

PERSONAL GHOSTS

There's about a mile of now-unused highway where the course of the highway is now directed somewhere else, and where Forager now likes to lead me when we go out on walks so that we have a wide, clear, long open space to play fetch. He's a white lab, though only his height and the shape of his head give this away: his body and legs show off long white hair which always ripples backwards as though perpetually moving forward through water.

As we arrive today, it's getting to be evening time. Still plenty of light to see by, but the sky is an antivibrant shade of muted blue. Forager pulls me forward through the yellow grass, panting and wagging, eager to get to run.

Before offering to take him off the leash, I have a look around. Nobody else out here (there never is). No wildlife (there sometimes are deer, I'm sure Forager has only kind intentions when he sees them and wants to go say hi, but I feel bad about alarming them all the same). There is the distant sound of cars rushing by on the now-still-actually-used part of the highway, a good mile or more of forest between that and us. There is the more all-present sound of the wind sweeping over the long grass that surrounds us here, and the crickets who harmonize in an immense choir and who sometimes hop onto your arm, turn to face another way, and then hop off.

Yeah, we're all clear here. He's good to be off his leash. I give him a little whistle, and he stops pulling me forward and comes towards me instead, wagging and pressing himself against me as

we stand there in our little parted divot of the grass. I let the good boy off of his leash and he flies forward, out of sight into the grass ahead: I see the tops of the strands of grass ripple in a line as he speeds through, and then I see him emerge up onto the section of highway. There he stops and turns to face me, and gives a little leap and a bark.

I smile and have a little laugh under my breath at how eager and happy he is; it's infectious. I pick up my pace to a trot, and step up onto the section of highway with him.

This section doesn't join up with the rest of the road; they demolished most of it on both sides, but apparently couldn't be bothered with this middle part. What the deal is with that, I don't really know, but I'll certainly take it.

I shrug out of my backpack, and set it down at the edge of the road. Forager watches me intently. The backpack has a place to put a water bottle on each side, sort of an elastic ring at the top and then more of a mesh below it. One side does have a water bottle, and the other has a couple of tennis balls stuffed in there. As Forager is already so amped up right now, I don't waste any time messing with him and pretending I can't find where the tennis balls are: I take one out straight away, wind up, and throw the ball as far as I can out over the highway.

Forager bounds after it at full speed, his long white coat making him look like a lone wispy cloud on a windy day.

The ball bounces once, twice, and then before it hits the ground a third time he's caught up with it. He catches it as it falls to him, and then he turns around in a big proud galloping arc, and comes running back to me for me to throw it again.

I do 3D modeling for a living. I make scary monsters in really, *really* obsessive detail. Right now I'm working on a two headed raven with sharp teeth and piercing red eyes, an open gory chest cavity from which tendrils emerge, and a pattern of tangled snakes imposed subtly in the sheen of the feathers such that it only becomes visible if light catches it in just the right way. When it's done I'll post up screenshots on my site, and most likely someone will buy the model off of me to use in their indie game or movie. I also work part time at a grocery store keeping tabs on the self checkout, and if the modeling business is going slow, I'll sometimes pick up some extra hours. I've been offered

jobs from game and movie studios that would pay, no exaggeration, ten times what I'm currently making at the grocery store, but none of them will let me work remote, and I know too well how many hours and hours and hours go into what I do, and I can't do it: that's too long each day to leave Forager alone by himself. He's been good to me beyond words. The summer Edith died, I don't think I would have managed to not kill myself if not for his concern over me, his constant readiness to give himself unabashedly into happiness if there is occasion for canine happiness, and his need for me to be functional and still alive in order to take care of him. I owe everything to him, somewhat literally after that summer. So I do what I can to be even half as good to him as he's been to me.

Edith had a tattoo sleeve on her left arm of an abstract forest, and peeking around the trees were a rabbit, a fox, a wolf, a deer, and an owl. I had the same tattoo artist recreate the sleeve on my arm from photographs so that I can carry Edith (my older sister, my best friend) forward in the world. More recently, not for quite the same reason but just out of sincere ongoing gratitude, I got a tattoo of Forager standing in profile against my back, a film negative of the real Forager, a wispy black cloud rippling across my shoulder blades.

