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Royal Treatment

They were supposed to work on closure, Sarah Boone and Todd, the disturbed adolescent who'd been bugging Sarah for weeks, ever since Jean moved to Toledo for a new job.

"She's gone," Sarah had told Todd last weekend, but he stood at the door in his football helmet, and peered over her shoulder into the living room, as if she were lying. Todd howled Jean's name, then went outside, and stared into the window.

Sarah had called the authorities at the group home so many times that it had become routine, as was the sight of Todd in the back seat of the van, casting her a spiteful look. Last weekend, Todd had given her the finger.

The counselor at the group home had promised her that it would be the final roundup. She'd called him, and had to suffer through many reminders of Todd's sensitivity and disorders.

"The kid took a shine to Jean. Finally made some headway in personal interaction, so you got to understand that losing her was a major setback."

It would've been risky and stupid to tell him that she was the one who suffered the big setback. She and Jean had been lovers for three years.

The counselor suggested a solution. He'd bring Todd over to Sarah's house on Saturday to

work on closure. "How'd that be?"

"No more practice runs. It has to be final," she said, then hid Jean's things—some books and knick-knacks—and decided she'd get the dog groomed later. Frankie's nails had become unsightly, and he needed to be shampooed and spiffed up. Frankie had been a mascot in the group home, but because of some of the kids' allergies and viciousness, Jean had adopted him, leaving him behind when she moved to Toledo, claiming that he was used to Sarah's house. The dog was old. Why put it through trauma? And Sarah had accepted the arrangement as a sign that Jean would eventually return to Colorado. Why else would she leave the dog and some personal possessions?

She'd been thinking of Jean for weeks, and imagining scenarios in which Jean would call to report a mishap, illness, or job dissatisfaction. In all the scenarios, Sarah visualized herself doing something noble.

The snowstorm hit Friday night. Early October, but it snowed, and high winds unfastened the remaining leaves from trees. When Sarah went to her window, she saw a partial moon peeking through bundles of clouds, and then the moon emerged fully, and Frankie howled at it.

She'd never had a dog before, and had been

content to keep it that way. Then she met Jean, and had so wanted to please this young woman that she said she loved the same movies and restaurants Jean mentioned, and had even considered adopting a pet.

"They're a real comfort," Jean had insisted, gushing about pets she'd had, and then described Frankie, as if he were a genuine miracle. Sarah had pictured an energetic, handsome young dog, and had to hide her disappointment when Jean brought Frankie home, an old Basset hound, squat and perpetually mournful, the most unattractive dog she'd ever seen, but in time, she'd grown fond of him, getting used to him sleeping between her and Jean. Now, he occupied Jean's side of the bed, a steady, dependable presence, like an old and humble servant.

"Stress-free grooming and full-service pampering. Problem pets and physically challenged pets are our specialty!" said the ad for Royal Treatment in the phone book, noting that Dr. Gretchen Royal practiced preventive medicine, senior pet care, acupuncture, even obesity management and treatment of behavioral disorders.

"Sweetie, you'll be a star in that place, the top student," she told Frankie in the bedroom upstairs, gave him a treat, then locked the bedroom door.

The counselor didn't bother to wipe his muddy boots before he stepped inside the house, but Todd did, and then plunged into the living room.

"Where's Jeannie?" he asked.

"We're working on closure, Todd," the counselor told him. "Okay, tell her."

"Adios," Todd said. "Adios, Jeannie."

"Way to go," the counselor said, and gave Todd the high-five, like a couple of athletes congratulating themselves. Then the counselor looked at Sarah.

"Good boy," Sarah told Todd. "Good boy."

Todd glared at her, then roamed the living room, picking up objects, and examining them.

"Look, but don't touch," the counselor said, and pried a vase from Todd.

"What's my reward?" Todd asked.

"A hot fudge sundae," the counselor said.

"I want a softie," Todd said.

"I think he means a smoothie," the counselor whispered to Sarah. He thanked her for her time, and prodded Todd toward the door, like a little goat. Sarah watched Todd standing by the van.

"Nice place you have here," the counselor said. "I always wondered about it, and now I've seen where it all happened."

