It is autumn in New York and the days are crisp, filled with a fine orange light in the mornings. At just the right moment, Tenth Avenue looks as if it had been made out of red glass, a shimmer of color over the asphalt and brick. Shelby Richmond usually walks her four dogs along the river downtown, sometimes up to five miles on the weekends when she doesn’t have work or school. But today she is in a cab on her way to Central Park. It is a huge splurge for Shelby. She’s down on her luck financially. Ever since she broke up with her boyfriend, Ben, she has to pay all the bills for her apartment, no halfsies anymore, no Ben to cover for her when she falls short.

It hadn’t been so easy to find a cabbie willing to take four dogs, especially because Pablo, the Great Pyrenees, is so huge, but finally Moses Leon stops, recently arrived from Jamaica, and curious about Pablo. “I never saw anything like it,” he tells Shelby as she herds the dogs into the back of the cab. “I thought he was a polar bear.”

“They used this breed to find people in France,” Shelby says. “They were search and rescue dogs. The strong silent type.’

“I had a pony the same size when I was a boy,” the cabbie tells Shelby. “I would love to have a dog someday. A big one.”
Shelby looks out the window. They’re going up Tenth Avenue fast; it’s early on a Sunday, not even seven a.m. Shelby hates cars, she has a phobia about crashes; she gets in taxis only in cases of emergency, but this is an emergency. She wants to appear casual when she gets uptown, just a woman in her late twenties with straight brown hair wearing jeans, an old sweater and hiking boots out walking her dogs in the park. When she runs into Harper, she wants it to seem like fate, rather than the act of a desperate woman so much in love she would humiliate herself this way, appearing on the path she knows Harper always takes early on Sunday morning at an hour when any normal person would still be in bed.

Shelby has always known love would be a mistake. It feels like a spell, something that makes her do stupid crazy things. She’s broken up with her boyfriend, agreed to wait till Harper finds the right time to leave his wife, been willing to see him only on his one day off, had sex with him in the locked lounge of veterinary office or at her place on Mondays, the day the vet is closed. Their day. Their only day. What will she do next? Walk through Central Park without clothes? Jump in the River? Perch outside his window, rattling the casings?

In the taxi, Shelby is jittery. She asks the cabbie if she he minds if she smokes, but it’s a smoke free cab.

"Sorry," Moses Leon says.
Turns out his wife hates smoke. So Shelby bites her cuticles instead. Almost as good as a cigarette, but not quite. Shelby isn’t like this ordinarily; she never cares about anything. She wants to get over Harper, she’d like to tell him to screw himself, but so far that hasn’t happened. And of course, her dogs love him. Harper walks into the apartment and they go berserk, as though they belonged to him, even though Shelby was the one who rescued each one. Even her mother’s poodle, Buddy, who is usually so aloof, jumps right into Harper Levy’s lap.

Harper lives on 89th Street, so Shelby has asked the cabbie to drop her at 5th and 79th. That will give her ten blocks in case she decides to turn around. If they ever got married, she would like to do it right in Central Park, so the dogs could all be there. Fall would be nice, or spring. Actually, an ice wedding would suit the dogs, a bower of snow, a perfect and cold blue sky.

“How long have you been married?” Shelby asks the cab driver.

“Five years and I hope it’s a hundred more,” the cabbie says.

Love is stupid, Shelby thinks. Love makes saps out of people. It turns them inside out.

“Unfortunately, she doesn’t like dogs,” Moses Leon says. “She’s particular about things. She’s a special lady.”
No smoke, no dogs. What does his wife like? Shelby wants to say
Run, divorce her, you’ll never be happy with a woman like that.
Instead she says, “Well, they shed a lot.” Pablo is actually shedding
like crazy all over the cab. “I’m sorry,” Shelby says as she pays the
fare. She adds a large tip even though she doesn’t believe in tipping.
She just knows this guy will never own a dog. “If you have a paper
towel I can get rid of all this fur.”

Shelby lets the dogs jump out; she ties them to a parking meter,
then cleans out the back of the cab.

“That’s good,” Moses Leon says. “You did a good job. I wish all
my fares were as thoughtful as you.”

