

Intake

by Greg Correll

I used to be a boy who would not walk the dog. Not like I should.
This —

I'm good. No, this is...I'm fine. Can I start?

This is hard to explain, the change I made. A change of, of real, of really small parts. In a way I just finally — I got up, is all. I got up — I would get up now, if she was still — even when I don't want to, and now, nowadays I mean, I sort of want to, even when I don't, because I want — I am, I mean, I am a good man, now. Even though you won't — you might not believe me, after I tell you about all this. But I am.

I know what year it is. No. No, I don't want to talk about it yet. I know who the President is, all that bullshit. I have been through this before. I am not crazy. I just want to talk about my dog. So just let me talk about this and I will talk about the other thing, then. OK?

No, just let me. Let me. Please. I need to do this, I have been thinking about this ever, ever since they brought me in. Please. OK? Then you will understand.

I am — I was — see, I used to be, in college. I was a freshman and I lived alone, off-campus, in three little rooms, one of those shotgun things, one room through another. You know. I was frantic — well, that's not quite the word; I mean, you won't think so, but it's how I remember me, inside. It's the word that fits now, looking back. And I was a loafer, too, for all my, you know, pretty hard work. I — I didn't do much, except what I had to. I did yoga, when I woke up, and ah,

also a few nights a week. That hard, Kundalini kind.

Frantic, y'see? But I was afraid to talk to anyone in the class, classes, or at the ashram. This one woman there thought I was really creepy.

And once in a while, when I was sure I was caught up, on assignments? I would just sleep. Even during the day. I was — I mean I had to fight it all the time. Being a loafer. I am naturally lazy.

OK. All right. I will say what you want, but then I want to go back to the dog part. That's the — OK, OK! Back then — but I have to tell about it back then, because that's still what it was, what it is. That's all it is. You will understand, I can tell. OK. But I need to say it my way.

OK! So, I'm trying to tell you: I was really screwed up back then. Way too, way, way too messed up to have girlfriends, and I felt guilty about doing, messing around with...what? You know. If you make — you know what I mean. Jerking, you know. This here. Jerking off. But I did it anyway. I hated myself for it. I mostly hated — I didn't like having my, my thing, my, my dick, mostly. How much I need to do it. I used to tell myself: not to, not to, not to. But I did it anyway. I was, like, sick, all the time. Everyone could see how sick it was. I sweated, all the time. People could just tell.

That's the way I was. People didn't like me.

Yes, I still feel that way, I guess. Obviously. Tonight — last night, I know it's not today anymore — I was in the other place, like before, like what I am telling you about. But I was really tired. I... I haven't been sleeping — but I didn't — now I just usually forget about it, sometimes. But last night I got — see, I get caught, caught up, I start to hate things, me... It's all so stupid, I know.

Just...

Please: let me go back, to tell the, how the, how my dog, this whole other thing, happened. No. NO. No, I got confused and I don't remember, exactly, what I was doing last night. But that was just a fluke. A mistake, last night. I am better now.

I am calm.

I don't really remember what it was. Last night. I did a bad thing, I know, but it's not too bad, is it? But this, about my dog...OK. OK. Thank you. I will. I will stay calm. Thank you.

I was a freshman, and my dad — I mean my step-dad — he helped me get my GED and then into the University because he was a professor, a teacher there, and, and, and he made sure I didn't have to live in the freshman dorm with all the jocks and the good kids, and we both pretended it was because I had been in jail when I was fourteen, and what, what it was was true and all, it was true, but, only, only, see he knew about me, what happened to me and all. No, I'm lying: I told my older brother, he knew, too, but now he doesn't know, because, then, about a month or so later I told him — what? my brother, I told my brother — to him I lied, and said really, nothing happened, because I hated how he looked at me — and anyway I was an emancipated minor since I was about fifteen-and-three-quarters anyway, anyway, and I had already lived in, like, communes, and I was in this runaway house, too — but really, and I think he knew this, my step-dad, it was because I was kind of my un-washed soul. I was broken still, in those days. I was barely functioning. Not talking to people anymore.

See? I'm better now.

