SECOND SATURN RETURN BY MARGARET HAWKINS

Bonnie Masoncup drove the van full of dogs up from Southern Illinois once a month. Her sister, Suzie, fostered German Shepherds and this was Bonnie's way of helping. Bonnie liked to drive. Suzie rode in back with the dogs, singing and talking to them, to keep them calm, sometimes holding an especially fearful dog in her lap. The dogs, strays picked up on the street or old unwanted pets, were in need of a way station between the kill shelter in Olney where they'd been housed and their forever homes in the Chicago suburbs. By the time the trip was over, Suzie was covered with dog hair.

"El Norte!" Suzie always shouted to the dogs when they arrived, hugging them as they leapt at her. They knew from her excitement that something important was happening. Then she'd open the back of the van inside the warehouse-like building and out would pour the dogs. Some shivered and cowered and shat. Others ran in circles. This is where they were kept until, one by one, they were placed in temporary homes on their way to adoption.

Forever Home is what they called it when you adopted an animal. They did a little ceremony in the office for the adopters, just a short one. Suzie read a poem she'd written. People had to make a pledge to keep the dog until it died, or, if they couldn't, give it back. They actually gave you a paper to sign. "Or until you die," Bonnie always said when she heard Suzie give the pitch. Suzie was never sure

if Bonnie was being droll or morbid or just literal. It made her worry, hearing Bonnie say a thing like that, repeatedly, though her sister appeared to be in good health even if she was a little overweight.

The organization had all kinds of lingo, and a bumper sticker for every slogan. Forever Home, GDGGSD (Goll Darn Good German Shepherd Dogs), FURever Friends, God Needed a Helper So He Created Dogs, Love Em 'n Leave Em (LELE). LELE was the support group for foster parents who grew too attached and found it hard to give the dogs up to their adoptive families. Suzie ran that.

LELE met the first Thursday night of the month at her house. Suzie's boyfriend, Ray, helped her make snacks, and people brought things. Really, Ray did most of the cooking. He was known for his pecan bars though Bonnie preferred the lemon. Suzie provided Diet Coke and jug wine and Kleenex. People cried. Sometimes they worried their dogs had gone to the wrong homes but usually they just missed them, the particular personalities of dogs they'd formerly found so difficult to live with. They often lamented not appreciating the dogs more while they were in their care. They felt guilty for sometimes wishing the dogs missed them now, knowing that was wishing them pain.

"Wiley would not sleep through the night," Josie said, waving her arms, knocking over a lamp in the shape of a Rottweiler. Fortunately, the lamp was made of cold cast resin and would never break. "He walked through the

house at night clicking his toenails on the wood floors," she said. "It drove me crazy. Every morning he'd go in the kitchen and pee."

"At least he went in the kitchen," someone observed.

"I wish I'd been nicer to him." Josie accepted the box of Kleenex and wiped her eyes.

"You took him in. That's the main thing." Suzie'd said it a million times. It was true. You couldn't go from 0 to 90 in love every time. Just helping was a lot. More than most people did.

"I know. But I yelled at him to shut up."

"Well, he was a noisy barker."

"He sure was." She dabbed her eyes, smiling.

Ray had a thing he'd do when things got too emotional. He'd trot in with a tray over his head and a dishtowel tied at his waist, swishing his hips. Not just pecan bars, either, but pizza squares and deviled eggs and broiled button mushrooms with melted parmesan cheese inside. It was a joke about a man serving women—they were almost always women —and he always got a laugh. Some people just came for the food.

You got some man there, women would say to Suzie. Giving up the game for us. There was always some game on TV they expected him to want to watch. Suzie had

stopped pointing out that he hated sports. They all thought he was God's gift.

Most of the members of LELE had their own dogs, too, in addition to taking in fosters. One of the advantages of belonging was that when you needed to take a trip and, say, you had a dog that was blind or incontinent, there was always someone to pinch-hit who'd give it special care. This happened the week June Hodges stayed late to tell Suzie she and her husband needed to go to California because her daughter was becoming a rabbi. They were going to the ordination and they needed someone they could trust to look after Folly while they were gone.

"You just go and enjoy," Suzie said. "Folly will have a great time here. You know that."

"She's a picky eater," June said the following week, on her third trip from her car, dropping off shopping bags and duffels full of dog things—two kinds of food, three kinds of treats, plus toys, bowls, two beds, diapers and special floor pads in case she had accidents from nervousness. Special toothbrush-shaped chewies to freshen Folly's breath and scrub plaque from her teeth. A thunder vest in case there was a storm and Folly got scared. Three pages of instructions.

