



Chapter 9 *A Grim Impartiality*

We had been living at Lockwood's for a couple of years and had settled into a life in which we had little or no contact with the neighbors. A sense of being outside the mainstream of society was palpable and a reflection of this was the clear berth we gave the front yard. We lived our days out of view. However, we learned that avoiding our neighbors did not render us safe from their censure.

We all smelled it, but at first the odor was just an insinuation and was lost among the other emanations of the house: the cooking, the cleaning, the various residents pressed in two close rooms. And then the smell grew stronger, paradoxically sweet, before it intruded offensively.

My mother, who was sewing in the kitchen, finally addressed the issue. "What *is* that?" she asked and we all knew the answer even as she framed the question. This wasn't the first dead animal we'd smelled and it wouldn't be the last.

Clinton and Dolores had been racing a couple of matchbox cars across the kitchen floor when my mother posed her question. Without missing a beat, Clinton rose and stated flatly, "I'll look". His assumption of responsibility wasn't surprising, since for years he'd handled every chore that might reasonably have fallen to my father.

We all knew what Clinton was looking for. The question was where, not what.

In short order Clinton came back, an expression of both anger and resignation coloring his face. "It's Hortense. She's in the cellar." The rest of his statement, that Hortense was dead, was not necessary. We were all angry. This was a very instructive anger, for we as children felt wronged and powerless. We were being schooled in the inescapable reality of our lives.

We wanted to accuse someone but could find no appropriate object. I think it was with Hortense's death and with the deaths of our other dogs that my personal inclination toward self-righteous rage began. Although this posture can be unattractive and even counterproductive, it has often been a useful instrument in my life.

Hortense had been born less than a year before. She was a small, black puppy. I think her coloration more than anything led us to decide she was my dog, since jet black hair was my most distinctive feature. Each child in my family was assigned a puppy from her litter. Not that the assignment meant anything--there were no privileges or responsibilities attached to the designation, but it did allow us to say, "Rusty is Dolores's" or "Hortense is Arlene's". This was like gifting a distant star in

the sky. No one on earth would challenge ownership, but neither did our title confer advantage.

Skippy was the mother of all the puppies. She was a medium-sized terrier and the only dog with which my mother bonded. Although none of the dogs were allowed to stay in the house, my mother made an exception for Skippy when she was expecting her litter. After the puppies were born, my mother made a place for the new family under a small cabinet in the kitchen.

My mother always said she was not fond of animals but her behavior belied these words.

For example, when Yellow Cat, a stray who had adopted us, was expecting a litter, my mother made a place for her in the kitchen, as she had for Skippy. I think, being a mother and having given life to six children herself, my mother probably felt a particular sympathy for animals going through the birthing process. Plus, my mother couldn't bear to see any creature suffer.

Yellow Cat's litter came but produced only malformed offspring. The poor cat was inconsolable and spent her day licking the lifeless creatures she'd birthed.

"She wants them to nurse," my mother explained. She left the cat alone until it realized the futility of its efforts and gave up. After that episode, Yellow Cat was allowed to stay in the house and became a fixture in the kitchen. Like all cats she loved heat and in our house that meant she loved the cast iron stove. She would inch up to that black behemoth and soak up the warmth emanating from its surface.

One morning, on a particularly cold day when the corners of the kitchen would not warm, Yellow Cat's desire for heat got the best of her. She jumped on top of the stove, right onto the red hot iron plate that covered the live fire. Four columns of smoke rose from her feet and the smell of burning flesh filled the kitchen.

"Yeow!" the cat screamed and jumped to the floor, leaving bits of flesh behind in the process. My mother was just a few feet away during this drama, but it all happened so quickly that she could not intervene to save the cat from its foolishness. Yellow Cat survived the episode but ever after accorded the stove the respect it warranted.

With the addition of Skippy's litter, the one that contained Rusty and Hortense, the number of pets in our household increased to ten: nine dogs and Yellow Cat. Of all these creatures, not one had been an animal my mother invited to live with us. Each had been left by someone or had wandered onto the property and had casually taken up residence.

The most spectacular of our canine acquisitions was Boots, who, as a Great Dane/Labrador mix, was the largest animal we ever owned. Boots was also the dog that was dropped off by my father. I remember the explanation for this remarkable

act.

“He was living behind a restaurant,” my father explained to us. “He was eating leftovers.” Even as a child I wondered, how could the animal possibly get more to eat at our house than at a restaurant? Because it was an inescapable fact of our lives that we did not have enough to eat. Every day my mother struggled to put together a meal. On some days even the barest elements of this provision were lacking and then my mother would send us down the road to one of my father's sisters to ask for food.