What an odd thing to say, Sarah thought, as if he were describing a scene of a crime, her house, where she and Jean had lived and made love, and this counselor, with his muddy boots and curiosity, had made it seem vulgar.

The morning had been overcast, but sunlight now spilled into the living room. She looked outside, feeling a glamorous sensation, as if she'd returned to the day she first saw Jean coming down the street, a gangly boy behind her, wearing a red football helmet. Jean and Todd had been going door-to-door, introducing themselves, and describing the services they offered. Sarah had allowed the peculiar boy to rake leaves and wash

her windows, feathers of breath riding from his mouth as he stared inside the living room, the helmet lending him an aggressive look, but a necessity, Jean had told her.

"He's autistic," she'd said brightly, and told Sarah about her job, describing the kids' disorders, like a tour guide inviting others to join her in an exploration of fabulous, uncharted territory. She'd even pulled her long hair back to show Sarah a cut on her ear. "Not a good idea," she'd said, "to wear jewelry around those kids."

Sarah recalled flinching later when Todd touched Jean's hair. "Big," he'd said.

Jean had nodded. "My hair's so big," she'd said.

"It should be put in jail," Todd answered.

That's how they operated, Todd completing Jean's remarks, like an intimate. Jean brought others by, hulking boys who shoveled snow, girls with spiky and variously colored hair who cleaned houses, even twin boys who spoke a private language. Sarah had endured the visits so that Jean would admire her. She was in her forties, and taught high school English. She'd never had an affair with a woman, and Jean was only in her twenties, but Sarah had been smitten.

"I'm overwhelmed. This has never happened to me before," Jean had confessed, after they made love the first time, saying the very thing Sarah was thinking, but it was better to let Jean believe that she'd been a veteran of love affairs with women.

Weeks later, she asked Jean to move in with her.

"Be careful what you wish for," she told herself, after Jean had been living in her house for three years. Jean kept talking about her job at the group home toward the end, and Sarah had felt forced to dole out sympathy or congratulations. And the epic time Jean spent on the phone the last two months with co-workers and friends, never referring to Sarah by her proper name, but using pronouns. "She's reading," Sarah had heard her say. "It's okay to talk."

She knew she was dwelling on the unpleasant parts now that Jean was gone, but it took little to recall the better parts, like the dinners after work, when they'd talk about the day and their plans, hearing Jean say how lucky she was to have Sarah in her life.

When Jean mentioned job prospects in Toledo, Sarah tried to act positive, but hoped the job would fall through. Then Jean left, and Sarah had put up with Todd's visits as a way to feel connected to Jean, but that was over now. She'd probably loved Jean too much at first, then too little.

The vet clinic smelled of ammonia and yeast. It was in a strip mall, wedged between a liquor store and pizza parlor. "Quality care for your companion," said the sign at the counter. She rang the bell, but no one came, so she sat down near a table covered with magazines and brochures about pet care and disease detection. On the opposite wall a poster showed various breeds of dogs. "There you are, Frankie," Sarah whispered, pointing to a distinguished-looking Basset

hound, but Frankie had collapsed under the seat, panting and trembling.

She rang the bell at the desk again, then began reading cards and letters on the bulletin board that expressed personal testimonies to Dr. Royal's expert and loving care.

"If all of us could have such pampering, the world would be a better place. Thank you, Dr. Royal, for being there for Buster and I."

"Buster and me," Sarah muttered.

"I'm glad I found this oasis of tranquility" said another letter. "Dr. Royal is a miracle worker. Daisy and I thank you from the bottom of our hearts. The personal touch is most appreciated, especially in this day & age."

Frankie scampered to a corner when the receptionist appeared, a young woman in purple scrubs and those ugly Crocs everyone seemed to be wearing lately. She introduced herself as Ann, and explained that they were short-staffed today. Last night's storm had felled trees, blocking the receptionist's road. Ann said that she was a Veterinary Assistant, doing her graduate study practicum with Dr. Royal.

Sarah explained why she was here, and then had to fill out many forms.

"I just wanted him to get shampooed."

"Dr. Royal believes in being thorough. Come here, big guy," Ann said to the dog. Frankie looked to Sarah, then slowly made his way to the desk, his tail between his legs.

