

Joe Franklin  
870 Oak Street Apt. 7  
San Francisco, CA 94117  
[joejdf@yahoo.com](mailto:joejdf@yahoo.com)  
415.823.4711

## **Bring You Home to Me**

I TURN on the light, open the door to call the cat, and there's the coyote again. It has actually come up onto the porch this time. I freeze and stare at him and he stares me right back, neck low, hairs on end. It's been nearly two weeks and his skin hangs looser along the top of his back. His ribs peek out at me and he has a hungry look in his eyes that I know is desperation.

Sid leaps from the darkness and stops dead still on the banister and so here we are, the three of us locked in a stalemate, each waiting for movement. I make a step forward and the coyote backs up the slightest bit, keeping its eyes on me. Apparently there is fear in him still, perhaps a bit of hope. I raise a leg and bring my weight down hard on the porch's wooden planks. It sends forth a resounding BOOM and the coyote tries to turn around too fast, slips and falls on its side. "Sid, get inside!" I shout. The coyote rises to its feet and runs full speed down the steps, toenails clicking as it goes. Sid leaps off the banister and breezes between my legs into the living room. I slam the door and turn around to face him. He stands in the middle of the rug looking intently past me, then gives me his vacant cat gaze, turns and walks away.

Kyle is asleep on the floor in front of the TV with his thumb in his mouth. He's wearing his Pokemon pajamas. On the tube a lion is having a conversation with a

warthog, at least I think that's what it is, and another animal I still cannot place. He has watched the movie at least a dozen times and is still not tired of it. I walk over and turn off the set and the video player and carry him up to bed like a sack of potatoes slung over my shoulder. When I lay him down and pull the sheets over him he wakes slightly and asks if mommy is home yet. He tries to keep his eyes open but his lids can only make it halfway. They bob up and down.

"Not yet, buddy," I tell him.

If he weren't half asleep it would take more than this to satisfy him, but as it is he simply roots his thumb back in his mouth and closes his eyes. In a moment his breathing is deep and heavy. I leave the door open and the hall light on and walk back downstairs. Once there I turn the living room light off and look out the front window, half expecting to see a pair of eyes glowing red along the edge of the tree line. But there is only the garbage that's been torn into and scattered around the far end of the porch. Tomorrow I will buy large trashcans and place bricks on top of them and hope it will be enough.

Soon there is the rumble of a semi outside, the punctuation of hydraulic breaks and then a short burst of horn as it drives away. Sound carries far out here. Edie throws her purse in the corner, kicks off her shoes and drops onto the couch next to me. I grab her feet, put them in my lap and begin rubbing them. Edie has blue-collar feet. They crack and sigh in my hands.

She is a waitress at The Long Haul out by the highway and talks about the truckers by name. There is Lex, who hauls Nabisco for convenience stores between Salt Lake City and Denver; Granger, who doesn't want to get in too deep, who's only in the gig short time, wants more and is ready to quit as soon as he finds it; and Lou, who's out of business if one more of his stupid ass kids ditches another rig in a whiteout because

they're trying to make time. I've never eaten there, haven't even been inside. Sometimes she'll call for a ride but is always waiting outside when Kyle and I arrive. I think this is on purpose. I know it is.

"Ed was drunk when he came in tonight," she tells me. "I bring him his steak and potatoes and he touches the back of my leg just above the knee. Real light like. 'Come on in here,' he says."

She is looking at the ceiling, apparently not concerned with what my reaction will be. Probably bored with any reaction I might have. She fingers the hem on her blouse, replaying the event in her mind.

"Can you believe it? That man wears a wedding ring on that greasy finger of his. He grabs me by the wrist then and stands up and tries to kiss me, just as bold as can be and so obviously pleased with himself. 'Somewhere there's a woman counting on me not to kiss you back,' I say. 'She don't mind,' he says. 'We got ourselves an agreement.' 'Agreement,' I says. 'Huh. Whose agreement would that be, yours or hers? Cause nobody's ever convinced me that those things are all upright and agreed upon.' That shut him up."

Sid appears from the other room and she scoops him into her arms and begins scratching him behind the ears. When I tell her about the coyote she hoists him up, says, "You watch yourself, kitty, it's a tough world out there, and if you're not careful they'll eat you alive." The cat looks at her nonplused, like he's heard it all before.