Shelby feels like such a loser. She cannot remember the last
time someone said she had done a good job at anything. She needs to
be grateful for small things. A beautiful October morning. A kind cab
driver. Time to walk in the park. She waves when the cab pulls away.
The dogs are excited. This is not the river walk. This is something new.
They’re all dancing, except for Pablo, who is more of a lumberer.
Shelby has one of those attachments that links all four leashes
together, but once they head into the park, she unhooks the General,
the bossiest of her dogs. He likes to walk ahead of the pack. Shelby
respects him for that. She has been looking for a man who had some
of the great qualities that the General has. She thought she’d found
that in Harper Levy. But what does it mean when a man won’t leave his wife? Does it mean he’s loyal or disloyal? Trustworthy or a lying manipulator? The General looks over his shoulder to make sure they’re behind him. Blinkie, the little blind dog, is slow, so Shelby leans down and scoops him up and carries him for a while. Everything smells like leaves and smoke. The orange light spins down through the leaves. Ten blocks to change her mind.

The park’s not yet crowded, so Shelby lets Pablo and Buddy off their leashes and watches them run with the General barking to get them moving. She always thought the General was a Maltese, now she wonders if he’s part sheepdog. He likes order. Maybe he’s looking for sheep. Maybe Harper Levy is too. A girl who will have sex with him on Mondays and wait for him to call after midnight when his wife is asleep. A girl who will say Baa and never complain.

Shelby lets the dogs run for half an hour – she’s timing everything so she will accidentally bump into Harper when he walks his dogs. She hates women who do things like that. She hates the other woman, even in movies; she has no sympathy for such low down bitches, none at all. At last, Shelby whistles and when the dogs run back she clips on their leads. Even the General gets leashed. Shelby needs her wits about her; she can’t be worrying about her dogs
wandering off at the moment when she needs them to be orderly when they walk past 89th Street.

Harper has told her that every Sunday morning he takes his two bulldogs for a walk at eight o’clock. He goes in through the entrance on 90th Street, so that’s where Shelby heads. She can see the white circle of the Guggenheim Museum. She can feel the blood pounding in her head. Here she is with her four dogs, casual, walking through the leaves and the orange light. She is irresistible, she is perfect for him: their love of dogs, their love for each other, what more could Harper want? Shelby thinks about this as she walks back and forth past the 90th Street entrance. At one point Pablo takes a huge dump and Shelby picks it up with a pile of leaves and throws the mess in the trash. She prays Harper will not spy her cleaning up shit, and he doesn’t. He doesn’t come to the park at eight or at eight fifteen or at eight thirty. He said he did it every Sunday. Shelby is feeling so jittery she asks a complete stranger for a cigarette and lights up. Her dogs mill around except for the General who looks watchfully at the steps to Fifth Avenue. He’s so smart he might as well be a person. Lord, Shelby wishes he were a person. She’d marry him and forget about Harper Levy.

Shelby walks up to the Avenue. There are more people out and about now. It’s a beautiful day. Shelby crosses the street and walks
down 89th Street. She knows Harper’s address. He hasn’t hidden much from her. Except for his wife. He doesn’t talk about her. He says it’s too depressing. He says they met in college and they fell into their marriage the way people fall over their own feet. Sex and inertia lead them to someplace they shouldn’t have gone. East 89th Street.

Does Shelby plan to go to his building or does it just happen? Her dogs are confused, they start up the steps, but Shelby pulls them back. The light against the brown stone of the building is brilliant. There are two gargoyles carved over the door. The General sits down and barks.

“Don’t,” Shelby tells him. Her heart is beating so fast she thinks she might be having a heart attack. She has it all: pain down her left arm, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea.

Shelby crosses the street and stands on the curb. She looks up. Harper lives on the sixth floor. Maybe his is the window with the beige curtains, or the one with slatted shades. Shelby gazes into the blue sky. She thinks about love. What is it made of? Air and sugar and fire and sweat? Something made of iron, something made of ribbon, something old and something new, something that is aching all up and down Shelby’s left side.

Shelby looks back down at the building. There is a slight blonde woman with two bulldogs coming through the door. Shelby feels
nothing. She is blank. She is air and blood. The woman is Sarah Levy, Harper’s wife.

Shelby has seen a photo of Sarah in Harper’s office at the animal hospital, and yet she has never thought of Sarah as three-dimensional. A woman in a navy jacket, corduroy slacks, a tweed cap. Her hair is so pale it shimmers. She talks to the doorman, clips leashes onto the bulldogs’ collars, than heads left on 89th, toward the park.

