

## Put the Sweater on the Dog

The stupid little dog yaps at everything. I get up to grab a beer, the dog yaps. I go take a piss, the dog yaps. The pizza guy comes to the door, the dog yaps. I'm sleeping in my own fucking bed and even with the pillow stuffed into my ear I can hear the stupid little dog, yapping.

The yapping is kind of a problem because technically the apartment complex doesn't allow pets. I say technically because I've seen the lady in 3A dragging a bag of cat litter up the stairs. But a dog is harder. A dog doesn't shit in a box. A dog you've got to take outside and walk around, even a little wiener like this one with a white fluffy coat that looks exactly like the hair of her previous owner, my grandma. And then there's the slobber. I know dogs sweat through their tongues but I don't want that gross saliva all over me.

It's a Tuesday morning and I'm taking the little stinker out into the alley to do her business. A least she's small. I can bundle her under my coat to get her downstairs in case the super happens to be snarking around. I feel her wiggling like a live sausage next to my shirt and a strangled whimper escapes through my zipper.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," I whisper. "*Donatella.*"

What the fuck kind of a name is that for a dog? A wishful thinking name, that's what. Maria-Sophia always wanted a little girl with a name to remind her of the old country, all olive trees and wine. Instead she had to make do with a fuck-up of a son and a dog walking around with what should've been her daughter's name.

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From the minute you're born, you're dying, so technically anytime you're looking at someone, you're watching them die. *Actually* watching is different, though. I was there when Maria-Sophia kicked the bucket and it isn't something I'd wish on anyone.

I called her Gamma because that was the only way I could say grandma when I started talking, and it stuck. Gamma would've rather I called her Nonna like a good Italian grandson but my mother wanted her side of the family to get some recognition. Therefore: Grandma and Daddy and Mom, not Nonna and Papa and Mama.

Is it normal, I wonder, to be dragging your whole history around behind you like a tail? I can see Mom and Daddy sitting together on the couch, laughing. I thought they were happy but that's because when you're four you think all laughing comes from being happy.

I remember Mom saying "Carly, Carly, my sweet Carly."

And then Daddy, "Don't be calling him no sissy girl's name. That's my boy, Carlo Jacobo Spano, *Junior*."

When it got to be just me and Gamma, she called me C.J. because she didn't want any reminders at all of the original Carlo.

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Why I'm sneaking the little crapper around, I don't know. It'd be a relief to have the super make me get rid of her. Then it wouldn't be on me. And I wouldn't have to be reminded of the last thing Gamma said to me as they wheeled her out of her apartment on the stretcher. She was already hooked up with an IV. We both knew she wasn't coming back, not with the fluid around her heart. I was standing by the door and the

EMTs stopped a minute like they knew something had to happen between us, which they probably did because they'd done this thing a thousand times before. Gamma moved her hand toward her mouth. I had to lift up the oxygen mask for her so I could hear the words hiss out: "Donatella. You'll take her."

Maybe if it had been a question, I could've just brought the dog to the shelter. Donatella got it, too, I swear. I closed the door behind the EMTs and the little yapper came and sat down on the plastic mat right inside and looked up at me like a dog in a dog-food commercial, head to the side and the big sad eyes.

"Okay," I said. "Fine."

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Tuesday we make it down to the alley and back up with nobody the wiser. It's the time I'm at work I worry about. I know she can hold her pee while I'm gone but what about the yapping?

We get through the week undetected. Saturday I decide to give the little pisser a treat and take her to the park. It's the same park Gamma took me to when I was a kid. I haven't set foot in it for probably fifteen years. The city's torn down the monkey bars where I used to hang upside down and give Gamma a heart attack (she said). Now it's all yellow plastic and fancy stained wood.

But the park's where I discover the dog's magical powers. I'm walking along the path with Donatella sniffing this and sniffing that, sticking her nose into whatever-the-fuck. It's not like regular walking. Start, run forward, stop, repeat. Then all of a sudden on one of the stop cycles there's this cute girl bending down in front of me.

"Oh, she's adorable!"

