

4-15-2017

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Recommended Citation

Venery, Claire (2017) "Give the Dog a Bone," *The Oval*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 33.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol10/iss1/33>

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GIVE THE DOG A BONE

CLAIRE VENERY

The afternoon sun beat down on the gravel and Tony's shadow wavered before him as he walked home. Tall and skinny as he was, his shadow was even thinner and stretched out, dancing before him like a skeletal puppet on strings. The driveway opened to seven acres of land where his house squatted, the white paint as bright as a bone in the sunlight. In the driveway another car was parked next to his family's pickup truck. The big black sedan had a license plate from Texas, not too far a drive from Tony's small hometown in New Mexico.

Tony eyed the car as he walked by. Crickets chirped in the tall grass as he stepped forward to peer through the tinted windows. A black pit bull lunged at the window, barking frantically. Tony staggered backward, his heartbeat pounding in his ears as the dog scratched at the window, foamy slobber gathering at its jowls.

The door of his house opened and a tall, thickset man with a graying black moustache and salt and pepper hair walked out onto the deck.

"Josephine startle you, boy?" asked the stranger.

"The dog?" Tony looked from the pit bull to the man and back again.

"Yeah, the dog."

Tony shrugged in response, though his heartbeat still skittered. His father stepped out behind the man, a beer in his hand. Tony got his wiry frame from his father. Next to the man with the moustache his dad looked small and washed out.

"Tony, meet Mr. Jack Corrigan, my new business associate. Jack, my son Anthony," his father said as he brought the can to his

lips.

“Pleased to meet you,” Corrigan said, lumbering down the steps.

Tony shook the stranger’s hand, self conscious that his own palms were slick with sweat.

A loud bang from around the side of the house followed by a string of curse words brought everyone’s attention to Tony’s older brother. As skinny as Tony and his father were, Murphy was even lankier, with sharp cheekbones and eyes that sank deep into his skull. His black hair fell unevenly around his shoulder and he had full, puffy lips that smirked at Tony as he approached, swinging a hammer at his side. Tony flinched away.

“All set then?” Corrigan asked.

“You want to have a look?” Murphy said.

“Yes. You coming, Martin?” Corrigan looked back at Tony’s dad, who nodded slowly and took another long sip, his Adam’s apple bobbing under the thin skin of his throat. He trailed after Murphy and Corrigan. Tony was about to follow when he heard his mother call from the house.

“Tony—is that you?”

“Coming, Ma!” he said and shifted his backpack, squinting at the trio as they headed up to the barn.

The house was even hotter than it was outside, though several fans were set up in various corners of the rooms. They made a loud humming noise that made Tony feel like his house was an airplane getting ready to take off.

His mom was in the kitchen, her limp blonde hair tied back in a dark green scarf and thick glasses magnifying her brown eyes as she blinked at him.

“Help me with the dishes.”

“Ah, come on Ma, I just got done with school,” he protested.

“I need to talk with you about something.”

Tony sighed, taking the drying towel from her, and let his backpack slide to the ground.

“Tonight some people are coming over to the house. It has to do with your daddy’s new business partner, but I don’t want you leaving your room under any circumstances, you hear?”

Tony mumbled a yes.

“What was that?”

“Yes ma’am,” Tony said, louder.

She patted his cheek with damp hands and smiled. The action forced the hard lines around her mouth up, more of a grimace than a smile.

“You’re a good son, Tony.”

They both jumped at the sound of the screen door opening and Murphy strutted through the door, flinging himself onto the chair, which gave a dangerous creak as he balanced on two legs. Tony’s mother opened her mouth to chastise him, but when Mr. Corrigan and Tony’s dad came in she pressed her lips into a thin line and turned back to the dishes, jaw clenched.

“It all looks great, the boys will be by in a couple of hours to set up the finishing touches. Spectators arrive at eleven o’ clock sharp. Place your bets and get ready because tonight, boys, there will be blood!” Mr. Corrigan clapped Murphy and Tony’s dad on the shoulder, jostling them a bit. His grin could have shamed the devil.

Mr. Corrigan left and Tony eyed his father cautiously, well aware that he was holding a new drink.

“What did he mean, there will be blood?” Tony asked.

His mom shot him a warning glance and Tony’s dad banged his hand down on a chipped desk. A pile of unopened envelopes spilled onto the ground and his dad kicked them aside, but he didn’t respond.

Murphy’s lips ticked up into a menacing smile and he opened the refrigerator with a yank that caused the cans inside to rattle. He took out his own beer, despite being only sixteen.

