

Stephen King "L.T.'S THEORY OF PETS"

My friend L.T. hardly ever talks about how his wife disappeared, or how she's probably dead, just another victim of the Axe Man, but he likes to tell the story of how she walked out on him. He does it with just the right roll of the eyes, as if to say, "She fooled me, boys-right, good, and proper!" He'll sometimes tell the story to a bunch of men sitting on one of the loading docks behind the plant and eating their lunches, him eating his lunch, too, the one he fixed for himself - no Lulubelle back at home to do it for him these days. They usually laugh when he tells the story, which always ends with L.T.'s Theory of Pets. Hell, I usually laugh. It's a funny story, even if you do know how it turned out. Not that any of us do, not completely.

"I punched out at four, just like usual," L.T. will say, "then went down to Deb's Den for a couple of beers, just like most days. Had a game of pinball, then went home. That was where things stopped being just like usual. When a person gets up in the morning, he doesn't have the slightest idea how much may have changed in his life by the time he lays his head down again that night. 'Ye know not the day or the hour,' the Bible says. I believe that particular verse is about dying, but it fits everything else, boys. Everything else in this world. You just never know when you're going to bust a fiddle-string.

"When I turn into the driveway I see the garage door's open and the little Subaru she brought to the marriage is gone, but that doesn't strike me as immediately peculiar. She was always driving off someplace - to a yard sale or someplace - and leaving the goddam garage door open. I'd tell her, 'Lulu, if you keep doing that long enough, someone'll eventually take advantage of it. Come in and take a rake or a bag of peat moss or maybe even the power mower. Hell, even a Seventh Day Adventist fresh out of college and doing his merit badge rounds will steal if you put enough temptation in his way, and that's the worst kind of person to tempt, because they feel it more than the rest of us.' Anyway, she'd always say, 'I'll do better, L.T., try, anyway, I really will, honey.' And she did do better, just backslid from time to time like any ordinary sinner.

"I park off to the side so she'll be able to get her car in when she comes back from wherever, but I close the garage door. Then I go in by way of the kitchen. I check the mailbox, but it's empty, the mail inside on the counter, so she must have left after eleven, because he don't come until at least then. The mailman, I mean.

"Well, Lucy's right there by the door, crying in that way Siamese have - I like that cry, think it's sort of cute, but Lulu always hated it, maybe because it sounds like a baby's cry and she didn't want anything to do with babies. 'What would I want with a rugmonkey?' she'd say.

"Lucy being at the door wasn't anything out of the ordinary, either. That cat loved my ass. Still does. She's two years old now. We got her at the start of the last year we were married. Right around. Seems impossible to believe Lulu's been gone a year, and we were only together three to start with. But Lulubelle was the type to make an impression on you. Lulubelle had what I have to call star quality. You know who she always reminded me of? Lucille Ball. Now that I think of it, I guess that's why I named the cat Lucy, although I don't remember thinking it at the time. It might have been what you'd call a subconscious association. She'd come into a room-Lulubelle, I mean, not the cat-and just light it up somehow. A person like that, when they're gone you can hardly believe it, and you keep expecting them to come back.

"Meanwhile, there's the cat. Her name was Lucy to start with, but Lulubelle hated the way she acted so much that she started calling her Screwlucy, and it kind of stuck. Lucy wasn't nuts, though, she only wanted to be loved. Wanted to be loved more than any other pet I ever had in my life, and I've had quite a few.

"Anyway, I come in the house and pick up the cat and pet her a little and she climbs up onto my shoulder and sits there, purring and talking her Siamese talk. I check the mail on the counter, put the bills in the basket, then go over to the fridge to get Lucy something to eat. I always keep a working can of cat food in there, with a piece of tinfoil over the top. Saves having Lucy get excited and digging her claws into my shoulder when she hears the can opener. Cats are smart, you know. Much smarter than dogs. They're different in other ways, too. It might be that the biggest division in the world isn't men and women but folks who like cats and folks who like dogs. Did any of

you pork-packers ever think of that?

"Lulu bitched like hell about having an open can of cat food in the fridge, even one with a piece of foil over the top, said it made everything in there taste like old tuna, but I wouldn't give in on that one. On most stuff I did it her way, but that cat food business was one of the few places where I really stood up for my rights. It didn't have anything to do with the cat food, anyway. It had to do with the cat. She just didn't like Lucy, that was all. Lucy was her cat, but she didn't like it.

"Anyway, I go over to the fridge, and I see there's a note on it, stuck there with one of the vegetable magnets. It's from Lulubelle. Best as I can remember, it goes like this:

" 'Dear L.T. - I am leaving you, honey. Unless you come home early, I will be long gone by the time you get this note. I don't think you will get home early, you have never got home early in all the time we have been married, but at least I know you'll get this almost as soon as you get in the door, because the first thing you always do when you get home isn't to come see me and say, "Hi sweet girl I'm home" and give me a kiss but go to the fridge and get whatever's left of the last nasty can of Calo you put in there and feed Screwlucy. So at least I know you won't just go upstairs and get shocked when you see my Elvis Last Supper picture is gone and my half of the closet is mostly empty and think we had a burglar who likes ladies' dresses (unlike some who only care about what is under them).