Ray and Suzie stood in the driveway and waved to June as she drove off. "Mazel tov!" Suzie called after her as she pulled out of the driveway.

“Gesundheit,” Ray said, to Suzie.

Actually, it was Bonnie who would be taking care of Folly. Suzie had to tell June at the last minute. They’d taken in an emergency foster, a moody white shepherd that had been found with an injured paw along the railroad tracks that Ray had named Ashley Wilkes. They already had two of their own, Norma Rae and Rhett Butler, who had also started out as fosters. Usually they could handle four but Mr. Wilkes, as Suzie thought of him, was turning out to be more of a handful than they’d expected. For the past few days he’d been growling and snapping. Suzie didn’t think it was a good idea to introduce a fourth dog just yet. Folly was gentle. She’d do better alone with Bonnie.

June’s face fell when Suzie told her. Suzie was famous for spoiling the dogs—Suzie’s Spa, they all called it—and June wanted it to be a little vacation for Folly. But it was too late now to make other plans. Bonnie was a good person, June told herself, driving away, hoping it was true.

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June knew Bonnie from LELE meetings though they’d never actually talked. Bonnie seldom talked to anyone, as far as June could tell. June thought of Bonnie mainly as Suzie’s sister. She was tall and big-boned like Suzie, but darker and blurrier somehow, not as fun-loving. One side of Bonnie’s face turned down a little, the result of nerve damage after she fell on a rake when she was a child,

Suzie had told June once. It made her look like she was always frowning. And she didn't cover the gray in her brown hair, the way both Suzie and June did, so even though Suzie was two years older she looked ten years younger. Someone should tell Bonnie it made her seem depressed, June thought. Suzie should tell her, though maybe she had. Suzie's hair was the same bright shade of yellow it had been for the eight years June had known her. It made her seem happy. Or at least it made her seemed determined to look happy, which was almost the same thing. At meetings, June had noticed Bonnie quietly working her way through Ray's excellent lemon bars while everyone else chatted.

Folly was supposedly a GSD though no one in the group thought she looked like one. Suzie asked June what else was in her, while they were hauling things to the porch and Ray stood holding Folly's leash. "Some boxer," June said, a little defensive. "Maybe some beagle, too."

"I see pit," Ray said, scratching behind the dog's ears. "She's pitty, through the face." He held the dog's ears and wiggled them while he studied her face. Folly gave him a wide toothy smile.

June frowned. She didn't like to be disagreed with. And she didn't like it when people said pit or pit bull instead of Staffordshire terrier.

Folly looked from June to Ray and back, sensing disharmony. She started to yodel. The effort made the

front of her body bounce up and down and her ears flap.

“I sure can hear the beagle,” Suzie said, trying to make peace.

“You should call her Miss Pitty Pat,” said Ray, thumping the yellow dog’s side, making a sound like a drum. He’d been an adjunct professor in film studies before he took early retirement and he liked to name dogs after characters in movies. “Pitty pitty pat,” he said, thumping away. Little yellow hairs flew off the dog’s body and sparkled in the sun.

“Folly,” June said.

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Bonnie arrived later in the afternoon. Ray loaded her trunk with all the things June had left and put a Tupperware container of lasagna he’d made the night before on her back seat. He led the dog to the passenger side and waited while she climbed in. “June says she likes to be called Miss Pitty Pat,” Ray said.

Miss Pitty Pat sat next to Bonnie in the bucket seat of the twenty-three-year-old convertible, toenails dug into the already-torn leather upholstery. The car had belonged to Bonnie and Suzie’s father. It was turquoise with a tan top. Bonnie drove slowly, still uncertain with manual transmission. She’d put the top down for the ride home, thinking the dog would enjoy that, but now she worried it

would jump out. She held the leash tightly though the dog showed no sign of wanting to escape.

At stoplights, Bonnie noticed people looking at her. It was a new feeling. At first, she wondered if she was getting a flat tire. Then she realized they were smiling and that it was the dog they were looking at. And the car, of course, the two together. Bonnie knew people weren't looking at her, exactly, that she was just a delivery mechanism for this striking tableau, but still, she enjoyed the unfamiliar feeling of glamour.

She'd had the car just five months, since their father's death. Driving it, with the top down, made her feel close to him in a way she hadn't expected, or felt when he was alive. People who'd known her father and knew where she got the car thought it was a strangely public way to mourn, if mourning was even what she was doing. Really, with Bonnie, people couldn't tell. She always looked mournful.

