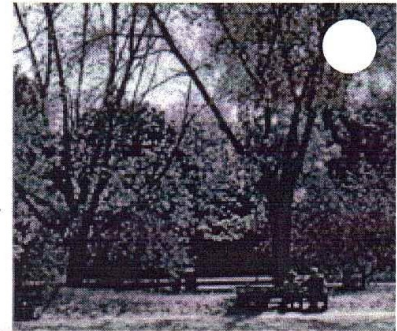


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Editorial Message

Someone I know, a woman, recently had her husband abandon her child, a son, to the care of her mother, since remarried, who then decides it is inconvenient in her new status quo to raise her grandchild under the roof of her second husband. The child gets shuffled from this house to another, the woman's brother, or her mother's son, and in short time, due to the pregnancy of her brother's wife, or her sister-in-law, the child returns to his maternal grandmother's house. The solution is money. The inconvenience



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FICTION

DOG DAYS

I

by Kathryn Holzman



Photo by Diyana Mohamad

Other women shop. I chop.

In the kitchen surrounded by carrots, cucumbers and squash. Greens of all varieties, strawberries, radishes, and turnips. Three melons last week. Today, twenty five tomatoes. A weekly task list dictated by my farm share, shaped by insect infestations and blight, rainfall totals. Exclamation marks designate “New This Week.” Whatever is posted on the share board, I chop. Monday morning’s email, the farmers’ update, sets my agenda for my weekly chores.

My kitchen is redolent with herbs. I’m knee deep in preservation.

At my feet, my dog Skylar lays dying, losing weight each day, wasting away. She smells like an old dog and is not uncomfortable. Her medical issues are chronic and unlikely to resolve. As long as she does not let me out of her sight, she is content. Left alone she will howl and howl and howl.

While I chop, my husband is helping our neighbor band birds. Every August, before the male ruby-throated hummingbirds depart for points South, Ira and Roger spend an afternoon counting, measuring and banding the local hummingbird colony. The men hang a feeder, filled with sugar water in a birdcage, its door held open by a string which Ira grasps. When a bird enters, hungrily sucking sugar water to fatten up for his long journey south, Ira lowers the door.

Roger knows just how to handle the tiny birds. He checks for prior banding, measures the wings and beaks. Ira takes notes. Often the bird is repeat business, a frequent traveler and they make a note of which years he has been sighted, changes in his appearance.

How small my culinary efforts seem in light of a minuscule bird, barely larger than a butterfly about to make the journey to Florida, Texas or Mexico. As my tomatoes simmer, Roger gives the final bird a reward of nectar and opens his palm. With a flutter of wings, his subject flies off into the August sky. I want to tag Skylar and wait for him to return to me.

Roger's wife Beth is away on business. She does marketing for a large pharmaceutical company and flies all over the world to gauge markets. Roger and Beth chose not to have children. When Beth is home, we often hear their arguments over the fence; they have knock-down drag out fights which culminate in tears and amorous evenings in their backyard Jacuzzi.

I am expecting my second child. My first, Sam, is a happy toddler with his father's easy joy. Last night Ira practiced catching hummingbirds with him, showing him how to hold the bird in his small hand. They made a small model out of green Legos and Sam held his precious cargo so tenderly that it brought tears to my eyes. He is developing an impish sense of humor, a sense of entitlement. I want to give him everything. I don't want him to see Skylar die.

Maybe it's the hormones. I have been remembering my mother sprawled out drunk on the bathroom floor one summer during my college vacation. A contentious summer. My mother, a corporate lawyer, lived to prove her worth. My brother and I were a reflection on her, our report cards her measure. She spent that summer enumerating my many shortfalls: my mediocre grades, my poor choice of a major, my weight gain, my inability to find a proper boyfriend. I detested her for it.

I tried it once. Drinking enough vodka that I didn't feel anything. It didn't work.

My mom had her regret and alcoholism down to an art. She only blacked out after a hard day's work, when everything was properly in its place. She never called in sick. She spent her life banging against a glass ceiling. I was never willing to take the blame.

