

Laurie

LAURIE

By Stephen King

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Six months after his wife of forty years died, Lloyd Sunderland's sister drove from Boca Raton to Caymen Key to visit him. She brought with her a dark gray puppy which she said was a Border Collie-Mudi mix. Lloyd had no idea what a Mudi was, and didn't care.

"I don't want a dog, Beth. A dog is the last thing in the world I want. I can barely take care of myself."

"That's obvious," she said, unhooking the puppy's toy-sized leash. "How much weight have you lost?"

"I don't know."

She appraised him. "I'd say fifteen pounds. Which you could afford to give, but not much more. I'm going to make you a sausage scramble. With toast. You've got eggs?"

"I don't want a sausage scramble," Lloyd said, eyeing the dog. It was sitting on the white shag carpet, and he wondered how long it would be before it left a calling card there. The carpet needed a good vacuum and probably a shampoo, but at least it had never been peed on. The dog was looking at him with its amber eyes. Almost seeming to study him.

"Do you or do you not have eggs?"

"Yes, but—"

“And sausage? No, of course not. You’ve probably been living on frozen waffles and Campbell’s soup. I’ll get some at Publix. But first I’ll inventory your fridge and see what else you need.”

She was his older sister by five years, had mostly raised him after their mother died, and as a child he had never been able to stand against her. Now they were old, and he still could not stand against her, especially not with Marian gone. It seemed to Lloyd there was a hole in him where his guts had been. They might come back; they might not. Sixty-five was a little old for regeneration. The dog, though – against that he would stand. What in the name of God had Bethie been thinking?

“I’m not keeping it,” he said, speaking to her back as she stalked on her stork legs into the kitchen. “You bought it, you can take it back.”

“I didn’t buy it. The mother was a pure-bred Border Collie that got out and mated up with a neighbor’s dog. That was the Mudi. The mother’s owner managed to give the other three pups away, but this one’s the runt and nobody wanted her. The guy – he’s a small-patch truck farmer – was about to take her to the shelter when I came along and saw a sign tacked to a telephone pole. WHO WANTS A DOG, it said.”

“And you thought of me.” Still eyeing the puppy, who was eyeing him back. The cocked ears seemed to be the biggest part of her.

“Yes.”

“I’m *grieving*, Beth.” She was the only person to whom he could state his situation so baldly, and it was a relief.

“I know that.” Bottles rattled in the open fridge. He could see her shadow on the

wall as she bent and rearranged. She really is a stork, he thought, a human stork, and she'll probably live forever. "A grieving person needs something to occupy his mind. Something to take care of. That was what I thought when I saw that sign. It's not a case of who wants a dog, it's a case of who needs a dog. That's you. Jesus Christ, this fridge is a mold farm. I am so grossed out."

The puppy got to her feet, took a tentative step toward Lloyd, then changed her mind (assuming it had one) and sat down again.

"Keep her yourself."

"Absolutely not. Jim's allergic."

"Bethie, you have two cats. He's not allergic to them?"

"Yes. And the cats are enough. If that's the way you feel, I'll just take that puppy to the animal shelter in Pompano Beach. They give them three weeks before they euthanize them. She's a good-looking little thing with that smoky fur. Someone may take her before her time is up."

Lloyd rolled his eyes, even though she wasn't there to see him do it. He had often done the same thing at the age of eight, when Beth told him that if he didn't clean up his room, she'd give him five on his bottom with her badminton racket. Some things never changed.

"Pack your bags," he said, "we're going on one of Beth Young's all-expenses-paid guilt trips."

She shut the fridge and came back into the living room. The puppy glanced at her, then resumed her inspection of Lloyd. "I'm going to Publix, where I expect to

spend well over a hundred dollars. I'll bring you the checkout tape and you can reimburse me."

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"Why don't you get to know the defenseless puppy you're going to send to the gas chamber?" She bent to pat the top of the puppy's head. "Look at those hopeful eyes."

What Lloyd saw in those amber eyes was only watchfulness. Evaluation.

"What am I supposed to do if she pees on the shag? Marian had this installed just before she got sick."

Beth pointed to the toy-sized leash on the hassock. "Take her out. Introduce her to Marian's overgrown flowerbeds. And by the way, pee wouldn't hurt that carpet much. It's filthy."

She grabbed her purse and headed for the door, thin legs scissoring in their old self-important way.

"A pet is the absolute worst present you can give someone," Lloyd said. "I read that on the Internet."

"Where everything is true, I suppose."

She paused to look back at him. The harsh September light of Florida's west coast fell on her face, showing the way her lipstick had bled into the little wrinkles around her mouth, and the way her lower lids had begun to sag away from her eyes, and the fragile clockspring of veins beating in the hollow of her temple. She would be seventy soon. His bouncing, opinionated, athletic, take-no-prisoners sister was old. So was he.

They were proof that life was nothing but a short dream on a summer afternoon. Only Bethie still had her husband, two grown children, and four grandchildren – nature’s nice multiplication. He’d had Marian, but Marian was gone and there were no children. Was he supposed to replace his wife with a mongrel puppy? The idea was as corny and idiotic as a Hallmark card, and just as unrealistic.

