

Dog Heavy

By Linda D. Brewer

Her heart beating beneath his ear—that was the best part about having Estella in his bed, Kellor thought. Da-dip, da-dip, the rhythm handed down from one woman to another for a hundred thousand years. Or the smell that came up off the two of them, like a mixture of chicken soup and flowers—he could never generate that exciting smell on his own. The mockingbird he called the neighborhood virtuoso was singing from the top of the orange tree. Most afternoons his imitations constituted Kellor’s chief entertainment. Now he was only background noise to the sound of Estella’s heart.

Estella sighed and moved her smooth legs out from under his hairy ones. Faster than thought came the impulse—hang onto her. Amuse her. Keep her here.

“You awake?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I want to show you something. It’s cinematic, something from the archives.”

“Yes?” she sat up in bed. Her bare shoulder brushed his arm. A happy shiver ran from his fingertips to the top of his head. “Yes?” Estella said again.

Kellor said, “This is an old Western. “Sasabe.” I think you’ll appreciate the way it opens. The director was a man named Payne, no longer in fashion. Well, he wasn’t in fashion so much back then, either, but a few of us loved him. I think you’ll see why he was a genius, in my humble opinion.”

He groped under the bed and pulled the remote out of the boot he kept it in for the sake of convenience. He wanted to share every humble opinion he had ever had with this bright, beautiful woman. He said, “It begins in silence and I contend that the silence is so intense it negates the need for words. You can smell the characters’ sweat. You can feel the grit in their hair. Keep an eye on the secondary characters.” He lay back on the bed and pushed the remote. “Let’s hear your thoughts.”

The DVD player flared on, then paused and ejected the disc. Kellor wanted to swear, but would not, in front of her. He crawled to the end of the bed and leaned forward, one finger extended like Adam reaching out for God, and pressed the disc back into the machine.

“I’m going to get a new one next time I get up to Tucson,” he said.

“Ojala,” Estella said. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her check her watch as she pulled the sheet up to her chin. “If this is some silly slapstick thing--”

“On the contrary. I mean it might look silly on the surface, but at a deeper level it’s also uplifting,” Kellor said. “I want to give you a memorable image to take home, to keep until next time.”

“About a next time,” Estella said.

“One second.” He pressed the remote. The DVD player flared on, then ejected the disc again. He sat up and found his glasses parked on top of his crumpled shirt. “You know I’m old and going blind,” he said. “I can’t always cope with this newfangled machinery.”

Estella said, “You’re fine as you are. Kellor, my dear one, let it go.”

“You’ll be glad you waited when you see it.” He got out of bed and began to push buttons at random. The tuner suddenly blared, some Mexican tenor singing his heart out with way too much vibrato. He pawed at the buttons until the music went away.

Estella threw back the sheet and got out of bed. Kellor was not too blind to appreciate the demure paleness of her breasts and nether regions as opposed to the athletic brownness of her arms and legs. He grabbed her ankle as if affectionately. Really, he wanted to pull her back into bed, devour her, make her part of himself so he would always know where she was.

“We can talk if you don’t want to watch the movie,” he said as she slipped away.

He heard her telling him from the bathroom that her husband and little child were waiting for Mommy to come back from the museum exhibit in Tucson. “Or the yoga class or Target or wherever the hell I said I was going,” she said. “Birthday party supplies, that was it. Which I’ve had for a month in the truck of my car. Shoot. This isn’t really me, you know, the way I’m acting now.”

“Don’t be troubled.” Kellor raised his voice. “You have the right to be happy. If that means being with me part of the time, then so be it.”

Estella came back into the bedroom wearing the long suede skirt Kellor liked to see her in. She found her own boots under the bed and stood looking out the window while she fastened her earrings. Kellor had a magazine cover view out his bedroom window of the slopes and peaks of the Santa Rita Mountains. He hoped nature’s majesty would become part of Estella’s feeling for him, so that every time she saw the mountains she would want to be with him. Instead of commenting on the scenery, however, she said, “There’s a little ground squirrel standing on his hind legs right

underneath your window. He looks like a shaggy little old man.” She smiled. “He looks like he heard something from down in his hole and he came up to see who it was, and there’s nobody there.” She turned toward him. “Kellor. Dear one.”

