

There Is Now Only This

BY DANA SHAVIN



I'M IN THE PALATIAL TAMPA THEATER with my husband, eating fistfuls of hot popcorn and watching Oscar-nominated animated film shorts. This is just one of the activities he has planned for us while we're in Florida, in what will be a series of valiant efforts to get my mind off my grief.

The last entry, *Mr. Hublot*, is an 11-minute film about a charming little robot man who lives alone in a house full of clocks and mechanical plants. Every day, Hublot rises at the same time and goes about his chores in the same order—winding the clocks, watering the plants—before jetting off to work. One morning, mid-routine, Hublot catches sight of a robot puppy as

it darts into a discarded box on the street. Then he sees the city garbage truck lumbering toward it.

Hublot saves the puppy, and his daily routine expands. Each morning, after winding clocks and watering plants, he feeds the robot pup breakfast. It's a rich diet of nuts and bolts, motor oil, and chains, and soon the pup grows so comically large that Hublot must widen his thresholds and hallways. When the dog grows too tall for the room, Hublot must make a decision: get rid of it or find a bigger home for both of them. In the movie's final frame, the two sit happily side by side in an enormous empty warehouse.

The lights come up, but I don't move. My husband and I sit quietly, shoulders touching, until the crowd shuffles out and the echo of voices fades. Then he pats my thigh.

"C'mon," he says gently. "We have to go."

We're in Florida for a few days because my husband has work here. He is an artist who travels around selling high-end work to wealthy patrons. I'm a writer who works mainly from home in a tiny upstairs office with three dogs I call my employees. Until recently, that is.

"Let's go to work!" I'd say every morning, and they would scamper upstairs and take their places on the rug and under the desk and in the chair beneath the window. When they were older and could no longer manage the stairs, I carried them up one by one—a human ferry, depositing them on the landing and instructing them to wait until I got the next one, and then the next one. At lunchtime, we'd reverse the process, and after lunch, we'd start all over again.

But a year ago, I put the 12-year-old to sleep (her heart was failing), followed by the 16-year-old a month ago (his liver was failing), followed by the 14-year-old a week ago (everything was failing, and she was a wreck without the other two). For the first time in 36 years, I am dogless. Cocker Spaniel-less, to be exact. Not that the breed matters, except that Cockers happen to be especially cheerful dogs, loyal to a fault and worshipful of their owners. Having three was like being the benevolent dictator of an extremely happy country.

"You should come on this trip," my husband suggested, a few days after we put the last dog down. "It would be a good distraction."

We'd go to the movies and explore downtown St. Pete and the Dali Museum. While he was at meetings, I could write. None of this excited me. But when I weighed the option of staying behind in a house newly emptied of dogs against taking a trip I didn't want to take, I decided the former was worse.

So I packed. Out of habit, I moved stealthily from suitcase to closet, sliding my feet as if on snowshoes though there were no dogs in my path to trip over, and none tailgating. I once read that writer David Foster Wallace liked to get into a cab and ask to be taken to some ridiculously un-urgent destination, such as the library, then adding, just for fun, "... and step on it!" It made me think about my dogs, always skittering behind me, their precisely aimed noses pushing urgently into the backs of my knees, as if to say, *To the kitchen, and step on it! To the sofa, and step on it!*

My husband and I file out of the Tampa Theater and walk through the darkened streets to the car. It has rained, and the air is cool. The smell of garlic drifts from a nearby restaurant.

"I'm starved," he says.

"That was sad," I say.

He reminds me that everything ended well for Hublot and his dog. Then he puts his arm around me and pulls me in close. He knows what I mean. Even a happy story is a sad story for a sad person.

But it's not just that Hublot's sweet tale of rescue and devotion feeds my grief. It's that the larger story—the endless accommodations Hublot made for the dog and the all-consuming dedication that ultimately came to define him—is my story as well.

I almost never travel with my husband. Partly this is because I'm the kind of person who clings to home, who likes to cook and putter and take walks around my own neighborhood more than I like to explore new places. But mostly I didn't travel with him because I hated to leave the dogs for more than a night, even though I had a sitter who loved them

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almost as much as I did. Despite the fact that she'd worked for us for 20 uneventful years, I worried that in my absence my dogs were lonely and bored and in near-constant danger. It was a worry that ruined everything from overseas trips to overnight jaunts.

Two years ago, my husband convinced me to go on a weeklong excursion to France. He would do everything—research tickets, make our accommodations, plan our days—if I'd just learn to operate the Blackberry we'd use while overseas. I agreed. Upon our arrival in Paris, I was immediately distraught because I could not remember if I had engaged the dog sitter (I had, of course), and I could not call her.

This was because I'd discovered that learning to use the Blackberry caused me to think about being away from the dogs, so I didn't do it. I spent our entire first day stumbling down the Champs-Élysées and in and out of pastry shops and the Louvre staring down at the tiny, mysterious phone, punching random buttons, willing it to call home. When at last by some miracle it did, it was three in the morning back in the U.S., and the dog sitter was groggy and alarmed.