“I’m not keeping her.”

She gave him the same look she’d given him as a girl of thirteen, the one that said the badminton racket would soon make an appearance if he didn’t shape up. “You are at least until I get back from Publix. I have some other errands to run, too, and dogs die in hot cars. Especially little ones.”

She closed the door. Lloyd Sunderland, retired, six months a widower, these days not very interested in food (or any of life’s other pleasures), sat staring at this unwelcome visitor on his shag carpet. The dog stared back. “What are you looking at, foolish?” he asked.

The puppy got up and walked toward him. Waddled, actually, as if through high weeds. It sat down again by his left foot, looking up. Lloyd lowered his hand tentatively, expecting a nip. The dog licked him instead. He got the toy leash and attached it to the puppy’s small pink collar. “Come on. Let’s get you off the rug while there’s still time.”

He tugged the leash. The puppy only sat and looked at him. Lloyd sighed and picked her up. She licked his hand again. He carried her outside and put her down in the grass. It needed mowing, and she almost disappeared. Beth was right about the

flowers, too. They looked awful, half of them as dead as Marian. This thought made him smile, although smiling at such a comparison made him feel like a bad person.

The dog's waddle was even more pronounced in the grass. She went a dozen or so steps, then lowered her hind end and peed.

"Not bad, but I'm still not keeping you."

Already suspecting that when Beth went back to Boca, the dog wouldn't be with her. No, this unwanted visitor would be here with him, in his house half a mile from the drawbridge that connected the Key to the mainland. It wouldn't work, he had never owned a dog in his life, but until he found someone who would take her, she might give him something to do besides watch TV or sit in front of his computer, playing solitaire and surfing sites that had seemed interesting when he first retired and now bored him to death.

When Beth returned almost two hours later, Lloyd was back in his easy chair and the puppy was back on the carpet, sleeping. His sister, whom he loved but who had irritated him his whole life, irritated him further today by coming back with a lot more than he had expected. She had a large bag of puppy chow (organic, of course) and a large container of plain yogurt (which, when added to the puppy's food, was supposed to strengthen the cartilage in those radar dish ears). Beth also brought puppy pee-pee pads, a dog bed, three chew toys (two of which squeaked annoyingly), and a child's playpen. It would keep the puppy from wandering in the night, she said.

"Jesus, Bethie, how much did that cost?"

"It was on sale at Target," she said, dodging the question in a way he was

familiar with. "No charge. My treat. And now that I've bought all this, do you still want me to take her back? If you do, you get the job of doing the returns."

Lloyd was used to being outplayed by his sister. "I'll give it a trial run, but I do *not* appreciate being saddled with the responsibility. You always were high-handed."

"Yes," she said. "With mother gone and dad a functional but basically hopeless drunk, I had to be. Now how about the scramble?"

"All right."

"Has she peed on the rug yet?"

"No."

"She will." Beth actually sounded pleased with the idea. "No great loss, either. What are you going to name her?"

If I name her, she's mine, Lloyd thought, only he suspected she was his already, and had been from that first tentative lick. The way that Marian had been his from the first kiss. Another stupid comparison, but could you control how your mind sorted things? No more than you could control your dreams.

"Laurie," he said.

"Why Laurie?"

"I don't know. It just came to me."

"Well," she said, "that's all right."

Laurie followed them into the kitchen. Waddling.

Lloyd papered the white shag carpet with puppy pads and set up the playpen in his bedroom (pinching his fingers in the process), then went into his study, fired up his computer, and began reading an article titled *So You Have a New Puppy!* Halfway through it, he became aware that Laurie was sitting beside his shoe, looking up at him. He decided to feed her and found a puddle of pee in the archway between the kitchen and the living room, not six inches from the nearest puppy pad. He picked Laurie up, set her down next to the pee, and said, "Not here." He then put her down on the pristine pad. "Do it here."

She looked at him, then did her puppy-waddle back into the kitchen, where she laid down by the stove with her snout on one paw, watching him. Lloyd grabbed a handful of paper towels. He had an idea he was going to be using a lot of them in the next week or so.

Once the puddle was cleaned up (a very small one, there was that), he put a quarter-cup of puppy chow – the recommended dosage, according to *So You Have a New Puppy!* – in a cereal bowl and mixed it with yogurt. The puppy tucked in willingly enough. While he was watching her eat, his phone rang. It was Beth, calling from a rest area somewhere in the wilds of Alligator Alley.

"You should take her to a vet," she said. "I forgot to tell you that."

"I know, Bethie." It was in *So You Have a New Puppy!*

She went on as if he hadn't spoken, another trait he knew well. "She'll need



vitamins, I think, and heartworm medicine for sure, plus something for fleas and ticks – it’s probably a pill they eat with their food. Also, she’ll need to be fixed. Spayed, you know, but probably not for a couple of months.”

“Yes,” he said. “If I keep her.”

Laurie had finished eating and wandered away toward the living room. With a full belly, her waddle was more pronounced. To Lloyd, she looked a little drunk.

“Remember to walk her.”

