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Strays

RITA'S PARENTS DIED WHEN she was a young woman: a mid-winter accident on the 401 involving a tractor-trailer truck and a bus. Rita couldn't bear to hear the details. Although she was too old to be considered an orphan, that was how she felt.

"What will we do with Digger?" murmured Aunt June, concerned about the family dog.

"We could put her down," Aunt Ellen suggested. "After all, she adored Dick. She'll just grieve."

But Rita would not put the seven-year-old Lab down. "We'll grieve together," she told her relatives.

She packed up her small apartment and moved back into her parents' home. The mortgage had been paid down years ago and the taxes on the little yellow brick bungalow weren't so unreasonable that she couldn't make them on her ultrasound technician's salary. She walked Digger before and after work and came home to walk her at lunch—home was just off Colborne, after all, a few short blocks from the x-ray clinic on Central and Maitland.

There were short, black hairs all over everything. The air was thick with fur, and her bed, which Digger shared, was full of sand, but that, Rita told herself, was as it should be. Generations of dogs had left their mark on the house—theirs was a legacy of chewed chair legs, claw-raked doors (dogs wanting to get out), sheers with ragged hems, not to mention that patch in the wall where Noodles, Digger's predecessor, had tunneled through from the bedroom closet. "Life," as her mother used to explain to visitors, "was more gracious *before the dogs*." The phrase conjured up images of ancient times, antediluvian epochs.

Digger lived another four years. Then the Lab contracted lupus and, after a painful and debilitating illness, died. Well, actually, Rita consented to put her down, on the vet's advice. He was a kind man, who had taken care of all their dogs. "The steroids aren't helping Digger anymore," he explained. "She's sick and in pain."

Digger's anguished eyes told her it was true.

Rita held the dog's paw as she fell asleep for the last time, then signed the papers and went home to an empty house. It was like falling down a deep, wide well.

Friends advised her not to get another dog. "At least not right away," Cheryl at work counseled. "You need time to mourn."

"Now you can actually go somewhere without worrying about the dog!" Barbara pointed out. "Pets really tie you down. Why don't you come to Acapulco with me in February? A bunch of the girls are going."

So Rita didn't get another dog and she did go to Acapulco with her friends and she even began to date: Brian, who worked at a medical supplies company in the East End, and Mike, who did something connected with systems for the mortgage department at Canada Trust. However, she could never find much to say to Brian, and Mike complained that she fondled him too much and followed him around and ruffled his hair. Both men married shortly after they broke up with Rita and, though she had loved neither of them (not really), this piece of information alternately gnawed at her like a rat and tugged at her like a child will its mother's sleeve.

The years went by. Rita turned thirty, then thirty-one and thirty-two.

Some of the patients whom Rita saw had suspected tumours which could not be detected with conventional x-rays. Sometimes their physicians were on the trail of elusive patches of endometriotic tissue or kidney stones or gallstones. Most of her clients, however, were pregnant women. She would smear their bulging bellies with gel and glide a transducer slowly over their taut skin, pumping their abdomen full of sound-like waves the frequencies of which were above the range of human hearing, beyond that even of dogs. The various parts of the foetus reflected and scattered the sound waves at different rates, returning an echo which her magic machine then structured into a blurry image. "Look," she would say to

the woman lying on her table, pointing to the screen suspended above it. "There's your baby's head and there are its lungs and its heart" A guided tour of the womb's furniture. She could not, however, tell the woman that her baby was dead, as it sometimes was, or not growing properly or misshapen, even though she always spotted these things right off. Often the women would ask her: "Is my baby all right?" Then Rita would reconstruct her expression to one of extreme blandness. "You'll have to ask your doctor," she must say, even though she knew that meant a delay and that the woman was desperate for information. "I am only a technician."

In the beginning, she had enjoyed her work. Lately, however, the parade of pregnant women that filed in and out of her cubicle began to depress her. One after another, leveraging their bulk between the table and the cabinet on the wall.

"Nancy?" she would consult the chart. "Hello, Nancy. How are you today? I'm Rita. If you'll just lie down And how far along are you?" As she pulled the vinyl surgical gloves over her fingers.

