Glenn Deutsch

Little Guy

I couldn't take care of one more thing. That's what I learned within a couple of months of my mother's bringing Little Guy out from Long Island to live with me, Lilia and Anja, our three-year-old, in Madison. Positive that Anja needed a toy poodle who was house-trained and beyond reproach temperamentally, and with my exercise-obsessed father shopping for a new second dog he could walk harder than old Hey-U, my mother by phone sawed and plucked on Anja's anticipation until one evening at the end of August she plunged through Dane County Regional Airport bearing our one-and-a-half-eyed adoptee in a cat carrier.

She'd advertised Little Guy as a "puppy," though he was already five. He was eight inches tall and eight pounds, with a grown-out, fuzzy apricot coat. Certainly he was puppyish in showing no mating instinct despite anatomical intactness. I had been away at college and my sister in high school when my parents bought Little Guy for less than one fourth of the going rate for a purebred toy poodle. He'd been drastically discounted for an eye defect: a too-tight opening between his left upper and lower eyelids. The breeder had mentioned the possibility of corrective surgery, but I never saw the need, and didn't now. He could see from both eyes, and they appeared bright and sharp. He was cute even with the flaw.

"Here's your new puppy!" my mother pealed when I opened the apartment door. Dressed in summer PJs, her ropy hair still damp from bathing, Anja was sitting with a book on Lilia's lap. Lilia released her and my mother knelt and unlatched the carrier gate. Little Guy stood still. Anja bent sideways to see inside the carrier. "Oh, hi, Little Guy," she said.

"Oh, hi, Lilia," my mother managed to greet my wife. "How're you?"

"Fine, Myra, nice to see you. How was the flight?" With that, Lilia pushed Anja forward, saying, "Go see your puppy, and don't forget to say thank you to Grandma."

Anja shuffled toward the dog as he exited the carrier, head held high. He nodded at me, licked Anja's fingertips, glanced at Lilia, and circled back to stand next to my mother. "He's happy to see you," my mother told Anja. "He just needs to get accustomed here."

"He'll be here when you wake up," I called out as Lilia carried Anja off to bed.

At last my mother took a place on the giant orange corduroy pit sofa that nearly filled our living room. I dragged a dining room chair across the carpet to sit opposite her. The dog came over to me. My mother smiled. "I remember thinking he would like it here. It's so cozy."

"Ma, stop with the selling," I said.

Lilia and I owned a starter income property in central Madison with two efficiencies upstairs, our one-bedroom downstairs (Anja slept in a converted walk-in pantry), a two-car parking strip for a front yard, and not much more space in the back. Such were the lots on that side of our block of Jenifer Street. Our place was horseshoed by a trio of historical homes also set on half-lots. When we first looked at it, I walked the sides of the house with outstretched arms, and in both cases there was barely a wingspan of clearance.

My mother returned home, and over Labor Day weekend I observed Anja and Little Guy play fetch—for his part more dutifully than joyfully, I thought—and it struck me I'd never sized him up over the years except as being weirdly cute and good around Hey-U, a spayed Cairn terrier mix I liked to pretend was a miniature Old English sheepdog even if there was no such breed. Now I took to perceiving in the depths of Little Guy's round right eye an exemplar of his breed—uncommonly intelligent, obedient, eager to please, gentle around children, a vigilant watchdog with a surprisingly deep bark—while finding myself wishing his left eye looked as normal as the right, or else, if he had to have this particular flaw, that it had manifested more as a raffish wink, interrupted, than what it was really starting to seem like, which was an inscrutable judging squint.

Whatever he thought of us, Little Guy preferred our company to being alone outside. One Sunday I built a doghouse complete with cedar siding and shingles and set it on paving stones. I placed a dish of cubed, cooked chicken and a bowl of fresh water inside, and

we left him in the yard while we went shopping. When we got back, the stuff was still there.

