

Uxo, Bomb Dog

by Eliot Fintushel

My bomb dog Uxo, my sweetie, my pal, he sweated and huffed, tongue unscrolled, forelegs folded. His fur was matted and dripping.

I held Mumps back with both my arms around her shoulders. The kid had lobbed stones at old Ux and tied soup cans to his tail, but now she'd jump mines to pet him.

"Stay put, little one. Uxo's pacing himself, is all."

"You can beat that pile of tin, Uxy." Mumps's chin was tear wet. Her voice choked and tumbled over the words. "Damn Volkovoy! Damn him! Cheater!"

We stood on a hill overlooking the meadow. A bunch of other kids ambled behind us, rags and bones, scruffy faces, some little ones on the shoulders of the bigger. Bit by bit, as Uxo and the damn machine cleared the meadow, we'd advance to the new safe zone for a better look.

It was a comical sight, if not for the stakes: Volkovoy, dull gray heap, like a breaching whale, trundled and pivoted, roared and smoked, extruding claws and spades and hammers. It plowed up the sod. Now and then, if it couldn't defuse a dinger, Volkovoy flashed and shook, encasing and detonating the thing, then dropping it out the back, busted metal dung. Meanwhile, Uxo, sweetie, his tail curled back like the tongue of a letter "Q," walked and sniffed and walked. His smart flat face was matted and dirty, but when he yipped and looked back at me and the kids - "A bomb here, boss!" he seemed to say. "Look how good I am!" - his eyes were full of light. Then I'd tiptoe out to fetch the dinger and disable it. He knew not to lick me then.

The bombs in Sheep's Meadow were easy and few. That's the great thing about your Neo-Luddites: their effectiveness as terrorists is limited by their disdain for the machine. (We share that.) Of course, it only takes one mine - or the rumor of one - to put forty acres off limits. They'd done a neat job of quarantining Central Park, you'll have to grant, with a little TNT and a lot of tongue wag.

My hip ached like hell over the plastic leg, and it was a job and a half keeping those kids back. The girls were the worst, because they knew I hesitate to swat them. Queenie and her half-sisters, Mumps and One Finger, might have lost some toes, dangling them down at the rim of the clean zone - such as they had to lose. I'd yell, and they'd smile back and root old Uxo on. Mumps, of course, you'd have had to know her to know she was smiling: love peck from a Jack-in-the-box smithereened half her chin. Sweet kid, what, nine or ten? She watches for wires underfoot since then, I'll guarantee. And she idolizes Queenie - something sad in that, truth to tell: it's because Queenie is perfect, tall and blond, a wiry ten-year-old with brains to spare and nothing missing.

Spot pushed through them and leaned into me. "You should throw in the towel," he said. "General Checkers don't give a damn if your hound explode or drop down dung and gizzard pie. Volkovoy's just about bagged it. Think of the dog, Blackie, and don't be so goddam proud."

Spot had all his bodily parts, lucky bastard. He was a de-mining vet from Frisco, from when they blew up the Golden Gate Bridge and ringed San Fran with black ball belly busters. He'd been a year at it when he got smart and kicked himself upstairs to be a Mine Safety Specialist. That's what I am, but I came to it the other way: I got a leg blown to hell, and then MSS was all I was good for. The government threw me and Spot together—two itinerant clowns with an easel lecture and a barrel of all day suckers.

"Throw in the towel, huh?" My bomb dog was dead tired and footsore. Wretched to the bone, wretched

to the fiber, he ran on love and will. He panted, limped, sniffed dirt, panted, limped. “You go straight to hell,” I told Spot. “Uxo’ll take him.”

#

Yes, they sent me Spot for a partner. He came with orders from General Checker’s staff. I wasn’t inclined, but I couldn’t say no. Pudgy fellow, a head taller than me, muffin of a man with a sweet baby face, strawberries and cream. (Me, I’m a scarecrow, all bone and ball bearings, face it, a rangy beast, was and will be, pop eyed, with the shoulders and neck of a vulture. Throw in the gimp leg, a couple gone fingers, and a heart condition. Guess I’ve the sort of visage only a mother could love, and she’s dead.)

I hadn’t had a friend since my Uxo wandered off at the Zimbabwe frontier. That was when I lost the use of my left leg. It was not from a landmine exactly, though the place was lousy with mines that the Rhodesian Army had laid there way back during the revolution. Local bosses called us in. Bad enough, said they, that no one in these regions can fetch wood or water without they risk their life, but with every accident, your tourism hits the skids. And investment goes down - look at New York today. Still, it wasn’t a landmine hobbled me. No, the landmine hobbled a lion, and the lion hobbled me. Animals go crazy when a mine gets them, and it happens all the damn time. Turns them into raging man-killers. I woke up in a lean-to with one leg chewed to shit - and no Uxo.

What dog?, they said. You’re lucky to be alive, they said. No more room in the cemeteries, and we dare not make more - because of the mines.

I’d been two years without Uxo when they sent me Spot. A fellow gets lonely. I made my peace.

Spot was a quick fellow, a thinker, and never without an angle. The way he always worked his lips, worked and worked his lips, it put me in mind of a rock sucker at the Frisco aquarium before the dambuster leveled it.

I showed him the ropes. Pretty straightforward: gather a crowd, get ‘em laughing, then the pitch:

NO SPORT-

REPORT! REPORT!

“KARELESSNESS KAN KILL.”

Spot was the White Face, me the Buffoon. The White Face fellow is the one who kicks and barks, which suited old Spot to a tee.

“Dammit all, Blacks,” he said to me over knockwurst and cola the very first day we met, “I was flush and pretty before I had to move here. I had this trick used to make me a pile of dough. Ever hear of the Russian Roulette? Me and some pigeon, we take turns spinning the cylinder on this here army issue revolver, see? The way I got it notched and oiled, it’s like loves-me-loves-me-not on a daisy, has to do with evens & odds -I always knew how the thing’d shake out. There’s a sucker dies every minute, don’t they say? Last time, like always, the mark blew his head off on schedule, but here’s the goddam kicker. He’d lied to me. The bastard had lied to me. I went through every pocket and lining and orifice, Blackie -

picture it if you have the stomach - and they wasn't a silver nor sawbuck. Blackie, boy, it puts a fellow in doubt of human decency, I swear it does. Stuffed by a stiff. I liked to slide through them border checks by means of a greased palm, didn't I, but here I was flat busted. It panicked me so, I dropped the business. Lost my appetite for it. Now I'm down to this. Pass the mustard?"

"You made that up."

"I didn't."

"You don't fool me. You're a sweetheart, Spot, aren't you?"

"The mustard."

How had a grifter like Spot worked the perilous Frisco terrain? How had he held his own on those famous squads of "half-shattered de-miners who daily offered up their other half," as the Chronicle put it?

"What? You kidding?" says Spot when I put it to him. "Scammed the whole business, Blackie boy. I never put in a day. It was all done with fake ID's and Muff the supervisor's craps chits - I'd bought them off a guy I know, and I knew I was buying me Muff."

I didn't believe a word of it. Damn me but there was something to Spot. I liked him.

Me and Spot worked up a passable "Dead and Alive" routine. We knock shoulders and he falls down dead - looks like. But when I try to drag off the corpse, an arm pops up. I push it down and try to drag him off again, but then, say, his head curls up. So I push it down with my heel. I lift his legs to drag again, but the other arm rises. Then a leg, maybe. Or he hinges up, legs and arms both, like a sprung bear trap, and I'm nearly squished pushing those appendages back down. It goes faster and faster, me frantic to get rid of the corpse. You get the picture. Meantime he's winking to the audience, and they're howling.

I'm the stupid one.

One time Sonny says to me, "The bit you and Spot do, 'Dead and Alive,' you shouldn't call it that."

"Why the hell not?"

"You're one or the other, aren't you? Can't be both."

"Sure. That's the point. It's a joke, Sonny."

"It's not funny. Take bugs."

"Bugs?"

"Bugs that make you sick and kill you."

"What about them?"

"Are they dead or alive?" This was the point of it. This was what he was trying to sneak by me.

"Alive," I says. "Those bugs are living things, Sonny. Bacteria, you call them."

"Alive." He thinks about it a minute. He squeezes dirt in the webs of his toes. He puckers and un puckers his lips. "Alive, huh? Damn. There's no beating a live thing, is there, a wily live thing? Hell, I'd rather fight a dinger, a damn dead dinger, than a live thing like that."

“Why did you need to squirrel that out of me, Sonny? What’s your interest in bacteria?”

“Who’s interested in bacteria?” says he. And he runs off.

BETTER SAFE THAN

S C A R R Y !

“KARELESSNESS KAN KILL.”

Far as I know, Spot had no wife and no woman and no friends but me and his General Checkers. He was not too keen on animals. All he cared about was his general. It was Checkers this and Checkers that, “me and the general,” “the general and me.” “Cause, Blackie, me and the General, I swear to Nader” - thrusting up his right hand with two fingers curled together - “we’re like this.”

He’d find me moping sometimes, polishing my prosthesis or staring at the blue yonder. “What you studying, Blackie boy?” says he.

