



Going Home
By Gertie Poole

When I was five years old, I remember being in the pet store with my thirteen year-old sister on her birthday. She was happily hugging a black fur ball to her chest and talking incessantly, while I let the puppy in the lower cage lick my fingers. I thought the other puppy would be a great pet, but she wouldn't listen as her heart was set already on the one in her arms. He was adorable, I had to admit. He had a white heart on his chest, one white front paw, and a little white tip to his tail. Other than that, he was solid black and very hairy.

"He's part Old English Sheep Dog," the clerk told us and then he told us the price. We turned our pockets inside out and found that although he wasn't much, we were still a few dollars short. My sister's eyes filled with tears as she hugged the puppy closer and he began to lap away her tears. I don't remember what happened next, to tell the truth, as I was crying right along with her. I automatically cry when she does and I never could figure out why. Someone came up with the additional amount, or the clerk gave in on the price. Well, either way, we had ourselves a new puppy that she named "Lucky" because she felt so lucky to get him.

To say the dog was smart would have been an understatement. Sure, everyone believes they have the smartest dog around and I guess we felt the same way. You only had to show Lucky once how to do something and he caught on and did everything we asked. He knew the difference between her slippers and mine, who to deliver the secret notes to, when the washer shut off and that we would need the laundry basket, and so on and so forth. He became a regular part of the neighborhood and was considered one of the kids. I'm embarrassed to say that when choosing sides for baseball, he was always picked for a team before I was. I have to admit it though - he was a great outfielder and could get the ball back to the pitcher faster than I could.

He'd walk me to school every day and lay outside the classroom door, waiting for school to be over. I shared my sandwich and milk with him at lunchtime and everything was fine until one day when he decided he just needed a little water. He nonchalantly slinked into the classroom, trying not to disturb anyone, and got a hearty drink out of the fish tank. Miss Kenzler tossed him right out on his ear then and told him not to come back inside, which he never did. He wouldn't leave, though, as he knew he had to walk me home.

He had a touch of the wanderlust in him and he would lower his head sometimes and take off running. No amount of whistling or yelling would bring him back, either. He was gone. I tried to follow him once but I never could keep up and where he went remained a mystery for some time. One afternoon, I was sitting on our front steps waiting for him to return, when a River Edge Police car pulled up to our sidewalk. I stood up in alarm as the patrolman got out, walked around the car to the back door, opened it, and Lucky jumped out and ran to me.

"Is Lucky in trouble?" I stammered out, looking very flustered at the police officer.

He waved a hand at me. "Who? Lucky? No, he's not in any trouble. He was down at the station, like he always is around lunchtime, and well, he is getting a little old now. I was going this way anyway, and I thought I'd give him a ride home. We have him on record as a good dog." With a smile, he got back into his car and drove away.

I looked, astonished, at Lucky who just stared at me and wagged his long tail, happy to be home. I wondered whether to tell Mom or if that would have gotten Lucky in hot water.

We grew up together, he and I. I saturated his fur more than once with my teenage heartbreaks, and he would always comfort me sympathetically by washing my face. I remember that he didn't know a thing about algebra and looked as frustrated and confused as I did when I was doing homework. Every time I opened the car door when I inherited my dad's old Rambler, I had a co-pilot. When my mother was ill, as she often was, he would stay with her and make her smile.

After thirteen years of taking good care of us, which was old for a dog his size, he went to his reward. It wasn't so much what he had done when he was alive that makes him a hero, as what he did afterwards. Seventeen years after we had lost Lucky, I found myself sitting in my mother's hospital room, trying hard to compose myself as the doctors shook their heads compassionately at me. Mom was dying and she didn't have long to be with us. In the wee hours of the morning, I was still sitting by her side, holding her hand. It was very quiet and she was asleep. I turned to her as she roused one last time before slipping into a coma. She squeezed my hand and chuckled a bit. I saw a radiant smile come over her face, as she said her last words to me.

"Well, waddya know? Here comes Lucky!"

I remember smiling at that, as the tears rolled down my cheeks. Once again, Lucky had come to us when we needed him the most. I could see in

my mind, Lucky running excitedly to meet her. Do our best friends wait patiently for us on the other side? I'll be honest, I don't know. I'd like to think so. I know there's no doubt in my mind that Mom saw him, and it would be just his way to comfort her and make sure Mom made it safely home.