Labor Day afternoon, with Anja napping and Lilia working in bed, I was raking in grass seed out back when I noticed Little Guy watching me from behind the storm door. I opened it and he meandered out onto the porch. I knelt on one of the steps and rubbed his silky chest curls. It seemed he was at once showing me love with the right eye and disdain with the left. Was the window to his animal soul so marred that I couldn't see inside? Or, was there another reason his malformed eye so unsettled me? "AKC with papers, and he was only seventy-five dollars!" my mother had gushed that day I called home from school. My parents' favorite recreational activity was shopping at schlock stores and flea markets. *No one can see*, they'd say of my new jeans or T-shirts with sewing faults and the manufacturer's label snipped off to the very edges.

My father, I recalled, also got on the phone that day. "Now listen to this," he said, reciting from the AKC papers the sire and bitch's names. "They have to get the kennel names in there someplace, but in'at crazy?" I knew from his high-spirited reading that he took some pride in the dog's pedigree, even if he couldn't decipher its lineage. "I already named him, by the way." He laughed. "We're calling him Little Guy, and registering him as, now get this, Little Guy Wire d'Turnbuckle, The First Prince Duke of Earl Road."

Inside, Little Guy and I crept past Anja, still asleep in her *alcoba*, and we had some water. From the kitchen I saw, across the flat, Lilia sitting cross-legged in the four-poster bed we'd purchased on credit at Ethan Allen, surrounded by another semester's textbooks. She would've already had her bachelor's degree if we hadn't sprinted into our child-rearing years.

Little Guy and I visited her in the bedroom. I jerked my thumb at him, saying, "I can't believe we have him. A German shepherd is the only breed I ever imagined owning."

Lilia slipped a pencil, glossy black as her hair, over an ear. "What does a *judeo* want with a German shepherd?"

"They're loyal, protective, a good family dog. And I like the way they look."

"Not me," Lilia said. "I'm afraid of big dogs. At least poodles don't shed."

"And his eye doesn't bother you?"

"Is there anything else you want to tell me now that it's too late?"

Looking back, I think I was starting to realize how much the dog felt like a parental imposition on my wife and me, as opposed to a childhood companion for our daughter.

"You should consider that your aesthetic prejudice reveals more about you than him," Marshall said from behind a drawing table in my office. Marshall was a freelance graphic designer at the young ad agency where I'd gone full time recently. In addition to being a copywriter and radio spot producer, I'd become an assistant account executive. Account service consists largely of reassuring clients their money is being spent well. I'd also been given the firm's *pro bono* account, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Dane County, though with a warning from my bosses that free didn't mean easy, that we worked *pro bono* to win awards. Fortunately, the organization loved the branding premise we enunciated. Presently I was trying to encapsulate the idea in a tagline while Marshall sketched layouts.

"Reveals what?" I said on my way for a coffee refill from the kitchenette next door. The first few years out of college I drank upwards of fifteen cups a day. Returning, I perched on the library table that had become my desk. "Like there was something wrong with me when I was a 'little guy'?"

"Was there?"

"Not that I know of."

Marshall flipped through a photographer's portfolio. "Why are baby mammals so appealing?" He jabbed at an eight-by-eight glossy of a multiculti toddler in madras overalls kneeling and hugging a golden retriever pup. "The eyes, see how big and wide-set? I wanna nurse these lil' pups, man, and I don't even make milk."

"The dog's eye didn't put off my parents."

"New challenge with you gone, Hal. Anything so stunted or asymmetrical suggests illness."

I doubted either of them had had unmet nursing needs. "Maybe my dad bought into the dog's unconventional looks, but for other reasons. He drives on the Long Island Expressway to work in an International Harvester pick-up truck, it's road-crew orange—"

"I thought you said he was a school district administrator."

"Nonconformist. He plays listener-sponsored radio. Rambling Jack Elliot, he digs obscurities like that. A one-and-a-half-eyed toy poodle might have seemed avant-garde."

"And your mother?"

"Conventional tastes—in music."

"Not that it matters anymore."

"No, because we have him now."

Next to encamp in our household was Lilia's sister, Dita, whose vendetta with a girl in middle school had escalated to knife-carrying now that they were in the tenth grade. It was agreed she'd be safer with us, plus our city high school was much better than hers in Rosenberg, Texas. As Lilia also explained to me, Dita received Social Security survivor benefits—her father, who was not Lilia's father or their mother's current husband, had died—and if we all got along fine over the next few months, then starting in January, Lilia and I would become Dita's guardians and we'd collect the payments. *Then* what would happen would be, we'd cancel one of the month-to-month leases upstairs, and Dita would live semi-independently. "Anyone can sleep on a sofa for four months," Lilia remarked.

