

# Farewell Ravine: A Tale of Homeless Dogs

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## 1. Our Ravine

Well, summer has arrived. How I love this time of year! It's not easy to survive the winter. If you find a morsel on the street, it's gonna be frozen. Just try to chew it.

Winter is a bit boring. The only pleasures are when the kids come to slide down the hill. You can chase after them, jumping and barking.

One of our dogs has gone hunting in the forest before. He said that there are lots of scents in the snow there. These are what warm a dog's heart.

But that's in the forest. Here in our ravine, if someone has left a trail, it's a familiar cat. All around us are human scents, bird tracks and lines left by skis. The ravine is only clean and white the morning after a snowfall.

No, summer is better. The grass grows high. Flowers bob their heads. And smells are everywhere, making your nose quiver.

Our ravine is large and beautiful. We have free reign of our ravine, and it is quite an excursion to cover it from end to end.

Bushes and trees grow on the edges of our ravine. Blackened birds live in the trees. Their homes are like baskets, without roofs or doors. Dogs' houses, of course, are better. But then not every dog has his own kennel.

I know every wrinkle here. A stream runs through the middle of the ravine. In the summer the stream just about dries up, yet its banks stay wet and there is even a little swamp. The grass here is high, up to your ears. Mosquitoes swarm like clouds, and the frogs laugh.

There are lots of things in the ravine. What can't you find here?! Old shoes and mittens. Wheels, balls and boards.

Brains found a crumpled hat and learned how to wear it, while Crumb lives in an old apple box. The box may smell of apples, but at night Crumb dreams of cutlets.

I know where there is a golden ring. I smelled it and immediately understood that a good person had worn that ring. I just don't know why he left it in the ravine.

Tall white houses surround the ravine on all sides. And beyond there are more and more of them... there is the sound of cars honking, and a glow rises up at night.

Our ravine gets smaller every summer. This spring, they dumped piles of stone, sand and clay here. They want to put up another house. Everyone here is cursing about it. Do they really have so little space? Why does it have to be in our ravine? Where is a dog to go?

But there is no one to complain to.

I especially like our ravine at night. From its lowest depths, you can see the blackened sky, full of many beautiful, glowing stars. They are very high up. Jump all you want, you can't reach them.

The sun is replaced by a white moon. A shiver runs down your spine and your fur stands on end. If you sing to the moon, you will have dreams that make your tears flow, and your insides will sweetly ache.

## 2. Free Dogs

All of us are free dogs. Time was, a village surrounded the ravine. They tore down the little houses and built big ones. The masters went away, but the dogs remained.

Shadow\* is our boss. He is big and he is strong. Everyone submits to him, yet I keep to the sidelines. He and I have had at it twice. He learned that my canines are no worse than his, and doesn't bother me any more.

Sometimes I run with everyone, sometimes alone. I've not tried to steal dogs from Shadow, and he is satisfied with that.

Before, Shadow had a buddy, a large, stupid lump that went by the nickname Scamp. And what do you know, Scamp picked a fight with Shadow. He had always been Shadow's guy. Scamp is gone now, but Shadow still fears something.

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\* Translator's note: This story offered an interesting challenges when it came to translating the dogs' very descriptive names. Literal translations would have sounded wooden in English, so in some cases near matches were chosen. The main character (Гордый, literally "Proud") was thus translated as Duke. The leader, Shadow, was Чёрный ("Black") in Russian. The other main characters' names in Russian are Головастый (Brains), Бывшая Такса (Once-a-Dachhund), Хромой (Gimp) and Крошка (Crumb).

Once, Brains came up to me and said, "Duke, take me into your pack."

"I don't have a pack, Brains," I answered.

"Then gather one up. Gimp and Once-a-Dachshund are asking."

"There should not be two packs in the ravine, Brains," I said.

"Then defeat Shadow. Yesterday he tossed my hat into the swamp."

Brains is our smart guy. He can read. For hours he will look at a torn up newspaper and put together syllables: "Re-ports f-rom the fi-eld..."

