

Anchored Leaves

by J.A. Pak

i.

More and more, for Megan LeMaster, each beginning was its own end. She couldn't bear to buy flowers or dresses that seemed too beautiful. Friendships formed, endured, gave out in a handshake. Each deed in life had an immediate, inescapable circumferencing, beginning becoming an ending, becoming a beginning, as if it were all one and the same like a Gordian knot she couldn't undo.

Megan stared at Waldo's little body. The pink satin was quilted, the casket a pale-colored wood. The Pekingese looked content. Why did people buy pets knowing they were going to die? A little line shivered up her back every time Stella showed her a new dog.

"I've lost track. Which Waldo is this?" Stella's neighbor Mrs. Abernathy asked. Each of Stella's dogs had a different colored ribbon but was always called Waldo.

"Waldo the Seventh, I think," Megan answered.

"You'd think she would have learned to pick dogs with healthier constitutions by now. Tell her next time to get a German shepherd."

"Stella's afraid of big dogs. Waldo was healthy. He just got into some rat poison."

"Little dogs have short lives. German shepherds live forever," the woman flatly declared.

Megan secretly admired people whose certainty was so level.

Josie Abernathy had never been to a Waldo funeral before; she'd been very much surprised when Stella had asked her to come. Of good Calvinist stock she didn't approve of funerals for animals. And a Waldo funeral was more extravagance than anything ever allowed inside a tepid imagination. She'd come early—she was a habitual early-arriver—stunned by the animal chapel's transformation into a microscopic Eden, with lush grasses at her feet, tender palms above her head, flowers exotica sprouting thickly all around her, their seductive whispers smoking the air. There was even a waterfall where the altar should have been.

When Megan had arrived in an enormous black hat and veil, Mrs. Abernathy had thought her very foolish. But then the others came, less subdued, outfitted in hats with foot-long black feathers, serpentine gloves, long chains of oyster grey pearls looped three, four times, satin dresses, morning coats, and veils, black veils, billowing all around the chapel, some as dark as liquid night, some too light to see except in movement. It was like some macabre costume party, Mrs. Abernathy fascinated in spite of herself.

Stella's funerals were eagerly anticipated and so well celebrated, death seemed hardly the point; in a couple of years a toy dog in the casket would be sufficient. What held it still serious and grave was Stella, who felt very keenly the death of any dog, and who so relished life.

After the funeral Stella received them at the house. With grave dignity, she accepted their tributes to death, the flowers and the tokens woven with whispers and condolences, and in her turn, gave out glasses of ice-cold champagne and pieces of her famous sauerkraut chocolate cake. (The recipe was a well-kept family secret [no one asked for the recipe]. Megan made the cakes now, Stella finding it too hard to cook with her hands gone arthritic. The cakes were wonderfully rich and moist, the sauerkraut having given way except for a hint of lingering piquancy.)

The night had already thinned when Peter Overlander arrived. He was Stella's nephew, a sensible, good-hearted doctor who was always bemused by his dead uncle's wife. Gamely playing along, he'd brought Stella dark African violets, their purple like blood. Stella's favorites. Violets were a vital ingredient in her home-brewed love potions—there were still bugs to work out, new formulations to try, more testing, dabbling, testing. Was she then still only an apprentice, she wondered? Stella had high hopes for her next batch, just maturing with the most delectable flavor. She'd drunk a small glassful right before the funeral and it had given her a nice, dreamy feeling. Violets, sauerkraut, chocolates.

There was something about Stella—no one wanted to let her go. It was three in the morning and people still lingered, reluctant to leave

even as Stella was pushing them out the door with a bracing hug. All the while, Megan was tidying up, quiet like a shadow against the wall, until there was only Stella and herself. After Stella's festivities, Megan usually slept at Stella's house. She loved Stella's house. The beautiful stained glass that framed the front door and lit the entrance with warm bubbles of light on sunny days. She liked to sit, right on the floor, where the light fell in soothing candy colors of yellow, red, blue, feeling time.

After changing into her nightclothes, Stella came into the kitchen, surprised that everything was already cleaned and put away.

"You're a miracle worker," she said to Megan, wrapping her arms around Megan's shoulders and squeezing tightly. "My little brownie."

