KATHY FLANN

Leave It

If there are no dogs in Heaven, then when I die I want to go where they went.
—Will Rogers

My dog's primal layer—let's call it Substratal Dog—surfaced when she scavenged for pizza that people discarded *next to* city trashcans. Clark inhaled crusts as if she faced starvation and had to compete with jackals. Substratal Dog also appeared during pursuits of my mother's cat, lingering briefly within the melee of eight paws scrambling in a hallway, until the cat spun around and bopped her, jolting Clark back to her usual self, Enlightenment Dog, who lived in an apartment and watched TV and tripped over her feet and earned an A+ in obedience class and fled from insects and never ate any of my food, even if I left a candy bar on the floor when I went to work. That was the affable Clark I knew, the one who became my roommate and gal pal after Live-In Boyfriend of Five Years dumped me. She was a canine Phoebe from *Friends*, a show that was still on the air back then.

After the breakup, Enlightenment Dog and I moved to Europe—me to England to teach writing at Saint Martin's College, and Clark to France. I boarded Clark with a couple named Ann and Lawrence in their gîte outside of Toulouse so that Clark could become "French" and earn an EU pet passport. It was a scheme I'd concocted to circumnavigate a six-month quarantine in British doggie prison. The motivation to move to England included escape from heartbreak, but subjecting Clark to the quarantine would've had me in its clutches again. I just couldn't.

One day, early in the six months she'd spend there, we strolled with Ann and Lawrence through a patchwork of vineyards and farms in the French countryside—a route we'd traveled before. Back in the US, we had walked without a leash a gazillion times, whenever safely away from cars. But on this particular day, a chicken strutted out from the forest. It zig-zagged into the open field, where we walked toward the tidy rows of grape vines in the distance. Clark loped ahead, ears perked, and what I didn't think was, Oh crap, she's going to pursue that chicken to the end of the earth or at least to Latvia. Clark then proceeded to charge the bird with a red-hot speed she never brought to bear on tennis balls.

"Stop her!" Ann cried. "The farmer will shoot her!"

Ann had warned me that here in France, and also in England, a farmer was within his rights to shoot a dog if it was "worrying" his animals. This was the price for open access, for the right people had to walk their dogs on private land. This chicken, which flashed into sight periodically, did look worried. Its stick legs propelled its plump body at a velocity that seemed impossible.

I *did* understand that my Labrador retriever's DNA could be supercharged for chicken homicide, so the shock I felt seemed really stupid, even in the moment. Ahead, a farmhouse presumably contained a farmer with an awareness of those dog-shooting rights. Grape crops bordered the field on the other sides. The rows of vines stretched into the infinity where the Midi-Pyrénées hills met the perfect blue sky. There was nothing to stop the pursuit from reaching that horizon.

Back in North Carolina, I'd carried an ache around that was the size of Live-In Boyfriend of Five Years, and I had rebounded into a relationship with a hot-tempered guy, Ex-Marine. Truthfully, I was afraid of him, and things became ugly at the end. With new friends and European cafés, I'd hoped for a new beginning, to find a strength in myself. I kept thinking life would get easier soon.

I'd met Ann and Lawrence online, when I was still in the US. At that time, in 2001, French pets were the only pets that could enter the UK without quarantine. Ann and Lawrence advertised their services boarding American dogs on their vineyard as a substitute for the UK quarantine on a nonprofit site. By their accounts, Clark had been well behaved up till now, a standout among their long line of temporary lodgers.

But when she spotted that chicken, Clark generated a gust, parting the grass. And then she was gone, gone, gone.

There was no Thanksgiving holiday in England, of course, but my mother and my new stepdad, Homer Schwartz, used the occasion as an excuse to visit. We set off one night to go see the first *Harry Potter* movie, which in Britain had been titled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. I'd learned not just that the word *philosopher* could connote "sorcerer" in British English, but that movies sometimes had different titles on the two sides of the Atlantic or were released in different versions. Life here reflected, quite literally, an alternate reality.

