

## Heart on a Plate

Tom's ex-wife wants him to take the dog.

"She's driving me nuts," Annie says. "She's so depressed. Call the pet shrink already. This Chihuahua I know? Cured. And he was totally messed up in the head by the puppy mills. And the pet shrink's a friend —"

*Of course she is*, Tom thinks, but doesn't say out loud.

The border collie belongs to his eighteen-year-old daughter, Rose. The same Rose who's been standing him up since he finally got his own place six months ago. Not that he blames her, but he can't let it go. He's a *dad*, after all.

"How's tricks?" he says to Glinda, the dog.

Tricks are not good. Her ears prick up then flatten as Annie's band clangs from the basement. Glinda's nose seems raw. She's both enervated and jumpy at once. The dog circles and sits and lays her head between her paws, looking up at him with her one blue eye and one brown, which pretty much does it for Tom.

In the car, Glinda leans. Tom has to work to keep the steering wheel straight. He keeps saying, "Hey, now," and "We'll get through this," but then stops. The jury's still out, after all.

First stop is the marijuana dispensary where Rose works — his *daughter* works in a *pot shop*, and *no*, he's not happy about that — but if there's anyone who can perk up the dog, it's Rose. Trouble is, every time he's come here before, she's either hiding or gone.

The dispensary is on Abbot Kinney near Venice Beach, an artery of uber cool. Strange and Invisible Perfumes has closed up early, but Compassionate Friendly Cure's *Very Open* sign blinks in the dusk. The place could be another sleek emporium peddling organic, locally sourced shampoo. Glass cases showcase the merchandise, rows and rows of premium bud in apothecary jars. White-coated young men and women glide around with tongs. A blackboard announces the daily specials: Orange Crush, Turtle Power, Northern Lights, Skunk.

Glinda shies from the Samoan security guard at the door, so Tom has to pull her through the store. A young man with the dazed look of the flying says, "Oh, look at the pretty doggie," in a Caribbean accent. His skin is the exact color of butterscotch, sunlight glinting off a ring in his nose. Surprisingly, Glinda submits to being touched by this boy. He takes a biscuit from a jar and she gulps it down

before Tom can say no.

"Thanks very much," Tom says, meaning the opposite, but the boy graces him with a beaming smile.

Tom inquires about Rose, again, and the kid says, "Let's ask my partner." Then he's bounding away, and Tom and his now possibly stoned pup scramble after him up a stair.

They reach a large and well-lit room, spanning the entire width of the floor below. A woman stands in the center with a yoga mat, wearing only boy shorts and bra. Spiky dark hair. Kittenish features that look somehow hard. Small breasts, gathered up in a tiny harness of lace. With a snap of her wrist, she unfurls the yoga mat.

"Not here. Day off," the woman says when Tom asks.

He wants to press her, find out more, but Glinda whines, and the woman actually folds herself into Downward Dog, facing east, away from Tom. The boy takes one look at Tom's face, locked into the view. Not unsympathetically, the kid takes a frosty Red Bull from a fridge on a counter, snaps off the cap, and hands it to Tom.

On the way home, Glinda gnaws her paw as if it's a chew toy. She's stopped leaning in, which can't be good. See, this is what happens: it's the ER where he works that's supposed to be out of control, but it always turns out to be the rest of the world.

Back at his bachelor hole-in-the-wall, he tries Rose again, but straight to voice mail. He opens a can of Hearty Beef Stew for him and the dog, and manages to slice a bright crescent moon off his thumb. A sickle of blood wells up, soaking one paper towel, then another. It tastes warm and metallic, and Tom discovers he kind of likes wounding himself. Meanwhile, Glinda lists onto her side, and Tom feels flooded with the sick worry he remembers from when Rose was little. He checks Glinda's pulse — steady, sort of — and the cold, wet tip of her nose, but he's still freaked out enough to fish out the number Annie gave him. Tom decides he owes it to Glinda and Rose and himself, and so yes, he calls.

