



NOT LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

By Donna D. Zeilman

It was a bleak February day and a quick glance out the window next to my desk showed that it was snowing yet again. I cursed the flakes as they fell. I was both frantic and heartsick, a feeling any animal lover who has lost their beloved companion will understand. My dog Dougherty, who I had adopted as a pup, had been missing for over two weeks and although he was a hearty Rottweiler, Doc was now almost ten and was not used to being outside in bad weather. More snow came down as I stared. It was so cold outside. Why couldn't I find him?

My anxiety increasing, I dragged my attention back to my computer screen and clicked on yet another shelter listing for a found Rottweiler in New Jersey. As the picture on the pet locator website slowly unfolded and I saw that it wasn't Doc, I immediately clicked onto the next one. My heart quickened and then plummeted as I read the description. "Ten year old, male Rottweiler found in North Jersey." Trouble, as he was being called by the kind neighbors who had temporarily taken him in, was left behind when his owners moved. The picture filled in and a photo of a handsome dog with sad eyes filled my screen. It was not Doc. "Sorry Trub," I murmured and clicked to the next listing, " but I'm looking for Doc." As I searched, I kept reviewing how Dog was lost.

Doc had been sleeping at my ex-husband's house, in a small town in southern New Jersey when someone had tried to break in. My ex-husband had arrived home to find a smashed window, an open door and no sign of

our Doc. Had Doc, ever the guard dog, chased the intruders away and then became lost? Had he himself been the target of the break in since nothing else had been taken? Doc did not look his age; in fact, he appeared years younger than ten. He was also beautiful; black and tan in color and 135 pounds of pure muscle. Was it possible that he had been taken to participate in dogfights or to be bred? Was he wandering around, scared and confused or had he been driven away in a car? The questions were numerous and I didn't have any of the answers. And so with the help of my husband, my ex-husband and his girlfriend, the search went on.

Day after day we split up the tasks. We walked the shelters, even going as far as ones in the surrounding states. We posted flyer after flyer, did mass mailings to all of the veterinarians in the phonebooks and placed advertisements in the local papers. We drove around daily, calling his name out the open car windows until our voices were hoarse. In between, I posted his most recent pictures on the internet and with the help of innumerable compassionate people in the animal rescue community, Doc's story and likeness were passed up and down the entire east coast. I prayed, I cried and I worked, but Doc could not be found.

February had passed into March and after almost a month of constant searching, Doc was still missing. Slowly we began to force ourselves to cut back on the time that we devoted to looking for him so that we could attend to our daily lives. But every day I continued to do one thing to find Doc, whether it was a new mailing, posting more flyers or making a repeat visit to one of the shelters. And each night, I checked my email and scoured the pet locator/adoption websites in the hope of seeing Doc's face staring out at me.

It was during this time that I found Trouble's sad eyes looking back at me from my computer again and again. People in the animal rescue community were not only trying to find homes for the animals in their care, they were also striving to match the lost with their owners. I have no idea

just how many people reached out to help Doc, but I received via email and phone many leads on possible matches each day. And Trouble kept coming back to me.

For weeks, it became a standard response for me to email back my thanks to a query about Trouble with a statement such as " This guy is not Doc. I've been told that his name is Trouble. I hope that he finds a good home, but I'm not looking for Trouble, I'm looking for Doc. Here's a picture of him. Please let me know if you see him."

Then one night at the end of March, things came to a head. Arriving home late, I found numerous messages on my home phone and on my email notifying me that a ten year old Rottweiler found in New Jersey was being taken to a shelter to be put down. A plea had gone out over the Internet from the animal life saving group sponsoring the pup for someone to please step in and save him. Again, as the picture unfolded on my screen, I saw that it was not Doc; it was Trouble and he had run out of time.

As I left my standard response to these messages, I found myself wishing the same hope that I had held now for months. Let there be people out there that were working as hard to find Doc his home as these rescuers were working for this dog Trouble. And if Doc could not find his way back to us, let there be someone who would look beyond the negative stories of his breed and his old age and love him the way that he deserved. It was then that it finally occurred to me. Maybe it didn't matter that I wasn't looking for Trouble. Maybe Trouble was looking for me.

