

Mark Mann

Fractions

So my roommate Kogan comes in and says, "Look at this," and he drops half a classified section on the table, and I say "What?" and he tells me to look in the upper right, but I still don't get it so he gets tight and taps hard on it a few times and then I see that it says "Free Greyhounds" over a telephone number.

"Maybe they only have three legs," I say, but Kogan doesn't think it's too funny.

"I'm calling," he says.

He talks long enough to write down the address and the time he should come. When he hangs up he says, "It's not that far. After dinner."

"I thought we're going into Nogales tonight."

"We are," he says, and snaps a beer off its ring. "We are."

"Where're we going to put a dog that big?" I say, but Kogan hasn't figured that out yet.

"Maybe we could sell it," he says. "I mean, they're free, so let's go over there and check it out."

"If they're worth money, then how come they're free?"

"Don't ask me," he says. "Ask the guy who's giving them

away.”

On the way there we stop off at Skaggs to pick up a couple six-packs. We finish two cans each before we find the right street. The light is fading but we finally come to the place, a rusting trailer out in a field at the end of a dirt road. Most of the field is fenced off. There's a truck behind the trailer, the kind with slots to carry dogs, and angled up beside the truck is a '69 Goat, gun-metal, mint.

A woman, sitting and smoking on an old loveseat by the front door, watches us approach. She looks young by the way she's dressed, a white halter and white jeans, and by the way she wears her hair, pulled back tight on her head into a short tail that curls to one side.

We get out of the car, but the woman doesn't get up. She keeps watching. Her nipples poke out through her shirt, but she's not as young as she looked back there. She has the feet around the eyes and the pudgy, pitted flesh on the backs of her arms. Still, she looks pretty good for someone who's maybe forty-five.

Kogan says hi to her, and she takes a long hit on the cigarette. She looks us over some more, then she says, “You're the one who called, I bet. You're here to get yourself a free dog.” She says this like she knows something, and the corners of her mouth aren't pinched as closely now, rising lightly into a grin.

“We'd like to take a look,” Kogan says.

“Bill,” she yells at the screen door, “they're here about the dogs,” but nobody answers. She pushes herself up from the loveseat and disappears into the trailer, the door clapping behind her. I hear her say, “Will you come on,” and then a man puts his head out the door and says he'll be with us in a minute. He's from the country or the south, maybe Texas. He has an accent.

Kogan reaches into the car and pulls off two beers. We drink and wait a few minutes before the guy, Bill, comes back out. He's tall and thick with a big round beard, and when he turns into what's left of the sun the light picks up the red in it. The woman

returns with a fresh cigarette and falls back on the loveseat. She draws her legs up and splays them along the cushion. She doesn't seem to care about anything one way or the other.

"You wait here at the fence," Bill says to us, pointing. "I'll bring them on out."

A few minutes later he comes out of a long tin shed with about ten greyhounds following him. They follow him on the other side of the fence to where we are. All of the dogs are muzzled, but they're beautiful anyway, especially the blacks. They're excited and weave back and forth in front of us, a single current making passes at the fence, heads up, ears back. Every now and then the ears twitch forward. After a while they calm down.

"They're good-looking animals," I say to Bill.

"Sure they are," he says.

I ask him if I can touch one and he collars a brindle with a choke and parks it sideways along the fence. When it looks over at Kogan, I can see the white crescent of its eye. Its head keeps close to Bill's knee, and he closes his hand on its ear so that the top of it drops out of his fist like a flower from a vase. The coat is smooth and cool. I can tell it's outside a lot from the coolness of it, the cool air that gets inside a coat.

"How come you're giving them away?" I say.

"That wasn't my idea," he says. "This lady down in Tuscon heard about it and got me to give her a couple weeks to see if she could find people to take them. She took one herself. She put the ad in the paper."

"Heard about what?" Kogan says.

"Don't get me wrong now," he says. "I mean, I'm in business here. I race these dogs, and if they can't turn the fractions, then they're no good to me. Too much to feed. They gotta be put down."

After this sinks in I tell him that it seems a little rough, and I see him tighten all over.

"What's that mean," he says.

"I don't mean anything," I say. "Forget it."

He shrugs it off. "Okay," he says. "Forget it. They never see it coming anyway, they think it's dinnertime." And as an afterthought: "If I can find the time I might just go ahead and unload them all down in Mexico. They run them slower down there. It's a pain in the neck, though. Some of those Mexican boys are slick as owl shit."

Kogan says, "Sure, I understand."

I pet the dog again, and Bill lets go of the ear. "Well, what do you think?" he says.

"I don't know," I say, looking up at Kogan. "We live in an apartment."

Bill rakes his beard a few times. "They're fine if you run them good," he says. "Takes the edge off when they're good and tired."

"We can take turns," Kogan says to me. "Change off every day."

"I don't know."

"Come on," Kogan says. "You can sit in the park and let it fly around on its own."

Bill puts the muzzle back on and lets the dog loose. "You know they been coursed, don't you," he says.

I don't know what he means. Kogan pretends that he's chewing something so he doesn't have to answer. Bill knows that neither one of us knows what he's talking about, but he waits like a teacher for one of us to ask.

"What's 'coursed'?" I finally say.

"You seen my track out there," he says, jacking his thumb over his shoulder. "They been coursed for racing. Trained on rabbits. Once you sharpen up the instinct like that, once they get the taste, they'll go after just about anything small that moves. You don't have a cat or anything, do you?"

I shake my head.

“No small dog or a small kid around your place?”

“No.”

“Then everything oughta be fine if you keep it leashed. Whyn’t you guys talk it over.”

Kogan and I go back to the car. “Let’s roll,” I say. “This guy’s jerking us.”

Kogan looks dismayed.

“I’m not living in an apartment with a dog who kills small things that move,” I say. “Let’s go.”

“We could sell it down in Mexico like he said he’s going to,” he says, but he knows it’s hopeless.

“We’re gonna think about it,” I yell across to Bill. “We’ll call you.”

“By Sunday,” he yells back. “Sunday’s the last day.”

We should be in Nogales in less than an hour. Kogan’s driving over the limit because he’s buzzed. It’s too late to get any of the free shots of tequila or mezcal the storekeepers pour for the Americans who cross over for the day. I guess they figure if you’re not drunk yet you’re not the kind who’s likely to spend much money regardless. I prefer the cantinas anyway, especially the ones with patios on the street. I saw a good fight at a place like that once. This little Mexican, no bigger than me, worked over some heavy-muscle type from Phoenix who had been bouncing off people all night. The Mexican was very fast, and it was beautiful the way he took that guy apart.

Kogan pulls off on the shoulder to piss. It’s very dark and bugs are flicking through the dust in the headlight beams, which break when Kogan cuts through them. I look out on the desert for anything there, anything solid to fix on, a big Saguaro maybe, but we’re nowhere and it’s dark and empty and no matter how hard I look it doesn’t lighten up. It’s like chasing something you always

used to catch but now it's always up ahead, just out of reach, and you don't even need to see it anymore, you can taste it in your mind so it must be a memory.

I light a match over my wrist to see what time it is. I hope Kogan gets on with it so we can get the hell going. I hit the horn and it lets out a hard, shattering note which should juice him good, which should crack through his bones. Things break in on you, zing, just like that, even when you're looking out. You get to a point and you don't even know it. You're somewhere else, and then the time comes.