After five years working sixty hours a week as a reporter at the *Chronicle* they gave me my second consecutive three percent raise and the added bonus of a cheap glass paperweight. I went home that Friday evening feeling like I'd been turned down for

parole. The job wasn't my real dilemma though; I could live on less; I just wasn't interested in doing so in the city where money was so important. Life in the eye of the storm had ceased to energize me; I thirsted instead for a simpler existence, one that included a dog, and it pained me to see how they lived there. Dogs are happiest when there's grass and trees and bushes to smell. They shouldn't be forced to shit insignificantly on the sidewalk. After a weekend of deliberation I walked into the managing editor's office Monday morning and gave him my notice. I emptied my savings account and spent most of it on a truck, which looked decent enough but was a gamble with a hundred and forty thousand on the odometer.

When I met Edie I'd been in the area about a week, renting a room month-to-month from an old woman who didn't have any teeth and was blind out of one eye. It was glazed over and milky blue. Her half-retarded son Robert lived down the block and would come by every day to sit at the kitchen table and shout up the stairs to ask if I wanted to play Go Fish. When I pulled into the Humane Society Edie was out front, hosing down the inside of one of the cages. I walked up and told her what I was looking for and she cut the water off and said she had to interview me before I could take one home.

We went inside and sat down in an office that had Polaroids pressed behind a layer of glass that covered the desk. The pictures were of smiling people with dogs and cats. All the happy success stories. It was early morning October and cold in the room. I remember her knees were pressed together, shoulders inclined inwards, and she was bent forward trying to keep warm. She asked me questions that were meant to qualify me for a dog, but I'd forgotten all about that. I was applying for her. I could tell from the way she bit her lip and embellished my answers, hesitating before putting them into her own

words, that she was pulling for me. I admitted I didn't look so great on paper. She frowned and said I didn't look so bad. The next day she called to say I'd been turned down because I didn't have a steady job and hadn't lived in the area for at least six months, but that she was sorry and I should come back after I'd been around a while.

A week later Robert shouted up at me to say I had company, and when I got downstairs she was standing there with Sid in her arms. She smiled and said he'd been there too long and that they were gonna have to put him to sleep. She couldn't take him because her place didn't allow pets. Did I want him? Her hair was the color of yams with the light skin to go along with it. "Sure," I said, and invited them both in for dinner -- grilled cheese sandwiches for Edie and me, leftover chicken for Sid. That was four years ago.

I wake early, throw on some clothes and make my way downstairs to clean up the garbage outside on the porch. Kyle is in the living room watching cartoons and Sid is in the dining room lazing away in the sunny spot. He stays away from Kyle, because Kyle picks him up roughly and throws him around. To cats, children are terrorists.

"Mornin', pal," I say, stopping a moment to take an interest in what he's watching. He sits Indian style no more than three feet from the screen and I think to say something but decide not to.

"I want pancakes," he blurts out.

"Go for it, you know where the eggs are."

"But I don't know how," he replies, furrowing his brow impatiently.

"You can read. Your teacher tells me you're tops in your class.... Go on, bud, make a mess." When I say this he jumps off the floor and races into the kitchen, growling

in imitation of a car shifting gears. The cat has his eyes on him and springs narrowly out of the way.

I walk out to the porch and notice a hole torn in the side of the Hefty bag and empty milk cartons, soiled coffee filters and eggshells scattered about. It hasn't rained in over two months and I realize it will take much more than a brick on top of a trashcan if he's as hungry as he seems. There's a circle saw in the basement and I contemplate trying to build a shed, complete with joints, a door, hinges and a tiled roof. It's been years since I've attempted to build anything and I lay out the plans in my mind, picturing Kyle and me, side by side, sweating it out in the sun. He will be wearing the little carpenter's belt that I give him, his hammer hanging down past his knee. Edie will come out with a glass of lemonade for him and a beer for me. She'll give Kyle a kiss on the cheek, which he'll wipe off with his hand, then she'll plant a long wet one on me, which will gross him out. I'll take her hand in mine and run it along the wood's smoothed surface until it's frosted with sawdust, then we'll look at each other and understand that this is the place we could never imagine, but always hoped we would come to. Kyle will make choking sounds and she'll go over to him and call him her little Lancelot, her little prince. She'll tell him that someday he's going to meet a girl and begin going out on dates and he'll grab his chest, faking a heart attack. Edie will laugh and turn to me and roll her eyes.

