

# One

By Wayne H. McDowell



“a stray turned up in our neighborhood”

You’ve undoubtedly seen them, perhaps driving to work, or coming home, or going to the grocery store. A dog running loose, sniffing everywhere it runs, probably looking for food since it is so skinny. Obviously a stray, with bedraggled coat and maybe even its ribs showing.

And you have looked away, as I have done, thinking, “I can’t save them all.” Even when you, against your will, think of their eventual and probable fate: starvation, or hit by a car, or captured by Animal Control and sleeping with a full belly for a few days before being...well, you know. “You can’t save them all.”

This is our rationalization, our excuse. After all, did the individual Germans in the 1930s and 1940s say anything or attempt to save their Jewish neighbors and acquaintances as, one by one, they disappeared into Hitler’s finer finishing schools at Dachau, and Auschwitz? No, of course not. They couldn’t “save them all” either. So they too looked away.

But there are times when conscience rears its inconvenient head. There are times when it speaks annoyingly to us, when it answers “You can’t save them all” with the comment, “No, but you can save one.” If the German people had each saved one Jew, the world would be very different place today. And that is when you realize, “No, you can’t save them all, but you *can* save one.”

That was how it started with me. The realization that I was rationalizing, and that I could save one. I could truly do that much, make that much difference.

A couple of weeks ago, a stray turned up in our neighborhood. But, and I have to be honest here, she (and she was definitely female) wasn't your "typical" stray. She was clean, slim but by no means skinny, her nails were trimmed, and there was a faint indentation of the hair around her neck, showing she had been wearing a collar until relatively recently. She was also very "people-orientated." By which I mean she was not in the least bit shy.

Our neighbors have young children, pre-school age, and they immediately took to her, playing with her, and even bringing her into their backyard to play with them and their two dogs. The group was having a fine time of it, and then night would come. The stray would be put out of the yard, the gates shut and latched, and the stray would find shelter where it could.

I imagine the neighbors fed the dog, at least some, and we took to feeding her too. As I have said, she was not in the least bit people shy and would come straight to you, and even act overjoyed to see you, to have a person to react with. The tail would wag so hard that it blurred, she would prance and dance around, so very excited.

I am the moderator of a pet web site, called "Goodpaws.org" and have been almost since its creation by a talented young lady named Dawn who goes by the name of "Squirkie" on the site. A member, a Malinois Shepherd owner who calls herself "malinoismom" posted something by another author called "A Dog's Life, Unfortunately," a short piece about a stray. The post stayed with me, and began reverberating in my head, alternating with "you can save one..."

My two children and I live in the same house as my mother, and we had a dog, a 12 year old West Highland White Terrier named Sally. Sally had spent the past year plus as the only dog in the family, since the death due to old age of our 15 year old toy poodle, Jo-Jo. My mother had been devastated by Jo-Jo's death (as I had been, to be honest) and was determined that there would be "no more dogs." But "A Dogs Life, Unfortunately" and the refrain "you can save one" kept singing their

own siren songs in my head, and I enlisted the willing and eager help of my daughter Nicole to adopt the stray that was hanging around now.

Now I have to explain something here about my mother. She is a hard, practical, and strong woman. She has had to be. She grew up during the Depression and the War Years (WWII) and was divorced with two youngish children at a time when ladies did not commonly get divorced. At least, not down South they didn't. However, all of this is but a shell. Get past that tough outer layer and the inside is marshmallow soft. I wear my love of dogs on my sleeve and happily proclaim my allegiance to anyone that will listen, hers is buried deep inside but burns only slightly less brightly.

And it was mother who first started our feeding of the stray. So I knew the task there, particularly with Nikki's help, was hardly insurmountable. The three of us actually sat down and discussed the feasibility of adopting the dog one night. It was decided that it really wasn't feasible. (There is a story about Lincoln putting a proposal to a vote at meeting of his Cabinet. Lincoln voted for it, the various Cabinet Sectaries, without exception, voted against it. Lincoln then said, "The vote is one for, nine against. The proposal is approved." That sums up Mother's family meetings...)

This occurred on a Tuesday. The next night, Nikki brought the dog into our fence. Mother hit the roof, and I think briefly considered hitting me, for allowing it. The dog went back out. The next day, Thursday, was a draw. Then came Friday.

And this was a Friday in November. It was rainy, and cold. I went to the grocery store and upon my return saw the dog curled up under our hedge in tight little ball, shivering. Keeping "A Dogs Life..." in mind, I dutifully reported this to my mother. Mother then left to pick up Nicole at school, and a few minutes later, when they returned, the dog was brought inside. Not just inside the yard, but inside the house. Towels were run through the drier to warm them up and then they were used to dry

the not-much-more-than-a-pup. Once again, the tail blurred in its motion, once more the dog went into her “happy dance.” The pup, now named “Patches” once more had a home.

We owe our good fortune to God, Who sent that cold rain that melted Mother’s heart, and to the members of “GoodPaws” who rallied around us and pledged (and actually sent) financial aid toward Patches early vet visits, essentially making her an almost free and totally painless adoption.

Patches is part Pit Bull and largely something else. Yes I know, there is a problem with Pit Bulls, Rottweilers, etc., but to my mind, 95% percent or more of the problems with these dogs are not dog problems, but people problems. Teach/train a dog to be mean, and it will be mean, teach one to be gentle, and gentle it will be. I’ve met too many sweetheart Pits and Rotties to believe otherwise. Patches, even at her young age, (only about 8 months according to our vet) believes firmly that all people were put on earth to pet her. There are no strangers in Patches’ world. Just friends she hasn’t met yet. I’m not going to spend a lot of time worrying about the Pit Bull part of her.

So, much to Sally’s disgust, Patches is a member of our family now. That blurring tail will be a fixture here for what I hope will be a very long time to come.

And that little voice in my head is silent now. Because while it is true that you can’t save all of them, you *can* save one. And if we all save just one...