



THE FARTHEST YOU'LL EVER HIT

BY JAKE LEMKOWITZ



It was later that Jason decided he was going to kill his dog. His dad worked the grill in a Detroit Tigers hat and drank a piña colada out of a pineapple. Everyone was drinking piña coladas. It was a barbecue. There was the smell of pork, and there was the ocean like a great big sequined bathing suit. The dog was still at the vet. Jason had never thought about killing the dog before, though he tried to lose Crumb on walks and locked him outside of the house more times than he could count. And there was that camping trip when Jason threw the dog a Frisbee dangerously close to the side of a cliff. He had called Crumb

back at the last second though, and let the Frisbee float away slowly like the end of a firework.

So he had thought about getting rid of the dog, but never of seriously killing it. It would be wrong. You can't just kill an animal for no reason, and it wasn't just his dog, either. It was his whole family's. Why? It was just a feeling, that's all. The way Crumb looked at Jason with those bangs in his eyes, it made him think about sandy towels. There was Crumb, watching Jason at the breakfast table, watching him in the bathroom, asleep and refusing to move out of the doorway when Jason came home from school. Sitting on the dresser, sitting in the car in the t-shirt Jason's mother made the dog wear when it was cold. There was the smell he left on Jason's clothes, the smell that followed everywhere. Crumb even made it hard to swim in the ocean, the way he would stand on the beach and stare.

Jason never got to see Crumb as a puppy. Jason's father had gotten the dog from a colleague at the military hospital, where he worked as a doctor, when the dog was already four years old. Maybe that's why Jason was just never able to warm up to him.

Jason was sitting on the back porch drinking about a gallon of grapefruit juice and wearing a pair of pants that didn't fit him the right way. They were too tight, because they were baseball pants. His father had bought them for him the summer before. They weren't the pair he liked at all. At least the barbecue was almost over. The food was all right, but he hated being forced to

hang around the other kids. All they ever talked about was who the tourists were that week. Tonight it was all about the new super yacht down in the cove on the south side of the island. Jason had already heard all about it. That it had two Jacuzzis on its deck. That someone had seen a motorcycle on it, and a man, and somebody else had seen a woman sunbathing topless. Jason wiped the grapefruit juice from his mouth and onto his not-favorite pair of baseball pants. He wiped the grapefruit juice on his pants, because he was watching a girl he had never seen before.

She was showing all the other girls at the party how good she was at the hoola hoop, and she was good. Her hair and everything she wore was yellow. Jason had never seen her before. It was a very religious moment. The girl had one hoop around her waist, and another on each arm. All life on earth seemed dependent upon them. It was dark, but Jason could see her just fine now in the mayonnaise porch light, shaking it slow.

"Hey Jason, catch!" his father yelled from over by the grill.

Jason turned around in time to see his father throw him a grilled fish sandwich. It hit Jason in the face and fell to the ground. Everybody laughed, especially the girl with the hoola hoops. His father knew that Jason couldn't catch. When the barbecue was over and all the guests had left, Jason's mother went to pick up the dog from the vet.

"Do you want to come and see what the doctor has to say, Jason?" his mother asked. She walked

by him in the kitchen with the last of the mustard fingerprint glasses on a tray.

“No, not really.” Jason opened the refrigerator and took out the leftover pasta salad his mother had put away a moment before.

“More pasta salad? I didn’t know you liked pasta salad that much.” She started to wash her hands. “But that’s fine, Jason, maybe it’s for the best you don’t come. I don’t want to...I wouldn’t want you to be upset.”

“Are you kidding me?” his father said, striding into the room. “The kid is tough. It’s going to take more than a veterinarian to scare him. You’re just tired, right Jase?” He slapped Jason on the back as he passed, right through the kitchen and out the screen door into the backyard.

“Yeah. I think I’m going to bed,” Jason said.

“Good idea,” his mother told him. “Just two more days of Spring Break for you. You better start getting rested up.”

Jason was on a hovercraft someplace between asleep and awake, when he heard his mom coming back into the house. He was confused at first, because it was so late, but it was definitely his mom. He recognized the sound of her walk up the stairs, little triplet drum rolls. Jason had to pee from drinking so much grapefruit juice. He rolled out his sherbet colored bedspread and walked out into the hallway towards the bathroom. There was a small shaft of light coming out from underneath his parents’ door. He stopped and listened. He could hear his mother crying.

