

At the Dog Park

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At the dog park I pull in behind a gold SUV with a bumper sticker that reads: “Don’t let this fool you, my real treasure is in Heaven.” Additional stickers read: “The Spirit Moves Me” and “ReJOYce.” I know the woman who drives the car. She tells me her daughters don’t like her, but she has many friends at the park, and often whips out her cell to load up someone’s digits. ReJOYce wears expensive jogging suits, and her dog has its very own quilted down vest with a fashionable collar that turns up. My dog, Oscar, looks at me with his pleading, brown, Cleopatra-eyes when he sees ReJOYce and her yappy Jack Russell, Portia. Oscar is a large, gentle, Golden Retriever, and dogs like Portia make both of us nervous: her constant yapping and sprightly dance steps—back and forth and around—forever moving.

I will admit that I sometimes walk around the park with ReJOYce. She tells me about making mega-nachos and watching football with her husband. ReJOYce even gives me the recipe for the nachos and I nod enthusiastically as if I’m going to make them. And then I do make them. I don’t watch football, and my husband isn’t home, so I eat the nachos right off the tray, standing at my kitchen counter, listening to a story on the radio about a group of kids who, for fun, leave a man to die in a well.

At the dog park there is a dog named Satan. He is part Shar Pei and part Boxer. He is wrinkled and earnest. Satan, one might say, is eager to please. I often walk the park with

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Satan's master. He has a name, but I won't commit it to memory. Satan's master is bearded, large, and very friendly. He borders on gleeful when he introduces his dog to someone new at the dog park. Sometimes ReJOYce, Satan's master, and I walk together with our dogs. It would be nice if one day Satan's Master asked ReJOYce about her real treasure in Heaven, but only so much can happen at the dog park.

At the dog park, it *does* sometimes happen that Satan's Master, ReJOYce, a philosophy professor, and I all round the path at the same time. We walk together, a loosely tethered group. The Professor doesn't talk to us much, but when he does, he always gesticulates wildly. Most of the time he texts while he walks. His dog, Heidi, short for Heidegger (of course), is an affable mutt. After I hear the story about the kids who leave a man to die in a well, I ask the Professor to explain to me how it's possible for people, even clueless children, to do something so horrid. He talks first of compassion and empathy and then about mankind's capacity to find wonder and even pleasure in evil acts. He throws some phrases at me: *The normalization of deviance* is one of them. I want to get more examples of how people find pleasure in evil, and I'd like to get his opinion on whether he thinks my husband might qualify as one of these types of people, but before I get a chance, Portia, nips Satan and our group disintegrates.

One day at the dog park, I find my group and amble along the dirt path, watching Oscar swish through the tall grasses. Per usual, it's the Professor, ReJoyce, Satan's Master, and me. I'd like to say that on this day ReJOYce and the Professor get into an argument about salvation. Unfortunately for me, that never happens. But what *does* happen, as we are all

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loping through the park with our sweet dogs, is that in the not too far distance, a car spontaneously erupts into flames. Big, tall, heaven-licking-flames. There is smoke, fire, and general chaos as Satan's Master and I sprint towards the fire to see what's happened. My ribs ache from running and probably because they never healed right after being broken. The dogs race ahead of us, their muscled haunches propelling them forward, and even Oscar, with his dysplastic sway of a gait keeps up with the pack, a trail of dust kicking up in their wake.

In the parking lot, other dog park people huddle in small groups not far from the car. "What in the hell happened?" Satan's master calls out to no one in particular and I watch people shrug their shoulders and raise their hands in confusion. "We had just pulled into the lot and it was just boom and flames." This from a petite woman whose Rhodesian Ridgeback, Tyco (the Psycho), often body checks Oscar midstride. I don't fault Tyco for doing this; it's instinct passed down from his lion hunting brethren. Not his fault. The woman keeps repeating her story to anyone who comes on the scene, so I move away from her. The car is pretty much obliterated, a charred mass pouring out smoke. It smells a bit like bread burning, not chemicals and exhaust, like it should. My sense of smell has been a little off since my nose was broken, or maybe a burning car really does smell like burned bread. I don't know. The Professor walks closer to the car and several yell for him to stay back. "But we need to see if anyone's inside, don't we?" He asks. "Well they'd be toast," replies Satan's master and I give him a look. Sirens blare in the distance and I know it's a matter of just a few minutes before the cavalry arrives. I back away from the flames and watch ReJOYce stride purposefully toward the car, brush past the Professor,

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and crouch next to what would have been the front seat. “Get away from there,” I shout. “You could get hurt!” She ignores me and circles the smoking wreck.

The firefighters and police tell ReJOYce and the rest of us to go back to the park and leave it to them. We follow their orders and begin another circuit of the trail, each of us exclaiming *how horrible* and *how strange*. We speculate. “More likely than not,” says Satan’s Master, “the car had some kind of engine malfunction, or some factory defect that made it blow.” He shakes his head up and down, sure of himself, and I wonder what expertise he has that makes him so confident. “Yeah” concurs ReJOYce, and I’m surprised and disappointed that she doesn’t have something more to say. She never says what I think she might, considering the stickers she plasters on her car, and I often feel deceived by her. “Maybe someone made the car explode,” I offer. The Professor looks up from his phone, on which he’s been texting, and squints at me. “Why would you say that?” “Because it happens,” I reply. “Yeah, well, I’m sure that’s not what happened here.” The Professor starts texting again. “How do you know?” I ask. It seems as plausible to me that someone blew up the car as it does that the engine malfunctioned. “Because people don’t do things like that unless they’re crazy,” says Satan’s master. He looks over and gives me a little shrug and neck jut. *Duh*.

