

Adult Short Story Second Place

Familiaris

By Matthew Kelly, Rockville

Dad looked up at me, nubs of eyebrow whiskers meeting at a creased fold of fur.

“OK,” I said, nodding at the bowl. Dad inhaled the kibble in a few seconds. He let out a muffled belch then clicked across the hardwood floor and into the living room.

Mom was on the couch, back arched and writhing. She was halfway through the transformation. Her jaw and nose were elongating, shifting into a snout. A tail budded beneath her pajama pants. Her tongue lolled between thinning lips.

The CDC volunteer who visited twice a week stood over her. “Probably a German shepherd, just going by the fur color and the limb-morph ratio.”

Dad’s floppy Dachshund ears perked up, tail whipping behind him. I knew he couldn’t understand the prognosis, but at least Mom would be able to keep him some company, even if she was quadrupled his size.

The volunteer handed me a bag of dog supplies: more food, a leash, a collar.

“When she’s through—probably a couple days—make sure to bring her in for registration and vaccines. You think you’ll keep both of them, Alice?”

“I think so,” I sighed.

The transformation didn’t seem painful for the victims, at least physically. But I knew Mom was thinking about the shelves lined with paperbacks, the nights around the table on the screened-in porch trying to finish a 1,000-piece puzzle, the yellowed keys on her grandmother’s piano. All of that was fading into unfamiliarity, replaced with who knew what.

Dad’s transformation was quick. He was near the epicenter of the attack and was fully exposed, absolutely coated in the aerosolized pathogen. It took less than a day for him to fully transform. Mom and I walked him out of the hospital on a leash.

Mom was outside during the attack, weeding the garden and exposed to the pathogen carried by a northerly wind. She was only outside for a few seconds before her phone buzzed to tell her to seek shelter, but it was enough for the pathogen to take hold.

“I guess I’ll be taking a lot more naps,” Mom tried to chuckle, but the elongating tongue choked her speech.

Mom and Dad were at it again, humping away on the rug in front of the fireplace. His little Dachshund limbs splayed out, trying to hold onto the thick fur of Mom's rump, her tail slapping him in the face as his pelvis thrust like a wind-up toy.

"Stop it!" I yelled from the kitchen table. I was trying to enjoy night three of overcooked spaghetti. They ignored me. Somehow, even after the transformation, they were still into each other.

I looked at the plate: marinara sauce baked into a crust by the microwave, lukewarm noodles knotting themselves together. I put it on the floor and the humping stopped. Paws clicked across the hardwood and soon my parents were devouring the pasta.

I still called them Mom and Dad. The case manager from HUD had tried to get me to give them dog names. Frankie or Oscar for the Dachshund (very clever). A regal name like Cleopatra for the German shepherd. I couldn't do it, not yet. Every once in a while, I thought I heard one of them mouth "Alice" at me. What if they were still there? A little part of them?

All of the studies pointed otherwise. Autopsies, MRIs, brain scans—they all showed the transformation was total. Even DNA tests held nothing of the original Vessel—that was the official word for it. My parents had been replaced by dogs. Switched.

At night they slept up on the bed with me. Mom curled at my feet and Dad sprawled out on the pillow. I'd read to them as they dozed off. Inevitably, one of them woke me up in the middle of the night, licking a paw or shaking out their fur, then doing that circle dance routine to beat down the imaginary grass that their wolf ancestors shaped into a bed every night.

The next day, my case manager visited. It was April and schools were still shut down. I was supposed to be finishing my junior year of high school in a month. Since I had my license, I was allowed to live on my own. That was the logic HUD had devised for how to take care of a bunch of minors who were suddenly parentless and charged with the care of grown dogs.

Alan didn't work directly for HUD. He was a therapist fresh out of school, who was hired by a contractor, who was hired by another contractor, who had won a bid to provide case management and counseling services in the greater D.C. area. Indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity. He had a thin goatee and wore a polo shirt with the company's name embroidered across the left breast. The polo was a size too big and, judging by the nylon piles knotting the blue fabric, they must have only given him one. It draped over Alan's thin frame and poofed out over his belt.

Alan carried a tablet computer where he was supposed to take notes for each of our biweekly check-ins. Five kids a day was how he put it—he covered five kids a day.

My parents loved him. Mom practically tackled him each time he came to the house while Dad homed in on the dog treats in Alan's satchel.

"Is it OK if they get dog treats?" he asked.

"They're dogs," I said with a shrug.

