

Smiling Puppies

They had almost just that moment walked in from a three day weekend at the beach and were tired but happy for having done something and been somewhere. They picked up the dog from boarding at the Veterinarian on the way in and he was sleeping off whatever had happened to him there amongst the barks of other dogs, clanging cage doors, fluorescent lights over concrete echoed sounds, strangers serving stale food babbling nonsense urging him to be sweet. He lay twitching but otherwise perfectly still, body spent, at the end of the bed reliving it all in disjointed fragments of dreams.

But that's the anatomy of true arguments. The really vicious ones that echo in everyone's minds afterward for pure meanness. They spring from nowhere, violent sudden eruptions fueled like exploding gasoline unexpectedness, a recoil of good feeling spun suddenly and ferociously on its heels with a venomous snap to attention surprise, insulting things expressed in words that sting then linger, leaving behind traces of poison that without the moderating effect of experience lend themselves to even meaner things said later. That was one advantage of getting older. You had learned not to say certain things you'd regret and really didn't mean. You could stop yourself at that very instant when anger otherwise might take you, because you understood it harmed you as much as the other person. But even that was an act of selfishness.

For a small dog he had always been plucky, possibly displaying a canine form of little man's syndrome, using boldness to compensate for lack of size. Why the boy had chosen that particular one, he always said dreamily afterward, was that this particular little tumbling ball of black and white fur had smiled at him, as if he recognized him already, as opposed to all the other puppies in the litter spilled out that day on a blanket in the grass squirming over each other at the puppy

farm they told themselves they had rescued him from.

Even though they had paid for him it had the moral equivalence of saving him from being put down at the pound once his adorable puppy shelf life had passed, only because they chose to think of it that way. Otherwise with these people, grubby, fat, quick eyed folk who accepted payment in cash only, counting it feverishly then nodding cleverly to each other it was all there, shoving it greedily into their pockets, he would have been shoved into a weighted burlap sack tossed over a bridge guard rail with his brothers and sisters squirming and squealing obliviously all the way down to their muffled gurgling death once they became too big and unmarketable.

His smile, as it turns out, had been a precursor of how the dog really was. Maybe a product of his rough beginnings. Not docile and demurring, but edgy, quick to defend and put himself forward. An Alpha dog they'd read on canine behavioral webs sites, having been struck by his obvious assertiveness, studying up anxiously, worried something was psychotically, pathologically wrong with him once they'd brought him home and it was too late.

In the beginning at times it seemed like a good thing. The dog knew who he was and wanted you to know too. But it had its bad side. And the eleven year old boy, who wanted to love the dog desperately because he was at that stage, needing a place to invest his emotions, had seen that already in the year they'd had him. He'd been nipped and wounded several times as he learned the hard way about wayward dog behavior and easy animal spirit provocation, and this dog's particular brand of bad behavior, having made every possible mistake along the way. Each time it had been scorched into the collective memory of the household for its degree of trauma, always accompanied by a seething argument over what it meant, or how much it mattered.

This time the boy was whisking the dog feverishly about his ears as the dog slept, when it happened. The dog presenting a perfectly irresistible curl of soft wavy fur and flopped over ears

at the foot of the bed. The boy was only doing what he couldn't help, as was the dog. Both were driven by instinct and base emotion. The dog had snarled, turning in a blinding instant slicing the boy's fingers with a slash of teeth as neatly as fine knives. Then just as quickly tucking back into his ball as if the thing had never happened.

The boy's fingers immediately bled. A sort of quick flash of blood typifying wounds to the fingers that frighten, causing a mother assume the worst. Then to have immediate fierce feelings about what caused it, looking quickly to identify and fix blame, for the sake of prevention, or just having someone pay.

The father never had a chance to see anything. Even though the whole thing happened as he relaxed on the bed after the five hour drive with the puppy curled at his feet. The boy had come in fussing with the dog right there, it being purely incidental, absent premeditation. The man didn't see the result because the boy ran away frightened, carrying his wounded hand close and protected like a baby bird, afraid to look at it himself much less show it to his father. The boy's first instinct after feeling pain and knowing he was hurt was to find his mother, not stopping until he did. He never uttered a peep, even though his father had been right there looking almost directly at the whole thing. It had happened so fast how could the father have even known. There might have been nothing wrong at all. He couldn't tell. There was absolutely no way he could have been responsible.