“Right.” Every four hours, according to *So You Have a New Puppy!* Which was ridiculous. He had no intention of getting up at two in the morning to take his uninvited guest outside.

Mind reading was another of his sister’s specialties. “You’re probably thinking that getting up in the middle of the night is going to be a hassle.”

“It had crossed my mind.”

She ignored this, as only Bethie could. “But if you’re telling the truth about having insomnia since Marian died, I really don’t think it will be a hardship.”

“That’s very understanding and caring of you, Bethie.”

“See how it goes, that’s all I’m saying. Give the little girl a chance.” She paused. “Give yourself a chance, while you’re at it. I worry about you, Lloyd. I worked in an insurance company for almost forty years, and I can tell you that men your age run a much greater risk of disease after a spouse dies. And death, of course.”

To this he said nothing.

“Will you?”

“Will I what?” As if he didn’t know.

“Give her a chance.”

Beth was pushing for a commitment Lloyd was unwilling to give. He looked around, as if for inspiration, and spied a turd – one single small sausage – exactly where the puddle of pee had been, six inches from the nearest puppy pad.

“Well, the little girl’s here now,” he said. It was the best he could give her. “You drive safe.”

“Sixty-five the whole way. I get passed a lot, and some people honk at me, but any faster and I don’t trust my reflexes.”

He said goodbye, grabbed some more paper towels, and picked up the sausage. Laurie watched him with her amber eyes. He took her back outside, where she did nothing. When he finished another puppy-rearing article twenty minutes later, he found another puddle of pee in the archway.

Six inches from the nearest puppy pad.

He bent over, hands on his knees, his back giving its usual warning twang.

“You’re on borrowed time, dog.”

She looked at him.

Seeming to study him.

Late that afternoon – two more puppy-pees, one actually on the pad nearest the kitchen – Lloyd attached the toy-sized leash and took Laurie outside, carrying her in the crook of his arm like a football. He set her down and urged her along the path that ran

behind this small development of houses. The path lead to a shallow canal which eventually flowed beneath the drawbridge. Traffic there was currently backed up, waiting for some Mr. Rich Guy's expensive toy to pass from Oscar's Bay into the Gulf of Mexico. The puppy walked in her usual side-to-side waddle, pausing every now and then to sniff at clumps of weeds that from her perspective must have looked like impenetrable jungle thickets.

A dilapidated boardwalk known as Six Mile Path (for reasons Lloyd had never understood, since it was a mile long at most) ran beside the canal, and his next-door neighbor was standing there now between signs reading NO LITTERING and NO FISHING. Further down was one meant to say WATCH FOR ALLIGATORS, only ALLIGATORS had been spray-painted over and replaced with DEMOCRATS.

Seeing Don Pitcher hunched over his fancy mahogany cane and hauling at his truss always gave Lloyd a small but unmistakable frisson of mean satisfaction. The man was a jukebox of tiresome political opinions, and also an unapologetic gore-crow. If anyone in the neighborhood died, Don knew it first. If anyone in the neighborhood was running into financial headwinds, he knew that, too. Lloyd's own back was no longer what it had been, nor were his eyes and ears, but he was still years from the cane and the truss. Or so he hoped.

"Look at that boat," Don said as Lloyd joined him on the boardwalk (Laurie, perhaps frightened of the water, hung back at the end of her leash). "How many poor people do you think that would feed in Africa?"

"I don't think even hungry people would eat a boat, Don."

"You know what I...say, what have you got there? New puppy? Ain't he cute?"

"It's a she," Lloyd said. "I'm keeping her for my sister."

"Hey there, sweetie," Don said, leaning forward and holding out his hand.

Laurie backed away and barked for the first time since Beth had brought her: two high, sharp yaps, then silence. Don straightened up again. "Not too friendly, is she?"

"She doesn't know you."

"She shit around?"

"Not too bad," Lloyd said, and for a while they watched the motor sloop. Laurie sat at the edge of the splintery boardwalk and watched Lloyd.

"My wife won't have a dog," Don said. "Says all they are is mess and trouble. I had one when I was a boy, a nice old Collie. She fell down a well. Cover was all rotted and down she went. Had to haul her up with a watchacallit."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. You want to be careful of that one near the road. She runs out in it, there goes your ballgame. Look at the size of that fucking boat! A dime to a dollar she grounds."

The motor sloop didn't ground.

While the drawbridge came back down and the traffic was moving again, Lloyd looked at the puppy and saw her asleep on her side. He picked her up. Laurie opened her eyes, licked his hand, and went back to sleep.

"Got to get back and burn some supper. Take it easy, Don."

"You do the same. And keep an eye on that puppy, or she'll chew up everything

you own.”

“I’ve got some toys for her to chew on.”

Don smiled, revealing a set of mismatched teeth that gave Lloyd the chills.

“She’ll prefer your furniture. Wait and see.”

4

While he was watching the TV news that night, Laurie came to the side of his easy chair and gave those same two sharp yaps. Lloyd considered her bright-eyed stare, weighed the pros and cons, then picked her up and set her in his lap.

“Wet on me and die,” he said.

