

Harvester · *Sari Rosenblatt*

IN THOSE SIX YEARS following college, I had just one employer—New York University. And for three of those years, I had just one boyfriend—Ted. He was a cameraman, always in and out of work. During one hiatus, he hurt his back playing racquetball, and gradually—so gradual I didn't see it coming—he fell in love with his back pain.

At the end of the day, I'd come home to our studio and he'd be in bed lying on his hydrocolator—a gray pad he endlessly boiled in our spaghetti pot. He'd use a big pair of wooden tongs to remove the pad; then he'd lie on it until it got cold. After awhile, he'd cook it up again. Our studio was always filled with steam.

Back then I was a research assistant to Professor Waxman who was studying ways to desensitize people to night fears. For each subject, I had to play a relaxation tape, then show a film that got progressively darker. On day one, you saw a bed and a bureau in bright light and by day five you could barely see anything at all, except the illuminated red hands of an alarm clock. I had to conduct interviews in which I asked subjects to describe their worst fears. It was amazing what people were afraid of. It was unsettling how descriptive they could be.

Ted didn't want to hear about it. And he could only talk about whether he felt tighter or looser; employable, unemployable; more bummed, less bummed. The hydrocolator took up more and more room in our bed; the bed took up most of the space in our studio; our spaghetti pot was never used for a meal.

Finally, he smoked me out. Which was okay. I had friends. I had my job. Only now I was afraid of the dark.

“New shirt?” Professor Franzi asked. I was in my sixth year as a research assistant at NYU and was considering a move. Maybe the NYU financial aid office or NYU fundraising or recruiting. “New scarf?” Professor Franzi asked. He didn't know new from old. He had just been appointed in the Political Science department, and I'd just started working for him. I told him things about NYU. I explained the benefits to him—the sick and vacation days, the health plan, the pension and flexible spending program. I showed him how the coffee maker worked. He learned fast, and he

noticed things. He noticed when I trimmed my hair, had fresh paper in my notebook. He smiled when I walked in his office, smiled when I left. He took off his glasses when we spoke. He took off his glasses when he fired me.

“He laid me off,” I said to Sam, my boyfriend of seven months. “I can’t believe it.” Sam lived in Connecticut and when I spoke to him by phone I always felt I was communicating with the real world. Not a cameraman or a professor. Just a guy—a blond prince of the normal people. “I can’t believe it,” I said. “People have always liked my work. I’ve always been considered an asset, a good worker.”

“You *are* an asset,” Sam said. “But you have to remember something. Franzi is a fuck-up. Forget about him. Come live with me.”

My job had been to read newspaper stories during Lyndon Johnson’s presidential campaign and put the content into a numerical code. Specifically, I had to read and analyze every story that had to do with the Cold War. “Goldwater Uses Red Issue,” for example, might be 5-5-2-1.

I scrolled my way through miles of microfiche. I squeezed a million numbers onto computer sheets. I ate scores of Jujubes to stay awake. After I coded a batch of stories, Professor Franzi would take my numbers and feed them into his computer.

He seemed to like my work at first. He certainly seemed to like talking to me. He liked Czech food, he said. Hearty pheasant. Black bean soup. He wore sweaters with horizontal stripes to make his shoulders look broader. Did I like Czech food, he wanted to know? The rugged breads? Yes, I said. I did.

Three weeks later he called me into his office. He hadn’t liked the numbers he was seeing and wanted to know if I was “on track.” His smile started to drip. “How would you code this *Times* story about Humphrey’s campaign speech in Detroit?” He had in front of him a copy of the story. “This is the one where Humphrey blasts Barry Goldwater for saying Johnson was soft on communism.”

“6-0-0-5,” I said.

We were sitting side by side in office chairs and he leaned closer to me, pointing to a paragraph at the top of the page. “The one,” he said, “where Humphrey says, ‘If Goldwater has to dig up that old smelly argument . . .?’”

“Right,” I said. “6-0-0-5.”

Franzi moved away from me and pointed further down. "The one where Humphrey says Barry Goldwater 'will die in the stench of his own political argument'?"

"Yes," I said with conviction. "6-0-0-5."

"5? I would have said, 6-0-0-3."

"3? I wouldn't have said 3. If anything, 4-0-0-5."

"4? 4?"

So we had major philosophical differences, the upshot being he couldn't work with me.

