

Managing Pain

At the Heart of Georgia veterinary practice, Virginia Ware watched Dr. Jim Parks' large, capable hands stroke the kinky fur of one of her dying Fox Terriers.

"With daily visits here for fluids, the medications I've prescribed, and this new low-protein diet, I think your dogs could have another year ahead of them," Dr. Parks promised Virginia's husband, Marty. At 57, Marty was twelve years older than Virginia, though in his current state he looked old enough to be her father. The dogs were his. Virginia liked them well enough, but she was always vaguely irritated by their long, bearded dopey faces and the way their little bodies quivered with excitement.

"Do you think it's worth it?" Marty asked his wife.

"Absolutely," she said as she admired the dimples peeking out from under Dr. Park's dark stubble.

"You can drop them off tomorrow morning for their first round of fluids. Mrs. Ware, will you be bringing them in?" Dr. Parks straightened up and handed Ruby and Lady's leashes to Marty.

"I think so; my husband will be at the hospital tomorrow morning for dialysis," Virginia said and smiled at Dr. Parks.

He smiled back at her, but quickly cast his smile over to Marty as well. Dr. Parks shook both their hands and excused himself to tend to another patient.

"You were right about this vet, honey. It looks like he really can help our girls," Marty said to his wife.

"Kidney failure isn't a death sentence for them, just like it isn't for you," Virginia said.

As they walked out to the lobby, Virginia ushered her husband to wait in the car with the dogs and said she would settle with the front desk. With her husband safely out the double-glass doors, Virginia turned around and went back into the treatment room. Dr. Parks was waiting, with his lab coat unbuttoned, on the bench occupied by Marty minutes ago. He rose when Virginia entered and she embraced him, burying her head into his warm, solid chest. She reached upwards with her lips and just barely grazed his. He laughed and pulled her face closer and pressed his tongue into her mouth. Finally, Virginia broke away and Dr. Parks said she could pay later.

“Can’t have Marty worrying why you’re taking so long,” he said

“Aren’t you glad I convinced him to bring the dogs here? It will be so much easier now,” Virginia said and squeezed the bulge in Dr. Parks’ corduroy pants. “You just have to hold up your end of the bargain and keep them alive for a while!”

Virginia felt elated as she walked out to her husband’s Porsche. She and Jim— Dr. Parks—had been stealing minutes together ever since they met six months ago through an online dating site. Bored with her marriage, Virginia told herself she was just on there to look, not touch, but one thing led to the next, as it often does. Their relationship seemed very fortuitous; Jim had a highly esteemed veterinary practice and she had two old Fox Terriers that their previous vet had urged them to euthanize. But Marty loved those dogs to pieces and she knew he would jump at a glimmer of hope.

The elation carried Virginia into the driver seat beside her husband. She smiled at him and even squeezed his hand when he reached for hers. Lady, sitting on Marty’s lap, started methodically licking Virginia’s hand. She pulled her hand away and turned the ignition. Marty, like his dogs, had chronic kidney failure. Before the tremors, fatigue and memory failure forced

Marty to retire, he was an anesthesiologist, charged with managing his patients' pain. Stage 5 kidney failure crippled him to the extent that Virginia idly wondered if he could wipe his own ass anymore. Luckily, she didn't have to concern herself with Marty's troubles. His wealth from his job and inheritance was so vast that they were able to afford a full-time nurse and put her up in the in-law apartment over their four-car garage. After fifteen years of marriage, her husband had nothing to offer Virginia but the promise of his impending death and the contents of his will that would make her happy for a very long time.

The next morning brought dialysis and blood work for Marty at the hospital and fluids for Lady and Ruby at Heart of Georgia. Virginia dropped Marty off; even endured a kiss on the cheek as he whispered yet again, "thank you for doing so much for our girls".

This overwhelming gratitude was a somewhat unanticipated side effect of establishing the dogs as Dr. Parks' patients and it made Virginia uncomfortable, since she knew her motives weren't what her deteriorating husband thought they were. But, ultimately Marty would die believing that she loved him so much that she fought tooth and nail to keep the family alive. He would never suspect the affair and she would still inherit the family fortune. The three-story cottage with an elevator in Palm Beach. The private plane. Things that Virginia didn't even know she wanted until she got used to having them, and now, she didn't want to do without.

Virginia smiled towards Marty, but the smile was all for herself.

During the official appointment with Dr. Parks, one of the vet techs remained in the room the whole time. Dr. Parks and Virginia were formal, and she fawned over the dogs. She had told

Dr. Parks it was important that the staff did not have any inkling of the affair, lest word get back to Marty. You know how people talk.

When Dr. Parks finished his examination, the vet tech took the dogs to the back to administer their fluids. Ruby and Lady often became dehydrated because they didn't feel well enough to drink, Dr. Parks had explained during yesterday's appointment. He recommended they receive fluid treatments at his practice each weekday, and Virginia reveled in the convenient excuse.

Finally alone, Virginia leaned into Jim and slipped her hands up his shirt. She started running her fingernails down his back, which usually made him shudder and sigh, but he gently grabbed her arms to stop her. She pouted at him and asked what was wrong. He reached around her and grabbed a can of wet prescription dog food from the counter. "I have to show you what to do with this first," he said.

"Don't I just put it in a bowl and give it to the dogs?" she asked and tugged at his sleeve. "Come on Jim, let's have some fun."

"As their appetite gets worse, you're going to have to start force feeding them," Jim said.

Virginia wrinkled her delicate nose. "Can't you do that here?"

"It's easy; I'll show you," Jim said and put the can down. He went over to the sink and washed his hands.

Virginia crossed her arms and waited.

"Get down on your knees," Jim said.

"I thought you didn't want to have fun yet."

"Do it, and open your mouth."

Virginia ran her tongue along her lips slowly.

Jim smiled and grabbed her jaw. “Grab the dog’s upper jaw, which will cause her to open her mouth as a reflex. You can stick a small ball of food—maybe a little bigger than a grape—into her mouth.” Jim probed with his thumb into the back of Virginia’s mouth. He pressed on the right side of her throat and she gagged.

“Position the ball of food here-” he jabbed his thumb harder into the side of her throat, “and give it a push so it goes down.” Jim withdrew his hand and clamped Virginia’s mouth shut. He held his hand over her lips and massaged her throat downwards.

“You want to keep her mouth closed until she swallows,” he said.

Virginia obligingly swallowed. She started to stand but Jim pushed her back down with a hand on her shoulder. He unfastened his belt and Virginia pulled down his khakis. He was already hard.

“So you do want to have some fun,” Virginia teased and opened her mouth again. Dr. Parks’ cock plunged against the side of her throat where his thumb had just been. His desire excited her and she took over, moving her mouth up and down his shaft.

Virginia easily fell into a routine over the next few weeks. Her husband occupied his time with his illness and lots of visitors, while she brought the dogs to Dr. Parks five days a week. Virginia was pleased with her splendid deceit. Fifteen years ago she had thought she was ensuring her own happiness by marrying a rich man who worshipped her. At thirty, Virginia was a receptionist at Marty’s hospital and bored with living beyond her means. She was recently divorced from her boring husband of three years and enamored with her own lithe, doe-eyed blonde beauty. She made Dr. Marty Ware feel like the most important man in the world. It took two coffee dates and one romantic dinner for them to sleep together, and it took three weeks after

that for Virginia to realize Marty's abysmal sexual performance wasn't going to improve. He lost his erection, came too early, and although he went down on her often and eagerly, Virginia could rarely stop her mind from wandering long enough to climax. But, Marty spoiled her lavishly in all other ways so when he proposed on their six-month anniversary, she said yes and embarked upon fifteen years of monotony. She married her first husband for what she thought was love, but it turned out she was a poor judge of that, so she decided to try to secure her own happiness through a different route.

Jim knew what he wanted and he took it from Virginia, and let her explore what she wanted it and take it from him. He gave her excitement and expensive gifts that she kept hidden from Marty. Marty, who suspected nothing of the affair. Since Lady and Ruby became patients at Heart of Georgia, Marty's spirits were higher than ever, despite his own weakening condition.

Until Marty's nurse discovered Virginia trying on lingerie one evening, Virginia had hidden all traces of the affair well. She had left her bedroom door open, since Marty couldn't make it up their grand staircase anymore. The nurse surprised Virginia and her hands flew up to cover herself. The nurse grinned wickedly as she saw what Virginia was wearing, before averting her eyes.

"I'm going to surprise Marty," Virginia said proudly. Inside, she trembled. Surely the nurse knew Marty hadn't been capable of sex in a year. She would suspect Virginia was wearing it for someone else. She would tell Marty. Marty would write her out of the will. No, the nurse was a dowdy thing, with unsightly downy hairs covering her cheek and upper lip; she wouldn't know the first thing about wearing lingerie to please a man. The thought settled her, at least for the moment, and she asked the nurse if she needed something.

"Marty wanted to know if you had fed the dogs yet tonight," she said.

“I’ll be right down.” Of course she hadn’t fed the goddamn dogs. She might have even skipped their lunch feeding. Virginia knew it was wrong; if she didn’t feed them they might die despite everything and there would go her clever affair with Dr. Parks. Feeding them was just such a hassle.

Virginia got dressed and joined her husband downstairs. Lady and Ruby lay sleeping on their matching plaid beds. They didn’t care she hadn’t fed them. They didn’t want to live anyway.

“Sorry, darling, I got caught up in my book,” she said to Marty. She swore she saw the nurse hide a smirk.

At the end of the fifth week, when Virginia tried to rouse Ruby for their daily vet appointment, the dog couldn’t or wouldn’t stand. Lady nudged at her with her nose and Virginia poked and prodded but Ruby lay still on her dog bed, heaving long, slow breaths. Virginia knew Marty would want to come along to the vet and hear the prognosis but she was worried that they would walk into an exam room to find Dr. Parks with his balls in his hand. Goddamn dog. Today was Friday, which meant that Virginia wouldn’t get to be alone with Dr. Parks until Monday. She pulled out her phone and sent him a warning text and went to wake her husband.

Marty carried Ruby into the exam room himself, even though his hands shook and he had to lean on Virginia. Dr. Parks had received her text, and so he appeared before them, flaccid and concerned. Marty placed the little dog on the exam table and Dr. Parks rattled off her alarming vitals. Her eyes were dark, sunken and dull. Her ribs protruded and her legs trembled as she lay there. She raised her head a little when Marty said her name and her legs scrambled a bit as if to rise, but the effort lasted no more than a second or two.

“She’ll be fine once she gets her fluids,” Virginia said.

Dr. Parks didn’t take his stethoscope out of his ear and turned his back to them. He bent over the computer for a while but didn’t appear to be entering anything in.

“Let’s just get some water into her, Dr. Parks,” Virginia said again.

“I am so sorry, but I think Ruby is telling us it is time to go,” Dr. Parks said.

“She ate a sweet potato treat yesterday; she seemed to be feeling better.” Virginia insisted.

Dr. Parks pulled up Ruby’s lip to reveal her alabaster gums. He stretched one of her eyes open wide and it was stained red. “Her pulse is 40 beats per minute,” he said.

Virginia, ever the pragmatist, looked away. If Ruby died, what if Lady started declining as well? She’d heard stories of dogs dying in quick succession. Jim had promised he could keep the dogs alive and she hated to see her careful plans crumble. She didn’t like to think of Jim as a man who wasn’t powerful enough to keep his promises. And, perhaps more importantly, she realized she liked playing the game, using Marty’s dogs as the fulcrum for her affair. It was delicious, the devilry of it.

“What does that mean?” Marty asked.

