

# **My Buddy**

**by Marilyn Thomas**



**illustrated by Chris Scharpf**



## 1.

I didn't know Al had a dog until we were married. In fact there were other things I should have known, but didn't. I failed to see the signs, some of them obvious like the fact that we lived in a borrowed house. That would have been okay except that his pockets were empty. And there were the little ones like that fact that the kitchen cabinets were without doors and the countertops were plywood. If he had been poor, I would have understood, but he simply didn't care. The house was badly neglected. In addition to ignoring the house, he paid almost no attention to the yard where weeds thrived instead of grass.

Before long I noticed the unpaid bills piling up on his desk. Then the bank called to say it owned the house because he had stopped paying the mortgage.

Sadly none of this mattered to me at the time because I was in love.

I saw Buddy for the first time on a bright, autumn morning shortly after I had moved in. I was looking out the bedroom window, and there he was, bounding through the weeds like a charbroiled sausage with stubby legs flattened against his underbelly. A head appeared and then disappeared above the weeds, now golden in color and swollen with seed pods. Then a white-tipped, black tail wagged above a stand of thistle before vanishing again. I heard playful barking. Was that the mocking bird in the paradise tree, or was it the dog? A contest between them? Was it even possible? A dog flying without wings and a bird barking.

I wondered for a few seconds if my imagination was playing tricks on me. A flying sausage lifted off, soared a bit, and then disappeared. I marveled at the spectacle even as I laughed to

myself. I had seen a lot of dogs in my life: Buster, Rusty, Nipper... all good cow dogs, now just vague memories from my childhood. I remember Rusty more than the others because he didn't need a clock to know when it was time to wake Dad for milking or to herd the cows from the pasture to the barn. What I had never witnessed before was a dog that could soar like a duck. On the one hand, it was pure grace. On the other, it was absolute silliness. He had the stubby legs and round belly of a pig, but when he was airborne, his body thinned out like a stick of licorice.

"Al," I called, "you never told me you had a dog."

He was shaving in the bathroom. I could hear the clang of the metal razor as he tapped the handle on the edge of the sink to shake off a clump of shaving cream that would have gathered there. Then I heard the whoosh of running water and knew he was rinsing the blade for

the next swipe down his cheek. Next he would make a face to tighten the skin over his jawbone. He prided himself on having a clean shave, his skin as smooth as the peel of an apple or the skin of a grape. I didn't need to shout because he could hear me from any room in the house. I joked with people about how we had our laundry room in the West Wing and our bedroom in the East Wing as if we lived in a mansion when it was a tiny, square box. "What dog?" The water stopped. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It flies like a duck, but it's a dog. And it's in our yard."

He came to the window, looked out, and laughed. "Oh, that. He belongs to Melanie." She was his teenage daughter by his first marriage, and she lived with us. Truth be told, I lived with them. We all know stories about wicked stepmothers, and I never thought I'd be one, but

that's what I became, at least in her eyes. For eight years after Al's divorce, it had been just the two of them, and she had been in charge. And then I butted in with my own opinion about how things should be, a hard pill she refused to swallow.

The intruder, I was the victim of Melanie's cold stares and glares. Had she been given the choice between her cat and me, I knew she would have chosen her cat. I understood and accepted that. She and her cat had been best friends long before I ever came along. And like a wicked stepmother, I didn't help matters because I didn't like cats in general and I didn't like hers in particular. In fact, I don't even remember the cat's name.

"Melanie," I said one day, "I don't want that litter box in the kitchen. In fact, I want that cat outside because when he runs in and out, he brings fleas in!" Strangely, neither she nor Al

ever got a flea bite, but I would be covered in them and then they'd itch for days. Of course, itching all the time made me an irritable nag.

Secretly I wished Melanie would move out with that cat, but I kept that thought to myself. It was sad for her having to deal with me, but when it came to things like fleas and a litter box in the kitchen, I refused to look the other way.

Nor was I willing to tolerate other things in that house. The walls and ceilings, for example, were riddled with cracks from all the little earthquakes and tremblers that had shaken it over the years. Soon all those cracks were like open mouths gaping at me. One day, ignoring arguments against the plan, I decided I would shut them up.

"Melanie," I asked one day, "how do you like wallpaper?"



She snarled at me. "I hate it."

Never mind. I was done putting up with those ugly cracks, and Al refused to spend money on anything to do with the house. So I took matters into my own hands and wallpapered every room except her bedroom, which was a converted, one-car garage only faintly disguised. When I finished wallpapering, I could read her lips: Wicked stepmother. Al scolded me with his eyes. Why couldn't I live with a few cracks? And why waste money on a house when it could be better spent on a boat? Somehow he had convinced me before we married that if I really loved him, I would pay for half of the Santa Cruz 27' he wanted, a boat he never sailed, but for which I paid the docking fees for years before I sold it against his will, and at a loss.

On the day in question, however, I watched Buddy bound over the weeds. "What kind of

dog is he?" I don't know why I asked because I didn't really care what kind of breed he was. I never paid much attention to the breeds of our dogs at home except to know they were all mixed. I only saw them when I had to feed them, always table scraps, mixtures like pickled beets with beef gristle and milk. We didn't fuss about naming them either because they were strictly work dogs.

Rusty was named for his rust-colored fur, Nipper for his penchant to nip at the heels of cows, and Buster for his habit of 'busting' free every chance he got, a fortuitous name for him because he ended his life as road kill when he 'busted' free one day.

Buddy was a different kind of name for a dog because it suggested friendship. I soon discovered, however, that if he and Melanie had once been friends, their friendship had faded over the years. If she had cared for him at one time,

that time had passed because she had converted to cat worship: Catoliscism. Buddy was an afterthought at best. I soon noticed that a day would go by now and then when he didn't get fed at all. No one ever took him for a walk. He never entered the house because it was strictly off limits. That was Al's rule, one I agreed with until the day I dropped a half-carton of raw eggs on the vinyl floor.

"Buddy." I called him inside. No luck. I nudged his behind. Nope. Finally I carried him into the kitchen where he cleaned up my mess better than any mop could have done. But that was later, much later. At the moment I was thinking about our dogs on the farm, which were also strictly confined to the outdoors where winters were severe, temperatures often falling below zero.

I wanted Al's rule to apply to Melanie's cat, but she stood her ground against me. After a num-

ber of battles, she agreed to confine it to her bedroom, but we remained at an impasse over his freedom of movement because she kept her bedroom window open so it could get in and out at will.

Buddy, unlike the cat, had nothing for shelter. It didn't matter if it was cold and rainy or hot and sweltering; he had to deal with it. When it froze on winter nights, he had his natural fur coat. If that wasn't enough, he simply had to shiver until the sun came up. Of course for our dogs at home matters were much worse. Besides, Buddy wasn't my dog and he never seemed to be sick, so I didn't worry about it.

But I was upset with Melanie. After all, he was her dog. In fact, it seemed to me that as her cat became more and more important to her, Buddy became less. One day when I noticed that Buddy had not been fed, I had a talk with Al. "Somebody has to feed that dog, and it's not

going to be me because he's not mine. You're the one who bought it for her."

"Wrong," he said. "Nobody bought him. He was a stray. Somebody picked him up on the side of the road, and then didn't know what to do with him; so Melanie brought him home. He's a mongrel."

I didn't like that attitude, but I didn't want the problem of Buddy either. I had more important things to worry about until that fateful day when the dog's plight became mine.



