

ROXIE

by Robert Reed

In “Roxie,” Robert Reed poignantly depicts the tragedy of death and the wondrous gift of life. Commenting on the story, he tells us that, “while my daughter is lobbying hard for a new dog, I have, so far, resisted every urge.”

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She wakes me at five minutes before five in the morning, coming into the darkened bedroom with tags clinking and claws skating across the old oak floor, and then she uses a soft whine that nobody else will hear.

I sit up and pull myself to the end of the bed, dressing in long pants and new walking shoes—the old shoes weren’t helping my balky arch and Achilles—and then I stop at the bathroom before pulling a warm jacket from the front closet. My dog keeps close track of my progress. In her step and the big eyes is enthusiasm and single-minded focus. At the side door, I tell her to sit and hold still please, and in the dark, I fasten the steel pinch collar and six-foot leash around a neck that has grown alarmingly thin.

Anymore our walks are pleasant, even peaceful events—no more hard tugging or challenging other dogs. A little after five in the morning, early in March, the world is black and quiet beneath a cold, clear sky. Venus is brilliant, the moon cut thin. Crossing the empty four-lane road to the park, we move south past the soccer field and then west, and then south again on a narrow asphalt sidewalk. A hundred dogs pass this ground daily. The city has leash laws, and I have always obeyed them. But the clean-up laws are new, and only a fraction of the dog-walkers carry plastic sacks and flashlights. Where my dog has pooped for thirteen years, she poops now, and I kneel to stare at what she has done, convincing myself that the stool is reasonably firm, if exceptionally fragrant.

A good beginning to our day.

We continue south to a set of white wooden stairs. She doesn’t like stairs anymore, but she climbs them easily enough. Then we come back again on the wide bike path—a favorite stretch of hers. In the spring, rabbits will nest in the mowed grass, and every year she will find one or several little holes stuffed with tiny, half-formed bunnies.

On this particular morning, nothing is caught and killed.

An older man and his German shepherd pass us on the sidewalk below. Tony is a deep-voiced gentleman who usually waves from a distance and chats when we're close. He loves to see Roxie bounce about, and she very much likes him. But in the darkness he doesn't notice us, and I'm not in the mood to shout. He moves ahead and crosses the four-lane road, and when we reach that place, Roxie pauses, smelling where her friend has just been and leaking a sorry little whine.

Home again, I pill my dog. She takes Proin to control bedwetting, plus half a metronidazole to fight diarrhea. She used to take a full metro, but there was an endless night a few weeks ago when she couldn't rest, not indoors or out. She barked at nothing, which is very strange for her. Maybe a high-pitched sound was driving her mad. But our vet warned that she could have a tendency toward seizures, and the metro can increase their likelihood and severity. Which is why I pulled her back to just half a pill in the morning.

I pack the medicine into a handful of canned dog food, stinky and prepared with the senior canine in mind. She waits eagerly and gobbles up the treat in a bite, happily licking the linoleum where I dropped it, relishing that final taste.

Before six in the morning, I pour orange juice and go down to my basement office. My PC boots up without incident. I discover a fair amount of e-mail, none of it important. Then I start jumping between sites that offer a good look at science and world events. *Sky and Telescope* has a tiny article about an asteroid of uncertain size and imprecise orbit. But after a couple of nights of observation, early estimates describe an object that might be a kilometer in diameter, and in another two years, it seems that this intruder will pass close to the Earth, bringing with it a one-in-six-thousand chance of an impact.

“But that figure won't stand up,” promises one astronomer. “This happens all the time. Once we get more data, this danger is sure to evaporate to nothing.”

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My future wife was a reporter for the Omaha newspaper. I knew her because in those days, a lot of my friends were reporters. On a sultry summer evening, she and I went to the same Fourth of July party; over

the smell of gunpowder, Leslie mentioned that she'd recently bought a husky puppy.

Grinning, I admitted that I'd always been intrigued by sled dogs.

"You should come meet Roxie sometime," she said.

"Why Roxie?" I asked.

"Foxy Roxie," she explained. "She's a red husky. To me, she sort of looks like an enormous fox."

Her dog was brownish red and white, with a dark red mask across her narrow face, accenting her soulful blue eyes. Leslie wasn't home when I first visited, but her dog was in the backyard, absolutely thrilled to meet me. (Huskies are the worst guard dogs in the world.) Roxie was four or five months old, with a short coat and a big, long-legged frame. Sitting behind the chain-link gate, she licked the salt off my offered fingers. And then she hunkered down low, feigning submission. But her human was elsewhere, and I didn't want the responsibility of opening gates and possibly letting this wolfish puppy escape. So I walked away, triggering a string of plaintive wails that caused people for a mile in every direction to ask, "Now who's torturing that poor, miserable creature?"

Leslie and I started dating in late October. But the courtship always had a competitive triangular feel about it.

