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Legends of the Seoul Dogs

I. WHAT WAS THE FIRST LEGEND OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

“They were first-class killers,” his father said. The puppies bit the boy’s fingers and he shook them off.

“Like lions?” the boy said.

“Absolutely like lions. In Korea, on Jindo Island, a pack of these dogs would work together to vanquish prey much bigger than themselves, then they would lead their master to the fresh meat. Actually, they’re better than lions. They’ve killed tigers, son. It’s true. If you can think of a single American dog breed that can beat a tiger then you should say so, but aha!, of course not. The Jindo dog, being Korean, is as superior to other dogs as a king is to his commoners.”

They were sitting together on the living-room carpet, the Californian sunlight hot and clean. The puppies, one boy and one girl, carried the warmth in their fur. Lulled by the sun, the boy spoke before thinking. “But, Abba, there aren’t any tigers here,” he pointed out.

His father rose from the floor, slapping gold fur from his slacks. The tightness of his father’s lips prompted the son to do what he should have done in the first place: he picked up the pair of tawny pups his father had pulled from his pockets with a magician’s proud flourish, *tada*. As he cradled them the boy heard his father say, “They are a gift for you because you are getting to be a man, and a man must learn to look after others.”

II. WHY DID THE MOTHER LEAVE THE BOY, HER ONLY SON AND THE ONE TRUE MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

Later that night, his mother sat him down and said his father had lost his job as a minister at the church. That was why she had to leave, because she needed to find a good job to take care of him. There were many more jobs in a big city than in this town of Nowhere, Northern California, too many trees and earthquakes,

too few Korean people, but she would come back for him soon. Then everything would be wonderful again, she promised, lifting her long pinkie finger to cross it with his, and did he think he could be a good boy?

She tugged at an end of her blue silk scarf and looked at him as if she were already remembering him. The boy saw that his mother was trying not to cry, and, because he wanted to help, he didn't cry either, until the next day when he woke up and his father told him she was gone.

III. WHAT WAS THE SECOND LEGEND OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

"Truly these dogs are lionhearts, their hearts more loyal than the heart of any woman, though maybe that isn't saying so much. Here's a one-hundred-percent true story, son: A woman on Jindo Island once sold her dog to someone on the mainland, hundreds of miles away. Being poor, she couldn't afford to keep the creature. On the day of their parting the dog and its mistress howled so loudly that every islander heard them cry.

"This happened before Korea built a bridge between the mainland and Jindo Island. But on a day months after the sale, fishermen on the shore looked up and saw, to their astonishment, a golden circle moving across the surface of the sea. It came closer and closer, like a growing reflection of the sun, until a dog's head rose splashing from the water, became a body, shook itself, and ran.

"Hours later, the woman slid open her front door and found her way blocked by a dirty, bony dog, its ribs like ladders. Only when she leaned down to shoo it and the creature jumped up to lick her face did she know whose dog it was.

"It's true. There's even a statue in Seoul that honors the dog. When you were a little boy, Abba used to show it to you, do you remember? But you do understand now that it's very cruel to give Jindos away. Better to shoot them."

IV. WHAT WAS THE FIRST TRIAL FOR THE BOY, THE ONE TRUE MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

Three fifth graders, his age but bigger, waited until they got him alone. They crowded him until his back touched the jungle gym. The boy felt the heat of the blacktop through the soles of his sneakers. Seth, the redhead, who always wore the same faded clothes, said, "Damn, your dad's one crazy fucked-up motherfucker," and shook his head as if genuinely sorry. The sidekicks giggled.

The boy's fear stiffened to anger and he said, "Take it back."

"My dad says your Chink preacher dad was pissing off a couple of big shots in his congregation with some shit he wanted to do. Shit like, he was gonna turn the whole church into a homeless shelter, and when the big shots said no your dad went psycho and started throwing shit, he threw a chair, one of the trustees almost *died*, and they fired his ass, and *my* dad says that kind of thing is in the blood so if it were up to him you'd be kicked out of school because who knows what could—"

"It's not true," the boy said quietly. "You're a liar."

