



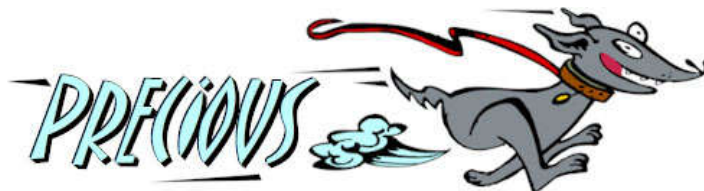


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by Andrew Wingfield

According to my mother, I am a gifted person who lacks the ability to focus. The truth is I focus very well on things that hold my attention. Like this dog that just passed the door of the restaurant and the woman who's passing the post office a block back, giving chase. Strange-looking dog: needle-nosed, bat-eared, with a collie-sized body and stubby dachshund legs.

This peculiar animal trots down the opposite sidewalk with a smile on its face. The woman is a block behind, yelling for the dog to stop. A large black woman, built to proportion unlike the dog—long legs and arms, ample everywhere. Her jeans are tight and her hightops aren't tied, which means the dog can hold its lead without trying too hard.

"PRECIOUS," the woman yells. "STOP NOW PRECIOUS. DON'T MAKE ME COME AFTER YOU."

No wonder the dog is smiling.

Left to my own devices, I would sit here behind the steering wheel and watch them pass, not leaving the car or entering the restaurant until they had vanished. A rich moment: late-spring evening, soft air, the street still damp from this afternoon's shower. A sleepiness in our little crossing, a few cars waiting for the light to change, a delicate, lemony scent descending from sidewalk locust trees, a feint odor of rot rising from the storm drains. And then this fabulous commotion.



But I am rarely left to my own devices. Harriet sits next to me and she wants to know what the woman is yelling about. In Cleave Springs, the cause of such shouting isn't always so benign.

I point to the dog.

Harriet gets out of the car and penguin-walks into The Avenue. The woman has stopped in front of the plateglass window to the right of the restaurant's door. I expect her to yell again but instead she produces a big blue bandana from somewhere and begins to mop her brow—a large gesture, dramatic.

Harriet stops on the double yellow line and turns back to me. "Come on." I see moments, Harriet sees situations. And this situation is tailor made for us—an opportunity, in my wife's view.

Harriet gains the sidewalk and plants herself smack in the middle, to cancel any thoughts the woman might have about pursuing the dog further.

"That's your dog?"

The woman looks suspiciously at Harriet, as people sometimes do when she inserts herself directly into their business. Then her eyes shift, scanning the sidewalk up ahead.

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[15](#).

“My cousin’s dog.”

“Your cousin live in Cleave Springs?”

The woman shakes her head. “Prince George’s.”

“We’d better catch that dog quick, then. It’s lost.”

Concern carves two deep lines across the woman’s brow. “That girl, she’ll kill me if something happens to Precious.”

“Don’t worry,” Harriet says, turning back to make sure I’m on her flank. “We’ll get Precious back, won’t we darling.”

“We’ll sure try.”

I could stick around to thank Harriet for giving me this chance to practice my chivalry, but that would increase the dog’s head start. It would also delay Harriet’s next move—the reassuring hand placed on the woman’s shoulder, the invitation to come into the restaurant. Harriet will seat her in one of the front tables, so she can see out to the street. She’ll bring the woman a soft drink and make small talk to distract and calm her, create a human connection. By the time I return with the rescued dog, my wife will know the woman’s story. Harriet will have built another bridge between New Cleave Springs and Old Cleave Springs, between us and one of the lifelong denizens of the neighborhood that we and our restaurant are helping to transfigure.



One problem: I’m not catching the dog. Oh, I’m trying. I’m running at a good clip, building momentum, warming to my task, but wily Precious is onto me. The dog runs with its tail straight back for aerodynamic efficiency. But the bat-ears stand at attention. Every twenty or thirty seconds one of the ears twists back in my direction and the eyes follow for a quick confirmation. No matter how fast I go, Precious keeps the distance between us constant.

It doesn’t hurt the dog’s cause that I’m shod for the dinner rush—leather-soled loafers Harriet picked out to dress up my black jeans and my crisp blue shirt. No competent judge of such things would ever call me fit, but I was terribly fit at one time, a punishing open-field tackler on the high school football fields almost two decades ago. My mother has noted that I am one of those people who barely skim the surface of their own capacities the vast majority of the time. Without trying, I hold a deep well of energy in reserve. I am six-foot-two, with a fairly long stride. For each step I take, Precious needs ten or so. Surely I can outlast this dog.

If it takes a while, so be it. What an evening to be running down The Avenue. Now is the transition time between work and dinner. People are out. Precious and I weave among them. Gordon the attorney is locking up his office, but Emily the candle maker will keep the shop next door open for another hour. Gordon waves at me and smiles, shifts his wire-framed gaze up The Avenue in the direction of Precious. I smile too. A real smile, mine. I like being known on The Avenue, even if it is a guilty pleasure. My life here is a bitter pill my mother must swallow every day. Poor Mother. She preferred it when I was known in the powerful rooms whose doors my first wife opened for me. It squared with her aspirations for me when I was still playing politics across the river.

