

Afternoon Walk

Olivia and Emma waited while their dogs rooted through freshly cut grass in the park. The page of an old newspaper stirred in the wake of a cyclist as he raced past. Though they shared fashion designer namesakes, the dogs were comically different. Emma had named her adopted apricot pug Marc. His coat matched that of the pug she had had growing up. Coco, a retired racing greyhound whose auburn spots matched Olivia's hair, had won Olivia's heart in an ad she'd seen posted on her news feed. Coco cantered along as Marc snorted through his scrunched snout, hobbling joyfully behind her.

"I read about a string of murders somewhere in the UK," Olivia began. "They followed the trail all the way to a nurse. Can you believe it? A nurse committing murder. You just can't trust anyone."

"For real?" exclaimed Emma. The phone in her jacket pocket buzzed with a message. She retrieved it and began typing a reply as she spoke. "You know, I read about a murder in Texas. The victim was a woman with dementia, and they suspect her husband did it. They'd been married for around twenty years! Stories like that give me the creeps."

"Well, her husband was a terrible person to betray her like that. Plain and simple. What's creepy is that bad people can seem so nice."

Robins sang through the clear April afternoon. A twelve-year-old girl with sunkissed skin pointed up at a branch of a lush old maple arched gloriously above her. Her seven-year-old brother smiled to see a robin working diligently on a nest.

Emma sent her message and looked up from her phone. “Is that Tracy's daughter? I can't believe her mom lets her dress like that. How old is she?”

“Maybe twelve.”

“And wearing a skirt that short? Yikes. I'm glad we had more self respect at her age.”

Olivia shook her head. “I hope she isn't following the online trends young girls get wrapped up in.”

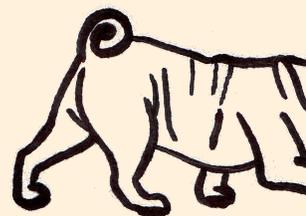
“Oh?”

“Have you seen the videos they post of themselves? It's no wonder we hear so much about eating disorders.” Tails wagging, Coco and Marc watched a soccer ball. A freckled boy kicked it to his father in the field. The boy beamed as his father demonstrated the trick of balancing the ball on his head. Another cyclist zoomed past the women and their dogs on the concrete path. Olivia's foot brushed against a crushed plastic bottle. “I can't believe people litter. How disrespectful.”

“I can believe it,” replied Emma. “People only think about themselves. Like I keep running into the same huge egos on dating apps. I'll never understand why guys all listen to the same podcasts, drool over cryptocurrency, and think day trading stocks is cool. Can they talk about *anything* else? They're either selfish or clueless.”

“Right, and the only women they're interested in are the ones they can swipe left and swipe right.”

Emma nodded, pursing her narrow lips. “This world is messed up.” Coco and Marc began to drool as they noticed an elderly woman opening a lunch basket at a picnic table. She retrieved the watermelon slices she'd lovingly prepared that morning. For their



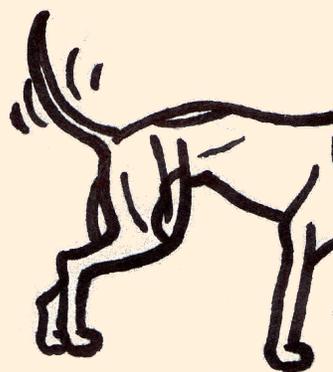
fortieth anniversary, she and her husband had returned to the tree where they had enjoyed their first date. The elm was freshly planted back then and there hadn't been a picnic table, so they had sat on a deep red blanket. The corners of the old man's eyes creased as he enjoyed a bite of fresh watermelon and marveled at how tall the tree had grown.

"I'm just thankful we're not naïve," Emma said with a sigh. "The world's full of evil. Humans make a mess of everything." Marc shuffled onto the grass and stopped, staring hopefully at the picnic basket. The leash tightened. Emma frowned and looked over her shoulder at her panting pup.

"No, Marc," she commanded with a sudden tug. "We're going *this way*." Marc stumbled onto the sidewalk. A cyclist a few meters behind the pug gasped. He veered toward the grass and squeezed his brakes. The tires squealed. Marc's curly tail drooped as the athletically handsome young man tumbled over his handlebars, sunglasses falling from the bridge of his nose. He landed with a thud in the grass beside Coco. Coco jumped. The cyclist rolled onto his back with a moan, exposing a fresh grass stain on the sleeve of his jersey. Olivia and Emma watched in stunned silence. Marc hobbled toward the young man as he coughed, recapturing the air that had been knocked out of his lungs. "Is the dog okay?"

"What?" asked Olivia. The wheel of the toppled bicycle spun aimlessly just above the freshly cut grass.

"The dog –" Marc licked the cyclist's cheek. He wagged his tail as the young man chuckled, then wagged more enthusiastically as the man gently pet his wrinkly apricot coat. "Wow, that was close. I have a pug of my own – I just... Oh, I would have felt sick if I had hit this little guy."



The phone in Emma's pocket buzzed with another message, but she didn't notice.

"Marc, stop licking."

"It's okay," the cyclist replied. He retrieved his mirror sunglasses from the grass and pushed himself back onto his feet. "Your dogs are cute," he said with a gentle smile, rubbing his sore arm.

"Thanks," replied Olivia. "You... got a grass stain on your shirt."

The cyclist waved the comment away and retrieved his bicycle from the grass. "Don't worry about it." He inspected his undamaged bicycle then mounted it. The young man rolled his shoulders, testing their soreness, and returned to the concrete path. "Well... So, I guess everything's okay." Olivia and Emma offered half-hearted smiles. "Alrighty then. I hope you enjoy the rest of your walk." Emma retrieved her phone from her pocket. The cyclist began pedaling then braked and looked back over his left shoulder. "Say um..." He noticed Emma's thumbs dancing across the screen. "Ah, never mind." He smiled and zoomed away.

"That was bizarre," Olivia declared. Emma nodded as she shared the story on her social media page. The message began with a gasping emoji: *"My little dog was almost hit by a cyclist in the park! Just a reminder to always watch where you're going. And always be considerate of others!"*

