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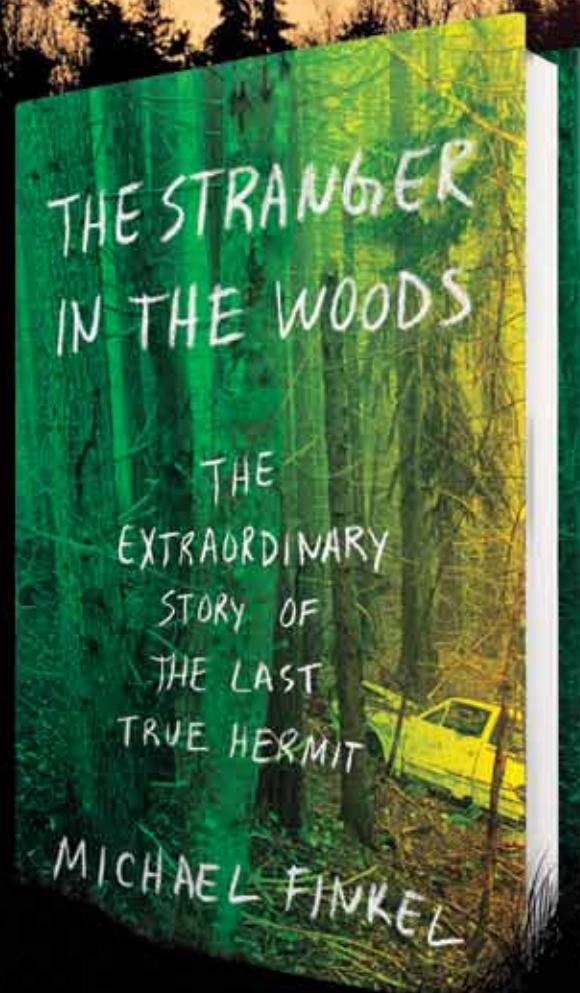
and thermos-ready, easily drained in one warm, rummy slug ... Raises a variety of profound questions—about the role of solitude, about the value of suffering, about the diversity of human needs.”

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A remarkable tale of survival and solitude—the true story of Christopher Knight, who survived 27 years in the Maine woods, undiscovered and unaided, without lighting a fire or sleeping indoors.



A Shaggy Dog

Shaggy-dog story \ sha-gē-'dög 'stör-ē\ n: of, relating to, or being a similar humorous story characterized by digression whose humor lies in the pointlessness or irrelevance of the plot or punch line <a shaggy-dog comedy>.

BY JOAN CONNOR

MY DOG, PHOENIX, did not make it through the fire. I got out. She did not. Heavy-handed symbolism, except that Phoenix, who did not rise from the flames, was not named for the myth but for River Phoenix, the character Mike in *My Own Private Idaho*. Whichever, ashes to ashes.

Like Mike, I was searching for my mother, who deserted me and left me to bounce, and not very high, from foster home to foster home until I got my own—a beat-up immobile home at the far end of the trailer court, Happy Acres. Trailer parks are not renowned for their grasp of irony.

So I was dog-less and homeless. Enter Pastor Pete. Pastor Pete was like no other

pastor I knew, not that I knew many (any) pastors. He actually helped people, helped clothe them, helped feed them. He did not criticize single mothers. He did not hate gay men. For all I knew he was one. He did not hate anyone as far as I could see. A Christian who actually was Christian. He had his own church—The Church of Pete—and he told me that he was named after Peter—*thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church*—Peter. So he felt a calling and founded his church, but it was not on a rock but rather in an abandoned former Woolworth's. It still had the red stools at the lunch counter. Nonetheless Pastor Pete led a large flock. On the mezzanine.

Lois was a member of the flock, and that

is how I ended up here. Pastor Pete clothed people, fed people, and sheltered them, and he sheltered me at 1001 Main Street, subsidized housing for seniors, Lois's unit, number 22.

Lois's unit was even unhappier than Happy Acres. It smelled like shot support hose, urine-stained bed linen, stale crackers. She went on talking jags, cooked although she could no longer see let alone cook, left food to mold in the refrigerator. But her dog made the living situation unbearable. Scruffy the dog.

Day One: Lois thrusts Scruffy into my face, says, "Say hello to Scruffy."