By the time we traipsed toward the cinema at seven, it had already been dark outside for four hours. Homer couldn't get over it. He kept leaning over to my mother on the walk there and saying, "Next time, can we go visit the dog in the South of France?" He always laughed, and he made my mother laugh. They

were newlyweds at fifty-seven and fifty-eight, respectively. She'd been a single mom when I was growing up, and she would admit later that she dated a string of selfish men back then, "fun" guys she worked to please. I spent a lot of time in my room reading on my bed, amid the black clothes and shoes that littered the floor. I had the wardrobe of an elderly Russian woman in mourning. And I *was* mourning in ways I couldn't articulate—there was my parents' divorce, the instability that came with all of their dating and relocating, the aunt who shot herself in the head and survived and then came to live with us for a while, the dogs and cats that were given away or died, and of course the Big One, the death of my stepbrother, son of my dad and stepmom. But I didn't let myself acknowledge that the Big One had happened. In the meantime, my mom was out windsurfing, playing soccer, and skiing with her boyfriends and eight thousand friends. It looked good from the outside, but she wasn't happy. Now, after dating Homer for many years and marrying him, she truly was.

I thought I'd been happy in my relationship too—for many years—and I loved the fact that my mom and I had found our "person" at the same time. Then Live-In Boyfriend of Five Years became withdrawn and depressed. He stopped showering and grooming regularly, his stubble growing almost audibly. He also stopped talking to me, which didn't prevent me from following him around our apartment and asking what was wrong all the time. It'd be tempting to say I was blindsided, but it all happened too slowly to characterize it that way.

I'd blossomed in college and grad school, and I was so dorky-excited by learning that I'd named my puppy after the faculty mentor who'd given her to me—Jim Clark. But with the loss of Live-In Boyfriend, my main companion, someone I'd met through my studies, I reverted back to the Russian mourner. Being with family and friends made me feel happy and somehow alone at the same time. Being with Clark was different. People were something painful I could do without, like an inflamed appendix, while she seemed more like a healthy vital organ.

"Clark! Clark!" I called, high-stepping through the grass, as Ann and Lawrence lagged somewhere behind. It was up to me to catch her. They were in their sixties—in good shape but twice my age with bad knees. They yelled for her, the sound slipping upward into the vacuum of fat clouds and blue sky. I was more than a little intimidated by them, and I worried that they might think my presence had affected Clark's behavior, making me the de facto perpetrator of the chicken attack.

No one in my new town in England had accents as refined as Ann and Lawrence's. The two of them sounded as though they could be part of the monarchy, riding around in a pumpkin-shaped carriage drawn by white horses. It was hard to imagine their English setter, Pip, ripping apart a chicken without their say-so. My inner Cinderella in her "rags" (i.e. clearance-rack clothing from Marshalls) wanted to be noticed or at least not found objectionable by these fabulous fairy dogparents.

Even though I was a member of a running club in Northern England, and even though I could pace a six-minute mile, my heart and lungs seemed to crash together, and Clark sprinted farther and farther away. I was in a running nightmare, pumping my legs full-on, guts-out, but somehow moving backward.

Whenever Ann and Lawrence picked me up for my near-monthly visits, they brought Clark to the airport to greet me. She had become a leaner, more wiry dog from her stay. Her waist had drawn higher, tighter, and I could make out her rib cage and the muscles of her hind legs. She was a shredded "after" version of herself in a yellow Labrador health magazine. I'd think, Wow, is that my girl? But the way she jumped and nuzzled my leg was the same as ever.

By contrast, I was developing the behaviors of a "before" in the sad American expat health magazine, which is why I joined the running club. Without the dog to force me out in the mornings and evenings, I hid indoors from the British rain. It was dark at 8:00 a.m. and at 4:00 p.m., when I left for work and when I came back. Not twilight. Not dusk. The kind of dark one encounters after a late-night showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This was midnight-movie dark. When I walked home in the afternoon, a few plucky students played soccer under the bright white circles of overhead floodlights, but mostly, campus was deserted.

My new roommate, Tom, often spent evenings at his girlfriend's house. So, when I wasn't doing schoolwork, I lay on the small settee in the front room, wearing pajamas and eating pistachios off my chest. Or I would partake of my other hobby—eating cheeses from every county and town in Britain. Lancashire cheese, Red Leicester, Cheddar, Wensleydale, and the rest. I ate several blocks a week in the blue glow of the TV and the "fire," a set of fake logs tucked into the tiny fireplace that probably once burned coal, now illegal because of the smog. I told myself I was acclimating to the culture via its popular entertainment—quiz shows like *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*, chat shows like *Graham Norton*, and late-night shows like *Eurotrash* that featured singing dogs and porn stars. I told myself it was educational.