My new girlfriend worked long hours and drove a two-hour commute to and from Omaha. She didn't have enough time for a hyperactive puppy. Feeling sorry for both of them, I would drop by to tease her dog with brief affections. Or if I stayed the night, I'd get up at some brutally early hour—before seven o'clock, some mornings—and dripping with fatigue, I'd join the two of them on a jaunt through the neighborhood and park and back again.

In those days, Roxie lived outside as much as she lived in. But the backyard gate proved inadequate; using her nose, she would easily flip the latch up and out of the way. Tying the latch only bought a few more days of security. Leaping was easy work, and a four-foot chain-link fence was no barrier at all. A series of ropes and lightweight chains were used and discarded. Finally Leslie went to a farm supply store and bought a steel chain strong enough to yank cars out of ditches. Years later, a friend from Alaska visited, and I asked sheepishly if our chain was overkill. No,

it was pretty standard for sled dogs, she conceded. Then she told me what I already knew: “These animals love to run.”

One morning, somebody’s dog was barking, and Leslie asked me to make sure it wasn’t hers. Peering out the dining room window, I found a beautiful red-and-white husky dancing on the patio, happy as can be.

“It’s not your dog,” I told my girlfriend.

Even burdened with the heavy chain, Roxie had killed a squirrel, and now she was happily flinging the corpse into the air and catching it again. The game was delicious fun until the limp squirrel fell out of reach, and then the wailing began. I got dressed and found a shovel in the garage, and when I picked up her prize by its tail, the dog leaped happily. Oh, I was saving her day! But with the first spade of earth, she saw my betrayal for what it was, and the wailing grew exponentially.

Two nights later, Leslie called for help. Again, her dog had killed an animal. She didn’t know what kind; despite being a farmer’s kid, Leslie has an exceptionally weak stomach, and she didn’t want to look too closely. But if I could drop over and take care of the situation....

It was late, and I was very tired. But I stopped by that next afternoon, when no humans were home. A half-grown opossum was baking in the sun. Using my growing puddle of wisdom, I gave my girlfriend’s dog a quick walk and put her inside before burying the bloated body. Then I let Roxie back out on her chain, and she hurried to the spot where the opossum had been, sniffing and digging, and then flinging herself down on her back to roll on the ripe, wondrous ground.

After a year of dating, I moved in with both of them, and that next spring, Leslie and I dug a pond below the patio. That’s where we found the opossum’s grave. Rot and time had eaten the flesh from the skull, and I put the prize in a little jar that I set on a shelf in the spare bedroom that had become my office.

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After several days, the new asteroid surfaces again on the Web, this time wearing an official designation. The bolide is found to be exceptionally dark, lending evidence that this could be a short-term comet with most of its volatiles bled away. A tiny albedo means it must be larger than it appears in the images. Two black kilometers across, and maybe more. As promised, the one-in-six-thousand chance of an impact

has been discarded. Extra data allow astronomers to plot a lovely elliptical orbit that reaches out past Saturn and then dives inside the Earth's orbit. Calculations are still in flux, I read online. If the object starts to act like a comet, watery fountains and gaseous vents will slow it down or speed it up, depending on chaotic factors. These are complications that will mean much, or nothing. But for the moment, the odds of an impact with the Earth have shifted by a factor of twenty.

“One-in-three-hundred,” I read at the **ScienceDaily** site.

In other words, it is easier to fill an inside straight in poker. And if the object's trajectory makes any substantial change, the chance of an impact will probably—probably—drop to one-in-infinity.

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I grew up with black Labradors in the house. They were docile animals, a little foolish but always good-hearted, and each one began his day by asking, “How can I make my owner proud of me?”

No husky thinks in those subservient, dim-witted terms.

Leslie grew up on a farm full of dogs and cats, but those pets lived outdoors. Because of that and because she wasn't home during the day, she'd had limited success housebreaking Roxie. Of course I like to tell myself that once I had moved in, the chaos turned to discipline. But the truth is a more complex, less edifying business: To make certain our dog was drained in the morning, I walked her. Since I worked at home, taking Roxie outside for the midday pee was easily done. And when my girlfriend was tired in the evening, I would throw a thirty-foot lead on the beast and take her up to the park and back again.

But “Who trained who?” is a valid question.

The evening walk came after the human dinner. When I put down the fork, the dog would begin to whine and leap, sometimes poking me in the gut with her paw. Disciplining her was endless work, and often futile. She was too quick to grab, too graceful to corral. One night, watching some favorite TV show, I got a little too clever and lured her out of the basement. Then after a few words about what a spoiled bitch she was, I shut the door between us, and after a few seconds of loud thumping, the house went quiet. At the first commercial break, I peeked through the door to find my dog sitting in the kitchen, waiting patiently. “Good girl,” I said, and as a reward, I let her come downstairs. She sat at my feet, as

patient as I had ever seen her act, sometimes glancing my way with an expression full of meanings that I couldn't quite read.

When I went upstairs again, I discovered what she had done. In my office, on the throw rug, she had emptied her bladder. Here was a message, and the lesson was learned; after that, our walks were a priority, and I tried to avoid treating her like inconvenient luggage.

