

# DOGS OF PARSONS HOLLOW

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*IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER,  
ANDRIA McCALLISTER (1946–2015),  
WHO INSTILLED IN ME A LIFELONG LOVE OF ANIMALS.*

Although God hadn't shown himself to any mortal since he'd appeared to Cain in the field that rainy night, and he'd therefore only lived as words among them for more than fifteen hundred years, no one seriously contested his existence. And why should they? They were there in the midst of his creation. Everything they could see bore witness to him. The sun that rose in the morning and filled the world with light, the clouds that came floating in from over the sea and emptied their water on the earth, the profusion of growth that sprang up in the fields. It was to this that they sacrificed each spring and autumn, without ever expecting that God would show himself to them. After all, what were they, except animals among animals, God's creations among God's creations?

—Karl Ove Knausgaard

RANDI MARGRAVE, HOPEFUL HOUSE HUNTER, BOUNCED ALONG IN THE back seat of the Escalade and stared at the chatting heads of her husband and the realtor, all three motivated by the vague but persistent notion that this latest property would be the winner. Or in the case of Cullen, only semi-motivated to that end. She supposed her hubby was a sport for going along at all—credit would be due, and duly given.

Randi sat counting every mile, especially in the minutes since they'd left the interstate to bump along forever on a county highway, and knew he'd never go for this house, not this far out. Not if the place were a crystal palace; not even if she gave him 'Cleopatra on a plate'—a line from one of the sacred movies he taught at Southeastern University back in Columbia.

Two turns later found them on Davis Macon Lane, a snaky uphill climb between walls of green. The SUV crested the ridge that bisected this deep rural part of Edgewater County, the woods fell away . . . and there, the house: As Vince and the online listing both promised, a stunner. An A-frame in cedar and stone, the home loomed imposing yet inviting, so unlike any of the suburban vinyl villages through which they'd been led. Situated on a sloping, rounded acre of cleared land like a mountain bald, the property afforded a three-sixty, blue-tinged view of the rolling countryside, with the shimmering snake of the Sugeree River visible in the distance.

Thrilled, Randi squeezed her husband's tweed shoulder. "It's gorgeous—like a ski lodge."

“Wow.” Cullen checked his enthusiasm, downgrading to calling the house “interesting.” Despite the loss of their son, and the daily hell that were the reminders whispering around every corner of their Victorian downtown next to campus, he didn’t truly want to move. “The view feels more like the upstate than the midlands.”

Vince beamed with pride, Randi thought, as though he’d built the place himself. “Ladies and gentlemen? As George Carlin once said, it’s-no-bullshit.”

In a flurry of enthusiasm, the three unhooked safety belts and piled out.

Standing on the circular, cement driveway, Cullen whispered, “I’m sick of him padding the square footage. No way this is thirty-six hundred.”

“They always do that.” Her quiet tone turned hard enough to etch glass. “Besides, it’s not like we need the extra room.”

“We don’t for now, anyway.”

Randi bugged her eyes, a sign of intense displeasure. Over the last year, discussions about having another child had been held, sure, but with acrimony, and infrequency.

“We’re house hunting—I don’t see how you can’t-not factor that in.”

“Why don’t you stand by and watch how much I ‘can’t-not’ factor that in.”

Cullen, chastened, cast his eyes down to the tips of his Weejuns.

Vince stopped in his tracks and slapped the hood of his vehicle. He all but shouted, “*Damn it all.*”

The exclamation startled them both. Cullen’s loafers cleared the driveway in a foppish, tiny hop.

“Vince—for god’s sake.”

“I swear, if y’all don’t take this house?” The agent unbuttoned his blazer to reveal a substantial, ex-linebacker’s gut. “I just might have to buy it myself.”

Cullen, dry. “Whoa, dude. Way to create a sense of urgency.”

“I’m not kidding, y’all.”

“What was that getting out here?” Glaring at Randi. “An hour?”

Vince, brandishing his phone. “Not even close. Thirty-six minutes, even with that state trooper on the interstate slowing us down.”

She touched her husband on the sleeve. “Honey, that was not an hour.”