## 2.

It was November, a month into our marriage, and the beginning of the rainy season in the San Francisco Bay Area. Al was gone on a business trip as a software engineer for a computer company. During the night it had rained cats and dogs, as the saying goes. (I pictured the cliché's source, a rainstorm in medieval England, cats and dogs sliding off thatched roofs where they had been placed to control the rats that nested in the straw.) The backyard was one giant puddle.

I was getting ready for work when I heard something like the sound of a baby crying, a kind of high-pitched whimpering. It was Buddy, his chain wrapped around the center block that helped hold the deck up. Trying to free himself, he had instead wound himself tighter.

I didn't have time to change out of my good suit into work clothes or to find my boots, which were still packed away somewhere. And if I did take the time for that, I certainly wouldn't have time for another shower to clean the cobwebs out of my hair. It was out of the question. College teachers cannot be late for their classes. It's bad enough if a student is late; it's unforgivable for a teacher to keep a whole class waiting.

Besides, Buddy was Melanie's responsibility. "Melanie!" I yelled in the direction of her room, grabbed my raincoat, and headed for the door. "Buddy is choking under the deck. Be sure to unwind his chain before you leave for school." Maybe he wasn't exactly choking, but his chain needed to be untangled. She opened her bedroom door, her cat tucked under one arm. She kissed it through his thick coat of gray fur and massaged his neck. He squinted his green eyes at me, a gnarly expression on his face. "You



don't have to yell," she scowled. "I'll take care of it." She buried her face in the cat's fur as the bedroom door closed against me.

When I got home that evening, I discovered Buddy still chained to the block, still whimpering. From Melanie's room I couldn't miss the thumping bass beat of the Kinks, her favorite rock band. "Melanie," I screamed. "I can't believe you left Buddy like that all day. He's still choking. You get out there this minute and take care of him. How would you like it if someone treated you that way?"

The closed door opened again, the snuggled cat glaring at me as it nestled in her arms. She brushed past me without a word. Anger flaring up, I grabbed the phone and dialed Al. Without even bothering to say hello and maybe ask how things were going for him, I blurted out what was on my mind: "This is it!" I yelled. "When you get home, you get rid of that dog. Why

keep him if nobody wants him?" As far as I knew, Buddy had never even been out of the yard and he had been living there for a few years already before I showed up.

Since Al liked to procrastinate, I was surprised when, the day after his return home, he led Buddy to his truck. I watched as that dog leapt onto the front seat, looking thrilled to be freed from his backyard prison. I felt thankful and relieved. "I can't believe you've already found a new home for him." Mentally I was congratulating myself for having arrived at such a good solution.

Al closed the door on Buddy. "If that's what you call the pound."

"What? The pound? I never suggested anything like that!"

"Well, you're the one who told me to get rid of him. What did you expect me to do?"

"Find him a home. The pound's not a home. They kill dogs there." At my insistence, he put Buddy back in the yard. "If you don't like it, you do something about it."

I phoned my sister Rita. She's younger than I, but I often ask her for advice and she usually has some. Nor did she disappoint this time. "Why don't you try to love him?"

That was just about the last thing I expected to hear. It was a crazy idea, but I was desperate. So I thanked her, said goodbye, and marched out on the deck. I couldn't see Buddy through the weeds; so I called his name. Like a flying stick of licorice, he bounded over the weeds and stopped at my feet. I looked down at his wagging black tail with the white tip, his tongue flapping in the breeze, and his chocolate-brown eyes smiling up into mine.

Even though I knew he hadn't had a bath in a long time, if ever, I ran my hand through his

thick fur from the top of his head to his silly, little rump. He took a few good whiffs of me, and that was it. I knew at that moment that he would be MY Buddy.

### 3.

Time passed. I fed Buddy every day and played with him in the yard several times a week. It wasn't enough, but it was more attention than he had been getting. Then one day, Mark, a teenage relative who craved sport, came to visit. When he looked out the back door and saw Buddy catapulting through the weeds, his eyes grew large with amazement. "What a cool dog! How about if I take him for a run?"

I shook my head. "I don't think it's a good idea because we don't have a leash for him and he's never been out." I could hear Al's baritone voice in the back of my head. "Don't you ever let him out because he will be across the Golden Gate Bridge before you know it. And if the pound gets him, you can blame yourself." In

other words, if I wanted Buddy to live, I had to keep him in the back yard.

Mark tossed a ball into the weeds and Buddy fetched it. Given how well Buddy played the game, I began to wonder if he had been trained before he had been rescued. Maybe his previous owners had dumped him on the road because they didn't want him anymore, or maybe he had run away. Mark watched Buddy plow through the weeds, prancing to the deck with the ball in his mouth. "Look at that. He loves to play. You have any parks nearby? We should take him out." Buddy held the ball with his teeth, teasing. "Look at that energy. How can you keep him locked up in this tiny yard?"

I had a feeling I'd be sorry, but Al was gone and Mark promised that if Buddy did get away from him (which he assured me Buddy would not) he would find him and bring him back.

In the end I gave in because I never did like the idea of keeping Buddy locked up in a yard, which was larger than our house, but much too small for a feisty pup like Buddy. At home on the farm our dogs had acres and acres to explore. They could run all day and still have acres left to explore.

Buddy jumping at his heels, Mark opened the gate. "You worry too much." He patted Buddy on the head. "Come on, boy. Let's race." Before I could say 'black glass backsplash,' the two of them had bolted, Buddy well in the lead. I ran behind, shouting: "He's getting away. Call him back!" By the time I caught up to them, they were playing a game of "Fetch" in the park. I stared in disbelief. Maybe it was instinctual in some dogs. I knew Buddy was some part beagle. He certainly was good at it, often catching a stick in mid-air.

When Mark left that day, I felt sad for Buddy because he had lost a new friend and the only one who had really trusted him until now. On the other hand, I had decided I would take Buddy out myself. Because Al insisted, I got Buddy a leash.

He held still for me when I put it on, but when we were outside the gate, things changed in an instant. Instead of slowing down when I couldn't keep up, he ran faster, the leash between us as taut as a stretched rubber band. The next-door neighbor, who had never talked to me before, suddenly did.

"I see your dog is taking you for a run." A heavy-set woman from Jamaica, she was practically doubled over in laughter. I waved and smiled, too winded to speak. The more Buddy strained against the leash, the more raspy his breathing became. Why didn't he slow down a little instead of stubbornly dragging me along?



I had to do something. If I yanked the leash too hard, I might strangle him. I decided I had just two options: Remove the leash so he could run free, or never take him out again. I warned him. "Look at me." I jerked on the leash so hard he had to stop.

What worked was probably the determination in my voice rather than my physical strength. I held up my index finger: "You come when I call. Understood?" His eyes, sad now, looked into mine. I interpreted that as both contrition and agreement.

Once he was free, however, he took off like a shot. One trip to the park and he knew how to get there again. Just as a test, I called his name. Instantly he circled back. So, I concluded, he knows what I mean. He's proving to me that he's trustworthy. Pleased with my success, I let him run further before calling him back a second time. Again he obeyed, at least I thought he

was coming back to me until he kept on running right past me.