"I only ask because some families are still feeding their new dogs exclusively human food and I want to respect any dietary decisions you've made for your family." He talked like he was reading from a script.

"They'll eat anything."

He tossed them both milk bones and we sat down at the kitchen table.

Our sessions always followed the same script. *How was I feeling? Any changes in mood or behavior? Thoughts of harming myself or others or the dogs? Had any of my extended family come to visit?* Yes, my paternal grandparents, every Monday and Friday.

Was I getting the money?

Yes, every Thursday I saw the sum show up in the account another subcontractor managed for me.

Was I eating well and staying active?

I glanced at the pile of spaghetti sauce-stained dishes in the sink and mentioned walking the dogs.

He'd always apologize for not having a lot of time. The younger kids got more intensive care. The ones who didn't have family to take care of them were living in what were essentially refugee camps. One was set up on the National Mall.

He reminded me I could call him or the HUD field station if I ever needed anything. Finally Alan always asked, "When I leave, do you want me to take the dogs with me?"

In May, Mom ran away. I turned my back for a second while she and Dad sniffed around the backyard and she was gone. Dad was too busy pawing at a bare patch in the browning grass to notice she was missing.

"Where's Mom?" I asked casually at first, thinking she had submerged herself in the hydrangea bushes. As a human, she had slaved over them each spring, pruning back rogue stems, making

sure to head off any of the dead flowers before they moldered with the coming summer heat. They stood ragged now, like a kid in need of a haircut. I thought it would make sense that the canine incarnation of Mom would spend time sniffing around these bushes, but here I was, projecting human feelings and motivations onto a dog. Anthropomorphizing—there was a word from ninth grade English that I never thought I'd use, but that was one of the things that Alan kept harping on whenever he visited: *Remember to resist the urge to anthropomorphize, accept the transformation. They're animals now.*

Dad gave me the blank, bug-eyed stare of the Dachshund. His tongue flicked across his nose.

"Where's Mom?" I asked again, with a bit more urgency. Dad let out a muted whine and cocked his head.

I ran out into the yard calling for her. Dad scampered ahead, tail tucked between his legs, and led me to the fresh earth of a hole dug under the fence in the back corner of the yard.

"S---. S--- s--- s---," I repeated, ducking to look through the gap between the fence and dirt.

I rushed back inside and grabbed the truck keys.

Dad jumped into the cab with me before I could tell him no. He clambered onto the bench seat and posted himself up on my school backpack, still full of books and homework and a D+ on an algebra II exam.

Dad loved riding in that truck. He had loved it the first time he pulled it into the driveway and declared it was "my car." It was really his, but I was responsible for everything that went wrong with it, even the transmission that crapped out a week after I started driving it. I was the only girl in school driving a bench seat pick up with crank windows.

I had gotten rid of the sandbags and cinderblocks that Dad had tied down over the rear axle to give the truck some extra traction in the winter. I floored it out of the driveway and the bed of the truck felt like it was sliding off the wheels. One of the benefits of a bunch of people turning into dogs was that there was a lot less traffic, really none in the middle of the day.

I leaned my head out the window, letting the afternoon air wash across my face and whip my hair back over my ears.

"Mom!" I yelled. "Mom!"

I heard a bark and slammed on the brakes, looking for the source. But it wasn't a German shepherd, just a black Lab tied up on a front porch. A boy, probably 10 years old, tugged it inside. "Shut up, Mom!" I could hear him saying as he struggled with the leash.

Oh right, I thought, there were thousands of dogs named “Mom” out there now, probably 10 on my street.

I did a few more laps around the neighborhood and the sun started to set. I looked at Dad, he was curled up on the bookbag now, no longer amused by the truck ride. By the fifth lap, tears were filling my eyes and I couldn’t see well. What was I supposed to do? I was just one person. I rushed back to the house and leafed through the binder Alan had left me until I found the number for missing dogs. I dialed it:

“Press 1 for missing parent. Press 2 for missing parent who has completed transformation.”

I pressed 2.

“Current wait time is 2 hours and 45 minutes.”

The hold music began playing its low-bandwidth static tune and all I could do was sit there with the phone on speaker while the sun set behind the hydrangeas.

I had friends. I had some family in the area. They could help me look for Mom. Mom had a collar with my phone number on it. She even had a chip under her skin that could be read at a pound or a shelter to ID her. Gramp had his Army buddies from Desert Storm who would probably love to ride around Montgomery County looking for an elusive target. They’d know how to organize a search party.

