

Puppy Love

by Alicia Gifford

I.

When it started to really sink in that Audrey might never meet Mr. Right and that she may never have the rose garden wedding, the South Pacific honeymoon or silver Honda Odyssey replete with plump-cheeked kidlets snoozing in car seats, she got an eight-week old puppy that she named Jimmy. Three weeks after bringing him home she met Leo Springer at Bestial Needs where she went to buy Jimmy's first collar and leash. Standing behind her at the check out stand he'd asked her what kind of dog she had.

"Soft-coated Wheaten Terrier," she'd replied. By the time Leo slapped down his money to pay for a ten-pound sack of kitty litter for his mother's cat they had plans for coffee. The following Saturday, Leo moved out of his mother's and into Audrey's cozy bungalow in the Burbank flatlands.

She worried that he was ten years younger but he reassured her that age didn't matter to him so it shouldn't to her. He told her he was working on his PhD in French at UCLA (though she didn't know when, nor had she heard him say one word in French—"What's the point?" he'd say), and managing Dino's Pizza and Video.

She'd been with two men in her life before Leo. There was Herbert Newman from college to whom she lost her virginity. They fumbled with each other for a few months, never looking one another in the eyes. She woke up one day repulsed and resolute to tell him it was over, whatever "it" was, but he never called her again after her epiphany. She heard at her ten-year college reunion that he'd lost both of his legs when a shark had mauled him while snorkeling in Maui. A few years later she saw him at the Glendale Galleria and he'd gained a hundred pounds, requiring a wheel chair as big as a Hummer.

"Herb, how are you?" she'd asked when she recognized the leviathan that had rolled up in front of her at the Orange Julius

stand. When he grabbed her hand to rub it against his ballooned face, she'd turned and fled, knocking down a child.

She had an affair with a married man, the father of one of her third grade students at St. Charles Parochial School. They had quick, hard sex in empty classrooms, in his car, at her house when he could steal away. The sex wasn't great, but still, she hungered for it, the pungent man-smell that lingered on her body, the crushing contact, its sticky, dank humors. When his office transferred him and his family to Omaha, he gave her a white leather Bible as a going away gift inscribed, "With love from Grandma Nelson". She doused it with gasoline and burned it in a bucket, watching it go up in so much holy smoke.

It's not that she didn't try to meet men, she'd paid her dues at single's dances, matchmaking services, the Sierra Club, even the bar scene when she had single girlfriends to go with. Now all her friends were married and busy with PTOs and carpools, calling Audrey to complain about the travails of domestic life, occasionally setting her up with a divorcing brother-in-law or their single plumber. If Audrey liked the guy, it never failed that he wouldn't call back, no matter how swimmingly the date had gone. If he revolted her she could count on his urgent phone calls and pleas to see her again, to give love a chance. She was almost pretty—attractive in that she had a trim figure if a bit thick at the ankle, lovely hazel eyes set a little too close, a fine, straight nose a few millimeters too long, a wide mouth that would've benefited from fuller lips, and wildly curling, dark hair. She had an alert, wary look to her expression that invited people to ask her what's wrong and to look over their shoulders.

Leo roused her from the dull, neutered place that was her default state. He was an ardent and inspired lover who brought her to rapture with their sex games like Taboo, where he'd pretend to be her brother, her father, a priest. She loved to play at rape, too, the outlaw way she felt for the political incorrectness of being taken against her will. She'd scream and struggle, kick and claw, but he'd overcome her, tongue her ear, suck her neck, hold her down and with her arms pinned behind her back he'd kiss down along her

spine, her ass; kiss places that made her blush to think of later and then, he'd enter her from behind, doggy style, her favorite.

She was crazy for Leo.

Jimmy grew to be one gorgeous George. His auburn puppy fur gave way to a silky, gently waving coat burnished like ripe wheat. He had perky ears that broke into two perfect charcoal blue triangles level with his fine, flat-topped skull and a sturdy squareness to his body and bearded muzzle. He could spring six feet straight into the air like a pogo stick. His eyes radiated adoration—intelligent, melting brown and almond shaped, rimmed with black to complement his enormous, prehensile licorice drop of a nose.

Audrey was grateful for her blessings—she *was*. A boyfriend and a dog were very good things to have and her father had left her a tidy trust, enough to buy her a modest home and some financial security. But at thirty-eight she longed for a family. A *baby*. Her life had no validation without them, not in her eyes, not in her mother's.

As a puppy, Jimmy had been a good surrogate. She coddled him, baby talked to him—even put him to her breast a few times, when she'd had a few. But after he sprouted a pair of black balls as big as figs, after he began to hump animate and inanimate objects at every opportunity in a state of transcendental oblivion, after he weighed in at forty pounds, it was hard to think of him as her infant.

