

## After the Fall

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

To understand the entire story, we have to start at the beginning -- and the story starts, ironically enough, with my very first memory.

I am three, a small three, especially for a boy whose male relatives are all six-two and two-hundred and thirty pounds of solid muscle. If you look at pictures from the time (and there's no reason why you should), you'd see a wisp of a child, hair so blond it's almost white, skin so white it's almost pale. Even in photographs taken in full sunlight, I tended to disappear, almost as if I were a ghost instead of an actual living boy.

The memory is mostly sensation: me on my back in the cold spring grass, a weight pressing down on my shoulder, hot drool dripping onto my face as I screamed and screamed and screamed. If I close my eyes, I can still feel the terror -- the absolute conviction that this monster on top of me, teeth barred, claws scraping my fragile skin, is going to eat me -- that the powerful jaws, so close to my face, are going to open, taking me inside with a single gulp.

If you hear the family tell it, the truth is less dramatic: our new neighbors, Sissy and Arnold Kappel, are holding a barbecue in the back yard. My father has just mixed the drinks -- his specialty even now -- when Michael Kappel, the six-year-old who resents being told to play with me, chases the family's Great Dane across the yard.

I run, and the dog thinks I'm playing. He chases me, tongue lolling, barking happily, with Michael Kappel -- already on his way to being the neighborhood bully -- scurrying nimbly behind.

I head for our house, for the safety of the back door, when the dog pounces, knocking me down. His paws are on my shoulder, his tail still wagging, as he licks my face.

The parents don't come over right away because they think my screams are cries of joy, just Peter's delight at his first introduction to a dog.

A dog, mind you, who weighs six times what I weigh; a dog who, when he stands on his hind legs, is nearly as tall as my mother was; a dog who, five years later, is put down for biting a toddler so badly that the poor kid never regains the use of her hand.

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The story continues -- college, graduate school, assistant professorships, until I finally amass enough experience to be offered tenure. Fortunately, I was offered tenure at a university I love, in Montana, a state I adore.

During those years, I had grown into my heritage, reaching six-two at sixteen, just like my grandfather, and father before me. Unlike them, however, I remained whip-thin -- "rangy," the women out West called it -- and my pale skin had become sun-baked, leathery, and tough. When I put on a cowboy hat, I looked like an icon of the American West.

Such a man needs a dog, or so the locals believed, and everyone tried to foist off their newest puppy or a particularly well-behaved hound. I smiled politely but didn't go near the animals, claiming allergies I didn't have so that I wouldn't risk showing the fear that I felt every time a dog got too close to me.

Montanans believed their dogs were their best friends, silent companions who forgave everything. It wasn't unusual to see grown men, hat pulled low over their forehead and toothpick in their mouths,

driving their four-by-fours, one arm resting on top of the steering wheel and a big dog -- generally a collie, a lab, or some other kind of hunting dog -- sitting in the passenger seat beside them.

I happened to wear cowboy boots and faded denims to class, and I had bought an old farmhouse just outside of Missoula, but I wasn't a cowboy any more than I was a Westerner. The dog attack incident had happened in Upstate New York, and my parents, still cosmopolitan socialites, wondered what made their son, with his Ivy League education and all his bright shiny promise, head off for parts unknown the moment Yale sent him his embossed Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card.

No one understood me and I thought that was great. I thought that was the way life should be.

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That June -- the month everything changed -- I attended five weddings, two in the space of a single weekend, was invited on and turned down three separate hiking adventures, and broke up with six women in six months. Spring in that part of Montana lingers damn near into July, and one cool sunny day, I decided to leave my home study, where I was examining two new statistics books, sent to me so that I could see if I wanted to upgrade the text for the fall course.

Reading about numbers was pure joy for me, but that afternoon, with the sun beating into the double-hung windows decorating my corner office, I felt restless. I decided to pull on my boots and walk the property to see what kind of presents the winter storms had left me.

I had twenty acres, much of it sporadically cultivated. I let one of my neighbors use a section as a garden, and rented out another section to the neighbor on the other side for his mother's double-wide.

The rest I wandered when I could. Over the years, I had worn a small hiking path along the property's edge. The path went in and out of a large stand of pine, and one entire area cascaded down to a creek that I shared with yet a third neighbor.

No one could understand why I didn't have a garden, or start a small tree farm, or keep horses so that this beautiful land wouldn't go to waste. But over the years, I'd come to appreciate my solitude, and having twenty acres all around me didn't feel like isolation, it felt like protection.

I put on my hiking boots and thick jacket, and started my hike.

The birds had returned full force, and the sun made them sing. I heard a variety of song as I passed in and out of the trees. The air was fresh, carrying on it a hint of pine, the crisp clearness of the creek, and a faint tang I could only identify as spring. The path was still spring-muddy, with deep pockets of rain water and mush along the edges. If I wasn't careful, I would find myself up to my ankles in muck.

No tree limbs had fallen, but in several areas, the rains and heavy spring run off had washed entire sections of the path away. I went around, over, above, whatever got me past, and as I walked, found myself thinking about the texts I'd been reading.

Statistics wasn't my favorite subject. I preferred the classes I taught to my graduate students, classes in theory and equations so pure that contemplating them made me feel more than human.

Statistics and its cousin probability were the workmanlike courses of the advanced math student, classes that attempted to define the world we lived in, not rise above it.

