

“The Dog Days of Laurie Summer”

Excerpt

“Daddy, is she dead? Please don’t die. Is she dead?”

Benny! His beautiful, wide-open brown eyes were looking into mine. “I’m not dead,” I tried to tell him, but nothing came out but a sort of . . . yip. But I could move my legs! It hurt, but they moved, and they . . . they . . .

They were covered with hair?

“Careful, don’t touch her. She’s hurt, she might bite you.”

I might what? Crouched over me, Sam had a pitying but distracted look on his face. This was not how I had pictured our miraculous reunion.

“We have to take her to the doctor, Daddy. We have to fix her up.”

God, not more doctors. Where were we? My ears ached, everything was so loud. And the smell was amazing. Smells, rather, millions of them, all strong and incredibly interesting. Cars were whipping by—that’s what was making all the noise. Why were we outside, in the street? A familiar-looking street, too. Weren’t we on Old Georgetown Road? In Bethesda?

“Come on, buddy, back in the car. It’s dangerous out here.”

Sam and Benny got up and left me in the road.

A lot of bad things had happened to me lately, very bad things, but I can say without hesitation that that was the worst.

Then Sam came back. Happiness! Joy! He was carrying the smelly flannel blanket we kept in the back of the car to set plants on, or wet bathing suits, anything messy or unsavory, to protect the upholstery.

He wrapped me in the blanket. And lifted me up with a grunt and put me in the backseat.

I had an inkling now, a sense, like glimpsing something from the corner of your eye that reveals

everything but is too outlandish to credit. Maybe I should've figured it out sooner—the evidence was pretty much everywhere—but let's not forget I wasn't in my right mind. I had been in a near-drowning-induced coma for eight weeks. Then too, if this was a cross-species metamorphosis, it makes sense that my normally sharp, analytical mind was already being blunted by something softer and more accepting. I'm saying my retriever instincts were kicking in.

Sam started the car and pulled out into traffic. Benny, buckled up in front, craned around to look at me. His mop of chestnut curls needed cutting. I wanted to lick him all over his freckled face. Here we were, all together again. The family. “Sam, Benny, Sam, Benny!” I said, overwhelmed with the wonder of it. It came out “Arr! Urra! Arr! Urra!”

Another clue.

The car smelled wonderful, like Sam and Benny multiplied by a hundred. And lots of other things, especially McDonald's, that fabulous greasy hamburger smell.

The ride was short. As soon as Sam parked, Benny unbuckled himself, shoved open the car door, and ran off. “Wait—” Sam called, halfhearted. He sighed, then hauled me out very gently and carried me toward a low brick building. Inside, the predominant smell was panic.

Benny was already jumping up and down in front of a counter, yelling, “We hit a dog! We hit a dog!”

Dog.

I was a dog.

As I said, the clues were abundant, but it wasn't until Benny said the actual word that the truth hit. I started to shake.

Nothing like a vet's exam on a cold metal table to knock the nonsense out of you. I credit it with shortening considerably what would otherwise have been a long and tedious period of No, it's impossible! How can this be? I don't believe it! Is this a dream? etc., etc. I'm not saying I accepted what seemed to have happened to me in half an hour. But there's just something about having your temperature taken rectally that really wakes you up to reality.

Blood was drawn. X-rays were taken. I was poked, prodded, listened to, felt, and in the end the doctor, who smelled like tick poison, said what I could only partially agree with.

“It's a miracle.”

“Nothing wrong with her?” Sam.

“Nothing serious. Bruises, mostly, and the scrapes you can see. But no broken bones or internal injuries, and that's pretty amazing if you were going as fast as you say.”

“Can we keep her?”

“I was going the speed limit.”

“And to hit her head-on and throw her as far as you did—that’s just amazing.”

“Can we keep her?”

“She must belong to somebody,” Sam said. “What kind of dog is she?”

“No collar,” said the vet, “no I.D. Hmm . . . some sort of Lab-Golden mix is my guess. And maybe something else smaller—she only weighs about sixty pounds. I’d say she’s four or five years old.”

This was helpful. All I’d seen of myself so far was my feet, basically. Good to know what I was. A big, middle-aged mutt.

“So can we keep her?”

“She must belong to someone,” Sam tried again. “I’m sure somebody’s—”

“No, Daddy, they’ll put her in the pound, then they’ll put her to sleep! They’ll kill her!”

That’s right. I read a story to Benny last spring about a dog with no collar who gets taken to the pound and almost euthanized before a little boy comes in and saves him. You tell him, baby.

“They won’t kill her,” Sam said, putting his hand on top of Benny’s head. “Um, what does happen here, Doctor? Do you put up flyers or something, keep the dog until she’s claimed—”

“We don’t have the facilities for that, unfortunately. No, she’ll go to the humane rescue and they’ll keep her there. As long as they can.”

“Then they’ll kill her!” Benny wriggled away from Sam and ran to me. I was still on the metal table—he had to stand on tiptoes to put his arms around my neck. “Please can we keep her? Please?”

“Benny, you know, your mother never wanted . . .” Sam trailed off, looking pained.

Benny took the words out of my mouth. “But Dad—she’s not here.”

I don’t know why I was worried. My heart was pounding, I was trembling uncontrollably, I had more saliva in my mouth than I could swallow. “The pound” was no abstract concept; I knew what would probably happen to me there. But that wasn’t what I was afraid of. Abandonment was.

It’s me, Sam! It’s Laurie!

Everything hurt—miracle or not, get thrown twenty feet in the air by a car, believe me, everything hurts—but when Benny let go of my neck I gathered all four slipping, sliding paws under me and made a lunge for Sam.

Who has good reflexes. He stepped aside in shock.

The vet's were even better, luckily. He caught me—otherwise I'd have flown into the wall. "Whoa," he said without surprise, and calmly set me on the floor. "Looks like this one really wants to go home with you."

Sam never had a chance, I see now, but at the time it felt like touch and go. I had sense enough to hold still, not jump on him again, and let Benny wind his arms around me. What we must have looked like, cheek to cheek, four brown eyes yearning up at him. "Pleeeeee, Daddy?" Beelzebub could not have resisted that plea. I echoed it with a warbly "Arroooo?"

The vet laughed.

Sam put his hands on top of his head. "All right, all right, all right. But she's going to have to be spayed."

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