

DOG PERSON

Scott Nicholson

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he final breakfast was scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, grits with real butter. Alison peeled four extra strips of bacon from the slab. On this morning of all mornings, she would keep the temperature of the stove eye just right. She wasn't the cook of the house, but Robert had taught her all about Southern cuisine, especially that of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Before they met, her breakfast consisted of a cup of what Robert teasingly called a "girly French coffee" and maybe a yogurt. He'd introduced her to the joys of an unhealthy start to the morning, along with plenty of other things, the best of the rest coming after sundown.

Even after two years, Alison wasn't as enthusiastic about the morning cholesterol infusion as Robert was. Or his dog. About once a week, though, she'd get up a half-hour early, drag the scarred skillet from beneath the counter, and peel those slick and marbled pieces of pig fat. The popping grease never failed to mark a red spot or two along her wrist as she wielded the spatula. But she wouldn't gripe about the pain today.

Robert would be coming down any minute. She could almost picture him upstairs, brushing his teeth without look-ing in the mirror. He wouldn't be able to meet his own eyes. Not with the job that awaited him.

Alison cracked six eggs in a metal bowl and tumbled them with a whisk until the yellow and white were mingled but not fully mixed. The grits bubbled and burped on the back burner. Two slices of bread stood in the sleeves of the toaster, and the coffee maker gurgled as the last of its heated water sprayed into the basket. Maxwell House, good old ail-American farm coffee.

She avoided looking in the pantry, though the louvered doors were parted. The giant bag of Kennel Ration stood in a green trash can. On the shelf above was a box of Milk Bones and rows of canned dog food. Robert had a theory that hot dogs and turkey bologna were cheaper dog treats than the well-advertised merchandise lines, but he liked to keep stock on hand just in case. That was Robert: always planning ahead. But some things couldn't be planned, even when you expected them.

Robert entered the room, buttoning the cuffs on his flan-nel shirt. The skin beneath his eyes was puffed and lavender. "Something smells good."

She shoveled the four bacon strips from the skillet and placed them on a double layer of paper towels. "Only the best today."

"That's sweet of you."

"I wish I could do more."

"You've done plenty."

Robert moved past her without brushing against her, though the counter ran down the center of the kitchen and narrowed the floor space in front of the stove. Most morn-ings, he would have given her an affectionate squeeze on the rear and she would have threatened him with the spatula, grinning all the while. This morning he poured himself a cup of coffee without asking if she wanted one.

She glanced at Robert as he bent into the refrigerator to get some cream. At thirty-five, he was still in shape, the blue jeans snug around him and only the slightest bulge over his belt. His brown hair showed the faintest streaks of gray, though the lines around his eyes and mouth had grown vis-ibly deeper in the last few months. He wore a beard but he hadn't shaved his neck in a week. He caught her looking.

Alison turned her attention back to the pan. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not much to say." He stirred his coffee, tapped his spoon on the cup's ceramic rim, and reached into the cabinet above the sink. He pulled the bottle of Jack Daniels into the glare of the morning sun. Beyond the window, sunlight fil-tered through the red and golden leaves of maple trees that were about to enter their winter sleep.

Robert never drank before noon, but Alison didn't comment as he tossed a splash into his coffee. "I made extra bacon," she said. "A special treat."

Robert nodded, his eyes shot with red lightning bolts. He had tossed all night, awakening her once at 3 a.m. when his toenails dug into her calf. He must have been dreaming of days with Sandy Ann, walking by the river, camping in the hollows of Grandfather Mountain, dropping by the animal shelter to volunteer for a couple of hours.

Alison moved the grits from the heat and set them aside. The last round of bacon was done, and she drained some of the bacon grease away and poured the eggs. The mixture lay there round and steaming like the face of a cartoon sun. She let the eggs harden a bit before she moved them around. A brown skin covered the bottom of the skillet.

"Nine years is a lot," she said. "Isn't that over seventy in people years?"

"No, it's nine in people years. Time's the same for every-body and everything."

Robert philosophy. A practical farm boy. If she had been granted the power to build her future husband in a Frankenstein laboratory, little of Robert would have been in the recipe. Maybe the eyes, brown and honest with flecks of green that brightened when he was aroused. She would have chosen other parts, though the composite wasn't bad. The thing that made Robert who he was, the spark that juiced his soul, was largely invisible but had shocked Alison from the very first exposure.

