

BRUTUS

by

Benjamin Shalva

Brutus bit her face, but not badly. A neighbor at the party, a radiologist, told them not to worry. If Chloe was his daughter, he'd skip the ER and take her home. Maybe start a course of antibiotics, couldn't hurt. Plus, locating a plastic surgeon at this hour, on a holiday weekend...honestly, the wound had stopped bleeding, had been cleaned and disinfected, and would amount to little more than a faint fault line beside the temple. A scar easily concealed with the right hairdo, or, when the occasion called for it, revealed. A story, the radiologist concluded. That's what this was. The time Chloe pet the big, brown dog.

The adults exhaled. Some rushed from the bedroom to share the good news. Chloe's parents, flanking her like sentries, showered the radiologist with thanks and curled around their girl. "Sha," her mother purred, "sha." Chloe offered more hiccupping whimpers, but her frantic, saucer eyes had finally settled. She gazed at some horizon, distant and invented. She looked more tired than traumatized.

Sharon, who'd been hovering behind the radiologist like a scrub nurse, could see she was no longer needed. She exited the bedroom and walked slowly down the stairs. The party below was busy dying. The wide, white-carpeted living room had been returned to its pristine vacancy. The dining room had also emptied. The caterers had replaced the serving bowls and platters with carafes of coffee and hot water. They'd also produced a tray of shot glasses filled with a murky, tan concoction. A calligraphed placard next to the tray read: *Birthday Shots ~ Glory, Glory,*

Roseanne's 40! Sharon dipped her pinky into a shot glass and tasted the liquid, cloyingly cinnamon and thick as milk. She'd helped Roseanne mix the shots earlier that day. Roseanne had insisted—even in the dead of February, her birthday should taste like December.

The dozen adults that hadn't yet fled were sequestered in the foyer, keys in their hands, coats over their arms. Their respective children, who had spent the evening ransacking bedrooms, sliding down banisters, and weaving around their parents' legs like hunters through the amazon, clung to these same legs now, chastened and amazed. Sharon watched one little boy being zipped by his father into layers of puffy down. The boy's pale face, scattershot with freckles, protruded from his hood like a luminous moon. *Where did Chloe go?* he asked, misting his father's glasses with every consonant. *Is she bleeding? Where is Theo? He sounded like a bear! Daddy, he sounded like a great big bear!* The father zipped, nodded, and hummed. He wiped his glasses. He rubbed his bloodshot eyes. Sharon didn't know the guy, but, earlier that evening, she'd stood shoulder to shoulder with him on the back deck, coughing hits into the cold. A half-dozen others had been there, too, the lot of them huddled around a smoldering joint like hobos around a dumpster fire. "The kids should be smoking behind *our* backs," someone had quipped, and, before Sharon could stop herself, she'd ripped a thunderous "Ha!". It took even her by surprise, surfacing from her belly like a bubble through tar. The uncomfortable silence that followed chased her inside. She'd stormed the kitchen, itchy, ashamed, her limbs electric, her fingers threatening to fly away if she didn't relieve the pressure somehow. She opened the fridge and grabbed the closest bottle—a wide-bodied, near empty bottle of steak marinade. Then, wading through a stream of scurrying staff, she planted herself at the kitchen table, bent over the bottle like a craftsman, and feverishly peeled the bottle's label. She scraped the gummy residue like a scab.

But that same kitchen was empty now. The caterers had tubbed the leftovers and fled. A single light burned above the stove. Sharon strolled the kitchen's perimeter, dragging her fingertips across swaths of dappled granite, leaving streaks. She took her time getting to the sliding glass door that opened onto the deck. Her reflection met her in the glass—a skinny, boyish figure topped with short, tight curls. A pixie's physique, live-wired and bouncy, only pinched a bit, as if middle age had just poked her in the sternum. She pressed her forehead to the glass, forcing the reflection to dive and dissolve. The glass felt good against her skin—a cold kiss. She cupped her hands by her temples. She could barely see the outlines of Roseanne and Ryan's patio furniture. Beyond this, the slopes of conjoined backyards crested like desert dunes. On sunny days, Sharon had watched great herds overtake this vast terrain—laughing, crying, blowing bubbles, dodging tags. On this night, however, hardly a porch light twinkled. No one dared disturb the inky gloom.

