

DOG DAYS

a short story by ALAN BARSTOW



TRAVELER TAJ TERPENING

Long past midnight Sam parted his mosquito net. He'd been in Namibia for a month, and each night he lay awake, listening to the corrugated-metal roof ping and the cinder-block walls pop as they cooled. He couldn't adjust to his new surroundings: the language, the climate, the rural isolation. Giving up even trying to sleep, he padded barefoot across the concrete floor and stepped onto the cool sand of the homestead yard. The full moon was like an overripe, incandescent fruit, and everything wore its pale-blue glow — the grass-roofed huts where his host brothers and sisters slept; the room adjoining his, where his host father quietly snored; the homestead gate, which was really an old mattress nailed to a wooden frame, the fabric gone and coils rusted. Beyond the gate was his host family's millet field, the young plants only as tall as blades of grass, and beyond that were other homesteads and other fields, cattle kraals, wells, a single tar-paved road, an overgrazed forest of stunted trees.

How far will you go to make a difference? the Peace Corps recruiter had asked him. The youngest of four brothers by eight years, Sam had joined the Peace Corps right out of college. He'd come to the remote village of Thikama (literally *Stop*, meaning "This is it; there's nothing after this") to teach English; to learn a new language and culture; to prove he could make a place for himself anywhere in the world. But a month of sleepless nights had sapped his resolve. He told himself it was just culture shock, the heat, the constipating millet porridge.

The only thing that comforted Sam was the pack of semi-domesticated dogs that slept outside the fence. His arms resting on the mattress-gate's metal lip, Sam breathed in their smells — the hot stink of their breath, the redolence of their filthy paws. There were eight of them, seven descended from the midnight-black matriarch, whose whiskers were white and whose nipples hung low and loose like a milk cow's. The smell of these dogs took Sam home to his family's farm in Maryland,

where his parents bred Chesapeake Bay retrievers. While Sam's older brothers would sneak off to smoke weed and drink cheap beer in cornfields, Sam, still in elementary school, would sneak out to the kennel. By the time his brothers had all gone off to college, the only companions Sam had left were the runts he'd persuaded his parents to keep over the years.

A cough startled Sam. "Who's there?" he whispered.

"Ah, it's just me, Mr. Sam," said Tate Petrus, Sam's host father, a widower with a gray beard and balding head. Tate Petrus worked in a grove of *mopane* trees near the tar road, where he wove enormous grain baskets out of bark. Now he was dressed only in red silk boxer shorts. "I was just going to the toilet," he said.

Sam was also shirtless, his chest and arms so white they glowed. He'd grown a slight paunch since coming here — from the thick porridge, he guessed. He wondered how odd this looked to his host: him standing by the gate half dressed at 3 AM.

"Is everything OK, my boy?"

"Everything's fine. I like to . . . be near the dogs."

"The dogs?" Tate Petrus said in an asthmatic rasp.

"My family raises dogs."

"For what purpose?"

"To sell to hunters." He explained that the breed had heavy fur for warmth and big paws for swimming and could be trained to retrieve downed ducks out of the icy Chesapeake Bay.

Tate Petrus said he'd seen dogs like that during Namibia's liberation struggle. He'd spent the last five years of the war imprisoned on Robben Island, where the guards had big, terrible dogs that were always barking and showing their teeth. He asked Sam whether the retrievers were equally ferocious. Sam chuckled and said no. Then Tate Petrus asked, "What can you tell me about my dogs?"

The unnamed dogs that slept on the other side of the fence were flea and tick infested, neither vaccinated nor fixed. In the structure of their bones and the slope of their shoulders Sam saw some Rhodesian Ridgeback and hints of German shepherd, but mostly, he guessed, African wild dog. Not sure what his host father wanted to hear, Sam said, "The matriarch is pregnant."

"Is it?" Tate Petrus exclaimed, then wheezed and cleared his throat. "How do you know?"