I glanced behind me. A black squirrel. It might have been the first one he had ever seen. Whatever the case, it was as if someone had pulled a trigger in his brain because he bolted after it. I called and called, but nothing seemed to register in him except a need to get that squirrel, which practically flew across the mowed grass to escape death. I had never seen a dog move faster than Buddy in the chase. The squirrel, acting according to his own instincts, headed for an old, stately oak tree, leapt onto its trunk, skittered up, and then along a branch to safety. Buddy, not one to be defeated, began to climb after it.

Was I seeing things? Was that a dog climbing a tree? Impossible. But there it was. Buddy was trying to scale the trunk of that old oak tree. Terrified now for Buddy's safety, I screamed.

"Buddy!" I screamed again, louder, forcing my voice lower to make it travel farther. "Buddy, get down here. Right now! Buddy!" The squirrel had climbed now to a branch too high and too weak to hold Buddy's weight, and was taunting him. Forced to give up, he scrambled back down, trotting to my side, his tongue flapping, his tail wagging fast enough to whip cream.

I fastened his leash and we headed back home. How could I be upset? Beagles are bred to hunt. It's their nature. Once again, I marveled how no one needed to teach him or model beagle behavior for him. It was probably his bad luck to be stuck with me, an owner who had not the slightest interest in taking him hunting. He needed to live in the country where he could do what he was born to do.

But since we don't always get what we want, we do the best we can with what we have.

Buddy had me. I had Al. We would make the most of a less-than-ideal situation.

I would say nothing to Al about today's escapade because if I did, there would be no more leaving the backyard for Buddy. One thing I knew for sure about my feisty pup now was that he had a mind of his own, and I should respect it. I rubbed his furry neck. "You're one silly dog; you know that?"

## 4.

After a number of test runs in the local park, I decided Buddy deserved a romp in open country. Before I married Al, we walked on the beach at Half Moon Bay regularly. We spent weekends exploring the Gold Country. Many times we strolled along Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. We climbed the stairs to Coit Tower. He took me to concerts and theater productions. All that ended soon after our marriage. A year into it, he quit his job, and retreated into himself. Soon he was becoming like one more fixture for me to dust around, books his constant companions, which also needed the occasional dusting.

Buddy, on the other hand, was always eager to go, day or night, rain or shine. But how was it he always knew a bit ahead of time what I was

planning? It took me a while before I realized I gave him cues. If it was going to be a ride, I had keys in my hand. The Walkman meant a walk.

Since I had keys in my hand today, he was jumping at the gate when I stepped out onto the deck. I lifted the latch, blocking his passage with my body. "Wait! I want you to listen to me," I said. "When I call, you come." His wagging tail indicated that maybe he would.

"You're in for a real treat today. First, we're going for a ride in Al's truck." His ears perked up. Did he remember that brief moment in Al's truck?

Holding his wiggling body between my legs, I struggled to secure the leash. Then I forced myself between him and the passenger-side door of the truck. He pushed me aside. "Easy!" I shouted. "I'm just trying to get it open." He found a mere sliver of air, squeezed through it

like sausage through a straw, and hopped up onto the seat.

As we sped north down El Camino Real, his neck craning out the open window into the wind, I tried to focus on the traffic and still enjoy his ecstatic reaction to the onslaught of scents he had probably never experienced before. The wind pushed his fur back and plastered his ears to his skull, but his nostrils were flared, his tongue extended. He was obviously overwhelmed by this rush of new aromas.

I imagined a child visiting a chocolate factory for the first time: Here a mountain of marshmallows, there a cartload of roasted peanuts, and over there a lake of chocolate. A child's craving for the taste of sugar might be keen, but nothing like the sense of smell for a dog. He couldn't get enough.

From El Camino, I turned left onto Page Mill Road. I nodded toward the approaching hills that separated the peninsula from the ocean.

"Look. We 're almost there!" Because his window was rolled down, I had to shout to be heard over the road noise. I turned right onto Junipero Serra Highway. Ahead and to my left we drove alongside hiking trails that wound up through rolling hills and down through deep ravines. We sped by patches of gold and blue indicating California poppies and lupine. On the top of the highest hill stood the satellite dish that gave this area of the Stanford University campus its name: The Dish.

Once on the ground I cinched Buddy's leash to make sure I had his attention. "The ocean is that way." I pointed with my free hand in the direction of the foothills to the west. I nodded to the north. "There's San Francisco." Because it was a clear day, I could make out the skyline



of the city beyond the San Mateo Bridge. I suspected Buddy was already inhaling the city's aromas.

The terrain I planned to hike was a three-mile loop. "The Bay," I continued, looking to the east, "is there just beyond where we live." I pointed in the direction of our house, which I knew was there even though I couldn't see it through the trees and red-tiled roofs of the Stanford campus. I knew I was talking to myself, Buddy sniffing the ground where he had a whole world of aromas to himself. Part of my getting to know Buddy included reading about dogs. One thing I read, for example, is that a dog's sense of smell can even pick up emotions like fear, stress, and sadness because our bodies release certain chemicals when we have these feelings. "You live in a world we know almost nothing about," I said.

He scaled the first hill, the longest and most challenging. I called once while he was close enough for me to still catch him if necessary. He trotted back, his tail spinning like a propeller. At my feet he glanced up to see if maybe I had a reason for calling him back, if something was the matter. I scratched him behind the ears. "Good boy." That was all he needed to hear. He was off again.

I followed as fast as my legs would carry me, but he was out of sight before I could catch enough of a breath to call him back. I watched for a glimpse of him as I rounded the first curve. Thankfully he had slowed to track the scent of a ground squirrel. With their holes, they had made the terrain look like a polka-dotted quilt.

He trotted back to me as if to reassure me that he was indeed trustworthy. I patted him on the head. He dashed off again, skipping over some-

thing dark, a stick, I thought, lying across the trail.

Closer now, I gasped. Not a stick. A snake. Suddenly coiled. A rattlesnake. I froze. Only a few steps ahead of me. I heard the warning rattle then and realized it was about to strike. Could I circle around the snake? Leave the path and run through the weeds? Not me. As long as I could see it, I would not venture around it. In the next instant I saw Buddy doubling back toward me. He was on the run. "No, Buddy," I screamed. "Go. Get away." I wanted him to read my mind. He should go ahead, complete the loop. I would go back the way we had come. We could meet in the parking lot.

I stared at that snake rattling its tail between us. For once I hadn't called Buddy to come back, but there he was racing toward me. That had never happened before. Had he sensed my increased heart rate? Could he smell the blood

rushing through my veins? I decided it was true. He had sensed the danger I was in, and was coming to my rescue.

Intending my arms to speak for me, I motioned away from the snake. "Go."

But instead of running away, he kept moving toward me until it seemed that instead of caring about the danger the snake posed for him, he was concerned about me, trotting closer and closer to what I saw as sure death for him. I kept shouting, waving him away more frantically. He cocked his head as if to ask what my problem was.

"Go! Get away! Run!" What I saw next was even more incredible than what I had feared. He trotted right over that snake's body a second time as if it were nothing more than a coiled twig. I gasped in disbelief, scarcely able to register what had just happened. Buddy had possibly saved my life.



We went home early that day and I didn't think I would ever go back. But then after a few days had passed, I decided I was being silly. Buddy loved The Dish, and I just needed to watch my step. Besides, what fun would life be for him if I only let him go as far as the local park? He needed to run free. Then too, hadn't the snake gone back to sun bathing? It was as if it hadn't even noticed a dog skipping over his body.

