

Pretty Boy

a novel

Ralph Bland

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Your buddy misses you.
- from the song *My Buddy*, music by Walter Donaldson, lyrics by Gus Kahn

For Otis (my man!)

1

I never thought my life would end up being all that interesting, but if I'm going to talk about it then I have to start at the beginning. You know, where I was born, what I remember, and how I got from there to here. It worked for Abraham Lincoln and even Old Yeller, so I figure it'll work for me too.

My name is Floyd Henry Knight, though most people called me "Pretty Boy." I was born in the backyard of a clapboard house in a rough suburban stretch of Nashville, Tennessee in October 2003. I had two sisters, a brother, and a mother who was mostly beagle. My father was gone before I arrived—he was rumored to have been a Corgi—but whether he was purebred or not never mattered much. There wasn't anything I could do about it because I was me all the same.

My siblings looked like hunting dogs, lean and long-legged, while I had short, stubby legs and big brown eyes people would later call soulful. In those first days we stayed close together, nursing and sleeping in a crowded shed where we curled in a ball together for warmth. But even then I could tell this wasn't the life for me. I wanted space, a place to stretch out without being nudged awake, and when we moved on to puppy chow I noticed how my brothers and sisters stuck together with our mother while I drifted off on my own, drawn to the fence around the property where I'd stare out at the street and wonder where it led.

On a cold afternoon in January, I decided I'd had enough. It was time to leave.

Getting out wasn't easy. I needed an opening in the fence and a few moments when nobody was watching. Digging crossed my mind, but it seemed like too much work when

there might be a quicker way. My brothers and sisters were thin enough to slip through tight spaces, but I wasn't, so I spent most of the day searching until I found a loose corner where the fence had begun to give. When I pawed at it, the wire bent. When I clamped down with my teeth and pulled, it bent even more, and that's when I first realized my jaws were pretty strong for a puppy.

I worked at that spot until I had a hole big enough to squeeze through, but by then it was nearly lunchtime and I didn't want to leave hungry. I decided to eat first, wait for the others to nap, and then slip away unnoticed. The only problem was I ate too much, as I often did, and ended up falling asleep with the rest of them, waking later in the afternoon with doubt in my mind telling me to consider waiting another day.

But something inside me wouldn't allow it. A little voice said that if I didn't leave then, whatever was waiting for me outside the fence might not be there tomorrow. The thought settled deep, and once it did, I knew I had to follow it.

Nothing bad was going to happen to me. That was the belief I carried in my heart as I went back to the fence, a steady certainty saying I was meant for something and that the only thing that could stop it was me.

At four o'clock that afternoon, I pushed my nose through the opening and worked the rest of my body after it, dropping into the side yard and pausing there to take in the world beyond. To the right, I sensed danger. There was a river, strange animals, and fast-moving cars. But to the left the houses stretched on, and behind me a hill rose up, quiet and unknown.

I chose the hill, turning left and then left again, certain as I climbed that something beyond me was guiding the way,

and feeling it with every step as I set out to find whatever life had waiting.

2

When I reached the top of the hill, the road split in two, and I had to decide which way to go. It wasn't a complicated decision, though at the time it felt like it might be an important one. Even then, in those first moments on my own, I had a built-in sense that I knew how to choose, that I could feel my way toward wherever it was I was supposed to end up. Left would have taken me back toward the place I'd just left, and I had no interest in returning so soon after making my escape, so I turned right and started down the road.

I walked for a while right down the middle of it, looking at the houses on either side as I passed, not giving much thought to what might happen if a car came along. That kind of thinking hadn't taken hold in me yet. My mind was occupied with something else entirely, something I couldn't name but felt certain about all the same. I was looking for something. I didn't know what it was, but I believed, without question, that I would recognize it when I found it.

Every so often I stopped to investigate. I'd lower my head and smell the grass at the edge of someone's yard or sniff along a mailbox, as if one of them might offer a clue. Once or twice I even sat down in the road and waited, thinking perhaps whatever I was meant to find might come to me instead. When it didn't, I'd get back up and continue on, still convinced it was out there somewhere, waiting.

After a time, I came upon a house where some children were playing in the yard, making a great deal of noise as they chased a ball around a tree. Next door, a pickup truck pulled into the driveway. I stopped to watch both at once, unsure which interested me more. The man who stepped out of the

truck walked to his mailbox, opened it, and then looked up and saw me standing there.

I knew him immediately. I can't explain how, and if you'd asked me then I wouldn't have tried. It was enough that I did.

"Who are you?" he asked.

It was a fair question, but I didn't have an answer. I hadn't been given a name that I knew of, so instead I wagged my tail as hard as I could and gave him what I hoped was an agreeable expression.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked. "You live around here?"

He walked out into the road toward me, and when he got close, I realized just how large he seemed from my position. He bent down and picked me up without hesitation, and I settled into his arms as if that had been the plan all along. I rested my head against his chest and looked up at him while he studied me.

"You can't stay out here," he said. "Somebody's going to run you over."

He ran his hand over my head and worked one of my ears between his fingers, like he was trying to determine what sort of dog I might be. I could tell he wasn't arriving at anything definite. At that stage, nobody could have, not even me. I was a mixture of things, and it showed.

He carried me up to his porch and sat down with me on a swing, continuing his inspection.

"We're going to have to find you a home," he said. "We can't have you wandering up and down the street."

From the yard next door came the sound of the children again, louder now, one of them crying. The older sister was hitting one of her little brothers with a plastic

bucket. The little boy was yelling like she was killing him. A woman opened the door and told them to quiet down before the police came, which seemed to suggest this had happened before.

The man greeted her, then stood and walked over with me still in his arms.

"I found this little guy out in the road," he said. "You ever seen him before?"

She looked me over briefly and shook her head. "No. He's new."

"I figured. Thought maybe your kids might want him."

She considered that for a moment.

"I'd have to ask Terrence," she said. "Maybe he could stay in the backyard. I'm not having a dog in the house."

"That makes sense," the man said. "Let me know. I'm moving this weekend or I'd take him myself."

He brought me inside his house, set me down on the kitchen floor, and filled a bowl with water. I drank it faster than I would have thought possible, and only then did I realize just how thirsty I'd been. It occurred to me, as I finished, that I hadn't given any thought to food or water when I set out, which in hindsight seemed like an oversight.

He must have noticed something in the way I looked at him, because he opened the refrigerator, took out some lunch meat, tore it into pieces, and set it down for me. I ate it immediately. It was the best thing I had ever tasted, which, given my limited experience, was not saying much.

When I finished, I looked up at him in what I believed to be a persuasive manner. He laughed.

"You're an operator already," he said.

He carried me upstairs and set me down on a bed while he changed out of his work clothes. I watched him, thinking

that whatever it was I had been looking for, I had likely found it. Whether that was true or not didn't seem worth questioning at the time.

I circled once on the bed, found a comfortable spot near a pillow, and lay down. It had been a long day, and sleep came quickly.

He lay down beside me a moment later.

Just before I drifted off, I pressed myself against him and felt a kind of certainty settle in that I hadn't known before.

During that sleep, I dreamed of a life where it was just the two of us riding in his truck, eating together, sleeping in the same bed, moving through each day as if that had always been the arrangement. It all seemed perfectly reasonable while I was dreaming it.

So when the knock came at the door and woke us both, I wasn't prepared for what followed.

He carried me downstairs and opened it. The woman stood there with the children, all of them smiling in a way I didn't yet understand.

Before I had time to think about it, I was handed over to her.

I twisted in her arms and tried to look back at him, expecting that he would intervene, that he would correct what was clearly a mistake. But he didn't. He simply stood there, watching, as I was carried away.

Inside the house, the children surrounded me immediately, grabbing and pulling in a way that felt less like affection and more like examination. I froze under their hands, too uncertain to react. Then, without intending to, I lost control and wet the floor beneath me.

The woman reacted exactly as you might expect.

A man appeared with a rolled-up newspaper and struck me three times in quick succession, which was both painful and instructive in a way I would come to understand better later.

"Bad dog," he said.

I was then informed in no uncertain terms that my name was Boo and that I would be living outside from that point forward.

It was a notable shift from the life I had imagined not half an hour earlier.

3

That was how I was introduced to the family I was meant to belong to. It wasn't an especially promising beginning, and in time I would come to understand that it was, in fact, one of the better moments.

There were three children: an older girl, maybe seven, and two younger boys who seemed to operate without much restraint or coordination. Together, they took a particular interest in me that I did not share. They pulled my paws out from under me so I would fall, tried to climb onto my back as if I were something meant to be ridden, and grabbed my ears in their fists, tugging them as though they were handles designed for that purpose. They made a great deal of noise while doing all this—high, sharp sounds that carried straight through me—and each time they called me "Boo," which I came to dislike almost immediately.

It didn't sound like a real name. It didn't sound like my name. I had the strong sense that, under different circumstances, I would have been called something better.

I wanted to explain this to them. I wanted to explain several things, in fact: that they should stop what they were doing, that I did not belong to them, and that if matters had worked out the way they were supposed to, I would not have been there at all. But I lacked the means to make any of that clear, so I endured it as best I could.

It became apparent to me fairly quickly that if I intended to improve my situation, I would have to take some responsibility for it myself.

That first day stretched on in much the same fashion until the children were called inside for supper. When they finally left me alone, I took a moment to recover, then began

examining the perimeter of the yard. It was a familiar approach. I had, after all, managed to leave my previous home using similar methods, and it seemed reasonable to assume that what had worked once might work again.

As evening set in, the man named Terrence came outside with a paper plate of food. It wasn't particularly good, but I ate it anyway, recognizing that I would need the strength. He arranged a kind of shelter for me using a wheelbarrow and some concrete blocks, with a few worn towels underneath. It was clear enough what he had in mind. This was where I would be sleeping.

I had never slept alone before, and I didn't care for the idea. Still, when I considered the alternative of constant handling, pulling, and shouting, I found I preferred the arrangement in theory.

In practice, it was less comfortable.

Once the yard went dark and I was left to myself, a different set of concerns presented themselves. The world beyond the fence felt larger at night. I had heard distant howls and strange barking before, but I had never thought of them as being directed at me. Until then, I had assumed that I was safe.

That assumption didn't hold up very well in the dark.

I ate what I'd been given, rested briefly under my new shelter, and then returned to the fence. If I could just make it back to the other yard, then everything would correct itself. I was certain of that.

As it turned out, I didn't need to dig.

The gate had been left open.

It struck me, even then, as an oversight of some significance. I walked through it without hesitation and made

my way back across the yards to the house I had decided was mine. I climbed the steps, scratched at the door, and waited.

Nothing happened.

I scratched again, then settled onto the mat to give him time. At some point, I fell asleep. When I woke, the door was still closed.

It seemed late by then, so late enough that I felt I should have been inside already, so I tried a different approach and began to howl. It seemed like a reasonable escalation.

Still nothing.

That was when I noticed his truck was gone, which explained things, though it didn't improve them.

A while later, I heard it returning. I stood up at once, tail moving faster than I could control, and when he pulled into the driveway, I ran toward him, making it clear that I had been waiting.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "How'd you get out?"

I pressed myself against his leg. He picked me up.

For a moment, everything felt corrected.

"Come on," he said. "I'll take you back."

He carried me to the yard I had just left, set me down on the other side of the gate, and closed it.

"Go to sleep," he said.

Then he left.

It was not the outcome I had anticipated.

I walked the fence line again, more thoroughly this time, but there were no easy exits. After a while, I began to howl. It seemed, under the circumstances, like the only available option.

I kept at it for quite some time. Eventually, I grew too tired and too cold to continue and returned to the shelter, where I slept.

Morning arrived quickly. The children returned even quicker.

The day proceeded much like the one before it. I ate very little. My interest in food had diminished somewhat, replaced by a general dissatisfaction with my circumstances. By evening, I heard Terrence speaking about me inside the house.

"This howling has got to stop," he said. "Kept me up half the night. I don't know what his problem is, but I'm not putting up with it for long. That dog may have to go."

This was not encouraging, though it did suggest a timeline.

While they were inside, I resumed my inspection of the yard and eventually found a spot near a faucet where the ground had softened. When I pressed my paws into it, the earth gave way. It wasn't much, but it was something.

I began to dig.

Progress was slow, and I understood that it would have to be a gradual effort. Too much activity in one place would draw attention, and I had no interest in having my work undone.

Still, I wasn't especially patient.

Over the next two days, I worked at the hole whenever I could and spent the nights at the gate, calling out in the direction of the house I preferred. A few times, I saw a light come on, which I took as a positive sign, though it never resulted in the outcome I was hoping for.

On the third morning, before leaving for work, the man came out and stood by the gate, looking at me.

“You’re going to have to cool it,” he said. “Neighbors are leaving notes. ‘Take care of your dog,’ they say.”

He paused, considering me in a way that suggested he had reached some conclusion.

“You’re not my dog, you know,” he added.

4

By the third night, I made it through. The ground had been softening for days, and I had been working at it in what I believed was a careful and strategic manner, though in hindsight it may have been more enthusiasm than strategy. Still, it paid off. The last layer of damp earth gave way beneath my paws, and once I got my nose under the fence, the rest of me followed in stages—first the head, then the shoulders, then a determined sort of wriggling until I was free on the other side.

It was a clear night, which I appreciated, as visibility seemed important under the circumstances. I crossed the yard without incident and made my way around to the front. His truck was in the driveway, which struck me as a very good sign.

The house itself was mostly dark. I took that to mean he was asleep.

I climbed the steps and scratched at the door. The sound didn't seem to carry the way I'd hoped, so after a few attempts, I adjusted my approach and began to vocalize. I developed a pattern of three sustained howls followed by a longer, more expressive note. Then I would pause briefly before repeating it. It felt organized, and I believed it conveyed both urgency and sincerity.

I had no intention of leaving. Going back was not under consideration. I had already spent enough time in the yard next door to understand the arrangement, and I didn't intend to accept it as permanent. In fact, I had begun to form a broader theory about my situation that explained quite a bit, if you were willing to accept a few generous assumptions.

It seemed to me that I had likely been born into some higher station and misplaced early on. These things happen. Circumstances get confused. Individuals end up in the wrong households. It stood to reason that my current condition was temporary, and that I was eventually meant to assume a more suitable role. In this case, that role appeared to involve living in this particular house, with this particular man, in a capacity that felt both natural and correct.

With that understanding in place, I continued my efforts at the door.

Eventually, a light came on. The door opened. He stood there looking down at me, not especially pleased.

"You again?" he said. "Do you know what time it is?"

I did not, but I felt the question was somewhat beside the point.

I gave him my best expression—open, hopeful, and as agreeable as I could manage under the circumstances. I wagged my tail to reinforce the message.

He studied me for a moment, then stepped back and opened the door wider.

"Come on in," he said. "I don't have the energy for this tonight."

That was all I needed.

I went straight inside and made my way down the hall to the room I recognized as his. There was a soft chair near a dresser, and I climbed into it without hesitation, circled once, and settled in.

It was, at that point, the most comfortable place I had ever been.

"Make yourself at home," he said.

He turned off the light and got into bed. I lay there in the dark, listening to the steady rhythm of his breathing, and

felt something settle over me that I hadn't experienced before. It wasn't just comfort. It was a kind of certainty. Whatever existed outside the walls, moving through the night, was no longer my concern because I was where I was supposed to be.

Which is why, after a few minutes, the chair no longer seemed sufficient.

It was comfortable, certainly, but it was also separate, and separation didn't feel appropriate given the significance of the moment. So I climbed down and made my way over to the bed.

He was asleep, or close to it, breathing in a slow, even pattern that suggested everything in his world was in order. I jumped up carefully and stood near his feet, waiting to see if I had disturbed him.

There was a brief pause.

Then he stirred, lifted his head slightly, and looked in my direction.

I braced for the possibility that I had made an error in judgment.

Instead, he reached down, picked me up, and moved me closer to him.

"That's a good boy," he said.

He set me beside him, adjusted a pillow near my body, and pulled the sheet up so that I was covered almost to my neck.

"Go to sleep," he said. "We'll figure things out in the morning."

That seemed reasonable.

I didn't know who or what we would be figuring things out about. He'd mentioned some names, Cynthia, Kitty, I didn't recognize, but it didn't concern me. At that moment, nothing did.

At some point during the night, however, a new problem presented itself.

I needed to go.

No one had explained the rules to me in any formal sense, but I had gathered enough from recent experience to understand that certain actions were not well received indoors. Given the circumstances and how well things were going, I had no interest in making a poor impression.

So I attempted to manage it.

I stayed very still and directed my thoughts elsewhere, which I believed might help. It did not. The problem persisted. Eventually, I began to make small, involuntary sounds. Nothing dramatic, just enough to register.

He noticed.

"You all right?" he said, already shifting to sit up. "You need to go out?"

I sat up at once and responded in the affirmative, as clearly as I could.

Within moments, he was up, dressed, and carrying me outside. He set me down in the yard and gave what I understood to be instructions.

"Go potty," he said.

That was all I needed.

I relieved myself with a degree of enthusiasm that, in retrospect, may have been excessive.

"That's good," he said. "That's real good."

It was, I felt, a strong step forward for both of us.

5

He talked to me all morning. Not in a hurried way, and not as if he expected much in return, but steadily, like we had already settled into something that would continue. He told me we were going to visit his new house, that I would meet Cynthia, who was soon to be his wife, and her dog, Kitty.

I had some reservations about that name.

It didn't strike me as especially well-considered, but I kept that to myself. I was, after all, in no position to criticize. As far as I knew, I didn't yet have a proper name of my own, and it seemed wise to let things develop.

He fed me a handful of dry cereal and a slice of bologna, both of which I accepted without hesitation. Then he told me he'd be right back and stepped outside.

I followed him to the window and watched as he walked next door and knocked.

This concerned me.

I didn't know what business he had over there, but I could make a reasonable guess, and none of the possibilities seemed favorable. It occurred to me that I might be returned, and that possibility required immediate consideration. I looked around for somewhere to conceal myself. The closets were closed, the back door was inaccessible, and after a brief but thorough evaluation, I settled on the space beneath the bed.

It wasn't ideal, but it would do.

I positioned myself as far back as I could without becoming stuck and waited. It was not a comfortable wait. I didn't know how long I could remain hidden, but I knew I wasn't going back without at least making an attempt to prevent it.

After a few moments, I heard the door open. He called for me.

"Hey, buddy, where are you?"

I stayed still.

"Come on out."

There are, I've found, certain expectations that come with the arrangement between a father and someone in my position. Ignoring him outright did not seem like a sustainable approach. So after a brief pause that was long enough, I felt, to register a mild objection, I came out from under the bed and crossed the room cautiously, prepared for whatever decision had been made.

He smiled, and that changed things immediately. He clapped his hands once, and I went to him without further hesitation.

"Come on," he said. "We're going to go bye-bye."

I didn't know what that meant exactly, but it sounded preferable to the alternative.

"You ever been in a car?" he asked. "You'll like it. We're going to see Cynthia and Kitty."

That settled it.

I followed him outside with a good deal more enthusiasm than I had a moment earlier. Whatever uncertainties I had entertained were set aside. If he was going somewhere, I was going too.

He opened the passenger door and gave me an opportunity to get in on my own, which I appreciated, though the height presented certain challenges. After a brief and unsuccessful attempt, he picked me up and set me on the seat.

From that position, I could see quite a bit.

There was a window beside me and another in front, and I watched as he walked around the truck and got in. When

the engine started, it produced a noise I wasn't entirely prepared for, and I reacted accordingly. He reached over, put a hand on my head, and just like that, everything was fine again.

It was becoming clear that this was a pattern.

We drove for a while—long enough that I began to understand that the world extended well beyond the few places I had known. There were roads I hadn't seen, buildings I didn't recognize, other cars moving in ways that suggested a larger system at work. It occurred to me that my earlier journey, which had felt significant at the time, had covered only a small portion of what was available.

Eventually, we pulled into a driveway and stopped beside another car, which he identified as Cynthia's.

He picked me up, carried me up a set of steps, and opened the front door.

Inside was a large room with brick walls and a fan turning in the window. It felt unfinished in a way I couldn't quite define, though I would later understand that this was because not everything had been moved in yet. There were plans underway. A wedding, for example, which I gathered was approaching.

A woman came down the stairs smiling at me. She had on a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans and her hair was tied up in a scarf, like she'd been busy cleaning or doing some kind of work. Despite all that, I thought she was very pretty, mainly because of her smile. I liked it when people smiled at me, so I smiled back in that way I had and wiggled my tail back and forth as fast as could. I was as glad to see her as she was to see me. It came to me that she might be my real mother. She reached out, touched my head, and ran her hand along my back.

"Oh, you're adorable," she said. "Let me hold him."

She took me from my father without any resistance on my part and held me close, studying me in a way that felt less analytical and more appreciative.

"He's a pretty boy," she said. "He needs a name."

She paused for a moment, then nodded as if something had resolved itself.

"I've got it. We'll call you Floyd. Pretty Boy Floyd."

She looked to my father for confirmation.

"Sounds good to me," he said.

That seemed to settle the matter.

I accepted the fact there are worse names than Floyd, and under the circumstances, it felt like a step in the right direction. More importantly, it suggested that I had been recognized, perhaps even claimed.

She set me down on the floor, and I took a moment to look around. The place had a certain solidity to it. I liked that.

"Come on, Floyd," she said. "Let's go meet your sister."

That introduced a new variable.

I followed her outside into the backyard, which was enclosed in a way that immediately caught my attention. I noted the fence, considered the enclosed area, and made a quiet determination that this outside space would serve, ideally, as a temporary destination rather than a permanent assignment.

While I was still evaluating the situation, another dog came running toward me.

She was black and white, moving quickly, and making it clear—without ambiguity—that my presence was not, at that moment, welcome.

She growled, snapped, and communicated a position that could be summarized as firm opposition.

I adjusted accordingly and moved behind my father's legs.

Cynthia told her to calm down. The dog—Kitty—did not appear inclined to comply immediately.

I watched her for a few seconds longer.

Then I reconsidered.

It seemed to me that her reaction, while strong, might not be permanent. These things take time. Relationships require adjustment. It was entirely possible that she had not yet been given the full picture of who I was. After all, if this arrangement was what I believed it to be—if this was, in fact, where I belonged—then it followed that Kitty and I would need to come to an understanding.

I decided, then, that I would be patient.

I would give Kitty time to adjust.

6

We went back inside after a brief but energetic exchange in the yard—Kitty's involving teeth and conviction, mine involving retreat and reconsideration. She followed close behind me, maintaining a posture that suggested she had not yet ruled out the possibility of ending my existence, though she was willing, for the moment, to postpone it.

