

The Unitarian Church's Annual Young Writer's Short Story Competition

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THE DOGS ARE IN THE FIELD, CIRCLING THE TROUGH, THEIR LEGS LONG AND thin. Michelle walks out in her rubber boots with a cloth bag of pig bones slung over her shoulder. The bones rattle into the metal trough and the nine hounds gaze at Michelle, their heavy eyes drooping, waiting for her to nod. When she does, they set in. As the dogs gorge, Michelle glides her hand across their massive heads, the straps of muscles in their skulls flexing while they chew. And amongst the snapping of pig bones, she blesses them.

The deadline is next week and I've left it until the last minute. The Unitarian Church's Annual Young Writer's Short Story Competition, with a grand prize of fifteen hundred dollars. There are only three rules: 1) Stories must deal with issues of faith, 2) No foul or off-putting language, 3) Writers must be seventeen or under and enrolled in high school.

Like the woman in my story, I'm having a bit of a difficult time in my own life right now. Mother passed away two weeks ago and I'm two months away from my due date. Living alone in our house, not knowing how I'm going to make rent, I was expecting somebody to come and get me—a friend's parent or some government agency with the words "child" or "family" in it. But nobody has. And day after day, I have waited.

I wanted to write something I'm passionate about. At first, it was going to be bears—grizzlies to be exact—but then I thought I was too close to them and when you love something so much it's hard to talk about it. So instead I'm writing about a dog breeder. I named her Michelle which is a Hebrew name that means "Who is like God," but I'm not sure if that translates into a statement or a question.

Michelle breeds a type of dog that's a Great Dane crossed with some sort of Himalayan hound. They stand as tall as young horses and have sagging jowls, their paws are large and round as a human skull. But Michelle also breeds rumours. She lives a few kilometres outside the town's southern limits and nobody has ever seen her in the flesh.

Before she moved in, the house had been on the market for months. An all-female cult had been headquartered there. A grandmother of eight preached the coming doomsday and demanded her followers forsake all their worldly goods, sign over their land, and drain their bank accounts. Once everything of value had been given, the grandmother declared that it was mere hours before Armageddon. Making their suicide pact in the field, they were each given a handgun. After everyone had one, the grandmother pressed hers against her temple and said that she was going to count down from five, and all twenty-six of them had to pull the trigger. She said she knew it was scary but they had to trust her. Five, four, three, two. One. After the gunshot had finished echoing, twenty-five women were standing in the field, trying not to look at the grandmother's body crumpled and oozing in the grass, red cobwebs draping between the blades. Eventually the women started milling around, packing up the few articles of clothing they still owned, and organized rides home.

Michelle had moved in at night. The house is at the top of a long driveway so when people drive

past, her home is too far away to see if she's there and they use that as an excuse for never stopping by. They only know she's alive because of the dogs. Once in a while, they'll see them charging alongside the car, galloping on the other side of the chain-link fence, their great grey bodies in full motion, muscles rippling and mouths frothing. They'll stay alongside the car, keeping pace, until Michelle's property ends and they collide into the fence. Each time the thin metal takes them by surprise. Some say that she's got a buyer, a tycoon in southwestern Texas, who takes a couple dogs each year and she lives off that. Others say that she inherited a lot of money from a father who used to run an energy company in Louisiana. Nobody even ventures a guess as to how she got started with the dogs.

There's a story about how a black bear once came down from its winter den, desperate with hunger, and wandered onto her property. Michelle's dogs set upon it with such madness that when it was all over, the only evidence that remained was a few tufts of black fur and a deep red that slowly seeped into the snow.

I used to be quite religious. Right up until a few months ago, actually. And you'd think that my fault of faith had something to do with Mother, the grand injustice of it all, but it doesn't really. Shortly after she had been discharged for the final time, she was lying in bed and called to me from the kitchen. I had been blending some carrots for her. She asked me to go down to the basement and get her scuba goggles. Mother had never been scuba diving. The only reason she'd had the goggles was because she'd bought them at a garage sale when she'd been told that it was a mask one of the divers had used when they were searching for the Stimson girl.

I brought them up and, to my surprise, she asked for me to help her put them on. She was in a lot of

pain and she said that the goggle's pressure felt good against her face, in the same way she'd press her eyeballs whenever she had a headache. And so there she was, lying in bed and wearing her goggles, her carrots in the blender. The speed bump of her body barely visible beneath the comforter, breathing through her mouth, her top lip puckered by the goggle's plastic. I stood in the doorframe as she breathed so heavily that it sounded like ocean—or at least, how I imagine the ocean to sound.

