

The Dog by the River

by Wah-Ming Chang

I am seven years old today and I want the dog by the river, the one with the great mane of hair like my father's who is a singer at night, and with big ears, too, that grow from the top of its head so that I can tug on them if it's being bad or stroke them into beanstalks if it's being good. I see so many dogs on my street lately, most of them reaching only to my ankle and their hind legs ending in furry stumps, and maybe it's that they all look so sick lying there in puddles in the middle of the street to cool themselves from the heat, but soon these dogs disappear into a van and they don't come back out. I feel sorry for them, but the kind of dog I want is sturdier, wagging its tongue as much as its tail, its great wet nose always in the air or sniffing the ground for my scent, the fur hanging from the thick middle ruffling in the wind and ruffling in a different way than the fur on those poor little dogs. I am seven years old today, and I can tell now when a dog is well and when it is not, and I want the one that's well, one that won't just lie on the ground not moving even when my bike runs over its leg, that will learn the tricks a dog is supposed to learn, like *take that food* or *drop this money into my hand* or *bite that man*.

And because I have turned seven, my father will get me this dog. He says we will go to a pet store in the city, but I want the dog that lives down the hill from us. It stalks the water's edge as though it's one of those monkeys waiting for food to be delivered from a motorboat. I have never seen the dog sit or lie down, or lower its tail, or flatten its ears. Its teeth are long and brown, and it eats whatever I throw him, hungrily, with its eyes watching me all the while.

I am seven today, and it is six in the morning, just about day, which means that my father, who sings only at night, will be down by the water on his boat. He has never seen the dog before because the dog stays clear from my father. It must be the fishing nets. When my father isn't singing at night, he rides in his boat

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during the day showing visitors the way to the nearby caves so they can act like fishermen. We have the deepest caves in the province, they reach so deep that once, when I tried touching its most inside, the light floating on top of the water suddenly went out and I didn't know which way to turn. I want to say that this dog living by the river had rescued me. Yes, I will say this: something had caught my arm and tugged me toward the opening of the cave, where the light came back on and I was breathing again, and I believe that that something had been the dog I want so much. My arm still has marks, and more and more they look like an animal's teeth marks, sharp, a little broken up. When I'd woken up back on shore, my arm was bleeding, some of the elbow's skin torn off, and I couldn't tell my father that night what had happened, that the dog that had saved me had also bitten off a part of me. So when he got home early in the morning from his singing in the city and I showed him my bandaged arm, I said I'd fallen off his bicycle, which he'd told me never to touch because I was still too small to ride it. He didn't spank me for this. He didn't yell. He wasn't drunk at all, and his voice wasn't hoarse the way it got from singing for a whole night in the city full of smoke. He just gave me my own bicycle the next day, smaller than his, with curved handles unlike his angled ones, and when I begged him to show me how to ride it he kissed the top of my head and told me I must be safe. That's when I knew he would get me the dog. The dog will keep me safe. I am growing up, and my father does not like to leave me alone in the house at night while he goes into the city to sing. A dog's job, after all, is very simple.