Ann lifted him up. "What a fatty, and ooh, such long nails you have."

"I've been awfully busy with my teaching

job. And I've been trying to renovate my home," Sarah lied. "All kinds of people have been in the house, as you can imagine."

Dr. Royal entered, wearing a starched white jacket and black slacks. She was thin, angular, and younger than Sarah had expected. "This would be?" she asked.

"Frankie," Sarah said.

"Well, Frankie," Dr. Royal said, "looks like you could use some personal intervention."

Sarah blushed and insisted that she'd come in to have Frankie groomed.

"Yes, he needs that, but I like to look at the big picture," Dr. Royal said.

"Holistic care," Ann remarked, and went into another room, with Frankie in her arms, the doctor and Sarah following.

The room felt chilly, and looked austere—a silver examination table, a sink, chair, a glass case containing instruments. Soft music played in the background, a soothing, repetitive tune meant, Sarah realized, to mimic the sound of waves, and perhaps calm pets and their owners. Ann held Frankie on the examination table, his nails sliding on the metal, his face a tableau of fear and bewilderment as Dr. Royal checked his hind-quarters, and announced that he was old, at least thirteen, or ninety in human terms. She went on about kidney and heart problems, and other disorders of age. "Stiffness in the joints, as expected, and exacerbated by his weight. Don't you exercise him? Basset hounds are prone to gaining weight and falling prey to a host of problems, just like fat people."

"He was always stout," Sarah said. "I inherited him. He's never had a sick day."

"How long have you had him?"

"Three years. Well, I shared him with a friend, but she had to move away unexpectedly, and I've been taking care of him. I just wanted to get him groomed."

"He definitely needs that, but it's the least of our worries right now."

"Worries?" Sarah said.

"He has an irregular heart beat, and his spleen is enlarged."

"Oh, no," Sarah said, and felt Ann patting her arm, making her feel like an unwilling participant in a training regimen.

"Dr. Royal does a thorough workup. Holistic care," Ann repeated.

Dr. Royal is passive-aggressive, Sarah thought, hearing the music, and seeing Frankie's obvious signs of distress. She knew that she should grab him and flee, but Dr. Royal was staring at her, judging her as a neglectful pet owner.

Dr. Royal said that she wanted to run some tests, and get blood and urine samples. She told Sarah to wait in the reception area. "The tests are stressful."

Sarah glanced back at Frankie, knowing that she was projecting her fears onto him, reading a look on his melancholy face that said, "How could you do this to me?"

When all this business was done, she'd get him a new toy and a t-bone steak, then take him for a walk in the neighborhood. His long face and hammock belly often made passersby smile.

Sometimes children would approach Frankie, staring at him, and lifting his pennant ears. He was patient and gentle, as if he knew he was a homely specimen, but could make up for it in kindness. "I'm no oil painting," he seemed to say, "but I have a good personality, and won't give you a lick of trouble."

An elderly man was in the waiting room, looking at the dog poster. "No problem with crowd control today," he remarked, then glanced back at the poster. "Can't find mine here, but if you take the bull dog and mix it with the pug, you'll have Sheila."

"Mine's a Basset hound," Sarah said.

"I hear they're good with kids," he said.

"Frankie's a hit with everyone, even with the most difficult people. He's been used in mental-health facilities for adolescents with mood disorders."

The man showed her a photograph of a dog standing near a Christmas tree. "That's Sheila," he said. Sheila was beige, her collapsed nose and face a sooty color. "She's got an abscessed tooth and a bunch of other problems, but I'm taking them one at a time. That picture is from last Christmas, one of the only times Sheila didn't have to wear one of those plastic cones for all her medical treatments. They even had to insert a drain tube in her that had to be cleaned out three times a day, and which cost me a bundle, but pets are worth every penny, aren't they?"

Sarah nodded. "I've been lucky with Frankie. No major problems."

"Dr. Royal should charge me rent for all the

time I spend here," he said.

A terrible howl came from another room, but it was not Frankie.

"Sheila's getting a tooth pulled. Routine procedure, they say, but anything can happen. My wife generally expects the worst. Our last dog was old and sickly, and my wife and I were finally planning to take a trip to Las Vegas. You ever been there?"

"No, but I always wanted to," Sarah lied.