" 'I get irritated with you sometimes, honey, but I still think you re sweet and kind and nice, you will always be my little maple duff and sugar dumpling, no matter where our paths may lead. It's just that I have decided I was never cut out to be a Spam-packer's wife. I don't mean that in any conceited way, either. I even called the Psychic Hotline last week as I struggled with this decision, lying awake night after night (and listening to you snore, boy, I don't mean to hurt your feelings but have you ever got a snore on you), and I was given this message: "A broken spoon may become a fork." I didn't understand that at first, but I didn't give up on it. I am not smart like some people (or like some people think they are smart), but I work at things. The best mill grinds slow but exceedingly fine, my mother used to say, and I ground away at this like a pepper mill in a Chinese restaurant, thinking late at night while you snored and no doubt dreamed of how many pork-snouts you could get in a can of Spam. And it came to me that saying about how a broken spoon can become a fork is a beautiful thing to behold. Because a fork has tines. And those tines may have to separate, like you and me must now have to separate, but still they have the same handle. So do we. We are both human beings, L.T., capable of loving and respecting one another. Look at all the fights we had about Frank and Screwlucy, and still, we mostly managed to get along. Yet the time has now come for me to seek my fortune along different lines from yours, and to poke into the great roast of life with a different point from yours. Besides, I miss my mother."

(I can't say for sure if all this stuff was really in the note L.T. found on his fridge; it doesn't seem entirely likely, I must admit, but the men listening to his story would be rolling in the aisles by this point - or around on the loading dock, at least-and it did sound like Lulubelle, that I can testify to.)

" 'Please do not try to follow me, L.T., and although I'll be at MY mother's and I know you have that number, I would appreciate you not calling but waiting for me to call you. In time I will, but in the meanwhile I have a lot of thinking to do, and although I have gotten on a fair way with it, I'm not "out of the fog" yet. I suppose I will be asking you for a divorce eventually, and think it is only fair to tell you SO. I have never been one to hold out false hope, believing it better to tell the truth and smoke out the devil." Please remember that what I do I do in love, not in hatred and resentment. And please remember what was told to me and what I now tell to you: a broken spoon may be a fork in disguise. All my love, Lulubelle Simms.' "

L.T. would pause there, letting them digest the fact that she had gone back to her maiden name, and giving his eyes a few of those patented L.T. DeWitt rolls. Then he'd tell them the P.S. she'd tacked on the note.

" 'I have taken Frank with me and left Screwlucy for you. I thought this would probably be the way you'd want it. Love, Lulu.' "

If the DeWitt family was a fork, Screwluca and Frank were the other two tines on it. If there wasn't a fork (and speaking for myself, I've always felt marriage was more like a knife - the dangerous kind with two sharp edges), Screwluca and Frank could still be said to sum up everything that went wrong in the marriage of L.T. and Lulubelle. Because, think of it - although Lulubelle bought Frank for L.T. (first wedding anniversary) and L.T. bought Lucy, soon to be Screwluca, for Lulubelle (second wedding anniversary), they each wound up with the other. one's pets when Lulu walked out on the marriage.

"She got me that dog because I liked the one on Frasier," L.T. would say. "That kind of dog's a terrier, but I don't remember now what they call that kind. A Jack something. Jack Sprat? Jack Robinson? Jack Shit? You know how a thing like that gets on the tip of your tongue?"

Somebody would tell him that Frasier's dog was a Jack Russell terrier and L.T. would nod emphatically.

"That's right!" he'd exclaim. "Sure! Exactly! That's what Frank was, all right, a Jack Russell terrier. But you want to know the cold hard truth? An hour from now, that will have slipped away from me again - it'll be there in my brain, but like something behind a rock. An hour from now, I'll be going to myself, 'What did that guy say Frank was? A Jack Handle terrier? A Jack Rabbit terrier? That's close, I know that's close. . . 'And so on. Why? I think because I just hated that little fuck so much. That barking rat. That fur-covered shit machine. I hated it from the first time I laid eyes on it. There. It's out and I'm glad. And do you know what? Frank felt the same about me. It was hate at first sight.

"You know how some men train their dog to bring them their slippers? Frank wouldn't bring me my slippers, but he'd puke in them. Yes. The first time he did it, I stuck my right foot right into it. It was like sticking your foot into warm tapioca with extra big lumps in it. Although I didn't see him, my theory is that he waited outside the bedroom door until he saw me coming - fucking lurked outside the bedroom door - then went in, unloaded in my right slipper, then hid under the bed to watch the fun. I deduce that on the basis of how it was still warm. Fucking dog. Man's best friend, my ass. I wanted to take it to the pound after that, had the leash out and everything, but Lulu threw an absolute shit fit. You would have thought she'd come into the kitchen and caught me trying to give the dog a drain-cleaner enema.

