

Animal Magnetism by Albert E. Cowdrey

This story arrived in our offices about a week before Katrina arrived in New Orleans (and it was much more welcome, as you'd expect). After the hurricane moved on, Mr. Cowdrey was out of contact for a few weeks. His first post-Katrina communique said, "Thank goodness Trixie got out of the Ninth Ward in time!" Which is a good lead-in for your editor to salute all the animal rescue workers who ventured into New Orleans after the hurricane, and also to salute the many people who adopted homeless animals after Katrina. Let's hope the rescue teams didn't have to contend with any of the problems that Henry Greene faces...

When Henry Greene's live-in lover moved out, he called his sister Marylou, a syndicated advice columnist, to find out what to do next.

"I'm so sorry, Hen," she said, when he told her. "I always figured you and Clem were, like, permanent. I mean, you guys almost rhymed."

After four husbands Marylou knew a lot about splitting up. If she had cared to hyphenate her name, it would have been Greene-Marx-Allen-Gambino-Cosmas. For professional purposes, she was just Ask Marylou; she was still wondering what to call herself in private life.

"I'm having a rough time," said Henry, when the commiserations had petered out. "I don't know how to live alone anymore, and I'm afraid to go looking for another guy because I'm still in denial that Clem really is gone for good."

"It's too soon," she told him. "Don't rush things. It takes the best part of a year to get over a breakup. It's like a little death. In God's good time you'll start dating again."

"How do I get along till then? The house is so empty it scares me. I've forgotten how to sleep alone--keep waking up, wondering why I don't hear anybody breathing except me. This morning I found one of Clem's socks in the back of a drawer and started crying."

"Get a dog," Marylou commanded. "Go down to Japonica Street and get a nice dog from the SPCA. You'll be saving its life and at the same time you'll have a companion to tide you over. Get a female," she added. "They're so much less trouble than males."

"What, another bitch? And here I've been living with one for fifteen years?"

"See, your sense of humor's coming back already. That's a good sign, Hen. If you can laugh, you can live."

"You're a wise person, Marylou," said Henry soberly.

* * * *

At the Camelot Oaks office of Greene & Gelhorn, Certified Public Accountants, March Madness was well underway--not the basketball frenzy, but the other and worse one caused by the income-tax deadline looming on the horizon.

Henry had to promise to take two of his partner's clients in order to palm off one of his own. Then he jumped into his Honda, swung onto I-10 and crossed half the sprawl of New Orleans to the Lower Ninth Ward, where the SPCA was located.

The forty-minute journey made him feel like Katharine Hepburn penetrating the heart of darkness in the *African Queen*. A confirmed suburbanite, he was accustomed to Camelot Oaks' clipped lawns, cobalt pools, tract houses, barbecue pits, baroque bird feeders, and its shopping center with hangar-like stores and parking lot the size of the Utah Salt Flats. Danger for him meant his evening jog around a seepage

pond called Lancelot Lake, pursued by ill-tempered Canada geese and sometimes by teens in the poison-pimple stage who roared past in SUVs, yelling, "*Faggot!*"

The shining shores of the Industrial Canal belonged to another planet--a blue-collar multi-hued urban landscape of crowded cottages, teeming docks, gunfire at night, body bags in the morning. It even had its own language, as Henry discovered when he explained to a kindly lady behind the shelter's front desk that he wanted an adult housebroken female not given to excessive barking, biting, or excavating in the garden.

"Sound to me like a poifeck description of Trixie," she replied. "She been spaded too awreddy, her."

Henry said he'd look, and a boy fetched from the kennels a smiling blue-eyed bitch with a brown coat, a white widow's peak, and a goodly dash of Australian shepherd in her family tree.

Henry and the dog exchanged caresses. Trixie was the first to make her mind up, and sat down on his left foot to make sure he wouldn't get away.

"She's really nice," he muttered, wiping a warm glaze of spit off his chin. "How'd you get her? Was she lost, strayed, stolen?"

"Honey, all I know is somebody found her wanderin' and called us."

"Then how'd you know her name?"

The kindly lady looked baffled. "I dunno. Somehow I just looked at her and thought, Trixie. So I said, 'Trixie?' And she come prancin'."

"First dog I ever had that named herself," he muttered, and after paying for fees and spaying, left the SPCA leading his new housemate on a plastic leash.

* * * *

At the Camelot Oaks shopping center, he filled the back of his car with supplies from Petco and dropped Trixie off at the local vet's for a checkup.

Shamus O'Neill, DVM, was a bulky sandy-haired man in a starched white coat. Trixie took to him at once as he scratched her ears, patted her head, and said with apparent sincerity, "She'll be a special dog." That evening after work Henry picked her up and took her six blocks to his house on Morgan la Fay Court with a clean bill of health and a receipted bill for ninety-five dollars in his pocket.

