

Nature of the Beast

Ashley Wakefield

I moved to a new house for the first time when I was sixteen. It was unplanned; my uncle had had a stroke and come home to live with the rest of my family. We needed more space, and I found myself in a new house before I'd gotten used to the idea of leaving the old one. One night, after a hurried dinner of pizza on paper plates, I took my dog for a walk to explore our new neighborhood. Somehow, when I wasn't looking, Rex had gotten old on me, grown out of his exuberant puppy-hood. His shaggy black hair was faded and streaked with grey. I thought it made him look dignified, a fitting image for the sedate pace he kept beside me. I led him out of our cul-de-sac and down a narrow, quiet side street lined with rows of old growth trees in full summer bloom. The leaves shielded us from the worst of the late August heat. It might have been the scenery, or the silence, or the pleasant inner hum of familiar ritual, but we walked for far longer than I had meant to. Sunlight faded. There were no street lamps to guide us, no moonlight strong enough to shine through the trees. I turned quickly back the way I'd come and set off at a swift walk that soon became a run, heart beating loudly in the darkness. Rex was panting beside me; hot saliva splashed my bare leg as he sat down on the street. I stopped short and started to tug on his leash, to drag him along the way he'd done to me so many years ago, but he was too tired to move. For a frantic moment I considered leaving him, running back to the lighted windows I could see in the distance. He looked up at me then with eyes as brown and lost as my own. We stared. I couldn't go. I sat down with him instead and wrapped him in a hug, hot tears falling on his salt-and-pepper fur.