"I don't see the attraction myself, but she had her heart set on it, and then she almost backed out, telling me that Midge could die while we were gone. Midge was our miniature poodle. Anyhow, my wife kept insisting that she couldn't enjoy Vegas, knowing she'd abandoned Midge. She even dug a hole outside, and told the pet sitter that if anything happened, Midge was to be put in that hole, in a little pink suitcase. Isn't that the damndest thing? Want to know what happened?"

Sarah nodded.

"Midge went outside to do her business, and ended up falling in that hole, breaking her neck, and dying. Dying!"

"My God," Sarah said, and thought about the poor pet sitter.

She would later remember thinking of the oddest things while she waited at the clinic—Todd hadn't worn his helmet today, and seeing his vulnerable head for the first time affected her. She couldn't recall much about Todd's hair, only that it might've been wet-combed, and his outfit seemed more coordinated, less berserk. Maybe he

looked like a country suitor paying a call on a girl unavailable to him, and examining objects in the house like talismans. He'd plunged inside, then left with little fanfare, completing his duty with as much dignity as he could muster. Had she envied him? He'd switched from brooding about Jean to thinking about his reward at the ice-cream parlor—a softie.

And she thought about last night's storm. She'd gotten up because creaking sounds had frightened her, coming, she thought, from inside her house, then discovering it was the wind rattling the branches outside. Frankie had made a plaintive noise, and scuttled under the bed. When she coaxed him out, hadn't he studied her face, as if trying to understand how to please her? He'd rolled over, and she'd tickled his belly, his stubby legs pedaling with delight, his eyes rolling with pleasure.

In her classes, she often urged students not to write corny stuff, bending nature to suit their wishes, as if the outside world cooperated with human emotions, and yet she'd felt optimistic this morning, the surprise of seeing sun and that she'd been spared damage from the storm. Didn't everything seem to glisten, matching her hopefulness? The business with Todd completed and the simple desire to get Frankie groomed. She loved Saturdays, her one free day. No schoolwork, a duty she performed on Sundays, a day that always felt heavy to her, but leavened when Jean had been there, preparing a huge breakfast. The smell of fried potatoes and eggs, and the merging sound and smell of coffee brewing, and all Sarah

had to do then was enter the kitchen.

One time Jean described how she'd watched cooking shows on television, something coming over her at the sight of someone puttering in the kitchen. "It must've been nurturing, I guess," Jean had said. "Anyhow, I loved watching those shows. I'd end up preparing the worst meals, but still feel all right."

All these details had come to her in the waiting room, while the elderly man dozed.

Her first thought was that Sheila would win the prize in an ugly dog competition, when Ann delivered a sedated Sheila to the man, bundled in a towel, the dog's tongue lolling, its head limp.

"Geez," the man said. "She looks like a burrito."

Sarah watched him place Sheila in his car and drive off.

She was hungry, and had considered going to the pizza shop next door, but didn't want to leave the clinic. The clock in the waiting room made bird sounds for every passing hour, and she looked at the clock and its colored birds, thinking she'd heard a robin, a sparrow, and possibly a meadowlark in the time she'd been there.

Dr. Royal's face was red, her eyes swollen. Ann was behind her, holding a clipboard and Frankie's leash and collar. As if this were one of Ann's training exercises, Dr. Royal watched Ann deliver the news. Ann looked at the clipboard, addressed Sarah as Mrs. Boone—even though Sarah had indicated Ms. on the form—and announced that Frankie had passed.

"Passed?" Sarah said.

Dr. Royal nodded and began crying. "It's never happened before, I can assure you. He was holding up just fine. I did an ultrasound, after doing the other tests, and then his heart just stopped."

Sarah watched Dr. Royal, resenting her theatrics, and how she seemed to be seeking forgiveness. "But you must've seen signs that he was not holding up just fine."

A flash of fear showed on the doctor's face. She stepped back, and would not look at Sarah.

Ann walked Sarah to her car, handing over Frankie's leash and collar, saying, "She's all broken up. She takes these things personally."