He'd had dogs in his life before--a placid mongrel, Grits; a proud Golden called Royal; a neurotic cockapoo named Freud; and a large aggressive dachshund, Orlando Furioso. In fact he'd never have gone dogless, except for his ex-lover. Orlando had been ruling the roost when Clem came along, bearing a thick menu of more or less psychosomatic ills, including sinuses that closed up completely in the presence of animal dander and left him talking like Donald Duck.

"Either the dog goes or I do," he quacked, with all the arrogance of an otherwise useless human being who gave, and knew he gave, Olympic-class head.

Henry temporized, installing a plastic Dogloo in the yard so that Orlando could sleep outside. But dogs raised indoors do not go gently into that good night. At the first opportunity, Orlando sneaked back inside, and when Clem tried to oust him the Furious One lived up to his name.

"Well, you know, dachshunds originally were bred for hunting," said Henry, while watching Clem get nine stitches in the ER at Ochsner Foundation Clinic.

"They were badger hounds," he added, as if that made the operation any more agreeable.

Marylou had to take Orlando into her opulent home at Beau Chne, across Lake Pontchartrain. They adapted well to each other, and in fact she had a longer and more satisfying relationship with him than with Marx, Allen, Gambino, or Cosmas. After a ridiculously long life (twenty years), Orlando got cancer and had to be put down; his last act this side of eternity was to snap feebly at the vet administering the lethal injection. Marylou had him cremated, and kept his ashes on her living-room mantel in a red terracotta urn inscribed *Mon Ami Toujours*.

With Clem now out of the picture, Henry installed Trixie in a comfortable dog bed next to his own four-poster. He instructed her to stay in it all night, and she obeyed very nicely as long as he was awake. But about four o'clock the next morning, he woke to find something warm curled up against his spine, and the heat and gentle pressure gave such comfort to his lumbar vertebrae that he thought, "Well, just this once."

He went back to sleep, and slept profoundly until half an hour past his usual get-up time. When he rose at last, Trixie was back in her own bed. After that they played the same little domestic drama every night; she pretended to spend the whole night in the dog bed, and he pretended not to notice that she didn't.

So began the Honeymoon Period of their lives together. Henry was a sentimental type, and Trixie played him like a trout. Soon he was boring his partner Morris Gelhorn--a large, glum man whose many chins and stomachs gave him the look of a semi-deflated blimp--with accounts of her unqualified love, awarded for nothing more than a bowl of dry dog chow every day.

"And shelter and shots and license and medical care and so on," grunted Gelhorn, who had an idle, loutish late-teen son at home and naturally regarded all living creatures as ungrateful. Henry didn't agree. When he came home after a solid day of March Madness, and Trixie placed a paw on his knee and rolled her blue eyes at him, he reflected that in all their fifteen years together Clem never had looked half so loving, so quietly ecstatic, except maybe on those occasions when he was face down, and Henry couldn't check his expression.

* * * *

Of course honeymoons, including interspecies honeymoons, don't last forever.

Henry was working longer and longer hours, and the only time Trixie had company was Wednesday, when his Honduran maid took the doorkey from under a flowerpot and spent a few hours pursuing a damp mop, watching the Spanish-language TV channel, and using his phone to gossip with her relatives in Tegucigalpa.

Besides being alone too much, Trixie lacked exercise. Like any shepherd-type dog, bred for chivvying sheep and harrying Herefords, she liked to run and run and run, while Henry increasingly was unable to find time even to trot with her around Lancelot Lake and be hissed at by the geese.

Out of excess energy or simple boredom she demolished a whole set of rattan porch furniture, comprising two armchairs, one rocking chair, and a small pedestal table. Henry came home to find her seated amid the wreckage, wagging her tail and looking at him with an expression that said more clearly than words, "So whatchoo expect me to do all day when you're off someplace having fun, hah?"

She developed an obsession with squirrels--there was something about the way they performed acrobatics that drove her a little mad; while they soared overhead she whined and danced and pranced and flattened Henry's bed of walking iris down below. One evening he discovered that a squirrel had misjudged its leap; Trixie was eating it, and when he tried to take away the sodden remnants, she growled and bared her teeth at him. Then she consumed the whole animal, including the big fluffy tail, and

licked her chops.

Next day he risked Gelhorn's anger and left the office long enough to take Trixie back to Dr. O'Neill for a checkup. The vet reminded him that his roommate bore the genes of a hunter-scavenger ("sort of like *T. Rex*," he said) and that millions of years of evolution were not to be undone by mere human squeamishness.

"I know all that," Henry protested. "I was worried about her digesting the fur and skull and teeth and whatnot."

"The pH in a dog's stomach is incredibly low," said O'Neill, scratching Trixie's ears while she looked blissful. He told stories about dogs of his professional acquaintance who had eaten, without apparent harm, a pair of deer antlers, ten pounds of walnuts in their shells, a three-foot-by-five-foot hooked rug, and a sack of chemical fertilizer. Then he sent Henry and Trixie home.

