



CENTRIFUGAL FORCE

By Susan Ewing

LILA KICKED THE WHEEL WITH A STEADY RHYTHM, centered her thumbs in the spinning ball of clay, and began to shape a cylinder. Tiny particles of grit sped past her fingertips, faithful for the moment to their fragile orbit. She imagined a time-lapse photograph of the night sky, stars like lit wires coiling black space.

Georgia lay curled on her bed under the window in a pool of October sun. Pushing back a wisp of hair with her wrist, Lila studied the old lab as she had a hundred times a day this last month. She wet a scrap of sponge and smoothed it up the inside wall of the revolving pot. Under the shifting pressure of her hands the spinning form yawed open into a bowl. Lila had been throwing bowls for a month. Her small studio, a converted porch on the back of their old farmhouse, was full of them. Just bowls. No pitchers, no cups, no plates. Only bowls, which no matter how deep or smooth or beautiful she managed to make them, she imagined perpetually empty.

Georgia huffed in her sleep. Lila and Wade had gotten her thirteen years ago, just after they were married. She was dreaming, worn paws paddling, gray muzzle twitching. Wade once told Lila he thought dogs could only dream about things that had already happened to them, reruns of their own lives. But Lila liked to think that dogs could dream unlimited pleasures: fields of running rabbits, scent-heavy breezes, reunions with lost friends.

Lila and Wade had spent the best part of their courtship hunting grouse and pheasant through frost-laced fields, though always behind a borrowed dog. Then they heard about a litter in Idaho and took a little road trip just to look, and came home to Montana with a fat black pup that had obviously been waiting for them to come claim her. She was from a solid hunting line, and they paid more for her than they could afford at the time. Lila was working at a sporting goods store to put herself through art classes and Wade worked for his father installing security alarms. But they



agreed they would rather have this puppy than a couch. Getting Georgia was their first joint decision as husband and wife and Lila slipped it on like a second wedding band, with a young bride's conviction that she and Wade would never be like the silent couples she saw on the street, walking blank-faced, one ahead of the other.

Lila hunched forward and pulled the walls of the bowl higher. She would try to glaze this one with the image stuck in her mind—filaments of light circling a dark sky. The bowl should be weightless. She lightened her touch on the clay, pulled the walls thinner. A good potter exercises caution at critical moments; centrifugal force can tear apart a pot.

The front door slammed and Lila flinched, pulling the rotating pot off-center. She let out the breath she had been holding, folded her hands over the wobbling ruin and collapsed it into a squelching mass. Lila stopped the wheel and stretched her back. Georgia grunted to her elbows, thumping her tail. When Wade appeared in the doorway Georgia

hauled to her feet, shuffled over to him and pressed her head against his leg. Lila wished she could still manage such a simple gesture, as if this were the only moment that would be or ever had been. But that was one more difference between people and dogs.

Wade scratched Georgia's ears. "How is she?"

"Not so much pain today, I think. How was Spokane?" Wade's father had sent him to a three-day seminar on the latest in electronic alarms. Wade had installed an alarm in their own house years earlier, but they'd forgotten the codes. Georgia's deep bark seemed security enough.

Wade shrugged. "I saw a few ducks on the drive." He put his face close to Georgia's. "Ducks! Get 'em!"

Georgia woofed and wiggled stiffly around Wade's legs, her hipbones sticking out like joists. A tumor sagged from her side.

"Get 'em!"

Georgia tried to dance but her back legs slipped on the wooden floor.

"Wade, don't. She'll hurt herself."

"What's your fucking problem?" Wade snapped. "It makes her happy."

Lila stared at the mess of clay on her wheel.

THEIR TROUBLES HAD BEGUN EVEN BEFORE LILA WAS used to saying "my husband," and hearing "my wife." The first fight was about Georgia, although Lila came to understand that it was less a fight and more an exercise in mapping the boundaries of marital terrain. They were at the Stockman having beers and Wade's buddy Kevin said they should go duck hunting that weekend, now that Wade had a duck dog.

"The only bitches allowed wear fur," Kevin had said, merrily crashing his beer bottle into Wade's. Kevin was 28 and had just gotten divorced for the second time. Wade laughed and licked a slosh of beer off his hand. Lila waited for her husband to tell Kevin that he wouldn't go unless he could bring his wife, who was a better shot on ducks than either of them. It didn't occur to Lila to say those things herself. Wade twisted his ring. When the next round of beers came, Lila said she would just walk on home. Navigating the dark shoulder of the road, she waited for Wade to drive up behind her in the truck, open the door and pull her into the



warm cab, but she was home and in bed by the time he rolled into the driveway. He was singing when he came through the door. He kissed her cheerfully, dropped his pants on the floor and fell asleep.

The next morning Lila had followed Wade out to the musky shed where he kept his decoys. Georgia trundled after them, chasing the ties dragging behind Lila's unlaced boots.

