

Dirck Toll

Pulled Over

He could see it clearly.

He stopped at the East Crafton Post Office, the first place of any significance he'd come to upon entering the village. The sun had burned off the last wisps of fog left from the morning, and before long skin would stick to things. Around the headrest he said toward the rear of the car, "I'll be right back," and got out.

There was no line inside. He approached the clerk's window, returned the clerk's nod of greeting, and said, "Hi. I was out on Route 8 and found a dog —"

"Alive or dead?" the clerk interrupted.

"Alive. She looked like she might be lost, so I stopped, and her tag says she belongs to somebody named Kessler —"

"You found Butsie!" The clerk spun in his chair and

shouted toward what was presumably a person out of sight, "Somebody saw Butsie! I'm going after her!"

"Excuse me," he said to the back of the clerk's medium-sized head, "the tag says the dog's name is Gretchen —"

"Yeah, that's Butsie."

"— and she's out in my car. Are you the owner?"

The clerk was grinning as if he'd just had sexual congress for the first time since the invention of television. "No, but I know them. The dog belongs to the mayor. Actually, to his little girl. And everybody in town has been worried for the past three days."

When he'd come in, he had noticed a small rectangular button that the clerk was wearing, and his mind had just figured out what was on it. The button was home-made, a piece of paper covered by clear plastic food wrap. On the paper was a hand-drawn rebus consisting of the letter "I," followed by a heart, followed by what he guessed was intended to be the head of some breed of dog but looked like an earless weasel wearing a party hat. At least the sentiment was clear. "Then I guess I should take her to them right away. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"Uh, I think you could go right to the mayor's office. It's just down the street, a lot closer than the house. I could go along if you like."

From the clerk's unspoken cues he realized that the clerk was probably eager to get out of the office for a while.

As they went out the door, on which was a notice with the question *Have You Seen Me?* beneath a photo of a dog, he introduced himself. "I'm Art Talley."

“Ed Fisk,” the clerk replied. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before. You live around here?”

“No. I was in Crafton on business. I was heading back to Montgomery when I saw the pup.”

Fisk stopped in mid-stride. “So this is out of your way.” He resumed walking with a shake of his head. “That’s pretty kind of you to come over our way to bring her back.” As Talley was about to respond, Fisk looked in the car’s rear window and joyously called, “Hey Buts! Hey Buts! Hey Buts!” The dog, a small spaniel with dried mud matting her fur in a few spots, was sitting in the middle of the rear seat tapping her tail.

Talley eased the car out of the parking lot. “I’m curious: How come the tag says her name is Gretchen?”

Fisk hung an arm out the window and frequently turned his head to smile back at the dog. “Well, the mayor’s little girl is named Gretchen. And when they got the dog, she wanted – she insisted – that it be named Gretchen too. ‘Just like me,’ she said. And I suppose that’s how she was registered.”

“Okay...”

“But I guess it got too confusing to know who they meant whenever they yelled ‘Gretchen,’ so they started calling the dog Butsie. I think that was because her paws look like boots but little Gretchen couldn’t say ‘Bootsie,’ and it stuck, like sometimes happens. You can park... right here is good.”

The town office building, in accordance with the size of the town, was a small ranch-style brick structure, adjacent to the combined police and fire station. To the side of the glass double doors of the entrance was a

flagpole. Tied in a bow around the flagpole was a yellow ribbon. Attached to the ends of the ribbon were what appeared to be dog biscuits.

When they got closer the exterior revealed itself to be artificial brickface. Fisk carried the dog, scratching her briskly behind the ears, and led Talley inside. "Hello, Miss Michelle," Fisk said to the receptionist, at a desk behind a glass partition. "I've got somebody here to see our fair mayor!"

"Hello, Mister Edward, I see you do!" She was a young woman with light hair, a pink blouse, and makeup that might have been excessive for a Kabuki actor. It was clear that they were both referring to the dog.

"This man found her all the way out on Route 8. Can you believe it? This is Art Taylor."

"Talley," Talley corrected, reaching through an opening in the partition to shake her hand. She took it by the fingers, which he hated as much as one can hate a gesture. "Nice to meet you."

