

Judy Budnitz

DOG DAYS

The man in the dog suit whines outside the door.

"Again?" sighs my mother.

"Where's my gun?" says my dad.

"We'll take care of it this time," my older brothers say.

They go outside. We hear the shouts and the scuffle and whimpers as he crawls away up the street.

My brothers come back in. "That takes care of that," they say, rubbing their hands together.

"Damn nutcase," my dad growls.

But the next day he is back. His dog suit is shabby. The zipper's gone; the front's all held together with safety pins. He looks like a mutt. His tongue is flat and pink like a slice of bologna. He pants at me.

"Mom," I call, "he's back."

My mother sighs, then comes to the door and looks at him. He cocks his head at her.

"Oh, look at him, he looks hungry," my mother says. "He looks sad."

I say: "He smells."

"No collar," says my mother. "He must be a stray."

"Mother," I say. "He's a man in a dog suit."

He sits up and begs.

My mother doesn't look at me. She reaches out and strokes the man's head. He blinks at her longingly. "Go get a plate," she tells me. "See what you can dig out of the garbage."

"Dad's going to be mad," I say.

"Just do it," she says.

So I do it, because I have no excuses, there's nothing left to do, no school, no nothing.

No place to go. People don't leave their houses. They sit and peer out the window and wait.

Outside it's perfectly quiet, no crickets, no katydids.

I come back to the door and lay the plate on the stoop. My mother and I watch as he buries his face in the dirty scraps. He licks the plate clean and looks up at us.

"Good dog," my mother says.

"He's a man," I say. "Some retard-weirdo."

He leans against my mother's leg.

My mother doesn't even look at me. "Not a word to your father, Lisa," she says, and she goes inside and slams the door.

I sit down on the stoop. The man sits next to me. He smells dirty and sweet, like garbage on a hot day. His eyes are big and brown. His face is lost in tangled hair. He scratches himself.

I sit there and breathe his smell and wonder if he has fleas. Finally I reach out and touch his head. The fur is matted stiff. I touch a ragged ear, then give it a yank. He doesn't even blink.

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Of course. It's not his real ear. I pat his head and stroke it, and his eyes sort of melt and blur on me the way a dog's eyes will when he's happy.

Then I stop and give him a shove, then a kick, then I chase him away so my father won't find him when he comes home from hunting.

It is so deathly quiet. I can hear him panting, his four-legged scamper scuttling on the sidewalk for a long time.

Last February was when things started happening. The plant closed. That meant my dad was out of work and sulking around the house all day. He'd sit and drink in front of the TV, his face big and red and his eyes all tiny from the drinking. He'd sit all scrunched up in the chair, his big head right on his shoulders like he had no neck at all. He'd watch the morning news, the news at noon, the evening news. "Aren't you going to look for another job?" my mother would ask. My dad would point to the TV screen and say, "What's the use?" Then March came. Some of the stores in town closed up, and the movie place, and two of the gas stations. No new stock coming in, they said. The government needs supplies, they said. Gasoline shortage. You understand.

April: My school closed early for summer vacation. So did the high school my brothers Elliott and Pat went to. For a while they enjoyed it. Then they got bored and tried to find summer jobs. But no one was hiring. Later even more stores closed up, and restaurants. Downtown began to look like a ghost town. For a while Elliott and Pat and their friends liked to drive through at night, smashing windows and things. Then gasoline ran out.

My friend Marjorie lived two and a half blocks away, and I went there. Marjorie had two long ponytails and always thought of things to do. She taught me to hang by my knees and how to make a grass stem buzz between my thumbs. Once we drew faces on our stomachs and made them talk to each other and kiss.

Then came June. The electricity went. No air-conditioning, and it was just beginning to get hot. We missed the TV. We still sat around it sometimes and stared at it like it might all of a sudden come to life. Then one night Dad got angry and kicked the glass screen in. Now he sits and reads the paper. Every word of it, even the ads.

It's all because of the war, they say. Roads are closed off. For government use only. And the power: they say the government shut it off so the enemy can't trace it with their radars and bomb us. I think the government's hoarding it for themselves, they're all holed up in Washington watching TV, one giant slumber party.

There's nothing to do, it's deathly quiet. No cars running since the gasoline ran out. People stay in their houses now. Nobody goes out. When you do, you can see people watching you from their windows, from behind curtains, all up and down the street. Everyone sits and waits. That's the worst of it. Sitting and waiting. For what? The attack? Should we look at the sky? Should we look down the road? The government delivers the paper, once a week. Dad says you can't believe a word of it anyway. But still he reads it and chews his lip.

I have nothing to do because Marjorie is gone. Her family went to stay with her grandmother who lives in the city. They left in June, just before the roads closed. These days my dad says I should stay near the house, but when he is away I walk over to Marjorie's old house and just look at it. I'm afraid to hang by my knees without her. I might fall on my head.

