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Survivors

BY RICHARD K. SNODGRASS

ILLUSTRATED BY EBERLE

Nuc had been the first sign of peace after Bikini. But now Chaffin was carrying Nuc back—dead—to a too peaceful world. Death came on great wings and in tiny, creeping carriers.

Cradling the dog gently in his arms, Dan Chaffin walked along the dusty, country road. Green ragweeds bordered the road. Each weed was sprinkled with an even film of powdery dust, not made splotchy by raindrops. It had not rained for three weeks.

"Same every June, isn't it, Nuc?" he asked the dog.

The animal made no response.

Not thinking, he glanced down at the brown and white form in his arms, then brought his eyes up quickly, wanting to force the image from his mind. The sightless, staring eyes. The limpness.

He kept forgetting. It didn't seem possible, but his mind

would not accept the dog's death, would not keep his eyes from glancing down at the animal.

He walked along, wanting not to think of it, his blue shirt dark with sweat, his arms numb from the weight. He looked at the side of the road and noticed a cocklebur in the road dust. How many had he cut from the brown and white coat? Five dozen? Six. Impossible to say, after so many years together.

It was always the same, though. Nuc would come up, his pointed ears laid back, his brown eyes apologetic. "Sorry, Dan," the brown eyes seemed to say, "but I caught another bur in my

coat. Can you cut it out, Dan? It's worse than a flea."

Dan smiled, remembering when Vernadsky, the Russian physicist, and he had found Nuc alive after Phase-Seventeen at Bikini. They had been checking the Russian armor section of the island when they found him, trembling and whining, his ears laid back, huddled under the wreckage of a heavy tank—and his coat had been covered with sand burs.

Nuc, sole survivor of the tests that ended war (the newspapers and politicians had said), who could not win the battle of the bur or flea.

But now he was dead. Sightless. Staring.

And carrying him into Monmouth like this, he hated the thought of facing them. They would blame him. Whether he lied or told the truth, the people of Monmouth would say it was his fault the dog was dead. The truth, though simple, would be unacceptable for the townspeople. They would say it had been his fault even if he explained how Nuc just would not go down the dark mine shaft. They all knew how the dog shied away from dark places, and God knows the place was dark enough, abandoned these past thirty years.

He wondered if anyone else

had thought to check the mine during those years. Doubtful. They were too busy basking in their blissful, peaceful occupations. With no more anxiety about the war, they had given up the search for uranium. They had given him up, too, and a lot of other technicians. All over the world, technicians—war technician—found themselves receiving unemployment checks as soon as the *Peace Of Bikini* was signed.

He thought about Vernadsky, wondering if he was wandering around some Russian countryside, checking abandoned mines and carrying a dead dog in his--

He picked up his step. Get to town and get it over with. Wouldn't be too many people uptown on a Tuesday morning. He would see Doc Cudd, first. Everyone knew and trusted old Doc. They had every reason to. He was the best veterinarian and mayor Monmouth had ever had. Understanding, too. He would be able to explain the dog's death to them. Yes, the sooner he got there and got it over with, the better.

The powdery road dust puffed up in front of his boots, and in the gray dirt the soles made a muffled sound . . . Sound!

He stopped, and for the first time since leaving the mine was conscious of the throbbing si-



lence around him. No robins or honeybees or frogs. No roaring jets overhead. No tractors in the cornfields around him.

Nothing but his own heavy breathing disturbed the intense quiet, and he thought of those silent minutes before dawn—the time when the earth seems dead.

He moved on, almost running, anxious for the people and noise and movement of the town, a mile and a half away . . .

The public square was quiet.

There were no shopping women having trouble with their kids, and only three cars were parked around the grassy, tree-shaded Square. Odd, he thought. Almost identical to the way it was at six this morning when Nuc and I left for the mine.

Even the usual six or seven old-timers weren't sitting on the green benches over there, but he guessed they'd quit arguing long enough to go to dinner. And Frank, the cop, was slumped across the steering-wheel of the patrol car. Can't blame him for that. Town's dead. Not a law-breaker within miles.

Taking the sidewalk across the Square, he tried to keep his eyes from the large monument, relieved that the oldtimers weren't there to eye him—and see the dog. They would have looked at the dog, then at the monument,

then back at the dog. They wouldn't say anything, but their eyes would yell, "Old Nuc's dead, an' Dan Chaffin's t' blame, sure."

The damned monument!

The damned marble Nuc with the little brass plate hanging around his neck:

TO DAN CHAFFIN'S DOG
"NUC"

Only living survivor
of the seventeen phase
Bikini tests of April
and May, 1962, which

brought peace and security
to the world.

The People Of Monmouth

Really the people of the world, he thought, remembering the day *AP*, *Time*, *UP* and *Life* reporters came for stories and pictures, followed by the President's citation letter.

He'd been a good dog, a friend, before the publicity, but afterwards the town held dinners for him, wrote poetry about him, and put up the damned monument. Overnight, he became Monmouth's property: overfed, spoiled, famous. They would blame him when it was their fault. Too much publicity. Too many steaks. Only it hadn't lasted long enough for them to kill him outright. Nuc and he had gone down to the Mississippi to fish, hunt and loaf Nuc back into some kind of condition.

Five years ago, he thought,

crossing the intersection. A long time. A wasted, long time to be a peace casualty.