Murphy reminded Tony of a wasp that he once had in his room. His big brother’s energy buzzed, warning him if he got too close, it would sting. It hadn’t always been that way. When they were younger, they used to play with old horseshoes and throw them at a stick they’d put in the ground, trying to catch the shoes on the stick. Tony never threw far enough, but Murphy used to run, pick them up, and put them around the makeshift pole, pretending like he had. Then Murphy made friends with what Ma called “the

wrong people.” They stole stuff, like key chains and candy bars, but they were never caught until they broke into a jewelry store. Murphy spent a couple weeks in a juvenile detention center. Tony wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but knew it was worse than detention in school. He also had to do community service, what Murphy called “picking up shit on the side of the road.” After that, Murphy was different. He was distant with everyone and there was a mean light in his eyes that hadn’t been there before.

Murphy purposely bumped into Tony on his way to the living room and before disaster struck, Tony picked up his backpack and went outside. He climbed up the oak tree to a thick branch that had a perfect dip in it for sitting. He hung his backpack on another branch and removed one of his textbooks. In science today they’d done an experiment with a Coca-Cola bottle and Mentos. The soda was full of carbon dioxide and the bubbles stayed suspended in liquid until they opened up the bottle. His teacher called that *nucleation*. Mentos contained tiny pits on the surface and they acted as nucleation sites. As they sink to the bottom, bubbles rise and a geyser of frothy soda is released. Tony opened his textbook, but instead of reading he leaned back against the tree and watched ants scurry across the textured surface.

“Hey, kid, you wanna see something cool?” Murphy asked.

Tony squinted down at his brother below.

“What is it?” he asked, suspicious.

“Come on, let me show you,” Murphy said, shrugging his shoulders in the direction of the barn.

Tony hesitated but Murphy grabbed his right leg that dangled down one side of the tree and pulled him down. The bark scraped uncomfortably into his skin as he fell.

“Get off of me!” Tony wrestled free of Murphy’s grasp, feeling the sting of blood on his calf where it had been scratched by the rough wood. He picked up his textbook, the pages were crinkled and he shook off the dirt.

“Don’t be such a baby, come on.” Murphy said and pushed Tony forward.

He didn’t have his beer can anymore but his breath smelled like alcohol. The sun was low in the sky, and dust kicked up around

their ankles as they trekked uphill to the barn. It'd been empty of animals for a couple years now, but as they entered the building it still smelled like horses, the scent of molasses from the sweet feed and leather from saddles and bridles subtle in the air.

Tony saw that wooden boards had been put up around the corral and his skin prickled uncomfortably. He wondered what exactly Murphy, his father, and Mr. Corrigan were up to.

"This way," Murphy said, striding to the back room where he opened a door and with an impatient wave called Tony over.

"Christ," Tony breathed out softly. In the dim light he could make out five cages with dogs curled inside, panting in the heat. The smell in the room was rancid, with meat gone bad and dog crap that hadn't been cleaned.

"How long have they been here?" Tony asked as he walked further into the room to get a closer look. A brown and white pit bull with a scarred face growled at him and he took a step back.

"Corrigan and some of his friends brought them up a week ago while you were in school. We've been training them." Murphy said, going up to the cage with the pit bull and kicking it with a strange look on his face.

"Training?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, you know, like with bait animals. We got some kittens and rabbits and let them at it, stuff like that. What are you looking so squeamish about? Jesus, kid, stop being such a pussy."

Tony opened and shut his mouth, unsure of what to say. His brother scoffed and bent down to look into one of the cages.

"Dad's not letting me bet in this fight, but if I was I'd bet on this one," he said.

"Fight?" Tony asked, the details beginning to click. "Dog fighting?"

"Slow aren't you?" Murphy grinned. "I can't believe you haven't figured it out already."

"Murphy! Tony!" They both jumped at the sound of their father's voice, and Tony turned toward the door, feeling guilty. His father looked angry. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Just showing Tony the new family business," Murphy said.

"It is not our family business," their dad said with intensity.

Murphy lifted his hands in mock innocence.

“Go inside and get washed up. Your mother’s got dinner just about ready.”

Murphy made a kissing noise to the dogs and strode out. Tony followed, his shoulders tight. When he crossed the threshold his father slammed the door shut and then took him aside.

“Forget what you saw in there, okay son?”

“But—” Tony started.

“Don’t talk back to me,” his dad said. His voice was harsh but his eyes were imploring, begging even.

The prickle on Tony’s skin since he’d entered the barn began to burrow deeper into his body, into his blood stream, making his heart beat faster. His mind raced with the reality of the situation. He felt like one of the Mentos in the Coke bottle, ready to explode.

