

The Runner

I knew he was just passing through. The black bandana he always wore as a sweatband under the long black hair distinguished him from the rest of us. That, and the way his feet and dark eyes were never really still, most of all when the stockade was in sight.

The others thought I had it pretty easy. They couldn't have believed how much I would have given to be going out with them, surrounded by their daybreak coughing. Ahead of the truck, the open pinkness of another dawn in the free world

I'd be in barracks each evening by the time they returned, mud-plastered, exhausted, hands torn and blistered after another hellish day, cutting and wrestling logs out of the palmetto swamp.

For me the departure of the work-gangs was a highlight in an endless succession of days at that high, old fashioned desk in the stockade office.

My future was decided when my record caught the eye of The Man on that first induction interview. Tapping the folder with a yellowed fingernail, my pale face was reflected in duplicate in the dark lenses that hid his thoughts.

"Says right here, y'got talents y'kin put t'better use. Th'judge said it. Ah'll have t'try find a use for them. Whutever they might be. Could be you'n me's ginna spend a lotta time t'gether, bo'. See y'don't disappoint me. An' th'judge a'course." A self appreciative snicker.

It didn't take long to define our respective roles. His as absolute ruler of this sweaty little kingdom and mine as recorder of every aspect of his ruling. His as definer of what and how I would record, and mine as obedient scribe. In time, I acquired other duties not normally associated with accountancy. It had some aspects very different from the daily shaving and padding of figures, costs and expenditure that my office work entailed.

One day I was locked in my struggle to create a balance between credibility and reality. Outside a deserted stockade, cicadas shrilled in the brush. Willy-Joe, oldest inmate by far, moved his whisk broom once every half minute or so to create his own illusion of industry. He was too old to have anywhere to escape to, and somehow, as the camp bookkeeper, I was never credited with the desire to run.

From somewhere far out from the stockade, I heard the strangest sound. It sounded like a foghorn rising and falling on the still air, as it grew swiftly closer. Pencil halted in mid-fabrication, I heard the familiar, braking squeal of the warden's jeep and saw Hodgson rush out to swing open the stockade gates even before the irritable blast on the horn.

The dust hung thick on the still air as The Man jumped down and stamped up the two warped wooden steps into the office hut, a sodden, filthy Stetson crumpled in one clenched fist and his matted hair standing up in spikes. Across the shoulders of his erstwhile crisply pressed shirt it seemed a giant slug had crawled, criss-cross, leaving thick strings of mucous – like bizarre, glittering decorations. It wasn't unusual for him to forget my name.

“Yo, bo’!! Y’all git thet dawg outta th’truck’n keer fer him,y’all heah me? Time I see him agin, he be clean an’ unner control, else y’all gunna heah fum me!!”

I was out of the office and at the jeep before I registered anything other than his tone. Nothing could have prepared me for my first sight of the other occupant..Incredibly furrowed and wrinkled, but silent now that the jeep had stopped, it sat expectantly in a pool of its own slobber, twelve inches of red tongue still dripping.

From somewhere in the mass of wrinkles, I guessed that its eyes were watching me. Although it was enormous, the first impression was that it's skin was intended for an animal three times it's size.

Somehow satisfied with its scrutiny, the dog, for such it seemed to be, extended a paw the size and texture of a bath sponge and whined. Reassured, I untied it, more or less as it snapped at a fly, irrigating a large area of stockade and me in the process. Attached to the stout leather harness, I found half of a soggy, printed label. It read “PROPERTY OF THE UNITED STATES PRISON SERV.....”

I also found out why we had a structure in the stockade referred to on the inventory as “the dog pen”. And why there were certain provisions on the ration roll that were ordered but never delivered.

Liberated in the wire pen, after a gingerly applied sponge-bath and left to his own devices, the great dog set off on a tour of inspection, enormous pendulous ears trailing in the dust either side of a nose that never left the ground until he

had completed three eager circuits. Returning to where I stood, he regarded me gravely for a moment before rearing up, massive paws against the wire and the sorrowful red pits of his eyes on a level with mine. I scratched his chest through the wire and he groaned with pleasure, drawing a mighty breath that I swear moved my hair.

A voice disturbed our communion. "This here's y'pure breed bloodhound, bo'. Murrigan variety – none o' them puny English dawgs in his ancestry, they tell me. Goes by name o' Plumblin on account a' he's so true, ole Rattray over t'the Deepot tole me when ah fetched him. Ketched hisself a mess o' runaways, so they say. Gonna change a few things 'round here, is ole Plumblin."

Showered and in a clean uniform, The Man was almost affable.

"Fum now on, y'be a trusty, bo'. Man runs - y'git Plumblin pronto, n'git yo' ass up t'the gate fo' me t' pick y'all up in th'jeep, y'heah?"

I was about to say that we had never had an attempted escape in my three years of tenancy, but The Man was moving away, and I realised that I had never had the words or the nerve to attract his attention.

Only The Gypsy showed an interest in Plumblin. The others saw him as an extension of the system and me as an accomplice. The Gypsy appeared outside the wire the first day as I tended to Plumblin, already with an offering in one brown hand and those glittering black eyes flitting from Plumblin to the stockade, from there to me and then back to the stockade. Back and forth. There had to be a reason. And of course there was.

