

DOGS

by Eric P. Isaacson

I feel when the dogs begin to smell her.

I wake, eyes still closed, my right hand feeling my heart. Then an urgent hot rumbling in my gut. I throw off the damp sheet and roll out of bed. My knees hit the carpet and I lose the acidic remains of supper. The smell hits me and I heave, back arching. I feel Susan hovering over me and hear her fall back on the bed, sighing.

“Jesus,” she whispers.

I heave again, spittle falling in strands. My ears feel wet and I’m hungry for cheese.

“Mark,” Susan says.

I reach up, placing a shaky hand on the orange dresser I’ve had since I was a kid, knocking off a few of Susan’s porcelain figurines in the process. I think I hear one break. I open the bedroom door and run my hand along the wall to the bathroom. The cold linoleum makes my legs sweat. I grab a white hand towel and mop my face. I pull the faucet on and sit on the closed toilet. My hand stays in the water. I start shaking.

Susan snakes by the door, opens the linen closet and closes it loudly. She fills the room, all arms and legs and flowing robe, tossing the bath towel into the tub. She kneels beside me and runs water. She blows hair away from her face as she balls the towel under the water.

“Sorry,” I say, sounding like “sawwy,” since I haven’t blown my nose yet.

“Third fucking time,” she says. She slaps the faucet off and water dribbles as she wrings the towel. She stomps out of the room. A dull scraping of the carpet follows a wet thud.

“Will you get over it will you?” she calls.

I close my eyes.

“Thanks for being so understanding,” I say, hoping she will and won’t hear.

“What were you this time? The dog or the cop?”

“The girl.”

“The girl.”

“And the dogs.”

“The girl and the dogs . . .” I know she is shaking her head now. She shook her head last night when I told her I was the cop and the dogs. Always the fucking dogs.

I stand in front of the sink, looking in the mirror. I’m pale, even more than my mom says I am when I see her at Christmas. My eyes are bloodshot and my hair sticks out in clumps. I stop the water and rub my mouth and chin with my wet hand. I need to shave.

* * *

There’s nothing new in the paper about Jenniver Graves. On the refrigerator are the last three articles about her disappearance: her life up to age seventeen, how her family is coping after a month without their daughter and sister, how there are no leads – all reduced to two-inch columns.

Colorful magnets of little girls in spring dresses and bonnets fall to the kitchen floor as Susan peels the articles off. I turn to her.

“I’ve been patient” She stands there, her green silk nightshirt open, half a nipple peeking out. Her arm is outstretched, pointing the papers at me, candy for a disturbed child. She looks over at the garbage.

“I want those.”

“Enough, Mark. Enough.”

She stands there, arm out still, the other dangling at her thigh.

“Watching Oprah again?” I say, looking at her nipple.

She turns, takes two steps to the garbage and stuffs the articles down. She stares at me, hugging herself. I look at her feet – the candy-apple red polish beginning to chip away on her toenails. Satisfied (for I can see the curl of a smirk on her lips), she walks by me into our room.

I go over to the trash and start to reach into it, but stop, my hand hovering there. I see myself ripping into the Cap’n Crunch and Cocoa Puffs boxes, the Campbell’s soup cans, pulling out the articles.

* * *

The dreams started after the second article. They’re not the same, except that I’m watching, switching perspective, as if I’m sitting in front of a TV, and then I’m seeing through someone’s eyes. I am Jenniver running through the woods; a dog searching for her; the cop holding the dogs as they pull at Jenniver’s left arm.

I stay awake now staring at the sun.

* * *

I call my boss at the cable company and tell her I can't make it in today. I tell her I have the flu bug that's going around and should be fine tomorrow. I hear the sigh in her voice as she tells me, "Okay." I glance up after putting the phone down and Susan is watching from the hallway. She closes her eyes, shakes her head, and steps back into the bathroom. The hair dryer screams on.

I go to the kitchen table and look through the paper again, thinking maybe I missed something. Nothing. The garbage peeks into view. The hair dryer cuts off.

I lie on the couch and flip through channels. QVC is running a special on signed collectible comic books. Bob Barker stands in front of the camera with his pencil-thin microphone. Logan's Run is on TBS.

* * *

When I wake, Susan is at work, snipping some old lady's hair for the third time this month. I touch the remote and the TV goes dark just as Cindy and Bobby of The Brady Bunch fall asleep on the see-saw. I stand and stretch, realizing I have to pee.