Bonnie knew the car didn't suit her. Her father, who'd died suddenly at an elder hostel on a diving trip in the Florida Keys, had left little else of value, except for his diving gear and his pipe collection. "You take it, honey," Suzie'd said. "Me and Ray'll keep the scuba stuff and the pipes. I bet we can sell them for a lot of money." Ray had given her a look, but Suzie held firm. "Bonnie needs something," she'd said to him later, and though he'd been hoping for the car, when she put it that way he couldn't disagree.

In May, two months after the funeral, when the weather turned warm, Bonnie got Ray to show her how to put the top down. Now she kept the car open in all but the heaviest rain. She thought the spirit of the car, and her father's spirit, maybe even a little of Suzie's, of which Suzie had plenty extra to spare, might enter her most easily this way, might alight on her much the way they'd promised the Holy Spirit would in church, when she was a child. Light you up on the inside, they'd said, though she'd waited and it hadn't. At the stoplight Bonnie looked over at the dog's profile. Miss Pitty Pat sat beside her, staring straight ahead, mouth open, panting. Bonnie could see the dog trembling slightly, though whether from excitement or fear Bonnie couldn't tell.

When they got home, Bonnie didn't feel like unloading the trunk so she just took the leash and the Tupperware container from the back seat and led the dog into the house. Bonnie had a duplex with a fenced back yard that she shared with a retired gym teacher friend of Suzie's named Nancy Shrout. Nancy mostly lived in Arizona so she could climb rocks. Suzie had helped Bonnie buy the place when she heard Nancy was looking for a quiet housemate.

In the kitchen, Bonnie filled a bowl with water and set it on the floor. She put the Tupperware container in the microwave and set the timer for three minutes. Miss Pitty Pat lapped noisily until the bowl was empty. When the timer went off Bonnie stuck her finger in the middle of the lasagna to make sure it wasn't too hot. She put some on a

plate for herself and set the Tupperware on the floor for the dog.

After they ate, Bonnie felt tired. She wondered about the dog though. Did it need to go out? She opened the back door and let the dog outside. Immediately the dog sniffed out a spot to relieve herself, then trotted back to the door and sat down and stared at Bonnie through the glass until she let her in.

Bonnie needed a nap. She wasn't sure what to do with the dog while she slept. Did it need to be entertained? Penned? Would it bark or destroy things? Ray had put some elaborate containment contraption in her trunk and offered to come over and set it up but Bonnie had told him not to bother. Now she wondered if she should have let him. At least she should go get the bed—beds!—out of the car. She didn't feel like it though. She walked down the short hall to her bedroom and sat on the edge of her neatly made bed. The dog followed, then walked to the other side of the bed and sat on the floor looking at her across the expanse of the comforter, which was printed to look like a wedding ring quilt. It wasn't actually a quilt. Bonnie took off her shoes. She lay back, hesitant to undress in front of the dog. The dog hopped up beside her.

When Bonnie woke, the dog was staring into her face, holding one of her shoes between its paws. Could the dog be hungry again? Though it didn't appear to be eating the shoe. Licking it appreciatively was more like it.

Bonnie cautiously pried the shoe from the dog's paws and put it on, then retrieved the other shoe from across the room. Both shoes were slightly damp but otherwise unharmed. Bonnie went to the kitchen and fried some eggs and gave one to the dog. She watched it eat. "Miss Pitty Pat," she said, patting its head, though Bonnie didn't care for the name. She didn't like Folly either.

"Patty?" she tried. Patty sounded better. The dog looked at her.

"Patty," she said, louder this time. The dog perked its ears and leaned against the wide expanse of Bonnie's blue jeans.

Half an hour later Bonnie was back in the car with Patty at her side, heading west toward the remains of the light. The nap had freshened Bonnie's spirits. A little drive in the cool evening air was just what they both needed. Bonnie decided to take the old roads, keep off the expressway. They drove for a while until Bonnie saw a sign for a Dairy Queen. She pulled into the drive-up window and ordered a large cone, no sprinkles. She wanted chocolate ice cream dipped in chocolate but Suzie always said chocolate was death to dogs. Vanilla, no dip, it would have to be, then, on a cake cone. Refreshed by her nap, Bonnie felt virtuous and responsible, more than willing to give up her preference in exchange for Patty's well-being.