And I’d tell him, “It’s my bomb dog, Uxo. I miss him, Spot. Honest to Nader, I do. Never had a woman longer than a night, even before I was one leg short of a pair. But my Uxo . . . ”

“You’re a loon,” he’d say. “If I had me a dog I’d train her to carry bombs, not sniff ‘em. Big furry dog, see? Strap plastique twixt her tits and send her into the enemy camp. Train ‘em and sell ‘em. Hell, the accessories alone - special straps, special ordnance, all that - there’s dough in it, Blackie boy.”

I had to blink. “Who gave you an idea like that?”

“It’s in the air, Blackie.” Surprising how mystical the fellow might wax. “Open up your eyes.”

Now, of course, I understand what “in the air” meant: General Checkers.

Spot didn’t want to hear about bloody Kabul when Uxo sniffed the cluster bomb bits and I smithereened ‘em with explosive foam. (Wonderful stuff. Spread it, ignite it, and blow the dingers harmless.) Somalia? Maputo? He didn’t care worth spit. He didn’t care about old Nick, either—Nicaragua, I mean, where my Uxo earned his big medal nearly at the cost of his hide.

Spot never cared to hear about any of it. I feel it was a defect in his character.

“Ah, Blackie, you poor sap. As between a dog and a machine, when it comes to war, only a fool would go for the canine.”

“I’ll take Uxo.”

KEEP TO THE LANE!

“You go straight to hell,” is what I told Spot, when he said we should throw in the towel. My kids yipped and swore at him, too.

Spot smiled. He tried to pat Mumps's shoulder. "Hey, I'm only thinking of old Uxo, you little cherry bombs," says he. One Finger reached over and swatted his knuckles with the spent ammo belt she uses to bundle her swag. Spot pulled back quick. He sucked his fingers. "Crusty shame you can't see reason. Dog's the one that'll pay for it. Damn it all, I could get General Checkers to requisition you a waterproof tent and a safe spot to put it on if you pulled the hound and made nice. But no . . ."

One Finger said, "Your sweetie general so sure that heap of gears gonna win, why he send you here to buy us off?"

"He didn't send me, brat. I come on my own, out of pity for you."

"Aw, you don't pee without your general's say-so."

The call went up: "He rises!"

Uxo was on his feet again.

Mumps was so happy, she jumped higher than the tripwire bomb that sculpted her chin and collar bones back in Jersey. "'Ataboy, Uxy!" She leapt and skipped to the lane Volkovoy had just cleared.

"Hey, wait!" I jumped after. Her white lace skirt, the dumpster find of a little lifetime, fluttered as she skipped.

Queenie snagged my elbow. "Leave her be, Blackie. It's cleared, ain't it?"

If I'd had the time, I would have told her, there's clear and there's clear. "Let me go." If I'd had the time, I would have told her that the army's idea ain't zero injury like yours or mine, it's "acceptable losses." "Queenie, for Nader's sakes . . ." If a tank can go through it, I would have said, if I'd had the time - "Dammit, Queenie." - or if a platoon can cross and have enough left to bivouac on the other side, why, by the army, that's okay, and that's the standard Volkovoy toes to. "Let go!" I shook Queenie loose and bounded for Mumps . . .

There was a flash and a wave of heat. I couldn't see anything for a minute, but I felt Mumpsy all over me, clinging and clawing, and when my hearing came back, I heard her wail. I was on my back, I discovered shortly, and I had all my parts, and so had Mumps.

These damn days, you can't ask much more than that.

STEP ON A CRACK,
BREAK YOUR MOTHER'S BACK.

#

According to the glossary in the NATO protocols, a *mine* may be detonated "by the passage of time, the

action of its target, or by controlled means.”

(1) *The passage of time.* I’ve seen mines hidden in elephant grass and low shrubs, where the tic of a twig in an unlucky breeze will blow a crater big enough to bury a man. I’ve seen them in dunes, I’ve seen them in eeries, I’ve seen them in the crotches of trees.

Waiting.

We might have had an end to them back by the turn of the century or so. All the suits, the honchos, the fat players met in Ottawa, Canada, in 1997 to ban the “use, production, stockpiling, and transfer” of anti personnel mines, the kind that’ll blow your legs off years after the soldiers have gone home, the gift that keeps on taking. This was back when there were only two hundred million landmines worldwide, plus, per annum, another two thousand planted for every one we cleared. Give or take. Still, it was nothing like today: the thing seemed doable. A hundred and twenty nations agreed, but the brute of them all wouldn’t sign: the United States of America.

And here we are.

(2) *The action of its target.* The shambling shards of men and women, ligatures and cauterized joints, pegs and hooks and makeshift hardware - soup can elbows, hose clamps cuffs - when blood loss or gangrene don’t scotch the fixes . . . look out any window. There’s your targets, cities full of them. Time was, a human person might have to journey to a strange far land to see such testimonials. Now, with your Neo Luddites and your Xian Militia and your Rights and your Lefts all “in the basement mixing up the medicine,” any old window will do. Near the start of the twentieth century, ninety percent of war dead were soldiers. At the end it was ten percent. Now, into the twenty first, Nader bless and save us, they say it’s five.

The other ninety-five being you and me. Civilians. Look out any window.

But mind the glass.

(3) *Or by controlled means.* Find it, mark it, quarantine it, blow it up. That’s what my old job was, mine and Uxo, my bomb dog’s.

Long before any of the world wars, soldiers were made to tunnel under enemy positions and fill the earth below with explosives. “Mine warfare,” they called it. That’s where we get the term. You might say that it’s part of our ancient cultural heritage.

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Did I say, “the action of its target?” Truth is, the *inaction* of the target is the mine layer’s goal, most often. Grand Central Station was a ghost castle when I first met Queenie and No Fingers and Mumps and Sonny and the gang. All’s it takes is one bomblet, one smithereened limb or gutted rib cage, one pop and flash, to close forty acres, as the Ludds knew well. Who would risk the rest? You assume devices everywhere. Hell, that’s what I’m paid to teach ‘em.

USE YOUR PATE.

CIRCUMNAVIGATE.

It was the Xians mined Grand Central Station, same as Port Authority, with the plastique gadgets the folks call “Bible Thumpers.” One little Bible Thumper had unmanned a copper at a newsstand near the 42nd Street doors, and Hell broke loose. What with the ruckus on the Tappan Zee and George Washington Bridges with the Ludds, and the Lincoln Tunnel nightmare that the Rights dreamed up, there weren’t enough of us de-miners to go around. I was already on the Awareness Squad then, already gagging about with my Spot, and they sent us down between clown turns to help cordon off Grand Central. I didn’t expect to find anybody there. Who had spare limbs to gamble?

But kids. Mumps and a couple dozen little street toughs took the place for their playground.

“Hey, get down off that chandelier.” I was cracked to be standing where I was standing just to shout that. Spot dawdled at the entrance, spooling and unspooling yellow tape (. . . CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION . . .) with now and again a halfhearted yip: “You crazy? ‘Mon back, Blacks. Ain’t our job, f’r Nader’s sakes.”

Mumps and Queenie and some I never met were up in the crystals like a band of spider monkeys japing and hurling shit. “I said, get down, you bozos, it’s not safe.”

“Nuts to you. We’re watching Sonny.”

“There’s more of you?” My heart was in my throat. Children and mines. And the holy Xians weren’t above laying butterfly mines, pretty ones, pretty as a quick death, that a child might grab for a toy. “Suffer the children to come unto me,” don’t they say? Yes, come and get it. Anything to prove a point. To pass a law. To force the release of a “political prisoner.”

“Sonny found a dog,” they said.

“A dog?” I was getting a kink in my neck looking up at them, but I didn’t dare move much. Like I say, sometimes it only takes a tic. Then I heard the yapping and the teasing. Yips and shouts echoed one over the other through the empty station:

“Hold him. Hold him still.”

“I’m holdin’ him. Waddaya think I’m doin’ here? Peel your belt and slip it round his middle. Hurry up. Jeez, this mutt’s a handful.”

“I got a rope up one leg here.”

“Tie the cans on.”

“Would you please hold him still?”

“I’m holdin’ him still.”

They were in the stairwell that led down to the commode, a dangerous place in its time, the Grand Central Station Men’s, but for different reasons. I saw the dirt tracks leading there, and I left the monkeys in the chandelier and followed them. I kept to the tracks careful as I could. There were pits and corrugations everywhere in the old tile, any one of which could hide a man killing gob of explosive. At my back I heard Spot complain: “Leave ‘em be, Blacks. We’ve warned ‘em, ain’t we? If they blow themselves up, it ain’t on us.”

I rounded the corner. It took my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dark of the corridor that ended in the stairway down. Three or four kids wrestled with a dog. The creature yelped and cowered while they manhandled and bound him. He was a sorry thing to look at, a loose sack of bones and knots, the fur dull and patchy, matted with filth. The dog wasn't fighting to beat them, either. The moves he made, curling and feinting, head lowered, fangs hidden, were those of a puppy at play. But the poor thing was confused by the children's ferocity. He whined, cocked his head, and tried to scamper back while they labored to pin and tether him. They were so absorbed in the business, the dog, weakened and baffled as he was, making them fight so hard, that I was able to come right up on them before they noticed me.

