

Me and James Dean

Jill's had James Dean since college, a gift from her parents before they died—car crash—which makes him extra-special to her, a last link to her ancestry or something. For Jill's sake, Dean and I maintain an amicable enough relationship, though there's been tension from the start, each of us sure Jill belongs to him.

The courtship was rocky, Jill waiting for Dean to warm to me. Our lovemaking was interrupted more than once by barking and a paw on my pillow. Five years after our wedding, he still jumps in bed between us, growling if I turn in my sleep. More than once, I've had nightmares of waking unmanned.

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Tonight, after Dean's been let into the bedroom, he nuzzles Jill's crotch and glares at me in a way that says: *I smell where you've been, buddy.*

Jill says, "Do you think we're meant to be?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, thinking, *Here we go again.*

"I mean," she says, "what if, in the end, your husband and your soul mate and the person you're supposed to be with—what if they all turn out to be different people?"

"Are you seeing Roger again?" I ask.

"No, sweetie, I told you. That's over."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," she says, rolling onto her side. She switches off her bedside lamp and pretends to fall asleep. I reach out, and Dean moves to shield her from my touch. He gives her elbow a lick, then looks me in the eye. He will not sleep until I do.

"Jill," I say. Jill offers only a quiet grunt. Dean moves to cushion the small of her back.

Clearly, she's still seeing Roger.

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This morning, I roll over Dean in the driveway. Just crush him. An honest mistake—not cold-blooded murder, just bad driving. Backing up without checking the mirrors, the kind of thing that lands a neighbor's toddler in the ICU and you on the evening news.

A simple case of wrong place, wrong time. That, and we had a deal, and Dean broke the deal.

It's my responsibility to walk Dean in the mornings. My *only* (Jill's word) responsibility when it comes to *her* (my word) dog. Dean, an old beagle with a nose like a coke fiend's, takes his time making his way around the block, stopping every few feet to sniff another dog's piss, to piss on another dog's piss, or to lick the place on his body where the piss comes out. Not a morning person, I never particularly wanted to get up early to walk Dean. The deal, then, was this: I get up and let Dean out. He has free rein in the neighborhood, leash laws be damned. In return, he comes home before I leave for work.

Both parties have found the arrangement appealing: I get to sleep in. Dean gets to take his time, pissing all over whatever he likes. For years we've operated like this, under the guise of what-Jill-doesn't-know-won't-hurt-her.

Usually, Dean scratches at the back door just as I'm buttering a bagel or pouring milk over a bowl of raisin bran. But, this morning, Dean doesn't come back. Not after I've finished breakfast and washed my plate. Not once I've made a second pot of coffee for when Jill wakes up. Not even after I stand at the open door, briefcase in hand, and quietly call for him.

I go to the garage, get in my Jeep. I've never had to look for Dean before. I think of Mr. Lancaster, imagine the man chasing Dean out of his vegetable garden, pitchfork in hand. Or, perhaps

Dean's made it under Ms. Mead's fence, at last having his way with the hot little Papillon who wags her ass at us whenever we walk by. I even envision Dean dead, the target of some gang initiation whereby one must off a dog in order to get his first bandanna and biker jacket.

What I don't picture is Dean hit by a car, not until the moment I feel the thud, hear the crunch, the unmistakable sound of beagle bones snapping under fifty-thousand-mile Michelin tread.

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I don't have much experience with death. There were Jill's parents. There was a great-aunt whose name escapes me. There was my middle school guinea pig. Something was wrong with him, and his ass exploded. Really, he started shitting his intestines. It wasn't pretty. But that was a guinea pig, a rodent. People don't cry over dead rodents.

This is nothing like that. Dean appears unhurt. Only a thin string of red runs from his open mouth. He pants. I place my hand on his side. He doesn't yelp, just closes his eyes. His rib cage feels like a bag of potato chips.

This dog, I think, will never make it. This is a doomed dog.