## 5.

A year passed. Melanie graduated from high school, and we made a kind of peace between us before she moved out, taking her cat with her. Occasional flea bombs had kept the fleas at bay. By working overtime, I had managed to take the house out of foreclosure and was paying off the second mortgage. The cat gone, I replaced all the carpets with hardwood floors.

Life ran along a bit more smoothly except that Al was a computer consultant now, but only in his mind, proclaiming that his former career had never been challenging enough for him. He knew the pretense irritated me, but I played the game rather than embarrass him in front of others. Privately, however, the deceit drove a wedge between us. He had stopped living and I didn't know what to do about it.

As on most mornings, the fog rolled in off the ocean, clung to the evergreens in the foothills for a couple of hours, and then around noon surrendered to the sun on the peninsula. I opened the sliding glass door.

Buddy was there wagging his tail, anticipation in every bone of his little body. He knew I wasn't planning an adventure in the park because I wasn't carrying my Walkman; nor would it be a drive to the Stanford Hills because I didn't have truck keys in hand. If either of those two options had been the case, he would have already been panting at the gate.

He circled the garden paths a few times before arriving on my heels at the garden shed. After having eradicated the weeds, I had coaxed Al into letting me make the whole yard a garden.

As long as I did the work, he didn't object. For me it more than doubled my living space with blue and pink hydrangeas in one area, agapan-



thus in another, azalea shrubs and canna in yet another. Climbing roses and jasmine of two varieties climbed the fences that enclosed the whole yard. Almost a hundred rose bushes filled in the open spaces, many of which I had started from cuttings.

Growing roses in the Midwest where I grew up was a challenge, but here they thrived on nothing more than water and an occasional pruning. Today I would plant a few more cuttings, these among the annuals that embraced the central birdbath installed for the mockingbirds, who also enjoyed the trees I had planted: a redwood seedling, now a small tree, and three white birch saplings in honor of my native Wisconsin where they were suffering from some deadly disease. I had also planted an apricot, an orange, and a peach tree. The mocking birds perched on the branches and teased Buddy who barked in retaliation, or maybe it was amusement.

Trowel in hand, I got down on my haunches and started to dig. Buddy pressed his body so hard against mine that I lost my balance and toppled over onto the ground. I smiled at his playfulness, righted myself, and pressed the trowel in the soil a second time. “Go tease them,” I said, pointing toward the branches of the white birch where I noticed a pair of birds mocking each other. Buddy held his ground. “We’re not going out.” I pushed him away from the spot and dug again.

His nose nudged the trowel out of my hand. Puzzled, I made eye contact with him. “What’s with you today?” I stood up and waited to see what he would do next. “Remember. no keys, no Walkman, no outing. You’ve got that, right?” I opened my hands, palms up so he could see they were empty. He could not mistake my meaning.

Instead he set to digging the hole deeper with his paws, soil flying behind him as he went deeper and deeper. In less than a minute, he came up with a bone in his mouth. I shook my head. No wonder he was so agitated. He thought I was trying to steal his bone.

“Honest,” I teased. “I have no interest in your bones, but wouldn’t it be nice if you could dig holes for me? Then you’d really be my Buddy.”

I hid in the shed so he would think I wasn’t paying attention. From there I watched through the window as that little stinker dug another hole and replanted his precious possession.

I came out again, sauntering over, as if by chance, to the spot where he had just reburied that bone. He raced over and barked at me the instant my trowel touched the ground.

“Silly dog,” I said. “You really think I want your bone?” I reflected for a few moments when it occurred to me: “You must think there’s a dog inside of me. That’s it, isn’t it? And I’ve been thinking there’s a person inside of you.” I shook my head and smiled at myself.

Weren’t we a pair? I was assigning human motives to him and he was assigning dog motives to me. “I guess we are each other in a different way,” I mused.

If only I could understand Al better. Our marriage was falling apart and I didn’t know how to fix it. What had happened between us? We didn’t talk about it. Every time I tried, he walked away.

On the other hand, I was becoming more and more attached to a dog I had had no use for in the beginning. Buddy, I knew, could read my moods. If I came out on the deck feeling happy, his tail signaled ‘happy’ by wagging.

Conversely if I was feeling sad, his tail was still like the time Al used my credit card without my knowing it for a \$30,000 expenditure. It practically destroyed my credit rating because I was overdrawn without my knowing it. I didn't usually have monologues with Buddy, but this time I did.

“What he spent it on, God only knows!” I recited my long list of grievances and ended with one I had never spoken out loud before. “Our marriage hasn't even been consummated.” There it was: what Al and I had wasn't even a marriage.

I just sat there with Buddy for a long time wondering whether I should soldier on or give up on a commitment I had vowed to keep “for better or worse until death” parted us.



## 6.

Azaleas gave way to roses that bloomed through the summer and into late fall. Winter came with rain before giving way in early spring to heather in my yard as well as the foothills. The rainy season ended earlier than usual that spring, which left me sad for the garden with its thirst.

As soon as Buddy saw the truck keys in my hand one day, he pelted lickety split, as was customary, for the gate, nudging it open with his nose when I wasn't fast enough with the latch. The feasting began even before I was out of the driveway, his nose in the wind, his tongue and tail wagging. I didn't worry about his running away anymore, didn't even bring the leash with me. The wind plastered his ears to his head. I glanced in his direction.

"Someone," I said, "must have wound your spring extra tight again when you were sleeping." He wagged his tail in my face, his tongue hanging out the window.

Once at the Dish, he bounded off the seat and onto the ground. I watched as he took off and landed again through the tall growth, his feet tucked under his tube-shaped belly.

When he was almost too far away to hear my voice, I shouted: "Buddy!" He responded. I rubbed his neck as usual: "Good boy!" And then he was off again, sniffing for gophers, ground squirrels, and other dogs while I enjoyed the colors of the rolling green hills dotted with patches of gold and purple. It wasn't often that one encountered a rattlesnake so I had stopped worrying about us accidentally getting in the way of one again.

Gradually I noticed that the sky was clouding up a bit, fluffy balloons in pastel colors floating



over the greening hills. The soft shades gave the rolling hills a velvety feel. Then I felt a raindrop on my cheek. A raindrop? More likely a bird dropping. I wanted rain for the sake of the garden, but the weather reports weren't promising. Buddy wasn't alone much anymore because I was an avid gardener. Al went on reading his books, telling people he had no time for cleaning the house or gardening because his job as a computer consultant ate up all his time.

I was daydreaming when a tall, slender woman wearing a fashionable jogging outfit in soft pink passed me by with her dog, a white pit bull, a mean look on his face, saliva dripping from his down-turned mouth. He was moving slowly; she had to yank on the leash every few steps. "Excuse me," she said turning back toward me, "but is that your dog?" She pointed toward Buddy who was racing up the trail after a squirrel, his tail, as usual, spinning like a

whirling dervish. I grinned and nodded, proud to admit that he was mine, that he was the best dog in the whole world. "Why isn't he on a leash?" I started to explain, but she wasn't listening. "You know it's the law, don't you? And I see there's something seriously wrong with him."

"Wrong? I don't see anything." I felt as offended as if she were talking about me, but forced a smile nevertheless.

"You don't? How can you miss it?" She pointed at him as he catapulted around the downward slope of a curve, his rear end swaying off to one side. I hadn't noticed before, but now I could see that he looked like a truck pulling a trailer, the weight of the load pulling the trailer off to one side. Or maybe it was just that his fore-quarters were impatient with his hindquarters, the front racing ahead of the back.

