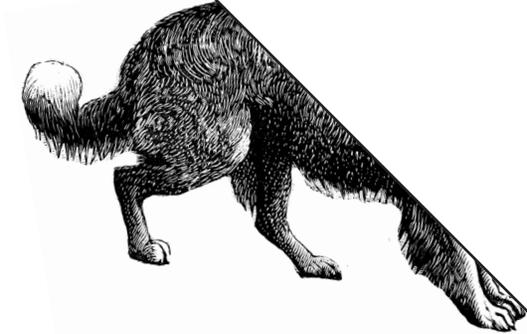


Julian Guise

## RETRIEVAL



Phillip piled the last of the logs next to the stove, which had been burning all morning. He wiped his hands on the front of his corduroy pants, then ran his fingers through his hair. He had meant to get it cut before she arrived, but it was another thing that had slipped his mind. The coffee in the pot had started to burn, and its earthy aroma was replaced by a faintly acrid smell. He poured a cup anyway, adding extra cream and sugar to mask the bitterness.

"I wish you'd let me do that," he said.

His wife was cleaning the dishes from the evening before. The kitchen was usually kept spotless, but last night, fraught and exhausted, with guests staying too late, they had simply piled the plates into the sink and run cold water over them.

"I can manage. But thank you."

Laura wore marigold rubber gloves. At first she had told him it was to help grip the china and glasses so she wouldn't drop them, but later confessed it was to protect her hands from the drying effects of the detergent. Her mother had hands that were cracked and calloused and cold. Laura turned to look at him, and he realized he'd been staring.

"If you're just going to stand there you could dry," she said.

"What? Oh, sorry. Sure. Let me help."

"Are you okay?"

"A little preoccupied, that's all."

"It's going to be fine."

"You were bleeding."

"I meant about my mom coming. The other thing, it's completely normal. Trust me, we won't lose this one. I won't let it happen." She picked up the heavy Dutch oven and ran warm water into it. He resisted the impulse to intervene.

"If you like, I'll pick Maria up from the station."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course," he said, with more enthusiasm than he felt.

She took off her gloves and laid them on the rack to dry. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, and she leaned into him.

"That would be great. It'll give me a little extra time to mentally prepare myself. I haven't spent more than a few days with my mother since I left for college. God, that feels such a long time ago."

"Whatever I can do to make you happy," he said.

"Thank you."

They stayed like that for a minute before he let her go. He pulled out a Marlboro Light from a pack on the marble counter and lit it. He opened the kitchen window and exhaled, blowing the smoke outside and letting the cold January air in.

"Please don't do that while she's here. I've told you how she is about cigarettes."

"I assume I'm allowed a drink while we're being inspected?"

"Of course you are. Only, don't go overboard."

"This is going to be a long week." He kissed her on the cheek, noting her slight recoil from the smell of the cigarette smoke. He'd promised on many occasions to quit, but there always seemed a reason not to test his willpower. Perhaps Maria's visit would provide the impetus. After all, he couldn't keep on smoking now. "It's a pity Joe's not coming. I kind of liked him, despite everything."

"My father was on his best behavior when you met him."

"He was?"

"Yes. At first, anyway. You were blessed with something of the good Joe. Be happy you saw it even once."

He left the kitchen to collect his coat, pocketed the cigarettes, and made sure he had mints. As he reversed the station wagon out of the driveway he saw his wife watching him from

the kitchen window. She did not wave goodbye.

Their trip to see Joe and Maria the previous summer had ended in disaster. Laura had told her parents she was bringing someone, but hadn't said much more than that. She'd insisted they not announce their marriage until after Joe's birthday celebrations, the ostensible reason for their visit. It had been an extended family party at an Italian restaurant in Rome, New York. Over veal parmesan served on checkered tablecloths he'd gotten his first look at what he had married into. It hadn't been pretty. Laura had waited until the next morning to break the news. They sat around a small table in the kitchen drinking too-weak coffee. The shouting started almost immediately, Joe verbally lashing out in hurt and bewilderment, a man not quite gone to seed seeming to struggle to control his own physicality. Maria had started quietly sobbing, and in her sadness Phillip had been transported back to his childhood, back to being sat in his own parents' kitchen, listening to them rage and scream and cry as their marriage imploded.