“She’s dying. That’s half the speed it should be.” Dr. Parks placed his hand on Marty’s shoulder. “I think it would be best if we let her go now. You can spend some time with her and say your goodbyes,” he said.

Marty nodded

“Can’t we at least try giving her some fluids?” Virginia bore her eyes into Dr. Parks’ face, willing him to understand the rules of the game. He avoided her gaze, and Marty rested his white hand laced with vivid blue veins upon Virginia’s slender golden one.

“Stop, Virginia. I will always remember what you did,” Marty said. His stare was stern despite the pall of his face.

Virginia froze, afraid to look at her husband. He knew about the affair. Her mind flew through mental checklists of how he could have found out. It must have been the nurse. She hadn’t been too fat and old to understand the purpose of lingerie after all. Or maybe one of the heifer receptionists had gossiped. She stared at the dog and forced herself to breathe. Maybe Marty was only thanking her for trying to save Ruby.

“I’m going to start prepping Ruby for euthanasia,” Dr. Parks said softly.

Virginia finally darted her eyes over to Marty. He was nodding solemnly and a tear slipped out of the corner of his right eye. She couldn’t tell what his words meant either way.

Virginia squeezed her eyes shut and didn’t say anything.

“You didn’t even try to save the dog!” Virginia said as she swatted Dr. Parks’ hands away from unbuttoning her blouse during their Monday morning appointment.

He threw his hands up and backed away. “Virginia, I’m your goddamn vet, not just your fuck toy,” he said.

“I thought you wanted to be with me,” she said. Whining usually worked with Marty.

“You can’t expect me to sacrifice my medical integrity. That dog needed to die.” Dr. Parks checked his watch. “I have another appointment coming in twenty minutes,” he said and looked at the top of her blouse that he had left unbuttoned.

Virginia reached for the next button and almost unfastened it. She could see Jim start to smile so she stopped and toyed with it instead. She could make him forget about his next appointment. She pulled the blouse open just enough to reveal the sexy black lace bombshell bra

she had bought over the weekend. She knew Jim well enough to know that his dick would be throbbing and hardening now. Teasing him always excited her, and Virginia waited to feel the familiar sense of arousal. She was wearing matching black lace garters and she reached up her skirt to caress around them. Jim bit his lip and reached out to help with her blouse, but she pushed his hands away again. She stared at Jim's face. The dark stubble she used to find mysterious and sexy looked oddly dirty to her now. He couldn't save the dog, a troublesome voice said in her head. He's just as weak as Marty.

Virginia ignored the voice and unbuttoned the rest of her blouse. She cupped her hands around her breasts, still perky and firm for forty-five. She squeezed them together and watched Jim touch his bulging pants. She should be excited by now, but all she felt was distracted. She didn't know what was blocking her except that Jim seemed horribly ordinary. The voice in her head compared him again to Marty, but no, Virginia countered, this feeling was worse. Marty hadn't set any high standards for the pleasure he could give her. But Jim had, and now he was failing to live up to them. Virginia tried running her tongue along her lips and let Jim reach for her breasts, but no, she was dry as a drought and bored.

Virginia abruptly stopped caressing her breasts and buttoned her blouse back up. She ran her hands down the front to smooth it out. Dr. Parks grabbed one of her hands away.

"I can be late for my next appointment," he said as he held her hand.

"I have to go," she said haughtily and took her hand away. It occurred to her that perhaps the problem wasn't actually with Jim. Perhaps she was just worried that Marty knew about the affair, but, then again, she doubted that could make Jim's handsome face appear so blatantly unappealing to her.

Jim said her name plaintively as she reached for the door handle.

She looked at his erection and said he might want to go to the restroom to take care of it.

When she returned from her frustrating appointment with Dr. Parks, Virginia decided to present herself to Marty and let him accuse her openly of her indiscretions, if he knew. If Marty didn't know, then her mind could rest easy and she could return to Jim and figure out how she felt about him now.

She had avoided Marty all weekend after they put Ruby down. Lady hadn't started rapid-fire deteriorating like Virginia had feared, and they had hunkered down to mourn in Marty's bedroom. Virginia would peek in when things were quiet and usually saw Lady asleep on Marty's chest, tucked under his chin.

Virginia went straight from the front door to Marty's downstairs bedroom to find him blowing on a spoonful of broth his nurse had prepared for him. When Lady bounded up the doggie steps that led to his bed, he placed the spoon back into the bowl without sipping the broth.

"How's our pumpkin doing?" he cooed to the dog. He dipped his finger into the bowl and let Lady lick it clean. He looked up and smiled at Virginia.

"You look stunning, my dear," he said and patted the space next to him on the mattress.

Virginia warily sat down, but the conversation remained innocuous. Marty asked about Lady's vet appointment and scratched her ears. Virginia waited for him to mention the affair, but he didn't. They sat in an oddly comfortable silence for a while until Marty spoke.

"Lady," he said. "Sh-sh-she's a ve-ery good dog," he said weakly.

"Marty?" Virginia stood up.

Marty lifted his arm to stroke Lady's head, but it flopped back onto the mattress, as useless as a noodle. He stared at his hand and tried to say something else, but his lips sagged as he soundlessly mouthed the air.

Virginia ran out of the room to the foyer where she had left her cell phone. Her index finger scrambled across the touch screen, trying to get to the dial pad to call an ambulance but a missed call from Dr. Parks consumed the screen. Her fingers lost all dexterity as she pawed at the screen and finally she was able to dial 911 as she raced back into Marty's bedroom.

She held his limp hand until the ambulance arrived.

Marty died later that day from the stroke without saying anything else to Virginia. She left the hospital before she could be overwhelmed by a deluge of sympathetic well wishers. She had the taxi drop her at the beginning of her driveway and walked the long, tree-lined stretch to the big white plantation house. Lady met her at the door, limping with excitement. Virginia scooped her up and carried her down the hall. She shut Marty's bedroom door and climbed the grand, central staircase to the master bathroom. She set Lady down and the little dog curled up on the bathroom rug. Virginia unbuttoned her ruffled blouse and slipped it off. She pulled her skirt down over her garter straps and stood in front of the full-length mirror. She had flaunted her body in front of Jim earlier that day, but now she saw her luster slipping away. Her flat stomach was starting to look vaguely paunchy and her inner thighs jiggled and were pockmarked with cellulite. Virginia frowned, but ultimately blamed the harsh bathroom lighting. She turned the ornate faucets in the claw foot bathtub and waited until the bubbles rose up almost to the edge. She removed her sexy black lace ensemble and slipped into the scalding water. Now that Marty was safely dead, she had no way of knowing whether he knew about the affair until his will was

administered. Maybe he hadn't even had a chance to write her out of it yet. That thought comforted Virginia and she let her mind wander to Jim. Her attraction to Dr. Parks seemed as dead as Marty. He had been fun, but fun is only ever as good as it lasts. Virginia thought of all the men's faces she saw only in passing and supposed she might like to know. Of Paris and New Zealand, yoga classes and TV dinners for one. She remained immersed until the water became too cold to bear, listening to Lady's occasional little dream yips.

The next day, Virginia received a phone call from Marty's lawyer. He told her they needed to address the specific accommodations in Marty's will for his funeral, and finally he said the words she was waiting for, "You've just become a very wealthy woman, Mrs. Ware." She breathlessly thanked him and squealed with delight when she hung up the phone.

At noon, Virginia carried Lady into the county animal shelter as soon as it opened. She wandered around the lobby until one overeager volunteer asked what she was there for. The chubby girl looked disappointed as she pointed Virginia towards the intake side of the room. Virginia set the dog down in front of the counter and the almost pretty receptionist with a face baked in makeup said she would be with her in just a minute. Her voice was deep and oddly husky and Virginia thought that was unfortunate. She kept her own makeup simple because she hated makeup applied in desperation. Girls that sloshed heavy foundation over acne, women who rimmed their wrinkles in smoky purple, the overeager volunteer whose bright pink lipstick couldn't quite draw attention away from her acne-scarred skin and fleshy arms.

The orange-faced receptionist finally looked up from her paperwork and bluntly asked what she wanted. Rude, Virginia thought. She wondered what ugly imperfections lurked under

the girl's makeup. She pointed to Lady on the floor but realized the receptionist couldn't see her over the massive counter so she lifted the dog up again.

"I can't take care of her anymore," Virginia said.

"So you want to surrender her?" Orange-face asked.

Virginia nodded.

The receptionist pushed paperwork across the counter to Virginia and asked if she had proof of ownership with her. Lady started drooling on Virginia's ivory sweater and she hastily put her down.

"Proof of ownership?" Virginia asked.

"Vet records, a microchip in your name, rabies certificate," Orange-face looked bored.

"No, I don't have that with me. Why should it matter if she's my dog? You have to take her regardless," Virginia said and hoped it was true. She should have said the damn dog was a stray.

"Yes ma'am, but if we take her without proof of ownership we can't do anything with her for five days until her stray hold is up. She looks like she might be sick." Orange-face stood up and leaned over the counter to look at Lady, who was heaving tremendous breaths.

"She has kidney failure," Virginia said.

"We don't really have the resources here to treat that. If you could get her vet records as proof of ownership, then we could make a decision about her health today," Orange-face smiled as if it was simple.

Virginia didn't want to call Heart of Georgia to get the records sent over because Jim didn't know she was here. He didn't know Marty had died. Dr. Parks had given her autonomy from her dying husband, but now she wanted her autonomy from him. She didn't want to talk to

him and feel that dead desire. She didn't want to explain why she wasn't interested in fucking him anymore. The grand scheme of their affair died with Marty. Perhaps she never even liked Jim; she only reveled in the conniving of her own mind. Virginia was widowed and rich and ready to follow the whims of her mind without any sort of restraint. She only wanted to spend her time on things that made her feel happy and young.

"I can't get her records. You'll just have to make do," she said.

Orange-face stopped smiling and called for someone named Nick to come to intake for an incoming dog. Virginia scribbled answers on the paperwork and waited for Nick to come get the dog. A young man with sullen eyes and a dark beard that shadowed his elegant cheekbones poked his head out of a door to the back and looked around before emerging fully. He walked up to Virginia and reached for Lady's leash. Before he turned to walk Lady to the back, he uttered a quick thank you. Virginia turned away also, but was struck by how attractive he was, and how single she was.

"Why did you thank me?"

He raised his dark eyebrows at her.

"Hmm, why did you thank me?" She tilted her head so she could look at him just with her eyes, coyly.

"Habit, I guess," Nick said. His face turned a little red, and Virginia thought her charms were working.

"You're going to take good care of her for me, aren't you?" Virginia stepped forward and touched his arm.

Nick shook his head and jerked his arm away. "You know we're just going to euthanize it after it suffers in the back for five days?"

“This is an animal shelter—you’re supposed to save dogs!” Virginia said to make herself sound more sympathetic.

“No, we’re just supposed to clean up people’s messes,” he said and looked pointedly at her.

“I’ve been a slave to that dog for too long,” Virginia said. The conversation wasn’t going the way she hoped but she could still make him understand how much energy she had already put into the dogs and win him over. He would be on her side. Marty always had been. The twenty missed calls since yesterday from Dr. Parks showed that Jim was on her side.

“I really admire the work you all do here,” she said.

The sullen guy snorted. He actually snorted at her.

“I had to force feed her three times a day! I took her to a very highly esteemed veterinary practice everyday for fluids,” she said.

He moved closer to the door.

“I’ve spent more money on these two dogs than you probably make in a year!”

Orange-face cleared her throat. “Ma’am, you’re free to go. We have everything we need from you,” she said in her dry, man-voice.