Mother was skeptical of Harriet’s charms when they first met, and utterly immune to the charms of Cleave Springs when Harriet and I first moved here. It was a more rugged place back then, yet Harriet and I fell for its cute old houses and gritty main drag. America is a rich land growing poorer all the time in places. Cleave Springs was a real place, a place that rose early last century with the great railyard that spawned it and then declined as the railyard went quiet. A place that had tasted death and was waiting to be coaxed back to life.

By now The Avenue is rife with reclamations. Emily the candle maker, a mother of two, is recently out of the closet. Gordon the attorney is a refugee from one of the big Manhattan firms. I was a few months clear of the divorce when Harriet found me over in the nation’s capital, still skulking and conniving with the rest of the hyenas on the Hill. She plucked me from the wreckage of my first attempt at making a man’s life, talked me into a version of myself that sounded sweeter than Mother’s.

And here he is now, the reinvented me, a dutiful husband playing the role his wife has scripted, a decent citizen committing a useful deed, a novice restaurateur in jeans and loafers, dashing down one of The Avenue’s better blocks. I follow Precious past the pottery studio, the custard shop, the yoga center, my body alive with the running, stimulated by the chase, for the first time chafing slightly at this

costume's constraints. I undo the top buttons on my shirt, slip the cuffs open to admit some air.

And then Precious stops, veering into the bed of pansies that fronts the Thai restaurant.

"Is that all you've got," I tease, slowing to a walk. "I'm just getting warmed up, little dog."

"Hey Precious." I shift into my dog-soothing voice, squat at the edge of the flowers. "Why don't you take a whiff of this hand. Why don't you check me out a little."

The dog stands six feet from me panting rapidly, tongue lolling, tail brushing the barberry at the back of the bed. What ears! Each one is almost as large as the skull, broad at the base and curving up to a rounded tip. Soft and deep, a pair of big mitts made for fielding sounds. The nose is dark and sharp. The top lip is up off the teeth.

I move to narrow the gap between us and Precious snaps at me once before darting away. I rear from the dog's strike, note the sound of canine teeth clicking together. I take several quick strides, lunge for the retreating animal with both hands but grasp air only.

Up once again in a running posture, I continue down The Avenue's wide, shaded sidewalk. I'm running faster now, feeling freer than before. I'm glad to know that Precious isn't just going to cave. I'm ready for a little competition, pleased somehow by this new hint of danger: the ivories are in play. What a relief to be out here, instead of back in the restaurant where I am still trying to fit. Harriet wasn't raised to this line of work either, yet she has taken to it. From dining room to kitchen to bar, she moves anywhere with a natural air of command—even more convincing since she's started to show.

I pick up the pace, welcome the sweat spreading down from my armpits and up from the small of my back.

Precious has plenty of go left in those stumpy legs. We're coming up to the Lily Pad, Cleave Springs' chief café, and though I probably know half the people at the outdoor tables I'm not looking for familiar faces now. I'm locked in on my quarry. I'm settling into a kind of deep, predatory patience. I've watched the nature shows, I know that wolves have more than just power and endurance going for them, I know it's their awful patience that really makes the difference. I'll catch this dog. I can wait.

The block beyond the Lily Pad is, as we say, transitional. The tacqueria and a pair of antique stores face a sealed up storefront, a failing laundry, a soup kitchen where homeless men chase sermons with meals. Three times a day, they line up out front. It annoys Harriet, the careful way I study those fellows' faces whenever we happen to pass the line. How many new leases have been drawn on each of those lives? Quit it, Harriet always says, they're not you.



Harriet. By now she and Precious' guardian are seated by the restaurant window, sipping cool drinks and talking. It's easy for me to imagine; Harriet conducts such conversations fairly often. Old Cleave Springs has been through hard times. If it's ready for anything, it's ready to talk. Most stories begin with the railyard, granddaddy worked in the yard, then daddy after him. And everything was good until the yard shut down, the families started unraveling—departures, foreclosures, addictions, arrests. Harriet listens with alarming interest: the more you tell her, the more she takes off your chest, the deeper your debt to her becomes.

Up ahead is the busy intersection where The Avenue crosses Joiner Road, the boundary between Cleave Springs and Brimslea. Precious speeds up as she nears the intersection, as if she's trying to time the light. Without breaking stride she plunges into the street and completes an immaculate crossing.

By the time I arrive the light in my direction couldn't be any redder; the pedestrian box offers an emphatic DON'T WALK. I don't walk, but run headlong into traffic, intent on losing no ground. A feast of honks and screeches. I slap a green front fender as if fighting off a would-be blocker. Foolish. Exhilarating.

When I gain the next curb I speed up to close the distance Precious picked up when the traffic broke my stride. I run hard for half a block, then settle back into my wolf-lope.

