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# California

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## Angela Pneuman

### CALIFORNIA

#### I. THE DOG

You don't think of a dog's toenails as particularly sharp or dangerous—not like claws, certainly not talons—until they catch the smooth, thin skin at the outer corner of your left eye as said dog springs, exuberant, up to lick you at the ear or hair or neck (all less delicate places than the slight depression, almost a crevice, that his nails somehow find). Standing on the beach several feet from the Pacific Ocean, Ellen felt no pain. The dog kept up its irrepressible jumping, its wet nosing at her arms, which she'd wrapped around her head for protection. She was not yet sure if the eye itself had been hit.

She said "Hey" to the dog. The dog didn't seem to hear her, but Ellen kept saying, "Hey, hey," because with her arms against her ears and her eyes closed, her voice sounded as if it were coming from somewhere new. She had just received a hard poke in the eye. She had not seen it coming, but she'd registered the instant, singular sensation of seeing with only one eye—waves, sand, sky brighter somehow—when still expecting to see with two.

Slowly she crouched to the beach. Under her feet the beach pushed back. Already she was considering that if the injury were bad enough she might never again see from the left eye. Too, the right could go in sympathy. It seemed to Ellen, suddenly, that she had been waiting for something like this to happen for a long time (she was forty-two), and from now on her life would be very different.

It is common knowledge that when one sense grows weaker, the others compensate (this was how Ellen learned the word "acute" years ago in elementary school. "The blind often have *acute* hearing"), and even with her arms pressed tight against her ears, Ellen was convinced that she heard, as if through a long pipe stretching out fifty feet to where her husband and his sister stood hip deep in the waves, their voices at the moment they looked back to where she stood on the sand, cringing blindly amid the exuberance of a dog. They laughed first, which sounded like birds, then they called, "Ellen?" then nearer, "Down, girl," and "Ellen, Ellen!" Ellen swore, too, that she could feel the sand separating under her feet, the individual grains with their

sharp edges. Her face was wet, and she thought, blood, and tried to distinguish its smell from the sea and the sweat and the dog. Later they told her it was only tears.

Ellen felt the sudden coolness—shadow—of Tim squatting beside her on the sand. His sister snapped on the dog's leash. Tim said, "Ellen let's see," his voice skimming over the wind, a manufactured sound from another world, almost without meaning. Then his hands were on her arms, tugging and hesitant at the same time. When she shrugged him off he did not touch her again.

"Okay," Ellen said, "I'm okay. Hey." But she kept her arms around her head. "Give me a second." The waves came in and said *shhhhhhh* on the wet sand. Ellen could not tell if she was hearing this or if the vibration was traveling across the beach to the sand under her feet. Somewhere nearby the dog panted.

## II. SWELLING

It costs a small fortune to rent a cottage on the beach in Oceanside, California. But each morning when you cross the road and descend cement stairs, voila: sea hits sky and you can almost forget your small collection of sorrows. How, for one, you've begun to attribute your general disappointment with life to the suspicion that what you've really always wanted is to be famous. Instead you are a loan-by-phone associate, who lived in Kentucky up until last year, when you came out to visit your brother in Malibu and married the friend he sent to pick you up at the airport. The friend was visiting too, up from San Diego; he was slender and handsome; he listened to you; he was, after your first husband, a refreshingly unambitious UPS man with whom you expected to get things right, but for whom you can no longer muster the necessary feeling. It's your own fault you married him too soon, after a courtship during which you did all the talking. Now you see that he says very little. This only gets worse as you hear yourself giving entrees that can come to no good: *Let's have an interesting conversation* and, *Don't you have an opinion?* Of late these questions have driven your husband to put his fist through a screen, to hurl the remote control across the room and into a hollow part of the wall, where the damaged plaster continues to accuse you. Otherwise it seems he does a lot of waiting around in doorways, limp and thin as a tall weed, a non-presence. You would leave, but you are one divorce down, and the prospect

of another bothers the back of your mind, where you are still trying to think of yourself as a certain kind of person. Your thirteen-year-old daughter, Kath, prefers your new husband's company to yours (Kath calls you "coffee breath"). Kath, you discovered just last week, has a fist-sized clover shape on her thigh that she scratched into her skin with a knife, doused in brandy, and set on fire with a match. A surface burn, a permanent scar.

Up the cement steps, across the road, to the rented cottage with a white picket fence, of all things, and a tiny yard. Ellen allowed herself to be led, although she could see perfectly well out of what she was already thinking of as her "good eye." She tried to see from her bad eye, secretly, while Tim and his sister were watching for cars. But this eye had already swollen shut, the skin now hood-like in front of her temple between brow and cheekbone. She found herself thinking how she would be more fortunate than other blind women, as she already knew what she looked like and how to do her hair and apply makeup in the dark. When she touched the swelling it felt familiar, like the regeneration of some forgotten part.

Tim went to the kitchen for an ice pack and his sister—her name was Belinda—shut the dog in the bathroom, then sat on the couch beside Ellen and offered suggestions. Ellen should go to the hospital. Ellen should take aspirin. Ellen should stop touching the swelling.

Ellen listed the things she knew about her sister-in-law. Belinda made casseroles and brought them by once a week, as though Ellen and Tim were ill. Belinda took kickboxing. She cultivated a salsa garden. Last night Ellen had heard Belinda talking to her mother, Ellen's mother-in-law, on the phone, telling her that the cottage looked as though it hadn't been cleaned all summer.

Belinda now made a noise, a quick expelling of air.

"Did I say that out loud?" Ellen asked. "About the salsa garden?"

"You need to see a doctor," Belinda said. "You're not making sense."

Ellen regarded Belinda with her good eye. When you looked from only one eye the edges of view pronounced themselves—Ellen's own curve of nose, lock of hair. Both women were blond and on the short side, and these similarities were what made Ellen always (acutely) aware that she outweighed Belinda by ten pounds.

