

Stray Dogs

By Julie Jensen

ACT I

Lights up on a cluttered, over-used kitchen. We hear a car door slam and a car engine running, then peeling out. A large collie dog, dirty and ill-groomed, comes on stage, eats from a frying pan on the floor. Nyda enters the kitchen on the run, carrying a box of newly washed clothes. She is about thirty but looks older. She is short, rather stocky, energetic and capable off seeing both herself and her chaotic life as funny. She puts down the box, grabs the dog, and scoots it out the screen door. She looks out with exhaustion.

NYDA. J. Ross, tie her up, will you?

J. ROSS. Okay.

NYDA. They're shooting strays tonight, remember. (Pause. J. Ross is on the porch, preoccupied with some small piles of cotton. He is about twelve, thin, and rather precise.) Did you see to them chickens?

J. ROSS. Not yet.

NYDA. Give them a little mash and make sure their water pan is full.

J. ROSS. I watered them this morning.

NYDA. Well, do it again. This heat could kill the whole damn flock.

J. ROSS. Yah, I know.

NYDA. And do something about that hinge on the chicken coop door.

J. ROSS. Okay.

NYDA. If you can't fix it, try tying it up with some baling wire.

And J. Ross...

J. ROSS. Yeah?

NYDA (*Smile.*) Don't ever build a chicken coop in the sun.

(*She moves away from the door and begins stacking dirty dishes.*) You see your dad today?

J. ROSS. Yeah. He come by just after you left.

NYDA. Gees, I swear that man's got spies in the back of his head. Every damn time I walk out the door, he walks in. Did he find it?

J. ROSS. I don't think so.

NYDA. *(She quickly checks the drip pan under the refrigerator where she has hidden some money in a jam bottle. She adds a few bills and replaces the cover.)* Did he have on his creamery clothes?

J. ROSS. Nope.

NYDA. Damnit! I bet he didn't go to work today neither. Was Ace with him?

J. ROSS. Yah.

NYDA. Both of them two is gonna get their butts fired, they don't watch it.

J. ROSS. He says it was his day off.

NYDA. Horseshit! It ain't his day off. Wednesday's his day off.

J. ROSS. He took our bicycle with him.

NYDA Huh?

J. ROSS. Says you had twenty dollar bills stuffed in the handle bars.

NYDA. *(Chuckling.)* First mistake is that I never seen more than one twenty dollar bill in my whole life. And the second is I'd never hide money on a bicycle. Would you?

J. ROSS. No. I told him you couldn't get the hand grippers off. They're sweat on.

NYDA. Did you tell him where I was?

J. ROSS. I told him you went over to Mildred Pickard's.

NYDA. You didn't tell him *why*.

J. ROSS. I says you had to deliver some ironing.

NYDA. J. Ross, I told you not to tell him that. He'll just take that money.

J. ROSS. I don't want to lie.

NYDA. It ain't lying. It's self defense.

J. ROSS. You can lie if you want to. I ain't gonna.

NYDA. Damn Mormons doing this to you, ain't it?

J. ROSS. None of your business.

NYDA. Listen, J. Ross, you don't live in the same world as that damn church. You gotta lie sometimes. Or you, me and your brother -- we ain't gonna eat.

J. ROSS. Uncle Wells will give us food.

J. ROSS. I don't think so.

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NYDA. Your Uncle Wells is already done more than his fair share. It ain't *his* job to keep this family alive. (*Pause. She crosses to screen while sink is filling with water.*) And let's remember to tie Sallas in the shed tonight.

J. ROSS. Why?

NYDA. Milo Boyer told me they're shooting any dog not tied up. They're also shooting any dog without a collar. Sallas could be shot twice. Once for not being tied up, once for not having a collar. She could be shot *while* she's tied up.

J. ROSS. (*Entering the kitchen.*) The cops know which one she is. They won't shoot her.

NYDA. J. Ross, they're shooting everything tonight.

J. ROSS. They won't shoot Sallas.

NYDA. Ez Barton has lost two sheep to dogs.

J. ROSS. How do they know it was dogs?

NYDA. It was a whole pack of dogs. If Sallas was with em, she'd be shot.

J. ROSS. Sallas is too old to chase sheep.

NYDA. She chases trucks all the time.

J. ROSS. Not very much lately.

NYDA. J. Ross, she chases every pickup comes down this road.

J. ROSS. That's just cuz it's usually Roy Harris. She hates Roy Harris.

NYDA. Well, she's got a point. But we did not ask for her opinion on Roy Harris. Just see that she's in that shed. And don't tell your brother they're shooting dogs tonight. He'l just wanna go watch. *(Pause. She returns to sink and washes the dishes.)* Where is he anyhow? You seen him since lunch?

