

# Transitional Objects

BY PATRICIA WATSON

"I have a collect call from Mr. Gibson. Will you accept charges?"

Before Fran could answer, her brother Al cut in. "Frannie! How ya doin'?"

"Al?"

"Of course it's Al. Who'd you think it'd be?"

"Where are you?" It was over five years since she'd seen him. The last she heard he was living in Florida.

"At the Fort Erie race track. I'm comin' up for Mother's birthday. How is she?"

"She's fine. We moved her to a retirement home."

"I heard. How'd it go?"

"Fine. The movers cleaned out her apartment yesterday."

"This is a bad connection." Al sounds impatient.

Fran raises her voice. "It went fine. Just a few tag-ends to clear up. What are you doing at the Fort Erie?"

"Workin'. What did you think I'd be doing?"

Drinking, she thinks.

"I'm comin' down on Saturday. Can you put me up for the night?"

"I guess so."

"What d'ya mean, I guess so. Can you put me up or not?"

"Of course."

"That's better. We'll get there around five."

"We?"

"Me and Amanda."

"Amanda?"

"My dog. I was wondering if I could leave her with you for a couple of weeks. There's this stupid rule at the track against dogs."

Fran does not want a dog to look after. "How many weeks?"

"Six."

"Al..."

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**Damn, she thinks,  
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Why doesn't he  
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A dog —  
on top of the kids,  
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the party.**

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"She's no trouble. She'll just lie around the backyard. Listen Frannie, do me a favour, pick something up for Mother. Spend a hundred dollars."

"On what?"

"Whatever you think she'd like."

"Al..."

"I'll pay you when I get there. And Frannie, while you're at it, pick me up a mickey of vodka."

Damn, she thinks, hanging up the phone. Why doesn't he buy his own goddamn vodka? A dog — on top of the kids, the house, work, the party.

She unfolds the newspaper and turns to the Food Section to check the weekly specials. She's invited her sisters and their children to celebrate her mother's eighty-fourth birthday. There'll be nineteen altogether but— apart from Al—her sister Margaret's son will be the only adult male. It occurs to Fran her that her father has been dead for almost 35 years, her brother Jim nearly as long, her sister Margaret widowed for ten years, Barb divorced for five.

She'd met Margaret and Barb at her mother's apartment after the movers left. Dark squares and ovals marked the walls where her mother's pictures had hung, a layer of dust defined the place where her bed stood. The place looked so small.

"It's hard to believe all that stuff fitted in," Margaret said. Margaret the eldest, plump and pretty.

"It's really dreary isn't it?" Barb, one year younger than Fran, shared the high-strung Gibson look.

"Well, let's get to work," Margaret said, leading the way to their mother's storage cupboard. It was crammed from floor to ceiling. They threw out an electric fan that wouldn't work, a broken step ladder, a couple of old TV tables, then began sorting through boxes of birthday and Christmas gifts her mother had never used.

Fran was surprised at how upset she felt. There was no question of her mother living on her own again. She'd started hallucinating, a side effect of Parkinson's. Nocturnal hallucinations. Cats jumping on her bed. Her sister Fay, long dead, sitting at the foot of her bed, reading a magazine, waiting. "She was dressed all in white," Fran's mother told her, "With a white veil wrapped around her head." Like a shroud, Fran thought. "Another night," her mother said, "I woke and found your father asleep beside me, his face turned to the wall. We weren't touching anywhere." A third night, she found her granddaughter Florie— her namesake—sulking in the curtains, refusing to come to bed, refusing to lie down with her. "'All right, Florie,'" I told her, 'I'll sleep on the couch, you can have the bed.' When I woke the next morning, I was on

the couch, but the bed was empty.”

She told Fran, Fran told her sisters. “What if Florie had suggested they go for a walk?” she asked them. That’s when they decided to look for a retirement home.

Sighing, Fran looks back at the list she has made for the party. She can get the food and wine at the corner but she’ll have to go downtown for Al’s present. And at some point during the afternoon drop by the office to finish typing up her notes for the editor. She’s gone from general office work to doing research for a small local *Seniors* magazine. She loves the work, but the hours are long, the pay not great, and Tom’s support payments unreliable. She feels as if she’s forever cutting corners, doing without, saving against a rainy day.

She glances at her watch. Katy should be up by now. With Tom gone the kids seem to think they can get away with anything. She opens the special notebook she always carries with her, in which each morning she makes a list of things to do:

*talk to Katy*

*review house rules with David and Ian*

*go to the bank*

*pick up groceries, etc.*

*call Mother*

And now this:

*walk the dog*

*put water down for dog*

*buy dog food.*

How much will that cost?

