Brooke Biaz

# Pets

FOR SOME YEARS my father had been dealing in children. He had grown them to order from infants sourced in a wide variety of circumstances, and he knew how to acquire the very best root stock. Applying the principles of good child husbandry (clean bedding, fresh food, clothing befitting aristocracy), he had never once suffered the indignity of a 'return.' He was a master, a perfectionist. Both the poor and the wealthy came to him. The young and the aged. He favoured neither one nor the other. He displayed detachment. Everyone agreed his approach was professional.

They said: "Is your father in, I have come to purchase a son? Fetch your father, boy, we have come to purchase a daughter." Just like that. And my father (eyebrows swishing back and forth like broom heads, head like an ox), read their real desires as if they were projected vividly onto a cinema screen, thirty feet high in front of him.

"People," he replied. "I know exactly the qualities you're looking for."

Naturally, he often worked to custom order. For example, a farmer from the west, where there was desert but also salt lakes, asked for "The will of an ox." His brothers in the tropical south and temperate north-east followed suit. Geography did not change things very much. A divorced grandmother, whether from the north or south shore, whether given to that exuberant unbridled emotion which bursts the blood vessels on yellow eyes and sees the lips spilling awfully outward, or taut and drawn with undimmed determination, required: "Someone to keep me company, now that the

others have grown." A couple, movie stars, indie heroes, private—and there were plenty of those used his services in those days (through the back door, out of white limousines, scented with taramasalata, skorthalia and halva, dripping gold)—ordered cute-as-buttons, snub-noses, green eyes, clichés, but always:

"Straight-shooters, you know? Streetwise."

There had not been, needless to say, a downturn in business for years. He planned for me to inherit things lock, stock and barrel. It was to be a going concern. In fact, he had bought me as an infant with that in mind, and raised me so that I would be perfect for it. He had bought me a mother too, and him a wife (a good woman, compact and smart, motherly by halves and wifely too). Added to this: three cousins, two boys and girl, an aunt whose eccentricity was certified (Dad himself carried the certificate), two stinking uncles who drank and played cards like the Devil, one who was a gangster and rode in a wheelchair, a grandfather not long for this world, a grandmother with the girth of a Friesian.

My father knew his margins. He understood his trade. So how could it be that we were standing in front of a customer who was refusing to take delivery?

"No," said the young woman, edging back into the dark of her house, "I don't want it now."

The infant, whose fine white hair might have put her off if not that Dad had combed it neatly to the left using an oil of linseed and bergamot he himself had invented, stared blankly ahead.

"How can you say that?" my father asked. "Look at her. She is the daughter you always wanted."

The young woman, who was difficult to see but did not appear to be large boned, shook her head violently at the child in his arms.

"No," she said, pushing at her door, which was already ajar. "No. I don't want her now ... nor the boy either."

"The boy," Dad said plainly, "is not for sale."

Behind us, black terraced houses held each other into huddled insecurity, their windows hung with remnants of curtaining and the flags of the local football teams in championships which had long passed. Dad raised the child higher. He had an affinity with her which is not surprising, because he knew his children like the back of his hand. He knew how to encourage the prime elements of our personalities. He knew how to make us what we became. Nevertheless, her inordinate length, which my father had

himself encouraged so determinedly with a regular diet of oats and garden cress, yoghurt and liquorice, weighed on his arms.

"Your deposit?" he demanded. "This is a lot of money. You will not get it back."

"That," said the woman, "is no longer a concern of mine."

I sat back on my haunches, glancing at Dad's silver Chrysler, which he'd imported personally and had an old man wash weekly. He'd parked it neatly behind us in the street, though the streets here had no edge and the citizens spilled their terrible lives out onto the dirt road in crates and broken furniture and trash.

"I cannot understand it. Such a child as this," he said, looking at the infant who, because he'd had a local woman wet-nurse her for nearly an hour, was now falling asleep. "I should have known better than to bring a child to a single woman who doesn't know responsibility or commitment."

The young woman did not reply; but began, inexplicably, to cry.

At that moment, a cat slipped through the remaining gap in the young woman's doorway. It shot past me, brushing my knees. It was difficult to tell its age or colour, but there was no doubt it was large and seemed to me to be a cross between a wild cat and a Siamese. The young woman screamed. She shouted out a name. But the cat, ignoring her, slipped beneath the pile of rotting trash in front of the house, and disappeared from sight.

"See now what you've done!" the young woman cried.

She dived out her door. She was dressed in a smock of red hibiscus and white roses and a white peaked cap reading ALCOA ALUMINIUM. Her hair was streaked burgundy. Her face made up in the manner of those who inhabit student bars and take part in May Day parades. She wore glasses which were made of wire. She had perfected the pout of disgruntled youth. This shocked my father because, when he had taken her order, she had sounded on the phone like a suburban girl, unsophisticated and reserved.

Sitting down suddenly on her doorstep, with the infant now limp in his arms, Dad watched as she tore at the trash. He was a conservative, my father. A believer in individual rights. His head was full of ideas he'd read as a young man in works by Montaigne, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. He was an expert marksman, a qualified accountant, a lover of grenadine, loboks, annatto, an occasional but innocent pervert. So he watched as the young intellectual pulled at the pile with hands painted with black nails and

coloured rings on her fingers. He saw that her fingers were soon bloodied by the twisted metal and broken glass, and her nails became broken. He saw that, although she was being hurt, she did not stop. He saw her discover the cat (it had hidden down low, as cats do, amongst some old cheese boxes). She took the cat up in her arms. It should have ended there but, to cut a long story short, it was only the beginning.

