

## Untitled\*

By Annette Ferran

They brought home a dog one day, a little flop-eared mutt whom they'd already named, and they said can we keep him? and of course she said no. Of course she did. What would they do with another dog, even with their 80 acres, and especially a dog that would stay in the house, as this one obviously would, called Bingo already as he was because they'd won him. Of course she said no, but of course he stayed. And got stolen. But that was later. He got stolen because he was trained by the children to be passive and trusting, as she'd trained them. So they guessed he just hopped in a car with someone, their poor little Bingo.

That was a day, it was. So many years ago. And even on that day so many years had passed. Her girls were wearing smocks made over from her old house dresses. Those smocks were part of the sofa pillows now. And her youngest, the red-head, was wearing a sunsuit she'd made for her eldest when he was swollenness in her 16-year-old belly, kept hidden inside the house as she smocked white baby's things and read Shakespeare to herself. Nine years later, that little suit was having a new puppy drool all over it.

She had no premonitions in those days. Not those puppy days, not those other days that should have been so gray. She had nothing but good feelings. Well, not "good" maybe. Maybe "exciting". Frustrating, certainly, as her husband was away so often and her family so cold to him for so long. Hers was the first mixed marriage--between a Scots and a Norwegian--and hers the first visible shame. Though God knows it happened enough afterwards and she always counseled her nieces not to marry. To bear the child and give it away or keep it as they wished, but not necessarily to marry just to cover the shame of having loved too soon. Not that her marriage was not a good one. Well, it was not a good one by modern standards, but it was a happy one. When he finally quit the boats, that was the hard part. Earlier, the years of 16 and 17 and through her early 20s, when she smocked and sewed for three babies and did laundry at the washboard for extra money and canned a milked and tracked down the stray pets and cared for the old woman, her mother, who lost her mind (but no, that was later)--that was not the hard part between them. The hard part was when he came home for good and insisted on his place when before he'd been a guest and a welcome relief and a joy and she'd go meet the boats, drive down by herself and feel her heart flutter at the sight of his lean tan body and his shock of bleached hair. That had been easy. But afterwards it was hard, because he wanted his place and she'd forgotten to leave it for him. Well how could she remember really? Not that she didn't want him to have it. It's just she was startled he expected it. So he'd be there every morning doing the chores and come home every evening from the factory and be there all night, every night, and fall asleep in his chair after dinner with his book and his cigarettes, while she roamed the house as usual, touching things in the dark and singing to herself.

She felt no premonition then, either, although times were not easy. They fought a lot in those days, and her family said they told her so, although they (the family) didn't realize how she and her husband laughed as they fought, because they loved the fire that flew out of one another's eyes. No, never a premonition, not even when the sirens screamed, too insistent for that little town, and made her look up from her daydreaming. No black cloud over the gut or lead weight on the heart, though her heart had heard him often enough before.

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\* Based on stories about Isabel Piper Olson

When the sirens screamed she looked up, but then went back to what she'd been doing, whatever it was, and then later she didn't even cry, but instead held still at the funeral the thin sobbing shoulders of the wife of the man who'd killed her husband. That woman was crying enough; there was no need. No need and no time because there was the daughter in Europe with her new husband who had to be introduced this way, and there was the red-head, whose blood, on his father's death, began pumping too fast and too hot through his young body. And there were the three passengers, three friends, who were injured and bereaved at once. And there was the money, the insurance, not to mention this young wife with the gaggle of small children and a drunken husband who wouldn't leave her alone. So many things to think about. Oh, and the crazy old woman, too, her mother. That's where that came in! Too many things.

So then when it was all over, or at least no longer immediate, she found herself in her house again, alone. And she left the lights out usually, as she liked to do, and sat by herself in the comfort of the dark and thought about her school days, made up conversations with herself in Latin, sang songs, composed poems. Until there was knock on the door and she had to turn on the lights and pull the butcher knife from the crack between the hinges where her children insisted she wedge it if she were going to live alone in this house that rambled about by now with all the additions they'd put on, the six of them, over the years. So she pulled it out and opened the door and there was a neighbor farmer, a friend of her husband's, in his Sunday suit, looking hitched up and ridiculous so that she almost felt silly herself, having forgotten the knife she held in her hand, until she asked him in and made coffee. And they sat and chatted. Or she chatted. She'd always been good at conversation, and her husband too, while their neighbors stuttered unless they were wearing coveralls and standing in the yard. So she chatted to this stuttering man until she got tired and then she stood up. And then too she realized what he'd been trying to get out. She hadn't really been listening, but had been thinking of the stars outside the window, but then she digested his words so she stood up and thanked God for old-fashioned manners that made this man stand up too. It wasn't until she maneuvered him to the door, ignoring his marriage proposal, and shoved the knife back in the crack and turned out the lights again that she allowed herself to put her head against the door jamb and cry.