

BORSIE BOY

The woman, a Brendan Behan fan, had named the dog Borstal Boy. Most often she called it simply Borstal. But she had come and gone, leaving the dog behind with Hank, and he, after accepting that the dog was there to stay, came to call it Borsie, and, at other times, Borsie Boy.

The woman's sudden leaving had been a setback for Hank. As his few friends had it, the death of his wife some seven years before had put him on the skids. He knew better. Good as it had been with his wife, he admitted more and more lately just how tenuously he had kept a hold on his nerve, even with her. He had used the marriage to program himself, had laid down their life together along strictly traditional lines. When she died, the program went with her. When, seven years later, Hank met this other woman--at the Maple Leaf Tavern, where he met nearly everyone he now knew--he had felt ready to make a new go of it. She was new to the area, down on her luck she said. He took her in, and a few days later her dog, which she had left outside of town "So he could find a life of his own," came trotting up, mud-spattered and thin, as they went out for an after-dinner walk.

Something in Hank had always kept him from going completely to hell with himself. Most probably it had something to do with respect for his dead wife. He had played something of the gallant to her, a rememberer of birthdays and anniversaries, a spontaneous giver of gifts. He drank now, but instances of excessiveness were scattered. He still maintained the clothing he had, kept buttons sewn in place and creases ironed in. Among his friends, nearly every one of whom was worse off than he, Hank represented memories of fineness and hopes for betterment. It was probably this dimension of his person that had attracted the new woman. But, evidently, that was not enough because she left a nice note one morning and disappeared--without the dog. She didn't steal his money, nor his wife's watch, she just left. Perhaps she had sensed that Hank was beginning to entertain a few hopes of his own and, having developed a good nose for depths at which she might have trouble staying afloat, had struck out for shallower waters. The note asked him to take care of Borstal, who was now his.

For some time, Hank resented the dog; it was not the woman, but this needful thing instead. As the woman did not and did not come back, the dog began to seem as shocked as

Hank. With every noise in the hallway, the two of them, always seated near one another, would perk up their ears. With each new disappointment Hank would yell at the dog, or give it a shove with his foot, pretending that the animal's earlier perking had generated the momentary hopefulness that he himself had felt.

One evening there was a knock in the hallway, the dog perked up, Hank perked up, but there was no second knock, just a distant commotion at another apartment door. Gradually, the dog slumped at Hank's feet and let its head fall onto its paws. Hank glared at it and, wanting to scare the thing, jabbed it with his toe and yelled "Will you leave off! She's not coming back, you dumb mutt."

The dog rose and retreated a few feet, and then stared intently at Hank--so intently, and for such a long time, that Hank was forced to hold its gaze. It appeared that the dog was considering what Hank had said. And then, dropping its eyes, it slunk away into the kitchen. At that moment Hank, too, realized that the woman was never coming back, that there was going to be only the two of them. He felt bad that he had imposed such crushing knowledge on the animal who, after all, had lived with the woman much longer than he. They should start a new chapter together, he and this dog. Hank got up from his chair and went into the kitchen.

"Borsie," he called gently. "Come on, Borsie Boy. I'm sorry."

The dog was curled up near its food dish. Its eyes peered up momentarily, heavy and sad, then dropped and stared on a straight line with the floor. It would not, it seemed, be consoled. Hank squatted down beside it and scratched behind its ears.

"Buck up, Borsie. Here's a nice warm place now. Not so bad here, is it?"

Borsie only stared. Then, under Hank's digging fingertips, its long body inflated with a deep inhalation followed by a quick, collapsing sigh.

"Boy, you've got it bad."

He remembered that the dog liked cheese. He also remembered that the bag of Purina Dog Chow was nearly empty. The few nuggets left in the bottom had rattled like chunks of crushed brick when he'd kicked it into the corner that morning. Cheese, however, was a treat and Borsie seemed to need one. Fortunately, the woman had laid in a stock of it (with his money!) before she'd left. He came away from the refrigerator with a big chunk which he dropped ceremoniously near the dog's nose. The dog gave it a sniff, but

seemed to want only to identify it. Hank was impressed. He'd seen the thing happily gobble down cheese at the woman's hand, but now in its grief the cheese meant nothing to it.