"Look at him!" She laughed, and talked to her own dog. "Now, Floyd, have you ever seen such a ridiculous looking dog? Aren't you glad you don't look like that?" She bent down and hugged him before talking to me again.

"What kind of mutt is he anyway? Floyd here is a purebred." She yanked on his leash to get him moving a little faster.

I had already decided that Buddy was many dogs: bloodhound, beagle, and dachshund. He had the long, floppy ears of a bloodhound, the barrel belly of a dachshund, but the nose and personality of a beagle. I had also decided that being mixed like that was better than being a purebred. It didn't matter to me that mongrels like Buddy weren't worth much as an investment. So what if purebreds could sell for thousands of dollars? In my eyes Buddy's body was a perfect work of art.

"He's a beagle," I said, intending to imply that he was just as 'pure' in his own right as hers might be.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think so. Oh well. Whatever he is, he needs to be checked out by a vet. It's possible that surgery could fix him."

Surgery? Fix him? He didn't need to be cut open and have his parts realigned. So what if he ran a little crooked? In fact now that I could see what this woman was talking about, I liked the way he looked when he ran. It was distinctive. His front feet touched the ground before his back feet did.

She kept on talking. "Floyd has a psychiatrist. Don't you, sweetheart?" She bent down again and kissed him on the head. Floyd pouted.

My eyes popped. "I never heard of such a thing. You mean there are doctors who read dogs' minds?"

"Of course not," she snapped. "What they do is study a dog's behavior and figure out what is wrong by how they behave. Floyd, for example, used to skid across our wooden floors from morning to night. He just wouldn't stop. It was the psychiatrist who figured out that he was guarding the house. What my husband and I had to do was to assure Floyd that guarding the house was not his job. That it was Graham's job." She must have seen the puzzled look on my face because she explained. "Graham's my husband."

A picture of this woman's husband, a balding man in a smoking jacket, skidding back and forth across the wooden floors, popped into my mind. I smiled to myself and walked on.

Thank God I had Buddy and not Floyd. Buddy's sausage body with the stubby legs and the white tip at the end of his tail was perfect for me.

Suddenly I felt many drops on my head. It was sprinkling. I looked up and got a shower on my face. I scanned the horizon. No sign of Buddy. I called. No Buddy. I yelled at the top of my lungs. "BUDDY!" I looked in every direction. All I could see was a few scrub oaks scattered here and there, clumps of California poppies, and tall grass dotted with the dark holes of ground squirrels. I had lost him.

## 7.

I ran the whole trail, looking in every direction, but saw no sign of him. "Here, Buddy. Here, Buddy." I called over and over. I looked as far as I could see toward the ocean and as far as I could see toward San Francisco. I looked behind and ahead of me. The rain pelted my pullover and jeans. Pretty soon I felt my sneakers sucking water. Buddy had vanished. I jogged the entire trail a second time, out of breath, panicked. No trace of Buddy.

Exhausted and worried, I got into Al's truck and drove home. He was standing on the front porch, his arms akimbo. He watched me get out of the truck alone. "Where's Buddy?" I shrugged, pretending that I wasn't worried, that his being gone wasn't my problem. "He ran away," I said as if it didn't really matter, as if to

say Buddy was old enough to take care of himself, that he should be able to find his way back home without my help.

As usual, Al was aggravated. "What? How could that happen? You had him on the leash, didn't you? You complain about my being irresponsible. How about you?"

I didn't want to argue just now. "The leash chokes him."

"You never listen, do you? I told you he would run away. Didn't I tell you that? Why do you always think you know better?" He shook his index finger at me. "If he ends up at the pound, you leave him there."

Those words stabbed me to the core. Leave him there? Buddy was a godsend. I thought about that. How had this particular dog won me over? I, the one who never cared about pets of any kind, was frantic to think harm might





come to him. How could Al be so cold, especially when he knew how important Buddy had become to me?

I followed Al into the house. If I was out searching for Buddy at night, I would need to change into dry clothes and grab an umbrella. "So you really don't care what happens to him." Muttering under my breath, I wondered if Al would care if I got lost. Of course he would miss my income, which supported both of us, but I couldn't think what else.

As I changed into dry clothing, I thought about the rain and how Buddy hated water, at least when it meant bath time. Whenever he saw me filling his bath bucket, he ran for cover under the deck where he knew I couldn't reach him. There he would cower until he thought I had given up and gone on to something else. Of course I would be lurking just out of sight, and when he scampered out, I would pounce.

“Gotcha” I’d shout, and then I’d laugh as I sudsed him up. He would be docile as a pup then, loving it when I lathered him up in warm water. But the next time I showed up with that bucket, nothing could convince him to come out from under the deck.

On the other hand, he adored puddles. He could smell one from literally miles away, and when he did, he dashed right into the middle of it and nestled down into it like a hen on her eggs. Settled there he would wallow until his underside was coated in mud. Then he’d get up and shake himself dry. On those outings I’d cringe at the thought of his getting back into the truck for the ride home, but I had to admit it was funny to watch. More than once, I ended up getting a muddy shower myself by standing too close. I was putting on my jacket intent on driving back to the Dish when the phone rang. I answered: “Did you lose your dog?” The male

voice was sympathetic, like one about to deliver bad news.

"Yes," I said. I could feel my heart pounding. Had he been hit by a car? Had he been hurt? Was he dead? I took a deep breath and waited for the man to say more. "He's at my house. You need to come and get him." I got the address, jumped in the pickup, stepped on the gas, and sped to the given address, which was just a few miles from home. There was Buddy romping in the yard with a poodle. The man smiled and nodded in Buddy's direction. "That's quite a smart dog you have there," he said. "It started to rain; so I went back to my car. When I opened the door, your little fellow jumped in." He nuzzled Buddy, but I wanted to paddle that dog's round, little butt.

Instead I refrained, thanked the man, and ordered Buddy into the truck NOW. He scooted inside, but instead of jumping up on the seat

and sticking his head out the window as he usually did, he cowered on the floor all the way home, his head on his chest, his eyes lowered so that I couldn't see them. "Bad dog," I said. "How do you expect me to trust you now?" When we arrived home, I watched him slink off to his corner of the yard where he cowered. When he dared to raise his eyes and meet mine, I saw so much remorse there that I forgot all about how worried and upset I had been.

The next day I didn't take him out of the yard at all. He needed to understand that choices have consequences. "We can expect good things to happen when we do what's right, and bad things when we don't." Why didn't Al realize that? How long did he think I would be content to do all the household chores in addition to handling all our financial responsibilities? What we had wasn't even a partnership, much less a marriage.



## 8.

A few more years passed. As always when we walked, Buddy dragged me breathless behind him. As always, I waved to the neighbor from Jamaica as we flew by. As always, she shouted from her front porch about how nice it was that my dog was taking me for a run.

Breathless, I always waved back. We never got beyond that for communication. As always, Buddy acted as if he was choking to death, and I removed the leash. Al turned from reading books to playing video games, as always, the busy computer consultant.

Just as Buddy refused to dawdle or saunter or sally forth, Al refused to work. "It doesn't matter what kind of work you do," I'd coax, "it's all honorable."

“If you’re talking about some kind of menial job,” he’d say, “I’d rather die.” I thought about how Buddy refused to slow down. It would go against his nature just as employment seemed to go against Al’s nature. If Buddy’s spring was wound too tight, Al’s was too loose. If Buddy exploded like popcorn in a fire when opportunity arose, Al collapsed like a deflated balloon.

