

CRUELTY *to* ANIMALS



by Craig Lancaster
Originally published by *Montana Quarterly*

WE WERE DONE FOR WHEN I BOUGHT THE DOG.

That's what I'm thinking somewhere over Idaho, on a twin-prop sputtering toward Seattle, where I'm going to hunker down and try to figure out what to do next, now that my last next thing has fallen apart.

Look, we had problems. Who doesn't? I might even be willing to concede that we had more problems than most people do, although you'd have to satisfy me that such a thing can be quantified before I'll cop to it. In any case, I'm not going to fight the basic premise: We were a mess. We were two people living in two cities in two states in two houses, and we kept pretending that maybe someday those circumstances would change and we'd be together. You know what? I'm going to say now that maybe that was a lie. I don't know. It didn't feel like a lie, at least not always. I do know that we were making it work, even if it was dysfunctional as all hell.

Then I bought the dog, and now nothing works.

But, look, I'm leaving a bunch of stuff out.

IF I'M GOING TO BE TRUTHFUL, and now seems about as good a time as any to start, I knew what I was doing when I sent her that first email. My marriage was skidding off the runway, and if you think that I should have been in a counselor's chair working on a solution to my troubles at home, I'm not going to disagree with you. But I didn't do that. No, I wrote a note to the kid sister of the first girl I ever loved. I hadn't seen her in nearly twenty years, when she was a fourteen-year-old, all arms and legs and orthodontia. I had added her as a Facebook friend the previous spring, along with a good chunk of the four hundred or so people I'd graduated with at Billings West High, a few co-workers and a handful of people I didn't even know but who seemed to know me. The more the merrier, as they say.

Most of those people quickly receded into the background. Facebook, like so many things these days, is all surface and no depth. You see somebody you once knew, say hello, exchange a few pleasantries, realize you can't possibly bridge twenty years, and you move on.

But Diane, she was different. For one thing, she wasn't a gangly little girl anymore. She was thirty-four years old, one hundred percent woman if her online pictures were to be believed, and beautiful in a way that moved me in all the right places. Her sister, Rachel, lurked somewhere in my little online universe, but I rarely heard from her and spoke with her even less frequently. But Diane. Oh, man, Diane. I took advantage of any chance I had to swap notes with her, stay up late chatting online or whatever. I even played that stupid farm game, just because she did. Even if I grant you that online communication is two-dimensional in a way that makes it a poor substitute and a dangerous stand-in for genuine human interaction, I couldn't help myself from falling in deep with Diane. She got me. She could tell when I wasn't eating well or sleeping well, just from my demeanor in the little electronic box where we talked. I began sharing my frustrations about work, and she helped me there, too. When I told my creative partner, Jonathan, that his bigfooting of me during pitches was damaging our relationship, he was properly chastened. "I owe you an apology, Doug," he said. "It was weird to hear you say it so directly. I don't know. Usually, you just go into your office and break something when you're frustrated." That was a gift from Diane, the ability to confront Jonathan. She was changing me.

Anyway, a few months later, I'm heading for D-I-V-O-R-C-E, and beyond my most immediate thought, which is that I'm glad we don't have any kids, I'm thinking this: Who do I know who can tell me what I'm getting into here? And just as quickly, I'm thinking: *Diane. Diane. If she can't do it, no one can.* Diane's been married and divorced twice. Now, you're probably thinking that someone who's thirty-four and has been divorced twice maybe knows more about the subject than is healthy. I might have thought of that, too, if I hadn't been thinking about what Diane would look like with her clothes off.

So I shoot Diane an email: *Hey, looks like I'm getting divorced. You have any advice?*

I'm sitting there browsing through some fantasy-football website when the reply comes not three minutes later: *I have tons of advice, but the best thing I can do is pray for you. Would that be OK?*

I'm thinking, well, it's not really what I had in mind, babe, but yeah. Pray for me. It can't hurt.

I CAME TO FIND OUT THAT DIANE PROBABLY ISN'T THE PRAYING TYPE, which is just as well, because neither am I. What she was, though, was a text-messaging fiend. I started getting them by the score—when I woke up in the morning; on my commute to work, when I was fighting half of Seattle up I-5; in the middle of brainstorm meetings, where I was trying to figure out another way to sell cat food. (*Your cat will die if you don't feed it. Buy Little Friskies!*) I was digging the attention. The messages came so fast that I eventually turned my BlackBerry to vibrate-only

so my co-workers didn't kill me, and in time, I came to associate that little double-buzz in my pants—no double entendre intended—with the pure pleasure of seeing her words.

Diane wanted me to come home to Billings, to spend some time with her, to make love to her. She started sending me pictures to let me know exactly what was waiting for me, pictures that didn't leave anything to my imagination, which was in hyperdrive anyway. It's all yours if you come, she said.

I blocked out a week's vacation, booked a flight, and hoped that people could keep their cats alive until I got back to Seattle.