"Did he just call me a liar?"

"You're a liar like your dad's a liar."

The boy couldn't hold out for long against the three. He fell to the ground, they were kicking him, he figured that maybe if they really hurt him his mother would come home, then the blows stopped.

He opened his eyes and saw his teacher, her eyebrows tented, and he was so disappointed he closed his eyes again.

V. WHO WAS THE LIAR?

His father came to pick him up and listened silently as the school nurse told him that though his son was badly bruised, nothing was broken. The silence was maintained until they were locked in the car and halfway home. When his father finally asked why he'd gotten into a fight, the boy told a piece of the truth and said the redheaded boy had called him a Chink.

His father looked sideways at him and said, "Did that boy say anything else to you?"

"Like what?"

"Well, about Abba, for example."

This time the boy thought before speaking and said, "Why would he?" and the father let loose a loud laugh, ha, *ha*, and said, "Well, Abba's not going to punish you. The teacher says those other boys attacked you first, and Abba knows and the good Lord knows that there are times when a man has to fight back. But school isn't the right place for making trouble, do you understand?"

"Yes."

For a while longer they drove in silence. Then, when it seemed enough time had passed, the boy asked, "Abba, how did you lose your job?"

“What a question! Abba didn’t lose it, Abba quit. And Abba has already found something better.”

“You have a new job?”

“Listen, son, your father has as many enemies as Abraham has descendants. It is the lot of a great man to have enemies, because first other people become envious, then they start to want what you have worked very hard to win, do you understand? As your father became increasingly influential and respected there were very evil people who spread very evil lies. Abba had no choice but to quit. Don’t worry, though. God has given Abba a different mission. A *better* mission. God provides for his own. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” the boy said, though, really, he didn’t.

“Well. How are your dogs?”

“The same,” he said. “Getting bigger.”

VI. WHERE WAS THE MOTHER OF THE BOY, HER ONLY CHILD AND THE ONE TRUE MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

His mother called. She’d flown across the sea, back to Seoul, but she would come back soon, she said. It was just that it was hard to find a decent job in the States after such a long absence from salaried work, and with only Korean degrees to her name. In Seoul, she could at least return to her high-paying job at a big *chaebol* company.

So he had to stay with his father, at least for now. After all, they had moved from Korea to California in the first place to get him an American education at an American elementary school, which would lead to an American high school, which would lead to an American university like Harvard or Stanford if he was a good boy and studied hard, so what sense would it make for him to move again?

“Your father isn’t making money anymore, sweetheart,” she added, “and someone in this family needs to make some money somehow. Do you believe Umma, that there’s no other choice?”

His mother was crying again, so the boy said quickly that he understood. And he did, in a way. She was his mother. Obviously, she would never have left him, if she’d had the choice.

“Can I come visit you?” the boy asked.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said. “Your mother is living with a friend here, and the friend doesn’t have space for anyone else right now. But Umma’s working on it.”

“I can be quiet,” the boy said.

“Umma knows. Umma knows.”

“Did you have to leave because of how much you and Abba were fighting?” the boy said. “Or is it because of me?”

“No, no, no,” she said. “It wasn’t because we were—fighting. And you didn’t do a thing. Your mother loves you so much. Listen, darling, I’ve sent money to your father for you, but do you know if he’s looking for another job?”

“I think he said he found something,” he said.

“Oh, thank God,” she said, and sighed, and the boy felt the sigh as a wind rising from a busy boulevard in Seoul, crossing the sea, and blowing into the empty house to rustle against his ear, as warm and familiar as the touch of his mother’s lips.

VII. WHAT WAS THE SECOND TRIAL FOR THE BOY, THE ONE TRUE MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

The son got off the phone and went downstairs, and he was startled to find his father was home after all, sitting upright in the center of the sofa. “I was just talking to Umma,” the boy said.

