

KEVIN A. COUTURE

MR MONEY-MAKER

“IT’S NO GOOD FORCING IT,” RUBIN SAYS, a response to Joel’s comment of *can’t you wake him?* It’s the reason Rubin stopped taking money up front in the first place—people got fidgety, afraid the dog might snooze through the whole visit and they’d be out a few bucks, no answer to show for it. Truth is Rubin doesn’t give a crap about their anxiety. Life’s not fair to anyone. What pisses him off is the fact so many regard him as someone who wouldn’t refund their money if they asked him to. As if he was the bad guy in all this and not the real, honest-to-goodness victim.

“You know, it’s the wife who’s worried, not me,” Joel says. “Just to be clear.”

“Of course,” Rubin agrees, though that’s clearly horseshit. Everyone likes to know, especially in this town, the carcinogenic time bomb. The dog’s the only one in this operation who’s ever really unconcerned, lying on the rug like a mound of dough, the pads on his feet pink as a child’s lung.

Joel works at the mine just like everybody else. (Everybody, that is, except Rubin.) He came in at the end of his shift and he’s been here long enough now to feel awkward. Rubin made some instant coffee, discussed sports, the weather, everything they might have in common. He even brought out samples of his handmade apple-branch necklaces at which time Joel smiled and said, “I don’t think so.” If things don’t happen soon Joel’s bound to give up and go back to his cushy, benefit-laden job wondering what, if anything, is growing inside him. And the worst part in all that: Rubin wouldn’t get squat for his efforts.

When Joel’s wife, Lara, came in last week, the dog didn’t act like the frozen turd he’s being now. It all went smoothly and when it was over Lara smiled and hugged Rubin like he was a superhero, like he’d performed some small-town miracle. If he actually could perform miracles—and it’s nothing against the labourer’s wife—but if he could, he sure as hell wouldn’t waste it on anyone but himself.

“More coffee?” Rubin offers.

Joel stares at Rubin's hands reaching for the mug, at all his missing fingers. There's a flash of sympathy on his face or maybe it's disgust. Either one is par for the course. "Sorry," he says. "I didn't mean to ..."

But before Mr Inconsiderate can say or do anything else remarkably stupid, there's a scuffling behind them. Rubin doesn't have to look. It's the sound of the dog stretching. "He's awake," he says.

They both turn and see the animal's hind quarters in the air, his claws digging deep into the carpet. He shakes each leg separately then stands there, solemn as a minister. Rubin makes him sit and, strictly for show, gives him some baseball-style hand signals. The dog looks up at Rubin, then at Joel beside him. He takes two or three long sniffs, walks into the other room, and lies down on the futon couch without a second glance.

"Alright. Pay up," Rubin says, holding his hand out. "You're clear."

The dog might have been born with it for all Rubin knew. Some kind of genetic misfit. He first came upon him at the scrapyards while scrounging for jewellery-wire and other useable crap. They stared at each other from five feet apart, flanked by a smouldering mound of plastic and the skeleton of a minivan. The animal was pathetic; his fur, smudged and oily as a work boot, riddled with ticks and spear grass. He seemed slightly retarded, if you got right down to it, with his upturned lip, his distant, smoky gaze. But there was something about him Rubin liked, something he couldn't explain. He checked the dog's tail to assess his friendliness but there wasn't one. It had been cropped or broken or maybe even blown right off at the ass. Hardly a stub left to show for it. How in all honesty could Rubin *not* have taken an animal like that home with him?

The dog moseys over to his food dish and stands there. He doesn't fuss. Doesn't get excited. Doesn't even groom himself. And if Rubin decided not to fill his bowl today, he wouldn't scratch or bark. He'd wander off and go back to sleep. The perfect pet, remote and distant as an emperor penguin.

It was back in April when the dog made his first diagnosis. The town was in the middle of a civic election and Sarah Newson, the incumbent mayor, was glad-handing door-to-door. At first Rubin wasn't sure if he should invite her in or what. Who knew the protocol for that sort of thing? Or the number of hassles it might lead to?

"Are you a decided voter, Mr Tack?" the mayor said from the hallway. She looked bored, like she knew Rubin hadn't voted in any election in his entire life. In actuality there was a tumour the size of an eyeball in her left

breast sucking the energy right out of her. Something neither one of them had a clue about at the time.

Before Rubin could answer, the dog started circling the mayor. He licked her blouse when she leaned down, pressed his nose into her chest hitting the tumour, painfully, dead on. Two weeks later she returned with the doctor's report. Two weeks after that there was a full-page article in the local paper and a bit piece in the nationals. And now, three confirmed positives later, people are even coming from down in the valley for a scan. Go figure.