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I glimpsed a rigid Labrador tail, a blond shoulder in the distance. She could have been a lion, the way she kept low, the way the tall grass whispered when she moved. Normally, her gait might have been described as *ungainly*. At best, she could muster a *saunter*. She was afraid to rumble through a sliding patio door unless it was pulled as wide open as it would go.

"Clark!" I cried, running faster. "Stop it! No!"

This wasn't how I'd imagined the visit to the vineyard would go.

At thirty-one, I had relocated twenty-three times already, some with my mom, some with my dad, and some on my own. So, given this tolerance and my recent heartbreak, this move needed to be really, really big in order for the hoped-for euphoria to take effect. And yet, even across the ocean, the past kept finding me. My best friend, who'd been a huge support through the break-up with Live-In Boyfriend of Five Years and also the mess with Ex-Marine, had sent a snail-mail letter to England that turned out to be the latest installment of a saga I thought was over. I loved getting overseas mail—all the colorful postage and barcodes and cancellation stamps like the inside of a passport. I ripped open the envelope eagerly, only to read, in a multi-page handwritten letter, that she was in *love* with Live-In Boyfriend and they were together now. An additional item: they would soon be married.

Last I knew, they lived in different states. I hadn't even realized they had each other's phone numbers. It made sense now why she hadn't responded to any communications for a few months. "I know," she wrote, "I'm now one more person who's let you down."

She was wrong about that. There was only one person who disappointed me, and it was me. Shitty things that happened helped me see, in what seemed to me scientifically unassailable ways, that I was the Cause of Everything. I alienated Live-In, and I had a lot of ideas about how I managed to do it. I picked a hall-of-fame terrible rebound guy with Ex-Marine. And I probably strained my relationship with my best friend by leaning on her too much.

I brought Clark to France on September 11, 2001. I had flown from Dulles, the airport where some of the hijackers embarked that day. Clark and I were in the air when it happened, and Lawrence broke the news to me in their living room soon after I arrived.

"America is under attack," he said.

I stared at him for a long second. Then I laughed. I thought, Boy, this guy has a weird sense of humor, but he got me. He really did.

He turned on the TV, and we stood there together and watched the towers fall, listening to the shouts of French broadcasters. He translated what they said, and he helped me try to call my family—my mom and Homer and also my dad and stepmom—again and again. It took three hours to get through.

Even though I'd wanted a big move, I wasn't prepared to be trapped on the continent for days by grounded planes. I spent this unexpectedly lengthy time at their gîte, running and walking with Clark down country lanes, saying, "Bonjour!" to toothless women tending geese. Ann, Lawrence, and I prepared meals together, shoulder to shoulder, in their country kitchen. I loved the way the little cage over the cheese protected it from flies. I felt, in a way, like I was in a little dome like that, in Brigadoon, a magically protected place far away from *that world*. And yet, I could not stop picturing the bodies of people who'd jumped from the buildings. I'd squeeze my eyes shut, hoping the fall had rendered them unconscious so that they didn't suffer. I both could and could not comprehend the aftermath that my mom described during our calls. And I certainly did not fully absorb that Clark and I could have died too, even though I kept thinking about it. I had shopped for many flights before settling on the one I finally chose, and options I'd considered had been heading northeast at about the same time that the ill-fated planes were in the air. Why wasn't it us?

I scanned the horizon for an angry farmer, my face burning with the prospect of dire consequences resulting from our innocuous walk. There was no one around, but I pictured a man in overalls—I had no French wardrobe for him in my urban American head—getting madder and madder, stuffing shells into the chamber of a shotgun.

The bird was now launching itself into the air, sailing a few feet. Then it would crash, disappearing in a sputter of useless feathers. The chicken burst from the grass over and over, squawking and flapping. I couldn't see Clark but could deduce that my dog, my channel-surfing couch buddy, was somewhere under there, nipping at the chicken's heels. Furthermore, I understood that it was her singular design to grab it by the neck and shake it like one of her adorable stuffed toys. The seemingly doomed creature gained less height with each clumsy leap. But at least the ruckus gave me a chance to draw closer.

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Life between visits to France wasn't real. England was the waiting area at a gray bus station, the countdown of a clock, the black-and-white part of *The Wizard of Oz*.

