

The Inevitable

The parking lot was packed dirt and empty. A haze settled in the wake of the car as the family piled out. “You’re sure about this place?” the father asked the mother, squinting at the drab building before them. The location—that is, the drive thereto—had already stirred some initial doubt, and the look of things did not help. Out here in the boonies, against the verdant forest backdrop, the ruin of the structure felt amplified. Its paint might once have been white. The girls giggled somewhere behind him and he scratched the back of his neck and squinted. “I mean I know you’re sure but you know what I mean.”

“This is what it’s like with a lot of these places,” she said. “Ask Becca about the place we went a month ago.”

He looked back, at Becca. Lily was showing off her drawings and the look on Becca’s face was exactly her mother. Crinkles at the eyes, skin bunching near the nose, unadulterated love. He looked back at the building. “You came to one of these places a month ago?”

“Just to look.”

“I thought we decided on Friday.”

She smiled. “You realized on Friday.”

He liked this but didn’t smile. He said, “You two.”

The mother turned to the girls and said, “Alright, girls. Put those away Lil, let’s go.” And the four of them went into the building.

Why exactly he had relented was unclear to him, even as it wasn't to anyone else. In truth the moment Lily had gotten the idea in her head his resistance was, as they say, futile. And especially with the way the other two encouraged her, Jesus. Yes Lil, we *should* get you a puppydog. We should and will.

Not that he minded, per se. He'd had a dog growing up, knew the importance of their companionship. But part of him felt duty-bound to objection. The role of the parent is to object, he knew, and doubly so when the other decides to go, fuck yeah we'll get you a doggy. (That wasn't the exact wording but it was something like that.) So he objected. "It's a lot of responsibility," he said, donning his Fatherly Frown. It was a frown that both extended from and confirmed the role he played. He felt intelligent, frowning, as if unhappiness suggested great consideration. Think Rodin, fist to chin. The man is perturbed but we focus on the fact of his thinking instead. Could be marketing—Rodin's *The Total Fucking Downer* probably isn't much of a draw. "You'd have to feed her every day, and walk her. Me and mom and Becca would help a little but it would be your job."

"I'm not a kid anymore, Daddy."

"No?" he asked, the frown breaking. "What are you, now, three?"

"I'm six and a half!", indignant footstamp confirming the number.

He scooped her up, bounced her on his lap, to squeals. "How about this. If you're really, *really* good for the next two months, your mom and I will talk about it. But you have to be really good."

That was three weeks ago. Last Friday his wife, as he was on the cusp of sleep, said to him, ambushed him, "So I think we should go get Lily's puppy this weekend."

He groaned, shifted his weight. The mattress groaned along. “It can’t be a puppy,” he said. “I can’t do a puppy.”

“It needs to be a puppy,” she said. “Becca wants one too. She hasn’t even gotten on me for how I never let her have one when she was growing up but now I’m letting Lily—that’s how excited she is. She won’t say anything obviously but I promise you she wants one too.”

“Puppies are so much work,” he said. “It’s like another kid. Except it’s worse actually ‘cause kids won’t shit on the carpet.”

“You’re being too practical,” she told him. “Be less practical.”

“A dog, okay. I can handle a dog. But a puppy?”

“Has to be. It’s not the same if it’s not a puppy. You know that.”

“I do not.” Boy was this argument slipping away from him. *I do not!*, might as well fold his arms and pout. Always a bad sign when he could tell they were arguing on some deeper level but the conversation itself wasn’t argumentative, as if the lack of an obvious edge was, to him, the lack of the whetstone upon which he sharpened himself. He struggled having to explain himself dispassionately.

“You *do* know,” she said. “New life, the circle of life, that whole shebang. Lily would get to watch it grow up before her very eyes. That’s important.”

He didn’t answer immediately. He laid in the dark thinking. Then he said, “No one ever goes in for the half shebang, do they?”

It took her a moment to respond. “It’s bad value, is why. You get more bang for your buck with the whole shebang.”

“Maybe that’s just what Big Shebang wants you to think.” The house was dead quiet except for them. “Wielding their insidious influence to upsell you, the American Consumer. God, it’s so obvious now.”