“Well,” he could hear his father say, “what do we do about old Crumb?”

“I don’t know,” his mother said. “I just can’t. I just can’t do it. But the money—”

“It’s alright. We’ve got to do something.” His father talked very quietly for a little while.

Then Jason heard his mother say, “Henry!”

“Just relax. Let’s not talk about it now. We’ll both take off early from the base tomorrow, and we can talk about it then.”

The shaft of light disappeared, and the sound of their voices turned off. Jason went to the bathroom, and peed for fifty seconds. He timed it.

There had been something wrong with Crumb for a while. He wasn’t a healthy dog. He would stand in one spot for a long time, and it would be apparent that he could not move at all, even if he wanted to. On the morning of the barbecue, Crumb collapsed on top of Jason’s favorite pair of pants. Jason told his mother, and she immediately whisked Crumb away to the vet, favorite pants and all. She came back from this first trip with tears on her face just as the first guests arrived. Somewhere along the way, she had lost Jason’s pants.

Jason lay in bed and thought about what he had heard through the door. The dog was old. We’ve got to do something, his father had said. As he lay there, Jason knew that the next day his parents were going to have to decide whether or not to kill the dog. His mother would never let them do it. She would want to keep it even after it was blind and deaf and they had to put it in a

stroller to take on walks. He imagined his father in his Detroit Tigers hat. He'd have to go along with her, either way. This was Jason's chance to be a hero, like the man he had heard about with the huge new yacht, or the general at the base. Jason's bed was soft and cold. Fifty seconds. That's a long time to pee.

Jason woke up after both his parents had already left to go to work at the military hospital. He picked out a t-shirt with a picture on the front of a surfer riding the lava of an erupting volcano. Then Jason put on a pair of kind of new sneakers, and angrily, his not-at-all favorite pair of pants. He went down the stairs and into the den. There was Crumb, lying on a bed of pillows on the floor.

"You better have moved by the time I get back," Jason said. He went into the kitchen and got some grapefruit juice. When he came back to the den, Crumb was still in the same place. "I told you to move," he said. Crumb opened his eyes, and they stared at one another. Then Jason walked over to the window, and looked at a palm tree in the back yard. It looked like it was being sucked up out of the ground into the sky.

Jason went upstairs into his parents' bedroom and opened his father's closet. In the back was a lock box. Jason took it out, and set it on the floor. Then he turned the dial three times to the left FOUR, twice to the right FOURTEEN, and once to the left NINETY-FIVE. There was little click. Easy, it had worked first try. The combination was Jason's birthday. Jason could feel his hands

sweat. He flipped open the lid, and looked inside. There it was, his great-grandfather's gun, a rusted silver six-shooter with a horse head etched into the handle. Jason picked it up. It was cold and heavy. He opened the chamber and looked inside. It was empty. The bullets were floating around the bottom of the lockbox like tea leaves. Jason picked them up one by one and loaded the gun. Then he closed the chamber back up and spun it around. It sounded just like he remembered, like when his father had shown him. His father had said that the gun was symbolic of the family's long military tradition. The chamber sounded like the Wheel Of Fortune. Jason's grandmother had been on Wheel Of Fortune once. She had lost. What a drag. That was the solution to the final puzzle she lost on. After that, the expression had kind of become the family motto.

Jason put down the six-shooter and closed the box, making sure to hear it lock. Then he put the box back inside of the closet, and stuck the gun in his pants. He stood in front of his parents' mirror and looked at himself. You could see the handle sticking out from underneath his shirt, so Jason went to his room to put on a bigger shirt that he never wore. It had a picture of a wolf howling at the moon. Smoke was coming out of the wolf's mouth, and the smoke was turning into another wolf. Walking to the garage with the gun in his pants, Jason had an epiphany. God must know the combination to every safe in the world. It was a good feeling.

In the garage, he took the shovel from the cor-

ner with all the gardening supplies, and returned to the den. It looked like Crumb was asleep. For a second, Jason thought that maybe Crumb had died without him. He smelled alive enough. Jason picked up the leash from the couch.

