

Killing Dogs

Sylvia killed Randy's dogs Tuesday evening.

She wounded Silky with her first shot, and she didn't like that. She aimed carefully, her next shot, and blew the top of Silky's head off.

She wanted to kill both dogs cleanly and quickly. She didn't want to cause them unnecessary pain. She thought about the possibility of bullets ricocheting off the water, too. She wanted it to start and end in the back yard, with no bullets flying wild who knows where.

She fired three shots and killed both dogs. Davie and Marie woke inside the house and screamed in panic. Sylvia put the pistol down on the concrete and ran into the house. Her children had run to the back door. She brought them outside onto the lawn and calmed them down. She kept them away from the pool.

Silky sank. Kylie floated. Sylvia wondered, *why the difference?* Blood diluted to pink in the chlorinated water.

Two policemen came, and one reporter. Sylvia advanced on the reporter. "Get out. This is private property, and you are trespassing. Get out." He took their picture as he left, but he left. She held her children's hands. When the reporter went out the gate, Sylvia and the children turned to face the policemen. Davie and Marie started crying again. Sylvia wondered if they might drive the policemen away as they had driven away the reporter.

The tall, youngest policeman stood close to them. The shorter man walked around the yard. He picked up the pistol Sylvia had left on the concrete near the pool. The younger man looked at the dead dog still floating in the swimming pool. He stepped toward Sylvia and the children and touched his pistol in its holster, as if to remind everyone of his function there.

He asked questions, and Sylvia told him what had happened. She said, "I'll speak more to you when I have the children quiet." He asked more questions, and Davie and Marie approached hysteria.

Sylvia said, "It's your choice. I'll get my children calmed down, or you can deal with their hysteria and my hysterical anger. There's no one who needs to be caught and nothing that needs to be done. You have the weapon, and you can see what I did with it, and I told you I had good reason. I'll tell you more about it when I calm my children down."

The policeman called in and reported. They all went into the house, and Sylvia put the children to bed. Then she told the policemen what had happened in more detail.

“So you can arrest me for shooting dogs, disturbing the peace, or for discharging a firearm in the city limits, and I’ll wake the children, and they’ll be hysterical again. You can take us all down to the station and have a mess on your hands, including charges of false arrest. I was totally within my rights, and you can’t even legally take my pistol. You’d better go back to the station, and when you get your paperwork taken care of, you can call and arrange to ask any further questions you might have.”

Which is what they decided to do, since Sylvia was a reputable woman, with respectable property, and the dogs, according to the law, were hers, jointly with her husband.

Who arrived unaware and found a police car in the driveway and policemen in the living room. Sylvia let them tell Randy what they would. By then, they wanted out, but they also wanted to be sure there was no more violence. Sylvia said nothing directly to Randy.

Randy blinked rapidly when the police told him what had happened. Sylvia saw he tried hard to stop blinking, but he couldn’t. She felt almost no identification with him, as if she stood at a distance, only observing.

Randy said he would guarantee there would be no more shooting, which Sylvia thought was brave and presumptuous of him, and the policemen left.

Randy walked out into the back yard. From the second-story window, Sylvia saw him looking into the swimming pool in the harsh artificial moonlight from the mercury lamp that held the night a small distance away. He got the long pole they used for cleaning the pool and reached into the water. Sylvia turned away from the window, walked in, and checked the children in their rooms. They slept.

Sylvia slept in the upstairs bedroom and locked the door. Randy slept downstairs in the spare bedroom. Sylvia didn’t know if he tried the upstairs bedroom door. He might have wanted his pajamas and robe, but she didn’t do anything about it.

In the morning, the children talked together in low voices. Davie asked, “Mommy, did you shoot the dogs last night?”

For a moment, she thought she could let it be their dream, as they thought it must be in the bright morning light. “Yes, I shot them.”

“Are they dead?”

“Yes, they’re dead.”

“Were they in the pool?”

“Yes.”

Davie reported to Marie. Randy stayed close for a while. In the garage, in the yard. He came in from the back yard. “I have to take the dogs out in the country and bury them.”

He waited for Sylvia to say something, but she didn’t respond.

He said, “ Would you go with me?”

“No.”

“I’m going to take Davie and Marie with me.”

“No. They’ll stay here with me.”

She watched him. He started to go. He wanted to say more. He started to go. He looked at her and said, “Sylvia....” He let what he had started to say die. He left.

