

THE Dog Thief

AND OTHER
STORIES

Jill Kearney

"One
of the
Best Books
of 2015"
—Kirkus

INDIE

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*For Doug and Lassie who never
found the homes they deserved.*

Kirkus Review of "The Dog Thief"

BY JILL KEARNEY

"Decrepit humans rescue desperate canines, cats and the occasional rat in this collection of shaggy but piercing short stories.

In the story "Sparrows," a disabled man and his meth-head sister precariously prop each other up but find a stabilizing influence when they take in a maimed pit bull. In "Beverley and Jim," a raucous old woman, stricken with multiple sclerosis and alcoholism, lives in a caved-in trailer with a herd of cats. An exasperated neighbor helps her out only to realize her importance in his life too late. In the engrossing title story, members of the Sebequet community—including a pot-dealing commune, an animal-control officer and a busybody city transplant who runs a local resort—work out their mutual responsibilities by helping a household full of abused dogs. The Sebequet-based stories are remarkable for their understated, yet vivid, realism and their pitch-perfect rendering of the hard-bitten poverty and frayed social fabric of rural America. Other stories move beyond this territory: In "Driving While Remembering," a woman returns to her childhood home in Des Moines, Iowa, and realizes how much she has missed; "Circles" ponders a Wyoming wilderness landscape—gorgeously painted by Kearney—and a woman's regret at rejecting a stray dog; "The Christmas Rats" elegizes the lingering impact of two short-lived, offbeat pets in a girl's life. Kearney's prose is elegant and unfussy, with threads of humor

Kirkus Review:

*“A superb collection of stories about
the most elemental of bonds.”*

“One of the best indie books of 2015.”

and lyricism. She has an excellent eye for settings and ear for dialogue, and she treats her characters, and their relationships with their pets, with a clear-eyed, unsentimental sensitivity and psychological depth. Through their struggles, she shows readers a search for meaning through the humblest acts of caretaking and companionship.

A superb collection of stories about the most elemental of bonds.”

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The Dog Thief



HOW IT ALL STARTED

Lucky, the three-legged pitbull, escaped from confinement in the tool shed by chewing his way through the rotten boards of the wall. He emerged, blinking in the sunlight, just as Donald opened his front door to toss some trash out into the yard. Donald gave a yell and charged down the steps. Lucky galloped across the yard and took off down the narrow dirt track that led through the woods to the paved road at the bottom of the hill.

Lucky ran like a dog having a fit. With only one front leg, he tended to throw to the left and stayed upright only because of his momentum.

At the bottom of the hill a Berlin Wall of moldy eight-by-four plywood sheets hid a collection of ramshackle homemade dwellings. Cats drifted between the cabins, cruising for mice or tidbits of garbage. An old pickup quietly disintegrated in the mud in front of the main dwelling. Only the community totem, a soggy MIA flag drooping on a pole, could be seen from the dirt road.

Three people stood by the open gate in the plywood wall and watched Lucky's clumsy three-legged race

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down the hill. They said nothing as the dog arrived, panting and exhausted, to collapse at their feet.

They knew who the dog belonged to, so they waited expectantly, watching the road. A few moments later a fat pale man in overalls arrived at a trot and halted, sweaty and breathless, at the property line.

"That's...my...sister's...dog," he gasped. He had a large shapeless head from which ears sprouted like pink mushrooms. His loose wet mouth betrayed weakness, but his tiny eyes had the strength of pigheaded stupidity. He took up a stance like a gunslinger and attempted belligerence. "Give him here."

"No," said Blacksnake. "Fuck off."

Blacksnake was wearing combat clothes. Judging by the smell, it was the same uniform he'd brought back from Vietnam. He had a sizable pot belly, a gray ponytail, and a cynical gaze. His two friends, a scrappy one-eyed woman and a tank-shaped Native American, also wore hodgepodes of military garb. All three were old, but looked like they might have been pretty tough back in the day.

