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Chihuahua Flats
by Michael Bishop
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First Published in Killing Me Softly ed. Gardner Dozois, Nov. 1995

Fictionwise
www.fictionwise.com

Science Fiction

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In a dusty panel truck with a slack transmission and no spare, Dougan bumped into the cactus-lapped verges of Chihuahua Flats. He came nudged by a fitful Texas sirocco, desperate to expand his territory. Behind him, in the cargo bay, a dozen or more economy-size bags of N.R.G. Chunx in slick double-lined red paper, the dogfood itself dry as potsherds and frangible as old biscuits.

Even over the engine's banging and backfires, Dougan, his good ear cocked, could hear a deranging insect rustle in two or three of the bags. Well. So what? How much could the blamed roach borers eat?

About a block from the kennel, he began to brake. He rode the rubberless pedal or else he fiercely pumped it. The truck squealed in the gust-driven desert blow, jounced in a perpetual sand scour; when it shuddered to a rolling ebb, Dougan wrestled it into the crazed adobe driveway of the kennel to which he had pointed it these past howevermany hours. Dead on the ground, Dougan's truck neither sighed nor swayed.

A sign in the yard -- a huge red-cedar shake on oily chains, its letters heat-gouged out and dyed in char -- said MILLICENT T. CHALVERUS / CHIHUAHUA FLATS KENNELS / BOARDING * GROOMING * BREEDING * SALES. It bucked and twisted, its chains glinting, its face sun-shellacked.

The sprawling house had a whitewashed mission look. Behind it, cockeyed on the rattlesnake-peopled steppe, blazed a three-story concrete run with a roof of terra-cotta macaroni halves.

Dougan pushed the door buzzer and got back through the wall a lizardly metallic hiss. The sweat-plastered hair on his nape struggled to stand, giving him an almost pleasant chill -- so he buzzed again, and then again, leaning with his decent ear hard to the doorframe.

Come around! You got to come around! said a speaker unit next to him, a grill like an Aztec medallion.

Miss?

Come around! This so piercingly that Dougan nigh on to stumbled off the porch. He recovered, though, and circled on a hurried limp to the fenced-in compound out back.

I'm Millie Chalverus, said the woman at the gate. Who are you? Whaddaya want? N why should I care?

She had green eyes bracketed by hard-to-see laugh lines, skin like coffee-colored suede, and, shoehorned into a pair of ebony-and-gold-embroidered pedal pushers, a haunch like a ripening matador's. A velvety black haltertop crossed her upper torso. Her toenails peered up at

Dougan from her scuffed huaraches like lacquered violets. Ankles, midriff, shoulders, arms: continents of glistening suede.

Talk to me, lover. I got stuff to do.

Dougan said, Vernester Dougan, Kennel Supplier.

Zatso?

Yes, Miss. Outta Lubbock. Specializin in high-protein, super-vitaminized bugproof feed. Not to mention assordid n sundree groomin, trainin, n recreational products.

How you do talk. What you got beyond a downpat spiel?

Miss? Dougan's eyes bounced. A bowel south of his navel went slack and took on a windy cargo of doubt. So much skin. Such lakegreen eyes. A mouth you could press a kiss on thout ever quite reachin her teeth.

By the way, Dougan. It's mam, not miss. I got a little too much age on me to truckle to miss.

Sorry, Dougan said.

Yeah. Well. Don't sweat it.

Beneath him, a quick yip and a helium-high growl. A dog no bigger than a heifer's stool had reared up against the chainlink gate. It had raised its paltry brindle hackles, and the fudge pools of its eyes stuck out like a mantis's. Dougan could have snapped off those eyes and sent the dog on a looping fieldgoal arc by slamming his boot against the gate. Except for Millie Chalverus, he would have surrendered to the idea and launched the mutt.

Instead he said, Nice dog.

He don't like you, Dougan. Thet's a fac.

He don't know me. I only jes got here.

Conchos has a built-in sense bout folks. You don't tickle his fancy cep mebbe crosswise n backards.

