

VLACHOS' VIEWS

America through the lens of PAUL VLACHOS

The Desert Dog



Let me get the worst part of this story out of the way right now – my dog died on October 4, last year. It was the day of the Feast of Saint Francis, patron saint of animals. I'm not that religious and I'm not a Catholic, but he did have impeccable timing. He graced my life for nine and a half years and changed it more than he could ever know. Jim has been asking me to write about him for a while and I guess this is finally the time.

I woke up on June 1st, 2006, in Winnemucca, Nevada, at the Scott Shady Court Motel, a perfect time capsule of early 1950s motel décor. My good friend, Paul, was in the next unit. We were in the middle of a two day back country hot spring trip and had an ambitious day planned. Paul came out as I was loading the car and said a serious family issue had come up and he had to cut the trip short and head home immediately. I gave him a hug, waved goodbye and then headed out. I stopped at the top of the exit ramp from east Winnemucca onto I-80, the big slab that would take me straight home to New York City. I wanted to check my air filter. We had been on a lot of dusty roads the previous day.



I checked it out, checked the oil, pulled up my jeans, mentally steered myself to put in 3 or 4 long days of driving, then eased down the ramp and gathered speed. I hit the base of Golconda Summit about 20 minutes later and kept the speedometer pinned at 70 the long haul up. At the top, there were no trucks on the sides of the road. There's a parking area on both the east and west bound sides of the summit for truck drivers to rest, check their brakes, and do whatever else they need to do before taking the steep hill down in either direction. I had just gone over the crest and was picking up speed when I glimpsed what looked like a small black and tan dog romping in the

grass next to the highway, heading east and seemingly oblivious to everything around him. I drove for a minute and wrestled with the idea of trying to help him. It was, after all, a hostile environment. No water, many predators – from hawks to coyotes, fast-moving trucks. Had somebody left him there? I had passed other dogs over the years, but something made me want to rescue this one.

I went a few miles, got off at a ranch exit – no services – called "Iron Point" and went under the highway through a narrow underpass, just wide enough for one vehicle, then started Westbound again, picking up speed as I went, heading for that summit. I got back to Golconda, then went under another narrow underpass and drove back to the truck parking area on the Eastbound side. I parked and looked around. This was crazy. That guy was gone. What was I thinking? Animals run around, loose and abandoned, all over the country. I walked around for a bit. Then, I spotted him. He was crossing the interstate, trucks were hammering by at 70 miles an hour and he was still oblivious. Natural selection would not favor this guy. I yelled out. He paused, turned his head and looked at me, then kept going.

I jumped back into my pickup truck, sped down the ramp, and went through the tunnel again. Hundreds of tiny birds flew out the other side as I went through. I came up onto the Westbound parking area and looked around, but he was nowhere to be seen. I debated walking up the shoulder of the road. This is a major, fast-moving interstate in the middle of the desert. Nobody is out walking unless he or she has a really good reason. Or a really bad reason. This was starting to feel crazy. I was between the towns of Winnemucca and Battle Mountain, but I was heading in the direction Elko. I thought to myself "I would call you Elko." I kept looking, but could not find him. Then, I saw him on the other side again, across the median. I sped down the ramp and under again.

On the other side, I could not find him again. I crossed under again. After spending ten more minutes on the Westbound side, walking up and down, I decided to call it off and go home. I had already spent 90 minutes trying to track this guy down. Clearly, he was on his own path and I needed to get back on mine. I drove slowly down the ramp to go under the highway and, as I made the little turn to go into the tunnel, there he was, in the middle of the service road, staring at me. I leaned out my window and yelled "Hey!", at which he turned and ran with surprising speed into the tunnel. I chased him in my truck. He went up the access ramp on the other side, probably terrified, and I stopped,

then got out.

He stopped and looked at me. Whenever I approached him, he circled away. He was small, much smaller than I had thought. He must have been sizing me up because, once I stopped and crouched, he stopped. I had some saltines in the truck, so I grabbed one and tossed it to him. He paid no interest. He slowly walked up to me, though, and I put out my hand. He looked at me, then he looked at my truck, a Tacoma which was high off the ground. He looked back at me, then leaped into the truck.

I said "I guess you're going east," then got in and petted him. He was covered in dust and looked pretty skinny. He lay down on the denim jacket on my passenger seat and looked at me. I said "I'm going to call you Elko," and took off.

I had no intention of keeping a dog, though. I had lost my cat of 20 years a year earlier and vowed to never get a pet again. It was too painful. I looked over at him. He looked back at me. I could feel a wave of something going through me that I had never before experienced so instantaneously and thought "this must be what love at first sight feels like." I had to be practical, though. I live in the city and didn't want to deal with having a dog. I instantly got on my cell phone and called people back home, animal people, dog people, trying to find him a home. A couple of people promised to help me. I finally reached Battle Mountain. He seemed to get animated as we pulled into the town and I thought that maybe he lived there, even though, it was way too far for him to have walked. I learned quickly that he got excited any time we pulled into a new place. A good attitude for anybody, if you ask me. I went into the supermarket and bought a cheap purple nylon collar and a leash, along with a small double dog bowl and some cans of dog food. At the checkout, I asked the woman if there was an animal shelter nearby and told her that I had just found a dog. She said "It's a kill shelter. People are always leaving dogs out in the desert." That was all I needed to hear. He was not going to stay in Battle Mountain.

