

STEPHANIE GANGI

THE RESCUE

Kath organizes herself: handbag under passenger seat, car keys zipped into right jacket pocket, gloves stuffed in left. She gets out and opens the hatch and blocks Lad to stop him from jumping before she gives the OK, but he jumps. She grabs the leash just in time. She struggles to get the gloves out of her pocket and on, Lad is pulling to get going, to get to the trail; he's strong, the pulling hurts her hands, already winter-dry in mid-November. She drops a glove and loses her grip on the leash, and because he's a runner, because he seizes every opportunity, Lad runs. Lad! Wait! Laddie! Wait up!

Lad runs opposite their usual direction, towards Long Trail North, dragging the leash. He runs nose to ground, scenting something, along the stone wall and past the tall binocular viewer through which people, later in the day, five hundred feet above the Hudson River, will enjoy the view at State Line Lookout until one of them spots Kathleen splayed at the base of the cliffs.

But it's 6:30 in the morning and that hasn't happened yet.

He's too far ahead. Kath runs calling, Lad! Bad boy! Stop! Stop right there! She's chasing him. She's upset. It's in her voice. She's had dogs her whole life and she knows—Lad knows—that she is not in control, he's gone beyond her. He is compelled by the scent of something, and she is fueling his mission, whatever it is, by calling and chasing. Kath sees Lad's determination—in that moment she realizes that the word “dogged” has something to do with dogs, that had never occurred to her—in the way his chest has expanded, how the barrel body barrels along, his short legs bony and toned and muscled and moving like pistons. That head, the head that

has weighted down her anxiety while he snored against her in the bed, is still dropped. His ears point ahead.

He's handsome, everybody notices. Gray with symmetrical white markings on his chest, forepaws and muzzle. He has an enormous pink tongue that matches the pink skin inside his ears. His eyes shine, otherworldly. She wanted him at first sight. He was not a puppy, so he came with a backstory she'd never know except that he was found by a rescue boat during Superstorm Sandy, swimming a flooded street as if in a river. They picked him up in time, he was panting hard and exhausted, and his legs kept paddling—he kept swimming—even after they got him in the boat. She'd never adopted a rescue dog before, had acquired previous dogs through word-of-mouth, even once from a pet shop, but she'd read the Sandy articles and scrolled images, and the magnitude of destruction in her part of the state after the storm overwhelmed her, and she couldn't observe any more, couldn't process any more. She read a story in her local paper about the pitbull-Staffie mix who paddled for his life and she got in the car, drove to the shelter. No deliberation necessary. Kath was still in her post-apocalypse denial period, when she was repeatedly secretly shocked, electric, by her new reality: she now had an empty house and a big yard and nobody left at home to confer with, to be considerate of.

Kath is not a runner. Her lungs burn and her breathing is chaotic, so she stops, tries to calm her breath, tries to assess. Her own legs, untuned, unmuscular, tremble. Lad is a lot of dog. Kath is on the dark side of sixty.

Three orange cones are lined up to warn hikers away from the part of the Long North Trail without a barrier wall, likely eroded, close to the cliff's edge, directly over the river. There are urgent orange signs, which Kath never noticed on previous walks. DANGER STEEP CLIFFS! WARNING! CLIFFS ARE STEEP AND SLOPES ARE DANGEROUS! STAY ON TRAILS! DO NOT GO BEYOND FENCES OR BARRIERS! It's almost like Lad understands about the orange cones and the signs because for the first time since he's gone on the run, he pauses and looks over his shoulder at Kath. He's panting, pink tongue fluttering, catching his breath, but it feels

to Kath like he might be checking in with her. Like a good boy. She drops to a knee and holds her hands up, one gloved, one bare, truce, no problem. OK, good boy. Good Laddie. Come to me. Come. What a good boy.

Lad stares, impassive. She smiles a phony smile, raises her eyebrows, gives him a trust-me face. She pats the ground. Come on, bud. His posture remains assertive. His tail is still erect. His ears flick forward. He looks away, back to where the old trail slopes down into the trees, and then back at Kath. They're conversing but Lad hears Kath's fake voice. Naturally, he decides against her.

Kath is stung. She hits the ground with the gloved hand. Lad, come here right now! I'm serious! I'm not running after you anymore! Get over here!

He resumes tracking. What is he after? Deer? Feral cats? Kath follows Lad into the sparse stand of trees along the edge. She is seriously out of breath, her ungloved hand is cold, her left calf muscle is so tight she's sure if she stops again it will cramp. She debates giving up, letting him go. Maybe this is what led to his getting separated from his first family during the storm, this obsessive pursuit of some irresistible scent. That thought falls into the next: like Brian. She mutters, Fuck off, but not too loud. She doesn't want Lad to misunderstand.

She realizes she could call someone. Call for help. Is this an emergency? Someone must be on duty all the time, a ranger, with a vehicle and a plan. She needs help. Why does it take her so long to admit it? There might be a solution other than her own, easier, with better odds of success. She's tried to embrace this idea recently, staying open to solutions, as a way to manage her stress, to talk herself down after meetings with The Mediator. The phrase *The Mediator* always comes to her accompanied by the slashing violins of a Hitchcock movie.



