



Nothing in my life has ever felt as good as the cool, clear flow of liquid that pulled me out of my dreamless sleep. The woman stood over me with a water bottle and was carefully showering me with the sweet spray. I shuddered with pleasure as the trickle painted my back, and raised my mouth to lap and bite at the stream the way I'd often attacked the drizzle that fell from the faucet above the trough in the Yard.

A man stood nearby, and both he and the woman were watching me with concerned expressions.

"Do you think he'll be okay?" the woman asked.

"Looks like the water is doing the job," he replied.

From both of them came the sort of open adoration I often felt pouring out of Senora when she stood at the fence to watch

us play. I rolled on my back so the water would wash over my hot tummy, and the woman laughed.

"Such a cute puppy!" the woman exclaimed. "Do you know what kind it is?"

"Looks like a golden retriever," the man observed.

"Oh, puppy," the woman murmured.

Yes, I could be Puppy, I could be Fella, I could be whatever they wanted, and when the woman swept me up in her arms, heedless of the wet splat I made against her blouse, I kissed her until she closed her eyes and giggled.

"You're coming home with me, little guy. I've got someone I want you to meet."

Well, it looked like I was a front-seat dog now! She held me in her lap while she drove, and I gazed up at her in gratitude. Curious about my new surroundings, I finally crawled off and explored the inside of the car, astounded at the rich, cold air coming from two vents in front of me. Against my wet fur the air was so chilly I actually began to tremble, and wound up climbing onto the flat floor on the other side of the car, where a soft warmth, just like Mother, quickly lured me back into another nap.

I woke up when the car stopped, sleepily regarding the woman as she reached down and picked me up.

"Oh, you are so cute," she whispered. As she held me against her chest and stepped out of the car I could feel her heart beating strongly and I sensed something like alarm coming off of her. I yawned off the last vestiges of my nap and, after a quick squat in some grass, was ready to face whatever challenge had her so worked up.

"Ethan!" she called. "Come here; I want you to meet someone."

I looked up at her curiously. We were in front of a big white

house, and I wondered if there were kennels in the back, or maybe a big yard. I couldn't hear any barking, though, so maybe I was the first dog here.

Then the front door of the house banged open and a human being like I'd never seen before ran out on the porch, jumped down the cement steps, and stopped dead in the grass.

We stared at each other. It was, I realized, a human child, a male. His mouth broke into a huge grin and he spread his arms. "A puppy!" he sang, and we ran to each other, instantly in love. I could not stop licking him and he could not stop giggling, and we rolled together in the grass.

I guess I had never bothered to consider that there might be such a thing as a boy, but now that I had found one, I thought it was just about the most wonderful concept in the world. He smelled of mud and sugar and an animal I'd never scented before, and a faint meaty odor clung to his fingers, so I licked them.

By the end of the day I would know him not just by smell but also by sight, sound, and gesture. His hair was dark, like Bobby's, but very short, and his eyes were much lighter. He had a way of turning his head to look at me as if he were trying to hear me more than see me, and his voice bubbled with joy whenever he talked to me.

For the most part, though, I was drinking in his scent, licking his face, chewing his fingers.

"Can we keep him, Mom? Can we keep him?" the boy gasped between giggles.

The woman squatted down to pet my head. "Well, you know your dad, Ethan. He's going to want to hear that you'll take care of him—"

"I will! I will!"

"And that you'll walk him and feed him—"

"Every day! I'll walk him and feed him and brush him and give him water—"

"And you'll have to clean up when he poops in the yard."

The boy didn't answer that one.

"I bought some puppy food at the store; let's give him some dinner. You won't believe what happened, I had to run to the gas station and get a jug of water; the poor thing was nearly dead with heat exhaustion," the woman said.

"Want some dinner? Huh? Dinner?" the boy asked.

Sounded pretty good to me.

To my amazement, the boy picked me up and carried me right into the house! I had never in my life imagined such a thing was even possible.

I was going to like it here just fine.