Virginia ignored the over baked receptionist. “I gave them everything,” she said to the guy.

“Well, aren’t you just Mother-fucking-Teresa,” he said and walked through the heavy glass door and let it slowly thud closed behind him.

She was a woman who cheated on her husband, and used his dying dogs to conceal the affair. She was a woman who dumped her dog off at the shelter to die, and hit on the kennel guy. She was a woman who would continue to ignore Jim’s phone calls until he finally stopped

calling. She wasn't Mother Teresa. She wasn't even close. Virginia watched through the glass windows as Nick scooped Lady up and cradled her in his arms. Virginia adjusted her sleek ivory sweater and smiled. But she wasn't a bad person. She just had things figured out a little differently than most people, and if everyone thought the way she did, then there wouldn't be enough room in society for them all. Some people were just destined to clean up dog shit.

The Road to Hell

How odd it was, I thought as a receptionist handed me Albert's leash, to live in a world where my daughter no longer existed. Leila killed herself a week ago, and I still didn't know what to make of it. I was sad, of course, at some basic level. Even all my own eccentrics that I had learned to live with couldn't entirely suppress natural biological instincts. I had the distinct feeling, however—as I often do—that I was missing some critical emotional response. It was easy to cry, standing there a week ago in front of Leila's body strung up, limp and ugly, from the rafters of her apartment. But even now, I can't tell if I was crying out of raw, animal grief, or because I had already accepted her suicide. No tumultuous five stages of grief for me.

Standing here, in Waggin' Tails Pet Resort with Leila's dog, Albert, I felt like I was doing at least one thing right. Next to Leila's swinging body there had been a note addressed to me that simply read: "Marie, please keep Albert like you promised."

My ex-husband, Tom, limply tried to argue that he should have the dog, because it liked him better, which was true, but we both knew he travelled too much to care for a dog. Still, I might have let him keep Albert, if it wasn't for the conversation I had with my daughter about two months ago in June. Leila spent the summers mostly at her apartment in Boone, an hour north-ish of me in Hickory, and three hours west of her father in Raleigh.

I remember this particular afternoon was muggy and I was outside, where I was happiest, sipping lemonade and intermittently staring at the sun until it hurt. Enclosed spaces stifled me and made me feel sleepy. During the summer, I refused to run the air conditioning, and instead threw open all the windows and ran a box fan, reveling in the steamy fresh air.

I heard the phone ringing inside the first time but I didn't get up to answer until I heard the phone ring again. It's not important unless they call back.

I said hello and Leila said, “I realized the other day, mama, I should make a will.”

I laughed because the idea of delegating out your possessions seemed absurd to me, and because Leila had called me ‘mama’, which she rarely did. Usually it was just ‘Marie’. “Leila, I don’t even have a will you’re half my age, only twenty.”

“Well, if anything happened to me, you would have to take care of Albert. He’s not always good with strangers; I don’t know if he would be easy to find a home for.”

Albert. I never liked animals like my daughter did. I didn’t dislike them, but I never thought I would find my solace in a dog. I found solace in my tiny remodeled Airstream nestled on a secluded three-acre lot. I found solace in my vegetable garden. I found solace in rainy afternoons where I had an excuse lie in bed and listen to the pitter of rain on the aluminum siding. Life comes at you so much more vividly in a trailer, which is precisely why I bought one, as a discarded, moldy hunk of metal, and transformed it with bleach, pretty curtains and new wallpaper.

Leila’s solace was her dog. She got the dog two years ago as an irresistibly wiggly German Short Haired Pointer puppy. Albert was all floppy ears, huge paws and a pretty liver and white-ticked coat. She was a year into college when she got the dog and declared, now that she had Albert, she had a best friend.

The day we talked about her will, I told Leila I would take Albert, and spent the rest of the afternoon working on my garden in the sun thinking about the various ways my daughter might die. Not in a mean way, it was just interesting to me, because I often imagined how I might die and when.

As I paid Albert's boarding bill, the receptionist told me that Albert had been a little aggressive with some of the staff. "Nothing too serious," she said and smiled, "but maybe you ought to consider hiring a dog trainer to consult on his behavior around strangers." I murmured an assent and led the dog out to my Suburu, trying to keep him from leaping up on me.

Leila always kept him in a crate during car rides and now I knew why. Unrestrained in my station wagon, he bounded from seat to seat, pawed at my arm when I wouldn't let him jump in my lap and whined incessantly. His energy was apparently limitless. I had purchased the "sports package" as a boarding enhancement, which the front desk girl had assured me would leave Albert so tuckered out from his stay that he would "sleep the whole ride home!" Albert didn't so much as sit still, and as we pulled into the parking lot of my daughter's apartment complex, he threw up yellow liquid bile all over the backseat. Unlike our old Maltese, Pansy, who would quickly slurp back up anything she threw up, Albert leaned back against the seat and just lightly panted at me while the vomit seeped into fabric.

I wrinkled my nose at the dog and pulled into an open parking spot. I leaned back against the headrest and thought about the task ahead of me. Leila had managed to accumulate many more possessions over her short life than I had over my forty years here. Well, that's not actually true. I'm an antiques dealer; objects are my bread and butter. On weekends, I hang out at flea markets with other worried, lonely souls, hawking my wares to obnoxious passersby. To me, all objects make up an ebbing and flowing stream of financial worth. I look at an old gold locket and I think of the current price gold, not the picture of two little boys contained within. There's little I wouldn't sell. When I divorced my husband Tom, five years ago, I got rid of practically everything to fit into my tiny trailer. Leila stood in my way, a mountain of materialism, and beseeched me to keep favorite family heirlooms. I gave her what I couldn't sell for very much

money and we both were happy. That's a big difference between my daughter and me. Was a big difference. She existed in clutter; I exist in scarcity.

Albert's whining woke me from my reverie. I looked back at the vomit but it was already seeped into the fabric, hardly noticeable. It didn't particularly bother me—no one ever sat back there anyway—so I got out of the car and left it there. I was struck by the brilliance of the sun for October and stood, gazing upwards with my hand rested upon my open car door. Warmth filled me and I thought maybe Albert and I could go for a walk before tackling the apartment. I moved towards the back door, but before I could even open it, Albert burst out of the driver's door like a bullet. He was ecstatic with freedom; his nose quivered, his butt wiggled and his tail wagged. He pranced a circle around me and nipped at my hands.

"No, no, I don't think this is good," I said to the dog. I knelt down and tried to grab hold his collar, but he kept wiggling around in circles.

His circles around me started getting bigger and I started reasoning with him.

"Just get in the car, Albert."

"I'll give you a treat!"

"There's a good dog. Good dog!"

"What would your mother say?"

Abruptly, his whole body stiffened to a taut stop. He held his tail erect and lifted his right front paw. I crept up behind him and snatched a hold on his collar. He turned around quickly, as if surprised and gave me a little tail wag as he tore his stare away from whatever little critter he wanted to chase.

"Gotcha!" I said to the dog, feeling strangely triumphant for holding onto him. I grabbed the leash from the car and looped it around his neck. My daughter called it a slip-lead, but it

looked like a noose to me. It looped around Albert's neck loosely, but tightened up whenever he pulled. I got my meager travel bag out of the car I walked up the steps to my daughter's apartment. I had resisted my ex-husband's efforts to pay a cleanup crew to come in and remove all traces of the suicide, and at my adamant declaration that it was a waste of money, he made a face of such horror I thought I had killed something in him. So I told him I knew someone who would do it for nothing, which was a lie, and evoked another horrified look, because what kind of person would volunteer to clean up a twenty year old girl's suicide for free? He stopped protesting though and just let me handle it. Tom was just as bad at feelings as I was, but in the opposite direction. He felt too much. Tom would have been content to just let the apartment sit untouched for months while he searched for his balls, but unlike Tom, I knew the value of a dollar. A childhood of poverty makes one quite miserly. My father provided for us as best he could, but he was at the whim of his barely above minimum wage jobs. Hired and fired. Hired and laid off. Hired and quit from the monotony. I started dealing in antiques to be my own boss. I set my hours and worked as hard, or as little as I wanted. A few months of rent on Leila's apartment was a fortune to me. No need to waste that while we waited for a respectable amount of time to pass after our daughter's death.

Since I hadn't wasted money on a clean up crew, the rope strung up from the rafters and the knocked over chair greeted Albert and me. The scene was positioned directed in the center of the room and illuminated from the last aching tendrils of low sunlight streaming in from the picture window. It looked perfectly composed and I almost expected actors to come out and take their places. I dumped my bag on the hardwood floor moved deeper into the apartment. Albert cowered in the doorway, staring up at the rope, his legs splayed wide as if he feared for his balance. I told him to come on, and he slunk past the rope, staying as close to the wall as possible

with his tail firmly tucked all the way under to his belly. He followed me into the kitchen and started whining. He looked hungry, not that it meant anything. Dogs always look hungry for something. I looked at the clock. It was just past five and I didn't know if that meant it was dinnertime for Albert, or not. It was dinnertime for me. Living on my little homestead I did everything early. Supper early, bed early, rise early. On mornings I sold at the flea market I was up by four.

I gave into Albert's whining, something, I read somewhere, you are not supposed to do with a dog. I found his food dish and put an arbitrary amount because Leila didn't leave me any instructions. I guess she reckoned I would figure it out, but I still thought it was selfish of her. The whole thing was pretty goddamn selfish.

She told me once, maybe just a week before she died, that she had been going to some yoga meditation class. It was sort of bullshit like Church, she had said, but also sort of less bullshit. I told her that sounded nice and thought maybe she would find something, some purpose in life, because, believe me, it's too easy to get lost in life if you don't have one.

I tried praying as a little kid, thinking that if I believed hard enough I could have God just like everyone else. I guess I could never prayed hard enough, because I never found God and stopped praying until I was twenty and pregnant with Leila. Even though we weren't married Tom wanted me to keep it. I was damn sure I didn't want a kid, but I couldn't seem to get myself to an abortion clinic. Tom made it clear that our relationship would be over if I aborted the baby. Some days I believed I was madly in love with him and other days I barely noticed him. I thought if I just had a little bit more time to decide, I could figure out how I truly felt about Tom and make a decision about the baby. So instead of an abortion clinic, I found myself going to checkups, taking prenatal vitamins and discovering I was carrying a girl. Tom proposed the name

Leila, after his grandmother, and I didn't bother to think of alternative names even though I thought Leila sounded like white trash. I guess I still thought I would be getting an abortion. I kept meaning to call and make an appointment, but then it would be evening, or Sunday and I would have to wait until the next day. One day, I was alarmed to realize I was already in the third trimester and my chance had passed. I spent the rest of my pregnancy wondering how I had let seven months slip by without making a decision. Anyway, at eight months when I was huge and avoided mirrors, I prayed silently for a miscarriage. It was only once, and I was embarrassed, because that was not a thought a mother should ever have. Where was my humanity?

Albert stopped whining once I fed him, but looked at me when he was finished like he hadn't gotten enough. I almost gave him more, but considered that he might be playing me, so I set my face sternly and wagged a finger at him. I swear he heaved a sigh, one of those that grate against the back of your throat to produce a thoroughly irritated wheeze.

I went to counseling after Leila was born. They called it post-partum depression, but it wasn't that; it had begun before Leila was born, before I was ever pregnant. I'm fucked up and I don't know if there is an easy psychiatric label for it, or a course of drugs that can help me. I don't think I want to be helped. I started to do fine on my own. After my crippling battle with uncertainty during my pregnancy, I slowly began to make choices, culminating in my decision to separate from Tom. I quit my job as a receptionist and started selling off family heirlooms as my first foray into my new career as an antiques dealer. I stopped going to the knitting group I hated. I made the resolution that if I was going to continue to live in this world, I'd have to attempt to forge my own path through it, instead of just bemoaning its arbitrary conventions. With the help of carefully scrounged pennies, I moved into my little, secluded trailer and made myself content. I was done letting other forces determine my life.

