

Dog Lover

By Bethalee Jones

Today has not been good for you. It has been the opposite of good. The opposite of good is bad. At 5:01 p.m., yabadabadoo, belched out of the building willy-nilly with the rest, into the heavy acrid air. It's oppressive; fumes find their way home to you. Your wrists are searing. Your hair is losing its curl, lank against your head; your underarms and the Y of your crotch are soaked, a font of sweat runs between your breasts, down your back, secreted in your buttocks. The miserable bus ride home: You're lucky--you get the last seat. You insinuate yourself in the middle of the back bench. You don't excuse yourself; dull eyes meet, flicker away. Bumping and sticking, defenseless against the exhaust, the shriek of the brakes. You have a half eaten Reeces in your bag. You reach in and finger it. It's mush. How come the east side never gets air conditioned buses? How come your schnoz is such an odor magnet? All the collective BO belly dancing up your nose.

Overwhelmed by the body odor, the noise, all you can think of are Tanto, Hi-C, and the stripping off, the ripping of this week's pantyhose. They have turned black and hardened at the soles; your toes will tear right through them. It's something that you look forward to every Friday. You debus with care. A recurring dream: Doors hissing shut on your leg. Being dragged along lumpa-bump, screaming, nobody noticing a thing. You come thumping up the stairs, one foot in front of the other. Your phone is ringing: One ringy-dingy, fumbling for your keys, two ringy-dingy, struggling to pull them through the Rite Aid bag (next week's pantyhose, procured at lunch), three ringy-dingy, you jam them in the lock, kick the door open and fall in. Last ring. Shee-it.

Hi. I'm not around right now. Leave a message. Beeeep. You lay splayed on the floor an unstrung marionette. You think about how together you sound on your machine.

"Casey, Luther here. Sorry I missed you. Hate to tell ya this way on the phone and all, but, well, I know you wanted to know. Well, Casey, ma, she's gone, Case. She finally went and done it. I'm all shook up, you know, even though, you know, we knew it was coming an all. So, the funeral's gonna be at St. Martha's on Monday at three. Hope ya an make it. There won't be many folks there, just some dog people, and Bunny and the kids. Well, bye, now." Click.

You can see Luther in your mind's eye, chewing a hangnail on his meaty thumb, belly bulging under his plaid shirt, the phone cradled between his shoulder and ear, his other hand softly twisting Bowser's hound dog ears round and round. It's cold in your apartment; you left the air on high for Tanto. You slide up so you're sitting against the wall. She's gone. Miss Aggie's gone. "Tanto," you call out shakily, "Tanto, get up you lazy old thing. I brought you a present."

You stand up and pull the cow's hoof out of your purse. Special treat. Tanto loves them. "Tanto, Tanto..." You look in his usual spot beside your lounge. Not there. Under the window.

Nope. "Tanto, Tanto, old boy, where are you?" Loop through the bedroom. Not there either. Down the hall into the kitchen. Turn the corner; there he is. "Tanto, Tanto, baby." He's lying with his head buried in a bag of Lay's Potato Chips. He's in bad dog heaven. "Tanto! Get out of there you old bad dog, you," a mock reproach. You reach down to pet him, pull the bag off his face. You expect his guilty doggy grin, merry eyes, thumping tail. Instead his eyes are dull coins, there's no smile on his doggy lips though they are studded with tiny points of potato chips; his tail is still. You sag down, bury your head in his fur. It's so soft, still warm.

This thing, this self, this me, precedes rationality, memory. I'm an amnesiac by design. The loops spin but the projector doesn't have a light. Joan Crawford and a coat hanger. That's a movie. Me, born whole out of mother's psychosis, on a bad day, at, say, age ten. Her head split open like a melon, a trajectory of seeds: You, poised for battle, staff drawn, an archetype. No. No. I was born defective out of Miss Aggie's kindness, Tanto's love, on a good day, at, say, age ten. You, bent stalk, a rotten egg, were prone to tremors, damaged merchandise.

Old Miss Aggie said:

"You," menacing arthritic joint, "was a pitiful excuse for a child, Casey. Skinny and wary as a stray dog, skedaddled, cause wandering was better odds. I don't think your mother thought to feed you, let alone..." Not true. I remember being in the grocery with mother one time. There was a baby behind us crying. Inconsolable. Mother turned and declared to the raccoon eyed young mother, "try mixing Coke-cola in the bottle. Casey here, loved it. That and a shot of paregoric. Couldn't give this one enough," patting my head, delighted with herself, her humanity, her willingness to share, cigarette drawing circles in the air. "Try a shot of that stuff for yourself while you're at it." Mother smiled sweetly, "look like you could use it, honey." She didn't register the looks of horror; she was lucky that way. An infant's dream come true, from womb to tomb, dream to dream, no stops in between. This train ain't a local. Thank-you, God. Mother was a genius and generous. She gave me the gift of life and more.

Miss Aggie gave you a spot near the fire; she gave you Tanto. "You needed something warm, lovie."

