

PRODIGALITY

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Five thirty-five already. Overcommitted again. I hate myself.

No. This isn't that bad. I've escaped the grocery store melee, I'll be home in ten minutes to marinate the sashimi, not exactly two hours, but close enough. I tuck the package of tuna behind the driver's seat with the frou-frou pink tote bag I settled on as Susannah's going away gift.

I turn the key, and the engine is so quiet that the woman strolling behind my car has no idea I'm ready to back over her.

It's my own fault I'm rushed. I'm the one who insisted on bringing an appetizer for Susannah's farewell dinner. I have to do something appreciative. After all, Susannah and David have hardly let me out of their sight since Rob died. They've been

determined to look out for me, the forlorn widow, alone for the first time in twenty-seven years, my only child married and living way out in California.

They don't want to leave me while David works in London for six months, but I'm relieved, more than ready for a chance to be alone for a while.

I don't know how to convince them that I'll be fine.

Being late isn't the way. Rob never allowed tardiness, so Susannah and David will say I'm wallowing in grief no matter how well I acquit myself.

Susannah! Sorry I'm late. I've been looking forward to tonight, but I got distracted this afternoon looking through Betsy's things, deciding what she might want me to send to her and Garrett out in L.A. So then I didn't get to the grocery store until after five, and what a mistake that was, you wouldn't believe. . . .

The traffic is never like this, all these office workers fleeing downtown cubicles for the expressway. Come on, people, it's a four-way stop, take your turn.

Out of the corner of my eye I glimpse motion, tan and white, a dog, galloping across the street. A puppy loose in all this traffic. He'll never make it. The car in front of me waits for the puppy to cross, and then it's my turn. I lift my foot

off the brake, but there's this guy, a kid, running across in front of me, oblivious, intent on catching the puppy.

Behind me, somebody lays on the horn, and I hear Rob's rational voice. *You have plans. The kid has to learn his lesson. Go home.*

But Rob isn't here, can't dictate what I do anymore. The tuna can wait. I turn right, follow the boy and his dog.

The kid strips off a plaid shirt as he runs, revealing an orange muscle shirt. Getting rid of a layer won't help much. He's still got on baggy jeans and lug-soled boots. He can't possibly catch up with the puppy, a low-slung bundle of energy.

Alongside the boy, I lower the passenger-side window.

"Hey, want a ride?"

He looks confused. I probably do, too, as I search for the door lock button. I've never picked up a stranger on the street. But how many serial killers drive silver Jaguars, how many are middle-aged women? And how many rapists lure their victims by chasing after puppies in traffic? He's in trouble, his puppy is a full block ahead, and he looks like he might be Betsy's age.

He gets in, and his weight shifts the balance. His sweat overwhelms the leather interior. I take off, say nothing about seat belts. The puppy changes course. We both gasp when he crosses the street in front of a pick-up. The blare of the truck's horn makes my stomach lurch.

The boy says, "We just got him today."

I can't tell if his breathing is ragged from the running or the emotion, but I can't cry and drive.

It's hard to keep the puppy in sight since he's running down the opposite sidewalk now. I'm going as fast as I dare. I punch the emergency flashers, and when there's a break in the oncoming traffic, I see we're directly across from the puppy, and I pull halfway into the opposite lane, like I'm secret service or something, making a roadblock.

"Jump out," I say, "Go get him."

In the split second the boy hesitates, the puppy veers off the curb again, and a van skids to a stop, maybe a foot from the little body. I can't take my eyes off the scene in the street. I hear my car door slam and the boy enters, stage right. The other driver lifts her hands in frustration. I give her the gesture back, it's a boy, a puppy, give 'em a break.

The puppy waits, tongue lolling, and as the boy reaches to scoop him up, the puppy darts away.

The shirt is still on the seat beside me, a blend of fabric softener and damp boy rising from it.

Rob weighs in from beyond the grave. *Now look what you've gotten yourself into.*

I answer him like I never dared before. So what, Rob? So what if I make a few mistakes without your direction? As it turns out, my life isn't all about pleasing you.

I reverse into my own lane, ignore the honks coming from all around. Flashers off, I tail the running boy, spot the puppy careening toward another intersection.

The puppy's across, trotting along between parked cars and storefronts. The boy waits at the curb, craning to keep his eye on the puppy, too sensible to dodge through traffic.

When I get to the light, I call, "Come on."

This time he doesn't hesitate, even looks relieved to see me.

As soon as he gets in, I say, "I'm Elizabeth."

"John," he says, leaning forward so that his breath fogs the windshield.

While we wait at the light, the puppy gets farther and farther away. I can still spot the white-tipped tail waving over those bounding haunches. Hard to believe he keeps going.

The light turns green. I accelerate and say, "I saw this exhibition at the fall steeplechases—they raced Jack Russells, got them to chase fur on a string right into a box."

"That's what he is. . .a Jack Russell."