(I'M GOING TO SAY THIS FOR THE BENEFIT OF ANYBODY who thinks I've got a good thing going to this point: When you buy that snazzy new phone—and you will, my friend, or I'm not doing my job correctly—and you sign up for that unlimited data plan, it's important to note that data and text messaging are not the same thing. Had I known this, I'd have not come home to a woman who still lived in my house, who stood in the living room quaking with fury, holding a thirteen-page-thick cell phone bill and screaming, "Who in the hell do you know in Billings, Montana, who you send 5,314 text messages to in a month?" What can you say to that? I said, "Well, we weren't talking about the weather, that's for sure." I want you to learn from my mistakes. Paying the unexpected \$800 bill is the least of the indignities. That night, I was living in a pay-by-the-week motel and my friends—Facebook and otherwise—had begun to flee the Good Ship Moron.)

AFTER A FEW MONTHS, things had begun settling out, at least a little. The divorce decree came in and Bree moved on nicely, as I knew she would. She got the house and the better car. I got the goldfish, which died the first week I was in my new condo in downtown Tacoma, where I'd run off to because I didn't know anyone there. Everything else, we split.

I saw Bree back in February at the Experience Music Whatchamacallit—you know, that thing over by the Space Needle that looks like a giant loogie? She was holding hands with someone, a guy taller and thinner than me, and that socked me in the gut in a way that I couldn't have anticipated. I don't think she saw me; I started working backward through the exhibits and left. I don't think I could have taken actually speaking to her.

Funny thing about seeing someone I know in a metro area of three-point-three million people: When I was in much smaller Billings—I flew there once a month, and once a month Diane came out to see me—I never saw anybody I knew, except Diane. That's odd, right? I mean, I grew up there, in a little house on Lyndale, next to a stretch of pasture that's now jammed between a McDonald's and a strip mall. Man, if that's not quintessential Billings, I don't know what is. *Welcome to Billings. Oil Changes and Unwanted Lip Hair Removal in the Same Building.*

It's not like I was going to see my people. My folks are dead, and my brother and sister scattered with the wind. Jeff was in Concord, New Hampshire, the last I heard, some kind of

I loved her, OK? I still do, when you get right down to it. A million pop songs can be wrong, because I'm here to tell you this: Love isn't enough.

professor or something. We don't talk much. Laurie, she's an Army wife down in Tennessee. But Diane's connections were still strong. Her parents lived there. So did Rachel and her family. Diane and I hit our fifth month of being an item, whatever that is, and I hadn't seen any of these people. It started to bug me, and I told her so.

"Don't pressure me about this," Diane said.

"I don't mean for it to be pressure. I'm just asking what the deal is. We've been together a while. Do they even know about us?"

"I'm not sure what together means."

"Well, look, we're something, aren't we? I don't normally make a dozen trips a year to Billings. Something's going on."

"Yeah, well, you're not here. Once you're here, we'll be together. Otherwise, I don't really see the point in getting them involved. You know that's going to be awkward, especially with Rachel."

I spilled the Coke I was pouring into my Jack Daniel's. "I stopped dating Rachel in 1990. I think we can move past that pretty quickly, don't you?"

She didn't say anything to that, but she moved in close and she kissed me, and soon enough, I was chasing her down the hall into the bedroom. I knew she was trying to divert my attention. It worked.

BY MIDSUMMER, doubt hadn't just crept in; it was sleeping on my couch and eating me out of house and home. It wasn't just the hiding me from her family. In retrospect, I should have confronted the "once you're here, we'll be together" bit the first time it flared up. I'm convinced now that a proactive course would have stopped things before they got out of hand.

Why should I have been expected to move? I was the creative director at one of the best ad agencies on the West Coast, in a city that fed us as much work as we could handle. Damned if I could find something similar in Billings, the 169th-ranked media market in the United States. Advantage: Seattle.

And Diane, she was a nurse. Billings has fine hospitals, some of the best in the region, but they can't really compare with Harborview or Swedish or Virginia Mason or Seattle Children's. Advantage: Seattle.

I'd put these things in front of her, implore her to come join me, and she would say, every time, "If you loved me, you'd come here, where I need you."

I LOVED HER, OK? I still do, when you get right down to it. A million pop songs can be wrong, because I'm here to tell you this: Love isn't enough.

On a mid-July evening, after Jonathan and I had sold a concept to a chain of coffee kiosks, we sat on the roof of my condo building and watched the sun glittering off Commencement Bay.

"How's it going with Diane?" he asked.

"Stuck in neutral."

"How so?"

"There's the whole won't-move-to-Seattle thing, for starters."

"Yeah, I don't get that at all."

"That's just the tip of it. You know, that way she could see through me and my problems when we first started out, I loved that. But now it's like she's turned that power against me."

"What do you mean?"

"Conversations are full of land mines. She seizes on individual words and beats me over the head with them. The other day, I'm fumbling my words pretty badly as we're going around and around again on being couple publicly. And I say, 'Look, I'm trying to articulate some-thing here.' And she says, 'No, you're trying to formulate it. If you were articulating it, you'd be saying it.' Who says something like that?"

Jonathan chuckled. "That's actually pretty funny."