At this moment, I can do many things. I can tell Jill, or not. I could say Dean ran away, got out the door while I fiddled with his leash and collar. But, then, what to do with the body? A neighbor's trashcan seems risky. There are woods nearby, but boys play there. I could drive out to the country, dig a little hole.

Except there's more to consider than just disposal. I can't bury Dean while he's still breathing. I mean, I could, but I can't. I'm not that man.

How long does it take a dog to die?

I consider methods of expediting the process: A plastic Kroger bag from under the kitchen sink, a shoelace to hold it in place. Ajax mashed up in raw hamburger. Shovel to the head.

I do own an acetylene torch.

Scratch that. I can't hide the truth of Dean's death from Jill, but perhaps I can disguise it. Another car, I could say. This car came flying around the corner, ripped the leash right out of my hand. I never caught the license plate, too intent on tending to Dean. Used the fireman's carry to bring the body home and everything.

In the end, Jill makes the decision for me. I look up, and she's running down the driveway, her worn, red bathrobe held together by a manicured hand. Even without makeup, with sleep caught under one eye and dried drool flaking from the corner of her mouth, as Jill crouches beside me and takes Dean's head into her hands, I think: *You, my love, are beautiful.*

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Jill won't talk to me. James Dean lies in her lap, legs at odd angles, head loose, jumping with every bump of the Jeep. At each jostle, Jill shoots a look my way that says, *Be careful*, and, as I slow down, bats eyes that plead, *Hurry up*.

It's no short trip. This is rural Kentucky, an hour from anywhere you've heard of. The nearest animal hospital is twenty miles of old roads away.

I reach for the radio, decide it's inappropriate, then change my mind and turn the dial. A fiery host argues back and forth with a listener. I was hoping for music. Before I can change it, Jill stretches over Dean, turns the radio off, and we're back to the hum of the Jeep and Dean's panting, the metronome of his quick, shallow breaths. It's the moment where one of us is meant to speak, and I'm still wondering who goes first when Jill interrupts the silence.

"You didn't have to do it," she says. "I would've stopped seeing Roger."

"But," I say, and my tongue catches on my teeth. So it's true. I knew this, sure, but it's different now, the admission making it more real.

Outside, apples bob in the morning light. We thread the or-

chard, then up a hill, and suddenly we're facing clear sky. From a field, a man on a stick waves a hand of hay, a crow for a hat, and I remember what it was like to be a boy, before life got so damned complicated.

Jill is crying. "How could you do this?" she says.

"Jill," I say, "it was an accident. I would never—"

I look at her. She looks back, searching my face for clues.

"Come on," I say. "Don't you know me at all?"

It's so much to explain, but I tell Jill about the deal and the walks. How, for years, this is how we did it. That I messed up. That I wasn't leaving for work. That I went to find Dean and didn't look both ways before I backed over him.

We continue down the road, the landscape mutating into a town. A drugstore here, post office there, and suddenly we're in Rosemont and the small animal hospital comes into view. It's an old house—green shutters, plank siding, and peeling white paint—that's been converted into a business. Out front, a sign features a caricature of a cat with a thermometer in its mouth. I pull into the parking lot. I'm afraid of what comes next.

"I'm sorry," Jill says.

"I'm sorry too," I say.

"Do you think . . ." Jill begins to cry again.

"I don't know," I say. "Let's take him inside and see."

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How I caught Jill and Roger last year: I came home from the firm early. Isn't that the way it always happens? I'd had a bad lunch with a client, awful conversation over lukewarm tortellini, and I'd been throwing up about once every hour since. There was no car in the driveway, no trail of clothes down the hall, no noise, even, to give me pause before I pushed open my bedroom door.

What I found was not fucking, just two topless people sitting beside each other, reading from the same book. It was strangely intimate, maybe the most intimate moment I've ever seen. Nobody

knew what to do. Then I threw up all over the floor. Times, I wish I *had* opened the door to mindless, unbridled fucking.

