

The Astronaut's Dog

By Dane Gill

Abe didn't want the dog, never did. Kelly had said: Get a dog, it's good company. Abe didn't want company. He especially didn't want company that shit on the floor. He wanted the television on bust and crossword puzzles and sometimes three beers alone in the evening. He wanted to be alone. There were no friends left and Kelly was a three hour's drive away. Not a call, not a knock on the door. No reporters, not anymore. A dog would just be a job he didn't want. A mess to clean up, another four legs to walk while he suffered to move his own. No dog he said. I mean it, Kelly. No goddamn dog.

On a Friday she showed up. Her, the baby and Mike, with the dog. A small beagle, unexcited, on a leash.

"That better not be for me." He pointed at the dog but didn't look at it. The dog showed no sign of being acknowledged.

"*That* is Betty. She's housebroken and she's quiet. She's a very well-behaved dog."

"She'll piss on my floors and you're taking it when you leave."

"She's housebroken!"

"Maybe in your house."

"It's fine, Pop. We'll take her if you still don't want her when we leave."

"I don't want her now. I won't want her Sunday. And Betty is not a goddamn dog's name."

For the rest of the weekend Abe cursed the dog; cursed the shit she left in his backyard; cursed the hair she shed on his carpet and couch; cursed her food and water bowls on the floor in the kitchen. But on Sunday, as Kelly was getting her things together and fussing in the kitchen

with the dog's bowls and bag of food, Abe stood watching her, his hands in his pants pockets, looking around his kitchen.

"Well, you can't take the goddamn thing back to the pound now. Might as well leave her here with me."

Kelly filled the water bowl under the running tap and put it back on the floor.

"She needs to be fed twice a day. Once in the morning, once sometime before bed."

"I'll figure it out."

"And don't let her get fat, Pop. Beagles have a tendency to get fat."

"She's my dog now. I'll figure it out."

That night the dog fell asleep on the couch next to him as he watched television, startling him when she started snoring. He'd never owned a dog, never knew they could snore. Sometime later, in the middle of the night, he awoke to find her curled in his lap, the television still on, playing for no one, his glasses lost. He went to bed and she followed. He didn't have the energy or the heart to tell her to stay outside of his room and so she slept next to him, above the covers.

In the morning, he took Betty to the library, apologizing to Donna as he walked in the door for bringing a dog in the place.

"I don't think it matters much about a little dog like that. Especially one so cute as you." Donna was out from behind the desk, almost on her knees. "Where'd Abe get you, hey? What's your name?"

"Her name is Betty. She came with it, nothing I could do."

"Betty's not really a dog's name is it?" Donna looked up at Abe as she continued to scratch the dog behind the ears. "I had a friend growing up named Betty. She died of polio, poor soul." Donna stood up and went back behind the desk. So what can I do for you?

“I need books about dogs. About beagles.”

Abe read everything they had, but as it turned out he didn't need any of it. Betty was a good dog. He talked to her at all hours and she listened or fell asleep on him. They walked at his slow pace and she never pulled the leash. She rarely barked. They were patient with each other and grew older and slower. Betty got fat, but neither one of them acknowledged it. They lived their years together, uneventfully. For the most part.

One morning in late May, Abe awoke and shuffled to the kitchen, making coffee, turning on the radio. He let the dog out the back door. It was a warm morning but it was far from summer. Outside on the lawn, Betty began her routine, sniffing here and there. Abe went back inside to make breakfast.

He sat and ate and listened to things he hardly cared for on the radio, hearing the same news he'd heard last night. He considered getting dressed, but lay down on the couch instead, reading the book he'd meant to finish last night but after getting in bed and realizing he'd left it downstairs on the coffee table, went to sleep without reading, something he seldom did. Even when he'd gone to the moon, when he was alone at the very edge of civilization, the loneliest man, he'd read. He read more than he slept when he was up there. Who could sleep in space?

When he awoke for the second time that day, foggy and blurred, still lost in wherever sleep had taken him, Abe got up from the couch, stiff and aching, and again went to the kitchen. He put the coffee on and as he waited for it to brew stared out the window at the backyard, expecting to see the splayed, sleeping body of a sun-warmed Betty. She wasn't there. Not on the deck, not on the grass. Abe went to the backdoor. She sometimes slept with her back directly against the door, as if she'd been on her way inside the house but had grown instantly and overwhelmingly tired. Abe opened the door. She wasn't there.

Then he saw the open gate.

