

A Wound to Close

by Christine Rushton

Police found all 65 dogs on the woman's land. They lay in flooded kennels and stood in two-inch deep piles of feces and sawdust. What a goddamn irresponsible, nauseating mess, thought the reporter assigned to the unfolding scene. At midnight on a Monday, the woman, a rookie journalist with the local news station, trudged in her rubber boots through the sludge to interview rescuers, police officers, and the old woman responsible for the smell currently rivaling the nearby sewage management plant.

Since her arrival ten minutes earlier, the sirens slicing through the night's silence had ceased, and the workers, who moved like bees in a hive, had hoisted several scraggly and sopping dogs into kennels for transportation. One dog, probably three-months old, had broken free and hidden behind the reporter's legs. She bent down to console the animal and found two eyes wide and shaking staring directly into her own. She froze, holding the fragile being with her soaking hands; and the commotion of the surrounding barking that had deafened her, seemed to illusively dissipate. A hand gently grasping the reporter's shoulder dragged her mind back to the scene. She quickly brushed away the tears that had fallen on her freckled cheeks. With a deep breath, she handed the dog to the volunteer and returned to searching for someone she could question.

She was starting to think the people in charge of the operation, those she needed to interview, were overlooking her petite frame, but she finally received the wave over from the leading police officer.

"Miss, we are through questioning the dog owner for now, and she has agreed to speak with you. You've got five minutes," the chief of police said as he held open a patrol car door. Apparently the interview was going to be held in the back of the car with the handcuffed old woman.

"So, Ms...," the reporter began speaking as soon as she sat down, not wanting to waste any second of her five minutes.

"It's Ms. Thompson, lady. I know what you're here for. Get it over with," the woman grunted, her drooping eyes and hunched posture reflecting the failure she likely felt in light of the scene outside the rain splattered windows. She was 72 years old and lived alone with these dogs.

“Tell me, why did you breed so many foxhounds without keeping up with the expenses and housing expansion?” The recorder pointed directly at the old woman’s wrinkled and cracked lips, ready to capture every defeated sound.

“I love them. Not loved, love. Get that right,” began the handcuffed woman. “I’ve loved them ever since I began breeding them, God only knows how many years ago. I haven’t got any children, see, and a husband, ha! That chance flew out with the last war, damn men dying on me. But dogs, they don’t leave you. They grow up, have babies; they become your family. They are my family.”

“And how do you feel about allowing your family to live in life-threatening conditions?”

“I’m old. It got away from me, and I knew if I asked the goddamn nosy asses around me they would take my family away and lock me in some house of the dying. So, I kept them.”

“And what about now, what will you do now that they are gone?”

“Now? I don’t know...I don’t....Maybe I’ll just die. It’s not like I have someone to live for anymore. But, I do want folks to know I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t care for my dogs like they deserved to be cared for, I’m sorry it had to come to locking them up in the pouring rain, and I’m sorry the world hates me. I just wanted to love them, but I understand now it wasn’t enough.”

The reporter, thinking about how much her own mother would hate the premise of this story, jumped when the same hand that had waved her over to the car banged on the window, indicating that the interview was over. She thanked the woman, yanked her hood over her frazzled brunette waves, and slid back into the sucking mud pile.

At 6 a.m. the same morning, the local news station broke the ongoing rescue of the sixty-five foxhounds to an audience of early risers showering and shaving for work. People listening to the news reporters stopped making their espresso lattes and egg white omelets for thirty seconds to listen as the man behind the anchor desk editorialized the images of skinny dogs wading through the murky water covering the floor of their metal cages. The anchor’s booming voice and grim tone coupled with the images caused viewers to imagine the operation as some sort of raid, as if police went in with gas masks and night vision goggles bursting into a potential terrorist cell. No, not a raid, though; simply an intervention.

The anchor continued without conferring with the assigned field reporter because the station was having technological difficulties with the live footage. Using the reporter’s notes, he began

to paint a picture of the owner; a hoarder and a woman in her seventies. He said the negligent Ms. Thompson had finally given up hope of keeping the dogs. Phrases like “puppy mill,” “out of control,” and “irresponsible breeding,” were thrown around to describe the woman’s fenced-in land upon which the rescuers, police officers, and reporters had spent hours working.

