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Dog Names

When you are zero seconds old, you will be born. You will be thrust into this new life and you will be scared and alone and naked and suddenly very cold. When you are 256 seconds old, you will still be scared but suddenly very warm in a blanket next to someone who looks just like you who is also wrapped in a blanket. A woman will hold you, and a man will hold the one who looks just like you. You will be named Baxter and Teddy. For a long time you will not know which one you are.

When you are four years old, you will have your first memory and it will be of you and your older brother on the swings outside of your Cape Cod-style home. Ranger will push you off of his favorite swing, and you will cry. Mom will kiss your knee where it's scraped. It will suddenly stop stinging. That night in the twin bed you share with Teddy or Baxter—whichever one you aren't—he will tell you that he thinks your brother Ranger is mean. You will fall asleep.

When you are six, you will learn you live in New England and you and your brother will ask why you don't have accents. Your teacher will say that you do and just don't know it. You will say no, you don't. Your teacher will explain that everyone has an accent. Then you will wonder why your parents said you live in America when you really live in New England.

When you are seven, you will be teased by the neighborhood bully for having dog names. You will be confused. You are not a dog and that is your name.

You will tell him that when you get a dog you can name it after him so that he can have a dog name too. He will push you. You will ask him not to do that. He will do it again. You will cry and go home. You will tell your dad, and he will say that's the way of the world. You will tell your mom, and she will ask what his name is. You will tell her Sylvester. She will call Sylvester's family. She will yell at his mother. She will keep bringing up dog names which you won't understand. You will be angry at her because she doesn't yell about the pushing. When she hangs up, she will tell you that the Miller family can go fuck themselves. You won't know what that is but you know it's bad because it's what Dad shouts when his team loses—or when he watches the news. She will tell you Sylvester is a cat name anyway.

When you are eight years old, you will have your first crush. She will be in the second grade class that you and your twin brother are in. Her name is Annie. On Valentine's Day you will give her a Hello Kitty Valentine, and she will call you by your brother's name when she hugs you. After that, you will think she's very ugly and you will not like her anymore.

When you are nine, you will sit with your twin on the couch and watch movies when you're supposed to be asleep. Mom will not notice because she will have already gone to bed. Dad will not care as long as you don't complain in the morning. He will buy you two his favorite DVDs. You will watch *Shawshank Redemption*. It will be good. You will not understand it. Your twin will say that he'll do this every night with you, but by the third night he's too tired to stay awake through the movie and his snoring will ruin it.

When you are still nine, you will hear your mom cry upstairs at the toilet and curse herself for not getting her tubes tied. You don't know what she's talking about, but you don't ask her. When you do get the courage to go upstairs and ask, she will slam the bedroom door. You will go to Ranger's room instead and find your twin sitting on Ranger's bed playing *Call of Duty*. You will join and forget about your mom.

The next day, your mom will sit all three of you down on the couch, and she will sit next to your father. She will tell you she has great news. You will have another sibling soon and that we should all be excited, and you will have questions, but she won't answer them. You will ask Ranger later, and he will

tell you what you want to know. Suddenly your parents will seem very dirty, and you will lay in bed at night unsure of why you want to know more.

When you are ten, you will get a little brother and he will be named Max. Mikey Piccone will say your family breeds like dogs and that's why you all have dog names. You will tell him his family acts like white trash and that is why they all have garbage children when they're sixteen.

Max will have beautiful curly blond hair and it will confuse your family because your dad has black hair. Your friends at school will make fun of it, saying your mom cheated. You will laugh along but secretly you'll wonder. You will think you shouldn't love Max if he's not related to your dad. After all, you love your dad more. But you will be ten and curious. One night, you will creep into your parents room when they are asleep and you will steal your mom's phone. You will read through her messages. You won't find anything of note. You feel ashamed. You creep into Max's room next and kiss his forehead and tell him he has beautiful blond hair. You tell him you love him.

