

TEN

MY FATHER WAS sitting at the kitchen table grading papers and listening to the broadcast of a distant country on his shortwave radio. “*Seis miembros terroristas de la Facción del Ejército Rojo han agarrado la embajada de Alemania del Oeste en Estocolmo, demandando que funcionarios liberen a miembros encarcelados de su grupo . . .*” I sat in the chair across from him and twisted the hem of my shirt around my fingers. “Dead?”

Without looking up he answered, “What is it, son?”

“Grover has a growth in his mouth. It’s on the roof of his mouth and it’s big.” Even though Grover was not allowed indoors, I snuck him inside sometimes, because it didn’t seem right to divide the dogs—the family—into “indoor” and “outdoor.” I was rubbing his belly while he wriggled and scratched his back on the rug, mouth hanging open, when I saw the growth.

“Well,” he said, marking a blue student examination notebook

with his red pen, "I hope it's nothing serious." He put the booklet aside and took another from the pile.

I was worried. The growth was webbed with veins, and so large that it spread over his rear molars. It created the illusion that Grover had a plump, hairless rat in his mouth and was just holding it there in the back of his throat, saving it for later.

"Can we take him to the vet?" I asked.

My father said, "We'll keep an eye on him."

I heard the crackle of gravel in the driveway. "My mother's home," I said, pushing my chair back and running to the front door.

She pulled up to the steps, climbed out of the car. "I've got a dollhouse in the back of the car here," she said. "You want to help me unload it?"

Barefoot, I walked across the gravel to the rear of the car. Turned over on its broad side was a small house. Together we hoisted it out of the car.

My father appeared in the doorway, shielding his eyes from the sun. "Well, what have you got there?"

"It's a dollhouse. Meg was going to just throw it away so I took it for Augusten."

I was flushed with humiliation and excitement. Nothing in my mother's tone of voice suggested it was odd in the slightest to bring her son a dollhouse.

"Help me," she said, lifting it, knocking the wood against the car's rear liftgate. I quickly reached for the other side and together we hoisted it out, stood it upright beside the car.

It was a three-story colonial held together with the thinnest nails. Perhaps it had once been white, but now it was filthy, the paint smeared with dirt and rubbed away in spots revealing bare wood.

My father smiled. "Well, look at that," he said, oddly pleased. Neither of them questioned the dollhouse.

"It needs a good cleaning," my father said. "Don't bring that thing in the house until you've cleaned it up."

My mother said, "Her girls are grown now, it was just sitting in the garage like trash. It seemed a shame."

She clutched her car keys and walked inside.

My father said, "Oh boy, it's hot out here," and walked inside, too.

I uncoiled the hose and turned on the water. I sprayed the dollhouse, flooding its rooms. Then I dragged it to the edge of the yard near the woods to dry.

It should have gone to some little girl, I thought. Not just because I was a boy, but because I didn't really *play* anymore.

THE GROWTH OVERTOOK Grover's mouth and he could no longer eat. "Please," I begged my father. "He needs to go to the doctor."

"Well, we'll see how he does," he said, waving me away.

Out in the yard, the four piles of woodchips delivered three years ago still hadn't been spread. Weeds were waist high. The trunk in the Chrysler had rotted away years ago because my father hadn't swept up the split bag of road salt he kept back there. The first three steps leading up to the deck were rotten; planks of the deck itself were so soft you could poke a finger through them. If he didn't do something soon, the entire deck would rot and fall to the ground. Grover had to go to the vet.

God? Please, make my father take Grover to the vet.

I needed my mother to take my side and insist that the dog be taken to the vet, but she sat on the sofa reading Emily Dickinson

and penciling notes in the margins. “‘Pretty people in the woods,’” she said to no one, looking up from the book. “Isn’t that a remarkable phrase? I suppose that could almost describe us.”

My father was in his rocking chair reading a textbook.

Because Grover lived outdoors, I worried that something about the outdoors had caused his tumor. Maybe he’d eaten a squirrel and a bone had pierced the roof of his mouth. Maybe the tumor was a mushroom that had taken root in the dark of his throat. Now, even when I poured hot water over Grover’s dry food and let it soak until it was soft he wouldn’t eat. The tumor was just too large.

I sat with my parents in the living room looking at our oldest dog, Cream, an indoor dog. “See the way she turns her nose up in the air like that?” my mother said resentfully. “She looks just like Mother.”

