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## Hoobner on the Post

Hoobner's reputation was a mystery, but there were rumors that he had killed a man. Colorful innuendo was common in a tiny rural town whenever someone arrived with no connections to the community, but there was no real evidence that Hoobner was on the run. Most of us figured he just preferred a nondescript location to hang his mechanic's shingle.

Hoobner was a biker, old school. He had moved to Middletown for no obvious reason and purchased an old wood-framed toy factory on the banks of the Manooksi River, adjacent to the sewer plant. He turned one end of the factory building into a motorcycle shop, and rented the mid-section as a residence for some local carpenters, and the other end as a workshop for a Hassidic candle-maker. The abandoned pig slaughterhouse in the center of the yard was rented as a residence to a young couple, Ned & Nancy, and their 18-month old Doberman named Sufi.

Hoobner's wife Mitsy was a bouncy, opinionated young woman known more for her bounce than her opinions. Mitsy stood up for her man. Even casual remarks seemingly unrelated to Hoobner could bring a cold glare of challenge, especially if they went over her head, as most remarks did. Although Hoobner himself was a good 300 pounds of biker, his woman was always there to protect him, and everyone took care not to rile her up.

It was also rumored that Hoobner had a pretty bad temper, but we hadn't seen anything of it in several months living in the "mid-section" and the slaughterhouse. He did stand up for his dog, though, in a rather ferocious manner—not unlike his girl's defense of himself. Altogether, Hoobner's little clan took care of its own.

Max, Hoobner's bulky black Labrador, had a well substantiated

reputation for being top dog, which made his master proud. Max defended the yard from any and all shop customers, and from those of us who happened to reside in the compound. We all learned the secret password, "OK, Max. Guard the house," which if uttered in a sufficiently gruff tone would give Max the impression we belonged there, at least for the time being.

During the day, Max would lounge around in the dust, springing into life whenever something moved in the courtyard. Now and then some Other Dog would trip Max's olfactory range-finder, and he would burst into action, barking his low, mean-dog bark at the interloper, fangs bared, hackles raised, and muscles twitching, primed for battle. Generally the offending visitor would slink away, but once in a while Max would have to go and take a bite or two to prove his rank.

Ned and Nancy had gone to some trouble to put a fence around their slaughter-house, not so much to keep Max out as to keep Sufi in. Sufi the Doberman was a youthful and almost delicate dog with the mind of a slightly dim-witted but well-meaning weight-lifter. He enjoyed flexing and preening, but more than anything he enjoyed a good run.

Unfortunately, in Vermont one doesn't let any old dog go running wherever it pleases, due to the cows. Local farm dogs, of course, and any dog who had been kicked (by cow or dairy-farmer), knew better than to chase cows, but sleek champions like Sufi, with the reflexes of an adolescent athlete on amphetamine, were a serious risk.

If Sufi—who effortlessly cruised at 40 mph for prolonged stretches—were to start playing around in a cow pasture, the consequences could be dire. Torn udders, broken legs, and lost revenue would bring righteous vengeance down on him and his owners, who were therefore extremely cautious about opening the fence around the slaughter-house. More than one errant canine had ended up on the wrong end of a shotgun while trespassing in one of the area's dairy farms.

Some weeks ago, Ned had discovered a cache of huge fence-posts, six or eight inches in diameter, and over many a long afternoon had built a massive fence around the slaughter-house's diminutive yard-within-a-yard. He dug post-holes at four-foot intervals, outlining an area along one side of the slaughter-house about the size of a 1958 Buick. Around the resulting six-foot high stockade he wrapped a roll of chicken-wire,

square-woven mesh whose horizontal wires were spaced closer and closer together toward the ground. Hoobner had watched the construction with disapproval—since it established an unwelcome domain for Sufi within the grander dominion of Max and himself—but he said nothing.

Sufi was extraordinarily well-behaved. He could heel and stay, and his comprehension of subtle human expectations was close to 9th Grade level. He was impetuous, to be sure, and always eager to explore new avenues of speed and agility, but that was merely his brilliant genetics, and not at all a character flaw.

Sufi's Teutonic heritage made him very literal-minded, but his sense of territory was as geographically fluid as Ned's own nomadic life in those days. Sufi's world was defined by constantly changing rules about what was in or out of bounds. As a result, Sufi possessed a flexible and insightful understanding of "turf."

The slaughter-house was barely larger than a modest bedroom, so Ned and Nancy shared the carpenters' rustic kitchen in the midsection of the complex. After cooking a meal, they would often invite Sufi into the kitchen area to clean up whatever bits of food fell to the floor. At other times, the invisible line across the kitchen doorway was an impenetrable Doberman barrier, and Sufi would lie just the other side, carefully keeping all parts of his body from touching the line.