When you are eleven, your dad will find an abandoned kitten behind the barbershop where he works. He will bring it home and you and your family will have your first pet. Your father will jokingly say, "We're a cat family now!" and your brother will look at him quizzically and point out that your last name is Barker. Ranger will add that you all have dog names. Dad will shush him. Mom will name the cat Sylvester.

When you are twelve, you have the same best friend as your brother. That best friend's first name will start with a M and his last name with a D, and you will think it's cool to call him Doc. Doc will not think it's cool. You won't stop saying it, though, because it sounds cool and you want other people to think your group is cool. You will notice Doc starts hanging out with your brother more and will start calling you "Teddy's twin" because he knows it will piss you off. You will tell him your name is Baxter. He will jokingly say it's a dog name anyway. Teddy will stay quiet, and you will wonder why your own brother chose someone else over you.

You learn about recessive genes that year, and people will stop saying Max isn't your real brother. You will try to explain this to Max, and he will gurgle

along in agreement. You will pat his beautiful blond hair and understand he won't understand.

When you are thirteen, Teddy will tell you about his crush without mentioning their name. He will tell you they are tall and funny and that they like science and that their eyes are really, really green. You will ask for pictures so you can see if they're hot. Teddy will tell you it's a secret and not to tell anyone at all. You will tell Doc and you two will tease Teddy about it. Teddy will stop sitting with you at lunch. You will write him off as being an ass who can't take a joke. At lunch he will sit with a new crowd and you will notice how he has made a new best friend who is taller than you and funnier than you and who has very, very green eyes and is named George, and you will understand why Teddy wanted to keep it a secret. You will apologize once you turn out the lights and climb into your bunk bed. Teddy will pretend not to hear, but you will see him put his headphones in and blast music before you can say anything else.

When you are fourteen, the summer before high school, you will have your first kiss with Polly Langley from the YMCA summer camp. You will tell Max excitedly after you get home. You know he won't understand. Max will be a toddler and from his unorganized little mind he will blurt it out at a family dinner. Your family will laugh, and though your cheeks will turn red, you start to laugh too. Your dad will sit on the bed with you that night and tell you about the birds and the bees. Teddy will listen too and smile nervously when you and your dad talk about your crush. Your dad will ask Teddy if he likes any girls. Teddy will say he hasn't found a good one yet. Your dad will put his hand on Teddy's shoulder and tell him that the right one will come along. Teddy will nod. Later that night, Teddy will tell you he and George are dating and not to tell anyone at all and this time you actually don't.

When you are fifteen, you will be on the baseball team with Doc. You won't be the best, but your coach will say you're on track for varsity. Your team will call you "Pup" because you have a baby face and a dog name. You don't mind when they say it. Max will be your biggest fan and will come to all of your games with your parents. Max will become your team's unofficial mascot, and after games he runs bases with the players. Doc will call you his best friend one night when you are both drunk and you will call him yours.

Teddy will invite George over for a family dinner and introduce him as his boyfriend. Your dad will raise his eyebrows, then sigh and say, "At least I don't have to worry about you getting anyone pregnant." After the meal, he will invite you, Teddy, Ranger, and George out onto the porch for beers. You will sip shitty beer under the moonlight until it's time for your dad to drive George home. You will watch Teddy kiss George goodbye, and you see your dad look away. You will wonder if it's because he's gay, or because it's his son. You will decide it doesn't matter; Teddy is happy.

When you are sixteen, you will have friends over to get drunk in your basement on your birthday. You will watch *Shawshank Redemption*. You will chug vodka. You will pretend it doesn't burn. George and Teddy will cuddle on the couch and you will cuddle Alissa Muchelli, from math class. Doc will fall asleep after his third shot. Soon Teddy will be asleep too, and you will talk to George and Alissa about life. You three will drink more, and you will laugh loudly as you help George to the bathroom. Once you get there, George will start to cry out of the blue and tell you he might be bisexual and ask you to go get Teddy. You will run downstairs, but Teddy is too tired to move. You will run back to the bathroom with the bad news, and George will think you are Teddy and before you can explain, he will kiss you. When you push him off, he will realize and cry harder. You will go downstairs and lose your virginity to Alissa to prove you're not gay. Alissa will say she loves you, and you'll nod and fall asleep on top of her.