It's late when she answers — buttery voice, some kind of educated accent — and Tom agrees to meet her at the local watering hole.

"I like to talk to the owners first to get a sense," she says. "Though the whole concept of *owning* a dog is ridiculous."

He doesn't want to leave Glinda alone, but he fixes her up as best as he can with a few biscuits pilfered from Annie's laundry room. Glinda barely looks up when he closes the door, and this bothers him, too.

The bar is dark and hoppy with sixty-eight artisanal brews on

tap. Una — yes, *Una* — has a flop of pink hair, a vibrating phone, and a necklace that says *listen* in Sanskrit (he asks). She also has a fetching white throat that he can't stop staring at. She tells him about separation anxiety, especially in the smaller breeds. Tom says that he once had a cat with insomnia just to freak her out, but she stays benign. She seems to know an alarming amount about him, but she wants to know more. He tells her about how he's worried about Rose. They talk about Glinda in her youth, a rush of puppy tearing after balls, chewing everything in sight, and then conking out exhausted on whomever happened to be nearby. Una listens to all of it. She has an enormous capacity to absorb. Is this how she gets to the dogs? After tidily putting away two drinks — Dewar's, neat — Una finally suggests they go back to his place.

Glinda perks up her ears when they come in. The biscuits are gone, and her eyes seem to have gotten back a fraction of gleam. Una ignores her at first — “You need to let them come to you” — and takes inventory of Tom's sad little pad: the plus-sized flat screen he awarded himself, the questionable stains on the L-shaped sofa (curbside rescue), and the twin bunches of brown-spotted bananas in the Andes-wood bowl from gay Terrence downstairs.

“And the fridge?”

“Don't need it. It's great,” he says, hollow words ringing in his ears. “I eat a banana and open a can of soup every night.”

Una is not amused.

After they move to the couch, Tom discovers yet another of her superhuman powers: she can sit eerily still. Glinda hefts herself up to explore the soles of Una's boots. Una puts her hand on the dog's head, and the collie shuts her eyes. All right, this impresses Tom. As the dog sways — yes, sways — Una begins to speak, telling Tom of the mountain lions sighted all over the city, in Malibu, the Palisades, Glendale. They've lost touch with the Hollywood Lion, Puma 62. Her collar stopped transmitting, though no mortality signal yet. And the markings of a huge fight were found.

“I'm worried.”

“But can't you tune in? You talk to animals, right?”

Una frowns. A delicate blue V appears between her eyebrows as if seen through ice. “That only works if I'm doing something else, and then I get clear images: headlights swerving, blood on a trail. The cats hang around the freeways waiting to cross. Three have already been killed on the 101, and two kittens on Kanan Dume Road. These poor cats are only trying to expand their roam.”

“And aren't we all?” Tom says, but Una gives him a look so weary that he flinches. A jerk. A total jerk. And why is she unnerving him so? The room's gone dark except for the rhythmic pulse of

the green and red Vacancy sign on the roof of the Xanadu Hotel across the street. It's hard not to reflect that here he is, forty-two years old, surrounded by the extent of his worldly possessions, along with a trail of destruction: a heartsick dog, an ex-wife, and a kid gone AWOL. And yet at the same time, Tom feels that flicker of life, and not just in his jeans. It's very subtle, maybe only an awareness that wasn't there before. When he can bring himself to look at Una again, he's struck by how pretty she is, her blush-colored hair drifting over eyes clear and green as a swimming hole. This, of course, is the place where he automatically leans in for a kiss — still a guy, after all — but Una stops him cold with a hand to his chest.

“I know what to do about Glinda,” she says.

The next day — Halloween — they head out to a place that Una insists is a surprise. She doesn't talk on the way, so Tom plugs in his phone and takes over the playlist. In an R & B mood, he loads it up with Usher, and Legend, and Lead Belly, too. He thinks about Rose and tries to imagine what she could be doing now, hopefully not wreathed in marijuana smoke.

“I thought we had this special bond,” Rose said the last time Tom saw her. “I thought you loved me. I gave you my tender heart on a plate.”

