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## TOO BAD ABOUT HOWIE

Winner of The Journal's Sixth annual  
Short Story Contest

Judge Lee K. Abbott has this to say about "Too Bad About Howie":

*One of the facts of literary life that so frustrated the late novelist Stanley Elkin was the dearth of a species of narrative he adored: the "sad" funny story (The Dick Gibson Show) or the "funny" sad story (Stanley Elkin's The Magic Kingdom). First, you need a feck-free protagonist, like the narrator of "Too Bad About Howie," a hero too innocent to understand the conflict between the head and the heart: the one proposes, the other disposes. You need, too, a dramatic situation where the stakes are high: anything involving a boy and a girl will do nicely, thank you. And, if you can manage it, you need a style as peppy as it is poignant. Tone, of course, is the devil in all these details: season with rue, in other words. To my mind, "...Howie" satisfies perfectly: I am tickled as much as I am touched.*

No Beatles. No Beach Boys. Not even a little "Me and Bobby McGee." Too cheap for music, that's what Wal-Mart was. You had to shop to the noise in your head. Gone was the Rodgers and Hammerstein era when my mother wore curlers in the market and my old man smoked Pall Malls in front of the beer coolers. Nowadays nothing but crying babies and single mothers filled Wal-Mart. Nobody noticed the chumps like me who foraged for red-and-white tins of McCormick Nutmeg.

So I was on one of my Saturday night shopping sprees, carting by Campbell's Cream of Mushroom, Campbell's Tomato, and there she was—Sally—my ex-wife. I only saw a snapshot of her in the aisle's open aperture before—poof!—she was gone.

When I reached the Wonder Bread aisle, I caught another glimpse of Sally. There she stood, the woman I'd almost spent my life with, and she was practically a stranger to me.

I watched her squeeze a loaf of wheat bread and had the strong urge to pinch her waxy cheek between my thumb and

index finger to see if she, too, was still fresh. Before I knew it, she carted away, so I abandoned my cart by a Wheat Thins display to follow her.

Two years of marriage. That's how long it had taken to navigate the peaks and valleys of my ex-wife's personality. Little did I know that her emotional topography included unmapped islands littered with human skulls and enormous Easter Island statues staring out at the sea. She was one hell of a mystery island: quiet on the outside but cannibal-infested within.

I caught up with Sally in the cold air of the dairy section where she was opening a pink carton of eggs to check that none were cracked. Her hair was pulled back in a professorial bun that revealed her pale neck. She hunched over her shopping cart like the Grim Reaper wearing the same black cardigan she'd always worn around the house.

"Hopper," she said. "I know you're behind me. I recognized the sound of your walk." Without turning to face me, she put her eggs beside a six-pack of Swiss Miss Chocolate Pudding and some Lean Cuisine frozen meals. Back at the Wheat Thins display, my own cart must have looked pitiful with its tin of nutmeg, case of Coors, and bag of Iams Hairball Care Cat Food.

When Sally turned, it was the first time I'd seen her in months, and I winced at the sight of her face. Her apricot-toned skin looked coarse, and her eyes were veinier than they'd been just ten months earlier, when she'd packed up her stuff and left.

"Your new hair color looks good," I said, shuffling like a schoolboy. A stray auburn hair clung to the shoulder of her cardigan. I resisted the urge to pick it off.

"You like it?" Her eyes brightened, and it almost sounded like the old days before she sicced those cannibals on me. "It covers all the white hairs from the divorce," she said.

"Ah, Sal, don't be like that."

"What do you expect?"

I shrugged. "So, how's Howie?"

"Itchy," she said. "Fleas."

"Well, Morton still craps outside the litter box." I waited

for her to say something. "Lately he's been on a puking spree," I continued, "leaving me little puddles of vomit all over the hardwood floors."

She shook her head in a perfunctory way, as if it didn't really matter to her that Morton was puking a lot. Just twelve months ago, we would have spent a whole dinner conversation on the subject. "And what exactly did the puke look like?" she would have asked, her little heart breaking.