"What will the neighbors think?" I asked maliciously that summer night when I discovered her on the bathroom floor. My father, who often drank with her in silent resignation, was asleep on the couch in the living room but it was always all about my mother and me. Her drinking had reached an apex that August. That summer ended in a blowout.

"You will never be independent." She screamed at me, two sheets to the wind. "Look at you." Meaning fat, slovenly. "Do you understand how much your college education is costing us? And for what. A waste!" She refilled her glass with vodka. I glared back at her, counted her pours out loud.

She drained the glass in anger. Her cigarette ash fell on the floor. I waited for flames that never came. She would vacuum the residue up in the morning before leaving for work. She never left a mess.

"At least I will never be like you," I screamed, slamming the door. Out of there for good.

"Don't expect me to pay your tuition next year." She yelled at me.

I noted with satisfaction the neighbors watching us through their open windows.

That's when I flew away. I was officially a college dropout, my mother's worst nightmare.

It would be years before I found another relationship with as much intensity as that I had with my mother. Ira and I wear kid gloves, even now. We have vowed to be careful with each other.

I chop vegetables. My pantry is almost full. At the end of the day, after putting away his gear, Roger joins us on our deck looking out into the woods over glasses of white wine. He describes the thrill of the hummingbird's heart throbbing in his palm. As we eat overflowing bowls of salad full of fresh farm greens, we identify bird calls, the jays' screech, the crickets' chorus. Sam searches for butterflies in the fields, telling our cat about the days' adventure. He is already synthesizing the experience, making it his own.

Outside the rain comes down. The corn is high. The end of summer in sight.

Roger's phone rings and he walks to the edge of the field to answer it. When Beth is away, Roger is calmer. He visits often and throws sticks for Skylar. But he keeps his phone close, his lifeline to his beloved wife. Beth is flying home from Thailand tonight.

Roger's face is pale when he returns.

"What's up?" Ira asks, carefully. We assume that they have had another argument and are ready to sympathize, as always. We are old hands at this. Later we analyze. We are voyeurs of their passion, borrowing the intensity without the pain.

"It's gone." I can almost not hear him. As if he lacks the strength to form the words. I look over at Sam protectively, watch to be sure Skylar is still breathing.

"What's gone?" Ira has gotten up and puts an arm around his friend.

"Her plane. It just disappeared off the radar screen."

Ira stands there with his hands open, entreating. These things just don't happen. He is a scientist waiting for a logical explanation. We listen intently, but all we can hear is the breeze in the trees and the distant gurgle of the stream. I take Sam's hand. Skylar is stretched out on the deck, his ribs

rising and falling faintly. We walk into the lighted house and I look back at the two men and the old dog in the darkness. The sun goes down early these days.

My mother and I talk once a month now, long distance. We are careful with each other, like strangers getting to know each other. She asks about my son but makes no effort to visit. She has limited vacation time. I post photos on Snapfish but she seldom comments on them. She does not understand why I would want to live in the country. "What do you do all day alone at home?" she asks. I describe the little things, pushing my son on a rope swing, watching him do his first puzzles, baking pies with fruit we have picked during the afternoon's walk, Sam assisting.

I remind her "You were never there for me." She replies that she remembers long nights of comforting me, changing dirty sheets when I was ill, whispering me to sleep (suggesting dreams, counting slowly in a lulling tone as she watched my eyes close) before heading off to work the next morning, exhausted. She remembers family outings, luring me to hike with M&Ms, taking me out for ice cream sodas where we shared confidences like girlfriends.

Now I think. They will find the plane.

Ira and Roger have gone to his study to call the airlines. I hear CNN on in the background. The newscaster is describing the routine flight, the experienced pilot who had signed off nonchalantly as he exited Thailand's airspace at nightfall. There was no indication that anything was wrong, they repeat. The TV screen flashes in the dark room. I listen to Roger sob, hear Ira comforting him, his voice soft and gentle.

The plane disappeared with 245 passengers aboard.

"Do you remember when I taught you how to drive?" My mother asked me last month. She reminded me that she was the parent with enough patience to hold her breath when I turned too sharply, landing on our carefully manicured front lawn. She said we laughed about it later, saying that if we had driven into the living room we could have announced: "We're home!" I remember her tight-lipped, the guttural noises in her throat when I stopped too quickly. She braced herself against the dashboard.

