

ADAM HAMMOND

THE MAN WITH THE DOG

AS MR. HO ROUNDED THE CURVE of the track and began back toward the tennis courts, he saw her, vaguely, through the falling snow, angrily kicking her small brown dog. Her: Mrs. Askin: to whom he had determined, after so much deliberation, to finally reveal his love. Her white dog barked stupidly and looked on as she kicked the brown dog a second time.

Mr. Ho walked toward her and saw, as she stood still a second and tilted her head to one side, that she had apprehended a presence. With affected naturalness, she reached into the pocket of her large coat, removed a ball, and threw it for her dogs. Unpossessed of memory, they ran ungrudgingly and excitedly after it. Then she looked to her left. Emerged from the veil of falling snow was Mr. Ho. They were face to face.

“Boy,” she said. “This is something. Must have blown in off the lake.” She was smiling apprehensively, gesturing toward the distant lake with one hand and catching snow in the mitten of the other.

“Yep,” he said. “Worst storm so far.” He had trouble with his Rs and his vowel sounds were odd. His way of talking layered several accents, and Mrs. Askin wasn’t equipped to reconstruct them. Something Asian, of course—but she’d never asked him which country he was from. And then there was something like an English accent. And a Canadian one, if there was such a thing.

For a second Mr. Ho looked quite intently into Mrs. Askin’s blue eyes, focused on the little ice crystals on her eyelashes, and then, shrugging his shoulders, said “Well, gotta run. Bye for now.” He tugged on the leash of his large black and gold dog, who followed obediently. As they passed out of the schoolyard, between the two tennis courts, Mr. Ho saw the puddle of frozen vomit—red, orange, brown, and green, with a glossy finish—that Mrs. Askin’s brown dog must have licked.

Teens.

He would declare his love tomorrow.

Mr. Ho liked to think that, for a transplanted country person, he would serve as a kind of mute rooster. Such was the regularity of his morn-

ing walk. Those up making coffee at six saw him walking to the schoolyard, his weathered, tea-filled plastic thermos pressed up and partly concealed against his side. Those up at seven saw him move along Harbord Street as they read the news. By eight he was on his way home.

His first visit was to the schoolyard, where he would throw a tennis ball for Roof and talk to the radio producer or his wife. On his way to a second, larger park he would usually stop in at a café. He knew the owner's daughter from her walks in this second park, and she was fond enough of Mr. Ho to offer him her company and hot water for his thermos. Next he would return to the schoolyard, which on this second visit was transformed. Here he encountered a high school drama teacher with a golden retriever; a South African civil servant whose dog was small and white; a woman who he presumed a writer and whose coprophagous poodle often ate Roof's poop, before it hit the ground;—and Mrs. Askin. Mr. Ho circled the track for as long as it took for each of them to appear. Then they walked around, losing and gaining people and dogs on each revolution.

That particular morning, which was to have been unusual, instead went as always. Mr. Ho walked past the vomit, turned left on Euclid Avenue, right on Lennox Street, and left again on Palmerston Boulevard. He walked like a toy soldier moved on by a massive, invisible hand, hardly bending his legs. Roof, disproportionately large, walked obediently beside him, his softening fangs hidden inside his cheek-flaps. Mr. Ho and his dog climbed the three flights of stairs to their fourth-floor garret in the Imperial Apartments, an aged tenement. Here Mr. Ho fed his dog and filled his water bowl. Not bothering to change out of his old black jeans and blue plaid shirt—and not having removed his coat, which had a fur collar—he put a banana in his old leather briefcase and left for work.

The unusual introduced itself later in the day, when Mr. Ho was returning from work. From Herrick Street he could see that people were gathered in front of the Imperial Apartments. From Lennox he could hear concerned sounds and sense excitement. The South African civil servant met Mr. Ho at the corner and pointed to the spot in the snow where Roof lay collapsed on a patterned sheet. Crouched next to him was Mr. Ho's unhealthy-looking downstairs neighbour—one of the young people with small dogs he sometimes saw on his second visit to the schoolyard. Her dog was named Pickle—a weiner dog—but he didn't know her name.

“She found him,” the South African said. “He jumped straight out the window. Must have seen a squirrel.”

Well, thought Mr. Ho. The declaration will have to wait.

