

Instincts

by Kathryn A. O'Donnell

It was a cool fall Saturday afternoon, the aroma of overripe apples and maple leaves wafting through the air. The sky was overcast and moist and smelled like rain.

Walking across a field of dried cornstalks, shotguns leaning against their shoulders, Dawson Sprague and Jim Pringle heard a dog yelp, not the bark of an excited dog, but the gut-gnarling cry of an animal in pain.

"Is it one of ours?" asked Jim.

"No," said Dawson. "That's an old dog."

The two hunters quickened their pace, knocking down stalks and kicking up clods of dirt as they made their way toward the distressed cries.

At the edge of the field, along a forest of mature trees bare of their leaves, Dawson and Jim found the dog, a beagle whose muzzle was nearly white from age. When she spotted the strangers, she tried to get away, hopping on three legs, her crippled hind quarters tripping her as she crawled through the undergrowth.

The hunters, best friends since childhood, were heading home after a successful day; they each had two ring-necked pheasants in their vest pouches. Dawson's three Brittany spaniels, dogs that slept with their master in his twin bed, had gone exploring to burn off excess energy not spent on the day's hunt.

Handing his shotgun to Jim, Dawson stepped ahead of his friend, removed his brown jersey gloves, and dropped to the ground on his knees like a Boy Scout making a campfire.

"Easy girl," said Dawson, offering the back of his bare hand to the beagle's face.

"That's a good dog."

He crept closer to the dog lying on her side and petted her head. With his other hand, he felt the bad leg for injuries.

"I don't see any cuts or thorns in her pads," he told Jim who hunkered beside his friend. "I think she's just got arthritis in her old bones. Look how gray her muzzle is."

The commotion brought the spaniels. They sniffed the beagle and headed back to the fields.

"She's in such bad shape that they know she's no threat," said Dawson.

Soon an old man in his eighties came through the woods, hatless and out of breath.

"Is she your dog?" asked Jim rising up to meet the man.

"Yeah," he said. "That's my Ruby. I've been looking for her all day."

"You must not live far away," said Dawson. "This dog can barely walk."

The old man pointed toward the woods where he came from.

"She's in god-awful pain," he said. "Cries in her sleep. Won't eat."

His hands were shaking and his chin quivered. He had a bloody scratch across his cheek and a rip in his plaid flannel shirt from walking through the brambles.

"I can't stand to see her like this," he said. "I was going to shoot her and put her out of her misery, but she took off before I could get my gun."

The old man bent down, his joints as stiff as the dog's. He stroked the beagle's head and a tear dripped off the end of his nose.

"Will you do it for me, son?" the man asked looking at Dawson. "Shoot her? End her suffering? I don't think I can do it now."

"Sure, mister," said Dawson seeing the pain in the man's face. "I'll take care of her."

The man pulled the dog to his chest, hugging it like a child, nuzzling her ears with his nose, tearfully saying goodbye. He reminded Dawson of his grandfather who taught him about dogs and hunting.

"You've been a good old girl, Ruby," the man said rocking the dog in his arms. "I'm gonna miss you."

While he was saying his goodbyes, Dawson rested his hand on the old man's shoulder to comfort him. When he was ready, the man set the dog down on the soft dirt and slowly got up, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Thank you, son," he said. "Bury her good and deep so the coyotes don't get her."

"I will," said Dawson. He knew about the coyotes. He and Jim had shot two the prior fall near the same woods.

The old man scrambled through the trees, not looking back at his dog.

"I'll follow him home and get a shovel," said Jim. "You take care of her while I'm gone, and I'll be back to dig the hole."

Jim leaned Dawson's 12-gauge pump against a tree and took off after the man.

"Take your time," said Dawson.

Gathering an armful of leaves and moss, Dawson made a bed in a sunny opening created by a break in the clouds. He carefully lifted the beagle and placed her in the nest. She whimpered; he winced.

"Sorry old girl."

Dawson took off his camouflage hunting cap, rubbed the feel of the hat from his head, and laid on the ground next to Ruby, close enough for his beard to pick up a dried leaf.

He spoke to the old dog as he stroked her head. Her eyes were the color of hickory nuts flecked with tiny specks of yellow, pretty eyes, eyes untouched by cataracts. Dawson

touched her nose. It was dry and crusty, warm with fever, not wet and cool like a healthy dog's. Her dull coat was coarse and wiry, not smooth and velvety like a pup's, the brown and black fur patches diluted by gray bristles as sharp as the spines of a scrub brush.

She thumped her tail at Dawson's touch.

You still have a bit of spunk. I bet you were a good rabbit hunter when you were young.

"Let's take a little nap, old girl," said Dawson lying beside the dog. "I won't let anything bother you."

