

The Expen

FARUK
~ THE
DOG

glasses. He r member what
was wearing nuumuu. No
e whatsoever.
Sounds good," I can't recall
detail of Cy. A close my eyes is a redheaded
; with blood and vomit. Did the husband think of it as *her*?
might have seemed alive. But why didn't he know she wore
ig? I can't even decide which question is the important
.
"What are you going to do when Cy gets here?" I ask Guy.
"What are you going to say?"
"I'll tell her I won, five hundred to fifty-seven," he says. "I'll
: her if old Miss Head is still alive." He stands up and gets
nself a glass of water. "I'll try not to act too surprised when
e comes home to me."

Dog Problems

Antonya Nelson

You always heard that dogs could smell fear; this dog could smell love. Whenever people were touching, embracing, kissing, she would be there, offering her front paw or nose for a similar embrace. She horned in on several moments a day. And there were times when David felt she was the most loved of the three of them.

She came into their marriage as more of a nanny, an older, pleasant enough female with a tolerance for interruptions to the schedule. She'd always been allowed to sleep in the bedroom, right next to Adrienne, but David, in their first year of marriage, had felt he wasn't having enough things his way. Not that Blanche bothered him at night—most nights he couldn't have said one way or the other whether she was in the room—but he wanted to be able to choose, and so he chose the backyard.

She went with only the mildest of sighs, aware, David was sure, of her own innocence in the situation. Every night Adrienne stood with her in the yard telling her good night. They'd play a halfhearted game of fetch, both of them conscious that though two had gone out, only one would return to the bedroom. Sometimes, in the black hours of the early morning, Adrienne would suddenly wake and, before David could move, be out the door, her robe swinging around her, worried about Blanche.

His family had had a dog while he was growing up, but he

didn't have very clear memories of it. Sergio, he was named, a big drooling oily kind of dog who spent most of the time digging an enormous tunnel under the toolshed. The backyard stank of him. It was always someone's chore to feed him, a chore that was as odious and regimented as emptying the trash or plunging the bathtub.

On the other hand, Adrienne had gotten Blanche in high school, named her from *Streetcar*, and taken her everywhere. She was a treat, not a chore. In college, Blanche smoked pot, had an ear pierced, sported a Magic Marker Picasso on her broad back. Blanche wore a bandana and rode in the bed of many boyfriends' trucks. She was a pal, a dog everyone loved, a dog who mostly seemed to take care of Adrienne instead of the other way around.

Blanche had meals twice a day, just like Adrienne. Breakfast was dog chow with powdered milk and warm water; dinner, dog chow with bouillon and more warm water. She was eleven years old, her teeth could no longer chew hard food, and the rest of her system wouldn't digest canned. Adrienne mothered her, spoiled her even. Blanche had only to sound a single yip in the morning and Adrienne was out of bed and on her way. David, still foggy with sleep, heard them through the heat vents, the cabinets opening, then shutting, the food rattling into the shallow tin pan that was Blanche's plate, the water running until it matched the temperature of Adrienne's wrist, just like any other child's food. And then Adrienne made her own breakfast, coffee and a heaped spoonful of crunchy peanut butter. After that, they went outside to sit in the sun. Blanche retrieved the newspaper, every day except Sunday, when it was too large for her teeth to hold.

Later, if Adrienne remembered, she would come back to bed for a few moments, roll next to David in her robe, and nudge backwards into his rib cage and stomach. She called it invad-

ing the fetus. When they were first married, five years ago, she came back to bed every morning, sometimes more than once, eager for him to wake. Now, she seemed to prefer being alone. Well, not strictly: there was Blanche, of course.

Today, however, Adrienne graced his frontside with her backside, bumping up against his erection with the crease between her buttocks. "Howdy," she said. Then, "Come on, Blanche." The dog heaved herself onto the bed, always careful to stay on Adrienne's side of it, and curled into Adrienne. "Three spoons," Adrienne said, completely happy.

After she had left for work, David called in sick.

"You're not really sick," his partner, Robinson, said. "Not really, right?"

