A Boy and His Dog  
by Meghan Larmore

I sit across the table from my dad. I try to shovel the dry, stale bread and undercooked macaroni in my mouth without looking disappointed. If I do look disappointed, Dad will get mad at me. He's always gettin' mad.

Now he looks up at me and I try to smile, but it must've faltered because he says, "What's the matter? I thought macaroni was your favorite."

"Uh-huh," I reply, pretending my mouth is full of food, but I really don't know what else to tell him.

"That all you got to say? Uh-huh?" he blusters.

"Uh-huh."

I know it's dumb of me, but I can't think of anythin' better to say. I wish Sandy were inside so I could sneak her my food. I hate havin' to shovel away and plaster my face with this weak-ass grin.

I attempt to sweet talk him. "Can't Sandy come inside tonight Dad?" I use my sticky sweet honey voice that works on my female teachers. It don't work on dad.

"No, I told you that the mutt stays outside tonight," he says through gritted teeth. "But Dad, Billy told me that it's gonna be like 110 degrees outside," I whine.

"110 degrees my ass. Besides, that's during the day. Nighttime's cool. The dog'll live."

"But dad--"

"--no buts. The dog stays outside because I said so."

It's not fair that Sandy has to sleep in the backyard every night. I can hear her outside, alone in the dark. She starts with a low, guttural sound that erupts into a full on yelp. I know it's sappy, but it makes my stomach turn to hear that mournful sound. Dad, well, it just gets on his nerves.

"Dad?" I begin again timidly.

"What is it, son?" he says as if he's happy to talk to me about anything in the world, as long as it's not about the damn dog. Now I
know he's probably gonna get mad, but I can't help myself. "Can I give some of these leftovers to Sandy?"

"Godammit, what did I tell you about that dog? You keep feeding it, that's why it keeps coming back. I have half a mind to take it to the pound tomorrow." Now I'm angry because he calls her "that dog" even though he knows her name is Sandy.

"You can't do that," I protest. "I love that dog."

I don't know what makes him snap, but he does. "You love that dog?" he snarls, "You love that dog? Well I'll tell you what."

He bumps against the table as he pushes his chair back, and bits of macaroni fly off my plate. Before he can reach Sandy, I bolt past him and out the sliding glass door. He stomps after me, but I shield her with my body before he can reach her. I know what's comin'. He's kicked Sandy before, to get her to shut up, but this time he means to scare her off for good. I've never understood why he hates the poor mutt so much, but it don't really matter. At this moment, I just don't want him to hurt her. So I stand with my arms outspread, and I stare up at him and try to match his mean expression. Instead of raising a foot to stomp at her, he raises a hand to swipe at me. But a second later, I swear I see something in his eyes soften and he drops his hand to his side instead. I don't waste a second to see if he's actually changed his mind. I turn around and dive into the shoddy doghouse that I made for Sandy after we first found each other. Two lost souls, wandering the dusty streets. It smells like shit and wet-dog inside, which is not a very different smell from my dad's run-down house. So I'm perfectly happy in this doghouse here with Sandy. I hear dad yell, defeated, "Fine, sleep in the doghouse tonight for all I care."

He shuffles back to the house, and I hear the sliding glass door click behind him. The old bastard really did it. He locked me out for the night. Mom always told me that she left dad because he was, as she put it, "a mean ol' bastard, and a drunk at that." After living with him for the past few months, I could see what she was gettin' at. Thinking about mom always chokes me up, so I talk to Sandy to get my mind off it. She sits next to me in the doghouse, a butter-
yellow Labrador mix with sad, abandoned eyes. I reach out to pet her warm, soft fur. It's matted in places, but where it's not clumped her fur is feathery to the touch. I bury my face in her side and am lulled to sleep by the gentle rise and fall of her belly.

I wake up a few hours later startled by the hard, cold surface I find myself on. I've forgotten where I am, but then I remember I'm in the doghouse and the whole night comes flooding back to me. The taste of stale bread is still in my mouth, but my stomach is grumbling. I can't get back inside to eat, so I guess I'll have to walk down to the Circle-K. But I don't have any money. So I'm gonna have to steal something. He left me no choice.

