

The Hounds

by Kate Wilhelm

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ROSE ELLEN KNEW that Martin had been laid off, had known it for over a week, but she had waited for him to tell her. She watched him get out of the car on Friday, and she said to herself, "Now he's ready. He's got a plan and he'll tell me what we're going to do, and it'll be all right." There was more relief in her voice, that was in her mind only, than she had thought possible. Why, I've been scared, she thought, in wonder, savoring the feeling now that there was no longer any need to deny it. She knew Martin was ready by the way he left the car. He was a thin intense man, not very tall, five nine. When worried, or preoccupied, or under pressure, he seemed to lose all his coordination. He bumped into furniture, moved jerkily, upsetting things within reach, knocked over coffee cups, glasses. And he forgot to turn things off: water, lights, the car engine once. He had a high domed forehead, thin hair the color of wet sand, and now, after twelve years at the cape, a very deep burned-in suntan. He was driven by a nervous energy that sought release through constant motion. He always had a dozen projects under way: refinishing furniture, assembling a stereo system, designing a space lab model, breeding toy poodles, raising hydroponic vegetables. All his projects turned out well. All were one-man efforts. This afternoon his motion was fluid as he swung his legs out of the car, followed through with a smooth movement, then slammed the door hard. His walk was jaunty as he came up the drive and around the canary date palm to where she waited at the poolside bar. Rose Ellen was in a bikini, although the air was a bit too cool, and she wouldn't dream of swimming yet. But the sun felt good when the wind died down, and she knew she looked as good in the brief red strips as she had looked fifteen or even twenty years ago. She saw herself reflected in his eyes, not actually, but his expression told her that he was seeing her again. He hadn't for the whole week.

He didn't kiss her; they never kissed until they were going to make love. He patted her bottom and reached for the cocktail shaker. He shook it once, then poured and sat down, still looking at her approvingly.

"You know," he said.

"What, honey? I know what?" Her relief put a lilt in her voice, made her want to sing.

"And you've known all along. Well, okay, here's to us."

"Are you going to tell me what it is that I've known all along, or are you just going to sit there looking enigmatic as hell and pleased, and slightly sousled?" She leaned over him, looking into his eyes, sniffing. "And how long ago did you leave the office?"

"Noon. Little after. I didn't go back after lunch. I got the can, last Thursday." He put his glass down and pulled her to his lap. "And I don't care."

"May they all rot in hell," Rose Ellen said. "You! You've been there longer than almost anyone. And when they come to you beggin' you to come back, tell them to go to hell. Right?"

"Well, I don't think they'll come begging for me," Martin said, but he was pleased with himself. The

worry was gone, and the circles under his eyes seemed less dark, although he still hadn't slept. Rose Ellen pushed herself away from him slightly in order to see him better.

"Anyway, you can get a job up in Jacksonville tomorrow. They know that, don't they? That you'll not be available if they let you go."

"Honey, they aren't Machiavellian, you know. The agency doesn't want to break up our team, but they had no choice, no money, no appropriation for more money. We did what they hired us to do. Now it's over. Let's go to bed."

"Uh-uh! Not until you tell me what's making you grin like that. "

"Right. Look, doll, I'm forty-nine. And laid off. You know what the story is for the other guys who've had this happen. No luck. No job. Nothing. It wouldn't be any different with me, honey. You have to accept that."

She kissed his nose and stood up, hands on hips, studying him. "You! You're better than all the others put together. You know you are. You told me yourself a hundred times."

"Honey, I'm forty-nine. No one hires men who are forty-nine."

"Martin, stop this! I won't have it. You're a young man. Educated! My God, you've got degrees nobody ever even heard of. You've got education you've never even used yet."

He laughed and poured his second martini. She knew it pleased him for her to get indignant on his behalf. "I know what I'm talking about, honey. Simmer down, and listen. Okay?" She sat down again, on a stool on the other side of the bar, facing him. A tight feeling had come across her stomach, like the feeling she used to get just before the roller coaster started to go down the last, wildest drop. "I don't want another job, Rose. I've had it with jobs. I want to buy a farm."

She stared at him. He said it again, "We could do it, honey. We could sell the house and with the money left after we pay off the mortgage, the car, the other things, there'd be enough for a small farm. Ten, twenty acres. Not on the coast. Inland. West Virginia. Or Kentucky. I could get a job teaching. I wouldn't mind that.

"Martin? Martin! Stop. It's not funny. It isn't funny at all. Don't go on like this." Her playfulness evaporated leaving only the tight feeling.

"You bet your sweet ass it isn't funny. And I'm serious, Rose. Dead serious."

"A farm! What on earth would I do on the farm? What about the kids?"

"We can work out all those things..."

"Not now, Martin. I have to go get Juliette. Later, later." She ran into the house without looking back at him. Bad strategy, she thought at herself dressing. She should have gone to bed with him, and then talked him out of his crazy notion. That's all it was, a crazy notion. He was as scared as she was. He could get a job in Jacksonville. He could. It wasn't a bad drive. He could come home weekends, if he didn't want to drive it every day, although some people did. She thought about the house payments, and the insurance, and the pool maintenance, and the yard people, and the housecleaning woman who came

twice a week. And the lessons: piano, ballet, scuba, sailing. The clubs. The marina where they left the ketch. She thought of her dressmaker and her hairdresser, and his tailor, and the special shoes for Annamarie, and the kennel fees when they went away for the weekend and had to leave the three toy poodles. She thought of two thousand dollars worth of braces for Juliette in another two years.

