

ANIMAL WRONGS



DWIGHT YATES

Redlands, California

Just one of the details Violet remembered: nobody on the animal rights panel wore leather shoes. She had easily noticed their feet, the panelists seated behind a folding table on a low stage. One of the men was actually wearing plastic sandals over socks, if you can imagine. That was the gentleman from back East who spoke about Pythagoras and the Hindus and the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. All you have to remember about that, Violet decided, is this: a horse or a pig--any animal, for that matter--could be your late Uncle Harry. She was so awake now, yet intending to sleep, eyes shut, but nothing could keep such an evening from replaying. The other speakers had been wearing jogging shoes or some kind of canvas shoes, like so many people do these days, except that most men don't with ties and sportcoats. Her late husband had only worn wingtips--even his golf shoes were wingtips--but then Donald had absolutely no imagination. He liked animals, but he wouldn't think to consider, to ponder for even a moment, what an animal's life is like. Maybe after retirement, she thought, maybe then Donald would have had time for that kind of thinking, but he had died at forty-seven, and she buried him in his best black brogans. The panelists were nothing like Donald. College professors can dress just any old way, and especially philosophers, who are trained to be strange. She laughed aloud, still keeping her eyes shut, but yes, it was true. Once she had seen a picture of Woody Allen wearing black and white, high-top tennis shoes with a tux. He was in a receiving line, and Mrs. Betty Ford, who was then First Lady, was being received. John Lennon had not worn leather shoes either, Violet seemed to recall, but couldn't be absolutely sure. All these associations. She was much too awake.

Of course it makes sense that if you are

trying to save animals from needless suffering, you don't go around with their dried flesh next to yours! The parallels do come to mind. She rolled over on her stomach and crossed her arms under the pillow.

Had she thought about the shoes during the discussion, she might have looked to see what kind of belts the professors had on, what kind of briefcases they carried, watchbands even. She knew Professor Tiermann's briefcase was made of fabric, like soft luggage. He brought it to class, and she noticed things like that. The students had always been busy talking to one another before the lectures began, but Violet was not part of their group and so observed more. And she remembered how she had always been so hungry then, because, practically speaking, staff members could take only classes offered during lunch hour. How that course had opened her eyes! Not that she didn't know many things. She did; she was by no means ignorant. But Professor Tiermann taught her how to think about the things she already knew and examine them in ways she never had. Which is precisely why she was not lying awake over inconsequential matters like the panelists' footwear or Professor Tiermann's dark eyes. That was only a little part of it, a little window dressing to her store of thoughts. She had decided a major bit of deciding that night, had found her cause, and could not be expected to sleep.

Always she had liked animals, but never had it been possible to do enough for them, because doing enough meant actively changing



FICTION

other people's attitudes. That is what the gentleman from back East had said. Think about it. One can't go around adopting all the strays in the city. Not nearly. Realistically, she could barely manage her two Pomeranians--what a handful, those yippers! Certainly she had been giving money to Greenpeace for years now and displaying a "Save The Whales" bumper sticker right below her staff parking decal. But sending money and showing stickers--it wasn't the kind of engagement she craved. Then the one time she actually went out whale watching with some Greenpeace ladies and gentlemen, well, she was greensick, believe you me, and that despite the dramamine. When she lost her breakfast over the railing of that awful ship, some children were looking at her instead of watching a perfectly presentable whale. Never again. And she gave to protect other endangered species, yes, but honestly now, just when would she ever see a pupfish or a dusky sparrow? So, at the end of the panel discussion, when Professor Tiermann announced plans for an ethics review board to oversee the university's use of animals, she knew that one was for her, tailored for her. Professor Tiermann said the panel was going to have a representative from biology, one from veterinary science, a humanist-ethicist (his very self), a staff person, and an outsider or community representative. Violet climbed right up on the stage after the panel, passing the other questioners who were waiting for the professors to descend. "Please consider me a contender," she announced to Professor Tiermann. He looked at her for a time, certainly he did. It was almost embarrassing--those dark eyes! "What do you have in mind?" he finally asked. Violet said she would like to be considered as a candidate for the staff representative. She reminded him that she worked in economics, not a department on one side of the animal rights issue or the other, unless cost-effectiveness were an overriding concern, and heaven help us if it is in such matters. All her qualifications came rolling out. He seemed taken aback. What a strain for the man to be a panelist and to be in charge too, to be the host, she thought. Why he probably had to line up vegetarian restaurants for the visitors, meetings with the S.P.C.A., the horrid press, that sort of thing. Violet also reminded him that she had taken Intro to Phil--not to let it pass that her heart and her head were in the right place. As she lay in bed, she repeated her very words, lip-

