

Sisters

by Sandra Rouse

ACROSS THE PARKING lot, Monday afternoon, she watched him. Judging by his police uniform he was on duty. He was carrying a limp dog. She knew the strength of those arms. In his earnest walk toward the door of the clinic, it was hard to see the guy who'd ditched her.

"He was dragging himself across East Main Road. Probably hit by a car." When Ray spoke, his eyes did not meet hers.

"I think you missed your calling," Stacy said, coming around to the front of the check-in desk of Johnson Veterinary Clinic. Once when she and Ray were on a Sunday drive, he had pulled his car to the side of the road and got out without explanation. He detoured oncoming traffic while a turtle sat with his neck pulled into his shell. Finally, he took Ray's offer and hobbled across the road. They watched it disappear into the underbrush of the woods.

The dog, probably a terrier mix, was in shock and one of its back legs was bloody. Ray had wrapped it in a dirty rag. Her own dog, Major, was a throwaway, a greyhound who no longer ran at lightning speed for the racetrack in Lincoln. Ray's shoulders were steady and wide. He could have been holding nothing. In a brief pause, like a prayer, they focused on the collapsed bundle in his arms. It had been twelve days since he'd told her he'd changed his mind after fourteen months, and that he was returning to his wife and kids who meant more to him than he'd realized. She felt rotten trying to compete with that. He handed over the dog. The callous of his hands rubbed against the smooth part of her wrists leaving a raw, open feeling in her chest. A rush of air from his nostrils sounded like relief but still he did not look at her. To avoid embarrassing him, she did not stare.

LATE THAT NIGHT, the phone rang. Stacy unclenched her teeth; her jaw was stiff. Through the blur of her dream vision, it was five minutes to midnight. The only night owl who'd be calling was her

sister. It was the reason that Bette took so well to waitressing, not for the servitude and measly tips, but for the late mornings and the after-hours social life. She lived across the bay in Jamestown.

"I hope I didn't wake you, Stace," Bette said.

"Well, you did," Stacy replied good-naturedly. "What's up? Aren't you working?"

"I didn't work today. My shift starts at 5pm tomorrow. But look, I have something for you I want to drop off tomorrow before work. I thought since we hadn't seen each other for Christmas it might be a good time."

"Anytime would be better than now," Stacy replied. Bette wanted to come around noon. She would never refuse a visit from her sister, or a phone call that dragged her out of dreams. It was mid-January. Arctic air from Canada was settling in for a spell. She pulled the goose down quilt tight around her neck to cut the draft in her bedroom.

The Peckham sisters were very close but looked nothing alike. Stacy was the younger by twelve months and because she was taller, she was always mistaken for the older. At first, they shared everything: friends, love of animals, clothes, even boyfriends through their junior year in high school. Until one afternoon after school when their mother met them with her suitcase parked by the door of the kitchen. She'd told the girls that they could manage without her. She'd announced that she was leaving before their father came home from work. It was all matter-of-fact, even the stiff hug she'd given them before walking out the door. When their father came home, he said with a flat expression that he wasn't surprised. He hired a private detective to find her to seal a divorce on grounds of amiable incompatibility. Six months later he remarried.

At first, Stacy had missed her mother terribly, crying silently into her pillow at night. Once she'd found an envelope addressed to her father in her mother's handwriting. She wrote using the return address, but the letter bounced back stamped "no forwarding address." Bette found comfort in the rough crowd who wore on their wrists their number of suspensions. Whenever she

broke up with a boy, her eyes widened as if to hold all the pain. When she cried at night, it was Stacy who soothed her hot, swollen face with a cold washcloth. But in spite of sharing their bedroom and disdain for their stepmother, the sisters grew apart. After graduation, Stacy found her dream job at the vet clinic. Eight years later she'd made herself indispensable, securing a paycheck and a vocation. Bette tried cosmetology school but dropped out and took up waitressing. They no longer dated the same guys and Bette moved south soon after high school.