"You kids crazy? This place is mined. Let that dog go, and . . ." The words stuck in my craw. The kids turned their heads to see what ailed me, what had choked off the booming galoot. Me, I just stared at the dog, ghost of a dog, yes, ghost of a square, fine dog, the once bushy tail, albeit balder, curled back into a little circle as of old, his ears, as of old, taut and low, and the coat of fine fur, though wrinkled and sagging, with the same scarlet patch . . . "Uxo!"

Ux cocked his head at me. He sniffed, then yelped and bounded so hard he slipped the kids, trailing sisal and hemp, and ended before me, up on his hind legs with his forepaws on my chest, a licking and a licking my stubbly mug.

"He your dog, Mister?" They were thunderstruck.

I stood on a landing halfway down the narrow stairwell. "Down, boy - do you know, you kids, do you have any idea who this canine is?" I kissed him and rubbed him while he tried to engulf me for sheer joy and dog love, than which there's nothing bigger. "This is Uxo the bomb dog."

"Bomb dog?"

I had them now. "So happens this dog achieved the rank of colonel in the United States Army."

The eyes on those kids were big as pancakes. When they inched close and sat down before me on the next few steps down, it was as if those big eyes had pulled them there, and their bodies wagged after like tails. "You're shittin' us," one of them said, but his heart wasn't in it. She longed to hear more, as any fool could tell. "Dogs can't be soldiers."

"You bet they can, little sister, and my Uxo was the king of them. Back during the wars, they were drafted and commissioned and decorated or busted - say, if one peed on a general's cuff - just like a human person. And my Uxo was the king of them. Why, he was even awarded the Purple Heart, was my Uxo."

"He wasn't."

"You see that scarlet streak the shape of Florida just in front of his left hind leg? Uxo got that down in old Nick."

"The Anti-contra-contras?"

"That's right. I was handling him, as they say, though the truth is, it goes both ways. Uxo sniffed and I defused. One time we was out away from our platoon, and Uxo sniffed some old nitre the Anti's had left all round a ruined cane field where the cripples played football. Well, a sort of football. If they had two feet to a half dozen heads, those Nicks were lucky. And old Ux dove away from me—zingo!—and jumped on some little-un, knocked him away from a dinger that exploded right under old Ux. Saved that fellow's life. Uxo got patched up mostly, brave dog, excepting that spot where the hide shows and the fur never grew back.

“Yes, my Ux was awarded the Purple Heart for that one; he was in the army then, like myself. He was one of only two dogs that ever got that particular medal, the other being a German Shepard name of Chips down in Sicily who he bit the hand of Ike once when he tried to pet him, which my Uxo never would.”

“Ike?” said a ragamuffin girl, all muscle and grit with an angel’s face.

“Eisenhower, dummy.” A boy in a girdled potato sack puffed out his chest and jutted his chin. He was unsteady on one leg; where the foot should be there was a lump of old bandage. The thing it covered would be toeless, I bet. And I bet right - this was the child I would come to know as “Sonny.”

“Eisenhower. He was a general and a president.”

“Smart fellow,” says I, spitting Uxo’s tongue off my mouth. I whistled for Uxo to sit, and, God bless him, he remembered the melody, two clean chirrups.

“He’s not your dog, though,” Sonny pipes up. “We caught him, we keep him.”

Mumps and Queenie and the chandelier gang were perched at my back on the steps above me. I hadn’t noticed them till now. “Shut up, Sonny,” says Queenie. Mumps sat next to her, brushing her friend’s hair with a dried out teasel head. “Tell us some more, Mister.”

I told them about Angola and the Sudan and Afghanistan and Iraq where me and Uxo soldiered months and years after the live wars had ended. I was kissing and rubbing and fussing over Uxo the whole time I was talking, and I noticed the pucker of a scar along his right side. “Look here,” I said, “God damn me if I don’t know what that must be.” And I told them the story of the lion. I knew what had happened to Uxo now, why I had lost him. Maybe, ripped by the same lion that had ripped me, he lay in the bush till some kind folks found him and healed him. Could they have seen him for what he was and sold him back to the de mining authorities in Zimbabwe? Maybe the Americans got hold of him then. Cream rises to the top, don’t it? And he winds up stateside with the de miners of the NYSLORC, the New York State Law and Order Restoration Command. And he breaks loose of it - looking for me?

Or else the whole damn thing was a miracle. Take your pick.

I didn’t hear Spot shout anymore. He must have given up on me and gone fishing, the way he liked to, by tossing a Burmese made M 76 into the East River. A dozen kids sat around me and Uxo, some of them practically in my lap. They nuzzled Ux nose to nose. “Hey, watch that shnoz, you bugs,” says I. “It’s a thousand times finer than yours or mine . . . Uxy’s part Canaan dog, from the Pariah stock out of the Palestine. Time was, I’d give old Uxo my bunk and sleep on the floor beside him.”

“Why you call him ‘Uxo?’” Queenie wanted to know.

“It’s what he’s trained to sniff,” I told her, “short for Unexploded Ordnance.”

Sonny said, “So when’s he gonna explode?”

#

It was on a Green Day that Spot broached the Sheep’s Meadow business, a bloody Green Day when everyone’s a damn Naderite, even the Rights and Republicans. Ever since the wars and the floods, you can’t find a soul whose family wasn’t Naderite, “honest to Nader,” going back to Ur and Chaldea. The

Ludds claim him as their own; so do the humble bomb-heaving Xians, and everyone in between. No bomb shows on Nader Day. Everybody scarfs kelp and bean curd pie courtesy of NYSLORC. They chant passages from *Unsafe at any Speed*, and they listen to consumerist harangues and ecological diatribes from some of the biggest price gougers and polluters on the surface of the earth, such as it is nowadays. They all wear their big Nader noses. They bare their shoulders and crowd into the safe zones for sunscreen sharing.

I believe in my Nader as deeply as the next fellow, but I won't take part in such stuff. Spot felt the same way, he told me. We nabbed our pie, with some extra for my Uxo, and we sneaked off to eat it in private, which is to say, in the shade of the half finished Trade Towers, all two stories of them, the ones they put up after the Anti-atheists blew the second World Trade Towers to hell, and that NYSLORC abandoned as too much red ink for the city stockholders. We had a cranny we liked to sit in and gab -bare concrete and steel with tarps sagging between the girders, but it was solitary and out of the sun. Uxo sat off in a corner happily pulling and gnawing at a hard rubber Nader nose someone had dropped in the gutter.

"I need a little favor, Blackie boy," says Spot. "I've made me some shady acquaintances, I confess. It was abysmal bad judgment on my part, I know it, but I was new on this island, and, well, anyway, what's done is done, am I right? A person has to pick himself up and . . ."

"What kind of acquaintances do you mean, Spot?"

"The gambling kind, Blackie. The kind that runs in packs and don't know the French for 'forgive.'"

"You in debt to them, Spot?"

He sighed. He pushed aside his plate of curd. "Afraid so. My head is on the block here, Blacks. These sharks mean business. These are the big boys. They got ten thou worth of my chits, and if I don't pay them back by next Saturday, I'm a dead man. You gotta help me out, Blackie. You're my only hope, you and Uxo."

"Uxo? Waddaya talking about - Uxo? What's Uxo got to do with it?"

"Well, Blackie, now, that's the whole thing. That's what I'm trying to tell you. It has to do with General Checkers. You know me and him are like this." The crossed fingers. "He'd give me the dough, but it'd be bad for my character, see? He says he'd do it, but it'd be bad for me, see? He's a military man, and that's the way your military types think, see? Character. But he'll still give me the money, I mean, only -"

"Yeah . . . ?"

"Only I gotta do something for it."

"What?"

Uxo stopped worrying the nose, which he had pinched between his paws, and pricked up his ears. We could hear the Naderites drumming and singing away off in the Washington Mews. They must have untethered the symbolic horse, the one that would run wild through the downtown streets, a Green Day ritual to celebrate the end of the production of passenger cars - as if it had been something that anybody had a choice in.

Uxo went back to work on the wet left rubber nostril at just about the same moment that Spot stopped working those lips of his and gave me a suppliant look. "I, we, gotta arrange a sort of a, well, contest."

"A contest?" I says.

“Don’t be mad at me now. You see the fix I’m in here, don’t you?”

“What sort of a contest?”

“You want my kelp?”

“What sort of a contest, Spot?”

“The General has some pals in the de-mining technology business, see? Just like Ike said - military industrial, see? It’s a marriage made in heaven.”

“Ike said it was a bad thing.”

“Whatever. But these pals of the General’s, outfit name of UM&D, they’ll bankroll the whole thing, me included.”

“What whole thing?”

“The contest, Blackie - what are we talking about here?”

“What contest?”

“The de-mining contest - at Sheep’s Meadow. Between your Uxo and their machine. The General and his friends at UM&D, they want to show these investors, these high rollers, what Volkovoy can do.”

“Volkovoy?”