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The dead comet surfaces in newspaper articles and on television. Its soulless official designation has been replaced by "Shelby," which happens to be the off-the-cuff name given to it by its discoverers. The odds of an impact are fluctuating between one-in-three-hundred and one-in-one-thousand, depending on the expert being quoted. But even the most alarming voice sounds calm, particularly when he or she repeats the undeniable truth: The bolide is a long ways out and still traveling toward the Sun. Any day now, Shelby will start to vent, and its orbit will shift some significant distance.

Meanwhile, what has been an unnaturally mild winter ends with a single heavy snow. Fifteen wet inches fall in less than a day. Cars wear white pillars. The warm earth melts the first several inches, but what remains is impressive. With my four-year-old daughter's help, I build a snowman in the front yard—my first snowman in forty years. And Roxie appreciates the snow, though she can't leap into those places that aren't plowed or shoveled. For several days, our walks are limited to the plowed streets, and it takes persistence and some coaxing before she finds a place worthy of her poop.

I still run with her on the cool days. For several years, we haven't gone farther than a mile. There is one course she accepts without complaint, knowing the turnaround point to the inch. One blustery afternoon, when the last snow has melted, I take her into a stand of old pines growing beside the park's nine-hole golf course, and then I lure her past that point, tricking her into running a course that is slightly longer than normal.

Together, we maintain a comfortable nine-minute gait. And at the one-mile mark, almost exactly, she begins to limp. She looks pained and pitiful, right up to the moment when we start to walk home, and then her limp vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

A few days later, she wakes me at four-thirty in the morning. Our walk is uneventful, but I can't relax when I come home. Online, I jump to the **NewScientist** site, reading that somebody has uncovered photographic plates taken several decades ago. These old images show Shelby moping along near its perigee—a forgotten speck moving just outside Venus' orbit. Astronomers now have fresh data to plug into their equations, refining their predictions. And more important, they don't see any evidence of a coma or tail. During its last fiery summer, this old comet didn't spill any significant volatiles.

Worse still, between then and now our bolide has been moving along an exceptionally predictable line.

Overnight, the odds of an impact with the Earth have shifted, jumping from a comforting one-in-three-hundred, at their very worst, to a one-miserable-chance-in-thirteen.

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I used to be a semi-fast runner, and except in summer, Roxie was good for a six-or eight-mile adventure. And in late fall and winter, when temperatures dipped to a bearable chill, we would run twelve miles at a shot, or farther. She adored the snow. I think she knew every course by heart, even when drifts obscured the trails. We ran with human friends, and she always worked harder around new people, trying to impress them. But the real fun was to get out and smell the smells, and she relished her chances to pee against fresh trees and important fences.

Roxie often lifted one hind leg like a boy dog would; but better than that, she occasionally did the canine equivalent of a handstand, throwing her piss high to fool strange dogs into thinking, “What a big bad bitch was here!”

And she was exceptionally competitive. When we saw another dog up ahead, or human runners, or even a slow cyclist, it was critically important to put on a sprint and pass your opponent. And not only pass them, but look back at them too, laughing happily, flashing the canine equivalent of a “Beat your ass” grin.

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People who know me—family and friends, and even passing acquaintances—start to ask, “What do you think the real odds are?”

Of an impact, they mean.

Sad to say, being a science fiction writer doesn't give a person special knowledge. It should, but it doesn't. All I can offer is the standard figure. One-in-thirteen. The most likely scenario is that Shelby will cross the Earth's orbit at a distance far closer to us than we are to the moon. If there is a collision, it will happen in a little less than two years: On March 11, at approximately 3:45 AM local time. And because of the orbital dynamics, if the object does strike, it will plunge down somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere.

But like the talking heads on television, I remind my audience that these numbers are certain to change.

In mid-April, I am a guest at a little SF convention held at one of our state colleges. Going in, I imagine an event where people talk openly about murderous asteroids and comets. But I keep forgetting that most fans today read nothing but fantasy and media tie-in books. They don't want to invest much breath in what is a very depressing subject. And the rest of us—including me, I discover—have convinced ourselves that in the end, nothing will come of this.

I enjoy the convention. Best of all, I relish the change in routine: I don't have a dog to listen for in the wee hours. I can sleep all the way to a lazy seven-thirty, if I want. Though I can't manage that trick, since my body isn't geared for so much leisure.

On Monday morning, I retrieve my dog from the kennel. As always, Roxie gives me a quick hello before heading for the car. Her poop has been fine, I learn, and she's eaten every pill and every bite of food that I brought for her.

The week turns summery warm. On Thursday morning, at one o'clock, I jump awake when Roxie begins to lick herself. She isn't licking her privates, but instead she is obsessively wetting down her paws and legs, working hard until she has to stop to pant. Then she climbs to her feet and gets a drink from the toilet, then returns to the bedroom to lick her legs some more.