Dawson's amputated leg ached from the prosthesis rubbing against the flesh of his stump, and he was glad for the chance to be off his feet. It was two years since bone cancer was discovered and his leg removed below the knee. Hunting with his dogs and best friend allowed him to forget for a few hours that he wasn't a whole man. *We're a lot alike, Ruby, you and me. Both of us with bum legs.*

He continued petting and stroking the beagle, scratching the back of her ears, rubbing her belly, warming her sore hips with his big hands. He slowed his breathing to match hers.

As Ruby's trust increased, her body relaxed. She closed her eyes, opening them occasionally to make sure Dawson was there.

"I'm here," he whispered.

Dawson gently lifted her lips and looked at her gums. The flesh was white, almost milky, not pinkish. Pale gums were a sign his grandfather taught him to look for. *It won't be long.*

"That's right, Ruby," he said. "Rest. Let the pain go. Sleep until it's gone."

By the time Jim returned with the shovel an hour later, Ruby had died. Dawson was sitting up, his legs straddling her body, his face as serene as a Madonna.

"What'd you do?" asked Jim. "Break her neck?"

"Of course not," he said. "She just died."

Jim dug a grave for the dog in the place where she had died. When the hole was as deep as Jim's thigh, Dawson curled up Ruby in a fetal position and laid her into the grave, facing her head toward the east. The two men filled in the hole and Dawson covered the mound with the moss and leaves of the nest.

"The old man is expecting to hear a shot," said Jim. "He needs to know it's over."

"I'll fire into the air," said Dawson racking in a shell with a sharp action. "I couldn't have shot her with the 12-gauge. The pellets would have blown her to bits."

He pointed the barrel to the sky and pulled the trigger. The blast brought his birddogs from the fields. They nosed around for a pheasant, found the fresh dirt instead, and soon gave up the hunt.

"I'll go back and tell the man his dog is dead and buried," said Jim. "Take the dogs and I'll meet you at the truck."

A couple of days after Christmas Dawson was reading a Louis L'Amour novel when Jim invited him to rabbit hunt at his uncle's farm in Alpena.

Dawson, 28-years old and never married, taught junior high math and science at the same school system he and Jim attended as boys. He jumped at the chance to get away during the holiday break.

"Pack your heavy coat," said Jim. "We'll look for freighters on Lake Huron."

Dawson and Jim arrived at the farm in the early evening, stiff and tired by the long drive north on slippery roads. A foot of snow had fallen on Alpena during the day, and more was expected during the night.

"The hunting won't be any good with all this snow," said Dawson. "The rabbits will be holed up."

Jim and Dawson trudged through the snow to the barn to help Jim's uncle with his evening chores.

The unpainted wooden barn was weathered but solid and softly lit by single light bulbs down its main aisle. In the corner, shielded from the wind, was a pen filled with straw and warmed with a heat lamp. Jim's uncle stood near the pen. Earlier in the afternoon, he had dried thirteen newborn piglets with a bath towel and was putting them under the lamp after they had nursed on the sow.

Dawson walked around the barn looking at the livestock bedded down for the night. While Jim spoke to his uncle, Dawson overheard them speak of cancer. He stayed on the other end of the barn, not wanting to answer any questions about his health. He feared just talking about cancer could bring his back from remission.

"Hey, Dawson," called Jim. "Come here and take a look at this dog."

In the pen next to the piglets was a Collie lying in a pile of burlap sacks.

"I think Ginger has cancer," said Jim's uncle pointing to her distended abdomen. "She's been acting funny, ever since I had her fixed. It's like she doesn't want me around. I don't know what to think."

That's the cancer they were talking about: not mine, but the dog's.

Dawson leaned over the pen. The dog was maybe a year old. Through her long thick fur, she appeared to have a tumor on her abdomen. She didn't even bother to lift her head as the men talked about her. Until Dawson saw her leg twitch, he wouldn't have believed she was breathing.

"Jim told me what you did with the beagle this fall," said the uncle. "Are you some voodoo guy or medicine man?"

Dawson looked at Jim and shook his head, thinking his friend was a fool.

Come on, Jim. Is that why you invited me to come here? Why doesn't your uncle take his dog to a vet? He can afford it. I'm already a freak with a fake leg. Now I'm a freak with a label.

Meet Dawson, doctor of dog deaths.

"I didn't do anything special with that dog," said Dawson facing the uncle. "I just talked to it."

The wind picked up and blew through cracks in the barn's walls. Snow fell heavily, and the men decided to go inside while they could still see the house. They wrapped Ginger in the burlap sacks and carried her into the farmhouse. The uncle made a pot of vegetable soup while Jim and Dawson settled in for the weekend.