In France, Ann and Lawrence slotted me into their bustling household as if I'd always belonged. Usually, family members, including grandchildren, had just departed or would be arriving the following week. I accompanied Ann to the market, where I retrieved items from her list, staples like eggs or produce or crème fraîche, which had its own section the way pudding or cottage cheese does back home.

On more than one occasion, I'd turned with a start when I spied a Yorkshire terrier in the baby seat of a shopping cart. "You can bring dogs in here?" I whispered.

Ann rolled her eyes. "They're not really supposed to. But people with small dogs. They think they can do anything."

France could be the most dog-loving place on the planet, I was beginning to learn. People loved dogs with the same intensity as they disliked children—the moppy Yorkshire terrier more tolerable than a toddler. No matter what the rules said. People often said "Très sage" when they stopped to pet Clark on our walks. "Very wise."

Back at their house, I'd vacuum a guest room or help prepare food. Later, the three of us would walk Pip and Clark along the country roads by their house. Pip surged ahead, meandering off into the tall grasses and long stretches of forest, his black freckled coat and feathered tail silky in the sunlight. Clark would trail him for a bit but not to the point of letting us out of her sight. She'd double back to the pavement to check on us and then go find Pip again.

We'd stroll behind all that frenetic energy, catching up on the family news. Their youngest son, David, had just returned to Thailand for another photojournalism assignment; their daughter, Kate, a solicitor, had been promoted; Henry, the oldest, had entered his first long-distance cycling competition. He spent half his life on that bicycle, they marveled. It seemed like I knew them all. And maybe that was why, over time, I stopped worrying that Clark might become more attached to them than she was to me—I imagined we were all family. And Clark wasn't changeable in that particular way. No matter how she loved these people, I was still "the one" for her and vice versa. Anne remarked that whenever I left, Clark looked sad for a few minutes. "But then you can sort of see her decide to get on with things." She said it was as if Clark would shrug, as if she were thinking, Oh well, she'll be back. "I see it as the sign of a secure dog," she told

me. She didn't know it was probably the nicest thing she could say—that I had done something right. So many things in the past that I kept a tight lid on left me unsure about that, even though I had done a lot "right" by certain measures, landing good jobs and devoting careful attention to students. Still, the doubt was like a case of mental hiccups. There was this spiraling thing I would do that can best be summed up as: stupid unlovable, stupid unlovable, stupid unlovable. The spiral involved also being mad at myself for being so dramatic. Maybe it was a tendency I'd always had, slipping into this cycle, but at this point in my life I was particularly vulnerable.

The chicken was too slow one too many times, and Clark was on top of it, wagging her tail like she was born for this moment. My legs did not get me there in time. The chicken was no longer visible, and Clark had her head down, presumably over where it lay. I dreaded to imagine what was not yet visible. "No!" I said, hands on my knees, catching my breath. "Leave it!" What scared me as much as the prospect of a wounded chicken was the unfamiliar dog, the one that didn't listen, the one that might look up at me with a blood-stained muzzle.

As the months progressed, I got to know some of Ann and Lawrence's friends. Lilly, a blond South African woman around my age, had lived with Ann and Lawrence in exchange for some labor at the winery when she'd first arrived in France. She had her own apartment in the city center now, but she still came and went from Lawrence and Ann's house like she lived there, popping over several times a week and sometimes spending the night.

Lilly chain-smoked, and she could use French curse words with perfect nuance. She gave out insults so easily that she often had her eyes half-closed when she did it. The guys who hung out in the centre ville loved her, crowded around her wherever she went.

One night, she talked me into going to a nightclub. I hadn't really wanted to. I was there to be with Clark, but then she said, "Don't be boring," and somehow this had the power to sway me. Hadn't I, in fact, become pretty boring? Back in England, the extent of my social life had been a few outings with some guys from the sport department at work—physical education specialists, exercise physiologists, osteopaths. I'd met them in the senior common room, jocks in tracksuits who sat with their legs splayed. Because one of them sort of liked me, I was off-limits to the rest. When we were out, they treated me like one of the guys, elbowing me in the ribs and saying, "Check out the tits on *her*."

The pubs there closed at 11:00 p.m., but sometimes the night seemed to go on forever.

