, on a single plane, unswerving, eyes focused ahead. Large, floppy ears stream behind, and his wide, flat tongue flaps out the side of his grinning jaws in ecstasy.

Some dogs chase balls, some dogs race cars. Now arrived, Hans plops down on the porch as if nothing has happened. When he next hears an approaching vehicle, he springs to his feet and assumes the classic pose of the pointer, a look carefully crafted through generations of breeding. His head rises well above his muscled shoulders, his noble nose juts forward, and the elegant hounds' ears drape softly behind his jowls. His powerful chest tapers back to a narrow waist, coiled hind legs, and a cut stub tail.

It is in his eyes where his soul glows. There is a depth of equanimity suggesting timeless understanding. Yes, his essence has been engineered by careful mating, but he knows he will outlive those who pretend to control his fate. In his eyes is a look of self-possession and confidence in his destiny.

In the eyes of his Master is a look of confusion and quiet desperation. We are at the vineyard's castle, a small box of two rooms, covered with white clapboards and a cheap hip roof, and featuring a large picture window with a panoramic view of the vine-covered valley. This is a period considered

historic in the circles of the American and international wine industries. The American partisans in the world of *degustation* have set out to challenge the conventional wisdom that only France can produce wines of the highest caliber, and the Master has taken on a leadership role in that campaign. His family purchased a heritage vineyard in the arid hills near the Pinnacles planted well before Prohibition dealt nearly a death blow to the wine industry in the 1920s. The time has come to return those long-neglected vines to full production, and to surround them with hundreds of acres of new plantings that will boost production in just a few years to viable commercial levels. At the same time, the estate bottled vintages must be created using both the classic wine-making methods of the past combined with the latest laboratory developments in the science of vinification.

The Master is crumbling under the pressure. He is just recently returned from a stay in the hospital where he was taken after being found alone on a hillside jabbering to himself. He has just received a bill from the county for his involuntary commitment, and he is furious that he should be forced to pay for services he did not wish to receive. Apparently his breakdown followed his reading the *Lord of the Rings*.

"Vanity," he tells me. "Vanity is at the root of it all."

I was not certain what "it all" might be, but I made a mental note to regard all signs of vanity with great suspicion henceforth.

The Master is a handsome man, tall, trim, and tanned. Light brown, curly but thinning, locks rest youthfully on his head, and he sports a matching mustache. When he smiles, his cheeks plump up like a chipmunks' loaded with a fresh walnut on either side, and he generously displays his beautiful white teeth. The smiles do not come often, however, and his face wears an expression suggesting he has matters to be concerned with that very few other people could even begin to comprehend. His tanned face looks a tad puffy, as with weeping or serious medication. The stern vertical furrow between his eyebrows threatens to become permanent, along with a grimacing squint, and his jaws are clamped tightly, even when he talks. The brilliant blue eyes flash alternately between vision and tragedy.

Hans rarely leaves his Master's side. He is his Master's therapeutic foil. As fragile as his Master appears to be, so stolid is Hans' corresponding demeanor. He awaits the Master's nod to dash to the top of the driveway and race a new car back to the house. He escorts the Master as he walks around the vineyard, and sits upright in the passenger seat when the Master drives anywhere. He lies next to the foot pedals of the pipe organ when the Master plays complex, classical pieces while staring out the front picture window. The immense pane of glass sits above the keyboard, and the entire, leafy slope basks resplendent before him while the peals of throbbing, sensuous notes pulse on either side and behind. Hans gazes inertly as the organist's feet, bedecked in black ballet slippers with bows on top, dance out magical bass lines. He retires with his Master to the bedroom at the back of the house when it is time to turn in.

Hans was the Master's only anchor for months, until the Master's two younger brothers came to live at the vineyard. How lonely were those months, for man and for dog? Surely the Master played his role; it is so simple. Provide food and water and a place to sleep. But what of Hans' role? Where does a dog pick up a PhD in psychology? How does a dog learn not to give so much of himself that there is nothing left to maintain sanity?