Ann might've told her that they'd handle the arrangements for Frankie's remains; she did remember that among the many forms she'd filled out, she'd signed a release, absolving Royal Treatment from responsibility should anything untoward happen. "He didn't suffer," Ann said, patting Sarah's shoulder. "We'll handle everything. You've got too much on your plate right now."

Sarah looked down, noticing that Ann's Crocs had a camouflage design. A sensible person would've asked what they'd done to Frankie, but she felt bewildered and exposed, and seeing Ann standing there in her Crocs and purple scrubs in the parking lot, practicing compassion, was too much to bear.

The man behind the counter at the liquor store stared at her, and Sarah saw wine, liquor, and cigarettes tiered on shelves, like a tempting audience. "My dog died," she said, selecting a bottle of wine, some candy bars, and a pack of cigarettes, even though she'd stopped smoking

years ago. The clerk rang up the items, and added a package of beef jerky. "On the house."

She drove by the pet store, seeing people coming and going with dogs and cats, and what came to her was the obvious knowledge that every pet owner knew the likely outcome of their attachments.

She headed home. She could call friends and colleagues, telling them what happened, but first, she'd have to enter the house, seeing Frankie's food and water bowl, which she'd have to get rid of, along with the toys upstairs, and his collar and leash.

Foolish to think that she'd see the group-home van at her house, and that the sight of it might allow her to imagine that it'd all been a crazy dream, or a test, and she'd have a second chance to get it right. No van, no one on the street. People would be enjoying this Saturday. And Jean. What would she be doing right now in Ohio?

She entered the garage, seeing rakes, a lawn mower, snow shovels, and plastic bags filled with items she'd been meaning to take to Goodwill. So many things, and so many reminders of seasons. And now she had this day, one that would always be marked in her mind and in conversation as the Saturday when Frankie died.

Two messages were on her answering machine, the first from Jean. "I heard about a storm in Colorado, and just wanted to make sure you're all right. It was on the news. The snowstorm. I'm worried. Call me, when you get a chance, okay?"

The other message was from Ann, expressing condolences. "No rush, Mrs. Boone, but we'd

appreciate knowing about Frankie's disposition, I mean, what you intend for his remains. Would you like us to cremate him, and have his ashes put in an urn that you could pick up at your convenience? Lots of people do this. Please advise."

Ann quoted an astronomical bill for today's services—\$650—and that cremation and the urn would be another \$250.

"Our hearts go out to you. Frankie was a good dog, and we know that you loved him, and that he loved you."

This would be, Sarah thought, the personal touch that people had raved about.

She called Royal Treatment, but got the answering machine.

"I'm declining the cremation and urn. Just do whatever you have to do to—." She couldn't find the right word. "Just do whatever's necessary to dispose of him."

What did most people do? And why worry about this? She thought of her earlier preoccupation with scenarios involving some misfortune happening to Jean, and the titillation she'd felt, thinking of how she'd act noble, and for what? The counterfeit pleasure of believing that Jean needed her?

Jean answered on the first ring. "Thank God! It's you! I've been worried."

"I'm all right, darling," Sarah said. "The storm was worse on the Western Slope. Just wind here and some snow, but it was scary, the noise last night. I was convinced that someone was in the house, after me."

"Poor thing. Poor thing."

"Yes," Sarah said, feeling a stab of anger. Did Jean see her as a pitiful old woman?

Jean mentioned the fair weather in Ohio, and yet how she'd always loved fall in Colorado, the aspen leaves turning yellow, the sight of snow in the high peaks.

Sarah listened, trying to exercise patience, and feeling the utter familiarity of the pattern. If she were one of Jean's autistics, she might find consolation in this routine.

"Frankie's gone," she said.

"Gone? What do you mean? What happened?"

"He died," Sarah said, and looked at her watch. "A couple of hours ago."

"He didn't suffer," she had to shout over the noise of Jean sobbing.

When Jean finally calmed down, Sarah told her about taking Frankie in for grooming, and how shocked the vet had been at what happened. "He didn't suffer," she repeated. "His heart just gave out." She described how he'd been his regular self last night, doing his antics. "Remember how he'd make those pleading sounds, giving us that mournful look? And how he just wanted us to cuddle up with him?"

"He must've been trying to tell you something, Sarah. Dogs do that, you know."