Tom was conscious of car noise around them, a sea of cars. He remembers thinking *what's she talking about?* When he left Annie, Rose couldn't have thought he was leaving *her*. He should have said something reassuring then, but he was just too exhausted, too done with the drama, too stuck on that heart, the gristle and blue-red muscle of it, fist-sized and pumping on one of his mother's Delft plates. They stood under a fig tree, the fruit covered with soot. Above them, expensive condos littered a canyon rim. Rose wore her tie-dyed T-shirt that said *Everybody loves a Jewish girl*, which was so not true, her dark wavy hair yanked fiercely away from her face. She began to cry, and he thought, *I need to be back at work*, even as he put his arms around her. She held her elbows in, back stiff, not relaxing, as the tears streamed. They stood that way, awkwardly, for five minutes at least, before he gently mopped her up with his sleeve.

Now Una bumps the car up a dirt road. They stop at a cluster of buildings: a barn with dusty white siding, a silo, and a rambling blue house ringed with fields. *Oh, great, we're going to pick fruit*, Tom thinks.

A woman with gray hair and Heidi braids waves at Una as she purposefully heads into the barn, and grabs them both a pair of

long wooden poles. Glinda seems alert and curious. She walks close to Una, veering into her, but Una doesn't seem to mind. Tom lets them go ahead for the first pleasure of the day: watching Glinda's rump sway side to side up the path; and Una's, he's not going to lie.

When they turn the corner to a paddock behind the barn, he understands: sheep. They're going to *herd*. A motley bunch with greasy white wool and long dark faces size them up before Glinda happily charges into their midst. Tom can't help but laugh, but Una just scowls.

"See, that's what a silly dog does," she says as her magical V seeps into view. Tom remembers what it reminds him of now — a Saturday afternoon long ago, Rose in her *Harriet the Spy* stage, and Tom showing her how to invisibly write with lemon juice.

The sheep scatter deeper into what he now sees is a three-sided enclosure. They back against the fence, watching Glinda warily as she circles back to Una and whines.

"No, I'm not going to feel sorry for you," Una says to her. "Get back out there. Figure it out."

She hands Tom a pole. "What you want is to teach her to nudge the woollies into shape. Slow and steady. If she uses too much force, they scatter and try to escape. She has to be in control, and that means you do, too. See, now she's at the flank of the herd. Any closer, and she'll be in the flight zone. You don't want to be the magnet here, getting her to come to you. You need to be the puppeteer."

"But I don't want to run her like that."

Una looks at him oddly. "Of course you do. You're giving her a purpose. It's what she wants from you."

For the next hour and a half, he tries hard to follow Una's commands with his pole and the obstinate herd of sheep. "You're moving too much," she says. "You're talking too much. It only confuses your dog."

Tom especially dislikes one particular she-devil ewe with a wandering left eye. She stares at him, thinking up more and more irritating ways to slip away. Glinda barks and nips, but the ewe only gets more entrenched. And it's criminally hot out here: his jeans are stiff with reddish dust and what appear to be burrs.

"When you call her, she's thinking of *you* when she needs to be thinking of *sheep*," Una says, as if talking to a young and dim child. "Go through the motions, again and again. Just keep doing it. She's a smart dog. It'll take."

But it doesn't, and now it's broiling.

Glinda pants, as the sheep get even more skittish. Tom fixates

on a tall glass of iced coffee, a swimming pool. Una's looking wilted now, too. This may be the time to admit failure, embrace humiliation, give the fuck up, but Glinda trots heavily from side to side in front of the herd. She backs them into a corner yet again, instead of away from the fence. Predator and prey, a ritual as old as time, he can see it in the slope of Glinda's shoulders, the stink eye she's casting around, and the wary agitation of the sheep. But then Glinda slows. The sheep huff and clump together, facing out. She backs off, and their knot loosens. She picks up her pace just slightly, coming behind She-Devil on the fringe closest to the fence.

"Take it easy, girl," Tom says, under his breath.

