

Dogs I Have Known

THE DOG I HAVE NEVER OWNED

It is said that dogs are good. People with dogs live longer, are happier, and are less likely to have their homes burglarized.

I have never owned a dog. This is in part because I am afraid of them, but also because I do not want to take care of an animal. My daughter would love a dog, but I will never buy her one.

So I guess you know what kind of person I am.

ONE DOG'S NEIGHBORHOOD

The dog has his memories, a street where trees don't grow very tall. South Milwaukee. Small houses with complicated rooflines: dormers, additions, awnings, and porches. An air conditioner punched out a window like a Pez in mid-dispense. Gutters sag, downspouts dangle, shingles grow moss. Inside are staircases with hairpin

curves, dining rooms with old built-ins, upstairs bedrooms with slanted ceilings, tiny closets shaped like mathematics problems.

One scrubbed kitchen smells from years of meat, a century of congealed gravy, coffee grounds, boiled spinach. A candy thermometer has fallen between the stove and the cupboard, visible with a flashlight but essentially lost forever. The backyard is exactly one-tenth the size of a football field, with a white Virgin Mary statue on a pile of stones at the fifty-yard line. The dog lived and barked and dished here, between white picket fences, his own classic wooden doghouse back-to-back with the garage on the alley.

Next door stands a corner tavern, also like a house, with the bar on the first floor and a family—my family—upstairs. Big square Pabst Blue Ribbon sign lit from within. A block over is the parish school, made out of the same rusty bricks as the foundry four streets away. Wedged into the complex like a gymnasium is a church with surprisingly beautiful stained-glass windows. Then there's the gymnasium itself, with its accordion bleachers and caged lights.

The dog was a nipper, yet loved by all. At first communions, he was always invited into the picture, sitting on his haunches by the girl in her white dress or the boy in his little suit. The pairing of child and dog gave the impression of an imaginary wedding in a children's game. I have such a Polaroid of Max, the dog, with Ginnie Lee, my first love.

Outside the school, the marquee reads: *Divine Mercy Catholic Parish. Excellence in Academics. Den of the Wildcats.*

MITCH AND SUSAN'S DOG

The closest I have come to being mauled and killed by a dog was at a Thanksgiving party thrown by my brother-in-law and his new wife.

It was a strange time for me. I had been experiencing a high level of conflict in the workplace. Even among other lawyers, my conversational style was deemed “excessively argumentative.” The firm had been trying to promote collegiality among our attorneys, and it was felt that we needed to keep it down and respect each other and save our relentlessness for the courtroom and other venues where verbal sparring was the mode and expectation.

There was a particular set-to I had in a conference room with a colleague who was advocating, to my view, a manifestly losing strategy in a case she and I were on together. The problem occurred when she did not see something I felt was obviously apparent and true—and still think is obviously apparent and true. But she would not see it, and my voice rose and rose, and neither of us could stop. The managing partner personally escorted me to HR, where I was debriefed about my behavior, which was apparently part of a pattern. I was told that my style raised concerns, and I was put on a sort of probation, and the decision about whether I would be a partner was postponed.

My wife, Beth, did not appreciate this development, as she had convinced herself that my finally making partner would work a miraculous change for the better in the harried life we were leading in our three-story limestone-and-brick house on Wrightwood in west Lincoln Park, Chicago. In an effort to patch things up, she e-mailed the woman with whom I had argued. This woman responded with a volatile mix of truth and distortion, and as we discussed these matters in tense postdinner conversations, while our five-year-old daughter Amanda watched her Elmo movie, my wife began to wonder, it seemed to me, whether she had married a bad man.

We arrived early at the Thanksgiving party up in St. Charles. When I rang the bell, a dog’s deep-throated bark exploded at a distant remove and then quickly grew louder, and then stopped

growing louder, while still being very loud, because the dog was right behind the front door and for the moment could not get any closer. The barking was so forceful it agitated the innermost molecules of otherwise dense objects, like the porch slab under my feet. I stepped back, trying to position Beth and Amanda between the dog and me, because they were comfortable with all dogs at all times. Susan came to the door and said in a silly, joshing manner, “Oh, you stop it,” to the dog, who growled as we stepped into the house. Something in the dog’s growl made Susan reach down and grab its collar, which was a lucky thing for me because I was radiating the sort of acute fear that drives dogs berserk and makes them kill.

