



3 SHORTS

by Denning



A sad story...

REQUITED REQUIEM

They stand there, the three of them, arms around each other, bawling their eyes out as they look at it. *A little Laocoon group.* I don't know what to do, what to say. So I just pop the top off the beer bottle, considering them from the kitchen. *Oh, oh, did I screw up?* My mind hits replay...

"It's the right thing," the vet says comfortingly. "Ben's in terrible pain. A couple of days... a week at the most."

I study the tile floor, smell its disinfectant. My eyes flit over the walls, their photos, plaques, citations. *Is this a good place to die?*

The vet squirts a little clear liquid from the needle, waves it around. Not Italian, but he talks with his hands anyway. Figure that.

"Jesus, doc, careful with that thing. It's Ben's time, not mine."

"Never lost an owner yet. Besides," he offers cheerfully, "the money you've put into all your pets over what, twenty years? My kids' college fund, ya know? I can't afford to do you."

I reach down to the dog splayed across the stainless steel table and scratch behind his ears. A tail thumps once, weakly. *Yeah, doc, you got that right. Joe Namath knees. Infections from porcupine quills. Cat-scratched eyes. Internal organ failures, assorted.*

"Money," I agree, "and Ben most of all." I rub the dog's head, get another thump, weaker. *And now it's time to cash out. Ka-ching.*

The vet strokes the shaved area above the paw, looking for a good vein. Shrugs a wry smile sideways at me. He gets the irony.

I run my hand down the dog's back. An unevenness in the hair. Scar tissue. *What was that one, Ben? The raccoon? Sharon should have let you die then. But she's a fucking saint. Had you stitched back together, hung with you ten more years. Kept you even when three tries at obedience school didn't work. Ka-ching.*

The needle slides in. The plunger eases down. The three of us wait.

I need to make conversation. A eulogy of sorts.

"You know Ben's story, doc?"

"Most of it, probably."

"Ben was her brother Steve's dog. Sharon rescued him from the pound after he cycled through all the other relatives who couldn't stand him."

"I heard." The vet's voice has gone soft, soothing.

“And Steve couldn’t take him back. After the Marines, he went to the State Department. Traveled the world. No dogs.”

“I heard.”

“So Sharon tried and tried and tried to civilize the damn dog. Never worked.”

“I heard.”

I’m getting pissed as I think about it, the inequity. *Some eulogy.* My voice heats up.

“All that love. And time, effort, money. And nothing back from Ben. Ever. Zip.”

The vet nods. He’s heard that too, evidently.

I stare at him. *Oho! So Ben’s a fucking legend around here. Billy the Kid of dogdom.*

“Sharon tell you all this?”

He smiles.

“In this business, you get to be a shrink, too.” He pulls off a latex glove, rubs the back of his neck, studies me, mulls over a confidence, decides.

“Sharon told me you were great about it, you knew it was a crummy idea from the start but kept your mouth shut. Forked out the big bucks. Never complained once. Not in ten long years.”

I think about that for awhile. *Long ones, yeah. Guess I’m a fucking saint too.*

We wait, the three of us. Ben’s not going to go easily. *That figures.* I’m antsy, need to make more conversation.

“I’m surprised Sharon finally told me bring him in to you. Can’t imagine her finally letting go.”

The vet looks at me steadily. He’s a good guy. We play tennis together, Sundays.

“Incontinence gets to you after awhile,” he shrugs. “And she’s got good instincts. Ben’s suffering terribly. No point prolonging it.”

My hand finally feels the dog’s breathing stop. An exhalation, and that’s it.

I take a breath of my own, let it out. I nuzzle Ben’s head with mine, getting close to give parting instructions in case that matters. *If you should recycle, Ben-bo, for Chrissake treat your new owners better. Don’t be such a goddamn pain in the ass in your next incarnation. Don’t make ‘em so fucking miserable. Don’t take so much, and give so little back.* I kiss his raggedy head. *Good luck, Ben-bo. Godspeed.*

“You want us to dispose of the body?”

“Mm. Yeah. Thanks, doc.”

