

COMPASSIONATE

C_(CARE)AR {!}E

By Jennifer {!} WALKER

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... How far would you go to stop your suicidal dog? At what point in time does keeping him alive consume the entirety of your life? Does the occasionally weird codependence develop between pet and owner?*

Jennifer Walker's, "Compassionate Care," is like a pleasurable love letter to quirkiness.

The premise walks this fine line between the absurd and plausible which makes this story all the more enjoyable. Pierre is a French bulldog with a seemingly enjoyable life, but he prefers to actively search for the opportunity to kill himself. Standing next to oncoming traffic, the dog will jump for the first close bumper, put him too high on the bed and he takes a diver, too close to a pond and he's inhaling water. Pierre is determined and Rob is trying to help.

I think what I like about this story the most is its straightforward believability. The characters are relatable and strong. I know that Rob is sad, trying to start a new relationship, and uses his dog as a crutch to walk through life; his mom is probably one of the funnier characters I've seen written (you almost imagine her talking in the background of the text the entire time you read); Matt seems simple and kind; and I end up feeling empathetic for Pierre. They are the center and they are everything that makes this piece click.

There is a touching humor that comes from this story, washing over you and making you feel better for having read it. The title is apt. In the background of every word there lies a thread of compassion, whether between characters, the author and the reader, or the author and their own story, that I think actually performs a caring act.

Every tree is in peak bloom and suddenly the Tidal Basin, so anachronistically grand the rest of the year, has a festive, newborn look. They join the hundreds of people under the blossoms and stop often to let Pierre be petted and admired by strangers. They stay away from the water. French bulldogs can't swim.

There is humor here that come from the dichotomy of the picaresque and the knowledge that all these children love this dog who would rather kill himself than be in another tourist selfie. The craft and subtlety here is can't help but make you smile.

From top to bottom, this story has heart.

Five Stars.

NOTE: *The first sentence of 'Compassionate Care' is the best opening line in this issue. The Eds.*

QUALITY QUOTABLES (*for the love of language...*)

The dog psychiatrist is young, maybe only a year or two older than Rob, and shiny and earnest.

They walk out from under the overpass then and the world explodes into downy pinkness. Every tree is in peak bloom and suddenly the Tidal Basin, so anachronistically grand the rest of the year, has a festive, newborn look. They join the hundreds of people under the blossoms and stop often to let Pierre be petted and admired by strangers. They stay away from the water. French bulldogs can't swim.

Rob remembers Matt asking, with such surprise, "You're from DC? I thought nobody was from DC." But maybe Matt's right. Neighborhoods are changing so fast, the whole city leaching its color.

Compassionate Care
by Jennifer Walker

When Rob's French bulldog falls off the bed for the fifth time he starts to suspect the dog is trying to kill himself.

"Well that's just ridiculous," his mother says over the phone. "Dogs don't get suicidal. What do they have to be so upset about? They don't have to work or pay bills or get a follow up colonoscopy in five years because Dr. Greenblatt found a suspicious polyp. Can you believe that? Have to drink that awful prep again and everything."

"But that's five years away," Rob says.

"Easy for you to say! Just wait until you have to take that stuff. Fifty years would be too soon. Believe me, it's no picnic. And did I tell you about this new spot on my toe I found the

other day? I've been calling Dr. Marino's office like crazy but the soonest they can fit me in is next week. Unbelievable!"

"Maybe I should take Pierre to see someone. Like a dog psychiatrist or something."

"A dog psychiatrist! These days there's a specialist for everything. Remember when I had to go to a hept-a...hep-a-tologist for my hepatitis C?"

"But you didn't have hepatitis C."

"Well thank God I went to the right specialist to find out! I tell you, DC's changed so much in the last twenty years. I just can't keep up. A dog psychiatrist of all things. What will they have next? Doggie hept-a-toly...oh, you know what I mean. By the way, did I tell you about this new tickle I woke up with in my throat on Monday?"

Rob continues to listen with bemused indulgence because he is nothing like his mother. Surely he's not. In fact, the more she talks, the more he knows he must be wrong about Pierre. The dog is healthy, happy even. Isn't that enormous mouth always stretched in a smile? He's just clumsy, and who wouldn't be trying to balance that barrel chest on those stubby legs. All can be explained with good common sense. And then a loud clatter comes from the kitchen.

