

Silences

By Sherri Moshman-Paganos

I can't sleep again tonight. Sometimes when I lie awake I hear crickets, choruses of them, chirping, serenading me in my sleeplessness. But more often the night is full of silences and the feeling of longing for something to happen. That's when I imagine the Keitel's dog from next door, baring his teeth, growling deep in his throat. I wonder how long he'll last before he meets the same fate as the others.

I saw the new dog yesterday when Joe and I got back from his business trip to San Francisco. I visited my sister while he did who knows what. When I opened the kitchen door, two robins were hopping on the patio and the air, still a little chilly, was starting to feel soft and springlike. I breathed deeply before I rang the bell next door to get my mail that the Keitels were holding for me. At the doorbell ringing I heard barking. Ruth had told me there would be no more dogs after Rudy. Was this Izzy's idea?

"Shhh! Quiet you damn dog!" Ruth opened the door, holding the dog in front of her, between her knees. He was black and tan with a

long tail that he wagged while sniffing at me. The other dogs had been almost tailless.

"Oh your mail, now where is it... Izzy, where did we put Anna's mail?"

"How should I know?" a grouchy voice called from the bedroom. "Now, just think carefully where you might have set it down."

"Hmmm, not here in the hall," she said, rummaging through some papers. "Let's try the kitchen." She had let go of the dog, who had quieted down but when Izzy walked in, it started growling again.

"Quiet Boone... Nice trip Anna?" said Izzy, tying his bathrobe around his plump body. He picked up a dish towel and cleaned his glasses.

"Yes everyone's fine."

"I see you've made friends with the little fellow," he said watching the dog lick my ankle. "Great dog, isn't he? Of course, he's just a puppy."

I shuddered. "Just a puppy." He had said the same thing

about Rudy and Bruno.

"You know what breed he is?" Izzy said proudly. "No more Doberman, no more Weimaraner."

"I really don't know."

"Come on, guess."

"No, tell me."

"He's a coon dog."

"A what?"

"A coon dog. Chases raccoons. His sense of smell is extraordinary."

The Keitel's house was set way back from the street practically in the woods, so maybe Boone got some practice growling at raccoons back there.

"What does he smell on my ankles?" I asked.

Izzy laughed and snapped his fingers. "Come here Boone."

"That's his name," Ruth shrugged, coming into the kitchen with a stack of letters. "Izzy likes it. Oh, I found your mail."

"Tell me Anna," said Izzy. "Isn't Boone a good name?"

"Just perfect."

"I think so. He's named for Daniel Boone because you know he used to go raccoon hunting."

"How interesting."

"I don't suppose you'd like a cup of coffee," Ruth grimaced.

"Sweetheart, what kind of way is that to ask?" Izzy shook his head. "Try it again and ask her positively."

"That's all right," I said, "I should

get home and unpack."

"Come on, that can wait," said Izzy. "Sit down, have some coffee with Ruth. I'll be back in a minute, I'm taking Boone out for a walk." He put his coat on over his bathrobe and slammed the door.

Ruth reached to the top shelf and pulled down a Melita coffee pot. She had long arms that could stretch to the ceiling and lean fingers that rippled up and down a keyboard. Sometimes when I took the car out, I could hear her charging through various piano concertos, what always seemed to be too *allegro*. Once she told me she played when Izzy was away because he needed silence to read his medical journals. Actually, his psychiatric clinic was in a front extension of the house closer to the street. Why anyone would seek help from him was beyond me, but I guess he was doing something right, as cars drove up and parked out on the street all morning long.

"You don't mind if I smoke?" Ruth asked. She lit a cigarette under the burner. "They're Vantage, low tar. It's only my second today, cutting down on Izzy's orders."

I nodded at Ruth's familiar refrain about her smoking.

She lay the cigarette in a glass ashtray and ran her fingers through her hair. It was cut straight and short, as if it was leveled with an electric razor. Her hands were constantly moving, touching her hair or forehead or clasping together in back of her head.

"With Boone, won't this be a big job again keeping the house clean?" I asked. "You said that after Rudy—"

"Oh I know but Izzy insisted. He doesn't feel safe without a dog, with all the burglaries. The Rosses were robbed last week you know. But I don't care. Let them come in and take everything. I mean everything." She swept her arm in a half circle.

