

CATHERINE MEETS ‘THE DOG EATER’

By Lois Archer-Duell

He ate ’em. Catherine knew it was so because it was Jamie Carlyle who was telling them it was so. Vashdar the hardware store owner ate ’em.

Well, leastwise he was telling her brother Tim and the other boys who invariably seemed to congregate around Jamie whenever he appeared. Head bobbing like a puppet Jamie’s best friend Calvin provided emphatic backup.

If Jamie Carlyle said it was so, it was so. After all, he had been all the way to Toronto on a train — twice. He’d even seen Niagara Falls and walked tightrope style along the top of the retaining wall above the falls until some mean ol’ fart with a badge had ordered him to get down. Jamie said his dad had “told that ol’ fart a thing or two”.

Jamie wasn’t speaking to Catherine of course. She was just a little kid, and only a GIRL, standing on the fringe of boys gathered in the empty schoolyard. She was there only because her brother had been given a choice. Bring her along to the sandlot baseball game or stay home and cut the grass. “I’m four fingers old and don’t need my brother to baby-sit me” Catherine thought rebelliously.

Her attention swung back to Jamie as he slashed the air with his ever present “Louisville Slugger baseball bat signed HE said by Mickey Mantle himself (though the signature was suspiciously smeared and virtually illegible). “Yep, ol’ man Vashdar kept all them dog ’til he had ’em good an’ fat, and then he ate ’em. Some of the fatter cats too. Why I’ve even seen the picked clean bones and stuff” he continued.

The story went that Jamie had once tried to spy on the dogs over the high fence in the alley behind Vashdar’s hardware store by standing on Calvin’s back. They had to be extra sneaky because Vashdar lived in the rooms behind the store, but just as they got into position the ol’ man snuck out and yelled at them from his back porch. According to Jamie, Calvin had squawked, wiggled out from under him, and left him dangling from the fence as he made his own escape down the alley. Head hanging Calvin mumbled “we didn’t hear him over the howling and

yapping of all them dogs he kept in the back yard”, Jamie shot Calvin a scathing look and continued. “I seen about a gazillion dogs before “chicken Calvin” left me stranded on the fence. One of them was a black wolf that leapt almost high enough to get me. I wasn’t scared though. I would have pounded it on the nose with my bat if “Chicken Calvin” hadn’t deserted me” he spat out.

Making his own escape Jamie said he “accidentally on purpose” knocked over ol’ man Vashdar’s garbage cans and seen with his own eyes all them bones mixed with a gazillion dog and cat food tins. He’d also seen some newspapers written in some weird language that looked like chicken scratching. Jamie said his dad suspected Vashdar was a Communist.

Hearing a new word with a child’s ear Catherine didn’t understand why being a communionist seemed bad to every one else. She enjoyed going to church with mother and even though she was too little to take communion with her mother she liked waiting in the familiar pew watching the sunlight stream through the stained-glass windows. She would blow her breathe out softly and watch all the little speckles dance and swirl in the shafts of colored light. Some time she thought she would have to ask daddy how people could breath in all those speckles and not get sick. She hoped that wasn’t why mother got terrible headaches and needed to lie down so often.

Her daydream interrupted Catherine’s attention snapped back to the schoolyard as Jamie punctuated another “gospel” fact with a vicious swing of the bat. It’s deep whooshing sound made her wince and back away, scaring her as much as his stories.

The baseball game over the boys made immediate plans to meet Tim in the vacant lot, if that is, he wasn’t snagged into cutting the grass or more importantly, he was able to ditch his little sister.

Tim had been very upset about having to suddenly move to a new neighborhood and school, but his discovery and sharing of this treasured vacant lot behind their new house had cemented his acceptance in school, the neighborhood and the “gang”.

Ever a magnet, the double-sized lot with its trees, bushes, waist-high weeds

and goldmine of scrap lumber, remnants of an abandoned and ultimately collapsed house, as in the past continued to be a favorite haunt and boys only territory. Most of the wood from the derelict house not whisked away to feed fireplaces by local, ever frugal foraging Canadians, or scavenged to patch up already dilapidated backyard sheds, had been commandeered by several generations of young boys.

With youthful inventiveness Tim and his new friends used the remaining scraps in a multitude of imaginative configurations – sometimes fort walls to repel invading “marauding hordes”; sometimes castle walls to hold back the ultimately vanquished dragons. The most popular configuration was ranch house walls needing to be defended (with much strutting bravado) against dastardly rustlers.

At other times the now barely useable boards (belatedly inspected for rusty nails) became simply a make-shift precarious teeter-totter which induced explosive laughter as invariably the antiquated board succumbed to the final indignity, cracked in two and unceremoniously dumped someone. The laughter of course originating from the one who managed to stay on the unbroken lions share with feet still firmly on terra firma. Young pride and dignity are so easily bruised.