There were too many of them and they were too happy. Or too sad. Too *expectant*. Rita had once been expectant too. She had expected all sorts of happy things: a husband, babies, picnics at the Port, friends, the show. They hadn't materialized. Nothing had. Rita was in the same place she had always been, stuck between worlds, an overgrown child, a stunted adult. At night she sat in her father's armchair, in the dark, and wept quietly, missing him, missing her mother. She had expected them too.

"Good evening. Do I have the honor of speaking with ... Mrs. Whiteside?" It was a young man's voice on the telephone, eager, desperate.

Rita blinked. "My mother has been dead for years," she told the caller.

"I beg your pardon. Is this ... *Rita Whiteside*?"

"Yes," Rita replied, annoyed with herself for picking up the telephone. She glanced at the clock radio. 6:05 p.m. A salesman, of course. "Look, if you're going to ask me what soup I buy and then try to coerce me into watching *Night Court*"

The young man cut her off. "Cheryl Potter gave me your name and number," he informed her.

"Cheryl?" Rita asked. She rolled her eyes. Was Cheryl trying to set her up again? This boy sounded much too young and, besides, she had given up on men.

"She's concerned about you," the young man advised her tenderly.

"Well, I'm sure that's very sweet," Rita said stiffly, " but"

"She's concerned about your environment."

"My *what*?"

"Your environment. Your *home*."

Oh, God, he's a real estate agent, Rita thought. "Look, I like my home. I don't want to sell," she told him.

"I'm not asking you to sell your home," he replied. "It's just that Cheryl said that dog hairs ... the air quality"

"You install air purification systems?" Rita guessed.

"Sort of Not exactly," he hedged. "Close, though."

"You clean hot air ducts?" Rita was growing more irritated.

"Nooo"

"Then what do you do?" Rita exploded. "Who are you and why are you calling me?"

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Then, "Why! My name is Roy, Rita, and, as I will be in your neighborhood this Wednesday evening, I thought it might be a great opportunity to drop by and demonstrate to you some of the exciting features of the new, top-of-the-line Superlative Vacuum Cleaner."

"Oh, no," Rita demurred.

"Please," said Roy.

"I have a vacuum cleaner."

"Not like this vacuum cleaner."

"I said no."

"Please, please, please, please!" Roy begged. "Please! I haven't had an appointment in five weeks. My sales manager will sack me if I don't at least get someone to agree to a demo. Please, Rita, please. Please! It won't take long. Just a half hour. And it's a really nice vacuum cleaner. And I'll even clean your sofa for free!"

"Oh, all right!" Rita snapped. "I mean"

"Great! You won't regret this! I swear it. Eight o'clock, Wednesday evening."

"But ...," Rita began before realizing that the line was dead.

"I'm going to show you something, Rita," Roy informed her. "Something you're not going to believe."

It had taken the salesman a quarter of an hour to convey the various parts of the Superlative up the steep front steps and into the house and another quarter hour to reassemble it—big-handed and fumble-fingered, he kept dropping pieces and seemed to have difficulty discerning which tube went where and which attachment might fit what wand. Rita guessed his age to be nineteen or twenty. He was slight, stooped, and his sallow face and what she could discern of his neck were peppered with red, angry-looking pimples separated by crater-like pockmarks. The salesman's rumpled, ill-fitting brown suit was cheap and shiny; his tie was a clip-on, and the battered Hushpuppies which peeked out from the salt-stained hems of his suit pants sported frayed laces. Roy was a mess. The vacuum cleaner, on the other hand, was an impressive piece of machinery.

Its sleek chrome canister was twice the size of a more mundane vacuum cleaner and gleamed in the dim light of the living-room like a big bullet or the sort of bombs one drops from airplanes in movies. From it obtruded various tubes and hoses to which, Roy assured her, one affixed brushes, wands and a variety of other attachments intended to suck debris out of crevices, for example, or remove lint from the electric coils on the back of the refrigerator. "Twenty-one attachments in all," Roy had exulted. "Dirt can't hide from the Superlative!"

Rita sat slumped on the lumpy couch, eyeing the vacuum salesman. "What is it you're going to show me?" she asked.

Roy reached into a large portfolio and pulled out a poster-sized piece of paper. Depicted on it was a huge bug, with pincers, antennae, big, compound eyes and what could only be described as furry mandibles. It looked very fierce.