That wasn't what I expected my own family and home would look like, having my teenage sister-in-law, shy, slim, possessed of Arab good looks—whose nighties just grazed her thighs—not to mention a cockeyed toy poodle—nocturnally command the middle space between Lilia's and my bedroom and the kitchen, off of which was the bathroom and Anja's *alcoba*. But *mi casa es tu casa* was completely real for the family I had married into, and, I told myself, just because I didn't grow up like that, it didn't mean it was any better to be me.

What I bargained away with such equanimity was more intimacy with Lilia. We hadn't had much of a love life since early in her pregnancy. Not that we didn't have other pressures now; but with Anja nearly out of toddlerhood, it would have been a good time to get back into each other.

But anyway, Dita moved into our tiny home and made her bed on the sectional sofa around the corner from Little Guy, who had taken to hopping up and sleeping on the *falsa* blanket decorating one of the ends.

I remember well, because it happened so often, chauffeuring Dita whenever she missed the school bus (Lilia didn't drive), and using those few minutes several times a week to further encourage her in her studies; I say *further* because nightly, we would sit at the dining table and work on vocabulary words or reading comprehension. On top of the usual teenage excuses, she'd say things like "School's too hard here." She'd smile whenever we started something new, then wind her fingers in her hair, summoning with her ringlets the almond scent of the Vidal Sassoon shampoo and conditioner she and Lilia used by the gallon, or else she'd pick at her pinkish nail polish, tiny flakes falling to the rust-colored carpet like fish food into a tank. Eventually she'd invite Little Guy up onto her lap or say she had to make a phone call.

Or her friend Lucy would arrive. The second or third week of classes, Dita met Lucy, a senior with nice manners, a baby face, a faintly mannish walk, and a vintage red Ford F-250. Oh, the loving gazes Lucy would shoot Dita whenever she strutshayed into the apartment. And how quickly the two of them would leave to go study somewhere else.

Lilia and I both enjoyed seeing Lucy and Dita in puppy love, though I don't recall our talking about it. I do remember a sense of responsibility welling up in me, a feeling that I needed to inspire Dita with seriousness so as to help her balance her life; in part this arose because I imagined having to do likewise for Anja someday. "Dita," I remember saying one night at the table, "you're not always going to be fifteen, or twenty, or young at all. But if you're smart in school it'll help you be smart about life." "Am I smart now?" Dita answered. "In some ways. You certainly have the potential." "Then why would I get dumber?" She was just tired, she said. And then Lucy was there on yet another weeknight.

In a way it was a relief to create copy for ads.

A couple of weeks before Halloween, on a stormy Thursday night, without our realizing it, a branch fell and knocked down part of our back fence. The following morning when we let Little Guy into the yard, he released himself into the southwest end of a well-treed, mile-long, low-traffic strip of the Madison isthmus, a neighborhood bounded by arterials to the west and north; Lake Monona to the

south; and due east, past a block-square park and finally just beyond an elementary school, a slender boulevard park with foot bridges spanning the Yahara River. When Little Guy didn't return from his morning pee and I discovered the broken fence, I visualized his roaming that far and being lost, or even carried off by a hawk or falcon.

For the next three days I searched for him intermittently. I remember pushing Anja in the stroller while looking around and whistling for Little Guy until she started crying out of boredom, and inching around in the car with Dita in the passenger seat, craning her head all around.

Sunday evening I was putting out the garbage and saw Little Guy running toward the house, followed by a white-haired man who told me, after catching his breath, that he'd found my toy poodle mounting his chained Labrador retriever on Rutledge Street, a few blocks away. Little Guy scampered past me and up the porch steps. I apologized for my dog, shut the door behind us, and in the hallway outside the apartment I could not suppress a sudden feeling of happiness for my eight-pound, late-blooming Lothario, whose coat was all mucky—a dog, for god's sake, who looked like something a cat might've have dragged in. No longer a schmucky five-year-old virgin toy poodle, Little Guy had unexpectedly become a petit boulevardier whose deformed eye lent him—yes, I could see it now—a rakish air. *Mon bon ami, je suis enfin un homme!* I imagined him telling me in this very private moment of ours.

