

Something We Can All Enjoy Together

Olivia Parkes

Shit on the alpaca rug. Sadie cursed Porgy for dying on her and took it back immediately. You couldn't say she hadn't seen it coming – 21 years made the Corgi practically a vampire. Sweet Porgy. Sadie still parked sometimes next to the food truck on the corner where the gardeners bought lunch, just to inhale the warm tortilla smell that reminded her of the dog's feet. Losing Porgy had been worse than losing both boys to college and the long months when their beds were always neatly made, a thing she had asked for and never really wanted. Now Ethan, her eldest, was living at home again, and they had a new dog, but the arrangement had lost heart, like a remake of a favorite movie that only reminded Sadie how much she loved the original.

Ethan appeared suddenly at the edge of the rug, his iPhone held at arm's length and dropped low to take in Sadie, still stooped over the stain. It looked like rubbing had made it worse.

"Again?" he asked.

"Well it wasn't me," Sadie said.

"Dad's going to flip."

"Do you have to record this?"

"People want to see where I live."

"I thought they wanted to see *how* you live."

Ethan had some kind of wellness channel. He had followers. They watched him do yoga and prepare high-protein vegan meals. He'd been running the show from home since graduating in May. Sadie, who approved of healthy living, had been trying very hard to explain to Doug that this was a job befitting a graduate of an elite university. Of course she was happy to have her son back – Doug worked later and later now – but it would be nice if his quest for perfection permitted him to participate at meal times.

"Where is she anyway?" Ethan asked, pocketing the phone. Lola tended to disappear after defecating. Sometimes the only evi-

dence that they even had a new dog was the waste she left peppering the many rooms of the house, like clues in a mystery Sadie was tired of trying to solve.

“Yesterday I found her behind all the ski stuff in the downstairs closet. I thought it was locked,” Sadie said.

“That dog is dark, Mom.”

“She’s just confused. This is a big house. Can you check our bedroom? Your father’s convinced she goes up there to scoot right after.”

Doug had made it clear that he didn’t have time for potty problems — for *this literal shit*, he had taken some pleasure in saying. He didn’t often swear. He’d been promoted, Sadie didn’t entirely understand to what, but he kept saying he was the face of the company now. The face, apparently, wasn’t something he could take on and off, and even at home Doug seemed bigger and blander — the representative of broader interests.

The car keys tinkled in the majolica bowl in the hall. Then Doug was in the doorway, his face showing Sadie the scene: the middle-aged wife on her knees, her hand poised above a basin of soapy water, the young man sculpted at the edge of the carpet, his long hair swept back by a sweat band.

“Please tell me you’re washing the kid’s feet and this isn’t what I think it is.”

“I can’t figure it out,” Sadie said. “I took her out an hour ago, but she just wanted to get into next-door’s trash. Are they allowed to leave the bags out on the curb like that?”

“That dog is pathological, Sadie, you think a little fresh air will fix her?”

“Take your jacket off. We’ll talk about it over dinner. Or about something else.”

“Just make sure you wash your hands,” Doug said. “Everybody,” he repeated, as if addressing a much larger family, “remember to wash your hands.”

“I’m going to do a Vipassana sesh in the den,” Ethan said. “Go

ahead and eat without me.”

Later, when Doug had fallen asleep, Sadie crept downstairs into the kitchen. Lola snored like a blow dryer on the lowest setting next to the breakfast bar in Porgy’s old bed. She stroked the dog awake and studied her face, dark and puckered as an umeboshi plum. Her lower lip was stitched by a crooked underbite, her brow deeply wrinkled, possibly in concern for the eyes, which looked like they could come loose at any minute. Was her squashed face too squashed?

“We have no idea,” Doug had said before turning out the light, “what that dog comes from.” Sadie hadn’t considered this angle before, and it seemed impossibly wide. She thought of the houses she had passed on the way to the shelter, chipboard bungalows with peeling paint and patchy grass, a busted armchair out in the drive for everyone to see, a plastic Santa toppled on a roof in August. She imagined a lino strip kitchen penned off by a baby gate and Lola, or whatever they had called her, straining over the pages of last week’s TV guide.