Hank gave the dog a final, consoling pat and then went off to bed, leaving the cheese in place. But the next morning he found the dog just as he'd left it, and the cheese untouched.

"My God," he said, stopping in his tracks. The dog raised tired eyes to him, then let fall its head again.

"This is ridiculous. Come on, get up. Get up, I said! Borsie!"

He stood over the animal and glowered down at it. "What are you going to do, lay down and die?"

The dog raised its head a little, then looked away as if considering the question.

"Hey, look around," said Hank, throwing wide his arms. "Heated rooms, food in the fridge, all snug and cozy. I tell you, you can stay here but you can't lie around like this."

The dog, a strange composition of hound and terrier, had eyebrows like an old-fashioned stereotype of a Southern senator. Hank had always been amused by them, and now he found one of them quizzically cocked his way.

He sighed and sat down beside the dog on one of the kitchen chairs. "What's the matter, don't you believe me?"

The dog continued to regard him skeptically. It seemed to want to hope, but life had played it some dirty tricks recently. It looked around at the kitchen, but with a distrustful expression. It seemed to want Hank to go away and stop toying with its feelings.

"Okay, listen," said Hank. "Eat the cheese, and then I'll take you out for a walk. How does that sound?"

The dog wheezed a tiny bit, perhaps on the verge of hoping again. It looked at the cheese for a moment and then, very delicately, took it up in its mouth. With the cheese pinned neatly in its teeth, it looked at Hank and raised its bushy eyebrows.

"It's okay. Christ, now eat it"

The dog looked around.

"Borsie, will you eat the goddam cheese!"

With a final look, Borsie very slowly, then more rapidly, began to bite into the cheese. Suddenly, he was really going at it--chomp, chomp, chomp. The cheese was gone, and Borsie up on his feet. He appeared a little embarrassed to have bolted the food like that, and gave one of Hank's hands, dropping down from his knees where he sat, a testing lick.

"Very good," said Hank, giving Borsie a good scratch. "Want some more? How about some more cheese, Huh?"

The dog wagged his tail and, Hank could swear, nodded.

"Okay, okay. Come on. Let's get some more cheese." Hank was on his feet. "Let's go to the fridge and get some more cheese, okay boy?"

Borsie pranced and bounced along beside Hank, nosing deep into the refrigerator when Hank opened the door.

"Which kind?" Hank asked, rummaging. "Monterey Jack or cheddar?"

The dog barked, twice, his deep bloodhound boom.

"The cheddar, is that it?"

The dog barked once, this time in terrier treble.

"Okay, cheddar it is."

Hank sat and watched for a while as Borsie gulped down the new chunk of cheese. Then he left Borsie and went off to read the rest of yesterday's paper. But soon Borsie was in the room with him and doing near back somersaults at the door. He was all terrier whine now, but galumphing awkwardly against the door with his pathetic houndy contours. Hank watched for a moment, merely puzzled, then was suddenly visited with a terrible pang. The dog expected to go for a walk, the one that he'd been promised! Responsibility, of a type long ago lifted from Hank's willing enough shoulders, came down heavily to roost again. He had succeeded in convincing the dog to trust him; it would be many walks now, many feedings, many pats and scratches. But the pang came more for a sudden, sharp projection, an image of how Borsie's face would look if he, Hank Sterling, were to disappoint that newly engendered and very fragile trust.

He took a deep breath. "So, you thought I forgot, huh? It's the walk, right? Of course, our morning walk."

Winter came and snow began to fall, but Hank kept up the walks. At first, when the mornings became very raw, he hoped that Borsie would just do his doggy duty and be done, but no, Borsie held off until the two of them had made a real outing of it. Afterwards, stamping and huffing in the downstairs hallway, Hank always had to admit that the walks did him some good too. The quick shot of cold, the quickening of his pulse effected by the efforts of negotiating icy sidewalks, put him in the pink and enlivened the rest of the day. When evening came, Hank was just as ready for another walk as Borsie. On those evenings he would let Borsie back in, and then strike off across his Jamaica Plain neighborhood for his nightly stint at the Maple Leaf Tavern.