Sometimes he will wriggle into his hat and sit with a thoughtful gaze. Shadow said to him, "Why do you wear a hat, Brains? You trying to look like a human?"

"I know how to read, just like a human," Brains answered proudly.

"And I know how to bite, like a dog!" Shadow said menacingly, shoving Brains so that he flopped down on his newspaper and his hat rolled under the overhang.

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Crumb.

Crumb loves to laugh. He is a small, shaggy dog, happy and good-natured. He always has a bit of clay on his nose. Kids spoil Crumb. They pick him up, squeeze him and ruffle his fur. But Crumb keeps right on laughing.

If Crumb laughs, Once-a-Dachshund sighs. Around her neck is a dirty, tattered ribbon. She does not want to take it off, saying the ribbon reminds her of the past.

When Once-a-Dachshund first appeared in the ravine, she addressed everyone formally. But Shadow quickly helped her unlearn this eccentricity. Shadow says that a dog should be a dog. My friendship with the cat Yamamoto, therefore, upsets him.

I would not have sought out friendship with the cat Yamamoto, but he is so smart. Yamamoto is the Japanese emperor, and everyone knows this. Yamamoto says that the emperor is more important than Shadow himself.

Yamamoto speaks dog well. We often chat while we are warming ourselves in the sunshine.

"Don't you find it disgusting, Duke, to talk to cats?" Shadow asks.

"None of your business," hissed Yamamoto. Shadow lunged at him, but Yamamoto deftly jumped into a tree.

"I'll rip your face bloody," he promises. Shadow growls and threatens. I calmly take it all in. I know that Yamamoto will not allow himself to be insulted. And no one except Shadow chases after Yamamoto.

Yamamoto and I talk about everything. About food, weather, about distant Japan. Gimp likes to listen in. He settles in and sits to the side. He listens, listens, wipes his wet nose with his paw and mumbles something.

"What's that?" asks Yamamoto.

“Oh, its just, you know...” Gimp rasps, but says nothing more. He sits a bit longer and tucks himself into his house. Gimp is a quiet, modest fellow. It’s a big thing for him to say even a few words in a row.

Shadow has invited me to join the pack several times.

“I will make you my right paw,” he says.

“No,” I answer.

Shadow is not a leader for me. If I were voting for a leader, I would chose another. I have one in mind. Yet he does not have four legs like us, but two. He has no tail and his upper paws are called “hands.” He is a human, and Shadow doesn’t like humans.

### 3. My Human

People are divided into children and adults. Children are small people. Children are happier and nicer. Adults can be evil, but there are also some nice ones. My Human is the nicest of all.

At one time, even Shadow had his Human. He kept Shadow on a leash and beat him. When they tore down the village, that Human got in a car and left. Shadow chased a long way after him.

The car stopped. The Human got out and chased Shadow off. But Shadow again ran after the car. Then the Human beat him. Shadow fell and the car drove off. Since that day, Shadow has not liked humans.

I met my Human at night. It was winter. I had hurt my paw badly. Steam was coming out of the ground in this one place, and the snow had melted. So I lay down on a large metal lid and warmed my paw.

My Human walked by with his coat flying open. He was gesturing with his hands and talking to himself about something. He stopped short near me and squatted down.

“Greetings, your honor,” he said. “How’re things?”

I immediately trusted him. I knew I did not need to run away. This human would not harm me. I showed him my hurt paw.

“That’s nothing to worry over,” he said. “Come with me.”

And I went. At the building entrance he searched a long time for his key and then said in a whisper, “Please, your honor, as quietly as possible. The neighbors will not understand.”

And so I found myself in the white house—or the white kennel, as Once-a-Dachshund calls it—for the first time.

In the darkness, I moved awkwardly and bumped into something, but the Human quickly opened the door to his room and let me in.

“Okay,” he said, “we’ll get you treated. But first a little snack. Ok, my friend?”

I agreed. He fed me some very tasty sausage, then treated my leg. It is so pleasant when someone fixes you up. It’s a bit painful, but you know that

you will soon be sorted out. My Human knows how to fix someone up.