“So it only felt that way?”

“On a good day, it’ll take you thirty and change. Not an hour.” Vince held out his hands. “If I’m lying, I’m dying.”

“Speaking of the phone, is there coverage up here? Out here? Whatever the hell you call it?”

“Three bars, baby—must be a tower nearby.”

“Let me see that device, sir.”

While the men talked signal coverage, Randi examined the surroundings: Woods, underbrush, a smattering of sunbaked, mossy boulders. The yard was rough around the edges, the grass yellowed and a little shaggy, but with decorative plantings surrounded by faded mulch—a sugar maple, a towering eucalyptus tree, a cedar hedge, azaleas that’d bloom gorgeous and pink in the spring—it was clear that someone had once put in time and effort. The hilltop lay serene and still but for the high, mournful baying, small and distant, of a dog.

Randi filled her body with the crisp air. Yes: Out here in the deep countryside, a woman could get some thinking done. Perhaps some of the purported writing.

The writing *was* helping somewhat—wasn’t it?

Not really. Since quitting her job producing news at the NBC affiliate downtown, she hadn’t finished so much as a single short story, nor made any headway on writing magazine articles, planning a novel, or working on a Ph.D and becoming a teacher like Cullen. Certainly not working on the Denny Memoir, which despite never being far from her thoughts nonetheless loomed as untenable rather than healing. As far as Cullen knew, she’d been putting in a couple of hours a day. A blatant lie.

On the opposite side of the crude cul-de-sac—it appeared that a mini-subdivision had once been planned, but never come to fruition—she noted a rusted chain stretched across a rutted dirt track that disappeared down the ridge into the woods.

A weathered hardware store sign dangled from the chain:

***PRIVATE PROPERTY  
KEEP OUT***

Pointing to the sign, she called out: “So we have neighbors after all?”  
“There’s utility lines nearby. Probably a power company road.”

“Wouldn’t say ‘private property’ if it was the power company. Or would it?” Cullen, musing. “No—the power company’s ‘private property,’ isn’t it?”

“Does it matter? Folks, look around. Nobody but us on top of this hill.”

Their footsteps crunching with sandy grit, Vince directed the couple onto a mosaic-stone walkway leading to the rustic, inviting front porch while giving a verbal rendition of the online listing she’d perused: amenities like a gourmet kitchen, fireplaces, a hot tub, a sauna, a rec room on a lower level built down the back slope, which accounted for Cullen’s missing square footage.

“Sunrise from the bedroom, sunset views from these beautiful, tall windows. And Brandi, I’m wagering that with the squirrels and the deer and the antelope playing and wandering around all wild kingdom-like, you’re gonna be in hog heaven.”

Cullen snorted. “Sounds like a goddamn petting zoo.”

Ignoring him, she instead corrected the realtor. “Randi, if you please. And—antelope?”

“Sorry, Mrs. Margrave. A little joke.”

Vince removed the lockbox, opened the door, and extended a welcoming arm.

Cullen, reluctant, crept inside. His voice echoed in the expansive, sunlit family room. “Holy crap—I mean, how very interesting.”

Vince grinned. “Come on, m’lady. You’re gonna go ape over these interiors.”

He waited for Randi, who’d glanced back at the woods. The road. She pictured being out here all alone, day-in, day-out, and frankly loved the idea.

Randi pulled her sweater tight. Since Denny’s death, she’d lost so much weight. Again came the dog’s distant, mournful baying and whimpering.

“You hear that?”

Vince, impatient. “Who cares—somebody’s old mutt.”

“Hate to think about a dog tied up outside somewhere.”

“Look: you know people hunt out here.”

“*Hunting?*”

Vince draped an oak-limb of an arm around bony Randi-shoulders. “No worries—just good old boys bagging themselves some venison. Hunt-

ing's good. Helps keep them pesky things out of people garden's. Besides, nobody's going to be hunting the Margraves."

"One would hope not."

"Wait till you see the master suite." He directed her inside, whispering as though concerned about being overheard. "You're gonna have kittens over it."