After half-heartedly sorting through some of Leila's possessions in the living room and trash-bagging most of them to bring to the flea market, I cut the hanging rope down and coiled in it up and left it in the corner. I moved the chair from the center of the room back to its place tucked under the kitchen table. I could probably get a hundred for that table at auction. With those two little adjustments, all traces of Leila's suicide were gone. Really, hanging yourself is not a messy way to go.

I settled down to sleep on the couch in the suicide room. Albert sat with me anxiously for a moment, then he trotted down to Leila's bedroom and I heard him arranging himself on her mattress. I feel uncomfortable in other people's beds, even my own daughter's I guess, so the couch was better. Falling asleep, I jolted awake periodically out of uneasiness with a strange place. It was during nights like this as a kid, when uneasiness with unease itself kept me awake, that I would cast my tentative prayers upwards. They always landed in the same place, I knew, reverbing around my rattled, dark mind. I got up once and tiptoed to the bedroom door and shined a light on Albert. He was curled into a tight, tiny ball with his butt pressed into a pillow. He looked up at me sleepily and gave one resounding woof until I shined the light back on myself to show him it was just me. Maybe he just liked to sleep all curled up, but he looked cold so I grabbed a blanket from the foot of the bed and threw it over him. I adjusted it so that just his face peeked out and was reminded of the years I spent badly mothering Leila. I tried to love her, I really did, but I didn't seem to have it in me. I don't know if I have it in me to truly love anyone. I went through the motions of mothering—fake it till you make it, right—hoping that one day my biological urges would sweep in and take control. I stroked Albert's head. He didn't look like he hated it. I felt a protective warmth surging up in me, that I never quite felt when I

looked at my daughter. I wondered why my daughter had entrusted *me* with her most precious friend. Why was she weak enough to abandon him here with me? Albert emitted a trembling, dream whine, and there was that protective, almost loving, surge within me again. Maybe I could do better with Albert.

I must have drifted off quite soundly at one point because I awoke to Albert whining and it took me a few moments to orient myself. He was sitting on the floor next to me, but his butt just barely grazed the ground, as if he knew he was supposed to be sitting but could barely control himself. Another long, grumbly whine forced me off the couch. Albert started bouncing on his front legs now, while keeping his butt reasonably close to the floor.

“Hungry again?” I asked the dog. The word ‘hungry’ elicited another long whine. I figured I should take him out first, since that’s what Leila did whenever they visited. I remembered my resolution made during the haze of nighttime to love Albert. Watching his sheer excitement over just being awake, I thought that loving him might be easy. I asked him if he was hungry again and this time he put his paws up on my shoulders and licked my face. Just one, serious lick and he was off again, bounding around in tight little circles. I walked over to the front door and threw it open to see how warm it was. It was later than I normally got up, but still early. The air was still and crisp, hazy and lovely. I stepped out onto the front stoop, leaving the door open behind me in one of my typical fits of forgetfulness.

Albert shot out the door like a bullet and *Déjà vu* hit me hard like kickback.

“Albert! Come!” I yelled, a command that Albert always heeded if it came from Leila. Albert seemed to forget our connection from a moment before, and ignored me just like he used to on the rare occasions Leila, Tom and I were all together. Albert spent loads of time playing fetch with Tom or licking his beard, but with me, he only seemed to do what Leila called the

“wag-by”. He would run up to me with his exuberant butt wiggle, but breeze right past, never pausing for kisses or a butt scratch like he would for Leila and Tom. I didn’t usually put much stock in a dog’s emotional cognizance, but now I wondered if he ignored me because he knew I wasn’t what a human should be.

Albert stopped for a moment and I started whistling at him. He cocked his leg and pissed on a tree as I ran towards him. Goddamn dog saw me coming and took off again, sprinting clear across the parking lot and into the surrounding woods.

Goddamn it.

I ran after him and called out again and again to no avail. I stared at the woods for a while, whistling for Albert. I was struck again by the warmth of the day and thought it was a shame that Albert wasn’t around to take for a walk. I was actually looking forward to walking Leila’s dog. My dog. Eventually, I took out my cell phone and looked up the number for the local animal control.

“I lost my daughter’s dog,” I said to the women who answered the phone in a husky voice.

She called me honey and asked me to describe him.

“I just want a tip on catching him. Do you have traps you rent?”

“Yes, honey, but why don’t you try this first. Take something of your daughter’s, a pillowcase maybe, and put it out where you last saw the dog with a bowl of food and water. If he comes back, he’ll stick around.”

I thanked her and wanted to hang up.

“Why don’t you describe him for me. That way we can contact you as a soon as we get a likely dog.”

“Can’t I just check the website?”

“Well, yes honey, but dogs don’t get too long around here, especially during the summer, if you know what I mean. This county’s stray hold is only 3 days. Best that you know he’s here as soon as possible,” she rasped into the phone.

I described Albert to her and gave her my phone number. I asked if I should do anything else.

“Just keep praying, that’s about all you can ever do, ain’t it.”

I put food and water out for Albert, and then went back inside for something of Leila’s. She had a beaded curtain hanging in the doorway of her bedroom. It was just as gaudy as I remembered from when we had strung it together when she was ten. It was just another thing Leila couldn’t bear to get rid of. Even when she was twenty she still wore things I had bought her when she was fourteen. I think she was afraid of disappointing me by discarding something I had gotten her. As if things proved my love for her.

I pushed through the beaded curtain into Leila’s bedroom. It felt too personal in here. The blanket I had covered Albert with was in a twisted heap and I focused on that instead of my daughter’s personal things. Although, since she knew she was going to die, surely she would have taken care to get rid of anything too personal, anything she wouldn’t want her parents to see? I sat down onto the bed and sniffed her purple sheets. Did her bed smell like her? It did to Albert, I knew. I pulled the pillowcase off a pillow and brought it outside.

I awoke the next morning after another restless night on the couch to my blaring cell phone.

“How’s it going over there, Marie?” My ex-husband asked when I answered.

I looked at the clock. It was almost nine, which may as well have been noon for me. I wondered if I should attempt to sound less groggy. I wondered what he was hoping I would say. I settled upon, “It’s tough,” because that sounded appropriately both mournful and stalwart.

“Just take whatever you want and I’ll call someone to come get the rest. Where do you think all those estate sales you search for on Craigslist come from?” Tom said.

“Leila was a twenty-year old college student; I don’t think her apartment constitutes an estate, Tom,” I said, mildly amused.

“Well, regardless, I told you don’t have to do it all yourself. I’ll pay someone to get the rest,” Tom said. He didn’t sound amused so I frowned a little to sound more serious. That was Tom, swooping in to do it better.

“No,” I said, flummoxed by why he seemed so determined. “I’m here now. It’s fine.”

Tom was quiet for a while and I thought I’d lost him until he said my name.

I waited for him to continue.

Another long pause. “Can you see if you can find her softball glove?”

I sensed that wasn’t what he really wanted to say but I didn’t see why I should prod him. I didn’t want to hear his sympathy for me or his sadness. I didn’t want to talk.

“I’ll look for it,” I said. Tom played baseball in high school and college and thought about going pro until he injured his shoulder. He always bragged that Leila could pitch just like him. Leila liked to make her daddy happy by keeping her eye on the ball.

We said goodbye and I hung up without mentioning Albert’s disappearance.

I drug myself off the couch and over to the mirror. My body felt creaky and as I peered into the mirror, my eyes looked sunken and whittled into my skin. I was surprised to notice that it

was the face of a mother that had buried her daughter. My emotions played out along the canvas of my body, if not my inner canvas. I splashed tap water onto my face to bring some life back. I walked back out to the living room and looked out the window again to see the sun. It was shining fiercely and I didn't want to put my sweatpants back on. They were the only pants I had brought. I had intended to be heading out today, in a hurry to get back to my little farm, but instead I was hanging around waiting for Albert. I went to my daughter's closet and pulled out a pair of jeans. I stepped into them and wriggled a little to pull them up. They were tighter than I was used to but fit. Trying on your dead daughter's jeans seemed like something you ought not do, but they were better than my sweatpants. I found a grey sweater in one of Leila's drawers and slipped it on over my bare breasts. It itched a little, but the warmth was pleasant.

I went for a little walk, hollering for Albert as I went. That turned up nothing, so I hung out in the apartment for a while and almost completely finished sorting through the living room and kitchen.

Eventually I got sleep again, so I stepped out of the apartment to go find some coffee and wound up at a little coffee house below a yoga studio. It was buzzing and eclectic; too busy for me. But it had outdoor seating in the back, so I settled down out there with my black iced coffee. I sat there for a while, sipping and admiring the view of the mountains until a tall man with wide set brown eyes and a boyish face tapped me on the shoulder.

"Are you her mother?" he asked me.

"Whose?" I said as I recoiled from his touch and wished he hadn't bothered me.

"Leila's."

"Who are you?"

"Andrew, I'm her ex-boyfriend."

“Aren’t you closer to my age?”

He nodded gravely. “You look just like her.”

I waited for him to offer overblown condolences and then walk off, feeling satisfied for being kind to the grieving mother. Instead, he sat down.

“That seat is taken,” I said quickly. I try not to interact with strangers because I always come away feeling false and weary. I must operate on a different wavelength than most people, because cheery, idle conversation seems to be enjoyable to them.

“Can I take you to dinner?” he asked instead of getting up.

“But it’s still lunch time,” I protested.

“I was hoping for tomorrow night actually. And it’s almost five.” He smiled the same confused way that my ex-husband used to, when I had said something silly.

“Five?” I pulled out my phone to confirm it was that late. I had three missed calls from Tom. I turned my phone off. He was starting to worry about me and hover, one of the many reasons our marriage ended in divorce.

“No, six. I’ll pick you up tomorrow at six,” Andrew said and winked. I realized I should have played up my grief and hatefulness to discourage these advances, but I found myself nodding. I realized I knew little about Leila’s life after she left for college. Maybe even before then. After Tom and I divorced, Leila lived with him during the school year during her last two years of high school. My trailer was really too small for the both of us, full-time, and Leila said she didn’t want to switch schools. I didn’t even know when she had dated Andrew. His name sounded familiar, at least.

Andrew placed his hand on top of my limp one and squeezed. He said he would see me tomorrow and disappeared. I didn't know what he wanted, but I thought maybe I could learn something from him about my daughter and her dog.

I walked back to Leila's apartment, wondering, as I often did, where the day went. I remembered to check Albert's food bowl and most of the food was gone, with some scattered messily around the bowl. I called the dog's name halfheartedly and whistled but no Albert.

The next evening Andrew was early and I was annoyed. I had my sweatpants on again because daughter's clothes and daughter's boyfriend was too much, even for odd, unloving little Marie. Andrew was in tight jeans and flannel, but tight in the nice way, and flannel in the warm, not hipster way. He stepped in to Leila's apartment when I opened the door. He looked around and asked, "Where's Albert?"

"He hasn't come back yet," I said.

"Come back from where?" Andrew said.

"Oh, he's lost," I said and it occurred to me that I hadn't turned my phone since yesterday to see if animal control had called.

"Should we look for him?" Andrew asked and I pictured us tromping around endlessly looking for a dog that we probably wouldn't just happen upon. That would require we spend much more time together than a quick dinner, and I didn't want that.