His father seemed not to hear him. “I need your help today,” he said. “With my work.”

So the boy learned what his father now did. For the rest of the afternoon, he stood with his father on the corner of Leal and Alondra and helped him distribute flyers about God to passersby, and he tried not to look around too much in case he saw someone from school. Instead, he watched for oncoming feet, most of which sped up as they got closer and his father cried, “My brothers and sisters, the day of judgment is coming, blessed be the name of the Lord!” Unembarrassed, his father continued, “We live in a time of the greatest prosperity humanity has witnessed, and every day people go hungry. Every day, children go to bed without dinner. Every day, our fellow men are dying. Brothers and sisters! Just as our brethren are hungry for food, we are hungry for the Word, and if we were filled with the Word, our brethren would not go hungry. The day of judgment is coming and soon the Lord God will ask us, did we feed our brethren when they were hungry? Did we solace our brethren when they grieved? Brothers and sisters!”

A couple of the people who walked by suggested, in passing, that his father go home to his own country. Each time, his father replied that they had but one home,

heaven, and that they were equally homeless until then, and equally brothers and sisters.

“Abba,” the boy said, at last, “I should do my homework.”

“Of course, son,” his father said, and took his hand to walk him home.

VIII. HOW DID THE BOY COME INTO HIS OWN AS THE ONE TRUE MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

The months disappeared and they were getting bigger and leaner, these dogs of his. Every day after school the boy ran home to free them from their cages and lead them to the park behind his house.

He had named the boy dog Leo and the girl dog Leah. His father was right: with their tawny coats and soft brown eyes, they looked increasingly like the lions he’d only seen pace the enclosure at the zoo or lope across the vast savannas of his fantasies. Another way his father was right: he loved these dogs more than any old lion. Lately, the boy was trying to remind himself of all the times his father had been right.

At first, the boy taught them well. He fit whistles to different commands and trained the dogs to stay, to beg, to sit, to heel, to shake, to drop, to jump, to die, to run, to creep, to pounce, and before long he could whistle at them from ever-greater distances—a different part of the house, the second floor, the other end of the park—and they still heard him and obeyed. Sometimes he told them stories of his real home, Seoul, where his mother now lived.

They were true stories. There were broad six-lane streets, the boy said, and steel buildings as tall and beautiful as God. And Jindos and lions everywhere. There, they would belong. They would be recognized as kings. There would be processions in their honor, a coronation. He remembered little of Seoul (a few memories, a handful of photographs), but the less he knew, the larger it loomed. Other times, when he was sad, he held the dogs’ blunt, trustful faces and looked in their eyes. In the reflection he saw only himself, magnified, and the blue sky. As though he were better and mightier than he was. As if he had superpowers, as if he could pick up a dog under each arm and fly away.

IX. WHAT WAS THE THIRD LEGEND OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

They were bona fide escape artists, four-legged Houdinis of the backyard. It was just a part of who they were, his father said, since on Jindo Island the dogs ran

free, defining their own boundaries. Therefore, when he told the boy the dogs were outdoor dogs and big enough now to live in the yard, it shouldn't have been a surprise when, one afternoon, the boy came home and found the dogs were gone.

"But—" said the boy, surprised, and frightened, "But how did they get out?"

"Well, they're expert diggers," his father said, "and jumpers, too. Some of them climb like cats, and it seems our Jindos are excellent climbers! Abba thought our three-meter wall would be big enough, but maybe not. But Abba's sure they're out surveying their territory, they'll be back soon enough."

"There's nothing to worry about," his father added, resting his hand for a moment on his son's head.

"This isn't Jindo Island, though," the boy said. "Things are different here. A car could hit them. They could get killed—couldn't they get killed?"

