

# 1

The irony is that I didn't understand the profound impact that death had on my life until I succumbed to its power. The signs were all there, but I guess I ignored them or had been too occupied with the act of living.

I'd married an orphan—a child of death. In fact, death itself had introduced us.

David had been driving too fast to get to an evening class at the law school. I was driving in the opposite direction half asleep from twenty-four hours at the Cornell vet clinic and completely lost in the memory of a chimpanzee named Charlie.

A large deer suddenly jumped from the woods into the road and froze in the glare of our headlights. I cut my wheel and rolled down a small embankment, stopping near a dense stand of trees.

David and the deer were not as lucky. He stomped on his brakes, but he was too late by seconds. I heard the sickening *thud* of metal against soft tissue and then the sound of his wheels scream as he spun off the opposite side of the road.

I quickly climbed the embankment. The force of the car's impact

had thrown the deer into the middle of the road. It was alive and struggling to stand on two clearly broken rear legs. I immediately thought through my options, none of them good.

“Are you okay?” David called to me from across the way as soon as he got out of his car.

I ignored him and ran toward the deer and into the road. The deer’s front legs gave out and it collapsed just as a pair of headlights rounded a bend on the hill no more than two miles down the otherwise pitch-dark oncoming lane.

“No!” David screamed. “The cars can’t see you!”

I reached the terrified deer in five seconds and tried to move it out of the road by tugging its forelegs. It was no use. The animal was too frightened and far too heavy.

The approaching car was now only a mile away. David reached me and tried to pull me out of the road and back toward his car. “Come on, we need to get out of the road,” he shouted.

I pushed him off. “I can handle this.”

When I next looked up, the oncoming car was maybe half a mile away. I realized that David was right—because of the steep grade of the road, the car wouldn’t be able to see us in time to stop.

David refused to leave me. He yanked off his coat and, after two tries, looped it around the deer’s forelegs up by its shoulders. He tied the arms of the jacket into a knot and heaved on the jacket while I pushed, but the deer moved only a few inches.

The oncoming car closed in.

A panicked hoof shot out and caught David on the cheek, carving a deep gash that immediately drew blood. David’s eyes glazed over and he stumbled on his heels. For one horrible moment I thought he was going to pass out in the road. I would never be able to move him before the car came through.

“Get out of the road!” I screamed. He shook the cobwebs away, and I saw his eyes finally clear.

He tried to get a better grip on the makeshift sling and said, “On the count of three, okay?”

I glanced at the headlights of the oncoming car. It was too close. I nodded at David, but started to sweat despite the cold.

“One, two, three!” If David said anything else, his words were drowned out by my own scream of exertion and the blare of the car horn.

We pulled the deer clear of the lane and onto the shoulder just as the car passed. Then we collapsed. The car didn’t even hesitate as its horn faded into the distance.

The deer struggled to lift her head and blood sprayed from her nose, splattering me and David and mixing with the blood already streaming from the cut on his face.

David slowly got to his feet while I ran back to my car. “Where are you going?” he called after me.

“Stay here.” Another car passed, narrowly missing me, as I ran across the road.

I returned two minutes later with my bag and pulled out a deep pink vial of phenobarbital and a large syringe. Death comes in such a pretty color.

“What’re you going to do?”

“I’m going to kill her.”

“Kill her? But we just—”

“—she’s got massive internal bleeding. Her abdomen’s already full of blood. I’m a vet. Trust me, she’s done.”

“When did you know that?”

“As soon as I saw her in the road,” I said as I drew the pheno into the syringe like I’d done dozens of times before.

“Then why’d we just almost kill ourselves bringing her out of the road?” David didn’t sound angry, just confused.

“Because I want my voice to be the last thing she hears, not the sound of oncoming traffic. I want her to feel gentle hands as she goes, not the force of a car crushing her sternum. I’m sorry, but she deserves that. We all do.”

David nodded at my answer. I don’t think he understood, but neither did he argue. “What should I do?”

“I can do this by myself,” I told him as I turned toward the deer.