Shelby is headed in the same direction before she is thinking. Thinking has little to do with this whole endeavor. She is walking fast, so that her littlest dogs, Buddy and Blinkie have to trot to keep up. She feels hot inside her coat. She feels orange inside. By the time Sarah reaches Fifth Avenue, so has Shelby, on the north side of the street. They cross together when the light turns. Shelby tugs on the dog’s lead and there they are. At the very same time, walking down the steps to the park, so close Pablo nearly collides into the bulldogs. Their names are Axel and Jezebel, Shelby knows. Harper adopted them from a client who was sent to prison. They’d been kept in a studio apartment on the Lower East Side. They didn’t know how to walk up stairs when Harper took them home. He had to teach them by putting bits of liver on each step. How could Shelby have not fallen in love with him?
“Sorry,” Sarah Levy says, laughing and pulling her dogs out of Shelby’s dogs’ way. “You have quite a troupe there. Do you do dog walking?”

Air, Fire, Water. Which will come out when Shelby speaks?

“They’re all mine.” Not water. No fire. Just words. Pleasant sounding words. Air. “I’m kind of a soft touch when it comes to dogs.”

“My husband’s like that. That’s why I have these two monsters.”

So now they’re walking along together, as if they’ve known each other forever. Old college friends. Pals from a knitting circle.

“You must be a softie, too. You’re the one walking the dogs, not your husband,” Shelby says.

Shelby sounds so pleasant. Not the bitch that she really is. All teeth and fur. She has managed to say Where the hell is Harper without even mentioning him. Was she ever so sly in her life?

“He’s in Philadelphia for the weekend. A veterinary conference.”

Bullshit, Shelby thinks. He never mentioned that. She wonders what he’s really doing. She wonders if there’s a Sunday girl. Her brain freezes at the thought. It’s not as warm out as she thought it was. She should have worn gloves.

Sarah lets the bulldogs off their leads, so Shelby lets Pablo and Buddy and the General off to run with them.
“Poor little guy,” Sarah says of Blinkie, with his one blind eye. There’s nothing where the other eye was, only an indentation.

“Enucliation,” Shelby says. “He was already blind, but his cornea burst so the entire eye had to be removed.”

“You sound like a vet!” Sarah laughs. “Just like my husband.”

“Actually I’m planning on going to medical school.” It’s Shelby’s dream, one she hasn’t dared say aloud to anyone. Why the hell she’s just confessed this to Harper Levy’s wife, she has no idea.

“I wish I was a brain,” Sarah says. “I paint.”

Shelby wishes she had a joint. Something to calm her down. She feels little jittery pinpricks in her arms and legs. Is she a crazy woman? Would she kill poor innocent Sarah, lead her and the dogs down into one of the underpasses and break her neck? “You’re creative,” she tells Sarah. Is she insane? She wonders if the painting on the wall in Harper’s office is one of Sarah’s. It’s a still life, a snow-covered field, a stream, boulders.

“Except I can’t even do that right now. I use oil-based paints and the fumes aren’t what you want to be breathing when you’re pregnant.”

The General is herding all the dogs, even the bulldogs, into the underpass. On the other side is a yellow-green field. Shelby doesn’t say anything. She just breathes.
“I never walk through there,” Sarah says as the dogs skitter into the underpass. The dogs are far enough ahead so that the women have no choice but to follow. “But I guess we’re safe with all these dogs. Right?”

“Right,” Shelby says.

They walk inside the underpass. There is writing on the wall. Someone is a fuck. Somebody believes in the Lord Jesus.

“Congratulations on being pregnant.” Shelby’s hands are freezing so she sticks them in her pockets. Sarah is wearing leather gloves. Nice ones. “I happen to hate kids.”

Sarah laughs. “No you don’t.”

“Well I like my best friend’s kids, but they’re the only ones.”

“You’ll love your own baby,” Sarah Levy says.

She sounds so sure of herself. How would she like a video sent to her of her husband with Shelby on the couch in his office? They office smells like Lysol and there are dog calendars scattered about --- one on the desk, one on the door, one of the bookshelf. Maybe Sarah would like a tape of them having sex on the floor.

“I prefer dogs,” Shelby says. She lets Blinkie down once they’re through the tunnel and he trots off. The General comes back and barks so that Blinkie can follow him. The shepherd in him. The boss.

