

**I, Louis**

*A Dogoir*

By Teresa Elliott

## **Epigraph**

Does my story begin when the bucket of cold water – intended to free the loins of my father from those of my mother – falls short of its target, thereby allowing the miracle that would be Louis?

Does it end when I pass? Indeed, is it my story at all? Let us explore.

## BOOK ONE

### 1.

The woman is big of heart. Evidence: she took me in when I was at my fattest and most needy and has kept me healthy and fit, at no small expense I suppose, though expenses are not my aegis. We are on our way to Austin, Texas, words I never imagined issuing from me. The woman has been successfully courted by an advertising agency of some renown; burly men have wrapped and cosseted our belongings, and driven them to our new doorstep. This new doorstep was the happy result of an earlier trip, also paid for by the advertising agency, where the woman was introduced to various parts of town. Here was a charming area...the house was tumbledown, but that's what imaginations are for. She could ride her bike to work and yet there was that tantalizing proximity to a ghetto. Most exciting of all, though, it sported a fence. And chain-link to boot. "Like dominoes," she told the folks back home. "Everything's just falling into place." Well-behaved dominoes? Hubris? I kick it around to this day.

We drove for four days. She would never have entrusted us to the bowels of an airplane, also she felt that such a cultural upheaval deserved the respect of a lengthy examination. Of course upheaval would not have been considered had a man not turned my woman's world inside out. A much younger man, the love of her life to date. The failure of this endeavor required a total revamping of her future, nothing short of that would do. I understood only too well: she was bereft. And lord knows I was game for a road trip. The woman's plan was to pass the time learning to whistle with her fingers, but the effort made her dizzy and we swerved once or twice

in Idaho. After that we just drove and the woman cried.

*Et voila*, here we are in the middle of the Lone Star state, where I pace and sweat *sur cease*.

My chest is sopping down to my knees, my red leather collar bleeds, suggesting that somehow I manage to survive a daily throat slitting. My eyes are glazed from the effort of generating all that moisture. Everybody's eyes are wet. The woman looks sideways and I hear her thinking, "Maybe Prozac," but for her or me? I knew a dog in Oregon who took it and was cured of eating chairs.

I've also heard it improves the vocabulary.

The woman suspects that this move, this harsh southerly transition, will ultimately kill me (this is how I interpret the guilty sideward glances, the bitten lip) and for that she is mightily sorry, if undeterred. She need not worry; for Louis death will come suddenly and romantically, via snake bite, I like to think. I hope it's the *fer de lance* that takes me. I appreciate a snake with a French name, the contrast of it. I think even the pain would be more important than that offered by the common rattler. Or, it could be rabies; the woman has a notion that rabies shots cause cancer.

She forewent all such measures in Oregon, but down here in Texas you hear the stories, the grisly post mortems. . .

But now it is spring and under my Texas belt buckle there is one summer and one winter.

*Printemps* has commenced moseying. Of course the fabled bluebonnets are here and there, and everywhere clean southern folk sprawl among them taking photos for Christmas and graduation and such. Bluebonnets. *Mon dieu*. I hail from Oregon, mind, where spring resembles an explosion in a piñata factory, so it's hard to get too worked up about monochrome. Ah, but the Mountain Laurel, now there's some flora! We go for walks in the woods and I watch the woman push her face into the big beefy blooms and cry. Maybe she thinks they smell like grape kool-aid, which is what I, Louis, maintain, though why grape kool-aid should bring tears, I can't know.

Perhaps some distant party frock was ruined by an errant splash?

I have a brother. His name is Little Lord Fuckpants. Not really, but can we not discuss him just now? All right then, just a word or two. He's beautiful and he can't help it. Moreover, he's the most beautiful dog anybody who ever saw him ever saw. I've heard it more than once. Sometimes, when the woman is sitting in her chair crying, he helps her by putting the first half of his body in her lap, and I view them in profile and I think neither one of them can help it. The woman tried to offset his staggering loveliness by giving him a cracker name, calling him Jones, but if you ask me it backfired. It just made him more enchanting, that's why I call him Fuckpants. You'll like this: not long ago I peed on his head and so far everybody thinks it was a miscalculation, but in fact I'm doing some offsetting of my own. I wish I could love him as much as he loves me. I love him a little of course, because I love everything a little, and I suppose if the truth were told it would sound something like this: I love him a little more than I did last summer. Because now we have weathered things, have done what you would call "some living."

2.

Several months after we left Oregon the woman received a call. Her mother had tripped while at the doctor's office and broken her hip. (If one must trip, and break one's hip, how auspicious to already be with the doctor.) There followed a surgery, metal parts were imbedded, our woman flew to her mother's side, and flew several more times while the old one was released from hospital, received at rehabilitation, and delivered once more to her home. This took place over a month's time and went swimmingly at every turn. But an uncertain future loomed. What had been a running gag – "Why don't I put a door on the chicken coop out back and you can come down here and live?" – became a more elaborate reality: "Why don't you sell your house, send me the money, and I'll build you a cottage? And you can come down here and live?" As they saw it, neither had much of a choice. And so, as efficiently as the old woman's hip had healed, so was her house sold, the money doled, her cottage built. One November morn the two flew together from Portland to Austin and as the airplane lifted, our woman did the same for her mother's spirits. "These are going to be the best days of our lives, Ma." I know that is what was said. I don't know if either one of them believed it.

The woman has become obsessed with the brain. Its limitations, its components. Her mother's brain, she has learned, is shrinking. Her mother's balance is going away. In the morning the woman kisses my forehead with dark red lips and says, "The Circle of Willis. The Circle of Willis of Louis," which I know to be an area dead center in the head; then she leaves and there I am, decorated, say some, bludgeoned, *dit moi*. She looks at me with her eyes all wet and tells me, "Don't trip her, Lou, don't trip her up." And then she walks away and it feels like the last scene in

*Shane*. But then she comes home and it feels like when the governor calls about the execution. The other evening I was watching a program about the geography of North Africa and Lee Marvin was narrating. Lee Marvin who, along with Forrest Tucker, was the most well-endowed man in Hollywood, *appropos* of nothing. Lee was discussing the "chott," a depression surrounding a Moroccan lake. I looked up from grooming my nether parts and thought, Yes, here it is, a metaphor for our lives: The woman's mother's head is going all watery, and we circle her and are depressed. Not always, and not all of us. Fuckpants, it goes without saying, isn't evolved enough to have a depression. What I mean is that lately the general *timbre* of the property here at Annie Street is a lowdown dirge, with sudden blasts of impendingness.

It's Halloween, of all the trash holidays the one we hate with the most gusto. The dreadful buzzer, the nightmarish ensembles, the notion that the louder one is the more candy one acquires, which has never paid off for me. Still, the woman has made costumes for her children. Mine is lip marks in crimson on all my white areas, Fuckpants has a linen napkin tied around his head *ala* Aunt Jemima. To carry out the theme, the woman has carved eyes and lips on an eggplant, tied a kerchief on and put big hoop earrings in its sides. It's in the refrigerator as a surprise, but for whom I couldn't say, as we've had no visitors for the longest time.

The gate is locked, but still the doorbell rings. We go see. It's the old woman, come all that way in the dark, musing her walker across the frozen tundra from the little house out back.

"Trick or treat," she says, "smell my feet, give me something good to eat."

"Take off your mask and let's see what we've got," says my woman, and we make our rickety way to the refrigerator.

The part of the sky I can see is blue. Historically this means the woman will vacuum then do some yoga and then! yes! take us to the woods! We watch her wake, close enough to see an eyelid flicker, Jones on one side and *moi dans l'autre*. The eyebrows go up first, taking the lids with them; tails thump the comforter, mostly mine, a habit I cannot break, owing to years of trying to please, trying to not be given away. I so wanted to leave it in Oregon but it came along, even with this woman, who now takes my head in her arms and nuzzles my ear saying, "Lou, my Lou."

"I'm dying," the woman said later, "I'm dying Louis," but she didn't pull over, she just kept driving. I did what I always do, the only thing I could do – force my head between her right arm and her right side, so that I'd be included in every shift and turn. "This is not living, so I must be dying, right boys?" Ah, so it was more of an existential outburst than a medical update. And we were indeed going to the woods and joy was in the air, or at least in two-thirds of the air.

The first time we met, the woman took me to some different woods, Oregon ones, dripping, mossy woods, and it was then I fell in love. She trusted me to come back. She couldn't keep me that day but the next day she took me to her home – into her home! – and introduced me to Jones. It all hinged on him. Would he like me? Would we spat? Worse, maybe? Well, Jones was delighted. He bounded all over me, he was not *soigne*, that came later, clearly he found me very much to his liking. I behaved as any prospective adoptee would: meek, guileless. When offered a libation I declined for fear of drooling and instead tendered my paw in a winning way. And it was decided! I would be hers! As soon as she returned from her Hawaiian vacation! I trusted

her to come back. And endured the worst nine days of my life. In my heart I'd said *au revoir* to that limbo state, to life on the block, yet I knew any number of things could befall the woman.

She could stay. She could drown. She could let a cooler head prevail. She came for me on day 10. And now here she was, dying. I think it's a man again. It's rained hard for two days straight.

The phone never rings.

The air crackles with negative ions. The woman no longer walks, she storms, from one room to another in this tiny house. She eats standing, moving, she never alights. She cries on her way to sleep and resumes *dans le matain*, perhaps she never stops. She dreams, we know, I and Jones, because her dreams produce little yelps. At first they made our heads tilt to and fro; nowadays we only glance, at her to make sure she still breathes, and at each other because now we're in league, united by our mutual fear of being marooned when she is hospitalized for craziness. Take last night. (Please, take it, and don't bring it back.) The woman's cauldron bubbled over and she karate-ed her foot through a door, a seldom used one to be sure, but still. We skittered away, and peeked at her from a safe place. Her head was hanging and tears went *splat* on the floor. It was unspoken that we would not embarrass her with any fawning and hand-licking. Instead we inched wide-eyed out the back door and over to the old woman's house. She came for us there, falling to her knees to bury her face in us, and sob. The old woman was frightened, though I knew she'd been expecting an outward expression of her child's hopelessness; I often caught her watching my woman with a gravity that wasn't there when they were face to face. Back and forth the old woman rocked, faster, and faster, until her recliner launched her to a standing position. She tottered over to the pile of us and touched her daughter's shaking shoulder.

"What's wrong...?" My woman looked up at the old woman's face, which had gone stony with the expectation of poor parenting charges being leveled, surely a mother's worst nightmare.

"I don't know, Ma. I just don't love anything anymore. Except you. And the boys." *Okay*, we were still in the club.

"But you've got so much going for you, why –

“I don’t know Ma. That’s just the way it is.”

The woman is sitting on the couch, reading something in the paper that makes her smile, and now chuckle. Jones looks at me, stupidly pleased, as well he should be. I firmly believe I have cured the woman's chemical imbalance by concocting a bold plan, which worked. To wit: though altogether docile, because of my precarious position in the family hierarchy, I acted against type one day and made as if to menace the mailman. The very mailman who hands us cookies in hopes our woman will be moved by his kindness and grant him sexual favors. Am I imagining? I don't think so. A confession: I and Jones are among the brainwashed masses who believe one's happiness is dependent on one's status as a couple, i.e., if one is part of a couple, one is happy. I'll modify: one requires the *option* of being part of a couple. Oh, we railed against this thinking for years, and privately I find the concept abhorrent, but the evidence is indisputable: when the woman has a gentleman caller her heart lightens and so does the whole world, if you ask me. Now I'm not classist, and I hope you'll understand when I say the mailman and the woman are not of the same ilk. It's not a station-in-life issue, it's a *joie de vivre* one. From what I gather, his days consist of bringing letters to people, supporting the New York Yankees, and eating onions, although a kinder man doesn't exist. And we were going for instant gratification here, I and Jones.

Last summer the woman found and lost the love of her life, again, in the same week. He was a bad man but she knew all that. You figure a bad man doesn't leave a good woman but it turns out that's exactly what they do, and in my experience the badder they are the faster they go. That fact did not apply as we tried to lure the nice mailman closer. We charged headlong at the fence while barking furiously for three days running. By Saturday the mailman had "no choice" but to discuss

with her our uncharacteristic behavior, and so began a friendship. The following Saturday they went out to dinner; the next two Saturdays she hid from him when he knocked on the door hopefully. It appears that Ramon's brief promotion has run its course and that he is, once again, simply an onion-eating letter carrier with a predilection for a baseball team he'll probably never lay eyes on. But he had the desired effect. This Saturday morning our woman sits here reading, and chuckling. And she is lighthearted. Work on this particular project has concluded. She's not back on the horse, my precious woman, but by God she's got her eye on the bridle.

The subject of age has reared its ugly monster head. The woman sits on the porch these balmy evenings, gliding in her old glider, noticing things in that slow summer way. She buries her bare foot in my tenderest parts and when I look up I see a question in her furrowed brows, and I know the question is “How old are you, Lou?” The rest of it is, “Please be younger than I think, please don’t surprise me in any permanent way. Please live forever, Lou.” What can I say, though. I’m only traceable back so far, back to when Elsa, the sturdy old German woman, freed me from that dreadful cage. Nobody knows where I was prior and that was three, almost four years ago. Even I’m not sure, though sometimes familiar vapors tickle at my periphery. What is known of me is this: another woman took me to live in an apartment in the middle of Oregon and every time she opened the door I bolted. I always came back but I suppose the not knowing made me not worth it. Elsa redux. Then off to a family on a farm who gave me everything but attention, i.e., they gave me nothing. *Guten tag*, Elsa. And then the sun broke through and now I am the woman’s dog, if not her main dog (and let’s not kid ourselves, if she could marry outside her species, she and Fuckpants would have celebrated their copper anniversary by now). Sometimes on the porch, gliding with a friend, I’ll hear, “How old is Louis?” And the woman will say, “Nobody knows. But not very. He’s like a small Clydesdale. Unstoppable.” And the friend might ask, “How old is your mom?” and the woman will tell the truth but as though a mistake has been made. “She’s 81 but...” And the buts run to 5 minutes. Age is an issue that wasn’t an issue before the old woman arrived. I suppose now it’s everywhere the woman looks: in the mirror, in the backyard, lying here at her feet. Not to hit a sour note, but dying would be next.

7.

The process has begun. I've started going deaf and blind and I lay down most gingerly these days. I suppose the process begins with our first breath, but it's being noticed. At the swimming hole I paddle as near the woman as I can but if she turns slightly, or takes an uncalled for stroke, it's a glittery blur, nothing stands out. And when she calls to me, guiding me, it's not until I'm an arm away that her face appears. And, truth be told, it's right about there I hear her voice. My nose still works though. And I was born to swim, which I didn't know until I got my woman. Each time I'm braver. Last Sunday I dove. Jones, bless his black heart, is still so very tentative, and when the woman throws him in he looks about to cry. But, also on Sunday, he swam unprovoked.

Later I overheard the woman on the telephone.

"I went to a therapist, a cool lady who I'd rather have as a friend but I think that's illegal..." There was a pause while she listened. "...One thing she said was, 'What would you want to be doing on the last day of your life?' and I said, 'Well not dying, mainly, but also swimming in the woods with my dogs.'"

That we are doing just that twice a week means we are living well, according to the specialist. And according to another specialist, I'm not going deaf after all. I have ear infections! My eyes are as good and as bad as any other dog. And I take care lying down because I am, quite simply, a careful animal, the deliberate kind.

Today the woman is back from her *petite vacance*, a brief jaunt to the Yucatan. I heard her discuss it with her best friend, Kim, who lives in the great state of California. Kim has won my heart in that she is highly allergic yet when she visits she runs her cheek across my back, and lets me creep into her bed in the wee hours.

The woman tells Kim this will be her last do-nothing trip, that she's not tired enough to relish indolence on the hot sand. In piecing together the clues I am of the mind that the woman met somebody in Mexico. Met him and broke his heart in the same 24 hour period. She tells Kim he was an old hippie, lives part-time in Oregon, a kind man who smokes and drinks beer well before sunset, in fact well before sun *rise*. She tells Kim it can only mean one thing – impotence – and it troubles her that she's become such an accurate diagnostician in these matters. My theory of heartbreak was given credence at 11 o'clock last night, when the phone rang. I'm certain it was the old hippie. The woman was polite but did not pine; one senses there was pining a-plenty on the other end.

Another recent phone chat with Kim featured talk of a Young Architect. It seems this youth fixated on my woman at a dance hall and ferreted out her number. She gives him points for resourcefulness and ardor. She deducts points for arrogance and poor message-leaving skills: "Like it's the 100th time he's called, not the first, not even the courtesy of a last name. Does he think no man named Cameron has ever called me before?"

"Has one?" I surmise Kim saying.

"Shut up."

So the woman is back and singing the same old song. And what of me? What of Jones? We

vacationed with the woman's mother, pleasant enough but not much in the way of action. I feel something coming, some major life change, the kind that preceded our move to Texas. I didn't know her so well then but I knew me, and I feel like I did then.