"Listen, when we catch up with him again, instead of running after him, get his attention and run away. See if he'll chase you.

He looks toward me, and I see the judgment in his eyes—he thinks I belong in an institution.

"I know it sounds crazy, but the way he looked when you nearly caught him before. . . maybe this is a game to him."

We're getting close, and the street is almost empty. I punch the gas to shoot a little past the puppy so John will have more time. I feel more prepared for my role, find the emergency flashers switch on the dash, and then John lets out a wail. Startled, I slam on the brakes. No puppy in sight. John's out of the car, and somehow the puppy's behind us, in the middle of the street, yelping and spinning in a circle.

John squats by his damaged, whirling pet.

I've done this.

I grab the shirt and get out of the car, and I'm swimming through tears. It's so surreal, I'm split into two parts, the guardian angel and the demon, and Rob says, *Don't leave the keys in the ignition.*

I shut out Rob's voice and try to recall some first aid. The yelping is a good sign, I think. I put my hand on John's bowed back, hold out the shirt.

"Cover him," I say. "Be right back." I jog to the trunk and rummage for anything that will help. I have a yoga mat. I find a small cylinder of sunscreen and a windshirt in my tennis bag.

Rob's taunts crowd my head. I have to fix this mess I've made. I kneel beside John. No blood. The puppy is still yipping, snapping at his tail, but his circles have slowed.

"Wedge this between his teeth," I say, holding out the sunscreen tube.

I'm not sure whether it's to keep him from biting or from swallowing his tongue, it's just a vague memory related to emergency care.

John manages to get the puppy to clamp down on the tube, and I ease the windshirt over the puppy and put the folded yoga mat down on the street. I hear a car engine slow, and I refuse to look, afraid it might be someone I know. The car passes, a warm rush of exhaust against my back.

"Slide him onto the mat," I say. "Careful." Like I need to say that. Shame drains my strength, and I have to push up from the pavement with my hands. "I'll take you to the emergency clinic."

The puppy isn't so active anymore. He's lying there, panting, sunscreen tube lodged between his jaws, spittle

bubbling into seafoam at the corner of his mouth, his eyes rolled toward us.

"Come on, he can ride in your lap."

John squints up at me, a look that has mutated into full-blown distrust. "I need to call my girlfriend."

"Call her on the way," I say, and think of the call I have to make. Another vision intrudes. Susannah, sniffing a fishy skewer of sashimi.

I help John and his awkward bundle into the car. The puppy whines and I bite my lip.

"You know where the emergency clinic is?" I say while I turn the car around. When I glance at him, I see new anxiety. "It's not far," I reassure him, "Other side of the crosstown expressway. Here." I dig my phone out of my purse and hand it to him.

John struggles to balance the puppy and manage the phone. I can't help, I have to drive.

"Emily?" he says. "Yeah. . .he's hurt, but I'm going to get a vet to look at him."

Then he says, "I don't know. I'll call when I get there."

And then, "Yeah, somebody let me use their phone."

Can't blame him for being cagey, caught between a distraught girlfriend and a madwoman. When we get to the concrete block building with the red-lettered animal emergency

sign, I jerk at the keys before I put the car in park. John doesn't notice—he's already struggling to get out of the front seat with a minimum of jostling.

I rush ahead to hold open the clinic door. A stricken-looking older man walks out, his arm supporting a woman who clings to his side while she sobs into his chest. Foreshadowing in three dimensions. My legs feel spindly, and I have to wrest control from the immobility of dread.

In the lobby, there's a girl sitting on the floor beside a greyhound wrapped in a blanket. John takes a chair across from her. This is not my Friday night. I can't sit. I need to call Susannah.

A young woman in green hospital scrubs comes out of the door with a clipboard. She kneels in front of John, lifts the puppy's lips into a snarl and says something I can't hear.

"Car hit him," John says.

I sit down, bend over and put my head between my knees, close my ears to the rest of the interview. I hear movement, hear the interior door open and shut, and lift my head to find empty space where the girl and the greyhound used to be.

John and his puppy are still here. His face has grown longer, lost all its color.

I raise my eyebrows. He gulps for air, and his words are barely audible. "They want eighty-five dollars in advance."

"Not a problem," I say. Rob jeers.

At the window, I hand the receptionist a credit card, sign, go back to the chairs with a clipboard. "We have to get this form filled out."

John stares at me, anguish and fear and doubt and no hint of relief.

"Look, it's my fault. Don't even think about the money."

If he'd say thanks, we could move beyond this hurdle.

Instead, Rob says, *Honey, people with no money, that's all they think about. He's going to get a lawyer. I left you set for life, and you're giving it up, just like that.* I hear Rob's fingers snap, and the shock brings me back to reality.

"Last name?" I try for an encouraging smile, pen poised above the papers.

"Pollard," he says, and looks toward the sliding window.

"Think they'd mind if I use the phone?"

