

The Dogcatcher of Oro Linda

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In the most widely circulated video of Windy Friedman working her dowsing magic—or whatever it is you want to call it—she walks in the white-hot San Joaquin Valley sun shrouded from head to toe in order to protect her near-translucent skin from burning. Her hands are veiled in white cotton gloves, and her body is cocooned in all-white linen pants and tunic. Under a freakishly wide-brimmed hat, dark, buggy sunglasses obscure her half-blind and wandering eyes; she more resembles a beekeeper or CDC scientist in a hazmat suit than a twenty-four-year old albino girl hunting for groundwater. But there she is, forked hazel switch clamped in both hands, palms down, stepping over the ruts in Stephen Ray’s desiccated alfalfa fields just as assuredly as if her eyes were crystal clear and she were walking around her own back yard.

In the video, a gust of wind agitates the microphone, and the brittle, milk-white tendrils of her hair fly about under her humungous hat like a barely-contained medusa. Her upper neck and face are the

only parts of her exposed to air, and her skin gleams bright and luminous, but in a glaring, LED sort of way. She slows her gait, and you can barely make out dust devils swirling to life along the irrigation ditch in the background. And then it happens: over the barest, most forlorn patch of earth in the fallow field, where not even star thistle dares to make a go of it, Windy’s shoulders start to twitch back and forth in an exaggerated shimmy, and she begins to hum. The hum is more of a drone than any human sound you might be used to, more wasp than girl. She squats to position the switch on the ground, and you can see that it’s sturdy, carved and sanded smooth with rounded edges; this is no mere stick. She takes great care in its orientation, then looks directly at the wavering camera with those thick black sunglasses blotting out her eyes, and says, “Here. You should dig the well right here.” Then she turns and walks away, vanishing into the scrim of an oncoming dust cloud.

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On the day of the incident, the air swelled with diesel fumes from a caravan of transport trucks carting off mandarins as they were harvested on the edge of town. We settled into our Saturday business in and around the town square like cats into a patch of sun on an overstuffed chair. We lingered over small-talk at the playground, the café, and the post office. More than one of us reached up in the air to point out the strange lattice of contrails criss-crossing the sky. They all just stayed up there, fixed and straight, rather than drifting off and dissipating the way they usually do—the air was so still. It was weird to watch the tracks of vapor accumulate and to realize just how many jets were passing us by to get to someplace else. There was a messy, oppressive quality to it, and you wanted to just shake everything up like an Etch-a-sketch to wipe it clean.

We’re lucky to be one of those rare municipalities in this region to actually *have* a town square, a product of being a key stop on the railroad on its way up to the handful of gold rush towns in the foothills. Still, ours is a small town in the truest sense of the term, wedged into the valley halfway between Highway 99 and the sky. The heady scent of manure and hay drifts down Front Street day and night in a not unpleasant bouquet. Cicadas sing the praises of the soaring heat more often than they do not. No direct freeway access, no

Walmart for miles, but we like it that way; we mostly rely on one another. We pool our resources together in small groups to go in for Amazon Prime.

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This isn't really about the dogcatcher at its core; he was just doing his job, after all—did what any of us would have done in his place. Of course, we can't tell it without him, so we might as well pick it up there as anywhere.

Adolfo Ortiz is a simple man, born bright as a beacon but made progressively slower in his wits over the years by a childhood of apprenticeship in his father's house painting business—the paint fumes, the consistent exposure to lead. They never followed the necessary safety procedures because it was cheaper that way. We feel, in part, collectively responsible for this, as we always paid Fernando Ortiz under the table, allowing him to operate without a license, but this is how it's done in a small rural town. Besides, we couldn't have afforded him if he'd had one, and there were inevitably worse tragedies than this one to dwell on by and by.

