

GEM

MO SRIVASTAVA

I NEVER KNEW WHERE he came from. He just showed up at school one day and hung at the edge of the field, watching the ebb and flow of children at play.

“Whose dog is that?” I asked Googie. I can’t remember Googie’s real name, but it doesn’t matter, because everyone knew him as Googie. Probably even his mum.

“Don’t know. Looks like a puppy. Might have rabies.”

“What’s rabies?” I asked.

“It’s a disease. Dog bites you and you die like a zombie. My dad said someone found a dead rabies squirrel last week and took it over for Doc Connors ’cause there’s been no rabies round here for years. The doc is trying to stamp it out, to quart ... quant ... quartermain it.”

I had no idea what quartermaining was, and I wasn’t sure that Googie did either. I thought about pointing out to him that zombies aren’t dead; but he was in Grade 4 and knew more than me. He’d have brought in something like silver bullets or stakes in the heart, and I’d have lost the argument. Googie almost never lost an argument and, when he did, he’d just beat you up anyway. Wasn’t worth it.

I was late leaving school that day. A lot of detentions weren’t fair, but that one was. I had, in fact, tipped Sandra Rowan’s elbow and made her books fall. It was a mistake to have done this in view of the schoolroom window, and the puddle only made it worse. I felt like a sack of shit when I saw her books fall into the mud, and Sandra burst into tears. I tried to help pick them up, but she shrieked and cried harder.

Mrs. Amos beckoned from the window. “Young Mr. Morley, I need to see you. In front of me. Now.” She had taught my father. Him being her first Morley made me the younger.

“Your father will be very disappointed in your behaviour.” She was right about that. Probably had a hiding coming. “You shall stay after school

today. I will write a note to your mother to explain the delay and the note shall have her signature when it is returned to me tomorrow.”

The hiding never did come, because the dog followed me home that day and gave my father plenty to talk to me about. I had given Mrs. Amos’ note to Mum, and she had signed it. But she must have decided not to pile on more bad news. The dog was bad enough.

He had started to follow me out of the schoolyard and up the lane to the main road. I turned to face him and told him to shoo.

“Go on! Rabies dog!”

He sat at a distance to listen to me, then stood up and followed me again. At first I turned around every few minutes to shoo him; but he just sat patiently while I talked, and then picked himself up to follow me.

Halfway home I gave up trying to shoo him, and walked the last mile without looking back. I could tell he was closing the gap, because I could hear the crunching of gravel behind me. I was walking on the railroad ties, which I wasn’t supposed to do. Wasn’t even supposed to be cutting through to the farm along the rail line. But I was already late, and I’d started to think about what to do with the dog once I got home. It would be easier to come in from the back, over the hill, and put him in the barn.

When I set the table for dinner, my father still wasn’t in from the fields, and I started to worry that he had stopped by the barn. I’d coaxed the dog up to the hayloft, and put him in a box with a burlap bag for a blanket. My father’s late arrival worried me. For him, being late was like one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

After we said grace, I started to chatter about my day, planning to leave out the parts about Sandra Rowan’s books and the dog, but my father cut me off. “You got a dog in the barn?” It was framed as a question, but crafted as an accusation.

“He followed me home. I tried hard to shoo him away, but he just kept coming.” I looked to my mother, but she’d already read the teacher’s note, and wasn’t inclined to help me out.

“Greg,” said my father. “You can’t go bringing animals home. You know these are tough days; you can’t expect your mother to be feeding an extra mouth.”

“I know. He just followed me. I didn’t want him running around the farm and scaring the horses, so I tied him up in the barn.”

“That was a fool thing to do. Damned near ...”

My mother shot him a look as the profanity escaped his lips.

Chastened, my father calmed himself and continued. "He nearly hung himself when he climbed over the hay bales. I put him in an empty horse stall. He's got water. I'll take him to Doc Connors tomorrow." As he spoke, he placed his hands flat on the table, palms down, thumbs touching, and slid them outward in a sideways motion as if clearing the space before him. I'd come to recognize that gesture as the signal of a final pronouncement, louder than any gavel.

It turned out that Doc Connors didn't recognize the dog. He took care of all the animals in the township, big and small; so he put up a "Found" sign in his window, along with his phone number and a rough description. We didn't have a phone in those days. We maybe could have afforded a party line, but my father didn't like the constant ringing. "Clanging," he called it.

Doc Connors didn't have space or money to board a stray, so he suggested that we take him back to our barn and keep him penned for two weeks to see if he had rabies. My father, who wasn't going to argue with Doc Connors, turned to me and said: "You're not to go in the stall. You're not to treat him like a pet. He's not to get a name. If he's not dead in two weeks, we'll find him a new home." If he'd had a table in front of him, he'd have put his palms on the tabletop and spread them apart.

