Fixed and Fixated

A man and a dog sit in the sun. Both have recently undergone a simple surgical procedure.

The dog, being a dog, has no idea what has happened to her. She chews her red rubber bone as if there were a hundred puppies in her future.

The man, being a man, is obsessed with what has happened to him. He sighs and gazes into the middle distance. "Here I am, an old man in a dry mouth. ... I was once indispensable. But now everything I can do — yard, house, child rearing — my wife could hire out. The one task for which I was uniquely qualified I can no longer perform. Biologically, I no longer exist."

The wife, guarding a toddler, does not respond. Perhaps she has not heard this. Perhaps she has heard it one time too many. The surgical procedure was yesterday. It was performed on an outpatient basis. The man was sent home with various instructions involving ice packs. We imagine it was a long night. The wife nods.

"Shall I part my hair behind?" asks the man. "Do I dare to eat a peach?"

Nobody answers. The dog's procedure was more complicated, because the dog is a female. She required general anesthesia and a two-day stay. Her owners were prepared to feel sorry for her. They bought an expensive cedar-chip-filled cushion, laid the dog upon it and sat back to watch her recuperate.

But the dog, because she is a dog, or perhaps because she is a female, had already recuperated. Immediately, she chewed through the cushion, eating the zipper pull and a lot of cedar chips. Then she jumped up and begged for a romp.

Her owners phoned the vet. The dog felt good; what was wrong with her? The vet assured the owners that feeling good was OK. "In the wild, an injured animal is easy prey. So dogs instinctively hide their pain."

The man, being more highly evolved, instinctively shares his pain. Thanks to the miracle of analgesics, this pain is mainly psychological.

With ostentatious slowness, he stands up. He gets another beer. "I guess I'll start drinking to excess now, and being abusive to my family, since my sense of self-worth has been so threatened. I'll cut down all the trees in my yard and buy a big power boat. I'll overcompensate."

We feel compelled to remind the man that, unless his surgeon made an extremely clumsy mistake, life will go on pretty much as usual. There will be no need for binge drinking or power boating.

"Yeah, but I'm speaking symbolically. Everything in the region is symbolically important."

The dog, who wouldn't know a symbol if it bit her on the nose, wags her tail and sniffs. The man pushes her away nervously.

"I could tell my wife was really enthusiastic about this. If she hadn't had to stay with the kids, she would have gloved up and grabbed that knife herself."

Things could be worse. If the man were an insectivorous midge or a spider, his mate would have eaten him as soon as she was impregnated with their first child. He wouldn't have lived to change a diaper.

But human families need two incomes nowadays. The man is safe. At least, we think so, although we have heard the phrase "expensive sperm launchers" spoken by behavioral scientists.

If the man could only be philosophical, we tell him, he could see these remaining years as a gift.

Then we stop ourselves. We are telling this man to be more philosophical? What is wrong with us? We whistle to the dog, pat the baby on the head and go.

As we walk down the driveway, a voice reaches us through the still summer air: "I have heard the mermaids singing. ... I do not think that they will sing to me. I mean, in many primitive cultures, I would be put to death now, wouldn't I?"