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Buster Hill Chased His Dog · Douglas Unger

ONE AFTERNOON, Buster Hill reached a hand out of his front porch hammock and discovered the bulldog pup he had named Buster, after himself, was no longer there. He awoke with a start and found the pup was running across the front lawn. It stopped by the paved road in front of the house and stood on its hind legs. "Goddamnit, Buster!" Buster Hill shouted. The dog was dancing around eagerly, looking south down the street. Buster Hill looked after him through the unmoving shadows of the cottonwoods toward the hot dust of Main. A long blue Pontiac sedan with California license plates and a woman at the wheel slowed in front of Buster's curb. The door swung open a crack and, as the story goes, that bulldog jumped right in.

The blue car sped off down the street. Across the street, Mary Carlson said it wasn't so much the dog barking that made her look up from her iced tea as the sound of Buster Hill lumbering past, grunting like a wounded razorback. The blue car signaled for a left turn onto the Baseline road. It turned again like it would double back along Grove toward Main. Buster Hill broke through Mary Carlson's white picket gate, goring himself as he leaped over the backyard fence. He ran limping through a parking lot behind the house. The car made a right turn onto Main Street toward the highway.

Buster Hill caught up to the car at the intersection. He bounced along beside the fender. He was shouting loudly enough that Deputy Ben Johnson and a few old boys scooted off their stools at The Cove Café. They watched through the new picture window of The Cove as Buster Hill was leaping sideways down the street, bouncing high alongside that car like a man on a springboard. He shouted at an unknown, dark haired woman, "*That's my dog! My goddamned dog! My damned dog!*"

He was stricken. He spun around like a quick whirlwind had seized him in mid-air and then released him; his huge bulk heaved face first dead in the middle of the street.

Deputy Ben Johnson hustled out of The Cove and made sure Buster Hill was dead. That blue car turned north onto the highway. Deputy Johnson ran off to wake Sheriff Meeker out of his afternoon doze at the municipal saloon. Sheriff Meeker stood for a long time over Buster Hill's immense carcass, still red-faced and sweating. Sheriff Meeker looked unsteadily toward the highway, muttering under his breath. He spat, turned, straightened up reasonably. He walked back across the street for the gun he had left on the hatrack at the saloon. He was still strapping the gun on, standing in the double doors of the saloon, when he stopped a minute, belted down a shot and tossed the glass back in to Delores Moss. When he reached the middle of the street, he stopped again. "Delores!" he shouted. "Delores! Fetch me them keys!" Delores Moss threw

his car keys out to him. The Sheriff managed the rest of the distance to his brand new, black and tan Nowell Sheriff's car, the one that had just been delivered the day before. He climbed in, steadied himself, talked on the radio. He had trouble getting the new car in reverse. A small crowd scattered when the car backed nearly a full circle into the street, tires smoking. Sheriff Meeker went wailing off in the wrong direction out of town.

Doc Monohan flat refused to pronounce Buster Hill legally dead. He didn't want any part of what was sure to follow. Sam Carlson would have him wasting his time with autopsy papers, official hearings and testimony. Deputy Johnson found the Doc in his office and told him the news. The Doc peered out his venetian blinds at the crowd gathering near the corpse. He asked Deputy Johnson if he was sure Buster Hill was dead. "Then you go on out there and don't let anybody touch a thing," he said. He ushered Deputy Johnson out of his office. At his desk, he stuffed a pair of socks and a shaving kit into his black bag. Doc Monohan disappeared out the back way, leaving town by the back streets to avoid Sam Carlson.

It didn't take long for the news to spread. A crowd gathered in the street, standing back a good ten feet from the corpse. No one had even so much as turned Buster Hill to a more respectable posture, not even Sam Carlson, the new general manager of the Nowell-Safebuy stockyards, Buster's second in command, his tie askew, sweat streaking his horn rims, his bald head bobbing in that sea of onlookers who heard his shrill, woman's voice raised at them, "*Has anyone please seen what's happened, please? Is anyone here please willing to make a statement?*"

When he found Doc Monohan was no longer in, Sam Carlson sent people running for the volunteer fire department ambulance. The ambulance was gone after a case of snakebite on Rocky Flats. At the fire department, no one could get Sheriff Meeker on the police radio. Sam Carlson ranged through the crowd ever more desperately. "*Did anyone see what happened here? Could someone please make a statement?*" Delores Moss finally thought to phone the Millis Mortuary, the newest member of the Chamber of Commerce since this town had grown sizable enough to attract its own mortuary. Darwin Millis and his son, Andrew, took their own sweet time putting on their best black suits, polishing up their wing-tipped cowboy boots and new maroon Cadillac hearse. It would be the family's first real public appearance, and Darwin hoped Willa Mason from *The Enterprise* would be out there with her polaroid taking newsphotos of the scene.

Willa Mason was too stunned for photographs. Buster Hill, that man who had first brought the turkey slaughtering industry to this town, that man who had built and organized Nowell Turkeys into the huge vertical farm it was, who had put this town on the map within the national system of Safebuy supermarts, raising half a million Safebuy turkeys per year, writing out the

paychecks for the thousand workers who took care of them, that man who had fought her consistently for ten years so as not even to pave the streets of this town in favor of low taxes—that man who had been her main source of front page news had become an obituary. Willa Mason's hands held tightly to her camera as if it were a kind of amulet. The crowd was growing. It was as if a kind of spontaneous generation had seized this town, borne from the shores of a shimmering, white gravel sea where Buster Hill's body lay waiting to be moved. It was a hot summer's day. Several people felt faint under the sun. No one seemed to know what to do but Delores Moss, who was already passing out free cold beers in front of the municipal saloon. The rest of the crowd was milling aimlessly, waiting for something to happen, a constant muttering rising off them like steam. The slaughtering line at the Nowell-Safebuy stopped at four thousand birds. Men in green bloody aprons poured into the streets. At the Tamblin-Hill grain elevator, the booming wind of the grain loaders suddenly died, leaving the same haunted atmosphere as the silence in a twister's wake. The First Bank Of Belle Fourche pulled its shades. The Pacific & Western Railroad blasted its noon whistle intermittently, calling its workers in from the loading docks. A gleaming maroon hearse lumbered down Main Street, that white gravel street Buster Hill had voted not to pave. The town pressed in. It took the strength of both Millis men and four plant workers straining to heave Buster's stiffened body into the hearse. Andrew Millis thought to cover it with a sheet. Men climbed in, cowboy hats huddling around that white tent as the door slammed. The hearse drove off and turned a corner out of sight. People stood then as if not knowing whether to feel mournful or terrified, as if ready for either emotion suddenly to take hold of them. The crowd mixed solemnly in the heat, a small empty space at their center that no one crossed, like a hearthstone around which they still gathered looking shocked, uprooted, as if expecting some final revelation that never came. Delores Moss began calling drinks on the house at the municipal saloon, but it was the heat that finally moved them. The town slowly began dispersing, one by one or in small groups, toward the bar, The Cove Café, their homes, in out of the blast furnace of the afternoon. They left Sam Carlson still calling to them from the street. For eleven years, he had been next in line for promotion. He needed a statement of just what exactly had happened for his superiors.