It had become common practice for all parties to eat supper on a low coffee table in the living room of the mid-section. At such times, Sufi would be reminded of the "Nose Rule," which defined the airspace above the coffee table as inviolate. Sufi would stand by, watching people eat, his nose pressed up against the edge of the table without ever intruding upon—or over—the top surface.

On one occasion, Ned had just built a sandwich of marshmallow fluff and peanut butter when some visitors arrived; Sufi was already in the kitchen cleaning the floor. Flapping his sandwich carelessly onto the kitchen counter, Ned invoked the Nose Rule and went out to greet his friends.

When Ned returned, he discovered that he had not left the sandwich (which comprised two of Sufi's most beloved ingredients) entirely on the counter top. About one-third had protruded over the side, in easy reach of a slathering, solitary Dobe. But Sufi had not reached up and pulled the

heavenly treat into his mouth, as any lesser dog would have done. Instead, he had curled up his rubbery black nose, exposing the even rows of delicate white incisors at the front of his mouth. With surgical precision, he then trimmed off the sandwich perfectly flush with the edge of the counter. In no sense had he violated the proscribed air-space above the counter.

Sufi and Max had met on a few occasions, and both dogs lived up to their reputations. At their first encounter, cautiously orchestrated by their owners, Sufi wanted to run and jump, which drove Max into a frenzy, and Max wanted to bite Sufi to show him who was boss. In the ensuing mêlée, Ned and Hoobner were forced to grab their dogs' respective hind legs, and wheel-barrow them backwards onto home turf. Both men acknowledged the dogs would probably not become friends.

On another day, Max became fixated on Sufi's presence within the slaughter-house yard. Max decided that Sufi should not be tolerated even within Ned's interior fence, and he elected to bark his low, menacing warning until the situation was corrected. Hoobner had a limitless tolerance for Max's testicular style, however, and went on repairing motorcycles. Sufi, being a dog, quickly became deaf to the sound.

After a time, Max decided that things weren't moving quickly enough, and began to creep slowly toward the chicken-wire, barking all the while. Only a dog can fathom the strategic subtlety of creeping and barking at the same time.

Sufi lay comfortably in his yard, one eye tracking the slow movements of the elder challenger. Minute by minute, Max moved closer to Sufi's turf, until his nose was touching the chicken-wire, rubbing up and down wetly as he barked. Sufi rose and stretched languidly, his tail stump upraised like a shining black digit; but his eyes were on the aggressor.

Max by this time could not have stopped barking if his life depended on it. Every droplet of grey matter in his 3-oz. brain-pan was stuck, like a scratched 78-rpm record. His need to rid the area of the Doberman had probably faded into oblivion—now he merely had to bark and advance, bark and advance, until nirvana suddenly dawned.

The fence obstructed his progress, and after a time Max moved sideways a little, and discovered that his entire snout fitted nicely into one of the rectangular spaces of the fence. Sufi's eyes brightened—a visitor, by definition, even if only the first few inches.

He pranced happily over to the fence, and looked Max in the eye, hoping no doubt that Max would finish coming into the yard. Max barked metronomically.

Finally, Sufi realized that the noisome intruder was not going to play—only bark, and in an insulting tone, once he thought about it. He waited for a while, perhaps hoping Max would tire, but he eventually realized that Max was stuck: the barking would go on forever if someone didn't do the right thing.

Sufi stretched his head toward Max, opened his notorious Doberman jaws very wide, and clamped down hard, taking most of Max's snout into his mouth. With a small fraction of his prize-winning 800-pound bite, Sufi calmly held Max's jaws together. A peaceful silence descended over the courtyard.

Max began tugging and struggling, but couldn't make a sound. He also couldn't get loose because Sufi's left canine had neatly penetrated the top of his snout, pinning him efficiently. Max pulled hard, his stocky shoulders bunching, dust flying as he backpedaled. Sufi stood his ground, six inches of Labrador still on his turf, where he was the legitimate ruler. A small smile crept around the corners of his mouth.

Eventually, of course, Hoobner came running, alerted by the sudden quietness. He yelled at Sufi and pulled on Max, but as long as Sufi kept his mouth shut, the dogs were joined at the fence. Roused by Hoobner's shouting, Ned emerged from the slaughter-house and told Sufi to "drop it!" This was done at once, and Hoobner and Max tumbled back in a cloud of dust and wounded machismo.

Since that time, the dogs kept their distance. Max knew in his heart he could tear Sufi to shreds, and Hoobner knew that sooner or later Sufi would get it. Sufi was apolitical: he knew that Max could make a terrific playmate, and he held no grudges.



Ned and Nancy had a friend who dropped in now and then, a girl who squatted secretly in the nearby village with her collection of buttons and brightly-colored ribbons. She was a tall and lanky lass, with a mind of her own, such as it was, and she delighted in the never-ending pursuit of the ultimate frill. Her name was Janella, and frills were her life.