She thought about the others it had happened to. Out of six close friends only one, Burdorf, had another job, advisor to an ad agency. But Burdorf had an in with them; his wife's father owned it.

Rose Ellen tried to stop thinking of the others who had been laid off. But Martin was different, she thought again. Really different. He had so many degrees, for one thing. She shook her head. That didn't matter. It hadn't mattered for any of the others.

She thought about being without him. She and the children without him. She shivered and hugged herself hard. She could go to work. She hadn't because neither of them had wanted her to before. But she could. She could teach, actually, easier than Martin could. He didn't have any of the education courses that were required now. So, she pursued it further, she would teach, at about seven thousand a year, and Martin would have to pay, oh, say four hundred a month... And if he didn't, or couldn't? If he was on a farm somewhere without any money at all? Seven thousand. Braces, two thousand. House, two thousand. Some extras, not many, but some, like a car. In another year Annamarie would be driving, and junior insurance, and then Jeffrey would be wanting a car....

More important, they wouldn't mind her. She knew it. Martin could control them with a word, a glower. She was easy and soft with them. It had always been impossible to tell them no, to tell them she wouldn't take them here or there, do this or that for them. They'd run all over her, she knew.

* * * *

Martin bought a farm in May and they moved as soon as school was out. The farm was twelve acres, with a small orchard and a deep well and barn. The house was modern and good, and the children, surprisingly, accepted the move unquestioningly and even liked it all. They held a family council the day after moving into the house and took a vote on whether to buy a pool table for the basement rec room, or a horse. It would be the only luxury they could afford for a long time. Only Rose Ellen voted for the pool table.

Martin had to take three courses at the university in the fall semester, then he would teach, starting in mid-term, not his own field of mathematics, because they had a very good teacher already, he was told, but if he could brush up on high school general science....

Rose Ellen signed up as a substitute teacher for the fall semester. The school was only a mile and a half from their house, she could walk there when the weather was pleasant.

"It's going to be all right, honey," Martin said one night in early September. Everyone had started school, the whole move to the country had been so without trauma that it was suspicious. Rose Ellen nodded, staring at him. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Dirt on my face?"

"No. It's strange how much you looked like my father there for a moment. A passing expression, there and gone so fast that I probably imagined it."

"Your father?"

She picked up the magazine she had been looking at. "Yes. I told you I couldn't remember him because I didn't want to talk about him. It was a lie. He didn't die until I was eleven."

Martin didn't say anything, and reluctantly she lowered the magazine again. "I'm sorry. But after I told you that, back in the beginning, I was stuck with it. I'm glad it came out finally."

"Do you want to talk about him?"

"No. Not really. He drank a lot. He and mother fought like animals most of the time. Then he died in a car accident. Drunk driving, hit a truck head on, killed himself, nearly killed the driver of the truck. Period. When I was fourteen she married again, and this time it was to a rich man."

"Did she love Eddie?"

"Eddie was the practical one," Rose Ellen said. "She married for love the first time, for practical reasons the second time. The second one was better. They've been peaceful together. No more fights. No more dodging bill collectors. Like that."

"Did she love him?"

"I don't know. I don't think so, but it didn't matter."

Martin didn't say any more, and she wondered about her mother and her second husband. Had it mattered? She didn't know. She turned pages of the magazine without looking at them, and Martin's voice startled her.

"Sometimes I think we should fight now and then," he said. "I wonder sometimes what all you're bottling up."

"Me? You know we discuss everything."

"Discuss isn't what I mean. We discuss only after you get quiet and stay quiet long enough to come to a decision. I'd like to know sometimes what all goes on in that head of yours while you're in the process of deciding."

She laughed and stood up. "Right now all that's in my head is the fact that I want a bath and bed."

She was at the door to the kitchen when Martin asked, "What did your father do?"

She stopped. Without turning around again she said, "He had a small farm. Nothing else."

She soaked for a while and thought about his words. It was true that they never fought. He hadn't lived with two people who did fight, or he'd never say anything like that. She knew it was better to be civilized and give in. She was a good wife, she told herself soberly. A good wife. And she was adaptable. He had taken her from Atlanta to Florida, from there to Kentucky. So be it. She could get along no matter where they lived, or what they did. One of them had to, she said sharply in her mind. She had been a silent observer in her own house, then in her step-father's house for years. It was better that way. She let the water out and rubbed herself briskly. At the bathroom door she saw that Martin had come up, their light was on. She paused for a few seconds, then went downstairs to read. She had been more tired than sleepy, she decided. Actually it was quite early.

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October was still days of gold and red light, of blue skies that were endlessly deep, of russet leaves underfoot and flaming maples and scarlet poison ivy and sumac, yellow poplars and ash trees. She walked home from school with a shopping bag under her arm, alone on the narrow road that was seldom used, except by the half dozen families that lived along it. Here one side was bordered by a fence line long grown up with blackberries and boysenberries and inhabited by small scurrying things that were invisible. The other side had a woods, not very dense, then a field of corn that had been harvested so that only skeletons remained. Behind the fence line was a pasture with a stream, peaceful cows that never once looked up as she passed them. The pasture ended, a stand of pine trees came up to the road. Then there was an outcropping of limestone and a hill with oak trees and some tall firs, and walnut trees. Walnuts had dropped over the road, along both sides of it.