I mean yeah, but, back then, just, like, like a total fucking mess. I was a real mess. Even MORE of a mess than now, I guess. Huh. Ha.

And he felt bad, maybe, about how him and my mom couldn't help me with paying for college, with all his money going to his first wife and all. I had to get a hot meal every Sunday and sometimes a twenty from my Nana, just to — ok, yes, she's my grandmother, the one who I went to last night, after — where was I? oh, right, to buy soups. And pencils. Soups. Soups and pencils.

But he did what he could, which was get me in school and then NOT in the dorms, which would have been humiliating for me, he thought, and, and I guess I thought so, too, I guess, staying with, with, with those other regular kids, those other eighteen-year-olds. I would have definitely done something and been kicked out, if I hadn't just lived with myself. And then I got my, the dog. With, I was with Obadiah, my dog.

So, so, so I had no furniture. Just my thin old mattress from home, and I got a wooden chair from the Salvation Army for two dollars. And I had a clock radio. And there was already this old kitchen table there. I want to not exaggerate — I try to improve myself — but it was really old. It was the kind with a linoleum top and a thick steel, nickel-steel edge, about this high, about, about an inch-and-a-half high, with a pattern of five rounded things, like ribs, and it folded over the table top a little. Just a little. I have it memorized.

I was stupid about cleaning and — in those days, and, and I guess I still am. I want to be honest. So it had this, this dark gummy stuff under the metal edge, the residue of uh, spilled sauce and God-knows-what, God knows, from whoever was there before. Be — before me. I used to pick at it and pick at it, with my thumbnail, while I did my school work, while I was supposed to be working, I mean, and then I look at it, LOOK look LOOK at it, then pick it out of my thumbnail with my other nail, then scrape it back and forth, back and forth, like this, see? Trying to get it off me. And then I'd roll it a bit on the table. Like this.

Then I would get mad at myself, for not doing my work — huh? Yeah. NO! — well, yeah. I guess. Maybe I am. But I'm not that mad now. I'm not really mad. I don't feel anything right now. I just want to fix — to fix what's wrong. To discipline myself. I lived alone, so I had to discipline myself. That was the year I learned how to do that, mostly. It was hard. I was mad — I was upset, all the time. I used to scratch the grime off my neck and then look at it under my nails and then do it some more, and then some more, like that. I did it too much. I don't remember what the bath or shower, whatever it was, looked like in that place. I must have taken some baths. I don't remember, not at all.

I used to scratch myself and I did it so much I left bleeding marks, scratches, like this, all over my neck. No, I know! I'm just showing you. OK. I had to go — OK! I know! — I had to go wash it off all the time, the skin and the blood and the scabs, I remember, and it stung like hell. Sorry. That's gross.

I just want to tell you the truth, that's all. It really stings, to do that.

I guess I was lonely — no, I know I was. Lonely. I was, I really was lonely. I know I was. Because one time? one time this girl who lived on the top floor, the whole third floor attic place — it was this old house some guy in an office way downtown had converted into small crappy apartments for students — she stopped me in the hall when I was bringing my bike upstairs to my place after class, and she says did I know, she can hear me? at night? when I am in the bathroom, from up in her place?

Then she just looked at me, her mouth, you know, tight, not a mean look, but, like, sad, and a little scared, and serious — but I didn't get it, what she meant, not right then. I felt that freeze-y feeling, but my face was hot. Do you know what I mean? I had to tell my legs, especially the front part of the tops of my legs, not to move, or like buck up. I just nodded, like: "Yeah. OK," to her. So she waited a

second, and I kept my face all neutral and she said "You shouldn't let me hear you talking" and such, like that. So I just smiled, normal, and said "OK" with my Honest Look, you know. I was being honest, but, in a way, just in a way, I was also being dishonest. And she walked downstairs, and I unlocked my door and I went in my place.

I am going to ignore your questions. I am not trying to be mean — I AM calm. I am. I am calm. Just let me finish. I know you want to do that thing, with the paper, and get me signed in. I know you have to make the papers and everything but can you just be human? I will let you do this, if — I mean, please. PLEASE.

I AM calm.

Can I go on? I am asking nice. I am saying please. I will do whatever you ask me to. I have to remember this now. Please.

