

Sola
Meghann Plant (2017)

I stick by two basic rules of conduct in my job.

Firstly, to keep my nose down; my foremost value is my sense of smell. Secondly, I am not a pet, and Frank is my master, not my owner.

It's not unusual to feel the leash click on my collar, but it is unusual to feel the anxiety rolling off my master. A voice with the same casual inflection crackles through Frank's radio.

'It's a serious situation, Frank. Schools are precarious. Don't come if your training isn't up to scratch. We can find another canine team.'

'We'll be fine, Ryan,' reassures Frank. The radio emits a sound like a gunshot, causing Frank to jump. 'Ryan? Mate?' Panic seeps into his voice, and Frank swears, pressing buttons on the radio. 'Crap. Crap! Come on, Sola. We gotta go.'

Frank sprints to the truck. Something's wrong, but nevertheless, I scamper after my master. He doesn't bother to brush the scorching sand off my feet. There's a sense of urgency, that I don't usually feel on a job. The petrol doesn't usually stifle my sense of smell, but I'm having difficulty detecting anything important.

Something rattles the truck as we stop; something that feels like a bullet.

I'm out of the truck before Frank, and I hear children crying. Some are drenched in their own blood and some in the blood of others. I can hear their unified pain, but nothing of what caused it.

Footsteps?

No.

Gunfire?

No.

Machinery?

No, only grief.

The perpetrator will be close, but where, I don't know. Frank isn't on the job. There's something more important for him here.

'Ryan,' he shouts, over and over.

He doesn't even respond when a teacher, a woman, grabs his arm. He shakes her off, but we're here to help those at this school; the girls on the ground and the lost teachers in the classrooms.

At least, I think that's our job. Frank seems to think it's something else, and I'm supposed to follow my master's commands.

What commands? I am given none.

I have no guidance, so I chase my tail for a bit, but I'm pretty sure that's inappropriate. So, I put my nose to the ground; rule one.

The building shakes as I enter, but it seems fine for the moment. What I do know from previous jobs is that people don't come into schools that teach girls, shoot a couple of kids, and leave.

Someone will have left something else here; I just can't smell it yet. They'll be waiting nearby, but I don't know where. But I smell something familiar; something like Frank, but sweatier, and bloodier, like the children outside.

'Ryan,' Frank's still at it, hopelessly drawing out the sounds in the name like he's trying to hold onto them as they disappear.

But I need his help. Whatever the smell is, the iron blood makes it hard to follow. Everything here smells like iron; the children, the building, this smell. So, I latch onto the sweat, or at least, I try.

Head down, nose down. Gunshot. Hearing isn't important. Find the sweaty smell, and Frank will help with the gun. I have a master, and I cannot work alone.

'Ryan.' Frank's moving, more frantic. He needs to get to the job. I need help.

The sweaty smell splits in two, confusing me. I can't follow both. My master would know which to follow.

A woman grabs me by my fur, which stands in sweaty clumps.

'Come on, pointer, find it. Find it.'

'Look. Smell.' More victimised educators join in, but I don't have time. Find the sweaty smell, and my master can help me. The second scent is stronger, so I follow that one.

'Ryan!' Frank's louder, so I know I've gone the wrong way; I must find the old smell. Backtracking, I locate the woman again, and I retrieve the scent.

Head down, nose down, follow.

Normally, I don't follow an odour this fast, but I'm sure the 'it' mentioned won't be good. But my first job is to find Ryan. After that, Frank will find 'it' with me.

The job is becoming harder, as the sweat mingles with the iron of blood. Inside the school building is a maze of rooms, filled with dust and smells to follow. Screaming outside is unimportant. Dust is teasing me, begging for a sneeze. But I can't lose this scent.

‘Ryan.’ Less confident, but still desperate. A plead. Frank needs help and I need help. I’ll help Frank then he can help me.

Screams, blood, dust. The sweat. Follow the sweat.

Crying. Crying? Confused, I stop. The crying is on the same trail as the sweat, but it's a girl, and the sweat is a man. Which is correct? Frank would know. But my smell is more important, so I must follow that.

Head down, nose down. Head down, nose down. I sneeze.

‘Sola?’

Ryan holds his hand out to me, the one that isn’t covering the grotty girl’s eyes, stopping her from seeing his bloody hip, but keeping her near him, safe. Ryan strokes my fur; he needs his brother.

‘Go get Frank.’

I’m off, and I’m running through the map of smells and sounds.

Frank Frank Frank.

Stop, bark, grab his pant leg, and run.

He’s following me, thank goodness. When I stop, he stops.

‘Ryan.’

In a second, Frank has the girl on his his and his arm around his brother. ‘Mum would have been furious, Ryan.’

Frank found Ryan, so we must find ‘it.’ The crying seems quieter; the dust is more still. I hear something, and my head shoots up.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

I can't smell the tick, though. I can only hear it.

Ryan’s blood.

Men’s sweat.

Girl’s tears.

No tick.

Frank doesn’t follow me; a master would be with me. Run in one classroom, out another. Find the sound, find ‘it,’ get ‘it’ away.

Tick.

Counting down from an unknown number. Tables, chairs, blackboards, pencils. None of these tick.

A shuffle.

Too big for a child, but too small for Frank or Ryan. The perpetrator waits.

Job three.

But first.

Tick.

Louder, and more insistent. Head up, ears perked. Listen, don't smell. Follow. Out the door, down the dusty hallway, around the corner. 'It' can't be in a chair, or a desk, or a pencil, or a blackboard.

Tick.

My head whips up. There 'it' is, down the hallway, maybe three doors to the right; I'll have to run. Frank's still near Ryan, but I can smell him coming.

There's a shoebox, sitting under the desk, taped to the floor. Bark until Frank comes, don't touch it. I've done this before, and I can't touch anything without Frank.

He comes around the corner. 'Sola! Good girl. Good dog.' He takes out a knife and cuts through the tape anchoring the box to the cement. Inside, a mass of wires and a mess of parts; cutlery, ceramics, stationery. No timer, only that tick. Placed there by the conceited man hiding outside.

Tick.

Frank swears. We're not supposed to be the only unit here. Normally, we have techs to dismantle this kind of thing, but the radio on Ryan's hip was shot with him.

Shuffle.

I know he's outside. Waiting for the finale. People don't come into schools that teach girls, shoot a couple of kids, and leave. I know. He's waiting.

Frank's on the verge of tears, I can tell. I can smell his desperation; he must save Ryan; he must save the girls, and the teachers.

Or I could.

I wrench the box from his hands, and he yells at me. But it doesn't matter. He's not my master anymore, not really.

Look, don't smell.

Listen, don't smell.

Shuffling, and eyes in the bushes. Eyes certain of victory. Over that long stretch of Middle Eastern sand. Run, Sola.

Sand burns the pads of my feet as I run with 'it' wedged in my jaw; he cannot see me. He only sees the school, certain of its impending demolition. Except, the school won't be demolished.

Halfway there, run.

Tick.

There's the man. He sees me. Gun out, loading, loading, loading. Like those games Frank always plays. Frank, who is running behind me. After me, or after 'it.'

Faster, faster, almost there. Through the heat travels a harsh sound in a different tongue: swearing.

Tock.

I'm skidding to a stop, to release the shoebox, so 'it,' can sail over to him, the man.

Run run run.

Sense of smell doesn't matter; what matters is how fast I can get back to my owner, back to Frank. My owner runs with me as, behind us, the bushes explode.

Firstly, I am more than my sense of smell. This is a rule.

Secondly, I have a job, a purpose. Nonetheless, I also have an owner. His name is Frank. I am his colleague; I am his friend.