She stopped at the walnuts and began to gather the heavy green hulls, hardly even broken by the fall. They would have to spread them out, let them dry. A scene from her childhood came to her, surprising her. There were so few scenes from her early years that sometimes she worried about it. They had gathered nuts one day. She, her mother, her father, out along a dirt road near their farm, gathering hickory nuts, and butternuts. They had taken a lunch with them, and had eaten it by a stream, and she had waded, although the water had been icy. Her father had made a fire and she had warmed her feet at it. She saw again his smiling face looking up at her as he rubbed her cold toes between his warm hands.

She finished filling her bag and picked up her purse again. Then she saw the dogs. Two of them stood on the other side of the road, behind the single strand of wire that was a fence. They were silver, and long legged, and very beautiful. They were as motionless as statues. She moved and their eyes followed her; they remained motionless. Their eyes were large, like deers' eyes, and golden. She turned to look at them again after passing them; they were watching her.

That night she tried to describe them to Martin. "Hunting dogs, I'd guess," she said. "But I've never seen any like them before. They were as skinny as possible to still have enough muscles to stand up with. All long muscles and bones, and that amazing silver hair."

Martin was polite, but not really interested, and she became silent about them. The children were upstairs in their rooms, studying. She realized that she saw very little of them any more. They had adapted so well that they were busy most of the time, and the school days here were longer, the buses were later than they used to be, so that they didn't get home until four-fifteen. Then there were the things that teenagers always did: telephone; records; riding the horse, currying it, feeding it; Jeffrey out on his bike with other boys.... She sighed and began to look over the papers she had brought home to grade. She would have Miss Witner's fifth-grade class for another week. She decided that she detested geography.

The next afternoon the dogs were there again; this time they left the field as she came near, and stood just off the road while she passed them. She spoke to them in what she hoped was a soothing voice, but they seemed not to hear; they merely stared at her.

They were bigger than she had remembered. Their tails were like silver plumes, responding to the gentle breeze as delicately as strands of silk. Feathery silver hair stirred on their chests and the backs of their long, thin legs.

She slowed down, but continued to walk evenly until she was past them, then she looked back; they

were watching her.

Her father had had a hound dog, she remembered suddenly. And her mother had let it loose one day. They never had found it. Sometimes at night she had thought she could hear its strange voice from the hills. It had a broken howl that distinguished it from the other hounds. It started high, rose and rose, then broke and started again on a different key.

She never had wondered why her mother let it go, but now she did. How furious her father had been. They had screamed at each other for hours, and just as suddenly they had been laughing at each other, and that had been all of the scene. She realized that they had gone to bed, that they always had gone to bed after one of their fights. Everything they had done together had been like that, fierce, wild, uninhibited, thorough. And now her mother was growing old in Eddie's fine house, with no one to yell at, no one to yell at her. No one to make up with. Rose Ellen resisted the impulse to look back at the dogs.

She knew they would be watching her. She didn't want to see them watching her again.

The next day was Friday and she left school later than usual, after a short staff meeting about a football game. As a substitute she didn't have to attend the meeting, and certainly she wasn't required to go to the game, but she thought she might. If Jeffrey wanted to go, she would take him. Maybe they would all go. The sun was low and the afternoon was cooler than it had been all week. She walked fast, then stopped. The dogs were there. Suddenly she was terrified. And she felt stupid. They were polite, well-behaved dogs, very valuable from the looks of them. They must belong to John Renfrew. They were always at his property line anyway. She wondered if he knew they were loose. Or were they so well trained that they wouldn't leave his property? She started to move ahead again, but slowly. When she got even with them, they moved too. Not at her side, but a step behind her. She stopped and they stopped and looked at her.

"Scat," she said. "Go home." They stared at her. "Go on home!" She felt a mounting fear and shook it off with annoyance. They weren't menacing or frightening, not growling, or making any threatening movement at all. They were merely dumb. She pointed toward John Renfrew's field again. "Go home!" They watched her.

She started to walk again, and they accompanied her home. She couldn't make them go back, or stop, or sit, or anything. No matter what she said, they simply looked at her. She wondered if they were deaf and mute, and decided that she was being silly now. They would have followed her inside the house if she hadn't closed the door before they could.

"Martin!" The three champagne-colored poodles were ecstatic over her return. They jumped on her, and pranced and got in the way, yapping. She hadn't noticed the car, but he could have put it in the garage, she thought, looking in the study, the kitchen, opening the basement door, stepping over poodles automatically. No one else was home yet. She looked out the window. They were sitting on the porch, waiting for her. She pulled back and found that she was shivering.

"This is ridiculous!" she said. "They are dogs!" She looked up Renfrew's number and called him. His wife answered.

"Who? Oh, yes. I've been meaning to come over there, but we've been so busy. You understand."

"Yes. Yes. But I'm afraid your dogs followed me home today. I tried to make them go back, but they wouldn't."

"Dogs? You mean Lucky? I thought I saw him a minute ago. Yes, he's here. I can see him out in the yard."

"These are hunting dogs. They are silver colored, long tails... "

"Our Lucky is a border collie. Black and white. And he's home. I don't know whose dogs you have, but not ours. We don't have any hunting dogs."