" 'If you take Frank to the pound, you might as well take me to the pound,' she says, starting to cry. 'That's all you think of him, and that's all you think of me. Honey, all we are to you is nuisances you'd like to be rid of. That's the cold hard truth.' I mean, oh my bleeding piles, on and on.

" 'He puked in my slipper,' I says.

'The dog puked in his slipper so off with his head,' she says. 'Oh, sugarpie, if only you could hear yourself!'

" 'Hey,' I say, 'you try sticking your bare foot into a slipper filled with dog puke and see how you like it.' Getting mad by then, you know.

"Except getting mad at Lulu never did any good. Most times, if you had the king, she had the ace. If you had the ace, she had a trump. Also, the woman would fucking escalate. If something happened and I got irritated, she'd get pissed. If I got pissed, she'd get mad. If I got mad, she'd go fucking Red Alert Defcon I and empty the missile silos. I'm talking scorched flicking earth. Mostly it wasn't worth it. Except almost every time we'd get into a fight, I'd forget that.

"She goes, 'Oh dear. Maple duff stuck his wittle footie in a wittle spit-up.' I tried to get in there, tell her that wasn't right, spit-up is like drool, spit-up doesn't have these big flicking chunks in it, but she won't let me get a word out. By then she's over in the passing lane and cruising, all pumped up and ready to teach school.

'Let me tell you something, honey,' she goes, 'a little drool in your slipper is very minor stuff. You men slay me. Try being a woman sometimes, okay? Try always being the one that ends up laying with the small of your back in that come-spot, or the one that goes to the toilet in the middle of the night and the guy's left the goddam ring up and

you splash your can right down into this cold water. Little midnight skindiving. The toilet probably hasn't been flushed, either, men think the Urine Fairy comes by around two a.m. and takes care of that, and there you are, sitting crack-deep in piss, and all at once you realize your feet're in it, too, you're paddling around in Lemon Squirt because, although guys think they're dead-eye Dick with that thing, most can't shoot for shit, drunk or sober they gotta wash the goddam floor all around the toilet before they can even start the main event. All my life I've been living with this, honey - a father four brothers, one ex-husband, plus a few roommates that are none of your business at this late date-and you're ready to send poor Frank off to the gas factory because just one time he happened to reflux a little drool into your slipper.'

" 'My fur-lined slipper,' I tell her, but it's just a little shot back over my shoulder. One thing about living with Lulu, and maybe to my credit, I always knew when I was beat. When I lost, it was fucking decisive. One thing I certainly wasn't going to tell her even though I knew it for a fact was that the dog puked in my slipper on purpose, the same way that he peed on my underwear on purpose if I forgot to put it in the hamper before I went off to work. She could leave her bras and pants scattered around from hell to Harvard - and did - but if I left so much as a pair of athletic socks in the corner, I'd come home and find that fucking Jack Shit terrier had given it a lemonade shower. But tell her that? She would have been booking me time with a psychiatrist. She would have been doing that even though she knew it was true. Because then she might have had to take the stuff I was saying seriously, and she didn't want to. She loved Frank, you see, and Frank loved her. They were like Romeo and Juliet or Rocky and Adrian.

"Frank would come to her chair while we were watching TV, lie down on the floor beside her, and put his muzzle on her shoe. Just lie there like that all night, looking up at her, all soulful and loving and with his butt pointed in my direction so if he should have to blow a little gas, I'd get the full benefit of it. He loved her and she loved him. Why? Christ knows. Love's a mystery to everyone except the poets, I guess, and nobody sane can understand a thing they write about it. I don't think most of them can understand it themselves on the rare occasions when they wake up and smell the coffee.

"But Lulubelle never gave me that dog so she could have it, let's get that one thing straight. I know that some people do stuff like that - a guy'll give his wife a trip to Miami because he wants to go there, or a wife'll give her husband a NordicTrack because she thinks he ought to do something about his gut - but this wasn't that kind of deal. We were crazy in love with each other at the beginning; I know I was with her, and I'd stake my life she was with me. No, she bought that dog for me because I always laughed so hard at the one on Frasier. She wanted to make me happy, that's all. She didn't know Frank was going to take a shine to her, or her to him, no more than she knew the dog was going to dislike me so much that throwing up in one of my slippers or chewing the bottoms of the curtains on my side of the bed would be the high point of his day."

L.T. would look around at the grinning men, not grinning himself, but he'd give his eyes that knowing, long - suffering roll, and they'd laugh again, in anticipation. Me too, likely as not, in spite of what I knew about the Axe Man.