Even the final fragmented scraps from teeter-totter wrecks found use as a daredevil’s ramp to propel bicycles into airspace that children’s angels miraculously decree to be safe. The landing area for these escapades was given little, if any, attention or concern and even acknowledging an uncomfortable landing was bound to earn you snickers of derision. However to use (yet to be learned) discretion and refuse the challenge was the blackest of marks and the epitaph “chicken” would never be tolerated. Height and distance ever the challenge in these exploits each boy strove to outdo the previous record and claim the victorious thump on the back and admiration of his peers. Heroes are thus born in a boy’s scale of worship.

Beneath the now missing homestead foundation had been found the wonder of wonders, the ultimate prize. It was a dug out space, which had once served as the owner’s root cellar. This windfall, when not a flooded quagmire from seasonal rains or spring thaws, became a perfect jail or dungeon, a safe meeting place away from parents’ prying eyes or Saturday obligatory chores. To those escapees from

said chores, that is who were willing to give up docked allowances for noncompliance. It was a place of shared secrets, boasts and naughty words; a place of high finance where baseball cards, aggies, cat's eyes and bunker marbles (shooters of course being sacrosanct non-negotiable in such bargaining) were haggled over and traded against new favors or the reluctant paying off of old debts and losses.

With thoughts only of the fun to come, Tim grabbed Catherine's hand and half-dragged her out of the schoolyard, trotting for home. Like a new puppy on an unaccustomed leash, Catherine was barely able to keep up with the enforced quick march. If they hurried, Tim reasoned, there still might be time left before supper to meet his buddies in the vacant lot, even if he did still have to cut the grass. Precious summer vacation daylight was not to be squandered for one millisecond.

Arriving home they were surprised to find their father blocking the screen door. Told that mother was still lying down and needed peace and quiet, Tim and Catherine were ordered to stay outside and play until their dad called them for a late supper. Though Catherine was instructed not to leave the yard, nothing was said to Tim about cutting the grass. Like a magician's rabbit, he disappeared for the vacant lot before the door had finished closing behind their father.

Catherine could now happily disappear herself into her secret place; a place without her brother or parents, almost completely hidden from view from their house or the vacant lot beyond their back yard where the boys played.

She had discovered it quite by accident chasing a stray cat she hoped mother would let her keep; something to ease the pain of losing her playmate now gone due to the unexpected move to the rented house and new neighborhood. The agile feral stray had eluded her by dashing under burdocks, bushes and giant prehistoric looking rhubarb plants now gone wild in the neglected and abandoned vegetable garden behind the house. Intent only on the prize, Catherine had plunged after it on her hands and knees oblivious in the heat of the moment of stinging nettles and thistles.

She emerged into a wondrous small open space carpeted in soft wild grass, between the back of the dilapidated and forsaken gardening tool shed at the back

of their lot and the empty lot beyond it. She had found a miniature meadow encompassed by trees, stunted bushes, and weeds with a rusty mangled wire fence, the delineation of the two properties. On the far side of this fence was a lidless rusted oil drum once used to hold spent woodstove ashes, the sides of which were now so perforated with rusted holes it could no longer hold even the seasonal rains, but it still provided added cover to Catherine's hidden nest. A large somewhat flat boulder resting to one side of the space provided the perfect play-table at which to host innumerable tea parties.

Truly raggedy (from too much loving) Raggedy Ann and torn Teddy – whose escaping sodden stuffing had taken days to dry out after poor Teddy had been forgotten outside during a rain storm, were her only guests. Countless cups of make-believe tea were served to these faithful companions from wild hollyhock flower blossom cups. Occasionally, she could offer her guests a real treat of pilfered oatmeal or raisins on baby rhubarb leaf plates. A broken vase rescued from the trash held withered buttercups and daisies and sat in the center of the boulder now draped by a torn soiled baby blanket. Her guests, now unfortunately so loose-jointed from use, flopped face forward into their teacups, or crumpled over backward. Catherine, oblivious of their condition, simply tried to right them, with orders to sit up straight and keep their elbows off the table like well-mannered guests, or they would not be given tea.

Through the fence Catherine was afforded a filtered secretive view of the vacant lot where the boys played. No glimpse into her secret space was possible from the other direction, unless someone were to kneel down on hands and knees to peer through the long wild grass bordering the fence. Her favorite haunt remained undisturbed and undiscovered. The dimly heard voices of her brother and friends playing beyond the fence, blue bottle flies, cricket and the occasional bird, startled to find her there were her only companions.

She could not hear her parent's strident voices during "discussions" unless the wind changed direction. She didn't understand why they seemed angry. She could remember when daddy was gone all day, but now that he was home during the day and they could spend more special time with him, mother seemed angry. Big

people confused her.