"So how you like living with a girl for a change?" asked Marylou some three weeks into Henry's new domestic arrangement.

They were dining at Emeril's Delmonico and both were deep in their crab-and-crawfish appetizers.

"She's sure an improvement on Clem," he replied, adding in his own mind, *except...* And having secret thoughts of Clem's one undoubted talent.

At least he thought his thoughts were secret. As far as Marylou was concerned, they might as well have been written in italics on the wine card in the middle of the table.

"Try not to get all obsessive about sex," she advised, pausing between forkfuls. "I know you're used to having it and it's hard to do without, but when you get right down to brass tacks it's nothing but a lot of screwing around. What you need is to find yourself a nice guy you can relate to, instead of a narcissistic dumdum like Clem."

"I thought you liked Clem. So did Clem."

"Hen, Honey, I lied."

While they were waiting for the entree, she added, "When you think you've found somebody, bring him home and watch how Trixie reacts to him. Dogs've been studying human character for a long time and even if they can't talk, they always say exactly what they think."

"You mean if she bites him, I should ditch him."

"That's what Orlando tried to tell you," she said.

* * * *

In addition to her destruction of squirrels and porch furniture, Henry decided that he also disliked Trixie's name, which struck him as trashy, banal, and uninspired.

He believed she could be persuaded to adopt another, provided it sounded somewhat like the old one. He tried Tess, Trish, Treena, Toni, and Thais, but Trixie would have nothing to do with any of them. Maybe she *had* named herself. When Henry called her by one of these counterfeits, she either ignored him completely or else gave him a cold blue look, as much to say, "So who're you, anyway--Herbie? Huey? What?"

One night, going on a month after he got her, Henry let her into the yard one last time before bed. She

sniffed, peed, ran around, peed, growled at something invisible under the azaleas, barked at the moon, peed, and peed.

"Come on in, Thais," Henry mumbled.

He was tired, really tired. March had finally died of exhaustion, almost taking him with it. Henry's work that day had begun at seven a.m. cleaning up yesterday's business, and had ground to a halt just after nine p.m., when the last client recovered sufficiently from sticker shock to write a check to Greene & Gelhorn, take his completed 1040s, 1099s, 8829s, 6251s, and Schedules A through Z, and go home for a stiff drink.

Sourly Henry viewed the beauty of nature. The night was lovely. The almost-full moon glowed through an iridescent veil of thin high clouds; lawns were already growing and the smell of cut grass hung in the air; in the garden, angel's-trumpet and sweet olive wove garlands of scent.

Meanwhile Henry's eyes burned, his carpal tunnel syndrome ached, his guts were still protesting the fast food he'd eaten at his desk for lunch and dinner, his butt was numb from too much sitting, he was constipated--and he still had two weeks to go before April 15th.

"Come on in, goddamn you! Trixie!"

At the name she showed up, and followed him obediently upstairs. While he was brushing his teeth and swallowing a sleeping pill, a gulp of antacid, a baby aspirin to prevent heart attacks, a laxative, and a stool softener, she was getting comfortable in her bed. When he climbed into his, she was in the dead-roach position, flat on her back, front paws curled up.

"Sure, *you* can sleep," he said bitterly. "I'll probably lie here staring at the ceiling until dawn"--and conked out almost on the word. He half-awoke one time. Green numerals on his clock radio said 4:28. A warm, comforting body was lodged against his lumbar vertebrae. Dream-logged, he murmured, "Clem?"

"No, Trixie," said a plangent voice that was new to his subconscious mind.

Henry went back to sleep. When he got up in the morning--rather hurriedly, for the medicine was working--she was snoring in her dog bed.

Half an hour later, shaved and showered and lighter in mind and body, he retrieved his newspaper where it lay in a clump of wild violets. The sun exhaled a golden mist; shining droplets of dew trembled on the needle-sharp tips of a Spanish Dagger plant. Flocks of small green parrots flew overhead, screeching ecstatically, like roadies at a rock concert. The whole world was a fat bud, swollen and bursting with joy.

Henry unfolded the paper. The date was April 1. March Madness was over, but April Daze--which were worse--had begun.

The morning, after conning him, turned to ashes. Tess-Trish-Toni-Treena-Thais came bounding up and licked his hand.

"It's still income-tax season, and you're still Trixie, aren't you?" he asked sourly.

She gave him a big grin. The answer was obvious.

* * * *

That night Henry arrived home under a brilliant full moon. His own sharp-edged shadow accompanied him from his carport to the side gate and up the garden walk.

A timer had switched on lights inside. That and Trixie were supposed to protect his house when he was away. Speaking of Trixie, where was she?