"You couldn't work with *him*," Sam said. His shoulders looked broad no matter what he wore.

"You have to think of skills you can transfer to another job," Sam said over the phone. "Preferably in Connecticut. Preferably starting out each morning from my house."

I looked around where I was, my tiny, post-Ted apartment on 44th Street. The couch folded out into a double bed. The ottoman, an old Castro convertible, folded out into a single bed. A bureau next to the stove was stuffed with silverware and winter sweaters. The night stand next to the couch had canned goods in the bottom drawer.

"6-0-0-5, Sam," I said. "It's not really a traveling show."

"Look for what that job has in common with other jobs. Jobs outside academia. Claims investigator. Fact checker."

"A spy."

"Okay, maybe intelligence work, investigative work."

"A spy whose boss betrays her," I said.

"Ruth, you had one bad experience. Not a lifetime of them."

"You haven't known me for my lifetime."

I stared at an oriental screen which had become my push pin bulletin board. On a backdrop of robed women holding Bonsai branches, I had pinned posters of NYU foreign films, NYU exhibits, NYU concerts and lecture series. "Franzi cut me off, Sam."

"You'll grow back stronger."

"He put me on a lily pad. Then severed the stem."

"You overexaggerate."

"I'm floating away."

"Float over to my house."

"I'm melting."

“Melt outside my door.”

“Have some coffee ready. And maybe a little Danish.”

“Deal,” he said.

I moved in with Sam. He had a house, a yard, a job, a dog, a car. I could live with that. He liked to brush my hair, as though putting in place what he understood me to be. I’m not sure what that was, what he saw, but he seemed to like it. He kissed it a lot.

Soon after I moved in, I woke one morning to find Sam in the kitchen drawing an outline of his dog, Rose. Rose was curled up on a piece of white cardboard and Sam was circling her with a carpenter pencil.

“This is different,” I said. “We used to trace our hands.”

“I’m taking her measurements,” he said. “So I can build a doghouse.” Sam drew her sitting up and lying down. From her reclining position, Rose stared at him languidly and licked her chops. To her this was not construction, but massage; in the same family as a belly rub. “I don’t want her underfoot when you’re doing your job hunt.”

Sam had bought me all kinds of books and skill inventories for my job conversion. He pampered me with legal pads, showered me with self-help questionnaires.

He finished his sketches and took out a yardstick to measure the lines. It was July and hot in the kitchen but he still wore long, white carpenter pants and a thick, leather holster studded with Powerman tools. Rose came over to me and licked my bare feet. My feet seemed to have some element that kept her electrolytes in balance. “Tell her no,” Sam said. But at that moment I didn’t care what Rose did. I was touched. No one had ever built me a doghouse before.

Sam stayed crouched down, making notations inside the sketches, writing notes along the edges of the cardboard. He erased, looked up, wiped his brow, looked to one side, wrote some more. A decent man, a for-once downright decent man was building me a doghouse. The thought flew around me for a few heady moments, throwing off light, blinking, twinkling. Then it smashed into a windshield.

The gesture just seemed too large, too suspect, too unconditional in its love. Not that I felt altogether unworthy. I just felt Donna.

I felt the doghouse was meant for Donna; that he had made a mistake with her and was trying to fix it with me. I felt Donna and I saw Donna—in

the afghan on Sam's bed, in the spider plant in the bathroom still shooting out those unrelenting babies. They themselves had no children, just a three year marriage. He told me he had loved her. He said that, in all honesty, he still loved her.

"So why did you break up?" It had taken me ages to ask the question. Instead, I waited for him to tell me and when that didn't come I nosed around the house while he was at the hardware store or doing farm chores for his father. I did a fair amount of marginal poking in his bureau and the string drawer in the kitchen. When that proved fruitless I tried listening, but Sam wasn't a big talker. He looked like a talker; he looked like a slightly weary, sardonic, 100 percent cotton intellectual who could talk well and wear a pair of shorts; a cross between John Lennon and Tab Hunter. But he wasn't a talker. He talked a little about Donna but he'd talk from the outside in, rather than the other way around. He'd talk about the sofa he had with her, with the sumptuous heaps of needlepoint pillows, or the pine coffee table with the recessed knot where she placed chunky candles. Still, I couldn't get him beyond the knot, underneath the pillows. So, finally I had to ask point blank, "So, why'd you break up?"