The professors who had written the two texts I was reading seemed to revel in that world, loving the way that numbers defined it, the way that the path defined the boundaries of my land. Unlike the path, though, the numbers didn't wash away. They formed a permanent barrier, a fence or a rock wall, something that

outlined the edges of the world and wouldn't let us see past it.

Perhaps that was what I did not like about statistics. I appreciated definition, but I liked my mind to roam free, to explore possibilities that human thought hadn't entirely considered. One of my Ph.D. students once claimed that she believed people who studied mathematics -- taking it to its outer edges -- learned to think differently than the average human. At some point, she said, the mathematician's mind reformed, becoming something greater than it had been before.

I liked the theory and had never forgotten it. She had taken her Mathematics Ph.D., taught for a year or two, and decided that wasn't enough. The last I had heard, she was attending Divinity School, continuing her quest for the great beyond.

When she left, she had given me permission to build on the theory, and I toyed with it, especially on walks like this one, where the air was so fresh, the sunlight so bright, the birds so loud, that part of me assumed this world couldn't be real. Sometimes I felt like it was a fevered dream, conjured by a delusional mind, in search of something better.

I hadn't been looking -- and I stepped on a washed out area, my foot seeking purchase where there was none.

I tumbled forward, my leg still extended. When it finally hit the earth, my ankle buckled beneath me, and I landed with a thud on my side. The breath slammed out of my body, and for a stunned moment, I felt like I had when the Great Dane stood on me, airless, frightened, about to die.

My weight forced the mud to move again, and a tiny avalanche of dirt, water, and rock carried me down to the creek. I grabbed at anything, my fingers finding mud so deep that it felt like a river.

A boulder caught me at the very edge of the creek. My back slammed into it, sending a rocketing pain up my spine.

But my breath came back, knocked into me, apparently, the way it had been knocked out. I gasped like a drowning man who had been dragged into the air.

I sat up, dizzy, drenched, caked in mud. The creek, swollen with spring run-off, passed two feet below the boulder. If I hadn't hung up here, I might have fallen in, get swept away, and drowned for real.

I'd fallen on slides before, and knew the best way out of them was to move horizontally across until I found solid ground. I wedged my hands behind me, pushing myself up, and felt a tug on my left leg.

My boot was caught between two smaller rocks, shoved in at an impossible angle by the force of my fall. I pulled, but couldn't get the boot free.

Then I leaned forward and tried to wedge it out.

That didn't work either.

My teeth were chattering from the cold, my fingers already red beneath their muddy surface. Staying out of the creek was lucky only if I could get back to the house to get warm. If I was trapped here, even on this sunny day, I could die of exposure, thanks to my wet clothes and the icy temperatures deep in the mud.

The thought made my numbing fingers more nimble, and I dug the muck out of my boot laces, struggling to untie them. I parted the eyelet, wiggled the tongue. A cool breeze found my foot and I hadn't realized until then how warm that foot felt, as if it were somewhere different than the rest of me.

I tugged again, planning to slip my foot out of the boot, then grab the boot and head across the slide on my escape back to civilization.

But my boot wasn't the thing that was caught. My ankle bones were wedged between those rocks, shoved in by the force of my fall, or perhaps by some odd movement of water and slime, and nothing I could do, it seemed, would set me free.

No one knew I had gone for a walk. No one even knew the route I normally took. This path was so isolated that the only footprints on it were mine, even though the mud had clearly been part of it since the last storm weeks before.

The neighbor's garden was on the opposite side of the property, and the double-wide was near the road, at least ten acres and a ridgeline away.

I had no appointments, nothing to do until the following week, when summer school started. I rarely answered my phone so my friends -- who were probably more accurately termed acquaintances -- wouldn't think anything amiss if I failed to talk to them for days.

Not even my parents, who called once a week just like they had done since I'd gone to college, would find my silence unusual. Sometimes I would take trips and forget to tell them I'd be out of town.

It was just me, the mud, and the creek below. And the sun, disappearing behind the Bitterroots quicker than I ever could have imagined.

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He appeared on the boulder at twilight. He looked like I always thought Puck should look, tiny, square, dark, his eyebrows slashing his forehead, his lips permanently turned up in mirth.

He had wings, thin as gauze and almost invisible in the dimming light, and as he peered down at me, I felt even colder, as if through his vision alone he could steal my soul.

He wasn't real and that didn't scare me. I accepted it as part of my experience, a delusion brought on by pain, exposure, and trauma.

"Your path brought you here," he said.

"Of course it did," I snapped. I was cold, hungry, and more than a little angry -- at myself, at him, at being forced to see imaginary creatures simply because I had not been paying attention.

"Not the path you fell from," he said. "The path you walked every day of your life."

The last thing I needed was for an hallucination to spout New Age crap at me. "You gonna get me out of here?"

"It's not my job to free you."

Because he wasn't real. But there was a slight chance that he was. An ever so slight chance, but one I had to take advantage of. "All you have to do is climb down here, help me move the rocks that are holding my ankle."

"Rocks that broke your ankle, and no, I can't."

Because I had made him up, of course. Although he shook his head slightly, as if he'd heard my thought. His voice, when he continued, sounded slightly indignant.

