

DAN POPE

SEE THE MISSISSIPPI

THE DOG HAD BEEN GROWLING for eighteen hours, ever since we loaded him into the back seat of my '92 Chevette and wheeled out of the driveway of Ed's abandoned house in Cranston, Rhode Island, a thousand and some odd miles back along the interstate. Fiona and I were fleeing for a better life in the west, carrying with us the few possessions we wanted to retain, the luggage and boxes and furniture strapped to the roof and piled so high in the hatch-back that I could barely see out the rear-view mirror, especially when the dog stood on his front paws and blocked my view, glaring at me with his beady black eyes. "Move, Sheldon. Get out of the way, Sheldon," I would say, and the dog would growl in response. He had been growling his low and baleful growl, as I have said, ever since we began our trip, and nothing Fiona or I did made him cease — not dog biscuits (he'd gobbled an entire box, snarling quietly while he munched and chewed), not babytalk, not Mozart (his favorite, according to Fiona), not even slipping a half-sleeping pill under his tongue. He was a difficult dog to please. If I changed lanes or braked abruptly, he'd bark, and if I lowered the volume on the Mozart — God forbid — he'd pitch a fit and start howling like a wolf. He didn't look out the side windows, as dogs will do. Sheldon, rather, stared directly into the rear-view mirror, watching me as I drove, his eyes on mine. It was disconcerting, being under close, constant observation by a Dalmatian, particularly during the dark and windswept hours after midnight, while Fiona slept in the passenger's seat and I pushed onward, westward along Route 80, passing barren fields, darkened farmhouses, lonely silos, the buildings

shuttered and battened, mile after forlorn mile. When the sun came up, somewhere in Illinois, the dog's growling began to sound decipherable to me—almost human-like expressions of pain and anguish—and by the time we reached the bridge that spanned the Mississippi River (the Fred Schwengel Memorial Bridge, according to the sign posted by the roadside), I couldn't stand the noise a moment longer, and I told Fiona so in those exact words.

She stretched her arms and said, "Sheldon doesn't like cars."

"That's absurd. Dogs love riding in cars. They love watching the scenery and sticking their snouts out the window. All dogs love that."

"Not Sheldon," said Fiona. "He gets car sick."

"I don't care. I'm pulling over. I mean it this time."

Fiona yawned and looked out the passenger window. She said, "It's not as wide as I would have imagined."

It was mid-November, and the trees along the riverbanks were bare. Below, the river was black and fast-moving. You could see the ripples, the current rushing downstream. I had read about the Mississippi in history books and now I was passing over it, like so many rivers one crosses during a lifetime, and it seemed portentous to me because we were leaving the east behind along with the lives that we had botched back in Cranston, Rhode Island—mine, hers, Ed's—and yet it also seemed utterly commonplace: just another bridge, just another river, albeit a famous one, as rivers go.

I said, "Isn't everything?"

"What?"

"Different than you imagined it would be?"

She didn't answer, and I moved into the right-hand lane and took the next exit.

A half-mile down the river road we came to a small town that looked like a 1950s movie set; there was a Masonic temple, a funeral home, a steak house called Sneaky Pete's, a general store. *Birthplace of Buffalo Bill Cody*, read the banner stretched above the deserted main street.

She said, "I'm tired, Al. Let's check into a motel."

"I'm more tired than you. I haven't slept a wink with that damn dog growling."

"A motel, Al. Clean sheets. Cable TV. A hot bath. Wouldn't you like a hot bath, Al?"

I shook my head. "Motels don't take dogs. Besides, we can't afford it. We barely have enough money for gas."

I turned down a sloping side street, crossed the railroad tracks, and pulled into a small paved lot that edged against the riverbank. The Chevette rattled and coughed when I switched off the motor. Fiona and I looked through the bug-splattered windshield at the water. There were no other vehicles in the parking lot, and no people in sight. Sheldon straightened up and barked twice, loudly.

I said, "We've got to do something about the dog."

She said, "You know the thing I like best? Those little mints they leave on the pillow. They're waiting for you when you unlock the door. Wouldn't you like some mints, Al?"

"Let's stick to the subject, please."

"It's been a long time since we checked into a motel in the afternoon, Al. How about we give it a go? What do you say to a giving it a go, Al? Wouldn't you like that?"

I was too tired to think about sex, and she was too. Her hair was bedraggled and her eyes were puffy slits, and we both smelled like b.o. We had been taking turns driving. She slept while I drove, and vice versa. We'd stopped only for gasoline, sundries, and rest-rooms. We figured if we proceeded in this fashion we'd reach Denver in approximately forty-eight hours total traveling time – maybe less. Then we'd unlock the door to her uncle's untenanted one-bedroom condo (water-damaged but rent-free) and celebrate our new place of residence with the bottle of champagne and steak tartare he'd promised to leave in the fridge. We'd breathe that fresh thin air and root for the Broncos. We'd have Thanksgiving turkey with Uncle Rudy and Aunt June and all their happy progeny whom we'd never met, a whole brood of friends and relations waiting to welcome us into their Coloradan lives.