From somewhere along the ridge the dog continued yelping and howling, but once Vince shut the heavy door behind them, Randi could no longer hear the animal. Instead, she heard only the hollow ringing of their voices and footfalls on the hardwood floors.

By the time she inspected the lower level with its gorgeous view of the peaceful Carolina hill country, and the rushing brook, the back deck with hot tub and outdoor kitchen, and the closets, and the extra rooms downstairs, Randi began mentally packing the contents of the Victorian on University Terrace. Everything, that is, but the cruel memories of her son, and her life before the series of tragedies that had undone it.

ON THE DRIVE BACK TO THE FREEWAY, RANDI'S GAZE DANCED ACROSS A blur of emerald as rural South Carolina rushed by outside the agent's SUV. Clapboard churches and aging ranch houses on scrubby lots didn't offer a particularly appealing sense of community, but at least the closest neighbor, at the bottom where Davis Macon Lane met the county road, seemed more middle class than poverty-stricken like so many other homes in the vicinity. Not that she was class conscious.

But if not her, Cullen would fill that role.

Randi gritted her teeth for the discussion ahead. Her hubby didn't share the urgency about moving, and it rankled her, an inexplicable, hurtful obstacle to her healing. His convenience, trumping her sanity? Check.

She had a trump card: for once the chalet, as she thought of the house, turned out to be everything a hustling real estate agent had promised. And more.

It looked like a keeper.

Vince zoomed by a group of mobile homes in a clearing, five dilapidated units in all. Laundry hanging from clotheslines. Vehicles on blocks in a cluster close to the road. Rusting barrels scored and scorched by the burning of trash. An old hound dog tied to a tree, but too far to be the one she'd heard.

Cullen cocked his thumb at the ramshackle compound. "Classy. And you had the temerity to describe this as a nice 'neighborhood'."

Randi shushed her husband, who bristled, but complied.

Signaling to turn onto the main highway to the interstate, Vince tried mitigating the tension in the vehicle with small talk, if a touch apocalyptic in tenor: “What y’all think about this Y2K hype?”

Cullen grunted. “Overblown hysteria going back to antiquity, and probably beyond. Every generation suffers some version of end-times mythology. Always just around the next corner.”

“Scary, though. Our business, it depends on computers now. Look how easy Miss Randi found that awe-some effing property back there.”

“Enough with the salesmanship. Christ.”

“Cullen Mar-grave.” Randi, again with the mommy-voice. “Cool your jets. Don’t forget that all this driving and showing is a favor.”

“Not necessarily.” Vince, winking in the rearview. “Depending.”

Randi watched her hubby rub his eyes, pat his ex-student on one meaty forearm a few times with appropriately masculine force. “Sorry about all the whining. I’ve got papers to grade. Too much coffee sloshing around. Yadda yadda.”

“Hey, no big whoop. Y’all have been through so much.”

“I’ll admit it: the house was a real ‘creampuff’—right, Vince?” But his voice betrayed dejection rather than interest.

“That it is.”

At that, silence and torpor settled over the car.

Vince turned on the radio to a country-pop station set to a low volume. Randi cracked the window and let warm slipstream flow across her pale face. “Smell that? It’s so different out here from anywhere I’ve ever lived. I kind of love it already.”

Cullen, suspicious. “Surprising. Never known you to be much of a country girl.”

“Different’s what I need. Different from who I am. Different from—this.”

“I hear you.”

Fraught with possible meaning and subtext.

Icky.

Her husband, far from incorrect about her roots: Randi’s life, before the kinda-cool seismic event at sixteen that’d been her parents’ divorce, had been spent as a child of northern California: Berkeley, a college town with a vastly different vibe and temperament from bucolic, sleepy Columbia, where she’d lived since coming to college at Southeastern.

Since becoming a reluctant South Carolinian—after her mother remarried, they moved all the way across the country—Randi often missed the spectacular scenery and progressive culture of the Bay Area, as well as the few friends she'd left behind. She considered her adult home, with its diminutive skyline, decent schools, and modest cost of living, as Mayberry on the mighty, muddy Congaree River: a little dull and staid, but convenient to plenty of other interesting places not far in any direction like Atlanta, Charlotte, and steeped-in-historicity Charleston, which hadn't been decimated in the Civil War the way Columbia had. The town had risen from its ashes, however, to become a decent enough place to live.