"Hey, Scruff," I say.

"Pet Scruffy."

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I pat the stiff, patchy fur.

"Kiss Scruffy."

"I am not much of a kisser. Sorry."

Lois pats Scruffy, plants one right on his dry little nose, says, "Poor Scwuffy, are your wittle feelings hurt?"

Scwuffy stares at me unblinkingly with evil green eyes over Lois's shoulder. I do not avert my own.

A better name for the pup would be Mangy. Scrofulous. Count Scrofula.

Unhappy Acres, the Senior Citizens Subsidized Housing, did not allow pets or live-in guests, for that matter. Scruffy, of course, was dead, the victim of an insanely untalented and equally insanely enthusiastic taxidermist.

I was temporary. Until I could get back on my feet, said Pastor Pete. But temporary. Not as temporary, I hoped, as old Scrofulous here. Nevertheless I kept on the look out for a taxidermy hobbyist among the old men mumbling to their pajamas in the common room when I passed through. Just in case some old duffer took a notion to stuff me.

Pastor Pete gave me temp work in his food pantry. Sometimes I stacked cans. Sometimes I kept the ledgers of the food distribution. Sometimes I even ladled stew. And I looked for work in shopping advertisement papers, store window signs, Craigslist, sometimes just intercepting house painters and carpenters—*Hey, could you use another hand?* Sometimes feeling Phoenix dogging me, or Phoenix' ghost. I scoured the streets and pored over the papers and pounded pocky pavement after pocky pavement because I knew that I must. It was life or death absolutely, world with end amen must, to get away from Lois and Scrofulous.

When I got back to Lois's after one of these job searches, Scruffy met me at the door with his Philips-head muzzle and haunted-house portrait eyes. Comfortably clutched under Lois's arm, he glared at me.

"Do you want some lunch?" Lois asked.

Lunch was PB & J on stale hamburger buns. Lois fed hers to Scruffy who apparently was feeling peckish.

That was the day Scruffy began talking, Scruffy the talking dog. Scruffy the talking dead dog. Now that could make the mid-way show. Ladies and gentleman, step right up to see and hear Scruffy the talking dead dog. Tipped the fat lady right off the stage.

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“RRRRR, I want your sandwich.”
“Now, Scruffy,” Lois said, “you already had your sandwich.”

“RRRRRR.”

I stared at Scruffy’s uneaten sandwich and choked down another mouthful of my own. “Lois, you should have gotten a lobster for a pet. Lobsters are immortal unless they die of unnatural causes. Did you know that? They’ll scuttle around on the sea floor until you boil and eat them.”

“Scruffy wants to bite you.” Scruffy needed into my forearm with his immobile mandible.

“Bad Scruffy,” Lois said and tapped him on the nose. “Bad, bad Scruffy.”

Scruffy began tailing me everywhere. When I opened the bathroom door, he’d be hunkering there, staring at me. When I drank my coffee, he’d be right there begrudging me every sip and gulp. When I sat on the couch, he planted himself right in front of me as if about to go for the jugular. Cujo. Stuffed Cujo. It might have been comical like *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken*, but it was creepy. Come to think of it, *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken* was creepy. Actually Don Knotts was creepy.

Lois was not helping. Apparently Scruffy had hired her as his interpreter. “Scruffy hates you,” she translated. “Scruffy says you drank milk from the carton. Scruffy says you don’t close the door all the way when you go to the bathroom.”

Finally I sought out Pastor Pete. “Do you know how Scruffy died?” I had begun to think that Lois had assembled Scruffy from recycled dog parts during an electrical storm while villagers with torches stormed the dog pound.

“Not sure,” Pastor Pete said, “but I think natural causes. Everything okay?”

I explained to the good pastor that I thought it was time to find me a new home.

The moment I opened the door I sniffed trouble. Scruffy stood on point at the threshold, followed me into the kitchen, daring me to swill from the carton. Thunder rumbled. Lightning split the skies with glee. I flashed on Phoenix and the fire, and my forearm hairs bristled.

“Scruffy says you ain’t going nowhere.”