Porgy had belonged to their life. Sweet custodian of the boys’ childhood: he aged in a rush when they both left home, as if it grieved him. The dog became stiffer, more cylindrical, a cork stopping up the past. And when he went it all seemed to rush out with him, years of fullness yielding to a dribble.

Briefly, in the days after Porgy died, things had assumed a familiar shape. Doug came home early and they remembered the way the dog climbed into your suitcase if you were trying to pack. Even Ethan seemed moved, or had at least submitted to Sadie’s teary hug before shredding the silence with his Nutribullet to prepare a thick green drink.

Sadie, looking for pictures of Porgy as a puppy, had come across a photo of herself pregnant with Ethan at twenty-three. It was an unflattering picture, thin lips hung crooked in a moony face. Ethan was an easy baby, a dream, and she had walked into the next child without having learned, perhaps, anything, other than how to anticipate need. Doug had wanted to have kids young – to be a

young dad, he said – and Sadie had wanted it too. But there had been another side to that coin, the one he was betting on – that he would emerge, honorably discharged from the duties of fatherhood with his best years ahead of him, poised for the high dive of his career. So here they were, halfway – fifty was half, right? The boys grown and Doug primed for the jump. And she was – she was what? She was up at six for back-to-back Pilates and Zumba on Wednesday mornings. She was in great shape.

Porgy had structured the day—feeding him, walking him. He had given purpose to the lawn-flanked streets around their house, a reason to nod at the neighbors. After he died Sadie felt suspect too long out of doors. You did not loiter in a gated community. Sadie spent more and more time looking at dog photos online. Videos of baby Corgis eating breakfast cereal or taking a bath gave way to rescue sites. The possibility of doing something good for the world worked like gravity on her discontent, which accreted steadily, collecting justification. Getting a rescue was certain to please Paul, her youngest, who, with each passing semester more stridently rejected the privileges of his upbringing, and had intimated in his last email that the drought in California was caused by the swimming pool she maintained but rarely used. Why it was her pool all of a sudden, Sadie had no idea. Sadie clicked and scrolled, reading the little paragraph sob stories that came with each animal, speaking some of their names aloud, even the most unconvincing, like T-Mac or The Rock.

She'd intended to discuss the idea with Doug over the long weekend when he had more time. But that Saturday he had packed her off alone again to the Chinese herbalist – something they supposedly did together, and Sadie snapped. The herbalist had developed a way of determining Doug's needs remotely, lifting his small dry hand and, with a twisted, grasping gesture, incanting once – *Doug*. But Sadie could not feel whatever this man felt, and she paid the extravagant bill in a kind of daze, clutching two large packets of capsules containing the herbs they each required for equilibrium. Instead of driving home Sadie drove to the shelter in Encino, and when she got

back she unloaded the kennel from the backseat like it was a crate of Napa Valley red, something they could all enjoy together.

Doug had not seen it that way. Lola, after some coaxing, emerged. The little dog shivered, squatted and strained, before depositing a tight dark coil at his feet and disappearing for several hours. Sadie didn't know what it was – anxiety, malevolence, or bowel disease – but it did not stop. She discovered the turds, snaked and dry, like dead lizards, or sculpted and immaculate as soft serve, in strange places. There had been one in the electric fireplace. Sadie was most tormented though, by the ones that eluded her, the ones Lola left for Doug to find. It was always Doug who found the final disgrace, who walked in from work to find the shit on the kitchen tiles, the shit on the yoga mat Ethan had left at the top of the stairs, rolled out like a prankish welcome.

Doug could only do his own business in absolute privacy. Even with Sadie, it was something never spoken of, a dark rite undertaken in silence. In the early days, they'd lived in an apartment around the corner from the office so that Doug could make it back for dinner with the kids, and he drove home sometimes after lunch just to avoid a co-worker seeing his shoes in the shared stalls. Last year, during a redesign of the executive floor, Doug had specified that his office be enlarged to include an ensuite bathroom, a chamber only he could access, with the exception of the cleaner, who he would tip at Christmas and never see.