Two weeks later, I was walking home from school when I saw my father's flatbed rattling toward me, trailing a big cloud of dust. He pulled over and swung open the passenger door. "Taking the dog to the vet. Needs a checkup and a clean bill of health for when we move him on to a new owner." I'd kept to my father's rules and done little with the dog, except to feed him scraps and make sure he had water. But he seemed glad to see me when I approached, and stood up in the box that was wedged against the rear window at the front end of the flatbed. It was the same box I'd given him the day he followed me home, and my father had left the burlap bag in it.

Doc Connors gave him a clean bill of health and suggested we that we put a collar and a tag on him in case he strayed again. "What name you want on the tag?" My father surprised me by answering immediately. "Gem."

On the ride home I asked him why he'd chosen Gem. He explained that a gem is a rare and beautiful thing. "You're a lucky man if one comes to you even once in your life." We rode in silence for a couple of minutes, then he added: "And I do mean YOU, Greg. I ain't taking care of that thing. Your money feeds him; I'm docking your allowance. And you should start saving

extra for when he needs to see Doc Connors. You're old enough to get a job. You need to start looking. You can start down at the grocery store after school. They were going to put in a new floor but can't afford it; so they're going to sand and fix the old one."

My heart soared, and I turned and banged on the rear window to get Gem's attention. He stood up in his box-bed and licked the window where I'd placed my palm.

"And he's a barn dog, Greg. Your mother is busy enough in the house. She doesn't need to be cleaning up after your dog."

We never again talked about finding a new owner for Gem. Mom kept half of my allowance, and after I'd done good enough with sanding the floor, the grocery store hired me for a dollar an hour to stock the counters. Gem got lots of fruit and vegetables that were going soft. He never much liked cucumbers, but was happy with peas and carrots.

He followed me back and forth to school every day. Kept himself busy doing God-knows-what during class time, and was always there at the door when we came out for lunch. He was great at mooching, and kids shared food with him.

He loved shinny, and turned three-on-three ball hockey into a six-on-one game of keep-away. We decided to count it as a goal if Gem could get the ball away from us and off to the edge of the woods. Tackling Gem was fair, if you could catch him before he got to the trees. He loved to be tackled and would hold up if anyone looked ready to sprint after him. Sometimes, we all dropped our hockey sticks, tore off and gang-tackled him. A big pile of fur and hugs, of licks and laughter. Googie pointed out that there was no way for us to score points in this game, and the aim became simply to minimize Gem's score. By the time we started Grade 8, still all in the same one room, we could sometimes keep him to three-zero. Our passes had become long, crisp and accurate. That winter our hockey team won the county championship, even beating the fancy team from Estevan who wore matching uniforms.

In Grade 9 I had to take a bus to the high school at the north end of Estevan, so Gem had to stay home. But he came with me to the bus stop each morning, rain or snow, and was there to meet me at the end of the day. Even when I had detentions and had to take the late bus home, he'd be there. Once when I was at a hockey tournament in Saskatoon, Mum had to fetch him from the bus stop. Gem was waiting patiently for the late bus, and she knew he'd be anxious when I didn't get off.

The start of high school was also when my father relented on his not-in-the-house rule. “He misses you during the day” was the explanation for the about-face. Sometimes, my father just decided to revoke his Commandments.

In the spring of my Grade 11 year, I was up early and ready to start my chores as the sun broke, gold and grey over the horizon. I had known Gem half my life. He usually got up to yawn and stretch with me, both of us taking a look out the window to size up the day. But that morning he stayed in his bed, the old box my father had allowed me to move in from the barn. He was awake, but tired. He picked up his head when I tried to chivvy him along, but sunk back into the burlap as I headed downstairs.

He didn’t walk with me to the bus that morning, but had managed to make it halfway up the laneway when I came home in the afternoon. The short walk had clearly tired him, but he made an effort to lick my hand.

That weekend, when Doc Connors came to look at the horses, I asked if he had time to see Gem. “We’ll pay you extra, of course,” said my father, looking at me, but talking to the vet. “Right,” I said. “Let me know how much for a check-up.” Doc Connors waved his hand dismissively and said he’d be glad to take a look. “It’ll just take a minute. No extra charge; I’m here anyway.”

My father believed that doctors, dentists, vets and priests should be left alone with their work, so I’d come back down to the kitchen to wait. One minute turned into twenty before Doc Connors came down. He had two vials in his hand. “I’ve taken a couple of blood samples so that the lab in Estevan can run us some tests.” He labelled the vials there at the kitchen table, holding them at a distance and peering over his glasses. “Should have the results back on Tuesday.”