After two years of marriage, our pets were our only significant joint property. She got Howie, the Weimaraner, who was hers to begin with. I got Morton, the cat.

And who was taking Howie for walks up to Shooting Star Bluff, I wanted to ask. No doubt, the divorce had caused Howie to succumb to licking his crotch excessively. "Too bad about Howie." That's what one of Sally's colleagues from the French department said when he ran into me at 9<sup>th</sup> Street Video, knowing how tight Howie and I had been, how we used to walk Columbia's trails and romp around town together.

"You know," Sally said to me, her eyes direct, "you don't have to talk to me every time you run into me, Hopper. We can act like we never met. We can be strangers."

I exhaled through my nostrils and said, "Fine," then walked back to my cart, thinking I'd write about our encounter in a book Sally once called my *Book of Bad Ideas*. I'd write about the arc of Sally's neck before she'd turned and the way her back stiffened like a wall between us, and I'd write something about the fierce urge to bite her scalp as hard as I could. Then I'd finally write:

The back of your ex-wife's neck  
is a stranger's blank face.

Before I moved to Columbia, Missouri, I was a low-rent actor in Kansas City and Branson and St. Louis. Musical theater mostly. I sang, I danced, I did a little soft shoe. Seven years ago I was doing *The Fantastics* at a dinner theater, getting paid smack wages that didn't cover the cost of gas, when I finally got a

decent gig doing matinees of *Mary Poppins* each weekend for a heavily funded kiddie theater in downtown St. Louis, the kind with a kids' art gallery full of finger paintings and a hands-on art experience where toddlers can squish their fingers into clay and draw sunshiny pictures of their parents. Kids would come into the theater smelling of Play-Doh and bubble gum. Midway through the performance they'd start bawling and asking, "Where's Daddy?" while I danced and sang my heart out playing the part of Dick Van Dyke. So I "Chim chimineyed" away each weekend until the show's three-month run and my meager finances finally ran out.

After that, I followed my girlfriend Mary to Columbia and got a gig teaching composition. Columbia's one of these land-grant college towns planned around state parks and an old railroad converted into a bike trail. A regular hiking boots and gourmet coffee kind of place. In a matter of weeks, Mary dumped me. Then she traipsed around town with an art history grad student named Ludwig. From then on it seemed like Columbia was strategically planned for awkward run-ins with ex-lovers. I'd see Mary and Ludwig at cafés, on campus, at the health food store. I didn't get over Mary until I was introduced to Sally, a newly hired French professor who didn't know anyone in town.

Now don't get me wrong, I was still unsure of Sally at the end of our first date. While I sat in her dining room waiting for coffee to brew, her dog Howie roved around my legs under the table. The warmth of his body pressed my inner thigh. Then his brown nose came snorting up between my legs after nuzzling my crotch.

Dinner had been the usual rigmarole of bad take-out Thai food and life histories: Me, I went to The University of Kansas. Majored in theater. Minored in creative writing. Got an MFA in poetry just for kicks. My old man would have flipped. A tough guy like him, someone who'd worked in an auto salvage yard, he would have looked me in the eye and said, "So you're

one of those damn fairies I see on TV, is that it?" Luckily my mother understood my desire to perform and saw me in *The Music Man*, *Oklahoma*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* before her death. She's the one who taught me to sing. She had albums of all the musicals by Rodgers and Hammerstein and Irving Berlin, and in harmonious times, she'd pull out *South Pacific*, and we'd stand in the kitchen drying dishes and singing "Bali Ha'i." My father hated it. He'd be sitting in the living room watching *All in the Family* yelling for my mother and me to "Shut the goddamn up!" as he so delicately put it.

Sally's life history was more to the point:

- Graduated with honors from the University of Chicago.
- Went straight to a Ph.D. program at Yale.
- Got a job.

"What about boyfriends?" I asked as Sally poured us cups of coffee.

"What about them?"