Rose Ellen hung up. She knew they were still there. The back door slammed and Jeffrey and Annamarie were home. Presently Juliette would be there, and Martin would be back, and they could all decide what to do about the dogs on the porch. Rose Ellen went to the kitchen, ready to make sandwiches, or start dinner, or anything. She felt a grim satisfaction that she had successfully resisted looking at the dogs again. Let them wait, she thought. Annmarie and Jeffrey rushed in then.

"Hi, kids. Hungry?"

"Hi, Mom. Can I stay over at Jennifer's house tonight? She's a drum majorette and has to go to the game, and I thought I might go too, with Frank and Sue Cox, and then go to Jennifer's house for hamburgers and cokes after?"

Rose Ellen blinked at Annamarie. "I suppose so," she said. Jennifer was the daughter of the principal. She marveled at how quickly children made friends.

"I have to run, then," Annamarie said. "I have to get some pants on, and my heavy sweater. Do you think I'll need a jacket? Did you hear the weather? How cold will it get?" But she was running upstairs as she talked, and out of earshot already.

"Well, how about you?" Rose Ellen said to Jeffrey. "You going to the game too?"

"Yeah. We're ushers. That's our chore, you know. This month we do that, then we sell candy at the basketball games after Christmas. Is it okay if I have a hot dog and go? I told Mike I'd meet him at his house, and we'll catch the bus there."

Rose Ellen nodded. Martin and Juliette came home together then. He had picked her up at the bus stop.

They had dinner, and Juliette vanished to make one of her interminable phone calls to Betsy, her all-time closest friend. Rose Ellen told Martin about the dogs. "They're out on the porch," she said. "I'm sure they're very expensive. No collars."

With the three toy poodles dancing around him, Martin went to the door to look. The hounds walked in when the door opened. The poodles drew back in alarm; they sniffed the big dogs, and then ignored them. Rose Ellen felt tight in her stomach. The silly poodles were always panicked by another dog.

"Good God," Martin said. "They're beautiful!" He clicked his fingers and called softly, "Come on, boy. Come here." The dogs seemed oblivious of him. They looked at Rose Ellen. Martin walked around them, then reached down tentatively and put his hand on the nearer one's head. The dog didn't move. He ran his hand over the shoulders, down the flank, down the leg. The dog didn't seem to notice. Martin felt both dogs the same way. He ran his hand over the shoulders, down the lean sides of the dogs, over their bellies, again and again. A strange look came over his face and abruptly he pulled away. "Have you felt

them?"

"No."

"You should. It's like silk. Warm and soft and alive under your fingers; My god, it's the most sensuous dog I've ever seen." He backed off and studied them both. They continued to watch Rose Ellen. "Come on and feel them. You can see how tame they are."

She shook her head. "Put them out, Martin."

"Rose? What's wrong with you? Are you afraid of them? You've never been afraid of dogs before. The poodles... "

"They're not dogs. They're animated toys. And I have always been afraid of dogs. Put them out!" Her voice rose slightly. Martin went to the door, calling the dogs. They didn't move. She had known they wouldn't. Slowly she walked to the door. They followed her. Martin watched, puzzled. She walked out on the porch, and the dogs went too. Then she went back inside, opening the door only enough to slip in, not letting them come with her. They sat down and waited.

"Well, they know who they like," Martin said. "You must be imprinted on their brains, like a duckling imprints what he sees first and thinks it's his mother." He laughed and went back to the table for his coffee.

Rose Ellen was cold. She wasn't afraid, she told herself. They were the quietest, most polite dogs she had ever seen. They were the least threatening dogs she had ever seen. Probably the most expensive ones she had ever seen. Still she was very cold.

"What will we do about them?" she asked, holding her hot coffee cup with both hands, not looking at Martin.

"Oh, advertise, I guess. The owner might have an ad in the paper, in fact. Have you looked?"

She hadn't thought of it. They looked together, but there was nothing. "Okay, tomorrow I'll put in an ad. Probably there'll be a reward. Could be they got away miles from here, over near Lexington. I'll put an ad in Lexington papers, too."

"But what will we do with them until the owner comes to get them?"

"What can we do? I'll feed them and let them sleep in the barn."

Even the coffee cup in her hands couldn't warm her. She thought of the gold eyes watching all night, waiting for her to come out.

"Honey, are you all right?"

"Yes. Of course. I just think they're... strange, I guess. I don't like them."

"That's because you didn't feel them. You should have. I've never felt anything like it."

She looked at her cup. She knew there was no power on earth that could induce her to touch one of

those dogs.

Rose Ellen woke up during the night. The dogs, she thought. They were out there waiting for her. She tried to go to sleep again, but she was tense and every time she closed her eyes she saw the gold eyes looking at her. Finally she got up. She couldn't see the porch from her bedroom, but from Juliette's room she could. She covered Juliette, as if that was what she had entered the room for, then she started to leave resolutely. It was crazy to go looking for them, as crazy as it was for them to keep watching her. At the hall door she stopped, and finally she turned and went back to the window. They were there.

The hall night light shone dimly on the porch, and in the square of soft light the two animals were curled up with the head of one of them on the back of the other. As she looked at them they both raised their heads and looked up at her, their eyes gleaming gold. She stifled a scream and dropped the curtain, shaking.

