

# Retirement Dogs



YOU SEE THE MEN in our neighborhood: big, stoop-shouldered, shuffling men, retired after thirty-five or forty years of hard, physically demanding labor, carpenters and plumbers, police officers and letter carriers, walking the little mops and sausages that their wives have procured in the first flush of their husbands' retirements because it wouldn't do, no it absolutely wouldn't do for them to have nothing with which to occupy their time. Leashes drag the ground or stretch to the point of breaking. Shrill yips and yaps echo between the eaves as one retirement dog passes another. The men shrug their shoulders and avert their eyes, studying the sidewalk. These are the men who once barbecued whole pigs in the middle of our street on the Fourth of July. They drank suitcases of beer, worked the pit with pitchforks, and shouted instructions and imprecations to their teen-aged children. Now, tiny poop bags dangle from their unleashed hands.

By dying early, my father was spared such indignities. By dying early, my father was spared the full bloom of my mother's dementia and the possibility that she might have purchased a Pomeranian and a rhinestone-studded collar-and-leash set while calling him by a former lover's name.

So, that's the story: my father died, and I came home because my mother was wandering the neighborhood in her nightgown at three o'clock in the morning looking for Bill, the aforementioned former lover. I came home only to find that the neighborhood of my childhood had become haunted with the husks of men I once knew, now shepherded by their Maltese and Shih Tzu and Havanese attendants.

I came home while my mother still knew me as her daughter.

She had forgotten my father and their thirty-seven years of marriage and remembered instead the two-week fling in Pismo with Bill in the fifth year of her marriage to my father. She and Bill ate fried seafood and drank cheap rosé in a bad hotel while my father changed my diapers and called his sister for back-up childcare.

I came home in the middle of a three-year NEH grant, the purpose of which I no longer knew or cared about. I came home to take care of my mother because

my father was dead and my husband had cooked the books on his restaurant and was drinking everything in sight, and I wanted out before getting out was no longer an option. I came home only to find the sidewalks awash in small, yapping fluffballs and despondent, shackled men.

“Mr. DeBenedetto—” I say to our neighbor from down the street and our former postal carrier—“you have a dog.” His Jack Russell terrier is beside him, and although the dog is no puppy and his muzzle is more gray than brown or white, he pogoes in the air, barking and yipping, a whoopee cushion in pain. All because I’m a stranger and he’s a dog and not barking is not an option.

“We,” he emphasizes. “We have a dog. Marla brought him home from the pound while I was watching Monday Night Football at the Dew Drop. She texted me that there was a surprise waiting. Dinner, I thought. A new recipe. Something with garam masala. Isn’t that a thing? Or maybe something to spice up our romantic life, like a new nightgown or unguents. But when I got home, there was this snout poking over the back of the couch, and Marla was cooing about how cute he was. How we were saving him from the gas chamber. Even though I don’t think they do that anymore, the gas. They use drugs, don’t they? I said, ‘Marla, we didn’t talk about this. Marla,’ I said, ‘you have to give him back, you just have to,’ which is when Marla began to cry and I began to cave because gas or drugs, it’s all the same, isn’t it?”

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “I can’t imagine a dog as a surprise, not unless you’re a seven-year-old and this dog is a puppy with a bow. Which he’s not. And you’re not.”

Which is when Mr. DeBenedetto says, “How’s your mother?”

And I don’t have much to tell him, except for the fact that this morning she tried to put coffee in the toaster and her dirty laundry in the microwave.

“I hear that Jack Russells can live as long as fifteen years,” I say.

“I know,” he says. “We’ll die within days of each other.”

Then there was my father, whose death none of us could have foreseen. A motorcycle cop for more than twenty years, he died not from being flattened by a garbage truck going the wrong way on a one-way street or by a grandmother in a Toyota failing to look before making a lane change, but when he fell off the roof of our house. He was replacing some asphalt tiles on the second story when he must have stood up and become light-headed, lost his balance, and fell to the driveway below. At least that’s what the medical examiner surmised. His head cracked like Humpty Dumpty on the cement, and blood pooled like an oil stain. My mother blamed his bowed legs from all those years on his police hog. In a moment of lucidity, she had warned him against it and tried to stop him from get-

ting the ladder from the garage. She was pacing inside the house, waiting for tragedy to occur, when she heard his body hit the pavement.