"Weren't there any?"

She shrugged. "I dated a guy named Mark for a year."

"No drug overdoses? No suicide attempts? No stints in mental hospitals?"

She shrugged again. "I'm pretty normal."

To tell the truth, it was the dog that made me stick it out that first night with Sally. We'd moved to the living room couch, and Howie put his mouse-brown chin on my lap. Then he looked up until I finally scratched his head. Afterward he put his paw on my thigh and snuffled me with his nose, asking to be smelled back, and so I did: I put my face against the dog's velvety ears and inhaled his musty scent. In return, Howie rolled onto his back, paws pedaling the air, and gave me that come-hither dog look with his mouth hanging open and his pupils big and black, begging for a little cootchie-coo.

God damn if Howie didn't talk to me that night with all his meaningful looks and gentle nudges. It made me want to forget about Sally and get naked with the dog. I wanted to wrestle him to the ground and straddle him.

And Sally, poor Sally, how I pitied her and the way she

dressed in frumpy sweaters and uptight turtlenecks, nothing revealing her tiny waist or her apricot-toned skin. So unlike the needy actresses I used to date who smoked clove cigarettes and drank whiskey straight from the bottle. By my mid-thirties, I'd had dozens of short-term relationships with women who slept all day and worked all night at bars or casinos. None of them were like Sally: straight-laced, stable, well employed.

Later that night, after the coffee and conversation had run dry, Sally seemed lonely and withdrawn when she called to her cat Jojo across the house, saying, "She's a sweet kitty once you get to know her."

Sally was still too shy to make eye contact. Her little turtle-head barely poked up from her cable-knit sweater. Howie sat beside Sally and mooned his eyes at her. There was something tragically romantic about the two of them—the way Howie gazed at her with unapologetic affection, the way Sally gazed back with nothing but love.

"Howie usually doesn't like strangers," Sally said.

"Dogs get me," I replied. "They always have."

"Howie gets me, too." Then Sally smiled for the first time all night, and it gave me this twinkling inside my chest that made me think, hey, this woman's all right. I could even live like this. A cozy home. A sane woman. A loving dog. It might be nice.

When I left, I stood in the doorway and clasped Sally's hands, lacing our fingers together like a strange fleshy flower. Then I gave the meat of her palm a gentle love bite. "Goodnight, Sally," I said, "Farewell, Sally," except I sang it to the tune of "Goodnight Ladies," and it all must have been very appropriate because she kept smiling at me as I walked away singing, "We're going to leave you now." There we were, totally incompatible, a 21<sup>st</sup> century Marian Paroo and Harold Hill from *The Music Man*; Sally was no different from the uptight librarian played by Shirley Jones, and I was nothing more than an emotional opportunist who knew right then and there what kind of man I had to be to make her fall in love with me. And, no, I wasn't that kind of man at all. Too moody. Too restless. I tended to wake up in the middle of night and walk the fenceless backyards of Columbia

where I'd look at people watching TV inside their homes and wonder what it felt like to cuddle under a crocheted afghan and just stay in one place for the rest of my life. So no, I wasn't the kind of guy to settle down with a French professor. But it occurred to me I was also an actor: I could play the part. If I felt like it, what did it matter? In the world of musical comedies, everyone is mismatched. The professor marries the street urchin. The Salvation Army officer marries the gambler. The librarian marries the traveling con man. In the end, everybody gets what they want, and not what they really deserve.

Six months after running into Sally at Wal-Mart, I had the summer off and made a new lady friend, a redheaded legal secretary named Teresa. The night I met her, I was at a bar wearing one of those blue mechanic's shirts with a white oval patch that said "Ike" in navy embroidery. I'd found it at a thrift store and couldn't resist. Most people called me by my last name—Hopper—but I liked the idea of being called Ike for a change. Something about that Ike shirt lifted me out of a long blue funk I'd been in since the divorce. It got me singing that old presidential campaign song for Dwight D. Eisenhower:

I Like Ike.  
And Ike is easy to like.