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The worst of it is the animals. Sometime in July, they all went away. Every one. You don't think about it really, until they're gone. Then the silence. No birds singing. No squirrels doing acrobatics in the trees or knocking in the attic. Even the crickets – gone. The pets have disappeared. My mother's cat Polka Dot wandered off long ago. She cried about it for days. Pets that couldn't get out died in their cages. My pet goldfish, belly-up in the bowl. Are they all dead, all those missing animals? Or did they all go somewhere else, a great exodus in the middle of the night? The flock, the pack, the herd, the horde of them. Two by two down the road? To somewhere safe? We'll never know.

"Rats deserting a sinking ship," says my dad. "They know something we don't know."

So we wait and watch the skies, watch the roads, watch the ground – who knows, they could tunnel straight through the earth and surprise us that way, where we least expect it. Technology, the technology can do anything these days, my father says. I picture technology as a big transformer robot crushing cities, slicing the sky. Germ warfare, Dad warns us. When I drink water I try to filter it through my teeth, screen out the germs. Surely they are big germs, heavily armed. We try to hold our breath.

I think radiation, when it comes, will rain down glowing like the juice inside neon signs.

No one seems to know whom we're fighting. Pat says it could be anyone. America has been number one for too long, and now all the little countries are ganging up on us. Anyone could be an enemy. Your next-door-neighbor could be a spy.

Pat says, "Your own sister could be a spy, even!"

"Am not," I say and hit him in the gut.

"I was just kidding, Sport," he says and whacks me a hard one. Pat has straight greasy brown hair. It hangs in his face. He hasn't had a haircut for a long time.

Elliott doesn't like to talk about whom we're fighting. He is almost old enough to get drafted. My dad says they haven't started drafting people yet, but they may, soon. He keeps telling Elliott to walk around barefoot all the time, so then maybe he'll develop flat feet and they won't want him in the army. I can't tell anymore when my dad is kidding. His eyes are always shiny. He watches us all without blinking. My mother says he has begun to grind his teeth in his sleep, keeping her up all night.

In August the beggars started coming around. My mom calls them unfortunates; my dad calls them bums. They don't have anywhere to live; they don't get government rations. They came wandering from I don't know where. First they came around asking for work, a night in the garage. Now they ask for food, scraps, even a glass of water. Now there's nothing left, and still they come. A little attention, some eye contact, conversation. Even when you yell at them, they seem to like it.

This one in the dog suit is a new thing.

He comes back again the day we feed him that first time. It is almost nice to see an animal again, even if it's not a real one. He's well trained. He sits up and begs. My mother puts a morsel in his mouth. He rolls over.

"How adorable," says my mother.

"He's trying to look up your skirt," I say.

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"You'd better look out, he's some nut," says Pat. "Some crazy. Some loony who hasn't seen tail in a long time. Yeah, and I don't mean a dog tail either."

My mother turns around and stares at him. "Where did you learn to speak like that?" she says. Pat hunches over and slinks away without answering.

I could tell her where Pat learns things. Pat and Elliott spend their nights sitting in the basement reading old Playboys by the light of the moon. There's a curfew now at night so everybody has to be home, inside, before dark. Army trucks patrol the streets.

My mother strokes the man's head for a moment. Then she goes back inside. She finds things to do, she cleans the house, she keeps busy. We haven't gotten mail for months, but she still checks the mailbox. There's nothing to do, but still she bustles around all day, stays on her feet, is exhausted by evening.

My dad reads the paper every day, then goes out with his gun. He's looking for anything: a pigeon, a rabbit, a squirrel, someone's pet chicken. There's nothing out there.

Pat and Elliott keep to themselves. They don't talk to me. They wear the same clothes, day after day. Back in May they traded most of their clothes to a friend for some joints. I heard them talking about it. Now they wear the same sour-smelling jeans and T-shirts. When I go down the basement they chase me out.

That is why I sit there on the stoop after my mother goes back inside. I sit next to the man in the dog suit. I tell him things. He cocks his head at me like he's listening, but doesn't really understand. Which is okay.

I stroke his head. It is a hot day. His nose is shiny with sweat. He pants.

It must be hot in the dog suit.

He smells worse than before. His teeth are yellow and his gums are black.

After a while I push him away. He looks back at me, wiggling his stump of tail. I chase him away again. He crawls off, whining and sobbing.

I go inside and find my mother straightening up closets. "Why does he do that, Mom? Why does he pretend he's a dog? Is he crazy?"

My mother sighs and sits back on her heels. "If he thinks he's a dog, why can't we let him think that? If that's what he wants, is it so hard for us to go along with it? It's the polite thing to do, don't you think?"