When she called me, she couldn't recall my father's name, blathering about Bill instead.

My father had programmed the phone with my number, and she was in the habit of speed dialing at all hours. I had become conditioned not to expect much from her calls.

"What, Ma," I said, while scrolling through the websites of divorce lawyers.

"Bill's dead," she said. "Bill. He didn't land on his feet."

"You have a cat?" I said. "And he's dead?"

"No!" She shouted, and it was clear that she was frustrated. "Bill. He's on the driveway."

By this time, Mr. DeBenedetto and Tommy Haslett, another neighbor from the other end of the street, had spotted my father and alerted 911, and an ambulance was on its way, too late to do any good as it turned out. Also, by this time, a crowd had formed since it was a Saturday morning, and the entire street was marked by yard sale signs and used furniture and not-so-gently-worn clothing, bargain hunters and trash pickers.

"Oh, Bill," my mother said, and the crowd parted for my mother and her madness and her cordless phone, so I heard it all. "He's broken," she said to everyone at large. "*Il s'est cassé la tête*," she said to me on the phone, her high school French emerging unbidden from some dark doorway.

"And who," I asked, genuinely mystified, "is Bill?"

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All was made clear in time. Mrs. DeBenedetto wrestled the phone away from my mother and gently told me that Bill's broken head actually belonged to my father, and after his funeral my Aunt Jane, my father's sister, told me about Bill and my mother's two-week dalliance with him in the wake of my birth.

"She was fragile, even then, and she couldn't cope," Jane said. "Not with her husband on the back of that motorcycle, and not with a brand-new daughter who was crying twenty-three hours a day. You were a handful, you know. Colic. Or just ornery. On the other hand, Bill was an old high school crush who had a car and a hotel room and a collection of plaid sport jackets. She came back to her senses when he started leaving her at night so he could gamble at the Grover Beach casino. She came home to you and your father, that's what you need to remember. Even though the sex was great. So she said."

"Eww," I said and stuck my fingers in my ears, "la-la-la-lah-lah."

“Oh, please. You think you’re so liberated, but the thought of your parents wanting some is more than you can take.”

“I can’t think of *myself* wanting some without throwing up a little bit.”

Sex had never been great with Peter. Tolerable mostly. Bordering on pleasurable only once in a great while. But never great. *Never*, more’s the pity. Not that he knew or recognized it or even considered the possibility that the experience might be other than golden. He talked about it afterwards like a sportscaster reporting the highlights. I knew that if I told him the truth, he’d sulk, and then I’d feel obligated to charm him out of his mood, a gesture not worth the effort or outcome. *Let him have his illusions*, I thought, and then as a rider, *maybe I’ll have some peace of mind*. Which was necessary since I had come to the crossroads of my grant-funded study of Ernest Hemingway’s wives. I had promised in my grant proposal a big, provocative book, an expansion of my dissertation, that used Hadley, Pauline, Martha, and Mary as the embodiments of his own clichés of femininity, but of late that ax seemed well-enough honed. What more was there to say, other than to make it worse than it actually was? And, if there wasn’t more to say, then it was worth only a big fat yawn. All this while Peter was in hock to the Russians who had muscled their way into all the hipster restaurants in the Hawthorne district. And because he was in hock to the Russians, he was fabricating the daily receipts, and because he was in for a penny, in for a pound, he was also drinking, and because he was drinking, what had once been tolerable was now just ten minutes of distraction before he got out of bed once again and opened the cabinet above the refrigerator and started shuffling bottles. So, after my mother called and Mrs. DeBenedetto intervened, I didn’t need another excuse to call for an Uber to the airport.

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I landed in Fresno on an August afternoon, as the temperature was cresting at 108 degrees. An honor flight from D.C. was coming in at the same time, and the tunnel from the gates to the concourse was jammed with eighty- and ninety-year-olds in wheelchairs and walkers and canes, in various stages of infirmity and military dress. Their wives and middle-aged daughters were waiting with signs and flags and little dogs in arms: Chihuahuas, dachshunds, and pugs. Some wiseacre had an air horn with which to celebrate the men’s return, and every few seconds the terminal reverberated with the pain and echo of high-pitched barks.