They sat in the parking lot and ate, taking turns licking the cone. Bonnie was surprised to see how polite Patty was, waiting to run her long tongue along the ridged surface of

the ice cream until Bonnie leaned it toward her. Bonnie wondered if someone had taught her that or if it was inherent, inherited maybe. She wondered briefly and for the thousandth time why she hadn't inherited her father's joie de vivre, as people called it, the way Suzie had. Or had she, and the trait simply hadn't been switched on yet, the way certain things had begun to happen in Bonnie's body when she was twelve, thirteen. Maybe other, more joyful things would begin now. Bonnie hoped so. Now or never, as Ray liked to say. She was 58 years old.

Bonnie gave Patty the remaining cone to crunch, then went to throw away the ice cream-soaked napkin after Patty tried to eat that, too. Patty turned to watch Bonnie walk to the garbage can, ears pricked, brow furrowed. She barked twice when Bonnie got back in the car.

"Don't worry, girlfriend," Bonnie said, liking the sound of it, this new jaunty way of talking. It was the kind of thing Suzie or even Ray would say to a dog. She wiped a little ice cream off Patty's fur. "I wouldn't leave you." Patty seemed to accept this fact and settled back into position. Bonnie started the car. She liked the V-8 engine, the sound of it, the unaccustomed feel of power. She liked this other kind of power, too, the feeling of being in charge of someone else's health and safety.

By now it was dark. Bonnie drove west for two more hours, then stopped at a motel on the Iowa border. The heavily sexual scent of the Mississippi River filled the night air. Bonnie felt sleepy and she had to go to the

bathroom and supposed Patty did too. She walked the dog around the parking lot under the pink neon sign that said “Vacan y.”

Bonnie wondered what to do. She really did need to find a bathroom. Did motels take dogs? She’d heard some did. She didn’t want to ask in case they said no. She wanted to stay here.

Normally Bonnie would leave the car open—no sign of rain—but now she closed the top and opened the window a little. Locked the door. “Quiet, girl,” she said to Patty through the five-inch opening she’d left between the roof and the top of the window. “I’ll be right back.” Patty rested her muzzle on the edge of the window and fixed her eyes on Bonnie’s back as she walked toward the office.

Bonnie came out of the office a few minutes later with a key attached to a red wooden oval. She got in the car and kissed Patty on the neck and drove forty feet to room number 8. She sat in the car a little while to give the man, whom she’d awakened, a chance to go back to sleep. She hadn’t told him she had a dog. If he saw her sitting here she hoped he’d think she was on the phone. Patty didn’t appear to mind waiting at all.

When enough time seemed to have passed, Bonnie got out of the car and went to the motel room door and unlocked it. Then she returned to the car and, after looking both ways to be sure no one was watching, hurriedly led Patty into the room. She flipped on a light. Two enormous beds stood side by side. Bonnie felt delighted to be here,

in a clean barren room where she knew no one. And they each had a bed!

Bonnie fell asleep in her clothes and woke in the middle of the night feeling overly warm. Patty lay next to her, pressed against her back, her spine against Bonnie's. Bonnie peeled away one of the covers, carefully, so as not to wake the sleeping dog.

Bonnie woke in the morning to the sound of Patty scratching the door. She rolled out of bed and pulled on her shoes, snapped the leash on Patty's collar. "C'mon girlfriend." She walked Patty swiftly toward a vacant lot, out of view of the office. When they got back, the motel phone was ringing. It was the man in the office, or someone with the same accent, asking in a clipped and affronted-sounding voice if she had a dog in her room.

Bonnie confessed. She'd never said she didn't.

"Then I must charge you an additional fee of twelve dollars and fifty cents. Assuming of course there has been no damage."

"Of course," Bonnie said. "I understand. I'm happy to pay." Bonnie surprised herself, talking this way, so easily, like calling Patty girlfriend. It was fun! "I assure you, sir, there has been no damage whatsoever. Patty is very well-behaved." Bonnie was even boasting. When Bonnie imagined she was her father, the words just flowed.

To show the man she meant it, Bonnie immediately walked to the office to pay. She took Patty along, to show him what a good dog she was, so he wouldn't feel as if she'd tried to take advantage, or dupe him.

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Bonnie drove west all morning, in Iowa now, stopping only twice, once at a McDonald's for three Egg McMuffins, two hash browns, two child-sized hamburgers, two apple pies, a vanilla milkshake, a coffee, and a large water, and once at a rest stop with a picnic table where she and Patty finished what was left in the McDonald's bag and refilled the water cup for Patty. Bonnie longed to let Patty off leash to run around but she didn't dare, so near the road. Even if she could find some open land far from traffic she didn't know if she could trust the dog not to run away.

