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Dog Star

I'd seen her the night before, walking in northern Minnesota dusk. Coming around the dirt road's bend I stopped, and there she stood, waiting to see what I was, her rusty tail as long as her body. Our eyes met, then with a few quick steps she disappeared. Back from my walk, as night settled to roost among the birch and pines, my heart surged—elated to know these woods were still wild enough for the fox to call them home.

When I saw her the next morning she hadn't been dead long—her eyes still glistened—but she'd been dead in an instant, the split-second she'd stepped softly from the woods and felt speeding steel smash her bones through the skin and fur of her face. Whoever hit her hadn't bothered to stop.

What I remember most clearly about the fox is that while its tiny-pawed body remained intact its mouth was a garish stew of bone-white broken teeth and bright red blood. While I write this I touch fingers to skin and wonder at the force it would take to move my entire lower jaw through the other side of my face. Force that would push my eyeballs halfway out of their sockets, force that would kill me before my heart stopped pumping blood or my brain finished its last thought.

Kneeling on the highway, I picked up a piece of jawbone, teeth still intact, and set it to the side, then moved the body into the woods. As I did, a red SUV came hurtling over the rise, honked, and rocketed past, the driver glaring at me while pinning the accelerator to the floor.

That night I did not walk, but took the canoe out on the calm lake and sat looking at the shore, thinking the woods around my house were that much emptier and wondering if somewhere hidden among night's dark wings three fox pups waited silently for their parent to return, an instinctual panic not yet bursting through their chests.

Albuquerque's Old Town is like a life-size doll house whose arrangement constantly changes. The streets are narrow, with butterscotch lights on

telephone poles every thirty yards. Even narrower are the walkways between the single or two story adobe buildings leading back to courtyards of ancient cottonwoods. Wandering these walkways at night, my dog Luna zipping in and out ahead, I feel like I'm always discovering new shops and corners, trees and signs. My first few times here I missed everything except what was right on the street, which is to say I missed almost everything.

Though I get back to Minnesota every summer, I've lived in New Mexico seven years, and Luna's been with me almost four. She's a Brittany, a bird dog, a breed born to run. She sits at attention until I open the door, then whines with excitement and races down the sidewalk. She doesn't leave the curb unless I call her; otherwise she's free to roam. We head east down Pueblo Bonito, cross Rio Grande, cut through the Sheraton Hotel parking lot, and cross Mountain Road into the park next to Old Town.

First stop is a small hill, surrounded by cottonwoods, the darkest part of the park because of the planetarium across the street. In winter the trees are silent, their bare branches laced with stars. I lie on my back to catch the constellations, starting with Orion, the hunter, and his two dogs, Canus Major and Minor, on their nightly walk across the sky.

In the north woods summer the Milky Way drapes north to south, constellations standing out in three dimensional beauty. But in the southwest winter, I see only the brightest stars. The city's artificial lights blot the Milky Way and the lesser stars from view, and I wonder how many of my sleeping neighbors know what's been lost. There must be some who've been lucky to grow up in, visit, or know a wild place where starry nights still exist, but I bet not many.

I used to walk with my ex-girlfriend Wendy and Lily, our Brittany. We moved from Minneapolis to Albuquerque and spent two years here together. Wendy was a great woman, healthy in body, mind, and spirit. We met our freshman year at college, and when we made love for the first time I gave her a dozen red roses to mark the occasion—for both of us. But in ten years together it never felt right to get married. I kept waiting for the reasons why it didn't feel right to disappear, but they never did, and when Wendy took a job in Boston, we agreed to break up. Lily and I were left alone to walk at night.

That lasted for a week—her racing around, me walking slowly—until she was murdered—I think I must use that word—by someone who laced chicken with cyanide and placed it around garbage cans and under trees, places where dogs were sure to find it. She did not die right away; it

wasn't until she collapsed into her water dish, spilling the water on the tiled floor and struggling to stand, that I knew.

What I didn't know was how to express my grief. The woman I'd been with for a decade had only left a week before—watching her go I wondered if I was making the biggest mistake of my life—and I felt as though I'd used up all the tears my body could produce. But I found that there were tears beyond those tears, like faint stars behind the stars we usually see.

