SUSAN PERABO

Shelter

More often than not it happens like so: in the middle of the night I'm woken up by a car door slamming out front. Usually the car's idling and there's a little bit of radio playing and sometimes there's a whistle or tongue click or scuffle. Not often words. People come alone mostly, and people who do what they're doing aren't the kind of people who'd have words for a dog, though every so often someone'll say a *sorry* or a *see ya* before getting back into the car and driving away. When I can tell they're good and gone I pull out of bed and, unless it's winter, open up the front door in my nightie and bare feet and usually the dog's standing about where it was dropped, wagging its tail and looking up the road after the car, not getting the picture entirely, and I rattle my jar of milkbones and nine times out of ten the mutt'll turn and run right up to me, and I let it stay in the house until morning, so it doesn't have to go meet all the others out back in the kennel in the middle of the night. They're barking by now, of course—they bark all the time, once one starts they all gotta be heard—but the sound is familiar to me as crickets or trucks on the highway, so I hardly hear it anymore.

I've found families for somewhere near four hundred homeless dogs across the state of New Hampshire. For twenty-five years I answered the phone for Dr. Brick, the town vet, but when Doc retired I looked around and saw I was fifty-two and had lots of days left and no clear way to fill them. I was still living in the house I'd grown up in, the mortgage long since settled. And I had a little money saved, so I didn't need a job that would pay much, if anything. I'd seen lots of hard-luck dogs in my years with Dr. Brick, strays brought in by folks who'd found but couldn't keep them, healthy, good dogs taken down (sometimes by me, in the back of my station wagon) to the shelter where I knew damn well they'd be gassed in a matter of weeks. So it seemed like maybe this was a way I could fill those days.

I've been at it nearly a decade now, so a lot of people know I do what I do, and if all a person wants is a regular old dog—not one to show or train for some job or another—they might call me instead of

going to a pet store or a puppy mill. Then what I do is I go out to the person's house, check things over to make sure they've got the right kind of space and the right reasons to be looking for a dog—that they're not the type to lose interest or change their minds after a week or two, landing the dog right back where it started—and then once they've signed the papers I let them come out to my place and take their pick from the lot. For the picking, the dogs line up against the kennel fence, slapping tails and nosing through the holes. A few hang back, some shy, others seeming not to care, scratching at a flea or stretching out in the sunshine, like they don't give a damn who wants them and never did.

Twenty dollars is all I ask as payment, enough to buy a couple more bags of the store-brand food for the ones left behind. Some people give me more. One time a lady from Hanover wrote me a check for five hundred dollars. She said I was doing the Lord's work. I thought to myself that maybe the Lord had more important things to worry about than a kennel full of slobbering dogs, but I wasn't about to say so, standing there with her check in my hand. The truth was, I didn't really know why I did what I did, and I didn't see any reason to spend a whole lot of time thinking about it. It was just the way it was.

I've gotten through a lot by not over-thinking things, by being able to keep certain matters out of my mind. You busy yourself with living, however it is you choose to busy yourself—dogs or kids or broken cars or numbers in a book—and you might well forget that after a year of anticipation your father decided not to move the family to Florida after all, or that the man you almost married had a change of heart at the last minute and traded you in for another. My sister, who lives down in Boston, thinks all the time about everything and as a result takes a half-dozen pills every morning. Last year I watched her suffer every detail of her daughter's wedding and I thought: *you can have it*. And so when I felt that thing while I was soaping in the shower, that thing like an acorn, I just put it right out of my mind. I went on tending to my dogs and making home visits and doing what I do and I went so far as to cancel my yearly check-up with Dr. Lands because I knew once I had on that paper gown there would be no more not thinking about it. And one day in October, when I was starting to feel a little weak walking from the house to the kennel and the acorn wasn't an acorn anymore but

a walnut, I drove up to the top of my dirt drive and swung shut the rusty iron gate and put a sign on the bars that said CLOSED—DO NOT DROP DOGS. Because I had nineteen dogs in the kennel and I had to find homes for all of them before I was dead.

It was a week or so later, around about Halloween, that I got a call from a man named Jerry who said he'd read about my kennel in his local newspaper and wanted to get one of my dogs. A big dog, he said.

"Not tall and bony," he said over the telephone. "Stocky. Fat if you have one. Do you?"