David was annoyed: he would have told Robinson the truth, that he was just down, tired of going to work, feeling a need to remain in his terry-cloth bathrobe—except Robinson tried to outguess him first. Instead, he said, "No, I woke up with the runs. Plus a toothache." Two inconsistent symptoms were better than two normally complementary ones, headache and fever, for example.

"Drag, man."

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll be at the Stivaks', shoveling rocks, in case you get well later on."

The Stivaks. A whole swimming pool, cabaña, and archaic heat pump to landscape around. Also, the son had allergies. David and Robinson had already had to dig up a Palo Verde tree, its root system some sort of world's record. A kid with allergies had no business in the desert. "Fat chance," David said.

Robinson laughed. "You ain't sick."

"I got the runs, believe me."

"Okay, okay." Robinson would be looking up at the sky, thinking about heat, imagining the day over instead of beginning. "Bye." He said it like a sheep, *bah*.

They hung up. David, free for the day, took a tour of the house. Blanche followed, toenails clicking. She was half golden retriever, half husky, lumpy and round with fur like a bear rug. The white on her muzzle was creeping toward her ears, soon to take over her honey back and tail. She sat down on David's feet at Adrienne's dresser, a small reminder that he was not supposed to be opening Adrienne's little boxes, fingering her trinkets.

Adrienne collected and David threw away. That's how he would have categorized them today, looking at her junk. Though she was twenty-six, the filler in the boxes could have been a high school girl's. It was one notch higher than Cracker Jack fare, one notch lower than valuable. Stuff, and about twenty little boxes full. Everyone in her family was an accessory to this crime; stuff boxes were all they could ever think to give her, every Christmas and birthday rounding up a few more, every vacation they'd send one to her. Hawaii, Fiji, Japan . . . David jumped. Blanche barked out the window at two girls jogging by. They looked toward the noise, and David, without thinking about it, shied behind the curtains: caught at his wife's boxes.

"Hush!"

Blanche pulled her front paws off the windowsill and dropped to her haunches, obedient.

"Shake." She shook.

"Lie down." She lay.

"All the way down." She lowered her chin to the floor, eyes on him.

"Okay, Blanche, here's the clincher: fix me a Denver omelet." She continued watching him, not batting an eyelid,

humorless, as David had always contended. They both perked up when they heard the front door open.

"Blanche?" Adrienne shouted. "Hey, Blanche." David considered hiding, spying on the two of them; what was it they did alone, anyway? But it was too late—there was Adrienne at the doorway. She grabbed her throat when she saw him.

"Oh you scared me!" She stepped backwards. "What are you doing here?"

"I called in sick. I got the runs." It was a handy illness, amazingly vivid for being just one word.

She wrinkled her face. "Can I do anything?"

He shrugged. "Just don't feel like working."

She nodded, her heavy breathing moving her chest.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"Well, on the way to the bus I saw this dog, a little black and brown dog, in the street. I mean, there was traffic . . ." She headed toward the kitchen, telling the story over her shoulder. David followed, just like Blanche. Adrienne was in the Tupperware cupboard, rummaging through the lids. ". . . I called to it, but it wouldn't come, so I turned my back and then it came. One of *those* kind of dogs. Not like you, big Blanche." Blanche smiled, flattered.

Adrienne pulled out a custard keeper, then dove back in for its top. "So I had to coax it backwards, you know, pretending I wasn't interested, until it was out of the street. It could have been a stray except it was wearing a collar. But it was so thin." She'd uncovered a lid and was now filling the custard keeper with Blanche's dog pellets. Blanche whisked her tail on the floor, licked her chops. "No, baby, not for you." Abruptly the tail stopped. "So I turned around. I thought I would just look in the paper real fast and see if there was a lost-and-found ad, but then, you won't believe this, on the way home I saw a notice on the telephone pole for a little black dog with tan

markings. I couldn't believe it." She shook her hair out of her face, snapped the lid on, burped it. "326-0775. I'm going to call. Then I'm going to feed it till whoever owns it gets there. What do you think?"

