

Animal Life

by Clive Barker, 1952-

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Ralph was dreaming of Kathleen again. She was standing on the edge of the pool he was building for Jerry Meuse on Coldwater Canyon, looking into the water saying: „It’s milk, Ralph!“

As he realized that yes, indeed, the pool was filled with milk, the ground began to shake. Somewhere far off, he heard Duffy barking frantically.

I’m not dreaming, he thought, and opened his eyes. The walls were creaking, the doors flying open, the bed pitching around. This was no minor temblor. This was big and getting bigger. He felt a patter of dust on his face and threw himself out of the bed. A heartbeat later the ceiling came down, burying the place where he’d been sleeping seconds before.

The drapes were open a few inches (He’d not been able to sleep in total darkness since Kathleen’s departure), and there was moonlight enough to get him across the pitching floor to the door. „Duffy?“ he yelled as he raced down the stairs. „Where are you, boy?“

He ducked into the kitchen where Duffy usually spent the night (he'd protect his food before us, Kathleen had pointed out), but there was no response. The shaking had given way to brutal jolts now, as though some titanic foot were kicking the house. Every jar, plate, fork, and glass were either on the floor in pieces or on their way.

„Duffy?“ he yelled again, fearing the worst.

Then, from the study, a fretful whine. He raced across the hall. The dog was under the desk, which was a more sensible place to be than—

Behind him, the sound of plaster cracking and splintering. He turned in time to see one of the huge bookcases, six of its shelves weighted down with files on recent projects, the seventh with his secret stash of skin magazines, toppling toward him. He started to retreat, but a hail of books and Penthouses felled him.

Ralph's partner, Vincent, surveyed the chaos of the study.

„This is not a safe place for you to be right now,“ he said, „Come stay with Lauren and me till you get a structural engineer in here.“

Ralph was at his desk, which had become a life raft in this sea of destruction. Preserved upon it: pictures of Kathleen, an antique clock, his first editions of Chandler.

„Thanks, but no thanks. I've already lost enough. First Kathleen—“

„She'll be back, Ralphie.“

„—Then Duffy running off. I'm damned if I'm going to leave this house. It's practically all I've got left.“ He put his hand to his bandaged brow. „Besides a permanent headache.“

The bedroom was uninhabitable, so the next night he made up a bed for himself on the sofa. The aftershocks had continued through the day--the seismologists up at Cal Tech were predicting they'd go on for several weeks after a quake of that magnitude—but in the brightness and warmth of the day the tremors hadn't bothered him. Once darkness fell however, he began to feel jittery. Sleep did not come easily. Twice he woke from a light doze thinking he felt plaster dust on his face.

The third time, it was the sound that stirred him, that of somebody eating. He rose, picking up the heavy-duty flashlight he'd left on the floor, and followed the noise through to the kitchen. He could just make out a diminutive figure in the darkness, sitting at the table. It wasn't a child. A sliver of light caught the whiskers around its chin.

„Ralphie?“ The interloper's voice was deep and warm.

Ralph snapped on the light.

„Too bright.“ said Duffy, squinting. He was sitting up at the table with a tub of peach ice cream in front of him. There was a spoon and a bowl beside it, but he'd apparently decided they weren't worth the bother, and plunged his snout into the tub. „Boy,“ he said, „You look like hell.“ Ralph put his hands to his throbbing head. His concussion was plainly worse than he thought.

„I know, I shouldn't be eating ice cream,“ Duffy was saying. „Our digestive systems weren't designed for sugar. But I thought, What the hell? Why not celebrate? It's not every day that a dog gets to talk with its master.“

„This isn't happening.“ Ralph said flatly.

„Now that, Ralphie, is a terrible cliché. Come and have some ice cream, and I'll explain.“ Ralph didn't move. „Come on.“ Duffy coaxed him, „I'm not going to bite.“

„I'm hallucinating this,“ Ralph told him, and went to sit down opposite his illusion, so as to find some flaw in its solidity.

„Kathleen was right, you know,“ Duffy said, „We'd be a lot safer in Wisconsin. But then we'd have her damn mother living around the corner. Are you sure you don't want some ice cream?“ Ralph shook his head. „You're probably wondering how I got to talk an' all, right? Well, after I ran off—sorry about that by the way, I guess it was instinct—I was wandering up in the hills off of Mulholland, an' I saw this pack of coyotes, so I followed them in case there was something worth scavenging.“

„And was there?“

„I was gettin' to that. They disappeared among these trees, and there were animals arriving from all directions. Deer and raccoons and snakes and birds and lizards. There were a few pets too. Runaways who'd found their way up there by some fluke.“ He broke off, and smiled at his astonished master. „It get weirder,“ he said, „See, there was this crack in the ground, with smoke coming out of it, and all the animals were takin' a breath of this smoke. So I did the same, and you know what? I could talk. We all could talk. You never heard such bedlam.“ He laughed, much entertained by the memory. „And then—“ he leaned across the table, his voice dropping to a whisper, „Out of the earth comes this woman. and she says to us all: ›You know me...‹“

„And did you?“

„Vaguely. She was huge, maybe 300 pounds, and beautiful. Every kind of blood in her, every kind of feeling in her face, all at once. Rage and love and rapture...“ he was entranced, even now. „Unbelievable,“ he said.

