The Chop

Their names, it turns out, are Pete and Mike. Mike is the girl. The dog, who smells of old socks and vinegar, is named Taylor. “Because of how fast she runs,” says Mike.

We sit in the living room, Kick squeezing her arms in that way she has when she’s uncertain. She’s still in her yoga clothes, her hair tied back in a ponytail. We are currently between dogs, ourselves, and have been for two years. For a while, we talked about new ones, but we couldn’t decide on a breed, or whether to go to the pound, which was her preference. I said I wanted something big and mean-looking. There have been break-ins. Then we stopped discussing it.

“We made her acquaintance outside of Carbondale, Illinois,” says Pete. “She was hitchhiking, too.” He has this flat tone to his voice, like no word is any more important than the other. I assume the intent is humor. He also clearly has a cold—he’s constantly sniffing and snuffing it back up into his nose. “There was a greyhound at this one place we stayed. Taylor could almost keep up with her.”

“That greyhound was fast,” agrees Mike. She’s about 20—same as age as our Tommy. Pete seems older, although the beard makes it hard to say for sure. Taylor is medium-sized, almost entirely black, with a white tip on her tail as if she dipped it in paint. A bit of Lab, a bit of hound. She has elegant legs, a long face, and Groucho eyebrows. I like her, and she seems to like me—she keeps licking my hand.

“I really need to shower,” says Kick, standing.

“I told them they could shower, too,” I say. “So, maybe after you’re done.”

"It's all right, Brad," says Pete. "It's no big deal." He seems compelled to always use my name. I'm beginning to wish I'd never told it to him.

"Sure, it is," I say. "I mean, no it isn't. Anyway, it's just water. Some towels. You look like you could use one." I look over at Mike. She's skinny and wears a pink knit cap and a black leather jacket. Her jeans have holes in the knees and her black sneakers are crusted with mud, possibly mud she's brought all the way from Illinois. I cannot imagine her any older than she is right now. Their Northface backpacks lean up against the living room wall.

"What's for dinner?" I ask Kick.

"I don't know," she says. "I didn't have a plan."

"My wife makes great spaghetti Bolognese. You guys like Bolognese?"

"Oh, yeah," says Pete. He sniffs. He's a big guy, and when I picked them up outside the Giant—they were panhandling by the exit—I did the mental arithmetic first about who would win in a fight. The obvious pick would be him. He's probably got forty pounds on me, and twenty years. But I hit the gym regularly, jog, play Friday night basketball up at the Y. I even know a little jujitsu. Not everyone does. Not that I expect it to come to that. It's probably just a guy thing, sizing people up. I've been doing it much of my life.

Mike just looks at me.

"Meat sauce," I say.

She shakes her head. "I don't do meat." She's pretty, with big eyes and an open expression, but it's an act. She's the brains of this operation. She was the one to hit me up for money, for instance, and pretty insistently. *Excuse me! Excuse me!* Their whole journey, I learned—they were from Portland, Oregon—was her idea.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," says Kick, and heads upstairs.

"Well, we can just leave the meat out of yours." I stand. "This is about the time of day when I open the wine. You guys like wine?"

"I do, Brad, I do," says Pete. "What have you got?"

"I've got white and I've got red. Mostly French. Do you like French?"

"Rhone Valley? Do you have any Cotes du Rhones, Brad?"

"I do. You sound like you know your wine."

"I worked in a wine store for a while."

I get us all wine. I also get out Pikachu's water bowl and fill it for Taylor, setting it out right where the old girl used drink, and Taylor heads for it and drinks a lot, so much I wonder when she'll stop.

"I think she minds," says Mike. "Your wife."

"She doesn't mind. You can stay in my son's room. He's at college. You spend the night. In the morning, you're off. To wherever." I realize they haven't said. "Where are you headed next?"

"Maine," they say, almost in unison.

"Portland to Portland?"

"Exactly, Brad," says Pete, inserting the lip of his wine glass into the dark cloud of his beard and somehow finding his mouth. "A confluence of similarly-dubbed urbanities."

"Don't mind him," says Mike. "He ate a dictionary when he was twelve."