She reaches for her phone, wondering about cell coverage. Her car and the Lookout Inn are a only half mile away, the Palisades Parkway is not more than a mile from here, she's been silly, she's close to everything.

She pats her pockets. No phone. She can't believe it. She makes herself

stop, touches every pocket again. No phone. She replays organizing herself to get out of the car and feels it, the phone left on the passenger seat. She checks her pockets again anyway, breathing and searching and finding nothing. Fuck me. Fuck me.

She can hear Lad up ahead, catches glimpses of him as he moves between the trees and over dry groundcover of leaves and fallen branches. She thinks again, I've got to let him go. I've got to go back and get the phone. She has this thought, she commits to the action, and then she sees Lad come to an abrupt short stop. He pulls forward and is yanked back.

His leash is caught on a half-buried plank left over from another time. It's faded battleship gray, maybe ancient boat debris. Kath is limp with relief. She approaches, crooning to Lad. He looks at her with the wide grimace she tells herself is a smile. She smiles back, not fake. He gives a tentative wag of tail. You dopey guy, you big dopey Laddie. Where the heck are you going? OK, buddy, here I am, here we go, just stay put, you're OK. We're OK.

The leash's loop has landed like a lariat around the plank. Lad pulls and the leash gets taut. Kath works to unhook the loop from the plank, but it's tight. She nudges it up along the splintered wood, her ungloved hand holding the board steady, the other hand inching the loop along. Lad pulls. Bud, stop, I'm trying, stop pulling. Stop pulling! She gives his leash a hard tug to convince him, she's the boss. He's got a neck like thick pipe and barely feels it. The frustration in her voice runs like a current through the leash.

Gray dawn becomes gray morning. They left home only forty-five minutes ago. She thinks about the coffeemaker, set for 7:00 a.m. She thinks about her sons, in their own homes, in their own mornings, with their own kids. Brian, now in his own morning. Kath wakes every day at 5:00 a.m., no alarm needed, it's a bad habit, she's tried to meditate or medicate herself out of it, because five a.m. is an empty hour and her thoughts rush to fill it. For forty years she emerged from sleep to waking into a daily comfort of here I am, there he is, I smell him. And the day began. Now at five a.m. her eyes jump open and her brain, her nostrils and her heart fill with the no-scent of Brian's absence. In

bed she tries to conjure his smell, but it's only Lad, snoring against her, while she waits for 6:00 a.m., when he needs his walk.

With daylight, Kath notices she and Lad are not more than eight feet from the end of the world. **CLIFFS ARE STEEP AND SLOPES ARE DANGEROUS!** The edge is near. She looks out and sees only distance, the gray river, gray city skyline on the other side, the brightening sky. Her heart pounds. They have gone through all this, she's finally got him, and now he's stuck on this random two-by-four, in a bad spot, a very bad spot. Come on, she says to herself, this is crazy. Come on. She considers unclipping Lad's leash, gripping him by the collar, but that seems risky, he's too strong, too headstrong, she might not be able to hold him. And then, easy as you please, the plank loosens and she can rock it from the hard ground. She laughs. Oh! OK! Who cares how we do it, right, buddy? We'll take it with us. A souvenir. Our little adventure.

Kath rocks and pulls the plank out of the ground. Lad pulls too and the board flies up. She registers splinters and slashing along the palm of her bare hand. When the board hits the ground, Lad startles. He rears and moves away, backwards. He drags the lassoed plank, he jerks the leash, trying to lose the plank, he moves backwards, and Kath has a solution, she does the next thing, thinking she has to stop him from backing up and over; she stamps down on the plank with her booted foot. She hops on it with both feet to use her full weight to stop Lad.



Nothing stops. Lad backs up with Kath still on the plank. She throws her arms up and jerks back, like snowboarding, something Brian and the boys loved, everyone except Kath, who in the many times before she slammed onto packed snow, fell wrong. Brian would say, You have to learn to fall! Relax! She had no idea what he was talking about. How could you relax while you were falling?

She sees treetops revolve, clouds drift, hawks glide. She decides to just close

her eyes and fall until the fall is over. Maybe this is what he meant. Relax.

Her head hits hard. She hears her own cries and her own boots scabble for purchase. She hears a yelp. She hears the plank bang against the cliff face once they are over, first Lad, then Kath. She hears gravel clatter. Igneous rock. She knows this from the environmental signage at the entrance to the park. Diabase, formed by volcanic activity. Two hundred million years ago. She wants distractions out of her brain. She's busy. She bumps downhill. She thinks, Focus. She opens her eyes.

It's not a sheer drop, not yet. She's not plummeting, she's tumbling. She has time, in a way, to establish: I fell, we fell, down the Palisades, we are on our way into the Hudson River. Signage said: five hundred and twenty feet. She needs a metric. Brian is six feet tall, how many stacked up, six-foot Brians equals five hundred and twenty feet? Less than one hundred. That's not so bad, is it? What's the size of a football field? She has no idea, even with all boys. Is there a ledge? Is there something to grab? She tries to slow herself more. She reaches, trying to be deliberate, trying not to be desperate or panicky, this side, that side, anything, saplings growing out from rock, igneous. It's too hard to get hold. She grasps grasses which slide through her hands, both now ungloved. A fearsome pain lights up her left side and bolts into her shoulder. She picks up speed past fewer ledges, less foliage, skids along the flat face of Ice Age stone. There is nothing to hold onto anymore.