Rob doesn't hear what his mother says next because he's already put down the phone to run to Pierre. The dog managed to climb up on the kitchen counter and dislodge the chef's knife from where it hangs next to the sink on a magnetized metal strip. He steps on the handle now so the point of the knife is off the counter and angled toward his throat. Rob grabs him just before he plunges his little body into it.

#

After that Rob gets rid of every sharp thing in his apartment and takes Pierre to see a dog psychiatrist. His mother is wrong. There is no dog psychiatrist in DC. He has to drive out to a

strip mall in suburban Virginia where the specialist shares office space with an animal dermatologist and human dentist. An old man with his hand cupped over his jaw and a middle-aged woman with an iguana sit in the waiting room. The iguana lies on a green towel on the woman's lap and lifts its head to look around in two stiff, mechanical movements.

Rob must be staring because the iguana woman leans toward him and says, "I think it's mites. She's just been so lethargic and her skin's all dull. Nice Frenchie. Is it mange?"

Rob recoils and then corrects himself before it's too obvious. Is mange worse than being suicidal? But before he can answer, Pierre, not fooled by the towel camouflage, starts tugging a corner and they have to quickly relocate to the other side of the room.

They get called back before the woman can untangle the iguana out of her hair. The dog psychiatrist is young, maybe only a year or two older than Rob, and shiny and earnest. They sit down on bean bags in the office and the psychiatrist tells Rob to let Pierre off the leash.

"Now what's going on with this big guy? Huh? What's up big guy? You okay? You doing okay?" The psychiatrist rubs Pierre's head while he speaks, moving down to his wide cheeks and sagging jowls and then back up to his ears. Pierre pants in delight and then lies down so the psychiatrist can rub his belly. "Ohhhh! This big guy's a little lover, huh? Look at that. Look at that. Who likes to get his belly rubbed?"

Rob doesn't know if he should say something or wait for a real question. Are these real questions? The whole appointment could go on just like this. But then Pierre strikes an excessively long-tongued, slobbering-smiled, paws dangled-in-delight poise and the psychiatrist looks up.

"He seems to be a pretty happy fellow. What makes you think he might be depressed? Is he eating okay?"

“He eats okay. He eats great.”

“Yeah? Okay. How’s his energy level? Looks pretty good right now. He wants to play, go on walks?”

“I think so. He’s got a flying squirrel, it’s like a frisbee thing. He likes to run after it. He likes to chew antlers. We walk a lot.”

“Okay, good! Does he show you affection? Seems like a pretty affectionate guy.” The psychiatrist reaches down then and pats Pierre’s side as the dog starts to avidly lick his ankle. “Almost a little too affectionate. Huh? Okay buddy, that’s good, that’s enough.”

He gently pushes the dog’s face away and crosses his ankle over his thigh. Pierre just goes after the other one.

“Come. Come here bub,” Rob calls.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Let’s just ignore it for now. He’ll stop soon.” The psychiatrist winces a little and tries to move the new ankle under attack. Rob can see the skin getting red. “Now aside from this licking, which, if excessive—okay there little guy—could be a sign of anxiety, anything else odd happening?”

Rob then describes all the falls off the bed, even when he was sure to place him in the dead center, and then before that all the stumbles off ledges and the close calls with curbs and on-coming traffic. Even now he remembers new accidents he brushed off as clumsiness or mistakes. He ends with the knife incident.

“And how long have you had him?” The psychiatrist sits cross-legged now on the bean bag, both ankles tucked out of reach. Pierre crawls up on his lap and starts in on his wrists.

“Two years.”

“Two years? Okay there little guy. That’s ah, that’s enough. You know what, yeah, maybe you should just take him. It’s okay. Call him over. Alright, there we go. Thank you. So, two years.”

“He was a rescue. They found him on the side of the Beltway. They think he was hit by a truck. Broke his back leg and pelvis.”

“Wow.”

“Healed right up.”

“I can see that. Strong little guy. And there’s just you in the household?”

“Right now. I got him with my ex but we broke up about three months later. I guess it was a last ditch kind of thing.”

