

Trusting Lilly

Coke Newell

WHEN I JUMPED THAT WESTBOUND TRAIN climbing north out of Fraser, Colorado, I wasn't intending to come back. Not for her. Not for anybody.

The soggy June fields between Tabernash and the pulp mills were literally hopping with deer mice, and I'd had to scrape back and forth across the long grass with the toe of my boot for a full five minutes before I felt safe in throwing my bag out. Sleeping with mice is one thing; lying down and hearing a couple three go squish is something else entirely.

It was my second trip through that area with the dog, and I mean a canine: cute little Aussie shepherd unit with eyes the color of the Minnesota sky in late November. Good dog, too. Picked her up at a roadside roof north of Torrington, Wyoming, and I mean a roof. Trucker coming west out of Wisconsin said they called them "ramadas," which I always thought was a brand of hotel. That's what I told the trucker, big fat dude that never quit sucking on the stub of a cold cigar. Never lit it, just sucked and sucked, rolling it around. Spit little bits of tobacco toward the dashboard every half mile or so. I didn't count. Anyway, what I said to him, and he re-

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plied, "Yeah, that's probably why the hotel got its name: Spanish word meaning place of rest or something like that."

So anyway, there's just these two corrugated steel roofs on top of big metal Highway Department posts out there on the side of the two-lane highway in Nowheresville, Wyoming, absolute heaven-in-every-direction Nowhere. Kind of country makes a man feel he's the most blessed important creature ever born, yet the country itself probably never knowing you or any other man ever existed, and caring less.

But here's this dog, just sitting there wagging its tail at me for a good quarter mile as I come hiking up, me let out at a ranch road three miles back, Bronco Buster heading home to the missus after picking up a cow branding something-or-other back in Lusk. I said, "Bet you couldn't find one of those at the Ace Hardware in St. Paul," and the guy just looks at me like I'm the dumbest man ever walked.

I bet you couldn't.

So I walk up talking soft. Dog never stood up until I was ten feet away, just sat there wagging its tail, probably guarding the spot for its owner's return, the faithful best friend. Only in the two hours I sat there talking to her before the next car came by and on through the next thirty minutes until one actually stopped, coupla cotton-headed giggle giggle cowgirls in mama's minivan, and gave us a ride, no owner ever came.

So I called her Princess, and she came with me.

It was that summer I first slept in the wildflower fields south of Fraser. By then I had both Princesses, the one who loved me forever after I gave her a can of Alpo Choice Cuts in the parking lot of a Safeway in Cheyenne and only left me cuz she got taken, and the other who touched my soul, melted right into my heart and swore she'd never leave me and then did just that not four months later when I told her I wanted to go south and see the cedar waxwings come through Madera Canyon migrating south and she said she wanted to go home to see Jesus.

Well I'd never been on a road to heaven anyway, and that just served to piss me off at first. I mean, she'd never brought it up before and I wondered what kind of game she was playing. Which particular comment, voiced, didn't help. We stood there on an aspen-gilded hillside northeast of Santa Fe while Princess One chased spruce squirrels and chipmunks and Princess Two—her name was Lilly Anne Lebris—buried her face in her beautiful knees and cried. Said she'd broken her parents' hearts, freaked out her little brothers and sisters, maybe even put herself at serious risk of

life and limb. Possibly even pregnant, although we'd done what we could to avoid that.

We had talked about everything important on earth—meat-eating and war and Iraqi oil and the total bone-headedness of public school and DARE and the merits of relocating to Canada or Australia, either one—but she never told me the God thing. Which is the one thing I did not want to talk about. That and her leaving me.

See, me and the dog had been heading southbound out of Durango on the road that eventually crosses the Big Rez, and here's this girl selling apricots.

I said, just to talk, "Where's the fruit from?" And she said, "Oh, I picked it here and around." I'm thinking, yeah, right, no apricots for a hundred miles, clear to Grand Junction at least, and probably not there this early in the year.

But I didn't want to walk on, so I said, "What about the bags?" Perfectly crisp little brown bags, like right out of a grocery store. Hand-lettered sign saying, "Apricots: Dollar a bag." And she said, straight out, "Oh I borrowed these from the City Market." Smiling at me.

God, and I don't mean Jesus, she was beautiful.

I laughed and she says, "What's your dog's name?"

So I told her that whole story, her practically tearing up at the Ramada Roof in Wyoming thing, a good dog just left out in the middle of nowhere, and I asked her why she was selling apricots. Sitting on a curb 200 feet from the City Market didn't bug me at all. I'm an entrepreneur of sorts. I just wanted to know: Why apricots? And to talk a little longer. I'd been on the road longer than I cared to think, since life went to hell back home, and I just wanted to talk.

The dog had cuddled right up to her, so close and so quickly I was wondering maybe the girl was the one left her in Wyoming in the first place. For about five seconds. But she said, real circumspectly, "I'm trying to get to Portland."

