

Tiny Guns

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Tiny Guns

by Steven Earnshaw

The dogs were homeless dogs and not liked and the parish meeting agenda was dominated by the problem of anarchic pariahs. In general the dogs were well-behaved, shitting in obscure forested shadows, communicating in whistles beyond the normal human range and the boy's. When the encrypted man walked through the main street and sat on the green's higher bench, dressed as an outsider with a funny hat, the boy followed by pugs was drawn to him.

"Sit down if you like," and Nathan did just that. The dogs stayed by the boy's feet, mongrel dogs composed of whippet, westie, bull, alsatian, unsure of the alien's attitude. "Are they all yours?" Lime leaves lay about the bench, placed there by cold autumn winds and the boy knew his casual charges would start to fuss the man and dirty his trousers and overcoat and lead to more misery in the village, mutterings and the like.

"My grandmother lets me be with the dogs."

"I have a Greek-sounding name, but Eck will do. Nat, we have to clear up the town. Will you help me kill the dogs?"

"I can teach the dogs. You don't need to kill them. I've got a dog. Applejack's harmless."

"That could work but the other dogs still have to leave."

"I can look after them. You don't have to kill them. It would be like killing."

"It's my job, Nat, to come into your village from the farthest digital recesses and restore order. It's more than symbolic, and we know you are responsible. Dogs of this magnitude are not welcome."

It was getting cold so Nat left the man on the bench, followed by his dogs who waited outside Briar Cottage, and fired up the net, looking for clues. He was only eleven years old, and sometimes the world made no sense. For now at least the dirty dogs slept, twitching the contents of their dreams to each other. The next parish meeting was Tuesday evening. Would Eck be there? He didn't know the membership rules or where the man lived, and his grandmother knew nothing and would die soon intestate. She said she was heir to the Sidwell millions and her death would bring a thousand Sidwells out of hiding, as death always did, as if money were the dark force that bound together everything under *Sidwell*, made each Sidwell node visible when death flashed brightly.

*

In games, characters modelled on the real world exploded or dribbled. He'd dragged the smell of the dogs into the bedroom and everything blurred into losing consciousness, into becoming Kekulé again, the many parodies of monkeys, snakes, tails, circles, and finally an understanding of structure.

"We don't know where these worlds end," Kekulé told himself, "what is deep, dark, webbed. What is a circle? A family is a tree? How many kingdoms can you name? Five? Seven? Those fungi beneath the bench, the smell of dogs, the smell of wetness and wiry hair in this November month. You are responsible for all this."

*

In the morning before school Nat took over the parlour and set to work on the tiny guns that would save the dogs. "They're carved out of mechanical rice," he told his grandmother, "we need lots." This one was magnified and projected onto the wall, and a space-age design rested on the laptop screen.

"Did you do all this?" she asked in her scared rattle.

He nodded and smiled. “It’s all mine. Look, here,” and he gently held her papery hands in his, guided her to the table and to the tiny gun which she pretended to see.

“You’re very clever Nat. All the Sidwells are clever, or insane. I’ve put your cereal out in the kitchen. Please eat it. Jean said you were talking to a strange man on the green.”

“Eck.”

“That’s not a proper name.”

“It’s short for Greek.”

“What did he say?” She gave up looking at nothing on the table, and at the gun on the screen and the wall. What was Nat up to?

“Can I go to the meeting on Tuesday with you, Grandma?”

“We’ll see.”

“Who’s going to look after me when you’re gone?” and he unsentimentally went through to the old kitchen and ate his breakfast before walking over the muddy fields to the big school.

*

All the students in the classes he took were two and three years older, and they couldn’t understand the way his mind worked in Ethics. It wasn’t helped by a teacher who insisted that one of the explanations was a vengeful god. Today they discussed the use of technology to kill remotely, guns, bombs, drones, chemicals and germs, Manchurian candidates (Lia thought not). When Nat said he’d brought a gun into the school the class was tense up until the point he said it was a grain of mechanical rice. They were impressed when he showed them the level of detail on the class visualizer, and they recognized the skill it must have taken, the many hours to hone and execute that skill.

“This would save the world,” he said, “it’s a gesture. Imagine firing it at a dog you don’t like—it won’t hurt it, but at least you’ve made the effort, and all those who want the dog killed and the dogs as well will be happy.” He did his

weird high-pitched asthmatic giggle. “The dog won’t even know it’s been shot, but we know we’ve tried to do something about it.”