The fat man had never been tough. He blinked, sputtered, and started a rant, waving one pink finger in the air. "My mother gave that dog to my sister. He was stolen by these dope dealers. There's a gang of dope dealers hanging around my house..."

"Your sister is dead," Blacksnake rarely made eye contact, but now he directed a glare straight at the fat man. "I said fuck off, Donny."

Stand-off. The dog sprawled in the dirt, worried brown eyes tracking the conversation. The three people didn't move, and their bodies melded into a wall as

dirty and mean-looking as their plywood barricade. Muttering threats, the fat man backed away. The three watched silently, not bothering to jeer, as he turned and shuffled up the track toward his home.

And that's how Lucky, the three-legged pitbull, was rescued by Blacksnake and his crew. It was an impulse born of a marriage between spite and kindness. No one realized at the time that this simple act would set off a cascade of events including a series of miracles and a felony.



BLACKSNAKE, DONALD, AND ELIZABETH

Blacksnake and Donald were neighbors. They'd lived in a state of low-grade warfare for decades, mostly skirmishing about drugs (Blacksnake sold them), or maintenance of their shared road (Blacksnake maintained, Donald didn't), or about witchcraft. Donald's mother was a witch, and it had been a source of deep offense to her that Blacksnake never succumbed to any of her spells.

Donald's mother was such a memorably malignant woman that, even after her death, her neighbors spoke of her in whispers. She was called "Her up the road" or just "her" as if the invocation of her name might conjure up her malicious spirit. Forty years as neighbors and Blacksnake could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he'd walked up the track to her house, and those were occasions when he stood in her yard shouting while she made faces out the window and threw curses at him.

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Much of Blacksnake's acquaintance with Donald, his sister, and their mother was based on their treks by his compound to get to the bus stop down where the track met the paved road. Blacksnake had decades of snapshots in his memory of the three of them passing by: the old witch gripping frightened toddlers by their shoulders, her shoving skinny children along, her marching beside teens fat and soft from years of watching TV inside their tiny cottage. They used to hustle by pretty quickly, the children with their faces averted, while the old witch muttered dark invectives.

After her death Donald got in the habit of stopping by to chat sometimes on his way to or fro, not to be friendly, but just to hear the sound of a human voice. He still saw Blacksnake as the man who, by staying alive, made his mother look less powerful than Donald believed her to be. He hated Blacksnake for that.

The sister, on the other hand, used to drop by sometimes on her way to town to ask if Blacksnake or his crew needed something picked up at the store. She never dated, never married, and never had children, but she was good to her dogs.

"It's hard work being normal when your family's crazy," said Sammish Bob, referring to Donald's sister. Bob, Blacksnake, and the one-eyed woman were gathered in front of Snake's cabin for a final evening passing of the pipe. They had been smoking weed off and on all day and were in that state of altered perception where nothing is surprising and everything is interesting. Elizabeth, their neighbor, had showed up unexpectedly with her own agenda: she was on a mission to investigate the Donald/dog situation.

“She wasn’t that normal,” said Blacksnake about the sister. “Fuckin’ little bitch.”

This last remark was addressed to his cat, a winsome tabby, full of purrs, who wound her body in figure eights at his feet. Blacksnake hunkered down to tap her gently on her nose with one big stubby finger. Bob and the one-eyed woman watched this interaction with amusement. Tactfully, Bob held the pipe cupped in his hand, out of Elizabeth’s sight.

“So...how long ago did the sister die?” Elizabeth asked.

Elizabeth was, in Blacksnake’s opinion, a pain in the ass. She had found the compound by accident: turned up the wrong dirt road, stopped to ask directions, immediately got nose. She had followed up on that one mistaken visit with deliberate ones: missionary services to the natives, in Blacksnake’s view. She didn’t like the way he cared for his cats. Always bringing him bags of spendy cat food and handing him fliers about low-cost spay and neuter. She was the new owner of the Bear Lake Resort, came from somewhere far away, a big city, probably. It was her self-assurance that got up Snake’s nose. He couldn’t think of any reason why a stuck-up urbanite with hoity-toity ideas about pet maintenance would buy a run-down resort in the woods unless she was hiding from something. She was the right age to be a former member of the Weather Underground. He could envision her blowing up buildings for some political cause. Animal rights, maybe.

