

The Hole in the Dog

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“In the middle of the day,” Elaine Smith said across Peg’s kitchen table. After seeing her distraught in church that morning, Peg had invited Elaine over to the house for Snackwells and lime water. She thought she might be able to console her, given that her home had recently been burglarized. Peg wished she were the kind of person who would hold a friend’s hand. But she was the kind of person who nodded and said, “Unbelievable.”

Elaine said, “While no one was home. In the middle of the day. If I had come home early. In the middle of the day.”

Peg said “Unbelievable.” Nate’s electric drill buzzed on the far side of the front door. He was removing their address letters. None of the neighbors had theirs up anymore.

“The police said they knew just where to hit him,” Elaine said. “So that he died instantly.”

“I’m sorry,” Peg asked. “Who did they kill?”

“Our dog,” Elaine said. “We found him beneath the mailbox the night before the robbery.”

“For mercy,” Peg said.

“No,” Elaine said, grabbing Peg’s hand as she reached for a Snackwell. “So that he wouldn’t bark to warn anyone. They’ve been targeting dogs. Have you heard? No dogs to bark means no warning. Have you seen a white truck? The color of egg shells? Moving always south? At reasonable speeds?”

Snickers, the family Labrador, nuzzled the warm space between Peg’s thighs. She ruffled his chin.

“I just can’t believe it,” Elaine said, pulling her hand away from Peg’s. “Robbed like that.”

“It was a burglary,” Peg said.

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Elaine took a long drink of ice water, put the glass down and said, "What?"

"If they had attacked you on the street that would have been a robbery. But the way it happened for you it was a burglary."

Elaine looked back at her, smiled toothlessly and said, "Well how about that."

That evening, Peg called her older daughter, Dana, who was living an hour and a half away in Cincinnati. They talked for ten minutes, in a way indicating no difference from any other Sunday evening call, when Dana said, "Oh, also. Emily thought of a name for the baby."

Peg's younger daughter was pregnant. The father was not married to her and Peg was, she told herself all the time, ok about this. She had also learned about the pregnancy from her older daughter during a Sunday evening phone call.

"She's going to name her Arya," Dana said.

"Are yah?" Peg repeated.

"Arya," Dana reaffirmed.

"I don't know," Nate butted in on the other phone. "Are ya or aren't ya?"

"Nate?" Peg said. "Apparently it's a girl."

"This was never promised to us," Peg said that night in bed. She often found her head attacked by strange thoughts throughout the day, and it was helpful to express them to the silence of her bedroom, after Nate had fallen asleep and just before she turned off her reading light.

Nate mumbled into his pillow. Peg turned off her light. Outside, the sound of the aluminum mounting bracket, colliding with the side yard flagpole, kept time with the rhythm of the wind.

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The next morning, Peg called Snickers for his treats, but he did not come. On his way out the door for work, Nate scanned the view of the front windows and said, "He's probably playing with the cows."

Their neighbor, Bill Cook, leased his pasture to a local dairy farmer to graze two dozen Herefords. The cows had been Snickers' playmates since the day Emily had found him, wandering starved and molted with ticks, abandoned in the forest behind the property. Outside of Emily, who Snickers ran up to and jumped on even when she hadn't visited in months, the cows were the dog's best friends

Peg rounded the house, past the flagpole and the butterfly bushes. The cows were clotted flank to flank against the property line. Their heads were bent as if to graze. Or, Peg realized as she approached the herd, to mourn. When she found Snickers, dead beneath the herd of noses, the body was bloodless, marked only by a black hole in his chest. That afternoon, after Nate called into work and the police had come and gone and Bill Cook had mumbled a forlorn, "Peg, I'm sorry," the official report would identify the hole as 16 millimeters in diameter and leading directly into the dog's heart.

"Maybe it was an accident," Nate said with dog in his arms, wrapped in one of Emily's old blankets as he carried it to the pickup. "Deer hunters."

Peg smiled. Nate said these things not just to support her. Even when confronted with an obvious cruelty, he still believed in the greater likelihood of accidents.

The animal hospital charged them forty five dollars to dispose of the body. They paid extra to put the ashes into a cedar box. On the box was a plaque that read, 'In Loving Memory of our Treasured Friend: Snickers' and, holding this between her knees on the way back home that evening, Peg announced, "I don't want you posting about this."

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“That’s a good idea,” Nate agreed. “The girls. Emily. We should tell them first. We can tell them during our Sunday call. Unless you’re worried someone from church will tell the girls.

“Don’t worry,” peg said. “No one from church is going to talk to the girls.”