Lia did say, “I get it!” and the teacher Mrs. Morris did say it was unethical. “Everybody who dies... It’s God’s wish... He stores all our tears in a bottle for the end of the world.”

In the computer lab Lia animated the dogs being shot by a tiny gun with a girl using her tiny right hand fashioned from a single grain of white rice. The tiny bullets took the paths of cartoon parabolas before sinking into the fur. The dog laughed and the girl laughed with the chiaroscuro crowd, Lia and Nat too. It was a jolly affair until break time. Nat always stayed in the lab to experiment with an encrypted underlay, something nobody had attempted or thought worthwhile, when Jamie came in, clever and mean, logged onto the world from the other side of the room. “Lia, Nat, I’ve got something for you kids.”

“We’re busy.”

“Come here,” and they had to obey him, worked their way through the banks of idle computers to the clever, mean boy. “Look!” It was a man having his head cut off. “Look!” Lia tried to smash the computer and smash Jamie and Nathan ran out shouting incoherently as if somebody were trying to cut off his head. When one of the teachers caught him she held Nathan close and tight but couldn’t stop the shaking and the tears, for all he could see was the man’s head and the big knife closing in once more on the deep, dark-red crevasse in the human neck, God watching and collecting tears, putting them in a bottle that Nat sensed was overflowing.

*

It was the middle of the night and the dogs wouldn’t let the grandmother alone, barking and whining, deeply unhappy with the world. When she went out the back door of the cottage in her nightgown there was her grandson laid out in the pretty garden, still shivering through the sedatives, the mutts gathered to keep him warm with their bodies under a bright moon. They let

her approach the boy and let her minister psychologically to him in their care, he was one of them now. Eck too came, letting himself through the gate in the hedgerow to stroke the boy's hair. Still the boy shivered in the new world, barely alive to anything around him. Some of the dogs started to growl at Eck, having only just realized.

*

In that realm where they encourage our development they miss the point that effluence will kill them. It's no good the worry around the release of million-year-old compacted organic matter. They say we're always angry angry angry. We are! We will always be angry at everyone who is wrong. Our mothers are wrong. Why does our father have children? He does not want us. Who cares? We get over it. They kill a man and we bark at the screen. We cannot get over it. Our effluence will kill. We will nickname the Parish Council the Pariah Council and take it over with our witty political skills. In this realm under the radar we are effective at undermining structurally inept socioeconomic systems and will bark and whine and whimper and snarl incommunicado. We are a natural language system that does not submit to codification or original algorithms and are born into encryption under the eyes of the foolish. Those who are tame, cozy, function as Persian rugs in their domestic setting. Nat's tiny guns will buy us time in the eyes of the world, doing something that is impressive and nothing, flim and flam, while we band of growlers encrypted will pass through the solid walls of datacentres, through the man-traps that catch only men, through the heat that requires global ice to keep it checked. And pets hate hoovers and feet. We have made dogroads into Nether Pawley thanks to that meanmutt Jamie's communications, and we eat all the bastard food we bastard can and shit all we can. Treat a dog like a dog, go on, they treat us like dogs. Do we think? Do we argue? They talk to us all the time, don't they, without knowing it. Only a word here or there works, *down leave here*

they think, they argue the rest is gibberish to us, their sense makes no sense. Yes, we will attend the meeting and thank them for not asking, shall we?

“Where is it again?”

“The village hall.”

*

Nat’s cult of like-minded people inflated his sense of agency so that the tiny guns could solve all their personal and ideological problems. Some people out there replicated the guns and under the cloak of electronic darkness the scheme hatched for multiple rescue attacks on dogs. Eck scratched on the door, dogs mocked attacks on him, and the grandmother came to shoo them away. He wouldn’t enter and Nat came to the scratched door, saw Eck’s long fingernails with dirt, blood and fur and looked up at Eck, looked at his hands, the scratches on the door forming a pattern of warning and across the way on the other doors in the street more markings. Nat looked at the dogs cowed by Eck’s presence, desperate, hungrier-looking than ever, meaner than ever. Had Eck altered their docile natures, wondered Nat? It was true that only tiny guns could save them now.