He called and whistled, but the moonlight remained vacant and nothing seemed to inhabit the pitch-black shadows but amorous tree frogs and chirruping bugs. Henry was standing a few feet from the porch, blinking tired eyes, when a movement in a lighted window caught his attention.

A human figure passed before the light. Henry's feet and hands both turned cold, and he began to back away. His cell phone was in the car; call 911, he thought, report a break-in, wait for the cops. Then his front door opened and a young woman emerged, wearing his bathrobe.

"Wow, Henry," she said, "I dunno whatchoo do all day, but you sure as hell must do a lot of it."

"Who," he said, "who--who--"

"I got the key from under the flowerpot. C'mon in. I figured you'd be bushed, so I heated you up a can of toitle zoop and made some hot garlic bread and opened a beer."

Baffled, he allowed her to usher him into his own living room. Close up she was small and intense looking, with candid blue eyes that he'd seen someplace before. She had thick brown hair with a streak of white that made him feel oddly that it hadn't turned white, it had just been that way from birth.

"Who are you?" he finally managed to ask.

"Trixie," she said. "I'da told you bout me before to, like, cushion the shock. Only I couldn. See, I'm a werewoman. I change when the moon is full. Sometimes it lasts only a few hours, sometimes a night, and sometimes two if the lunar influence is really really intense. Then I go back to being the usual me. Throughout the whole cycle, I keep my blue eyes." She batted them at him to underline her claim. And viewing her small pointed face, her hair, her smile, her glistening white teeth, inhaling her clean scent of dog soap, Henry found himself--against all odds--suspending disbelief.

"Wow!" he breathed. "That's practically incredible."

"Sugar, we live in a practically incredible universe, or haven't you noticed?"

While he ate and drank, Trixie sat across the table from him and told him about herself. He learned that she was four years old and that her transformations had begun when she was still a puppy. At first the changes had been partial, and lasted only fifteen to twenty minutes.

"Hooee, I'm glad I didn' hafta look at me when I was in between," she said. "I really gotta give Mama credit. Lotsa bitches woulda figured me for an intruder and attacked, you know. But she just thought I must be sick or something, and she'd lick me until I went back to being all dog."

"Any idea how you got like this?"

"Only thing I can figure, when Mama was pregnant she musta got bit by a were-sump'm. She was a feisty little mutt, her. Always figured she could bite the males and get away with it. Only some of 'em wasn't gentlemen, you know, and bit back."

She asked Henry what he did all day long, but when he tried to explain she wanted to know what "money" meant. If she didn't grasp that, how could he explain taxation?

He finally said that he had to guard the premises of a man who, in return, gave them the food they ate. Trixie was impressed.

"Sugar, I didn't have no idea it took you all day long and part of the night to get me dog chow. You finished your din? Well then, come on upstairs and lay down and I'll rub your back for you. I mean, you rubbed mine often enough."

"Uh, Trixie, I don't want to get us off on the wrong foot. I don't know how to explain this, but I'm--uh--"

"You're queer?"

"Well ... yeah."

"See this?" she asked, tapping one nostril. "The nose knows. I wasn't in this house ten seconds before I knew another guy had been living here--for a long time, too. And," she added, "I wouldn'ta liked him. He smelled like a cat."

"Maybe that's what Orlando thought," Henry reflected.

"Now come on, lemme help you get comfy, so you can sleep good and go back out tomorra and oin us more dog chow and stuff. And don't worry about sex. Since they spaded me--"

"Spayed," he corrected her.

"Yeah, since they spaded me I wouldn't pay no attention even if you was a big, beautiful Eytalian mastiff, which to be honest you ain't."

About four the next morning, Henry awoke with Trixie curled up against his back. This time she was under the covers, rather than on top of them. He put one hand behind him and felt a nap of stiff fur.

For a few minutes he lay pondering the question of whether she'd changed back to a dog, or whether--as he suspected--his plainly incredible memories of last night merely meant that he'd been driven insane by the 2005 income-tax season.

"Whatever," he muttered, and being very tired soon fell back asleep. When he woke again, Trixie was agitating to be let out for her morning run, as doggy a dog as he'd ever seen.

"So I've gone crazy," he muttered. "How logical." And headed for the shower to begin another frantic day.

* * * *

That evening the sky clouded up, rain fell, and the moon was hidden.

For a while before bed Henry sat in his favorite recliner, listening to the rain and wearily sipping a glass of Syrah, while Trixie lay at his feet, drowsing and occasionally waking to thump her tail on the floor.

"As soon as I can take some time off," he told her, "I'll find a good therapist and tell him about my hallucinations. Christ, I hope imagining you're a girl doesn't mean I'm going straight after all these years. I got troubles enough without ending up like Morris or Marylou."

The day had not been a good one, even as April Daze went. Gelhorn had been in a foul temper; after months of fighting with his handsome, sullen son Mark--and his wife, who usually took Mark's side--he'd shipped the youth off to a famous wilderness school, more in order to get rid of him than from any hope that backpacking and whitewater rafting would turn him into a tolerable human being.

