

Foraging

Dennis went out in the early evening and followed the trails they had so often walked, until he found a place that was right. The memory of the tugging leash was like a phantom limb. "You'll be wanting the cremation service?" the vet had said, and Dennis, picturing Fergus stored in a freezer until his turn in the fire, immediately answered no. It was October. The green had begun to leach from the trees. Garlanded vines scattered neon-yellow coins upon the pathways. The faces of the Queen Anne's lace had all caved in to form little balled fists. The vet had asked if Dennis planned a burial in the garden. Dennis just squinted through his sorrow. But after a moment he seized on the idea. "Yes, that's right, the garden." And now, here was the spot.

Next morning before dawn, when there was no risk of curious passers-by, he returned and by the light of his cellphone laid down the shovel. He tilted the wheeled, green bin the city provided for compost to standing. Inside was Fergus' body, wrapped in a blanket, curled up as if in sleep. In the years since he'd brought Fergus from the shelter back to his apartment, they'd come to the Don

Valley every day, wandering the ravines like children. Dennis was not one to break the rules, but some things were more important. This way, Fergus could be in the garden forever.

It took longer than he'd expected to dig deep enough to ensure Fergus' resting place wouldn't be disturbed. The earth, hard-packed, gave way to the point of the shovel – thank goodness there'd been no frost. The soil had a clean, mineral smell. The tasselled heads of tall grasses shushed in the wind. Light from a distant streetlamp silvered Dennis's breath. He lowered the green bin onto its side and slid Fergus out. When he went to pick the dog up, he felt a primordial revulsion at the corpse's stiff heaviness. Yesterday, Dennis had gently stroked Fergus' pale-yellow fur – there was nothing more he could do. The dog, ancient and sick, lying on the plaid blanket, had watched Dennis and the vet with dark, liquid eyes. The rhythm of his tail slowed, then stopped.

Now, touching him, even through the blanket, felt taboo. And that thought in turn seemed like a betrayal, like a warning hissed by his mother. It was his parents who had disallowed a dog in the family home – dogs were unhygienic and impractical, they said. But this was Fergus,

who snouted for messages inscribed in a sheaf of leaves beside the ravine path, who charged into the lake, then shook a halo of water from his thick coat, who caroused at the off-leash park, muzzle flecked with foamy drool. Fergus, who lay under the kitchen table with his head on Dennis's foot, who never withheld his love.

He'd already put Fergus in the hole when he remembered what the vet had said: "No non-biodegradable materials – let the earth do its work." The plaid blanket was 100% recycled polyester. Dennis reached in to pull it off. "I'm sorry," he choked out, as Fergus pitched in the bottom of the hole.

By the time he trod the dirt down and heaped leaves over the fresh earth, there was enough light to see. He stood back and massaged the blister at the base of his thumb. He hadn't thought to wear gloves and his hands were also stiff with cold. Nobody coming upon this stamped-down clearing amongst the high weeds would know Fergus was here, he thought. Once the new growth came next spring, even he might have trouble finding the place.

As he rolled the green bin on the sidewalk, the wheels emitted a low rumble that reverberated in its plastic belly.

A jogger on the other side of the road looked over as she passed. When he reached his building he opened the bin and took out the plaid blanket, then wheeled it back around the side with the others.

Dennis showered and dressed and went to the kitchen. He tipped beans into the coffee grinder. It had been a thirtieth birthday gift three years ago from Matt, his best friend since university. Matt seemed excited watching Dennis open the gift, leaning forward as Dennis peeled the tape off. "My love of German engineering meets your love of coffee. Enjoy, buddy!"

Dennis suspected it had been costly. The expense was probably nothing to Matt – he was a very successful financial planner. But, to Dennis, it was the thought that counted, that he valued most. Matt pulled down the kind of money that Dennis' parents would be impressed by. But Matt treated it like a game – the money hadn't changed him at all. He still cajoled Dennis to come out for drinks, tried to talk him into joining an axe-throwing league. Dennis wasn't like Matt – he couldn't have thrived in that career the way Matt did, much as it would have pleased his parents.