David grabbed my arm. “I know you can, but you don’t need to. Let me help.”

“Okay. Hold her down and as still as you can. I need to go into her neck.” David did his best to comply. The doe’s eyes were wide with fear and pain. I stroked the doe’s throat for a moment to give comfort, but also to find the major vein for the needle. I finally found it.

I took a deep breath, jabbed the needle in, and quickly injected the contents of the syringe. The doe struggled for a moment, and then her lifeless head dropped into David’s arms. I took the stethoscope from my bag and listened for a heartbeat. “She’s gone,” I said.

A tear rolled down David’s undamaged cheek as he stroked the head of the animal. His shoulders relaxed, his breathing deepened, and his teeth chattered. Perhaps it was the accident, or the pain from the deep cut on his face, maybe it was the accumulation of the events of his day or simply being witness to the act of taking a life, but this man I didn’t know was suddenly known to me.

For that instant, David was again the lonely high school boy who learned that his father was gone, and whose mother left him

so soon after. He was the responsible only child who swallowed his pain because there was no one to share his grief. Death had spoken to him in a secret language, and this act of communication had changed him and set him apart. He was both an innocent and damaged by experience.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered into the dead deer’s ear.

We called the sheriff’s office from the Tompkins County Community Hospital thirty minutes later, reported the deer carcass, and requested a tow for David’s car. I held David’s hand while they put twenty-two stitches in his cheek and fed him antibiotics and painkillers. You can still see the faint line of a scar when the sun hits his face just the right way.

After that night, without too much discussion and even less fanfare, David and I were together. Period.

Such is the power of death. It can rip apart or fuse together. And now, sixteen years later, it sits on David’s chest, slowly squeezing the life out of him.

We lived in a beautiful part of New York State—close enough to Manhattan that David could get to his office in seventy-five minutes, but far enough away that I could pretend I was a simple country veterinarian.

Our house sits in the middle of a clearing at the top of a small hill. The house itself is modest, but the property is very pretty and provided more than enough room for all my creatures.

We bought the house and moved north from the city at my request two years before David made partner at his firm. This was my first real demand during our marriage. I believe it was the right decision—for both me and him. In return for the additional stress

of becoming a homeowner and a commuter, David gained a house full of life and love—until, of course, it wasn't anymore.

I hardly recognize our place now. A thin dusting of snow provides the only color to this otherwise steel-gray day. The grounds around the house are a mess—newspapers and small bits of garbage blow across the property. The source of the refuse, a trash bag torn open by a hungry raccoon, lies in the driveway next to two overturned plastic garbage cans. My Jeep is encrusted in snow and ice, its battery long dead. Several unopened FedEx packages marked URGENT and addressed to David Colden line the steps leading up to the house.

I'm reminded by the scene before me that a home is an organism, and no organism gripped by death is particularly attractive.

Right next to the house, a small wood-framed barn and a paddock fill out several acres. My two horses, bored and restless from lack of attention, paw the ground looking for fresh hay.

Arthur and Alice were Premarin foals, unwanted by-products of the manufacture of a drug made from the urine of pregnant horses. We saved these two from the slaughterhouse within a month of our move north.

With Premarin foals, you just never know what kind of horse you're going to end up with, and my two well make the point. Alice, who looks part Morgan and part quarter horse, is shy, sweet, and always up for a good scratch on the head. Arthur, my huge draft horse, is very smart and has little tolerance for any human contact except mine. Even now I believe he senses me; he stares right at the spot where I'm standing and snorts curiously.

A second smaller enclosure abuts the paddock. Several years ago, I placed a large doghouse into the space. Now something moves within the doghouse and pushes mounds of old straw out onto the

ground. The creature in the doghouse—a 375-pound pink pig—raises its massive head and grunts in my direction. This is Collette.

We adopted Collette four years ago. She'd been abandoned with her twenty young brothers and sisters in a rotting upstate barn in the middle of winter. When the piglets were discovered, all but three were frozen to the barn's dirt floor. Collette was one of the three.

