

The Life of Worm, by Ken Barris

Worm, as I call him, is quivering. He needs to go for a walk. I have nothing to fear with Worm on the leash. He shivers with untapped energy, his muscularity itself bristles at the thought of violence: even his walking is violent. His eyes have a lugubrious quality, they are liquid with soul. It is a deception. He crouches at the doorway, hair bristling, his ribs standing out, outrage in his eyes, a sort of terror that he might be denied his walk. I sometimes picture him stripped of fur and skin, a flayed beast walking.

I need to make preparations. I check that the electric fence is working – there is a panel in the garage that makes a ticking noise – and preset the alarm. I take the remotes out of their cabinet. Then I fetch the leash, which I keep in the scullery. There is no line of sight between the scullery and the front door. It is inadvisable for Worm to see his leash.

I have the leash behind my back. I have to approach him carefully. Until it is fastened he is potentially psychotic. His eyes roll as I approach, showing the murky corneas. Then I snap the leash on in a smooth and practiced movement, aware of a certain nausea, a sour taste in my mouth. A curious ripping sound rolls out of him, neither bark nor snarl, strangely high-pitched, alto rather than tenor. He rises on his back legs, foreclaws ripping at the door. I have to jerk him back in order to open it. He lunges out, and I grab the handle from outside, using his momentum to slam the door behind us.

He tugs me rapidly towards the electric gate, while I lean back, a staggering land anchor, slowing him down long enough to reach into my pocket to find the gate and burglar alarm remotes. I am skilled now, I can take out both and juggle them in one hand, well enough to open the gate and set the alarm. It activates, the siren giving a single blip. The gate has a seven second delay before it closes. I hear its trundling noise behind me as we set off at a ridiculous pace. Worm tugs madly, trying to go at his natural speed. He ranges left and right, right and left, testing the leash. Sometimes he chokes on his collar, strangling and gargling, but never relents. I would like to let him go, but it wouldn't work: this is an animal one dare not unchain. It is difficult to live with a dog of this nature, but it is necessary. I have no choice.

I look back, unobtrusively as possible, difficult at this speed, difficult to keep balance and scrutinize the street. There is no-one behind me. So far, so good. There is obviously no-one ahead. I feel apprehensive as we approach the intersections – who can tell what (or who, more to the point) might be lurking down the road unseen? You cannot tell, until you are right in the mouth of the intersection, and can gaze left or right, and reconnoitre. The first intersection on this morning's route is Avenue Picardie, which rises to a gentle crest above my current position. There is someone – in the distance, there is a human figure, and a small dog trotting – she wears a dress, there is no threat there. Worm lurches towards them, dragging me up the hill, trying to sprint while his claws scabble at the tarmac. Can he see the little dog? I wonder about his eyesight sometimes. I know that he is blinded by rage, by battle madness. When he gets that

look, blood films his eye, its blood vessels thicken and swell to bursting. Surely that must damage his sight?

The woman is a stick figure wearing a dress. Her dog sniffs the ground and struts about, oblivious to the approach of terror. The distance closes swiftly, though they seem to stand still, as if the street rolls towards me on massive and silent gears. We are on the right hand side of the road, the side on which you face oncoming traffic. It is better to walk on this side, but the woman and her dog are on this side too. I glance backwards, hastily, confirm that nothing approaches from behind, and swerve out behind Worm, dragging him to the other side of the road.

I begin to make out details. She wears a raincoat, an unpleasant yellow. It is this I mistook for a dress. Beneath it she wears beige slacks and sensible shoes. She appears to be middle aged. Despite the overcast weather, she wears white-rimmed sunglasses, of a type I would think were old-fashioned, with thick white rims. She comes nearer, and I see a spray of silver shot in her cheeks, and sprays of silver in her hair. The woman positively glints, she is metallic with manners and face powder.

To my annoyance – to my consternation – she crosses the street, and comes to a halt right in front of Worm. Before I can warn her, she bends down over him. Is she mad? She takes both his cheeks in her hands, and says, looking up at me, ‘Isn’t he a love? What’s his name?’

