

Pedigrees

I

Your dog is drowning.

In front of you is a bathtub—water still running—and your dog, sunken to the bottom. You are three years old and this is the first time you've ever seen death. The body is stiff (you learn the term for this later: rigor mortis) and on it's side. The only thing moving is her hair, which looks darker underwater. You thought dead things float. They do, but not until later. They have to rot first, let the gases build until all the body can do is buoy up like a kid's rubber floaties.

Dad has two rules when a bath is running. You know them by heart: don't leave the bathroom door open and don't touch the water. After brushing your teeth, you forget to shut the door. Look down at your consequence. Your dog, a fancy dog with a pedigree, is drowning. Probably already dead. Because of you. Remember that.

Stare. Coast your fingers over the water's surface. Plunge two hands in, let them almost grab the dog before pulling back out. The heat of the water still tingles across your palms as beads drip from your fingers to the tile. Years later, tell yourself you didn't grab the dog because you didn't want to break your dad's second rule. Know you are lying. You didn't save her because you hate the feeling of wet fur. Admit this only to yourself. Feel guilty.

Leave the bathroom. Walk to the porch where your father sits in a green wicker chair. In his left hand is a cigarette and in his right is a flip phone, held to his ear. You can't tell who he's talking to, so don't interrupt. Wait for him to notice you first, let him shoo you inside. Only then

tell him about the hot water, the dog lying on her side. Lifeless. He won't let you finish your sentence before he snaps his phone shut and puts his cigarette out. He makes his way inside. Stay on the patio.

Play pretend. Lift the dead Marlboro and pretend to smoke it. Hope he comes back with wet hands and a Shih Tzu padding behind him, soaking the carpet. He won't. You don't know this yet, so exist in the moment where your dog is both breathing and suffocated. When he walks back on the porch, his eyes will avoid yours as he cradles a white towel. You can't see what he's hiding, and you won't ask, but you'll know anyway. Your dad puts the wrapped carcass down on the glass table in front of you. Go to bed that night and think about the warmth of being alive.

When you wake up, gone is any trace of last night or your dog's body. You will never see her again. Think then God took her to Heaven. Know now your dad woke that morning before anyone else, grabbed a shovel, and buried your dog under the walnut tree outside.

II

The first dog show occurs in June of 1859 in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. The entries are hunting dogs and the first place prize is a gun. The popularity of dog shows grows over the years, particularly in the upper class, and in 1884, the American Kennel Association is founded. Their mission statement is to define the standard look of all pedigree dogs.

Pedigree is first coined in late Middle English. It originates from Anglo-Norman French, the term "pié de grue" meaning crane's foot, which is all talon and rough, jutting out in three directions, like a family tree. It's used to discuss the ancestry of a domesticated animal.

By the late 1880s, researchers begin to worry about the health of pedigree dogs. The cork-screw tails of pugs are linked to spina bifida. Cavalier King Charles Spaniels have

syringomyelia, a genetic disorder making their brains too small for their skulls. Shih Tzus can be born with stenotic nares, meaning they can't receive the oxygen they need and their bodies fail. They suffocate against nothing. The weaknesses they have are hereditary, the entire makeup of a breed is shifted. Alters them forever.

III

It's the tail end of the Vietnam War and your grandmother wants to join the army. Not as a nurse, but a soldier. She tells no one but her older brother, an Air Force pilot, who says to her:

“Only whores join the army.”

As if she would ruin the family's pedigree. As if she would pass down more than her dark hair and bony fingers and quick temper to her children. As if being a whore would be all she amounted to.

He says he will disown her if she enlists. And so your grandmother does not. Instead, her father forces her to marry at eighteen because she is pregnant. She has one son and one daughter who bicker the way she and her own brother do. Opens a bar in Wisconsin with her husband and it does well. She lives for seventy years and has three grandchildren but still wonders what might have been had she not listened to her brother and listened to herself.

IV

Georges Simenon writes his fictionalized autobiography *Pedigree* after he is falsely told he has two years to live. He wants to record the family history for his son, who is too young to remember. The novel he publishes, his longest ever, details Simenon's life in Belgium as a boy between the beginning of the 20th century to the end of World War I.

When asked about his writing process, Simenon says he removes “every sentence which is there just for the sentence. You know, you have a beautiful sentence—cut it.” But *Pedigree* completely deviates from this style. The novel is clouded with nostalgia-filled descriptions of the town he grew up in and the people who raised him.

He spends his career fighting the “literary” elements of writing. He cuts, “adjectives, adverbs, and every word which is there just to make an effect.” What is it about the family that makes him forget this strategy?

Is it the honesty required to write about your childhood? The need to love your family despite their bad intentions? The need to hide the ugly and distance yourself from the work? Call it fiction, like Simenon does, but know: the truth is still there, buried under layers.

At the end of his career, Simenon says, “If I had to choose one of my books to live and not the others, I would never choose *Pedigree*.”

Pedigree is critically regarded as his worst novel. Ever.

V

It’s Sunday and your brother is released from jail. This is the second time in one week. His hair is longer, so ignore the faded track marks on his arm from one girlfriend ago. They shot up together. When she got high enough, she stole your clothes. Or had sex with the owner of the music store in town for pills. Your brother breaks up with her over the cheating. Not the drugs. Or the theft. It would be hypocritical if he did: your brother’s criminal record starts with weed and burglary.

He plans to go home with your mother when he is released.

But instead, his girlfriend (a new one who doesn't do meth—he promises) picks him up from jail and takes him to a trailer park. After an hour of searching for her son, your mother hears from your cousin where he is. Sit in the passenger's seat as she drives, twisting down a clay road which coats the car's windshield red. Don't turn on the radio. Notice how blinds pull closed and lights turn off as you ease past trailers. Your mother drives a Durango, same model of car as the sheriff.

Your mother abruptly parks in front of a rusted white trailer. The grass around you is long and yellow. Uncut and dead. A dog barks from somewhere you can't see. Look at the trailer and see that instead of a curtain, a *Toy Story* blanket covers the window. Watch your mother get out of the car, slamming the door and leaving the keys in the ignition. Turn up the air conditioner, it's August in the south. Your mother walks up the trailer's rotted wood stairs and knocks on the door. Stands for a minute. You know that no one will answer. Pray that you're wrong. Text his girlfriend, ask her for your brother. She does not read your message. Your mother comes back to the car empty-handed and alone. She circles out of the trailer park to talk. Says she will never speak to your brother again. Except she will two weeks later, lets him take up your room and her heart once again.

He'll go through withdrawals. And lie. And steal, because that's all he's been doing since he was sixteen. But she'll give him clothes and cook his favorite dinner and forgive. Because he is her son, that is his pedigree, and something she cannot change.