Eventually, Adolfo developed vertigo as a side effect from all the chemicals infusing his brain, which was a liability on a ladder, so when a position opened up at animal control, his parents encouraged him to apply. Thus, he's been our town's dogcatcher for coming up on thirty-five years. He has other responsibilities besides rounding up stray dogs—there are plenty of raccoons and roadkill to deal with, or from time to time a possum or coyote to put down—but we interact with him mostly when he's catching dogs, so that's what we call him: the dogcatcher. It sounds more personal than “animal control.”

Although Oro Linda as a whole has suffered from periodic budget cuts in addition to the prolonged drought, Adolfo's job security as dogcatcher over the last decade has rested comfortably in the paws of Chinook, the wily German shepherd belonging to Cheryl Ann Friedman—adoptive mother to Windy Friedman. This dog was the Houdini of canines, and though Cheryl Ann built increasingly fortified enclosures for Chinook over the years, they've all crumbled and collapsed—each and every last one—from the subsidence that's been sinking Oro Linda further and further below sea level at a rate of 18 inches a year. We can't fault Cheryl Ann, then, for it's our

collective over-reliance on groundwater that's to blame, the same reason the bridge over the canal is now kissing the water's surface, and why every month, a few more pipes burst and jut out from the earth like in some kind of nightmare.

So Chinook escaped at least twice a week and became somewhat of an Oro Linda mascot, for we saw him loping about nearly everywhere we went. If he didn't frighten the children so, we would've let him roam free, but you could always tell when Chinook was around by the shrieking of the preschoolers heralding his approach. He was a wolfish creature—large, keen, and perpetually on the prowl (often with a limp ground squirrel dangling from his jaws). The children never did warm up to him, so we always called Adolfo, who has morphed into a hero to the kids. A savior in blue coveralls.

Chinook was originally intended as an unofficial and uncertified seeing-eye-dog for Windy back when she was a teenager, but it didn't pan out that way. He was too unpredictable, too willful and poorly trained to be of any use to her in that capacity. Still, he was a treasured companion to her over the years. To Windy and Cheryl Ann both. They didn't have many human friends, you see.

Despite the obvious opportunities for tension between dog owner and dogcatcher, Cheryl Ann and Adolfo evolved to be great friends. Adolfo has been kind enough over the years to simply return Chinook to Cheryl Ann in person without any journey to the pound and all the paperwork that would be involved there. She's a lifelong spinster, if you'll forgive the term, having never reconciled the guilt and shame of her severely Catholic upbringing with any sort of functioning sexuality. We could sense this back in high school, the way she cocooned herself in long-sleeved shirts and dark, tented skirts, even in the blistering one-hundred-teens of a typical September day. And Adolfo always seemed too guileless for sex; he loves candy and arcade games, and as far as we know, that's mostly it, as if the paint fumes stunted the pleasure centers of his brain as well as his cognitive abilities, rendering them both forever eleven years old. So anyway, they are well-suited to one another's companionship, and we'd all been secretly hoping they would marry one day.

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The next most popular video of Windy features her three

years earlier at twenty-one playing pool in a bar two towns over. The quality of the video is grainy given the paltry lighting in the bar, but Windy is now unencumbered by all the excessive fabric and sun protections of daytime. She practically glows a neon white in the dark space, as if under a black light, and she is clearly in her element—tight jeans, bare midriff tank top, low-cut neckline. Her nighttime sunglasses are also more hip, a reflective aviator style, and her lips flourish into an organ all their own under a glossy coat of cranberry lipstick. Her opponent appears to be a trucker-type who observes Windy with a cocky sneer under an equally obnoxious mustache. He has no idea how badly he is about to be whupped.

Whoever is holding the cell-phone camera doing the recording obviously knows what to expect—he might even be one of our sons. The viewer can hear him whisper, “Check this out,” or, “Watch this,” every now and then to a neighbor or friend standing nearby. And then you watch as Windy performs some sort of geometric alchemy to sink three of her balls in two different pockets with several outrageous rebounds in between.