Al did not arrive Saturday at five, or six, or even ten. The party was well underway Sunday afternoon when his pickup truck pulled up in front of the house. He was wearing jeans, a

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Her belly extending  
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faded blue shirt, a cowboy hat and boots. He looked like an elderly, pink-faced, beer-bellied parody of an American hero. For a moment Fran didn’t recognize him. But then he turned and looked at her, his eyes as blue as ever, in them the mix of sorrow and defiance that had paralyzed all the Gibson men.

“Sorry, Frannie. A sick horse.”

That’s when she noticed Amanda. A smallish black dog, with touches of tan at her throat and above her eyes, like eyebrows, giving her a curiously human look. The fattest dog she’d ever seen. Her belly extending in a wide curve to either side, her legs dwarfed and bowed by the weight. Her face like a small pointed triangle set against a perfect circle. Like a child’s drawing of a black sheep.

“Is she pregnant?”

“She’s not fat,” Al says quickly.

“Are you Amanda?”

Amanda wags her tail nervously, not taking her eyes off Fran.

“How old is she?” That might explain it.

“Five years in July.”

“Al!” Fran says horrified. “She’s a young dog!”

The kids crowd around the truck, more interested in Amanda than their Uncle Al, who some are meeting for the first time. “Here Amanda, here Amanda.”

Margaret gives Al a hug. “Hey, this is hard,” she laughs, patting his belly.

Al pretends not to hear. “Who’s this little old grey haired lady? Haven’t you ever heard of Grecian formula up here?” He hands Fran a white plastic bag. “This is for Amanda. She should have one or two tins a day.”

Fran looks inside. A couple of tins of gourmet dog food and two one hundred dollar bills. “Al, you don’t have to do that.”

“I want to. Where’s Mother?”

Flo is inside asleep, surrounded by gifts almost identical to ones they found in the storage cupboard.

“Don’t wake her,” Al says, opening the first of a pack of beers he brought with him, just in case.

After supper Fran suggests they take Amanda for a walk in the park. She wants Al to know she has no intention of letting Amanda lie around the backyard. She wants Amanda to know it’s Al’s idea she stay here.

“What do you usually feed her?”

“She likes people food. I take her to the restaurant with me most nights.”

“What do you mean people food? Scraps?”

“Hell no,” he laughs. “I order her a rash of bacon for breakfast. Maybe

a hamburger for lunch. A chicken for supper."

"A whole chicken! Al that's terrible."

"What's terrible? She loves it!"

"You're lucky she doesn't choke."

The other dogs in the park are purebred. Golden retrievers, French poodles, terriers, great danes. Their coats gleaming, their haunches lean. Their owners fit and immaculately dressed. Fran is embarrassed by Amanda, by Al himself.

"Christ I hate those dogs."

"Al, what a thing to say."

"I mean those damn French poodles"

"They're beautiful."

"You think so?"

"What's Amanda?"

"I dunno. Who cares."

Fran guesses she is mostly border collie. A dog she usually likes. Kind domestic animals, not too big, not too small, with long silky fur. She reaches down and pats Amanda. Her coat feels like steel wool. "How often do you wash her?"

"I don't," Al laughs. "She goes out in the rain once in a while."

Al is the last to leave. Fran has been looking forward to a few quiet moments alone before going up to bed, but almost immediately Amanda begins to howl. Fran opens the door so Amanda can see for herself that Al's pickup truck is gone, then takes her upstairs and closes her bedroom door so the noise won't wake the kids.

Her room is a mess. Stuff from her mother's storage cupboard everywhere—a framed reproduction of *The Blue Boy* that hung in her parents' home as long as she can remember, candlesticks that belonged to her grandmother, a bookcase her father built, the only thing he ever built, a mirror from her parents' bedroom, assorted knick-knacks, some of her old college books.

Strange what her mother had kept. They'd found a collection of hats from the 50s, a set of dishes from the days when they were given away as door prizes at the movies. "What

shall we do with them?" Margaret had asked.

"Chuck 'em," Barb said.

"We can't do that," Margaret said.

"You take them then."

Margaret held up a lace table cloth. "This is pretty."

"Take it," Barb said, pulling a pile of yellow newspapers from the top

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**The term  
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shelf. Front page coverage of the Kennedy assassination, photographs of Jackie all in black, a framed portrait of the President. "Oh god, I'd forgotten about that."

Their mother Flo had mourned Jack Kennedy as if her heart would break. She had not mourned their brother Jim who'd killed himself two months earlier, drunk on a highway miles from home. Taking the driver of the other car with him.