She didn’t wet on him. She went to sleep with her nose under her tail. Lloyd stroked her absently while he watched cell phone footage of a terrorist attack in Belgium. When the news was over, he took Laurie outside, once more using the football carry. He attached the leash and let her walk to the edge of Oscar Road, where she squatted and did her business.

“Right idea,” Lloyd said. “Hold that thought.”

At nine o’clock, he lined the playpen with a double layer of puppy pads – he could see he’d have to buy more tomorrow, along with more paper towels – and lowered her in. She sat, watching him. When he gave her some water in a teacup, she lapped for a while, then laid down, still watching him.

Lloyd undressed to his underwear and laid down himself, not bothering to pull back the coverlet. He had learned from experience that if he did that, he would find it on the floor in the morning, a victim of his tossing and turning. Tonight, however, he

fell asleep almost immediately and didn't wake up until two o'clock, to the sound of high-pitched cries.

Laurie lay with her snout stuck through the bars of the playpen like a lonely inmate in solitary confinement. There were several sausages on the puppy pads. Judging that at such a late hour there would be few if any passersby on Oscar Road to be offended by the sight of a man in his boxers and a strappy tee-shirt, Lloyd put on his slippers and carried his visitor (it was how he still thought of Laurie) outside. He put her down on the shell driveway. She waddled around for a bit, sniffed at a splat of birdshit, and peed on it. He told her again to hold that thought. She sat down and looked at the empty road. Lloyd looked up at the stars. He thought he'd never seen so many, then decided he must have. Just not lately. He tried to remember the last time he had been outside at two in the morning, and couldn't. He looked at the Milky Way, almost mesmerized, until he realized he was falling asleep on his feet. He carried the puppy back inside.

Laurie watched him silently as he changed the puppy pads she had shat upon, but the keening began again as soon as he put her in the playpen. He considered taking her into bed with him, but that was a very bad idea, according to *So You Have a New Puppy!* The author (one Suzanne Morris, DVM), stated unequivocally, "Once you start down that road, you will have great difficulty turning back." Also, the idea of waking up to find one of those little brown sausages on the side of the bed where his wife had slept did not please him. Not only would it seem symbolically disrespectful, it would mean changing the bed, a chore which also did not please him because he always

screwed it up.

He went into the room that Marian had called her den. Most of her things were still there, because, in spite of his sister's strong suggestions that he do so, Lloyd hadn't yet had the heart to clean the place out. He had mostly steered clear of this room since Marian's death. Even looking at the pictures on the wall hurt, especially at two in the morning. He thought a person's skin was thinner at 2 AM. It didn't start to thicken again until five, when the first light began to show in the east.

Marian had never upgraded to an iPod, but the portable CD player she had taken to her twice-weekly exercise group was on the shelf above her small collection of albums. He opened the battery case and saw no corrosion on the triple-As. He thumbed through her CDs, paused at Hall and Oates, then went on to *Joan Baez's Greatest Hits*. He mounted the CD and it spun satisfactorily when he closed the lid. He took it into the bedroom. Laurie stopped whining when she saw him. He pressed PLAY, and Joan Baez began singing "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down." He placed the CD on one of the fresh puppy pads. Laurie sniffed at it, then laid down beside it, her nose almost touching the Dymo Tape label reading PROPERTY OF MARIAN SUNDERLAND.

"Will it do?" Lloyd asked. "I goddam hope so."

He went back to bed and lay with his hands under the pillow, where it was cool. He listened to the music. When Baez sang "Forever Young," he grizzled a little. So predictable, he thought. Such a cliché. Then he fell asleep.

September gave way to October, the best month of the year in upstate New York, where he and Marian had lived until his retirement, and in Lloyd's opinion (IMHO, as they said on Facebook) the best month down here on the west coast of Florida. The worst of the heat was gone, but the days were still warm and the cold nights of January and February were still on the next calendar. Most of the snowbirds were also on the next calendar, and instead of opening and closing fifty times a day, the Oscar Drawbridge only impeded traffic a dozen or twenty times. And there was so much less traffic to impede.

The Cayman Key Fish House opened after its three-month hiatus, and dogs were allowed on the so-called Puppy Patio. Lloyd took Laurie there often, the two of them ambling along Six Mile Path beside the canal. Lloyd lifted the dog over the places where the boardwalk was overgrown with sawgrass; she trotted easily beneath the overhanging palmetto that Lloyd had to bull his way through, head bent, arm outstretched to push back the thickest clumps, always afraid that a tree-rat might fall into his hair, although none ever had. When they arrived at the restaurant, she sat quietly by his shoe in the sunshine, occasionally rewarded for good manners by a piece of french fry from Lloyd's fish and chips basket. The waitresses all oohed over her, bending to stroke her smoky gray fur.

Bernadette, the hostess, was particularly taken with her. "That *face*," she always said, as if that explained everything. She would kneel beside Laurie, which gave Lloyd



an excellent and always appreciated view of her cleavage. "Oooh, that *face!*"

Laurie accepted this attention, but did not seem to crave it. She simply sat, glancing at her new admirer before returning her attention to Lloyd. Part of that attention might have had to do with the french fries, but not all; she looked at him just as studiously when he was watching TV. Until, that was, she fell asleep.