There she was asking about the dogs up the road as if it was any of her business. Asking when the sister died.

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“Shoot, how long ago was it?” Bob furrowed his brow.

Everyone thought. Blacksnake guessed a year. The one-eyed woman put it more like nine months.

It was Bob who’d let the dogs out after the sister’s death. Upon learning of her demise, he’d wandered up to her place to forage. He heard barking from her cabin and discovered five dogs shut inside. The door was locked, so Bob hunted around in the yard until he found an ax. The dogs had barked hysterically as he whacked the door. He chopped the knob off, opened the door, and the five dogs ran out. The inside of the cabin had been an appalling mess, carpet-bombed with shit. No food or water. Bob wasn’t into pets, but he knew that locking a bunch of dogs up in an abandoned house was a lousy thing to do. He went next door to talk to Donald about the dogs, but the conversation degenerated, as conversations with Donald usually did, into a surreal flow of confabulations and drama spun from the endless tawdry TV shows that fed Donald’s mind.

“So...are the dogs still there?” Elizabeth asked.

Everyone shifted around and shrugged. They were cat people down at the compound and hadn’t thought to go up the road to help the dogs. It had been a major deviation from the norm when Blacksnake rescued Lucky, the three-legged pitbull.

Lucky was a genial animal and very grateful to Blacksnake and his crew. On the day of his rescue, Lucky had been encrusted with dried feces, with pee burns on his butt and bloody lacerations on his nose. It had taken most of the water in one of Blacksnake’s rain

barrels to clean him off. The people at the compound cared about Lucky, but they didn't want to keep him because he chased the cats. There was no chance that he would ever actually catch one—he couldn't take corners fast without falling over—and his efforts were hilarious, but Blacksnake didn't want his cats bothered. And now, through a strange process of small-town osmosis, the news about Lucky and the sister's dogs had come to the ears of Elizabeth, hence her visit.

"Well, I guess I'll go up the road and check things out," Elizabeth said. She started walking up the hill, swinging her arms with determination, while Blacksnake and his crew watched.

"Now she can ride Donald's ass for a while," said Snake. Bob laughed.



DONALD

The Sebequet Peninsula was about twenty miles long, ten miles wide, and encompassed two separate realities. The edges were dotted with expensive ocean view homes, culminating in an upscale golf course community at the tip. A seven foot tall chain link fence with an elaborate wrought-iron gate divided the golfing community from the rest of the peninsula. Whether the gate was to keep the barbarians out, or in, was a matter of perspective.

Most of the interior was corporate-owned timberland. Up the innumerable dirt tracks leading into the woods were the homes of the descendents of the original settlers and isolated enclaves of old hippies who bought

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acres back before the road was paved and land prices skyrocketed. The old timers and old hippies were a beleaguered lot living behind walls, fences and “Keep Out” signs. Some cobbled together existences based on meth labs or puppy mills. The more respectable ones did odd jobs off the books for the peninsula’s wealthier residents to supplement Food Stamps and disability checks. They burned wood, gathered water in rain barrels, and pooped in the woods like bears. Sometimes when they died it was weeks before anyone noticed.

Donald lived in a disintegrating cottage nearly buried in overgrown shrubbery half a mile back in the woods. The clearing around the cottage was strewn with large hunks of rusting metal—old appliances, old cars, oil barrels—and everything overflowed with sodden trash and rainwater. Dilapidated outbuildings along the edges of the clearing were disappearing beneath blackberry vines. A musty stink rose from the damp ground.

Elizabeth surveyed the mess and wrinkled her nose. Just because someone was poor was no reason to live like a pig. Well, that thought was unfair to pigs.

She looked for dogs, but saw none; however, the lot was so crowded with tangles of blackberries and collapsing outbuildings that a pack of dogs could be hidden if they didn’t bark. Elizabeth found a footpath through the grass and debris and followed it to the front door.

