

Domestic Arrangements: Live with It

LEARN TO LIVE WITH YOUR DISAPPOINTMENTS. This is what I tell Alan, newly retired middle school English teacher and my would-be-novelist husband. I mean, I could give him the Campbell party line, you know, follow your bliss, etc., etc., but that's where the disappointments come from, don't they? I mean that's where bliss leads if you're no good at the thing that you think makes you happy.

Take Georgette Cartwright (*please*). A choir director for the past forty-seven years, Georgette is a local institution and something of a spiritual dominatrix. She has been in the front row of our sanctuary for thirty-five of those forty-seven years, and since I've only been on the ministerial staff for twelve and the senior pastor for a little more than eighteen months, she often uses her years of service as a blunt instrument when disagreements over worship occur. The congregation of the Church of the Open Door is non-denominational and as liberal as the Progressive platform will allow, but we use the Methodist hymnal, a nod to our mainline past, so she refers to me as "that Unitarian" because I've attended workshops at Starr King. All of which is beside the point. What you should know is that for all of Georgette Cartwright's years, she is a mediocre choir director at best, and her own voice is terrible, which means that every Christmas and Easter and at various holidays in between, we are treated to some of the most cringe-worthy solos I have ever heard. *Ave Maria* as dental drill. Her voice breaks, the pitch is imperfect, her instrument

is out of tune and has been for the decade-plus that I've known her. Not that I could do better. But she loves to perform, and she loves having an audience, no matter how captive we all are. She presses on, delighted with herself, and no one has the heart to stop her, an autocrat of the first order: she follows her bliss and she does what she wants while the rest of us suffer. We talk about it later, though, over dinner amongst ourselves. Unkindly. Ruefully in some cases, spitefully in others. Which makes us all feel smaller by half. And makes the roast taste like ash in our mouths.

When our older son set off for college the first time, he asked me (because he wanted to be good so desperately) what he should study, and I gave him the Campbell line. "Follow your heart," I said, "and satisfaction will come." To which he shook his head and said that of *course* his ministerial mother would say that, with no regard for money or long-term sustainability. How "satisfaction" might play forty years hence with no retirement at hand. We were just that feckless; that's what he seemed to be saying. On the other hand, Alan said that Josh should study finance and get into investment banking so that he could take care of his aging, infirm, and spendthrift parents when the time came. He was kidding. A little. Mostly. Josh knew that his father was joking, at least in part, but he looked worried nonetheless. Josh did start as a finance major, but then he was back home before the end of his second semester. He was that miserable. "I thought I needed to take care of you," he said, much to Alan's chagrin, "but I couldn't open one more textbook with dollar signs. Those fat books are the image of death." He shivered as though from a cold wind. He stayed at home for the next two years working at a Best Buy where he used his employee discount to buy computer parts for his brother, who never thought twice about his purpose in life, just started making money hand over fist as the sole proprietor of three different companies. Cole designed software for restaurants and bars. He built custom game systems. He unlocked cell phones for the

police, but only in cases that passed his own private sense of conscience. I don't know where he got his gifts, that boy, or his sensibility; one day Cole was thumbing a Game Boy, the next day he was tearing apart a leftover Trash-80 unearthed from his grandfather's closet, and the day after that he had a sleeve of business cards, an accountant, and an assortment of phones which were always ringing. If I wasn't constantly tripping over cords and wires, I might have concluded that my son had become a dealer.

"Who are you?" I said.

To which he shrugged while taking another call from the technologically desperate and afraid.

"Do you like this?" I was puzzled and astonished; how else can I say it? I had a fifteen-year-old nerd-savant on my hands, and I had no idea how that had happened. "I mean, does this nourish your spiritual being?"

He covered the cell phone with one hand. "Mom," he said, not unkindly, "I'm busy all day long, my computer science teacher asks *me* questions, but I never know what you're talking about."

He had no disappointments that I was aware of, but if this was bliss, it had taken a form for which I was completely unprepared. When his brother had had enough of wandering in the Best Buy wilderness, he packed the car for college once again with a plan that he said he'd share with us once he was sure that it was going to work out. We didn't hear from him for fifteen weeks, and Alan and I were in agreement: we would give him the freedom to make his own decisions and we wouldn't pester. We received texts now and again letting us know he was alive. He said he was happy.

He made his announcement over the Christmas break after he had unloaded the car. He had shaved his head and he wore a cashmere scarf around his neck even though it was sixty degrees.

"Mom, Dad, Doofus," he said addressing us and his brother, "I've come to certain conclusions. First, I switched my major to theater. Don't worry: wardrobe and costume design, not acting.