A beat. “Wasn’t Big Shebang your nickname in high school?” she asked.

“No,” he said, grinning like an idiot. “That was this girl I dated, actually.” If they could just wallow in this distraction until they fell asleep it would be alright with him. Ultimately he knew they were getting a dog, and this detour was, if he really thought about it, which he wouldn’t, an abstract method of acceptance. Delaying the inevitable, giving himself time to process. “Potty-training,” he said, “will be totally on us. On me, basically, and that’s not me being unfair, it’s just reality. You’re not here as much and I’d end up having to deal with it.”

“It’ll take some work. Becca will help.”

“She would,” he admitted.

“She will.”

He turned on his side to face her, more awake than he cared to be. “I object to how definite you’re being about this.” His tone remaining controlled, lighthearted. In the darkened bedroom he could not see her face clearly but knew she was smiling.

“How about we go this weekend?” she asked. “Big guy. You big softie.” She shifted closer to him, pressed up against his chest.

He exhaled hugely and rolled onto his back. “It has to be a puppy?”

She didn’t say anything, just moved closer and pulled his arm around her. They lay there in the silence for some time. “Okay, fuck,” he sighed. He was wide awake and staring at the ceiling. “You’re lucky I like you,” he said, and stretched down to kiss her temple. Beyond their window he heard a lone car rolling on towards midnight.

Talk turned to naming the thing. Remarkably it was stretched across Lily’s lap, sleeping, golden, precious, family.

Behind the wheel the father listened to the deliberation. Lily had the final say, her dog, but she was a kindly and benevolent ruler, open to suggestions. Good thing, too—her first idea was Pancake.

“I don’t think we want a generic name, like Spot,” Becca said. “Or Max.”

“The Fitzgerald’s dog is called Max,” Lily agreed.

“Exactly. So nothing like that. We want a cool name. Something unique.”

“Keep in mind,” their mother said, turning from the front seat, “that we can pick an official name and then also use a nickname. We basically get two, if you do it right.”

“Like Max is from Maximillian,” Becca explained to her half-sister. “We won’t use that, obviously, but something like it.”

“Use Richard,” the father suggested. The wink offered to his wife elicited a highly marital eyeroll.

“What’s short for Richard?” Lily asked.

“Rich,” Becca said, quick on the pickup. Becca to the rescue, as ever.

“Isn’t there another one?” the father said, glancing in the rearview mirror and then again at his wife. “I coulda sworn there was another one.”

“I think the other one might be *too* short, dear,” his wife said. Becca laughed.

“Should we do Rich?” Lily asked her sister, eager to wrest the party back from the shadowy realms of Adult Humor.

“I don’t think so, no. There’s a guy I work with at the hospital named Rich who’s not very nice. We need a name that’s not tainted.”

“What’s tainted?”

“Like ruined, I guess. What I mean is I already know a Rich who I don’t like, so the name is ruined, because I don’t want to have to think about someone I don’t like every time I call the dog, right?”

Lily nodded at this sage wisdom.

The father’s thoughts turned to the half hour prior. Hard not to feel that sharp pride pushing up into his chest, watching. No tears thank God. He remembered his mother in the kitchen of his childhood, telling him life is like a band-aid, just rip it off, how whatever quotidian unpleasantness he sought as a youth to avoid was best dealt with head on. She had proved right, unfailingly. The sheer girlish triumph in his daughter’s eyes trained on the dog bounding uncertainly through the play area was simply one more confirmation. As a young man it seemed to him the men he knew who became fathers became overnight something they weren’t, as if the very fact of progeny rewired the brain, excavated the selfish Id depths to overwrite instinct with what in him was not instinctual at all. He knew by now he’d been right. To suffer heartrending loss and call it happiness, that’s fatherhood. To turn your back on the formative years of your life is fatherhood. Accepting the untruth of what in youth is so assuredly fundamental: fatherhood. The self is the universe is the self and then you have a daughter and you get her a dog and her world is so contained and perfect and you look around you and realize just how small, how insignificant, how fucking irrelevant you are in the light of the real world, with so much darkness pushing in on what is good and right, which is her. And then while her world is small and perfect, yours grows ever smaller. At scale, fatherhood is death.

