

A Boy and His Dog

by Donna Delaney

Jim is a strong, tall, energetic sixty-five year-old man with big blue eyes and a full head of white hair. He has a wife seven years his junior and four grown children. His youngest is in college doing her senior internship, and Jim volunteered to babysit his daughter's cocker spaniel while Donna had a busy week chaperoning Grad Night at Disney World and preparing for final exams.

This dog already knew at the ripe old age of eight months how to play dead when Donna shot him with thumb and forefinger yelling, "Bang!"

Red would crawl under the coffee table when Jim said, "Hide your face." Red was not your typical cocker spaniel. Sure, he was cute, but he seemed to come potty trained at six weeks. If he had an accident in the house, it would happen on the mat by the front door. As soon as he learned to speak, he would bark at the door to get out. He never peed all over himself when he was excited like the neighbor's cocker spaniel did.

While Jim was babysitting Red for a week, he walked the eight-month-old puppy down his neighborhood, umbrellaed by one hundred year old oak trees, and after they reached the orange groves at the end of the neighborhood, he let Red off the leash every day. Red would usually run figure eights around Jim and the trees, burning off that excess puppy energy and taking a long nap afterwards. Today, though, he took off in a straight line at full gallop unaware of the dirt bike that leaped out from behind a line of orange trees and rode over the poor dog. The boy on the red and blue Honda XR600 crashed, yet was very apologetic. He offered to carry the puppy home for Jim. After he saw that the boy was not injured, Jim carried the lifeless body of his daughter's dog home to bury. Jim waited until after school to tell her.

As he held his crying daughter in his arms, he remembered a day long ago when he was ten years old. He woke up eager for the day to begin. Jim and his dad, Bill, were going fishing. Jim had twelve brothers and sisters, but today he was going to have Dad

all to himself. His brothers had to mow and trim the golf course that his family owned and lived on, and his mother and sisters were working in the pro shop. However, Jim had done his chores after school yesterday, so today he could fish with his dad. He hurriedly got dressed and went down to breakfast. The big two-story house was empty, so Jim made himself a bowl of oatmeal.

After eating, he went outside to the shed, got the trout line out, and laid it under the old oak tree in his family's front yard near the eighth hole. Now, don't get me wrong, this was not a fancy golf course you might find in Palm Springs. This golf course was small and on top of a mountain in Parsons, West Virginia. In fact, his was the only house connected to the golf course. Jim's family never made much money from it until recently. Everyone always had to have a second job until the rich people from D.C. began buying vacation homes in Davis, a neighboring city. They spent money snow skiing in the Canaan Valley at Black Water Falls in the winter, and these rich vacationers would golf in Parsons during the summer. So, Jim's family no longer had to take a second job. But I digress . . .

So, Jim baited the trout line with worms. He obtained the worms by taking the left over soapy dishwater from breakfast and dumping it in a place in the yard that had nice rich black soil. He hammered a sharpened 2 X 4 board into the ground soaked with suds. Up came the worms as if they were dancing to the beat of his different drum. He scooped them up in an old tin can and set them beside a trout line that he baited with different kinds of bait, including worms, leftover chicken, and bacon fat.

Jim went inside to pack a lunch for their fishing trip. He decided on corn bread and crackling.' With his lunch in hand, Jim skipped out to the tree to collect the trout line and take it to the lake where his dad was waiting with the boat. The trout line was gone! The line, the hooks, the bait, all gone! All that work for nothing! He heard a whimper from near the shed and realized the only thing that could have happened to it was his Irish setter. He went to the spot under the porch and saw Patty, whining, lying on his side with a hard, round stomach the size of a basketball. Jim couldn't believe that Patty had eaten the entire trout line. Had he remembered to feed him this morning?

No, Jim had thought all his chores were done. What was he going to do now? Patty was really suffering and staring at him with those sad brown eyes. Should Jim run down to the lake and get his dad? Patty was gagging and bleeding out of his mouth now. Jim knew what he had to do. It was all his fault and he would clean up his own mess. He went into the house and retrieved the shotgun off the rack. He went out to the shed, lovingly held Patty for the last time, and shot his dog. Afterwards, Jim sat down and cried.

Bill came running after he heard the shot. When he saw his son with his shotgun and dead dog, he was shocked and confused. After several minutes of holding him, Jim explained about the trout line between choked sobs. Bill held Jim and said, "Son, the right choice can be very hard to make. Today, you have become a man."

Now, that Jim was comforting his own child about the loss of her little cocker spaniel, he grasped the fruition that life as a man didn't get any easier with age.