I stared at Lois’s eyes; they had the fixed intensity of Scruffy’s. Had Pastor Pete called her? How else could she know? I reached

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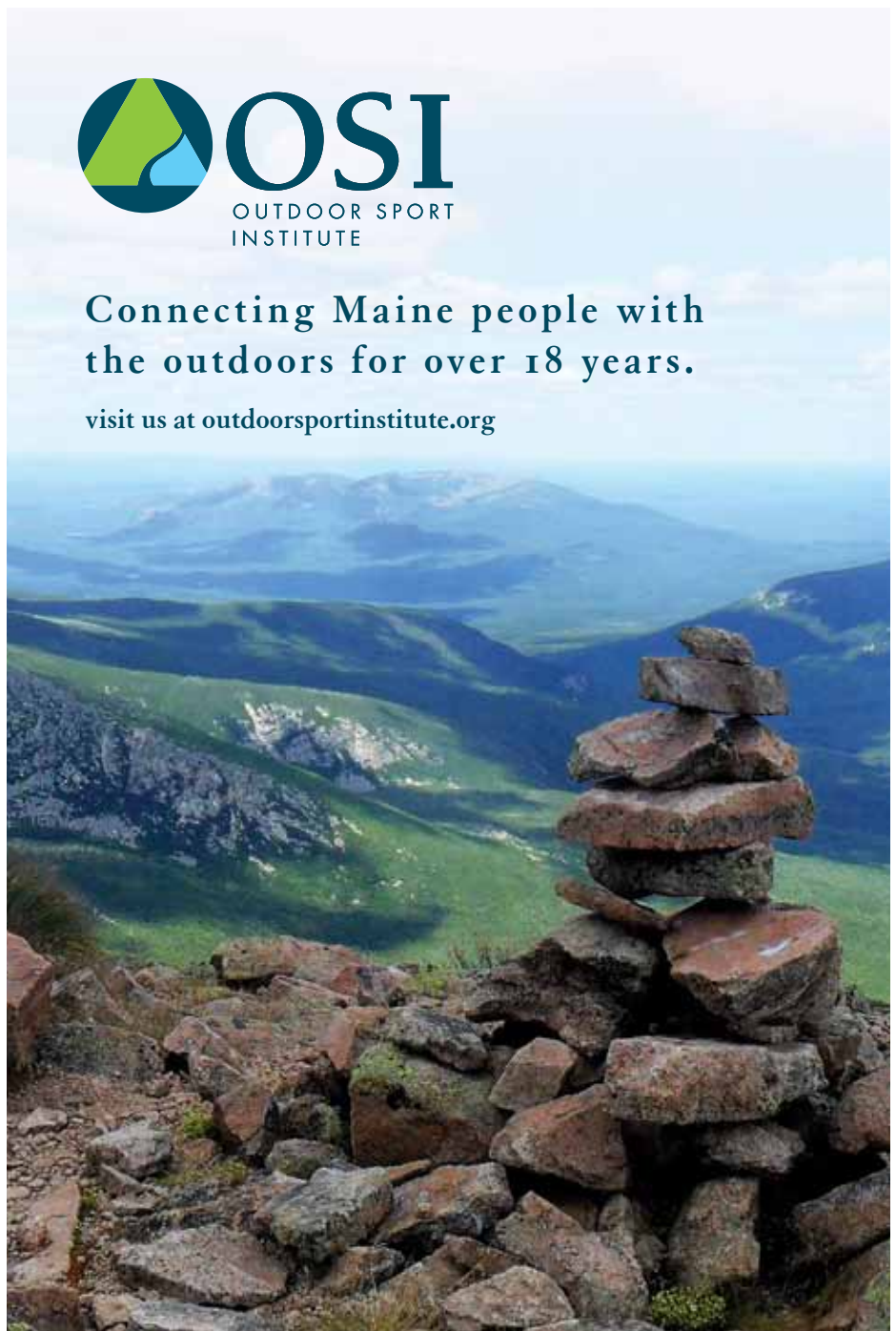
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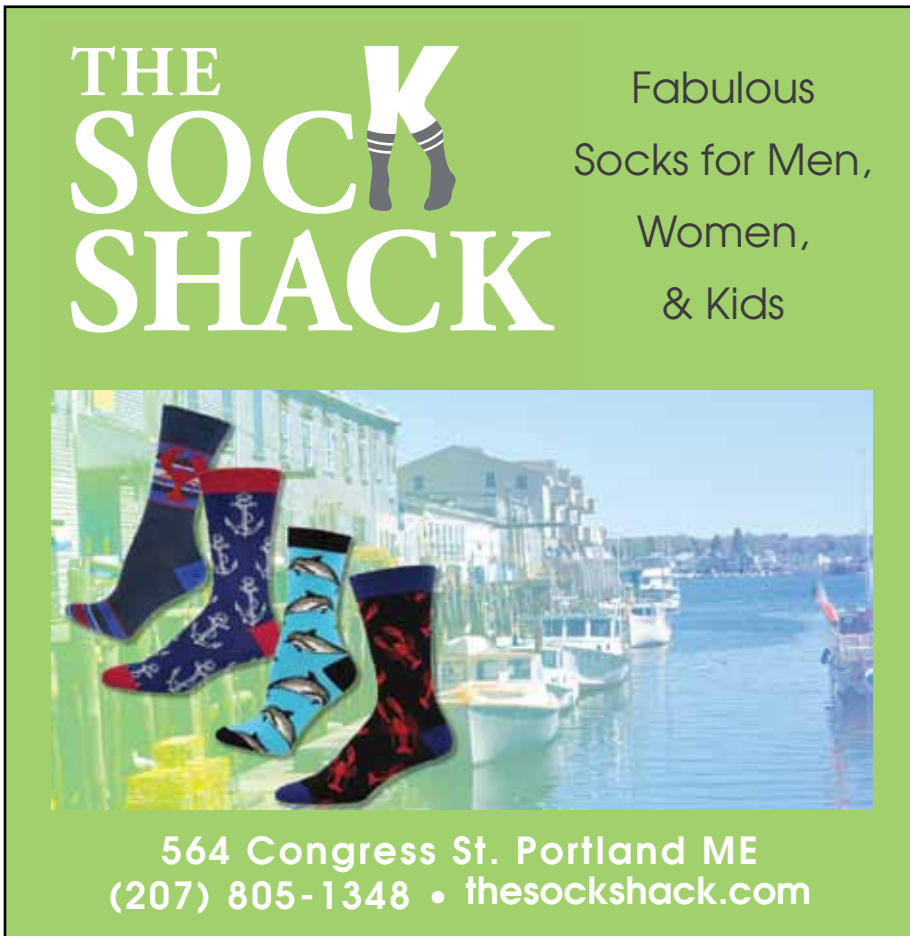
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out and scratched Scruffy’s mangy ruff, and thought of that old joke about the starving man who eats his trusty dog, picking the bones clean. The punch line: Poor old Rover sure would have loved those bones.