I like to draw, I like fabric, and I like to pretend. Second, I don't give a shit about money, but I'll figure it out. Third, I'm gay, and I finally had to admit it to myself. There. That's it, that's what I needed to say."

We were silent for a moment.

Until his brother said, "Like you being gay was such a secret."

Sure, we'd seen all the signs, stereotypical as well as intuitive; maybe we had taken civility to the extreme in thinking that Josh needed to be the one to broach the subject first. That wasn't the biggest surprise, though. Theater? I mean, we'd taken them to plays, but neither boy had seemed particularly interested, not when they could go see the latest dystopian thriller at the IMAX. Sitting in bad seats in a drafty auditorium while two people yak about their sins when they could be lolling in recliners and watching half-dressed female androids carrying phasers? Not a tough choice, apparently; they yawned and asked for popcorn, and I never was successful at making the argument politically. About their intellectual enrichment, about what they ought to watch. Although, given my ministerial lens, that should have been my first clue about their disinclination: the word "ought."

But now, whether they chose to admit it or not and whatever term they might have used, Josh and Cole were both following their bliss, they were doing what sparked joy (to use yet another cliché), and they were finding their way.

Alan, on the other hand, Alan is the one I need to talk about.



When I proposed to Alan thirty-one years ago, he looked at me a little vacantly, as though I had disturbed his calculation of pi to the thirtieth decimal place when, in fact, he was only grading vocabulary and spelling quizzes. *Piquant*. *Reptilian*. *Trapezoid*. *Mercurial*. Check. Check. Oops. Check. We had been living together for a couple of months in his over-the-garage apartment. He was

five years older than I was, my brother's best friend, and he was already working at the middle school. He had a responsible job, a tie, and a brief case, while I had homework and Jung and a rich imaginal life, one that didn't include a retreat back to the trailer park that I had once called home.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why not?" I said, as smartly as I could. To be honest, I was worried that it all might blow away—this camping site of momentary stability—before I had a chance to hammer the tent pegs as firmly as possible in the ground.

"Oh." He looked up and rubbed his eyes. "I guess. I mean, I suppose we could do worse."

"Right," I said.

He was pudgy and abstracted, and when he wasn't abstracted, a bit bad-tempered, which no amount of coffee could cure, and I had psoriasis and a limited bank account dwarfed by student loans and a mismatched thrift store wardrobe that I called bohemian but that was really just the best I could manage. Neither one of us was destined for a magazine cover, is what I'm saying. So we were not in thrall to any huge upsurge of hearts and flowers and nonsense; I knew what I was getting, and I think he did, too. In my mind, the trade-off was clear, and the garage apartment with Alan won hands down over the cramped quarters of a trailer and my mother, especially after my brother left and the boyfriends started moving through like the wind.

If I'm honest, though, I didn't entirely reckon with what marriage meant for Alan. All along, he had said that he was going to work at Garfield Middle for no more than five years and then quit to work on fiction full time. But then we got married, and then we got pregnant without really intending to, and, well, that's the oldest story in the world, isn't it? In most cases, it's a story that results in recrimination and bitterness, but I didn't see that at the time.

Instead, Alan soldiered on, a little more resigned each year, while I finished seminary and then worked for a succession of more and more liberal congregations, churches further untethered from their denominational origins. On Sunday mornings in the adult spirituality class, I talked about dream work as a pathway to the divine. Alan never came to church if he could help it; instead, at night and on weekends when he wasn't grading bad middle-school writing, he dreamed up plots and characters imprisoned by language and mired in the mess of reality. He had boxes of typewritten manuscripts that he hadn't looked at since our days above the garage and then files on a computer that were foldered under the title "Old Shit"; I had taken a peek at some of it, and I understood well enough the reason for both parts of the title. I encouraged his continued employment at Garfield, and I confess that this was due in no small part to aesthetic as well as economic reasons. He commandeered the garage for his writing space, and if I have any memories of the last twenty years, it's of parking both cars in the driveway no matter the weather and taking the boys to soccer practice and band practice and swim lessons while Alan fumed and fretted behind a roll-up door. At the time, I thought I was making a sacrifice in the name of equity, and like any state of compromise, neither of us was getting what we wanted.

