

MICHAEL BYERS

GOOD DOG

NO, HIS WIFE Deborah hadn't wanted a dog from the beginning, but then there was this let's call it opportunity, Irina had to change apartments and therefore Max came available, a shaggy friendly old retriever, no threat to anyone, though yes in the first week he did eat the back of the green velvet sofa, heirloom from *Stan's* aunt, *his* loss, Stan pointed out, and yes there was the issue of *not having asked* before he furnished the guest bedroom with a big crate, but they were both more or less retired and the children grown and gone and Stan, at least, found solace in Max, a perfectly joyous beast, purely expressive of his canine rectitude, that in the elevator Max would sit upright maintaining the lifelong apartment dweller's open-faced neutrality, ready to engage if required but otherwise holding his opinions to himself. He fetched tennis balls as though they were partridges, and he committed his business to only the most convenient patches of scruffy dirt, looking not at Stan but up at the trees and the changing weather, a naturalist at heart. Eventually Deborah came around and took turns walking him and a shift in household relations followed shortly, a softening between husband and wife when neither, maybe, had noticed things had hardened. In the way of such things this softening seemed to extend to all the corners of Stan's life, his daughters especially noticed the change over the phone and at Thanksgiving when they all agreed to gather

at home for the first time in ages he felt he was not only tolerating his sometimes gratingly ambitious children and wondering what they valued in life besides money and prestige, but in fact presiding over a family of golden-hearted nobility, in reality he supposed not far from the truth as their daughters were both internists and their son a playwright of all things who had floated with little visible effort into the front rank. And Max was at the heart of this renewal, his silky head on Stan's lap, not begging for turkey but recognizing that Stan might enjoy providing Max a reward for his constitutional excellence. Deborah did not discourage them, rather enjoyed these developments, it seemed, so when she returned one day after New Year's with the terrible news that Max had bolted from the leash and disappeared into the neighborhood they were both equally crushed. Flyers and advertisements proved fruitless and they had never thought to chip him, and after a few weeks Stan resigned himself to the cruel truth, that all the new joy in his life had disappeared, and that now he had to make his way alone with Deborah, which was only the truth as he understood it, for in fact unknown to him Deborah had arranged to have Max shipped off upstate to a goat farm where Max would be happy, for she did love him but fucking Stan, fucking Stan who could not be bothered for decades to consider the punitive realities of her own existence, all the secretaries and secret purchases for women hovering on the perimeter of their circle, she knew all about it, all of it, and at last she had managed to exact a tiny measure of revenge, and how she looked forward to the coming summer when she would drive with Stan as though accidentally to the farm upstate

and say, as the sweet-hearted dog came gamboling across the fields toward them, overjoyed at their reunion, Oh! Stan! Doesn't that just look like Max! But exactly! And masterful, heedless, fucking Stan would have no idea what was happening, no idea at all! And what a lovely change that would be! And what an altogether new kind of married fun!