We leave the hill and enter Old Town on San Felipe, Luna racing around corners, her coat rust and white under street lights. During the day, Indians sell jewelry in front of La Placita restaurant and tourists fill the shops. But the shops keep daytime hours, the restaurants close by nine, and by the time we come through after eleven, no one is around, save for an occasional stray car or store owner counting receipts in a pool of bright light. Behind the San Felipe church, two cars in the "Priest Parking" are as silent as prayer.

Old Town rose from the desert floor in the early 1700s. For more than a hundred years Old Town *was* Albuquerque, until a new downtown grew two miles east. It's not large—there's the plaza, the church, and the shops spread for a block or two around them—but it's deep. In three hundred years a lot of people have been through, with stories and memories all. How many lovers have walked here? How many lonely souls? Now at night it's just me and my dog, as though we walk where people once lived but no longer do.

Watching Luna, I smile. It's like watching an extension of me, part of my spirit, run free. My best friend, her tongue hanging from her mouth as though it's simply too big to fit between her teeth, smiles at me and leaps over a three-foot adobe wall into a small sleeping garden.

I met Bonnie in October. On perhaps our best night together, we walked through Old Town twice. It was the first Friday of December. I got home around three and left a message for her, then crawled under my sleeping bag. Twenty minutes later the phone rang.

"You're taking a nap?" she said.

"Why don't you come over and join me?"

"Really? I would love that."

When she arrived I pretended to be asleep. I love naps, and before she'd called I was settling into a nice one. But the truth is that we didn't sleep at all, and from then on "nap" became code. We were like two chemicals that when placed together in bed couldn't help but react. I

remember being genuinely excited to just lie curled with her. But my solitary kisses soon led to other things.

"God, I want to fuck you so bad," she said. I was instantly both startled and thrilled. But the look on my face must have shown more the former because she then said, "Is it OK to say that?" And though I think I managed to say "It's very OK," there's part of me that wishes I would have responded with more approval and encouragement because she never said anything quite like that to me again.

Halfway down San Felipe I walk by the round windows of the gallery Saints & Martyrs, its interior lit by amber light. In one window stands a horse made of wood, screaming as it gallops—stopped frozen, perhaps four feet high and five feet long. A beautifully carved figure, the look on its face reminds me of reading about the Chechnyan peasant describing a Russian bombing as so vicious the horses had tears in their eyes.

The brick sidewalk curves behind Saints & Martyrs to a ponderosa pine towering over a courtyard, a small chapel in its shadow. This is my second stop.

Stepping past thick wood doors I stand before an altar crowded with several dozen candles, the scent of incense and fresh flowers washing over me. The chapel opens to the right and there are places to sit, to rest, even a place for confession—although the room for the priest has mops and brooms in it. I step to the sound of candle flames, thick adobe walls keeping their warmth. Notes from desperate souls—"Help him find his way," "I love her but don't know what to do"—rest next to the candles. No one is ever here when I visit, but the doors are always open.

I kneel and say a short prayer, breath visible above gloved hands. Luna comes trotting in, licks my face once, and trots back under the stars.

Most of my life I was night-sky dumb. I could identify only the Big Dipper and Orion and had no idea that Orion's dogs trail close behind him or that the brightest star any of us will ever see lies in Canus Major. I know now that star is Sirius, the "Dog Star."

Sirius is that star because not only is it a very hot, bright star, but it's also—at 8.5 light years—one of our closest stellar neighbors. If you're like me, the term "light years" doesn't mean much. But think of it this way: if the sun were the size of a Ping-Pong ball, the earth would be a pin-prick thirteen feet away and Sirius would be a tennis ball 1,400 miles away.

Still, what stands out is just this: while the Milky Way glows with the faint light of billions of stars, and naked human eyes are capable of seeing some 6,000 individual stars (though most nights we see far fewer), on any

clear night from October until June, Sirius will be there, the brightest, most faithful star in the sky.

I don't know why I love this, but I know I do. It feels instinctual, like finding that brightest star speaks to some desire to know for sure, to feel certain, to understand, to have my direction, my efforts, confirmed. So much in our lives is not clear, is cloudy, that when something comes along that is clear, we know it without knowing why, without having to try.