Collette is a survivor, a champion over death, but her early experiences have left their mark. She is moody and even on good days does not have a vast sense of humor. Today clearly is not a good day.

In the house itself, there is some evidence of life—but just barely. Empty Chinese food boxes merge with condolence cards to form an odd sculpture on the hallway table. A dozen of the cards have cascaded off the table and landed on the floor. Several of these have been chewed to shreds.

The living room curtains are drawn and, but for the glow cast by the dying embers in the fireplace and a dim floor lamp, the room is dark. Loose stacks of unopened mail and used wineglasses cover most of the flat surfaces.

The wineglasses frighten me. David likes wine. In the few times that I've seen him seriously troubled, his wine consumption soared. He was never roaring drunk. To the contrary, the alcohol made him even more subdued and closed off to me. The wine deadens him and that, I believe, is his intention.

I raised this concern with him perhaps twice, but the episode always passed before it escalated. The demands of David's job require that he be 100 percent mentally focused, so his work invariably served as an outer limit for his alcohol intake. But without the daily burdens of the job? I don't know. We've never gone there.

Like the rest of the house, the kitchen is a mess. Empty wine

bottles line the counter, and dirty dishes and glasses fill the sink. If this were the city, roaches would be everywhere. Because we live beyond even the borders of suburbia, however, there are no vermin that cannot be rationalized as “wildlife.”

I find David in the kitchen struggling to open a can of dog food while my three dogs—Chip, Bernie, and Skippy—wait patiently at his feet. In a dirty pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, work boots, and several days of stubble, he is the house personified. He’s lost even more weight and looks so gaunt that the new harsh angles of his face mar his handsomeness.

He is too young for this. Thirty-seven is too young to bury a wife. He still wears our wedding band because even now he cannot believe this is happening to him. I know this because he has the same look on his face as the deer trapped in his headlights so many years ago.

It is more than just the fact that I’m gone. David poured himself into my life. My friends became his friends. My animals became his animals. My plans became his plans. All connections passed through me. That’s not a complaint. I was not only a willing vessel for David’s life; I found it exhilarating.

In return, David became my rock—steady and dependent, a safe harbor when I became overwhelmed by the accumulation of still, little bodies. He calmed me down when I started to lose it on a difficult case and convinced me to trust my own instincts instead of the textbooks. David’s confidence in me was a great gift, and I realize now that I never really thanked him for it.

Up until now, it all worked, didn’t it, David? It was a good deal all around, wasn’t it? Still, I cannot help but fear that my death has severed your slender tether to this human plane. You are beginning to fade, just like me.

I swear, David, I didn’t know. I didn’t know it was all going to

end this way. It's not like I could've changed things; we met at a crossroads, and the people you meet at the most important times of your life invariably become the most important people in your life. But I do wonder if it would've turned out differently if there had been no death—no Charlie—in the story line. Would I have been available for you when the layers finally peeled away? Would you even have cared if I hadn't been so haunted? Every action is inextricably dependent upon the one that preceded it, like some infinite dance that continues out in perpetuity until one of the partners exits the floor. I know that now. A fat lot of good it does me, though.

David finally manages to open the can of dog food and quickly fills the three bowls on the floor. The dogs look at David, then the food, and back to David. I usually add rice and chicken broth to their dinners, but David doesn't remember this or (as likely) can't be bothered by the extra effort.

Chip, Bernie, and Skippy. My sweet, sweet boys. I miss you so much. I long for the feel of you, to rub your fur, touch your wet noses.

Seeing my dogs again is almost as heartrending as looking at my husband. The always-anxious Chip, the Labrador, was with me the longest. I brought him home soon after our move following one of my monthly vet visits to a nearby mall pet store. When I first saw Chip, the product of some Midwest puppy mill hell, he was only eight weeks old and his face was covered with running sores from a rampant staph infection. I told the asshole of a store owner that I could cure him with a month or so of antibiotics, but the owner complained that the dog would then be too "old" to sell. He demanded that I "put him down" so he could save the cost of the drugs. Chip came home with me that same day and left me only when David drove me to the hospital for the last time.

