

The Dog Who Wanted to Die by Colleen Archer

The Claphams rented the house next door to the Parkers the same week 15-year-old David Parker's father moved out. There had been some strange people renting there before, but the Claphams were the worst yet.

Mrs. Clapham was pale and tight lipped and rarely came out of the house. Mr. Clapham was large and red faced, and on weekends he rarely went into the house. Instead he bellowed and blustered and looked around the neighbourhood for things to complain about – children making too much noise, cars driving too fast, pets running loose. David thought this last complaint was ridiculous since the Claphams' own pet was always loose and was the biggest pest of all.

Just looking at their dog Monty made David sick. Though Monty's stomach was fat and bloated, his legs were spindly. His dull black fur was filled with crusts and scabs, and bald red patches with oozing sores.

The Claphams didn't seem to pay much attention to Monty. Now and then Mrs. Clapham would appear briefly on the back step and set down a bucket full of potato peelings, stale bread and leftover food. Monty would shuffle over to the bucket and eat the entire contents mechanically, as if under some obligation to reach the bottom.

The day after David's father left, Monty was lying on the Parkers' front lawn when David came home from school. The sight of the fat and smelly dog sent the boy into a rage.

"Get away!" he shouted, and stamped his feet. The dog blinked sadly and thumped his tail in dumb appeal. This made David even madder.

"I'm warning you, get moving."

He picked up a stone and raised his arm. The dog stared at the stone and cringed, but he still refused to budge. Then David, who had never deliberately hurt a living thing before, bounced the stone right off the side of the fat dog's head. With a yelp Monty heaved himself up and started slowly away, his tail between his legs and his sides heaving.

It was soon after this that David first noticed Monty's suicide attempts. Every time a car came into sight, Monty would head into the centre of the road and lie down on his side. Soon the neighbourhood became used to screeching brakes, angry shouts, and honking horns. Then there would be the roar of an engine as the driver would give up his futile attempt to rouse the dog and drive up the low curb in front of David's house.

Luck seemed to be with the dog (or perhaps not with him), for despite many close calls he survived day after day. During those days David's anger against his father grew and grew, but he got nowhere in his attempts to turn his mother against him.

"Why did he have to leave?" he would demand. "He had a good job here."

"It's not just a matter of a job," his mother would say quietly. "You know we decided to separate long before he got the supervisor offer. Please David, won't you at least drop him a line?"

Not only wouldn't David write to his father; he also burned the unopened letters postmarked "Ottawa" which came for him twice a week. Whenever his mother called him to the phone, he made sure before taking the receiver that it wasn't his father on the other end of the line.

Tiny Mrs. Parker worked harder than ever as a freelance photographer now she and David were alone. David, on the other hand, stopped working completely and his school marks dropped. His mother was afraid he might even fail his grade.

David came home from school one day in a mood as black as his hair to discover Monty sprawled in the centre of the street but not a car in sight. He picked up a stick and advanced towards the dog. The he stopped as he noticed something unusual at the Claphams'. The curtains were gone from the windows and the lawn ornaments had disappeared from the yard. He went over to the house and peered through the living-room window. The room was bare.

"What're you doing?" It was Alvin Cross from down the road. Alvin was a grade ahead of David at school.

"I'm looking for the Claphams."

"They moved away after lunch."

"But they can't have moved. Their dog's still here."

It didn't occur to David that people could go away and leave their pet behind.

"So call the Humane Society. They'll get rid of him for you."

"Get rid of him?"

"Sure. Who'd want a fat old mutt like that?"

Alvin went home and David was left alone, staring at the dog he loathed – the dog who asked nothing more than quick death. If he called the Humane Society, he reasoned, he'd be doing the dog a favour.

While he was thinking about this, a truck wheeled around the corner and headed towards them, going much too fast for a residential street. The driver saw Monty and stepped down hard on his brakes. The truck screamed to a stop a few feet away from them.

"Get your dog off the road or I'll run right over him!" The driver began swearing at David and shaking his fist.

David knew exactly what he wanted to say. He wanted to say it wasn't his dog and to go right ahead and run over him. Then everyone would be happy. Instead he looked at the man's red face and the dog's limp body and something inside him stopped the words. He got down on one knee and held out his hand to Monty.

"Come here, boy."

Monty rose and tottered towards him, his tail making slow circles, his mouth open. When he reached David he licked the outstretched hand, but instead of responding with kindness the boy grabbed him by the fur on his neck and hauled him roughly into the house.

"How come you're bring Monty in here?" asked David's mother. "I thought you didn't like him."

"The Claphams have moved out."

"Oh," said his mother, and that was all.

Although David had adopted Monty, his attitude towards him seemed unchanged. The dog followed him around, accepting any abuse with a slow wag of his tail and any small kindness with ecstasy. David's mother let him stay because she thought he might rouse David from his despair, but as time went on the boy's mood grew darker and darker.