The gas station must be pretty far away from my house because it feels like we've been walkin' for a long time. My face is getting really hot and sweaty, and Sandy's tongue is hangin' from her mouth. I read somewhere that panting cools dogs off. So I give it a go. Now we're both panting and I feel silly doin' it. I wish I had a bottle of water to pour right over my head. Mom and I used to take walks at night. I guess I never really thought about it before, but the air next to the beach must have water in it. I dunno what the hell is in the air here.

I'm finally at the door of the mini-mart and my hunger is so strong it feels like I have a hole in my gut. My hands are shaking real bad too, probably from nerves. Even though I've thought about it before, I've never actually stolen anything. The guy behind the counter is flipping through a Playboy, so he doesn't notice me or Sandy come in. I like bringing her inside places. She usually doesn't get kicked out because she charms the storeowners with her cuteness. I've thought before about using her as a decoy, but this guy looks kinda mean so I don't think Sandy's charms will affect him. It's probably a good thing he ain't payin' attention.

Even though I try not to, I act hella suspicious, peeking over my shoulder as I walk down the aisles of the store. It pops in my head that I really want a Kit Kat bar. But if I do get caught, telling 'em I stole a candy bar to satisfy my hunger isn't gonna get any sympathy from anyone. So I stuff peanut butter sandwich crackers, the orange
ones, in my pocket instead. When I go to swipe some ranch flavored CornNuts, Sandy starts to get real curious about my pocket. She sniffs at it and lets out a soft growl. I push her nose away, shushing her. She's not playin' it cool, and I'm starting to lose mine. I wanna grab a beer too. The first time I tried one was when I stole it from one of my mom's boyfriends. I pussied out after one sip. On second thought, there's not even enough room in my pockets for a bottle of water.

I get the brilliant idea to stop by the rack of dollar comics and make it look like that's the reason why I'm here. I've been in the store for a pretty long time, and I don't have anything in my hands to buy. I don't want the clerk to get suspicious. On my way towards the comics, he glances up from his magazine and gives me the eye. I guess it wasn't such a great idea after all. But I fidget with the comic books anyway, pretending that I'm trying to decide which one to buy. I act out the routine my mom used to go through whenever I asked her to buy something for me. I pick one up, peer at the price sticker, and — in a grand gesture — let out an exaggerated whistle and shake my head, makin' out like it's too expensive.

I hear the clerk's voice behind me. “Not gonna buy anything today?”

I turn around to face him and let out a, “Huh?” like I'm not sure he's talking to me.

“I said, if you're not gonna buy anything today, you should leave. I'm not running a daycare here.”

“Yessir,” I say in my most convincing give a shit voice. It must not be convincing enough because his eyes narrow even more, and he eyeballs me all the way to the exit. That's when he notices Sandy. As I reach the threshold, she stops dead in her tracks. I turn my head and call, “Come on, Sandy,” but she stays put, eyes locked on my buttocks, ears pulled back, and a slow, steady rumble emitting from her clenched teeth.

“What the heck — why is your dog in here and what is it doing?” My eyes meet the clerk's eyes and before I can stop them they grow as big as dinner plates. The clerk makes a sudden lunge, Sandy lets
out a yelp, and it clicks in my brain that I better run. The door slams behind me as I bolt out of the store and towards home. My heart and thoughts are racin' as wild as my feet. I don't know what the bigger mistake was, stealin' or bringin' Sandy along. I never thought she'd turn on me. I'm almost at the street when I hear, “Hey! Hey! Get back here!” I hope to God he hasn't caught up with me and when I turn my head, I see him standing just outside the store. Sandy's at my side though, barkin' her head off like mad. She's not barking at me anymore, but I can't tell what she is barkin' at.

I focus my attention back to running. Without noticing it, I've run out of concrete and am now on asphalt. Just out of the corner of my eye, I see a stream of light aimed at me. I turn my eyes to meet the blinding shine of two headlights coming right towards me. And now I know why Sandy's barkin' so much.

