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# The Stray Dog

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# The Stray Dog

## **Disciplines**

Anthropology | Fiction | Modern Literature | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Comments**

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# The Stray Dog

Translated by Brian Spooner

A square and a few small shops. A butcher's, a baker's, grocer's, a couple of cafés, a barber shop. All concerned with meeting the demands of hunger and satisfying the most fundamental needs of everyday life. Both the square and the men who lived in it, almost burnt away, almost roasted alive by the omnipotent sun, longed for the first cool breeze of evening and the shade of night.

The men, the shops, the trees, the animals, no longer worked, no longer moved. The stifling heat weighed down on their shoulders, and the fine dust gently swirled against the bright blue background of the sky, rising and settling according to the density of the constant traffic.

On one side of the square stood an old plane tree. The inside of its trunk had rotted and fallen away, but with long persistent effort it had spread wide its gnarled and twisted branches, and in the shade of its dusty leaves a broad platform had been set up where two boys selling nuts and rice shouted their wares. In front of the cafés thick muddy water pushed its way slowly along the *jub*.<sup>1</sup>

The only building which attracted attention was the famous tower of Varamin, but it was only partly visible from the square. In gaps where the bricks had fallen away sparrows had built their nests, and even they were quiet, dozing, because of the intense heat. Only the noise of a dog howling from time to time broke the silence.

This particular dog was a Scottish setter. He had a gray snout, and his paws were black, as though he had been running about in the mud and caught the mange. His ears were large and floppy and his tail caught the light. His coat was wavy and dirty, and above his shaggy snout sparkled two eyes which betrayed a very human intelligence, the suggestion of a human soul.

In the darkness which had overtaken his life something infinite surged in those eyes, an indecipherable message, caught just behind

<sup>1</sup>Water channel.

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his pupils. It was neither light nor color. It was something else something unbelievable—like the eyes of a wounded gazelle. But not only was there some similarity between this dog's eyes and the eyes of a man, but a sort of equality was visible there. Two big brown eyes full of pain and torment and patience, such as can only be found in the face of a stray dog.

It seemed no one saw or understood these looks of suffering and entreaty. In front of the baker's the errand boy hit him. In front of the butcher's the assistant threw stones at him. If he sought shelter in the shade of a car, the driver came and kicked him with his heavy studded boot, to amuse himself. And when these people all grew tired of tormenting him, one of the boys who sold rice took particular pleasure in tormenting him further. For every howl he raised, a well-aimed stone hit him in the small of the back, and a burst of laughter broke through the noise of his howling. The man who had thrown the stone swore, and the others joined in the laughter as though they were in league with him and slyly encouraging him.

It was to please God that they all hurt him. They thought it perfectly natural to earn their place in heaven by humiliating a dog—a creature which their religion had pronounced unclean and cursed, and which had seventy lives.

Eventually, the boy who sold rice tormented him so much that the poor animal fled into a side street which led towards the tower. That is, with difficulty he dragged along his empty stomach and sought refuge in the bed of an empty *jub*. He lay his head on his paws, let his tongue flop out, and gazed in front of him, half-awake, half asleep, at the field of young corn rippling in the breeze before him. His body was tired. His limbs ached. But in the dank air of the *jub* a special feeling of repose filled him from head to foot. Various smells wafted past his nostrils and awakened confused and distant memories in him—dying vegetation, an old shoe rotting in the stream, and other things, some dead, some alive. Every time he looked at the field an old instinct awoke in him and brought to life memories of the past. But this time the feeling was very strong, as though a voice inside his ear was urging him to get up and run about. He felt an extraordinary inclination to beat about in the field, to run and leap.

It was the power of instinct still working within him; all his ancestors

had grown up in the freedom of the Scottish glens. But his body was so bruised and exhausted that it would not allow him to make even the least movement. Even the pain and weakness he felt, however, did not still the old forgotten feelings which had been excited in him. Before, he had felt only obligation and needs—to be ready at his master's call, to chase away strangers and strange dogs from his master's house, to play with his master's children, to behave properly with acquaintances and strangers, to eat his meals, and to expect to be stroked at the proper times. But now all those obligations had been lifted from his shoulders.

Now all his attention was confined to searching in the dung for morsels of food, afraid and trembling, to being beaten all day, and to howling—the only means of defense left him. Before he had been daring, fearless, clean and lively. But now he had become timid, helpless, abject. Every noise, anything which moved near him, made him start and tremble. Even the lonely sound of his own voice was frightening. He had become quite accustomed to the filth and dung. His body itched, but he no longer had the patience to hunt his fleas or even to lick himself. He felt he had become a part of the rubbish, and that something in him had died.

From the time when he had fallen into this distant hell two winters had passed during which he had not eaten a single bellyful of food nor known a peaceful sleep. His passions and emotions had been stifled. During this time he had not come across a single person who would stroke his head or look into his eyes. Although people might appear similar to his master, nevertheless there seemed to be a world of difference between their disposition and behavior and his master's. It was as though the people whom he had been with before had been closer to his world, had understood better his pains and feelings, and had protected him.