Yesterday I heard the woman say this to her mother: "Maybe I'll start a think tank." I began to think she was feeling better. "Or better yet, a feel tank. Yeah, and maybe the first project will be a study. I'll call it 'Woman Who Love Dogs Who –'" and here she looked at me, "—"Shit, Eat It, Puke, then Eat Puked Shit.'" They laughed for awhile, at me, not with me, but truly it's a dog's nature, is it not? As well as a ringing endorsement of the quality of the victuals? It's nearly as clean when it comes out as when it goes in. Yes, they laughed, and a bit of good-humored jesting I can take as well as the next dog, but what followed has quite changed my life.

"You mean Mr. Broadus, there?" the woman's mother said, in a way that made you know she was waiting for her daughter to say, "Who's Mr. Broadus?" which is what she did. "Mr. Broad? Ass?"

Oh my. I watched as the woman embraced the notion fully. And my world diminished. I've thought all this time that I had a nice figure, really more akin to a Greek statue than something that could be called fat. Witness my sinewy flanks as I make my way up a hill. Look at this chest. Deep, proud, the engine that runs the rounded hardness behind it. How can they see fat before function? My feelings are torn asunder and tonight, when the evening meal is presented, I begin my statement. I will sniff and turn away. I will listen as they discuss the phenomenon; I expect to hear "depressive episode," possibly "cancer." Let them agonize and diagnose. Let them take me to the doctor, let him puzzle as well. I've been hearing news reports of the goings-on in a Turkish prison lately, inmates protesting their conditions by refusing food. They're dying, well over a hundred so far and lots more on deck as their vital signs sag to an irretrievable point. And the only people who care are non-Turks, or non-Turk-prison-officials, at any rate. It is a harsh

model, but an inspirational one. I will eschew food until I hear the woman say, "My Lou, my sweetest Lou-Lou, you're getting so thin." Or words to that effect.

My project proceeds apace. It's Day Three now of what I'm calling the Food Issue and I can report that their attention has been captured. Even Jones eyes me curiously and, it pains me to admit it, with more interest. That it may be prurient interest concerns --I observed him trying to "marry" three males of the species on the trail yesterday -- but attention is attention and the woman is most deferential. My dirty secret goes thusly: Each morning Fuckpants practically draws blood wresting my cookie from me, keeping me from any spares that hit the floor, only to hide them among the bedding or under a newspaper, or behind a plant -- in short, any unimaginative place he can wrap his little mind around. Naturally I can find them, and of course I do, and eat them, thereby keeping up my strength while making my point and becoming svelter by the hour. I'm enjoying the response, if not the deprivation. Oh say, remind me to tell you about the fireman, the woman's latest twisted delve into coupledness.

I stand accused of snobbery. I, Louis, who have made it my life's work to contort and fawn indiscriminately, with utter disregard to the fawnee's station in life, have been deemed Aloof.

The word came from the mouth of a Fireman who took my mother on a canoe ride. "Big dogs," he remarked witlessly. "The spotted one, he's aloof." This said as I was rushing headlong back to the old woman's cottage, where, with my new ears, I heard a can being opened. Cans hold food, ergo I rush headlong. And following the word "aloof" (and surely you caught the way the sentence was arranged, E.B. White roll over in your urn), there came a hearty belly laugh, loud and deep and having nothing at all to do with the remark preceding it. Why? Later, after overhearing the whole story, I developed a theory having to do with both insecurity and inflated ego, if you can even picture it. But regardless of details, the careful reader will divine the essence of the tale: the woman is dating. And yesterday she came home with a copy of *Man's Search for Meaning* and a potato gun. I amend: the woman is soaring!

But about the date: the Fireman assumed too much. That the woman enjoys wrestling canoes off of and onto truck tops. That she doesn't mind paddling upstream for multiple hours in the dark. That she knows what to do when a Fireman, a public safety expert, who has neglected to identify himself as a diabetic, has an acute blood sugar episode in the middle of a lake in the middle of the night. That she doesn't need an apology for having her life jeopardized. That she enjoyed his company in the first place. That she doesn't have caller ID. That she doesn't find asking her best friend to see Paul Simon when he can't reach her to be an utter deal breaker.

And so the search continues. I have been observing the new man across the street and am quite liking what I see. He has three dogs, not a one under 80 pounds. Otis, a decrepit hound,

must be hefted and placed inside the truck and have his pillows plumped. He decorates the Springer with a clean red bandana, and last Wednesday I watched him kiss the Rottweiler full on the mouth. And, while he didn't shout "Hey world, I just kissed a dog on the lips!" and he didn't do it twice, at least he had the decency not to feign embarrassment. More to the point, this is my kind of man, and, unless I've completely misinterpreted these past few years, my woman's kind as well.

I, Louis, am to go under the knife. My teeth, experts claim, are soiled. A bump near my rear is an infected cyst. A pillow of fat on my side grows larger by the day. All these things will be seen to on Friday and will require sedation. This I have done before, though not alone. I and Jones had a double teeth cleaning ceremony in the autumn, so – speaking for myself - it was more an educational outing than a near-death experience. But this time Louis flies solo. I must prepare a will. All my earthly possessions, i.e. my new turquoise collar, my old beige leash, a soup bone whose spirit I can't seem to break despite 8 months of trying, all of these I shall scrape into a pile where the woman keeps her shoes, the sacred place where I and Jones go for memories and current events. I have no cedar-filled dog bed, no raincoat from a catalog, no brush, no other evidence that Louis walked the earth. Pitiful legacy, or minimalism? I go back and forth. Oh, she'll have me incinerated, as is her wont, a private cremation it goes without saying, and I'll join the three other heavy cedar boxes in her bedroom to be used as a doorstep, to keep my successors inside or out. What a sad and elegant circle I'll have made. Perhaps I'll have touched her so deeply she'll put me in rare fabric from Sumatra and place me under her mattress to spend eternity with Hunter, another renowned beauty. Tears will rain on me every six months, when the mattress is turned. I wonder: by then will I even know? Or will I know everything?

A wrenching, stellar day, this Sunday past, a continuation of the water theme that has defined our lives of late. Temperate, clear, a day begging to be spent in the woods *et voila*, we did just that. Some storytellers go off on a tangent totally unrelated to the subject at hand, then finish by saying But I digress. In a stunning reversal, I digress *maintenant*.

In February the woman was gone to South California, sent by the Advertising Agency to make commercials for products she wouldn't be caught dead using. It's an occupational hazard, I understand. One week became two. The rain began the moment our woman left the ground and worked tirelessly day and night the entire time, a "cat's away" type of thing. The old woman had been here a mere six months; she was and would be for evermore hooked up to a walker.

Spontaneity was like a lover who had fled in the night, taking with him all her prized possessions. But, adjusting she was. Between her cottage and her car was an unpleasant expanse; never much of a yard to begin with, it now had more in common with a plowed field. So there was that. Rain for claustrophobia, mud for immobility, intimations of mortality for company. I and Jones found various uses for the mud, chief among them was laying waste to her pale and brand new carpet, but also we thought it amusing to stand on our back legs and press our front paws against her windows, and smile. Our woman called each day, and Henry the Builder and his band of merry illegal aliens checked on her too, but despite this coddling, the old woman broke down. Henry called to report he'd found her sobbing in her brand new recliner with *les chiens* arrayed at a safe distance, watching as though she were one of those old buildings that make the news when they blow up from the inside. And so the old woman broke down, then she heaved a great sigh, and soldiered on. The rain stopped, my woman came home, sod was laid, and God

sent us spring. And our reward for enduring record-setting wet bleakness is full lakes and deep, crystal clear creeks, deep enough to dive. But I resume.

On this particular Sunday we ran with water on our left where last year there were only rocks and rattlers; the adventures began washing over us at once. Down in a ravine there was a great commotion which turned out to be two amok Springer Spaniels, doing verbal battle with a mother duck hell-bent on shielding her young. Jones, in an unprecedented show of valor, streaked toward them and made a sharp right-hand mid-air turn. He swam – *swam* – across the stream, had a brief caustic word with the Springers, and *swam* back. Even I stopped to watch. A bend or so later a morose man who we see regularly walking with great purpose and a bag of groceries, said, “Do you want to rescue two Spaniards?”

“Sure,” said the woman, “what girl wouldn’t?”

The morose man told us what we already knew, and something we didn’t: “I seen two coral snakes and those dogs’re gonna get bit. And they’re expensive dogs.”

*Zut alors!* Snakes! Indeed, not the celestial *fer de lance*, but exotics still, and deadly to boot. As if summoned, the Spaniards climbed out of the ravine, non-bitten, on leashes manned by a middle-aged woman. It was rather like looking in a mirror. Then it was on to our first stop, a place called Campbell’s Hole, for a dip, and *it was still Sunday!* (Incidentally, is it not every dog’s dream to have a Hole named for him? Or is that just me?) Today Campbell’s Hole was deep enough to admit boys from twenty feet above and not break their necks and it was certainly deep enough for me and my woman. This, then, would forever be my great joy, to be with my woman swimming in Louis Hole, and to hear her laughing.

Later, spent and fairly dry, we all three would run some more. I would stray off the path, lured by the irresistible whiff of something dead. I would roll in it, not a cursory tumble, but a deep

wallowing that would scent and stain my white parts, for it is in this way a pack member shares with his family where he has been and what he has seen. I would emerge, saffron colored, with some real news for a change. I would rub against the woman's leg and spin in circles and plead with my eyes. I would do this thrice more, but try as I might I would be unable to tell her that the place I'd been was a shallow grave and the thing I'd seen was a body. That's right, a *body*.

This was the news I brought her last Sunday. For God's sake, I couldn't make it any clearer.

I've never wished to be anything but what I am: a larger than average English Setter. It's what I was dealt and I play it with *elan*. And I have never lusted for anything I didn't already possess, except maybe *fois gras*. (I once heard the woman tell her mother she's a *fois gras* whore. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" "I just really like it.") So, except for a large mouthful of the liver of a tortured French goose, my life is complete. Or was until now. Now what I wish, for only the second time, more than anything has ever before been wished, is to speak, one sentence, in any language, preferably English, though French would suffice, to any person, preferably my woman. I would say, "Listen closely, for these are the last words I shall utter: there is a body just off the trail past Campbell's Hole and I can take you there." We have been near the place two times since my first encounter but each time the woman leashes me so I can't roll in the pungent remains. Leashes me coming and going, so even if I wanted I couldn't rush to the site and stand there barking. And I do want to, so badly, because if the corpse was a woman and she met with foul play, my woman could be next. She wonders to friends what her dogs would do if she became accosted, wonders if they'd defend or flee. She thinks the latter, because we've only ever known kindness to issue from a human being. Ha! Either one of us would kill for her, or die. We'd be honored. We've been saving up. I've been in an agitated state since the discovery weeks before; my appetite has well and truly disappeared, I don't need the image of starving Turks to fortify me. My only hope is that the woman forgets soon and lets me run the way I used to so I can dash straight to the profane spot and stand and bark. Like Lassie.

These are heady times. Tragic too, of course, but all in all the stuff of which memoirs are made. You'll recall the body? (Of course you will, it was a page ago.) I thought it had a familiar reek. The body was that of a runner, a German, a man who was nearing the end of his legal tenure in this country and had tried, with increasing desperation, to extend his stay by wedding an American. Several women attested to his pattern, which consisted of charming them with his brooding nihilism, proposing marriage, being turned down, and moving on. This was the *modus operandi* described by one Det. Dooley as he interviewed persons of interest, among them, my woman. Ah, the German. I never understood it as I'd heard my woman remark more than once that Germans and runners were a few of her least-favorite things. Regardless, he was a constant during our first weeks in *Tejas*; I remember heated nighttime activities. How ironic that the two times I've desperately wished to speak were both regarding the same man. First, I wanted to tell her that when he stayed with us during her trip to Paris, he didn't stay with us at all. He dropped by to feed us then left us alone for the remaining twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes. He kicked us away when we swirled around him, lonesome and afraid. He drove her sports car and wore her leather jacket and we never trusted him, not even when she did.

And the second time was to say, "Hey remember that German prick you dated? Well, I just rolled in what's left of him." And now he's dead. If I were a vindictive dog I would have been thinking *quid pro quo* the instant his stink drew me off the trail, but dogs can't afford to hold grudges. And I'm in no way glad he's passed, though I do find it pleasingly circular, and just.

Det. Dooley was circumspect when the woman asked about foul play but assured her he'd be

in touch. I can assure her of it too, but for different reasons. We had a moment, *moi* and Det. Dooley. I stood staring, wagging, drooling on his pant leg, and he stared right back and crow's feet appeared, engraved over years of being kind, and in that tiny moment we became dear to one another. What a complicated man. Maybe the exploration of violent death, rather than ruining him, has made him excel at life.

And speaking of matters cupidesque, I believe I mentioned the Rottweiler across the street? I now know her name, Dixie, and that I love her. She shimmies with joy and glistens and catches the light. She cavorts and looks up at her man in a way that makes me know she's never been hurt. She sees me and lumbers across the street to wiggle and smile through the fence. She leaves me motionless with desire. Damn the fence. Fences are strong but they are no match for love. Again, I refer to Lassie. Dixie's man, alas, is not the one for my woman. He grows corn, she grows plumeria. He plays harmonica, she plays Eric Satie. He is a hippie, she is a former hippie. Now she is an exotic.

The woman stands in her barely green bedroom, backlit through the freshly washed French doors, pink foliage trembling over the sun-strewn deck. She's regarding His Silkiness, curled so precisely on the white bedding. The new white 450 thread-count bedding that's never been slept in but is about to be, is about 8 hours away from some major nocturnal goings-on. Could I get away with this? I think not. Though I'd compliment the downy expanse, owing to my elegantly mottled spots-on-white motif. Fuckpants is about as elegant as a fly in the *vicchysoisse*. But, eye of the beholder and all. "Just like the Wyeth painting," she told her mother, "Master Bedroom?" Yeah I know, but he's the same shape, and the bed's white and stuff." Lord, if I didn't know the source of her pride I'd have guessed he'd been named a National Merit Scholar. Yes, alright then, enough bitterness.

The real news is that after weeks of fruitless looking into the murder (yes, *murder*) of the German runner, Det. Dooley has focused his investigation on my woman, specifically on her lips and her breasts. And I can't say I disapprove. It makes her happy, the attentions of this odd, funny man. The investigation has proceeded slowly, with many leads and just as many dead ends, and Det. Dooley has kept us apprised of every new development. He's fond of the evening debriefing. At first he pulled up in his unmarked car (a misnomer if ever there was one, they might as well be made of neon) hoping to spy her on the porch. Then he began pulling into the driveway and joining her on the glider. He began bumping her knee with his to emphasize a point, and then with his hand. She began receiving him with a hug and seeing him off with a kiss and he began bringing good wine and films best described as *outré*. I've counted three different cars, none of them new, none of them ordinary. A pale blue, pristine Falcon station wagon, a

faded yellow International pick-up truck with a didgeridoo on a rack in the rear window, and an old white Mercedes convertible with red leather seats. Curiously, it's the leather seats onto which we are welcomed most heartily. He takes us to the dog-swim on them, sometimes without even the woman. He brings us fleece animals that squeak, and marrow bones. Knowing our various proclivities he hands the toys to Jones and *moi* the bones. He also has the good sense to ply the old woman with hardbound Robert B. Parkers and Ruth Rendells; sometimes he does that part of the courtship in the middle of the day and lets word of his largesse filter up to the big house.

The bad man who broke my woman's heart last summer had spent time in prison, federal prison, ten years' worth. She likes what this represents, she feels that a man who has done time, but only once, has become more interesting and learned valuable lessons. The theory is sound, yet now she is in league with a Detective. Do his eccentricities excuse his profession? Or has she overcorrected?

Today is Saturday. I've never seen a house so clean. Uncharacteristic smells emanate from the kitchen and the table has been set since yesterday. Price tags are removed from a flowery brassiere and a wisp of panty. White roses in the living room, gardenias by the bed. Methinks this case is about to break wide open.

I'm under the table the next morning while the lovers gaze and giggle over the coffee she made and the muffins he ran out for. Streaked, rather, as though it had to be done before she changed her mind and locked the door. The uncertainty, the insecurity that wasn't there the night before is here tenfold this AM. Lovers. What are you going to do? It must be exquisite, this pain, else why would one seek it?

As expected, there are miracles from above: Det. Dooley's muffin-toting hand dangles limply while the other strokes my woman's forearm. I snatch the pastry like a frog does a fly, with so much stealth that later, when he remembers he's having breakfast, he is frankly surprised to find his hand empty. Of course mixed in was the obligatory feeding of strawberries to one another and the cliched being overcome by lust and returning to the bedroom. And closing the door. I look at Jones who seems confused as well as crestfallen. While he digests this sleight, I digest what's left of their breakfast. There is muted laughter and sounds of pain and then nothing for the longest time. Jones and I head back to the old woman's cottage to lick our wounds. She knows that last night brought a gentleman caller. She sees by our faces that he's still here.

