

18

a two-hander

by Hank Willenbrink

contact:
208 Ridge St.
Clark's Summit, PA 18411
hankwillenbrink@gmail.com
502.314.3896

Characters

Ella, F
Eugene, a dogcatcher, M

Place

A hometown.

Time

Now and then.

AT RISE: A pile of memories. A typewriter clacks away. Ella hears the typing and enters. She rummages through the pile and pulls out the typewriter. It stops. A dog barks and Eugene enters. He is a dogcatcher. He searches for the trapped dog and attempts to coax it out from the pile on the floor. The dog barks stop. Eugene and Ella see one another for the first time in years. A pop of recognition.

The typewriter, magically, clicks on. It writes:

ONCE UPON A TIME,

Ella types:

THE 18 REASONS DOGS ESCAPE.

The typewriter pings.

Eugene

Dogs escape 18 different ways.

Dogs escape because they sense danger – earthquake, flood, fire, divorce.

Dogs escape by jumping fences

Dogs escape by crawling through holes.

Dogs escape thru the unlocked gate that you forgot to shut, because you're an idiot.

Dogs are abducted by aliens and transported to a small field south of Jasper, Wyoming where they run free.

Dogs escape to harass other, smaller dogs.

Dogs escape because they have plans.

Dogs escape to eat Drive-Thru

Dogs escape to prove themselves to bigger dogs.

Dogs escape to alert the authorities when a boy gets stuck in a well.

Dogs escape to attend secret canine functions.

Dogs have social lives, too.

Dogs escape because they're too good for you.

Dogs escape because you said the wrong thing.

Dogs escape and sometimes they find you, even after you move. This has been documented in several films.

Dogs escape to die because they don't want to burden you with their body.

Dogs escape because they can't take it anymore.

Dogs escape and it breaks your heart.

Dogs escape and you are secretly happy.

Dogs escape.

It's my job to catch them.

(A bark in the distance. Projection:)

**THE DOG POUND,
LAST MONTH**

(Eugene & Ella face one another. She is two years younger than him. At the same time:)

Hey, I—	Ella
Hi.	Eugene
<i>(Back to normal.)</i>	
I lost my dog.	Ella
Hi.	Eugene
Can you find him?	Ella
What's your dog's name?	Eugene
Bernard. Shit. That's my boyfriend's name.	Ella
You have a boyfriend?	Eugene
I didn't know if you'd come back.	Ella
Did you lose your boyfriend?	Eugene
My dog's name is Arnie.	Ella

Eugene
Because I could find your boyfriend—if you need me to.

Ella
That's not funny.

Eugene
Sorry.
When was the last time you saw your dog?

Ella
I knew I shouldn't have come. I knew you'd be like this. You're such an asshole.

Eugene
I said "sorry."

Ella
Sorry doesn't change anything.

Eugene
I thought that's what you wanted.

Ella
I told him he was going to get castrated.

Eugene
Who? The dog?

Ella
Arnie.

Eugene
Not Bernard.

Ella
Right.

Eugene
Arnie.

Ella
Is that why he left?

Eugene
Dog's don't leave because of castration.

Ella
He knew I had the appointment made.

Eugene
No he didn't.

Ella
I said it over the phone. I know he could hear it.
Arnie has excellent hearing.

Eugene
That doesn't mean anything.

Ella
Then why did he leave?

Eugene
Did you go thru with it?

Ella
No.
I let him outside one night and I didn't hear him claw on the door. So, I started looking for him. I asked my neighbors, but nobody'd seen him. I drove around the block. I kept driving but I couldn't find him. So, I went home.

Eugene
When was this?

Ella
A day ago, maybe.
I don't remember.

Eugene
Why didn't you send Bernard out to look for him?

Ella
I don't have time for this, Eugene.

Eugene
Right.

Ella
So can you just drop it?

Eugene
Whatever.

I'm serious. Ella

So am I. Eugene

You are not. Ella

I came back. Eugene

I just want you to find my goddamn dog. Ella

Okay. Eugene

I've already put up signs. Ella

(She hands him one.)

I came back. Eugene

Why'd you leave? Ella

That's the way this kind of thing happens, isn't it? Eugene

No. Ella

(Silence.)

I should go.
This is my new number.