Sharon rapped on the glass. Nothing. No movement. No sound. She hesitated, encouraging the knot in her gut to release. She was being irrational, she knew. And downright unfair. The bite had been an accident. One of those regrettable party fouls. If Brutus had wanted to hurt the girl, he could have torn her in two. He could have dragged little Chloe across these kitchen tiles before dropping her like a finch at Roseanne's feet. But he'd only done what dogs do, not when they're certifiably antisocial, but when they're justifiably distressed, when they've had enough time stuck inside, bladder full, bowl empty. When they've suffered an evening of loud music and oblivious grownups and unsupervised children beaming towels at them from the landing upstairs. So, yeah, he slapped the girl away. He grazed her with a fang. But should that negate a decade of docile companionship? Does man's best friend turn beast with one wayward bite?

Sharon opened the door. The night rushed to greet her, steely and tart. She stepped out to the deck, closed the door, and burrowed her chin into the cowl neck of her sweater. She stretched the sweater's cuffs over her hands.

“Brutus?”

He had to be here. Where else could he go? The deck was enclosed by a hardwood railing on three sides and by the house on the fourth. She took some tentative steps forward, waving her arms to ward off obstacles. Her teeth were chattering. She bounced on the balls of her feet to stay warm.

“Come on, Brutus,” she coaxed. “You’re okay. Where are you, boy? Come on.”

Wild. Was he sulking? Had he drifted hypothermic? Had that bark of his, that seismic shriek, deafened his own tender ears? Entirely possible. It had nearly deafened hers. One minute, she’d been sitting there, diligently scraping that marinade bottle, and the next, *wham!*—she’d been punched from her manic trance, pitched up and out at the speed of sound. On her tongue, she’d tasted twisting steel. The tang of hot blood. And then this little girl—*where had she come from?*—had crawled out from beneath the kitchen table, a crimson gash blooming at her cheek. Sharon had reached out for her, but the mothers had beat her to it. With squawks and hollers, they’d swooped in and whisked the girl away. “Sharon, bring ice!” someone shouted. Sharon had dashed to the freezer, gripped the hem of her sweater with one hand, and scooped ice with the other. The makeshift pouch at her belly swelled, the cubes swaddled in wool. Then, hem in both hands, she’d sprinted up the stairs, the ice bouncing at her belly with clacks and pops.

Sharon arrived at the deck’s far edge. Still, no movement. Still. No sound.

“Brutus,” she called. “Come on, baby. Come on. It’s me. I’m not mad. Come here, boy. Come.”

Thump-thump-thump.

Sharon smiled and crouched low.

“Come on, sweet boy,” she coached. “There you go.”

Thump-thump-thump.

“Come on, sweet boy. You’re fine.”

The beat began to swell, to accelerate. It thundered to her across the floorboards, reverberated up through her boots. She tracked the sound. *There.* Beside a stack of deck chairs—a shadow, mammoth and savage, slamming the deck with its crescent tail. Sharon heard a low, guttural groan, then watched the shadow rise and stretch, the groan pulling like taffy into a bawdy squeal. The beast sniffed the distance between them. It shifted to its haunches. Sharon indulged, for a brief moment, a fantasy of being felled, of being gutted, of being warmed by a blanket of her own entrails. She would go willingly, she knew. She would go down without a fight.

But Brutus had other ideas. He sneezed. He flopped to his side. He tucked his legs demurely and presented his belly for a rub.

Sharon chuckled. “There’s my boy. There’s my good boy.”