J. ROSS. Reese? He's over in the stack yard with Scott McKnight.

NYDA. Doing what?

J. ROSS. Bottling mice, I think.

NYDA. Doing what?

J. ROSS. Catching mice in fruit jars.

NYDA. What for?

J. ROSS. See how long it takes em to die.

NYDA. Good Lord! He's gonna kill something important one of these days, end up in prison.

J. ROSS. He'll be all right.

NYDA. But he can't read.

J. ROSS. So... He can do other things. (*Slight pause.*) He's a good shot.

NYDA. That's what scares me. He'll grow up to be what then?

J. ROSS. He could be a soldier.

NYDA. He ain't joining the Army. That's what made your dad crazy. Besides, you have to be able to read to be in the Army.

J. ROSS. Let him be a slaughterhouse worker like he wants.

NYDA. Oh good Lord, what kind of job is that? And just who told him about slaughterhouses anyhow?

J. ROSS. Scott McKnight, I guess.

NYDA. That's another thing. He should not be running with Scott McKnight.

J. ROSS. Scott McKnight's okay.

NYDA. He's twice his age, mean as hell, and dumb besides.

J. ROSS. He's no worse than Reese.

NYDA. He can't read. In the seventh grade and he can't read.

J. ROSS. Well, neither can Reese. They make a good pair.

NYDA. (*She sighs, having finished the dishes, then sets up an ironing board, plugs in the iron. They both move out on the porch.*) Move that hair stuff fore I put this fat butt right in the middle of it.

J. ROSS. It ain't hair. It's cotton. Off the trees. Pioneers used it for cloth.

NYDA. (*Sitting.*) No they never.

J. ROSS. They spun it up into cloth and then made real beautiful things like ties and handkerchiefs out of it.

NYDA. They never neither.

J. ROSS. Did so.

NYDA. They never, J. Ross.

J. ROSS. They did.

NYDA. Look, they never had no fancy things, first of all, and they never done nothing with that stuff, second.

J. ROSS. How do you know?

NYDA. (*Hitting him affectionately.*) Cuz I used to believe the same thing when I was a little kid.

J. ROSS. (*Hitting her back.*) I ain't a little kid.

NYDA. (*Hitting him back.*) Well, I can't help it if you still believe like one. Ask your Uncle Wells if you don't believe me.

J. ROSS. He don't know everything.

NYDA. He knows. enough. What he don't know, I do. And between the two of us we got you covered. (*She pinches him.*)

J. ROSS. Don't mess up them strings I got there.

NYDA. Tell you what, let's you and me go down to the store and get you one of them shirts with the little buttons on the collar.

J. ROSS. Okay. But git it smaller.

NYDA. We git it almost the right size. You gonna be cute enough to eat when you grow up. (*She pinches him and takes a bite.*)

J. ROSS. You grow up, Ma.

REESE. (*Yelling. Off.*) Mom!

NYDA. Yeah.

REESE. Guess what's in the water ditch? (*Reese bounds on the porch, breathless, carrying two quart canning jars full of something. He is seven and incessantly active.*)

NYDA. Leave them bottles outside, Reese.

REESE. Fish eggs or something. God, millions of em.

J. ROSS. Don't say "God," Reese.

REESE. (*He puts the bottles on the first step of the porch.*) you should see it. There's more of them than there is water.

NYDA. Not where people will step on them, Reese...

REESE. See, they're fish eggs. And then, see, when you mash em up, they make snot.

NYDA. Sounds lovely. Put them bottles over by the tap. (*She moves back into the kitchen. Reese begins spreading fish eggs on the steps.*) J. Ross, I run onto them baby shoes we was talking about.

J. ROSS. Why didn't you tell me? (*Running inside. Taking a pair of satin baby shoes from her.*)

Gees. Can I have em?

NYDA. If you take good care of em. They belong to your Gran.

J. ROSS. I'll take care of em. This here's satin, ain't it?

NTDA. Yep.

J ROSS. Don't look lie no one even wore these things.

NYDA. Well, your dad and you both did.

J. ROSS. Did I like wearing em?

NYDA. I used to lay you on this table, let you kick away in them little shoes.

J. ROSS. I wonder if it was dancing.

NYDA. Sure. Then sometimes you did a little singing.

J. ROSS. Yeah. (*He sticks his hands in the shoes and walks them on the table.*)

REESE. If you put these fish eggs on the sidewalk, makes it slickern ice, people just go flying.

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