

Dog of the Day

by Charlie Brule

The sight of an empty yard and an open gate left Mandy's stomach in a knot.

"Piper!" she yelled repeatedly with increasing animosity. Where had she gone? Her small voice tightened and she ran through the grass, the morning dew tickling her bare feet. Mandy's heart was ripping apart as she realized that Piper could be gone forever. The image of the friendly white boxer, splashed with a brown eye patch brought tears to her eyes and a snuffle to her nose. She promised her mom that she would help take care of a new dog, and here it was only a few months since they found the playful puppy at the humane society, and for all her young mind could fathom, Piper would be back there, never to come home again.

Her voice was going hoarse and her faithful companion was nowhere to be found in the expanse of green between her and the street she was not allowed to cross. Tears dripping onto her baby fattened cheeks, she ran up the front porch stairs and straight into her mother's arms.

"Momma, Piper is missing!" her uncontrollable sobs were causing her fragile limbs to quake and her words were incomprehensible over her hiccups and gasps. Mandy's mother, Josie, wrapped her arms around her whimpering daughter, hoping to calm her enough to understand her sputtered, crazed words.

"Shhh honey, breathe." The whites around Mandy's blue eyes were turning red as globs of snot and tears dribbled onto her mother's chest. "Honey, take a deep breath." Josie cooed as she rubbed Mandy's blonde curls, rocking her slightly. "Now explain what happened," she coaxed. Josie hoped it was nothing more than a scraped knee, but Mandy's frantic manner indicated it was more serious. A four year old easily stumbles into catastrophes.

"It's Piper! She isn't in the yard! I yelled and yelled and she never came back." At the final sentence tears erupted again, and Josie swept up the delicate child in her arms and went out to the front

yard. There she saw just as Mandy had: an open gate and a yard without Piper.

"Mandy, grab my purse from the kitchen counter." Josie set down her daughter and sent her towards the door. Mandy stumbled along as Josie continued her own search of the yard calling for her Piper and investigating the open gate. She should have taken care to fix the latch better; she should have thought to watch Mandy and Piper in the yard. What if she was hit by a car? What if she was gone forever?

Josie began to tear up now, but soon Mandy was at her side lugging her mother's purse. Her nose was still running with tear streaking down her face. Josie composed herself before taking her purse over her shoulder and Mandy on her hip. Josie was a strong woman and her arms tensed with definition as she held her daughter, walking across the yard to the garage. Her chestnut hair was cropped short and it tickled Mandy's neck as she was lowered into her car seat. Mandy's fragile four year old body was shaking as the seat belt crossed her hips.

"Honey, we will find her." Said Josie with enough reassurance to convince even her doubts. She kissed the tip of her daughter's nose and wiped the tears away once more. "Piper is a smart dog; she'll find her way back to us."

With that Josie took a breath herself, and then went to the driver's side of the car. They'd do a sweep of the neighborhood before calling the humane society and praying they'd find their puppy.

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"Where do you want to go to dinner tonight babe?" Nick asked as he adjusted his position on my bed. He pushed his back against the wall and kicked off his shoes, knowing we would not come up with an answer with any sort of ease.

"Well what type of food do you want?" I huffed, going through the usual rundown of questions that normally helped narrow our options.

"Pizza?" he posed raising an eyebrow and titling his head toward me. I knew exactly what he was thinking at this point and I was surprised a decision was coming this easily.

"Kaos?" I replied mirroring his actions. This was our classic "date night" restaurant.

"Sounds deliciously perfect." He replied, moving in to plant an unexpected kiss on my cheek. "Let's go! I want to check out a bookstore on Pearl Street before we get food."

"A man after my own heart!" I joked, pulling on my sandals, disregarding my chipping toe nail polish. Instead I started gathering items to throw into my oversized purse. Phone, keys, money, I looked around and found Nick waiting at the door. I assumed I had everything so I sauntered after him.

The light rail quickly heaved into our stop and hand in hand we exited. Pearl Street was alive as one would expect on a warm Friday afternoon. Spring was peeling off its last layer of chill and revealing the blistering summer ahead. I felt the prickling heat on my bare shoulders as we walked down the uneven sidewalks toward our first stop, the bookstore.

The windows of the store looked dark, and to our displeasure, it was closed. Disappointment was apparent in the both of us, but I came up with a better idea.

"Nick! Let's go play with the cat in the pet store!" His green-brown eyes lit up in delighted satisfaction. We both were going through withdrawals without our pets. Living in a residence hall meant the closest thing we got to having a pet was a particularly hairy roommate. Any chance to play with an animal was exciting for us so we ventured to the pet store just a little further down the street for the chance to play with a cat. We were nearly started skipping as we moved down the sidewalk again in search of a calico cutie or a tabby friend.