The admiration's mutual. Donatella's sniffing and licking and begging for her ears to get rubbed. The girl looks up at me. I think I'd like to rub *her* ears but I just smile.

"She's yours?"

"Yup."

The girl must have been running. She's in shorts and one of those athletic tee shirts and there's just a tiny bit of sweat at her hairline. She rubs Donatella's ears. I'm thinking madly whether there's anything I could say to keep her here for a minute as it dawns on me that the dog did this. The dog's a fucking chick magnet, just like they say.

But before I can come up with anything clever, the girl gives Donatella a final pat, stands up, and runs off down the path with a little smile and a wave over her shoulder.

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I can't say the dog's magical chick attracting power makes up for everything else. But there's less yapping now, like she's resigned to me. And cliché number two: it's kind of nice to have someone who's glad to see me when I get home. She's still a pain, especially having to sneak her around. And discovering she doesn't have a nice neat coat of fur. I realize after I've had her a month she's starting to look damn shaggy. Doggy eyebrows hang over her eyes so she can hardly see. I Google "Pet Groomers" and we walk over to a place on Ashton Avenue where they give her a shampoo, a blow-dry, a trim, and a nail-clipping. Seventy bucks later I walk out with Donatella looking like a drowned rat.

I'm telling this story Monday at work and the receptionist says, "You have to get that dog a sweater."

I don't say the obvious, which is the dog had a perfectly good coat of hair before I spent a fortune getting it chopped off.

Around then I start thinking again about the girl in the park and whether Donatella could help me out with the biggest problem in my life right now, the problem I ignored while Gamma was dying and right afterwards when I was cleaning out her apartment and getting used to taking care of her dog.

I'm sitting on the couch one night watching TV with Donatella curled up next to me like a sow bug with her nose under her tail. I have to admit she's pretty damn cute.

"Wanna see someone else cute?" I say. I've been doing that lately: talking to the dog. Somehow it seems natural, not wacky like you'd think it would be.

I slip my wallet out of my back pocket and slide my finger into the slot behind my credit card. I ease out the picture of Jane and hold it up so Donatella can see. I'm scratching the dog's ears and she's looking at Jane staring out at me from that photo. Jane's been staring out from the photo just that way for the last year. I don't know why I expect anything different this time. Do I think this is a crazy magic moving photograph like in Harry Potter, where the picture's a window into another world?

"I don't know what the fuck I think," I say out loud to the dog. I haven't seen Jane since three months after she gave me that picture.

I wanted to think Jane was just another one in that long line of girls who seemed so promising at first and then couldn't stick it out. Things would be nice for a while—months, or sometimes close to a year. Then it'd be, *C.J., I don't think you're really committed* or *C.J., you're holding back part of yourself*. Mostly I didn't care but with Jane I cared more than most.

Donatella whines like she's just as confused as I am.

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It's getting colder. There's frost on the sidewalks in the morning. Sometimes Donatella shivers. I know should look for a sweater but it seems so stupid. And they want me doing overtime at work so now my Saturdays are just like any other day of the week. I have to leave Donatella alone the whole day and I don't have time for sweater shopping.

I'm lying in bed one Sunday morning in November. It's eleven already and I've been awake for a while but I'm happy not to have to get up. I took Donatella out late last night so she can last another hour. She's in bed too, curled next to me on the pillow. Her ears go up when she hears the knocking.

"Shhhhh," I say, and shut her in the bedroom just to be safe.

Through the peephole I see the super, Mr. Parker, in his super outfit, all tan and buttoned down with a cap on his head. I leave the chain on and crack the door open.

"Mr. Spano," he says. "Some of the residents have reported hearing a dog."

"A dog?"

"Yes, a dog."

"I don't have a dog."

"I certainly hope not. You are aware that pets are not allowed under the terms of your lease."

"Must've been the TV."

"Maybe you should turn down the volume."

"I'll do that," I say.