"I don't know," he said.

We were in his bed. Wood rosettes were carved on the tip of the headboard and wood leaves cascaded down the sloping sides, as if they were falling. It had been his parents' bed. It had been the bed he shared with Donna. "We just stopped talking," he said.

The box fan in his window was set on "high" and I had to raise my voice to a slightly louder and abnormal pitch. "If you loved her, why didn't you just start talking again?"

"I don't know. We were beyond talking and couldn't seem to get back. I don't know. I was going to school getting my master's and I'd stay up late trying to think up a thesis topic. I remember one morning she found me asleep over a blank notebook, with a glass of Yukon Jack next to me. It must have been my second glass. I remember she said, 'Next time spill some whiskey on the page. At least you'll have a stain to start with.'" He laughed.

"I don't get it."

"And she was taking accounting classes and would stay up late putting numbers in columns."

"I don't get it. Was it something like you were going your separate ways, growing apart? Growing up?" He took off his wire rims and set them on the wood night table.

"I don't know, Ruth. I honestly don't know. Why did Franzi fire you? Why do things happen? Maybe it was a little of 6005 vs. 6004. That kind of thing."

"You saw things differently. You were at philosophical odds with each other. You were basically incompatible even though at first there were some real sparks."

"No."

He rubbed some sweat off the bridge of his nose, where his glasses hit. "It was just something that caught us both off guard, even though it must have been happening a long time."

"It just snuck up on you?" I said too loudly. I noticed with grim interest that the tiny grids of the box fan were filled with dark, hairy mounds of dirt. The dirt bore a great resemblance to the fine, hairy dirt I'd see in Ted's oscillating fan and to the luxurious head of dirt in Franzi's air conditioning unit.

"Yes," he said. "That's it." He looked straight ahead at his blank bedroom wall and his face registered a great deal of thought. His head moved slightly, his hand was cupped over his cheek and he was frowning. "She took off her shirt on our first date."

"God," I said.

"We were alone in the school newspaper office and she just took off her shirt."

"God."

"Who cares. Who cares who did what when. It's over, Ruth. She's remarried. It's over."

"Right," I said. "Right."

He turned off the light, a clamp-on light attached to the carved roses in the headboard. Not always, but often, he'd turned off the light and we'd sigh and I'd feel I was falling back on myself, dizzy in a swoon. But tonight my limbs felt heavy and I couldn't even put my arm around him. I just kept my eyes open in the dark and waited to see where I was.

It was the end of summer and until Sam had to start teaching again he spent his time working on the doghouse. He measured, cut, nailed, and conferred

with carpenters. He conferred quite a bit with his father, a farmer, who lived on the other side of town.

When he was finished, he unveiled the house in the back yard. He threw off a huge horse blanket and launched into his tour. He used words like *plywood*, *A-frame*, *thermopane*. “You coughed all around the window?” I asked.

“Caulked. I caulked around the window. Do you like the color?” he asked. He had painted the house red—engine red, the color of emergency vehicles, houses burning. Yes, I said. I did.

Sam’s back yard was a big square in a small town I never imagined living in. Naugatuck, Connecticut. The home of Naugahyde. The actual site where washable couch covering was manufactured. When I first met Sam, at a party in Fairfield, I thought he was trying to trick me. Naugatuck.

“No,” he said. “Honest.”

But I didn’t trust him until I asked a mutual friend and she gave me the answer with a straight face. “Naugatuck.”

Sam grew up there, went to Naugy High. He still went to Naugy High where he taught World Civ. He’d never left Naugatuck except to go to the University of Bridgeport, but he was worldly: You could say to him, *Truk*, *Bala Klava*, *Smolensk*, and he’d know, right away, where to point on the globe.

“There’s only one flaw in the whole house,” Sam said. He stopped the formal tour and sat down. “Rose hates it.” He smiled at me but he didn’t look happy. He took off his baseball cap—a man’s way of saying “the fun is over.”

“How do you know she hates it?” I asked.

“She won’t go near it.” Standing above him, I could see a ridge in his hair from where the cap had been. I bent over and tried to fluff up the fine and fair strands, tried to bang out the dent with my fingers.

At my feet, Rose played her favorite game: Rip the Rag. She grabbed the rag in her mouth, held it between her paws, and growled, howled, and ripped the thing into a mass of flyaway threads. She was gray, brown, half terrier, half something else. The terrier in her was the hunter: the part that had the instinct to systematically stalk, stand perfectly still, and then annihilate an old rag.