He seized the opportunity to push the button more time. The DVD player flared to life and kept playing. Kellor’s heart leapt. He fast-forwarded to the scene he had in mind, about ten per cent of the way in. “Here, watch this.”

A younger Kellor--not young, but still under fifty--pushed his way through the saloon door into the bright sunshine of a dusty town. A yellow hound dog lay snoozing on the porch. Kellor, or Mason as he’d been called in the movie, kicked the dog on his way down the porch steps.

“What do you think of this hombre?” he asked Estella.

“He’s a bad guy. He kicked the poor dog.”

“And instinctively you don’t want him to be the hero. You don’t want to be on his side. And who do you think that bad guy is? Was?”

She stared at the stilled frame, then at him. “You?”

“Chad Kellor, king of the expendable cowboys. I get shot in about another minute.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to see it.” She returned to the bathroom and began to brush her hair.

They’d met at an adult ed cinema class he was teaching in Green Valley. He’d built a house just far enough outside the retirement community to make him feel free, yet close enough so that he could pop into town for groceries whenever he wanted. Estella, age 42, was the youngest member of the cinema class by several decades. That first evening, speaking to an audience of “active adults” whose bald heads and white, no-nonsense hairdos shimmered in the light from the movie screen, he’d honed in on Estella and promised himself he’d get to know her.

“I’ll walk you out,” he told her now. He got out of bed and pulled on his jeans.

“Please, no.” She picked up her purse and said, “I bought trick candles for the birthday cake. Daisy said she didn’t want the kind that Gilbert had, that you can just blow out.”

“Who’s Gilbert?” Kellor asked in a sudden spasm of jealousy.

“Her cousin. Carmen’s little boy.”

Kellor lay back on the pillow. “She’s smart, like her mother.” He closed his eyes, unable to watch Estella walk away.

“Kellor.” He opened his eyes. Estella stood in the doorway with her

bag over her shoulder. “I’m not inviting you to the party for a good reason. I couldn’t stand to have you there and pretend I don’t know you in this way.” She gestured at the bed.

“Sure,” he said, “I have a lot of things to do this weekend anyway. I haven’t talked to my own daughter lately.”

She nodded. “If I had to complicate my life with anyone, I’m glad it’s you.” A moment later he heard her close his front door.

He felt like a dog whose mistress had just told him, “Stay,” but not for how long. For her he would stay until the house crumbled around him and the sun dried his bones. When he heard her car turn onto the paved road at the bottom of his hill, he groaned and buried his face in her pillow.

After a while he restarted the movie and fast-forwarded to the end. He loved the part where the hero, who had been the hero all along but in disguise and unjustly reviled, made himself available for the heroine’s caresses.

Thunderheads had blossomed over the mountains during their playtime. The sky was a blue-black he’d never learned to like in his five years in Arizona. The first silver finger of lightning made him jump back from the window. Ten minutes later rain was beating melodramatically on the roof and muttering down the drainpipe into the cistern.

He’d cut as much of a swathe as he could in California in his younger days, but he had only dated one other woman since he’d come to Amado and she turned out to be more involved with marijuana importation and sales than he was comfortable with. Estella was the first woman he’d been serious about in years. Serious. He thought he might die if he lost her. He’d thought that about his wife and daughter after the divorce and he hadn’t died, but he’d been younger then, more resilient. “That was in another country, and besides, the wench wishes I was dead,” he said over the sound of the rain.

He got up and turned on some lights and made himself take food and drink. He was standing at the kitchen counter scooping peanut butter out of the jar with a pretzel when he decided he would go to the little girl’s party. Not as himself--that was forbidden--but as someone else. A knight in disguise often won the day when the man unadorned could not. He went to the back bedroom, which housed artifacts of his past life.