His father repeated that there was nothing to worry about, but this time he sounded less sure of himself, so the boy went out whistling for the dogs. He ran until he couldn't breathe, then he walked as quickly as he could, hunched over to help his lungs, then he ran again, and all the while he whistled, high and piercing. But they'd gone too far. They couldn't hear him. Finally, he went home and sat vigil in the backyard until the day suddenly went darker and he raised his head to see Leo and Leah standing silent on top of the wall, the sun behind them, and they leaped to the ground, quick pours of gold, first Leah, then Leo, and as they trotted to him to be petted it was as if they were competing to see who could look more pleased.

That night, he snuck them into his room and they curled together at the foot of his bed, warming him. The boy did this every day for the rest of the week, until his father came to make him translate a tract into English and discovered them. There was space for the dogs in this big house, but his father said no. He forbade the boy to let the dogs into the house again, because humans had one place and dogs had another.

The boy led them to the backyard, and sat down to talk to them. He touched their ruffs of soft fur. "I want you to stay put," he said. "You can't just wander around by yourselves. Dogs don't *do* that here."

Leo and Leah opened their black-gummed mouths and, panting, seemed to laugh.

"I know," the boy said. "No, really, I know. You think no one can hurt you. But you hurt me when I don't know where you are."

A long pause, then the dogs licked his hand. After that, they stopped their straying.

X. WHAT WAS THE THIRD TRIAL FOR THE BOY, THE ONE TRUE
MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

The days lengthened, the days shortened, and the boy continued to help his father with his preaching. Sometimes, people stopped to take a tract, but not many. His father held weekly prayer meetings in his house, promising free food to all comers. No one ever came, and his father made the boy pray with him instead.

It wasn't that he didn't believe in his father's God, not quite. It was just that his father's prophecies about the end of the world were beside the point, since he, being a boy, was in all likelihood going to live forever.

The months passed. By now, everyone knew about his father. School was a disaster. Sitting in the front of the classroom the boy could feel Seth's stares from the back of the room where the teacher had seated him because Seth had stolen a pair of scissors and then a stapler from her, and she'd said *enough*. The boy tried not to return the look because the last time he'd glanced back, Seth had slit a line across his thick throat and winked. Even the fat kids had the right to make fun of the boy. And where were these hungry people his father kept preaching about? The boy lived in a small and quiet town. It was all trees and tiny earthquakes here—his mother was right. Tennis balls spun in the sun. Nothing bad happened here.

He asked his father, finally, during dinner. "Abba, are there poor people in our town?"

"Of course."

"Where?"

"Some wander from town to town, because the police around here won't let poor people alone. If a homeless person tries to sit on a bench, then, *poof*, a policeman shoos him away. Rich people like us don't like to see poor people. It's like God. Just because you can't see him, it doesn't mean he's not there."

"We're not rich," the boy said. "Are we?"

"Let me tell you something," his father said. "You know that big forest at the edge of the park?"

"Yes."

"Well, some poor people live there, because they have nowhere else to live. Some live in tents, others live in the open. Abba has tried very hard to look for them, but they hide when they hear people coming. They live out in the forest while you and Abba live in this big house. Believe me, we're rich."

So the boy was trying to understand, but he was still a boy and he had a life to live, too. At last, late one night when his father came to his room and handed him yet another tract, the boy resisted. "Will you proofread and type this before school tomorrow?" his father said.

The boy looked at the sheet his father held out. The notepaper was a bruise of blue ink, covered with the latest prophecies. Every week, his father changed the prophecies. This was going to take too long.

"Abba, I have a test tomorrow," the boy said. "*Two* tests."

The grimace that passed over his father's face made the boy flinch. But instead of pulling him up for a whipping, his father sat on the boy's bed and covered his face with his hands. He sat very still. At first, the boy wondered if his father was in a trance, if this was how God spoke to him, but then he saw the water run down his father's wrists, and it was worse than any punishment: his father was crying.

"I didn't mean it, Abba," the boy said, frantic. He went to sit by his father. "It's just school. Here, let me take this paper from you."

After a while, his father raised his face. "No, it's not just school," he said. "School's important, son. Abba knows you're tired. Your father's tired, too, but Abba has to do just as he's told. Do you understand? For that, Abba needs you."

