

Hurry Home, Candy

By Meindert DeJong

Chapter One :The Dog

The dog had no name. For a dog to have a name someone must have him and someone must love him, and a dog must have someone. The dog had no one, and no one had the dog. The dog had only the silent empty countryside of the few houses. The dog had only the crumbs and cleaned bones he could pick up at the few houses. The dog had only himself, so the dog had nothing, and he was afraid.

He was a scared little whip-tailed cur. He was a stray, and he seemed to have been born a stray. He clung to a small area of countryside just a few miles outside a town. In a furtive, hidden, almost wild-animal way he had made it his own. Here the houses were few, and where houses are few, people are few, and he was afraid. He was afraid of people.

But even though the people were few, the dog kept himself to the back fields, the woodlots, the fencerows and hedgerows, the shadows. The woodlots were shadowy and dark -- hiding places, lurking places where the dog could live unseen. The fencerows and hedgerows were weedy and thorny and deep -- secret traveling avenues by which the dog could move about unnoticed and unseen by the people and the other dogs of the countryside.

Hunger drove the dog to the few scattered houses of the people, but only at night. At night -- well after midnight -- when all light and life were gone from the houses, he made his rounds. He knew every house.

He knew the houses where the watchdogs lived, and he knew the houses where there were no dogs. He knew the houses where at night the dogs were kept locked up to bark uselessly at him when he made his stealthy darkness rounds. He knew the dogs of that whole countryside, but saw to it that they knew him only as a scent and a stealthy movement roundabout their houses in the night. But much more important to the all-important knowledge of his nightly meager sources of food, the little dog knew the houses where the women shook out the tablecloths outdoors. He knew at which houses the women set out too much food for the early-roosting chickens. He scoured up the crumbs; he finished off the picked over chicken food; he dug up the buried bones of the dogs so that he might live another night.

Hunger haunted the dog. It sat like an agony back of his eyes. Hunger ached out of his ladder-rack ribs, those lean ribs that threatened to break through the stretched, shivering skin. Always the dog shivered. When at rest he shivered. Not from cold necessarily, but from hunger, from fear, from loneliness, and from lovelessness -- mostly, perhaps, from lovelessness, for the dog had nothing but himself.

Sometimes the haunting hunger drove the little dog out of his woodlot hiding places by day. But only when hunger became bigger than fear. Only on days when he had not been able to find a dead rabbit or crow, or hadn't been able to catch a quick, scurrying field mouse. On such days he would emerge from his shadowy woodlots. By secret avenues of hedgerow and fencerow he would whip himself across the furtive fields to still another woodlot. In the hope of finding something dead there, or of catching a mouse there. In that hope.

And sometimes on those furtive trips from woodlot to woodlot he was seen. A woman looking out of a window might see a distant flash of something brown and white, but it would be little more than a streak and a shadow going into the shadows. Sometimes a man working in a field would catch a movement from the corner of his eye, but the flash and the shadow would be gone even as the man jerked his eyes around to search it out. That was all the dog was to anyone in that countryside -- a flash and a shadow gone into the shadows. It wasn't a particular dog that they had seen before; it was just the shadowy movement of what they supposed to be a dog. No one in that countryside really knew the dog existed. No one was sure. Still the dog had lived there for a year.

But now in the last two weeks of his stray year the little dog had added a house on another road to his nightly rounds. A house where two old people lived with a toothless, rheumatic old hound. The hound was too toothless to gnaw his bones, too old and weary with life to bury his bones. But still the old hound obeyed his dog instincts and shoved his bones under an old burlap bag against the wall of a shed where he lay during the day sunning his rheumatic joints. And the little dog knew.

Now in the last week the dying old hound had even become too weary with life to eat the pan of mushy meat and vegetables set out for him every evening. And the little dog knew. Oh, how he knew, for because of the toothless old hound, the little dog had not gone hungry for a week. It was the first time in his year-long stray life. The house of the two old people became his first stop on his nightly rounds of the dark houses of the countryside. And that was how two old people became aware of the little dog's existence. Two old people -- just beginning to suspect that the stray dog existed. It all came about because of the toothless old hound, and a picture window.