The others followed Grur. She stood sentinel to the future, eyed man and boy, the further generation back behind them eyed the village and down below at the end of the street eyed Nether Pawley’s lights twinkling its inane message. Grur knew something Nat didn’t. Under Eck’s strong, elongated nails was the history of battles with other animals that shat and fucked and ate and killed, animals that generated animals to shit and kill and fuck, that showed each new animal how to live and to live on using the same potentials, and now the cute plan, the soft power of animal warmth, big eyes, the succour for loneliness in complex affective environments, the lure of the preyer in a world that now did homage to the nature that would reave from its own. Grur pushed her nose into the back of Eck’s leg (do you like me now?), turned to her pack, pushed again at his trousers, pushed the button in Eck that made his left

hand clench as far as the nails would allow, unclenching to stroke Grur's stupid head. There would be a tune to play and Nat could not arrest the growth of his survival.

*

Tuesday. Upper Pawley Village Hall.

Extraordinary Open Meeting to discuss 'The Problem of the Dogs'

Minutes (requested verbatim transcript)

Present: Rei Sato (Chair); Sarah Johnson (Treasurer); Martin Johnson (Secretary); Asha Dudley-Carter; Charles Farley; Lia Wilson and Nathan Cartwright; Eck Parthan; Grur

Apologies: Grandma Cartwright

Extraordinary Agenda Item: The Problem of the Dogs

RS: (*Redacted opening comments*) We are here to discuss the issue of the unwanted dogs.

SJ: Feral I call them.

EP: They are generated by uncontrolled programs, enculturated coding that makes no sense except to me and others I serve. Your village doesn't understand what it's up against. The dogs are not the problem. They are mere encryptions masking the real problem.

G: Grur

LW/NC: We have tickled their bellies, made friends.

SJ: They are unwanted dogs eating the planet. We have limited resources so they must die. Nobody wants them to die, literally, but we have to accept that they must die, literally, or be sent to Lower Pawley, whichever is the lesser of two evils (*laughter*).

MJ: Who is their leader? Couldn't they disappear into the quicksand on their way out of our village? That would be acceptable to all of us here, to the majority at any rate.

EP: Physical disappearance is not enough. I don't wish to blind with science.

G: Brrrrwaha.

LW/NC: They can be our friends. We're the future, you keep telling us. Let us be the future, ours, yours, theirs.

A D-C: This is the problem of the cats again. Does anybody remember?

EP: This is not the problem of any cats, whatever that was. Trust me, this is beyond human ken. Trust me, I know. You are all connected, complicit every time you enter the ether, every time you send and receive you contribute to your downfall. These dogs are your downfall, what you will reap unless they are destroyed.

G: Ekjjhhha.

CF: Who are we to say what is 'weed' and what 'flower,' what is 'dingo' and what 'dog'?

MJ: "A dingo ate my dog" (*village laughter*).

RS: Could we return to the matter in hand? I understand that Nat and Lia have submitted a plan involving microscopic guns. It is time to hear that.

LW/NC: These are real tiny guns with real tiny bullets. We shoot the dogs in order to do something. The dogs realize that we do not really want to hurt them, but at least we're doing something real to make a change. A gesture like this can change the world. Look (*they stroke the belly of the dog; shoot it with a tiny gun; friendly dog noises; a chorus of disapproval from the floor*). They domesticate themselves. Everybody is happy.

EP: They will still destroy us. They cannot live with us without destroying us. Look, do I have to say 'alien'? We're all thinking it.

MJ: I certainly am (*awkward laughter from the floor*).

G: Ee ee ee ee.

EP: I can rid this village of the unwanted. *Tiny gun*—come on. Kids or not, that's not going to make any difference. These dogs are from the depths of hell, canine devils intent on the death of our species. You can't see it because you take the virtual for the real, but it's in their design. Don't make me out to be the bad guy, I have our best interests at heart. They communicate *sub rosa*, a neuro-electronic nano language that will see us eat ourselves when we click and drag and turn ourselves into global machines talking to each other beneath any manner of sensibility that is articulable.

LW/NC: Don't listen to him. Nobody understands what he says. We trusted him. None of those words make sense, he doesn't understand the electronic dogs of hell like we do. Look (*tickle G*). And we should be friends with Lower Pawley and all the other places. We are not the idealists, we are the realists. Let's bring them in from the valley as well, the more the merrier. Here's a box of tiny guns. There's nothing magic about what we're saying. Please? Please? Don't kill the wild dogs. Don't let them die in the quicksand. We don't want to live in that world.

(Meeting brought to a sudden end. All hands, all paws, blood-red.)