Conchos, huh? Hey, Conchos, howya doin? Dougan knelt in front of the dog. He moved a forefinger toward Conchos with a thought to rubbing his nose through the mesh, but Conchos leapt against the gate, snarling and pogo-sticking. Dougan fell over sideways.

Chalverus chortled. Dougan brushed himself off.

Guess if Conchos don't like me, you don't either, he said. Guess I got as much chanst to sell you on my bidnus as I do to drop me a baby nex Friday.

Don't give up so quick.

Mam?

Conchos cain't judge character worth a sue. Why, he'd bite Mother Teresa on the tush n lay a sloppy wet one on a liar like Ollie North.

Dougan blinked in the magnesium glare of the sun. To the northwest, a hawk floated between Chalverus's stockade and the salmon and mint ridges of a distant rampart. Below Dougan's left eye, a tic began to cycle.

If Conchos don't like you, you must be okay.

No shit? Dougan turned crimson. His last word rang in the air like a bell. No lie. I meant, no lie.

No lie, Chalverus said. Whynt you show me what you got?

Dougan recovered. Curryng combs? Choke chains? Bugproof feed? Jes name it n I'll go gitter.

Whynt we try some food? Conchos aint gonna come round to you, honey, for no choke chain or metal brush.

Food it is. Good choice. Great choice. N.R.G. Chunx're flat-out worth their weight in Taos silver.

Dougan broke into a pebble-skittering trot. Thank God Conchos didn't like him. Stupid pile of crap. Why'd anybody own a chihuahua? Why'd a gorgeous gal like Millie Chalverus breed the bat-eared midgets?

In the oven of his cargo bay, Dougan wrestled with the dogfood bags. He scrutinized them all for punctures, tears, and bore holes, then selected out a bag as glossily seamless as the Messiah's robe. This one he toted in a Groucho Marx crouch back to the kennel.

As soon as the Chalverus woman let him in, Conchos seized his trouser

cuff, snarling through clenched teeth and flapping like a pennant on his instep until they reached a feeding area under a wide green plastic awning. All along the three-tiered run next to it, a chorus of unseen caged chihuahuas whimpered and yipped.

Chalverus cried, Let go, Conchos. _Let go!_

Conchos released Dougan's cuff, reared like Trigger, and scuttled holus-bolus away, fussing without relent. Grateful, Dougan lowered the dogfood bag and bent over it like a soldier over a gutshot buddy.

Thanks, he said. Much bliged. It jes gits hotter. As if to prove this remark, clammy drooping semicircles had bloomed under his workshirt's arms, big cancerous splotches. He split the bag with his pocketknife and doled out onto the concrete a handful -- a prodigal double handful -- of N.R.G. Chunx, brickred pellets craggy as owlcasts and burly as paperweights. Conchos pricked his ears, tilted his head, scented the spill, skipped from foot to foot like a balsawood puppet. Several chihuahuas on the tiers, also smelling the food, began to yammer and bay, a doggy munchkin chorale.

Awright, Dougan told Conchos. Come git yore picnic.

Conchos looked at Dougan, then at Chalverus, then at the mound of N.R.G. Chunx. Go on, Chalverus said. I don't mind. Have yoreself a go. So Conchos tiptoed over and tried to mouth a chunk, but not one in the pile was less than half the size of his head. Conchos could not even crack a piece with a forepaw on it to hold it down. Stymied, he danced a bemused do-si-do, looking up again at Chalverus.

You must feed these boulders to St. Bernards, she said. Or starvin African pachyderms.

We give you a lot for yore money.

Well. It's useless to me if Conchos n his sort cain't eat it. N it shore as shivers looks like they cain't.

