

FICTION

"MASTIFF"

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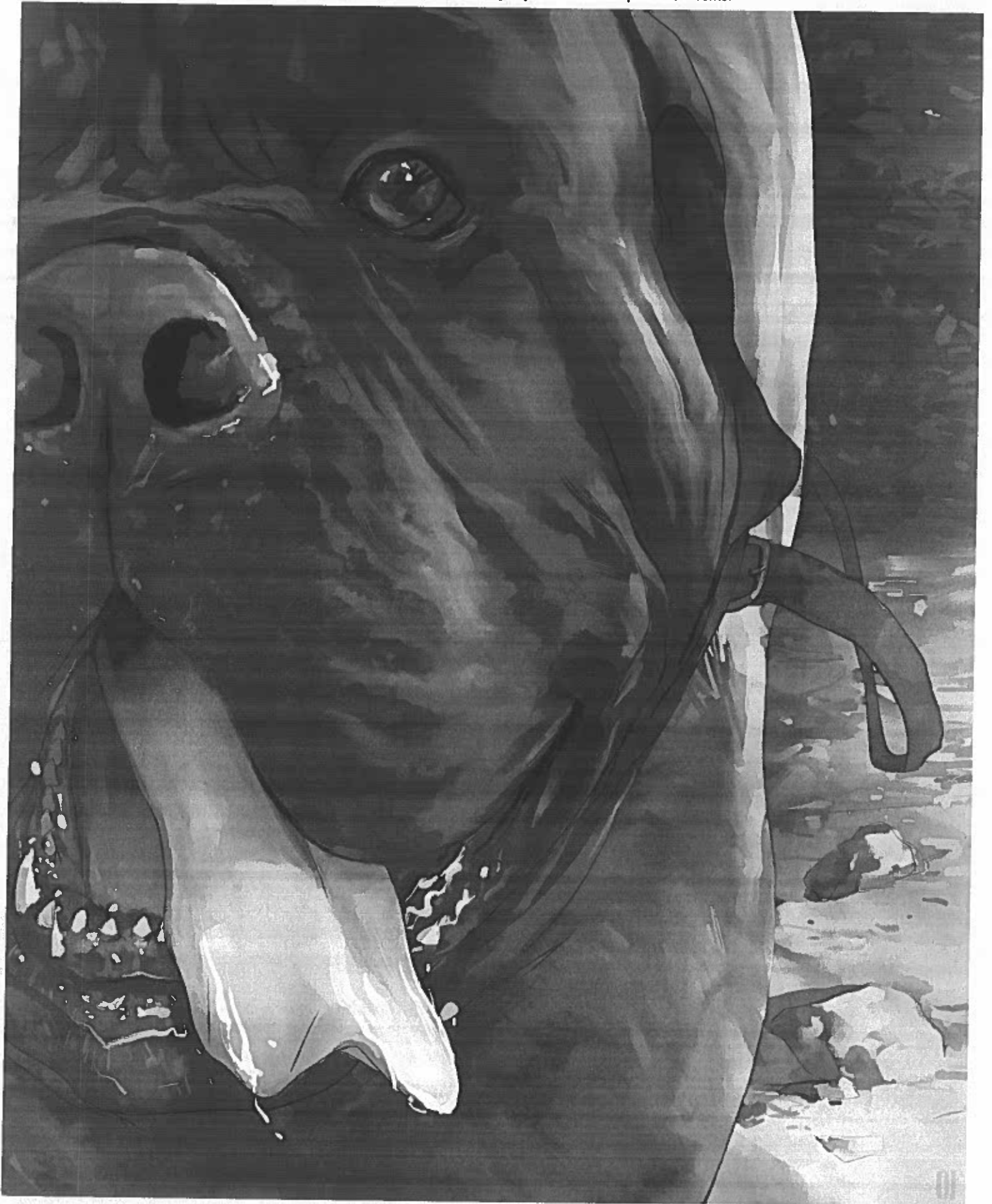


Illustration by Owen Freeman

Earlier, on the trail, they'd seen it. The massive dog. Tugging at its master's leash, so that the young man's calves bulged with muscle as he fought to hold the dog back. Grunting what sounded like "Damn, Rob-roy! Damn dog!" in a tone of exasperated affection.