She toilet trained quickly, and in spite of Don's prediction, she did not chew the furniture. She did chew her toys, which multiplied from three to six to a dozen. He found an old crate to store them in. Laurie would go to this crate in the morning, put her forepaws up on its edge, and examine the contents like a Publix shopper evaluating the produce. At last she would select one, take it into the corner, and chew it until it bored her. Then she would return to the crate and select another. By the end of the day, they would be scattered all over the bedroom, the living room, and the kitchen. Lloyd's final chore before going to bed was picking them up and returning them to the crate. Not because of the clutter, but because the dog seemed to take such satisfaction from surveying her accumulated booty each morning.

Beth called often, asking about his eating habits, reminding him of the birthdays and anniversaries of old friends and older relatives, keeping him up to date on who had kicked the bucket. She always ended by asking if Laurie was still on probation. Lloyd said yes until one day in the middle of October. They had just come back from the Fish House, and Laurie was sleeping on her back in the middle of the living room floor, legs splayed to the four major points of the compass. The breeze from the air conditioner was ruffling her belly fur, and Lloyd realized she was beautiful. It wasn't sentiment,

only a fact of nature. He felt the same about the stars when he took her out for her final pee of the evening.

“No, I guess we’re past the probation stage. But if she outlives me, Bethie, you’re either taking her back – and fuck Jim’s allergies – or you’re finding a good home for her.”

“I copy you, Rubber Duck.” The Rubber Duck thing was something she’d picked up from an old trucking song back in the seventies and had hung onto ever since. It was another thing about Beth that Lloyd found simultaneously endearing and as annoying as shit. “I’m so pleased it’s working out.” She lowered her voice. “In truth, I didn’t think it would.”

“Then why did you bring her?”

“It was a shot in the dark. I knew you needed *something* more labor-intensive than a goldfish. Has she learned to bark?”

“It’s more of a yark. She does it when the postman comes, or UPS, or if Don drops by for a beer. Always just the two. Yark-yark, and done. When are you coming up this way?”

“I came last time. It’s your turn to come down here.”

“I’ll have to bring Laurie. There’s no way I’m leaving her with Don and Evelyn Pitcher.” Looking at his sleeping puppy, he realized that there was no way he was leaving her with anyone. Even short trips to the supermarket made him nervous about her, and he was always relieved to see her waiting at the door when he came home.

“Then bring her. I’d love to see how much she’s grown.”

“What about Jim’s allergies?”

“Fuck his allergies,” she said, and hung up, laughing.

## 6

After mooning and exclaiming over Laurie – who, other than one stop to relieve her bladder, had slept in the back seat all the way to Boca – Beth reverted to her usual big-sister priorities. Although she could nag him on many subjects (she was a virtuoso that way), her main issue this time was Dr. Albright, and Lloyd’s need to see him for an overdue checkup.

“Although you look good,” she said. “I have to say it. You actually appear to have a tan. Assuming that’s not jaundice.”

“I can always count on you for a cheerful thought, Bethie. It’s just sun. I walk Laurie three times a day. On the beach when we get up, on Six Mile Path to the Fish House, where I have lunch, and back on the beach in the evening. For the sunset. She doesn’t care about it – dogs have no aesthetic sense – but I enjoy it.”

“You walk her on the canal boardwalk? Jesus, Lloyd, that thing’s a wreck. It’s apt to collapse under you someday and dump you into the canal, along with the princess here.” She rubbed the top of Laurie’s head. The dog half-closed her eyes and appeared to smile.

“It’s been there for forty years or more. I think it will outlast me.”

“Have you made that doctor’s appointment yet?”

“No, but I will.”

She held up her phone. “Do it now, why don’t you? I want to watch you.”

He could tell by the look in her eyes that she didn't expect him to take her up on this, which was one reason he did it. But not the only reason. In previous years, he had dreaded going to the doctor; kept expecting that moment (no doubt conditioned by too many TV shows) when the doctor would look at him gravely and say, "I have some bad news."

Now, however, he felt good. His legs were stiff when he got up in the morning, probably from so much walking, and his back was creakier than ever, but when he turned his attention inward, he found nothing worrisome. He knew that bad things could grow unfelt in an old man's body for quite some time—creeping along until it was time to dash—but nothing had progressed to the point where there was an outward manifestation: no bloody stool or sputum, no deep pain in the gut, no trouble swallowing, no painful urination. He reflected that it was much easier to go to the doctor when your body was telling you there was no reason to do so.

"What are you smiling about?" Beth sounded suspicious.

"Nothing. Give me that."

He reached for her phone. She held it away from him. "If you really mean to do it, use your own."

7

Two weeks after his checkup, Dr. Albright asked him to come in to go over the results. They were good.

"Your weight's pretty much where it should be, your blood pressure's fine, ditto reflexes. Your cholesterol numbers are better than the last time you let us take some of

your blood..."

"I know, it's been awhile," Lloyd said. "Probably too long."

"No probably about it. Anyway, no need to put you on lipids as of now, which you should see as a victory. At least half my patients your age take them."