She knocked. A series of thumps indicated footsteps approaching. The door opened a cautious crack. She saw a pale, red-rimmed eye surrounded by dusty,

inflamed skin.

“Good evening, Donald. How are you today?” Elizabeth greeted him with a big, fake smile. Slowly a round bald head emerged from the cottage, followed by a bulbous body. Donald blinked in the sunlight, as uncomfortable as a snail dragged out of its shell. Elizabeth ignored his squints and grimaces.

“My name is Elizabeth and I’m a friend of your neighbors,” she chirped brightly. “They say you have some dogs you need help with.”

Donald made no eye contact. He just mumbled, “I don’t need no help.”

“They told me that your sister passed away and left some dogs. I know of a dog rescue that could help find homes for her dogs.”

“I’m taking care of them.”

“Could I see the dogs? I love dogs, and I heard that your dogs are really special.”

Donald stepped out of his house. He was wearing a bathrobe and boxer shorts, and Elizabeth could see far too much of his pink flesh. “I take good care of the dogs,” he told her.

“I’m sure you do, but I can help you. I can get dog food for you, dog beds, that sort of thing. I can get them spayed and neutered for you, so you don’t have to take care of puppies.”

“My sister did that. All of her dogs were fixed.”

“Why don’t you show me? Then I will know that everything is alright.”

Silent and grumpy, he guided her across the mine field of junk to a pair of ramshackle kennels butted up against a wall of salal and huckleberries. Behind the

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wires two weary dogs climbed to their feet, wagging their tails feebly, wishing for food but not hopeful. The kennels were constructed of odds and ends of chicken wire and scrap wood enclosing mud and feces. Donald hadn't thought to put in gates because it hadn't occurred to him that he might ever want to clean the kennels. Elizabeth was horrified, but she praised the kennels effusively.

Donald glowed pinkly in her approval. "It's the Hilton," he bragged. He was waking up, beginning to get talkative. "Those dogs live better than I do." That wasn't saying much since the cottage stank like a waste disposal site.

The dogs were friendly, poking their noses against the wire, thrusting anxious, needy faces toward Elizabeth. There was no food or water in the kennels. Donald watched at a distance.

"You need buckets for food and water," Elizabeth told him.

"I give them water every day. Fresh water. They knock the bowls over."

"Let's find some buckets," Elizabeth said cheerfully.

They hunted around until they found some rusty paint cans. Elizabeth made the Donald hose the dirt out before filling the cans with fresh water.

"Do you want to keep these dogs?" Elizabeth asked. "I can find good homes for them."

"They were my mother's dogs," Donald leaned forward, hands clasped in front of his chest in an almost prayerful attitude, blinking piously. "I am keeping them for Mother. My mother always took good care of her dogs." He nodded solemnly. "They are pure-bred

Alaska huskies.”

Pure-bred huskies, my ass, Elizabeth thought. Border collie mixes, maybe. The situation was hopeless. Donald was not going to give up his mother’s dogs.

“What about your sister’s dogs?” she asked. “Your neighbor says you used to keep them in her house, but now they are running loose.”

Donald’s face darkened. “The wolves got them, all except the pitbull, and Blacksnake stole him.”

“Wolves got them?”

“Yeah, and Blacksnake stole them. I was keeping them in her house because that was their home, but they got stolen and eaten.”

“Is that her house there? Next door?” A plywood shack, barely large enough for human habitation, was just visible through the trees.

“Yeah, it’s real nice, has a fenced yard, and I was taking care of her dogs, but Blacksnake and them stole them. Can you get them back?”

“I’ll try to find them,” Elizabeth said with deliberate ambiguity.



MERCY

Elizabeth stood at the sister’s gate and studied her yard. The difference in ambience was striking; while Donald’s place was dreary and lonely, the sister’s home was peaceful. Alders and big leaf maples leaned over the grassy clearing, shedding yellow leaves onto the deep green grass. The little plywood cabin nestled against a backdrop of conifers. Leading to the door