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*The Best Unpublished Stories
by New and Emerging Writers*

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Bruised People

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Lulu only gets a quick look at the photo before she's distracted by the heat-pulse from Wilford, the project manager who's begun leaving Peppermint Patties on her chair like dead birds. He sits at her right angle, radiating a longing. Is she available? Is she into older men? Is she someone who will abandon him like his wife did, leaving him with angry children? His interest in her has recently heightened. He's begun asking others about her, passing along these queries to informants who've sent Lulu text messages with crying emojis. These co-workers are sympathetic to both sides, yet they're rooting for Wilford. Everyone wants a happy ending, Lulu reminds herself.

"I'm going for a coffee," Wilford says. "Want one?"

"I'm good," Lulu says.

"I don't mind getting you something," he says.

She looks up and sees damage. His eyes, his hair, his shoulders tilted forward like a mast pulled by a storm. So this is the visual of gutted, she realizes. "If they have any black tea," she says. "I'll take one with milk."

"Thank you," he says and walks purposefully towards the community kitchen.

Once Wilford's gone, Lulu looks at the newspaper photo again and confirms what she already knew but didn't want to know: Billy Gerston is now a famous rock star and is never coming back to her. The photographer has captured everything about Billy that she loved and, unfortunately, still loves. Even though he's awkwardly bent, tying his sneaker, Billy manages to contort himself so his face is in the frame: his sweet good looks, the doll-curls, the chubby cheeks interrupted by the pointed chin. He loves to be loved and the camera is smitten. Despite herself, Lulu's moved by his relaxed smile, the gentle slouch of contentment his lips easily fall into. She glances at the caption and, just like she knew the photo was of him, she knew what the description would say: Billy Gerston and his band now reside in Sacramento, California.

When she gets home that evening, Lulu holds open the door for Rex, Billy's seventy-five pound Labrador retriever. He's a big dog, Rex, with heavy muscles. He lumbers to his bowls: food and water, water and food. The dog looks first at Lulu, then at the door, his eyes moving with consideration from the old snow to her. He knows. He knew when Billy packed the small duffel, said he'd see them in a few weeks, and waved from the pickup truck that he drove to his new home on the other side of the country.

"Yes, yes, yes," Lulu says, repeating the word as if worrying it. "He's left us."

Rex gazes beyond her at the gravel driveway, which hits the paved road in a sharp T. He tenses and sniffs, quick intakes of cool air. His ears prick and then, as a car goes by, they relax. His shoulders resume their slouch, his tail droops, and his body resigns itself to abandonment.

With her coat, hat, and gloves still on, sobs heave out of Lulu as if a freight train is passing through her organs, sticking on her heart, then

attaching themselves to her lungs. She kneels next to the dog, rocking, gasping, wrapping herself like a cape around Rex. "I'm sorry," Lulu says. Rex doesn't move; he stays rooted and she leans. The dog takes on all of her. The light outside shifts and the sun appears and then coyly disappears. They sit there until Rex grows rigid, benignly shirking off Lulu. He lifts his neck and tips back his head and howls. He holds this croon on a note, an octave, that Lulu has never heard him reach before. He repeats the song again and again, taking pauses in between to rest. When he's done, Rex stares at Lulu with a stoicism that confounds her. He shakes his body twice, as if ridding himself of not just the moment but of Billy Gerston. He then walks outside to pee.

"So the dog's yours, I guess," Tina says the next day. She's new and young and says this not like it seems or could be, but like it is. "Did he ask?"

"Ask what?" Lulu says, confirming she hadn't just missed the point but a whole generation.

"If you'd inherit the dog when he ditched," Tina says. She files and staples and uses paperclips like the old days.

"No," Lulu says. "I guess not."

They are sitting in the nook with its one window and leafless tree cluster. Tina spreads hummus on a rice cake. "I'm not a sharer," she says, offering Lulu one. "But this situation is extreme." She then smiles and Lulu sees that she's pretty.