Then there’s the dog, precious, sleeping thing. A foil to his old man’s rambling. He glanced at it in his rearview, spindly across his daughter’s lap. In humans if fatherhood is death then why isn’t this the case elsewhere? Well, some places it is. Praying mantis have their heads ripped off after sex. At times in his life that’s sounded like a pretty good deal. But at large his fatherhood as death

theory didn't hold up to the wide scrutiny of the animal kingdom. Certainly not to dogs, animal closest to our hearts. But if there's no death in fatherhood, what is it he feels so urgently in his chest the moments when he is alone? Why would it be that his biggest anxiety these days is time slipping away?

He only heard her the second time: "Dad, what do you think?"

"About what, Lil?"

"The name?"

He paused. "I think it's great."

She giggled. "You don't even know what it is!"

To his wife, he said, "Kid's good." Then, directed to the back seat, "What name did we decide on, Sugar?"

"Bambi!"

Fuck.

"I think that's a great name," he said. "Bambi." At which point the animal in question lifted its dumb furry face, gazed sleepfully around. So tiny, so fragile. It wobbled to its feet and scouted, from the vantage of its new master's skirted thigh, its surroundings. Lily petted the dog's head ferociously. Family consensus spoke of the puppy's cuteness, a trait difficult to find in young dogs, most of whom are grotesque, slobbering creatures. I'm kidding. The moving car was a novelty Bambi struggled to adapt to, basic motor functions being somewhat difficult under ordinary (read: stationary) circumstances. She flopped from thigh to seat and, unbalanced, flopped again towards Becca. Becca scooped her, held her chubby and dangling like young Simba, announcing to the dog

more than anyone, “Looks like little Bambi is awake!” Her voice noticeably higher in tenor, encroaching on Lily’s domain, verging on squeak.

The family has been remade anew. There’s your death in creation, the death of what was. Perceptibly, dynamics have begun shifting, and it’s not a power struggle so much as it is a relinquishing of it, no struggle necessary. They got her the dog, she named it Bambi. Her adoration thus divided.

Was that it? Any trepidation nothing more than a ridiculous sort of possessiveness over the set of his daughter’s reverences? Her world is not perfectly contained and small, then, as he fancied to think, but acquisitive, and his world not growing ever smaller exactly, but something more like fading. As if in her world’s growth was written his opposite. As if her growth was nothing more than a corporeal reminder of his own inevitable conclusion. She thinks, therefore he won’t.

New life has always stirred his morbidity. Lily’s birth was bad. This was a man who spent a lifetime facing whatever he must because that was what you did, you ripped it off like a band-aid and dealt with it, and yet the consequence of such a method of thinking was that he never once stopped to give consideration, actual consideration, to those items outside the tangible world. Death, say. His tools of assessment dealt entirely with the practical, the evident. How could he grapple with such an unknown? How would he even begin? It wasn’t any inability to grasp the abstract so much as an inability to realize the abstract might be worth considering. His thoughts on death could’ve been summed as, ‘it happens’ (maybe with a couple extra letters). And then he held his daughter in his hands. Trembling life. A clear divide, there, before and after, from when time was a fact of nature, like the wind or gravity, to when time was a dwindling resource. He held his daughter and wept and after the fact, the line he went with was he was just so moved by holding his daughter, he was simply overwhelmed with joy. But at the time there was no certainty to it. He was just crying.

They neared town. Civilization came thicker and faster, houses and restaurants and shopping malls and parking lots, the bacterial sprawl of development. Other cars, other families. They moved through this great wash with the rest of his family unaware, absorbed as they were by puppydog Bambi. Giggles abounded. A disconnect there, chauffer and gleeful chauffees, such that he, while driving, became removed, consigned to a sort of intermediary between family and society, Charon and his dread boat. Oddly this made his role as driver a position of comfort. He enjoyed the control, of course, needed it even. But the real reason, the one truer and deeper than any he might admit, was he liked the solitude of the position. Solitude? Three others in the car prattling away, that's solitude? And yet his feelings on this one were not murky. He felt alone behind the wheel, not in any traditional sense of loneliness, a source of heartache, but in a sense that likely meant something closer to removed. Like he lived his whole life these days for other people and the only times that were really his were those pockets of breathing room, behind the wheel. He was a different man ten years ago and twenty years and thirty but behind the wheel there's never been any difference. He slid into that seat and slipped back into himself.