The boy stayed up, and typed the prophecies.

XI. BUT WHERE WAS THE MOTHER OF THE BOY, HER ONLY SON AND THE ONE TRUE MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

During their phone calls his mother always asked the same questions, was he studying hard and did he have enough to eat, and he always said yes. To his surprise, it had turned out that his father knew how to cook. "Is Abba helping you with your homework?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"How are your grades?"

"As," he said.

Then she asked if his father was still preaching on the sidewalk. When he said yes, she fell silent.

"Umma?" he said, finally.

"What does he preach about?" she said.

"Poor people, usually," he said. "Hungry people. God's judgment. Abba invites people to come to the house. No one comes, though. I think it makes him sad."

One day, she told the boy that the friend with whom she lived was someone he might like to meet. A lot was changing for her and she was coming up with a plan to see him soon, and he wasn't to say anything to his father, OK, darling?

The boy asked her to tell him more about her plan, but she said she would tell him more as soon as she could. When his mother started calling less often, the boy knew it was because she was busy piecing together a grand plan to get him back to her. The longer the silences between her calls, the grander the plan became.

XII. WHAT WAS THE FOURTH TRIAL FOR THE BOY, THE ONE TRUE MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

As the days got even shorter, the dogs got bored. To keep them interested, the boy's whistled orders became increasingly baroque—*rise on your hind legs, hop, then run in six long counterclockwise circles*—until first Leah then Leo sat down and refused to move.

“Rise on your hind—” the boy tried again, but Leah lay down and rested her head on her leg, as though to make the point.

“All right,” he said, “I get it. You're tired of circus tricks, is that it?”

They gazed serenely back at him and he saw that they agreed, so he took them to the woods that edged the park and continued all the way to the sea. The boy was afraid of these trees so dense they squeezed out light, this dark place where hungry men lived, but the dogs needed a new mission. He knelt and slung his arms around the dogs, his head close to theirs, and he whispered, “We're on the savanna now, and you're lions and I'm the king of the pride, the legendary pride of the swiftest killers of the Serengeti, and you need to get our next meal, got it?”

Leo and Leah barked and dashed away. Within minutes, so that the boy hardly had time to get nervous about being by himself in the woods, they were back. From Leah's jaws there hung a fat furred creature. It was a possum, its throat open and bloodied. The boy asked, “Did you bring this for me?,” hiding how upset he was because he hadn't really believed they would kill anything and had only hoped to give them a new game. He'd wanted to give them back their sense of purpose. But this was wrong, too. They weren't going to eat this creature.

He had told them a bad story, so he told them a better one. “You're the royal hunters,” he explained. “And I'm the prince. We were chasing—we were chasing our worst enemies, lukewarm Christians and false prophets. And this possum was the ringleader, so now that you've found him the other evildoers will go away forever.”

Leah nosed the boy's palm, smearing it with blood, and he said, his voice shaking, "Good girl." Leo sniffed him, so he said, "Good boy."

XIII. WHAT WAS THE BOY'S FIRST TRIUMPH?

After he cleaned the dogs, the boy left them in the yard and went back out to the corner of the park where he'd hidden the dead possum. It was still there, its pink, intelligent face barbed with dried blood, so he carried it to the Dumpster near the public bathroom and threw it away, trying not to think of how frightened it must have been.

As he walked out of the bathroom, where he had washed his hands, the boy saw Seth pedaling a bicycle that was too small for him, which made Seth look even bigger. The boy flattened himself against the wall in the hope that he wouldn't be seen, because twice already, just this month, Seth had been about to beat him up and had been stopped just in time by the appearance of, first, a teacher, and, second, a school-yard supervisor, but he was too late: Seth turned, saw him, and waved. It was almost night. There was no one around.

Seth jumped gracefully off his bicycle. He strode up to the boy, getting so close that if the boy breathed they would have touched foreheads, and said, "Hey, buddy."

"Hey," the boy said. He wasn't breathing but he could still smell Seth's breath, like milk gone funny.