“The puppies that have been brought out were just wading through inches of feces,” one rescuer said to reporters. The police chief briefly stated that officers had arrested the woman and helped send the dogs to local shelters.

Luckily some of the station’s footage finally came through, and even in the inky darkness in which cameramen filmed countless hours of video, viewers could see dozens of hands coaxing the frightened and shivering creatures into plastic travel crates. Police and rescuers uncovered dog after dog, young, old, and dead, until nearby shelters took each and every one into fresh kennels for inspection.

Unfortunately, the intervention flickering across the television screen did not detail some fanatical idea of corrupt homeland security, so many latte-drinking viewers returned to their buzzing Blackberries and shrieking milk steamers. But, to someone somewhere the operation became both the heroic and horrific story of their week.

One television tuned to the news broadcast had a viewer who did not busy herself with making a soymilk Chai tea latte or with making a proportion-perfect omelet with just enough protein to last until the spinach salad with light balsamic dressing at lunch. Quite the opposite, the woman, Leslie, sat silently drinking her black tea with milk and sugar, two Labrador retrievers lying at her feet. The dogs Rio, yellow, and Cody, black, had just eaten breakfast, and their satiated stomachs required a nap at the now 6:30 a.m. hour. Breathing in the slight aroma of her brewed tea mixing with the familiar fresh-oatmeal dog scent from a recent hose-down of both Labs, Leslie lifted the cup to her smooth lips, sipped the hot tea, and set it back down again. Listening to the anchor and tracing the rim of the teacup with her marker-stained index finger, she compared the dogs’ story to the shootings and robberies Seattle had experienced during the 2012 summer. She noticed that from a realistic perspective the dog hoarding story did not elicit quite the same reaction from most people, even in those she observed on the TV news station. Sure, dogs nearby lived in squalor, but they are only animals, right? Wrong, she thought, furrowing her eyebrows.

With dire tones and unbroken eye contact, the reporters revealed the facts by level of importance against a background of still images and limited video. The dogs, identified as foxhounds, appeared in pictures with their eyes colored in blue and brown hues. One set in particular stared straight into the Leslie’s eyes, burning and wide with a fear she had only seen

when visiting foster children in the downtown. Instinctively, she reached a slightly wrinkled hand down to touch the yellow and black fluff balls snoring softly on the rug. It was a maternal touch, the one mothers acquire the moment their newborn falls into their arms. She could not help herself; she could not help but consider the possibility her dogs' eyes could be the ones staring at her from behind the cold metal chain link. She shook her head as if to push the dogs out of her mind and got up to start the day.

By this time, the newscast had moved on to the possibility of snow in the pass for Sunday. Snow, she thought as she plodded up the stairs. What if those dogs had still been out in the cages when it snowed? Would they have frozen? Would they have lived? Would anyone have cared? And why did this story bother her so much? Toothbrush in mouth, Leslie contemplated the circumstances in which any person could ever treat an animal with such cruelty. One news anchor had mentioned that the woman had just loved them too much, but maybe the owner was deranged, maybe she had worked some sort of breeding black market, maybe she was just lonely and decided cats were not an option. No, the newscaster had said it was an issue of hoarding. This woman, she thought, had hoarded sixty-five dogs like they were magazines filled with years of depressing celebrity break ups. She had kept those dogs like porcelain dolls sitting on her mantelpiece; only, the dolls at least would have had dry conditions in which to survive.

Half-empty teacup in hand, graying black-brown hair restrained in uniform spirals, Leslie walked down the stairs to greet her own Labradors, tails wagging as they waited for their daily bone-shaped biscuits. She smiled because she remembered how much she loved that little wagging gesture every morning. Rio, as usual, threw down his head in sneeze that nearly sent his legs flailing about, but recovered to whip his head back up and look at her with his almond shaped eyes, the shape that revealed his half-asleep state. And then Leslie nearly dropped her cup as a strange, yet familiar pang hit her in the gut. It wasn't sickness, she thought while grasping for the railing to support her buckling knees, but it definitely was not to be ignored. Her mind suddenly returned to the hoarded foxhounds. Why on earth could she not shake this feeling she had a connection with these dogs? It was as if some invisible calling had grasped hold of her motherly instincts and threatened to squeeze until she did something, but what?

