

Damages

Bastard. I say this to myself when I see Tom standing in front of my closed garage door. Hands in his pockets. Mud or something dirty on his jeans.

I've spent the morning at Catha's school making snow-cones for her third-grade class. I am feeling good, until I see Tom.

I aim the remote door opener in his direction. Punch it with a vengeance. I do not look at him. I concentrate on the dark hole of the garage growing from a thin rectangle to more of a square as the door rises.

"Something's happened, Rachel."

"Get out of my driveway, Tom. In fact, get out of my life." There. I've said it.

"Don't go inside, not yet." He is beside the car now, his hands on the sill of the open window. His fingers are inches from my arm.

My hair prickles from the memory of his touch.

"Vega's dead, Rachel."

Last year. At a neighborhood party. Welcome home or going away, I can't remember, for somebody, I don't remember who, some place I don't remember. Must have been Afghanistan. That's where almost all of them go now.

The sweet little neighborhood is about half military, so there are a lot of parties, mostly in the tiny park, a circle at the center of about thirty houses with trim lawns and pink

crepe myrtle trees. The circle is filled with tall Georgia pines. The ground is sandy, covered with pine needles. The kids like to play there. And sometimes, on Wednesday afternoons, we take lawn chairs out there for a beer.

“Since we’re next door neighbors,” the new guy said to me, “how about if we have a drink sometime?” Tom had boyish good looks, handsome enough to be a ladies man. Airline pilot. Bachelor, evidently.

I didn’t say yes, or no, for that matter. Certainly not in front of my neighbors.

The next afternoon about six, Tom showed up at my front door. He held up a bottle of red wine and two stemmed glasses with flowers painted on them.

“Would you happen to have a corkscrew?”

It is funny what you remember. I was wondering if I was wearing lipstick.

I invited him in and sent Catha and the two dogs to the backyard. “Be sure the gate is closed, sweetheart. Don’t let Vega and Nunki get out. Promise?”

When the bottle was half gone, I went into the kitchen to get a container of hummus from the fridge. I fumbled in the basket above for crackers, bit into one to see if it was stale. Good enough, I decided.

Tom followed me, stood behind me. “I love long dark hair,” he said, and he lifted it off my neck. I knew he would find the small star tattooed behind my ear. He kissed it.

I heard myself draw my breath sharply, as I arranged the crackers around the edge of the hummus.

“Saturday,” I whispered. “Catha spends nearly every Saturday night with her grandmother. And if not, she’ll be with the twins across the circle.”

We took the hummus and the last of the wine onto the concrete slab patio just off the kitchen. We sat next to one another in low butterfly chairs. Catha was rolling in the grass with the two dogs.

“Nunki, that’s the white one, that’s Catha’s dog. The black one is mine, my best friend, actually. She’s named Vega. I’ve had her since before Catha was born.”

“Yorkies?” Tom asked.

“Close,” I said. “Yorkie-Maltese mix. Keeps them small.”

I hadn’t planned on letting anyone into my life. My husband was on his third tour of Afghanistan, only a few months into his year-long deployment. It would be a long time before he came home. Military life had taken its toll on our marriage. Brian had always seemed less sensitive than other people. After he came home from the second tour, he was even more so. Often he was distant and cross. Even our daughter Catha had seen it. She cried more when he was home. Brian seemed not to notice her sadness, but before he left this last time, he bought Catha a little dog for her own. The two of them named him Nunki, a star to match my Vega. Now Brian was gone again. Catha and I had our little dogs, but we still were lonesome.

When Tom came along, I didn’t even question myself. Soon we fell into an easy routine. On days when he didn’t fly, one of us slipped through the back gate for a few hours before Catha came home from school. We were careful to be no more than cordial at neighborhood gatherings. So I am sure the neighbors didn’t guess. But if they did, I had not heard a whisper of it.

Eight months we kept the secret. And then, Brian’s tour was coming to an end. I promised Tom that nothing would change. We would still have the days as Brian would be at the base. Just no more Saturday nights and languid Sunday mornings with bloody marys. Tom only shrugged. It made me wonder if he cared at all.

A few days after Brian’s return, when he was at the base and Catha at school, I slipped through the back gate and into Tom’s house. As soon as I walked in, he pushed me

against his kitchen door, ripped at my pants, and pawed at me. Then he pulled me roughly to his bedroom, shoved me face-down on the bed and fucked me from behind. When he was finished, he left the room. I could hear his keys jangle, then the buzz of the garage door, and his car backing out of the driveway. He had not said two words to me.

The next day, I saw a faded and rusted car in front of Tom's open garage. One of the car windows was gone, covered with a plastic bag taped over the opening. I watched out the living room window, as a twenty-something woman ushered two large and mean-looking dogs – pit bulls, I was certain – along with several boxes and suitcases, into Tom's house.

I hear myself screaming. "Vega's not dead. Where is she? Where's Vega?" I push the car door open against Tom.