I went back out to the lot and opened the truck door. He stood there with his tail wagging. I put the collar on him, which seemed to make him happy. It seemed to me as if somebody had abandoned this dog. I imagined somebody taking his collar off and leaving him. I gave him water. He drank three cups. I gave him a can of dog food. He inhaled it and I gave him another. He wolfed that one down, too. I walked him around the parking lot and noticed he had a limp on a rear leg. Still, he seemed sound enough and he had a good disposition. He jumped triumphantly back into the truck and stood on top of my ice chest. I took a photo of him, which I then sent back to a few people in New York, trying to find somebody to take him in. For whatever reason, people looked at the photo and thought I had found a large dog. The scale is very clear, but perhaps it was his heart and his persona showing through.



We made it home in three days. He lay on top of that cooler half the time, watching the continent slide by. Every time we stopped, he would put that long snout in the air, take a few sniffs, then blink his eyes. We were heading east and he seemed to know it. It turned out that he was not chipped. I ran "Dog Found" ads for weeks online and never heard a word. It seemed strange to just have him enter my life that way, but maybe that's the way life is.

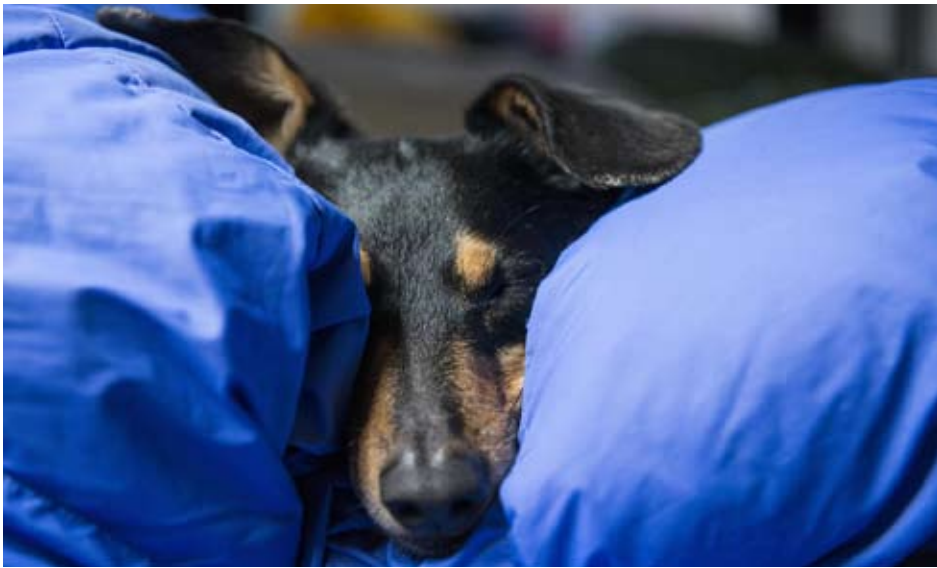
Over the next few years, we traveled across the country and back many times in that Tacoma. Elko loved the road. He loved marking every truck stop. Every time we got out west, whether it was the Black Rock Desert or the Oregon coast or Canyon Country, he'd stand there, face the wind, and close his eyes with a beatific look on his face.



We took that truck to Portland, Oregon in late December of 2009. I was trading it in for a four-wheel drive van. Another triumphant journey with my co-pilot. On the way back, I was driving the bare van – I'd eventually build myself a little room in the back – and it was loaded with all the gear from the pickup. He sat all the way in the rear for most of that high speed run and barked at cars from the rear windows.



Once I built up the inside of the van, his preferred position was in the bed on the shelf I built right behind the drivers seat. Whenever I pulled off the road and was heading to a gas station, a motel, a campsite or a photo opportunity, I could count on that little head popping up and resting on my left shoulder, snout out the window, eyes scoping out the scene. He also loved to get lost in the sleeping bags further back in the van



I'm leaving out a lot, but maybe I'll get to that in the future – "The Continuing Adventures of Elko, the Desert Dog." He led an interesting life. He started out wandering in the desert, eating flies, and ended up in Greenwich Village, eating hamburgers. He put in over 200,000 miles with me all over this country and Canada. He was known and loved in his neighborhood and had many friends. He taught me a lot about life and how to be in the moment.

Every once in a while, when we were on I-80, I'd stop with him at Golconda Summit and let him sniff the air. He never really seemed to like coming back there that much, but it meant a lot to me.



PAUL VLACHOS
lives in
New York City

I miss him terribly. I would tell people this story over the years – people always seemed to stop and want to say "hi" to him in the street – and they would invariably say "Wow, he got lucky," to which I would invariably respond "I'm actually the one who got lucky."



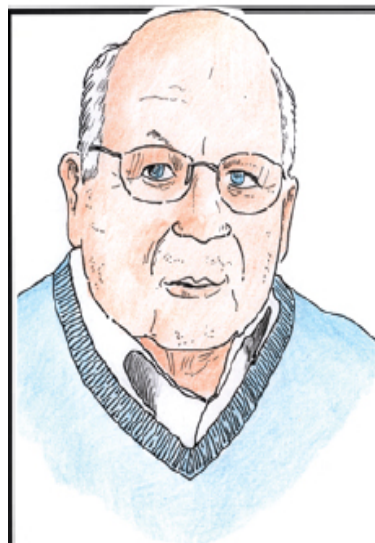
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