The brothers brought with them some of their friends to help ease the isolation on the mountaintop. Unlike Hans, they came and went. Dave drove the water truck for a couple of weeks, following the same route from a well in Soledad to the huge water tank perched on the highest hill above the vines, from which flowed the water lines for the drip irrigation feeding each vineyard. The last quarter mile required the huge semi tractor with its heavy water tank to pick its way gingerly up a steep, rutted, unpaved pathway, pump out its load, and then ease back down without turning around. Dave was very good with a rifle, and he used his dog to flush out rabbits and pheasants from the tall, dried grasses. He seemed to enjoy the hunting, if not the driving, until his dog got bit on the nose by a rattler. Dave jumped in his pickup, sped to the vet, and never came back.

I was part of the entourage that spring, sleeping in a white stucco hut behind the main house, helping where I could with the weeding and irrigation repair in remote corners where it made no sense to hire entire crews. I helped in the winery, and generally provided some kind of companionship while I tried to figure out what to do next with my own life. I learned to appreciate the simple beauty of an extensive and thoughtfully assembled wine cellar, and thanks to the Master's tutelage, I developed a taste for fine wines that to this day far exceeds my means to buy them.

Farming of any kind requires endless repair of equipment and machinery, and long hours of monotonous labor. Planting a vineyard is even more complicated. A vineyard is expected to last many decades, while a corn or wheat field will get plowed under in a matter of months. Grapes require a special infrastructure of plumbing for the drippers, and wire supports to keep the vines erect. Layout is important, especially on hilly terrain, for proper spacing, so each vine has the required root space, and so tractors and other machinery can access the rows. Many of the tasks require special skills, and the right tradespeople are not always easy to find. Late rains meant digging tractors out of mud holes day after day, and the time pressures began to mount. The vines had to be in the ground early enough to survive the long, hot, dry summer they would endure before the winter rains returned in November.

At last, the new acreage had been laid out and was ready for planting. Farm labor in California was in chaos in the

early 1970s. The growing movement to unionize farm labor under the banner of the United Farmworkers made it difficult to find large, reliable workforces. The Master finally found some Filipino leaders in the Salinas Valley who had been excluded from the UFW, and who could bring together the crews needed to plant the new vineyards.

On a brilliant Monday morning in May, the Master sat in his armchair in the rear of the living room, looking out the picture window. He did not release Hans as a flotilla of pickups and cars appeared at the top of the hill and turned toward the house. He lightly massaged Hans' shoulder muscles as the dog sat on his haunches next to the armchair. They both watched the procession approach the house. In a few minutes, a short, elderly man with gray-streaked black hair, a dark brown, creased face, and a regal bearing entered through the door to the left of the organ, followed by three others who remained a respectful step behind. They removed their wide-brimmed hats and turned toward their employer and his dog. Hans sat at attention, calmly looking the men over. He was no longer a mere German short hair, but had been transformed into the Egyptian god Anubis, seated at the side of the Pharaoh, bearing with timeless understanding his burden of responsibility for ushering souls into the afterlife.

After a brief pause of respect, the man spoke to Hans.

"We are ready to work!"

The rest, as they say, is history. The work continued steadily for the next several months, and the dream of a successful, respected wine brand eventually came to pass. The business side of the wine industry was, and likely still is, a savage jungle, and the Master's brand today is the property of one of the biggest beverage multinationals in the world. In subsequent years, as the vineyard expanded acreage and production, the Master played a dwindling role until that day, years later, when the plane he was flying crashed in the Salinas Valley.

My time at the vineyard came to a close with the advent of summer. One afternoon, while passing through the main house, I caught my reflection in a mirror—one of many modern conveniences missing in the hut where I slept. I was pleasantly surprised to see a full, brown beard had planted itself on my face. For years I had been trying to grow it out, and now it had snuck up on me without my noticing it.

