

Stealing Yakima

A woman reports her estranged husband came to her house while she was gone and took their dog.

—*Lake Oswego Review* police blotter

HERE IS BRIAN PALMER, dressed and ready for work, and here is his two-year-old daughter in his bed, still asleep, her stomach barely moving with each breath and one hand resting above her head. He watches her for a moment and then backs out of the room, closes the door slowly, and steps lightly down the stairs. His mother is already in the kitchen, scrubbing his dinner dishes from the night before. She's already opened the living room and kitchen blinds, though it's still dark outside. Even so, Brian can see water clinging to the other side of the glass and knows it will be wet again.

"When did you get here?" Brian asks, reaching for his mug.

"Ten minutes ago, fifteen maybe. She sleeping?" Brian thinks about Charlotte, her two-year-old breaths on his pillow, and nods his head. His mother grabs the pot of coffee and fills his cup where

he holds it out to her. He thinks he should tell her not to do his dishes, that he can take care of things like that himself, but he knows it won't make a difference. His mother puts the last dish in the dishwasher, slings the gray dishtowel over her shoulder, then pulls a novel from her purse and sits at the kitchen table. From the baby monitor on the counter, they hear the swish of wet tires on pavement every time a car drives past the house.

"I have an appointment today," she says. "I'll need to take Charlotte, but it won't be too long." Brian nods his head in agreement and finishes his coffee quickly. If he leaves before Charlotte wakes, it will be easier to get out the door. He walks to the breakfast nook out of instinct, ready to fill the dog's bowl, but stops himself when he sees the empty dog bed and remembers that Yakima, along with his wife, is gone.

Brian steps into the dark rain and starts his car. He knows his mother will hear him—as he releases the emergency brake, as he backs from the driveway and into the morning rush out of Mountain Park, as he accelerates in the direction of the high school—all in a circle of sound: the baby monitor in his bedroom upstairs, tuned to its highest sensitivity, will inhale the sounds and spit them out again somewhere in his kitchen, where his mother sits turning the pages of her book and slowly sipping her coffee.

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When his wife left with Yakima three weeks ago, it would have been full light already at this time of the morning. And she *had* left in the morning, before he and Charlotte were awake, in that first light. At the time, he felt mostly confusion that she had left and anger that she had taken their dog, which they'd found abandoned five years ago along a stretch of highway just south of the Washington city that bears its name. As the weeks have worn on,

through the beginning of spring and twenty-one nights and mornings, he's become more angry for Charlotte's sake than for his own. What kind of mother takes the dog but leaves the child? What kind of mother leaves at all?

His first visit to her new place went badly. She'd taken an apartment in Pipers Run, a unit of duplexes at the forested end of Child's Road, in the part of Lake Oswego that isn't Lake Oswego at all, but county land. She was in an upstairs unit, the top end of a duplex, and he climbed a full flight of steps covered with moss and almost slipped twice. The place was dark, curtains drawn, but when he knocked Yakima appeared in the window next to the door, jumping up between the curtain and the glass, whining and barking at the sight of Brian on the front mat. Through the dirty glass, Brian admired the swish of his dog's long dreadlocked fur. His wife opened the door and he looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. She appeared as if days had passed since she had combed her hair or dressed. Empty milk cartons and newspapers crowded the kitchen table, and the apartment smelled of mold and old animal stains. Brian glanced around the place and then back at his wife. He told her they could find her a better place to stay if she still needed some time.

"You aren't paying for this," she said, "my father is." She looked up at him and lit a cigarette. "Do you want to go through it again, Brian?"

"Through what?"

"Through the part where I tell you it isn't about you. The part where I make it clear I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

Brian was silent for a long while, then said, simply, "And Charlotte?"

She laughed, then met his gaze. "Look at me," she said. "One step away from those women on the news with long hair and no

makeup, the kind who wake up one day and drown their kids in the bathtub.” She stopped laughing, said, “I don’t want to do that.”