You remember: You always hung in the garage. In slow time: It was a safe place. Mother rarely ventured beyond the back door. She needed a frame for drama and support. Weaving, her left arm a wobbling rotor with ciggie and drink, her right arm the support. Mommy's a helicopter; if that arm falls away she's gonna auto-rotate. "Ca-sey, Ca-sey." Voice like a starling. She was a banshee, wailing for herself. Then she'd forget. Or she'd need another drink.

When I discovered that place I was thrilled: Up in the rafters. Snug, but most of all away, away from the smokes and the drinks and the hills of the pills that mother loved to fondle, and the red lips that moved heavily, the eyes that looked but couldn't see. Up and away. There was an octagonal window to peer out. I can see you but you can't see me. "Ca-sey. Ca-sey." It was pubescent sex: Pure and joyful. I loved her even so. I didn't mean to hurt her.

You stocked it with booty lifted from the Lawsons: Doretos, Lays, Fritos - "Ey, yi, yi, yi, I am the Frito Bandito...", Pringles, Heath Bars, Almond Joys -- "Sometimes you feel like a nut.

Sometimes, you don't..." "Whahooo," Mountain Dew, Coke --"I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony...." The jingles are a din in your head, your literature. Sustenance. That's what your head is full of, a cacophony of commercial jingles and theme songs.

Television was a safe place too. Another hide-out, in the dark, below the ground, in the basement, boob-tube ablair, introducing yourself to mother's medicines, her cough syrups; she always had some lying around, orange, grape, cherry--Chronic bronchitis--one diagnosis, Perkodins--bad back--another, Quaaludes--insomnia, Plastidils--unable to black out with alcohol alone. What did they make those things for? Stacking pills, pulling on sweet warm fruit syrups to the flickering blue light of, "I Love Lucy," "The Little Rascals," "The Lone Ranger."

On my belly up in the rafters, with my old blankie, rain beating on the roof, heavy drops, thunk, thunk, thunk, flashlight swinging softly, Modern Romance in one hand, Almond Joy in the other. I could smell the sweet smell of the rain, the damp rot of the wood. Engrossed in the story about a woman abducted and buried alive in a coffin with only a pipe to breath through, I'd pull a bottle of the cough syrup out of my back pocket, perfect fit, unscrew it with my teeth, still reading--her captors were tormenting her, jumping up and down on the ground and laughing down the pipe-- blow the top out of my mouth, poofff! And take a few long drinks, a few thirst quenching swigs. I liked the orange cough syrup best, the sweet sticky taste. Then I'd go back to reading and eating and wait: I'd wait for the warm wash.

Bobbing up and down, your self spiraling inward and expanding, a sea shell, your ear turned in, tides ebbing and flowing, remember how you'd pray? "Now I lay me down to sleep, pray the lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the lord my soul to take." Just in case. On the outside chance. Head down on arms, blankie bunched under belly, you'd cast off.

Miss Aggie was your next door neighbor. She was a recent arrival, renters being that way. You watched her move in from the garage. She raised hounds.

"My son come over and built their cages at the back of my yard. You crept around like you thought you was invisible on the other side of the bushes. Oh, how I loved to hear my hounds sing. Hooooooooooooowoo. You did too. They called you out. You'd flit out of that garage, bent over, creeping. One day, I remember, I was feeding 'em, changing their water. You was skulking on the other side of the forsythia." Wait. I remember. There were six of them jammed in the cage. They hopped up and down, yelping, a scramble of noses, tongues, ears, assholes and tails. I reached through to pet one. She snapped and growled.

"You best leave that bitch alone, honey. She's a mean one." A dumpling dressed in red, the leaves rustled, then your wrinkled face appeared. "Do you like dogs?" You asked. "That's right. You gave a little yes nod. Wouldn't look me in my eye. 'I got a real sweetie inside,' I said. 'Wanna see?' So then I pushed apart the bushes and pulled your sorry little ass through. I tried to hold your hand. You wasn't having none of that though, but you followed me in the house. Tanto was a puppy. A fur ball on fire is what he was. Remember? I fed you lunch."

"What's this?" you asked."

"What's what?' I didn't know what you was talking about."

"What's this?' You pointed at your plate."

"That's a sandwich, hon."

"Where's the chips?"

"I don't have none, lovie."

"Oh,' you said."

"What did I look like?"

"What did you look like?" Pale eyes glinting, stubby chin twitching, "He, he, he. You was a mess. Your hair was a rat's nest; bet it'd never seen a comb. You was a dirty, brown faced, hand me down clothes, grimy nailed little thang. Walked like you'd been punched in the belly. You had pretty eyes, though, love, the color of tea. Still do. I saw you in them eyes. I'm a doer by nature, you know." Hands set proudly on the table, bent shoulders pulled back. "Yes, I know."

"I saw them tea colored eyes. Said to Luther, I said, that little gal next door; she's alright."

"Did not!"

"Did so! Tanto liked you too. That sealed the deal."