Alone. Out of money.

Well, long story short, which is kind of how ours turned out, I asked her if that was home and she said no way, it's where a girlfriend's family had moved that winter, the place she was going to find refuge. I said, from what, thinking, somebody hurt this girl, I'll bust their head, but she just told me her family was nuts; I think her words were "religious kooks."

It took a few days to build up some trust. It really freaked me out that

she was traveling all alone looking like she did, and only eighteen years old. So I told her so, the realities of crossing the country, and she said, "No crap. Tell me about it." Reluctant to cuss and kind of drawing back into herself. All the way from Baton Rouge in four days, guys offering all varieties of help.

Well, I sat down on the other side of the dog and just looked off to the south.

She said, "What about you?"

And I looked back at her, right into her almond-brown eyes, and said, "I'm going to Portland." Which she didn't believe at all.

But I did. Something in the air there, and it wasn't, I swear, just me wanting to get into her sleeping bag. I only had four years on this girl, but I'd been mostly on the road for seven, and by God or Buddha or whoever cared, I was really tired of being alone. Not a single friggin' direction in the world and sick of it. So I committed right there. I said, "I mean it. I won't be able to live with myself knowing I left you all alone. A traveling partner to Portland, a few pesos for the journey, and I'll keep my hands to myself."

She looked at me a while, then at the dog, then said, "Okay."

I said back, "I'll prove it. We'll camp right here above Durango for a few days, let me make a few bucks doing day labor, sleep in our own tents."

And she said, looking right into me: "I trust you."

Test me, okay, but *trust* me I thought was a little premature.

"Let me prove it," I said.

And she said, "I trust the dog, and she obviously loves you."

So that's what we did. We stayed right there in the piñon woods above town, she in her bedroll, me in mine. I got a gig unloading freight at the Wal-Mart, me and a bunch of Navajos up from the Rez. Way they do it in Durango: cash-daily migrant workers everywhere but the law offices, I suppose, and probably a few there.

Day two I was actually afraid Lilly Anne wouldn't be there when I got back at night, and I told her as much. She said, "How 'bout I come down and hang out around Wal-Mart all day so you can keep an eye on me?" And I said, "I'd like that, but please leave the merchandise on the shelves cuz a shoplifting rap will wrap our trip up quick." I said "our." And then added: "And I'd just have to hang around waiting for you till they let you out."

She kissed me quick on the cheek and said, "You're sweet, Nick. See you tonight."

And she did.

Eighty-seven dollars in our pockets, we made Colorado's North Park on day seven and made out for the first time right there in the Mouse Meadow, Princess One rolling (alone) in the cool afternoon grass thirty feet away.

We never did get to Portland. I convinced Lilly Anne to at least send her folks a postcard from Steamboat Springs, saying, "Man, if I had parents, I'd let them know, girl. They gotta be going nuts." To which she agreed: "Mom and dad, I'm okay, I'm safe, and almost to Portland. A friend is helping me out, Bye."

We got as far as Craig on U.S. 40, then headed south and west to Grand Junction where we pitched our tents (gear in hers, bodies in mine) in a farmer's field and picked Bing cherries for almost three weeks, then summer apples.

Plenty of food and nearly \$400 between us, one day we bought a big truck tire inner-tube at a Sinclair station and floated seven hours down the Colorado River, the dog right on Lilly's or my lap most of the way, then all of us climbing out somewhere east of Moab. We followed a slot canyon back into the cool north bank of a low mesa and set up housekeeping. Princesses One and Two both thought this was the finest spot on earth, and I told them both it was. We'd bathe in the river, day-trip into Moab once a week for vittles, hike and read and just lie around, the dog coming to believe she actually owned the place. Until August, when even the slot canyon was hitting 80 degrees before 10 A.M. and all three of us were needing some high-country cool.

It was at a country market in Gunnison that some guy buying fishing tackle mentioned the Sangre de Cristos. He and the clerk were talking big fish and deep water. Lilly Anne walked right up to him and said, "What are the Sangre de Cristos?" Saying it real foreign-like, which I suppose it is.

And the guy just stared at her and said: "Mountains. Range over east of here."

Lilly Anne said, "How far?"

And the guy looked up to see me coming closer with the dog, they don't even care in Gunnison, and says, "I suppose that depends on where you want to go. Bout sixty miles to Poncha Springs, up over Monarch Pass,

then south into the San Luis Valley,” which he pronounced “Looney.” “You can head up into the Crestones from there, not a lot of roads, or clear down to Taos and Santa Fe. All the same range.”

We got as far as Red River, New Mexico, before Lilly Anne went to Jesus Pieces on me.

She called her folks from a pay phone in front of the Red River Laundromat while I watched a mule deer doe and three identical fawns still in spot cross the highway, just amble right across, four of the fifty-eight residents of that heartbreaking little town.