There were all sorts of cardboard and boards in his room, and they smelt strongly of something. He sat in front of one of the boards and took some thin sticks into his hands.

“These are brushes,” he said. “Rest, your honor, and I will work a bit. Things go well for me at night.”

He touched his board with the sticks for a long time, frequently stepping back and looking at it with his eyes all squinty.

“Come admire it, your honor,” he said.

I went up to the board and sniffed it.

“It’s a shame that dogs can’t distinguish colors,” he said. “But then again, maybe you are different.”

I pointed my nose at the top of the board. To the right, the left, and across it. No, it smelled very beautiful, this board. The odor strung out like a tape, blurred into a sphere, ran into a wave. I became agitated and scratched the floor with my paw.

He sat again before his board and touched it some more with his sticks. I dozed in the corner.

Finally, the Human stood up, touched my bound-up paw and said, “Well, your honor, time to go our separate ways. You are fed and bandaged up. I can’t do anything more for you now. Let’s wait for better times.”

I understood everything. He could not leave me here alone. I stood up and went outside. He came out to accompany me, and we strolled in the morning frost. The sky had already lightened, and the snow squeaked underfoot.

“Goodbye, your honor,” he said. “You can always count on my help. Believe me, I would gladly live together. C’mon, give us your paw.”

I stuck out my paw to him. He left, hiking up the collar of his coat.

I see my Human often. I walk alongside him but never invite myself into his place. We have met several times on the street. He always recognizes me, pets me and is tender. He calls me “your honor,” and asks how I am doing.

I happily wag my tail and run alongside him. My heart pounds from happiness in these moments. How nice it is to have your Human! At such times, life is simply like a fairy tale.

#### 4. Our Troubles

A free dog has lots of things to take care of. At the crack of dawn, you have to run the ravine and find out whether there is anything new. Every dog has a corner that he knows better than anyone else. If you are in a pack, then you have to report your news to the leader.

Shadow typically sits in his place behind the Wild Bush.

Once-a-Dachshund runs up and says that a metal box has shown up in her ditch.

“Rusty?” Shadow asks.

“Yes, very rusty, with two holes in it.”

Shadow thinks it over, then says:

“Alright, let it lie.”

Brains reports that someone forgot a book on his outcropping.

“About dogs?” asks Shadow.

“No, about people,” Brains replies.

“Tear it up into little bits,” orders Shadow, even though he knows that Brains is not capable of tearing up a book, and will hide it somewhere further away.

A nighttime fire burned over by Gimp and destroyed a nice stump we all itched ourselves on.

“I will find out who destroyed it!” growled Shadow. “I’ll get him by the pants leg and rip it off!”

Crumb says that nothing has changed in his gully.

“What do you mean, nothing changed?” Shadow asks. “Everyone else had something change, but with you nothing? Did you check out everything thoroughly? Did you follow your nose around your loop, sweep crosswise, go top to bottom?”

Crumb hastily confirmed that he followed his nose around his loop, swept crosswise, went top to bottom.

“Then what is this?” Shadow asks menacingly.

He tosses an elder branch in front of Crumb.

“I checked up on you on purpose, Crumb. I ran to your gully and ripped out this branch, and you didn’t notice.

Crumb begins to fidget and snigger.

“That’s how it always is,” Shadow says to me. “No one knows anything, no one can do anything. Bury the whole ravine and they wouldn’t notice.”

After rounds, it’s time to accompany the children to school. They walk along, happily chatting, swinging their packs, running, fighting.

We also walk, yelping happily, wagging our tails. It’s too bad that the school is closed in the summer. Lots of kids go away. But then all the others who stay behind spend their days in the ravine. They play hide-and-seek, burn sticks and dig caves.

We have to watch over all of this. Without us, they couldn’t cope with anything. If some unpleasant person shows up, we bark at him and don’t let him near.

The littlest ones need rides, the big ones need us to bring them some sort of wild game. For example a grey mouse. It can be a bit tiring, entertaining kids all day long. Our burden is not a light one.