It hits me then, what I need to do. I unhook the collar, slip it into my pocket.

The vet pats my shoulder on the way out. He’s a good guy. Good tennis player. Excellent shrink.

The florist shop is right on the way home.

“A really nice plant, an orchid, if you have one.”

They do. A white one, pretty, in a ceramic pot. Very fragrant. *Good. This should counter the Lestoil-over-urine smell on the kitchen floor.*

“It’s a piliatum,” the salesgirl says. She gives me an approving smile. *I must have good taste.* No, that wasn’t it; she tells me the price. *Must be on commission. Goddammit, Ben!* The cash register goes ka-ching. This one sounds like the bell for the fifteenth round.

“And a nice thank-you card, if you have one.”

She does. It’s simple, just “Thanks for everything”. A freebie, thank God; no ka-ching. I sign the card “Ben” and slip it into its envelope.

At home, there’s a note scrawled on the small whiteboard by the phone: “Gone shopping with MK+Lee, back by din”.

I put the plant on the bar counter across from the kitchen.

I slip the collar around it.

I print BEN SAYS THANKS in big magic marker letters on the envelope and lean it against the orchid stem above the collar.

I study it, then adjust the collar so the tags hang down over the pot’s rim. I stand back to admire my artistry, nodding. *Somebody’s gotta say thanks, you miserable fucking mutt. For all that love you got. And never returned.* I turn on the spotlight over the counter and like the result. The orchid gleams bright, a counterpoint to the ratty collar.

Satisfied, I walk over to the fridge. The occasion calls for a beer. I go with the good stuff. Heineken.

As I turn to get the bottle opener, the ladies troop in: Lee sixteen, Mary K twenty-six, Sharon forty-six. Packages in their arms. Shopping is a solace, no doubt, while the deed is done.

Lee spots the orchid first.

“Oh!” she says. Her package drops. Right hand goes to her mouth. Left hand points at BEN SAYS THANKS. She wails.

Mary K and Sharon see it together. Instantly, they wail.

The three of them wail, holding onto each other. *My little Laocoon group.*

Sharon reaches out, gently touching the dog tags. They clink together.

The hugging gets tighter. The wailing gets louder, almost howling now. Like Ben. *Jesus, what have I done? Did I fuck this up? Decide I don’t have a clue.*

Then an insight, out of nowhere. *Maybe Ben never had a clue either.*

Dry at the vet’s, my eyes now mist up. I flick the bottle cap into the trash, raise the Heineken in salute to mourners the damn dog doesn’t deserve.

Or maybe he does.



A happy story...

SATORI

The tide is out, the sun low, the beach deserted save for an old bum gazing into the empty horizon below the setting sun. An unseasonably warm Christmas Eve, Marseilles, France, 1647 AD.

Two tubers come rolling down the beach. No, not *that* sort of tubers, my friends... 1647 is way too early for rubber tire technology, as you must surely know. This pair of tubers is... a sweet potato and a yam. Their buds push rhythmically against the hard-packed sand, jogging themselves along the beach. They roll to a stop in front of the beach bum to catch their breath, still arguing.

“I will not!” Yam says, heatedly. “Not only are you crude, rude and a disgrace to the male persuasion, but I am a YAM! Totally above your sweet potato class! I want nothing to do with you, dammit, so spud off!”

But the object of her disaffection is not so easily dismissed. “Naw, you jes confused, babe; you really a sweet pertater! Jes like me. I mean, moi. We can do the soily, make music, vegetate together!”

She rolls her eyes at the beach bum. All six of them. She’s looking for any kind of support. “Do I look like a sweet potato to you, kind sir?” she implores.

The bum gives her an empathetic eyeroll back. Only two eyes, though. “No, ma’am. You look like a yam to me.”

Sweet Potato senses he’s losing ground here, decides to play his ace-in-the-hole card, goes for the direct approach. Extending two buds, he uses them to fondle a third bud suggestively. “Hey, sweet thang, looky here! This bud’s for you!”

Yam sighs in disgust.

