

# HEAT

BY ASTRID BLODGETT

**T**HE DOG LIES IN her house, cold. Her pups, four of them, lie by her side, blindly crying for milk. Annie puts her hand on the dog's belly, though she knows Sandy cannot feel it. "It's okay," Steve says, from behind. She didn't hear him approach. He strokes her long hair, and she turns away and heads for the house.

Annie and Steve have moved six times in all the years they've been together. In the moves, they have misplaced the following: a mohair sweater. One blue shoe. The alarm radio. Annie's favourite jeans. An entire box of old photos, left to Annie in her mother's will. A tourist poster of Brazil, a country Annie has always wanted to visit. *Tirra Lirra by the River*, a book she'd found in a second-hand bookstore and bought because she liked the sound of the title.

There are more things Annie can't recall. But the sweater, the jeans, the



book, they all come back to her from time to time.

"These are little parts of me," she tells Steve. "Gone, forever. I will never be whole again."

THEY HAVE NOT MISPLACED ROSS AND Gemma. Ross and Gemma have lived

with Steve and Annie for years. Both perpetually unemployed, like Steve, and both perpetually looking for work, like Steve. Steve and Ross met when they were tree-planting in northern Alberta one summer.

They did some planting this year, but they've been home for a week now. It's only August, so they'll have some more shifts, Annie hopes. Gemma is a beautician. She was laid off in May, and there doesn't seem to be any work in her field. Or, so she's told Annie.

"Your deal," Ross says, and shoves the deck of cards toward Gemma. Gemma straightens her stack of

pennies. It's long, like her neck. Annie thinks of the long neck-rings some African women wear. How the neck eventually becomes weakened from them—if you took the neck-ring away, the women would not be able to hold up their heads. Her grandmother told her this.

"Need more beer?" Annie asks. She's going shopping. She knows she should be with the dog, but she can't face Sandy right now. It hurts too much. She feels she has let Sandy down. She has had Sandy for eight years, after all.

"Yeah," Ross says.

"VLT petition imminent," Annie reads aloud from the Saturday paper, yesterday's. "Albertans spend an estimated \$600-million on VLTs since same time last year."

"You going?" Steve asks.

"BEER'S IN THE FRIDGE," ANNIE SAYS. Ross has the most pennies. A smart guy, Ross. He just doesn't know what he wants. Not lazy, just doesn't believe in himself. Good old what-you-see-is-what-you-get Ross from Saskatoon.

"Play with us, Annie," says Gemma.

Annie looks at Gemma's long curly hair, long fingernails, long legs, long nose. Gemma reminds her of the models in the art class she and Steve once took. Steve has more talent. Annie gave up drawing when she took the job at the Student Records office at the university. It seems like she's been there forever now, mindlessly entering names and dates and addresses. Steve is still drawing, when he's not tree-planting. They moved to this place, an old two-storey, so that he could have some more space to draw. Though she hasn't seen his work in a long time.

"No," Annie tells Gemma. She won't play cards. She has chores to do.

ANNIE MAKES THE BED. HERS AND Steve's. It's on the top floor of the house, the one room filling the entire upper level. It's the longest distance from Ross and Gemma's space in the basement. It's only been three or four years since they became boarders, but it seems like forever. For better and for worse, Annie sometimes says. The joke that isn't a joke.

Annie and Steve have had the bed since she first moved in to his place,

13 years ago. She was 17 then. She'd been going with Steve for almost three years, and as soon as she finished high school she moved into Steve's bachelor apartment in the city's northeast. That first night, in the new bed, she was unsettled, had some niggling doubts. After a while, though, the reservations slowly disappeared. They were like the mohair sweater, the blue shoe. She remembered them in a vague way. In the same way that she knew those missing items would never return, she accepted that this was her life, now.

Besides, who else would want her? She was so scrawny and tiny, her mother always said. Bony. There were six kids in her family, and Annie, the eldest, was the odd one. Her mother had never described her as beautiful. She wasn't brain material, either. She wouldn't get into university, wouldn't ever be able to support herself properly. As long as things went well with her and Steve, she would be okay.

Good sheets. Annie adds this to her mental list of things that go missing when she and Steve move.

"The boys are out back," Gemma says. She is standing in the doorway, watching Annie.

"Out back," Annie repeats.

"Yeah, Steve is taking care of Sandy."

"How is he doing that?" Annie is suspicious.

"He thought you'd want her buried out in the yard."