“Well now you really do have to tell me how much I owe you,” I said, and my father nodded approvingly. But Doc Connors waved me off again. “I said no charge, Greg. Lab owes me a couple of favours.” I didn’t see how that worked, and felt sure that he’d cover the lab costs out of his own pocket. I felt badly, but couldn’t argue with an adult.

Doc Connors came to my school at the end of classes on the Tuesday and met me as I was waiting for the bus. “Got a couple of minutes, Greg?”

“Sure, the bus doesn’t leave for fifteen minutes.”

“Just picked up Gem’s test results. Here, walk with me.”

We strolled onto the empty football field and were standing near the 50-yard line, about as far away from anyone as he could have managed. “Gem’s not doing well. He’s got distemper. Dogs rarely survive it.”

Tears welled up, and I looked around to see if anyone was watching. I realized that Doc Connors had done me a kindness by delivering the news to me at school. I never wanted to cry in front of my father, and if the vet had told me at home Mum would have given me a hug, and that would've been the end of everything.

"Let me know if you want me to put him down. You can be there if you want. Or I can come fetch him. Your choice, Greg. It's a painless end. Like going to sleep."

The next day I begged off when Googie asked if I was coming to lunch. I went to the school library and read up on canine distemper. Dogs died with fluid in their lungs, ending up drowning as much as suffocating. At dinner that night I told my parents what the vet had told me. I was prepared for Mum's hug, and managed to stem the tide of tears. "I'm going to put him down."

"How you going to pay for that? Can't be asking more favours from Doc Connors." Now it was easy to keep my tears back, safe behind the dam of my father's gruff remark.

"I know. I'm going to put him down myself." Mum looked shocked and glanced at my father, an unspoken plea. But he stuck to the hand he was playing.

"How you gonna do that?"

"I'll need to borrow your truck. I'll pay for the gas."

"Need me to start it for you?"

"No. Just leave it parked over by the water pump if you could. Saturday morning."

That morning I had to carry Gem down from my bedroom in his box. His breathing was laboured and there was a milky fluid in his eyes. Neither my father nor mother were around. I figured he'd explained to her that this was something I had to do by myself. He'd parked the truck where I'd asked, and I used the hose to give Gem a bath on the flatbed of the truck. I dried him with my own towel, which he sniffed and tried to lick, then brushed him out as the water dribbled through the floorboards of the truck, running small tracks of mud around my boots.

I let Gem drink as much as he wanted from the hose, then laid him back in the box, on his first and only blanket. It had grown soft over the years, and was now as much a mat of his own hair as it was a sheet of burlap. I detached the hose from the water pump, ran one end into the truck's tailpipe and the other into the box. Used duct tape to seal a canvas feedbag to the

top of the box and the hose over the tailpipe. Then I started the engine and sat on the ground beside the box.

I tore a small opening in the duct tape where the hose ran in, and fed my hand in to stroke Gem's fur, still damp from the bath. I found a place under his chin where I could stroke him. He licked my hand. I worked my fingers deep into his fur and find his pulse.

Leaning my head against the bumper of the truck, I looked skyward as it started to rain. I remembered an inscription I had seen on a gravestone: "Here lies Mary, who died by the roadside at the age of six. And no angels wept." I had asked my father what it meant, and remember that it was my mum who answered. She had a way of saving him from his own pride. He never had to say that he didn't know something, because she would know for him. She explained that rain is the tears of angels. The angels poured forth their grief that morning, and I wept with them. I wanted the whole world to weep at the passing of the rare and beautiful being who had graced my life.

I felt Gem's fading pulse; when it had disappeared completely I rubbed his belly roughly and affectionately, then tried to pick up the pulse again. I couldn't find it, and counted to one thousand. And then again. I turned off the engine, peeled off the feed bag, and felt once more. Nothing. I checked his breathing. Nothing. The rain had stopped.

It dawned on me that I didn't know what to do next. I hadn't thought about where to bury him. I went to the barn for a shovel, but could find only a small one. I brought it back to the truck, and then realized that I'd need both arms to carry the box. I felt stupid that I hadn't thought this through.

"Here, I'll carry the shovel," said my father as he approached from the side of the barn.

"But I haven't figured out where to bury him."

"Here—follow me."

We walked past the barn, up the hill. As we came over the crest and started to drop down to the path that leads to the railroad shortcut, I saw Mum standing there with Doc Connors, Googie and the priest from our church. They were standing beside a freshly-dug hole. My father's work. There was a rough white stone beside the pile of dirt, and someone—surely my father again—had chiseled the single word "GEM" into the rock.

The wind blew through the tree and it started to sound like rain again as water dripped from leaf to leaf. My father put an arm around my shoulder, as I turned into his and wept.