I am under the table two nights later, hoping for a fraction of the luck that blessed that recent morning, when the woman drops a bomb.

"I'm going to Hawaii next week to visit my brother." Det. Dooley addressed his sea bass with intense, specious interest and whispered huskily,

"Really. That's great." The two of them had been quasi-out of breath ever since the night of the new underwear. "To cool off somewhat?" This, a reference to the 100 or so degrees that were just outside the door.

“Not likely,” she rasped. “I’ll be in volcano country.”

Then he said “I’ll miss you,” but what I heard was *Don’t leave me I won’t survive it.* He added, “How long will you stay?” but what I heard was, *A week I can stand, one day longer and I’ll do something embarrassing and regretful.*

“So, your brother, huh? What does he do over there, you never said.”

“Oh, various things. Whatever it takes to keep living there.”

“Alone? You going alone?”

“Sure. Could you take me to the airport?”

I thought he’d cry at the opportunity to reenact a great love scene to be named later. And while he snaked his fingers across the table to cover hers, I removed the bruschetta from his dangling other hand. And once again, poor stupid, mannerly Jones sat at attention with his ears back, waiting to be offered a bite. *Offered.* If we ever ran away from home he’d perish.

I've never met the man but this is what I know of my Uncle Marc, the legend, if you will, as it pertains so far. He is the subject of much speculation between my woman and her mother. It seems he is, in general, a disappointment. He is big and handsome and charming, "So much like his father it's scary," says the old woman on a regular basis, and with palpable resentment. "I want to beat the shit out of him sometimes, he looks so much like his father." The angry molecules fly around the old woman's head and we know to just let them. "Except he doesn't have a mean bone in his body."

"No, he doesn't," agrees my woman, and they stay with this fact for a long time, reforming it, restating it, because from what I gather it's the only thing worth bragging about. I know he's funny. I hear his phone messages to the old woman. She has not bothered to record her own greeting, and the factory voice on her answering machine sounds like noted physicist Stephen J. Hawking. Uncle Marc often leaves messages demanding that Dr. Hawking release his mother at once. He threatens to "rough up" Dr. Hawking and to make it so he'll "never walk again." I know Uncle Marc spends far more than forty hours a week avoiding work, and has spent a lifetime avoiding conflict. He just leaves. I glean, eavesdropping on the shorthand the women use, that his father was brutal to Uncle Marc, psychologically, the worst kind, and that he doted on my woman until he abandoned her, that is. And it seems that this harsh early childhood absolves Uncle Marc of having to be a responsible adult. It must be like having a child with Tourette's. You know they can't help it, and yet you are often quite disgusted. For some reason the old woman must not say, "Marc, you're a perfectly healthy grown man, for Christ's sake get a job and get that fucking motorcycle out of my garage before I put a Free sign on it." She can only

tell my woman, who can only shake her head in sympathy, who must never reply, “Say it to him, Ma, not me.”

Something sent Uncle Marc to Hawaii 12 years ago. We don't know what he does there and apparently we like it that way. All right, the old woman doesn't know, but I've heard the story often enough: Uncle Marc grows marijuana. His methods are outlandish and outlandishly successful. He prepares the soil with the dedication of a *saucier*, with special time-release nutrients and vermiculite to retain water. He puts the mixture in round plastic bags about two feet tall. He places just two seeds in each bag, wildly special seeds, the kind of seed that nurtures greed, and violence. He covers the bags with sheer fabric in a camouflage motif. “So the birds don't get the seeds.” On the night of the full moon he rents a car and drives to the lava fields, the dry side of the island where, it is theorized, nobody thinks to look. He carries the bags deep into the moonscape then returns with ten gallons of water, five gallons per hand. He carries a roll of toilet paper with him also, in case the authorities are waiting by his car and wonder what he's doing in the middle of the lava in the middle of the night. Once each week he rents another car, or borrows a visitor's if one is to be had, and carries ten gallons of water to his seeds. After a month he kills the male plants so the strength will go to the females, a slap in the face to Chinese population control doctrine. In two months, on the night of a full moon, he harvests. Each plant is the size and shape of a mule's penis and worth eight thousand dollars wholesale. He has ten plants going at all times. One time an associate of his, who was carrying water into the lava field, stepped carelessly and broke his ankle. He had to push on, it was either that or let the plants die. A few steps later he broke the other ankle, but that's it for cautionary tales. It is a good life.

So for obvious reasons my woman didn't tell Det. Dooley about her brother until she had to, and liberally interpreted his vocation, at that (organic farmer). And for even more obvious

reasons, she didn't tell him she was meeting her ex-husband there.

He learned that later. As did we all.

When she goes our minds reel but do not delve too deeply. We stay on the surface, running frantically between the front yard and the old woman's rug, fearful of lighting for any significant length of time, fearful of the questions that might nag. Among them: how can she be happy without us if the reverse is not true? How does something as big as an airplane stay in the sky? If she decided to become a Hawaiian would she smuggle us in by boat? Would she put us through the expensive and Draconian Hawaiian quarantine? Or would she start over with less troublesome, indigenous dogs? The old woman tells her friend Nancy, "When I look around first thing in the morning I can't believe I live like this. Jesus. There are soiled sheets on all the chairs and filthy dogs on top of them, and shards of dog toys on the rug, and somebody's been farting and I know it's Louis. All they care about is getting their cookie. They don't even know she's gone." We allow her this small conceit. But when we stand in the driveway and bark to the west, it's not at motorcycles, it's in the hope our woman will hear us and come home.

And she does.

Here's what I've managed to piece together of the homecoming. After the slow deep kissing and the embrace that had airport bystanders wondering how long they would remain clothed, Det. Dooley asks, "Did you check anything?"

"Just one thing," says our woman, "Did you bring the station wagon by any chance? Or the truck?"

He'd brought the truck. "Because I have a surprise," he says.

"Me too," says the woman, and I expect her brows soared and furrowed at the same time.

"What's your surprise?" And here I picture her smiling hopefully.

“I brought the dogs,” says Dooley. “What’s yours?”

“I brought my ex-husband.”

“...You...”

“We can put him in the back with the dogs.”

“...We...”

“I’m still his only family, baby. And...”

“...I...”

“...he’s dead.”

And here’s how it seems the Hawaiian vacation unfolded: Uncle Marc, in a bid to reunite the only partially happy couple he’d ever known, invited the woman and her ex at the same time for fun in the sun. The woman opted not to tell Uncle Marc how happy she was, how un-single, because certain questions would be asked, such as what does he do. She was as ashamed at having a government boyfriend as she was at having a gangster brother. Therefore Uncle Marc assumed she was not happy, due to singlehood. And he knew Mike, her ex, a man of few words and many penetrating looks, was miserable without her. Hence the bold plan. Mike the Ex arrived, settled in. The woman arrived. The big surprise was far too big. Mike’s heart took one look and quit. But it is said that his smile, dormant for years, made a stunning farewell appearance.

Det. Dooley loads us in his pristine station wagon and we hit the road, just the three of us, two of us drooling copiously into his delicate window mechanisms. Every week we make the trip, it is called Going to Church.

We stop at the HEB and buy 12 roses, “White, still, boys, or something different?” The limpid eyes of Fuckpants must have whispered, “Peach this time,” for he returned with two bunches. One for the grave of his beloved’s ex-husband and one for the beloved herself. At the gravesite Dooley pulls out the dead roses and puts in the living. He makes us sit in reverence for a moment while he looks to the sky and says, “Let’s thank God, boys. Let’s thank God that’s not me.”

Our woman is in Los Angeles again, making TV commercials that do not make her proud, again, and Det. Dooley is “looking in on us” this week. They speak on the phone on this hot summer evening. Dooley wonders aloud if there is anything she’s neglected to mention, given that odd things seem to happen to her baggage when she heads west. He tells her the mystery of the dead German is solved. The killer is the morose man we’ve seen so many times on the trail. His grocery bag, when apprehended, contained organic carrots, *Us Magazine* and a .25 caliber handgun. The German was killed for his Rolex watch, a cheap imitation. Dear God, would that I had the grace not to point out that the German himself was a cheap imitation.

Dooley lets me drool on his pants while they chat, and washes my neckerchief before bed. In the morning he puts on blood red lipstick and kisses my Circle of Willis, then wipes his mouth and vacuums. Our woman will be home at 2. I hope she loves him. Certainly I do.



The race is on. Will my woman strike oil before she is fired from her advertising job? We're all on the edge of our seats.

She feels something wake in her stomach as she gets closer to work and feels it falling asleep as she leaves. She tells the old woman, "Never in my life have I felt penalized for being a woman, and an older one at that. They don't give me anything meaningful to do."

"It's Texas," opines the elder.

"If they don't think I have talent, why did they hire me?"

"They're Texans."

I heard her speaking to her friend Stuart. "Oil?" she said. Then, "Your dad, too?" And finally, "What's his number." She tells Det. Dooley she's invested in an oil well under the name Ellie Mae Clampett and plans a trip to West Texas to dance naked in the gusher. She whistles the "Beverly Hillbillies" tune and belts out the part about Ol' Jed being a millionaire. She paces and studies arcane daily reports, muttering phrases therefrom: "Oh good, a 7 inch casing." "Wow, drilling at 3510 with mist." "Uh-oh, lost half truckload oil in Queen zone." "Well according to this, he's acidizing a hole." Etcetera.

But when she sits, tears seep from her eyes, the way I imagine the black gold will seep from the earth. She tells Dooley she feels like she did when her father left her and she wanted to know how a big man could do such a thing to a nice little girl. How could a big company ignore and diminish the nice woman she's grown into? Dooley holds her and has the good sense not to speak.

"Maybe I should go to cooking school."

“Long hours, baby, hard work.”

“I know. But food’s important. You can live a long time without advertising.”

I fell out of bed this morning. I sneezed, flailed, overcorrected, and slid, slowly, inexorably to the floor below, like a *Titanic*. The last of me to be seen was one desperately clutching paw and one wild eye. It was a source of great amusement.

The woman leaned over the side, Dooley beside her, and they laughed down upon me. “Lou, you’re gonna be a diamond necklace.”

“That’s right, Lou,” Dooley paraphrased, in song. “Currently you’re an old lump of dog but you’re a-gonna be a diamond someday.”

I’d heard it too, moments before, an NPR story. Some enterprising funeral home has realized that burned loved ones make carbon and carbon makes diamonds. A brooch, a ring. I suppose, depending on the magnitude of the tragedy, an entire tiara. Right now the funeral home is focusing on former Humans but anybody in the room will tell you the smart money is on Pets.

And now I put my head in my woman’s lap and guide her to happier thoughts using only my eyes and my tail. I invite her to view the picture I’m seeing: she and I, cavorting in a thick black spew, naked save for our tiaras.

We lie in our white bed, I and Jones, furry commas around the parenthetical expression that is our woman. The radio comes on and Bob Edwards regales us with a tale of botched romance, wherein the skywriter sprayed “leave” instead of “love.” Our woman groans in deepest pleasure and nuzzles first my ear then the ear of Jones, rolling carefully, so as not to upset the sentence structure.

“We’re not getting up today, boys. Things couldn’t get any better than this, so why leave, right?”

We thump our agreement. Words directed solely to us are acutely precious, as it seems our woman entertains thoughts of adding a family member. Specifically, a bird. More precisely, a crow. Has she forgotten our most fundamental truth? That, though we comport ourselves like lap dogs, we are in fact *bird* dogs, and proudly so? Can she not envision the ensuing chaos?

I remember the story as it was related by her friend Mary Ellen. It seems a friend of a friend had struck up a conversation with a crow while doing some roof work. They chatted for most of a week, the crow drawing closer. And now the crow was within the friend’s grasp, had he chosen to exercise said grasp. And now the crow took a roofing tack in his bill, and the friend grasped the crow and wrested the nail from its throat, and now the two are inseparable. The crow rides on his shoulder as he walks the dog. The crow flies in his window and sits at the table while he eats his oatmeal. The crow hides his tools then brings them back just in time. The crow allows friends of the friend’s friend to scratch his head until his wings droop and he dozes. The crow is coy and playful “And,” Mary Ellen enthused, “the damn thing *reasons*, for God’s sake!” Our woman’s eyebrows soar as her jaw drops. Oh yes, she *would* have a crow.

“Don’t get a crow,” suggests Mary Ellen. (Can one in fact “get” a crow? Does it not fall to the crow to be had?) “Get a parakeet and see how that goes.”

I can tell her right now how it will go. A crow would stand a decent chance; things do not bode nearly so well for a budgie.

God help us all. I have fallen out of love with Dixie the Rottweiler across the street, she of the sweet writhings, in favor of an interspecies *amourette*. And my woman, it seems, has fallen out of love with Dooley.

She returns from a trip south of the border, a place where there is naught to do but snorkel, make love and eat lobster, naked. As well as make conversation with the innkeepers. It is these encounters she finds tedious, owing to Dooley's habit of over-explaining, of belaboring the obvious.

"It just made me sneer pretty much the whole damn trip." The woman shakes her head at the memory while her mother blinks and fumbles for the volume button.

"He did what?" she finally locates.

"He over-explained."

The old woman digests this slowly.

"And when he gives you a phone number he gives, like, two numbers, then the next four, instead of, you know, area code then prefix? Also, he cuts his spaghetti."

"So where is he? Is he ever coming back?"

My woman shrugs. "I probably wouldn't. I was harsh. Anyway, I'm busy with the new bird."

One ponders certain inequities: my woman maligns the man who talks incessantly and grieves his exit by teaching a parakeet how to talk incessantly.

But what a parakeet! He is called Gomez and is the color of the sky after cataracts have been

removed. An impossible blue. And this from *moi*, a creature who has never been a fan of the hue, having always favored your mauves, your flames and corals.

It began innocently enough: the woman brought him home and we circled his cage and stared.

“Be nice, boys.”

For the first time ever I believed she could love others as she loved I and Jones, and it smarted. The tender looks of Gomez were a balm, though, and I took comfort therein. Jones went to the old woman’s house and took comfort *therein*, letting his eyebrows do the talking.

Presently I stopped circling and sat down to stare. The little ball of blue cocked his head from side to side so that each eye in turn could take in all of me, and gave a tentative chirp. Damned if it didn’t make my tail wag! Another chirp, another wag, and now I was on my feet, my nose reaching up to him, and Gomez was clinging to the lowest bars of his cage, as close as steel would allow, and...

“Lou, do you want to meet him?”

Meet him?! I wanted to have his children!

“Be sweet, now...don’t be afraid little bird-o...here you go...”

And now my love rode my woman’s wrist to my waiting nose... and we kissed!

“No nibbles, Lou-Lou...”

Suddenly my dearest love leapt! *leapt!* from her wrist to my head, and peered at me in an upside-down manner. I sank to the floor. I could scarcely breathe, how ever could I stand?

Gomez hopped from my head to my left foreleg and gazed up at me, and again our lips met.

Since that day we’ve been inseparable, except when I leave the house. He might as well not have a cage, as little as he uses it. When the woman takes a bath he sits on her knee and scampers down her leg until he touches the water then hurries back up to report. When she eats, he rides on

her fork or taps at the crumbs on the table. When she reads in bed he sits on her book and comments in his mesmerizing upside-down fashion. And in between these duties he rides on my back, tiny feet anchored under my collar. When I lie on my side he nests under my chin. When I dine (al fresco) my darling waits patiently at the window and flies to me when he hears the rubber flap on the dog door. And in my eagerness to return, I don't finish my dinner. Leave it for the grackles, I say, a screeching, loose-boweled, altogether inferior bird, for my love awaits!

“Is it my imagination,” wonders the old woman, “or is Louis slimming down?”

“He definitely is, and Jones is packing it on. And sleeping constantly. You gotta tap him on the shoulder to wake him up.”

And indeed, there he lay, the once-proud Lord Fuckpants, splayed on the rug, mute save for the occasional heaved sigh. It was true, there was no evidence of skeletal structure as there always had been. He'd aged 70 years. “I think he misses Lou.”

But perhaps the biggest news of all is that my woman has caught the attention of a local caterer of some renown, and is doing nothing to deflect it. Not that I encourage such deflection, as the reasons for the caterer's increasingly frequent visits are to “get your opinion on this pate;” please, opine as to whether the “*baba au rhum* has too much *rhum*;” and, most memorably, to “tell me which of these versions of *foie gras* is your favorite.” Good god, there were six versions. At that point it no longer mattered that the caterer was a woman.

They are a handsome pair, both lanky and blond, given simultaneously to grace and coltishness. Of course the caterer, being a “full-blown lesbian” as the old woman reminds her daughter, appreciates an exceptional canine, and in us she has two. My woman appreciates anybody who appreciates her lads, and need it even be remarked that I and Jones appreciate caterers? Even lousy ones? It’s been a giddy festival of appreciation these last few weeks, and although no touching has occurred, not that wouldn’t occur in a regular girl/friend setting, one feels certain ions waking, electrifying. “You know what your Aunt Ulla used to call those girls? Morphodykes. God, she was ignorant. So what do you two do, anyway?” the old woman wants to know.

