ADOPT ME

Nicole Banas

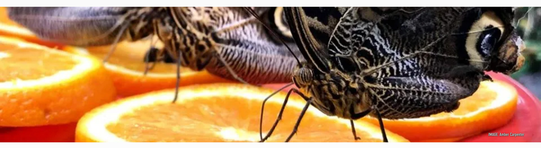

Photo: Ethan Gelperin

Nicole Banas lives in the Philadelphia area and writes essays, fiction and drama. Her first published essay, "Fuck," was a runner-up for the *Missouri Review's* Jeffrey E. Smith Editors' Prize in 2010. Her work has appeared in *The Lake Review, The South Dakota Review,* and other publications.

The summer I volunteered at the animal shelter, I couldn't stop talking about it. It sounded so good rolling off my tongue: "When I was volunteering the other day . . ." It was like rolling up my positive qualities into a neat little package: do-gooder, dog lover, person not afraid to pick up poop. I never mentioned that it wasn't my idea. My coworker, a longtime shelter volunteer, suggested I join a program that linked runners in Philadelphia to shelters. The goal was to provide exercise to cooped-up dogs so they could make a better impression on potential adopters. As my coworker knew, I ran and liked dogs, so there wasn't any good reason to say no. In reality I didn't want to see what went on in there. But I needed to make amends.

Rudy was my first runner. A nearly full-grown pit bull mix, she had deep grooves in her cheeks that made her look much older. She was full of mange when they found her, the shelter worker told me, and I nodded, pretending to know what that meant. Rudy groaned on my forearms when I pulled the collar over her head and fastened the orange "Adopt Me" vest around her belly. She didn't press hard enough to break the skin, but it was hard not to recall. *Don't look clueless.* I thought. Some part of me felt like I owed it to Sam. Compassionate Sam, who never teethed on me, but devoted all his puppy energy to digging. He left holes in the front yard and tore up the carpet in our den one night while Mom, Chris, and I slept.

Rudy hated running down Gray's Ferry Avenue with its flurry of cars and underpasses and cheesesteak joints, but the shelter worker said it wasn't safe to run in the neighborhood. They recommended going to Fitler Square, a small park in a wealthy neighborhood. I talked to Rudy the whole way, explaining what route we were taking, pointing out things I didn't know but I drank at as an undergrad. It was remarkable how fast my self-consciousness disappeared when tasked with someone to care for. Rudy was like Sam in her fear of cars, her impulse to shrink back when she saw one coming fast around a curve. Sam would have hated this street, too. He would have sprinted through an alley or tried to pee on every parked car on a backstreet instead, pretending he wasn't folding. I told myself to stop making comparisons. They only increased my guilt and distracted me from the life-affirming mission I was on with Rudy.

* * *

That summer when I was twenty-nine, I was trying to get my shit together. Trying to stop being so fearful and start doing the things I always made excuses about in my head, like writing and volunteering. Thirty was looming large at the end of August, and I felt a stirring that things weren't just going to happen to me. I needed to get off my ass. So I wrote advice of Kristen, my therapist. I'd even written a letter to my father. My dad and I hadn't spoken in nearly a decade, since I moved to LA for an unpaid internship in screenwriting, against his advice. I'd come home to Philly six months later, but we never reconnected. At first the silence was a relief, a way to avoid acknowledging any lack of wisdom on my part. He had always been on the fringes of my life, so it wasn't an enormous change. The absence morphed over time into a sense that an enormous judgment on me, proof I was never very important. My dad, the elder statesman of my fear of abandonment, the inquisition for my relationships with disinterested men, the centerpiece of so many therapy sessions.

Whenever someone asked why we didn't speak, I said I'd never known him very well, or hinted that something ominous lingered in our past. The truth was that there wasn't a single overarching cause, a blowout fight, or clash of moral principles. What I was too embarrassed to say, but felt at my core, was that my dad never liked me very much. He'd always preferred my older brother Chris, and was quick to back away whenever I posed a problem. As a teenager I once confronted him over the phone about why he'd left my mom high and dry when he moved out—he must have known she didn't have enough money for the mortgage or for groceries. Hadn't he cared about what would happen to me and Chris? He mumbled something about lawyers and said he wasn't interested in having these kinds of conversations with me. *You're not interested in having any conversations with me,* I'd wanted to say. Our conversations had long ago devolved into a stream of cut-ins grifting our teeth through an exchange of generic updates. It always felt like a charade that couldn't go on forever.