"I haven't ever been hated before," he'd say, "not by man or beast, and it unsettled me a lot. It unsettled me bigtime. I tried to make friends with Frank - first for my sake, then for the sake of her that gave him to me - but it didn't work. For all I know, he might've tried to make friends with me ... with a dog, who can tell? If he did, it didn't work for him, either. Since then I've read-in 'Dear Abby,' I think it was - that a pet is just about the worst present you can give a person, and I agree. I mean, even if you like the animal and the animal likes you, think about what that kind of gift says. 'Say, darling, I'm giving you this wonderful present, it's a machine that eats at one end and shits out the other, it's going to run for fifteen years, give or take, merry fucking Christmas.' But that's the kind of thing you only think about after, more often than not. You know what I mean?"

"I think we did try to do our best, Frank and I. After all, even though we hated each other's guts, we both loved Lulubelle. That's why, I think, that although he'd sometimes growl at me if I sat down next to her on the couch during Murphy Brown or a movie or something, he never actually bit. Still, it used to drive me crazy. Just the fucking nerve of it, that little bag of hair and eyes daring to growl at me. 'Listen to him,' I'd say, 'he's growling at me.'

"She'd stroke his head the way she hardly ever stroked mine, unless she'd had a few, and say it was really just a dog's version of purring. That he was just happy to be with us, having a quiet evening at home. I'll tell you something, though, I never tried patting him when she wasn't around. I'd feed him sometimes, and I never gave him a kick (although I was tempted a few times, I'd be a liar if I said different), but I never tried patting him. I think he would have snapped at me, and then we would have gotten into it. Like two guys living with the same pretty girl, almost. Menage a trois is what they call it in the Penthouse Forum. Both of us love her and she loves both of us, but as time goes by, I start realizing that the scales are tipping and she's starting to love Frank a little more than me. Maybe because Frank never talks back and never pukes in her slippers and with Frank the goddam toilet ring is never an issue, because he goes outside. Unless, that is, I forget and leave a pair of my shorts in the corner or under the bed."

At this point L.T. would likely finish off the iced coffee in his thermos, crack his knuckles, or both. It was his way of saying the first act was over and Act Two was about to commence.

"So then one day, a Saturday, Lulu and I are out to the mall. just walking around, like people do. You know. And we go by Pet Notions, up by J.C. Penney, and there's a whole crowd of people in front of the display window. 'Oh, let's see,' Lulu says, so we go over and work our way to the front.

"It's a fake tree with bare branches and fake grass - Astroturf all around it. And there are these Siamese kittens, half a dozen of them chasing each other around, climbing the tree, batting each other's ears.

'Oh ain' dey jus' da key-youtes ones!' Lulu says. 'Oh ain't dey jus' the key-youtest wittle babies! Look, honey, look!'

'I'm lookin',' I says, and what I'm thinking is that I just found what I wanted to get Lulu for our anniversary. And that was a relief. I wanted it to be something extra special, something that would really bowl her over, because things had been quite a bit short of great between us during the last year. I thought about Frank, but I wasn't too worried about him; cats and dogs always fight in the cartoons, but in real life they usually get along, that's been my experience. They usually get along better than people do. Especially when it's cold outside.

"To make a long story just a little bit shorter, I bought one of them and gave it to her on our anniversary. Got it a velvet collar, and tucked a little card under it. 'HELLO, I am LUCY! the card said. 'I come with love from L.T.! Happy second anniversary!'

"You probably know what I'm going to tell you now, don't you? Sure. It was just like goddamn Frank the terrier all over again, only in reverse. At first I was as happy as a pig in shit with Frank, and Lulubelle was as happy as a pig in shit with Lucy at first. Held her up over her head, talking that baby-talk to her, 'Oh yookit you, oh yookit my wittle pwecious, she so key-yout,' and so on and so on ... until Lucy let out a yowl and batted at the end of Lulubelle's nose. With her claws out, too. Then she ran away and hid under the kitchen table. Lulu laughed it off, like it was the funniest thing she'd ever had happen to her, and as key-yout as anything else a little kitten might do, but I could see she was miffed.

"Right then Frank came in. He'd been sleeping up in our room-at the foot of her side of the bed-but Lulu'd let out a little shriek when the kitten batted her nose, so he came down to see what the fuss was about.

"He spotted Lucy under the table right away and walked toward heir, sniffing the linoleum where she'd been.

'Stop them, honey, stop them, L.T., they're going to get into it,' Lulubelle says. 'Frank'll kill her.'

'Just let them alone a minute,' I says. 'See what happens.'

Lucy humped up her back the way cats do, but stood her ground and', watched him come. Lulu started forward, wanting to get in between them in spite of what I'd said

(listening up wasn't exactly one of Lulu's strong points), but I took her wrist and held her back. It's best to let them work it out between them, if you can. Always best. It's quicker.

"Well, Frank got to the edge of the table, poked his nose under, and started this low rumbling way back in his throat. 'Let me go, L.T. I got to get her,' Lulubelle says, 'Frank's growling at her.'