That night I entered the main house through the back door, and I stumbled upon an uncomfortably intimate scene. The Master was seated in his arm chair with Hans next to him. They were both staring out the picture window at the night's blackness outside. The Master's hand was gently running along Hans back side, from his neck and shoulders to his haunches. Hans, from the rear, was a shockingly sensual figure, his powerful body, seated in this posture, looked more like that of a young woman, beautifully proportioned, alluringly curved, the fur so smooth and shiny it seemed more like naked skin, warm and longing to be touched and caressed. For this, too, had he been bred. Through my mind flashed those generations of Prussian landowners breeding their dogs to be intelligent and obedient partners in the hunt, to point to downed prey in the woods and meadows, and to retrieve it when ordered. They had been bred to be mute and appreciative, but also sensuous and intimate companions, physically beautiful and attractively proportioned, bred to share those lonely evenings by the fireplace when the responsibilities of the estate seemed overwhelming and the rest of the world could not be trusted.

Hans had sired three male German short hair puppies while I was there, and I had taken a special interest in the light 'liver' colored one. In my imagination I pictured becoming his owner, although I can't recall that he was actually offered to me. That would have been unlikely, considering the value of a full-bred German short hair. And a dog like that needs a vineyard's wide-open spaces to run in, he needs a steady hearth where he can bestow the stability a home needs to be livable, and he needs that Master to whom he can deliver the complex and intense companionship for which he has been bred.

I knew I wasn't ready. Was I worthy?

Lady

Every red-blooded male, or failing that, every male's red-blooded woman, sooner or later dreams of building a second home, a place where a family can vacation, but still enjoy the feel and comforts of being in their own space. That vaguely defined but insistent urge is the only explanation I have for buying a piece of property in the mountains of Plumas County when we could least afford it, and then engaging in a second round of creative financing to build a small house on it. Our children were still toddlers when we realized that the lot we had owned for seven years would come to mean nothing if we didn't create a home there that the boys could bond with. That meant building something soon, because once young boys become teenagers, all bets are off on what might capture their affection and loyalty.

We made the leap, and built something far more modest than our fantasies had considered, but something doable under the circumstances. We were delighted to learn that an unfinished house is even more

fascinating to two young boys than just another regular house, although the idea of a four-year-old climbing a ladder to the second floor is unsettling to most people. We were also delighted to learn that our second home came with a free dog.

Free dog! Sounds like free love, or free checking, or free range, or free box. There has to be a catch! In this case, however, the only catch was that dogs don't live forever. I can't remember the first time I stepped outside our door on a sunny Saturday morning and saw Lady curled up on the ground, patiently waiting. My reaction may not have been totally benign—remember, my freezer was full. Lady's karmic aura, however, put me at ease. She was small to medium size with short black and white ringlets peeling off the side of her head and ears and all down her body. She was probably part border collie; at least that was the look, and they say border collies are very intelligent. But I doubt Lady was pure bred. She embodied all the comfort, homeyness, and acceptance of destiny that are the finer qualities of muttdom.

Naturally, she wasn't really waiting for me. She was waiting for the boys, who were probably four and six years old at the time. For the rest of that first summer they spent the days and weekends together having their adventures while I worked on completing the house. We were seldom there for more than a few days at a time, but it was never long before Lady sensed our arrival and curled up in her position as the family dog.

Once a red-blooded male has built his country castle, or at least begun construction, an uncomfortable truth often emerges. Feuds with neighbors flare up with more frequency and fervor in the country than they do in the city. Perhaps this is because urban existence comes with more rules and an expectation that life will be lived within the tight confines of a house usually just a few feet from the one next door. Perhaps it's because when city people buy into the country, they think they have purchased the entire forest or meadow, when actually there are other people just a short distance down the road.

Our country house was one of twenty-something lots of two to five acres along a river in a National Forest. The properties were bound together in a 'homeowners' association;' the people, not so much. At first, there were only one or two buildings in the entire development. As the years went by, more homes went up, and it began to look like having two or three acres was not enough to capture and preserve that remote country estate fantasy. After a couple of years, it also became pretty clear who liked whom, and who were pariahs.