When she brought it up—marriage and family—Leo would mumble about his thesis and not wanting that kind of responsibility. If she pressed him, he'd get mad and leave and she'd be frantic until he came home. The stress gave her terrible headaches for which she gobbled down Vicodin after grinding them up in her mortar and pestle because she couldn't swallow pills. She stopped dogging him, afraid of driving him away.

Jimmy was just over a year old when things went bad for good. Leo came home from work and told Audrey they needed to talk.

"I'm going to be straight with you. I'm in love with someone else."

Audrey yelped, reeling as if he'd clubbed her.

"It's Bonnie, from work. She's pregnant. I'm going to marry her."

“Bonnie?” Bonnie was his boss's twenty-year-old daughter. “You're in love with Bonnie and she's—*pregnant?*”

“You and I have been boring each other to death. It's over. I'm moving to her place. I'll get the rest of my stuff tomorrow.”

“But—your thesis, the responsibility...”

He grabbed her by the elbow. “It's *over*. Don't do anything stupid, okay?” He took a Rolling Rock from the refrigerator, opened it, took a long pull, set it on the counter and then went to the bedroom to get some things.

Don't do anything stupid?

Jimmy jumped on her leg, curved his body into an obscene pelvic thrust and humped her vigorously. She kicked him away, ramming her big toe hard against an iron baker's rack where she kept her pots and pans. The pain made her see sparkly things and she opened the kitchen cabinet door where she kept her medications to get her Vicodin. She spied the bottle of sleeping pills and grabbed them instead—tiny little things—and shook four of them into her mortar and ground them with her pestle. With her big toe throbbing she whisked the powder onto a sheet of junk mail with her finger, funneled it into Leo's beer bottle and swirled it around. She licked her fingertip, tasting the bitter powder.

He came back into the kitchen with an overnight bag.

“Look,” he said, “I'm sorry. It just happened.”

He picked up the beer and threw his head back, taking long swallows. He shook his head. “Beer and toothpaste don't mix.” He threw his head back and killed it.

“Maybe we can be friends,” he said, wiping his mouth on his forearm. He squatted down and scratched Jimmy's neck. “I'm gonna miss you boy.” She opened her mouth to tell him he'd better stay here if he knew what was good for him, but then he said, “I'm looking forward to being a daddy. Can you be just a little excited for me?”

She lunged for a skillet to crash on his head but he scooted out the door.

"Nighty-night," she said softly as he walked to his car. Limping and desperately trying to make her raging mind blank, she took the empty beer bottle and put it in the trash, then pulled her trash can to the curb for pick up tomorrow. Then she poured herself a tumbler full of vodka over ice, ground up a couple of Vicodin and added them, swirling the ice around with her finger and wondering how she would survive life without Leo and the humiliation she'd suffer since Audrey had been promising her mother that it was just a matter of time before she'd be married and pregnant with her grandchild.

She was shit-faced when the California Highway Patrol showed up at her door.

"Is this Leo Springer's residence?" asked a woman officer.

"Funny you should ask—" She covered her mouth and smothered a giggle.

"Are you Mrs. Springer?"

She leaned on the doorway to steady herself as everything spun crazily. "Sure," she slurred. "The little woman."

"I have some bad news, ma'am." The cop sprung back out of the way of her projectile vomit.

Leo was killed when he fell asleep at the wheel on the 118 Freeway. In addition to Leo, a family of three—mother, father and baby—were killed in the accident. Audrey hadn't really thought this through. She hadn't wanted Leo to *die*; she'd been improvising, using what was at hand. She'd wanted to mess him up some, in an impulsive, unspecified way, and now, because of her, a whole family had been killed.

She took an emergency leave from work, telling them she wouldn't be back until school started again in the fall and took to her bed. On TV they showed the photos of the family that got killed, a young black family who'd just moved into a new home, one moment going about the business of life, the next moment wiped out of existence. She tried to twist it around in her head so she wouldn't feel the blame but it kept circling back: They were dead because of

her. And so was Leo. She gulped vodka until their images softened in her brain.

Jimmy was her comfort in the dark days following the accident. She held him close to her, cried into his soft coat while he panted, his dark pink tongue dripping saliva off its tip. Leo never let Jimmy sleep on the bed but now she spooned with her dog, clutching him to her to feel his twitchy warmth. He was all she had in the world and he must've sensed her distress, her need for him because he stayed with her night and day, nudging her gently when it was time for his dinner, going out only to do his business.