syncing the whole conversation. Professor Tiermann had listened intently. He had looked her up and down while finger-combing his beard like he does. "We'll have to get together and talk about this . . ." "Violet," she had supplied. "Of course, Violet." The way he looked at her, she thought, you could tell he was already time and space ahead, devising the strategies and politics and weighing all the intra-personal dynamics of the panel. What a cogitator!

Of course eventually she would have to phase out her leather shoes, but not overnight on her salary, and she a widow, on her own in a queen-sized bed, and wide awake.

She called Professor Tiermann sooner than she considered proper, but it was the gophers that made her do it. It was what the gophers were doing to her iris that made her do it. He seemed groggy, a little disoriented when answering, but she charged right in, a bit nervous to be calling him at home. And she always feared her diction was inadequate for conversing with the professors.

"Before my eyes it was being pulled underground. A wiggle left, then right, then down a few inches, imagine. Many others are already gone. And these are not just any iris, you see. I have won prizes for these."

"So you want me to come see you, Iris?"

"It's Violet."

"I'm sorry; hold on," he said and was gone for a few seconds.

"Yes?" he said, returning.

"Yes?" she said.

"Please go on, yes," he said.

"Well, if you could assist me. It is your expertise I need."

"I see. About what time?"

"While it is still light. Before sunset, if you can."

"Around sunset then, and may I bring anything?"

"If you know of anything that will have

some effect, yes, of course."

"Violet, I am looking forward to this."
He seemed clearer now.

"It is kind of you. I realize gophers have rights."

"Don't belittle yourself, Violet. You run more than errands over there, from what I hear."

"Is this about the panel?"

"The panel?"

"Well, we can talk when you arrive."

She gave him precise directions and set about straightening up.

She was surprised when he arrived in a velour pullover, his hair slicked back, a rather obtrusive after-shave scent in tow, especially considering he was not a shaver. "Call me Leonard, Violet," he said, correcting her use of "Professor" at the door. He was carrying champagne. Immediately the Pomeranians were at his ankles.

"Don't mind them," she said. "They must recognize one of their advocates."

"I have these allergies," he said, trying to shake his feet free of the dogs.

She led him directly to the backyard and the ravaged iris bed. It was already too dark to spot actual gophers, which rather disappointed Violet. She sometimes felt her word was not enough by itself. Leonard was still carrying the champagne and seemed to be casting about for a place to set it and himself as she leaned over the tapered spears of the plants. "They may not be active at the moment, but I did see them at work here, and later I found some of their holes. They are well established. Here, you see, there were mature blooms right here."