“Oh, okay, I see. And does your ex—”

“No. He was never really interested to begin with. Pierre’s always been my dog. We don’t see him anymore.” Rob gives Pierre a little hug as he adjusts him on his lap. The dog licks his chin and then relaxes.

“Alright. And are you dating anyone new?”

Rob is. Matt. But it doesn’t seem like the vet’s business. This is about Pierre. Just then the faint whirr of a dental drill drifts through the wall. The vet holds up his hands.

“Not meaning to pry. It’s just that any changes—”

“But it’s been happening the whole time. Even getting hit by the truck maybe.”

The vet tilts his head like he doesn’t believe a word but wants to look open. What a waste. The drill kicks up to a whine.

“Well, it looks like we’re out of time for today. Let me give you a prescription for Calmadrose. It’s excellent for his anxiety and will really help with that extreme licking.”

Rob doesn't mind the licking. He finds it comforting, sweet. But he takes the script, fills it, and gives it to Pierre anyway because he doesn't know what else to do.

#

The rest of the week is uneventful. Rob takes off from work to keep an eye on Pierre but by the weekend he's desperate to get out of the apartment. He buys a new harness on Amazon and decides it's safe enough to take Pierre down to see the cherry blossoms at the Tidal Basin. He invites Matt to come along.

"What a perfect day," Matt says as they kiss hello in front of M street station, tentative in their newness. "Oh! Look at that harness. So macho."

"It's the same kind special forces dogs wear. In combat."

"Nice. Durable."

They walk toward the waterfront in silence and Rob appreciates it. Matt works nights in the ER and the few times they spoke during the week Rob didn't want to burden him. They had so many other things to talk about, so much to find out about each other. But Rob starts to feel uncomfortable holding back about Pierre as they stop to let him sniff in the bushes lining the sidewalk. He met Matt at a mutual friend's party and they spent the whole night in the corner talking until the friend ran a vacuum under their feet as a hint to get out. When Matt leans down to pet Pierre Rob tells him the whole thing.

When he finishes Matt stands up and Pierre lurches for the curb into on-coming traffic. The harness proves incredibly strong.

"You see?" Rob says.

They start walking again, Pierre on a short, short leash. Matt nods thoughtfully and wipes off some drool stuck on his sleeve.

“It did seem like he timed it right when that truck went by.”

“Right? I know I’m not crazy. It just sounds so crazy.”

“Maybe not. Did I tell you already? I worked the psych ward for like three years before the ER. I couldn’t take it. I just kept seeing the same people try to kill themselves. Over and over.” Matt’s voice echoes as they walk under an overpass. “I couldn’t help them at all. It started to feel like I was torturing them, you know, by making them take these medications when what they wanted to do was die.”

They walk out from under the overpass then and the world explodes into downy pinkness. Every tree is in peak bloom and suddenly the Tidal Basin, so anachronistically grand the rest of the year, has a festive, newborn look. They join the hundreds of people under the blossoms and stop often to let Pierre be petted and admired by strangers. They stay away from the water. French bulldogs can’t swim.

At the Jefferson Memorial a makeshift stage is set up and people cover the stone steps watching a group of Japanese women in elaborate kimonos dance. Rob and Matt stop to watch too. They stretch out on the marble, lazy in the new spring warmth and the fact the performance is free. Rob looks more at the crowd than at the dancers. There are pink-faced tourists in matching t-shirts, upper NW families with strollers like tractors and NE and SE families with none, GW kids and Georgetown kids and Howard kids, families in headscarves and families eating pupusas, people speaking Amharic and people speaking Akan, hipsters and button downs and baggy pants, preppies from Alexandria and hippies from Takoma Park. All of DC is out on those steps. Rob remembers Matt asking, with such surprise, “You’re from DC? I thought nobody was from DC.” But maybe Matt’s right. Neighborhoods are changing so fast, the whole city leaching its color.