Wait, said Dougan. Jes you wait. Outside the run, he saw a steppingstone long and wide as a breadloaf. Gimme a minit, okay? He wedged himself through the kennel gate while holding it ajar with an outstretched leg, prised up the stone, and eased back through the gate with it before him at groin height, an honest-to-Jesus threat to herniate him. See, he said. See, now. He dropped the stone on the N.R.G. Chunx, picked it up, dropped it again. He put one boot sole on the stone and ground it from side to side. There. See. He nudged the stone aside, disclosing a pile of rubbly fragments and a scatter of brickred powder.

Conchos pitter-pattered up and fell to. He chewed what he could, cracking the kibbles in his jaw teeth, and licked what he couldn't. He did a little jig as he ate.

The put-up-or-shut-up test, Dougan said. The taste test. I think this stuff's done passed it. Don't you?

Looks thet way, Chalverus said. But am I myself gonna have to pulverize ever bag I decide to buy?

Nome. No way. Place you a long-term order n I promise you plenty of prepulverized N.R.G. Chunx whenever you ast.

Deal, Chalverus said.

She and Dougan shook hands. Her palm and fingers, Dougan noted, had a breezy dry silkiness. Even her calluses had a well-cared-for feel, as if she refused to allow the desert any tyrannical say-so over the expression of her womanhood. What a find, thought Dougan.

* * * *

On Christmas Eve, four months later, Dougan married Millie Chalverus in a Catholic ceremony in the den of her house on the outskirts of Chihuahua Flats. About seven years back, she had lost her previous husband, Joseph Worrill, to an oilfield fire between Midland and Odessa, Texas. Starting up Chihuahua Flats Kennels had rescued her from the blues and maybe even poverty, for the biggest part of Mr. Worrill's insurance money had gone to cover a slagheap of outstanding debts. Dougan cared nothing for the petty facts of Chalverus's past life, particularly her marriage and any earlier romances -- except

insofar as her past, sprouting up as memory or as unfinished business, derailed her happiness or blighted his and her itemhood. Even today, the rolling gravel in her laugh and her skin's swarthy flush could make Dougan swoon standing up.

I do, Chalverus had said, keeping her own name, as she had kept it with Mr. Worrill (for business purposes and to feed her soul). Anyway, at that I do, Dougan had begun to live -- to live in sweet truth -- for the first time since his release from Dooly Correctional Institution in Unadilla, Georgia, where he'd spent five years on a DUI unlawful-death conviction. (Driving blotto on cheap corn liquor in Macon, he had fender-glanced with his pickup an old woman walking home. Except for a vicious bump to his right ear, he had killed her without half noticing.) Even operating his own shoestring kennel-supply business in Lubbock had failed to drain from Dougan a melancholy unease, and this subtly toxic ache had poisoned him on every long-distance haul through the panhandle or across the hot alkaline flats of the Jornada del Muerto. But one I do had changed that, nullifying the poison.

Dougan abandoned Lubbock. He threw over his kennel-supply business. Chihuahua Flats Kennels had work enough for two, and Millie Chalverus, now his beloved wife, had no objection to his coming aboard and shouldering a man-sized moiety of the labor. He toted bags of chihuahua chow, hosed down the runs, patched gaps in the chainlink, replaced fallen roof tiles, and haggled at the doorstep with jewelry-freighted high-pressure salesguys besotted with their own stale hormones and decades of worn-out macho propaganda. And so, in many ways, the union of Vernester Dougan and Millie Chalverus seemed to Dougan the recipient of a sure-nough heavenly blessing.

Conchos, though, never came around. He despised Dougan. He yapped whenever Dougan entered the house. He tried to guard the master bedroom against Dougan's certain arrival. Failing that, Conchos fell back to protect the bed itself, an immense two-layer wheel under a spread of the same embroidered fabric from which Chalverus had made the pedal pushers in which Dougan had first beheld her delectable croup.

Yip yip yip, went Conchos, yap yap yap, meanwhile snarling his outrage and prancing in strategic if hopeless retreat. Dougan wore heavy suede gloves to deal with Conchos and always picked him up and moved him aside whenever such run-ins took place. It annoyed him, Conchos's implacable hatred along with all the silly-ass threats, but Dougan never -- not once since the day of his first N.R.G. Chunx delivery -- felt the least urge to strangle Conchos, dropkick him into orbit, or render him unpeelable roadkill. Dougan had resolved not to hurt Conchos because Chalverus loved Conchos and what Chalverus loved Dougan respected unconditionally.

