Two months after my wife, Becky, died, I went on my first speed-walking date. I followed behind Corrine and watched her thighs move. Tight and brown, they reminded me of roasted chicken legs. They made me hungry for a kind of take-out Becky used to bring home. I didn’t know where to find it. I pumped my arms as I walked, the way I’d seen others do, so it looked, I hoped, as if I were hard at work.

When we got back to Corrine’s house, her daughter-in-law was bench-pressing her baby on the couch in the living room, both of them wearing bright orange T-shirts, the television on mute. We walked by them on our way to the patio, and for a moment the baby’s fat diaper, with its comforting powder smell, passed in front of my face.

I followed Corrine through her shining kitchen out back to the hot tub. She sat on the wooden ledge and kicked her feet to an efficient, private beat. Everything exercise.
Still wearing my gym shorts, I lowered my body in and tried to convince myself that this was different than taking an actual bath together. I positioned myself so a jet was poised against my lower back. This felt not altogether pleasant, as if I were having a single, neglected tooth cleaned. Before Becky died, I never understood people who claimed they had simply ended up somewhere or with someone or in some job, but now maybe I was starting to.

“You can bet they’re not doing this in Chicago right now,” Corrine said to me.

As I walked up the street toward my house, slowed down as I always was by the lump of hill, I could hear my seeing-eye dog barking in the living room. Twice a day, I had to clean the saliva off the window he barked onto. He jumped on me when I walked in, followed me until I shut the bathroom door against him, and whined as I showered off warm chlorine.

The dog was Becky’s retirement project, but she died before she’d finished training him. Becky had always had an idea or two going, and without her around, I didn’t seem to have any. In Chicago, she had taken a single class and come home and sponge-painted our entire kitchen purple. Our backyard was full of compost and tomato plants, and our thirty-eight-year-old daughter’s first drawings were laminated and arranged on the wall of the den.

In California, she had just gotten started. Training the dog was it. The Guide Dog of America people had warned against getting too attached. “Let’s just call him the dog for now,” she’d said, rubbing him behind his ears. All our friends in Chicago had grandchildren, but our daughter wasn’t even on her first marriage. Before Becky’s urine had turned bright red, she’d set off with the dog down the street several times a day, his leash twisted short and tight around her hand.

After Becky died, the guide dog people decided they didn’t want him back. At the volunteer luncheon in Sylmar, a Guide Dog of America official tapped me on the shoulder when I was in the middle of eating my peach cobbler, took me into the small blank room, in which moments earlier Becky’s dog had been evaluated, and told me that the dog was ruined, and for a hundred dollars he was mine. The
dog smiled up at me and offered his paw, the one trick I had taught him myself to amuse Becky. “Cute,” the official said, “but completely useless.”

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When the doorbell rang, I turned down the Simon and Garfunkel record that I had taken to listening to during the day while I folded my laundry, rinsed out the coffeepot, and generally padded around my little house as if I were trespassing. The music depressed and stirred me. I felt buoyant with suffering, part of a huge arc of human failure.

Corrine’s daughter-in-law and her baby stood at my front door, their thin blond hair in high ponytails above their ears, their rounded bellies exposed between black gym shorts and yellow shirts that looked as if they had been peeled open in front like bananas. “Christ, I hate to bother you like this,” the daughter-in-law said.

“I didn’t know she could walk yet.”

“Well, I am sort of helping her up a little,” the daughter-in-law said, and I could see now how the baby’s head was propped against her mother’s knee.

“A-hoo,” the baby said to me.

“She doesn’t really talk yet either,” the daughter-in-law said. “Hell, she’s only thirteen months. What do people expect?”

I tried to remember what to expect at thirteen months. My own daughter was nearly middle-aged now. It was her Simon and Garfunkel record.

“She looks fine to me,” I said.

“A-hoo,” the baby said and pointed next to my leg. I looked down at the dog who put out his paw. The baby reached forward to take it and fell into my house.