“You know,” says my woman, “friend stuff.”

The old woman raises her eyebrows at anyone in the vicinity.

“I’ve been thinking about cooking school.”

“Oh you’d be great. Look at those forearms,” says Olivia, strokingly.

“Yeah, I’m really on edge at work lately, really insecure. You know, older woman, young man’s game.”

“Do I ever.”

“So I got involved in this oil deal and it looked really promising but I haven’t heard anything lately and, well, I need to do something else. You know, shake it up.”

“Yeah. Shake it, baby, shake it.”

“But make money.”

“Mmm-hmm...”

Olivia the caterer takes this opportunity to pounce on my woman’s tight neck muscles. I see the gleam in her eye. She has spent the day with us running and swimming in the woods, and the evening preparing Monkfish Marsala with Potatoes Anna and something green that didn’t interest me. It is my feeling that she plans to spend the night as well.

When I allow non-love or non-food thoughts to intrude I have to admit that, though there are certain bright spots and many interesting goings-on of late, for some reason our home has become a house. No, for one reason. Lack of Dooley. Certainly I miss him, but Jones, who has lost both his woman and his brother to incomprehensible romances, is utterly bereft.

Gomez is swaddled and dangling in my luxuriant tail area as we stroll the grounds of Chez Annie. It is the latest escalation of our love, the traveling-together test. If it goes well perhaps we'll wed in the Spring. I hear his dear coos behind me – now from the left, now from the right – and if I turn my head I can catch a glimpse with each happy swish of my tail. I like the weight of him, the importance it bestows.

It is late October and yesterday, beating the old woman to the punch for the 4<sup>th</sup> year running, my woman made the annual pronouncement: “I feel a hint of fall in the air.” (In Oregon these were not hints, they were nips, and they were felt as early as August 12<sup>th</sup>.) Tradition holds that when these words are spoken we pause to reflect. And I never thought I'd notice it, much less reflect on it, but I am worried about Jones. I can't remember the last time I thought of him as Fuckpants, so pitiful has he become. His spring clip has grown out messily and the hair on his head falls into his eyes, like Moe Stooze in a used fur coat. When we go to the woods he trots right beside our woman, with frequent glances into her eyes, as if there is a penalty for being first to break the plane. When he is not collapsed in the sun or arrayed on some hapless divan, he is eating, industriously but without joy. My woman is *desolee* to think that her treasure has entered his golden years and – rather than go down swinging – embraced decrepitude. No son of mine, etcetera. And I can tell you that his pride wenteth before the fall: in the olden days he would be twitching-and-yelping asleep but if somebody so much as whispered his name he would be in that person's lap, vamping coquettishly, waving the elegant plume of tail. He never smiles anymore. He's gone to fat. Nothing, but nothing, wakes him. Last week the neighbor's washing machine fell from a tree not 20 feet away and he did not budge. And no, it's not his ears because we

checked. Today Jones sports a produce label on his head identifying him as a Fuji apple, there-  
affixed by the old woman who has become my only source of whimsy these days, apart from  
Gomez, of course, and my own imaginings.

Comes now this same old woman, pushing her walker up the path, grocery bags hanging from  
the handlebars.

“Pork ribs tonight Lou, in applesauce and sauerkraut and... Jesus Christ, that bird is all caught  
up in your ass feathers. Where’s your mother?”

Gomez and I trot off to find her. Jones, splayed in her doorway, just snores.

Gomez and I are taking our ease on the front porch. My love is in his rooms and I am draped elegantly about the base, like an ermine scarf writ large. Jones decorates the cement walk, looking, as usual, like his parachute failed to open.

But now there occurs the rarest sight: the tail of Jones, waving tentatively at first, and now like a storm-tossed pennant.

And now he stands and forces his nose through a square of cyclone fence and begins to moan and twist in some class of paroxysm, joy, I believe. I regard the street beyond. Lord. It is Det. Dooley in his old white Mercedes, cruising slow as can be, noticing Jones as well. Noticing, ha! Never has a word been more freighted. Never has a fence been more divisive. And never has a cause been more lost. For Dooley is here on official business, unauthorized to do more than glance. He has an appointment across the street, where Sam the Hippie, father of the sublime Dixie, has been beaten up for growing turnip greens. It seems the vacant lot he so lovingly tended belongs to a Mexican Gangster who is angered by certain vegetables, or something.

Jones remains frozen for the duration of the interview and when it ends, and Dooley pulls away, so slowly the auto almost drifts backwards, his eyes follow the Mercedes for a good hour, his tail a tiring metronome and finally...now... a broken one. If I weren't so in love I think I'd cry.

We are in for the evening, though lately this is far cozier in concept than reality. My woman sits in her chair, the one that offers a severely angled view of the television set, and though it blares constantly – lightweight celebrity-based fare for the most part – she pays scant attention. She focuses instead on the first of several enormous high-octane margaritas that have come to grace her evenings, letting her tears salt the rim. It is my feeling she is coming to terms with singlehood again, having recently struck out in the Sapphic arts.

It was a month ago, the day of my allergy shot. I'll hand it to Olivia the caterer, she had maneuvered masterfully what with her neck rubs and her "do I have something in my eye again" ruse. That last night I watched her pour a bottle of wine down the sink then claim to have over-imbibed:

"I'd better stay here tonight," she faux-slurred. The bedroom door closed. Tussling sounds emanated. Quite soon the door opened again and Olivia went into that good night, but not gently; she took an ineffectual kick at a stuffed chicken and the doorside mirror fell and shattered with the force of her departure. (Whose bad luck does that make it?)

After a suitable length of time, I and Jones crept into the boudoir and there lay our woman. Her eyes were big as saucers and her mouth open mid-gasp. She was laughing.

"What was I thinking, boys? What in the world was I thinking? Not that there's anything wrong with it," she hastened to add.

She invited us up and we rolled and snorted and for the first time in forever Jones went for his squeaky duck, and we celebrated the end of an era.

But now we are "in for the evening" and I've had my November allergy shot. The duck is

gathering dust under the bed and only squeaks when my woman staggers through it on her way to bed or toilet. It's dark now but only because it's winter outside, and far too early to sleep unless one is foul-faced, or Jones.

It was almost midnight. I'd had my first group of dreams and now it was intermission and I knew I was a dog again. I believe this is how it works for persons as well. At any rate, something woke my woman too, or made her less asleep anyway, and we were adjusting ourselves, I with my distinctive stand/ circle thrice/ crumple, she with the careful mirror-image rolling so as not to disturb Jones. I had begun the blessed descent into Act II when it struck me, like a frozen leg of lamb to the side of the head, that of all the household smells in all the world, the one climbing into me, deeper with each breath, was the one to be avoided most fiercely.

The lady who owned me in between Elsas was called Kathi-with-an i. She was tall and beefy, with carefully coiffed blond-ish hair. Everything she did that pertained to appearances she did with utmost care because she was not lovely. She wore pantyhose with jeans. She only liked white meat, and saw no need for cable TV. If she had had an aura it would have been pale beige. She adored cats, kittens actually, but fancied that walking a handsome dog in the park would attract men. And so it did. The first one brandished something from the bushes that made her scream, and the second one, in heavily accented English, asked her to be his bride after a five minute courtship. We stopped going to the park; I started running away whenever possible.

One evening, about 9 as the clock flies, I was returning to the vast apartment complex where Kathi lived, having spent the last several hours visiting lucrative trash receptacles and back porches where I know cat food to be served. A man walked up to me, examined my collar and led me to Kathi's door, as if doing so would win him some form of sweepstakes. I suppose it did, for she invited him inside and the following Friday night she cooked him dinner. "Don" brought a bottle of Mateus Rose which is said to go with anything, even canned beef stroganoff, one gathers. After dinner they walked me in the park. This scenario played out four more times before Don stayed the night. Their expressions were no different when they retired than when they emerged fully dressed for breakfast, as though they'd crossed this bridge many times without my knowing, or them either. But there was one exciting development, a romantic right of passage that would be attended to: we would go camping!

We went camping. It was dirty and wet. All the food was gone before the second day because

it always is, and the tent didn't work because they never do. Come sundown Kathi and Don sardined themselves into the car which freed me to run without care through the woods. You'd think my dreams had come true, but no. It was too much. Too much space, too much darkness, too many smells. I was paralyzed with freedom. That was the last night Kathi and Don spent *a dieu*. I don't know what was discussed in the car but he stopped calling, and it must have been my fault because two weeks later Elsa came for me once again. And yet, thinking back on that night as I made myself small by the fire, I supposed I was as happy as I, Louis, had any right to be: steeped in smoke all alone in the dark, and utterly free.

Steeped in smoke. In the dark.

*Gomez! His tiny lungs!*

I leap from the bed. I pretend it is morning and time for our ablutions. I will be calm. Gomez will hop down upon my back. *No! Too slow!* I butt the cage and it falls. I take him in my mouth. I run to the bedroom. I leap up. I dance near her face. I stand on her stomach. She sits up. She smells it. *She screams*. She runs outside. She runs to the little house. The smoke is deep here. She unlocks the door. She drags the old woman from the bed. She drags her outside. She screams *MAMA MAMA MAMA WAKE UP MAMA!* She breathes into her mother's mouth. She screams and breathes. Screams and breathes. Astronauts run up the path dragging a hose. The tiny house sizzles. Doctors are here. Doctors and astronauts push aside my woman and cover her mother with themselves, with metal, and cloth. They lean onto the old woman. And now a peep is heard. Now they smile. The old woman blinks. My woman laughs and cries then stands and screams. *JONES JONES NO NO NO NO JONES JONES JONES NO!* She runs to the big house. An astronaut pulls her back. She kicks at him and twists and screams. He grabs her feet. He

pulls her down and covers her with himself. But still the hoarse heartsplitting sound the  
*JONESJONESJONESJONESJONESJONESJONESJONESJONESJONES*

The bedroom doors explode. I think it is Jesus, with the power and the light behind.

Then Det. Dooley comes to us. He is holding my brother.

Gomez is limp. I drop him and lay beside my brother, my great chest sparing my little bird from raw elements. I pant down upon my love and see his tiny leg move. I've seen enough Animal Planet to know about post-mortem twitchings, and this is not that, this can be counted on.

I shower him with my warm breath while beside me Det. Dooley closes his hands around the snout of Jones and breathes into his nostrils. He pushes rhythmically on my brother's chest, and now the snout, and now the chest. My woman is curled tight against her boys whispering of better days.

I glance at Det. Dooley, and my own chest, already so full of emotions, takes on another one: we might be saviours, he and I. He looks at me but what I see in his eyes is not the satisfied look of a life well saved, it is a soup of grief and fatigue. As yet I know little of the line between saviour and failure, but I suspect it is exceedingly fine and that it nearly destroys before it commits.

Something moves now, something black, we both see it, I and Dooley. My woman seizes a breath, and holds it and stares beyond everything, awaiting word on how to live the rest of her life. Dooley breathes again into my brother, fierce and certain, and I allow a shard of hope to pierce our tableau. For I have always been an optimistic dog. I have had to be.

I bend once more to my work.

## BOOK TWO

This morning the radio told a story about a woman who loved her parrot as much as her children. More, really, in that the bird's vindictive screeching frightened the tykes, rendered homework impossible, and made them question their place in the family hierarchy. They begged their mother to give the bird away, covering their ears piteously and waving their bloodied thumbs, but the woman could only shrug helplessly. She'd spied the bird imprisoned in a pet store when she was 12 and borrowed \$1,500 to free it, paying it back over the course of seven years. One time she'd fallen 50 feet from a tree and broken her back trying to rescue it. She was 35 now and knew about sacrifice, and about priorities. She was pretty sure that one's children should be numbered among those priorities, and somewhere close to the top, but she also knew that a foster home signified certain death for the bird, for they were hopelessly in love. So in love that at one point the bird actually hormoned its way into laying an egg. It was a love that transcended convention, and species, and I relate the tale to illustrate the depth of feeling I had for my darling Gomez, a parakeet, and the love my woman had for my brother, Little Lord Fuckpants, nee Jones, a Gordon Setter. Depth that went farther down than China. Driven even deeper when fire swept through our lives, burning away everything that was not vital, scarring everything that was left.

I'm on the driveway this fine day, flattened like the chickens they roast in the Yucatan. These birds are then displayed on a basket and vendors leap from the bushes to tempt approaching cars with them, but it all happens so fast cars can't possibly stop in time, and it's so furtive they prefer not to. An odd pastime, an iffy way to make a living, I only heard part of the story. At any rate, from the sky I'm thinking I resemble one of those flat birds, but whiter. And now I imagine that I'm in a concentration camp, pinioned by Nazi fiends for insubordination and my world has become six inches tall, framed by cyclone fencing and if I move my head a jackboot will come down on it hard.

This is where I am and what I am doing when Cruz Pardo drives up in his bread truck, or home, depending upon the hour. Today he blasts Neil Young, the one about the needle and the damage done, his favorite due to its autobiographical bent. Cruz used to own a bar where he sold whiskey and bought heroin, then he started doing it the other way around and went to jail. Cruz is the old woman's nurse.

He approaches the gate on long jean-clad legs, a modified mosey, clearly tickled to be in his own skin. He's slim and handsome. He's the marryin' kind, five times so far, currently on hiatus. I don't think he has any real nursing skills, apart from injections of course, we've mostly called upon him for the companionship and the heavy lifting. He is the brother of the Mexican gangster who beat up Sam the Hippie; Cruz represents the more refined side of the family.

The fire scalded the old woman's lungs, you see, and they don't propel her far these days: she must choose between walking on her own or carrying on lively conversation and she has gone with the latter since it offers more variety. So Monday through Friday Cruz lifts her into and out of her wheelchair and the car, and onto and off of the toilet and the bed. From what I gather the rest of their time is spent talking about vegetable gardens, and prison.

Cruz bends down and touches my head. In his softly accented English he says, "Your mama kiss you today, Lulu-belle?" I defy my Nazi tormenters, lifting my chin so Cruz can scratch it. There is so much love in his black eyes he has to wipe some on his shirtsleeve. He picks up the rubber snake I've selected for play this morning. It was Cruz's idea to scatter faux snakes when we planted grass seed so the grackles would be too scared to eat it. But the next morning there were the grackles, standing on the snakes, eating the seed.

Cruz plucks this snake and lofts it onto the grass with the others.

"Fetch, Louis," he says. We both laugh.

I stand and stretch and trot beside Cruz Pardo as he heads for the little house out back. It has been rebuilt since the fire and looks just the same, but of course that's not how it feels. It feels like a family member who you have to love but don't have to trust, because one time they got drunk and shot at you, or some such. Of course you cannot blame a fire on a bad house, you must find the flashpoint. And it turns out the flashpoint was Henry the Builder. He cut corners. He did so because his wife, a woman 20 years his senior, wanted him away from my woman ASAP. She was threatened by the friendship between the two, jealous of their easy way with one another. It all came to light, of course, as flashpoints do. The diabetic canoe-sporting Fireman was assigned to the case and figured it out, and soon after Henry and his bride moved to Oregon. So circular, so sad.

“Cruz,” says the old woman, “forget the toilet a minute, I can wait. Sit down and watch Scott Hamilton.”

“Oh yeah,” says Cruz, “the little dude wit’ the testicle.” Ice-skating is another of their shared passions. “I heard it like a comeback or something.”

“The testicle?”

“No, no like a *comeback*, like he gonna skate professional again. Hey, you hear he got married? To a woman?”

Presently there is a noise from outside. Cruz reaches behind him to open the door. We all know what we’ll see but we look anyway.

Because it is Jones.

He floats in with his squeaky duck. We all smile as he presents the dirty little thing to Cruz Pardo who begins the absent-minded tossing that has somehow worked its way into his job description. Cruz says “Thank you, Jonesie,” each time, and he is never the first to stop. We all know what almost happened to my brother. Indirectly he almost died of a broken heart. And his reward for not dying, besides life, is unfettered indulgence by all parties. None of us minds. I show my brother love in ways I didn’t always. I began manufacturing large amounts of it when I met my bird, Gomez, and even though he is gone I still produce it in abundance. It is my heart remembering, I suppose, and I suppose it will wane over time. But right now Jones can use it and I have it to give. My darling parakeet, my Gomez, did not survive the fire so well. I know that initially he lived, and I choose to believe he still does, but not here, not with us. I’m not denying that he was mistakenly carted off, certainly something as petite as my dearest love could easily have gotten lost in the chaos, the shuffle, the clean-up that must needs occur post-conflagration.

But the irony, that's all I'm saying. To live, only to disappear.

We hear the gate rattle and run to the front yard. It's the second best time of the day: Dooley is home, or as home as he gets.