“Yeah, it’s this big machine, is all, a de-mining machine.”

I had seen lots of de-mining machines, of course. I’d seen them in war zones between the battles, and I’d seen them when the armies were gone, in those places that had the dough to hire them. The specs were not the same. “This machine, is it a military tool or civilian?”

“Huh?”

“What standard is it designed for, Spot? Would you walk across a field it cleared?”

“Well, no, I mean, but I’d send a squadron across it. Okay, military. I see your point. Military - so what?”

“If it don’t clear to UN standards, 99.6%, then why should a stiff like me help them? Nader! This is the kind of thinking that got us into this mess. They want to sell them to foreign armies. They’re just in it for the money, aren’t they?”

“And so should you be, Blackie, boy! Don’t you see? What better way to demonstrate how good it is than to pit Volkovoy against the most famous bomb dog on the face of the earth . . . ?”

“Most famous . . . ? Wait a minute.”

“Don’t be modest. You can get some dough off it, too. The General and his buddies are rolling in dough. Made in heaven, I’m telling you, like Ike said.”

“That’s not what Ike - listen, you’re crazy. Uxo’s past his prime, f’rcrissakes. I’m not gonna risk his life for . . .”

“For mine? That’s what it comes to, Blackie. Besides - come on. Uxo’s a champ. Uxo’s famous. The

General had heard all about his Purple Heart and everything. You should have seen his face when I happened to mention Uxo one day, just chitchatting, see, that I got this pal and that this pal's got this old bomb dog . . . ”

Uxo had finished his nose. He sidled up and commenced to beg eats off me and Spot. Spot petted him and shoved his plate under Uxo's nose. Uxo wolfed it.

“Spot,” I says, “there has to be another way.”

“There isn't, Blackie. Listen, I'm begging you, Blackie. It's my head on the block here. And it's for humanity, too, remember. They're test running a de-mining gizmo here. Think of the lives, and so on. And there'll be something in it for you.” He saw I was about to shake my head no, so he jumped in with, “And for the kids. For the kids, Blackie - don't forget that. You could put some decent clothes on their backs, a roof over their heads, for Nader's sakes, three squares a day, sure thing.”

“Win or lose?”

Spot laughed. “You're a hard item, Blackie. Win or lose, huh? If that ain't the crusty limit! Volkovoy is top of the line, Blackie boy. All due respect, your Uxo winning ain't in the picture. Lose, is what I'm talking about. Lose. I'm your friend, goddammit to hell: I wouldn't put you in the spot of needing that mange bucket to win. It's Uxo's *reputation* we want here. The dog himself, thank God, don't matter.”

Just then Uxo stiffened and sniffed the air. The tarpaulin on the uptown side of our banquet room rustled, and Sonny punched through. He had two hands full of pie and Nader noses bulging out of both pockets.

“What the hell?” says I.

“Don't think I was following you,” he says. “I was just looking for a quiet spot, like you, away from the stupid Ralphies. The towers don't belong to you, you know - want some pie? I got extra.”

We didn't.

“I heard what you bums were talking about, Blackie,” says Sonny, “and if you're going to run Uxo against that machine, you better make sure what the rules are.”

“Kid,” says Spot, “why don't you shut up and eat your pie?”

“What do you mean, Sonny?” says I.

“Dead and alive,” says he. “Uxo's alive and Volkohoozis is dead. That's what I mean. That's what the contest has to be. Dead against alive. Just so everybody knows it, and nobody tries to sneak a human person inside that thing - or another dog, say. Because that would be cheating, and then Uxo wins.”

“Kid,” says Spot, “your brains must have gone where your gone foot went. Who'd want to hide something worse inside of something better?” Sonny pulled a face and slipped out the same way he had come.

“What's with him?” says Spot.

I said, “Damned if I know.”

#

The next night after Spot and the General's proposition, we camped out, me and the kids and Ux, in the home team dugout at the ruins of Yankee Stadium up in the Bronx. The night was wild, with a stiff eastern wind and noctilucous clouds scudding past a sickle moon. Being in the business I'm in, with the connections I've got, I happened to know the place was safe, and since most people took it for a death trap, we had it to ourselves most nights we felt like it. We felt like it that night, wanted to stay someplace special for the decision we had to make. Spot was out beating the squatters on Wall Street with a hustle he called "Bears and Garbage." It had to do with betting on the actual bears that foraged around there nowadays. Spot. What can you say?

The kids didn't like the deal. For one thing, they didn't trust Spot. For the other, like me, they were afraid for old Uxo. Those days they were tagging along with me all over what used to be Manhattan Island, corn starching their faces white and sticking things on their noses - a rose petal, a split radish, a wad of red bubble gum - and helping out in the bomb shows. They worked up a tolerable routine, and they even pulled Uxo into it. They pasted a red paper cone over Uxo's shnoz. They called themselves the Feckless Warriors - a phrase Queenie, who could read, had read in a book, but I don't know how well she understood it, because their refrain was:

WE USED TO HAVE FECKS,
BUT NOW WE ARE WRECKS.
STAY AWAY FROM LANDMINES.

One Finger played the landmine, rolled into a ball, kissing her knees and hugging her shins, with a fist (the good one) full of tin foil bits and pulverized spaghetti noodles. When one of the kids made to fetch her or step on her, the others, Uxo included, would pull him away, but at the last they failed, of course, and One Finger exploded, de-fecking them.

I never in my life had the benefit of so many belly laughs as when those kids did their number. I loved them almost as much as I loved my Uxo.

They loved Uxo, too, and no mistake. Ux was their playmate and their hero. The stories I'd told them of Uxo's feats, they told one another and everybody else - and then they made up some more. Mumps liked to hold Uxo's head between her palms and roll her own head against it. She'd kiss him and shake him and wrestle him down. It delighted my Uxo. He loved the children. He'd lie on his back, pawing at the air and mewling like a puppy till one of them rubbed his belly, and then, with fangs sheathed, he'd gnaw at them and give them little love pecks. The kids loved to feed him and groom him. I watched old Uxo regain some of his girth and muscle and sheen.

Sonny said, "Forget it. Spot and his girlfriend the General, all's they want is to see Uxo dead."

Queenie said, "Uxo can take him."

"He's old," I said, Uxo in my lap. He was asleep and dreaming, head on his paws, muzzle in the hollow of my good knee. Now and then he squirmed and yipped to doggie angels or groaned happily and snuggled himself deeper into my lap. I said: "He's old, and he don't take the sun like he used to. Heat stroke, blisters . . ."

Queenie said, "Spot said the contest would be at Sheep's Meadow, the part that nobody's de mined yet."

That ain't much. How long would he be out there? His nose is still good, ain't it? No way he'd stumble into something and blow up."

"Not that. Not likely," I said. "Ux knows his nitre - trained in Belgium. Unless there's been a hard rain and the soil is wet, or if there's soot or ashes mixed in -that'd throw him off good."

Mumps hugged Uxo for a pillow. She was curled up against me and talked in a sleepy voice. "Same as metal for a machine. Your Volkovoy'd be helpless on a bridge, I bet. That's why the Ludds mined the Tappan Zee." Time was it was baseball averages every toddler knew. Now it was mine lore. "Or if there were lots of pipes and wires or trash underground, that would bumfuzzle 'im for sure."

I said: "You're thinking of the gizmos that pulse out a current and read what bounces back, like radar. But some of those sensors work just like a dog's nose, Mumpsy. 'Course, they have a lot of mix-ups into the bargain. Take the ones at the checkpoints: every damn time, they sniff my meds, and before you can say Ralph Nader, there's a badge in my face and a baton at my chest."

"Your meds?"

"Nitroglycerine pills," says I. "For the ticker."

Sonny was just outside the dugout swinging a couple of bats he'd boosted from an unlocked cage - unlocked, that is, as far as a baby burglemeister like Sonny was concerned. Sometimes he'd drop one of the bats and, with the other, clobber a gelded landmine he'd picked up, then fetch it and clobber it again. It set an awful example, playing with dingy, but, well, Sonny was Sonny. "You dying, Blackie?" he piped up.

Jiggling my pill tin for a castanet: "Not so long as the goddam Civil Service keeps me in these."

"You know," says Sonny, never looking at me, mind you, but just swinging and a swinging those bats, "I heard about those checkpoint sniffers. They run off bugs."

"Bugs? You mean, bacteria?"

"That's it." Over the left shoulder, over the right shoulder, swinging and a swinging and eying the black horizon. "Bugs. Glow bugs."

"Yeah, I've heard of that," I says, "bacteria that glow funny when they're exposed to nitre. Is that what those sensors have?"

"That's what I hear," says the little man. He swings and he swings. Inscrutable, I call that one.

One Finger, who had looked to be fast asleep under the bench in a wrap of Astroturf, picked up her head and said, "Anyway, I don't care. Machines aren't perfect. They can get thrown off just like a dog can. And they can't smell plastic like Uxo can."

"Machines don't get tired," Sonny put in.

"Yes, folks," the PA boomed, "machines don't get tired." We all looked up at the broadcasters' booth. Uxo ticked his tail and muttered. "Take old Volkovoy: backups in backups in backups . . ."