I could push her into the hall and shut the door, but that would only make her whine. So I lie awake for two or three hours, thinking about work. I play with unfinished stories. I dance with a novel that still hasn't sold. And when I don't have anything else to consider, I think about

Shelby. If this is the murderer of human civilization, doesn't the bastard deserve a better name?

By four in the morning, I am exhausted and anxious.

Shutting the windows, I turn on the air conditioning. The cool air doesn't seem to help my dog, but at least the noise covers up the sounds of licking. And by four-thirty, I manage to drift into sleep, fifteen minutes of dreamy slumber enjoyed before Roxie comes to the foot of the bed and starts to whine.

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One winter, my dog took an extraordinary interest in one portion of a local bike path. The path dove under a bridge. That bridge had three tunnels. The pedestrian tunnel was narrow and dark. Beside it was a wider tunnel where a peaceful stream flowed through. And on the far side was a second, equally wide tunnel meant for the overflow during high water. I usually gave Roxie a chance to drink, but suddenly she got it into her head that we needed to investigate the far tunnel. She would stand in the freezing creek, looking back at me with a questioning insistence. This was important; this mattered. We really need to cross over here, she was telling me. But there was no way to convince me to wade through shin-deep water, only to reach an empty tunnel floored with packed clay and trash.

More than most humans, my dog is woven into her world. Drop a cardboard box anywhere near the bike path, and she will leap and woof until she is convinced that the new object isn't dangerous. The same can be true for a kid's bike left in a front yard, or a snowman that wasn't there yesterday.

One evening, years ago, Leslie and I were walking the dog together. One of our neighbors had been enjoying too much partying that night, and his wife had refused to let him inside. So he lay down on the front walk and fell asleep. At a glance, Roxie knew this was unusual. Somebody needed to be alerted. She began to bark and whine, and then dance, very much troubled by the fact we were dragging her away from what was clearly somebody in distress.

She often notices details that the observant writer beside her has completely missed.

One calm, cool afternoon, Roxie and I were running on a bike path when she suddenly, inexplicably went mad, running circles around me while staring up at the sky, her blue eyes huge and terrified.

I looked up, and ugly me, I laughed.

Floating directly above our heads was an enormous white spiral. It looked ominous, yes. To Roxie, this apparition must have been ready to drop on us, which was why we broke into a hard sprint. Off in the distance, a little biplane was spitting out random letters; a skywriter was practicing his trade. I was breathless and laughing, my strides pulled long by the panicked tugs. But the wind happened to be out of the north, and since we were racing south, the spiral hovered above us for another half mile before the trail mercifully bent westward, allowing us to escape. (Though I noticed that she never stopped watching the busy plane, having wisely decided that it must be to blame for this travesty of Nature.)

Roxie often knew what I didn't know. But when she tried to coax me into the mysterious tunnel, I ignored her. "You're not the only stubborn creature in the family," I warned. Then the weather grew warm, and a couple of local kids went exploring. In the tunnel was the body of a teenager, a young man who had been buried in a shallow grave. Police were summoned, and for a week the underpass was cordoned off. Piles of excavated earth were left in the streambed, and when we could run through again, Roxie would stop and shamelessly sniff at the dirt, burying her nose in the ripest parts, every breath telling her stories about what was still, judging by her interest, vividly real.

As it happened, the dead boy had vanished months ago from a group home for troubled youth. His two best friends in the world were arrested. It came out that there had been a fight over cigarettes. One boy confessed to being present at the murder, but he swore the other fellow had bashed in their buddy's skull. With no other witnesses and only sketchy forensics, the state had to give a free pass in exchange for testimony. But then at trial, the boy recanted his story. In the end, a brutal crime was committed and nobody went to prison. And I occasionally have to ask myself, "What would have happened if I'd listened to my dog? If we'd crossed that stream, and if I let her unearth the grave, would the police, given a fresher trail, have been able to make their case?"

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By week's end, one spent comet has pushed everything else out of the news. Most of a dozen runners gather at the YMCA early Saturday

morning, and Shelby is our first topic. I explain what I know about its delicate motion through the sky. I report that the venerable Hubble has spotted what looks like a tiny eruption of gas—probably carbon monoxide—from its equator. Will this make any difference? Maybe, I admit, and maybe not for the best. On the Torino scale, our enemy presently wears an ominous seven. Ten means doom, and the group wrings some comfort in the gulf between those seven and ten. But the Torino scale is misleading. Only rocks and tiny asteroids can earn eights or nines. And the fatal ten won't kick in until a massive object—Shelby, for instance—has a 99 percent chance of impacting on the Earth's face.

For the last few days, the published odds of the horrific are hovering around one-in-eleven.

“We're going to have to blow it up,” one runner announces. “Stuff a thousand nukes on a missile, and hit the bastard hard.”

“But that's not going to help,” I mention.

“Why not?”

I don't respond.

But the other runners are listening, and our lone female—a little ex-gymnast—comes up beside me, asking, “Why won't bombs work?”