Bernie, the Bernese mountain dog, is beautiful, huge, goofy, and the sweetest dog I've ever known. He came to us a year later. Bernie had been bred locally to be a show dog. Given Bernie's parents, the breeder had high hopes for "best of breed" at Westminster and then many years of stud fees. Within a few months of his birth, however, it became clear that Bernie's bad shoulders would keep him out of not only Westminster, but any breeding circle that would pay his way.

The breeder requested that Bernie be "put to sleep." I told her that I could easily find Bernie a good home. The breeder insisted that death was the only option that would preserve her reputation; it simply wouldn't do to have a "defective"—her word—out in the world that was traceable to her stock.

I sent the breeder away with assurances that I would take care of it, and then I snuck Bernie home on my lunch break. That was a good day. Chip loved the company, and the two big dogs became fast friends.

Skippy the schipperke, the last dog I adopted in life, was my greatest challenge. He is a small black bundle of thick fur with a beautiful fox-like face and pointed ears. Intelligent, industrious, and energetic, Skippy does not suffer fools lightly. Of the three, he reminds me most of my husband.

I always assumed that Skippy was yet another Missouri puppy mill special, although I don't really know where he came from. Early one winter morning, I went to open my office and found Skippy sitting patiently and alone on the welcome mat at the front door as if he were waiting for an appointment. When I opened the office door, Skippy trotted in with an air of entitlement that I could not question.

I carried Skippy into my exam room and gave him a once-over. Skippy didn't object. He had no tags, no collar, and no visible

injuries. I noticed almost immediately, however, that he was breathing too fast for a small dog at rest. When I listened to his chest for the first time, I began to understand why. Skippy had a heart murmur that sounded only slightly less turbulent than Niagara Falls. The sonogram I took of Skippy's heart later that morning completed the sad picture of a heart built wrong. We predicted he had maybe a year of life in that heart before it gave out.

I figured Skippy was a runaway. My staff posted notices everywhere while I silently prayed that no one would come to claim him. That particular prayer, at least, was answered.

Skippy is unaware of his death sentence, or it may be simply that he enjoyed our life together too much to let it go. He is now almost four years old and still going. He's been a great companion and helped keep my own heart open during my last year. I could hold him upside down between my legs or swing him high in the air and he would wag his little stump of a tail and yip with excitement. He would wake me every morning by licking my nose and then run and hide until I found him. After we had our special morning alone time, he would go off and play with the big guys, oblivious to being stepped on or the physiological failings of his heart.

The fact that Skippy has actually outlived me makes me smile.

You just never know with dogs.

"Well, come on then," David says, motioning to the food. The dogs reluctantly move to their respective bowls as David raises a full wineglass in toast. "Cheers."

The doorbell rings and the dogs run out of the kitchen barking wildly. David slowly follows them.

In the darkened living room, David parts the curtains just enough to peek out into the driveway. A silver BMW convertible sits next to the garbage cans.

David trudges to the front door as if he's on a schoolboy's trip to the principal's office. He tries to quiet the dogs and then opens the door. There on the front porch stands Max Dryer.

Max would look like a caricature of an incredibly polished and self-important Big Manhattan Law Firm Rainmaker if you didn't believe his claim that he was in fact the initial model for that caricature. He is fifty-four, tall, thin, handsome, dressed in a custom-made charcoal pin-striped suit, purple tie, and sparkling Allen Edmonds shoes. As soon as he sees David through the screen door—the first time in three weeks—Max pulls out a box of Davidoff cigarettes, lights one with a gold Dunhill lighter, and inhales deeply.

“Max, Max, Max,” David scolds and shakes his head. “Those cigarettes will kill you.”

Max offers a tight smile. “I'm assuming my clients will get to me first.”

“There's always that hope. I guess you want to come in?”

“That's the general idea.”

“Fine. Leave the smoke outside, though.”

Max tosses his cigarette into the snow, where it sizzles dead, and then he steps into the house.