"Makes my day to see you," Seth said, and feigned a shove, and the boy, to his great shame, flinched, and Seth laughed, then kicked his legs out from under him.

The boy lay on the ground. He tried to whistle but he was so winded that the sound barely left his lips. Still, Seth lifted him, dragging him up by his armpits, and his broad, dirty face was frowning. "What was that whistle for?" Seth said.

"I was calling for help," the boy said, trying to cover his terror by looking sure of himself.

Seth's face opened up and smoothed out. "Yeah, good luck with that, you little shit," he said, and he drew a fist back. As the boy closed his eyes at the sight, he felt Seth let go of him. A rush of air, a high shout, and even before the boy opened his eyes again he knew they'd come. Leah was standing on Seth's chest, her teeth pointed at his throat; Leo stood over his legs, slavering. They were golden and glorious, and larger than the boy had ever seen them. For a moment, he thought he glimpsed a mane.

"What the *fuck*?" Seth cried. "What is this?"

“You should stop squirming,” the boy said, improvising. “They’re trained to rip a prey animal’s throat until it’s not moving anymore. Not even I can stop them.”

The other boy went perfectly still, like death. Leah was snarling now, too. They would kill Seth, the boy knew, at one whistle from him, the tiniest whisper. He thought of the playground humiliations, the jeers and insults. It would be easy.

He was no killer, though, and he couldn’t hurt the boy on the ground, even if part of him wished he could. He didn’t hurt people. Instead, he told Seth that if he ever bothered him again or told anyone about this, then he, the boy, would call for his dogs and they would find Seth, no matter where he was.

“OK,” Seth breathed.

“Swear on your mother’s head?”

“My mother’s dead.”

“Swear on her grave?”

“I swear,” Seth said.

“We-ell,” the boy said, with a smile he couldn’t hold in. “I’ll let you go. But if you forget then you know who’s going to come for you.”

He whistled, and the dogs reluctantly set their catch free. Seth kept his word, and at least school became a little easier.

XIV. WHAT WAS THE FATHER’S FIRST TRIUMPH?

His father seemed happier, too. There had been an earthquake, not enough to bring down any buildings, but bigger than usual. Some trees had fallen. It made people nervous. All of a sudden, more people were willing to stop and listen to what the sidewalk doomsday preacher had to say. Added to which, as his father explained, the earthquake had brought down most of the lean-tos in the forest in which the homeless people had been living, which was why hoboes had materialized all over town. Like ghosts, they drifted from bench to sidewalk and again to bench. Policemen tried to move the hoboes along but more kept coming. These people were hungry; his father told them he could help. A number of the homeless people even started to meet weekly with his father in their house. His father preached, then there was a short question-and-answer catechism, then a prayer, then his father gave them food.

Things were different in Seoul, his father told the boy. “Abba wants you to remember that. In Seoul, Abba was the first son of a long line of the highest level of *yangban* aristocrats, a family that for centuries served kings as scholars and

philosopher-governors,” his father said, and his father’s own uncle, the boy’s great-uncle, had been the prime minister of all of Korea, and how things changed: here Abba was, unemployed, ignored, a failure in the eyes of the world.

“But the Lord humbles the mighty and raises the weak to his right hand,” his father continued. “Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

“Then why don’t we just go back to Seoul?” the boy asked, hoping.

His father smiled at him as he would at a child, and said, “Your work is here, son. So is your father’s.”

“But I liked Seoul better,” the boy persisted.

“So did I,” his father said, looking above the boy’s head. Then he jerked his eyes back to his son and said, “Come to think of it, what can you possibly remember?”

“We belong there, not here.”

His father’s face closed like a fist. He said, “I know I haven’t raised a selfish son, so don’t say such selfish things,” and he walked away.