"Right," she said. "Sometimes they go off and disappear, but not Frankie. Loyal and dependable, right up to the end."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you call?"

No need to tell her that she'd just gotten

home, and it would be cruel to say that Jean had taken off, leaving Frankie behind. "I'm sorry. It's shocking, I know."

"Did you call the group home? Those kids had a special attachment. You should call. They need grief counseling."

"And you?" Sarah asked. "What do you need?"

"I can't think straight right now. I need time to process this."

Although she knew she'd dwell on this later, regretting her remarks, she asked Jean how she could be "of assistance," cringing at the words. "Want me to send you his collar? They say it helps to have reminders."

"No, but thank you for offering. I've got memories, positive ones. I want to stick with those, alive, the memories of him alive. How are you holding up?"

Sarah glanced at the front window. Still bright out, the sun casting shadows of spiny tree limbs on the wall. Last night there'd been a full moon, but tonight it would get darker earlier, and with a smaller moon. She knew that this was a defining moment, an opportunity to sound noble, or just honest. "I'm not sure how I feel," she said. "Jean?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"I wish you were here."

"Well, this call is costing you, and you must've had to pay a lot at the vet's. I'd be happy to send you some money."

"No, you must be strapped. You've always been underpaid," she said. "Todd came by today. He can't seem to get it in his head that you've

gone.”

“I can’t seem to get it my head that Frankie’s gone, and you all alone now. Have you eaten? You need to eat. You’ll feel better. People always feel better after a meal.”

“Depends on the meal,” Sarah quipped.

“I’m glad we talked,” Jean said. “It was helpful.”

Be careful what you wish for, Sarah thought, when Jean hung up. This was closure, and she did not see the attraction in it.

Yes, she needed to eat, but after she got rid of Frankie’s things. She dumped everything in the trash bin in the garage, then thought of an assignment she’d given to students: to imagine that their house was in peril, and they had only a few moments to rescue what was absolutely essential. How bored she’d been, reading sentimental essays about how students would rescue pets and photographs, insisting that objects could be replaced, but living things and precious memories could not. “They’re priceless,” the students always wrote.

She prepared scrambled eggs and poured herself a glass of wine. She glanced at the cigarettes, but she wouldn’t give into that habit again, so she took the tray upstairs, knowing that entering the bedroom would be hard. She looked under the bed for Frankie’s favorite toy, a set of rubber keys on a ring. She pitched it in the trash, and turned on television, the station showing damage in the Western Slope—collapsed roofs, highway accidents, and stranded motorists at shelters. The newscaster pointed to places in the state that suf-

fered the most, while people in the middle had only to contend with cleaning up branches and debris, some people lamenting the spoiled foliage, as if they’d suffered a grievous, personal loss.

And it was then that the tears came. She was thinking of her routines with Frankie, both of them on the bed, watching television.

“Look at him, Frankie,” she’d say. “You’re a prince, a regular prince, compared with that clown in his toupee.”

She remembered unkind remarks she made to Frankie about Jean, but the image she saw was the man in the clinic today, with his little dog folded in a towel, like a burrito. He might be feeding Sheila soft foods right now. He’d spent a fortune on her already, and he’d spend more. Sheila would die, yet he and his wife would go right out and get another pet.

“Not me,” she said, “not me,” startled to hear the doorbell.

She went calmly down the stairs, expecting to see Todd, and not knowing how she’d react to him.

A young man was at the door, wearing a blue windbreaker, blue slacks, and bulbous black boots. “Mrs. Boone?” he asked, and she was tempted to correct him, but he looked earnest, and he was holding flowers.

“Special delivery,” he said, and thrust the flowers at her.

She thanked him, gave him a hefty tip, and watched him drive off.

The card and flowers were not from Jean, but from Royal Treatment. “We’re so sorry about

what happened today in the passing of your beloved pet. Words cannot adequately express our sorrow, but we hope that the flowers might bring you a little cheer and a sincere reminder that we're thinking of you."

If anyone should ask her, Sarah thought, about what mattered most to her, what she'd most want

to save, should something untoward happen, it would be a memory of the release she'd felt, hearing the doorbell, imagining a second chance, but maintaining composure as she approached the door, believing that something intimate, personal, and true lay behind it. 