

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Rita Buckley
The Reconciliation

Hunter was a special kind of German shepherd, one who could turn heads and inspire people to ask where he came from and if they could pet him. "Sure," we'd say. He loved to be the center of attention. He was a champion. The son of champions. The grandson of champions. The great-grandson of champions. It was in his blood to be smart, handsome, and somewhat high-strung. So, in a way, we weren't surprised when he started to talk at a young age.

The first time was during one of our fights. Hunter was in the living room watching CNN and I was in the kitchen. I'd made myself some French toast and was eating it when Brenda came in.

"Thanks for thinking of me," she said, flicking her hand in the direction of my plate.

"You could've told me you were hungry," I said. "How am I supposed to know you're not dieting tonight?"

"Dense fool," she said. "You could've asked."

"Nasty primate," I replied.

"Useless wretch."

"Vile trashmouth."

Back and forth. Back and forth, like some perverse tennis game. We were good at this. Pros. We'd had a lot of practice since my one-time fling with the young widow who lived down the street. It was over a year ago, but she still couldn't let it go.

"Pervert."

"Cipher."

That's when Hunter said his first word: "Stop."

We both turned and saw him standing in the doorway. His ears were pointed straight up and his body was taut. He was staring at us with a hint of menace in his brown eyes.

"Okay," we said in unison. "We'll stop."

He trotted back into the living room, jumped on the sofa, and stretched out with a grunt. Brenda left the kitchen, and I ate the rest of my French toast in stunned silence.

Brenda thought it would be a good idea to increase Hunter's vocabulary with some intensive daily tutoring.

"This is an apple," she'd say, holding it in the air. "A-p-p-l-e. Can you say apple?" She'd cut up it up and feed him slices.

"This is a ball," she'd say. "B-a-l-l. Can you say ball?"

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She'd toss it to him and hug him when he picked it up. Hunter would lean against her with a happy look on his face.

She bought a chalkboard and used it to teach him how to spell. Then they started reading. They'd sit together on the sofa, heads bent over whatever book they were working on. Brenda would read aloud and Hunter would follow her finger as it moved across the page. They'd do this for hours at a time.

I did more active things with Hunter, like play frisbee in the park. Hunter loved to run. He was fast and powerful; a very special animal. People would stop to watch him. "He's so handsome," they'd say. "Is he a movie star?"

I made a gym for Hunter in the backyard. It had tunnels, mazes, hurdles, walls, and a sand pit. I put up spotlights so he could run the course at night. Hunter made great progress. "Dad," he said one evening, "watch this." He jumped over a 6' wall with ease. I was so proud, I felt like crying. And maybe I did, just a bit. He came over and licked my hand. "Stop it," he said. "Let's go in and get some cookies." That was his first full sentence. We went in and had some cookies.

Brenda was sharing a pizza with Hunter. She took large bites and swallowed them whole. Hunter had a napkin tucked under his collar and was using a fork and knife. He looked like a gentleman.

"Please pass the cheese," he said.

Brenda slid it across the table.

"Mind if I join you?" I asked.

"We don't want you," Brenda said.

"I do," Hunter replied.

"Well I don't," Brenda snapped.

Hunter nudged a seat toward me anyway.

Brenda's face turned red. Her eyes bulged and the vein in her neck pulsed. It was very disconcerting. She pushed her chair back and jumped to her feet.

"Okay, Mr. Big Shot," she said, shaking a finger at Hunter. "No school for you tomorrow."

Brenda flipped the box off the table and the pizza landed upside down on the floor. We ate it anyway. Afterward, Hunter went into the living room and stretched out on the sofa with a grunt. He was reading Heart of Darkness. I sat on the floor beside him and watched a rerun of The Simpsons on TV.

The enmity in the house was growing. At certain times of the day, it would sit at the kitchen table and drink Corona beer. Brenda also fed it enriched soy powder shakes.

