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Stray

MARY MORRIS

FROM THE MOMENT THEY ARRIVE, the dog follows them. He trails them on their first morning as they walk on the golf course by the sea. The wind is so cold and strong that their faces turn numb as he follows them into the bogs and out on to the headlands. Once they think they've lost him, but he comes, racing back to them across the moors as they sit at the edge of the cliff, the sea roiling below. It's as if he's trying to bring them into the fold. Roger jumps, the dog startles him so, but Justine laughs, her long pale hair, which she's tied back, coming loose in the wind. "He's herding you," she says.

As they walk back to the hotel, the dog races, chasing a flock of sheep. He drives the sheep into a perfect circle, then makes them swirl. He chases a goose right back to its pond where the goose makes a frantic water landing. But mostly he trots beside them as they climb the hills and tramp through the peat bogs. He sticks close to them on the trails that jut above the sea. Justine comments that it seems as if he belongs to them. And Roger agrees. "He could be our dog."

That night Justine and Roger play cards before the blazing fire in the common room and sip Irish whiskey. Soon they are drowsy. "Shall we?" Justine says. She is tired, but it is "good tired," she tells Roger, not that bone-aching fatigue she's felt for so long. He keeps his hand pressed gently against her spine as they climb the stairs. They tumble into the feather bed, cradled in each other's arms, and stay that way all night. They sleep as well as they have in years. A hard, weary sleep.

In the morning they wake slowly to the sound of the sea. Justine nestles her head into Roger's shoulder, but neither of them moves. They take their time, getting up. When they are dressed and ready to head down to breakfast, they find the dog, asleep outside their door. His fur is wet with morning dew. She reaches down to pet him. "He must belong to the inn," Justine says as the dog lies on his back, taking the pose of surrender.

He is a black and white spaniel, some kind of a mixed breed. Maybe part border collie, Justine muses. One of those dogs with a blue eye and a black one. But it seems as if the black eye might be a blind one because when the dog looks at you, he turns his head to the side. As Justine bends to rub his belly, she feels a twinge, like a tug, where her scar is, but tries not to wince. She doesn't want Roger to notice. Because he will worry. And she does not want him to worry. She is, after all, finally well.

She pets the dog as his legs pedal in the air, and the pain courses through her, then goes away. "I wonder if he should be here," she mumbles. Then, as if on cue, as they head down to breakfast, the dog slips into a stairwell, then seems to slink away. In the lobby where the fire still smolders from the night before, Justine frets that he is a stray. "What if he doesn't have a place to go? Or if he's lost?" she asks Roger.

"He's some kind of sheep dog," Roger says. "I'm sure a dog like that has a home."

"But what if he doesn't?"

They pause at the desk to ask about him. "There's a dog," Justine says. "A spaniel...He seems to have taken a liking to us."

The clerk with the bright red hair and local brogue just shakes her head. "He's up to his old tricks again, is he?"

"Oh," Justine says. "So he's done this before?"

The girl rolls her eyes. "He's done it many a time," she replies. "It's his way."

"So you know him."

She nods again. "He's got a perfectly good home just up the road, but he's a double dipper. Prefers Bally House, I suppose." Then she adds, turning back to her work. "He likes to play with the children."

Justine thinks about this for a moment. She hasn't seen any children at Bally House since they arrived, though she can't be sure. It is late October, the off-season for Connemara. Already a cold mist blows in from the sea. It's not the holiday season. But perhaps he comes here expecting to find children.

"So it's all right if he's around."

"As long as he's not a bother to you. If he is, let me know and I'll send him on home."

"Oh, he's good company. He's no bother at all."

It is Justine's first trip since the surgery. Her first trip really in years. In fact she thought she'd never go anywhere again. It

wasn't that she hadn't wanted to get away. She had dreamed of hiking and standing by the sea, but every time she tried she sank back into a kind of lethargy. Once they got as far as the airport and had to turn back. But now that is all behind her. Now she is well.