OK. So, ok. See, I had this knack? and I can almost still do it, where I black things out, I mean I blank things out, even the instant they are happening. So I really didn't get it when she said it. I just said "yeah, OK" to her, but then when I went inside, when I rolled my bike in, and I put it, I put it against the wall in that first empty room, my, my front room, and I close the door and I lock it, but I start, I was starting to remember, to know what she was talking about. And I drop my backpack which was really heavy, with, well, probably it was my Norton Anthology, and my Algebra 102 workbook and my papers and protractor — ok, but I just want — so, OK, and I had my pencils and whatnot, and I went through the bedroom and into the bathroom and then I remembered all the way, mostly, what she really just said, and what she means, and I look in that old mirror on the cabinet and I get — got all red. I guess I must have remembered what she must have heard me say, my — the crying and all that lonely stuff and the stuff about my thing, maybe, maybe she heard that, too, all that, uh, repeating myself that I do sometimes.

I hate my stupid way, and not knowing why everything is, was, like this. Always like this. It's still like this. I can't make it stop.

Yeah, hating myself, my thing, like I said, I think she heard that, too. I think. I mean I think I said that part out loud, and she heard that, too. I'm not sure. I'm still not sure what she heard. What all I said, all those nights, I mean. And I remember I didn't know what I was going to do, if I couldn't talk like that in my bathroom anymore. And I remember I wanted to kill myself, immediately.

But I'm not talking about that. Can we talk about that after? I am talking about the dog. About my, my Obie. That's what I really want, most want to — what I really need to talk about. What you need to understand. Do you see how I know, how I know all about myself? How I want to tell you?

Well, I guess I don't want to, sort of, too. I hate this. I wish I — well. It doesn't matter now, anyway. OK.

OK, so here it is: I used to let — I mean, she used to pee in the corner of the kitchen, next to the door. And I would get mad at her. I didn't hit her — I mean, I swatted her a few times with a rolled up paper, like you're supposed to, if she, if she poops inside, which she hardly did that, because I walked her twice a day, once in the morning, and one time after dinner — and sometimes I took her to class, and I tied her up outside to the bike rack, and I know she sometimes pooped out there, too. I saw it. And she peed, too, probably. Outside the building.

But it's all I did in those days, was go to class, and go home and work, and sometimes go to evening yoga, which I was usually scared to do, like I said before — what? No, I said that, that already, that I was scared and that they thought I was creepy and all — and I mostly did it in the morning, by myself, my yoga, anyway, to get my breathing right, so I could get up, and be normal in class and all.

And I walked her twice a day, which should have been enough, right? is what I thought. I still think it, but now I know it's wrong. Not to walk her. Enough, I mean.

So when she whined, I thought: I don't want to get up. I would be doing my pictures, my engineering drawings, and she looks at me with those eyes and I would just get so mad. I had to do all those drawings so perfect, and she would whine, and I would tell her: "No. NO. Knock it off." Or sometimes: "Oh Jesus, Obadiah, I have to concentrate!" Because I wanted her to know why she had to be quiet. I used to sweat in that hot kitchen, but even more if she made me mad or nervous, and I would have to wipe my face a lot and I wouldn't, I couldn't, let a drop fall on my paper, not a drop, and when she whined I would instantly sweat more. "Twice is enough!" I wanted to tell her, to try to calm her down. I probably did tell her.

This is more important than that, that stuff about me, my, and, and what happened last night. Tonight, before. Before I got here. You see? You see why? What my Nana found, and the stuff in my notebook, it's just me being, — being my stupid self.

No, I can't remember, exactly, last night I mean. I just hate myself sometimes. It's not a big thing. Or what I did. No, I'm saying: it's not. No, I know what I — I know I did it. I do it. I know what I do because I can feel those stupid cuts I made. That's just me being screwed up and stupid.

You'll see. This is important, this is why I am not a bad guy anymore. Just wait.

All right. I am almost done.

I used to forget what time it was, or how long I was working, but in a good way — but then she would — yeah, Obie — she would whine, and I would look at the time and remember how much work I had to

do, and all my assignments for the week, or I would stare up at the shelf and not do my work and try to ignore her and count my soups, the cans, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two...