This is when the trucker starts to suspect she’s invented the whole blind-girl persona and reaches over to yank off her glasses as an uncommon hush falls over the crowd. Her eyes flutter a bit at the sudden change but they soon steady. The anonymous cameraman zooms into her face, then, and you see that her irises contain pools of the most uncanny pale blue, the kind reserved for glacial ice-melt in the high Sierras. Her pupils are pinpricks, infinitesimal vessels tunneling to some minute and undiscovered end; they aren’t even pointing in the same direction. Her eyelashes appear coated in snow.

Windy snickers at both the man and the room, then says in the direction of no one in particular, “No, I’m not faking it. You’re just that bad.”

She holds her hand out expectantly—and if she is trembling, it can’t be detected on the shaky video—to wait for the man to return her sunglasses. Instead, he tosses them on the pool table and clomps away, cursing both her and females in general under his breath on his way out. Another young woman, a sidekick of Windy’s perhaps, gathers the small sheaf of twenties senescing on the rim of the table like fallen leaves, and Windy addresses her audience to say, “Drinks

are on me.”

It’s at this point in the video that the man marches back into view, and if Windy notices, it doesn’t register on her face. He lifts a pool cue and brings it down in a glancing blow to the side of her head, as if he were testing her for certain to see if she’d duck. She doesn’t duck, and no one else reacts in time to intervene on her behalf. You see her fall to her knees, and the blood seeps through that white hair as if it isn’t even there. She keeps her head held high from down there on the ground, the look on her face more defiant than surprised.

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We have done relatively well in this area over time as a community in large part due to soaring prices of almonds and avocados, orchards of which surround what would otherwise be the desert of Oro Linda in a kind of oasis, although the extended drought is certainly putting a dent in that success. They say it’s a seasonal grassland but anyone who’s been here for more than a few years can tell you it’s plainly a desert—tumbleweeds, roadrunners, and all—with only a little grass season on the side. Let’s call a spade a spade, here.

There are things we miss, to be sure. Simple things, like sprinklers and rose bushes, which we’ve only been able to keep alive in small numbers by hauling out the bucket of water we capture as runoff from our two-minute showers. We miss proper showers. We miss the splash pad that we installed ten years ago at the playground, the 100-year-old fountain in the heart of town square. It used to be a place to mingle over coffee to share news with friends, but no one wants to sit around a barren fountain, exposed pipes poking up in plain view like some kind of scandal. No one wants to be reminded of that.

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Windy first came to town as a two-year-old. It wasn’t that long ago, but it was still less common then for a child, especially a white child still in diapers, to be given to an unwed prospective mother. But by the time Windy was a toddler in foster care, her genetic albinism was compounded by the latent realization that she was also legally blind, which made her less attractive to couples who were compensating for childlessness. Cheryl Ann, on the other hand, was seeking a child purely out of Christian charity, a sense of altruism and

duty, so what were interpreted as shortcomings in Windy by other adoptive families were really selling points for Cheryl Ann. She would get bonus points on the day of reckoning, and we did not grudge her this boon.

Of all the strange moments in Windy's life that have been caught on camera, it strikes us that the most interesting bits might be the ones that were never recorded. As a young child, for instance, she was hyper-sexualized and oddly unselfconscious about this state (one can only imagine the kinds of abuse she emerged from over in Fresno). We would be at the playground with our own children, and little Windy—draped in protective hats, clothes, and gloves even then—would be mounted on one of the springy rocking creatures, but she wouldn't be riding it so much as grinding it with her crotch, panting all the while. Or while waiting for her mother Cheryl Ann outside the post office, Windy would be there with a lollipop in one hand and with the other she'd be gripping and humping the railing along the sidewalk. She is well-known around here for many things, not least of which is that she's probably the first citizen of Oro Linda to have orgasmed in public.

This type of compulsive behavior of course devastated the ever-chaste and deeply religious Cheryl Ann, who turned the most compelling shades of pink whenever this occurred and took off at once with little white Windy firmly in tow. She dragged the poor girl down to morning mass at St. Williams before school each and every day in trepidation for her immortal soul.