"Yo, Ike," Teresa said. "This round's on me."

A bartender filled our shot glasses with whiskey. Then we went for round two. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in Teresa's bed, and she was humming a song to herself as she made breakfast. While Teresa fried some bacon and eggs, I put on my Ike shirt and stepped onto her deck to gaze down a grassy slope at all that Saturday morning sunshine. Wind chimes played on the breeze. The air smelled of fresh-cut lawns and new beginnings.

Teresa's deck overlooked a large mowed lot where one neighbor's yard blended into the next. Nearby were the decks of two other homes. And what do you know! There was my old

friend Howie curled up in front of his redwood doghouse, no more than one deck away.

During the divorce, just before we'd left our old house, Sally mentioned she was moving to a subdivision with unfenced backyards that receded into woodsy evergreen groves with property lines demarcated only by the height of the grass. "A home that was good for Howie," she'd said. I'd never seen the place.

From Teresa's deck, I let out a long two-fingered whistle, and Howie's head perked up from its sleeping position, his ears at full attention. Suddenly I felt like little Roddy McDowall in the classic film *Lassie Come Home*.

"Howie," I said. Even though it had been sixteen months since I'd last seen him, Howie stood up on all fours, alert, ears pricked. He had that "come get me" stance with his front legs pushed out: If I made a sudden move, he'd have charged straight into me.

Later that week, I did a little on-line spying and found out Sally's schedule of summer-school courses. Turned out she was *Qu'est-ce que c'est*-ing her way through an Intensive French course that lasted four-hours a day, from ten to two p.m., five days a week. So after Teresa smooched me goodbye in the mornings, I'd watch *The Today Show* for a few hours, then go down the slope to visit Howie.

The first time I went, I paused outside Sally's bedroom window, listening. Inside was our old bed, the same sunflower bedspread we'd used, the same wicker bookcase, the same oval loom rug. Everything was the same except it wasn't *ours* anymore, and it had all been picked up and put down somewhere else. Nothing had really changed for Sally, I thought. She'd probably imagined going to the Humane Society and picking out a new husband the way she'd picked out Howie, a place with caged men in suits sharing pens with mutts like me. And I was the kind of wild-eyed mongrel they'd put to sleep after two weeks, the kind no one really wants to bring home.

On Sally's back deck, a bag of potting soil sat beside some

geraniums and an unfinished cedar window box. Sally's bird feeder was empty, though a few chickadees still flew across the yard from a tall pine tree to peck at the seedy remains. Seeing all those singing birds and our old life reminded me of the beginning of our relationship when we were like characters from *The Music Man* and everything seemed so harmonious. I was always singing, and Sally was always smiling. When I was in a loving mood, I'd sing "Getting to Know You" from *The King and I*. And when I was feeling perfectly in character—perfectly Harold Hill—I'd sing "Marian...Madam Librarian" to my little Shirley Jones.

Howie had been sleeping in his doghouse, delinquent in his guard dog duties. When I turned from the bedroom, there he was, wagging his tail so hard that his whole body shook. He looked good but heavier in the gut, no doubt from not being walked enough. Even his facial fur looked paler, his jowls more hangdog and loose. His mouse-brown fur appeared ashy and older. Howie was chained up, so we just sat on the steps of the deck and reminisced about old times—run-ins with unleashed dogs in the park, swims in the creek, and long sprints into the woods whenever I biked the MKT Trail.

The following Monday, while Sally was teaching four hours of French, I unchained Howie and took him out to Grassland Trail. I'd missed the way Howie would run ahead of me and snuffle around looking for field mice or rabbits. Howie once dove his nose into the snow and brought out a fat brown mama mole and all the brown babies came squirming up with their panicked pink snouts searching for her. Howie was a bad dog that day. He ran off with his trophy mole in his mouth. Meanwhile Sally yelled after him to "Put back the mole!" But Howie didn't come back right away, and Sally started crying for the baby moles in the snow, each of them a bent brown thumb against a bed of white. When Howie finally returned, the mama was dead, and I took the mole and buried it with the babies back underground where they belonged.