"Animal control is looking," I said. "I left food out for him, and Leila's pillowcase," I added, to make it sound like I was being more proactive.

"Leila loved that dog," Andrew said.

I nodded. I wanted to say I loved him too, but I didn't, not yet.

Outside, we got into his red truck and he drove us to this Southern restaurant, relaxed and not overly crowded. It was the kind of restaurant Leila would have liked. It was the kind of restaurant I liked. We tucked in and chatted about aimless things until our food came. I asked him how long he and Leila had dated. He spent a while churning his pork barbeque around in his mouth before he answered. “A year and a half.”

I looked down at my plate and could feel him watching for my reaction.

“She never introduced us,” I said finally.

“I wanted to meet you. I met her dad a bunch of times,” Andrew said.

I winced. I was the kind of mother whose daughter didn’t want her boyfriend to meet.

Andrew shook his head as he chewed another huge heap of barbeque. He swallowed quickly and said, “I didn’t mean—I think she wanted me to meet you. But she couldn’t bring herself to do it, I think. You guys were too close.”

I shook my head. “We weren’t that close.”

“Too much alike. I think she was afraid I would find too much about her if I met you, too,” Andrew said.

I bit into my fried green tomato sandwich and thought about that.

“At least, that’s just my hypothesis,” Andrew laughed and gazed steadily at me.

I had spent so much time viewing my daughter as something I never wanted, someone I didn’t really even know, that I had never really stopped to consider that she could be like me. That was out of the question. No one was like me. I wanted out of this conversation because I hadn’t signed up for uncomfortable realizations. I wanted to hear that Leila’s favorite color was orange and that she loved collecting postage stamps. But Andrew, damn him, was determined to continue.

“It’s good she left you Albert. If you can find him again. I bet he’ll recognize how similar you two are.”

I wondered how Andrew thought he knew so much about me and started resenting him for it, but not wholehearted resentment because as I thought about it, he wasn’t wrong.

“You play with your hair just like she did when she was nervous,” Andrew said and happily took a gulp of sweet tea. I looked down at my hands twisting little spirals into my hair. I laid them down on the table.

“How did you meet Leila?” I asked to move the subject away from myself.

“I’m a yoga instructor, upstairs from the coffee shop I ran into you at. Leila started taking classes with me and we hit it off. I really thought she was getting something out of it...you know, we practice yoga holistically; it betters your body and your mind. I thought Leila was healing her mind, until she broke up with me six months ago and never returned my calls or opened her door when I knocked.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s all right,” Andrew said and huge smile lit up his face that made his handsome features seem distorted and creepy. “I’ve made peace with it.”

I didn’t think I liked him, but something drew me to him, perhaps the same thing that drew Leila to him. I was also drawn to this new version of Leila, the one that mirrored me. How could I have missed that, a chance to connect with someone else who understood? Andrew reached across the table and dragged his finger along my arm. Light. Sensual.

“Why don’t you let me show you the yoga that Leila and I practiced together?” he said.

I slept with him. I spent the past three days sleeping with him. I learned more about Leila and maybe I learned more about myself, but when I finally broke free of Andrew's spell, I was left wondering how Leila had stayed with this guy for a year and a half. He kept reiterating how similar Leila and I had been. I agreed with him to a point, but now another question nagged me. If we were so similar, why hadn't I killed myself yet?

At the end of the third day with Andrew, I turned my phone back on. I had emailed Tom to let him know my phone was lost so I didn't have to talk with him, but there were a couple calls from an anonymous number. I dialed back and got the main menu of Watauga County Humane Society. They must have Albert. Andrew hadn't bugged me about the dog, because I guess he knew from his experience with Leila, if indeed we were so similar, the harder you pushed me, the more I backed off. But now, I almost wished someone had pushed me, because I had avoided my phone like I usually avoid things.

I untangled myself from Andrew's bed sheets and drove to Animal Services alone. I felt lost in the huge lobby but followed the signs pointing to the desk for reclaiming animals. An old, short man with pickled cheeks and a gruff voice asked what I wanted. His nametag said his name was Dale. I told him I thought they had my dog. He asked for a description and I gave him the specs.

Dale spent a while staring at his computer screen then finally said, "No ma'am we don't".

"I got a call that said you did," I said.

"How long ago?" he asked.

I checked my call log. "Three days ago."

Dale frowned and started to say something but coughed instead. He coughed and coughed and I stepped backwards. Finally, he stopped coughing and he would have to check with the supervisor. “Three days is our stray hold period. It might could be that we don’t have your dog anymore, ma’am.”

I waited in the lobby for quite a while until a bald man with a mountaineer’s beard came out and asked me to look at a picture. The picture showed Albert, ears pushed back, snarling mouth opened in a grimace.

“That’s him,” I said. “Where is he?”

Bald man frowned and looked at Dale who coughed again. “We have a policy of holding animals that come in as strays for a three day period, as required by North Carolina law. He came in three days ago and we called the number you gave us, but since we never heard from you and space is at a premium right now...”

I slowly realized what Dale meant when he said it was possible they didn’t have my dog anymore but I kept my face confused to make the bald man say it.

“He was very unhappy here. He snapped at multiple members of our staff and no one could get near him,” the bald man said.

I ran my hands through my hair and fixed it into a ponytail.

“We euthanized him this morning. I am so sorry.”

I took my hair down from the ponytail.

“We called you three times.” Dale looked up from coughing to say. Both men stared at me.

“There was a death in the family,” I said to assuage their accusatory looks. I had done it again. I waited too long, thought I had more time than I did. I was always running out of

goddamn time. It was my abortion debacle all over, except this time I'd destroyed what was left of Leila's life, maybe even what was left of my life. Maybe that's wrong. Maybe I destroyed her life the first time by failing to have the abortion. Doesn't that sound fucking counterintuitive. Go tell our story to the pro-life nuts.

I sank down onto the floor. I felt like I could melt into the tiles and it would all be okay. I closed my eyes and cried for the first time since Leila died. Oh, I had cried before this, but those tears were for myself alone. This time they were for Albert, who lost his purpose in life when Leila died. I knew what it was like to not have a purpose. My daughter had warned me about Albert's unease with strangers. The receptionist at Waggin' Tails had advised me to hire a dog trainer for God's sake.

Dale came around the desk offered me a box of tissues. As I reached for one I was struck by how much I cared about the stupid dog. I realized it a little late, perhaps, but it was something. Someone walked a brown and white dog past me, and its nails scrabbled against the tile floor in an effort to greet me. Its handler lost control of it, and it bounded up to me, replacing my tears with kisses. The young girl ran up to me, apologizing. She had a volunteer nametag on her shirt. It told her it was okay and pulled away to look at the dog. It was a female, evidenced by the engorged tits hanging down from her belly. She looked like a pit bull to me, but I'm no expert. I don't really even know what a pit bull is. She had a few old scars crisscrossing her broad face, and lots of enthusiasm in a muscled, compact package.

I held the dog's face away from me to stop her from continuing to lap up my tears.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Anny," the girl said.

I pictured Anny on my little farm with me, curled up on the deck in the sun and that felt right. I was still fucked up, but maybe I had added a dog to my little list of things to care about.

Surrendered

Roxy and Mack are your first owner-surrenders. It's only day three of the job so you jump right into the circus, ready to help.

You took this job as an Animal Care Tech to be around animals all day long—much better than stuffing yourself into a suit straight out of college. And you took this job because you know millions of animals are put to sleep every day and you want to lead the charge in that battle against that. You had volunteered at animal shelters before, mostly private no kill ones, but this was different; volunteers only see one small part of a shelter. And this was a county government shelter, which meant open admissions; they don't have the luxury of turning animals away like no-kill shelters. More chances for you to actually save a life in danger. And as much as you know your reasons for taking the job are noble, a small, buried part of you thinks this is your Peace Corps, your Teach For America, your missionary trip to Africa, your chance to feel like you made an impact on the world, because your college major isn't leading you anywhere compelling. But for now, you're just going to focus on the animals.

The girl is sitting on the floor leaning against the intake counter crying her eyes out, but somehow her red lipstick stays perfectly in place. The boyfriend is out in the parking lot holding—hugging, you think—one of their cats and the Office Assistant, Jim, is watching him through the window saying just put the goddamn cat in the carrier, idiot. Crying lipstick girl jerks her head up from sobbing to exclaim that her boyfriend is not an idiot. Greg, another Animal Care Tech, assigned to follow you until you learn the ropes, edges out into the lobby besides you. Now is the time for you to escape outside to smoke before anyone notices, Greg says to you, with a joking, yet hard edge to his voice. You tell him you don't smoke and look at the girl sobbing on the floor. She's making this into a spectacle, but she's kind of cute with her full red

lips and doey weepy eyes. This is obviously a hard decision for her and you respect that. You know that she treated those cats like royalty and they'll probably be easy to find homes for, being beloved, friendly pets.

Jim looks eager to get them out of here so you walk over to the intake desk, ready to take the cats and comfort the crying girl with promises of adoption. The boyfriend comes inside with the other cat and he's wearing plaid pajama pants and ponytail. He looks greasy and stoned, but you figure he's just torn up about this as well. The girl gets up from the floor and they hand the two cat carriers to you and Greg. You don't feel right just whisking the cats off to the back so you peek into the carriers and say hello to them in your best baby voice. You have a cat that just showed up at your house one day, a big, aloof orange tomcat. At first he wanted nothing to do with you, but eventually you won him over with baby talk and wet cat food. It was probably mostly the wet cat food in scrumptious flavors, but still. You named him Steve and he sleeps on your chest every night now.

These two cats being surrendered are not the fluffy, spoiled cats you were imagining. Both cats have huge clumps of fur missing and look scrawny and pathetic. You attempt to pick the black one up out of its carrier by its scruff but you drop it when your fingers rake against layers of crusting scabs. Even Jim, who Greg described to you as a seen-it-all hard ass, comes over and says shit, is that all from the fleas?

We tried everything . . . we can't get rid of them. The girl stresses the word 'everything' and continues to cry, as if her tears excuse the awful condition of her cats.

Now, you're anxious to get the whiney couple out as well, because you can't understand how someone lets their pet get this messed up. Fleas your ass. You grab the cat carriers and your

lips stumble over a thank you. You fucking thank the people, because that's what you're supposed to do when someone gives you something, isn't it?

Boyfriend stops you just as you're about to make a run for it with the cats.

If you send Roxy home with her adopters when she's in heat, she'll bond with her new owners he tells you, as if you're his ally. You're surprised he didn't add a bro and a handshake.

You don't know what to say. You don't know all the rules of the shelter yet, but if you've learned anything so far, it would be these poor cats will most likely meet their end here, in the room marked Euthanasia.

Greg speaks up from the doorway to the back. We fix all the animals before they're adopted out, he tells Boyfriend.

*

You and Judy get called to the front for two incoming dogs. You're going into week two on the job and you're now completely trained, a full-fledged Animal Services staff member, but you don't know if you feel like one. The other Animal Care Techs, like Greg and Judy, seem happiest outside the building, gathered around the smoking circle, a well-worn patch of dirt beyond the range of the loudspeaker. But you relish the moments spent inside the building: teaching little shy puppies that people are great, or coaxing a reclusive tabby cat out into your lap.

You're the first to respond to Jim's loudspeaker call. Maybe Judy isn't coming because she's outside smoking, or maybe Judy isn't coming because she is old, tired and lazy. There's this woman at the desk holding two dogs on chain leashes and she looks like either a lesbian or a hillbilly, you can't tell. One of the dogs looks like it could be a chocolate lab, and it starts snarling as you get closer.

Ma'am, have these dogs bitten anyone in the last ten days? Gruff Jim asks.