Lad's first yelp, when she still held her ground, plays like an echo. She can't see him. She slides down. She thumps hard, shoulder, broken shoulder, one and then the other, her head, her head, her head. She makes the mistake of turning slightly to protect the back of her skull and her face scrapes rock, rock scrapes her face. Fuck no, not my face. She's still a good-looking woman. She feels a majestic agony everywhere and thinks, absurdly, about medical insurance, one of the pending items for—violins—The Mediator. Custody of the fucking dog is a pending item. She thinks, Fuck it. Keep him. She thinks Ah, humor, just to make herself know. She is Kath, falling, it's a disaster, but she is still Kathleen. Still alive.

She hits very hard, too hard, and the fall is over.

When she comes aware, she sees the shadow of a scarecrow hung over a tree branch. She realizes the scarecrow is she herself. Her arms and legs dangle, her head hangs. She processes what the shadow shows: she's slung over a sturdy tree branch that has sprouted from a seam in the rock face. Her body feels slammed. Her ribs must be crushed considering how she's ended up, thrown like a wet towel over a clothesline. She thinks, OK, OK, broken bones heal. Her body checks her irrational rationalizing brain by pumping hot pain everywhere, except for the terrifying feeling of no feeling in her hands and feet. She is afraid to look around, she is afraid to breathe. She lives now and forever across this branch that grows like a whisker from the face of an ancient rock presiding over the river. Yet, alive. She can see, she can breathe. Where is Lad?

Elsewhere, the day, a Tuesday, carries along. Things happen, like always. Kath's two sons have both left for work and the wives, whose names Kath still mixes up, have dropped Kath's grandsons, Dylan and Arnie, Liam and Ryan, at their schools. All sons, all grandsons. Brian is with an Emily or an Emma. He's not retired, not yet, but time is finally his own. Kath has imagined that in the mornings, they linger. Are probably lingering now.

It's Hawk Watch season at State Line Lookout. People visit, with binoculars. Dads hold kids up to look through the tall viewers, approximately five hundred and twenty feet, less than one hundred Brians, above Kath. She thinks she can hear distant voices but she's afraid to try her own, to call for help. She wonders if anyone can see her slung across this branch. The idea of turning her head to look can't even really form, she's so hurt, but she does make her eyes search below, past her own gruesome shadow to a sandy stretch of riverfront between a dense stand of leafless trees on either side. It's close, a do-able drop down for anyone less broken.

She sees Lad; at the same time he senses her return to consciousness. He tries to raise himself up from a tight curl. He's been sleeping it off too, near her shadow, with one busted hind leg and a flank scraped clean of fur, the

pink skin red with blood. He can't stand. He licks his wound. He looks up at her and vocalizes from the chest, a cross between a croon and a whine and a grumble. Rowr, rowr, rowr, Lad says.

Kath says, Look who's here. She can speak but still, she's afraid to holler, she might crumble. Lad watches her with intensity; he can't get to her. She says, Don't rush me. Let me think. He softens his stare, waits. She says, I'm coming.

There is nothing to do but try to get off the tree. It takes her a long time to move her arms out of their dangle. Reaching, pulling, bending, it all blinds her, she's crying, she's blinking hard, she needs to see, the numbness in her hands requires that she watch her hands because her hands feel like things other than hands, like lumps of nothing inside mitts, but she has to grip the branch, she has to. She can hardly move. Her head, her neck.

Rowr, rowr, rowr. I'm trying, I'm trying, I'm trying. She gets hold with her numb hand-things and inches down until she is hanging off the branch by her two broken arms. She can't do it, it's impossible, her arms don't work, but there's nothing to do but what she is trying to do, which can't be done, so she does it, she lets go and drops down six feet, one Brian-length, to the beach.

She has collected in a heap like seaweed at the base of the Palisades along the shore of the Hudson River. It's still Tuesday, it's still November, it's still morning. Everything that was gray is now blue. Her body is now just like the nothing-hand-things, a nothing-body-thing, mostly numb. Except she can tell that Lad is nearly on top of her. That she can feel, that she knows. He has dragged himself to her side, has dropped the block of his head on her dead thigh and the weight of his head—she sees it and feels it in her muscle-memory—is ballast. He smells terrible, kibble mixed with metallic blood and pain. His anxious breathing rocks her though. She says, You're a good boy. Good boy. She says, You maniac, look at us. His eyes burn with love. He shimmies like a commando alongside Kath and rests his head between her dead shoulder and her neck. He burrows. She feels, thank god, she feels his cold nose. She says, You're so good, you're so good. She says,

Sshh, sshh. His ears twitch against her chin. A motor, and the slap slap slap of the river's chop cresting against a hull. His tail hits the sand, up and down, up and down. Next they wait.