"Don't you think she's too little to go duck hunting?" Lila asked, as Wade sorted through the gear. She was conscious of the way her voice sounded over the assured, masculine shuffle of decoys: sissyish and pleading, like some other kind of wife might sound. Georgia pounced on Lila's bootlace and tugged it, growling.

"Never too little," Wade said, checking his hip boots for holes.

"I'm afraid she's too little," Lila tried again, imagining Georgia drowning or lost forever in the cattails.

"She's a goddamn hunting dog," Wade said, kicking an empty bucket out of his way. Georgia dropped the lace and sat down. The bare light bulb cast shadows on Wade's face. "Don't tell me what is and what isn't, Lila."

And Lila had felt small and exposed and suddenly unknown to herself.

Georgia came home from the outing unscathed. Wade came home happy and relaxed. He plucked the birds and made orange-honey duck, and begged Lila to make a peach

pie. He tugged her ponytail and hooked a finger in her back pocket and watched over her shoulder as she made piecrust, and he told her that Kevin was as bad a shot as ever.

The oven warmed the house with the smell of duck meat and hot peaches, and Lila bent herself around the turn. Georgia smiled and wagged and hopped back and forth until they settled together on their old loveseat so she could sprawl across their laps like a black-lab-blanket stitch. They used to joke that she must be part sheep dog, the way she kept them together.

LILA GOT UP FROM HER WHEEL, skirted around the high worktable to the sink and began to scrub drying clay off her hands. Wade measured Georgia's tumor with his palm. She hadn't been able to touch it herself. Wade's imperviousness to pain was one of the things that had attracted her to him. He was tough and confident and made her feel safe, and she thought he might teach her how to be that tough. But what Lila had learned was how to contain herself, like a perfectly sealed jar.

"I'm taking her pheasant hunting tomorrow," Wade said, stroking Georgia's head.

Lila watched brown water swirl down the drain. "I'll go, too."

Their days together in the field had been calm eddies in the crosscurrents of marriage. They had walked countless miles behind Georgia—watched her discover her nose, learn how to use it and refine her art. They followed her gladly as she covered the fields, and for those hours the world was tranquil and the silence uncomplicated.

"You might not want to come this time," Wade said.

That night, Georgia whimpered in her sleep, and Wade crossed the continent of the bed to wrap his arms around Lila. She curled against him, her mind empty of everything but the reassurances of body heat and a dog's night breathing.

In the morning Lila put some scrambled eggs in the dog dish, but Georgia laid her head by the bowl without eating. Wade came downstairs and Lila poured him a cup of coffee and they sat without talking. Finally Lila pushed away from the table and went to the hall closet to get her shotgun and hunting vest. Georgia followed, cloudy eyes wide and happy. When Lila turned around Wade was standing in the hall, watching her.

"Your choice," he said, brushing past her to get his own



gun. His worn coat smelled of gunpowder, feathers, man and dog, and Lila trailed the bittersweet fragrance into the cold air.

Wade had to lift Georgia into the back of his new pickup. It was taller than his old one and her toenails scraped on the lowered tailgate as he hoisted her up. She laid down on her blankets and rested her head on the soft leather case holding Wade's shotgun. Lila looked at Wade but his expression was closed. He shut the shiny tailgate and latched the topper.

"I want to drive," Lila said. Wade hesitated before handing over the keys. He hadn't let her drive his new truck yet because he wanted the engine broken in right. Lila took the keys, looked in at Georgia and slid behind the wheel.

It was about an hour's drive to their favorite hunting spot. For the first thirty minutes, the nearly empty interstate followed the curves of a shining river. Tall cottonwoods lined the far bank, and behind the trees, short cliffs rose to a tawny, rolling prairie. The cottonwood leaves glowed yellow. Wade and Lila were quiet except to point out to each other the occasional sandhill crane or antelope. At the familiar exit, Lila turned off the interstate onto a two-lane highway running north.

"How's she doing back there?" Lila asked.

Wade turned to look into the back. "Sleeping."

"Wade," Lila rubbed her palm on the steering wheel. The new truck felt like dangerous foreign territory, with no dust

on the dashboard, no grouse feathers stuck in the sun visor.

"Are you . . ."

"Nice day for hunting," Wade said, scanning the brown fields.

"You aren't thinking of shooting her, are you Wade?"

He stared out the side window.

"Wade."

"She's in pain," he said to the glass.

"I could call the vet," Lila said, aware of a weakness in her knees. "He could come out to the house." In the rearview mirror Lila saw Georgia shift uncomfortably.

Wade looked back at Georgia then focused on the horizon ahead. "A man shouldn't have a dog if he can't take care of it all the way through."

"You can't." The words came to her lips like the shape of bowls had been coming to her hands.

"Then you goddamn do it."

"I'll leave you if you shoot her."

Wade cracked the window and leaned his head against the doorframe. "You're going to leave me anyway."