"They're rock outcroppings, part of the layer of rock underneath. They will not move."

"Then help me dig my way out."

"They narrow into a V. Removing the mud will not help you."

He was merely confirming what I had learned during my long afternoon, my fingernails broken and bleeding from the force of my lessons. But I didn't want to hear his answers. At least, not spoken aloud.

"Then go to the road, flag someone down. Get help."

He leaned back and smiled. A slow small smile. "Even if your people could see me, they wouldn't believe me."

Strange that I did. Perhaps it was part of the experience. Perhaps I was unconscious. I certainly accepted this fantasy creature as if he were part of a dream.

But that didn't stop me from trying to save myself. "If you don't help, I'll die here."

He shrugged, and his wings glistened. They weren't transparent as I had initially thought. They were iridescent.

"It was your choice." His voice rumbled.

"I didn't chose to walk some life path," I said. "Things happen."

"Do they?" He turned his head toward me. The movement was not human. It was insect-like; his entire head swiveled so that he could see me more clearly.

"Yes, of course they do. I didn't plan to fall today. It just happened."

"Because you forgot to watch where you walked, something people have warned you about often." He squatted, his hands dangling between his knees.

"That's an easy prediction to make," I said, not trying to hide my sarcasm. "Everyone gets warned about that."

"And most people heed. You never have. You prefer to analyze, think of statistics and numbers and equations as if that makes you different. As if that makes you special."

A chill ran through me, making my shivers grow. He was guessing. Of course he was guessing. What else would a mathematician, who had just finished reading statistics texts, be thinking about?

"You haven't heeded anyone's advice," he said. "You have gone along, ignoring everyone. And now you shall be ignored. Forgotten, even in death. They won't find you for nearly a month, you know."

That sounded likely. I supposed, if I had known the average time it took to find someone missing in the woods -- someone whose movements were known -- and then add to it the number of days it would take before someone realized that I was missing --

"But we can change that," he said.

Had he been speaking? I hadn't noticed. Concentration was becoming difficult. My shivering had grown worse. Wasn't that a sign that hypothermia had set it?

"Change what?"

"Your time of death, if you want."

I squinted at him. The sun had nearly disappeared. All I could see was his outline, dark and foreboding.

I wasn't sure if I believed him, but I wasn't sure if my belief mattered. I had a hunch he would do what he wanted to, whether I liked it or not.

"Why would you change my time of death?"

He shrugged again and I wished I could see his face. "Why not?" he said, and vanished.

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Actually, he didn't vanish. Everything vanished. The woods, the creek, the cold. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in an ancient station wagon, the radio blaring ZZTop. A piece of plastic dug into my back. The seat was ripped, even though I had no idea how I knew that.

The station wagon was parked in front of a church. The building was large and gaudy, with a white cross rising from the center like a malformed spire. The land around me was flat and the streets carved into blocks.

Even, uniform blocks, covered with houses -- all decked out in tacky-tacky and lined up in a row.

I shivered again. Or for the first time. I wasn't certain.

I had no idea how I had gotten here, or if this was yet another hallucination. I must have been pretty far gone -- and that had happened fast, hadn't it? -- in order to be unconscious and dreaming.

A woman came out of the church. She wore a gray knit dress with a flared skirt and a pair of low-slung pumps that matched the cheap purse she carried over her arm. Her brown hair swung in rhythm to the skirt, and my breath caught.

She looked familiar.

She smiled when she saw me, and then she jogged down the last part of the sidewalk. When she got to the car, she pulled the passenger door open.

"Well?" she said as she got in. "Aren't you going to ask me how it went?"

I couldn't remember her name, but I did remember her voice, telling me that mathematics reshaped the brain, that human thought could reach beyond the mundane --

"Aren't you?" she asked again, her smile now gone.

"How'd it go?" I tried to make myself sound interested.

She reached forward and shut off the radio. "I don't know how you can stand that stuff."

I couldn't. At least, not now. Or then. I knew what was going on. I'd seen it in countless movies and now my brain had chosen to recreate the plot, perhaps as a way to ease my pain in dying.

"...and are you listening?" she asked.

"Sorry."

"Peter, this is important."

I nodded.

"Are you all right?"

Obviously not. Obviously something had gone wrong here, but I wasn't about to tell her that. "Fine."

"Do you want me to drive? You look funny."

It would be better if she drove. She, at least, knew where we would be going.

I got out of the driver's side and walked around the back. The station wagon was full of junk -- toys, folded comic books, theology texts and a blanket. A child's safety seat had been installed behind the passenger seat. I hadn't noticed before.

She was waiting for me at the passenger door. She kissed me, and I felt nothing. I should have felt something, right? This was my fantasy after all.

"I didn't get it," she said and I heard the disappointment in her familiar voice. "The committee told me that I would be better off in some ivory tower, that a church had pragmatic concerns, and I was too intellectual for them. I guess they're trying to draw from outside the university neighborhood. They didn't like Pastor Wilkinson, despite his reputation as a scholar. No one warmed to him."

She sighed, squared her shoulders, then walked toward the driver's side. I was supposed to soothe her, I knew, but I was at a disadvantage -- I hadn't seen her in nearly a decade, and I couldn't remember her name.