During the days Hank would keep himself busy writing long, involved, and sometimes angry letters to congressional representatives, newspaper editors, and the state and national consumer affairs agencies. He had made it his personal duty, chief among others, to ferret out violations of truth in advertising. Sometimes he fueled his ire with scotch.

"Look at this tire ad," he said to Borsie one evening, rattling a page of the newspaper at him. "The ad says there's a sale on these sizes, the thin ones, but they run a picture of an expensive wide-tread." Hank snipped out the ad and pasted in into the space he'd left in the center of a letter typed, as always, on his old manual Royal. This, the last of seven letters he'd produced that day, was duly stuffed into an envelope and slid with the others into his coat pocket. It was habit to mail them on the way to the Maple Leaf.

But later, after that particular evening's walk, Borsie hesitated at the apartment door which Hank held open for him.

"Come on, in with you." Hank prompted.

Borsie hung back. He sat down on the steps and looked up at Hank, merely faking movement by shuffling his front paws.

"What's the matter with you? Come on, I don't have all night."

Borsie began to whine thinly in his terrier mode.

"Oh, so you want to go to the Maple Leaf. Is that it?"

A slightly more active vibration passed through Borsie's body, but he suppressed it. Now Borsie could not meet Hank's eye. He looked around instead, flicking his brows a bit.

Clearly, to go along to the Maple Leaf was too much to ask--but what the heck. He waited on the top step, quivering with assent.

Hank considered. He tried to place Borsie in his imagination among quietly hunched figures at the Maple Leaf's bar. The place was warm and dimly lit, full of old sweat-darkened wood, and some selection or other from Abba or Kenny Rogers was always playing on the juke box. Would Borsie cause any trouble there?

"Okay, Borsie Boy. Come on."

With a shocked expression Borsie looked up at Hank, his heavy eyebrows hitting their highest distention, and then, grasping that yes, really and truly, his request had been granted, he gave full rein to his happiness. He lurched and jumped, bouncing and batting himself against Hank's legs. Twice he lost his footing on the stairs and went down in a clattering heap--only to lunge back up, all this huff and puff designed to somehow get Hank to move faster. Clearly, he wanted to be transported immediately to that mysterious place into which Hank disappeared each evening; the time and distance in between, short as both may be, could be nothing less than unbearably long.

"Jesus Christ, will you settle down. You're acting like a kid."

Borsie would not be contained, however. It took half the distance there for Hank to quiet him down enough to be able to lay down the law.

"Okay, now listen up," he said seriously. Borsie dropped his ears and assumed an attentive expression. "Remember what I've taught you. Don't go sniffing everybody, don't bark out loud. You have to be quiet and well-behaved. Otherwise, they won't let you stay. This could be your first and last visit. Got it?"

Borsie signaled his understanding by lowering his brows and walking beside Hank with very precise steps.

"Don't be eating stuff off the floor neither. I might feed you something, but then you take it from my hand. And whatever you do, don't go walking up to people eating and hang around looking starved."

Not three seconds in the Maple Leaf and Borsie was completely overwhelmed by instinctual drives.

"Hey, whose mutt is that?" yelled the bartender--Danny by name, and a good friend to Hank. Borsie, at that moment, had both paws up on the lap of a woman about to bite deep into a cheeseburger.

"He's mine, Danny," said Hank. "A little excited." He gave Borsie a cuff behind the ear. "Get down, you idiot!"

"No, he's all right," said the woman. "Come here, boy," she said and began to break a bit from her cheeseburger.

"Please don't feed him, lady. Bad habits, you know."

Borsie ignored this and barked, hound style, to let the woman know that feeding him was all right despite what this other person was saying. The woman, divided, held the morsel aloft. Borsie's round hazel eyes were pinned to it.

Hank glowered at him. "Did you hear me?"