On Saturday morning, Joe MacLaughton, the county agent, came over to help Martin plan for a pond that he wanted to have dug. He looked at the dogs admiringly. "You sure have a pair of beauties," he said. "You don't want to let them loose in those hills. Someone'll sure as hell lift them."

"I wish they would," Rose Ellen said. She was tired; she hadn't slept after going back to bed at three-thirty.

"Ma'am?" Joe said politely.

"They aren't ours. They followed me home."

"You don't say?" He walked around the dogs thoughtfully. "They don't come from around here," he said finally.

"I'm going to call the paper and put an ad in the Lost and Found," Martin said.

"Waste of time in the locals," Joe said stubbornly. "If those dogs belonged around here, I'd know about it. Might try the kennel club over in Lexington, though."

Martin nodded. "That's a thought. They must know about such valuable dogs in this area."

They went out to look at the proposed pond site. The dogs stayed on the porch, looking at the door.

After the agent left, Martin made his calls. The kennel club president was no help. Weimaraners? Martin said no, and he named another breed or two, and then said he'd have to have a look at the dogs, didn't sound like anything he knew. After he hung up, Martin swore. He had an address in Lexington where he could take the dogs for identification. He called the newspaper and placed the ad.

All day the sound of hammering from the barn where Martin was making repairs sounded and resounded. Annamarie and Jennifer came in and volunteered to gather apples. Jeffrey helped his father, and Juliette tagged with one pair, then the other. She tried to get the dogs to play with her, but they wouldn't. After patting them for a few minutes she ignored them as thoroughly as they ignored all the children. Rose didn't go outside all day. She started to leave by the back door once, but they heard her and walked around the corner of the house before she got off the steps. She returned to the kitchen. They returned to the porch.

They wouldn't stay in the barn. There were too many places where creatures as thin as they were could slip through, so Martin didn't even try to make them stay there. They seemed to prefer the porch. No one wanted to go to town to buy collars for them in order to tie them up. Martin didn't like the idea of tying them up anyway. "What if they decide to go back to where they came from?" he asked. Rose didn't press the idea after that.

At dinner she said, "Let's go over to Lexington to a movie tonight?"

Martin sagged. "What's playing?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Something must be playing that we'd like to see."

"Another night? Tomorrow night?" Martin said. "Tell you what, I'll even throw in dinner."

"Oh, never mind. It was a sudden thought. I don't even know what's on." Rose and Annamarie cleared the table and she brought in apple pie, and coffee. She thought of the dogs on the porch.

"Next February I'll spray the trees," Martin said. "And I'll fertilize under the trees. Watch and see the difference then. Just wait."

Rose Ellen nodded. Just wait. Martin was tired, and thinner than usual. He worked harder here than he ever had anywhere, she was sure. Building, repairing, planting, studying about farming methods, and his school courses. She wondered if he was happy. Later, she thought, later she would ask him if he was happy. She wondered if that was one of those questions that you don't ask unless you already know the answer. Would she dare ask if she suspected that he might answer no? She hoped he wouldn't ask her.

Martin was an inventive lover. It pleased him immensely to delight her, or give her an unexpected thrill, or just to stay with her for an hour. They made love that night and afterward, both drowsy and contented, she asked if he was happy.

"Yes," he said simply. And that was that. "I wish you were, too," he said moments later. She had almost fallen asleep. She stiffened at his words. "Sorry, honey. Relax again. Okay?"

"What did you mean by that?"

"I'm not sure. Sometimes I just feel that I've got it all. You, the kids, the farm now, and school. I can't think of anything else I want."

"I've got all those things too, you know."

"I know." He stretched and yawned and wanted to let it drop.

"Martin, you must have meant something. You think I'm not happy, is that it?"

"I don't know. I don't know what it takes to make you happy."

She didn't reply and soon he was asleep. She didn't know either.

She dozed after a while, and was awakened by a rhythmic noise that seemed to start in her dream, then linger after the dream faded. She turned over, but the noise didn't go away. She turned again and

snuggled close to Martin. The bedroom was chilly. A wind had started to blow, and the window was open too much. She felt the air current on her cheek, and finally got up to close the window. The noise was louder. She got her robe on and went into the hall, then to the window in Juliette's room. The dogs were walking back and forth on the porch, their nails clicking with each step. They both stopped and looked at her. She ran from the room shaking, and strangely, weeping.

At breakfast she said to Martin, "You have to get them out of here today. I can't stand them any longer."

"They really got to you, didn't they?"

"Yes, they got to me! Take them to Lexington, leave them with the kennel club people, or the dog pound, or something."

"Okay, Rose. Let's wait until afternoon. See if anyone answers our ad first."

No one called about them, and at one Martin tried to get them into the car. They refused to leave the porch. "I could carry them," he said, doubtfully. They weren't heavy, obviously. Anything as thin as they couldn't be heavy. But when he tried to lift one, it started to shiver, and it struggled and slipped through his arms. When he tried again, the dog growled, a hoarse sound of warning deep in its throat, not so much a threat as a plea not to make it follow through. Its gold eyes were soft and clear and very large. Martin stopped. "Now what?" he asked.

"I'll get them to the car," Rose said. She led the two dogs to the car and opened the door for them. They jumped inside. When she closed the door again, they pressed their noses against the window and looked at her. "See if they'll let you drive," she said.