She was annihilating my new orange sneakers, too, incorporating them into her rag game, spitting on them, growling at them. Sam whacked her

and she reluctantly opened her mouth and let the rag go. “Sorry, Ruth,” he said, as I surveyed the spit on my sneakers.

“It’s okay,” I said, rubbing the spit around so the tip of my toe was a uniform wet color. “Rose is my top dog.”

Sam looked down and snapped some grass from the lawn. “What am I?” he asked.

I sat down next to him and wiped the sweat off my forehead. It was a hot day early in September—one of those days that leave you depressed and perspiring. You think it should be fall. You think you should have a job. You think your mother was right—about everything.

“You’re top dog, too,” I said to Sam, although frankly I wasn’t able to concentrate on him. I was thinking about sitting in the NYU periodical room, a quiet room with long wooden tables and thick walls that separated me not just from the Cold War but from the outright murder and mayhem going on elsewhere in the city. I was thinking about the big cushioned chairs where I read about the Red scare and wrote small numbers in the tiny squares of computer sheets. I had felt like Thumbelina doing her homework in Judge Hardy’s study.

“Am I the toppest dog?” Sam asked. “Enough to marry?”

It was too soon to be asking this of me. There were still unopened cartons of my stuff in his bedroom closet. I hadn’t taken out my address book or the white sneakers I wore to work. I hadn’t unpacked books, jewelry, or my better line of casual clothes.

I didn’t answer him. Instead, I sat there looking at the doghouse trying to find evidence that he’d told me the truth—that, indeed, he had gone all around the window and caulked.

One night Sam showed me old super 8 movies—reel to reel. He used one of the bare walls in his bedroom as a screen. Part of his intention was, I think, to show me when he was younger, thinner, had long hair. Guys I knew were always taking out old passports and student IDs to show me their long hair, and I always said the obligatory, “Freaky.”

Only this wasn’t just about hair. I think—although he wasn’t aware of it—he wanted me to see Donna, to see Donna move and speak, to see that somebody with perk and spunk found him desirable enough to marry.

So, in a big well-lit square on his bedroom wall, in a kind of window we were peeking through, I saw Donna move and speak. In the movie, they

were camping with friends. First we saw Sam peeking out of the tent. His hair was long and fine, parted in the middle, a Breck Girl without the sheen. "Freaky," I said. Then we saw his old dog, Grace, also with long hair, sticking her head out of the tent. "What a hippie," I said. Then we saw Donna starting a fire outside the tent and yelling, "Who's got a good match." She had short hair and a perfect, petite body. Beneath her short jacket, she probably had perky and petite breasts.

There was no way to date her, historically speaking. Her hair could be then or now, her jeans could be then or now, her overbite was timeless. There was nothing outrageous or tie-dyed about her to freeze frame her in the seventies. She was a L.L. Bean Everywoman, constantly current, always camping in Freeport with a red anorak and trail boots. "If I had a good match, a really good match," she said, "we'd be golden." The camera stayed focused on her, the camera probably in love with her. She was crouched down near the fire, her body folded into a compact package you could fit in your pocket. Carry with you forever.

Sam turned off the projector, turned off the lamp on the headboard, and came into bed with me. Only that night I couldn't make love to him.

"Was it the movie?" he asked, in the dark.

"I think so."

"Sorry. I shouldn't have shown it to you."

"Your hair was so long."

"You didn't like it?"

"Yes, I did. You were cute."

"Was it Donna?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe it's good that you see her, so you're not imagining her and conjuring up something that's way off the mark."

"Like some ugly, awful person where it's so obvious why you divorced."

"She remarried my best friend."

"Don't tell me anymore, okay? I'm better off imagining and conjuring."

We just lay there, not moving or talking, both of us on our backs, until he picked up my hand and kissed it. "So, do I look a lot older?"

"No." My eyes were used to the dark now and I turned and looked at him when I spoke. "Although that hair gets in the way of any real comparison. You look more mature now, and handsome. Seasoned."

“Like a cast iron pan.” He beat his chest. “Better with use.”

It was quiet in his room, after those whacks to his chest. I could hear his clock making slight ticks, and I began to count them; the number of ticks that were released when I inhaled, exhaled, inhaled. I turned to look at him and his eyes were open, too, as though looking at the ceiling he could see the stars. Could get his bearings.