Signs along the trail forbade dogs without leashes. At least this dog was on a leash.

The woman stared at the animal, not twelve feet away, wheezing and panting. Its head was larger than hers, with a pronounced black muzzle, bulging glassy eyes. Its jaws were powerful and slack; its large, long tongue, as rosy-pink as a sexual organ, dripped slobber. The dog was pale-brindle-furred, with a deep chest, strong shoulders and legs, a taut tail. It must have weighed at least two hundred pounds. Its breathing was damply audible, unsettling.

The dog's straggly-bearded young master, in beige hoodie, khaki cargo shorts, and hiking boots, gripped the leather leash with both hands, squinting at the woman, and at the man behind her, with an expression that seemed apologetic or defensive; or maybe, the woman thought, the young man was laughing at them, ordinary hikers without a monster-dog to pull and strain at their arms.

The woman thought, That isn't a dog. It's a human being on its hands and knees! Such surreal thoughts bombarded the woman's brain, waking and sleeping. As long as no one else knew about them, she paid them little heed.

Fortunately, the dog and its owner were taking another trail into Wildcat Canyon. The dog lunged forward eagerly, sniffing at the ground, the young man following with muttered curses. The woman and her male companion continued on the main trail, which was three miles uphill, into the sun, to Wildcat Peak.

The man, sensing the woman's unease at the sight of the dog, made some joke, which the woman couldn't quite hear and did not acknowledge. They were

walking single file, the woman in the lead. She waited for the man to touch her shoulder, as another man might have done, to reassure her, but she knew that he would not, and he did not. Instead, the man said, in a tone of slight reproof, that the dog was an English mastiff—"Beautiful dog."

Much of what the man said to the woman, she understood, was in rebuke of her narrow judgment, her timorous ways. Sometimes the man was amused by these qualities. At other times, she saw in his face an expression of startled disapproval, veiled contempt.

The woman said, over her shoulder, with a wild little laugh, "Yes! Beautiful."

The hike had been the man's suggestion. Or, rather, in his oblique way, which was perhaps a strategy of shyness, he'd simply told her that he was going hiking this weekend, and asked if she wanted to join him. He had not risked being rejected; he'd made it clear that he would be going, regardless.

The woman had been introduced to the man seven weeks earlier, at a dinner party at a mutual friend's home in the Berkeley Hills. The friend, closer to the man than to the woman, had said to the man, "You'll like Mariella. You'll like her face," and to the woman, "Simon's an extraordinary person, but it may not be evident immediately. Give him time."

The woman and the man had gone on several walks together already. But a hike of such ambition seemed, to the woman, something quite different.

She'd said, "Yes! I'd love that."

It was late afternoon. They had been hiking for several hours, and were now making their way single file down the mountain. The woman was descending first, then the man. The man, the more experienced hiker, wanted to watch over the woman, whom he didn't trust not to hurt herself. She'd surprised him by

wearing lightweight running shoes on the trail and not, as he was wearing, hiking boots.

She hadn't thought to bring water, either. He carried a twenty-ounce plastic bottle of water for them both.

The man was a little annoyed by the woman. Yet he was drawn to her. He hoped to like her more than he did—he hoped to adore her. He had been very lonely for too long and had come to bitterly resent the solitude of his life.

It had been an unnaturally balmy day for late March. At midday, the temperature was perhaps sixty-eight degrees. But now, as the sun sank like a broken bloody egg, darkness and cold began to rise from the earth. The day before, the man had suggested to the woman that she bring a light canvas jacket in her backpack; he knew how quickly the mountain trail could turn cold in the late afternoon, but she had worn just a sweater, jeans, and a sun visor. (The woman's eyes were sensitive to sunlight, even with sunglasses. She hated how easily they watered, tears running down her cheeks like an admission of weakness.) And she'd confounded the man by not bringing a backpack at all, with the excuse that she hated feeling "burdened." In the gathering chill, the woman was shivering.