It occurred to me that she must've known that the goggle's pressure would feel good. It meant that she, at one time or another, had tried them on. I pictured her waiting until I was at school, creeping into the basement to get them and then retreating into the bathroom, locking the door. She would've stood before the mirror, holding them in place with one hand as she dragged the headband behind her skull, careful not to catch her hair. And I pictured her looking into her reflection and realizing that she'd never get the chance to wear them in the water, to see that other world.

It was that image of her in the bathroom that swept the last bits of faith out of me. Not because it was sad or pathetic, but because it was so genuinely funny. And after I'd stopped believing in God, everything just got so much easier.

The Michelle in my story has a secret. Last week, a boy—a teenager, really—snuck onto her property. The moon was full and cast silver shadows across the brush. He eventually lost track of which way he'd come. As he turned to look for the highway, he heard heavy breathing from behind him. He spun to see what it was but wasn't quick enough, hearing it fade into the distance. His heartbeat began to pulse in his skull. He heard growling off to his side so he picked up a rock and hurled it towards the sound. In the spill

of moonlight, he saw a hulking shadow recoil. The shadow then sunk low into the grass but then rose and stood up tall, swelling like a thundercloud.

In the morning, Michelle found his body in the centre of the field, mangled and shredded but uneaten, the bent grass forming a halo around him.

I want my story to be about guilt, who's at fault and who's to blame. I guess, if Michelle had just reported the death, it would've been the boy's fault. But she didn't. She buried the boy in the same grave as the dog who killed him. She didn't know for sure which dog it was but just took her best guess.

Over the next few days, the police began looking for the boy. Nobody suspected Michelle because nobody had ever really met her. But she, along with everyone else in their postal code, got the flyer. On it, the word "MISSING" was in large bold letters above a picture of the boy at his high school graduation. His hair gelled and parted, his tie in a knot so perfect it must have been a clip-on.

Mother had been sick for a few years. In and out of the hospital and then out one last time. Nothing about it was a surprise. She died in her bed with her goggles still on and the ambulance came to pick up her body, keeping its sirens off. The paramedics asked me if I had grandparents or anything and I said I did, because—technically—I do. At least I think I do. The paramedics must've assumed that my grandparents were coming to take care of me, but I've never even met them. They're somewhere in Saskatchewan. I want to say Bethune but it might be Bethson. The paramedics didn't say anything about the goggles (maybe they'd seen it before) but just lifted Mother onto the stretcher, her body like one of those large, stringy birds.

As they were rolling her out the front door, one of them put his hand on my shoulder and said something

stupid about pain and how it will never get easier but one day it'll stop getting harder. I nodded like I understood.

He then pointed at my stomach and asked how close I was. I told him a couple months and he said that he was sorry that the baby would never get to meet its grandmother. But he said it like he actually was sorry, like he shared some blame in this.

When the three of them had left, I didn't know what to do. I packed a small duffel, just a few shirts and some socks and underwear. I wasn't sure where I was going but I assumed that I'd be able to return if needed. I went to my bookshelf and took *Moby Dick* to zip into the bag's side pocket. It's not that I wanted to read *Moby Dick* at that time, but it was the longest book I had and, wherever I was going, I couldn't count on there being a library.

Once I was done packing, I placed the duffel by the front door. Not sure how long I'd be waiting, I clicked on the TV, catching the last half of *Jeopardy*.

What is body building?

Correct.

I looked around at the empty house. The television flickered shadows across the drywall.

What is a body snatcher?

Correct again.

The house isn't even ours. We rent it from the Cohens. First place in the short story contest would buy me another couple months. I closed my eyes and listened to the show.

What is Habeas corpus?

No.

There was a pause while the timer ran out and the buzzer sounded. I felt the baby kick.

What is Corpus delicti. 'The body of the crime.' Corpus delicti.

The next morning, I woke up in the chair and felt the urgent need to vomit. Running to the washroom,

I tripped over the duffel still waiting by the door like an obedient dog. Afterwards, I washed my face in the bathroom sink and went to the kitchen to start working on my story.

I wanted to give Michelle some background, something to explain why she is the way she is. But it's hard to write deep enough to get to the root. Like, there's something you should know about Jay D'Angelo, the boy the dogs killed. But it's impossible to talk about Jay without talking about his mother, Chloe. And it's impossible to talk about Chloe without talking about her prescription drug problem. And it's impossible to talk about that without talking about the long nights her doctor spends alone, driving up and down the highway, listening to Radio-Canada and trying to learn French. Everything bleeds into everything else.

