REBECCA SCHWARZ

THE SILVA

I cut through the park on my way home. It wasn't a shortcut I was looking for—I needed a border to cross, something to separate the hours of air-conditioned, backbiting gossip and petty politics of the Herald's editorial office from the empty wreck of my apartment.

I stomped along the paved trail, skirting a tree line too thin to hide the buildings on the other side. My heels were killing me. The squeal and roar of traffic bled through the branches as I turned onto the gravel path that led into the park and away from the noise.

Tears filled my eyes as I approached the dense circle of forsythia shrubs that hid the koi pond. On the other side, a lone bench stood by the water. Our bench. I rubbed at my eyes. Just yesterday Hal sat there waiting for me. This had been our secret rendezvous. It was almost always deserted.

He loved this place, brought me here on our first date. Yesterday, he brought me here to tell me about his fifteen-year marriage. His family. The son of a bitch.

I stepped into the grove. I didn't see anyone, but didn't exactly feel alone, either. I'd told Hal not to come here anymore, I couldn't think of anything better to demand in return for his belated honesty. I should have smelled it. Thinking back, there were plenty of clues. Just the other night after taking me to dinner, he'd picked up a gallon of milk before going home. He claimed he had a big case to argue the next morning and had to turn in early, which was probably true. But what single guy buys a gallon of milk? He was just so damn charming. It had blinded my instincts. Still, I looked over my shoulder, hoping to see him walk down the path. Pathetic.

I sat on the bench, tears spilling down my cheeks and bent double, heaving out the sobs I'd been strangling for hours. I'd barely made it through today. I didn't know how I would make it through tomorrow. I didn't want to go home. Even though he never came over on Thursdays, my place would be desolate. The carp watched me from under the surface of the water, orange and gold and white and piebald.

Then I saw the dog. It stood in the ragged shadows of the underbrush. Big like a husky. Its fur as gray as the ash left behind when something has been burnt to the ground. In pictures you can't tell them from normal dogs, but in person it's different. I'd seen them before. This wasn't a dog, it was a Silva.

Silvas were named after the first identified victim: nine-year-old Timmy Silva. He had begged his parents for a dog, and one day a stray followed him home. His mother let him play with it in the yard. They would discuss adopting it at dinner. But when his father arrived home from work, he found his son sitting alone in the grass, staring vacantly, his skin cold to the touch. His parents put him to bed. When the dog appeared in the yard the next day, the mother chased it off.

The city desk editor sent me out to the burbs to follow up. At the hospital, the doctors could do nothing to prevent the boy's descent into a coma, and nobody was talking. The editor spiked the story.

Similar stories began to surface. People rendered speechless and immobile after contact with a strange dog, though most recovered after twelve to twenty-four hours. Others claimed to have been affected after waking up, usually in the open somewhere, chilled to the bone with sticks in their hair. All sorts of crackpot theories began to float around the Internet. My editor had written the story off, but it nagged at me and I lurked on conspiracy and natural healing sites for more information.

When his parents brought Timmy home from the hospital for palliative care, the dog returned, running straight across the yard toward the house. The father shot it with the pistol he kept in his nightstand. A local vet performed a necropsy with the boy's doctors attending, but when they opened the carcass up they found no clue as to the origins of Timmy's illness. That made print when the tabloids splashed pictures of Timmy Silva curled in his bed on their covers.

The headline read FROZEN SOLID!

I stood and edged my way along the path past the dog. It made no move, only followed me with its blue eyes. I couldn't look away. Blue as the sky at 35,000 feet—the one I'd only ever glimpsed through scarred Plexiglas and the bitter bite of stale peanuts, the blue out there beyond the jet engines' whine and the crushing exhaustion.

I stared back at the sky behind his eyes. I thought the Silvas would be terrifying, but I was not afraid. I knew one thing for sure, I didn't want to go back to my empty apartment tonight, or my shitty job tomorrow. I stretched my hand out toward the dog.

Its fur was as cold as ice. Colder. As cold and empty as I imagine space to be. I don't know a thing about space, but feeling its fur made me think that Silva's do. It shook itself out, head and shoulders, tail and rump, as if my touch had soaked it. It sidled closer like a love-starved stray. Despite the cold, something inside me melted too.

I worked my fingers through the thick fur at its neck, down to its flesh. My hand went numb. Pain shot up through my arm and wrapped around my chest. I staggered back and fell to the ground, helpless to do anything more than feel the sunlight on my face.

The Silva followed me down, its face close to mine but growing vague at the same time. The world shrank away; as if the wrinkled water of the pond, the trees, the dull roar of the city were all now contained behind the curving glass of a fishbowl.