His wife sat on the floor then, and Yakima sat with her, his head in her lap, while she stroked the dog’s charcoal dreadlocks with her free hand. And looking at her like that, Brian thought: How unoriginal. He could have painted his wife from an article he’d read in a waiting-room magazine with the title “When Mothers Can’t Cope: Postpartum Depression and the Twenty-First-Century Mom.” He had a hard time believing his wife’s problem because it was so textbook, something she could have copied from a million other women in their color-coordinated kitchens. But then he thought about his wife: that uncontainable energy that so quickly disappeared after Charlotte was born, the way she used to squint her eyes when she smiled. Her situation *was* different. She had grown to feel as trapped by him as by their child.

Yakima looked up at Brian and wagged his tail. Brian called Yakima to him and let the dog lick his face, jump up onto his knees. He’d come with the intention of convincing his wife to come home, or at the very least of taking the dog with him, but at the last minute, the courage he’d come with had gone. He guessed nothing he said could get her to come home. And he guessed he liked the thought of Yakima snuggled close to his wife, keeping an eye on her.

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Brian is at the high school within five minutes, and by the time he parks his car, the rain has slowed considerably. The parking lot is mostly empty, but he knows as the sky lights up and another hour passes, it will fill with other cars, most of them student cars nicer than the one he drives. He accepts this as part of the reality of being a teacher in the Lake Oswego School District, where he

and his colleagues joke that many of their students have allowances greater than their own salaries.

He walks into the high school slowly, passing Kay at the front office desk and offering a hello. He unlocks his classroom and then the English department cupboard, pulling stacks of books from the top shelf. He'll start a new unit with his sophomores today, so he counts out sixty-four copies of *My Ántonia* into stacks on his desk. Half of the copies are the edition he fell in love with when he wrote his honors thesis on Willa Cather in college: the edition whose cover shows a picture of a single plow illuminated by the sunset. His notes on Cather he pulls from a manila folder and sits to read through them, when he hears a tentative voice from the door: "Mr. Palmer?"

A student from his freshman class is standing in the doorway, half in and half out, her whole body a question. Every sentence she speaks is a question, too. "I'm here for my makeup test? I was sick last week?" He should know her name; it's April already, after all, but the only names that come to mind are the characters from the notes in front of him.

"Of course, right," Brian says and waves her in with his hand. He runs his fingers through his file box until he finds the exam and gives it to her with a forced smile. She chooses a desk in the front, directly on the other side of his, and places the exam and a phone on top of it. The phone looks like the kind that can take pictures and do other spectacular things. "I'll use a pen?" She pulls a blue ballpoint from her backpack. Brian nods his assent and the two settle in to their separate tasks. He is surprised to find he likes how it feels to have someone else in the room with him. He likes how much smaller the space seems. He looks at the empty coffee mug on the corner of his desk and wonders if Charlotte is awake. The girl sighs and scratches something out with her pen. Her phone beeps and she looks at it, briefly, and smiles at some-

thing she sees, probably some text message from a boyfriend just now arriving at school.

Claire. Her name is Claire.

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Brian and his wife found the dog along the highway after visiting relatives in Yakima. His wife had fallen asleep as soon as they had started out, and he had thought she was still napping when she started screaming, "Brian, stop! Stop! Pull over!" He eased the car to the shoulder of the highway and they found the dog in the bushes fifty yards behind them. Brian held out his fist the way he'd been taught and lowered it gently under the dog's nose so the dog could smell him. The dog tilted his head to the right and then licked Brian's knuckles.

They tried to get the dog to stand, but he limped severely on his hind leg. His fur was rough and matted near his face, but the long dreadlocks still hung off some parts of his body, and Brian could tell that if the dog was cleaned, those dreads would be the color of the highway asphalt underneath them. Brian's wife buried her face in the dog's fur and said, "What this poor dog must have been through," and Brian said, "Must be one of those Hungarian sheepdogs. Never seen one in person."

By the time they carried the dog to their old Civic and settled him into the backseat, his name was Yakima. A veterinarian in Portland put Yakima's hind leg in a cast and shaved some of the most matted spots of his fur, making him look as if he'd survived a major battle. They made a bed for Yakima in the living room out of their best blankets, and Brian held his paws while his wife worked to get the antibiotic capsules into the dog's mouth and down his throat. Brian went to bed early, worn out from the day, but his wife fell asleep next to Yakima, her arm slung across his back. That's where Brian found them in the morning, and he made

coffee as the dog sat up in its makeshift bed and wagged his tail and they all laughed and felt like a family. Brian put his hand on his wife's thigh and loved her so much he felt like a newlywed again. He kissed her cheek. "I guess he's pretty lucky we found him," he said, and scratched Yakima behind his left ear.