Mrs. Parker worried constantly about him, but there seemed little she could do to help. She hated leaving him alone, but the insecurity of her job meant she had to teach a class at the community college Monday and Wednesday nights. One Wednesday she gathered her equipment as usual and headed out into the March darkness.

"Be sure to lock the door, David. You know how many robberies we've had on the street this month."

David didn't answer. By the time the old car roared away he was lying on his bed in the dark staring at the shadows.

His room was Spartan by choice, with no posters and no loud colours. On the solid wooden desk, which had once been his father's, there was a microscope and a small aquarium. On the wall was a single shelf with a neat row of books – some science books, and a complete set of Black Stallion novels left over from his elementary school days.

Monty came in to keep him company, but David angrily ordered him out. Although Monty was now kept clean, he was still fat and covered with scabby patches and he made a sorry sight as he waddled dejectedly downstairs.

It must have been a half hour later when David realized there was someone in the house. He could hear drawers being opened in the dining-room, and every few seconds an eerie beam of light played on the hall wall. David felt like his heart had stopped. Why hadn't he locked the door? Why hadn't he left some lights on?

Then there were footsteps on the stairs, and David felt certain he was going to faint. In the dark he couldn't even find anything to use as a weapon. Maybe if he lay very still everything would be all right.

Suddenly a large figure stood framed in the doorway. The flashlight circled the room, and stopped right on David's face.

David was too terrified to scream, and his eyes closed in terror as the arm with the flashlight descended towards his head. There was no pain, however. Instead he heard a low snarl, and when he opened his eyes, Monty was clinging tightly to the jacketed arm. Next David

heard swearing, and he saw Monty drop to the floor and a leg kick out. There was a scuffling sound, and then silence.

By the time David was calm enough to turn on the lights and call the police, the man was gone. Mrs. Parker's silverware lay scattered in the hall and Monty was on his side on the floor, panting heavily and obviously in pain.

It was two kindly police officers who drove David and Monty to the vet's and David told them his story on the way. He hadn't seen the man's face, but the police found hair and fibre samples in Monty's fur, which months later would help them convict a suspect.

The police had contacted Mrs. Parker and she was on her way to the vet's office. Meanwhile David sat on a chair next to the examining table with tears in his eyes.

"What's wrong with him, Doctor? Is he going to die?"

The young vet smiled comfortingly. "Just bruised ribs. They'll be better soon." Then her smile disappeared.

"His general condition is something else. What have you been feeding him?"

"He wasn't my dog until a little while ago!" said David indignantly. "He was fat and old when I got him."

"He's not old, David. He's probably four at the most. He's just a victim of neglect."

David was suddenly humble.

"What can I do for him, Doctor? Can I make him better?"

"You can, but are you sure you want to take it on? It will be a big job, you know."

"What do I do, please?"

"First, here's a powder for the infections on his skin. He also has eczema, so give him cod liver oil every day. And no starch. Dogs have a short digestive tract and they need a concentrated diet. Then there's grooming and exercise. See that he gets plenty of exercise. Now I'm going to give him a couple of needles to protect him against disease, and then you'd better both get home to bed."

Mr. Parker had always said that once David got started on something there was no stopping him. Over the next few months Mrs. Parker couldn't believe she was living with the same boy she had known right after Mr. Parker left. David was up every morning at 6 taking Monty for a two-mile walk. At first the dog moved slowly, but gradually he was able to walk quickly, then trot, and finally run.

Each day after school David groomed Monty. He removed all the mats from Monty's hair with a thinning shears, then he brushed him. For the first few weeks the brushing and combing had to be done very gently because of the sores, but after a month the sores had healed and Monty's coat was shining and soft.

As for food, David watched Monty's diet more closely than his own. Besides oil and rationed kibble and meat, Monty also got hard biscuits to clean his teeth, beef hide strips, and raw rounded soup bones.

All this care cost money, and David knew he should earn it himself instead of relying on his mother. After a lot of searching he found a job delivering circulars for the community's advertising paper. It wasn't much of a job, but it was enough to keep Monty, with a little spending money left over for himself.

When June came, David rushed home with his report card and handed it to his mother.

"Passed with honours," his mother read, and she hugged him proudly. "Come on David, let's go out for dinner and celebrate!"

That same night they were watching a television show when the phone rang.

"David." Mrs. Parker's voice was hesitant, her eyes pleading. "It's for you. It's your dad."

To her surprise, David came forward and took the receiver.

"Hello, Dad?" How are you?" At first David's voice was shy. Then suddenly the words poured out.

"I'm coming to visit you this summer after all. I'll be down on the bus next week. Only for a few days, though. I can't leave my dog for long. I'll have to tell you all about Monty, Dad. He's the best looking dog you've ever seen. Did Mum tell you he probably saved my life?"

David was so busy talking he didn't see his mother smile. Nor did he hear the thump of a well brushed tail on the hard kitchen floor as he spoke the name "Monty" in a voice filled with love.