It wasn't often she felt this pang, which had since increased to more of a stab. A few times while raising her two children she had encountered the knife-like reaction. Once, her son, Charlie, took the corner too quickly on his big-kid bike and fell face first onto the pavement. He had to get stitches for the gushing chin wound, and for five days that wound ached in her stomach. Then, her daughter, Michelle, contracted pneumonia and spent months in testing at Seattle Children's Hospital for some unknown secondary illness causing nodules in her lungs. The blade poked at Leslie's own lungs for months. Finally, her husband, Casey, had called a few years ago from a business trip to Wichita, Kansas, to warn her about the newscasts informing

distant viewers of the F-4 tornado just miles from his hotel. She remembers the stab, stab, stab, over and over. Leslie had survived both of her children's upbringings and dutifully shoved them out the door to college when the time came. Her husband still traveled on business trips, but now censored some of his more thrilling adventures. And for her, the stabbing feeling had subsided in most recent years.

In each of those situations Leslie knew she could not ignore the knife, and for her, this time was no different. Flipping open her laptop, she searched for the online news article for more information. She quickly discovered the dogs weren't yet up for adoption because veterinarians needed to check them for worms, parasites, fleas, and more foreign creatures that occupy mangy dog fur. Grasping the table with white knuckles, her half-digested tea nearly ruined her freshly brushed teeth when she read about the dog police found dead, how it was left to rot on the concrete floor of the cages with the live dogs. In the human world, people would have equated the conditions to a Nazis internment camp during the Second World War. But, they weren't humans, just dogs, right? What a disgusting oversight, Leslie thought.

Glancing at the clock, which read 7:15 a.m., Leslie jumped up from the computer as her Labradors bounced around her impatiently waiting to receive a treat on the way to their own heated kennels. Rio hopped up and down like a rabbit, while the Cody leapt like a gazelle from deck to grass to kennel door. Cody had come with spring-loaded back legs, she and Casey had always told friends. With a loving goodbye kiss and a "see ya later," she turned on her heel in the wet grass. Keys, purse, and peanut-buttered toast in hand, she burst through the garage door and into her SUV's front seat. Down the driveway and into 7:30 a.m. traffic, she contemplated the possibility of her fifth graders behaving accordingly for today's extended math equations. So, just as the newscasters moved to weather in an orchestrated five second segue, Leslie's day moved forward with the foxhound dogs left on a laptop sitting next to her unwashed teacup.

The day seemed to drag on for Leslie, known to her students as Mrs. Stewart. Her 65-degree classroom played host to a continuous symphony of coughing, sneezing, and sniffing. Then there was the usual wiggling dance accompanied by the question, "Can I use the bathroom?" She had spent her college years fighting her stubborn Irish father's wish for her to pursue engineering. Her heart belonged in teaching. However, sometimes a classroom of thirty bodies moving like thirty separate Energizer bunnies made the school's exit doors seem like gates to paradise. At 4:30 p.m., a sigh and a dull thud marked Leslie's successful attempt to once again plant her petite, 5-foot-3-inch frame in her SUV. Just the gym and the store and she would once again be home with her dogs.

Oh my gosh, the dogs, she thought, her shoulders slumping back in her seat. Suddenly it happened again; right at the intersection where the McDonalds faced the Starbucks, she felt a knife twist in her gut. It was always just she and her local oldies station in the car to and from work, so no passenger was there to see her face shatter at remembering the animals that had occupied the morning news. Is this how easy it is, she thought. Do people just see it on the news, think about what they should do, and then let the tragedy fall out of their minds like the dirty laundry they didn't want to deal with? The gym would have to wait. She needed to find out something and she needed to do so now.

Back in the garage, Leslie slid out of her car and walked to the backyard. Despite hundreds of little questions rattling in her head, questions from children too small to understand her sarcastic comebacks, she managed to smile at her dogs as they nearly knocked her over when released from their kennel. Their chubby sides, courtesy of too many cookie treats, wiggled with energy pent up from a day spent inside their dog run. Casey, her husband, had dedicated hundreds of dollars putting in a cement slab and heated boxes for the dogs to walk around and sleep in during the day. Casey was an engineer and she loved him, meticulous mannerisms and all. Rio and Cody ran circles around her until the coveted Chuck-It ball thrower came out to play. Growling, fighting, and body slamming each other, the two slobbering animals spent their energy until the wet grass became heaven to their warm bodies.