But that's of course what she thought when she escorted the boy back, both of them red faced and frightened, hurrying into the bathroom to rinse the boy's hand. Of course she was angry right away, at the dog, at the father for sitting benignly there idiotically watching mindless sitcom television while the boy's hand spurted blood, and no one knew how bad it was until we could get the thing cleaned and take a look at it, it might be really bad, and now that dog had done it again,

and this wasn't the first time but it was going to be the last. And what did he think he was doing just sitting there doing nothing next to that dog, the two of them acting in league like nothing went on while her son's hand bled out. And who really knew what could become of this, what could become of anything really if things went this way all the time, if people that are supposed to care, be responsible and that you should be able to trust so you could look away for only a minute did nothing. Where would we be then. This was exactly the problem, and what required constant unerring vigilance to be protected against.

"What," the man moaned not getting up. The dog did not flinch, relaxed balled at the man's feet.

"Have you even looked at this," she howled from the bathroom, "at what that vicious little mutt of yours did, do you even know about it, that it even happened."

"He ran out, he ran out right when it happened, I never got a chance to see it. It's not my fault."

"Well what do you mean it not your fault, what does that mean, why do you have to even say that, are you a child, I mean really, I've had it, this looks like it might need stitches, that dog's got to go, I mean it. I can't believe this."

Now the man struggled to his feet weighted by the feeling he had done this before, ruffling the dog's head as he passed, who grunted maybe at something approaching in his dream, sleeping off whatever had happened at the Veterinarian, having work to do there, the man being sympathetic letting the dog lie quiet and unharassed.

He stepped into the bathroom conscious to assume a certain concerned posture, hovering over the sink as the mother held the boy's fingers firmly under the water rinsing them thoroughly, vigorously scouring away all potential lurking microbial contaminants, watching the tainted

blood fade vanquished down the drain carrying away danger. The boy winced at the sting of water in his wounds and the man could see the boy was close to crying. His eyes were swollen, and the man knew it was as much about the betrayal of the dog, that the dog would even be the cause of such pain, as it was about the wounds themselves; two clear slices on the adjoining insides of the ring and middle fingers running close to the length of one and half that much on the other.

The man winced seeing that. These were real wounds causing actual pain. But examining closely he gauged in the boy's eyes exactly how little the crying had to do with that, and more with the dog having caused it. By the boy's feelings it was personal. The dog did it because he didn't love him. As it had been proven out he never had. It was simple.

"Look kid," the man said wrapping his arm about his son's shoulders, "there's more to it than that." Everyone was packed tightly about the sink, the mother feverishly looking over the wounds, the boy holding out his hand disembodied, not looking as if it didn't belong to him. The man forced himself in closer to see everything, imposing himself wrapping his arm completely around his son's shoulders, nudging the mother out the slightest intentional bit making her hrmmpphh and shove her way back in, clutching tight her son's hand as her tether, what made her indispensable.

"You can't take it that way, he didn't meant to do it like you think, he's tired from boarding at the Vet and he was sleeping and you woke him by messing with him and he did what dogs do, that's all, it's got nothing to do with you personally. He would have done that to anyone. He's an animal no matter how much you love him. He's still an animal and he will act like one if you do the wrong thing, all animals will, do you understand."

"Oh now you're saying it's his fault," the mother snarled, quick to anger as if her son's injury

were her own.

"No I'm not saying that. I'm not saying it's anyone's fault," the father breathed out as if this should be understood. "That's not the point. It's a matter of understanding, that's all, certain things will happen if you do other certain things. It's got nothing to do with how we feel or what we want. I just want him to understand that, by understanding he'll realize it's not his fault. Sometimes it's nobody's fault. It's instinct, that's all, and if you don't want to get bit you need to understand that and know what not to do."

The mother's face tightened unwilling to hear that. There was no good reason something like this should happen, or through someone's neglect be allowed. There were no excuses.

"Well that's the last time, I'm telling you that. We either get that dog in a training program or keep him muzzled all the time or something, and I mean quick, or we get rid of him. I don't care what you think about that anymore."

And she didn't, right at that moment as those words spit from her lips. All her sympathy and affection toward the dog, which existed most of the time, the dog being so entirely cute and adorable making him impossible to resist; cuddling, feeding, nurturing, in turn him being a loyal companion leading the way pulling her along by the leash during brisk walks around the neighborhood, was for naught. It meant nothing compared to an injury to her child. Her actual flesh. The most honest expression of her truest self, the vessel of her heart and all hope going forward into an uncertain and dangerous future.