My father hated Cream because my mother constantly compared the dog to her own difficult mother. Once when I was small, he kicked her to get her out of the way. I’d cried and kicked him in return. I was sure he’d kick me back, but he only walked away.

“Even the way she wags her tail. If Mother had a tail, she would wag it just exactly like that. There’s something superior in the way she does that. She’s so much like Mother it almost makes me feel ill.”

I SAT IN front of the dollhouse and peered into its tiny empty rooms. I could almost feel the presence of two girls lurking over my shoulder. Thick-boned Swedish girls with long blond hair and pale, soft wrists. Their gleaming blue eyes would know every inch of this house. While I didn’t know any flesh-and-bone girls

like this, they felt so real. I could almost see them reaching into the dollhouse and moving a chair just a fraction of an inch, so it's *perfect*. And I began to wonder about the girls who had this dollhouse before me, if perhaps some part of them lingered within it.

Once, these little rooms had been lovingly decorated with tiny beds, pillows the size of earlobes, skillets made of iron and smaller than a dime. What games did the girls play? Did the doll parents scream at each other? Did the doll family have a dog and did it have to sleep outside? And did the doll children have a dollhouse of their own? Was this dollhouse a mirror held up to a mirror, reflecting itself back forever?

THE GROWTH IN Grover's mouth began to bleed. Rivulets of blood clung to the whiskers beneath his chin, as though he'd recently consumed a bit of prey. Grover had always patrolled the deck like a small officer. He alerted us to cars, dogs, people out for a walk.

Now, Grover lay in the shade, his back pressed against the cool sliding glass door. I discovered the bleeding when he licked my hand and left a swath of blood behind, death's autograph.

I knew if we didn't get him help soon, he would die. But maybe that would be for the best. Because his life had been no kind of life at all. Always sitting out there on the deck, watching the other dogs inside, through the glass. He wouldn't have been able to understand why these other dogs got to be indoors and have dinner in the kitchen and come and snuggle up whenever they wanted. He would have wondered why he had to stay outside, even on the coldest winter night. Maybe he even wondered if he'd been bad. Maybe the reason his tail would wiggle

so fast it became a blur every time somebody opened the sliding glass door was because he thought he might get a chance to be an indoor dog, too.

Grover couldn't understand my father's awful indoor, outdoor rule. He couldn't understand it at all.

The only thing he ever wanted was to lick a person. And that's where he got his growth, his cancer, his dead lump—right there on his tongue.

The awful truth was that it might be better for Grover to be dead. For him to not *be*, than to be always on the outside.

I wanted what was best for Grover, and perhaps what was best was death. Still, I couldn't let him go. I had to find a way to get him help. And maybe I could make my father understand it wasn't right to make Grover live apart.

“Dead? We ought to take Grover to the vet right now, he's bleeding. I mean, that thing in his mouth, *it's* bleeding and bigger and worse. It's bad. I'm scared.”

My father surprised me by giving me his attention. “What did you say? We *ought* to take Grover to the vet, is that what you said?”

“Yeah, because his lump is worse, it's bleeding. I just saw.” Among our family photographs was one of me dressed in a jacket and tie, holding tiny Grover in my arms. My puppy, named for the Grover on my then favorite show, *Sesame Street*.

My father was seated at the kitchen table and now he leaned back in his chair. He cocked his head to the side and extended his hands before him, as though he were shaping something, a bowl from invisible clay.

“You know, son, there are many interesting and important problems associated with the notion of ‘ought.’ There is the problem, which each of us faces at one time or another, of

exactly what we *ought* to do. Then, there is always the problem of understanding exactly what we mean by saying that something ought to be done, and whether or not we make a distinctive claim when we assert that something *ought* to be done. There is also the problem of determining what kinds of statements are relevant for the support of such obligation statements, and even if any statements whatsoever are relevant for their support. It's very interesting to consider, how best can we express an *ought* statement?" He leaned forward and placed the sides of his hands on the table about a foot apart. "People have obligations, and the things which people are obligated to do are concrete actions. Now, as far as our obligations are concerned, we know that many of the things which we consider ourselves or others to be obligated to do are things which are not, and perhaps never will be, *done*. Therefore, you see, from the fact that a certain action ought to be done, we cannot always conclude that there is a concrete action which is the action that in fact ought to be done. Many of the things that ought to be done are never done. In those cases, it will then be false for us to conclude from the fact that some action ought to be done that there actually exists some action-event which is an action that ought to be taken. I mean," he chuckled, "did you ever consider the ramifications of such a simple word?"

Grover died.