"Thank you," Lulu says. "I guess it is."

Rex is at the front door when Lulu gets home. His tail's raised and suspended midair as if he's awaiting an answer: Where has she been? Who was she with? Is she going to leave him, too? The questions exhaust Lulu who, instead of answering, lies down on the couch again with her boots, coat, and scarf on. She sleeps until the heat turns off, the click of the radiator awakening and reminding her that Billy Gerston's still gone.

Wilford bookmarks sites that have to do with excavation, rare books, and home-brewing. He scratches the top of his left hand with his right at least once an hour. He chews gum and catches the air in the wad so it snaps with no rhythm or predictability. He answers his cell phone in

a whisper and makes promises he can't keep to the person on the other end, like "I will be there for you always." He rarely does what he says he's going to do and when he does, the staff's caught off guard, which makes a dull job lively. In this way, Wilford's an amenable boss.

Lulu lifts the four sections of *The Sacramento Bee* from her desk and puts them in her lap. The weight of the paper is comforting, like a baby. She has a section system, C, D, A, and B, whose logic Lulu can't explain, and luckily, no one has asked her to; her colleagues are thankful that someone—Lulu—will do this searching for a needle in the haystack so they leave her to it. She eagle-eyes the sections by columns and then she cross-checks horizontally, employing a geometric equation in which the points plotted create shapes in her brain that organize the information. When Wilford leaves their corner, Lulu anticipates his return so she never fully loses herself in what she's doing.

"I know *what* you do," Billy had said. "But *why* do you do it?"

"I like solving problems," Lulu had said.

"Then become a spy," Billy had said.

"I am," Lulu had said. "Undercover."

"Under the covers?" Billy had said, lifting the blanket and looking at her.

"I'm serious," Lulu had said.

"So am I," Billy had said. "Very, very serious." They had made love and Lulu tried not to like it, or Billy, or the small life they had created out of a rental house and used furniture and meals made from this and that. But she had liked it.

Tina disapproves: She doesn't like the way Wilford tells Lulu what to do without asking; she doesn't like the way Marcus, the technology wizard, reboots Lulu's computer once a week without asking; she doesn't like the way Billy has left Lulu with Rex without asking. "It's like the world's sending you a giant *fuck you*," Tina says.

It's snowing again, so when Lulu wakes up she considers staying home, though the prospect of being with Rex all day makes going to the office a holiday. Whenever he can, he lies on her feet, the weight of him almost cracking her. Then, when she gets up, he does too, following her from

the bedroom to the bathroom, from the bathroom to the kitchen, and from the kitchen to the bedroom. His walk is slow and considered, but he keeps pace with Lulu. If she looks at him, he turns away as if he wasn't staring at her. When she shuts the bathroom door, he waits, and when she opens it, he looks away. This goes on until she leaves for work.

A week's passed and Lulu is searching for a line mention or a chunky article that could support her not-for-profit's dedication to keeping people safe from the decaying ozone layer. Her feelings about this topic are unpopular, particularly within her company's culture of optimism through knowledge. She doesn't believe any theory or proven fact that she may find in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Sacramento Bee*, or any other national daily is going to protect anyone from being sizzled by the sun. Still, she's not going to be the buzz-kill that tells her co-workers, particularly Wilford, that the punch is poisoned. Instead, she combs the paper for data.

"I thought I saw something in Sports," Wilford says. He has recently hired a digital team that handles online editions, but Lulu knows that what she does is invaluable, and she isn't, like her co-workers, fearful of being canned. No one can synthesize print like she does.

"Football fields," Wilford says. "The air quality after the turf has been sprayed." Wilford has developed a tic when he talks to Lulu. He doesn't turn around, but his back and ass tense as if he's bracing for rejection.

"Thanks for the heads-up," she says, searching for more pictures of Billy.