"Her teats are swelling." They were always swollen, but Sam knew the difference.

"Truly," Tate Petrus said, "you know too much about dogs."

Sam nodded. The truth was that he felt more comfortable with the dogs than he did with his host family.

The dogs were a ragged bunch. Not working dogs. Certainly not companion animals. Too cowardly to be watchdogs. Sam wasn't sure why the family kept them. When Tate Petrus walked to work, a couple of the males followed, but he never passed them a treat or patted them on the head. Sam had seen people in Namibia throw rocks at dogs. He'd even heard that

dogs were eaten. They weren't raised for the slaughter, but if a dog were hit by a truck or caught killing chickens, the animal's neck would be unceremoniously slit and its meat cooked directly on hot coals. In a purely utilitarian way he understood that everything had a purpose — growing up, he'd eaten the meat of cattle that had won him blue ribbons at the county fair — but eating dogs felt wrong to him.

At mealtime, over a plate of porridge and a bowl of goat broth, Tate Petrus told Sam stories of his dead wife, his time fighting for his country's liberation, and how he'd toiled in a limestone quarry with Nelson Mandela during his imprisonment. The rock dust had caused his asthma, he said: "The guards made us cart rocks out of the ground in the morning and dump them back in the quarry in the afternoon. They thought repeating the same job for years would break us." He laughed until he wheezed. "It showed us they had no vision. With no vision how could they sustain apartheid?"

Tate Petrus's eldest daughter was thirteen, all beanpole arms and legs. Her name was Today, and she began stealing into Sam's room to wash his clothes and sweep out the sand. One day Sam opened his door and found her inside, reed broom in hand. "You're cleaning for me?" he asked.

The girl nodded. She wore pink corduroy shorts and no shirt. Her hair was short, and her chest was flat. The only blemish on her face was a scar above her left eyebrow.

"I can pay you," Sam said. He reached for his wallet.

Today frowned and shook her head.

"What do you want?"

She narrowed her eyes and said, "Play *mancala*."

They played the board game in the shade of the *omuye* tree, a wild fig with branches that fell in waves to the ground. Today traced the board in the sand and lined it with marble-sized litchi seeds. Her hands were rough and pitted, not what Sam expected of a young girl.

She trounced Sam, beating him five times. It was embarrassing. After the last game Sam said, "You won again," and Today imitated his accent, saying, "Yesh, of courshe, Mishter Sham."

He brushed the board away and said, "Ngoye oshinena." He'd meant to say, *Ngoye oshinona* — "You brat," in Oshiwambo — but he'd confused the penultimate vowel.

Today's jaw dropped. Sam realized he'd just told a thirteen-year-old girl, "You are syphilis." But then Today's face blossomed into a smile so genuine Sam couldn't help but smile back. Soon they were laughing, holding their stomachs, calling each other "gonorrhoea," "chlamydia," "herpes," even "HIV."

Today grew bold. Much to her father's chagrin, she nicknamed Sam "Mr. Syphilis" and even called the name across the schoolyard, raising the alarm of his colleagues. Sam told his host sister she had to stop, but she didn't. With a sly smile she'd ask inane questions: "Do all white people drink as much water as you, Mr. Syphilis? Is that why you're so pale?"

She took to inviting herself into Sam's room each night, to do her math homework at his table while he graded papers. She would interrupt him with her questions — "Why is your

nose so sharp? Did your mother pinch it when you were naughty?" — and he would tell her to get back to work.

One night Sam looked up to find Today studying a photograph he had taped to the wall. Taken the day before he'd left for Namibia, the picture showed Sam dressed in a barn jacket and holding a toy duck over his head. Next to him Ivan, the only runt from his boyhood still alive, crouched with his mouth open, waiting for Sam to throw the toy. The picture had always made Sam smile.

Today, however, furrowed her brow and narrowed her eyes as she examined it. *She's wondering why I put up this private picture*, he thought. Most photographs of Namibians were formal shots, the subject serious and unsmiling.