“Wendy,” a voice called. “Wendy, yoo-hoo.”

Samantha Guidry, who grew up three houses away from me, was waving wildly.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“I could ask you the same.”

She had an oversized bag looped over one shoulder and across her chest, and the head of a silky Pekingese played peek-a-boo behind her arm.

"The Grand's on this plane," she said. "He went back with two other army buddies to see the monuments one last time before they die. They've become morbid old fucks. And I ended up watching Coco for a week. Fucking little fuck-turd. I can't wait to hand her back." She paused, and I could see light come and go from her eyes. "I'm sorry about your dad. I heard. So, this is why you're back, I'm guessing."

"My father fell off the roof, and my mother is losing her mind. That pretty much sums it up," I said.

"No Peter?"

"Nope. He's the other shoe," I said. "Living with Mom for a while will seem like a picnic by comparison."

"Fucking hell," she said. "Sorry, Wen."

"Not half as sorry as yours truly," I said.

But then, another rank of nearly-dead war heroes emerged, among them Sam's grandfather, whose motorized wheelchair carried himself and two carry-ons. Clear tubes snaked from his nose while a garrison cap tilted rakishly from his bald head. When Coco spotted him, she began scrabbling furiously against the constraints of the bag until finally she freed herself from Sam's grip, launched herself to the floor, and bolted down the carpet, leaping into her owner's lap, her leash trailing behind.

"Hwar, hwar," Sam's Grand blurted.

Laughter joined the airhorns and the barking and the general din of a happy return.

"Fucking hell," Sam said again. "Fucking little fuck-turd."

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Did I mention that in the first year of our marriage, not long before the Russians, the duplicate sets of books, and the bottles, Peter brought home a five-pound female puppy of indeterminate breed? Saying it was for me? No? I was turning twenty-seven, in the throes of my dissertation, and he had seen a box of free puppies across the street from Powell's, and he assumed that a dog would keep me from being depressed in the evenings.

"We'll be able to tell," he said, "about our fitness."

"What are you talking about?"

He winked at me. "Being parents," he said.

"Maybe we ought to work on being married," I said. "Make sure we've got the hang of that first."

“Sure, sure.” But I could tell he was not to be dissuaded. “She’ll be great when you need a break from reading or writing. Nothing better than seeing your puppy become housebroken.”

“And you know this from what experience?”

“I’ve had dogs since I was ten. And now you have a dog.”

“Your *parents* have had dogs since you were ten. You were just another member of the litter.”

I have to say that this was one of the things that had caught at me when we had first started dating—Peter’s parents and their indifferent regard, as though he were another in their herd of Irish Setters.

“And,” I said, “who says this is ‘my’ dog? I didn’t sign up for that.”

“Don’t be like that.”

What he didn’t like was that I hadn’t fallen all over myself for his gift of a free dog, and he especially didn’t like that I made it clear that I was having nothing to do with the care, feeding, or training of said dog.

“Let me know when you have her sorted,” I said, “and I’ll reconsider.”

Peter started gamely enough; I have to say that much for him. He walked Portia morning, noon, and night three days in a row but then started to miss his appointed rounds. He signed Portia up for obedience lessons and managed to show up for the first one before there were schedule conflicts. He bought food and bowls and puppy pads, balls and chew toys and jerky snacks, but he found it difficult to pick up the puppy pads when they became soaked, and he forgot to refill the food bowl at a regular time. She chewed the baseboards and clawed the doors. I found fingers of poop behind the couch and on the bathmat, but I let them lay where I found them, waiting for Peter to notice.