He’d been a space man and still had the silvery moon boots. He’d been a Merry Man, but the tights had been too tight for him even back then. He pawed through the T-shirts and jackets and his one tuxedo and wondered why he’d kept any of it—even the sparkly parts looked stale. Finally, beyond his old ski jacket, he came to the dog suit. He hadn’t worn it professionally, but as a surprise for his daughter on her tenth birthday, because she had just

watched “Old Yeller” and been rendered heartsick by the movie and the fact that he and her mother were splitting up. He pulled the costume off the hanger and sniffed the polyester fur. The torso still hinted of body odor from the last time he’d worn it, for a joke at his daughter’s seventeenth birthday party, after which she hadn’t spoken to him for a month. Ever since, for that and other fatherly faults, she hadn’t spoken to him much at all.

He took the suit out to his back porch and hung it from a hook in the rafters. The storm had passed across the border and was drenching Sonora now. The August moon gleamed in the puddles around his house. A coyote yipped on the other side of the wash. Kellor listened to the lonely voice for a while, then went inside and dialed his daughter’s number. There was no answer, not even an answering machine.

He couldn’t think of anything to do but go to bed. He put himself between the musky sheets and listened to the coyote.

The next morning he remembered dreaming about his rival, Estella’s husband, Daniel Cobb. Cobb was a local attorney specializing in accidents and DUIs. He ran for public office every chance he got, just to make the race interesting, or so he said. He never won. He was a stocky man who fancied himself light on his feet at the Longhorn on New Year’s Eve. He wore his hair in a ponytail and never got dressed on Sundays, Estella said.

“What if someone drops by?” Kellor had asked. He hated the fact of the man’s existence, and couldn’t help ferreting out his evil ways, the better to despise him.

“He wears his bathrobe. He has a white terrycloth robe he got from a hotel. He wears it over his pajamas. He calls it his Sunday best.” That revelation had come at the beginning of their affair, back in March. Kellor had bought her an after-class cup of coffee at the café next to the community center. Kellor surmised that Daniel Cobb had a new bathrobe by now. He’d backed over his daughter’s cat in June and carried it into the house, where it died in his terrycloth arms. A man that would back over a cat would kick a dog, Kellor thought. A man that kicked a dog revealed his true nature.

If Estella saw Daniel Cobb’s true nature, she would ally herself with the dog he kicked. QED, Kellor thought, and smiled.

A curve-billed thrasher whistled him up and at ‘em. He drank his morning coffee and ate a couple of rubbery tortillas, and then he tried on the dog suit. It was brown and shaggy, with cracked elastic around the ankles and slipper-like paws. The nose was black rubber, once shiny but now dull and crackled. The eyeholes had always been too small. He remembered having a hard time seeing through them with his glasses on. He enlarged them

with scissors and found a red bandana to go around the neck.

The party was set for eleven o'clock, to avoid the afternoon monsoon. By ten he was ready to go. He stripped down to a T-shirt and shorts and zipped himself into the suit. The glasses, he remembered in time, went under the head, not outside it.

As soon as he put the head on he realized he was hungry. The tortillas, which had landed with a thud in his stomach, had finally gone on their way. "Food at the party," he told himself, and then he said, "Woof, woof-woof woof-woof," getting into character.

He rolled down the window of his truck and stuck his big shaggy head partway out as he drove. The hot air rushed through his eyeholes and fluffed the fake fur. He wanted to drive fast, but he forced himself to keep his speed down on the rolling, curving road between his house and Amado. At milepost 6 a Border Patrol truck came up behind him fast and followed him for two miles. Kellor felt his desire to speed to the party in conflict with an urge to stop and explain the situation. When another Border Patrol agent sped past in the opposite direction, Kellor counted himself lucky when his man made a U-turn and followed it. They were on the hunt, but they weren't hunting him.

By the time he reached Estella's road, a film of sweat and fabric glue had bonded the suit to his body. He parked the truck fifty yards from the house in a mesquite bosque. The keys fell from his paw and landed underneath the seat and he left them there. His big fur feet made interesting tracks in the dirt under the trees. He wondered what other animals would think, coming across them. He could hear music above the sounds of birds. A paper plate tacked to the mailbox post said, "The birthday girl lives here."

