



A VERY SHORT STORY

## THE CATCH

BY ALISON HUGHES

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*GREAT PRICE*, great location, but she remembers the realtor's evasive look when Mark had asked "So, what's the catch?"

Who would have thought to view the house at night? Nobody.

And now it's too late.

She peers out the kitchen window into the dark yard. There, there, *there*. Slinking shadows along the fence, a figure crouched in the corner, a few pinpricks of glowing red. She grips the edge of the sink, her heart bumping.

"*HEADING OUT FOR* a run," Mark says the next night.

Unbelievable. She'd warned him but he'd actually *laughed*. Humouring her by using the front door. As if a fence would keep those things in.

But she's prepared.

As the front door slams, the back yard comes alive. Rustling, shifting, like ripples of silk.

She grabs some strips of raw meat from the Tupperware container. Steak; ironic. She runs to the back door, cupped hand catching the droplets of blood, and flings them into the yard.

An immediate, electric response.  
Locked inside, watching them feed, her eyes soften. *Poor things are ravenous!*  
Maybe she'll toss out just a few more pieces.

*THEY COME TO* a silent understanding: She feeds them, they stay in the back yard.

There were a few bumps. Mark's laughable idea of getting a dog. A *dog*. A fenced yard, he'd argued. A fish in a barrel, she'd countered. He hadn't understood, but let it drop.

Then hosting Mark's staff potluck. She'd caught the one in the dusty suit jacket eyeing the meatballs at the buffet. *Inside the house*. She half-admired his nerve. Rumpled, pale, too thin, nails needing a good trim. She caught his guilty, anguished eye, mouthed "OUT!" and pointed to the back yard. He went — no fuss, no ugly, party-ruining scene. Mark never even knew he'd been there.

Cleaning up later, she'd dumped the meatballs, dry ribs and leftover sliders into a mixing bowl and marched it out to the back yard.

"Enjoy!"

She'd appreciated them waiting until she was inside before they swooped in. They'd never rushed her. Not once. Decent, that's what they are. Well mannered.

She smiles, thinking of that pot roast she bought as a special treat.

Maybe tomorrow.

*LATER THAT YEAR*, Mark's unexpected promotion means another move. The news sends her into a blind panic; she cooks a Costco side of beef, clears out an entire sale rack of jerky at Wal-Mart.

*They coped before*, she tells herself, *they'll cope again*.

She spoils them those last days. Blood sausage. Pork roast. Everyone was on edge, but they behaved beautifully, even helping move that heavy hutch she sold on Kijiji, practically floating it to the end of the driveway.

She thinks of writing a note to the new owners. *A few friendly pointers! Table scraps will insult them. Avoid cat food (it's used as bait)*. Rookie things like that. But ultimately, she decides that the joy is in the discovery.

*AS THEY DRIVE* away that last evening, Mark is in high spirits, mid-story; she chokes back tears.

In the side mirror she sees their shapes flitting into the front yard. *Rascals*. She shakes her head, a tender smile trembling on her lips.

*They'll be fine. They're survivors.*

She watches the shadows slip by, missing them already. **ED**