The dog was a German shepherd, thick across the shoulders, with a wolfish snout and wet black eyes. Its tail, I would say, swayed rather than wagged. During Susan’s futile efforts to quiet its barking, I learned its name was Roxanne.

We amoebaed into the kitchen, where a spread of appetizers was laid out on an island: cold veggies and strange salads and even shrimp. Not many folks were there so far—Mitch and his brother Charlie were apparently out getting last-minute things—but I was glad to greet and hug anyone and so prove to Roxanne that I was a member of the pack in good standing. The dog kept coming back to me though, sniffing my crotch and growling. Then she stepped back and barked very loudly at me, baring her teeth.

“Hi, Roxanne,” I said in a thin voice, standing with my hands at my sides, debating whether to extend the back of one for her to sniff and lick.

“Roxy, that’s enough,” Susan said. “There’s drinks in the mudroom,” she added.

“Do you want something?” I asked Beth. I was trying to be polite so she would not think I was a bad man.

“Sure,” she said, without looking at me. “White wine.”

I backed over to the mudroom and filled a wineglass sitting on top of the clothes dryer, then fished a Bud Light out of the utility sink. I twisted off the cap and drank the beer in less than a minute. My eyes watered. I opened another.

Carrying my second beer and Beth's wine, I returned to the kitchen. Roxanne was in the family room with the kids. Amanda was hugging Roxanne's neck from the side, and Roxanne was looking away like a cruel teenager. Amanda had been asking for a dog lately, and I had maintained my position despite some Category Five whining episodes.

"That's some dog," I said to Susan, who was basting an enormous golden-brown turkey.

"Brian is afraid of dogs," Beth told Susan, taking the glass of wine from me.

"I'm not afraid of dogs. I just don't think this dog knows me very well."

"She's a sweetheart," Susan said. "She's just protecting me because Mitch isn't here. She knows you're a male."

It was oddly reassuring to have my manhood affirmed by a dog, and for a moment I wondered if this was worth Roxanne's hostility.

Just as Mitch and Charlie walked in via the garage, the doorbell also rang, and Roxanne went nuts. It was Beth's folks and, right on their heels, two more of Beth's brothers and their families. Roxanne barked wildly, though now there was almost a recreational quality to it.

"Roxanne. *Roxy!*" Mitch said. "Settle down—now!" But the dog didn't mind him.

"Should I ask them to put the dog somewhere?" Beth asked me.

"Hey, Sis," Mitch said, and he embraced Beth.

"No," I said to Beth. "I wouldn't do that."

"Do what?" Mitch asked.

“Put the dog somewhere,” Beth said. “She’s scaring Brian.”

“She’ll be fine,” Susan said, coming from the living room, an edge of exasperation in her voice. It was her dog and predated her marriage to Mitch. “She’s just excited to see all the people.”

“Hi, partner,” Mitch said to me, extending his hand for a shake. I knew he meant “partner” in the Wild West sense and not in the law-firm sense. We shook, and then he leashed Roxanne and held her away from people. Roxanne leaped and strained and barked.

“Mitch, please take off the damn leash,” Susan said sharply. “You’re making her think something’s wrong!”

I eased into the mudroom for another beer.

When dinner was served buffet-style, I hung back, even though I was incredibly hungry, because I didn’t want to seem like an aggressive hog. By the time I filled my plate, all the seats in the kitchen had been taken, so I went into the dining room, where the table was extremely low to the floor and people were sitting on cushions, Japanese-style. Susan explained that she and Mitch had sawed off the legs of their dining room table because they liked the feel of sitting on the floor when they ate.

“It’s neat,” I said, even though I was sitting at the dog’s level with an aromatic plate of meat and potatoes and gravy. I was drunk, but this had barely sanded the edges of my fear.