The telephone rings and I hurry inside to answer it, but when I pick up there is only silence.

"Hello?" I say.

In the background I can hear the distant sound of cars passing and the idling of a diesel engine. "Hello?" I say again, trying to sound casual and preoccupied, as if my attention were elsewhere, as if my life were not being slowly torn apart by this silent

opponent who is connected to me by more than a phone line. It takes all my strength not to scream at him to stay away from her, to leave us alone. It takes Kyle making pancakes in the next room. I don't slam the receiver down; I place it softly back in its cradle. Smoke is coming from the kitchen and I go in and throw Kyle a high five for almost creating an oven inferno.

"The fire dude's here," I tell him. "Go park your butt in the other room and he'll fix you breakfast." He rips out of the room and Sid uses his entire buffer zone to slip narrowly out of reach.

Half an hour later I'm still cleaning the dishes when Edie wakes up. She walks in shuffling her feet over the linoleum and takes a seat at the table. I hand her a cup of coffee and she sits silently for a few minutes, watching me blankly. I think she's just allowing herself time to wake up, but when she speaks it's to announce that she's considering sending Kyle away to summer camp for two weeks. Not, "What do you think of us sending Kyle to summer camp?" or "Do you think he would enjoy it?"

"Yeah?" I say defensively. "Camp costs money."

"Money isn't the issue, Staige."

"Then what is?" I ask, realizing that her parents have probably offered to pay for it, because money is the issue, or one of them anyway. There was a time when I wasn't the last to find out about these things and we would discuss them as a couple. It is hard for me to consider that it might be fun for him, because I'm afraid of how quiet the house will become when Edie and I are alone together.

"What about his friends?" I ask. "Don't you think it might be rough on him to be alone for that amount of time? My parents sent me away to day camp once and I hated it." This is a lie of course.

"He's there two days and he'll forget all about them," she says, not really trying to convince me.

"Okay then, I guess it's not my decision to make." I wait for her to ask me what that's supposed to mean so we can discuss what is really happening here.

"Don't worry, kid, you'll survive." She says this in a mocking voice and I hope she means spending the time away from Kyle, but think I'm probably wrong.

We are interrupted by a knock on the door and I hear Kyle get up to answer it. It's his friend Tony and immediately they're screaming all over the house.

"What the hell is this?" I say bitterly. "Nobody told me he was having friends over today."

I am in the room later when Edie asks Kyle if he wants to go to summer camp. I expect indecision from him, or fear, but he is curious only.

"What will I do there?"

"Just about anything you've ever wanted to," she tells him and pats her lap. He gets up and walks over, but chooses instead to sit beside her on the floor.

"You'll learn to make things out of wood, and go swimming all day. You can ride ponies if you want and sleep in a cabin and share ghost stories with other boys who will want to be your friends."

"What if it's not fun?"

"Oh it will be."

"But what if it's *not*?"

"Kyle, sweetie, you know you don't have to stay if you don't like it, but I want you to try, okay?"

He pauses and looks at me for help and I consider whether there'd be anything left to betray if I told him he doesn't have to go, because if he does I might not be here when he gets back.

"Can I sleep on it?" he asks. He has learned the adult technique of putting off the inevitable.

"Of course you can!" She pulls him in and rubs his nose. He doesn't know how he's done it, but realizes he's said the right thing somehow.

"And when it's over will you come get me in your pick-up, Staige?" I'm first happy, then sad when he says this. His words are a painful reminder of how much I have come to love him.

"You bet, Kyle. We'll go out for chilidogs and Cokes and you can tell me all about it."

"Deal!"

I can feel Edie's eyes on me, sensing that Kyle is a stronger ally of mine than she'd imagined. If I turn to look at her I will know what's to happen between us, and I cannot do it.