Inside, my new parents moved from room to room, discussing what was here and what was there and what would be added later. It sounded like a place in transition, which I found encouraging. Transition implies change, and change, I had already learned, can work in your favor if you stay with it long enough.

Eventually, they sat down at a table near the kitchen and ate. They shared small pieces with us, one from her, one from him, which seemed, at the time, like a fair and balanced arrangement. It was smoked turkey, and I found it to be an improvement over previous offerings.

While they ate, they talked.

There was a good deal of discussion about the upcoming wedding, its details, timing, something called a reception, and then what would happen afterward. There was also mention of a honeymoon, which I understood to be a kind of extended absence, though no one consulted me on the matter. Plans were made about moving the rest of his things, selling the other house, and generally consolidating their lives into one place.

At some point, the conversation turned to Kitty.

Then, to me, and when my new name came up, I looked over and saw Cynthia smile and say, "Yes."

That seemed definitive.

It was at that moment I concluded, with a reasonable degree of confidence, that I had secured a permanent position. It's difficult to describe the satisfaction of that realization, but I can say that, at the time, I felt I had arrived.

That said, the situation remained somewhat fragile.

My father left shortly after, saying he had things to take care of. I wasn't entirely sure what those things could be that didn't involve me, but he went anyway, leaving me there with my new mother and Kitty, who had not softened her position.

In fact, she appeared committed to it.

Any time I so much as looked in her direction, she responded as if I had issued a challenge. Her expression tightened, her posture shifted, and she produced a series of sounds that, while not technically ferocious, carried much the same intent. I began to suspect that winning her over might require more time than I had initially estimated.

That's when Cynthia picked me up and headed toward the back door.

"Come on, Kitty," she said. "Time to go out."

Kitty moved through the door without hesitation.

Then I realized I was going with her.

This was not ideal.

I attempted to communicate that fact—first through subtle resistance, then with increasing urgency—but my objections did not alter the outcome. I was set down in the yard, the door closed behind me, and just like that, the two of us were alone.

"Get some fresh air," Cynthia said from the other side. "You two get to know each other."

That was, in theory, a reasonable suggestion.

In practice, it required adjustment.

I turned slowly, expecting at any moment for Kitty to emerge from behind some bush or piece of lawn furniture and complete what she had been suggesting earlier. But for a moment, there was nothing. Just the sounds of the birds, distant machinery, and the steady hum of activity that suggested the world was continuing without regard for my immediate concerns.

Then I saw her.

She was standing in the yard, perfectly still, her head tilted upward toward the sky, as if she were tracking something far above us or considering matters of a broader scope. It was not the behavior I had expected.

I followed her gaze.

Until then, I hadn't given much thought to what was above me. My attention had been largely directed at ground level, where most of my immediate concerns tended to reside. But when I looked up, I found something else entirely, a wide expanse of color and light, clouds arranged in shapes that seemed both deliberate and accidental, and a brightness that suggested there was more to the day than I had been pondering.

It was, I realized, worth noticing.

I looked back at Kitty.

For the first time, I considered that she might have something to offer beyond opposition. It occurred to me that there were things she understood, things I hadn't yet learned, and that, given enough time, I might benefit from her perspective.

Of course, that assumed she would eventually allow me to exist.

Which was still very much in question.

I decided, nonetheless, to make an effort.

Direct communication seemed unlikely to succeed, so I adopted a more measured approach. I moved closer, but not too close, offered what I believed to be a disarming expression, and then occupied myself with sniffing the ground and examining the perimeter, demonstrating, in general terms, that I posed no immediate threat.

This was partially effective until I made a small error in judgment.

There are certain actions that carry more significance than one might initially assume. I discovered this when I attempted to mark a shrub near the fence, an act I considered minor but which Kitty interpreted as a serious breach.

Her response was immediate. She crossed the yard at a speed that suggested she had been waiting for a reason to ford an attack, stopped just short of contact, and presented herself in a way that made her position unmistakably clear, her teeth, posture, and intensity meant to communicate authority.

I considered the situation, then perhaps unwisely, I did not retreat.

It wasn't defiance, exactly. It was more that I hadn't yet developed the instinct to be afraid in the way she seemed to expect. I had, over the past few days, arrived at a general conclusion about how things worked. I felt that I would be all right, that events would tend toward my favor if I continued forward. It wasn't based on evidence so much as conviction, but it had held up so far. Nothing bad was ever going to happen to me.

I stood there, looked at her, and allowed for the possibility that this, too, would resolve itself.

Which is when I shifted tactics.

If distance and neutrality hadn't worked, perhaps engagement would. I lowered myself into what I understood

to be a play stance, my front down, my rear up, and offered a series of short, encouraging yaps.

She hesitated.

That was enough.

I moved forward, adjusted at the last moment, and made a light, strategic contact designed less to challenge and more to invite a period of play. It was, in my estimation, a reasonable opening.

She did not agree.

She held her ground and responded with a series of barks that, while not translated directly, conveyed a clear message regarding territory, hierarchy, and my current standing within it.

I listened.

Then I smiled.

Not literally, perhaps, but in the way I carried myself. I let her see I had no intention of leaving these premises, and that, over time, she might even find this arrangement to be to her advantage. She was not convinced, but I stayed with it.

I grinned at her and let her read my thoughts.

You love me, I told her. You know you do. I'm the little brother you always wished for.

I followed her at a respectful distance and maintained what I believed to be a consistent and agreeable presence. It seemed to me that persistence, properly applied, could produce results.

And if there was one thing I had already decided, it was this: I was not going anywhere.

7

By the next morning, Kitty looked at me and did not growl. It may not sound like much, but under the circumstances, it represented meaningful progress.

My father, operating under what I took to be a sense of propriety, did not stay the night. He returned to his previous house for the remaining days before the wedding, so that, to the outside world, everything would appear in proper order. There were, apparently, expectations about these things, and he seemed intent on meeting them.

He did not take me with him.

"This is your home now," he told me. "You need to get used to it."

I didn't particularly care for the arrangement at the time, but I trusted him, and more importantly, I believed him. If he said this was where I belonged, then that was enough for me.

That night, I slept in a wicker basket. Kitty had a foam bed of her own. We were both in the same room as my mother, which, in my estimation, was the important part.

I slept well, though not continuously. Every so often I would wake and find Kitty watching me from across the room, her expression cautious but no longer hostile. It was the kind of look that suggested she hadn't made up her mind about me entirely, but was willing to consider certain possibilities.

At one point, I needed to go outside, but I chose not to move. It seemed unwise to test the situation prematurely. So I stayed where I was and waited for morning.

By the time Cynthia stirred, Kitty had fallen fast asleep, stretched out and breathing in a way that indicated she had relaxed her position overnight. That, too, felt significant.

When Cynthia sat up, I took the opportunity to approach.

"Good morning, pretty boy," she said.

I had just begun to respond when Kitty appeared beside us, inserting herself between me and my mother with quiet determination. It was a clear statement, though notably, it was delivered without any accompanying growl.

Her tail was moving.

That was new.

Now, Kitty had certain physical advantages like longer legs, but she lacked density in her body. I, on the other hand, was compact. Solid. Built in a way that suggested I would not be easily moved once I decided where I intended to stand. Even then, I had a sense of how to position myself, how to shift my weight, how to hold ground when necessary. I could be a fireplug if I wanted.

But I had no interest in using any of that physicality against her.

It's worth noting that I never had much inclination toward conflict. Even in less favorable environments, I had preferred avoidance over confrontation. It seemed to me that things worked out better that way.

So when Kitty edged in, I allowed it. We stood there together, both of us receiving attention and outwardly agreeing to the arrangement.

And she still didn't growl.

That was when I decided we had turned a corner.

I followed her around for most of the morning, keeping a respectful distance but maintaining a consistent presence. She didn't object. There were no warning sounds or sudden movements, just a general acceptance that I was there.

It felt, to me, like an understanding had been reached. Of course, I was still young. And with youth comes a certain lack of restraint.

I began to notice things about her—small hesitations, particular habits—and, without fully intending to, I started to test them. Not out of malice, but curiosity. There's a difference, though I understand it may not always appear that way from the outside.

For instance, Kitty had a tendency to pause at doorways, as if evaluating the situation before committing to movement. I found this interesting.

So I adjusted my timing.

I would move ahead of her, position myself just out of her sight, and then wait. When she finally stepped through the doorway I would make a sudden appearance, leaping out from my hiding place and making her jump. The result was immediate and, from my perspective, informative. From hers, less so.

There were similar experiments on the stairs.

And with her toys.

I extended my repertoire to finding her favorite stuffed animal toys and eviscerating them with my puppy teeth before her horrifed eyes. I didn't really mean her any harm. I was still just a puppy, you know, and that's what puppies do, chew on stuff and get into mischief. I had to watch myself, though. I got carried away and chewed up one of my mother's shoes and she wasn't happy with me for several days. She ended up getting a replacement shoe in exchange for her taking my picture and sending it off to the company to be displayed on their Wall of Shame. If you pull up their website on your computer you can find my face and name on a bulletin board

at their factory. I suppose I should have been ashamed of myself but I wasn't. It was sort of a badge of honor to me.

None of it was intended to cause harm. It was, I believed, part of the broader process of learning the environment, understanding the dynamics, and establishing a presence. Occasionally, I may have gone too far. There was, for example, an incident involving a shoe that was not well received.

Consequences followed. Temporarily. But even then, I sensed that the larger trajectory remained intact.

Because the most important development, the one that outweighed all others, was this: Kitty no longer hated me all the time. There were moments when she seemed to regard me with something closer to tolerance. Possibly even curiosity. It was a shift, and I recognized it as such.

I chose to interpret it as progress. It seemed to me she was beginning to understand that my presence was not temporary, that I was, in fact, part of the environment now. Whether she had asked for such an addition or not was beside the point.

I was there, and given enough time, I was confident she would come to see the value in it.

After all, by that stage, the consensus in the house had begun to form and it was trending in my favor.

8

The wedding took place that Saturday afternoon. I didn't have a full understanding of what a wedding involved, but I had gathered enough to assume I would be included. It seemed like the sort of event where all relevant parties would be present, and I considered myself very much a relevant party. So when Cynthia left for the church and kissed both of us goodbye, I remained under the impression that my father would return shortly and collect us.

He did not.

After a few minutes, this became difficult to fathom. I had an idea something was up. Then a car pulled up, its door opening to reveal someone I had never seen before.

She was young girl, though not entirely a child, with blue hair and large pink glasses. Kitty reacted immediately, announcing her presence in terms that suggested this was an invasion. I took a different view. It seemed more likely that this was simply someone who had not yet had the opportunity to meet me.

So, I approached.

"Well, hello there," she said. "I'm Harmony."

Harmony seemed pleased to see me, which I took as a good sign. She mentioned that she knew Cynthia, that she had been told about me, and that I was, in fact, the "handsomest boy around," which confirmed that accurate information had been provided to her.

She gave me a few reassuring pats, then turned her attention to Kitty, who had paused somewhere between defense and retreat. "I've heard about you too," she said. "I came prepared."

She then produced a small bag and, from it, two items of edible interest. I accepted my portion without delay. Kitty required encouragement, but when it became clear that I was willing to assist in the matter by taking hers too, she resolved her hesitation quickly.

It was, all things considered, a strong start.

Harmony explained in some form of baby talk that she would be staying with us for the week while my parents were away on something called a honeymoon. I did not fully understand the term, but I gathered that it involved travel and absence, neither of which I had been consulted on.

She stepped back outside to retrieve her things, and I watched her through the window, adjusting to the new arrangement. I was still somewhat disappointed about missing the wedding because I felt it was an opportunity for a more official role, but I found ways to occupy my thoughts.

Food, for instance.

There are certain items that establish themselves early as favorites, and I had begun to develop my own personal list. The offering from Harmony ranked right up there, though it did not surpass some of the bologna or cookies my father and I had shared the previous day.

She went out the door to her car and I stood looking out the window watching her, feeling a little disappointed that I wasn't going to the wedding and wasn't going to get to be my dad's best man, but I figured I'd get over it soon enough, because I do like wieners, almost as much as I do cheese and bologna and carrots and those peanut butter cookies that my dad and I shared our last night together at the old house, that we finished off the morning before I came over here for the first time and called it home. It's hard to say, and there may be some new things that come along that complicate the

choices some more, but right now I'd have to put those cookies at the top of my list. I like everything, but cookies are my favorite.

I wondered if this Harmony had any cookies in the bag she was carrying in?

The sad thing was the treat portion of our relationship was abruptly over, and from then on for the next week all Harmony felt required to do was feed us kibble two times a day and open the back door occasionally and let us out into the yard when we were about to burst and then take her sweet time letting us back in after we'd had our constitutionals. All she felt compelled to do was watch movies on my dad's big screen television that had people with swords and shields and lances and fire-breathing dragons in every scene while stuffing herself with Hershey Kisses and Raisinets and not giving us any of it because she said chocolate was poisonous for dogs. Using telepathy, I attempted persuading her to go to a store and buy treats we could all share without somebody dying. This didn't work though, because Harmony was afraid if she left she might miss some important scene where someone gets impaled or a dragon gets his head cut off or something thought-provoking and artistic like that happened.

So we jointly suffered, Kitty and me. We toughed it out together for seven days.

9

So it was that Kitty and I endured the week together, which in retrospect may have been useful. Shared circumstances tend to produce a kind of alignment, and while we had not arrived at complete agreement, we had managed to reach a workable understanding. By the end of the week, Kitty's opposition had softened into something closer to tolerance, and at times, something beyond that.

Then, one afternoon, she rose from her place and went to the door, her attention fixed, her posture alert.

Something was about to happen.

Kitty had a way of sensing these things. She could detect changes before they occurred, like storms, footsteps, or the approach of meals. It was one of her more reliable traits.

A moment later, I heard it too, the car and a door slamming. Our parents had returned.

Harmony gathered her things and left, and then our father and mother were both back where they belonged. The reunion was immediate and thorough. There were greetings, embraces, a level of attention that confirmed what I had suspected all along: this was home.

And it remained that way, not just that evening, but in the days that followed. There was a consistency to it, a pattern of care and presence that established itself as normal. It was, I came to understand, what life was supposed to feel like.

I was learning more about Kitty every day. Her history explained her caution, her sudden reactions, and the way she measured every movement before committing to it. She had not always lived in a place like this. She had come from

somewhere louder, less stable, where mistakes were met with consequences and comfort was not guaranteed.

It had taken her time to adjust to being in a place of peace.

It had taken quite a while to learn to trust Cynthia, and even then, some doubt and uncertainty lingered. There were moments when Kitty still expected something to go wrong.

But somewhere between her caution and my search for family, we found a way to make it all work.

10

Looking back on what I've said so far—how I got my start, how I found my way into the right house at the right time, and how I managed, more or less single-handedly, to improve the general condition of everyone involved—it seems fair to call all of that a prelude.

Necessary, certainly, but still a prelude. Because the real story, the one worth telling in full, begins after all of that is settled, when I step into what would become a seventeen-year run as something like the central figure of the household, our house at 102 Mockingbird Lane, and, depending on how broadly you define these things, the surrounding territory as well.

I had, by that point, covered a fair amount of ground. Not just physically, though there had been some of that in my journey to this point, but in terms of circumstance. I had gone from being a stray briefly labeled "Boo" to someone who had identified, selected, and secured the proper arrangement. I found my father, added a mother to the structure, acquired a sister of mixed disposition, and established myself in a house that met, and in some cases exceeded, my grandest expectations.

There was space. There were options. You could sleep in one room or another depending on the mood or the temperature. The environment itself was warm when it needed to be, cool when the weather outside was sweltering, and there was a roof that performed its duties with consistency, keeping out both excess sun and unnecessary rain.

Meals arrived on schedule and treats appeared in between. Beyond all of that, there was steady and generous

attention. My parents provided it without reservation, and even Kitty, in her more cooperative moments, contributed to the general atmosphere.

Taken together, it amounted to a life that was not only stable, but, in many respects, ideal.

Which is where my story begins.

11

My dad's job was with a local produce company. It was the kind of job that required a person to begin his day at hour most reasonable folks would consider a violation of common sense. He got out of bed at two-thirty every morning so he could be at the warehouse by four, which was when the real business of the day started to take shape. That was the hour when grocery stores and restaurants all over town were opening and taking stock of what they had on hand, figuring out what they were short on, and calling in their orders to make sure their shelves and kitchens would be properly supplied for the day ahead.

My dad was the one who answered those calls. He wrote everything down, sorted it out, and turned it into a workable schedule for the four delivery trucks and their drivers who would head out on their routes just after sunrise. It wasn't a small task. There were details to keep straight, people depending on him to get everything right, and a rhythm to the whole thing that required him to stay sharp from the moment he picked up that first phone call until sometime mid-morning, when the rush finally eased and he could take a breath.

It wasn't an easy way to live, getting up like that six days a week, but he did it without complaint.

And I did it with him.

If he was getting up, then I was getting up. That's just the way it was. I followed him through the early routine of preparing for the day, the bathroom, the kitchen, the rocking chair by the window where he sat with his cup of black coffee. I stayed close by the whole time, making sure he understood he wasn't going through this ordeal alone. Then, when it came

time for him to leave, I took up my position at the bay window, my front paws propped up on the ledge so I could see him clearly as he walked out to his truck.

I made certain I was there when he started his ignition.

That mattered to me. I wanted to be the last thing he saw before he pulled out of the driveway, just so he knew I was thinking about him, that I was loyal, that I would be right there waiting when he came home again later that afternoon. It seemed like the kind of detail that made a difference in a man's day.

And once he was gone, I went back to bed.

My mother, being an elementary school teacher, didn't have to be up nearly as early. She didn't need to be at work until eight, so unless there was something unusual going on, she stayed in bed until around five-thirty. That gave me a little window to catch some more sleep, which I took advantage of without hesitation.

But when she did wake up, it was important that I be ready.

I made my way to the bedside as soon as I heard her stirring and positioned myself to receive the proper amount of attention required to start her day She would rub me, pat me, say a few kind words, and then I followed her through her own morning routine, much the same way I had with my dad.

The only difference was Kitty. In my opinion, she incorrectly felt she was entitled to the same level of attention at the same time, which meant I had to take certain measures to ensure the situation remained balanced. I positioned myself between her and my mother, shifting as necessary to block her access, which had the immediate effect of irritating her to no end.

I'll admit, it wasn't my most generous behavior.

But there was something about the way she reacted—the growling, the barking, the general outrage—that made it difficult not to continue. It had a certain entertainment value, especially that early in the morning.

Eventually, the noise would reach a point where my mother had enough of it and sent us both outside so she could have a few moments of peace. By then, I was perfectly fine with that outcome.

Because there were things to take care of in the yard.

I handled my responsibilities of marking territory and maintaining the grounds while Kitty devoted herself to her ongoing campaign against the local wildlife. She had a particular hatred for starlings, though I never did get a clear explanation as to why. It seemed personal.

After we'd been outside for fifteen minutes or so, I knew it was time for breakfast, and I'd go over to the door so I could be the first one inside. I was like that a lot in my life, a perpetual first-grader who always had to be first. Sure, I loved eating as much or more than anybody, but what I really enjoyed was to getting inside while Kitty was busy in the yard and then hiding behind the door to wait for my mother to come let my sister back inside. It was great. My tail would go back and forth a mile a minute and I'd lurk behind the door in breathless anticipation, waiting for Kitty to venture through a dreaded doorway that was traumatic enough to her already. I'd leap out when she finally got up enough courage to come through and scare her out of her already-foreboding wits. My mother would always say, "Floyd, that is so bad of you," but I could tell she loved it. She thought it was cute and about died laughing every morning when I did the same thing time and time again.

Now, my sister was no dummy, and after a few times she got to where she knew what was coming, how her little brother was hiding behind the door waiting to jump out at her when she passed through, so she tried waiting outside the door in hopes I'd prematurely lurch forward and reveal myself, but I was one patient rascal and I always stayed put until it was the precise moment for the evil deed to be done. There was no way I was going to allow Kitty to get by me in the morning without suffering another in a series of nervous breakdowns.

Now, as for Kitty and the way she was, there were reasons for all of it.

Her name, for one, didn't come out of nowhere.

When she first arrived, she was in a state that could best be described as unsettled. She had been brought home from a Wal-Mart parking lot, flea-infested and nervous, and her initial approach to life in the house consisted mainly of hiding under the dining room table or a patio table, anywhere she could remain out of reach.

Neither of my parents were able to get to her in those spots, so they had to coax her by talking to her or sliding food toward her, trying to convince her that coming out into the open might not be the worst thing in the world.

At some point, they realized they needed a name to call her by. My mother had ideas. Names from literature—Miranda from Shakespeare, Estella from Dickens, Emily from Faulkner—the kind of names that carried a certain weight. But none of them fit, and none of them seemed to make any difference in how Kitty responded.

My dad, seeing the situation for what it was, chose something simpler.

"Kitty," he said. "we'll call you Kitty."

And from that point on, that's what she was. It fit in a way the others didn't. There was something about the contradiction of it that made sense.

But even with a name, Kitty remained Kitty.

She was, without question, one of the most perceptive creatures I've ever known, and at the same time absolutely the most cautious. She evaluated everything—the sky, the ground, the air itself—as if it all might turn against her at any moment.

She studied the clouds, looking for signs of storms. She checked the fence line for weaknesses where something might get in. She sniffed plants as if they might decide to bite her. She listened for cars that could somehow veer off course and come crashing through the yard.

She was always watching. Always preparing. And yet, for all of that, she had an uncanny ability to know things before they happened. She could sense a storm long before it arrived, recognize the sound of a car and identify whether it belonged to my mom or my dad, and detect the presence of a stranger before they ever reached the door.

And she knew me. She could tell when I was about to do something I shouldn't. She'd look at me in a way that said don't even think about it.

I thought about it anyway and usually went ahead.

It took her a long time to accept my dad, even as long as he had been around her, fed her, talked to her.

Not because he gave her any reason not to trust him, but because he fit into a category she had already decided against. From the beginning, she had it in her head that males were to be avoided because they were dangerous, unpredictable, and not to be trusted. She held onto that belief with a kind of stubbornness that was hard to argue with.

I tried, in my own way, to explain things to her. It didn't help. See, I was a boy too.

12

After a while, without any of us quite noticing when the shift had taken place, we settled into one another and became something whole, something that felt less like a collection of lives and more like a single current moving forward. Time did not rush. It moved the way a calm tributary moves, steady and sure, widening as it goes until it joins something larger than itself. Days folded into weeks, weeks into months, and before I had the sense to mark it, a full year had passed and the calendar had turned again. Somewhere in all of that I had grown out of what I was and into what I was becoming, though no one could have convinced me of it then. In my heart I remained exactly as I had been, full of motion and wonder, certain that being the baby of the family was a condition that would hold forever.