The unhealthy-looking downstairs neighbour was named Dolly. She had a tiny body and a large head with thin pale brown hair and large, dark, protruding eyes. Pickle, her Dachshund, was a long brown noodle with one blue and one black eye.

Though he didn't know her name, and even before he met Pickle, Mr. Ho was well acquainted with Dolly. Two years before, she had moved in directly beneath him with her short-haired, unflappable boyfriend. Proximity brought premature and undesired intimacy. During their fights, Dolly screamed and cursed. Her companion's responses, if any, were of a frequency that transmitted itself through Mr. Ho's hardwood floor as a sensation rather than a sound. When Mr. Ho heard a slap, or when something was broken, he assumed that Dolly was responsible.

After they moved in, Mr. Ho became even quieter than before—he wore slippers, whispered to his dog, kept Roof's nails clipped, and listened to music and the radio with headphones. Since they heard nothing from above, and since the apartment below them was kept by a foreign person never in occupancy, Dolly and her boyfriend became louder and louder.

Mr. Ho saw them sometimes on his walks. He saw the boyfriend, whose name was Gregory, on mornings after fights. He would be in the schoolyard on the first pass, and from his strained pleasant chitchat Mr. Ho learned that Gregory was an engineer. Normally, however, it was Dolly who walked Pickle, twice a day. If Mr. Ho saw her, it was usually as he was on his way home and she on her way out. The odd time they both happened to be in the part at the same time, Dolly stood in the centre of the field instead of joining the company in their turns around the track. In her massive blue down coat, Dolly looked like a cartoon sheep: huge and puffy about the middle, with tiny spindly legs and a little brown head. She threw a small ball for Pickle, who was oblivious of the orbiting, barking dogs.

On the day in question, at approximately two thirty in the afternoon, Dolly was surprised to see Roof, a massive old Rottweiler, pass by her window, top to bottom, at high speed.

She had been in the middle of distractedly painting her nails red. She muted the television, went to the window, opened it to the cold, stuck out

her head, looked down, and saw Roof in the snow. She put on some socks, her boots, and her down coat. Then she made her way down the stairs and out the front door.

Roof lay there panting, his open snout and escaped tongue pressing up against and melting the snow. His head was turned uncomprehendingly toward his unresponding, disobedient body. He whimpered at it. The practical look in his eye suggested he wanted to bite it off. Dolly knelt down next to him and petted the top of his head. She got some nail polish on his fur, which the veterinarian mistook for blood.

"I'll be right back," Dolly said to Roof. She ran back up to her apartment and removed the sheets from her bed. Some neighbours then helped her roll Roof onto the sheet, and the South African, who had been passing by with his little white dog, called for a cab. It was shortly afterward that Mr. Ho returned from work. While he talked to the South African, the taxi arrived. Two out of the forming crowd helped to lift Roof into the back seat. Dolly, quite unexpectedly, got in next to him.

"You get in the front," she said to Mr. Ho. "Bark n' Meow Animal Hospital," she said to the driver. She had to explain where this was.

Roof's four broken legs took nine months and several thousand dollars to repair. Mr. Ho stopped going to his workshop, leased his workspace, and moved his equipment into his apartment, which was empty enough to receive it. He adjusted to a new routine, which, since it was not freely made, was unpleasant to him. He consoled himself with the thought that this new schedule served the purpose of restoring the canine mobility upon which his previous, beloved routine depended.

He woke up now between eight and nine-thirty. He carried his heavy dog down the three flights of stairs, waited until he peed, and then bore his burden back up. This needed to be repeated at noon, at four, and just before bed. (He had also periodically to check Roof's diaper, which was worn in case of an emergency that, thankfully, never materialized.) Mr. Ho did not usually begin work until noon, and then stopped at four. He listened to the radio. In the evenings he read, wrote letters to his mother and sister, and, welcoming sleepiness, went to bed.

He seldom spoke to Roof. Though neighbours cited him in various contexts as an exemplar of kindness, generosity, and selfless devotion, in fact forced confinement and the business of carrying him up the stairs—Roof weighed only a little less than he did—turned Mr. Ho decidedly against his

dog. A few times the South African had come by and offered his help with Roof. He called Mr. Ho a few times as well; as, once, did the daughter of the café owner. The rest he didn't see or hear from for the whole nine months.