A week or so after Leo's death she had a wildly erotic dream—Leo, so vivid she could feel his hot tongue burrowing in her ear and then licking her bottom. She opened her eyes slightly, but the tongue didn't go away. Jimmy, in full ardor, was licking her rear and alternately humping it. She was still achingly aroused from her dream and half asleep, but still, she knew it would be wrong—so very, *very* wrong—

And that made it irresistible.

The days and weeks passed in a boozy haze. Liquor and pills couldn't obliterate that she was responsible for killing the man she loved and an innocent family, or that she had taken her dog as her lover. She knew this was some kind of post-traumatic stress bestiality but she couldn't go to a shrink and talk about it. How could she tell anyone? In the meantime, she needed the connection, even if it was canine.

She was doing the best she could.

A detective came to question her because the toxicology report showed that Leo had a slight amount of alcohol and a high level of zolpidem tartrate in his system.

"It's Ambien," the detective said. "Sleeping pills. We wondered why he took a slew of sleeping pills before getting behind the wheel."

"Beats me," Audrey said, shrugging and scratching Jimmy's head. She admitted she had a prescription and that he borrowed one or two when he had insomnia.

"I understand he was dumping you for someone else," the detective said.

"We had plans to get married," she said. "And when I found out he was fooling around I kicked him out. I did notice some pills missing. I thought he stole some in case he couldn't sleep in his new digs." Digs? She was starrng in a *film noir*, craving a slow, deep drag off a stubby cigarette even though she'd never smoked.

"Maybe it was suicide," the detective said.

Audrey looked up sharply. "Maybe," she said.

"Too bad he wiped out an innocent family. That makes it murder, too."

"Yes," Audrey said, looking back down at Jimmy and fingering his soft floppy ear. "Murder."

"Do you mind if I look around?"

"I don't like strange men in my house. I have a morbid fear of rape. I'd like you to leave."

The detective ambled to the door. "Might have a few more questions for you," he said. He bent down and patted Jimmy on the head. "Cute dog," he said. "Goodnight." He left and she closed the door behind him.

They couldn't prove *anything*.

She relied more and more on her dog for comfort. Most of the time he was an excellent companion—and lover—but he'd started to jump the fence or take off when the gate was unlatched, and it irritated Audrey. She didn't like driving around the neighborhood looking for him, worrying he'd get hit by a car. She didn't like being reminded that he was a *dog*.

He ran off every chance he could lately. This time he'd streaked out the front door when she'd left it open a moment to get the mail. She drove around for an hour with no luck. She went back home and there was a message from someone named Wolfe who had Jimmy at

his house. He'd gotten her number from Jimmy's identification tags. She called and arranged to come get her dog.

The Wolfes had a Schnauzer. A female, named Jezebel.

"I suspect you're going to be a grandma," Mr. Wolfe said, an overweight Santa Claus of a man in denim overalls and a railroad engineer's hat. Audrey gave him a polite smile, shook her head and raised her eyebrows.

"Jezebel's in heat. Your dog's been here at least four times since she's come on. I don't mind, I think it'll be a cute mix."

They walked into the backyard and there was Jimmy giving Jezebel's swollen, oozing introitus long slow licks while the bitch's flanks heaved and her tongue lapped at the air.

Audrey swooned.

When she came to, Mr. Wolfe was tapping on her face. "Whoa, you gave me a scare, I was ready to call 911," he said, squinting at her through thick glasses. Jimmy was rapidly thrusting into Jezebel, a glazed smirk on his face. "Figured to let them have their fun. I'll give you pick of the litter."

Audrey puked a trickle of bile onto the grass.

"You must be coming down with something," Mr. Wolfe said. "Better separate these two love monkeys and get you and your dog home so you can get to bed."

She jumped up and narrowed her eyes. "Just what kind of sick crap are you implying, mister?" She hustled Jimmy into the car and drove straight to the veterinarian's office.

"Cut them off," she told the clerk. "Today. *Now.*"

II.

A month later Jimmy's a calmer, better dog. Audrey forgives, forgets, stops drinking so much. She has other things to think about.

She rests her hand contentedly on her roiling abdomen. She figures there are eight of them. She fingers the rosy nipples that have emerged in two parallel lines along her torso, sensitive and swelling more every day. Jimmy pants at the foot of the bed, occasionally hissing out a fart or lifting his leg to lick the place his

balls used to be. Audrey stretches, yawns. She spins around three times and lies down, anxious to get some sleep. She has her first vet appointment tomorrow.