With time she had found a better way to and from her secret place without scratches, nettle stings, and clinging burrs in her hair and socks. She now used the garden shed to mask the entrance and exit to her secret bower. Leaning up against the back wall of the shed one day, once again pulling burrs from her socks, she unexpectedly felt two of the shed wall- boards move sideways. They were held in place by two rusty nails and she found she could shove them to one side. The gap created was just large enough for her to slip through into the shed. Once inside she found the boards easily swung back into place.

Small shafts of sunlight filtered through gaps in the old shingled roof and the door, which hung askew from a broken hinge. Getting to and from her secret place meant groping her way across the earthen floor littered with rusty useless tools, broken flower pots, bric-a-brac, car parts and small broken furniture pieces, all now little more than trash awaiting someone's interest or energy to transport to the town dump.

Catherine always shivered and prayed the spiders had not had time to rebuild the webs she had destroyed on her previous passage through the shed.

It was a few days later and her brother, without a little sister to baby-sit and slow him down was gone like a whiff of smoke to join his buddies. Catherine was curled up on the porch, surrounded by her few toys. Since her preferred toy, her plasticine, was too dried out to use, she was left with paper scraps from shopping bags and a meager collection of broken crayons which had taken on curious shapes from repeated melting in the hot sun.

Her father suddenly appeared and asked her favorite question: "want to go with me to the store while I get.....?". Leaping up Catherine was halfway to the car before he finished. He swept her up into the front seat with the customary "are all little fingers and piggies safely in?" before closing her door.

As he drove Catherine fell to daydreaming. She hoped the shopping trip would be to the "mall" (another new word to her). She remembered the trip with mother to a huge building that had many different stores inside, with a real live tree growing INSIDE the building. There were stairs you could stand on that lifted you

magically up and up, and made you feel scared. She had clutched mothers' hand tightly. She had dared to look down behind her only once and watched in amazement as the indoor tree became smaller and smaller.

There was a special store there that had the most beautiful princess doll she had ever seen. It had long silky hair you could comb and blue eyes that opened and closed. Mother became cross when she begged for it; angry but sad at the same time. Catherine had offered to buy it with the pennies daddy had tied in the corners of her hanky. He had said she could spend them on any candy she wanted but it was the doll she yearned for. Still her mother said no.

Busy daydreaming about the beautiful princess doll her childish faith was shattered and her happy dream ended, when her father stopped not at the mall, but another familiar store. Through her fathers' open car door she recognized the ugly old store in their own poor neighborhood. Its' windows were filmed with dirt, the walls and door showing three colors of peeling paint and a sun bleached barely legible sign: VASHDAR HARDWARD. It was a building her mother and Tim crossed the street to avoid when they were all walking to church on Sundays.

Anyone who approached the building was greeted by a cacophony of barking, yowling and often snarling dogs. Nervous customers were always grateful for the strong high fence that separated them from "the beasts". Their noise filled the air as her father worked to peel her reluctant body out of the car onto the cracked weed filled pavement in front of the store. Exasperated and tired of her resistance, he swept her up into his arms and struggled to open the shop door. Once inside he remarked how heavy she was becoming and set her down on the shop floor. Catherine immediately clung to his leg like glue.

Her father greeted Mr. Vashdar as though he had known him many years, calling him Zoltan, and laughingly introduced him to "Catherine his daughter, the "human burr". Mr. Vashdar fixed her with a rheumy gaze and further frightened her by leaning down to greet her. She had no idea he suffered with poor vision and near deafness had to get real close to his customers in order to see or hear them.

Too frightened to return the greeting, she backed up and mutely turned her face away. He chuckled and in his thick accent called her a word that sounded

suspiciously like mouse. Highly indignant but too shy, she stifled the desire to tell him she was NOT a mouse.

Catherine's father and Zoltan resumed their conversation, conferring periodically to a foreign newspaper the shopkeeper waved excitedly in front of her father's eyes. The more excited he became the harder it was for Catherine to understand what was being said.

Her father seemed to have no difficulty, however, and amazed Catherine when he sometimes replied in what seemed to be the same foreign language.

Leaving the men to their conversation, Catherine began to examine Mr. Vashdar. She noticed he wore an old green knit sweater, dirty and unraveling at the collar, wrists and elbows. Covered in animal hair, it smelled of mustiness, old grime and like the store itself: of animals. The smell made her wrinkle up her nose.

She had never seen an antiquated tin ceiling before. Its once pretty design stamped into the metal, was unfortunately now stained with rust, the result of neglected roof leaks over the years. The stains had ribboned down the walls into hardware bins devoid of new stock for years.

