

Ralph

by Johnny Worthen

This Story is Dedicated to Ray Bradbury

Round and round the table, in and out of the chairs, down the hall and back. Alone, afraid and mourning.

To the couch, to the chair, to his bed by the fireplace. All was lifeless save the single trapped dog.

He'd sensed it in the air before his people left. An unease. A worry. A certainty of coming calamity. Words he'd not heard before spoken in uneasy tones by his people after a television broadcast he could not understand, though the flashing lights were memorable.

A present or coming calamity but it had seemed to pass.

His people had turned off the machine and scratched his head before falling into their phones for the night. All attention absorbed in that scrolling, that reading that made them gasp and grumble.

He went to each to sooth them, sensing they needed it. Father had tousled his ears and scratched between them like he was after a bug. Mom stroked his back—not too hard, never so

hard that her hands got dirty. The boy however, tried to ignore him, his tablet pulling all his attention. He'd pushed him aside, but, undaunted, the dog had found an angle and landed a slobbery kiss on his cheek, setting off a wrestling match that lasted until a bark brought a shout from father in the den.

And all seemed like normal again after that.

But then they'd left.

How many days had it been since his people were here? How many weeks? Months? The food was gone. He was hungry. He'd made mess where he'd be punished for it, but he yearned for the scolding. The loneliness was unbearable.

To the window he went to look again for the car that would bring his people back. But the street was empty and the shadows showed no signs of lifting, only reminded him that his people fled in the dark.

A silent street. No birds. No cars. Just a plastic bag rolling in the breeze, the "new world tumbleweed," father had called it, floating like a ghost between the yards until it is caught on a rose bush, pierced by a dozen thorns, impaled by the wind.

Then stillness.

And loneliness.

Clouds gather but give up without rain. "Rain" was a word they'd said with some worry that last day. Rain. Water. A problem somehow. A reason?

His water was gone. His bowl upturned next to the empty plate of kibble in the kitchen. He'd drunk from the toilet, but that water too was nearly gone. The lid was down on the other but

he could smell water under it. He'd need to find a way to open it if he were to survive much longer.

Another round through the house. Nuzzle the pillow, smell the boy's hair. Lilac shampoo, sweat and oil that are the scents of love and friendship. He climbs on the bed. Cuddles in the sheets. Remembers the boy longingly, his face already fading in the dog's memory, but his scent refreshing the ideal. It comforts him. He falls asleep to dreams of walkings, of squirrels and treats. He was a good dog.

He wakes after ages of sleep to the sound of another dog. Howls of loneliness from the neighbors' dogs, that yippy little poodle, that St. Bernard. He was not the only one left behind. He joins the chorus of complaint, shares in the cries of isolation, but soon the energy dissipates and the deathly silence of a humanless world returns.

He has to wonder what happened to the world that people made. What a wonder it was. Full of food and shelter. Warmth. Scratches and treats. All was here. What catastrophe must have happened for them to leave it and leave it so suddenly?

And leave him.

It is raining. How long ago was it he looked out this window? It seems like years. The road beyond the fogged window is still vacant, lifeless and barren, but it is wet now, and shiny. In the murk of the late light, it reflects the neighbor's white fence in cold gutter torrents disappearing forever down the drain that took his ball once.

A damp seeps into the house, bringing new smells of ozone and cold. He smells also lightning in the rain and metal and smog from some forgotten city burning, burning, burning under the soft rain.

Sharp hunger stirs in his belly. His dish long empty, he follows a scent into the kitchen. He traces it to the cabinet under the sink. It's not easy, but after long tries and raking claws, he gets his muzzle between the door and frame and whips it open.

In a moment he is tearing into the garbage bucket. He eats all he can, chews what he can't. Hunger drives him to near madness as he finds the remainder of a pork chop, a bit of pasta, a crust of jelly sandwich. The food will keep him alive for a while longer.

He is forsaken, forgotten, left behind. He knows his people are dead, victims of the *apocalypse*, a word he did not know but they'd used often. His only purpose now is to keep their memory alive for as long as he lives. That is all he can do. Remember, and give to them the light of his loyalty, of his love, of his failed protection, so their perished ghosts will be at peace, and he, the good-boy, be true to the end.

Later, so much later, he is weak. He is fading. He feels the end is near, and resigns himself to death in this quiet house, under the patter of the soft rains that come.

Hopeless. Helpless. Forlorn.

He wakes to a sound at the door, keys and words.

A miracle.

"Dammit, Ralph!" comes a familiar voice. "We were gone for like two hours. What'd you do to the kitchen? Ralph!"