'No, he's not,' I say, 'he's just purring. I recognize it from all the times he's purred at me.'

"She gave me a look that would just about have boiled water, but didn't say anything. The only times in the three years we were married that I got the last word, it was always about Frank and Screwlucy. Strange but true. Any other subject, Lulu could talk rings around me. But when it came to the pets, it seemed she was always fresh out of comebacks. Used to drive her crazy.

"Frank poked his head under the table a little farther, and Lucy batted his nose the way she'd batted Lulubelle's - only when she batted Frank, she did it without popping her claws. I had an idea Frank would go for her, but he didn't. He just kind of whoofed and turned away. Not scared, more like he's thinking, 'Oh, okay, so that's what that's about.' Went back into the living room and laid down in front of the TV.

"And that was all the confrontation there ever was between them. They divvied up the territory pretty much the way that Lulu and I divvied it up that last year we spent together, when things were getting bad; the bedroom belonged to Frank and Lulu, the kitchen belonged to me and Lucy - only by Christmas, Lulubelle was calling her Screwlucy - and the living room was neutral territory. The four of us spent a lot of evenings there that last year, Screwlucy on my lap, Frank with his muzzle on Lulu's shoe, us humans on the couch, Lulubelle reading a book and me watching Wheel of Fortune or Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, which Lulubelle always called Lifestyles of the Rich and Topless.

"The cat wouldn't have a thing to do with her, not from day one. Frank, every now and then you could get the idea Frank was at least trying to get along with me. His nature would always get the better of him in the end and he'd chew up one of my sneakers or take another leak on my underwear, but every now and then it did seem like he was putting forth an effort. Lap my hand, maybe give me a grin. Usually if I had a plate of something he wanted a bite of.

"Cats are different, though. A cat won't curry favor even if it's in their best interests to do so. A cat can't be a hypocrite. If more preachers were like cats, this would be a religious country again. If a cat likes you, you know. If she doesn't, you know that, too. Screwlucy never liked Lulu, not one whit, and she made it clear from the start. If I was getting ready to feed her, Lucy'd rub around my legs, purring, while I spooned it up and dumped it in her dish. If Lulu fed her, Lucy'd sit all the way across the kitchen, in front of the fridge, watching her. And wouldn't go to the dish until Lulu had cleared off. It drove Lulu crazy. 'That cat thinks she's the Queen of Sheba,' she'd say. By then she'd given up the baby-talk. Given up picking Lucy up, too. If she did, she'd get her wrist scratched, more often than not.

"Now, I tried to pretend I liked Frank and Lulu tried to pretend she liked Lucy, but Lulu gave up pretending a lot sooner than I did. I guess maybe neither one of them, the cat or the woman, could stand being a hypocrite. I don't think Lucy was the only reason Lulu left hell, I know it wasn't - but I'm sure Lucy helped Lulubelle make her final decision. Pets can live a long time, you know. So the present I got her for our second was really the straw that broke the camel's back. Tell that to 'Dear Abby'!

"The cat's talking was maybe the worst, as far as Lulu was concerned. She couldn't stand it. One night Lulubelle says to me, 'If that cat doesn't stop yowling, L.T., I think I'm going to hit it with an encyclopedia.'

" 'That's not yowling,' I said, 'that's chatting.'

" 'Well,' Lulu says, - 'I wish it would stop chatting.'

"And right about then, Lucy jumped up into my lap and she did shut up. She always did,

except for a little low purring, way back in her throat. Purring that really was purring. I scratched her between her ears like she likes, and I happened to look up. Lulu turned her eyes back down on her book, but before she did, what I saw was real hate. Not for me. For Screwluca. Throw an encyclopedia at it? She looked like she'd like to stick the cat between two encyclopedias and just kind of clap it to death.

Sometimes Lulu would come into the kitchen and catch the cat up on the table and swat it off. I asked her once if she'd ever seen me swat Frank off the bed that way - he'd get up on it, you know, always on her side, and leave these nasty tangles of white hair. When I said that, Lulu gave me a kind of grin. Her teeth were showing, anyway. 'If you ever tried, you'd find yourself a finger or three shy, most likely,' she says.

"Sometimes Lucy really was Screwluca. Cats are moody, and sometimes they get manic; anyone who's ever had one will tell you that. Their eyes get big and kind of glary, their tails bush out, they go racing around the house; sometimes they'll rear right up on their back legs and prance, boxing at the air, like they're fighting with something they can see but human beings can't. Lucy got into a mood like that one night when she was about a year old - couldn't have been more than three weeks from the day when I come home and found Lulubelle gone.

"Anyway, Lucy came pelting in from the kitchen, did a kind of racing slide on the wood floor, jumped over Frank, and went skittering up the living room drapes, paw over paw. Left some pretty good holes in them, with threads hanging down. Then she just perched at the top on the rod, staring around the room with her blue eyes all big and wild and the tip of her tail snapping back and forth.