I take the slobbery ball that Forager offers me, wind up real big, and throw it again. Again and again, he chases, brings it back, and I throw it.

After a couple dozen or so, he comes galloping back, but does not give the ball to me: he goes and stands on the shoulder of the highway, slobbery ball still held in his mouth, head held high and facing back towards the city.

"Want some water?" I offer.

He drops the ball and wags, and licks his lips and tosses his head in what is practically a human nod.

We both walk towards the backpack. I take the water bottle out of its side pouch, unscrew the top, and begin pouring it down onto the highway in a gentle stream. Forager laps at the stream, drinking as much of the trickle as he can manage to. When that water bottle is empty I unzip the backpack and take out a second water bottle, and begin pouring out that one for him as well; he gets about halfway through the second one

before backing away, finished. I stop pouring, and drink the rest of that water bottle for myself.

As I'm screwing the top back on, the sight of Edith's tattoo sleeve catches me in a strange way, and I find myself then in a suddenly cognizant moment. I stand up straight. I look out at the field before me and the sunset that drapes over it, an astonishing distillment of orange and violet and in the clouds a type of grey which still in and of itself manages to feel like a full fledged color there. I flare my nostrils, and deeply take in the smell of the grass, and some sort of sweetness which is also in the air. As the wind picks up and then becomes still, I happen to catch a smell of Forager's breath, and it makes me smile, that reminder that he is here with me right now in this moment. He is panting.

I stop looking at the sky, give Forager a rub on the back, and then collect up the water bottles and slobbery tennis ball into my backpack. I clip Forager back onto the leash, and the two of us head back for the city.

On this edge of town, there is a strange mix of buildings which are still maintained and seem to be doing quite well, and buildings which are wholly abandoned. There is a bakery which has delicious cake-y smells coming out of it, which shares its wall with a derelict sandwich shop whose name can still be seen in the absence of grime over the door where the letters were. Past the sandwich shop is a derelict gym, all of the equipment gone from the inside except a few empty racks; one of the windows is cracked a bit. Past the gym is a derelict souvenir shop. Past the souvenir shop is an all night diner on the corner, and a dozen people sitting inside and having dinner while the sun outside is just finishing setting.

After the diner, Forager and I pass down an entire block of boarded up storefronts. The wind here whistles and our footsteps echo. Some street lamps begin turning on, one by one here and there in no particular order, no particular hurry. Being out here with Forager often at around this hour, I know that it will probably be fully five minutes before the last of the lamps goes on.

On the next block, both sides are dominated by fortress-esque parking garages, each six stories high, concrete and mostly dark

on the inside throughout, illuminated only here and there by lights which are going on at the same lazy cadence as the street lamps.

Leaning back against the railing of one parking garage's third floor is a guy with dark curly hair short and close to his head and a pair of headphones draped around his neck. I can't deny that he looks cool leaning there, silhouetted against the yellow orange light of the garage's interior. On this edge of town, there's a strange quirk that people leaning back in high up places like that are usually after one thing. You might find someone leaning back on an apartment balcony, on the roof of an abandoned store, on a pedestrian overpass, on a plastic crate positioned against a wall at the mouth of an alleyway. But it all means the same intent, and hey, a lot of times I'm interested. I don't have anyone I'm seeing too regularly.

I stop walking with Forager, bring my fingers to my mouth, and give the guy leaning against the railing an inquisitive bird call: "*twee twee?*"

He rolls against the railing, turning to face me. His elbows now perched on the railing, he has a look down at me, brings a hand to his mouth, and gives a negative bird call back to me: "*tewww.*"

I don't have any hard feelings; he probably isn't gay.

I point down at Forager, and offer, "*twee twee?*"

As I do, Forager looks up at me and then at the guy, wagging excitedly. He knows what I've just advocated for for him.