"Gruber, you got our ticket there. Eating outta your hand so to speak. Our ticket outta here...y'get it?" he said with that furtive smile that never touched his eyes. I mumbled something to cover my inability to see how this canine sleuth could effect our escape instead of bringing it to a swift and ignominious end. The Gypsy was patient.

"Listen. Dogs are all the same, no matter the breed. It's people imagine all sorts of things about them. Can't believe they do things come natural, not because they think. Knew a fella once... had a brace of coonhounds woulda run circles round this fool here. Reason I'm in here, actually. Never could resist a good-looking dog. Neither can the market...."

Without thinking, I was piqued enough to respond, "Plumblin's the best in the country. Rattray from the Depot says he's infallible !"

"Infallible, eh?" The Gypsy looked impressed and scratched under the bandanna. "Well...I dunno. He looks kinda dumb t'me. Mind you, I could be wrong. Tell y'what... " he looked round before dropping his quiet voice even lower and moving closer...."

Four weeks later, when The Man charged up the steps into the office and made for the gun cabinet, I knew he was going to say, excitedly...

"YO'bo'! Git th'dawg !! We got ourselves a runner !! The Gypsy over t'the logging gang done lit out into th'swamp...ah knew th' sumbitch gwine t'run one day !" but I must have looked convincing as I raced off and moments later was back, Plumblin excited and baying, as he plunged along at the end of the lead, showering everything in his path with saliva.

At the swamp, the guards had rounded up the other convicts, all holding their breath for the arrival of The Man and Plumblin. I realised that one hundred pairs of eyes were focussed on me and that I was expected to initiate some sort of action. Plumblin, by contrast, knew what he was there for, pacing up and down at the end of the lead, nose up and inhaling great draughts of wind-scent.

The Man growled impatiently. "Give th'dawg the scent, bo'. We got some ground t'cover afore sundown, unless y'all aiming t'lose The Gypsy?"

Guilty knowledge made me ham-fisted, but I got Plumblin's nose to the ground and turned his collar loose. He cast about for just three seconds before he shot off down the embankment with a jerk that nearly tore my arm off.

The next few hours I remember on bad nights. Palmetto looks lush and green in National Geographic and on Florida postcards, but from up close it's a steamy bug-ridden hell of sucking mud, hooked thorns and stinking scummy water that's home to every kind of scary reptile you can imagine.

The Gypsy ran through that nightmare like it was a Kentucky meadow and Plumblin followed him, baying joyously the whole way. Pleading, I hung onto the lead, mostly out of fear that I would be alone in this awful place if I lost Plumblin. I was aware that The Man and his guards were falling behind, their shouts growing fainter as Plumblin's headlong charge took him and me far ahead.

Never once did Plumblin hesitate. He lapped water on the run, paid no heed to the thorns that raked harmlessly over his loose hide and even less to my hoarse commands to slow down. Mostly we ran, dragging a bush or a branch entangled in the lead, but it slowed him not at all.

Only when I fell face down in the water, did he pause, although he didn't look back. Just stood there, staring excitedly in the direction The Gypsy had taken, thick tail waving and the lead taut as I hauled myself to my feet. Then we'd be off again, him yelling fit to bust and me staggering along behind, more dead than alive. When I fell for the last time, I knew I couldn't get up again.

The lead was knotted around my wrist and even Plumblin couldn't find the strength to pull me up. As if he realised it, he slackened off and sat down in the mud, still staring away into the swamp, tongue lolling. I just lay there, trying to keep my mouth out of the water, listening to him whine.

Much later, Plumblin started fidgeting and I thought I heard splashing footsteps. I was relieved that The Man had caught up and I rolled over. But the sound wasn't from behind, it was The Gypsy, coming back from up ahead. Plumblin was hollering now, bouncing up and down fit to pull my arm loose.

The Gypsy came up, cool and almost clean. The bandanna was tucked into his breast pocket. He put out his left hand to Plumblin without taking his eyes off me. With the hound slobbering all over his arm, his right hand appeared holding a knife and I watched, helpless to stop him killing the dog.

There was a slight tug on the leather lead as a single knife stroke parted it and Plumblin and I were separated.

"Thanks, Gruber. Right good of you – delivering the goods I mean. Man's never too young to think about a little retirement policy. C'mon, Plumblin." And he turned to go, Plumblin running free around him, like any domestic dog out for a walk with its owner.

I spent a very bad night in the swamp, up a scraggly tree to avoid the 'gators, but unable to escape the mosquitoes. By morning, I was glad to climb down and try to follow my own tracks back. I was hopelessly lost by afternoon, when a guard accompanied by an Indian tracker, hailed me over the sights of his rifle.

I can't say if The Man believed my account of that day. But I was there when he opened the newspaper six months later. After thirty minutes, he came to the place I'd been hoping he'd miss.

I've still got the picture of the winner of the All American Working Dog Trials stuck up above my cot in the barracks. His stud fees alone are into 4 figures and his owner looked real pleased with life. There was no sign of a bandanna.

Mike Job