

HUGH

PEGGY WISEMAN

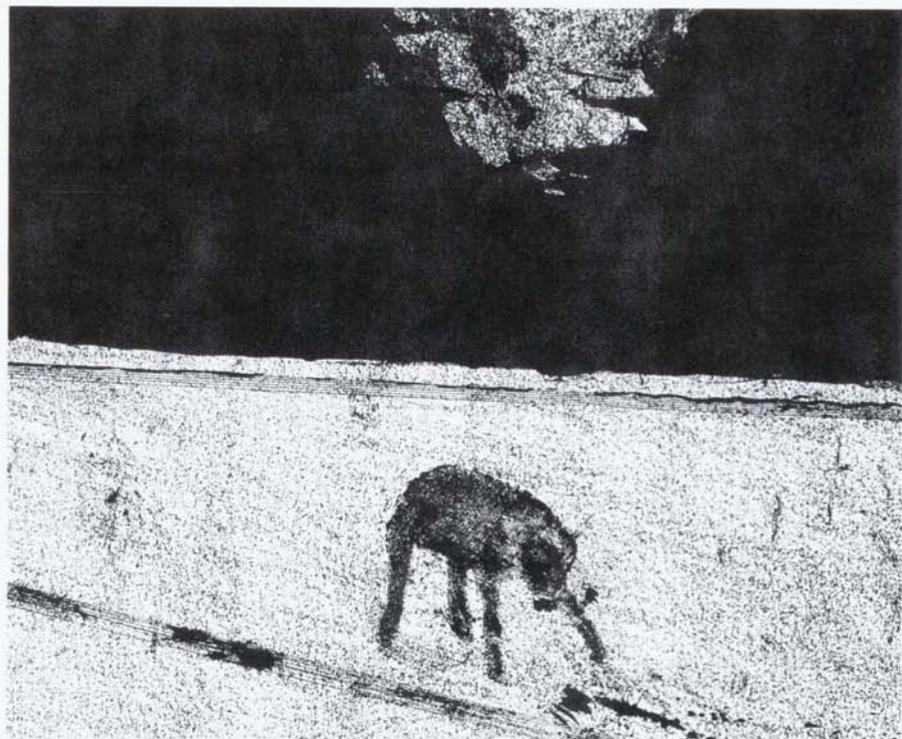


Illustration by Lynn Owen Hanks

Hugh was my father's partner in a small automotive parts store that stood on the main street of the Idaho town I grew up in. That fact is nearly the whole knowledge I had of his life when I was a child.

My father never discussed Hugh in front of us children. Sometimes my mother would speak loudly enough at night for my sister and me to hear from our bedroom: "I wish you would stand up to him just once. Shut him up just once, can't you?"

"What do you want me to do?" my father would say, and then he would remind her that we were in the next room. I did not often discover the precise reasons for my mother's outbursts, but whenever I passed by the store and caught a glimpse of Hugh through the plate glass window, I pretended I had not seen him.

Hugh was younger than my father, tall and muscular, with gray at the ends of his curly black hair. "Brown as an Indian," my mother would say on the summer evenings when he came to our house and did not wear a shirt or shoes with his white slacks.

It delighted him to discover my father in the kitchen, helping my sister and me with the supper dishes as he sometimes did.

"Who's that," Hugh would say, pinching my elbow hard and laughing, "your old man or your old lady?" My father never failed to join in the joke, laughing loudly to persuade us that he was not offended. My own smile at those times was very stiff around the edges, and once I had pulled myself from Hugh's grasp, I usually tried to escape through the back door to the dog house in the furthest corner of the yard, where, with our black mongrel pup, I listened for Hugh's

sports car to spray the gravel in our driveway.

But he was a good businessman, I had heard my father say. He was sharp and uncompromising, and was an excellent bookkeeper besides. I had heard his brisk recitations of brand names and catalog numbers, and had seen the delicate accountant's accuracy of his handwriting on the pages of the company's books, and it seemed to me my father must have been right. In his turn, my father was a salesman and diplomat, smoothing customer feathers Hugh had ruffled, and, with his bashful good humor, "non-pressuring" local farmers into large, out-of-season purchases. They made a fine team in spite of everything else, and I think each must have known that the other knew it. But my mother did not.

"Unthinking selfishness!" she exploded on the afternoon I showed her Hugh's postcard sent to me from Acapulco. He had disappeared the week before, temporarily confounding our summer vacation to the Black Hills.

"I'll be damned," my father said when my mother waved the postcard in his face. "I had no idea in the world — I was ready to report him missing." Then he looked at me in puzzlement. "Why you?" he asked.

I could think of no answer except that I had recently admitted to Hugh after a great deal of teasing that never before in my life had I gotten a postcard.