But, no matter what she did, Leslie's mind kept returning to the images of the foxhounds walking through inches of feces. She left her contented beasts to the grass and went inside. Her laptop, with the unwashed teacup still sitting beside it, had just finished firing up and opened to the page she had abandoned earlier. The foxhounds were still there, still receiving help after their internment at the old woman's hoarding site. Taking a deep breath to keep from crying over the drooped ears and quivering bodies on the online newscast, she settled down to research.

Where were the dogs now? Several shelters. What is this breed of dog like? Well-mannered, good with other animals, pleasant with children, energetic, she read they are even American Kennel Club certified and actually win dog show competitions. Well, she thought, this breed is basically a lab with mixes of browns, blacks, and white hairs in their short coats. This typically 60 to 65 pound dog breed might hold its own against the beastly beings now collapsed outside.

Leslie clicked through webpage after webpage of detailed information answering every question she asked. Suddenly, she looked up to find two pair of glowing yellow eyes locked on her tiniest movements. Oh dear, she thought, looking at the clock to find time had disappeared and the face now read 6:00 p.m. Casey would soon walk through the door to help with dinner.

Leslie turned back to the glaring eyes only to see her two dogs pleading for their two cups of delicious kibble. As she smiled at them she thought she saw another pair of eyes appear dimly next to Rio and Cody's. Frowning and shaking her head to clear her mind, which was weighed down by a day's worth of convincing small children that ingesting an entire pencil was not a wise choice, she looked again to find the third set of eyes had vanished. A ghostly coincidence, she thought; a sign, a call, maybe even a demand. Still, she did not know what the forces of her now growling stomach were asking of her.

The weekend arrived with plans of a road trip to see her son, Charlie, and look at property. Leslie had discussed with Casey the possibility of helping the foxhounds, and he had agreed to help her research the breed. In the car at 8 a.m., with her newfangled wireless hotspot device and iPad, she heard the buzzing phone ring from the speakers when her daughter, a recent college grad and ambitious journalist, called in for a Skype session. Michelle, momentarily confused by her mother's ability to video chat with her while driving in a car, settled in for the weekly rundown of all the crazies she had met while reporting in the field. Last week's update included a man who stopped four-lanes of traffic to save a crossing duck and a business owner who refused to sell to liquor to a woman because she didn't like his favorite brand.

"God mom, you wouldn't believe what I came across this week. Some guy tried to jump off of the I-5 Bridge and caused a six-car pileup," Michelle explained, the recollections of her job assignments seeming to pull her body deeper into the chair she sat in while talking with her mom through the Skype screen.

Leslie listened intently and followed her daughter's pixilated image with her graying-blue eyes, as she always did, missing Michelle's presence in her home with every new story shared. Then, mind wandering, Leslie remembered the last four years during which Michelle left for college, graduated, and found a job at the local broadcast news station. Somehow every goodbye after a visit still managed to grab her heart and tug a little. Well she thought, pursing her lips at the paralleling situation, my heart has certainly become the subject of a tug-o-war competition these last few days.

"Mom, MOM! Did you hear me? Why are you in the car?"

"Sorry! Did I tell you about the foxhounds?" Leslie asked, jolting against her seatbelt as Casey turned a corner like the Formula One drivers he secretly wished to emulate.

“The foxhounds? Wait, what about foxhounds...I didn’t think...are you talking about the news? And I was asking if you and Dad are going to visit Charlie today. You know, in Walla Walla?” Michelle asked, clearing her throat and nervously shifting in the screen’s image.

Leslie noticed her daughter seemed to fear something about the question, but continued to share the information she thought Michelle, her know-all newsgirl, had not yet heard. “No, no, the foxhounds. Oh wait, you said Walla Walla? Yes, we’re going to see your brother Charlie and look at some land, but that’s beside the point. I was watching the news the other morning, the station you work for of course, and saw this big story on a foxhound hoarding case,” she continued without waiting for the commentary she knew her daughter would willingly offer if given the chance.