I smelled the faint odor of tuna salad, my lunch, overlaid by the eau de cologne I'd sprayed on my neck in the morning. The floral scent now only smelled like the inside of a high-end department store, with an abrasive metallic undertone I'd never noticed before.

Hal had given it to me, very expensive. I wondered now if it was the same kind he bought for his wife.

I sneezed, and four legs splayed under me.

The dog.

I was inside the Silva.

I looked at my body where it lay on the ground. My vacant eyes stared at the pond. The Silva shook again, the delicious wave of mammalian heat revving its body up like an engine. Heat I had somehow provided with my touch.

The Silva got to work tugging at my shirt collar and pushing my legs with its snout until it had tucked my body into the shadows under the bushes behind the bench. I watched my chest rising and falling in long, slow breaths and a wave of panic swept over me, but I could also feel the Silva's urgency. I didn't know where it intended to take me, but when the Silva turned and trotted up the path, there was nothing I could do to stop it.

The sun had disappeared behind the buildings that bordered the park. I peered out through the Silva's eyes. No one noticed us. A jogger trotted past a young couple pushing a stroller along the main path. I could smell sour milk on the baby, and the sweet humidity of the woman's lactating breasts. Everything had a distinct smell, the grainy pebbles under its paws, the leaves that bobbed just at the edge of sight. After the couple passed, the Silva slunk along the shadows toward its destination: and I glimpsed a memory of shadowed pillars, the noise and blackness of big water.

It jumped the low stone fence at the south end of the park—and now we were noticed. Someone screamed and a man pulled a child away as the Silva ran for the intersection. It didn't understand about traffic lights and the colors were wrong, but when the bottom light flicked on, I felt a surge of panic, and the Silva reacted, skidding to a stop at the curb just as the first cars hurtled by. Its terrified confusion at this strange world washed over me—but it had understood my fear. I struggled to keep calm, and wished

for it to turn back. Take me back, I thought picturing my sleeping body.

People shouted behind us. The fuzz and crackle of a police radio sounded. The Silva had no collar. Thanks to Timmy and the other cases of the mysterious sickness, untagged dogs were now picked up by animal control and euthanized. Some had been shot on sight. Heart racing, I looked back at the cop running toward us drawing his gun.

We had to get across the road. The lights cycled, slowing traffic. The Silva dove between two taxis, weaving through the lanes. Its tail whacked an SUV that screeched to a stop almost too late. I glanced back at the rime of frost spreading across the bumper. Then we were running through the shadows between buildings, legs pumping, pushing the warm cement under our pads as we tore down block after block.

Finally, at the river, we slowed, trotting around broken Styrofoam cups and the plastic bags that rolled under the elevated highway. The smell of oil, salt and rotting fish mixed with exhaust fumes and the chalky tang of bird shit. My muscles ached. I knew they weren't my muscles, but when I wanted to look back at the cop, and the SUV's bumper, we had turned as one.

I thought again of Timmy Silva, and the dog responded with a memory of Timmy's dog. A small straw-colored mutt with floppy ears, just the type you'd imagine walking down a country lane with a kid. They had joined together enthusiastically, but the dog had been unable to return Timmy to himself.

Oh my God—Timmy had been inside the dog when his father had shot it.

The Silva stopped and sat heavily as comprehension dawned; both host and symbiont were lost. I thought of the little boy's body curled in his bed, forever an empty shell.

Behind us a siren blipped. I thought of the officer at the park. A cruiser roared by. I saw a shotgun mounted on the dash, and the Silva understood gun. The cop would try to cut us off or corner us by the water. We darted across the street through more blaring horns and screaming tires, toward the labyrinth of buildings. We ran over shredded paper and broken glass, past blank, barred windows.

In an alley, a dog charged through a gap in a chain link fence. It was all muscle under scarred, dirty white fur. It clamped its jaws around our neck. Its mouth burned, molten, saliva soaking into our fur. It whined as its mouth froze but didn't let go. We rolled onto our back, kicking at the dog's belly, gasping, trying to twist out of its grip.

Someone yanked back on the dog's collar, careful not to touch us, pulling us off the pavement as well. "Ammo, get off him!" a man yelled. "He's one of them diseased dogs."

He thrust a wide, flat stick into his dog's mouth and twisted it, prying its jaws open. We wrenched our neck away and ran into the darkness, skirting the streetlights' glare, the dog's howls of pain echoing behind us.

We limped back to where the river slapped against the concrete side of the island. The Silva needed to drink, to eat, but nothing looked safe to consume. In the darkness under the highway we shook out our fur, pieces of the white dog's frozen, shattered teeth skittered across the greasy dirt. The scent of urine filled the air, the ghostly amalgamated evidence of every creature that had passed this way.