I think maybe she fancies me, just a little.

Lately, I've been learning boogie-woogie piano from a guy in England called Flattop Johnson. I watch him on YouTube. His videos are charming, home-made affairs where he talks

to his wife, who he calls “Madame Cameraperson,” in a Mancunian accent. Madame Cameraperson never appears—we never even hear her voice—but somehow, I’ve developed a crush on her. I like how devoted she is to her husband’s cause. Flattop wears his hair high and pomaded, but otherwise, he seems like a normal, middle-class Englishman who just happens to have become obsessed with this quintessentially American music. “Boogie-woogie,” he says, giving it the English pronunciation, with “boo” as in Halloween, and “woo,” as in try to get someone to fall in love with you.

I practice in the evenings, after Kick has gone to bed, or to Frank’s house. We have a digital piano, nothing fancy, that we bought for Tommy to learn on, although he never used it much. The foundation of boogie-woogie is called “the chop.” It’s just your pinky and forefinger on the left hand coming down and playing a fifth, to which you add an alternating sixth with your thumb. The chop is the heartbeat, a steady, repetitive, engine you don’t think about at all, just know is there, keeping you going. I have also experimented with names for myself, but nothing seems to fit. A good name should have zing. “Lightning” sounds like I’d have to play fast, so that’s out. Incorporating a city name is always good, and if I had red hair, I’d go with Baltimore Red. Frank has red hair. He’s of Irish ancestry, but in spite of the stereotype about his countrymen, he is not particularly musical. Kick stays with Frank two nights a week. I don’t hold it against him, exactly, but it has definitely changed the way we relate when we bump into each other around the neighborhood.

In the morning, I’m up early, as usual, around 6am. I read some internet news, work on my chop. After they wander down around 7:30, I cook them eggs. Mike sits at our table, staring

into her phone, swiping this way and that. Taylor lies at her feet. “How come your wife doesn’t sleep here?” she asks, looking up from her screen.

“Ah,” I say. “Therein lies a tale.”

“Not my business, of course. But if she’s got someone, maybe you should, too.”

“Maybe. That’s an interesting idea. I’ll have to look into that.”

She stabs out a message, then looks up again. “I’m sure there’s someone out there for you. So, anyway, listen, we talked and we were wondering. You want to take Taylor?

“Take her where?”

“Everywhere. Like, be her owner. She’s tough to travel with, honestly. We love her and all, and we’d come back for her later, when we get settled. You could keep track of expenses and we’ll pay you back.”

There is indeed a dog-sized hole in my life. Nearly two years since I stroked the old girl’s head while the vet inserted the second, final needle. I called one of those specialty vets who will come to your house, since Pika was such a nervous girl. The drive to our regular vet would have been too much for her. Still, even as disoriented as she was, she recognized what was going down, saw she was being betrayed. When the vet left, taking the old Star Wars blanket we’d wrapped her in, I went out to the yard and sobbed for twenty minutes. It took another month before I stopped hearing the silence in the house, the way nothing happened when I put my key in the front door.

“I’ll take her,” I say.

“Just like that?”

“Does she do any tricks?”

“Not really.”

I kneel down beside the dog. She really needs a bath. She gives me a lick. “Madame Cameraperson,” I say, “take our photo, would you?”

Mike aims her phone at us. It looks like a fairly new one, and she’s decorated the back with stars and rainbows and glitter. “There,” she says. “That looks decent. Madame who?”

I give her my number so she can send me the pic.

I take Taylor to our old vet on York Road, which is challenging—she wants to be in my lap as I drive, so I have to kind of peer around the side of her head.

“The works,” I tell the doc when we get in the exam room. “Who knows what’s going on with this one.” I get the sense he doesn’t even know who I am, despite fourteen years of visits.

“You’re not going to like this,” he says, when he returns with the test results. Taylor and I are just waiting in the tiny room, she sniffing around at the walls and door, me reading the latest copy of *Dog Fancy*. “She hit the jackpot. Positive for tick-borne disease, Lyme, and, unfortunately, heartworm. Have you been giving her Heartguard?”