She had been thinking about Emily’s last visit, eight months ago, stopping by for the first time that year on the way back to her new life in Chicago. How she had stepped out of her car looking a little thin, Peg realizing only now through retrospective math that she had been one month pregnant. Emily had hugged her parents with perfunctory pats against their shoulder blades, only to melt into Snickers’ paws as he bounded into her arms from behind the house. And, only after a love fest with the dog in which she took, Peg counted, no less than seventeen selfies, she had said, “Sorry, Jon had to cancel at the last minute.” To which Peg had asked, “Jon?” and Emily had repeated, “Jon. Jon?” To which Nate had replied, “Honey, I think Emily needs to use the toilet, har har.” To which Emily had replied by disappearing with the dog on a long walk around the property, returning only after dinner was cold to admit she was sorry, saying, “I guess I told Dana about him and thought she’d tell you.” In bed that night, scrolling both of her daughters’ various posts for pictures of home, Peg had seen that her younger daughter now memorialized where she grew up with pictures of herself and Snickers, pictures of the horizon, and countless likes by a person named Jon who, apparently, she was living with and very serious about. It had been so long, Peg realized, since the family had taken a photograph together on the couch for a holiday that she would have to actually go to one of the photo albums to find one.

Did she have, she wondered that night in bed, memories of an unfamiliar truck idling in the road beyond the house the week before? Did she have an accurate memory of the killing wound? The police report said it was sixteen millimeters across. But in her memory it was so much larger. The diameter of a can of Diet-Pepsi.

“There are two worlds,” Peg said to herself, finger pinched against the light switch.

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Nate mumbled, "What?"

"I didn't say anything," she said.

"Yes you did," Nate said, turning over to face her. "You said there are two worlds."

Peg stared ahead, looked down and pretended to read.

Nate said, "Peg "We'll get another dog. I'll take you down to the shelter on Saturday."

"I didn't mean it," Peg said. "I was just joking."

The next morning, Peg ground the coffee beans and stared through the kitchen window at the cows across the field. Nate, dressed for work in his Carhaarts, was on the floor, fiddling underneath the fridge with an unfurled coat hanger. "Almost got it kitty," he grumbled. The cat, at his shoulder and recently emerged from its basement lair, meowed.

"Here you go kitty," Nate announced, chucking a recovered toy mouse across the kitchen, where the cat ran after it. It took it in its mouth, mimed breaking its neck, then carried it over to the dog bed in the corner of the room, already covered in cat hair.

There are two worlds, Peg thought, finding the thought from the night before still waiting there for her. The butterfly bushes, the birdfeeder, everything outside the window belonged to one possible world, where the hole in things was no wider than a wedding band, and one could trust in the lasting diameter of wounds. Here, cows gathered for prayer, to mourn the body of the Labrador. Coyotes died in the fields all the time, but the herd reserved their ritual for Snickers. Here, the shots of good intentioned people traveled clean into the skulls of evil men, and all the news of scattered daughters came quick and simple on the phone every Sunday. And yet there was another world, less physical but perhaps more real, where the hole in Snickers now seemed as big around as a can of dog food, big enough to draw in the numbers from the mailboxes and the "Welcomes" from the mats. Cows gathered

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here without friendship or ceremony, drawn together only by dumb instinct. And here they stood watching while the men in the egg shell truck made their way into her home in the middle of the day and there were no dogs left to warn the neighbors. Here, baby's gestated with names and genders known only to a few, until that news trickled through the phone lines as if an afterthought.

On Wednesday morning, Peg went for Snicker's bag of treats before remembering there was no one left to give them to. She thought about calling her friend, who was also named Peg, for advice. But Peg was two time zones away, retired in Southern California. "With all the fruits and nuts," Nate had laughed at her going away party. "Goodbye Peg", everyone had said. And Peg thought back to when they were in school together. And how many girls there were named Peg. Sometimes there were three or four of them in one class at a time. For years she had been known as Peg L. Then she had met Nate and, with her named changed, got to be known as Peg R. But now she was the only person she knew named Peg. She couldn't remember them all dying. She would have good memories of a death notification for someone with her name. Had they moved away, like California Peg?

Then, when her second daughter was born, Peg named her Emily. And when she was growing up, Emily would have usually at least one friend also named Emily. She must have had six friends named Emily, little kids in dance class, in her marching band, during his stays at the hospital, in college. And now her daughter was grown and wanted to name her daughter Arya. They were already replacing the Emily's and not even all the Pegs were gone yet.