"So he's Westward Bound," he concluded. "I just hope he keeps on going."

Henry had his own problems. While brooding yet again over what had gone wrong between him and

Clem, he'd fed his office computer some data with a decimal point misplaced. It spat out a return showing that the client owed the IRS \$11,673,922.98, and Henry signed as Preparer without noticing. Only the sharp eye of his secretary had prevented the return from being mailed out.

He'd been left considerably shaken: the client, he knew, had an aneurysm, and if he'd seen the return would probably have died on the spot.

Certified Public Accountants were not supposed to make errors, at least not of such a grotesque magnitude. They were also not supposed to see werewomen. Henry had been planning to go to Tahiti after the fifteenth to escape from his memories, relax on the beach, practice his French and check out the gay life of Polynesia, if any. Instead he'd be lying on the couch of some Dr. Krankheit, getting shrunk.

Goddamn.

He stroked Trixie's head, and she laid her chin beside her paw on his knee, her blue eyes filled with the kind of love only animals know how to give. Henry reflected that if he forgot his baby aspirin tonight and consequently dropped dead tomorrow, she'd howl and moan and refuse to eat for a few days, then find another master and forget him.

That was how God or whoever had intended love to be--intense and simple and necessarily transient. Then why did his mind keep drifting back at the most inopportune moments to the narcissistic dum dum?

"Where did we go wrong?" he asked her, meaning by *we* the human species.

Maybe that was why he was hallucinating. Wrapped up hopelessly in the human tangle, he was envying Trixie her dog's life. But in that case, instead of imagining Trixie was human, why didn't he hallucinate himself as a dog?

"Woof," he said experimentally.

Trixie pricked up her ears and gave him a look that said clearly, "You nuts or sump'm?"

"Almost certainly," he said, tossed off his wine, and headed upstairs to bed, Trixie's toenails clicking on the steps behind him.

* * * *

The moon was new. Silver-fringed clouds parted like theater curtains in the aftermath of an April shower. Down below, all the world throbbed with life--frogs mating in ditches, clover blossoms exploding across dark, wet, verdant lawns like firecrackers at a Chinese New Year celebration.

Henry sat huddled in his recliner. He had a headache, a new and painful hemorrhoid, heartburn, sweating palms, conjunctivitis, cold feet, and a conviction of impending disaster. A red eye was winking at him, but he paid no attention.

"Still a week to go," he muttered to Trixie, who was gnawing gently on one of his shoes. "I'm not gonna make it this time. I'm too old for this. I'm sure I have a heart condition. AIDS. Erosive esophagitis. *Something.*"

It was ten past midnight and he'd just gotten home. How easy it was, he reflected, to take on new clients in the dull days of summer, forgetting you'd have to do their taxes the following spring.

He finally noticed the winking red eye. Red-eyed himself, he stared at it for almost five minutes before realizing that his phone had a message for him.

"Hi, Honey!" exploded Marylou's overloud voice. His heart sank another notch. He knew that tone; his sister was about to fix him up with a guy she'd just met, who was exactly right for him.

"Didn't want to bother you at work, and your cellphone was turned off. So listen, Hen. I just met the most wonderful young man. He's a Fellow of the Academy of Interior Design, and he's redoing my house, and he's loose at the moment. So why don't you drive over on Wednesday for dinner, and--"

Henry's eyes traveled over the room in which he sat. His maid's idea of cleaning was to run a damp mop just to the edge of the furniture, for fear of disturbing the dust bunnies underneath. The sofa's cushions sagged from bygone sexual adventures, of which busted springs were the only memorial. The rug had been gnawed years ago by Orlando, more recently by Trixie. Moths were batting around inside the tattered shade of an old brass lamp for which Henry felt great though obscure affection.

Into this dump--so dearly loved, every grungy square foot of it--he was supposed to bring some interior decorator with a queer eye for the queer guy?

He hit the delete button, dialed Marylou's number, and told her machine, "Thanks for thinking of me, but right now I'm worked to death, and after the fifteenth I'll be, uh, traveling. Love you. Bye."

After that he put his face in his hands. He wished he was anywhere else. He wished he was anybody else. He wished Morris Gelhorn had sent him to Westward Bound instead of Mark. He wished that he, too, could just go and keep on going.

A paw was laid on his knee, and he raised his burning eyes and looked into Trixie's concerned blue ones. Contrary to that night when he'd gone looney, she couldn't talk, but dogs and masters were supposed to develop a kind of telepathic rapport over time, weren't they?

Was that why he seemed to hear--not passing through his ears but distilling itself inside his brain--echoes of a human voice? At first blurred, then clearer and clearer, the unmistakable plangent music of a Lower Ninth Ward accent, telling him:

"Don'tchoo worry, Hon. I'ma fix you up good, and it won't be with no dismal little jerk with swatches, neither."