The trail had looped upward through pine woods to a spectacular view at the peak, where the man had given the woman some water to drink. Though she said she wasn't thirsty, he insisted. There's a danger of dehydration when you've been exerting yourself, he said. He spoke sternly, as if he were a parent she could not reasonably oppose. He spoke with the confidence of one who is rarely challenged. At times, the woman quite liked his air of authority; other times, she resented it. The man seemed always to be regarding her with a bemused look, like a scientist confronted with a curious specimen. She didn't want to think—yet she thought, compulsively—that he was comparing her with other women he'd known, and finding her lacking.

Then the man took photographs with his new camera, while the woman gazed out at the view. Along the horizon was a rim of luminous blue—the Pacific Ocean, miles away. In the near distance were small lakes, streams. The hills were strangely sculpted, like those bald slopes in the paintings of Thomas Hart Benton.

Absorbed in his photography, the man seemed to forget about the woman. How self-contained he could be, how maddening! The woman had never been so at repose in her *self*. For nearly an hour, he lingered, taking photographs. During this time, other hikers came and went. The woman spoke briefly with these hikers, while the man appeared oblivious of them. It wasn't his habit, he'd told her, to strike up conversations with "random" people. "Why not?" she'd asked. And he'd said, with a look that suggested that her question was virtually incomprehensible, "Why not? Because I'll never see them again."

With her provocative little laugh, the woman had said, "But that's the best reason for talking to strangers—you'll never see them again."

At least the bearded young man with the English mastiff hadn't climbed to the top of Wildcat Peak, though other hikers with dogs had made their way there. A succession of dogs, in fact, of all sizes and breeds, fortunately most of them well behaved and disinclined to bark, several of them trailing their masters, older dogs, looking chastised, winded.

"Nice dog! What's his name?" the woman would ask. Or, "What breed is he?"

She understood that the man had taken note of her fear of the mastiff at the start of the hike. How she'd tensed at the sight of the ugly wheezing beast. It had to be the largest dog she'd ever seen, as big as a St. Bernard but totally lacking that dog's benign shaggy aura. And so at the peak the woman made a point of engaging dog owners in conversations, in a bright, airy, friendly way. She even petted the gentler dogs.

As a child of nine or ten, she'd been attacked by a German shepherd. She'd done nothing to provoke the attack and could only remember screaming and trying to run as the dog barked furiously at her and snapped at her bare legs. Only the intervention of adults had saved her.

The woman hadn't told the man much about her past. Not yet. And possibly wouldn't. Her principle was *Never reveal your weakness*. Especially to strangers: this was essential. Technically, the woman and the man were "lovers," but they were not yet intimate. You might say—the woman might have said—that they were still, fundamentally, strangers to each other.

They'd been together in the woman's house, upstairs in her bed, but they hadn't yet spent an entire night together. The man felt self-conscious in the woman's house, and the woman hadn't been able to fall asleep beside him; the physical fact of him was so distracting. Naked and horizontal, the man seemed much larger than he did clothed and vertical. He breathed loudly, wetly, through his open mouth, and though he woke affably when she nudged him, the woman hadn't wanted to keep waking him. In truth, the woman had never been very comfortable with a man at close quarters, unless she'd been drinking. But this man scarcely drank. And the woman no longer lost herself in drink; that life was behind her.

The woman liked to tell her friends that she wanted not *to get married* but to *be married*. She wanted a relationship that seemed mature, if not old and settled, from the start. Newness and rawness did not appeal to her.

"Excuse me? When do you think we might head back?" She spoke to the man hesitantly, not wanting to break his concentration. In their relationship, she had not yet displayed any impatience; she had not yet raised her voice.

At last, the man put his camera, a heavy, complicated instrument, into his backpack, along with the water bottle, which contained just two or three inches of water now—"We might need this later." His movements were measured and

deliberate, as if he were alone, and the woman felt a sudden stab of dislike for him, anger that he could take such care with trivial matters and yet did not seem to love her.