It did not take long before Joe and Maria's anger was directed at him. How could he? How could he take their only child away? He was only seven years older than Laura but they talked as if it were decades, as if he'd preyed upon their daughter.

They hadn't planned to leave that morning but it became clear they couldn't stay. The joy of Joe's sixtieth birthday party dissolved as if it had never happened. Phillip had left their house feeling like a thief. It was nothing Laura hadn't expected, apparently, and now he knew the reason she barely saw them. Eventually they made a peace offering, inviting Joe and Maria to visit, to stay with them, not really believing they would accept. Now Maria, and only Maria, was on her way.

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He pulled into the station parking lot with ten minutes to spare. He picked up the pack of cigarettes, then, thinking better of it, tossed them into the glove box. The AM station was broadcasting a Syracuse basketball game but he was too distracted to concentrate on it.

It was ten of two but already stinging cold. Alone on the platform he shoved his hands into his pockets and stamped his feet as light snow began to fall. If anyone else was collecting passengers they had wisely stayed in the warmth of their cars. The station had blue wooden benches that looked like they had recently been painted, but the scars from couples etching their initials into the wood were still visible. As he ran his fingers over the shallow markings, the train tracks began to let out a metallic hum, a gentle precursor to her arrival.

She was the last to leave the train, struggling to pull what seemed to him like a month's vacation-sized brown suitcase from the high train door and onto the platform. He rushed over to help her.

"Maria. Wonderful to see you." He was unsure whether to shake her hand or hug her, and as she turned away to retrieve her purse he ended up giving her a half-hearted pat on the back. He pointed to her coat.

"You'll want to put that on. It's starting to snow."

"Well then, help me on with it."

She passed the coat to him which he opened for her. She was shorter than he remembered, in lumpy jeans and scuffed brown shoes that he imagined were comfortable. They certainly couldn't have been bought for their looks. On top she wore a faded sweatshirt commemorating a trip to Niagara Falls.

He struggled with the heavy case, leading the way through the parking lot. By the time they reached the car he had sweated through his shirt in spite of the cold. He opened the passenger door.

"I'd rather sit in the back," she said, "if you don't mind."

"Of course, whatever you prefer."

He set off, driving cautiously, feathering the gas pedal, trying not to spin the rear wheels of the white station wagon on the snow-slick blacktop. They drove north on a starkly tree-

lined road, past scattered houses, before turning left onto the bridge. The Hudson River was frozen below them.

"I was saying to Laura what a pity it is that Joe couldn't come."

"He could have come. He didn't want to. I think it's best for all concerned that he didn't. I don't think he'll ever forgive you for what the two of you did."

"Well, anyway, I'm sorry I won't get to see him."

She sniffed, signaling the end of their brief conversation. Not that there was anything to say that hadn't already been said at significant volume. He reached for the knob on the radio, but hesitated and returned his hand to the wheel.

For a while they drove in tense, excruciating silence through the gray half-light of an East Coast winter. They saw few other cars on the two-lane road that curved along the reservoir.

"Temperature okay for you?" He needed to try and make some connection. He'd promised Laura he would.

"Don't worry about me."

Part of him wanted to open the windows, let the icy air blast in to see if it would elicit some reaction.

"Laura's really looking forward to having you stay with us."

"Hmm. Is she?"

"Look, I know neither of you approve of what we did, getting married like that, but I do love your daughter, and it was what we thought was best. I know that it hurt you and Joe, and I can't tell you how bad Laura feels, but this wasn't an easy decision. I want you to know she agonized over it. She wasn't being frivolous; she just wanted as little fuss as possible. We weren't being malicious, please don't think we were."

"That sounded rehearsed. Did she tell you to say that?"

"No, of course not. I'm only trying to be honest. If we can't be honest, or at least cordial with each other, then this isn't going to be a pleasant week for any of us." His words came out harsher than he'd wished them to, though Maria offered no response.