The phone rings and Rubin fumbles with the receiver. His defective hands are tired from feeding branch segments through the bead borer and it's a strain to hold the phone. It's worth it though if it's a customer. It'll be the third this week and at twenty-five bucks a scan that's not bad.

"Hello?" he says, trying not to sound impatient.

"Is this Rubin Tack?"

"Yes."

"My name is Caleb. I work for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, guest acquisitions. Do you have a minute?"

When Rubin was a child his mother used to bring him out into the backyard at night. She'd put a blanket on the grass, an ashtray for herself, and they'd lie there looking for comets. She said he was a shooting star in his own right and like a giant idiot he believed her. "You're destined to do big things in life, Rubin. Good things. Things that really matter," she told him.

He holds his hands in front of him now—just a thumb and two fingers remaining on each one. Not even a knuckle to show where the others were before the accident. Nothing but pale, lumpy scar tissue as repulsive as moon rocks. When he's beading, or doing anything really, they look more like beetle mouths than hands. If that's the destiny his mother was talking about, she could have it.

Truth is Rubin wasn't looking to do *anything*, special or otherwise. He was waiting for something to happen *to him*. This is how he figured it'd play out: the mine (that never hired him) spewed out all kinds of pollution—the tailings pond near the well, the big, phallic smokestacks—so it was just a matter of time before diseases started popping up like maggots. And Rubin lived right on the edge of town, closest to the mine site. Sooner or later he'd find some lump in his neck, blood in his urine, a sore that wouldn't heal. And then, lawsuit money.

But now, instead of all that, Oprah wants him to be her guest on TV and two things immediately come to mind. One, Oprah sure beats chemotherapy. And two, it's about bloody time.

In six weeks Rubin and the dog are flying to Chicago, staying in a fancy hotel, eating good paid-for meals. And though he only gets a small honorarium for his trouble, this is the kind of thing that opens doors. The chance he's been waiting for. He doesn't want to use the term *meal ticket*, but hey, whatever.

He pushes a chair on the landing just outside his home. Carefully, he lifts the sign he just painted above the door and nails it in place. *Cancer Scans by Oprah-Dog—\$150*.

Rubin sits beside the dog and pets him with his half-hands, smoothing out the imperfections. There are dozens of scars on his back like bits of scrap metal wedged under the skin. They feel, for all intents and purposes, like whip marks. And then there's that damn lost tail and whatever story's behind that. This dog's had a hard life, there's no doubt about it. Exactly like Rubin's own lousy plight.

He was twelve when it happened to him, the day before Halloween. Marcus, a friend from school, had a brother old enough to buy fireworks and the three of them were in the soccer field with a bag full. *Cluster Bombs*, *Phantom Blasts*, a boxy thing named *Godzilla*. The first few went off perfectly and then Rubin lit a huge barrage, *The Dream Weaver*. It tilted and he tried to straighten it before it ignited. He doesn't remember anything after that except the sound: horse hooves on pavement, trees falling, pumpkins being dropped from way, way up. And then silence.

There were many people at fault there, none of them Rubin. He was twelve, as incapable of blame as the dog lying in front of him now. But Marcus' brother, Christ, he was eighteen. And Marcus' parents need to take responsibility for being such unaware slobs. The town council too for hemming and hawing over a proposed fireworks ban. The fireworks company itself. It goes on and on.

And now, because of it, Rubin lives a life where wiping his own ass is as complicated as solving a Rubik's Cube. When he thinks about it he gets so mad there's just about no amount of money on earth that could settle him down.

Someone knocks on the door. He takes a deep breath, feels the softness of the dog's ears between his fingers, and goes to answer it.

It's Dwight Kingsley from the mine. The putz in Human Resources who interviewed Rubin years ago for the job he didn't get. He never said why they passed on him but it's not as if he had to. It's too obvious.

"Hi Rubin," he says. He removes his sunglasses and puts them in a small cloth bag. "How are you these days?"

"A-okay," Rubin answers, making an okay sign with his remaining fingers. It amounts to a circle and an extended middle finger pointed right at Dwight's nose.

Dwight nods his head. He's wearing a brown leather coat, the ultra-soft kind that costs an arm. If Rubin could, he'd pull it over Mr Discrimination's head, spin him around, and boot his ass right out the door. That is unless he's here looking for a scan. Rubin should probably find that out first.

"I don't want to take up too much of your time but I hear you're going to be on TV soon," Dwight says. "Congratulations."

"Is that why you came? Congratulations?"

