

Chicago Tribune

NELSON ALGREN



AWARD WINNER

FIRST PRIZE

HIS DOG

BY HEATHER E. GOODMAN



he dogs splinter the frozen night with barks and bays. It's a climbing sound, overly dramatic. I think if I lie here long enough, George will get out of bed to check on the dogs, see if a new one has found its way or if it's a raccoon. I always get up. This is why I won't have a baby with him. One reason.

When I roll over three more times and still George never moves, I shine the flashlight out the second-story window and see that His Dog is back. She

huddles against the store door, tucked in where the short snow barely reaches, her feathery Labrador tail hemmed under her. I go back to bed. She's the one dog that won't wander off.

In the morning, I say, "His Dog came back last night."

George looks me in the eyes. "How're her scars?"

"I didn't ask her."

George gets out of bed, throws a jacket over his pajamas and slams the door on the way to see the dogs. When they hear the door smack, the dogs begin their howling, frantic yelps for a touch from the pack leader. The newcomers join in hoping for food. Or freedom. I watch, feeling the chill off the window in my shoulders and neck. George shuffles with his head down and fists buried in his pockets; his breath smokes in the cold. We should have opened the store 20 minutes ago, but there's not a truck in sight.

His Dog leaps from her spot, rushes to George and wags her entire body in greeting. George clomps to the store but keeps his hands out of his pockets so His Dog can nudge his fingers. Inside George will open a can of corned beef hash and let her eat from the tin.

After I make the coffee, I cross the wide flat that used to be empty and now is studded with 8-foot chains pegged to the ground and metal barrels cut in half to shelter the dogs. All 17 yowl and woof when they see me cross to the shed. The wind roars when I emerge with bails of hay for the dogs, and I quicken my pace. Once I'm empty-handed again, I turn north to breathe in the biting wind. Beyond the store, spruces and pines hide hushed lakes and interrupt the horizon, sharp incisors gnawing at the tousled sky. The wind comes from the direction of Highway 41 that lays limp and silent.

I let George think keeping the dogs was his idea. But only the barrels were: 55-gallon drums cut in half lengthwise for the dogs to sleep under.

Last winter, our fourth running the store, snow fell only twice.

Instead, 35-degree slush ice and rain spilled from the sky. No snowmobiles, no ice-fishing, and so we took turns sitting in the store, starting crossword puzzles, George whittling, me playing solitaire. By the wood stove, we talked optimistically of a strong summer. But winter rains merged into summer rains, and the bass and trout quit early. In August, we planned for the fall deer hunt, not talking about what we would do if this season didn't pay out.

Hiking to Little Wolf Lake at the end of the August rains, I said, "We could keep them, the dogs, feed them and make some money."

"We can't keep people's dogs, Rebecca."

"Not keep them, keep them. Like we did for Dakater, Henry's dog. And John's." Last year the hounds showed up at the store after both men hunted the wildlife-management areas where dogs are allowed to drive deer. Other dogs wandered through, too tired to return to their owner or lost from trailing deer. Henry and John thanked us for providing shelter and food, gave us money for our trouble, and the dogs kept coming back.

The wind came up and instead of rain, a thin pattering of brown hemlock needles fell to the earth and in my hair and on George's shoulders.

"Keep them in the back?" He cracked a dead branch when he stepped on it. "Put stakes in the ground," he said to himself as he climbed the last granite slope before the trees opened to the little lake. The peppery smell of aspens made me think of Mom humming in the kitchen, writing notes on her personalized stationery with her good fountain pen.

When we both stood at the top of the overlook, before we backed down the sheer face of the rock to the lake on all fours, he said: "We can make dog houses of Red's 55-gallon drums. Bec, we could make some money. Keep the store."

I didn't doubt George immediately. Some of his ideas to keep the shop afloat had been decent. The hunting licenses, the attempts at getting gun and liquor permits, the trail maps, but most of the ideas couldn't happen because of government restrictions, and those that could never amounted to much. A trail map only sells for \$2.50. We'd probably sell more if we marked them at \$1.99.

Two trucks pull into the lot, and I look out the window. "I'll get them," I say to George, who builds a fire in the wood stove in the office.

"Morning, Rebecca," says Henry.

"Hey, Bec," echoes Buck, Henry's older brother. "Our pups here?"

"You bet. Give me a couple minutes to get them, and I'll be back in to ring you up for whatever else you need."