“Go on, get inside now,” his father said.

Tony swallowed and nodded, walking back to the tree to get his books.

“Don’t forget to wash your hands,” his mother said when he entered the kitchen. Steam rose from the rice in the pan, but even the smell of flour from his mother’s homemade tortillas couldn’t get the memory of the sour smell of the dog cages from Tony’s mind.

They sat at the table and Tony began to eat the beans and rice heaped onto his plate. There was too much inside for him to roll the tortilla up yet.

“Burritos again?” Murphy said, “I hope we can afford something different after the fights get under way.”

“Murphy, I told you, we are not discussing this!” Tony’s father said.

Tony methodically brought forkful’s of beans and rice to his mouth, keeping his gaze fixed downward.

“What is the big deal?” Murphy asked. “It was your idea, wasn’t it?”

“Murphy,” Ma said, her voice was tight. Tony glanced up to see her clutching her fork and knife, staring at his father.

“What? We are just supposed to pretend like everything is normal when it’s not?” Murphy demanded. Tony felt his mother’s gaze turn to him and Murphy’s followed. His older brother gave a

scornful snort.

“Right, let’s protect innocent little Tony. Tony who gets good grades, Tony who is this family’s last hope.” He turned his dark eyes to Tony, who was having trouble swallowing. Suddenly, he wasn’t hungry.

“Hate to break it to you, kid, but everyone’s going to tell you you’re gifted and then you’re going to get older and realize they were lying. You aren’t worth a damn.”

“That’s enough,” his father said, “go to your room, now.”

“My room?” Murphy laughed without humor. “Two more years and I’ll be out of this shit hole of a home and I’ll go farther than that.” Murphy shoved himself away from the table. The door to his bedroom slammed so hard the water in Tony’s water glass rippled. The only sound was the whirring of the fans as Tony set down his fork.

“May I be excused?” he asked.

“No,” his father said.

“Yes,” his mother said at the same time. The two of them stared at each other from across the table and Tony looked back and forth, unsure of what to do.

“Fine.” His father sighed, “Just go.”

Tony looked to his mother and she nodded in affirmation, a small smile on her face.

On the way to his bedroom, Tony paused to look at a picture frame that leaned crookedly on the chipped brown shelf. The glass had long since been broken and never replaced. The picture inside was sepia and scratched, but Tony was fascinated by it all the same. It showed his parents, his mother eighteen, and his father twenty, on their wedding day. They looked happy. His mother held a bouquet of flowers, and a single one was tucked behind his father’s ear where she had put it. His mother looked out from the photograph, not smiling exactly, but her face was soft and sweet. His father was looking at his mother in a way Tony had never seen him do in real life. He set the photo down with a sigh and retreated to the safety of his room.

The rumbling of car engines woke Tony and he lay in bed listening to the sound of voices outside. His mother had told him

to stay inside, no matter what he heard. He kept picturing those dogs curled up in their cages and Corrigan's voice echoing in his head: *there will be blood*. Once the slamming of car doors stopped and the voices faded away, he climbed out of bed, put on his tennis shoes, and removed the screen from his window. The night was warm and a slight breeze tickled his skin, not quite cold enough to raise goose bumps. Tony slid the window half closed and, after making sure the coast was clear, headed towards the barn.

Music blared inside, the walls reverberating with the beat as Tony walked around the back. He slipped through the door and climbed the rungs of the ladder, the metal cold and sharp on his hands. Up in the rafters the smell of cigarette smoke hung in the air. Tony maneuvered his way above the corral where Murphy and his dad had nailed in plywood walls to prevent escape. People surrounded the enclosure, watching a dog being dragged away, bleeding and whining, to the backroom.

A cowbell rang loudly and the sound of snarling dogs rose above the noise of drunken conversation. Tony caught sight of Murphy in the crowd, his face animated and shiny with sweat as he looked at the next pair of dogs being brought out.

The next fight started.

The two dogs were large with thick muscles. Tony recognized one as Josephine, Corrigan's dog, and the other was the white and brown pit bull. As soon as the two were released they lunged toward each other, jaws wide, giving off deep, guttural growls. With each rip, tear, and bite of the skin the crowd raged. Outside the pit, meaty hands clapped, deep voices bellowed, shouts of anger and manic laughter. Tony expected the barn to collapse with all the energy.