And so the days descended, with the sun, into darkness. Each evening when the green outside darkened to blue and the shadows lengthened and merged, Sadie hunted. Lola seemed always to deliver the final blow just before Doug came in. Without fail he reared up, repulsed, he swore, and Sadie told him to calm down, stooping to remove the offending excrement with one of the green compost bags she had felt it an ethical necessity to use now that Ethan juiced every day. The dog, when Sadie found her, would sit quaking between them, her squashed face staring into the middle distance, reliving some trauma that they would never be able to access.

The strip lighting over the breakfast bar was set on low. Lola's tail wriggled cautiously as Sadie rubbed her tough, silky ears. "Why can't you be good?" she asked. The kitchen hummed its reassurances. Sadie often came down here if she couldn't sleep, to keep company with the appliances. Sometimes she defrosted half a bagel or made a slice of raisin toast. Bread tasted better when Ethan wasn't around. Sadie stood up. She leaned against the fridge, cool on her forehead and firm against her belly. She pressed a glass against the ice dispenser in its door. The two fingers of gin she poured made the cubes crackle and fizz.

Sadie could admit a mistake. It had been a mistake to surprise them. Doug still acted like she'd come home pregnant with another man's child. Ethan wanted nothing to do with it – the dog was an affront to his standards. Sadie had acted alone, and she was left alone to suffer the consequences. She was alone now, she realized, with Lola, a damaged pug who would never know her children, who would never learn to love them all as one ineffable organism – a family, as Porgy had. She cradled the dog with the too squashed face in her lap and wept.

Sadie drove east, leaving the balm of the sea behind. The traffic was unforgiving, set in a harsh line of disapproval. She crawled on, deeper into the city. The air squatted over double-parked streets, shimmering with heat and exhaust. She turned up the AC. The car was packed with economy and care, as if for a beach trip with the children, loaded with items to keep them safe and happy. The back-seat was piled with all of Porgy's old things—his blankets, beds, ball scoopers and pooper-scoopers. His toys, even the most beloved: a plush hotdog he'd once gutted, consuming its squeaky heart.

The women at the shelter were overwhelmed by her generosity. She gave them money, too, and the brand new toys Lola had never evinced the least interest in, but which Sadie thought she might turn to in a more austere environment. She handed Lola over last, wrapped in Porgy's old blanket.

On the way out Sadie walked the corridor of dogs. A yapping battery hurled against the wire. There were blue blind eyes and torn ears, poorly cropped tails curled in ugly exclamation above asterisked anuses. There were the ones that didn't come forward at all, slumped in the far corners of their cells. It was a litany of human wreckage – the damage done when people broke up or moved on, ran out of money or changed their minds, wherever they incompletely loved. A dark rivulet of pee snaked over the concrete. The light outside was blinding. Sadie dropped her sunglasses over her eyes and pushed the image from her mind, Lola swaddled like a baby for a doorstep—she would never have abandoned one of her own.

The traffic was slacker on the way back. You could not go picking up somebody else's mistakes to solve your own problems. Lola had been cast off, but not by them – she had fallen out of someone else's story. They had loved their Porgy. Sadie rolled the window down as she neared the coast, filling her lungs with briny petroleum air. She held her breath in the tunnel, focused on the window at the end that framed and then released the view of the sea. The water was crepey with sun, the beach subdivided messily with towels.

Sadie powered without warning across two lanes, enraging a Lexus, and squinted at the approaching parking lot. A sandwich board barred the entrance, LOT FULL. There were two more before the turn for home. LOT FULL, the second, LOT FULL, the third, and Sadie stifled a sound in her throat because she realized that she didn't have any cash for parking anyway, she had emptied her wallet at the shelter, and that the lots were full because it was Labor Day, and all the kids were out of school, scrambling in and out of the water while their parents guarded their carefully staked claims and shouted them back for sunscreen.

Sadie glanced in the rearview mirror and caught sight of the empty back seat, that old flash of fear like you'd forgotten the baby. She'd been almost embarrassed by the mountain of stuff she'd had for Porgy—had he even known it was his? Had Lola known she was

theirs, and had they themselves believed it? The question, suddenly, of who it all belonged to—and who to whatseemed to offer either infinite consolation or infinite loss, and zero indication of what to do next. She thought of Doug, cheerfully helping the boys build sand-castles at the beach, there at the edge of the rising tide, so they could enjoy the thrill and terror of watching, at the burnt end of an afternoon, their work subside and be washed away.

