

THE MALTESE GOAT

Yanick Champoux

Anja Krebber

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It was a dark and stormy night, and it was obvious that the lady at the door wasn't coming to buy lettuce heads. No, no lady ever came to Leo Gear, private sloth, to buy lettuce heads. Probably because of the sign "No, we aren't a grocery store" on my office door.

It was just as obvious that she had not come to avail herself of my services in the accepted manner. Or so I deduced from the .42 she was calmly pointing at my chest. I was sure I had seen that gun before, black and gleaming like licorice. And then it hit me, and my guts froze solid. It was one of Joe Sweet's special makes from the candy-store downstairs.

Clutched by fear, knowing that Death was in the room and was all too eager to give me the final wedgie, I stared at the lady. With a voice that I hoped to be sure and confident, but knew to be strident and whining, I

reminded her that multiple perforations of a fellow human by projectiles was the last resort of the weak. The damsel, undaunted by my words, raised her hand and pulled back the hammer. Her eyes, hard as marshmallows forgotten at the back of the pantry, left me little doubt of her intentions.

She was going to off me. Right here in my own office (pardon the pun). I don't know what got to me more; the fact that I was going to die, or the ignominy of meeting my end by a licorice gun. I should have stayed in dad's grocery store after all. But suddenly an idea hit me with the force of a bulldozer. Quick as lightning I grabbed my desk lamp, dove across the desk and with the heat of the lamp melted the gun before the dame could fire it.

To have her arsenal suddenly reduced to a black puddle of (otherwise) delicious licorice didn't deter my garter-belted assassin. While

I might be a private sloth, my public reflexes are more akin the jackrabbit's. And it's only by the virtue of those reflexes that I kept my life, as I found myself dodging a most lethal praline stiletto.

Evading the stabs of this most literal femme fatale, I desperately searched for a way to get out of this rather uncomfortable situation. I was about to vote my predicament a cause perdue, when I stumbled over the lawn-mower that I always tinker on between cases.

In my mind's eye a quick succession of events unfolded, the chief action of which was her Praline stiletto being shredded to little bits by said lawnmower. Unfortunately my tinkering had left it in a rather unassembled state, and all I could really do at this point, was to grab a screwdriver. Jumping just barely out of harms way and onto the top of my desk with a show of athletic prowess that would have done an olympic high-jumper proud, I faced her with desperate resolve. "En garde!"

My desperate resolve was met with fanatic bloodlust. Which, in the grand scheme of things, was making a kind of harmonic balance but at the moment left me rather displeased. Not to mention vaguely worried about the perpetuation of my body's integrity. With a screech reminiscent of the sound of a kitten discovering an electric jack is not a thing to lick, she leaped forward. Which was damn curious, since I was on her left. The sound of broken glass punctuated her encounter with the window, which diligently yielded and let her out where gravity, no less polite, promptly indicated her the way

to follow.

When someone is in my line of work, someone is brought to see unpretty things. Over the years, I have become jaded of the sight of the many ways humans may come to need band-aids. Nonetheless, I winced as I leaned out over the broken window to assess the fate of my curvasious aggressor. Her flight had spared her the exhausting descent of ten stories worth of stairs (the elevator, by a quirk of the designer, only went up, and thus has remained on the last floor for the best part of the last two decades). Unfortunately for her, she unwittingly landed straight in the middle of a pound whose owner was known to underfeed his dogs.

By the time I made it down to her landing site, she was a case for the coroner, and what was left of her would easily have fitted into a medium sized suitcase. There was no way I could get at her clothes or purse to look for some clues.

A busy neighbor must have called the fuzz, the first sirens were to be heard above the din of traffic. Remembering my last encounter with Captain Haddock I deemed it prudent to postpone a repeat performance and vacated the premises to watch the events unfold from the safety of my window. My very broken window. One look up the side of the building would tell my sharp friend, the Captain, immediately where her fall had originated from. Cursing myself for a fool I made to descend the stairs yet again, when a flash of white to the side of the door caught my attention.

