

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Pam Rosenblatt
The Switch

THE DOG IS MISSING. The woman knows it. There has been switch. She had boarded Archie at a dog boarding hospital in a nearby town, one that is supposed to cater to dogs and cats, because she was taking a vacation to Florida to visit with family. The trip was nice and relaxing. But when she returned, she went to the animal boarding hospital, and the attendant actually handed her a dog that looked like Archie but had slightly different markings. Her dog is white with gray-tan colors like this dog but the colors are differently placed on the new dog. But both dogs are the same size – tiny, tiny, tiny. And this dog is frightened, as if he never met the woman before.

She asks her friend who had driven with her to pick up Archie if the dog looks different to him, but he says no. But she knows her Archie, and she recognizes that she was given another dog. Why when she tries to walk this dog outside of the hospital, he starts to run away, frightened. Archie would never do that. Archie would perhaps be upset that she had left him alone in the boarding hospital for so many days, seven to be exact, but he would have gotten over it quickly. This dog acts like he doesn't know her or her friend, Jacob. She should say something to the attendant, but it sounds so stupid. Archie is a rare imperial Shih Tzu. Very few toy dogs of his breed exist in the United States, never mind the rest of the world. Maybe this other dog is related to Archie somehow.

Archie was adopted by her almost seven years ago. There's a possibility that this dog is her offspring or a brother of hers or even a cousin... So maybe she was given another dog, but thought it was highly unlikely. She couldn't believe that a switch had happened.

So she takes the "new" dog convincing herself that he is Archie. Of course it's Archie. How could the attendant make such a mistake? Yet, maybe the attendant did it on purpose. That's it! The two dogs were switched during the bath time earlier that day. That's how it must have happened.

Boy, is this new dog frightened. She places the dog into Archie's crate in the backseat of the car. How could she go into the hospital and ask if there's been a switch? Ask if there's another dog that looks like Archie, as if Archie is there? It sounds so stupid, so irresponsible of the hospital, and so nutty of the woman to think that there's another Shih Tzu that looks like Archie at the hospital or anywhere. Maybe the markings are Archie's. Maybe it is all in her mind. She puts the key into the ignition, watches Jacob hook up his seatbelt, and drives away an hour back to Belmont.

The phone rings a couple of times before her mother picks up the receiver. "Hi dear" her mother says, "How's Archie?"

"He's like a different dog, Mom. I mean a really different dog," the woman replies. "I think he's been switched. But how is your day going?"

"What do you mean?" her mother answers. "Oh my day is going well. Does Archie look well?"

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The woman sighed, does not know what to say except, "I think so. Anyway, I'm home. The dog is home. And I'm going to give Archie his eye medicine, unpack, and then go to sleep." They hung up the phone.

She picks up the dog to give him his eye meds. She wonders if the dog actually needs the medicine but gives it to him anyway. It's been a long day, and she hopes this dog is Archie and, if not, that Archie is safe and sound in a new home. How can she find him? How can she bring him back home?

Weeks have passed, and Archie still isn't Archie to Pam. But he is certainly adorable. So Pam calls the dog Adorable one instead of Archie. She keeps thinking of ways to get Archie back but is wary to contact the boarding hospital because this dog acts so much like Archie. And this dog even has a similar weak immune system like Archie. In fact, he gets ill quite often.

Today he has started coughing a lot, so much that the woman brings him to the local veterinarian's office. The vet looks at Adorable one and recommends that she bring Adorable one to an emergency hospital because she thinks that the dog has a tear in his trachea, something that can be fixed with surgery. So the woman brings the dog to a nearby emergency hospital. This "Archie" has several medical problems besides a tear in his trachea: a heart murmur, eye problems, and a small, growing cancer in his right lung. So Archie is sick. She is exhausted caring for him but hopes that this trachea situation can be healed soon.

The woman brings the dog to the emergency section of this 24 hour emergency animal hospital.

A receptionist speaks with her, asks what's going on. As the woman describes the situation, the receptionist hears the Archie coughing and crying, so she immediately contacts a veterinary to come see the Archie. The woman is still wondering if this dog is her original Archie. It must be Archie. Archie was always so frail.