I'm content for Precious to run right though Brimslea. We'll have our showdown at some point, that's inevitable now. I'd prefer to cross the bridge over Ganders Run

and get into Hillside, an upscale residential zone where no one is likely to be watching. But what if we extended this game of preferences, Precious fleeing with fuel enough to lead me out of Hillside and into the next neighborhood? And the next? For a heady minute I indulge this vision, Precious re-cast in the role of guardian, a hairy angel leading me beyond Harriet's orbit, out past the pull of love and need and fear, into a weightless world where nothing at all is expected, a timeless black zone where no past can haunt you and no future can fall to pieces.

But Brimslea is no place for escapist; its vividness quickly hauls me in. The sidewalk here is even more crowded than back in Cleave Springs. Everyone is Salvadoran, a thriving legion of tough, diligent people doing the jobs most Americans don't want. One of these women will come to care for our newborn child in a couple of months. Some of these men humped the sheets of drywall and stacks of lumber, the wheelbarrows of brick and sacks of concrete that enlarged our tiny bungalow and made it a fit place for the coming brood. Others mow our lawn, change our oil, wax our car, toil in our restaurant's kitchen.

Harriet has Spanish enough to chat up the Salvadorans who work for us, find out what town they come from, who's spending the money they send back home. But when I pass close by the men in the restaurant kitchen, they always go quiet. It's a certain kind of quiet—playful, ironic, watchful, a quiet that pokes all kinds of holes in my shaky performance.

As I weave amongst the people now I don't hear their voices, but feel them watching me, laughing silently at me and the absurd dog I'm chasing. I endure the strong fish odor that wafts out from the FERIA del Pescado, briefly savor the smell of grilled meat and spices around El Jardin. Precious passes the check cashing place and the grocery, giving me reason to hope we'll continue along this end of The Avenue and clean out of Brimslea. But suddenly, for no reason I can detect, the dog swerves off across the lawn of an apartment complex.



I reach the lawn just in time to see Precious round the corner of a yellow stucco building. The grass in the complex is weedy and long. The stucco is moldy; brown paint peels from the trim. I follow Precious' path and find a kind of courtyard, walled on three sides by the yellow stucco buildings. Clumps of ratty crepe myrtle grow here and there. Lone males peer down from wide open windows two and three stories up. A sense of recent hush, as if my emergence on the scene has silenced a

lively exchange. I slow to a walk and scan the courtyard for Precious.

The dog has taken up a position in the joint where two of the buildings meet, back under the foliage of a bushy yew. Precious in a corner, preparing for a last stand. I laugh at the High Noon drama of it, glance up at one of the young Salvadorans in his window, then another. I'm fishing for signs of humor or sympathy. Both men show me faces of stone.

I stand ten feet away from Precious, whose ribcage puffs rapidly. The lip is up off the teeth again, the tongue lolls, the eyes burn darkly. A defiant growl rises from the throat. As I unbutton my shirt I glance over my shoulder again. Faces appear in several more windows now: older men, a few women, children of all ages. I am the entertainment.

The shirt is heavy, wet to the touch. I wrap it tightly around my left hand. Thus equipped, I assume the wrestler's pose, knees bent, wrapped paw raised for defense. All these strangers' eyes upon me, yet it's Mother's gaze I feel most acutely. No, she can't see me now, but this is how she sees her only son. Exposed, displaced, misspent.

I lunge forward. Precious bounds to meet me, leaps at my throat and clamps fiercely on the swaddled hand I raise in her path. A sudden heat there, fangs piercing through layers of cloth and skin, probing deep enough to tap the dark energy that once guided me to all the sons who suffered my furious blows on the gridiron those long-ago Friday nights. As I did then, I yell like a barbarian now, loud and long, clutch the animal's haunch with my free hand and raise both arms high above my head, the squirming body splayed in my reaching hands like a child being offered up for sacrifice.

I turn a slow circle, staring back at the watchers, surveying my options. I could hurl the creature hard against the building, dash its brains out. I could lower it to my breast and bring it dutifully back. I could bend over, pry the jaws apart, and see to my maimed hand.

I am still completing my circle, still revolving my choices when I catch sight of

Harriet and the woman, who didn't wait back at the restaurant after all, but must have trailed me all this way in the car. The woman halts the instant she catches sight of me, steps back as if I've pulled a gun. But Harriet continues toward me, impressively pregnant, moving with the determined air of a person intent on dispensing mercy or justice.

I have warned her before, but words only go so far. At long last, she's forced to see the actual me: feet planted on the ground, legs spread apart, back straight, chest bare and heaving, sweat streaming down my body, blood beginning to trickle down one of my raised arms. She pulls up a couple of feet from me and studies me with great concentration.

"That's right," I say. "I'm going to be somebody's father."

She nods.

"I'm wounded."

"I know," she says, and then steps up close to me, tips her head to the side, kisses me on the rib.

"Let go," she whispers, because she believes I eventually will.

[Andrew Wingfield's](#) novel [Hear Him Roar](#) (Utah State University Press, 2005) deals with people and mountain lions in the sprawling suburbs of northern California. "Precious" is one of a group of short stories set in a "recovering" neighborhood near the nation's capital. Andrew teaches in New Century College, the integrative studies program at George Mason University in Virginia.

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