Curious, I retraced my steps. I felt myself on the brink of an important clue that would help me resolve the foggy mystery I had been

thrown in. Shiny things on the ground always had this kind of effect on me, and while the premonition was rarely proven true, I found a great deal of spare change that way.

But this time it was not a couple of dimes that had attracted my eyes. It was a wrapper. A thin aluminium foil whose erstwhile function has been to protect and conserve a little piece of cheese, a little piece that my razor-sharp ocular appendices immediately reported to be missing. The logo, a stern-looking goat, was unknown to me. I looked around for further clues when I heard noises in the stairwell. I cursed under my breath, for there was little doubt that my friend the Captain who was coming for a visit. Stuffing the cheese wrapper in a pocket of my raincoat, I hurried from my office. The elevator was not an option; the stairs were occupied by the enemy and my would-be assassin, the femme fataled, had made very clear how hazardous an exit by a window from this floor could be.

My choices were quite restricted. But there was still at least one way out of this trap. I opened the garbage chute. I peered into the malodorous darkness within. A voice at the back of my head screeched how bad this idea was, and several others immediately agreed. The footsteps, they were climbing the final flight of stairs. I had to act. Grinding my teeth, and promising myself I would not mention any of this at the next Christmas party, I leaped into the unknown.

Well, not quite true. I knew perfectly well what was in the chute; I just didn't want to remind myself about it.

The ride down would have done any fun

fair proud. I tried not to yell too loudly when I hit my head on the first bend, was a little better prepared for the centrifugal forces in the second. My elbows collected a number of contusions on the way down, but at least the landing, after a free fall of what I guessed must have been at least five meters (it later turned out, it had been one and a half), was soft - and moist. I put the thought of whatever I had landed on firmly out of my mind and turned to scramble in the rough direction of where I thought the gate to freedom must be. The olfactory assault on my senses would have forced me to my knees if I had not already been in that position. Faint rustling sound brought home the fact that I wasn't the only denizen of this deep and I was almost thankful when my groping hands encountered stuff that squished between my fingers instead of needlesharp teeth.

Finally my head encountered the opposite wall. Concrete. Now which direction was the door in? I decided to try right and after about two meters met a corner. Whoever called right right had obviously never found himself in a situation in which right turned out to be wrong. Swearing like a Caribbean pirate fresh out of rum I felt my way back into the other direction and finally sensed glorious metal under my sensitive fingertips - very locked metal.

Out of anger and frustration, I slammed my fist against the cold metallic obstacle. It is said that, under dire circumstances, people are capable of extraordinary feats of strength. What is less known is that steel-reinforced inanimate objects, under the same type of circumstances, are also ca-

pable of great stubbornness. My clenched hand, vigorously driven forward by muscles gorged with red-hot blood pumped out of a frantic heart crushed itself against the unimpressed door in a powerful demonstration of self-pulpification.

Cursing with a gusto that would have put to shame any practitioner of the voodoo arts, I brought my ravaged knuckles to my lips. I tasted blood, rust and some slimy, fuzzy substance reminiscent of that yogourt whose expiration date I would always regret not having paid attention to. There I was. Hurt, locked in a dark, nauseous place filled with garbage and horrid little creatures that would soon realize my superior alimentary potential over their usual diet of rotten cabbages, while the captain and his men were doubtlessly looking for me with the intent of accusing me of a murder than I only accessorially committed. Things couldn't get worse.

That's when the hand grasped my shoulder.

I spun around and screamed like a girlscout having inadvertently stepped in the locker-room of a gerontologic sumo wrestling club. High on adrenaline, I fisted my bleeding hand forward. A most regrettable reflex, my brain permitted itself to comment as it delivered the backlash of teeth-grinding pain my much abused hand's nerves dismally reported. But the meaty grunt that followed the impact, with the sound of a body stumbling backward told me that this time I not only received, but gave.

