**PROLOGUE**

*They're nice to have. A dog.*  
— F. Scott Fitzgerald,  
*The Great Gatsby*

Truth be told, I'm not an easy man. I can be an entertaining one, though it's been my experience that most people don't want to be entertained. They want to be comforted. And, of course, my idea of entertaining might not be yours. I'm in complete agreement with all those people who say, regarding movies, "I just want to be entertained." This populist position is much derided by my academic colleagues as simpleminded and unsophisticated, evidence of questionable analytical and critical acuity. But I agree with the premise, and I too just want to be entertained. That I am almost never entertained by what entertains other people who just want to be entertained doesn't make us philosophically incompatible. It just means we shouldn't go to movies together.

The kind of man I am, according to those who know me best, is exasperating. According to my parents, I was an exasperating child as well. They divorced when I was in junior high school, and they agree on little except that I was an impossible child. The story they tell of young William Henry Devereaux, Jr., and his first dog is eerily similar in its facts, its conclusions, even the style of its telling, no matter which of
them is telling it. Here's the story they tell.

I was nine, and the house we were living in, which belonged to the university, was my fourth. My parents were academic nomads, my father, then and now, an academic opportunist, always in the vanguard of whatever was trendy and chic in literary criticism. This was the fifties, and for him, New Criticism was already old. In early middle age he was already a full professor with several published books, all of them "hot," the subject of intense debate at English department cocktail parties. The academic position he favored was the "distinguished visiting professor" variety, usually created for him, duration of visit a year or two at most, perhaps because it's hard to remain distinguished among people who know you. Usually his teaching responsibilities were light, a course or two a year. Otherwise, he was expected to read and think and write and publish and acknowledge in the preface of his next book the generosity of the institution that provided him the academic good life. My mother, also an English professor, was hired as part of the package deal, to teach a full load and thereby help balance the books.

The houses we lived in were elegant, old, high-ceilinged, drafty, either on or close to campus. They had hardwood floors and smoky fireplaces with fires in them only when my father held court, which he did either on Friday afternoons, our large rooms filling up with obsequious junior faculty and nervous grad students, or Saturday evenings, when my mother gave dinner parties for the chair of the department, or the dean, or a visiting poet. In all situations I was the only child, and I must have been a lonely one, because what I wanted more than anything in the world was a dog.

Predictably, my parents did not. Probably the terms of living in these university houses were specific regarding pets. By the time I was nine I'd
been lobbying hard for a dog for a year or two. My father and mother were hoping I would outgrow this longing, given enough time. I could see this hope in their eyes and it steeled my resolve, intensified my desire. What did I want for Christmas? A dog. What did I want for my birthday? A dog. What did I want on my ham sandwich? A dog. It was a deeply satisfying look of pure exasperation they shared at such moments, and if I couldn’t have a dog, this was the next best thing.

Life continued in this fashion until finally my mother made a mistake, a doozy of a blunder born of emotional exhaustion and despair. She, far more than my father, would have preferred a happy child. One spring day after I’d been badgering her pretty relentlessly she sat me down and said, “You know, a dog is something you earn.” My father heard this, got up, and left the room, grim acknowledgment that my mother had just conceded the war. Her idea was to make the dog conditional. The conditions to be imposed would be numerous and severe, and I would be incapable of fulfilling them, so when I didn’t get the dog it’d be my own fault. This was her logic, and the fact that she thought such a plan might work illustrates that some people should never be parents and that she was one of them.

I immediately put into practice a plan of my own to wear my mother down. Unlike hers, my plan was simple and flawless. Mornings I woke up talking about dogs and nights I fell asleep talking about them. When my mother and father changed the subject, I changed it back. “Speaking of dogs,” I would say, a forkful of my mother’s roast poised at my lips, and I’d be off again. Maybe no one had been speaking of dogs, but never mind, we were speaking of them now. At the library I checked out a half dozen books on dogs every two weeks and left them lying open around the house. I pointed out dogs we passed on the street, dogs on television,
dogs in the magazines my mother subscribed to. I discussed the relative merits of various breeds at every meal. My father seldom listened to anything I said, but I began to see signs that the underpinnings of my mother’s personality were beginning to corrode in the salt water of my tidal persistence, and when I judged that she was nigh to complete collapse, I took every penny of the allowance money I’d been saving and spent it on a dazzling, bejeweled dog collar and leash set at the overpriced pet store around the corner.