It is a glorious morning and they decide to walk before breakfast. "We can work up an appetite," Roger says. They set out at a clip. The cobalt sky over the Atlantic, the sun that breaks through the sky. There is a donkey up the road. Justine has taken two apples from the bowl at the inn and she feeds them to the donkey whose yellow teeth nibble at her hand. The dog is nowhere in sight. After their walk they have breakfast. Roger jokes about the kippers and eggs. The bacon. Porridge. But she likes the hearty Irish breakfasts. She pats her belly. "I believe I'm putting on weight."

He rubs her belly too, then smiles up at her. "Yes, I believe you are." They have been married for twenty-seven years. How is this possible? Justine wonders at times. It seems as if just weeks ago they met in a coffeeshop in Boston where they'd both gone to school. He has stood by her through all the sickness, and now the health. And she wants to be strong. She will be strong if only for him.

After breakfast they set off again along the headlands, and across the peat bogs, and before they have gone half a mile, the dog is there. He seems to appear out of nowhere, startling them. Suddenly he is at their side. "Oh," Roger laughs, "where'd you come from?" The dog cocks his head as if he's listening. Then trots along at their side.

The dog stays with them until he spots a flock of sheep. He runs off, chasing them, just for the fun of it. "He's showing off," Justine says. Then he comes back, panting. Two women, also dressed in hiking gear, probably tourists from the inn, are walking their way. As they pass, they give Justine and Roger a nod. They pause to pet the dog. "What a nice fellow you've got here."

"Oh," Justine laughs, "he isn't ours."

"Well, you could've fooled me," one of the women replies.

When they grow hungry and start to head back, the dog drifts away, dashing up the road. After lunch Justine is tired. "Not bad tired," she says to Roger, touching his arm. It is their euphemism. The way she tells him she's not sick. "Just a little sleepy. I'd love a nap."

"Oh, it's all this fresh air and walking. Well, we're on vacation, aren't we?"

Their room is neatly made-up, the fluffy comforter folded back, and they slip into bed. Outside the waves crash and Justine lies with her eyes open, watching the clouds race across the sky. Roger dozes right off, but she doesn't. She listens to footsteps, racing up and down the hall.

After their nap, the dog is waiting for them. He is sitting on his haunches when they open the door. As they trot down the hall, the three of them, they pass the housekeeper and the dog hugs the wall with his eyes to the floor as if this way he won't be seen. The elderly woman has her arms full of clean linen and wool blankets. Seeing the dog, she shakes her head. "Oh, he's just spoiled."

Justine and Roger nod in agreement. "I guess he's adopted us."

"He likes the child," the housekeeper says.

"The child?" Justine and Roger say in unison. "Yes, the one I've seen with you." She begins counting through small bottles of conditioner and shampoo. Then she looks at them, confused. "I must've made a mistake," she tells them. "I've mixed you up with the other people." Then with a nod of her head, "Sorry about that."

Justine looks at Roger and he gazes back at her. She shrugs. They had a child once, but now she is grown. She went off to college a few years before and is on her own. They are, after all, not a young couple, though they aren't particularly old. Still it seems odd someone would think of them as two people with a child.

Suddenly Justine feels exhausted. It isn't the old fatigue she used to feel, but it isn't entirely unfamiliar to her either. It is deep in her bones. "What child?" she asks Roger. "What do you think she meant about the child?"

Roger shakes his head. "I don't know, darling." The way he looks down at the carpet makes Justine think of the dog. "She must have mistaken us for another couple."

"Perhaps it's the ghost," Justine says with a laugh, leading him down the corridor. It is true, because they read about it in the tourist brochure, that Bally House is supposed to have a ghost. The ghost of a child who hung himself in one of the rooms. They read that guests sometimes see a little boy dressed in a red velvet suit with a rope in his hands. And sometimes they hear his footsteps. Justine doesn't see how this could be a selling point, but apparently it is.

Roger gives her a strange look, shaking his head. "Don't even say such a thing." It is a colder, cloudy afternoon and they take their all-weather gear. Justine pulls her straight, blond hair back into a ponytail and pulls a cap over her head. "You look twenty years old, my dear," Roger says, kissing her on the cheek.

"I'm not sure how far I can walk this afternoon."

"Well, don't stress yourself. Just do what you can. Remember what the doctor said."