The barn didn't fall, but Josephine staggered and the brown and white pit bull didn't hesitate to strike. Tony closed his eyes. He couldn't see the carnage, but he heard it all: the awful yelp of pain and the jeering of the crowd. He didn't know how long the fight lasted, but after that moment everything felt wrong. He twisted and broke strands of straw that lay in heaps beside him as the dogs fought with a vicious determination.

Finally, the cowbell rang again and the brown and white

pit bull was declared the winner. Tony opened his eyes and saw three men jump into the pit, one holding a rod and the other two carrying a muzzle. They wrestled the pit bull to the ground, forced the muzzle on, and dragged the mutt out. Josephine lay at the far end of the corral. Tony watched Corrigan walk over and stare at her for a long moment. She whined and lifted her head, but Corrigan spat on her and then reeled back and kicked her hard in the ribs. Tony winced and gripped the railing hard as Corrigan beat down on Josephine with a terrible rage, breaking his beer bottle on the corral and jamming the broken shards into her flank.

“Hey Corrigan! Don’t be a sore loser, you bastard,” a man laughed and walked over, clapping him on the shoulder.

“What a bitch,” Corrigan said, tossing the fragmented bottle down beside his broken dog. The two stumbled out of the barn.

Tony waited. He counted to one hundred and tried to slow his heartbeat, which thudded loud in his ears. When Tony was sure everyone was gone he scrambled down the ladder and rushed over to the corral. He slowly lifted the latch and went towards Josephine with soft steps. She growled low in her throat and he could see the whites of her eyes as he approached. Her skin trembled. Blood and dirt stained her matted fur. Tony crouched down beside her and reached out a hand. Her head lunged up, teeth snapping, before collapsing back down in the dirt.

Josephine’s breath came in short puffs. An ear trickled blood, some parts coagulating while the deeper wounds on her side seeped into her fur, staining it a dark and muddy red. Tony inched closer, talking in low, soothing tones until he got close enough to touch. He didn’t though, instead letting Josephine get used to his presence.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” he told her. His throat felt tight and he cleared it. His eyes burned and hot tears ran down his cheeks. The dogs puncture wounds oozed with blood.

“Oh, Tony,” his mother said. “I told you to stay in bed.”

Tony looked up to see her standing at the corral entrance in her pajamas, bathrobe hanging off her shoulders, the light reflecting off her glasses so he couldn’t see her eyes.

“Can you help her?” Tony asked. His mother bit her lip as they both looked at Josephine.

Before she could respond there was the sound of gravel crunching beneath feet and the squeak of the barn door as it was wrenched open. Tony’s mother grabbed his arm with surprising strength and dragged him out of the corral, pressing him back behind one of the thick wooden posts. Tony peeked his head around the corner and saw that the person entering the barn was his father. His mother stiffened, her grip on his arm began to cut off circulation. In the dim light his father’s figure looked distorted. He saw him remove a long, thin object from around his shoulder. It took Tony a moment to realize the object was a shotgun.

“Close your eyes, Tony,” his mother whispered.

He didn’t. He left them wide open as the shell left the barrel with a loud crack. Josephine’s head thumped heavily against the ground, instantly dead. It was over.

He watched his father’s shoulders shake with suppressed emotion and then he disappeared from sight as he crouched next to Josephine’s body. Tony’s hands were clammy with cold sweat. He felt queasy when his father reemerged, dragging Josephine’s body behind him. Several breathless moments passed and Tony squeezed his eyes shut. His throat felt dry with dust.

“Come on, Tony,” his mother said, releasing her grip. His arm tingled as blood began to return. “We got to leave before they come back.”

She didn’t have to say who “they” were, for Tony to know that she was referring to Mr. Corrigan and his friends.

The sharp scent of juniper and sagebrush assailed Tony’s nose as they stumbled back to the house, taking the long way around. The moon leered, a cruel half crescent in the dark sky. He felt shaky and unstable, his ears still ringing from the shot of the gun.

“We could’ve brought her to the vet or...or...” Tony trailed off. His mother’s glasses flashed in the moonlight as she looked back at him. She gave a heavy sigh.

“They’d take one look at that dog and want to know how she got that way and we have to keep what happened quiet,” his

mother said. She spoke evenly, but when he glanced at her he could see tears glistening behind her glasses.

“He didn’t have to kill her,” Tony said, although he wasn’t sure of anything anymore. His mother’s mouth twisted into a grim line. She stopped when they were outside the backdoor and turned to face him.

“Your daddy did the only thing he could do, you hear?”

Tony nodded, but he couldn’t meet her eyes.

“Look at me,” she said.

With effort, he dragged his gaze to her face that was full of resolve.

“Sometimes, my son, the only mercy we get in this life is death.”