The letter to my father was a collaboration between myself and my therapist. Kristen—an attempt to carve out of the woodwork. She said it was important to acknowledge some of the issues between us without saying something that might incite a defensive response. There must have been eight drafts of that letter, and I had no idea what I wanted in return. Kristen said making contact with my dad might help reduce the shame I felt over the divorce, and I was desperate for anything that could ease my suffering.

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My dad wrote back a few days before my run with Rudy. His letter was full of the shit I thought he wanted to hear: that he'd always loved me just as much as Chris, that he'd wanted to be a part of my life and still did. He asked if we could get dinner sometime. It was the *kind of thing that dad would have made me weep with joy, but it made me angry. Then why didn't you ever show it?* I wanted to shriek. *Why did you ignore me when I was a kid? Laugh at me when I was broke and asked for help? And why have you never asked Chris about me once in a decade?* It felt like I was supposed to write back and pretend it was some kind of crazy misunderstanding, like we'd both simply gotten busy and forgotten to call for nine years. I wanted to tell my father that he was responsible for every ugly thing that had happened since 1990. I wanted to list every self-destructive act of my twenties and claim it was his fault.

Instead I went running. Rudy and I got kicked out of Fitler Square for lounging on the grass, which was forbidden to dogs. The next week I took out a sanitar chocolate Labrador named Smokey Joe who ignored me for most of the run, placing his giant head in my hands only once after a drink at the water fountain. I tried not to take it personally. Joe was going through a lot. He was surrendered to an animal shelter, and although his chances of adoption were good, he probably wouldn't find anyone again. *I thought about how many runs it would take to make up for Sam,* I lay for my part in things. *Sam couldn't have been himself either, twelve years old and hard of hearing and sight.*

* * *

When I let myself think about it, the thing I always came back to was Sam's toenails. The way the nail curved over the top of his paw and back around, teetering the flesh. *No one did anything about it,* even though I was the one who took him to a veterinarian she told us to keep after his nails. But Sam didn't like anyone touching his feet. He'd warn Chris and me with his teeth every time we came near him with the clippers, so we told ourselves there was nothing we could do. If Sam was in pain, he didn't show it.

Sam belonged to me and Chris. My mother reluctantly agreed to let us have him as a puppy when we were nine and eleven. Our father had moved out the year before to live with his secretary. Around the same time, we'd watched our beloved English springer spaniel, Randy, die on the garage floor after getting hit by a car. My mother had gone quickly from being a stay-at-home mom to working overtime at the phone company and going to night school. Chris and I were alone much of the time at our house in the woods. We were responsible enough to microwave TV dinners, but young enough to be terrified if a stranger knocked on the door.

Sam was one of the puppies that Randy, my dad's prize hunting dog, sired with the neighbor's German shepherd. To my father, mutts were worthless, a fact he repeated often whenever he came to pick us up for a visit and saw Sam lounging in the kennel he'd built for Randy. But Sam was our baby. On the day we brought him home, we took turns holding him and offering his bite halter's squeaky toys. We praised him for not shitting on the carpet, until he did, and then we promptly forgave him. We let him decide whose lap he'd prefer to sit on, and he settled down between us. "He's such a sensitive little guy," Chris laughed.