Tanto was a mutt, maybe some shepherd, some collie, some mastiff. He was a dog, big heavy bones, a mane around his broad face. He topped out at 120. He was loyal, devoted, fierce in his love. I was his sea, his moon, his stars. The look in Tanto's eyes when I sidled in Miss Aggie's door that day. It was rehabilitating. The world fell away. No. It came to be. He scampered and slid across the kitchen floor, hopping up and down, widdling a little joy; his salmon colored tongue washed my face, milk teeth pulled at my hair.

"I think he likes me."

"Oh, sure he does."

"What's his name?"

"I ain't had time to name him yet. Got any ideas?' You was real serious. You took the question seriously. You was a thinker even then."

"Tanto,' you said. You was real sure about it, sweets."

Mother didn't care for Miss Aggie, or the dogs. You remember that:

I remember you in your chair, Monkey Wards sixties floral, stained, dotted with burn holes, head cast back, hair in a black halo, your red lips moving, eyes half open, half closed. "You'd better stay from that old bat next door, Case. She's gotta have a screw loose. Lettin' you hang around. All them god-awful dogs. The noise. The noise really gets to me. All them dogs, Casey. God-damned dogs." Drink lifted to lip. "Change the channel, Casey. I'm tired." Words slowing down. "It's three isn't it? ABC, General Hospital," Your eyes getting heavier. "Get me another pack of ciggies." Arm tossed in the direction of the kitchen.

Me, sitting like an Indian at your feet, stiff. "I don't feel like it," I'd mutter into the rug. "What's that, Case?" Lips and tone atrembling, voice unsteadily climbing the octaves. "Come on now, honey, be a good girl for your mama, kay?"

Me, groaning, getting up, doing my job.

Then your hand going limp, head nodding off, ciggie in lips. Again, I'd tiptoe up and pull it out. You'd snuffle, maybe murmur. I'd plant the butt with all the others. Nab my tip: A few pills, a half full bottle.

I was negligent in my duties, mother. I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't there to lift the butt from your lips, plant it safely in the sand. I was with Tanto, down in the woods, playing in the stream. He needed exercise, that one. Me too. Chasing him through the grass, him chasing me, flopping down, him snapping at the bees, barking with joy, the butterflies, puffy clouds overhead. It filled me up. I chewed on a weed, the late afternoon sun warming us, crickets on and off.

I saw the smoke curling up behind the trees, hoochie-cooching up to the sky. Thought nothing of it. I heard the sirens. Thought nothing of it. I heard the hounds barking up a storm, then Miss Aggie calling our names, "Cas-ey, Tan-to." Time to eat, I thought. We tromped happily home, Tanto running ahead, stopping, then racing back behind, silly puppy. I can't describe the terror that prickled over me, annihilating me, freezing me up. Every hair standing on end, like pine needles. The sure knowledge that you were dead and that I was as culpable as if I'd lit the match myself. I could see you in your chair, flames licking at your feet.

Miss Aggie took you in. You were 15.

"I give you the front bedroom, remember, love?" Papery hand stroking your arm. "You'd only sleep up there if I let Tanto up, too," shaking her head, giving you a craggy smile. "You made me break one of my golden rules," finger pointing again. "No dogs upstairs!"

He slept in your bed with you. Every night. Fourteen years unbroken.

"You still got them pretty tea colored eyes, love, but that damn mother of yours, she went and stole that little flicker I was trying to stoke up. Went and took it with her." The soft, loose, wrinkles, hung by good humor, pulled to a grimace. "Oh, stop, Miss Aggie. You're casting on. Makes a better story," I said. "I'm here, big as day, bigger than life."

Tanto's fur soft and warm. Your legs are going to sleep. Nature's calling. You get up and stretch. Fold the potato chip bag neatly in half, throw it in the trash. You go to the bathroom, urinate. Look at yourself in the mirror. Unrecognizable. Opening the cabinet door, you've been saving up for this: Three bottles of cough medicine--you have chronic bronchitis too--25 Perkodins-- and a bad back. 60 Valiums. 45 Xanax. You found a source mother never thought to mine: A shrink. They're good for lots of drugs. That's their raison d'etre. They love a good story too. They pay in kind.

Taking the booty back into the kitchen, you set up next to Tanto. Get some water from the sink, a bottle of Stoly from the freezer. Siberia. It's cold there. You run your hand down Tanto's side. Get comfortable. Line up some shots of cough syrup. Hail, hail, codeine. Hi-C! Mother, Mommy dearest, I never missed you because you never left. We'll go on together then.

You chase the cough syrup with water, swallow a pile of Valiums; you love them, they're so tiny. A space of time passes. The coldness dissipates. You start to feel drowsy. Stroking Tanto's head, you kiss his nose. It's rough and dry.

Heavier now you line up the Stoly. You slug it back.

Miss Aggie, thank you for the place near the fire. It was warm and it was light. I hope to see you soon.

Big ol' handful of Valium and Xanax, mixed together, pretty pills, more water. Almost gags you. Plenty of practice swallowing pills, yup, more pulls on the sweetness of fruit, orange, your favorite. Like the lollipop at the bank, the barbershop.

Tanto, Tanto, words can't say....I'll just lay me down and pull up close like I always have and we'll go float away together.