It's easier for me to just keep a static image of Michelle in mind: she is on her back porch, Sunday morning, watching her pack circle a frozen pond, their loose-limb trot. The night prior, a coyote was scampering across the ice and had fallen through. And even though the water is shallow, it was unable to pull itself out. The pond froze again, and now its hind legs are held solid beneath the ice as it scratches uselessly against the surface. Michelle watches the coyote snarl at the dogs in its desperate bluff of violence. The dogs begin to pick up speed and soon they are galloping around the pond, long vines of drool dragging off their lips. The ice glimmers like silver. One dog finally makes a move and they all descend together. And there is Michelle, on her back porch, listening to the cracking of ice and bone, the coyote's whelps and whines, while she fingers the beads of her rosary and makes up the prayers to go along with them.

I've tried to think of a set image of Mother, but everything I think of are moments that I wasn't there for. Like the goggles in the bathroom. I've tried to remem-

ber how she reacted when I told her I was pregnant, but I keep seeping back into when she told her parents that she was. She is alone in the kitchen, sitting at the table and drinking grape soda out the bottle, picking at her thumbnail. In comes her mother, holding up her hands like she's a surgeon that has just washed them. But instead of being clean, they are gloved in blood. She had just gutted the pig. Using her elbow, she turns on the tap and begins to scrub. Behind her, Mother's father enters, his hands just as bloody. As he waits behind his wife, Mother announces what she has done. "I'm pregnant," she says.

Her mother stops washing and the three of them just listen to the running water. Then, her father turns around and sits in the chair across from her and, his hands still soaked in blood, roots around his pocket for his cigarettes. He fishes one out, lights it with a match, and begins to smoke. His fingers covering the white paper in red prints. "I assume," Mother says to them, "that you'll be telling me to leave."

Her father inhales sharply. "I guess," he says, letting the smoke stream out his nostrils, "you finally did it. You've finally gotten out of here." Her mother begins to scrub her hands again, with such force that her skin deepens to red. But Mother's father just sits at the table calmly, smoking, and the cigarette smoulders until the room is rancid with the smell of burning blood. Not that I know what blood smells like when it burns, but I imagine it reeks like something between rust and vinegar.

Michelle peered through her blinds. She didn't usually close them but earlier that night, on the local radio, the announcer had said that Chloe, the boy's mother, had come forward claiming that the last thing her son had said to her was that he was going to steal one of Michelle's dogs. He was going to sell it so he could settle a debt that his mother owed to her boyfriend.

Not long after the radio announcement, there was a knock at the front door. It was two RCMP officers. Behind the pair, Michelle saw their idling car, still spinning blue and red, the high beams casting long light into her squinting eyes. The pale light from her kitchen couldn't reach the front door and since her porch light had burnt out Michelle couldn't see either of their faces, just their silhouettes. One of the officers shifted his weight and rested his hand on his holster. The other one asked her if she knew anything about the disappearance of Jay D'Angelo.

Michelle knew that once she said this lie, there was no going back. So she hedged her bets. "I've never met anyone by that name," she told them.

She saw something move in front of the headlights. She couldn't tell what it was, or even what shape it was, but saw something shift in the darkness. An officer asked her if they could look around her property but she refused. He asked if that was because she was hiding anything, to which she replied, "Plenty of things. Plenty of things that have nothing to do with a dead boy."

The cops said that they'd be back in the morning with a warrant and she should have her dogs chained up. "For their own safety," one of them said.

She watched them get into their vehicle, flash the siren once, do a U-turn, and drive off. Michelle saw what had moved in front of the car. There was a group of ten or twelve people, standing like statues in the darkness. The officers must have seen them but had drove past regardless. She assumed that they'd just wanted to catch a glimpse of the woman they'd never seen before. But after Michelle closed and bolted the front door, the crowd stayed.

On my fourth day alone, I started the cleaning. At first, I was just tidying up the mess I'd been making in the kitchen. When the people came to rescue me,

whoever they were going to be, I didn't want them to think I couldn't keep myself together. After I'd swept, I mopped, and then after that I started scrubbing everything. The stove top, the hood vent, the faucet and sink, the steel wool rubbing my fingers raw. I used a face cloth for inside the fridge that I had gradually been emptying. I took Mother's toothbrush, still in the mug by the sink, and used it to scour the grout between the tiles, the minty smell of her toothpaste wafting through the water. I didn't want to use any chemical cleaners because of the baby.