"I do a lot of walking," Lloyd said. "My sister gave me a dog. A puppy."

"Puppies are God's idea of the perfect workout program. How are you doing otherwise? Are you coping?"

Albright didn't need to be more specific. Marian had also been his patient, and far more conscientious than her husband about her six-month checkups – very proactive in all things, was Marian Sunderland – but the tumor that first robbed her of her intelligence and then killed her had been beyond proactivity. It hatched too deep inside. A glioblastoma, Lloyd thought, was God's version of a .45 caliber bullet to the brain.

"Pretty well," Lloyd said. "Sleeping again. I go to bed tired most nights, and that helps."

"Because of the dog?"

"Yes. Mostly that."

"You should call your sister and thank her," Albright said.

Lloyd thought that was a good idea. He called her that evening and did so. Beth told him he was very, very welcome. Lloyd took Laurie down to the beach and walked her. He watched the sunset. Laurie found a dead fish and peed on it. They both went home satisfied.

December 6<sup>th</sup> of that year began in the normal way, with a walk on the beach followed by breakfast: Gaines Meal for Laurie, a scrambled egg and a piece of toast for Lloyd. There was no premonition that God was cocking his .45.

Lloyd watched the first hour of the *Today* program, then went into Marian's den. He had picked up a little accounting work from the Fish House and a car dealership in Sarasota. It was low-pressure stuff, no stress involved, and although his financial needs were met, it was nice to be working again. And he discovered that he liked Marian's desk better than his own. He liked her music, too. Always had. He thought Marian would be glad to know that her space was being used.

Laurie sat beside his chair, chewing thoughtfully on her toy rabbit, then took a nap. At ten-thirty, Lloyd saved his work and pushed back from the computer. "Snack time, girl."

She followed him into the kitchen and accepted a rawhide chew stick. Lloyd had milk and a couple of cookies that had come in an early gift package from Beth. They were burned on the bottom (burnt Christmas cookies were another of Beth's specialties), but edible.

He read for a while – he was working his way through John Sandford's hefty *oeuvre* – and was eventually roused by a familiar jingling. It was Laurie, by the front door. Her leash was looped over the knob, and she was brushing the steel clip back and forth with her snout. Lloyd looked at his watch and saw it was quarter to twelve.

“Okay, right.”

He snapped on her leash, grabbed his left front pocket to make sure he had his wallet, and let Laurie lead him out into the bright light of midday. As they walked down to Six Mile Path, he saw that Don was putting out his usual collection of horrible plastic holiday decorations: a Nativity scene (sacred), a large plastic Santa (profane), and a collection of lawn gnomes tarted up to look like elves (at least Lloyd thought that was the idea). Soon Don would risk his life by climbing a ladder and stringing lights that flashed on and off, making the Pitcher bungalow look like the world’s smallest riverboat casino. In previous years, Don’s decorations had made Lloyd feel sad, but on this day he laughed. You had to give the son of a bitch credit. He had arthritis, bad eyes, and a bad back, but he wasn’t giving up. For Don it was Christmas or bust.

Evelyn came out on the Pitchers’s back deck. She was wearing a misbuttoned pink wrapper, there was some kind of whitish-yellow cream smeared on her cheeks, and her hair was every whichway. Don had confided to Lloyd that his wife had begun to lose the plot a little bit, and today she certainly looked it.

“Have you seen him?” she called.

Laurie looked up and gave her trademark greeting: *Yark, yark.*

“Who? Don?”

“No, John Wayne! Of course Don, who else?”

“I haven’t,” Lloyd said.

“Well if you do, tell him to stop farting around and finish the damn decorations. The lights are dangling and the Wise Men are still out in the garage! That man is *loopy!*”

If he is, that makes two of you, Lloyd thought. "I'll pass it along if I see him."

Evelyn leaned over the rail, alarmingly far. "That's a good-looking dog you've got there! What's his name again?"

"Laurie," Lloyd told her, as he had many times before.

"Oh, a bitch, a bitch, a bitch!" Evelyn cried in a kind of Shakespearian fervor, and then uttered a cackle. "I'll be glad when goddamned Christmas is over, you can tell him that, too!"

She straightened up (a relief; Lloyd did not think he could have caught her if she'd fallen) and went back inside. Laurie got to her feet and trotted down to the boardwalk, pointing her snout toward the smells of fried food wafting from the Fish House. Lloyd turned with her, looking forward to a piece of broiled salmon on a bed of rice. The fried stuff had begun to disagree with him.

The canal meandered; Six Mile Path meandered with it, lazily turning this way and that, hugging the overgrown bank. Here and there a board was missing. Laurie paused to watch a pelican dive and come up with a fish wriggling in its satchel beak, then they went on. She stopped at a spray of sawgrass poking up between two boards that had warped apart. Lloyd lifted her over it by the belly – she was getting too big for the football-carry now. A little way further down, just ahead of the next curve, palmetto had grown over the boardwalk, forming a low arch. Laurie was small enough to walk under, but she paused, sniffing at something. Lloyd caught up with her and bent to see what she had found. It was Don Pitcher's cane. And although it was made of stout mahogany, a crack ran halfway up its length from the rubber tip.