(She writes it down.)

I'm sorry. Eugene

Ella
You said that already.

Eugene
How's your little girl?

Ella
Fine. She's fine.

Eugene
Good. I'll, uh.
I'll call you...
when I find something out.
About the dog.

Ella
Arnie.

Eugene
Do you ever wish you could go back? Do you ever wish you could go back in time?

Ella
Why wish for things that don't happen?

(Ella goes. Projection:)

**THE AQUARIUM,
5 YEARS EARLIER.**

*(The summer after Ella's senior year—Eugene and Ella look at the fish.
Pictures of fish appear as they name them.)*

(at the same time:)

Eugene
Angler fish, California Sheephead, Cape Seahorse, Dwarf seahorse, Big Skate,
Bristlemouth, Gulper eel, Broadnose shark, bat ray, manta ray, sting ray (I think that's a
fish.), reef shark, hammerhead shark, Pacific Hagfish, Sardine, Clown Fish, Giant
Kelpfish (did I say that already?), Hatchet fish, Kelp Bass, Sea Bass, Ocean Sunfish,
Sturgeon, wolf eel

Ella
Anemonefish, Blacktip reef shark, Cownose Ray, Deep Sea Anglerfish, dolphin fish,
dwarf seahorse, fangtooth, leafy sea dragon, monkey-face eel, leopard shark, bluefin
tuna, (I already said reef shark), viper fish, parrot fish, dog fish, rat fish, bat fish, rock
fish, rosy rock fish (different species), soupfin shark, snipe eel, lantern fish, white shark,
snail fish, California halibut.

That was pretty good, I think. Ella

Yeah. I think so. Eugene

Pretty good. Ella

Don't do that.

Do what? Eugene

Don't look at me like that. Ella

Like what? Eugene

Like the way you're looking at me right now. Ella

I'm not looking at you. Eugene

It creeps me out. Ella

Okay. Sorry. I thought...I don't. Sorry. Eugene

Black tipped reef shark.

You're doing it. Ella

I'm not. I'm looking at them. Eugene

They can't see us. Ella

I think fish can see thru glass. Eugene

Ella

They forget, you know. Their brains are so small that they forget. They only have like 30 seconds of memory.

Eugene

That doesn't mean that they can't see.

Ella

Who would torment a fish by making him look at us all day?

Eugene

Who said it was tormenting to look at you?

Ella

See? That's what I'm talking about! You were looking at me.

Eugene

So what if I was.

Ella

So, you're a liar.

Eugene

Well.

(He moves in and kisses her.)

Ella

I told you they're watching.

Eugene

Let them watch.

Ella

Don't.

Eugene

Why?

Ella

PDA.

Eugene

I thought that's why we came to the aquarium.

I came to look at fish.

Ella

So I'm just, like, along for the ride?

Eugene

No.

Ella

(Beat.)

I'm thinking of moving out.

Eugene

Yeah?

Ella

I was thinking I could go with you.

Eugene

They have this major – criminal law. And you know how I'm taking those Private Eye correspondence courses, well, criminal law's like the next step up.

You applied to go to college with me?

Ella

Uh. Well. I haven't *applied* yet. I was going to go up there for a year and then, you know, apply next year. I'd only be a year behind you. And you'd have a place to sleep when you don't get along with your roommates. I've got some money saved up. I could get a little house off campus. I mean. It's an idea. I wanted to run it by you. So you don't think I'm, like, horning in on your parade or anything.

Eugene

You mean: "raining" on my parade.

Ella

Let's just say if there's a parade involved, I don't wanna screw with it.

Eugene

Okay. I think it's great. I know how hard it's been—I think it's great you want to go to school. And this is more than a summer thing, right?

Ella

Yes. Yes.

Eugene

Ella

Well. We'll have to rent a bigger U-Haul.

(They kiss.)

Eugene

They're still watching.

(The sound of bubbles underwater turns into a song. It sounds like the way they met. The song becomes something from the early 90s. It sounds like every bad party you've gone to. Projection:)

**THE WAY THEY MET:
PROM NIGHT.**

(Ella wears a terrible prom dress and has a can of dip. She sees something revolting offstage. Out of spite, she shoves the dip into her mouth. She tries to play it cool, but it tastes awful. The dip drops out of her lip and onto her prom dress. She attempts to brush it off, but there's a noticeable stain. Eugene enters.)