The lightning cracked. “Lois,” I said, “I am moving out. But you and Scruffy will be fine. And, Lois,” I added, “Scruffy is dead. Stuffed. Stuffed like a Thanksgiving turkey.”

For a moment, just the briefest moment, Lois looked struck, struck dumb, lightning struck. Then she resumed the ventriloquist act. “Scruffy says you’re a total loser.”

“No soap radio,” I said.

“What?” Scruffy asked.

“No soap radio. *Har har har*. Trial by fire. Did you hear the one about the dog who chewed on his own bones? So I am walking around and I meet a dog named Rover. When I was a kid we used to play Red Rover at the foster home. Weird name foster home; they do not foster a thing except resentment. Rover was not a shaggy dog. Fur sleek as a seal. I saw a seal once at the zoo. I made that up. Actually I have never been to a zoo. I went to a fair once. But I digress,” I said.

Scruffy stared glassily. “GRR,” he said, “and you are still a loser.”

I nodded, then headed for the door, thinking that Lois and I were finally not dissimilar, both transformed, disfigured by grief and resurrected by it.

“Bye, Lois,” I said. I glanced at Scruffy, good ole Scruff, but I did not bid Scruffy farewell.

As I closed the door, Scruffy growled and said, “And never come back here, loser.” The door clicked.

I walked with no clear direction where I was headed. Maybe Pastor Pete would let me throw down a pallet on the food pantry floor. Maybe not. A complete unknown like a rolling stone. I walked just walked to the rhythm of this refrain in my head.

From grief we turn away; to grief we return.

And somewhere in the woods a singing bone.

And very very quietly Scruffy bounded down the street. ■

Joan Connor is a professor at Ohio University. She has published four collections of short stories and a collection of essays.