Kitty, in her way, came around to me. Acceptance for her was not a sudden thing but a gradual softening, and once it arrived she took it upon herself to shape me as she believed I ought to be shaped. She offered guidance with a seriousness that suggested she believed herself uniquely qualified to explain the world, and although I had no intention of becoming anything like her, I found a certain pleasure in being chosen as her pupil. I listened when I could, or at least appeared to, though more than once I had to turn my head to hide a small laugh at the elaborate fears and rigid rules she carried with her. I tried to give her the respect she felt she deserved, but there were limits to my patience. Now and then the weight of her lessons became too much, and I would answer in the only language that felt natural to me. I would bump her off balance with my hindquarters, or seize one of her cherished toys and tear into it with all the enthusiasm of

youth while she watched in disbelief. It was never done out of cruelty. It was simply that her way of seeing the world could only be endured for so long before I had to remind both of us that life, as I understood it, was meant to be lived more freely. Even after all that time together, I could never quite resist the urge to spring out from behind a door just to watch her be startled and then scold me, her outrage as predictable as it was satisfying.

One thing I never tired of, not once, was the quiet awareness I had of my parents and the bond between them. I could sense it before it showed itself, a shift in the air, a kind of warmth that gathered before either of them made a move. It might come on a slow afternoon when the work of the day was done, or after they returned from an evening out, carrying with them the faint traces of wherever they had been. However it began, I always knew when it was coming, and I made it my business to be part of it. The idea of being left out never sat right with me. Togetherness, to my mind, was not optional. It was the whole point. I carried with me that simple, insistent urge to be first, to arrive before anyone else and claim my place, and so whenever they headed toward the bedroom I was already moving in that direction, determined not to be shut out by a closing door.

In the beginning, it was only me who joined them during those unplanned retreats. Kitty kept her distance, holding to her belief that the bedroom belonged to certain hours and certain conditions, and that anything outside of those rules was suspect. She would remain elsewhere, uneasy and alone, while the rest of us settled into an easy quiet together. Over time, though, curiosity and perhaps a touch of loneliness began to work on her. The problem, as always, was the doorway. To her it represented risk, a threshold behind

which anything might be waiting, including me. It took her a long while to gather the courage to cross it during those moments, but eventually she did. She would edge her way in, cautious and alert, and then, once satisfied that no ambush awaited her, she would settle into her bed. When all four of us were there, the room dim and still, the world outside held at bay, I would let out one of those long, contented sighs that seemed to rise from somewhere deep within me. It was a sound shaped by every good thing I had known, and it carried with it the simple truth that, for that moment at least, nothing could be better.

I could sense my family's smiles even when I could not see them, and not long after, we would all drift off together.

Life in what my mother called the Happy Abode unfolded in that same gentle rhythm. Each day brought something good with it, and each passing week seemed to offer another reason to mark the time. Birthdays arrived in their turn, hers in April, my dad's in June, Kitty's in September, and mine in November, a date chosen with care and a bit of guesswork. There were anniversaries, holidays, and small celebrations invented on the spot simply because we were all there together. The past, whatever it had been for each of us, felt distant and irrelevant. What mattered was the life we had stepped into, one that seemed determined to remain bright.

Easter meant baskets set aside just for us, filled with treats and bones and small portions of vegetables that we accepted as a kind of dessert. Thanksgiving brought slices of meat we gladly received. Christmas came with its own rituals, stockings hung and gifts arranged beneath the tree. My parents told us that Santa Claus was responsible, that our good behavior had been noted and rewarded, but I knew

better. I had watched the preparations when no one thought I was paying attention, had seen the careful way my father filled each stocking on Christmas Eve. I never revealed it. There was no reason to take that pleasure away from him, and no need to disturb Kitty with truths she had no interest in hearing. Her mind carried enough burdens already without adding one more.

For all the ways I teased her, I cared for Kitty in a way that ran deeper than any of those small acts might suggest. It seemed to me that part of my purpose was to look after her, to stand where she could not and face what she would not. Not everyone is made for that sort of work, but I believed I was. From the earliest moment I could remember, there had been a sense within me that I was meant for something, that my place in the world carried with it a responsibility I did not fully understand but never questioned.

I realize how that sounds. A dog is not expected to think in such terms, to consider purpose or design or any higher order of things, yet what I felt was not something I had reasoned out. It was simply there, as clear as any instinct, telling me that I had been shaped for a role that extended beyond my own small life. I carried that awareness with me without needing to explain it, and it guided me in ways I only came to understand later.

If someone chooses to interpret that as a claim that I have been sent here with intention, that I was meant to bring something good into the lives I touched, I would not argue with them. It is as close to the truth as any words I have.

Because before all of this, before the house and the names and the sense of belonging, I had left one place and wandered into another. There had been hardship along the way, moments that could have turned out differently, but I

was led, whether by instinct or something greater, to the people who would become my parents and to the sister who would challenge and complete my days. Together we formed something steady and bright, a small world set apart.

I never needed to be anything more than what I was. I did not have to prove myself in grand ways or perform feats that would be remembered beyond our walls. All I needed was a place to belong and a name to answer to, and with those in hand, everything else seemed to fall into place just as it was meant to.

13

There were many things that felt new to me in those first months when we were all together and learning how to move through the same space as if we had always belonged there, but if I had to choose one stretch of time that stands out above the rest, it would be that first holiday season. It came on gradually, in ways that were easy to miss if you were not paying attention, though I always was. My mother began bringing things into the house that had not been there before, placing them on doors and along the walls, wreaths and strands of silvery icicles that shimmered when the light caught it, bits of holly that carried a scent I did not yet recognize but quickly came to associate with something important. I remember my father standing in the doorway one evening, looking around at it all and saying, "Well now, it's beginning to look like something in here," and my mother answering from across the room, "It's called Christmas, you might try getting into the spirit of it."

My mother had some wooden figurines that were about two feet tall. I think there were five of them in total that she placed against the walls by the entrances to rooms or at the top of the stairway. They were soon all over the house, soldiers dressed in red who always stood at attention, and it took me quite a few days before I decided they weren't real and weren't going to harm me. Kitty, naturally, was even more suspicious of them than I was, and it was me who had to explain to her finally that she had no cause for fear because they weren't going to come to life and jump out at her anytime soon. She also didn't like the singing Santa Claus that hung on the wall by the kitchen, the one who sang "Jingle Bells" every time somebody passed by him, which didn't happen with us

because we were short and low to the ground but did with my dad who finally got tired of being sung to every time he passed by and removed the batteries from Santa's rear end so he could have peace and quiet again. But even with Santa going silent it didn't help Kitty much from being wary of him up there on the wall, and when it came time for us to get our dinner in the kitchen she had to deliberate some before finally gaining enough gumption to dash across the kitchen tiles to her bowl, where she ate as fast as she could while keeping one eye on Santa up on the wall behind her, making sure he wasn't fixing to come down and try to steal her food.

I did not know what Christmas was then, at least not in any way that made sense to me. I had been alive for nearly a year and must have lived through it once before, but in that earlier time I had not been allowed inside, and so whatever had taken place had done so beyond my sight and beyond my understanding. I had never seen a tree brought into a living room and dressed up like a living thing made of light. I had never heard the songs or seen decorations. It was as if a separate world had been set down inside our home, and I was being asked to accept it without question.

There were other things as well, decorations of every shape and size that seemed to multiply as the days passed. Wreaths hung from doors, tinsel caught the light in shifting ways, and small arrangements appeared on tables and shelves. One of these held my attention more than the rest, a wooden scene with animals gathered around a man and a woman and a child lying in a bed, a faint glow surrounding the child's head. I remember my mother adjusting it one evening and saying softly, "There we go, just right," as if it mattered more than the others. I did not understand what it represented, only that it seemed important. Taken together,

all these additions created a sense of unfamiliarity that was difficult to ignore. I did not know whether they were temporary or permanent, whether I would need to adjust to them or simply endure them until they were gone.

Just as I began to settle into this new arrangement, convinced that I could adapt if given enough time, something else arrived that changed everything. One afternoon my parents carried a large box into the living room and set it down near the window. “Here we go,” my father said, rubbing his hands together, and my mother answered, “Don’t rush it, we’ve got to do it right.” I watched from a distance as they opened the box and began removing pieces from within, green branches that looked as though they had been taken from the trees outside. They fitted these branches into a central pole, building upward until the shape of a tree took form inside the house. Then came the lights, thin strands that they wrapped around the branches, followed by ornaments pulled from boxes and unwrapped from paper. “Careful with that one,” my mother said more than once. “It’s fragile.” My father would nod and answer, “I’ve got it, don’t worry.”

He plugged a cord into the wall and the tree came alive in a way I had never seen before. Light spread through it, soft and steady, casting a glow across the room as evening settled in. “Well?” my father said, stepping back. “What do you think?” My mother smiled and said, “I think it’s perfect.” I stood there with Kitty beside me, both of us alert and uncertain, trying to make sense of what we were seeing.

It was then that my parents called us into the den. “Come on in here, you two,” my mother said, her voice bright with excitement. I moved first, as I always did, nudging Kitty ahead of me with more force than I intended. She stumbled forward, scrambling to regain her footing as she slid toward

the base of the tree, and my father reached out just in time to steady her. “Whoa there,” he said, laughing a little. I came bounding in behind her, trying to pass her so I could be first, even as I felt a flicker of hesitation at the sight of the towering shape of the new tree before me.

What I did not yet realize was that this was only the beginning. Soon after, my mother brought out stockings, four of them, and hung them along the mantel above the fireplace. “Now these stay right here,” she said, pointing to them, “and you don’t bother them.” My father added, “Santa’s going to need those.” I listened as they explained how on Christmas Eve while we slept, Santa Claus would come and fill the stockings with all sorts of things. “You better be good,” my father said with a grin. “Santa is always watching.”

Christmas morning, when it came, was everything that had been promised and more. “All right, let’s see what we’ve got,” my father said as we gathered in the living room, and my mother laughed as we moved from one thing to the next. There were chocolate bars and cans of peanuts for my parents and squeaky stuffed animals and chewy snacks for Kitty and me. Later, as my parents to visit with my mom’s family and my dad’s sister, my mother said, “We won’t be gone too long,” and my father added, “You two hold down the fort.” Kitty and I watched them go, then settled into the quiet that followed, which felt like a return to something familiar.

When they came back, the house filled again, this time with people whose presence I found difficult to navigate. “Come on in, come on in,” my mother said as the door opened again and again. Voices overlapped, children ran through the rooms, and I heard my father say at one point, “Careful now, don’t knock anything over.” It was a lot to take in, and though I did my best to remain part of it, I found myself slipping away

when I could, grateful when at last the house grew still again. I didn't know my parents had so many friends and relatives until that day.

Over time I came to understand that holidays brought with them a certain kind of disorder, a temporary shift away from the routines that defined our days. "It's just the season," my mother would say when things felt out of place, and my father would nod and answer, "It'll settle back down soon enough." They were always right. Kitty and I returned to our patterns, carrying with us the memory of what we had experienced but preferring the steadiness of what came after.

Years later there came a Christmas that felt quite different from those that had come before. It was during the time when something called Covid-19 had spread through the world, changing the way people lived. I remember my mother standing in the kitchen, saying, "We're going to have to stay home," and my father answering, "We'll make it work." Groceries arrived at our door, and I heard her say more than once, "Wipe everything down," while my father replied, "I'm on it." At first their being home all the time felt like a gift, but as the days went on I could sense the weight they carried. "I just don't know," my mother said one evening, and my father answered quietly, "We'll get through it."

That season is not one I revisit often. It held within it a heaviness that does not belong with the others.

What I remember more clearly took place years earlier, during a winter morning not long after the new year. My father had risen early even though it was his day off and was outside warming up my mother's car while she got ready for work. It was cold enough that the air seemed to hold its breath. When he started the engine, he heard something and said aloud, "What in the world is that?" A moment later I

heard him call out, “Hey, come here a second,” and when my mother answered from inside, “What is it?” he said, “You’re not going to believe this.”

When he came through the door, he was holding a small, trembling puppy. “Look what I found,” he said, and my mother stopped where she was and took it gently into her hands. “Oh my goodness,” she said softly. “Where did you come from?” The puppy looked at her, then at me, her eyes uncertain but searching.

“We’re going to have to find out who she belongs to,” my mother said after a moment. “Somebody’s missing this little thing.”

“She’s a girl,” my father said. “And her name is Penelope.”

My mother looked at him. “You’ve already named her?”

“Well, she told me,” he said, as if that explained everything. “She’s intelligent and loyal and faithful, and just look at her. Have you ever seen a prettier girl?”

“I think this is your way of telling me we have another dog,” my mother said, though she was smiling as she spoke.

“We can’t just let her go a day longer without a name,” he replied. “That wouldn’t be right.”

My mother held the puppy close, and the puppy licked her cheek. “All right,” she said at last. “I guess we have a new dog. But she’s yours. If there’s any trouble, it’s on you.”

“Now wait a minute,” my father said. “You’re in charge of the girl dogs. You had Kitty first. I’ve got Floyd. That’s the arrangement.”

“Floyd belongs to me too,” she said. “He’s my pretty boy. You don’t get to keep him all for yourself.”

“You always win,” he said, though there was no complaint in it.

“I’m supposed to,” she answered, still holding the puppy.

They moved closer then, drawn together in that way I had come to recognize, and I did not need to hear anything more to know how this would unfold. My mother said something about being late, my father answered that it would be all right, and I turned at once and made my way down the hall at a steady pace, intent on reaching the bedroom ahead of them, because some things never change, and being first was still number one on my list.

14

With the arrival of Penelope, the yellow Labrador who had been pulled shivering from beneath the car on that cold January morning, the membership of our household rose to five, and for the first time the balance tilted in favor of the girls. There were three of them now, my mother, Kitty, and the newcomer, while my father and I made up the remaining two. My father seemed pleased with the arrangement in a quiet sort of way. It didn't really matter much to me being outnumbered this way, since now I could be one of the men of the house and my dad and I could be in allegiance to each other against the girls. Girls were okay with me, to tell the truth. I loved my mother and I loved Kitty, and I was certain I would come to love Penelope too, just as soon as Kitty and I got through teaching her the ropes and making sure she understood what was required of her being a part of our family. Penelope did have a tendency to want to play a large part of the time, which was okay so long as she didn't disturb my nap times too much, but her zealous activity got under Kitty's skin there at the outset, the nipping and the biting each time Kitty tried to take a step anywhere, to go outside and regard the heavens or smell flowers or tell any starlings around how much she despised them and what was likely to happen if she ever caught up with one of them. Kitty had a hard time concentrating on her usual duties with a wild and super-charged yellow labrador racing around her at all times challenging her to skirmishes or races and finally inspiring Kitty to tear into her and exhibit her molars and tell her new charge how proper behavior was supposed to be followed around this homestead, all of which

worked perhaps three minutes at the maximum before Penelope was possessed with puppy demons again and ready to begin tampering with her older sister once more.

It didn't take long before Kitty reached her limit. One afternoon, after being harried across the yard for what must have been the tenth time, she spun around and planted her feet on Penelope's snout, baring her teeth in a way that left no room for misunderstanding.

"That is quite enough," she seemed to declare, her body stiff with authority.

Penelope skidded to a halt, surprised but not entirely deterred, and for a moment there was stillness between them. I watched from a short distance, curious to see how this would unfold. Kitty issued what amounted to a lecture on proper behavior, and for perhaps three minutes it seemed to take hold. Penelope lowered herself, ears back, as if absorbing the lesson. Then, as if some switch had been flipped deep within her, she sprang forward again, all restraint forgotten, and resumed her campaign with renewed enthusiasm.

I would be less than honest if I claimed that I found no enjoyment in this. Kitty had been the architect of my own education when I first arrived, and while I had come to respect her in my way, I had never entirely abandoned my fondness for testing her patience. Now, with Penelope in the picture, there were new possibilities. There were times when I could sit back and watch the two of them, a quiet observer to the unfolding chaos, and other times when I could join in, turning a simple annoyance into a full-scale operation.

"You get her from that side," I might signal to Penelope with a glance, while I circled around to the other, and together we would press the matter until Kitty was fully engaged.

When that happened, the yard became a true playground. Kitty would give chase, first after one of us and then the other, her focus shifting as opportunity presented itself.

"Come back here," her movements seemed to say, though neither of us had any intention of doing so. I took particular pride in my ability to evade capture, drawing on instincts that allowed me to stop short, pivot, and change direction in ways that left my pursuers scrambling. There were moments when I could bring them both after me at once, and those were the finest of all. I would lead them just far enough, then cut sharply, causing them to collide or tangle in their efforts to adjust. My favorite maneuver involved slipping behind one of them and using my weight to nudge one into the other, sending them both sprawling in a confusion of limbs, after which I would dart in for a quick nip before retreating to safety.

Not all these adventures took place outdoors. There were times when the same spirit carried over into the house, usually when my parents were away and we were left to our own devices. It did not always end well. A table might be bumped, a chair knocked askew, or something left in a neat arrangement reduced to disorder. On one occasion a stack of papers was scattered across the floor, and when my parents returned, my mother stood in the doorway and said,

"What happened here?"

My father looked around and shook his head. "I don't even want to know."

I did my best to appear uninvolved, adopting an expression of mild concern as if I too had just discovered the scene. If blame was to be assigned, it was only natural that it should fall elsewhere.

Even so, there were moments when Penelope's behavior exceeded anything I had known in my own earlier days. I recall one afternoon when she turned her attention to the coffee table in the living room, a piece my father had given my mother as an anniversary present which carried a certain importance. By the time anyone realized what she was doing, the corners had been chewed in a way that suggested a level of carpentry expertise I could not help but admire, even as I recognized the consequences it would bring.

"What in the world happened here?" my father said when he saw it, and my mother answered, "I think we both know."

Penelope, for her part, seemed untroubled, moving on from that accomplishment to other targets. Books were sampled, shoes investigated, and at one point even a set of vinyl records was reduced to something unrecognizable.

"She's like a goat," my father said, holding up what remained of an album cover, and my mother replied, "She's a puppy. This is what puppies do."

I exchanged a look with Kitty that suggested we both found this to be an extraordinary interpretation.

Those first six months of Penelope's life with us were remarkable in their intensity. She grew quickly, not only in size but in confidence, and as she did, her interactions with Kitty took on a new dimension. What had once been a simple imbalance of energy became a contest of will, with each of them asserting herself in different ways. From my position between them, I found a certain advantage. I could allow Kitty to maintain the appearance of authority, nodding along with her expectations while knowing that I could navigate around them when it suited me. At the same time, I felt a measure of responsibility toward Penelope, who, for all her enthusiasm,

lacked the experience to understand the finer points of our household. There were moments when I would draw her aside, away from Kitty's watchful eye, and offer what guidance I could.

"Listen," I would suggest in my own fashion, "sometimes you have to let her think she's in charge." Penelope would tilt her head, considering this, and I would continue, "It's easier that way. You go along with it, and when it gets to be too much, you just remind her you beg to disagree."

She seemed to take this to heart, though her interpretation often leaned toward immediate action rather than careful consideration.

I cannot deny that I found their encounters entertaining. There was something about the way they engaged with one another, the sudden shifts from stillness to motion, that held my attention in a way few things did. One moment Penelope would have the upper hand, pressing Kitty down and covering her with enthusiastic gestures that bordered on overwhelming affection, and the next she would be racing across the yard with Kitty close behind, determination etched into every movement.

"You asked for it," Kitty might as well have been saying, and Penelope, for all her speed, did not always escape unscathed.

There were afternoons when I would simply lie down in the grass and watch it all unfold, a spectator to what I considered the finest display available. I might have had access to any number of diversions, but none could have matched the unpredictability and energy of those moments. I would let out a low sound of amusement, satisfied in the knowledge that I was witnessing something that belonged

entirely to myself and my family, a small and lively drama that played out repeatedly in different forms, never quite the same, always worth seeing.

15

Spring came on in a way that felt almost deliberate that year, as though the season had been waiting just out of sight to step forward and take hold of everything at once. The light stretched longer each day until it seemed there was hardly any night left to speak of, and with that slow and steady expansion of warmth came a change in the world around our house that I had never fully noticed before, or at least never understood in the way I came to understand it then. What had once appeared to be an ordinary yard revealed itself to be something far more crowded and alive, as if the ground itself had been holding its breath through the winter and was now exhaling all at once.

Creatures began to appear in numbers that felt almost improbable, moving along the edges of the property and through the spaces between trees and stones, slipping in and out of view with a kind of quiet purpose. Squirrels darted across branches with more urgency than I had ever seen, birds gathered in clusters that filled the air with constant motion, and along the ground there were smaller forms that revealed themselves only in passing, scales and tails and quick movements that suggested a life happening just beyond my ability to track it. There were raccoons and opossums at night, and once or twice I caught sight of deer moving along the far edge of the yard as though they had every right to be there.

I had known, of course, that there was life beyond the walls of our home. Anyone with eyes and ears could not help but know that much. But there is a difference between knowing something exists and understanding the fullness of it, and that spring brought with it a kind of revelation that

made me see the world outside our door as something far more complex than I had ever given it credit for.

Naturally, it all began with Kitty.

It started small, though even then there was a sharpness to it that hinted at what was to come. Her attention fixed on the starlings first, and she watched them with a focus that felt less like curiosity and more like resentment, as though their very presence offended her in some personal way. She would sit for long stretches of time, body low and still, eyes tracking every movement they made, and when they took flight she followed them with a tension that remained long after they were gone.

Before long, that attention widened.

It was no longer just the starlings. Anything that moved outside the boundary of the house fell under her scrutiny. Squirrels became targets. The small reptiles that lingered near the rock garden were stalked with a patience that suggested she had all the time in the world to wait them out. Even shadows, if they shifted the wrong way, seemed enough to draw her interest.

Penelope, as was her nature, did not hesitate to follow suit. She even took it to the next level by coming inside and hanging out by the picture window in the living room and voicing threats and her displeasure at anyone passing by in the street, the mailman, the children disembarking from the bus after school, the neighbors who dared to jog or walk their own dogs for exercise at any time of the day. It got to be so hectic and noisy most times it was hard for yours truly to get a nap in without being awakened by Penelope having a fit and Kitty joining in with her as a duet.

This a routine.

Until the night it changed.

It was a night that began like any other, with the house settling into stillness and everyone finding their place in sleep, and for a time there was nothing to suggest it would be any different from any night that had come before. But somewhere in the middle of it, I woke with a feeling I could not easily explain, a kind of quiet insistence that something was not right.