"Sure," I said. "I got all kinds." They were barking out back as we spoke.

"I'd like to see them immediately." He talked swift and clipped like a military man, everything an order. "I'll be there at three o'clock."

I hesitated, but not for more than a breath or two. I needed to place the dogs in a hurry, sure, but I had to stick to the rules. What did the dogs care about a little lump? All they wanted was somebody who'd take them and keep them. So I told this Jerry I would have to make a home visit first, and if he passed he could come out and take his pick.

"I'll bring references," he said. "There's no need for—"

"This is the way it works," I said. "No home visit, no dog."

He didn't say anything for a minute, but I could tell he was still there. I could practically hear the spokes in his head creaking through the telephone line. Then he said, "Just you? Nobody else?"

"There is nobody else," I said.

And so he gave me directions to his house, up in Cornish, about forty miles from my town. We set a time for the following morning.

One day last year I did a home visit in New London and I was walking through the house and I saw an old man sitting in an easy chair and I knew right off he was dead. His hands were droopy in his lap in a way only dead hands droop. So I said to the woman walking me around—she wanted a little dog, one that would sit on her lap while she did the crossword—I said *ma'am is that man okay?* even though I knew full well he wasn't, but didn't know quite how to say it. And

she says *oh Daddy always takes his nap around this time,* and instead of telling her that her father was dead as a doornail I just said *oh, all right*. And I guess a little while after I left she must have figured it out. I don't know what exactly happened because she never did call me about getting a little dog.

Lying in bed that night before I went out to Jerry's, I started thinking of that old man and his droopy hands. I tried to imagine the way my body would relax when I went, which direction my head would nod to, where my eyes might be fixed before somebody had a chance to shut them. When my mother died, down at the hospital in Manchester, frail as a leaf, she gave a little gasp of surprise right before the end. I wondered if anything would surprise me, if I would think something different than I'd thought before.

Then I pushed all that garbage out of my mind and went to sleep.

There was a gate at Jerry's driveway, with a little box like at Wendy's. I poked the button and a crackly woman came on and I told her who I was and she sighed and said, "Come on up." And the gate swung open and I pulled through. And right then an idea started coming to me that these were people who could take three or four of my dogs. There must have been ten acres of grass and trees from what I could see and every bit of it fenced. The house was just shy of a mansion, two stories with tall windows and long white steps leading to a front porch that was empty but big enough to hold twenty rocking chairs. I parked my car at the foot of those stairs and saw Jerry was waiting for me up on the porch. He was older than he'd sounded on the phone. He looked eighty, though he also looked like he'd be okay with a few big dogs, tall and spry and with those muscled forearms you always find yourself looking at a moment too long. He had a head full of gray hair that was going in a hundred directions and a rectangle chin. There was no sign of the woman who'd sighed into the box.

"You got a lot of room for a dog to run," I called to him as I got out of the car.

"I don't want a dog to run," he said, crossing those arms as I climbed the steps toward him. "I want a dog to lie on my feet."

"Most dogs'll want to run every so often," I said, reaching the top. My words came out thin and wheezy. It was weary work, climbing, and I wasn't sure how many stairs I had left in me.

"Don't you have a fat, old dog?"

I gathered my breath. "Sure I do. I got a few of 'em in fact. But even fat, old dogs need to get up every so often."

He twisted his lips into a lopsided frown. He looked like a child when he did it, a young child experimenting in the bathroom mirror with what his own face could do, and I nearly busted out laughing.

"What is it you need to see?" he asked.

By now, frankly, I was more than a little curious. I'd been to a lot of houses, met a lot of people. And I know they say everyone's different, that we're just like snowflakes, no two alike and all that, but I think that's a load. I think most people are alike. I think most people go from the job to the TV to the pillow. In between are meals and a quick game of catch or checkers and a telephone call and one minute of looking out the window wondering what happened to someone.

But there was something about Jerry that wasn't like a person you met coming and going, something about the way he was old and young all at once. Plus, if I was going to talk him into taking more than one of my dogs (four was the number I had in my head right then), I was going to have to warm him up a little bit first.

"I need to look inside," I said. "I need to see where the dog'll be kept."

"The dog will be kept in the dungeon," he said. "And forced to wear a clown costume."