Running outside in his bare feet and pajamas, he left the coffee brewing in the kitchen, the front door wide open. He called her name at the end of the driveway, putting his hands to the sides of his mouth. He whistled, though Betty had never responded to whistling before. Walking up the street, still in his bare feet, he continued calling her name, his voice soon growing hoarse and strained.

He made a loop of the block, asking every person he saw if they'd seen her. Nobody had seen a thing. He went back in the house. It had rained while he'd been asleep and his feet were wet, covered in grass clippings and dirt. He stood in the front porch, panting, leaning against the door of the closet. It had been a very long time since he'd panicked. The air force has a tendency to work that out of you. They don't want you to choke and so they make sure you don't. He went up stairs, threw on whatever he'd been wearing the night before, got in the car, and slowly drove around the neighbourhood for the rest of the afternoon, eating take-out from the paper bag when he was hungry. Twice he went home to use the bathroom. Late that evening, when it had grown dark and his back and legs could no longer tolerate the misery of sitting in the car, he came home to an empty house and made a phone call to the animal shelter. There had been no dogs brought in that day. Abe gave the woman on the other end of the line a physical description of his lost dog and hung up the phone.

Alone, in front of the television, he sat at the coffee table and wrote up a lost dog sign, realizing only then that he didn't have a photo of Betty (he didn't even own a camera anymore). He phoned Kelly and told her what had happened.

"Oh, Pop. I'm so sorry. I'm sure she'll show up."

“I’m going to have to find her. She’s a quiet dog, you know, doesn’t know much outside the house here, off the leash.”

“She have a name tag?”

“She doesn’t like her collar, she shakes her head around when she’s got it on.”

Abe fell asleep in front of the television, all of the lights on in the living room. He couldn’t stand the house without her, couldn’t stand the dark.

The next morning he met Donna as she was opening up the library doors.

“Oh my, you’re in hurry.”

“I need a hundred of these photocopied. You still do photocopies, right?”

“Of course.”

He handed her his sign.

“I’m sorry, Abe.”

“Nothing to worry about. I’ll find her.”

He stood at the photocopier, collecting the warm sheets one at a time as they came out, tapping the collected sheaf on the top of the machine, straightening the edges.

A half hour later, back home, he loaded up a staple gun he hadn’t used in well over a decade and started out on foot, carrying his signs in a plastic grocery bag. It took him almost three hours to get the neighborhood done, and he still had over half of his signs left. It was feeling more like summer today than spring. He headed back home for lunch, his bag of signs, though fewer in number, heavier than when he had left. His hand ached from using the stapler.

Just before he got to his house he saw a kid reading one of his signs. Abe watched him reach into his pocket, take out his phone and hold it up to the sign on the pole. Abe picked up his

pace. Getting closer he thought he may recognize him from around the street but couldn't be sure. All those kids looked the same.

"Son, have you seen that dog?"

"He's your dog, right?" The kid didn't look up from his phone.

"She's my dog. Have you seen her?" Abe stood next to the kid, looking down at the top of his head.

"Nah, I was just taking a picture of the sign and posting it online for everyone else to see."

"Do you want one of these signs? For your school or something?" Abe started digging in the plastic bag.

"Nah, I got it posted now. People will see it and, like, share it. You got a picture of him? People won't read all that stuff you wrote."

"No, I don't have a picture of *her*." The kid went silent for a moment, taping something into the phone. He held it up for Abe to see.

"Is this what she looked like?" The kid held up his phone. Abe dug his glasses out of his shirt pocket and shaded the glare on the phone with his hand. He saw a beagle, but it looked nothing like Betty.

"Colour is wrong. She's lighter in colour and she's got these spots around her nose. He gestured to the sign. It says that right there. Lightish brown, spots around nose."

"How about this?" The kid held up the phone again.

"That's closer. The colour is close, but the spots aren't there. And she's bigger."

"Like fat?"

"No, just wider. Bigger."

“So, like fat?”

“Yes. Fat, I guess.”

The kid stared at his phone some more and then held up a third photo, this one closer to Betty than the others.

“That’s pretty close. Where’d you find that?”

“I’ll post this with the pic of the sign.”

“But that’s not her.”

“I know. I said that it’s a pic that *looks* like the dog. What’s your name and phone number?”

“They’re right there, on the sign. Both of them.”

The kid read the sign. He tapped the phone a few more times, put it in his pocket, then moved past Abe and up the street without another word.

Abe called out to him and the kid stopped and turned around.

“I appreciate your concern, son.”

“No problem. Lost dogs need to be found.”

Abe came home to the empty house, greeted by silence. Exhausted, he fell asleep and woke up in the dark blue of twilight, the phone ringing. It was Kelly.