The dogs' barking hits me in the face when I open the door. The sound,

muffled when the brothers pulled up, reverberates between the house, the shop and off the cedars in the back. I remember Buck and Henry's first visit to the store after I moved in with George. Ruddy-cheeked, in Carharts and flannels, they shook my then-soft fingers with their callused hands and stayed for coffee we brewed in the office. The wood paneling, broken-in red-wool couch, sepia photographs of George's grandfather opening the shop 73 years ago and fire in the wood stove warmed me—a terrain where everyone gathered at the store, a last frontier of wilderness and compassion, and I was happy to have traded in the piano, stationery and an overprotective father.

The dogs yelp, and Dakater does circles until I get to him. "Hey Dakater. Dad's back." He wags his tail so hard, he slaps my knees with it. He's such a good dog and requires so little, I wish we could keep him off the lead, let him be our dog.

Jacko, Buck's dog, is a good one, too, just more high-strung. They pull me past the dog pens and to the trucks. With these dogs I can unhook the leash before I open the hatch because they want to go home. They leap into the truck, eager and panting.

Back in the store, I look at the book and give them each their totals for the dog's stay. "What else can I get for ya?"

"That'll do it, Bec. Thanks." As I make their change, I curse the slick grocery store that went in a hundred clicks south of us last winter. Used to be the shop served everyone in a 200-kilometer radius, but Ottawa keeps pushing out, and now even if we give customers time to dawdle, they don't need detergent or a loaf of bread from the freezer.

His Dog lies in the office by the wood stove. The freshly lit fire makes the stove knock with metal ticks. I hang my jacket on the coat rack next to George's dad's hat, which has hung there since he died five years ago and left us to tend the family store. George doesn't turn around on his stool at the counter when I walk in, so I step over His Dog and pick up the ledger that sits near George's elbow. I nod toward the dog and say, "I thought you weren't going to do this after the last time." George doesn't answer me.

I open to the thin red satin ribbon that used to remind me of fancy Christmas presents. I don't need to look. I entered the last sale, two days ago for a Coke and a bag of pickle-flavored chips. \$2.03. Less than a trail map. I enter Buck and Henry's charges and place the open book in front of George.

A truck pulls up, and I think I recognize it. A hunter for sure because of the gun rack. Maybe we have his dog. The barking begins again. The dogs that have been here before know tires on gravel means one of them might be going home.

I can't imagine what it's like working in an orphanage.

The man bangs in the door, letting it slam behind him. "You gotta blue tic with a split ear?" He smells of tobacco and doesn't smile or look at me.

George answers. "Yep. Henry Strobe brought him in almost two weeks ago. How'd you know he was here?"

"Saw the posting at the liquor store. Hear you charge to keep 'em?" The man tongues food out of his back molar as he says it, more a challenge than a question.

"Three dollars a day to cover our cost for food and cleaning up after them."

The man doesn't reply.

George flips to the back of the ledger and says, "Been here since last Tuesday. Twelve days. Thirty-six dollars."

"Dog ain't worth that."

When George gives no response, I say, "We'll keep him."

"You'll steal my dog?"

"We'll take what we're owed," I respond.

George moves to the wall where the leash hangs, preparing to give the dog back even though we haven't been paid. The curve of his neck and the shuffle of his steps remind me of when he picked up his car keys off the antique table in the foyer at my parents' house three years ago. It was George's only response when my dad accused him of asking to marry me so I would help with the "dump disguised as a dime store."

But the stranger doesn't know what George is about to do, so the man reaches into his pocket for crumpled bills, two 20s. I make the change while George gets the dog, the others howling as he walks with the leash in his hand.

When I give the man his \$4, he points at His Dog and says, "Ain't that Guffin's dog?"

I nod.

He sucks in his breath, walks out the door and lets it slam again as George brings the blue tic to the back of the truck. The man takes the leash from George, unhooks it from the dog's collar, drops it on the ground, unlatches the hatch at the back of the truck and orders the dog up. George doesn't even wait until the truck pulls away to stoop to pick up the leash.

When he comes back in, he scratches His Dog's ears and replaces the lead.

I say, "You weren't gonna make him pay?"

"I don't need enemies Rebecca."

"You need money. We need money."

He opens the door of the wood stove and places another log on the fire. When

he closes the stove door, he scratches His Dog's head, and she rolls over to have her belly rubbed.

"Two of a kind," I say, and stomp to the woodshed to grab the bag of kibble for the other dogs.

When we first started, we made the mistake of naming them if they weren't dogs we knew. George named Ram and Vicious; I named Darwin, Dig and Monk. And His Dog. We don't name them now, and I try not to look at their faces when I feed them, though some of them beg more for that than kibble.