Because of some perceived trespass by neighbors at the end of the road against a piece of property held in common by the association, we weren't really talking to them. In the world of country living, this means we just pretended they weren't there, and they, of course, did the same. Fine. We didn't go to 'The Land' for the social life, after all. That's why it seemed ironic that Lady was their dog. They had named her. They fed her. They had raised her from a puppy, presumably. And yet Lady, exercising her constitutional rights as an American dog, chose of her own free will to be with us whenever we were there. Of course, we didn't read anything into that. Just because Lady seemed to prefer us didn't, by itself anyway, mean that we were in any way superior to our distant neighbors.

On the theory that attraction, and eventually affection, naturally reciprocates, I grew fond of Lady, and looked forward to seeing her when we traveled the three hours to 'The Land.' We never gave Lady any food, and when we put out a bowl of water, we never actually saw her consume any of it. Even more remarkably, I never found any of her dog droppings. Has evolution come so far that we now have defecation-free dogs? Will miracles never cease? More likely, she was exceedingly discreet, and that made her even more endearing. With dogs, and perhaps with people as well, once you have decided you like them, there is no limit to the positive qualities you are willing to ascribe to them.

A 'no questions asked' family relationship grew over time. Then, one day, the boys decided to explore the other side of the river. Naturally, Lady escorted them. A short walk took them to the bridge, and then the road followed the bank to the left. The first property was a large ranch with a small house, a large, classic barn, a fish pond, and acres of fenced and irrigated pasture land reaching down to the river. The barn was at least a hundred years old, dating back to a time when ranches and farms in the mountains could still compete with the emerging corporate farms in the Sacramento Valley. It had been partially restored and wire pens spilled out into a fenced corral surrounding the building. Instead of the cows or horses that likely were its tenants in bygone times, the barn was now home to about a dozen ostriches.

The ostrich rancher was the evil Renee. His operation had become a considerable curiosity as the local chapter of a national trend embracing the ostrich as a new, nutritious, more ecologically compatible source of red meat. While very few grocery stores actually carried ostrich steaks, and those that did charged exorbitant

prices, investors were betting that a new market was in its nascent stage and would soon take off. The money was in the eggs. Ostrich eggs didn't go into omelets—they went to other people interested in raising the birds who were ready to pay top dollar for each football-sized, leather-jacketed vessel. Through no choice of their own, ostriches had become unwilling pawns in a Ponzi scheme of significant proportions.

The word in the neighborhood was that ostriches are skittish creatures, and Renee was rumored to be leery of people walking by and upsetting their fragile and finicky tranquility. His acreage was supposedly patrolled by a pair of savage Rhodesian ridgebacks, known in Africa for their ability to keep a lion at bay while awaiting its master to make the kill. It was also whispered that the small white house contained an ample gun collection. Nevertheless, the gravel road that dissected his domain was a public thoroughfare, and young boys are bred to ignore that kind of gossip.

We had a troupe of visitors one summer weekend, and the number of kids had swelled to four or five. They had taken off for a nearby swimming hole a short distance up Last Chance Creek. It was late afternoon when the boys, panting, ran up to me and squeaked out, between breaths, the fearsome words.

"Dad! He took Lady!"

What? Who? The boys had been walking past the ostrich ranch with the normally taciturn and respectful Lady when a primal herding impulse switched on at the sight of the flock of large birds. Despite the boys' efforts to restrain her, she ran up to the fence and started barking at their feet. The birds spooked, getting Lady even more excited, and Renee charged out of his house, shotgun in hand. Had the boys not been present, there is little doubt what would have happened next, but of course had the boys not been there, Lady would not have been there, either. Instead of shooting her, he grabbed her neck and threw her into a dark, wooden outbuilding and gruffly told the kids the dog would stay there until an adult came for her. In a panic, they had run back home.

I felt my chest tighten, my jaw clinch, and my ears turn red. We'll see about that, I said. The macho rage that comes with any threat to one's children was now extended to include the threat to our family dog. Where does he get off thinking he could do something like that to our dog? I had never met the man, but I was going to meet him now. I walked down the street, over the bridge, and toward the ranch, ready for a man-to-man, head-to-head, good, old-fashioned shame down.