We could hardly afford for him to quit, though, but even more importantly, I didn't know if he could withstand the onslaught of rejections that he was sure to receive. In my humble opinion. As a fulltime minister of the modern gospel and in my spare time a reader of fiction that real people actually buy and consume. He wrote about people who were down on their luck, but even though I could have told him a thing or two, he never asked. Then again, what do I know about fiction? About the tastes of publishers or the book-buying public? Year after year, he tried and tried. One novel was a finalist at a no-name publisher for a \$500 prize; the

editors kept him on tenterhooks for eight months before sending him a form letter thanking him for his interest and his patience, not to mention the entry fee. They had received so many quality manuscripts. Blah, blah, blah. He had come close—he was in the final five—and yet so far: no publication, no check, no cigar. For three months, his name appeared on a website that no one ever viewed and then winked off again. He had a tough time with conversation for a week or more, and then most of it was in grunts of one syllable or less. Myself, I couldn't make heads or tails of it, that novel. There was a murder, and various characters assumed identities not their own; the time went back and forth, and by the second chapter, I was lost, and I didn't care enough to figure it out. He also had short stories that didn't seem to end and others that had no beginnings; nonetheless, he called them all complete. I would have called bullshit if there had been anyone to listen.

I wasn't his ideal reader, I guess.

We had some tense times. One Saturday afternoon, the boys were off somewhere, and the house was quiet while I rattled around from kitchen to bedroom to living room while Alan worked away at his job-away-from-the-job. I suggested obliquely that he could try another hobby. Other husbands in the neighborhood had taken over their garages, but instead of a desk, a file cabinet, and computer they had installed Shopsmiths or AUTOLifts.

When I said something to that effect, he looked at me over his glasses. "A hobby. Something a little more manly? A little more in keeping with the middle class?" he said. "Something that costs three or four thousand dollars and adds to environmental woe. Is that what you're saying?"

"No, no," I said, backtracking for all I was worth. "I just don't like to see you unhappy."

“Who says I’m unhappy?” He looked as puzzled as he was irritated.

“I thought that was obvious,” I said. “Every time you get a rejection, your eyes glaze over, and you wander around like a member of the lost battalion.”

“Unhappy?” he said. He was genuinely mystified. “I want to write. It’s something I have to do, not something I do to occupy my time. I don’t want to make birdhouses or bookshelves. I don’t want to change the oil. So shoot me.”

“But no one wants it!”

I lost it, and I yelled. I admit it. I lost my ministerial reserve, affect, and understanding. “No one fucking wants it.” He seemed so intransigent. “It’s not like you write something fun to read.”

He shut down his computer and removed his glasses; he put a dustcover over his monitor because he was just that fastidious about his tools. This was a garage, after all, and even his lawn mower was clean.

“That may be true,” he said. He was quiet and measured in the wake of all my noise. “Speaking of fun, I’ll admit it’s no fun to read yet another email saying thanks but no thanks, but that’s not why I do it. Maybe no one ever wants anything I write. Maybe no one enjoys a word. Maybe no one reads it except me. I’ve had to make my peace with that. I’m the tree falling over in the forest. But, at the risk of sounding too full of myself, I do hear the sound of my own demise even if the forest is empty of all else. If I have to be my own reader, so be it. I’ll know I did it.”

“Okay,” I breathed. “Okay. If that’s how you feel.”

“That’s how I feel,” he said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

After such an argument, another husband might have gone to a bar to drink beer after beer and yell at the television with the rest of the pickleheads; instead, Alan picked up his laptop and went to the silence of his classroom to continue working on the

next novel that no one would ever want. I mean, if you were me, what would you prefer?



I was worried, then, when Alan announced his date of retirement. He said he was doing what he wanted. He'd put in his years, twenty-four more than he had originally bargained for, and he put me on notice: no party and absolutely, under no circumstances—no ifs, ands, or buts—was I (or anyone else) allowed to utter the words *Mr. Holland's Opus* within range of his hearing. He was sensitive, I guess: to the thought of committing a lifetime's effort to a transcendent quest but being rewarded instead for the grudging toil at the salt mine. He couldn't stand the thought of having the quest treated as some kind of sideshow, a kind of lifetime joke, celebrated and given an epitaph. To be honest, I doubted whether he was any better a teacher than he was a writer, more taskmaster than counselor and consoler, but did I say that? I'm not that stupid. It wasn't worth the discussion or the inevitable argument.

Instead of a party, we went out to eat the day after he turned in his last grades. I told no one of our plans, I swear, but wouldn't you know that there were half a dozen of his younger colleagues there anyway, having their own end-of-year celebration in the bar, and I could see his face freeze in a rictus of fear that he would be forced to engage in social niceties and unwanted chit-chat with others who knew how to laugh and have fun. The hinges of his jaw turned into golf balls, a good trick for a man who looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy otherwise. How, I wanted to ask him, could he write about people when he plainly didn't like them?