I am so astounded I cannot speak at first. Worm’s tail wags madly, his hindquarters shake. He pays no attention to the small dog at all, all his sensibility focused on her attention. The little dog sniffs at a pile of droppings just inside the curb, with the utmost delicacy, reading its information, keeping its distance. My dog makes excited guttural noises, sounds I have never heard before.

‘Worm,’ I say at last.

‘What a strange name for a dog like this!’ she exclaims gaily.

I clear my throat, unsure how to respond. I take in as much slack on the leash as I can, without pulling him backwards. Does she realize her danger? Does she know he might take her face off?

She straightens up, wiping her hands down on her hips, against the unforgiving yellow of her raincoat. No doubt he has slathered over fingers.

‘Such a frantic young man,’ she remarks, amused.

The dog is tugging at the leash again, vibrating.

‘Well, yes,’ I reply, feeling quite foolish. ‘I think we’d better move on.’

We spring away briskly. I feel intense relief. I cannot be responsible for foolish people who risk their lives and faces. I close my eyes for an instant, unable to suppress an image of her scalped,

exposed. Turning back, I see her departing frame, a splash of yellow. Then I stumble, tugged forward, and scramble after Worm. A gentle, squeezing pressure makes itself felt in my chest, with a single clear tendril of pain moving upwards on the left, and curling into my heart. It is not unpleasant.

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There is a threat to my security that I cannot do much about. It is an oak tree growing on my neighbour's property, right next to our shared boundary wall. I know for a fact that this tree is rotten to the core. The trunk is hollow. My neighbour, a wizened and stubborn old fool, has confirmed it. I've asked him repeatedly to cut it down, but he refuses. 'Can't go around cutting down trees,' he mutters. 'Not old trees like this. Too much history in them.' He points to the fresh leaves growing from its upper boughs, as if that's proof of its health. When the winter wind blows from the north-west, I cannot sleep. I fear the tree. How much does a medium-sized oak weigh? I try to calculate the direction of its fall. This is difficult, because the tree bows in my direction, the lower half of its trunk leaning slightly over the wall; then it bends back, inclining the other way. The bulk of its branches are on his side, tipping the centre of gravity back towards him; but the northwester would push it onto my side. The soil here is of poor quality, with terribly low compressive strength. If you push a steel rod in the ground to test it, as engineers do – as I have done in front of this neighbour – it goes right in, easily sinking 600 millimetres or more. How stable can the roots be in this soil? It is so precarious.

To make matters worse, he has allowed a bougainvillea to grow up the trunk and into the branches, so a matted, massive network of vegetation – virtually a hedge in the air – hangs from these branches. More accurately, it grows up into the branches; in any event, it must act as a sail; it inevitably must catch and amplify the force of the wind.

I sometimes try to estimate the height of the tree, and mentally convert that to horizontal distance. How far will it reach? It will obviously destroy my lounge and chimney, probably scatter the coals in my fireplace and start a fire. It could well bring down the roof and outer wall of the dining room adjacent as well. I do not think it will reach my garage and so destroy my car. But it is difficult to translate height to length without instruments of survey. I have a number of valuable paintings in my lounge. These are uninsured. How might one replace these? I often consider removing them, but surely the lounge is where one hangs valuable paintings? They are my only heritage – paintings by Boonzaaier, Stern, Jensch, Maggie Laubser, Ignatius Marx – paintings that capture the country of my youth. I refuse to displace them. No doubt this is unwise. No doubt I will regret it one day.

One thing is certain: this oak tree will shatter the boundary wall. It will cut the electric fence. Once that is down, my first line of defence is gone. This presents no immediate danger, not in a storm. Criminals are as sensitive to bad weather as we are. However, it will take days to repair. In a bad storm, many trees go down in this city. It will take time to get it cut up and removed,

the rubble cleaned up, the wall rebuilt. Only then can the fence be restored, only then. Fortunately, I have Worm.