Everyone at the bar turned to watch. Arnie Treacher was there, a first-class jerk in Hank's estimation, and he piped up as expected.

"Is that the dog your girlfriend left you? Looks like a hound in a mink coat." He burst out laughing so that his stupid little pork pie hat nearly toppled off his head, but Gladys DeWitt, though deep in her cups already, came to Hank's rescue.

"No, he's pretty," she said. "He'll calm down in a minute."

Borsie seemed to interpret her tone as something he could distort into permission to proceed with the cheeseburger. He made another leap, and Hank grabbed him by the ear and dragged him to the bar.

"Really, Hank," said Danny. "I can't have an animal in here."

"He's a service dog!" Hank announced, inspired.

"You've got some PTSD I don't know about?"

"Let's just see, Danny. If he doesn't straighten himself out, then I'll never bring him in again."

Borsie immediately sobered up. He flickered his eyebrows with surprise, as if suddenly coming to and wondering what had come over him. He sat up straight beside Hank's stool and struck a pose like Rin-Tin-Tin, very regal with tongue slithering huskily.

"That's better," said Hank.

"See that!" said Gladys DeWitt to Arnie Treacher.

"So what's his name?" Danny asked. He brought Hank his usual, a scotch and water. Hank spelled the name, not wishing to get Borsie's ears pricking.

"You remember that lady I met in here a couple of months ago, the one with the frizzy red hair."

"And this is the dog you said she left?"

"Yep."

"Imagine that," said Gladys. "The poor thing." She reached down with difficulty and patted Borsie's head. Borsie, maintaining immaculate élan, took the pats as if suffering them--certainly not something he needed.

As Hank's scotch did its medicinal thing, and he felt himself becoming more and more the person he imagined himself to be, he began to relate other details of the Borsie story: how the dog had found his way back to the woman, how he had mourned her disappearance, how he had agreed to accept Hank as his new owner. Everyone at the bar was visibly moved.

"That's some dog," said Danny.

Hank nodded in agreement, but when he looked down he discovered that Borsie was no longer there. He looked around, but no Borsie.

A woman came out of the ladies' room and, passing Hank, muttered "He's in there. Followed me in."

"Oh, Christ," Hank thumped his empty glass on the bar.

"Now, Hank," Danny began.

"Just hold on a minute." Hank had stomped off toward the ladies' room and there he threw open the door without thinking. Luckily only Borsie was within. At first he would not come out, shocked and embarrassed to be discovered in a place which, only upon entering, did he realize was taboo. Hank dragged him out and led him to the front door.

"I gotta talk to him," he said to Danny.

Outside on the cold walk Borsie listened with drooping head as Hank read him the Riot Act. "Who the hell do you think you are? Do you think everything in there was designed for your personal eating and sniffing pleasure? Where the hell are your manners?"

Borsie was terribly ashamed. He swayed his head from side to side and actually appeared on the verge of tears. He had been very bad. He could see that now, but earlier he had somehow figured that it was all right, or at least that he could get away with it.

"Now you're going to get one last chance," Hank announced seriously. He shook his finger sternly at Borsie. "We're going to go back in there, and if you don't mind your manners you're out. Understand?"

Borsie attempted, by coming more erect but still remaining a bit hunched, to appear both capable and humble at the same time.

"All right. Let's go then." Hank whisked his finger toward the door. Borsie instantly struck his Rin-Tin-Tin posture and marched forward, then waited at the door, the model of restraint.

When they were back inside again, Hank on his stool and Borsie beside it, Hank called out in a loud voice, "Gimme one of those Slim Jims, Danny."

"You're not going to *feed* him!"

"You'll see. Just give me one."

Danny obeyed and Hank, holding the Slim Jim up and partially peeling it open for everyone to see, looked down at Borsie. All eyes in the Maple Leaf watched in silence.

"Okay, Borsie Boy. Speak!"

Borsie reared back his head and let out two, stiff bloodhound woofs.

"Good boy. Speak again!"

Borsie spoke again.