Still, we settled into something like a new routine. The boys were gone. Josh was working at his first job for a regional theater in Idaho, and Cole had an apartment in town and a revolving door

of roommates and his share of surfable couches. Alan stayed at home, primarily in the garage since he refused to use one of the newly freed-up bedrooms as an office. Meanwhile, I was at church, doing my own work and fending off my own set of frustrations. Georgette Cartwright's hymn selections. The monthly leadership committee meeting. Annie Bengsten, church administrator, who believed that she truly was the final arbiter of all church business. The parishioners who had suggestions for my hairstyle as well as my sermon delivery. For a congregation of thoughtful, well-educated souls, I had no shortage of ill-informed opinions, suggestions, and criticisms to absorb.

Then the pandemic happened.

And like everyone else in America, I came home.

To Alan. Our echoing rooms. And the dog.



I didn't mention the dog, did I? So first, I have to make a confession. I once got a dog without consulting Alan. Well, it wasn't that simple. You know how ministerial work goes: you're one quarter spiritual leader and with the other three quarters and a half, you're social worker and psychologist, food bank administrator and community organizer. It's not a job for the faint of heart or the inflexible. At the Church of the Open Door, we had our share of the homeless and the psychotic, those who had been abandoned by the society that should have cared for them, and we had a name to live up to, even if our best efforts were only as a referral source. But now and again, we also saw those of the middle class who had fallen on hard times for one reason or another. Job loss, divorce, domestic violence, alcoholism, gambling. The reasons were as many as the supplicants who came and just as prosaic.

Not long after I started working at the Door, a young woman came to the office with her suitcase and a Jack Russell on a leash

and a choke chain. A bark collar was fizzing on its neck, and he looked like he was poised to launch into outer space. She had been living with a man twelve years older than she was; her partner had kicked her out for reasons she didn't specify, but the right side of her face was several shades of purple and green from a black eye that looked to be at least a week old, and it wasn't hard to read the signs. She didn't seem daunted, however. In fact, I would have called her downright chipper, given the circumstances. She needed to get home to her parents in the Midwest.

"Terre Haute," she said. "Tea and sympathy, pity and gossip. It's all in my future. At least I'm not pregnant."

She needed money for a bus ticket, a ride to the station, and one more thing.

"It's the dog," she said. "I can't take him with me, and I won't take him to the pound, but I don't know that I have any other choice." She paused, and I waited for the next ball to drop. "His name, by the way, is Bastard. Sorry. That's just the way he came."

We asked around, and there weren't any obvious or good choices. The no-kill shelter had closed a couple of years earlier, and no one in the office was looking to adopt a dog that appeared to be needy in the extreme. If we took Bastard to the pound, there was no guarantee he'd ever get adopted, no matter how many pit bull mixes would be there to make him look benign. And if he didn't get adopted, well, you know the drill. The senior minister, Reverend Smithson, called a meeting. We sat in a circle while Bastard quivered at the end of his leash. As the newest member of the staff, I volunteered to take the bullet. It felt like the thing to do.

Alan was not thrilled. And the boys were less than impressed. For years they had asked, begged, and pleaded. They had had their hopes pinned on a Labrador retriever or a Golden, one of those beautiful dogs with a doped-up personality. Instead, they got a twenty-pound psycho who required dog park runs morning, noon, and night. He couldn't lie down; he paced and he twitched,

even in sleep. He chewed the legs of our furniture, and it was not uncommon to find a pile of Bastard's leavings, embedded with wood chips, by the laundry room door. As a watchdog, he let us know about every leaf that fell as well as any suspicious visitors, no matter how high we turned his shock collar. If he couldn't discriminate between threat and a moment of benevolent nature, that was our problem.

We lasted six years as dog owners, and I have to admit, the majority of the burden fell on Alan since the boys were as good at avoiding the dog as they were the rest of their chores, and I was usually at church until the early evenings. One afternoon, when Alan came home from school, he opened the back door, and Bastard shot out as he was wont to do. But instead of running in frantic circles in the back yard, he found the side gate ajar and was off. The end result was as inevitable as it was, at least on an unconscious level, desired. From two blocks away came the squeal of brakes, the bleat of a horn, the sound of breaking glass and accorded metal, and then silence. Alan jogged toward the sound and found Bastard inert in the southbound lane of Armstrong Boulevard, the only time that dog had ever been still. He had barreled headlong into an oncoming Humvee, and when the driver tried to stop, the Honda Accord behind him couldn't brake in time, its hood wedging itself underneath the SUV's back bumper. While the drivers argued, Alan picked up the bits of what was left of Bastard and carried him home. When Cole and Josh came home from school, they helped him dig the hole and buried the dog in the backyard. They marked the grave with rocks that, over time, sank into the ground and were covered over with bark (*hah!*). By the time I got home, the deed had been done, but I'm not sure that Alan ever forgave me. Or the dog. That poor, demented creature.