She says she wants to be present for the baby's birth.

It occurs to me that we all reinvent our past.

Actually, my mother did have a vegetable garden and, living in California, it was often prolific. She dried apricots on the roof of our garage at the end of the summer. For some time, I denied it. Now, she takes credit for my love of vegetables.

More foolishly, we all pretend to control the future.

My baby kicks. I hope it is a girl.

I know they won't find the airplane.

I read Sam a good night story, my ears peeled for news from the next room. I love holding him in my lap, the way he snuggles in, his soft hair tickling my neck. He asks me many questions about

hummingbirds, how they fly. He describes the beating of their wings, bats his eyes to demonstrate how fast. He describes Roger placing the bands, letting him touch the stunned birds. In his version, Roger is calm and in control and life is amazing. I want to freeze these moments for him before he succumbs to a world that is careening out of control. I want him to remember this, bonds this simple, this pure. I want to shield him from the sorrow in our home.

Last winter, I saw my farmers exchange a kiss at the farmer's market. They were selling the last of their blueberry pies before taking a winter break. My root cellar is full of their wares, but still, I troll the market. I wonder who I might have been if it had not all been about breaking free of my mother.

I wonder who she might have been if she had not had so much to prove.

Roger tells us that Skylar howls all day when we leave her alone, certain that she has been abandoned. He has gotten used to the howling and doesn't complain.

I wonder how Roger will live without Beth. Which will he miss more, the battles or the passionate lovemaking? The Jacuzzi in his backyard breaks my heart.

What is my mother thinking, asking to be present at the birth? How will she handle the mess of it all? The blood and gore of delivery? Will she need a drink? Will she and Sam stand together and watch as the midwives pull the baby into my world?

When I was a girl, my mother would play the radio while she cleaned the house "I am a woman. Hear me roar." She would strut proudly across the living room pushing the vacuum like a bayonet. I never questioned what it took for my mother to be the primary wage earner in our family. I only held her accountable for her absences, her inability to "get" me. All the tools she offered me seemed wrong. The cherries she gave me from her martinis were poisonous.

Now I am afraid of her flying. Afraid of having to reinvent her once again.

Very soon the hummingbirds will be gone. It's an endless cycle. It is only an illusion that we can count on them returning. How can 245 people disappear into the Atlantic Ocean while a minute ruby throat makes its annual journey to Mexico unscathed? How can I dare to bring a child into this world and let my mother bear witness after fleeing from her in order to begin living?

I feel a fluttering in my womb, already bracing for flight. Banded by me out of curiosity and a desire for evidence of my care. Will I have the chance to teach this child how to pick the fresh herbs from a summer garden? With luck, will I have a chance to demonstrate to her how to preserve sustenance for the dark times?

I warm water for tea and set out the peach cake on the kitchen table, knowing it will offer little solace this dark night. Gestures are all we have to offer. Food is as primal as we get. Sam is asleep with Skylar at his feet. The dog at the moment contentedly twitching as he runs through some dream field, young again. Roger has not set down his silent phone. His fingers grasp it tightly, whitely, waiting for it to ring and offer hope. In the morning, Ira will drive him to the airport and he will fly to some bleak hotel where he will huddle with the other family members, strangers with whom he will grieve. For now, we sit up all night, watching the TV coverage, the endless loop of

information that is not known, unable to turn off the anchor's morbid fascination. When the sun rises, we are already older.

Perhaps Skylar and I will wander the U-pick fields together before she dies, I think, as the Ira pulls out of the driveway. Maybe my mother will join us, though for the life of me I cannot imagine where that will lead. When winter comes it will be too late. The dog's heart will give out. My mother will change her mind. Roger will be a widower with a white untanned ring around his finger.

But my freezer will be full. When winter buries the farm fields, the vegetables I have chopped will still be there, frozen or dried, some cured in olive oil. During the darkest days, my pantry will be overflowing. My root cellar well stocked. I'm learning tricks to make the summer last. My farmers start planning spring crops in January. They draw maps and calculate demand.

The flash of a ruby throat, about to depart. Longer, and stranger, journeys happen around us all the time.