And so it was on a damp and chilly weekend in early April that my husband, stepson and I found ourselves taking the two-hour drive to visit Trouble at his foster home. Trouble, at first sight, was nothing short of imposing. Although smaller than Doc and obviously suffering from slight malnutrition, he was still 110 pounds of pure muscle and looked more than capable of living up to his name. Trouble was also much darker than Doc

with only small splashes of rust on his muzzle and paws. He seemed to be having a problem with his right eye, which he blinked often and rubbed with his paw. With his good left eye, he watched me warily as I approached, his ears flattened to his head. I was nervous and so was he.

The three of us took turns gingerly petting Trouble as Mr. Chila, the neighbor who had temporarily taken him in, related his story. Over the last few years, Trouble had lived down the street from Mr. Chila. Kept chained outside in all weather, and ignored by his family, Trouble had gotten in the habit of getting loose and running away to Mr. Chila's house where he would be fed and petted by Mr. Chila's children before being taken back home. One day, Trouble's family told Mr. Chila that they were moving and taking Trouble to live at a relative's house several hours away. That was the last that Mr. Chila has seen of Trouble's family, but Trouble returned to Mr. Chila's door only a short time later. Mr. Chila said that he didn't really know what had happened to Trouble, but it was obvious from the length of time that had passed without any word from Trouble's family that Trouble had not become lost, only forgotten.

I looked down at Trouble's paws and couldn't believe what I saw. His toenails were worn down so far into his paws that they couldn't be seen! This poor dog had obviously walked countless miles from where he had been left to return to the only people in his life who had shown him any love. Unfortunately, the Chila's were a large family, who already had multiple pets. Trouble could not stay with them.

As I petted Trouble, my nervousness disappeared. Although he showed signs of an abused animal, Trouble had no hate or anger in his heart. He would play ball in the yard with abandon and then hesitantly approach us, eyes downcast, head drooping to the ground waiting to receive any small praise that we would give. When it came time for our visit to end, I knew

that I couldn't leave this brave boy behind. To me, Trouble had more than earned himself a forever home.

During the next month, Trouble overcame many obstacles as he adjusted to his new life with us. He became housetrained in two weeks and learned all of his basic commands in even less time. On his initial vet visit, we learned that the problem with his right eye was that the lid had grown inward so that it was constantly irritating the eye. This condition had been left go so long by his previous owners that much of Trouble's eye was covered by brown scar tissue. Trouble had surgery for his eye and was also neutered.

Although Trouble quickly improved physically, the emotional sores took longer to heal. Pictures from those early weeks show a dog whose expression can only be described as stricken. In the beginning, Trouble bonded only to my stepson, and me while showing great fear of my husband. If one of us raised our voice or hands, even in play, he would cower and shake. Over time though, he came to adore my husband and his other behaviors all disappeared. Trouble has become not only a happy dog, but also a spunky one who runs about the house, tossing his toys in the air and daring us to play.

It's the end of July now and almost six months have passed since my sweet Dougherty went missing. He has been neither forgotten nor replaced. His flyers still hang in many veterinarian offices, his picture and story are still posted on the Internet and my husband and I still respond to several leads every month. Doc is a part of my family and needless to say he is forever in my heart.

Yes, the scars from losing Doc are still there. I have now come to the conclusion that he must have been stolen. How else could a dog of his size, so widely advertised as lost, just disappear? When I think of this, I am consumed with hate toward the people who took him. But it is then that I

look to Trouble for inspiration. Trouble too has his scars, both physical and emotional. He was neglected and abused for years by the people he trusted the most and then finally just dumped off somewhere to die. And yet, now he has not only healed, he is happy. I am humbled by his ability to forgive and love again. This lesson has been his gift to me.

I look out of the window as I finish typing this story and watch the sun rising behind the trees in my yard. In another couple of hours the heat will be unbearable out there. This does seem to be a year for extremes. But right now, the morning looks just perfect for a long walk. Smiling, I push myself away from the computer and head downstairs to look for Trouble.