* * *

Kristen encouraged me to be more candid when I wrote my father back, to address a few of the most important issues without placing blame. Writing the following letter was even more tortuous than the first, a weird blend of confession and explanation and taking responsibility. I told my dad one of the reasons I didn't like visiting him as a kid was that he always made fun of fat people walking down the street, and I was afraid he'd laugh at being fat. I told him I was a personal failure, even if he didn't mean it that way. I said I missed my mom terribly as a kid, that even though we lived together it felt like I never saw her. I told him that for a big chunk of my childhood I didn't feel supported by anyone. That I felt like I was dead in the gut when I wrote it that it haunted me for the rest of the day. I said he shouldn't feel responsible for my fear of things because many of them were "just things I had to work through like anyone else." *I thought that part would appeal to his "up by the bootstraps" sensibility.* I told him I was grateful that he and Mom had worked hard to support us; I understood my childhood was privileged in many ways. What I didn't say: that money seemed to be the most important thing to him. That for years a man's approval of my body felt like the ultimate validation. It felt useless to say that I hated him for the parts of me I let guys do whatever they wanted to me, that I'd betrayed myself over and over. It veered too close to self-indulgence. I didn't say I was such a cookie-cutter display of daddy issues that it was embarrassing.

My father wrote me back a couple of weeks later, on the Fourth of July. He said he was sorry for the pain I'd gone through and that he hadn't been able to help more in those days. He said he didn't want me to think he'd neglect me because of the past. The past is just that, and we needed to move forward now and appreciate the good things in life, he wrote. I cried when I read the email, mostly out of relief and also sadness. He wasn't angry at me, but he didn't seem to want to discuss anything either. It seemed odd that he'd never asked what I'd been up to in the past decade. Why did he assume everything was fine now? I could have ended up anywhere.

* * *

One of the reasons Chris and I got lazy about Sam was that we couldn't trust him. He liked to play with us, but sooner or later he'd pounce on the edge of the woods, a stubbery tennis ball inches from his paws, and dart into the brush. We'd chase him through yards, crying his name, terrified that he'd wander into the road and meet the same fate as his father. The fear that we'd have to see it again, another dog with blood running into his mouth, led to the decision that Sam had to be leashed whenever he wasn't in his pen. We took turns letting him pull us around the yard as he lifted his leg methodically at each tree, even when he had nothing left to release. The process took about fifteen minutes, with Sam working the perimeter of the property before he'd relax and play with us. Sam was sweet—he'd cuddle and frolic. If only one of us came out, he'd place his paws on the windowsill, looking in at whoever was on the couch to entice them to join. Sam was skinny and tall and had a long tongue with a black birthmark on it. When he managed to escape, he'd return hours later with burs tangled in the black fur on his ears and scratches on his chest from scuffles with other animals.

Eventually Chris and I tired of the process at the runs—the yanking of the leash taller's arm, the interruption from sitcom reruns and bagel pizzas. We'd bicker about whose turn it was, and claim we had some kind of urgent homework that prevented us from taking even twenty minutes off. Sometimes it would get dark before anyone had run Sam, and my mother would come home and demand that one of us bring him food and water.

"Sam doesn't care whose turn it is," she said, the empty pitchers in her hands.

But we cared, and sometimes our standoffs about whose turn it was caused us to wait days before taking Sam out. Sometimes we forgot to feed him too. My mother would rebuke us, saying Sam was our dog, that she'd only gotten him for us. She gave me leftovers to bring to him at night, trying to offer some reward for our neglect. He scarfed them down in seconds and ran around his pen in circles, emitting a high-pitched whine as I walked away.

* * *

Part of me wanted to ignore my dad's invitation for a meeting, but I knew it wouldn't be right. I wrote back to say that I really appreciated his response and would like to catch up the next time he came down to visit his mother. I was afraid something would happen when I saw my father, like I'd puke or sob or spontaneously combust.

"Why would it be so bad if you cried?" Kristen said.

"Because I don't want him to think I'm weak. He thinks all women are weak."

"Do you think he might cry too?"

I shook my head. My dad didn't cry when he left home. The only time I'd ever seen his tears was the day we buried Randy. He'd thrown his wedding tissues into the open grave.

My dad didn't write back for weeks and there was nothing I could do. I went to the shelter and took out a bland pit bull named Cow who appeared to be male until I realized she had an unfortunately saggy penis. Cow was the first dog who didn't want to run even though she was in good health. She was happy to sit on a crosswalk and watch the cars go past, reluctant to walk across the street when the traffic stopped. She showed remarkable restraint when we passed an abandoned pan of macaroni and cheese on the side of the road. I felt like Cow was just humoring me until we got to Fitler Square, where she kept up beside me on a bench and buried her head in my chest. Never before had a shelter dog sought affection from me. She stretched her paws against my lap and rested her head on my like a child. We sat there for a long time and I told her everything would be okay even though I knew it might not be. It just felt good to give her what she needed.