Then Roxanne swung into the room and circled the table; Susan had finally won the Battle of the Leash. I tried to ignore Roxanne until she nudged me under the armpit with her snout. I didn’t know if she was trying to raise my arm so I could finally pet her and earn her trust, or if she was demanding that I hand her my plate. She could have bitten off my face without having to adjust her posture at all. Lifting my hand to pet her head seemed dangerous. I just kept eating and she kept nudging, until Mitch said, “Roxanne! Go sit down!” The dog considered him, then walked away.

Two of my sisters-in-law began arguing about how one of their children had been treated by a teacher. “I don’t like the way she talked about Alex,” the mom said. “And I had to take time off from work.” The other sister-in-law, for various reasons, took the side of the teacher. As things got heated, the aggrieved mother asked for my opinion.

“Well, I see what both of you are saying,” I offered. I very badly wanted to lie down.

When the dog came back, I impulsively rose from my cushion. “Excuse me,” I said. I didn’t have a plan, but I wandered through the kitchen, waved to Amanda at the kids’ table in the family room, and turned down the front hall. I saw the pile of shoes near the door. If Roxanne had left my shoes uneaten, I would take a breather in the car.

Just as I was putting on my shoes, the dog came down the hallway with her head and tail down—a common pre-attack attitude. I decided that my life was over and not a moment too soon. This produced a strange calm in me, and I said, “In case you haven’t noticed, Roxy, I’m on my way out, so your little defend-the-house thing is going well.”

My hands were trembling as I tied my laces. She put her muzzle to my fingers and growled her deepest growl.

But Mitch, who during his first marriage had become addicted to OxyContin but was now on his second marriage and pulling out of his tailspin in fine form, saw what was happening and called Roxanne to him, and she lifted her head and barked at me incredibly loudly. I straightened up, and as Mitch came for her, I opened the door and told Mitch that I needed air, which was true, and then I left the house.

I went to our car and moved the child seat to the front and lay down sideways on the backseat. I tried to fall asleep and make everything go away. But I couldn’t sleep.

Maybe an hour or so later, Beth and Amanda came out. I sat up. In the same way that light is both a wave and a particle, my head swam and throbbed. Beth cut her eyes at me and made a dismissive hissing sound as she opened the passenger-side door. Amanda climbed into the backseat as I was heading out of it. "Hi, Daddy," she said. "What were you doing out here?"

"Taking a nap."

"I didn't know daddies take naps."

"Some daddies do," Beth said, moving Amanda's seat into the back.

After everyone was buckled, I rubbed my face with both hands and said to Beth, "How was it in there?"

"Oh, Mitch and Susan got into another fight about the dog."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Charlie and Fred were making fun of you."

"That's not right," I asserted.

MURRAY, MY FAVORITE DOG

From the moment I met him and he licked my hand, I knew Murray would never attack me, though he did doubt me once, which, for some people I have known, can be considered a form of attack. Still, he remains my favorite dog.

Murray was a Labradoodle who lived at my friend Frank's house in North Potomac, Maryland. He didn't shed. He rarely barked and never growled. He also sat by me sometimes in Frank's living room, and I petted his head and scratched his neck, while I drank wine and conversed freely with Frank and his wife, Rachel.

My friend Frank was a dark-haired, round, low-to-the-ground friend with whom I had gone to college. During that time, we had

spent many a night getting drunk at parties and in the company of other friends, having boisterous conversations in which many things were hilarious and what we were heading for when we graduated could be ignored completely. My god, I loved those times! So after things degenerated and the divorce became final, and it was clear that Beth was never coming back, I took a trip to visit Frank as a way of rebuilding my happiness and self-esteem.

I have a tattoo of a labyrinth on my back, between the shoulder blades. It takes me two mirrors to see it and a lot of concentration to find my way out of it. I got it with Frank and some other guys during the week before graduation. I would never have predicted I would get a tattoo. But despite all the idiotic things I saw happen at my parents' bar, I loved to drink, and if you drink as regularly as I was drinking, eventually you will get at least one tattoo. Before passing out facedown on the tattooist's table, I did ask for the labyrinth, I'm pretty sure, but I don't remember asking for a Minotaur. Of course, when I look at it now, in two mirrors, the Minotaur doesn't look like anything so much as a large-headed dog.