Among the odors which reached his senses the one which above all else made his head swim was the smell of rice in front of the boys' stall. This white mess, so like his mother's milk, brought to life memories of his childhood. He felt overwhelmed by a sudden sensation of numbness. The time came to mind when he was a puppy sucking that nourishing warm liquid from his mother's paps while her soft firm tongue licked and washed his body. The sharp, heavy smell of his mother and her milk returned to him. When he was full with milk, his

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body had felt warm and comforted. Warmth had flowed throughout the veins and sinews of his body. His head parted heavily from his mother's paps, and a deep sleep overtook him, making intoxicating tremors along the length of his body. What pleasure greater than this: that his paws should unconsciously press his mother's paps, and, effortlessly, out came the milk! The soft downy body of his brother, the voice of his mother, those were all full of joy and tenderness. He thought of the wooden kennel he had had and the games he would play with his brother in the little green garden. He would bite his brother's floppy ears, and they would roll over on the ground, only to jump up again and run off. Then he had found another playmate in his master's son. He would run after him at the bottom of the garden, barking and grabbing his trousers in his teeth. Particularly he remembered when his master used to stroke him and the lumps of sugar he had eaten from his hand. He would never forget these things. But he loved his master's son more, for he was a playmate and had never hit him.

Later on he had lost his mother and brother. Only the master with his son and wife and an old servant remained. How well he could distinguish the smell of any one of them or recognize the sound of their step from a distance! At lunch and dinner they would gather around the table. At the sound of the carving knife he would prowl around the table smelling the food. Sometimes his master's wife, despite her husband's opposition, would drop him a piece of meat, a token of her affection for him. Then the old servant would come and call him, "Pat . . . Pat . . ." and pour his food into the special bowl at the side of his kennel.

But a full stomach was to become the cause of Pat's bad luck. His master did not allow him to go outside and chase bitches. One day in autumn his master got in a car with two other men whom Pat knew and who often came to their house. They called Pat and sat him in the car beside them. Pat had often gone places with his master by car, but today he was full, and feeling particularly ruttish and on edge. After a few hours' driving they got out again in the same square. His master went with the two other men down this same alley, by the tower, but by chance the smell of a bitch—the remains of a trail of a particularly attractive smell which Pat had long been following up—this time drove him mad. The trail continued intermittently until at last it led him into a *jub* which passed under a high mud wall into a garden.

Around sunset he twice heard his master's voice calling, "Pat—Pat—" Was it really his voice? Or was it the echo of his voice still resounding in his ears?

His master's voice had a strange effect on him. It reminded him of all the obligations and duties by which he knew himself bound. But now, some unfamiliar force, stronger than the forces of the world outside him, persuaded him to be with his female; his will to respond to the noises of this world outside had become sluggish and dull. Violent emotions had been awakened in him, and the smell of the bitch was so keen and powerful that it had sent his head spinning. All his muscles, his whole body and senses had ceased to obey him. He had lost all control. But it was not long before they came along with sticks and spade handles and drove him out along the *jub*.

He felt giddy and tired but light and at ease, and as soon as he came to himself, he went off to look for his master. In several back alleys a faint scent still remained. He visited them all, and at certain intervals left a token of himself. He went as far as the ruins outside the town. Then he came back again. Pat realized that his master had returned to the square, but there his scent had become weak and confusingly mingled with other smells. Had his master gone and left him? A cautionary fear passed through him. How could he live without his master, without his god, for his master was a god to him. But at the same time he was sure his master would come looking for him. Becoming afraid, he started to run along different roads, but his efforts were in vain.

At last, well after dark, he returned wearily to the square. There was no trace of his master. He made a few more rounds of the town, and finally went to the end of the *jub* where the bitch had been. But they had blocked up the hole where it passed under the wall.

Angrily he dug at the ground, thinking perhaps he might be able to get into the garden, but it was impossible. When he had given up, he occupied himself dozing there on the spot.

At midnight he started from sleep at the sound of his own howling. He got up, afraid, and prowled up and down a few alleys, smelling the walls and wandering through back streets. After a time he felt violently hungry. Back at the square the smells of one sort of food after another

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reached his nostrils. The smell of meat left over at night. The smell of fresh bread and yogurt. All these mingled together. But at the same time he felt guilty. He felt he had entered the domain of others and must beg from these men who looked like his master; if no rival appeared for him to chase away, little by little he would acquire the right of ownership, and perhaps one of these creatures who had food in his hand would look after him.