It was after dark when Bonnie and I emerged from the bedroom and walked to Old Town, our bodies still warm from our shared heat, the taste of her skin on my lips and tongue. My mind felt lighter, and it seemed time had stopped and was only now beginning to move again. I wondered if people could tell where we had been minutes before. It seemed so obvious to me.

Old Town was closed to cars that night and we walked down the middle of San Felipe. The planetarium had two large telescopes in the street, and we stood in line to see Saturn's rings. Bonnie looked first, and after I took my turn I couldn't find her. It felt strange—I thought she'd wait for me, but she'd already gone to stand in line for the next view.

In the plaza hundreds of *farolitos* lined the sidewalks and building tops, the yellow candles in lunch sacks guiding couples and families. A booth for kids to paint their faces and another for making Christmas tree ornaments each had serious business on their hands, and a newly opened Mexican restaurant hummed with hungry diners. We soon were swallowed by the crowd awaiting the tree lighting. When I put my arm around Bonnie and kissed her she was surprised, ending the kiss quickly and leaning away.

"Sorry," I said.

"It's all right."

"You're not comfortable with the 'public display of affection'?" I said, sensing her answer and wondering why at the same time.

"Not here," she said, brown hair curling from beneath a dark green wool cap. "But later. I wouldn't mind doing what we just did again."

"I could probably be into that."

"Yeah?" She smiled briefly and turned her back to me. I took my arm from her shoulder and told myself to remember that this is what I wanted: a lover, a woman for sex and companionship, but not someone to get too serious about. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth. My heart felt held together, loosely, by an uneasy alliance between two sides who didn't entirely trust each other.

A red stage coach rolled to a halt near us, with actors dressed as cowboys and four huge beige horses stepping in place nervously. I felt sorry for the horses; their eyes were wide with fear.

Bonnie turned and said, "I'd like to see them wheel up and dump the stage coach. Or kick somebody in the ass."

I nodded and smiled but didn't know what to say.

After the tree lights were finally lit we walked back the way we'd come. Saints & Martyrs, normally closed at 4:30 p.m., was still open and serving hot apple cider. There were several pieces of art on sale for hundreds and even thousands of dollars. Small candles sold for one or two dollars each. But we didn't go to the chapel. It was crowded with visitors.

We decided to get some dinner. At Mr. Sushi I spotted a friend and went to her, but when I looked to see if Bonnie was watching, she wasn't. We drank a lot of sake and left happy. I drove, she taking my hand between hers.

Back home I poured a hot bath with juniper soap and Bonnie took off her clothes. Soon we both were sweating and she stood and opened the window, steam rising from her skin and climbing into moonlight. I knelt before her and kissed her thighs and belly and breasts and lips and when she came she took my hand and placed it on her chest so that I could feel the way my fingers and lips made her heart pound. Then we got out and made love in my bed with happy drunken energy that recharged us both and she said, "Let's take Luna for a walk."

After Lily was poisoned, I waited a year and a half, then brought home an eight-week-old puppy. I remember the winding road to Los Alamos, fat snowflakes floating toward me. I remember not being able to decide which puppy to choose, sitting on the breeder's kitchen floor while two puppies wrestled in front of me, then fell asleep in my lap. I remember driving home in the dark, my new puppy in the blue plastic laundry basket on the passenger seat. I left the heater on while I ran in to buy dinner, coming back to find her still curled in sleep.

I named her Luna to honor the L name of her predecessor, the loons at the Minnesota lake we would surely visit every summer of her life, and the Spanish name for moon to reflect her New Mexican roots.

I spent hours every day training her—never to leave the curb, always to return to my side when I said, "Come," loving her, trying to create the dog who would be as proud of me as I was of her. It's this training, along with her natural intelligence, that allows me to walk her without a leash.

I don't regret that Wendy and I broke up. We'd reached a point where we had to do something, and getting married—devoting our lives to each

other—wasn't the honest thing to do. One reason was I still wondered what it would be like to have a girlfriend who wanted to drink sake and have sex three times a night. Who hadn't been my first partner. Who wasn't, in a way, more like a friend.

Bonnie told me she'd been raped at sixteen. That for many years she'd thought men were simply "dogs." She talked about boyfriends with arms covered in tattoos answering doorbells carrying their bong and dressed only in boxers while Bonnie stayed in bed, giggling. She said she did not think of sex as much as she once had. "I don't daydream about it constantly anymore," is how she put it, and said that for months after her father died she did not think of it at all, but that now, with me, she felt she was almost back to where she had been.