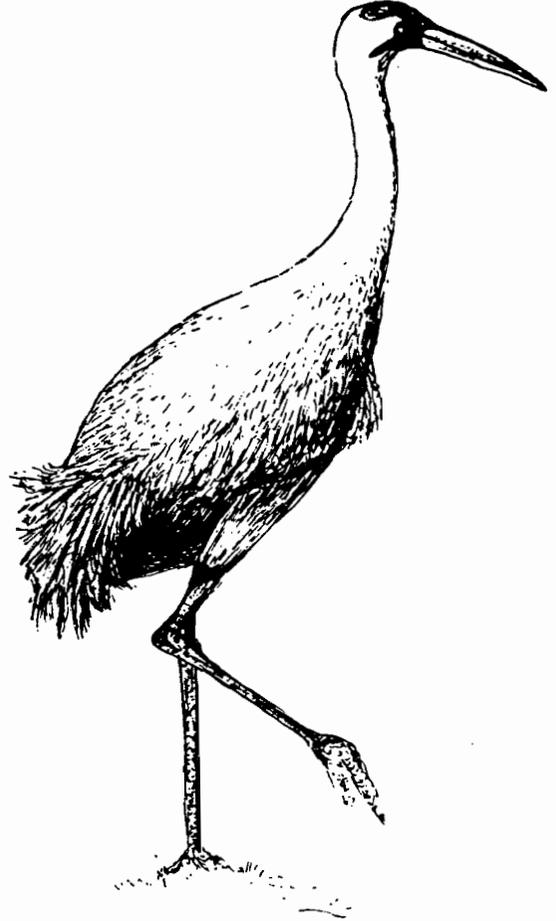
"These little mutts do this?"

"No, the gophers. The gophers are the problem."

"Oh, so gophers, actual gophers. So, what are you going to do, poison them?"

"Oh Leonard, that's it, isn't it?"

That's exactly what we're up against. That's what people do, not thinking for a moment that it is in the nature of gophers to eat iris, even their right." He had looked so serious when he mentioned the poison, she thought; she hadn't known this ironic side of him before. In his velour sweater, he also



looked a bit overweight, but in a sleek, appealing way, pleasantly curved, like a well-risen loaf. She seemed to have his complete attention now.

"But I've been trying to think about this clearly. My iris, as far as I know, were here first, yet I realize that the gophers are only doing what it is in their nature to do, eating tubers and corms."

"And damn near everything else," Leonard said, looking into the depths of her garden. He had a weary look that Violet found attractive, a look of great mental power in too much demand, over-subscribed. Leonard suggested perhaps they should go in, sit down, and talk it through. She put the champagne in the refrigerator. It would be just the

thing to celebrate with once they had solved this dilemma, she told him. Leonard sighed himself into a chair at her kitchen table and began to explain the pitfalls of teleology. He said we cannot expect the gophers to recognize the priority of her plans for a bountiful iris bed. That was number one. Furthermore, he said, although it may be coherent to oppose her rights to those of the gophers, we should not oppose those of the iris to those of the gophers, because iris, as non-sentient beings, lack rights, or so runs the orthodox line. "Have you anything to drink" he asked.

Violet had some cream sherry, if that would be all right, and he said sure, fair enough, anything.

"Then iris have no protection at all?" she asked.

"You could say they have standing."

"Only a few of them still have that, Leonard."

"There you go," he said.

The street lights were coming on, and that signal of evening made Violet wonder if and when the gophers slept. She was also trying to infer a course of action from Leonard's philosophical theory.

"What should we do?" she asked. There had been a bit of silence, Leonard just looking at her.

"Go to dinner. Then I'll think about what must be done," he said, and in the tone of masterful decisiveness that Violet had longed to hear.

Leonard arrived before noon on Saturday, and Violet helped him unload the large rat maze from the back of his station wagon; it had barely fit. Leonard told her that his colleague in behavioral psychology had reluctantly loaned the maze, arguing that the runs were too small for gophers, but Leonard thought it just might serve. Violet helped him secure the plexiglass top and then tape flexible venting pipe, which they scavenged from her clothes dryer, to the opening of the maze. They ran the other end to the largest

gopher hole, bending the baffle shield at the terminus of the pipe, so that it completely encompassed the animals' exit.

"We'll have to weigh this down with bricks or something," he said.

"I'll stand on it," Violet said. "I'm not afraid." She was wearing her new canvas shoes and feeling especially nimble.

"Okay, Tiger," he said.

Leonard placed large stones over three of the other gopher holes and stuck the garden hose down the remaining one. "You're sure there're no more holes?" he hollered from across the yard.

"I'm sure."

"Okay, we're set," he said and turned the water on. They waited. After five minutes, she asked how long it would take. He said that he didn't know but that she should remain at her station. She said that she would. She asked him how on earth he had devised such a scheme.