As we were talking, we all got so drunk and relaxed that I told Frank and Rachel I had a tattoo of a labyrinth on my back and the labyrinth was guarded by none other than Murray. I pulled my shirt over my head and showed them. Frank laughed when he remembered, and Rachel told me I was "a troubled individual," but in a way that might have meant I was a fun guy and a good friend to Frank through the years.

Murray and I had only one awkward moment between us the entire visit: Frank and his son and I were walking Murray around their upscale suburban neighborhood of creeks and play lots and large colonial houses on cul-de-sacs. It was cool and drizzly, but for late December it was much more pleasant than the weather back in Chicago. At one point an SUV was parked at the end of a driveway,

blocking the sidewalk. Frank, his son, and Murray went around the SUV to the left, going up the driveway. I went to the right, into the street, thinking this was more respectful to the homeowner. When I rejoined them, Murray confronted me. He sniffed me to discover who I was, as if he had never met me before. I slowed but did not stop, and Murray allowed me to continue with them.

Still, after my time with Murray, I actually reconsidered getting a dog. Beth had moved to an apartment in Bucktown so Amanda could stay in her Montessori school, and she hadn't bought a dog herself. Maybe I could prove Beth wrong about me and make Amanda happy during her three days a week at my place.

But then there would be the other days with me alone with the dog in the house. I could hear the tinkling of its tags as it approached, feel its warm breath on my knees, even through my pants. I would be reading the paper in a chair in the living room and the dog would make it clear to me that it wanted to be in that exact chair. What would I do? I have always counted on words to defend myself and my clients, to assert dominance as needed, but I could not imagine bearing the constant strain of having to assert dominance in my own home, and in a language I did not know how to speak.

REVENGE OF THE DOG

We all started barking, and our fascinating neighborhood enemy, John Nelson, retreated to his sandbox enclosure and methodically dug between his knees. We congregated on the basketball court of Divine Mercy, which was close to his lot line.

I turned to Ginnie Lee, my first love and next-door neighbor, and tried to kiss her ear, but it was a moving target. "Cut that out," she said.

She flattened her palms against her shorts and worked her tongue around her gums as if there were peanut butter on them. She had a boy's haircut, parted on the side. Her hair was black. She had large, adult breasts. We were thirteen.

How to go about being Ginnie's boyfriend was not clear to me. I didn't like hanging out at her house because of her dog. Once I talked to her from my bedroom window on the second floor above my family's bar, while she was in her yard with Max. She got down on her knees beside that dog and frolicked and wrestled with him. It was hard to hold a conversation that way. What if we became married and she wanted a dog?

Max, a smallish mutt, had almost been killed by Dozer, the Great Dane John Nelson's family had owned. Max had been loose on the sidewalk in front of the Lee home when John's father was out walking Dozer. In a flash, Dozer took Max in his mouth and shook him by the neck. Mr. Nelson held Dozer's leash but could not call off Dozer. Ginnie herself had broken Dozer's grip by beating the dog with a broom. A few months later, Dozer was hit by a car and killed.

We had been barking at John Nelson to taunt him with the loss of his malicious pooch, and, though I could taste my own cruelty in my metallic saliva, I barked the loudest because I was trying to please Ginnie and because I knew my imitation of Dozer's bark was uncannily close. Still kneeling in the sandbox, John Nelson finally unearthed a coffee can, opened it, and reached inside. His long bowl haircut swayed as he rose to his feet, holding what I was pretty sure was an M-80. He pulled his prized Zippo lighter from his T-shirt pocket and disappeared behind an overgrown bush at his property line.

Someone swished a basketball through the chain netting. When John stepped back into view, the long, customized fuse of his M-80 was burning.

My gut filled with butterflies.

“Eat me!” John yelled, and he hurled his bomb toward the basketball court.