"Frank only jumped a little and then put his muzzle back on Lulubelle's shoe, but the cat scared the hell out of Lulubelle, who was deep in her book, and when she looked up at the cat, I could see that outright hate in her eyes again.

All right,' she said, 'that's enough. Everybody out of the goddam pool. We're going to find a good home for that little blue-eyed bitch, and if we're not smart enough to find a home for a purebred Siamese, we're going to take her to the animal shelter. I've had enough.'

" 'What do you mean?' I ask her.

" 'Are you blind?' she asks. 'Look what she did to my drapes I They're full of holes!'

'You want to see drapes with holes in them,' I say, 'why don't you go upstairs and look at the ones on my side of the bed. The bottoms are all ragged. Because he chews them.'

'That's different,' she says, glaring at me. 'That's different and you know it.'

"Well, I wasn't going to let that lie. No way I was going to let that one lie. 'The only reason you think it's different is because you like the dog you gave me and you don't like the cat I gave you,' I says. 'But I'll tell you one thing, Mrs. DeWitt: you take the cat to the animal shelter for clawing the living room drapes on Tuesday, I guarantee you I'll take the dog to the animal shelter for chewing the bedroom drapes on Wednesday. You got that?'

"She looked at me and started to cry. She threw her book at me and called me a bastard. A mean bastard. I tried to grab hold of her, make her stay long enough for me to at least try to make up - if there was a way to make up without backing down, which I didn't mean to do that time - but she pulled her arm out of my hand and ran out of the room. Frank ran out after her. They went upstairs and the bedroom door slammed.

"I gave her half an hour or so to cool off, then I went upstairs myself. The bedroom door was still shut, and when I started to open it, I was pushing against Frank. I could move him, but it was slow work with him sliding across the floor, and also noisy work. He was growling. And I mean growling, my friends; that was no fucking purr. If I'd gone in there, I believe he would have tried his solemn best to bite my manhood off. I slept on the couch that night. First time.

"A month later, give or take, she was gone."

If L.T. had timed his story right (most times he did; practice makes perfect), the bell signaling back to work at the W.S. Hepperton Processed Meats Plant of Ames, Iowa, would ring just about then, sparing him any questions from the new men (the old hands knew. . . and knew better than to ask) about whether or not L.T. and Lulubelle had reconciled, or if he knew where she was today, or - the all-time sixty-four-thousand-dollar question - if she and Frank were still together. There's nothing like the back-to-work bell to close off life's more embarrassing questions.

"Well," L.T. would say, putting away his thermos and then standing up and giving a stretch, "it has all led me to create what I call L.T. DeWitt's Theory of Pets."

They'd look at him expectantly, just as I had the first time I heard him use that grand phrase, but they would always end up feeling let down, just as I always had; a story that good deserved a better punchline, but L.T.'s never changed.

"If your dog and cat are getting along better than you and your wife," he'd say, "you better expect to come home some night and find a Dear John note on your refrigerator door."

He told that story a lot, as I've said, and one night when he came to my house for dinner, he told it for my wife and my wife's sister. My wife had invited Holly, who had been divorced almost two years, so the boys and the girls would balance up. I'm sure that's all it was, because Roslyn never liked L.T. DeWitt. Most people do, most people take to him like hands take to warm water, but Roslyn has never been most people. She didn't like the story of the note on the fridge and the pets, either - I could tell she didn't, although she chuckled in the right places. Holly ... shit, I don't know. I've never been able to tell what that girl's thinking. Mostly just sits there with her hands in her lap, smiling like Mona Lisa. It was my fault that time, though, and I admit it. L.T. didn't want to tell it, but I kind of egged him on because it was so quiet around the dinner table, just the click of silverware and the clink of glasses, and I could almost feel my wife disliking L.T. It seemed to be coming off her in waves. And if L.T. had been able to feel that little Jack Russell terrier disliking him, he would probably be able to feel my wife doing the same. That's what I figured, anyhow.

So he told it, mostly to please me, I suppose, and he rolled his eyeballs in all the right places, as if saying "Gosh, she fooled me right and proper, didn't she?" and my wife chuckled here and there - they sounded as phony to me as Monopoly money looks - and Holly smiled her little Mona Lisa smile with her eyes downcast. Otherwise the dinner went off all right, and when it was over L.T. told Roslyn that he thanked her for "a sportin'-fine meal" (whatever that is) and she told him to come any time, she and I liked to see his face in the place. That was a lie on her part, but I doubt there was ever a dinner party in this history of the world where a few lies weren't told. So it went off all right, at least until I was driving him home. L.T. started to talk about how it would be a year Lulubelle had been gone in just another week or so, their fourth anniversary, which is flowers if you're old-fashioned and electrical appliances if you're newfangled. Then he said as how Lulubelle's mother - at whose house Lulubelle had never shown up - was going to put up a marker with Lulubelle's name on it at the local cemetery. "Mrs. Simms says we have to consider her as one dead," L.T. said, and then he began to bawl. I was so shocked I nearly ran off the goddam road.