"How'd Spot get up there?" No Finger crawled out from under the bench.

After his fashion, Spot commenced to sing:

"On the first day of Nadermas, Volkovoy had installed:

a Single Chip Neuromorphic Silicon Nose.

“On the second day of Nadermas, Volkovoy had installed:
two Resonant Microstrip Path Antennas,
and a Single Chip Neuromorphic Silicon Nose.

“On the third day of Nadermas, Volkovoy had installed:
three Lateral Migration Radiography Units,
two Resonant Microstrip Path Antennas,
and a Single Chip Neuromorphic Silicon Nose.

“On the fourth day of Nadermas, Volkovoy had installed:
four One and a half Kilowatt Carbon Dioxide Laser
Thermal Impulse Induced Temperature Differential Imaging Devices,
three Lateral Migration Radiography Units,
two Resonant Microstrip Path Antennas,
and a Single Chip Neuromorphic Silicon Nose.

“On the fifth day of Nadermas, Volkovoy had installed:
FIVE TUNGSTEN CARBIDE TILLER DRUM CHISELS,
four One and a half Kilowatt Carbon Dioxide Laser
Thermal Impulse Induced Temperature Differential Imaging Devices,
three Lateral Migration Radiography Units,
two Resonant Microstrip Path Antennas,
and a Single Chip Neuromorphic Silicon Nose.

“On the sixth day of Nadermas, Volkovoy had installed:
six Giant Magnetoresistant Sensor Arrays,
FIVE TUNGSTEN CARBIDE TILLER DRUM CHISELS,
four One and a half Kilowatt Carbon Dioxide Laser
Thermal Impulse Induced Temperature Differential Imaging Devices,
three Lateral Migration Radiography Units,
two Resonant Microstrip Path Antennas,
and a Single Chip Neuromorphic Silicon Nose.

“On the seventh day of Nadermas, Volkovoy had installed:
seven Active Electromagnetic Induction Sensors,
six Giant Magnetoresistant Sensor Arrays,
FIVE TUNGSTEN CARBIDE TILLER DRUM CHISELS,
four One and a half Kilowatt Carbon Dioxide Laser
Thermal Impulse Induced Temperature Differential Imaging Devices,
three Lateral Migration Radiography Units,
two Resonant Microstrip Path Antennas,
and a Single Chip Neuromorphic Silicon Nose.

“On the eighth day arrrrrrgh . . . “

Spot fell into a drunken snore.

Uxo woke for an instant. He shoved his nose into my palm to make me pet him, whereupon he let his eyes close, and he slid back down into doggie bliss.

“Sonny,” says I, “why don’t you see if you can scootch up to the booth and kill the PA before old Spot

wakes the whole damn island?"

"Sure thing." Off he scooted, bum foot and all, up the bleachers and hand over hand to where Spot had snuck.

"Must have drunk his Bears and Garbage boodle," I opined.

In a minute we heard Sonny's voice as if from the throne of Nader: "Want me to kill him?"

I shouted, "Just shut the thing off and leave him be."

One Finger told me, "Never mind Sonny. He don't mean it when he talks like that. It's just his mumma and poppa died -"

"Landmines?"

"Nope. The shits. Some bug, he said."

"Ah, bugs. Bacteria. Dysentery." For fear of the mines folks let a piece of land go to swamp, things breed, and sickness spreads. Happens all the time.

"The shits. Then an uncle took him in and raised him with a stick with a nail in it."

"I figured something like that," I said.

I addressed them all: "Well, seems like Volkovoy has a variety of systems at its disposal. State of the art gadgets with coils and currents. Backups for backups, a Russian doll of gadgets. But that's not the point, kids. Winning or losing is not the point. Myself, love Uxo as I do, respect him as I do, I don't see him carrying the day. But the point is, do we give it a go? Do we put old Ux out there, risk his venerable hide, do you see - for UM&D's money? I'm putting it to you kids, because you love him like I do, and, dammit, that gives you some say so."

Sonny vaulted down from the bleachers. "Wouldn't be bad having a place to live once the ice hits."

Queenie said, "I don't care about that. I care about assholes like Spot and Checkers dissing our Uxo. I say, Uxo will beat Volkovoy's cast iron butt. If we get some dough at it, fine. But I just want to see the suits wag their heads and eat humble pie."

The other girls shouted, yes, and Sonny sort of nodded, though he was too proud to make so much of his assent. Uxo shook, but I pressed him to my lap again; docile as a lamb, he closed his eyes. I said, "That's the wrong idea, kids. But if you say yes, I say yes. Our Uxo's going to de mine the Sheep's Meadow and give the high hats their goddam show. Bring on Volkovoy."

They cheered, of course, but then Queenie spotted the beer soaked scrap of paper in Sonny's paw, and, being Queenie, she had to grab it and read it - or try to read it: ". . . Mag-nee-toh-ree-ziss-tent Sensor . . . My-crow-strip . . . Kill-oh-watt . . ."

Sonny parked his chin on her shoulder and watched her sound out the syllables. "How do you suppose Spot got a hold of that thing?"

"His sweetie general, stupid. Ther-mal . . . Radio-graph-ee . . ."

"I mean, why, Queenie? What was a jerk like Spot doing with Volkovoy's spec sheet?"

"Singing it, Sonny. Didn't you hear? Now would you let me be? Rez-oh-nant My-crow-strip Path

An-ten-nuhz . . .”

The moon drowned in a thick bank of clouds. Dust devils swirled across the infield. The E-section gates stuttered and echoed. Sonny shrugged. He went back to his bats. The rest of us got busy falling asleep.

#

That Sonny: a brusque mystery. I always thought someone must have beat him silly before he knew to punch back. He flinched when anybody made a sudden move, but he sneaked it into some nonchalant gesture. Didn't fool me. I've seen that bravado in men of all ages. Even in a dog or two. He kept his own council, but I saw he desired fine things. Reading, for example - the way he had to snatch Spot's printout of Volkovoy's backup systems. He collected printed matter, though he couldn't read much of it. He squirreled away books and ledgers and learned journals, even phone books, in a locker at an abandoned Y. Queenie told me.

He wouldn't let anyone catch him being less than impenetrable. He did things nobody understood, and if you opposed him, he fought you. Take the contest rules, when Spot proposed them on behalf of the General. Spot had them all typed down, just like the list that Sonny had boosted. Volkovoy and Uxo were to work parallel swaths in the death zone in Sheep's Meadow. I was to stand on the side, handling Uxo by means of whistles; we were well used to that. When Ux sniffed a dinger, I'd go and geld the thing. But Volkovoy was to do everything on its own. Volkovoy, in its lane, had to find any mines or live ordnance and destroy it as well.

Sound fair enough? Not for Sonny. “No,” says he, “you got to add one line.”

“Shut up,” says Spot, “What do you know about anything?”

“Plenty. You got to add one line.”

“Sonny,” whines Queenie. “You didn't even want us to do this.”

“Sonny, dammit, Sonny,” the rest of us are complaining.

“One sentence or no go,” says Sonny.

“What sentence would that be?” says Spot, with a smile that was an easy spit's distance from bloody murder.

“This one,” says Sonny. “That this contest is to prove who's better, a living creature or a machine, and however it gets proved, no matter what's in the ground or out of the ground when the thing is finished, that's what makes the winner.”

“You're like a dog on a bone, kid,” says Spot. “Can't you give it a rest?”

Nobody knew what Sonny was talking about, but Sonny put up such a fuss, and, truth to tell, we all loved him so (all but Spot, I suppose) that Spot finally had to write Sonny's sentence down.

“Don't you have to clear it with your general?” says I.

“No,” says Spot. “The General and me, we talked over this little eventuality. I apprised him of it after Sonny did his little bellyaching on Green Day. Me knowing how soft you was on the little joker, I mean.” Here he frowned at Sonny like Sonny was something he had just scraped off his shoe. “It's okiedokie by

the General, but if that's how things are going to be, then you won't be paid for just joining in the show. You have to win."

"That mean your money is on the line, too?" says I to Spot. "Do the sharks eat you if Uxo loses?"

"There wasn't no sharks," he whispered. "Don't hate me, Blackie. I'm the General's man. How else am I supposed to be anybody?"

I didn't hate him. I guess I'd known the truth all along but wouldn't let myself know that I did.

"Do it, yes, we're on," the kids were yelling.

"It's crazy," I said, but in the end, the kids infected me with their craziness, I guess. Sonny prevailed. It was to be an actual contest with actual stakes. I didn't sleep a wink after that right up till the day at Sheep's Meadow. Why had I gone along with it? Damn me if I wasn't more of a kid inside than the kids were. I was swollen with love of Uxo, love and pride, insane pride. Odds on, we would come away from this with nothing, and Uxo dead tired - or dead.