Eugene

It looks like your date is making out with my date.

Ella

Whatever. *(Beat.)* Do you ever get the feeling that you're supposed to be someone else? Everything and everyone around you is about to fall over like the end of Blazing Saddles. Or someone's gonna step in and yell "cut" cuz everything isn't the way it's supposed to be. And then, no one walks in, so you're either doing something right or no one's up there at all in which case what does it matter what you do. You could be failing or succeeding and there's no way to know.

Eugene

Are you succeeding or failing?

Ella

Failing.

Eugene

Me too.

Do you know you have a stain on your dress?

Ella

I don't want to talk about it. *(Beat.)* I'm Ella.

I'm Eugene.

Eugene

I don't remember names.

Ella

Everyone says that.

Eugene

I'm serious. I'm terrible with names. I mean, I still forget my mom's name.

Ella

What does she think about that?

Eugene

She doesn't mind.

Ella

It's cool that she's so forgiving.

Eugene

Yeah, well, we're pretty close.

Ella

What's her name?

Eugene

Corinne.

Ella

Sweet. What does she do?

Eugene

It doesn't matter.

Ella

I'm interested.

Eugene

I said, "It doesn't matter".

Ella

You're like a pessimist, aren't you?

Eugene

Ella

God. That's so High School.

Eugene

You're in High School.

Ella

That doesn't negate the fact that calling someone a pessimist is juvenile. We all feel different things. Can't we just be people?

Eugene

This guy told me that you can tell the different types of people from what they look at when they get out of the car. One kind of person gets out of the car and looks at the sky and the other kind looks at the ground. So look up, Buttercup.

Ella

I can be happy.

Eugene

Well, give it a go. I don't think they're gonna stop making out on our account.

(Ella smiles a bit.)

Ella

Look.
I'm fucking happy.

Eugene

You have a pretty smile.

Ella

I was faking it.

Eugene

It's the shape of your lips. Your lips have a splendid shape.

Ella

You think so?

Eugene

Oh yeah. I mean, not many people have a perfect divot. That's what I call that little spot where your lips attach to the valley that's under your nose. I don't know if there are technical terms and if there are, I prefer not to hear them. But yours—yours is perfect.

Ella

Thanks.

(Ella smiles for real this time.)

Eugene

Look at me:

Eugene.

Eugene.

Eugene.

You won't forget now.

(Ella moves back to her typewriter. She is learning how to type. She types the following projection:)

LESSONS #1 LEARNING HOW TO TYPR

(She screwed up. She backspaces, types an "x" over the "r" and finishes the word. The ping of a typewriter.)

LEARNING HOW TO TYPRE.

(Eugene looks for Arnie, Ella's Dog.)

Eugene

People think that putting up signs will help them find their dog. It won't. Dogs can't read.

Many people think that dogs are colorblind. This is a misconception. Dogs can see in shades of purple.

To catch one, the first thing you have to do is not wear a purple shirt.

Then. You have to get into the dog's mentality. You have to think to yourself: Where would I go if I were a dog? What are the scents I find irresistible? What does freedom smell like? Make a list:

- Does freedom smell like: newly cut grass?
- Does freedom smell like: squirrels?
- like: the alpo factory on the edge of town?
- that shoe that someone left on the side of the road
- azaleas
- Dairy Queen
- wool

- hair dye
- Cheesy Biscuits

Find these things. Set your traps. And most importantly...wait.

(The sound of a child. Ella gets up quickly from her typewriter. She goes to comfort it and returns with her child.)

Ella

Sssh. It's ok. It's all right, little girl. You're my little girl. I always wanted a girl. It's true. There weren't any girls around when I grew up. My dad raised me to be a boy. I played lots of sports and dated guys with monosyllabic names like "Dirk, Keith, and Carl." My dad would bring the boys over and we would all drink beer. Even when I was in high school and too young to drink. My dad would bring "Dirk, Keith, or Carl" out to the back porch and give them a beer and we'd talk about what game was on. My dad never got remarried. He sold mortgages.

