

Under the Radar
Darrell Petska

Sheriff Raines sat half-asleep, ramrod straight, behind the wheel in a shaded pullout just off Highway 11. He'd been daydreaming about his sometimes girlfriend, the fast-and-furious Marianne Coe, when a call from his dispatcher roused him.

Kids playing by an irrigation canal near North Fork had discovered a dead dog lodged in a canal turnout. A parent managed to pull out the body then called for Sheriff Raines.

Cattle loose on the road, bullet holes in farmers' mailboxes, a dead dog floating in a canal—two years into the job, and the worst he'd had to handle was the mayor's shoplifting wife.

When he arrived, he saw the parent and four enthralled boys waiting by the sodden corpse—no mistaking the large black dog with one white paw: it was Joe—or "Joegoddammit"—Guy Tate's Rottweiler. How the hell could this have come about? The canal snaking through the valley ran roadside for a stretch past Tate's farmstead. Did the mutt simply fall in? But dogs swim. Joe should have been able to climb clear.

Sheriff Raines thanked his audience for their good deed, saw no wounds through the muddied hair, and heaved the dead animal onto a sheet of plastic in his trunk. He headed for Guy Tate's farm.

Tate was away, his pickup gone and all the window shades in his house drawn. On the porch, an opened five-gallon pail of dog food sat alongside a metal trough of water: Joe's

provisions. A flyer juttet between the screen and front door: Jehovah's. It had to be recent. If Joe had been around, they wouldn't have made it to the porch.

The unsavory corpse needed burying. Raines figured Tate, once a cop himself, would appreciate the consideration. Knowing his way around the farmstead, the sheriff went to the tool shed for a shovel. How many times had he been out to speak with the farmer about Joe's harassment of salespeople, neighbors, even the mail carrier? The dog disliked everyone except his owner, and inexplicably Raines, scarcely lifting an ear each time the sheriff had pulled into the yard.

Behind the old house, a garden had gone to weeds. That's where Raines set aside his flat-brimmed hat, stripped to his waist and started digging. A hot forty-five minutes went by before he'd finished, his muscled torso shiny with sweat. A big dog like Joe required a big hole. After cooling down and putting away the shovel, he wrote a note and lodged it next to the flyer. He knew he'd be back as soon as Tate returned.

Wearing camo head to foot, Tate reached the cruiser even before the sheriff had fully stopped. Raines expected their conversation to be loud.

"My old dog—I can't believe it."

Raines did a double-take, hearing wistful words from the usually gruff man.

"I raised him from a pup, goddammit!"

That was more like it. "Yeah, some kids down the line found him stuck in a canal turnout. Kind of odd."

"No shit! How'd the poor fellow look?"

Raines thought a minute. "Well, he looked dead, Guy. Kinda muddy. But dead."

"I know damned well who did it!"

The sheriff gave Tate a stern look. "Now, slow down! How do you know he didn't chase something atop the canal and just fail to hit the brakes in time? That slippery bank might have proved too much for a dog his age."

"Hell, he was still tough as nails. No, there's malice involved. A coward purposely did this. And you know who?"

"No, Guy, why don't you tell me." Raines could have said the dog had long been living on borrowed time. Twice Joe had bitten salesmen, and both times Raines supported the farmer's court appeal to keep the dog. Joe also chased cars.

Tate nodded smugly, stroking his stubbled face. "Don Coe, that's who!"

"Oh, come on, Guy, you shouldn't make accusations like that. There's no proof!"

"He hated Joe, you know that."

"Guy, everyone hated Joe. Nearly. And you know that!" It didn't surprise Raines that Tate suspected Don Coe. Their farms bordered. Coe's fences weren't great. His cows tended to get out, and when they did, Joe chased them into a frenzy.

"He drives past here on his way to town like a bat out of hell. I can just see him, steering his pickup right into my poor pup."

"Don intentionally hits your dog and then casually chucks him into the canal?"

"Damn straight! He could tell I wasn't here. Too chicken to fess up, so he covers his ass!"

Raines doubted that. Don Coe would have left the dog lying there for Tate to find, knowing how that would hurt. "Did you have a look around?"

"Hell no. I called you right away. I haven't even unpacked my bag."

Tate took one side of the road, Raines the other, checking the gravel for blood, hair, maybe a piece of broken signal light. Then they walked the road ditches, but the county had just mowed. The short grass revealed nothing. Finally they climbed up from the road ditch onto the

verge of the canal. On the baked clay they spotted dried blood darkening a clump of foxtail grass.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about!" Don Coe—Marianne's father—had been loading fence posts into his pickup when Raines entered Coe's farmyard. "Though the dog deserved what he got."

"Don't let Guy hear you say that, or you'll have a fight on your hands."

"You know it's true. But if it was anyone, I'd go knocking at Bill Curry's door."

"Bill Curry, huh?" Raines had never cared for Don Coe, who complained endlessly to everyone about his neighbors. Angular in appearance and personality, Coe grated on a person like a shelled corn cob.