"Very good, Borsie. Now, stay! Stay, now." And with that Hank lowered the Slim Jim to the floor and dropped it before Borsie. Arnie slid from his stool and peered around Gladys DeWitt. Borsie sniffed the Slim Jim.

"Stay-ay," Hank warned.

Borsie stay-ayed. He raised his head and looked around as if there were no such things as Slim Jims in this world.

"Okay, now, Borsie." Hank took a languid pull on his newly refilled glass and then held out his hand. "Give it to me."

Borsie dipped his head and gently took up the thin tube of unbearably delicious meat into his teeth, careful to keep his tongue from it. Then, deftly and quietly, he dropped it into Hank's outstretched hand.

Hank held up the Slim Jim all around and all the scattered patrons applauded wildly. After a final flourish, he rewrapped the snack and slipped it into his pocket. "Later," he said to Borsie.

"What a great dog," said Danny.

"I sure wish Borsie was mine," said Gladys. "Come here, Borsie Boy. Give me a hug."

Borsie came to his feet and with as close an approximation to a Tennessee Walker as his short legs would allow, he pranced up and down the length of the bar receiving pats and scratches of tribute. Then he collapsed at Hank's feet again, suddenly exhausted.

From that night on Borsie was a welcome, even looked-for guest at the Maple Leaf Tavern. He and Hank went out each night together, Borsie running ahead to wait at the mail box, and then dashing off to the Maple Leaf where he sometimes gained entry before Hank himself. Hank even forked over thirty-five dollars to an emotional support pet certification agency and received a good-enough looking certificate in return, which he folded and kept in his inside jacket pocket...just in case.

As time went on Hank began to wonder why he had every settled for life without Borsie. Living alone as he had, for so long, he had forgotten what it was like to share things with someone else. He recognized these feelings as the ones that he had begun to allow late in the second week of the new woman's stay--feelings which he now centered around Borsie. Strangely, he now felt sorrier for the woman than he did for himself. By leaving she had deprived herself of things that Hank and Borsie now did together--like reading over Hank's letters together.

Hank read all of his letters to Borsie before sending them. Borsie, of course, did not understand them, but he was a great listener. Through this ritual, Hank discovered errors and weaknesses in his letters. He discovered too that he could not send on a poor quality letter after reading it aloud to Borsie; it would have reduced the animal somehow, reflected on its integrity, and Hank found he could not do that.

And this went both ways. There were certain matters about which Borsie made his feelings known, and chief among them was Hank's drinking. Evidently inured to drinking

masters by his previous ownership, Borsie tolerated alcohol-induced mood swings, but only to a point. When Hank became surly or especially cynical, and began to inveigh against just about anything that popped into his head, Borsie would rise and quietly remove himself from the room. It did no good for Hank to demand in a loud voice that Borsie return and present himself, nor to get up and go after him. On such occasions, Borsie always went to the same place, a spot near the bathroom radiator, and simply waited it out. In time Hank stopped demanding or glaring because Borsie had a way of looking when he was disgusted with Hank. He would raise a single eyebrow and look away as if he'd rather regard a fallen wash cloth than Hank in such a condition.

Hank gradually admitted to himself that his drinking, as Borsie seemed to realize, was not under such great control as he had been pretending. There were patterns to it: weekends and holidays, whenever everyone outside of his plastic-covered windows seemed to be enjoying the comfort and love and peace that he or she had probably earned, Hank would ease himself into a generalized love of the world with a little Cutty Sark. As always, this worked--but only to a point. Following upon the initial glow was always the realization that he, Hank Sterling, was not loved nor wanted nor useful. He then would rant, but now here was Borsie to give the lie to it. He began to drink less, and then only rarely.