“There was a live report, but I couldn’t see the reporter because of video problems and the audio was slightly gargled by the rain in the background. But anyway, the police seized about 65 of these dogs at a woman’s house. She was keeping them in disgusting conditions and one was even found dead. Puppies, old ones; you name it, they found it. It was horrific, all the photos and video,” Leslie paused to regain control of the stabbing feeling in her middle. She felt a hand cover her own and realized Casey was glancing between her face and the road, with his eyebrows knitted in a quizzical, worried expression. His warm touch and strong fingers quieted the hand she realized was shaking.

There was a pause on the other end of the Skype line, and Leslie could see Michelle’s eyes fall, the telling sign that she had information she didn’t want to share.

“Mom, I know how you feel about my reporting job. You worry about me and all of the bad situations I encounter every day. But...I don’t need to ask someone about the case because I was there. I was the reporter. I saw first-hand the conditions those dogs walked away from.”

Leslie locked her gaze on her daughter’s blurred image, scanning her shoulders, eyes and mouth for an unintentional wincing hint of pain. Michelle worshipped animals, especially dogs, just as Leslie did. When their first dog, Jet, died, Leslie and Michelle had both insisted their other dog, Jaguar, come along on every car, bike, and walking trip. For her daughter to have now experienced the abuse of several dozen dogs, Leslie wanted to make sure Michelle understood there was nothing that she as a reporter could have done.

“Honey, are you alright?” Leslie asked, pushing her own emotions aside for a moment.

“Yeah, I will be. It was rough, especially because I personally interviewed the hoarding lady, what a real piece of work she was,” Michelle’s lips curled in disgust like the time Leslie sat her down on an old neighbor’s lap even though she knew Michelle hated the woman.

"I just really hope that woman is charged with something. Volunteers spent hours in the pouring rain helping those dogs. But...I don't know...I felt like I could relate to her when she talked about them because she really loved them. Who is to blame then? Someone has to be responsible!"

Despite the limited clarity on her iPad's screen, Leslie could see the anger burning in Michelle's eyes. She knew the aspiring journalist in her daughter could not let go of the scenes she had witnessed.

"Honey, calm down please. I was going to ask you to do some research on the dog breed and the situation because I think I need to do something about it," Leslie said, but at this point the connection on her iPad broke causing her voice to distort.

"Okay. I'll look it up right now. Wait, what do you mean you need to do something about it? You know what; I can't really hear you on my computer. The only time you ever have me research a breed is when you lose a battle with Dad about buying a new dog. It sounds like you want to buy or adopt one of these foxhounds, and I don't think that's what you said," her daughter responded in confused disbelief. Michelle's face then turned into a pixilated version of her Sunday morning just-showered look. "Hang on a sec."

Leslie's cell phone began to buzz with her daughter's number flashing on the screen. She answered and attempted to further explain to Michelle that she had a gut feeling she needed to help these dogs somehow. She herself had only considered adoption seconds before, but the twisting knife in her stomach loosened at the idea. Yes, she did have two dogs already and yes, she had argued against Rio and Cody, the two beasts now occupying her household; but a woman can change her mind if she wants.

Michelle regained Leslie's attention on the phone and questioned her mother about this radical mind change. She asked about the breed, the dog's behavior, and where these particular foxhounds now resided. Leslie heard the journalist voice kick in as the questions flowed, pumping Leslie for information. She could hear the tapping of her daughter's fingers on the keyboard as she searched for the news story. Then Leslie smiled, turning up her lips in an expression of pride as her daughter's determination began to solve the issue at hand.

"So, I've found out the dogs would fit right in with Rio and Cody. They get along well with others. Although, I don't think they are up for adoption yet. Hm. I'll keep you posted."

Glancing back at the road ahead, Leslie began to relax as Michelle turned the conversation to her brother's inability to call her back. At 9 a.m., somewhere between North Bend and Ellensburg, the foxhounds were once again lost in the mix. The flocked trees in the icy mountain

pass flickered past as the car headed toward the dry, eastern fields of Washington State. Four hours later in the car, Leslie's eyes played tricks on her again as a foxhound ran alongside the car and quickly disappeared into the invisible air from where it had appeared. The knife stabbed, then added an extra twist.