ALONE IN BED, after hanging up with her sister, Stacy sunk into her pillow exhausted but couldn't sleep. When she closed her eyes, she welcomed the image that emerged on the back of her eyelids. It was a silhouette of Ray's head from yesterday, his left profile from the side window of his police car just before he pulled out of the clinic parking lot. She imagined the relief he must have felt in getting rid of the dog. And the relief, too, he must have felt in leaving her without a scene. Some kind of inertia was visiting her now, replacing her deep sleep. She did not want to work in the morning. She'd call in sick, a first. She reasoned it was after the holidays when the clinic was slow and the kennel had emptied out, except for the one dog recuperating from the amputated foot. Dr. J could manage without her for one day. She just didn't feel like going in.

AROUND NOON, Major was pointing his pencil thin nose in the air tracking the scent wafting from the oven when the sound of a harsh car engine distracted him. Cutting fresh loaves of bread from their pans, Stacy turned from the counter. Bette stood in the open doorway holding a box against her chest. Her straight black hair was brilliant against the fake white fur of her hooded parka. Major rushed toward her and blocked her from stepping inside.

Stacy called to Major while Bette wrestled with the aluminum door handle of the trailer. With an extra push, she forced

the latch to close securely. "God, Stacy, when are you going to get a real house?"

"This is a house," Stacy replied. She hesitated to remind her sister how she had often slept in the new twin bed, which replaced the old bunk bed they had once shared. And, she didn't want to give Bette the satisfaction of knowing that she had enough money toward buying a 'real' house. Some things about her life were better kept from Bette.

"Here Stace, this is for you." With self-conscious pride, Bette extended her arms holding the thin cardboard box. "I hope it survived the drive." She giggled in response to Major's long tail that whipped against her black leggings and thin legs.

"It looks yummy," Stacy said after looking inside. The cake had slipped around and was wedged in a corner of the box. "I'll put it in the refrigerator." She was well practiced at keeping disappointment from her sister.

Bette's delicate skin glowed on winter days. She had a wide smile as unselfconscious as a child's and Stacy guessed she wouldn't be staying overnight. After seeing Ray yesterday for the first time in twelve days, she realized how sensitive she still was about the breakup. Bette's presence seemed to somehow recall Ray and the intense feeling of what she'd lost. But Stacy couldn't talk. A pang of jealousy took hold recalling how Bette could release a dramatic cry and rid herself of her last lover.

The sisters propped themselves on matching recliners. The ottomans popped out simultaneously with a thud and prompted them to reminisce about silly things over fresh bread and Scotch.

"Remember the time you walked across the kitchen floor after you cried and threw a glass because Jimmy Webster broke up with you?" Stacy asked.

"I never figured that out; how I didn't get cut," Bette said, "but you cut two fingers cleaning up."

"Dad said you were naturally thick-skinned."

"I never appreciated that," Bette said. "And, I didn't appreciate it when he gave you all of this." Her arm swung out in an

arc as if to scan the room; she managed to keep the drink inside her glass.

“Come on, Bette, you were living in New Orleans. He figured you couldn't use it and I was here anyway.”

“Hooking up with Ray,” Bette said. They paused and Stacy felt challenged.

“What do you mean? You were doing the same in New Orleans.” This sparring match to Stacy was pointless since Ray wasn't coming around anymore.

“Maybe I was, but the guy wasn't married,” Bette said. “I'd learned that lesson long before you. You're a slow learner; I'm Bette-r.” She gave out a spiteful laugh.

“Okay, thanks for the sisterly advice,” Stacy said. There was no way Bette could understand. Married or not, kids or not, she and Ray knew how to connect with each other at the shore wrapped in the light of liquid gold spreading across the rippled surface of the bay watching it turn to shimmering gray.

“Hey, I forgot about your job. You still have one, right?” Bette smiled, her attempt at humor as an afterthought.

“Of course. I took the day off to see you,” Stacy said. Typically on such visits, Bette came around for money to cover a temporary short fall in her bank account.

Her sister's eyes were unnaturally open, stretching the thin skin under them. In an instant, Stacy wondered if Bette realized the creeping signs of age, how her young adult years were slipping and time was accelerating its forward pitch toward middle age. She recognized her own entrapment between youth and age, more often than not without love. With drink in hand, Stacy concentrated on the imperfect edge of the glass. An irregularity, its smooth swelling, surprised her and she kept going over it with the tip of her tongue.

“What's with the plastic?” Bette asked nodding toward the window.

