

The Right Thing to Do

The old dog was snoring again. Wyatt's foot was beside one scarred old flank, and he nudged it gently. The grey muzzle came up and the dog blinked rheumy eyes at the sunlit yard, searching for the source of the disturbance.

A few fowls pecked away at the hard-packed earth by the storeroom, their *kok-kok-kok-korrrrk* the only sound on the still morning air. With a sigh, the old dog flopped over on his side, flaccid old mouth audibly composing itself again for sleep. Wyatt glanced at his watch and settled back into the collapsing verandah chair.

There was a scraping sound behind the storeroom where Petros was emptying the big, black porridge pot into the dog's dishes. From the shady side of the house the two young dogs emerged at full tilt, heading for the sound, ears and tails streaming. A string of abuse and a yelp and a moment later, the old servant appeared, making for the house, muttering and shaking his head with an occasional crisp, Bantu click of disgust. He waggled the pot by the handle and a shower of scraps fell out, sending the fowls into a dusty flurry of wings and squawks as they raced for this windfall.

Wyatt swung his chair around to afford himself a view over the orchard of the far distant hills. The old dog stirred in his sleep at the vibrations sensed through the cracked concrete of the stoep. The clatter of the now empty dishes moved him not at all, as the young dogs sought the last morsels.

As usual, he'd missed his breakfast and Wyatt considered fetching him a bowl of something to the stoep, but it seemed pointless.

They remained as they were, the man and the dog, unmoving except for the occasional twitch of a paw in some dream memory of past chases.

With the livestock gone, and the labour all paid off and departed, the farm was very quiet. Petros would be somewhere in the dark old house, doing what it was that Petros had always done at this time of the morning for as long as Wyatt could remember.

He realized that he didn't know how Petros spent his time and supposed that the old man hadn't known or cared either. The food was cooked and served and the beds made and washing done. Petros probably dusted after a fashion, cleaned floors and windows and pottered about all day, unsupervised until the next mealtime.

Wyatt looked at his watch again. Under the tin roof of the stoep, it was getting hot now. He studied a tub of geraniums, forgotten and untended but still flowering bravely here and

there, even they looked defeated – like the rest of the farm. Like the old man. Wyatt tried not to think about the old man. Memories crowded in, each eager for recognition, like old friends in a circle of faces. Wyatt pushed them away, thinking about the future, not the past. There was nothing in his future yet, so he reluctantly let his mind slip back into the past. All he really felt was guilt.

All the events, all the good times - and the bad times. All of them left him with the feeling that he could have done better.

He tried to imagine the old man appearing round the corner of the house, in that head forward, elbows back, way of his, the young dogs bounding about him, snapping at each other. The sweat-stained hat would be pulled down over his intensely blue eyes so that you only saw them when he looked up at you. Looked over his falcon's beak of a nose, and waited for you, in that silent way he had.

Even as he was then, over eighty, you were conscious of the massive forearms and the powerful hands. Those hands never seemed to be idle, and as you talked to him, you sensed that he had things to do and you would stop, and either trail along behind to help him, or let him go, preferring your vague guilt to his silent company.

He had work to do, he would sometimes say, and Wyatt knew that he had never seen him unoccupied. But as he opened his eyes and looked out over the yard again, he wondered where it had got him. As he had lived, so they had buried him. A budget funeral for a budget life come to an end.

Even mourners had been few enough to make you believe sympathy was in short supply. He'd stood there quietly, to receive their condolences, and waited until they'd gone, Petros weeping openly in the back seat. In his clean, white shirt and shiny suit – something the old man had given him.

Wyatt had been left by the grave, his friend Larry waiting by the car on the road outside, Petros already slumped in the car. He'd crouched next to the headstone, looking into the hole where the coffin was hardly covered by the sprinkling of soil the mourners had thrown in. The old man would have said the coffin was a waste of good wood.

Wyatt waited for some sort of prayer to enter his head, but nothing came. The two African grave-diggers were standing back respectfully, but looking restless as they leaned on their shovels. He rose to his feet and walked away, leaving them to their work.

Wyatt saw by his watch that it was time. He delayed another minute and then got up. He patted the old dog awake. There was a yawn and a stretch and the dog heaved himself to his feet, head hanging low between once-powerful shoulders.

Standing like that he had to peer upwards at Wyatt and the wrinkles above his eyes deepened and multiplied. His tail swung slowly back and forth, an inch or two each way.

Wyatt picked up the rifle leaning against the wall and tucked it under his arm. He stepped off the stoep and into the sun and beckoned to the old animal. It was almost possible to see surprise in the misty old eyes, and then, nails clicking on the concrete, he made his way carefully down the two steps.

Together they strolled down the gentle slope to the gate, Wyatt matching his pace to the dogs, and as they went, he talked. The old dog plodded on, unhearing, as the reminiscences flowed. Through the gate and into the orchard, where against the odds, there were blossoms on the peach trees. The old man would have been pleased.

This was dangerous ground when Wyatt was a boy. The beehives still stood along the fence, most of them empty and silent now. He reminded the old dog of chases down the lines of trees, happy laughter mingling with excited barking, usually terminated by an angry shout from the house or outbuildings. Boys and dogs racing about in orchards disturbed the bees or dislodged blossom or just sounded idle, the old man would say, after they had slunk out and they would range further out into the bush where they could do no damage. A boy and a dog, running wild and uncaring.

Today, they went no further than the shade of a great, lichened boulder in the corner of the orchard. It was almost vertical and the others at its base were small by comparison. Spread out beside one of these was the dog's ragged blanket. If he was surprised to find it there, the dog showed no sign. He dropped to his haunches as Watt settled on one of the rocks, so that they faced each other. The talk went on, and occasionally the dog's tail stirred slightly as Wyatt spoke. They sat there for a long time, Wyatt gently caressing the tattered ears and occasionally kneading the stiff cartilage at the base so that the old dog moaned softly and deep in his chest with pleasure.

The sound of an engine became audible, not to the dog, but to Wyatt, and the two young dogs up at the house began to clamour. He carried on talking and stroking the broad head but the words came faster as though racing the engine, rising in pitch as it climbed the incline from the drift and reached the house. It was time to go.

The other dogs were going mad now but the old dog with Wyatt lay down with a grunt on the blanket, lowering himself by degrees until his weight was off his front legs and on his chest. He sighed and looked away from Wyatt, the cracked old nose with its rim of dried porridge twitching at some half forgotten scent drifted by. Wyatt stood up from his seat, hearing a few clods of earth roll down into the freshly dug hole behind him.

He worked the bolt and the first of the two cartridges in the magazine slid smoothly into the chamber. The old dog was still looking away but his head was up and very, very still.

Mike Job