

Molly

LATE ONE SPRING night, during a satisfying buffet and agreeable conversation at one of Reeva and Jerry Zachary's gatherings, Lessing understood with an ardent certainty that he intended to steal their dog, Molly, and somehow contrive to rear her as his own.

A six-year-old mixture of Cattle Dog and Australian Shepherd, Molly's coat was distinctive with its broad splotches of black and brindle, which gave the impression of the detail maps seen in the political section of Sunday newspapers. Thanks to an accident with a pair of hedge trimming shears her tail was preternaturally short. Her bark, a crisp yip which evoked comparison with a coyote, marked her even further. To compound the problem, Lessing and the Zacharys had many acquaintances in common; short of boarding the dog out every time he had guests, what precautions could Lessing take to insure against eventual discovery? Added to these impediments, Jerry Zachary, a friend of Lessing's since university days, had the habit of dropping in on Lessing to drink pilsner beer and listen to Lessing's sound system.

Lessing had long enjoyed Molly but it was a benign fondness; the impulse to steal her, to contemplate some kind of life with her, did not come until a conspiratorial bonding forged when he, almost directly behind Reeva Zachary's back, offered Molly a large shrimp from the scampi chafing dish on the buffet and Molly, with a patrician nod of her head, took it. For the first time, Lessing sympathized with wealthy collectors who owned stolen works of art or kept

archeological contraband locked away where only they could see it. Knowledge that he could contemplate such a plan gave him a galvanic surge of excitement, causing him forget plans to bring his date, Cynthia, back to his apartment.

“Hey, I thought we were going to your place,” Cynthia said after they left the Zachary gathering. Before Lessing could retrieve any lost equilibrium, she’d pushed matters over the edge of recovery. “I knew it. That horsy blonde in the pink dress and spike heels who came by herself. Spilled a big glass of wine. Whatsername.”

“Alida,” Lessing said. In truth he had been building to quite a nice lust for Cynthia and had not found Alida to his liking. But once again the thought of stealing Molly from the Zacharys and the extent of the logistics the theft would require, especially after the fact, overtook him and he waited a critical beat too long to replay.

Cynthia seized the interval. “Some men your age have to have Porsches or Lotuses; for others it’s blondes with freckles and long legs.” Cynthia, who was neither blonde, freckled, nor long-legged, had stark topaz eyes set in a bony, angular face that Lessing found compelling. She reached for the door of his car. “You don’t have to park. I’ll get out here.”

“Would it do any good to tell you it’s not what you think?”

“No,” they both said in unison.

“AH, MR. LAWSON, come in.” Dr. Plotnick greeted Lessing from the center of a small, bright room, where a stainless steel examination table stood like a pagan altar, surrounded by shelves in which were displayed exotic implements, bottles of medications, and enlarged drawings of fleas and ticks. An early

Beethoven string quartet wove its way through expensive, wall-mounted speakers. “I see you’re having trouble getting your little friend to come in.” A short man with a round head, thinning black hair and dark shadowy cheeks, which he probably had to shave twice a day, Plotnick squinted behind designer frame glasses at the file folder. “Would you like some help bringing—” he scanned the folder again “—er, bringing, er, your little friend in?”

Lessing decided Plotnick was at great pains to order his office clothing from the catalogue of some outdoors clothier. But something about the man spoke to his spending little or no time in what could be considered outdoors much less wilderness. He was a man of the urban, indoor tennis court and health club, but his image of himself included lug-soled moccasins, forest ranger twill trousers, and a red plaid field shirt. His loosely knotted black knit tie seemed a grudging concession to formality. “We don’t have a listing of the name, type, and breed of your friend.”

“I intend to pay for a standard visit,” Lessing said, “but I have come alone and it might be more comfortable if we talked in your office.”

Plotnick pointed a finger at him. “You’re the one who called yesterday, aren’t you? In all my years in this profession, I’ve never been asked a question like that.”

“Well,” Lessing said, “what can you do?”

“It depends on the breed, of course, but there is always the possibility of docking the tail and shaping the ears by trimming or implanting the equivalent of one of those collar stays.”

“What would that do?”

“Give upright, prick ears to a dog with floppy ears.” Plotnick began to give himself over to the challenge. “Say the animal is piebald; the coat can be dyed a single color. A single-colored animal could be mottled. I suppose a longhaired animal with a straight coat can be made curly and visa versa. We might do some dental work if the animal is middle-aged or older, and if the animal is overweight, a diet could help. But many of these things could become expensive and require frequent maintenance. The bigger question is why you would want to do such a thing in the first place.”