“Don’t forget the *Naugy News*,” Sam said, as I sat in the kitchen reading the want ads in the *Waterbury American*. Then he went outside with Rose and threw a ham hock inside the doghouse door.

Yesterday he had thrown a knuckle bone and the day before, a half box of dog biscuits, the name-brand kind. Other days he had tried baked eggplant, pigs in a blanket, Chicken Piperade. But Rose wouldn’t go in there for her deep dish meatloaf with the boiled egg in the middle.

“Sorry, Ruth,” he said, when he came inside. He threw the ham hock in the trash. “I tried.” I was flattered. No man had ever tried this patiently, this hard, this long.

For a month, until the end of September, I spent a good part of my day in Sam’s kitchen, drinking coffee and reading want ads. Administrative assistant, teacher’s aide, marketing trainee. Rose licked my toes until I offered her something else. My fingers. My cheek. Reading out loud, I used my most reassuring voice, the voice my mother always used with us kids during thunderstorms—upbeat with an undertone of hysteria. “Junior writer,” I said to her. “Development assistant. Assistant to the assistant.”

Rose licked my coffee cup clean and never left my side. She came with me as I walked, like a confused interloper, through Sam’s living room, bedroom, den. She heard what I had to say, got high from my coffee. And as we paced and drank, as we considered this job, that job, love and marriage, we came upon, if not the answers to our questions, at least a piece of the right track.

My methodology was the time-honored practice of progressive desensitization. My subject was Rose. I figured if I worked with her, if I could gradually get her closer to the doghouse, if I could soften the threat and heighten the pleasure, maybe she’d get down on her belly and crawl in.

On Day One, I tore up an NYU T-shirt and placed it a good fifteen yards from the doghouse. Rose wouldn’t look at the house; but she was delighted

with the rag. She lit into it, ripping and roaring until sparks flew from her mouth; she salivated until my sneakers darkened and sparkled like quartz.

“How’s the job hunting going?” Sam asked.

We were in the living room and I was giving him a scalp massage. I was swirling my fingers through his hair, as though wiping the glass of a misty windshield. Rose sat by my side, one paw on Sam’s belly.

“I’m just getting ideas,” I said. “I’m figuring out how to transfer my skills.”

“Sounds good,” he said. His head was in my lap and I was leaning over him. “Do what you think is best. I wanted to keep talking but I didn’t know what to say. I put my hands on either side of his neck, feeling for a pulse, a drum beat, the right key of C. “Just remember me,” he said.

Who could forget him? He slept by my side at night. By day, he seemed to blush whenever he said my name. As though the sound of it—Ruth—was more biblical than he’d bargained for.

We worked slowly. For one full week we stayed at fifteen yards. We were in no hurry and it was October now, a good time to be outside. Sam’s backyard had trees that extended far back to the state road and from the dense brush I could hear vibrant, sometimes rythmical bug sounds and bird calls. This was a whole new life, this natural world.

One day, unexpectedly, I was overcome by the smell of grass. I was happy to be overcome by grass. I hadn’t smelled grass for much of my adult life, since I graduated from college, and in a moment of simple and sudden realization I knew that I had missed it.

When Rose had ripped her way through two T-shirts, a tank top, and a needlepoint pillow, I cut up my NYU sweatpants, and we moved closer—ten yards away.

“There’s always Yale,” Sam said, “only forty minutes from here.” We were in the kitchen making a dish I’d invented from found objects in the refrigerator. He was wearing an old gray T-shirt, worn so thin that in some places you could see just a few gray threads covering a tiny hole; the kind of shirt he’d wear only around the house. A shirt he’d wear only in front of me.

“Not academia,” I said. “I don’t want to fall into that old trap again.”

“Not all professors are a Franzi, but you know that. Maybe academia is just wrong for you now. Trust your instincts.”

This was a new thought for me. Trusting instincts was never something I did, never something I trusted. I always thought instincts were for dogs.

I cut up potatoes, onions, carrots, cabbage. Sam watched white rice boil. Steam from the rice rose up and covered his lenses with a moist smudge. Rose had already eaten leftover Shepherd's pie and was asleep under the kitchen table. I had an urge to cover her with a blanket.