I love you, Chalverus told Dougan on their wedding night, but --
But what, babe?

But my soul -- my deepest privatest heart -- is tucked away in the little dog. I jes cain't help it.

You don't have to, Dougan said. I respect whatsoever you love n'll try to love it myself n hope that one day Conchos'll take to me too.

Although Dougan heard the nobleness of this pronouncement, he found that in town for his weekly haircut he had a hard time being faithful to it. Pete Mosquero, his barber, liked to rag him about Conchos:

You don't look to me like a chihuahua esorta guy.
No?

No. I jess refuse to believe you like em.

I don't, Dougan said, but --

You see, I imagine you an Espringer espaniel esorta guy or mebbe a golden retriever.

Thanks, but --

As I esee em, chihuahuas are estupid popeyed prisses, n you got too much class to be messin widdem.

They've got their points.

Yeah. On the eends of their ears. Mosquero laughed at his own joke,

sclipping his scissors to punctuate it.

Back out at the kennels, Conchos's despisal of Dougan went unallayed. The dog chewed holes in his jockey shorts, shat in his Sunday oxfords, peed on the mahogany valet that Chalverus had given him as a wedding gift, and either strewed about the house or punctured irreparably every foil-wrapped condom in a box of three dozen that Dougan had bought at Best Buy Drugs. Conchos scrabbled at the bedroom door every time Dougan and Chalverus grew amorous. When they declined to admit him and made love to spite him, Conchos stood in the hall baying like a plangently deflating balloon. If they did admit him, Conchos straddled Dougan's back and aimed penetrating nips at his nape and shoulder blades. This misbehavior had earned Conchos the sharpest scolding he'd ever got in Dougan's hearing and a quick exile to the utility room.

Couldn't we jes kennel him when we git frisky? Dougan said.

Why?

I lose concentration.

I don't. Mmm. Mmm mmm _mmm_.

S different for a man.

Yeah? Howso?

But Dougan could think of no explanation that did not imply that he might surrender total focus on her even in the throes of climactical passion. So Conchos remained indoors, if not in their bedroom, even when Cupid attacked.

Outside the boudoir, Conchos played other games. He sat on the couch between Chalverus and Dougan. He guarded his daily allotment of N.R.G. Chunkletz -- chihuahua-sized pieces that the company had begun producing for smaller breeds -- as if fearful that Dougan might hijack it and eat it himself. Conchos never carried any of his rubber squeak toys or his leash to Dougan, and on early-morning winter walks through the cacti he refused to take a dump until Dougan's lips had visibly blued and his bladder had grown as taut as a volleyball. Often, once Dougan had unzipped and made steam, Conchos would give in and unload, eyeballing him from a crayfishing squat that only a smart aleck could have choreographed.

Little dog, Dougan would say, you make me sad.

But not sad enough to go back to the bottle. And, setting aside the hatred of one muleheaded chihuahua, he viewed his new life with Chalverus as charmed.

* * * *

I have a new idea for our bidnus, Vernester.

Yeah. Like what?

Races.

Whaddaya mean, _races_? Dougan stood baffled, transfixed by the applegreen fire in Chalverus's eyes.

Chihuahua races. Daily doubles. Trifectas. The whole everlovin pari-mutuel schmeer.

Ha ha.

S no joke, honey. It's legal for greyhounds, idnit? Why not for my little Toltec babies?

I don't know why not, Dougan said.

So they built it. Or, nigh on to singlehandedly, Dougan did, a track not much bigger around than the public swimming pool in Tucamcari, with two sets of seven-tiered bleachers on the eastern side so that paying spectators would not have to peer like nuclear-test observers into a blazing sun when the evening races started and the first nine to twelve chihuahuas broke like windup toys from the miniature gates.