“I’m looking at options,” Lessing said.

“Options, is it? There are enough available dogs in the world without having to resort to subterfuge.”

“Some dogs are more desirable than others.”

“That’s it,” Plotnick scowled. “Divorce. Now I see why you’re here. Pure selfishness. You don’t want to share the animal as community property, so you come sneaking over to a hospital where you’ve never been before and aren’t likely to be traced.” He stole a quick glance at the file folder. “I have to congratulate you, Mr. Lawson. In a world where it’s easy enough to distrust our elected officials, religious leaders, and financial advisors, you’ve managed to add an entire new layer of corruption to human behavior.” He wrote something Lessing could not read on the file folder and tossed it on the examining table. “I want nothing to do with your contemptible subterfuge.” A final connection came to him. “Your name isn’t really Lawson, is it?”

“No,” Lessing said, “but it’s very close.”

“Very close?” Plotnick advanced on him. “Very close? Listen, if you don’t get out of here right now, I’m going to do something very physical to you.”

LESSING BEGAN TO compile a schedule of Zachary’s comings and goings which he hoped to supplement with research. He drew a weekly calendar on a sheet of paper and began by marking off in red what he believed to be Jerry’s hours away from the house.

Brian, their oldest son, was living in Ashland, Oregon, trying to make progress as an actor, and could be regarded as on his own. A room was still kept for Ondine, their daughter who was in school at Berkeley, but the furnishings were less hers than things that had worked their way out of other rooms and thought suitable for guests. Because of Reeva’s dual status as a real estate broker and devoted part-time student, her hours were more likely to be notional. Lessing colored these in with a blue marker. The times they were both away from the house, such as Thursday nights at the health club, Lessing coded in black.

From recalled conversations, observations, and what he hoped were shrewd extrapolations, Lessing worked rapidly, producing a chart that was more substantial than he’d thought possible. The completeness of it gave him a vision of the Zachary’s he had not before considered. It was easy to see, for instance, that they merely affected leisure. Whether they knew it or not, they were over-programmed. They did not spend much time together, which must account for their biweekly gatherings and their alternate Friday nights out at dinner and a play or concert. Even so, the chart revealed, when Reeva and Jerry were together, they were alone on rare occasions.

Lessing was lost in the contemplation of what charting his own activities would reveal—a Lessing’s Uncertainty Principle?—when the door chime sounded with the distinctive shave-and-a-haircut ring pattern of Jerry Zachary.

When Lessing opened the door, Molly bounded in front of Jerry Zachary, sniffed at Lessing, wagged her truncated tail, then made for the kitchen. “I can leave her in the car,” Zachary said.

“She’ll be fine here. There’s goulash if she’s hungry.”

Zachary extended a six-pack of pilsner beer. “Goulash, eh?”

In the kitchen, Lessing drew water for Molly. He set out a ceramic bowl for himself, Zachary, and Molly while Zachary poured beer and put slabs of sour dough bread in to toast. “She seems to like you,” Zachary said.

“She’s used to me.”

“She’s used to the maid, she hates the gardener. You she likes.” After a moment, Zachary observed, “I find it hard to accept your not having a dog or a cat. You always had one or the other hanging around.”

“There’s some hot paprika for the goulash if you want. Hungarian.”

“It looks like Reeva and I are going to be able to get away for a few days. I suppose we could board her. Reeva heard about a guy in the Valley named Plotnick who plays classical tapes for his guests. Top conductors: Dutoit. Haitynk. Solti.”

“You want me to look in on her at your place, play her some Mahler? What about it, Moll, *das lied von der erde?*” Lessing put the goulash bowls, toast, and beer on a tray and carried it into his study. Molly followed Zachary, but once in the study stationed herself at Lessing’s side.

“I was hoping,” Zachary said. “I was hoping you’d keep her here.”

“How about the Berlioz *Requiem*?”

“Sure. Berlioz is fine. Well, what do you say?”

Molly followed Lessing to the shelves where the records, discs, and tapes were stored.

“EXCUSE ME, BUT isn’t that the Zachary dog?”

Lessing suffered a pang of defensiveness for which he reproached himself when he looked up from his coffee and newspaper. After all, Molly was legitimately with him. He had every right to be enjoying the ambience of the outdoor portion of the Xanadu coffee shop that permitted Molly to sit at his feet, sniffing at afternoon scents borne on a mild breeze. “Molly, it is,” he nodded, recognizing his inquisitor as he waited for the adrenalin to run its course.