“I don’t know. I just took over yesterday. Probably not.”

“Well, that would have been a good idea. Where did she come from?”

“Southern Illinois.”

“Figures. Redneck country. They don’t care down there. Heartworm incidence correlates to mosquito population, of course, but you know what else it correlates to? Educational achievement and income level. Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi—you get the picture. Hey, girl, you like country music?” He sniffs her ear. “That’s infected, too. Can you talk to whoever you got her from? Because this isn’t going to run cheap.”

"They were just some people I met. I dropped them at the bus station yesterday afternoon, so no." Taylor had gone with us in the car, smelling much better after the bath I'd given her. Mike had just scratched the dog's head and said, "*See you around, clown."*

"We're talking over a thousand."

"Doesn't matter, anyway. I don't think they had any money."

He explains the situation. "Doxycycline for a month, at which point she'll get a shot—a powerful one. Arsenic, basically," he says. He is a no-nonsense vet, short, with a beard. I always kind of liked him for his lousy communication skills. When I asked him about Pika before she had her rapid decline, when she was just seeming a little confused, he reassured me that she wasn't "circling the drain." That phrase, insensitive as hell, stuck with me. By the end of that summer, I'd watch her wander the house, stumbling a little. Sometimes, she'd find herself up against a wall and would just stand there, tongue hanging out, waiting. For what? The wall to move? "I think she's circling the drain," I told Kick, who just teared up and left the room.

"And after that?" I ask. "She'll be okay?"

He makes a little scrunchy-face. "Nothing is guaranteed. The shot itself could kill her. But it probably won't. Then what happens is you've got these worms in her that die and have to break up and dissolve. So you don't want any big pieces moving through her system. That's the bigger likelihood of death. Another eight weeks of extremely limited motion. Bathroom breaks, on the leash, and that's it."

I nod. What else can I do? I signed on for this, after all. I wait while he takes her away to put medication in her ear.

Frank was abandoned by his wife, Karen Wu, who moved in with a finance guy she met through her job (she's in fundraising for Hopkins). We had him over one time a few weeks after it all went down, and I didn't think he looked so bad, but Kick was sure he was putting on a show, and that his heart was broken. Worse, he wasn't eating. So she started making stuff: meatloaf, lasagna, carrot soup. She brought it over there. Frank and Karen have two daughters, Aoetha and Bernadette, but they're both married and gone to Midwestern cities (Chicago and St. Louis), which happened pretty fast, as I can still picture them on their bikes. Aoetha was pretty, but Bernadette looked like an experiment gone wrong. Really, she just looked like Frank, only with a hint of epicanthal fold. Still, someone had married her. Sometimes, Kick stayed a while, just to talk or whatever. One night, they watched "Planes Trains and Automobiles" together. She came home in tears because John Candy's wife died and he was all alone for Christmas. Then, another night, she didn't come home at all.

So that's where we all are and have been since last February. The seasons changed. I binge-watched dark British crime shows, went for nighttime jogs. Tommy came home and spent June and July with us, supposedly. We barely saw him—he slept until one or two in the afternoons, smoked weed pretty much nonstop. "Talk to him," Kick told me, and I tried. His grades were horrible and he was planning on starting his third major, this one called Eastern Religions.

"You've got to think, pal," I said. "What do you want to happen?"

"Reality is many-sided," he told me, his eyes the color of paprika. "I'm working on developing my own philosophy. It's sort of like Jainism, but maybe a little bit Jewish, too."

"He's depressed," Kick said. "He needs a shrink."

"What's he depressed about?"

"You don't always need a reason. Some people just are."

"Make an appointment," I said, and she did. He didn't keep it, and that was that.

In August, we put him on a plane back to Winter Park. "Kick ass this semester," I said to him. "For certain!" he replied and then gave me a smile and a fist-bump.

The right hand is important, too, and I'm making progress there. The hard part is independence. But it's the left that makes you or breaks you. I don't even need to be at the piano to practice. I can chop on the dashboard while driving. I can chop in my sleep, which I'm pretty sure I do.

