

Scraps for Dogs

Can a street-smart rover ever settle down?

By Bryon Cahill • Illustrations by Steve James

“Woof,” I said.

This was what they liked: a happy face on a happy dog with his happy, free tongue lapping out of his dumb, happy mouth. So that was the image I strove for. It was a small price to pay for nourishment.

Life, as I had come to know it, was not always filled with smiles. I had known my days of trouble and pain. I had known hunger. But, as those who fed me said, beggars can't be choosers. Ain't that the truth.

For as long as I could remember, I'd been a beggar. I grew up on the hard streets of New York City (which is odd because I'm a Boston terrier). I was separated from my mother about three weeks after I was born. Animal control snatched her out of our cozy corner in what I *thought* was a safe alleyway. It was dark, and my black coat hid me from the dogcatcher's searching eyes. I blended. Ma had a lot of white in her though. And in a flash, that white (that light) was gone from my life. I never saw her again. Tragic, right? Tell me about it.

I surely would've died if it wasn't for Charlie. Charlie was another stray who took me in. Showed me the ropes. He was a boxer (which was odd because he was the gentlest dog I ever knew) who had all the tricks down. You ever heard the phrase

sad puppy-dog face? Well, that was Charlie's M.O.* If there had been farms in New York City, Charlie coulda begged the bacon off a pig with that mug of his. He taught me everything he knew. He was like the father I never had. But sadly, I didn't have him for long. The old dog was taken away from me too. New York was nothing but cruel, and I couldn't stand it no more. It was time for a change.

I moved outta the city when I was about a year old. That's in human terms, you understand. To me, it was more like seven years. I know I'm going to have a very short life. I can feel it all over me now as I tell you this story. I got the aches and pains of old age creepin' in. I've been walking the beat of this cozy suburban neighborhood close to eight (human) years now. I'm getting up there. Lemme ask you this: If it truly is a dog's life, as they say, then why must it be so short?

Those humans I visited, they were all special. I had about a dozen of 'em. I knew exactly when to hit each one up. I had it worked out to a science. I always knew when there was gonna be easy food. Human emotions have a certain ebb and flow. As the saying goes, they are like clockwork. Beg at one human's door for two days in a row and you'll get no love, but wait a week between visits and he or she



will be so glad you aren't dead that you'll get the last chicken leg.

They all fooled themselves into thinking that they "owned" me. But that wasn't true. I wasn't that kinda dog. I was as independent as they come. But ... that was then.

I got to this quaint Westchester neighborhood by jumping in the back of an unsuspecting driver's pickup truck headed north on the Henry Hudson Parkway. The woods were my home; the overhead branches, my roof. It rained and I caught cold, sure, but no biggie. I was a mangy mutt and proud of it! Things were going great. And then this new kid showed up. He was all **sprightly** and full of **vigor**. Just like I used to be. Said he was from New York City, too, and had a story similar to mine. At first, I admit, it made me kinda sad to realize I wasn't as unique as I thought. The kid made me wonder just how many others like us there were out there. Lost souls, homeless dogs, fend-for-yourself wanderers, scrappers.

“So, what do you want from me?” I said to him,

kinda rough-like. When he gave me a perfect sad puppy-dog face, I eased off him.

“Not bad,” I said, impressed. “What's your name, kid?” I asked, and he said his name was Sprinkles. I had to laugh at that. “Sorry, kid, but come on. No self-respecting mutt can bum around the city with a sissy name like Sprinkles and get away with it. Am I right?” Then I saw a piece of the kid's ear was missing. And there was some dried blood on his back. Poor thing had probably been through hell. “I'm just bustin' on ya, kid,” I said. “There ain't many dogs round here that can even talk, let alone care what your name is.” Because really, this isn't New York City we're livin' in. It's the suburbs. And the types of characters that hang out around here aren't exactly what you'd call the dangerous type. They're mostly over-fluffed princesses with pedicures and

* vocab

SPRITELY: animated, vivacious, full of good spirit

VIGOR: physical or mental strength



silly scrunchies in their fur (both the females *and* the males, mind you). Harmless.