"Yup. Bill. You knew that damned dog bit him, didn't you? For some reason Bill consented to help Guy wean calves a couple years back. Apparently, he was just minding his own business, when Joe comes along and takes a piece out of his ankle. A lot of yowling followed, so I was told!"

"Bill, or the dog?"

The farmer looked at Raines like he was stupid. "Well, Bill, I suspect, though you can be sure he wanted to take a stick at Guy's dog. He made Guy pay the doctor bills!"

Raines couldn't imagine how he'd ever tolerate this man as a father-in-law. For that matter, he supposed Marianne's hot-headedness and fast ways would eventually wear a man down. But she was surely something fine to dally with!

Marianne didn't get her looks from her father, whose weathered face stewed beneath a Royals cap concealing his bald dome. The farmer avoided looking up at the taller Raines, always speaking to the sheriff's shoulders. "You should set up a speed trap out here. Bill zips by my place like he's late to his own funeral."

"I'm not one for hiding behind a radar gun. Only a cop with a low estimation of people does that."

"Well, never too late to start. Maybe your estimation of people runs too high."

Raines didn't need anyone telling him how to do his job. He gave Coe a curt nod and returned to the cruiser, his mind veering from his thankless task to the luscious Marianne, who permeated his life like periodic heat waves.

Leaving Coe's farmyard, Raines saw the mail carrier, Nat Bronner, advancing in a cloud of dust from Bill Curry's direction. Curry was next on Raines' list. The sheriff exchanged a finger wave with Bronner as they met. In the cruiser's rearview mirror, the mail carrier came to a stop at Coe's mailbox, then sped on toward Tate's.

Rapping his knuckles against an ankle cast, Bill Curry insisted he couldn't have done it. One of his cows had bowled him over, smashing his foot. He'd scarcely been in his car the past three weeks. Peering over his glasses, however, he suggested Raines should be talking to Don Coe: that man had real motive. Raines summarily thanked Curry for his input and left, disgusted by the unneighborliness of all three men.

The sheriff hoped to put the annoying matter to rest as quickly as possible. He'd speak to one more person, the mail carrier. Bronner drove that route six days a week. Maybe he knew something.

They arranged to meet on Sunday, almost two weeks after the dispatcher's call. Sheriff Raines hustled into the Donuts 'n Stuff because he was twenty minutes late.

"Really sorry, Nat. Mary Crane slammed into a deer by the ethanol plant early this morning. Totaled her car. The deer didn't fare so well, either."

"Poor Mary! Didn't mind the wait. Had a roll and coffee." He'd also been working on the Sunday paper's crossword puzzle.

Raines hadn't shaved yet. His tan shirt was wrinkled. He signaled the waitress for coffee.

"I appreciate your meeting me on your day off, Nat. It's this business about Guy Tate's dog. The whole town is buzzing about a dog killer. Ridiculous!"

The sheriff paused, watching Bronner's reaction. The mail carrier was a quiet man bordering on meek, yet handsome in a soft sort of way.

"We both know farm dogs come and go. Only reason I've bothered with Guy's is to make sure no malicious activity was involved. You don't find dogs dead in the canal very often."

The sheriff paused, accepting coffee from the waitress. "That week Guy's dog got killed, Guy was back in Omaha. I suppose he placed a hold on his mail?"

"That was his custom, yes."

"Though in that case you wouldn't have slowed for his box, might you have seen anything out of the ordinary along that road?"

"Nothing unusual. A road crew maybe the first part of the week. That's about all."

Though the cramped cafe was uncomfortably hot, the sheriff noticed sweat rimming Bronner's hairline. Raines yawned and gulped coffee. "Well, Guy thinks it was Don Coe. Don more or less accused Bill Curry, who accused Don— Hell, I'm sick of the whole affair. Over a mean dog any number of people might have wanted dead." He gazed at Bronner. "You've probably felt the same yourself."

The mail carrier swallowed some coffee. "He was the most frightening dog I've ever come across, but I can't say I wished him any harm." He hesitated. "How'd Guy take it?"

"You know Guy. A lot of bluster. His bark is considerably worse than his bite." The sheriff tipped back his cup and stood. "Well, gotta run. I'm glad we could chat. Just wanted to

touch all the bases. You have a good rest of the day." He left a five-dollar bill beside his cup and walked out to his cruiser.

Unless old Joe had been the agent of his own demise, Sheriff Raines' long-shot guess was Bronner, who showed as proof nothing more than a sweaty brow. How the event actually transpired, he'd likely never learn. Curry, Coe, Tate and Bronner—who else drove that short spur of a road? Three sprawling farms, corn or alfalfa fields lining the route, a couple plots of pasture: not a sightseeing paradise. Kids drinking in their cars beneath the moon? Not the road he'd have picked in his wild years.