The term *transitional objects* pops into Fran's head. She isn't sure exactly what it means. Objects—or persons, she supposes—onto which we project our feelings. Perhaps the only way her mother could allow herself to...

Her thoughts are interrupted by a resounding thud. Amanda has collapsed on to the floor next to her bed. "You're fat and dirty," Fran says, eyeing her. "If I had Al's number, I'd call and tell him to come and get you."

On her way home from work, Fran

stops at the local pet shop and buys a bag of kibble for overweight dogs. She fills a bowl and places it on the kitchen floor next to the water she's put down for Amanda. Amanda looks at it, puzzled.

Fran rattles the bowl impatiently. "It's dog food, Amanda."

Amanda retreats under the kitchen table.

Fran rummages in the fridge for the utility chicken she bought at the local super-market. She covers it with water, brings it to a boil, simmers it until it's tender, then pours the broth from the chicken into a jug and skims off the fat. When the broth is lukewarm—she tests it on her wrist the way she used to test baby formula—she pours it over the diet kibble. Amanda waddles over to the bowl, sniffs, and begins to eat.

Fran's daughter Katy comes into the kitchen.

"Look!" Fran says. "Amanda's eating her diet food!"

Katy is seventeen, slender, and lovely. "Mum, you're the one who should be on a diet."

"How can I diet with so much on my mind?"

"Mum..." Katy begins, making it a two-syllable word.

"I want you to help me give her a bath."

"Where?"

"In the bathtub, where else?"

Katy holds Amanda's head while Fran douses her with dog shampoo, scrubs and rinses. The water runs brown.

Fran does it a second time. She is about to do it a third time when Amanda jumps out the tub and shakes with surprising vigour.

"I'm wet from head to toe," Fran laughs, on the phone to her mother.

"The poor thing," her mother says. "Make sure she's dry before you let her out."

Fran glances at Amanda lying with her head on Katy's lap, staring at Fran as much as to say, What did I ever do to you?

Fran gets up early so she can take

Amanda for a walk before she leaves for work. As she steps out the door, a station-wagon pulls into the driveway she shares with her neighbour. The driver waves. It's Tony the carpenter. A familiar figure on the block when everybody was renovating but it's years since she last saw him. "Tony, I'm so glad to see you!"

Tony beams. "You look good."

"I feel fine." Thankful she's wearing a loose top over her sweat pants, she's grown thick around the middle. Tony, she notices is lean and hard, with scarcely a grey hair. He must know about Grecian formula. Only his eyes look old—faded and smaller.

Tony looks at her more closely. "You look much better than when Mr. McNally was here."

The summer before Tom left she'd called Tony to do a few things around the house—clean the fireplace, adjust a door, rewire a lamp. That was the last time she saw him.

"He wasn't very nice to you." Tony shakes his head. "The way he talked..."

It was true. At times Tom ordered her around like a child. It embarrasses her to think that even Tony noticed. She leans forward and adjusts Amanda's collar. Her coat feels wonderfully silky.

"You gotta new dog?"

"I'm babysitting for my brother."

Tony pats Amanda. "She's too fat. Animals are like people, they need lotsa exercise."

"I'm taking her for a walk."

Tony glances at the house. "The house looks just the same."

"It hasn't changed much." It hasn't changed at all, she thinks. She'd intended to make all sorts of changes after Tom left but somehow never found the time.

"Call me if you need anything done."

"I will."

The park across the street is the size of a small city block, but there's a larger one a few blocks away, beyond the cemetery. Fran turns in that direction. Amanda waddles beside her

like an overweight matron. *He wasn't very nice to you.* Fran had always assumed Tony admired Tom, that being a man he would naturally side with him. Of course she was the one who spent time with Tony, making him coffee, sweeping up after him, running to the hardware store when he forgot something. Sometimes

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**At work Fran  
begins to picture  
Amanda waiting at  
home, eager to see  
her. But not, she  
knows, as eager as  
she is to see Katy.  
She's the one who  
walks Amanda, but  
Katy is the one  
Amanda loves.**

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she'd just sit and watch him work. He could fix anything, build anything. Tony laughed when she complimented him. *It's my job Mrs. McNally.* But she could see he was proud of his work, that he loved what he was doing. The house felt good with Tony in it.

Well, if Tony hadn't admired Tom, what had he thought of her? Had he felt sorry for her? Or wondered why she put up with Tom? Why did she put up with him? And for so long.