What I didn't realize was that, after one date or however many that long weekend, the dog would want more. If we left Little Guy in the backyard while we were all away, he would either find a new way to get free, or else yelp for hours on end; if we kept him indoors, he'd make the same incessant, piercing noises. And, leash laws weren't all we had to worry about; alternatively, he—we—could be fined for disturbing the peace. Leaving him indoors seemed the better option, with it turning cold and people keeping windows closed; yet neighbors, or passers-by—whoever they were, they never contacted us first—started calling the police, who merely warned us the first few times.

"How could someone be so bothered or concerned about a toy poodle yapping and crying through walls and windows," I complained to Lilia one time after a cop left.

"Easier to defend animals anonymously than to care about people," Lilia said. "Have you ever made a citizen's arrest on a parent who smacked her kid in a store? No."

"Should we keep him in the basement?" I asked.

"It's not a soundproof dungeon," said Lilia. "Anyway, what kind of dog would he be for Anja if he was locked up in a basement all day?"

"At least he's not ripping up our furniture or anything like that," I said.

"Hopefully he'll adjust," Lilia said.

"He will," I said, "if he's half as smart as he's cracked up to be."

Halloween arrived. With Dita at a party, the rest of us left Little Guy home alone to bark his head off at trick-or-treaters—with impunity, I hoped—to go out with Marshall and Sandrine and their six-month-old, Jordan. Marshall and Sandrine happened to be the only other early-twenties child-raising couple Lilia and I knew in Madison. We strolled the four blocks to their place on Spaight Street, Anja in a store-bought pumpkin costume and black and orange cape Sandrine had made for her. Presently, holding her mother's hand, a jack o' lantern bucket in the other hand, my daughter started up a stoop. Marshall and Sandrine and I stood around the stroller where Jordan, dressed as a skunk, blithely gummed a pacifier.

I caught Marshall and Sandrine up on our problems with Little Guy since his sexcapade with the Labrador retriever.

"Little Guy is like Robert Mitchum in *The Night of the Hunter*," said Sandrine, "except instead of LOVE and HATE tattoos on his paws, he looks out from one puppy eye and one crazy eye."

Lilia and Anja rejoined us, and we continued strolling up Spaight. At this early hour, mainly there were just little kids and parents like us out trick-or-treating.

"I can help you with the fence, but it doesn't sound like that's the real problem," Marshall said.

"I stapled chicken wire on our side to any place low that looked rotted."

"If he just discovered sex, chaining him might not be beneath his dignity," said Sandrine.

"I already chained him once near his doghouse, and he uprooted the stake."

We'd made a loop around Orton Park and were once again in front of the Marshall and Sandrine's single-family Victorian, which they were renovating. "It's also the howling and crying," Marshall said. "We've passed by on bikes, and even from the street we heard it coming from inside."

"You could try getting him a companion," Sandrine said.

"He didn't whine in the house alone before the fence thing," I said. "We'd have heard. The last thing I need is to take care of another dog. I've never trained a dog. Now's not—"

"We could try leaving the TV on for him," said Lilia.

"How about a kitten?" said Sandrine, quietly so Anja wouldn't hear. Anja was kneeling by Jordan's stroller, identifying candy for his edification. "Inessa is going to have a litter." Marshall and Sandrine had named their cat for Inessa Armand, a French communist and organizer for female equality in the early Soviet Union. "It's a myth," Sandrine added, "about cats and dogs always fighting. You could have one of hers."

We left our friends at their place and continued on home. Carrying our sleepy toddler, I asked Lilia delicately, "How about a *g-a-t-o* to keep him company?"

"Do what you want, but I'm telling you as the daughter of a maid, I'm not cleaning litter boxes," said Lilia.