And we had a blast together. She was sarcastic, silly, self-mocking—making each other laugh was easy. She worked as an occupational therapist with slower grade-school kids, I could tell she was good at it, and I don't think she ever knew how much that contributed to my liking her.

But god, I wrestled myself. She's not what I want, I would think. Not a woman who told me, "I don't know if I can ever like someone who likes me." Not someone who'd had "bitch" tattooed on her back. It's covered by flowers now, but on her skin for life.

Then I'd convince myself to hang in there, to be cool, to have sex with her even though she didn't want me to kiss her in public. I told myself I could handle it. That this was something I'd wanted all those years with Wendy. I remember pushing myself to stick with it, even while knowing, deep inside, it wouldn't last.

So we went back, the same walk, the *farolitos* still glowing and the huge tree lit but Old Town deserted. We walked to the chapel, stopping where the telescopes had been to look toward stars. Luna trotted ahead, then took off after a cat down the alley just before we turned past Saints & Martyrs.

Inside the chapel I sat down next to a basket of cards and letters. On top of the pile was what looked like a page torn from a children's coloring book. On one side brown crayon strayed across the black outlines of a saint, or maybe Jesus. I turned the page over, and from a child's hand, in that same brown crayon were the words, "Pray for my dog."

I stood and left the chapel. Luna hadn't followed us into the courtyard. I whistled, looked down the dark alley, and watched as she flashed past. She was headed home, running as fast as she could in the direction she thought I'd gone. In the seconds it took me to reach the street, she ran to the edge of Old Town, crossed Mountain, heard my whistle, and came

racing back toward me—if anything, faster than she'd been headed the other way.

The speed limit for cars on Mountain is thirty, which would have been fast enough—think of the fox—you don't need much speed when the equation is two tons of steel to 29 pounds of blood and bone and lungs and love. There was nothing I could do, no special whistle or shouted command, no extra time spent in training that could now pay off. No way to risk my own skin by standing in front of the speeding SUV. No amount of attention to the quiet of Old Town, the beauty of the night sky, or the peace of candlelight in the discovered chapel was going to make a difference. Everything just stopped—the blood moving through my bones, the instinctual beat of my heart, the uncertainty circling my thoughts.

Of course, knowing Bonnie wasn't really the woman for me long term didn't keep me from falling in love with her. For a time, as we got to know each other, I told myself that if it ended I would be fine. I would say thanks for the experience and move along. But then that time was gone, and I was hooked.

It was like sinking into a lake—for a while you see the sky, then only a general sense of light, then only lit water—and if you go deep enough you're together in darkness. The light of your identity before you met is there and you know it but can't really see it any more. Being with someone is moving through a kind of darkness, you can't see what the other person thinks or feels, it's new territory, you have to make your own light. On the surface, before you go deeper together, it's safer. It's not as risky.

Going deeper scared Bonnie and she raced back to the surface. On a rainy Saturday night before New Year's saying she'd thought she was ready but she wasn't. "Fuck. I don't want to cry," she told me. And then crying because, she said, she didn't know if she'd ever be able to let herself go on with anyone. "I'm fucked up when it comes to relationships." Crying because she couldn't let herself trust a man. "Is that OK?" she asked several times as she wept and I assured her it was, sitting with my arms around her while she rose back to the light of the surface.

The rest of the winter I walked looking east over the city's gold glitter to her neighborhood. In her bedroom she'd slung white Christmas lights from corner to corner. The last time I was there, the night she ended things, those lights were off, and then she shut her bedroom door. It's that closing of the door that hurt the most. I'd walk to the small hill and look toward the room where I had once been welcome and wasn't anymore, and then to where Sirius shined, and felt the gutted feeling of wanting what I'd had.

I will still be able to see Lily when I'm an old man—her body rigid and convulsing, lying in the spilled water, tongue sticking barely out. The surprise and fear on her face when the seizure ended. I knelt and put my arms around her. She might not have known that death was in her blood, but she knew something was wrong.

At the vet's office I was too polite. They were busy, Lily seemed nervous but otherwise normal, and maybe I thought—as we do—that things would be OK. We sat together, she on the floor in front of me, and waited. A vet in a white coat came from the back and began conferring with a woman at the front desk. And Lily had her second seizure on that waiting room's cold tiles.