"No, not really. I know how you feel about the company, Rubin," Dwight goes on. "But nobody likes bad publicity, especially the televised kind."

"I'm going on the show. You can't stop me."

"On the contrary. I want you to go. You can represent us in a sense. Preserve our good environmental name."

Rubin pauses for a second, letting this bizarre conversation sink in. "What's in it for me?" he says finally. "I mean, financially?"

There have been no positive scans since the sign went up but business has been great. And Rubin's even managed to sell a bunch of necklaces in the deal, working the souvenir angle of all things. Hell, he might even bring something to hock to Oprah when he goes, maybe the choker with the bullshit whalebone pendant. What a coup that would be! He just about craps his own pants when he thinks about it.

The bottom line is he's made more money in the last few weeks than in the previous six months. He has tons saved, more than a thousand bucks. In fact he's going to use some of it to get the dog an official *Oprah Winfrey* t-shirt at the studio gift shop. Something to wear while he works his lucrative magic.

"That's right, buddy," he says to the dog lounging by the heat vent. "A nice t-shirt, just for you."

Rubin lies on the carpet with him and rubs his own chin against the dog's stubbly nose. Then he says in a voice most people use only for babies, "You and me, Mr Money-Maker, we're going places. Uh huh. Yes we are."

The dog leans into him, rests his head on Rubin's arm and closes his eyes. Rubin closes his too but the moment ends with a knock on the door. "Duty calls," he says.

The woman standing there is new to him. She's young, nineteen maybe, and very tiny. Her hair's tied back and though it's not cold out she's wearing a wool vest. He also notices some homemade jewellery, glass beads on a thick leather string. A bent copper bracelet polished orange, the colour of a comet's tail.

She takes a clipboard out from under her arm.

"Don't worry, I'm ultra low-pressure," she says. "It's just a petition to prompt the mine into cleaning up its environmental act. It's a no-brainer actually, almost signs itself." She winks at him and smiles.

Rubin stares for a second, and then laughs out loud.

If this is a joke it's really quite good. All these years nobody cared. And now, a petition! If she'd got to him last week he'd have been all over the damn thing. But not now.

When Dwight visited Rubin, he brought a folder of studies the mine has done on its ecological impact. Rubin leafed through them but mostly he just read the fact-sheet Dwight wants him to reference on the talk show. Statistics like the cancer rates in town being the same as everywhere else in the province, the giant amount of money the company has spent on reclamation and tailings treatment, and the mine's own water results, testing out as clean and drinkable as a mountain stream. "Our water's even fluoridated," he told Rubin, "for your teeth."

The funny part is he wasn't going to trash the mine anyway. He'll be too busy promoting himself. But now, by some strange twist of Karma, the mine's giving him a whack of cash not to say things he wasn't going to say in the first place. How fucked up is that?

"I don't think so," he says to the girl at the door. "Our air is fine, our water is fine."

And because he's feeling smug he goes over to the sink, pours a glass and takes a big, exaggerated drink. He pours the rest into the dish on the floor beside him.

The dog moseys over and laps at the bowl.

“You’re funny,” the girl says. “But like I said, low-pressure. Hey pupper. How about you? Will you put your paw-print here?” She puts her clipboard on the floor so she can pet him. “So you’re the famous dog, huh?”

“Would you like him to scan you?”

“Me? No thanks. If I was going to die, I wouldn’t want to know ahead of time. It would screw up all my plans.”

Rubin doesn’t respond.

“It’s a big responsibility,” she goes on, patting the animal’s head. “Taking care of someone who can’t care for himself.”

Rubin’s suddenly uncomfortable with the path this conversation has taken. Mostly because his fingers are sore and there’s no money to be had here. But also because he’s not sure if the clipboard girl is talking to him now or if she’s still talking to the goddamn dog.

The only suitcase Rubin has is a heavy, orange thing that smells like a bus depot. The latch barely closes and there are no wheels which means it’s probably from the fifties or something. It was his mother’s and it annoys him he’s thinking of her now, the day of his big flight. If she were still around would she be happy for him? Is being on Oprah *shooting star* enough? It’ll lead to a pocket full of money and that’s more than enough for a cripple like Rubin. No matter what anyone might think.

He turns to look at the dog. “What would you wear on TV if you were me? Hmm?”

The dog hasn’t moved all morning but his eyes have been following Rubin, watching him pack. Rubin gave him a bath last night using his own shampoo and right now they both smell like apricots.