Once the kitchen was done, I moved into the living room. I wiped down the baseboards, shelves, and television screen. I filled a bucket of frothing, soapy water and started shampooing the carpets. I can't remember Mother ever cleaning. A layer of grime had spread seamlessly across everything.

When I moved into Mother's bedroom and pulled the mattress out from behind the wall, I found a clasped leather edition of the King James Bible. There wasn't any dust on its cover. And it would've been nice to think that Mother was secretly pouring over its pages, whispering psalms while I slept upright in the chair beside her, pleading Keep her well, Lord. Keep her well. But I'm sure it's dustless only because it somehow got wedged between the headboard and the wall and has been squeezed there for years.

There was a knock at the front door. I ran out of the bedroom, pausing to wipe the hair from my face and tie it into a bun. They had arrived, they were finally here. I opened the door, my duffle already in hand.

Mormons.

Michelle didn't know what to do about the people outside her house. The police had driven straight past them and hadn't stopped.

She peered through her bedroom blinds when she heard another car pulling into her driveway, its tires

chewing the gravel. There was now a group of twenty or thirty where there used to be ten or twelve. A minivan pulled up and another five got out. Through her blinds, she watched the crowd swell on her front lawn. She wondered how many people down there had known Jay. Not just known his name and where his parents lived, but really knew him.

Michelle's thoughts floated from her bedroom window, around the house, out into the tall grass, and down into the hidden grave that held the boy and the dog. On the day of the burial, the earth had been dry and the spade rang off the cracked dirt. And so the grave had made them tight as twins, both of them curled forward with their limbs folded in. As Michelle's mind moved over the boy's body and towards his face, his eyes began to shine like coins. And in them, possessing perfect knowledge, Michelle saw his childhood, flat and full of unknowable distance. She saw him being scared of thunder but not lightning, saw him sneaking bread crusts into the bird feeder behind the laundromat. She saw him tunneling into a snowbank and then watching his breath dissolve the flakes as he pretended that this was all there was in our white and weightless world. She saw him standing alone in a field scorched with sunlight, watching the scales of cotton rise into the air, as his mother sat on the stoop of their vacuum repair shop, taking long sips from a bottle beaded with water, and telling the gel-haired bachelors she loves them. And then, years later, Michelle saw the same woman asking the priest through the confessional's slotted reeds how is somebody ever supposed to know what kind of a human a person is going to be, her hands around the hem of her shirt with her knuckles pulled white, while outside her son throws gravel at the endless stream of passing semis. And then Jay's eyes began to burn with desire and daring and a beautiful brightness. And then she looked into the dog's eyes, its skull huddled

closely to his. And in them, Michelle saw that when it had mauled through the boy's body, it was looking for something it had smelled inside him, something bitter and strong. But when Jay's insides had been ribboned onto the grass, it turned out to have only been hate and more hate, solid and slippery as a heart.

Another car arrived and the sound of its horn whiplashed Michelle's thoughts back into the present. She knew that she, like the crowd below her, didn't know anything about Jay and was just making these things up. But they seemed as if they could be true and there are times when that's all that matters.

She took a deep breath and opened her window a sliver. She smelled the exhaust from the idling cars. The crowd still hovered on the far side of the headlights so she couldn't see their faces. Hidden behind the blinds, she yelled for the villagers to leave, said she'd sic the dogs on them if they didn't. Below, the crowd mulled and then silenced. And from it then came a bottle that shattered against her front door, louder because it was night.

I had missed three days of school. When I arrived on Tuesday, it was as if I had this force field around me. I couldn't get close to anybody, like when you chase one magnet across a table with the push of another. But then, at lunch, Travis came up to me and said he had heard about Mother and that he was sorry. It was shocking. Not that he was sorry but that he knew about it. Everyone did. But they didn't do anything. Though I couldn't blame them. I didn't know what to do either.

The day droned on, students offering their sympathies in the hallways or in notes passed in class. At the end of Social Studies, the last period, Ms Haxton asked to speak with me. She said she had heard about my loss and was deeply, deeply sorry. She said that she too had lost her mother—"stepmother," she cor-

rected—and if I ever needed anything I knew what to do.

"Do you have grandparents?" she asked.

I had learned from my mistake with the paramedics. "No," I said.

"That's good. That's good," she said. "Nobody should ever have to bury their child."

I agreed with her and let both my hands wander over my belly. Usually, I avoid touching my stomach in front of others but this time, I didn't care. I felt the round warmth spread beneath my hands, and then excused myself to the bathroom where I splashed water on my face before I went home.