“Any luck?”

“No.” He turned on a lamp. In the new light he saw a tuft of hair next to him on the couch. He swallowed. “Some kid down the street did something with his phone. Took a picture and put it on the internet or something. I don’t know.” Technology had left Abe behind a long time ago. He’d let it. He’d wanted it to pass him by, to forget him.

“That’s good. That’ll help.”

“Maybe.” It was only then that he realized he didn’t even ask the kid his name.

“It will. You’ll find her.”

“Oh, I know.” But he no longer knew.

The nap had ruined his night. He was up watching television for hours. He ate a bowl of cereal at three, standing up in the kitchen, his back to the empty food and water dish on the floor.

In the morning, he awoke on the couch, the light of day hitting him through the blinds he’d forgot to close the night before. There was somebody knocking on the front door. Slowly, he uncurled himself to answer it.

It was the kid, with his hair in his eyes, and his clothes not fitting properly. That goddamn phone in his hand.

“Hey, Colonel. Did I wake you?”

“Yes.” Nobody had called him colonel in years. Where the hell did the kid pick that up?

“What do you want?”

“I think I found your dog. That her?” He held up his phone. A beagle stared out of it.

Abe took the phone from the kid and held it at arms length, looking at the picture. It certainly looked like her. Leaving the kid on the front step he walked back into the house for his glasses, holding the phone in front of him as if it were something that may catch fire any minute. Finding his glasses he looked at the phone again, but the screen had gone black. He rushed back to the door and held out the phone.

“She’s gone.”

The kid touched the screen of the phone and handed it back to him, the screen now illuminated with what was clearly Betty looking out at him.

“Where’d you get this? Where is she?” He felt a relief so strong he feared he may weep in front of this stranger.

“Some dude found her and sent me the pic.”

“Some *dude*? Where?”

“He didn’t say his name. He lives in Chesterton.”

“Chesterton? Where the hell is Chesterton?”

“Chesterton Apartments. Over by the mall, the one with the movie theatre.”

Abe put up his hand, frowning. He needed a moment. He looked down at the kid.

“What’s your name, by the way?”

“Larkin.”

“What’s your first name?”

“That is my first name. Larkin Abbot.”

“Okay, Larkin. What I need from you is the full address and phone number of this person who has my dog.” Abe started to move into the house, talking over his shoulder. “And then I need you to draw me up a simple map to this Chester place. I’ll get you some paper.”

“Here’s a map.”

Abe turned to see the kid holding up his phone. “That’s not going to do me any good, son.”

“I’ll come with you. Give you directions.”

Abe stopped looking for paper and looked at him. “How old are you?”

“Twelve.”

“Don’t you go to school?”

“It’s Saturday.”

Abe stood there, staring and thinking for a long time. “Okay, maybe you should come. Call your mother and let her know.”

Larkin played with his phone a bit. “Now she knows.”

Abe shook his head. “You ready to go now? You better be ready to go now. I’m not waiting around all morning for you.”

“I’m ready.”

They drove slowly, Larkin calling out directions as needed. Ten minutes in, they hit a lengthy straightaway and a quiet fell on the two of them.

“You’re a famous astronaut,” Larkin said, breaking the silence. He spoke with his eyes on his phone in his lap.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Mom said. I told her about your dog. She said you walked on the moon.”

“I didn’t walk on the moon.”

“I know. I looked you up. You only, like, flew around it.”

“I was the command module pilot. I was in orbit.”

“Why didn’t you go on the moon?”

“Doesn’t work that way. I did my job. Everybody’s got a job. I needed to stay in orbit, get everybody back safe.” He gestured to the phone. “What else that goddamn thing have to say about me?”

Larkin held up his phone, open to an encyclopedia page, Abe’s photo at the top, wearing his spacesuit, his gloves and helmet off. He had hair then, dark hair. His knuckles looked enormous. His school ring, his wedding ring, that clunky watch. Larkin read out his vital statistics, his military record, his flight record with NASA.

“There’s a picture of you in the spaceship. He held up the phone again. But it’s really blurry. And then there’s a link to a page about your trip to the moon, but you’re only mentioned twice there because you didn’t really do much.”

“No, I only flew the goddamn thing.”

“And then there’s a part about you retiring from NASA and the air force. And then there’s a part about you getting a divorce.”

“Why the hell is *that* in there? Who wants to know if I got a divorce or not?”

“I don’t know. It’s just there.”

Larkin instructed him to make a left turn at the next intersection.

“Who writes this stuff?”