The woman shakes her head and looks feral, like she's not used to being inside a building. No bite, no bite, she tells Gary. She looks down at the two dogs. No bite. Her shirt is oversized and black and tucked into her men's jeans, suspended by a belt that has lots of extra holes poked into it. Her tight, curly hair is dark grey, but oddly seems to blend in with her skin, giving her a walking dead sort of look.

Judy still hasn't found her way to the front, so you take the leash of the non-snarly dog, a shepherd mix that looks reasonably happy to see you. You walk to the back intake kennels with the feral woman leading her chocolate lab. She keeps telling the dogs come on girls, but you can clearly see the shepherd's dangling balls. You wonder if she knows this one is a boy. You knew when you took this job that you'd see lots of animals in need; you just didn't realize most of their problems would be their owners. You think back to the girl with the two cats with threadbare coats and wonder why these people have animals. Can you love your dogs if you don't know their gender? Do most people not love their animals? You know you love your battle-scarred old, orange tomcat, but maybe you're the anomaly.

The walk to the back with the feral woman is too long to be comfortable in silence so you ask the dog's names, hoping to get some insight into what she thinks of their genders. Cocoa is the snarly female lab, Brownie the intact shepherd. The names could go either way so they don't really help. You put Cocoa and Brownie in separate kennels and the woman rubs the tops of their heads through the bars. You glimpse a concern in the woman's feral eyes that you can finally identify with and you think she must be sad. A tear wells up in her eye, but its quickly battered back by her blinking eyelids. You try to think of something to say that can comfort her, to forge a connection, but nothing comes to mind, so you pick up her leashes off the floor and ask if she

wants them back. She looks startled by your words and shakes her head, wide-eyed and feral again.

*

Three weeks in, you stop treating adoptions like automatic success stories. You come in one day, after your weekend and see the dog you had adopted out to the Most Perfect Family, now cowering in the back. You feel personally duped. Fucking indignant, because you thought you could spot the good people. This family hadn't even given the dog a week before bringing it back.

We're changing her name to Molly, Perfect Mother told you when they signed the adoption paperwork. Perfect Child clapped her hands and kissed the scruffy brown mutt previously named Delilah. Perfect Father beamed at his now perfectly complete perfect family and they all left together in their Perfect Mercedes SUV.

You seek out the surrender paperwork to see if they gave a reason that might have been insurmountable, that might make returning the dog okay. They wrote 'Separation Anxiety', with a little frownie face. Makes sense they returned her then; there's nothing perfect about that.

Molly/Delilah whines when you stop by her kennel. You reach through the small separation of door and wall and scratch her head. She whines some more and you tell her you're sorry. You tell her they could have tried crate training, giving her more exercise, or hiring a dog trainer to help her separation anxiety but they didn't. You tell her people are selfish. They give up too quickly. They don't like to be inconvenienced.

Sophomore year of college you watched your roommate adopt a puppy and return it a month later because he didn't realize how much it would interfere with his life. You felt guilty, like you should offer to take care of it for him but hell, you didn't go out and get the damn dog.

He didn't even really consult you about it, just showed up with it one day and treated it like a girl he had impulsively fucked, then got sick of when she wouldn't stop texting him. You never got a pet until Steve showed up because you didn't want to make a commitment you couldn't keep, and that's an idea that seems to escape most people.

You take Molly/Delilah's cage card down and cross off the name Molly and write Delilah. You don't know why, but it feels good.

*

Cocoa, the feral woman's snarly chocolate lab, never comes around. The shelter wasn't quite at capacity so she got to stay alive a little longer than her holding period required, but one day you walk by her kennel and it is just coated in blood. There's a huge puddle in the back of her kennel slowly oozing into the trench drain and there are splatters and bloody paw prints everywhere. Wall, blanket, glass cage door. You alert medical staff and they say they'll check it out. You're antsy about what caused the blood and you want to save Cocoa, get her out of here. You fixate on the gore and keep looking in on Cocoa until the vet techs get around to it.

That makes the vet techs sound uncaring—they're not. They're just busy. You're struck by their callousness at first, too, until you step out to the smoking circle and accepted a proffered cigarette. You never really liked cigarettes in college; you preferred the smoke assaulting your lungs to be herby and sultry with the promise of escape from your own mind. Cigarettes, with all their chemical scorch, have some of that sultriness now for you. Smoking gets you out of there. You shoot the shit and forget about the blood, the piss, the shit, the masses of engorged ticks. You make friends with the other employees, and realize they want to help the animals just like you do; they're just not as hopeful about it. You begin to think that not even the darkest places of your own mind could have ever been as horrifying as what the shelter presents to you everyday.

You've never seen so much blood. You imagine Cocoa was pregnant and had a miscarriage. Maybe she ruptured something because she was so goddamn freaked out. Is that possible? The vet techs get a catchpole around her neck later that day and drag her down the hallway to Euthanasia, but you don't watch. The catchpole is long and metal with a tightening noose at one end that goes around the animal's neck. They use it to control dangerous animals from a pole's length away. You've seen the effect a catchpole instantly has upon an already stressed animal: paralysis sometimes, thrashing and straining other times. Always intense fear. You asked your manager early on if you'd have to use one yourself. No, he assured you, there's usually someone else around to do it. It comforts you to know you don't ever have to be the harbinger of an animal's final devastating moment. Maybe the animal is relieved in that instant when the death serum is coursing through its blood and it knows it's going to die. Does it know that? Can animals feel relief?

You have to sanitize that hallway after Cocoa, squeegeeing the piss, blood and runny poop down the drain. You ask Greg if he knows what was with all the blood, but he tells you to let it rest. You can't get the image out of your head, so you ask one of the vet techs, and then another. They just shake their heads at you. They didn't look for a cause.

*

You meet Bailey at the end of your first month as an Animal Care Tech. He's a lanky, white and brown, all-American family mutt. His cage card still has his baby picture on it from when he was adopted out about a year ago. It's lying in the trash now. A family surrenders him, and their little five or six-year-old boy leads him to the back with you because they say he sometimes isn't good with strangers. Somehow, this doesn't deter them from dropping their dog off in a place full of strangers. Bailey figures out pretty quick, during the walk down the austere

hallway to the back that this isn't a good place. He plants his feet and violently shakes his head as he tries to back out of his collar. You have to take the leash from the little boy and coax Bailey along yourself, finally resorting to dragging the goddamn dog along, while the kid stands there, slack jawed. You want to tell him to go back up front, but the place is big and the doors are heavy and the kid might get lost. So you're stuck with the kid who looks teary now and the terrified dog. You resolutely drag the dog down the hallway and into an intake kennel, just to get it over with. As soon as his kennel door clangs shut, Bailey starts snarling. You try to feel bad that the little boy had to see that, but you don't feel bad, and that disturbs you just a little bit, because you know it would have bothered you a month ago. Instead, you feel strangely smug and you hope this memory sticks with him so that he never surrenders a dog of his own.

Every time you clean Bailey's kennel you give him the fluffiest blankets and best toys with the squeakers still intact, and you steal rawhide bones for him from the volunteers' stash on the adoption floor. You squat outside his kennel and tell him that he's a good boy and things will get better. He responds with bristled hackles and a low warning growl punctuated with shrill, anxious barks. You wonder if you look into his mournful amber eyes long enough, you could get him to understand that he has to relax and stop growling at everyone. But you can never bring yourself to look at him for as long as that might take, because his barking rings in your head, making you crazy, and your fingers jump for a cigarette.

*

One of the adopters you feel good about, and not just because of her nice ass, adopts a squirmy black fluffy puppy. She's serious about the adoption, and you can tell she's really done her research. She accepts your phone number, scribbled on a shred of paper torn off of a deceased animal's cage card that you slipped into your back pocket, meaning to throw away.

You don't tell her the origins of the piece of paper of course; you don't really even think about them yourself. You tell her to call if she needs help with the puppy and she says oh, I will, so prettily that you cannot doubt her sincerity. You find yourself smiling while spraying shit down the trench drains for the rest of the day, both for the lucky puppy and yourself. You think maybe this place isn't so bad. You've been single for a while; too consumed by work to go out and socialize, but you felt a connection with this girl you would like to feel again.

She never calls, and she brings back the puppy three days later, accompanied by her mother this time. They're both in tears.

She just doesn't have time for the puppy, her mother so graciously explains. She's gone twelve hours a day.

The girl tells you to give the pink rhinestone collar to the new adopters, and smiles at you in a coy, sweet way.

Did you think a puppy was a fucking stuffed animal you want to ask. You feel too disgusted to even admire her ass on the way out. Four months ago, before you started working at the shelter, you wouldn't really have cared if a hot girl surrendered a puppy. She'd still be hot. A little thoughtless maybe, but still hot. Hell, even a couple weeks ago, she might have still been hot.

But now, you hate her, you hate her selfishness, and you hate how she didn't even have the balls to come surrender the puppy alone.

*

The worst thing about this job, you might think, is how quickly you stop seeing animals as individuals and how overwhelming your loss of compassion becomes until it's numbing. The adorable squirming litter of pit bull puppies that just want to love you and chew on your

shoelaces are reduced to a goddamn hassle in the middle of the day when you're behind on cleaning and Judy called out of work and Jamal has managed to injure himself and be put on light duty yet again, so it's just you manning the adoption floor.

The puppies are here in quarantine, a neglect confiscation case, maybe a dog-fighting bust. The case is pending court so the puppies sit in their shit-smeared cages and wait for months for their owner's conviction. They're not supposed to have any contact with staff, so they're attention starved. You hastily shove food bowls into the cages while fending off puppies that want to know you more than they want to eat their kibble. You know that they get feces in their water bowls and mixed in with their food but there's never time to clean their cage more than once a day. Some days if you can abide their pee-soaked paws and shit-streaked fur, you break the rules to play with them but it's never enough, is it? It seems doubtful to you that there is an 'enough'.

*

Toby is left in night drop, with a handwritten note taped to the front of the cage. There's a big sign on the door that asks people to leave only healthy, adult stray animals in these cages, but, unfortunately for the animals, the shelter administration are the only ones compelled to follow their own rules, so people often dump their own pets: puppies, aggressive cats, rats without a cage and sometimes a snake. The room is sterile and depressing. The cages are built into the cinderblock wall and have heavy solid metal doors that lock after an animal is placed inside.

This is Toby, the note reads. He is a very sweet cat, but unfortunately we have three kids, two other cats and a dog, and we think Toby would do better in a home with less activity because he can be shy. Thank you so much for taking care of him!

You throw the note away and forget about the cat until someone tells you Toby spent his five day hold period growling, hissing and spitting and was euthanized as soon as possible to free up desperately needed space. Then, you wish you could send the owners a postcard with a picture of their cat peeking out of a body bag to show them he did indeed find a home with ‘less activity’. Much less activity.

*

Homer became Brody, then Clifford, before he finally ran out of chances. He was a big nervous hound who was a favorite with potential adopters because he wasn’t just another pit bull, and the least favorite with the staff because he bayed incessantly and coated his kennel with shit. He was adopted three times and returned each time for escaping fences or being a bad apartment dog. He spent over three months in and out of the shelter, and with each return his barks got louder and more frantic. He spun around in tighter and tighter circles all day, until he was almost just pivoting on his hind legs. You’re not guilty at the relief you feel when they finally euthanize him, because Homer had reached the cusp of insanity, the point of death or bust.