Teddy will hate you for a month after his break up.

A month later, when you are still sixteen, Alissa will tell you she's pregnant. Through tears, you tell your parents, and they tell you that you have to decide what to do. They will not help you anymore. You will start to date Alissa. You will take care of her and do what she asks, and you will say, "I love you." You will not love her. You will, however, love what's growing inside of her. You will ride your bike to her house after practice and read stories to her growing belly. You brainstorm names and think of what your baby will look like. You will learn it's a boy. You daydream of playing catch with him and tying his shoes, and you will be excited to be the best dad ever. You will count down the weeks until he is born. You will quit baseball to get a job at CVS and take all the hours you can get. Your grades will start to plummet; soon you'll skip school altogether. You will work for as many hours as they let you. You will look at apartments online that you could afford in a year or two, and though you will be nervous, you will be excited to be a father.

When you are still sixteen, Alissa will go into labor nine weeks early. You will rush to the hospital with your mother. You will see Alissa's parents crying, but you won't see Alissa. You will run into the hospital room and see Alissa

holding Matthew. You will realize something isn't right. Your baby is blue. The umbilical cord got tied around his neck in the womb, and you will realize Matthew didn't even make it into the world.

When you are still sixteen, you and Alissa break up.

When you are seventeen, you will walk the hallways of school with Teddy and Doc by your side. You won't talk as much as you used to. You will have a new girlfriend, Patricia, but you won't love her either. You will watch your grades fall even lower. You will pick up cigarettes. You won't go out much; instead you spend your days and nights playing video games with Ranger or taking care of Max. Teddy will try to talk to you, but you usually won't listen. Your therapist will hate you as much as you hate him. You will cry occasionally. In October, George will walk by with his new girlfriend and call Teddy a faggot, and you will punch him so hard his jaw breaks. You will be expelled and get a job doing landscaping with a family friend. Patricia will dump you.

One day, Max will come into your room and tell you he has a present. You will ask what. He will say you have to guess. You will learn it is not a goose or donut or a firetruck, and it will make Max laugh that you guessed those things. He will hold out his present to you. It will be a brand new baseball he saved up his allowance to buy. You will start playing catch again and tying Max's shoes and being the best brother ever.

When you are still seventeen, you will be on a walk with Max and you will stop to pet a dog. He will have fluffy white fur and he looks like a corgi except his ears don't stick up. He will be very friendly and lick your hand when you go to pet him. He will make Max smile, and you will kiss his head when you stand up to say goodbye. You will ask the old man with the leash what his dog's name is. He will tell you the dog's name is Baxter. You will hear Max laugh, and you thank the old man and suppose that if you have to share your name with a dog, at least it's a very nice one.

When you are eighteen, Max will get a lung infection. You will take time off from work to sit with him at the hospital while your parents are at their jobs. Max will tell you about how he wants to be a scientist someday, that he likes astronomy the most. He will show you his books about the stars and name them all. Max will be in the hospital for three months and you get in trouble for playing catch inside the hospital room, even though it's just a Nerf ball. Max will giggle mischievously when the doctors yell at you two. Soon, though, Max will stop wanting to play catch and will instead sleep all day. Soon the infection will grow stronger and spread throughout Max. Soon you

will push the blond hair off of his forehead and kiss him goodnight. It will not be a good night. Max will not see the morning.

When you are still eighteen, you will quit cigarettes and exchange them for weed. You will hope your lungs will fill with smoke and you won't be able to breathe. You hope you will suffocate too. You will get a vasectomy.