Thinking about these things as I strolled through the park, I wasn’t prepared when I suddenly realized Buddy was swinging a squirrel in my face. In my daydreaming I had almost forgotten that we were in the park. The sight of a squirrel dangling before my eyes jolted me back to reality.

So unexpectedly confronted by this high-pitched, squealing fur ball, I kicked it away, kicking Buddy’s nose in the process. “No!” I yelled. “Bad dog. Get away from me. Get away!”



At first Buddy jumped back, a puzzled look in his eyes. Why wouldn't I want a squirrel? In the next second he was off, trotting with his prize toward a young woman pushing an infant in a carriage.

As he had done with me, he dangled it in front of her face. Like me, she also screamed, but not at him. She screamed at me. "Get your damn dog away from my baby. Why isn't he on a leash? I'm going to call the police."

Frantic, I called Buddy back. He obeyed instantly, the squirrel still held by its neck in his jaws. He shook it at me again like one might shake a rag. Here, take it. The squirrel, which was still squealing, squirmed to free itself. Again I kicked at the pair.

This time Buddy gave one final shake of his head and it was all over so fast the squirrel could not have felt pain. He dropped the corpse

on the ground at my feet before trotting off, disappointed, no doubt, but resigned.

Soon Al added movie watching to his books and video games. Buddy ran away a few more times (once actually finding himself in the pound). By then, however, the spring inside of him had started to wind down.

It was a warm afternoon in the fall when he decided to make one of his Great Escapes. I had managed to get home from work early to take him for a walk before dark. He romped in the park as usual while I strolled along the walkway enjoying the golden color of the shrubs, and the patterns of shade created by the ancient oaks overhead.

As I daydreamed, daylight was slowly seeping out of the sky. If we wanted to get home before it was completely dark, we needed to start back now. "Buddy," I called. "Where are you? Here, boy." The park wasn't a wide-open space

the way The Dish was, so I was sure I would see him.

I looked ahead toward the local high school. No sign of him in that direction. To my right I scanned the pasture where the donkeys used as models for the Shrek movies lived. No Buddy there, just two donkeys chomping hay. I turned around and looked in the direction from which we had come, but didn't see him there either.

It was completely dark by the time I gave up and walked home. Al looked up from his video game when I walked in the front door. If Buddy was with me, I came in through the back door after leaving him in the yard. "Don't tell me you lost him again."

I nodded, trying, as usual, to pretend I wasn't worried. "It's not a problem. He knows the way back. He'll come when he gets hungry. I'll just leave the gate open so he can get in."

Al wasn't having it. "No, you won't. He's your responsibility. Get in the truck and find him. Now!"

The silence was punishing as I drove, straining my eyes for any sign of him. "It's no use," I said to myself, "how am I going to see a black dog against a black sky?" I slowed down to get a better view. Of course it was my fault. Where could he be? I needed to think the way Buddy might. "He loves people," I whispered to myself. I thought about how he loved to fetch with Mark, and how a student of mine taught him to roll over and play dead in just one visit. He liked to please, and liked to be petted. "I'll go to the high school," I thought.

Al wouldn't have seen any sense in that, but since he wasn't with me to object, that's where I drove. As soon as I saw a small crowd gathered outside the gymnasium, I felt hopeful, especially when I saw light pouring out through

the open door. I jumped out of the truck and headed in that direction. I was close to the entrance when I noticed a basketball game in progress, the crowd laughing and cheering wildly. I approached three teenage girls who were standing together just inside the door. "Have any of you seen a dog?"

They all laughed, pointing to the action on the court. "You mean the pudgy one running around with the bagel in his mouth?" I stuck my head in the door.

Sure enough. There he was racing back and forth across the court with the team, the crowd cheering, the referees blowing their whistles to stop the game. I should have guessed; his true calling was basketball, and he had a crowd that both understood and appreciated that talent. The players in white shirts raced to the basket, Buddy a black smear in their midst.

The ball sailed through the hoop; the opposing team in blue seized the ball on the rebound, and took off for the opponent's court. Leading the charge, heading in my direction, Buddy lunged for the ball. He might have clutched it in his jaws except that he was gripping a bagel.

A bagel, I puzzled. Where did he find a bagel? I imagined someone tossing it in his direction and his catching it in mid-air. I needed to act, and act now. He was disrupting what should have been a serious game. Then, too, I knew that if he ever sank his teeth into that ball, I could expect a bill from the school because I knew he could easily rip a hole in leather with his sharp teeth. I had seen what he could do to a garden hose.

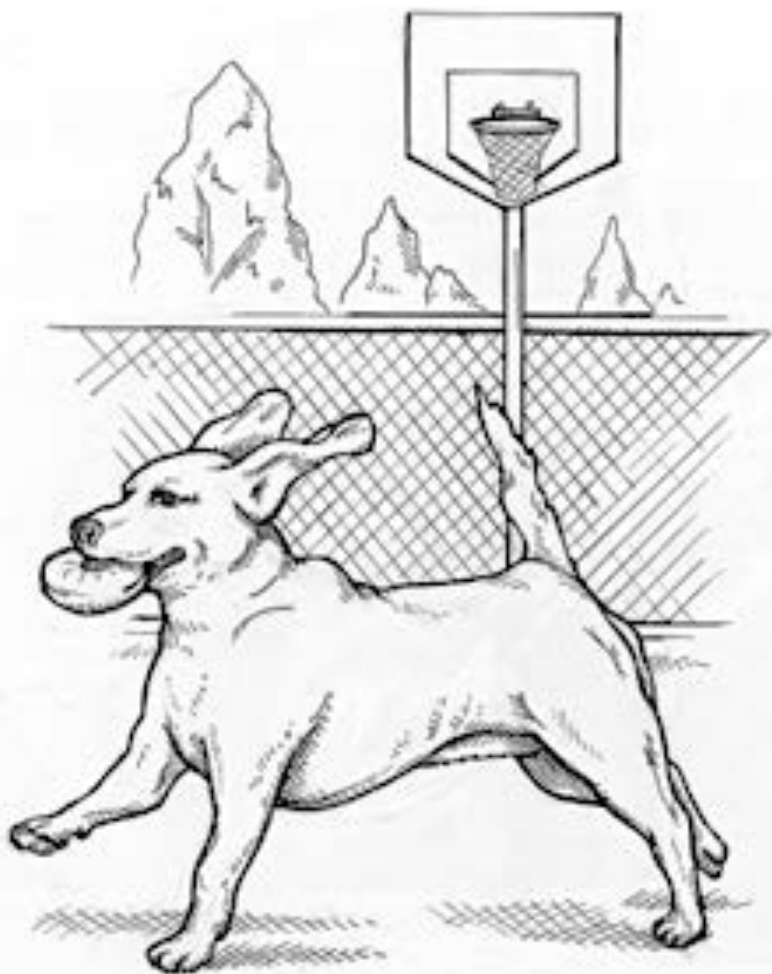
The crowd was going wild with the hilarity of it all, but the refs were waving their arms for a time out. I cleared my throat, took a deep breath, and yelled as loud as I could . "Buddy,

get over here right now!" He caught my eye, paused for a mere second, and then bolted for the door where I stood scowling. The bagel was still in his mouth, his head down now as he plopped at my feet. "Where did you get that? Drop it." He hung on. I took a hold of it and tried to take it. His jaws were too strong for me. I gave up.