She sat at his table without being invited, herself a bit fluttery. “Alida Jacobi,” she said. “I met you at the Zachary’s two weeks ago. You were with that very serious looking brunette.”

“Cynthia,” Lessing said, waiting for her to continue.

“Of course I knew Molly, she’s quite distinctive. How could anyone who knew her have any doubts? But I’ll be frank with you, I knew you were sitting her for the Zacharys and the moment I saw her here, I thought you’d be nearby and the first thing that came to my mind was that dumb question I asked you.”

Lessing tilted his chair back, surveying her. True, he had not been especially drawn to her at their first meeting, but his preoccupation with Molly had caused him to bungle things with Cynthia and now, watching her, he began

to suspect there might be some potential for karmic redress with Alida. She was dressed for a visit to the supermarket next to the Xanadu: faded denims with a green and blue silk scarf as a belt, a chambray work shirt with rolled sleeves, a washable sun visor to protect her freckled forehead and cheeks. There were splotches of dried paint on the shirt and another small splotch on the side of her nose. No ear rings although her earlobes were pierced. No makeup. No jewelry except for an old Zuni necklace with thick turquoise beads and mother-of-pearl surfaces.

Leaning farther back in his chair, Lessing caught sight of her serviceable but stylish latticework sandals and he bore in for a closer inspection of the feature that could easily seal Alida's fate so far as he was concerned, karmic debt or no karmic debt. Let others complain about misshapen noses, a prognathous jaw, or thighs bloated with cellulite. Lessing had no use, no sympathy, for long toes. This was no double standard, either. Although he had toes suitable to his own precepts, he had long been aware that he would have sought surgical correction if the reverse had been true. Long toes in a woman he otherwise admired were warning signals to be obeyed and the times he had gone against his dictum had turned out to be bad times.

“Did I get something on my foot?” Alida said.

“I was just looking to see if you had long toes.”

She nodded as if this made perfect sense to her. “I'm considered to be articulate and at least well-coordinated if not graceful, but this is not easy for me and it isn't going well, I can see that. From the moment Reeva Zachary suggested

I might like you and then invited me to that open house to meet you, I've simply not been at my best."

They were silent until a waitress appeared, asking if Alida wanted to order anything. When her cafe au lait was brought, Alida, in the act of taking a sip, spilled a good deal of it. While Lessing was helping her sop up the puddle with tiny paper napkins, Alida asked him, "Can you come to dinner sometime this week?"

Someone in the nearby parking lot fired up a motorcycle. Molly, outraged by the noise, followed it from the lot out onto the street, yipping defiance in its wake. She returned as Jack, a butcher from the market, came out for his coffee break, bringing Molly a lamb shank bone which she propped delicately between her front paws and gnawed at with an elegant poise, her eyes closed in mindless enjoyment. Lessing watched her with a mindless enjoyment of his own.

"You're very fond of her, aren't you?"

Lessing was wrenched back into the moment with another surge of defensiveness. It would have been easier to contemplate the robbery of the nearby jewelry store or to plan some elaborate and questionable financial manipulation than it was to contemplate the theft of a dog. There were so many implications, things that could be remembered and pieced together to form a mosaic of guilt.

"She's a fine animal," he said, thinking a neutral observation would cover the tracks of his intentions. "What about Wednesday?"

Alida smiled into the remainder of her coffee. "That's a relief. I was afraid I'd blown it."

“Do you have any dogs?”

Alida shook her head.

“Any kids?”

Her laughter was like a firecracker going off inside a tin can. “You are a funny man.”

“Notional,” Lessing said. “I was a funny man when I was younger. Unintentionally funny.”

“You’ve been behaving mysteriously for some time.”

REEVA ZACHARY MOVED about Lessing’s study, searching for things to be dusted, moved, or straightened. She lifted a heavy free-form marble paperweight that Thornley, the sculptor, had given him, a notable dust trap. But she replaced it without wiping it. “Is there something wrong? Are you in any trouble?”

Lessing shook his head.

“Even now you look —that’s it —you look unsettled. Wistful. Painfully reflective.”

“I’m not in any trouble.”

“I know you sometimes manage large sums of money.”

“But I haven’t been tempted, I’m not going to suddenly disappear with my secretary. The Feds aren’t going to come around asking you provocative questions that will make you think I’ve been leading a double life.”