There were no rest rooms on the damn trail, of course. These were serious hiking trails, for serious hikers. Longingly, the woman recalled the facilities at the trailhead. How long would it take to hike back down? An hour? Two? For male hikers, stopping to urinate in the woods was no great matter; for female hikers, an effort and an embarrassment. Not since she was a young girl, trapped on an endless, hateful hike in summer camp in the Adirondacks, had she been forced to relieve herself in the woods. The memory was hazy and blurred with shame, and humiliation at the very pettiness of her discomfort. If she'd told this story to the man, he would probably have laughed at her.

Driving to the park that day, the man and the woman had felt very happy together. It sometimes happened to them, unpredictably—a sudden flaring up of happiness, even joy, in each other's company. The man was unusually talkative. The woman laughed at his remarks, surprised that he could be so witty. She was touched that, a few days before, he'd visited the art gallery she ran, and purchased a small soapstone sculpture.

The woman slid over in the passenger's seat, to sit closer to the man, as a young girl might do, impulsively. How natural this felt—a rehearsal of intimacy!

The car radio was playing a piano piece by the Czech composer Janáček, "In the Mists." The woman recognized it after a few notes. She'd played the piano cycle as a girl. Her eyes filled with tears as she remembered. The man continued talking, as if he didn't hear the music. Avidly, the woman listened to the sombre, distinctive notes in a minor—"misty"—key. She didn't register the man's words, but his voice was suffused with the melancholy beauty of the music, and she felt that she loved him or might love him. *He will be the one. It's time.*

The woman was forty-one years old. The man was several years older. He had been the director of a research laboratory in Berkeley for many years. His work was predominant in his life. He was idealistic, a zealot for science education and the preservation of the environment. He was famously generous to younger scientists, a legendary mentor to his graduate students and postdocs. He'd never married. He wasn't sure he'd ever been *in love*. Though he'd always wanted children, he had none. He was dissatisfied with his life outside the lab. He felt cheated and foolish, worried that others might pity him.

He'd been upset earlier that year, while visiting one of his protégés at the Salk Institute, whose wife was also a scientist and who had several children; the young family lived in a split-level cedar house on three acres of wooded land. In this household, the man had felt sharply the emptiness of his own existence, in an underfurnished, rented house near the university, where he'd lived for more than twenty years. He'd ended the visit shaken. And not long afterward he'd met the woman at a dinner party.

The woman was also lonely and dissatisfied—but primarily with others, not with herself. She'd had several relationships with men since college, but she hadn't felt much for any of them. Some she had dated simultaneously. And yet she was deeply hurt if a man wasn't exclusively involved with her. Her father had left the family when she was a child and rarely visited. All her life she'd yearned for that absent man, even as she'd resented him. She'd hated her own vulnerability.

She was an attractive woman. Within her small circle of friends, she was popular, admired. She dressed stylishly. She was social. She'd invested wisely in her art gallery. Still, she was preoccupied with how she appeared in others' eyes. She could barely force herself to contemplate her own image in a mirror: her face, she thought, was too small, her chin too narrow, her eyes too large and deep-set. She hated the fact that she was petite. She'd have preferred to be five feet ten, to walk with a swagger, with sexual confidence. At five-three, it seemed she had no choice but to be the recipient, the receptacle, of a man's desire.

Sometimes, in the midst of buoyant social occasions, something inside the woman seemed to switch off. She could feel a deadness seeping into her, a chilly indifference. At the end of an evening, her women friends would hug her, or a friend's husband might slip his arm around her waist to kiss her, just a little too suggestively, and the coldness in her would respond, *I don't give a damn if I ever see any of you again.*

She laughed at herself. A hole in the heart.

Yet it happened, in the new man's company, that the woman felt a rare hopefulness. If she couldn't love the man, it might be enough for the man to love *her*, enough for them to have a child together, at least. (In the woman's weakest moments, she lamented the fact that she had no children, that she would soon be too old to have any. Yet children bored her, even her nieces and nephews, who she conceded were beautiful.)

What would the man have thought if he'd known about the woman's calculations? Or were these just harmless fantasies, unlikely to be realized?