A nice community in which to raise kids.

Have a family.

Make a life.

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Vince dropped the Margraves off at Cullen's BMW parked on campus outside the Mass Comm College, located in a renovated, ancient campus building with wide wooden floors that creaked and moaned. The campus of then South Carolina College had been spared the wartime fires, with quite a few buildings dating back to the early nineteenth century.

"Bottom line time." The beefy realtor, leaning out of the driver's side window with a troubled countenance of concern. "If you want that house—or even think you want it—don't wait."

Cullen offered his hand. "Respect the effort, but the hard-sell? Let's table that."

Randi, smiling and warm in her gratitude. "We'll let you know."

But Vince, driving away slumped like a man who'd wasted a chunk of valuable time. Years ago he'd been one of Cullen's students, the athletic types who took the most basic of cinema survey courses as an easy elective. As Cullen would mock the Vinces of his world: "A class on, like, watchin' movies? Sign me up, Coach."

The couple sat in the BMW listening to the reassuring low-volume murmur of *All Things Considered*. Randi, waiting for him to have the first word, but getting instead only the silent-treatment, a familiar avoidance tactic she also wielded with impunity.

She broke the impasse: “I have to say—I love it. I freaking love that house.”

After what seemed like the longest sigh in the history of human exhalation, Cullen asked, “Why this one, honeybunny?” His favorite pet name for her, one picked up from *Pulp Fiction*, a film the cineaste claimed, in certain circles anyway, to loathe. “I know the house is beautiful—it’s the kind of place I’ve always dreamt of owning. But if we want, we can build. Buy some land. Closer in,” he begged. “Please.”

“But we won’t find one like that.”

“Like what?”

“High up. Able to see so far around in every direction. Like a fish-eye lens in one of your little movies.”

“‘Little movies.’ Ouch.”

She felt the sting come back on her. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Cullen mulled, drumming fingers on the steering wheel. Finally he touched her on the arm. “Such a huge decision... all I ask is that we chew on this.”

Randi drew breath to lobby, to argue for the house on Davis Macon Lane, then deflated. She wondered about her certitude, that perhaps she sought only to feel assured about the house on the ridge because she needed to feel sure about something. Pick a topic. Did it matter what? Since Denny, no aspect of life had felt settled or certain, but in her most raw and honest moments, she knew it’d been that way before his death, too.

Randi—when she allowed herself—knew she now clung to Cullen for reasons far afield from romantic love: despite his perfidies, he remained the life-link to Denny. The only one.

A pang in her gut, a sharp one—if she hadn’t recognized it as grief, she’d have sworn a case of pancreatic cancer had sprung into ruinous being.

She shifted around in her seat and hid from Cullen her welling sorrow. “We’ll chew on it, then.” Randi, trying to stave off the wave. “Sleep on it.”

“There we go—all perfectly reasonable, yes?”

“Quite reasonable.”

Besides, Vince himself had undone any true sense of urgency: he’d slipped up earlier in the day and admitted the house had been on the market for months. So: yes yes, time enough, she thought, to decide.

Nothing but time. The last third of 1999 to grind through, and next, a new century. A new millennium, in fact.

Or else, no time left at all—Vince, with his Y2K fears, fed into her own low-level, simmering and persistent anxiety. Her resurgent, welling paranoia felt worse than the outright panic attacks that lurked, struck, and lingered, but those had gotten better over the summer, finally, after she got through the anniversary of the accident. But she had to be careful about the Xanax—an easy, pillowy solution to all this internal strife.

Too easy.

Another honest thought: since her son died—since she'd killed him by putting him on that goddamn plane—she hadn't had a purpose, hadn't had a place, hadn't had a marriage that worked. What choice had they but to start over? Split up? There was that. "Just do me the favor of taking this one seriously."

"Sure, of course." Cullen, nodding and squeezing her knee. His hand, lingering, sliding upward. Warming her thigh. "Let's go grab din. Then home. Maybe a snuggle? It's been so long."