I slipped into the passenger seat, listening to the rhythm of her speech, making an occasional "uh-huh" or "mmm" in the pauses. The irony was that I didn't even like *Twilight Zone* stories. I always thought men who dealt with the devil were dumb, and I certainly had no respect for whiners like Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life* or Nicholas Cage in *The Family Man*.

In fact, it looked like I had walked into a new version of the latter two films. A man, enjoying his single life, discovers he's isolated and finds contentment in domestic mess, a wife, some children (I glanced at the car seat behind me and shivered), and a dog.

Always a dog.

I would have wagered that Jimmy Stewart had a dog too, although I couldn't remember one. I tended to blank out dogs from movies.

"...not right," she said, "asking you to go out of state, lose your job so that I can find mine. I could teach or write a few books. And then I could stay home with the kids."

I looked at her. She had crows feet around her eyes, and gray dusted her hair. Sorrow and disappointment lined her face, but it still remained pleasant. I could get used to that face -- if I could only remember her name.

"It sounds like you're giving up," I said, because I knew that "mmm-mmm" would no longer cut it.

She turned the car onto a side street. I had no idea how she knew where she was. The houses in this subdivision -- obviously built thirty years before -- looked the same as all the others.

"No one wants a philosopher any more," she said as she turned the wheel again. She pulled into a

driveway, and stopped so suddenly that I jerked against the seatbelt. "They either want someone who is positive about who she is and what she knows or they want the same old thing, a warm loving people-person who gives hugs and canned sermons on Christmas Eve."

She opened the car door and stepped out. I stared inside the open garage. An ancient Volkswagen Rabbit hid inside, surrounded by two bright pink bicycles, with ribbons hanging off their handlebars. Matching helmets hung on the seats. Another bicycle, boy's style, built for speed, hung on the wall, next to skis that looked like they hadn't been used. A snowblower, a riding lawn mower, gardening equipment scattered along a tool bench.

It looked like she -- we? -- had been here a long time.

I unbuckled the seat belt, opened the door, and got out. The air was humid, and instantly I started to sweat. The front door opened and a dog bounded out. A sheep dog, like they use in the movies, only this one had tangled hair (no mats, though) and bows tied onto his tail.

Pink bows.

He barked as he came toward me, tail wagging, pink bows sailing in the breeze.

I pressed against the car, wanting to get back inside, but knowing there wasn't enough time.

"No!" I shouted at the creature that sent me here. "I won't do it!"

Behind the dog came two little girls, maybe six, obviously twins. They looked like my cousins had at that age, just as willowy, just as determined.

"I won't!" I shouted, not looking toward the sky because I had to keep my eye on that dog. "I'll be Ward Cleaver, but I won't have a damn dog. \_And you can't make me!\_"

\* \* \* \*

"Of course I can."

The creature sounded so reasonable, up there on the boulder. The sun had vanished completely, but a thin silver light bathed everything. The creek looked beautiful, the water reflecting the light. The water babbled as it hurried past, as if reminding me that I would have been no better off had I fallen in there.

I was so cold that I had turned numb. My clothes had caked on me, and my ankle ached.

"No sense in making you more miserable than you already are." He turned toward me, this Puck-like creature, and I realized that the silver light was coming off his skin. He was the thing that glowed. I had never seen anything like it and because this was my hallucination, I was all right with that.

I even found it slightly fascinating.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "Why did you come to me?"

He was still crouched, hands dangling between his legs. He'd clearly been holding that position for hours, and it didn't seem to bother him. His legs seemed longer than they had before -- or maybe I had just noticed them -- and his arms were short. Like a grasshopper's.

"Her name," he said, answering a question I hadn't asked and ignoring the one I had, "was Annabeth. What I want to know is how could a man as intelligent as you are miss the attraction? She is perhaps the only woman in your sphere who thinks like you do, about the larger issues, stretching her mind, and you



refused to take note."

I had noticed how she thought. I hadn't noticed much else, true enough. But she had been a student.

A student with long brown hair and wide, almond shaped eyes. A student who wore a light perfume that reminded me of summer rainstorms. A student had clutched her Philosophy of Mathematics books as if they held the secret to the universe.

It seemed a shame to marry her, force her into the 2.5 children mode, buy her a dog and a station wagon (probably because we had been unable to afford the now-obligatory mini-van), and live as if we were just like everyone else.

He hopped to the edge of the boulder, peered at me, and blinked his round eyes. They had slits in the middle of the pupil, like cat's eyes.

"So," he said, "you would have been Ward Cleaver if it weren't for the dog. Do dogs frighten you that much?"

Unbidden, the stench of the Great Dane's breath filled my nostrils and I could almost sense the drool on my face. I shuddered, deep, racking, and it had less to do with the fading chill (fading. That was bad, wasn't it?) than it did with the memory of that monstrous dog.

"I don't want one," I said stubbornly. "I never have."

"Nor have you wanted a wife or a child or any human contact at all. How strange that all is." He leaned closer, extending his neck. Something brushed my face. Feelers. Soft, translucent, even in the silver light from his skin.

"If you have magic," I said, "you can spell me out of here."

His head retracted, the feelers gone. Only the sensation of their touch remained, burning against my numbed cheeks. "You misunderstand the nature of our encounter. I give you choices. I do not make them."

"Between dying here and living there? What kind of choice is that?"