When you are nineteen, you will wave Teddy off as he boards a plane to go to college. He will hug you last before he goes and tell you he loves you. You will say it back.

Ranger will take you into work with him at the library and you get a second job there. You will spend a lot of time reading. You will learn a lot, especially about astronomy; you will be able to name all the stars. You read about how stars are born and how, even more fantastically, they die in an explosion. You will learn how black holes are formed and what comets are. You will learn about other planets and galaxies. You start to spend your nights outside staring up. One night you will be there smoking with your girlfriend Jen, and she will ask why you are crying. You explain that Max used to love stars before he passed. He was eight, you tell her, and loved catch and had beautiful blond hair and always made you feel better and that he died a year ago today. She will ask if he was a golden retriever.

You two break up.

When you are twenty, you will go back to school at night to get your GED. Your teacher will tell you that you are really smart and will ask why you dropped out. You say other things came up. You will not mention Matthew.

When you are still twenty, you will look through family photos and wonder why you all have dog names. You will realize that actually you were the only one with a dog name because you don't have a nickname. You will realize Ranger is a nickname for Randolph and Teddy is short for Theodore and Max was short for Maxwell and that none of those are dog names. You will remember when you asked your mom where your name came from and she told you that it came from your great-grandfather. You will wonder if he ever was told he has a dog name. You will be jealous of your brothers for being able to say that their real name isn't a dog name when people told them they had dog names.

When you are twenty-one, you will go to a party at Doc's college and you will drink a lot. You'll meet a girl there named Ginger, and she'll ask you if you want to go back to her dorm. You will. Once you're there she'll pull out

whiskey, and soon after will start looking for condoms. You are adamant that you need one. You will tell her you can never be too careful. You will tell her about STDs and how people can get pregnant even after a vasectomy and you won't be able to keep it up, and suddenly Ginger will have an idea. She will pull out a baggie of white power and line it up on the desk and snort some through her nose. She will invite you to do the same. You will. It doesn't help. She will invite you to do some more, saying that it doesn't always kick in at first, and you will. Suddenly, sex won't matter to you at all and you will spend the night in hysterics, watching your hands shake.

When you are twenty-two, you will be in an apartment you won't recognize with a woman you won't know the name of. She will ask you if you want to smoke up afterward. You will say yes. You will sit on her fire escape, jittery from the lines you did before you came out here. After a few moments, she will ask you what your name is. "Baxter Barker. Yours?" She will take a long hit and pass it to you. "Danielle Adley." You will watch her eyelids flutter as she thinks and you will realize she has beautiful eyes. Then she will light a cigarette, but choke on the smoke and abruptly start to laugh for what seems like forever. "You ever been told your name makes you sound like a fucking dog?" You will take a long hit too and tell her no, no one has ever mentioned it before. Her eyes will show surprise but you will not see because you will be looking up at the stars instead. You will think they are even more beautiful than her eyes. She will set up a few more lines and you will go back inside. You will not remember anything else that happened that night.

When you are twenty-three, you will wake up in an ambulance somewhere in New York City and you will see paramedics trying to hold you steady even though you can't feel yourself moving. You will see yourself vomit, though you won't feel it. You will be so tired it hurts and your muscles will feel like string. You will not remember most of that year. You will remember your parents talking with the doctor outside of the hospital room, and then your memory will jump to a week into rehab when you have group therapy. The doctor will ask what makes you feel happy, and one girl named Emily will say stargazing.

You will be in rehab for six months, and most of them you will spend talking to Emily about the stars. You will show her constellations from the windows and you will be able to name every star. You will tell her about how stars are born, and even more fantastically how they die in an explosion. You will tell her about how black holes are made and what comets are. You will tell her about other planets and galaxies and she will hate it. She will ask you why

you must explain everything in the world around you when you could just enjoy it for what it is. You will think she must be right, and you will be quiet and sit and stare up at the stars and not worry about understanding anything.

