

Rescuing Toby

Written by Vivian Bikulege

At first, I mistook him for a white box, a discarded traffic hazard in the middle of the left hand lane on Highway 21, something that had fallen off of the back of a pickup truck. The car traveling toward me swerved to miss him and crossed the double yellow line into my lane about 100 feet in front of me. It was the day after Christmas, about 7:30 p.m. Mac and I were returning from dinner with my mom, my sister and her family at Johnson Creek Tavern.



As I got closer to “the box,” I realized it was a dog, sitting like an Egyptian sphinx, head up, white necked, waiting on the next car, the next encounter with fate. I told my husband we have to pull the car over. So I stopped, lodging the Ford 500 between orange and white striped barrels, traffic beacons outlining Sea Island Parkway road construction on a dark December night.

I fumbled for my hazard lights and got out of the car to assess the situation. Another car approached the scene in the same lane as the injured dog, barely slowing down. The animal clawed its way to the shoulder of the highway, narrowly escaping having his back paws run over, as he dragged his damaged body to safety. I screamed at the oncoming traffic to slow down. At the stop sign of the T-intersection where this melodrama was unfolding, a man got out of a Ford Bronco, crossed the road, picked the dog up and carried him into the weeds.

“That dog needs to get to a vet,” I called out to the man.

“I’m not taking him to a vet,” he replied, still holding the beagle by his front haunches, the dog’s back legs dangling toward the overgrown brush on the shoulder of the road. “You want to take him to a vet?”

“Well, if you’re not taking him to a vet, I am,” I responded. My answer was instinctual. I was caught off guard. I was making grand statements on how the matter should be handled and now, I had to step up to the plate. The animal was hurt, helpless. He couldn’t be left in the weeds to die.

The man crossed back over Hwy 21, carrying the wounded package of canine goods. I opened the back door of my car and he delivered the dog to the back seat, bloody, smelly and in shock. Now, almost three months later, this tale is part of my personal history and Toby is part of the family.

The dog’s femur was broken in two places. He was full of ticks, fleas, no collar, no ID. The break was hard to repair and the vet had to cut the ball of his hipbone off. He favors his back right leg but miraculously, this orphaned beagle can run like a son-of-a-gun and he is a 40 lb bag of Advanced Scientific Diet away from the malnourished specimen he was when he moved in. The hair on his shaved hip is almost grown back, he’s been neutered and now I pick the ticks off of him that have hitched a ride on his coat during his outdoor adventures to the community dock.

Coincidentally, on February 12, the Westminster Kennel Club chose Uno the beagle as Best in Show. It was the first time the breed had been chosen in over one hundred years of competition. Stout, determined and full of personality, the little two year-old won the crowd’s hearts, baying and howling in the excitement of the moment. Toby won’t make it to Westminster but his unique personality and loyal companionship make him a winner all the same.

Toby accompanied me to graduate school this past January. He has visited my brother and his family in the upscale Thornblade subdivision in Greer, is a frequent house guest at my mom’s and spent a weekend joyriding with my sister in a Mitsubishi Spyder convertible. Not too

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shabby for a backwoods St. Helena stray.

Last night, Mac came into my home office and asked what I was going to do with Toby while I'm away at school in May. I shrugged my shoulders. I hadn't thought that far ahead. "You didn't think this through," he said and I just looked at him. I do not know if you can think everything in life through. Sometimes life just falls into your lap begging the question, "What are you going to do now?"

Shortly after Toby adopted me, a friend of mine sent me one of those cutesy lists of sayings, this one entitled, "If A Dog Were Your Teacher." A few key lessons included the advice to always run to greet loved ones when they get home. Take naps and stretch before rising. Avoid biting when a simple growl will do. When you're happy, dance around and wag your body. Delight in the simple joy of a long walk. Eat with gusto and enthusiasm and stop when you've had enough. Never pretend to be something you're not and when someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit close by and nuzzle them gently.

When I was growing up, my dad raised beagles with names like Patches and Pharaoh, hunting companions to kick birds and rabbits out from Pennsylvania underbrush. Toby is a short name for Tobias which means "God is with us." I didn't know this until after I named my beagle. I'm going to learn a lot from Toby. I already have. Toby is slowing me down. I often stop to get down on the floor and cuddle with him. There's dog hair everywhere and I don't care anymore.

If Toby is a rescue dog, I'm a bit unsure of who rescued whom. What I do believe, deep down in the hollows of my heart, is that Toby was a Christmas present I wasn't expecting, the best kind of gift. Maybe God – and maybe even my dad in some sort of miraculous way – figured I was old enough to take care of a dog. Or just maybe, Toby was sent to take care of me.