She then reached over and gave the spaniel's back a somewhat perfunctory rub. "Hey girl. We were worried about you!" The dog had given only two or three barks in the car, and remained quiet now. Michelle looked up. "There's nobody with him right now so you can go right on back, and I'll let you surprise him." Fisk thanked her and gestured for Talley to come with him.

Through job-related activities, Talley had met several small-town mayors before, and found it neither exciting nor intimidating, but more like talking to a school principal who could also get roads fixed. He followed Fisk through a security door that Michelle had buzzed

open, which seemed incongruous in this area. They started down a hallway that was slightly wider than that in a mobile home, and Talley pointed backward with his thumb. “Do you have a lot of trouble with security here?”

Fisk kept his voice low. “Oh, I think they had a water cooler stolen not too long ago.” Fisk motioned for Talley to stop as they neared an open doorway on one side of the hall, close to its end. Fisk leaned his head and shoulders sideways over into the opening, holding the dog away from it. After a second he said, “Keeping busy, John?”

Talley heard the reply from the room. “Hey, Fisk, who the hell let *you* in?!” At the sound of this voice, the dog yelped and started trying to jump out of Fisk’s arms. Fisk went into the room, and Talley, stifling his desire to now put his face in his hands and be on his way, entered after him.

The mayor jettisoned his chair and exclaimed, “Oh my God, where have you *been*?!” as Fisk handed the wriggling fur to him. The mayor was stocky, with strands of dark hair combed across the otherwise bald crown of his head, and did not seem to have had a facelift. His suit jacket lay across a chair in the room, and his sleeves were rolled up, showing arms with light grey hair. Talley felt there was no resemblance.

“Well,” Fisk explained as the mayor lowered the dog and then helped her roll and twist on the floor, “this fellow found her out on Route 8. This is Art Taylor.”

The mayor, on his knees, reached over as Talley said, “It’s Talley. Good to meet you.” They shook hands.

“John Kessler, Mr. Talley. I’m very pleased to meet you. Route 8 was it? That’s over ten miles, I think. No wonder we couldn’t find her.”

“Right. There were no houses around and I saw her just lying at the edge of the woods near the road, so I stopped. She sat up and gave me a paw, but she wasn’t nearly as energetic as she is now.”

“Well, she’s been gone for four days. She broke her leash when they had her out in the yard by herself. Probably chased a rabbit. She’s never been off the leash so she must have gotten carried away. Didn’t you Butsie? Didn’t you Butsie? Diiiiidn’t you Butsie?” Still on his knees, he had brought his head down to hers at the floor. “Her name’s really Gretchen but we call her Butsie because she’s always sticking her butt in the air. See?” He did look like his pet after all.

“I see,” Talley said. “And now that she’s back where she belongs, I think I’ll head on out.”

The mayor stood up, slightly out of breath, and leaned against his desk. “Are you going to be in town long?”

“No, I’m —”

“He came just to bring Buttsy back,” Fisk interrupted, saying it with such pride as if he’d done it himself.

“Is that right?” the mayor asked with some surprise. A tangent thought then came to him and he said, “Oh, excuse me a second,” and reached to the intercom on his desk. “Michelle?”

“Yes,” Michelle’s voice came back.

“Could you call Donna please and tell her to let Gretchen know that Buttsy’s been found and I’ll be bringing her over.”

“Sure thing.”

He turned back and said toward Talley, without actually looking at him, “My daughter lives with my first wife. Buttsy is... Buttsy is her dog.” She had been looking up at the mayor, and he picked her up and held her cradled with one arm, stroking her sideways across the top of her head with his free hand, which made her ears see-saw. “Anyway, were you saying you took a detour to bring her back?”

“Yes,” Talley answered quickly, to head off another pre-emptive rejoinder from Fisk. “I’d been in Crafton on business. I’m from Montgomery, and turned off 8 to come over here after I found her.”

Kessler smiled. “You must really like,” he paused as if searching for the right word, then concluded, “dogs.”