One day, Janella came to visit the slaughter-house when Ned and Nancy were away. Finding no-one inside but the dog, she fastened a gay scrap of colored ribbon on the door and departed, leaving both the door and the gate wide open. Sufi, ever mindful of rare opportunities, emerged into the bright sun, inspected his private yard, and proceeded on out into the world beyond, eyes gleaming with youthful enthusiasm, and utterly heedless of the black Labrador snoozing in the shade beneath a decrepit Land Rover.

Glancing from side to side, Sufi began trotting around, sniffing happily for traces of excrement. His jingling collar soon caught Max's ear, and seconds later, Max was running full tilt at his hated rival. Sufi, sensing a terrific gambol, took off around the slaughter-house.

To be fair, Max truly was a daunting junkyard dog, with ample fighting experience, and plenty of speed. Few opponents had escaped his charge.

Sufi, by contrast, was an extraordinary best-of-breed from a lineage Max had never encountered. Sufi could run in sprints over 45 mph, and he always happily accepted the baton.

Within three-quarters of a revolution, Sufi rounded the entire slaughter-house and was about to lap the Lab, who had no idea he was being overtaken. Suddenly, there was Sufi, sprinting right on past, and Max redoubled his pursuit. In another few seconds, Sufi came round again, and Max's fury knew no bounds.

His confusion mounting (how many of these damned skinny sprinters were there?), Max stopped abruptly and turned for a confrontation.

Sufi stopped too, standing alongside Max like an old friend. It took a moment for Max to realize that his enemy was right next to him, and then he turned and snapped, a snap at the throat, to end it as quickly as possible.

In the twinkling of an eye, Sufi danced into the air, placing his front paws lightly on Max's back, and came to rest standing on Max's opposite side. Max's teeth clicked loudly on thin air—his prey had vanished. Quickly he turned, this time snapping to his left, but Sufi again pirouetted over his back to land again at Max's right.

Max spun around furiously, and for a moment both dogs faced each other, panting and tense, their tongues dripping, teeth bared. Max was snarling, lips curled back, hackles straight up along his burly neck; Sufi was smiling his Doberman smile, exposing twin six-inch rows of pearly whites

as he panted, but his dewlaps hung loose—he seemed not to understand this was a fight to the death.

Suddenly, both dogs froze, as Hoobner emerged from the garage, brandishing a large broom. He howled with rage, yelling to Ned (who wasn't home) that his damn Doberman was going to kill Max. Waving the broom, he ran around in circles, alternately shouting at Sufi and yelling for Ned to come out before it was too late.

The dogs stared each other down for a few heart-beats, and then Sufi took off down the street at a fair pace. Max cowered beneath his master's broom; Mitsy appeared and hauled him away to safety.

But Hoobner was not finished with his rage. His dog's junkyard crown had been tarnished, and with it the entire pride of his clan. And Mitsy was watching. Something had to be done.

Hoobner hauled his massive frame over to the fence at the slaughterhouse, still bellowing for Ned, who still was not home, to come outside and make things right. Nothing happened, and Hoobner's rage increased. He kicked the open chicken-wire gate, and it bounced back and bumped against him, insolently. This was the cause of the whole disaster: this damned fence.

Now howling with unbridled vitriol, Hoobner began tearing the chicken-wire from the posts with his bare hands, running back and forth while violently tugging and jerking at the wire. Within minutes, and with considerable exertion, he reduced the fence to a tangle of bent mesh encircling Sufi's tiny yard. But still his rage was not satiated.

The fence posts remained, like a spindly Stonehenge, to deny his authority over the property, so Hoobner attacked again, lunging his considerable weight against the posts. One after another, they bent a little, and worked loose in their holes, but the hard-pan kept them obstinately upright. Finally, in one roaring explosion of revenge, Hoobner jumped into the air, seeking to topple one of the damned posts by sheer mass.

For a frozen moment, Hoobner was poised atop the post, bunched into a ball, clinging with a furious grip of arms and legs, several feet above the ground. His face had gone white and puffy, and he emitted gasping, apoplectic grunts as he clung to his perch.

The fence post swayed slightly in the dense dirt that held it upright, Hoobner's obesity at its top like a gigantic Tootsi-Roll-Pop. Then, in slow

motion, the post bent slightly, crackled in protest, snapped in two, and deposited Hoobner, still clinging to a section of splintered post, onto his back in the dust.

Silence returned to the yard once more. Hoobner's panting could be heard above the light summer breeze; birds chirped cautiously across the road. Sufi was long gone.

Mitsy came running across the yard, crying out, "You've killed him! Your damn dog has killed him!" She reached her exhausted man, and helped him to his feet.

Covered with dust and sweat, Hoobner limped back to the motorcycle shop with one arm around Mitsy. But he had defended the honor of the tribe; he had proven his rank; his dignity was restored.

Max was already inside, asleep in one corner of the garage. Ned and Nancy were still not home. And Sufi was cruising the green hills of Vermont, in search of new adventures.