David blinked into the blank space the end of her story had made. He thought that nothing like that would happen to him on his way to work, that if he saw a dog he wouldn't think twice, but he said, "I think that's a good idea."

Disappointed, mildly disappointed in his answer, but too happy in her busyness to be disappointed for long, she picked up the phone, singing, "Three two six oh seven seven five," and dialed. She hooked the receiver between her shoulder and chin and pulled Blanche to her, ruffling her face. "Oh, come on," she told the phone. Finally, she hung up. She pursed her lips, shook the Tupperware of dog food, and then calmed Blanche, who'd thought she'd seen a second chance at the pellets. "Well, I'll feed it, anyway. And I'll just call later. But what if it goes back in the street? Maybe I should bring it here and put it in the pen. But what if it has rabies?" She worked through these while David watched. "I'll call from work, tell them the dog is in this neighborhood and they can come get it. After all, it's lived this long without my help." Satisfied, she kissed Blanche, then David, took her dog food, and left.

The house was quiet again, nothing to indicate she'd been there at all. David wished he had gone to work. He wished he had volunteered to join her with the stray. He wished he had anything besides watching Donahue to do. It was in this boredom that he decided to give Blanche a bath. She stank, as always, and Adrienne would appreciate it. Besides, bathing her would absolve some of his growing guilt at sticking Robinson with the Stivaks' rocks.

First he took his own shower, before the tub got filthy. Blanche lay on the bathmat, ignorant of what was coming, and tried to lick his legs when he got out. Apparently,

Adrienne allowed this for, try as he might, he'd never been able to break the dog of it. True, her tongue felt nice, soft and caressing, but still, wasn't this how they gave you worms?

"Okay, Blanche. Bath time," he said. She crawled under the sink, trying to get small, trying to become heavier, trying to cling to the tile with her nails. "Out. Now." He pulled and she pulled. He almost gave up, almost felt sorry enough and respectful enough (after all, she was nearly eighty years old) to quit, but Adrienne would love to have her clean, would love him for cleaning her.

"Out!" he said, and yanked her onto the bathmat. He then slid the dog, on the mat, to the tub and hefted her in.

David had had an uncle who lived with David's family for as long as he could remember. Uncle Festes. Infestes, David and his brothers called him. Festes was a cheerful, doddering, mostly harmless alcoholic who took great pains to hide his affliction from the family. They all knew anyway. He would come into the kitchen after a night on the town and say, regretfully, apologetically, shaking his head sorrowfully, "Bottle problems." That was it.

If David's one sister, Leticia, whose job it was to fix breakfast should burn something, which happened frequently, Festes would say, "Toast problems," and shake his head, sadly but without anger. What could you do? he seemed to say. Some nights, because there were too few beds and not nearly enough space to hold them all, they would fight. These were "P.M. problems."

David hadn't thought of his Uncle Festes in a long time. While scrubbing Blanche's hand-sized paws, he thought *dog problems*. Adrienne had gone out and found one, and here he was with his own. It was a good approach, a basically safe one. Shrug your shoulders and take the problem by the hand.

He hadn't dressed after his shower, figuring, correctly, that

he would only have to change again after a round with Blanche in the tub. They both rested leaning against the wet porcelain in their respective corners, waiting for the bell that would send them back to the fight. Blanche threatened to shake her wet fur, and David responded by lifting the squeeze bottle of flea shampoo to her nose. There was something satisfyingly masculine about wrestling naked with a wet dog. David could get his teeth into this, he thought. For her part, Blanche kept her tail out of the water, staring straight ahead at the hot and cold faucets and blinking like a tortured prisoner when he rinsed.

David left the bathroom as Blanche stepped out; matron from the tub, she could attend to her drying off by herself. He put his bathrobe back on, beginning to believe he did have the runs. And a toothache, he reminded himself, reaching for his jaw. He mixed a Bloody Mary and opened the bathroom door.