Some of the floors were soft and embedded with the same animal odor I'd picked up on the boy, while other floors were slick and hard, causing my feet to skitter out from underneath me as I pursued the boy through the house. When the boy picked me up, the flow of love between us was so strong it gave me a hollow feeling in my tummy, almost like hunger.

I was lying on the floor with the boy, wrestling over a cloth, when I felt a vibration rumble through the house and heard the sound I'd learned meant the closing of a car door.

"Your father's home," the woman, whose name was Mom, told the boy, who was called Ethan.

Ethan stood up and faced the door, and Mom came to stand beside him. I grabbed the cloth and gave it a victorious shake but found it much less interesting without a boy attached to the other end of it.

A door opened. "Hi, Dad!" the boy yelled.

A man stepped into the room, looking back and forth between the two of them. "Okay, what is it?" he asked.

"Dad, Mom found this puppy . . .," Ethan said.

"He was locked in a car, nearly dead from heatstroke," Mom said.

"Can we keep him, Dad? He's the best puppy in the world!"

I decided to take advantage of the lapse in security and dove onto the boy's shoes, biting his laces.

"Oh. I don't know; this is not a good time," the father said. "Do you know how much work a puppy is? You're only eight years old, Ethan. It's too much responsibility."

I yanked on one of the boy's laces and it gave, sliding away from his shoes. I tried to run off with it, but it remained attached to his feet so that it yanked me back, tumbling me head over heels. Snarling, I dove back onto the laces, grabbing them and giving them a furious shake.

"I'll take care of him, and I'll walk him and feed him and wash him," the boy was saying. "He's the best puppy in the world, Dad. He's already housebroken!"

Having wrestled the shoes into submission, I decided this would be a good time to take a little break, and squatted, depositing a stool along with my urine.

Wow, did *that* get a reaction!

Soon the boy and I were sitting on the soft floor. Mom would say, "George?" and then Ethan would say, "George? Here, George! Hi, George!" and then Dad would say, "Skippy?" and Ethan would say, "Skippy? Are you Skippy? Here, Skippy!"

It was exhausting.

Later, playing out in the backyard, the boy called me Bailey. "Here, Bailey! Here, Bailey!" he would call, slapping his knees.

When I trotted over to him he would dash away, and we ran around and around in the backyard. As far as I was concerned, it was an extension of the game inside, and I was prepared to respond to "Hornet" and "Ike" and "Butch," but it seemed like this time "Bailey" would stick.

After another meal, the boy took me into the house. "Bailey, I want you to meet Smokey the cat."

Holding me tightly against his chest, Ethan turned so I could see, sitting in the middle of the floor, a brown and gray animal whose eyes grew big when he spotted me. This was the smell I'd been tracking! The thing was larger than me, with tiny ears that looked like they'd be fun to bite. I struggled to get down to play with this new friend, but Ethan held me tight.

"Smokey, this is Bailey," Ethan said.

At last he placed me on the floor and I ran over to kiss the cat, but he drew his lips back from a set of really wicked-looking teeth and spat at me, arching his back and thrusting his puffy tail straight up into the air. I stopped, puzzled. Didn't he want to play? The musty smell coming from under his tail was delicious. I tried to inch in and give Smokey's butt a friendly sniff, and he hissed and spat and raised a paw, nails extended.

"Aw, Smokey, be a nice cat. Be a nice cat."

Smokey gave Ethan a baleful glare. I picked up on the boy's encouraging tone and yipped in a very welcoming fashion, but the cat remained unapproachable, even batting at my nose when I tried to lick his face.

Okay, well, I was ready to play with him whenever he wanted, but I had more important things to care about than some snotty cat. Over the next several days, I learned my place in the family.

The boy lived in a small room full of wonderful toys, while

Mom and Dad shared a room with no toys whatsoever. One room had a basin of water I could only drink from if I climbed into it, and also had no toys unless you counted the white paper that I could pull from the wall in a continuous sheet. The rooms for sleeping were at the top of some steps that were impossible for me to climb despite my full-sized dog legs. The food was all kept hidden in one part of the house.