He scuttled farther from me, hunkered in the center of the boulder, and then grinned, Puck no longer. Now he was the Cheshire Cat -- all teeth and attitude.

"It's the usual choice. Most don't want anything else."

"I'm not most," I said.

"I should have known that when I realized you could see me." His smile faded. With his back foot, he reached up and scratched behind his wing. A hum, the cross between a violin and a sustained piano chord, sounded faintly in the evening air.

My cheeks were feeling flushed. In fact, I was growing warm.

"I'll have to be more creative," he said, and for a moment, I thought I was the one who had spoken.

My confusion was not good. Not good at all. I wondered if we both knew it or if there was only one of us. If there was only one, then of course we both knew the entire situation was not good, because he had to be a part of me.

But if he wasn't --

If he wasn't --

\* \* \* \*

Annabeth sat across from me, stirring a large ice coffee topped with whip cream. She was the girl I remembered, not the woman she would become. Her hair, long and brown, was tucked behind her ears, and her face was narrow -- a young face, filled with promise, none of it fulfilled.

The coffee shop smelled of roasting beans -- a sign behind her claimed that the place roasted its own -- and behind the counter, a coffee grinder roared. Conversation hummed around us -- mostly young people, wearing that season's uniform of black leather and pale make-up.

I recognized the shop. Far from campus, near the high school and the bad section of town. The kids here didn't carry books or homework. Instead, they hauled wads of money from their jacket pockets and traded tiny bags for cash.

Annabeth looked uncomfortable. Her backpack hung over her knee, as if she was afraid someone would steal the books. Overhead, Ella Fitzgerald sang Cole Porter -- the eerie song about Miss Otis, who regretted missing lunch, but didn't regret murder. I learned to love Fitzgerald in this place; I used to come alone, read a book, and spy on the parts of humanity I would never inhabit.

Even though I wasn't cold, even though I clutched a warm mug of coffee between my hands, I knew I was still sitting in the mud near my house, imagining that a creature which was half human-half insect had control of my mind.

"I've never been any place like this before," Annabeth said, and the words echoed in my memory.

We had been here before -- I had brought us here, at her request. Not that she wanted exotic coffee, but because she wanted a conversation someplace where we could be alone.

I suspected then that she had been thinking of my house or my office, a place that was both intimate and personal, but I was conscious of the fact the differences in our status. Even though I didn't want any other faculty member to overhear what she had to say, I didn't want to risk being caught inviting a female student into my home.

She looked over her shoulder. "I can't believe they're all in high school."

The other kids did look too tough to be in school. I had suspected most of them weren't. Or I remembered suspecting it.

I knew this conversation now. I had shoved it into the deepest recesses of my memory, but it was returning, with all of its despair and embarrassment (hers), and slowly dawning understanding (mine).

On that afternoon, in a place filled with Goths, Annabeth -- Ph.D. candidate and future theology student -- propositioned me.

I had turned her down.

And now the creature on the rock was giving me a second chance to accept.

"No," I said, not willing to go through the banality a second time. The small talk, the flushed moment where she spoke of her attraction, the way she had looked at me when she talked about how much she

admired my mind.

Annabeth frowned at me. "What?"

"No." I looked up, like I had wanted to do when that sheepdog was running toward me. "I'm not changing my mind. I lied. No Ward Cleaver. No marriage. Not everyone needs 2.5 kids and a dog."

Annabeth's face turned white. "I wasn't going to talk to you about marriage, I was -- "

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And then I was back in the cold. A moon had risen overhead, its white light negating some of the silver flowing from my strange companion. An occasional throb from my ankle told me that my body still existed -- although it existed in a strange half world where it was sometimes cold, mostly numb, and no longer feeling like my own.

The creek burred past, strains of Ella still echoing in my ears. I had made myself forget Annabeth because she had made me uncomfortable. That afternoon was not the best of my life.

"I already made that decision," I said, sounding peevish. I never sounded peevish, but beneath my bravado, I was scared. A night was going by, and I was wet, cold and exposed. I had no idea how much longer I had before the life leached out of me, one degree at a time. "I don't know why you thought that was creative."

The creature hadn't been looking at me although I hadn't realized it. When his head swiveled, I was startled. The front of his skull was shaped the same as the back of his skull. Only his glowing eyes -- red now that complete darkness had fallen -- marked the difference.

"No dogs, you said." His voice rasped. I hadn't noticed that before. Or perhaps I was adding details, recreating him as I slipped deeper into delirium. "So I went back to a fork on the path. Allowed you yet another choice. Which, you claim, you would not take."

"Had not taken," I said. "Will never take."

His eyes widened, glowing beacons in the darkness.

"See?" I said, the anger returning. "That's what I don't get. You wish-granters, all of you have such conservative tendencies. You seem to think alternate lifestyles are bad, that people should live one way and one way only. Don't you understand that It's a Wonderful Life is a movie about how to live with failure? Its message is to take what's offered and be content. The people who love that movie are people who fail to strive, who need some affirmation of their humdrum life."

"You have a humdrum life," the creature said.

"I have a life I like." Except for this part. The dying part. But I didn't know anyone who was looking forward to that. "I don't want a wife. I don't want to live in a suburb. I like it here."

"In the mud," he said.

I shook my head. "On my land."

"Where you'd rather die than go back and start over."