It got to the point where Cheryl Ann felt she needed to dress Windy in two layers of training pants just to send her to kindergarten—though we all counseled against it—in order to dull any sensations approaching her private parts from the outside. The girl already had her skin condition and was visually impaired, but sending her to school in double diapers was too much for the other children—for our children—to overlook. They didn't openly ostracize her as far as we know, but they didn't exactly welcome her with open arms either. Such is the way with children. You can't make them be friends.

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There've been times in recent years when we've all questioned our resolve against this water shortage. People were going around

saying this was the new normal. Reverse migration depleted the schools and the tax base. Orchards were left to die by the hectare, and the skeletons of peach trees were lumped high in mass graves along the county roads to be shredded for mulch. You'll never see anything like it—whole bare trees bleached completely gray by unremitting sunshine and stacked several stories tall at every conceivable angle, even upside down. They were all wedged together into a single piece, like a crown of thorns intended for a giant, for Paul Bunyan himself maybe.

You think you know a place because you were born there, but that turns out to mean absolutely nothing. We're only second or third generation Californians, after all, and we either came from lands of little rain during the Dust Bowl or lands of little economic opportunity across the ocean or south of the border; now we're facing both at the same time. It has been bred into all of us to only trust in our own resourcefulness, never in the land itself, though we can't help but feel a little betrayed.

It was only in these last few years that Windy became a dowser, and one of significant notoriety up and down 99. The rain's been pretty much absent throughout her entire adult life, and though her talents only emerged as a parlor trick, that girl and her hazel switch have had better luck at sourcing genuine wells than geologists and hydrologists with advanced degrees from UC Davis. You can call it anecdotal or whatever you like, but the numbers don't lie.

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Our children went to school with Windy, whom we'd initially thought Cheryl Ann had called "Wendy" inflected with just your typical Okie accent until we saw the kindergarten roster that year. Perhaps it was the one way Cheryl Ann felt she could express her inner free-spirit, but there never was an explanation for the name. Our girls judged Windy to be ugly, which she sort of was, although we encouraged them to be kind. Our boys, on the other hand, found her to be downright creepy, for she was always catching worms and grasshoppers and dumping them down their backs, or doing weird stunts like that. She could distinguish colors and shapes to some extent, but how a legally blind child could catch camouflaged grasshoppers in the parched, monochromatic fields surrounding the

schoolyard with only her bare hands was beyond any of us at the time. It certainly spoke volumes about her character, we felt. Her true nature.

Once, some of the boys attempted to enact their revenge later on in elementary school. On a bright fall day, they all bought candy from the ice cream truck and made a point to be eating it when Windy walked by with her cane after school (it's the kind of small town where a nearly blind child could be allowed to walk the few blocks home alone from school). As she approached their pack, the boys all slurped loudly on their own candies, crinkled their wrappers, and offered her a sucker for herself, which she gladly accepted. What she didn't know was that they'd given her a Hotlix, the kind of lollipop which came with an entire cricket carcass encased inside. We imagine the hushed pause that must have followed the presentation of the lollipop, and wonder if perhaps Windy's heightened senses alerted some part of her to the fact that she was being closely watched for any signs of awareness of what she was eating. But rather than stay and eat with them, Windy merely thanked the boys and took off for home, sucking around that corpse of a cricket all the while.

There followed an agonizing night, during which all of the boys expected an irate phone call from Cheryl Ann to us, their parents. Some of them even confessed prematurely—which is how we all came to know the story—so intense was the guilt of what they had done and the anticipation of an impending punishment. But the call never did come. Windy went to school the next day and behaved the same as she always had, so they never did figure out if she'd finished the lollipop and discovered the prank they'd played. This only served to distance them from her ever further, for they were frightened of any girl who wouldn't tattle on them for feeding her insects under false pretenses. They wondered what she might be planning to do with all that leverage in the future.

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People will do crazy things for water in this world. Governments will seed the skies with silver, entrepreneurs will find ways to condense and collect water out of thin air, and farmers will put their faith in a blind girl with only a high school education. In this part of the state, where all livelihood is entirely dependent on

irrigation, the money follows the water, and the water followed Windy Friedman. Go figure. She became the richest person in Oro Linda. Our sons and daughters have since kicked themselves for the judgmental tendencies of their youth, and we try not to say we told them so.