Every time I decided I needed to squat and relieve myself, everyone in the house went crazy, scooping me up and racing out the door with me, setting me in the grass and watching me until I'd recovered from the trauma of it all enough to continue with my business, which earned me so much praise I wondered if this was my main function in the family. Their praise was inconsistent, though, because there were some papers they'd set out for me to rip up and if I squatted on them I was called a good dog, too, but with relief, not joy. And, as I mentioned, sometimes when we were all in the house together they became upset with me for doing *exactly the same thing*.

"No!" Mom or Ethan would shout when I wet the floor. "Good boy!" they'd sing when I peed in the grass. "Okay, that's good," they'd say when I urinated on the papers. I could not understand what in the world was wrong with them.

Dad mostly ignored me, though I sensed he liked it when I got up in the morning to keep him company while he ate. He regarded me with mild affection—nothing like the berserk adoration flooding out of Ethan, though I could feel that was how much Dad and Mom loved the boy. Occasionally Dad would sit at the table in the evenings with the boy and they would talk quietly, concentrating, while sharp, pungent fumes filled the air. Dad would let me lie on his feet, since the boy's feet were too far off the ground for me to reach.

"Look, Bailey, we built an airplane," the boy said after one of these sessions, thrusting a toy at me. It made my eyes water with the chemical odors, so I didn't try to take it away. Making noises, the boy ran around the house holding the toy, and I chased after him and tried to tackle him. Later he put the thing on a shelf with other toys that faintly smelled of the same chemicals, and that was it until he and Dad decided to build another one.

"This one is a rocket, Bailey," Ethan told me, offering me a toy shaped like a stick. I turned up my nose at it. "We're going to land one on the moon one day, and then people will live there, too. Would you like to be a space dog?"

I heard the word "dog" and sensed there was a question, so I wagged. Yes, I thought. *I would be happy to help clean the dishes.*

Cleaning the dishes was where the boy would put a plate of food down and I would lick it. It was one of my jobs, but only when Mom wasn't watching.

Mostly, though, my job was to play with the boy. I had a box with a soft pillow in it where the boy put me at night, and I came to understand that I was to stay in the box until Mom and Dad came in and said good night and then the boy would let me up into his bed to sleep. If I got bored in the night, I could always chew on the boy.

My territory was behind the house, but after a few days I was introduced to a whole new world, the "neighborhood." Ethan would burst out the front door in a dead run, me at his heels, and we'd find other girls and boys and they'd hug me and wrestle with me and tug toys from my mouth and throw them.

"This is my dog, Bailey," Ethan said proudly, holding me up. I squirmed at the sound of my name. "Look, Chelsea," he said, offering me to a girl his size. "He is a golden retriever. My mother



rescued him; he was dying in a car from heat exhaust-station. When he gets old enough I'm going to take him hunting on my grandpa's farm."

Chelsea cuddled me to her chest and gazed into my eyes. Her hair was long and lighter than even mine, and she smelled like flowers and chocolate and another dog. "You are sweet, you are so sweet, Bailey, I love you," she sang to me.

I liked Chelsea; whenever she saw me she would drop to her knees and let me pull on her long blond hair. The dog scent on her clothing came from Marshmallow, a long-haired brown and white dog who was older than I but still a juvenile. When Chelsea let Marshmallow out of her yard we would wrestle for hours and sometimes Ethan would join us, playing, playing, playing.

When I lived in the Yard, Senora loved me, but I now realized it was a general love, aimed at all the dogs in the pack. She called me Toby, but she didn't say my name the way the boy whispered, "Bailey, Bailey, Bailey," in my ear at night. The boy loved *me*; we were the center of each other's worlds.

Living in the Yard had taught me how to escape through a gate. It had led me straight to the boy, and loving and living with the boy was my whole purpose in life. From the second we woke up until the moment we went to sleep, we were together.

But then, of course, everything changed.