I awoke in my bed because there was something in my brain telling me that something wasn't right. I rose as quietly as I could and journeyed out of the bedroom and down the hall to the dining room and kitchen. The house was still and the only sound I could hear was the ticking of the grandfather clock, but I knew it that wasn't what had awakened me. I stood at attention for a good minute, cocking my head to pick up the least disturbance. There was only one light on, but I could see everything crystal clear. If anything made the slightest move I would be on it in a flash.

I did not know what it was at first. There was no sound that I could immediately point to, no movement that revealed itself, but the feeling within me remained, pressing against my senses in a way that would not allow me to ignore it.

The grandfather clock ticked steadily, marking the seconds with a rhythm that had become so familiar I barely noticed it most of the time, but beneath it there was something else, something faint and irregular that did not belong. I stood there for a long moment, head tilted, listening for it again.

Then I heard it.

A scratching sound.

It was not loud, but distinct enough that once I recognized it I couldn't mistake it for anything else. It came from the direction of the kitchen, and after a moment's hesitation I began to move that way, placing each step with

care as though whatever was making that sound might hear me in return.

As I drew closer, the sound stopped. I froze in place, listening.

Nothing.

Then it came again, a little sharper this time, and from the way it carried I could tell it was coming from above the oven, somewhere within the vent where no living thing ought to be.

I stared at it, trying to make sense of what I was hearing.

I inched toward the oven with a low growl in my throat, a sound so terrifying it even scared me. So far in my life I had never had the occasion to announce my presence with such ferocity. Had I not known better I would have thought that some dangerous entity other than me was preparing to put a stop to whatever this usurper was with its plans for home invasion.

I wondered what destruction I might be capable of to protect the holy soil of my family and myself. I had never until this moment thought of myself as a killer. I was adept at catching flies as they buzzed around the house, snapping them in mid-flight with my jaws and swallowing them down my throat before they knew what hit them. Sometimes my parents called me Renfield, the lunatic from "Dracula," the one who got sent to the asylum for eating flies and spiders, but that was as far as my homicidal tendencies had ever gone.

The sound shifted again, moving upward, as though whatever was there had taken notice of my approach and was reconsidering its position. I inched closer still, my attention fixed on the vent, my mind beginning to fill with possibilities I had never seriously entertained before. It was one thing for

the creatures outside to move through the yard, to pass along the edges of our space and test its boundaries, but this was something else entirely. This was an intrusion, a crossing from one world into another, and I understood in that moment that it required a response.

Inside this house, I thought, things were different.

Inside this house, they would have to deal with me.

I let my growl deepen, having it fill the space in a way that felt both unfamiliar and strangely natural. I wondered if I should go back to the bedroom and bark and wake up my dad to alert him to the danger of an imminent attack, but once or twice before in my puppyhood I'd awakened him because I had to go do my business outside—maybe I'd eaten a few treats too many and had a little case of puppy diarrhea or heard a fire truck or a police car go by with sirens shrieking full blast and the high decimal had startled me awake. I'd jumped up on the bed without giving it a little more consideration, and those were the few times he'd ever gotten irritated with me and scolded me. I didn't like when that happened. I only wanted to be rubbed and cooed to and told what a good and pretty boy I was all the time, so I tried to be careful and keep it that way. Anyway, I thought about the consequences long and hard before I decided I would attempt to take matters into my own paws all on my lonesome. I don't know if I was ever as brave as I tried acting sometimes, but now and then moments come along when a fellow must forego his fears and step up to the plate, and this was my turn.

I stepped closer to the oven, positioning myself as best I could, though I was aware of my limitations. I was not built for height, and even standing upright I could not reach the place where the sound was coming from, but that did not mean I was without options.

Since I couldn't reach the intruder with my death-like bite I decided I'd scare the pants off him so badly he'd vamoose and skedaddle back to where he'd first come from.

So, I barked. I cussed this would-be burglar out but good.

Get out, I said. If you know what's good for you. Your life is close to being over, do you realize that? If I get to where I can reach you then it's curtains for you.

That was when everything broke at once.

My barking, louder than I had intended, carried through the house, and within moments I heard movement behind me, footsteps approaching, voices stirring.

"What is it, Floyd?"

My father's voice came up behind me. He wasn't the only one who came running out from the bedroom to see what was wrong. My mom was there along with Kitty and Penelope, so I figured I'd made a lot of noise. Both my sisters started barking along with me in three-part harmony, like they were afraid I was going to get all the credit for being a hero while they'd done nothing but sleep through it.

Dad stepped up beside me and reached toward the stove pipe and gave it a tentative shake, and at once we heard movement retreating upward, quick and certain.

"There's something in there all right," he said.

"What are we going to do?" my mother asked.

My father let out a breath and glanced toward the clock.

"I guess we stay up," he said. "No sense going back to bed now."

Then he looked down at me and rested his hand gently on my head.

"Good boy," he said. "Thanks for keeping us safe."

I was proud of myself that moment. I felt grown up of a sudden, a force to be reckoned with. In my mind I began fancying the idea that I was at this moment and would continue to be in my coming life one of an elite personage of a canine exalted above all others of my breed. I would be the highest line of royalty and rule here in my kingdom for all the years to come. And somehow, I told myself, I will be the greatest of them all. I will be so great a king that I will never die.

It turned out it was opossums that were plaguing us. There was a colony living upstairs in the insulation, and the sound I'd heard was the mother coming down the pipe looking for a place to have her babies. She didn't get the chance for that to happen, because she ended up getting stuck in the pipe and unable to get out. In a day or so she died and began to stink up the house. A wildlife man had to take the pipe down above the oven and pry the dead body loose. I remember when the carcass fell from the exhaust and landed on the oven range. Kitty and Penelope acted like they wanted to get hold of it and tear it to pieces, but not me. I knew it was dead and there was nothing to kill anymore. Plus, it stank. God, did it stink. I wanted no part of it.

In the end the wood had to be replaced around the roof and the attic insulation had to be sucked out and new insulation blown in. My mother spent about a week sanitizing the oven and the kitchen until all traces and remnants of the mother opossum were gone. Me, I didn't let on so much, but I was kind of traumatized by the whole incident. About once a month after that, I found myself waking up in the middle of the night and taking a trip around the house making sure everything was safe and secure and me and my family were the only living things inside the walls.

There was hardly a night that went by I wasn't up and out of my bed for a while taking a trip around the house making certain everything was jake. It got to where I woke up automatically as if an alarm had gone off in my head, and there I'd go, sniffing along the baseboards, peering out the window to see if I saw anything hiding in the darkness, or simply coming to a halt in every room and standing transfixed listening to see if any kind of unusual noise came from anywhere around. I'd inspect every door and closet, use my nose to push back the shower curtain to make sure someone wasn't hiding there, stop below the attic stairs tucked up into the ceiling to determine if any wildlife had managed to find a way in again. All this usually took about fifteen minutes to accomplish, and then I'd go back to bed until my dad's alarm went off, when I'd get up and go out and sit with him while he had his coffee, doze a little by the door until he was ready to leave for work, watch him go down the driveway and feel a little sad to see him go, and then head back to the bedroom to catch another hour of shuteye until it was time for my mom to get up.

16

Spring and summer weather had always carried a certain meaning in our house, and if I am going to tell it correctly, I must begin with Kitty, because nearly everything that had to do with storms or loud noises circled back to her in one way or another. I had already seen how she reacted the first time a storm rolled in after I came to live there, back when everything was still new between us and she had not yet decided what to make of me or my dad. She tolerated me sooner than she did him, and I always figured that was because I was at least a dog like her, while he belonged to that other category she did not trust, the kind that walked upright and carried with them the memory of something she never spoke about but never forgot either.

Even so, there came a moment when something shifted for her, and it happened during one of those early storms when my mom was away and the sky turned dark in a hurry. The thunder rolled in long and low, and I watched her try to hold herself together before she finally gave in and went to my dad, climbing up into his lap as if she had nowhere else to go. He did not rush her or make a fuss, but simply rested his hand on her and spoke softly until she settled, and from that day on she made an exception for him that she never extended to anyone else.

But her fear never left her.

Rain alone was enough to make her uneasy, but when the wind picked up and the sky began to flash, she would start to tremble in a way that seemed to come from deep inside her, as if the sound of thunder reached into a place she could not defend. Whenever it came, she abandoned whatever comfort she had been enjoying and went straight to my dad, because

there was no substitute for the safety she believed she found there.

As bad as storms were on her part, fireworks were even worse. Kitty absolutely lost her marbles whenever the Fourth of July or New Year's Eve came around. One of the few bad things about our house was that it was in a neighborhood full of folks who liked setting off fireworks whenever the opportunity arose, and the Fourth and New Year's Eve were holy nights for them. It didn't matter that in the county where we lived the possession of and the shooting of any kind of firework or explosive material was illegal and punishable as a misdemeanor crime. No one paid the first bit of attention to the law and the police were far too busy those nights trying keep the streets safe from drunken drivers and control the partygoers who descended on the downtown area to drink and revel and perhaps murder one another. So, it was fair game for anyone with the inclination to crack eardrums or shatter nerves and outright disturb the peace on those occasions. They would begin discharging their arsenals just after sunset and continue the crescendo until the desired level of fortissimo was reached late at night. The real problem with that was that once they reached that high mark of loud noise they did their best to remain there. The deafening and unpredictable series of varying kinds of blasts and booms drove Kitty into a frenzy. It was impossible for her to remain still or calm during these assaults on her ears and nerves. She would pace in circles around the room, hide in her crate which for a few seconds before emerging to pace once more and pant and jump up into my dad's lap, then take off to begin the entire frenetic procedure again. My dad tried turning the volume on the television up or playing The Beatles at full decibel on his stereo. He even tried pulling out his old electric guitar and

hooking it up to a battered amplifier and mimicking Jimi Hendrix playing "The Star-Spangled Banner." But nothing would really help Kitty. She was in a hell of her very own.

Luckily, my parents were not party animals. By the time they got married all that restless rambunctious spirit of youth was pretty much gone from them. They weren't interested anymore in going out on the town or drinking themselves senseless at night restaurants or concerts or night clubs, so most of the time they settled down to dinner at home and a night in their recliners in the den to read or watch television until bedtime. This kind of lifestyle meant that most of the time, when a violent storm came our way or our neighbors were simulating D-Day shooting off fireworks, my parents were home and around for my two sisters to seek solace and comfort from. Generally, this meant that Kitty would be in my dad's lap and Penelope, finding no room in the inn with her father because of Kitty's presence, would choose to go to my mother for security and quiver and shake there in her lap too. It was kind of funny to look at, since Penelope had grown so much since her puppy days that she fairly well covered my mother up completely when she jumped up into her lap, with about all you could see of my mother were two eyes peeking out under Penelope's body.

Me, I was always pretty brave. Fireworks didn't bother me much, mainly because I knew where they were coming from and I had the idea that however loud and frequent they were for a time, sooner or later they would stop because the supply of explosives had run out, because most people couldn't afford to spend too much money on fireworks in those days, not and expect to eat and buy gasoline and provide for their families in an acceptable manner. Of course, there were those nutsos who'd go out and blow a fortune on

fireworks and start shooting them off the first of July or at noon on New Year's Eve and continue doing so until the wee small hours until they either decimated their supply or fell asleep holding a cherry bomb, but really, those folks were in short supply in the grand scheme of things.

Storms, too, I could manage.

It was not that I enjoyed them, but I carried with me a belief that had settled into place early on, a quiet certainty that nothing terribly bad was going to happen to me as long as I was where I was supposed to be. I could not say exactly where that belief came from, only that it had taken root when I first found my dad and realized that I belonged somewhere, and from that point forward it stayed with me, steady and reliable.

There were limits to that, of course.

When the storms grew strong enough to knock out the power and the house fell dark, my mother would insist that we go down to the basement, and that was a different matter altogether. It was not the storm itself that bothered me then, but the disruption of everything familiar, the movement from the comfort of the den to that cold, hard space below.

I never cared for it.

The concrete floor offered no comfort, and no matter how I tried to settle myself I could not find a position that felt right. Often I found myself pacing, moving from one end of the room to the other, checking corners, sniffing along the edges, making sure there was nothing there that should not be. I walked back and forth making sure there weren't any animals from outside taking shelter there with us or there was no danger of the basement springing a leak and water getting in. In case I haven't mentioned it, I never liked getting wet the least little bit. I didn't like baths or getting caught in a downpour or having any kind of liquid spilled on me. Water

was made to be drank and that was it. I didn't need it messing up my pretty fur. I'm still traumatized by those times when my mom decided it was time for me to have a bath. I had to go to great lengths to hide and make myself scarce until the notion of such an act passed. Sure, I always felt better after the bath was over, but it seemed like a lot of trouble going through such an ordeal when as soon as it was done I'd go out in the yard and wallow in the grass until I got my adorable aroma back again.

Snow, though rare, was another matter entirely. Where we lived, it did not fall often, but when it did it brought everything to a standstill, closing schools and keeping people home, turning the day into something unexpected. My mother would stay home with us, which meant extra attention and more time together, and that part of it I appreciated.

What I didn't appreciate was how my mother would inevitably get the idea that we all had to go out in the backyard and walk around in the snow so she could take pictures and watch Kitty and Penelope romp around and chase each other like this was the greatest thing they'd ever engaged in. Well, sorry to say, but that wasn't the way I felt one little iota. My delicate paws got cold and my tummy, already so low to the ground it was in danger of scraping against it, sunk down in the snow and the ice and snowflakes collected against me and it was all I could do to survive until I could get back inside the house and warm up and stop shivering. Walking in a winter wonderland was not the least bit of fun for me but was more like a punishment for a crime I never committed. And to make things worse, my mother thought my reaction was altogether cute and funny and about fell over laughing at me.

"My poor little Pretty Boy Floyd," she giggled. "You have got to be the most delicate dog who ever lived.

Well, it wasn't that I was so delicate or spoiled or anything like that. It was just I was smart and had sense enough to know that being inside all warm and cozy beat the dickens out of freezing to death. I didn't see why I had to suffer when I didn't have to, but you couldn't tell my sisters that. They weren't as intelligent as me.

So, that was how it was in our house.

Kitty with her storms, Penelope with her boundless energy, my mother with her laughter, and my dad steady through it all, providing the kind of presence that made everything else feel manageable, no matter what the weather or the world outside decided to bring.

17

The day would come when my sisters and I would be hitched up on leashes and escorted to the car to make our annual visit to the vet for a checkup. I always knew from the start what was going on, but it was as if the world was ending to my sisters. Kitty would act as if she was being carted back to Wal-Mart where her mother rescued her when she was a puppy, shaking and trembling and doing everything in her power to run away from the fate that awaited her. She would dart under tables and duck behind chairs and do her best to keep from being apprehended, until she was finally hemmed up in a corner with no place to go, then get transported out to the car to shiver and shake all the way to the vet's office. Penelope would observe her older sister's behavior and decide this was the way she was supposed to behave too, so she'd find her own tables to dart under and chairs to duck behind, even though after a while she got too big to fit under tables without knocking them askance or hide behind a chair without her butt or hind legs sticking out. So it generally didn't take much of an effort to catch her and get her walked out to the car and up into the back seat with the rest of us.

I, on the other hand, saw no reason to behave like my sisters. I understood the trip was unavoidable. While my sisters ran and hid, I stayed where I was and waited.

"Look at him," my mother would say. "Such a good boy."

I walked over on my own and let her fasten the leash without a fuss. There was no need for chasing or coaxing. I believed my behavior spoke for itself. Anyone paying attention could see that I was not the type to run off or cause trouble.

"He knows how to act," my father would say.

We went to a veterinarian who lived close to the house. My parents trusted him at first, but that did not last long. There was something about him that did not sit right with them.

"He said not to pour water down our dogs' ears," my mother said once, shaking her head. "Like we were planning to."

It was not the kind of advice that inspired confidence. Before long, they decided to find someone else.

The change in veterinarians came after something happened to me when I was still young. I believe I was around five years old. One day, a large bump appeared along my side. Not long after that, my stomach began to hurt. I had trouble keeping my food down, which was not like me at all.

"He's not himself," my father said.

"We need to take him in for a visit," my mother replied.

At the office, the doctor examined me carefully. He listened to my heart and pressed along my side.

"We're going to take an x-ray," he said.

I did not know what that meant, but I was taken into another room and positioned in a way that felt strange. After some time, the results came back, and the mood shifted.

"It's a tumor," the doctor said. "We don't know if it's dangerous yet, but it should be removed."

My parents were clearly concerned.

"He'll be okay, right?" my mother asked.

"We'll take good care of him," the doctor said.

I was put to sleep for the operation. I can't say what happened during it, only that I woke up afterward feeling better than before. The pain was gone. Whatever had been wrong was no longer there.

"You're alright, my Pretty Boy," my mother said.

My parents were relieved. I could see it in the way they looked at me.

From that point on, we went to that same veterinarian. The drive was longer, but I did not mind. I preferred knowing that I was being looked after by someone who knew what he was doing. The only thing I did not care for was the patch of fur they had shaved from my side during my operation.

"I don't look like myself," I thought.

My hair grew back in time, but for a while I felt less than my usual handsome self.

Everyday life at home had its own challenges. One of the most frequent came when my mother decided that we had grown too dirty to tolerate.

"You three smell," she would say. "Bath time."

Towels appeared. The tub filled with warm water. My mother prepared herself with determination.

Kitty was always first. She had to be. If she were given any time, she would make things harder than necessary. My mother would bring her into the bathroom before even turning on the water.

"It's okay," she would say.

Kitty did not believe her. She didn't like being wet and didn't care to see water coming out of the tub spout and was of the opinion she would rather die than have a shower nozzle come anywhere near her. But after she got lifted from the tub and toweled off and released, she learned to romp through the house and wallow on sofas and recliners and even beds if someone made the mistake of leaving a bedroom door open.

Penelope had another level of craziness no one else possessed, seeing how from her earliest days she had consistently enjoyed being outside in a rainstorm—as long as there was no lightning or thunder involved—and was

delighted to run around dripping rainwater off her body and flopping about in the wet grass or a puddle, and lots of times my dad would have to run her down in a deluge and catch her and drag her back into the house so she wouldn't be likely to drown. But when it came to the tub and the close confines of the bathroom, Penelope would become something like a seal and become slippery and writhing with each section of her lioness-sized body a moving part all its own. At this time my dad would always be called in by my mother to help restrain her, which would cause him to become drenched as much as she was, and when finally she had been soaped and the suds rinsed off she'd be lifted out and allowed to break free to gallop with abandon and make a pathway to the den where she rubbed herself against available furniture until my dad came with towels to make her somewhat less liquid.

When it came to me, there was none of that chaos. I did not enjoy baths, but I couldn't see the point in resisting. I stood still and let it happen.

"That's my good boy," my mother said.

Still, I made sure they knew I was not pleased. I lowered my head and let my expression show how I felt. I hoped it might make them reconsider.

"Look at that face," my mother said, laughing.

"Poor fellow," my father added, though he was laughing too.

This was not the kind of reaction I wanted. Sometimes I felt like letting out a growl, but I always held it back.

In the end, the baths always finished the same way. We were dried off and set free. Then came the part that made it all worth it.

"Who wants a treat?" my mother asked.

At that, everything else faded. The three of us gathered close, ready and eager, our earlier troubles forgotten as we waited for our reward.

18

My favorite times around the house were always the holidays, which was not a difficult conclusion to reach when I thought about it, because those were the stretches when my parents were home for longer periods, moving about the house at an easier pace, talking more, laughing more, and generally acting like there was nowhere else they needed to be. It changed everything for us. The rhythm of the place softened, and with that came something else that mattered just as much, which was the food.

My mother believed in doing things properly when it came to meals, and she did not cut corners when a holiday arrived. Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas each came with their own traditions, but they all shared one common feature, which was that the kitchen stayed busy and the table filled up with more than anyone could reasonably eat. When a birthday came along, it was taken just as seriously. It did not matter whose birthday it was. She treated it like an event worth celebrating, and she made sure that everyone felt like they were part of something special.

That included us pooches as much as anyone else. We were never left out of the attention or the abundance. There were always treats set aside, always a moment when we were acknowledged, and it did not take long for me to understand that these holidays were different from the rest.

I never thought too much about my parents' past when I was younger, but over time I began to pick up pieces of it, the way dogs do when they live close to people and pay attention to more than they are supposed to understand. Both had lived full lives before we ever came along, and neither of those lives had turned out the way they once expected.

My mother had been married before, and from what I gathered, it had not been a kind arrangement.

"He was mean," she said once, not going into detail but not needing to.

My father had his own story, which carried a different kind of trouble.

"She changed," he told someone one evening. "Not in a good way."

There were hints and fragments, enough to form a picture without ever being told outright. What mattered more was what came after. Mom and Dad had known each other years before, back when they were younger and still figuring out who they were. They had liked each other then, though nothing had come of it at the time. Life had taken them in different directions, into marriages that did not last, into situations they had to find their way out of.

Then, somehow, they found each other again.

From what I understood, there was hesitation at first. Neither of them wanted to repeat old mistakes. They had learned enough to be cautious.

"We're not rushing into anything," my mother said.

"No," my father agreed. "Not this time."

But the truth, as it turned out, was simpler than all that. They had liked each other once, and they still did. That feeling had not gone anywhere, even when they had been apart. Once they accepted that fact, the rest followed naturally.

Anyway, when it came time for it to be a holiday or a birthday there was always a full dinner served and everyone was invited to come by and gorge themselves, which meant my mother's daughter and son and my dad's daughter and their spouses and three short people who squealed and fell down and cried and always convinced me to go to the bedroom at

the far end of the house and take a nap until the onslaught was over. Kitty usually stayed under the dining room table to keep from harm, while Penelope chose to gallop and play and slide across the wooden floors in the breakfast room and fall into chairs and tables and juggle drinking glasses. I'd awaken from my nap when mealtime arrived, and then position myself around the table to pick out who was the most likely to drop their food and who might think I was cute as I beseeched and implored them with my eyes and slip me a handout of the main course while no one was paying attention.

You know, the thing is that dogs aren't supposed to know the intricacies of what humans are thinking. We're not supposed to know what Valentine's Day is all about or who Jesus and the Disciples were or the Easter Bunny or when it's Halloween and people in costumes are at the door. We're not supposed to know about Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas Eve or Christmas Day or Santa Claus or the Wise Men or any of that stuff. But I did. I think Kitty and Penelope got to where they knew some of it too, but it could be they learned by watching me. They both knew how I picked up on things quickly, and sometimes they'd wait until I filled them in on what was going on.

I think the three of us went through all the holiday dinners and the birthday celebrations and in the end we decided we liked Thanksgiving the most. I mean, my mother, goofy like she was, would make everybody Easter baskets and would include us in the mix, so we'd get squeaky ducks and chewable bunnies and plastic eggs with dog treats inside them, and that would be fun, and we'd get our own stocking at Christmas with more toys and treats and new collars inside them, and that would be cool too, but it was Thanksgiving we

liked the most, because Thanksgiving was all about food, and there was nothing the three of us liked any better than food.