So our tenure as dog owners did not go well, and there were no pleas by the boys to try again. We couldn't even use the word

“bastard” in a fit of anger since the very word made us feel complicit in a failure of compassion and vocabulary.

Surprise, surprise, then, when a month after Alan retired, I came home to find a monster asleep in the garage on Bastard’s former dog bed, which was positioned next to Alan’s table and computer.

“Who or what is this?” I said.

Alan and the dog looked up at me simultaneously and with the same expression. Something like passive-aggressive victory.

“Dorothy,” he said.

“And the Wizard of Oz?” I said.

“No,” he said. “More like your aunt from Topeka.”

Here’s a side note: my great-aunt Dorothy, who was single her entire life, had hair on her chin that she treated with pride. She made a mint from writing accounting texts back when textbook publishers were the only game in town and thought nothing of gouging students’ and their parents’ wallets. Her books are probably among the reasons why Josh went to college twice. She wrote accounting book after accounting book, new edition after new edition, and when she retired, she had enough in the bank to purchase a mansion in the Rockies. Bought it outright without batting an eye. Oddly enough, she never skied and had never cared for the outdoors, so her choice of location was surprising, and when her car was caught in a snowdrift one frigid night in December a year after she moved, she died with her bank account more or less intact, but with none in the family either named in the will or surprised. My mother, her niece, could have used some of the cash but never saw a dime. Make of it what you will, but thirty years after her death, her textbooks are still available online on various used-book sites, making money for others. I say it’s a story with a moral attached.

I looked at our new-old dog Dorothy, named for a cautionary tale as she was, and she looked back with intelligent, if indifferent,

eyes. She crossed her saucer-sized paws across each other and then let her black-and-white snout rest upon them. I had no idea what she was breed-wise, but she was like a triple-sized terrier, Asta on steroids. Lying on the dog bed, she made it disappear, and when she stood up, the top of her head hit my ribs.

“You named this thing after a mean old lady who froze in her car?”

“It was either that or Grendel,” he said. “Or Kali.”

“Oh, good one,” I said, “a gender-fluid list of monsters.”



But let me back up for just one moment. Dorothy and the pandemic can wait their respective turns.

Friends sometimes ask, Why church work? And given the social moment in which we live there is also buried within the question another subtext, Why *liberal* church work, of all things? Can there be anything more irrelevant in this age of literalized faith? It's a good question and one I don't always know how to answer, especially when I drive by those hotel monstrosities and monuments to the Prosperity Gospel. Given my trailer-park background, you would have thought I'd be the one to go to B-school in order to learn the mysteries of capitalism and get a piece of the pie previously denied my family. And if I had ever been the beneficiary of some illuminating, evanescent moment, you might have thought me grist for the Evangelicals, Charismatics, and Fundamentalists. But no, and no. One day I was a psych major reading Jung, and after that, all the cognitive stuff seemed like warm tea and dry toast. From there I walked into religious studies with all the free will of an orphan in an Irish convent. But don't think me unhappy. Bliss for me was having a place at the table without comparing paystubs. I could have gone into social work, but that seemed like a job, while the church reassured me of a sense of calling.

One of the advantages of growing up poor was that I knew how to adapt to situations; I knew how to be a chameleon. Before I came to the Door, I had jobs at other mainline churches, mostly in the area of youth work. Since I didn't really stake a claim on any particular dogma other than a need for goodness and introspection, I could finesse the doctrinal stuff and become what was required. I worked for some pastors who looked at me a little askance when I hedged my bets, but since I was a woman and they were happy and oblivious in their misogyny, they figured what harm could I do? Besides, these associate slots paid so little, they were happy enough to let it go. In their own calculations, I was a risk that they were willing to take for the sake of someone willing to do the work for next to nothing. I developed the Sunday school curriculum, set up programs for summer camps and retreats and festivals, and made sure to cultivate the power brokers, both male and female, of each congregation. In a sense, I was everyone's wife. If my activities skewed toward service and social action, self-actualization and pizza, and away from Jesus and verse memorization, no one ever faulted me. I made myself just that indispensable as well as likeable and non-threatening.

So when I came to the Door, I found myself at home without any need of pretense at last. I could take the high schoolers to temples and synagogues and churches alike in the name of comparative spiritual experience, and none of the parents questioned my choices. The senior pastor, Reverend Smithson, was gruff and crusty, but he told me the truth, which was a far cry from some of the others I'd worked with and for. I was happy there for ten years or so, and then Smithson retired, and since the congregation was dwindling and aging and young families were coming but mostly going, the leadership committee decided to hand me the job as his replacement, no interview needed. They eliminated my former job in favor of college interns. A promotion, a new

title, twice the work, the same pay. Because the church knows how to take care of its own.