Blanche stood dripping on the bathmat. She hadn't shaken, and that alarmed David. He set down his drink, which then fell over. The glass rolled on the carpet of the hallway, the cubes slid on the tile of the bathroom floor. The Bloody Mary formed a stain. Blanche trembled, then ceased, then trembled again, her eyes at David's waist, not accusing, not forgiving.

"Shake, buddy." David stepped into the humid room and pulled several towels from the racks, draping them over her. She vibrated beneath his palms. Drool formed a long strand from the corner of her mouth to the floor. "Oh, Christ," David said, "oh, Christ. Come on, come on." He decided to take her outside in the sun, warm her up, and dry her off. A bath wouldn't kill her, he told himself, luring her step by wet step through the house and out the back door, a bath wouldn't kill her.

She stood as before, this time on the redwood deck David and Robinson had built in an off-week. Despite the sun, her

back and legs quivered, her tail drooped. What had happened in the five minutes it had taken to pull on his robe and mix a drink? "Fuck," he said. "Come on Blanche, pal, shape up." The dog wouldn't even meet his eyes. He would have to call Adrienne. The thought of calling her was worse than the sight of the dog before him, two strands of drool now connecting her with the deck.

He dragged the phone onto the porch and dialed, twice incorrectly. Blanche didn't listen as he told her help was on the way, soon Adrienne would be there. But Adrienne hadn't come in yet; her boss was wondering, herself, where she could be. For a second, David wondered: where was Adrienne anyway? Then he remembered the stray. Then Blanche. He said, "Tell her to call me. It's an emergency at home. Dog problems."

"Oh dear," said her boss. "Not Blanche?"

David resented this: she knew the dog? He'd never even met Adrienne's boss, and yet here she was, familiar with their dog. He wanted to ask if she knew his name as well. "Yeah," he said, "Blanche. Maybe you can tell me what to do. She's all quivery . . ."

"No, no, I don't know a thing about animals. I rely on the veterinarian, I'm afraid."

"Well, tell Adrienne to call."

Blanche had knelt, all four legs buckled, as if suspended in mid-jump. She panted. She looked like she was doing a push-up, like she was a lizard.

At the vet's, a thousand things occurred to him, most of them having to do with Adrienne's blaming him for what had happened to her dog, whatever that would be. The vet, instead of escorting the two of them into a cubicle, had called her assistant and taken Blanche to the back, leaving David in the waiting room, pacing like an expectant father in a B movie.

Now he played out a few scenarios: Blanche died, Adrienne wept and wept and never recovered. David would then discover, as he probably subconsciously had known all along, that she loved the dog more than him. And why not? She'd had her longer, grown up with her, confided to her all her secrets. Another scenario: Blanche died and David disappeared, caught the next train out, leaving the dog corpse with the vet and Adrienne with a mystery.

David stood before a colorful cartoon poster. It told how to brush a dog's teeth, beginning with a paper towel or soft cloth and just rubbing, eventually moving up to toothpaste and a soft-bristled brush, graduating into meat-flavored paste you could order, see below. David snorted. He wondered how Adrienne would read this: funny or serious?

From the back he heard Blanche yelp. This could be good or bad. Her bark aroused in him a sudden sympathy; she wasn't such a bad dog, really. It was just Adrienne's fixation on her that bothered David. Under any other circumstances she would have been a fine animal, good company and smart to boot. She did exactly what Adrienne said, always. If Adrienne were here now, in fact, he was willing to bet she could command Blanche to be well and the dog would obey.

David's stomach rumbled. He looked at his watch: 1:30. The time surprised him, though which way he could not say. Did it feel earlier? Later? He was hungry, his diarrhea and bad tooth long forgotten. He peered around the corner of the front desk and called out the vet's name. Nothing. He checked his watch again. Still 1:30. He slipped out the door.