#

Flat to the stubbly grass and sifted loam of Sheep's Meadow, we still had all our parts, Mumpsy and me. Mumpsy had a mild flash burn, a hide full of bloody pits and nicks, plus a cinder spray tattoo. I busted up my good knee, and one hand would never clap again. I thanked Nader for the breath in our lungs and the pulse in our veins. For a minute, I confess, eyes closed, senses electric, I even took some pleasure in the hug little Mumps was giving me. I hadn't felt such a thing since before the wars, when I held my sister's baby, dear warm dumpling flush to my shoulder and chest. Mumpsy clung to me like I was her own flesh.

But when my head cleared and I looked up, Spot was looking down. "The General wants to talk to you, Blackie." Mumps spat blood from a bit tongue, looked daggers at Spot, peeled off me, and made for her pals.

"Watch yourself, Spot," says I, "you might be standing on something."

"Nah, you just cleared it, didn't you? Get up. The General wants to talk to you - Gawd, you look a crusty mess. You okay, Blackie boy? Maybe you should take one of those yellow pills of yours?"

"No, I'm perfect, Spot." I tightened my belly. I shivered a bit, shook the roar out of my brains, and stood. I wasn't bleeding that bad. I wobbled a little before achieving the steady vertical, and the first thing I did was to scan the meadow for Uxo.

"The dog's okay, Blackie. At least, it ain't dead yet."

I couldn't see Uxo - hidden for a moment back of Volkovoy, or mixed up with the stars and flowers that stippled my vision. Up the hill, the kids fussed over Mumps. They'd left off cheering Uxo for the moment.

"We've put Volkovoy on pause so's you and General Checkers can have a little tête à tête. You can call off your Uxo or let him keep working - we don't care. Blackie," - the hand on my shoulder - "it's hopeless."

I whistled my whistle that told Uxo to stay and wait, a long toot and a chirrup. He barked back. I

nodded to Spot. "Let's go."

I followed Spot to the edge of the pasture, back behind the old latrine. I breathed slow and I walked slow, and Spot let me. He kept looking back at me like a worried mother.

General Checkers stood under a white parasol that an orderly held for him there. I'd heard of countermine boots before, but I had never seen them. Don't know how a fellow could walk in them. Somebody must have suspended General Checkers above a vat of molten iron and dipped him to mid-calf, was my impression. He had a dark blue uniform. He had a dark blue cape with gold piping. He had epaulettes and ribbons and medals on his jacket and stars all over his hat. A fellow would have had a hard time shooting the man without perforating a couple of those badges.

Inside those clothes a monstrous tall fellow stood sweating. His face was all sausages. If he had any hair, I couldn't see it for his hat. He smiled and smiled while the sweat dripped down his face and rained off his chin like spray off a busted gutter. That fellow smiled so fiercely he could have leveled a squadron by the gleam off his teeth. It nearly leveled *me*. He had what I'd call an intentional belly, not the featherbed kind of a pot, but the kind that you don't want to mess with, the kind that will bull you up against a wall and pin you there while its owner chokes you. A serious mean belly, I call it.

Spot ran ahead of me - it was an odd feeling. It was as if, as soon as his General was in sight, he wasn't my friend anymore. He was the General's man, period. "He's here, General," says he, like I was a parcel of mail. To me: "Come on."

I stepped up to Spot's General.

"Good job, Spot," says he.

Then he turns to me. "Stinks here, don't it? And the heat. I can practically feel myself putrefy under all that sun. But, damn me, it's worth it. Let's face it: everybody loves a mine field." Waving off objections, though nobody was making any: "I know! I know! But let's be honest: it's like the smell of a fart. You pull a face—but you sniff, don't you?"

"General Checkers," says I, "I've got a dog out there sweating in the sun just like you and me. Could we get to the point, if you please?"

"You hear that, Spot?" says he to his man. "That's what I call cajones. This fellow has a full couple, and no mistake." Back to me: "Ah, can't say as I blame you, Blackie. I was a mudface once, you know. I wasn't born with medals and adjutants, for Nader's sakes." The General pulled from his pocket a palm sized cardboard box and slipped the top off. I smelled. I drooled. "Have a choklit, Schraffts Assortedes from before the wars." I clamped my teeth. "No?" He threw a couple into his mouth, crushed, swallowed, smiled. Spot smiled too.

"Now listen, Blackie, m'boy, your Uxo - good dog, don't get me wrong, but face it: he hasn't got the chance of a maggot up a Mauser barrel. Hell, Blackie boy, only reason I asked Spot to set up this little show we got running here was for an entertainment for my friends and associates at UM&D - and for my friends' friends." The general tilted his head in the direction of a near hill where three gentlemen and as many ladies all sat in business suits sipping cocktails, if I'm not mistaken, under a wagon tent. "My friends own the plant that produces Volkovoy - that's what the 'D' is for in UM&D: *de-mining*. And *their* friends are thinking about buying in, if you catch my drift - but we've all seen enough, I think."

"The General works for them," Spot chirped.

"Shut up, you ass." Checkers snapped his head toward Spot so quick the sweat flung off him - it wet my

cheek - and his umbrella lackey trembled.

“Nobody works for anybody here - where was I? Your Uxo! Damn me to the tits, if he ain’t a soldier’s goddam soldier, Blackie boy.” Laughing: “Damn me to the tonsils, damn me to my granny’s toupee. But. But, is what I’m saying here, Blackie. The mutt’s at death’s door. You really want to see him slip off into mange and mutt pus?” The General pulled out a child sized black leather belt with a pouch attached.

“What’s that?” I says.

With a wink: “What’s in here, Blackie, will blow a friggin’ tank sky high. If. If, say, some four-legged tail-wagging sonuvabitch of a soldier was to mosey underneath her . . . ”

“No!”

“Slow down, Blackie, for Nader’s sakes. Hell, the Russians used to do it with bottlenose dolphins out of Sevastopol on the Black Sea. Worked like a goddam charm.”

“Damn your eyes, General Checkers, sir. My Uxo’s gonna beat that tin can of yours. He’s a creature, General, a living creature. And no machine is a match for a living creature.”

“Ah, Blackie, you poor sap, yonder’s a field full of machines that’re more than a match. Count your fingers if you think I’m wrong. Ain’t it a machine reduced them for you?”

“He’s got you there, Blacks,” Spot crowed - then he winced and dodged a little, recalling his recent comeuppance.

“Now, you listen to me,” says the General, “Your dog is finished. I’m offering you an out.” Laying a hand on my shoulder: “Uxo’d do anything for you.” Here came the other hand.

“And if I say no?”

A little of the theater drained out of his face. “You couldn’t be that stupid.” Clutching my shoulders in what he must have thought was a brotherly way: “Look, your country is calling you, Blackie.” *Sotto voce*: “Nobody expects a dog no more.” His lips were in my ear now, fat lips, and I could feel their flappage against my lobe: “We’ve got this one job, Blackie: hit the Ludds where it hurts and smithereen them whilst their heads spin, see? Right now they’re rolling up the dry bed of the Potomac, them and the Xians in collusion. Uxo could blow up their lead vehicle and stop the lot. Taste it, Blackie -the Ludds KO’ed by a living thing, by a dog, not by a machine - there’s poetry in it. Those throwbacks would be demoralized. I need you, Blackie. I need Uxo. Nobody knew any bomb dogs were left. Everybody thought they’d died off after the wars, and what with the new gizmos, nobody bothered to train more. You see what I mean? Demoralized.”

He gave me my ear back, and stood there a nodding and a smiling, with eyes like freezer burn.

I just stared back at him, eyeball to eyeball. I didn’t lower my peepers. I didn’t blink. I could see that he wasn’t used to that, and it made him angry. “Otherwise . . . ” He puffed a bit, and he narrowed his eyes. “. . . you’d get nothing, of course.”

“That’s assuming me and Uxo lose.”

“Oh, you’ll lose.”

“You’ll lose, Blackie,” Spot chimed in. “You know what the ‘U’ in UM&D is for?”

“Tell me, Spot. What’s the ‘U’ for?” I felt so sorry for him, licking the ass of a martinet like Checkers, it nearly eclipsed my annoyance with him - but not quite. He was the smartest fellow and the dumbest I’ve ever known, and all rolled up together, good and bad, like worms in a bait bucket.

He flashed his General another shit-eating grin and then explained to me: “*Universal*, Blackie boy. You can’t match ‘em, and you sure as hell can’t beat ‘em.”

I just ground what teeth I’ve got and stared past Spot at that gorilla of a general till he busted out laughing. Up to that moment I had not understood exactly how phony the man was. He couldn’t be mad but he turned it to a yok-fest. Then how could the fellow laugh when he really wanted to? He couldn’t. He hadn’t the courage, this great courageous galoot, to give range to his human feelings. I wondered what ancient farts he must be clutching with that tight ass? What tears had turned poison behind his eyes? That’s how a fellow can kill, I was thinking - once he’s killed *himself*, why, there’s nothing to it.

Then it was I knew for a dead certainty: we wouldn’t lose.

#

Spot shadowed me most of the way back to the meadow. He couldn’t seem to decide where he belonged, with me or with Checkers. He kept standing and turning to look back at the General, then sprinting to come alongside me again. I paid him no mind. I jutted chin and chest, set my jaw, and strode to the theater of battle.

“Blackie, Blackie, boy, that was a big mistake, Blackie.”