Thanksgiving dinner would be attended by maybe ten family members with the three of us dogs present around the table to provide cleanup for dropped food morsels and aid anyone in cleaning their plates. Most times it was like a school of piranha or a family of crocodiles were down below gobbling and chewing up anything the instant it landed on the floor, but on this one Thanksgiving I noticed Kitty was holding back from the feeding frenzy and not being her usual self. I continued to eat for a while longer, but soon I lost my appetite and didn't want anything anymore. I knew something was wrong with her.

No one else seemed to notice. The conversation above us continued without interruption. They talked about work, about travel, about weddings and plans and things that did not concern me.

Penelope, true to form, ate more than she should have and eventually left the room to lie down.

I stayed where I was, keeping an eye on Kitty. She was not herself.

The first thing that stood out was how much water she was drinking. It was not like her. She had never been one to linger at the bowl, but that day she kept returning to it again and again.

I went over once to take a drink myself, but the bowl was empty.

"That's strange," I thought.

She had finished it entirely. It did not make sense. I tried to explain it to myself. Maybe she had eaten something salty. Maybe something had upset her stomach. There were reasons it could happen. I told myself that maybe what had

happened was she had gotten hold of something salty or spicy and was having to take in a lot of water to get the bad taste out of her mouth. But after a while as she kept visiting the bowl I knew it had to be something else. My dad even remarked about it after he'd had to replenish the water supply a few extra times.

"Boy," he told my mom, "these pups sure are thirsty tonight."

But it wasn't me or Penelope emptying the bowl. It was Kitty. I could hear her during the night drinking water like there was no tomorrow.

This went on for about another week until finally my dad and mom knew something was wrong. I'd been doing my best to make them notice earlier, like going up to the bowl and pawing at it because it was empty again to get it in their heads that what Kitty was doing with the water wasn't natural, but sometimes it takes a while for humans to comprehend what dogs know already. I didn't blame it on them too much for not catching on quickly, because they're only human, you know. I couldn't expect them to be as smart as I was. They just weren't made that way.

Besides drinking like a reservoir of water daily, I could tell Kitty was also beginning to lose weight. It started off slow at first, but after a week or so she was becoming skin and bones. She was dropping so many pounds so quickly that even my parents noticed it. They called the vet and made an appointment to take her in the next morning.

I had a bad feeling. I was no expert, mind you, but I'd been around my sister for seven years by this time and I knew her every quirk and habit. I knew when she was irritated with me or was tired and simply wanted a puppy nap and the way she tucked her tail and slumped her shoulders when she

sensed a storm was coming. There was a reason everyone called her a little canine meteorologist. She knew when a thunderstorm was on the way long before anyone else. There were a thousand things I knew about Kitty, starting off because I liked teasing her and riling her up, but later because she was simply my big sister and she was the first real family member I was ever around night and day. I never really made it plain for her or anyone to see, but I was always fascinated by her and wanted to be just like her in a lot of ways. I guess you could say it was because I loved her.

All night long Kitty drank water and then sat on the edge of her bed and stared off into space. I don't think she was looking at anything in particular, just staring out into the void of the night and wondering what was going on with herself. I tried to comfort her the best way I could by going up and getting on the bed with her and leaning my hip into hers as a way of letting her know I was there and she wasn't all alone, but I don't think it did much good. All her life she'd been prone to worrying about what might be the next bad thing that might happen to her, and now she was afraid her nightmarish dreams were about to come true.

She didn't eat anything that next morning when it was offered to her, just turned her head down like she was ashamed of feeling so bad and causing everybody to worry about her. She looked so sad that Penelope didn't even try to run up and snatch her food the way she normally did each morning, an act which always made Kitty crouch over her bowl and growl like a wolverine before gulping it down. When my dad scooped her up into his arms and he and Mom and Kitty started out the door to go to the vet Kitty gave me a look as she peered over Dad's shoulder. I'd never seen such a look on her face before, but all I can say is it looked like a goodbye

to me. I had never had a goodbye come my way before, especially from my big sister. When the door closed, I sat there a minute and didn't know what to do. Then I went over to the door and pawed at it, like I could get it open myself without having hands to turn the knob. After that I went upstairs and looked out the window at the driveway. My dad's truck was gone. He and my mom were gone. Kitty was gone. Then I began to howl a little. I'd never howled in this way before. I think it was my way of crying.

It seemed like forever they stayed gone. Penelope laid down across the room and looked at me the whole time, not understanding what was happening. I didn't know how to explain anything to her, so we stayed where we were and it was very quiet in the house. All I could hear was the grandfather clock ticking and an occasional car going by out on the street. It was sometime after lunch when I heard my dad's truck pull up out in the driveway, and I went over to the door to welcome them inside. My mom and my dad walked in and I stuck my nose out toward the steps to see Kitty, but she wasn't anywhere to be seen. I turned around and looked at my parents to see if I'd missed her, if one of them had her in their arms and I hadn't spotted her. But Kitty wasn't there.

"Your sister had to stay at the hospital," my dad said. "The doctor wanted to keep her overnight and give her some medicine. Maybe she'll feel better tomorrow and she can come home then."

It was quiet in the house the rest of the afternoon and night. Nobody said anything much. My mom and dad had taken off work that day so they could both go to the vet with Kitty, so I knew something serious was going on. The fact that they both had to go told me this was not a good thing. We sat and waited and stared at the television, which its volume was

down so low I didn't see how my parents could hear anything. After a while I got the idea that they really didn't want to be disturbed by voices or sounds. They wanted to deal with what was going on in their minds. They were looking for some words that would give them peace.

There wasn't anything else for me to do, so I found myself dozing off. I guess I got my fill of sitting there watching everyone missing Kitty and feeling miserable and I closed my eyes to get away from it. It wasn't like I was trying to ignore the crux of the situation but more like I was searching for something within myself that would provide some hope and tell me everything would be okay. In my mind I saw myself as a mischievous puppy only a few years back, and I thought of all the fun games I played with Kitty back then, how I'd run around her in circles and nip her on her back flank each time I made a lap. I remembered how she'd take it three or four times before she finally lost control and chased me through the yard threatening to kill me. I recalled all the times I'd hide behind the door and spring out at her when she entered, how she'd jump out of her skin even though she knew I was back there all along. I remembered herding her up the stairs with my nose to her rear end so she couldn't hesitate. One, two, cha cha cha, my parents would laugh, watching Kitty's legs go back and forth on the steps. I thought about the time I stole her stuffed rabbit—which she absolutely loved—and eviscerated it with my puppy molars as she watched. It was supposed to be a joke but I regretted it later because I felt like I'd been mean to her, which I never meant to be, even if it had happened just because I was a crazy puppy. I felt bad about it a long time because I never wanted to do anything to hurt my sister. You don't do things like that to the ones you love. I spent years

afterward trying to make up for it. I didn't want to be that kind of brother.

Around sunset I heard my dad's phone ringing, so I opened my eyes and listened to what was being said.

It was the veterinarian calling. I could hear his voice coming from dad's phone, explaining how something was going on with Kitty's liver and she was having a lot of trouble digesting her food. She couldn't keep it down and was trying to ease her hunger pangs by drinking water to fill herself up. He was going to have to do something to help her digestion and wanted to know if it was all right if he put her on an IV all night and streamed some drugs into her system to see if that would help. My dad said yes and said he and my mom would come in the next morning to see how it was going.

I don't know if anybody thinks that dogs have any kind of conception of God being up someplace in a place called Heaven, or if a dog actually has the capability of praying for some kind of earthly miracle, but I can truthfully say that's exactly what I did all night long. Maybe it was in my own way and was entirely different from the way humans do it when they're facing the end of their ropes, but that's the way it was. I talked to God all night and asked him to bring Kitty home, but maybe I was different in a way humans are—I already knew the truth and I was just asking the Power that was over it all to make it as easy as it could go.

I knew when my parents left for the vet that next morning that they wouldn't be bringing Kitty home when they came back. I guess it's true I knew it before anybody did, my mom or dad or Penelope, because it's like I said, I have always known how things were going to happen before anybody else did. I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse, but it's the truth.

What happened was nothing the vet had tried had worked the least bit for Kitty. She'd only gotten worse for the effort and there was nothing else that could be done. The vet said Kitty was only going to continue to suffer and hurt until she reached the end. When my parents went in to see her that last time, she managed to get up on her legs and wag her tail. That was all she could do. My parents took turns holding her, sitting with her on a blanket on the office floor until the vet came in. This won't take but a few seconds, he told them, so tell me when you're ready to say goodbye.

When they came home, I could tell they'd been crying. I knew there wasn't any use, but I still went over and looked out the door to see if Kitty was there. Then I turned around and looked up at my parents and waited for them to tell me she'd be here later. I knew what the answer was going to be, but when you're desperate you can't help but grasp for straws.

Kitty lived to be eight years old and that was it. They brought her ashes by in a ceramic bowl with her name on it and my mother placed it on a shelf in the breakfast room. I knew it was her but I didn't like to think of her that way. I preferred to always wait until the door got opened down in the den and then stand there and look out to see if she was there. I guess you could say I was in some kind of denial by staying forever hopeful. All I can say is I kept on looking and hoping maybe a miracle would happen and I'd see her again. Anyway, that way it didn't hurt quite so much.

19

Those first months after Kitty was gone settled over the house like a long stretch of gray weather that didn't seem interested in moving on. Nothing felt quite right those days, even when things looked the same on the surface, and it did not take much for me to see how deeply Kitty's passing had affected all of us.

My mother carried it in a way that showed itself often. There were lots of times I saw her eyes fill with tears when she spoke about Kitty, whether she was talking to Dad or to a friend on the telephone. It could happen without warning, right in the middle of a sentence, and she would have to stop and collect herself before she could go on.

"I just miss her so much," she said one afternoon, her voice catching.

The person on the other end of the line said something I could not hear, but it did not seem to ease her suffering much.

"She was my girl," my mother added, quieter now.

It was clear to me that this was not something that would pass quickly. The sadness stayed close to her, always within reach, and it did not take much to bring it back to the surface.

My father was different. He did not show it as often, at least not in ways that were easy to see. For the most part, he kept moving, going about his daily routines, speaking in the same steady voice he always had. But there was one day, about a week after Kitty was gone, when I saw something that told me how much he was carrying inside.

He had been in the kitchen, making himself a sandwich for lunch, moving slowly but deliberately, when all at once he

stopped. He stood there by the counter for a moment, staring at nothing in particular, then set everything down and walked into the den. He lowered himself into his rocking chair, leaned forward, and put his hands over his face.

Then he began to cry.

It was not quiet or restrained. It came out of him in a way that made it clear he had been holding it in for as long as he could. It went on for a long time, maybe half an hour or more, and I stayed close by, not knowing what else to do.

"I miss her," he said at one point, perhaps to himself, his voice breaking.

There was no one around to answer him, but I understood.

I did not know how to help either of my parents in any real way. I was hurting too, and there were moments when the weight of it pressed down on me so heavily that I could hardly think of anything else. Still, I stayed near them as much as I could, hoping that my presence alone might offer some kind of comfort.

Penelope handled it differently. She moved through those days like she was caught in something she did not understand, as if the world had shifted without explanation and she had not yet caught up to it. Most of the time she lay on her bed in the den, staring off into space, her eyes fixed on something that was not there.

She would get up and walk through the house, moving from room to room, nosing into corners and behind furniture as though she believed Kitty might be hiding somewhere, waiting to be found. When that search came up empty, she would go outside and make her way along the fence, following the same path Kitty had walked so many times before, as if she

believed by doing so that Kitty, wherever she was, would be proud of her for upholding the tradition.

I tried to hold myself together as best I could. I told myself that I had a role to fill now, that I needed to carry myself with some sense of purpose as the new alpha dog in the house, the one who was supposed to set the tone. But there were times when that was harder than I wanted to admit.

I missed my big sister more than I could say. There were moments when I felt myself slowing down, losing interest in things that had once come easily to me, and I had to make a conscious effort to push against that.

"Keep going," I told myself.

I began to think of Kitty as still being present in some way, watching me, paying attention to how I carried myself. It helped to imagine that she might still be aware of what I was doing, that I could still make her proud if I handled things the right way.

I put that idea into practice wherever I could. When my mother was in the kitchen, I stayed close, moving around her as she worked, paying attention to everything she did. She started to talk to me more during those times, filling the space with her voice.

"You're my helper today," she said one morning. "I'll make a chef out of you yet."

I wagged my tail and stayed by her side, and before long she began to sing, the way she sometimes did when she was cooking. She was not what anyone would call a good singer, but that did not matter to me. There was something about her serenading me that felt right, and I made sure she knew I was listening.

"You like that, don't you?" she said, smiling a little.

I did, and in time it became something we shared. She cooked, I stayed near, and she sang while I listened, and somehow it helped both of us.

I nipped Penelope when we were out in the yard together. Sometimes in the house I'd yank one of her toys from her mouth and take off running with it with her barking like crazy trying to catch me. I didn't really feel playful at all during those days but it was my duty to keep life rolling along smoothly. I couldn't just loll around feeling sorry for myself because my big sister had gone to Heaven.

With my father, I stayed close in a quieter way. Wherever he went, I followed. When he sat in his chair by the window, I lay nearby. When he moved to the den, I settled at his feet.

"You're sticking with me, huh?" he said one evening.

I was, and I meant it.

But for all that I did, my mother remained the hardest to reach. Her grief seemed deeper, more rooted, and it did not respond easily to anything I tried.

"There are days I can't stop thinking about her," she said.

My father nodded.

"I know," he replied.

There were times when she grew quiet for long stretches, saying nothing at all, and other times when the sadness came over her suddenly and she could not hold it back. I did everything I could think of, but there came a point when I began to wonder if anything would truly change. I thought there wasn't an avenue on the face of the earth that could put a smile back on her face and believed that Dad and Penelope and I were all going to have to adjust to the way she was going to be from this point on.

Then one Saturday morning, something shifted.

Mom was sitting in her rocking chair in the breakfast room, a cup of coffee in one hand and her phone in the other, scrolling through it without much expression. The house was quiet, and for once there was no rush to have to be anywhere.

All at once, she looked up.

"Come here," she called to my father. "You need to see this."

My father was down in the den, watching the morning news, and he got up right away and walked in to join her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Look at this picture," she said, holding out her phone.

He leaned in and studied it for a moment.

"That's one cute dog," he said. "She looks sad, though."

"She's a rescue," my mother replied. "Five months old. Her owners abandoned her. If no one adopts her soon, they're going to put her down. She'll go to Doggy Death Row."

My father frowned slightly.

"What kind is she?"

"They say she's a Border Terrier mix."

She looked at the picture again, her expression softening.

"We could go see her," she said. "They're open until noon."

My father gave a low whistle.

"Three hundred dollars, huh?" he said after she explained the cost. "We got these two here for free."

He stuck a thumb out at me and Penelope.

"Maybe so," she said, "but this little girl doesn't have anyone. She deserves a chance to have a home too."

He studied the picture for a moment, then nodded.

"Let me jump in the shower," he said. "We'll go when I get out."

I watched them get ready, and I had a feeling about what was going to happen. When they left, I knew they would not be coming back alone.

And I was right. A couple of hours later, I heard the car pull into the driveway. The doors opened, and I could hear their voices as they came up the steps, but they were not speaking only to each other.

The door opened, and my mother stood there holding a small puppy in her arms. The little dog looked terrified, her body tense, her eyes wide, drool dripping onto the towel wrapped around her.

"Meet your new sister," my mother said.

The puppy blinked, unsure of everything around her.

"They've been calling her Jazzy at the shelter," my mother added. "But I don't think that name fits."

My father smiled.

"We'll figure something out," he said. "we're pretty good at handing out names."

Mother set the puppy down on the floor to let it smell its new premises, and Penelope and I approached carefully, taking in her scent, assessing her, giving her the once-over to see if she had any kind of odor about her that was going to deem her unacceptable at becoming a member of our family. Penelope had a strange look on her face like she wasn't particularly happy about relinquishing her position as baby of the family just yet. She got up close to this un-Jazzy and looked her squarely in the eye to let her know how she was a force to be reckoned with around here, then opened her jaws like a Great White and swallowed un-Jazzy's head. It was only for a few seconds but was enough to make a point. I didn't

make any sort of aggressive showing on my part since I had nothing to prove in this case or any other, on account of how I knew in my heart that I would always be the apple of my parents' eyes and couldn't in any way drop from the number one spot on their affection list, so there was no need whatsoever for me to be jealous of this newcomer Border Terrier something-or-another.

The new puppy shook herself slightly, then began to move, exploring the room with cautious steps. She circled once, then again, glancing back at us as she went.

"She's nervous," my mother said.

"She'll settle in," my father replied.

After a few minutes, the puppy made her way down the hall and into my parents' bedroom. She climbed up onto the bed and turned in a small circle before lying down in the center, as if she had decided this was where she belonged.

"Well," my father said, watching from the doorway. "I guess she's made herself at home."

My mother smiled, and for the first time in a long while, it reached her eyes.

"I think she has," she said.

20

It happened so quickly that it almost felt like something unnatural had taken place, like some unseen force had reached down and flipped a switch inside that little dog. One minute she was drooling like a leaky faucet that could not be tightened, leaving wet trails wherever she went and soaking through towels like they were nothing, and the next she was strutting around the house as if she had always belonged there, issuing demands and inserting herself into every corner of our lives without hesitation.

My parents found it delightful.

"Look at her," my mother said, laughing as the puppy trotted past with something in her mouth that did not belong to her. "She thinks she owns this place already."

"She might," my father replied. "We may just be renting."

Un-Jazzy did not seem to notice that she was new or that there might be rules of the household she had to learn. If she took one of Penelope's squeaky toys and dragged it under the bed, that was met with laughter.

"She's hiding it from Penelope," my mother said. "That's so cute."

If Un-Jazzy darted into someone else's sleeping spot and curled up like it had always been hers, that got met with approval too.

"Guess that's her bed now," my father said.

At night, she stretched herself out across the center of my parents' bed, claiming as much space as she could manage, and if either of them shifted even slightly and disturbed her arrangement, she would let out a low growl as if to remind them of their place.

"Easy there," my father whispered once in the dark.

"She's serious about her sleeping arrangements," my mother said, trying not to laugh.

They found everything amusing, even when it woke them up. That was how it went. Everything the new puppy did was treated like a performance worth rewarding.

Her name was soon changed to Mabel, though it did not seem to make much difference to her. She answered to it well enough, but she carried herself the same way no matter what she was called.

I decided early on that I would keep my distance from her for a while, give her time to settle down and learn how things worked. It seemed like the sensible approach. I had no interest in getting caught up in her constant motion or her habit of inserting herself into every situation.

"She'll calm down," I told myself.

But as the days passed, it became clear that calming down was not part of her plan. That's why as a matter of recourse, from time to time, I started dishing out a little discipline of my own when I felt like this small dictator had it coming to her. You have to understand that I was never mean or vindictive my entire lifetime and what counterpunch I provided to this new Mabel was delivered with a smile on my face and a twinkle in my big brown eyes. Mable, even though she was a smart little bundle of wiry fur who possessed a goodly amount of energy and mischievousness in her system that had probably been gleaned by her escape from Death Row and subsequent arrival here in what she considered to be Puppy Paradise, was not as advanced as I was in diabolical thinking and would always fall prey to the traps I put before her, before turning the tables on her abruptly and giving her a good boot with my expansive rear end and sending her flying

across a room or landing nose-first in the grass in the backyard.

Mabel was as fuzzy as Penelope had been as to the unwritten laws of who was really ruling the house, because, like Penelope and Kitty before her, Mabel thought of herself as a walking bundle of royalty who could do as she pleased whenever the occasion arose, which in her mind was always. See, that had always been fine with me, these sisters thinking they were the ones to make laws that benefited themselves, and being wiser than a flock of owls with Philosophy degrees I always let them continue with that line of thinking. When I did decide to turn their worlds topsy-turvy, they would find themselves soaring off-balance off their feet on their way to an inglorious landing before they knew what was happening, all courtesy of my ample posterior.

There was a rhythm to it after a while. A movement here, a reaction there, and then a burst of energy as one of them went sliding or hopping out of the way. It became part of our routine, something expected and welcomed.

For five years it went on like that, with my sisters believing they were in charge and me launching them with my posterior at given times during the day. The thing that absolutely slayed me was when I realized they were enjoying going airborne, that it was a wonderful game to them, that sensation of defying gravity on a moment's notice and not knowing where they were going to land afterward. So, what started as a means of me providing comeuppance for my sisters became instead a magical part of their existence. And I must admit I enjoyed it too. My sisters were a troublesome lot sometimes, but I did grow to love them despite their foolish ways.

Then came the matter of the cat.

It appeared one morning without warning, a sleek black shape moving through my mother's garden with the kind of quiet confidence that it suggested it had been doing this sort of thing for some time. At first, I was the only one who noticed it. That was part of my role as head of security. I paid attention to things others missed.

The cat always moved with purpose, slipping between plants, pausing near the bird feeder, constantly aware of its surroundings. It was hunting, though not in the way I expected. When it caught something, it did not eat it. It played with it. I watched when it carried a small creature in its mouth, set it down, then pin it with a paw when it tried to escape. After a moment, the cat tossed its catch into the air and then catch it again, repeating the process as if it was some centerfielder on a major league baseball team.

After amusing itself for a while, the cat would kill its prisoner with a swipe of its paw, then leave it behind for the birds and ants and saunter off into the neighborhood, back, I was sure, to its own home for a long afternoon nap.

I grew tired of this intrusion after a week or so and decided to put an end to it. I was never the kind of dog who went into histrionics upon spotting an unwelcome presence and jumped and barked and pawed at windows and doors and ran back and forth emitting threatening sounds, so what I did was study the situation a few days and make note of the black cat's habits and methods and then formed a plan of my own. I was fairly certain this cat made no distinguishment between weekdays and weekends, so I was sure that come Saturday or Sunday morning and probably both this creature would return to the garden for further hunting and killing. What I had to do was make certain my parents would see him when he arrived. I knew my mother wouldn't be happy with a cat

coming into her garden disrupting the wildlife and scaring away the birds from their feeders and birdhouses. Besides that, my mother was also highly allergic to cats and didn't want them around her anywhere or anytime.

Saturday morning came, and I was ready.

Around ten, the cat appeared, slipping in behind the assorted plants and headed toward the feeder. This time I didn't stay quiet.

I threw myself against the window and let out a series of sounds between a howl and a cry, designed to draw attention.

"What in the world?" my mother said from the kitchen.

She came to the window, curious, and followed my gaze.

