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SHERRY SHAW

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## OCTOBER

On the day we bury my husband, I take a sedative and sit in the living room. People in borrowed funeral home chairs surround me. "So sudden," someone says.

A man speaks up. "Ellis was walking across those fields just like he'd done for forty years." He looks at me. "Isn't that right?" I nod. People are right during times like these.

Across the room, Harriet orders everyone around including Elizabeth, my dry-eyed daughter, who cannot stop checking her voice mail. Harriet likes to say we are cousins although this is not true. She is my oldest and closest friend. Crouching beside me she says, "What you need, honey?" rubbing my back with small firm circles that remind me of a planet's fixed orbit.

"I don't want this," I say through bleary eyes, lifting my soggy plate. Harriet sighs. It is a reluctant hand that removes it.

After lunch, my husband's pallbearers gather near the edge of the woods to inspect the stray dog that wandered into Ellis's life a month ago and refused to leave. The men stare in disbelief as the skinny beast hurls itself against the chainlink pen as if trying to pass through an opening only he can see. On the afternoon Ellis died, his workers found him lying in the middle of the back eighty, the nameless dog guarding the body, refusing to let anyone near.

I watch the dog with a helpless gaze. It is one of those bright, clear October afternoons when the world is like a glass ball, and I ask the men if they think the dog can be saved. "Ellis wanted him to have a home," I say. When I suggest one of the men teach the dog to hunt, they grow quiet and stare at the ground.

Women and children emerge from inside when the men approach the pen. "Watch yourselves now," warns Farley, preparing to throw open the door. Farley is Harriet's husband and was Ellis's best friend. I have known him all my life.

The dog hesitates, then explodes from the metal cage. He runs in circles, growling, snapping his teeth at the men who suck on their toothpicks, bewildered. The dog pauses to gnaw at his scabby backside before disappearing deep into the woods where he howls as if branded with a fiery iron.

"You won't never catch that dog," says one of the men. I rejoice at his confession because it is true.

The men shake their heads at each other. One of them says he has never seen a dog like it in his life. They toss out possible breeds. "Part pointer?" "Too wiry." "Lab?" "Too mean."

The men cannot reconcile the dog's long, graceful snout, its short brown and white-

speckled coat. Its deliberate gait. How the dog eats and eats yet his bones protrude like a carcass. As the men make their way inside the house for coffee, one of them mumbles, "That dog is not of this world."

That afternoon, hot tears streak my face like a child's as I let people I forgot I once loved comfort me and rummage through my kitchen, pouring large glasses of iced tea with lemon wedges perched on the lip. Women stand in the kitchen wiping the countertop while men sit in the den watching The Weather Channel in silence.

In private, Harriet and Farley ask me what I plan to do with the dog. "What exactly did Ellis have in mind?" Farley says in his gentle way. "Surely, he didn't mean to keep him." He glances at Harriet for encouragement. "It can't hunt. It can't be a pet."

Before I met Ellis, I lived in a house where I slept with my clothes on so when my daddy came tearing through the house drunk, waving a shotgun at three o'clock in the morning, I could crawl out of the window, fast.

The first time Ellis took me out, I was seventeen years old. We sat in his car by the river. "Where's your mama?" he asked.

"Gone. Years ago," I said, hoping I'd have to say nothing more.

"You want me to come inside and meet your daddy?" Ellis offered when he drove me home.

I shook my head. "He's not like you. He's not a good man," I said, touching his cheek. That night I dreamt of apple trees and Ellis.

By evening, Harriet has shooed everyone home. My daughter recedes to her old room where she creates elaborate profit reports on her laptop and I am left standing in the kitchen alone, wondering what to do with myself.

Outside the window the dog emerges from the woods, looking for Ellis. He paces and howls underneath the large pin oak, the moonlight casting his grief in silvery-white streaks in such a way I cannot bear to watch.

*Ellis has been dead for fourteen days.* This is my first thought in the morning.

"Each day will get easier," Harriet promises, dropping an armload of self-help books on my kitchen table. But it doesn't. It only becomes more real.

Harriet sees to it that I shower and dress every morning. Since Ellis died, she has become like my grief, trailing me throughout the grim waking hours of the day.

Forcing a cheery tone, she says, "Read this book, honey. It'll change your life."

"My life is changed." She bristles at this, and what I say next: "I believe that dog can see into my soul."

"Farley's right. That dog is a menace to society. And you have got to get out of this house," she says, and invites me to walk the indoor track at the new fitness center.

In the car, I notice my neighbors have decorated their yards with happy autumn displays of pumpkins, gourds, and dried cornstalks perched on bales of hay. They have given up on the leaves that cover our lawns like something we are all trying to forget.