When the dogs see me go into the shed back by the cedars, the barking starts in pops and escalates to a sprint of yaps till I'm finished, different from the howling and whimpering at truck tires or a new dog approaching. I hump the dog food onto my shoulder and hold the open end shut until I get to Dig, who keeps coming back to us, so his owner doesn't worry if he doesn't return after the hunt. I let myself scratch Dig's head and in between his shoulders. His fur, like the others', is rough and leaves my hand coated with an oily film. The dogs' musk mixes with the oat smell of the kibble and the acid of urine and crap, and I feel it in my hair and down my back. I wash my hands with juice from the yellow plastic lemon container after each feeding, and still I smell their wildness, and my hands crack and burn.

These aren't the dogs I grew up with. House dogs of Mom and Dad's that curled up at the foot of the bed, wagged their tail when I came home from school with fur so soft I napped on them. They sat before each meal, gave me their paws in exchange for Milk-Bones, and they watched me out the window when I went to my piano lessons.

Dig has constructed a moat around his barrel, and the thin snow is melting and running into it in places. I fill his bowl, and he wolfs his kibble in leaping breaths. The last dog in line doesn't bark. The first time I fed him, he didn't even look in his bowl until I walked away.

"Can you give that one extra?" George asks. I didn't hear him come up behind me because of the raucous yelps.

"Was going to." I can count every bone on this dog, and he's losing hair. It reminds me of His Dog when she first came. But this dog, now that he's been here a few days, wants to be touched. He strains at his chain for my hand and nuzzles it when I place the bowl. I never fed His Dog, the only one I've ever been scared of. Was scared of.

When the rusting-out blue Chevy fishtails on the snow we haven't shoveled, I vow not to say anything and stand at the window in the office, just behind the door. The dogs in the back wail and bay, but His Dog knows the sound of the truck and darts from the wood stove to under George's legs, so George trips on her as he moves to the counter. "It's OK, Girl. We'll see you again soon."

Vink Guffin lets the door bang behind him. He is nearly as thin as His Dog was the first time. His skin hangs from his cheekbones, as if he hasn't eaten in a week, and his eyes retreat into deep yellow hollows. I don't think about his children.

"That bitch here again?"

"Vink."

"George. Don't have time, gotta get out after a huge buck spotted this morning. What's the score?"

"I'd be happy to buy her, Vink."

"I'll make you a deal. She can stay here free, but I need her for the hunts."

"What good is she to me without hunting?" George asked, not looking at Vink.

"You hunt?"

"Yep." George realigns the candy bars in the rack.

"Huh." Vink smiles out of the corner of his mouth. "Well, I need her. She's the only one ever brought a buck with more than a dozen points." He studies George. "How 'bout a thousand?"

George waits. Vink shakes his head.

George says, "I don't have that kind of money."

"Then what do I owe?"

His Dog leans into George's leg. George doesn't need to look at the back of the book, but he does. "Just came in last night. Three bucks."

Vink reaches into his pocket and from the change he tosses a loonie and a twonie on the counter. "Meet ya at the truck." The door slams behind him.

George leans down and says, "Sorry, Girl. Sorry. Come back soon as you can." His voice is tight. When he passes me in the office, he doesn't look at me. I watch from the window as George trudges out the back door as if His Dog hasn't been with him the whole time.

Vink opens the back hatch. His Dog lingers behind George, her nose at his ankles.

"I'll put her in."

"You don't put a dog in a truck, George. They get in." He grabs His Dog by

the collar and backhands her snout. “You bitch. Stop the runnin’.” She leaps into the truck and flattens herself into the far corner with her ears tucked low to her head.

“Really would like to buy her from you.”

“See you, George.”

When the truck pulls out, George looks at me through the window, and for a moment, I remember falling in love with him.

Later, as he enters the payment into the book, George says, “Sixty-three dollars before noon.”

“We’re rich.” I dust the shelves of canned and boxed food, medicine, fire starter and tackle, though they don’t need it. “So you’re buying His Dog?”

George doesn’t answer. He closes the ledger.

In two days His Dog is back. She lies in the thin snow at the back door of the store when we come out to open up. The other dogs mewl. As soon as he sees her, George says, “Hi, Girl,” and bends at the waist, calling to her. She stands and wags her tail, but she doesn’t move. “Come on, Girl.” She takes a step and yelps.

We cross to her. Her ears are back and the eye that isn’t swollen shut is wide. Before we reach her, she lays back down in the new snow that fell last night. “What is it Girl? What happened?”