"There's always paralegal." I said. I wasn't sure what paralegals did but it sounded like something I could do. Paralegal. Almost legal. A stone's throw from the real thing.

"Or maybe teaching," I said. "Public school teaching." I knew what I was doing here. Donna was a teacher. What I was doing was throwing a Donna bone to see what Sam would come back with.

"You?" he said.

"Why?"

"Nothing. But you're more scholarly than front line. More substance than glitz."

"I could be both. And I don't have to be glitzy."

"No, I know, I know. You'd be great if you wanted to do it. Do you really want to do it?" He sounded worried.

The kitchen was filled with complex and overwhelming smells, nothing I could put my finger on but something vaguely west of Odessa with traces of Warsaw, Berlin, Vilna. Smells I grew up with. Smells that nourished a body that could swamp anything perky and petite.

"Maybe I want to do it. Did Donna like doing it?"

"Very much. But she taught math. All she had to do was wear nice clothes and scrawl all over the board."

I gave him a kiss because this answer satisfied me; because aside from his spoken words I clearly heard the subtext: Donna would be bold and free and young enough to take off her shirt. But I had the bigger, fuller, more potentially abundant breasts.

I had books to read: *The Best Jobs for the Eighties*. *New Living Spaces*. *Marriage and Intimacy*.

But I didn't read them.

Instead, over the next three weeks, almost into November, Rose and I went from ten yards, to eight, to four. She had shredded my sweatpants, so I made new rags for her out of my NYU sweatshirt with the fleece-lined

hood. We were making progress: At three yards, she occasionally looked up and into the doghouse, as though she heard voices coming from inside.

By the time we got to two yards, I was running out of old clothes to tear up, and I felt my time was running out. My instincts, in this case, were right on track.

Sam phoned me from school and asked if I'd meet him for lunch. "I need to get away from here," he said. "All these teachers ever do is smoke and find fault with each other." I put Rose in the car and we met at Burnsie's, a diner on Rubber Avenue. Sam had known Freddie Burns for over twenty years. They were in Cub Scouts together, had gone to Salem School and, of course, Naugy High.

"You brought Rosie?" Sam said. We arrived at the same time and parked around the corner from the diner.

"She loves to get out."

I opened some car windows so she'd have some air, and Sam and I walked to Burnsie's. "Ruth," he started, as soon as we sat down, "I'm not sure about you. Sometimes I think you're happy hanging around the house, figuring out your next step, making meals. But more times than I care to think about, I get the feeling you'll slip out the back door and head for the city."

He stopped for a moment to wave hi to Freddie who was tending the grill. Then he held up two fingers, a kind of men's code, a secret language that meant either: Give me two of the usual, or my girlfriend has the ears of a burro.

"What did I do?"

I had a nervous, shaky feeling and while I hadn't really expected it, I thought, right—this makes sense. This is it. This is where he finally hands me my pink slip.

"I have to be assured things are okay with us," he said. That we're on track. Because if we're not, we should either do something about it now or call it quits. I just can't go through this again."

"I don't want to call it quits." My heart was racing. "Why do you think things aren't okay?"

"Because I don't see any real show of interest or commitment. Are you really looking for a job?"

"I can't figure out my personal and professional life at the same time, Sam. It's too much."

"I don't know, Ruth, I just want you to settle in. If it's okay to ask, what are you doing with your time?"

"Research."

"I need to hear more from you. I need to know you're with me. Otherwise, why should we bother?"

A woman placed in front of us burgers with bacon coming out of the sides like spears. Sam took a few bites, but I couldn't even open my mouth. We sat there ten minutes and didn't say anything. Finally, he stood up, put some money on the table. "It's okay," he said. "We'll talk later."

"How can you teach if you're upset?" I asked. He didn't answer. He just walked out.

What would make someone steal a dog? Anger? Revenge? A case of mistaken identity? Rose certainly wasn't a beauty queen. She had too much gray. The hair around her face was flat and lank. She wasn't a dog for show. She was just our dog. Our Rose.

I called the police. I called the pound. I called Sam's father who met me at the house. I didn't dare call Sam. He was already angry with me.

"I'm a miserable person," I said to Sam Sr. "A scumball." His father had met me at the house, had asked his wife to stay by the phone at their farm. We were sitting at Sam's childhood desk, a small makeshift square, that he now used as a kitchen table.

"Someone stole your dog," Sam Sr. shouted. "Why does that make you a scumball?"