Towards the end of our marriage, walking Howie was the only thing Sally and I did together. I'd reverted back to my true self. Irritable. Restless. Sleeping all day, writing all night.

Sometimes I'd take a nip of whiskey when Sally was sleeping, or I'd run off with the dog to get away from her. So it was on one of those final walks when I was singing "Seventy-six dog bones" to Howie that Sally asked, "How is it that you have all this time for the dog but no time for me?" From the look on her face, I could tell the island drums in her head were beating; the cannibals were sharpening their spears.

"You can't throw tantrums and run off with the dog and expect me to roll over and forgive you when you come home."

We'd been walking Howie on a street behind our house. Sally folded her arms like she was cold and tightened her black cardigan around herself.

"I think we need to split up," she said.

"I'm not ready."

"Well I was ready six months ago," Sally replied.

"But I had no idea anything was wrong."

"Well something *has* been wrong," she said, "and it's been wrong for a long time. I can't believe you haven't noticed how depressed I've been. You sleep all day, for Christ's sake. Couldn't you figure out you were neglecting me? Couldn't you tell I was sick and tired of the bullshit antics with the dog? And all that manic writing in your stupid book! Well I've read your book," she said quite firmly. "You keep asking why I haven't finished reading it. Well I finished it a long time ago, and it's nothing but a book of bad ideas," she said. "I've been trying so hard to keep my mouth shut, but I can't keep it shut any longer."

When we got back to the house, Sally was crying. None of the cats were around. Not our newly adopted cat Morton. And not Jojo, who'd begun pissing so much that we had to put her in our rumpus room downstairs. It was after midnight when Sally came out of her office and went to the basement litter box, only to find Jojo on the bathroom floor shaking.

During my third week of summer dognapping, I tried the sliding glass door to Sally's house and *Bingo!* Must have been my lucky day. Sally wouldn't be home for another three hours,

so there I was in her dining room where she'd left a baggie of dog biscuits on the table. Thoughts started cycling through my head about what to do first, where to go, which thing I should steal. I couldn't leave without committing an act of emotional vandalism.

There was this particular spatula that Sally made off with, and I'd been missing it so damn much ever since. It was a little beige plastic number with the words Log Cabin on the handle. Perfect for flipping flapjacks without scratching the bottom of the pan. One day I'd chased Sally around the house with it, smacking her on her bum like a little girl, and she giggled and shooed me away, saying, "Stop it, you jackass! Stop it." Anyway, this particular spatula had sentimental value, so I went into her kitchen, which she'd prised up with some ceramic containers for flour and rice, and started pulling open drawers. By God, there it was, next to the bamboo tongs and soup ladle. Funny how when you see something you haven't seen in a long time, your brain does a little somersault, and that's what my brain did, not expecting to see those old tongs. My brain went "TONGS! Holy shit! Tongs!" And then I threw open all the cabinets and loaded up on spices that I'd purchased. Sally wouldn't be using anything like allspice or cardamom or the queen of all spices, saffron.

There'd been a mango chutney I used to make that Sally raved about, and I'd been the star of academic parties for months. "Did you bring the chutney?" people would ask the minute I walked in the door. "Yes, yes. Of course I brought the chutney." My fifteen minutes of fame fizzled out when the wife of a Spanish professor came up with a new-fangled guacamole. Anyway, for a moment I imagined what it would be like if I made Sally mango chutney right now, with Sally finding me naked in her "Look Who's Cookin'!" apron. How could I be threatening in a getup like that? She'd have to laugh, wouldn't she? She'd have to say, "Ha ha. You asshole. You made me chutney!"

Of course, there were no mangoes in her fridge, no chutney to be made.