“It’s a free encyclopedia. Anyone can write it.”

“Anyone?”

“Yeah, anyone. It’s all free.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“I can change it, make it say something else.”

“You? You can change it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, change it. Better yet, erase the whole thing.”

“But then no one will know who was the command module pilot on your mission.”

“Believe me son, the people who want to know already know.”

“I wouldn’t have known. And I want to know. How about I just take down the part about the divorce?”

Abe was no longer listening. He pointed out the window to a group of four apartment buildings.

“That Chesterton?”

“Yes.”

The staircase was dim and smelt of cooking and cigarettes. At the third floor Abe knocked on the door of 3C and he and Larkin stood in silence, their hands held at their sides, Larkin’s phone in his pocket for the first time all day. They said nothing in the silence, they waited.

The door opened. A man in bare feet, wearing pajama pants and an untucked plaid shirt stood there, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“What the fuck you want?”

“I’m sorry. I think we made a mistake,” Abe made a move to leave.

“Wait! Ah shit, you’re the dude here for the dog.” The man stuck out his hand and Abe shook it reluctantly. “Sorry ‘bout that, man. Sorry. Rough night. Rough morning. Fuck.” He opened the door further, waving them in with a hand. Abe and Larkin followed him into the dark of his apartment, the curtains still drawn. There was no sign of Betty, there was no sign of anything but cigarette smoke and sleep.

But then out of this dark unfamiliarity, Betty waddled to life, suddenly at Abe’s feet, quietly standing on her hind legs, her front paws in his hands. He went on his knees, feeling no pain, no fear of being unable to get back up. Betty licked his face as if she were drinking from it. The apartment owner said something behind him he didn’t hear and Larkin answered something he also didn’t hear. He was practically lying down on the filthy carpet in a stranger’s apartment, weeping at the sight of a dog he once swore he never wanted.

Larkin and the man watched Abe slowly get up, both of them with an arm ready for him to lean on that he politely refused.

He reached into his pocket and took out Betty's collar and tags.

"Son, do you mind putting that on for me?" He handed the collar to Larkin. "She hates that goddamn thing, but she's no longer got a choice." He turned to the owner of the apartment. "I'd like to give you something."

"No, man. It's all good. Got your dog back. Happy reunion. It's all good."

Abe dug out his wallet. "No, please."

"No trouble, boss. None. Go home. You and your grandson enjoy your dog."

Abe never bother to correct him. He thanked him again and left.

On the ride home, Betty sat on Larkin's lap, her nose testing the air of the opened window. They drove in silence for a long while, Abe having driven the way once, knew his way home without asking for a single direction.

"Were you ever scared in outer space," Larkin eventually asked.

"No, I was not."

"Never?"

"I wasn't scared. Nobody was. It was work. It was exciting and dangerous, but it was work."

Larkin kept his eyes on his phone, his thumbs moving all over the screen.

"I changed that entry about your divorce."

"That fast? I told you to get rid of the thing all together."

"Well, I didn't. I took out the divorce and put in a thing about Betty. It says Colonel Abraham Hawkins lives with his dog, Betty."

“That sounds like I married the dog.”

“No, it doesn’t. It says you live with her. Live, not married. Never mind, I’ll get rid of the whole thing. If anyone looks up your mission, they’ll think the space ship just flew itself around the moon. There was no lunar pilot or whatever.”

“No, no. Leave it in. It sounds good. I’m sorry I said anything.” He reached over and touched one of the dog’s ears. “You’re famous now, Betty.” His eyes back on the road he said to Larkin: “And It’s not space *ship*, it’s a spacecraft. Spaceship sounds like it’s in a comic book.”

“*Spacecraft*, sorry.”

“And I was the command module pilot.”

Back on the street, the morning still not over, things were as if Abe and Larkin and Betty had never left, as if nothing had happened. They got out of the car, Betty following Abe, never to leave him again. Larkin walked to the end of the driveway and stood there, saying nothing, his phone in his hand. Abe again went for his wallet.

“Listen, son. I can’t thank you enough.”

“I don’t want any money.”

“No, take it.” Abe held out everything he had in his wallet.

“I can help you take down all the signs you put up.” Larkin looked past the money when he spoke, looking Abe in the face.

Abe folded the money back into his wallet and put it away. He started nodding his head. “I will need some help with that, yes. Not yet though. I need some lunch and maybe a nap. This afternoon I’ll be out. You going to be around?”

Larkin nodded but said nothing, and headed down the driveway to the street, his eyes on his phone. Abe watched him go for a second and then went inside, Betty ahead of him.