Randi, not caring what she ate for dinner, if anything at all. "Mediterranean?"

Cullen, calling a negatory; instead, he extolled the virtues of the buffet he'd tried at a new Indian place off Rosedale Avenue. A quick agreement—Randi, hoping that the intense spices would awaken her spirit. Would make her feel sated.

Alive, again.

To avoid seeing Denny's old grammar school, Cullen took the long way around campus through the Old Market, the commercial district adjacent to the university. The streets, damp from an afternoon shower, teemed with the beer-drinking, Humpday happy hour crowd flowing down the hill from the huge campus. Randi envied them, those students and budding professionals—their youth, their innocence, their lack of obligation.

Wait—what obligations did she have? Not many. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all.



Now full dark, Cullen cut through the nice neighborhood up the hill from the Market, a sort of twin peak to their own hoity-toity University Terrace

area visible in the rearview—Herndon Hill had been the original suburb of the downtown area, its densely packed Craftsman bungalows dating all the way back to the beginning of the century. Here began their house-hunt earlier in the summer, which in the season since had gravitated farther and farther into the outer spiral arms of exurbia, all the way into southernmost Edgewater County.

Randi's chest felt tight. The massive oaks lining the street stood expansive and mature, their shadowy, sheltering canopy only serving as claustrophobic contrast to the wondrous property on the lonely and quiet ridge.

A shape—an animal—darted across in front of the headlamps. "Cullen, *stop*."

The BMW's tires slid on the wet road. Randi craned her neck back to see a bone-thin boxer, brown with white paws, holding one bloodied leg aloft and panting. "It's hurt."

Cullen made no move to get out. His hands remained gripped upon the leather-wrapped steering wheel. "That's somebody else's prob."

Her mouth gaping, she wrenched off the seatbelt and sprang out of the car. "Sweetheart—are you all right?"

Cullen rolled the window down. "We're not futzing around with some stray dog."

"We have to help it!"

"The hell we do." He tooted the horn.

Startled, the animal whimpered and turned tail, limping into the shadows between a pair of overvalued bungalows.

"You son of a bitch—she's injured." Randi pounded the trunk of the Beemer and darted over to the sidewalk. She cupped her hands. "*Doggie? Hello?*"

This time Cullen laid down on the horn, long and annoying. Lights came on. Silhouettes appeared in windows.

Cursing, Randi threw her skinny arms in the air and stomped back to the car.

Leaning over and facing away from her husband, she collapsed, sobbing against the window now fogged by her anguished, hot breath.

A calm Cullen smiled and nodded. He'd seen her break down so often over the last couple of years it had become part of a family routine. "Don't worry, honeybunny—just a mangy old mutt." He put the car in gear and drove on down the street. "It's Herndon Hill. One of these bleeding heart yuppies'll take responsibility. Suckers that they are," he added.

Spastic, she yanked the seatbelt across herself. “You’re a coldhearted bastard.”

“Randi, we cannot put a dog in this car—what about my allergies?”

Checkmate. The allergies eclipsed all.

But Randi, fuming: This, beyond the pale—cruelty to animals? A new low.

Oh, but on another level, he’d done worse. And she’d forgiven so much.

How could she make a big deal out of this latest display that her husband was an inveterate asshole?

Who would care, or be surprised? Nobody.

Newsflash.

Besides ignoring said a-hole, what she did do for the rest of the night was take her laptop into the guest room where she’d been sleeping for months and pull up the online listing of the house on the ridge. She clicked through the photo set; she closed her eyes and pictured the light and the air and the trees, the creek, the wind blowing and the high, lonesome scree of a hawk she’d heard. This hilltop in the middle of nowhere: a place to begin anew, to escape the yawning, yearning sense of unreality that pervaded her every waking moment here in Denny’s house.

Satisfied and certain, with or without her husband’s participation and sanction, Randi drifted to sleep believing she’d at last settled on a new place to call home.

OVER BREAKFAST CULLEN REFUSED TO DISCUSS THE HOUSE IN Edgewater County, or any house. “I have to teach three classes before noon. All due respect, but let me divest my mind of all this. For a few hours. If you please.”