"Listen, you'd be surprised," I said. "I've had some real weirdos. Once I—"

"No need for stories," he said, opening the door.

I figured he must have been moving in. The first two rooms we entered—what might have been a living room and dining room—were empty of furniture, the walls peeling paint. Our footsteps on the wood floors echoed all the way to the high ceilings.

"Where you comin' from?" I asked. "Out of state?"

"Pardon?"

I gestured to the emptiness. "I'm guessin' you just bought the place?"

"I've lived here for fifty years," he said. "So it depends on your definition of *just*."

In the kitchen there was a breakfast nook–type area with a small circle table and two wood chairs. There was nothing on the counters, and I don't mean there were no plates or cups or cereal boxes. There was just *nothing*—no toaster or sugar bowl or roll of paper towels. The only things in the whole room that would have moved in an earthquake were two dog bowls in the corner by the fridge. One of the bowls was filled to the rim with water.

"You got a dog already?" I asked. "Lookin' for a pal?"

"No dog." He cleared his throat. "Just the bowls so far."

"A dog needs bowls, all right," I said.

"Then you're satisfied. I can—"

"Just one more thing," I said. "I need to see where the dog will sleep. Some people, they—"

He held up his hand. "No stories," he said.

He led me to a small room off the kitchen. If it hadn't been connected by wood and plaster you couldn't have convinced me it was part of the same house. First off, it was tiny compared to everything else—maybe it had been a laundry room or a mud porch. But now it was carpeted with thick brown shag and stuffed with furniture: a fat brown recliner, a rickety old tray table, and one of those big fancy TVs with cables and speakers and slots for movies and whatnot. *The Andy Griffith Show* was playing on the TV. There was an open jar of pickles and three cans of ginger ale on the tray table, and at least four or five socks flopped on the floor like dead fish.

"This is where it'll sleep?"

"I expect so," he said. "It's where I spend most of my time."

No kiddin', I thought. But instead I said, "Are there others in the household?"

"Possibly," he said, taking a small step away from me. "But they won't have anything to do with the dog. The dog will be my responsibility."

He said this like he was repeating something he'd been told a bunch of times, and I thought again that he was like a gray-haired boy. Here he stood, seventy-five, eighty years old, and I could imagine that crackly woman on the intercom saying to him, "I'm not feeding that dog, not walking that dog, not brushing that dog. You bring a dog into this house, you better be willing to take care of it,

buster." And Jerry toeing the floor, like little Opie Taylor on TV, saying, "Oh yes ma'am, I'll take care of it, I promise."

"Here's the thing," I said. "There's paperwork you gotta fill out, and there's a form that needs signed by everyone in the household. I don't want a dog coming back to me because someone here doesn't want it."

"I won't return the dog," he said.

"I know you're thinking that's true," I said. "I know you—"

"I won't return the dog," he said angrily. "No matter what."

"You feel that way now," I said. "But you might change your mind if there's someone harping on you about it every time it makes a noise or sheds some fur. Everyone has to sign off on the form. Everyone. No form, no dog."

He scowled. "I'll be in touch," he said.

Here's a fact: nobody wants a dog in November. Spring's the best—no surprise there—and summer's fine and early fall calls to mind pictures of happy dogs playing in leaf piles, and even December brings out a few folks looking for a Christmas present. But nobody in the state of New Hampshire's thinking about dogs those first weeks of bitter cold leading up to Thanksgiving, when the threat of snow sits over every house big and small and it's only a matter of time before simple things—getting to work, picking up groceries—aren't so simple.

Not that I didn't knock myself out trying. I spent extra money for color ads in the local paper, taped signs in every store window, waived the $20 fee. This brought out a couple more people than usual, and after the home visits and the paperwork I was down to just under a dozen dogs by the middle of November. But I had to move faster. At this rate it would take well into the new year to find spots for them all, and I was pretty sure I didn't have that long.

My sister called, asking me to come down to Boston for Thanksgiving, but I told her I was too busy. I might have gone—there was something nice even thinking about it, a heavy meal and voices talking over each other and a football game on somewhere—but I was afraid if I went I would buckle and tell her about what was inside me, and I knew right where that would lead. By the time that turkey's bones were simmering for soup I'd be in some specialist's

office and there'd be cousins and nieces and god knows who turning up with flowers.