"I guess -" I say, though, it doesn't seem polite to me, exactly.

"If he thinks he's a dog, he is a dog," my mother says, in a way that means: that's final.

"Okay," I say. Then I look down and see what she's doing. She's sweeping out little dried carcasses from the back of the closet. Dead beetles or roaches or something. Dozens of them, curled up and hollow, legs in the air.

Now it is September. Now the man in the dog suit comes to our house every day.

My mother feeds him bits and crumbs of things. Then I play with him, tell him things. He is a good listener. I show him the bruise Pat gave me the day before, pushing me out of the basement. They don't want me down there, but sometimes I sit at the top of the stairs and listen to their voices.

I tell the man in the dog suit all this, and also about the limp dark hairs on Elliott's upper lip.

And about the dark cloud that always settles in the room where my father is. I tell him about

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Rick Dees, my favorite DJ on the radio before the power went out. Rick Dees, I tell him, has a slick handsome voice and he must be a slick handsome man with sunglasses and movie-star eyes.

The man in the dog suit nods.

I decide to give him a name. Prince.

I tell my mother and she says, "Good. That's a good name for a dog."

Then the day comes when my father comes home too early and finds Prince on the front steps, and my mother and me stroking his back.

"What's this?" says Dad, his face going darker than ever. He's got his gun pointed at Prince, at us. His shirt is unbuttoned so I can see the tuft of fur peeking out. Prince freezes.

"Oh, Howard," says my mother, "he's not hurting anything. Really."

"What's that you're giving him?" Dad says.

"Just trash," my mother says. "He's helping me clean up."

"He's dangerous. He could hurt you," says my dad, aiming the gun.

"He keeps the other beggars away," says my mother.

This is true. Since Prince started coming, the other beggars have avoided our house.

"Like a guard dog," I say.

"Howard, let him stay. He's not doing any harm," says my mother.

"Please, Dad," I say.

And Dad, I don't know why, cocks his head and says okay and stomps into the house.

A moment later he calls to my mother to find him something to eat.

I sit on the stoop with Prince. We listen and wait. We watch the sky.

October now. We're still holding our breaths, waiting. Nothing happens. It is still hot.

Nobody tells us anything: how the war's going, or when school will start, or how many people are dead. No one has told me this, but I can feel the waiting, the tension buzzing in the air around my head like a hornet.

I think people are moving away. I don't see our neighbors peering from behind the curtains anymore. "They're dead," says Pat. "The government comes with trucks and clears them out in the middle of the night, when we're asleep." I think he's teasing. Maybe not.

I play in the yard with Prince. I throw the ball. He chases it, brings it back to me in his mouth.

My dad, watching us, says, "He's not a dog, he's a man, for God's sake. Treat him like a man."

But we ignore him. I throw, Prince fetches. We are having an all-American good time, just like Dick and Jane and Spot in the reader. After my dad leaves, I sing all of Rick Dees's favorite songs for Prince. Prince likes that. He barks with me.

I tell Prince all kinds of things. I know he won't laugh, like Elliott, or punch me like Pat does.

He presses against me, all warm and furry. He would never hurt me. I am taller than he is anyway.

His face is so kind: warm, wet, blank eyes.

I have little pink bumps on my legs. Flea bites, I think, but I won't tell my mother.

"If he hurts you, tell me right away," says my dad.

Prince would never hurt me.

My dad thinks everybody thinks like him.

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One day I see my dad in the yard, talking to Prince. "You're a human being, for God's sake. Stand up like a man. Listen to me! Take off that costume shit. I'll give you my own clothes, if you'll take it off and stand up like a man and talk to me. I know you can talk. Come here, you!" And he grabs for the dog suit, tries to pull it off. Prince runs away.

One night Elliott says: "Well, you know what they say. Man's best friend?"

Pat says: "Don't let him touch you. You want to end up with a litter of puppies?"

He and Elliott snigger and lean in together, their faces all twisted. Pat's face is rotten with pimples. He doesn't have any cream to put on them, so they are getting worse and worse. Sometimes at night I creep downstairs and out onto the porch, and Prince is there sleeping or waiting. I curl up beside him and bury my face in the rough, sick-smelling fur. Prince gives my hand a lick. That is his way of saying good night.

November: the army trucks, with their ration packages and bottles of water, stop coming. The sky is a curdled yellow color. It seems like most of our neighbors have gone on vacation, or died, or disappeared, or moved away, or something.

We seem to be losing.

The silence is deafening.

In December Elliott and Pat break into some houses at night, looking for food. An army patrol brings them back. If they do something like this again, they will be taken away for good. "Taken away where?" I say. No one will tell me.

My father has a dark look all the time now, as if a black mildew is growing and spreading on him.

"Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, to get out of this shithole," says Pat. But he and Elliott stay in at night.