"That's some winning way he's got with a practical joke, isn't it?" my mother said.

When I was twelve years old, I played in the semifinals of the city's junior division tennis tournament. I was far better than my opponent,

and by the end of the first set I was bored. Even my best shots had become sloppy and half-hearted.

"What do you think you're doing?" I heard a voice hiss as I sauntered to the service line for the beginning of the second set. I looked up quickly. There on the other side of the chain-link fence stood Hugh, his hands on the hips of his white tennis shorts, with a neat strip of sweat down the front of his pullover shirt. Hugh was everyone's choice to win the city championship. I guessed he must have aced his opponent to be finished so quickly.

"I'm winning," I mouthed to him.

"Like hell," he said quite distinctly, and turning his back to me, he walked away to sit with my father and mother on the bleachers.

I stepped back at the words as though his fist had been thrust at me. When the set began, I entered into it with what I thought must have been a magnificent ferocity, tossing my head after each point and baring clenched teeth to emphasize the power of my drives.

I saw the girl on the other side of the net hurriedly smear a tear across her cheek near the end of the set, and I marveled at my own lack of concern. I had heard Hugh's loud applause after every good shot I made. For the moment, nothing else mattered.

"The winner in two sets," shouted the local radio announcer who was officiating at my match, "six-four and six-oh."

"Good set," Hugh said as he passed. I grinned, rubbing my forehead hard with my wristband.

"Don't flatter yourself," said my mother. "If you had been losing, he wouldn't have stopped to watch at all."

The day before the city championships, I dropped by the store to beg fifty cents from my father.

"Hey," said Hugh, looking up from the orders he was writing, "let's melt our trophies down and save them for hard times."

"I'm not winning one," I said with a modest grimace. "Cecily's really good. I mean, her father used to be a coach, and all that." I shook my head. "I won't win," I said. "But I guess second place is better than nothing."

"Bullshit," said Hugh.

The next day I lost to Cecily Andrus, four-six, six-two, and six-three. I watched for Hugh in the stands, but I didn't see him. That night, he won the city championship.

"We'll never hear the end of it," my mother said. For several weeks, we did not. Hugh and my father displayed the trophy behind the plate glass window at the store until the end of the summer, when Hugh dusted it off and took it home. Somehow, the subject of my own match never came up.

My sister and I were alone on the day two summers later that our black mongrel dog wandered into the path of a carload of tourists returning from Yellowstone Park.

"I think we've hit your dog out here," the worried little man in bermuda shorts said when I answered the door. My sister and I raced past him to the street. The dog had somehow gotten to his feet, and when he saw my sister kneel on the pavement in front of him, he staggered to her, laid his broken neck in her lap, and died.

"He just darted out in front of me," the man in the bermuda shorts said again and again. His wife and chil-

dren were crying noisily from the inside of a blue station wagon.

"Yeah," I managed to say. Our dog had never darted anywhere in the five years of his life, but I couldn't be sure enough of my voice to argue.

"Gee, I'm real sorry," the man said. His face was very red, either from emotion or sunburn, and I wanted to slap it.

"Was he purebred?" he asked.

"No," I said, "just a mongrel." My sister began to sob at this, and I wanted to slap her, too.

"Call Dad," she moaned. "Call Dad."

"Dad's not here," I said. "It's Tuesday. He's gone north on his sales trip."

"Then call Hugh."

"No," I said.

"You've got to," my sister said. She rocked back on her heels, still clutching at the fur on the dog's back with her fist. His head dangled crazily over her knee, but she did not notice.

I turned away. I was dizzy from looking at them all. Although I did not know how I would handle it myself, I vowed silently to die before I called Hugh. A fresh chorus rose from the blue station wagon.

"I wish there were something I could do," the man said, but not before I caught him looking at his watch.

"No," I said, "there isn't anything."

"We're just on our way home from Yellowstone —" he began. My look must have cut him short.

"Call Hugh," my sister said again.

"All right," I said, stamping my foot. "If you think it will solve any-

thing, if you think it will do any good in the world, all right, I will call Hugh." Then I went in the house and cried.

I heard my sister come in the back door as I was washing my face.

"Are those people gone?" I asked. She nodded. There was a little silence.

"Have you called Hugh?" she said finally, in a high, wavering voice.

"No," I said. I looked cautiously in the bathroom mirror to see if the red puffiness around my eyes had lessened.

"He's still out there, practically in the street. I don't dare touch him anymore." My sister grabbed my wrist. "Why won't you call Hugh?"

"Shut up," I said.

Hugh answered the phone after the first ring. I told him what had happened, paying careful attention to every modulation in my voice, as though the sounds were typed out on an emerging piece of ticker tape.

"Where's your mother?" Hugh interrupted me once to ask.

"She's at that civic league convention in —"

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Just give me a minute. I'll be there."