To thank him for saving the life of her dog, my woman has given him the ancient Live Oak that shades our bedroom and agreed to let him live there. It's posh, as tree homes go, much like the old woman's cottage, but smaller and with a superior view. There is heat and cool and light. There is a stairway for those who have outgrown climbing; he has even cobbled together a crude apparatus that behaves like a forklift so I and Jones can visit without putting undue strain on our hips. He has a hotplate and a small refrigerator and a toilet. He has books and music and a telephone and nearly every night he sleeps with our woman in the main house, the new-if-not-improved main house. It was assumed that the new house would exactly mirror the old one, though I never actually heard those words spoken. It was understood that if everything looked the same everything would feel the same. Except that living in the old place felt like something we would do until we died (more irony) and living in the new one, though identical in appearance, feels like a temporary posting. Nobody seems too entrenched.

To borrow a phrase from Queen Elizabeth, it has been an *annus horribilus* all the way around. Not only did our woman lose her house and almost her family, a week later she was told that she is of absolutely no value to her place of employment and just between the lines, they wish she would go away. When they're not outright insulting her they're ignoring her. But they don't know my woman. They will have to carry her out, and if they do they might as well carry her all the way to the bank. She likes this phrase. She was reading her employee benefit brochure one evening, sitting with Cruz and the old woman.

“Hey it says here I get a hundred grand if I’m dismembered. Makes you look at your limbs in a whole new way, huh?”

“No,” said her mother, gazing at two of her own near-useless ones.

“Not really, no,” said Cruz thoughtfully. “But I knew a guy in the joint, dis Willie Nelson lovin’ *cabron*, and dis guy say, ‘I cut off my ear if Willie say to do it’ and so dis other guy sen’ him a letter, you know, like from Willie? And the letter say ‘cut off your ear for me, man.’”

The old woman was on the edge of her wheelchair, her eyes sparkling like an orphan at Christmas. “And did he?”

“Hell no. He was a black dude. Black dudes don’ cut, hardly never.”

“Cruz, you’re not racist,” the old woman reminds him, and hopes, simultaneously.

“Oh hell no. I’m all in favor of de Negro. *Lo me gustan* for sure.

“Well, according to this he’d only have gotten ten grand,” says my woman, closing her booklet. And like that, the subject is changed and they’re on to pansies, to my mind the sorriest of the winter flora. Give me an Icelandic poppy any day.

4.

We are in the tree with Dooley when our woman comes home from her advertising job, her boots striking purposefully. Nobody moves, except to smile and lower books. I wonder why she has her own home, as she spends most of her time where she has made other people live.

"Hi baby, come on over here," says Dooley and carefully moves my head from his lap. He knows that first she will go to the bathroom and that Jones will follow her at a dead run. Jones will wait, bouncing and trembling, for her lap to appear.

"The lap," my woman has told him, "is a curious thing in that it does not exist until one is seated." Jones has finally mastered the principle. He climbs up and they do their welcome-home nuzzling while I work my way into the area between the sink and what's left of her. I usually get my share.

"What's new in propaganda?" Dooley asks my woman once she is nestled among us.

"Nothing. Although I farted in yoga again."

"Om my."

"What's new here?"

"Your brother's on his way."

I'd heard the joyous tidings earlier in the day. I and Uncle Marc seem to be soul mates, as do I and Dooley, though this does not automatically make Marc and Dooley soul mates. I'm not sure how that works. Possibly even something so beguiling as *moi* is not enough to bridge the men on either side of my woman. Perhaps they are simply too different from a career standpoint. Perhaps there is residual grimness around the dead ex-husband debacle. All I know is that when Uncle

Marc swooped in after the fire he only stayed long enough to make sure he still had a family. He and Dooley met, but their eyes never did. I watched.

“My brother's on his way here?”

"He told your mom he was working his way south. What kind of a timeline does that suggest?"

"Wow. Could take six hours, might never happen.”

But it does happen, two days later.

Uncle Marc emerged from the rear of a chauffeur-driven black Lincoln Town Car with matching windows. I and Jones escorted him to the old woman's house, carrying the standard aloft, sounding the trumpets.

"Mommy ?" He swooped in confidently and handed her a store-bought fruitcake and a bag of dirty clothes. Yinning and yanging, a technique that always made her feel lucky without quite knowing why. He bent to hug her then held out his hand to a nonplussed Cruz Pardo.

"Marc Turner, number one son."

Cruz rubbed his chin and considered, then they shook. "Cruz Pardo. Male nurse."

The old woman was glowing like a school girl. "Mowie," she said, using the family endearment, "let me look at you...mm-hmm...mm-hmm....well you look healthy."

"All due respect," said Cruz, "you look like you about to give birt'. That a tumor or what? My medical backgroun' makes me ask."

Uncle Marc patted his stomach lovingly. "My own anti-smoking program."

The old woman said, "Well whatever works, Mowie. Good for you."

“So what line of work, you in, Number One?” Cruz wonders.

“Automotive. I buy BMWs and ship them to Hawaii then sell `em for three times what I paid.”

“Es fairly lucrative?”

“Can be.”

“So how many you sell so far?”

“...This year...none. I gave a nice red one to an old girlfriend `cause I felt sorry for her ‘cause I broke up with her. And I kept the other one. Too nice to let go, you know?”

“Yeah, I tink I’m catchin’ on.”

“Don’t forget the motorcycle, Marc, that’s a wonderful story,” said the old woman brightly.

“Yeah, this one of a kind Harley Sportster that Kevin Costner owned when he was over there doing “Waterworld”? It’s in a magazine and everything. They’d kill for this thing in Japan. It’s a collector’s item. Lots of unique selling points. I bought it.”

“Does it still smell like Kevin Costner’s butt?” Cruz wondered. “Talk about a unique selling point.”

“Did you sell it yet, Mowie?”

“Not yet. It’s not for just any motorcycle enthusiast. Even *I’m* afraid of its speed.”

Uncle Marc turned his attention to me. He took my chin in his hand and bent close to my face. "Louis? Louis, I finally figured out what you remind me of. A monk seal."

Magnificent creatures, indeed, and yet I'm ambivalent at the comparison. It is good in that, owing to their endangered nature, they are deified, but bad in that the first words they invoke in spectators are "Is it dead?" I'd seen a special on them. They are Hawaiian. When they come ashore, or "haul-out," (such an indelicate image) they are immediately cordoned off with signs that attest to their frailty, and their demeanor. To wit: they are disturbed by the attention of humans and are not in fact dead or dying, but are resting, and fine. I am like them, it seems, because I loll and am of ample physique.

And then Uncle Marc addressed Jones, waiting patiently to present his filthy duck.

"Jones-*ie* ? You're still a sissy-boy."

My brother's tail slowed; even I felt the sting. He picked up his duck and walked out the door.

I wondered how long we'd treat him with kid gloves, but I was not inclined to stop this day.

I followed him and where two paths diverged in a yellowed back yard, Jones headed for Dooley's tree and I repaired to my driveway, and that's where I learned a delicious secret. The driver's window of the swank Town Car was down, the engine running, but there was no driver. I watched as Uncle Marc slipped into the back seat then climbed over the front seat, and drove himself away, utterly chauffer-less. Just before the window went up we locked eyes. Again, I had to laugh.

Later that day Uncle Marc left for good, but not before a conversation with my woman in which she asked why he never stayed longer than two days.

"Is it cause you have to get back to I-5?" This, offered with derision and received with contrition and I knew why, I'd heard the story. It seems Uncle Marc had developed a fondness for narcotic cough syrup, the kind where if you're sick enough to need it you'd just as soon they put a bullet in your head. Uncle Marc, never ill, enjoyed it for its recreational properties and so had to find another outlet. This he did on Interstate 5, specifically the stretch that runs through California's Central Valley, even more specifically the tiny farm towns with immigrant doctors, Vietnamese as he tells it, who required only the flimsiest of evidence to part with a prescription. Uncle Marc would drive up and down the freeway screaming at the top of his lungs until his throat was raw and he was hoarse; he already had an impressive smoker's cough, *et voila* : for a forty-five dollar office visit, he had enough dope to keep him high for a week. It's the kind of story that can be either laughed at or cried over, depending on how the rest of the life unfolds.

“I don’t do that anymore.”

“Then why can’t you stay?”

Uncle Marc shrugged his enormous brown shoulders and tried several reasons.

“Too hot? Not enough room? Got things to do on the coast? I’ll be back. Bye, Pook.”

And they hugged, hard and real but never long enough for my woman.

The thing happened. The awful thing we'd dreaded and longed for. My woman was finally asked to leave her advertising job. It was a harrowing ride home, fraught with potholes and S-turns, one or two edifying side trips, the odd thing in the road that needed attention, and a record number of gruesome accidents to crawl by, but she'd arrived back home at last. I was reminded of the old days, the first Texas days where she paced and wept and railed. Back then it was love, now it was unfair labor practices.

"I'll never leave you again, boys," she bellowed into our fur, then proceeded to do just that, over to the old woman's cottage.

The stress had given my woman a bad virus and for much of the next two days she'd joined her mother in the old woman's recliner.

"Stop mauling me," the old woman would say, but with a twinkle.

"I'm not mauling you, you're comforting me, you're my mom."

"That chair ain' hardly built for two, you know," Cruz Pardo remarked between pistachios. "But it's a tender sight."

The big drawback of all this Sharing and Healing was that the old woman now sported my woman's virus and when she coughed it sounded like Krakatoa and made us stop what we were doing to watch.

My woman sat bolt upright and stared at the radio one morning. Indeed, we all craned our ears, for coming out of it was a tale that suggests certain dreams do come true. It seemed a girl in India had married a dog. The girl was nine, the dog's age not given. Apparently one of the girl's

teeth had begun sprouting straight out from her gum, and in her circles this is a bad omen. Her father, a poor sharecropper, sought to break the spell with an arranged marriage (the principle escapes me) but could not afford a proper dowry and therefore could not entice a son-in-law of his own species. An agreeable street dog was found, however, and the wedding took place, attended by 100 guests. The story concluded by assuring listeners that the girl was in no way stigmatized and was free to marry again, should she be of a mind to do so. We leapt up and scampered over to the old woman's house to share the news, just as Cruz Pardo arrived.

“So lemme get dis straight,” Cruz recapped between bites of toast. “The little girl have a crooked toot’ so she have to marry *un perro*?”

“That’s it in a nutshell but I think there was more ritual to it. I don’t think 100 people are going to show up just to laugh.”

“Oh, I don’ know.” Cruz said, trying not to himself.

“So does the dog throw acid on her or set her on fire if he doesn’t want to be married anymore?” the old woman wondered.

“Or maybe *de perro* say ‘I divorce you’ three times.”

“You people,” said my woman, shaking her head sadly. “I think it’s beautiful.”

And with that we turned and trotted back up the path.

That evening my woman was still caught up in the spell of the little girl and her dog-husband. She shared it with Dooley who’d been invited down from his tree for dinner. It was a sumptuous repast that took us all day to prepare because time was no longer an issue.

“So *that’s* animal husbandry,“ Dooley remarked upon hearing the tale. “Have you been this happy all day? Because when I mention marriage you look like you’ve been hit with a cattle prod.”

“Do I?”

“You’re doing it right now.”

“I am?”

“Never mind, baby. This is exceptional, by the way. Paella, huh? You could sell this.”

Cruz Pardo situated the old woman in her shower chair then began lunch preparations. He sipped sherry from an egg cup while he worked. During lunch yesterday the subject was collective nouns, which proved amusing. Cruz wrestled with the notion that certain words are already assigned to certain items, such as "exaltation" and "larks."

"So it can't be a exaltation of, like, gym teachers?"

"Not in my book."

"How about, like, a school of gym teachers?"

"Now you're being academic, Cruz."

"If you say so, Mama." Cruz smiled down at me. "Whatta we makin' for lunch today, Lu-Lu?"

Lately I'd had a yen for cat vomit, or maybe a nice tampon, but Cruz would probably want to show off his gardening *savoir-faire*. He took a sip of Amontillado then decided.

"Gazpacho. Mm-hmm...wit' tomato sandwiches wit' basil and cheese."

With that the old woman let loose a volley of wet sounding hacks.

"Dat ain't getting' any better, Mamacita."

"I'm not hungry, Cruz."

Cruz's ever-present smile disappeared. He whipped off his apron, grabbed the old woman's purse and walked to her chair.

"Das it. We're goin' to the doctor right now. I told myself a long time ago if I *ever* heard dat from you, I'd implement emergency measures."

The old woman didn't argue. My heart went on full alert and my ears laid flat. I forced my head under her bony, jeweled hand and my tail moved fast and low. Nobody spoke as they made

their way down the path. And as they drove away in Cruz Pardo's bread truck, there was no music.

I circled and lowered, circled and lowered, a bit of each, until I was one with the driveway. A spot of brilliant color flitted past, not the mottled sky/navy of my beloved parakeet, but rather the neon lime of a renegade parrot. And it all fell into place. There was altogether too much emotion that day, for in an instant I knew two things: the old woman may not live, but Gomez did. And I knew where.

In the days that followed there was much furious coming and going. The old woman had been admitted to hospital, and there were details to see to. I waited for my chance, relentlessly poised for escape; I had a plan. And in the same way they never expected to find their sandwiches missing from their hands, growing careless, eventually letting down their guard, one of them finally left the gate open just wide enough and just long enough, and I was off on the quest of my life.

I flew, as best an elderly, girthful dog can fly, and listened to the wind as it urged me on. *Gomez*, it said, *Gomez, Gomez*. And I answered with speed I never knew before, and never needed.

Now that I'm here it seems easy and so obvious. I'd heard about them, a colony of monk parrots that dwell at the softball field. Their nests are heavy enough to cripple the giant light standards that illuminate the night games and there is a triangle of animosity involving the Parks Department, the bleeding hearts and, of course, the birds. How they survive the winter is anybody's guess because it snows here and freezes even more. But they have adapted. My own dear woman tells a first-person story of a time when she was working in Holland, trying to convince the Dutch to buy things they didn't need, and on one of her daily runs through the Vondel Park she spied a big green bird, a native of the tropics whom, she felt, had wandered out of his warm apartment and needed succor. She began climbing the tree that housed him even as the townsfolk jeered and waved her back, as though she and the bird might do harm to one another. My woman began to cry – at her inability to climb a tree, at the certain ugly fate of the tropical bird, at the callousness of the natives – and finally an English speaker explained it all: the birds had lived in those trees for decades and not only did their ranks not dwindle, there was something of a population explosion each spring.

“Well,” she concludes, “I'd rather feel stupid than guilty for not trying to help the poor birds. Plus, what the hell, I'll never see any of those people again.”

Something tells me, a little bird, if you will, that Gomez is running with this crowd, their Texas relations. I will wait until I see him, until he sees me. He will alight on my neck, secure his tiny feet under my collar and we will go home.

The sun is about to set on the first day of my vigil and no sign of blue save for the searing

sky, indeed, no sign of green either. Have my calculations veered off at some critical juncture?

It is now fully dark and it has been hours of dog time since I heard the last human voice, the dedicated joggers, the braver of your teenage lovers. As I knew it would, food has become an issue. Water, water everywhere, as the softball field is next to Lady Bird Lake, but no kibble, and certainly no chicken meat mixed with olive oil. I wonder fleetingly how things are at home.

Fleetingly, because I cannot abide the scenarios I imagine are taking place. I suppose my absence has been noted, but in the grander scheme it's not uppermost. That would be the old woman.

When they took her to hospital I tucked my head under her claw so she could say goodbye. "I'll be right back Lou," is what she said. Is she still there? Indeed, is she still here? Has Jones noticed I'm gone? Have they made a poster or two? Do they say REWARD, and if so how much are they prepared to pony up for the reunion? I wonder what they're having for dinner. I wonder how long the night is when one is not at home. I wonder if there is a people heaven, or if they go to the same place dogs do.

Dawn breaks the same way night fell, with the distant plop and murmur of people running. I have dozed but not truly rested; every sound must be investigated. There has been rustling aplenty in the nest above, and I question each sound with a bark that Gomez knows well. As yet, nothing.

The good news is that there is an organic Mexican restaurant situated across the street with a large outdoor component; it's a very casual open-air affair and I feel that I could wander among the diners and, if blasé, they will feel that I live there and give me chips and such. I wait until the lunch rush is well underway before I stroll over. Indeed, my plan yields chips galore and when tykes drop their little tacos I am right there in a janitorial capacity. But it is the older single women who are most forthcoming. The ones with overfed, cooked-for little dogs at home. One blessed bluehair allows me to cadge half a plate of zucchini enchiladas cloaked in a fine *melange* of cheeses, one of them goat, I believe, and it set me up for the rest of the day.

Back under the light standard I hear a commotion above. It is a chorus of squawking and among the voices I detect an interloper. A tiny, albeit throaty chirp. A wee blue bullet among the thunderous green bombs. I don't have to see him to know he's up there. I have calculated correctly. My love is above, and safe. I answer. I sigh. I sleep.