"I didn't think we could manage bags too well, and cages, well, they seem to go against my grain. And besides, the little critters could turn on one another in their distress, don't you think?"

"Oh, I hadn't thought quite that far," she said, trying to keep her feet firmly planted.

"This arrangement will give them space and separation until we relocate them. Each gopher can choose a small apartment in there. It's sort of a low-tech condo for the little guys."

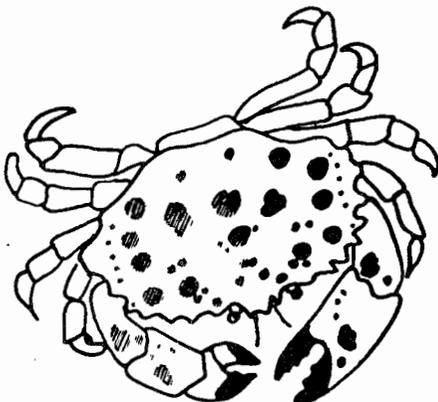
Leonard came up to her side and put his arm around her most familiarly. She obviously couldn't move away and actually didn't mind. "Frankly, Violet, I don't know what these animals want," he said and winked. Then he gave her a squeeze.

The first gopher startled them both as it rattled through the piping and entered the maze, splattering mud on the plexiglass roof in its scramble down the main runway. The animal did not turn but simply toppled the

divider designed to force less desperate--and far less powerful--laboratory mice to consider, reconsider, then turn left or right. Doused, mud-besotted, the gopher sought refuge along the outer wall as two more, maybe three entered the maze. So much mud was being thrown up in the plexiglass, that it was hard to keep count. Leonard was rapidly circling about the perimeter now, checking security as Violet held fast to her post, excitement throbbing through her legs. She thought she could hear the frightened, barked squeaks of the confused animals, distorted and muted by the enclosure, or was it Leonard making those sounds as he moved crablike about the trap, crouched, his arms out like one of those wrestlers she had seen on tv? Then the Pomeranians, tethered to the clothesline, began yipping. My heavens, it was so much at once and all happening so quickly, and right then the water began to enter the maze, so she yelled to Leonard to shut it off, and he did, and then back he came, still in his wrestler's crouch, quickly kneeling to remove the piping and seal the entrance.

"Oh, Leonard, how wonderful! How many are there? Can you count them? Can they breathe? Are they all right? Can I move now?"

There were six. Fortunately, the largest two gophers, now securely stuck in the main runway, had entered the maze last. Leonard surmised it had been women and children first, and when Violet playfully pointed out that he might be ascribing altruism to lower mammals, he gave her a major mammal's



ursine hug. It had been an exceptional experience, she told him. She said she had never felt quite so collegial. "Is that the correct term, Leonard?" she asked. He said that was a good term.

"What a very successful undertaking," she said. "I think we have acted with probity; don't you, Leonard?" He said they should dump the critters out in the woods and drink some champagne.

It was difficult to find the seat belt on the passenger side of Leonard's station wagon, and it was rather soiled once she did retrieve it, but Violet finally managed. He apologized for the mess at her feet--a half-full milkshake carton that appeared to have been half full for quite some time, and one of those styrofoam boxes that restaurants give you for leftovers. These were lying on a torn issue of The New York Review of Books. Violet's husband had been so fastidious about his automobiles--about everything. She expected that she had adopted too many of his attitudes without really examining them.

"What kind of car is this?"

"I don't remember. It should say somewhere." He seemed a bit confused about the route.

"Well, it certainly is capacious."

"Right. How are those flower chompers doing back there?"

She investigated and reported that the gophers were faring very well, thank you. Even the Pomeranians were quiescent, she reported. She had never used that word before, although she had seen it in print. She asked Leonard if this animal interaction were the type of thing he might write about in an academic journal. he said it was probably the kind of thing you write home about instead. At a long stop light, he turned to her and said she was a very attractive woman.