“‘This?’ I feel so special.”

“We’ll talk about the house. Just not this morning.”

Since he’d left, she’d lounged bored and desperate there on University Terrace, pacing hardwood floors scuffed from the toddler years of toys and strollers and hobbyhorses.

Useless. Empty.

Anxious.

New house or not, how was she to become what Cullen was expecting, in essence a new person? A writer? Speaking of fiction, she’d dug herself deep with this phony excuse to be left alone. This would be her therapy, as she’d insisted to everyone, to colleagues from the station like Cynthia-Anne and Spencer, or to her own mother, whose advice, before or after the tragedy of Denny, had rarely been helpful, and now accused her of hiding from the world and her grief, and not getting on with things. The ice queen. Her mother had been perfect for her father—why on earth they’d gotten divorced Randi hadn’t a clue.

As for her taciturn and humorless academic of a patriarch, he’d been dead to her long before his actual corporeal demise a few years ago—

Durant Montreat, brilliant and inscrutable, but a minor character, one suitable only for an occasional flashback. For backstory.

Sure—she'd gone to a community writing workshop or two at the library, and attended an on-campus series that hosted authors discoursing about craft, so even if she hadn't written a single word, around the Margrave dinner table Randi could at least fake the lingo.

At one writer's talk in the Humanities auditorium-classroom, she'd held up her hand and asked the middle-aged, Southern novelist who'd been leaning into the lectern and visibly suffering through a grinding, uninteresting Q&A, "How should one write about grief?"

"Grief?" Wary, shifting from foot to foot. "In what context?"

"When you choose a subject like grief, hasn't it all been said before?"

Cort Beauchamp, the upcountry's mid-list answer to Conroy, went *mm-hm*, *mm-hm* into the mic. "A problem for any writer, about virtually any subject. In the case of grief, everyone who's ever lived not only watches others pass away, but we all eventually die—a central conundrum of human existence, and ripe for artistic exploration. So with a subject like grief or loss or death, one that's so ubiquitous and endemic to the experience of being alive, it's been more than covered with sufficient grace and aplomb, both in philosophy, theology, and in modern times, fiction.

"So what to do? You must find the angle, like a newspaper reporter sniffing out a story. If the grief's inspired by your own experience with loss, figure out an oblique way to say what it felt like, without hitting them on the nose with a sledgehammer—tell it slant, as Emily Dickinson advised in her elegant metaphor."

Randi, tingling—his reference to news-gathering gave her a sense of synchronicity.

"Think of it this way," musing his way into a rhetorical groove. "It's like the Southern tradition of criticizing family members to their face around the Thanksgiving table. Talk around the truth. Treat the subject like subtext, rather than hit it head on. This approach, it's as good a template for an author as any I've read in creative writing textbooks."

Laughter, applause, and a flurry of fresh hands fluttering in the air for his attention. "So sneak up on that grief, ma'am. Find your way through the dark woods."

Green tea in hand and roiling with guilt, Randi forced herself to sit down at the dining room table with the word processor open to a new document. Her

fingers poised, she dragged herself back into the past, striving to dredge up interesting scenarios and plot lines inspired by the people and places that had mattered. Times she'd enjoyed with friends back home; moments of conflict and strife, of which her mental inventory provided an unwelcome surfeit.

So, how about her college years? Coming here to Columbia. Meeting Cullen, a young associate professor ten years her senior. How they'd hit it off, explosively and passionately, and so what if she'd been his student, because by then she was all grown up and done soon enough with the J-school degree and all was well and right... until she presented as pregnant. Poof. Out of the blue. Pregnant with Denny. Pregnant with possibility, with love for the scholarly, urbane Cullen Margrave, impregnated by him with the seed of their baby boy, their spawn, their glorious progeny who'd grow into a—

Fiction. She needed to write fiction. Not think about Denny.

What about mining the marriage for drama?