They wouldn't let Martin get inside the car at all, not until Rose was behind the wheel, and then they paid no attention to him. "I'll drive," she said tightly. Her hands on the wheel were very stiff and the hard feeling in her stomach made it difficult to breathe. Martin nodded. He reached out and put his hand on her knee and squeezed it gently.

He was saying it was all right, but it wasn't, she thought, driving.

The kennel club was run by Colonel Owen Luce, who was a Kentucky colonel, and wanted the title used. "Proud of it, you know," he said genially. "Got mine the hard way, through service. Nowadays you can buy it, but not back when I got mine." He was forty, with blond wavy hair, tall, and too good looking not to know it. He posed and swaggered and preened, and reminded Rose of a peacock that had stolen bread from their picnic table at Sunken Gardens in Florida once.

"They're handsome dogs," Colonel Luce said, walking around the hounds. "Handsome. Deer hounds? No. Not with that silky hair. Hm. Don't tell me. Not wolf hounds. Got it! Salukis!" He looked at Rose, waiting for approval. She shrugged. "I'm not certain," he said, as if by admitting his fallibility, he was letting her in on a closely guarded secret that very few would ever know. He didn't ignore Martin as much as by-pass him, first glancing at him, then addressing himself to Rose. Obviously he thought she was the dog fancier, since the hounds clung to her so closely.

"We don't know what they are," she said. "And they aren't ours. They followed me home. We want to return them to their owner."

"Ah. You should get quite a reward then. There aren't many salukis in this country. Very rare, and very

expensive."

"We don't want a reward," Rose said. "We want to get rid of them."

"Why? Are they mean?" It was a ridiculous question. He smiled to show he was joking. "I always heard that salukis were more nervous than these seem to be," he said, studying them once more. "And the eyes are wrong, I think, if memory serves. I wonder if they could be a cross?"

Rose looked at Martin imploringly, but he was looking stubborn. He disliked the colonel very much. "Colonel Luce, can you house these dogs?" Rose asked. "You can claim the reward, and if no one shows up to claim them, then they'd be yours by default, wouldn't they? You could sell them."

"My dear lady, I couldn't possibly. We don't know anything about a medical history for them, now do we? I would have to assume that they've had nothing in the way of shots, obviously not true, but with no records..." He spread his hands and smiled prettily at Rose. "You do understand. I would have to isolate them for three weeks, to protect my own dogs. And give them the shots, and the examinations, and then have an irate owner show up? No thank you. Owners of valuable dogs tend to get very nasty if you doctor their hounds for them without their approval."

"Christ!" Martin said in disgust. "How much would you charge to board them then?"

"In isolation? Eight dollars a day, each."

Rose stared at him. He smiled again, showing every tooth in his head. She turned away. "Let's go, Martin." She took the dogs to the car and opened the door for them. She got behind the wheel and Martin got in, and only then did the dogs sit down. The dog pound was closed. "They won't get in the car again," Rose said dully. "Can you think of any place else?" He couldn't and she started for home.

The blue grass country that they drove through was very lovely at that time of year. The fields rose and fell gently, delineated by white fences, punctuated in the distance by dark horses. Stands of woods were bouquets in full bloom, brilliant in the late afternoon sunlight. A haze softened the clear blue of the sky, and in the far distance hazy blue hills held the sky and land apart. Rose looked at it all, then said bitterly, "I shouldn't have let you do this."

"Come here. Bring me here."

"Honey, what's wrong? Don't you like the farm?"

"I don't know. I just know I should have told you no. We should have tried to work it out without this."

"Rose, you didn't say anything about not wanting to come here. Not a word."

"You might have known, if you hadn't closed your eyes to what I wanted. You always close your eyes to what I want. It's always what you want. Always."

"That isn't fair. How in God's name was I supposed to know what you were thinking? You didn't say anything. You knew we had to do something. We couldn't keep the house and the boat and everything, we had to do something."

"You didn't even try to get a job!"

"Rose. Don't do this now. Wait until we get home."

She slowed down. "Sorry. But, Martin, it's like that with us. You say you want to do this or that, and we do it. Period. It's always been like that with us. I never had a voice in anything."

"You never spoke out."

"You wouldn't let me! It was always decided first, then you told me. You always just assumed that if you wanted something then I would too. As if I exist only in your shadow, as if I must want what you want without fail, without question."

"Rose, I never thought that. If I made the decisions it was only because you wouldn't. I don't know how many times I've brought something up for us to talk about and decide on, only to have you too busy, or not interested, or playing helpless."

"Playing helpless? What's that supposed to mean? You mean when you tell me we're moving I should chain myself to a tree and say no? Is that how I could have a voice? What can I do when you say we're doing this and you have the tickets, the plans, the whole thing worked out from beginning to end? When have you ever said how about doing this, before you already had it all arranged?"

He was silent and she realized that she had been speeding again. She slowed down. "I didn't want children right away. But you did. Bang, children. I didn't want to move to Florida, but you had such a great job there. What a great job! Bang, we're in Florida. I might have been a teacher. Or a success in business. Or something. But no, I had to have children and stay home and cook and clean and look pretty for you and your friends."

"Rose." Martin's voice was low. He looked straight ahead. "Rose, please stop now. I didn't realize how much of this you had pent up. But not now. Or let me drive. Pull off the road."