It was true on occasion she loved the dog. After all she was the one that routinely looked after his well being, just as she did everyone else's. She's the one that always remembered his flea and heart worm treatments, was overly aware of his health in a way the boy and the man were not, once correctly identifying that the dog had infected ears when it never would have occurred to

either of them, simply because she paid attention. She even commented occasionally when he seemed a little down in the dumps, depressed even if he stared too forlornly out the window at passersby on the street from his steady post atop the sofa cushion at the window. That is if clinical depression was even possible in a dog with such an otherwise indefatigable temperament.

But none of that mattered now. Not when she saw it as a choice that had to be made. That choice could be decided upon quickly and ferociously, without remorse, between her child and that dog. The dog no longer being her's but the father's, or no one's at all, deserving of no tenderness after having harmed her child.

"Oh that is a good one," the man said now that the cold water from the faucet had stanching the bleeding and he could see the details. What he was going to say now was very calculated.

Although the wound was actually worse than he thought, and he cringed a little on the inside once that became clear under the lens of running water, it was nowhere near bad enough to need stitches. But so what if it did. That was not the worst that could happen. He had gotten stitches when he was a boy, and it was always because of something stupid he had done, and thereafter careful to never do again, avoiding that exact same type of pain. Pain often in the father's estimation, if not crossing the threshold into scarring trauma, was the best teacher. It inoculated you from something even more idiotic in the future, certain to present itself as an irresistible opportunity, requiring seasoning to recognize and avoid .

"All it needs is a little ointment and a couple of band aids and it will fine." The way he said this, his exact carefully placed inflection of specifically weighted sympathy, reassurance, and mocking seriousness, each purpose as fine and distinct as a bright thread braided into his tone and tenor showing against each other, was his way to publically calibrate the severity of the wound. Recognizing it had happened and without question hurt. But also saying it was not that

bad, that there was something else here just as important. Even in the face of his child's momentary pain this needed pointing out. The careful condescension in his voice accounted for that. The sympathy of course was meant for the boy. The rest for his wife, who recognized all of it by a keening of her eyes.

"It is bad," she snarled. "That's just stupid. It's not even the point. It's just totally unnecessary, a dog shouldn't bite his own people, his own boy." The man could see her sheathed anger in her trembling hands, and also that she was speaking on behalf of the boy now, leveraging that as her cause, using him as blanket justification for anything she felt needed being said now that he had taken it that way. She didn't much but eyed the man deliberately insinuating she could, bending over kissing her child on the top of his head with a showy gentleness keeping her eyes fixed on her husband, signaling she understood everything. She even pulled the boy in tighter, away from him, being purposefully peevish, showing how low she was willing to go if that was the way he was going to be.

The boy responded by reaching out further, holding his hand under the water watching the last blood spin diluted down the drain, studying everything with fascination now. His shock was gone so that he was able to see things for their own merit, void of fear, having earned his way passed that. He had the capacity for that the man knew, and he smiled now when he saw it. It was something he tried to encourage, a way of regarding matters clearly, past pain or confusion, to that which mattered. The things needed to form wise decisions.

The mother continued her grappling hold on the boy, and her stare at the man, locked into both as if resistance were her final statement on the matter. There was nothing left to discuss or dispute. Now the man felt suddenly peeved and pushed around, his patience spent. He looked hard into her eyes, meeting her stare with an exceeding one of his own. Then he spun on his heels

with purpose, leaving the room by actor's gesture, going back into the bedroom snatching up the little dog tossing him onto his shoulder still in his dreams, and marching him as if a drum major about the house. He ruffled his fur, and cooed at him in a provocative theatrical babble showing it could be done, demonstrating the degree of control possible, proving the dog was harmless and what happened had been an aberration. The boy had simply done the wrong thing at the wrong time. In the end the dog was the same, sweet most of the time, the exact dog the boy loved and that she took for walks, and that what happened did not mean what the mother would have the boy believe. Irrational caution was not required all the time, only good sense.