“What am I thinking? Come in,” I said. The baby crawled over to the couch, where she pulled herself up and gurgled at the dog who stayed by her side.

“Maybe he thinks the baby is another dog. He’s not that quick,” I said.

“Here’s what I was wondering,” Corrine’s daughter-in-law said, still close enough to the entranceway to be neither completely in nor
outside my house. “What would you think about giving us a ride to the mall?” I looked around for an excuse, but everything looked in order.

“Can you give me five minutes?”

* 

On the seat next to me in the car, the baby bounced around on Corrine’s daughter-in-law’s lap. I remembered my own daughter loose in the backseat, hopping from one window to the other, depending on the view, but weren’t there laws now, complicated provisions about car seats and seat belts?

“Is she okay like that?” I said. The daughter-in-law waved her hand at me in a gesture of dismissal.

“What are we talking about here? Two, three miles?” She pulled down the visor and, while her baby bounced, examined her teeth in a mirror I didn’t even know was there. Becky had always applied her makeup before we left the house and then left it alone.

Becky’s seeing-eye dog sighed heavily in the backseat, as if commenting on the general dullness of things. The baby wouldn’t stop crying until I agreed to take the dog along with us, and now I was stuck with him for the foreseeable future.

“We’re Baby Spice,” Corrine’s daughter-in-law said to me, “in case you were wondering. You don’t think it’s a problem that the group broke up, do you?”

“Certainly not,” I said, although I had no idea what she was talking about. I longed for nothing more than to be back in my quiet little house.

“A-hoo,” the baby said to me.

“But you can call me Rose. Not Rosy, whatever you do. Man, I hate that.”

The parking lot at the mall was crowded, despite the fact that it was Saturday and seventy degrees and sunny. Back in Chicago, if we had weather like this in the middle of February, everyone would be standing outside looking startled, as if jet planes had just landed on each of our front lawns.

“There’s just the matter of the entrance fee now,” Rose said to me
as we walked through the lot, the baby squirming in her arms to touch the dog that I walked between us. I had the dog in full training harness, the way I always did when I had to take him somewhere dogs weren’t normally allowed. I found there was no need to wear dark sunglasses. I’d simply give into a dazed fog I’d been fighting off since Becky’s death, and no one ever asked me any questions. “But you can bet we’ll be winning it back for you momentarily. You don’t know what it means to me, a near-total stranger like you believing in me this way when him and his whole family don’t.”

Once, two weeks after Becky died, I came to this mall at eight a.m. on a Tuesday for free coffee and donuts and to circle the perimeter before the stores opened with fellow senior citizens. Senior Day. The donuts were small and dirt brown, and everyone seemed already to belong to informal groups, and I didn’t come back. Instead I began to wander my own new neighborhood, which is how I met Corrine, and which is how, I supposed, I was led into this very situation.

It turned out the entrance fee for the Mother-Daughter Look-Alike Contest Rose planned to enter was only twenty dollars, so I paid it, pretending to finger the money in my wallet as if finger-reading the denominations.

“Cool, Gramps,” a teenage boy said to me. He handed Rose two white squares of cardboard with the number 68 printed on them in red. I helped her peel off the adhesive and centered one of the squares on her back.

“Mommy’s putting wings on you, sweetie,” Rose told the baby, who held onto my knee. “Stay still just a minute.”

All around us were mothers and daughters, wearing matching numbers, straightening out each other’s makeup and examining each other’s teeth for pieces of food. Despite their matching hairdos and outfits, Rose’s baby looked more like the other babies than she did her mother. I picked out the mother-daughter set I thought would win: an adolescent girl and a woman in her late thirties who wore big skirts and red neckties and had the same wounded-looking, eager faces. Rose pulled the baby away from my leg and held her up in the air.