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Third period, Brian is reading the prologue to *My Ántonia* out loud to his sophomores when Kay comes into the classroom. "Sorry, Mr. Palmer," she says, and beckons him to follow her into the hall. Brian looks at his students. He puts one of the girls from the front row in charge of reading where he left off and closes his classroom door behind him.

"Sorry, Brian," Kay apologizes again, "but your mom keeps calling. She says your little girl won't stop crying. Wonders if she feels well." Brian sighs and nods his head. He uses the phone in the office to call his house and tells his mom that Charlotte is probably cutting molars, that she can give her some Tylenol drops from the medicine cabinet. He hurries back to his classroom and finds them finishing the passage just in time for him to launch into a discussion about first-person narration and the role of the narrator in Cather's novel.

By the time the bell rings, his stomach is churning and he's ready for lunch. But Kay stops him on the way to the teacher's lounge to tell him his mother is on the phone again. He makes his way to the front office and puts the receiver to his ear. His mother's voice: "She's fine, Brian. She's asleep. Wanted to let you know." There's a pause on the line, and then his mother says that his wife had called. "She claims she needs some cash and that she's leaving town for a while. I don't know, honey, I think you should call her."

Three of his students pass him and call out his name. "Yo, Palmer!" And he answers back with a smile. He thanks his mom

and hangs up the phone. He heads back to his classroom, forgetting his hunger, and loses himself to his notes about *My Ántonia*, to wheat fields in the Midwest and the book he admired for its realism before he had any problems of his own. And he's suddenly struck with the idea that he wants to get away, that he wants to take Charlotte and leave for the weekend, to do something away from the house with the mortgage he can't afford, and away from his helpful mother, from the empty dog bed in the breakfast nook.

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Two weeks after Charlotte was born, Brian's wife refused to get out of bed, refused to nurse the baby. Her breasts became hot boulders that would occasionally leak circles of milk onto her clothes. She stared at the ceiling with Yakima's head on her stomach while Brian danced around the kitchen with a fussy Charlotte, learning how to test the heat of formula on his wrist and squeeze the air bubbles from a bottle. On the third day of this, his wife, who hadn't smoked for years, asked for a pack of cigarettes and let the tears stream down her face after she'd lit the first one. Yakima clambered up the bedsheets and licked the first round of tears off her left cheek before she pushed him away.

And two weeks later she got out of bed, showered, and cuddled Charlotte in the crook of her elbow. She said, "I think I can do this now," and Brian didn't question. His wife was back and he tried not to think of losing her again until she and Yakima disappeared in the early morning. Sometimes, late at night, in the dark, he wonders if they were ever in the house at all.

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By skipping out on his last-period prep, Brian is able to get to his house in Mountain Park by two o'clock. Charlotte has just awakened, and there is still sleep crusted in the corners of her eyes.

Brian sends his mom home and then grabs the small suitcase from the closet—the only piece of luggage his wife left behind. He packs three changes of clothes for each of them and whatever toiletries he sees nearby, and they are in the car by three, heading for the coast. Brian feels almost giddy, being so spontaneous. He doesn't know where they'll sleep, doesn't know, even, which coastal town they're headed to.

While they're being spontaneous, why not? Brian decides to stop off at his wife's place to see if he can persuade her to come along. He makes faces into the rearview mirror and Charlotte giggles, sticking her tongue out in return. When they get to Pipers Run, he leaves Charlotte in the car where he can see her and runs up the steps to the apartment. Yakima is in the window before Brian reaches the top step, so instead of knocking Brian tries the door and finds it unlocked. Yakima jumps up on him, panting, goes for Brian's face with his huge tongue. When he looks up, Brian doesn't see his wife in the living room or kitchen, so he figures she must be behind the closed bedroom door. He contemplates going in there after her, but changes his mind at the last minute. Instead, he takes Yakima by the collar and leads him outside. They are only halfway to the car when he can see Charlotte pumping her legs up and down with excitement, bouncing her arms off her knees at the sight of the dog.