During this period when we were constantly “speaking of dogs,” I was not a model boy. I was supposed to be “earning a dog,” and I was constantly checking with my mother to see how I was doing, just how much of a dog I’d earned, but I doubt my behavior had changed a jot. I wasn’t really a bad boy. Just a noisy, busy, constantly needy boy. Mr. In and Out, my mother called me, because I was in and out of rooms, in and out of doors, in and out of the refrigerator. “Henry,” my mother would plead with me. “Light somewhere.” One of the things I often needed was information, and I constantly interrupted my mother’s reading and paper grading to get it. My father, partly to avoid having to answer my questions, spent most of his time in his book-lined office on campus, joining my mother and me only at mealtimes, so that we could speak of dogs as a family. Then he was gone again, blissfully unaware, I thought at the time, that my mother continued to glare homicidally, for long minutes after his departure, at the chair he’d so recently occupied. But he claimed to be close to finishing the book he was working on, and this was a powerful excuse to offer a woman with as much abstract respect for books and learning as my mother possessed.

Gradually, she came to understand that she was fighting a battle she couldn’t win and that she was fighting it alone. I now know that this was
part of a larger cluster of bitter marital realizations, but at the time I sniffed nothing in the air but victory. In late August, during what people refer to as “the dog days,” when she made one last, weak condition, final evidence that I had earned a dog, I relented and truly tried to reform my behavior. It was literally the least I could do.

What my mother wanted of me was to stop slamming the screen door. The house we were living in, it must be said, was an acoustic marvel akin to the Whispering Gallery in St. Paul’s, where muted voices travel across a great open space and arrive, clear and intact, at the other side of the great dome. In our house the screen door swung shut on a tight spring, the straight wooden edge of the door encountering the doorframe like a gunshot played through a guitar amplifier set on stun, the crack transmitting perfectly, with equal force and clarity, to every room in the house, upstairs and down. That summer I was in and out that door dozens of times a day, and my mother said it was like living in a shooting gallery. It made her wish the door wasn’t shooting blanks. If I could just remember not to slam the door, then she’d see about a dog. Soon.

I did better, remembering about half the time not to let the door slam. When I forgot, I came back in to apologize, sometimes forgetting then too. Still, that I was trying, together with the fact that I carried the expensive dog collar and leash with me everywhere I went, apparently moved my mother, because at the end of that first week of diminished door slamming, my father went somewhere on Saturday morning, refusing to reveal where, and so of course I knew. “What kind?” I pleaded with my mother when he was gone. But she claimed not to know. “Your father’s doing this,” she said, and I thought I saw a trace of misgiving in her expression.
When he returned, I saw why. He’d put it in the backseat, and when my father pulled the car in and parked along the side of the house, I saw from the kitchen window its chin resting on the back of the rear seat. I think it saw me too, but if so it did not react. Neither did it seem to notice that the car had stopped, that my father had gotten out and was holding the front seat forward. He had to reach in, take the dog by the collar, and pull.

As the animal unfolded its long legs and stepped tentatively, arthritically, out of the car, I saw that I had been both betrayed and outsmarted. In all the time we had been “speaking of dogs,” what I’d been seeing in my mind’s eye was puppies. Collie puppies, beagle puppies, Lab puppies, shepherd puppies, but none of that had been inked anywhere, I now realized. If not a puppy, a young dog. A rascal, full of spirit and possibility, a dog with new tricks to learn. This dog was barely ambulatory. It stood, head down, as if ashamed at something done long ago in its puppydom, and I thought I detected a shiver run through its frame when my father closed the car door behind it.

The animal was, I suppose, what might have been called a handsome dog. A purebred, rust-colored Irish setter, meticulously groomed, wonderfully mannered, the kind of dog you could safely bring into a house owned by the university, the sort of dog that wouldn’t really violate the no pets clause, the kind of dog, I saw clearly, you’d get if you really didn’t want a dog or to be bothered with a dog. It’d belonged, I later learned, to a professor emeritus of the university who’d been put into a nursing home earlier in the week, leaving the animal an orphan. It was like a painting of a dog, or a dog you’d hire to pose for a portrait, a dog you could be sure wouldn’t move.