“You don’t want to know,” I say, and touch her ears, still down-feather soft.

George rubs her belly, but when he moves his hand over her side, she yelps again. He picks her up, cradling her in his arms, and she whimpers. I open the door for them, and he sets her down in front of the wood stove.

George snaps the kindling and sweet smoke fills the office when he touches the match to the teepee of cedar. “Hell,” he says.

I walk out into the yard, gulp at the frozen sky, and the dogs think I’m coming to feed them. They bark frantically, sending hot puffs of dog yelps into the icy morning air. “In a little bit,” I tell Dig and grab a metal bowl from one of the few unused barrels.

When I return, George is trying to fork-feed His Dog corned beef hash from the can, but she won’t eat. I set the bowl full of snow on the stove and urge His Dog to drink once it’s melted, but she won’t do that either.

“Worse than the first time,” George says when he’s given up on the canned food.

At noon, still no one has stopped at the store. We give His Dog water by dripping it onto her tongue. The wood stove burns hot, and we’re both down to

T-shirts.

“What are you going to say to him?”

“I don’t know, Rebecca. What can I?”

I don’t respond, just run my fingertips over her sweet velvet ear.

George answers himself. “I’m just going to tell him he can’t have her. Plain and simple. I’ll tell him I’ll call the cops.”

“You’ll let Jerry fight your fight?”

“No, I’m just going to tell Vink that.”

When we hear a truck pull in, we check the window. We don’t say we’re relieved it’s not him.

“I’ll get ’em,” I say, and close the door behind me as I walk out of the office and behind the counter.

When the customer pulls away, I go back to the woodstove, and the room feels like a sauna, steaming and thick. “Trying to sweat it out of her?”

George looks up but says nothing. He’s the way he was the first time with her, except not scared. She snapped at us then, darted her head, and growled at leaves blowing by. George had nursed her back on his own; she’d been with us three weeks that first time and got used to the fact that she wouldn’t get hit here. Then, we thought her injuries were from the hunt.

The second time she came, George cried when he saw her. She had been tattooed with a cigarette, burnt circles about her eyes and on her ears. His Dog licked his tears, and they came faster. She’d arrived in the middle of the night, and we didn’t have time to prepare. Vink came before sunrise the next morning and pounded on the door to our house. When George looked out the bedroom window, Vink pointed to His Dog and yelled, “Taking my dog.”

George ran downstairs and grabbed his coat from the hook by the kitchen door and put his jacket on outside. I watched them from the second story while I rushed into my jeans and sweater. I couldn’t hear them but watched George’s stance, legs spread wide and arms crossed at his chest. He looked strong, ready.

By the time I came out, George was unlocking the padlock at the base of His Dog’s lead. Vink leaned over, grabbed her by the hair on her back, carried her to the parking lot and tossed her into the truck. Vink handed George three bucks and sped off. George stood in the parking lot with his hands in his pockets until I went to him.

His eyelashes were wet. “I let him take her.”

I didn’t say anything but steered him into the office and built the fire myself. Later, after I brought him coffee, George swore he would never take care of the dog again. “That damn dog needs to stay at home.”

I asked for the \$3 from his pocket, put it in the register and entered it into the ledger.

When I finish the morning feeding, I go back into the office. They are sleeping next to each other on the floor, George curled around His Dog. George hasn't wrapped himself around me that way since the snow didn't fall last year.

I check the dates on the cheese in the standing refrigerator and am not surprised to see almost all of it expires today. I take it back to the house and plan grilled cheese for lunch and tuna melts for dinner. From the kitchen, I hear screeching wheels, and like the dogs, I know whose truck is here. I dart from the house to the office to wake George, but he is already up, petting His Dog's ears. She doesn't move, and he looks at me for a moment and then stands. He closes the door of the office so His Dog and I are left in the room baked with wood smoke and sleep. I sit down next to her and hold her feathery ears between my fingers, think of holding her in my lap.

"She here?"

I expect George to say no. "Yep."

"I need her."

"Sorry Vink. I can't. She won't even walk."

"She's fine."

"You can't have her." I stop petting His Dog's ear and hold my breath.

"You telling me what I can and can't do?" Vink's voice pinches.

I hear George take a deep breath. "Vink, that dog's useless to you now. She can't walk. She won't eat or drink."

"Again, you telling me what I need to know?"

I stand up and look through the crack at the door, debating whether or not to go out there. George lays his hands on the counter, spread wide. "I'll call the cops."