Tina and Lulu are sitting on the railing of the porch of the building on Main Street where their office takes over the first two floors. It's a gray New England day with no promise to be otherwise.

"Have you heard from him?" Tina asks.

"Not since the postcard from Baja."

"When did that come?" Tina says.

"Seven months ago."

"Bastard," Tina says, looking at Lulu. "And the dog? Did he mention the dog?"

"No," Lulu says. "I don't think he did."

"Bastard," Tina says again. "Do you want to go dancing on Friday?"

Billy said, *There's no one like you.*

Billy said, *I love you.*

Billy said, *Will you marry me?*

Billy said, *I'll be back in a month.*

Billy said, *I promise.*

The digital team found a miracle, so Wilford springs for champagne and miniature cupcakes, where four equals one. A Teflon company has invented a new form of non-stick that uses the sun's rays like a boomerang. "That's how they explained it to me," Wilford says to the staff of eight, which has been summoned to Lulu and Wilford's shared space. Tina is sitting on the floor, her knitting needles clicking like a metronome. She looks at Lulu and rolls her eyes, mouthing, *What next?*

Billy's underwear lived for four years and two months in the top drawer next to hers, small knots of wrinkled cotton. *This is how I fold*, he said, and bunched them up. She laughed and said, *like this*, folding his boxers, left leg, right leg, then in half. He grabbed the perfect rectangle from her and bunched it up. *Like this*, he said. She laughed and then he smiled and picked her up like a barn post, stick straight, so that her head—she was taller than he was—almost touched the low bedroom ceiling. He carried her to the bed where he undressed her, piece by piece, bunching up her jeans, underwear, t-shirt, bra, and tossing them onto the floor, useless fabric separating his body from hers. *Like this*, he said and then kissed every bit of her.

It's late at night and Lulu's listening to the icicles melt. There's a persistent drumming of the water that keeps her from reading or sleeping, so she packs up Billy's clothes, books, CDs, and bottles of essential oils. Rex watches her standing in the hallway with the closet door open, trying on a motorcycle jacket. "Should I keep this?" The dog stands up and walks to her. He sniffs the waist of the coat and when she lowers her hand, he licks first her palm and then the leather cuff. He sits and waits until she hangs the coat back in the closet. "It's the least he can do," she says. When one box is taped, she carries it downstairs to the front door. Rex curls himself next to the cardboard and rests his chin

on his paws. He's still there in the morning when Lulu pours food into his already full bowl.

They go to a bar where live bands play on Fridays. Tina knows everyone, so they get in without a cover, take stools at the counter, and the round is on the bartender. Lulu wears make up for the first time since Billy left. She realizes this when Tina picks her up and says, "I guess I'm an occasion." Is it a date? Is Tina gay? Is Lulu? Rex has begun sleeping in her bed, their bed; the space that was taken up by Billy is now Rex's. Tina kisses a guy and then says, "He's my brother."

"But not really," the guy says.

"But not really," Tina says and they laugh.

When they're alone, Tina says, "Were there clues?" The bartender doesn't ask but just keeps filling Lulu's glass with Malbec. After the third pour, Lulu puts her hand over the top and the bartender holds up his hands as if arrested.

"No clues," Lulu says. "At least not that I was aware of."

"No offense," Tina says, standing up and taking lipstick from her back pocket. "But you don't seem like the most aware person." She then uses the mirror behind the bar to run the tube around her mouth. "Ready?"

They dance as if they're a couple, aping each other in a way that's intimate. Tina sashays her hips and then leans into Lulu and says, "I think Billy is an asshole." She smiles and Lulu feels a part of herself break off and fly away.

That week, *The Sacramento Bee* offers up nothing about Billy. There is, however, a teensy article on D2 guest-written by a local sixth grader about how the Earth's puckering and the rain's not cooperating and the forecast predicts heat and more heat and no moisture for eternity so it's absurd to think that California will be habitable in fifty years.

"Anything?" Wilford says.

