

The Best Dog In The World

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She was having a hard time getting up in the mornings. Well, that wasn't exactly true. She didn't stay in bed to get more sleep, she stayed in bed waiting for him to shower, brush his teeth and hair, get dressed, eat breakfast, read the paper, and leave for the day. The second the door clicked shut behind him it was very easy to get up.

"You're *depressed*," he said. "You should *see* someone."

"I'm not depressed."

"Trouble getting up in the morning. It's one of the *signs*."

He brought home one of those checklists you get in a doctor's office: Could You Be Depressed? There was a stock photo of a woman in a gray bathrobe hugging herself. I wonder how you get that job, she thought. Are there Depression casting calls? Or do you show up thinking it's going to be glamorous modeling, and then they've got the bathrobe and the makeup artist painting bags under your eyes. If you were good at looking sad you could collect a whole portfolio of Depressing Modeling, maybe do a little sideline into Grief or Having a Terrible Headache.

She could remember a time when she loved him with every bone in her body. He was kind and thoughtful. He was good in bed. He chose nice restaurants and picked up the tab, but he wasn't a show-off about it. He liked going to live theatre (which he spelled like that, theatre) and doing the Times crossword puzzle on Sunday mornings while they ate bagels just like all the people pretended they wanted to do in their internet personal ads. He hung real art on his walls, voted for Pro-Choice candidates, and brought reusable bags to the grocery store. Unfortunately, everything he said and did lately annoyed the shit out of her.

It started to fall apart when they got the dog. Not because of the dog, who was everything a dog should be. Because of how he was about the dog.

"Nice dog," people said in the park. "Is he a lab?"

"Nice dog," people said when they saw the photo on his desk at work. "Is he a lab?"

"Nice dog," said deliverymen, the cable guy, and dinner guests. "Is he a lab?"

"*She's a chocolate lab*," he'd say, so you could hear the italics. Like having a *chocolate* lab was an achievement. Like people were rude for not checking out the dog's crotch before speaking.

"Oh, well. Nice doggy!" They'd already be backing away.

"Why do you have to correct everyone? It's so rude."

"People like to be informed."

"Do they?"

She realized that he was that way about other things, too. How long had it been like this? The first date? The second? How long had he been talking in insane italics?

"I'd like the house salad, with *balsamic* vinaigrette."

"Can you fix me a *dirty* martini?"

"I practice *public interest* law."

"I love a woman with *petite* nipples."

"I went to college *in the Cambridge area*." This is the code that people who went to Harvard use to pretend that they're a little embarrassed about going to Harvard, like mentioning it would be gauche, but they'd still really like you to know that they went to Harvard. They must teach it at freshman orientation.

This seemed like a stupid reason to break up. She'd probably have to leave the dog, and he'd go on pointing out its vagina and superior dark brown color to strangers forever. Finding a new apartment, dividing the stuff, getting off the "family" cell phone plan, teaching a new man to reliably execute her favorite sexual positions – the whole thing seemed like a huge effort for a ridiculous reason. Her mom would have kittens.

But something had to be done. She was going to crack soon. She'd already found herself imitating his way of speaking to girlfriends over brunch, and now they used insane italics whenever they addressed him. "Alan, you're looking good today – is that a *cashmere* sweater?" "Where's a good place to eat *in the Cambridge area*?" She couldn't tell if she wanted him to figure out they were making fun of him or not. On the one hand, it would show a healthy sense of humor and self-awareness. On the other hand it made her heart hurt to turn him into an anecdote. She and her friends always came up with nicknames for ex-boyfriends. "Jazzy Pants." "The Tumor." "Darth Vader." "Unfortunate Slam Poet." She could already tell what Alan's nickname would be, and the story she'd tell new people about him.

In the shower, Alan listened to Morning Edition. He'd be out of the house in exactly thirty minutes. In the bed, she spooned herself around the dog, and sang a little song to it. "You're a pretty girl, and you're a *chocolate* lab. You're the best dog in the world."