"This ... this, Rita, is a dust mite!" Roy crowed. "This is what lives in your mattress!"

"That doesn't live in my mattress," Rita told him. "I would have noticed."

"Well, the image is magnified, of course," conceded Roy. "You can't see these things with the naked eye."

"So, what's the problem?" asked Rita.

"You want to sleep in a bed full of things that look like this?" Roy waved the picture at her, apparently incredulous.

"If I can't see them, why should it bother me what they look like?" Rita wanted to know.

"But there ... there's your health to consider. These things get into your lungs."

"How much is the vacuum cleaner?" Rita asked wearily.

"And there's all the dog hairs," Roy soldiered on. "Your friend Cheryl was particularly concerned about the dog hairs"

"Did Cheryl buy a vacuum cleaner?"

"No. But"

"Roy," Rita insisted, "how much is the vacuum cleaner?"

"\$2,100," Roy admitted. He held his hand up. "Oh, I know. I know. It's not cheap ... but can you set a price on your well-being?"

"Yes," said Rita. "And it would be a lot lower than \$2,100. I'm sorry, Roy, but no." Rita stood and waved Roy towards the door.

"No?" Roy echoed. He looked at her quizzically, his head cocked to one side, his watery eyes beseeching.

"No sale," Rita clarified. "I can't afford this vacuum cleaner and, what's more, I don't want it. You've had your demo. Now, please, get this thing out of here."

"Can't I at least clean your couch?" Roy pleaded.

"No," Rita decided. "I like dog hair. It's all I have left of poor Digger, when I think about it." Suddenly she felt glum, as though felt had been wrapped around her heart and pulled tight.

"What about your carpet?"

"Roy!" Rita insisted.

A sound woke her: some click or the round pop of a handle turning. A quiet footstep, deliberately guarded, the crunch of bone-dry leaves. The sound came from outside, from the ramshackle wooden garage which hunkered at the end of the steep, pitted driveway some ten feet from the bungalow.

Rita pressed the little button on the side of her indiglo watch: it was just past two in the morning. She sighed, then groaned and shuffled off the covers. Throwing on an old pink chenille bathrobe of her mother's, she shoved her socked feet into worn terrycloth mules and stumbled into the kitchen where she fumbled around in the junk drawer for upwards of five minutes before managing to extricate a flashlight and her father's heavy, black iron crowbar

from tangle of string, old glue tubes, bits of candle, batteries, fuses and extension cords jammed into that receptacle. Thus armed, the ultrasound technician unlatched the side door and gingerly stepped out into the chilly October night, surveying with some trepidation (her heart tapping lightly in her throat), the moon-drenched driveway and the white garage which glowed like a ghost at its end.

Dried leaves hunched across the asphalt like startled crabs. A slight, fresh wind jangled the branches of the old maple that overarched the driveway. In the distance a dog barked urgently and the train from Windsor howled back its gruel-thin response. But, in addition to these perfectly reasonable sounds, another, unlikely one oozed out from under the closed garage door: *Brrrrrr. Tick-tick-tick*. It was a warm, machine noise. The sound of an engine running.

It's the Pony, Rita realized, aghast. Someone had crept into her garage and started her decrepit car. Silently she cursed herself for leaving the door unlocked and the key in the ignition. But who in his right mind would think of stealing the Pony? It was over thirteen years old and every other week some vital part fell off it. It must be some kid, Rita rallied, or kids. Joyriding, most likely. I'll just frighten them off. She strode up to the garage door and pounded on it with the crowbar. "Hey, you in there! The police are on their way!"

No answer.

Rita waited. She pounded on the garage door a second time. "I'd get out of there if I were you! The police'll be here any minute!" Scurrying back to the side door of the house, she huddled in it for a moment, ready to leap inside and draw the bolt at the first sign of movement from the garage.

There was none. The Pony rattled away in a phlegmy manner, occasionally hiccuping.

I should call the police, Rita thought, but, instead, she crept back to the garage and, taking a deep breath, grasped the door handle and pulled upwards. The garage door shuffled along its track, shrieking rusty protest. She shone the flashlight around the back of the car. Something was connected to the exhaust pipe. A tube of some sort, the kind one might find on a vacuum cleaner. The opposite end of the tube was thrust through the window of the back seat. It was propped up and held in place by the window glass, which had been rolled down some two or three inches.