"Ha." Vink barks a laugh. "And tell 'em you stole my dog?"

"Tell them you're beating your dog."

Vink studies George.

"And others at home?" George poses it as a question, and the moment it leaves his lips, Vink swings and makes sick, sound contact with George's nose. Blood pours, and I'm through the door, slamming it behind me, grabbing paper towels from under the counter.

"Get the hell out of here!" I yell, holding crumpled towels to George's face.

"Keep the lazy bitch." Vink stomps out the door, guns the truck and spits

stones. George slumps to the floor with his head between his knees, trying not to get blood on the linoleum.

I give him another crushed pile of paper towels. "I'll be right back."

I sprint across the yard to the kitchen and douse a towel in warm water, and when I dash back to the store, it steams in the icy air. George is in the same place as when I left, but now he holds his head back, trying to stop the bleeding. I realize I should have grabbed more than one towel. I take the gloppy mess of paper from him and place the plaid cotton dish towel over his nose and mouth. He murmurs.

I throw the wads of paper towels in the garbage. "Son of a bitch," I say.

George mumbles.

I ask, "Can you move? Can you get to the couch in the office?"

He doesn't fight me as I help him up. He keeps his head tipped back, so he can't see anything. I guide him past His Dog, who hasn't moved, and lay George down on the couch, putting a pillow under his head. I go back to the house for two new warm-soaked towels, and when I return he is wiping blood from his chin. It's on his shirt and in the cracks of his fingers. He smiles. "His Dog stays."

I dab at the blood he's missed and bring him two Tylenol with codeine and a bottle of water from the store. I fold the box up from the pills and put it in my pocket, so I remember to mark it in the book. Eventually George falls asleep, and I sit on the couch watching him breathe shallow breaths and listening to the burning embers in the wood stove.

When I get up to go to the fire, I put my hand on His Dog to see if she will wake. She doesn't move, and when I place my hand to her nose, she isn't breathing. She's dead. I bite the inside of my cheeks and break the kindling down to smaller chunks than it needs to be. I open the wood stove door, and the coals tinkle like porcelain breaking. I throw in the splinters I've created, and for a few moments the fire flares, and I think it's enough to warm His Dog back to life. But the flames die down quickly. I put a log on the fire and wait for it to catch, a dull burning.

No one comes to the store for the rest of the day, and for once, I'm glad for it. I sit in the office on the couch next to George. When it's close enough to closing time, I lock the store door, shut off the lights and get two short glasses of dark rum for us to drink.

"George." I touch his cheek, careful to avoid the spreading blue purple at his nose. He opens his eyes, closes and reopens them. He smiles, but it must hurt because he stops and just crinkles his eyes.

HIS DOG NELSON ALGREN WINNER

I want to tell him quick before he's wholly awake. "His Dog didn't make it."

He licks his dry lips and starts to ask a question.

"She died, but she heard you keep her?"

His eyes well, and mine do in response. I help him sit up and hand him one of the glasses of rum. He sees her still at the fire because I haven't moved her, don't know what he wants me to do. "Really?" he says.

I nod.

The rum warms us more than the fire does. We talk about where he wants her buried, by the tallest cedar in the back. When I finish my drink, I kiss George on the forehead and grab my jacket.

I puncture and prod the freezing ground, chiseling chunks and shards of dirt. The dogs rant and yelp, hungry for dinner. The moon rises, and when the hole finally gapes deep and wide enough, I return to the office sweating and flushed.

When George is ready, I go to His Dog, but he wants to carry her. Leaning down makes him curse, so he stoops on one knee while he holds his head up and works his arms under the dog. I imagine His Dog cold on one side, and still warm from the fire on the other. This time the dogs bark only until they see George carrying His Dog; then they whine, a low keening. He places her in the hole under the cedar. We move frozen dirt chips over her body, covering her silk ears.

I send George to the house and feed the dogs in the moonlight. They quiet immediately afterwards and fold themselves into tight circles of tail and ears. The night breathes pounding quiet, and I check the sky thick with stars.

When I go to the house, George is already in bed, stripped of his bloodstained clothes. I crawl under the covers and curl around him.



Heather E. Goodman grew up in Pennsylvania and now lives in Minnesota with her husband, Paul, and their dog, Zane. She has taught writing to non-traditional students awaiting trials and sentencing, as well as students at public high schools, Villanova University and the Loft in Minneapolis. Her work has appeared in Crab Orchard Review, Minnesota Monthly and Whistling Shade. She is completing her short-story collection "Bones" and writing a novel.