A couple of days later I dropped Anja off early at daycare. I had an appointment—to talk—with the veterinarian Marshall and Sandrine used. Adrastos Peristeridis greeted me in the waiting area and pointed me toward his office. His beard overflowed his smock. He poured hot water into a salamander mug, and I agreed to a mug of Lemon Zinger myself.

My parents must have a lot of property, he said, if in five years Little Guy never picked up on the scent of a female dog in heat. He also guessed they never walked him.

Quarter acre with a fenced-in backyard, I said. And I doubted they ever walked him.

"Because if the winds rush the scent of a bitch in heat to an intact adult male," Dr. Peristeridis said, "he might do almost anything to reach her. A fence presents almost no obstacle. He'll scale it or dig underneath. If he gets out, he might follow the scent

literally for miles. Interesting that if he can't run free, Little Guy merely vocalizes his frustration."

"Vocalizing is what's been getting us into so much trouble."

"I mean to say he might escalate, become more dominant, start mounting cushions, drapes, people's legs. Urinating around the house to mark his territory. Attacking other dogs no matter how big."

On the other hand, said the vet, while Little Guy wasn't elderly, the older the dog, the greater the risk of anesthesia.

"But neutering him is a good idea?" I tried clarifying.

"Six to nine months is best," said Dr. Peristeridis, putting out miniature pet bowls for our superannuated tea strainers. "Problematic behaviors can become ingrained after that. He would still have testosterone, just not a level associated with the most serious problems."

"If he's making up for lost time," I asked, "could they become ingrained *faster*?"

"Maybe, Hal. It comes down to who Little Guy is at this point as an individual."

That night Lilia came home late from drinks with a friend at the Edgewater, a printmaker, Joanne, who'd revealed she'd started stepping out on her boyfriend, Jeff—who worshipped her—with a guy, Lilia now also related, who was exceptionally well endowed.

"I feel sorry for Jeff," I said.

Lilia emanated alcohol and dairy and something warm, spicy, sweet. She was a reclining Brandy Alexander who now asked me what the vet had said that morning.

"It's not easy to put a toy poodle under general anesthesia," I started. "And do we know if it'd even work? He can't guarantee. Once a male dog learns to roam and respond to the scent of a dog in heat—"

"If you're not going to do it, don't do it."

"I just feel like I ought to be able to take care of him. To just have a vet cut …"

"If he gets caught again and you don't pick him up and they put him up for adoption, wouldn't they have to neuter him? The shelter?"

"Shouldn't it be up to the people adopting him?"

"Who'd want him otherwise? No one's going to want to breed him."

"He'll get fat and listless. He'll turn from a poodle into a puddle of mush."

"Fix your mother's present to Anja so he's really her dog, or have a good story for why he had to go bye-bye."

"What about Dita?"

"What about her?"

"She's attached to him."

"No, she's not. She plays with him, that's all."

"You play with me," I said. In my defense, the sexual near-drought we'd been suffering since before Anja was born had worsened that autumn, had become something like a marital Dust Bowl, in that there was a drought and a vicious circle: the less physical attention I got from Lilia, the less I was able to seduce her.

"Yecch," Lilia said that evening. "And I'd rather not be compared to my sister."

Dita set a plate on the glass table in the living room. We both heard it. By now I knew not to approach Lilia for sex when her sister was moving around outside our door.

"But you like playing with me?" I said, desperately.

"Some parts more than others."

"Which?"

"Don't I like as much?"

"Okay."

"Your chest."

"You don't like that it's hairy?" That was the only thing I could think of saying, even if Lilia had told me often enough that she liked my furriness. Unlike her mother, who once, in her backyard in Rosenberg, in Spanish, smilingly pretended horror at the thought of Lilia marrying someone with a hairy chest, adding she herself only liked smooth-skinned men.

"No, it's kind of, not broad. A little soft. A little boyish."

"Boyish?"

"It's not such a big deal. You shouldn't have asked if—"

"It's just not what I thought you were going to say."

"You wanted me to tell you which part of you I like best?"

"Yes."

"Your dick. I want to keep your dick in a jar after you're dead," Lilia said, and then she yawned.