She reached out and dug her nails through his coarse fur. His steaming heat soothed her chapped fingers. He kept pace to her ministrations with soft, satisfied grunts. What a mooch, Sharon thought. Big baby. Oh, he looked like a Brutus alright, with that Rottweiler snout, those thick, lineman’s thighs, and that barrel of a body upholstered in rust-colored turf. And he felt like a Brutus, too, all one-hundred pounds of him slamming into your shins when you walked through the door. But the charm of the nickname was that it extended skin deep. Underneath all

that hulking mutt, Brutus was just a slobberpuss. A voracious cuddler. “Aren’t you now?”

Sharon cooed, scratching the bum behind the ears.

She’d dubbed him “Brutus” years ago, during her stint in the guestroom. Roseanne and Ryan had given her a housekey. She could stay as long as she needed; they only asked, if she was up for it, that she occasionally walk the dog. Roseanne had been pregnant with Katy at the time. Nathaniel was just turning three. Sharon offered to babysit, too, but Roseanne had insisted—Nathaniel liked his routines. Preschool, nanny-share, a teenage sitter for nights out. “Nate’s fine,” Roseanne repeated. “When you’re feeling up to it, walk the dog.”

So Sharon walked the dog.

They’d wandered the subdivision at first, following curved roads with names like Beech, Maple, and Elm. The subdivision lacked sidewalks, forcing them to hug the thin strip of concrete between the asphalt and the grass. They usually embarked mid-morning, which produced inevitable run-ins with gardening crews. Brutus growled at the gardeners with their orange headphones and their leaf blowers. They turned their blowers off and respectfully waved. All the neighbors recognized Brutus. They’d call out big Midwestern “Hi there’s!” and saunter over to pet the dog. The resulting pleasantries flayed Sharon alive. She could feel her pulse quickening, her breath catching. She felt like someone was tying a belt around her neck and, with every comment on the weather, cinching it tighter, notch by notch. After a week of this, she’d had enough. She piled Brutus into the backseat of her car and drove out past the gates, parking on a long, lightly trafficked road leading east to the lake. She let Brutus lead from there. He sniffed and pissed, lunged and pulled. She shuffled behind, absorbing his tugs, eyes lowered, feet plunging through splotches of shade. Brutus never tired; Sharon tired, but never cared.

Once, they made it as far as the bluffs. There, overlooking green strips of frothy, Lake Michigan surf, Brutus stretched out on a patch of grass and Sharon joined him, her head bobbing on his panting ribcage, her eyelids ready to close. She'd slept so little these past months; she'd spent so many nights peeling bottles and haunting halls. But below her now was patient earth, above her indifferent sky; a rough, pink tongue was bathing her brow, and growling cars traded riffs with the gulls. Here, by the lake, she felt she could finally vanish. And she did, sleeping for hours, waking only when the temperature dipped cold. For the span of one delirious breath, she remembered nothing. She opened her eyes to a violet sky and felt free. But then a second breath flooded her lungs and she realized, in fact, that she was frozen. Glacial grief held her firm to the turf. Even Brutus, tethered to her wrist, could do nothing but pace and whine. It was Roseanne who finally found them. She had been searching for hours. She lifted Sharon by her armpits and brushed her off. She drove them home and sent Ryan out jogging the next morning to retrieve Sharon's car.

Sometimes, Roseanne joined them from the start. They never traveled far. As they looped through the subdivision's cul-de-sacs, Roseanne answered call after call, her phone pressed tightly to her ear, her brassy patter drowning out the birds. If it wasn't one of the preschool moms calling, it was Ryan. Sharon could always tell when he called. She recognized, in Roseanne's voice, the blend of inflexibility and fidelity, the teetering ferocity, the love. Gabriel had been in touch with Sharon by this point. He had rented a small apartment. He hadn't burned through their savings or started dating or indulged in other destructive gestures. He'd started seeing a therapist and a psychiatrist. He'd left their bills on autopay. Sharon's calls with Gabriel remained perfunctory, their updates banal, but she'd noted the tenderness in both their voices. Theirs was a kind sort of quitting. Nothing teetering nor ferocious. A steady, tempered goodbye.