* * * *

At last April 15th came and, incredibly, went.

The coda of the tax year was Henry's and Morris's secretaries making a midnight run to the post office, where federal employees on overtime were frantically postmarking the last-minute avalanche of returns.

In the office, the fax machines cooled down. The coffeemaker was unplugged. The computers' Cyclops eyes went blank. On the vast darkness of the shopping center's parking lot, with its puddles of light where toads newly roused from hibernation waited, hoping to snag a moth, Morris Gelhorn slowly inserted his large gut behind the wheel of his green Infiniti and drove away toward his unhappy home.

Henry turned out the office lights, put on the security system, and walked the six blocks to his own home. A car careened by, its occupants yelling, "*Faggot!*" At Lancelot Lake a big gander woke long enough to approach with neck extended, hissing like an anaconda. Henry hardly noticed; his feet slapped the pavements nervelessly, like Bozo's in size-eighteen clown shoes.

He spent the next week with his phones unplugged, mostly sleeping. Then he dragged out his gym bag, packed some jeans, T-shirts, and his bathing suit. Plus a handful of condoms and a tube of K-Y Jelly because, with life returning, lust revived and hope sprang eternal.

He tossed Trixie into the Honda's back seat, they hit the I-10 and escaped the city and drove down an endless corridor of pines to an out-of-the-way motel, a gay-friendly enclave on Mississippi's Redneck Riviera where he hid out from time to time. There they spent two days sunning, jogging up and down the beach, splashing in the chilly salt water, and watching sunsets of molten copper quench themselves someplace off Yucatan.

The third morning, Henry exited his room to find another vacationer, a neatly bearded guy with thick glasses, playing with Trixie. She waltzed back and forth between them, almost forcing the introduction: *Hi, I'm Henry. Hi, I'm Jim.*

During the course of the day they got chummy, and hooked up for the night. But Jim was headed to Florida, and Henry had a home and job to go back to, so that was that, except for promises both knew would not be kept. Nevertheless, it was a relaxed and rehumanized Henry Greene who tooled home along the interstate with Trixie's head sticking out of the car, tongue lolling and eyes half-closed in canine bliss.

Back at Morgan la Fay Court he fired up his laptop and began scrolling down a seemingly endless array of shrinks and therapists approved by his medical plan, baffled about which one to choose. He was still thinking it over when night fell, a full moon rose in a perfect sky, and Trixie changed again.

He wouldn't need psychotherapy after all. The werewoman was truly, incomprehensibly real.

* * * *

She wouldn't let him watch her transform--as her voice told him from behind the closed bathroom door, "It's just too weird, Sugar, y'unnerstand what I'm sayin'?"

But after she'd had a hot shower and donned a robe, she let him into the steamy chamber. And there she was--the same small, neat female he remembered from the last time, with a white streak in her coarse, damp brown hair. She sat on the toilet lid while he used his hair drier, comb, and brush to complete her coiffure, and despite her species-driven hostility to cats, she almost purred with pleasure.

"Wow, it's like havin' a big sister, you know?" she enthused.

She joined Henry for a late supper, and he made one of his specialties, a kind of veal scaloppini with sage and heavy cream. After tasting it, Trixie told him, "You gotta noive, givin' me Alpo when you eat like this!"

Drowsy and replete, they were cuddled up in bed when Trixie murmured dreamily, "So, you still wanna guy? I mean, long term, like?"

"I guess so," he said. "Yeah, I do. Sex is great, but I also have this, you know, weird need for love."

"Okay, then," she told him. "Tomorra we go shopping."

"Shopping?"

"Yeah, for sump'm for me to wear when I'm a girl--sump'm nice, okay? This here's my chance to get me a nice new coat. Meantime I'm a shop for a guy for you. Nighty-night."

At ten a.m. he drove her to the shopping center, and while she waited, ears pricked and fangs ready to bite anybody who might try to jack the car, Henry embarrassed himself in a shop called Guinevere's by buying her jeans, shirts, bras, Nikes, pantyhose and thongs.

The saleslady asked him pointedly if he liked *La Cage aux Folles*, and when he said not much, she

murmured, "I guess it ain't authentic, huh?"

Then he visited Walgreens for certain items of an intimate nature he thought Trixie might find useful as a human female. (Tampons? He guessed not; after all, she'd been spaded.) Back at the car he deposited his heap of packages in the trunk, climbed in behind the wheel, and asked, "Where to next?" before remembering that she was no longer in talking mode.

So he sat quietly, the windows up, the A/C on low, the noise of the parking lot mostly excluded, just looking at her. She gazed back with hypnotic fixity, a kind of ecstatic attentiveness, while her message formed inside his head.

"You want to go to the *vet's*? Why? Are you sick?"

More silent communion followed; then Trixie began to whine.