Small bolides aren't brittle rocks ready to shatter to dust under a single hammer blow; they are usually soft, stubborn rubble piles filled with considerable empty space. “It'll be like kicking a snowdrift,” I mention. Besides, we don't have a fleet of rockets strong enough to fling hydrogen bombs across the solar system. Even with a crash program, no workable bomb could be launched for months. And without years of lead-time, we won't be able to carefully map Shelby's surface before putting down at the best possible location. What we'll have to do is attack it straight on, one or several tiny bullets battering one gigantic cannon ball. Sure, the rubble pile might break into pieces. But that might turn a near-collision into a shotgun blast, hill-sized chunks raining down on everybody. And even if we are very lucky—if Shelby holds together and we trigger the perfect outgassing—that won't happen until late next year. “Which won't leave us any time, if we make a mistake then,” I remind them.

My lecture finished, I discover that I'm out of breath, my stomach aching and throat parched.

For a long moment, the others say nothing. Then the CPA in our group points out, “Ten times out of eleven, Shelby misses us.”

That is a fair point.

“And the odds can get better,” says an optimistic voice. My voice, as it happens. I don’t want everyone left as miserable as I feel, which is why I promise, “One-in-eleven isn’t the final word.”

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My dog isn’t comfortable. That afternoon, I’m sitting at my computer and reading about orbital dynamics, and Roxie lies nearby, licking at her paws and feet. I can’t stand the sound of it, and when she finally quits, I breathe easier. But she only quits because she is exhausted, and after half an hour nap, she wakes and begins the process over again.

My vet’s office is closed until Monday. I call the emergency clinic, and the assistant says that it sounds like allergies, which isn’t too unexpected with the warm spring weather. She suggests Benedryl, though I don’t have any in the house. Or, if I want, I could bring my dog over for an examination.

I lead Roxie outside and open the back of my CRV, and she leaps in, but with nothing to spare. It’s a five-minute drive to the clinic. I’m the only customer. The veterinarian is a heavy middle-aged fellow with big hands and a matching voice. He asks if my dog has arthritis. “No,” I say, and immediately I’m remembering every slow trip up the stairs. Yet she managed to jump into my car, which is impressive for a thirteen-year-old lady. He tells me that her heart is strong. It shows that she gets plenty of exercise. Then he points out the redness in her eyes—a telltale sign of allergies. He recommends a cortisone shot and pills. The hypodermic needle is only a little smaller than a pool cue, and he injects a bucket of oily goo into her back and both hind legs, leaving her whining, trembling from the stress.

Returning to the waiting room, we find a patient in genuine trouble—a little mutt who got into a one-sided fight with a pit bull. Seeing that dog’s misery, I feel better. Roxie suddenly looks to be in pretty good shape. The prescription is for twenty tabs of prednisone, and the total bill is nearly one hundred and fifty dollars. But the licking stops immediately, and she sleeps hard until nearly seven that next morning, waking refreshed and ready to walk.

Her pee comes in rivers, but I was warned about that side effect.

The watery diarrhea that arrives later is a big surprise. By Monday morning, I call my own vet to ask questions and complain. The pred dosage is quite high, I learn. But I have to wean Roxie off the medication slowly or risk the catastrophic failure of her adrenal gland.

For the rest of the week, my sleep is broken, full of dreams and abrupt moments of wakefulness. Someone in the house groans, and I find myself alert and exhausted. And if I can't hear my dog, I start to wonder if she has died. It astonishes me how I seem to want that to happen. In the middle of the night, when she whines and demands to go outside, I feel trapped. Nobody else is going to take care of this dog. Leslie claims that Roxie is just getting old, slowing down but generally happy, and I worry about her too much. But at three in the morning, shaking with fatigue, it isn't worry that I'm feeling. I am angry. I feel trapped. With nothing else to do, I can't help but imagine the days to come when I won't have to get up at all hours, when I won't have to tend to this animal; and it scares me when I realize just how much I am looking forward to this one inevitable end.

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When Leslie became pregnant, certain people in both of our families worried. We were sharing the house with a wolfish dog, and did we appreciate the risks? That summer, we went out of town on short notice and couldn't get Roxie into her usual kennel. But my mother-in-law offered to take her, promising us that our sled dog would live in air conditioning, safe from the July heat.

When we returned to the farm, we discovered Roxie in the yard, chained to a tree and looking miserable. My father-in-law had us sit down in the kitchen, and with urgency, he asked if we knew that our dog was vicious. It seemed that everything had been fine until this morning, and then for no reason, Roxie attacked one of his dogs and killed a cat.

This was ominous news, yes.

We asked questions, both of us trying to put these incidents into context. What I kept thinking was that Roxie had decided we weren't coming home, and she was trying to establish dominance. Leslie asked if the other dog was hurt.

“Not too bad,” my father-in-law conceded. “She’s a little stiff, is all.”

“Which cat?” I wanted to know.

He described this sweet little calico that I’d noticed before.

“Where’s the body?”