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I follow a certain protocol at night. I begin with the garage, checking each night on the electric fence charge energizer panel. It has five LEDs to indicate the level of charge. They are arranged vertically, light runs upwards, one after the other, arriving at the topmost with a snapping sound if all is well. Tonight, as usual, there is full charge. It is an excellent unit. If we have a power cut, there is a battery. It cannot provide power indefinitely, of course – not if the power cut runs for several hours – which concerns me. I will install a generator if these power cuts go on. Then I go through each window in the house, and each external door, making sure that it is secured. I do not neglect the windows of my study upstairs. People who believe that thieves only break in on the ground floor delude themselves. I leave open a single fanlight in the bedroom, as fresh air is so important when you sleep. I have burglar bars, but they are easily removed. These are flat strips of metal. All one has to do is adjust a large shifting spanner to the apposite thickness, brace the flat bar in its jaw, and twist. The burglar “bar” will snap soon enough. Of course, that will make a noise, and arouse my dog, but they are aware of this. Now they have battery powered metal-cutting torches that can remove the bars almost silently. All it takes is expertise. Whatever measures you take, they will bring the counter-measure to bear.

I set the external beams and activate all the window sensors. While I am awake, I bypass the infra-red motion sensors inside the house, though not those on the two patios. My perimeter is secure as I can make it. I would like to leave Worm outside the house, patrolling my garden, snaking his way into the dark shrubbery, into every corner. I have reason to believe his hearing is not particularly sharp, though like all dogs he must have a keen sense of smell. But I cannot do this. He barks and howls all night. It was my practice not long ago, but the neighbours complained, particularly the man with the oak tree. One rude, anonymous letter threatened to get the municipality on to Worm. I was not disturbed by this threat itself – the municipality is incapable of doing anything at all other than sending one wildly inaccurate accounts – but I like to keep the peace.

Now he patrols inside the house, which is acceptable, if not ideal. I would rather he dispatched intruders outside, before they come in reach. And even if he didn't – for example, if they sprayed him with some kind of disabling toxin, pepper spray or insecticide for example, or even shot him, none of which is uncommon, it would make a great cacophony, I can assure you. He would not die easily. Another problem is that my security beams are set to ignore any animal weighing less than forty kilograms. I don't know what Worm weighs, but sometimes he trips off the beams, and sometimes he doesn't. It upset the neighbours again, many times, and there were complaints. They are stupid and short-sighted: there is no boundary between my security and theirs, despite the walls that divide our properties.

On completion of my first-level security protocol, I am free to read, or watch television. Sometimes I listen to music, or prowl the internet. I keep track of incidents in my area through the local Neighbourhood Watch website. It is an excellent service. They email Crime Incident Notifications every day – I call it a CIN – usually two or three, with a synopsis of the event and news, if any, of arrest. They circulate the number plates of suspicious vehicles, and even photographs of people who are suspected of being a danger to the area. These are police mugshots, which proves their danger.

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I listen to the wind. To say that it howls, as people do, is inaccurate. Howling is a curve of sound that lifts and dies smoothly. This wind surges, mounts raggedly, drops off. It builds up its power unsteadily, using many instruments to steal or manufacture a voice, having none of its own: sheeting slapping under cement roof tiles, the thump of that poorly fitted door against its frame, creaking gazebo timbers, whining telephone cables, the choir of branches that sing as the gale scuds through them. Then rain drums on the skylight, a nerve-wracking percussion, growing high-pitched and more frantic still as hail bounces off. I believe I feel the night go pale at the climax. But none of this matters: my attention is endlessly drawn to that corner of the property above which the oak tree stands, fragile and yet monstrous.

Worm cannot sleep either. His nerves are frayed too. He paces about the house, around the sleeping quarters at least. They are blocked off from the remainder of the building by a steel security gate in the passage, so his area of patrol is confined to three rooms. His claws click on the passage tiles, robotic but anxious, and on the sprung floor of the empty bedroom beside mine. Then he comes back in and flops down beside my bed. He sleeps briefly, snoring and grunting through his flabby lips. A particularly sharp peal of thunder sets him on his feet again, howling in outrage. Howling again is inexact. It is a slobbering, manic voice that lifts at last into a bloodcurdling, high-pitched groan.