With trembling fingers Rita depressed the latch on the hatchback and dragged the hatch upwards, tipping forward into the car as she did for a view of the back-seat. There, his knees pulled up towards his chest and his hands crossed over his chest in a funeral pose, lay Roy the vacuum cleaner salesman, looking as much like the Lady of Shalott as an ugly boy in a bad suit could.

“Why did you try to kill yourself in my garage?” Rita fumed.

“Because you were nice to me,” Roy told her. “I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“Nice to you? I wasn’t nice to you!”

“Nicer than most,” Roy maintained, glumly.

The hospital had released the vacuum cleaner salesman into her care as soon as he was fit to leave. She hadn’t wanted to sign for him, but he said there was no one else whom he could trust.

“My manager fired me when I didn’t make the sale to you,” Roy told her. “Said he was tired of carrying me. Then my landlady kicked me out.”

“I suppose you couldn’t pay the rent,” Rita snorted.

“No, actually,” Roy admitted. “It had to do with a hot plate I left on.”

“Well, you can stay with me for a couple of days until you get yourself sorted,” Rita told him, against her better judgment. “You can sleep in Dad’s old workroom. It’s pretty rough, but there’s a cot.”

“Oh, Rita, Rita, thank you!” Roy exclaimed, seizing her hand with his cold, wet one. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a shed!”

“It is a shed,” Rita advised him.

The workshop was located in a wooden lean-to tacked onto the brick bungalow in the mid-thirties. Under the solitary fly-speckled window stretched an old army cot covered with a somewhat crusty red-and-green striped Hudson Bay blanket and a limp feather pillow smelling of gasoline and dating back two decades—her father used to take naps there, of a Sunday afternoon. The opposite wall was taken up with a workbench on which hunkered a big, bright red Canadian Tire tool box along with bits and pieces of the dysfunctional lawnmower engine he had been tinkering with at the time of his death. Hand tools hung from an unpainted pegboard above the bench—saws and hammers, a level, a plane. Beside the bench stood metal shelves. The upper shelves were stacked with

Mason jars and a jumble of old baby food jars filled with bolts, nuts, nails and screws, while the lower provided space for an assortment of gardening implements and supplies—bulb planters, trowels, gloves stiff with earth, moldering boxes half filled with grass seed, fertilizer and blood meal. Rakes, a hoe and a snow shovel hung from hooks on the wall; fishing tackle dangled from the ceiling. Mud-caked hip waders and brittle galoshes littered the floor. Apart from the cumbersome fluorescent fixture suspended over the workbench (Rita's father had salvaged this from an old department store) and the grimy window, what light there was emanated from a solitary forty-watt bulb planted in the middle of the cobweb-strewn ceiling. An ancient electric heater provided heat; when activated, it hissed, tottered and glowed a fiery red. There was a door leading to the small backyard and another which opened onto the kitchen.

"Very nice," said Roy.

"This is just until you get on your feet," Rita warned him.

A year passed. Roy continued to live in Rita's shed.

"I could call him my roomer, I suppose," she mused. "But it might be more appropriate to refer to his as my shedder."

Pyramid schemes still exercised considerable fascination for him. Rita discovered Amway product lists stashed covertly here and there in the shed and once a pamphlet on how to become a Tupperware representative.

"Roy, no self-respecting woman would order Tupperware from a man!" she advised him. "You have to have parties, for God's sake! With little sandwiches!"

It was harder to find a nice way of letting the young man know that no one would buy mega vitamins or health and beauty products from someone afflicted by severe adult acne. For a very brief time he talked excitedly about selling shares in a condo corporation in the Grand Cayman Islands in which were implicated Straight Arabian Horses or parts thereof, but luckily the Ingersoll podiatrist behind the scheme was arrested for fraud before Roy could sign on.