This grunt, this voice. I knew it.

Joe Sweet!

Damning Joe's eyes for giving me such a

start I gingerly removed his sticky fingers from my by now equally sticky shirt while sending a silent thank-you note to St. Andrew Arellino for patronage against sudden death and strokes. Joe for his part was telling me roundly what the caterpillar could do with my as yet non-existent progeny. Which reminded me that I had another bone to pick with him altogether.

"You been issuing any liquorice rods to glacier-eyed redheads lately?" I growled.

I could feel Joe's silent chuckle beside me. "Had a nice day didya? Whaddaya think I'm in here for, brother?" Then his voice turned belligerent. "And what business you have wandering around garbage dumps, sluggin' innocent folk, I'll be damned if I know."

"Which way out?" I demanded, thus recalled to my surroundings.

He muttered something under his breath moving away from me. I deemed it prudent to follow. I could hear him pull the door open, which he had apparently left slightly ajar, but the basement beyond was as dark as a pimp's heart and I almost fell flat on my face coming through. There was another familiar grunt as Joe ran into some inconvenient piece of the wall, but dim yellow light shone, or rather coated every surface, when he found the switch. I picked myself up counting bones and ineffectually made as if to clean the worst of the debris off my clothes.

I was in the middle of trying to process some evidence Joe had helpfully peeled from my right shoulder when the basement door flew open and Haddock strode in purposefully giving me the old baleful eye.

"Hey there, Fish? What's rolling?" I

purred. Cool, but not all that diplomatic. He hadn't reacted too well to the name-calling on previous occasions.

Haddock's never been a man of many words. He was one of those old school police officers that believed in the power of grunts, one-liners and very big guns. Something I could respect in a man, and fear in a mother-in-law.

Faithful to himself, Haddock snorted, growled and produced other sounds conveying the same message of discontentment. The pulsing veins of his eyes were of a particularly angry red, and the sour reek of stale coffee was heavy on his breath. As he was still a good three meters away from me, I gathered those observations to be bad news from me.

Indeed, the captain zeroed on me like a fly on the bloated carcass of a toad dead of indigestion. I felt the sensation of cold steel on my wrist, heard the sharp clickety of metal closing on metal. I was handcuffed. Loudly, I proclaimed my indignation.

"Shut you trap, Gear. I arrest you for the murder of whoever the bloody remains we are scrapping from the pavement belong to." He looked at me like a Frenchman would eye a plate of haggis. "Effin' private eye... Think yourself above the law..."

I was about to hit him with a pithy reply, but Joe, and the shovel he was holding, beat me to it. Haddock might be tough as a nail, but even nails, when hit on the head, go down. And that's what he did.

"Cops," mumbled Joe, "I dunna a-like them..."

I voiced my agreement that one could never be too wary of policemen in general, and of

Haddock in particular, and pointed out to Joe that the latter was still moving a little bit. A well-placed second helping of shovel took care of sedating the captain. Quickly, for I knew Haddock's men could burst in at any time, I frisked him and found the handcuff's keys. Free once more, I pondered upon my situation. Like my clothes, it was grim and rather foul-smelling.

An idea struck me.

"Joe, close that door. And come here help me undress the Fish..."

Mercifully the man was wearing suspenders, otherwise I would have been too busy holding up his pants to sneak out of the building through one of the back windows, Joe hard on my heels. I didn't suppress a wicked grin as I imagined Haddock trying to struggle into my trousers. It would take him a little time before he was back on my trail.

Enough, hopefully, for me to temporarily vacate center stage and hunt around for the answer to a riddle that hadn't quite been posed yet. I had better ask myself some questions like: Who had the dame been? What brought her to my office? Of what significance was the cheese wrapper? And, above all: Why had the fuzz been there faster than a streak of lightning?