'For God's sake, shut up!' I hiss at the dog. A dying cornetto of sound, and then he subsides, slumping against the side of the mattress. Somehow – I do not know how – I sleep again. I dream of Worm torn open like a bloody exploded diagram, his organs and limbs detached and spread out. I struggle to read the total meaning of these hieroglyphs, to picture the animal from which they spring. The wind mounts up too, building up its batteries of spiritual violence. I dream this too, caught between waking and sleep. It grows louder and stronger, a blast sustained. Then there is a crumpling sound, not very loud, as if thousands of voices whisper in resignation, but never in unison. And one meaty percussion, which I feel even in my chest, that unites these voices and give them a single meaning. No doubt the tree has come down. But as my waking mind assembles itself, I realize that the alarm is silent. The electric fence is obviously intact. I am flooded by relief. Just to make sure that the system has not malfunctioned, I check the control pad at my bedroom door. There is no report of malfunction. I must have dreamt the tree collapsing, though this remains inevitable. It is only a matter of time.

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The storm has blown over. The clouds are sullen and bruised, their edges stained iodine. As Worm and I turn the corner and pace swiftly down Avenue Provence, I realize that my dream was not entirely misplaced. A large section of a neighbouring oak tree has indeed fallen. It is not the whole tree, but it is far more substantial than a branch. I recognize the tree, of course - I walk past it every day. It is one of these oaks with a somewhat bifurcated trunk; or perhaps over the years, its lowest branch grew almost as broad across as the trunk itself, so that it is hard to distinguish branch from stem. In any event, a massive section of oak tree lies halfway across the road. The sight worries me deeply: not the fresh, almost pink inner wood exposed where it sheared off, or the sweaty odour of its sap. It is rather the depth and spread of inner rot exposed in the supine part, a clotted chocolate mould, dense with bacterial and insectoid life. And spreading along what would have been the inner arm of this bifurcated branch or trunk are giant funguses of some kind, a leathery brown mushroom that protrudes, like half a generous soup plate embedded in the rot, feeding off it. This is not strength, legendary or otherwise: it is corruption.

The damaged tree triggers something: I choke with anger. I want to drag that old fool next door by his collar round the corner to see this spectacle of ruin. I want to show him the inner life of oak trees, their weakness, their corruption, the bloated mass of their history. I want to prove to him that his tree, at last, will break open my property. But my dog has done as much sniffing and urinating on the corpse of the tree as he is going to, and now he tugs wildly at the leash, impatient to get on. I tug back, hard, trying to discipline him, but it makes no difference. We lurch round the tree and carry on, Worm exulting in his furious movement, and I merely furious.

By the time we reach Avenue Le Seuer and pace beside the green belt, things are easier. He has used some of his excess energy. I would love to let him go, let him hurtle down the green belt, but this is a dog one dare not unleash. As if to illustrate the point, a cocker spaniel in his prime comes trotting towards us. His body language is worrying. He is confident to the point of arrogance, blind to his danger. I cross the road, trying to avoid the dog, but he swerves in towards us and comes to a halt before Worm, challenging him, growling. I begin taking in the slack, aware that Worm does not indulge in threat behaviour. Then weariness overtakes me. I cannot explain this. It is so extreme that I feel queasy, and all the colours of the street, the greenery, become too rich, seem to float off their objects and fill the air. I let go the leash. There is a brief pause; Worm hurtles forward and sinks his teeth into the neck of the lesser animal. Perhaps he growls, I am not sure; his mouth is muffled by fur, by flesh and no doubt blood. He gives an occasional shake, tightening his grip each time. The spaniel is oddly silent, eyes stricken with disbelief. I think he is being throttled. Slowly, he collapses; Worm lowers him in stages, allowing him to keel over.

My arms are weak, the edges of my hands tingle. There is the cream and liver of Worm, and the copper fur of the spaniel. I've always thought - I realize it afresh - their ears are ridiculous. But life and motive return gradually. The spaniel appears to be dead. I cannot get Worm to release

it. He growls if I try to pull him away. He does not try to eat his kill, merely to tighten his grip. To give his victim redundant death, I suppose. Or perhaps this moment is just the completion of his nature. Luckily, so far, no-one has seen us. If I can only detach Worm, make him open his jaws somehow, we will walk on, leaving the spaniel behind us. There will be no consequences. I am filled with a grim satisfaction, which I do not really understand. It is a relief, however, a kind of pleasure. I stand holding Worm's leash, hoping he will soon let go.