One of the girls who had pointed him out to me explained: "I saw a woman hand it to him. He must have looked hungry." She giggled. Back in the truck Buddy carried that bagel in his mouth all the way home and to the back corner of the yard where he put himself every time he sensed that a 'time out' was in order. I stood over him. "What am I going to do with you? Here we are now, but you should have been adopted by a family with children."









## 7.

I bit my tongue every time Al talked to people about his consulting career. One day I plopped down on the couch behind the desk where he was ensconced. He didn't look up from the monitor. "All these years of searching," I began, knowing that he had never even begun a career search, "and not even an interview. Your name should be in the *Guinness Book of World Records*." Did I really think sarcasm would work? In his baritone voice perfect for a career as an announcer, he grumbled about my being a nag.

Then I broached the subject that had been on my mind for a long time, but never voiced. "We both know our marriage isn't working. Maybe it's time to end it."

"Well, if that's what you want, fine. I'm sorry if you're not happy."

I was speechless. So he thought this whole situation was my fault. "I'm sorry too," I said, "sorry about a lot of things." Was he just trying to get my dander up? I decided to test his seriousness. "Since you are so good on the computer, maybe you could download the divorce forms, and we'll just fill them out together. How about that?"

I heard the words come out of my mouth, but didn't believe I was saying them. End our marriage? Just like that? No discussion? No counseling? I tried to look composed, but inwardly I was crying. I had committed for life. How could he be so callow about something like a marriage? Certainly we could find some solution other than divorce.

Buddy was sitting at the sliding glass door watching us, his eyes following the interchange. Even though the door was wide open, I didn't think he would come in because he nev-

er had with the exception of the time I dropped a half carton of eggs on the floor, and then I had to drag him inside to lick them up.

Al closed the program he was in and turned his chair to face me. “There’s no pleasing you. It doesn’t matter what I do or don’t do.” Where had that come from, I wondered. What had I asked him to do other than seek employment? I could tell he was just getting started because his voice had gotten louder.

“If you were sick or disabled,” I said, “I could understand, but you’re healthy. And I know how much you hate house cleaning and cooking; so why not get a job?”

“Is it my fault that no one is hiring?”

“The problem is that you have never looked. After all, isn’t this Silicon Valley?”

He raised his voice another notch. "If you're not happy, that's your problem."

Buddy eased just one paw on the door sill. Was he hoping to come to my rescue?

I gave Buddy a 'side eye' and shook my head. The paw retreated. "Any job," I ventured is better than sitting home doing nothing."

"Nothing?" He yelled. "If you want to know, I'm educating myself so I can start my own company."

I had heard excuses many times before, but never this one. "How many more years of education do you need?" I threw up my hands, my body trembling. I needed to get away before I said something I'd regret.

Suddenly, as if on cue, Buddy was IN. Al pointed toward the door and yelled at the top of his

lungs. ‘Out!’ Buddy was out with a single bound.

I jumped to my feet and joined him on the deck. What was there to say? The command to get out might as well have been addressed to me. He wanted me out. Sitting with Buddy on the top step, I addressed him: “I’m talking to the person inside of you now,” I said. I thought his eyes were smiling at me. “Thanks for being so happy to see me all the time. Al hardly looks up from his computer.” Buddy whimpered. “It’s ok. I’m fine.” He licked my hand; I brushed his fur; we called it a day.





## 10.

When I realized that Al had no interest in preserving our marriage unless on his terms, I took the next step. We disagreed on many things, but not about keeping lawyers out of a divorce. So I found the forms online, printed them, and marked the places for his signature.

Then I sent the whole bundle to the county courthouse. Two weeks later I found the entire packet returned to me unopened. What could I have done wrong? I checked the address. It was correct. The postage was the right amount. I asked Al if he had any idea what I had missed.

Had I had asked about warfare or weapons, he would have been happy to direct me to the appropriate books. Because he collected guns and knives, I sometimes joked with friends that he was planning my demise; they laughed until

they saw his collection of ropes hanging along the back fence. “He’s going to braid me a rug,” I said.

I put the forms in a new envelope, stamped it appropriately a second time, and mailed it again. Another two weeks passed. The packet came back: ‘Return to Sender.’

I asked around. Oh, so there were steps, and each step had to be approved by the court before one could move on to the next step. How had I missed that?

Knowing how much Buddy liked to ride in any moving vehicle, I grabbed the truck keys a few days later and headed for the backyard. Reading the code between us he made a mad dash for the gate.

On the road his nostrils feasted on the wind passing by while I listened to classical music on the radio. Traffic in San Jose, always hectic, was

nearly impossible. “Buddy,” I said, “today it’s each one for himself.” I turned off the radio because I needed all my powers of concentration to navigate the labyrinth of lanes demanding immediate and constant attention as the painted lines shifted. Never mind the vehicles that cut in and out of these lanes at speeds too fast for conditions.

A half hour into the journey I spotted the courthouse on the outskirts of the city but missed the exit. Al loved challenges like these, but he was too busy with his own affairs, he said, to take time out for some errand like this.

I turned right, planning to take the next left, and then another left, thinking such a maneuver would at least put me back on the correct street. No left was permitted on the next block.

I drove on and tried again. No left permitted at the end of that block either. After a few more

turns, I found myself on a one-way going the wrong way. Unintentionally, I cut a driver off. He laid on the horn.

Nervous now about hitting a car, I gripped the wheel and checked the mirrors, rear view and both sides constantly. If I was on the verge of a breakdown, I could see that Buddy was in an amusement park for the senses, relishing every sight, sound, and scent. By the time I was safely parked, I felt totally rattled.

I left Buddy there, cracking the windows just enough to give him air without temping him to make a run for it. Thankfully it was a cool day.

As luck would have it, the room for divorce filing was almost full. So many failed marriages, I thought, sad that mine was about to be one of them. I stood in line, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, hoping Buddy was taking a nap. Finally, it was my turn.

“Not only are you at the wrong window,” the clerk muttered, “but this is the wrong courthouse.” Her voice was monotone, her expression droll, her movements mechanical. She reached for a map, handed it to me, and pointed at a star on it. “This is where you need to go.” She gestured for the next couple in line. I moaned inwardly, determined to complete step one no matter what.

A mile or so deeper into the city, traffic came to a standstill. Not an accident, I hoped. Accidents could snarl traffic for hours, especially in cities the size of San Jose. It was the logical assumption, but in this case I could not have guessed what I was up against.

Sandwiched between vehicles with no way to escape, traffic impossibly congested, I craned my neck to get a better view. Was it possible? Over the tops of the vehicles multi-colored banners fluttered in the breeze. Crowds lining

the curb shouted and pointed. I wiped perspiration from my forehead. Somewhere I had taken a wrong turn.

I was trapped in a parade. A parade? What was the occasion? Today was no holiday, at least none that I had heard about. Because the window was rolled down for Buddy, I recognized the sound of trumpets playing a fanfare. People dressed in formal regalia were marching. As we inched closer, I noticed a horse, all silver glitter as it high-stepped along the street, tassels fluttering along his mane and tail, his neck arched, nostrils flared. What was going on? I couldn't remember the last time I had seen a horse in a city parade.

Maybe it was the red glitter of his hooves or the American flag painted on his rump; maybe it was the silver tassels. Or maybe it was just the sight of another animal that set Buddy off.