As he walked up the dusty driveway he saw that they'd installed a plastic kiddie pool in a corner of the front yard and dragged every available toy out of the house. A birthday cake sat in the middle of a yellow paper tablecloth on the picnic table, which stood in the shade of a well-pruned acacia. Balloons hung from the porch roof. The scent of roast meat wafted from the barbecue, an expensive black cooker that proclaimed Daniel Cobb's status as bringer-home and burner of bacon.

For a moment he felt foolish, lumbering into the midst of this sedate gathering. Then he saw that he was not the only non-human in attendance. A clown juggled lemons, none-too-skillfully, in the shade of a portable ramada. Half a dozen tots crouched on blankets in front of him, agog. Their parents sat in lawn chairs, sipping drinks and chatting, tossing an occasional encouraging word to the clown. Estella and Daisy were not there, he saw at

once. A little redhaired boy ran up to the clown and batted at the lemons. The clown, whose expression veered between grin and grimace, ignored him.

“Cool it, Sam,” a man said. He drained his beer bottle and got up and went to a cooler on the porch for another. The redhaired boy seized the clown around the knees and pulled. The clown staggered and dropped a lemon.

“That kid needs Ritalin,” a woman behind Kellor said. He turned and saw the librarian from Green Valley laying out paper plates and plastic cutlery on the yellow tablecloth.

“Woof?” Kellor tried.

The woman, whose name he remembered as Sandy something, smiled. “Exactly. He poured fruit punch all over Daisy, the little creep. Ruined her party dress. Gary should take him home.”

The redhaired boy ran over to the kiddie pool and threw in a lemon, then jumped in after it. There was a frenzy of splashing and shrieks from the other children. A man stalked over and fished the boy out. The boy ran to the swing set, his wet shorts sagging on his skinny buttocks. Kellor walked over to two tame-looking children playing in the sandbox and got down on all fours.

A little girl looked up from her digging. “Are you a dog?”

“Bow-wow,” Kellor said.

She peered through his eyeholes. Kellor had forgotten how small children were and how penetrating their gaze. He lowered his head and whined like a puppy. The little girl gave him a cautious pat on the nose. Another little girl broke away from the clown’s audience and ran over to pet him. He said, “Woof,” and she laughed loudly in his face. Kellor sat up on his haunches and waved his front paws. He had seen a picture of Estella’s daughter. She had dark hair like her mother and a serious look about her eyes even when she was smiling. He frolicked on his hands and knees and scanned the miniature crowd for little girls with dark hair. The children’s knock knees and soft little bellies took him back to his daughter’s early years and he caught himself rejecting each small face, not because it didn’t resemble Estella’s child but because it wasn’t his own little girl.

“Roll over,” a child commanded and he obliged, pulled back from the brink of nostalgia by his obligation to amuse. He saw that the clown had stopped juggling and was studying him with his big surprised eyes.

“Here she comes,” someone said. Kellor saw Estella leading Daisy out of the house. The child was wearing a pink sundress with wet splotches down the front. Her face was flushed, her expression unhappy. Her damp

dark hair was pulled back with a pink ribbon. She wore red cowboy boots and carried a small yellow blanket.

The clown held out his arms to her. The child drew back with a disapproving look. Kellor, seizing the opportunity, barked.

The child pulled on Estella's hand. Together they walked across the dusty yard to the sand box. Kellor sat up on his haunches and panted. Daisy gave him a faint smile. Kellor went through his repertoire of tricks. As he lay on his back, the child leaned over and poked her finger through the mouth hole. He felt her fingertip light as a feather probing his unshaven chin, moving over his lips.

"He's not real," she said to Estella.

"He's real, but he's not really a dog," Estella said.

Kellor saw Estella's legs inches in front of his face. She was wearing a denim skirt and red sandals. The knob of her anklebone jutted enticingly. He stuck his tongue through the mouth hole and licked.

Estella jumped back. "You!"

Kellor shifted onto his knees and assumed a begging position. Estella pretended to shake his paw. "You should leave," she said in a harsh whisper.