Sweet Potato fondles his ace-in-the-hole card more, extending the bud even more impressively. “Hey, I’m a-germinatin’ fer ya, sweetness! You be my l’il Sweet Pertater! I b’lieve it’s love!”

Yam extends her own bud and slaps down his germination. “I’m a YAM, goddammit! I can’t consort with a sweet potato, even if I wanted to. Which I definitely don’t! Especially with you!”

But now Sweet Potato’s persistence has Yam wondering: could she really be a sweet potato? Sudden uncertainty about her genetic heritage blindsides her. She looks around, worried.

Rubbing his wilting germination, Sweet Potato senses victory and is quick to follow up. He goes to the bum for support. “Hey! Hey you! You human bean! You the beach guru, right? The wise man?”

“Some have been so kind as to say that, yes, sir. My name is Descartes, by the way,” the guru introduces himself softly, as befits a beach guru in enlightened medieval Marseilles, “Rene Descartes.”

“So, Day-cart, how do I persuade this little French Fry she ain’t a yam?”

Descartes ponders, then... “Starch to dextrine to sugar... induced by enzyme action... diastase... nitrogenous... azotized...”

Sweet Potato grows impatient with the guru’s extended biochemistry soliloquy. “Hey! Day-cart! This goin’ somewhere?”

“Yes,” the guru answers after a long pause, “yams have higher protein content, sweet potatoes higher carbohydrate content.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. So what? He’p me out heah!”

“In salt water, a sweet potato will float, a yam will sink.” Descartes smiles gently at Sweet Potato and gestures at the horizon. “There’s some salt water. The test I leave to the two of you.”

“Hot damn!” Sweet Potato senses he’s on the cusp of his umpteenth conquest. His germination hugely re-extrudes, throbbing this time. “C’mon, babycakes! Into the water! If you really a yam, I be buggin’ off. I promise! But... if you a sweet pertater... woohooooo!”

Yam looks imploringly at the guru. He nods yes, smiling.

The two tubers roll down the beach and into the water for their test.

The outgoing tide seizes Sweet Potato and yanks his floating body away; he screams in frustration.

Yam disappears beneath the surface, but flails madly to pop a bud out of the water so she can shout her delighted confirmation and thanks back to the beach guru: “I SINK, THEREFORE I YAM!”

“Aha!” says Descartes. He is -- as you surely have guessed -- a tad hard of hearing. This is the true story, my friends, of how modern philosophy really got its start.



A love story...

LIBRARY LOVE LOST

Joe, the late-shift librarian, stands behind the check-out counter. He pores over a newspaper, highlighting words in yellow marker. Occasionally he shifts his weight from one leg to the other. Occasionally he looks out at the nearly deserted library main floor. No waves for help; it's a slow night. Occasionally he wipes an eye, then goes back to the paper.

A flash of color at the entry slips into his peripheral vision. As footsteps click across the tile he highlights one more line before looking up. A good-looking woman in jeans and a bright print shirt looks around as she strides in, then smiles at him. He pushes the paper under the counter's parapet.

"Carol, hey! Welcome back! We heard you're coming back to work at the Health Center. So that's true?" Joe reaches his hand out.

Carol takes his hand, but leans over the counter to kiss his cheek. "Fourteen years around the world, Joe. Time to come home."

"Ah. Your mom? Her health?"

"Oh, partly. But Afghanistan... just... it got to me."

"I hear nobody put more time in Doctors without Borders than you, ever. South America, Africa... we lost track." Joe smiles at her.

An announcement sounds over the PA system: "The Library will close in TEN minutes."

"Oh! Quick, Joe. I just got off the airplane, and it looks like you're totally re-organized here. Where are the Conard yearbooks now?"

Joe points. "Upper stacks, right there..." He watches her run off.

Carol climbs the stairs, finds the yearbooks, pulls one out. She flips it to a picture of a young man, strokes her fingers along it, murmuring. "Twenty-some years of missed chances, Josh... husbands and wives that didn't work out... we were the perfect couple... why didn't it happen?"