There was more wretched silence. He looked in the rear-view mirror. She had her arms folded, coat still on, staring straight ahead, impassive. He tried again.

"Laura doesn't talk much about her childhood. What was she like as a kid?"

"Willful."

"Aren't all children?"

"Not like Laura."

He waited for more but nothing was forthcoming. He pushed on, trying to sound cheerful.

"You home-schooled her, right?" It was one rare detail of her childhood she'd allowed.

"You could say that. Only for a year. Frankly she did most of the schooling herself. She always loved to read. I'm not sure that it qualified as a rounded education, though." She paused. "I did my best."

"Why only a year?" He'd assumed it had been all through high school.

Again she was quiet. They drove through what passed for a town on the edge of the Catskills — a few clapboard houses, a diner, and an old car mechanic's shop turned, optimistically, into an antiques store. He kept to thirty, the posted speed limit, though he hadn't seen any police.

"Stop here," she said as they passed a gas station, "I want to buy some flowers."

He pulled over and did a u-turn. He didn't need gas so he parked in front of the station's store, a small, single story hut, barely bigger than a shed, in heavily weathered red paint. He doubted she would find flowers inside. Motor oil, beef jerky and cigarettes seemed more likely. He thought of his pack in the glove compartment.

She exited the store empty-handed and walked purposefully around to the rear of the building, following a sign to the restroom. He clicked the radio on. The Syracuse game had ended so he hit the FM button and scanned the frequencies. A country station, Christian programming and plenty of static. He turned it off and waited, watching small snowflakes hit the windshield then melt away. Eventually she emerged from behind the building. He quickly unbuckled his seatbelt and got out, walking around the car to open the back door. She ignored him and chose the front instead, slumping into the

passenger seat. Seated next to Maria he re-buckled his seatbelt and pushed the key into the ignition.

"Wait," she said, touching her hand to his. It was icy cold. He pulled the key back.

"I was expecting Laura to meet me at the station. I was surprised it was only you. I don't know why she didn't want to come. I am still her mother."

He started to speak in Laura's defense, but Maria shook her head. He turned the key over in his hand, not looking at Maria. Waiting to see if there was more.

She took a deep breath.

"She wasn't used to drinking. She was nothing but a kid. Barely fifteen."

He stayed quiet.

"She'd been grounded. Or at least I grounded her, which didn't count for much. I can't even remember why now. Our house then had only one level so she just climbed out of the bedroom window after Joe and I had gone to bed. I don't know if she'd ever done it before. I suppose she must have."

"Where did she go?"

"A party. Someone's house. Someone whose parents were away I guess. She didn't come back until the next morning. We didn't realize she wasn't home. I assumed she was sleeping late. It was a Sunday. She wanted to sneak back into her room but Joe was mowing the lawn when the car pulled up. They dropped her off and sped away pretty quickly."

His stomach tightened reflexively.

"She wouldn't say where she'd been, only that she snuck out, which of course was obvious. She looked disheveled and dazed. This time Joe grounded her. When he did it, the grounding stuck."

"Was she okay?"

"What do you think? No. She wasn't okay. She was never okay after that."

"What happened?" he asked, not wanting to know.

"She never said. Never said anything about it, only that she would never do it again. That was okay by Joe. He didn't want to think too hard about what could have happened. If

she wasn't talking that was fine by him."

"Why are you telling me this?"

She didn't answer his question, but continued.

"She and I were never really close, especially after Joe Junior was killed. After his death Joe doted on Laura and she worshipped him back. Not the same now, of course. It was me she came to though. Me she confided in. I was the one who had to take care of it. Sneak around behind Joe's back. Arrange for the procedure. Pay for it without Joe noticing the money gone."

He tried to imagine Laura at fifteen but no images came to him. She'd shown him no photographs and clearly there was no yearbook.

"There were complications. An infection. The doctor said she could have problems becoming a mother. Those were the words he used. They seemed strange to me, but I'm not sure Laura even heard him. You should think about that. It seems like she never told you."