They both stared at the gray road ahead as if it were the tightly pulled seam holding the world together. Lila heard Georgia in the back struggling to sit up, and felt herself pinned at the center of a great, spinning weight.

The week before, Lila had carried a dozen finished

bowls outside and one by one raised them up and let them go until tinkling shards covered the concrete patio like a stratum of shark's teeth. But it gave her no relief, and she swept up the mess before Wade got home.

"Don't miss the turn," Wade said. As if by its own volition, the truck turned onto a gravel road. There were barbed wire fences on both sides, dark wire strung loosely between weathered fence posts. Behind the wire on one side, an ocean of wheat stubble swelled to the sky. On the other side, rangeland rolled out to meet distant mountains. Eventually Lila and Wade came to a gate posted with a sign that said "hunting by permission." They met the landowners years ago when Wade installed a security system in their house, an older couple whose children had dispersed to three different cities. Lila made them a special plate every Christmas.

Wade got out and opened the gate, dragging it back closed after Lila drove through. They bounced a short ways down the rutted dirt road and Lila pulled over at the regular spot. Wade was out of the truck before she turned off the ignition.

The sun was warming the air, lifting a sweet scent from the earth. They often found birds at this place—a wide, brushy draw with a creek that held water when the other creeks were dry. Georgia whined, anxious to get out. Wade lowered the tailgate and lifted her to the ground. Her legs crumpled under her when he set her down, but she heaved herself up and staggered off to snuffle the grass. As if in a dream, Lila took her gun from its case, loaded both barrels and put a fistful of 20-gauge shells in her vest pocket. Wade loaded his 12-gauge and tucked his .22 pistol into a shoulder holster under his coat.

"Hunt 'em up, Georgia," he called, setting off toward the draw. Lila followed.

Georgia tottered a little until she warmed up, then quartered back and forth across the field in front of Lila and Wade, nose to the ground. Wade took one side of the creek, Lila the other. Walking parallel, they slowly worked up the draw behind their dog. When Georgia started getting birdy ahead of them, Lila's heart filled and broke. The black dog's snuffling intensified, her limping zigzags tightened.

Georgia plunged into a tangle of wild rose bushes and a pheasant burst out cackling, long tail feathers fluttering. Lila swung up her gun and shot one barrel. The bird dropped heavy and straight.



"Fetch it up," Lila called. The bushes shook as Georgia looked for the dead bird.

"Nice shot," Wade said, joining Lila on her side of the creek.

Georgia stumbled out with the bird in her mouth and delivered it to Lila.

"Good girl, Georgia." Lila took the bird, her throat closing around the dog's name. Georgia watched as Lila smoothed the pheasant's iridescent feathers. There was a bright spot of blood at its mouth. Lila put the bird into the game pouch at the back of her vest and its warm weight rested against the small of her back. Georgia sniffed the air after the bird.

Wade reached over and clipped a leash onto Georgia's collar.

"Let's go, old girl." He started to lead her up the side of the draw, away from the truck.

"Wade. Stop."

Wade didn't respond, but Georgia looked back.

"Stop!" Lila screamed, raising her shotgun.

Wade turned around and Lila leveled her gun at his chest. Georgia pinned her ears back.

“Let her go,” Lila said, pulling the stock into her shoulder.

Wade tightened his grip on his shotgun but kept it down, the barrel transcribing a small arc on the ground in front of Lila. “Don’t make this harder than it is.”

“You can’t. She trusts us.”

“She’ll trust us when the vet knocks on the door with a syringe and stretcher, too,” Wade said, his voice taut and low. “What’s the difference?”

“I want her to die gently.”

“Like that bird?”

“I want to hold her when she dies.” Lila started to cry. “I want it to be peaceful.”

“Peaceful is a fucking marketing strategy, Lila.”

“I want to take her home.”

“You want an awful lot lately.” Wade shook his head. “You’re scaring her.”

Georgia’s ears were still back and her mouth was open in an appeasing smile. Wade was right about some things. Goddamn him.

Lila lowered the gun. “You’re a good girl, Georgia. I love you. It’s okay.”

Georgia lifted her ears and wagged her tail.

“Come on, old dog,” Wade said. “Good dog.”

Lila watched them walk away from her. She watched them top the draw and disappear behind it, then reappear up the next hill and sink again—a man and a dog bobbing on the waves before drowning.

She went back to the truck. The hood was warm. Around her all was silent; no bird song, no rustling leaves. It was as still as the air in a perfectly sealed jar. Lila raised her shotgun, squeezed the trigger and the truck’s windshield shattered like an exploding nebula. She felt a rush of cool air. She reloaded, shot out the window. Lila circled the truck, shooting and reloading until the vehicle stood in the center of a glittering galaxy of glass. She shot the tires, shot the radiator.

With the pheasant still warm against her back and the shotgun light in her hand, Lila headed straight south under a revolving dome of bright-blue sky.

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