I hear Donatella whining as I close the door. My heart is hammering away in my chest. I bust back into the bedroom. There's Donatella looking up at me. She makes that swallowed little whimper like she knows she's done something bad. I don't want to do it but I lean down in her face and start to yell, not loud, just that whispery kind of yell where you don't want anyone outside the four walls of your apartment to hear.

“You little shit! How could you be doing that? You’re going to ruin everything with your stupid yapping. You should know better! What do you want, me to drop you off at the shelter so you can find some family with kids to pull your tail? Or maybe *not* find someone and they’ll send you off to doggie heaven?”

Donatella runs to the corner and looks up at me like she thinks—what? Like she thinks I’m going to hit her.

I slam my fist into my palm instead. I wasn’t going to hit her. I wasn’t.

“Shit,” I say. I head toward her in the corner but she shimmies away under the bed. I sit on the edge of the bed and press my palms against my skull to keep everything in. Or maybe out.

“I’m sorry,” I say. A whining sound starts to come out of me like the sound Donatella was making a minute ago.

“I’m sorry, you little crapper. Sometimes everything is just too much.”

*Too much* to be a guy in his late twenties babysitting his dead grandma’s dog and dragging his past around like a pit bull clamped on his calf. You’d think I was a veteran of the fucking Iraq war with PTSD or some such, given all the visions I have. Visions of Mom and Daddy. Visions of Gamma pushing me behind her and me trying to peek around her thighs from the kitchen. That kitchen I grew up in, with linoleum I knew like I knew my own skin. Visions and sounds: the way my mother’s voice rose high and cracked when she screamed.

Gamma never screamed. Even when she made me go to school. She made me go because I was *at risk* and everyone knew it. I might as well have had a big sign around my neck saying *at-risk kid of a junkie*. That’s all anyone saw. That’s all *I* saw when I looked in the mirror at my greasy hair hanging down over my eyes and my lips curling back over my teeth.

Now I feel something brush my calf. I reach down and Donatella lets me rub behind her ears. Something warm spreads in my chest like when you're a kid and you piss yourself inside your snowsuit. All is forgiven.

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Jane used to cook for me. She loved to cook. She tried making the dishes Gamma made but something was always missing, not quite right.

The night she left, Jane threw a plate of *involtini* at me.

"You're in love with your fucking grandmother!" she screamed.

But I wasn't. I was in love with my grandmother's *involtini* and Gamma was too sick to make it any more.

Jane brought her voice down almost to a whisper. "So go! Go back to your precious Gamma!" Never mind we were in my apartment and Jane was the one grabbing up her coat, her purse, shoving her feet into her Uggs.

I covered my ears because the voice echoed just like Mom's did when she screamed at Daddy. *You're in love with your fucking crack pipe!*

Everyone is always screaming and leaving. I just want a quiet house where no one screams and no one leaves.

The pivotal day came when I was eight, old enough to know Daddy wasn't like other dads. He was in bed all day not because he was sick but for some reason I wasn't yet old enough to understand. At night when other dads were in bed mine was out somewhere. "Stepping out," he called it, like he lived in some 1930s movie.

Mom went with him when things were good. But even when things were good, they weren't. I'd stand behind Mom while she got ready to go out with her eyes staring into



mine from the mirror. There was something crooked and funky about her eyes and about her mouth when she drew her lipstick on.

Then one day I got home from school and Daddy was up. He was never up before five but this day he was on the couch with Gamma, and no Mom anywhere.

Gamma patted the cushion next to her for me to sit. She was a big lady and she sank into the couch so I rolled toward her, close enough to smell the Prell shampoo she used on her hair, which back then still had some black in it. She put one arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer.

“Your mama went. She had enough of this.” She waved her other hand around the living room. Judgment was passed.

“You’ll come with me, C.J.,” Gamma said.

Daddy didn’t say a word.

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The Running Girl is there again the next time I take Donatella to the park. Only now she’s bundled up in sweatpants and a sweatshirt, with a fuzzy blue headband covering her ears. She jogs in place and gestures at Donatella.

“Isn’t she cold?”

I shrug. “She’s a tough cookie.”

Running Girl stops jogging and bends down to pet Donatella. I think the dog really likes her.