Now, making her way down the trail, eager to be out of the park that had seemed so inviting hours ago, the woman felt disconsolate. The long wait at the peak had enervated her. The man's seeming indifference had enervated her. As the sun shifted in the sky, she felt strength leaking from her.

Brooding and silent, the man walked behind her, sometimes so close that he nearly trod on her heels. She wanted to turn and shout at him, "Don't do that! I'm going as fast as I can."

So absorbed was the woman with the voice inside her head that she only half realized that she'd been hearing a familiar sound somewhere close by—a wet chuffing noise, a labored breathing. The trail continued to drop, turning back on itself; another, lower trail ran parallel to it now, and would join it within a few yards, and on this trail two figures were hurrying, one of them, in the lead, a large beast running on all fours.

Appalled, the woman saw the enormous mastiff stop at the junction of the two trails, unavoidable. The dog's damp, shining eyes were fixed on her, sharply focussed. With a kind of indignation quickly shifting to fury, it barked at the woman, straining at its leash as the bearded young man yelled at it to sit._.

The woman knew better than to succumb to panic; certainly she knew better than to provoke the dog. But she couldn't help herself—she screamed and shrank away. It was the worst possible reaction to the dog, which, maddened by her terror, leaped at her, barking and growling, wrenching the leash out of its master's hands.

In an instant, the mastiff was on the woman, snarling and biting, nearly knocking her to the ground. Even in her horror, the woman was thinking, *My face. I must protect my face.*

Her companion quickly intervened, pushing himself between her and the dog, even as the dog, on its hind legs, continued to attack. Futilely, the dog's master shouted, "Rob-roy! Rob-roy!" The dog paid not the slightest attention.

The frantic struggle couldn't have lasted more than a minute or two. Fiercely, the man struck at the dog with his bare fists and kicked it. The young man yanked at the dog's collar, cursing. With great effort, he finally managed to pull the animal

away from the man, who was bleeding badly now from lacerations on his hands and arms and face.

The woman, terrified, was cringing behind him. She felt something wet on her face. Not blood but the dog's slobber. She called out, "Help him! Get help for him! He'll bleed to death."

The dog was still barking hysterically, lunging and leaping with bared fangs, while the young man struggled to hold it down, apologizing profusely, claiming that the dog had never done anything like this before—not ever. "Jesus! I'll get help." There was a ranger station a half mile down the trail, the young man said. He'd run.

Alone with the injured man, the woman cradled him in her arms as he moaned in pain. He appeared to be dazed, stupefied. Was he in shock? His skin felt cold to the woman's touch. She could barely comprehend what had happened, and so swiftly.

The dog had bitten and scratched her hands, too. She was bleeding. But her fear was for the man. She fumbled in her pocket for her cell phone, tried to call 911, but the call failed to go through. She wondered whether she should make a tourniquet to stanch the flow of blood from the man's forearm. Years ago, in high school, she'd taken a course in first aid, but could she remember now? For a tourniquet, you had to use a stick? Her eyes darted about, searching for—what? Like a foolish trapped bird, her heart beat erratically in her chest.

The man insisted now that he was all right, that he could walk to the ranger station. Grotesquely, he tried to laugh. He had no idea how torn and bloody his face was.

The woman helped him to his feet. How heavy he was, how uncoordinated! His face was a mask of blood, flaps of loose skin on his cheeks and forehead. One of his earlobes was torn. At least his eyes had been spared.

The woman gripped the man around the waist, clumsily, and he was able to walk, leaning on her. She tried to comfort him—she had no idea what she was saying, except that there would be help for him soon, he would be all right. She saw that the front and sleeves of her sweater were soaked in dark blood.

By this time, the sun had sunk below the tree line. It was dusk, and the air was cold and wet, as if after a rain. They began to hear calls—two rangers were running up the shadowy trail with flashlights, shouting.

They were taken to the ranger station and given first aid. Sterilizing liquid, bandages. For the man's lacerated forearm, a tourniquet deftly applied by the elder of the rangers, who told the man how lucky he was: "The artery wasn't severed." With a dog attack, there was the possibility of rabies. It was imperative to locate the dog. It seemed that the young man had fled the park with the mastiff. Incredibly, he had not even reported the attack. But a hiker, who had witnessed it from a distance, had alerted the rangers and taken down the plate number of the young man's Jeep. The son of a bitch would be prosecuted for the attack, and for leaving the scene, too, the ranger said.