Back from the road trip, rays of orange light reached through the white clouds the following Monday morning. The news anchor once again sat before the 6 a.m. viewers, this time with a story about robbers preying on the elderly. Did the people know the elderly have less of an ability to protect themselves? The discovery seemed to rival the recent Nobel Prize project, according to the anchor's tone. It's unfortunate they don't each have bodyguards to protect their assets because the anchor believed that would surely solve the elderly's problems.

Washed and dried, the teacup was once again full, and Leslie settled in her cushioned armchair with her recently fed, contented foot warmers resting on her slippers. The sixth news story in, the anchor started in on an update of the dog hoarding case.

"Recent reports have found that the woman whose dogs were seized by police, began having problems caring for the animals five years ago. During a winter rainstorm, her house and land flooded, drowning several of her foxhounds and leaving only four for her to breed. She received help from rescuers, but started breeding soon after regaining access to her land. At 78 years of age, the breeding got out of control and the number of dogs quickly became too much for her to handle."

The anchor continued for a few more seconds, telling how police were considering pressing charges for negligence.

And then it came back; the stabbing came flooding back to sweep away Leslie's quiet morning routine like the rushing waves of floodwaters had swept away the lives of the foxhounds five years ago. She couldn't handle it anymore; she simply couldn't handle feeling as if she could throw up at any moment because of the images of innocent creatures withering away. She leapt up, sent Rio and Cody into a half-conscious barking frenzy, and slammed her teacup on the table beside her. Glass shattered, shards flew, and hot tea erupted all over her white carpet. Well crap, she thought, she had never broken a teacup in the last ten years she had been watching this news station. Even when Michelle joined the crew and the stories became personal, she had still managed to keep her cup intact. However, still determined to act, Leslie stood up and marched over to the phone. At 6:15 a.m., she stabbed the numbered buttons to call the local animal shelter.

"Pasado's Animal Shelter, this is Amy. How can I help you?"

“Yes, how can I adopt a foxhound?” Leslie seemed to shout at the phone as her hands shook with anger and desperation. She did not understand her fury because she couldn’t save them all, but maybe she at least could stop one from being murdered by a veterinarian’s needle.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am. We can’t put these animals up for adoption yet. They are not screened, but we do have several other dogs you could consider adopting,” Amy offered.

Stab, twist, stab.

“No, you don’t understand. I need to save a foxhound. How can I do that?”

The two bantered back and forth for several minutes before the operator, Amy, finally caved with the real story that not even Michelle’s news station could get.

“Fine. You know what Ma’am; the dogs are dying, okay? I no longer have the time to dedicate to arguing with you this morning. We can’t save the dogs! They have parvo. So take your selfish charity and find another shelter to piss off.”

The vibrations from the snapped connection line rattled Leslie’s eardrum as Amy slammed the handset down, apparently ending the conversation. But, it wasn’t the abrupt silence that forced her legs to tremble beneath her sinking body. Leslie hit the kitchen chair with a dull thud and sagged under the weight of her defeated body. The knife stab seemed to subside for a moment, but in actuality the pain only numbed because Leslie’s nerves were responding to the fact she couldn’t breathe. Rivers of tears flowed down her face and her hands searched near her feet for the warm, rising and falling bodies that had recently fallen back to sleep after their barking episode.

Six years ago Leslie had learned about the parvovirus that is not curable, not easily seen, and not merciful. It takes the lives of puppies too young to feel the tiny arms of a child hugging them close. It takes the lives of aging dogs too old to muster the strength for a worthwhile fight back. It is a murderer, a killer, and an assassin of man’s best friend. Leslie first encountered the disease during a trip those six years ago to the breeder of her other two dogs, a family friend. While in the car, Casey received a phone call informing him all the puppies in a chocolate Lab litter had died due to a parvo outbreak. Someone had abandoned an infected dog at the boarding kennel. Even though Leslie’s family had not planned to take home a puppy from that litter, she still cried until Casey wrapped her in his arms when they arrived home. The knife twisted for two days after that incident.