"Some day I'm just gonna come up there and kidnap you," she said. "All alone in the old house with those dogs out back, it's not right. You come live near me and we'll go for lunch every day and play bridge with the other ladies on the block. Two sisters growing old together."

"What'll Joe think of that?"

"What Joe thinks of everything—that he should turn up the TV."

We'd thought, for almost a year when I was twenty-three and she was twenty-one, that her and I and the men we were fixing to marry would take vacations together, play shuffleboard on the deck of a cruise ship, ride donkeys down the Grand Canyon.

"I miss you," she said. "You might as well be a million miles away."

"I'll see you soon," I said. "Not now, but soon."

It was the next Friday, around lunchtime, when Jerry came out to my place. He drove a big pickup truck, shiny black and no more than a couple years old. He pulled past the dirt drive and onto the grass and on up to the kennel, which most people have the common courtesy not to do. He was already out of the truck and looking at the dogs by the time I'd gotten on my coat and gloves and made my way up there. He wasn't dressed for the weather—it was twenty-something degrees—and he had his hands tucked into the pits of his flannel shirt.

"Talked her into it, did ya?" I asked him.

He didn't look at me, just kept checking out the dogs. "Talked who into what?"

"The one who didn't want a dog. Promised her you'd take good care of it?"

He rubbed his hands together and then blew into them. "Are there any fatter ones?"

Most of the outright strays were skin and bones. But there were at least three overweight dogs—orphaned by divorce or allergy most likely—standing not ten feet from him when he said this.

"Look at that black one," I said. A bit of dizziness blew through my head and I took hold of the fence pole to steady myself. "You want fatter than that?"

"He a barker?"

"They're dogs," I said. "They bark. But no, he's not one that keeps you up nights. That one in the corner—he's a fatty, too, and quiet. The two get on well. You want 'em both, I'll charge you just for the one."

He shook his head. "I don't want two dogs," he said. He still hadn't looked at me.

"You got a big yard, all fenced up. Shame to let it go to waste."

Now he finally turned. In the cold his face was a little gray, his eyes watery. "It's not going to waste," he said.

"Well," I said. "Come on down to the house and we'll write it up."

I was stalling, really. The sky promised snow and probably no one else would come by today, and though being alone wasn't something that'd bothered me in many a year, the truth was in the early afternoons it was starting to get to me just a little bit. Plus maybe I could convince him if I gave him a cup of coffee. We walked down to the house. I hadn't been much for picking up in the last couple months, and there was a lot of mess around the living room, including a couple empty boxes that the bulk milkbones had come in that I'd just left lying near the front door.

"You want a coffee?" I asked him, a little embarrassed by the state of things.

"You're moving," he said, looking around the room.

"No," I said. "I just—"

"You are. You're moving. I saw the sign on the gate." He pointed a bony finger at me. "You don't want any more dogs because you're moving down to Florida to live in a condominium. You're going to get skinny and leathery and wear shorts with flowers on them."

I laughed a little. "All right," I said. "Have it your way. Do you want a coffee or not?"

"You're not going to like it down there," he said. He sat down at my kitchen table, which was covered in junk mail and paper napkins.

"Now how could you know that? You don't even know my name."

"You're not going to like it," he said. "This is your home. Look at this place. Nobody in Florida lives like this."

"Where's your paperwork?" I asked. "In the truck?"

"I don't have it," he said. "And I'm not going to have it. But you're going to give me that fat black dog anyway, because you're moving to Florida and you want to get rid of those mutts as soon as you can."

I thought about making a deal. I thought about saying, okay, mister smarty-pants, take two, the black one and his pal, and I'll take your word for it that you won't change your mind, that you'll keep them no matter what that crackly woman might say. I thought about it for five or six seconds, probably, which is likely the longest I've taken someone's word for it in thirty years. But then I remembered, and felt like a fool for forgetting: you never know what a person will do. They'll tell you one thing and five minutes later do something else. I'd seen it again and again.

"She needs to sign," I said, pushing back from the table. "I'll get you another copy if you—"

"What will you do down there?" he asked. "Bingo?"

"You really got me all figured out," I said.

He finished his coffee and set the cup down on some yellowed envelopes. "Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "You're a rich man with a fenced yard big enough for a half-dozen dogs who's afraid to ask a woman to sign a piece of paper."

