

Set Free by Helen Peppe

The dog sat on the grass near the house, his tongue out. There was a red collar around his neck. A long cable wound from his red collar to a hook on the house. It was strong. The boy knew it was strong. Everyone knew it was strong. They had seen the dog lunge and jerk at the end of the thick cord barking at the cars, the cats, the people, forcing against the cable and hook with its black chest. It hurt the boy to see the dog strain so frantically, so uselessly. He hoped that the cable would break so that the dog could be free.

The boy felt the dog's frustration as if it were his own. He knew it was like the frustration he felt when his father held him tight in his arms and wouldn't let go. Even though it was a game, and his father laughed, he hated it. It was no game to him. At those times, the boy felt hate that he was incapable of expressing to anyone, but he knew the dog knew how he felt. It was not right for the dog to be tied just as it was not right for his father to hug him tight and laugh at him as he struggled to free himself. The pain was too real to the boy; he had to do something.

The boy walked to the dog and gently rubbed the dog's black pointed ears. The dog responded by licking his hand and butting him with his smooth black head. The boy slid his small hand under the dog's collar. The fur was hot and ruffled. He knew it would be easy to unfasten the clip from the hook on the collar, but other things were not so easy. The question of where the dog would go ran through the boy's head. Would he just run so fast that no one could catch him, not even his father, who could do anything? And the question that the boy wondered the most, would the dog ever come back? The boy loved the dog. He was the only one who shared his hate and anger, his closest friend. The boy removed his fingers from the collar and instead wrapped his small arms around the dog's neck. The dog endured this new form of attention for a minute, then struggled free, although still sitting next to the boy.

The boy sat down on the grass. A new thought entered his mind. His father would be angry when he discovered that the dog was gone. The dog had cost a lot of money and they had had him for only six months. They had needed a watch dog, a Doberman, his father had insisted. No other dog scared enough. The boy had found this to be true. The kids next door had not taken

his bike or played on his tire swing since the dog had come. Cats had certainly been scarce too. His father hated the mess that cats made and they all hated the yowling of the cats fighting under their windows at night. The boy didn't like cats. They were not like dogs, and no one could convince him that they were as fun to play with or that they did not make as much mess. He could smell the difference when he went to his friends' houses in the city.

He moved toward the dog again, this time gratefully, and patted the dog's head. Maybe if he let the dog loose, the cats would come back. The boy instantly realized that it was a selfish thought. The cats would be a small price for the dog's freedom. He made a move to set the dog free, but just at the moment his mother came out of the house with the dog's supper. The boy wished that he had thought of this himself. It would have been terrible to let the dog loose without his supper.

His mother patted him on the head and told him that his own dinner would be ready soon. The boy nodded but stayed where he was. It would have been awful if the dog had had to eat out of garbage cans to get his supper like the dogs that the boy saw on his way to school. The boy hated that. He wished that he could feed all the dogs in the neighborhood so that they wouldn't have to eat someone's old potato peels and beef gristle. But the boy knew that he did not have enough money. At eight, he barely had enough to weigh his piggy bank down. On windy days he always had to remove his bank from the sill or he would find it on the floor, the black eyes of the pig staring up at the ceiling lamenting its inadequacy.

The boy sighed. The dog sure was hungry. He knew his mother did not feed the dog enough. An eighty-five pound dog needed more food than one bowl of food a day. It wasn't right. But his mother had gotten mad at him for bringing the dog his own mashed potatoes. The boy had always hated potatoes even though his mother always insisted that they didn't taste like potatoes when they were mashed. He still had stray lumps of potato in his jacket pocket. He was beginning to think that he would never be able to forget about trying to feed the dog his potatoes. The dog hadn't liked them either. That was how his mother had found out. Mashed potatoes don't disappear very quickly from black pavement. The boy smiled. He was glad that the dog didn't like potatoes either- even mashed. The boy bet that the dog also wouldn't like liver. For

that reason, he hadn't tried to sneak it to him. It was not right to feed liver to people who did not like it. The slimy liver residue lasted indefinitely on the dinner plate destroying the taste of the best elbow macaroni.

He wished his mother felt like he and the dog did. But no one seemed to care how he or the dog felt. Anyone could see that the dog needed to run, but his father only took him for a walk once a day. The boy knew that wasn't enough. The dog had so much energy. And the boy's mother wouldn't go near the dog unless it was to feed him or clean up the dog messes. She said that the dog was dangerous. She had wanted to get a poodle. She thought that Dobermans were too much like Pit Bulls. But his father had insisted on a Doberman. No other dog could do it he said. As far as the boy knew his father had been right.

The dog started to his dog house, then turned and studied the boy. It was obvious that the dog was puzzled with the extra attention. The boy thought instead that the dog was looking to him for more food. He looked away with an angry look toward the house. His mother should know better. She was the one always talking about adopting a foster child for twenty-five dollars a month. But his father always made a disgusted face and said there were better things they could with twenty-five dollars. His father disliked those dark kids with the large bellies. But the boy knew though that his mother sent money secretly. He wished that he could do things secretly too, but his parents always found out. He wondered what his father would do when he saw that the dog was gone. Maybe he wouldn't do much. His father had called the dog the boy's when there had been a mess in the driveway last week. Maybe the boy had the right to do with the dog what he wanted. This thought made the boy move again toward the dog's collar.

The dog's short black hair tickled the boy's fingers. The boy looked anxiously toward the house. He hoped his mother was busy, maybe on the telephone. She was on the telephone a lot. The hook felt cold on the boy's fingers in relation to the dog's fur. He slid his fingers around the metal clasp. For a minute, he hesitated. He hoped that the dog would not get lost. It was a large neighborhood. The misgiving was quickly suppressed with the thought of the dog's approaching happiness, and he undid the metal clasp. With his hand still on the dog's collar, he kissed the dog, and hugged him tightly. A tear squeezed out between the boy's lids. He hoped that the dog

would come back. He was his only real friend.

He released the dog's collar from his sweaty hands and stood back feeling miserable at the near separation. The dog yawned and stretched glad to be free from the boy's restrictive arms. He looked at the boy then he licked his whiskered mouth for the last vestiges of his supper. The boy waved his hand slowly and whispered a bye. The dog stretched again and yawned with a high pitched sound. Then he moved toward the side of his dog house lifted his leg, and urinated against the rough boards. He gave the boy another look as if to ask, "Are you through? Is there anything else?" then moved to the front of his dog house, kicked up his hind legs scratching up the grass, went inside, turned around, and laid down resting his pointed nose on his strong paws. The boy stared at him in confusion then walked to the dog house. The dog raised his eyes questioning tiredly, not bothering to lift his head. "You're loose," the boy whispered. "Don't you realize that?" The dog closed his heavy lids with a grunt. There was a gurgle from the depths of his black rounded stomach.

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