Later in bed I make a traditional pass at her and am almost unprepared when she responds. As we were getting to know each other we did a lot of talking. One time she told me about Kyle's dad, and how toward the end of their relationship she'd tell him that she was too tired. It was funny then, but she's tired most all the time now. Immediately I feel her distance and am acutely aware that this is it between us. Probably she's permitting my advances because she too is hoping that something good will reveal itself. For a short while I double my efforts and attempt everything I've ever done to please her. I want us to be happy together again, but there is no use. After a few minutes I stop. She

doesn't ask why. I feel like a junkie trying to kick a habit and understand that I am becoming scary to her.

"Fuck you," I say, giving in to the sudden rising of anger within me. Shit is about to fly, I can feel it. I am not ashamed, though, because this anger is the only truth in the room with us now. I stand up and look around for something to break, preferably something important to her. There is a figurine on the nightstand that I don't remember being there and I pick it up, aim for the window and send it crashing into the wall. Small bits of porcelain explode around my face.

"You can tell your chicken shit boyfriend who busted that!" I rage.

Suddenly she has come back from wherever she's been and is in the room with me. She's impressed with my outburst and there is a slight uplifting at the corners of her mouth. She raises herself up on the bed and straightens her back and sadness overcomes me as I realize she's always had nice posture. There is something wet on my face I wish were blood.

"What do you want me to do, Staige? I just don't feel it anymore." What she doesn't say is that she doesn't feel anything anymore, that her feelings for me are remnants from the past and fading fast, that she doesn't worry about how I will react, or even care what my opinions are. What I don't tell her is that I'm jealous of everyone that talks to her throughout her day, including Kyle and Sid and every little thing that shares a small, seemingly insignificant moment of her life.

What I want is too pathetic to ask for. I pound my fist into the wall, frustrated that my words can no longer convince her to feel anything. I fold myself into a pathetic heap at the foot of the bed when I consider I'll accept any lie she can think up that will soften the truth, and that I owe her my thanks for not finishing me off like that.

Many silent minutes go by. Eventually I think of how I must look to her and it's enough to get me up, to take a deep breath and fight back. I wish she would say something so I can stay a while longer. She doesn't though; she just sits and looks at me with a face full of pity, which is the only sincerity she's capable of offering.

"Fuck it," I declare, and decide to go sleep in the truck. I grab a pillow off the bed and walk over to the closet and pull the sleeping bag down from the top shelf. Once outside I unroll the bag on the flatbed and lie on my back, staring up at the treetops. The night is clear and when Edie turns off the porch light the stars pop out of the moonless sky and I stare at them unblinkingly until they lose their focus and depth. I've begun to feel as if I'm floating amongst them when the coyote's song comes from up on the hill. It is mournful and long as it pierces the night. Time and again it comes, over and over, soothingly, guiding me into sleep.

When I wake up the sun has just crested the line of trees behind the house. Sid is stalking something along the bushes out front, and as I close the door he turns his head and regards me for a moment. If he could speak he would reprimand me for scaring off his prey.

I walk into the house, begin piling my stuff in the middle of the floor, and realize I don't own much. Twenty minutes later I've got it all loaded into the back of the truck when Kyle comes down and asks what I'm doing. I tell him straight that I have to go because his mother and I don't understand each other any more. He is confused and wants to know how long I will be gone. He asks me if I still plan on picking him up when summer camp is over.

"I don't know, buddy," I say, putting a hand on his shoulder and giving it a squeeze. Part of me still hopes that things will work out between Edie and me. It is a part of me I don't like.

Kyle follows me out to my truck and I get in and start the motor. He chins up to the window and peers in, not comprehending fully, but certain that something big is up. Finally he asks me.

"Can I come?" It's hard for me to look at him, even though I must. When I do his eyes are full on anticipation and I feel myself about to make a very unwise decision.

"Sure," I say. "Hurry and get some clothes on, but be quiet about it. If your mom wakes up she won't understand."