My reflexes take over and I shield my eyes and jump out the damn way. I expect my feet to hit the ground but instead I watch in slow motion as the curb rises up to meet my face. My whole body hits the ground. I land in a crumpled heap, my face buried in my arms, complete darkness surrounding me. I don't dare open my eyes, as if squeezing them tight enough'll make it so the car was never even there. But the sound of the tires screeching behind me jolts me away from the fantasy world. And when I open my eyes and realize that Sandy isn't lying there on the sidewalk next to me, that's when the real world really kicks in. I see the look of shock on the clerk's face as he runs back inside and I hear the driver yellin', “What the hell were you thinking, running into the street like that?” and I can't deal with it all knowing that Sandy might be hurt because of me. As I turn around to look behind me, my worse fears are realized. There she is, right next to the front tire of the car, lying still as can be. I pick myself up off the sidewalk and drop to my knees beside her. I lower my face to the familiar comfort of her belly, now matted with blood. “Please, please be okay,” I sob into her fur. With my face against it, I can feel that her stomach is moving up and down. She's breathing. She's okay! The blood is coming from her front paw,
which is curled in towards her body. “Oh no!” The tears start streaming down my face and at that moment, she opens her eyes. Her tongue laps at my face, her mouth in the shape of a huge grin. She has more energy than she should, almost as if seeing me alive has made her the happiest dog in the world. But seeing her lying there with a bleeding paw and me with barely a scratch makes me cry even harder.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”

The driver is blocking the oncoming traffic with his car, but he's trying desperately to get me out of the street. I ain't gonna leave Sandy's side. But then I feel a pair of strong hands wrap around my waist and peel me off of Sandy. “We know you're sorry,” a voice behind me says. I must've been saying it a million times and I meant it a million times. “That's why Mr. Tanner here has kindly decided not to press charges.” Now I'm facing the owner of the voice and hands. It's a burly cop. He continues, “I'm Officer Naylor. Can you tell me what happened?” I normally clam up around cops, but he doesn't look mad or intimidating, so I find myself just lettin' it all out.

“My dad...got mad. I left. I...was hungry. Wanted to...but couldn't. No money. And Sandy--”

“--Sandy? That must be your dog. And who are you?”

“Jimmy. Jimmy Reed.”

“Jimmy, come sit on the curb with me.”

He leads me by the shoulders back to the sidewalk. “No need to explain any more. I think I got the picture.” I sit down and he asks me my dad's name and his phone number. I wanna know what's gonna happen to Sandy. He tells me that first he's gonna call the local animal shelter and then call my dad and have him meet us there. I sit at the curb for what seems like hours, but is probably more like a few minutes. Animal rescue shows up and I make sure to tell 'em to pick Sandy up gently. They don't care about her like I do. In the distance, I see the cop on his phone, making flustered up and down movements with his free hand, almost like he's trying to calm a screamin' kid. He must be talkin' to my dad. After what I'm
sure is a grueling few minutes, he hangs up the phone and walks towards me with a sympathetic grin. Tired and emotionally sore, I crawl into the front seat of his patrol car. We make small talk on the way to the animal hospital. When we get there, they rush Sandy into an operating room. All I can do is wait patiently and pray that the damage to Sandy's paw isn't permanent. Officer Naylor is trying to console me, but I'm not really listening to him. I'm just staring at a spot on the floor, trying not to look at the healthy and happy pets and owners leaving the hospital. I almost jump outta my skin when the vet's assistant tells me that Sandy's fine. I practically step on the lady's ankles as I follow her past the front and desk and into the room where their keeping Sandy. Not a second later, my dad bursts in the room demanding of everyone there, “What the HELL happened?” I wish the receptionist hadn't told him where to find us.

I stand next to the Officer Naylor, blushing 'cause I can feel my dad staring me down. The cop tells my dad the whole story. He's not leavin' nothin' out. And he's goin' on and on and on about Sandy. “So first she tries to teach your boy a lesson about stealing, and then she jumps out in front of a car for him. Now that's what I call unconditional love.” My blush deepens because I know my dad is thinkin' about how silly that sounds. But then I dare to look up at him and I catch the look on his face. He's staring at Sandy now instead of me, with an expression of utter seriousness. His eyes have that glassy look, like he's about to cry. But he don't cry. He makes no fuss at all in fact. Just says, “Come on son, let's go home,” in a quiet voice and heads toward the door. As he steps outside the room, he makes a clucking sound with his tongue. Sandy jumps off the table, pushes past me in the doorway, and runs ahead of us. He doesn't try to stop her. I stray behind a bit, confused as all hell, watching Sandy run up the hallway and my dad following her like it's the most natural thing in the world. He doesn't even seem slightly annoyed, let alone mad. But with Dad, you never know. Maybe he's just decided to wait until we're at home to yell at me.