Reeva perched on the edge of his desk. “Is it something with Alida? She says you become abstracted at the strangest times.” Lessing poured coffee for

each of them from the Thermos decanter on his bookshelf . For a moment, they drank in silence.

According to Lessing's taste, Reeva was a handsome woman who weighed less now than when she and Jerry began dating. Her face had aged well, giving her the appearance of character or compassion or humor, depending on the moment's need. He had envied Jerry his early discovery of her and his persistence in courting her. Now he had come to the awareness that his interest in Alida had something to do with a similarity he saw between Alida and Reeva. Both women could be highly vexing but of course Alida's ability to exasperate him was now predicated on the fact of their having become lovers. "That's quite a bill of particulars you've got on me," he said. "Mysterious. Unsettled. Wistful. Painfully reflective. Abstracted."

"How is your health?"

Lessing snapped his fingers. "Right. We forgot about that. Am I the victim of some disabling disease? Ought I to review my will? Ought I to get my house in order?"

Reeva kicked one of her Reeboks at Lessing. "You *could* use a maid. Meanwhile I'm going to gather up our dog, go to the market, and restock the house. Amazing how a vacation makes home cooking seem attractive. You would be welcomed for dinner tonight, with or without Alida."

Lessing sipped his coffee as Reeva pecked his cheek, crooked a finger at Molly, and started for the door. "Maybe a trip would be the thing to get you out of your funk. Get in your car and go someplace unplanned," she said. "Thank you for taking care of Molly."

There was some pleasure in the fact that Molly looked back at Lessing twice before following Reeva, but it was bittersweet pleasure at best. Molly's departure left him feeling strangely alone, and the connection he'd just made between Reeva and Alida left him uncomfortable as well. He went to the kitchen and brought out the ingredients for spaghetti carbonara, but stopped short of breaking the eggs when he remembered that spaghetti carbonara was the first meal he'd made for himself when he'd moved into his new apartment after the divorce and also the very dish he had prepared for himself after a woman he'd been dating for six months suddenly broke a thin flute of French bread over his head, called him enigmatic and vexing, packed her things that had been accumulating in the bedroom closet, and stormed out.

He made instead a thick sandwich, fortified with onion, tomato and lettuce, the kind that had to be eaten while standing over the kitchen sink. Just before dark, Lessing sat in his car outside the Zachary's home in the hilly Riviera section of Santa Barbara, not entirely sure why he had come until he saw Molly, sniffing at a hedge two houses away. He whistled softly, saw Molly's ears prick, her head snap about. She came to him at a cobbly but efficient run.

When Lessing opened the door, Molly jumped inside with an effortless lift, seeming to encourage conspiracy.. Firing up the engine, Lessing chucked Molly lightly under the jaw. "We're off," he said.

He headed west for a time, into the brightest part of the evening, well past Goleta toward Mariposa Reina and the Gaviota Beach camps, with no particular destination in mind. Molly sat on the front seat, sniffing at the rush of information that ran by her nose in the breeze of movement.

Reeva's suggestion of a trip had great appeal for him. Steinbeck had set forth with a poodle, of all things. He'd had a revitalizing experience and a book out of it. Nearly all the street people seemed to have dogs—more sensible dogs than poodles—and actually appeared to fare the better for it.

Now, he had the coastline on his left and a sense of purpose in front of him. The car, which Lessing had come to regard as being as idiosyncratic as he was, had never responded so well, the notion of driving without a destination felt as good to him as he imagined Molly felt, her nose out the open window. He hummed a fragile harmony to an Oscar Peterson CD.

At a roadside stand, Lessing got them hamburgers with everything, which they ate with ceremony, parked in front of a grassy dune near the beach, conspirators in a spontaneous adventure.

It was some time before the thought of Jerry and Reeva yanked at Lessing like a dog who has overrun its leash. "A little bit longer, while we walk off dinner," he said, heading across the dune.

Shortly before ten o'clock, he returned to the Zachary's to let Molly out. When Lessing called the next day to apologize for missing dinner, Jerry Zachary said, "Damndest thing. You'd think our dog would be glad to see us after we'd been away, but she took off for three or four hours and came back covered with sand and had caramelized onions on her breath."

"You'll have to accept it," Lessing said. "She has a life of her own."

From *Love Will Make You Drink and Gamble, Stay Out at Night* by Shelly Lowenkopf