We no longer slept in the same room. Hunter and I stayed in the second bedroom, the one set up for Brenda's 10-year-old niece. It had a poster of Justin Timberlake on the wall and a ruffled pink comforter. A few stuffed bears hung out near the pillows, playing poker. They drank Glenlivet and smoked hand-rolled Cuban cigars. One of them was packing a Smith & Wesson .38 Special.

Brenda took a job selling cars at the local Audi dealership. She worked from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m. six days a week. On the 7th day, she rested. I wrote newspaper columns in the mornings and spent afternoons in the park with Hunter. We played ball and checkers. He attracted a lot of attention, mostly from women.

"He's magnificent," a well-dressed lady with a female German shepherd said. Her name was Elaine and her dog was Rosetta Marletto de la Hoya, or Rosie for short. Hunter sniffed Elaine, then played with Rosie. I apologized for his rude behavior, said he came from a long line of champions and was brilliant, but a little high-strung. I offered to show her his pedigree. We talked about this and that.

Meanwhile, Hunter and Rosie were getting along beautifully. They chased each other around the park, stopping every now and again to take a break. Hunter nuzzled her haunches and nipped her neck. He whispered in her ear.

"Come back to my place," he said.

"Woof," she replied.

We went to the house and I showed Elaine the pedigree. She was impressed. Rosie was also registered with the AKC. Her father was Oh What a Night from New York, or Night for short, a highly decorated dog. Her mother was Miss Tootsie de la Hoya, or Trish for short. She was a champion in her own right.

"They'd make a lovely couple," I said.

She agreed.

"So would we," I added, faltering in my resolve to be faithful.

"Perhaps," she replied.

Brenda came home early and caught the dogs in the act. I was in the

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den with Elaine watching Wheel of Misfortune. Nothing had happened between us.

"Atlantic City New Jersey," she shouted

"Beijing China," I yelled.

The contestant gave the wrong answer and won a free trip to hell.

Brenda stood in the doorway and stared at us.

"I hate you," she said. "And you too, whoever you are."

She ordered me to leave the house.

"Get out," she said.

"Gladly," I replied.

I packed a couple of suitcases and left them by the back door. The enmity carried them out to the car.

Hunter and Rosie heard the commotion and came inside. The volleys started

to fly.

"Philanderer."

"Parasite."

"Beast."

"Monster."

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Hunter took a position between us.

"And you," she said, staring at him. "What do you have to say about it?"

"Stop," he said.

His ears were up, his gaze steady. "Okay," she said. "I'll stop."

Then he turned to me and said, "Stay." His voice cracked a bit, like he was about to cry, and we both rushed over to comfort him. He sat down and accepted the attention. His coat was thick, his eyes clear, his teeth white. He was a proud-looking animal, the product of good parenting.

"Remember when he was a puppy?" I asked.

"Who could forget?" she replied. "He was all teeth and paws."

"Not anymore," I said.

Our eyes met over Hunter's head and we held each other's gaze. The enmity was in the doorway, tapping its foot in frustration.

Brenda turned and glared at it. "Go away," she said. "Leave."

It slammed the door on the way out and we went back to looking at each other. Suddenly, I saw the beautiful young girl I'd married 20 years before. She was inside a chubby middle-aged body, but she was still there, as lovely as the first day I saw her sunning herself on a Cape Cod beach. I

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remembered our first kiss and my eyes teared up.

"I'm sorry," I said, "terribly sorry."

Brenda looked stunned, then started to cry.

"I'm sorry too," she said, wiping her eyes..

We stood up and hugged. Hunter leaned against us, a happy dog. Elaine and Rosie tiptoed from the room and slipped out the back door. The doorknob sighed. The peonies smiled. The newel post cleared its throat.

"Love is patient," it said in a soft wispy voice. "Love is kind."

I took Brenda's hand and we walked upstairs. Hunter trotted into the living room and jumped on the sofa, ready for a nap. The newel post chuckled.

"All's well that ends well," it said.

"That's right," said the peonies.

"Here here," said the doorknob.

"Hi ho," said the carpet.

"Eros and agape, odi et amo," said the floor.

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