“It was Ray's idea, to keep out the cold.” Stacy said. “But it came loose. I just haven't gotten around to re-taping it.

“Speaking of whom, have you seen him since?” Stacy regretted having told Bette about Ray on the phone last night.

“Two days ago. He brought in a dog hit by a car. We had to amputate.” Stacy said.

“Ray, or the dog?” Bette's self-conscious laughter reached a high pitch. “Just kidding.”

“I don't want to talk about Ray, including any jokes.”

“Stacy, you need to lighten up. You spend too much time alone. By the way, it's colder than a witch's tit in here.” She pointed to the opaque sheet that billowed with the movement of escaping wind. “All you need is a thumb tack.”

“Okay,” Stacy said slamming down the ottoman. “I'll look for the tape.” She was grateful for an excuse to leave the room anyway. The air wasn't so much cold as it was thick. It was bound to happen at some point, their allotted time together ending abruptly. Sisterhood was like that. The overall direction was clear; part of that direction you could influence, part of that direction you could coast on, and the rest you let go because it was too strong to hold onto.

In the bathroom, she discovered his comb. At the back of the drawer where he once kept his things, hidden by the duct tape, she found his black vinyl comb. She held it to her nose. The oily scent of his scalp brought back a familiar pleasure. Her irritation with Bette's arrival almost vanished with a reverie. Had he left this because he secretly wanted to come back? Why did he refuse to look at her yesterday? When she drew the fine comb through her thick, wavy hair it snagged. Suddenly she wished she'd gone to work but it was too late for that now. She was not in the mood for her sister's visit. Knowing she would feel relief after Bette left, offered little solace. She would rather not feel that way about her. She plunged Ray's comb into her brush on the counter.

“How about another drink to warm us up?” Stacy asked returning empty handed to the front room.

Without moving from the chair, Bette's words returned to the same topic. “There's dirt blowing around town about Ray.”

“Bette, I'm not interested in dirt.”

“Okay,” she said, “but he filed for divorce.”

In silence, Stacy handed the refill to Bette and sat down with her own. The cold ice cube hit her front teeth and she trembled. With one large swallow she didn't have to wait for the rise of heat through her chest. She leaned over the side table and opened a drawer. “By the way Bette, Merry Christmas.” In her hand was a red envelope sprinkled with gold stars.

“Oh Stace, I thought we weren't going to do it this year.”

“I don't have anyone else to spend it on. Cheers,” Stacy said lifting her glass. She waited for the heat to rise again but an unpleasant burn seared at the back of her throat as Ray's name burned in the air. Before Stacy could take back her sarcasm, Bette was bending down over her in the chair offering a make-nice hug. The one thing that Bette had in unlimited supply was hugs.

“Stace, you shouldn't have done this,” she said. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Stacy didn't say anything. She wanted to believe ‘something’ wasn't about money. In this brief moment, she stared at her glass because it felt good to hold onto hope against hope.

“After I pay the oil bill, tips won't amount to much. January is a slump for restaurants.” Bette stood beside her chair and her eyes admitted failure. Stacy knew she was the only person her sister could rely on. The guys she connected with always left.

While Stacy wrote the check, Bette slipped on her jacket and cooed over Major. From the open door, Stacy watched her sister drive away in her beat up Camaro that she'd inherited from one of her ex's. Stacy wanted to believe that this current guy she was seeing wasn't a loser because Bette needed someone who could keep her on an even keel. And didn't she want that for herself, too? She breathed easy; they had survived the visit. When she closed the door, Canadian air was trapped inside. She might as well be living in a meat locker but Major brought out her smile as he rubbed his lanky side against her thigh.

LIGHT FALLING SNOW, the next day, cast a grainy texture in the parking lot beyond the clinic window. Even new snow couldn't erase the imprint of Ray left there two days ago. All morning Stacy looked at her watch and counted the minutes to lunch. A number of clients had rescheduled because of uncertain weather, and only two brought cats for routine checkups. At noon, she drove to Joe Tremblay's bar. She owed him her usual Christmas bread. More importantly, she wanted something from him. How much did Bette know about Ray? Joe had served her and Ray together whenever they ended up on that side of town. She hadn't been there in over two weeks, afraid that she'd run into Ray. Ironically, he'd shown up on her turf.

