

Fidelus

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It was a deserted part of San Francisco, an area not yet recovered from the World Series Earthquake five years ago. Boards had been pulled away from some of the front and back doors of the condemned buildings still standing. I walked up a steep hillside street, where the pigeons sat upon the telephone lines, like notes on a musical staff. The sun was low upon the bay, and just beginning to turn that orange hue before bidding the city good night. The light burnished the facades in a deepening crimson.

The buildings that had been gutted by fire looked down at me from the black vacant eyes of their windows. I hurried my step. After all, those missing boards meant that this was very likely a neighborhood haunted by creatures of the night - junkies, drunks, the homeless and hopeless who might see me as fair game.

A dog came out through the front door of this three story Victorian structure. He barked twice, and then with the tail wagging he hustled down the front steps and rushed towards me. At first I did not know what I should do, but the dog seemed friendly enough.

I looked up and down the deserted street. Not a soul in sight. The trees rustled slightly in a gentle cool breeze that came down the hill, even as this black Labrador closed in on me, head down, but visibly excited. Three feet away from me he halted. Raising his head he barked, his front paws leaving the ground, as he turned his body to the side. He trotted a half circle and repeated the gesture, only this time upon landing he trotted back several paces the way he had just come. Stopped, then turned back towards me.

I must have grown up watching too many episodes of Lassie, because I could not resist saying, "What is it, girl?" The dog barked twice more, turned towards the Victorian, and looked back to me over its shoulder before trotting back to the stoop. I began to follow. When the dog turned and seen me, it ran in two excited circles, then bounded up the steps and in through the doorway.

As his bushy tail disappeared into the dark void of this once proud yellow house, I paused. I looked up at the place, it did not seem fit for

habitation. Not that the large "condemned" signs had any more to do with my impression, as did the lean of the structure. The white window frames were clearly out of square, and gaps were quite obvious at their joinery. Rain had drawn rust off of the nails onto the pale yellow paint of the clapboard siding, which in the fading light began to look as if the building had been crying tears of blood.

There were drapes, but no other sign of occupancy, save for that black lab, whose head then popped out through the crooked doorway, beckoning me with a bark. I mounted the steps, and he watched for a moment, then retreated back inside, his black lustrous coat fading into the black interior, until they were one.

At the door I paused, sticking my head in I called out, "Hello?" Hardly an echo returned. "Is there anyone there?" A bark, and in the dark, at the second floor landing I could see the yellow lights of the black lab's eyes framed in an almost pitch black void.

Entering this world of shadows, leaving the last of the daylight behind, my eyes began to adjust to the gathering gloom. There wasn't any clutter on the steps leading up, no rubble or traces of disaster, but the hand rail seemed skewed, and some of the balusters had fallen out onto the floor below. The dog darted into an adjoining room upstairs and barked again, following with a short whine.

I mounted those stairs cautiously. They creaked at nearly every step. My heart picked up its pace. What if I should fall through these stairs and be hurt, I wondered. Still I climbed the stairs to where the front windows cast a red square of setting sunlight upon the floor. At the threshold of a door, the silhouette of the lace curtains, gave that square of light the appearance of a red-laced door mat.

Inside of this room the dog, at the far side, framed by two windows, excitedly hopped about and barked, pausing only to nose and whine at a toppled bookcase. It was a huge book case that at some time had toppled over, unleashing its numerous volumes in a large pile in the center of the room between a leather couch and two wingbacked arm chairs, before

coming to rest atop the mound of books.

Then I saw it. I wasn't sure at first, but there seemed to be a shoe, toe down, heel up, at the near edge of the pile of books. Had this book case fallen on the dog's master? "Hellow. Are you all right?" Had some homeless person suffered a mishap? Lucky for him that he has a dog, I thought, and that I happened by. There was no response, so I carefully removed some books from around the leg. "Are you okay in there?" I repeated. Left hand on the book case, the other pulling out books, I could see his pant leg. I reached in to touch him carefully. My hand closed around cloth covered bones.

Looking up across the back of the bookcase, the black lab sat, softly whining. His master had been long dead. Did he die in the quake, or some time after? that would be for the N.E. to find out. In any event, he died a long time ago, yet his faithful friend remained by his side, until help arrived.

I stood up, there was little that I could do. "There not more you can do either, girl." I said to the dog. "Come along. Come." She came over to me and we picked our way out onto the front stoop. I dialed 911, surprised to get such a clear cell signal this side of town. There the dog and I sat, waiting for the authorities, as the sun set slowly in the bay.