



**I THOUGHT
YOU
WERE DEAD**

BY

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FROM ALGONQUIN BOOKS

PART 1.

WINTER/SPRING

“Individual heart cells beat at their own rate when separated from each other, a phenomenon easily observed beneath a microscope. It has long been known that when they are pushed together, they will synchronize their pulses. Recent studies have shown, however, that heart cells begin to synchronize slightly *before* they touch. It is not known how they signal to each other across this distance. Some scientists speculate that this method of communication may be able to cross great distances, and may explain how social animals bond, or how pets seem to sense when their masters are coming home, or even how people fall in love, one heart calling to another.” From *Nature for Morons*, Arthur Green Books, (New York, 1999) p. 223.

CHAPTER 1

TWO OF THEM GOING NOWHERE

The snow was coming down hard by the time Paul stumbled home drunk, which meant the plows would be rumbling all night, clearing the roads. It was early March. Paul would have to shovel in the morning, a favor he did for his landlady, who lived upstairs and hadn't raised the rent in years in part because of the kindnesses he'd done her. His go-getter neighbor would already have finished snow-blowing his own drive, salting it, sanding it, probably drying it with a hairdryer, before Paul got out of bed. Paul didn't mind shoveling, even though he'd shoveled enough snow as a kid, growing up in Minneapolis, to last a lifetime. He had to be at the airport by noon to catch his flight back to the Twin Cities, a flight that might not have been necessary, had he been more on the ball. Some days were better than others.

"I'm home," Paul said.

"I thought you were dead," the dog said. Her name was Stella, and she was a mixed breed, half German Shepherd and half yellow Labrador, but favoring the latter in appearance. Fortunately, she'd also gotten her personality from the Labrador side of the family, taking from the Germans only a certain congenital neatness and a strong sense of protectiveness, though as the Omega dog in her litter, it only meant she frequently felt put upon.

"Once again, I'm not dead."

"Joy unbounded," she said dryly. Stella had no sense of permanence and therefore assumed Paul was dead whenever he was out of sight, hearing or smell. "How was your night?"

"I went to the Bay State and heard the blues," Paul said. His head swam as he bent over to scratch her behind the ear, jingling her collar.

"Do you realize you're only slightly less routinized than a cat?"

"No need to insult. Do you want to go for a walk or what?"

"A walk? Yes. I think a walk would be nice. Is it cold out? I don't want to go if the weather's bad."

"There's no such thing as bad weather," he told her. "Just bad clothes."

She could still walk to the door, though sometimes Paul had to help her lift up her hind end to get her off her dog bed. Usually he took the dog with him wherever he went, but tonight he'd left her home because of the weather. They lived in an apartment on the ground floor of a double-decker between the railroad tracks and the cemetery in Northampton, a small college town in Western Massachusetts.

Stella paused on the front porch, gazing apprehensively at the snow, then took a cautious step forward.

"Hold it," Paul said, picking her up and lifting her down the three concrete steps to the sidewalk. He'd built a ramp for her to walk up, made from an old door with carpet squares nailed to it, but walking down the ramp was difficult for her. He set her down gently. She walked ahead of him, sniffing at the Sliwoski's bushes, and at the house next door to that, and in all the places where she'd stopped and sniffed every night for the seven years they'd lived there. She stumbled occasionally.

That made two of them.

Paul inhaled deeply through his nostrils. He felt snowflakes on his face. The neighbors across the street still had their Christmas lights up. The neighbors next to them were watching

television. At the corner house, he looked up. The student who lived there, “Journal Girl,” he called her, was again at her computer, her profile lit blue in the second floor window. Sometimes she was brushing her hair. She was lovely.

He examined the pavement at his feet beneath the corner street lamp. The snow was falling in flakes fat enough to cast shadows that, as they fell, converged in the circle of light cast by the sodium bulb overhead. He stood in the exact middle of the convergence and imagined he was absorbing some kind of boreal energy, then stopped himself before anybody saw.

“Did I tell you you’re going to be spending a week at Chester’s house?” he told the dog.

“No problem,” Stella said. “I like Chester.”

“What’s not to like?”

“Why am I going to Chester’s house?”

“I have to fly home. My dad had a stroke.”

“What’s a stroke?”

“That’s when part of your brain dies,” Paul said. “Either you get a blood clot that blocks an artery so your brain doesn’t get enough blood, or else an artery bursts and you get too much blood. I looked it up.”