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It seems like it was just the other day we spotted Windy practicing martial arts through the chain link fence of her mother's back yard, for she still lived at home. She had some sort of effigy strung up on the old pine tree, and she and Chinook took turns attacking the stuffed creature as it swung back and forth like a punching bag. Chinook waited in the weeds, primed and tense, for the signal to leap, and when it came he did his best to tear the strung-up being to shreds. Windy twirled a broomstick and used it as a weapon against the effigy, and we couldn't help but picture it as a pool cue.

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So we spent that morning just a few months ago like any other winter Saturday in the valley—hoping for rain, but seeing none on the horizon, out and about and enjoying the warm, dry weather with our families. Some of us were eating pancakes at Rosaline's on the front patio. Those of us with grandchildren were enjoying our coffee at the playground across the street. Jackie Resnick was there pushing her daughter's daughter Josie on the new and ever-popular bucket-seat swing intended for the disabled, which all the children fought over because it was the only one of its kind. Josie was barely three years old, and her ruby-red Mary Janes only just poked out from the end of the wide, fiberglass seat.

Those of us at Rosaline's were the first to spot Chinook lumbering down the sidewalk from way up the street, perhaps hoping to snag a sausage link from one of our patio tables. More than one of us picked up our phones to call Adolfo, who receives overtime pay from the city—from us, really—in order to be available like this on an on-call basis.

James Yee stood up from his family's table to stomp menacingly in Chinook's direction, yelling "Scram!" when he came too near. The dog darted across the street as if he'd never been interested in our leftovers anyway and trotted over toward the

playground, where he might find more than a morsel or two in an abandoned stroller tray or diaper bag. When Adolfo pulled up to Rosaline's in his truck, we pointed him in the direction of the park.

It was all so routine to us at the time that none of us considered following Adolfo across the street until we heard the shouting and the barking and the snarling, which was uncharacteristic of Chinook when he was in town, but which those of us who'd seen him at home with Windy in the back yard vaguely recognized. We leapt up from our seats, abandoned our pancakes to the crows, and rushed over to see what the hell was going on.

A few brave parents were already trying either to yank Chinook away or subject him to a series of blows with sticks and water bottles to try to get him to loosen his grip on the chains of the swing, but his teeth were locked into the loops of those links—in addition to what appeared to be young Josie's pant leg—as if they'd been made together in a mold. Adolfo held in his hands the long metal stick with a noose on the end of it carried by dogcatchers everywhere, but the tool was useless as long as Chinook's jaws were clamped down on the swing. It was unclear at the time whether he'd punctured Josie's leg or just her clothing, but we will never forget the screaming that accompanied the low, guttural growl as the dog shook both the swing and the girl contained within as furiously as if they were prey.

It wasn't even Adolfo's idea to shoot the dog to get him to stop. His innocent nature prevented him from making that leap on his own. A few of us yelled at him to pull out his gun, even though we privately wondered whether the paint fumes which had affected his abilities to succeed academically might also have impacted the parts of his brain responsible for aim.

It took him awhile to get the gist of what we were saying, but eventually he drew his weapon and took what seemed like reasonable precautions to aim low, away from the swing and the girl. Even if he only grazed the dog's foot, it might have been enough to shock him into submission.

But what none of us saw until it was too late to cry out in warning was Windy, dashing in like the white witch that she was, or perhaps—if we were more generous—we would say like an angel, a

blur materializing out of nowhere. There is closed-circuit camera footage of this event from the bank across the street, and on the tapes she is mostly absent, but then in the blip of a single frame, she is there diving for Chinook. Wherever she came from, she must have been drawn by the commotion as we were. She couldn't have seen that Adolfo was about to shoot.

