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Dog

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THE DOG

ETHAN IS AN ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE, and Barbara is a model. Every year they have a very tasteful Christmas brunch in their loft downtown. The party is always bright, but a little chilly. Bright because Ethan and Barbara are such generous, beautiful people, and chilly because I always feel a little chilly when a certain kind of hipster is around and in great numbers. Don't get me wrong, though: Ethan and Barbara are not chilly hipsters. They are, however, the kind of people who look great in a loft and even better in a loft with a sharp-faced red Doberman and almost no furniture. I feel good about having them as my friends because they both have healthy irony about who they are. Not the kind of irony which is really just stupidity, but the deepest kind of human insight.

I do my best to be a good friend to them. That job entails not judging too harshly *their* friends. Last year's party, though, was a trial, breaking down into two groups: on one end of the loft, there were the shy-but-supercilious fashion types, and, on the other end, there were the goofy-but-arrogant-because-they-make-too-much-money advertising people. I tended toward the advertising people, but that's not to say that I preferred them. They provided better camouflage. A thirty-five year old queer professor, I need rich food and warm company to pull me away from my book lined, preciously small, and tchotchke-ridden uptown apartment. Like an old woman in dark house they say. The ad guys and gals were more likely to think I was one of them than the models and photographers.

It happened as the party reached its zenith. The two distinct groups were almost mingling near the designer table groaning with sun-dried tomato quiche and semiprecious mozzarella and new potatoes so perfectly crisped that I was afraid to ruin them with my fork. I myself was on the side of things, swilling fresh-squeezed orange juice, wondering if my belt size would withstand another slab of mozzarella. It was at that moment that I caught this big guy accross the room laughing at me. Now ... this

is important. Have you ever had anyone *laugh* at you? I don't mean when you were at John F. Kennedy Junior High School and they all hated you because you insisted on wearing red sneakers. And I don't mean someone who loves you and their laughter isn't their *only* response to your being. What I mean is a total stranger, standing about ten feet away, laughing as though you were a movie, as though you couldn't see that he was laughing at you.

Confronted with this, I first checked myself to see if I was doing anything ridiculous. I then looked around to see if there was anyone between me and the wall. I even smiled my precious little smile to let said Big Guy know that I could laugh at him just as well as he could laugh at me. But nothing changed. His deep, unhurried, pleasant-under-any-other-circumstances laughter just continued. No one seemed to notice him standing there beside the Christmas tree by himself. The more annoyed I became, the less likely it seemed that he would ever stop.

Without any calculation, I approached him. I can't remember another confrontation I have entered with less ammunition. I didn't have a plan. I wasn't prepared to say anything. It was as though my body itself demanded that I be standing right in front of him as he dared to laugh at me.

I just stood there, about a foot and half in front of him. It must have taken him a moment to realize that I had moved in time and space, because at first he just kept laughing. And then, after a moment to take a deep breath, he spoke.

"I'm sorry," he said. He offered his hand. "My name's Greg."

"Martin." I didn't accept his hand.

"You probably want to know why I was laughing at you."

"No."

"You don't want to know why I was laughing at you?"

I just looked at him.

"Listen," he said. "Why don't you come over here with me and sit down on the couch?"

Why I followed him, I don't know, but when we sat down on Ethan's bright red linen couch, this encounter started to feel familiar. He fit into none of the categories by which I had divided the party. He wasn't attractive, but he wasn't ugly either. His hair was receding just a little bit, and he hadn't been as careful about

his mozzarella intake as I had. For a straight guy, he was attractive; if he'd been gay, I would have ordered him to the gym. He had that quality that big straight guys sometimes have of making their own beauty completely beside the point. Like Robert Mitchum, whom I have always loved. His familiarity was pleasantly disorienting, and I was starting to wonder exactly how straight he was when I suddenly, terribly realized that I had already slept with him.

"You really don't remember me?" he asked.

"I do now."

"But you didn't a minute ago?"

"No."

"I was laughing at you because the last time I saw you was in Ann Arbor," Greg said, "and we were sitting around your kitchen in our underwear, and I was feeling bad about what we'd done, and you said to me, 'Pal, I'm not even going to remember this five years from now, and you should give it exactly as much importance as that.' Does that ring any bells?"

"It does. I'm afraid it was the kind of thing I would have said five years ago." Who was I kidding? It was the kind of thing I might have said last week.

"No, you don't understand." The big guy leaned forward to whisper. My hands rose on their own between us. Whether to push him away or pull him in, I can't say. "You said just the right thing, *really*, the perfect thing. I was sick to my stomach because I'd never been with a man before, and I was worried that it meant something bigger than I wanted it to. I was laughing just now because it was so true—you didn't remember me. I'm *glad* you said that." He took my hand into his big hand and squeezed it.

And then he got up to leave the party. I had a question: I wanted to know if I was the only man he'd ever slept with. I didn't get a chance to ask it. He smiled one more time, though, gave me one of those fake frat boy salutes, and the last I saw him was as Ethan was escorting him out the door.