“Why was that a mistake, Spot?” I never slowed. He stumbled to keep pace, and me with my half plastic gam.

“The General, he, those fellows in the tent, I mean - look Blackie, Uxo’s got to lose. He’s got to.”

“Why would that be, Spot?”

“Because, well, because . . .” Now he grabbed my arm and made me stand still. He looked up at me with hollow and ruined eyes, jewels like dripstone, a ghost of himself. “Because I made some side bets, Blackie boy.” He laughed, but he didn’t smile. “Who’d have thought, huh, Blackie? Who’d have thought that the mutt . . . I bet everything, more than I’ve got. I’m telling you the Nader’s truth this time, Blackie. They’ll bust me to pieces. They don’t know the French for ‘forgive.’ They’ll string me up and kill me. You’ll help me out, won’t you, Blackie boy? I’ll make it good. I’ll pay you out everything the General would have paid you if you’d won. Mostly. Come on, pal . . .”

I pulled away from him. I gave him my back. I walked on toward my kids and my dog.

“You’re not gonna win, anyway, you dumb sonuvabitch. Go on, Blackie. Go dig yourself a grave, you and the brats. Nobody cares about you, you sap. Look at you! You ain’t even a whole man, Blackie.”

I was coming up a rise, angle left and angle right, poke and pivot, as I had to on my busted leg. I heard Volkovoy gear up, so I gathered my wind, and I whistled Uxo to get going.

“You’re history, Blackie boy. You’re dead - Blackie, Blackie, please, I’m begging you, Blackie . . . !”

Now I breasted the hill and saw the two racers, Volkovoy and Uxo, the dead and the alive. I was only a little dizzy. The kids rooted at the sidelines. Sonny policed them, bulled them back whenever they surged toward their four-legged beloved. They had reason to cheer, at the moment. Volkovoy, for some mystic purpose, had moved twenty five yards backwards in its lane to neck and neck with Uxo. It had been doing this every so often, and I knew it only presaged an even greater leap ahead, but the children, bless them, chose not to remember.

“Go, Uxy! Now you got him!”

Mindless of the wheezing, gyring, smoking behemoth, Uxo sniffed dirt and ambled forward in his lane. He was slowing again, even though he had just rested. How much longer could the old dog last? The field, as we had suspected, was sparsely mined. This was not so much a matter of removing lots of explosives as of proving where the dingers *weren't*. For the bomb dog, that's just as much work.

The sun was low in the sky. It had cooled a bit. Shadows of the hills on its west rim fell across the meadow. I thought I saw the soil glow before Volkovoy on the swath over which it had just backed up. It glimmered like foxfire, dimly - or so I thought. I was just musing about that odd little show, when Sonny climbed to where I stood and threw a crushed can at my foot.

“What's that?” says I.

“What's it look like?”

“Cola can, Sonny. Or chicken gumbo soup. Who cares?”

“One of the tinies wandered out when I wasn't looking. I scooped her back quick, but she was playing with this. There were lots of them buried in the ground. Cans and busted pots and pipes and printed circuits, and you could even see a car top, Blackie. Volkovoy's blade must have turned it all up.”

“So what, Sonny?” I was only half listening. Uxo had stopped moving, and I was looking to see if he would signal me to come defuse a dinger. But there was something wrong with him. I hopped down the rise and picked my way - chary as a de-miner, as the saying goes - toward Uxo, who sat licking his nose and snorting.

“What's up?” says Sonny, following me.

“Stay back.”

“No. What's up?”

“He's bleeding.”

I skirted Volkovoy's lane, safe for a mechanized squadron, maybe, but iffy for a man, and came up on my Uxo from behind, across the ground he'd checked. I hugged him. I stroked him under the chin and lifted his head to inspect the wound.

“Cut it on scrap tin, I bet,” says Sonny coming up on us.

Sure enough, the earth around us was lousy with rubble. The dirt had been worn away or blown away in patches. Just as Sonny had said: metal debris everywhere.

“The goddam Rights,” says I, dabbing Uxo's face with a clean hanky. “Before the Ludds mined this park, a band of Urbophobes were building a uranium reprocessing plant here. Can you believe it? Smack dab on old Mannahatta. Bunch of throwbacks in the goddam USA Senate backed them. Hated the cities

and city people. Never got very far, though, what with simple NIMBYism. Looks like they left in a hurry, and someone plowed under their leavings. Plus, there were a few squatters twixt them and the mine-layers.”

“Yeah,” says the kid, “I was one of them.”

I thought of the stick and the nail Queenie had told me about, but I kept my mouth shut. Poor Sonny on the lam, alone.

“So?” says Sonny.

“Looks bad,” I says. “The cut’s nothing, but Uxo’s worn out. It ain’t worth him shredding his face here.”

“You don’t get it, do you?”

“What are you talking about?”

Volkovoy was moving again. It found a couple of dingers and disabled the firing chains with its precision sensors, its music box brains, and its burglar tool fingers. Backups in backups in backups.

“A compass would go crazy here, wouldn’t it?” says Sonny. “How do you figure Volkovoy sniffs out those dingers, huh?”

“Why can’t you just talk straight, Sonny, goddammit?” says I. “What are you babbling about? I got a bleeding dog here and a field full of tin cans and dingers and . . . holy Nader in heaven!” My face went slack. I finally caught his meaning.

“Bugs,” says Sonny.

“Gotta be. Bacteria. Bioluminescence - you saw the glow, didn’t you, Sonny, you wily bastard?”

“We win.”

I kissed my Uxo between the ears. “We’re done here, Uxy sweetie.” The three of us headed for the sidelines. The kids stopped cheering when they saw us come near. Their faces were as long as a New York winter, but we were about to make them happy.

#

Volkovoy whined, roared, and spat foam while me and the kids huddled. He was still whining, roaring and spitting foam while we tramped uphill to the General’s encampment. We felt like a platoon. We had our battle plan. Mumps rehearsed her lines as we climbed. One Finger marched and sang the Battle Hymn of the Republic, as best as she remembered. Amazing are the little shards of culture that survived the wars - lullabies, work songs, oaths . . .

“Oratory, Naderoola!

“Hunky dory, Naderoola!

“Gory glory, Naderoola:

“Deluth is parched and gone!”

Checkers was in high spirits. He rose from his camp chair to greet us. “So you’ve come to surrender, huh? Well, by Nader,” - paw on my shoulder - “you can keep your sword, General Blackie. Har, har. Look at the bright side - you’ve done your little bit to de mine the Sheep’s Meadow, yes? The kiddies can play there again. Picnics, baseball, what have you.” This was all a lie, I knew, since Volkovoy hewed to the military and not the humanitarian standard, but I let old Checkers flap his lips. “It ain’t like it was all for nothing. No dishonor. Uxo gave it the old college try. Do the math: pound for pound, all that. Too bad you put the kibosh on our original deal, of course. The dough wouldn’t do you no harm in these straits, but - there’s right and there’s wrong, for Nader’s sakes. Volkovoy has won.”

“Yeah,” says Sonny - the opening volley - “Volkovoy. Uh huh. But was it a living creature or a machine that won?” Sonny had brought along that gelded dinger of his. He kept throwing it up and catching it as he spoke, which leant an insouciance to his words that seemed to irk old Checkers.

“Cute kid.” The General tousled Sonny’s hair for the half second he managed to keep him under his hand. “I just said - and we all saw - that Volkovoy won. You pulled the mutt, didn’t you?”

Mumps jumped her cue. “General,” says she, skirts aflutter. If she had waited another minute, she would have forgotten what to say.

“What is it, darlin’?” -a pinching her cheek.

“Is Volkovoy dead or alive?”

“What?”

“Dead or alive?” says Sonny. Up and down, the dead dinger, up and down.

“Well, he ain’t alive,” the General laughed. “Neither he nor nothing in him. Do the math. He’s a lab on wheels, a lab and a tank and a plow . . .”

” . . . and a Single Chip Neuromorphic Silicon Nose,” says Queenie. “We know.”

Sonny gave Checkers a sly sidewise look: “You let us know.”

“Huh?”

“The spec list you gave Spot.”

“The what? Why, I never gave . . . Spot, you scoundrel, have you been rifling through my private papers?”

Sonny half smiled. “No, you gave it to him, General Checkers, sir. You wanted Blackie and us to see it. Well, we heard it, actually - I bet you didn’t think old Spot would sing it to us.”

“He’s not much of a crooner,” Mumps put in. Spot was creeping off - “Gotta see a man about a dog,” he mumbled to his collar bone - when Mumps jabbed: “No offence, Spot.”

Spot smiled, then remembered that he shouldn’t, so he stopped it.

The General roared: "Who is this child, Blackie? Spot, why are we dealing with children here? This here is a clown show, is what it is. I never in all my life . . ."

It was my turn. "What Sonny is getting at, General, sir, is that the list is not complete. It was a little disinfo ploy, wasn't it, sir? Whether Spot boosted it or you had him deliver it, that don't matter, sir. What matters is that a certain item, as we surmise, has been left off the list."

"The ninth day of Nadermas, so to speak," Queenie put in.