Dolly, however, was a constant presence. From the day of Roof's fall, she had involved herself increasingly in the lives of Mr. Ho and his dog. On the day itself she played an absurdly heroic role—opening doors, filling out forms, dealing with receptionists and assistants—like a kitten dressed up as a pirate. That evening, when Mr. Ho was alone in his apartment, she came up to ask if he wanted anything. A few days later she called for the cab that took them, together, back to the animal hospital to pick up Roof. The day after that she brought him a plate of cookies made from frozen dough and covered in colourful sprinkles.

Dolly began watching Mr. Ho out her window. She learned where she could be useful, and began to appear in front of his door at noon and at four to help him carry his dog down the stairs. She asked if he needed help moving his work equipment, but he refused. She made him meals of increasing size and quality, attempting for the first time recipes her mother had given her when she left home—a stack of blue index cards held together with an elastic band. Because Mr. Ho was shy he never specifically thanked her. This only made her more willing to help.

Mr. Ho watched also, and listened. In the mornings she woke up only after Gregory had left for work. Then she ate breakfast with the television on, engaged herself in animated conversations, and walked her short-legged, long-torsoed black and brown dog. At noon, and again four hours later, she knocked on his door and they took Roof downstairs and back up. In between, she usually left the building in her down coat, looking apprehensively from left to right as she reached the sidewalk—and once or twice glancing asymptotically up at Mr. Ho's garret to see if he was looking. He usually was, of course. But even if her glance had ever reached the place where he stood, he would have been hidden from view by the reflections in his window.

Mr. Ho's apartment, where he had lived since the middle 1980s, was long and narrow. Entering from the fourth-floor hallway, a living room was visible on the left. In it was a couch, a table with a radio and a record player sitting on top, several bookcases, and two ferns. The eastern wall, which was angled in at sixty degrees, had a dormer with two windows, one of which Mr. Ho left open to counter the effects of heat convection, even in winter. (This was the window from which Roof had jumped. Because he could still

not move under his own power, it remained open.) There was a chair nearby the window, but Mr. Ho preferred to stand as he looked out. Roof's bed was under the window; he spent the entirety of his convalescence laying on it.

To the right of the entryway was a long narrow hallway leading past a shut door on the right. At the end of the hallway were a water closet and a bathroom, one indicated by a small, framed piece of fancy white paper on which Mr. Ho had painted in green and blue watercolours a W and a C. Past them was his small kitchen, which had another door leading from it. When Dolly saw this door she couldn't figure out where it might lead. The shape of his apartment, so different from hers, was disorienting.

Dolly did not have the opportunity to be disoriented by the interior of Mr. Ho's apartment, however, for several months. But it happened on Good Friday that as she handed Mr. Ho a plate of fresh, hot sauerkraut perogies, she invited herself in. It was the boldness of a person very shy and very uncomfortable with her shyness, who, finding herself in the company of someone somewhat shier, seizes the opportunity of creating for herself an image of the imagined ideal society from which her accursed shyness has excluded her. He reacted as she expected he would. He looked uneasy and told her to stay where she was as he cleaned up. As he did, she removed her slippers. After waiting for three or four minutes, she started off down the hallway to where Mr. Ho was. He interrupted her, carrying a tray with a teakettle, two cups, and two apples, and repulsed her toward his living room.

This room was large, had white walls, contained numerous old globes, and was brightly lit by the windows—though it had no overhead light. Dolly petted Roof, told Mr. Ho that the perogies were for him, drank the small cup of tea which was still much too hot, and talked about her plans for the holiday. Mr. Ho ate and listened without looking at her. She left as soon as she could, her heart beating wildly. That night, Mr. Ho noticed, there was a loud fight beneath him, with her audible screaming, Gregory's low rumbling, and the arresting sound of a slammed door. The next morning he heard them having sex. They left in the afternoon for three days, and Dolly slipped a note under Mr. Ho's door: Hope you manage OK with Roof! Happy Easter! (Back Monday PM)—Dolly. The "olly" was written with a different pen.