Taco Tico would give him diarrhea, he decided, and that would be justice. He ate his burritos, sauce oozing down his chin. He thought about Adrienne's million pictures of Blanche, every stage of the way. First, Blanche changed the most, grew

through puppyhood while Adrienne stayed the same, her high school hair stringy and close to her head. Then Blanche stayed the same for a few years while Adrienne changed, went from chubby to thin, then settled for medium, her hair growing longer, getting stringier, then shrinking against her head, getting permed, then growing into medium also. There was a picture with the two of them in earrings, Adrienne both sides, Blanche only one. For a while they both stayed about the same. Then Blanche got grayer, chunkier, shorter, if that was possible. Her tongue hung out more and her eyes got wider. Her face turned white. Her legs bowed. She looked a little desperate. Adrienne remained tall, medium, smiling, hair and eyes the same: young, basically.

David dropped his tray into the trashcan accidentally and left it there.

Back at the vet's, nothing had changed. He considered tapping the bell on the desk, then thought he'd rather not know, really, if something had changed. Eventually the doctor emerged, pulling a rubber glove from her hand as if she were a real doctor. David felt scorn, then corrected himself. She was a real doctor. Even vets wore gloves. He waited for her to speak.

"We'll keep her overnight and see what we can do. She's had a stroke."

David drove home, Blanche's leash beside him on the front seat. If Adrienne had come home while he was gone she would have put two and two together: spilled drink, bathroom a wreck, car gone, dog gone. But she wasn't there, the mess was still intact. He cleaned up, wiping the tub smooth, washing Blanche's honey hairs and sand down the drain, throwing all the towels in the machine after he soaked Bloody Mary out of the carpet with them. The phone rang; David's heart leaped over a few beats.

"Hey, how's the boy?" It was Robinson, calling from the Stivaks' pool house phone.

"I'm all right. But my wife's dog had a stroke." David undressed while they talked, wanting to get back to his bathrobe for some reason.

"I thought that was a human problem."

Human problems, David thought. "Nope. It can be a dog problem, too."

"Well," Robinson said, then didn't follow up.

"I'll see you tomorrow, for sure," David said. "I know I'll be better."

"Okay. Sorry about your dog, man."

"Yeah."

"Bah."

When he heard Adrienne's key in the lock he realized he shouldn't be in his bathrobe. How would she believe he'd taken the dog to the vet if he was wearing his bathrobe? He grabbed his clothes from the hamper and ran into the bathroom just as she called for Blanche.

At four-thirty they both sat in the familiar waiting room, Adrienne's fingers dug into David's wrist. There was no word on Blanche. The clinic was supposed to close at six, but the doctor would stay with Blanche all night if necessary. David had listened without really believing it: the vet would stay all night for the dog. It didn't surprise Adrienne a bit.

"What happened to the stray?" he asked, to distract her.

She was staring at the toothpaste poster, uncomprehending. "Oh, it's really pretty interesting," she said, not interested at all. Her eyes were miserable from crying, her face contorted. She was ugly, David thought briefly.

"Tell me," he insisted.

She took in a lungful of air. "Well, I found the dog again, but

he was running down this alley. I followed him and he ran into this yard. I didn't want to go in, you know, in case somebody was home, but . . ."

"Go on."

"So I squatted down and I called him, tempting him with dog food." She stopped to calm her tears. Blanche's dog food. David patted her with his free hand. "But he wouldn't come, so I threw some to him. He ate it and I threw more, each time getting it closer and closer to me. Then this cat showed up, this huge cat, bigger than the dog, and she started eating the dog food. You should have seen this yard. I couldn't believe it. What a mess, junk everywhere, toys, wood, a red wagon full of limes. That was the weirdest thing—that wagon full of limes." She snuffled. From one of the cubicles an old woman and man emerged, the woman carrying a black tom, his fur mangled.

"Oh Spike, Spike, Spike," she cooed while the man looked over her shoulder, patting the cat's ridged ear.

The man smiled at them. "If you can't have kids, you have pets," he explained. They paid the receptionist, who would not look David in the eyes.

"So there's the cat and the dog in the yard," David prompted, "with the wagon."

Adrienne watched the couple. "They're so old," she said when they left. "And they love that cat." She sighed, her tears starting up again.

"Come on, Ade, what about the stray?"