Roseanne knew everyone—and everyone knew. With Roseanne along, some neighbor in caked foundation and designer sweats would invariably pull over and roll down a window. Howled hellos. Puckered lips. Smacked cheeks. Roseanne would remind Sharon at which of Roseanne's parties she'd met this particular stranger. Sharon wouldn't remember, of course, and, of course, it wouldn't matter. The woman behind the wheel had already put two and two together and had slapped on a desperate smile. The woman—the women—they knew better than to stare. They gabbed with Roseanne while popping Sharon sly, snooping glances. They couldn't help themselves. They were mothers. They imagined. They had, like Sharon, played out every scenario. They'd poked themselves with every thorny thought until, unable to bear it, they'd tiptoed into bedrooms to kiss sweaty foreheads and smooth tangled sheets. Yet here, in the flesh, was the nightmare realized. How was it possible, these mothers wondered, for Sharon's lungs to demand breath? How was it possible that her heart requested beats? Incredible. Here, before their prying eyes, was motherhood at its most tenacious and tragic. The mother no longer a mother, walking the dog on a fall afternoon.

“How is he?”

Sharon yelped. Brutus smacked the deck twice with his tail, then held it high like a conductor's baton. Sharon swiveled on her heels. She recognized Roseanne's silhouette shivering by the door.

“How is he?” Roseanne asked again. Her voice had settled into its nighttime register, raspy and hollow.

“He's fine,” Sharon answered. “He's cold.”

Roseanne hugged herself and ran her hands up and down her arms. She was nearly a foot taller than Sharon, with broad shoulders, meaty hips, and a mane of long, thick curls.

“Everyone’s going home,” Roseanne said. “It’s late.”

“What time is it?” Sharon asked.

“Katy’s passed out. She fell asleep on the couch. Nathaniel is exhausted. He’s having himself a little tantrum.” Roseanne cleared her throat, then added, “Theo’s not coming back in the house.”

“Rose, he’s not a grizzly bear.”

Roseanne answered with a sardonic chuckle. Sharon straightened up on popping knees.

“I keep thinking—what would have happened?” Roseanne said. “What would have happened if he’d bit her an inch to the right? He could have caught the eye!”

Sharon crossed the deck. Brutus followed. He squeezed his snout between the two women, nuzzling at their hips. Roseanne pushed him away.

“Ryan was right,” Roseanne continued. “We should have rented out a restaurant. Whatever. Gone to a bar. I just wanted everyone around this time. I wanted the kids to have a good time.”

“Rose, it was a great party.”

Roseanne shook her head.

“It was,” Sharon repeated.

Roseanne folded her arms beneath her chest. She looked down at Brutus. She inhaled sharply, as if, until this point, she’d been forgetting to breathe.

“Ryan’s talking about the pound. He says there are laws about dogs that bite. He says we’re lucky we don’t get sued.”

Sharon frowned. “No one’s going to sue.”

“Maybe. But, Sharon, her face...I mean, God, he could have blinded her!”

Brutus whined. He leaned his full girth into Sharon's knees. Sharon stooped and, with both hands, grabbed him by the jowls.

"Soon, sweet boy, soon."

"He can sleep in the garage," Roseanne announced.

"It's cold in there."

"He's not coming back in the house. Not tonight. I'll bring out his bed. He'll be out of the wind. He'll live."

"Why don't you let me take him home?"

Roseanne didn't answer.

"Rose, I can take his food and bed. He can stay with me as long as he needs."

"He'll be fine in the garage..."

"Rose..."