I know. OK. Three. One, two, three. I know I sometimes — I do that sometimes. I am not thinking right, right now. I will concentrate. Those pain pills from the ER make me weird. I will concentrate. You want to hear this, right? I can tell. You know now, right?

So I would do that, count like that, and five or ten minutes would go by and it was all because of that damn dog. Sometimes she would just stop, but later I would find out it was because she peed right there. But sometimes she'd just go back over to the other corner and sleep, but then get up, like, ten or maybe fifty minutes later, and go whine again. And every time I would have to tell her to stop, and I would try not to get hot and sweat and then I'd move — I would have to move all my books out of place and then back into place again and my papers a little bit and then back, and settle in, and I would never get those minutes back again which made me hurt, crunch my teeth on each other, and I would still be mad at her even if she was just sleeping and I would have to look at my 2H and 8H pencils, the most expensive kind, and maybe take that really sharp little x-acto knife and, and, I — and maybe re-sharpen them, the pencil points, and sand the points, again — I'm — I'll be calm —and then sometimes I would blow that wasted graphite dust away very carefully and some of it would go into, into, under the edge where all that yucky, gummy stuff was, and turn it from dark reddish brown to black and I would have to rub along the edge to mix it in and then go wash my fingers and under my nails and THAT would waste all THAT time and sometimes I would just move the graphite dust around in a little row, then a pile, and then a row again with my finger and I would think about how much pencil I had left and what new pencils would cost. And I would maybe cry.

Yes, I know. I can tell, from how my eyes feel. I know I'm crying now. I just don't really feel it. I think it's that pain pill.

All that pencil dust, see? And those minutes would go by and be gone and I would have to go wash my fingers and clean up so my paper would be perfect and I would be so mad at Obie again, for all that wasted time.

So see it wasn't because I was just mean. I wasn't mean.

But so OK sometimes Obie would pee there in the corner by the door. Sometimes I heard her do it. Sometimes I would find it later, drying and sticky and yellow and puddled on the one side next to the door, because in that old house, the floors all tilted. I would get so mad. Or else she wouldn't pee but just whine again. I tried to block it out but I could hardly ever do that. I would say: "No. NO!" or "Don't you pee!" or if I was sad I would just say: "Please, PLEASE!" over and over and pull my hair 'til it hurt or hold my face with my hands, real tight. But I had to learn to get over all that, to ignore her, because I had no one but myself to blame if I wasted my time all the time, being mad or sad or yelling at the dog, and didn't get my work done.

I — I — I appreciate this, though. Letting me me finish. It's the middle of the night. And there's nobody else here. Are the drivers still downstairs? Are they waiting to see what you are going to do to me?

Oh. So...well, OK. I knew I was going to stay. I just said that...I don't know why I said that. I will tell you everything else you want me to tell. I will say whatever you tell me to say. I'm not stupid. I know what I did. What I've been doing.

Thank you.

So I got better, because I started hooking her up outside, on the chain — but this was like, this was "why have a dog, then?" — but I used to hook her up outside during lunch, even though I wanted to pat her and all when I came home from my morning classes. I used to hook her on the chain on the old swing set in the back yard, from when this was a real house. If I came home and she had peed, even after I walked her in the morning before I left, I would tighten up my whole face and shoulders, so I wouldn't hit her, and I would grab her by the tags collar, and I would hiss at her what she needed to know, what she did, and "bad dog" and all that — but not too hard, I wouldn't grab her too hard — and I would stomp her down the back stairs, and then...and then hook her up out there. And she would whine, but I would just go back upstairs, and say to her as I went back up to be a good dog, in a more friendly way, I would say it friendly, but I was still mad, and I'd go inside and have my soup, and do my work. So this was better. I don't know how I figured this out. Or maybe it just got better, in the spring, so I could start leaving her out more.

If she didn't pee, while I was gone, then I could take her down there and pat her in a friendly way, more friendly, more friendly the whole time.

But it made me sad to put her out there.