You will ask her what she's here for and she will tell you alcohol but you will notice she always covers up her arms even when it's hot. You will tell your whole family about her on the phone and they will be hesitantly happy for you. Mom will tell you Sylvester has died and you will tell her it's a miracle he survived so long in a dog family. Mom will not think it is as funny as you do. Teddy will talk to you four times a week. You will tell him about Emily and the program and how well you've been doing. Teddy will talk about his new job as a tech monkey at a law firm and tell you about a guy named Brian who works in television in New York. He says they met online. You will congratulate him and he will congratulate you.

About a week before you leave, you will tell Emily you love her so much and that you want to spend the rest of your life with her once you get out of here. You will tell her you'll wait for her to get out. She will break down in tears and tell you she can't—she is married and has a daughter back home in Connecticut. She is only there to get better for her. She will tell you she loves you too, but no matter how much she hates her husband, she has to be there for her daughter. You will ask her daughter's name and she will say it is Jada. You will tell her that's a beautiful name.

When Doc will pick you up, he will ask about this girl Teddy's been telling him about. You will tell him everything, and then you will tell him you want to forget it. You will lose contact with her when you leave rehab. You will cry occasionally.

When you are twenty-five, Ranger will marry a girl from back home named Sara and you will all travel to Massachusetts to see the wedding. You will be a groomsman and as you watch the wedding you will imagine how beautiful Emily probably looked on her wedding day. You will shake the idea from your head.

When Teddy is drunk later, he will tell you about how badly he wants kids with Brian and how he's gonna marry him. You won't drink much anymore, and you will take the chance to apologize to him for being such a shitty twin. He will ask what you mean and you will apologize for the fact that you told Doc about his crush and for being sent to rehab and for being depressed and for dropping out and for the pregnancy happening and for the pregnancy failing and for falling for a girl you can't have and for the cocaine and for letting Max die. Teddy will stop you and tell you that you have nothing to apologize for and that none of that was your fault. He will hug you and he will tell you that you are his best friend and you will tell him he is yours.

You will get a job at a planetarium and you will get to tell kids every day about the stars and black holes and comets and other planets and galaxies and they will love it.

When you are twenty-seven, you will be the best man in Teddy's wedding. He and Brian will look beautiful together and you will joke with them about having children. Teddy will laugh but pull you aside later and will ask you if you know of any women who might be willing to be surrogates. You will say no.

Later in the night, Ranger will come sit next to you and ask you if Teddy had asked for you to find him a surrogate. You will say he mentioned it. Ranger will sigh and say Teddy already asked his wife to be a surrogate but that she wasn't sure she could give up her child. He will tell you the whole thing is a mess. You will say that at least Teddy won't get a girl pregnant accidentally and you will laugh and sip shitty beer under the moonlight for the rest of the night while staring at the stars.

When you are still twenty-seven, Ranger will have his first child with Sara. They will christen their son under the name Gerald Barker and you will hate the name but you will thank God it wasn't a dog name.

When you are twenty-eight, you will get a phone call from a woman in a panic and you will immediately recognize her voice as Emily's. She will be at the hospital and she will ask you to come meet her. You will speed the forty-five minutes there. You will meet a little girl in the waiting room of the emergency room who looks like Emily. She will introduce herself as Jada. You will ask her what happened. You will ask her where her mommy is. She will shrug and stay silent. You will see Emily walk up and she will hug you and thank you and cry. Her crying will make you cry too. You will ask where her husband is and she will tell you he's been shot. You will ask by who. She will say she doesn't know over and over again until the police come for her at the hospital and arrest her. You will drive Jada to the precinct and you will wait for her aunt to come get her. To occupy Jada, you give her a book about stars from your car.

Occasionally, Emily will call you asking for help or money for a lawyer, and you will eventually stop accepting her calls and realize she was not who you thought she was.