"In isolation, yeah. It gets old when it comes at you continually. And I'll tell you something else: There's a lack of empathy there. Last night, she asked how I was doing, and I told her, 'Well, I'm nervous about this pitch tomorrow. I'm not sleeping well. I feel like crap.' And she said, 'Well, I have to go to bed.' "

"That's cold."

"Yeah, and it happens all the time. I don't know, man. In many ways, she's everything I ever wanted. Drop-dead gorgeous, smart, funny. But more and more, I feel like garbage when I talk to her."

Jonathan took a long sip off his beer. "Sounds like she's ninety percent perfect and ten percent battery acid."

"Apt description."

"And it's the ten percent that will eat you alive."

AS RECENTLY AS LAST MONTH, I was hanging in there with Diane. We'd had a few good visits, and

I was thinking that maybe we still had a shot. One day, she sent me an email with a picture of a chihuahua, one of those little yappy, chalupa-defending dogs.

“I want him,” she wrote.

This smacked of opportunity. I set aside my work, figuring I’d just stay late to catch up, and I started searching for breeders in Billings. It didn’t take long. I found one out in Shepherd, called the lady up, found out that she had a litter born four weeks earlier that would be ready to go in the next month or so. That was cool by me. I agreed to send her a check for five hundred dollars, and then I hung up and called Diane and told her the news, and I could hear her jumping and clapping like a little girl. She said she would name him “Guido,” because little dogs with gangster names are genius, and I was thinking that this was the best five hundred dollars I’d ever spent.

A FEW DAYS AGO, I landed in Billings. David Sedaris was playing the Alberta Bair, and while there’s a limit to how much oh-so-cleverness I can take, Diane really likes him, and I was on a Greatest Boyfriend in the World roll because I bought the tickets without her asking me to. We got a room in the Crowne Plaza and made a reservation for steaks at Jake’s. After that, the plan called for hitting the show and then coming back to the room and wearing out the bed and anything else we could scale without clothes on. A good plan.

We were dressing for dinner when Diane said, “I wish I didn’t have to wait for Guido.”

I fumbled with the buttons on my sleeve. “It’s just a couple more weeks. He’s going to have a great home with you. Way better than that cage in the closet.”

She stopped. “What?”

“You know, the closet. I saw her take him out of it when we visited him yesterday.”

“He lives in a closet?”

“You didn’t know that?”

“How could I know that? I was sitting on the couch. I didn’t see where he was. How could you let him live in a closet?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think anything of it.”

“That’s terrible.”

“I don’t know. I guess it didn’t seem like a big deal.”

“Didn’t seem like a big deal? Of course it’s a big deal. That’s animal abuse. You call that woman. You call her right now and tell her we’re coming to get him.”

“Come on. That’s silly. He’s not ready yet. And we have plans.”

She stamped her foot. “Call her now.”

WE DIDN’T HAVE STEAKS AT JAKE’S. We didn’t see oh-so-clever David Sedaris. We damn sure didn’t have sex. We sat in our hotel room and played nursemaid to a quivering, big-eared, long-legged rat. Diane talked to Guido in a singsong voice that amused me for about ten minutes and

then had me wishing the windows could be opened from the inside so I could leap to my death. Guido sat on my chest and peed on my shirt. Daddy was not pleased.

This morning, Diane took me to the airport. I rode up the Rims in the passenger seat, rigidly holding Guido away from me, because if he started to evacuate his little bladder again, down to the floorboard he was going to go.

“Idn’t he da tweetest widdle ting,” said Diane-cum-Tweety-Bird.

“Oh, yeah. He’s the best.”

She looked at me and grinned wide. “We’re a happy widdle famiwy.”

AS WE SAID OUR GOODBYES, I got a quick peck from Diane and was told to kiss Guido on the mouth. I didn’t want to do it, but in the interest of famiwy harmony, I acquiesced. Neither Guido nor I seemed pleased with the encounter.

At the TSA counter, I turned back and Diane was holding the little guy up and waving one of his paws at me. I waved back and felt a flush of stupidity for doing so.

After I’d run my shoes and my belt and my carry-on through the X-ray and suffered the indignity of the wand, I turned around again for my customary blown kiss from Diane, but she was gone.

THE CAPTAIN JUST SAID THAT WE’RE MAKING OUR FINAL DESCENT INTO SEATTLE, and here’s what I’m thinking: When I bought that dog, I punched my own ticket out of Diane’s life. She doesn’t want me, not really. She wants a companion who won’t challenge her, who won’t make her deal with his moods or feelings, and she wants someone who thinks everything that tumbles out of her mouth is golden. She wants someone who’s cool with living in Billings. Guido’s her man, on all counts. I can’t possibly compare.

I’m going to miss her. I’m going to miss those moments, increasingly rare, when she makes me laugh uncontrollably, like the story she told about a patient who was carping to go home. She told him that soon enough he’d be playing footsie with his wife, remembering a moment too late that he was a double amputee. I’m going to miss sidling up to her on a cold night and sleeping in a warm embrace till morning. I’m going to miss the way she could make me feel like the sexiest man on earth, which I most assuredly am not.

It’s going to be lonely for a while. Maybe for longer than that.

I think I’ll get a cat.