“Are you a dog person?” I ask.

Running Girl laughs. “Is that a pickup line?”

In a way it is, though not the way she thinks. I’ve been hatching a plan. “No, I’m curious.”

“I had a dog when I was a kid. But now I work a ton of hours and I don’t think it would be fair to the dog.”

“But you run. The dog could run with you.”

She stands up and adjusts the headband. “Gotta go before I get stiff. See you.”

Donatella lunges after her as she takes off down the path.

I start going to the park more often, even after work, but I don’t see Running Girl during the week. I don’t let myself think that’s why I’m going.

The next Saturday it’s colder with that damp bite that says snow, maybe. We’ve been at the park a half hour already and my hands are frozen. I forgot to bring gloves because let’s face it, I’m not there for the fresh air.

Finally, Running Girl jogs by. Maybe I’m imagining things but it seems like her face lights up when she sees us and runs over. This time, she gives Donatella only a moment of ear rubs before she stands up and jogs in place to keep warm. She looks at me sternly.

“Put a sweater on this poor pooch!”

On the way home I wonder why I’ve been so resistant to the sweater. Don’t I want Donatella to be warm? A sweater is nice. A sweater is comfy cozy. You can wrap it around you and feel like the person who gave it to you is hugging you. Or a sweater can just be practical: it’s fucking cold out and the sweater keeps you warm. And anyone can see the poor little bitch is shivering her ass off out there.

Jane would say, *You’re being passive-aggressive*. That’s what she used to say when she wasn’t accusing me of being in love with Gamma. *You pull away. Then you lash out with the damn sarcasm. Can’t you be honest for once about how you feel?*

Maybe it’s the indignity of the sweater. Dogs aren’t meant to wear human clothes. I don’t care how cold it gets. That’s the whole point of being a dog: some things you just don’t need. Then I hear Jane’s voice again. *Yeah, maybe in prehistoric times, but dogs*

*these days are humans' little playthings. We've bred all the wild out of them and now we've got to put sweaters on them when it's cold.*

And it's true. I can feel how shivery the little thing is when I pick her up to stuff her inside my coat to go into the apartment building.

Inside I make coffee and sit at the kitchen table. Donatella noses my leg. She expects a treat when she gets back from a walk. That was Gamma's doing, always doling out food to the ones she loved. I get a Milk-Bone from the cabinet and make the dog sit for it. Then I bring up the subject that's been rattling around in my brain for weeks.

"Donatella," I begin. She looks up at me like I'm the most fascinating person in the world. "I've been thinking. You're a cute dog. And I really like you. But you've got to admit, it's kinda silly, the way we've been living. Sneaking around worrying what the neighbors are going to say."

Donatella wags her fluffy stub of a tail.

"I know your favorite person in the world isn't here anymore, that being Maria-Sophia-may-she-rest-in-peace. I know anyone else is just going to be second best. But I think there could be a better second best than me."

I stop and clear my throat. Why the fuck is it so hard to have this conversation with *a dog?*

"So I've been thinking. You know the lady at the park? The one with the headband?"

Donatella flops herself down, crosses her paws, and gives one of those wheezy dog-sighs.

"She seems like a really nice lady, don't you think? And she likes dogs. She said so." I leave out the part about the long hours she works. Because what's the difference—I work long hours, too.

"So—what do you say we propose to her next weekend?"

As soon of the words are out of my mouth I feel what I've done like an explosion in my chest. Because there's a huge fucking difference between *proposing to* and *making a proposal to*, which is what I meant to say. Somehow I'm out of breath, even though I've just been sitting there.

I don't know what I expect from Donatella—tail-wagging, joyous yapping, vigorous head nodding—but she just rests her chin on her paws.

“It's up to me, is what you're saying.”

I reach down and bury my fingers in the fur behind her ears. She pushes her head back against my hand and turns to lick my palm. It doesn't seem gross to me anymore, just a signal of trust and contentment.

The aftermath of the explosion in my chest feels warm and comfy.

“Okay, then,” I say. “But either way, we're getting you a sweater.”

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