A few minutes later a young, handsome veterinarian walks over to the emergency section and speaks with the receptionist who informs him as the dog's condition. Immediately, the vet asks if he can examine, take x-rays of her chest, and bloodwork. The woman looks sad and replies of course, though thinking of the expense. Her poor dog, and poor her!

About 45 minutes pass along. The doctor returns without Archie. He is holding an x-ray in his hand. "Archie is very sick," he says. "The trachea has a hole in it which needs surgery. That's operable.

But his lung mass has progressed. It's inoperable. We can give him surgery but it's only a temporary situation. I suggest that you may want to put him under. It's the most humane thing to do.

The woman looks devastated. "Here, look at the x-ray," the veterinarian says. The woman looks at the black and white film. She has seen these before. Her father is a physician and taught her how to evaluate them. "Why, there's no lung mass there," she says. "That's right," stated the doctor.

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The woman thinks that she misread the x-ray, does not compute that the startled doctor agreed with her. "I guess the right thing is to put Archie under. I don't want him to suffer, to be in pain," she whispers.

"Okay, I think you're making the right decision. Would you like to see the procedure done. It may put your concerns to rest."

The woman first replies, "No, that's all right."

The veterinarian asks, "Are you sure?"

Then the woman answers, "Okay."

The man walks away, saying to the receptionist, "Please show this woman to the condolence room. The woman is taken to a room with a sofa, a couple of chairs, a phone and a large box of Kleenex. She sits, waits for about 10 minutes. The veterinarian reappears, with "Archie" a.k.a. Adorable one in one arm, the dog's crate and the necessary equipment in the other. He hands the dog over to the woman, places the crate on the floor, and sits down on the couch. "Are you ready?" he asks.

The woman says "Yes," with a tremble in her voice. She hugs the dog, and the veterinarian pats the dog on the head.

Then the veterinarian injects Adorable one with some medicine and repeats it. The dog looks so peaceful but the woman starts to cry.

The veterinarian says, "I'll leave you alone with Archie. A veterinary technician will come by in a few minutes to collect him.

The woman pets her dog on the head then leans over to a nearby table and selects a couple of tissues to wipe her eyes. A few seconds later she stands up, looking at how calm, almost sleeping Adorable one looks. She cries, takes more tissues from the box. She starts quietly saying Jewish prayers to the sleeping dog. She thinks, maybe Adorable one is sleeping. Maybe he'll wake up and give me that look he does when he wants a treat.

But minutes pass, a half an hour passes, an hour passes, and the dog doesn't wake up. The veterinarian technician doesn't make his or her appearance yet either. The waste basket is filling up with used tissues. Finally, at about one and a half hours later, the woman picks up the phone, calls the front desk and requests that a V-Tech walk over to the room and collect her deceased dog. She hangs up the phone receiver and takes more Kleenex. The tears keep flowing. She doesn't know if this dog is Archie but he certainly was adorable like Archie.

Finally, a short, muscular built young man walks into the room. He looks at the woman then at the resting dog. Without saying anything, he picks up the dog and tosses him over his shoulder, and then saunters across the room into an adjoining examining room, and flips the body like a stack of potatoes onto a steel examining table. Then he re-enters the room, "Someone will come by to collect the dog in a little while." He exits the room.

The woman starts to cry even more. The least thing that veterinarian technician could have done is put her dog gently down on the table, not heave it like a stack of potatoes. "Well," she thinks, "I guess Adorable one's really gone...But how cruel!"

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The woman takes her dog's crate and leaves the room, walks slowly, nervously down the corridor and to the receptionist's desk. "Do I have anything to pay for Archie?"

"Yes," replied the woman. "The procedure costs, the cremation costs, and the mailing of the ashes costs."

The woman pays her bill, leaves the animal emergency hospital with the empty crate, with tears still dribbling down her face. She may not have the bills to pay anymore but thinks how the empty crate feels too light in her hand.