He carried the dog into the bathroom, slinging him down with a dizzying spin from his shoulder teeth first toward the boy like the muzzle of a rifle as his mother finished bandaging the wound. At first the boy withdrew remembering. But the dog was docile now, unprovokable, looking up sweetly at the boy, and the boy forgot himself reaching out his intact hand unable to resist. Only the mother remained afraid, keeping her eyes locked closely onto the gap between the dog's teeth and her child's exposed hand, her entire body tensed and cocked ready to snatch the boy's hand back, or smack the dog hard away, or dive into the breach, anything to protect her child.

"That's not a good idea at all, no sir, you should not be doing that, it is way too soon after what happened, I'm telling you that is not a good idea, I mean it takes some kind of idiot to think that's okay," letting go a stream of cautions and dire tones and veiled insults that the father purposefully and gleefully ignored, snickering at her absurd overreach, pressing the dog closer groggy and deferential, close enough to nuzzle the boy with his wet nose so that the boy smiled broadly remembering why he loved the little dog, forgetting completely what had happened.

The mother and the father traded barbed glares, like pistol play over everything. The father

pressed the dog in closer, knowing the boy could not resist absent his fear, then looked harder again at the mother, who returned his look best she could given her practical worry that the puppy would bite, and so having to look away, her face alternating to the meet the man's, then fraught with attentiveness toward the dog and her child, finally wrapping her hands about the dog not to pet but to restrain, to prevent something from happening. The dog would have to go through her before getting to her child.

"Okay, that's enough, I think we get your point, I mean it, are you some kind of horses..." she said the words trailing away as she snatched the dog from the man's hands clear of her child, dumping the dog onto the floor. The dog stayed put, perching high on his haunches, feeling the gathering of his pack, looking up toward them tuned to emotions he understood were about him, instinctively knowing this as a moment to exploit with everyone standing near.

"No really, I mean it, my god this is just, I don't know, that really is enough," the mother said her voice sputtering, pushing her way out into the living room holding her palms high in surrender and protest. "I want my child to stay away from that dog. I shouldn't have to explain it. It's what I want. That just shouldn't happen. It's simple. You know it and I know it. A dog shouldn't bite his own kid. Period."

The man watched and didn't speak. As he would not for a while. What would be the point. He knew what he knew. That it was in the nature of animals, no matter how tame or seemingly domesticated, to act in particular ways given particular situations or stimuli. So it was for people, such as overly protective mothers. All living things behaved as an expression of their innate nature, oblivious to feeling or wants, and as such these behaviors needed to be acknowledged and understood, not mindlessly ignored because you didn't like them, or to get angry over simply because they didn't suit you. In order to avoid certain negative consequences people needed to

act sensibly with this reality in mind. On that basis alone it was a valuable lesson. It was not about what you wanted. It was about as it was. On this he knew he was correct and would not apologize or explain further.

The mother didn't care for any of that. Her desire was to protect. No matter what. This didn't require complicated rationals excusing bad things happening, even allowing them because they seemed inevitable. In the end that had nothing to do with it. Protection was a simple and necessary goal, uncomplicated in its rationale, straightforward in execution, fundamental to survival. Like the idea of prevention it made it's own sense, the most basic and important kind. She believed as all mothers did that her child suffering pain of any kind, coming from whatever the cause or idiotically rationalized end, was unnecessary and to be stopped.

So they didn't speak. And that was fine. As it should be given they had nothing to say. Their positions had been put forth unresolvable to each other, and would never be conceded given the certainty they had in themselves.

There followed a long seething silence allowing each to maintain these opinions, even continuing to argue for them in the muttering stillness of their thoughts. Until much much later, when the sense of not speaking and awkward loneliness broke down due to the impracticality of living in the same modestly sized house. The silence would be finally breached by a one or the other, offering a small testing gesture or carefully forwarded considerate word, cautious not to gamble too much lest it be rejected, triggering a flaring rebound. The other would then seize on the kindness out of relief and gratitude, without recrimination, not letting the opportunity pass.

But they went to bed angry that night sure enough of themselves, tired from the trip, unwilling to concede anything, leaving it unresolved for a time to emphasize their point. The boy fell asleep quickly, exhausted by it all, as always leaving one lamp on to scare away monsters lurking under

his bed in the dark. His bandaged fingers throbbed under the tightness of the bandages as the dog cuddled close once the house had settled, feeling the boy's touch and connection as dogs do, using the simplest contact to cement the feeling of being part of something larger. He still twitched on occasion seeing the Veterinarian coming toward him in his white jacket smiling, gushing baby talk mistaking the dog for an idiot reaching out his hand like he might grab him.