

PRISCILLA LONG

Our Separate Ways

A MAN AND A WOMAN stand ten feet apart, looking at each other. They stand in the shadow of the north approach of the Aurora Bridge, within the weed-and-dog-poop yard of a bungalow clad in asphalt tile. This is in the Fremont neighborhood of Seattle. The man holds three dogs on a three-dog leash. These are an Australian shepherd, a black standard poodle, and a big mongrel with overtones of German shepherd and Lab. The man looks like he belongs to the dogs, which he does, and he looks like he's about fifty years old, which he is. The woman, who is actually older than she looks, leans on an aluminum tripod cane. She stands just inside the chain-link gate, which she has closed behind her. This woman, dressed in a blue-jean skirt that conceals her limp, an ironed white blouse, and a blue-jean jacket, has a bony beautiful copper-coloured face with prominent teeth and high cheekbones and black hair pulled back into a single, thick, long braid. She is petite but stands tall, almost ramrod straight, as if her back were in a brace, which it is. She is an older student, getting a Master's Degree in Social Work, and she is here to say a few words—perhaps to express her gratitude, or to say goodbye—before returning to the unexplained Ford Shelby Cobra out of which she has emerged. Her name is Mehar.

The dogs have, as usual, put themselves at the center of the scene. The Aussie, typically a cheerful breed but not in this case, is whimpering, actually quavering against the blue-jeaned leg of his master. He resembles a small, thick-coated collie with a snub nose and he regards the intruder into his dog-yard with actual terror. He is a rescued dog, and whatever tortures he endured before being abandoned at the 45th Street exit to Interstate-5, he has never gotten over it. His name is Chico. The poodle, tall, black-coated, unclipped, stands on her four legs wagging her tail slightly, a picture of dignity and intelligence. Her head is cocked in the manner of inquiry. This graceful aristocrat is Cody. The third dog, the mongrel, has the size and markings of a German shepherd but the nose, ears, and plebian friendliness

of a Labrador retriever. He is wagging vigorously and straining against the leash. His name is Bud.

The dogs' master, Jake Gartrell, is thin, fairly tall, and extremely attractive to the women who predominate in the world of dog trainers that he inhabits in his off-hours, an attractiveness to which he remains oblivious. He was married for two years, and his dogs stand for that marriage, though he is only dimly aware of this fact. Jake has no family; that is, he lives (happily enough) entirely outside the world of after-school snacks, family soccer games, and romantic dinners on Valentine's Day, the world that more-or-less surrounds him. He would as soon serve Chico for dinner as ask a woman out on a date. He wears clean blue-jeans, a short-sleeved plaid shirt over a clean white t-shirt, steel-toed workboots as befits a highway engineer, and a long-billed baseball cap.

At this moment he is looking at the fragile beauty of Mehar with a slight sense of shock. He has known her for eight weeks, and here she is, graduated from rehabilitation, standing in his weed-yard. He sees his place through her eyes and he feels mortified. She has just told him that she is here to say goodbye. She thanks him. Who her driver could be in this silver-grey muscle car, he has no idea.

Jake feels, quite suddenly, that his life is over. He regards her there, leaning on her tripod cane. He is awkward, tongue-tied, confused in the presence of Mehar's exquisite beauty and in the presence of the unexplained automobile with its unexplained driver. They stand in silence, in the hum of traffic on the approach span of the high bridge that overshadows Jake's yard. Chico's whimpering escalates into hysterical barking.



Jake's ineptitude in matters of the heart dated back to long years working his way through engineering school with near-perfect grades while labouring by day on road crews. He'd had little time and no real thought of romance until the summer after his graduation, out having a whiskey with two engineer buddies, he met Jasmine, a singer at the Bad Juju Whiskey Bar on Capitol Hill. Jake fell hard and fast. Jasmine was skinny and tall with pastry-white skin and short black hair and black eyes. That night she wore a high-necked shiny red dress and red spike heels. Jasmine had brought her new poodle pup to the gig, a big mistake—the pup had already messed the floor, and the maître d' was ready to cancel the gig. Jake came to the rescue. He took little Cody—named after Jasmine's uncle though she was a female dog—out for a walk, then out for another walk. He cuddled her, scratched her little black poodle ears, took her out again, and in this way stayed till

the end of the gig. His buddies, seeing what was up, gave Jake a few pokes and winks and went on home. From that night, things between Jake and Jasmine progressed rapidly.

They married rather quickly, and for their first anniversary Jake gave Jasmine the large, gregarious mongrel, Bud. It was just in time, for already Jasmine was returning later and later from gigs. It was not until after she left him entirely, abandoning her dogs as well as her husband, that Jake found Chico quivering beside the North 45th Street exit of I-5. Jake saw something of himself in Chico. He took him home and continued to care for the dogs—his and Jasmine’s dogs—as if keeping the home fires burning would somehow bring back his wife. The years went by.

Jake’s job with the Department of Transportation was everything he’d ever dreamed of. He enjoyed working on traffic flow, exit ramps, embankments and overpasses, and he enjoyed the entire process of retrofitting I-5 for earthquake readiness. He especially enjoyed working on bridges.

His colleagues knew little about his personal life, which was entirely dog-oriented. He still had the letter Jasmine had sent him, years ago now, informing him that she’d never really loved him and that her real name wasn’t even Jasmine. In time the hot coal of pain cooled. He went about his life, not unhappy, but burned, not about to be burned again.