He scoffed. "And you're too scared to give me a dog without a guarantee. What do you care? You'll be sunning yourself by the time the dog knows which door he goes out to pee."

"My dogs," I said. "My rules."

It's almost always something tiny that fouls things up, ruins your plans big or small. A couple days later I was at the grocery store and feeling a little woozy. I hadn't been eating very good, had been sick to my stomach if I put much more in there than a few cookies, so sometimes I swayed a bit on my feet and had to find a spot to sit. So I was pulling out a bag of dog food from the bottom shelf and I felt that wave wash over me and stood up and then all the colors came rushing at me at once and that's the last I remember.

"Ma'am," the nurse said. "Do you know where you are?"

Well, I thought, I'm looking at a gal in a nurse's uniform, so unless it's Halloween I guess I'm at the hospital. But I didn't say this, only nodded.

"You hit your head," she said. She was a black gal, cute, with the braids in her hair. "Do you remember?"

I nodded again. What I was trying to figure out was if they'd already given me the once-over. I was thinking, by the look on her face, that they probably had.

"The doctor will be back shortly," she said. "Just stay here and rest."

"The place is only two miles from my house," my sister said.

In the hospital room there were cards and flowers and bright balloons bobbing in the corners, all the things I'd been hoping I could be spared.

"I can come up every afternoon," she said. "It's the best care in Boston, which you know means the best care anywhere. There's a lake with ducks. And the big goldfish."

"I'm sure it's nice," I said. I was watching the local news, on the television way up high. I'd turned off the sound but I knew well enough what they were saying, and all in all it was better than anything coming out of my sister's mouth.

"A man came today while I was packing," she said.

I turned away from the news lady. "Did he take a dog?"

"He didn't come for a dog. He came for you. You got a boyfriend you didn't tell me about?"

"Who was it?"

"He didn't say. He brought you this." She handed me a beach towel. It had a flaky picture of a golden retriever on it. It was one of those towels you might get at K-Mart, rough to the touch, ready to fall apart the first time you put it in the washer.

"He said you could take it to Florida with you, to remember your dogs. I said you must be thinking of somebody else. My sister's not going anywhere. I said—"

"Don't," I said. I turned back to the TV. The weather map was bright blue with snow. "I don't want to know what you said."

"Well, I'm sorry if I talked out of turn. I didn't have a clue in the world who he was and why he was bringing you a present. It didn't occur to me until he was driving off that he might be your—"

"He was just a man who was thinking about a dog," I said.

"He seemed awfully sorry to hear about your trouble."

I kept my eyes on the TV. "That what he said?"

"No," she admitted. "He didn't say anything. He just *seemed*. Then he took his truck and left. But I guess he still wanted you to have this, even after I told him about..."

She held the towel out to me.

"Just pack it away with everything else," I said.

"Why don't I leave it for now?" she said, tucking it beside me. "I'll just leave it in case."

That night I wrote him a postcard. I still had his address from when I'd gone up to his house. I was thinking ten dogs was better than eleven. I was thinking all the guarantees in the world didn't mean anything. I'd had a life full of them, paperwork stepping stones from the time I was twenty-four all the way to this hospital bed. And now I could see the path in front of me, down to Boston, and then the end of it.

I had that rough towel across my cold knees.

"Jerry," I wrote on the card. "Take the black one. I trust you won't bring it back."

Yesterday my sister came to tell me the dogs had run off.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "When I got there the kennel gate was standing open and they were all gone, every one of them. I'm sorry, honey. I know—"

"It's all right," I said, patting her hand. "There's nothing you could do."

"I bet they'll get taken in," she said. "Some of them, at least. They're good dogs. They'll find homes on their own, honey. They'll find little boys who—"

"Shhhh," I said, because I could hear something in the distance, gravel crunching under tires, claws scraping on metal, a man cursing me. I smiled. I could see it now, clear as day: the gate hanging open, the dust kicking up, eleven dogs crowded in the bed of that black truck. Old Jerry was scowling. Where were they all gonna sleep? And what was he supposed to tell that woman? He was going to have to do some fast talking, that was for sure, but he'd work it out. He'd been living in that big empty house for fifty years. Once he was set on something, he wasn't the type to change his mind.