That had been the plan, at least.

"Pass the pharmaceuticals," I said.

She removed the film canister from the glove compartment and handed it over. I flipped off the top. "Which are which?" I asked.

"Blue are speed, brown are sleeping pills," she informed me.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"What about the green ones?"

"What green ones?"

"These green ones."

She leaned over and looked down her nose into the canister. She'd bought the stuff for twenty bucks from a mobster truck driver who frequented the Italian seafood joint on Federal Hill where she used to work. *All truckers have a stash*, she'd told me. *You just have to know how to ask*.

"Forget the green ones," she said. "Save the green ones for later."

I popped a blue, and Sheldon growled when he saw my Adam's apple working the pill down my throat.

"He thinks you're eating something," said Fiona.

"Come, Sheldon," I said. I reached into the backseat, trying to gather the dog into my arms. "Good boy, Sheldon. What a good dog. Let's go. Here we go. Come on, boy. Upsy daisy."

Fiona said, "Where are you taking him?"

"See the Mississippi," I said.

The dog growled when I scooped him up, but not loudly. He was accustomed to being picked up because he suffered from hip dysplasia and couldn't walk anymore. He'd undergone acupuncture, osteopathy, electrostimulation, various medications — but nothing had stopped the progress of the disease. His back legs were stiff and unsteady; if he stood on all four legs for any longer than ten seconds, he'd fall down flat. Most people will put a dog to sleep when the animal can't walk anymore, but not Ed, my former best friend. Ed was a loyal master to that dog, or at least he was up until the day he found out about Fiona

and me and lighted out for parts unknown. "Sheldon doesn't like thunderstorms, firecrackers or flashing lights," read the note he left behind. "Steak tartare gives him gas but otherwise he can eat almost anything. I've taken all the money. Ed."

SOMETIMES TIME PASSES WHEN YOU'RE not paying attention. Maybe you've been staring at a river. The current flows downstream, the water laps against the bank. There is a smell of woodsmoke. A flag rustles in the wind. Geese pass overhead. After a while you blink. You scratch your head. You wonder, What time is it? What have I missed? How much time has gone by? A minute? An hour? A day? A year? Seven years?

Ed and I were firemen together. We worked three-day shifts, followed by three days off. You get to know someone pretty well when you spend twelve and a half hours a day together at the firehouse. We cooked, lifted weights, watched the Celtics, Bruins, Patriots and Red Sox, played gin rummy, ping pong, Scrabble and Parcheesi. We slept in bunks, snoring in rhythm. His presence was basic to me, like being alone.

I went with Ed the day he purchased Sheldon from a breeder in Warwick, Rhode Island. Dalmatian puppies all look pretty much the same. They have those black and white spots. How do you pick one and not another? What hand guides you? Chance? Will? Desire? Destiny? The puppy ran on his little wobbly legs directly to Ed and started licking his fingers through the fence of the pen. I said to Ed, "There's the one. That's your dog," and Ed said, "Sure looks like it, doesn't it? The little fella came right up to me." Later I would learn that picking out the first dog that comes to you out of a pack is the worst thing you can do, because that dog is the alpha male; he's been leading the pack, and he wants to lead you too. He'll make your life a living hell. But neither of us knew that, that day in Warwick, Rhode Island, seven years ago, when Ed gave the breeder five hundred dollars and took Sheldon home with him, and the very next day, or maybe it was a year later—I can't be certain anymore of time or dates because time started moving differently after I met her—Ed rescued Fiona from the balcony of a burning apartment building on College Hill in Providence, Rhode Island (it was night; she was wearing a slip and nothing else; she was yelling, "I'm here, come get me!") and married her shortly thereafter, the next day, I think it was, or maybe it was a year later. Sheldon wore a black doggy-tuxedo. I was the best man.

What does one want out of life? For some people, this is a difficult question, but not me. A man like me doesn't want much. Primarily, he

wants to be fed, fellated, and listened to. He wants to look into the eyes of a pretty woman and see adoration. He wants to share his innermost feelings without embarrassment. He wants to engage in frequent sexual congress with someone he cherishes because after twelve and a half hours at the firehouse he gets horny as a bastard. He wants someone he can trust not to engage in sexual congress with a third party while he is at the firehouse. He wants, in short, a wife and a dog to come home to. That's not asking much, but why was it so hard for me to find? Ed had found it. Why couldn't I?