Mesmerized, I stood and watched while the others scattered. Ginnie screamed.

The M-80 landed; I calculated ten seconds left on the fuse. Very conscious of Ginnie watching me, I did what any boy who had seen *The Dirty Dozen* would do: I reached for the M-80 to throw it back.

Even as I bent to grab it, wild emergency shouting went off in my blood. Nevertheless, I picked up the M-80. The sparking hiss sounded like something essential leaking from my head. I realized I was wrong about how much time was left; I spastically shoved the M-80 into the air. It arced toward Ginnie, who shrieked. I heard the lightning crack, and Ginnie convulsed and reeled.

I ran to her quickly. She was bleeding from her ear. There were powder burns on the side of her face. She looked at me with her mouth open, but no sound was coming out. I thought the blast had deafened me, and in fact it had temporarily because as my hearing came back, I heard Ginnie’s hard breathing more and more clearly.

“You idiot!” she shouted. “I can’t hear, I can’t hear!” She began crying.

“Get away from her!” her best friend, Luann Rodgers, yelled at me. She pushed me from the side, and I staggered for about fifteen feet, trying to keep my balance, before I finally went down and skinned my hands on the crumbling asphalt. Couldn’t she tell it was an accident? Getting up, I found that everything was slow and cottony. There were some thick minutes when maybe I blacked out on my feet, shouting horrible things at Luann. When she stopped yelling back, I detected an echo from the surrounding houses.

“Where’s John?” I asked, my voice hoarse, but no one answered me.

Then Ginnie's mother showed up on a ten-speed, which was odd, so I thought for sure I was dreaming and tried to wake up. She got off the bike and let it fall. I heard Max barking in the distance. I could picture his front paws up on the picket fence; I could tell when he got down and ran the fence and then got back up again.

Mrs. Lee went to Ginnie, who was still crying, and checked her wounds, and then wheeled and said, "What are you kids doing out here? Are you crazy?"

"John Nelson threw it," my brother Scott said. Scott was quite a ladies' man, and I thought his word would carry the situation.

"Not either!" Luann said. "Brian threw it."

"I said I was sorry!" I protested, though I don't think I had said it. Then I ran home because I was afraid I'd start to cry in front of everyone.

A week later I was sitting on the steps of the tavern when Ginnie came home with her mom. As Ginnie got out of the car, she wouldn't look at me, but I saw her beige hearing aid. It was like seeing Farrah Fawcett with a hearing aid.

I never got used to it. I hoped she would come to see John Nelson as the evil one. But, as a lawyer would say, I was the proximate cause of her hearing loss. In fact, near the end of eighth grade, she actually dated John. I kept my distance, waiting for her to come back to me.

I remember a definitive day on the playground. We were in our respective boy/girl gangs, standing around telling funny stories, and I looked over and saw Ginnie going on about something to her friends. She turned toward me and shouted, "Why can't you be like your brother? You are such a fucking loser!"

I stared at her across the playground, but nothing I wanted to say to her could be conveyed at that distance.

THE DOGS OF THE DOW

Having lost my wife and, eventually, my bid for partner and subsequently my job, I searched the important aspects of human experience for new terms by which I could judge myself A-OK. I came up with two. One of them was money: I had more money than most other people in the world, and if I could secure another job, the amount of money I had would continue to grow. The other was trying to make myself a better person. It is said that money and soul-improving activities don't mix, but for me they did: when I failed at being a better person, I could fall back on having money. This in turn gave me the strength I needed to renew my attempts to be a better person.

Karen, a law school friend who hated the swagger of litigators and everything they stood for, took pity on me and invited me into her mediation practice.

"Are you sure?" I asked at the Hard Rock Café in downtown Chicago. It was an idiotic place to have lunch, but it was my idea. "I tend to create conflict, not resolve it."

"But that's what will make you so good!" she enthused. "You really *understand* how conflict happens."

Karen's hair had gone gray when she was in her twenties. She had just let it happen. Later, it would occur to me that she used her long gray hair and her young face and willowy figure to work her mediatory magic, as if she were saying, give in to gray hair and death, mediate with it, and you'll be rewarded with cheerful willowiness.