Case in point the dog. Not living for himself, there. He didn't want it. But perhaps that was both selfish and untrue—wasn't he living for himself, living for Lily? Did anything warm his heart the way warming hers did? He glanced in the rearview mirror, as if to check. The girls giggling over Bambi, who reveled in their attention, on her back, paws folded over. His wife reached across the console to give his thigh a gentle squeeze. Our family, she was saying. What a gift it was. His eyes flicked from the rearview to her and then to the road and he slammed on the brakes as a car came flying through the upcoming intersection, red light be damned, and the family lurched against taut seatbelts and he stamped as hard as he could on the brake pedal and car horns blared unidirectionally and he could tell in that instant their car was not going to be hit, they were going to

be safe, and in that same instant he could also see that the car in front of them would not be so lucky. And then came the collision.

It could have been a detonation, the way the sound hit. And it was forceful enough, destructive enough. Glass shattered, metal crumpled. The struck car rolled onto its hood and scraped along the pavement until it at last cradled to a stop in the middle of the intersection, upside-down and warped. The other car wasn't a car at all but a truck and its crushed fender and grill revealed the steaming and mangled engine viscera that permitted this calamity. The truck's front axle was visibly bent and the windshield was cracked through and fluid dripped and darkened the asphalt. A man staggered out of the truck, muttering obscenities. Wide-eyed. He took off his hat and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand and stared at the car he'd demolished.

All traffic had stopped, and some drivers and passengers stepped out to take in the wreckage. Lily cried in the backseat; Bambi clambered onto her lap. "Shh, shh, it's okay," the father said, turning to reassure his daughter before returning his eyes to the upturned car. He undid his seatbelt mechanically and opened the door and slid out of his seat, not moving his gaze. He advanced slowly, tracing a hand along the hood until it fell beside him and he pushed forward stricken. Suddenly Becca ran past him. He shouted after her but she didn't slow down, running into the frozen intersection over metal and glass shards, running past the stunned practitioner of this act of random violence. "Call an ambulance!" she yelled over her shoulder, to anyone. Then she reached the flipped car and wrenched the door open.

There was only one occupant, hanging thanks to his seatbelt, unconscious. Blood dripped from his skull, a journey of less than a foot to the road, to death. As it was he was close. Becca wrangled him out of his seatbelt and car, doing her best to keep the neck straight, trying to balance care against urgency. A crowd gathered around as she pulled him from the wreck and started doing compressions. Becca's stepfather stood entranced. The deep maroon running from a gash above his

temple pooled about his shoulder. A siren wailed in the distance. Someone knelt beside Becca and pressed a tee-shirt onto the gash.

The father heard the siren and looked back to his car and jogged over to it. He hadn't jogged in years but instinct told him to avoid walking, wary it might be vulgar. Like flaunting his own excess of life.

His wife had moved from the front seat to the back and was holding Lily, who was squeezing her puppy to her chest and dribbling tears. He touched his wife's upper arm. "How you guys holding up?" he asked.

"We're fine," she said, looking anything but. "It's just scary. Is Becca helping him? The guy."

"Yeah, she's giving him compressions. Someone called an ambulance." He wanted to add something about the man's condition but balked in front of Lily.

"Thank God you saw the truck coming," his wife said. Lily was looking through the front windshield, at the crowd around her sister, the crowd around the dying man. There were too many standing bodies for her to see the important ones but she looked on as though she could. In her lap Bambi squirmed and licked at her hands.

The ambulance came, and police. Lights flashed. Becca was relieved of her duties and she stood beside and watched as her relievers readied the man for the stretcher. She wasn't positive he was still breathing. Blood stained her hands and clothes. She'd told the first responders she was a nurse at the hospital and they commended how swiftly and decisively she'd acted, told her they knew people over there who'd hear about it. She watched while they loaded him.