I am awakened by a toddler pushing a stubby finger into my haunch. He interrupts my recurring dream of fire. This time it is a small one surrounded by hobos under a bridge, sharing a bottle of something that makes them grimace. One of them, Esteban, rests his grimy hand on my

head in a proprietary manner. Apparently I am the dog companion of Esteban. It's too prosaic and I'm glad for the rude jolt, surprised too, that I could sleep so soundly in such circumstances.

I leap up and shake, and make as if to sniff the toddler just as his mother swoops in.

"Doggy!" he squeals.

"DO NOT PET strange dogs," his mother instructs.

I don't know which is the greater offense: being poked or being feared. But I am awake and I am hungry. I trot over to the restaurant.

I am under a table enjoying a cup of charro beans, redolent with pork essence and onion, when I hear them, the most electrifying collection of words ever to grace my ears: "Isn't that the dog on the poster?" I don't look up, I simply take my bean cup and leave, walking slowly, purposefully across the patio and out the door before breaking into a gallop so swift the bean cup affixes itself to my snout like a muzzle. The holes from my teeth make fine gills as I run for my very life.

The jig is ascendant, what else can one think? My choices are few and dismal: stop going to my favorite restaurant and suffer a brutal wasting, or keep eating and risk certain capture. The only things that make it worthwhile are the distinct not-infrequent chirrups of my dear, lost Gomez. I answer each note, but thus far nothing resembling a dialog has taken shape. Maybe fire destroys memory along with our other precious possessions and this is the only home he knows. Maybe he is being held captive, forced to submit to the deviant practices of the greater birds. Maybe he never was a big fan of the doings over on Annie Street and the fire was a convenient way of saying "I got to be movin' on." I can't know, I can only wait and see. And I will. Until

death do us part, if necessary.

Here it is, the denouement. In the distance I see a shape, one I know so well. The shape is standing with a similar, though unfamiliar shape and they are pointing, first at the light standard, then at me.

Now the shape becomes indistinct, blurred, but moving closer, and *fast*.

And of course, it is my woman.

I can't help it, I wiggle and wheeze with joy... then stiffen with primordial instinct, the muscle memory of my duty here. Ah love. Salvation and betrayal. Either way, is one not screwed?

“Lou,” sobs my woman, “my sweetest Lou, my dearest boy, my Lou, my best Lu-Lu...”

She is buried so deep in my neck that I assume as much as I actually hear. Is it not every runaway child’s happy ending, though, to have been missed so? Another woman is with her, the one who blew the whistle apparently, for she is clutching the REWARD poster. I notice the photo, and am quite mortified: me wearing a paper Krispy Kreme hat and a pair of Det. Dooley’s boxer shorts. How was I even recognized? The bossy woman is dressed like a runner and tells my woman she’s noticed me for two days now, seen me staring at the birds’ nest above. My woman quickly adds two and two.

“Is Gomez up there, Louis?”

“You, uh...know somebody who lives up there?” the running woman asks carefully.

“Lou’s parakeet flew away, we think, and I think Lou thinks he’s up there.”

I look up and bark sharply at regular intervals, because I feel that’s what Lassie would do in this situation. Indeed it pains me to be so predictable, but did she not write the book on high-stakes rescue?

“So, just out of curiosity, how much was the reward?” the running woman asks, fluttering the poster a bit. “Not that that’s why I called...”

“Oh God, name it, really, how much can I give you? I don’t know how I’d live if...” My dear woman falls to her knees again and begins anew the nuzzling and sobbing. I am stunned at the outpouring.

“You know what?” says the running woman. “Why don’t you just give a donation to Special Olympics.” And with that she jogs away.

Yes, well this was grand, but we have something to tend to up in that nest. I resume my regular, very specific barking.

“Gomez is up there, right, Lou?” I lick her face in agreement and because of the briny deliciousness of her bodily fluids. The tears, the nose leavings; it’s wondrous.

“Then I have to get him.”

In several nutshells this is what happens next: I am taken home and am greeted by Jones, who licks me as industriously as I have done my woman. I am reminded of our very first meeting, when Jones saw that he would have a brother, and submit graciously to his welcome. Dooley is not at home but I expect much the same from him. I learn that I have been disappeared for three days and two nights, rather like a cut-rate vacation, and that one hundred posters have been affixed to as many poles. Is there a word that has more depth and staying power than “appalled?” I need that word to hide behind while the image of one hundred portly English Setters in boxer shorts and paper donut hats fade from the collective memory.

Cruz Pardo is not present for the homecoming, nor is the old woman. There is no bedside vigil, though, and it appears that I was important enough to be agonized over even while the matriarch languishes in hospital, which suggests to me that she is stable. But if I have been gone three days, she has been gone five, and while there is joy at my reemergence, it is a delicate joy. We are reacquainting on a bubble that could burst like *that*.

My woman telephones Dooley to give news of his boy. She grips my head and nuzzles it for most of the conversation. She lets me go and stops smiling when Dooley gives her some kind of news in exchange. The last I hear is this:

“Why can’t you tell me now? ...And you promise it’s not awful? ...Okay. No. No, I

swear.” Here she sighs dramatically. “I swear I won’t try to get the bird by myself.”

My woman finishes tying the ladder to the top of her Jeep and helps me into the back. Jones has already assumed the shotgun position and there is barely room for the cage of Gomez, which somehow survived the fire. We kept it of course, as homage and hope, and now it is once again pressed into service. I worry that the hint of smoke might give him unsettling dreams, but I will be there to offer comfort when he awakes.

“All set, boys?”

We look at each other. My woman starts the car. It will be a long time before I hear that sound again.

...As I watch my woman falling toward me I wonder why she doesn’t flap her arms as birds have done so successfully for millennia...and then I realize she is using them to cradle Gomez! She has seized him along with my heart, anew! It is joyous and yet contrary to the laws of physics and so I rush to break their fall and feel the full weight of them drive me to the ground, and possibly into it.

Save for the frantic singing and dancing of Jones, we are a quiet tangle of bodies for the longest time.

I do not. Cry out. The breath. Has been. Driven from me. In the silence. I hear souls. Begging. For air. To once again. Grace their lungs. And now I feel. A weight slide from me. And now I hear. A gasp. A long. Controlled. Gasp. I breathe in. Again. Farther now. Farther. Until it hurts. Then I exhale. And again. Farther now. Deeper. I raise my head. Turn it. I see my woman curling into a slow ball. Her hands are still cupped. From inside them comes a little

prayer. Jesus God, it goes. Can we go home now?

And so, in exchange for the bruising of eight ribs and the sundering of four, a roughed-up shoulder and a sprained ankle, we have received a tattered, half-wild parakeet. Some would think it an unfair trade but not here at Annie Street. We are absurdly happy.

And, in the role of cherry-on-top of this magnificent confection, is the old woman, back from hospital and the picture once again of health, if not mobility. She is mildly put out that Cruz Pardo must now minister to more of the brood than just herself, but she stops well short of begrudgement.

“Don’ dare be givin’ me attitude now, Mama,” says Cruz peremptorily, “it’s pretty obvious I got my hands full. Jus’ peel them onions.” And she doesn’t, and she does.

Since half the family can’t get up into the tree for the nonce, Dooley has set up operations in the Big House and Cruz has taken over the tree. His bread truck is moored out front; he visits it several times a day.

“I’m clockin’ out for my break, Highness,” he tells the old woman. “If I ain’t back in fifteen minutes it means you ain’t paying me enough.” When he stoops to pet me on his way back up the drive his eyes are mere slits; he chuckles at nothing I can see and smells of wet hay.

The second day back from the ordeal, up came the subject of Uncle Marc. He was *en route*, it seems, to visit the old woman when opportunity knocked. This is what Dooley would not say into the phone the day I came home: Uncle Marc had robbed a train. Or more precisely the quasi-toy train that runs between the local swimming hole and the local soccer field. This modest choo-

choo ferries out-of-towners through Zilker Park, putting and meandering and returning fifteen minutes later. Which just gives him time. Apparently the sight of the tiny, slow-moving thing weighted down with tourists and their vacation money put him in mind of a brief stint at Knott's berry Farm and it was too much for Uncle Marc. He leapt from the bushes with a kerchief disguise and a Masai spear, the only weapon in his truck, and relieved the group of their wallets. Never was a robbery more heartily received, as the victims assumed it was all part of the show, that cowboy/hippie amalgam that one expects from Austin, and that their valuables would be waiting when the train pulled in the station once again, possibly with a gaily twisted joint of marijuana tucked inside. Imagine their surprise. Imagine Uncle Marc's when his truck didn't start and the cycling *gendarmes* collected him moments later.

As they waited for vehicular back-up, he reviewed his failed strategy with his captors, one of them a comely blond. "I shoulda grabbed the cell phones too, huh?"

"I would have," admitted the girl dick. "And probably the watches."

"Next time," Uncle Marc winked at her, and in the spirit of that cinema classic, *Raising Arizona*, she allowed a corner of her mouth to elevate, just enough. Or if she didn't, she should have.

Uncle Marc "did a dime," in the words of Cruz Pardo. "But, see, in my day a dime was ten years not ten days. Pussy," he added. Mercy was shown due to the relationship between Dooley and the Presiding Judge. Apparently the former had hosted the latter for six drunken, grief-plagued months following the break-up of the Judge's brief marriage to a lap dancer. The judge had been a beat cop in those days and the episode had served to show him the light with respect to choice of mate and career path. He headed off to law school and hollered over his shoulder to Dooley that he would never forget it.

Cruz Pardo has parked his bread truck in the driveway proper this day, a first for all of us. It's as irresistible as a basket of two-day underwear, and its lack of doors demands that I and Jones inspect the interior.

I've long imagined it: a manly jewel box with leopard skin beanbag chairs, an enormous ivory hookah pipe, and black velvet walls covered with paintings of bosoms. But no. It's pretty much still a bread truck, with one or two niceties. There is blue shag carpeting on the floor and a boom box on a former bread shelf, also a leggy philodendron hanging from the rear dome light. It's homey and unadorned and, with no way of knowing when our next visit might be, I opt to take one of my naps on the blue shag. Jones opts likewise.

I think I am dreaming, but it is not the fleeting kind that darts just out of reach when you try to make sense of it, in fact it isn't a dream at all. It's Cruz Pardo and the old woman. They are coming closer; it seems they are taking a field trip.

"But what's the occasion, Cruz? The last time we left the house it was for the hospital." She couldn't have cared less where they were going, only that they were. It was an undertaking akin to a South Pole expedition, and she knew it.

"Yeah, we goin' back. I don't tink dat first lobotomy took so good."

They laughed for a full minute, back and forth. Then Cruz said, "Is *secatary* day, Mama. I know you was a bang-up *secatary* back in the day. I figure we'll go see what's new at the Tuesday Morning."

"...Cruz..."

“Hey, don’ cry now or we goin’ bowlin’ . Here.” He handed her a box of tissues. “Mop up, den buckle up.”

Liftoff! Amid so many distractions, I and Jones weren’t even noticed! We look at each other for the longest time. His eyes are as big as a Costco apple pie so mine must be too. In the Unabridged Manual of Wildest Dreams, this one isn’t even mentioned.

We lay still as stones for most of the ride, until it occurred to me that we already were home free. They wouldn’t go to the trouble of taking us back, they’d rely on our obedient natures to stay put while they shopped. I believe this dawned on us simultaneously, for in unison we moved forward, between the big captain chairs, and presented ourselves to Cruz Pardo and his passenger, wagging, smiling.

“Oh for God’s sake,” said the old woman, “what are you hooligans doing here?” She said it with a smile, though.

“Stay, Lulu-belle. Stay Jonesie. I mean it now.”

Cruz Pardo united the old woman and her walker and they shuffled the thirty feet or so between the bread truck and the door that gave onto Tuesday Morning, the old woman’s version of Shangri-La. Once they were safely inside we began examining our options from our captain chairs. I was driving and Jones was in the dogbird seat; it didn’t take long for us to be noticed. And as luck would have it, it was a child with an ice cream cone; he wondered if we liked peppermint. We did! He held the cone up to Jones who quickly verged on taking more than his share, then the lad traipsed around to the driver’s side, where I had my way with the treat. I’d

never tasted anything quite so refreshing. Of course the boy's mother hauled him off almost immediately, but it was an auspicious beginning.

Very soon Jones realized we were not restrained by anything stronger than an implied promise. You could see the wheels turning as clearly as if his head were made of glass. He slipped out into the parking lot. It was incumbent upon me to do the same.

We were in a strip mall, one without an abundance of charm, or distractions. We wandered into a nail salon and allowed ourselves to be cooed over until it appeared there were no sandwiches to be had. We trotted into and out of a store that sold scuba gear, peed on a few tires then headed back to the bread truck. I was a little disappointed in myself. Had I lost my taste for adventure? Worse, did I fear the consequences? Worse still, was I getting old? A resounding no. It was a simple matter of preferring the creature comforts of shag carpets over those of asphalt. What creature wouldn't? If Jones was entertaining the same litany, it didn't show; his head was opaque once again.

I don't know how long we dozed, but presently we heard the clatter of aluminum.

"Well, I'll be damned," said the old woman. "Look who's still here...what's that...Cruz, what is that white stuff on Jones's muzzle? Could he have gotten rabies in 15 minutes?"

"Not likely." Cruz bent close and sniffed my brother's snout. "Ice cream. Lu-Lu got it too."

"I don't want to know."

"You right about that, Mama," Cruz chuckled. "Let's flee."

"How could a joyride tucker me out so," the old woman wonders rhetorically, as we pull into the driveway. "And I didn't even buy anything."

“Well, a body only need so many chafing dishes and sets o’ luggage. I got you dis candle though. Is gardenia-flavor.”

“Thank you, Cruz! I didn’t see you buy that.”

“Yeah. Nobody did.”

She smiles, shakes her head, swings her legs to the side of the seat and waits for Cruz Pardo to assemble her walker. Instead, he scoops her like a sleeping child from the truck and they make their way up the path. I trot behind and listen to their murmuring. I hear “Thank you, Cruz” a hundred more times if I hear it once, and several “Mamacita, de pleasure was all mine”s.

I, Louis, have a syndrome. Horner's Syndrome to be precise. When one hears Horner one thinks of James, celebrated composer of the *Titanic* score, or of Little Jack, he of the corner and the plum pie. Would that my Horner were so whimsical or uplifting. Instead, I look as though I've had a stroke: my left eye droops, exposing the meaty red underlid, and the doctor tells us my ear and mouth will soon follow, though that is not in stone. Yes, I have a syndrome. But Dooley, we learn, has something much worse.

Our woman was in Hawaii again, at the wedding of a friend, when the Judge went with Dooley to the doctor. Our woman was in Hawaii on a golden beach, talking with her man on a cell phone, describing the flowers and the glistening water, and then she was on the sand, crumpled, as her man described what the oncologist had found. The day was June 6. Six-six. One more six and I might have worried.

The day was June 7. On the way to the emergency room they got a license and right there, in stall 14, Dooley and my woman were married by the Judge. As wedding nights go, it could have been better, also worse. Dooley went immediately to surgery to debulk the tumor that had invaded his trachea, and my woman took to her mother's lap, Cruz Pardo, I and Jones arrayed at their feet. The next day my woman crawled into Dooley's hospital bed; a nurse put a note on the door proclaiming their recently-wed status. That afternoon they came home.

Four months have passed since the news broke, time that has seen us travel *en famille* even

deeper in the heart of Texas, to Houston, where they never met a tumor they couldn't vanquish, at least for a while. The woman has dubbed the tumor Grumpy because it forces a smile but what she really wants to do is start screaming and never stop. How can it be, I hear her thinking, but not saying, because how can it not be? How can our paradise on Annie Street not be targeted for grief? It's the odds. For all the downs there were scores more ups and that gets the attention of the gods sooner or later.

We live at the Camden Vanderbilt, a gated complex near the medical center. There is lush vegetation, a swimming pool and two man-made lakes, all of which are off-limits to those who would appreciate them most. When we go outside it is on a leash, with a bag.

My shoulder never quite recovered from my woman plunging onto it during the rescue of Gomez; I am compelled to lick my wrists until they bleed; and my forehead, as always, has lipstick on it. When we stroll the grounds, Dooley with his IV stand, Jones with his circumstantial trepidation, me with my Syndrome, limp, bloody wrists and apparent head wound, our woman sometimes completes the Revolutionary War motif by pretending to play a fife. We take our laughs where we find them. And revel in tales of worse woe than our own, which our woman wheedles out of obliging nurses. The man with the tumor on his head the size of a head, into which maggots had taken up residence. The man with maggots *and* wet gangrene, so that he announced his coming with loud squishes and a stink for the ages. Grisly nuggets that have us scampering back to Camden Vanderbilt counting our blessings, feeling almost pleased with our lot.

Dooley has cancer of the esophagus. Odds were alluded to early on but never spelled out because, as we soon learned, they were not in our favor. “And anyway,” we were told many times, because it was the only hope they had for us, “those are numbers and you are an individual.”

Despite his various sad *accoutrements* and his daily radiation treatments, Dooley is not “in hospital,” he is “at home” and tended to by his wife. This makes it feel more like our idea, a transitory frolic rather than the death sentence we know it might be.