At the nightclub, Lilly knew a lot of people. I got tipsy. A few guys flirted with me. Lilly disappeared for quite a while, and at some point, I thought, Wow, I'm really tired. I stumbled out to the parking lot, where she sat sleeping in her car.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for you."

"You could have told me. What time is it?"

"Five."

"*What?*" It turned out that nightclubs didn't exactly have closing times in France.

Lilly shrugged. "We could all tell you needed a night out. Ann and Lawrence wanted me to take you."

If I didn't think she might have stubbed her cigarette out on my neck, I would have hugged her. I had so little by way of friendship in England, no one to notice what I needed or didn't need. I felt awake and sparkly even though I'd stayed up all night and was hazy drunk.

The next morning, I still got up so I could spend a full day with Clark.

I found Lawrence waiting for me with a cup of tea. "You dirty stop-outs," he said, shaking his head. I'd never heard this British expression, but I got what he meant from his sly grin—a "dirty stop-out" was someone who had been out late and who'd probably been up to no good. Lilly would sleep for hours in one of the guest rooms, and when she woke in the afternoon, he'd say it again: "Dirty stop-out!"

We were women without countries, without families. But here, at this house, we could be teased like daughters.

Clark looked up from the chicken with a panting smile, a furrow on her white-blond brow. There was no blood, no evidence on her fur of the animal's fate. She just looked confused. Why had the game ended? This chicken was considerably less interesting now that it wasn't doing anything. Maybe, she seemed to hope, I'd pick it up and toss it for her, the way I did with her toys. After a moment though, when I didn't do that, her expression fell, and she sighed. Then she wandered off, resigned, to sniff something. She seemed so very like the self I knew. The lack of blood on her face might logically have been reassuring. But the fact that I had pictured the blood there had already altered something. The thing

about heartbreak is that it contains multitudes—there is not just the primary loss but a cascading loss of faith in others, in reality, and in one's self.

I drew closer to inspect the unmoving grass where the chicken presumably lay, holding my breath, bracing myself against what I might see.

During many of my visits to the vineyard, Ann and Lawrence hosted dinner parties. They held them for their neighbors to welcome them back to town. The closest house of these "neighbors" was probably half a mile away. They were often people who owned the properties as vacation homes. I learned to set a complicated table, with scores of forks and spoons, learned the European habit of serving salad after the meal and cheese for dessert.

Once, I sat opposite a slight, quiet man. His wife had done most of the talking, but I'd liked him. He'd laughed at my jokes. The next day, the *Guardian* had printed a listing of Britain's wealthiest people. "Look," Ann said, the paper spread out on the island in the kitchen. "It's Paul."

Paul? Who was Paul?

"From last night," she said.

From last night?

At another dinner, I sat next to a man who owned a very prominent rugby team. We'd hit it off. His wife could do a spot-on imitation of the local accent in the English town where I lived. I'd gone wide-eyed. It seemed like a magic trick. I simply could not understand a word the local Lancastrians said. When a store clerk struck up a conversation with me, I heard, "Blah, blah, blah, luv?" I did a lot of nodding and smiling.

I'd grown up with a single mom who served TV dinners and who tutored in the summers or endured time-share pitches so that we could go on vacations. My dad's parents had come of age during the Great Depression, and they lived in a trailer; my grandma often stole ashtrays and silverware from restaurants. I didn't relate to wealth, struggled to comprehend all the ways it shaped reality for the people who had it. But one thing about wealthy people is that they travel a lot, and Ann and Lawrence's wealthy friends understood the way I was grappling with a new culture.

This couple explained to me that in Northern England the word *tea* actually meant "dinner." Whoa, wait a minute, I thought. Puzzle pieces rearranged themselves in my brain. The phrase "I'm going home to have my tea," which sounded like, "Ahm goin' 'ome to 'ave me tea," had nothing to do with hot beverages. The urgency with which people sought out tea made a lot more sense.

I seized on the opportunity and told them about searching for a top sheet for my bed. I could find fitted sheets, but no one knew what I meant when I asked for a flat sheet or a top sheet. "What's the word for that?" I said.

They laughed. "That's an American thing," they told me. Everyone at the table murmured their assent. Here in Europe, people didn't use top sheets. There were duvet covers and that was that.