So the boy tried to be less selfish. These new congregants, though—the boy wondered what his mother would have thought if she could see them in her once-upon-a-time beautiful house, matted-haired and stinking as they were, their clothes grimy and ragged, half of them reeking of alcohol, the other half slurping the food his father gave them straight from the bowl as though they’d never learned how to use a spoon. But then, of course, his mother wasn’t here, and even the spoons were disappearing.

XV. WHO WERE HIS FATHER’S FOLLOWERS?

His father was a man of rules and like father, like minister. There was an order to the prayer meetings that no one was supposed to break. For example, no one could eat until the end of the services, and those who came late received only half-portions of food. This held true for the boy, too. “We can’t keep the Lord waiting,” his father said. No one was to curse, and no one was to drink liquor.

The majority of the new congregants submitted to his father’s rules. The food was plentiful, the services short. If they needed a place to stay, his father let these people sleep over, too, though no one ever lasted more than a night or two at a time, because his father’s rules about alcohol included finding and draining any bottles brought into the house. Drugs, too. The boy wanted not to be glad when guests left, but he was, he was happier when they disappeared, taking their smells with them.

But there was one man, Richard, who was different. He followed the boy's father around, asking him questions about God, and he listened to the answers. He stayed past the customary two-day mark, then past a week, then it seemed he had been there since the beginning of time and he still gave no sign of going anywhere. The boy's father whispered to the boy that he thought Richard was on his way to being saved. "Be kind to him, son," the father said, and the boy said he would, he was, though Richard frightened him, pacing around the house, sitting silently by himself on the couch for hours, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, shaking no matter how high the boy turned the heat.

"Is Richard sick?" he asked his father, one night.

"Anyone without God in his life is terribly sick," his father said, tucking him in. "It's up to us to try to help. The poor are the chosen people of the Lord, and it's a great honor, son, that we are given the chance to help."

So the boy didn't say what he would have liked to ask—was Richard dangerous?—because he knew his father would think it a silly question, and selfish, too.

XVI. WHAT WAS THE STORY OF THE MOTHER OF THE BOY, THE ONE TRUE MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

One day, the boy came home and heard small noises from the master bedroom, where no one was supposed to be. It was Richard, sitting cross-legged on the floor. He had pulled out the drawers from the large chest; the bottom drawer was full of the boy's mother's scarves, and Richard was touching them.

"Those are my mother's," the boy said.

"Well, obviously."

"You shouldn't get into my mother's things."

Richard lifted a long bolt of blue silk, thick but delicate, shivering in his hands like something living. The boy's mother had worn the scarf often enough that its folds still carried a whiff of her scent. The boy knew; he'd looked for her there. "This is something like it," Richard said. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I get kinda, I get cold easily. And your dad, he tells me what's his is mine. So."

The boy was breathing hard. "Let go of my mother's scarf," he said.

For the first time, Richard seemed to focus in on him. "Oh, man," he said. "You've got it bad, don't you. Trust me on this, little brother. You can't live your whole life chasing after the ladies who leave you. It'll kill you."

“My mother’s coming back.”

“She left your dad for some other guy. She left you, too.”

The boy stared at him.

“It’s God’s truth, little brother. Your dad told me all about it. Now. Run along.”

The boy hurried to the yard and whispered into his dogs’ sturdy necks. Their fur brushed his lips. “It’s not true,” he said. “Don’t believe that man. He’s a drug addict and we should be sorry for him, but he’s a liar, too. What does he know. He doesn’t know anything about us.”

They licked the tears from his face, and they sniffed him, agreeing, and the boy kept talking. They ran a few feet away from him and looked over their shoulders, hoping he would come play, but when he didn’t move they ran back. The dogs’ tongues wet his cheeks more than his tears would have, but he let them keep trying to dry him. Then they went to the park.

XVII. WHAT WAS THE FIFTH TRIAL FOR THE BOY, THE ONE TRUE
MASTER OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

That night’s prayer meeting went well enough, at first. A number of regulars, a newcomer, his father, the boy, and Richard, all sitting in a circle in the living room, which had once seemed large but was now too small to fit everyone comfortably. His father’s eyes shone as he spoke. The boy tried not to look in the direction of the liar, Richard—the familiar blue of the scarf flashing from his neck—but tonight the man was shaking more than ever. At some point during the sermon, Richard slid a cigarette between his lips. He flicked open a lighter.