I fish my cell phone out of my shoulder bag and hand it to him, and hope the batteries hold up, because I still have to call Susannah. Or maybe the batteries will die, and I can't. Either way, she won't understand.

"Emily's coming," John says when he hands the phone back to me.

The paperwork seems interminable. The wait is longer.

Finally the scrubs woman comes to the door and holds it open, nods John inside. She cocks her head toward me, and I shake mine.

As soon as the door closes, I dial Susannah.

"Listen—I'm running late because I hit a dog."

"How horrible," Susannah says. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. The dog—it's a puppy—he's getting checked."

"Where are you?"

I tell her, and she says, "Why are you still there?"

"It's a long story," I say.

"It must be. Well, come as soon as you can. We'll get your mind off of it. David's chilled a couple of bottles of Cristal."

A woman pushes open the outer door and brings in a wailing animal in a carrier. I think banshee, though it must be a cat.

"Call you back," I say, and close the phone.

The woman in scrubs appears at the inner door and motions the newcomer inside with her yowling pet. The closed door muffles the noise. A few minutes later, the cries stop. The sudden silence is as unsettling as pandemonium.

The outer door opens again, and a slight girl with a brown ponytail enters.

"Emily?"

She's surprised by the recognition.

"I gave John and your puppy a ride here."

She can't know the whole story, and I'm not telling.

"Oh, God, what happened? Do you know what's going on?"

"No, but—the emergency staff, they seem pretty calm."

She stands in the middle of the lobby, arms crossed, waiting on someone official to deliver a second opinion.

She says, "We were out in front of our apartment playing with him. I said, 'Let's name him Rascal,' and John went to pick him up, and he took off."

"Rascal." My lips twist, but I can't quite smile.

"Where did he get hit?"

My armpits tingle. "Near Five Points."

"Oh, my God, people drive so crazy. He's so little."

I'm supposed to be at Susannah's. The tuna is spoiling.

My phone rings. Susannah says, "What was that?"

"I think a cat."

"Are you on your way yet? Because David and I'll come get you if you don't feel like driving."

"No, I'm OK. But I'm not done here."

"What do you mean? Come on, David is practically foaming at the mouth."

I flash back to the puppy's saliva collecting around the sunscreen tube jammed between his jaws.

"I still have to get ready. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I watch the clock, can't think of a thing to say to Emily. My phone rings again, but I don't answer. Let Susannah think I'm in the shower.

Another fifteen minutes, and John comes through the inner door. His face softens when he sees Emily. She stands and meets his embrace.

The scrubs woman is at the door, beckoning to me. A broken hip, they'll put a pin in it, a surgical procedure, an overnight stay for observation. It comes to four figures, the first one is a two. The other numbers don't even register.

I disregard Rob's cry of outrage and authorize the charge. I'm free to join Susannah and David, to leave Emily and John to await the outcome. I wish them well and dial the phone as I turn toward the exit.

"Susannah?"

"Tell me you're finally coming. We've already drunk the first bottle."

I lower my voice, surprise myself when I say, "It'll be a while longer."

Susannah turns my name into a lament. "E-liz-a-be-eth."

"I'm sorry, it's—"

"Come on, get over here."

I can imagine Susannah stamping her foot the way she does to emphasize a command.

"Susannah—" I walk out the door into twilight.

"Elizabeth, we bought you a ticket."

I stop on the sidewalk. "What?"

"So you can go with us."

"No. I already told you no."

"There's nothing to keep you here."

"Oh?"

"If Rob's crash made you afraid to fly, we can get you something, Valium or Xanax."

"I'm not afraid."

"David says this—whatever you're doing tonight—it's the kind of impulsive thing Rob used to say you were prone to."

"Yeah?"

"When you're with us, you don't have time to act out dangerous impulses."

"It's a boy and his dog. And his girlfriend," I say. "I hit their puppy. I could see Betsy and Garrett like this, out in California, needing someone's help."

"Betsy and Garrett don't have a dog. This is a grief reaction."

"Even if that's what it is, it's a good one. I totally forgot for a couple of hours what a tragic widow I am."

"Don't go melodramatic on me. Just say you'll go to England with us."

"No. It's too impulsive."

"You're mad about what David said."

"Susannah, Rob is gone. You can't replace him."

I hold down the button to turn off the phone, unlock the car and pull the tuna and the designer bag out of the back. I find a pen, tear a corner off the butcher paper and scribble my number on it.

Back inside, I pass the package of tuna through the reception window, say to the girl, "Fresh fish, for the cats."

I hold the impossibly cheerful pink tote out to Emily. "Here, something to take your mind off all this trauma."

I hand the scrap of paper to John. "My number. Let me know how he does with the surgery, OK? I'll be at home."

I glance up at the wall clock again as I leave. Seven thirty-five, but I'm not in any hurry.

Outside, it's almost dark, and so quiet I can hear the crickets in the verge.