His response is gleeful. He bounds up the steps into the house, slows down and shuts the door quietly. I sit in the truck and begin to sweat. My knuckles are rimmed white as I grip the steering wheel, half hoping she will come out and avert this madness. But in a minute he is running back down the steps toward me, wearing shorts and his new Velcro tennis shoes. He pulls a T-shirt over his head, opens the door and gets in. Gravel clangs off the inside of the wheel wells as I speed away. *Let that wake her up*, I think to myself. *Let this teach her what nothing feels like.*

I head out past the junction, then drive north along Route 89. We are less than five miles on the road before Kyle can stand it no longer. He wants to know where we are going. I tell him it is a surprise. He wants to know if it will be more fun than summer camp. I tell him that what's happening he will remember for a long, long time. He fidgets around in his seat, then gets to his knees and looks out the back window at my belongings, which are secured by a single length of cord threaded around and through the legs of two kitchen chairs, a lamp, a ficus tree and miscellaneous other items. I tell him if

he sits down and puts his seatbelt on I'll break the speed limit. "Okay!" he says, and I press the pedal to the floor. The engine growls like a throaty beast as we career down the state highway, crest a hill and go weightless as we come hurling down the other side. The truck zigzags back and forth, then lurches violently to the right, sending us almost into the ditch before I jerk the wheel in the opposite direction and we cross the median into the path of an oncoming semi. The load in the back shifts, sending the ficus smashing against the back window as I swerve quickly back into our lane, easing off the gas in a struggle to keep the truck straight. The semi rushes past and I look over a Kyle as he releases his grip on the dashboard and then screams in ecstasy.

"You enjoy that, bud?"

"Yeah!"

"Wanna do it again?"

"No!"

It is a good laugh and I reach over and ruffle his hair, then fall silent and choke back tears, wishing I could stretch this moment into a lifetime of happiness. *Who's to say?* I think to myself and turn down a dirt road, where I immediately pull over and ask Kyle if he would like to drive. A thin smile of uncertainty spreads across his face as I reach out and pull him onto my lap, release my foot from the brake and let the idle ease us forward. His little hands grip the wheel as he sticks out his tongue in concentration, pinning it to the corner of his mouth while I rest my chin on his shoulder and help him steer. The needle on the speedometer edges past ten, then fifteen, and when it reaches twenty I let go and tell him that he's doing it, he's driving.

Soon we come upon the painted sign that peaks out from behind the trunk of an old pin oak and I take my foot off the gas and ask him if he'd like to try a left turn. He

nods his head confidently so I point to the sign and the path just beyond it, and when I say “now” he uses his entire upper body to crank the wheel and we roll over the little bridge that spans the ditch dividing the road from the parking lot of the Humane Society. I point to an open space off to the side and he steers us over, and when we’ve stopped he turns around and gives me a curious look that I respond to with a grin.

“Hop out and take a look around,” I say. “I need to talk to the man inside.”

“Really?” he asks, his eyes widening.

“Yes,” I say, “really.” He sprints to the door that leads to the kennels and disappears behind it and I get out and walk toward the office.

We pull back into Edie's driveway an hour later, and when she hears the truck she hurries outside before we've even come to a stop. Her eyes shoot daggers at me as she closes the distance between us. Kyle gets out in a hurry and cuts her off, wanting to tell her everything. She puts her hands on his shoulders to calm him and then turns to me, seeking an explanation that I am not likely to give her.

“How could you?” she demands, her lips pressed together, her face red with anger. “You *know* you had no right.”

“I know,” I reply, my voice faltering in betrayal of the bold front I'm trying to affect. “But what about *his* rights, huh? I mean, come on, Edie, fucking summer camp?”

“These are *not* your decisions, Staige.”

“Please,” I say, wearily setting the puppy on the ground. “Just... I know.”

I step beyond her and head slowly toward the house. When I open the front door the dog squeezes through with its tail wagging and its tongue hanging out. Sid is in the living room and the dog bounds immediately toward him, knocking over a lamp that falls to the floor with a crash. The dog gets right in the cat's face and begins to bark. Sid hisses

and stands his ground as I walk over, scoop him up and bring him tightly to my chest, then turn and walk back out onto the porch where Edie is standing with Kyle by her side, holding his hand. He is acting brave, as I instructed him the man of the house should. When she releases him he steps forward and wraps his arms around my waist, struggling with the moment and what it all means. Edie also takes a step forward, then checks herself. She appears ready to cry, this woman I am so horribly in love with. Suddenly I understand that this can't be easy for her either.

Not knowing what to say I look at the two of them and wonder how all of this could really be happening. A dreadful urge to apologize rises within me, to try and explain it all and plead for their forgiveness. But I am afraid of what I will become if I stop now, so I go, we go, Sid and me, together.