

NICOLE BAYES-FLEMING

## **BETWEEN HER TEETH**

ANNA GOT OUT OF BED AT SIX, threw a coat over her pyjamas, and walked to the front door. She wondered why the dog wasn't waiting there already, bottom wiggling with anticipation, and she opened the door to see if the sound would make the dog come skittering over from wherever it was hiding. The cold from outside was already sneaking through the open door and sucking on her fingers. Then she remembered the dog was dead.

The dog had never been hers in the first place. It had belonged to Emmanuel, who got it back when he and Anna lived in the same city and met for coffee most afternoons between shifts or classes. He had been finishing his master's degree in computer science, and she had gone back to school for teacher's college. They'd met at the restaurant where they both worked, and they instantly became one another's best friend. It would have felt too sentimental to admit it at the time, but it was a fact.

Once Emmanuel got the dog, it came with them everywhere. They would sit on a patio and tie its leash to the outside of the railing, and everyone passing by would stop and ask to pet it. Or else they would get coffee and walk through the park with a red cardboard Tim's cup in one of Emmanuel's hands and the dog's leash in the other.

Anna hated that the dog was named Samantha and that Emmanuel refused to shorten the name to Sam. When she said, "I went for a walk with Emmanuel and Samantha today," it sounded as though Samantha were a real person with an apartment, a shitty job, student loans, and bad dates.

Samantha was a gift from a boyfriend Anna had only met twice and didn't like. The boyfriend never came to parties, movie nights, or afternoon walks. "He's *busy*," Emmanuel said. It was his first real relationship, and he was touchy about it. When Anna said, "You shouldn't let him walk all over you like that," Emmanuel countered, "You don't even know him."

The boyfriend was the first crack in their friendship. The second crack came when Emmanuel took a co-op placement in Waterloo for six months

and only came back to the city on weekends. They saw each other at the bar, but without their coffee dates or shared work shifts Anna found she knew less about him.

After the co-op, Emmanuel got a permanent job in Ottawa. They had a good-bye party at Anna's apartment, and the first year he was there she took the Greyhound up to visit. They went skating on the canal and bought Beavertails that warmed their hands and mouths, and afterwards Anna's ears turned red as they walked around the green-roofed parliament buildings. Then months went by and became a year, and Anna realized the last time she'd spoken to Emmanuel was briefly on his birthday. She felt bad about it, but not bad enough to call.

Anna learned about Emmanuel's death from Facebook. The only mutual friends they'd ever had were from the serving job they'd both quit eight years prior. She knew some of his new friends, and he knew some of hers, but those connections had fizzled out along with their friendship. It felt awkward, as though perhaps their friendship had never truly existed.

In the end, it was Rochelle who called her. Rochelle was Emmanuel's sister, whom Anna knew vaguely from big-life events, like graduation and the going-away party. She told her that Emmanuel had wanted her to take care of Samantha if anything happened to him. Taking care of Samantha was a joke they had when Emmanuel first got the dog. He said, "Anna, you be her godmother," and she said, "I can't, I'm not Catholic," and they both laughed. All of their friends knew, back then, that Samantha was Anna's goddaughter. Anna even bought her a giant bone and said, "This is for your First Communion." Anna also used to take care of Samantha whenever Emmanuel was out of town, dropping by the apartment to feed her and take her on walks, and he would leave her a bottle of wine to say thank you.

Anna had not quite forgotten about all of this, but she had catalogued and filed away the memory, so when Rochelle called it took a moment for her to sort through what was being said. Anna tried to get out of it as gently as possible, but it turned out that Rochelle was allergic, the boyfriend was long gone, and Emmanuel's parents were too old to take on a diabetic yellow Lab, so she borrowed her mother's car and drove to Ottawa for the weekend. It was June, and the parks were lined with tulips and tourists. She stayed overnight at a hotel by the market, and the next morning she picked up the dog from a coworker-friend of Emmanuel's.