Those days I was a searcher. I was always with someone different. Ed and Fiona would invite me to dinner and I'd go over to their house with Susan or Teresa or Michaela or Carla or Kathryn or Melissa or Melissa (there were two Melissas, one Irish, the other Filipino) and ring the doorbell and smile heartily and pat Sheldon on the top of the head and sit down to dinner and say things like, "This is great steak tartare, Ed. You'll have to give me the recipe sometime," and Ed would say, "Nothing to it, buddy. It's a cinch," and Fiona would sit across the table, tipping a glass of wine, smiling her mysterious smile while sizing up Susan or Teresa or Michaela or Carla or Kathryn or Melissa or Melissa.

"Thick calves," she would say the following day. Or: "A little broad in the behind, don't you think?" Or: "Does she always wear powder blue eye shadow?" Fiona's judgments were always indisputable, always decisive. From then onward I couldn't look at Susan or Teresa or Michaela or Carla or Kathryn or Melissa or Melissa without thinking about the thickness of her calves, the overabundance of powder blue eye shadow, the broadness of her behind, or any other trait Fiona had called to my attention. Ed did his best to stick up for my girlfriends. He'd say, "Don't listen to her, buddy. I thought she was pretty, if you don't mind me saying." He liked watching TV with the lights low, even on sunny afternoons. He'd close the shades and we'd sink into our respective couches in his dark den. We were big fans of the Boston teams. We watched every game—Red Sox in summer, Patriots in autumn, Celtics and Bruins in winter. Fiona would bring us snacks at halftime, filling the room with her scent. Sheldon would sit at my feet, and I'd slip him potato chips and peanuts, and when he wanted more he'd climb up next to me and lick my hand and whimper. I loved those afternoons at Ed and Fiona's. It felt like home to me, like family.

Imagine you're starving. All you can think about is food. You're ravenous with hunger. You're pleading for a bite to eat—a morsel, shoe leather, anything. Then someone puts dinner on the table in front of you—steak tartare, let's say. But you can't eat that steak tartare. You're

not allowed to eat that steak tartare because it's not your dinner. You didn't pay for it. It belongs to someone else. Your stomach is grumbling. You're dizzy with the aroma. The smell of the meat fills your nostrils, driving you mad. You believe you're losing your mind. After a while, a voice inside your head starts talking to the steak tartare. Hello, steak tartare. You sure look good tonight. I bet you taste good, don't you, steak tartare? I bet you want me to eat you. I bet you want me to sink my teeth into your flesh, don't you, steak tartare? I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you, steak tartare?

Actually that's not a very good analogy because it was her idea too, not mine alone. She had green eyes and red hair — red like those sunsets you see off Cape Cod, Massachusetts sometimes in August, when the beaches are empty and the boats are docked for the evening. She spoke with a British accent, called a truck a lorry, an elevator a lift and a jerk a wanker. I couldn't believe Ed's luck. I was a fireman, like Ed. I had labored long and hard, like Ed. We had worked side-by-side those many years. We had waited in the firehouse for the call to come, and when the call came he had kicked down the door and rescued Fiona from the burning balcony, and I had not. The rooms I entered were empty. I found only ash and debris. For seven years I kicked down doors and discovered nothing but the residue of flame. For seven years, I resisted. Then Fiona called me in the middle of the night and whispered the words I had always suspected were true. She said, "Do you get ever the feeling your life is a mistake? That something was supposed to happen, but didn't? That something, in fact, failed to happen? Do you ever get that feeling, Al? I do. I get that feeling all the time."

I should have told him then, at the start. He was my best friend; he was bound to figure it out. I should have taken him aside in the firehouse pantry away from our colleagues and said, "Ed, it's stronger than the both of us. Kill me. I don't care. I'd rather you kill me than invite me to dinner and make me sit at the table beside you and Fiona and Sheldon, like we have done on so many nights. She has red hair the color of fire, the color of a Cape Cod sunset. I am drawn to her, Ed, and she is drawn to me. In short, Ed, my dear friend, Ed, I'm in love with your wife." But I didn't say that. Instead, I took Fiona to the Super 8 motel in Scituate, Rhode Island and had motel sex with her while cars and trucks raced by on the highway outside our window.

I OPENED THE CAR DOOR and got out, carrying Sheldon.

Fiona rolled down her window. "There's a steak house up the road. I saw it on the way in. Maybe they serve tartare."

"I doubt it," I said. "That dish is a delicacy, and this is Iowa we're in now."

"It's raw meat, Al. Every restaurant has raw meat. What kind of delicacy is that?"

"French."

She sighed. "I'm tired and hungry, Al. I want to go up to that steak house and get something to eat. I want to brush my teeth. I want to use the bathroom, for bloody Christ's sake. Let's forget about sightseeing for today, okay Al? Let's go get ourselves a big fat steak."

I shook my head, jostling Sheldon, and he growled and drooled spittle down my arm. "You see?" I said. "He just won't stop."

