

Rifle's Way

The vet's office can be a joyous place, such as when your new puppy is getting his first checkup, or it can be utterly terrifying, such as when your best friend, field trial champion dog, Red, is dying. At the moment, my situation is the terrifying one.

I have been at the vet's office for 3 hours and I don't even know if my dog is alive. I'm hoping his old age won't take him, or at least not today. I'm so involved in my thoughts that I don't notice the vet walking out of the exam room that Red is in.

"Rifle Remington?" the vet calls.

I jump out of my waiting room seat.

"Yes, ma'am?" I ask, desperate for some information.

"Come with me please," the vet says.

I quickly follow the vet into a sad, droopy room where Red is laying wearily on the examination table.

"He bud," I coo in my firm, yet gentle voice as the tears stream down my face. I hug him and rub his belly for the last time as I watch his eyes shut and his chest go still.

Later that day, I call my friends, River and Gunner, and ask them to come to Red's burial.

So here I am standing under Red's favorite tree, the same tree he was napping under just yesterday. I started to sob as I watched my grandpa dig a dog-sized hole. When Grandpa finished, I picked up Red, whom I had wrapped in a blanket and put on top of his dog bed, and lay him in his love-filled grave. After we put the hand painted headstone and the rich soil on top of my dear dog's grave, everyone left, except me. I sat next to my dog and admired my mountainside home.

About a week later, I was fishing with Gunner and River when an important discussion arose.

“Junior field trials are coming up. You know, the ones where kids compete with their puppies,” River explained. “You could get a puppy.”

“Only if you’re ready, though,” Gunner said.

I thought about the matter for a long time before reaching a decision.

“I think that Red would want me to have a doggy friend, even if it isn’t him,” I said, happy with my decision.

A few hours later, I was standing in the kitchen, watching my mom make dinner.

“Mom?” I asked. “Could I get a puppy?”

“I think that’s a great idea, and I bet Red agrees,” Mom answered, and smiles broke loose on both of our faces.

“Your grandpa has to stay late at the shop. Could you ride Murphy over there and give him this food?” Mom asked. “You could stay and have dinner with him.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

I went to the barn and saddled up my horse, Murphy. He stood, drop reined, as I put the food in his saddle bags. We rode up the drive to my grandpa’s gun restoration shop, where I drop reined Murphy and carried the food inside.

My grandpa always picks on me for not sliding off the horse on the right side, so I was ready for what came next.

“Rifle, I thought I taught you how to dismount a horse!” Grandpa chuckled.

“I’m just doing things Rifle’s way,” I replied playfully.

As we ate, I told Grandpa about my decision to get a new dog.

“Well,” my grandpa said. “Trevor Burnett’s dog just had pups. We can go take a look at them tomorrow.”

I rode Murphy home with a smile on my face, thinking about what I wanted my pup to be like.

The next day, my grandpa and I were on the road in his old Ford pick-up truck just as the August sun rose over the mountains.

After a while of calm silence, I asked, “Who are the parents of the pups?”

“The mother is Mr. Burnett’s dog, Mae, but the sire is unknown,” Grandpa answered.

When we arrived at the Burnett Ranch, Mr. Burnett greeted us warmly and led us to the small field where the puppies were running and having a good time.

“Here they are,” Mr. Burnett said, motioning toward the puppies.

“What about that one?” I asked, pointing at a small pup far away from his siblings, who looked like he was trying to play fetch with himself.

“He’s a bit...peculiar,” Mr. Burnett said, looking sadly at the strange pup. “He’s also the best athlete in the litter. It’s too bad that I can’t get any money for him. Nobody will pay for such a strange pup.”

As Grandpa and I left, I smiled fondly at the little pup, who was now chasing a butterfly across the field.

“It wasn’t very nice of Mr. Burnett to be so disappointed in the pup. He was just being himself,” I mumbled under my breath on the ride home.

I was just heading up to bed that night when I saw my mom making my birthday cake.

“Mom, could River and Gunner come over and celebrate with us tomorrow?” I asked.

“They always do,” Mom said with a smile.

I skipped to my bedroom, excited about the day ahead.

That next morning, I went to visit Red before my guests arrived. I missed him terribly and sitting with him under his tree made me feel closer to him.

A little while later, when my friends and I were sitting on the porch eating birthday cake, Grandpa came outside, holding a wiggling puppy in his arms.

“Happy birthday, Rifle!” he exclaimed with a grin.

I stood, speechless.

“That’s Mr. Burnett’s peculiar pup,” I said in awe. “And he looks just like Red.”

“Rifle, that’s what I was going to tell you. The pups are purebred Labrador Retrievers. There was only one male purebred in the county at the time of their birth. That means Red is the father,” Grandpa explained as I cried joyous tears.

“Let’s see how good he is at retrieving,” I said through happy sobs.

Grandpa and I took Dusty (as I had named him) to an open field where I threw a ball for him and he ran after it. He balanced it on his head and brought it back to me.

This dog isn’t peculiar. He’s just different. He does things Dusty’s way, just as I do things Rifle’s way.