At the end of the meal, the rugby team owner turned to me. "You must come to our abode in Wales," he said in his regal accent. I already knew they lived on a country estate. He was a big guy, husky in a former-athlete way, the kind of man's man it was easy to imagine drinking whisky and smoking cigars. He put a beefy hand on the table for emphasis. "And bring your hound." He pronounced it like "yo-ah hound."

In those moments at the dinner table, no matter how different I was, I belonged. I had people to talk to. They liked me. And for a long time, it was easier than anything I could remember.

The chicken had a red face and black feathers that glinted rainbows in the sun. Poor thing, I thought as I bent closer. There was no blood visible, but the animal was perfectly still. A broken neck? A heart attack? The chicken was beautiful, just like heroines who collapsed in old movies with their makeup and hair absolutely perfect. I had never been this close to a chicken. A part of me, the part wracked by pity and guilt, wanted to flinch, but another part, one I'd tried to keep at bay, was fascinated by the chicken's beak, the textured skin of its legs, and its talons, which were more curved and formidable than I'd pictured.

How much would I offer the farmer who lived in the distant house? I tried to picture how it might happen. I would carry the bird to the porch. I could almost feel its weight in my arms. Oh god—maybe it was a family pet. Maybe they'd want to bury it. I'd lost a dog a few years earlier, a feisty terrier we adopted when I was ten, and I knew how a pet could be woven into the fabric of every memory. That terrier had shuttled with me between my mom's and my dad's, moved houses with us, slept in my black laundry. He scratched his back on my bed frame, groaning like Chewbacca, making us laugh no matter what else was going on. He rode shotgun in my Honda when I drove to college and to grad school. My mom joked that he was away getting his degrees in animal husbandry. Then one morning, when he was seventeen years old, he labored to breathe. At the vet's office, cradled to my chest, he pulled in a final loud gasp, and our ribs pushed against each other. It was as if he were as surprised as I was that this was the end.

Clark had potentially dealt this same kind of emotional blow to the family in the farmhouse. But maybe the chicken's pristine condition meant that it hadn't suffered. I wanted to believe that the still and perfect bird had simply slipped away.

One cold night, we stood at Ann and Lawrence's large kitchen island preparing a quiet dinner for the three of us. It was dark outside and crisp. The phone rang, and they asked me to answer it. I dashed up the stairs to the desk on the landing. The woman on the phone asked for Lawrence.

"Can I ask who's calling?"

"It's Mary."

Mary was their oldest son's wife. I felt like I knew her. Though we had never met, Clark had learned a new comfort with children by spending time with her family. Ann had told me that she licked ice cream off the little ones' faces and snuggled in a bottom bunk with the toddler. Would Mary know my voice? I opened my mouth as if I might figure out how to explain our connection. Instead, I called Lawrence to the phone, and I went downstairs to resume chopping.

I didn't think much of it when Lawrence escorted Ann outside. But something was different when they came back. They moved with purpose here and there, whispered to one another, stopped.

Finally, Ann said, "It seems only fair to tell you that our son Henry has been killed on his bicycle."

"Oh my god," I think I said.

"He was riding home from work in London."

None of us spoke much after that. The dogs milled around the kitchen island. There was the chop of knives, the clank of pot lids, but we didn't look at each other. It might have been five minutes or half an hour.

Finally, we sat down at the table. I don't remember what we'd made. Maybe it was soup. It was piping. There was steam. We had completed the preparations without contemplating what would come next. I held the spoon to my lips as if I would eat, as if eating were something that could happen.

Ann finally pushed the bowl away. "I can't."

"Should I—*go*?" I said. "I could change my flight."

"No," she said. "You shouldn't."

It would come to me a few minutes later—the way this night was an almost exact replay of the night my own brother died many years before in an accident far away. My dad, stepmom, and I played at making dinner, even came close to eating it, as if we could will the banal back into our lives, could say a polite "No,

thank you" to what had happened. I'd been saying "No, thank you" ever since, pushing away even the good memories of him because it was just too hard.

I took Ann at her word and stayed. I wanted to stay, but at the same time, something was unraveling, something that had once been tamped down and safely stored.

I met the boy who would become my brother when we were both nine years old. His mom was dating my dad. We were both kids who'd never known nuclear family. It was as if we'd stored up nine years of stuff to talk about, nine years of butt jokes. We played Matchbox cars while we talked and popped caps with a hammer on the basement floor and played tag until after dark, encouraging my terrier—when we got him as a puppy—to chase us. As we grew older, we talked late into the night most weekends, divulging our potential romances and gossiping about school.