"Thank you," I remembered to say, and hung up the phone. "He's coming," I told my sister. "Are you satisfied now?"

For an answer, she burst into tears and ran upstairs to our bedroom. I heard the door slam.

"Come back here," I yelled after her. "It was your idea. Come back here and help me." Anger forced tears against the backs of my eyelids. There was no sound from upstairs.

Through the front room window, I

could see the small black carcass against the curb. Each time the breeze lifted its fur it appeared to take on new life. Except for a handful of the bolder neighborhood kids who seemed to have come on some sort of dare to examine the body, the street was deserted.

"Damn you," I said softly. "Help me."

It was several more minutes before Hugh barreled into our driveway in one of the company's pickup trucks, scattering the remaining neighborhood kids. He did not come to the house at all. Instead, he stood on the curb next to the body of our dog, looking at it. Even from behind the living room window's sheers, I could see the smart crease in his slacks. Once, he turned and looked back at the house, and I knew I couldn't put it off any longer. As I passed the mirror in the entry hall I looked quickly to assure myself that at least most of the redness was gone.

I knew Hugh could hear me coming up behind him, but he did not turn around. After several seconds he said, "I can take him away right now."

"No," I said. "We're going to bury him." Up close, I could see that the fur blowing did not make our dog look alive at all.

"Okay," said Hugh. "Okay. I'll take him out back, behind the tool shed, and you can bury him when your dad gets home. Have you got that?"

"Yes," I said.

He stooped down on the curb and made a movement as if to touch the dog's head. Then suddenly he looked back at me.

"Go in the house and get an old rug or something. Your neighbors aren't

going to be too thrilled about looking at this the rest of the afternoon."

"Okay," I said.

My sister had come downstairs again and was peering at Hugh out of the same window I had stood behind.

"What's he going to do?" she said.

"Shut up." I had gone straight for the hall linen closet and was on my knees burrowing in my mother's collection of cleaning rags.

"He's not taking him to the dump is he?"

"No." I slammed the closet door shut and headed for the back door with a ragged blue bath towel under my arm.

"Is he going to bury him?"

I paused at the door.

"Come outside and find out," I said, and, opening the back door wide, stepped down hard on the porch. Behind me, I heard my sister ascending the stairs again.

Hugh came around the corner of the tool shed and started across the lawn. It was a long expanse, and I thought that my father would be embarrassed if he knew Hugh was there, because it needed mowing. But Hugh said nothing at all about the lawn. He only walked steadily across the yard to the porch.

When he came close, I noticed several bright streaks on the arm of his crisp white shirt where my dog had drooled blood. Hugh had carried it in his arms like a child.

I swallowed several times until I felt I had gained a rigid control of my throat and then stepped off the porch to meet him.

Before I could think of something safe to say, though, he reached for

my hand and jammed the dog's red leather collar into it.

"It — I thought — Do you want to keep it?" he said. The gray tips of his hair rose and fluttered in a breeze.

I only nodded because my control of my throat was suddenly not half as rigid as I had thought. A small tuft of the dog's fur had been caught in the collar buckle, and I pulled it out carefully and held it so that the breeze would not blow it away.

Hugh looked worried. "Don't cry," he said, and I glanced down, I saw the drops on the back of my hand.

"No," I said, "I won't." I smeared the water from my cheeks and lifted my hair behind my ears.

"Thank you," I remembered to say at last. Hugh looked at me for a couple of seconds, and then his arms came up and curved as though they would go around me. It was like a piece of cold metal had been laid on the back of my neck.

"Here," I said and thrust the blue towel nearly in his face. He took it from me with both hands.

"Okay," said Hugh. "Okay."

You tolerated Hugh's teasing because you were told to, you sent him a Christmas card each year, and sometimes you shared your Coke with him when he happened upon you in the drugstore. But you did not have to touch him.

"What happened this afternoon?" my father asked me when he came home that night. My sister was upstairs again.

"He got run over," I said. "He's out behind the tool shed. We've got to bury him."

"I know that," my father said. "But what happened?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. For a moment I was worried about Hugh had told him. But that was silly. Hugh would never do that. I went on setting the table for supper.

Later that night, after my father had buried our dog under a lilac bush in the back yard, he told me what Hugh had done to make him curious.

When my father came in from his sales trip, Hugh was closing up the store for the night. He stopped work on the adding machine long enough to tell my father about our dog. Father thanked him, Hugh brushed it off, and they went back to work.

But later, as they were locking up the money, Hugh took a hundred dollar bill out of the safe and put it in my father's shirt pocket. "Here," he said. "Go buy those kids another dog."

When my father laughed and tried to refuse it, he crumpled another fifty dollars into his fist.

"Damn you," Hugh said to my father, "Buy her two or three."