It occurred to me that here I was, back with all my former

belongings, yet the whole time I was married, I felt caged and confined, fighting the role I was playing. Now and then I'd call Sally names and slam cabinet doors, basically kicking and screaming and storming out of the house with Howie at my heels. Off we'd go, driving to the pitch-black fields of Grassland Trail at midnight with Howie's dog tags jingle-jangling and his paws galloping over the grass.

Now I was home sweet home. Howie had come inside with me. I found him in Sally's bedroom on her sunflower bedspread. He invited me to lie down by stretching his tippy-toes and little black toenails all the way out, elongating his body so I could spoon him the way we used to spoon while waiting for Sally to come home. I checked my watch: two-and-a-half hours to Sally.

So I rolled onto the bed with Howie and placed my arm over his rib cage. He smelled like he'd recently had a flea bath. I shut my eyes and felt a warm feeling in my chest. Howie rolled around to face me and draped his front leg over my waist. He looked into my eyes with his nostrils flaring.

And for a moment, Howie smiled—his gums pink and slippery, his tongue lolling over those itty-bitty baby teeth between long sharp canines. He gave me this look that was pure love. Breathing hard, his tongue quivered a little, and he stared at me with one ear cocked up like he was asking me a question: "Do you love me too?" My hand was on his chest, feeling him pant. As we stared at each other eyeball-to-eyeball, I couldn't understand why a woman had never looked at me like that, or how it was possible that a woman had never thrown her paw over my waist and snorted heavily and stared at me for minutes on end, wearing a huge grin, with her dark pupils dilated, her tongue hanging sideways out of her mouth.

Had Sally ever looked at me when I was emotionally naked and stared back with nothing but love? Had she ever let down her guard? Had she ever loved me at all? As for Howie, he refused to look away. It was the first time in months that I felt my body and soul were in sync, like I'd returned to the place where I belonged.

When I went back to my apartment later that night, I wrote

about Howie in my *Book of Bad Ideas*. I wrote:

Man's best friend  
is his ex-wife's dog.

A week later, the jig was up. Teresa came home early from the law office. It was lunchtime, and I'd been on one of those dates with Howie that always started out as an innocent walk but somehow ended up with us rolling into bed. I was naked. Howie was naked. And Teresa caught us frolicking on her white down comforter.

"Unbelievable," she said from the bedroom doorway. She'd taken off her strappy high-heeled shoes and held them in her hand like a weapon.

"You know," she said, and for a moment she put her free hand over her mouth like she might cry, like it was all too much to bear. "I think you're tragic."

I covered myself with a sheet and said, "I'm not tragic. You caught me in bed with a dog. This is comedy, not tragedy."

"You have no idea how bad this looks," she said. "I wish you could see yourself right now."

"Oh, come on. You're making a mountain out of a mole hill."

She snorted in disgust. "Everything is a game to you. Just make-believe."

Howie was on his back with his back legs playfully kicking.

"Don't you play cute with me," she said to Howie. "Stay," she said. "Stay." Teresa put her shoes on the bed, then sat on the edge next to Howie. She grabbed one of his upraised paws and rubbed her thumb over the rough dirt-encrusted black pads of his feet. "Yeah," she said. "You like that, don't you?"

"Stop it, Teresa."

"What's the matter? Is this wrong?"

Teresa stroked her hand over his brown nipples and dragged her hand to the crease of his lower legs.

"That's enough," I said. "You'll get him worked up."

"I know what I'm doing," she said, then found his toy bone on the bed and waggled it in front of his face. "I have your bone," she said in a sing-songy voice. "I have your bone."

"Would you stop?"

"I'm just playing with the dog," she said innocently. "That's how people play, isn't it?"

Then up went the bone, and she held it aloft like she was either going to throw it or brain Howie. Instead she said the one word Howie understood: "Out!" Howie shivered up from my side, stretched, jumped off the bed and went brushing past her. That's when she said it again, to both of us, "Out! Out! Out!"