Actually, Hank was the sort of man that solid alcoholics are jealous of. He kept himself well short of total debilitation. Someone like Gladys, who wore all her hearts on her sleeve, could openly praise Hank for being able to stop at a certain point. Others, like Arnie Treacher, merely backbit about it, attributing what others saw as power of restraint to simple lack of nerve. Few people knew that it was mostly because he wanted to follow his wife to a decent death. But regardless of the reason, his curbed vices allowed Hank some important options. Most important among them, he retained the ability to seek and find work, and then, for a time, to hold it. In fact, just about the full sum of Hank's dignity was based on his occasionally being able to work, build up savings, and stay off welfare. Sometimes his drinking lost him a job, but more often it was the boring or short-term character of the employment he was able to secure. But he saved, and that allowed him to be a loser that somehow still resembled a normal citizen. He wrote his public-spirited

letters with the confidence of one who participated in, felt accountable for, and was affected by the processes that he criticized.

When Borsie began to get sick in mid-December, Hank happened to be near the end of his latest bundle of savings. Borsie had developed a limp which, maddeningly, came and went. Hank would examine the paw of the offending limb, the right rear, and always find nothing. Then the limp would go away and then, a few days later, return. Gladys told him that he should take Borsie to the vet.

"The vet? What do you mean, the vet?"

"A vet. Dogs need doctors just like people do."

"I don't know any vets."

"Then take him to Angell Memorial."

"Is it expensive?"

"I think they charge based on income."

But it was no joke when, a few days later on their way out for a morning walk, Borsie collapsed on the stairs. Both his back legs suddenly folded under him, and he slid down the last two stairs and walked about pitifully dragging his behind.

"What's the matter with you?" Hank yelled in alarm. "Get up!"

Borsie could not get up. Hank, shaken, bundled the two of them into the cab and asked the driver for Angell Memorial.

It was surprisingly close, a wide redbrick building that he had never paid much attention to. Inside, the two of them waited side by side on serviceable wooden benches bolted to the waiting room walls. Then Hank was called to the counter by a young woman to fill out certain forms. Hank answered truthfully about his most recent employments and that part of his savings still intact.

"Are you on unemployment now?" she asked.

"No, and never have been."

"Then you live on your savings."

"For the time being."

"All right. Now, may I ask why you separated from your last job?"

"Separated?" Hank considered the term; perhaps it could find a useful place in one of his letters. "You mean, why was I fired?"

"Oh, you were fired? Well, what I should be asking is why you were. Fired, I mean."

"I get it! For shoving the jerk I was working for."

Heads turned in the waiting room. Hank sensed this and blushed.

A young woman in a white coat came in through swinging doors and called out "Wishbone? Is Wishbone here?" The woman had a stethoscope hung around her neck.

A frumpy lady with a white cat struggled to her feet. "Right here," she said, and then followed the woman down one of several hallways.

"You're here for emergency treatment," said Hank's young woman, "so your pet will probably be seen. But we'll have to make a determination on your ability to pay.""

"Whatever it is, I'll pay it."

He was allowed to go back to Borsie. But he had only just sat down, arranging Borsie in his lap again, when a short, squarish man in white came bursting through the swinging doors.

"Borsie?" he called out, eyes flicking up from his clipboard.

"Right here!" cried Hank, coming to his feet. He followed the man down a hallway.

"Are you the vet?" he asked the man's back.

"One of them. Right in here now." The man had turned on a heel and now flung out an arm toward a doorway of one of the examining rooms. "Let's get Borsie up on the table here."

Hank put Borsie down atop a simple bare stainless steel. Borsie flopped immediately, tongue snickering away, and looked around the room. Briefly, his eyes met Hank's, checking, then looked away. The short glance cut Hank to the heart. He knew Borsie now, he knew when Borsie was trying to look brave.

The vet was reading from his clipboard. "Leg's bad. Now what does that mean?"

"They don't work," said Hank. "He fell on the stairs this morning."

"Fell?" The vet already had his stethoscope clipped to his ears and was working its other end up and under Borsie's middle.

Hank explained the whole history of the malady in more detail.

"Okay, I got it."

The vet wore his glasses swung up on his forehead, and these he now dropped to his nose and peered at Borsie. He swung away the stethoscope and took Borsie's head in his

hands and drew down his lower eyelids with his thumbs. He looked into Borsie's ears, felt his nose, dug his fingers in behind Borsie's jaw. All the while he kept muttering to the animal: "So, what's the matter, Borsie, eh? What is it, an infection? Tell me what it is."