Next day she and Jimmy head to the Los Lobos Animal Clinic and Hospital. She eats from a wax paper package of saltine crackers as she drives, the crumbs coating the front of her black velour sweats. Jimmy hangs his grinning head out the window, squinting and blinking and gulping in the air.

When Ed, the vet's assistant calls her name, she takes Jimmy by the leash into the examining room. Ed takes Jimmy to weigh him.

"Do you want to weigh me too?" she asks. Ed looks at her and laughs. Jimmy weighs in at forty-one pounds.

The doctor will be right in, he says.

When Dr. Gato comes in he shakes Audrey's hand and Ed lifts Jimmy onto the stainless steel exam table.

"So what's going on with this rascal?" Dr. Gato asks, looking inside Jimmy's mouth.

"Jimmy is going to be a father," she says.

The vet, who had neutered Jimmy a month earlier, asks, "Are you going to bring the bitch in for prenatal care?"

Audrey blushes as she lifts her shirt showing the lesions lining her torso. "It's me," she says happily. "I'm the bitch."

Dr. Gato and Ed stare at Audrey with polite smiles.

"Will you be doing a pelvic?"

Audrey tells Dr. Gato about her pregnancy symptoms, blushing when she tells him about her brief affair with Jimmy, now over. "We're just a girl and her dog now," she says.

Dr. Gato listens and then leads Audrey and Jimmy into his nice rustic office with lodge-pole pine furniture and fake pony-hide upholstery and invites them to sit there while he makes a few phone calls in an adjacent room. The police arrive shortly, and tell Audrey they're going to take her to the Emergency Room at St. Joe's to see if she's okay. Audrey protests, stating she wants Dr. Gato to look after her but the vet says it's impossible, he's not licensed to treat

humans. He agrees to keep Jimmy in the meantime, until Audrey can arrange for someone to pick him up.

Audrey has looked forward to this litter, salvation from an otherwise barren existence. When she sometimes thinks it a bit *too* extraordinary, she lets her mind go comfortingly blank, and drifts back into gestational bliss. Whatever this combination of dog and woman begets will be her offspring. Her *babies*.

She fights the dreams she has even when she's awake; bad dreams of dark body parts scattered in chunks on a highway between piles of smoking, twisted metal, of Leo's disembodied, sleeping head bouncing down the porch steps spewing clots and tissue from the severed neck while a baby cries. She pinches her developing teats hard to distract herself, and concentrates on the miracles inside of her.

At the hospital they ask for her mother's phone number and a bunch of other tiresome questions. After a while her mother's there, wringing her hands and rubbing her forehead, filling out papers.

"They want to keep you here," Audrey's mother says. "They say you need to be under observation. They say you need medication because you're having a psychotic episode. Jesus, Audrey, no one in the family's *psychotic*."

Audrey feels the tumult in her belly, writhing sparks of human/canine consciousness illuminating her insides like a Chinese lantern full of fireflies. She feels the beatific serenity she'd always coveted in pregnant women.

"You're going to be a *grandma*," she says with a wide smile.

Audrey's mother begins to cry and leaves the room. Audrey calls out after her. "Mom! You need to pick up Jimmy. You need to get him from the vet's and look after him while I'm in maternity."

That night, cramps and a warm sticky gush between her legs wake her. She's glad the vet decided to hospitalize her—*she doesn't know nothing 'bout whelping puppies!* She goes to the bathroom and blood runs down her legs and colors the toilet water. She presses the call button by the toilet, and waits for the night nurse to enter.

"It's time," she says. She opens her mouth, hangs out her tongue, and pants.

The night nurse takes in the situation and returns with a box of self-adhesive sanitary napkins. "You've started your period. Clean yourself up and put on the pad," she says.

"I'm having puppies," Audrey says tensely. "For God's sake, are you going to help me whelp or what?"

"The puppies won't come until morning. Trust me," says the nurse. "In the meantime you need to clean up, put a pad on and get to sleep." The nurse looks down at Audrey's foot. "What happened to your toe?"

Audrey's left big toenail has been blue-black since the night Leo left. "I stubbed it," Audrey replies. "Ugly, isn't it?"

They give her medication and she drifts in and out of dreams and visions. She plods along in the hall in circles with the other patients, zombie-like, their garbled speech like white noise. In a few days she realizes she's had a normal period; that she's never been pregnant. The teats disappear slowly as she stops tweaking and twisting the skin. She's had a break from reality, the shrink tells her, something that may or may not happen again.

"What causes it?" Audrey asks.

"An alteration in brain chemistry, maybe a genetic propensity triggered by guilt, grief, trauma—but really, who knows? For now you need to keep taking medication. Maybe later we can get you off it. We'll see."