“Oh, she ran off to die,” he reported. Then in the next breath, he added, “I don’t care about the cats. That’s not the point. But they’re little animals, and your baby is going to be a little animal too. Who knows what that dog might do?”

Leslie and I were shaken. But when I went outside to rescue the forlorn, thoroughly pissed-off dog, I saw a familiar calico walking beside our car. Going back inside, I pointed out the window and asked, “Is that the dead cat?”

“Huh,” he responded. “I guess she didn’t die.”

And at that point my best defense was to say, “If my dog wanted that cat dead, believe me, she would have killed it.”

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Roxie goes off the pred early, and for the next of couple days, she seems fine. She seems perfect. But then the licking resumes. I give her Benedryl, and not just a little taste. Six tablets go inside her—three times the usual dosage—but she continues moving from place to place, licking at her miserable legs. Late on Sunday night, I call the emergency clinic, explaining symptoms and mentioning that I still have half of the original prescription. Ten tabs. Their advice is to feed her one pred to help her through the night. But the effects aren’t immediate. I can’t sleep with Roxie in this mood, which is why I take refuge in the basement. If she follows me, I decide, at least the white noise of the aquariums will help mask any chaos.

But thank goodness, my dog leaves me alone. This little vacation lasts until six—an exceptionally late hour—and then she pees rivers while we slowly, contentedly make our usual one-mile walk.

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When Jessie was a newborn, we would set her on the floor, on her back, and Roxie would come close to investigate, never quite allowing the tiny hands to grab hold of her. Sometimes she brought our daughter gifts—tennis balls or one of the plastic snowmen with its head chewed off—and she would put the toys at Jessie’s feet, waiting for the kick that would start their little game.

The violence came later. Teeth and nails inflicted pain, and there were some hard body blows delivered in weak moments. But as I explained to others, I couldn’t euthanize the guilty party. She was my daughter, after all, and not even two years old.

When we return from daycare, Roxie always makes a point of greeting Jessie. I rarely get such treatment, which is another way huskies aren’t anything Labrador. She is smart enough and secure enough to take me for granted. And if my dog decides to come when I call her—a huge crapshoot as it is—she usually stops short, forcing me to take the final few steps.

“You’re describing a cat,” one lady exclaimed upon hearing our stories.

A fifty-pound cat, yes. With blue eyes and a curled tail, a graying coat and a predator’s fierce instincts.

My haphazard research into huskies gave me one explanation into their nature: Come summer, the Siberian humans would let their dogs run free. With no work for the animals to do, they could feed themselves on the three-month bounty. Then with the first snows, the happy survivors would return to camp, ready to pull sleds in exchange for easy food.

I can’t count all of the rabbits Roxie has killed. She has also butchered mice and at least one nest of shrews, and there have been a few birds snapped out of the air. But rabbits are prizes above all others. When she was young, she nabbed a half-grown bunny and happily brought it home. But I refused to let her prize come indoors, and after giving me a long baleful stare, she ate it whole. And for the rest of the day, there was an extra bounce to her always-bouncy step.

Over the years, Roxie developed a taste for breadsticks and pizza. Sloppy people and my nephews often found their hands suddenly empty. But when Jessie was in the house, I tried to put an end to everybody’s misbehavior. One night, Roxie snatched the bread from my wife’s grip, missing her fingers by nothing. My response was abrupt and passionate. I

asserted my dominance, and my dog responded by baring her teeth, telling me quite clearly to back off. But I tried to grab her collar anyway, wanting to drag her outside, and when she snapped, a long sharp canine punctured the meat between my thumb and index finger.

After that, both of us were exceptionally careful with one another.

More than once, tension would erupt and I would see my dog willfully holding back. I would do the same, or at least I tried to. One morning when Roxie picked up a road-killed squirrel—a putrid, half-grown marvel—she looked at me with a wishful expression. I didn't reach for her mouth, but with a calm voice, I warned her that as soon as we were home, I was going to stick a hose in her mouth and flush that ugliness out of there.

Maybe she understood. More likely, she remembered when I had done that trick with another edible treasure. Either way, she stopped in front of our driveway and crunched on the carcass, and then she gave me a long smile, letting me smell the rancid wonders riding on her breath.

A week later, she was living at the vet's.

When I finally retrieved her, I found her lying on her side inside a wire cage, looking depressed and painfully skinny. But when the cage door opened, she sprang out, evading every reaching hand and trying to leap up on a table where a squawking parrot sat inside its cage.

That illness was followed by several months of acting happy and comfortable. Roxie would follow me around the house until I settled, and then she would sleep nearby. She ate well, and she pooped quite a lot, and there were a few bouts of diarrhea, but things always resolved themselves within a day or two.

Roxie often slept in the exact place where she had bitten me. And sometimes when she dreamed, her legs would run fast, little woofs leaking out as she chased the most delicious prey.

Then one day, it occurred to me that I hadn't seen her running in her sleep in some time.

My dog sleeps almost constantly now, but with very few dreams.