His road and bridge accomplishments were considerable, and in the world of highway engineering he was greatly respected. In his other world, the world of dogs and dog trainers, he was also a person of distinction. He had a special touch with dogs and became a trainer’s trainer; his only failure being his own Chico, which became a standing but affectionate joke in the Seattle dog world. In this world of dogs, women found Jake extremely attractive. He liked women and he was a good listener, but these women never seemed to be able to attain their goal, which was to get him to ask them out. Even when the occasional bold woman handed him her phone number, he would never make his move. He would always say, “It’s been great talking,” and gather his dogs and walk off. He appeared to be unavailable and from time to time conversations in low voices would question whether he was, in fact, taken, or perhaps gay. Nobody seemed to know.

He lived in the shadow of the Aurora Bridge with his dogs, going to work, coming home to Cody, Bud and Chico, walking his dogs, running his dogs, brushing them, taking them to the vet, taking them to the Saturday training sessions where he helped train other dogs. If he was lonely or despairing or unhappy, no one knew that, including himself.



Jake met Mehar when a Metro bus careened off the north approach-span of the bridge and crashed into the street outside his house. It was a Saturday. He'd called 911, which was busy with everyone else calling, and ran out to see what had happened, and when he saw the catastrophe, tried to help. People were crawling out of the bus, lying on the ground, bleeding. There was blood everywhere and an eerie sort of silence. Sirens wailed in the distance. He saw Mehar on the ground, twisted in some awful, unnatural way, bleeding from her arm, red blood throbbing out. Without moving her, which he was afraid to do, he clamped his hands around her arm to stop the bleeding. He asked, "What's your name?" and she looked at him and after several tries said, "Mehar." "Mehar," he said. "You're going to be all right. Help is on the way." He kept his hands clamped hard around her arm until the Medics came. When he went home he was splattered with her blood.

He knew her name was Mehar. Later that week he had to go in for a blood test—all the "Good Samaritans" were asked to go in—one or more of the injured passengers had HIV. He'd gotten his blood test and then called the hospital to ask how Mehar was. The nurses told him that Mehar was a visitor to the city, and knew no one in Seattle. She had asked that if "the man who'd saved her life should call," he be requested to come in to visit.

On Jake's first visit, Mehar smiled weakly. Her pelvis was shattered and her arm broken. She thanked Jake for saving her life. He wasn't sure he had. She told him she'd come to Seattle to interview for a job, that she lived with her mother in San Diego, that she was getting a Master's Degree in Social Work. She spoke to her elderly mother every day by phone.

"What you do?" she asked.

He told her that he was a WSDOT engineer.

"WSDOT," she said.

"Washington State Department of Transportation."

"Oh!" she said. "That's ... nice."

He studied her face.

"Are you married?" Her eyes were fixed on him.

"Was once," he said, shifting in his chair. "I have dogs"—as if that explained everything.

"I like dogs!" she said. And as Jake got up to leave: "You come again?"

He said he would when he got a chance.

"Come this week, couple of days," she said.

He began visiting twice a week. She would ask him about his day, about Cody, Bud and Chico, about his WSDOT projects. When he told her

they were replacing the Irving steel-mesh decks on three Lake Washington Ship Canal bridges, she asked what was Irving Steel Mesh Deck. He found himself telling her about the old lethal timber decks, slippery and rotten, the death of six people a year, on average, and how ever since Walter Irving had invented the Irving steel-mesh deck there were no more fatalities. He stopped. "But this is not interesting."

"My father was engineer," she said. "He always tell me everything."

"In India?"

"My father was hydraulic engineer in Port of Mashad, Caspian Sea."

Jake tried to remember where the Caspian Sea was.

"He was Indian," Mehar continued. "He emigrated to Persia as a young man. After Iranian revolution we came to America."

Jake took this in. He looked at her long fingers tracing the edge of the white hospital sheet.

"He died the year we came."

"Sorry."

Mehar looked at him through narrowed eyes. "My husband engineer."

Jake jerked slightly, as if he'd touched a wire.

"He went away—abandon me. But he was engineer. American engineer."

Jake became her official support system, her friend, the one the social worker called when it was time to move her to a rehabilitation centre. He brought champagne to celebrate the occasion when she got up off her wheelchair by herself. He helped her take her first steps. He kept visiting and they talked and talked, like brother and sister, he once thought on his way home in time to walk the dogs.



Now, in the noise of Chico's barking, they stand facing each other in the weed-yard, in the shadow of the bridge, near the scene of the accident, near the scene of their meeting. He had come out the front door with the dogs, and there she was, leaning on her tripod cane. The silver Ford Shelby Cobra is parked behind his pickup truck.

"Chico," she had said with a quivery little smile. "Bud. Cody."

"You are leaving?" Jake suddenly becomes aware that he loves her. He loves her completely.

She looks at the ground and then half turns, gestures toward the car, a little wave,

“My husband,” she says. “He come back. He want to take care of me now.”

Jake stoops beside Chico, strokes Chico’s head. Chico reverts to whimpering.

“Best of luck to you, Mehar.

Mehar says nothing.

They continue looking at each other, not moving, as if reluctant to take the next step. Then a man, the husband, climbs out of the car. He is large, a blond, football-player type. Jake imagines him as jovial, back-slapping, hearty. He comes to the fence shrugging his shoulders and twisting his head as if trying to get comfortable. “We can’t thank you enough,” he says.

Jake stands up.

“I like you to meet Jeffrey, my husband. I tell him how kind you are to me,” says Mehar.

The husband opens the gate, enters the dog-yard, and puts his arm around Mehar’s shoulders.

“Not at all.” Jake waves his hand. “No problem.”

The husband turns Mehar and takes her arm and they walk slowly back to the car, a silver bullet of a car, a car that quietly speaks: I have arrived. Make way.

They drive off.

Jake, Bud, Cody and Chico are left standing there. Chico falls silent. The only sound is the traffic on the bridge, sighing and sighing. Jake stoops again. He puts his arms around Chico and buries his face in Chico’s beautiful white ruff.