Early in the afternoon Bonnie got off the highway and followed signs to a town she'd never heard of, though when she got there it was deserted and hardly a town. She drove around until she found a park. It was empty in late August, with two fenced tennis courts with cracked pavement and torn nets, and, importantly, a big metal gate that shut firmly with a latch.

Bonnie parked facing the tennis courts and led Patty inside. She closed the gate behind them and unclasped the leash from Patty's collar. She wanted to see what

Patty would do. Patty sat on the hot pavement and looked at her.

“Go on, girl,” Bonnie said. “Don’t you want to run?”

Patty slid all the way to the ground, raised one leg, and began to scratch behind her ear. Bonnie looked around for something to throw. She spotted a green tennis ball along the fence, then saw more outside the courts, in the grass. They were everywhere. She remembered now that Nancy had donated baskets-full of green tennis balls to Suzie, from her gym classes, for the shelter dogs. “All sprung out,” she’d said, slamming one hard on the sidewalk to demonstrate how little bounce was left.

Bonnie picked up the ball and held it in front of Patty’s face. “Fetch,” she said, tossing it with some force toward the opposite corner. Patty ignored the ball and continued to look at Bonnie, and pant. Bonnie tried a few more times but gave up when Patty showed no interest. “Not an athlete, I guess,” she said to Patty, snapping on the leash and heading back to the car. “It’s OK. Me neither.”

Bonnie sat in the car wondering what to do next, thinking she should probably check her phone. She’d turned it off yesterday when she and Patty took their nap, and had forgotten to turn it back on, accidentally on purpose, as her mother used to say. Suzie said it was passive aggressive, this constant forgetting to check her phone, though she didn’t see why she should have to. Why did she have to be on call just because someone else wanted to talk? Not

that anyone ever called her, except Suzie. Suzie in fact had bought her the phone, put her on her and Ray's plan.

Bonnie dug the thing out of her purse and turned it on. There were seventeen unheard messages, all from Suzie.

June had forgotten to leave Folly's medicine and had called, frantic, from the airport. Was Folly OK? Did she seem weak and listless? Where are you? Please call back. Suzie called again ten minutes later to say June had called to say she'd contacted her vet and had him call in a new prescription. Suzie was on her way to pick it up and would deliver it to Bonnie. New message: She had the medicine. Where *was* Bonnie? Would she please call. Subsequent messages reported that Suzie was on her way over, that she was stuck in traffic, that she was standing on Bonnie's front porch not getting an answer to the doorbell, that she was in the back yard looking into the kitchen and didn't see Folly or her crate. A few minutes later she called to say she was looking into Bonnie's garage and not seeing a car. A later message announced that Ray had been summoned with the extra key to Bonnie's house. The message after that said June had called again, this time to suggest that if Folly wouldn't eat, which she probably wouldn't, a little boiled chicken with rice might persuade her. Suzie's next message said, "Bonnie? Is Folly OK? Bon? Did something happen? Just tell me."

Listening to these messages, Bonnie felt the world shrink. It had seemed large and welcoming and excitingly unknown just minutes before. Bonnie hadn't thought a

single thing about June. June's feelings hadn't entered her mind, hadn't mattered. Hadn't existed. Even Folly didn't exist anymore. Her dog's name was Patty and the only thing she wouldn't eat was the pickle on the hamburger, which she'd licked clean of mustard and grease, then left on the ground, neat as a button, next to the picnic table. Now the world was crowded again with people telling Bonnie what to do. Bonnie turned off the phone and side-armed it out the window into some bushes, with six unheard messages still to go. People lost their phones all the time.

Beside her, Patty made a little burping sound. Bonnie looked over, worried now about the dog's digestion. Was she sick? But when Patty made the sound again Bonnie could see it wasn't a real burp but a mini bark, aimed at a squirrel crossing the parking lot. "You tell him, girl," Bonnie said.

She started the car and drove slowly toward the highway entrance ramp. When she got to the intersection where the local road met up with the highway she stopped at the stop sign and reached for her turn signal. Right or left, forward or back? Bonnie hesitated, wondering how far she could get before Suzie called the police.

Margaret Hawkins's stories and essays have appeared in The Missouri Review, The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Sun-Times, ARTnews, Brevity, The

Perch (Yale), Fabrik, and many other publications. Her third novel, Lydia's Party, was published by Penguin. Currently she writes for The Democracy Chain and teaches at Loyola University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. When she's not writing or teaching, she can be found walking her dog, Willem.

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