*

Kitty Two is feline leukemia positive obese cat, and she inhales the wet food you give her to make her life less miserable, but doesn’t do much else. When her owners surrender her, they say that their first cat was named Kitty, so naturally their second cat is Kitty Two. Kitty Two is a muddy brown tabby, not distinct or pretty at all, and she spends all of her time lounging at the back of her tiny metal intake kennel with her belly spilling out in rolls. The vet techs might have put her on a special prescription diet food if she was going to live, but she can’t be adopted out because of her disease, and she’s not special enough to try to find a rescue for.

*

Cash is a giant blockhead pit bull with huge balls, scary at first until you hear his high-pitched toy poodle whine. He's ecstatic about people and one of the most enthusiastic dogs you ever meet. You're instantly smitten with him, which is rare now that you've been an Animal Care Tech for five months, because mostly all the dogs blur together. Cash makes it out onto the adoption floor, because the vet techs forget to do a temperament test and you soon realize that all his pent up energy channels into nasty dog aggression, which means you can't, in good conscience, allow him to be adopted out. You tell your manager and the dog is immediately added to The List. The euthanasia list.

You're not sad, no, not until you see how delightedly Cash greets the vet techs when they get him out of his kennel to euthanize him, and then you wonder what exactly it means to act in good conscience. You wonder exactly what right anyone has to decide that a dog has to die.

*

Trixie is a tiny bobtail kitten surrendered because she can only poop through an enema. Her owner informs you that no, she is not actually an orange tabby, she is a rare desert lynx. You think the owner's an idiot and her designer, incessantly meowing kitten, annoys you. Remember, you don't see animals as individuals to be saved anymore. Just a day later, the goddamn cat is pooping fine, just in time for her scheduled death, and you don't feel anything when you imagine it in a PVC body bag much too large for its tiny body, thrown into the freezer with all the other bodies. You don't even fantasize about sending the owner a postcard because it wouldn't change anything.

*

Another catchpole victim, this one a white Boxer named Frosty, gets dragged down the hallway to be euthanized. You lean over to Greg, and murmur conspiratorially in his ear, you

know what they say about Frosty? He'll be back again one day. Greg chuckles loudly and the vet tech holding the catchpole gives him an annoyed look. You don't feel guilty about making the joke; you didn't even know the dog.

*

A couple surrenders their mange-ridden, emaciated dog on the intake side and walks over to the adoption floor to find a better one. You don't know if they do; you're busy sticking the distemper shot into their dog's scabby, hairless scruff and laughing with Greg over the difference between a dick and dog: a dog stops coming if you beat it.

*

Six months into the job, towards the end of busy Saturday, an exhausted vet tech thrusts a catchpole into your hands and asks you to bring Dog Hold 11 to Euthanasia. She's gone before you can say no and you know she's exhausted from being the only vet tech on duty in a day full of euthanasia. You carry the catchpole down to Dog Hold 11, feeling its weight in your hands and mind. You stand in front of the ancient, rasping Rottweiler, snarly and flattened against the kennel wall, its dignity gone before you even loop the catchpole around its neck. You catch it sloppily. It takes you a few wild, tentative thrusts to catch the dog with the pole. As soon as the loop tightens, the dog starts thrashing and you wonder why you're doing this. You drag the dog to Euthanasia, writhing, howling, pissing, shitting and expressing her anal glands and you tell yourself you don't feel anything. Nothing at all. You're just doing your job. There is no fucking battle charge, no Peace Corps. You're never going to save this dog. You can only give it the end of a catchpole, its final mercy.

Fleas

Wednesday, July 3rd, saw Davie Francis fired from his job as pet store clerk at The Dog's Meow, compounding his mound of problems. The manager, a short freckly woman, secretly renowned among her staff for fucking her willowy brunette girlfriend in the one stall men's bathroom, pulled Davie out of one of his perfectly rehearsed spiels.

"The life cycle of a flea is generally only twenty to thirty days. However, once the eggs are laid, the fleas can remain inside, incubating and biding their time until they sense a viable host is nearby. If a flea never detects a warm body it may choose to remain in embryo indefinitely, avoiding the struggle entirely. Flea eggs can lay dormant for as long as a year, which is why vacuuming daily and promptly emptying the vacuum bag is vital when combatting a flea infestation in your house."

The manager caught him right as he started to hand over an organic flea repellent spray and chemical Frontline and thought it was a shame she had to do this. Mostly she was just concerned with herself, because she hated confrontation and also because she thought there was an off chance Davie might become violent with her. She didn't have any real grounds for this concern besides from not-secret secret that Davie had now been homeless for six months. That, and the poodle incident.

She cleared her throat awkwardly as they walked away from the haggard flea-infested pet owner.

"Davie, I'm afraid this just isn't going to work out?" she said, because she thought it would go quicker if she just said it outright.

"Is there something wrong with my flea speech?" Davie asked, but he looked miles away, as he always did. For the first few months of his employment Jenny was convinced he was

stoned all the time until she purposefully drew his name for one of their random drug tests and he tested clean as a whistle.

“No, your employment here,” Jenny said.

Davie was afraid of that. She was probably going to mention how he opened a package of dog clippers to shave his lice-infested head, and clumsily taped it back up and re-shelved it. Another employee narced on him. And she was probably going to mention the goddamn poodle. “Why’s that?” he asked.

Jenny pursed her lips and was annoyed that Davie couldn’t just accept it without prolonging this conversation.

“The clippers, Davie. And the poodle,” Jenny said.

“What about the poodle?” Davie said.

“Oh for God’s sake, Davie, you told some old lady to ‘go fuck her poodle!’”

“Well, it was funny and the way she fawned over that dog, I’d be surprised if she *hadn’t* considered fucking it at some point.”

Jenny rolled her eyes and pointed towards the door. “Out.”

Davie left the Dog’s Meow and started walking. He realized Jenny had interrupted him right before he got to say the most important part of his flea spiel: “Don’t bathe Fido for 72 hours before and after the Frontline application. Davie hasn’t bathed in over 96 hours, so if he were a dog he could have dosed himself with Frontline, instead of sneaking open a package of electric clippers to buzz his head. Maybe lack of bathing is where the fleas came from. Lice, technically. Not that Davie was usually one for technicalities, except at his job where he prided himself on purveying important tips to owners about their pets. He’d gotten the job at the Dog’s Meow just a few months before he became homeless. It paid better than his job at Burger King, but still

didn't pay enough to get him out of the financial hole he had dug himself into, but he loved interacting with all the dogs who walked through the doors, and even a parrot once.

Davie didn't know why he said what he did to the poodle lady. He delivered his flea speech to her and before he handed her the combination of organic spray and chemical serum, he gestured to his freshly bald head and joked that she could just shave her dog down instead.

"I don't want my Louie to look like a fool like you," she said with a nose and her high heels went click click click as she walked away. Old Davie would have just shrugged it off, but old Davie was morphing into Homeless Davie, who was a whole new person. He found anger dwelling inside of him in crevices he didn't even know existed. So instead of shrugging it off, he told her to go fuck her poodle and Jenny fired him.

Davie walked from the outlying shopping mall that housed the Dog's Meow towards the downtown. Chapel Hill was a hard town to be homeless in. Then again, Davie supposed, any town would be hard to be homeless in. He passed a pretty girl on the street. She was a blur of long tan legs and sleek brown hair, admired only from the very corner of his eye. College girl, he thought. He was ashamed to look any harder. How would he talk to her anyway? Got any change? In the brief moment that they passed close enough on the sidewalk for him to see her face he noticed that she looked sad and distant and he wished he could find out why.

The brunette girl on the street had just dumped her dog. Her name was Lizzie and she was a college student, as Davie supposed. She had gotten the dog as an adolescent puppy about a month ago and changed his name from Cane to Roscoe. He was a big pure white pit bull, with long, lithe legs instead of the usual stocky body. His ears were left long instead of cropped close to his head in the fighting style, and they flopped down adorably over his eyes, or stood straight

up when he was looking up to beg for food. Her neighbors kept him tied up in their backyard. When animal control came around and slapped them with a fine for tethering, they asked Lizzie if she wanted the dog since she often visited it on its chain. She said yes, of course, because she had wanted a dog ever since she moved out from under her parents' thumb two years ago. She and her three roommates squealed over Roscoe at first; he was the happiest dog they had ever met. But then, he wouldn't stop pissing on the carpet and shitting in the laundry room, and the landlord stopped by and said they couldn't have a pit bull. Lizzie was too embarrassed to take him to the shelter, so she tied him up on Franklin Street with a bone and his blanket and furtively slipped away.

Davie came upon the dog just a few minutes after passing the brunette girl. He was whining, a high-pitched breathless sound that made him sound frantic. Davie let his hand dangle down for the dog to sniff and didn't look him in the eyes. The dog looked friendly enough but Davie always tried to approach animals as nonthreateningly as possible. He looked around for the owner, but of course, he didn't know she was long gone. Instead, Davie figured the owner was shopping in the nearby Walgreens, but just in case, he sat down on a bench across the street and watched the dog. Eventually the dog stopped whining, but he remained nervously braced against the leash, ready for his owner to come back.

Davie sat there for over an hour waiting for the owner. Finally the dog's panting drove him into the Starbucks to ask for some water. Davie was used to the staff giving him no trouble, but today the girl at the register was brand new, and not used to their ways. She wrinkled her nose at him when he asked for water and asked him if he was buying anything. One of the other

baristas overheard her and gave her a dirty look and said that water was free. She filled him a cup and Davie pointed out the window to the dog across the street.

“It’s for him,” he said.

“You have a dog?” She said. An accusation.

Homeless Davie felt his great well of anger boiling up, but he pushed it down and walked out the door. He jaywalked across the street and offered the cup of water to the pit bull. The dog lapped it all up and snuffled around Davie’s clothes, searching him for good smells. A girl stepped out of the clothing boutique next door to the Walgreens.

“Is that your dog?” she asked.

Davie said it wasn’t and she frowned. Customers had been complaining about the scary dog tied up outside and her boss threatened to go untie and shoo it away unless she found the owner.

“Well, it needs to go,” she said.

Davie felt solidarity with the dog. She could just have easily have been telling him that he couldn’t loiter outside that ritzy boutique. He looked around the street once again, hoping the owner would materialize. He untied the dog and picked up his blanket and bone. The dog fell in next to Davie and he felt its tail beat happily against his leg. They started walking.

Davie brought the dog back to his camp in the woods off a public greenway trail. When he first became homeless, back in January, he stayed in the men’s shelter. He knew others who slept outside in grim alleyways or doorways in the bitter cold and couldn’t imagine it. But as the weather got warmer, he moved things outside to get some space away from the other guys. Word gets around quick though, and Davie’s buddy Red told some people about Davie’s new sweet

spot and Davie found himself with company. No one particularly liked the men's shelter—curfew by 8, no smoking inside, weekly meetings with a counselor—so company turned into a crowd and there were about fifteen of them living out in those woods now.

One of the guys, Slim, sidled up to Davie and the dog. “Nice looking dog you got there,” he said. Davie nodded as he peeled off his work shirt.

“We could make some money with that dog,” Slim said.

“Naw, man,” Davie said and turned his back to Slim to shimmy out of his dirty khakis and replace them with basketball shorts.

“Come on man, I know a guy who runs a fighting ring not too far from here. Small time, you know, way under the radar, but the payoff is big if you got a dog that can win.”

“I said no, man.”

Slim reached out to the dog and pulled its lip up, forcing the dog into snarl. He held on to the dog's jaw and bared his teeth at the dog. Slim started snarling at the dog. “Grr, look at those muscles, grrr, who's a tough guy now, grrr.”

The dog whined and backed away from Slim. Davie stepped between them. He clenched his hand into a fist and flexed his muscles. “Knock it off,” he said to Slim and the other men in the camp got quiet. Slim backed up, deferential, apologizing. Davie had a reputation around here. He beat someone to the brink of death once for stealing his can of beans, or so the story went.