The children were helpful and obedient. Marie asked, “Mommy, did you kill the dogs because they were in the swimming pool?”

“That was only part of the reason, Marie. I shot them because they were dangerous to me, and to you, and to Davie.” She picked Marie up and hugged her.

Perhaps she would need to assure the children she wouldn’t shoot them for disobedience, though she hoped they would see it themselves. Randy, that was different. It might be fun to shoot him. The legal problems afterward would be much rougher than with the dogs. She wondered if there was any reason beyond that, but she dropped that line of thought and went on with what she needed to do through the day.

Sylvia told the judge the dogs would not accept commands from her, and Randy wouldn’t help her establish control over them. He wouldn’t show her how to command them. He wouldn’t show them they must respect her authority. He enjoyed commanding them by merely pointing, while Sylvia could not get them to mind, however she might command, ask, or threaten them. Yet he often left them in the yard when he left, so Sylvia had to try to put them in their pen or keep the children in the house.

She told the judge the dogs would not tolerate the children. Kylie bit Davie, because Davie walked too close. The bite was not serious, punctured skin, a little blood, but for the fear it caused Davie, it was severe. Randy saw it as of no significance and called Davie a cry-baby.

Then Silkie growled at Sylvia and bared her teeth when Sylvia tried to put her in the dog pen. Sylvia went upstairs and got the pistol. When she returned to the back yard, the dogs swam around and around the pool, and she shot them.

Sylvia thought, “ A gun is a wonderful thing. Don’t let anyone tell you it isn’t guns that kill. I couldn’t have done anything with those dogs without a weapon that allowed me to

kill them from a distance. Dogs are fast and strong, and they have sharp teeth. With the power to kill them from a distance was the only way I could do it.”

The judge said she understood why Sylvia had shot the dogs. She said, “If a dog attacked my child or me, I would have the dog destroyed.”

Sylvia wanted to say, “You’d have it done? If you can’t handle it yourself, hire me. I’m good at it. Experience counts.”

She said nothing. It was a hearing, not a trial. Randy answered questions the judge asked him, but he volunteered nothing. He didn’t disagree with anything Sylvia said. Afterward, Sylvia left the building, got into her car, and drove home. She didn’t look back to see what Randy did.

At home, the children settled back into their routines. Randy and Sylvia had no routine. Randy slept downstairs. The morning after the hearing, David and Marie left for school. Randy started to leave, turned in the doorway, and looked at Sylvia. Sylvia said, “You should move out, Randy.”

“I don’t want to do that. I wouldn’t know where to go. This is my home. I’m sure you think it’s late to say this, but I want to keep our marriage and our family together.” He walked back into the house, shut the door behind him, and walked into the living room.

Sylvia said, “Your chances are better with your friend downtown.”

“That’s over. It’s been over for a long time, a long time before you shot the dogs.”

“I killed your dogs, Randy.”

“Yes. I know that. I understand what happened, with the dogs and with me. I became something I didn’t mean to be.” He walked the length of the room and then back. Beyond him, outside the windows, the big trees in the yard showed a dozen colors of autumn leaves. “I changed, a little at a time. I became more and more something I really didn’t want to be. I didn’t understand what was happening.

“I got caught up in the world around me. I never drank, but the guys at work have a few drinks after work. I started going with them and having a drink or two after work, not because I wanted the drinks, but because I wanted to be with everyone else. Now, I look at the men I work with, and none of them have anything that interests me. When they’re done with the day’s work, and a few drinks in the bar, and then dinner, there isn’t much left, maybe television, no thought, little thought. I don’t want to be what I’ve become. I became hollow, with no center. I let the most meaningful parts of my life slip away from me. I didn’t consider what my life would be like if I lost my family. I know you understand what I mean. You saw it

happen. You stopped talking to me about it. Why talk to a post?

"Sylvia, sometimes a person can wake up and change. I already saw what was happening. I was already trying to change, and I did make some progress."

Sylvia looked at Randy. She looked past him, through the windows at the trees that grew long before anyone thought of building houses among them. Their leaves twisted in the wind.

Randy said, "I stopped drinking months ago. I don't have a friend downtown anymore. I still didn't put everything together right, I know that, Sylvia. I tried to fight my way through half-blind. I fought to go both ways at once. I wanted to change, but I couldn't let go of what I'd started.