Inside the park, Amanda pauses—her expression soulful, her haunches quivering. "Stoop and Scoop" a sign warns all who enter. Fran pulls a plastic bag from her pocket.

At work Fran begins to picture Amanda waiting at home, eager to see her. But not, she knows, as eager as she is to see Katy. She's the one who walks Amanda, but Katy is the one Amanda loves. But then she's also the one who deprives Amanda of

chicken, who won't let her up on her bed at night. She suspects Katy does. Well, at least the dog is clean. It dismays her to think Al let her sleep on his bed unbathed.

She tries to imagine Amanda and Al in California. Al has been married three times and has children spread across the northern and southern states but now lives alone in a house trailer. Amanda, his sole companion. She pictures the two of them at the end of the day walking along a dusty road to the local restaurant. Does Amanda sit up at the counter next to him or lie under the table at his feet? Maybe he feeds her on the way home. She hopes so. She hopes he has that much judgment. That he doesn't drink his supper while Amanda eats hers.

At the party Margaret had whispered that Al's hard belly and pink cheeks could be signs of cirrhosis of the liver. Fran can't bear the thought. Al was such a beautiful, golden-haired boy. She worshipped him when they were children. They used to pretend they'd live together when they grew up, like old Mr. Hopper and his sister across the street. Neither of them would ever marry. She would never be mean like their mother, he would never drink like their father.

One morning a few weeks later, Fran notices a workman removing the *No Dogs Allowed* sign at the entrance to the cemetery. "Does that mean dogs are allowed?" she asks. "As long as they're on a leash, lady."

She keeps Amanda on her leash as long as they are in sight of the gatehouse, then sets her free. Amanda races ahead, nose to the ground, tail wagging, then flies off to chase a squirrel. Like a young dog, Fran thinks, pleased. Amanda has been on her diet now for 26 days and the pounds are dropping slowly from either end. Her head and shoulders beginning to look quite elegant, her haunches lean. Only her belly resists change.

The cemetery is pleasant. Cool and quiet. No one around. Beautiful

old sandstone tombstones, some so worn they're illegible, but not all. Fran glances at the names—*Graham, Kilgour, Boyd, Robertson*—then stops to read the small print. *Katy Boyd, born Jan. 25, 1836, died Oct. 12, 1857, aged 21 years.* From what? she wonders. TB? The flu? *Hanna Porter, aged 30 years, 7 months, beloved wife of Samuel Porter.* She probably died in childbirth. *Sabella Ferguson too—beloved wife, aged 39, 1842.* Beneath Sabella's name are the names of her children: *Christina, 1831, 10 mos., George Sinclair, 1832, 3 days, Byron Alexander 1842, 2 mos.* Were there other children, between George and Byron, children who lived? She hopes so.

Next to Sabella lies Mary Sweetapple dead at 83, *after a pure good life alone.* A pure good life. Who thought so? Nearby Margaret Swann, 1876, 90 years, *Relict of Francis Swann* who died in 1832. So some women survived their husbands even then. But they couldn't count on it. Children died, young men died, men and women died in their prime. Edwin Bell, age 23; Charles Wiley, age 38; Becky Tyrell, age 55. That must have seemed a good long life then.

Her mother was 55 when her father died. It won't be long till she's 55 herself. The children will be gone and if she's anything like Flo, she could live another 30 years, maybe even 40. Alone.

Amanda. Where is she? Fran panics. "Amanda? Amanda!"

Amanda bounds to her joyfully.

Fran sighs with relief. She kneels down to stroke her, crooning "Good girl Amanda. Good girl."

"Amanda looks beautiful," Margaret exclaims. "Wait till Al sees her."

"You should keep her." Her mother says reproachfully. "She's so happy with you."

Amanda is lying with her head on Fran's lap. "I wish I could."

Barb is shocked. "Fran, she's Al's dog! Why do you want to keep Al's dog?"

"Of course I don't. It's just the time is going by so quickly."

"Al doesn't deserve her," her mother intervenes. "The way he treats her."

"He feeds her too much," Barb says evenly. "That's all. She's not an abused animal."

"When's Al coming to get her?" Margaret says.

"Supposed to be the beginning of next week."

"Knowing Al, she could be here for months," her mother laughs.

Margaret smiles. "She won't mind, will you Amanda?"

Amanda wags her tail.

Usually Fran falls into a deep dreamless sleep almost as soon as her head hits the pillow, but tonight she tosses and turns. And when she finally sleeps she dreams, not about Amanda or Al, not even Tom. About Tony.