A policeman asked the father to pull the car out of the road and the family sat on the curb while he drove away from the wreck and looped back towards it and parked on the opposite side of the street. Behind the wheel he exhaled and surveyed the scene. The destruction. The flipped car utterly fascinated him. A kind of primal awe, like the joy in watching fire. Becca stood agape in the

intersection while his wife and child and dog sat on the curb. He felt like a tourist. He watched his daughter. Her face was puffy and red but the tears had stopped. She was ignoring Bambi; his wife was left to wrangle their newest family member. Lily's attention was focused on half-sister Becca, savior, idol. Her tiny brow furrowed, legs planted on the road, leaning forward, propping up her chin with a tightly balled fist. She watched Becca watch the stretcher with the sheet laid overtop that merely whispered of death rather than spoke of it openly and Lily watched the stretcher herself as it was loaded into the ambulance and hauled away. The father blew all the air out of his lungs very deliberately and inhaled with the same deep slow care and then got out and trooped back to his family. From beside the wreck Becca did the same. They gathered and looked on for a moment, silently, the five, the family, taking a moment. And then they went home.

Morning, weeks later. Lily and Bambi frolicking in the backyard. Each had grown. Lily had taken to calling the dog Bam—a nickname after all. He stood in the kitchen with his wife and held her around her waist while she sipped coffee twohandedly and together they watched the backyard through the window.

“They are so cute together,” his wife remarked. It was not the first time he'd heard the sentiment. It was hard to disagree.

“When's Becca off?” he asked.

“Not 'til tonight,” she said. “Working her to the bone, as ever. She's exhausted.”

“Who isn't?”

“The dog,” she said, and smiled at him. He grinned in response.

Lily was throwing a red spiked chew toy for Bambi, provided 'throwing' was defined loosely. Bambi would snatch the toy and just run with it, loops and loops, until she decided it was time to

allow Lily to toss it again. At which point she would drop it right at Lily's feet, and bounce on her paws, and wag her tail. Dogs. The two were inseparable, naturally. He had the sense they were somehow truer as a family these days. The only conclusion, which he admitted to himself readily and to others reluctantly, was he was glad they'd taken Bambi into the fold, despite any halfhearted protestations he may have mustered in the weeks prior. Probably not as glad as Lily, but still. Leave glad enough alone.

The two bounded into the kitchen, Lily first, Bambi in tow. Lily declared, loudly (almost a complaint but not quite), "Bam doesn't like it when I grab her tail." Her mom told her dogs tend not to like that. They hadn't yet learned to cope with man's everlasting pursuit of annoying the people they like.

He scooped his daughter and kissed her and told her and his wife (and the dog) he had to retire to his office for work. But when he closed the door and dropped into his seat he found himself anxious. He answered a few banal emails and thought about a call he had to make but his mind persisted in drifting. A painting hung above his desk of a group of boys playing in a field, sun shining, a barn in the distance, two dogs running alongside. It had been displayed in his childhood home and was passed to him when his parents died but despite all this he'd never really looked at it. Reminded him too much of his childhood, as such. But now he pushed off from the desk to roll backwards, angling for a better view. Behind him, a window overlooking the backyard, and in front, the painting. He leaned forward in his chair and propped his chin with his hand and looked at it, the group revelry, the perfected day. Those words came to him: the perfected day. Not perfect but perfected. He looked hard at the painting and at the boys and the dogs and the whole again with his brow furrowed the whole time like he was trying to puzzle out some inscrutable aspect of it, divining whatever deepest riddle the artist might've intended. He noticed the door to his office crack open. Lily was standing there.

“Hey, hon,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Are you working?” she asked. Timidness in her voice.

“I’m never too busy for you,” he said, which was really just a clever way of saying no. She wanted to show him something, but wouldn’t say what, and led him downstairs by the hand. They came to the living room, father and daughter, hand in precious hand, and the father realized what she’d wanted to show him. It was the inevitable. Bambi had shit on the carpet.