“You hungry?” I asked him **rhetorically**. The kid was, as they say, all skin ‘n’ bones, even for a dachshund. He wagged his tail and barked. “Keep it up, Sprinkles. That’s exactly the type of positive attitude that gets you dinner.”

It was Saturday, which meant it was pizza night at the Florentines’. We arrived on their back stoop just as the parents were cleaning up. “Perfect,” I said, and Mr. Florentine opened the sliding glass door.

“Hey, fella! Boy, you are prompt, aren’t ya?” He was happy to see me. Always was. He scratched my head and smiled. “Hey, kids,” he shouted inside. “Guess who’s here?” The kids came running. Janie and Jill. They were 6 and 8, respectively, and in love with me. When she saw me, Janie screamed as she always did.

“Poo Poo! You’re back!” I gave Sprinkles a look that said, *She calls me Poo Poo, what’re ya gonna do?* And then she saw my tagalong and ran to him. “Oh! You brought a friend!” she hollered in delight and jumped on the dachshund, squeezing his neck.

Jill seemed enamored with the kid, too, and

ran to grab a piece of his cuteness for herself. “Easy, girls,” Mr. Florentine said, dropping me a slice of pepperoni pizza. “You don’t know where he’s been.”

“We don’t know where Poo Poo’s been either, Daddy!” Janie said. She had a point. But I was too involved with the heavenly cheese that was melting in my mouth to care.

“Oh, can we keep him, Daddy? Please? Can we?” Janie said. And when I heard her say it, I dropped my food and ran.

“Come on!” I screamed to Sprinkles as I flew past him. Reluctantly, the kid chased after me, leaving Janie crying behind him.

Back in the woods, I slowed, and Sprinkles caught up to me. “Trust me, kid,” I said, panting. “You do not want to be taken by a human.” He was confused. “Yeah, they may look all right on the outside, but when they snatch you away ...” I stopped. I couldn’t go on. When Charlie was taken away from me, I followed the dogcatcher’s van. For 30 city blocks, I ran behind, hoping to save him. But it was impossible. The van stopped in front of a building. The dogcatcher brought Charlie out of the van in a cage and carried him in. I waited there (in the shadows, careful to hide from the human) for weeks. He kept bringing dogs in. But no dogs ever

came out. I didn’t know what went on in there. But I did know it was the end of the road, as they say. For Charlie. For Ma. Not for me. Not ever. I was free.

Sprinkles didn’t understand. I guess his story was

**‘Woofwoofwoof
woofwoof!’
His battle cry
echoed back to me.**

a little different from mine after all. He still trusted humans for more than what they were: mere food machines. The kid’s checkered history was with mean dogs, not mean humans. I was gonna have to show him the fear. It was for his own good.

In the morning, we woke. The crisp freshness of the autumn air brought so many scents to my nose. Winter would be coming soon. When it did, I would show Sprinkles my cold-season shelter. It was no picnic in that cave, but at least it saved me from the elements. For now, though, school was in session.

“Wake up,” I said, kicking him gently. “I wanna show you somethin’.”

We walked a couple miles through the woods and emerged behind the Wicker home. The 13-year-old terror Clyde Wicker was still inside. We waited there at the edge of his property for about an hour before he emerged. Once outside, he walked to the street and headed for his friend Billy’s house.

Together, Sprinkles and I followed Clyde and Billy to the playground (keeping a safe distance of course). Once there, they started terrorizing every kid around. They grabbed Tommy Worcester and took turns giving him noogies. They made poor little Daniel LaMonica eat dirt. Not even the girls were safe from their cruelty. Billy stole Janie Florentine’s blond dolly and tossed it to Clyde. “You see what I mean, kid? Humans. They’re no good.” I looked down, but Sprinkles was gone. He was tearing his way across the playground, heading straight for the bullies. “Oh, for cryin’ out loud!” I said and chased after him.