I don't think I left the couch for the rest of the party. People came and talked with me—God bless them—and I struggled to be companionable, but I didn't feel like myself. I am always the last one to leave Ethan and Barbara's parties, but that was the

first time I stayed because I couldn't bear to leave. I needed to talk to them about what had happened.

Just as the three of us were settling down together for our post-party postmortem, though, Ethan was called away by some crisis at the office, and though he railed at the idea that he had to go uptown on a Sunday evening, he finally left Barbara and me on their couch to talk. He brought his Doberman with him, I thought, to prove that even though Ethan was on a short leash at work, he was still his own man.

"Does he always bring the dog?" I asked.

"Jacer?"

"Does he always bring Jacer?"

"Almost every day, except if I'm scared and I need some company."

I hardly ever talk with Barbara alone, although we seem to have each other's numbers in a profound way. I know her as the extremely smart girl in dumb girl costume that she is; and she knows me as the solid nearly-Republican citizen that I hide behind this wacky, well-dressed art fag thing that I do. When it comes down to it, I'm probably more like her Missouri dad than Ethan will ever be. When we're alone together, I feel like we're circus performers on a cigarette break, finally free to stop entertaining everyone.

"Tell me more about the dog, Barbara. I want to hear something about Jacer."

I couldn't find a way to ask her about the big guy. Asking her about Jacer, though, felt like a similar question. He fascinated me, I guess, for being the most well-mannered dog I'd ever met. Impeccably well-groomed too. I'd never even thought about having my own dog until I met Jacer. Maybe I imagined Barbara would tell the truth about that, some kind of truth, something that I didn't know, something that Ethan wouldn't tell me. And in that truth we'd find our way to some other truth. And in some other truth I'd discover why I felt such grief over a man whose face I could barely remember.

"What do you want to know?"

"Did he have trouble accepting you? Does he recognize you as part of the pack? He seems to incredibly devoted to Ethan. I

asked Ethan about it once, but he just gave me a list of dog training books.”

“Now, that’s interesting. It’s interesting that you should ask that.”

“Why?”

“Well, one night we were sitting on this couch....” Barbara runs her hand along the top of the couch. “And we were watching TV or something. And Jacer was sitting between us. And I don’t know exactly how I did it, but I reached around Jacer to touch Ethan. It wasn’t a big deal, just an absent-minded kind of thing you do when, well, Jacer *growled* at me. It was very intense. I’d never seen him like that before, and I have to tell you it’s terrifying to have a Doberman making that face at you, baring his teeth.”

Barbara paused and swallowed. She had a dramatic way about her, but not affected so much as just felt. She was breathing deeply and preparing herself for what she would reveal next.

“Ethan looked at me for just a second before he stood up and grabbed this huge dog by the top of his coat....” She made a gesture like she was tossing something large and unwieldy. “... and threw him against the wall. It wasn’t this apartment so it wasn’t this wall, but it was *a* wall. And Ethan just threw him against it.”

She waited while the image sank in. Jacer was a big dog, but Ethan was also a big man. I could see it, and there was something terribly satisfying about seeing it. Jacer is in many ways a canine version of Ethan—they are both beautiful and dark with well-bred, sharpened features. They both seem to contain a lot of happily unexplored ferocity.

“I thought I was going to throw up. It was just awful. And when it was over, and Jacer was stumbling away, whimpering, Ethan looked at me with the most horrible face. I mean, he was twisted, he was in real agony. But all he said was, there’s nothing you can do with a Doberman that goes bad but kill it. He can’t ever do that again.’ *I got it.* That was all he said, and I didn’t ask him to say anything else.”

I could see that too: it would have been, all of it, everything he needed to say, right there in his eyes. Barbara would have

known, by that look, not to mistake his swiftness for anger. Maybe fear, but never anger.

I have told this story so many times, and I can't get anyone to understand it the way I did. I've come to believe that no one ever will. I have never, until now, told the story of the big guy, Greg. That night, I wished I were Ethan. Or, at least, Barbara watching Ethan in all his magnificent pain. I even wanted to be Jacer, the object of such a beautiful fear.

It wasn't long after when Ethan returned. He was smiling, happy to have put out his brush fire and happy to be home with us. Jacer padded merrily toward us on the couch and then swiftly changed direction toward the buffet. We followed him and munched on what was left of the party. We then talked much longer than we needed to about going to a movie. I had someone to meet later on—a date, if you have to know—and we just couldn't get the times right no matter how hard we tried. And yet, I think now, it was a good thing for us to sit there and spend all that energy trying to figure out a compromise because it reaffirmed our friendship in a way that's hard to accomplish in the middle of our busy lives. Jacer set his nose on the end of the table, at different places on the table, so that we all had our turn rubbing his neck while we scanned *The New York Times*. Finally, I took Ethan's cell phone and canceled my date at the last minute. People go to hell for that sort of thing, but I didn't care. I wanted to go to the movie, and I wanted my friends to choose the time.