It isn't until I lift the lid that I realize I slept without Jenniver. Then my penis goes erect. I can't get her out of my head now. She has round cheeks, almost too big for her face; a long, thin nose, pinched at the end; full lips that I can almost feel on mine; two front teeth larger than the rest, like a child's baby teeth.

But it's her eyes.

The same eyes I've seen in my dreams — pale blue, dead, like a cow's eyes.

I am a child of ten walking alongside the state highway down the hill from my home. I hear it before I see the puppy, lying in the dirt and dried grass. A rib moves funny as it takes grating breaths. I know it's dead before it does. I watch it for a while longer, then reach down, petting it, over and over, harder and harder. My tears mix with its blood in the dirt. Then I squeeze its neck. I squeeze until the rib stops moving.

* * *

I keep walking. It's drizzly out, with a slight breeze. I find the faster and farther I walk, the more Jenniver's face becomes a fading after-image.

A red Thunderbird honks and I jump, stepping back onto the sidewalk. White puffs of breath fill my vision as the driver yells "Watchitasshole!" The car starts down the road, its cylinders clanging. I stand on the corner, looking around me. Houses rise up along the street, all white and two-storied. One has columns, framing the double doors. The lawns are not like mine. They do not have dandelions and clumps that I call grass. These are living Astroturf. Three houses down a man in white bowling shoes and a grey golfing cap, complete with the fuzzy ball on top, sets his sprinkler on another part of his well-watered lawn.

I turn to leave, to head back the way I came, when I stop and stare. This house, too, is white, but with green fake shutters and windows divided into twelve small panes, three high and four deep. It's the brassy numbers on the right side of the door that capture my attention. I know the address without thinking about the numbers. 636 Clinton Avenue.

This is Jenniver's home.

* * *

I wake, my heart running, and Susan's sitting up, staring at me like that pet shop myna bird that looked like it wanted to peck my eyes out.

"What?"

She turns away and slides out of bed. The tail of her cream satin nightie is stuck between the crease of her butt and thigh; she pulls it down with a short jerk and goes into the bathroom, the door clacking shut.

My eyes break from her and I gaze at the red digits on the dresser: 2:42.

"Shit," I say and rub at my eyes, hard, until bright shifting patterns and shapes firework in front of me. The toilet flushes and Susan walks into the living room and clicks on the lamp. The couch squeaks as she settles into it. The TV comes alive and a woman screams at the audience about her lost fat.

I watch the clock change: 2:43, then 2:44, before I sit on the side of the bed. I close my eyes as my mind spins. The room is cold, so I grab a T-shirt out of the bureau. Susan stares at the TV when I stand beside her. I kneel between her and it.

"What?" A shiver starts at the back of my neck.

She looks at me with Jennifer eyes.

"Nothing," she says.

I listen to my breathing, watching her eyes — she doesn't blink. I stand.

"Fine," I say and head into the bathroom. I lean on the sink, palms down and outward. My body aches. I think I'm coming down with the flu.

I turn the water on to cool my face. My dream swarms over me. I stand in a clearing, pine trees and sycamores surround me. It has just rained – drops fall from above; I can smell the sweetness of the thick underbrush, like rotting fruit. A stream is nearby, but I don't see it for the fuzziness enveloping the clearing, as if my reception is bad.

Then my nose and paws are in the water, straining against the leash that cuts into my neck. I can smell her, even through the fog that hides the trees ahead. Crossing the stream, I pull to the right, up, up, past the clearing where I stand watching the dogs. A pine tree that must be seventy-five years old or more, rises in front of me. Leaves, brown and orange and yellow, sit in an odd pile at the base of the tree. My nose brushes at the pile. I clamp down on a wrist and pull the arm free. The leaves fall from her face. Dirt makes the hair look brown in clumps, along with the blood. Part of a nostril has been chewed on. The eyes are still open.

I paw at the leaves, tossing clumps away in giant handfuls. I rake away the leaves, revealing legs, waist, stomach. Her shirt is open. I fall on her, ripping into her cheeks, feeling the skin in my nails.

The eyes stare at me. My thumbs pause over them – I wait for her to blink. As I press my thumbs in I am jolted by a feeling from below.

* * *

I am aware of the pressure of my fingers below my right eye. I raise my head, feeling the fingers slide down my face, watching the motion in the mirror. I bring my

hand up, looking at it, feeling the soft skin on my fingertips, the hard pulse of blood in the neck.

I keep waiting to wake.

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