

NOT TODAY

The woman figures she was walking the dog about the time her son killed himself. He had called very early that morning. The dog was getting used to his new surroundings. He didn't want the little guy to be alone in the apartment, anxious, while he was at the VA hospital. So her son had the van stop by their house first. The raggedy-eared, three-legged dog looked up at her as if he knew her when she took the leash. He reminded her of an old, gray Scot with the unruly coat, wiry whiskers, and bleary eyes. She'd never been to Scotland, but she'd seen that movie, the one with the gruesome fighting, the blue-painted faces, the bare-assed taunt of the uppity English soldiers—they're a stalwart bunch, those Scots.

She'd told her son not to worry and that the little dog would be fine with her. Her son said of course he would as he raised his arms for a hug before he wheeled himself back up the ramp. After the therapy appointment he rolled his wheelchair onto the tracks at East Main and faced the oncoming train. It couldn't stop. She hoped her boy had closed his eyes tightly, the way he did on the roller coaster when he was small.

Now they've got this peculiar-looking dog. The woman says he's got nowhere to go. Her husband says open the door, push the dog out, shut it, forget him, he'll get hit by a car, or picked up by some bleeding heart, be somebody else's problem instead of hers. Instead of his.

For heaven's sake, the woman can take care of the little dog just fine, and without his help too.

Damn straight, don't ask him to do anything, he didn't ask for this trouble, he didn't tell her son to get a dog, he didn't ask for her son to dump the dog on them, and sure as hell doesn't need dog hair or who knows what else all over the place.

A three-legged dog can't fend for himself; he's got next to no chance of surviving without help. She didn't ask for it either; but the dog is here, and she will deal with it, all of it. It's the right thing to do. Loss squeezes her heart, closes her throat, loosens her knees, and steals the breath from her lungs. It was the last thing that her son asked of her. How can her husband be so cold? Where's his compassion?

She'll make a bed for the dog in the kitchen, next to the fridge. Their yard is fenced in. Ideal. He can limp out the back door to do his business. She'll pick up after him, clean up, there won't be anything left to step in. The dog will be company; he'll bark when strangers come knocking. He'll be family.

Goddamn defective dog, says her husband. Of all the friggin' dogs in the shelter, the boy had to adopt this one. Why not a big dog? A whole dog? A dog that doesn't smell like dirty wet wool? It's obvious, she thinks, why her son adopted this one; the reason is staring her husband right in the face, but the blockhead is too self-absorbed to see. You aren't spending a dime of my money on it, he says. She tells him you don't have to worry yourself about that.

He stinks, her husband says. A thought lodges in her head: So do you.

He's her second-chance husband, her boy's stepfather, the man who pulled her out of her first sorrow, her first despair, with his looks, his charm, his ready acceptance of her son. She's so exasperated with him, she can't remember that charm, or see those good looks, or recall his warmth with her boy. He pisses her off more often than not these days.

He was fine when he was working. Dinners were pleasant, they had discussions, they laughed, haggled over the remote, and made weekend plans. He'd changed. She gives him space. She keeps her feelings to herself because he has no patience for them. It is easier to keep to herself, stay busy with the house, the roses, her books, and intermittent substitute teaching.

That Monday, when the bell chimed, the dog had followed her from the kitchen to the front door with slow, hopping steps. He hadn't barked in the few hours she'd been caring for him and didn't then. How he knew that the two people in uniform who greeted her by name meant no harm was beyond her. He sat at her feet, listing to his good side, as an officer extended his two hands to grasp one of hers and asked if anyone else was home.

She opened her mouth to reply, but nothing came out as her husband yelled from the other room that the cable's gone out, you gotta call the bastards, third goddamn time this month! The other officer raised his voice, sir, we need to speak with you and your wife together. Her husband said what the hell. He rocked from foot to foot as they listened to the terrible words. He kept his hands at his sides; one held the help-wanted section of the newspaper and slapped it hard against his thigh.

After the crematory, when they've gotten home and her good black shoes are back in the closet, she lets the dog out into the yard. Her husband has put the television on. The volume is

too loud. Some football team has scored a goal. He calls out, get me a soda, a root beer. There is a quiver of question in his voice. He's out of sight. She starts to flip him the bird but stops herself. Not today, she thinks. The action isn't like her. That's not who she is. It's something rough boys on corners do, or people crazy with road rage. She tucks her middle finger into her palm. She suppresses the gesture. She stands at the screen door and watches the dog sniff along the perimeter of the fence. Maybe, she thinks, she *is* rough; maybe she *is* crazy. Maybe, she thinks, this is her new self.

The post-motherhood self. The thought is excruciating, strange, fresh and raw. What, she wonders, will she say if some stranger asks if she has children? Her eyes water up yet again.

Just leave the dog out there, her husband calls out, he doesn't need watching. She doesn't get his soda; she pretends she hasn't heard. She stays at the door. The dog looks back at her over his shoulder and wags his skinny tail.