Talley nodded. “Very much. To be honest, when I first stopped I was half-hoping there might not be a tag and I couldn’t find the owner. Then when I saw there was, I thought maybe they’ll have moved and nobody knows where they are. Things like that. I loved dogs when I was little but haven’t had one of my own since then. Seeing her reminded me.” He noticed a framed photograph on the mayor’s desk, of a little girl holding a puppy in a tentative grip. The girl had long brown hair parted in the middle and eyes that appeared to be solid brown dots. The dog seemed to be smiling. The girl was not.

A second or two passed in which Kessler set the dog back down and then put a hand to his chin. “What kind of work do you do, Art?”

“Employee orientation, for the Eagle Realty Group. There are a couple of new people at the Crafton office I

was meeting.”

The mayor hinted at a chuckle. “I thought I might be able to do something to thank you, but right now helping real estate move is beyond even my power. So much for a commission for you. Hey, Fisky, how about some free stamps for this gentleman?”

“If only I could.” Now Fisk was on the floor playing with Buttsy. He had his hands folded in front of him and was repeatedly bowing to touch his head to her then straightening up, as if she were in line between him and the Holy Land. She seemed to enjoy this but had settled down since her initial frenzy with the mayor.

Talley felt his usual urge to clear up the usual misunderstanding. “No, I don’t actually sell property myself. I mainly do role playing to train new employees.”

A transparent overlay of uncertainty slid onto the mayor’s face. “What’s that exactly?”

“It’s really just a fancy way to say that I get paid to play ‘Let’s Pretend.’ After they have the usual company instruction, I get them to think of different situations that could happen and what they should do in them, acting it all out, making it up as we go along, to be as real as possible. Our personnel director went to some management seminar about it and is really sold on it. The only drawback is that they never let me do any wild stuff just for fun.”

As expected, the mayor replied, “Hm. Interesting.” He pushed off the desk and stood up straight. Returning to more solid conversational footing, he said with enthusiasm, “Well, I could at least buy you lunch. You haven’t eaten yet, have you?”

Talley had planned to be back at Main before lunch, to have the afternoon to get ready for tomorrow. On the other hand, these guys were pleasant enough. And tomorrow wasn't that big a deal. "Lunch would be all the thanks I need."

"Great! If you want to follow me in your own car, we'll be on the way back toward 8 anyway. And I can get the old girl a big steak before she gets any hungrier. Come along, Ed?"

Fisk gave a sigh and stood up. "No, I should be getting back." He looked at Talley. "So it's up to you to see that he doesn't pay for it with the town's credit card."

Together they all went out the front doors, the mayor carrying Buttsy with one arm. "Just a second," he said, "I want to tell Michelle to take the ribbon down when she gets a chance. But go ahead and pull your car up." He went back in.

Talley asked Fisk, "Need a ride back?"

"No, thanks, the walk will do me good." They both turned to go up the sidewalk.

When Talley saw that there was a police car double-parked beside his, he instinctively felt a clammy twinge. But the sensation was just as instantly superseded by a calm curiosity, because he'd done nothing to feel guilty about, so it must be something of a non-infractionary nature. He approached the officer standing between the cars and said confidently, "This is my car. Is there any problem with it?" Fisk stopped and stood next to him.

The officer didn't look up from the pad he was writing on. He was in his twenties, slightly less than average height, and in good physical shape without any indication of

steroid use. His hair was short and dark and combed with some substance that gave it a damp appearance. "There's no parking here."

"I didn't see any sign."

"Town ordinance."

"Okay. I'll move it right now."

"Good. Here you go." He handed a slip of paper to Talley, which Talley reflexively took. It proved to be a parking violation notice, with a total fee of forty-seven dollars.

Fisk spoke up. "But Scott, this man just brought Buttsy back. He found her out on Route 8. We were just seeing the mayor."

"He still can't park here." The officer began to turn away as the mayor, with Buttsy, walked up. The mayor asked, "What's going on, Scott?"

Over his shoulder the officer said. "Nothing much," and opened the door of the police car.