Burglaries of course happen in this posh neighborhood, where clotheslines are not allowed in the back yard because of being too unsightly, where the house owners all hire landscapers and lawn maintenance services. A few years ago I got so nervous that I talked Joe into putting in an alarm system. At first, he grumbled and said it wasn't necessary, but then he said, "Do what you want," not looking at me, on his way out to the garage to drive to work. I'm beginning to realize he'll never retire, 77 years old and still going to the office. That's why I feel this deep ache in my heart.

I remember the first time I saw Rudy. I was halfway down my driveway when this dog leaped out at me. A puppy they called him too, dragging Ruth. She was pulling at him with all her might while she told me casually that they had put their dog Bruno to sleep for not being vicious enough.

"Rudy behave yourself!" She tugged on the leash. Both she and Rudy were long and sharp, like butcher's knives.

I often saw Rudy pulling Ruth around the block, but about a year ago I noticed that I hadn't heard that low growling and I hadn't seen that long smooth brown body, taut with anger. Ruth told me that Rudy had charged at their seven-year-old grandson, playing on the lawn. He wasn't hurt but he was terrified. Rudy's teeth had ripped through his jeans. When their son complained about the dog, Izzy insisted that the child somehow taunted him, that Rudy would never just attack him.

"But do you know, Anna, a little after that, Rudy attacked Izzy himself and tore the flesh from his arm, even his face."

"But why?" I asked. "His owner?"

"Well Izzy was wearing a

different cologne that night, one I'd bought him for Father's Day," sighed Ruth. "Rudy didn't recognize it and tore into him. So, Anna, we had to put him down."

"You mean, you put him to sleep?"

"That's right, took him out of this world."

Before Rudy, Bruno had been gray and ghostly with light colored eyes and had grown up with the three Keitel children. They had kept him in a cage in the basement which he soon outgrew. My daughter used to babysit there and tell me of Bruno's yelping, the kids laughing and tormenting him.

Bruno went crazy from being squeezed into that cage, but not aggressive or violent-crazy, just whimpering and having no appetite. Izzy, as a psychiatrist, should have been interested. But no, that was reason to put him to sleep; he was not ferocious enough for a watchdog.

Ruth was fixing the coffee when I heard barking. Boone came running in, then roly poly Izzy slowly following. He went over to Ruth at the stove, stretched up, she leaned down and they met to kiss. Boone kept barking. Funny, their dogs

always started out resembling Izzy and grew up to resemble Ruth.

"Excuse me Anna," Izzy apologized. "I've got reading to catch up on, some journals came in the mail and I was reading an article when you came over."

After Izzy went into his study, Ruth leaned over and whispered, "*Washingtonian Magazine* ran a terrific article on psychiatrists here. Izzy is ecstatic at the number of crazy people, he's got more patients than ever."

No wonder that Izzy's little round bald head, which reaches Ruth's shoulder, has been looking even rounder and happier these days.

"Ruth, I have to get moving." I picked up the mail.

For the next few weeks, I could hear Boone growling. When Ruth wasn't working in the garden with her long slender gloves or practicing the piano, she was pulling Boone on the leash around the neighborhood.

Then one day I saw Izzy, his arm bandaged, with scratches on his face. And Ruth was taking walks in the neighborhood, alone.

I tried to tell Joe about their dogs, but he just buried himself silently behind the newspaper. How I yearn for that old Joe who

used to talk to me. Did he really exist?

At night I'm haunted by dreams of Rudy, Bruno and Boone rattling their cages like the ghosts of Christmas past and present. I listen for barking. I think about Izzy, and how he needs help, and who can treat him? And I wonder at the

carelessness in the heart of others.

I imagine choruses of crickets, chirping, serenading me in my sleeplessness.

And I long to get one of those little miniature dogs, a poodle maybe, or terrier, just to keep me company in this sad silent world.



Sherri Moshman-Paganos is a writer and former educator based in Athens Greece, where she publishes a monthly travel blog. She has had poetry and prose published in the *GW Review*, the *Remington Review*, *Body Literary Magazine* and others. She is the author of a poetry collection and two memoirs: *Step Lively: New York City Tales of Love and Change*, and *Miss I wish you a bed of roses: Teaching Secondary School English in Greece*.