In the kitchen Tim covered ice in a dish towel and whacked at it enthusiastically with the meat tenderizer. He flourished in emergencies, relieved and happy whenever the activities of his next ten minutes were decided. He was

a UPS man, after all, importing purpose from the priorities and deadlines of others.

“Tim’s a good man,” said Belinda, as if she knew already that Ellen would leave him.

“I know it,” said Ellen, “you don’t have to tell me.” Under her fingers the swelling had turned hard as an unripe peach.

### III. BRUISE

Ellen’s eye was not black when she lay down to rest, but she dreamed it turned black, and when she woke up, it had. In front of the mirror over the dresser she touched it. Purple over and under. Her lips had puffed up too, from the sun. With her hair disheveled she thought she looked exactly like a very tough woman who had been in a fight. She wished she had a cigarette. She didn’t smoke, but she would have liked to look at her own reflection—black eye, mussed hair, cigarette jerking up and down between puffed lips as she paused before lighting it to say something tough.

The bedroom window was open. Tim’s sister had gone home, and Kath had returned from her afternoon at the pool. She and Tim were talking on the front porch.

“She just dropped her in,” Kath was saying, “her own baby. I didn’t see it happen, but it was weird because even though there were radios and people talking, there was this soft splash when she dropped in the baby, then there was this scream.”

“The woman who threw the baby?” Ellen heard Tim ask. As he spoke, the back of his chair gently beat against the wall.

“No, a woman at the other end. I looked where she was looking and there was this woman standing with her arms out, looking into the water, and the lifeguard was looking from woman to woman, trying to figure out what had happened, then the baby came up and bobbed around. It was so tiny and fat, and it spit a little bit, then it swam a little, and the mother jumped in and it swam to her. So everything was okay, but they made the woman go home anyway.”

In the bedroom in front of the mirror, Ellen pried open her bad eye. She covered the good eye with her hand, and discovered she could see only shapes and light, as if she were peering through cheesecloth. She let the bad eye close.

“Man,” Tim said outside. “I heard you could do that to a baby, but I never heard of anyone who did.”

When Ellen joined them, Kath was sitting at the edge of the porch, dangling her legs into the flowerbed. She was a big-boned girl with sticky-looking blond hair. Tim was drinking beer from a bottle and rocking on the back legs of his chair. Both looked across the road at the ocean.

“What happened to you?” Kath said, glancing once and looking away. She sounded at once surprised that something had actually happened to Ellen and annoyed at the physical evidence that forced her to acknowledge it.

“Rough day at the beach,” Ellen said.

“Did you sleep?” Tim asked.

“Some,” Ellen said.

Kath scowled and picked at the clover shaped scab on her leg. Ellen had not yet punished her for the scarring. In her mind she saw Kath sitting on her bed, stretching her loose white thigh taut between her fingers and carving into it with the wood-handled paring knife. Then the brandy and the match, the shock of pain, Kath willing herself still and quiet, aware as she must have been of Ellen just on the other side of the wall, making tacos in the kitchen. Each time Ellen got to that point, where she saw herself standing at the stove over a pan of ground beef, blithely wielding a spatula, her mind skipped and she found herself shaking her head, unable to picture the scene further, unwilling to name it by speaking aloud.

“Really,” Kath said again, curious in spite of herself, “what happened to your eye?”

“It was Belinda’s dog,” Tim said.

Ellen said nothing. A woman rode by on a bike, and Ellen listened to the ticking of the chain. She felt Kath watching her. She meant to say, “It was the dog,” and “I don’t think I can see right,” and “Why did you do that to yourself, to your eye?” but the eye had begun to throb, a gentle probing that reached back towards her brain. The ocean came and went. Ellen, eyes closed, remembered how it had been only last year on the first day visiting the west coast. How from LAX they’d driven to her brother’s in Malibu. Tim had a jeep and they wound through the scrubby Malibu canyon, extreme in its highs and lows, very brown, the road narrow and isolated. The sky seemed nearer than in Kentucky. Kath was reading in the back seat, and there was the relieved silence of riding with Tim, the fact that he’d not felt he had to explain why a forty-year-old with a college degree was still delivering pack-

ages, the fact that he did not ask her questions or turn on the radio. How sometimes she looked over to see him smiling to himself.

There is a point in Malibu Canyon, a particular curve in the road; going into the curve everything is brown and hot and barren, and the land drops from the road in staggering degrees as you wind upwards. It seems a place where you could dive from the door of a moving vehicle and just keep rolling, bumping along down the dirt, a dry death. Then you round the curve and where there was only more of the same there is suddenly the great blue Pacific, the sun casting a path on the waves, the sky meeting water in a line so straight that the back of your throat begins to ache.

“Kath,” you say, your eyes on the endless water, “Kathy.” But she hates you for leaving her father, for bringing her out here on vacation, away from her friends. You reach into the back seat, grab the book from her hands. You place your palms on either side of her face, her doughy, not-yet-developed face, and force her head up, because you want her to feel what you’re feeling even as you realize that precisely because it’s what you feel, she will never own it. “Look,” you say anyway. “This you have to see.” Her lip curls in disgust because you sound emotional, because your breath smells like coffee, because she senses your fever for change and considers you too old for such urgency, and maybe you are.

Then, although it is a blind curve with no shoulder, you realize Tim has brought his jeep to a stop in the middle of the road, and he’s looking at you as if he understands, and he’s smiling and blinking at the ocean and at Kath’s disgust, which suddenly seems as natural as the way the sea is black in shadow, blue in light. It’s your first day ever on the west coast, and the weather is fine. *California*, you say, and because you are full of the promise of it, the word comes out singing.