He glanced down Main Street and saw four cars and two semi's parked in front of Hawcalk's Cafe. Funny there were only two other cars parked along the street. Then he noticed Bertdumb's Milk truck and Bowmen's Garbage pick-up further down the street. Slowest morning he'd ever seen. Main was like this at six, seven in the morning, but never at eleven or twelve. Just one of those things. Everyone eating at the same time.

He felt the heat of the pavement inside his boots, wanting to wipe the sweat. No wonder the farmers are complaining for rain. Most anything from the sky would be welcome, even a cloud.

He stopped, his hand on the doorknob of Doc's office door. Funny, the old boy drawing the blinds in the middle of the day? He tried it—locked. Well, he'd be back in a minute. Probably out for dinner.

He leaned back against the blue tile wall, and the coolness of it was relaxing against his shirt. Now, if only the town wasn't too bitter about the—he glanced quickly back at the drawn Venetian blinds, feeling a light finger of fear move across his stomach

muscles. Then the finger began jabbing, almost making him sick. The sweat was drying on his face, and suddenly, in the shadow of the doorway, he was cold.

The impossible was again around him.

Everywhere, the intense, beating silence. It had come in from the road and now stood on Main Street. As he heard it, vermin crawled through his scalp—and the second realization exploded in his mind. Twelve o'clock noon on a sunny street running through Monmouth, Illinois—twelve o'clock and he had not yet seen one walking, breathing, talking human being. Only Frank, the cop, who had been slumped across the—

He swallowed, stepping back into the blinding sunlight.

"Hello?" he asked weakly, then yelled, "Hello! Hello, there! Anyone? Hello?"

The silence yelled back.

The muscles in his arms were tight with cramps from the dog's weight as he turned and half-ran toward Quinn's Place. Quinn'd be open. Always was. He'd order a beer and tell Quinn all this. Quinn'd talk back in his loud voice, laughing and explaining today was a holiday. "Everyone in Monmouth's gone to a parade over in Galesburg," Quinn would say. Then he'd pay up, drink the

beer from the cool, sweating glass and walk outside in time to see them coming back from the next town, their cars clogging Route 34.

The dog was heavy, and he wondered if he should put him down. Come back for him later. No. He couldn't. Anyone saw him do it they wouldn't like it.

He hurried past Ebersole's Magazine Shop, Parolee's Dress Shop, the white dust-covers thrown across the dress-racks—past the R. Atlass Rendering Service office, Cort Cigar Store and Dart's Used Cars showroom. In front of Quinn's, he stopped.

The door stood open. It always did. Entering, blinking in the almost dark room, smelling the dead beer, he felt a wild relief sweep over him. He wanted to sing and shout. The crazy ordeal was over because even though Quinn wasn't around, Dix Joseph, drunk as usual, was slumped over the polished mahogany bar.

Never in his life did he think he would be glad to see the old fool, but now he felt a warmth, even kinship toward the drunk. He'd buy him a drink, good whiskey, tell him about the dog and find out why they had all gone to Galesburg.

"Dix," he said, laying the dog on a red leatherette stool. "Dix,

you told liar, wake up. Drinks on me."

That's funny? "Dix? Dix!"

He grabbed the old man's collar, jerking up—then let go when he saw the face, the eyes. Cold, sightless, staring eyes. The body slid slowly to the spit-covered floor.

He heard the sobbing, screaming voice, and recognizing it, forced his lips shut. He stared down at Dix for an unbelieving minute, feeling the spasmodic tremble wrenching his body, then scooped up the dog, turned and ran out the door and down the street, his footsteps echoing among the still buildings, his heart pounding . . . pounding . . . pounding . . .

"Lord, God," he murmured, gasping for air, "have mercy on—"

He stopped, numb with fear, in the open door of Hawcalk's Cafe, the trucks and cars parked at the curb behind him. The spasmodic jerks possessed his body, and he began sobbing, biting his lower lip. They were posing. A joke. Not possible. Impossible!

"Get up!" he screamed, the sobs growing. "Get up from the floor!"

But the nine people did not move—remaining by the counter and tables, sprawled grotesquely,

each staring in a different direction.

"Lord, Christ in Heaven . . . Father and—" He broke off, walking to the main counter, the dog suddenly unbearably heavy. He dumped him on the chip-paint counter like a sack of grain, then straightened up slowly, staring at a plate of cold ham and eggs a foot from the dog's tail. They don't look very good, he thought quietly, bringing his eyes back to the animal.

"You're to blame," he whispered hoarsely, looking down at Nuc as if he were a newspaper spread on the counter. "You wouldn't go down the shaft and you were dead when I came out—you're to blame and—" His hands lunged down, grabbing the dog around the neck, feeling the cold collar and fur—squeezing tighter . . . tighter . . . watching

the eyes bulging . . . straining . . . bulging . . .

Then he let go quickly, hearing the body thump back against the counter. He let go because of the tickling sensation on his right forefinger. He planted his elbows on the counter, and looked closely, his mind charged with hope—with fear. When he saw what it was, his scream filled the cafe, vibrating a loose plate glass in the pie case.

The scream died and he stood there, frozen, an insane chuckle rising in his throat. The chuckle became a laugh; the laugh a scream as he watched what was causing the tickling sensation crawl slowly up his finger toward his knuckle.

It was a flea.

And from outside, overhead, like the mild hum of a mosquito somewhere in a dark bedroom, he heard the ships—returning.