"No," Lulu says. "Just this." She puts the article on the corner of his desk.

"You're a miracle worker," Wilford says. He smiles at her, but not at her. In no time, Rex has halved himself. His eyes bulge from their sockets and his hipbones nearly catch on the doorframe as he staggers like a starved war prisoner following Lulu from room to room. He rejects his

dry food, his canned food, his special dog treats made from organic products. Lulu tries meals from her grandmother's recipe book, chicken and lamb with root vegetables and paprika. He looks at the plate with meat swaddled by gravy and mashed potatoes and then walks over to his bowl of kibble with more enthusiasm than he's had in days. Lulu squats down and takes a handful of the dry food and puts it in her mouth as if it were cereal. She's unsure she'll get the stuff down without water or vomiting, but she does and Rex watches as if making sure she's committed to this. "Try some," she says. He noses the small circles, flipping a few from her palm and onto the floor. He licks and licks and chases one or two as they scuttle across the wood but swallows none. He then raises his head to stare at her, his skull visible under his skin.

"He's giving up," Lulu says on the phone to Tina, who is two cubicles away. Everyone in the office is quiet, listening.

"Wouldn't you?" Tina says.

The veterinarian says that Rex is normal, though there's nothing normal about Rex. He sits on Lulu's lap, his head, as hard and small as a coconut, resting in her palm. His eyes close and his paws go limp in midair. The vet runs the stethoscope over his chest, around and around, searching for his heart. They are all waiting for relief: Is he alive or dead? "There it is. Slow and steady," the vet says. She rubs his back and neck in a way that Lulu never does, not rough but not gentle. Rex isn't a baby boy anymore and the vet doesn't treat him like one. When he responds with a groan, she nuzzles up to him, and Rex licks her chin. She laughs and Rex tries to lick her again and this physical playfulness goes on and on with Rex suddenly half in Lulu's lap and half in the vet's. There's panting and low growling before Rex jumps off of Lulu and sits, waiting and wanting for whatever the vet is fiddling with in her pocket. "Is this what you want?" The vet teases Rex, and Rex barks, and the two stare at each other in a taunting, feisty way. When the vet finally offers him a small bone from her pocket, Rex lunges for it, crunching and drooling, sniffing her fingers for more.

Instead of chocolate, there's a note on Lulu's chair from Wilford that says, "Will you go out with me?" They talk about the sections of the

dailies; they talk about the color of the shrub that is beginning to bloom outside their shared window; they never mention the note so it sits behind Lulu's computer, read, but unanswered.

Tina's wearing jodhpurs and paddock boots, but when Lulu asks her if she rides, Tina says, "Do I look like a rider?" Tina has begun smoking clove cigarettes and even though they smell good, she has to take her habit outside. They are leaning against the gutter, breathing in clove and wet grass shoots, wearing down parkas. Lulu air smokes and Tina laughs. It's the season where anything seems possible even though it isn't.

Tina asks about Rex and Lulu tells her about his ears pricking forwards at the vet.

"That's sort of hot," Tina says.

"It sort of was," Lulu says. "I was the third wheel."

"You were," Tina says and smirks.

"He's coming back to life," Lulu says.

"Now what?" Tina asks.

Lulu isn't wearing much, a long t-shirt and underwear. The weather has changed, and while yesterday it was winter, today it's summer. Rex sits in the red sling-back chair and watches her uncross her legs. She does it again, cross, uncross, cross, uncross. Rex's eyes move past her calves and up her thighs. When he gets to her face, his eyes stop and he stares at her. He lifts his head and studies. This was a trait of Billy's, the contemplation of her. Sometimes he did it to get her attention and other times, like when he stuffed two t-shirts and his only pair of unripped jeans into a duffel bag and left her with Rex, he would stare to communicate something bad. Any time Billy stared, Lulu would sweat, high on her neck and between her breasts.

