

CLASS: 1 – PROSE

LOT: 1 – SHORT FICTION

OLD DOGS

by Stan Matthews

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## OLD DOGS

Sarah Jacobs sat on the park bench trying to focus on a book of poetry, but today she didn't feel the need to wrest the truth and beauty from the poet's words. It was spring, flowers were blooming, birds were singing, and a pleasant-looking old man was wandering down the sidewalk looking lost.

"Waldo," he called out looking around. "Where are you off to?" No one and nothing responded.

As he wandered closer, Sarah asked, "Is Waldo your dog?"

The old man turned and smiled at her. He was neatly dressed in a casual shirt and vintage cargo pants.

"We almost named him 'Houdini' because of how often he slipped his leash," he said, "But we decided that 'Where's Waldo?' sounded cooler than 'Where's Houdini?'"

His voice was deep and calm, like a man who was at peace with himself. He had good smile lines, etched deeply in his face. Then she realized, with a start, that she was probably close to his age. *Do I look like that?* she wondered.

"What does your wife shout when she's looking for you?" she asked.

His smile broadened and he offered his hand, "My name is Sam Beckett."

"Like the playwright?" she asked. He held onto their handshake for a moment before answering.

"Yes. I am dark, brooding and ambiguous." He released her hand and glanced around again. Still no dog.

“Mind if I sit for a little while? Perhaps Waldo will find me.”

He eased himself down on the bench a chaste arm’s length away from her. Instinctively, she scooted a few millimeters further toward her end of the bench to make sure there was no chance of accidental contact. As she fumbled for something to say, a freckled puppy skittered up the path and froze in front of them for a split second, staring as if it had never seen humans before, then it ran on.

“Waldo?” she asked.

Before Sam could answer a young boy came laughing after the puppy, calling out some nonsensical name.

“I wouldn’t have the energy to chase a puppy these days,” Sam said. “Old dogs are more my speed. They’re grateful just to hang out with you.” He seemed to disappear into a daydream for a moment.

“Seriously, is there really a Waldo?” Sarah asked.

“There was,” he said.

The puppy reappeared, running at a full gallop. It vaulted onto Sam’s lap and stood on its hind legs to lick his face.

“My dad says you shouldn’t let him do that,” the little boy shouted, “he eats poop.”

Sam wrestled the puppy back down on his lap and gave it a quick tummy rub before letting it squirm free and yap off after the boy.

“How is your wife?” Sarah` asked.

“I’ve had two of those. Matilda - if you can believe that - and Jill. Tillie ran off with a real estate developer named Larry. Jill hung around until the lord called her home. That was three months ago. How about you?”

“My one and only husband died last year.” She paused to deal with a cramp in her shoulder, raising her arm and flexing her shoulder. She caught Sam checking her out as she stretched and glanced down in the direction Sam was looking. “They were an anniversary present from my dear departed. I’m having them removed next month.”

Sam looked confused.

“Implants,” she said.

Sam laughed. “Well, it seems like every time I go to the doctor these days he wants to cut out something. But for me it’s all original equipment. I’m beginning to suspect that when my soul finally departs my body, it’ll be because there’s not enough left of it to inhabit.”

“So Waldo’s dead?” Sarah asked.

“He passed a month ago.”

They sat in silence until it became uncomfortable.

Finally, Sarah asked, “If he’s dead, why were you calling him?”

“I still see him sometimes. Out of the corner of my eye, mostly. Jill too.” He stopped for a deep breath and gave Sarah a crooked smile. “Until today I hadn’t been out of the house since Waldo died, except to go to the grocery store. No reason to go out. I was afraid I’d forgotten how to do it.”

She looked at him skeptically.

“But a lot of mornings I still wake up thinking, I need to get up and take Waldo for a walk,” he paused to compose himself. “So, this morning I just did it; and I smelled some flowers and I played with a cute little puppy, and now I’ve flirted with a pretty woman. A tear tried to escape from his left eye, but he stopped it. “There is absolutely no reason why you can’t still love and enjoy a dog simply because it is deceased.”

Sarah dug around in her shopping bag and found a tissue. Sam accepted it graciously and blew his nose.

“So now that we’ve experienced this moment,” she said, I suppose you are going to suggest that we climb aboard a slow boat to Tahiti and spend the rest of our golden years together basking in the sun and drinking piña coladas?”

“I don’t think this is that kind of a movie,” he said.

“You never asked my name,” she said.

“You never asked what Waldo looked like.”

Sarah put her book of poetry back into her shopping bag and stood up.

“I guess I’d better get back home. My grandson will be coming by after school and he’ll expect cookies.”

Sam groaned a little, out of habit, as he stood up to face her. “I think I’ll stroll over to the animal shelter and see if they have any old dogs that need a home.”

She smiled. “If you find one, bring it along next time there’s a sunny day.”

Sam touched his forehead as if he was tipping his hat. “Best of luck with your operation. I suspect you’ll come out of it even more beautiful than ever.”

Sarah watched him dodder off, expecting him to look back. But he just kept walking and looking ahead.

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