A tear drops on the yearbook page. She brushes it off, flips to another page showing her younger self with a young Joshua behind her, his arms encircled under her breasts as they sang into a microphone.

"Scandalized the whole damn school with that song, didn't we...?" Carol remembers, singing softly to herself in the empty library stacks:

*"Deep in my soul, I've been so lonely...
All of my hopes, fading away..."*

Another tear falls on that page. As she brushes at it the page flips, showing a loose newspaper clipping someone put there. It has a photo of a smiling soldier in a green beret. She turns back to Josh's younger picture, holds the clipping beside it, comparing. She smiles and goes back to the page with the two of them singing.

"They almost threw us out for that song. Then you went to West Point. And I went to pre-med, and..." Carol sings again, remembering more words:

*"I've longed for love, like everyone else does...
I know I'll keep searching, even after today..."*

The lights in the stack flick off, leaving only dimmer light coming up from the main floor below. Another PA announcement sounds: "The Library will close in FIVE minutes."

"...and then, Josh, our one magical night in Kandahar... you said you were getting out of the Army, going home... that we should meet in the Library... where we first met..." Carol sings more of the song:

"... longing for shelter from all that we see..."

She strokes the picture, closes the yearbook, hugs it to her breast, crying.

"Well, I just got off the airplane, love. And here I am. And I'll be here tomorrow, and the day after, and..."

Arms enfold Carol from behind, desert camouflage fatigues rolled up to the elbow. A green beret shadows Joshua's face. Carol sighs, starts to turn in his embrace.

"No," he murmurs, "just let me hold you, like I did back then..." He sings softly in her ear as they sway together:

*"So here we are, babe, what do you say...
We've got tonight, who needs tomorrow...
We've got tonight, babe...
Why don't you stay?"*

Carol turns in his arms and they kiss, thoroughly. Finally she pulls back.

"Been waiting long?" she asks.

"No. A couple of weeks." He brushes an errant tear from her cheek.

"You're out of the Army now."

"Fair to say."

"But still in uniform?"

He smiles. "Old habits die hard."

"Like still sneaking up on people?"

"I'm a spook, love. That's what Special Forces do."

Another PA announcement sounds: "The Library is now CLOSING."

Carol turns, slides the yearbook back onto its shelf. When she turns back Joshua is gone. As she walks down the stairs his voice tracks her, coming from different places, singing:

"We've got tonight..."

She responds: *"Who needs tomorrow..."*

"Let's make it last..." he offers.

"Let's find a way..." she agrees.

The ceiling lights cascade off from the back of the library forward, following her. She waves at Joe in passing.

"Turn out the lights..." Joshua sings.

“Come take my hand now...” Carol offers.

Joe watches her leave, puzzled, not quite hearing what she said. He pulls the newspaper into the full desk light. It shows a big spread of pictures and stories about the hometown hero, Major Joshua Jacob Christensen, US Army 5th Special Forces Group. Words are highlighted in yellow marker: *operating in the south of Afghanistan... Silver Star, posthumous... burial with full military honors... died in the service of his country...* Joe whispers his sadness to her retreating back:

“I’m sorry you missed the funeral, Carol. They beat the drum slowly. They played the fife lowly. Just like it says. It was truly beautiful. I cried the whole time. I loved him too, you know. Our whole class did.”

Carol pauses at the front door, ready to walk out into the darkness. Her right hand moves out from her side, open.

“Come take my hand now...” she sings.

Carol’s hand clasps. She walks out alone, but two voices sing together in close harmony:

“We’ve got tonight, babe...

why don’t we stay...”

Joe switches off the desk light.

A refrain drifts back into the library from the empty darkness outside, voices interwoven:

“We’ve got tonight, babe...

why don’t we stay...”

-End-

Note: Credit where credit is due. This story is a visualization of a song. Lyrics from *We Got Tonight* by Bob Seger, c1978. Anybody interested, see the YouTube duet by Kenny Rogers and Sheena Easton at www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/k/kenny_rogers_sheena_easton/we_got_tonight.html.