She continued to help Mr. Ho with his dog and to bring him food. She regularly—no more than once a week, and at least once a month—invited herself in for tea and apples. Mr. Ho now kept his living room clean in case of her visits and moved his globes and maps to his bedroom, which he now kept locked. (The key was tied with a piece of string to a belt loop

in his black jeans and kept in his right front pocket. Dolly never noticed it.) Once she surprised him by asking to go to the bathroom. He gave her very detailed instructions—told her to use the room marked W.C.—but in spite of them she ended up in the bathroom, was unable to find the toilet, and had to give up on peeing. She then wandered into the kitchen, where she saw the strange door. Only on the way back to the living room did she finally see the door marked W.C.—but by then she had already been gone too long to use it.

During these visits Mr. Ho seldom spoke. Sitting on the couch, drinking his tea, he listened to Dolly talk about her daily activities. She always presented her stories so as to leave open doors to further discussion about her family, her childhood, her ambitions, and her relationships. Mr. Ho never walked through them. In the letters he wrote to his sister and mother, he didn't mention Dolly's visits.

It was in September that things changed. Roof's four casts had come off, and his legs were gradually becoming useful. One day, Roof walked for the first time from his bed (Mr. Ho had to lift him up) all the way to the rear door. That night Mr. Ho went to sleep very content at the prospect of normality's return.

He was woken up, however, by the sound of a violent fight beneath him. The sound of something heavier than a door contacting the wall or floor woke him. He heard Dolly scream much louder than usual and Gregory respond without his usual reserve. Doors slammed very loudly. Complete silence followed, and then a sound much closer: a quiet knock on his door.

Mr. Ho could hear her crying on the other side. He sighed and opened the door. "I'm sorry," she said. His sleepy irritation was tempered when he saw her, looking tiny and crumpled, her eyes wet and purple, holding her right elbow in her left hand, which bisected and deflated her puffy down coat. She knew he might not answer his door and was dressed hyperbolically for the outdoors—she wouldn't go back to her apartment. The sight of her suffering—like that of a squirrel who had stored too little—affected him. He went to the kitchen to make them tea.

When he returned she was standing in the window, looking out. "He left in the car," she said, turning her head but not her body, moaning on the edge of another effusion. Roof looked up at her but remained lying down. The room, lit up by the streetlights below which made a pattern of converging, mutually interfering squares on the ceiling, brightened somewhat when Mr. Ho turned on the lamp. He sat down on the couch, patted the spot next to him

with his right hand, and stirred the sugar with his left. She sat next to him, for the first time, and he handed her her cup of tea. She was poised between drinking and speaking. But before she could begin to pour forth the story she had been forming while she looked out the window, Mr. Ho told her his.

He began on the day that Roof jumped out the window. He told her how, for fifteen years, his life had progressed toward that moment—the moment he would tell Mrs. Askin that he loved her, that he had loved her for fifteen years, that he spent his days thinking of their meetings in the park, that there was nothing he loved so much as to circle the track with her and her two dogs (which had changed; died and been replaced)—that he always hoped she would stay for another turn. But then Roof, his passport to his life, to life itself, to contact and people, jumped out the window, broke his four legs, and everything stopped. And now, when life seemed once again to be distantly visible—when he could see it, as if through falling snow—he knew he wouldn't be able to tell her. In a week Roof would be well enough to walk. But it would take another fifteen years—another dog's lifetime—to get back the boldness, so deliberately achieved, that he had felt that day.

The effect of his story was exactly as Mr. Ho had intended. Dolly's gratification was enormous. As he finished his story, her tears were not for herself but for this small, lonely man. She had forgotten herself; she thought only of him and the sad, lonely woman he loved. When she did remember herself, it was with immense fondness. "Imagine me behaving like that!" she thought, very relieved.

Though Mr. Ho would have continued talking, Dolly stood up to go. At the door, before she left, she leaned down and hugged him, deflating her jacket against him. She felt his tiny body, like that of a tall grasshopper. He, with a single tap, divined all the boniness her coat concealed.

The next day, and for some days after that, everything was as usual. Roof was able to walk but not to get up under his own power, and still couldn't be trusted to descend or climb stairs. Dolly came and offered her usual help. Something in the way she acted, however, made Mr. Ho apprehensive. The normal things, it seemed to him, had become deliberate.