Peter lasted ten days altogether. The restaurant got busy. He was distracted. Cash flow problems. It was raining. In Portland, go figure. While I wrote about Hadley’s devotion toward her younger, unfaithful husband, Portia stared at me with reproach, and when she wasn’t staring, she was barking to let me know that her pad was soaked, her bowl was empty, or that the wind was blowing the rain against our windows and the sound frightened her. I wrote, feeling angry and guilty in equal and alternate measures. But I wouldn’t be coerced, and the anger won. One day I came home, and the house was quiet, and three days later Peter admitted that he had taken Portia to a halfway house for mop dog rescues—it was Portland, after all, and yes, there are such places—and while he had felt heartbroken to say goodbye, he knew she’d have a better life than with those who were unable or unwilling to care for her.

“Don’t put this on me,” I said.

"I'm not." He sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands and was as glum as I'd ever seen him. "I'm just so sad," he said. "She stared at me with those button eyes, and I felt awful. Like a failure. A terrible dog owner and a complete and total failure of a human being. Bad, bad, bad. My parents would be appalled. They're terrible people, but they know dogs." But that's when he brightened up and told me about the restaurant's new investors. "Our money worries are over." So, if the Russians were the beginning of the end, then Portia was the end of our beginning.

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Before I left for college in Eugene, my father sat me down in the den. I was afraid that he might feel obligated to have some sort of serious talk—about men and women, about sex, about alcohol and drugs, about responsibility and safety; he was, of course, a motorcycle cop, and he had only survived the dangers of his job by virtue of his hypervigilance—but instead he wanted to know whether or not I planned to attend any of the games at Autzen.

"Your mother and I might come if you can get us some tickets," he said. "If you don't mind your parents being underfoot for a weekend."

"You don't need an excuse," I said. "I miss you guys already."

I was telling the truth at the time. Even though every day of that last summer I felt the tug of a new life and a letting go of the old, I didn't realize how quickly everything would change once I hit campus. Is there anyone more self-absorbed than an eighteen-year-old freshman girl, away from home for the first time?

During the week of freshman orientation, I met Peter. He had a red halo of hair, full lips, and a way of talking to strangers as though they were cousins newly revealed. He was Peter, and I was Wendy, and I thought I had met my soul mate. Silly me. I didn't realize that his Neverland was loneliness. His parents lived in Eastmoreland with their kennel of six setters, and that was my first exposure to dogs as an anodyne for meaningful human relationships. Peter's father taught philosophy at Reed, and his mother was on seven different volunteer boards. In her spare time, she raised their Irish Setters, those overbred dogs who are as neurotic and skittish as they are beautiful. She spoke to them as though they were her confidants and then locked the kennel gate, leaving them with their own company.

I met his parents that first Thanksgiving rather than go home to mine. Their dinner was prepared by a private chef and looked like a magazine layout, but nothing was as expected. The turkey smelled like fennel and the sweet potatoes tasted like cherries. Peter's mother drank Chardonnay before and throughout dinner, and by the time dessert was brought from the kitchen, her head was on the table. His father disappeared before the pies could be cut.

"Are you hungry?" Peter asked.

"No," I said, although I could have murdered a bag of tacos.

"I'm sorry," he said. "They don't go out of their way to be nice."

"No," I said, "they're awful people, but it's not your place to tell them."

We left the next morning and were happy to be back in our respective dorm rooms and eating institutional food with others who had nowhere else to be. I realized that by meeting his awful parents, I had somehow made an unspoken commitment: to see how awful they were was to be enlisted in Peter's support team.

On the other hand, we spent Christmas with my parents, which was easier, except that my mother was already beginning to show signs of the deterioration to come, and my father had his reservations about the boy I'd brought home.

He pulled me aside one morning before Peter could make his appearance from the guest bedroom. "I like him, don't get me wrong," my father said, "but he's a little bit soft at the center. Like, you push too hard, you might make a hole." His forehead was creased; I could tell he was concerned that he might have said too much, but he was only saying what I already suspected but hadn't yet put into words.

"His parentals are nuts," I said, automatically assuming my role as his defender. "They're smart people, they know everybody important, and they have loads of money, but they're assholes. His mother treats their dogs better."

My father, who didn't approve of swearing or otherwise harsh language, winced. "They can't be that bad," he said weakly.

"They can, and they are."

That was when we heard my mother keening in frustration from the kitchen. She was sitting at the table attempting to refill the salt shaker without taking off the top.