Intelligence, agility, small size, pheromones on the wind—whatever may have led Little Guy to shred rotted boards, move bricks, squeeze past posts, I don't believe I ever deliberately abetted his delinquency. Though I may have secretly wanted him to escape, I don't remember ever seeing an opening I didn't close. I do know the scot-free days did not last long. In early November he was impounded and we were fined twenty-five dollars, the minimum, for a dog running at large, plus the same amount for his being untagged. However he got out, wherever he went, it involved shucking his own collar. The additional fine felt like a penalty the dog imposed on us, rather than one from the city. "He must do everything but defy gravity to get out of the yard," the attendant at the animal shelter said when she opened the front door. I was there at eight after dropping off Anja, wanting to take care of this before I went to work.

His coat was matted, his undercarriage so filthy that dirt flaked to the floor of his carrier. We got home and had the house to ourselves. I removed my overcoat and suit jacket. I picked him up by the scruff of his neck for the first time ever. In his good eye I spied fear, in the bad one, distrustfulness. I walked with Little Guy dangling in my grip through the living room, kitchen, to the bathroom, where I opened the cold-water shower faucet. I held him up to the spray. He narrowed both eyes and, depending on how I positioned him, involuntarily dog-paddled, herky-jerkily in slow-motion or faster, whirling round and round, never the whole time making a sound. I knew I wasn't just cleaning him off, I knew he was a sentient being I was making miserable, and yet I had something more to add. As he twisted this way or that in my grip, I cursed him, "You little fuck, little fuck," and something cleared in my brain, like when you can breathe after a cold lets up. I didn't feel exhilarated, just that we'd achieved equilibrium. I toweled him dry before placing him on the floor with a warning: "I've had just enough of it. Knock it off. Be good." He shook himself off. I didn't follow to see where he went in the house, but just left for work.

"Is Little Guy bad?" Anja asked from her rear car seat. He'd been captured a second time, on a Thursday. Now it was Saturday

morning. We had a longer grace period at the shelter than that, but picking him up today was easiest.

I turned down the radio. "He does some things that aren't nice."

"Where does he go when he goes away?"

"He roams around." The streets were slushy. I tried imagining what a mess he'd be this time.

"Does he sleep outside? Squirrels sleep outside. Birds sleep in trees. Not with squirrels."

"If he's not home, I'm sure he finds a place where he's not cold."

"I like my bed."

"Your bed is nice. What else is nice?"

"A kitty."

"Kitties can be nice."

"Inessa is nice," Anja said.

"She is. She's warm and fluffy."

"She likes the sunshine inside."

"She does. She likes to be warm."

This time he cost us a hundred bucks times two offenses.

The third time, a mere few days later, Little Guy kept on his collar, but I paid two hundred more dollars to get him back. After dropping Anja at daycare, I arrived at the shelter, once again at eight. Waiting, costumed in a conservative navy pinstripe three-piece suit and black wingtips, harassed by the pandemoniacal barking in the kennels, I found myself wondering what a real business person might think of my home life. I had started meeting with business owners ten, fifteen, thirty years older than myself, most of whom liked being taken to lunch. I could survive an hour of fine dining, but worried about having to entertain at Wisconsin football games the following fall. Eventually I'd also have to be good dinner company. That also already seemed punishing. Some clients and prospective ones, I had come to realize, would pay us mainly just to be friends. Which, I thought, waiting, might make a good tagline for Big Brothers. Just friends.

I had recently experienced the onset of something else, was round-the-clock burping the taste of rotten eggs; and now in the shelter, where they hadn't even flicked the lights on yet, sulphur rumbled up through my esophagus and blew out my mouth, hot and foul.

Inside the apartment I retrieved the overcoat I had forgotten earlier, while Little Guy circled on the carpet near the door. "You're not going back out," I said. "You've already cost me more than I would have paid if you were a perfect specimen of your breed, you little fuck." He stopped and stared at me. Another dog would have gone to another room. I half-kicked, half-nudged him above one of his hind legs. My sense of right and wrong stopped me from hurting him further, but so did the black wingtip shoe that looked so preposterous on my foot and felt heavy as a dumbbell.