Lloyd picked it up and examined three or four drops of blood dotting the wood. "This isn't good. I think we better go b—"

But Laurie bolted ahead, jerking the leash out of his hand. She disappeared under the green arch, the handle of the leash clattering and spinning behind her. Then the barking began, not just her usual double yark, but a volley of deeper sounds he would have said she was incapable of making. Alarmed, Lloyd ducked through the palmetto, waving the cane this way and that to push bunches of it aside. The branches whipped back, scratching at his cheeks and forehead. On some of them were beads and smears of blood. There was more blood on the boards.

On the other side, Laurie stood with her front legs spread, her back bowed, and her muzzle touching the boards. She was barking at an alligator. It was dull green and smudged black, a full-grown adult at least ten feet long. It stared at Lloyd's barking dog with its lusterless eyes. It was splayed atop Don Pitcher's body, its blunt shovel nose resting on Don's sunburned neck, its short scaly forepaws possessively cupping Don's bony shoulders. It was the first alligator Lloyd had seen since a trip to Jungle Gardens in Sarasota with Marian, and that had been years ago.

The top of Don's head was pretty much gone. Lloyd could see splintered bone through what remained of his neighbor's hair. An ooze of blood, still wet, lay drying on his cheek. There were oatmealy strands in it. Lloyd realized he was looking at Don Pitcher's brain. That Don had been thinking with that very stuff perhaps only minutes ago seemed to render the whole world meaningless.

The handle of Laurie's leash had dropped over the side of the boardwalk and

into the canal. She continued to bark. The alligator regarded her, for the moment not moving. It looked remarkably stupid.

“Laurie! Shut up! Shut the fuck up!”

He thought of Evelyn Pitcher standing on her back deck like an actress on the apron of a stage, crying, *Oh, a bitch, a bitch, a bitch!*

Laurie stopped barking, but continued to growl deep down in her throat. She seemed to have grown to twice her size, because her cloudy dark gray fur was standing out not just on the scruff of her neck, but all over her body. Lloyd dropped to one knee, never taking his eyes off the gator, and plunged his left hand into the canal, feeling for the leash. He found the cord, yanked the handle up, clutched it, and got back to his feet, never taking his eyes from the green-black thing resting on Don’s body. He tugged the leash. At first it was like pulling on a post stuck in the ground – Laurie was that braced – but then she turned toward him. When she did, the gator raised its tail and brought it down, a flat thwack that sprayed up droplets of water and made the boardwalk tremble. Laurie cringed and jumped onto Lloyd’s sneakers.

He bent and picked her up, never taking his eyes off the gator. Laurie’s body was thrumming, as if an electrical current were passing through it. Her eyes were wide enough to show the whites all around. Lloyd had been too stunned by the sight of the alligator astride his dead neighbor’s body to be afraid, and when feeling did return, it wasn’t fear but a kind of protective rage. He unclipped the leash from Laurie’s collar and dropped it.

“Go home. Do you hear me? Go home. I’ll be right behind you.”

He bent down, still not taking his eyes from the alligator (which never took its eyes from him). He had carried Laurie like a football many times when she was smaller; now he hiked her like one, through his legs and directly into the palmetto arch.

There was no time to see if she was going. The alligator came for him. It moved with amazing and totally unexpected speed, kicking Don's body several feet behind it with its stubby rear legs as it pushed off. Its mouth opened, exposing teeth like a dirty picket fence. On its leathery, pinkish-black tongue, Lloyd could see bits of Don's shirt.

He struck at it with the cane, bringing it around in a sideways sweep. It whacked the side of the gator's head below one of those weirdly expressionless eyes, and broke along the crack in the mahogany. The broken piece twirled away and splashed into the canal. The gator stopped for a moment, as if surprised, then came on. Lloyd could hear the clitter of its claws. Its mouth yawned, its lower jaw skidding along the boardwalk and raising gray splinters.

Lloyd thought of nothing. Some deeper part of him took over. He stabbed out with what remained of Don's cane, plunging the jagged end into the whitish flesh at the side of the alligator's shovel head. Grasping the cane's handle with both hands, he leaned forward, putting his weight into it and pushing as hard as he could. The alligator was momentarily driven sideways. Before it could recover, there came a rapid series of cracking sounds, like blanks from a track-starter's pistol. Part of the old boardwalk slumped, spilling the gator's top half into the canal. Its tail came down, whacking the twisted boards and making Don's body jump. The water boiled. Lloyd struggled for balance and stepped back just as the gator's head surfaced, the jaws

snapping. He stabbed at it again, not aiming, but the jagged stub of the cane went into the gator's eye. It reared backward, and if Lloyd hadn't let go of the cane's curved handle, he would have been pulled into the water on top of it.

He turned and bolted through the palmetto with his arms outstretched in front of him, expecting at any moment to be bitten from behind or thrust upward as the gator swam under the boardwalk, planted itself on the mucky bottom, and battered its way after him. He came out on the other side, daubed and dotted with Don's blood and bleeding from a dozen scratches.