"I see you," she said, her tone changing immediately.

She set down her coffee and moved quickly to the back door, grabbing the spray bottle she kept nearby.

"Get out of here," she called as she stepped outside.

She sprayed in the cat's direction, the liquid catching the light as it moved through the air.

"Shoo," she said. "Go on."

The cat reacted at once, darting away from the garden and into the neighboring yard. It paused briefly, looking back, then began to clean itself before disappearing.

"That should do it," my mother said as she came back inside.

It did. The cat never returned.

"Good job," my father said later when he heard the story.

I accepted the praise from my mother for my surveillance.

Life in the house settled into a nice pattern after that. My mother handled all the cooking, even on days when she came home tired from work. She would change clothes, tie her hair back, and head into the kitchen with a sense of purpose.

"Let's see what we've got," she said, pulling out ingredients.

My father made his way to the den, where he would turn on the television and settle into his chair.

"Call me when it's ready," he would say, then drop off into a nap.

That left the kitchen to my mother and me. Penelope and Mabel would stay in the yard chasing each other. I stayed close to my mother as she cooked, watching as she chopped and stirred, listening as she talked through what she was doing.

"Now we add this," she told me. "Then we let it cook."

She treated me like a partner in the process, explaining each step, pausing now and then to look down at me with a smile.

"You're a good helper," she said. "Maybe I should get you a chef's hat."

I would have worn it proudly.

After a while, she would start to sing. Her voice was not what most people would call tuneful, but that never mattered to me. There was something warm about it, something that filled the room in a way that felt right.

She had an entire catalogue of songs dedicated just for me. My favorites were "Pretty Boy," sung to the tune of "Soldier Boy" by the Shirelles— "Pretty Boy, oh my little Pretty Boy, I'll be true to you." Then there was "You're So Vain" which became "You're So Cute," and then my favorite, the old Vogues song, "You Are My Special Angel," which became "You

Are My Special Puppy," which generally made my sisters and my dad cover their ears because of my mom's singing voice, but I can truthfully say I never did. I thought she sang like an angel from Heaven those times. It sure sounded heavenly to me. made my sisters and my dad try to cover their ears because one thing my mom didn't have was a good singing voice, or at least that's what most folks thought, but you might as well know I never did. I thought she sang like an angel from Heaven because it certainly sounded heavenly to me.

The smells of the food would drift through the house, and before long my sisters would arrive, drawn in by the promise of something good. They took their places in the kitchen, waiting, watching, hoping for something to fall or be offered.

There were always small rewards. A piece of something dropped, a bit set aside, a moment of generosity.

"Just a little," my mother said.

My favorite thing was when the Christmas holidays came and we baked cookies for our neighbors and everybody in the family. I recall my first Christmas as one of the most magical times in my life, because that's when my mother first looked down at me and thought there wouldn't be any harm in slipping me one of her oatmeal cookies. I still remember the gorgeous rush of flavor when she held one in her fingers and my jaws began closing around it.

"Be gentle, pretty boy," she said. "Don't be an alligator or you'll make your mother lose a couple of fingers."

As far as I know my mother never gave cookies to any of my sisters. Nobody but me. She told my dad she really shouldn't do it that way but the way I looked at her when she had cookies cooling on the top of the stove made it so she couldn't resist.

It's impossible, she smiled. Those eyes of his, she said.

Coloring Easter eggs was terrific too. I was almost as fond of boiled eggs as I was cookies. You could throw cheese in there too, and lunch meat and an occasional chicken finger if there was some left over. I guess it's fair to say I had become a real chow hound. I lived to eat. I'd lie around all day and have sweet puppy dreams and when I woke up it was time for my morning meal or my evening meal or a little treat between meals because I was such a good boy or some shared food from the table because I could sit so still and stare deeply into my mom and dad's eyes and entreat a sample here and there, so pretty soon I wasn't so svelte anymore, was, in fact, a tad on the hefty side, and got called Stumpy or Rolly Polley, Daddy's Little Fatty, and stuff like that.

My parents put me on a diet, which I didn't care for one lick. I did my best to make them break it, but they held steadfast because they loved me so much. They wanted to keep me around. It took a couple of months of getting no between-meal snacks or cookies or table food, but finally I shed enough girth that the vet pronounced me fit. I realized my parents and the vet were right and that I needed to watch my figure and stay pretty forever and not turn into some Jackie Gleason dog folks post pictures of on the internet because they're so corpulent.

I did have an image to maintain and it was my duty to stay healthy and stick around to take care of my parents and my sisters and our house. This was what God had placed me on this earth for. I now understood what my purpose here on earth was, and I knew what to do to get the job done.

When you know what you are meant to do, when you understand the part you are meant to fill, it becomes easier to

accept what is required of you. For me, that meant staying strong, staying present, and taking care of the ones I loved.

"That's my job," I told myself.

I was determined to do it well.

21

When the seasons began to change and the air outside softened into something more inviting, when spring settled in and summer started edging closer, my father would step out outside, look at the grill that had been sitting idle through the colder months, and decide it was time to bring the patio back to life.

That meant the patio would be swept and blown off, the grill cleaned, and before long the smell of charcoal or propane would begin to drift through the yard. It also meant that I would have to spend more time outside than I generally preferred, which was not something I looked forward to under normal circumstances. I had always been a fellow who appreciated the comforts of the indoors, a soft place to lie down and a steady climate that did not change without warning. Still, there was one thing that could make me forget all of that, and that was the smell of food being prepared over an open flame.

When my dad started flipping burgers or grilling chicken or charcoaling a big, fat juicy steak, my nose, being the finite instrument it was, picked up on every tantalizing smell and sent me into glorious spasms anticipating what morsels I might get to sample in the coming minutes, which made it easy to forget about how cozy it was inside the house and willing to stay outside in the elements with my parents hoping they'd perhaps get benevolent and share their meal with me, or maybe have an attack of clumsiness and drop something my jaws could swallow down in a jiffy.

"You're not getting all the food," my mother said once, catching me watching too closely.

I wagged my tail and pretended such a thought had never crossed my mind.

My father had his own way of enjoying these evenings. After he finished grilling the food, he would prepare himself for what he considered the full experience. He had a small cooler that he filled with Pabst Blue Ribbons, and he would set it beside his chair along with a music player loaded with songs from years long before I was born, hits from the sixties and seventies and maybe a fifties tune or two and a spattering of Worls War II melodies and perhaps a classical tune mixed in. He would plop down in his chair hits and get pleasantly buzzed and enthusiastically inspired by the music and often howl at the moon like me and my sisters did whenever we had the urge to act uncivilized. There were nights when the food would be eaten and the grill closed up and my mom and sisters would go back in the house to settle down to read and watch television and unwind, but my dad and I would stay outside and keep each other company and finish up listening to one CD which soon became another while the moon rose higher and the stars popped out in the night sky like popcorn. We'd sit there and Dad would rub my ears a while and knock back another Pabst and say, "Just one more, okay?" and I'd grin and look into his eyes and let him know it was all right by me. Lots of nights he would stand up and laugh and pat his stomach. This was the signal for me to raise up on my hind legs so he could take my front paws in his hand and we could dance there in the moonlight. We liked Glenn Miller and Rosemary Clooney and Frank Sinatra and lots of stuff by Louis Armstrong, but I think our favorite was Andy Williams singing "The Hawaiian Wedding Song." It was like in the strangest of ways my dad the human being and me the purebred Borgi sent down from Heaven danced together alone out there on the

patio beneath a jillion stars and the moon and it was our private way of saying how much we loved each other.

I guess some folks might think that sounds goofy, but I don't care, because it was true. My dad and I loved each other from the very beginning. Love, see, is different in the dog world as opposed to human beings and their concept of the term. Most human beings—and I'm not including my mom and dad in this equation because they're both about a million times higher on the scale than the rest of the race—tend to equate love with at first a satisfying physical encounter and then with what they think they might get out of such a relationship in the aftermath. They stay together because they both like going to football games or they both sing in the choir or they started going steady when they were seventeen and have no idea how life might be with anyone else, so they get married and give that a go and it either works or it doesn't and then they stay together for good or say adios and go out and look for somebody else. Dogs aren't like that. They wait until they run across their special someone and they know who it is instantly and there's never a debate about leaving. Dogs recognize their person even in a crowd with the rain falling and the wind blowing up a gale, and when they do they cross that crowded room that Rodgers and Hammerstein way that people seldom do anymore and go and make that person their own, and when that happens there's no way under the sun that a dog is ever going to leave for somebody else, because a dog is faithful and loyal and true to its special person, and there's nothing that goes on in the world that is ever going to change it.

That's the way it always was with me and my dad, and in a sense, with my mom too. We loved each other right from the start and it didn't take us any time to recognize it. It was

the same way with me and Kitty too, although Kitty was a stubborn sort and did her best to fight against it. But she wasn't successful. Love always wins in the end. Love always finds its way through, no matter how much someone tries to push it aside.

My sisters had their own ways of moving through the world, and not all of them made sense to me. Kitty had always preferred to be outside when the weather allowed it, stretching out in the sun, watching birds, listening for anything that might catch her attention. Penelope followed her lead in that, doing many of the same things simply because Kitty had done them first. Mabel was different. She did not want to be anywhere that someone else was not. If Penelope was outside, then she had to be outside too, no matter what she had been doing before. If there was barking to be done, Mabel had to be there to add her voice to it, whether it was directed at a passing person, a truck, or a passenger plane from the airport going by overhead on its way to Chicago or New York.

My sisters may have been the ones outside disturbing the peace barking, but I was the one born with the nose. Penelope had hawk-like eyesight and Mabel could somewhat hold her own sniffing and following a trail, but neither one could come close to my acute sense of smell. They might have been able to see and hear better than I could, but they couldn't match me in intuition and my superior nose. Not only did I know what was going to happen before anything occurred, I could also raise my nose up from one of my beauty sleep naps and detect the least thing that was different around the house. I've already mentioned how I alerted the household when we were being invaded by opossums, but there were other things

beside that which came to my attention, and I handled them adroitly each time.

I knew when a family of skunks were thinking about living in the bushes by the garage and let them know they weren't welcome and wouldn't get any peace while I was around. I told my mother when a potato was rotten in the bag, when some bit of food was beginning to decompose in the refrigerator, when there was a dead mouse in the basement. I'd throw back my head and take a big sniff, then walk over to where the offending odor was coming from and stay there at attention until somebody took notice and got rid of it. I knew when one of my sisters had an accident in the house—I never did, of course, I was a good boy and I was perfect—and I knew when my dad went out in the yard and stepped in somebody's poop and barked at him until he understood and did something about scraping it off his shoe.

I mention all this to make it clear how the wonderful existence my family had would have never been so good if I hadn't devoted my energy to making it so. I'm not trying to go on any kind of puppy ego trip, but just making it known how hard I had to work every day to keep things in line and smooth out life's wrinkly problems for everyone. I didn't ever want anyone to have a bad time of it. My sisters and my parents were my family. It was my job to get them through life safe and sound.

22

As much as I tried to keep everything running smooth and steady around our house, there were times when no amount of effort on my part could hold back what was coming. Trouble has a way of finding its way in no matter how carefully you watch the doors and windows, and I can remember more than a few occasions when it felt like happiness had packed up and left us for good.

I won't linger too long on Kitty because I've already said my piece about her and what losing her meant, and that kind of thing comes to every family sooner or later whether they are ready for it or not. But I will say this. Not a single day passed after she was gone that I didn't find myself drifting toward the window or the door, looking out as if she might be there waiting to come back inside. I would stand there and watch, sometimes for longer than I meant to, letting that small piece of hope rise in me again. It never amounted to anything, but I never stopped doing it either. In a way, I did not want to stop. That feeling, that brief surge that maybe things could be put back the way they were, gave me something to hold onto.

There were other times too, moments that came without warning that changed the air in the house in an instant. One happened while we were eating dinner. My mother's phone rang, and she picked it up. Whatever she heard on the other end stopped her cold. Her father had died. She said he was only sixty-eight and how it didn't have to happen, but it did because he was too stubborn to go to the doctor. He died while he was working in the yard. There was a long discussion whether she should tell her mother, who he'd divorced fifteen years before and was in a nursing home and didn't even know her own name. Early onset dementia

was what she had, and my mother told my dad she felt like an orphan now because she didn't have parents anymore.

I stayed close to her that night, not moving far from where she sat. I wanted her to know I was there.

Another time, it was my father who became the center of worry. It started with something small, something that did not seem like much at first. During a routine checkup, the doctors found something they did not like.

"They want to take a closer look," he said.

My mother frowned.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means I've got to go back in," he replied. "They want to do a biopsy."

That word hung in the air like something heavy. I did not fully understand it, but I understood the tone that came with it.

"Do you think it's serious?" my mother asked.

"They don't know yet," he said.

For the next couple of weeks, everything felt uncertain. There was a waiting that settled over the house, a quiet tension that made even ordinary moments feel different.

"We'll find out soon," my father said.

I stayed by his side as much as I could, following him from room to room, lying near him whenever he sat down.

"You're not leaving me, are you?" I might have asked if I had the words.

He would reach down and rest his hand on my head.

"I'm not going anywhere," he would tell me, as if he understood what I was thinking.

When the results finally came back, the change in him was immediate.

"It's not cancer," he said, letting out a breath.

My mother closed her eyes for a moment.

"Thank God," she said.

I felt it too, that shift from fear back to something lighter.

Not every form of trouble was tied to people. Some came from the world itself, from things that could not be reasoned with or avoided. There was a storm once, not long after Kitty was gone, that seemed determined to test everything we had.

It started with rain that would not stop.

The rain poured down relentlessly for what seemed like days and the wind blew and a big tree fell against the house and gashed a hole in the roof and water came into the back bedroom and the lights went out overnight. All we could hear was the rain and the wind while we waited for daybreak to see if there was anything we could do to fix it, which we couldn't until the rain finally stopped forty-eight hours later. There was flooding everywhere and when I went out in the yard my paws sunk down in the mud and I thought the earth was going to suck me down to a place where I could never return. I thought our house was going to sink or float away, and I was sad at the thought of us being homeless.

There was the winter when my mom tested positive for something called Covid, which was when the whole world had it and everything shut down and no one went out anymore and food had to be picked up or delivered to the door. She had been so careful and washed everything off and wore a mask but she got the virus anyway. A week later my dad came down with it too, and they were both sick and it was Christmas and there were no dinners or family coming by. A few days before Christmas Eve it snowed six inches and the powerlines couldn't bear up under the weight of the ice and snapped and

the neighborhood went dark and there was no heat. For three days we all sat huddled in blankets eating takeout food with our breath coming out in foggy clouds. I tried to be brave for everyone in all the despair, but it was almost more than I could muster. When I thought I couldn't go on any farther, the lights and power finally was restored and my parents got over that horrible Covid thing I thought might kill them.

There was a time when my shedding became more than my mother was willing to manage without intervention. My fur had a way of finding its way onto everything, drifting down like a constant snowfall. When I walked around it was like there was a blizzard of fur falling off my body with every step. My parents were vacuuming the house every day because I was covering the floors and furniture with a daily inch of accumulation. I wondered if I was going to eventually get punished for this, but instead they decided to take me to a huge pet store where they sold everything you could think of for dogs and cats and fish and snakes and also gave pets baths and groomed and gave them haircuts. We drove to this place and I was left behind, and some person with wire in their lips and cheeks gave me a bath and dried me with a hair dryer that blew hot all over me and then tied a blue bandana around my neck. My parents came to pick me up and gushed about how spiffy I looked with my bandana. My mother said I was a dandy and I pranced around the house for a while so they could praise me more and take my picture. I got sick of it finally and went out in the yard and rolled in the grass to get the bandana off because I wasn't sissy enough to wear something like that all the time and had my macho image to maintain.

Part of that image came when I moved in with Kitty and my parents those years ago. I was always a stout fellow with

my chubby paws and my thick backside distributed over the totality of me, making me a solid physical presence to go along with my advanced intellectual side. I discovered I didn't want to spend as much time outside as Kitty did. I didn't need that much fresh air or exercise. After a week or two I started examining that portion of the back door that allowed it to open and close. I saw where there was a latch at the top that fit into a clasp that clicked the door shut, and I studied how the latch raised up from the clasp when the door opened. It didn't take long before I inserted my paw in the crevice between the door and the frame to determine if I could make it move, but my paws were too big to fit in like I needed them to. I studied the situation some more and devised a system where I could swipe the crevice with my paw to make it jiggle, then catch it with my nose before it slipped back into place. The next thing I knew I was holding the door open with my nose and sliding my body through. I was back in the house and ready for a nap, and I knew I could do this anytime I wanted. I also knew I could reverse the process and go outside on my own if a bathroom call came, just so long as the screen door was all I had to negotiate.

My new trick became a point of great astonishment to my parents because of the manner I had figured this all out. They never tired of watching me or showing off to company the trick their pretty boy had taught himself.

Such a feat made Kitty jealous and fascinated Penelope to no end and made me appear to be a genius to Mabel. They all tried to learn to do what I could, but Kitty was too skinny to open the door but did learn that if she took a running start from inside the house she could hit the bottom of the storm door at such an angle that it would fly open and she could go out. She could never learn how to get back in, and lots of times

I liked to stand inside and look out at her in her misery. It ticked her off royally, but I loved it. There was never anything better than tormenting my big sister.

I'll have to give Penelope credit though, because in a few months she learned how to do what I did by watching me and practicing about a thousand times. But she was successful finally, so bully for her. The thing with her was she had no real purpose in learning the procedure like I did; I wanted to come and go as I pleased and not be a prisoner in the great outdoors with precipitation falling from the sky or the sun beating down or the north wind chilling my tootsies. I wanted a choice, but Penelope was wired so that once she got out, she wanted back in again, and once in she couldn't remember why she had re-entered the premises and so let herself out again. This went on constantly and it got annoying after a while. I'd finally have to go over and swing my rear end her way and knock her silly so she'd know enough was enough.

Mabel was no dummy either, so she also learned to angle the door to get out, but had to bark and throw herself against the storm door to get someone to let her back in. She would never take no for an answer on those occasions, especially if it started to rain, for like Kitty, she was sorely afraid of thunder and lightning and rain and would practically beat the door to pieces to get inside. Sometimes I would look at the outside door and there would be dried muddy prints of her plastered all along the bottom frame.

But when a rainstorm came and we were inside with our parents in the den there was no better feeling than stretching out like an accordion and closing my eyes and listening to the rain falling on the roof. And that would be one of those times, like I did most every night when the lights were out and everyone was on the verge of sleep, when I would let

out a long, satisfied sigh, and my family around me would smile, and we'd all be contented and cozy the rest of the night.

23

It was during dinner one night in April when my father said something that changed the shape of our days in a way none of us quite expected. We were all gathered around the table, the food still warm, the conversation moving along in its usual way, when he set his fork down and looked across at my mother with a seriousness that made me pay attention.

"I'm going to retire," he said.

My mother paused, her eyes lifting from her plate.

"When?" she asked.

"On my birthday," he replied. "Six weeks from now. I'll be sixty-two, and that's enough for me."

She studied him for a moment.

"You're serious," she said.

"I am," he answered. "I'm tired of getting up before the sun comes up. My back's been hurting, my knees aren't what they used to be, and I'm doing more than I should have to."

He went on to explain what had been building for a while. The company had trouble keeping help in the warehouse, and the workload had grown beyond what the staff could handle. That meant he was not just organizing things anymore. He was lifting, carrying, loading, doing the kind of work that wears a person down over time.

"They can't keep people," he said. "So I end up doing it myself. I've been there thirty-seven years. I think I've done my part."

My mother leaned back slightly, taking it in.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

He smiled then, the kind of smile that comes when someone has already made peace with a decision.

"I'm going to stay home," he said. "I'm going to write poetry and see what happens."

My mother raised an eyebrow.

"Poetry," she said.

"That's right," he replied. "You might be looking at the next Dylan Thomas."

She laughed. I could tell she was pleased.

"Well," she said, "I suppose we'll find out."

He followed through on it too. The next day he went in and gave his company six weeks' notice he was leaving. He made it clear he couldn't be talked out of it and wasn't going to change his mind. And six weeks later he was home with me and my sisters all the time.

My dad and I got up with my mother and I dozed between them as they drank coffee before she had to leave for school. If the weather was good, Dad would go out on the patio with more coffee and a notebook and I'd go with him. I'd stroll around some while he wrote down the verses that came to him in his head, and if he sat for too long, I'd simply take my paw and nose and open the door and go back inside for a drink of water and a nap. Another good thing was my dad was home most of the time for lunch, which meant I got extra treats during the day.

He never worked past lunch. By the time he inhaled a sandwich or leftovers from the night before he liked settling down in the den to watch an afternoon movie. My dad had a taste for older ones, so we were always watching some film with Cary Grant or Steve McQueen or Humphrey Bogart in it. They were his favorites. I also noticed he never missed anything with Grace Kelly or Audrey Hepburn, so I knew he had a secret crush on them. From what I could tell my father

always had an affinity for pretty women. All you had to do was look at my mother and you'd know I was right.

He'd always fall asleep during these viewings. This was fine with me because I always liked sneaking in a nap when I could. By this time, my sisters would be spent from causing ruckuses all day and fall on their beds too, and the four of us would snore for a delicious hour or so until it was time to get up for what my dad would announce, "Tea Time!"

Since he was now getting more sleep than he'd been accustomed to for three and a half decades, Dad was more energetic at night. Sometimes he and mom went out to dinner somewhere or watched television until it was time for her to go to bed, at which time he stayed up with us for an hour or two and watched a ball game being played out in the Pacific Time Zone. And if that was the case then you could bet he'd pop up a big bowl of popcorn or break out some pretzels or chips to munch on. And you could also bet I'd be the first in line there to help him dwindle down the supply.

24

It was a good life with my dad around all the time, one I settled into easily, and for a while it felt like it might continue that way without interruption. Then, about a year later, something new entered the conversation.

My parents began to talk about taking a trip.

"Somewhere different," my mother said one evening.

"Longer than a weekend," my father added.

I did not like the sound of that. It was not that I lacked independence or that I could not manage without them. It was something else. I had spent enough time alone early in my life to know what it felt like, and I had no desire to return to that feeling.

"I don't like this," I thought.

They talked about it often, looking at different places, weighing options, imagining what it might be like.

"What about here?" my mother said, pointing at something on her computer screen.

"Looks good to me," my father replied.

For a while, it seemed like nothing would come of it. They talked, but they did not act, and I began to relax a little, thinking it might pass.

Then one day, they made a decision.

"Ireland," my mother said.

My father nodded.

"Ireland," he agreed.

They went to speak with someone who helped them make arrangements, and when they came back, it was clear that this was no longer just an idea. From what I could gather, the trip was still some time away, about six months, and I held onto the hope that something might change before then.