“And too much blood is bad, but not enough is bad too?”

“I guess,” Paul said.

“A conundrum.”

“A conundrum,” Paul agreed. “An irony.”

“So part of his brain died?” she asked.

“Something like that,” Paul said. They walked.

“What part? How many parts are there?”

“Lots. They don’t know how bad it is. I was talking to a guy at the bar who said if they get to you in time, they can limit the damage.”

“A guy at the bar said that?”

“Yup.”

“Always a good source for reliable medical information,” she said. “I’m sorry for you.”

“He was shoveling the walk.”

“Your dad or the guy at the bar?”

“My dad. So it’s my fault. We should have bought him a snow blower. I was supposed to do some research and find out the best one to get, but I hadn’t gotten around to it. We were worried about him shoveling. There’s a family history of strokes and heart attacks.”

Paul scraped a handful of snow off the hood of a car and tried to make a snowball, but the snow wasn’t wet enough.

“I’m confused,” Stella said, pausing to sniff at the base of a fence post. “If there’s a family history, then how is it your fault?”

“He was exerting himself,” Paul said. “If we’d bought him the snow blower I was supposed to research, he could have taken it easy.”

“Shoulda woulda coulda.”

“Even though he probably wouldn’t have used it. He liked the exercise.”

“There you go then. You can’t live your life second-guessing yourself.”

“Dogs,” Paul said, turning left on Parson’s Way.

“Where to?” Stella asked.

“I need to walk a little bit,” Paul said. He was headed toward the cemetery.

“The sign says no dogs,” Stella reminded him.

“Let’s live dangerously,” he said, turning his collar up to keep the snow from falling down his neck. He took a glove off and checked his back pocket to make sure he had plastic baggies to pick up after his dog. He did. They walked in the street, keeping to the tire tracks. The sound of his feet crunching in the snow reminded him of his teenage years, before he was old enough to drive, the miles and miles he’d walked, in blizzards even, looking for friends, for adventure, for something to do, anything to get out of the house. It pained him now to recall how much he’d once craved being free from his parents. He’d be free of them soon enough, the stones in the cemetery reminded him. Walking among them, it was hard to pretend that wasn’t true.

“Beautiful night,” Stella said, trying to make things better. “I love how quiet it is when it snows.”

“Me too.”

“Though it makes it hard to smell things.”

“Why is that?”

“Water doesn’t evaporate in the cold the way it does in the heat,” Stella explained patiently. They’d already had this conversation.

“Know why they put this fence around the cemetery?” Paul asked, reading the names on the grave markers. One of the town’s celebrities, Sylvester Graham, was buried here. An orator and health-food advocate, he was widely misattributed as being the “Father of the Graham Cracker,” though he’d only invented the flour the cracker was made from. The other regional celebrity was Emily Dickenson, who’d lived across the river in Amherst. He wondered if they’d ever met, as contemporaries or as ghosts.

“Why’s that, Paul?” Stella asked, though she’d heard it a dozen times.

“Because people are just dying to get in.”

“That’s a good one,” Stella said. “Wasn’t the road outside the cemetery where Emily Dickenson got pulled over for recluse driving?”

“I’ve told you that one before?”

“Once or twice,” Stella said. In fact, he told it every time he told the cemetery-fence joke, and in the same order. He had other jokes he felt obliged to tell in specific circumstances, like how whenever he saw a kitchen colander he would advise the cook, “Be careful not to sing through that --- you’ll strain your voice.” The dog tolerated it, better than some people, Paul always said.

When they got home, he carried her up the front steps and set her down on the porch. Inside, she took a drink of water in the kitchen, sniffed her food bowl for recent additions, then went to her bed by the radiator. L.L. Bean, red plaid, down filled, only the finest, she told the other dogs in the neighborhood, though Chester, her boyfriend, swore it was poly fill, but then, he was a Golden----in other words, no rocket scientist. She let out a grunt as she lowered her weight to the floor, then appeared satisfied. Paul threw his coat over a chair and sat on the couch.

He took the TV remote control in hand and began at the top, channel ninety-eight, surfing down slowly, pausing just long enough at each channel to pass judgment. No, he did not want to invest in real estate, or car polishes, or stain removers, or hair/skin care products endorsed by aging actors and actresses. He could remember back when cable TV was first introduced in the seventies. “People will pay a monthly fee to watch the shows, so there will be no need for commercials --- it will be *commercial-free television*,” they’d said.

