

Dub's Loss

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Dub used to be handsome. The eighty-year-old ex-horse trader knew some quality stories about the price of land, about grappling for catfish in hollow logs, about going out with married women. He always drove a new Chevrolet truck. A lock of curly hair still brushes his forehead, falling forward softly, more gray now than black. Not long ago, he wore his flannel shirt opened at the neck, the first two buttons undone to reveal curly chest hair and a couple of gold chains. Now he keeps it buttoned all the way to the collar.

Dub's trouble began when he offered his friend, Riley, the use of the old trailer house, which sits at the back of Dub's property. Just for a few weeks, until Riley could get back on his feet. Two years passed. Finally, Dub asked Riley if he would mind paying a little rent. Not long after that, Dub began missing things. One morning over coffee, Dub reported his losses to his nephew.

"Yesterday, he got my good log chain, C. T."

"Sure 'nough, Uncle Dub?"

"Yep, 'n left me an old wore out rusty one. Just like he did me on my post hole diggers. My axe. He's replacin' all my good stuff with a bunch of junk. Riley's stealin' from me to pay his rent, C. T."

"That makes no sense, Uncle Dub."

Six months later Dub asked Riley to vacate. Reluctantly, Riley complied. After that, Dub noticed something peculiar happening to his food and household items. "He's dopin' my bacon, and my sausages, and my whiskey. Dub thrust a bottle of Johnny Walker Red under C.T.'s nose. "Here, smell of this."

"Aw, Uncle Dub." C. T. pushed the nearly empty bottle away from his face.

"Last night," the old man continued, returning the bottle to his hip pocket, "I went to get a can of chicken noodle soup out of the cabinet." He paused, pulling out his handkerchief to blow his nose. "And he'd replaced it with some a that ol' cream of chicken." Dub curled his mouth in disgust. "And my pretty little blue bowls? Well, he switched 'em. Left some old chipped white ones."

Dub installed triple locks on every window and door, but to no avail. Riley continued to pilfer. No amount of bolting could keep him out, for even while Dub slept, the filcher absconded with every good pair of Dub's underwear. So obsessed Dub became with guarding his belongings, he rarely left his property unattended. One morning he called C.T. to housesit while he went to the sheriff's office to file a complaint.

"Now you watch everything, C.T. He's one sly devil." Dub lowered his voice to a whisper. "Last week I went out to the mailbox, and the sorry rascal switched my mattress on me. Made the bed back up just as neat." The old man's voice rose angrily, "Don't you be shakin' your head like that, now I'm tellin' you, C.T., that ain't my mattress!" Taking on a more rational tone, he added, "Looks a right smart like it, I'll have to admit, 'cept mine's a whole lot newer."

Dub brought the sheriff back with him. First, he showed him an old refrigerator, one of the first electric ones on the market, the kind with the motor on top. "Looky here, Sheriff. See all them little dents and rusty spots? Mine didn't have a scratch one, it's just like new." Dub pursed his lips and looked up into his head for a second. "You know, he must've switched 'em when he swapped my light pole."

"Your light pole?"

"Oh, yeah, you'll see where the wire's been disconnected, and stuck back. Come on, I'll show you." The two walked to the side of the house.

"W. W., ain't nobody been messin' with this light pole," the sheriff said gently. "You need to get a grip."

Dub looked like he might kick the sheriff. "Why, I oughta—"

"Naw, you oughta nothin'," the sheriff said as though scolding a child. "I mean it, W. W., I'm worried about you." Nobody but the sheriff and the preacher called Dub by his full name. "And don't be messin' with them electrical wires."

"Like there ain't been nobody stealin' my underwear, or my lamp—"

"Lamp?"

With the most baffled expression on his face, Dub put his hands on his hips, and stared into the lawman's face. "Reckon how he does it?" The frustration over the light pole vanished in light of this new concern. "The only difference in the lamps is mine had some little bitty writin' on the base, and the one he left me don't."