"The vet," Henry said, trying to accommodate to the idea. Trying, so to speak, to take Dr. Shamus O'Neill out of the white coat he wore as a kind of mass-produced professional manikin. Out of the fumes of antiseptic and flea baths where Henry's mind had assigned him. Trying to locate his humanity.

"Yeah, him," the words formed in his mind. "And unless I been sniffing too many exhaust fumes and screwed up the old smeller, you gotta bigger surprise than that coming."

* * * *

"I don't think he believed me when I said you'd been eating squirrels again," he told her.

Night and the moon had returned. She was wearing running attire and had her hair tied with a red ribbon she'd found in the back of Clem's chest of drawers.

"Good," she said, polishing off a last spoonful of roast oysters in garlic leek sauce with parmesan cheese--one of Henry's sublimest concoctions.

"I hope he didn't believe you," she concluded. "That way he knew you was really after sump'm else."

"I was surprised when he just came out and asked if I wanted to go jogging tonight. Said he'd come by about nine ... but why at night?"

"Well, Honey, the man woiks all day."

"I better get suited up. Are you sure he's gay? That's not the vibes I get."

"Go and get dressed."

"Besides, when he sees me with you, like you are now I mean, he'll think I'm straight."

"Nobody in their right mind would think you were straight. Now, shut up and go get dressed before I bite you."

The garden was blue, the white flowers ghostly, the red ones already submerged in the dusk. To the west, a last bar of sunlit cloud floated just above the evening star; to the east, a golden moon was rising.

Henry was nervous, depressed, fearful of making a new connection, fearful of not making a new connection. After all, who the hell was O'Neill? So he liked dogs, so what--*Hitler* liked dogs, for Christ's sake. Besides, the vet wasn't even good-looking ... well, he was okay, maybe ... sort of like Bruce Willis playing the plastic surgeon in *Death Becomes Her*. But...

Wrangling with himself, scuffing his feet, he followed Trixie through the gate and out into the dark and seemingly empty suburban street. They waited a while, strolling up and down.

"Well, that's it. He's a no-show--*aaak!*"

Out of the shadows of a bushy, fragrant privet hedge lurched the biggest dog Henry had ever seen. A heavy ruff of hair like a lion's mane clothed its powerful shoulders; its eyes flickered green when a car drove past; it yawned and displayed an array of teeth that might have drawn respect from a juvenile *T. Rex*.

"Ain't he sump'm?" Trixie enthused. "Let him sniff you, Henry. Only take it real, real easy. Like he is now he got some incredibly strong jaws, him."

Henry didn't need urging to be cautious. Someplace deep inside the wolflike being began a low indefinite rumble that might mean--rage? hunger? Maybe both?

Or maybe not. Gradually the sounds quieted. The beast sniffed and snorted, then turned and examined Trixie with gynecological candor.

"Yeah, it's me, Sweetheart," she said. "In the flesh."

At last he seemed content, and the three of them--the werewoman, the werewolf, the Certified Public Accountant--set off at a trot toward Lancelot Lake.

"Was he bitten by one of his patients?" Henry panted after a quarter mile.

"That's a possibility," said Trixie, moving along with the effortless, tireless lope of her fundamental kind. "Or maybe bein' like he is got him innerested in animals. I know it would me--uh, oh. Trouble."

The car that passed earlier had stopped near Lancelot Lake and cut its lights. Now the headlights suddenly flicked on, changed to highbeams, and the car started up with a roar, rushed at them and screeched to a halt by the curb. Three guys wearing hooded jackets jumped out, bearing in their hands wrecking bars, chains and a jack handle.

"*Yo bitch! Yo faggot!*" they yelled.

That was when the wolf, with a shrill eager whine, went into action. A hundred and ninety pounds of fur, muscle, and preternatural fury slammed into the muggers and they crashed against one another and collapsed in a tangle of twelve ill-coordinated limbs. When they were down the beast worried at them, driving its two-inch fangs selectively into rounded parts such as calves, thighs, butts, and deltoids while hysterical squawks and mewlings rose from his victims.

Maybe Dr. O'Neill disdained such witless adversaries; maybe even in his present form he felt some basic reluctance to dismember creatures who belonged, however distantly, to his other species. In any case, the muggers got away, hopping and squawking and tumbling headfirst into their car, which roared into motion, scattering weapons and tatters of clothing as it blasted away. Uttering blood-freezing growls, Dr. O'Neill was still chasing the car when he and it vanished from sight.

"Well, so much for our run," sighed Trixie, as lights began flicking on in surrounding houses. "I dunno what got people so agitated. Maybe all the screaming, you think?"

Back at home, Henry was having a nightcap and Trixie was seated on the busted couch, dabbing with spit at a run in her pantyhose, when he cleared his throat and said, "O'Neill is out."