She hit the brakes hard, frightened suddenly. Her hands were shaking. She saw the dogs in the rear view mirror. "They wouldn't let you drive," she said. "Will you light me a cigarette, please?"

He gave it to her wordlessly, staring ahead. She reached for the radio and he said, "Let me do it." He tuned in country music and she reached for it again. He changed the station to a press interview with someone from HEW.

Rose stubbed the cigarette out. "Martin, I'm frightened. We've never done that before. Not in the car anyway, not like that."

"I know," he said. He still didn't look at her.

She drove slowly and carefully the last ten minutes and neither of them spoke again until they were inside the house, the dogs on the porch.

"Why'd you bring them back?" Jeffrey asked disgustedly. He thought that dogs as big as they were should be willing to retrieve, or something.

Martin told them about the colonel and Rose went upstairs to wash her face and hands. Halfway up the stairs, she turned and called, "Martin, will you put some coffee on, please." And he answered cheerfully.

It was the dogs, she told herself in the bathroom. They had made the quarrel happen, somehow. She couldn't really remember what they had quarreled about, only that it had been ugly and dangerous. Once when she had glanced at the speedometer, it had registered eighty-five. She shivered thinking of it. It had been the dogs' fault, she knew, without being able to think how they had done it, or why, or what the argument had been about.

Annamarie had made potato salad, and they had ham with it, and baked apples with heavy cream for dessert. Throughout dinner Rose was aware of Martin's searching gaze on her, and although she smiled at him, he didn't respond with his own wide grin, but remained watchful and quiet.

After the children went to bed, Martin wanted to talk about it, but she wouldn't. "Not now," she said. "I have to think. I don't know what happened, and I have to think."

"Rose, we can't just leave it at that. You said some things I never had thought of before. I had no idea you felt left out of our decisions. I honestly believed you wanted it like that."

She put her hands over her ears. "Not now! Please, Martin, not now. I have to think."

"And then hit me with it again, that I don't talk things over with you?"

"Shut up! Can't you for the love of God just shut up?"

He stared at her and she took a deep breath, but didn't soften it at all. "Sure," he said. "For now."

That night she finally fell asleep breathing in time to the clicking of the dogs' nails on the porch floor. She dreamed. She floated downstairs with a long pale silk negligee drifting around her, like a bride of Dracula. She could see herself, a faint smile on her lips, her hair long and loose. It didn't look very much like her, but that was unimportant. The air was pleasantly cool on her skin, and she glided across the yard, beckoning to her dogs to come. There was a moon that turned everything into white and black and gray and the world now was not the same one that she had known before. Her horse was waiting for her and she floated up to mount it. Then they were flying across the fields, she on the horse, the dogs at one side. They were painfully beautiful running, their silver hair blowing; stretched out they seemed not to touch the ground at all. They looked like silver light flowing above the ground. Her horse ran easily, silently, and there was no sound at all in this new world. The field gave way to the forest where the light from the moon came down in silver shafts, aslant and gleaming. The dogs disappeared in the shadows, appeared, dazzling bright in the moonlight, only to vanish again. They ran and ran, without a sound and she had no fear of hitting anything. Her horse knew its way. They reached the end of the motionless woods, and there was a meadow sprinkled with spiderwebs that were like fine lace glistening with dew that caught the moonlight like pearls. They slowed down now. Somewhere ahead was the game that they chased. Now the dogs were fearful to her. The golden eyes gleamed and they became hunting machines. First one, then the other sniffed the still air, and then with a flicker of motion they were off again, her horse following, not able to keep up with them. They were on the trail. She saw the deer then, a magnificent buck with wide spread antlers. It saw the dogs and leaped through the air, twenty feet, thirty feet, an impossible leap executed in slow motion. But the dogs had it, and she knew it, and the buck knew it. It ran from necessity; it was the prey, they the hunters, and the ritual forced it to run for run. She stopped to watch the kill, and this was as silent as the entire hunt had been. The dogs leaped and the deer fell and presently the dogs drew away from it, bloody now, and stood silently watching her.

She woke up. She was shivering as if with fever.

* * * *

Martin took her to school, and when she got out of the car, he said, "I'll be back before you're through. I'll pick you up."

She nodded.

The dogs were on the porch when they got home that afternoon.

That night he asked her if she was ready to talk. She looked at him helplessly. "I don't know. I can't think of anything to say."

"How about what's bugging you?"

"The dogs. Nothing else."

"Not the dogs."

"That's all, Martin. They're haunting me."

"Live dogs can't haunt anyone." He picked up his book and began to make notes.

Tuesday he met her after school again. The dogs were on the porch when they got home. She didn't look at them.

On Wednesday Martin had a late class and wouldn't be home until after six. "Will you be all right?" he asked, when he dropped her off.

"Yes. Of course."

He reached for her arm, and holding it, looked at her for a moment. He let her go. "Right. See you later."

When she turned into the county road after school the dogs were there waiting for her. She felt dizzy and faint, and stopped, steadying herself with one hand on a tree. She looked back toward the school, a quarter of a mile down the highway. She shook her head. Stupid! Stupid! She started to walk, trying not to look at the golden eyes that watched her. For three nights they had shared a common dream, and she felt suddenly that they knew about it, and that was the link that bound them together. She walked too fast and began to feel winded and hot. It was as quiet on the little road as it was in the fields and woods of her dream. No wind blew, no leaves stirred, even the birds were silent. She picked up a stick, and looked at the dogs, slightly behind her, so that in order to see them she had to turn her head. They trotted silently, watching her.

