

Bandit

by Joey Delgado

He was a beautiful dog, part German Shepherd, part something else. I always thought the something else was Greyhound because his torso curved up into his chest, which I suppose is why Greyhound's are so fast. But mostly, he looked like a German Shepherd.

I found him as a puppy at a shelter, a cute thing with big paws, an indicator of future size, and I like big dogs. I always feel a little safer with a big dog, also feel a little less lonely. When they crowd you on the bed or welcome you at the door you feel their excitement in their size, and the love they have for you feels powerful, like them, because they're so huge.

He was the only puppy to walk up to the gate and lift his paw to the chain link. His eyes were light brown, almost yellow, and around them was black fur that looked like a mask. I picked him immediately, I picked him because of the way he lifted his paw and his black mask. I'd called him Bandit.

Bandit was an interesting dog. He liked to sit with me on the sofa, head in my lap as I read or watched television. He hated cats, a deeper hatred than even the cliché suggests. Before I bought Bandit, I'd leave food out for some mangy looking strays and they would come and eat and then leave, the same ones every time. When Bandit came into the picture, he'd hear the food jangling in the ceramic dishes and he would bolt out the doggy door, hackles at full attention and he'd run them off. One time he captured one in his jaws and shook it until its neck broke.

I would scold him and he'd lower his head, feeling guilty, and then spend the good part of an hour underneath the coffee table as his penance. Then he would come out and want to play or go for a walk.

Walks with Bandit were uninteresting. He was afraid of everything: dog, human, car, squirrel. Everything except cats, that is. When he'd see one he'd pull on his leash and practically yank my arm out of its socket. I would yank on the leash, scold him, and with

his head down we'd walk back to the house and he would take his place under the coffee table.

He was never a chewer. I never had to worry about him chewing up shoes or DVDs or books. When I left for work I knew my things would be safe. He'd occupy himself by exploring the backyard and chasing the blue jays that liked to land on my lemon tree.

He didn't like when I left, though. He knew when I was getting ready and he would talk to me the way dogs do, in rhythmic growls and whines. He quickly became familiar with my morning ritual. I'd make coffee, that was step one. I'd fill his dog dish and water bowl, that was step two. He'd take a few bites and go stand by the bathroom door and wait for me to complete steps three and four.

When I left the bathroom, he'd lick the remaining water from my legs and run to my bedroom. He'd jump on the bed and watch me dress. Step five. Then he would follow me back into the kitchen and I'd pour myself a cup of coffee and open two yogurts. He'd finish eating while I ate my breakfast. That was step six.

Step seven was me leaving and him barking at me, not wanting me to go, and he knew I'd pet him, crouch down and kiss him between his ears which stood straight up. Then I would be out the door.

Step eight, was me forgetting something, which I always did, and which he always counted on. I'd grab whatever I forgot--my keys, my glasses, my work pens--then I'd make my way for the door. Bandit gave up on trying to talk me into staying home and would lunge at my backside, nipping at my pants, not wanting to hurt me, but making it very clear he did not want me to go. He wouldn't stop until I yelled at him, but even then he would stand a few feet away and bark. He'd continue to bark while I closed and locked the screen door and closed and locked the big door.

As I pulled out of the driveway, I could see him running up to the window, pushing aside the curtains, watching me leave. I don't know how long he watched, maybe until my brake lights were in view, maybe until my car reached the end of the street, but my heart

would always break a little knowing he was standing there watching me leave.

Bandit was never a sociable dog. He got along with my friends, who came over very infrequently, and my family, who came over even less frequently. But he didn't enjoy the company and he didn't much care for the attention he received from them. Pretty soon he had the reputation of being an unfriendly dog, maybe even a dangerous dog. I reminded them, just because he's not drooling at your feet, doesn't mean he's a dangerous dog. I was very protective of him because he was so affectionate towards me. I knew the true nature of Bandit. He loved his owner and he was polite to everyone else, not unusual for a dog.

It wasn't until the day I killed him, that I realized what they meant.

I grabbed his leash and he wagged his tongue and bounced around. I told him to sit and he did. I latched the leash to his collar. I opened the door and I told him to sit and he did. I said, "Let's go," and he walked with me to the end of the driveway where we made the usual right. I let him sniff the edge of the grass and pulled the leash when it was time to move on. We walked to the corner and I told him to sit, and he did. When I was sure there were no cars coming, I said, "Let's go," and he followed me into the street and onto the next sidewalk.