When you are twenty-nine, you will date a girl named Jasmine from the gym. You will have a lot in common. She will love baseball as much as you do and you will regale her with stories of your childhood and your brothers and you

will tell her about Alissa and Matthew and Max and the cocaine and Emily. You will show her constellations while sitting on the hood of your car and you will be able to name every star. You will tell her about how stars are born, and even more fantastically how they die in an explosion. You will tell her about how black holes are made and what comets are. You will tell her about other planets and galaxies and she will love it. In turn, she will tell you about writing. She will tell you about her favorite stories and be able to retell every single one. She will tell you how characters are born, and even more fantastically how they die in glory. She will tell you about how villains are made and what subplots are. She will tell you about other worlds and universes and you will love it.

She will listen intently to every single word you say and you will listen just as intently to every word she says. She will learn you inside and out, just as you will learn her inside and out. She will make you feel spectacularly alive and you will fall in love with every inch of her being. You will fall in love with every inch of her soul and mind and body and you will suddenly realize how beautiful Jasmine would look in a wedding dress. You will ask her to marry you.

She will say yes and you will get married in a small ceremony with only Teddy, Ranger, your parents, and Doc there for you. It will be one of the happiest days of your life and you will cry when you see that Jasmine looks even more beautiful than you ever could have imagined in a wedding dress. You will kiss her with sticky tears on your face and she will wipe them off and kiss you back.

She will call you her puppy dog, and it will make you the happiest you have ever been.

When you are thirty-one, Jasmine will tell you she wants children with you. You will tell her you want the same thing, but that you had a vasectomy when you were eighteen, and that it's too late now to reverse it. She will bite her lip and ask if Teddy could donate sperm. She will point out it's your DNA too, since you're identical. You will think about it at night and you will hold Jasmine close and wonder what the best thing is.

When you are still thirty-one, Teddy will approach you and Jasmine and ask if Jasmine would be willing to be a surrogate for him and Brian. They explain that they have always wanted a child, a daughter especially, and that they would like to have a surrogate in the family. You and Jasmine will look at each other and you will realize this is the best thing for everyone. The only problem is the matter of who would get the child. They will agree to two pregnancies, where you will get the child from the first pregnancy and they will get the child from the second.

When you are thirty-two, Jasmine will get pregnant through artificial insemination with Baxter or Teddy's sperm—whichever one isn't you. You will all eagerly await the first ultrasound and you will learn it is twins and Teddy will be so happy for you two. You will think about what your father said when you were fifteen and you will tell him it looks like Teddy got a girl pregnant after all.

A few months into the pregnancy, you will learn how hard it is for Jasmine. The doctors will recommend terminating the pregnancy but after talking it over with Jasmine, you decide to go through with it. You will explain to Teddy that Jasmine's body cannot go through this again and you will apologize profusely for letting him down. Teddy will pat your shoulder and thank you for doing everything you could.

At one of the ultrasounds, you will learn it is a boy and a girl. You and Jasmine will rejoice. Secretly you've both always wanted a son. One night Jasmine will turn to you and will confide in you that she doesn't think she could handle two children. She will tell you she is scared, and she will tell you that she made a promise to Teddy to give him a child. She will tell you she thinks you two should realize this is the last shot, and that she wants to give one of the twins to Teddy.

You and Teddy will talk. You will tell him that you want the kids to be close to each other like you and he were as kids. You will tell him that you want them to know they are twins. You will tell him you want him to have a child. He will thank you.

When you are thirty-three, Jasmine will give birth to a boy and a girl with beautiful blond hair and you will love them both so much and you will promise to love them no matter if they get sick or are gay or get pregnant too young or use drugs too often. You will hold them close for a minute before Teddy becomes a father. When you are holding your newborn son, you will ask Teddy what he will name his newborn daughter and he will say Cat, because that is not a dog name. He will ask you what you are naming your newborn son and you will say Max because that is not a dog name either.