She sold casualty insurance, and Robert liked to point out she was one of the "Good Hands" people. Robert's account had been assigned to her when a senior agent retired, and during his first appointment to discuss whether to increase the limit on his homeowner's policy, she'd followed the procedure taught in business school, trying to sucker him into a whole-life policy. During the conversation, she'd learned he had no heirs, not even a wife, and she explained he couldn't legally leave his estate to Sandy Ann. One follow-up call later, to check on whether he would get a discount on his auto liability if he took the life insurance, and they were dating.

The first date was lunch in a place that was too nice and dressy for either of them to be comfortable. The next week, they went to a movie during which Robert never once tried to put his arm around her shoulder. Two days later, he called and said he was never going to get to know her at this rate so why didn't she just come out to his place for a cook-out and a beer? Heading down his long gravel drive between hard-woods and weathered outbuildings, she first met Sandy Ann, who barked at the wheels and then leapt onto the driver's side door, scratching the finish on her new Camry.

Robert laughed as he pulled the yellow Labrador retriever away so Alison could open her door. She wasn't a dog person. She'd had a couple of cats growing up but had always been too busy to make a long-term pet commitment. She had planned to travel light, though the old get-married-two-kids-house-in-the-suburbs had niggled at the base of her brain once or twice as she'd approached thirty. It turned out she ended up more rural than suburban, Robert's sperm count was too low, and marriage was the inevitable result of exposure to Robert's grill.

She plunged the toaster lever. The eggs were done and she arranged the food on the plates. Her timing was perfect. The edges of the grits had just begun to congeal. She set Robert's plate before him. The steam of his coffee carried the scent of bourbon.

"Where's the extra bacon?" he asked.

"On the counter."

"It'll get cold."

"She'll eat it."

"I reckon it won't kill her either way." Robert sometimes poured leftover bacon or hamburger grease on Sandy Ann's dry food even though the vet said it was bad for her. Robert's justification was she ate rotted squirrels she found in the woods, so what difference did a little fat make?

"We could do this at the vet," Alison said. "Maybe it would be easier for everybody, especially Sandy Ann." Though she was really thinking of Robert. And herself.

"That's not honest. I know you love her, too, but when you get down to it, she's my dog. I had her before I had you."

Sandy Ann had growled at Alison for the first few weeks, which she found so unsettling that she almost gave up on Robert. But he convinced her Sandy Ann was just slow to trust and would come around in time. Once, the dog nipped at her leg, tearing a hole in a new pair of slacks. Robert bought her a replacement pair and they spent more time in Alison's apartment than at the farm. Alison bought the groceries and let him cook, and they did the dishes together.

The first time Alison spent the night at the farm, Sandy Ann curled outside Robert's door and whined. He had to put the dog outside so they could make love. They were married four months later and Robert was prepared to take the dog with them on their honeymoon, an RV and backpacking trip through the Southwest. Only a desperate plea from Alison, stopping just short of threat, had persuaded Robert to leave Sandy Ann at a kennel.

"You got the eggs right," Robert said, chewing with his mouth open.

"Thank you."

He powdered his grits with pepper until a soft black carpet lay atop them. The dust was nearly thick enough to make Alison sneeze. He worked his fork and moved the grits to his mouth, washing the bite down with another sip of the laced coffee.

"Maybe you can wait until tomorrow," Alison said. She didn't want to wait another day, and had waited months too long already, but she said what any wife would. She bit into her own bacon, which had grown cool and brittle.

"Tomorrow's Sunday." Robert wasn't religious but he was peculiar about Sundays. It was a holdover from his upbringing as the son of a Missionary Baptist. Though Robert was a house painter by trade, he'd kept up the farming tradition. The government was buying out his tobacco allocation and cabbage was more of a hobby than a commercial crop. Robert raised a few goats and a beef steer, but they were more pets than anything. She didn't think

Robert would slaughter them even if they stood between him and starvation. He wasn't a killer.

"Sunday might be a better day for it," she said.

"No." Robert nibbled a half-moon into the toast. "It's been put off long enough."

"Maybe we should let her in."

"Not while we're eating. No need to go changing habits now."

"She won't know the difference."

"No, but I will."

Alison drew her robe tighter across her body. The eggs had hardened a little, the yellow gone an obscene greenish shade.

Sandy Ann had been having kidney and liver problems and had lost fifteen pounds. The vet said they could perform an operation, which would cost \$3,000, and there would still be no guarantee of recovery. Alison told Robert it would be tough coming up with the money, especially since she'd given up her own job, but she would be willing to make the necessary sacrifices. Robert said they would be selfish to keep the dog alive if it was suffering.