From the beginning, business at Chihuahua Flats Raceland boomed, even if the dogs themselves failed in heat after heat to have a like impact on the sound barrier. Breeders from across the country fell upon Dougan and Chalverus's little town to strut their dogs and place flashy wagers. By mid April, sometimes as many as two hundred people occupied the stands; and on that redletter night in early May when the one-thousand-and-first chihuahua

hit the track for its maiden handicap, the raceland noted the event with a barrel drawing, a cowboy band from Portales, and a video-cassette giveaway.

Dougan announced. As the bell rang to start each heat, he intoned over the public-address system, "There ... goes ... Ricky!" and the mechanical rat that paced the chihuahuas on a mobile pole lurched out to a herky-jerky lead, heading around the track via a concatenation of twitches and fits. Maybe a dozen times since the raceland's opening, the lead chihuahua had caught, or caught up to, Ricky, but owing to the rat's size -- it stood almost as high at the withers as the pursuing dogs, else even patrons with binoculars would have had a hard go seeing it -- no dog had yet halted Ricky or dragged Ricky off its jerkily advancing lever. Dougan thought it unlikely that even a pack of chihuahuas, cooperating as stranger dogs almost never did, could pull down Ricky and turn a decent money heat into a yelping group feed.

Dougan enjoyed calling the races, updating the odds, and introducing such celebs as the owner of the biggest local car dealership, the latest homecoming queen, and the weatherman at the NBC affiliate in El Paso. But Conchos, the winner of four tiptop stakes races and a first or second runnerup in several others, liked Dougan no better. Floodlamps burned through half their nights, and Chalverus often seemed distracted by success, drunk on the picayune details of public relations, concessions stocking, and the twelve thousand applicable state and federal tax laws. Such crap made Dougan long for the desert serenity of Chihuahua Flats before the boom. Sometimes, then, he took a beer; sometimes, even, a hit of the hard stuff.

Chalverus throve. An interviewer from a TV newsmagazine asked her questions against the backdrop of the sawdust track and its electronic toteboard, the hubbub of spectators, touts, bettors, and boozy hangers-on counterpointing the audio:

What led you to open a chihuahua track, Ms. Chalverus?

The chihuahuas. What else?

Why not cocker spaniels or miniature poodles?

I knew when my first hubby died that whatever I did had to have a really cheerful grounding in my own selfhood. It also had to like start with the Chalverus sound. That was my first true ch-ch-ch-challenge.

Challenge?

To myself. To my womanly Chalverus spirit. At first, you see, I figgered chinchillas. A chinchilla ranch. For the furs n the cheap cheeky glamour.

Okay. What killed that idea?

Havin to kill the chinchillas. Also, you cain't cuddle em. They have a odor n they bite. You have to kill em to git any use from em. The pelts don't come off thout you brain the varmints then flat-out strip off their skins.

So you turned to chihuahuas?

Didn't want to cherry-pick. Or charm rattlesnakes. Or try out for cheerleader. N chow dogs're too danged mean.

Tell us, Ms. Chalverus, who's your little friend?

Oh. Him? Thisere's Conchos. Say hello to all the folks, Conchos.

Dougan, standing back, watched his wife take Conchos's paw and wave it at the nation.

Cute dog, said the interviewer.

Thanks. My soul lives in this little dickens. Him n me're jes like this. She crossed her fingers. So to speak.

How does your new husband and business partner feel about the colossal upheaval in your lives, Ms. Chalverus?

Dougan? Dougan honestly loves me. Whatsoever I love, even a persnickety n possessive little booger like Conchos, well, he tries hard to love, himself.

So he's happy with a thousand-and-one chihuahuas aswarm in your backyard?

Shore. Who wouldn't be? We're doin what we love n gittin royally flush in the doin.