“Come on boy,” he said. Crumb made a drinking noise. Jason hooked the leash onto Crumb’s collar and gave it a yank. The dog shakily lifted up onto his legs, but refused to budge. “Come on,” Jason said again, and began to drag Crumb across the hardwood. Poor dog, Jason thought. They crossed through the kitchen, and Jason stopped by the sliding screen door. I’ll give him one more chance, he said to himself. “Sit boy,” Jason said. “Sit.” Nothing. “Sit,” he said. The dog leaned forward and coughed on Jason’s shoe. Jason took a breath. He opened the door and walked out into the sunlight and the sound of the ocean. It was hot. I should have worn shorts, Jason thought.

He pulled Crumb out onto the lawn. Where? Jason surveyed the premises, and decided on the spot beneath the palm tree he had noticed earlier. It would be a good spot. It would be a good place. There wasn’t anyone around. Way off over the water, he could see some people water skiing, but they were so far away you couldn’t hear them, so that the water skiers seemed like memories of people water skiing hundreds of years ago. Leash in one hand, shovel in the other, Jason led Crumb to the palm tree. When they got there, the dog lay down on the ground. Jason took the six-shooter out of his pants. He lifted it up with both hands, and aimed so that Crumb sat right in the middle

of the sight. As if he knew, the dog stood up. Jason pulled the trigger.

It was hard to say whether it was the loudest thing Jason had ever heard, or the quietest. For a second it sounded like someone dropping a sack of flour on the floor, and there was nothing else. Nothing. Light, noise, everything faded away... And then everything rushed back in at once in a tidal wave, a thousand times louder than before. The ocean was like a million gallons of piña colada being poured onto concrete, and the wind was like a lawnmower. The dog fell over, blood running down his back leg. Colors popped into focus like truck headlights. Jason took a step forward, and the dog burst off of the ground and jumped through a wall of bushes into the neighbor’s backyard. Jason stood there, his mouth open. This was not supposed to happen.

Jason cleared the bush with a six-shooter in one hand and a shovel in the other. “Oh no no no,” he kept saying. As he stepped into the neighbor’s yard, he saw Crumb turning the corner around their house. The neighbors were very old, a husband and wife. The husband had been a Regular Army officer. He was asleep in a lawn chair already, at noon. A swarm of butterflies hovered around the slumbering neighbor. He must have been watering plants when he fell asleep, because next to the lawn chair was a running hose, and the backyard was completely flooded with water. Jason splashed through as quietly as he could so as not to wake the old guy up, and turned the corner.

Crumb was bleeding a little and poised by the edge of the big hill that gave everyone their Hawaiian ocean views. The hill ran all the way down to the water. Now the dog was trapped. If he shot Crumb now, Jason knew that he would be sure to wake the retired major, but he didn't have a choice. He needed both hands, so keeping his eyes fixed on his dog, he lowered the shovel down to the ground, and dropped it. The second it left his hand, Crumb turned and jumped. Dog suicide, Jason thought. He rushed over to the edge of the hill and looked down. There was Crumb, somehow sprinting down an almost straight vertical drop on three legs. Jason watched him go. Then, tentatively, he put his arms out at his sides for balance, closed his eyes, and stepped over the precipice. As he ran, he screamed. It helped. I'm going to get you dog, he thought. You are not getting away.

The hill leveled off, and Jason began to chase Crumb down the road that split the mountain in two. The dog had a pretty good lead. It seemed that no matter how fast Jason ran, he couldn't get close enough. Every time he was near, Jason would have to put down the shovel to aim the gun. And every time, Crumb would run out of range before Jason had a chance to get a shot off. It went on like this for over a mile, until Crumb suddenly cut towards a retractable driveway fence. Desperate, Jason tried to fire the six-shooter with just one hand while running, and the gun flew backwards out of his grasp and onto

the ground. It lay there and looked embarrassed about the smoke coming out of its barrel.