Cautiously, for he was afraid and trembling, he went in front of the baker's, which had just opened. The smell of freshly baked dough wafted on the air. A man with an armful of bread called to him, "Here . . . here!" How strange this new voice seemed to his ear! The man threw a piece of warm bread in front of him. After a brief respectable hesitation Pat ate it and wagged his tail for him. The man put his bread down on the step in front of the shop and started very cautiously to stroke Pat's head. Then with both hands he undid his collar. What a restful feeling, as though all responsibility and obligation were being lifted from him. But as soon as he set his tail wagging again and went up to the shopowner, he got a firm kick in the ribs and ran away howling. The shopowner went and washed his hands carefully in the *jub*. Pat saw his collar, now hanging in front of the shop.

From that day onward Pat earned nothing but kicks, stones, and beatings from these people, as though they were all his ancestral enemies and enjoyed his suffering.

Pat sensed he had come into a new world in which he had no place and where no one understood his feelings or knew the world he was used to. The first few days were difficult, but as time went on he gradually got used to it. Besides, he had found the place at the corner of the alley, to the right, where they emptied the rubbish and dung. And in among the dung there were a few tasty odds and ends such as bones, fat, skin, fish heads and many other scraps of food which he didn't recognize. Then the rest of the day he spent in front of the butcher's or the baker's, his eyes glued to the shopowner's hand, but before any tidbits he got a beating.

He soon fitted himself into his new way of life. From his past life only a handful of vague faded memories and a few smells remained. Whenever things got particularly bad, he found consolation and escape



in this lost paradise of memory, and scenes of the past would materialize unsummoned before his eyes.

But the thing which tortured him more than anything else was his need to be stroked. He was like a child which has been humiliated and sworn at, but the tenderness in him had not yet been put out. He needed to be stroked more than ever in this new and painful life. His eyes begged for it. He was ready to give his life for some affection or a stroke on the head. He needed to express his own affection to someone and make sacrifices for them, to show his feelings of worship and faithfulness to someone. But it seemed no one needed him. No one protected him, and in every face he read nothing but anger and mischief. Every movement he made to attract the attention of these men only seemed to arouse their anger and indignation the more.

And so he dozed in the *jub*, howled a few times, and woke up as though nightmares were passing before his eyes. Suddenly he felt violently hungry. The smell of kebab was in the air. Violent hunger tortured the whole of his inside so that he forgot all else. He got up with difficulty and made his way cautiously towards the square.

At the same time a car roared into Varamin Square in a cloud of dust. A man got out and came towards him and stroked him. It was not his master; he knew his master's smell well. But how was it that someone had turned up to stroke him? He wagged his tail and looked doubtfully at the man. Hadn't he been deceived before? But there was no longer a collar on his neck to earn him a stroke. The man came back and stroked his head again. Pat followed him, and his amazement grew when the man entered a room which he knew well and from which the smell of food came. The man sat on a bench in the corner, and they brought hot bread, yogurt, eggs and other food. The man dipped some pieces of bread in the yogurt and threw them in front of Pat. Hurriedly at first and then more slowly Pat ate them. His winning, big brown eyes, full of weakness, were glued to the face of the man in thanks, and he wagged his tail. Was he awake or dreaming? He had eaten a whole bellyful of food without being interrupted by a beating. Was it possible he had found a new master? In spite of the heat the man got up. He went into the same ruins his master had gone to. Perhaps these men too were following the smell of their female? Pat waited for him in the shadow of a wall. Later on they returned to the square.

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The man stroked his head again and after a short walk around the square went and sat in one of the cars which Pat recognized. Pat did not dare to get in with him. Instead, he sat down beside the car and watched the man.

Suddenly the car moved off in a cloud of dust. Pat did not hesitate a moment but started to run after it. He did not want to lose *this* man. He panted along, and in spite of the pain he felt in his body, he bounded behind the car with all the strength he had left. He ran swiftly. The car drew away from the town and passed through the desert. Two or three times Pat nearly caught up with it but fell back again. He gathered all his strength and bounded along in desperation. But the car went faster, and he realized he had made a mistake. In trying to keep pace with the car, he had become weak and broken. He was about to pass out: he had suddenly lost control of his limbs and was not capable of the least movement.

All his efforts had been in vain. He could not think why he had run. He did not know where he was going. He had no way back and no way forward. He stopped, panting, his tongue hanging out. Everything went dark before his eyes. His head low, he dragged himself painfully from the side of the road. He went to a *jub* at the side of a field and rested his belly on the burning, damp sand. An instinctive feeling, which never deceived him, told him that he would not move again from this place. His head was spinning. His thoughts and feelings had become vague and dull. He felt a sharp pain in the pit of his stomach, and the light of sickness glimmered in his eyes. A series of spasms shook and twisted his body, and his paws and limbs gradually lost their feeling. A cold sweat broke out all over his body. It was a gentle, intoxicating coolness.

Towards sunset three crows hovered over Pat's head. They had smelled him a long way off. One of them approached cautiously and settled near him. It watched him carefully. As soon as it was sure he was not yet quite dead, it flew off again. These three crows had come to take out Pat's two big brown eyes.