"I just got a parking ticket," Talley said matter-of-factly, holding it for the mayor to see.

The mayor took it from Talley's surprised hand and said jovially, "I'll fix this." To the officer, the mayor said, "This man was just returning Buttsy to me."

"So I heard. Congratulations." He started getting in his car.

"Wait a minute, Scott," the mayor implored, now with a tint of anger.

"What?"

The mayor spoke as if the answer was obvious. "I want you to rescind the ticket."

The officer exhaled sharply between his teeth to create what in context was a laugh of derision. He began reversing

the process of getting in his car, and Fisk said quietly to Talley, “Scott is the nephew of John’s – the mayor’s – first wife, Donna.” Fisk then added, with what might have been a trace of anticipatory glee, “This could take a nasty spin.”

Talley started to whisper, “Maybe I should just go,” but was cut off by the officer demonstrating complete civility decay.

“Forget it, John! I don’t care what he did! *You’re* the one with the haunted doghouse!”

The mayor reddened. Fisk tapped Talley on the arm. When Talley tipped his head toward him, Fisk said, “I don’t think I mentioned that John believes Buttsy is the reincarnation of his grandmother.”

“No,” Talley replied earnestly, “I don’t believe you brought that up.”

“Besides,” the officer expanded, “I never liked the animal anyway! It pissed on the cruiser’s tire. You can’t get a stain like that out of rubber. You can still see it!”

To Talley, Fisk elaborated, “John and his grandmother were very close. She became a Buddhist in her seventies. People kept thinking she meant ‘Baptist.’ It raised some eyebrows, but she had been in vaudeville, so most figured it was par for the course. Now, her hair was a darker shade, I think. And not as silky. Of course she probably dyed it. Her name was Betsy. Stage name, anyway.”

The mayor, now a striking purplish-crimson, snarled, “If she were here in person, she’d pee on your car too! And why isn’t she here? Why *isn’t* she?!”

The officer didn’t respond.

“Because your aunt killed her!” Still looking at the

officer, the mayor swept a hand toward Talley. "Tell him! Go ahead! Tell him!" The mayor looked at Talley. "His aunt took my eighty-four-year-old grandmother to a shoe store and left her in the car with the windows rolled up!" He snapped his head back to the officer. "And you're just like your aunt!"

Fisk murmured to Talley, "The doctor said she was ready to go anyway and it just happened to be that day. They had other problems – like for one thing, Donna's always loved insects, and John can't stand them – but the grandmother incident is what eventually ended their marriage."

The officer shouted, "She could have opened them herself! She had thumbs, for god's sake!"

The mayor narrowed his eyes and put blades in his voice. "They were electric. Donna had the keys." Sweat decorating his features, his voice still lowered, he said slowly, "Waive the ticket, Scott."

Talley started to break in with, "Hey, gentlemen, it's no big deal, I can handle it." But, ignoring Talley, the officer also lowered his voice and responded simply, "No, I won't. So why don't you just have a drink of water and forget about it? In fact, why don't you get it from that new cooler in your basement?"

The mayor erupted with refreshed venom. "You little brat! Don't you need some lipstick for your blowhole?!"

Talley, under the circumstances, took this at face value, but Fisk clarified: "There's a rumor that at, uh, certain times Scott likes to behave as if he's a feminized porpoise." Fisk clarified further: "See, there was a fire at the apartments where Scott lives – it turned out to just

be a pan of scrod making a lot of smoke – but when the emergency crew was checking the building, in Scott’s room – he wasn’t there – one of them saw a high-quality porpoise costume, modified with what I think you call a flounce skirt. It’s his own business, but the firefighters are always joking on Scott anyway, so they made hay with it.”

Scott started jabbing the air with an index finger to punctuate his bile. “You know, *you know*, that was mine! I mean *wasn’t* mine!”

“Right the first time, Slippery Scotty!”

“At least *my* relatives all walk on two legs!”

“Yeah, and that’s their biggest accomplishment!”

