

The Day We Found Herman

By Andrew Smith

It was one of those warm winter days, when the woodstove burns out and no one even notices.

The boy, nearly four years old and tired of the house, said that he wanted to go for a hike. The dog agreed. I dare not let them down.

A lunch was packed; two ham sandwiches, a lump of cheese and two canteens of Kool-aid.

A man's best friend may be his dog, but a dog's best friend is the man's ham sandwiches. The Kool-aid was for the boy and I. The ham sandwiches were to remind the dog who his friends really were, when the going got tough. And it was to get tough, indeed.

We drove some short way to where the Centennial Trail crosses the road near our house. I'd been one way many times before. So we went the other way.

We had to cross Estes Creek to get on the trail, and the dog splashed happily in the gurgling water, while the boy swung like a young baboon from my hands until we were across. That was so much fun that once across, he decided to abandon hiking and just spend the rest of the day swinging back and forth across the creek on my arm.

Veto. We decided to head down the path. "You never know what you'll find on a path through the woods," I pointed out. The boy agreed, and raced ahead.

"Look Dad, I found Mud!" He jumped up and down excitedly in a puddle of fertile brown ooze, thrilled that he was able to so soon prove me right. "Man, that looks like some good mud!" I said. "C'mon, let's see what else we can find."

We followed the trail into a stand of decaying 350 year-old ponderosas. The sunlight splashing through the canopy rippled like water on the forest floor. A rock beside the trail was covered with the shelled red hulls of dozens of pine cones, dropped by a hungry squirrel. The boy stopped.

"That's where a squirrel eats lunch," I said. "He eats pine cones."

"Looks like a lot of pine cones," said the boy. I agreed, glad that I wasn't a squirrel.

We went on, and at the base of a tree not far away I found something very rare; at least, rare to me. It was a dead ermine. Ermines are a type of weasel that turn all white in winter, except for the very tip of their tail, which

stays black. I'm told they're not very rare, but they are shy, and I'd only seen one other in my whole life.

"Look, an ermine!" I said to the boy.

"What's a Herman?" he replied, shoving the dog aside.

For an instant my deepest hunter/gatherer instincts were aroused and I imagined dragging the luckless, bloody ermine back to my cave and throwing it at my mate, while screaming, "Eat! Eat!" or some other form of endearment.

It seemed a shame to waste such a tiny, perfect creature –snowy white and barely bigger than a mouse. But what could I do with it –make a one finger fur glove? We headed on down the path.

We crossed a meadow, went over a hill, and started up the other side. A doe crashed through the brush behind us and headed at a flat out run for the meadow. The dog bolted away after it, and a coyote, hard after the deer, came skidding to a halt and reversed herself in mid-air when I yelled at the dog. The boy cheered them all on.

The dog's name is Jin. In Japanese *gin* means silver, while *jin* means the silvery-colored dead wood found on old pine trees. In English, of course, gin means gin, which is a drink that smells like pine trees. Or Djinn, which means a genie, or spirit. So the dog's name could mean spirit, or dead wood, or silver, or booze. Anyway, it's easy to say.

"JIN!" I yelled, "Come back here!" The dog was rocketing after the doe like a silver streak, and obviously had no intention of stopping, when suddenly the ham sandwich organ in his brain tripped on and he whirled around and raced back towards us. "Good Dog!"

The boy was getting tired now, and I had to coax him up the hill.

"Come on. There's something I want to show you."

"What is it?"

"Come up here and find out." Reluctantly, he hiked up to where I was.

"Look," I said. "This spruce tree got broken off by the wind. Spruce trees aren't good in the wind. They blow over."

"Is it gonna be Ok?"

"No. It's dead now."

"Like the Herman?"

"Yup."

It was only a little further to the top. We hiked up there and found a sunny spot for our picnic. The boy found a long streamer of bright blue ribbon on the ground, an escapee from the boundary of a soon-to-be timber sale. He made it dance in the breeze, and by his eyes I could tell that he'd found, momentarily at least, the prize that we all are looking for.

We shared our sandwiches with Jin, and threw pinecones at a puddle. Then we started back towards home. And I thought about Herman, and what a privilege it is to take someone young out into the woods.