“I’m not telling anyone, but it’s a girl,” Sarah Levy says.
“Excuse me?” Shelby says.

“My baby. It’s a girl. I haven’t even told my husband. He said he wanted it to be a surprise. I had an ultrasound and I couldn’t stand not knowing.”

They are walking through the grass, off the path, following the dogs. Harper told Shelby that he definitely would not be with Sarah after the first of the year. He needs that long to get out of his marriage. That is what he said last week. They were having Chinese food at his desk. Orange-flavored beef, chicken in plum sauce, mushrooms and broccoli. It was complicated leaving Sarah because she was so dependant and they’d been together for so long, since college.

Shelby and Sarah sit on a bench.

“Are your hands freezing?” Sarah asks. “I have Reynard’s syndrome. My hands get so cold.”

The dogs have grown tired and they all trot back to the bench. Sarah clips on the bulldogs leads. Shelby does the same with Pablo and Buddy and the General, but Blinkie is still wandering around.

“Do you mind holding them?” she asks Sarah.

Shelby walks over the grass. Maybe she should grab Blinkie and run, leave Sarah holding onto the leashes of the other dogs. When Harper came home, there the dogs would be.
Can you believe this woman just left her dogs with me and took off?

Shelby scoops up Blinkie and heads back.

"It’s getting cold," Sarah says.

They walk back toward the 90th Street entrance.

"So what are your favorite girl names?" Sarah asks.

The park is much more crowded now. There are kids everywhere, or maybe Shelby just doesn’t usually notice toddlers and babies in strollers.

"I don’t know," Shelby says.

"I don’t either. I need to think of her with a name. So she feels real. It’s stupid, I know."

They have walked through the underpass, down the path. Now they take the stairs to the Avenue. Shelby has the crazy feeling that she’s about to lose something major.

"My best friend’s daughter’s name is Jasmine," Shelby says.

"That’s pretty," Sarah says. "I like that. A lot. Are you going down Eighty-Ninth?"

"Nope. Downtown."

Shelby holds Blinkie close.

"I’m going to think of her as Jasmine," Sarah says. "Thanks for that."
Shelby stays where she is when Sarah heads for home. Sarah turns back after she crosses Fifth. She waves and Shelby waves back.

Shelby turns and walks downtown. She cuts back into the park and just keeps walking. She stops for a while at the carousel. There are so many children in the world. She stands there in the orange light, and then she goes on, hailing a cab on 59th Street.

"I’m going to have to charge you extra for the animals," the cabbie says. He’s no Moses Leon.

"Fine." Shelby gets in. They go down Fifth, until Shelby tells the cabbie to head toward the west side. She has him stop outside the veterinary hospital. She promises the cabbie ten extra bucks if he’ll watch the dogs for five minutes.

"But just five minutes," the cabbie says.

"Just in case you get any ideas, I’m taking down all your ID info," Shelby informs him. She’s committing it to memory, but let him think she’s writing it down.

"Don’t worry. I’m not going to kidnap your dogs."

Shelby goes around the corner. She knows the maintenance guy, Arturo. Luckily, he’s still there. He cleans the cages on Sundays. Arturo waves and buzzes her in.

"Hey, it’s not Monday," he says to Shelby.
“I forgot my lipstick,” Shelby tells him. Everybody knows her schedule. Everyone knows what she’s done. “I’ll just run in and get it.” Shelby doesn’t even wear lipstick. Harper said that was one of the great things about kissing her; he could taste her.

“Okay, holler for me and I’ll lock up after you.”

Shelby goes into Harper’s office. There are two other vets, but she’s never been formally introduced to them. Now she wonders if they joke about Mondays. If they don’t bother to say hello when she passes them in the hall because she’s not the first.

Shelby looks around. The couch, the desk, the calendars, the photos of Sarah. She takes it all in. She breathes in the scent of Lysol. How could she ever have overlooked that smell? She takes what she wants, then goes out of the office. She doesn’t call for Arturo to lock up till the door closing behind her and she’s halfway onto the street. The paining she has is heavy, but it fits nearly into the trunk of the taxi. She’ll probably get charged another ten dollars fee, but Shelby doesn’t care. She wants to look at a field, a stream, a boulder. A landscape of pure white snow. That’s what suits her now.