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FORREST

GUMP



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One



GEORGE MARTIN, A BANKER, WAS SITTING IN HIS living room in a well-to-do suburb of Boston reading a local story in the newspaper headlined "Barking Dog Saves Family of Five." George had never owned a dog, or desired to, but he had a sudden flash of feeling, gentle as a feather's tickle, that it might be nice to have a dog. The feeling vanished as quickly as it came on; nevertheless, it was ironical.

His wife, Alice, watching the nightly news on television in an adjoining room, a little den with a fireplace and bookcases and a built-in bar, got up and shut the machine off. She stood in the doorway and interrupted George's reading.

"Sometimes I think I can't stand it anymore," Alice said weakly. "Bad news. All we ever hear is bad news!"

It was true that in that particular summer the world was in upheaval, the year marked with war,

riots, assassination and chaos. Most people had strong and sometimes violent opinions on a variety of subjects; some simply didn't know what to believe in any longer. Children sassed their parents and ran away from home and lived on drugs and loud music. Laughter seemed to have been replaced with a dry and frustrated battle between the "Us's" and "Thems." Politicians, as usual, continued their sonorous booming and posturing. *Divorce* and *son-of-a-bitch* had become household words. Such was the summer of nineteen hundred and sixty-eight.

This unwholesome atmosphere extended from the White House down to the meanest Arkansas hovel, from posh penthouses on Manhattan's upper East Side to Watts's lowest ghettos. Frozen somewhere on the fringe was the new and ungelled marriage of George and Alice who, all things considered, were doing a pretty good job of holding their lives together in Wimbeldon, Massachusetts.

"Mix us some martinis, and I'll help you drink them," George offered.

"Doesn't any of this bother you?" she asked plaintively.

"It's only television," he said, not looking up from the paper.

"It *isn't* just television," she said in exasperation. "Those are *real* pictures—*real* people!"

George let the paper drop into his lap and looked

up at her. He took off his tortoiseshell glasses and rubbed his eyes. Alice was a pretty girl, twenty-six years old, with long straight black hair and violet eyes. They had met in college, fallen in love but waited for marriage until George had established himself somewhat firmly as a junior trust officer in one of the city's larger banks. Through his careful money management they had been able to put aside enough to buy a quaint old historic townhouse; they had two cars, were friends with a lot of fashionable people and also owned a sailboat, thirty-one-foot-long, which they used almost every weekend, weather permitting.

"Well, what would you like me to do about it?" George asked.

Alice sat down on a stool in front of him and shook her head. "I don't know," she said, "I just thought maybe we should talk about it or something." She was twisting her hands, and he could feel the edge in her voice. The smell of lilacs and jasmine and trellised roses wafted into the room on a breeze from the brick-walled garden out in back. Shadows had settled softly over the trees and somewhere in the distance was the laughter of a child.

"You know," Alice said after a moment, "instead of going down to the boat tomorrow, maybe we could just take a ride in the country. Go up to that little inn in New Hampshire for lunch."

Something impulsive had driven Alice to that suggestion because she knew that Sundays were for sailing, and tomorrow promised to be an ideal day. But just now she wanted open land rather than the salted air of Cape Cod. She pictured rolling fields of grain and soft green forests with ferns and moss-covered rocks in clear brooks and winding country roads and the neatness of small farmhouses. Another impulse, subtler than the other, had also invaded her mind; she felt it somehow, but did not know what it was nor would she ever really be sure it actually existed, but she would have to wait for tomorrow to find it out.

Since life brings the things most dear mainly by chance, the man who schemes to make millions, and does it, at the same time cannot buy the love or respect of another living thing; that, he must earn, though there might be a certain amount of calculation attached to it. This, of course, is no news to anyone familiar with most religious teachings or with literature or, for that matter, to anyone who has ever tried to break a horse. But it is important in the case of George and Alice Martin, because although each knew it in their own way, they knew it only obliquely. They had been raised in a time and place where *who* you knew was as important as *what* you knew—a world that, coincidentally, was crumbling around them—but a world in which

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appearances and position had to be maintained, no matter what. And so on a lovely early summer day in nineteen sixty-eight the elements of chance and calculation were on a collision course with the Martins' new green Volvo sedan. They ran out of gas.

"Well," George said wryly, "I guess we know what 'empty' means now."

"It means what it says," Alice replied sourly.

"My old Plymouth would run fifty miles on empty," George said.

"Well, we're going to have to *walk* fifty miles on empty unless somebody's got a filling station around here," she said. "Wasn't there one back there somewhere?"

"Quite a way," said George. He stood beside the car, watching the orange ball of sun disappear behind some low foothills in the distance. A field of chartreuse grain shoots waved from the roadside as far as the eye could see, but there was only the silence of open country. Alice got out of the car too.

"Well, should we start walking?" she asked.

"Yes, I suppose so. The question is, which way?"

"The filling station was back there."

"Four or five miles, maybe," George said. "I wasn't paying much attention."