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The vet's office is beige walls and wax plants, track lighting and tinny music piped through cheap speakers concealed behind flowerpots.

I'm filling out forms when Jill returns from a back room. She sits beside me on the long, narrow bench that takes up one wall. She looks terrible, face red and blotchy, hair like Medusa's.

"How is he?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says. "They won't tell me anything. They're doing X-rays. They asked me to leave."

Jill raises a hand to her face and traces the outline of one eye with a single knuckle. She mumbles something I can't make out.

"What's that?" I ask.

"I think I'm pregnant," she says.

When you hear something shocking, I mean something that just lays you out, you have a choice. You can accept it immediately, react to it, or not. I tend to stall.

"I'm sorry?" I say.

"Pregnant," she says.

"But, when? How long have you known?"

"I don't know. Maybe a month?"

"But we've hardly . . ."

"I know."

"Hold on. Do you mean—"

"I don't know," she says. "I'm just not sure. I'll have to go to the doctor, do the math."

I stand. I sit. I stand, walk once around the room, sit again.

"Sweetie," she says, and it's her turn to be the levelheaded one. "Calm down."

"Are you going to leave me?"

"What?"

"If it's Roger's, are you going to leave?"

"Of course not," she says. She takes my hand and squeezes. "I mean it. It's over now."

"So, what would we do with it?"

"Things can be done," she says.

I consider this, and a shiver runs down my spine. I try to picture it, try not to. And what would we call this, in our case? Extermination?

I won't raise another man's child, and yet, I don't think I could kill it either.

"What if I told you it wasn't an accident?" I say. "That I ran over James Dean on purpose?"

"What?"

"If I meant to hit the dog," I say. "Would you still want me around?"

Jill watches me, openmouthed. She lets go of my hand.

"Did you?"

"No."

I want a song to soar through the waiting room, suddenly meaningful and ironic. "Your Cheatin' Heart" or something. Something to make Jill cry. Of course, this doesn't happen. The same soft, classical music comes out of the speakers, some concerto or other. The thing swells, peaks, then falls away in a shimmy of violins.

"You," Jill says, "are an asshole."

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The first time I met Dean, I was drunk. Jill's parents had just died. We'd been to the viewing, then gone straight to a bar a few blocks from Jill's place. We were bracing ourselves for the funeral the next afternoon.

We were still in school at NKU, had only known each other a few weeks, but, standing by the caskets, Jill introduced me to one relative as her boyfriend. When I look back, it's as if there were never a choice in the matter. Neither of us had the chance to turn

the other down, as though, in death, something had been decided for us.

Jill and I stumbled into her apartment and groped on the couch.

I was horizontal, Jill on top of me, taking off her shirt.

I looked to my right, and there was this animal, brown and white, broad-shouldered and squatty. His tail stood in the air like a middle finger. He was about six inches from my face.

"Jill," I said. "Jill."

Jill pulled her shirt from her face and looked down.

"Oh," she said, "that's James Dean. Say hi, Dean."

Dean growled. His teeth were white, but his gum line was black. He didn't bite, but he let me know he'd like to.

"Dean," Jill said, "you be nice." Then, to me: "Don't worry, he's really friendly once you get to know him."

We made love like that, Jill on top of me, the beagle beside me. Dean did not take his eyes off me the whole time.

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The veterinarian, tall and thin, forty or fifty, is not a bad man, but he's the bearer of bad news, and I think we both hate him for it. He frowns, but his handlebar mustache curls upward in a smile. He's probably given this speech so many times that it no longer holds meaning for him. They're just words, what he was taught to recite before he got his diploma.

"I'm sorry," he says in conclusion, "but there's nothing else we can do. It would be cruel to draw this out any longer. I think that the best thing we can do for"—he pauses, glances at his clipboard, looks back at us, and reassumes an expression of sorrow—"James Dean, at this point, is to let him go. We can help him do that. It won't hurt. It will be like falling into a peaceful sleep."

I look at Jill for confirmation, but she's gone, beyond words.