She was having a salad; I was having a bacon cheeseburger. It was like one of those folktales where the bunny and the wolf end up good friends. I really wanted to date her, but she told me,

apropos of what I don't remember, that her relationship with her boyfriend was "unusually strong." In fact, when the check came, she added, "My relationship with my boyfriend has recently grown stronger."

I am not good at seeing or hearing myself. The thing that helps people know how they're coming across to other people doesn't work very well in me. It's one of the reasons I fear dogs: because they might see what I don't want to show. To this day, I have no idea what I did to make Karen say those things to me.

When I was signing for the bill, Hendrix's version of "All Along the Watchtower" was playing. It happens to be my favorite song. It seemed clear during his trippy, funky guitar solo that I would mediate and have stronger relationships and become a better person. And also make money.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, my weakness as a mediator was a tendency toward excitable clarity. I would be a gentle listener until I grasped what I thought was going on; then, inevitably, my framing of what I saw would tick someone off. It wasn't long before I was back at another firm, this one specializing in insurance defense work, once again litigating my ass off.

In the meantime, I had been diligently pursuing my first goal, investing my money according to a strategy called "The Dogs of the Dow."

Take the five Dow Jones Industrial Average stocks with the worst performance the previous year and invest in them for the coming year. Hold for one year and then sell and invest in the five worst from the preceding year, and so on.

The idea, in a nutshell, is to profit from the fear of others.

SELDOM KNOWN FACTS ABOUT DOGS

Without ever seeming to look, a dog knows where its master's hands are at all times.

The nose of a dog is two thousand times more sensitive than the nose of a human.

Dogs make excellent earthquake detectors; they perceive the electromagnetic waves earthquakes emit just before they occur. If your dog acts erratically without apparent cause, release it from your home and follow it to safety.

When a dog barks, the semantic content is always, "There are things I wish to say. There are things I wish to say." There are no other "words" in dog language. All differential shades of meaning in dog communication come from the tone in which this desire to communicate is announced.

RUFUS

Though I was litigating again, I never abandoned my dream of becoming a better person. Even after I jumped ship, Karen sent me some pro bono work for a local hospice, and when the hospice director mentioned a volunteer drive, I said, "Count me in."

The volunteer training sessions were awkward. We were asked why we'd volunteered, and for all of the other trainees—a few in their thirties, some recently widowed—death had recently been a major part of their lives. Many of them had relatives who had been cared for by the hospice program, and they wanted to give something back. I felt like an imposter. Except for two pairs of grandparents whom I hardly knew, I had never been close to someone who had died; my well-pickled parents were chugging

along, notwithstanding decades of first- and second-hand smoke. When it was my turn, I told the group, “I don’t think we’ll make it if we don’t help each other once in a while.”

I’m not sure how my rationale was received since I could not meet anyone’s eyes and the silence that ensued was perfectly rippleless.

After we completed our training, I was assigned to Wilbur Tesch, former farmer, US marine, and hardware store manager, a man slowly dying from a pulmonary disorder. About once a week, I would provide respite for his wife, Caroline, so she could run errands for a few hours. Wilbur had asked for a man, and there were not a lot of male hospice volunteers.

Mr. Tesch lived in Cicero, a largely treeless expanse of low-rise, low-grade urbanicity whose residents had thrown things at Martin Luther King Jr. when he brought his civil rights movement north. I pulled up in front of the small Tesch home, which crowded the sidewalk the way small homes crowd sidewalks in South Milwaukee.

Caroline greeted me and invited me inside. In a cage in the kitchen was a dark brown muscular dog. He barked vigorously. “He’s just a big baby,” Caroline told me. “His name is Rufus.”

“Hi, Rufus,” I said.

Rufus was newly acquired to protect Caroline from prowlers when Wilbur finally passed. He was lean yet gave the sense of filling the cage.

“I just took him out,” Caroline said. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

The way she said this let me know that Marigene, the volunteer coordinator, had passed on the gist of the note I had scrawled on the back of my volunteer questionnaire.