"Aw, c'mon, Henry. Give the man a chance. He's only like this one or two nights a month. The rest of the time he's mild-mannered Clark Kent, or whoever."

"Trixie, I can't handle this. Half the time I still think I must be crazy to believe you're a werewoman. So I'm supposed to develop a relationship with somebody who now and then turns into Lobo the Superwolf?"

Instead of answering she raised and half turned her head. But Henry, deep in his low-self-esteem monologue, failed to notice.

"Do I look like the kind of guy can handle a situation like that? I mean, I'm afraid of *geese*, for God's sake. I advise my clients against claiming a home office deduction because it might, just might, get them audited. I--"

"He's out by the garden gate," she interrupted. "And he wants to come in."

"Oh, Lord."

She rose to her feet. "Lissen. He's whining, he's so eager."

"I don't hear anything."

"Trust me. He's there, and he's a live one. So, you gonna go talk to him, or what?"

"I'll just tell him through the bars of the gate to go home," he muttered. "I'll promise to buy all my dog supplies from him instead of Petco. I'll promise to come see him in his office tomorrow and just not show up."

He opened the front door and stumbled down the garden path. Trixie followed. He could hear the whining now. From something he'd read he remembered that wolves and wild dogs don't bark, they whine and they growl and they--

Howl.

From beyond the gate, a low moan began and rose swiftly to a moonstruck ululation. Round and perfect, Luna blazed in the sky, and the wolf, etched in silverpoint, serenaded it. Henry forgot to breathe as his suburban garden turned into a pagan grove, where the moonlight and the scent of flowers and the wolfsong fused into a heart-stopping rite celebrating some deathless and dark and waste and wild divinity.

Then Trixie reached past his shoulder and unlatched the gate.

The wolf sprang, the gate flew open, and a heavy furry mass knocked Henry flat. The beast planted its paws on his chest and for a timeless moment its yellow eyes burned into his. Its rank breath fanned him and its long wet tongue licked his mouth.

Lightly, playfully almost, it took his right hand between its teeth and clamped down. Not too hard. Not enough to break the bones.

Just enough to draw blood.

* * * *

Over the months that followed, Marylou was increasingly impressed by the way Henry was improving.

Not only had he stopped grieving over Clem. Not only had he found a new live-in lover. Not only was

the L.I.L. a nice man, a professional, a respected part of the community.

No, Henry's improvement went beyond all that. Every day in every way, he was looking stronger and better.

"You been working out, or what?" she asked him at one of their Delmonico dinners.

"Well, running a lot, anyway. Shamus and I take Trixie and we all go running together. Or," he added in the hoariest of dog-owner's jokes, "she takes us."

"You didn't get those big shoulders running," said Marylou, eyeing him critically, "unless you been running on all fours."

He smiled; he used to smile kind of tight-lipped, she remembered, but now he showed off all his nice white teeth.

"You won't believe this," he said, changing the topic, "but Clem came by the house. He actually wanted to move back in with me."

"He's got a nerve. What'd you do?"

"Didn't have to do anything. Trixie ran him off."

This produced a scream of laughter. "She bite him?"

"No, just nipped at his heels, the way shepherd dogs manage sheep. Shamus said she was herding him. It was a good thing she did--I was so pissed at Clem, I might've chewed him up."

Marylou, who rarely paid close attention to anybody, heard this as "chewed him *out*."

"I wish you had," she said. "If anybody deserves it, he does.... How's Morris these days?"

"A lot happier. His son Mark went to Westward Bound and had a kind of epiphany. A grizzly bear chased him up a tree, and he was up there clinging to a branch while the bear tried to shake him down, when suddenly he flashed on what he wants to do with his life. He wants to become an accountant, join the firm, and never go outdoors again as long as he lives. Morris says he's hitting the books with incredible energy. We can use the help when income tax time rolls around next year."

"It's so nice when a young person finds himself. Any other news from Camelot Oaks?"

"Well, those damned geese have disappeared. You can actually walk around Lancelot Lake without being attacked. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals complained that somebody must've eaten them, but if so they didn't leave any evidence."

"Those homophobics still bothering you?"

"No. They've quieted down. In fact, when I see them they head off in the other direction."

"Maybe they're growing up. Learning some sense."

"If they want to, they better."

He regretted this indiscreet remark as soon as he made it. But Marylou's mind had moved on, and she paid no attention.

"You know, Hen, I *never never* pry. I mean, people come to me for advice, I don't push it on them. But I just find myself wondering if you've got the right guy. I mean, Shamus is sweet and all, and I like him--*really*, this time I mean it--but he seems kind of repressed. Almost too quiet."

"Trust me," smiled Henry. "When he's in the mood, the man is an animal."

At first Marylou felt a little shocked. For all her sophistication, she didn't like to dwell on the physical side of her brother's love life. But then a pensive, longing look came into her face.

"Do you think," she asked, "he might have a straight friend for me?"