"Maybe they'll decide not to go," I thought.

I knew that sounded selfish, but I could not help it. I wanted them close. I wanted things to stay the way they were.

My sisters did not seem concerned. They moved through their days as they always had, unaware or uninterested in what was coming.

I, on the other hand, thought about it constantly. I imagined every possible outcome, some of them worse than others, and I could not seem to stop myself.

"What if something happens to them?" I wondered.

I considered things that I probably should not have, possibilities that only made me more uneasy. Part of what troubled me most was not just that they would be gone, but who would take their place while they were. I remembered that previous experience with the weirdo Harmony that had not gone well. She was someone I would have preferred not to see again.

"Something better will happen," I told myself.

And it did.

About a week before they were set to leave, my mother spoke to a teacher from her school who offered to help.

"They said they'd stay here," my mother told my father. "She can drive to school from here."

"Really?" he said.

"The entire fifteen days," she replied. "They think it'll be good for them too."

She explained that her friend and her husband had recently lost their own dog, and that their house felt empty since then.

"They could use the company of dogs," my mother said.

"And we could use their dog sitting expertise," my father added.

Their names were Suzanne and Carl, and from everything I heard, they seemed like the kind of people who would fit in well. They liked cooking and staying in.

I listened to all of this, taking it in, and for the first time since the trip had been mentioned, I felt something close to relief. Our sitters weren't weirdos and they weren't going to beat us or lock us in the basement but would stay in with us and watch television and cook big dinners and perhaps share some of it with us. I felt reassured I wasn't going to be in some sort of gulag while my parents were away. That was the way life always seemed to go for me. Even if something bad seemed likely to happen there was still a silver lining that made it nice and tolerable even in the midst of trouble and woe, and the truth was trouble and woe had pretty much ceased to be a possibility in the marvelous life I led.

They left for the airport on a Friday afternoon, just after lunch. Suzanne and Carl arrived to take them, stepping into the house with easy smiles and voices that carried a calm I could recognize right away.

"Hello, sweet dogs," Suzanne said, kneeling.

Before they left, my parents made a point of coming over to us, sitting down and giving each of us their full attention.

"Be good," my father said, scratching behind my ears.

"We love you," my mother added, pulling us close one by one.

"We'll be back soon," my father said.

"Don't worry," my mother told us.

When they stood up and moved toward the door, I watched them closely. There was something in my mother's face that caught my attention, a shine in her eyes that I recognized as a tear.

“Take care of them,” she said to Suzanne.

“We will,” Suzanne replied.

The door closed behind them, and for a moment the house felt different, quieter in a way that did not sit easily with me.

Penelope stretched, turned in a circle, and lay down. Mabel followed her lead, settling in as if nothing at all had changed.

I watched them and felt a small measure of envy. They did not carry the same awareness I did. They did not think ahead or dwell on what might come next. They simply accepted what was in front of them and moved on. I could not do that. I knew I would be watching, waiting, counting the time until my parents returned. Not because I distrusted Suzanne and Carl, but because that was simply how I was built.

While my sisters slept during that first interlude of our parents being gone from us, I propped my two front paws on the bay windowsill and looked at the world outside. I told myself it was time to buck up and not be so sad and to put on a happy face, if not for me then for my sisters and Carl and Suzanne Montgomery. It was up to me to keep my sisters from being lonely and help the Montgomerys while they were here getting over the death of their own dog. The more I considered it, the more it came to me that this period I was embarking on was going to be one more test of my mettle, and it was up to me to step to the fore and make certain everything went smoothly. There was nothing any different about these coming days than any there had been in the past, because once again I had responsibilities to take care of. This was my job and always had been and it was what I was placed here on earth to do.

My parents had mentioned they'd be back the Saturday before Memorial Day, so I walked over to my mother's desk and looked at her calendar book that was open there. I couldn't exactly read or decipher numbers but I could look at the page and know it was where we were right now as far as days and weeks go. I saw where she had highlighted a box with a bright color that had hearts drawn around it. Somehow I knew those hearts meant this was the day they would return and she could see her puppies again. I couldn't count, but I could see a succession of blank boxes and how they led down to the box with the hearts drawn in it, so I knew this was how I'd know how long it would be before they returned. All I had to do was walk over here each day and mentally put an X in the box that represented the day before, and then I'd have my own private countdown going. Outside of my parents, nobody ever believed I was smart like that. But I was.

Even so, the days and nights did nothing but drag by for me, even though Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery were more than kind to us every day. They talked to us and patted us and fed us on time and gave us treats. Mr. Montgomery spent a lot of time throwing stuffed toys for Mabel and Penelope to fetch and shake back and forth to show how ferocious they were. I was glad to see them having fun, but I never joined in, mainly because I have never cared much for fetching or retrieving or playing with toys or anything like that. I thought it was stupid if you want to know the truth. I mean, if Dad or Mom threw something I'd always go and get it once, but if I gave it to them and they threw it again then they were on their own. They could go and get it themselves, because I've never believed in doing something that made no sense over and over again. So, my sisters and Mr. Montgomery would play, sometimes for an hour at a time, and I'd sit down and watch until my eyes got

heavy. I did appreciate Mr. Montgomery giving me a break from watching over my sisters. It was hard for me to keep it up twenty-four seven.

Every few days my parents would call to see how everything was going. They'd text a lot and send pictures and Mrs. Montgomery would read the texts aloud and walk around and show us pictures on her phone, but it was the live phone calls I looked forward to. I could hear my parents' voices, and Mrs. Montgomery would turn up the volume on her phone so they could tell us hello and say they loved us and would be home soon, which always lifted my spirits and made Penelope and Mabel run around the house looking for them, them being the idiots they were. But it was entertaining at the same time watching them, even though I had the good sense to know my mother and father were still in that place called Ireland. Sometimes after they'd hung up I'd start missing them badly, but I knew the days were being X'd off and the time was getting nearer all the time for their return. I could hear the grandfather clock ticking and I knew my wait was getting shorter with each swing of its pendulum.

I don't know and can't say how it was that I knew one morning that this was the day my parents were coming home, but from what I'd deduced by looking at the calendar on my mom's desk I had the conviction this was it. I know people are never going to totally believe a dog can tell time or know what day it is or what holiday is coming up, so that's okay. All I'm saying is I knew. I'm not saying there are many other dogs in the world who can figure out such things, but I could. You'll just have to take my word for it.

Just after lunch, Mrs. Montgomery announced to us that they were leaving for the airport to go and pick up our parents now, how we'd been good dogs and she and Mr.

Montgomery had enjoyed their stay, and how in just a little while our parents would be home to hug and kiss us. Your parents are very lucky people, she said, having three nice dogs like you around. When we get home we're going to see about getting another dog for ourselves, maybe even two or three.

And then they were gone. I watched them leave the driveway and listened to the grandfather clock tick some more.

I went to sleep with the ticking of the clock, curled up in a ball by the window. I heard the car door and I stood up on the sill and saw my parents outside. I barked my throaty hound dog welcome. They looked up and saw me and smiled and waved. In a minute they were inside and we were hugging and kissing.

They were home at last.

25

I made no mention of it, nor did I allow my actions to reveal anything amiss to my sisters or our dogsitters while my parents were gone on their trip, but while engaging during this time in my usual responsibilities and daily duties I began to feel a loss of energy within myself at varying times of the day.

I'd always enjoyed relaxing and having a good nap in the afternoon, but suddenly I felt more inclined to have several rest periods even before noon, which I at first attributed to the fact that my parents were gone and the more I slept through the moments they were absent then the less I'd have to think about it and miss them by being awake and aware. But more than a few times during their trip I found it more difficult to keep up the pace I usually set for myself each day, a troublesome fact I tried to ignore and keep to myself while hoping it would eventually go away.

It didn't, though.

It did not pass. It stayed with me, appearing at odd times, settling in whether I wanted it to or not.

What troubled me more than my lack of energy was the change in my appetite. Food had always been one of the great pleasures of my life. I approached it with enthusiasm, with focus, with the kind of dedication that left no room for leftovers. But now there were times when I did not even clean my bowl, and either Penelope or Mabel would notice the remains and immediately come over and gobble it down. In the past this sort of action would be grounds for war, and I would have shown my incisors or given them a good threatening growl from low in my throat, but now I didn't care much for such theatrics. I just let them get away with it and went and found a place to take another nap.

Aside from that, what occupied my thoughts the most was the fact a huge thirst started overtaking me and I had to go drink water for inordinate amounts of time. I was like a camel preparing to embark on a trip across the desert sand to a distant place, or a bucket that has sprung a leak and won't stay full. I'd stand at the water bowl and lap up water for what seemed like ages, wondering if this terrific thirst I had would ever get quenched. Maybe it wouldn't have been so alarming if it only was a now and then occurrence, but it started getting to the point where I was emptying the bowl three and four times a day.

Nothing was said about it much by the Montgomerys, for they had only been around several days when my excessive drinking began, so they didn't know the difference in my daily habits and thought my water consumption was normal. Maybe my sisters noticed, but they were usually too into mischief and play they didn't consider the implications. When you're young and embroiled in being a puppy you don't pay attention to anything other than what shenanigan you can get into next.

I suppose if I'd been a worrisome sort I would have been much more concerned about these new symptoms, but I have always taken the high road on what life throws at me and so told myself not to waste time worrying over things that are probably only temporary distractions that will soon pass. After all, nothing bad was ever going to happen to me in this life because I was special and had been sent on a mission by the Almighty. My entire life had been built along this precept, and I saw no need of abandoning it now.

Still, there were moments, especially at night, when the quiet made it harder to hold onto that belief.

I was used to waking once or twice, making my rounds, checking the house, ensuring everything was as it should be, but I found myself getting up more often, drawn repeatedly to the water bowl, moving through the house while everything else remained still.

In the wee hours of the morning when the world's dead and everything silenced unwelcome thoughts can pop into your head. I kept thinking of Kitty and the way she drank water before she walked on out of life. I couldn't help but wonder if a similar fate was awaiting me. I didn't like having such thoughts. I had an agenda that was by no means completed, and it had never occurred to me that I would not complete my allotted tasks because I wouldn't be around to see them through.

These were not happy reflections on those long nights, and I vowed to take steps to get them out of my head and get back to more important things.

Thinking too much can be harmful. If there's something negative lurking in your subconscious it can sink you pretty low if you allow it. The best thing is to try and concentrate on other things and maybe the harmful thoughts will get tired of trying to make their presence known and will give up and go somewhere else. It was an unwelcome visitor that was visiting me and attempting to hamper my usual lifestyle, so I gave myself over to focusing on home security and correctional behavior toward my sisters and finagling additional treats from the Montgomerys any chance I could, even if I didn't really want them the way I always had before.

26

It took a few days to change my mindset and get into a groove, but I've always been able to do anything I wanted when I put my mind to it. This was no exception. I simply began chanting a mantra in my head that said I was young and my actions should continually keep proving it. When I got tired, I talked myself into taking more steps. When I wanted a nap, I made myself open the door and go out in the yard. For a few days I even chased a squirrel or two but that didn't last. I'd grown up thinking such fruitless actions like that were unnecessary and bordered on stupid, so I let the squirrel pursuit go and contented myself with perimeter strolls along the fence and studying the sky for cloud formations. By the time my parents made it back from Ireland I had succeeded in sweeping the bad thoughts out of my mind like I had a giant vacuum cleaner and stuck it up to my ear and sucked the poison right out of my skull. Whoever said it was right—it is all in the way you look at things.

I'm not going to lie about it and say everything was hunky-dory after I adjusted my mental viewpoint. No, that wouldn't be true. I did my best to try and keep my spirits on the sunny side of the street, but reality would now and then make an appearance and I'd have to deal with it and get started all over again. I couldn't ignore the fact that my hearing wasn't what it used to be. When I was a pup a butterfly shuffling by fifty yards away couldn't hide its flight from me. I'd know it was there because I could hear its wings fluttering in my ears. Same thing was true for my vision. I was no longer Mr. Eagle-Eye when it came to spotting something in my path. In the good old days I'd stand by the window and spot a chihuahua in a yard a half mile away—I'd know it was there

when it had no idea I was looking at it. As far as my nose went that seemed to be nothing to worry about and was probably going to be the last thing to go, since there was never any creature on the face of the planet with a sense of smell like me. I don't care if it was a flower in bloom or a dog a block away marking its territory or somebody firing up a steak on a grill in another county, I'd be the one homing in on where it was and deciding if it was worth investigating on my part. Even in my advanced age I was still at the head of the field on that count.

Speaking of age, by my calculations I was fifteen by the time my parents came back from their trip. That made me more than a hundred in human years, which sort of freaked me out when I let myself think about it. When you start getting up there in triple figures like that you can't help but worry some. You start considering your breed and your lifestyle and if you've done something foolish in the past that might shorten your years. I tried not to be an alarmist about it, but a guy would have to be stupid to not consider the implications. Something kept repeating to me on a regular basis every day, nobody lives forever. That didn't depress me too much but simply ticked me off and made me want to prove it wrong. See, I never thought of myself as being on equal ground with any other living thing. I considered myself way above it all.

My appetite kept changing too. I don't know if anyone else noticed it, but I did. I still enjoyed food but couldn't down huge quantities of it like I once did. Even if there were treats involved, there were times when I really didn't go after them with the same zeal and enthusiasm I once did, although I was careful not to let this aspect show too much, because I knew if I did my parents would get it into their heads that I wasn't

immortal anymore and I might be winding down. I for sure didn't want that to happen. I had an image to maintain.

By far the biggest thing I had to watch was the occasional misstep when I was going up or down stairs or was called for a treat and had to go into a dash to keep everything looking normal. The hitch in my gait and the occasional stumble I first attributed to being just a minor mishap because I hadn't been paying attention, but as the stumbles and the trips began increasing in number I had to have a coming to terms meeting with myself and tell myself to slow down a bit and be careful. I was smart enough to know how to disguise all these portents of old age, and whether anyone else knew about them and noticed or not I couldn't say, but I certainly did. I knew I had some major challenges in front of me.

And yes, I didn't sleep the way I used to either. All my life when I lay down and closed my eyes the feeling was always peaceful and serene and came upon me so fast I hardly knew it was happening. I would be asleep before I knew it, almost as if a switch had been turned and I had gone into the land of the ethereal with no preliminary waiting. Most everyone I have ever seen has to settle in and get comfortable before being allowed into a world of dreams, but it had never been that way with me. It was as if I had been granted a safe and quick passage into the land of repose and, unlike others, did not have to wait my turn to be granted admittance. All I had to do was close my eyes and I was there.

But suddenly it was not that way anymore, and the presence of this new restriction on my rest bothered me and made me begin to worry that because I was now having to wait to enter my own personal plain if that meant I was becoming like the rest of creation in my sleep habits and would thus follow them into other realms? Just the fact that I had to wait

and endure the reality of stark thoughts instead of being granted an immediate escape to peace caused my imagination to go to dark places it had not been forced to visit before, and the thought of sharing this with my fellow creatures, both human and canine, was enough to make me question how especially regal my time upon the earth had been and if it was now going to end the same as others had, a realization heretofore denied and unvisited because it could not be true this sort of ending was actually going to include someone like me.

I would linger on the plane of consciousness, praying for that moment to come when I would be swept away from the dismal truth that was trying to dominate my thoughts and be allowed to go off away from it again into the soft sweet world of sleep. And different too was the fact that when sleep did finally come and take me my dreams were not as they once were, had always been, had up until this time never ventured into some hostile enemy territory where I was not permanently assured that bad things were not going to come my way. I remember waking with a start, a whine in my throat and a cry pervading my brain, as if there was something evil bearing down upon me soon that would cause me harm and pain and perhaps take my life. I would lay in the darkness panting with my heart beating as fast as it ever had, sore afraid. It was a new feeling I had never experienced, one I reckoned all the creatures of the world had all the time, and I did not like it at all. I wanted nothing of this fear and helplessness the world was so familiar with. I was not supposed to be a part of any of it.

I would arise from my bed to escape the cruel night, saddled with unfamiliar visions of dreadful things possibly to come. I would walk through the house feeling like the loneliest

dog in the world, wondering what had become of the late great me whose every step through his kingdom was now fraught with a birthing despair. I would suddenly feel dry and parched, as if I had been trudging through some endless desert, and then I would stop and drink water to make the dream and the thirst and the fear go away and tell myself that there was nothing out in the world to be afraid of. Yet I knew it wasn't true, because even though that something had no face and had no name it was out there somewhere, and it had visited the world forever before me, and it had visited all around me and would visit my sisters and my parents and had already come for Kitty, and in the night and with the day I came to know that it was coming for me too and I had better be ready.

Yes, I was fifteen and age had come upon me suddenly and unannounced, and I knew it was going to be a contest from here on out. I was outnumbered and didn't possess the ammunition to keep from harm very long, but I told myself I would not let it win. I was who I was and all my life I had held the answer to everything, so there was no sense in stopping now. I would continue my—should I call it this? –ministry until I knew it was completed and finished in the way I had always conceived it. I would fulfill my purpose of being. To this end I would never waver.

I simply had to change my style in unseen and unnoticed ways. If my howl could not hit the high notes it once had I would lower the melody an octave and howl that way. If I could not run as fast as before I would simply study angles and arrive at a finish line at the same time by shortening the distance and taking a shortcut. I could go out in the yard and munch on grass to aid my digestion, maybe do my best to wait and quench my insatiable thirst when the house was sleeping

and wasn't awake to notice my bowl going dry, and never let my worry and concern show, but instead keep my eyes bright and shining and a smile on my face and make certain that when we all lay down to sleep at night that at that moment when the lights went out I would breathe my sigh and let all my family think before sleeping how our world was wonderful and how it was never going to change.

27

It wasn't like I was the only one experiencing the passage of time. My dad had retired and my mother kept trying to, but since she was such a great teacher the school kept calling her back making offers she couldn't refuse. One more year, she kept saying, and then there were three more and she was still getting up in the morning and heading out to school. I looked at Penelope and was astonished to discover that she was no spring chicken anymore either. She was nine, and I wondered how in the world that had happened. Even Mabel was grown up. She'd been with us five years by then, and though she still behaved like a puppy with boundless energy, the truth was she was an adult now. Time was letting no one in our family escape.

"Time doesn't stop," I realized.

It moves forward for everyone.

As I mentioned, I did my best to keep my ailments to myself, but try as I might, there came a few times when my legs would slide out from under me and I'd fall down, maybe not altogether in a heap but at least down on one side of me where there was suddenly no leg to support me. I'd recover fast and get back up on my feet and hope no one had noticed what happened, but the time finally arrived when I couldn't escape scrutiny. I'd take a tumble and someone would see, my dad or my mom or my sisters, and there wasn't much I could do but try and regain my dignity and act like the fall hadn't hurt me and certainly wasn't a regular incident and was truly nothing to worry about, but I could see it in everyone's eyes that they were starting to be concerned about me. I moved on as if nothing had happened, but I saw the change registered

on their faces. They were beginning to understand what was going on.

I wasn't losing my appetite too much, because there never was a time I didn't like my dog food or a slice of lunch meat or a big bite of chicken. I could start in the morning and gobble down food all day until bedtime in the old days and I could still do it these days. The only difference was that before I'd get pudgy and chubby and get put on a diet so I'd lose weight, but when I started having my aging problems I could be eating the same amount of food but losing weight at the same time. At first it wasn't all that noticeable, but beneath my fur I was becoming thinner by the week. When my dad picked me up to sit in his lap, he remarked how I wasn't as stumpy or such a roly-poly anymore. For a while he didn't make a big deal about it, but I knew he was worried. He just never brought the subject up because he was in a state of denial.

I wanted to be in denial about everything too, but I couldn't hide it from myself. I knew what was on the way and started trying to come up with a plan where my family would be able to handle the truth. When my parents took me to the vet to see what was going on he gave them the bad news right there and then with me sitting on the metal table in an examination room. He told them my liver was shutting down among other things, that I was starting to lose a percentage of my senses and was beginning to suffer from arthritis. He's getting old, he told them, and this is what happens. I can give you some medicine so he doesn't hurt so much and can stay somewhat comfortable, but I'm afraid he hasn't got a whole lot longer to go. My mother started crying then and my dad kept patting me and biting his lip, and I just smiled back at

them and wagged my tail. I was planning on how to get them through this. I knew it wasn't going to be easy.

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What I had to do was convince my family to not think with their hearts so much and to allow me to prepare for the end. I couldn't let them try and change the impossible and get sadder by the day until their hearts broke. So, I decided not to hide my condition anymore and let them know that there was never going to be a happy ending for my condition, that sooner or later the time was going to come when we were all going to have to call it a day.

I showed them how bad I felt. I didn't hide it when I fell. I stopped making my security checks or being my mother's kitchen assistant. Mostly I would lie on the floor and look up at them, entreating with my eyes that I was ready to set a time for departing.

It took a few months and I turned seventeen, and finally my dad and mom saw me fall out in the yard and knew the time had come. A week later a man came to the house in the afternoon by appointment. All morning long I'd been patted and hugged and kissed, been fed chicken every time I came near the kitchen until I couldn't swallow any more, and there was a lot of crying going on by my parents and whimpering by my sisters, who both knew what was going on because I'd gone out of my way to communicate to them and prepare them for becoming brotherless. All this was happening without anybody having to tell me that this was my last day, because I knew already. I was ready to walk on, despite the thought of leaving everyone behind. I knew I had to make it as easy as I could for them. That was the last thing yet to be accomplished my last hour of life.

When the time came, the man explained what was fixing to happen. I halfway listened to what he was saying,

partly because I already knew what was coming, but mostly because I was busy taking a last look around at the world I was leaving behind. I guess if I was a puppy I would have cried about it right then, but I was not young anymore, I was older than any dog on the face of the earth ever had the right to be. I was old and my time here on earth, however wonderful it had been, was used up. It was time for me to say goodbye and wake up in my eternal home.

My father led my sisters outside.

"Come on," he said softly.

I said my goodbyes to them in my heart. They loved me and I loved them, and I knew they were going to miss me. I wondered if they'd be like me, the way I'd always look for Kitty to come through the door after she was gone. Would they look for me the same way?

My mother spread out my favorite blanket on the den floor and she and my dad sat down beside it. I climbed in between them and lay down on my side, stretching out so they could pat and hug and kiss me, caress one last time their pretty boy and all that he had been to them. I sighed for them one last time.

"I love you, my pretty boy," my mother said.

"I love you, buddy," my dad said.

The man kneeled and gave me a shot in my front shoulder. It didn't hurt at all. I didn't cry. I just looked at my parents and then I closed my eyes.

The man gave me another shot.

I could hear my mom and dad crying. I could hear them telling me they loved me.