"Go please," said the young intellectual. "Go."

My father stood staring. "I recognize you," he said.

Now clutching the cat the woman laughed, crying: "You should," she said. "You raised me."

2

I was seven. My legs belonged to a grasshopper. My arms belonged to a monkey. My father had grown me alongside another boy, whom he later sold to a unionist couple who wanted, more than anything, a son with revolutionary zeal (the kind of energy that breaks toys and eats like a horse). They had plans for him to take up the cause of the working classes. He was encouraged to be loud. To shout. For months he was subjected to a diet of cheap pork. As it turned out, that kid didn't last a year with the unionists. He had his throat cut.

My father, God bless him, was never happy about that.

3

That afternoon Dad left the rejected infant with the staff and went out into the late heat. We carried with us a boy of three, held firm in a sugar sack which Dad kept for reticent types. I could see he wanted to get the week's business over and done with and get back to the hills. Though we had, in my mother's house by the sea, all manner of youngsters, the discovery of my elder sister had harmed his sense of purpose and he wanted to spend some time in the hill house, his own house, where the bedrooms were all full to overcrowding and our family was being raised on clean air and cold water. Dad didn't say so, but I could see he was thinking of a way of murdering my sister and getting things back into order. To gar-

rotte her, he knew, would only raise her profile as an intellectual and, let's be honest, he had his integrity to protect and the future of our family. He was a proud man, my father, and did not sell children solely for his own benefit.

When we arrived at my sister's house she was sitting in the kitchen with a group of twelve friends dressed in suits and floral dresses, the women with their hair tied back and the men with ties left over from the 1970s. My first impression turned out to be correct: her house had been taken over entirely by schoolteachers.

By then I was so desperate for things to work out that I felt I would burst and spread myself in tissue and fat all over that ghastly street. But I did not want to push the point. I could see Dad had a schedule worked out and I recognized in his eyes (which, incidentally, I will never forget because they were covered by eyebrows so thick and so sprung with personality that they often overcame the sight of his eyes themselves) that it was not my time to question, only to observe.

Though she let us into her home, my sister was no more welcoming than before. On seeing my father tip the boy (whose name, etc., is inconsequential) onto a trestle-table in the kitchen, my sister violently shook her head.

"Not for me," she said.

The schoolteachers, who were having their lunch (mostly chutney and cheese it seemed), laughed at us.

"Take him away," they said. "She has changed her mind."

My father, who was alone except for me, was at a disadvantage. His mouth fell open.

"No," they said, "old boy. So that, you hear, is her final word."

At which point, as luck would have it, a white dog came out of my sister's bedroom. It circumnavigated the table, brushed each of the schoolteachers with its hard white tail, and moved toward the cooker. Its muzzle was caked in smatterings of meat and biscuit, foods which had helped to fatten it considerably. Its belly, low as it had become, was rubbed completely away to its smooth black pink flesh. It licked its lips. Smiled at us, the way dogs do. And then slumped down at my sister's feet. She patted it fondly.

She said: "I would have bought you a grandchild, father, but I'm too old now and have other things to do."

Her compatriots suggested we leave.

4

That afternoon my father walked on the long beach ... and I followed. The sun was burning. We were stung by the salt. I thought of our large family with its children so purposefully grown, their hearts and heads made for their futures and their lives mapped out so neatly that all they had to do was live them. I couldn't quite grasp my sister's position, her with her intellectual friends and house of her own. Her with her pets. She seemed to have lost her sense of respect. I could not imagine what had got into her. I tried to convince myself there was some mistake. I wanted to speak to Mum, but she was busy with the new children and could not be disturbed. The ocean, as we walked, was the colour of puke and thunderstorms.

Later Dad, sweating profusely and brilliantly, bathed for an hour in a rock pool on the basalt ridge, letting his belly rise above his chest and his penis loll on the red weed. He could not swim, but then didn't need to: his weight filled the pond neatly to its brim. In the late afternoon we slept together for a while in the dunes. I woke now and then to make sure he was still there and felt his magnanimity surging in the farts he was burying inconspicuously in the sand beneath him.

Eventually, night fell.

5

We entered my sister's house through the kitchen window. This had been left open for her cat. The house was dark and hot and smelled of smoke and sweet things, cake, sweet teas. Dad's Chrysler was in the street shining silvery like moonlight. The lines of its leather upholstery were printed on my backside. When my sister's dog came out of the bedroom it merely looked at us and slumped to floor. I patted it kindly.

Dad said, whispering: "I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

When we entered her room my sister was sleeping. She did not wake until we lifted her. Then, while I sat on her bed and watched, Dad taped her mouth and put the sugar sack, which had previously held the reticent boy, over her head. He tied her feet

and her hands and he put her, making almost no noise at all, into the boot of the car.

Then we drove out of the street. We drove out of the town, away from the beach and into the blady grass swamp. We passed brackish ponds fed by tea trees where mallards were nesting. We left behind the coast and headed toward the hills. As the sun rose, I saw a whole hill of marigolds. Soon there were fields of corn and oats and sugar beet, tractors working in the soil, farmhouses, churches. My father had brought a hat with him and it was a very fine panama. We drove into the morning in the direction of his house and we sang together to a tape which Dad explained was Johnny Mathis and Deniece Williams singing *Too Much Too Little Too Late*. This we replayed fifty-seven times. I kissed my father and I told him that he had no need to worry. Things would work out.

I said: "Dad, we still have each other."