I crossed my arms, felt the swollen material of my jacket sleeves push against my chest. Some feeling was left then, but not much.

Actually, dying of exposure wasn't a bad way to go -- considering all of the other possibilities. I wasn't going to be hatched to death by one of my students, or shot by a jealous lover. I wasn't going to suffer through operation after operation trying to stem a wasting disease like cancer, and I wouldn't feel the sudden, sharp, breathless pain of a massive heart attack.

"You're being difficult," he said, and it sounded as if he were angry at me for being content with my life.

"No," I said. "You are. All I did was ask you for help out of this mud."

"I am not here to help you." He said this slowly, patiently, as if he were speaking to a particularly dumb child. "Oddly enough, this is not about you."

Then he blinked. The effect was eerie, like one of those slow motion nature videos of a reptile, watching its prey. The redness vanished for just a moment, only to reappear even more powerfully than before.

"If it's not about me," I snapped, "what is it about?"

His eyes closed again, and then his skin stopped sending its luminescent glow across the boulder. Even the moon seemed to have faded.

Blackness grew...

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...and I realized it was rain, so thick and heavy on the windshield that I couldn't see the road. The headlights illuminated drops right in front of them and little else. I slowed, not knowing where I was.

The car was old, familiar, the used BMW I bought as an indulgence in the early 1990s. I had sold it when I got tenure, splurging on a brand-new four-by-four, bright red, which suited my life in the Montana countryside.

An NPR voice -- chatty, deep and knowledgeable -- tracked mid-term election results, reciting Congressional districts state by state -- as a corner loomed ahead of me, suddenly clearer than the rest of the road.

The rain was letting up just enough to let my headlights defeat the darkness. I saw the large white lump ahead in time to swerve around it.

My back wheels skidded, and I spun, crossing lanes, circling madly, the car hydroplaning. I fought the spin, pumped the brake, and eventually, the wheels caught. I eased the car to the side of the road, and sat there, my heart beating so hard that I could barely catch my breath.

Sweat ran down my face, even though I was still unnaturally cold. My fingers looked blue in the light from the dash.

I had been through this before too. But there had been no woman beside me, no dog or children looming in my future. Just me, the car, and the deserted road -- the highway coming off of Lolo Pass. I had been to Idaho for a seminar, and I mistakenly decided to drive home instead of staying the night.

Tired, hungry, horrible weather. I had vowed, after this trip that I would be more cautious with myself and my life in the future.

Obviously that took.

I shivered, then wiped the sweat off my face. What point was the creature making now? I remembered

sitting here, remembered putting the car in gear, remembered switching to an oldies station because I needed something to match the rhythm of my pounding heart.

I knew how this night played out. I went home, slept, and woke with pulled muscles in my back. Then I went to my probabilities class to see how well they had done with the election results, not caring one way or another, and never bothering to do that lecture again.

What would one swerving car, one near miss, have to do with a slid in the mud on a spring day?

My brights were off. Sometimes I did that in heavy rains, finding the glare of the brights lessened visibility more than adding it. I flicked them on, and saw the thing in the road again, a white lump that looked like a matted rug.

I hadn't seen the first time I went through this night -- not after the spin. If I remembered correctly, I saved myself from the spin, rested a moment, and drove east to Missoula.

Instead, I felt an obligation. If I didn't move that rug, someone else might not be as lucky as I was. Someone else might slam into a tree, hit a car in the opposite lane, or tumble down the embankment into heaven knew what lay below.

It wasn't until I had gotten out of the car, pulled up the hood on my Gore-Tex, that I realized how cold I was. I shivered again, and felt the wet, even though my clothes beneath the Gore-Tex were dry. The rain had stopped, but the pine trees dripped on me, and the road was slick. I had nearly reached the carpet when I realized it wasn't a carpet at all.

It was a dog. A sheep dog. And its sides went up and down as it took shallow breaths.

No one stood near it. There wasn't a car down the embankment. The dog had been hit, and no one had done anything.

Leaving it to me.

"You son of a bitch," I muttered to the creature. I supposed I could call to him, and he would probably pull me from this past, like he had pulled me from the previous one, like he had pulled me from the alternate timeline.

But I was probably dying, just like that damn dog. My chances were nearly used up, and all of this was a figment of my imagination anyway.

Besides, this wasn't like a wife not getting a job, or failing to take a woman up on her first-ever proposition. This was a situation I hadn't seen, one I had been in and hadn't realized how very dangerous it was.

The first time this happened, if my car had come out of the spin facing west instead of east, I would have seen the dog. I would have gotten out, and I would have gone to move it off the road.

If the dog had been alive then (and what's to say it wouldn't have been?) I would have been furious, but I wouldn't have been able to leave it. Much as I hated the creatures, I couldn't let one die alone and in pain on the side of the road.

But I was terrified, even now. Even when I knew I could go back to my own muddy isolation with a single shout.

I didn't shout. Instead, I went back to the car, and got the blanket I carried for emergencies. Safety first,

something you learn on Montana roads in the winter.

Only I'd never planned to use that thick blanket to protect me from a dog bite. I'd planned to use it to stay warm if the car broke down in worse weather than this.

I was shaking violently, my fear making me queasy. I'd never volunteered for a dog bite before. That dog, in pain and dying, would probably lash out blindly, hoping to hurt whatever had hurt it.