Part of why I have time to learn boogie woogie piano is that I am recently unemployed, as the German medical equipment company I worked for has filed Chapter 11, or whatever the German equivalent of that is. Chapter *elf*. The news was a surprise to me. The guys in New York said it was to them, too. Arthur told me he might have to sell his place and move. "You're young," he said, over the phone. "You'll find something else."

"I'm 45," I told him.

"Listen," he says. "I've got a buddy in the container business. I'll hook you up. Packaging, you know? With your mega-skills, you'll be golden."

Arthur always sounds like he's feeding you a line, which I guess he is. I guess we all are—it's sales.

I had an interview with the packaging people. They have an office up in Timonium, not far from Lowes. "Do you know what we do?" the woman asked me.

"You're the enemy," I said. "You encase things and make them impossible to get at."

"Nice attitude," she said. "You must want this job a lot." She wore very stylish, blue-rimmed glasses, was maybe about 32. I aged her in my head, which is a thing I do lately. I know, it would be more likely to undress her, picture myself making love to her—and she was good-looking, with no apparent wedding ring—but for some reason I just project their faces to retirement age, like a Photoshop trick. Every woman I see, no matter her age, to me she's about 65. I don't do it with children, though. Not sure what's up with that.

"I once cut my hand pretty badly trying to get an Iron Man action figure out for my son."

"With a scissors?"

I couldn't remember. "Yeah."

"Then you can't blame the packaging."

"That's true," I said.

"If you were going to drop an egg off a two story building, what do you think would be the best way to keep it from breaking on impact?"

"A parachute?"

"You do remember what we do here?"

"Foam, duct tape, a layer of those air pocket things, a couple green plastic peanuts and then a very thick plastic coffin with razor-sharp edges."

"This may not be the job for you," she said.

"Oh, I can turn on the charm." I smiled to show her. "I'm actually a people person."

In the end, she said they'd get back to me, and I'm waiting. I know it wasn't a good interview, but Arthur's word was probably worth something, and my sales record is strong—millions of dollars over the years. The PK-6 Ventilator was my biggest seller. I'd made sales at

hospitals across the country. We also had a nice autoclave that went for about 18K—I moved a lot of units there, too.

Flattop Johnson seems to live in the north of England somewhere. There's a cat that occasionally wanders through his videos. The closest I've gotten to an actual view of Madame Cameraperson is when her hand came in and scooped up the cat to get it off of Flattop's lap while he was demonstrating a right-hand trill. I have no idea if she's thin or fat, or what, but I suspect she's sort of in the middle. Pretty, but not a knockout. Just a normal, everyday person who loves her husband.

"I'm taking Taylor to Florida," I say. Kick stares past me and out the window, her hands clasped around her Kurt Vonnegut *Breakfast of Champions* coffee mug, a book I know she hasn't read. "Visit Tommy, see a bit of the country on the way."

"Does he want to be visited?"

"No. But it's a destination, and I think it's my right as a parent. Really, I just like the idea of a long drive."

"But does he know you're coming?"

"I'll inform him. How is this important?"

"What about her condition?"

"She's going to make it or she isn't. Either way, she might as well see some of the world." The vet was confusing on the subject of the limited movement. Definitely after she gets the shot, but before? How do you limit the movement of a dog that loves to run so much? We

have a fenced-in yard, and I watch her fly around it chasing squirrels and birds, a dark, quicksilver shadow.

"All right," Kick says. "I actually think this is a really good idea."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Just--" she gets up and puts her cup in the sink. She's ridiculously fit these days, and her skin seems cinched around her body. "Just that I'm sure it would be good for you to get out of the house."

"You could come." It just seems like something I ought to say—I don't mean it. Her coming would be a very strange thing, at this point.

"Work is really busy."

"Too bad."

"Do you wish you'd never gotten yourself into this?"

"No. I'm saving a life. I mean, maybe."

"Will you pass through South of the Border?" We're big fans of South of the Border. I actually spent a night in jail near there when I was a teenaged runaway, but that's another story.

"If I do, I'll make sure to stop and get you something."

