

Ranger

by H.L. Pauff

"What. Is. That?" Sid asked, staring at the shaggy ball of fur sitting in the living room. Its tongue hung out of its mouth and its tail beat against the carpet.

"This is Ranger," his mom said. "I don't know what breed he is, but he's a sweetie pie." She stroked the panting animal's head causing its eyes to roll into the back of its head with delight.

"Uh, what is that doing here?"

"*Uh*, he lives here now. Duh," his mom said. "He's your dog."

"I don't want that thing. Why would I want that thing?"

"Dogs are good companions. A boy needs a good dog. I thought that since it's the first summer without your father that... you know. Go see Sid, Ranger."

Ranger trotted towards Sid and sat before him. Its dark brown eyes looked up at him and it almost looked like it was smiling when it panted.

"What I *want* is to play ball with dad. Why can you bring him back here instead of this stupid thing?"

His mother sighed. "Your father made his choice. You know he's not going to..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever. It still doesn't mean I want this ugly idiot."

Sid avoided Ranger as best he could during the first few weeks of summer vacation. If he was out in the yard throwing a ball against the barn and Ranger came out, he would go inside and leave the dog out there.

When he rode his bike up and down the dirt road, he would make sure to ride extra hard to tire out the chasing Ranger. By the end of the day, Ranger would be too exhausted to bother him anymore.

At night his mom began to open his bedroom door and he would wake up with a snoring Ranger lying in his bed. There wasn't much he could do about that except yell at Ranger when he woke up and yell at his mom over breakfast.

"I'm going to the swimming hole," he announced one afternoon and tiptoed down the stairs so Ranger wouldn't hear him up and about. As he pushed open the front door, he heard his mom yell "Take Ranger with you."

Ranger's little legs could barely keep up with Sid's purposefully long strides. The shaggy brown mess carried a stick alongside Sid and begged for him to throw it every so often. Sid would heave the stick as far into the woods as he could and then start running when the dog was out of sight. Somehow, the dog always found its way back to Sid's side with the same stupid stick.

"You can't come swimming with me," Sid told him at the swimming hole. This is my spot. Well, my dad showed me this spot so it's only for family. That means you can't come in."

Ranger's eyes were focused on the body of water twelve feet below them. Its ears were perked up and its tail was moving a million miles per second. "Did you hear me? Are you listening? You can't go in there. I don't want your stupid dog fur polluting it." Its ears perked up and its plopped down on the ground. "Good. You stay there and don't you dare move or I'll leave you here and tell my mom a coyote ate you."

Sid stripped down and took a dozen steps away from the ledge of the swimming hole like he always did to get a running start. "Now, you better watch this," he said to Ranger. "This is called the Sid Special and dogs aren't capable of doing something this cool. I bet I'll make a big enough splash that you'll get soaked all the way up here."

Sid started sprinting towards the ledge and jumped. He tucked his knees in and folded his arms around them. The splash of water reached high into the air, but not high enough to splash Ranger.

Ranger stood and wagged its tail as Sid came up the trail for another jump. "Sit back down," he said and the dog obeyed. "I bet I can splash you this time. I forgot to do the little turn that my dad showed me. Watch."

He took off running again and at the ledge he tried to jump, but the loose dirt beneath his feet gave way and he tumbled forward,

smacking his head against the ledge before plunging into the water.

Sid woke hours later with a pounding headache and a bump on his head to match. The sun had begun to set and his body had long since dried. He remembered slipping and falling. "How did..." He sat up and looked around and saw that he was lying far from the water. Ranger sat in front of him with its tongue sticking out and its tail beating against the ground.

Sid reached out and ruffled the fur atop Ranger's head. "All right. All right."