Anna had not anticipated that the dog would come with so many of its

own belongings. There was a rather large bag of kibble, a box of toys dented with teeth-marks, a wide floppy dog bed, her leash, a bottle of pills, and a file with medical records of immunizations and prescriptions printed off for Anna to take to the vet in Toronto.

The coworker helped her load up the trunk, and Anna laid an old towel over the back seat so as not to get dog hair all over the car.

The sky was beginning to swell with grey clouds, and there was a sharp breeze that warned of rain. The coworker said, “You two must have been close for him to leave you the dog.”

“Yeah, we were. We kind of grew apart, though.”

The coworker nodded quietly. The sky began to spit up as they went back inside the house to get Samantha. Anna wanted to shake the coworker’s hand and get on the road before the storm hit.

“I . . .” she started.

“Did . . .” the coworker said.

They both laughed nervously.

“Go ahead,” she said.

“I was just wondering, did you . . . were you surprised when you heard about . . . you know . . . how he . . .”

The Facebook post had been vague, written on the family’s behalf and posted from Emmanuel’s own account. There had been no cancer diagnosis, car crash, or random act of violence that would have gotten people’s attention. During their phone call, Rochelle only said, “It’s nice to think he finally found peace after struggling for so long.”

When they used to work together, there were days when Emmanuel would call in sick because he could not get out of bed. Sometimes he could not sleep at night and would then sleep all day, or he would not sleep during the day either but still could not get out of bed. Of all the things the boyfriend said to him, they finally broke up when he told Emmanuel to see someone. Emmanuel said, “I thought seeing you was enough.” He recounted this to Anna one evening when they were sitting on her couch drinking wine and watching reruns of *The Office*.

Later, much later, Anna said something similar, like “maybe you should try therapy” or “lots of people take medication when they feel this way.” He snarled and called her pathetic. They didn’t talk for two weeks until he called to apologize and she forgave him.

This pattern repeated itself for a few years. She would recommend

therapy, and he would say that there was no money for it, that he did his best work late at night, or that antidepressants made him nauseous. They wouldn't talk, and then they would, until they finally stopped. She couldn't even remember anymore whether it was the distance or the depression that had made them lose touch.

Anna squeezed Samantha's leash in her hand, told the coworker a lie, and walked to the car as it began to rain. The entire ride home all she could smell was wet dog.

After that, she walked the dog twice a day, sent her to the groomer's every four months, and crushed up pills into her food. The dog developed arthritis, walked with a limp, and required gluten-free kibble that sucked up Anna's paycheques. Anna had seen the same man for eight months, and every time he came over Samantha would growl at the sound of his car. Anna attributed at least fifty percent of that break-up to Samantha. Samantha also howled whenever it rained and peed on the carpet whenever it stormed—the carpet of the townhouse Anna was renting, which wasn't supposed to have any uncaged animals. She waited to be found out or tattled on, but the landlord never said a word.

A few weeks before Samantha died, Anna took her for a walk in the park—the same way they had every day for the past three years, and all those years before, walking alongside Emmanuel and sipping burnt coffee. Two or three pigeons poking around on the grass startled as Anna and the dog drew near. Samantha lunged and caught one of the birds between her teeth. She had never managed to capture one before, and she didn't know what to do with it, so she dropped it in shock and looked up at Anna, awaiting judgement. The bird twitched, and then it was dead. Anna had never seen something so violent play out in front of her eyes. She wondered what to do, and then she just tugged on Samantha's leash and they walked away.

She had been mad at Samantha for the rest of the night. "Rotten dog," she said. "You killer!"

Still, she pleaded for her to get up when she faltered and fell on the carpet. She rushed her to the vet in vain hope and petted her head during the inevitable injection. She cried in her car on the way home, thick tears that jerked mascara down her cheeks in violent smears. The vet offered her the ashes, and Anna felt too guilty to leave them behind. The dog had always made her feel guilty, and it was a relief, really, to turn away from the open door, go back to bed, and not have to walk around outside in the cold.