Slim threw his hands up and backed away.

“Have your way. If you change your mind though, remember, we can split the profits. Sixty forty.”

Davie put the dog's bone and blanket in his backpack turned to walk out of camp.

“Sixty forty!” Slim yelled after him.

Davie lifted his fist in the air and shook it, without looking back.

“Just you and me now, pup,” Davie said to the dog.

Davie waited for the bus to take them up the road to the animal shelter. It was three or four miles away, in his reckoning, six miles away in actuality. When the bus rolled up to the stop, the bus driver wrinkled her nose at him and the dog and said, “You can’t bring *that* on here.” He wondered if she would have let them on the bus had he been a little old lady with a poodle instead of a pit bull. The doors shut in their faces.

Davie set off walking towards the shelter, holding his thumb up periodically. He didn’t really expect anyone to stop because hitchhiking hadn’t worked for him yet.

They trudged up the road and it was *hot*. The dog’s tongue hung halfway out of his mouth, and finally he plopped down under the shade of a tree and refused to move. Davie sat down beside him and stroked his head. They still had miles to walk and the dog needed a name, Davie decided. Working at a pet store, Davie had come across just about every dog name there was. He quickly ran through them and decided on Quigley. Maybe it wasn’t perfect, but he didn’t want to spend too much time picking a name. People name things they’re going to keep, and he couldn’t keep this dog. He just wanted to call the dog besides “dog” on the long walk to the shelter.

After the dog stopped panting so heavily, Davie got up from the ground.

“Come on, Quigley,” he said and the dog wagged his tail furiously.

They walked for another hour, maybe two. Davie told Quigley stories as they walked. “My parents let me name our first dog. It was real fluffy, a stray we picked up in some Podunk

town during a road trip. I called it Foofy. I still don't know why my parents let me name it that. Ridiculous goddamn name for a dog." Davie looked down at Quigley. "You're not very fluffy, are you? You're sleek," he said and Quigley wagged his tail again and panted even more enthusiastically.

"I wasn't always homeless you know. It snuck up on me gradually, I guess as things like this often do. At some point, I don't remember quite when, I started noticing the homeless guys on the street and thinking, I know how they got that way. And then that changed to, that could be me some day. And then it was. It wasn't one thing that made me homeless. More of an accumulation of things. I'm twenty-nine years old and I've never sat down and made a budget, or really even looked at my bank account until my card is denied somewhere. I broke my arm and cracked some ribs skateboarding, and before I knew it, I found myself three months behind on rent and buried in medical bills. It can be as simple as that, you know. Everyone assumes homeless guys are druggies or just, you know royally *fucked up*, but that's not true. I don't think I'm fucked up."

More tail wags from Quigley.

"You know what I do think is fucked up though, as hard as this life is, sometimes I think I like it better. I'm not really accountable to anyone, you know? I don't have to worry about doing what everyone else does, or caring about what people think of me, because mostly they don't think of me as a person."

Davie looked down at Quigley. He knew they were close to the shelter. One and a half miles, to be exact.

"Do you notice when people don't treat you like a dog? When they look at you and they only see a pit bull? An unstable beast with jaws of steel?"

Davie scratched Quigley's head. "You're not a scary beast," he murmured. The sun was starting to set and Davie knew it would be dark soon. He hoped they would get to the shelter before it closed.

Another half hour of walking brought them to the doors of the shelter, locked up and closed with an empty parking lot.

"Shit," Davie said to Quigley.

A sign posted near the front of the parking lot directed him towards the after hours drop-off room.

"What do you think buddy? Can I leave you here? You should be safe."

They walked to the door marked "Night Drop" and Davie swung it open. It was heavy and he had to put his weight against it. Davie was dismayed with what he saw inside. The cages were tiny, built into the cinderblock walls with solid metal doors that locked once you closed them behind an animal. Most people leave their animals inside without a second thought, but not Davie. He had planned to walk back to the city streets tonight and try his hand at some panhandling, now that he was unemployed. He had heard that drunken college students tended to be sympathetic, and besides they tended to drop wads of cash. But he couldn't imagine leaving Quigley to spend the night locked away, sleeping on hard concrete. So they backed out of that depressing room and found a soft spot on the ground in the woods, just out of sight of the shelter. Davie tied Quigley's leash to his foot and settled down. He was tired, probably from all that walking and finally lying down away from camp, he felt peaceful, like he didn't have to sleep with one eye open. Quigley curled his body into Davie's and started snoring lightly. Davie draped an arm around Quigley's body and quickly fell asleep.

Quigley and Davie slept until the sun was high in the sky and the shelter parking lot was filled with cars. Davie awoke panicked, thinking he was late for work, until Quigley's rough tongue licked him into awareness. He couldn't remember the last time he really slept. Nights at camp were punctuated by the various comings and goings all night long. Drunken rants, stabbings, sobbing, fucking, rowdy laughter.

Davie stretched out like a cat in the sun. Before he became homeless, he was useless without his morning cups of coffee. Six months without his rusty coffee maker told him he could live without just about anything.

"All right, buddy. Time to greet the day"

Davie and Quigley walked further into the woods to take a piss, and Davie swore Quigley waited until he pulled his own dick out to piss, to cock his leg and do the same. They pissed together, watering the same patch of ground, and Davie let his imagination run away with him. Quigley and Davie, the unstoppable duo.

Davie rubbed his fingers over his face, removing the crusty traces of sleep lodged in the crevices of his eyelids. He walked over to the doors the building, but the sign still said "Closed". The timetable of hours said they'd open at noon, but Davie didn't have a watch or a phone to see how far away that was. He thought about putting Quigley in Night Drop now with only an hour or two to go, but he still couldn't bring himself to do it. He walked back over to their little patch of grass and sat down next to Quigley. Quigley bounded in circles at the end of his leash around Davie. He stopped and did a wide-legged play bow before springing up and pouncing on the ground by Davie's feet. He picked up a stick and thrust it into Davie's hands. Davie laughed and looked around to make sure there wasn't anything distracting that Quigley might go bolting off

towards and flung the stick. He dropped Quigley's leash and the dog flew after the stick, trailing the leash behind him. He brought it back and dropped it at Davie's feet.

"What a smart boy!"

Quigley and Davie played fetch and lounged around until the sun was directly overhead and it was noon. They walked into the lobby once the "Closed" sign was flipped to "Open", and it was already teeming with dogs and people. Davie felt like everyone's eyes were upon them. He walked over to the counter marked "Intake" and Jim, the stern little man at the desk, asked him what he needed.

"I found this dog tied up on Franklin Street. No one saw the owner and he was left there for over an hour," Davie said and reached into his backpack. He pulled out the dog's blanket and bone and set them on the counter. "These were left with him."

"So you're surrendering the animal?" Jim asked.

"I, uh, I guess," Davie said and looked down at Quigley, happily sitting by his side.

"You're sure this isn't your animal?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Well, then I'll need you to fill out this brief surrender form, stating where you find him and such. And your phone number and address, in case it turns out this dog has rabies or some other communicable disease."

"Is it all right if I leave those blank?"

"Why?"

"I'm in the process of moving. Everything just changed."

Jim considered this and nodded. The guy looked homeless to him, but he wasn't going to make him admit it. He'd done a decent thing, bringing this dog in.

"You can just call the shelter and check in then, when you get things figured out," Jim said.

"Thank you," Davie said. He used the moving excuse often when faced with an address or phone number question, but he suspected that answer didn't fool anyone.

Jim came around the side of the intake counter and waved a microchip wand around Quigley's shoulders, back and belly. He put it away and shook his head.

"Anything?" Davie asked.

"Nope. Didn't much expect there'd be. If you just wait right here, someone will be right up to get him," Jim said. He spoke into the loudspeaker and called Nick, the Animal Care Tech to the front.

As Davie waited, a couple entered the building with a disgustingly mangy pit bull. Its fur was missing in huge clumps and the skin was red, rashy and raw. The couple looked even dirtier than Davie did. The woman, manic and happy from her meth fix on the car ride over, squealed when she saw Quigley.

"He's so handsome! Can we get him, baby?" she said to her boyfriend.

He ignored her and walked up to the intake counter with their pathetic dog. Davie moved away to give the dogs plenty of space.

"We need to get rid of this dog," the boyfriend said.

Jim went through the same process with him that he did with Davie while the girlfriend hopped around nervously in the corner, cooing at Quigley.

Once the surrender paperwork was completed with a few hasty scribbles, Jim called Nick again to the front, who still hadn't shown up for Quigley. He had been outside smoking when Jim called the first time, but he heard the second call and took his time walking up front.

The man with the mangy pit bull stood beside his girlfriend. He was impatient. Dumb bitch had finished up their supply on the ride over and he was anxious to get out of here and re-up. He knew she was going to make them go look around at other pit bulls though, and maybe get one that didn't have such an awful skin condition. He just hoped she'd make it quick.

"Ooh, baby, let them say hi," she said and pointed at Quigley.

He didn't say anything but handed her the dog's leash. She could do it if she wanted. Wouldn't even be their damn dog for much longer. A few months ago, it developed mange, because it had a poorly functioning immune system. It wreaked havoc on the dog, unchecked for months, and they finally brought the dog to the shelter when the girlfriend declared she couldn't stand watching it suffer anymore.

She grabbed the leash and the dog towed her over to Quigley.

"Hey!" Davie practically shouted. "Wait!"

The couple's dog had only ever met three other dogs in its whole two years of living. It never really left the couple's backyard where it as chained to a tree for most of the day. They brought it inside when it stormed or snowed, at the girlfriend's insistence.

The dog launched itself at Quigley's face and a huge growl exploded from Quigley's throat. The other dog's mangy fur bristled across its back and both dogs erupted in snarls and barks. Davie jerked Quigley back before it escalated, and the boyfriend was laughing.

"Shit, he's got more balls than we thought," he said to his girlfriend. She nervously laughed and didn't look at Davie.

The shelter rules dictate that a dog-aggressive dog cannot be adopted out to the public, and Quigley's little display was enough to put him into that category if his owner didn't step up to claim him. The same was true for the mangy pit bull. Davie didn't know the rules exactly, but he suspected that what just happened in the lobby wouldn't be good for Quigley.

Nick, the Animal Care Tech, finally made it up front just as Davie jerked Quigley away from the mangy dog.

Davie felt a rising sense of panic. Could he just leave Quigley here with the odds already stacked against him? Nick reached out to take the dog, but Davie stopped him.

"Do I have to give him up?"

"Was he a stray?"

Davie nodded.

"No, you can keep the dog, but leave his description here with us. If no one comes forward after ten days, then the dog is legally yours."

Davie gulped and impulse overwhelmed him.

"I think I'll do that then."

Nick liked Davie and hoped he would keep the dog, especially since odds were the dog wouldn't be reclaimed and would be euthanized. But he had to ask something.

"Hey man, you got a place to live? I saw you walk out of the woods with him earlier," Nick said very softly, so only Davie could hear.

Davie felt defeated. Of course they wouldn't let him keep Quigley. They wouldn't want a down and out piece of shit owning a dog.

Resigned, he nodded.

“Meet me out by the side door. I’ve got some dog food to give you.” Nick said and smiled. Nick didn’t mind that this guy was homeless. Davie was so far from the sorriest piece of shit ever to walk through the door of Animal Services that he looked like Mother Teresa compared to most other people.

Davie looked down at Quigley.

“Hungry?” He asked the dog in a high-pitched, excited voice.

Quigley wagged his tail and licked his lips.