My conscious mind flinched away from that last one. You don't ask questions like that without being prepared for the sort of rumble that takes the whole district by its heels and shakes it thoroughly until you yourself are buried under the rubble. I wasn't too keen on taking the part of casualty in this play. Time to take out a little insurance.

It was with an odd mixture of emotions that I climbed the steps of the little brownstone's porch. I had left Joe to the good attentions of a pub, a few blocks before. While it was dubious that he would encounter any problem with the law – the Fish's attention had been so intensively focused on my person back in the basement of my building that I was pretty certain that he hadn't even realized we weren't alone before the shovelful interjection – he had insisted on following me.

He had mentioned something along the lines of feeling bad for having been instrumental in my attempted murder, however failed it turned out to be. Typical. I had been in the milieu for a long, long time, and I had learned to understand the like of him. Those denizens of the underworld, those dealers of death and destruction, they were all big softies, inside. Knowing that not one but two of his creations have been used in belligerent ways against a neighbor affected him more than he would ever admit to anyone, beginning with himself.

So, out of respect for the man, I accompanied him to the Stuttering Spinster, a pub we knew to be off-limit for the forces of law and public health. There, we calmed our apprehensions and fears in a true male way. Namely, we drank a lot of beer and discussed at length of how likely the Dolphins would make it to the SuperBowl next year.

Seven pitchers of beer and more than four hours of ferocious argumentation later, Joe finally came to accept how things turned out to be. Along the way, and somewhat helped by this emotional lubricant that alcohol is, he came to realize how much similar we were.

Soul brothers, meant since the dawn of time to meet in a garbage chute. I tried to gently tell him how honored I was, but how unlikely his affirmations were, but he wouldn't hear any of it and insisted to go to the Lonesome Crab, another pub of the sector, to celebrate the joyful discovery.

In normal circumstances, I would have politely refused. But what if he was right? What if we were indeed spiritually linked in some deep, mysterious ways? What if he was truly the sibling the tragic accident that my father had with the pneumatic stapler denied me? Could I really find in my heart to be so cold as to refuse to raise one, only one, more glass to our mutual health? Could I really be so monstrous?

So off to the Lonesome Crab we went. There, with the help of a low double-digit count of pitchers, we came to realize how different our appreciations of the charms of the females of the human species were. But it was all right. To each his color and taste, and of the magazines we own we should not discuss. And to prove that we could have divergent opinions and that was okay, from the Lonesome Crab we moved to the Jiggling Marshmallow, a strip joint not far from there.

After the Jiggling Marshmallow, the details get fuzzy. Only thing that is sure, is that we ended up at the Hallowed Harridan, the pub at which I had finally bode farewell to the man that had become more than a man for me, and a little less than a blessing for my liver, in the past few hours.

I couldn't exactly go back to my apartment, as I was sure some of Fish's friends would be there, ready to welcome me in a

most law-enforced way. And here I was, battered, smelling of garbages, dressed in clothes six sizes too big, climbing steps that were paved not in stones but in bittersweet memories. Joe had me waylaid a little bit, but I was now back on (slightly woobling) track, at the very doorstep of one of the only persons on this dirt-covered orb that could help me get out of this mess relatively unscattered.

For in times of need, to who could I turn, if not my ex-wife?

I took a deep breath, and rung the doorbell. As I stood there, in the cold air of the small hours of the morning, I hoped she wouldn't mind too much.

From inside, I heard heavy footsteps climbing down the stairs leading to the first floor. The light above the door came to life, tracing a heavy, broad-shouldered silhouette against the door's stained-glass window. Horrid suspicion arose in my breast as the door creaked open, stopped a few inches later by a heavy chain lock. A meaty hand covered with thick, coarse hair came to rest against the door. Cold sweat began to run down my back. I knew this hand. Quite well. This hand, and also the bead-eyed stare of a dead bulldog that was peering at me from behind it.