When the villagers hear the bottle shatter, they know they've crossed a line. Michelle runs from the house to the back barn where she keeps the dogs at night and slides open the door. All of them stare at her for a moment, their planetary eyes glowing beneath the barn's incandescent light. When they hear the villagers running and shouting, firing their rifles, the dogs all charge past Michelle, abandoning her.

She follows them through the moonlit field, towards the woods that grow on the north end of her property. As she runs through the tall grass, the rifle fire seems to come from all around her, her dogs whelping and whimpering. As she sprints into the woods, she hears someone gaining on her. She makes it to the trees but then trips and tumbles down a rock face and onto the dirt.

Lying there, she hears their breathing. She picks herself up, ready to face what has been chasing her, her heart beating wildly inside her chest. And in the moonlight that needles through the canopy, she sees a shadow skulking towards her.

At first, I'd started working on my story to keep my mind off Mother. Near the end of it, she was sleeping

for twenty-three hours a day and it was nice to watch her breathe heavily and then write about Michelle walking through a sunny field with her pack galloping around her.

When Mother would wake, I'd read her what I had written and she'd nod along and then fall back asleep. "Make sure it has a nice ending," she'd once said. It was good because she never felt like she had to share anything of herself when she was awake.

I think I'm still writing for more or less the same reason.

Today, I got home from school to find a letter in the mailbox that's addressed to "Current Occupant." The letter says that unless somebody claims Mother's body in the next five business days, the province will donate her cadaver to the university hospital. They use that word and everything. "Cadaver." Like they already know what she'll become, and why bother trying to change what's already been determined?

I pick up my duffle bag, bring it into Mother's room, and toss it on the bed. I've been thinking all day—calculating, really—and if I win this competition, the prize money and the money I have saved will take me to summer. And maybe Travis can help out a bit too. I dump the duffle onto Mother's bed. I go to the kitchen, grab a large plastic bag from beneath the sink and bring it back. And then I start pulling all of the drawers out of the dresser and dumping their contents into the bag. Once the drawers are empty, I tie a knot in the bag and place it by the front door.

As I was putting *Moby Dick* back in the bookshelf, I found a photo of Mother wedged between two novels. In the picture, she is young—as young as I am, so this must be only a year or so before she had me. She is at a Greyhound station, leaning against the bus's silver side, wearing sunglasses, a plaid shirt, and jeans with holes in the knees. Her head is shaved and she isn't

wearing any shoes. There is a man beside her whose back is turned and his shoulders are hunched inwards like he's lighting a cigarette. He's wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and steel-toed boots.

Mother isn't looking at the man but straight at the camera. And at first I thought the two don't know each other. But then I noticed that the way her hand is frozen is like she was reaching to grab his sleeve, wanting him to look before it was too late. I can't imagine who took the picture. In the window of the bus, right above the man's head, is a sign that reads "Bethlehem."

In the photo, Mother stands straight with her jaw tilted up. She looks proud and stoic. Content. But there's something about that contentment, like it's more surrender than ease, like she knows that when push comes to shove, whatever she does, there's nothing she'll be unable to walk away from.

I feel the baby kick and a wave of puke churns inside me. I go back to the bedroom and lie down on the bed and take deep breaths. I focus on my breathing and I can feel the baby growing inside of me, can feel it swelling, pushing against my stomach, finally realizing it's trapped.

I'd once heard on TV that after you die, they harvest everything. I think of my Mother on the stainless steel table in the university hospital. At her feet, a scalpel has unzipped the skin from her legs, the line running up her shin. And in her chest, sawed and sprung open, latex gloves lift out the parts of her that are dense and heavy and flow out like a magician's handkerchief. But on her face, her goggles are still on, their clear plastic freckled with blood.

There's nothing that haunts you quite as much as something you knew was coming. At night, sleeping in my mother's old room, I hang my dreams on the ceiling fan and watch them dance their slow circles above me, and they are soft and plush and safely held

out of reach. Life, I am realizing, isn't short at all. Life is the longest thing you will ever do.

It had spread amongst the town that the dogs were loose. But someone had said that all canines were afraid of fire. So they douse the dresses of their daughters and wrap them around the hockey sticks of their sons, and while the children watch from the living room windows, all the parents exit out their front doors. And they see something on the far end of the road. What was first just a shadow limping down Main Street, will soon be illuminated in the torches' hot gasp of orange light.

It will be Michelle, riding on the back of a Great Dog, both of them bloody and ragged. And as Michelle and the dog stumble past each house, the neighbours will wave their torches, the flames frantically whispering their secrets.

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