Jason turned around to pick it up, and heard what sounded like a car coming. "What a drag," he said to himself. He ran with the shovel in hand back to where the gun had fallen, stuck it in his pocket, and pulled his t-shirt down over the front of his pants. He just had enough time to get to the side of the road, lean on the shovel, and look up at the clouds, before seven guys on mopeds rode by. Jason couldn't tell whether they noticed him or not, but they were really shirtless. As soon as they had all passed, Jason ran across the road and climbed over the retractable driveway fence and the PRIVATE PROPERTY sign, and continued the pursuit.

The driveway was a long dirt path that had weeds growing in the middle part. It was lined on either side by palm trees. Past the palm trees was an overgrown lawn that spilled over the horizon out of sight, and Crumb was hobbling over it. Jason could feel his legs starting to burn now, and his arms were sore too. Stupid shovel. Pretend you're in the army, he thought to himself, and he kept going. He ran to the edge of the knoll, and looked down to see Crumb limping by a large rectangular building. A dusty looking pickup truck and a shiny orange motorcycle were parked in front, and the building had a big painted sign on it that read, RAINBOW FLOWER FARM. Behind the building were miles and miles of flowers, the kind on kitchen tables and leis.

Jason was crying, but he didn't realize with all the sweat. He watched Crumb fade into a ripple somewhere inside the flowers, a blanket of color that went on for as far as Jason could see, like living television static.

The flowers were high, but Crumb was just tall enough for his ears to poke up over them, and Jason followed. Butterflies hovered over everything, thousands of tiny kites. Jason was gaining fast, leaving a path of red and blue petals as he went, the shovel slung over his shoulder. The butterflies were everywhere. They brushed up against Jason's face as he ran and made him go faster. Jason tripped, and pulled himself back up. The dog's insides must have given way to the disease and the gunshot wound, because he was just barely walking now. I've got you, Jason thought. He took out the six-shooter, and used it to knock off a butterfly that had landed on his ear. Then he held the gun out in front of him. His arms were tired and his hands shook. Jason closed one eye, and tried to aim. But before he had a chance to fire a shot, the dog made a noise like a bad mattress, and collapsed. Jason rushed over, and dropped to one knee. He pushed the bangs out of Crumb's eyes. They were closed. Then Jason froze. He heard something. Voices were coming from the direction of the Rainbow Flower Farm building. He threw himself on his stomach and tried not to breathe, but it was already hard enough to get any air. He was drowning in flowers and butterflies. Crumb's face lay inches away from his.

Jason heard the voices coming closer, and stared at his dead dog. He could feel the flowers beneath his body. Had somebody seen him? Why hadn't he thought to worry about who owned the pickup truck and the orange motorcycle? Just a moment before, he'd thought that it was all over.

"No need to get anxious. The hospital on the base is a real good one," Jason heard the voice of an old man say.

"Yes, I hope so. It was so stupid, a stupid accident." The other man was much younger, and had some sort of heavy European accent. "She had never gone scuba diving before. She did not know what the signals were."

"Mmm. Well, we usually only sell to distributors, not individuals, even if they are buying in bulk. But...I suppose we can make an exception."

The voices were drawing nearer by the second.

"You have no need to worry about the money. I will buy enough flowers to fill my entire yacht, a get well present for when she comes back tonight. Your flowers here are beautiful." It was the man from the yacht, the man with the Jacuzzis and the motorcycle, Jason realized.

"Thank you," the old man said, "but I hope you understand exactly how many flowers one gross really is." The footsteps stopped. Jason pulled himself a little closer to Crumb.

"It does not matter. May I ask you something? A question?" the European man asked. "Do you have a wife? A girlfriend?"

"No," the old man said apologetically. "I don't." The man from the yacht gave a sad laugh.

"If you were smart, you would love women like champagne."

"Well...what kind of flowers did you have in mind?"

Jason couldn't make out the next part of the conversation. The butterflies were torturing him, and he was scared. He put one arm around Crumb's body.

Then he heard the old man say, "Let me take you to my greenhouse." And then the voices got fainter and fainter, and there was the sound of a pickup truck starting and driving off. Jason stood up. He was alone again. Well, almost. Crumb was a nice dog, Jason thought. He picked Crumb up with both hands, and hoisted the dog over one shoulder. Using the shovel as a walking stick, Jason slowly made his way out of the flowers.