The woman listens to her husband's heavy footsteps, she tracks him by the sympathetic clink of the china in the cabinets, the squeak of floorboards, and the rattle of jars on the shelves of the fridge door as it opens and closes. She waits for silence at her back before she calls the dog in. Then she sits at the kitchen table. She leans over and lays her head on her folded arms.

Nearly everything her husband says lately irritates her. His constant obsessing gets under her skin and makes her long for escape. If it isn't the weather, it's the taxes, the president he voted for, the newspaper deliveryman's bad aim, the shrunken boxes of cereal that cost far more than the old bigger ones, reruns, thin toilet paper, and the neighbor's choice of house color. Mauve? What the hell! The constant why are you doing that, you should do this, don't forget to, did you do whatever. When he's on a roll, she can't think straight.

Maybe this is what drives some women to kill their spouses, how they find themselves on the cover of *People* magazine and the news at five, six, and eleven. No, don't go there, you're being ridiculous, she tells herself; he's not a bad man, he's never cheated, or been violent, or drunk or gambled. It's just been recently, with the changes, he isn't what he used to be. Now, neither is she.

He'd always said he wanted time to do things he wanted to do. Now that he's got it, he's miserable. Money's got him worried, the tightness of it, the never-shrinking bills: flick off those lights, don't use the dishwasher. Unemployment isn't much and won't last, and then there's health insurance sucking up the savings. Why does a damn tiny bottle of eye drops cost as much as a month's worth of groceries? His briefcase is still on the floor where he dropped it next to the front door. The day he came home and announced he'd been laid off. That he'd been replaced by someone in Mumbai or New Delhi.

At least there was no mortgage; her first husband had made sure of that. The house was paid for, in full, by his premature death when their boy was only two. She'd cemented their security by teaching English in the middle school while her mother babysat. She met her second husband when she backed into his car and was amazed to discover that she could fall in love again. Her new husband dropped into their lives like a well-cut puzzle piece. Her son became *their* son, formally adopted a week after the wedding and the biggest star in their heaven.

The boy grew up. Sometimes the woman saw his dead father in him, in an expression, a gesture, in his love of soccer. Sometimes she saw his adoptive father in him, in a tone or a posture, in his sense of humor. She liked to think that he'd gotten the best of both men. She and her husband were proud when the boy chose premed in college; cancer research was what he

wanted to do, in his first father's memory. Then, inexplicably, with one semester to go, he enlisted to become a Marine. Only half of him came back near the end of his second tour.

She had thought, and her husband had thought too, that they were all doing well coming to terms with their boy's new reality, that their son was adapting, coping. How could they have been so mistaken? How did she fail to see it coming?

The sick feeling of loss wells up from the newest fissure in the woman's heart and rushes to her head. It rides fat tears that drop on the yellow linen tablecloth.

The dog sits on her foot. The nubby stump of his missing leg pokes into it and the sharpness startles her. She shifts her foot. His tail thumps the floor and brushes her ankle as it goes up and down. She reaches under the table with one hand to rub the top of his head and for a paper napkin with the other. Her nose is running.

She hears a familiar commercial coming from the television, the one with the talking infant, the one that, on better days, makes her smile. Her husband calls, you okay? Yes, she replies, knowing it is true in the small sense, and not at all in the big. Her arms feel heavy, sluggish, as she pushes herself up to her feet. A walk, that's what she needs, air, sun, a stretch in her legs. The dog's leash is still unfamiliar; the harness is confusing in the way it latches. She fumbles with it before she figures it out. The dog is patient.

He leads her through the living room. The dog's tail bats back and forth, happy he is, she guesses, to be on the move. She feels her husband's eyes follow them. You want company? She could not remember when he had last asked her that. The little dog turns back and stops at his feet. Her husband leans forward. He reaches down and extends his hand, palm up, to the tip of the dog's whiskers. The dog sniffs it and licks the fingers with his cloudy eyes rolled up to hers.

Give him a chance, lass, the dog seems to say. Okay, she replies to her husband. To the dog she nods. Chances, she thinks, that's all we've got, to make something of anything. She tells her husband, let's go. The couch creaks as he gets up.

She lifts a zippered sweatshirt, her son's, from a hook on the wall by the door. The woman touches the patch on the chest, the tight embroidered threads of gold, red, and blue. Small words are stitched along the banner streaming from the eagle's beak. *Semper Fidelis*, always faithful. Yes, she thinks, she will tell them yes, she had a son. She puts the sweatshirt on. She zips it up. She opens the door. A cool breeze lifts the hair away from her face.

She tugs on the dog's leash and looks back at her husband. *Semper Fidelis*, never give up, never give in. Is it a message? Advice? To be stalwart like the Scots, like a three-legged dog?

Maybe it's just a sweatshirt left on a hook, but not today.

THE END