Of course Justine remembers what the doctor said. She's listened to nothing but doctors for years. She's been hooked up to machines, on drugs, off drugs, endless hours on dialysis (But she'd read more novels than she'd imagined she would in a lifetime), and finally on transplant lists. Though her brother was a perfect match, he declined, something Roger will never forgive, and so she waited more years and then last spring a kidney was found.

"Of course I remember..."

He takes her hand and leads her through the golf course where the wind blows like crazy. Roger takes a practice swing with an invisible club on the 4th hole. "I can't imagine playing golf here," he says. She can tell he longs for a game, but this is their holiday, their time together. They cross the golf course, holding on to their caps, then slip under the barbed wire fence.

The dog isn't with them. They walk for quite a while along the headlands, and they think perhaps he has gone home. But he appears, dashing toward them as if they are long lost friends. Can a dog smile? Justine wonders. This dog does seem to have a happy look on his face as he races to their side, runs a few circles around them, then settles into their pace. Despite Justine not being sure how far she could walk, they walk farther than they have. They almost reach the point where the lighthouse is, but then Justine says she thinks she needs to go back. "I'm not sure I can walk anymore."

Justine can tell that Roger is stunned to see how pale she looks. She feels as if the life has drained out of her and in fact she has to struggle to get back. The dog never leaves her side. That night her side throbs. That spot right above where the new kidney is. She feels it from time to time—a kind of pulsing. She doesn't like to mention it to Roger, but it beats like a living thing. She lies awake beside him, staring out. A full moon rises and she stares as it drifts in and out of the layers of clouds. Then the clouds part and the sky

turns clear. Stars twinkle and the moonlight, golden, shimmers on the cold, pounding sea.

In the morning they wake to a chilling fog and when they open their door, the dog is there. Damp from the morning dew, but ready to go with them. This time he walks right into their room and flops down on the bed. "Well, make yourself at home," Justine says with a laugh.

But Roger frowns. "Really, he shouldn't be in here."

"Oh, he'll just follow us when we leave." Already Justine feels the chill in the air. She decides she'll be cold and wants to change. "You go ahead, dear."

As Roger heads down, he takes the dog by the scruff of the neck and guides him out and the dog reluctantly obeys. Roger leaves for breakfast while Justine dallies, adding a layer of flannel beneath her fleece. When she goes into the hall, the housekeeper is there. The one she saw the other day who said she'd seen her with a child. The old woman is sorting through towels which she drapes across her arm when Justine approaches.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I was wondering..."

The housekeeper, not accustomed to fraternizing much with the guests, looks at her askance. "I was wondering if the child you've seen me with is a boy." Justine wants to know if it is the ghost of Bally House that keeps the dog nearby.

But the housekeeper shakes her head. "It's a girl. And she's dark." "Dark?"

The housekeeper nods, then thinking she's said enough, dashes into a room. "Sorry, Miss. I've got to be going," she says.

She leaves Justine in the corridor, pondering what she's said. In the dining room a fire blazes in the hearth and Roger has taken a seat near it. He already has served himself from the breakfast buffet. Justine sits down, just with a cup of tea. The warmth of the fire brings the color back into her face. "So," she says, "I asked the housekeeper and says the child she's seen us with is a girl and she's dark."

Roger's eyes open wide. He's listening, nodding, but not looking her way. "Right," he says.

"Do you think it's a joke?"

"I don't know really." He shakes his head. "I don't think it's a joke." His hand trembles as he butters his toast. He isn't looking her in the eye.

"You know something, don't you?...If you know something, you should tell me."

Roger hesitates. Justine can tell he doesn't want to say anything, but he does. There have never really been any secrets between them. Then he tells her, "She was a murdered girl. And you have her kidney."

Justine stares at her cup which she keeps stirring. "You've known..."

"Yes," he says. "It was a perfect match."

Justine nods, sipping her tea.

"Perhaps I should have told you..." But Justine gives him a wave of her hand. After breakfast they set off once more along the headlands. Justine's side throbs, but she doesn't want to say. It will only worry him. The wind is fierce off the Atlantic, and they haven't gone far when they see the dog. They are expecting him, of course. He races to them, then he dashes away. He runs at them, then again darts off. It is clear he's come to play.