"Yaki! Yaki!" She's screaming when he opens the car door and guides Yakima inside. The dog puts his front paws on either side of Charlotte's car seat and licks her face while she squeals in delight.

Brian looks at them in the backseat and says, "Well, guys, should we go?" Yakima looks at him and Charlotte laughs.

What he didn't expect was that Yakima would miss his wife. They are barely to the freeway before the dog has propped his paws

against the window, whining. The whole ride to the beach, he paces the rear of the car, as if he's nervous, as if they've left something precious behind. Yakima finally settles in to sleep by the time they head north on Highway 101, but soon Charlotte begins to fidget and cry, wanting out of her car seat. Brian is prepared for this one: he has fruit snacks and cheese puffs in Ziploc bags on the empty passenger seat beside him, and he tosses them to her, one after the other, to keep her contentedly chewing for the rest of the drive.

He pulls from the highway at his first sighting of the ocean. It's not even five o'clock, and he's pretty confident he'll be able to find them a motel somewhere along the highway, in any one of the impending coastal towns. But there's been a sudden clearing of the sky, and he wants to take advantage of it. He wants to feel the sting of blowing sand on his face and touch the chilled ocean water. He wants to watch his dog run again, Yakima's long fur swaying rhythmically as he strides.

As soon as she realizes Brian has pulled off the highway and is parking the car, Charlotte starts yelling, "Out, Daddy, out!" and tugging at the straps of her car seat. She yawns as he frees her from her buckles and transfers her into the metal frame backpack from the trunk of the car. When he straps her on his back, she tugs at the top of his hair with her tiny fingers. He pulls one of Yakima's leashes from the glove compartment and then the three of them are off, following an old trail in the direction of the water.

Charlotte falls asleep in minutes, lulled by the bounce in Brian's walk and the sound of the waves as they approach them. Brian hikes down a large dune and finds himself on a long, empty beach. In the distance, at the tip of a peninsula, Brian can make out the old lighthouse, and not too far before that is Haystack Rock, an immense boulder rising above the water like a newly

hatched island. Beside him, Yakima whimpers again and looks behind them in the direction of the car. The dog plops down in the sand and rolls onto his back, as if to feel the sand in his fur. Brian laughs and lets go of the leash. He slowly eases his arms out of the backpack, and then pulls Charlotte from it with gentle tugs, careful not to wake her. He lies down next to Yakima with his baby girl on his chest, the sand damp beneath him, and closes his eyes.

When he opens them again, he knows he's been asleep for some time, and he instinctively grabs for Charlotte on his chest, but she's gone. There's a split second when he thinks he must have dreamed the drive, and Yakima, and the ocean air, but he can hear the waves, and knows that as soon as he sits up he'll see miles and miles of sand. He jumps to his feet, panicked, and realizes Yakima is gone, too, and he knows the dog must be with Charlotte. He yells the dog's name and scans the horizon, frozen to his spot on the sand because he doesn't know which direction he should head.

But then he sees off in the distance, in the same line of vision as Haystack Rock, a pair of dark figures that must be Yakima and Charlotte. The sun behind them has started to set, so they look like silhouettes. He sees Charlotte put her arms around Yakima's neck and fall backward on the sand, then stand up again and jump, as if they're playing some game. He walks toward them slowly, feeling a strange calm. As he gets closer, their figures grow larger and larger in his vision, and soon the sky behind them is filled with the orange light of sunset, and his girl and his dog look like the illuminated plow on the cover of *My Ántonia*.

Charlotte is laughing as he approaches, and seeing her face up close makes Brian's heart pound for the first time as he becomes aware of how close he could have been to losing her. The sky feels as though it's getting ready to rain again, and his entire back side

is wet from his nap on the damp sand. Yakima barks playfully and starts to run parallel to the surf, his one bad leg a split second behind the even rhythm of the others. And Brian Palmer thinks, A kid needs a dog. And he knows, scooping Charlotte up in his arms and chasing after Yakima, that they might never get his wife back, but the dog, the dog they'll keep.