Why, in the name of everything that require batteries to function, did my ex-mother-in-law had to choose this day to pay a visit to her daughter?

"You?" she snorted.

What does one answer to a question like that? I kept my mouth shut.

"What do you want?" A voice like finger-nails on a blackboard.

A shower? Clothes? Cup of coffee? "Could

I talk to Beth, please?" Please? I must be completely out of my mind. Or drunker than I'd thought.

"She ain't in." Make that iron nails on a blackboard.

"Who is it, Mom?"

"And anyway, she ain't talking to you." On third thought - make it steel bolts.

I inserted my foot in the crack between door and frame. "Beth!?" I hollered.

Pressure was exerted on my poor extremity - rising pressure, the kind a glacier exerts on the ground it moves over. I winced but held my ground. The booze might dull my battle-instincts, but it sure did its bit towards painrelief as well.

"Leo?" Bells and angels this time. "Leo, is that you? 'scuse me, Mom. Mom!"

The glacier withdrew, muttering imprecations.

"You need to take your foot out, so I can open the door?"

Do angels ever lie? I decided to take the chance, felt like a widow on welfare, when the door closed, heard some clinking and muffled voices on the other side. Then the door opened again - wide as the gates of heaven, and there she stood.

For what seemed an eternity, I stood there, transfixed.

I was a Bedouin, who after a trek of a thousand miles between unrelenting sun and merciless sand had finally reached the outskirts of an oasis.

I was a sailor, who after having clung for days and nights to a piece of shipwreck not to fall prey to the hungry circle of sharks, was seeing the green line of coast at horizon.

I was a babysitter, having tried everything but breast-feeding to put an end to the steadfast wailing that had been the toddler's leitmotiv for the whole night, hearing the parents's car pulling in the drive-way.

I had been through Hell, and Paradise was before me. Beth would understand. She would help. My misfortune was perhaps not at an end, but it would be suspended for a time, for asylum was but a foot step away from me.

I opened my mouth to tell Beth of my gratitude, of my relief, but what came out instead was most of the liquor and beer that had been used to christen Joe and I's new brotherhood, along with some peanuts and chips that had played the role of confettis in the same ceremony.

Had I been sober, I would have been crushed by shame and guilt. But had I been sober, I wouldn't had been sick in the first place. Had I been high on peyolt, I would have seen in this a proof of a Great Design, and of the Universe's Creator wisdom. But I was merely drunk, and thus eschewed metaphysical considerations, preferring to look befuddled by my sudden gastric outburst as I slowly felt first on my knees, and then on my face.

The last thing I heard, before oblivion mercifully decided to punch my card for the day, was the grunting voice of the panzer in a nightgown.

"Your father used to do that, too."

Next thing I know, I woke up.

Only, words badly convey the process involved. Waking has only two syllables. Had the word being crafted to resemble the actual

motion of going from sleep to consciousness, it would had been made of at least thirty-eight syllables, and would have comprised several spittle-prone phonemes. In my mind, the slumbering soul was a submarine, generally separated from consciousness by hundreds of feet of plankton, schools – nay, whole academies – of jelly-fishes and a thick super-tanker-class oil spilling.

It was when I was reaching sonar distance of the surface that I took in the fact that I was in bed. A clean bed – which precluded the notion that I could have somehow managed to crawl back to my apartment. The bedsheets were crisp, cool, and even with my eyes still glued together I could sense their impeccable whiteness. Over the bedsheet I could feel the soothing weight of a comforter. Around my head, the gossamer touch of a pillow as deep and as soft as memories of one's first love.

I became aware of a warm presence, lying at my side. Through the contact, I was feeling the thumping of a heart, the tidal movements of breathing.

With great care, for I could feeling a headache rumbling at the back of my head like an approaching summer storm, I opened my eyes. And couldn't help but to smile.

"'morning, Love."