A year and three months after my ascension, the pandemic sent us all home, and I had to figure out how to conduct a person-to-person job over the internet and listen to the same tired jokes about our faith community as the Brady Bunch. I also had to figure out how to negotiate being at home with Alan, whose encampment in the garage had become permanent. And Dorothy, who now could not remain at Alan's feet in the garage but felt the need to pace back and forth from the garage to Josh's old bedroom where I had set up shop; back and forth she went, making sure we were both in our appointed spots.

I practiced giving my sermons into a screen and conducted meetings and worship over Zoom, and it was not uncommon for Dorothy to join us at the most inopportune moments; she put her paws on my shoulders, set her muzzle against my cheek, and peered into the eye of the camera along with me. There was no denying her. There was also no denying the fact that whenever she made an appearance, she was better than the best visual aid as far as attracting an online audience's attention. Much better than I was on Sunday morning, for sure, no matter how practiced my rhetorical flourishes. They might be eating their breakfast or painting their nails while I spoke about *Needing to Listen to One Another in a Time of Plague*, but once Dorothy took a bow all eyes were forward. They still weren't listening to me because they had their own worries and concerns, but they were entertained by the dog, and I could at least pretend otherwise.

One dark Friday afternoon in November, Dorothy started barking and barking, a hound's baying that I had never heard from her before. It was during that week just after the election when the outcome was still in doubt, and my first thought was that Dorothy was merely joining that chorus of anxiety that

seemed to have us all in its grip. I finally got up and went downstairs and found Dorothy near the door to the garage. She was hopping on all four legs as though possessed by Bastard's spirit, and for such a large, ungainly creature, hers was the oddest depiction of panic I've ever seen. Alan was on the floor on his left side. His glasses were a few feet away and his face looked to be a shade of blue. But then he'd always harbored his own set of angers, and besides, I could see his lips moving, so I didn't leap to any level of concern. I'm not uncaring, but you wouldn't be wrong for believing me that way. Even I can't quite fathom my reactions. Call it shock. For some reason, I could only think that we'd had another of our usual earthquakes, one that I hadn't felt, and he had fallen off his chair.

"Oh, Jesus," I said, "what happened to you?"

"Call 9-1-1," he whispered. "I think I've had a heart attack."

"That's not possible," I said because, after all, we were both too young for something like that, weren't we?

"Don't argue with me." His breathing was shallow, and his eyes were squinting and strained. "I know what I feel."

"What are you on about?"

"Do you realize," he whispered, "that I worked all my adult life at a school named for a president who was killed by a religious lunatic? Ain't that something?"

"What you won't do for attention."

So I made the call despite my own misgivings, no matter my disbelief, and it seemed that within seconds a fire truck was there with enormous firemen who filled the garage with their shoulders, their equipment, and their competence and began to ask Alan questions. And then there was the ambulance with two exhausted EMTs. Each took a deep breath outside on the driveway as they unfolded the gurney and maneuvered it between our parked cars.

"I can't believe it's anything serious," I said. I still wasn't processing the situation; I couldn't see myself as a widow, grieving or otherwise. "I mean we've been in lockdown for months."

"You'd be surprised," one of them said through his mask. "It hasn't been easy, being at home. Fewer car accidents, more falls."

"More domestic violence," the other said. "And with chest pains we don't mess around. No matter what's going on otherwise."

"It's not like we fight." Not for nothing, I felt as though I needed to say it. "It's friendly banter, maybe a little aggravation. We pick at each other, but it's all in good fun."

"Okay. Look," the first one said to me, "we're going to get him into the ambulance and do an EKG. Then we'll determine which hospital to take him to. If there's anything he should have with him, you better get it now. You can barely make it into the parking lot much less through the doors."

"Right," I said. Such were the strictures of our virus-wary world. "Okay."

I followed Alan and the gurney and the EMTs, and after they'd pushed him inside, I stuck my head in.

His phone and charger, Alan said when I asked. They had put one of those nitro gizmos on his chest, and his eyes and forehead were a little less clenched. The EKG monitor was spitting out numbers and charts.

"And a favor," Alan said. "Walk the dog, would you?"

"Fine. Me and Ms. Sasquatch. What about clothes?"

He thought for a moment.

"Nah. It's not summer camp."

"Your laptop?"

He thought for a moment more.

"No," he said. "What the hell. I'll take a vacation day."

"You're retired," I said. "What do you know about vacations?"

He lay back on the airplane pillow on the gurney. “Huh. Call it a vacation from my life, then. A vacation from my vocation.”

“Oh, boy,” I said. “The monk on his holiday.”

“Go ahead, laugh,” he said. “Cruel woman.”