Just then Mr. Vashdar exited the shop into his living quarters behind through a door Catherine had not noticed. They were immediately engulfed with the heightened sounds of barking dogs, and she watch mesmerized as three dogs of varying breeds and sized danced and leapt against Mr. Vashdar's legs, each vying for attention. Unable to jump a very old fat dog wagged his tail frantically in greeting. Catherine also glimpsed several cats lounging contentedly, seemingly oblivious to the raucous noise. She watched as Mr. Vashdar stiffly knelt down on one knee, spoke softly, and gave each dog his share of ear scratches and pats. Gently pushing the dogs back he carefully closed the door and handed her father the newspaper he had returned with.

As he entered her fathers' small purchase into a cash register, the huge old machine chunked and rattled while numbers popped up in a glass window, and the drawer bell tinkled. Catherine was startled when something moved and pawed languidly at the drawer as it slid open. She had not seen the huge orange cat

draped across the top of the display case above her head. The cat now rolled over and tried to bat at her hair barrette and she giggled.

Shaking hands with Zoltan and thanking him for the newspaper, he father prepared to leave. Unlike the reluctant mule he had entered with he now had to pull Catherine out the door to the car, exclaiming “my little burr has grown roots”. She had wanted to stay and play with the cat.

It was several weeks later and back in her hide-a-way Catherine was again immersed in her tea ceremony with Raggedy Ann and Teddy, hardly aware of her brother and his friends in the lot close by, when a child’s sixth sense made her aware of a profound silence in the vacant lot. Perhaps it had been the sudden silence of the green bottle flies and crickets, but for a moment she thought the boys had all gone home. She was disappointed. Her brother might now come home and she would have to leave her secret play place in fear he would discover it.

Suddenly she heard Jamie Carlyle’s hoarse whisper, “Get her, cut her off”. Instinctively she leaned forward for a better view of the lot wondering if she had been discovered. She watched fascinated as a mangy terrier mutt skittered across the lot toward her hidden place with the determined boys in hot pursuit. Frantically looking for any refuge the terrified animal pelted across the lot heading for the ash barrel at the outside edge of Catherine’s hide-a-way.

The dog, a female heavy-laden with soon to be born pups, belatedly aware of Catherine, skidded to a halt and cringed up against the barrel, caught between two enemies. Jamie, the first to reach the cowering dog, pinned her down by shoving his baseball bat against her snarling snout, and calling her a name Catherine was not allowed to say. The poor creature, knowing this was its’ last stand, rolled onto her back in submission and seemed to wave her front paws in supplication.

“Hey there, you buoys — vot are you doing?” Startled by the suddenness of a heavily accented adult male voice shouting at them, the boys froze for an instant. Then chaos as they all scattered like chaffs of wheat in the wind. Jamie tripped over his bat and left it behind without a glance and he and his “gang” peeled away out of the lot, high-tailing it for their homes.

Like the dog, a fearful Catherine cringed against the wall of the shed, feeling a sudden chill. The warmth and light of the sun seemed to recede as Mr. Vashdar slowly advanced toward the frightened animal. He stood silently gazing at the dog. Catherine didn't think he was going to grab the animal and consume it on the spot, but was worried he would take it home to be fattened up.

Then a curious thing happened. Mr. Vashdar seemed to be making some peculiar sounds and it took Catherine a few moments to understand he was half-singing, half-talking to the dog who gradually ceased snarling and whimpering. Mr. Vashdar slowly removed his ragged green sweater and with great difficulty settled himself on the ground beside the dog. Leaning up against the wire fence, his thread bare plaid shirt puffed out between the wire strands. It reminded Catherine of her grandmother Bennett's quilt on the bottom of her bed.

"So now, little creature, you are very frightened are you not?" he murmured as the dog gave his hand the first tentative licks. "You should not be frightened of Zoltan, he will never harm you. He will care for you and keep you safe. And when your pups are born I shall find them happy homes. And if not: I shall have even more in my family.

Hearing the gentle assurances, Catherine slowly let her breath out. It was as though he was crooning to her as well. Soon the sun's warmth returned as the three of them listened to the natural sounds of the day.

Still holding the dog gently up against him in the sweater nest, Mr. Vashdar, with a grunt of exertion, clumsily regained his feet and slowly began to leave. As he hesitated and turned slightly toward her she was surprised to realize that his words were directed to her and not the dog. She listened in wonderment as he said, "So little owl eyes hiding behind the fence, our own little shy mouse. Perhaps your poppa can be convinced that a puppy should come and live with you. And you will care for it and be kind eh?" He paused a moment longer and hearing no reply from Catherine continued out of view still soothing the dog with his gentle crooning.

Catherine continued to sit quietly until she could no longer hear Mr. Vashdar's gravelly voice, then resumed pouring imaginary tea for Teddy and Raggedy Ann. "You must share and behave when our new friend comes to live

with us,” she admonishes the two with a shake of her finger just as mother does to her before the arrival of guests. She hugs her knees, shivers with delight, and smiles and smiles.