Beth. Full name, Bethlany Midas. Her first name was the consequence of the inability of her mother to choose between Elisabeth and Melany as her daughter's name. Her last name, or so I gathered, was the consequence of her mother not being able to resist handsome Greek men in full traditional garb, and her father not being able to resist shaved go-

rillas in a dress.

I remember my first encounter with Beth as if it was yesterday. How could I ever forget? She slammed open the door of my office and all but cried. "I need help to find Love."

It took no more than one single look at her big distraught brown eyes to know that of all things I desired in my life, helping her in her quest was the one I desired the most.

Do I need to say that, thank to me, Love was indeed found? Two months later, Beth and I were tying the knot. A quick turnover, but it was motivated in part by an ardent, reciprocal passion, and mostly by the edict of a mother that wasn't fond of playing chaperone that speculated that I was either to marry her daughter right there and then, or get lost.

The first times, even considering the unlikely biological cause for my loved one, were blissful. But, alas, it is one of the laws of this world that a fruit, however sweet it may be, can't stay ripe forever.

Bethlany was a soft, peaceful creature. Her dreams were made of a cozy home, Friday nights spent playing bridge and picnics on Sunday afternoons. My reality was made of cheap booze, shady characters and incriminating pictures. Our souls were cut out of the same fabric, but it was obvious for anyone with eyes that our worlds were different. And in the long run, irreconcilable.

Neither of us wanted it, but we had to part. Part before we come to resent each other, before our love became tainted by regrets. We came to this decision together, and we agreed it was the sensible and logical thing to do. Later, however, I caught myself wondering more than a few times if, as sensible and log-

ical it might have been, it had been the right thing to do. I never had the heart to answer myself.

So we drifted apart. We still were seeing each other, but not too often as those reunions were too stirring and, in a way, too painful.

But the time was not for melancholy. Returning to the present, I reached out and scratched Love behind the ear. The big St. Bernard, always a sucker for this kind of ministrations, thanked me by a big sloppy tongue-slurp across the face.

I got out of the bed and dressed up. Clothes – not the Fish's but old clothes of mine – were neatly folded on the treasure chest sitting at the foot of the bed.

Taking a deep breath, feeling more nervous that I should have been, I opened the bedroom's door. Coming from the floor below, the bewitching odor of baking muffins and the siren song of frying beacon immediately assaulted my senses. Behind me, the sudden squeaks of springs and sound of four paws hitting the floor told me Love had left the bed. With a resonant whoof, he made clear that standing one more second between him and breakfast was tantamount to a clear confession of a life-long desire to become dog-carpet.

My breast harboring no such desire, so I moved forward.

Beth was alone in the kitchen and a sight that would have moved the nether regions of marble statues.

"Eggs still fried over?" she wanted to know and, I couldn't help it, I put my arms around her and whispered a "Yes, darling" into her

ear before kissing her soundly on the cheek.

Said cheek turned as rosy as a Hawaiian sundown; shyly she freed herself from my grasp. "Please. Leo. Don't make things difficult."

Things already were as difficult as keeping your hands to yourself in a candy store or a ... but you didn't think things like that in front a lady, and, anyway, I didn't want to drag her farther in than I already had.

"I'll just grab my coat and I'm out of here, Beth, honestly. And I can't thank you enough."

She smiled at me in a way that made my knees convey an ardent desire to my brain to quit their job. "The one you had on is not dry yet, but your old Mac is still in the closet upstairs."

My brain was not exactly a well-oiled machine at that point, but one of the cogs moved neatly into place. "Did you clean out the pockets?"

"Of course I did." She was slightly peeved, and I hurried to squeeze in an "Of course" sideways.

Mollified she pointed to the little porcelain dish on the hall table. "It's all in there."

I quickly went over to check. Keys, ballpoint, lighter, gum, piece (why, the hell, was that in my coat pocket? I made an on-the-spot resolution about drinking and gun-carrying). That was it. "What happened to the rest?"