"When you shot the dogs, when I buried the dogs, then at the hearing in court, when you went totally out of touch and refused to care about me, I saw what I couldn't get a grasp on before. I have changed. I'm still changing, and I will be successful. Give me a chance to show you."

Sylvia looked away from the trees, dancing in the wind, at Randy. "It sounds so fluent, Randy, so simple. Presto; Randy has changed. Everything is all right. Everyone lives happily ever after. But two people can build up so many differences, it's no longer possible to live together. Divorce can become the only way out."

"Give me some time, Sylvia. I've stopped everything that isn't supportive of our family and our marriage. You loved me once, before I got so far off track. Give me a chance to show you we can do it. David and Marie are my children. I want to be your husband. I love you. We can work it out if we try."

"I don't think I feel any love for you, Randy. I look at you; I'm near you; I talk to you; and I don't feel anything at all, love or hate, attraction or repulsion. I don't know if I believe what you're saying now or if it makes any difference if I believe it or not. You don't have any more dogs to kill. You're late for work."

"I know." He picked up his briefcase and left. And left Sylvia unsure. She thought he would be gone by now. She would have helped him pack, and she would have cooperated on reasonable visitation rights. Now she is off-balance.

Yellow, red, golden, brown leaves tore away from the trees in the wind and blew across the valley. Randy covered the pool for winter.

Sylvia felt suspended in time. She didn't mind her suspension, with everything hanging undecided, with Randy patient, waiting, held at a distance, but she knew she would have to decide what her next step would be.

Winter blew cold winds down from the mountains and descended inexorably toward the lower country still safe in

autumn's warm days. Sylvia knew Randy would leave if she told him that was her decision. That might be the easiest, the simplest and clearest action to take, just say, "Randy, leave."

She watches. Randy spends more time with Davie and Marie than he ever has. At first, he devoted time to them to show Sylvia he could, he would. Gradually, being with his children became a natural pattern for him. Sylvia watches Randy wake to the fact that these two small people are people now, not children who will be people someday.

Evenings, Davie, Marie, and Randy read together and talk about what they have seen and heard and what they have learned during the day. Most weekends, all four of them drive out and walk in the forest on the foothills of the mountains that rise above the valley where they live. Randy bought a guidebook to plants, another on birds, and one on mammals. Together, they learn about trees and bushes and birds and other animals.

Saturday evening, Randy, Davie, and Marie look at pictures in the bird book and read descriptions of the birds' habitat and habits. Davie asks, "Does this bird live around here?"

Randy turns to the text on the bird and says, "It does, but I think it's already gone south for the winter. We can see it when spring comes. In the spring, when the birds come back from the south, we'll see a lot of birds we don't see now."

Marie asks, "Where do they go when they fly south?"

"I don't know. When we have some weekends that are too wet and cold to go to the hills, we can go to the library and find out."

Snow dusts the mountain peaks above them. Dark clouds roll off the mountains and gather above the valley. Sunday morning at breakfast, Randy says, "Let's go anyway. If it starts to rain, we can come home."

Marie says, "Let's take our raincoats and hats."

David says, "The forest would be beautiful in a rainstorm, too."

Randy asks Sylvia, "Are you going?" She nods, leaves the table, and gathers rain clothes. She has gone on most of the outings. At first, she didn't trust Randy with the children. She didn't think he would intentionally harm them. She thought he lacked the sensitivity to meet their needs, especially in a crisis.

Her lack of trust faded. Now she goes with her family into the foothills not as a nervous caretaker, but because the forest is beautiful, even in a rainstorm.

The light of the day changes a thousand times as Davie, Marie, Randy, and Sylvia walk up the mountain between pine trees, fir trees, spruce and hemlock. Bright sun shines when clouds open spaces into the blue sky above them. Subtle colors

tint daylight as moisture plays with light from the sun speeding to the earth, bending it, reflecting it, limiting its passage by piling cloud upon cloud.

Sylvia walks up the ridge and watches the forest and the changing light in the forest. She watches her family. This time, Randy is not the leader and the instructor, deciding where they will go, reading from the guide book when they find a plant or a bird they have not yet named.

Marie starts up the trail, plant book in hand, and David follows her. He carries the bird book. Randy follows David and Marie. Sylvia walks behind all of them. At the crest of the first ridge, Marie leaves the human-traveled trail and follows the top of the ridge up, toward its confluence with the ridge north of it. Where the ridges merge, in a large meadow, they look across the top of the forest below them and at everything closer, in the trees, under and between trees.