Each night in the dream she got closer to the deer before the kill, and that night she was afoot, standing close enough to touch it when the dogs leaped. In her hand was a knife, and when the dogs felled the animal, she braced herself to leap also.

"No!" She sat up throwing off the covers, thrashing about frantically, moaning now. Martin caught her and held her still until she was wide awake.

"Honey, you've got to tell me. Please, Rose. Please."

"I can't," she moaned. "It's gone now. A nightmare."

He didn't believe her, but he held her and stroked her hair and made soothing noises. "I love you," he said over and over. "I love you. I love you."

And finally she relaxed and found that she was weeping. "I love you, Martin," she said, sobbing suddenly. "I do. I really do."

"I know you do," he said. "I'm glad that you know it too."

On Thursday she learned that the teacher she was subbing for was well and would return the following day. Martin picked her up after school and she told him.

"I don't want you to stay home all day with those dogs," he said. "I'll get them in the car somehow and take them to the pound. No one is going to claim them."

She shook her head. "You can't," she said.

"I can try."

But he couldn't. They refused to budge from the porch on Friday morning. Rose watched from inside the house. She hadn't slept at all during the night. She had been afraid to, and she felt doozy and heavy limbed. All night she had sat up watching television, drinking coffee, eating cheese and apples and cookies, reading. Listening to the clicking nails on the porch.

"I'll stay home, then," Martin said when they both knew that the dogs were not going to go with him. "Or, maybe you could trick them into getting in the car."

But they knew she couldn't. The dogs wouldn't move for her either. He approached them with the idea of trying to carry them, and they both growled, and the hairs on their necks bristled.

"Martin, just go. We'll have all weekend to decide what to do with them. They'll sit out there and I'll stay in here. It's all right. You'll be late."

He kissed her then, and she felt surprise. He never kissed her when he left. Only when they were going to go to bed, or were in bed already. "Stay inside. Promise?"

She nodded and watched him drive away. The dogs looked at her. "What do you want from me?" she demanded, going out to the porch, standing before them. "Just what do you want?" She took a step toward them. "_What do you want?_" She realized that the screaming voice was her own and she stopped. She was very near them now. She could touch them if she reached out. They waited for her to touch them, to stroke them. Suddenly she whirled around and ran back inside the house. They didn't try to get in this time. They knew she would be back.

She went to the kitchen feeling dull and blank and heavy. She poured coffee and sat down at the kitchen table with it, and then put her head down on her arms. Drifting, drifting, the warmth of sleep stealing over her. Suddenly she jumped up, knocking over her coffee. No! She knew she must not sleep, must not dream that dream again. She made more coffee and cleaned up the mess she had made, then washed

the dishes. She put clothes in the washer, made the beds, peeled apples to make jelly, and all the time the clicking back and forth went on. She turned on the radio, and found herself listening over the music for the noise of their nails. She turned it off again. At noon she looked at them from Juliette's room. They turned to watch her, stopping in their tracks when she lifted the curtain. The light caught in the gold eyes, making them look as if they were flashing at her. Signals flashing at her. She let the curtain fall and backed away.

Then she went to Martin's study and took down his rifle. She loaded it carefully and walked out the back door, letting it slam behind her. She didn't turn to see if they were coming. She knew they were. At the back of the barn she waited for them. She thought of how beautiful they were running, how silky and fine their hair was, alive and blowing in the wind. They came around the corner of the barn, walking quietly, very sure of her. She raised the rifle, aiming it carefully, as Martin had taught her. The large gold eyes caught the sun and flashed. She shot. The first dog dropped without a whimper. The other one was transfixed. He hadn't believed she would do it. Neither of them had believed her capable of doing it. She aimed again and shot.

She was looking into the golden eyes as she pulled the trigger. She saw the light go out in them.

She dropped the rifle and hid her face in her hands. She was shaking violently. Then she vomited repeatedly and after there was nothing left in her, she retched and heaved helplessly. Finally she staggered to the house and washed out her mouth, and washed her face and hands. She didn't look at herself in the mirror.

She put the rifle back and went out to the barn again, this time with a spade. She dug the grave big enough for them both, behind the barn where she could cover it with straw so that it wouldn't show. And when she was ready for them, she stopped. She would have to touch them after all. But the hair was just hair now, the silkiness and aliveness was gone. Just gray hair. She dragged them to the grave and covered them and hid the place with straw.

* * * *

The children asked about the dogs, and she said they had run off just as mysteriously as they had come. Jeffrey said he was glad, they had been spooky. Juliette said she dreamed of them last night, and she was sorry they were gone. Annamarie didn't comment at all, but ran to the phone to call Jennifer.

Martin didn't believe her story. But he didn't question her.

That night she told him. "I killed them."

A tremor passed over him.

He nodded.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm all right." she looked at him. "You're not surprised or shocked or disgusted? Something?"

"Not now. Maybe later, Now, nothing."

She nodded too. That was how she felt. They didn't talk about it again that night, but sat quietly, with the

television off, neither of them reading or doing anything. They went to bed early and held each other hard until they fell asleep.

The End