He grabs the nicest thing he has from the closet: a wool jacket, white button-up shirt, and a pair of black pants. It’s the outfit he wore for his one and only job interview, the no-thank-you event with Dwight Kingsley. It’s either suitable for the occasion or it’s jinxed, there’s only one way to find out. He puts it in the suitcase and fumbles with the latch until it clicks. In a separate bag he packs some dog food, a blanket and the new chew-toy he got on sale at the drugstore; the woman from the airline suggested bringing a few of the animal’s favourite things for the flight. “It’s noisy and dark in the cargo hold. Something familiar in the crate will keep him calm,” she said. “Everybody likes calm.”

When he’s finished packing he takes an icepack from the freezer, sits down and puts it on his finger stumps to soothe them. After a minute or two

he wraps a second icepack in a tea towel and places it where the dog's tail should be. They stay nestled like that for a while, until the airport shuttle van pulls up in the driveway and honks for them to come out.

Inside the terminal there are dozens of other travellers, all wheeling their suitcases around effortlessly while Rubin struggles with his. He puts it down and checks his ticket; it isn't clearly marked which way to go. He looks at the boarding pass, at the many numbered signs all around. The dog sits quietly beside him the whole time.

"Can I help you?" someone says.

It's a woman in an airport uniform. Her face is hard, stippled like the skin of a lemon and her hair's tied back in a dramatic bun high on the top of her head. Rubin hands her his ticket. She takes it and glances at the dog. Then she looks at Rubin like he just presented her with a bowl of ass-hair.

"Is the animal travelling, too?" she says.

"Yes."

"Did you pre-register?"

"Yes."

"Follow me."

Rubin walks behind her, suppressing the urge to trip her with the dog's leash. The only reason he doesn't say something like, *Excuse me, I think you forgot to go fuck yourself this morning*, is because this woman is a key to unlocking Rubin's windfall. His wallet feels fatter with every step and nothing, not even Miss Lemon-Face here, is going to spoil his mood.

They veer off the path of the other travellers and end up down a long, windowless hallway. A cleaning man leans against the wall, holding a mop as grey and unkempt as his beard. He doesn't say a word as they pass but he watches the dog the whole way.

"In here," the woman says. She goes into an elevator at the end of the hall. Rubin puts his suitcase down and stands beside her. The dog leans into his leg.

"Has the dog flown before?"

"No," Rubin says. "I don't think so."

The doors open into what looks like a high school basement. Bare cement floors, drain hole in the middle of the room, a puzzle of air ducts and water pipes across the ceiling. And along one wall, a row of plastic dog-cages each with a small, barred window for the animals to look out.

“We can take it from here,” the woman says.

A man approaches wearing work gloves and overalls. He looks more like a plumber than an animal handler. The woman takes Rubin’s blanket and puts it in one of the cages. She tosses in the chew toy. The man reaches for the leash.

“Alright, here we go,” Rubin says.

The dog stares at the kennel. For the first time ever Rubin sees the fur on the scruff of his neck stand up, stiff and bristly as a toilet brush. He tries to smooth it down but it bounces right back. The flesh underneath is quivering. And the dog’s lip flares, revealing yellow teeth and dark, pigmented gums.

He barks, sharply.

“Bad dog,” Rubin says. It a stupid thing to say but he wasn’t prepared for this. The dog’s never barked before. Not even once.

“You’ll be fine. These people will take care of you.”

He barks again. Four or five times with deep, low growls in between.

The man tugs his gloves tighter and rubs the leather palms together. “It’s best if we do it,” he says. “Seriously.”

The dog pulls on his leash, tries to wiggle free of his collar. His eyes are huge and his whole body is shaking. Like he’s waiting to be saved from a burning barn.

Rubin bends down and whispers in his ear. “Hey pal,” he says. “Don’t screw it up okay? There’s nothing to worry about.”

He pets him with his aching hands. Rubs his coat all over, trying to stop the animal from shuddering. Trying to make this work. Then, through the fur, Rubin feels something he’s never noticed before. A lump. The exact size, texture and hardness of a walnut shell.

The dog twists around and tries to lick that spot. He can’t reach, though, so he turns and growls at the airport staff again.

Rubin presses his fingers into his own temples. He pictures a sack full of money, so big he can hardly lift it. It’s right there in front of him. Right friggin’ there. “We’ll fix you up later,” he says to the dog. “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.”

“That’s right,” the plumber-man says. “He’ll be fine.” He reaches for the leash again. Rubin hesitates for a second, then gives it to him and walks away.

Behind him he hears the dog bark, his claws dragging across the cement floor. A yip. A strained cough from the pull of his collar. Another yip. Rubin fakes a coughing fit of his own to drown out the noise of the struggle.

He still hears it, though, all of it, until he gets into the hallway and closes the door behind him.