He said it, but the tone was kind. At least, I think it was.



For the next two hours, I did what needed to be done. I called the hospital, I called the boys, I let the leader of the pastoral care committee know the situation even though it was the pastor and her husband who needed the care and not some unlucky member of the congregation. The boys reacted in ways that surprised me. Josh ran through a list like a diagnostician while Cole started to cry. For a theater major, Josh seemed to know his biology, and for a computer nerd, Cole seemed more friable emotionally than I would have expected. When I called the Emergency Department, a harried nurse told me to call back in an hour, that Alan had not even been entered into their system yet.

So then I called Alan.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Lying here having a heart attack,” he said.

“No, you’re not.”

“Maybe not now. But I was.”

“You probably ate something you shouldn’t have,” I said, because that was something that Alan was liable to do, eat some questionable chicken that had been in the refrigerator for three weeks or spoon out some yogurt, the skin of which was thicker than it should have been.

“I know heartburn. It wasn’t heartburn,” he said. “You won’t be laughing when I’m gone. And I’ll bet you haven’t walked Dorothy yet, either.”

He had me there on both counts.

"I've had a few phone calls to make, you know," I said. "Given all the drama. I told you I'd do it, and I'll do it. She hasn't been lunging at the door or anything."

"Okay," he said. Then, "You wouldn't believe this place. It's crazytown."

He was still on the ambulance gurney in a non-virus hallway, surrounded by the demented, the aged, and the insane, all of whom were shouting and yelling something about how bad they felt, how they were being abused. He now sounded more than a little rueful about sounding the alarm.

"You could have a heart attack just by walking through the door," he said.

"If you didn't already have one," I said.

"True."

"You did the right thing," I said, replaying the EMT script. "You did the right thing, making me call. You don't mess around with chest pains."

"Helluva way to spend a Friday night," he said.

"It's no great entertainment," I agreed. "Not exactly dinner and a movie, which we couldn't have gone to anyway, things being as they are. Listen," I said with the force of revelation that sounded to me as something like the truth: "Don't you dare die on me and leave me with this damn dog."

He promised to text me in the next hour, once he was again sure he hadn't died, and then I searched the house for Dorothy before I found her in the garage; she was curled up into a dog-doughnut underneath Alan's desk. You would have thought I'd look for her there, wouldn't you? Well, I did, but she wasn't there the first time I checked. All I can figure is that she waited for me to leave the garage before she resumed her place. As large as she was, she could be a sneaky bitch when it suited her.

So I got a jacket and poop bags and hooked the leash to her collar, thinking she'd jump at a chance for a walk, but she only

looked at me as though I was kidding. Which gave me a moment to look at Alan's computer, and his email that had remained open from when he'd fallen off his chair. Line after line of political screeds, product ads, and magazine offers of various kinds. Buried in their midst was an email from a journal in the most flown-over of flyover states, with the subject line, "Congratulations!" A story, written at least five years earlier, a story about a depressed minister and an absurd, politically correct congregation, had been selected as the runner-up in a contest. Two hundred dollars, publication, and consideration from an agency in New York.

"Well," I said to Dorothy, "he better not kick off until I have a chance to tell him."

The dog was unmoved and seemingly unimpressed by this turn of good fortune.

I texted Alan, in case he hadn't checked his email from his phone.

"Guess what?" I wrote the news with my thumbs. "You're almost famous, thanks to me."

And almost immediately, came the response: "That's great," he wrote. "Better than a sharp stick in the eye."

He didn't have much to do except nurture his usual cheery self while he was lying on his ambulance gurney, and I suspected he had hours to go before they got to his turn in the queue.

"You can thank me later," I wrote, "since you co-opted my life."

So, the dog. The night had turned wet and sloppy in this place where the merest threat of rain seems to be judgment from above, and I could hear the wind and water against the metal of the garage door.

"Come on," I said. "I'm not cleaning up puddles and landmines."

With that, she began to move, albeit grudgingly. But then, once we were outside in the wind and the rain, she began straining

at the leash, and no matter how hard I tugged, it seemed that nothing could hold her back.

“What do you want?” I shouted at her. “Where are you going?” Because it seemed that she had a destination in mind.

And as it turned out, the destination we found was three blocks away from the house: the parking lot of the Door, and my office that I hadn’t visited except briefly in the last eight months when I needed certain records or office supplies. There was a canal that ran by the church property, and Alan often let the dog run there to snuffle along the canal bank when the season was dry. And although that was not the case this evening, she was running for all she was worth, and my arm was about to come unhinged at the shoulder.

“Whoa, Dorothy,” I yelled. “Slow down, you dumb, fucking dog.” Hardly ministerial. Still, she pulled.