I walked close. I made myself take deep breaths, mostly to stop the urge to beg my Puck-like hallucination to get me out of there. If I did survive, even if this were all a dream, I didn't want to know I could be the kind of man who could leave a dying dog in the middle of the road, a dog large enough that, when another car hit it, that car would probably spin out of control worse than I had.

I didn't want to be that man. I didn't want to die knowing I could be.

I swung the blanket over the dog's head and body. The animal whined, but its tail thumped, a response I hadn't expected. I slipped my hands underneath it, feeling warmth.

The dog whined again.

The air smelled of fresh rain, oil, and blood.

Who left this animal here to die? Who had been cruel enough to feel the double thud of the wheels as they drove over the body, and then just continued onward?

I knew it hadn't been me -- not even the previous time I'd lived through this. I always stopped when I hit something -- and hitting something wasn't uncommon on a country road. Usually it was mice. Once, I hit a mole and I had to use a shovel to move it off the road. And once, worst of all, it was a rabbit, skull crushed and little feet still moving.

I had used the shovel on the rabbit too, just to make sure it was dead, since there was no hope of saving it.

I supposed I could have used the shovel on the dog, but I saw no obvious injuries and, much as I feared them, dogs were something more than rabbits.

Dogs were almost human.

I lifted the dog, startled at the weight. The warmth spread along my hands. Blood, then, a serious amount. The wet fur stench nearly gagged me, bringing up memories -- the pressure of the Great Dane's paws on my shoulder -- and I banished them, sent them away as if they hadn't mattered at all.

Then I carried the sheep dog -- who didn't try to bite me -- to the car. I realized, as I struggled to open the back passenger door, that I had been crooning to the animal, talking to it as if it were a frightened child.

Ironically, or perhaps not so ironically, I knew what it felt like to be alone in the wet, knowing you're dying, and realizing that nothing you could do would save you.

No matter how much you wanted it.

No matter how much you tried.

\* \* \* \*

A dog was barking in my dreams. A deep rumbling bark with a hint of a rasp. It sounded like Pythagoras, only panicked. Why would Pythagoras panic?

I opened my eyes. Sunlight, filtering through the pines, momentarily blinded me. I raised a hand, and cold water dripped onto my face.

I'd fallen. Mud held me like a lover.

Below, I heard the creek, still filled with snowmelt, roar by. My ankle hurt. It was caught between two rocks. I looked up.

Pythagoras was peering at me from the path, his face caked with mud. His legs and long fur were caked too. He would need a bath when I got out of here.

Nothing I hated worse than bathing the dog.

And then the chill that had filled me from the moment I landed here got worse. I remembered bathing the dog. Long careful baths to ease his pain after the car accident, then regular fighting baths after he had healed. Years had gone by. Years, just the two of us. He even accompanied me to class.

But I remembered the years without him, too. Years that ended in me sliding off the path, dying of exposure here, between the rocks and the creature, like something out of Kafka, watching me from the boulder that had broken my fall.

There was no creature. Just a raspy voice still echoing in my ear. And music, a cross between a violin and a sustained piano chord, humming nearby, even though I couldn't see the source.

Pythagoras still barked, but he didn't try to come down. Had he tried before? Had he been trying to rescue me the way that I had rescued him?

\_It's not about you\_.

I looked, couldn't see the voice had come from. I'd passed out, had a strange dream, and now I was awake. Pythagoras had awakened me with his barking, and I had to get out. I had to figure out a way.

I sat up, feeling *deja vu*. I knew, before I tried, that the rocks would go beneath the surface, that when I dug in the mud, I'd find a V, narrowing as it went down, that trying to remove my boot would make no difference. I'd been through this -- and yet I hadn't.

The barking had stopped. I looked up, but the sun caught my eyes again. Still, I couldn't see Pythagoras up there. Maybe he had found a way down the path. Maybe with his combined strength and mine, we could pull me out of this mess.

It wasn't right to save him like that so that he'd have to find yet another owner, one he'd have to train all over again.

The dreams had been odd, though. Not just the creature. But the woman -- Annabeth? Amazing that I would remember one student out of hundreds, the one I'd found mentally fascinating, who'd been the only one I'd ever allowed to proposition me.

Pythagoras had been in one of those dreams as well. Running toward me, with children following him. Apparently, even in that alternate life, I had saved him.

The creature gave me the chance not to, when he'd sent me back to that coffee shop, allowing me to try

all over again.

\_You have to ask yourself: how many of those stories -- those traditional stories you claim to hate -- have dogs?\_

I squinted. Was there a shape on the boulder? I couldn't quite tell. Something iridescent flashed before my eyes -- a dragonfly wing? A splash of creek water in the sun? -- and then it was gone.

"I don't think Jimmy Stewart got a dog," I said to the voice. "Zuzu's petals, but not a dog."

"Peter?"

I squinted again, but saw nothing. Not even the iridescence from before.

"Peter!"

I looked up. My neighbor stood there, Pythagoras at his side.

"Jesus, Pete, let me get a rope."

"My ankle's wedged," I said, feeling relief. Someone human. Someone real.

"This is going to take more than me, then." My neighbor. So practical. One of the real Montanans, crusty and strong. Not just someone who looked the part. "I'm going to get help. You stay, Pythag."