I told Kristen I wanted to wait it out, to see how long it took my chickenshit father to write me back. I told her he had always been a coward and that's why he never looked for me.

"This is what they do in his family," I said. "They have a fight and then never talk again."

"Have you thought about what he might be afraid of?" Kristen said. "Your dad might have a lot of anxiety about seeing you again, too."

I sulked in my chair. She is always fucking right.

"What do you think he might be nervous about?" she asked.

"Probably that I'll confront him about things. That I'll bring up all the stuff in my letters and ask him to explain it."

"Do you want him to explain it?"

"Yes, but I'm not going to ask him. I wish he wanted to explain it, but I know there's no good explanation."

"What would you talk about with him instead?"

"I don't know. General update stuff? I guess I want him to think that I'm a successful person."

"What do you want him to know?"

"That I finished college, that I became a writer even though he didn't want me to. I want him to know I'm in a good relationship, but I don't want him to ask any questions about it."

I didn't want him to know that I was still afraid of him. He was the person who had hurt me most, and he had the power to do it again.

My dad sent me a birthday card but didn't contact me again until October, months after I decided I would never hear from him again. *Game over,* I'd thought, trying to muster some sense of superiority instead of feeling hurt. The email arrived while I was sitting on the couch.

"*I don't want to delay our getting together too much longer,* as I would really like to talk to you. *I know that must sound funny given our situation, but I do miss you.*"

Fuck. What could he miss? He hadn't spent more than a few hours at a time with me since I was fifteen. What was I even like at fifteen? Miserable. Prone to emotional outbursts and taking Gloc Goo Dolls lyrics too seriously. I wrote him back and we arranged a date to meet at a restaurant off the turnpike. My resume sounded hollow when I recited it in my head. Dad had always praised me for getting good grades in school—it was the one thing I felt respected for. My degrees and office job and freelance gigs felt like something less than an A. I didn't want to go through the motions to impress him anyway, but I didn't know what else to do.

I drove up and down the street in front of the restaurant because I was early and because I felt like I was going to die. My dad stood at the entrance, shorter and a bit rounder than I remembered. He wore jeans and a leather jacket, his hair fluffed up to hide that it was thinning.

He hugged me when I approached, and we went into the packed waiting area. It was like an awkward date—two people who don't know each other jammed up on a bench next to a million people who do. We made small talk about my office and his visit with my grandmother, whom I hadn't seen in nearly two decades. I took out my phone to show him photos from the hospital of Chris's new baby, a third boy. He said it was okay—Chris had already seen them. We talked about Joshua, Chris's three-year old, and the funny things he said on the phone. My dad hadn't seen him in almost a year.

Then we were seated. I ordered beer because I thought it would make me seem less fragile somehow. My father kept saying how good the *coco bucci* was here, and I kept wondering how many times he'd been to this restaurant, thirty minutes away from my apartment. Had he often been close by? Did he think of me?

After we ordered, he looked down, and the tone in his voice changed.

"I wanted to thank you for your letters."

"I just thought it would be good to say something. I've been talking to someone—a therapist—who encouraged me to do it."

I wanted him to take the bait. *Therapy? Why? What's been happening in the last ten years?*

He nodded. "That's good. I appreciated getting them." He took a sip of sangria. His voice sounded formal. "Is there anything you want to ask me? You know, about the divorce?"

"The divorce? Not really."

He shifted in his seat. "The circumstances weren't good, and I know you and Chris suffered for that. Me and Karen always felt bad about it."

"I'*m not angry about the divorce. I was more upset by the stuff that came after that. I know that marriages are complicated,*" I congratulated myself for that last line. It sounded so adult.

My father looked away. "Things between your mom and me had gotten difficult, and I was traveling all the time and then I met Karen."

Suddenly I remembered what it was like to be fifteen and mortified by a topic of conversation. He was going to try to explain why he started fucking someone she twenty years ago.

"Divorce is hard on kids," he went on, not looking at me. "I always felt you guys were mad at me and might have resented Karen."