There were lights on in the church, which didn’t really register with me as odd since Friday nights had often been filled with activities in the past, before concerns over our public health had put groups and gatherings at an end. I wasn’t thinking, I guess, trapped in a time from before. I heard “O God our help in ages past” on the church organ, and I was thinking that this was the hymn that our boys had once called “The Stormy Blast Song” since that was the line that they bellowed whenever they were given the chance. At the ages of nine and twelve, they were like frat boys with a musical expletive. Dorothy pulled on. And then we came to a curb that was hidden by wet leaves, and I guess I slipped or tripped or fell while trying to hold Dorothy at bay with the leash. I don’t know. I’m only grateful that I didn’t take a header into the fast-moving scum of the canal that was only three feet away. But I did take a header into something hard, the ground, if nothing else, and I blacked out momentarily. Blessings small and large.

I have the sense that I went back to that moment when Alan and I were first living together, when I first heard the no-tone sounds of my so-called calling. I had come to Alan's apartment above the garage to visit my brother. When Alan and I looked at each other, I knew that safety lived there. With him. I don't know what he saw. He wasn't looking for a roommate or a wife, I knew that, even then. And I wasn't looking for bliss because I didn't have unrealistic expectations, no matter what Campbell might have said about it to others. Safety, stability, that was as far as I allowed my mind to drift. My brother left our mother's trailer and our mother's life with her erratic succession of less and less possible boyfriends, and I was just that envious and desperate to make a move of my own. Because I had no desire to bear the consequence of choices our mother made with, you know, those boyfriends. Gary moved in with Alan, and then he took off with his engineering degree and his desire to make his own life in another state altogether, which is when I moved in, and I couldn't do it fast enough. I couldn't even be certain that Alan noticed the change when it happened, he was so intent on teaching and writing his unpublishable stories. Did we talk? I guess we did, but I couldn't tell you whether we understood each other or were merely responding to our own needs at the time. We lived together and we had absent-minded sex, we got married and we got pregnant. We worked, and one of us retired to follow his own interests, no matter what anyone else might think of the result. *Things have worked out.* I guess that's what I should have said to Josh or Cole. Or Alan, for that matter. Lives work out however they can. You can call it bliss when it's over, but it's nothing to follow. I was thinking all this, dreaming all this, and that moment when Alan looked up from his typewriter and saw me, really saw me, for the first time. That time when I proposed. He saw me through glasses that were opaque from the reflection of the overhead light.

"We'll get along okay," he said, "so long as you don't mind . . ."

He gestured toward the typewriter on the kitchen table. The manuscript pages with penciled cross-outs, corrections, and bubbles of insertions.

"As vices go—" I said, but I admit it: we both left our sentences unfinished and circling in the air.

"Just don't die on me," I said.

"What?" he said.

"Just don't die on me." I might have shouted.

"Who said anything about dying?" Wearing a rain coat and a hood that made her look like something out of a medieval pageant, Georgette Cartwright bent over me with a flashlight that made me go blind.

The rain fell so steadily I had to keep blinking. Somewhere nearby, Dorothy was running along the canal.

"Godzilla was barking, and I couldn't even hear the organ. So I came out to see what was the matter."

"I fell," I said, "and I must have hit my head. And then you found me."

"So I did." She switched off the flashlight, and even though she was in her seventies and not the most robust person I knew, she helped me to my feet, and the world and the parking lot came back into focus. That was when I told her about Alan, the 9-1-1 call, the firemen, the EMTs, and the rest. The worry that I hadn't allowed myself to believe, much less feel, which now was like a pressure in my own chest.

"Oh, honey," she said, putting a hand on my arm. "There, there." Which is all anyone can say. There, there. "He'll be fine, or he won't. One way or another, you'll get through it."

"Things will work out."

"Exactly."

"I've been thinking," I said, although it wasn't entirely true; if I had been thinking at all, it was straight from the top of my

head, which was already throbbing. “I’ve been thinking we ought to sing something together some time. A duet. ‘Amazing Grace’ or the one you were playing a while ago. One of the standards. I’ll ditch the sermon, and we’ll make a joyful noise.”

“Sure,” she laughed in her strained senior citizen register. “Noise. We’ll make them cover their ears in the safety of their own homes.”

“We’ll be fools,” I said, “but we’ll be human.”

“That’s all we can be,” she said. “None of us will ever be more. And they can laugh all they want while muted.”

Dorothy had returned, her muzzle visibly muddy even in the dim lights of the parking lot. She trailed her sodden leash like a criminal record.

“Miserable, wet, windy, and cold,” Georgette said with no small measure of triumph. “Don’t you love a night like this?”