"An ashtray. On second hand, maybe not. I saw someone have an epileptic fit after buying an ashtray."

"I remember."

"Funny how ashtrays used to be such a big thing. Now, you hardly ever think of them."

We're both silent, thinking about ashtrays.

"We should talk," she says.

"What about?"

"Everything."

"You should just move in with him. Don't you think? Isn't that where this is going?"

"I don't think so, no."

"So, you're still here?"

"Of course, I'm here."

"Here, and there."

"Sometimes there. It's hard to explain." She checks here watch. "Oh, heck, I'm going to be late."

For my job, I used to drive quite a bit. New England, upstate NY, Virginia. I had accounts everywhere. It has occurred to me that this choice—being a road-warrior—may have led directly to my current situation. I was, on two occasions, an unfaithful husband. Once in Rochester, NY, after martinis at a hotel bar, and another time outside of Boston with an old college girlfriend who had gotten in touch with me after her divorce. Did I come home and confess? Of course not. That would have been pointless and cruel.

I put Taylor in the back seat and start to drive. Within thirty seconds, she's in my lap. I pull over and pat her head. "Good dog." I shove her into the back, where she sits pretty well, but upright, not curled into a ball like the old dog. Pika was easy—a nervous dog nearly everywhere else, but the backseat of a car put her right to sleep. Taylor's position doesn't bode well for any turns we might take, but I try it anyway and get probably a half mile this time before she snakes forward between the front seats of the Rav 4 and lands again in my lap. This time, I push her over into the passenger seat and crack the window on that side about an inch. The sound and intake of October air is enough to get her to settle.

"That's your spot, huh?" I say. "Shotgun?"

Because I need more whisky—boogie-woogie goes particularly well with it—I take her down to Resource in Hampden. It's a little too hip for my taste, but they have great sales. I have to shove the dog back to her seat a few times, but by around Northern Parkway, Taylor settles into tourist mode, just staring out the window at the passing trees and apartment houses and row homes. I get one of the few parking spaces behind Resource, tell her to stay—does she even know that?—and head inside, figuring there's a limit to how much damage one dog can do to a car in the space of time it takes to locate and pay for a bottle of Cardhu.

Who should I run into heading up the register toting a six-pack of Lagunitas but Pete, his beard a few days bushier. He's still sniffling. At first he doesn't seem to notice it's me, but then I see it dawn on him that we've met.

"You're not in Portland?" I say.

"Not at all. Right here."

"Meaning you're back? Or you never left?"

"There was an embargo on our departure. I was just discoursing with Mike about Taylor. How is she?"

I could get into the whole story, but what would be the point? "She's fine," I say.

"That's a good dog. We're staying with some musicians and they have cats, so right now isn't probably the best time to take her back."

"To tell you the truth, I didn't know that was the plan. I kind of figured she was mine."

He nods, thinking this one over. Ahead of us, a huge man in an overcoat completes his purchase of a bottle of coconut liqueur. Maybe it makes him think of the tropics when he drinks

it. Kick and I toured distilleries in Scotland the year before we married and I still see that landscape when I pour myself a drink.

"I'll talk to Mike," he says.

"Discourse 'hello' for me," I say.

When I get home, Frank is in my backyard taking something from the shed. He holds it up for me to see—a rake.

"Mine went missing," he says. "Kick mentioned you had two. Said I could borrow one."

"Sure." We are surrounded by leaves. The most recent ones to fall are from the maple in the neighbor's yard. Thousands of them, everywhere, yellow and red, just starting to curl. "I mow them now, anyway."

"That's what I heard. Better for the environment. Except of course for the fumes from the mower."

"I enjoy it. You make these nice pathways, just chopping away. It's very satisfying."

"Who's this?" The dog is sniffing at the knees of his jeans.

"You didn't hear about our new dog?"

"Oh, maybe I did."

"We're gearing up for an adventure."

"Florida, huh?"

"That's right."

"Great place. We vacationed there a number of times as a family." He's posed with the rake now, its green metal tines fanning out beside him like some military standard.

I nod in commiseration. And I do feel sorry for him.