Beth looked at me reprovingly. "I threw the trash out."

I blanched whiter than a Mexican adobe wall at high noon. "Trash? Ok, never mind. Where is it?"

Her eyes grew slightly wary. The look you might throw a beggar in front of the lunatic asylum. "Mom took it out before she left. Why?"

Squishing the word 'evidence' through my teeth I moved towards the backdoor in my holy quest for a cheese wrapper.

I popped out of the house faster than an egg out of a strangled chicken. Outside, I was greeted by a particularly disgraceful chiaroscuro of sounds, a discordant mix of defective hydrolic systems, un-oiled transmission and blaring diesel engine.

Far too often, when I was still living with Beth, had I performed the sacrosanct manly part of house duties to ignore what was the source of this cacophony. With dread playing hopscotch with my guts, I dashed across the backward and around the house.

The second I turned the corner of the house, my eyes darted to where driveway had its inevitable and orthogonal meeting with the street. At the junction of those two asphalt-covered vectors, my ocular scouts locked on the object of my immediate quest – the white trash bag that had been sitting in Beth's kitchen not so long ago. With an acute pang of nostalgia and fondness, I noticed that Beth was still tying her garbage bags with blue ribbons. With diametrically different feelings, I realized that the blue ribbon was hooked on a finger.

It was an ugly finger. A repulsive nest of knuckles and thick, coarse hair. Attached to the the finger was a hand, flat and furry and mottled and dirty as a week-old road-kill. Following that hand was an arm which length and pilosity would have made any ape green

with envy. Past the shoulder, it didn't get better. A lantern jaw the color and width of a brick, bloodshot eyes the size of dried raisins and a belly trying to free itself from the confine of a thoroughly stained undershirt were the most appealing characteristics of the trash man I was looking at.

As a private eye, I prided myself to be a good judge of character. And on this particular case, it took me but one nanosecond of deliberation to come with the verdict: whatever this gorilla perceived to be his goal in life, making me happy wasn't it.

Still, I could have been wrong. Appearances can be deceiving, and this grim-covered gorilla hide could have covered a philanthropist soul. Maybe this heinous sneer wasn't a sign of general sign of contempt toward reality itself, but an unfortunate facial predisposition.

So I raised my arm and waved frantically. "Put this down! This garbage ain't no garbage!" I shouted, rather emphatically.

From the distance, I could see the trash man blink and look in my direction. A whole second passed before his brain processed the words his ears had captured. Once his cognitive abilities had performed this feat, his oily sneer turned into a grimace oozing contempt and foul hilarity. His impossibly long arm moved in a long, lazy arc and the blue ribbon'ed trash bag went flying into the garbage truck. Issuing a short laugh that sounded like the belch of an asthmatic pig, he hopped on the small platform at the back of the truck and slammed his hand twice on its side. The truck, like an ox made of steel and filth, shuddered and slowly began to roll onward.

"Still, I could have been wrong"... Really, I could be such a brain-dead sucker, sometimes. Having left my piece in Beth's kitchen, the option of shooting down the crapulous primate wasn't available to me. Having no other choice, I leaped forward and dashed toward the truck.

Swift as I was, the truck had an head-start and the advantage of an engine which was able to deliver acceleration in addition of thick, cancerous-black trails of smoke. I ran for a hundred meters or so before slowing down. This was useless. Unless any miracles was to survene, there was no way I could catch up with the trashnapping fiend.

The miracle announced itself with a resounding basso bark. Love! Beth had let him out, and he was now running at me, massive paws pounding the pavement and unending tongue flapping in the wind like the red flag of renewed hope. I shouted my happiness to see the big oaf. As he passed by me, I grabbed two handfuls of his deep fur and jumped on his back. Feeling the vindictive spirit of Valkyries possessing me, I locked my legs around my valorous steed and, pointing at the vanishing garbage truck, bellowed: "Get that truck, boy!".