He thought of the bed sheets he had changed that morning, of the tiny blood stains on her side. He felt wounded and betrayed, then embarrassed by his own reaction and furious at Maria, holding her responsible for invoking it.

He realized he'd been grinding the point of the key into the palm of his hand as she spoke. He now jammed it into the ignition, started the engine, and pulled out of the gas station. As he drove, the road ahead seemed to fall in and out of focus, and he had to blink to see clearly. He felt sick.

The narrow highway tightened further and rose in elevation, the turns growing sharper. They were driving on the side of an increasingly steep, heavily wooded hill. A guardrail on the other lane protected the inattentive from a perilous drop. Years before he would ride his motorcycle along this route, and he knew it well. He drove faster now, though he sensed Maria's discomfort with the speed. He wanted to be home.

There was no warning. An animal ran from out of the woods and onto the road, striking the passenger door with a loud, sickening smack that echoed through the car. He slammed on the brakes and the station wagon fishtailed slightly as the wheels locked and the tires scrambled for grip.

"What was that? Did you hit something? A deer?" she said.

He pulled to the side and hit the hazard lights. It took him a couple of moments to realize what had happened.

"No, I think it was a dog. I'm going to see if it's hurt."

Ahead, limping along the dirt and gravel edge of the road was a large gray dog that looked part Wolfhound. One leg was suspended, hanging uselessly in the air as it leaned and stumbled.

"Hey, hold on."

He ran in front of the injured animal and blocked its path. The dog obediently stopped. He patted its head then lightly traced his hand along its back, noting it was thin and not wearing a collar. As he ran his hand over the hind quarters the animal yelped. Its back leg was definitely broken, and blood was starting to mat the hair from a gash across the dog's ribcage. He pushed gently and, cradling the dog with one arm, eased it onto its side. It scrambled awkwardly trying to remain upright but, unable to, finally succumbed. He kept one hand on the animal's body to encourage it to stay down.

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He shouted up into the woods, "Hello? Hello? Is there anyone there? I have your dog. Hello?" but there was no answer, only a wintry void. He stayed for a little while stroking the dog's fur then, stiff from crouching, stood up. The animal began to shake gently. "What am I going to do with you?" he said.

"What are you thinking? We'll take him with us of course." He hadn't heard Maria get out of the car and was startled to find she was standing right behind him. "You can't very well leave him here, can you?"

He only now registered that the dog was male.

"What about his owner?"

"Never mind that. Go and get the car while I stay with him."

He did so, driving slowly past them, then gingerly reversing the vehicle off the glassy road and back onto the stony verge.

"Move my suitcase," she said. "We'll lie him down in the back."

He did as instructed and the two of them part coaxed, part

lifted, part shoved the large animal into the back of the station wagon — Maria sitting on the lip of the car's open tailgate offering the dog soft words of encouragement. After he gently closed the station wagon's door the dog seemed content to lie in the warm vehicle.

Leaving the engine running, he strode up the steep slope and into the woods to look for the dog's owner. As he climbed, his shoes and the bottom of his trousers became wet and cold, and his breath, increasingly heavy, condensed. He called as he went, but the woods were eerily still, dusk encroaching and the snow falling harder. Sweating again, he reached the crest of the hill then walked until there was no point in continuing. It was clear no one would claim the dog. He turned to make his way back to the road, walking down slowly, using the trees for balance. He was careful, but the soles of his shoes were too smooth and he lost his footing, skidding down the slope, catching himself with his hands as he fell, grabbing at the damp earth.

Phillip sat on the cold, wet, ground. He pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, let his head sag and closed his eyes. The snow fell onto the back of his bare neck. He stayed motionless in the frigid wood until it occurred to him that Maria might come looking. He pushed himself up and carefully side-stepped down the hill.

He'd wandered further than he realized, and when he reached the road the station wagon was fifty yards ahead of him. He pushed his muddy fingers through his wet, tangled hair, wiped his hands dry on his coat, then walked toward the car.

As he approached he saw that Maria was once again in the back. The rear window was slightly fogged, but he could still see inside. He paused. Maria, oblivious to his gaze, was leaning over the seat gently stroking the dog's head. She had given it her coat.