In any case, before I could grab him, Buddy had slipped out of my grasp, leapt out the open window, and landed on the ground, and dashed into the parade. I gasped. What could I do? Moving the truck out of the traffic was impossible. To leave my truck in the middle of the street while I went to retrieve Buddy would have been reckless. At the least I risked being fined.

What was that crazy dog of mine doing? I held my breath as the horse, spooked now, reared up on its hind legs and kicked its glittering front hooves at Buddy's head. Undeterred, Buddy stood his ground and barked.

A policeman with a barrel chest and large hands blew his whistle and grabbed Buddy's leash, the officer's complexion scorching red. I jumped out of the truck, preparing my defense as I raced to the scene. He was not amused by what I had to say. "What the hell do you think

you are doing? If you can't control your dog, don't take him out! Look what you've caused. I'd fine you if I didn't have to get control of this crowd right now."

I looked around at the chaos I had created, apologized, and trotted Buddy back to the truck, cars honking behind me for holding up traffic even though it was at a standstill no matter what.

Back inside the truck, I cranked the windows shut and settled my nerves by pressing my body into the vinyl seat disguised to look like leather. Meanwhile, Buddy, his tail wagging, enjoyed the spectacle. I checked the time. If traffic didn't move any faster, the courthouse would be closed before I got there.

Without air conditioning, the heat inside was soon stifling. Opening the window on my side helped a bit, but not enough. And where was I?



I reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a map of San Jose, and began to unfold it.

Buddy, as if a proficient reader, had his nose all over it. Never mind. I put it back in the glove compartment and picked up the handout from the original courthouse.

I managed by some miracle to orient myself in relation to the fold-out map. I even had an hour to spare before closing time when I arrived at the designated courthouse.

What a day! So much time wasted, but I would at least be returning home having filed the necessary papers. I drove around the parking lot until I found a spot that promised Buddy shade, for which I was grateful. After adjusting the window on my side, I leaned over Buddy and opened his window a bit as well so that the air would circulate. I admonished him. "I've had enough of your shenanigans for one day."

Finding the right entrance was my next challenge, followed by a security check, and then a green line to follow to the correct office. A quick count of waiting couples told me that I was number five in line. I checked my watch. If each applicant took no more than 10 minutes, I should be fine. Nothing to do but wait, I thought about Buddy, trusting that he would be okay. Hopefully he would be asleep.

I berated myself for having come without even a book to help pass the time. Did I really think I would be the only one filing for divorce today in a county with well over a million citizens? I fidgeted in my seat, a beige plastic affair designed to be uncomfortable but easy to clean.

People probably sweat plenty while they wait, I thought. One woman twisted her long, dark hair around her index finger as if trying to make it curl. She could not have been married long considering how young she looked. Her

husband drummed his fingers on the metal arms of the chair.

Next to them a somewhat older couple passed the time in a way that must have been familiar to them, she paging through *People Magazine*, he reading the sports page of the *San Jose Mercury News*. Maybe this wasn't a first divorce for one or both of them because they had obviously come prepared to wait.

I had created lives for all the couples before my turn eventually came. One had cheated on his spouse; another had a drug problem. Mine was a husband who refused to work. How bad was that compared to alcoholism, drug addiction, and infidelity?

In response to my request, the clerk looked at me as if I had escaped from a mental institution. "You want to file for a divorce? You realize this is Children's Court." She shook her head and smiled a wry smile. I cleared my throat,

apologized, and sidled toward the exit, hoping no one had been eavesdropping.

Humiliated, I made a couple of wrong turns as I searched the parking lot for Al's truck. Why had I failed to pay attention to the row and number? Looking for trees that provided shade, I finally located the black Chevy with Buddy inside.

Before turning the key in the ignition, I checked the large map to get my bearings for the trip back home. Buddy, excited to see me again, licked my face, messing up the map with his front paws. I shoved him away.

"It's your fault," I said. "Everything is your fault." I felt the same way about Al. Everything was his fault too. I paid all the bills, did the cleaning, everything but cook for him. And I would have done that as well if he didn't mistrust a vegetarian to cook meat. Maybe the solution was to simply let him be who he was.





## 11.

One day I noticed that Buddy was limping. I wondered if he had a thorn in his paw or if maybe a bee had stung him. Neither was true. Then he dragged his back end along on the ground, his hind legs too weak to hold him up. Soon after that, I noticed he had trouble climbing the porch steps even with his front legs. After that I suspected he was going blind because he stumbled into things. Once I had to lift him out of a hole where I found him whimpering because he was too weak to help himself. Then he got sores that wouldn't heal. I put ointment on them, but it didn't help much. In short, he wasn't enjoying life anymore. He ate, but only a little. Most of the time he slept. When he was

awake, I knew he was in pain because he whimpered a lot.

I approached Al while he was doing something on the computer. "I don't know what to do about Buddy."

"What to do? Face it. He's old."

For whatever reason, that statement jolted me even though I knew he was right and said so.

"I'm right about most things," he said, "like how I should have taken that mutt to the pound in the first place."

I knew I was changing the subject, knew he would explode, but I said it anyway. "And like how it was all right to refuse to go with me to my own brother's funeral."

He slammed his hands on the desk. "I never liked him when he was alive. Why put on a show when he's dead?"



I walked out without a word and headed for my favorite little corner of the back yard where I had had a stone patio built with a garden atop a low, flagstone wall. There I sat on the step and leaned against the wall. Buddy was in his house, asleep, I thought. One thing Al had done right in our marriage was build a house for him.

A few winters into our marriage, I had begged him to make some kind of shelter for Buddy against the occasional freezing night. He created an A-frame structure with a cedar-shake roof; I painted the sides white with black trim. Then I painted the American flag on its face, the stripes red, the stars blue. From then on Buddy was a patriotic American.

Not long after I sat down, I watched as he dragged his body from his house and limped along the path to my side where he put his head on my lap. I held him close. "How am I go-

ing to get along without you?" His tail was still, his breathing strained. We both sat quietly as I watched the sun sink slowly behind the next door neighbor's house. "It's ok," I said. "I'm not going to leave you." Tears streamed down my cheeks. He didn't seem to be in pain; so we just sat quietly. At some point I drifted off to sleep. Maybe he did too.

When I awoke, I noticed that he had stopped breathing. 'Buddy.' I spoke softly in case he was asleep. His body felt warm against mine. I choked up then as I said his name again, more softly now, garbled and faint. I knew as I said it, that he wasn't hearing me.

He would never hear me again. I knew that from now on I would be talking *about* rather than *to* him. And when I did talk about him, it would be like talking about a person, a good friend.

I let my hand rest on his body and delivered my private eulogy. “You brought so much joy to my life. I think you knew that. But now you’re done. You’re free. No more leash.” Mentally I burned it. “The whole universe is yours now. Have fun exploring.”

As I spoke, I realized I was delivering a eulogy to my marriage as well. I, too, needed to be free. It was time to embrace the future without a leash around my neck. Divorce would be a good thing, not only a good thing, but the right thing to do.

The following weeks as the divorce proceedings took their course, I strolled the garden paths alone. All Buddy had left behind as a tangible reminder of his existence was his patriotic dog house. I might also find a bone or two if I gardened, but my gardening days here were over. Nothing that was tangible mattered any-

more. What did matter was how much I had gained while learning to love My Buddy.