He sniffed at the telephone poles and the bushes, but never lifted his leg to mark his territory. I always thought that was kind of unusual, but attributed it to him being neutered at such a young age. No, he just liked to sniff to see what's been going on, who else had been there, and whether or not the scent appealed to him or disgusted him.

We'd move on and cross another street. On the left side of the road was a cemetery and a plot of land, abandoned and unused. A family of coyotes made the land their home and Bandit could sense them. Him, begin the timid animal he was always made me cross the street, and I did because I could tell the smell of them drove him crazy.

So we continued on until we reached a small park in the middle of the neighborhood. The park consisted of a large grass field, a small baseball diamond, a basketball court, and playground for the little kids.

Bandit and I always cut through the park. He liked chasing the birds and being away from the street was comforting to him, since he cowered at every passing car.

We walked up the path that cut through the field. There were no birds that day, so he had no interest in running around the field. The sound of kids playing a pick up game of baseball could be heard; the clink of the ball against the metal bats, the encouraging yells, the discouraging ones. I could tell the noise was making Bandit nervous, so I quickened the pace to get through park a little faster.

The playground was full of kids and the basketball court was being used by grown men playing a game that was mostly for the cardio than for the love of the sport.

I didn't see the little boy run up to Bandit until it was too late. The kid was about four and was excited to see such a big dog. He reached out his hand to pat Bandit's head and Bandit lunged at him. The leash was wrenched from my hand, leaving a bloody burn on my palm. The kid screamed and Bandit had him pinned to the ground, the boy's chubby face in the dog's mouth. I could tell he wanted to bite down, hard. Every muscle in his body was flexed, a controlled chaos of physiology that was probably the boy's saving grace.

The boy's screams brought over the men from the basketball court and that's when Bandit lost control. I could see his sinewy muscles roll underneath his fur and his mouth clamped down on the boy's cheek. The kid howled in pain and blood spurt from the wound onto the grass.

I ran to Bandit and tore him off the boy and pinned him to the ground, but he was fighting me, the smell of the men's lust for blood thick in the air. He wasn't finished with his carnage, wasn't ready for the fight to be over. He snapped at me and I yelled at him, but it had no effect on the dog. His blood was up and he lunged again for the

bleeding child who was picked up by his father. Bandit was ready to tear into both of them.

I grabbed his neck and pulled down as hard as I could to try and get him to stay still, putting all my weight into it. I felt his neck break before I heard the snap. He whimpered once and went slack, falling lifeless onto the ground. The boy's blood was still on his snout and I had the urge to wipe it off but I didn't. I couldn't move. I just killed my own dog.

"I have my phone," I said. "I'll call 9-1-1."

"Was that your fucking dog, asshole?"

"Yeah."

"Why, wasn't he on a leash?" The man who cradled the boy, the father I assumed, didn't really sound angry, just confused and shocked. The anger would come, but I think the father in him just wanted to make sure his boy was okay.

"I did." I showed him the rope burn from the leash, but he turned away, uninterested. "I'm sorry. He's never done that before." I wanted to say that I thought his kid ran up to him too quickly, scared him, but I knew that was a bad idea.

"Daddy, it hurts," said the boy.

"I know, baby. The ambulance will come and fix you right up. You know ambulances. With the sirens and the flashing lights."

"But it *hurts* now."

The man looked at me, anger finally reddening his face, darkening his black eyes. "Be ready to pay."

"Of course. Of course."

A kid, one of the baseball players walked up to the scene.

"Is that dog dead?"

I couldn't say anything. I wanted to pet him, to put my face into his golden fur.

"He looks pretty fucking dead to me," said one of the basketball players.

"Did you kill him, Carlos?"

"No."

"Then who did?"

“Dude, just shut the fuck up for a second.” He looked at me and asked if I called 911. I told him I did and they’ll be here any minute.

The father, kid still in his arms, knelt down next to me, and I saw the child’s wounds up close, two punctures on his soft brown cheeks. They’ll probably scar up, be there for the rest of his life. I reached out to touch the boy’s arm and the father let me.

“Jesus, I’m so sorry.”

“I know.”

“I’ll pay for everything, hospital bills, surgery, everything.”

“We’ll worry about that later.”

“He’s never hurt a kid before.”

“I’m sorry you had to kill your dog.”

“Thanks.”

That’s when I heard the sirens.