Annie goes to the window and opens it. Steve has spread an old grey blanket on the lawn and is laying Sandy on it. He takes each of the four corners of the blanket and pulls them in together. He picks up the bundle, then walks to the back of the yard, where Annie can't see him. Ross follows, not speaking.

"Annie," Gemma grabs one end of the sheet. "Take this sheet, Annie."

There is a short silence while they pull the sheet tightly over the mattress. Annie is thinking of Sandy. She is trying not to cry. Everything was

fine until today. Sandy got up, had breakfast, even had a short walk around the yard. Annie knows she ought to call the vet or the SPCA. They'll have to take the puppies there anyway. The little milk Annie fed them with the rag will not help them much.

Then Gemma says, quietly. "D'you feel, you know, married?"

"Watch out!" Steve calls to Ross. Annie hears the shovel blade slicing through sod for the grave.

"What kind of question is that?" Annie asks, annoyed. She pulls the sheet toward the head of the bed.

"I mean, have you—" Gemma stops, tucks. "I mean, take Ross. On some days I could take him or leave him, you know. We talked about marriage a while back, but... Once I was at a bridal shower where the bride received fourteen knives. Fourteen, Annie!"

"YOU WANT SOME ICED TEA?" ANNIE asks Steve. Her hair is pinned up on her head. After making the bed, she was hot. She put on a sleeveless shirt and shorts.

"Sure," Steve says. He runs warm water over his hands at the kitchen sink. "Dirt's pretty hard out back."

Annie is looking for the yellow bowls. She'd found the bowls, just the two of them, at a garage sale and fell in love with them. Her mother had given her a set of china from Safeway when she moved in to Steve's. A wedding gift, her mother had said, though there'd been no wedding. "We're not an army!" she told her mother.

"Fruit salad?" Annie asks Steve.

It's hot, too hot for a real meal.

"Just the two of us?" Steve says, looking at the yellow bowls.

Annie knows he doesn't like to exclude Gemma and Ross.

"Steve, we're dealing!" Ross shouts from the porch. "Come on."

"Yep," Annie says.

"Annie..." Steve pleads.

"You coming, Steve?"

"I'm not looking after them, Steve,"

Annie says. "We agreed, remember?"

Steve takes the bowl and walks outside.

ONCE LAST SUMMER, ANNIE GOT OFF work early. Because of a parade everybody was supposed to go to. She went home instead. They were living in the townhouse then. Annie walked round back, out to the tiny pip of a yard with its 8-foot fence. The fence was so old some of the boards had warped and there were gaps. Coming along the path, Annie could see through a gap: Ross and Gemma on one side of the picnic table, Steve opposite. Gemma's long legs were stretched out in front of her, and Steve's dark brown eyes were focused on Ross, who was sorting his cards.

There is something innocent about Ross, Annie thought. He's such a nice guy. Sometimes he misses things altogether, though. He's in his own world.

Steve's foot slid forward slowly till it rested on Gemma's. They were both barefoot. It was the heat. Annie remembered the sandals, the precise layout of the sandals. All three pairs near the door in such a jumble that if people stood in them, all six legs would have been twisted around each other. She could almost see the legs, later. She felt her blouse sticking to her back. A drop of sweat trickled between her breasts. The air was stale.

Gemma's other foot, the one not covered by Steve's, moved over on top of his. Gemma's lips curled up, just a little. Her neck rocked forward a few times, as if she were keeping the beat to a tune that had come to her all of a sudden.

Annie pushed the back gate open.

"A little footsies under the table?" she wanted to say. But she said nothing. They dropped their cards, all three of them.

"Jesus, woman, where'd you come from?" Steve sputtered. He pulled his legs under the bench and sat up straight.

"You the invisible woman or some-



**Annie could see through a gap in the fence: Steve's foot slid forward slowly till it rested on Gemma's. Her other foot, the one not covered by Steve's, moved over on top of his.**

thing?" Ross chuckled.

Ross was winning.

Gemma stared down at her hand. Her stack of pennies was short, off-kilter. Annie kicked off her shoes, not caring that they fell on top of the jumble of sandals, and walked inside, Steve following.

ANNIE HAD TAKEN SANDY TO A BREEDER, by herself. Steve didn't want pups. He didn't want to look after them.

"I will, then," Annie said.

"You like looking after creatures, don't you." He said it kindly, but with curiosity. As if he didn't understand the inclination.

"Some," she said. She liked being loved.