"Guilt, grief, trauma," Audrey repeats. The staff thinks she wiggled out because her boyfriend died in a tragic car crash. She hasn't told anyone that she's responsible for it, all of it. Once those words are out, she'd never be able to undo them. "I can't wait to see my dog," she says.

"Do you still claim you had sex with him?" the shrink asks, keeping her eyes on the paperwork in front of her.

"No," she lies. "Part of the delusion." They don't need to know all her business because of one, well-deserved psychotic break.

“Will you be staying with your mother?” asks the social worker who arranges her discharge.

“I have my own house. I’ll be fine.” Audrey is grateful to her mother for taking care of Jimmy but she couldn’t bear her long, miserable face, her heavy, disappointed sighs tempered by false, brave-soldier cheer.

When Audrey’s mother arrives to pick her up Audrey runs up to her excitedly. “Did you bring Jimmy? Is he in the car?”

“Honey, there’s something I have to tell you,” Audrey’s mother says. “Jimmy ran away. He jumped the fence and took off. I looked and looked for him but he’s gone. The pound doesn’t have him either. I didn’t want to tell you until you were better.”

Audrey stares at her mother, convinced she’s lying, convinced her mother had Jimmy put to sleep *for her own good*, punishment for bringing psychosis to the family, for the mortification of bestiality, real or imagined. If she were to have a fit right now, if she were to attack her mother and smash a chair across her head, they would lock her up forever.

Outwardly Audrey’s mother looks mildly flustered and befuddled but underneath Audrey knows there’s something cold and hard as polished granite. She thinks back to when she was ten and the police came and murdered her beloved rooster, Charlie, after the neighbors complained about his crowing. Charlie, white and magnificent, who used to sit on her chest as she lay in the grass and peck bits of food from her teeth; who rode on her shoulder and streamed hot chicken shit down her back. As she had sobbed over her limp, dead bird Audrey’s mother had told her that she’d tried to stop them but they’d grabbed Charlie anyway, saying he was an unlawful fowl and wrung his neck. It was years later that Audrey realized her mother had allowed it, had asked the police to take care of the messy business. She’d been tired of his crowing, too.

Oh her puppy—her good, good boy! She’d let him down, gone psycho on him and then turned him over to his executioner. She struggles for composure, anxious now just to get home and away from her Judas mother. In the car, tears well in her eyes as she

stares out the window at the passing hubbub of people, cars, noises, buildings, alienated from all of it. She wants to go back to the good old days and at the same time realizes there are no good old days. Everything in her past is tawdry and pathetic. The faces of the young family float in front of her—the baby, the fat flesh flower of his mouth; his parents, shiny-eyed and smiling for the camera.

“Are you sure you don't want to stay at my house for a few days, until you're stronger?” her mother asks.

“I'm sure Mom,” Audrey replies as woodenly as she can.

They pull into Audrey's driveway and Audrey gets the small bag from the back seat, digs out her keys. Her mother stands in front of her, twisting her hands.

“I'm real sorry about the dog,” she says. “But maybe, you know, it's for the best? What about a cat? Lots of single women have cats.”

“Bye Mom.”

Audrey goes inside, sorts through her mail. The house looks strange to her, like she's been gone ten years instead of a couple of weeks. She looks at Jimmy's leash, his food and water bowls and allows herself a small breakdown—shaking shoulders, swollen eyes, cheeks wet with tears. She fills the bathtub with hot water and dumps in half a jar of bath salts and sinks into it, determined to survive all this, to prevail.

The water is fragrant and soothing, and at least she's home. She closes her eyes and lets her mind wander, thinks about adopting a baby of color, a sick baby—addicted or HIV positive, maybe more than one—a family, a loving, blended family of children no one else wants that she could home-school and make a difference to somehow; find some redemption that doesn't involve doing hard time. She feels she's not cut out for the turbulence of romantic love, most likely a moot point anyway. Then she remembers Jezebel and the Wolfes—the pick of the litter, one of Jimmy's puppies, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone; maybe a sweet little female, a baby girl dog she could pamper and adore responsibly this time.

So much wreckage.

More tears and through them she catches sight of her ugly, black toenail; it's started to lift off the nail bed. She picks at it with her fingers, giving it a backwards tug and it rips off sickeningly but painlessly. She inspects the dead thing that was once a part of her body and flicks it across the bathroom to plunk into the toilet. Looking at her great toe, bulbous and bare looking with a pink depression where the nail once lay, she finds a dim, warm ray of hope in its tiny ridge of new nail that will grow to replace the ruined one, slowly, steadily, until once again, whole.