Dooley sits in his chair. He takes his food through a tube in his stomach and his water through a tube in his arm. Every few weeks he wears a pack that pumps poison through another tube. Our breaths are synchronized with his now; when he dreams badly so do we; when he smiles we smile so big the tears come. And we hang on, because Dooley does so with a grace that sustains us.

Now he grows thinner and Christlike. Now he looks like a little boy. He sits in his chair.

We hang on.

## **BOOK THREE**

1.

I, Louis, am eating for two. Of course that has always been my objective, but now I can say it with authority. For Dooley cannot eat at all. He has not so much as swallowed water – save for his own saliva, and even that is advised against – for seven months. His nutrition comes through a tube that goes into a hole in his stomach. The only reason he endured it for so long is because we all believed it was but a troublesome necessity until his treatment was over. Alas. The treatment is the culprit. For when the radiation set fire to his tumor, the hole where his tumor had lived was emptied. A *fistula*, it is called, or in the words of my woman a “big fucking giant-assed hole, *how could they not know this would happen, HOW, FOR FUCK’S SAKE! SOMEBODY PLEASE TELL ME!*” She is indelicate in this matter. She rails for Dooley who is too weak to do anything but mix medicines and plunge them into the hole in his middle, and to take morphine like they’re about to stop making it. It sends him drifting, but with a bit of a smile at least.

One morning Dooley got up as usual, coughed until many, many tissues were heavy with phlegm, as usual. Then he sat in his chair while my woman crushed several pills in his mortar; mixed them with a bit of “nutritionally dense” liquid “food;” plunged the concoction slowly into his feeding tube; plunged anti-nausea medicine, preceded and followed by many syringes of water; plunged one ounce of dilaudid followed by more water and then waited. As usual. For the pain to diminish, and for enough time to elapse so that when he plunged in more food he would not be sickened. In other words it was what had become for all of us a typical morning.

Typical, that is, until Dooley asked my woman to kill him.

My woman reaches deep within her for probably the tenth time this week, and calls a psychiatrist. He is a man Dooley saw early on, by the luck of the draw a cancer survivor himself. This morning my woman calls and speaks in a voice I have never heard before. It is full of fear and demand, a voice that puts the listener on notice: help is required, substantial help, and quickly. She puts down the phone. She stares at it, one hand clutching her husband's, the other stroking his face. Days or hours or perhaps minutes elapse; at any rate nobody moves until the phone rings.

“Four thirty. We'll be there.”

She turns to her husband who is still and gazing at his lap, tears marching silently down his sunken cheeks. “Hang on, baby. Hang on.” He does not move as I clean the salty goodness from his face, even when I smear his glasses.

2.

Odds schmodds. Dooley has pulverized them. First, we learn, simply by living through the savage treatment plan. Moreover, his disease, rather than petering out, has fled as if its hair were on fire, which in fact it was, leaving no measurable trace. Ah, but the caveats.

The sequence was this: we skedaddled from Houston *en famille* at the first whiff of an all-clear, with the understanding that we would return in a month to evaluate the efficacy of the treatment. We waited that month, with optimism, with anticipation of a meal together. We returned. The tumor was gone, thin air was in its place, in the space between where he swallows and where he breathes, thin air recently occupied by tumor. Not unexpected, except by us. We were sent home again, this time with only the slimmest hope of the hole repairing itself. Assisted suicide was considered, then tabled.

And then.

And then a magic doctor, having been blinded by the niceness that surrounded Dooley where e'er he went, and somewhat alarmed by the steely resolve of his wife, after much doctoral head-scratching, hatched a plan. A tube would be snaked through his stomach, and up, and up, and fetched through on the other end by another specialist.

Word of the plan's sheer audacity would bring hordes of observers. The hole would be covered with something called a "stent," history made. The following day, the patient would have a sip of water, his first in seven months. He and his wife would laugh and sob and allow themselves an unthinkable luxury: talking about Christmas. Later, scholarly papers would be written about the Procedure, and translated and delivered at far-flung conferences.

But today, at this moment let us consider only the profound joy of sipping water. Tomorrow, like the Clampetts, we pack up and head off to a life of unimaginable riches.

Uncle Marc has arrived for History's Best Christmas, and arrived a changed man. All who have witnessed the miracle agree that it was Dooley who performed it. Dooley, who never met a protoplasm that didn't make him smile and want to know more. Dooley who, with his irresistible yokel/sage presence, showed Marc that one does not lose anything by being generous and thoughtful, in fact one gains exponentially. The lessons were so subtle nobody even knew they were taking place, yet the result is that Marc has achieved the potential my woman and her mother always knew he had, but had stopped talking about decades ago. Now Marc is like Dooley. He weeps for and spends money on others. He does without being asked. He asks before he does. I observe my woman and her mother glancing at one another, giddily distrusting their own eyes and ears, and now and then my woman stands in front of her mother, removes her shoes, drops one, then brandishes the other in a precarious manner.

But now Dooley eats, slowly, and we watch, with awe and gratitude, as though we've been invited to the original manger scene. But so much better.

And so Christmas came and went. I and Jones began to hear talk of "going back to work" as it pertained to Dooley. Why, there was even talk of a vacation before he returned to the grindstone. To be sure, his color was good. *Normal* was a word that we allowed back into our vocabularies.

Cruz Pardo and the old woman were making chutney while finalizing the guest list for Fantasy Thanksgiving, wherein the public persons they found most annoying would show up and dine with us.

“I don’ t’ink we want both John Madden *and* Terry Bradshaw, do you?” Cruz was peeling the mangoes that suddenly, this year, had become troublesome for the old woman. “Too similar. Plus, we already at ten.”

“Rescind the Madden invitation, then.” The old woman snorted. “I want to put Bradshaw next to that harridan Anne Coulter. At the kids’ table. With Tiny Tim and Joan Rivers. Hell’s own double date!”

“I’m re-tinking little Dakota Fanning. She tore it up in ‘Man on Fire.’ Plus she ain’t so little anymore. But nah, let’s have her anyhow. She needs to learn. And didn’t Tiny Tim pass on?”

“I believe he did! In that case we’ll put him between Tom Cruise and Henry Kissinger.”

Cruz Pardo lowered his voice to a deep German-flavored monotone, “Leave me alone, I’m old.”

“What do you think about Alan Greenspan next to Gilbert Gottfried?” The old woman was sitting on a stool, tossing cloves into the chutney pot.

Cruz chuckled. “Iss diabolical.” He slid mango chunks into the pot. “You know who I want at that table more dan anyone, don’ you? Or under it?”

The old woman smiled into the chutney. “Lou. Sweet Lou.”

“Yeah, I’d give my left nut to see old Lu-Lu-Belle drool on Bill O’Reilly’s pants. An’ I only got the one nut, you know.”

Yes, it is so. The dog is out of the bag, if you will. I am a failed creature, and am now reporting from the Great Beyond, about which I shall go on at some length, and in due time. For the nonce, though, let me describe the descent that led to the eventual separation of my body from my spirit. It was rapid and fraught with indignities, but some beauty too.

5.

My woman had always marveled that a dog could be simultaneously knock-kneed and pigeon toed, but I managed to combine them in an odd gait, and one that served me long and well. In the end, my rear legs simply ceased to support me: I would wobble and weave and finally fall, and eventually, as often as not, it was my most recent bowel movement that would cushion the fall.

One day there appeared, in every place I had ever set foot, Astroturf to give me traction. An added benefit was that it could be quickly removed and hosed off when incontinence flared. It helped. One time when my woman and Dooley had to return to Houston, Texas for further tests, and because they could not ask the old woman to pick me up or clean me up, I was taken, along with my Astroturf, to a spa-resort. I had a suite. I wagged my tail furiously as my woman walked away, in hopes she would see I was relaxed and pleased, and her tears would stop.

It was a week after their return that they saw what I knew too well. *Le jou* was *finis*. And suddenly they couldn't arrange it soon enough. Urgent calls were made, referrals run to ground; finally a mobile veterinarian was located and the date was set.

The following day at High Noon was a busy one. It was the first anniversary of the marriage of Dooley and my woman, and it was the last day of my assignment in the mortal coil.

The neighbors were invited; all who had loved me left their jobs and came to our porch. Dooley arrived home from work and the three of us, *moi*, Dooley and my woman, repaired to the doorstep from which spot, and for six years, I had surveyed my vast holdings. Gomez was, as always, anchored under my collar, and even in my advanced state of next-realmsness I could feel

a stubborn ferocity coming from his tiny feet, a hanging-on-for-dear-life if ever there was one. I feared a spectacle when it came time to disengage, an overwrought widow at graveside type of thing.

It was reported that my eyes had stopped seeing, but that was not the case; I simply had seen enough and was trying for a glimpse of the afterlife. I could sense it, I could almost make it out, and the effort, I suppose, gave me the classic 1,000 yard stare.

The old woman tottered over on the arm of Cruz Pardo; lunch was served. There were corn dog starters followed by a generous mound of steak cubes – filet for tenderness, porterhouse for depth of flavor. After lunch it was apple fritters and cruellers, several of each, though nobody but me seemed to be eating. Photos were snapped and roses de-petaled and strewn thither and yon. And there was crying. I couldn't hear it, of course, my ears having failed me sometime the previous summer, but I felt the wet plops.

And now up the street comes the grim reaper. And it turns out there is no tall scythe, nor long black robe, nor faceless hooded darkness, in fact there is no menace at all. Instead he is wearing cowboy boots and has a guileless grin with much space between each of his huge white teeth. He has a doctor bag. As he ascends the porch he removes his cowboy hat with a respect that is born, not bred. He kneels, and for a moment I am the only living thing in his world. With a whisper and a nod, and a small kiss on my paw, we agree on a plan. But there is no hurry, none at all.

In the chatting that ensues it turns out he is not a Longhorn, but an Aggie, a distinction that meant nothing to anybody until we came to Texas. But truly this is a divide that is never bridged, except on days like this. Dooley, of course, is a Longhorn. The doctor allows as how we should have guessed his alma-mater: "Didn't you see me pickin' my nose when I walked up?" At this I saw my woman's face fall even further than the events of the day demanded, then saw them rise a

bit when she realized that to be a veterinarian, one had to have more than a modicum of intelligence.

The doctor wanted to know about me. My provenance, my proclivities. As the stories unfolded he made notes in a little book, which I fully expect to see published one day. The shot of valium was unnecessary but I accepted it, along with the news that I would be asleep before the real work began. I didn't sleep, though I did close my eyes. And allowed myself to be absorbed by the universe. The standard dying clichés pertain: I hovered above and watched as the good doctor tied a rubber tube around my wrist (which had healed nicely, isn't that always the way?) I watched as he slid the needle in my fattest vein and plunged. I noted with a small bit of tenderness that my woman, in whose lap I lay, looked old. I saw that these creatures with whom I had spent my happiest times, were themselves not happy at all. And just before the absorption process was complete, I understood, for the first time, supreme heartache. I didn't feel it, but I understood.

The day I passed is the last day we saw Dooley wearing work clothes. Dooley's days had much in common with those of Sisyphus and there came a Friday shortly after my last Monday when he said, "Baby, I can't do this anymore."

My woman grinned and carefully threw her arms around her husband's frailness and replied, "Nor should you. Your job is to stay home and get better. I don't want you out of my sight."

There were more Houston check-ups, and never any sign of cancer, but a troubling item in one lung. It got bigger, then stopped growing. It never went away, although one time it was said to have "cavitated" which meant collapsed. Surely, then it had just been a cyst of some kind. But the phlegm continued in abundance, and the coughing. And there came a day when neck pain sent us all to the doctor for more tests. All of them negative. It seemed a bad cold. Home again, and the cold got worse. To hospital, then, for rest and to get to the bottom of the infection, which did not seem to be pneumonia. The infectious disease specialist was called in and took a culture. We clung to exotic nature of "infectious disease." It allowed us to imagine that we'd been looking for new species in Borneo and had simply picked up a nasty bug.

My woman rode her bike to the hospital every day after work and sat with her husband, who was by turns fussy and hard to please, and apologetic, fearful that he was driving his woman away, that she would say, "I've had it up to here with your nonsense" and leave him.

On that occasion she took his face in his hands.

"Baby, that won't happen. There's nothing you could say or do to me, ever, ever, ever, that would make me go any farther away from you than the bathroom. Nothing."

The next day she rode her bike to his room. It was empty. The bed was made.

*“WHERE IS MY HUSBAND?”* my woman demanded of the first uniform she saw, and the next, and the next, until one of them showed her.

“Put this on first,” said the nurse, handing her a mask and a gown before leading her into another room altogether. “We’re checking him for TB.”

But that’s not what they were checking him for. One of his legs had stopped working and the other could feel no pain. A doctor was present.

“We’ve got to find out what’s causing the paralysis or it could become permanent.”

Things started to blur. Words like MRI stuck out. A second MRI was ordered, the first one was aborted because Dooley was shaking so badly from the still-mysterious infection. This second one would be done under sedation.

Catherine and Andrew arrived, Dooley’s – and now my woman’s – best friends. They’d been at the ceremony in this very hospital, the one that united the Dooleys in holy matrimony. They’d been the witnesses. And now they accompanied Dooley and my woman to the deep reaches of the building where the MRI would be done. Dooley handed his wife his wedding ring, his valuable. Just in case. He would wake up hours from now. The rest would go sit with the old woman and drink wine, and return to kiss him hello.

7.

When the family decamped for Houston, my beloved Gomez came along. He did not thrive however, owing to the humidity and, let's face it, the drear. On day one he wilted, followed by the loss of his sheen, then most of his head-feathers. You could see inside his ears, which felt very wrong; even my presence did not buoy him sufficiently. During our evening Revolutionary War reenactments, Gomez dangled in his cage from Dooley's IV stand, but rather than amuse him, our strolls terrified him with their vastness and he cowered and shook at the bottom of his cage. My opinion was that the sky put him in mind of his time as a runaway, though my opinions scarcely counted. Opinions were the purview of experts, not family members, not these days.

My woman volunteered to take Gomez back to Annie Street, and two thirds of my heart with him. Dooley blessed this enterprise, made it seem as though his bride were making some great sacrifice, but I believe now he knew the truth, as did we all: our woman needed to fall apart in the arms of her mother. She needed to cry unapologetically for twenty-four hours, then she needed to pull up her socks and drive back to Houston and ladle cheer and resourcefulness over her brood; the catharsis, as far as she knew, would forever remain her secret.

Gomez was exactly the link needed by Cruz Pardo and the old woman, a bridge between the past and the future. They immediately set about teaching him to talk, surprising one another with their accomplishments.

"Cruz, listen to this: Whose woods...Gomez: whose woods..."

*"Whose woodsthese...areIthinkIknow..."*

"Wonderful! His house..."

*"..Inthevillage, inthevillage..."*

"You recognize it Cruz?"

“Iss a poem, right? An later on dere’s a little horse who tink it queer?”

“Good God, Cruz. You continually surprise me.”

“Why, you don’t figure no ex-junkie-con from the *barrio* could know no Robert Fros’?”

“I don’t know. You’re the only example I have.”

“An’ the only one you’re likely to. Whatta we doin’ about lunch? I’m tinkin’ braised oxtails an’ orange soufflé.

“Good God, Cruz, you—“

“I’m dickin’ wit’ ya, Mama. We’re havin’ grill cheese an’ soup. An the cheese ain’ all that fresh.”

*“Pleasegodpleasedontlethimdie. Pleasegodpleasegodplease.”*

Dooley has been gone one month today. It feels like years, it feels like minutes. It feels like a unit of time that has yet to be invented.

As well, today is my woman's birthday. For once the world has come to a stop to acknowledge it. Books that heal, cards that shore up, gift certificates for better smelling hair, smaller pores, more shapely eyebrows. For my part, I arranged for a cloud of fireflies to descend upon the fuschia plant that lives outside her bedroom window. On my order they each found their way into one of the dark pink blossoms, illuminating it like god's own chandelier. I instructed each man to glow as he'd never glown before; it had an unsettling effect on their little *vivres* (they're here with me now), but I for one have never seen a more beautiful sight, and I've seen my share.

She lets it all wash over her, for to do otherwise would be ungracious; really, though, she just wants to go to bed with Jones and....wait! Have I forgotten to tell you of my successor? I quite approve! Like me, he is English and, also like me, he is of dubious origin. Born in Tennessee, given away owing to mysterious "allergy" allegations, fostered in a swank Chicago suburb and discovered on the internet by my woman.

After an arduous screening process and an agonizing wait for the green light, my woman flew to the Windy City, rented a car and was back home 23 hours later. An odyssey indeed, and for this reason, as well as others, frankly Simpson-related, he is called Homer. He is half my size and one-third my age and is said to resemble goth-rock star Marilyn Manson, what with his long black ears and smoky eyeliner. He does not lumber, he levitates. He does not leak or drip. He barks, but not when asked to stop. He has appointed himself head of the Squirrel Abatement Program and

runs it with diligence and aplomb. At dinnertime he contorts and twirls like a sleek dervish and gratefully licks the wet-food spoon, formerly my job. It pains me to say it, but he and Jones are *compadres* in a way I and Jones never were. No, it doesn't pain me, there is no pain in Heaven, but it is something I notice with what would be called a "pang," if there were such things over here.