"Mom," I said, "what are you doing?"

"Sweetheart," my father said, taking the box of salt and the shaker from her. "Let me give you a hand."

We never managed to finish our conversation, and that night Peter and I made love for the first time. It did not go any better the first time than it did the last: so clumsy and inexpert and needy as to qualify as accidental coupling rather than intercourse. I'd had better experiences at high school keggers with a dim-witted football player from Clovis. At the time, I blamed the ambiance of the guest bedroom, and the ruffled shades on the end table lamps. But that was just me, beginning a pattern of rationalization that would last for years, and like my glimpse of Peter's parents and his childhood, this only seemed to be one more



bond that would keep us together rather than send us on our separate ways. In the morning, he seemed to believe that the experience had been transcendent rather than the travesty it was, and he would have been more than happy to talk about it.

“Nope,” I said, refusing his offer of a discussion. “Not my thing.”

He was clearly disappointed, and I was clearly a slow learner.

We lived together for eight years, we were married for another five, thirteen years in unlucky total, but it took my father's death and my mother's unmooring for me to make a move

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In the front hallway of my parents' house, an *étagère*—that signifier of middle-class establishment and pride—features a series of photographs: my class pictures from elementary, middle, and high school. Since my parents had only one child, they evidently decided to people the house with a kind of time-lapse multiplication. More noteworthy, however, are those portraits of my parents at various police department events, my father in his uniform, my mother in either cocktail dresses or ball gowns. It seemed they never stopped going to proms, and if I were the jealous sort, I might see in this my exclusion.

Which reminds me that, while growing up, I used to measure myself against her, but the comparison was always unfair. How could my lank ponytail of mousey brown compare to my mother's highlighted Farrah Fawcett layers? When I was in high school, she borrowed my clothes as a matter of course; they looked great on her and better fitting than they were on me. She offered me hers, in turn, but we both knew I'd never wear them, bookish, flat-chested thing that I was.

What I wanted throughout elementary and middle school was a dog. I begged her for a dog, which was the least that my parents could do, or so I thought, since I had no brothers or sisters. By high school, I'd given up, but in my sophomore year, she brought home two kittens, a male and a female, in a Del Monte box filled with newspaper strips. They had been abandoned by their mother at such a young age, their eyes were only half open, and they mewled and bumped into each other.

“Cats,” I said. “Why cats?”

“They're independent,” she said.

“That's why you're feeding them with an eye dropper?”

“They will be,” she insisted.

She purchased all the necessities—formula, bottles and nipples, a heating pad, pet carriers—and she fed them round the clock until they became fat young things. All was well for several weeks, and my mother doted on them, her zeal for the kittens displacing her Pilates routine. I lent a hand now and then, but they

tended to bite anyone other than her, and my sympathies did not extend to the puncture wounds their teeth inflicted or the inflamed stripes their claws left.

"They're kittens," my mother said, "and that's what kittens do."

But even her sympathies were tested when one of the kittens dropped a hummingbird carcass into one of her pumps, and they lost their ally entirely when both began to claw the sofas and armchairs, leaving the fabric in threads and shreds. They looked at their claw post as though it were an amusing idea imagined by an idiot.

"That's it," she said, "we're done with this."

She put them in their respective crates and loaded them into the back seat so I could ride shotgun. She carried them to a clinic she had found in the phone book, where a veterinarian looked at her strangely but did not say no when she explained what she wanted.

"You won't be able to let them outside ever again," he said.

"Of course," she said. "I can handle cat litter, but I will not be party to the murder of innocent birds, nor will I condone the destruction of personal property. We will make do with their presence indoors."

"Fine," he said, clenching his jaw before he took them to the back of the clinic. "So long as you're sure."

"What's with him?" my mother said. "I'm only asking him to do his job."

"Maybe he's having a bad day," I said. "Maybe a horse died."

"Or maybe he's just an asshole," she said. "Just because you love animals doesn't mean you're a good person."

When we retrieved them several hours later, they were still tottery from the anesthesia and cowering in their crates.

"They'll be fine," my mother told me.

"No," the vet said, "they are not fine, and I am not fine, as I have participated in a mutilation at your behest."