"Sharon!" Roseanne stuck her chin forward, incredulous, her crossed arms hefting her breasts towards her chin. "He bit a child! Our dog bit a girl on the face! He's not going anywhere. He's not going to your house. He's not going to the dog park or out for a walk. We can't pretend this didn't happen, Sharon. It happened!"

Brutus whined. Sharon huffed on her chilled fingers, then answered Roseanne in a gentle, steady voice, "He's the same dog. He had a bad night. Look at him. He's the same."

"Just take him around the house. I'll open the garage door."

"And then what? What are you going to do tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"He's not dangerous."

“Sharon, God, please, I’m freezing! Just take him around back. I’ll open the door for you.”

Roseanne turned on her heels and entered the house. Sharon watched the door close, then hooked two fingers under Brutus’ collar and dragged him towards the deck’s exterior gate. He plodded reluctantly, forcing her to grip tight on his collar and to lean forward with every step. They took their time skirting the deck, pushing, pulling, pausing every few feet as Brutus showered a deck post or a mound of old snow.

What choice did she have? Roseanne had spoken. All must bow and obey. And Sharon knew better than to bite the hand that feeds. When Sharon’s own presence had nearly evaporated, Roseanne had been the one to grab hold and ground her. It was that same steely intransigence that had carted over casseroles and washed the dishes and opened the blinds. It was Roseanne’s unflinching grit that had lifted Sharon and carried her like a ragdoll from wherever she’d collapsed that particular hour. No thanks needed, Sharon knew, but there was a cost to such kindness. Roseanne possessed the power to resurrect, but she possessed, in equal measure, too much density to forget. She absorbed, remembered, reminded, plagued. To this day, she coddled Sharon like a child. No bite could be undone.

They reached the garage. The door was open. Ryan’s car and Roseanne’s jeep stared outward, surrounded by bikes, scooters, lawn equipment, a snow blower. The dog bed, as promised, had been tossed between the cars.

Sharon led Brutus to the bed.

“It’s just for tonight,” she reassured. “Come on. Lie down.”

He nosed the bed skeptically, then stepped onto it. She released his collar. He spun twice and lay down.

“Stay,” she commanded, presenting her palm like a traffic cop. “Stay.”

She backed away towards the inside wall, ready to dive if he bolted. He tracked her progress with pliant eyes. Finding the interior wall, she reached up and pressed a large, plastic button. Wheels groaned and squealed. Brutus flicked his eyes back and forth between Sharon and the descending panels. His eyebrows danced, one side lifting while the other lowered. The panels stacked one atop the next, sealing them in. Then, with an encore of kicks and sputters, the motor clicked off.

Brutus tucked his nose to his back paws. His eyebrows continued to dance.

“One night,” Sharon said. “I’ll check on you in the morning.”

She watched his body settle. She listened to the loping tide of his breath. He had torn a child’s flesh tonight, yet, tonight, he would sleep. She envied him. To be a dog, to not remember, to be beached everlasting on an island of eternal now. After her accident, Brutus had sheltered her with this oblivious irreverence. She had walked him those thousand miles because he couldn’t care less. He spared her the flowers and the pity-drenched condolence cards. He tackled her every morning whether or not she convulsed with sobs. Grief had done the drowning, but it was pity that still held her head underwater. And that dog, bless his heart, was pitiless, a brute to the bone, ill-suited for the artsy-fartsy “Thelonious” engraved on his tags.