"Want some more grits?" she asked. Robert shook his head and finished the coffee. She looked at the fork in his hand and saw that it was quivering.

Sandy Ann ran away when Alison moved in. Robert stayed up until after midnight, going to the door and calling his name every half-hour. He'd prowled the woods with a flashlight while Alison dozed on the couch. Sandy Ann turned up three days later in the next town, and Robert said if he hadn't burned his phone number into the leather collar, the dog might have been lost forever.

Sandy Ann was mostly Lab, with a little husky mix that gave its eyes a faint gray tint in certain light. The dog had been spayed before Robert got it at the pound. Robert's mother had died that year, joining her husband in their Baptist heaven and leaving the farm to their sole heir. Sandy Ann had survived thirty-seven laying hens, two sows, a milk cow, one big mouser tomcat that haunted the barn, and a Shetland pony.

Until today.

Alison's appetite was terrible even for her. Three slices of bacon remained on her plate. She pushed them onto a soiled paper napkin for the dog.

"Four's enough," Robert said.

"I thought you could give her one piece now."

"It's not like baiting a fish. A dog will follow bacon into hell if you give it half a chance."

Robert finished his plate and took the dishes to the sink. She thought he was going to enter the cabinet for another shot of bourbon, but he simply rinsed the dishes and stacked them on top of the dirty skillet. His hair seemed to have become grayer at the temples and he hunched a little, like an old man with calcium deficiency.

"I'd like to come," she said.

"We've been through that."

"We're supposed to be there for each other. You remember April eighth?"

"That was just a wedding. This is my dog."

Alison resented Sandy Ann's having the run of the house. The carpets were always muddy and no matter how often she vacuumed, dog hair seemed to snow from the ceiling. The battle had been long and subtle, but eventually Sandy Ann became an outdoor dog on all but the coldest days. The dog still had a favorite spot on the shotgun side of Robert's pick-up, the vinyl seat cover scratched and animal-smelling. Alison all but refused to ride in the truck, and they took her Camry when they were out doing "couple things."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Alison asked. She had tried to draw him out. In the early days, Robert had been forthcoming about everything, surprising her with his honesty and depth of feeling. Despite the initial attraction, she had thought him a little rough around the edges. She'd been raised in a trailer park but had attended Wake Forest University and so thought she had escaped her breeding. But Robert reveled in his.

"Nothing left to say. Maybe later."

"We can go down to the farmer's market when you get back. Maybe we can get some sweet corn for dinner. And I've been looking for a Philodendron for the living room."

"I won't feel like it."

"Robert, I know it's hard. Talk to me."

"I am talking."

"Really. Don't shut me out."

"Never have."

She slammed her fist on the table, causing her flatware to jump and clatter. "Damn it, don't be so stoic. You're allowed to grieve."

Robert wiped his hands on the kitchen towel that hung from the refrigerator handle. "Thanks for breakfast."

He went past her to the hall. She heard him open the closet door and rummage on the upper shelf. One of the snow skis banged against the door jamb. She had convinced Robert to try skiing, and they'd spent a weekend at Wintergreen in Virginia. He'd twisted his ankle on the first run. He said skiing was a rich kid's sport and it had served him right to try and escape his breeding.

Robert came back to the kitchen, the rifle tucked against his right shoulder. A single bullet made a bulge in his pocket, the shape long and mean.

"Have you decided where to bury her?" Alison had always thought of Sandy Ann as an "it," and had to consciously use the feminine pronoun. Alison wanted to show she cared, whether her husband appreciated it or not.

"She's not that heavy, or I'd do it near where I was going to bury her. I'm figuring behind the barn. She loved to lie in the shade back there."

Alison hated the back of the barn. It was full of barbed wire and blackberry vines, and once she'd seen a snake slither through the tall weeds. The garden lay beyond it, and she tended a bed of marigolds there, but she associated shadows with unseen reptiles. Sandy Ann would sometimes watch from the edge of the garden while Alison worked, but the two rarely communicated when Robert wasn't around, though Alison often left bacon for it by the back steps.

The grease from breakfast coated Alison's throat, and her chest ached. Robert went through the back door onto the porch. Alison followed him, trading the heavy smells of the kitchen for the tart, dry October morning. The mountains were vibrant in their dying glory, umber, burgundy, ochre.

Sandy Ann was sleeping in a hollowed-out place under the steps. The dog lifted its head at the sound of their feet. It must have smelled the bacon in Robert's hand, because its dusty nose wiggled and Sandy Ann dragged itself into the yard.