"Are you okay?" she croaked into the phone, her voice gravelly with sleep.

"Yes!" I shouted. "Are you at my house?"

"Of course," she said, sounding bewildered.

I apologized profusely for waking her. Then I apologized profusely to my husband for the distraction. Within an hour, I was worried again, afraid the dogs were sad without me and that the sitter would forget to padlock the gate when she went out.

But that was then and this is now. There are no dogs pining for me at home or on the edge of danger. The worst that could happen has happened.

My husband's art rep owns the 23rd floor penthouse condo in St. Petersburg where we are staying. Like the theater, it's palatial. Floor-to-ceiling windows line the living room, offering a dizzying view of the bay, a busy small aircraft landing strip and the Dali museum. We waste no time selecting one of the four enormous bedrooms to drop our bags and learning to operate the espresso machine in the kitchen. We kick off our shoes and take our coffee onto the balcony. Below us on the street, people and cars and horse-drawn carriages mill about, all of it so far down that the symphony of voices and engines and clopping hooves barely reaches us. It is as if we exist in a world apart.

My husband loved the dogs every bit as much as I did. He loved to snuggle with them and take walks, and he, like me, marveled endlessly at their quirks (look how she folds her paws under, like a lamb; look how he buries his head behind the pillows, like an ostrich!). Whenever we went out, he turned on the golf channel.

"They love golf," he'd say, grinning at them lined up on the sofa.

But I was the one who'd pulled them off the streets. I was the one who fed and bathed and took them to the vet and managed their pills and their diet and their days. And not just the three Spaniels, but the four dogs before them as well. There were mornings, washing my hair and brushing my teeth, that I wanted to scream from the boredom of it, the repetition (hair *again?! teeth again?!), and yet never did I weary of asking my dogs whether they were, at suppertime, ready to eat; or at potty time, to potty; or at walk*

time, to walk, even though I knew the answers to these questions were yes, yes, always and forever yes.

Like Hublot under the spell of his growing pup, my meticulous tending to the ever-expanding needs of my dogs became the point of my life. It was what defined me. It was not what defined my husband. I know for a fact that he never once thought his life would be pointless without dogs.

Our second day in St. Pete, we do everything else on my husband's list of distractions: Dali Museum, antiquing, lunching downtown. At 2 PM, he catches a cab to a meeting and I walk back to the penthouse. I stand in the silence of the living room, then make coffee and take my laptop out on the balcony. Thirty minutes later, having done nothing but watch prop planes glide in and out of the airport, I go back inside and lie down facing the back of the sofa. Two hours, later my phone rings, jolting me out of the blackness of sleep. "The meetings went great!"



SEARCH AND RESCUE

Mia's long sleek body arcs over Switchgrass and Side Oats, Antelope Horns and Butterfly Weed. Her nose and flews quiver to pull in scent—feral hogs and gunpowder, cat piss and deer scat. But more: she tracks the disruption my body has left in its wake, the displaced molecules as they swirl through her neural scrollwork, the air regrouping behind me, the erasure of shape that still trails my trace
as I wait to be found.

—Leslie Morris

shouts my husband. I'm to meet him downstairs in an hour. I put down the phone and walk over to the window. Below, the street still swarms with traffic and crowds and horse carriages. It looks frantic to me, like throngs of people desperately seeking diversion from boredom or sorrow or regret. To pleasure, and step on it!

I often wonder how it's possible to know the end is coming for your dogs, and to still be shocked when they die. How, when they could no longer breathe or eat or shit—the advance guards of imminent death—and you made the decision to euthanize, you could somehow feel you'd been heartless. As if, had you truly loved them, you'd have engineered something beyond biological possibility. You'd have made them immortal, like Hublot's mechanical dog.

Suddenly I am visited by a crushing homesickness. I've fled back to home from wherever I was for so long, I still feel urgently that I must go there, regardless of what does or doesn't await me. Even without dogs there is alive in me the same panicked, compulsive tending—once to their presence, now to their absence. I think of devoted Hublot, in a final sacrifice to the ever-expanding needs of his dog, moving to an empty warehouse, marking a renunciation of life as he knew it. As if to say, *There is now only this. Only us.* What began as expansion—saving a pup—becoming, in the end, a contraction. A narrowing. A sealing off of the exits.

This was not what I intended. This is why, when our last dog died, my husband asked for a year before getting another. And this is why I agreed.

I leave the condo and walk down to the harbor. The sun is hot on my neck, the water calm except for tiny swells that form around the boats, are swallowed up, form, and are swallowed up again in a rhythm that is hypnotic to watch. When at last I look up, my husband is standing over me, his tall, lanky form backlit by the sun. He sits down, puts his arm around me and kisses me. His shirt and lips are still cool from the chilled indoor air of his meetings.

For now, there is only this. Only us. **B**