"Well . . ." She took a deep breath, enough to finish off the story. "The surprising thing is that the dog and cat got along. So I thought, 'He lives here. He found his way home and I was just following when it happened.' By then I'd come farther into the yard. I knocked on the door and nobody answered, which made sense, because nobody had answered when I called on the phone either, so I figured here he was, home.

There was even a leash tied around the tree, and an empty dog food bowl." She stopped.

"Hmm," David said. An empty dog food bowl, he thought.

"So. So I tied him to his leash, left him the rest of Blanche's food, and walked on to work. The end, I'm thinking. I'm thinking, while I'm walking, what a good deed I've done, how I hoped if anybody ever found Blanche out loose that they'd bring her some food and leave her back in her yard with her cat. If she had a cat."

David laughed, involuntarily. He reached around Adrienne. It occurred to him that if Blanche died he would have a chance, a real chance, at becoming the thing that Adrienne loved most. The thought raced through his blood.

"And I was also thinking how you would like it if I helped this dog, you know? I was thinking about that poem, 'A thing of beauty is a joy' and so on, I don't know why. It doesn't make much . . ." She lifted her toes off the floor, breathed wetly. "Sense. I was thinking helping was a thing of beauty, but it was conscious, which kind of ruins it maybe . . . Anyway," Adrienne went on, stronger. "Here's part one of the weird stuff. I call this number from work. Three two six . . . and so on, and this German guy answers. Very old, deaf practically. I say, 'You lost a dog,' and he says, 'Yes?' and I go, 'Well, I tied it up outside your house.' He says nothing. Then he says, 'The woman will be happy.' I go, 'What?' He goes, 'The woman next door will be happy.' Turns out they live in a duplex, she doesn't have a phone. Well, I ask him what's his address, and it's the wrong one. It's like half a mile from where I tied the dog up."

"Really?" The plot thickened.

"Really. So I tell why I tied his neighbor's dog up at the wrong house, explaining about the cat and the tree, but who knows what he's understanding, and then I give him the ad-

dress of the house where the dog is tied up. He can go over there himself and get it, I figure. 2015 East 8th, I tell him. Then I say I'll call back later. Okay, so that's the end of it. I forget the whole thing and work. I was late so I have a lot to catch up on . . ."

"I called you."

"Yeah?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"She wasn't there when I got there. Early lunch. You called about Blanche?" she said.

"Uh huh."

"Oh."

"Go on. What happened next?"

"Anyway, so I forgot all about it until after work. Since it was on the way, I decided I'd stop by and see what was up with the dog. Well, I gave that German man the wrong address—it was on 7th Street, not 8th. 2015 East 7th. God, I thought, what is he going to think? He probably went to the wrong backyard and everything. So I went up to this house, the right house, and the front door was open. Somebody was home. And I wondered what they thought about that dog tied to their tree, you know? I worried that maybe they'd called the pound or something. I looked through the screen and there was this girl, maybe twelve, sitting in a swivel chair staring at the wall. I swear to God, there was nothing around her, nothing she could have been doing. Just staring at the wall." Adrienne sniffed.

"Staring at the wall . . ." David coached.

"I knocked. She kind of came to, really spacy. I told her the whole thing, you know. 'You don't know me, but . . .' She said, 'Just a minute. Let me go see if there's a dog there.' She left me on the porch and went out back. Pretty soon she returns. She says, I swear to God, 'I think that's our Paco.' I say,

'That's your dog?' She says, get this, 'I think so. I think that's Paco. Come on in and I'll look again.' So I come into this house, you wouldn't believe it. Junky, but like it's still being constructed, pieces of the walls are missing, a globe on the table, a broken telephone, and dog bowls, which kind of reassures me. I go into the kitchen and out the back door. She's squatted on the ground, holding up the dog's paw—he's still there, tied to the tree, the cat's still walking around—and the girl's checking him out. 'Yeah, I'm pretty sure this is Paco.' What a case, I'm thinking, doesn't know her own dog. Well, I leave my phone number and name. What else can I do? The dog looks happy enough. She says her mom will call me. I'm starting to figure that maybe it is the same dog, but with two different owners or something. Maybe they haven't had it long enough to remember what it looks like . . . "

The front bell rang, a boy and his cat came in. The receptionist hustled them into the cubicle the old man and woman had come from. The cat cubicle, David thought. It was nearly closing time.