Pushing open the door, a bell clanked against the wooden frame and a smile from the gray-haired lady behind the front counter was all the welcome we needed to walk around and find the kitty roaming the store. Unfortunately, the signs about letting the cat out

were unneeded, or so the front counter lady informed us after she watched Nick and me scavenge around frantically.

"It's Friday, which means we get deliveries. We can't let the cat run around with the door constantly opening up." The old woman sighed in sympathy as we left the store without a plan on what to do next. The door clanked behind our sorry frowns.

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"Now what momma?" asked the calmer Mandy as the car pulled to park in their garage.

"Now we just have to wait until the humane society calls us back." Josie kept her optimism as the mother and daughter walked through the afternoon heat back into the house. They had driven around the neighborhood all morning and then stopped in at the humane society to let them know they were looking for their dog. The young receptionist was helpful and assured her that Piper probably had a microchip in between her shoulder blades, meaning she would ultimately get home if found.

"Ok momma." Said the small blonde girl in a quiet voice as she walked up the front steps. Mandy's panic had worn off and now she was relying on her mother's assurance. She reached the top of the stairs and as she turned the golden handle on the big oak front door she released a yawn.

"It's just about nap time isn't it? Josie suggested as she watched the little girl yawn again, step into the large doorway, and rub her eyes. She helped her sleepy daughter take off her shoes in the hall. Together they went up the stairs to get Mandy ready for a nap.

Up the carpeted stairs and down the hallway of family photos they went hand in hand steering towards the small bedroom at the end of the gallery. Mandy hopped into her bed and reached for her stuffed animal as a supplement for her lost dog. The red floppy-eared puppy had a heart shaped nose and a fuzzy exterior. Tucking Mandy beneath her purple princess sheets, Josie kissed her forehead and the tip of her nose. She nuzzled the stuffed dog beside her, and kissed the stuffed animal too. The morning had clearly worn out Mandy and her eyes fluttered beneath the soft touch of her mother's

hands combing through her thin blond wisps. She rubbed her face against the fluffy red fuzz on the stuffed puppy.

"Momma, I wish Piper was here to nap with me." Mandy mumbled sleepily.

Josie bit her lip and wondered how on Earth she was going to keep her little girl from getting her heart broken by a missing dog.

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"Now what?" I whined tugging on Nick's hand, my fingers interlaced within his.

He pondered the questions as we strolled over to a bench. He quickly turned to sit, and pulled me into his lap. Giggling with each other, we failed to notice anything in our surroundings, not the middle aged couple walking behind us, not the buzz of cars going by on the adjacent cross street, and not even the white, young boxer puppy bounding down the street. Well, we *eventually* noticed that.

I jumped off of Nick and assuming the energetic pooch belonged to the couple a few paces ahead, I asked if I could pet their dog. Nick shook his head at my not so uncommon actions of petting any dog I came into contact with.

"He isn't ours," said the strange man. He towered over me as I crouched to scratch the ears of my new friend.

"What do you mean?" I asked without paying attention to the answer as the dog rolled on its back and my fingers tickled its tummy. While I became consumed in playing with my new friend, Nick discussed the dog's details with the tall man and his wife. I tuned back in as they said something about being followed and how the dog would most likely decide to follow us next. Before any sort of confusion could set in, or Nick could add his logical input to be careful of the stray dog, I was on the ground receiving wet puppy kisses all over my face. The couple walked off with a slight annoyance at my disregard for them, but what could I do? I had a new dog to take care of.

"Oh look at the good doggy," Nick caved and joined me playfully, sitting on the cement and petting our new friend. The dog's body,

legs, and face were all white, but it had a splash of color across one eye. "It looks like someone hit him in the eye with a paintbrush," Nick noted, and I agreed. The brown, black, smudge over its eye looked in fact like the stroke of a brush. I couldn't examine the dog for long from the position I was in because its big tongue kept finding me in yet another sloppy kiss.

"Well he has to be from around here. He looks healthy and groomed," I observed. "Someone is missing you a lot." I changed my tone as I conversed with the pup.

"Let's walk with him back through the residential part of the neighborhood; he was walking from that direction. If we have no luck maybe if we go back to the pet store they will recognize him!" Nick was getting more excited than me at our new adventure. "Let's give him a name!" I nodded in agreement, rising to my feet while still petting my fuzzy pal.

"Rodger!" Nick suddenly burst out, in a bit of a yell. He was *really* getting excited. But, no sooner had we agreed on the name, had our friend revealed that he was actually a she. We decided the name already stuck, so we continued to call her Rodger regardless. We walked in the direction she had approached us from; back toward the light rail past many houses with intricate gardens and yards. One of those fenced in greeneries had to be hers.

We needed little coaxing to get Rodger to follow after us with her rambunctious prance. She followed along my side especially, rubbing against my free hands anticipating more ear scratches, which I willingly administered on her still puppy fuzzed ears. I was so happy at the happenstance circumstances Nick and I had found on our date.

