

Dogs

Thomas Nielsen

One time, I kidnapped my ex's dog.

The dog was small; I could pick him up in my arms. Scooped him up from the backyard. It was easy to get in, Griffin never locked the gate or anything. He liked that people could come over whenever, a brand of small-town hospitality that I admired. I slipped through, whispered "C'mere, Bear," and he came right over. I think he was happy to see me. He's a Havanese. I remembered how my face would light up with Griffin's when he'd tell people that. But now I think he just liked knowing more than other people.

The dog didn't mind being picked up, especially not by people he trusted. He looked excited to go somewhere. Car trips were his favorite. He was not the type of dog to stick his head out the window, too small for that. But he loved to curl up in your lap and watch the trees go by. I put him in the back seat with a towel under him so he wouldn't get anything on my faux leather.

I didn't know where we were driving. I couldn't take the dog home, if there were ever an investigation they'd find him there and I'd have to go to prison or pay a fine or something like that. I remembered that we'd visited the dog park together, Griffin and the dog and me. Nice June day, we'd held hands and watched Bear wag his tail and bark at passing dogs. Dog things. He was just a puppy back then, wide-eyed at just how big the world could be.

It was cold in that January way, snow still on the ground from Christmas. It hadn't been warmer than freezing since November. Still, there were people at the dog park. Before we got out of the car, I took off the dog's collar. "Bear", and a phone number. He wagged

his tail, looking past me and onto the other animals. He'd make friends, certainly. I could put him down and he'd run away and Griffin would never find him again. Good-riddance to joy.

I sat the dog down at the edge of the grass, right by the gate. He ran a few steps towards the other dogs before looking back at me, wondering if I would follow. Black eyes against wood-brown fur. I couldn't look at him anymore.

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"My wife is a riot! Can you believe her?"

"No, no. I can't."

The next day I worked as normal, cutting hair as well as I could and straining interest at customer stories. My coworkers got tips with notes singing praises of their kindness, but my notes were about my proficiency with scissors. That's what kept this regular coming back. George, I think. But it didn't stop him from talking.

"It's cold out, isn't it?"

"Yes-sir, it is."

"Found a squirrel dead on my porch this morning. That cold, should have found a warmer place to sleep!"

Cold. I hadn't thought about that.

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I'd been trying to find a new way to walk home since I left Griffin. I'm very fortunate to live nearby. We used to get lunch sometimes, at a nice sandwich place a block away from work. He called it his favorite spot, but I didn't. We'd sit across from each other, me facing the window and him facing the counter. He brought up getting a dog for the first time, us

sitting just that way. The guy he fucked worked there. I looked him in his wide eyes, caught pretending that my spot in the bed was his. My, what big teeth you have.

Left on Fourth, right on Jackson – that’s what I wanted to try. I wrote it down so I didn’t forget. Street names were never my strong suit. I took my left, then my right.

Across the way was Jackson Park. I didn’t remember it being there. I’d only ever come from the other direction – from Griffin’s house – and only twice before. I never thought about the street it was on. It’s where I’d left the dog just a day ago.

I wondered about Griffin. It was so cold, his tears probably froze to his face. I rounded the corner, and I didn’t want to think about the dog anymore.

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I couldn’t say what I think happened to him. It might be too horrible to put into words. Too much, too much. I felt like he deserved it, at the time. Not Griffin, but the dog. Deserved it for being Griffin’s and not mine.

I loved him. Not Griffin, but the dog. Black eyes against wood-brown fur, I think the dog might have loved me, too.

It was the last Thursday of May when Griffin brought Bear home. He was smaller then. I held him in one hand. Instant love. He wasn’t awake when I met him, tired from the newness of the day. “Lev, do you want to stay the night?” Yes, but not for you.

I had a friend, then, but all I have now are flashes of if-I-can’t-have-him-no-one-can and this pit in my stomach, hole in my heart where maybe I could find the words for what happened to Bear.