His father stopped midsentence. “Not in the house of God,” he said. Richard shrugged. “Whatever, man,” he said. He put the cigarette back into its box. His father kept going.

The sermon ended, and they were in the middle of the call-and-response catechism when Richard interrupted the boy’s father again. “I’ve got a question,” he said.

“I’ll be glad to hear it,” his father said, his head still bowed over the evening’s catechism. “Later.”

“I’ve got a question right now.”

Now his father raised his head. “All right, Richard,” he said. “What is it?”

Richard’s legs were jittering up and down. “You say you hear God.”

“That’s right.”

“Do you mean, like, you imagine you know what he’s saying? Or you *hear* him, hear him?”

“I hear him,” his father said.

“*Bullshit*,” Richard said softly, rolling the syllables out as if he were tasting them.

The boy jumped up. “You don’t get to use a dirty word to my father,” he said. “You’re the liar. You’re the one who’s full of shit.”

“Sit down, son,” his father said.

“I’ve been thinking about what all you’ve been telling me,” Richard said. His eyes were fixed on the boy’s father; he didn’t seem to have heard the boy. “How come the rest of us don’t hear him. What’s your secret. You’re lying or you’ve got a secret, so. Which is it?”

Richard was standing now; the boy was still standing, too. The regulars were muttering, shifting in their seats. One of them, more skittish than the rest, got up and left. The door stayed open behind him.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” his father said, slowly. “I wish I knew exactly what to tell you, but I don’t—”

“I’ve got to know,” Richard said, and the scarf was flying long and blue as he leaped toward the boy’s father.

XVIII. WHO DIED?

Afterward, the boy realized it was possible that Richard had meant no real harm to his father, but by then it was too late. He whistled for his dogs. They rushed by, blurs of gold that grew as they jumped, knocking the liar on his back.

It was finished before the boy could put his lips together for a different whistle. Leah lifted her head from Richard’s throat. The silk was torn. Richard was no longer yelling. Another man, then another, ran out the open door. The boy’s father dropped to the ground, staring at the dead man. Blood ebbed, darkening the scarf. Now the only two standing were the boy and one last regular.

The boy looked at the regular, Simon. He was an alcoholic, but gentle. Once he’d brought the boy a gift, a small milk-chocolate bar. The boy had seen him at his house every Sunday for the past month. Simon was all right, the boy thought. Simon had to be all right.

“I’m going to call 911,” the boy said. “Can you wait with my father until an ambulance comes?”

"I can do that," Simon said.

The boy made the phone call. Then he whistled, and his dogs ran with him to the park, loping easily, their gold fur gleaming under the occasional streetlamp until they were in the woods. There was no more light, but he could hear them breathe. In the distance, sirens sang.

XIX. WHAT WAS THE LAST AND BEST LEGEND OF THE LEONINE DOGS?

They were first-class killers. They were lionhearts. They were bona fide escape artists. They were his responsibility, and the boy knew he couldn't go back to his father's house like nothing had happened and allow strangers to take his dogs away to kill them, probably. They hadn't meant any harm. The dogs were his. The fault was his, it was all his.

He continued into the woods and the dogs were his eyes, they guided his feet, and as they went forward the dogs grew larger, their legs lengthening, their fur thickening, their tails thinning and tufting, their paws broadening, and with a shake of his massive head Leo flourished his royal mane. As they walked, the boy knew they passed the broken shanties of the homeless people, and he was sorry, he wished them well. They would be all right. He would be all right. His lions padded by the side of the boy. They were the three rulers of the wild, and nothing could hurt them.

XX. WHAT BECAME OF THE BOY AND HIS LEONINE DOGS?

They were going toward the sea. They were going over the sea. They were going.