"Obviously," Alice said. When he turned with a

frown she had a smile on her face. It foreclosed a sharp response.

"It's probably better if we just go to someone's house and ask to use the phone," George said. "I don't want to be stuck walking around all night."

"There was a house a few miles back," Alice said. "A big pretty place set on the side of a hill."

"Unless I miss my guess there's one closer than that," he said. "Probably up ahead. I'll bet the farmer who owns this grain field is just around that bend in the road up there."

"Do you think he'll have a phone?" Alice asked.

"Everybody has a phone," George said incredulously.

Alice peered at him with raised eyebrows. "Let's go," she said.

Naturally, the farmer had no phone. But he did have some gasoline in a big fifty-five-gallon drum, which he used to run his truck and a tractor so ancient-looking it might have been the first of its kind.

"Won't take but a minute," the farmer said. "I'll get you a gallon jug, and that ought to get you up to the station 'bout three miles ahead." They followed him behind the barn while he pumped the gas out with a hand pump that was attached to the top of the drum. "You from the city?" he asked.

"Boston," George said.

"Actually we live outside," Alice said. "Wimbeldon."

"My daughter went off to the city," the farmer said. "It's where she got the dog. Just comes back on weekends now."

"What dog?" George asked pleasantly. He saw no dog.

"Oh, she's around someplace, prob'ly inside with the pups." He nodded toward the barn entrance, continuing to squeeze out the gasoline.

Alice wandered around to the cavernous entrance to the barn. There, lying with its face on its paws in the cool of the dirt floor, was a huge shaggy black and white heap.

"Oh, George, come here!" Alice cried.

"That's Sarah," the farmer said, without looking up. George turned the corner of the barn just as the heap rose up and began waddling toward Alice, who had crouched down and was calling to it.

"Her name's Sarah," George said.

"Come here, Sarah," Alice cooed. "Isn't she adorable?"

"Amazing," George said. The thing looked like a bear, he thought, but that wasn't what he said. "It looks like a yak without horns" was what he said. He felt like being witty.

When Alice reached out her arms as Sarah approached, there came a cacaphony of tiny yelps and whines from one of the stalls. The big dog turned and looked back for a moment, then continued

toward Alice. The farmer appeared suddenly in the doorway, back-lit in the glow of sunset, the gasoline jug in his hand.

"Them's the puppies," he said happily. "Whelped her about seven weeks ago. Cute little dickenses, I reckon."

"What kind of dog is this again?" George said. "I've seen . . ."

"Sheepdog," said the farmer. "Old English sheepdog. Never saw one up close myself till Jenny brung her home to drop that litter. Said she's gonna sell them pups and make some good money."

"Oh, let's see them," Alice said. She got up and walked to the door where the whining and yelping continued, and she peered inside. There on a bed of straw were close to a dozen tiny forms, fluffy and white with black saddles of fur around their heads and necks. Several lay in a pile, two or three wandered about, others begged at the gate; one lay alone in a corner.

"Open it up if you want," the farmer said.

Alice reached for the wooden latch and swung the gate wide, and the puppies wormed out in all directions like fingers of water on dry dusty ground. Sarah ambled over and most of them toddled to her and began sucking for milk, reaching as high as they could, for she did not lie down. A few others went helter-skelter inside the barn corridor, and one came straight for Alice. She picked him up in her arms.

"I don't believe it!" she said. "They're the cutest things I've ever seen." She handed the pup to George. "Look at their big paws," she cried.

"This one . . . he, she ah, *he*," he said, after a quick examination, "looks like he's not hungry now."

"That one's kind of a loner," the farmer said. "Hard to believe, but after six or eight weeks you get to know them pretty well, considering they all look alike. That one, though, he's—well, the runt, I guess."

George put the puppy down. "Your daughter—what's she want for them?" he asked. Being a banker, George thought it important to know the value of as many given things as he could. He had meant no more than that. But immediately the farmer's eyes brightened.

"Two hun'rit fifty dollars," he said. "Lot of money for a dog, I reckon, but these are pretty expensive kinds of dogs. Kind of funny lookin', but they got a real good disposition. S'posed to be good with children. You got children?"

"No," George said. "Not yet."

"Prob'ly good watchdogs too," the farmer said. I wouldn't want to go barging onto anyone else's property and run into something like that," he said, nodding toward Sarah.

"Yep, two-hundred-and-fifty's a lot of money," George said, silently calculating it was about the amount of a good used jib for their boat. The puppy

he had just put down went straight for Alice again, and she knelt down, stroking him behind the ears. She looked up at George pleadingly, her eyes large and hopeful, the way she always did when she wanted something but did not want to ask for it out loud. George's brow furrowed, and his lips pursed, and he looked away.

"Vet's s'posed to come by here in the afternoon tomorrow. Check out some of my cows and give them pups their shots too," the farmer said. "Then she's goin' to put an advertisement in the paper. Reckon she stands to make two, maybe three thousand on them pups. Not bad, huh?"