At Tremblay's, some cars and pick-up trucks were parked nose-in away from the waterfront facing the building. A crushed clamshell mote ran along the foundation. "Look what just blew in before the nor'easter," Joe haled as he wiped the counter that shone with a caramel light.

"You know better than to look a gift horse in the mouth," she said and pushed the bread across the counter. It was wrapped in cellophane with a big, red bow.

Joe offered a bashful smile and drew her beer from the tap. A few home contractors types were drinking and eating at the other end of the bar. In a booth, a young couple sat so close they must have been recycling the air between them.

"Herb Beasley treating you okay?" Joe asked sliding a coaster toward her and placing a beer down. Stacy raised her eyebrows in response to his question.

"Because he just sold all of Sunny Acres to two New Jersey developers," he said clearly satisfied at delivering unexpected news. "All those trailers will have to hit the road, including yours."

"Beasley hasn't said a word to me," she said. Joe placed the burger and steaming fries in front of her. Inhaling the salt and the fat gave rise to a comforting pleasure. When she reached for the ketchup, she blurted out, "Has Ray been around?" But she nearly

choked on his name. The look on Joe's face told her he knew everything, a look as if he'd bitten into a lemon.

"What are you asking about him for?" Joe was always generous with advice.

She shrugged feeling her neck retract into her shoulders, like that turtle declining rescue. She felt hurt the way he said 'him' with disdain. He slid on his sleeved forearms leaning closer to her across the bar. His eyes were the color of the ocean on a stormy day, hostile and gray.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Stacy. He's in and out of here with a different gal every time." His look of disdain could have charged Ray with adultery. But just because Ray might be sitting next to a woman in a bar didn't make him an adulterer. No camera could prove that. Joe was skating on thin ice about Ray.

One of the guys at the end of the bar was making noise about service. "Put your energy into real estate. Something with a permanent relationship to the ground," Joe said to her. "A trailer doesn't speak stability." The tail of a white rag from the back pocket of his black pants swung as he turned to serve the others.

She sat back feeling the pleasure of her meal wear off. And then she felt the judgmental look of a guy as he passed behind her on his way to the men's room. It seemed that some men enjoyed measuring a woman by a crisp visual model they conjured in their head, allowing an easy 'yes-no' fit. Did it happen only to stocky girls like her, alone in a bar, declared open targets for cruel scrutiny?

Bette, she knew, would have handled the situation differently. She'd no doubt catch the guy's eye in the act, flash her smile and laugh in his face as an insult or an invitation, depending on how she wanted things to go. Even at the clinic, people saw Stacy only as the reliable assistant to Dr. Johnson.

But with Ray, it had been different. She loved walking with him at night, or having him back at her place for a meal, or just puttering around enjoying each other. The next morning, she'd be all business at the clinic with a talent for sick animals. With Ray in her life, it didn't matter if others saw her only for how competent she was.

Easing toward the door, leaving untouched half the fries, she heard Joe's parting advice: "Sell that tin can! Buy a house before ol' man Beasley takes off for Florida."

Confusions about Ray and her trailer were spinning inside her head on a brew of beer, burger and fries. Joe wasn't much help. As for her house, she could end up homeless by spring if she wasn't prepared to move. Leaving the bar, she had a sense of purpose fueled more by a conviction to leave the place than where she was headed.

Snowfall had progressed to thick and heavy. The storm that Joe mentioned had arrived. From the look of the line of cars on the hill, it would take a little longer than she'd planned. Her cell rang and it was Dr. J. He told her he had to close up. The schools were letting the kids go early, and he had to pick up his daughter. The anxiety in his voice made her felt guilty about her excursion to Joe's. She told him she was headed over there right now and for him to leave things to her. She would close up and check on the dog.

The fan in her car was grinding away. Traction was difficult on the slick incline of the road. While the town's road crew was hitting the main roads, down here it would be a while. She couldn't go faster than the cars ahead of her.

Straining her eyes through the slanting snow between partial wipes on the windshield, she felt claustrophobic. Without thinking, she turned off the road and found herself on a side street she was familiar with, Fountain Avenue, and had parked in front of a white cottage with yellow trim. It was the house where she and Ray had stayed last summer on several weekends.

