

Boy's Worst Friend

by Vincent Fino

When I was eight years old, I hit my dog in the head with a baseball bat. Some eyewitnesses, especially the pitcher, said it was premeditated, but I've always upheld my innocence. Cher was a young, skittish runt--a poodle with a quick temper and a nasty bite. When metal connected with skull, her heart stopped, so did mine.

I killed the family pet.

I killed my big sister's best friend.

My heart winced. I thought about taking the Louisville to my head, too. Waterworks in full force, I motioned toward the pitcher, my cousin, to walk over to the lifeless body.

"You're a dead man," my cousin said, huddling around the dog.

"She can't be dead! She can't be!" I said, dropping to my knees and gently touching Cher's chest, so as to not disturb her peaceful slumber if she, ya know, was really having her all-dogs-go-to-heaven moment.

Instantly, as if my hand was cooking at 450 degrees, Cher shot up and frantically ran across our farm. She galloped under the barn fence and into the pasture, where the horses were grazing. We watched her jarred and uncontrollable movements in horror. She settled out in the paddock by the oblivious horses; it was there, amid the hay and the muck, she made her stand.

After ten, mud-filled minutes, my cousin and I baited Cher with leftover chicken nuggets from lunch, which my cousin had in his

pants pocket for safe-keeping. When the three of us -- Cher, my cousin, and I -- reached the house, I made a pact with my cousin.

"I'm not opening this door until you promise you'll keep your mouth shut," I said. He was my little cousin, and I believed I was still a formidable figure in his eyes.

"You got it, Vin. I won't say a peep," he said, looking down and smiling at his baseball glove.

If I hadn't been holding Cher, who was still reeling from the blow, I would have smacked that glove right out of his hand.

"Lil' Vin. I'm not joking around with you-not about this," I said. His name is Vincent, too. The "lil" part was added by kids in the neighborhood. He would grow to emulate other "lil" figures from hip-hop. In later years, the nickname would be his albatross.

The porch led into my kitchen. The house smelled of basil and Tea-tree oil. My mother stood behind the stove, stirring the sauce. My approving grandmother always said my mom was a "Jewish hippie" who cooked like a Neapolitan. Mom spent most Sunday mornings frantic; she would lose a key ingredient, run out of boxed wine, or forget Italian bread. She believed something would always go wrong on this Gentile day, especially if the ten-year-old me lurked around the kitchen. I stayed outside on those mornings.

Before I could explain why I held the dazed dog in my arms, Lil Vin spilled the beans, outlining the whole incident to my mom, from the pitch (he took no blame for the incident) to the dog's frantic last stand by the barn.

My horrified mother took Cher from me, holding the dog to her chest.

"Lil Vin, thank you for being honest. I'm going to drop you off at home," my mother said.

"You," she pointed at me with her long-witchy finger, "you're coming with me to the vet."

"But what about Sunday dinner?" I said, fearing there would be no meatballs.

"It's canceled. You're lucky your sister and dad are at a softball game. Don't think for a second you're in the clear."

I gulped.

The situation at the vet's office was less intense. The x-rays showed there was no lasting damage. Cher had a mild concussion. The vet gave the kind of prescription you'd give to a sore athlete: ice and rest.

On the way home, my mother weighed my fate. "You're very lucky Cher is going to be OK," she said, buckling her seatbelt.

My mother went on, saying, "Aw, just look at the poor thing," She and I glanced back at Cher; the dog sprawled herself across the backseat, taking in all the sympathy.

"I'm not going to tell them about the bat. I'll say she was sleeping underneath the dinner table. And then got startled by a passing police siren and hit her head."

"What?" I said. My thoughts were back on the meatballs.

"Pay attention! This is going to be our little secret, ya hear? I'm trying to save you from your sister's wrath."

"Thank you, mommy." I said, relieved that I would be alive for at least a few more years.

Yet, the dust didn't settle. Our family bathroom, the only one in this old farmhouse, sat between my room and my sister's "dungeon," as I called it. She was twelve and quickly jumping into the Nirvana phase. After dinner, I looked forward to taking a shower and cleansing myself of the day's mishap. Cher had other plans. As I left the bathroom, Cher nipped me in the butt, taking my towel, skin, and blood with her. I remember writhing on the floor outside my

sister's bedroom, screaming, "Why would you do this? Why?" à la '94 Nancy Kerrigan. Cher cowered back behind my sister; her almond eyes told me she was unfazed, or rather satisfied by her actions. She had tasted boyhood and wanted more. A fifteen-year feud had begun.