“Woofwoofwoofwoofwoof!” His battle cry echoed

back to me. *The kid’s nuts!* I thought. But I was close behind him. So what did that make me?

He reached Clyde Wicker, and his little teeth latched onto Clyde’s leg and sunk in. Clyde dropped Janie’s doll and howled. “Owwwww!” The girl picked it up and ran to her father and her sister. They were in the picnic area not too far away and had started sprinting down the hill to all the commotion. Everything was completely outta hand.

When I got to the scene, Clyde was shaking his leg like he had invented some horrible new dance move. His **cohort** Billy had run off like a coward, so I honed in on Clyde’s other leg. I was barking mad (as they say). Just as I was about to sink into Clyde’s trousers, I looked up and saw Sprinkles go flying. He soared through the air and landed on his paws about 12 feet away. He shook his head quickly and charged again. I don’t think the crazy kid ever would have **relented** if I hadn’t intercepted him. I got right in his path and screamed, “What are you doin’, ya crazy hound dog? Come on! Let it go. The girl’s all right.” He kept snarling past me at the retreating Clyde, but at last his anger **subsided** and I managed to get him outta there.

Back in the safety of the woods, I was beside myself with confusion. “What’d you go and do that for?” I implored him. “Ya never *ever* bite a human! Don’t you know that’s just askin’ for trouble?” And then I wondered. “Hey, you ain’t got rabies, do ya?” He shook his head. “All right, well, that doesn’t mean they won’t come after you anyway. You can’t be crazy like that, Sprinkles. You just can’t. Not here. Not in suburbia.” Did he understand? I don’t know. I think so. But it doesn’t really matter whether he did or not, does it? The kid was crazed. He had a thing for that Janie girl. That much was obvious. He latched onto her easier than he had latched onto Clyde Wicker’s leg. The only two saving graces of the day’s events were that (a) Clyde wasn’t the type to tell anyone about what happened. (He’d be too embarrassed

*** vocab**

RHETORICALLY: merely for effect with no answer expected

COHORT: a companion, an associate

RELENTED: became less severe

SUBSIDED: became quiet, less active

to admit he got beaten up by a wiener dog.) And (b) There were no adults present for the actual biting. By the time I saw Mr. Florentine running down the hill, we were both far away from the scene, and Clyde was running in the opposite direction. I believed we were safe. This time. But I had to lay down the law.

“You just can’t do that again, kid. Not ever. You got me?” He nodded and walked off to be alone for a while. Yeah, he said he understood where I was coming from. But was I sure he got the whole idea of what I meant? No. Not at all.

***There were no
bullies here. There
was no fighting.
There was no fear.***

After Sprinkles cooled down, he was his happy-go-lucky self again. I took him to all the houses on my route, and we ate like kings. However, for three weeks, we stayed away from the Florentines. At first, the kid agreed with me. He was shocked and embarrassed by how he had acted. He didn’t know what had come over him. He said he had never felt that kind of intensity before. He said that he had seen Janie crying over her stolen doll, and it had reminded him of how she had cried the night before when he left her. I think the poor, dumb kid thought that *all* her tears were his fault. Now, I’m no shrink, but I daresay he was attacking an image of himself in Clyde Wicker. Cry “Havoc!” and let slip the dogs of war ... as they say.

But three weeks in dog time is really like four or five months. It’s not an exact science, mind you, but as I’ve said, we feel time slip away so much faster than humans. We’re more keen to our senses too. We *feel* suffering and bliss so much more deeply, so much more passionately. I think that’s because our minds aren’t clouded with too much stress. All we need is food and shelter to survive. You humans need so much more. Companionship. Love. Bah. I’d say that stuff is for the birds (as they say), but those birdbrains don’t know squat either.

And yes, I’m digressing all over the place now.