The unlucky woman on whose doorstep we inevitably landed lived on a tight budget herself and never greeted our arrival with a smile. The door to her house would open a few inches. We would softly deliver our message: “My mother wants to know if you could lend us some spaghetti ”.

She would shut the door against our request, but always return in a minute to hand back through that begrudged opening a partially full box of spaghetti. I don't know why it was always spaghetti--not macaroni, rice or beans. Whatever it was, though, my mother was going to cook it up.

It was from those meals of requisitioned spaghetti that I learned to eat pasta soft, for the longer my mother cooked this obliging carbohydrate the more it swelled and the fuller we felt when we consumed it.

With our limited menu there was rarely food for dogs, though my mother did her best. She did not invite these pets to live with us, but she had a tender spot for anything that was alive. She would look for scraps to give them. On nights when we ate potatoes, for example, she'd cook the peels and served them to the animals.

Of course, those animals took measures. They were hungry. They lived with us but ate elsewhere. Anywhere else. And so the complaints came in.

I don't know how much of our neighbors' troubles were attributable to our dogs and how much was perhaps the fault of a fox or raccoon. One neighbor complained that a sheep had been killed. Another said that his back storm door had been destroyed by an animal trying to get to the trash. My mother was embarrassed, but without a remedy.

Hortense was one of the last of our dogs to be poisoned. The poisoning had been going on for weeks. I've always wondered, was it all the neighbors who conspired to kill our pets or one particularly proactive individual who decided to depopulate our home? We had our suspicions and we believed we had our proof.

“It's S--,” Clinton said one afternoon when he came home with a bandaged finger. There had been an accident in school and he had been taken to a local doctor for treatment. “I saw S-- at the office. He had a patch on his eye. He's blind,” Clinton declared. “It's rat poison.”



About the picture: the mud hole was deep in the woods. There is some conflict between my memory and Clinton's. He recalls dispatching many dogs in the bog and I can see in my mind's eye only Hortense. The possibility exists that I accompanied him when he took care of Hortense and he went up to the bog without me for the other dogs. My sister Dolores also remembers that there were several dogs who were placed in this bog, so perhaps she went with him. One thing is certain, however. I was so impressed by this experience that it never left me. I could not believe the power of the mud and I was distressed to see Hortense disappear so completely. This rough interment ceremony was more final than a burial because it did not allow for leaving a marker. There was nothing in that place to indicate that Hortense had ever lived.

That could all have been true, or Clinton might have concluded that S-- was blind merely because he had a patch and therefore the blindness was due to rat poison. The important thing about this explanation was that it fit into the narrative of our family. So from that moment on we all hated S--.

Whoever had killed them, we had to deal with the dead pets. Clinton did the burying, as he did all outside chores. The rest of us were mourners. Our job was to follow him to whatever spot he chose for interment and to grieve.

Hortense presented a particular challenge. Not only was Clinton tired of digging, but Hortense was going to require a very large excavation. She had swelled considerably. To make things more difficult, the ground was frozen. Undaunted, Clinton led us into the woods. We went across the stream which served as the physical boundary of our property and headed straight up the mountain. Clinton had Hortense in tow. The weight of her did not slow his progress. He was such a skilled woodsman that even with a dead dog attached to a rope he was more agile at negotiating rotting logs and dense brush than I was.

Eventually we reached our destination. Clinton always knew exactly where he was going. When we arrived at the place of burial, I recognized my surroundings but had no idea how we'd gotten there. I believed, whenever I went up into the woods with my brother, that if he somehow vanished, I'd never be able to find my way home again.

We stopped in front of a mud hole, a black viscous pit in the center of a clearing. I remembered then that a few times before we'd thrown rocks and small branches into the pit and that these had disappeared. We'd never attempted anything as large as Hortense, though. Despite this lack of history, I trusted Clinton. He knew what he was doing.

Sure enough, when he threw Hortense into the mud, it accepted her. After a while, she disappeared, as everything else had. We left no marker at that place, no sign that Hortense ever lived. While it was true that my proprietorship of Hortense carried no responsibility and no privilege, it did, I believed, entail a certain allegiance. And that allegiance was not well served by my participation in her casual disposal. We had dispatched her remains as though she was refuse.

That scene by the side of the mud hole, with my dog slowly sinking below the earth, was one that stayed with me for many a year, even to the present.