„And who was she?“

„Some earth spirit. A goddess. My Mother. I don't know. The point is, she said to us: ›I need to know whether or not I should shake this city to pieces.‹“

„Oh, my God.“

„So then everybody starts talking at once, saying how cruel you people are, and how stupid and destructive.“

„And what did you say?“

„I shut up. I mean we've had some fine times, you and me, but it put me in a spin, hearing all these terrible stories. I didn't know what to think.“

„So there was a vote of some kind?“

„Oh yes.“

Ralph studied Duffy's brown eyes, looking for some clue as to the result. „And?“ he said, his voice a whisper.

„I'm not allowed—“ He stopped, ears pricked. „Oh-oh.“ he murmured.

„What's wrong?“

„Don't you feel it?“ He was up from the table now and heading for the door.

A moment later, the aftershock came rolling through the house. The lights went out. The windows rattled. The walls creaked.

This time, Ralph was fast. Arms over his head to keep his skull from a further beating, he raced across the shuddering ground and out the front door, not

looking back until he made it to the safety of the street. From there, he had all too fine a view of his house collapsing, the already wounded walls folding in upon themselves and the roof coming down in the rubble, burying in one moment all he'd called his own.

He called Kathleen from Vince's place, to tell her the news. She said that she was sorry, but then, they'd said that to each other countless times and not really meant it. Before the conversation ended, he asked if she was planning to come back out to California anytime soon. She told him no.

„You can rebuild,“ Vince said the next day when they went to sort through the rubble. „The government's already promised interest-free loans, and you've got the insurance.“

It was true. Of course he could rebuild. Stronger foundations next time. More steel, more concrete. But right now, the thought sickened him.

He kept thinking of his hallucination. Of Duffy devouring ice cream and thinking about the cruelty of men. The headaches were diminishing, so he assumed he wouldn't be bothered further by such deliriums, but the conversation stayed with him. „Rebuild?“ he wanted to ask Vince. „Why?“

He kept his doubts to himself, however. Put a brave face on things, he even managed a smile or two. But when Vince headed off to get some beer, he immediately ceased digging and sat with his back to the rubble, staring down the canyon.

Where had Duffy gone this time? he wondered. Back where he'd gone before, up onto Mullholland?

Without really thinking about what he was doing, he got up and started to walk. The thought of searching for Duffy was only a vague notion in the back of his head, but the further he got from his house, the more focused that ambition came. If he could just find his dog, it would be a sign that that life was not beyond reclamation. he would rebuild it with stronger foundations.

There were scenes of devastation everywhere—houses he had yearned to own obliterated, swimming pools upended, cars crushed—but once he got onto the ridge the air was clear and finer than he remembered it.

He walked for maybe a quarter-mile, until he reached a spot where the bushes at the side of the road had been trampled. Curious, he turned off the asphalt and onto the dirt, following the muddied ground towards a spot concealed from human eyes by a wall of trees.

Even before he reached the grove itself, an absurd suspicion began to make the hairs on his neck prickle. The ground had not been churned up by human feet. Animals had been here, in considerable numbers. Nor had they come from a single direction. Paths had been beaten to this place from every conceivable compass point.

He wanted to turn and run, but curiosity overruled his fear. With his heart thumping in his temples, he slipped between the trees.

The grove was deserted. But there was evidence that an extraordinary congregation had gathered here. Hoof marks and paw marks in the churned dirt,

feathers and fur flitting about, splashes and pellets and mounds of excrement spread all around.

And in the middle of the grove, a crack in the earth. Tentatively, he approached it. There was no smoke. The ground was still and cold. Whatever miracle had been here—if any—it had passed.

Or had it? He caught a motion from the corner of his eye, and glancing round saw Duffy appear from between the trees.

„So...“ he said to the dog. „It was all true.“

At the sound of his master’s voice, Duffy came pounding over, jumping up at Ralph’s face to lick him.

„Duffy,“ Ralph said. „Are you listening to me? I said I believe you.“

Duffy just barked and ran in circles.

„Speak to me, damn you!“ Ralph hollered.

The dog barked again, his tail wagging furiously. Then he was away, out of the cool of the grove, glancing back over his shoulder to see if his master was following.

Ralph took one last look at the crack below him, then followed the dog out into the sun, stepping in a dozen different kinds of excrement on the way.

Duffy was still cavorting and barking, and did not let up all the way back to the house. Ralph kept listening, hoping to hear a recognizable phrase (even a word) somewhere in the din. But all he heard was the dog’s bliss at being alive and back with the creature that fed him.

That didn’t answer any of his questions, of course.

But Duffy’s joyful mood was contagious. By the time they came in sight of the rubble, Ralph was already planning the house that would one day replace it.

He would not, however, waste his heart loving it, he decided, in case the vote had gone badly and the animal running ahead of him was pretending simple doghood to keep his master from despair.