When he died at fifteen, people said, "At least he wasn't your real brother." *Real.* In my grief, I pretended none of it was real. I tried not to say his name in case something in me might break. As a teen, it was the only way I knew to keep going, and I had never figured out how to survive another way.

At Ann and Lawrence's, I bore witness to many familiar things—funeral arrangements for a beloved son, the subsequent flight bookings. I saw both Ann and Lawrence separately endure the task of breaking the news to others, as I had seen my parents do—my stepmom and my dad, of course, and even my mom, who had brought my brother with us on trips and often invited him over to spend the night, even though he wasn't her *real* son.

I walked dogs. I tried to stay out of the way. Should I have left? Insisted on it?

I fielded phone calls and took coats from old friends and put flowers in vases, and I found myself unable to answer this question: "Oh, how are you related to Ann and Lawrence?" Who was I? Where was their *real* family?

I couldn't bring myself to say that I was someone who paid the two of them to dog sit. It was embarrassing. What would entitle someone like me—a client? a customer?—to be here, in the presence of something as intimate as their grief? I simply gestured to Clark and Pip, who gazed up at everyone with expectant grins, tails wagging. "Dogs," I'd say with a shrug, as if this explained something, and then I'd turn away, busy myself in order to avoid anyone's confusion.

I could not shake the feeling that my presence, my physical being, served as a reminder of the worst phone call, the worst night, in fact, of their lives. It was how I'd felt when my mother, father, and stepmother gathered for my important milestones, like prom or graduation—milestones my brother would never reach.

I'd be all dressed up, but it was as if I were naked, a big embarrassingly alive lump just making everyone sad.

Like sniffing smelling salts, Ann and Lawrence's pain made me remember the moment I'd stood over my fifteen-year-old brother's coffin, his skin slathered in heavy makeup to disguise the injuries. He'd been visiting his dad out West, and they were on a road trip. He'd called from a pay phone hours before he died, and I hated that I didn't say something to alter what happened. "Tell your dad to get a hotel room so he doesn't fall asleep at the wheel," or at the very least, "Wear your seatbelt." I could have let him finish the joke he was trying to make instead of cutting him off to say something I don't even remember.

I lay awake at night imagining the way Henry's body might have sailed through the air from his bicycle, the thoughts he might have had in those last instants, the crack of cranium on tarmac, the full gore of impact, the spilling of vital tissue. It was exactly what happened to my brother, whose body ejected through a windshield on a Texas interstate.

I pondered for the first time whether my parents might possibly have found my presence a comfort, not simply a reminder of what they'd lost. Substratal Me had not considered that the "burden" story might have been something I'd conjured. I wasn't a dirty stop-out for being alive. That's the thing about guilt. Its misdirection is light and elegant as feathers, obscuring with artistry the grief and love a person feels.

It was quiet except for the breeze. I surveyed the horizon. The rows of grapevines contained no angry farmer, no one charging over with a gun. I knelt down. I leaned over the inert chicken, searching for a way to scoop it up. I had not grown up in the country and had never been this close to a chicken before. The bird opened one eye. I gasped and flinched back. The eye was beady, as I would have pictured, but surprisingly shrewd, as if there were an intelligence behind it. The eye regarded me. Then it darted back and forth, a quick assessment of the area. The chicken didn't move a muscle, its little body perfectly still. Then the gaze settled back on me, a pointed look. Psst, the eye said. Hey, beat it. Or maybe what it said was, Look, numb nuts, can't you see I'm working on something here?

Whatever it said, I rose and backed away, and the chicken got up too, and then it ran, rather casually, toward the shelter of some trees.

"Hey!" I called back to Ann and Lawrence, who were still catching up, walking now across the field. "That chicken was faking."

"Oh yes," Ann called to me, a hand on her chest. I loved her silky white bobbed hair in the sunlight and the spray of freckles across her nose. "Chickens do play dead. Thank heavens."

Clark trotted over to greet the two of them, her whole rear end wagging with glee, not just her tail. Ann bent down to pat her, squinting her eyes like she always did when she laughed. "You daft girl. You daft, lucky girl."

She could have just as easily been talking to me.