A divorced friend once told me that sooner or later my marriage would seem like blurry memories from someone else's life. Instead my marriage was a broken record of images that Sally and I shared together but interpreted differently. As I walked away from those moles in the snow that cold winter day, having felt the warmth of the mother's body in my palm, the dying heat of life, what I really felt was Howie's tragedy, not the mole's. Behind me, Howie had been pacing and whining and mourning his lost plaything. He was so upset I later bought him a new toy. Meanwhile, Sally had a white-mittened hand to her mouth. "Those poor babies," she kept saying. She said it thirty minutes later when we were back at the gravel parking lot. "Those poor babies," she said.

There was one memory I had, however, that Sally managed to dodge, one thing that defined our divorce: I stayed to watch our old cat Jojo die. Taking Jojo to the veterinarian was the last thing Sal and I ever did together as man and wife. The vet asked if we wanted to watch her go down. At first we agreed that we'd face Jojo's death together, but at the last minute Sally broke down crying and backed out. So she stood in the hallway weeping, while I watched Jojo get pressed onto that stainless-steel table, hunkering down to avoid the needle in the back of her neck, squatting low on all fours, then twitching after the first shot, and thrashing like crazy to resist the second. Her claws

scraped the metal table. A low growl emitted from her throat. Finally the doctor pressed her head against the cold table and forced the needle into her neck. Jojo gave me one last look, but it was a look that said nothing at all.

By the time the doctor called Sally in to see Jojo, the assistant had wrapped the cat in a clean white towel like a baby so only Jojo's sweet face showed. Seeing that cat, Sally let out a noise I'd never heard her make before. Not a shriek. Not a wail. But naked grief.

For some reason, I needed that image of death in my head. I needed to know what things looked like after the end.

\* \* \*

Now it's fall in Columbia, Missouri, a new semester, a fresh start, yet for some reason I see Sally all over town. She's the lonely soul walking Howie through campus at night or the woman stepping out of a jewelry store downtown. So it's no surprise when I walk up 9<sup>th</sup> Street and see Howie with a big smile on his face and his tongue lolling out. He's tied to a bench in front of Lakota Café, and I bend down to scratch his neck. This is how it should be when ex-lovers run into each other on the street, all smiles and warm pats on the back. It's been over a month since I spent my last afternoon with Howie. When Teresa kicked us out, our summer had come to an end, and I returned Howie to his doghouse for good.

Through the café window, I see Sally sitting alone, so I walk in to pay my respects.

"You cut your hair," I say.

"I thought we agreed to be strangers," she replies. She's replaced her turtleneck with a tank top and gotten a bob cut. Her skin seems unusually tan.

Every time I'm face-to-face with Sally, it feels like we're still married, and a rain cloud bursts in my chest. "I want to talk."

"There's nothing to say."

"I want to talk about Howie."

She turns her head, and there it is—her bare neck—and

I think: The back of your ex-wife's neck is a stranger's blank face.

Sally turns back to me. "Okay," she agrees. "Let's talk about Howie."

So I sit down and say, "You first. Why don't you ask about Morton?"

Her face softens. "Fine. How's Morton?"

"Miserable," I reply. "He yowls at night. He head-butts me when I'm asleep to get me to pet him. It's been rough."

"It's been rough for me too," Sally says.

Sally touches a silver dewdrop pendant hanging from her necklace. My eyes go to the blue veins mapping her chest, the fragile transparency of her apricot skin.

Then Sally says, "I've accepted that I'll never see Morton again." She nods and presses her lips together like she's about to cry.

Finally it feels like I'm winning a conversation with my ex-wife. "So," I ask. "How's Howie?"

"C'mon Hopper...don't you already know?"

For an instant I think I've been caught. Me. Teresa. The dog. The sordid scene of twisted bed sheets and drool. The two women—Sally and Teresa—meeting each other between their decks with their arms folded, nodding conspiratorially.

Sally's hand reaches out, not for my hand, but to grab the napkin on the table. She crumples the napkin to dab her nose and leaves it covering her mouth when she says, "I thought someone would have told you by now. He got hit by a car. Some stupid teenager..."