"And stalwart. By God, you stood your ground this morning."

"Well, thank you. I believe that is what you logicians call a non sequitur, but a compliment is always welcome, in or out of sequence."

"Life is a series of non sequiturs," he said, looking out his side window. "Here we go," he said when the light finally changed.

Leonard had described their destination as a sylvan spot on national forest land,

good for picnicking and emancipating animals, and it really was close by, if he could find it. As they drove, Violet wondered to herself about the appropriateness of a forest habitat for these animals, but did not wish to question Leonard; he had been so capable, so marvelous, and by the time they arrived at this very secluded spot, a true wooded glade with patchy islands of light shifting about the leafmulch, well, she decided that such a place was probably what every gopher dreamed of but never achieved. Leonard had acquiesced about bringing the dogs, and she agreed it was prudent to leave them in the back seat with the windows cracked. She helped him unload the maze then unscrew the plexiglass top, immediately liberating the four smaller gophers. Leonard had to use a stick to spring the larger two animals, who seemed, although initially sluggish, none the worse for their constriction. All six began scurrying about, looking, Violet suspected, for holes or for some familiar scent, a purchase of turf, rooting about in the leaf litter, looking for a new path, looking. It was another wonderful moment for her. This day had provided the best animal interaction in her experience, she told Leonard. "And the day is young," he said, with a glance at his watch.

He now spread a large blanket on the forest floor and bought out the champagne. Squirrels in the oaks seemed to scold or welcome the intruders--who could tell which? She wanted to ask Leonard which it might be, but he was intent on opening the bottle. Besides, she didn't want to be always asking him questions.

"To the dignity of creatures," he said.

"To Leonard Tiermann, champion of the underdog, the little underground dogs in this case," she said and giggled the champagne right into her nose. he refilled her glass.

"To the rights of all animals," he said.

"Hear, hear," she said.

"To the animal in all of us," he said and kissed her before she could assent to that sentiment. Of course, she would have assented.

"Leonard," she said, looking at him

evenly, "I used to wear leather, but I gave it up."

He matched her steady gaze then, his bristled beard so sleek, his slight overbite giving him a feral look she had not noticed before. "Did your husband like that, when you wore the leather?"

"I'm sure he hardly noticed. Donald was quite indifferent to what I wore."

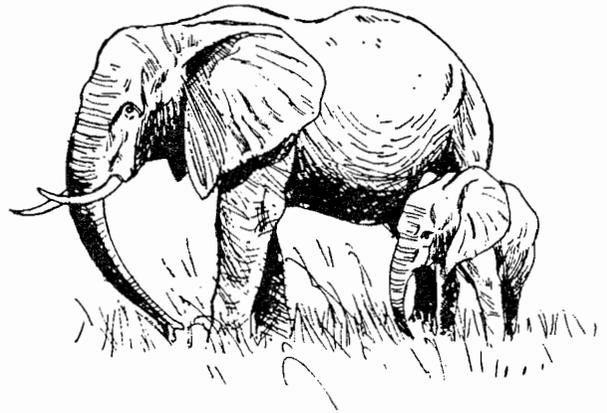
"Violet, how unappreciated you have been." He put his hand on her leg, and she had that collegial feeling again.

"But I don't need to wear leather any more."

"Violet, these things are not unnatural. It is not for everyone, but it is for some. Those of us chosen to lead in this culture cannot be constrained by the pinched imagination of philistines. You don't realize how it might please us both. You are so much more than I expected, than I dreamed of."

"Leonard, my canvas shoes."

"I will remove your shoes now."



From flat on her back, Violet saw the blue sky as an unaffected, irreducible essence, pinned there by an applique of leaves; it was as elemental as the sky had ever been in memory, a pastel, acoustical dome for the cacophony of squirrels and Pomeranians, the slushing rustle of the gophers in the leafmeal, and for the happy squeaks punctuating Leonard's puffed breaths as he burrowed forward and deeper into her demonstrative bosom. In these few moments she had felt, as she realized later, in a condition akin to the state of nature itself.