"That's a picture of me and my dog," he said. "Do you like dogs?"

She swung her furrowed brow to Sam. "No. They smell and have parasites. Why have your picture taken with a dog?"

Sam's face flushed. He'd had enough of this girl and her questions for one night. "Today, I have a lot of tests to grade. Find someplace else to do your homework."

The girl's head dropped. Slowly she gathered her notebook and pencil. Sam watched her leave, wondering if he'd been too tough on her. Probably, but she needed to show him more respect.

After that, Today stopped coming into Sam's room. She no longer swept for him or washed his clothes or asked him to play *mancala*.

The following week a series of storms transformed the countryside. The runoff gathered in low areas that before long teemed with grass and wildflowers, and by the end of a month the millet had sprung up over Sam's head. Today and the other children hunted frogs, fished with mosquito nets, and gathered wild spinach, palm nuts, and the citrus fruit *marula*.

In between rain showers one day, Sam visited the toilet, a three-foot-square corrugated-metal shack with a narrow hole that opened onto a pile of feces and a thousand flies. As he sat there, Sam heard someone running toward him and then the voice of his six-year-old host brother: "Mr. Sam! Mr. Sam! Snake go in there!"

Without wiping, Sam stood, pulled his pants up, and threw open the door. His foot caught on the concrete threshold, and he fell forward in the sand, half in, half out of the latrine.

"Where's the snake?"

No answer. Sam saw Today standing next to the boy, her mouth agape. Sam zipped up, and Today exploded in laughter. The boy said, "Sorry," and ran off. It was not the first practical joke he'd suffered at his host sister's hand since he'd made her leave his hut.

"Today!" boomed a voice. An asthmatic cough followed. The girl went quiet. Tate Petrus approached in a royal-blue jumper, a camouflage canteen over his shoulder, and he fired off a volley of angry Oshiwambo that Sam couldn't follow. Today hung her head and left.

Sam stepped back inside the latrine. He heard Tate Petrus's voice. "Mr. Sam, may I please speak with you?"

"I need a minute."

"Of course."

A few minutes later Sam found Tate Petrus in the shade of the fig tree. From his canteen the older man poured two glasses of *ontaku*, a nonalcoholic beer made from crushed millet and sorghum. With his left hand touching his right elbow — a Namibian gesture of respect — Tate Petrus handed Sam a cup. Sam took a sip of the bitter drink and choked down the half-ground millet kernels. He wondered if he'd ever get used to *ontaku*.

"I must apologize for my daughter," Tate Petrus began. "I think I know why she is acting like this. You know we had another Peace Corps volunteer before you."

Yes, Sam had heard of Mr. Brad: How Mr. Brad had spoken Oshiwambo like a native. How he'd herded cattle and goats with the boys and pounded millet into flour with the girls. How the students had learned so much from him. How his appendix had burst, sending asthmatic Tate Petrus running three miles to the nearest phone. How the whole village had gathered when the medical helicopter had landed. How, weeks later, a Peace Corps staffer in a Land Cruiser had come to retrieve his things and reported that Mr. Brad had returned to the U.S. to recover; a replacement was on the way.

Sam was the replacement.

Tate Petrus said, "Today and Mr. Brad were very close. They played these jokes on each other. Today is a good girl, at times mischievous and naughty, but I think she is sad because she didn't get to say goodbye to Mr. Brad. She expects you to be just like him." Tate Petrus sipped his *ontaku*. "I tell her it's OK that you're different, that you don't enjoy these jokes. But she doesn't understand."

Sam nodded. "I get it." He knew he'd upset her when he'd kicked her out of his room. He felt he deserved her practical jokes.

"Good, and thank you for your understanding. I'll talk to her. Don't worry."

In silence Sam swallowed the remaining *ontaku*. With his tongue he worked the millet shards out of his teeth.

(end of excerpt)