When he got back to the gate with the PRIVATE PROPERTY sign, Jason put the dog down. Crumb was old and heavy. Jason knew how to get back to his home further up the mountain, but it was too far to carry Crumb the whole way. He looked back at the row of palm trees lining the Rainbow Flower Farm driveway. They were very tall. After some deliberation, Jason decided on the third one on the left, because God loves things in threes.

He waited for some sort of feeling to come before he started. He felt the same, so he waited some more. Then he began to dig. At first it was easy, but the ground became hard after about a foot deep. The shovel would just bounce off. It

was like trying to cut bread with a bad knife: frustrating. The sweat dripped down and got in Jason's eyes. Then Jason got the idea to stand on the shovel. It sunk down a little bit, and Jason scooped the dirt out. Then he did it again. He continued on like this for a long time, working at the middle, and then going around the perimeter. He had discovered a good way to dig a hole. There was a breeze and his sweat began to cool him down. The palm trees swayed a little and made noises like books. There was a hole, and a palm tree, and the dog on the ground next to it, and Jason digging, and a pile of dirt.

Jason took the way back home that went past the base. He was afraid of running into his parents along the way, but that was unlikely, and it was the way he had to go. The wire fences that the Army put up could already be seen, set ten feet away from either side of the road. And there was the faint sound of helicopters. Jason was walking and thinking about the dog. He wasn't paying too much attention.

"Hey!"

Jason wheeled around and looked at who was behind him. Three boys were standing in the middle of the street. The tallest boy had a baseball bat. He probably owned it. "How old are you?" the tall boy asked.

"Eleven," Jason told them.

"Why do you have a shovel?" the shortest of the three said.

"Burying my dog," Jason told them.

"You want to play baseball?" the kid with the bat that may or may not have belonged to him, asked. "We really need five more people, but we can play with just one more."

"I don't know," Jason said. "I don't think I really feel like playing baseball today."

The third boy laughed. He had sunglasses on, and his sunglasses had a neon strap attached to them that went around his neck. "If you don't want to play baseball, why are you wearing those baseball pants?"

Then they all laughed and waited to hear what Jason had to say. They really had him there. Jason didn't want to tell them that the pants he was wearing were not his normal pants. He didn't really feel like telling them that his mother had lost the pair he usually wore taking his sick dog to the vet, and that he didn't like to play at all. What could he say?

"Okay. I'll play," Jason said.

"Great. Follow us." The three boys led the way.

"Can you play third base?" the short one asked as they began to climb over the United States Army wire fence. In here? Jason thought.

"Sure," Jason said, and climbed up after them.

They went through some trees and down a hill at the bottom of which was a little valley that was a baseball field. There were about ten boys sitting around the infield. Most of them had hats on.

"Hey!" the tall boy yelled as they came down the hill. "We got someone!" Everyone on the field stood up simultaneously and put their mitts over

their eyes to see. They looked like the same kind of animal.

"And guess what, Charlie?" the boy with the sunglasses and the neon strap attachment yelled as they got closer.

The boy who must have been Charlie yelled back, "What?"

"He plays third base!" This made everybody laugh, but especially the boy with the sunglasses, and especially not Charlie. Jason and the three boys reached the infield and everyone instinctively gathered around the pitcher's mound. The field looked like it must have been professionally cared for.

"But third base is my favorite position," Charlie said.

"Shoot it out," somebody suggested from an outside part of the circle, before Jason could say anything about not caring.

"Rock, Paper, Scissors," Charlie said. Everyone agreed.

"One wins it," another boy offered.

"Okay," Jason said. What would a third baseman pick, he wondered? The circle tightened in, around Jason and Charlie.

Jason could tell that every person in the circle was mouthing each word as it was said: "Rock... Paper...Scissors...SHOOT!"

Everyone looked at Charlie and Jason's hands. "Charlie loses!" they all yelled. Charlie turned his hat around backwards. He knew he was going to get stuck playing catcher.

"Alright then," the boy with the bat said. "Let's

play."