Megan flushed with delight. They sat down at the breakfast nook and shared the last piece of sauerkraut chocolate cake, gossiping about the party and enjoying the warmth of the kitchen, the quietness of a new day begun.

ii.

After the funeral, Stella spent a month visiting her sister in Hawaii. She came back with a miniature Doberman pinscher the size of a man's forearm. Tiny and potent, the Doberman's body was an efficient distiller of spite. It'd attack anything, dead or alive, although birds seemed to be its special favorite—the only time the dog was ever quiet was right before an attack, its body suddenly stiff with concentrated anticipation. The pinscher scared everyone except Stella. Stella had to lock it away in the garage whenever anyone visited. Furious, Waldo the Eighth would bounce against the door, its nails grinding into the veneer—as if it truly believed that it had the power to break the door down.

Stella only saw the dog's side. She'd rescued the dog from her sister, who'd wanted to put it to sleep (her vet fully supporting the decision).

"Well, take it," her sister Natalie had said, exasperated. She resented being called an animal killer. "Of course, it likes you."

Megan wondered. Perhaps the dog was just smart enough to know it needed a defender.

“Waldo, Waldo,” Stella would say, nuzzling her tender cheek against the dog's growling muzzle. For a few seconds the dog would pause to perfunctorily lick Stella's cheek with its dark, whip-like tongue. But its eyes never left Megan, as if licking Stella was an annoying, slightly distasteful duty and frightening Megan the real pleasure. Megan couldn't understand how Stella found love in such a vicious, evil animal. The other Waldos had been little darlings. Perfect major-domos to Stella's gracious hostess. Waldo the Second used to wag her little tail when the teacups needed to be refilled—oh, how Stella had loved that little Westie.

Waldo the Eighth was the first Waldo without a ribbon. Instead, it wore a tiny red collar heavily studded with bells. On Waldo's walks the bells jingled feverishly, warning birds near and far. Stella didn't enjoy walking Waldo, a task that had to be performed several times a day. The dog nearly choked itself trying to run after cars, cyclists, squirrels, birds, pedestrians, ghosts. Stella's arthritic hands couldn't keep Waldo from escaping, so she'd taken to tying the leash around her fragile wrist.

One day, too tired, Stella mindlessly let Waldo lead. Sly, it walked directly to the Abernathys' yard. Josie Abernathy was fanatical about birds. Her yard was festooned with every imaginable kind of bird feeder, fountain and house. Birds, as well as squirrels and mice, infested her yard, and even occasional skunks came to forage. Waldo's House of Fun. It was too much.

That day, adding to the chaos were Mrs. Abernathy's grandchildren. They were running around the front lawn chasing squirrels and screaming with laughter. Waldo became spastic. Instantly fascinated by the new amusement, the children ran towards Waldo, laughing and pointing at the hysterical dog.

“Look! Cute doggy,” Mrs. Abernathy's four-year-old granddaughter exclaimed, clapping joyfully.

“What is it?” one of the boys asked. “It looks like a Doberman but it's much too small.”

“It's a miniature Doberman pinscher,” Stella explained, bending down to calm Waldo. She tugged hard at the leash, trying to reel the dog in.

“It looks like a freak,” the older boy said, barking back. Waldo was in a frenzy. Desperate, Stella stretched out her arm, her joints aching. She was just about to touch Waldo's trembling little body when Waldo lurched forward with unexpected power. Stella tumbled to the ground. She heard bone breaking.

“My leg, my leg!” she screamed. She could feel the leash tugging, then sliding away from her wrist as the dog raced towards the children. Stella struggled on the ground, writhing. Her only comfort were her screams, which seemed to her to be growing louder and louder, echoing at higher pitches. Waldo was attacking the little girl. In shock Stella saw Josie Abernathy rush out of the house with her husband's old baseball bat. With one powerful swing—a golf swing, Stella thought (Mrs. Abernathy was a champion amateur golfer)—she batted the dog clear across the yard. Waldo gracefully arced the sky—ages passed before it landed on a funeral pyre of beautiful red camellia blossoms. Stella lost consciousness after that.