Laurie had not gone home. She was standing ten feet down, and when she saw Lloyd, she raced toward him, bunched her hindquarters, and leaped. Lloyd caught her (like a football, like a Hail Mary pass) and ran, hardly aware that Laurie was wriggling in his arms, and whining, and covering his face with frantic licks. Although he would remember this later.

Once he was off the boardwalk and on the shell path, he looked back, expecting to see the alligator hustling after them along the boardwalk with its eerie, unexpected speed. He made it halfway up the path to his house before his legs gave out and he sat down. He was crying and shaking all over. He kept looking back, watching for the gator. Laurie kept licking his face, but her trembling had begun to subside. When he felt able to walk again, he carried Laurie the rest of the way to his house. Twice he felt faint and had to stop.

Evelyn came back onto her deck as he trudged toward his back door. "You know if you carry a dog around like that, it will start expecting it all the time. Did you see

Don? He needs to finish putting up his Christing decorations.”

Did she not see the blood, Lloyd wondered, or did she not want to see it?

“There’s been an accident.”

“What kind of accident? Did someone run into the goddam drawbridge again?”

“Go inside,” he said.

He went inside himself without waiting to see if she did so. He got Laurie a fresh bowl of water, and she lapped at it eagerly. While she did that, Lloyd called 911.

9

The police must have gone to the Pitchers’ house immediately after retrieving Don’s body, because Lloyd heard Evelyn screaming. Those screams probably didn’t go on for long, but it seemed long. He wondered if he should go over there, maybe try to comfort her, but he didn’t feel that he could. He was more tired than he could ever remember, even after high school football practice on hot August afternoons. All he wanted to do was sit in his easy chair with Laurie in his lap. She had gone to sleep, nose to tail.

The police came and interviewed him. They told him he had been extremely lucky.

“Luck aside, you did some damn quick thinking,” one of the cops said, “using Mr. Pitcher’s cane like that.”

“It still would have gotten me if the outside part of the boardwalk hadn’t collapsed under its weight,” Lloyd said. It probably would have gotten Laurie, as well. Because Laurie hadn’t gone home. Laurie had waited.

That night he took her to bed with him. She slept on Marian's side. Lloyd himself slept little. Each time he started to drift off, he thought of how the alligator had splayed on Don's body, with such idiot possessiveness. Its dead black eyes. How it had seemed to grin. The unexpected speed when it had come at him. Then he would stroke the dog sleeping beside him.

Beth came from Boca the next day. She scolded him, but not until she had hugged him and kissed him repeatedly, making Lloyd think of how frantically Laurie had licked his face when he had emerged from the palmetto tangle.

"I love you, you stupid old bastard," Beth said. "Thank God you're alive."

Then she picked up Laurie and hugged her. Laurie bore this patiently, but as soon as Beth put her down, she went off to find her rubber rabbit. She took it into the corner, where she made it squeak repeatedly. Lloyd wondered if she was having a fantasy where she tore the alligator to pieces, and told himself he was being stupid. You didn't make them into something they were not. He hadn't read that in *So You Have a New Puppy!* It was one of those things you found out on your own.

10

The day after Beth's visit, a game warden from Florida Fish and Wildlife came to see Lloyd. They sat in the kitchen, and the warden, whose name was Gibson, accepted a glass of iced tea. Laurie enjoyed smelling his boots and pants cuffs for a while, then curled up under the table.

"We caught the gator," Gibson said. "You're lucky to be alive, Mr. Sunderland. It was a damn big one."

"I know that," Lloyd said. "Has it been euthanized?"

"No, and there's some discussion about whether or not it should be. When it attacked Mr. Pitcher, it was protecting a clutch of eggs."

"A nest?"

"That's right."

Lloyd called Laurie. Laurie came. He picked her up and began to stroke her. "How long was that thing there? I walked that damn boardwalk down to the Fish House with my dog almost every day."

"The normal incubation period is sixty-five days."

"That thing was there all that time?"

Gibson nodded. "Much of it, yes. Deep in the weeds and sawgrass."

"Watching us go by."

"You and everyone else who used the boardwalk. Mr. Pitcher must have done something, quite by accident, that roused her...well..." Gibson shrugged. "Not maternal instincts, I don't think you could say that, but they're programmed to protect the nest."

"He probably swung the cane in its direction," Lloyd said. "He was always swinging that cane. Might even have hit her. Or the nest."

Gibson finished his iced tea and stood up. "I just thought you'd like to know."

"Thank you."

"Sure. That's a nice little dog you've got there. Border Collie and what else?"

"Mudi."

“Okay, yeah, I see that now. And she was with you that day.”

“Ahead of me, actually. She saw it first.”

“She’s lucky to be alive, too.”

“Yes.” Lloyd stroked her. Laurie looked up at him with her amber eyes. He wondered, as he almost always did, just what it was she saw in the face looking down into hers. Like the stars he saw when he took her out at night, it was a mystery.

Gibson thanked him for the iced tea and left. Lloyd sat where he was for a little while, stroking his hand through that cloudy gray fur. Then he put his dog down to go about her business while he went about his. It was life, you were stuck with it, and all you could do was live it.

*Thinking of Vixen*