I don’t say anything else, but what I’m thinking is that people do things like that all the time, even when they’re not crazy. For fun, kids leave a man to die in a well. A husband breaks his wife’s ribs because she’s late, or breaks her nose because he can. That husband isn’t crazy, and I don’t think those kids were either. And while I haven’t done

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the following, I can imagine it easily: Sinking a silver knife deep into my husband's flesh, just beneath his ribs; the solid thud of the wooden bat connecting with his skull; the way his skin would melt and then char if I rigged his car to go boom and then up in flames. I'm not crazy, but I could do all of these things.

It is only when he kicks Oscar's weak leg so hard it pops the dog's hip out of socket that I leave. I pick up my beautiful boy, who cowers in the corner looking at me for an explanation, and carry him out of the house, my face buried in his fur beside the flap of his ear. *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry*, I whisper, and Oscar turns his head to try and lick my face.

I don't need anyone to point out the irony of leaving because he kicks the dog, but staying when he does the same to me. I know better than to try and explain to my closest friend how it's different, but I do anyway. Yes my husband is a monster for breaking my nose and ribs, but it takes an altogether different kind of beast to kick a dog when he's down. When I can't resist, and I stretch my mouth to exaggerate the *literally* that caps off this explanation, my friend fidgets and looks away. It probably doesn't help that I proffer a stiff *ha-ha-ha I shouldn't even joke*. I know nothing about the situation is funny, but I don't know how else talk about it. And so I stop.

There is a German surgeon visiting the vet program at the State University, so I use part of my savings to buy Oscar a new titanium hip the surgeon has designed. Oscar will be the first dog in the state with this kind of hip and I don't bat an eye at the expense. I can't

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stop thinking of Oscar cowering in the corner, and it seems only right that he at least get the best hip on the market. After his surgery, my bionic boy hobbles along beside me, supported by a towel with handles that I loop under his belly and hold, taking some of the weight off his back legs. We are a sight as we shuffle along through our new neighborhood. A six-legged oddity.

During recovery, the dog park is off limits and I wonder if Oscar misses Satan and Heidi, possibly even jittery Portia. I wonder whether any of my dog park friends—I guess I'd call them friends—would spend five grand on a titanium hip for a dog. I decide that ReJOYce is the only one who would, yet another thing we have in common.

Two days a week, I drive to the State University for Oscar's physical therapy. He walks on a treadmill in a giant tank of water to build up the muscles in his hindquarters. I don't tell anyone about this. There is only so much most people are willing to swallow when it comes to caring for a pet, and like a titanium hip, hydrotherapy isn't one of them. Oscar slow motion canters in the water tank, and the feathered fur on the back of his legs streams behind him like golden seaweed. I imagine muscles and tendons growing stronger, wrapping around the gleaming titanium of his hip, repairing what's been broken. His leonine head occasionally turns towards me, checking to see that I'm still there and I call to him, *Keep going, Oscar! That's a good boy!* Like a demented cheerleader, I clap and yell encouragement.

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It's required, in order to avoid dislocation post-surgery, that Oscar be crated at night, and anytime I'm not at home. Oscar hasn't spent a day of his life in a crate, and though I know that many dogs find crates comforting, I hate the idea of him being in what, let's be frank, is a cage. But I'm told it's a must if Oscar is to heal without incident, so I buy the most gigantic crate I can find, and Oscar still seems crowded in it. In our new apartment, I position the crate by my bed and we stare at each other for a few minutes before I take one side of the cage off, drag my comforter off the bed, and sleep on the floor beside him. It goes on like this for a month. Oscar's nose twitches in his sleep, and his legs jerk slightly as he dream-chases a rabbit or squirrel. His sighs are soft and contented, but occasionally, in the deep of night, he emits a strangled squeak or bark in his sleep, so I reach out to him, run my hands through the crest of fur and loose skin at the back of his neck, and tell him *It's okay, I'm still here*.

In the spring, Oscar gets the okay to return to the dog park. I scan the park for Tyco the Psycho before we enter, worried that a mid-stride body check might be too much for Oscar's hip, bionic though it may be. I cringe at the thought of his slick titanium femoral head popping out of the pocket of his shiny new acetabulum. But, as soon as I open the gate, Oscar makes a break for the tall grass, his sickled tail waving its goodbye. I find him with our group on the back loop and they call out their *Hellos*, their *Where have you beens?* The Professor even pauses from texting. "I was so worried Oscar died." His overly dramatic gesticulations, as he says this, are oddly soothing. ReJOYce wants all the details of Oscar's injury and surgery, and is duly impressed that Oscar runs on the only titanium hip in the state. "I would have done the same for Portia," she tells me, and

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I am triumphant that I've predicted ReJOYce would say this. Satan's Master gets down on his knees and holds Oscar's head, letting the dog's gigantic pink tongue lap at the bare skin above his beard. I feel my chest tighten, the beating of my heart charges around my thoracic cavity, ricochets off my ribs and my lungs and tunnels up my throat. For a moment I feel as if I'm underwater, feel the slight, almost soft, resistance against my body, and then we begin to walk.