After a client lunch I headed back home, parked two doors down—the house was quiet. Inside, Little Guy seemed fine. That afternoon around five-thirty, I left work hoping to have the place to myself briefly before I had to get Anja at six (after which daycare charged five dollars for every five minutes you were late). I pulled up at five forty-five, and there was a cruiser parked out front. I was getting a ticket for Little Guy's howling indoors.

"My fence fell down and ever since all he wants is to get out," I told the cop. She was my age or even younger, and stood there, barely five foot tall, gun belt covering her minimal hips, billy club holstered to her left, long flashlight on the other side grazing her knees, writing the summons. "Please, he's a toy poodle, the smallest kind," I said, alluding to their common diminutiveness. "My three-year-old, my daughter, she thinks he's just a puppy."

"We know the dog," said the cop, her voice deep for someone so small, "and you can't let him howl all day no matter how small he is."

I went inside and my mind felt electric and this time I kicked him flat out. On his left haunch. Nausea filled my mouth and tears burned the corners of my eyes.

He limped slightly, on and off, after that. "Something happened to him out there," Lilia noticed, but no one suspected me.

Somehow he kept managing to get out of the backyard and up onto his rear legs to mate, as we were told, with dogs ranging from his size to two or three times taller.

With Lucy in tow, we had Thanksgiving dinner at the UW's Memorial Union. The temperature was falling, it snowed while we were eating, and by the time we drove home, the streets

were crunchy. That evening, after I read Anja a bedtime story, played midair "slapstick" with her Winnie and Tigger dolls, and tucked her into bed, Lilia asked in her sweet voice from the sofa, where she was watching TV: "Is it too cold to put more salt down?" She had gotten into a T-shirt and thin sweatpants while I was putting Anja to bed.

"I'm exhausted, I'm finally relaxing, it's five below," I said. "But I'll go see."

"It's not like I have it easy," said Lilia. "I'm still in school and I help out at *your* agency and in case you haven't noticed I'm always the one who gives Anja her bath and I'm the one who shampoos and untangles her hair. I'm the one—"

The litany being in English, I thought *fucking asshole*. Little Guy watched as I pulled my parka over my sweats and got on the sneakers I wore in the winter. I shut the apartment door in his face. In my pockets I found my gloves and ski mask and Walkman with a punk and power pop mix tape. And instead of salting, I ran. I didn't even bother warming up—I sprinted a block to the Wil-Mar Community Center, stopped, and as if from starting blocks, took off again. Elvis Costello's "High Fidelity" crossfaded into The Raspberries' "I Wanna Be With You," and the instant drum-roll intro to that simple, stupid song made me cycle my feet in midair, like in a cartoon, and upon landing, I blasted down the rest of the block. The freeze I initially felt dominating the bridge of my nose had by now spread halfway around my eye sockets, but I didn't turn back until I crested one of the footbridges that humped across the Yahara River, where ducks bobbed here and there and ice grew near the banks.

A mile and a half, fourteen minutes later, Dita was in the living room watching TV with Little Guy in her arms. Lilia was in bed, holding a travel magazine, the extension phone nearby. I thought I'd heard her talking and hanging up before I opened the bedroom door.

"I looked out the window and didn't see you," she said. "I was worried. Why're you so red?"

"I ran a little." I undressed and got under the covers. "Let's get Little Guy a vasectomy like me," I blurted out. "In Paris male cats get vasectomies so, you know, they can act naturally without raising the birthrate."

"But if Little Guy continued to 'act naturally'—"

I fingertip-combed the wispy, wavy black corona of Lilia's hairline. "Maybe one vasectomy per family is enough."

I had thought I was so smart, talking my way into a vasectomy after Lilia delivered Anja by cesarean. Lilia was warned during her painful recovery not to get pregnant again for at least two years. I heard through a nurse who dated one of the agency principals that a Madison urologist was boasting a vasectomy technique with a seventy to ninety percent reversible rate, and I persuaded him to operate. Then, recurring pain, mild, but annoying. The New York urologic surgeon who did my vasovasectomy eight years later said that for that entire time I'd had "epididymal blowouts": my sperm cells backed up to such an extent behind the cauterized ends of my vas deferens that they punched tiny holes in the tubing.