The guy leans a bit further over the railing, cups a hand around his mouth, and shouts, as casually as can be shouted, "Morph dog?"

I return an affirmative bird call: "*tew!*"

Forager is just as much male as I am, but with morph dogs, most people at least don't really care.

The guy looks away and goes back to leaning back against the railing, staring up at the concrete ceiling over his head, thinking about it.

After he's had a few seconds, I ask, "*twee twee?*"

He brings a hand to his mouth, and answers, "*tew!*"

With that he stands up and walks into the rest of the garage. "Cmon, this way Forager," I tell Forager, and he and I trot into

the garage, him wagging. We start up the ramp towards his hookup.

We meet up on the third floor: the guy is giving us a coy smile, leaning back against the wall beside this floor's restrooms. I've never seen him before, but whether this is his first time or whether we've just missed each other until now, he certainly knows the protocol of how these go down. Hell, he looks about my age but he might predate me, might have happened to be out of town for longer than I've been newly arrived. But I'm only speculating, I don't know any of that, and I likely won't. Part of the fun here is filling in the blanks with really whatever you'd like them to be. I suppose I can presume some things about him by the tattered jeans, the leather jacket, and the scratched up green and black and orange shirt which says *something* in a death metal font.

I glance around the garage. Just us here, and two cars so covered in dust that I doubt anyone is ever coming back for them. I lean down and let Forager off of his leash.

The long haired white lab bounds playfully towards the stranger. The stranger crouches down and meets Forager at dog level, embracing him and petting him and receiving all kinds of licks to the face, though eventually he turns his face away to avoid any further kissing for the moment—it is very apparent to me that he likes dogs, but doesn't like-like dogs, as such. Which I don't have any issue with; the first one, just liking dogs at all, is far and away the more important one.

The guy stands up; Forager paws politely at the guy's leg to mount him, but the guy seems not to notice. "What's his name?" the guy asks.

"Forager," I answer; Forager looks to me and tilts his head; "Good boy," I tell him, and he wags and returns his attention to guy, politely pawing at his jeans a second time.

"Forager," he says down to the dog; the dog wags, and the guy crouches down to pet him some more.

I'm still standing a bit of a distance away, and at this point I begin walking closer. I contribute to petting Forager by giving him a pet on the head, and then I ask the guy, "You got a name?"

“Jamie,” he tells me. Some people tell the truth about that on these and some people don’t, but I don’t really mind either way. If he wants to be Jamie, he’s Jamie.

I pet Forager again.

“You got a name?” Jamie asks, understandably sounding like an afterthought to getting my dog’s name.

“Ivan,” I tell him.

“Cool,” he says, nodding. Still crouched there with Forager, Jamie looks up at me, nods his head back towards a restroom door, and says, “So uh.”

I lead the way, and hold the door open for him. Forager trots in first, and Jamie slinks in after. I close the door behind us all, and lock it shut.

The restrooms in these garages (this is not my first time) are inexplicably well cleaned and spacious. In one corner is a toilet, in another a sink, and in another a urinal; otherwise we have about an apartment bedroom’s worth of space here to ourselves.

Jamie rests a hand on the button of his jeans. “Mind if I...”

“Heh. Kind of the point, I thought,” I tell him.

With a bashful smile, he shrugs, keeps his pants on all the same, and says, “Yeah. This is a little bit different than how I’m used to it going, wanted to make sure we were on the same page. Are you going to stick around in here?”

I nod. “You seem cool but I gotta make sure you’re nice to him.”

He nods.

“I’ll keep my clothes on,” I assure him, though I add, “Not that I wouldn’t be interested, but, I *will* keep my clothes on.”

“Yeah, hey, I’m not like homophobic at all or nothing—”

“I know.”

“I just wasn’t—”

“You’re okay,” I assure him, and lean down to pet Forager who has finished sniffing around the bathroom and has now come over to stand in front of me.

“So how does it work?” Jamie asks.