The sun glinted in the tears that ran down Robert's cheeks. "Good girl," he said, giving the dog a piece of bacon. The dog swallowed it without chewing and ran its rough tongue over its lips, ears lifting a little in anticipation of more. Robert moved the bacon to his rifle hand and scratched the dog on top of the head.

"Come on, girl, let's take a walk." He headed toward the woods.

Sandy Ann looked back at Alison, eyes dim and hiding pain, brown crust in their corners. She held out the bacon in her hand. Unlike the other pieces she had fed it, this one wasn't sprinkled with rat poison. The dog licked its lips once more, exhaled a chuffing sigh, then followed Robert, the yellow tail swinging gently like a piece of frozen rope.

Robert led the way across the yard, holding the bacon aloft so the dog could smell it. He and Sandy Ann went through a crooked gate and Robert leaned the rifle against the fence while he fastened the latch. He looked back at the porch. Alison waved and bit into her own bacon.

They started again, both of them stooped and limping. They reached the trees, Robert's boots kicking up the brittle leaves, Sandy Ann laboring by his side. The last she saw of him was his plaid flannel shirt.

She should chase them. Maybe she could hold the bacon while Robert loaded the gun. After all, she had cooked it. And, in a way, she was replacing Sandy Ann. If Robert ever got another dog, it would be Alison's home and therefore it would be the dog that would have to adjust, not the other way around. She didn't think they would get another dog, not for a while.

Sandy Ann was just a dog, and Alison wasn't a dog person. She was the practical one in the relationship. She could have driven Sandy Ann to the vet, even at the risk of getting dog hair in her car. The vet would have drawn out a nice, clean needle and Sandy Ann could drift off to sleep, dreaming of fast squirrels and chunks of cooked meat and snacks by the back porch of home.

Maybe Robert needed the catharsis of violence. Perhaps that would be his absolution, though surely he couldn't view the dog's infirmity as his fault. After all, it would have aged no matter the owner. Sandy Ann, like all of them, would die and go to whatever heaven was nearest. Robert's way might be best after all. One split-second and then the pain would end.

Alison went inside and poured herself a half cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen table, looking through the window. The sunlight was soft on the stubbled garden. Some of the marigolds clung to a defiant life, their edges crinkled and brown. Collard leaves swayed in the breeze like the ears of small green puppies. The shovel stood by the barn, waiting.

Her coffee mug was to her lips when the shot sounded. The report echoed off the rocky slopes and the hard, knotty trees. Alison didn't know whether to smile or pout against the ceramic rim. The house was hers.

When Robert returned, she would have tears in her eyes. She would hug him and let him sag onto her, and she would lead him to the couch. She would remind him of all the great memories, and let him talk for hours about the dog's life. She would kneel before him and remove his boots and wipe the mud from them. He would have no appetite, but she would cook for him anyway, maybe something sweet, like a pie. If he wanted, he could have some more of the Jack Daniels. She would turn on the television and they would sit together, the two of them in their house.

Her house.

Alison finished her coffee. The remaining bacon was covered with a gray film of grease but she ate it anyway, her stomach finally unclenching.

She washed dishes, a chore she loathed. She rinsed the pans with hot water. Later in the evening, she would vacuum, try to remove the last traces of Sandy Ann from the living room carpet.

Something clicked on the porch steps. She wondered if Robert had decided to come back to the house before he began digging. Either way, Alison would be there for him. She would shovel until she raised blisters if he would let her. Alison wiped her hands on her bathrobe and hurried to the door, blinking rapidly so her eyes would water.

The scratching sound was at the door now, as if Robert were wiping his boots on the welcome mat. She braced herself for Robert's crestfallen expression, the caved-in look of his eyes, the deep furrows at the corners of his mouth. She would never have inflicted such suffering if it weren't for the best.

Alison opened the door. On the porch, Sandy Ann stood on bowed legs, working her dry lips. The dog lifted a forlorn paw and dropped it with a click of nails. There were spatters of blood across the dog's snout.

One shot.

Robert couldn't have missed.

Not from so close.

Could he have...?

No, not Robert.

But it was the kind of choice Robert would make.

His only choice.

A dog person to the end.

"Robert?" she called, voice cracking, knowing there would be no answer.

Alison's ribs were a fist gripping the yolk of her heart. Her legs were grits, her head popping like hot grease on a griddle. Her spine melted like butter. She sagged against her house and slid to a sitting position. Sandy Ann whimpered, limped over, and ran a papery tongue against her cheek.

The dog's breath smelled of bacon and poison and unconditional love.