Wilbur was watching *The Price Is Right* in a brown leather recliner in the small family room at the rear of the house. He was

wearing oxygen tubes. His left arm trembled. Still, he rose and shook my right hand firmly. Though his arms were mottled with wine-colored bruises and his ankles were swollen and chafed, he didn't seem as if he were about to die. Caroline showed me the backup generator for his oxygen if the power went out, gave me a tour of the refrigerator, and took off.

Wilbur wore a hearing aid and the TV was on quite loud, but he dampened the volume so we could talk. At times we watched the action on *The Price Is Right*, and at times I asked him a question, such as, "So what was your commanding officer like?"

Wilbur considered my questions as thoughtfully as I have ever seen anyone consider questions. "I'm trying to remember," he'd say in his airless voice. And when he did remember, he'd give a twenty-minute answer. Finally, he asked, "Do you want something to eat?"

When I walked into the kitchen to get out the food, Rufus didn't lunge at me or bark or get up or make any noise at all. I was almost disappointed.

Wilbur shuffled over to join me at the dining room table. He had an ice-cream bar, and I had a ham sandwich washed down with a caffeine-free Diet Pepsi.

After lunch, we repaired to the family room for more TV.

"You like hunting and fishing?" Wilbur asked.

"Yes," I said, automatically. "Very much." I had never hunted in my life and had only fished once for bluegill off a pier at Fries Lake in Wisconsin when I was a kid.

He fumbled with the remote and the channels clicked by. He passed CNBC and I saw the stock ticker running across the bottom. INTC, one of the dogs, was up thirty-nine cents. Not bad.

Wilbur settled on the Outdoor channel. We watched a pair of men hunt caribou in a highland meadow. They whispered excitedly

as ten or twelve animals blundered into range, some inadvertently saving their lives by wandering behind a bush, others exposing themselves by trotting after a herd mate. At the key moment, the guide blew on some sort of kazoo, which froze all the caribou, and the hunter fired. One animal tensed for a millisecond and then bounded away, but apparently it was hit. The two men tracked the wounded caribou and found it dead in a ravine. They lifted its head by the rack.

“He’s beautiful,” the hunter said reverently. The caribou’s neck had retained its flexibility: though it was lying flat on its side, the men were able to hold the head up straight by the antlers.

“That’s a helluva animal,” the guide said. He described the points on the rack in great detail. “A nice trophy,” he concluded.

The hunter gave a big hand clasp to the guide and said, “Thank you so much.” Then he added, with tremulous emotion, “This is awesome! A dream come true!”

“Pretty impressive,” I said, though I was vaguely disturbed. The hospice had taught us never to upset a patient with our own beliefs. The hunter reminded me of being happy to learn Dozer was dead. It occurred to me, and not for the first time, that if I weren’t afraid of dogs, I wouldn’t have had anything to prove by barking and going for the M-80, and then Ginnie and I would have married, instead of Beth and I, and we would still be married.

While we were watching fishermen in a johnboat on what looked like a drainage ditch in Florida, Wilbur’s son Henry showed up. Henry was a fit, straight-backed man with a mustache and thick graying hair. Wilbur had told me his son had fought in Vietnam. “Now he works for a woman,” Wilbur had said with a sad disbelieving laugh.

Henry chatted with us for a bit, while Rufus whined to be let out.

“Time to release the beast,” Henry said, and he stepped into the kitchen.

“You need some help?” I said as I stood up.

“He doesn’t need help,” Wilbur said.

Nevertheless, I went into the dining room, just in time to see Rufus drag Henry out the kitchen door. Henry clicked off the leash, and Rufus darted into the small backyard like a released fish. He did his business, then gamboled and turned and looked expectantly to Henry, his short tail wagging furiously. Henry picked up a chew stick and tossed it, and Rufus ran after it and brought it to him. I should have gone back to sit with Wilbur, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the two of them. They played fetch for a while; then the next time Rufus brought back the stick, Henry grabbed it on either side of Rufus’s jaw and wagged it. They played tug-of-war, man and dog, Henry and Rufus, rolling and playing, bumping into an empty blue kiddie pool on the grass, until they almost seemed of the same species and Rufus gave up the stick to Henry.