Before I got to the house, Renee's wife Cathy emerged and walked toward me with a friendly greeting. She was younger than Renee, and much more attractive. As she cheerfully walked me to the shed, she explained they had been concerned about the ostriches possibly breaking a leg, which I silently conceded was a remote possibility, and that the kids didn't seem to be able to heel the dog. That was probably more than a possibility, since it had never been necessary before. It was only in this one circumstance where Lady had done something the boys had to keep her from doing. Renee was nowhere in sight, and it was clear Cathy had taken control of the situation as the ambassador of goodwill to the neighborhood. Released into the daylight, Lady looked none the worse for wear, and she walked home with me like nothing had happened. The boys were relieved to see her, and perhaps a bit uncomfortable that they had led her into temptation. I tried to ease them of that worry, assuring them that this town belonged to Lady, and not to a bunch of big feathered floozies from the plains of Africa.

A couple of days later, after our visitors had left, Cathy stopped by in the late morning with a plate of cookies to make nice. She was a strong-looking woman, shapely, with strawberry blonde hair long enough to be drawn back into a soccer-mom pony tail. I assured her she needn't have gone to all the trouble, and secretly enjoyed the fact that she did. We chatted amiably, and when she left, I thought perhaps our worlds were not so different, after all.

Unfortunately, or not, the bubble burst for ostrich eggs not long after this adventure, and after a couple of years the wire pens stood as an empty reminder of what was likely a steep financial loss for Renee and many others. With the birds went the marriage, and one neighbor quipped that she got the dogs, and he got the guns. Renee lingered on for a couple of years, unseen to the neighborhood while he supervised the rapacious logging of the hills across the road from the stream, squeezing what money he could from the ranch before he finally sold it off.

How much longer Lady served as our dog away from home, I couldn't say for sure. There was no announcement or letter of resignation. The time came when I opened the door on a bright Saturday morning and Lady simply wasn't there. I may not even have noticed her absence when it first occurred. Ours was an under-the-counter relationship. We had no claim on her. Then again, we had all gotten older. The boys, as we had hoped and planned, had indeed bonded with our second

home, but as they entered their teens, they came less often. At first, I could recruit one son to accompany me on a work weekend, and then the other, but eventually most of my sojourns to the cabin were solo. Perhaps the scent of family had faded to a level Lady could no longer sense, but somehow I doubted that.

The truth was more heartbreaking. I don't know how many years after the actual event I learned the story. We all—even I—had gotten quite attached to Lady, but we never thought that much about where she went and what she did when we weren't there. We learned that Lady, in her innocence, had picked the wrong place to lie down and sleep. A neighbor directly next door to her owners ran her while over backing out of the driveway one day.

Could we have saved her by coming up to the cabin more often and offering her a more consistent, safer place? The murderous neighbor felt terrible about what happened, but nasty thoughts crept into my brain anyway. How could somebody be so oblivious to the world around them that they don't notice a dog under their wheel when they start the engine? What if it had been a child, for God's sake! Why couldn't Lady just stay home and away from such dangers? But, had she done that, we never would have known her. Was she hopelessly promiscuous, wandering the neighborhood looking for a one night stand almost anywhere? That would be like blaming her for joining our family. Lady was generous, not wanton.

Or did lady grow old without us knowing it? Was she no longer strong enough to roam more than a few dozen feet from her home. Was it difficult to move from a sunny spot once she found one? Had she grown so deaf that she heard neither footfalls in the duff nor the grunt of an engine starting?

Thanks to Lady, we had given our boys that precious experience of sharing childhood with a loving family dog. She was always there to pet, or to play or walk with, or just to watch while the boys played and explored in her company. She was infinitely generous, and made no demands of us at all. When we were at our cabin, Lady was one of our children. When I think of her, I think of our children when they were toddlers, and then rascals. Those days are gone now, and so are all the children. The boys grew into adults with their own lives, and Lady is off somewhere, curled up in the Saturday morning sunshine by a cabin door, waiting for her favorite family to arise from their slumbers and to join her in creating new childhood memories.