I still did not walk her, not more than twice a day, because that was enough. That's not what I thought — I mean: that's, that IS what I thought, what I did thought — THINK — and it was important to teach her that, I thought, back when I was that boy. That was two whole years ago. Back then I couldn't let her make me walk her again by whining. It was bad for her. I would stand over her all mad and all, until she stopped whining, and then I would pat her, even though I was still mad. I was training her, and she let me think that, too, with the way she acted and all, let me think she was learning. She wanted to, to make me think that. I think.

Yes, of course. I know. Dog's don't really think like us. Just mostly, they do.

Sometimes I left her out there while I went to my afternoon classes. If I got back and it was close to dinner — my classes were different and, and I had to take — I took an incomplete in Spanish halfway through the first semester, because I just couldn't, I couldn't learn a new language, like I thought. I should have, I know, I blew it, but I — so, so I had a smaller, a shorter afternoon schedule, class load, whatever. But especially if I had to clean up pee that day, if that happened, I made her stay out there longer.

But then I couldn't let her just stay and stay out there, so I let her come back in. Almost always by the time I went out there to get her I would love her again, and she was always so happy to see me, jumping all over me and everything, and it was like a new morning, and I didn't feel small, like, like, like a fraction, a part of a person, or so guilty, for those minutes — especially outside, where everyone could see how we loved each other and how happy she was and how I — I was a good guy with my good dog and all.

But mostly, secretly, I just hated that dog. Obie. It's true. I know I have to tell you the truth. I know. No, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I am. I will stay calm. I will. OK. I am really crying now. I knew — I know, I can feel this. Them. These. I touch them, see? I can feel them. I'm — no, I'm not mad, it's just that I know when I am crying. I'm just feeling sadness. Isn't it OK to feel sad?

No, I am not mad. Just stop asking me, asking me if I can feel if I am crying and all.

OK. I don't need a break. I said: OK. We are getting to the bad part, and I want to be done, so I can go to sleep. The bad part that is the good part. And...well, let me say. Just let me say. Thank you. You

are a good person. Just don't be so impatient, don't fidget me like that. Please.

I just hated how she wouldn't learn. How she made me clean up her accidents. I would look at her and say: "Why? Why are you, are you like this?" and "Why are you so god. damn. stupid?" I hated her even when I knew I loved her, sometimes. But I guess sometimes I forgot I loved her at all.

So then I tried walking her early, before dinner. The ridiculous thing is, I liked walking her, once we were out there. Mostly, I did. But she still peed, while I was at classes, sometimes. I thought: if you can NOT pee sometimes, why can't you not pee all the time? She just wouldn't learn.

OK. OK. OK. So one time, this, this bad, this one bad time, I was sitting there working and she didn't whine, at least, I don't think she did, but I heard her go, just go, pee, anyway, by the door, and I just looked at her. I took my good pencil and I just jammed it down, the point — I will tell you the truth, I did it deliberately — and it broke off in that old linoleum. It just stuck there, the point, half into that rubbery old linoleum, a tiny little circle of round rubber, like a crater around it. Just snapped off. I got so mad. It was a waste, a deliberate waste, of all those p-p-potential lines and letterings, my letters, all I could have made with it, with that p-pencil point. And I would never g-g-get it back.

Now it was just a cone, a grey pencil point cone, wasted, and I got up and I stomped over to her and she whined and tried to run and I grabbed her by the collar and some of her neck and I dragged her to where the towels I mean the rags were and she was whining and I know she was scared but I didn't care and and and she had to learn goddamnit no I am I will be calm just let me say this part and I dragged her back and switched hands and I grabbed just fur this time and I am sorry I did that and and and so I grabbed again just

her collar — but I clenched it real hard, really tight, tight as I could so I felt it all the way up my arm and in my shoulder and in my face and and but so I wouldn't hit her and so I wiped and wiped up all that pee and made her smell the rag right on her nose and I think I said no no and why why and all that and lots of other stuff, mean stuff, crying stuff, stupid stuff, over and over. But I don't remember. I really don't.

Thanks. Thank you. No. this is fine. I will be OK.