Rex is staring and Lulu's sweating. She scoops up her hair and twists until it stays put with a pencil. She tries staring Rex down, making him turn away first, but like Billy, Rex wins because he can look at her forever. Once Lulu has lost, Rex crawls out of the chair and eats his bowl of food and whimpers for more. He is ravenous.

The sky's blue with no clouds, and there's a heat that seems prehistoric. She looks for it, but finds no trace of winter as she loads the car with the

seven boxes of Billy Gerston's. He's becoming harder for her to smell and touch, but she can still hear him as if he's behind her, reading a magazine that reflects their shared humor. She both longs for and dreads her eventual non-reaction to a photo in *The Sacramento Bee*. Her nervous system still speeds up when she sees snapshots of him at the farmers' market, a fundraiser for water preservation, performing with one of the big bands he dreamed of becoming. When she can no longer hear him behind her, reading, these photos won't faze her and he will be gone entirely.

Rex starts on Billy's side of the bed, but then stretches himself like Gumby so that by morning he's melded with her. Lulu often wakes up with her fingers wound around his collar holding tight to the leather, spooning with him. Since the vet visit, sometimes, in the middle of the night, Rex's eyes open, his head jerks up, his nostrils flare and he moans softly to the horny terrier down the block. He gets out of bed and paws at the door until Lulu lets him out. In the morning, he's on the porch waiting for her.

She finds Tina sharpening pencils, turning the crank and holding No. 2s steady while the shavings fall into a plastic waste bin.

"That was quick," Tina says. "You and Wilford."

"What about me and Wilford?" Lulu says. They have moved to the coffee machine where they put metallic pods in the dispenser and watch them pop into the garbage post-brew.

"You're going out," Tina says. She pours half-and-half into her mug and walks away.

It's Saturday afternoon and Rex is agitated. He's been living a few nights a week down the block and has plumped up, so Lulu knows someone else is feeding him. There are two young girls who live with the lovesick dog, and they have made it clear that their house is Rex's. "It's okay," Lulu tells Rex. "Thank you for staying, but you can go." He's lying on her feet, and though she's accustomed to the bulk of him now, she nudges him forward. He stands quickly, his body ready to move but his mind hooked on Lulu. She stands, leans down and looks him in the eyes. He stares back and then his eyes move from her to the bathroom, bedroom, bookcase, rug, lamp, his food and water. Lulu gets up, empties

and packs his bowls, a leash, and two tennis balls. "Let's go," she says, standing by the door. Rex doesn't even turn towards her voice when she talks to him. He just lowers his chin towards the ground.

"Let's go," Lulu says again.

Rex walks through the open door and leads Lulu towards his lover.

"Did you get my note," Wilford asks.

"Yes," Lulu says, her salad on her knees.

They say nothing for a while and then Lulu says, "Sometime, but not now."

"Fair enough," Wilford says. His back and ass release and he resumes typing. The sound of his finger pads on the keyboard reassure her that he won't take no for an answer.

"Friends?" Tina says, holding out a Chia cow. Its ceramic haunches are covered with a thin green fuzz.

"I thought we already were," Lulu says.

"I like clarity," Tina says. "Speaking of which." She gives Lulu a piece of paper with Billy's band manager's address so now, Tina says, Lulu can mail Billy back to himself.

"Wow," Lulu says.

"The dog has me stumped," Tina says. "Give me some time."

"He's gone," Lulu says. "He fell for a dog down the road and the owner wants him."

"That was easy," Tina says. "Do you want to go get a tattoo for remembrance?"

Lulu shakes her head but accepts the cow and the address. Once the last box gets put in the bin at the post office, she waves and the postmaster shrugs and waves back.

On her desk, there's a picture of Billy Gerston on the front page of *The Sacramento Bee* with a girl who looks like Tina. A yellow Post-It says, "This is not me." Lulu laughs and Wilford says, "Is that a yes?" There is silence and though Lulu listens, she hears nothing.