The manual grinder was heavy and solid in his hand. Dennis turned the handle and the conical burrs bit into the beans, creating a sensation like the crushing of small, dry sticks. The cracked beans gave off a scent of blueberries and pepper. The pour-over carafe and dripper – a Melita, only hipper – had also been a gift, more modest, from a woman with whom Dennis had had a short-lived relationship. He placed them on the scale and performed a small, deft act of origami on the unbleached paper filter so it stood open, ready to receive the grounds. He noticed Fergus' empty water bowl then. He bent and picked it up, then stopped and put it back down.

Dennis checked his work email on the cell before leaving the apartment. His boss had sent an invitation for a meeting at one. There'd been rumours around the office of impending cuts. The invite notice offered options – Accept, Reject, Tentative – but the appearance of choice was an illusion. Whatever happened was out of his hands now. He wasn't sure whether the prospect of being fired felt like a threat or a relief. On the subway on the way to the office, an empty plastic bottle rolled across the floor, then wavered back and forth on its axis, rotating like a compass

needle with the motion of the train, seemingly ambivalent. Dennis, too, felt lost.

When he got to the meeting room, a brown 9X12 envelope lay on the table in front of Rod – the rumours had been true. The last quarterly results had been unsatisfactory, Rod explained – company performance metrics had been missed. Now shareholders must be appeased, the flow of red ink staunched, heads must be cut. That was the way of things – nothing personal.

“I’m sorry,” said Rod, “I have no strings to pull. My hands are tied.” Rod placed two fingers on the envelope and hinged his torso forward to propel it across the tabletop at Dennis. “I think you’ll find it’s fair.” Dennis remembered Fergus gazing up at him from the blanket at the end. He wondered if he now appeared that way to Rod.

Rod left and an HR person came in to explain things and, Dennis suspected, follow him to his desk and then escort him from the building like a criminal, or a child. The brown envelope lay unopened on the table. The HR person spoke, but Dennis’ mind was elsewhere. Six months ago, Rod had *voluntold* him for a new project – a hair-brained scheme, an elaborate solution in search of a problem. The project leader overpromised, missed all milestones, then

jumped from the sinking ship to the safety of a more senior role. The orphaned project had become a convenient scapegoat for every corporate failing. And now the team members, tainted by association, out on a paralysed limb, were being axed. It was the way of things, Dennis knew. But no – to be dismissed after ten years' spotless, loyal service so numbers on a chart could line up in a certain way – he did not find it fair. At least he could tell his parents he'd done all he could.

When he got home, it was still only mid-afternoon. He left the gym bag with the things from his workstation by the door and dropped onto the sofa. Matt would probably call later, and Dennis would tell him everything. But for now he had nothing to do. The scaffolding of his life had all been kicked away. Mounds of Fergus' hair had accumulated against the wall in tumbleweeds. Dennis hadn't vacuumed in weeks – the noise distressed Fergus. He got up, went to the closet and pulled out the Hoover, finished the living room and was starting on the bedroom when the indicator showed that the canister was full. He released the transparent canister from the machine and placed it on top of a plastic bag. He extracted a tangle of fur from on top, a knitted-up wad the size of a grapefruit, squashy

like a large, yellow, dollar-store sponge. It was a tiny, formless Fergus.

Dennis put the fur ball in his pocket. He took the main path down the ravine that led towards Lakeshore and crossed under the Gardiner and headed south through the Lower Don Lands towards Cherry Beach. Cherry Street was a desolate place with few buildings. Though slated to become part of an ultra-connected smart city of the future, on that day it seemed abandoned. He crossed the two metal lift-bridges that spanned channels of brackish water. At the bottom of Cherry Street near the lake there were sketchy warehouses with fenced, gravelled yards. On the other side of a chain-link fence were construction equipment, graffitied, wrecked delivery vans, and an old stainless-panelled coffee truck.