"Howie's sitting outside," I say. "Right on the sidewalk."

Sally shakes her head. "That's Joey, not Howie. It happened right after the divorce. I didn't want you to know. I had to mourn alone."

I stand up and say, "I don't want to hear anymore," refusing to consider the implications of me and a strange dog rolling in bed for two months. Before I leave the café, Sally puts her hand over her mouth and seems to convulse with grief, but for an instant, she might be laughing.

This is the last story I'll tell, a story from when I was a kid and



had a sleek-haired black lab named Elvis, back when my family lived on ten acres of land where a dog could run free without fences or chains, just open country full of fleas and beggar's lice, and Elvis would come home with his fur crawling with seed ticks. Well, one day Elvis vanished, and we figured he'd gone girling around town. But he didn't come back, and there was no trace of him at the pound or signs he'd been rolled into a ditch. We figured he'd been killed, and a road crew had cleaned him up along with the deer and possum carcasses around town.

Six months later, that's when the Elvis sightings began.

First we heard stories that he was in a nearby neighborhood. Then friends called to say Elvis was running feral on Doc Saunder's farm. We heard a lot of other stories that didn't add up to squat.

My father left the same year, and we knew he'd gone off with some woman who lived in Independence, Missouri. Now Elvis was gone, and it was the only time I'd ever seen my mother cry. Well, when I heard Howie was dead, I felt betrayed and abandoned just like my mother had. Something in me wanted to die.

At the time of Elvis's disappearance, I was in junior high and along with my mother's LPs of musicals she had a stack of 45s from the 1950s. Most were Elvis Presley singles. My mother and I used to listen to the scratchy A-side of "Hound Dog," then she'd flip to the B-side's "Don't Be Cruel." The 45 was an old RCA Victor recording with the little black-and-white dog listening to a metal gramophone horn. I'd always associated that little dog with Elvis Presley's hound dog. I was just a kid then; I'd missed the whole point of the song. From then on, however, it was *my* Elvis that the song belonged to. *My* Elvis who made us croon "Don't Be Cruel."

The worst part of the whole story—the part I never told Sally or Teresa or anyone else—was that I never realized how much my mother loved Elvis until we found him on another family's couch. One day I spotted him on the walk home from my friend Joe Donnelley's house. Elvis was looking out another family's picture window. He saw me. I saw him. And I stood there calling his name as if he could read my lips through the

glass. When I knocked on the front door, no one was there. I told my mother as soon as she got home from cashiering at the five-and-dime store. Well, she grabbed her purse, and we marched right back to that little white house with the blue shutters to confront the family who'd stolen our dog. "We've come for Elvis," my mother said to the gray-haired widow who answered the door. It was 1976. The King of Rock n' Roll was not yet dead. And the old lady got this look on her face, as if we were accusing her of diddling the King himself. "The dog!" my mother explained. "The black lab." Turns out the old lady'd renamed him Johnny Boy after she found him snuffling around her garbage cans. And no, Elvis didn't recognize us that day, not one bit. He just sat on that old lady's couch watching *Happy Days*. To Elvis, we were nothing but strangers.

"Nothing good ever stays," my mother said, and that's when she went into the old lady's kitchen and leaned over a gold-flecked countertop to have her final cry. And no, Elvis never did come over to comfort her. And I didn't know what to do. And the old lady begged us to go. It all felt like the end of an era in our lives. I didn't even take Elvis home.

After seeing Sally, I sit at my computer to write about our conversation in my *Book of Bad Ideas*. So I write,

Dogs should run away  
but never die.

But the words ring hollow, and I realize that running away is no easier than death.

I stare at the computer screen, still feeling torn up, when Morton leaps onto the desk to nuzzle me for affection. I push him away to type, then curse at him to leave me alone. But Morton keeps coming back to purr in front of the computer screen. And he keeps coming back for more love. No matter how much I ignore him, how much I push him away, over and over again, it's Morton who keeps coming back.