Now, six years later, the disease had found its way back into her life. She couldn’t handle it and curled herself on the floor between her own two dogs. Rio licked her nose with his scratchy, pink tongue, and Cody lovingly nuzzled his snout under her arm. She couldn’t adopt the

foxhounds. It was now a fact. To risk her own dogs' lives would not only be irresponsible, but it would destroy her if she caused their death. Helpless on the floor, she suddenly realized the clock said 7:00 a.m. and in fifteen minutes she would officially be late for work. Why reality found it necessary to remind her of her job at this particular moment, she had no idea.

Another day, another class, and another child who could not grasp the concept of blowing his nose into a Kleenex; 9 a.m., 12 p.m., and finally 4 p.m.; stab, twist, stab, twist. Finally free, Leslie stepped into her SUV. The gym didn't even cross her mind. Driven by the automatic pilot directing each turn toward home, her mind drifted to images of her own Labradors wasting away in muddy pools. Cynicism did not usually occupy her thoughts, but neither did dying foxhounds.

The stoplight came too quickly. She didn't see the green flicker to yellow and didn't even hear the ambulance's sirens blaring in the direction perpendicular to her own vehicle. Glass shards, shrieking metal, and crimson pools littered the wet asphalt. This time a silence brought several legs to the ground, as the 5 p.m. rush-hour traffic halted. And then, stab.

"Ma'am, are you alright? Ma'am, can you hear me? You were in an accident. We are going to get you out, but we need you to stay very still. Ma'am?" The ambulance driver, a victim in the accident but without injury, tried without success to illicit any response, twitch, or moan from the woman in the SUV. The police and fire truck had arrived by this time, but the woman in the vehicle stayed motionless, eyes closed.

Leslie saw the dogs, foxhounds wiggling with life, running, jumping, rolling, and wrestling in the green grass. Her lips turned up in a gesture she had not experienced since the first time she had heard of this beautiful breed. Then her husband, her daughter, her son, and her two dogs walked beside her to play with and greet the apparent new members of their dog family. A light, warm breeze blew through her hair, the scent of the maple trees reached her nose, and the air seemed full of a tingling freshness. But then, just as they did when she had closed her eyes so many times before in the last few weeks, the foxhounds faded to ghosts in Leslie's dimming vision. The color grayed and the light faded as her confusion grew. Then, stab.

Gasping for air, Leslie flailed her arms until she hit the dashboard of her crushed SUV. Where was she? What was going on, and oh God! What was that pain in her stomach?

“Ma’am, it’s going to be alright. We are getting you out and to the hospital, but I need you to hold still. Can you do that?” The ambulance driver tried to sooth Leslie, but to no avail. Her world was crumbling around her. She couldn’t get away from the pain and realized this time it was real. A piece of metal from her car had lodged itself in her abdomen, causing the blood in her veins to turn icy. She couldn’t breathe; she couldn’t take in the air she so desperately desired.

And then, the image of a foxhound crossed her deluded vision. The dog paused, looked into Leslie’s eyes, and seemed to answer the question that had been slicing a gaping hole in her stomach. Maybe these particular dogs could not be saved, but hundreds of others still lived, waiting for the love of a family to embrace them. They may not have survived through floods and malnutrition, but they had survived abandonment and loneliness.

Despite the metal puncturing her abdomen, Leslie somehow knew that she would be fine. She knew Michelle, Casey, and Charlie would sit by her bedside until her body could complete the task her mind was already prepared to take on. Adopting a dog, no matter what the situation, would heal her heart, ease her mind, and allow her the strength to remove the knife and stitch the wound. Sirens whirring, the ambulance transported her to the hospital where Casey waited.

Four weeks went by before the doctors finally allowed Leslie to go home. Walking through the front door at a pace she thought only eighty year-old ladies should move at, she was met by two wiggling bodies and wagging tails. Her boys, Rio and Cody, each fought for her attention and wrestled until they received a little peck on the head. Michelle had already come and gone, leaving the house spotless and full of prepared food. Feeling her lungs expand and shrink with every unobstructed breath, Leslie turned to Casey and laid her head against his cozy chest. No stabbing, no twisting, and no need to curl in a ball to cry.

Her contented smile stretched across her face as she leaned up to whisper in his ear.

“Let’s talk about adding to our little family of fuzz balls.”