"Lordy mercy." The sheriff shook his head and tipped his hat to C.T., who was heading toward his pickup. When Dub returned to scrutinizing the markings on the light pole, the sheriff followed C. T.'s lead.

Dub's attention shifted from the light pole to the old dog masquerading as Sam. The sheriff and C. T. departed unnoticed. The graying cocker spaniel sidled up to Dub, begging to be patted and rubbed.

"You ain't Sam, and you know it. Little ol' Sam ain't much more'n a pup." Dub fought back the tears. "You go on, you pitiful-lookin' varmint. Git outa here!" He slapped his hands together, startling the confused, whimpering pet. "Nawsir, you ain't my little Sammie."

One morning a few weeks later, Dub returned home to find an unfamiliar vehicle parked in his driveway. Easing out of his truck quietly, leaving the engine running, he approached the house cautiously, his handy deer rifle loaded and ready. From the steps, he saw Riley, hunkered down beside the holly bushes at the far end of the house, tinkering with the water hose. Dub fired directly at the man's shoulder, knocking him to the ground.

"Oh, my God," C. T. moaned, clutching his right shoulder. Blood bubbled out through his fingers as he tried to stand up. "Help me, Uncle Dub, I'm bleedin'—"

"Don't you think for one minute that's gonna work. I been wise to you a long time, Riley Wright."

"No, it's me, Uncle Dub. Don't you know me?"

"I know you, by God. I have had it with you! Now, go on." Dub waved his rifle precariously in C. T.'s face. "I'm takin' you in!"

"I's just gettin' a drink of water, Uncle Dub." C. T. stumbled backward, in the direction of his uncle's truck. "I stopped to check on you before I went back to Dallas."

The old man peered into his nephew's eyes as if the two were playing some kind of game. He paid no attention to C. T.'s bleeding shoulder, to the difficulty the man was having climbing into the truck. "Thought I'd never ketchee, did ya? Figgered ever'body'd just think I's crazy. And you's good at it, too. Real crafty, the way you matched up ever'thing so close. Why, I's the only one could tell the difference." Dub squinted, gazing toward the house. "Cept for Sam and the icebox, and them bowls, you matched ever'thing almost perfect." He frowned, staring curiously into the distance.

His rifle arm relaxed in his rambling, and the gun's barrel nudged the ground. He recovered quickly, shaking his head as if clearing his mind. Dub pushed C. T. into the truck with the rifle barrel, slamming the door against his blood-soaked shoulder.

"Well, Riley, I tell you one thing," Dub ranted, climbing behind the wheel. "It takes an awful sick mind to go to so much trouble." Attempting to start the truck's already running engine, the confused old man raced the motor, forcing the accelerator and brake down at the same time. Then, with motor racing and tires screaming, he threw the vehicle into reverse, slamming his bleeding passenger into the dash.

Dub released a short, smug snort, and glanced sideways at his barely conscious passenger. "I can't wait to see the look on the sheriff's face. By God, he'll believe me now!" As the truck plunged toward town, Dub chuckled. "Riley, you are one crazy little pecker nut." He swerved back into the right lane. "And you look 'bout as much like C. T. as that mangy old dog looks like Sammie."

The sheriff's office eluded him, even though he passed it several times without noticing. "They must have moved it," he told the police officer who stopped him out near the high school after he made an illegal u-turn. "It's sure not where it's 's'pose to be!"

That was the last time Dub drove his truck. The city impounded it, holding it for six weeks, until C. T.'s shattered collarbone healed enough for him to claim it. By the time Dub, with his dog, Sammie, went to live with C. T. and his family, the old man had forgotten his pickup truck, Riley, and all his trouble.

He forgets his own name most days, passing the time watching television and playing with his great-nephew, Rusty. He calls the boy C. T. Some nights Dub feeds the graying cocker spaniel, and ponders the whereabouts of the beloved puppy he used to own, although Sammie's name long ago slipped away.