Then I could hear no more. It was dark and quiet and I felt myself walk away.

This time I didn't trip. All that was behind me now.

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I would not call it waking, not in any way that resembled what I had always known as waking before. There was no stretch, no slow return to the body, no blink of the eyes to let the light back in. It was something else entirely. It was more like becoming aware, as if a curtain had been lifted without my noticing when it had been drawn in the first place.

At first there was nothing that felt familiar. There was no weight, no pressure, no sense of lying down or standing up. The body I had known all my life was no longer something I could feel or command. It was not frightening. That's the thing that stands out the most. There was no panic, no sudden need to understand everything at once. It was as if whatever I needed to know had been set aside for me, waiting until I was ready for it. I was like some passenger on a conveyance where there was neither sound nor sight or thoughts one has when they are alive in the world they've just departed. Maybe you could call it some sort of private, silent subway of which I was a passenger but couldn't remember boarding and couldn't see out of the windows because there were none and I didn't know where I was journeying to because there was no conductor present to tell me.

I had the faintest impression that something had been left behind. It was like looking at a distant place without really seeing it, like knowing that what had been me was no longer where I was now.

I was cool. I was contented. I knew I wasn't going to trip and fall anymore and I wasn't going to be thirsty all the time and whatever I once used to worry about I could let go of now because everything was going to be okay from this point forward.

I did not hear anything. I did not see anything in the way I had once seen. There were no sounds, no shapes, no thoughts forming in the way they used to. It was as if everything that had defined my experience before had been set aside. Time did not exist in any way I could measure. There was no sense of how long this would last, no way to say whether it would be only a moment or something far longer.

It wasn't like I had some guide appear before me and set down the rules and regulations for me and explain how this afterlife I'd entered worked. It was like I got it myself immediately, which was the way it had been back on earth when I was a puppy, when all the intelligence and common sense and intuition had been given to me at birth and I'd not had too much difficulty putting what was really a complex puzzle together without assistance. I'd known when to leave and which turn to take and who my parents were without anybody having to tell me, and I knew in this new place it was going to be the same way. I didn't have to worry. I was going to be happy and smart for eternity.

There was a calm certainty that settled over me, a feeling that whatever I might need would be there when I needed it.

All I had to do was concentrate for a scant second or so and I was moving along without prompting on a journey where my soul and mind were my means of transportation, and I knew I needn't worry about how long this was going to take or where I might end up, because here the time and place were all my own, and all I had to do was wish for a certain moment or feeling or a place to arrive and it would appear. It got me thinking about what a waste it is for anyone to worry, because if a fellow is to eventually end up in a place like this, then it was never worth spending so much time fretting and

expecting the worst, because once it is certain that life is done and this is the destination then that's when all the bad stuff goes away. I could tell it was so, because that moment I couldn't recall anything terrible that had ever come my way. I had been happy where I came from, and now that I was here in a better place I knew I would discover a unique way to be happy here too. No one had to tell me. I just knew. If I thought of scratching, the idea was there, but the need was not. If I thought of eating, it was only a thought, not a desire that demanded to be filled. There were no dangers. No unseen threats. No illnesses waiting to take hold. The world I had known, with all its risks and sorrows, was no longer the place I stood in. There were no lost animals wandering alone. No fear of being taken, no hunger, no suffering.

"Nothing bad ever happens here," I thought.

This was like when I had first come into the world as a puppy, when I had known what to do without being told, when I had understood where to go and who I belonged to without question.

After a certain time—I couldn't say how long, because from what I was learning there wasn't such a thing as time past or time to come but only now—I was almost certain I had totally adjusted to this unknown happy world I was now a member of. I was an inhabitant, a citizen all at once. I stopped feeling like a stranger in a foreign land. It came to me all at once how everything my new eyes were seeing was spanking new yet pleasantly familiar. The weather was perfect, not too hot or cold, no snow or rain or impending storms to make me uneasy. Even if I didn't know where my trek was taking me there was a solid assurance in my soul my new place would be where I would always want to dwell. I was lonesome no more for my home and parents and sisters back on earth. I was no

longer sad. I was cheerful and hopeful that around the next bend was a place that would bring me happiness. I was in wonder at the way this happiness seemed to be cresting and rising higher and higher coming my way.

Nothing bad was ever going to happen to me again. I was safe.

All at once I was in a large expanse of grass and flowers and shrubbery with a tall wooden fence surrounding it, and in half a heartbeat I could see it was my own backyard, larger, greener, the flowers more colorful, the sky above bluer. I didn't need anyone to explain it to me, how this was my home and my place in this grand vision of heaven. There were the trees my mother planted, now grown gloriously tall, swaying full-leaved in a gentle breeze. I could hear my father's voice sing one of his favorite songs—"the summer wind came blowing in from across the sea"—and I looked around to spot him, but he wasn't there. It didn't matter, I wasn't sad, because I knew I would see him again, he and my mother, my two sisters too. I can't say how I knew, but I did.

I stood there, or whatever standing meant now, taking it in, letting it settle.

Then I saw her.

She stood by the far corner of the fence, still as a statue, her body held in that familiar way I had known, alert yet hesitant, as if she could not quite trust what her eyes were showing her. She stared at me transfixed, the way she'd been so many times in her earlier life, when there was an open door and she was suspicious to go through it, or if there was a stairway she was hesitant to climb without some prodding from her little brother standing behind her. She stood at rigorous attention as if the sight being bestowed to her

couldn't be real and would fade away any second. She was the same then, even in this new place. She was my big sister.

It was Kitty!

Well, I knew Kitty. That crazy girl would stand looking my way and imagining all sorts of things in that pinball mind of hers forever if I let her, so I ran to her, my new legs carrying me faster than I had ever traveled in my old life, gliding almost, carried along toward my long-lost sister, not knowing if I would shower her with licks and kisses when I reached her or nip her hind quarters and herd her around the yard as a way of saying I'm so happy to see you again.

It was not running the way I had known it before. There was no strain, no effort, no pounding of paws against the ground. It was smooth, effortless, as if I were being carried forward by something lighter than air. The distance between us closed in an instant, and when at last I reached her I felt something spark between us, something bright and alive. It was as if we were back on earth and the spark was there in her eyes saying I was her little brother and she had learned to love me once long ago and it was that way once again in this new place. We were here in this heaven and the joy we shared would go on forever.

We didn't speak. We didn't say things out loud or ask questions or give answers, but there was a telecommunication that went on between us, and so when she wanted to know how I'd found her I was able to let her understand the way I had followed her down a long trail away from the life we'd known and used my scent and detective powers to pick which road that would lead me to her.

"I always said I would find you again. I made a vow that you would not be gone from me forever. It is like a lot of things I did back on earth. When I made my mind up about

accomplishing something difficult and impossible there was always something in me to carry me along and keep me going until my quest was complete."

She smiled at me.

She told me how she used to think I was crazy. She thought it was her duty to keep an eye on me and try and keep me safe from falling downstairs or jumping through the window if I saw something outside I thought was a threat to the family. And in the end she said it was her who ended up feeling foolish, because it was you, Floyd, who always came in first, you who'd be the one who was correct. You'd be right and I'd be wrong, and it would end up you saving me and me being glad you came along to keep me from doing something stupid. Half the time I was mad at you and half the time I was thankful you were around. It was something different all the time.

She said she was frightened out of her wits the day I came here, but something allowed her to rest for a while and catch her breath and get a feel for what was around her. There didn't seem to be any of the horrible things she used to imagine around anywhere. And after she rested and closed her eyes and took a nap she woke up here in this yard. She knew it wasn't the yard she came from initially, but it was okay, it was fine, because it had the same flowers and the fence and the shrubbery was identical and there were just enough starlings and squirrels around for her to stay occupied chasing them off. And after a while she realized she didn't get hungry or thirsty and there were never any storms to frighten her. The sky was always clear and no thunder ever came. But I missed my family, she said. I have to confess I missed you.

There was that familiar glimmer in her then, something playful, something that had always been there beneath her caution. I recognized it and something moved in me.

So I gave her a quick nudge, not enough to knock her over, but enough to remind her of who I was and how I was with her again.

We had done this a thousand times before. I would circle, she would dodge, I would close in and give her that little push that sent her off balance, and she would recover just in time to come back for more.

We stood there together, and for a moment everything felt complete.

We missed you, I told her. I looked for you every day, hoping you would show up. But after a while I knew you weren't going to come back and it would be my job in the future to find you, and that's what I've done. I knew I'd find you eventually. That was the plan. I know it's nice here, I've found that out already. But I miss my family and want to see them again, just like I know you do. I know that someday they'll all be here with us, and it will really be heaven then. But it still hurts to think I'll have to wait so long.

There's a new dog back at the house now. Her name is Mabel, and she came along a few years after you left. Our parents missed you so much they had to do something, so they went out and got another rescue dog. She's all fur and nutty as a fruitcake—about like you were—and she's a brat if you ever saw one, but I got to where I was fond of her. You'd like her too after you beat her up a couple of times to show her who's boss.

I could see the look of longing in Kitty's eyes and knew right then that one of the reasons I'd been able to find her so fast was that I needed to save her from herself again. Something informed me I was placed here to find her and lead her outside this fence to where there was a passage back to the world we knew, not as permanent members again, but as

visitors, observers. Kitty could see her family once more and perhaps that would fill whatever hole that was here in her heart and let her know that everyone was all right and time was ticking and the day would come when, yes, we would all be together again.

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I told her we were going to take a little trip. How, she wondered? I thought this yard was where I am supposed to be now. It is, I said, but now I'm here and I can show you things you haven't been able to see yet. Can you take me to our family? she asked. If only for a little? Wishing makes it so, I smiled. You should know that by this time. You ought to know I can do lots of things that in the end will make you happy.

I gave her a little bump with my posterior to get her going. It was like the old days.

"This way," I said.

There was no gate on the fence but we moved through it anyway, out onto a road Kitty recognized straight off.

I could read her mind.

This is Carter Avenue, it said. This is the road that leads to our house. I remember it from that time we both ran out the gate the wind had blown open during a storm. I ran up this road and you followed barking all the time for me to stop and for us to go back. And right over there is where Dad drove up in his truck and ran out and grabbed me and took us both home. I sat in the back behind his seat shivering and trembling, and you sat up front wagging your tail. I think you'd been scared too, but right then you had your front paws on the dashboard and you were looking toward home and you kept turning and smiling at dad and turning back to smile at me. You were so happy and I was too. I knew I could have died but you and my dad came after me and saved me, and I couldn't wait to get back to the house so I'd never have to leave again.

We stood on that road, looking at it, feeling it. This isn't really here, is it? I knew that was what she was thinking. I

made her understand it was. It was just not the way it used to be but part of what we were and part of what we get to keep.

"It's all connected," I said. "Everything we were, everything we did, it's still here in some way."

Yes, we really weren't on Carter Avenue at all, just as we hadn't been in our old backyard before either. I realized that what Kitty and I were seeing were glimpses of the wonderful life we'd just finished having, and that although the backyard and the road to our old house were visions, they were nonetheless real in our new way of looking at and knowing things. The way it was, it came to me, was that this promised land heaven-type existence we were in was replete with slices of the past added in as a sort of reward for our lives as good dogs whose very presence had made for a better life for all who came in contact with us. In this way, we truly had gone on to our just reward after departing life, for now we were granted an eternal time in the happy places we once knew on earth.

We stood there together, not needing to move right away, not needing to rush.

We moved along the road together, the one that was not truly there and yet was as real as anything we had ever known. It stretched before us with a quiet familiarity, and though nothing beneath us could be called ground in the old sense, it felt steady and sure, like a path we had traveled a thousand times before.

We traveled the imaginary but real road, and all the while in my mind's eye I could see how there was the old-time zip in Kitty's gait and how her tail stood straight up in anticipation and her eyes were fixed toward whatever was down the road and around the bend. Of course, there was no gait or tail or eyes from our former world that belonged to

Kitty for me to see, but I was beginning to get accustomed to such a phenomenon now. I had come to terms with how what I imagined was real in this place and how the physical manifestation did not have to be present here for it to exist, because it was what was in my mind that made it so. Perhaps it had been precisely that way before back when we were all on earth in our home together, but there are some things that simply can't be comprehended by any being who has never visited any town beyond the clouds and out of sight, like a lesson that had not been taught to school children when they were learning to read or write, how if one can't read it's impossible to digest a book, if one can't write it's difficult to leave a message, and how it is impossible to take in an image one has never before been allowed to imagine, much less see. I began then to understand that in this new eternity where Kitty and I were to reside there were many more marvelous and magical things awaiting us.

All at once we arrived at the top of a hill overlooking our old neighborhood. It had seemed like a long journey when we started out but now it seemed it had only been an instant. We paused for a moment and looked at our house, the metal roof gleaming in the afternoon sunset, the red bricks beckoning to us from our vantage point, the green shutters relaxing against the windows. The grass was green and the sidewalk was ivory white, and then it was like we were watching time passages of a movie, because the sun began to set and the moon rose and just like that it was dark and the lights shone from the windows of the house and the stars above twinkled and beamed right along with them. We could smell the aroma of our mother cooking dinner, we could visualize our father sitting in his recliner watching the news or a baseball game, we could hear Penelope and Mabel barking

in the backyard and it was as if they were calling out to us, asking us where we had gone, wanting to know when would it be when we came back home? And then the night grew instantly later and the lights went out and we knew our family was asleep. We waited for another moment and the sun started to appear in the east, and it was in that divide between night and day when it is both and day and neither that we knew life was going on in our old house without us as it once had with us, and we knew without discussion that this life would never end even when it was time for our family to leave as we had, for they would come to join us in our place and we would be together and know it was heaven for us then just as it had been for us before.

In those instants that might have been weeks or months or years we watched our house on Mockingbird Lane go through seasons with sun and rain and snow, where the Christmas tree appeared in the living room window with its blinking colored bubble lights for the world to see as it passed by, knowing within our beings that inside the house that same tree was covered with ornaments and mementos and trinkets from the past, little figurines that represented ourselves from when we had been with them, and we knew there was still a stocking for both of us hanging on the mantel with everyone else's, and we knew then that we had not gone away truly, that we would always be there with them in one way or another.

In the manner I had come to know so well, Kitty was afraid to advance with me further toward our house, so I had to resort to my herding skills to get her to move along where I wanted her to go. She was frightened that if she came any closer than the top of the hill the entire vision would dissolve and she would lose it forever, and it took some persuading on my part to once more assure her that loss and sadness were

not things that occurred to us anymore, that all of that was behind us now. In the dark of what was an October autumn night we crossed over into the yard, and after a spell of prodding, I led Kitty through the brick walls and into the den. It was silent and dark there; the house was asleep.

I was a tiny bit frightened myself, since this was my first visit back home since the day I'd received two shots and walked on for what I thought was for good. I knew the two of us in our new forms would make no noise like footsteps or paws clicking on the floors, but I was afraid Penelope or Mabel might sense our presence in that uncanny way dogs have of knowing things and sound an alarm and wake up my parents. I couldn't imagine what kind of scene that would have been. Kitty and I being discovered would have thrown off the natural order of things and likely spoiled this quest and possibly make it impossible to come back again in the future, so I froze in my motion and silently willed Kitty to do the same, and for a moment we both stood in our old home and listened to the silence of the world we had left behind.

When I was certain no one was aware of our presence, I led Kitty down the hallway to the bedroom where our parents and sisters were sleeping. The door was open, so I didn't have to perform my trick of entering a closed portal. All we did was stand in the doorway for a long minute and look at everyone sleeping, listening to the patterns of their breathing. I couldn't help but communicate to Kitty how no one in the room was snoring even half as loud as she used to, and her eyes narrowed and I knew she wanted to nip me for bringing the subject up.

She went to the side of the bed and sniffed our mother's hand, and then she came back and I knew she was satisfied and was ready to return, that she had been in the aura of her

old world and she was content to go back and wait for the remainder of her family to come and be with her. She was sure now it would happen. She was doubtful no more. She would be glad to wait for such an event to transpire, for time to dogs is not the same as it is to their humans. It consists of no great length but just a continual now, and in a dog's mind as long as it is now what is to come is very near, only another heartbeat, the end of another day that goes by like the blinking of an eye. Kitty was eager to return to her present place with her yard and her flowers and a blue sky above her head, to wait as long as it took.

I led her from the house and we began our journey back.

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I've taken great pains to make it clear that I am not completely akin to the lifestyles and philosophies of all members of the canine world. I am all dog, sure, but I am not totally within the restraints of that species and don't conform a hundred percent with their behaviors and preferences. I am a different sort and always have been.

Visiting that one time with me as her guide was enough for Kitty. It reaffirmed her belief in the longevity of her parents' love for her and solidified her memories of the wonderful life she had been blessed to live, and now she was glad to live her afterlife in a golden place—not a reproduction, but a home identical to her first joyous place that was larger and eternal. She was happy to be where she was in her own mode of waiting for her loved ones to arrive. In the meantime, she had me.

Yet for me, being happy and contented to live in Paradise was not enough. It wasn't that I was unhappy and desiring more than all the treasures that were at hand. That was not it at all. What I had and possessed that other dogs didn't was this abiding charge in my being that required total allegiance to my family and some sort of divine obsession that I possessed a power that could not only watch over and protect those beings but also ease their sufferings and assuage their fears. I knew that my parents had not been able to get over my departure in the same way I had not been able to stop missing Kitty and wondering if she was all right. I had finally been able to come to terms with it and feel okay with it, but like I say, I was different, I was aware of being sent from a heaven equipped with more intelligence about the whys and

wherefores of the hereafter. I knew everyone couldn't come to grips with time and reality the way I could.

This was why I decided I would continue from time to time to return to the old world and look in on my family from time to time and see if they needed anything that only I could bring them.

I know how it is for the rest of creation, how one comes to understand that there is a beginning and an end and a time and a place and that sooner or later it all ends and that is the natural order of things. But once again I have to say that it has never been that way for me. I am not a normal member of this thing called life. I am an eternal herding dog. I was made to be around and guide those I love to a prolonged state of happiness and joy, but unlike other herders, my duties did not end when my time on earth came to an end. I didn't know it for certain at the time, but when death came it was merely a conveyance to move to another plain and set up office there to continue my work. Not only did I learn that death does not end all things, but also that my responsibilities would continue and never stop. I had come to realize that what I had thought was an ending had only been a transition. I had not been taken away from my purpose. I had merely been moved to a different place to continue it.

After a few visits back to observe my family and attempt to instill a telepathic thought to them about Kitty's and my well-being, I began to think that something much more concrete might be required. I didn't want to overstep my job duties, but thought a certain kind of relief might go a long way toward healing this big hurt I had left behind when I went away.

I didn't want to be a ghost dog. I didn't want to all at once appear before everybody like Lon Chaney Jr. did in that

movie *Son of Dracula* in a swirl of smoke and scare the pants and fur off everybody coming at them like a phantom. I was always one for pranks and sophomoric behavior and such, but being how this death and afterlife stuff was a pretty serious subject I thought it might be best to show a little discretion. I wanted everyone to know that Kitty and I were all right and that we were waiting for them someday, but I didn't want to scare them all to death to the point where they'd be on their way to join us immediately. I visited by myself a few more times for inspiration, came back and put on my thinking cap, and came up with what I thought was a rather good idea.

It was the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving and I knew everyone would be home and up late. My mom would be cooking and getting ready for the family and friends to come over for Thanksgiving dinner the next afternoon, and knowing my dad, I figured he'd be down in his recliner in the den watching old movies until all hours of the night, so I camped out on the front porch and waited for all the lights to go out and everyone to go to bed. I made certain to wait an hour extra after that to make sure the whole house was asleep and nobody was up with a case of insomnia or anything, and when I was positive no one was going to happen upon me I entered the house in that way we in the afterlife have of averting doors and locks to get where we want and started in on my regular inspection of the house.

I checked out the back bedrooms and the guest bathroom, looked in on my mom's yoga room and sniffed around a minute or so in my dad's office. I remembered curling up in there many a time when he was writing or paying bills or simply surfing the internet, and I was almost tempted to take a load off and stretch out and elongate the way I once did, but I had business at hand. I came into the kitchen and

saw all the pots and pans freshly washed and stacked in the drainer and smelled my mom's cookies she'd begun this evening as a prelude to her holiday baking. I imagined the taste of one of her oatmeal cookies in my mouth and felt the same measure of delight I once had when I was here in the flesh. I wanted to stay there and sniff and smell some more, but time was short. I made my way through the den and the library and the dining room and examined the bathroom where sometimes I used to have a drink of cold water, and then I looked into the bedroom and saw my family sleeping.

Penelope was on her side with her back legs twitching, having another of her usual dreams, while Mabel was rolled into a small ball up on the bed at my parents' feet, a place where she wasn't particularly welcome, since as a puppy she liked to jump up there and pee on the quilt because it felt like soft grass on her feet. My mother was on one side with her hand dangling off the side just like the night Kitty was with me and had gone over and kissed it, and my dad was scrunched up on his side with one hand under his pillow and the other resting on my mother's leg. They were all as sound asleep as they could possibly be.

I turned and left them sleeping and went back through the library to the dining room. I concentrated fully, urging myself for a moment to transform back to my earthly state, and when I knew I had accomplished such an act, I shook my body as if I had been out in the rain, as if I had just awakened from a delicious nap and was ready to resume my duties. When I did I saw a white cloud of fur rise in the air and then begin to softly fall like snow onto the floor. I looked at it and willed it to move to the center of the route to the kitchen, knowing that there was where my father would find it Thanksgiving morning, and he would know in that way we

always had with each other that I had been here and was saying hello.

Hello, I love you. I remember that had been one of his favorite songs way back when. He used to sing it to me. And I knew when my mom and my sisters saw the message I'd left behind that they would know it too.

Everyone would be happy knowing, yes, we would all one day be together again.

I left then, satisfied.

I knew nothing bad would happen to any of us ever again.

It was nice knowing life was this way, nice to know it would be that way forever.

About the Author

RALPH BLAND is the author of seventeen novels and four collections of stories. His work includes Stars Rain Sun Moon, *Lockhart,* and *Lamb White Days.* Ralph is a graduate of Belmont University, married with a daughter and three very spoiled dogs, and on numerous occasions likes disguising himself as a normal person. When not coercing himself to write he spends his time suffering over the heartbreaks of the Vanderbilt Commodores basketball team, lounging in his backyard with his adorable dogs, or tinkering with his 1949 Wurlitzer jukebox, trying to determine why one day it works and the next day it doesn't, knowing full well that because he is a mechanical idiot he will never know the answer. A lover of Universal monster movies and British sports cars that don't run, he is the proud owner of perhaps the South's largest Frank Sinatra audio collection, as if that has anything to do with the price of tea in China.