He whined.

Daisy said, "There's a man in there."

"I'm afraid so," Estella said. She bent over him again. "Just please go quietly."

"Woof woof woof," Kellor said, with an "I love you" intonation.

Estella turned and led Daisy away. He barked one deep, throat-wracking bark, and then something solid struck him from the side and knocked him off his paws. A child's hot, sweet breath gushed through his eyeholes. Kellor swatted at the redhaired boy who laughed and lunged at him again. Under the ramada, the clown began to sing "Eensy Weensy Spider."

"Go play," Kellor said. The boy jumped on his right front paw with both feet. Kellor embraced the boy and squeezed until he heard the child's maniacal laughter segue into a cry. He released his grip and the child kicked him in the elbow. He felt the impact in his crazy bone even through the fake fur. The child kicked again and connected with his ribs. Kellor growled and bared his teeth.

A man's heavy feet thudded beside his head and the boy rose into the air. Kellor tried to crawl away, to take inventory of his bruises, but the man grabbed him by the bandana.

"How about this for a trick, you jerk," the man said. A fat sunburned hand forced the neck of a beer bottle through the mouth hole of the dog's

head. Beer spilled down the front of Kellor's T-shirt, which was already soaked with sweat. "Drink, boy," the man said. He pushed the bottle in further. Beer flooded Kellor's nostrils and he choked. "I saw the way you manhandled my boy," the man said. "You shouldn't be let near kids. Did he hurt you?" he asked the boy. "Did he touch you in a bad way?"

"He squeezed me," the boy said in a plaintive tone.

The man withdrew the beer bottle and hit Kellor on the head with it.

"That hurt?"

Kellor shook his head. He seemed to be existing in two universes, the wet, suffocating world inside the fur, and an outer world in the fresh air where monsters attacked innocent animals. Each was hell in its own way.

The man kicked him in the rear end. "Feel that?"

"Feel that?" his son shrieked. He threw himself onto Kellor's back. Kellor tried to shake him off but the child clung to folds of fur.

"I want a ride," another child yelled. A small sharp fingernail penetrated an eyehole and scratched his cheek. He tried to crawl, but the weight was too heavy on his back.

"Hold up, there, Gary," someone said. A big flat sandal as wide as a tennis racket appeared beside Kellor's right front paw. The weight disappeared from his back. "Let's let the dog rest a minute." Red-and-white striped baggy pants, a white gloved hand, suspenders, a red nose, a fright wig—this is what my savior looks like, Kellor thought.

"We're just having fun. Trying to," Gary said. "My boy has his own way of showing affection." He feinted a kick that made Kellor flinch. "Who's in here? One of your drunk driving customers?"

"You've been on that side of the desk yourself, Gary," the clown said.

"Yeah. I have. And I'm man enough to admit it. I know who I am. Not like this freak." Without seeming to move he shifted his weight onto Kellor's paw.

Kellor made a sound he had never made before. He grabbed Gary's lower leg with his other paw. He wanted to bite the thick pink thigh, but he couldn't get his teeth through the mouth hole. He pulled back with all his strength and felt Gary's leg buckle.

"Hold up, guys. There's kids watching," the clown said. He tried to separate Kellor and Gary as they struggled. Kellor heard an "oof" that wasn't him and saw the clown's red nose bounce on the ground in front of him.

Far away a woman began to sing, "Happy Birthday to you." Kellor registered how much he hated that song, and then Gary lost his balance and brought the clown down with him.

Kellor's head twisted sideways as he hit the dust. He couldn't see anything except the inside of his own furry skull and he remembered being in this place before, years ago. Before he could identify the memory a fist punched him in the chest. He crawled toward the fist rather than away, and kept crawling, up and over struggling bodies until he felt a sufficient collection of limbs underneath him. He splayed himself out on top of the heap and clung there as it roiled underneath him. Over at the picnic table an adult was badgering the children into singing the alphabet song.

Kellor took a breath of beer-flavored air and realized he hadn't felt this good since football in high school. The painful pleasure he felt went further back even than sex. A foot glanced off the side of his head and he laughed. Somewhere beneath him he heard someone else return the guffaw.