The truck reminded Dennis of the ice cream vendor that used to come around his childhood neighbourhood. The chimes played a happy tune, or perhaps it was a recording of chimes playing a happy tune. If he'd been good and had finished his homework, his mother gave him change and he ran across the parkette to stand in line beside the truck. The equipment hummed, the scent of warm chocolate drifted

out. John, the ice cream man, reached down from his high-up window to hand Dennis a small soft-serve twist with chocolate dip. Dennis had wished he could be John when he grew up.

Dennis walked along Cherry Beach and picked up a piece of the tumbled glass that was abundant there. It was pale blue. The afternoon was fine, with a gentle breeze. Across the sheltered harbour, the boats rocked on their moorings. Without Fergus pulling him along, he felt aimless. He had thought to turn back once he reached the strand, but instead he continued along the pathway that followed the waterfront eastwards towards Tommy Thompson Park and Ashbridge's Bay.

After a while, the path diverged from the water. The foliage on either side loomed higher than his head. Some of the trees were still green. Others wore their fall colours, while still others were already bare. It was a secluded place with no adjoining trails. He rounded a curve and saw a woman up ahead. Her legs were planted firm, arms raised towards a tall bush beside the path. She wore jeans and Docs and a thick sweater, hair tied back in a thick, brown ponytail. There was a basket at her feet.

Fergus would have strained at his leash towards her, tail wagging and with that goofy expression he had that could not be resisted by anyone. She might have bent down and patted the head snuffling around her knees and said what a beautiful dog, how old is he? And Dennis might have inquired about the basket. But Fergus wasn't there – all Dennis had was an inert ball of fur in his pocket. He was not a man with a friendly dog, just a man walking by himself along a secluded path that was not the fastest way to anywhere. And yet she seemed unconcerned, perhaps in part because of the pair of secateurs in her gloved hand.

“Rose hips,” she said, turning towards him. “They’re related to apples, you know – same family.”

Dennis stopped. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s been a good year for them – for everything, really. I can hardly keep up.”

“But that’s better than the alternative,” Dennis hazarded.

“It’s true.” She smiled at him as if he’d said something more than just a platitude.

She pushed hair away from her face with the back of her free hand. Her eyes were blue-grey, her face heart-shaped. She had a calm energy that was appealing.

Dennis turned towards her. "What else do you harvest?"

"There's lots, if you know what to look for – everything we need. Like there." She gestured with the secateurs at a bush across the path. At the end of each branch was a red, velvety, club-like mass.

"Sumac," he said. He was glad he knew that much at least. "But isn't it poisonous?"

"No, that's a myth. Poison sumac only grows in swamps. This is staghorn – perfectly safe."

She drew a wide sweep with her arm and rhymed off a long list of plants – common ones like dandelion, crab apple, nettles. Others he didn't know – burdock, Japanese knotweed and something that sounded like *soffifree*.

"I never knew there was so much," he said. "What do you do with it all?"

"Sumac drupes – the red part – I dry and grind for spice. It's tart – I make za'atar. Or boil them for syrup for lemonade or cocktails." She nudged the basket with her foot. "I'll make these into jelly," and then she said, "I have a stall at Leslieville farmers' market, with fresh and dried things and baked goods, teas. I harvest everything myself and prepare it. Come on Sunday and see." She met his eyes with a straight-on gaze. She seemed sincere.

"I'd like that," Dennis said. And he realized he would like it very much.

She smiled again, then turned back to her clipping. He paused a moment. Then he went in the direction from which he'd come. It might look odd, he knew, but he'd walked enough. If he continued east he'd have another kilometer before he could get off the path and head home.

On the way back up Cherry Street, he passed the coffee truck again. A diamond-shaped, quilt-like pattern was embossed on the stainless-steel side-panels. Sunset burnished the metal skin with gold. In the windshield was a sign he hadn't noticed before – For Sale. He put his hand in his pocket for something to write with, but found only the ball of fur. He thought of the brown envelope from work lying unopened on the kitchen counter. He had an idea what would be inside, the numbers. Maybe what he had was enough. He read the phone number out loud, then he repeated it to himself.