I give him the crash course: “Make eye contact with him, think of it kind of like a staring contest, focus really intently on his eyes, and then while doing that, in your head imagine the form that you want him to take on.”

“Does he sound like them?”

I shake my head. “He just looks like them, but it’s still him in there. He doesn’t talk.”

Jamie asks, “He can be anyone? Female, included?”

“Anyone you can imagine,” I say with a nod.

“Celebrities?” he asks.

“I don’t think he knows what a celebrity is, but sure.”

“Damn. You must be pretty lucky, huh? Getting to have him be whoever you want, whenever you want? I bet you two are getting nasty all the time.”

“To be honest, not really,” I tell him, and I shrug as though the reason why is a mystery to me, but I know the reason why: my head is full of monsters and I worry what on Earth I’ll turn Forager into if I happen to not be able to keep my mind off work. I do admit to Jamie, for his interest, “I give him handjob jobs if he asks for it, in his regular form.”

“Oh. Heh. Hey if that’s what you’re into in the first place, yeah why bother with the transformation I guess.” He gives Forager a pet on the head. “I wasn’t going to do a celebrity though, I was just curious. Actually have in mind a uh, friend, if that’s not weird to you.”

“Not really. Even if it was, hey, your fantasy, not mine.”

He nods. Then without putting it off any further, he sits down on the tiled restroom floor, cross-legged in his jeans. Forager, knowing what this is and wanting to play along, leaves my side and goes and sits in front of his hookup to be.

The two of them stare into each other’s eyes. I hope it works for him. Some people aren’t able to visualize things very well, and there’s nothing that even the most talented of morph dogs can do for them in that case. But as I watch Jamie and Forager sitting there staring at each other, I do see that it’s working: the image of Forager fades out, and in his place fades in a woman sitting cross-legged in a black and red skirt and top, black fingernails, pale makeup, piercings on the ears, nose, mouth, and eyebrow.

“Tris,” he calls her, and reaches out a gentle hand to touch to her cheek. He looks her up and down. “Holy shit, Tris.”

Tris leans forward and licks Jamie’s face seductively. He opens his mouth and catches her tongue, and the two of them

are soon making out, him lying her back on the tiled floor. Both of them are *really* into it. Eventually Jamie breaks from the kissing and takes off his jeans and underwear, and reaches up under Tris's skirt and pulls her panties down off of her. He starts to finger her, and she lies on her back with her legs spread, grinding forward against his hand. It doesn't take much of that before there's no question that both of them are ready: he pulls up the front of her skirt and puts himself in, and they go at it there on the cool tiles of the restroom floor.

When they're all finished, they both lie on their backs looking blankly up at the ceiling, Jamie using one arm to provide a pillow for Tris and the other arm to provide a pillow for himself. Both of them are breathing heavily. Jamie gives Tris a kiss on the side of the mouth, and Tris returns a similar one back.

Still a little out of breath, Jamie says, "Thank you, Tris, Forager, whatever."

Tris gives him another lick on the mouth, and the two of them fall back into kissing again, before eventually Jamie gives one final deep smooch and then sits up, and reaches for his discarded pants.

With the pants still in hand, he looks up at his casual observer who has been trying not to be in the way. "Thank you, for that," he says to me.

"Happy to serve," I say with a quick little mock salute. "And hey, it's not like you're half bad: my friend got plenty out of that too."

He glances away bashfully, and then stands up and puts on his underwear and his pants. I kneel down with Tris, indulge her in a quick kiss when she cranes her neck towards me, and then I slide her panties back on, and make sure they're on comfortably. I also put her collar back on. Even looking like a human, I still want to make sure she has it in case somehow, though I don't imagine it happening, we get separated.

Tris's stomach growls loudly.

"Is she alright?" Jamie asks.

"Hungry," I tell Jamie, although Tris also recognizes this word, and gives an affirmative lick of her lips. "Most morph dogs do love to show off their services, but it does also take a lot out of them to make the switch. Probably keep her like this until

I can get her some food, just to make sure the morph back to dog goes alright.”