I guess it’s because things were getting hard again. You see, during those three weeks (four or five months), Sprinkles became less and less **enthused** about being a happy dog. When he first came to me, he was 100 percent ecstatic to be alive, despite his scars and bruises. But he started turning into a phony. I had taught him so well. He fooled every single person and family we visited. He painted the perfect image of a happy face on a happy dog with his happy, independent tongue lapping out of his dumb, happy mouth. Only I saw the truth behind his eyes. Sprinkles was so sad. I don’t know what drove him forward, really. I’d like to think he enjoyed being with me. That he considered me a friend and a mentor. But no ... dogs don’t need companionship. I said that ... didn’t I? All we need is food and shelter. Isn’t that what I said?

It was too much to bear after a while. I was living with two different dachshunds. There was the one who performed for his meals, and there was the one who sulked in sadness. It came to the point where he was inconsolable. I couldn’t stand it anymore.

“All right, I give up!” I said on that fourth Saturday night. “We’ll go and see what kind of pizza the Florentines aren’t eating tonight.”

The stupid kid jumped on me, and we rolled all through the leaves and the dirt. His rough tongue was all over my face, and he was soaking me with his doggy saliva. “All right, all right, enough!” I yelled at him, but he wouldn’t stop. The kid was easily half my size, and I should’ve been able to throw him off, but he was making me woozy with his disgusting, smelly breath. Had to be. I can’t explain any other reason why I didn’t just throw him off. It must’ve been his stinky breath. Must’ve been.

After a good 20 minutes of that nonsense and horseplay, we were off. Soon, we were back where it all started. Back on the Florentines’ back porch. This time, Mrs. Florentine opened the sliding glass door, and with pizza box in hand she called back into the house, “Girls, hey girls! Guess who’s here?” And then a white flash of dazzling nightgowns enveloped the kid; they were all over him. I stood over to the side, in the shadows, and watched as Janie gave him kisses and he smiled from ear to ear. This wasn’t make-believe. This was true. This was emotion. This was the better side of humanity and caninity



coming together. There were no bullies here. There was no fighting. There was no fear. And there was no sadness. But there was laughter and warmth despite the fact that it was getting chillier and chillier by the day. I thought of the cold cave waiting for me. It seemed a lot colder now.

“Can we keep him, Daddy, puh-leasssse?” Janie said, and I perked up. My instinct kicked in again, and I made as if to run. But the poor dumb kid jumped into my path.

“Stay,” he whispered to me, so the humans couldn’t hear. “There is no danger here.” But I couldn’t. There was Charlie. And there was Ma. Both had vanished into buildings. Both were gone.

“We have to go, kid,” I said to him. But he refused. It broke my heart to do it, but I started walking away. After all, I was a loner, right? Right?

“Poo Pool!” It was Jill, the older one, chasing after me. Jill never said much. I’d been watching her for years. We came into this neighborhood right around the same time, and I saw how slowly she developed

from a distance. I had seen her through her window, being quiet in her room. I had seen her sitting alone at school through the cafeteria window. I had always thought we were kinda the same, me and Jill. Too cool to be tied down, as they say. But now ... now she was chasing after me. I stopped and turned around.

“Don’t go, Poo Poo,” she said, her big, beautiful eyes smiling at me. “We got a lotta pizza tonight and ...” She giggled and then whispered a secret in my ear and begged me not to tell.

I looked back at the crybaby Florentine kid and Sprinkles, the wiener dog kid. They were playing with a ball. The parents were laughing at the madness. Was the whole world just plain dumb?

Fine. It was no use resisting. Someone was gonna have to protect the mutt from whatever horrors were inside that house. So I let quiet Jill lead me back to them. “Woof,” I said, and stupid Sprinkles licked me again. Gross.

We played for a little while with the kids and then followed the whole dumb family inside.

And we were never heard from again.

As they say. ■

*** vocab**

ENTHUSED: enthusiastic, excited