"I'*m not mad at Karen.*"

"Not?" He looked surprised.

"I like Karen."

It was there that I could have said something of substance, that it was him I'd resented. Not for leaving, but for what he did while he was there. For trying to assuage his guilt by treating my mother like shit, by telling us we couldn't do anything right, for causing me to think that if I were more exceptional, a little more interested in the things he liked, then I could win his favor. I should have told him that all I'd needed from him was kindness; it was so maddeningly simple. I'd like to think I didn't confront my dad out of some inner reserve of empathy—that I looked at him sitting in the booth and saw his vulnerability, his inability to change any speck of the past. Reality is was that I didn't want him to see me cry. I didn't want to be a little girl again.

Our conversation veered back toward the present, my job and lack of retirement savings. His distrust of Obamacare. The burdens of snow removal. He spoke to me as if we'd always been in contact and were just passing the time until dessert. The *coco bucci* was excellent. I admitted.

In the parking lot my father told me he was really glad we'd caught up. I was doing so well, he said, and it would be nice to see each other a couple of times a year. He didn't want to be too much of a burden on me or Chris. I felt a sting of self-righteousness—*a parent proposing an annual visiting schedule!*—tempered by the certainty that I didn't want to go through this more often than it wouldn't occur to me until months later that too much had already passed between us. I would never get the things I thought I needed from him.

We stood under the street lights in the parking lot, shifting our weight from foot to foot.

"You look so much like your mother," he said. "It's amazing."

I was always hers.

* * *

When I was twenty-one my mother sold our family home, the one she'd built with my dad in her early twenties. It was too isolated, she said, and it reminded her of too many things. She was tired of driving an hour to work or thirty minutes to any kind of civilization. I knew she'd wanted to move years earlier, but put it off because she didn't want to put more strain on Chris and me after the divorce. Sometimes it just felt like the house was weighing on her, she said.

I went with my mother to look at a condo in Harleysville, a bland two-bedroom unit with white walls and beige carpet. She signed up on the spot. The leasing manager shook her head when my mom mentioned Sam.

"I'll have to figure something out," Mom said on the ride home. "I can't stay here forever because of Sam."

Chris lived in an apartment building that didn't allow dogs, much less ones without reliable bladder control. I lived in a house in the city with five roommates. I had to picture keeping Sam in the backyard or the basement, where bands played at our parties. It just wouldn't work, I decided, ignoring the inner voice that said I could try harder.

A few weeks later I came home again to help my mom pack. She couldn't find any takers for Sam. His advanced age didn't help his cause. He seemed startled whenever anyone approached him, like he didn't see them coming. Only the loudest noises could rouse him from sleep. The door frame on Sam's kennel had broken years earlier, but he was oblivious to the fact that it was open. Some part of me wanted to see him make his long-deserved escape. We rarely deserved some measure of disloyalty, but he seemed more content than ever to lose on top of his doghouse.

I bathed Sam in the yard while my mother organized junk from the garage. A giant dumpster was parked in our driveway. I whispered apologies for the cold water, explaining that the hot-water valve on the outdoor faucet had never worked right. Sam trembled but stayed sitting between my feet. I lathered him up with an old bottle of Pert Plus, the dirt running off his fur and into the puddle at our feet. I had just graduated college a few months earlier. My father hadn't spoken to me in more than a year.

"You're such a good boy," I said to Sam, cupping his chin in one hand while I rinsed his head. "You've always been so good."

It was late afternoon and the light was filtering through the trees. Sam shook himself off and then jogged around the backyard in big circles, victory laps for being done with the bath, and for being out of the pen, off the leash.

"Sam, you look great!" my mother chimed in, noticing his happy burst of energy.

Days later she would take him to the shelter and explain the situation. It wasn't that we didn't love him; it was just that she couldn't have him anymore. There was nowhere else to take him, and he was so old. I knew my mom deserved to leave that place behind, but I couldn't help wishing she stayed. Sam, my baby, who took the brunt of so many mistakes.

I knew that Sam had no idea what was coming that day on the lawn, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth, the water still on his skin. He was just happy that we were there.