The ewe takes a few uncertain steps toward the others.

Glinda doesn't break eye contact, edging between the ewe and the fence. The sheep responds as if it has been fiercely told to move away. Tom freezes, holding his pole just grazing the ground as Glinda works the ewe toward the other end. The sheep clump and then shy away in a perfect mass, and there it is: a triangle of intention between Glinda, the sheep, and Tom.

Triumphant, he turns to Una — she saw that, right?

No smile, but he scores the tiniest nod. "That's what I'm talking about," she says.

It's not as if — presto — everything's changed, but Tom *does* wake up the next morning filled with a sweet sense of hope. He even thinks about inviting Annie over for coffee, just so they can talk things out. And he doesn't even mind that Rose still doesn't answer her phone.

Glinda seems much better, too. Tom takes a few days off so they can work on their skills. Before long, Heidi Braids is waving at *them*, and the sheep even show some respect. But it's Glinda who's magnificent. He loves to watch her come to life in that field, herding with a focus, grace, and drive that Tom didn't know she had.

On the last day before Tom has to dive back into the ER, the wind's knocked off, the afternoon crystalline. Tom rushes around doing errands, with Glinda riding shotgun in the car. On Sunset Boulevard, he passes the Hustler headquarters with its rows of teddies and whips, Book Soup with its hand-lettered signs, the boba shops, and the sad husk of Tower Records, now a cut-rate clothing store. He's parked at a light when he happens to look to the side, and the moment he's given up on finally arrives.

Rose.

There.

On the sidewalk.

One hundred feet ahead.

Her hair is much longer now, slashed with burgundy, and she appears to have a complicated tattoo on her arm. She's longer and thinner; her features have sharpened, her cheekbones defined; with the fury of hair and huge eyes she looks very much a woman, so much that he swallows hard. Glinda has spotted her, too; he can sense the dog taut beside him, every ligament vibrating. He can hear her quickened breath, and he feels the same: filled with nervous joy and alarm. That heart on a plate is back, only now it's his own.

"Hey!" he cries, but she doesn't turn around. A strangely familiar boy guides her down the street, his hand resting lightly at the small of her back. As Tom watches, she slides her head down to rest on his shoulder, neither stopping or slowing, just that same young, easy gait.

They turn a corner at the end of the block before Tom snaps alert. He floors it, twisting in and out of traffic after them. A Prius cuts in front. Tom slams on the horn until a hole opens up, then in he scoots, and hangs a right.

The boy's hand is in Rose's pocket now, and Tom's palms go tacky with sweat.

They pass a store, a loose awning flapping, and the young man pulling her away just in time. Tom catches a glimpse of Rose's face, and the young man tips his head back too, before he turns around and looks at Tom as if he's known Tom's been there all along. Of course — the kid from the store — and that's when Tom says "Go!" The window's open, and Glinda launches herself out of the car.

The dog streaks down the street. Seeing her, Rose reacts with surprise, then delight, but Glinda remains focused, ears cocked to Tom's whistles, circling and circling, trying to coax the young people back to the car. And when that doesn't work, the dog nips at Rose's heels, this time accomplishing a perfect fetch even though the three of them have to weave into traffic as they step off the curb. Horns blare. People shout. When Rose finally gets how she's been herded to *Dad*, she scowls, even as Glinda plops down on her rear.

"What did you do to Glinda?" Rose says. There's anger in her voice mixed up with irritation and . . . what? Something else he hasn't heard in a long time, because the boy starts to grin, and there's a moment when Rose just looks from the boy to Tom, and Tom can see all those childhood hurts scrolling past. She's not a kid anymore, and she knows it now, and that's why she can laugh, as well. It isn't a laugh that really gives an inch, but there's joy in it, thanks to the dog, and he'll take that, too. What a glorious sound. Because no, he hasn't been the best dad in the world, distracted

and often clueless, but he loves, he *loves*.

"I'm not forgiving you, Dad," she says.

"I know, I know," he says, and they laugh some more.