David, ignoring his visitor, addresses the three dogs. “Fellas, I believe you know Max.”

Max bends down to invite the dogs to come to him, but they decide instead to return to their meal in the kitchen.

“Don't take it personal,” David says. “As you might expect, they're not themselves. By the way, neither am I. That is your one and only fair warning. Drink?”

“A little early, isn't it?”

David shrugs off the question. “It's some time after Helena's death. That makes it late enough in the day for me. But suit yourself.”

“I’ll pass for now.”

David enters the kitchen while Max heads for the living room. Max opens the curtains and in the sudden light winces at the scene before him. The only part of the room that is not in disarray is the long bookcase that lines one of the walls. The bookcase holds the books I’d read and used for research during my illness. My books still remain as I’d left them. I’m not surprised. Change has been cruel to David in the past, and he has learned to avoid its proof until events overtake him.

Max walks over to the bookcase and scans the titles—*Animal Rights Today*; *When Elephants Weep*; *Being with Animals*; *Kanzi*; *Animal Behavior and Communication Studies*. Every title concerns animal behavior, animal rights, communication theory, or American Sign Language, but to David they might as well have been in Latin.

David returns with his glass and the dogs at his heels. Pointing to the shelves, Max asks, “All of these Helena’s?”

“She read a lot once she became sick. I guess she felt she was running out of time to learn. She was right.”

David drops into an overstuffed chair by the fireplace, leaving Max to fend for himself. All the seats by this point have been taken by the dogs. Max tries to make room on the couch next to Chip, but Chip holds his ground.

David enjoys Max’s confused discomfort for a minute before calling Chip to join him by the chair. Max quickly takes the open spot.

Max cares about three things—money and women (loved in that order, I believe) and last, my husband. Max, who recruited and trained David from day one, saw him as his protégé. This was a problem for both of them. Although I know David felt a great deal of gratitude toward Max and, when pushed, would admit that

he had a deep but inexplicable fondness for his mentor, Max had a recurring tendency to confuse his *c*-words—*care*, *concern*, and *control*. Max wanted David to be more like him and ultimately replace him on the firm's governing executive committee. The prospect of becoming any more like Max, however, used to keep David awake at least two nights a month.

"So, what is it that gets the great Max Dryer to leave Manhattan on a weekday?"

"You knew I'd need to come to you at some point," Max says. "You don't pick up the phone and you don't return messages. Even my messages."

"Don't beat me up about my communication skills right now."

"I'm not. I was just worried."

David rolls his eyes, a gesture he has perfected around Max. "I can only imagine."

Max glances at the wedding ring that David still wears. David follows his gaze and then self-consciously hides his hand in his pocket.

"Look, I understand how you must feel," Max says.

"Really? Do tell. How many wives have you buried?"

"You know that's not what I meant. You've every right to be bitter, but don't be an asshole."

David looks away as he tries to compose himself. "Sorry, but I warned you."

"It's just that . . . well, it's been over two weeks since the funeral and four weeks since you've even seen the office." Max once again takes in the disarray that is the living room. "What have you been doing to yourself here? Didn't you have someone coming in to take care of things?"

"She was only a home care aide for Helena. I haven't replaced her yet since . . ." The sentence hangs between them.

“I think you could use some help around here,” Max says while avoiding David’s stare.

“You didn’t come up here to talk about my housekeeping, did you?”

“No, but you could’ve made this a little easier.”

“But it is so seldom that I get to see you fumbling. It’s the most fun I’ve had since the funeral.”

“Lovely.”

“So, I’m out of time?” David looks at his watch. “Note to self: The exact duration of the firm’s compassion in the event of death of wife. Three weeks, three days, ten hours, and twelve minutes.”

“That’s not it at all. We only want to know how you’re doing. That’s not unreasonable.”

“I don’t really know how to answer that. Seriously, what’s the appropriate benchmark? My wife is dead. I can’t see her again on this earth. Not today. Not ever. So, how am I doing? I’m doing just great.”