He took from his jacket an envelope of grocery coupons and set them on the table. He was seventy years old and held onto anything of perceived or questionable value.

"Because I brought her to Burnsie's."

"Did you steal her?"

"No."

"Well, you shouldn't take credit for it then." His voice rose in pitch and, to my ear, anyway, he was hollering. "Do you take credit for every stupid thing someone does?"

I didn't answer, hoping he'd just go on.

"If someone wrongs you, or is a stinkin' liar, do you take credit for it?"

He opened the envelope and started setting his coupons on the small table. "Do you use Camay? Thirty cents. Double coupon, sixty."

I nodded.

“If someone does something low-down and dirty, do you take credit for it?”

“I know I shouldn’t,” I said.

He shook his head. “There’s a lot of nuts in the world. Doesn’t mean you have to be one. Do you use non-stick cooking spray? Low-salt gouda? Double coupon, eighty cents.”

“Yes,” I said.

“You’re a smart girl. I know that much. And look here: If you use this coupon and fill out this form, you get a box of Milkbones. For nothing. And another thing: No one wants that dog. Believe me.”

He was right. Sam’s mother called to say Vinnie Marek was at Scheide’s Gas Station and saw Rose across the street. He figured she was lost or confused, so he put her in his truck and dropped her off at the farm.

She was in a corner of the kitchen when Sam Sr. and I walked in. She had just finished another bowl of water and her second scoop of Cherry Vanilla. She seemed tired, but otherwise okay. She smelled like vanilla when I kissed her.

We all figured the crook must have left her by the side of the road after she snarled and, we hoped, bit him.

Sam’s mother was busily going through the freezer, trying to find all the venison scraps she’d been saving for Rose. “Is there anything I can get you, honey?” she asked me. I sat there and thought. I moved a wooden salt shaker back and forth on the kitchen table. “Yes,” I said, pushing Rose out of the way as I stood up. “A few scoops of hay.” Sam Sr. didn’t ask me why; he just seemed flattered I wanted something he had to give. He and Rose and I got in the car and drove to the barn. I backed the car up to a big double door and he loaded half a bale into the hatchback. Rose sniffed the hay, then kept her distance. On the ride back to the farmhouse, she tried to maneuver her entire squat body onto my lap, and I had to push her away so I could drive.

“Do you think hay would make a nice bed in a doghouse?” I asked Sam’s father.

“Where’d you hear that?” he said.

“I just thought it up.”

“Well, you’re right.” It was cold in the car—Sam’s old car, his old Chevette. Sam Sr. played with some knobs on the dash until he got some

heat. "Maybe you'd like farming. Sam never did, really." He shrugged. "Maps, foreign places. That's what he always liked." He looked out the window and had that look on his face, like Sam, as though he could almost make out the mountains of Luzern, the huts of Truk.

I dropped him off at the front door where Sam's mother met us. She was holding the scraps for Rose in one hand, venison stew in the other. "Sam likes it," she said. "Will you eat it, do you think?"

Side by side, Sam's parents stood next to the car and spoke to me through the window. They were the same height and both wore navy windbreakers and brown glasses. They could be my parents, if I wanted. All I had to do was reach out, scoop them up, nestle them in with the hay.

"I'll probably try it. Sure," I said. I rolled up the window and started backing down the long driveway. "She won't eat it if she don't like it," Sam's father shouted. "She's not stupid."

It was starting to get dark and I fumbled around until I found the headlights. In the distance, all I could see were sky and trees. Here you could see the sunset. You could see fall come and go. You could smell fall. You spoke of the horizon, not the skyline.

I had left a note for Sam telling him I'd be back around five. It was six now and he was probably starting to worry, probably wondering if I'd left him and taken the dog.

Sam looked out the kitchen window and waved when we pulled into the driveway. He had made a path through the house; lights were on in the kitchen, living room, bedroom.

Rose ran ahead of me and stood by the door. I left the venison in the car and scooped up an armful of hay. I wanted to walk in the door holding a bountiful bouquet. I wanted Sam to see who I was trying to become. A harvester.

He came to the door before I was there, and he and Rose stood looking at me coming down the walk. He was wearing the gray T-shirt with the holes. I was wearing hay. It was falling from my arms. Hay was strewn high and abundant around my feet like a bumper crop and there was only one thing I could think to say. "Here!"