“What does she eat?” Jamie asks, and I can hear him slightly hesitate on the word she, now that we’re talking about getting back to Forager’s original form. I won’t deny that there is a weird grammar to it sometimes.

The answer to his question is that she’ll eat damn near anything, although meat is certainly a strong favorite whether looking like a human or like a dog. I have high nutrient snacks stowed in my backpack for this type of occasion, although admittedly they’re a bit pricey, so if I can manage it it’s certainly preferable to save them for more of an emergency situation and just go and get her some regular human food for now.

Answering his question out loud though, I say, “We’ll probably head to the gas station up the street, pick up some hot dogs and beef jerky.”

“I’ll buy,” Jamie offers.

“Nah, really, it’s no big deal.”

“Yes, it was,” he insists. “You have no idea. But, anyways, I’m not trying to cling if you don’t want me around, but if you’d let me buy, I’d like to.”

I think about it, and then answer, “Yeah. Thank you.”

We all slink out of the restroom. Jamie goes and stomps on a skateboard to make it jump up to his hand, and he catches it, and we all begin walking down the ramps. Tris and I hold hands, which is always a much nicer alternative to needing to use the leash.

“What band is that on your shirt?” I ask. We chat about metal on the short walk to the gas station. I’m more into weird croaking black metal, he’s more into glam metal actually, which is also cool.

The three of us head into the gas station. As Tris and I are making our way to the beef jerky, hand in hand, the clerk behind the counter calls to me, “Hey fella!”

Tris and I turn to look at him.

“No dogs inside,” he says, and then gestures around his neck—he has noticed Tris’s collar.

I'm about to lie and pretend to be insulted he accused my friend of being a dog, but Tris's mouth opens, and she begins panting nervously.

"We'll be in and out, man," I try.

"Out," he insists, pointing over at the door. "I won't sell you nothing."

"Tch, fuckin people," I mutter.

"What was that?"

I give him the finger as we pass by.

Tris and I stand outside, holding hands near a tall ashtray that's out here. She smells nice, I realize. Orange-y. Jamie really did have Tris pretty strongly in mind when he visualized her, whoever she is.

A couple minutes later Jamie emerges with six hot dogs stacked in his arms and four long sticks of beef jerky sticking out of a pocket of his leather jacket. "Asshole," he says about the clerk, and I nod. He goes on, "I didn't know how much she needed, and I figure if there's extra we could eat the difference."

Hell yeah, sounds good to me. Some hot dogs are passed around and the three of us dig in, Jamie and I each taking our time, Tris eating as fast as she can manage to swallow. She ends up eating four while Jamie and I each finished one.

When we're all finished with our hot dogs, I stand in front of Tris and press a palm to her forehead so she closes her eyes. When they're closed, I give her the command, "Return."

The image of Tris fades away, and sitting in her place, wagging, is Forager.

Jamie suddenly steps in close beside me, says, "For your trouble," and then turns my chin with his finger and gives me a kiss on the lips.

I am shocked but pleasantly shocked, and I press my lips against his in turn, but he breaks it off pretty quick.

I feel dumb, but I can't help but smiling. "You didn't have to do that."

"Maybe I wanted to. I'm not not a little bicurious." With that he hops onto his skateboard, hands me the sticks of beef jerky, and says, "I'll be around," and then glides off around the corner. I listen to him go for a while, until the sound of the little wheels rumbling on the road is too faint to be heard.

Forager and I stand outside of the gas station a while longer. I stare blankly, pleasantly blankly, ahead at nothing, as I think back on the kiss. I can still feel the press of his lips on mine. Eventually my mind wanders back to the little kiss I shared with Tris too, as we were getting her dressed again—Tris, who was actually of course Forager, who politely sits here outside a gas station beside me, happy to be patient and sniff the air as his weird human friend stands there staring at nothing.

I give him the sticks of beef jerky, and then the two of us leave this post by the gas station wall, and continue our way back towards home.