"What then?" David prompted, gently.

"As I'm walking out the door, she says, 'This has been a strange day. All day long strange things have been happening.'"

"Whoa," David said. Adrienne had cheered a little in the telling, but then the vet came out of the other cubicle, the dog cubicle. She motioned with her finger for Adrienne, who recognized the woman's expression, just as David had. Blanche had died.

They drove home the long way, avoiding the rush hour traffic of main thoroughfares. Adrienne cried and cried; David's eyes teared in response. The vet wouldn't let Adrienne take Blanche home. There was some law about city burials.

". . . and I never let her have puppies, I got her spayed so early on . . ." She cried harder, confessing other non-sins.

"Let's drive by that stray's house," David suggested. "What'd you say, 8th Street?"

"7th." She wiped her nose on her arm. "Oh, David, I've had her so long."

"I know," he said, hoping in some vague way that he did.

They pulled into the alley. Adrienne pointed out the notice on the phone pole: missing dog, small, black with tan markings, red collar. Reward. 326-0775.

"This house," she said, then, "No, one more." A woman with a red bathing cap was emptying her trash across the alley, watching them suspiciously. "This is it," Adrienne said. She had to lean over David to look.

In the backyard, sure enough, was the dog, sitting under a tree, tail curled around him, looking content. Even if he did have another home, he seemed perfectly happy at this one. There were no lights on inside, though a few other lights had gone on next door. Beside the house, with her back to them, seated a few feet from the red wagon full of limes, was a woman. She was playing a blue accordion.

They lay in bed, dinner foregone. Adrienne was beyond crying. She said nothing, clung to David and shivered, then ceased, the way Blanche had earlier. He hadn't told her about the bath (how could that be the cause, he worried, endlessly, how could that possibly be the cause?), hadn't told her he wasn't really sick. He ran his tongue over a tooth that really had begun hurting; inside, he felt loose enough to have the real runs.

"I won't be able to sleep," Adrienne had said, but eventually she did, still clinging to David.

In his dreams, when he finally slept, he saw Blanche, outside for her nightly stool. She circled, as was her habit, for a moment in the corner of the yard, her designated area. She cast a sad but resigned eye at David, who always watched when he took her out, curious. Her legs fanned, her honey-colored fur pale in the dark yard, she lifted her head. The expression on her face had always struck him as oddly peaceful—odd, because it was obvious that she was in pain.

David thought now, dreaming and yet close to waking, that he had willed her death, that he had killed her in order to save himself. He saw Adrienne as a vessel, capable of holding only a limited amount of love. Blanche had syphoned off her share and now it was his turn. He held his wife in his arms, sure that she radiated sufficient heat for the two of them.

Cold Places

Hersh drew circles with her toe at the end of the tub. She had been instructed by her mother to stay upstairs, so she brought the phone into the bathroom, dialed her brother's number in Lawrence, and talked as she soaked. They talked about the East High play; Hersh had a supporting part. She played the mother, as usual—she always tried for the younger roles, but always ended up in the oldest. Dress rehearsal had finished late and had been an especially good one. Her hair was still knotted on her head, and the heavy pancake makeup sweated into her bath water, turning it dirty pink. She told Lee that she was in the tub and he said not to drop the phone in the water. Then he asked about their parents, whose marriage was off and on.

Hersh told him *that* hadn't changed. "Something's happening, though," she said, "because I have to stay up here." When she'd come home, her mother had stepped from the kitchen, closing the door quickly behind her, as if keeping something from escaping. She told Hersh to go upstairs, that she could eat dinner later, although it was already late. "No whining," she had warned.

"What did you just say?" Hersh said.

"I wish things would clear up," Lee repeated. "One way or another."

"Which way?"

"I don't know." He had started to fade out.