The overhead light switched off. Sharon put a hand on the wall to steady herself. Roseanne was right—the garage was cold, but he’d live. Beneath a fur coat, he’d be fine. But this darkness. If Brutus woke in the night, he’d be lost. Even by morning, would any light creep in beneath the door? *No creepy-crawlies slipping in past the seams.* God, is that what he’d said? Something like that. *Poplar is prettier, but steel comes sealed with a rubber gasket. No rain, sleet, or snow invading the crepe interior. No creepy-crawlies slipping in past the seams.* He’d

been young, the funeral director, younger than Sharon. His crisp, black suit bunched at his shoulders. It looked like he'd borrowed it from his dad. The funeral director had handed Sharon and Gabriel the casket brochures and then, in little more than a whisper, delivered his pitch. He never once moved his hands. Through his whole song and dance, his interlaced fingers stayed put on the desk blotter. His fat, fraternity ring trained on her forehead like the barrel of a gun. *How many others*, Sharon had asked herself. How many mothers had sat in this same chair before her? And where had she been? While these other mothers reviewed these brochures, what had she been doing? Working? Running errands? Driving Gidi to preschool? Sharon had glanced out the window, through the lowered miniblinds. Was another mother driving by at this very moment, one hand on the wheel, the other digging in her bag for a box of raisins or some juice? Would that other mother be singing along with the stereo to her son's favorite song? Would that mother look the wrong way at the wrong moment and end up in this office tomorrow? Or would she be blessed to drive on by, forever ignorant of casket schematics, of the pros and cons of poplar—the prettier option—or the more secure steel?

Tap, tap, tap.

His fancy pants pen. Sharon remembered that, too. *Tap, tap, tap.* The funeral director had finished his spiel and then, awaiting their decision, drummed that pen insistently against his desk. What will it be, Mom and Dad? Sharon had turned to Gabriel, hoping he'd have an opinion, but Gabriel stared straight ahead of him. He'd not said a word for days. Sharon hardly recognized him now beneath all that gnarled stubble. She could barely find his eyes above those dense, purple loops. She had no way of knowing it then, but, in less than a month, Gabriel would be gone. After the funeral, he'd spend a few weeks wandering the house, foregoing fresh air and conversation, forgetting to eat or bathe. He'd make a habit of falling asleep at any hour on any

surface. She'd find him passed out on the bench in the mudroom, his head cradled by a pair of gardening gloves. Then, one afternoon, she'd come home and not find him at all. And it would be her turn to be found.

Tap, tap, tap.

Gidi—he would prefer poplar. He wouldn't give a damn about creepy-crawlies. He loved creepy-crawlies and, for that matter, rain, sleet, and snow. But, Gidi was gone. He'd vanished on impact. The body she'd been tasked to bury was flesh of her flesh. The bones in that box were her own.

Tap, tap, tap.

Sharon handed back the casket brochure and made her decision. The funeral director nodded. His pen leaped and danced. They would bury their boy in steel.

Sharon pressed the garage door button. The overhead light switched on again. The door leaped and screamed. Brutus popped his head up. He extended his front legs before him like a sphinx, watching her, waiting. Sharon strode to him quickly, hooked his collar with two fingers, and led him out of the garage. They trotted down the driveway to her car, parked in front of the house. Brutus' tags jingled merrily, cutting through the quiet night. She'd left her coat in the house but had her key in her jeans. She opened the back door and helped Brutus hop in. He knew the drill. He padded back and forth over the beige upholstery, exploring his old stomping grounds. She closed him in, then climbed into the driver's seat and shut the door. She adjusted the rearview mirror until his face came into view.

“Hi, sweet boy,” she called. Brutus stamped his feet and whined. He tapped his nose to the window, then leaned forward and licked her ear.

The gate spat them out without fanfare or delay. Sharon headed east towards the lake. She figured Brutus would prefer this to the interstate and, at this hour, it was just as fast. Heat began to pour through the vents. She turned up the fan. She'd forgotten how cold she'd become. She checked the mirror again but couldn't see him. She tilted the mirror. There he was, stretched low across the seat.

"They'll forgive us," she told him. "It's just one night."

They headed south with the lake on their left. Sharon kept her eyes on the dark, flat road. The heat had softened her knuckles. She stretched her fingers, then gripped the wheel tighter. It was too dark to see past the shore.

"I'm sorry, boy" she said, looking in the mirror again. "I should have looked out for you. I'm sorry. I should have been watching."

END