There is nothing to eat. My mother has scoured the house. She tries making us a salad of grass and things. It makes me throw up.

One time I find a bottle of Flintstones chewable vitamins in the back of my drawer. I don't want to share. I eat a whole handful and it gives me a horrible stomachache.

My legs are nice and thin now. And my bones stick out of my face in a nice way. I look like the models in the magazines. I know this because I spend a lot of time in my room now, looking in the mirror. We have conversations. Sometimes if I squint really hard into the mirror I can see Marjorie there, in the mirror-room, smiling at me.

I've been writing things down in my diary, month after month. I'm beginning to lose track of the days. They all run together. I remember when every day was different: Monday was music day at school, Wednesday I had piano lessons, Friday I went to Marjorie's house.

Now they are all the same.

Sometimes I look in my closet and it surprises me to see all the clothes hanging there. Now I always wear the same shirt, and some pants all bunched up with a belt. There's no reason to change. I remember my mother used to yell at me to put on clean underpants every day.

Now they are all dirty and she is too tired to yell.

Every day I go downstairs and sit on the porch. Prince is still curled up there, shivering in the

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cold. My dad won't let him in the house. And Prince won't leave, even though we can't feed him anymore.

He loves me. I can see this in his soft brown eyes.

I scratch him and sing to him. His fur is loose and baggy on him. I tell him secrets. Sometimes I pretend he is Rick Dees and we are on a fashionable date in his fancy car. Prince plays along, though he doesn't really understand. Rick Dees and I have a romantic dinner at a fancy restaurant.

My mother stays in bed most of the time now. She asks that we not disturb her. Maybe she is imagining that she is somewhere else, someone else. But who else would she want to be? She's my mother, she can't be anything else.

My brothers stay in the basement. They are making plans down there, I think. They are stroking the magazine pictures, trying to pretend they are real. I know that by now the magazine pages must be all withered from their pawing. Looking at the fleshy naked women all day must make them hungrier.

Only my dad still goes out, every day, with his gun. He walks unsteadily, hanging onto things, but still he goes. He still seems to think there is something out there, something to put in the pot.

There's nothing left. There hasn't been for months. But he refuses to believe it.

Then suddenly it gets colder. Is it because of the war, because of a bomb? I wonder. Or is it just a very cold December? My mother comes downstairs, my brothers come upstairs, and we all settle in the living room. The bedrooms and the basement are too cold. It is warmer with all of us together, and the living room is better insulated. We hardly speak to each other. My brothers seem to speak by looks: they snicker suddenly, together, at nothing. And my parents speak with stares and shrugs. Me, I don't look at anybody, I stay in my corner with my winter coat and my blanket. Two of my teeth are loose. They shouldn't be.

I still spend a few hours a day with Prince on the porch. Most of the time he stays curled up against the side of the house, trying to steal some of the warmth. Once in a while he crawls around the yard, trying to warm himself up.

I'm too tired these days to sing. Just opening my mouth gives me a headache.

Prince understands. He is the only one who understands me.

Then one day I come in from the porch. It's starting to get dark so early, now that it's winter. I come into the living room and it's all in shadows. I can't see anyone's face clearly, all I see are their teeth shining.

It is so quiet. Then I hear their breathing, each one of them separately like singers not in harmony. They are all waiting for something.

"I wish I had a steak," says Elliott, his voice strained and high.

A pause.

"In Africa they eat grubs and things. Maybe there are worms in the backyard," says Pat.

"You can eat dandelion greens. I've heard of dandelion salad," says Elliott.

Pat says, "I heard in Korea people eat dogs."

No one says anything. I can see the room get darker.

Then my dad stands up.

"What are you doing?" my mother says. He doesn't answer.

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"Where are you going? Howard – don't – don't –"

They are walking slowly to the door.

"He's a man, Howard! A man! You can't –" my mother screams.

"He's a dog," says my dad. "He's an animal!"

And then I see the door swing open, see Prince lift his head expectantly. I see my dad lift the gun and aim. I'm trying to get over there, I can't get there fast enough, the air is too thick. They're framed in the doorway, my dad and my brothers, and beyond them I see Prince pause, showing the whites of his eyes, wind ruffling the fur on his head. Then he's running, galloping on all fours across the yard, his tongue hanging out like a pink streamer. A shot rings out echoing in the silence, but it misses him, he keeps running, and then he's up, up on his hind legs, lurching away two-footedly, front legs pawing the air, and then another shot rings out, shaking the world, and he's down, down, splayed out on our front lawn, nose in the dirt, tail in the air, wind whipping his fur around, his legs quivering then still.

I try to go to him but it's too late. My dad and Elliott and Pat beat me to him. They run across the lawn, the pack of them, and fall upon him snarling.

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