I shuffled on over near the phone booth, and I could hear her dad crying, actually pleading with her to please just catch a bus or find the nearest airport. They’d pay for the ride and meet her anywhere she wanted. Lilly crying back, then sobbing to her mother, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

So we sat at a broken-down picnic table near the river and just kind of stared for nearly two hours. She let me hold her hand, in fact she held real tight, but that’s as far as it was going. She told me about the call, and we talked about her home and family for quite a while, her Mormon family, always so damn happy and solid and sweet she had decided it just couldn’t be real, it couldn’t be everything. So she decided to shatter every dream they’d ever had for her and hit the road like a gypsy, hit that daisy-train highway all the way to the West Coast.

But now she was really wanting to go home. Something broken back in Baton Rouge.

Finally I said, “Baby girl, I love you. What did I do?” And she said, “It wasn’t you. It was these mountains.”

I said, “These mountains make you want to go back to Louisiana?”

And she said, “No, what they mean, Sangre de Cristo.” And just stared at me like I should know something.

I actually raised my left hand and shrugged, my right hand so tight around hers my own knuckles hurt. I did not want to lose this girl, but there was a ticket in her pocket. Just one. And she still looked at me. I know now what she was doing, probably wondering if I was worthy of her confession. Or if she was.

She said, “. . . the Blood of Christ.”

I almost said “Bullshit,” but she really meant it. It was coming out all over her face. So I just said, “Lillygirl, tell me about it.” But she just shook her head and looked down, so I had no idea what was going on in there.

And then the bus came and my Princess kissed me real long, hugged the dog, then climbed on that big bus and went away.

I spent that fall picking fruit in Grand Junction, living in a tent out under the Book Cliffs. Then I got an actual job stacking caramel corn and Twinkies at the Wal-Mart and rented a little trailer home on Grand Avenue near the River for the winter. Me and Princess headed down toward Moab a couple of times just to sit on the lip of the bluff and look off across the canyon, my eyes seeing nothing beyond what was in my head. For weeks, the dog was as morose as I was.

Come April we cashed the last paycheck, closed the door, and headed back to the Sangre de Cristos just so I could sit at that picnic table in Red River and try to relive, relieve, do anything of the sort. Nothing worked.

She had written her address on a ripped chunk of a cereal box top and stuffed it in my pack, but I never wrote her until right there in Red River nearly seven months later, which was stupid because no way she could write me back. But it was sincere, oh God, it was everything left in my heart:

My dearest Lilly Anne,

I am sorry I have not written before. Now that you are back home, perhaps you no longer care to hear from me, and I suppose I will come to understand if that is the case. But Lillygirl, I love you. My whole soul hurts daily, hourly, minute by minute as I remember what you are, what we had, and where we wanted to go.

We did love, didn't we.

I hope to write again (and send an address).

In complete love and loneliness,

Nicholas Who Loved You

Me and Princess Number One, whom I'd taken to thinking of as Princess Number Two, headed back to the north, taking the long route through Winter Park and Fraser just because I had to do the full circle. And that's where one more ending turned into a beginning, although of what I'm still not entirely sure.

We were walking a back road south of the wood pulp mill, having spent a cool night full of crickets and scritch-scratch in the Meadow of a Million Mice just north of town. I had just decided that night, and espe-

cially that morning when the sun came up over the mountains, that it was time to move on, move ahead, to get back to Still-life with Nobody and Nothing, especially not the heartache. Me and the dog. So anxious was I to get gone that we jumped an empty boxcar at the pulp mill on a Union Pacific heading all the way to Portland.

I was hanging back in the shadows until we got out of town, trying to keep Princess right there with me; but at the sound of some kids playing across the field, she headed right out into the full sunlit doorway and stood there, wagging her tail. And one of them shot her, right through the brisket. I can't say that they were aiming for her, they may have just been peppering the sides of the boxcars as they went by, the weekly ritual, but she sat down, and then fell to her side and lay there bleeding. I saw her fall about the same time I saw the kid yelling to his buddy and pointing from the far side of the meadow, the Mice Meadow, and I knew something was wrong.

I just sat there and held my dog over my legs as she whimpered and wagged her tail until it stopped. And then I just sat there.

When the train finally stopped in Ogden, I carried my Princess to a shady spot on the Weber River and laid her down as deep as I could in some rocky soil under a cottonwood. At some point I realized I was digging in Mormon soil, planting a piece of my heart. I didn't know much else; but by then I'd had some time to look at life with a long lens, and so I sniffed the wind, threw a few pebbles in the creek, and headed back to the rail yard as lonely as I've ever been.

So now I'm somewhere in the middle of Nebraska, the rails roughly paralleling the North Platte. I'll ride to Omaha, then find my way down to Baton Rouge with only one thought on my mind: Lilly Anne knew nothing more about me than the fact that a dog found me worth trusting. I can't offer her any less about the things I don't, at this point, know for sure.