Hank was relieved; and that, to his surprise, was what it was--relief. As he watched the veterinarian, watched the expert movement of his hands, he felt empowered suddenly--as if he could, with the proper help, make a difference.

The vet's hands were working slowly down Borsie's trunk, then they slipped under to his abdomen and all at once Borsie let out a tremendous yelp. He tried to get to his feet, but the vet restrained him. "Okay, Borsie," he said. "Come on, just a little longer."

Borsie wasn't liking this at all. He kept ducking his behind away.

"Borsie!" said Hank sharply. "Lie down."

Borsie lay down, but only after shooting Hank a significant glance to let him know that he was not long going to take on trust something that he didn't fully understand.

"Uh huh," said the vet, feeling around low in Borsie's belly.

"What is it?"

"Something. Maybe an ulcer. Ultrasound will tell us."

"Ulcer? You mean an ulcer?"

"Well, it's smaller than a bread box but bigger than a jelly bean. That's the scientific explanation anyway. How's his appetite been?"

Hank thought back. Actually, there had been more and more Dog Chow left in the bowl at every refilling time. He hadn't even thought that significant.

"Come to think of it, not so good. I didn't think dogs could get ulcers."

"Sure. How long you had this dog anyway?" The vet's hands had never stopped working, and Borsie, though he occasionally flinched, seemed to have settled in with the knowledge that somehow this momentary discomfort was going to pay off.

"Not long. He's a recent acquisition."

"Well, then, you wouldn't know. The said fact is that lots of dogs suffer from them."

"I didn't know."

"Sure. Laboratory animals especially. The cigarette companies used to have a terrible time with it. They wanted to see how fast a dog would get cancer from cigarette smoke, but they kept dying off from ulcers first. Really messed up the jerks' research."

Hank was horrified. He peered closely at Borsie. "So how could he get an ulcer?"

The vet raised his glasses to his hairline, and then gave Borsie a whack on the rump. "From a tough life," he said, then hunched over a laptop and rifled in some notes. "How're you treating him? Like indoor dog, regular walks?"

"I treat him good, I think. 'Cept someone else owned him before me. Some woman drunk."

"Is that right." The vet kept typing.

"So how come he never complained before?" Hank asked. He had been standing the whole while and now, tired all at once, he sat down across from the vet on the little Formica bench. "How come he didn't whine or something until now?"

The vet looked up at Hank, then lowered his glasses and took another look at Borsie. "I'd say that Borsie is not the complaining type."

The two men regarded the animal for a long while until Borsie modestly looked away.

The vet finished up with a lot of questions that Hank had trouble answering. Had he noticed any blood in Borsie's stools? Did Borsie seem especially thirsty recently? Hank hadn't known to be alert for such things. Then he had to wait outside while Borsie was given an ultrasound and further examined. In the waiting room he spent most of the next hour jotting down the names of cigarette companies he could recall. Finally, the vet--who he forced himself to remember was named Lorenzo Barrila--came through the doors again and talked in whispers with the young woman who'd dealt with Hank earlier. Then he broke off and came over to Hank, where he squatted down and placed a hand on Hank's forearm.

"I'll give it to you straight, Mr. Sterling," he said. "It's serious. A bleeding ulcer. You say you never saw anything in his stools or urine?"

"Never," said Hank. He felt his face blanching, go cold.

"We've got to operate right away. Today. You ready for that?"

"Hey, if it's gotta be."

"It's gotta."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Yep. And abdominals are one of my specialties."

"That's great," said Hank, but he choked on the word. When he wiped his eyes his hands trembled. This was terrible, he was falling apart.

"Just hold on," said Dr. Barrila. "Talk to Ms. Stanley there about the arrangements. I've got to go and prep Borsie."

"Okay, sure."

Hank drank down Ms. Stanley's calming drone like a thirsting man.

"As far as I can tell," she said, "you're capable of paying."

"Damn straight."