“Is sarcasm a sign of healing?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Let’s start with the basics. Do you need anything?”

“Sure. I need a device to go back in time and get back all those nights I spent out with you reliving your greatness, or in the office working on the next draft of a brief that mattered little or not at all, or following you around the country on rainmaking trips. I want—no, I need—all that time back.”

Max nods. “I know,” he says softly. “If I had the power, I would give it to you.”

David looks at Max skeptically at first and then in growing disbelief. “Wow. Do you actually feel guilty? Max Dryer? Is that really you in there?”

“Please stop it. I loved Helena in my own way and subject to my own many limitations—of which I am well aware, thank you.”

David searches Max's eyes, but Max quickly looks away. "I think I believe that," David says. And so do I, Max. It's just that you always seemed so proud of your limitations. Perhaps I should've looked at you harder and longer.

"Would you like us to get you a place in the city? Temporary, you know, until you can get your own?"

"The city? Who said anything about moving back to the city?"

"This is me, David. I know you and how you work. I've seen you prepare for trials and I've seen you try cases. How're you going to handle this place? What happens when you're in trial? How can you take care of all Helena's animals?"

Really, David. How can you? I asked him this same question months ago. I was the gaunt woman with the eyes hollowed out by chemo and the scarf wrapped around a bald head. Propped up on pillows in our bed, David's arm around my bony shoulders, I tried to reason with him when all he wanted to do was avoid looking at what I'd become.

"I can tell that you miss it," I told him. "Ordering Chinese food for delivery at midnight, jumping into a cab home instead of racing to catch a train or fighting traffic. Think of how much easier it'll be for you."

"Why are we talking about this? Why is this even relevant?" David asked me, beginning to get upset.

I pulled back from him then, suddenly hot and angry. "Relevant? Look at me. It's the most relevant question we have left, don't you think?"

"Stop it," he begged, turning away from me.

I took David's face in my hands and made him look directly at me while I spoke. "Please don't make me pretend. It is what it is. We both know it. The animals have needs and they're not going

to stop having them just because I'm gone. I've given this a lot of thought and made arrangements for placing everyone."

"How could you have decided this without me?"

"Because someone needed to and you won't talk to me about it. Please don't be angry. I'm just trying to be realistic and think of your life."

"This is my family you're talking about, too. You can't just break us up."

"Those are just words, David. Nice words, but just words. We both know the truth. I dragged you up here. You've been great about it all, but you're here because of me. These were never your animals. You're even still afraid of the horses and Collette. You barely know the others. How will you care for them and work sixty hours a week?"

"We've done okay so far," David argued back. "I've made accommodations, haven't I?"

"This isn't a criticism of you. It's really not even about you at all. We knew the demands of your career going into this. But this can't be an accommodation; this is the rest of your life we're talking about. You're not going to be able to count on my friends to take care of everyone forever. People will move on. You will move on. You must."

"It is my decision to make now and I want to keep us together."

"Why? I still haven't heard one reason why."

"Do I really need to say it?" David's voice rose.

"It would be nice if I finally understood what you thought," I said, my frustration and fatigue getting the better of me. "You're a lawyer. You know words. Use them with me for once!"

"Because..."

"Because what? You're still not saying anything."

“Because there is nothing else, okay? There’s nothing else,” David shouted. “There never was!”

I melted at David’s desperation. “I know you feel that way now, honey, but—”

“Don’t tell me how you understand! You don’t! You can’t! I’m the one who’s left behind. Again.” David rose, but I pulled him back down to me and waited for his breathing to slow.

“Okay,” I told him, finally. “You’re right. I won’t be able to tell you what to do, but I need you to know that you don’t have to do this. You’ve nothing left to prove to me. Just do what’s best for them *and* for you. There might come a time very soon when this may not be the same thing.”

Now David tells Max precisely what he told me during that conversation months ago. “I’ll handle it.”

And hearing those words again, I can’t help but feel that somehow I failed my own creatures. I should’ve tried harder to make David understand that their purpose in the world is not merely to serve as proof of his ability to multitask.