"Don't, Rachel. Please don't go in there," he says to me as I run into the house through the open garage door.

The kitchen is a mess. Muddy tracks all over the floor, small ones from my dogs, and large ones, from big dogs. Blood spatters on the front of the stove. Dog shit smeared everywhere. Catha's little Nunki is on the floor in the corner, behind the kitchen table. The dog is shaking violently.

"Nunki is fine," Tom said. "It's Vega that's dead. One of the pitbulls broke through the fence. He killed Vega."

I pick up Nunki. He yelps in pain. His skin feels like bubble wrap. There are puncture wounds all over his body and neck.

"No, he's not fine, you fool." I carry the dog into the bathroom and wrap him in a towel. Tom follows me.

“Now where’s Vega? What have you done with her?”

“Vega’s gone, Rachel. I’ll take you and Nunki to the vet.”

“No.” I am screaming. “I’ll take him myself.”

In the car, I phone Brian to come home from the base. I want him there. It is Brian I want to be with me.

I am remembering my image of Vega from last night. Brian had brought hoagies for supper and Catha and I hadn’t finished them. Vega had fished the remains out of the garbage and eaten an entire half of a hoogie. Her little belly was huge and she had vomited on the floor. I fussed at her. I wagged my finger and told her how bad she was. She cocked her head to the right, then to the left, to the right again, paying strict attention to every word I said. It was so cute, I couldn’t help but laugh.

When I return from the vet, Catha has come home from school. Brian is home, too, and is trying to explain what happened. Catha is wailing. I stop my own crying and wrap my arms around her. What is wrong with Brian that he has not thought to do this?

“Where’s my Vega?” I ask. I am rocking Catha as if she is a baby.

Brian explains that he and Tom have gathered Vega from the backyard, wrapped her in a towel, and loaded her into the back of Tom’s SUV. Tom has left, to take my precious dog to the pet cemetery to be cremated.

“Why couldn’t I have seen her? Why couldn’t you wait?” Catha and I are both crying, great heaving sobs.

“Vega was bloody mess,” Brian says. “She was chewed and broken. You don’t want to see her.”

Then Brian explains in his exasperatingly calm and collected way what happened. About two this afternoon, Tom's girlfriend noticed that the dogs were quiet. When she didn't see them in Tom's backyard, she went outside to check. Three of the boards of our wood-slat fence were smashed through. Kaiser, that's the bigger of her two dogs, was roaming our backyard. Vega was evidently already dead.

When Debbie... "that's the girlfriend," Brian interrupted himself... didn't see her other dog, she looked in our window.

"One of the pit bulls was in the kitchen. He had Catha's little dog in his teeth, shaking and shaking and shaking him. Nunki had probably run inside for protection. Debbie's dog must have followed him through the dog door. But Nunki was trapped. He couldn't get past the baby gate."

Of course the baby gate was there. I was at Catha's school and didn't want the dogs turning over all the trash cans. I don't even bother to say this to Brian.

"Fortunately, the back door was unlocked," Brian says. "A good thing you forgot to lock it. Debbie ran inside and called her dog off. She broke them apart. Otherwise we would have two dead dogs."

"You act like Debbie is a fucking hero."

Brian didn't answer.

"Well, she's a slut and a tramp and has no business bringing dogs like that into our neighborhood."

If he suspects my affair with Tom, Brian has not let on. Nor does he even seem to recognize that I am stiflingly angry for more than the apparent reason at the man next door. I believe I am safe.

It is the next evening. I am still in bed. I didn't dress all day. I hear Tom in the living room with Brian. I hear Tom offer to pay the cost of the vet bills, the cremation, and for a marker for Vega at the pet cemetery. He tells Brian that he had Kaiser put down today. Kraft, the other dog, is still there, but he has told Debbie she must keep him inside. Kraft is her favorite dog, and she won't let Tom put him down, since he didn't actually kill Nunki. Tom says he is sorry. Over and over, he says he is sorry.

About what, I wonder. What is he so sorry for?

When Tom leaves, Brian comes into the bedroom and repeats everything I have already heard. He sits close to me on the side of the bed and puts his hand on my shoulder.

“You must get over this, Rach. There are a lot worse things in the world. Now let's get up and get on with life.”

He stands up and leaves the room.

Brian's scorn is unmistakable.

Nunki is back from the vet now. He is bandaged and has two exposed metal bars sewn to the outside of his broken rib cage so that it does not sink into his collapsed lung. The vet says he will be all right in a few weeks, but his heart is bruised and that will take longer to heal. As will mine.

I lie on the sofa every day, in a spooning position with Nunki. A vodka tonic next to me. The big-screen TV is on, but I don't watch it. I have turned off the sound. I am unable to let this little dog leave my arms, even though he is not Vega.

There is a parade of neighbors. They come with lima bean casseroles and pound cake, which I don't eat. They sit across from me in Brian's big chair and tell me how angry they feel for what happened.