"It may seem like a bad time to talk about this, I know, but it's best to get everything as clear as we can at such times. We'll get you a hospital card, the works."

"Let's do it right," said Hank. "Can you bill me?"

"Of course. As long as we both understand the process."

"We do. Do you think he's got a good chance? I mean, he's not going to die or anything, is he?"

"I'm afraid I'm not the one to answer that question."

"Oh, you mean God," said Hank.

The woman looked surprised. "I meant Dr. Barrila, but you've got a point there."

There was a clatter at the swinging doors, and Hank looked over to see Dr. Barrila standing in the doorway. "Hey, Borsie says not be worry," he said. He saluted and went back through the doors.

Complications set in. Borsie came out of the operation nicely, but his health had been undermined. He caught pneumonia, and every day, after job-temping at his go-to freight loading company, Hank came in and watched a thin, wan-looking Borsie sleeping in a wire cage. Sometimes Dr. Barrila accompanied him, sometimes he could not. Every day for half a week, Hank came and stood outside of the shoulder-high cage with his fingers hooked through the wires. He simply watched as Borsie, his trunk wrapped in white bandages, quietly slept. Once Borsie did awaken, but he only stared druggily at Hank and did not seem to recognize him.

Friends at the Maple Leaf inquired nightly about Borsie.

"I can't tell anything yet," Hank told Danny. "He just keeps sleeping."

"The medication," said Gladys. "Sleep is a healer."

"Is that right?" More and more he was seizing upon every bit of positive information, scientific or merely popular.

"Don't you worry," said Arnie. "He's a tough bird, that dog. He's gonna pull through, I can feel it."

Hank wondered if he'd been wrong about Arnie.

Then, exactly one week after the operation, Hank was awakened by a call from Dr. Barrila. "He's up and around," said the vet. "Come and see."

Hank rushed down to Angell Memorial and there was Borsie, up on his feet and tail wagging. He and Hank banged their heads against the wire trying to get to each other.

"Oh God, oh God," said Hank, fumbling with the latch. "Can I hold him?"

"Sure," said Dr. Barrila. "Just get out of the way so I can get the door open."

Borsie lurched through the cage door into Hank's arms and suffused his face with a hundred licks.

"Careful of his middle."

"He knows me!"

"Of course he does," said the vet, shaking his head. "Christ."

Back in the examining room lots of staff members crowded in to witness the reunion. Hank and Dr. Barrila stood across from each other at the table. Ms. Stanley held Borsie, who kept looking up at her--a little familiarly, it seemed to Hank. A few of the vets, most of them women, and several attendants that Hank had come to know stood about smiling.

"Okay, now we're going to get him back on solid food," said Dr. Barrila. "Emulsified meats, and on the lean side--for digestion. You can get it creamed from the butcher, or get a meat grinder yourself with a fine grind attachment. Commercial stuff won't do. Too spicy."

"It's steak tartar for a couple of weeks, Borsie," said Ms. Stanley.

"What about his teeth?" Hank asked the vet.

"You've been doing your homework. Just give him a chew toy, no bones. And here's some pills too," he added, producing a small plastic bottle. "Get it refilled when you bring him back in two weeks for the follow-up."

"Just give them to him?"

"Grind one in with his food every day," said an attendant. "Or break it up and mix it in."

"What about the bandages?"

"I'd take them off now," said Barrila, "but it's cold outside. "Let's let a little hair grow back first."

"Should I exercise him?"

"Just short walks for a while."

"Things are going to be better now, Borsie Boy," said Hank during their cab ride home. "I think they're going to ask me to stay on at Sintered Metals, right down on Washington Street, breaking down junk machines. I used to do that, you know. And we're going to get a better place when I can save up the money. A place with a yard."

Three months, just after the weather broke, Hank and Borsie moved to a ground floor one-bedroom apartment with access to a small yard. It's a few extra blocks to the Maple Leaf, but Hank thinks that's just as well. It cuts down a little on the number of visits. Borsie likes the new place, but he still chafes at the soft food. He eats it, but he really can't see what all the fuss is about.