"Stop it! Stop it! Get up!" Estella yelled. A blast of water struck him in the face. He felt himself slipping from the top of the pile and tried to hang on. An earthquake flung him onto his back and he curled into a ball to protect himself. Any breath he could find, he used it for laughing.

"Okay. Enough's enough," the clown said. Kellor wrenched his head back into place and sat up. Gary had a black eye. Red blood dripped from the clown's real nose.

Estella flung the hose under the acacia. She pointed at Gary. "You. Sandy will drive you and Sam home. Right now." She was crying, Kellor realized. He had never seen her cry. He wanted to take her in his arms right there and comfort her.

She pointed at the clown. "You. Take off that ridiculous suit. Daisy's been afraid of you all day."

The clown pulled himself to a sitting position. His fright wig had come off. Kellor saw Daniel Cobb's face transfigured by blood and white paint.

"I'll take it off when he takes his suit off," Daniel Cobb said. He pointed at Kellor. "I want to see the dirty dog inside the fur."

Kellor flexed his limbs. His right hand fingers were stiff and swollen. The skin of his chest stung in a line from his throat to the end of his breastbone, torn by contact with the zipper.

Gary stood up. "Couple of loonies." He addressed Daniel Cobb. "You wonder why I never want to drop by. You're always in your pajamas." He looked around for his son and when he spotted him standing on the hood of a car in the driveway he yelled, "Sam! Get your butt over here!" in a tone that made the boy jump to the ground and run to his side. He picked the boy up in a rough, possessive gesture. "I'm giving you fair warning. Neither of you are coming around my boy again, swear to God." His son regarded them

with scorn.

Estella waited until Sandy had escorted the pair to her car. Many people were leaving. The few who remained clustered around the picnic table, simultaneously picking apart the cake and the fight.

“I am disgusted with you both,” Estella said. “This is humiliating. Daisy will need therapy.” She wiped her eyes and blew her nose on a party napkin. “She will need therapy for so many reasons.”

Daniel Cobb and Kellor stared at each other. Finally Daniel held out his hand and helped Kellor onto his hind legs. Kellor limped to the side of the house, where the hose was attached to a spigot. He didn't think he'd ever been so hot in his life. He pawed at the zipper of the dog suit and found that the tag end had come off. He felt faint, and wondered if he'd sustained internal injuries, either from the fight or from a lifetime of making a fool of himself.

The fight itself had felt good, though. He almost wished he could fight like that every day.

He was dying of thirst. He fell to his knees in front of the spigot and tried to unscrew the hose. His paw hands were stuck to his skin with sweat. He swiped them against the bricks to try to loosen them.

“Here you go. Drink this.” Daniel Cobb crouched in front of him with the hose. Water ran out of it at a drinkable pace. “Come on. I don't want you dying on my property.”

Kellor grabbed the nozzle and worked it through the mouth hole into his own mouth. He drank until he couldn't breathe, caught his breath and drank some more. He noted that Daniel Cobb had changed out of his clown suit into a pair of baggy shorts and sandals. His belly was plump and tan, his legs surprisingly skinny. The man sat down on a decorative, flat-topped rock and let the hose run over his feet into a strip of withered garden.

“She's not much of a gardener,” Daniel Cobb said. “Every year she starts a few tomatoes and then lets them dry up after we eat the first dozen or so.” He bent his head and sipped water sideways from the hose. There were traces of clown white around his eyes. “Sure you don't want to take that suit off? I'd like to get to know you better.” He peered into the eyeholes. “Do I know you? Have we met?”

Kellor shook his head. Daniel Cobb was turning out to be nicer than he'd expected. That and the gallon of water he'd just drunk made him feel queasy about his afternoon's activities.

Daniel Cobb took another sip of water and offered Kellor the hose. This time Kellor let the water run down his neck and back. It occurred to him

that if he ended up with a full bladder before he figured how to get the suit off, he was screwed.