For money, Roy did odd jobs and yard work around the neighbourhood: he blew snow that winter and cleared driveways and sidewalks; when it turned spring and then summer, he mowed lawns and weeded gardens; in the fall, he raked leaves and cleaned

eavestroughs. He did these jobs slowly and ineptly, falling off ladders whenever possible, tripping on ice and breaking things like his elbow, wrist and, once, his coccyx. He even went so far as to chop off the small toe on his left foot while attempting to start up a cantankerous mower—the bloody scene which ensued entered the annals of neighbourhood legend. Because he was cheap, readily available and charged by the job rather than the hour, the neighbours considered him a great addition to the community.

One grey, drippy day in late November, Roy went to Joey's Variety to check his lottery numbers in the London *Free Press* and found a small speckled puppy, mostly skin and two big eyes, shivering in a dilapidated cardboard box in the alley beside the store. He brought it home, wrapped in his muffler.

"She followed me home," he lied. "She doesn't have a collar and look at how thin she is. If I knew the jerk who abandoned her, I'd tell him a thing or two!"

Rita cuddled the puppy, which had big, ragged ears, tinged with pink. "We should call the Humane Society," she worried.

"Let me do it," Roy offered. "You're tired."

"Okay," Rita agreed.

"I'll do it tomorrow," Roy said. "For tonight, she can sleep in the shed." He brightened visibly.

"I only make people sleep in the shed," Rita told him. "She can sleep in here with me."

"She's probably covered with fleas," Roy pointed out.

"We'll bathe her then," Rita decided. "I'm sure there's some of Digger's shampoo still kicking around."

"I could run down to Joey's and pick up some dog food," Roy suggested. "Take me two minutes!"

"Would you?" said Rita, reaching for her purse. "Dried though, not canned. You wouldn't believe the garbage they put in canned dog food." She handed Roy a ten dollar bill. "Better make it puppy chow. She needs some fat on her."

"Will do," Roy trilled. He pulled his coat off the rack. Then he paused, "Oh, and Rita! What shall we call the dog? I mean ... just for tonight?"

"What about Dotty?" Rita suggested.

"Dotty!" Roy approved. "Dotty was my mother's name," he said fondly. "I wonder what ever happened to her." He bent down again to pat the dog's head. "Dotty! Dotty! How do you like that name, Dotty-for-a-day?"

Roy forgot to call the Humane Society the next day ... and the next ... and the next. Two weeks went by, then Rita drove out to Wonderland Road and bought a dog license from Animal Prevention instead. By that time, she had already paid the vet to spay Dotty and give her all her shots.

As for Roy, he was put in charge of walking Dotty, or, more precisely, of being dragged around the neighborhood by her, while protesting loudly: "Whoa, Dotty! Whoa! What's your hurry?"

For several weeks during the third grade, Rita had attended Sunday School. This was not her parents' idea, but Rita's. As an eight-year-old, she had found religion terrifically exotic. This was because her own parents seemed blandly unaware that God had so loved the world etc. It was not so much that they had fallen from Grace, as they slipped away from it down some wide and fast-flowing secular drainpipe. While the parents of all the other children Rita knew went to Metropolitan United or the Lutheran church on the corner of Colborne and Oxford or to St. John the Redeemer, Rita's mother and father worked in their little garden of a Sunday or took long walks with the dog; in the winter, they executed sleepy chores in slow motion. Rita hoped God would not notice her parents' failure to acknowledge His Power and Might; that he would accept the offer of her attendance at Sunday School in the place of their appearance at church. Otherwise, Rita fretted, might He not smote them? (Of course, that was exactly what happened.)

Rita did not attend Sunday School for long, however. When Mrs. Boyd, the teacher, told her that dogs were not allowed in heaven because they had no souls, Rita rebelled. "I don't want to go to Heaven if there are no dogs allowed," she announced. "What fun can that be?"

"What fun, indeed?" Roy commented when she told him this story. The two of them sat at the kitchen table, drinking tea and warming their slippers against the cozy bulk of Dotty who lay stretched on the floor underneath the table between them—Dotty was now the size of a big retriever and weighed close to ninety pounds. "But I tell you what, Rita" He proffered the punctured can of condensed milk. "Some Eagle's?"

“Yes, please,” replied Rita, taking the can from him and dripping it into her tea. “What?”

“We can all go to Dog Heaven instead,” Roy told her. “I hear it’s much nicer.”