Rubin feels like he's being watched as he walks through first class. The rich folk are all staring at his hands or his second-hand clothes, making him feel like a criminal. Even after he takes his seat with the regular people he feels scrutinized. Dissected even. The whole thing is playing out much crappier than he'd envisioned.

He flags down a stewardess. A young, plain-looking woman with big cheeks and freckles all over her face. He chooses her because she seems the friendliest. "Excuse me," he says. "Can I get something to drink?"

"You sure can. But not until we're up there." She smiles and points skyward.

"Oh. Right," Rubin says. He turns and looks out the window beside him. A man on the tarmac is driving a luggage cart in a meaningless circle. Rubin sees a dog-crate piled in among the baggage, but it isn't his. The cart drives off the other way and manoeuvres between two smaller planes. Rubin watches until it disappears.

He'll get the dog checked the second they get back. And he'll find the best people to do it too. Not some crappy horse doctor but someone who knows this kind of thing, a top-of-the-line specialist. There's nothing to worry about, at least nothing substantial enough to kibosh the Oprah Winfrey gravy train. The thing Rubin's been waiting for his whole miserable life.

He hears a noise, a torque-wrench or a compressor squealing. It's loud inside the cabin and must be much louder underneath him in the cargo hold. The wrench stops and he hears something else. It's faint, but it's there: a raspy, persistent barking in the belly of the aircraft.

He closes his eyes. Then he puts the free airline headphones in his ears, but there's no sound coming from them yet so he stuffs them back into the seat pocket in front of him. Barking doesn't mean anything. It's what dogs do. And besides, they'll only be gone a week. Nobody dies of a tumour in a week. The dog will be fine until they get back home. Absolutely, perfectly fine.

As long as his heart doesn't give out in the cargo hold.

"Damn it," he whispers. He leans forward and puts his hands over his face.

"Excuse me, I think you're in my seat," someone says. "Oh, it's you. Hello again."

Rubin looks up and sees a woman wearing a glass bead necklace, copper bracelet, wool vest. It's the petition girl. Right here in front of him as conspicuous as an albatross.

"This is a funny coincidence, isn't it?" she says. "Life's too weird sometimes. How's your pupper by the way?"

Rubin shakes his head. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm sorry?"

Rubin looks out the window again. In his mind he sees an image of the dog's face in the glass. Those eyes, looking right into him. Reflecting the life they've both had. And even though it's like finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and then setting it on fire, he knows what he has to do.

He rubs his neck with his lousy hands and squeezes by the woman. "The seat's all yours," he says.

She looks at him strangely but Rubin couldn't care less what she's thinking. The flight will be taking off soon, he doesn't have much time. He runs up the aisle, banging his knee on one of the armrests. He swears under his breath and continues limping into first class, the section he should have been sitting in originally if life were fair at all. He gets stuck behind some snub-nose standing up like he owns the airline, taking off his thousand-dollar jacket. Rubin waits patiently for two or three seconds, and then pushes him out of the way. He rushes up to the stewardess at the front, the one with the pleasant face.

"I have to get off the plane," he says.

She stares back at him, blinking. "I'm sorry. You're too late. They're about to close the doors."

Rubin looks at the cabin door. Another woman is there, turning a big handle, sealing it shut while the others prepare for their useless pre-flight safety speech. And then, right on cue, the seatbelt sign chimes, flashing for him to sit down.

It's finished. Over. He missed his chance.

People are staring at him now, waiting for him to settle in his seat. He turns, slowly, and starts walking back towards his row. Halfway there though, he stops. The dog is barking again below him, more and more frantically with each yelp.

He takes a deep breath and looks at the ceiling. "Is there no one else on earth," he whispers, "that you can fuck with besides me?"

He returns to the front of the plane and walks up to the stewardess again. He holds his hands in the air for her, for everyone, to see. "Is it because

I'm handicapped? Is that what you're saying?" he says in a loud voice, full of phoney disbelief. "Is this what they call *discrimination*."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the stewardess says. She looks nervously at the cabin crew behind her. All of whom have stopped what they were doing to listen. The entire front section of the airplane has gone quiet as snow.

Rubin leans in close and whispers, "Look, I work for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, okay. And I know neither you nor the airline wants any bad publicity here."

"Of course not," the stewardess says. "But—"

"No buts." Rubin positions a hand right in front of her face to stop her sentence. She stares at his fingers and he knows he's got her.

"Here's the deal," he says, "I don't want a refund. I don't want compensation. All I want is to get my dog out of that crate and to go home. Now, are you going to tell me that's too much to ask for in life? Seriously, to my face? Is that what you're about to tell me?"