SHE DIDN'T WANT ROSS AND GEMMA to come, when they moved from the townhouse to the little two-storey Steve found in Northlands. She wanted it to be just her and Steve.

"No," Steve said. He was angry. "They have no place to go. We're their only family. People have to stick together during tough times, Annie."

"They don't even pay rent anymore, Steve!" Annie was still wondering about the day she came home from work early. "Steve, what's going on between you and Gemma?"

"Oh, Annie, Annie," Steve said, not angry anymore, giving her a hug. He held her close to him, in his way, tight but gentle.

BECAUSE ANNIE WAS THE oldest, she'd looked after all five of her brothers and sisters while her mother worked. Sometimes she thought she was good at it. But she knew what children meant: dirty diapers. Vomit. Laundry forever. Screaming.

No sleep.

"C'mon, Annie, there's the fun stuff too," Steve had said once. He was the youngest of four.

"WHAT ABOUT US?" GEMMA WANTS TO know, watching Annie sip the iced tea. The condensation from the outside of the glass drips steadily onto Annie's chest.

"Your arm broken?" Annie asks. She sits apart from the picnic table under

the old umbrella, hot in the shade. Sees the dark look Steve shoots her way. He hasn't touched his fruit salad.

Gemma is sitting at the far end of the picnic table from Steve. They are a long way from each other. They have sat this way since Annie surprised them in the townhouse back yard. They don't say much to each other, don't laugh openly like they used to. But they look at each other. Annie sees them catch each other's eyes and smile, or look just long enough to communicate something.

Annie closes her eyes. Something in the coffee, she thinks. Arsenic. But she doesn't want to poison Ross. She wonders what he thinks of all this. He must know, too. But she never seems to be alone with him. She never seems to be alone, at all, in her own house. The idea terrifies her. She had heard her mother say it often enough: What would a girl like you do, all on your own?

LAST NIGHT, THEY LAY NAKED, THE sheets and bedspread pulled back.

"Ever wonder," Steve asked, "how life would be if things were different?"

Annie—hot, dozy—said, "Uh."

"Say, if it wasn't you and me, but you and someone else and me and someone else." Annie felt her body stiffen with sudden alertness.

"Sounds like videos—take your pick and put it back if you don't like it." Lying on their backs, not close. Too hot to touch, he'd said.

"Sometimes you can be so narrow, Annie."

"What's wrong with us?"

"Think about it, Annie. It could be good for you. Remember the first apartment?"

Annie remembered. In bed all day, Sundays, not noticing the time till it began to grow dark outside. Their bodies hot, spent, so pleasantly tired. Not wanting to move. Lying tucked in his arm or with her hand on his chest. Then, they'd have red wine and soft bread, French.

Good for me, she thought. "Yeah," she said. "It was just the two of us

then. Remember?" She wondered if he did.

"That was a long time ago," he said quietly. She imagined putting Gemma in a rubber raft and sending her away.

SHE LOVES HIM. AND SURELY HE LOVES her. He buried her dog, after all.

Sometimes, they come close to the way they were in the first apartment, on their own. Wasn't it just last month he came back from tree-planting after the 14-day shift, stinking to high heaven? Didn't she take him anyway? It was short, though, and they didn't lie in bed with wine. She sent him to the shower.

"NOW YOU'RE GOING TO START ASKING for the rent money again. Don't be petty. Tell her not to be petty, Steve." Gemma lights a cigarette.

"Where'd you bury Sandy?" Annie asks. Melting. Sweat mingles with the tears that have sprung to her eyes. But she feels chilled. Her iced tea is finished. She holds the cool glass against her cheek, tries to numb the ache she suddenly feels.

"Back there." Steve nods in the direction of the garage. "She'll be all right."

Gemma and Ross watch in silence. Ross gestures toward Gemma, and the two of them slip inside.

"Was she cold?" Annie asks, though she touched Sandy herself.

Steve nods.

"I took her to a breeder, remember, Steve? It must have happened before I got her there. A stray must have found her before I got her to a pure-bred. She wasn't meant to have those pups."

Annie stares past Steve.

Steve nods again and puts a hand on her arm, but she doesn't feel it.

**Astrid Blodgett** lives and writes in Edmonton. Her short stories have appeared in literary magazines, in the anthology *Meltwater: 25 Years of Writing from The Banff Centre* and on the CBC radio program *Alberta Anthology*. "Heat" is part of a collection in progress.