While for me, sleep comes in brief snatches that are filled with the most lucid and awful nightmares.

* * * *

In less than two years, Shelby will reach the Earth. The most likely scenario has the black body dipping below the geosynchronous satellites and then plunging even closer. The space station is in a relatively high orbit, and if it happens to be in the proper position, its crew will be able to watch an irregularly shaped body streaking between them and their home world. From a distance, Shelby won't look particularly large or ominous. But the sun will light up its black crust, even when North America still lies in darkness. And then after kissing the atmosphere's upper reaches, it will head back out into space, its orbit nudged slightly by our gravity's sturdy tug.

Just as I once predicted, the odds of the worst are continuing to evolve.

One-in-eleven has become a rather worse one-in-nine. But unless there is a major outgassing event, these numbers won't move much farther, at least for the next year or so. Shelby exists in a strange territory where it mostly harmless. More often than not, astronomers will decide in the final weeks that it won't hit, and everybody will get up in the wee hours and step outside to watch a dull little star passing overhead. The asteroid will miss us by miles and miles before continuing on its mindless way, following a new orbit that is our big old world's little gift to it.

My wife and I discuss what to do if the odds worsen. My mother lives in Yuma during the winter. We could pay a visit then, bringing her granddaughter as well as a few tons of canned goods as gifts.

Our four-year-old hears us talking and sees pictures on the news, and she repeats little fragments of what she hears, in a mangled form. Yet she is an unapologetic optimist, assuring me, "It will be pretty, this meteor thing. We'll go out and watch it. You and me. And Roxie too."

"What about Mommy?" I ask.

"She'll be sleeping," Jessie confides, obviously having given this issue some thought. "She has go to work tomorrow, Daddy. Remember?"

One day, coming home from daycare, NPR is giving details about a Mars probe that's being quickly reconfigured. With less than perfect equipment, it is going to be launched early and sent on a near-collision course with Shelby, skimming low over its surface while snapping a few thousand pictures that will help us aim a nuke mission that may or may

not launch in August. Or September. We need milk tonight, and pulling up in front of the local grocery store, I turn off the car and listen to the rest of the story before getting out and unbuckling my daughter.

A man is walking past, his German shepherd striding beside him.

I don't often see Tony during the day, and rarely up close. Watching Jessie more than him, I say, "We don't cross paths much anymore."

The man holds his dog leash with both hands. I sense his eyes even as I hold my daughter's hand. This isn't easy, but I thought I should tell him my news. A few years ago, when Tony's original German shepherd was failing, he would share updates while working through the usual emotions.

I explain, "Roxie's walking earlier and earlier. And she's starting to lose strength, I'm afraid." That's when I look up, staring directly at the man's face, and I honestly don't recognize him.

The man says, "That's too bad," with a voice that I don't know. Tony's voice is thick and hearty—an FM radio voice—while this man has a faint, almost girlish tenor. He is also quite skinny and overly dressed for what isn't a terribly cool afternoon.

"Are you Tony?" I have to ask.

He smiles and nods, saying, "Yes."

He says, "It's the chemo. It does this to me."

I feel silly and lost, and I am quite sad.

"But I'm still vertical," he adds with a ramshackle pride.

I wish him all the luck in the world, and then I take my daughter into the store, for milk and a little tube of M&Ms.

A few mornings later, well before five, Roxie stops a few feet short of our usual turnaround point. She gives me one of her meaningful stares, and when she has my undivided attention, she glances at the big white stairs. She isn't tired, at least no more tired than usual. But she tells me that she isn't in the mood to climb those stairs, which is why we turn and start back home again.

It is a starry chill morning, with Venus and the remnants of the Moon.

I don't know why I'm crying while I walk. But I am, blubbering myself sick, hoping to hell no other dog walkers come by and see me this way.

* * * *

My hope was to someday invite Roxie to a road race. A small town five-miler seemed like the perfect candidate—held in February and named, appropriately, the Animal Run. But one year proved too warm, while the next winter left me in the mood to run a serious, undistracted race. But eventually a timely Arctic front arrived, ending any thought of racing; before bed, I told my dog to sleep hard because we had a very busy morning coming.

But the cold was even worse than predicted. Digging out from under my blankets, I discovered it was ten below, with a brutal wind sure to cut through any exposed flesh. Being rather fond of my nose, I didn't want to lose it for fifteenth place in some little survival run. That's why I stayed home, telling myself and my dog that maybe next year would be our year.

Except soon after that, Roxie quit running long miles.

She told me her wishes by various means: She wouldn't come when I called. She would feign sleep or a limp. Or if another runner visited the house, she would greet him joyfully and then make a show of diving into the window well, hunkering down in the delicious shade.

My wife says it's crazy how much I talk to my dog.

Leslie hears my end of the conversation, and with a palpable tension, she'll ask, "How do you know that's what she wants?"

"The eyes. The body. Everything about this dog is talking. Can't you see?"

Not at all, no.