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A few citizens of Oro Linda have since pointed out that, with a kind of weird twisted logic, you could say that Windy contributed in some miniscule way to her own death with her dowsing activities. If it weren't for all the over-pumping across the valley, those enclosures for Chinook wouldn't have been so unstable, and that dog would've been properly contained. But what else were we really to do? Turn off the spigot and go back to Kansas? to China? to El Salvador? Nobody worth his weight in salt really thinks that's a viable solution.

Farmers from all over the valley snagged front-row seats at the funeral. Many of them had been on the verge of bankruptcy and were back in business thanks to her. The eulogy was given by the mayor of a town up in the foothills that had resorted to trucking in potable water last summer for its citizens, but was saved from extinction by three new wells sourced by Windy Friedman. These out of town admirers even commissioned a statue in her honor near the park in Oro Linda. They opted to go with the dowsing rod and beekeeper look, which was how they knew her best, though we're fairly certain it isn't what she would have wanted to be remembered for.

We were impressed to learn that a twenty-four-year-old girl like her had a last will and testament, but it makes some sense when you consider the money she'd made. It should not surprise us that she didn't leave anything to the town itself, for we never did much in the way of reaching out, never crossed over the line from tolerance to inclusion, as they say. We were, however, outraged on behalf of Cheryl Ann, who'd taken Windy into her home and received not a penny as gratitude in return. It was all designated for the dog, who expired along with Windy herself in the confusion and could not collect on his inheritance.

The alternate beneficiary would turn out to be a trust in the honor of anyone who would use the money to open up a sex shop on

the main strip in Oro Linda and operate it as a non-profit (with a modest stipend, of course). At first, there were no takers, but when it became apparent that no one else was going to step up, it was Adolfo who ultimately came forward for the opportunity. He'd retired effectively immediately from dogcatching just after the incident, although the official review found him to be not at fault. He needed the income of another steady job, but the primary reason, he said, was that he felt compelled to honor the wishes of the girl he had accidentally killed. We are sure that it was this decision in the end—to open up The Bump and Grind one block down from Rosaline's—and not the fact that he'd shot Windy and Chinook, that ended the friendship between Adolfo and Cheryl Ann for good. She could not abide the sin of lust, and so she left town to join an order of nuns in the Bay Area, which might have been the prudent thing to do all along, if you were to ask for our take on things.

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The sex tape doesn't directly credit Windy by name, but we all can tell that it's her; she has a very distinctive look. It takes some digging to find it online, some steeled nerves if you're not used to that sort of thing, but rumors of its existence began to circulate shortly after the scandalous contents of her will were made public, and we were certainly curious. Apparently, there are several of them on various sites behind a pay wall, which is in part how her small fortune had grown to be more substantial than we'd realized. It wasn't just the pool-playing and the dowsing, but pornography which had sustained her.

In the video, she's lying naked on a blanket in a field at night—it could be anywhere, but it's probably somewhere on the outskirts of town—under what appears to be a full moon. Whatever extra lighting she's used only amplifies the lunar quality of her skin, and it is clear that this is the way her body is meant to be seen.

She appears to be in a trance, although that could just be because she's not wearing sunglasses for a change and we're not used to the meanderings of those creaturely blue eyes. She seems to be doing some sort of sensual modern dance routine on the blanket and pleasuring herself at the same time, either that or she's performing a kind of ritual. The moaning is downright otherworldly. Then the

camera, which appears to be operated by someone else, zooms into an object on the blanket, and we see that it's her rod, her dowsing rod. She picks it up and mutters something barely coherent about water being life and land being the mother, and then takes the two pronged ends to firmly insert the smooth, rounded pointer of it, which usually faces outward, all the way inside her. She gyrates to the rhythm of her heavy breathing and grips the handles in a way that makes them seem designed expressly for this purpose, this fornication.

And all of us who are watching, at least the ones who are watching it in private, feel compelled to follow along now in whatever way we can. After a short while, she climaxes, head thrown back and howling to the moon, and we come too. We were so wrong about her, and it's this that finally turns us into true believers. We are the converted; we repent. All hail Windy Friedman, goddess of water, deity of dreams.

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