As we continued, the chipped pillars holding up this section of the highway looked familiar, though I'd never been here before. At last a Dogloo came into view, filthy beige plastic worn to a velvet fuzz, its domed shape inconspicuous in the shadows. Where I grew up, upstate, everyone had one of these cheap doghouses in their yard. This was the first one I'd seen in the city.

We trotted to it. A cool breeze drifted out from the small, arched opening. We lifted our leg, left our mark, then ducked through the opening—and fell into a black, sucking rush. All the air disappeared and then all heat—and then the darkness resolved into a frozen landscape the same cloudless blue of the Silva's eyes.

Home.

Our limbs, still four, had become fins ending in numerous webbed digits. We stroked the slick ground to move across it. Clouds of vapor rose whenever they made contact with the surface—we were hot here. Light radiated up through the blue ice. Above, stars crowded every corner of a black sky. If this planet had a sun, it was very distant.

This body felt so strange, so utterly different. Why dogs? I thought. The Silva's mind bloomed with a cascade of images. Many had gone into the portal to search for a new world and never returned. Once they found Earth, the Silvas needed to adopt a native form in order to survive. The new world was difficult to comprehend, so bright and hot and abundant with life. In the end, it came down to chance. The first Silva to arrive encountered a stray dog dying inside the abandoned Dogloo. The Silva gave comfort in exchange for genetic material.

We descended into a fissure, floating in the minuscule gravity to the mouth of a tunnel. The blue light grew brighter as we traveled under the surface. What light and heat this planet had, came from somewhere deep within. After a long time drifting, the tunnel opened into a vast space filled with translucent rubble. Sleek structures rose above the wreckage, fractured spires dotted with unlit windows. They spiraled toward the arched ceiling high above. The ground rumbled, quaking in a quiet, constant tremor. Even ruined, the place was beautiful.

Creatures moved through narrow pathways cleared of glimmering boulders. Large, expressive eyes set into broad foreheads, their long necks widened into sleek bodies covered with a smooth pelt. We look like this, I thought. One turned to us, and the Silva thought of it as elder sibling. We proceeded together, drifting on little puffs of vapor toward the center of the settlement.

The ground screamed and fissured. Chunks of ice drifted down from above as the earthquake flung us high into the air. We drifted back down in a lazy free fall. A large blue boulder fell toward us. I felt a surge of panic thinking of the weight and mass of something that size on Earth. It hit us with a gentle slap and pinwheeled away.

The buildings did not fare so well. Another one tumbled slowly to the ground, glittering dust hung in the air. We waited until the rumbling subsided before moving on.

We approached what looked like an immense tree. Thick branches twisted away from a deep purple trunk that emerged from the shattered ice below. The elder sibling stopped but we continued, drifting up to the trunk. The deeply grooved surface expanded and contracted in a kind of respiration. The Silva stretched out its long neck, pressed our forehead against the trunk and I felt them.

Above us, many branches drooped with masses of bulbous fruits. The translucent skin of each revealed the curled body of a nascent Silva.

A tree of life. I looked around at the other Silvas drifting among the broken buildings. They didn’t seem to care about the homes they’d lost, instead they floated like fish in a current, their eyes on the great tree. This was the last one I realized, and my breath caught at the sight of several blackened branches among the living ones, their fruits withered and dusty gray. The shifting ice at the base of the tree was crushing the root system.

Above us, a living bulb detached, its leathery rind curling away. The newborn Silva stretched out as it floated down between us. The ground began to tremble again as we nuzzled the new sibling. There was little time.

The three of us hurried back to the mouth of the tunnel, pausing only to invite elder sibling. Sadness. It refused to join us, instead pushing the little one closer to our flank. We turned away and moved through the tunnel and back across the surface, our pace slower so that little sibling could keep up.

There was no Dogloo on this end, only a deep shadow between two shards of ice that exhaled the warm, stinking breeze from the unloved piece of land under the highway. We glided into the heat and were sucked though the blackness again to emerge, alone,

in the dark.

Next to us, a long strand of blue light coalesced on the rough pavement. Four paws appeared on the ground, fore and hind legs growing from them, then the knobs of a spine. A puppy solidified, clear as a block of ice and lit from within. The light faded as a coat of black fur covered it, black as the sky above their home world. She had brown almond-shaped eyes and alert ears.

A bitch, I thought, though I didn't know how I could know that without checking—something about her smell. The Silva responded with puzzlement.

How to explain gender? I imagined a man and a woman standing next to each other, holding hands. That didn't clear anything up, so, with a pang, I recalled the last time Hal and I were together in my apartment. I tried to follow that memory with an image of the infant Silva emerging from its pod as it drifted down from the tree.

Of course, the pictures Hal had shown me of his children invaded my thoughts. The ones he'd had in his wallet all along. I don't know if the Silva got what I was trying to convey. They'd figure things out eventually.