But they don't really understand. They are only frightened. They don't let their dogs or their kids outside. The children can't even wait for the school bus on a beautiful spring morning, they say. One of the neighbors carries a gun, and has sworn he will shoot the remaining dog if he so much as sees it.

Sometimes in the night, I have erotic dreams about Tom. I wake to find myself clutching Brian's back. I worry if I have called out to Tom in my sleep.

I think of the secret I am keeping from Brian. I wonder what he is not telling me. He never speaks of what happens in Afghanistan. He tells only happy parts about jokes between the soldiers, that he takes candy to a little girl about Catha's age, and that sometimes Afghan families honor him with raisins and walnuts and green tea. I decide that he survives what he must face by pretending not to see it.

It is two months now, since Vega died. I have not spoken to Tom. In fact, I have hardly seen him, and then only a glimpse as he drives in and out of his driveway. Debbie's car and her dog, and Debbie, in fact, have vanished. I am not interested enough to ask anyone what happened.

Most of the neighbors have stopped coming by. They don't bring food anymore. And the ones who do come won't talk about the incident. "Forget it," the twins' mother said. "You can't bring Vega back. Just be thankful it wasn't one of our children."

The neighborhood has returned to normal. Yellow ribbons on the mailbox when someone comes home from war. Neighbors anonymously mowing lawns for each other. Children play again in the circle. There's a party there tonight, another farewell to a soldier leaving for a year.

It rains all day. About mid-afternoon, Brian comes into the bedroom, where I spend most of my time now. He has been on the phone much of this morning. I could hear his muffled voice in the kitchen, talking quietly so I couldn't distinguish what he was saying. I kept seeing the red light flash on the bedside phone, signaling it was in use.

"Rachel, it's going to rain all day. I've offered to have the party at our house. Get up and help me get things ready." Gertie, who is always in charge of who brings what food, was notifying the neighbors. Diane has already left paper plates and plastic utensils on the front porch.

"And Tom's bringing the keg over in a few minutes."

"That bastard is not coming in my house." I start to cry.

"That bastard..." he paused to underscore his mimic, "paid all the vet bills, bought the grave marker, and fixed the fence. He's apologized a thousand times. Now if you want to stay here and let yourself rot because of what happened to a goddam dog, then do. But Vega is dead, Rachel. Get over it."

"I know Vega is dead, Brian. But even in her absence, she feels more here than you do, even when you are standing right in front of me."

"Can't you see where you're going, Rachel?" Brian has stopped calling me Rach. I try to think what this means, but I am drinking every day now, and don't think as clearly as I did before.

He turns and walks out of the bedroom. From the hall, he offers "Oh, and I called your mother. She wants to come to the party for a while, then she'll take Catha home with her for the rest of the weekend."

I know I have plunged into self-pity. But I do not want to be resilient. My mother, who loves me but judges me, will be here. My husband, who looks down on me, will be

here. And my lover, who is my former lover, will be here. My neighbors – now I am thinking they know everything – will be here. I am feeling something like a moral panic.

The only one absent is my precious Vega. As sad and sorry as I am, there seems to be nothing of my dog left in me. I try to replay the little fragments of her, but it feels useless. The memories have slipped past me. I get up and run the bathtub full, soak for a long time.

When the party begins, I have pinned my hair up to let the star show behind my ear. I am thinner now and choose an outfit I haven't been able to get into for a couple of years. It is dressier than the occasion. I wear it anyway.

Brian tells me I look beautiful.

When Tom arrives, he has been drinking. I know him well enough to know he has had too much. He is telling everyone about what a great guy he is, how much he did for us after the terrible incident. I hate him for many things, but especially for this.

Little Nunki goes crazy when he sees Tom. Funny how a dog can associate a person with a bad experience. He is barking and cowering in the corner. Catha and I are the only ones who understand.

My mother is not much better than the little dog. When she figures out that Tom is the next door neighbor, she tells him to get out of her daughter's house or she'll call the police. Brian tries to calm her, but she will have none of it. The party is suddenly quiet.

Tom pours himself another drink. He tells my mother she's a meddlesome old bag. Then he corners a couple of the neighbors and recounts exactly how much he spent on Vega and Nunki. I can see by their faces that they are tired of all of it. Finally, Tom calls them stupid little shit dogs, shouting over his shoulder as he leaves by the back gate.

My mother announces to no one in particular that she never could stand Tom, anyway, though I was not aware she had ever met him before. It makes me wonder what she might suspect. I look hard at her to see if I can guess, but she has busied herself gathering

Catha's overnight things. The neighbors are murmuring among themselves, packing up leftovers and empty serving dishes to carry home. In what seems only minutes, Mom and Catha are saying goodnight and the last neighbors are filing out the door.

I am alone with Brian. He tells me again that I look beautiful tonight, that he is glad I came to the party. I smile at him. He tells me he thought my mother was funny. "Such a kick-ass," he calls her. I am laughing. He touches the star behind my ear. And he tells me we can clean up all this mess tomorrow.

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