But Dougan wasn't happy, and he didn't love Chihuahua Flats Raceland,

and Conchos's spitefulness gnawed like a true raton (rat) at his bruised and tender alma (soul). This condition was so painful, and yet so inward, that it billyclubbed him when Chalverus, less than a week after her interview, received a medical diagnosis of inoperable pancreatic cancer. Before he could chew up and swallow this news, she had to start a series of radiation and chemical treatments in Las Cruces. Her hair let go. Her skin turned sallow and squamous. Her eyes played daily host to floating graygreen clouds.

By the end of summer, Chalverus was so sick that it hardly mattered, except to her, in which venue, public or private, she forsook the struggle and died. So Dougan brought her home. PR guys, gamblers, and uninformed chihuahua breeders still stopped by occasionally, but all racing activity had long since ceased, and Dougan knew in his bones that Chalverus had contracted her terminal disease as an apology to him and a huge unrepayable gift. He said as much, in rougher words, as Chalverus lay abed amidst the air-conditioner drone and the brittle night hush of the desert.

Nonsense, she said. Thet's all pure nonsense.

It ain't, babe. It purely ain't.

Lissen, you. I had to've had this damn ol cancer before we even begun our raceland. Had to've. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be this far along to

She stopped, not for her benefit but his. They both knew dying was the missing fill-in-the-blank word, and even unspoken it dropped between them like a wall.

You think I got sick apurpose?

Dougan sat with his long hands holding the insides of his knees and his long eyes downcast in craven abashment. Even so, he managed a mortified nod.

Sick apurpose? To give us cause to undo the nightly to-do round here? S thet what you think? Tell me.

Yessum, I do.

I got me a cancer to make you happy?

Yessum. You're like selfless thet way.

Awright then. Let me ast you. You happy?

Course not. How could I be? You think I'd trade off my precious wife dead jes for some lousy quiet?

Chalverus rolled her face toward Dougan on her pillow and smiled. No, she said. I never thought thet off the top of my brain or deep down in its kinks, neither one. Which shorely orter tell you somepin, lover.

Dougan began to cry. He kept looking down, though, and his tears plunked the backs of his dangling hands like beads of hot candlewax.

On the bed beside Chalverus, Conchos fought to his feet, peeled back his whiskery lip, and growled at Dougan in pitiable quivering disdain. Chalverus took Conchos's snout between her thumb and forefinger, tugged on his papier-mache skull, and in spite of her weakness easily rolled him over.

Hush thet disrespectful noise. You silly cur you.

Dougan swept a forearm across his eyes and looked over at Chalverus with a question or maybe just a thanks.

Take care of Conchos when I go, she said. Do what you want with them others, but save Conchos to home. Promise?

Babe, you know me. You know me.

Thet's right. I do. I shorely do. N the Lord'll repay.

A week later, eased through at least a stint of her going by old Eddie Arnold songs and a morphine drip, Millie Chalverus forsook the struggle and died.

Conchos, sitting on her sheeted midriff, lifted a long bittersweet howl.

* * * *

Dougan sold most of the chihuahuas in the kennel's runs and shut down its top two floors. He remained in Chihuahua Flats. He remained in his late wife's house. He fed and watered Conchos, who went on eyeing him askance, hitching growly rides on his trouser cuffs, eating his socks, and awakening him from dreams of Chalverus with vampire nips at his earlobes, fingers, and groin. But

Dougan forbore, in obedience to the deathbed charge, Take care of Conchos.

One evening a month after the funeral, Chalverus appeared to Dougan in the kennel yard as he played hose water over the concrete in slate-thin tides. In haltertop, pedal pushers, and a wavery cape, she hovered three feet off the ground between a storage shed and the multilevel runs. Her image had so little substance, so little hue, that it looked to have faded from a hard medium like china onto a flimsy one like rice paper or old silk. It rippled as it hung, melting and remanifesting in the twilight like a Jornada del Muerto mirage.

Dougan, she said. Dougan.