"Would you like to say goodbye?" the man says.

I turn to Jill. Nothing. I look back at the man and nod.

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The euthanization room is dim with weird halogen lights that cast an unsettling yellow-green glow over everything. James Dean is on his side on a steel table. He's been muzzled, and an IV tube extends from one paw to a bag hanging from a hook on the wall. The table looks cold. I touch it, and it is. There's something alien about the scene, like he's not even our dog. I expect Jill to burst into tears, but she displays no emotion.

"Here," I say. I unclip the muzzle and pull it away from Dean's snout. Suddenly, he looks more like the dog we both know. I pet his head, and he sniffs at my hand. He tries to shuffle forward, but his lower half doesn't follow his front legs' lead, and his nails scrape futilely against the table.

"Would you like to step outside?" I ask.

"Yes," Jill says. She moves toward the door.

"Wait," I say. "Jill, I'm really, really sorry about this. All of it." She stands at the door, her hand on the knob.

"Whatever you want to do," I say, "I'm your man. We're in this thing together."

Maybe it's the classical music coming through the thin walls of the next room, or that our dog is dying on a table in front of us. Perhaps it's something else entirely. But before Jill walks out the door, she smiles. She gives me a look that says, *At least we have each other*. That seems to say, *We can still make this work*. A look that says, *Don't worry. Love won't let go*.

* * *

Now, it's just me and Dean. It's hard to look at him, so I look around the room. It's small, not like the offices where you take your pet for a checkup. No posters of breeds on the walls or tins of doggy treats on the countertop. This room is reserved for death. There are two chairs, a big padded one for the vet and a white, plastic chair, an old piece of patio furniture. I pick the plastic chair, which seems to open its arms to accept me as I sit, then grips my hips so tightly I wonder if I'll ever escape.

I force myself to look at Dean. Dean looks back. He's got his head balanced on his front paws. If you took away the IV tube, he'd look like one of those dogs you see on calendars with titles like *Beautiful Beagles* or *Purebred Hounds*.

"We had a deal," I say. Dean doesn't say anything, just watches me with his big, sad dog eyes. "We had a deal, you fucker."

Dean winces, and I know that he must be in terrible pain, that it's time to get this over with. As if on cue, the veterinarian walks in. He carries a small tray with a stiff, blue cloth draped over the top, like I won't guess what's underneath.

"If you're finished," he says, "I'd like to go ahead with the procedure." *Procedure*. He says it the way you'd say *spatula*. There's no inflection, no hint of what's in the syringe and what it will do to the dog.

"I'll need you to step out," he says. His face is kind, but his voice is firm.

"No," I say. "I think I'll stay."

"We generally don't recommend that."

"I want to watch you kill my dog," I say.

"Sir," he says, but there is nothing else to say.

"If you want me to sign a waiver or something, I will."

The man frowns. He pulls the blue cloth from the tray, revealing two shots.

"I'm afraid I'll need to put the muzzle back on," he says. "He tried to bite one of my technicians."

"Sorry about that," I say.

The vet steps forward with the muzzle, and something churns inside me. It seems undignified, like Dean deserves better. I may not like this dog, but all living things deserve to die decently. I believe that.

I jump up, the chair clinging to me for a second before clattering to the floor. "Wait," I say. "Don't put that on him. I'll take care of it."

The vet looks at me skeptically, then puts the muzzle away. I

step up to the table and crouch so that me and Dean are eye and eye.

"Well," I say, "this is it, buddy." I make a fist around his snout and nod at the vet. The first needle goes in and Dean whines, struggles under my grip.

Quickly, the vet retrieves the second syringe. When the needle hits Dean's hide, though, he thrashes, pulls his mouth from my hand, and bites down hard on my thumb. The vet injects the last of the toxin, pulls the needle out, and, still, Dean doesn't let go. I try to pry my hand from his jaws, but he holds on tight.

He dies like that, my bloody thumb caught between his teeth. And, for the first time since we met, he looks happy.