Fisk, his voice a blanket of patience and reason, informed Talley, “Of course, I’ve explained to John that Buttsy is not really his grandmother.” Talley managed to give Fisk a noncommittal look, which Fisk apparently mistook as a desire for substantiation. “Because,” Fisk went on, “the dog, every dog, is an embodiment of the one living god. Caninis.”

Fisk put a hand to his button and shut his eyes as he pronounced the name, then opened them. “It’s something I know in my heart.” After a second he added, “My beliefs are very personal, but I feel you’ve earned the right to the truth.”

Talley’s head was devoid of responsiveness. He lost his focus on the exchange between the mayor and the officer as he heard Fisk testify. “I learned of Caninis” – Fisk again blinked and fingered his pin – “from a pamphlet somebody left at the office. Near the public moistener. There’d been ones left around before about Christ and

Heaven and Hell. But this one seemed to make sense. Did you know that dogs have been around longer than human beings? It is *they* who walk *us*.”

Talley was grateful to hear the officer scream. “You’ve had it old man! Drop the animal!” Scott was starting to unfasten his badge.

The mayor reached with his free hand for the knot of his tie. “Your ass is going to get a taste of my foot!”

Talley caught some movement in the corner of his right eye and turned to see Michelle approaching. She was apparently unaware of the hostility in progress and called from down the sidewalk, “John, don’t go yet. I just reached Donna.” Her tone was serious, perhaps sad.

The mayor, not looking away from Scott, gave no response.

“John?”

“SO?” he snapped.

“Well...she wasn’t...when I told her Buttsy had been found she wasn’t...like, happy. And she told me...that Gretchen doesn’t really like her.”

“I don’t blame her!”

“No, John.” She spoke as if doing so gave her electric shocks. “Gretchen doesn’t like *Buttsy*. They’d *let* her run away. I got the feeling they don’t want her back. And then Donna said she’ll be damned if she’ll let *you* keep her, and she said she’s still got the court paper. I’m...so sorry, John.”

Fisk quietly said to Talley, “Donna got really mad when John started letting Buttsy try on Donna’s best dresses.”

The mayor overheard this and whipped his head to face them. “I just wanted her to feel young again!”

Fisk cupped a hand to his mouth and whispered directly

in Talley's ear, "Michelle, by the way, is what lay people call a 'cat person.' But cats are the anti-Caninis." After opening his eyes he noted, "I pray for her misguided feline-centered soul."

Scott had his gunbelt partially off. He momentarily paused in removing it and muttered under his breath, "*Damn* them," when he noticed, as did Talley, that in the holster was a metal ice cream scoop. Parts of his face showed a strong pulse, but when he looked back at the group it appeared that the desire to slug had already crested and begun to recede. Remembering the thread of conversation, he looked at the mayor and gave another derisive noise. "You might as well know, you idiot, Aunt Donna just wanted to take the dog to stick it to you. Same as you did to her with the big crystal grasshopper. Gretchen couldn't care less about the cur."

A physical blow might have been easier for the mayor to weather. Talley could perceive something fracture and collapse inside him. In a pained voice the mayor wailed, "That's it! That's it!" He spun and said, "You! Mr. Talley!" His eyes held nascent tears. "Please!" He thrust Buttsy toward Talley, who reflexively took her. "Take Nana and *go!*" Then he addressed the sanguine dog. "You'll be happy with Mr. Talley, okay?" She gave a little bark, and as Talley instinctively started stroking her head, she raised herself in his arms and licked at his cheek.

The mayor smiled weakly. Talley glanced around at the hairless faces and observed, "I guess I better go."

As Talley quickly pulled out from between the curb and the cruiser, he saw Fisk wave and heard him call out

cheerfully, “Goodbye, Mighty One! And so long, Mr. Taylor!” Talley naturally waved back.

Yes indeed, he could see it happening clearly.

Letting go of the paw that the little muddy dog had offered him, he said to her, “So let’s just save time and trouble.” He picked her up and put her squarely in the front seat of his car.

She was postured in the sphinx position as they went by the turnoff for East Crafton. He asked, “By the way, would it be all right if we make your name...how about Button?” She put her head down against his right thigh, and went to sleep.

Ω