"You know something, Al. If I'd known it was going to be like this." She turned away, running a hand through her hair.

"Likewise," I said.

"Likewise what?"

"Likewise to whatever you were going to say."

Her eyes flashed green at me. "You think you know what I'm going to say before I say it. You think you're some kind of mind reader?"

"Look, Fiona. We'll get your steak. After."

"What makes you think I'll be here, after?"

I ignored her, and carried Sheldon in my arms along the riverside. We passed the hulk of a double-decker riverboat, latched to the shore, the top deck sagging, the planking rotten. It appeared to be a sort of tourist attraction, condemned now to rot. Beyond the riverboat was the town green. There was a plaque commemorating war dead, two World War II howitzers aimed at the sky above the river, a gazebo, and a row of benches, positioned for river-watching. Each bench was inscribed with a placard bearing the name of a towns person. I read the names aloud as we passed. "In memory of Philip Czachowski," I said. "In memory of Robert Lenninger. In memory of Thomas Furlong. In memory of Sylvia Tolander. In memory of Ansgar Olsen. In memory of Ansgar Olsen. That's two for Ansgar Olsen. He must have been something

special, I guess, to have two benches named after him, don't you think, Sheldon?"

We'd come to the edge of the green. I placed Sheldon on the grass beside the second Ansgar Olsen bench and took a seat beside him.

It was late afternoon. The sun splashed a pale pink and blue haze above the tree line on the opposite side of the river. The patterns of color seemed to melt together, and traces and trails of light slashed across the sky. I felt that I could grab the individual lines of light like you would grab a baton and wave it around.

"Look at the sunset," I said to Sheldon.

As I spoke, a cluster of birds came from the bare trees to our right—small black birds, hundreds of them. They flew in tight circles, around and around, in the shape of a whirlpool. They hovered in the sky above Sheldon and me. Then they started spiraling downward, until they were directly above my head, flapping their wings noisily. I was surprised how close they came and how small these birds were. I reached up to touch, but the birds lifted momentarily, away from my hand.

"Maybe they think we have breadcrumbs," I said.

Sheldon didn't seem concerned about the birds. He was busily sniffing the grass, his snout pointed toward the river. I watched the water, and the riverbank seemed to be swaying, rocking with the current, and I felt I had to sit down, and then I realized I was sitting down and that I should instead get up and go, that it was time to leave. I rose from the bench, as quietly as I could, and took a few steps toward the parking lot. The birds moved with me, hovering over my head.

"Where do you think you're going?"

I stopped and turned around. There was no one in sight, only my '92 Chevette, parked in the distance.

"Well?"

I said, "Sheldon?"

"What?"

"You can talk?"

"Yeah."

"I can't believe it. When did you learn to talk?"

"I always knew how."

The dog seemed to be giving off a halo of light. His white and black spots moved and melted together, forming and reforming patterns that suggested some meaning just beyond my comprehension.

I said, "I think there was something in that pill."

Sheldon's voice had a mechanical quality, like a person who had suffered a tracheotomy and spoke out of a box in his neck. He said, "I'm hungry. Get me something to eat."

"I can't, Sheldon. I have to go."

"You think you can just leave me here and go away? Fat chance."

"I'm sorry."

"Ed wouldn't like this. Not one bit. Wait until he finds out."

"Ed's gone. He took all my money and left. He got me fired from my job. He left you alone, Sheldon."

"You fucked his wife."

The flapping of the wings grew louder. I waved my hand above my head, trying to scare the birds off. I felt the soft underside of one's wing, the briefest of touches.

"Now you're stuck with her, and you don't even like her very much. You idiot. Look what you've gotten yourself into."

I turned and started walking away, and Sheldon raised himself on all fours and took a few wobbly steps toward me and barked four times, loudly. Then his legs gave out and he collapsed on the grass. He said, "I'd bite you if I could. I should've bitten you when I had the chance."

"I'm sorry, Sheldon. Someone will come along. They'll give you something to eat. It's nice here. You'll like it here. They're nice people, I bet. Look at all the benches. People come here to sit and watch the river."

"Nah," he said.

"Really. You'll be better off."

He raised his snout and sniffed the air. He said in his mechanical voice, "There's something dead in those trees there. A possum, or something. Maybe a porcupine. Let's go down and see. Carry me."

"I can't, Sheldon. Fiona's waiting."

"I can smell lots of stuff. This time of day, the wind carries the scent of everything that people are cooking inside their homes. It makes me hungry. I'm hungry all the time. You never gave me enough to eat. Ed fed me a lot better."

I turned and headed back to the car, and the birds followed, swarming and circling above my head, and when I opened the door to my '92 Chevette they flew inside with me, hundreds of small black birds, flapping their wings. It would take a long time, I figured, for Fiona and me to clear them out and get back on our way.