A steller's jay comments raucously about this human intrusion into its territory and flies from tree to tree. There is no need to look up this dark blue and black bird. They know the species from other walks.

David starts up a game trail worn into the shoulder of the ridge rising toward the higher mountain. He becomes the leader by leading. Juncos and nuthatches fly from tree to tree. They know these small birds too, as they know the ponderosa pines, the Douglas firs and white firs, and the western larch.

Clouds darken and thicken above them. Far above them on the mountain, thunder rumbles, then closer. Rain sprinkles them and increases. Randy removes his backpack, opens it, and distributes rain coats and hats.

The day darkens under dense clouds and then lights up with lightning. Crashing thunder follows closely. Randy takes Marie's hand, and Sylvia and David join hands. They walk rapidly back down the trail. Brilliant lightning flashes close, and thunder roars. The four people on the trail draw closer together.

The sky and the mountains shake and rumble and roar. Rain pours down from dark, massive clouds. They see the car ahead of them, and Randy starts toward it. Marie shouts over the drumming sound of the heavy rain. "Stay away from the car, Dad."

Lightning flashes close against the mountain and lights up the day. Thunder roars. "Wait until the lightning moves away. Stay with us and wait." They all cover their ears with their hands. On Marie's instructions, they crouch, with some distance between them, as lightning flashes and thunder shakes the mountain beneath their feet.

Lightning and thunder move away from them, flash and

rumble out across the valley. Rain pours down. Randy says, "Can we get in the car now?"

"Yes." They run to the car and climb in.

David says, "That was something. Boy. That was really something. I don't think I'd want to do it again, but I'm glad we did it. I'm wet, even if I did have rain clothes."

Randy asks, "Why did you say don't touch the car?"

Marie says, "The car is metal. If you touch it, you ground all that metal, and lightning can pass through the car and you to the ground. Touching a car is very dangerous in a lightning storm."

"And why did we crouch?"

"Because lightning was so close all around us, I thought it would be wise to present the least target possible for lightning. Crouching low like that gives the least target."

Randy says, "I learn something new fairly often lately. Sometimes, I learn something that could save my life."

They pull into their driveway. The rain diminishes. They get out of the car and walk to the house. Sylvia is startled to see the rain begin to turn to ice, to feel cold water turn to hard, sharp ice and to cut at her hands and face before she gains shelter.

Cold wind blows down from the mountain all night long. Rain and sleet in the wind hammer the house.

Just after daylight, the rain stops. Clouds blow away west. The sun rises and shines into the valley, but most of the heat has washed out of the sunshine. Strong wind blows west across the valley. Sylvia watches the wind tear the last red leaves from the maple tree in the yard outside the front window.

At breakfast, Sylvia looks at Randy across the table and says, "We could go on this way for the rest of our lives."

He smiles and says, "As you wish."

She thinks she understands everything he means by the allusion. She thinks he means it literally. If she wants to go on living as they have been, he will accept that. There is enough to keep him here, even if the distance between them is permanent. He will ask nothing more.

That afternoon, Randy comes home from work early. He walks down the hall. Sylvia steps out of Davie's room in front of him. He stops.

She raises Davie's pirate pistol, aims at Randy's forehead, and pulls both triggers. Paper caps snap sharp and loud. Smoke puffs and stinks in the hallway. From the hip, left handed, she fires the suction cup projectile that is supposed to stick to smooth surfaces but rarely does. It hits Randy on the chest, bounces up against his face, and falls to the floor.

He stands still, but he blinks rapidly.

"When you stop trying to stop blinking, you'll stop."

"I know."

"You died well."

"Thank you. If the old man has died, then can a new man be born?"

"How much patience do you have?"

"Plenty. Enough." He stopped blinking. Fear no longer lived in his eyes, nor nervousness. He seemed to be neutral, inert, waiting.

Sylvia thought she almost knew him. She might recognize him, as if he reminded her of someone she had known in a young and romantic dream. She said, "You're dreaming if you think we can go back."

"I don't want to go back. I want to go on from here."

"Maybe that's a dream, too."

"It's worth dreaming."

"When do people stop dreaming?"

"Never. We die when dreams die."