The incident needed closure, or Guy Tate and Bill Curry would forever hold Don Coe responsible, and the stink of suspicion would continue to hover over the farmers' already strained relationship. If Bronner actually did it, maybe Joe would take revenge in the mail carrier's dreams. Raines decided a small lie would resolve the situation.

The Tuesday following the meeting at the Donuts 'n Stuff, Raines pulled into Guy Tate's farmyard. The farmer, in his usual camo gear, was fueling his tractor. A large black dog stood alert nearby. It growled and approached as Raines left his cruiser.

"Joegoddammit, lay down!"

Raines walked slowly because the rumbling in the dog's throat continued. "What's this, Guy? Son of Joe?"

"Got him through Rottie Rescue. Somebody abandoned him. Smarter than some people I know!"

"But 'Joe' too?"

"Hell, I shout the name even in my dreams. Anything else, I'd have had to retrain myself. He's the one needs training."

"Some of Joe's bad habits?"

"Pretty much. So what's up? Don Coe confess?"

"Yeah, right. Wasn't Don and you know it. He'd have left Joe alongside the road just to spite you." Raines enjoyed their banter, Tate's tough exterior merely the armor he'd worn handling the big-city crimes that finally got to him.

Tate tipped up the bill of his cap. "OK, you got him pegged. So who, then?"

Raines marshaled his story. "You know that river access trail this side of Bill Curry's place? I spotted a bunch of cans and bottles just inside the gate there. Looked like party central. High schoolers, likely." He watched Tate's eyes to see if his story floated.

"Stupid kids, you're saying?"

"Best explanation available if Joe didn't do it to himself. They get drunked up, blow past here late that night. There's Joe at their wheels—bang. They back up, see your dog all stretched out. Nobody's thinking straight. But there's the Grand Canal flowing right beside them, and someone has a bright idea—" Raines could almost see it. Maybe he'd give up law enforcement someday and write crime novels—surely more enjoyable than handling petty crimes and misdemeanors for the next quarter century.

"Their daddies need to kick their asses!"

"I'll tell Bill to lock his gate so late-night partiers can't pull in. And if you like your new dog, maybe you should chain him up when you're not close by." Raines couldn't help tossing that in.

"Hah!" Tate scoffed. "You can go be sheriff somewhere else now. I've got a meadow to cut."

Raines gave the farmer a light salute and headed back to his cruiser, believing he'd restored the shaky status quo among the neighbors.

Only a week after Bronner met Raines at the Donuts 'n Stuff, the mail carrier stood hunched before the sheriff's front door.

"Nat! This is a surprise. Come in, sit down! Something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong—that way. But I was hoping we could talk. I should have called."

"Nah, I was just about to turn on the game. No problem at all. What's on your mind?"

Bronner exhaled deeply. "It's about Guy Tate's dog—"

"Ahh!" the sheriff exclaimed in a tone that stopped Bronner cold. "I guess I know what this is all about. I credit your coming to see me."

Bronner's eyes widened as Raines continued. "We've known each other quite awhile now, and I know you're no criminal. I told Guy the culprits were likely kids partying late and driving like fools past his place. What's done is done—"

"Whoa, wait! So you *were* thinking I killed that dog and threw him in the canal—I didn't!"

"You didn't?" *Dammit to hell*, Raines thought to himself.

"No, but that's the thing: I guess I know who did it. I...just didn't want to say."

The sheriff blew a loud breath and shook his head. "Everyone seems to know who did it except me. So, who are you accusing?"

"You see," said Bronner, "she and I had been going out a little, so I was hesitant..."

"She? Who you been seeing, Nat?"

"It never amounted to anything. She's way too much for me to handle. Don Coe's daughter."

"Marianne? You're kidding! My god!"

"We were drinking at the Town Tap one night. She had too much, you know how she is, and pretty much admitted it. Said she'd been gunning for that dog every time she was out to her old man's place, and now it was done."

"That's it? That's all you got?"

"I asked her straight out what she was saying. She laughed when she said it: 'Oh, I'm a killer all right!' You sure won't see me anywhere near her again!"

The sheriff didn't immediately contact Marianne. Why bother? The dog was dead, regardless, and what did her drunken words mean, anyway? But the sheriff in him kept nagging until finally he settled on their customary means of communicating: a text message: "Something about Guy Tate's dog I should know?"

"You men are so predictable," she replied. "He did his job, and here you are again."

"Who's 'he'? What?"

"What's the diff. Dog's dead. We're alive. Meet soon? xoxoxo"

Raines didn't answer, instead driving down Highway 11 to the shaded pullout where he'd received the call about the dead dog. He got out the radar gun he'd never used before, propped it on his lowered window, and waited.

Darrell Petska worked for many years as communications editor, University of Wisconsin-Madison. His writing has appeared in Red Paint Hill, Right Hand Pointing, Mobius: Journal of Social Change, Plainsongs, and numerous other publications. New work will appear shortly in Chiron Review, Outcast Poetry, and elsewhere. Darrell lives in Middleton, Wisconsin.