For more than a year, Roxie would run nothing but little, lazy-day runs. Then on an autumn afternoon, while I was dressing in the basement, she suddenly came to the side door and gave me a long look. When I

returned the stare, she glanced up at the leashes hanging from the hook on the wall.

“No, hon,” I said. “I’m going long today.”

She knows the difference between “long” and “little.”

Yet those blue eyes danced, and again she stared up at the salt-crusted six-foot running leash.

I told her the course I wanted to run.

She knows our routes by name.

“You’re sure?” I asked.

She stepped back into the kitchen and stretched, front paws out ahead while the body extended, teasing out the kinks.

“Okay then. Let’s go.”

Until the following spring, she ran twenty miles every week. And then the weather got warm, and she quit again. For good.

But in that final youth, one run stands out: A different Arctic front was pushing through. We began by heading toward the southeast, letting the bitter wind push us along. But then we had no choice but to turn and head for home. For some reason, I was using her twenty-foot leash—probably to let her cavort in the snowdrifts. Roxie was as far ahead as possible, nose to the wind and her leash pulled taut. We eventually reached that place where the path split two ways. To the left was home and warmth, while straight on meant adding miles in a numbing cold. When Roxie reached the intersection, she looked back at me, making a request with her eyes. I said, “No, girl.” I told her it was time to finish. But she trotted ahead anyway, stopping only when I stopped. And then she turned and stared stubbornly back at me, making absolutely certain that I understood what she wanted.

“I’m cold,” I confessed. “This isn’t fun anymore.”

“Are you sure?” she asked by lifting her paws and putting them down again.

“No, girl. We’re heading in.”

And this is why that one run is my favorite: Just then, Roxie gave me a look. A disappointed, disgruntled glare. Those pale blue eyes spoke volumes. Behind them lived a vivid soul, passionate and secure. And to my dog, in ways that still make me bleed, I was such a fucking, miserable disappointment.

* * * *

I really don't know what to do about Shelby.

For now, we do nothing. When our daughter is elsewhere, my wife and I will have to talk about the possibilities. The practicalities. And the kinds of choices we must work to avoid. The latest guesses claim that if the asteroid strikes, the hammer blow comes either to the western Atlantic or the East Coast. The President promises that the government will do everything possible to help its citizens—a truthful statement, if ever there was, and full of ominous warnings. We probably won't run far from home, I'm thinking. Two years from now, California and New Zealand will be jammed with refugees. But most people would never think of coming to Nebraska. If it's a wet March, with ample snow cover and rain, the firestorm won't reach us. At least that's what these very preliminary computer models are saying. There won't be any crops that year, what with the sun choked out by airborne dust and acids, but by then we'll have collected tons of canned goods and bottled water. Leslie's family farm seems like a suitable refuge, although I can't take comfort imagining myself as only a son-in-law, surrounded by strong-willed souls who feud in the best of times.

Chances are, Shelby misses us.

Vegas odds say that nothing changes on this little world.

Not for now, at least.

It is a warm perfect evening in early May, and my dog needs her post-dinner walk. A baby gate blocks the basement door; if Roxie wanders downstairs, she won't have the strength to climb back up by herself. She waits patiently for me to move the gate and clip her six-foot leash to her purple collar with the tags. The metal pinch-collar sits on a hook, unnecessary now. The prednisone makes her hungry and patient, sweet and sleepy. I had a rather tearful discussion with the vet about dosages and the prognosis. For today, she gets half a pill in the morning, then half a pill at night. But if she acts uncomfortable, I'll bump it up. Whatever is needed, and don't worry about any long-term health effects.

She has become an absolutely wonderful dog. Her mind remains sharp and clear. One morning, she acts a little confused about where we are going, but that's the lone exception to an exceptionally lucid life. When I give commands, she obeys. But there is very little need to tell her what to do. Every walk has something worth smelling. The weather has been perfect, and neither of us is in a hurry anymore. Halfway to the park, we come upon an elderly couple climbing out of an enormous sedan. They're in their eighties, maybe their nineties, and the frail little woman says to my dog, "You are so beautiful, honey."

I thank her for both of us and go on.

The park lies to our right, beginning with a triangle of public ground where people bring their dogs throughout the day. Roxie does her business in one of the traditional places. I congratulate her on a fine-looking poop. Then we continue walking, heading due north, and at some point it occurs to me that it would be fun to change things up. We could walk down into the pine trees standing beside the golf course. But since I'm not sure that she's strong enough, I say nothing. Not a hint about what I want to do. Yet when we reach our usual turnaround point, Roxie keeps on walking, not looking back at me as we pass the old maintenance building and start down a brief steep slope.

Coincidence, or did she read my mind?

Whatever the reason, we move slowly into the pines, down where the long shadows make the grass cool and inviting. I am crying again. I'm thinking about everything, but mostly I am telling myself what a blessing this is, being conjured out of nothingness, and even when the nothingness reclaims us, there remains that unvanquished honor of having once, in some great way or another, been alive....

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