Around the bandages, the man's face was ashen. His breath came quickly and shallowly. He was urged to lie down on a cot. Despite his protests, an ambulance was called. His injuries required stitches—that was clear.

Within minutes, the ambulance arrived in the now near-deserted parking lot. The woman wanted to ride with the man, but he insisted that she take his car and

meet him at the hospital; he didn't want his vehicle to be locked in the park overnight.

Even with his injuries, and speaking with difficulty, the man appeared to be thinking calmly, rationally.

The woman took his keys, and his wallet and backpack, and followed the ambulance along curving mountain roads in his station wagon. She could hardly breathe, her loneliness as palpable and suffocating as cotton batting.

She still could not quite fathom the idea that the dog's owner had fled the park without reporting the attack. The young man had cared so little about their welfare; he'd fled knowing that if his dog wasn't located by the authorities both victims would have to endure rabies shots.

She'd been told by the rangers that he would be apprehended within a few hours. The attack had already been reported to the local police. A warrant would be issued for the dog owner's arrest. She'd been assured that the authorities would find the man and check the dog for rabies, but in her distressed state she'd scarcely been able to listen or to care.

At the brightly lit clinic, the woman hurried inside as the man was carried into the E.R. on a stretcher. He seemed to be only partly conscious now, unaware of his surroundings. She asked one of the medical workers what was wrong and was told that the man had had a kind of seizure in the ambulance; he'd lost consciousness, his blood pressure had risen alarmingly, and his heartbeat had accelerated, in fibrillation.

Fibrillation! The woman knew only vaguely what this meant.

She was prevented from following the man into the E.R. She found herself standing at a counter, being asked questions. She fumbled with the man's wallet, searching for his health-insurance card. His university I.D. How slowly she moved

—as clumsy in her bandages as if she were wearing mittens. One of the E.M.T.s was telling her that she should be treated as well; her lacerated hands and wrists should be examined. But the woman refused to listen. She flushed with indignation when the woman behind the counter asked how she was related to the injured man. Sharply she said, "I am his fiancée."

How long she remained in the E.R. waiting room the woman had no clear idea. Time had become disjointed. Her eyelids were so heavy she could barely keep them open. Several times, she inquired after the man and was told that he was undergoing emergency treatment for cardiac arrhythmia and that she could not see him yet. This news was unacceptable to her. He'd only been bitten by a damn dog! He hadn't seemed so badly injured; he'd insisted on walking. The woman was light-headed. Her hands and wrists began to burn. She heard her thin, plaintive voice, begging, "Don't let him die!"

Looking around, she saw how others regarded her. A woman crazed with worry, fear. A woman whose voice was raised in panic. The sort of woman you pity even as you inch away from her.

She saw that her coarse-knit Scottish sweater—it had been one of her favorites—had been torn beyond repair.

In a fluorescent-lit rest room, her face in the mirror was blurred, like those faces on TV that are pixelated in order to disguise their identity. She was thinking of how the massive dog had thrown itself at her and how, astonishingly, the man had protected her. Did the man love her, then? What a coward she'd been, ducking behind him to save herself, grabbing at him desperately, cringing, crouching, whimpering like a terrified child. The man had thrust himself forward to be attacked in her place. A man who was virtually a stranger had risked his life for *her*.

The woman had the man's backpack, with his camera and his wallet. In a state of nervous dread, she looked through the wallet, a leather billfold of good quality but badly worn. Credit cards, university I.D., library card, driver's license. A miniature photo of a tensely smiling middle-aged man with a furrowed forehead and thinning shoulder-length hair, whom she would have claimed she'd never seen before. She discovered that he was born in 1956—he was fifty-seven years old! A decade older than she'd guessed, and sixteen years older than she was.

