**DO GEESE FLY AT NIGHT?**

“Don’t make plans today,” she said staring down at her buttered muffin top. “We’re doing something.”

 I nodded through the glass as I drank the milk at our oak breakfast table. Last year, we put in the center leaf in expanding it by fourteen inches, but still it felt clustered.

 “Did you hear me? No last minute excuses. There’s something I want to do.”

 Her after-coffee, before-brushing breath was no longer a quirk of our courting period. I looked at the curtains which changed each spring when our neighbor, a self-appointed decorator, came calling for our checkbook. This year the fabric panels changed to yellow with pink flowers with white and blue vertical stripes. It was our ninth set.

 “What did you have in mind?” I asked.

 “We’re getting a dog.”

 “When did we decide this?” I jabbed at the floating cereal with my spoon looking for one of the dehydrated sugar treats to palliate the next swallow.

 “I decided last night while you were watching television. I need the company.”

 Over the years, there had been a host of fertility specialists and procedures, followed by half as many miscarriages. When we decided to stop trying, I found a relief, almost an equilibrium, like a helium filled balloon with just enough lift to hover inches above the floor.

 It started with cats, Buddy and Lazarus, but one was crushed in a garage door accident, and the other died of feline leukemia. The two were replaced by five: Rosie, Domino, Ginger, Lilly, and Daisy; and a new homeostasis. Then came a series of dogs.

 Barkley was the first, an expensive German shepherd that proved to be a genetic anomaly. At eight months and one hundred pounds, he jumped on the open dishwasher door cleaving the hinges.

 “He’s leaving,” she said.

 Roger, an Old English sheepdog with a hefty price tag followed several months later. It was two days before she noticed he could only run moving his back legs together as a unit. I suggested a trip to the Veterinarian. She came home alone.

 An appropriate duration later, and a price tag of half our mortgage payment, brought Chloey, a Siberian Husky, to our home. She lasted a summer shedding and sharing hair while batting her chalcedonic eyes. On Columbus Day, Chloey snatched up one of the cats in an attempt to break its back.

 It had been a year since that assault, and a bevy of feral cats had taken to feedings at our back door. She had even named some of them. There was Harry, Sponge Bob, Betty, and a half dozen all gray ones indistinguishable from one another.

 Rinsing my dishes, I went upstairs and crawled back into bed. There had been a time when that resulted in her joining me, but the bloom had long been off the rose. Her interest was perfunctory at best and further still apart. I waited, but the intentional banging of pots and pans in the kitchen sink was another code. Deflated, I rose and showered. When I came out of the bathroom, the bed was made, and she proceeded down the hall in a hooded sweat-shirt, blue jeans, and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

 “I’ll meet you downstairs. Don’t dress like a slob,” she said.

 I looked at her wardrobe through the open closet door, a cachet of garments from places like New York, Paris, London, and Milan. No expense had been spared in clothing that rotated like the curtains.

 I donned a light blue button down oxford shirt, pants, loafers with argyle socks, and grabbed a navy blazer I had no intention of wearing, but allowed me pockets for storage.

 As I descended the steps, I heard the car running which meant the kitchen door was open. I locked the front door from the inside. A hand painted ceiling border of various fauna and flora adorned our entrance hall, rendered and brushed by an alcoholic, red headed Loretta, a friend of the always spending decorator. The contiguous mural had been a two day project which stretched into as many weeks and five figures. In her defense, it nicely accented the eighteenth Chippendale lowboy, Victorian era hurricane lamp, and the two hundred year old Chinese export bowl.

 I turned left into the dining room making my way to the kitchen. A small green and white cooler sat by the back door. The placement meant bring it, and signaled the excursion would take a good part of the day. I palmed my back pocket confirming the presence of my wallet and set the alarm using my wife’s birth date.

 My wife had already programmed the GPS in the car. I scanned the top of the screen determining which way to exit the driveway and the bottom which estimated the one way trip to be two hours and fifty-eight minutes. I wasn’t sure which bothered me more, the thought of hours of silence or hours of scant conversation.

 I don’t care for small talk. Once, when flying home from Vienna after several exhausting days, a rotund and exuberant fellow took the middle seat to my right and felt compelled to strike up a conversation, “Hey. Are you from the States? I’m from Chicago. First time in Europe. Amazing, but the food really messed with my stomach. Where do you live?”

 I had no interest in banal chatter. I responded in my best French that I did not speak English, “Je ne parle pas Anglais.”

 The portly passenger responded the way a French chef retracts from spoiled wine, “Asshole.”

 With embarrassment and crimson cheeks, I realized I was reading an English version of Time magazine.

 We traveled the Turnpike eighty-six miles before she spoke, “I need to use the bathroom, and I’d like another cup of coffee.”

 We piqued as minimalists, self-professed artists. I departed the highway at the first exit, pulled into a rest stop, and drove to the front entrance so she wouldn’t have far to walk.

 “I’ll get the coffee,” I said as she closed the door.

 Finding a myriad of kiosks, I sought the high end brand with origins in the Pacific Northwest, “A large cup of your morning mountain blend, please.”

 A young Hispanic girl with jubilant eyelashes, coarse black hair, and brown ovoid eyes smiled up at me as she handed me the coffee, “That will be five dollars and thirty cents.”

 I reached for my wallet knowing the change from the tolls lay in the center console of the car, “Add a blueberry muffin to the order.”