"Oh my gosh!" said the vet. She scooped Lily from the floor and carried her into the back. When she returned a few minutes later she said, "Well, she came out of that seizure and we've got her on an IV. We'll call you if anything changes. Do we have your number?"

I gave her the number—I had to think about it for a second—and left Lily in her care. When the phone stayed silent for a couple hours I decided to check in. The receptionist asked me to hold.

"I'm so sorry, Paul," were Dr. McGuire's first words. "We tried to call but the number you left didn't work." I'd just moved from the house I'd shared with Wendy, and in the nervous moment I'd left the wrong number. "She had another seizure and this time she didn't make it."

At the clinic Dr. McGuire opened an exam room door and said, "Take as long as you want."

Lily lay on a stainless steel table on her side, looking as though she were asleep, as if all I had to do was touch her and she'd be fine.

Years ago, I saw a young couple biking across a Minneapolis street together. A car perpendicular to them came to a stop but not before running into the woman and her bike. She wasn't hurt, but her bike was damaged and she had been scared. Her boyfriend screamed at the driver and then picked up his bike and hurled it at the windshield of the car. I remember admiring his passion and wondering if I would ever respond like that.

Then I saw the face of the man in the SUV—impassive, dark—the man about to sever my connection with Luna. I knew he wouldn't even stop. The SUV itself seemed drunk on speed, but it was driven by a man, possibly who had a dog he loved or a lover whose skin he couldn't wait to taste. And for long seconds, the kind that carry your life before your eyes, long enough to feel the blood surge down my arms and flush my hands, I had a vision of tearing him from his seat and bashing his head into the street. Of screaming why don't you fucking slow down?

I watched Luna run toward me and stopped thinking about that. In a split second—no, a small piece from a second cut to bits—Luna came across Mountain (and is there a faster dog speed than, "I thought I'd lost my master but there he is and he's calling me"? She came at that speed) and the huge silver SUV crossed going the other way, close enough so that I imagined the air disturbed by Luna passing through the air disturbed by the SUV.

Neither stopped. I doubt the driver even saw her, but she saw me and kept running until she reached me. Her tongue out, her eyes happy, the look on her face saying woo-hoo there you are, come on!

I touched my fingers to my cheek, remembering the fox last summer—the soupy blood mixed with chunks of bone—and imagined seeing that again under the Old Town lights.

Bonnie came up behind me. "Hey man, what's going on?"

"Luna," I said, "come."

"What happened?"

Luna sat next to my left leg. "Luna almost got hit by a car."

"Holy shit. Just now?"

But I was crouched, facing my one and only dog, my best friend, her tongue licking my cheeks, and didn't hear what else Bonnie said. I was thinking about the work I'd put in. The choices I'd made. And I knew that if Luna had paused to consider coming back to me, she would have been dead.

It's confusing, wanting different things, wanting the wrong things. Losing what you love, losing what you didn't love enough, wondering if you'll get another chance. Some desires seem so clear, summer stars standing out in three-dimensional beauty, others seem blurred by artificial light. Friends used to tell me the person who murdered Lily would go to hell, and I believe they're right. Every minute I spend with Luna feels true, feels bright. A fox is killed by a driver who doesn't even slow, and I know, with my whole heart, that's wrong.

But when it comes to love I'm less certain. I think sometimes of Wendy and wish we'd met at another time, a time after Bonnies, and Lilys, and loneliness. A time when I wouldn't be clouded by wondering what else was out there, when I'd have learned what I'd wanted to learn, when I could see what I hadn't before seen. But that's not how life works, and if I were to meet her today she wouldn't be the Wendy I knew.

And with Bonnie, I see her around town and we share a hug, but I don't walk wondering what she's doing any more. I'm grateful for our experience together but I wouldn't want to go through it again. I want something else now. I wish I could find a woman where loving her felt as natural as other things I love at night.

I stop at the chapel and remember the fox. The fox's jaw bone that I saved—I cleaned it in lake water and set it on the picnic table outside—when I went out the next morning it was gone. Something, some living creature came during the night and took it back into the woods. I wonder sometimes if it was her partner. But I don't think I'll ever know.