On the seventh day after Mr. Ho's confession, while he was still working, he heard activity below. Two things struck him: that Gregory was home on a weekday; and that in addition to Dolly's, there was a second female voice. Mr. Ho turned up the volume on his headphones.

At two thirty Mr. Ho was confused by a knock at his door. In the living room, Roof tried and failed to stand up. Mr. Ho looked in at him as he locked his bedroom door.

It was Dolly. She was smiling.

“I really hope I’m not bugging you,” she said. “Is it okay if I come in?”

Mr. Ho said he’d boil some water.

When he returned to the living room with the kettle and two apples, Dolly was crouched down, petting Roof. She turned her head toward Mr. Ho. She smiled at him as if he was a small child or the victim of a brain injury. Mr. Ho put the kettle and the apples down on the table next to the couch. She stood up, oriented herself, and began.

“After our talk the other night,” she said, “I got an idea.”

She paused.

“I know Jane—Mrs. Askin—you know. Did you know she was my teacher? And I almost always see her in the afternoon with my dog—with Pickle. Our dogs are friends! And I go to her house—for tea.”

Mr. Ho’s pulse began to hit harder and more frequently.

“I’ve had her over here too sometimes. I didn’t know you knew each other! I would have invited you.”

Dolly composed herself.

“Well, I got an idea. You said it would take another fifteen years! I had to—Well. The day after our talk, the most I could do was just ask if she knew you—And she said of course she did, and how was Roof, and ‘Poor Morgan’—I didn’t know that was your name. The next day I was all ready to talk to her but she wasn’t there. So I waited and waited—walked around the track ten times—and she still didn’t come. So I go to the store and come back, and there she is. I asked if I could come over for tea—that I had something interesting to talk about—and she said okay. I told her everything. She seemed surprised. I didn’t push her. I just left. For the next couple of days I still didn’t bug her. But then I saw her yesterday, and she said she talked to some friends and her son, and did I have any sort of plan. I said ‘Why don’t you just come over?’ She said ‘Okay—I’ll bake something.’

“Morgan,” Dolly said, “—Mr. Ho—she’s downstairs.” She was on the verge of tears, in a nervous excitement. “She has butter tarts!” It came out as a whisper.

Mr. Ho was silent and utterly blank. Dolly thought she saw a hint of a smile or a look of hope and walked up to where he was, crouched down

just as she had to Roof, put both her hands on his right knee, and said, very sweetly, “Can she come up?”

Mr. Ho groaned. His eyes, which had been closed, opened, and were looking far off to her right. The look of pain turned progressively to one of anger as he moved his eyes toward Dolly. When his eyes met hers, his look passed over into hate.

He stood abruptly, knocking himself against Dolly. She fell out of her crouch, landed on her back, and in beginning to cry started also to wiggle her limbs like an upturned insect. Roof barked but couldn't stand. Mr. Ho picked up the apples and threw them at Dolly one after the other. The first glanced her shoulder and the second struck the wall behind her, leaving a round wet stain and ring of pulp. He picked up the teapot next and moved to drop it on her, but checked himself and dropped it instead to her right, where it broke against the floor. The hot pool grew to include Dolly before draining off and disappearing between the planks of hardwood.

In the room below, Gregory and Mrs. Askin saw the spilt tea collect on the ceiling. Through the aurally transparent floor they heard the thrown apples, Roof's bark, and Dolly's crying. They ran upstairs, Gregory leading, where the door was open. Mr. Ho, looking as apprehensive and terrified as a squirrel, stood above Dolly, his foot raised for a kick. He saw Gregory first, who paused, and then Mrs. Askin. In her cold blue eyes—eyes trained in disapproval through thirty years as a Grade Two teacher—was a look of fresh disgust.

Mr. Ho lowered his foot. Seeing the entryway blocked, he turned toward the open window. With all his power, with his head tilted down, with his key spinning circles around his belt loop, he ran at it. He was already inside the dormer when, quite unexpectedly, Roof stood up under his own power. Mr. Ho, moving at full speed, tripped over his dog and fell toward the open window. As he did, he imagined himself passing through the window, but not falling as Roof had done. Rather he rose—over the street, over the park, down Bathurst Street, over the islands, over Lake Ontario, and on, the earth slowly losing its flatness, resolving itself into a sphere.