Rufus waited for Henry to throw the stick, but Henry lay on his back with his eyes closed and his arms over his head, looking exhausted by more than dog wrestling. Rufus approached and licked his face, and Henry smiled faintly, lying there for another ten seconds before he got up.

. . .

The following week the hospice nurse came and before I knew it she let Rufus out and filled his pool with a hose because it was a hot day, and the week after that, Caroline came back early. Then there was a day when it all went as the first day, and Wilbur and I were watching TV while his oxygen supply system motored and hissed and made occasional clicking and whumping sounds. During a fishing program, Rufus began to whine intermittently, and by the time

a reindeer-hunting program came on, Rufus was whining piteously and continuously to be let out. His whine was high-pitched, loud, coercive; it shredded my consciousness. I rubbed my damp palms on my knees. I thought Wilbur might turn to me at any second and say, "Could you please let him out?" Instead, Wilbur repeatedly tried to shush Rufus, but the dog's whining found an extra gear, an even sharper pitch.

"No!" Wilbur finally shouted, though he was dangerously short of breath. "No!" He rose from his chair, his left arm shaking, his fist curled around a phantom newspaper. He almost toppled as he turned laboriously toward the kitchen, his oxygen tube dangling, his right hand braced on the armrest. If I were to help him, I would have to open the cage and quickly move my hand past Rufus's jaw to grasp his collar. I would speak soothingly while I did this and pray that whatever it was that gave me away to people wouldn't give me away to Rufus. I would let him drag me outside. I would let him go. Wilbur straightened and shuffled six feet to the kitchen doorway. It took him a full minute, the dog whining frantically. "No!" Wilbur hoarsely shouted. "No!"

Wilbur tottered. I sprang from the sofa and dashed to him. He tipped in my direction. I went to one knee, as if fielding a grounder, and took his falling weight against my shoulder. But he was heavier than I thought, and I sprawled backward, and Wilbur collapsed onto me, his foul-smelling hair tickling my nose, his pointy elbow sharply pinching the skin on the side of my midsection. "Ack!" he wheezed, lying on top of me, waving an arm; the tube stretching to his nose piece came loose. For a confused instant, I thought of Rufus and Henry wrestling in the backyard, and I imagined I was roughhousing with Wilbur in a similar way. But then I came to my senses.

MEDITATIVE DOG

Dogs circle me in fluorescent moonlight, in some rectangular South Milwaukee backyard. Their unruly loping. Their narrow mouths and oversize teeth. The thing I would never do, the thing I am afraid of, barks at me. I have the ability to hear dogs barking at great distances, in any weather. Every dog confirms for me that I am not near it.

You might expect that I would have had a case involving a dog. When a dog bites someone—and this happens with fair frequency, though never to me—a lawsuit sometimes ensues. But, given my largely corporate practice, I have never come across a case in which a dog's behavior was material. I have never even defended a corporation that breeds or distributes or caters to dogs. Nevertheless, sometimes I think dogs have taught me everything I know, that they have made me the man, and the litigator, I am today.

My daughter is ten now and she calls occasionally to renew her pleas. I tell her, if your mother can handle a dog at her apartment, I won't stop her, but I can't have a dog over here.

"Dad, you hate me," Amanda says.

"No, I don't, sweetie," I say. "I love you."

We hang up with something between us, I'm afraid.

Wilbur is of course dead now, but how did things turn out with Rufus? Did I ever wrestle with him in the backyard? Did I ever fill his pool with water? Did we play fetch? He was purebred Doberman, a beautiful dog, trust me. Once, I simply put the back of my right hand against his cage, and he licked my fingers through the bars.

Soon I will take profits in Pfizer, Boeing, and Intel and put the money into inflation-indexed treasuries. The dogs have had their run. My strategy has proved successful. It is time to turn somewhat conservative.