 I didn’t turn around to see if my wife was behind me, nor did I have to ask if she wanted anything else. There was never a question.

 On the night we met, we were concluding weekend shifts at the local hospital during our senior year. We spent all night on the phone planning our first date, and then planning our lives. After marriage we learned to anticipate each other’s thoughts and communicate with gestures. Somewhere after that, it was as if the tide receded, not to be replenished by the new moon.

 Ninety minutes later, we departed the Turnpike to a four lane highway, which morphed to a two lane road. At the end was a dirt and gravel drive marked by a mailbox fabricated from motorcycle handlebars and a tear drop gas tank. Mounted where a headlight would have been was a crude yellow and black hand painted sign that read “Fat Bob’s.”

 “This is it. Pull in,” she said.

 I advanced in first gear feeling every rock striking the undercarriage. I silenced Pandora that had been playing in the background, her playlist, and closed the windows as the dust billowed up the side. She unbuckled her seatbelt and slipped her shoes on.

 The driveway brought us to a white clapboard, three story, farm-house with a green tin roof. There were several large barns, outbuildings, a silo, and chickens running about I was careful not to hit.

 An oversized bearded man evacuated the house through the front screen door, across the porch, and down three steps favoring his right leg.

 She was out of the car before me.

 “How was the drive?” he said scratching his chest through stained and faded denim overalls. “You’re right on time.”

 I was unaware there had been a schedule.

 “It was pleasant,” my wife proffered. “No problem getting here. We enjoyed the scenery.”

 I shook his hand saying “Bob” as a means of confirming the sign at the end of the drive.

 “Like that did you? Actually, my name’s Gerhard, but my friends call me Gerry.”

 I felt the silent reprimand from my right, a chastising for a perceived faux-pas in my greeting.

 “So you’re here for the dog?”

 “Casey,” my wife said.

 “This here’s ma’ farm. I got lots better pups, pure bred you know. That Casey’s a mix. I told you how we found him.”

 “That’s fine. We want him anyway.”

 I wondered what had been previously discussed and questioned the use of the proverbial “we.”

 Gerhard spoke in a German accent seasoned with a country drawl. He looked at my shoes and chuckled, “Follow me.”

 We passed a large white bank barn with molting paint. The lee side was muddy, and a dozen pigs penned at the far end. Their size and filth surprised me.

 Gerhard reached into a rusting barrel pulling out a handful of broken ice cream cones, “The hogs love these. I get ‘em down your way several times a month. It’s a shame we couldn’t have worked things out better. I might’ve saved you a trip.”

 “We didn’t want to wait. There wasn’t time,” she said.

 Gerhard nodded understanding something I did not, “He’s around the side. I’ve got him on a wire cable. Are you sure you don’t want to look at some of my pups? I think they might be better suited for you folks.”

 “No. We’ll see Casey first,” she said.

 “Fair enough. Walk slowly. He spooks.”

 As we turned the corner, a spindly dog spotted us and ran in the opposite direction until the lead snapped his neck with such force I wondered if he had killed himself.

 “Easy boy,” said Gerhard, “Turn and try walking backwards. Crouch down if you can.”

 I pulled on the leg of my trousers hiking them up as I bent at the waist and the knees. The dog kept his back to us, on his belly, legs splayed out. He was white with brown and black splotches and looked like a Beagle on stilts. Gangly, his ribs showed, and his eyes were brown, wide and frightened.

 “Casey, baby. It’s okay Casey,” said my wife as we shuffled closer.

 Gerhard reached out for the lead minimizing Casey’s movement. The dog ran back and forth in panic, uncoordinated like a luffing sail, its arc narrowing as we drew near.

 “Try not to make eye contact,” whispered Gerhard. ‘He’ll see that as a challenge.”

 “Is he going to bite?” I asked.

 “No. He’s yet to even growl at me.”

 We backed in until I touched the dog’s hips. He quivered with his tail tucked under his compressed body. The lead yanked taut, pulling on Casey’s collar, but he emitted no sound. My wife reached out and petted him behind the ears. The dog flinched and pulled away. Gerhard held firm on the lead.

 “He looks undernourished,” said my wife.

 “I put food out for him, but he won’t eat when I’m around. Sometimes I wonder if the birds and raccoons get to his bowl before he does. I wanted to bring him inside, but I have other dogs that’ll only scare him worse.”

 “Was he abused?” I asked.

 “Depends on what you mean by abused. As I shared with the missus, this dog’s never been around people. I found him in the woods, and he don’t know how to communicate. It’s like he started out normal, probably a mix of Beagle and some kind of hound, should ‘a been a simple lap dog, but because of circumstances, his wires got crossed. You can’t quite call him wild because he’s from domestic stock, but I’d say feral is the right word.”

 “I’ve never heard the word feral applied to dogs, only cats,” I said.

 “Well let’s just say the foundation’s there with this dog. With the right people, the right home, he might just come around, but I can’t say for sure.”

 My wife, still with her hand on the dog’s collar, looked at me, her eyes asking rather than telling.

 I released an audible sigh and considered a piece of quartz sticking out of the shale and clay soil. It was embedded, and its true size unknown, but with a little prying I could probably work it out.

 My wife pulled a leash from her sweatshirt pocket, “We’ll take him.”

**THE END**