My dog looked at him, then looked at me, and started barking all over again.

"Christ!" My neighbor said, voice fading. "That dog could wake the dead."

And probably had. No one could ignore Pythagoras for long. The students never had. My friends couldn't. Hell, half of them became my friends because he led them to me, as if he felt we'd be a good match.

He was rarely wrong.

He sat, and looked down at me, like that Great Dane had so many years ago. Only Pythagoras would never hurt me. Couldn't really.

The Dane might have, but that wouldn't have been his fault. That would have been caused by Michael Kappel, Neighborhood Bully, or the parents that created him. People who didn't know how to treat an animal, let alone a child.

The fact that that dog had to be destroyed wasn't the Dane's fault. It was theirs, for treating him wrong.

Pythagoras had taught me that too.

"It's okay," I said to him. "They're going to get me out."

He glanced over his shoulder, as if to say if they didn't, he'd find them, he'd find someone, he'd make sure I was safe.

I leaned against the boulder, conserving my warmth. And, after what seemed like a moment -- even though it had to have been much longer -- there were voices on the trailhead, followed by my dog's happiest, most welcoming bark.

\* \* \* \*



I still walk with a limp. The ankle had been crushed, the bone only shards. That, the doctors proclaimed, was how I got wedged into such a narrow space.

Even if I had been able to get out, they weren't sure I would have made it up the hill. The land was fragile, slides common. There were two when my neighbor tried to rescue me -- fortunately none of them serious.

But it could have been. Everyone impressed upon me how serious it could have been if Pythagoras had fallen with me, or if he hadn't had barked incessantly, drawing all that attention.

As if I didn't already know. The dreams -- the creature -- all seemed so real, although everyone assured me they couldn't have been. Fever dreams from the pain, from the cold, from the exposure.

It had been spring, yes. June, even. But not warm. Dangerous, as those of us who live in the mountains know.

Still, I had convinced myself they were right -- my friends, the doctors, even Pythagoras, who listened to those conversations and looked at me with a hurt expression, as if he thought I wanted him out of my life.

I didn't. I just could remember a life with him and a life without him. Not only a life before him -- I could remember that too -- but a life in which my car, after spinning, faced east, and I never realized that the thing in the middle of the road had been a dog, not just some vague, ruglike shape.

Funny how we both would have ended up the same way. Dead from our injuries or exposure or both.

Three weeks ago, I received a new text in the mail. The volume was slim, the binding simple, the pages thick and smooth.

Mathematics and Thought by Annabeth Lillys, recommended for Philosophy of Mathematics courses.

I read her bio first. Now teaching courses on the brain at Harvard, Lillys had gotten her Ph.D. in mathematics at Montana. She had gone on to study theology and biology, settling on sciences which focused on the structure of the mind.

The nature of thought.

Just like she used to talk about.

The book was fascinating, but a bit above the coursework I taught. Annabeth postulated that thought patterns could change the brain itself -- how thinkers who focused on theory seemed to have a capacity for seeing things that were beyond the average human ken.

The link between genius and madness, she claimed, wasn't that geniuses were close to being insane. It was that they saw dimensions inaccessible to the rest of us.

Dimensions where creatures who looked like Puck if he had been part grasshopper played music when they scratched behind their wing, and smiled like the Cheshire Cat when they forced recalcitrant humans to live up to their responsibilities toward the animals they had domesticated so long ago.

At least, that's my theory now. My theory as of this afternoon, when I found a box of photographs beneath the eaves of my house, photographs of a four-by-four truck, bright red, one I never bought. One I couldn't afford after all the vet bills from saving Pythagoras's life.

The truck wasn't in just one or two. It was in a lot of those pictures, taken over years. The shiny red paint

became dull, mud-splattered, and dented as time went on.

And I was skinnier in those photographs, as if there were times when I got so absorbed in thought that I forgot to eat. I looked like a pale ghost of my current self, a man who existed half in this life and half out of it.

A man who might have found a partially open door to another dimension and tumbled, Alice-like, toward the rabbit hole.

I am still not Ward Cleaver material. In the years since the fall, I have had more opportunities to marry and I have avoided them all. I like being childless. I don't believe in the suburban dream, and I see no point in living in a house that looks like all the others on the block, without a creek or a mountain in sight.

I will never have two-point-five children, but I know now that I will always have a dog.

With the help of friends, I've rebuilt the path. I've walked it maybe a hundred times since my fall. And even though I enjoy the hikes, I've never achieved the fugue state of my memory -- my pre-Pythagoras memory, the one others claim is a dream.

It's impossible to get lost in thought with a dog beside you, snuffling the ground, reading messages in the leaves, leaving his own on tree trunks. Impossible to think of equations and higher numbers with a creature who finds joy in a chill wind, who knows -- perhaps better than you do -- how close he came to death, and how very happy he is to be alive.

I know I am living a different life from the one I started in. I suspect that the man I had been died that afternoon, propped against a boulder, near a dangerously swollen creek.

But I never discuss it any more. I'm not sure if it matters whether that death was real or metaphorical; the result is the same.

I am solidly here now, a man whose presence will be missed if he disappears again. A man with contacts, friends, and a dog. A man with a life.

The events of that afternoon may not have been about me, but they changed me -- and the change, I like to believe, was my choice.

It still is.

-- END --