“We’ll show that daddy and grandma of yours what’s what,” she
said. Becky’s dog pulled at his harness, and I told Rose I was going to take him for a walk and come back soon. I let him lead me away from the Mother-Daughter contest to the food court, where the smells were large and urgent and where the dog tugged harder. He sniffed at a garbage can, and a woman held her burrito away from her mouth and pointed at him to her friend.

“I thought they weren’t supposed to do that,” she said.

“Shh,” her friend said. “Just because he’s blind doesn’t mean he can’t hear.”

“What did I say that was so terrible?” the other woman said, clamping down on her food.

Maybe they were sisters, not friends, I thought. I pulled the dog away from the garbage can and slowly circled the edge of the food court until I found a smell that was so familiar I nearly sat down on the floor and wept. Instead I stood in line and waited for my turn. Behind me in line, someone whispered, “Their other senses are highly developed.”

“I’ll take a bucket of legs,” I said when my turn came. I paid my money, stepped to the right, and was handed a white beach bucket full of roasted chicken legs. I found a spot at the end of a long table and sat down. The dog reached out his paw to me. I put a leg on the ground, and only after the dog had snatched it did I remember Becky’s warnings about bone splinters. I had forgotten to order a drink, and it seemed too late for that now, so I ate just two legs and put the bones back in the bucket. I thought about Becky bringing home this chicken for me and how I was now going to bring it home for myself and how this wasn’t the same thing at all.

I pulled the dog back out toward the area of the mall where the contest was being held. A tight circle had formed around the mother-daughters, but people moved apart to let us in. Two women with curly red hair and lots of gold-colored jewelry stepped into the center of the circle when their number was called out. They spun around in front of the judges in unison, then shook their wrists in the air as if their bracelets were tambourines. The crowd applauded and the dog barked. All around the inside of the circle were mother-daughter
look-alikes, smiling hard at the judges who sat behind a long card table. I looked around for Rose and the baby but didn’t see them. Then someone pulled at my hair. I turned around, and the baby said, “A-hoo.” Rose said, “Ready to roll?”

Rose didn’t talk as we walked through the parking lot, the baby tight against her body, and I thought about several different ways of asking her what had happened but thought better of each one of them. I put the bucket of chicken legs down on the seat between us and didn’t say anything when, the baby on her lap, Rose dug in.

“Fine print, my ass,” she finally said. “Who ever heard of disqualifying someone because they couldn’t turn around on their own in front of the judges yet? At least they should have given me my money back.”

*My money,* I thought, but I didn’t say anything.

“Slow down here for a minute, would you?” Rose said.

I couldn’t imagine driving any slower than I already was, as worried as I was about the baby loose on her mother’s lap in the front seat, so I pulled over by the side of the road in front of a strawberry stand.

“Hey, Rosy! Is that you?” the man behind the stand called out.

“I said ‘slow down,’ not ‘stop,’” Rose said, but she was already putting the baby down and pushing the car door open with her pink sneaker.

I put the baby on my lap and let her pretend to drive while her mother leaned over the rows of strawberries and talked. She got back into the car and slipped a piece of paper into her pocketbook. “High school,” she said. “At least I didn’t marry *him.*”

When we pulled up to the front of their house, Corrine was watering the front yard in her bathing suit. She started to wave at us and then stopped and frowned and turned the water off. I threw a leg in the back for the dog, dumped the rest out on the street, and handed the baby the bucket. “For the beach,” I said.

“A-hoo,” the baby said, reaching for the bucket’s handle and grabbing the air next to it instead.

“I mean, she just turned one,” Rose said to me, taking the bucket. “What do people expect?”
I watched them walk to the front door and then drove my car
down the hill and around the block, the long way to my house. I pulled
into my driveway and shut off the engine. The dog sighed heavily in
the backseat, his chicken leg devoured. Tomorrow morning, I’d bring
the DustBuster out to the car and clean up bone chips that he missed,
but for now I stared at my little house, this place where, after so much
time, I had ended up living.