This voice -- no question that it was hers -- sounded distant and tinny, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the radio. The voice startled him, though, even more than had the apparition. It startled him so much that he unwittingly put his thumb over the hose's nozzle and sprayed the floating eidolon of his wife with a piercing burst. Chalverus billowed backward, dissolving on the fusillade, and then came together again, wavering, much dimmer than before.

Babe, I'm sorry, he cried. Real real sorry.

I cain't stay, she said. I ain't got the strenth. But I'm with you always anyways n won't ever wholly depart.

Like Jesus? he said.

Lissen, honey, I love you. Even if, as thisere proclaimin shade, I've got to fade off to Lethe. So to speak.

You only jes got here. You cain't go.

Don't beg me, now. I'm leavin you with a comforter.

It's too danged hot for a comforter. Dougan flung the hose aside and trotted wet-faced toward the melting spectral figment that was, or had been, Millie Chalverus.

Adios! she called in her fading cathedral-radio voice. To God, my darlin!

When Dougan went inside that night, Conchos stood guarding the circular bed. The dog growled, feinting forward and back. Dougan opened the top drawer in his chest-of-drawers, found his gloves, pulled them on.

Hush, you popeyed rat, he said. Then he picked Conchos up, carried him in outstretched hands to the bedroom door, set him down gently in the hall, and, ashamed for even considering such an act, slammed the door on him with a bang that shook windows and toppled bric-a-brac. He slept soundly, though, a dreamless slumber of scouring purity.

In the morning, Conchos greeted Dougan with a wriggly butt, a toothy chihuahua grin, and an ecstatic four-footed jig. When Dougan walked to the kitchen, Conchos followed at heel, yipping in excitement and homage rather than in provocation or spleen. Outdoors, Conchos took care of business in two minutes flat and returned to the utility room for breakfast. When Dougan poured N.R.G. Chunkletz into his bowl, Conchos licked Dougan's hands; when Dougan pivoted to leave, Conchos reared up and begged for a noggin rub.

What in heavenly rip's got into you?

Mmm, Conchos whined. Mmm mmmm _mmm_.

And Dougan knew. Chalverus had sent him a comforter. He let Conchos finish eating, then scooped him up, perched him in the crook of his arm, and took a reminiscent stroll through every room in the house and across every sandy stretch of his and Chalverus's arid acreage, however Gila-monster-haunted or boobytrapped with cacti. As they went, Dougan murmured sweet nothings to the dog, and Conchos rode like a raj in a howdah, lordly as all get-out. From that day forward, in fact, Conchos went everywhere with Dougan.

Even to the barbershop.

Esorry bout your loss, Mosquero said, trimming Dougan's hair as Conchos sat upright one swivel chair away.

Thanks, Dougan said. But the dead can do things the livin cain't.

Mosquero had no reply to this epigram. He clipped and snipped.

Eventually he said, I never esaw you as a chihuahua esorta guy.

You didn't, huh?

Course not. They're aw like that one. Mosquero waved at Conchos with his comb. Ugly little rats. Deesgustin popeyed prisses. You musta had to take him to the vet or esomepin, eh?

Mmm, said Dougan.

That one he's an especial laugh, eh? No more hair than a piglet. Legs like crippled finger bones. A face like one of them pickle-jar abortions. I mean, it's --

Dougan knocked Mosquero's hand away and jumped from the chair. No more insults! he cried. Not another nasty word! Or I'll danged shore deck yore ass!

Easy, Mosquero said, conducting a calm-down symphony with his open hands.

Easy? We're sick of yore insults!

I'm jess talkin, hombre. It's jess my esame ol haircuttin esorta way of time passin.

Well, don't do it like thet no more!

Okay. O_kay_. You got my esolemn word.

Dougan and Mosquero held a long wary look. Conchos perched attentively in his swivel chair, a lopsided grin on his snout. Dougan sat again, and Mosquero resumed cutting his hair with a sharp _sclip!_ of the scissors.

A little later, taking care to say it behind Dougan's bad ear, Mosquero whispered, But he's _estill_ ugly.

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