Paul turned the TV off. And Karen said, he had no self-control. She never did like to watch television. He'd known that about her from the start, and married her anyway. He only had himself to blame. It was a mistake he wouldn't make again, assuming he'd ever have the opportunity to repeat it.

He was tired and wanted to go to bed. Flying made him anxious, which meant he was going to have a rough night sleeping. He realized only as he locked the back door that he'd forgotten to check messages on his answering machine. There were two.

The first was from Tamsen, the woman he'd been seeing for the last three months, not exactly a true romance, more a strange but mutually satisfying exchange of courtesies, a benevolent closeness that allowed for physical contact, which made him slightly tumescent merely to recall. Yet to qualify as a true romance, the relationship would have to hold promise for both the near and distant future, and as far as Paul could tell, the long-term prognosis was poor. *"Hi Paul--- it's me. Just calling because I had a terrible day. It's not looking good at WebVan. Everybody around here is freshening their resumes and stealing office supplies, and here's a bad sign --- Derek had his favorite pinball machine taken out for 'repairs,' or so he said, but I'll bet you anything he's hiding it somewhere so they don't repossess it when the whole thing goes belly up. So anyway, I just wanted to talk to you because I miss you and I need to hear the sound of your voice. It's eleven now but you can call me and wake me up if you want. Have a good flight tomorrow if I don't hear from you, and call me when you get to your parents' house. I know it's going to be hard for you but you can do it. I know you can do it. Okay? Your dad's going to be okay. So call me."*

She had a sexy voice, slightly smoky and tinged with a northeast corridor Boston/Rhode-Island/New-York accent that made her seem tougher than she really was. It was far too late to return her call.

The second message was from his mother, who always began her messages, "Hi Paul --- it's your mom," as if he wasn't going to recognize her voice.

"Hi Paul --- it's your mom," she said. *"It's about eleven o'clock here, and I'm at Mercy Hospital. Your father is still resting comfortably, and your sister is here and I'm going back just as soon as I get some coffee. Pastor Rolander was here visiting but he's left too. I think Bits will meet you at the airport and she has your flight number and all that, so don't worry. I'm looking forward to seeing my little boy. Love you lots. Bye."*

It was nice to think there was at least one person left on earth who thought of him as a little boy.

Paul filled a glass with ice and poured himself a scotch, adding an extra splash for good measure, because it had been an extra difficult night, and tomorrow was likely to be worse. He took the drink to bed with him, where he read another paragraph of *Anna Karenina*. He'd been reading the book about one paragraph a night for the last three years. He heard toenails clicking against the floor. Stella had risen from her dog bed all on her own and had come to join him.

"You want up?" he asked her.

"Sure."

"Promise not to whimper in the middle of the night to be let down?" he asked. "I need my sleep. Chester's owners are going to come get you and take you to their house while I'm gone."

"No whimpering, I promise," she said.

He lifted the dog up onto the bed, where she made a nest for herself at his feet. He tried to read. Levin was convinced that Kitty thought he was an asshole. Paul was inclined to agree

with her. He put the book down. He wondered if his father knew the difference any more between being asleep and being awake, or if he had no words in his head at all and felt trapped, bound and gagged. Maybe the opposite was true, and he was engaged in some kind of unbroken prayer and felt entirely at peace. Strokes could occur in any part of the brain, couldn't they? Each stroke was probably unique, immeasurable or unpredictable to some extent. His mother said before it happened, Paul's father had complained of a headache, and his speech had seemed a little slurred, though she didn't make anything of it at the time. "I saw him shoveling and then when I didn't see him anymore, I thought he'd gone down the block," his mother had told him on the phone. "Then when I went to look for him, I saw him lying on the sidewalk and I thought at first that he'd slipped on the ice."

When he didn't get up, she'd dialed 911, fearing he'd had a heart attack. The operator told her not to move him because jostling could cause a second heart attack. Paul's mother had covered her husband with blankets where he lay and stayed by his side. They took him in an ambulance to the hospital, where a stroke was diagnosed. There they gave him a drug to dissolve the clot, but it would only work, they said, if it was administered in time, before too much damage was done to the tissues in the brain that were being deprived of blood and, therefore, oxygen. Maybe the old man simply thought he was dreaming and couldn't wake up. Maybe it was a good dream. Maybe it wasn't.

"What?" Stella asked. "You sighed."