Of course Dooley and I are together all the time now, time being, again, nothing anybody over here talks about. One day Gomez will join us but for now he seems content to perch on my handsome brass container – identical in appearance, if not in weight, to Dooley's handsome brass container. The difference is that Dooley's remains are next to my woman's pillow, and mine are by the front door and are always covered in parakeet dung.

Cruz Pardo and the old woman are discussing weighty matters.

"I once knew a cat who chased cars," said Cruz.

"Well one time when I was in the Navy in Washington, D.C. it rained so hard I actually watched the grass turn green."

"Whew. You win dat one, no question."

Cruz took a deep breath and folded his hands in his lap. When he looked up his face was very still. "I tink my cancer come back, Mama. In fact, I know it."

"...No... Cruz..."

"It ain't de bad kind, though. It's the kind where somet'ing else gets you first."

"You promise? You're not sugar-coating to spare an old woman?"

"No Mama, I'm tellin' you da trut as I know it."

They sat in the heavy air while the information soaked in. The old woman spoke first.

“Are you scared?”

“Not yet,” said Cruz. “Are you?”

“Not if you’re not.”

“Only ting scares me is not being around for you. You a specialty act, Mama.”

The old woman’s aura is dimming, although funnily enough it seems to be growing brighter all the time over here, where I and Dooley sit. Her hands tremble with a constant, subdued ferocity and when she adjusts the volume or the channel it sometimes makes for a wild ride. Cruz Pardo pays her bills, signs her name, knows her numbers. It’s not much of a kingdom. Still, it crosses the old woman’s mind that the keys to it rest in the hands of a known felon. She gets a big kick out of that.

One hovers, as stars and memories streak by like fish in schools. One is never alone over here, or maybe always alone, it's difficult to explain, though I and Dooley seem to occupy the same bubble more often than not. One gazes upon the still-precious woman and wants so badly for the dating pool, into which she has stuck a tentative toe of late, to have more depth than bacteria.

"I see they're still peeing in it," Dooley said to me after watching a thoroughly unworthy suitor disappear after what we all thought was a fine first date.

"It's classic," I said. "She's what they dream of and, therefore, they can't possibly deserve her. How did you ever manage?"

Dooley smiled and took off his glasses. "I just knew I could wear her down. I just knew." He polished his glasses with his gauzy white shirt then held them down to the sun. "So, what do you want to do today? You want to send puzzling e-mails to the Royal Family again? Or how about if we let a whole bunch of Boy Scouts see Bigfoot but not the Scoutmaster? Drive the little woodsmen crazy."

"Hmm. Maybe. Here's something: how about if we start moving Cuba closer to Key West, a mile at a time?"

"I like that. I like it a lot."

It was not for want of trying that our woman failed to fill the void created by Dooley *et moi*, but let us be clear: she didn't seek to replace, only to dull an ache.

At first she came looking for us, ignoring traffic conventions, biking *sans* helmet, eschewing all seatbelts. She branched out, pursuing various leads, among them drinking heavily, not drinking

at all, reading about Bhuddists, swamis and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, flirting with a chewing tobacco addiction.

She wanted noise so we sent thunder, instructing it not to roll, but rather remain over the house until further notice. She asked for cataclysm and we offered lightning, giant bolts that came calling on the patio, just outside the bedroom door; she read *Good Poems for Hard Times* by bolt-light.

She went to a shooting range, she took the last of Dooley's dilaudid, she held her breath until she could clock two minutes, then went swimming so she could scream underwater. She went to the Sonoran desert, lay down naked in the hellish sun and smeared honey all over to attract biting insects. No, she didn't do this, but she thought about it, inviting something, anything to alter the threadbare status quo.

As many a single *mademoiselle* does nowadays, she took to the internet. What a sad and glorious place it must be. I believe it to have much in common with the afterlife, in that until you actually get here, it's anything you want it to be! Even the sky is not the limit! She double-clicked. The men were of a piece: shorter, balder, less interesting, and more desperate than described. One or two were far more married, and far less employed than was acceptable. *Likes to Travel* rarely involved an airplane, and never a passport; *Good cook* was code for "meat" and "more meat." *Well-read* meant the entire Robert Ludlum *ouvre*. *Not political* skewed Republican. And on and on. She knew several happy couples who had met this way, but clearly these were rare exceptions to a depressing rule. And so, unlike the afterlife, she left almost immediately.

Of course she tried to get in touch with us, and began by contacting a medium. His stage name is Marcel, and he was a friend of a friend. She couldn't know that Marcel was the genuine article, but we knew it; we see a lot of him over here, and he's a crowd favorite. Marcel touched upon

certain areas that resonated deeply. He saw an image of a bicycle, which made her recall the deathbed promise to Dooley, that she would never ride without her helmet. She had, and now she felt guilt, and a palpable sense that Dooley was watching. Marcel saw laundry and wondered if it was important. It was. She had agonized about the last garments Dooley had touched. Should she wash them? Was that sacrilege?

“Wash them,” instructed Marcel. “He says he doesn’t need them where he is.” Then, “He was a funny guy, huh?” Then, “Ah, he’s saying `What do you mean *was*?’”

“Wow,” said our woman. “Wow.” Dooley was so *there*, so *close*, just behind a scrim.

“And now he’s showing me the letter J...a name, a one syllable name,...a child, maybe? With a name like John...or James...”

“JONES!”

“He’s saying yes...”

“Jones is our dog!”

“Okay, he showed me dogs a minute ago and I blew it off. My bad. Ha, and he’s telling me not to do *that* again. Guy’s cool.”

Marcel went on to tell our woman that we would insert ourselves into her day most likely in the form of lights and numbers. As yet we haven’t figured out what to do with lights because lights apply to everybody, but personalized numbers are easy: ninety percent of the time when she looks at a clock, the numbers are all the same. Three thirty-three is a common one; eleven-eleven is her favorite. And two weeks ago she was passing by a running shoe store and glanced in to see that the big race day clock read 5:55:55. It would be wonderful to simply present ourselves to her, and certainly we have the capabilities, but we’re not allowed. So we show her certain

number. We've also assigned meaning to Michigan license plates, other people's grocery lists, and argyle socks. It's how we say, "Don't despair, Baby" and, "Hi Mama."

In time she began to – not only launder – but to give away Dooley's clothing, though only to special persons, and only those articles he didn't wear in her reveries. She kept two t-shirts (one white), two pairs of socks, a pair of clean white briefs, a handkerchief, a pair of jeans, his boots, the fleece jacket he never took off in Houston. She kept the ensemble he wore on their first date, his shaving kit and his wallet, into which she put a twenty. She kept his glasses. She kept them in his closet, in a drawer, in case he came back, because you never knew, you just never knew.

Back when such things mattered Dooley and I would have considered it a flawless day, the kind of day that makes the notions of *too cold* and *too hot* quite worth wading through. Perfection in every direction.

Through this lack of haze we watched our woman, driving, running out the clock with errands, trying hard for some contentment. How long was it? Maybe hours, maybe weeks, what does it matter? And what does it matter that we still hurt when she hurt? Yes, to clear up a widely held misconception, we still *feel* over here, and our feelings run the gamut. Though I have yet to see evidence of blind rage or loneliness, ennui is not uncommon, nor is petulance. And certainly we are not inured to the feelings of ones who were especially loved.

While we're on the subject of heaven, naturally the question everyone asks first is about the The Man. When do we meet him? Is he moody? Is he tall? Indeed, is "him" the correct pronoun? Here's what I know: every now and then a long silver limousine passes by, surrounded by persons in suits and sunglasses, looking much like a presidential detail except that they wear roller skates and their heads go all the way around, like owls. We all stop what we're doing to watch. Is it

God? Is it God's mom? You know as much as we do. I *can* tell you that we have a website – [www.next.hvn](http://www.next.hvn) – but I don't know why, because there are no computers. Why would there be? We can do anything a computer can do. Dooley and I believe that the website exists to make us feel at home and to give us hope that one day, when the computers do show up, we'll be able to do some corresponding. (Incidentally, the second question everybody asks is, "Which house is Marilyn Monroe's?")

Here is something else I've learned and which I pass on in the hope it will save you some time. Don't pray for what you want, *holler* for it, and at the top of your lungs. Quiet prayer on bended knee just makes us laugh. I'm sorry but it does. I've seen some really stunning results from hollering; I wish I could share, but I've probably said too much already. And in related news, you people who have spent your lives tossing spilled salt over your left shoulders, fearing black cats, taking the long way around ladders? You can stop now. There is no such thing as superstition. Word on the street is that the Masons started it. (It's bad luck to be superstitious, Dooley likes to quip.) To be fair, I have run into quite a few mothers who suffered broken backs, but that could be coincidence.

Another misconception? That heaven is perfect. It's not so. Just the other day Dooley was taking a guitar lesson from Andres Segovia and he broke a string during a critical passage; the master cut loose with a string of Spanish epithets so raw Dooley's ears turned red. Julia Child prepared an otherworldly *coq au vin* last night, but the wine – an '85 Yamhill Valley Pinot Noir – had corked, and her wait staff was, in the main, surly. The endorphin machine is often on the fritz. A few weeks ago at Movie Night the film broke in the middle of *The Godfather*, right at the part when Michael was teaching his beautiful young Sicilian bride to drive. And heaven has done no

favors for Andy Warhol; privately most still find him to be unnecessarily pale, and too inscrutable by half.

A particularly annoying feature over here are the Shriners, who drive around in their little parade cars. They're always underfoot, always in a hurry, always barking an announcement. Sometimes it's about Movie Night – which I appreciate – but sometimes it's not the least bit germane, as though somebody's playing a joke. “Mind the Gap.” “This Tuesday only, you may open your eyes while sneezing.” “Por Espanol, marque dos.” And the like. Sometimes the announcements are interactive, as when a Shriner calls, “When you've loved and lost like Frank has,” and the crowd responds, “Then you know what life's about.”

As for angels, my friends, they walk among you. They are the ones who see you looking at a map and say, “Three blocks down, on the left.” The ones who give you a warning instead of a ticket. The ones who notice that your garbage can is not at the curb on trash day and put it there. The ones who appear behind you when your car stalls and push it to the side street. The ones who see that a dog is running and confused, and offer it safe-keeping before the authorities do. You probably know an angel or two without even realizing it. It's not a difficult club to join and certainly membership has its privileges, apart from sheer altruism. For example, when angels come to heaven they get first crack at the new library books and free spa services, every day if they like. Also, Frank Lloyd Wright does their houses.

But back to the flawless day, back to our woman. We watched while she drove, watched as her face grew more and more still, paled, then finally gave way. Tears jumped out as though fleeing a burning house, they couldn't escape fast enough. She pulled over in a treed neighborhood and let them come, imagining that at some point she would be empty. At this

imagined point she drove on, only to find that the second wave was just as eager to flee the house as the first had been.

In this manner, drive a moment, cry awhile, drive, cry, she was able to make it home. But on this occasion, rather than sharing her pain with the old woman, who never can just let it be, but always must try to fix it or talk her out of it, our woman does something different.

With a single phone call the plan is put in place. My woman will apply her great optimism to those who are in shortest supply, hospice patients. It's as close to Dooley as she can get, for the time being anyway. As it happens, training will commence the following week, and they have an unexpected opening! This opening was created when a would-be volunteer named Marlys Lassiter won a sweepstakes that would send her to the San Francisco Bay area, all expenses paid! Few people knew that Marlys Lassiter had long harbored a desire to see Alcatraz, especially now that the criminals were gone. In fact the only person she'd ever told was her old bachelor Uncle Frank, who had passed away seven years ago. It was just some kind of crazy voodoo, figured Marlys. Why, she didn't even remember entering the contest, and though canceling her hospice training for this romp wasn't exactly taking the high road, she was oddly compelled.

Our woman is smiling. There is *Aha!* in her eyes as she pulls into the parking lot of the hospice headquarters. She doesn't realize it, but she is roughly six centimeters off the ground, and if one were to touch her one would experience the gentlest of electrocutions. With a whip in one hand and a chair in the other, she enters the ring. I look over at Dooley. I want to high-five him with my eyes, and speculate on certain things, but he and Uncle Frank are lost in their whist game. We'll do it later. There's plenty of time.

More and more, our woman is one with her computer. It is sleek and purselike and accompanies her everywhere. Why, she can even plug it into her car and also, doesn't need to plug it in at all. Portability thy name is wireless. She wonders if – had she been of childbearing years, and had Dooley not been so gone – if the rays from her beloved machine might have interrupted a pregnancy. She goes on to wonder what kind of mother she might have made, too obsessive or too carefree? She knows the father Dooley would have been and it brings a smile even now, for even in death he makes the finest of husbands. Not long after Dooley passed, our woman received a letter from an insurance company along with a check sizeable enough to last until she gets her bearings. The first thing she does with the money is reward Uncle Marc for becoming good. He has bought but not yet paid for a houseboat so he can be close to the sunset every day. She arranges for the title to be put in his name and sends to him with a note that says, “Love, Dooley.”

And our woman has quite embraced the internet, along with her loyal *aide de camp* Gomez. While she types, Gomez assists, perched atop the screen, reviewing her work in the inimitable upside down manner that still, *still* quickens my pulse. It is good that my lost love has found satisfying work; as well, he and Homer have quite taken up where Gomez and I left off, but without the fireworks. Or perhaps passion smolders, but distance has muted my ability to assess correctly. I'm not discounting it; I wish them well.

Her new computer-assisted hobbies include contrarian investing in a wildly flailing stock market, at which she has become quite fearless, and “scam baiting,” which is the art of conning con men into thinking they are conning you. She finds it immensely rewarding. Currently she is

in dialog with one Xion Fumber who has suggested she be fucked in the ass, threatened to set the FBI on her, and, in his next communication, hopes that all is well with her family and that she soon receives his check for more than the amount requested, the balance of which can be sent to his agent in Gary, Indiana. She delights in squandering Mr. Fumber's valuable time. She suspects that he is not the family man from Scotland he purports to be, relocating to America as an Executive with the Ashley Furniture Organization. She thinks it far more likely that he is a Nigerian in an internet café and that she is not his only client, hence the confusing sequence of instructions. Sometimes she calls him Mrs. Fumber; sometimes she answers a particularly detailed set of instructions with a simple "Excite!"

Her other hobby is the stealthy and laborious renaming of certain neighborhood dogs. There is a rat terrier on the next block called Wham-o who strikes our woman as more of a Martin. She whispers his new name urgently through the fence as she bends to pet him on her evening walks. He is beginning to respond. She feels that one day soon he will wake up a Whamo then, for several hours mid-day, he will not know his name, and around four PM, she will appear and remind him that he is called Martin. He will relax visibly. Another project that interests her involves a Chihuahua saddled with the vastly overused Max; she plans to tap his inner Caesar.

And surely you remember our woman's *aha* moment regarding hospice service? Well, it has delivered an unexpected bonus, in the form of a widower. Our woman assisted as he claimed this status, gave comfort and solace as well as logistical support. Walked him through the grief process as she knew it, starting with the moment of death, at which she was present. It was our woman's first brush with the hereafter since Dooley, but rather than the celestial reigniting she'd hoped for, it was just very clinical, and familiar. Not even especially poignant, except nobody likes to see people with that brand of sadness, the kind that for sure won't let up anytime soon. I

wondered to Dooley if she had become jaded. Dooley thinks no, she was simply depleted after the two of us left, and also she has to save some for Fuckpants, and her mother.

But as usual, I digress.

The widower, Dennis, is a remarkable man in all respects. Remarkably down on his luck, physically, and remarkably smart and funny. He is a writer, an editor, a professor, an alcoholic (non-practicing), a drug addict (only the ones that keep him calm), and though their hospice relationship ended when his wife did, their friendship blossoms apace. Dennis has encouraged our woman in her writing, and even foresees the day when a publisher will come calling. One time he actually said the words “bidding war”! Our woman nearly swooned.

The subject of our woman’s jottings is... me. Can you believe? But not just me, we’re all in there! Jones, the old woman, Cruz Pardo, Dooley, naturally. Uncle Marc, Gomez. Fantasy Thanksgiving is there, the chickens from the Yucatan, the dead German. My life. Our death. Everything. Oh, she plays fast and loose with time, and species, but I and Dooley, even though predisposed, see what Dennis sees: that a good life makes for a good read. And the way our woman tells the story, well, it never really has to end.

I notice that over here the residents say *anyways* instead of the obviously proper *anyway*. And a fair number say *anyhoo*, which I’ve actually come to like, even as it erodes my high-brow *je ne sais quois*.

Anyhoo, our woman, she’s staying busy.