However destructive my doomed swimmers may have been that night, my runner's high had lifted my spirits and something else, and I tried moving Lilia's hand over to feel. She rolled away. "Should we move to New Delhi?" I said softly, facing the back of my black-headed mama. "The Hindus let their dogs roam. What do the Mexicans do?"

"We don't eat them anymore, that's all I know," I heard Lilia say.

Falling asleep I asked myself if it mattered that Anja had never seen me kick Little Guy. I thought it did. I also asked myself: Was I an animal abuser? I was sure I hadn't grown up short on empathy for other living things. There was almost always a family dog. An early memory came to me, of driving with my father to a house in Brooklyn or Queens, and a woman taking us into what was probably the living room, where there were four or five kennels in a row, all holding tall, tan barking dogs, and of the place smelling mostly like canned dog food. I also remembered Rocky, our first dog, an adult when my father brought him home. My mother was afraid of Rocky, so we only had him for a few days, and later she said sometimes she hated the dog we kept for a few years, Roxy, because she snarled at her. Maybe there was more to it, but I couldn't recall my mother hitting Roxy. I remembered Roxy eating a box of my sister's crayons and leaving art-shits around the edge of the yard.

In high school I got angry hearing a kid had stuck a firecracker up a cat's ass and lit it.

Little Guy was my scapegoat. My behavior wasn't normally violent. All the same, if I looked through a window and saw someone give even a half-kick to a toy poodle, I'd call the police.

After he was caught leaping fervently but without much chance behind an Irish wolfhound, I left him impounded. Circumstances had not eroded my empathy, exactly, but I was afraid of what I'd do to him next. I told myself Little Guy was cute enough to be adopted well inside ten days, which was how long dogs got at the pound before being euthanized. I couldn't imagine those workers euthanizing a youngish toy poodle, even one with an eye deformity and slight limp.

I told Anja a story at dinner. I said Little Guy was so good at running and leaping and flying through the air that the people at the pound had found him a special new place to live.

"Where?"

"It's a secret."

Dita tsked and hurried away from the table.

Anja looked concerned but also excited. "Where is Little Guy?"

"He's going to be a sled dog for Santa's elves."

"Like Rudolph? But tiny? Can we still see him?"

Lilia raised a brow at me. "Pretend-see."

Anja didn't bring him up again to me, which eased my guilt at turning my back on him. Maybe she didn't because they hadn't bonded closely in the four months we owned him. We'd had him only eight or nine weeks before the fence fell down, and after that he was gone days at a time. And she was at daycare weekdays. I suppose it's also possible Anja read on my face my feelings toward Little Guy, and was disinclined to love him.

Lilia, as I recall, cared about the dog only insofar as Anja was concerned. As for Dita, she begged Lucy to adopt him. Lucy said she couldn't. Soon after, they broke up.

"A crying shame," my mother said on the phone when I told her I'd given up on Little Guy. "Five years and never a problem. Three people in the house"—my parents didn't know about Dita—"and no one could manage to take care of him?"

"Who's going to take care of me when I have a heart attack at twenty-five?"

"You have that much stress?"
"I'll see if anyone's adopted him," I said, but never did.
I remember thinking: At least I didn't seal his fate.

If you are wondering whether Little Guy ever haunted us, I believe so. Growingly in our household, responsibilities felt imposed rather than consciously chosen, and thus easier to back out of. Dita, for one, decided she missed her mother too much, and that Christmas break she remained behind in Texas. She steered clear of her nemesis, but dropped out after spring break. Lilia and I had affairs. Almost exactly a year to the day that Little Guy arrived on our doorstep, we separated. Anja lived with me in New York—where I found some success in fields other than advertising—while Lilia attended a graduate program in D.C.

Actually it wasn't only Anja I took care of during those years. A few weeks after I passed judgment on Little Guy, Inessa had a litter of kittens. Anja, Lilia and I were partial to three: a calico, Alexandra Kollontai; a brindle, Trotsky; and a black and white named Boris, who grew into a handsome, pacific twenty-two-pounder after we neutered him, which we did the first chance we got, which was one of the last things my intact family ever got right.