The first two innings were three up, three down, and Jason didn't have to do anything. Neither team could get a hit off the other's pitcher. In the third inning, Jason came up to bat. He was last in the order. The first pitch flew by underneath him, and the catcher threw it back. Jason stepped out of the batter's box and took a couple of practice swings, like he had seen others do so many times before. He tried to remember. The second pitch came whizzing in. Jason swung and missed. He could feel his grandfather's gun pressing up against the inside of his leg. The catcher threw the ball back. Jason set himself at the plate. The pitcher spit and leaned in. The catcher pounded his fist into his mitt. The pitcher wound up, took a step, and released. Jason looked straight ahead and swung as hard as he could. POP. The noise vibrated through Jason's hands, down his fingertips, and across his entire body like chocolate syrup in milk. The perfect sound. Jason watched the ball disappear. He ran the bases, but he could have just as easily walked. When he got there, Jason slid into home plate for no reason. There was dirt on his baseball pants now. The six-shooter almost fell out, but didn't.

"That's the farthest you'll ever hit," the catcher said to him. Jason's teammates swarmed around.

"Hey, what's your name?" they asked.

The other team's pitcher gave up a few more runs before striking out the side. Jason jogged back onto the field to play defense, and picked up the

mitt left for him at third base. The first player up at bat for the other team was the boy with the neon strap attachment sunglasses. On the first pitch, he got a little bit of noise on it and smacked a line drive right down the third-base line. Don't close your eyes, Jason thought. He stuck his arm out, and felt the ball smack into his left hand. He looked into his glove, and then carefully raised it up into the air above his head. The infield began to cheer. Then they all stopped. Three camouflage drop-top military jeeps with mounted machine guns were rolling out of the trees somewhere in deep right.

A man got out of one of the jeeps, and spoke into a megaphone. "This baseball field is the property of the United States Military—"

Everybody ran. Jason didn't even remember to take his shovel along with him.

Jason walked home with a smile on his face the whole way. His legs ached though, and he went slowly, so that it was late afternoon by the time he got there. He opened the front door and looked around. There were no lights on.

"Hello?" he called, but there was no answer. Jason started towards the kitchen. He hadn't eaten anything all day, and had worked up quite an appetite. Then Jason stopped. His father was sitting at the kitchen table, alone in the dark. He was wearing his blue operating scrubs and his Detroit Tigers hat. In front of him, on the kitchen table, were dozens upon dozens of identical paper airplanes. Jason watched his father pick up a piece

of paper from a neat pile, and begin to fold it. An entire fleet of paper airplanes. It was strange to see so many of one thing exactly the same. Jason felt a hand on his shoulder, and looked back to see his mother. She put her finger to her lips, and motioned for Jason to come with her into the living room.

“What happened to you? You’re filthy,” she whispered.

“I was just with some friends,” he whispered back. “What’s going on?”

“Sit down on the couch, Jason,” she told him. “I think that you’re old enough that I can tell you this. Your father had a rough day at the hospital. There was a civilian, a scuba diving accident. A woman.” She looked back towards the kitchen. “She didn’t make it.”

“Oh,” Jason said.

“I know you wouldn’t remember, but your father, he gets like this. There was nothing he could do. But I don’t want you to worry. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Jason said, very serious.

“Now listen,” she said, “do you know where Crumb is?”

“I don’t,” Jason told her.

“Your father must have had it all arranged while we were out of the house, then.” She sighed. “That’s just like him. I’m so sorry Jason, but Crumb- he’s gone. It was his bones, you know, he was sick. There was nothing we could do.” She hugged him close and didn’t let go. Jason didn’t know what to say, so he was silent.

After what seemed like a long time, his mother let Jason go and wiped some dirt from his face.

“Oh, but we shouldn’t mention anything about it to your father now,” she said. “He loved that dog, too. In fact, it might be best if we waited at least a couple of days. I don’t think you should go into the kitchen, either. Can I make you anything to eat?”

“Sure,” Jason said.

He ate, and took a shower, and got into his pajamas. He felt clean and good. When he was sure that the coast was clear, Jason went back into his parents’ room and put the heavy metal six-shooter back into the lockbox in the closet. He crept downstairs and peeked into the kitchen. His parents were both there, sitting at the table, his father still making perfect paper airplanes one after the other. There were hundreds now. Neither of his parents spoke. Then Jason went to bed. He lay there for a long time like a suction cup dart on the wall, holding on to the night for as long as he could while slowly, inevitably, peeling off into sleep.

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