Another card indicated that the man had a cardiac condition—mitral-valve prolapse. There was a much folded prescription, dated several years before, for a medication to be administered intravenously. Nearest of kin to be notified in case of emergency: a woman with the man's last name, possibly a sister, who lived in San Diego.

The woman hurried to the desk to speak with a nurse. She pressed the prescription on the woman, who promised to report this discovery to the cardiac specialist overseeing the man's treatment.

They were only humoring her, the woman supposed. The hysterical fiancée! They'd performed their own tests on the stricken man.

"Ma'am?" The waiting room was nearly empty when an attendant came to inform her that her companion was to be hospitalized for the night, kept under observation in the cardiac unit. The cardiologist on call had managed to control the man's fibrillation and his heartbeat was near normal, but his blood pressure was still high and his white-blood-cell count was low. The woman tried to feel relief. Tried to think, Now I can go home, the danger is past.

Instead, she went upstairs to the cardiac unit. For several minutes, she stood outside the doorway of the man's room, undecided whether to enter. Inside, the man lay unnaturally still, as nurses fussed about him. His heartbeat was monitored by a machine. His breathing was monitored. The woman saw that the bandages

hurriedly applied to his face at the ranger station had been removed; his numerous wounds had been stitched together and bandaged again, in an elaborate and lurid mask of crisscrossing strips of white. The man's arms and hands had been re-bandaged as well.

As she entered the room, she thought she might faint. Yet she felt gratitude for the man's courage, and for his kindness. Shame for herself, that she'd valued the man so little.

She pulled over a chair and sat beside his bed.

The man's breathing was quick and shallow but rhythmic. The bed had been cranked to a thirty-three-degree angle. His eyelids fluttered. Was he seeing her? Did he recognize her? The woman thought, He has forgotten my name.

The man was trying to speak. Or—trying to smile? He was asking her—what? His words were slurred.

She heard herself explain that she would stay with him for a while. Until visiting hours ended. She had his wallet and his camera and the key to his station wagon. She said that she would return in the morning, when he was to be discharged, and would drive him home then. If he wanted. If he needed her. She would return, and bring his things with her, and drive him home. Did he understand?

In his cranked-up bed, the man drifted into sleep. They'd given him a sedative, the woman supposed. His mouth eased open, and he breathed heavily, wetly. This was the night-breathing the woman recalled, and now felt comforted to hear. She practiced pronouncing his name: "Simon." It seemed to her suddenly a beautiful name. A name new to her, in her life, for she'd never before known anyone named Simon.

Now tears spilled from the woman's eyes and ran in rivulets down her face. She was crying as she had not cried in memory. She was too old for such emotion; there was something ridiculous and demeaning about it. But she was

remembering how at the top of the steep trail the man had insisted that she drink from his plastic water bottle. She hadn't wanted to drink the lukewarm water, yet had drunk it as the man watched, acquiescing, if with resistance, resentment. In their relationship, the man would always be the stronger; she would resent his superior strength, yet she would be protected by it. She might defy it, but she would not oppose it. She was thinking of the two or three occasions when she'd kissed the man in a pretense of an emotion she hadn't yet felt.

Like the man, the woman was exhausted. She laid her head against the headrest of the chair beside the bed. Her eyelids closed. Vividly, she saw him at the peak of the Wildcat Canyon trail, holding his complicated camera aloft, peering through the viewfinder. The wind stirred his thinning silvery-copper hair—she hadn't noticed that before. She would go to him, she thought. She would stand close beside him, slide her arm around his waist to steady him. This was her task, her duty. He was stronger than she, but a man's strength can drain from him. A man's courage can be torn from him, can bleed away. But it was she who was afraid of something—wasn't she? The pale-blue rim of the Pacific Ocean. The bald-sculpted hills and exquisite little lakes that seemed as unreal as papier-mâché that you could poke your fingers through. To her horror, she realized she was hearing a panting sound, a wet-chuffing breath, somewhere beside her, or below her on the trail, in the gathering dusk, waiting. ♦

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Joyce Carol Oates received the 2020 Prix Mondial Cino Del Duca. Her new poetry collection is "American Melancholy."

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