“All right. Let’s get goin’.”

Gramp had his 4Runner pulled into the driveway and the two other trucks were idling in the road.

“Eddie and Al are going to help us out. Here, try these on.”

He had flipped open a small pelican case, and nestled into the foam was a pair of goggles.

“Night vision!” Gramp beamed.

I looked at the goggles skeptically. “Does Grandma know you bought these?”

“Grandma has two horses and a winter house in Florida.” That was all the rebuttal he felt he needed to muster.

He helped me adjust the fit and flicked a button on the battery pack.

“Pretty cool, eh?”

It took my eyes a second to adjust. There was too much ambient light from the headlights of the trucks to make the goggles effective; it felt like looking through a clouded green bottle at patches of brilliant white. I quickly took them off.

“Pretty cool,” I said. “Now let’s find Mom.”

Gramp had a walkie-talkie clipped to his belt and he muttered some jargon to Eddie and Al before pulling out of the driveway. The three SUVs rolled out of the neighborhood and split in different directions.

“Thanks for coming, Gramp.”

“Alice, you know I’d do anything to help you out.”

“You think we’ll find her?”

“Yes.”

Gramp was a force of nature once he decided on something. I once watched him assemble an Ikea nightstand, and halfway in he threw out the directions and hardware, grabbed some screws, a drill and wood glue from his workshop, and ended up with a TV cabinet.

“Your Dad get what’s going on?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. He rode around with me this afternoon but ended up napping most of the time.”

Gramp let out an amused grunt. I still couldn’t tell how this was sitting with him. His son had transformed into a dog. Grandma had refused to have a funeral without a body to prove her son was gone. She took all of Dad’s old clothes and made chew toys and blankets out of them. She forwarded me email chains from her women’s Bible study group about the government developing a cure for the transformed, or worse, how the government had engineered the pathogen in the first place. Whatever it was, God had a plan.

We were driving in ever-widening loops that arced out from the house. Eddie and Al were doing likewise. They reported to Gramp every 15 minutes or so.

“She couldn’t have gotten too far. Dogs get distracted. They want to sniff things, follow trails of scent; you know, dog stuff. Someone might be taking care of her for the night or she might already be at a shelter.”

“But they would have called me, Gramp. My name is on the collar.”

"She might have slipped her collar."

"All right, but we keep going."

Al radioed in that he had finished his sweep. "I'm turning in," he said. "Let me know if we'll be doing this tomorrow."

"Roger," Gramp said. We all knew that by morning Mom would be out of our search radius. Too much ground to cover. We'd have to rely on someone finding her or her wandering back to us.

"Do you think Mom can survive on her own?" I asked Gramp.

"Well from what the reports say, she's all dog. Which means she's some wolf too, and German shepherd at that, not a breed to sneeze at when it comes to ferocity. If she doesn't find someone who will take her in, I'm sure she'll scavenge some food or catch a rabbit or something. She's got thick fur too, so a night like this won't bother. What I'd be worried about is her getting hit by a car." He glanced quickly at me, "Sorry. Shouldn't have said that bit."

I cradled my head in my hands. Finding Mom felt impossible; there were too many places to look. Why would she leave in the first place?

"We'll find her, don't worry."

Gramp turned the truck around, whipping up gravel as his tires fought for traction. We didn't speak. My window was half rolled down and the rushing night air was filled with the smells of budding trees and freshly laid mulch. We were zigzagging through a neighborhood crowded with big houses. Gramp's eyes darted back and forth, scanning the little alleys and walkways and strips of lawn that cordoned off each house.

We reached the end of the street and he let out a sigh. Gramp stopped the truck, contemplating something, then the radio crackled to life.

"Cap, this is Eddie," Al and Eddie still addressed Gramp by his rank, "I'm up at the Commons by the big swimming pool. I think I found her."

"Roger that. Can you get her to come to you?"

"Negative. Uh, Cap, is Alice with you?"

"Affirmative, what is it?"

"Well, she might not want to hear this."

Gramp turned, looked at me, and then drew the walkie-talkie up to his mouth. "Whatever you gotta say, she can hear it."

"It's Abby, she's got another dog by the throat and won't let go. It's a mess. The other dog's family—human family—already called the police. I picked it up on the scanner."

"We're on our way. Don't let anyone take her."

"Roger."