That was the one time, the one really bad time. She shrank up into a little ball, next to the door, afraid to run, all curled up, and I stood over her and made my face so tight and like that and I was so mad I was dizzy and I saw little gold and blue and black pinwheels and I couldn't breathe, sort of like just now but a lot lot lot worse, and I was so afraid I would hit her, or break her bones, break her thin little golden neck and just never stop hitting her, just hit her like my dad, my real dad, used to do and all. My real dad, with my mom, and us kids, a long time ago.

But I did not.

See? I did not. You will not believe it probably now, you will not believe, or forgive me, that stupid little boy I was, I know, because he was I think unforgivable, being so stupid that he couldn't see how Obie told him, told him every date, every day, I mean, every time, to "let me out", but he wouldn't get up, he wanted to do his work. But I know he loved her. I mean Obie, he really loved Obie. What? Yes. Me. Of course.

Because he did not hit her. He just grabbed her hard on the fur, this, that one time, and that hurt her I think but he — I was so sorry — no, I don't, I don't think so, not, not unforgivable, I mean, because he did not hit her, even on that bad day, that terrible day.

Do we have to? But..can I take just one? Because I want to tell this part, and I don't want to talk about those other things. Not yet. It was nothing, anyway. Just let me go on and finish about this, for the end, just let me finish, OK?

Thank you.

I felt better, after that day, for a few days. I would come back from class and put her outside. Not for whining, but just because. Because that's what she wanted. I knew that now. Back then. And she did better. I would take her back in before I left. I still wasn't walking her extra times. Not yet. I thought about it, I started to think about doing it. But I still thought I needed her to learn, not to need that third walk. The thing is, I don't know why. Why I wouldn't do it, take her out more. I know now: she just had to go. A dog just has to go when she has to go. I know that now. I have had two years to think about it. Even since she's gone, since we had a bad accident and she left, I mean. I have calmed down and I realize the right thing, what's right to do, I mean.

No. I don't know. She's just gone now.

I did walk her more, I think. I am pretty sure I started walking her more often, before she just disappeared. I wish I could go back, back in time to that time, and go up to that boy and say: "wake up!" and "get up!" Just slap him really, really hard, show him my hard tighttighttight face, and knock some sense into him. To walk her, goddamnit, when she's whining like that.

I wasn't good to her. I didn't hit her. I know I didn't hit her. I am pretty — pretty damn sure I didn't.

But I was too mean. I don't want you to think I was nice all the time, or I didn't know, when I was being way too mean, using my eyes to control her, squeezing my face into the hard, mean place to train

her. I was raised right. I know better. I should have suffered her, her mistakes more.

But I don't know. Ha! Maybe not. I wouldn't have listened, right? If I went back. It's all pretty useless. What? What would I just, just tell him? Me, or...you mean me?

I dunno. I dunno. I guess I, I would have to explain to him, that boy, to me, how dogs tell us what we need to know, what they need us to know. What they really need and all. I will, would have to make him, make me understand: it wasn't personal. I know this now. I was the dog, i guess, not him. It was like a dog dream, that whole time, back then. I was running with my eyes closed, lying on the floor, barking at nothing.

I would tell myself to grow up. Yeah. Yep.

Probably, though, I wouldn't understand. I don't know how I could get it into his head, even if it was me, telling me, to myself. Even then I still wouldn't understand. I would probably have to take myself outside or some place, away from all that, and just hold myself, for like three days, just rock myself, and pat myself, and say "there, there" and "OK, OK, OK", and over and over, over and over, before I could even hear anything else, or listen, or do better, or learn or anything. I guess maybe even that wouldn't do any good. I was a stupid boy.

No. No, I'm OK. I guess...I thought this would make sense. Now you think I am a bad guy. But I'm not. I'm not. No, I know. I guess. I am very tired.

I don't know what happened earlier. It was last night? I don't really remember. No. No, I really don't. I know my Nana found my notebook and I say all this stuff in it, and she found her sewing scissors in my bag. I didn't really do very much, though. I know I just

hurt myself a little, sometimes.

I am getting better. I just got mad when she told me I had to leave. I didn't hit her. I would never hit my Nana. I didn't even think about it. I didn't hurt anybody. I don't do that. I am not like — I don't — I am not like that.

I'm sleepy now. OK. OK. I guess so. If that's what you have to do, then. OK.