The overpass above us was quiet with only the occasional long, slow swish of cars passing in ones and twos. It was maybe an hour before dawn. We headed back to the park along empty sidewalks. Somewhere, a garbage truck crushed its payload. The puppy trotted at our heels. We stopped at a battered metal trashcan that lay on its side to root through fast food wrappers, and gulped down the crescent remains of a burger. The cheese was the consistency and flavor of plastic, but there was a bit of meat. We kept digging, and found some broken French fries.

A cat strolled up the sidewalk, a delicate creature with a tortoiseshell coat. Curious, the puppy leaned forward and dropped a French fry into the cat's path. It demurred and kept walking, a little golden bell tinkling on the collar around its neck. The cat regarded us with slitted emerald green eyes as it strolled by, and I realized what the Silva already knew. Cats weren't from here either. Who knew where they were from. All we knew for sure was that cats were well established, and that they were sharp.

At the grove, we put our nose to the ground and followed the faint metallic-floral scent of my perfume until my face came into view, round and pale against the knuckled roots at the base of the shrubs that hid my body. My eyes were closed; my chest barely moved.

The Silva slunk under the tangled branches and curled up against my cool body. The puppy huddled close, and we licked her face slowly and rhythmically with our warm tongue, bathing and calming her until she toppled over in an exhausted doze. We too closed our eyes at last.

I opened my eyes and looked through the damp blades of grass, past the cast iron legs of the park bench, and across the surface of the water glittering in the morning light. The Silva lay spooned against my chest, cold, but not freezing.

I sat up, blew hot breath onto my fingers and waited for yesterday's bitter loneliness to catch up with me. The sun crested the tops of the buildings beyond the park, touching everything with an orange glow. So many colors! I sat looking out at the water reflecting the sky and the green grass and the bright yellow flowers on the forsythia bushes; and I thought of the black sky, of the countless shades of blues and purples of their world. I wasn't lonely, only a little homesick.

The Silva lay there, panting and filthy, blood clotted in the fur around its neck. The puppy slept curled between its front legs.

Abruptly my head started pounding, like I'd been on a monumental bender. I tried to think, then reached out and stroked the Silva's fur. Nothing. Cool, but no shock. I did not lose myself. Last night in a desperate gambit, the Silva had chosen me hoping it would find kindness in a stranger. What it needed, what they needed, was an ally.

I stood and stepped away from the bushes, then grabbed the back of the bench, weathering a wave of dizziness. I sat on the smooth wood and brushed crumbs of dirt off my skirt.

"You both need a bath," I said, "and some tags." I would have to bribe someone to get them licenses and vaccination records. "And I need some aspirin."

I looked back at the tangle of branches behind me, but the Silvas were gone. Then I heard footfalls and turned to see Hal walking down the path.

He stopped in front of the bench, his expression sliding from smug satisfaction to alarm. I wiped at my face, hoping it wasn't too grimy. I was sure my hair was a disaster.

"Baby, what happened to you?" he asked.

"Nothing," I lied.

He reached out to touch me, but I shrunk back reflexively and he withdrew his hand. He sat down on the other side of the bench. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," I said and couldn't keep from smiling. I didn't dare look around, to see where the dogs had hid themselves.

“Big night out?”

“You could call it that.”

“I didn’t think you’d be here.”

Now who was lying? “I was just leaving,” I said.

“I know you’d asked me to stay away,” he went on without hearing me.

“It’s okay,” I said. “You can have this place after all. Come here all you want.”

I stood, slung my purse over my shoulder, relieved that the world felt solid under my feet. “Good bye, Hal.”

He stood too, his hands hanging uselessly at his sides as I turned away and walked up the path.

“Good bye,” he said, in that little lost-boy voice I’d found so endearing the day before yesterday.

As soon as I was out of sight, I took my shoes off and ran around to the opposite side of the bushes. The two Silvas melted through the chaos of branches without a sound, and the three of us cut across the park, avoiding the trails, until we reached the border closest to my apartment.

I knelt, took off my belt and looped it around the Silva dog’s neck, approximating a collar and leash. I looked out across the avenue. It was early, and there wasn’t much foot traffic.

“We’ve got several blocks to cross,” I said. “You both just walk next to me like proper dogs and we should fool most people.”

I dropped my shoes on the sidewalk and stepped into them. We’d crossed to another world and back; I was confident we could make it a few city blocks to my apartment. I’d get myself and the dogs cleaned up, so that we could all catch some sleep before they returned tonight. How many more could they get out before the tree was crushed and their world crumbled? When they arrived I’d be waiting with an armful of bright collars and shiny tags.

I would have to quit my job, I thought, and another grin broke across my face. I would sell the apartment and get a house upstate, one with a big backyard that backed up to the woods.

A place with lots of room for dogs.