"Just thinking," Paul said. "If you could be a vegetable, what vegetable would you be?"

"Is a tomato a fruit or a vegetable?"

"There's been some debate. Why would you be a tomato?"

"To get next to all those hamburgers," the dog said.

"But if you were a tomato, you wouldn't want to eat hamburger."

"Of course I would. Why would I change, just because I'm a tomato?"

"You'd want tomato food. This has got to be the stupidest conversation we've ever had," Paul said.

"Actually, this is fairly typical," the dog said.

"You think my dad is going to be okay?" Paul asked.

"Sure. He's a tough old bird, right?"

"He used to go to the park and play pick-up hockey with the high school rink rats until he was like sixty-five years old."

"The only guy alive who thinks Gordie Howe was a quitter."

"That's right," Paul said. "The only guy alive who thinks Gordie Howe was a quitter."

"Your dad's not a quitter."

"That's got to be in his favor."

"On the other hand," Stella said, "everybody gets old and dies. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course I know that."

"It's supposed to work that way. If it didn't, the whole planet would fill up with decrepit, useless old wrecks everybody else would have to take care of. And that wouldn't be good, would it?"

"No, that wouldn't be good."

"If you ask me, you humans have already artificially extended your life spans to the point where you're seriously screwing up the environment for the rest of us. You're supposed to die at

forty or forty-five, tops. You're not supposed to gum up the works by hanging around for an extra thirty or forty years."

"That's a bit insensitive."

"Nothing personal."

"Look who's talking," Paul said. "How old are you? Fifteen? What's that in dog years?"

"Fifteen and a half," she said proudly. "And it's all relative. In tortoise years, that's nothing. In butterfly years, it's forever. I want your dad to be okay, but if he's not okay, that's no less desirable, in the grand scheme of things. That's all I'm saying. If he goes, it means more food for you."

"It's not a question of food," Paul said.

"Paul," Stella said, "*everything* is a question of food. Everything except where you lie down. And even that has to be somewhere near food. If you had a choice between sleeping somewhere that was soft and warm, but a thousand miles from food, or a place that was totally uncomfortable but right next to the kitchen, you'd sleep where there was food."

"I'm just a bowl of Iams to you, aren't I? That's all I am."

"You're more than a bowl of food, Paul. You're a dish of water too. You even pick up my shit." Sometimes she'd crap in the middle of the sidewalk downtown and turn and say, "Be a dear and get that, would you, Paul?"

"All I'm saying," she continued, "is that there's a line. And above the line, life is good, so keep on living, because you're healthy and alert and everything is okay. But below the line, life isn't good. Below the line, you're in pain, or you're hurting others, or you don't enjoy seeing your loved ones anymore, or you're embarrassed all the time because you're incontinent or you're pissing on yourself. Below that line, pulling the plug is better than not pulling the plug. Just play it by ear when you get there."

"I'll take it under advisement," he said.

She nestled in, resting her head on his leg.

"If he dies," she asked a moment later, "will that make you the alpha dog in your family?"

He'd once explained to her how wolves organized themselves as social animals, referencing research he'd done for the book he was working on, tentatively entitled *Nature for Morons*.

"No," Paul told her. "That would be my brother, Carl."

"Oh," Stella said. "So you're not even going to try?"

"Don't worry about it --- I lost that battle a long time ago," he said. "That's one thing you and I have in common. You don't remember, but you were the shyest pup in the litter when I got you. Your siblings used to knock you all over the place."

"In that case," she said, "you might want to bring some sort of offering..." but he was asleep before she got the words out.

She sniffed the air, then cocked her head to listen a moment. She heard the furnace in the basement kick on. A truck, somewhere far off. The pilot-light in the gas stove hissing. A mouse scratching, somewhere behind the mopboard in the kitchen, and of course, her master's breathing, his heart beating, his teeth grinding slightly, something he did when he was stressed. Other than that, all seemed to be in order.

How difficult it was now to remember her siblings. She could remember running wild through the weeds, usually last in the order, but it never bothered her to be last, as long as she

had someone to run with. She remembered a farm and, vaguely, a fat man playing the banjo in the twilight, singing:

*what you gonna do when the liquor runs out, sweet thing?
what you gonna do when the liquor runs out, sweet thing?
what you gonna do when the liquor runs out?
stand around the corner with your mouth in a pout
sweet thing sweet thing sweet thing*

“Goodnight, Paul,” she said. He was snoring, but that never bothered her either.