He cried so hard that when I was done being shocked, I began to be afraid all that pent-up grief might kill him with a stroke or a burst blood vessel or something. He rocked back and forth in the seat and slammed his open hands down on the dashboard. It was like there was a twister loose inside him. Finally I pulled over to the side of the road and began patting his shoulder. I could feel the heat of his skin right through his shirt, so hot it was baking.

"Come on, L.T.," I said. "That's enough."

"I just miss her," he said in a voice so thick with tears I could barely understand what he was saying. "Just so goddam much. I come home and there's no one but the cat, crying and crying, and pretty soon I'm crying, too, both of us crying while I fill up her dish with that goddam muck she eats."

He turned his flushed, streaming face full on me. Looking back into it was almost more than I could take, but I did take it; felt I had to take it. Who had gotten him telling the story about Lucy and Frank and the note on the refrigerator that night, after all?

It hadn't been Mike Wallace, or Dan Rather, that was for sure. So I looked back at him. I didn't quite dare hug him, in case that twister should somehow jump from him to me, but I kept patting his arm.

"I think she's alive somewhere, that's what I think," he said. His voice was still thick and wavery, but there was a kind of pitiful weak defiance in it as well. He wasn't telling me what he believed, but what he wished he could believe. I'm pretty sure of that.

"Well," I said, "you can believe that. No law against it, is there? And it isn't as if they found her body, or anything."

"I like to think of her out there in Nevada singing in some little casino hotel," he said. "Not in Vegas or Reno, she couldn't make it in one of the big towns, but in Winnemucca or Ely I'm pretty sure she could get by. Some place like that. She just saw a Singer Wanted sign and give up her idea of going home to her mother. Hell, the two of them never got on worth a shit anyway, that's what Lu used to say. And she could sing, you know. I don't know if you ever heard her, but she could. I don't guess she was great, but she was good. The first time I saw her, she was singing in the lounge of the Marriott Hotel. In Columbus, Ohio, that was. Or, another possibility..."

He hesitated, then went on in a lower voice.

"Prostitution is legal out there in Nevada, you know. Not in all the counties, but in most of them. She could be working one of them Green Lantern trailers or the Mustang Ranch. Lots of women have got a streak of whore in them. Lu had one. I don't mean she stepped around on me, or slept around on me, so I can't say how I know, but I do. She ... yes, she could be in one of those places."

He stopped, eyes distant, maybe imagining Lulubelle on a bed in the back room of a Nevada trailer whorehouse, Lulubelle wearing nothing but stockings, washing off some unknown cowboy's stiff cock while from the other room came the sound of Steve Earle and the Dukes singing "Six Days on the Road" or a TV playing Hollywood Squares. Lulubelle whoring but not dead, the car by the side of the road - the little Subaru she had brought to the marriage - meaning nothing. The way an animal's look, so seemingly attentive, usually means nothing.

"I can believe that if I want," he said, swiping his swollen eyes with insides of his wrists.

"Sure," I said. "You bet, L.T." Wondering what the grinning men who listened to his story while they ate their lunches would make of this L.T., this shaking man with his pale cheeks and red eyes and hot skin.

"Hell," he said, I do believe that." He hesitated, then said it again: "I do believe that."

When I got back, Roslyn was in bed with a book in her hand and the covers pulled up to her breasts. Holly had gone home while I was driving L.T. back to his house. Roslyn was in a bad mood, and I found out why soon enough. The woman behind the Mona Lisa smile had been quite taken with my friend. Smitten by him, maybe. And my wife most definitely did not approve.

"How did he lose his license?" she asked, and before I could answer: "Drinking, wasn't it?"

"Drinking, yes. OUM' I sat down on my side of the bed and slipped off my shoes. "But that was nearly six months ago, and if he keeps his nose clean another two months, he gets it back. I think he will. He goes to AA, you know."

My wife grunted, clearly not impressed. I took off my shirt, sniffed the armpits, hung it back in the closet. I'd only worn it an hour or two, just for dinner.

"You know," my wife said, I think it's a wonder the police didn't look a little more closely at him after his wife disappeared."

"They asked him some questions," I said, "but only to get as much information as they

could. There was never any question of him doing it, Ros. They were never suspicious of him."

"Oh, you're so sure."

"As a matter of fact, I am. I know some stuff. Lulubelle called her mother from a hotel in eastern Colorado the day she left, and called her again from Salt Lake City the next day. She was fine then. Those were both weekdays, and L.T. was at the plant. He was at the plant the day they found her car parked off that ranch road near Caliente as well. Unless he can magically transport himself from place to place in the blink of an eye, he didn't kill her. Besides, he wouldn't. He loved her."