"Not bad at all," George said. "I guess they're purebred then?"

"As the driven snow," replied the farmer. "She's got all the papers up at the house. Dog was real good stock, I'm told. First-class line."

"Well," George said. "I guess we better get started . . ." He looked at Alice again, and she was playing with the puppy; it was nuzzling her fingers and trying to crawl into her lap.

"Why don't you let me ride you back in my truck?" the farmer asked.

"Oh no, we're just down the road, thanks. Alice, we'd better get going," George said. "I'll stop back and bring back the jug in a few minutes."

The farmer nodded and began shoving the puppies back into the stall as the two of them walked out into the dim light.

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"Oh, George," Alice said, the pleading look still in her eyes.

"Uh-unh," he said.

"Why?"

"Look," he said wearily, "I know they were really cute, but we've got the boat and the new car and everything, and besides do you have any idea how much a pain it is to have a dog—especially a puppy—all the work it takes?"

"I'll do all the work," she immediately offered. "You wouldn't have to do a thing. I'll put papers down, and feed it and . . ."

"Alice . . ." George said, "un-uhn . . ."

"Please, I mean, we don't have children now, and . . ." She left the sentence unfinished, and they walked in silence down to the paved road and turned toward their car.

"It would be a serious decision," he said finally. "You know that puppy is going to grow up to be a great big dog and then . . ."

"^{美美的}But didn't you love the big dog? Sarah? She's gorgeous," Alice said. She suddenly reminded him of a ten-year-old child pumping her father for a party dress.

They came to their car, and George poured the gasoline in, screwed back the top and got inside and began working the accelerator. To his surprise the car started immediately. He drove back to the farmer's house and found him outside the barn,

raking. The puppies and Sarah were no place in sight. George got out and took the gas out of the back seat. "Where do you want me to leave this?"

"Just set it down, I'll get to it in a minute," the farmer said.

"I'd sure like to pay you for the gas," George said.

"Oh, no, it's not enough to bother with. I get it cheap here anyway," said the farmer. "Farm gas—no tax."

"Well, thanks again," George said, extending his hand toward the farmer. He noticed that Alice had gotten out of the car and walked behind them into the barn, where she stood with a foot on the stable door, looking wistfully down into the stall.

"C'mon, honey, let's go," George said.

"In just a second."

He waited patiently beside the car for a few moments. The farmer went on with his raking.

"Alice," George called.

"Come here for a minute, I want you to see this," she said, not taking her eyes off the stable floor. George sighed, shook his head slowly and walked over and looked down. In the rear of the stall was Sarah lying on her side with the puppies suckling their evening meal. All except the runt, who was sitting alone directly in front of Alice, looking up at her with sorrowful eyes, its pink tongue hanging out just a little.

George looked at the puppy, and it looked back at

him and for a moment he felt a twinge of softening, then dismissed it.

"No," he said, quietly, but he said it firmly, too, putting his hand on Alice's shoulder and leading her from the barn toward the car. Neither said anything else for half an hour. As twilight turned to dark and with a newly filled tank from the country service station they drove the narrow road back toward the city. The dashlights on the Volvo glowed green, and George had turned on the radio and gentle sad music filled the car. After a while he turned it off, and as silence rolled in, the silence of the country with the purr of the engine, his eyes still on the road, George said very evenly, "Do you think we could teach him to sail?" Alice pounced across the seat with a hug that nearly threw them off into a drainage ditch before George could slow the car and turn it around—back toward the farmhouse.

"The problem is," the farmer was saying nicely, "the vet's coming tomorrow to give them their shots. I don't know if she wants to sell them before that. And I reckon he needs a bath, too, to clean him up a little, after being in that barn."

"We have some vets in our neighborhood at home," said George. "I think it would be a lot easier to take him now instead of having to come all the way back up here."

"Dunno," said the farmer. "I mean, she said she

didn't want to start selling them till next week. She was gonna take out advertisements and all. . . ."

"Can you call and ask her?" Alice said.

"No phone," replied the farmer.

George rolled his eyes ruefully. "Tell you what," he said. "I'll write you a check right now. I'll leave our address and number, and she can send the papers along. You might just tell her that 'a bird in the hand's worth two in the bush.'"

"That it is," the farmer nodded, "that it is."

"Oh, thank you," Alice said, almost tearfully. "I'm, well, can I . . ."

"Sure, go ahead," the farmer shrugged. "We'll take care of things in here."

Alice was almost out of the door when the farmer stopped her. He got up and reached for a big flashlight on top of the icebox. "You'll need this," he said.

George and the farmer had transacted their business and stepped out the door when they saw the flashlight coming at them from the dark direction of the barn.

Alice had the beam pointed at the ground, bathing the puppy in its light as he tagged along beside her, bouncing and nipping.

"Don't they have tails?" George asked the farmer as they stood together on the porch. He had wondered about that before but forgot to ask. It was unlike George to forget a detail.