Both my father and the animal came into the kitchen reluctantly, my
father closing the screen door behind them with great care. I like to think that on the way home he'd suffered a misgiving, though I could tell that it was his intention to play the hand out boldly. My mother, who'd taken in my devastation at a glance, studied me for a moment and then my father.

“What?” he said.

My mother just shook her head.

My father looked at me, then back at her. A violent shiver palsied the dog's limbs. The animal seemed to want to lie down on the cool linoleum, but to have forgotten how. It offered a deep sigh that seemed to speak for all of us.

“He's a good dog,” my father said, rather pointedly, to my mother. “A little high-strung, but that's the way with purebred setters. They're all nervous.”

This was not the sort of thing my father knew. Clearly he was repeating the explanation he'd just been given when he picked up the dog.

“What's his name?” my mother said, apparently for something to say. My father had neglected to ask. He checked the dog's collar for clues.

“Lord,” my mother said. “Lord, lord.”

“It's not like we can't name him ourselves,” my father said, irritated now. “I think it's something we can manage, don't you?”

“You could name him after a passé school of literary criticism,” my mother suggested.

“It's a she,” I said, because it was.

It seemed to cheer my father, at least a little, that I'd allowed myself to be drawn into the conversation. “What do you say, Henry?” he wanted to know. “What'll we name him?”
This second faulty pronoun reference was too much for me. “I want to go out and play now,” I said, and I bolted for the screen door before an objection could be registered. It slammed behind me, hard, its gunshot report even louder than usual. As I cleared the steps in a single leap, I thought I heard a thud back in the kitchen, a dull, muffled echo of the door, and then I heard my father say, “What the hell? I went back up the steps, cautiously now, meaning to apologize for the door. Through the screen I could see my mother and father standing together in the middle of the kitchen, looking down at the dog, which seemed to be napping. My father nudged a haunch with the toe of his cordovan loafer.

He dug the grave in the backyard with a shovel borrowed from a neighbor. My father had soft hands and they blistered easily. I offered to help, but he just looked at me. When he was standing, midthigh, in the hole he’d dug, he shook his head one last time in disbelief. “Dead,” he said. “Before we could even name him.”

I knew better than to correct the pronoun again, so I just stood there thinking about what he’d said while he climbed out of the hole and went over to the back porch to collect the dog where it lay under an old sheet. I could tell by the careful way he tucked that sheet under the animal that he didn’t want to touch anything dead, even newly dead. He lowered the dog into the hole by means of the sheet, but he had to drop it the last foot or so. When the animal thudded on the earth and lay still, my father looked over at me and shook his head. Then he picked up the shovel and leaned on it before he started filling in the hole. He seemed to be waiting for me to say something, so I said, “Red.”

My father’s eyes narrowed, as if I’d spoken in a foreign tongue. “What?” he said.

“We’ll name her Red,” I explained.
In the years after he left us, my father became even more famous. He is sometimes credited, if credit is the word, with being the Father of American Literary Theory. In addition to his many books of scholarship, he’s also written a literary memoir that was short-listed for a major award and that offers insight into the personalities of several major literary figures of the twentieth century, now deceased. His photograph often graces the pages of the literary reviews. He went through a phase where he wore crewneck sweaters and gold chains beneath his tweed coat, but now he’s mostly photographed in an oxford button-down shirt, tie, and jacket, in his book-lined office at the university. But to me, his son, William Henry Devereaux, Sr., is most real standing in his ruined cordovan loafers, leaning on the handle of a borrowed shovel, examining his dirty, blistered hands, and receiving my suggestion of what to name a dead dog. I suspect that digging our dog’s grave was one of relatively few experiences of his life (excepting carnal ones) that did not originate on the printed page. And when I suggested we name the dead dog Red, he looked at me as if I myself had just stepped from the pages of a book he’d started to read years ago and then put down when something else caught his interest. “What?” he said, letting go of the shovel, so that its handle hit the earth between my feet. “What?”

It’s not an easy time for any parent, this moment when the realization dawns that you’ve given birth to something that will never see things the way you do, despite the fact that it is your living legacy, that it bears your name.