The owner — it must be him — looked motionless bending over the open trunk of his car to retrieve grocery bags. The normally unobstructed view from the picture window through the back of the house was now blocked on the beach side by a blur of falling snow. She and Ray had rolled around on the warm sand there, and slept partially hidden in the sea grass. She remembered waking in the morning curled against his warm body. And her first glimpse of morning light was an expanse of glistening blue water; no

sky, no horizon, no headlands. Only the infinite bay and the feelings she had for Ray.

“Excuse me!” she shouted running hatless from the car. He turned toward her as she stood at the end of his driveway. He was balancing three grocery bags whose edges began to wilt against the slick material of his parka. She raised her voice. “Someone told me you might be thinking about selling your house.”

“That’s right. We’re thinking about it. Come back in April.”

She watched snowflakes land and melt on his brow. He raised one arm to close the trunk. By this time, a woman had opened the door to the house.

When she got back inside her car, Stacy peeled matted strands of hair from her forehead. Her cheeks felt warm with excitement. The quietness that comes with new snow sealed her with infinite peace. If Ray knew she had this house, not a trailer on blocks that could be hauled away on the whim of a landlord or a storm, they could make permanent what was right between them.

She edged her car onto the main road still slick without a layer of sand and cinders. She could barely see through the veil of snow clouding her vision but she concentrated on the groove of tire tracks and the nervous pull of the steering wheel. Suddenly it struck her that she’d forgotten the dog. Her mind had been in such a whirl.

Her father’s keen sense of weather broadcasted like filaments of conversation inside her head. When a nor’easter approaches, he’d taught her, it comes without the discernible eye of a hurricane. It’s an amorphous storm that loses energy as it veers off coast and out to sea. But the surprise when it returns to land is the wallop of moisture that bumps against frigid air howling from the north. When the force of cold air and moisture collide, they leave an unexpected snowstorm in their wake. Life is full of surprises like that. Just when you think you’ve seen the end of something, it hits you from behind.

Inside the kennel, she rushed to get to him. He managed to wag his tail as he hobbled up on his three good legs. She would bring him home until the storm had passed. Roads would be impossible tomorrow with ice. She gathered some towels and put him in a plastic kennel. In a bag, she stocked his canned food, his antibiotics, and bandages.

ON THE RIDE HOME, she struggled to see beyond her windshield between the wiping of each fresh layer of nature's Irish lace. The turnoff for Sunny Acres Trailer Park was barely visible under the dulled streetlights and drifted snow. She saw Beasley, the park owner, at his yellow-lit window peering out as her car crept by. She didn't bother to wave. She knew he couldn't see her through his cataracts. She only wanted to get inside her place, but the distance down the short road seemed to stretch forever.

A car was parked under the black skeleton of a maple tree. With its engine running, it was facing her and its fog lights glowed through the blur of a curtain of snow. Exhaust fumes rose eerily in a funnel shape above its roof. Inside, the overhead light was on and two people separated from an embrace. Wiping the condensation on the windshield was a woman's small hand, and she recognized Bette's face framed in white fur. Sitting next to her behind the steering wheel was someone larger, a man. When Ray stepped out of the Camaro, his head tipped slightly toward his left shoulder, Stacy pressed her lips to keep her mouth shut. So he had found himself another car and another girl.

"Stacy," Bette shouted when she sprang from the open car door, "we have champagne!"

What was her sister thinking? That she could come yesterday to clear the air about Ray and ask for money? To buy champagne?

Fixing her gaze on Bette, Stacy said, "I don't have a bed large enough for both of you. You decide." She ached seeing her sister's rosy cheeks and expectant smile, but turned away from her, never looking at Ray. Through the back of her jacket she felt his

eyes burn a spot between her shoulder blades. By the time she reached the top of the iced-over iron steps of her trailer, her back felt a chilling pain. She slammed the door so hard behind her it closed without springing from the latch. With a swift kick, still holding the kennel, she flung her boots across the kitchen floor. Major cowered close by, sniffing frantically at what was left of Ray's rescue. Like a bad storm, despite their leaving, Ray and Bette would return again.