Sitting in church that Sunday, listening to the pastor, Peg remembered a passage from the Bible. It spoke of the coming of a second world to eclipse the old, when dogs fell dead among the threshes. Peg stopped paying attention to the pastor and started flipping through the Bible in the pew in front of her. She flipped all through the sermon, through the books of the latter half of the Old Testament, past the prophecy and king making and her favorite part, the story of Ruth, but found nothing. She even

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went ahead, all the way to the end, into The Revelation, whose verses read like toxic juice wrung from rotten berries. That afternoon they would call their eldest daughter, Dana, and tell her about the dog, and then Dana would tell her younger sister Emily and then Emily would tell the father of her baby that there was no point in visiting home ever again. Peg thought that if she could find that passage, the exactness of its words would guide her, the way it was supposed to. But then the service was over and it was time to shuffle out and go home.

Milling about in front of the church, Elaine looked better. She had already started posting pictures of her new dog online. Peg wondered why she didn't return the favor and invite her over to console her. Even now that they shared the experience of an assassinated dog, Peg felt that she had come to know something different. No one else, not even Nate, had seen what she had, that morning gazing into the hole in the dog's neck. It had been the beginning of something endlessly expanding. Tomorrow it would be the size of a hubcap, large enough to swallow photo albums and baskets of birthday fruit. The day after, the lid of a garbage can, consuming toddlers and lost sheep. Then, a hoola hoop. An outdoor pool. A skating rink. Every time she thought of it, it grew larger, a nothingness dilating past comparison with the works of man. And now Peg imagined herself leaned over the dog's corpse, her ear pressed up against the hole, listening for the good news. Once, when she was a little girl reading the Bible out loud to her grandmother, she had thought, I could write a gospel or two. She had never even spoken this to herself at night. But surely there were other revelations for which the world was long overdue.

Instead of heading straight home, Nate took Peg to see the dogs in the shelter. They looked at their eyes through the bars of the cages. Nate pointed out a few who looked like, as he said, "good dogs." Peg looked at them all and imagined the angles by which rounds would have to pass through their hearts. There were days she had assumed would come to be, in which the giver of things and the taker of things would come in equal measure. When the scattering of silence of her daughters' bedroom

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would be soothed by the regularity of their returns, and she would be given reason to attach the extension leaf to the dining room table every Easter, so swelled with guests would be her house.

“Look,” Nate said. “This one looks like Snickers.”

And, looking at the abandoned Labrador in the cage, Peg considered just swapping it out for the lost dog. The girls might catch on when they visited, but maybe it would be enough to keep them fooled until then.

“I don’t want to tell her,” Peg told Nate as they pulled into the driveway at home. They had decided not to get another dog just yet.

Nate stopped the truck and turned off the engine. He said, “Peg.”

“If we tell Dana, she’ll tell Emily. And I want the girls here for Thanksgiving. Both of them.”

“But the baby,” Nate said.

“By Thanksgiving it will be nine months old,” Peg said, having anticipated all of Nate’s questions and formulated answers for them during the long, silent ride back from the shelter. “I want Emily and Jon here. I want Dana here and whoever she’s dating and I want you to be nice. I don’t want to eat Turkey, I want to eat venison and I would prefer it if it was from a deer you killed. There’s more than enough time for the meat to cure. And I want to have a family picture that I can put on Facebook. And I want everyone in it to be smiling. And then we can tell them about the dog.”

She had Elaine over that weekend while Nate was out shopping for new window locks. They sat at the kitchen table and ate Milano cookies and drank iced tea. The cat sat on Peg’s lap.



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“Did you hear?” Elaine asked. “They stopped two men in a truck last week with a bed load of stolen bicycles. Can you believe it? They were stealing them from people’s front yards. Kids bikes. What they were doing with them I don’t know but it just goes to show you.”

Peg said, “Unbelievable.” She wished she were the type of person to take a friend out into the backyard, load up their pistols and empty twenty or so rounds into the sky.

“What color was the truck?” she asked.

Elaine said, “I don’t know.” She had replaced the dread of a weeks ago with this new thing. And she didn’t say it but Peg thought, that’s the problem with people these days. No one paid close enough attention.

“The girls are coming in for Thanksgiving,” Peg announced.

“You really plan ahead, Peg,” Elaine said.

Peg shoved an entire cookie into her mouth, the chocolate chips emerging from its edges pressing against the edges of her jaws. Peg laughed, her lips curling back to reveal the the cookie still filling her face, and said, “ Eean, Mgub ib gwere wub mebber uh cember mbeway?”