“I guess you know best,” Max says.

“Yes, I do.”

“Any thoughts about when we can expect you back? Just so I can tell the committee.”

David sighs. “Tell ’em I need until the end of the week to make arrangements.”

Max rises to his feet. “That would be great.”

“I know the firm is just grinding to a halt without me.”

“Don’t underestimate your value. You control a lot of business and the clients love you.”

“Only because their alternative is to deal with you.” David smiles for the first time since Max’s arrival.

“No doubt. Your cases for the time being are being covered, but Chris is spread pretty thin and—”

“—yes, it’s an important year for her. I know.”

“Actually, I was going to say that they need your special touch.”

David walks Max to the front door as he talks to the dogs at his side.

“This is the part of the conversation where Max gets manipulative.”

“You know me too well, partner,” Max says with a shrug.

“It’s the ones you sneak past me that I worry about.” A light snow is falling again. The two continue to Max’s car in silence.

“You don’t have to answer this,” Max finally says, “and heaven knows, you don’t have to tell me the truth, but . . .”

“Spit it out. I’m cold.”

“Did Helena ever, you know, forgive me?”

Poor Max. He does not yet know that seeking forgiveness from the dead is like looking for the wind in a field. But David takes the question with surprising seriousness. He turns his face up to the sky for a long moment. When David looks back at Max, melted snowflakes run down his face.

“It took two people to turn the sad and frightened little boy she met at Cornell into the hard-assed corporate litigator he became. He was not an unwilling pupil. In some ways, you saved that boy as much as she did. There was a cost, though. Helena understood that. Helena also was smart enough to realize the benefits of my employment. This,” David says as he gestures to the barn, the paddock, and the wooded acreage beyond, “wasn’t going to happen if I was out trying to save the world.”

“And so . . .?”

“So, yeah, I think she forgave you. I think she probably was always a little disappointed at where the elevator let me off. But she forgave you.” David wipes the snow from his cheeks.

Max eases his tall frame into the tiny car and lowers the window. “I guess that’s something then,” he says, gives David a small wave, and drives away.

David watches the red taillights progress down the steep driveway through a screen of ever-increasing snow. “Yeah. Something,” he mutters, then jogs back to the house.

David is wrong; I was never disappointed in him.

How could I be? Under Max’s tutelage, David soon became very good at being a lawyer. David’s success brought financial security to our home, and for this I was grateful. We could not have lived the lifestyle “we” (meaning “I”) chose on my salary alone or something too much lower than the absurdly high six figures David’s hard work and Max’s favorable support at the firm commanded. Because of David, I not only was able to avoid the mayonnaise sandwiches and Cup Noodles of my youth, but also obtained the freedom to create a very special home surrounded by my animal companions.

But it was more than just the money. The job gave David another family—one that could never be taken from him because it lived on and in the insulated world of facts, legal reasoning, and case law. This family helped make up for the history of his profound loneliness and, frankly, took some of the weight off my own shoulders.

So, was I disappointed? No. I just wanted a little more for David, not from him. I wanted him to relax more, to enjoy his life more, to revel in our animals, their antics and little idiosyncrasies, more. I wanted David to feel connected and be in the moment when he was with us instead of distracted by what he’d just left or where he needed to go next. I wanted David to realize that he had succeeded in the practice of law, had mastered the craft of being a lawyer, and now needed to learn the much more difficult craft of creating and living a full life.

I guess I really just wanted him to value what I was able to contribute to our relationship.

I wanted.

Perhaps David's feeling that he disappointed me is understandable after all. Letting someone you love know that you want more for them probably does go into the ear at the same pitch as disappointment.

When David returns to the front hallway of our house, the three dogs are waiting. David walks past them, but they don't follow him this time and instead continue to stare expectantly at the door. It is disturbing to see the recognition that finally crosses David's face.

"It's just me," he says to the dogs. "I'm sorry, but it's now always going to be just me."

The two big dogs eventually give up and move elsewhere. Only my Skippy retains his vigil for me by the front door.