I used to steal dip from my dad for my boyfriends. You don't know what dip is do you? Of course you don't. You're just a baby. Dip is tobacco that you chew. You stick it between your lip and your gums and let it kinda sit there, and then you have to spit out the tobacco juice and it's nasty. My dad only dipped in private, but he usually had a canister out somewhere. I used to sit in my boyfriends pickup trucks with them and they'd dip and sometimes we'd make out, but to tell the truth, it's kinda hard to make out when one of you has dip in your mouth.

I used to dip too. Well, once. And it was so disgusting that it just plopped right out of my lip onto my Prom dress.

I'm older now. And I don't play sports so much anymore. And I don't date guys with trucks. And I still see my dad. And we still drink beer. I think he has a girlfriend now, which is good. I think he became a dad too soon.

I think I became a mom too soon.
God that's weird to say.

(A bark in the distance. The sound of a field in summer: insects rubbing their legs together, long grass.)

**THE EMPTY FIELD ON THE EDGE OF TOWN,
WHERE A GIANT WAL-MART WILL GO.**

(Ella has a camera.)

Ella

I'm taking pictures of our hometown.

The abandoned Maytag plant.

(The pictures begin to appear: The Maytag Plant.)

The Shell Station that used to be a Texaco.

(A Gas station in muggy summer heat.)

The train tracks.

(Train tracks in the afternoon sun.)

The Dairy Queen.

(The red & blue sign of a Dairy Queen.)

Downtown.

(Storefronts, flags, seasonal decorations.)

The bridge.

(A bridge into the distance.)

What if that's all there is?

Eugene

It's not.

Ella

What if it is?

(Ella starts taking pictures of Eugene.)

Eugene

Can't you put that away?

Ella

Um, no.

Answer my question.

Eugene

What?

Ella

What if this, what if that's all there is?

Eugene
It's not.

Ella
How do you know?

Eugene
The world is big. It's huge. I've seen it.

Ella
When?

Eugene
I jumped a train once.

Ella
Fuck you, drifter.

Eugene
I did. It was really late. I was in High School and me and Jimmy Rhodes and Allen Baker were drinking this really cheap wine. This was when I was reading a bunch of that Beat Generation stuff and we went out to the train tracks. Because, we were all gonna hop the train – cause that's what Sal and Dean would've done. And there was the train and it was running and I jumped on it.

Which is not an easy thing to do. First, you have to go as fast as the train. So it's good to jump on when it's slowed down, which it usually is when it's moving thru a town. I think there's a train speed limit or something. Then you have to pull yourself up by a bar or a footrest or whatever's around to get inside. Jimmy and Allen never made it. Because they were too fucking drunk. It was so late and that thing was so loud. I mean, if you think the train's loud when it goes by your house, you should be inside it. It feels like you're inside a metal and wood machine. Because. Because you are. And I stood up in the boxcar like I was riding this giant skateboard. This skateboard that I had no idea where it was going or how I would get there. The door was wide open. And, I think there was straw inside. Just a little bit. Just enough for some guy to sleep in or cook beans. That's what hobos do. I was moving north. I had the door open and there was this big wind that rushed in. It almost knocked me over.

(We see the pictures Ella took of their hometown. They move in sequence, like a departure. With every new picture, a part of Ella begins to recede.)

The wind was rushing in and the stars were so bright. I had my head out and my arms... It was tough to breathe, like when you stick your head out the car window. There's so much air that you can't take it all in. I was trying to breathe in the whole world but it was impossible. There was all this air and I couldn't have all of it.

I woke up when the sky was turning colors and the sun was this little flashlight on the horizon. I didn't know where I was. The train wasn't moving anymore. The sky was pink and rose. I got down from the train and there was no one else around. I was miles from anywhere. There were train tracks and pine trees and a road but no people.

No people.

(Ella is no longer there. He looks for her, but she isn't there.)

I was alone. The train started to move. But, I didn't hop back on. I watched it lurch down the tracks. I don't remember why I left. This is what I remember:

I turned my back to where I came from.

I took a deep breath and...

I ran.

I ran till I couldn't feel my legs anymore.

I ran until I ate up all the air.

I ran. I ran. I ran.

END OF EXCERPT
To Read More, contact the AUTHOR
hankwillenbrink@gmail.com