"Where do we start?" He asked me as we came up to a few houses.

"Well if this is anything like my neighborhood at home, people know the dogs. So let's just ask anyone who is outside if they've ever seen her before."

It seemed like a solid starting point, but after multiple houses looked at us as if we were quite crazy, we decided to go back to the

pet store. Most people were empathic, but their suggestions to us were that we should just keep her, she looked good with us. This, of course, was not an option. The hopelessness at finding Rodger's home must have been obvious because as we doubled back, a woman on her porch called out to us.

"Do you want a leash for her?" She asked offering us a sad excuse for a leash, or at least in comparison to the size of Rodger it was. She was a puppy, but she wasn't small. She could have snapped it pieces, but I figured some control of this energetic ball of fur would be helpful. Nick grabbed the leash and making a slip not I passed it over her thick neck. She began biting at the restraint, clearly revealing her age and how unused to a leash she was. But even as she tugged and nipped at the leash, she still had a strong sense of joy at being in the company of an owner. Her tail wagged and whipped behind her and the three of us walked down the street in search of her home.

"Can I walk her?" Nick asked shyly. "I've never walked a dog before."

Growing up with dogs all my life, it was the strangest concept to me that Nick had never held a dog's leash before. I handed it over and watched Rodger explode with excitement again. Nick's smile illuminated his whole face and I felt like I was watching a posed scene from *Lassie* as my boyfriend enjoyed his first dog walking exploit. Rodger's energy increased our pace and we were in front of the pet shop in a few minutes.

"Came back with a pet this time?" said the gray haired woman who was now locking the doors.

"We found her!" I exclaimed with excitement. "We need to try and find her home. Have you ever seen her before?" I was trying to talk, but I was too preoccupied with my dog. She had pulled the leash out of Nick's hands and was now nuzzling my legs with her dark wet nose. I was scratching her ears, and then she jumped up and placing her paws on my shoulders she started licking my face. Her spotted eye was such a distinguishing feature and I couldn't help but feel a

pang in my chest as I realized a family somewhere had to be missing this beautiful dog.

"Well let me get her some water and treats, and I'll get you the number for animal control." The pet store lady dug her keys out of her high waist jeans and after clanking around behind the door, she returned with a bowl of water and a couple of treats. I immediately began testing Rodger, telling her to sit and shake and other commands. She loved having treats as rewards and was proud to show off her skills. As I played, Nick called animal control. We knew we couldn't take her back to school, and no one had any idea where this poor dog belonged. It was the only option if we wanted her to get back home with her family.

I knew that somewhere, someone was missing this sweet white beauty. Rodger licked the tears off my cheek as she was attracted by the salty flavor. I looked up at Nick as he ended his call. In a swift motion he patted Rodger's head and then tucked himself beside me, resting his head on mine.

"Oh baby, you knew she had to go home at some point."

"I'll leave you two." Pet store lady called as she crept away. Turning back once more she muttered one final comment, "You two are good kids, you know that? Real good kids."

At her words I smiled amidst my teary eyes. Nick's fingers moved between my right hand fingers, while to my left I scratched at Rodger's puppy fuzz on her neck and ears. She exhaled and lay down, placing her head in my lap.

"She has a home she misses." Nick's eyes met mine and I saw they he was also attempting to conceal his hurt.

"I know. I just miss having a dog." I bent down and kissed the top of Rodger's head and brushed my few tears against her head.

"Animal control should be here soon," Nick informed me before kissing my cheek again. The three of us sat there in silence. Nick and I sad for our loss, and Rodger simply tired out from her adventure around town.

Within twenty minutes a large van approached. Its label was simple and the red letters stood out against the stark white sides.

"Animal Control" read the startling letters that pulled up even with my sight line. The chubby man exited the driver's side door and walked toward us.

"You call us?" He asked in a simpleton tone.

"Yeah, we did." Nick sighed, rising to his feet. He patted Rodger on the head and I stood handing the man the leash. The chubby man pulled Rodger toward him just as my eyes watered again.

"Wait." I called before he could yank her toward the van door. Nick and I knelt in front of our seated friend and wished her our goodbye and she kissed us both, sloppy, just like a dog should.

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The phone rang with a shrill that made Mandy wake up from her nap. She could hear her mother's voice, soothing and calm at first and then she was getting excited about something. From Mandy's room she could only hear a muffled tone from her mother, but somehow she could tell the pitch was picking up. She quickly rolled out of her princess sheets and into the kitchen.

"Yes, we are out the door right now." Said Josie as she rushed to grab her car keys. "Thank you so much!" She clicked the phone off and saw Mandy standing in the kitchen doorway.

"They found Piper!" She said as Mandy ran to give her a hug. "Let's go pick her up!" said Josie pulling back from her daughter. "Apparently she just went and made some friends for the day, but now she wants to go back home."

