**The Night Shift**

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In 1984, I sat on the patchy, dry grass of my family’s backyard to cut the matts that pinned our Irish Setter’s ears to the sides of her neck. The grass, previously lush and even, now grew in clumps that scratched my bare legs, creating a splotchy rash. The dull kitchen shears, too large for my eight-year-old hands, caused me to cut her skin, making her whimper. My parents had split up. There were no more family walks after dinner. No more weekends cleaning up the yard and bathing the dog with my dad. Her thick red coat was dirty. Her ears filled with blood-sucking ticks.

My classmates didn’t know anyone else whose parents weren’t together. Friends drifted away and even my teachers treated me like I was tainted, like divorce was a contagious disease. As though they too might be swallowed by the deconstruction of my childhood.

At age 19, I got a job working nights at an animal shelter. Training was a crash course in the basics of veterinary medicine. The constant barking and cleaning kept my mind from wandering through the past or panicking about the future. I appreciated the clear-cut job, a visible problem, an obvious solution. A cage was soiled. I cleaned it. My manager often left a list of tasks or a special project to complete before morning. Some nights that was all I did because there were no calls to pick up animals. I’d finish the list and go home. Other nights I drove around picking up animals until I squinted through the windshield at the morning sun as it rose above the trees to burn the mist from the road.

My favorite thing to do when I got to work in the evenings was select a dog from the kennel to take her out for a walk along the bank of the creek that separated the shelter’s crumbling asphalt parking lot from the hill where a private school perched in judgement. The shelter was located in the wealthiest neighborhood in the city. Volvos and Mercedes carried khaki-and-polo-clad children through tree-lined, winding streets to expensive schools. Historic two and three story homes secluded residents from the world with tall hedges. Professionally edged walkways led to stoops framed by white columns. It was not the kind of neighborhood where short-haired teenage girls in denim overalls and lemon-yellow Converse sneakers walked unruly dogs.

Despite that, the animal shelter was dilapidated. The wooden frame surrounding the front door was so rotten the staff joked that to lock the door at closing was merely a suggestion. A metal support for the roof of the outdoor kennel was lashed into place with a braided plastic slip leash. The wooden beam it was originally bolted to had rotted away. To tie the leash, holes were drilled into the corrugated fiberglass of the roof, making it leaky. Inside, lights flickered on and off. Whenever the building got quiet, cockroaches, mice, and feral cats appeared from holes in the ceiling to feast side-by-side from tears in the food bags stacked on the floor.

Behind the building, the creek was a bubbly trickle at the bottom of a deep trench most of the year, but seasonal rains made it rise to flood the back half of the shelter. Adoptable dogs sloshed about the outdoor kennels in a foot of murky, brown water. This had gone on for three decades. Few donations came from those grand homes.

Usually, my excursions with a shelter dog were peaceful. I received suspicious looks when I encountered neighborhood residents. They cautiously offered one hand for the dog to sniff, asking what kind of dog she was, usually a German Shepherd, Collie, or Doberman mix. The shelter bustled with mutts in every shade of brown, year-round. The person might next pat the dog’s head and ask her name. When I explained that I worked at the shelter they stopped petting the dog to wipe their hand on their hip. The act was subtle, but the message was clear. I related to receiving that reaction, identified with the dog left behind. The animal shelter was torn down to be replaced with a parking lot. My experiences there were dismantled, hauled away, along with the lives of all those animals that had no other home. It is as if none of it ever happened.

One night, I meandered along the creek with a large, nameless dog. Her body was dark brindle with a mahogany muzzle and eyebrows. She stood on deer-like legs and had a broad chest. As we approached the end of the property, where the creek passed under the curve of the road up to the school, an inhuman voice erupted from the creek bed below us. I recognized the annoyed croak of an interrupted heron, but I couldn’t see the bird anywhere. My companion sniffed the humid air as the streetlights buzzed to life.

Commotion like a wind-whipped flag, the enormous bird rose into the air right in front of us. In the dusk, I could barely make out the muted greys and pinks of the bird’s soft feathers even though, if I put out my arm, I could have stroked its long chest and belly. The thin body and legs contrasted the expanse of its wings. The heron’s appearance felt like a fragile gift that I didn’t dare betray. I remained motionless, breathless, clutching the dog’s leash.

A rush of air hit my face as the heron flapped its wings, pushed above us. The dog leaned against my hip to follow the bird’s silent arch over our heads. I watched as it flew over the empty street and the nearby businesses until it vanished into darkness. I patted my quiet dog-friend on her shoulder. We turned toward the shelter to walk back with autumn leaves crunching under our feet.