In her dream, she is visiting an old school friend and Tony is with her. Tony as he looked when she first knew him. They're sitting side by side on a comfortable sofa in a small cottage—the sort of cottage Tony probably grew up in in Portugal; low ceilings, white plastered walls, hand-made furniture. Her friend, who in reality is in her early 50s, in Fran's dream is no more than 30. She's wearing something loose and comfortable and sits with her bare feet curled beneath her, smiling. The walls are hung with paintings—beautiful glowing interiors, filled with shimmering flowers, mysterious ghostly figures.

Tony moves closer and rests his hand on Fran's lap. She wonders what her friend thinks. What her friend's lawyer husband thinks. Either they don't notice or they don't care.

It feels good.

"Mum! It's after eight o'clock!" Katy is standing by Fran's bed looking down at her. "Aren't you going to work?"

"Of course I am." Embarrassed by the memory of her dream, Fran sits

up, and reaches for her robe. It's a bright, clear, spring day, one of the first. She decides not to bother with slippers. It pleases her to risk the feel of the cool hardwood floors under her feet, the texture of carpet on the stairs, the tiles in the kitchen. She puts the kettle on and goes to the front door for the newspaper.

There she suddenly remembers another part of her dream. Tony had followed her upstairs to hang the mirror from her mother's cupboard. "I've put a mark where the nail should go," she said, and they fell back on the bed.

How ridiculous! She'd never thought of Tony that way, ever.

She glances up and down the street, but Tony's stationwagon is nowhere to be seen.

Al turns up on her doorstep a week later.

Amanda doesn't seem to recognize him at first, but then begins to moan and jumps to lick his face.

"Thatta girl!" Al laughs. He takes a step backwards. "She's fat! What have you been feeding her?"

"Al, you're not serious!"

Al looks at Amanda and nods towards his pickup truck.

"C'mon Amanda, c'mon Babe."

"Aren't you going to stay for coffee?" Fran blurts. It's too quick.

"Sorry, Frannie, got to feed them horses."

"But don't you want to know what I've been feeding her?"

"Frannie, I know how to feed her."

Amanda runs ahead to the pickup truck and leaps into the cab. It's grimy with dust, littered with straw and stable gear. Amanda doesn't care. Her nose begins to quiver in pursuit of some more important scent.

Al backs the truck out. He pauses where Fran stands watching. "Look, I really appreciate this," he says, changing gears.

Fran could swear she smells chicken.

"We'll be in touch, eh?" Al shouts over the noise of the motor, then speeds off down the street.

Amanda doesn't look back.

What was the use? Fran asks the sudden void. What was the use, she asks herself, the park across the street, the sky. The park is empty, the trees perfectly still. They seem to be watching her, waiting. For what?

She walks back to the house and sits on the porch steps, thinking she should make a list of groceries, tidy up. But she doesn't move. The house looms behind her, like a living thing. One day she will have to pack up everything in the house, sell or give most of it away, and move to a small apartment. Like her mother.

Thank heaven she has her work. Her mother never worked. A widow for almost thirty years, living alone waiting for one of her children to call.

Fran thinks of calling the office to say she'll be late. She's made a few appointments. Retired people who have embarked on new careers. She'll enjoy talking to them, getting to know their stories.

But what about my story, she thinks, what about me?

A faint breeze stirs the upper branches of the trees. She pulls her notebook from her pocket, turns to a fresh page, and writes:

*lose weight*

*exercise*

*buy new clothes*

Her closet is crammed with clothes she hasn't worn in years. She'll give them away. She'll fix up the house, starting with her bedroom.

*paint walls*

*hang Blue Boy*

*hang mirror*

*reorganize cupboard*

*build shelves*

Tony will help. She looks back at the page.

*have hair cut and coloured?*

She can decide that later.

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## EMILY HUNTER

### french onion soup

the pauses lengthen,  
drawing shadows across polite conversation.  
you move away from me,  
until i feel suffocated by memories  
and a sadness we once would have laughed at.  
a wall of steam hides your eyes  
as you place the bowl  
in front of me.  
my spoon plunges  
through layers of awkward knots  
to where the amber liquid  
has been waiting,  
onion crescent moons  
float naked  
beneath the surface.  
i disturb their orbits  
bringing the fragile slivers to my lips,  
their vulnerability catching in my throat.  
you have torn away the onion's callused, sunburnt skin  
to reveal baby white smoothness.  
i am filled with the beauty of you  
as my spoon returns again and again  
to satisfy a hunger,  
i have only now begun to feel.

*emily hunter is a 23-year-old Toronto-based poet and writer. She is currently working with a friend on a collaborative book of illustrations and poetry which will be published later this summer.*