*Hah*—now there was a source of conflict, though admittedly contrived and familiar: Before the plane crash had taken Denny, she'd done her best to move on from Cullen's ridiculous, clichéd grad student indiscretion. But at the risk of hypocrisy, Randi often rationalized his behavior by asking, what pray tell had she herself been but that: an attractive, bright pupil he'd seduced?

A huge difference: twelve years ago, when he'd begun dating her during the semester she'd taken his documentary course, Cullen Margrave had been a single man, if indeed committing an indiscretion. Randi, a smitten younger woman who fell hard for his deep brown eyes, the sharp mind, the energy and intellect and stamina, a lover like none she'd had before.

Not an indiscretion. A romance. That's the way she thought of it.

Ugh. She couldn't drag herself through all that again.

A better idea came over her, a small rush of ah-ha that made her jump in her chair: She tapped out a title, and kept on typing for over an hour before she stopped:

*DAISY ON THE ROAD*

*by Marandi M. Margrave*

*The being is confused, uncomfortable, utterly alone. Its paws are scabbed over and coat*

*damp with the rainwater that so recently fell from the slate-gray sky. It hunches its shoulders and flinches at the peals and rumbles from overhead, like great animal-gods at war with one another. It sniffs at the air, looks around, and then wanders on, careful to stay away from the hard trail over which the ugly machines roll, side by side, back and forth, belching and loud and merciless. The dog, a pet, heretofore sheltered from the unforgiving and merciless world, understands the machines only enough to stay out of their murderous way.*

*From what had been a life of no want, from the warmth and safety of a soft bed inside the large box of stone and wood in which it had lived with its companion, from a world of endless food and clean water and a patch of green earth protected on all sides from the unimaginable threats that lay beyond those impregnable borders, the being's existence is now an endless cycle of fatigue, fear, privation. The creature's mind understands its predicament, yes, but only on one essential and primal level:*

*Food, or not-food.*

*Or otherwise: Safe, or not-safe. And for the past few days, mostly not-safe...*

Randi went on at great length describing the circumstances behind the animal's quandary: How the boxer had been frightened into bolting its fenced yard by the explosions from "the demonstrative bipeds next door, whooping and hollering as though mad"; she imagined a Fourth of July celebration, cacophonous and violent to a frightened dog. She related how it'd once worn a pink collar that said *Daisy*. What had become of the collar. The horrors of what the dog had resorted to eating on its miserable trek. The terrors and pangs and close shaves—all fabrication, of course. Randi couldn't truly know what it'd been like for the injured dog. Or why it'd become lost.

Now verifiably autobiographical elements at last came into play: the scene on the street, the blowing of the horn, the woman running after the dog, then cursing her human companion in the noisy, dangerous machine. How Daisy's heart had been broken anew. A sad sad story.

*...Daisy will never know how much the woman wanted to help her, and how not being allowed to do so haunted her from that day forward.*

*A dog to replace a boy.*

She went back and struck through this line, an inappropriate authorial intrusion of concerns lacking in context.

Hands aching, she closed the word processor window and put the laptop into hibernation mode.

At dinner, Randi announced she'd at last completed a piece.

Cullen pressed her for details. "So—is it a short story?"

"Think so."

"Ready for the blue pencil of doom?"

Pondering, she gnawed on her lower lip. "I don't think you'll appreciate it."

"Do tell."

"Let me get the training wheels off. It's not ready. But it will be."

He sipped wine, probed her with skeptical eyes. "No pressure. I've got Nouveau Vague essays to grade anyway—*tuez-moi maintenant, s'il vous plaît*."

"I'll send up a flare when I'm ready for fresh eyes. No peeking in the oven, though. Fair enough?"

"You'll send up a flare in the oven?" He smiled. "I think that's a mixed metaphor."

"See, I don't know what I'm doing yet."

"Sure, sure—boy, you artists. *You can't see it, till it's finished*," sung in a reasonable David Byrne. "Take your time."

Time she had, a surplus, an endless grind of unstructured hours and days.

But how best to use these moments and hours? To her the afternoon's work demonstrated only that so long as she kept trying to force a round, new life into the square hole of what had once been their warm, reasonably happy home, she'd fail. Writing? Sure.

But not here—anywhere but the house on University Terrace.