"Bugs," says Sonny.

General Checkers' eyebrows knotted. That whole puss of his, in fact, turned into a mess that old Gordias would have wondered at, and Alexander the Great, by Nader, would have needed three swords to undo it. "Bugs? What, I, uh . . ."

"Live bugs, General," says Sonny. "Live, not dead. *Back-tee-ree-uh.*"

"That sod was full of rubble, General," I says. "Not one of the gadgets on your list could have spotted a bomb in all that metal junk."

Now the suits were up. They sauntered over from their wagon tent, holding cocktail glasses by the stem, pinkies extended, I swear to Nader. An elegant lady, three sails to the wind, with black silk stripes on her tuxedo trousers and black lipstick and a spiked choker, who seemed to be the boss of them, barked, "What's happening here, Checkers? Show's over, isn't it? Our guests are impressed and ready to do business -is there a problem?"

"Of course not, of course not, Ms. Buttons, ma'am," said Checkers with a slight bow and a gentlemanly sweep of the arm.

No Finger, taking charge of her considerable power of cuteness, took the woman's hand in her little hand and pronounced in a baby voice: "General Checkers isn't playing fair, ma'am. It was supposed to be creature versus machine, alive versus dead, but he cheated and snuck live creatures inside Volkovoy to do the real work. That's why we made Uxy stop."

"Bacteria, ma'am," Queenie reiterated. "Nitrogen sensitive bioluminescent bacteria. We win, and he won't pay."

Ms. Buttons frowned at the General. "Is that true, Checkers?"

"After a fashion, yes, but . . ."

"Pay them."

"What?" All the color washed out of his face.

"What difference does it make, Checkers? For Nader's sake, we've seen what we needed to see. Win or lose, who gives a damn? We'll mass produce Volkovoy and as long as the Ludds are laying mines, them and the Anti's and the Anti-anti's and who all, we'll make more money than you can stuff up a Liberal's loose asshole."

"Ma'am, all due respect, it isn't a matter of that . . ."

"Yes, it is. Pay them."

Spot had been standing stock still the whole time, frozen where Mumps had zinged him. He shouted: "It

isn't right . . . ”

“Shut up, Spot,” says the General. He was a man who hated to lose, but as between military and industrial, it seems, the industrial is the fellow on top. So Checkers says to me, “My paymaster will take care of you, Blackie. Just get the hell out of my sight, you and your no-necks, and take Spot with you.”

“General, please . . . ” says Spot, but the General has already taken Buttons in arm, and they are waltzing back to the wagon tent to talk the big bucks.

“General,” I heard the lady say as they retired, “we're going to be rich as Republicans . . . ”

“Looks like everybody wins, kid,” says I to Sonny. “How bad a thing could it be, UM&D stamping out a shit load of Volkovoy's to clean up the goddam world, even if it's just halfway clean?”

“UM&D, huh?” says he, with that smug mystic look. “You know what the ‘M’ is for, Blackie?” He shoves his gelded dinger under my nose. I hadn't noticed what a slick job it was, a neat black ball with stubs where the sensor arms had broken off. He turned it to display the tiny print etched along a join:

UM&D

“Son of a bitch,” says I.

#

With the dough that stiff neck paid us we bought us a trunk of canned refries from before the wars, and a canvas wall tent, and some blue nylon two man tents that fit in a little bag, and coats full of goose down for each and every one of us against the coming drear, and a solar powered calculator for Nader knows why but Sonny had to have one, and a Barbie doll for No Finger - the little girl Barbie, Barbie Barbie, not the vivisectionist one, Klaus Barbie, that boys favor nowadays - and an actual palm sized computer for Queenie that actually still worked and it had a shit load of batteries that came with it and whole books that were loaded into it, and many other necessities and luxuries, and rawhide toys for Uxo, and we still had some dough left over against the next catastrophe, which Nader knows there will be one.

With plenty of grub and a sure dry place to sleep, everybody kicked back and played awhile - between our bomb shows, of course:

ONE THING'S CERTAIN -

KICK A DINGER

AND IT'S CURTAINS.

We ate like Republicans. We fattened up Uxo. But my mind kept returning to the Sheep's Meadow. Uxo had never finished his lane, and Volkovoy's, which was only cleared to minimal, combat standards, could still maim or kill someone. Maybe it was stupid, with all the minefields on Manhattan Island, to fixate on this one, but it seemed my bailiwick, me and Uxo's last bomb job. So I stole away from the kids some mornings, in the cool at daybreak, and walked Uxo out to Central Park. I didn't want them

around causing trouble, maybe getting hurt.

I worked Uxo slow and easy. I took my time unlinking the firing chains on those simple dingers the Ludds had laid. We were almost finished in seven good mornings, but on the eighth, which, like the goddam eighth day of Nadermas, I had figured to be the last, we encountered a little problem.

Some bare-chested fool was running all over Sheep's Meadow, leaping and jumping as if he were trying to tamp down the topsoil - or break his damn feet. I calmed old Ux with a hand on his back as I got down onto my haunches beside him. I wanted to careful see what sort of a bird we were up against before announcing ourselves and causing his death or ours.

It wasn't Spot - he was too skinny, and it wasn't Spot - his gait was too tipsy, and then, by Nader, it was Spot. I hadn't seen him since the day of the big contest - three weeks or so, time enough for a fellow with some determination to turn himself into a howling skeleton.

"Spot, boy," I shouted, "stand still. You're on live ground. Me and Uxo'll guide you out."

He fell down laughing. "That you, Blackie, you hound-humping loony? What makes you think I want to be guided out?"

I went round the safest way I knew, playing the odds just a bit here and there for fear that Spot would find his dinger. "Just you stand still, partner. Here we come. There's eggs and toast back at the kids' place, Spot. You hungry?" Just stay alive a minute, was the thought.

"It's no use. You're talking to a dead man, Blackie, boy." He jumped up and slammed down hard, like belly flopping onto a pond. "Missed it," he mumbled. Then he says, laughing, "The bad guys have called in my chits, Blackie, boy, just like I said they would."

Me and Uxo came up along Uxo's lane now, a safe clear run, till we came to the edge of the bad ground. "We'll talk to 'em, Spot. They're businessmen, ain't they? We'll negotiate. What good are you dead, am I right? They lose their whole investment."

Spot skipped and kicked. The man was hysterical. "What good? For an example, that's what . . .

"HERE LIES SPOT,
"BEATEN TO A PUDDING,
"EYES GOUGED,
"BONES BROKE,
"TONGUE FOR A NECKTIE
"THROUGH HIS SLIT THROAT.
"DON'T CROSS THE MOB."

"Tell me, Blackie, what the hell did I ever do wrong? I never hurt anybody. All I ever wanted was to help people and be good."

One last jump, and Spot found his dinger. It was an awful sight. I had to hide my eyes in Uxo's fur. Uxo shivered and howled. My head to his flank, I felt the howling through his ribs. I looked up and saw Spot's blasted body lying face down, half buried in a man-sized hole. Sure, I cried, but it was nothing new. Those times were full of blasted bodies and tears.

I didn't have to do much digging. What was left of old Spot I kicked down into the earth. I used my hands and my feet to pile down dirt. Afterwards I had to sit down and breathe. Uxo licked the sweat off me. I saw dimples in the air, and my chest felt like a falling elevator car, but a pill fixed it.

Uxo and I finished that morning. Turns out, Spot's was the last dinger in Sheep's Meadow. It was Spot de-mined it. The kids who play there nowadays - "picnics, baseball, what have you" - they have Spot to thank.

#

Sometimes in my tent at night while Uxo snores, I dream. I dream about ancient heroes. I dream about Jason and the Argonauts, for example: how Jason planted dragon's teeth in King Aeetes' field and raised up demons, then slew them. I wonder if we can slay our portion, geld our dingers, me with my gimp leg, Uxo with his tired old bones, these kids with the bum dice Fate has thrown them.

Dragon's teeth, landmines - not much changes. I guess the question is, once all the mines are pulled, supposing we manage that, will we have the guts not to plant any more? Maybe we're all just too selfish, too scared, and too angry. The way I figure it these latter days, before you de-mine the goddam world, you have to de-mine yourself.

I laid a stone where Spot was buried. I hauled it on a skid over the last wink of the dandelions, just before the hard winds hit. On it I had a guy I know, a sweet tempered legless duffer who'd do anything for a story, chisel the French for 'forgive':

PARDONNEZ

###

[Eliot Fintushel](#) lives in a magnificent Victorian in Santa Rosa, California, between the horse stables and the transmission shops. He makes his living as a writer, thereminist, and itinerant solo performer. He won the US National Endowment for the Arts' Solo Performer Award twice. He has performed at The National Theater, among thousands of venues, including once, for diplomats, under the anti-aircraft gun of a German ship in NY harbor. He has published about 50 short stories, mostly in *Asimov's*, and has been in many Best Of Anthologies. He was a nominee for Nebula and Sturgeon Awards. His crazy new novel *Breakfast With The Ones You Love* is just out from Bantam Dell ... and he loves to play Debussy on the theremin.