Daniel Cobb said, “I was walking down the street in San Francisco one day and this couple came along walking this big black dog on a leash. He was shaggy but elegant-looking. I asked them what kind of dog it was and the woman said it was a standard poodle she’d had clipped according to her own design. The man said, “He’s not a standard poodle. He’s a Russian imperial poodle. He weighs ninety pounds.” The look on the guy’s face when he said that, I’ll never forget it, the way his mouth curled in this proud, righteous expression. Meanwhile I’m standing there thinking he’s pussy-whipped and all he’s got for comfort is this fancy dog. His wife says, “He’s got the standard German conformation.” I walk away and they’re still arguing about just what kind of dog they’ve got, so they’ll know how proud of it they’re supposed to be.” He switched off the spigot and coiled the hose beneath it. “I guess that’s what Estella and I’ll be arguing about tonight—what kind of dog you are.” He said, “You clear out now. Don’t keep hanging around. It’s going to storm. Thunder and lightning. Kaboom.”

Kellor’s knees throbbed. It took him a minute to get some forward momentum on his two feet. Daniel Cobb called after him, “This is not an act I would stick with if I were you.” A flash of lightning forked across the sky. Kellor would have flinched at the thunder except that he was too tired.

He limped across the front yard, past the wading pool and the picnic table and back down the road to the bosque where he’d parked his truck. By the time he found the keys and climbed in, the first drops of rain were falling.

He seized the end of the first fur paw in his teeth and dragged it off his swollen hand. The fur tasted of dirt and someone else’s sweat. The second paw came off a little easier now that he had a free opposable thumb to work with.

The washes were just beginning to run with water. He drove a couple of miles, looking out for hazardous conditions, before he noticed a sheet of paper fluttering on the seat beside him. He grabbed it but the writing was too small for him to read and drive at the same time. He drove over the crest of a hill and pulled off on the side of the road. The rain was pelting the earth, and lightning flickered all around the horizon. He couldn’t see the mountains in the downpour. The sky had come right down around him.

The note said, “This is more than I expected. You’re a real person, I realize now, and it’s too much to cope with. Be good to yourself. I do care about you, but I have a family and they are real people, too. Me.”

Kellor looked up from the note and saw movement in the mesquites

off the side of the road. A man thin as a shadow emerged from the trees, saw him, and slipped back through the rain as if it were a gray curtain. Kellor pulled off the dog head, put the truck into gear and drove toward home.

He had left the front door unlocked that morning with, he thought tiredly, no dog to guard the property. He turned on a light and scanned the living room. Pictures from his movie days still hung on the wall, his piano was still in place with the lid down, the dust undisturbed. He found a pair of scissors in the kitchen and gouged a hole in the front of the suit, working the blades in far enough to cut the fabric. It took several minutes before the lower half fell away and he was able to pull it off like a pair of pants. He cut upward parallel to the frozen zipper and pulled his arms free. Barefoot he went to the bathroom and relived his sore bladder and soused his face. He looked at himself in the mirror and saw a woebegone mad-haired creature looking back at him. He found his phone and dialed his daughter's number before he had time to think.

She said, "Hello?" At the sound of her voice he had to sit down. In his mind's eye he saw her furrowed brow, the suspicious squint of her brown eyes.

"Woof," he said.

"Jeez. Dad?" she said.

"I love you with all my heart. Just wanted you to know."

"Well, that's all well and good, but I have company right now. I'm having a party."

"It's been a humdinger of a day. I was thinking about you. I was thinking we could talk some time."

"We'll see. Not now." He imagined her looking at her watch and mouthing something to a friend. "I've got to go now."

"What time is it?" Kellor asked.

Her voice was not entirely without warmth when she said, "It's time for you to learn some new tricks, Dad." Then, but only then, she hung up.

The suit lay on the kitchen floor like synthetic road kill. He gathered it up, the legs and the head and the cut-up strips, and carried them outside. The rain had stopped and the ground was as soft as it was ever going to be. He buried the suit under the lemon tree and put a rock on it. One of the scratches on his inner arm smarted and he licked it. The taste told him how badly he needed a shower. He went inside and took one. Then he fed himself.