"You know," he says, "there are worse things than smoking weed. I smoked a lot when I was Tommy's age. You did, too, I'll bet, right? You get over it, you move on."

Frank is a family counselor, or therapist, or something. I'll bet his parents find him comforting.

"I'm not worried," I say.

"Good. But you're still headed down there."

"I want to show the dog some more of the country. She's from Illinois."

"Chicago?"

"The southern part."

"Pretty down there, huh?"

"I don't know. I've never been."

"Hey." He digs out his wallet and gives me four twenties, folded. "See if you can get me some from Tommy, okay? If not, don't worry about it."

Mike calls me that night. "Can you bring her by?" she asks. "We're crashing somewhere else now, and dogs are okay. I miss her so much."

"I took her to the vet," I tell her. Then I hold back. I don't know why. Maybe because I paid for the information. It's mine. "You sure you're up for dog ownership?"

"I know, I know. I'm not a flake, I promise." She gives me the address. "Now would be great."

I load Taylor into the front seat and crack the window for her. The place Mike and Pete are crashing turns out to be a relatively nice townhouse down near the mill complex. It's an area that used to just be workers' housing back in the 19th century, when the mills were a big deal.

After years sitting empty, developers put in restaurants and galleries and offices, and now there are young professionals just one block away from the ratty old houses where the old people live with their skinhead, oxy-sniffing offspring.

Mike comes to the door holding a big spoon with tomato sauce on it. Taylor nearly busts through the glass at the sight of her, and I have to admit I'm happy about that, if also a little jealous. She doesn't love me as much.

"I'm making Bolognese," she says. "Just like your wife." She gets down on the floor and the two of them roll around together, hugging and pawing each other.

"So, you're going to be living here now?"

"For a while." She gets back to her feet. There's old time jazz playing somewhere behind her, but she's not inviting me in. "We have a business opportunity, it turns out."

I'm thinking porn. Or craft beer. I don't know. These are sketchy people. How have they gone from panhandling to brand-new townhouse in such short time? But it's not my business.

"I'd like to keep her," I say. "I thought that was where this was all going."

"I know. I just didn't feel right without her."

"There's an ultimate sadness to this, you know? She's going to die."

"Jeez, don't be so grim. That's the deal with pets. So are you."

"Yes, but not nearly so soon."

"You hope."

"All right, then," I say. "She's all yours."

Mike leans forward and kisses me on the cheek. "You know what? You are seriously awesome. We appreciate what you did. I mean, what you *were* going to do."

I head back out to my car feeling like I just ate a rock.

I drive slowly, searching for the past. Where there used to be a family hardware store, it's now a fancy pizzeria with flour flown in from Puglia. The bars have mostly gone upscale, although Crivelli's still holds its spot mid-block, a rotted tooth amidst gleaming colorful implants: the Inkspot, with its fountain pens and 40% rag paper; Press, where a cup of coffee costs $7.

I think about Tommy, and in particular about the time when he was fourteen or so, when we played basketball. Years of letting him do well at things I could easily have beaten him in: chess, basketball, board games. You maintain a distance—of course you could beat him, after all, he's a *kid*. But then he grows, and you wonder, are you doing him any favors? Because that's not the real world. No one bubble wraps you and encases you in plastic before they drop *you* off the roof. You just get dropped. And so that day, looking at him in the grinning suit of young manhood, his confident belief that all those years of close games and one-point wins were real, I decided. I stripped the ball from him on defense. I drove hard, even used my elbows. I shot, got my own rebounds, shot again. He didn't score a point—not one. It was just outside ball, one-on-one, at a hoop down the block owned by a neighbor whose boy had already grown and moved on. At the end of it, I was exhilarated. But Tommy had a strange, distant look—he'd checked out. And I knew, I'd done something irrevocable.

At the next traffic light, I look over at the doggy smudges on the window across from me. The way the afternoon light is hitting them, they look like clouds. In Baltimore, U-turns are as common as crows. After a few moments, I'm headed south again.

And what will I say? How can I explain myself?

Madame Cameraperson? If you are there, I'm listening.