After the third time Pierre tries to throw himself down the stairs they decide to move on. It's too beautiful to go back yet so they continue to walk around the basin behind the stage. Backstage, waiting to go on next, are a group of Japanese schoolchildren in round pink and white costumes that, in a cartoonish way, look like cherry blossoms. They squeal when they see Pierre, and run towards the dog the best they can, knocking into and bouncing off each other. Rob and Matt stop as the flower children crowd close and try to pet Pierre or take pictures. It's giggling chaos and Rob momentarily loses sight of Pierre under the bulbous buds. He looks over at Matt who has his arms up good naturedly, trying to avoid being bumped. And then the tension on Pierre's lead is gone.

Rob pushes through to the water's edge just in time to see Pierre take a flying leap into the basin. He doesn't see anything else, not the kids behind him with their phones in the air, not the ring of cotton candy the cherry blossoms make on the water, not the handful of heavy paddle boats circling aimlessly. That's because he's already diving into the murk.

When he surfaces immediately, the spring water still so frigid with winter it shuts his body down to mere reflex, he sees Pierre. The dog is extruded to the surface too and looks shocked at his own ability to float. And then there is another look, one that, instantly, Rob understands. But that's the last thing he sees before a sky splitting crack shuts everything out.

#

When Rob wakes up the next thing he sees is his mother.

"Oh Robbie!" she says. "I'm so glad you're finally awake. It feels like I've been sitting here for hours and, you know, with my hemorrhoids. I really wasn't worried though. This is the same hospital they took Reagan to when he got shot so I knew they'd do a good job. I'm thinking about changing my endocrinologist to one of these—"

“What happen?” Rob’s mouth is woolly and there must be a piece of glass in his throat. His mother puts down the hospital brochure.

“You had a bleed. In your brain! Can you imagine? They had to drill a hole right here to drain it all out. The surgeon showed me the drill and everything. Didn’t look nearly as bad as the one Dr. Feinstein used on my root—”

“What happened?” Rob tries to sit up but the weight of a hundred sand bags holds him down.

“You smacked your head against one of those boat things, down at the Tidal Basin. What’re they called? Pedal-something. Well anyway, this guy from Iowa, or was it Idaho? Illinois? Someplace. A tourist. He saw Pierre struggling in the water and pedalled as fast as he could to save the poor little guy.”

And then it does come back. The freezing water. The shock. The look.

“And don’t worry. The guy used to be a tackle, or back, or end...some kind of sports thing. You’d recognize the team if he said it. Big guy. So he went and picked Pierre right out of the water.”

The look was something Rob had never seen before, not exactly, even on a human. The little Frenchie’s face was consumed by it until it seemed the look replaced the face completely, so completely that instead of Pierre and his too wide mouth, and his too long tongue, and his too round eyes, there was only annihilating disappointment.

“Pierre,” Rob says.

“Oh the dog’s fine. Turns out he’s a swimmer. I thought you told me French bulldogs sink. Wrong! Like when Dr. Meyer said post-menopausal women can’t get—”

“Where is he?”

“Who? The dog? He’s with that nice guy you started seeing. Mike? He said he’d watch him like a hawk, especially crossing the street. That dog pulls like crazy while you’re waiting for the light. I like this guy! Imagine, a nurse in the family. I won’t have to...”

Rob closes his eyes. As his mother talks he thinks about how, as soon as he’s recovered enough, he’ll take Pierre to the vet. A regular veterinarian. Because they do that sort of thing, even if the dog isn’t sick. They do that sort of thing all the time. And Matt will understand because he’s seen it too. But even if he doesn’t it doesn’t matter. Pierre is Rob’s dog and he can do this one, wonderful thing for him.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’ve been thinking about right to die for a while now, especially when it comes to mental illness, and I also happened to have a very, very clumsy French bulldog. After I found him wedged upside down between my bed and the wall the idea for this story began.*

I’ve always loved the strange and anyone who writes it, including O’Connor, Jackson, Dahl, Kafka, Poe, Bradbury, Cheever, Vonnegut, Murakami, Saunders, Russell, Machado, and all the other greats I’ve left out. Hopefully, they influence me very much.

AUTHOR BIO: Jennifer Walker writes short stories, many of them strange. One was published last year in the collection *Beach Mysteries* and two are forthcoming in *Hags on Fire* and *Bewildering Stories*. She lives in the Virgin Islands with her girlfriend and an exquisitely beautiful and understandably narcissistic dog.