Gramp peeled out onto a main road and got us up to the Commons. We passed the tall wooden totem that marked the entrance and followed the road up past the pond where all the geese lived and like to s--- on the sidewalk. Gramp slowed down as we rounded the corner toward the swimming pool. Eddie had the lightbar on his truck illuminated and there was Mom, straddling another dog on the lawn in front of a brick-built split-level home.

The lightbar saturated the scene with glare. Mom's jaws clenched around the ruff of the other dog, a hound with a butterscotch coat and floppy ears. Mom's snout and face were bright with blood. She had a wound on her back that was gushing with each breath she took. Her tail was missing a chunk of fur, the open wound bleeding freely onto the green grass. The other dog's head hung limp over Mom's front paws. Her snout was bunched up in a snarl like a cinched drawstring bag: teeth bared, eyes darting between Eddie's truck. The family gathered on the front steps of the house. The mother was holding a boy and girl back. All three had tears streaming down their faces.

"She killed him! She killed Daddy!" the boy shrieked between sobs.

Gramp and I stepped out of the truck as the blue lights from two police cruisers bounded off the house.

"Stay here," Gramp muttered under his breath.

He sprinted toward Mom. She tensed, raising up on her hind legs and arching her tail, while still pinning the other dog down. At the last second, Gramp slid like a baserunner, extended his right arm, and caught mom around the neck in a clothesline. He wrapped her in a bearhug as he rolled her off the other dog. She kicked and bit, snorting in savage growls. She fought his grip, wriggling and twisting in Gramp's arms, but he held on and his mouth was pressed to one of her bloodied ears, whispering something to her that seemed to calm her enough that he could start backing toward the 4Runner.

While this was happening, two police cruisers pulled up and a pair of officers got out, one holding a long pole with a loop of wire on the end to tighten around a dog's neck.

Gramp kept backing toward his truck, struggling to control Mom. The officer with the pole approached us while the other went to talk with the family. Their mother was on the grass now, kneeling in the pooling blood next to the limp body of the hound. The boy followed. The sister stood on the front step, gripping the white wooden banister.

"Sir, please stop where you are."

"I've got it under control, don't worry," Gramp was saying—to the officer or to me, I couldn't tell.

"Sir, stop."

His eyes had a wild energy in them. I think we both saw ourselves jumping into the truck and running, Mom in the back seat. Fleeing for who knows where. But the reasons why that wouldn't work—who would take care of Dad and Grandma?—worked over Gramp's face and his eyelids closed slowly in a wince.

"What do you need me to do, officer?"

"Let's just take it slow and get her in the back of the cruiser for now. There's an animal control unit on the way."

"That's my Mom. She got loose. It's my fault, I—" the next words were choked by a sob and the tears started. After Gramp handed Mom off, he hugged me, his jacket coated in dirt. I could smell the metallic odor of blood mixed with Mom's dander.

On the ride home, Gramp pulled the 4Runner over. A corridor of darkness bisected the road perpendicularly. It was a section of clear-cut where big power lines stretched for miles.

"Put the night vision on and take a look."

I knew he was just trying to cheer me up, to take my mind off what had just happened.

I slipped the goggles on and flicked on the battery pack resting against the back of my head. I stared out the passenger window but the only thing I could see was a green-eyed creature staring back at me. I almost jumped out of my seat before I realized it was my own reflection.

"Oh, almost forgot," Gramp said and rolled down the rest of the window.

The corridor of cleared land stretched before me, the trestle pylons holding the power lines jutted up out of the ground. There was a dirt service road that wound through the legs of the towers. Patches of tall grass and scrub were scattered throughout the clearing.

There were too many stars in the sky, little pinpricks in a sea of dark green, more than I'd ever see with the naked eye. Insects flitted through the grass. A bat swooped down from on high, its wings pale as it snatched a mosquito. The spring air wafted in through the window, fresh and pregnant with pollen.

The high-tension wires crested a hill and something was traversing down the slope, moving from bush to bush, leaping across the dirt road when it had to. I had trouble tracking it, but it stopped beside a large boulder, gnawed at its bushy tail, then cocked a hind leg and scratched its chin. The eyes, pupils wide to drink up any available light, saw me. We locked gazes. I stared deeper into its eyes; stared at the mirror pool of retina. Then its ears perked up and my vision flooded with blinding white. I made the mistake of turning my head to look at the car heading in the opposite direction on the road, its headlights overwhelming the amplified vision granted by the goggles.

"Do you see anything?" asked Gramp.