She grunted. It's this hateful sound of skepticism she makes sometimes. After almost thirty years of marriage, that sound still makes me want to turn on her and yell at her to stop it, to shit or get off the pot, either say what she means or keep quiet. This time I thought about telling her how L.T. had cried; how it had been like there was a cyclone inside of him, tearing loose everything that wasn't nailed down. I thought about it, but I didn't. Women don't trust tears from men. They may say different, but down deep they don't trust tears from men.

"Maybe you ought to call the police yourself," I said. "Offer them a little of your expert help. Point out the stuff they missed, just like Angela Lansbury on Murder, She Wrote"

I swung my legs into bed. She turned off the light. We lay there in darkness. When she spoke again, her tone was gentler.

"I don't like him. That's all. I don't, and I never have."

"Yeah," I said. I guess that's clear."

"And I didn't like the way he looked at Holly."

Which meant, as I found out eventually, that she hadn't liked the way Holly looked at him. When she wasn't looking down at her plate, that is.

"I'd prefer you didn't ask him back to dinner," she said.

I kept quiet. It was late. I was tired. It had been a hard day, a harder evening, and I was tired. The last thing I wanted was to have an argument with my wife when I was tired and she was worried. That's the sort of argument where one of you ends up spending the night on the couch. And the only way to stop an argument like that is to be quiet. In a marriage, words are like rain. And the land of a marriage is filled with dry washes and arroyos that can become raging rivers in almost the wink of an eye. The therapists believe in talk, but most of them are either divorced or queer. It's silence that is a marriage's best friend.

Silence.

After a while, my best friend rolled over on her side, away from me and into the place where she goes when she finally gives up the day. I lay awake a little while longer, thinking of a dusty little car, perhaps once white, parked nose-down in the ditch beside a ranch road out in the Nevada desert not too far from Caliente. The driver's side door standing open, the rearview mirror torn off its post and lying on the floor, the front seat sodden with blood and tracked over by the animals that had come in to investigate, perhaps to sample.

There was a man - they assumed he was a man, it almost always is - who had butchered five women out in that part of the world, five in three years, mostly during the time L.T. had been living with Lulubelle. Four of the women were transients. He would get them to stop somehow, then pull them out of their cars, rape them, dismember them with an axe, leave them a rise or two away for the buzzards and crows and weasels. The fifth one was an elderly rancher's wife. The police call this killer the Axe Man. As I write this, the Axe Man has not been captured. Nor has he killed again; if Cynthia Lulubelle Simms DeWitt was the Axe Man's sixth victim, she was also his last, at least so far. There is still some question, however, as to whether or not she was his sixth victim. If not in most minds' that question exists in the part of L.T.'s mind which is still

allowed to hope.

The blood on the seat wasn't human blood, you see; it didn't take the Nevada State Forensics Unit five hours to determine that. The ranch hand who found Lulubelle's Subaru saw a cloud of circling birds half a mile away, and when he reached them, he found not a dismembered woman but a dismembered dog. Little was left but bones and teeth; the predators and scavengers had had their day, and there's not much meat on a Jack Russell terrier to begin with. The Axe Man most definitely got Frank; Lulubelle's fate is probable, but far from certain.

Perhaps, I thought, she is alive. Singing "Tie a Yellow Ribbon" at The Jailhouse in Ely or "Take a Message to Michael" at The Rose of Santa Fe in Hawthorne. Backed up by a three-piece combo. Old men trying to look young in red vests and black string ties. Or maybe she's blowing GM cowboys in Austin or Wendover - bending forward until her breasts press flat on her thighs beneath a calendar showing tulips in Holland; gripping set after set of flabby buttocks in her hands and thinking about what to watch on TV that night, when her shift is done. Perhaps she just pulled over to the side of the road and walked away. People do that. I know it, and probably you do, too. Sometimes people just say fuck it and walk away. Maybe she left Frank behind, thinking someone would come along and give him a good home, only it was the Axe Man who came along, and...

But no. I met Lulubelle, and for the life of me I can't see her leaving a dog to most likely roast to death or starve to death in the barrens. Especially not a dog she loved the way she loved Frank. No, L.T. hadn't been exaggerating about that; I saw them together, and I know.

She could still be alive somewhere. Technically speaking, at least, L.T.'s right about that. Just because I can't think of a scenario that would lead from that car with the door hanging open and the rearview mirror lying on the floor and the dog lying dead and crow-picked two rises away, just because I can't think of a scenario that would lead from that place near Caliente to some other place where Lulubelle Simms sings or sews or blows truckers, safe and unknown, well, that doesn't mean that no such scenario exists. As I told L.T., it isn't as if they found her body; they just found her car, and the remains of the dog a little way from the car. Lulubelle herself could be anywhere. You can see that.

I couldn't sleep and I felt thirsty. I got out of bed, went into the bathroom, and took the toothbrushes out of the glass we keep by the sink. I filled the glass with water. Then I sat down on the closed lid of the toilet and drank the water and thought about the sound that Siamese cats make, that weird crying, how it must sound good if you love them, how it must sound like coming home.