He went on to describe the details of the procedure, the amputation of the tips of the toes, the cutting through of ligaments and tendons.

"They are in pain," he said, "but your furniture will remain pristine so long as they don't urinate on your couches in revenge."

"If they do that, buddy, you can bet I'll be back," she said, "but then we'll be discussing the final solution."

She paid, and we walked to the car, the kittens rolling this way and that inside their carriers, making small terrified sounds.

"The nerve of him," she said. She adjusted her sunglasses, pulled down her visor to block the midday glare, and started the car.

But when we pulled to a stop in the driveway, she put her head down on the steering wheel and wept. “I had no idea,” she said. “He could have told me.”

Those cats lasted for sixteen years, and she was right in one sense: they were independent, they wanted little to do with anyone other than themselves, and they asked for nothing except for food, water, and a litter box. They slept for twenty-three hours a day, blending in with the furniture they once tried to destroy, and were as useful as two extra throw pillows. They shed drifts of fur at regular intervals and hocked up hairballs in front of the television. They lasted for sixteen years, and I suppose they had a fine enough life, all things considered, but that afternoon, my mother brought them home and then went to bed for the next forty-eight hours convinced of her own wickedness.

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So, my father was notable for his caution and prudence, and his lifetime habits were undone by one moment on a rooftop under a hot sun. My mother, on the other hand, was known for a flightiness and a changeability of mood that over time turned into anxiety and then paranoia. Before her dementia became clear, she was prone to sudden and obsessive bursts of hobbies and interests. Watercolors and community theater one year, the saxophone, woodworking, and diesel mechanics the next. She outlined a novel about Chinese missionaries and the opium trade. There were the cats. “Your mother is a woman of many passions,” my father was fond of saying, although he conveniently omitted Bill from his list. “She’s color and noise,” he also said, by which I understood him to mean that, though colors can be beautiful in certain combinations, they can also clash in others, and while noise can be music, it can also be sound and fury with all its attendant nonsense.

On the other hand, I left home for college, returning only infrequently. After graduation, I allowed myself to become trapped, inured by another person’s needs, spending the next thirteen years living with the consequences. I wrote a dissertation on Hemingway’s wives—all of those enablers, trophies, and bank accounts—and then got halfway through an expanded, more commercial version, but the woman I should have been writing about all along was Zelda.

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On the third morning that I was home, my mother was nowhere to be found. Her bed was rumpled, the bedspread on the floor, but she was not in it. Three days at home, and I had already lost her. Panic grew. I finally found her in the downstairs guest bath, the one with the embroidered hand towels and dusty decorative soaps that no one ever uses. She was standing in the dry shower in her nightgown and robe.

She turned to me as I opened the door. "Do you know," she said, her eyes vacant, "what I do next?"

"If you're talking functionally, then take off your clothes and turn on the water." I held her hand and helped her from the shower. "But if you're talking existentially, then I'm not sure I'm the one to ask."

I have no idea what possessed me. It certainly didn't help either of us.

"I love you, Jane," she said, speaking to me as though I were her sister-in-law and this was years earlier, when she had behaved badly. And then her eyes searched my eyes, and something clicked into place. "Wendy, I mean," she said. "Wen, something bad is happening, but I don't know what it is."

"None of us do," I said. "None of us ever do."

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The sun sets behind the haze and mountains to the west, and twilight begins, the sky an arc of reds, pinks, and shades of blue from the palest cyan to deepest Delft. Our sky in summer is often best described as dirty and gray and nondescript, cloudless but without sun. Heat and dust, smoke and smog conspire. But evenings can be magical. A red sun, a breeze. The parade of dogs and dog-walkers. Our neighbors lurch behind their collection of retirement dogs. Leashes cross, legs are tangled, and seventy-year-olds perform a complicated ballet: pirouettes and arabesques with their furry, beribboned partners. My mother's arm is trapped securely beneath my own, and we walk slowly in tandem, a choreographed pair, one more part of the parade. We greet the DeBenedettos, the Hasletts, and the Guidrys. We bend over and pat their little dogs while they gnaw our hands. We say good night and move forward, one step at a time.