After dinner, Jim and his uncle went upstairs to bed. Dawson stayed with Ginger near the woodstove to warm a deep hurt in his leg.

Too much exercise trudging through the deep snow.

Rubbing the soreness from his limbs and watching the Collie's spasms, Dawson thought about the old beagle that died in the fall. He didn't really know what happened that day. *Was it anything he said or did that helped her to die?* From his grandfather and his own experiences, he had learned a lot about dogs over the years, but her passing surprised him. Then he thought about Jim's comments to the uncle. *Maybe I do have a gift for easing the pain of suffering animals.*

Dawson was bothered about the dog in front of him. He couldn't confirm that she had cancer and was near death. Most likely it was just a fatty tumor and it was her other symptoms that made everyone think she was dying. Without knowing for sure, he could only speculate. He was hopeful that her young age would be in her favor and she would get better on her own. *After all, dogs get the flu just like humans.*

While the others slept, Dawson laid out some newspaper on the bare living room floor near the woodstove. He spread sleeping bags over the paper to form a pallet. It reminded him of deer camp, the hunters sleeping wherever they found an empty spot on the cabin floor.

“Here, girl,” he called to Ginger, patting the bedroll, inviting the dog to sleep with him.

Ginger wagged her tail and rose from the burlap sacks in the kitchen. After circling Dawson’s pallet several times and dragging the edges of the sleeping bags into a pile with her front paws, she flopped down in the center of the nest.

“Hey, we’re supposed to share,” laughed Dawson patting her head, “but that’s okay. I can find another sleeping bag.”

The storm dumped another foot of snow on the farm during the night, clogging the main roads and stranding everyone in their homes.

For two days Dawson stayed with Ginger, playing with her when she was frisky, occasionally going outside with her in the frigid air when she relieved herself, often just napping with her on the floor. As active as she was, he began to believe she was getting better.

By the third day of Jim and Dawson’s winter getaway, high winds blew the snow in giant drifts across open fields and roads. The snowplows wouldn’t attempt to clear the roads until the wind died down, and the men were forced to stay on longer than they had planned.

During the night, Ginger started whining, loud enough to wake Dawson. He found her shivering, noticeably in pain. He thought the tumor was bigger than the first time he saw it, and it was giving her greater discomfort. She should be seen by a veterinarian, but he knew it would be impossible to get to town for at least a day. If the dog hadn’t died by

morning, Dawson decided he'd put her out of her misery. For now, he'd do his best to comfort her.

Dawson got up and threw some blankets in the dryer. He covered Ginger with them to warm her body and stoked the fire in the woodstove. It seemed to help with her trembling, but not with the pain. The dog still whimpered.

As with the beagle, Dawson stroked Ginger's copper and white fur, carefully avoiding her tender side and belly. He scratched around her ears, petted her back, and spoke quietly for more than an hour. She still periodically writhed in pain, an ache that sometimes doubled her up. There seemed to be no relief for the Collie. Dawson was heartsick.

Although it was still night, the room was lit by the reflection of the snow on everything outside. Dawson watched Ginger's eyes follow his every move, trusting his actions, silently asking whether she would suffer much more.

"I'm not going to hurt you, girl," said Dawson, tucking another warm blanket around the dog.

The warmth allowed her to finally relax. Ginger slept, woofing quietly in her dreams, moving her legs as if in chase.

Dawson dragged his sleeping bag next to Ginger's and was soon asleep. The man and dog were both exhausted.

Just before daylight, Dawson woke with a start. Ginger was digging up the bedroll. So intense were her movements that her paws tore up the layer of newspaper under the sleeping bags, her toenails scratching the wooden floor to get every scrap of paper. Ginger was panting so heavily that Dawson thought she was having convulsions. *I can't stand this much longer.*

When she settled into the pile of paper and blankets and exhaled, Dawson thought she had taken her last breath. Turning on a lamp to get a better look, he got up, expecting to see the dog dead on the floor. Instead, Ginger was curled up, only her long snout and eyes visible above the ridge of the deep nest. She was alive, her eyes locked in fear, the bulging pupils as black as the sooty logs in the woodstove. Her breathing was shallow and quick, her eyelids blinking in between breaths like she was afraid to keep her eyes closed for long.

Dawson let out a sigh, his eyes as bugged out as Ginger's. *Let it be over quickly.*

"Easy girl," he said soothingly, trying to cover his own fear. "It's okay. I won't leave you."

As Dawson approached Ginger, she gave a short yip and immediately jumped up, like someone had shocked her with a cattle prod.

Is she having a heart attack?

Turning around to see what caused the pain, Ginger discovered her puppy, warm and wiggly, the first of six she would whelp that morning.

As Ginger licked the afterbirth and cleaned herself, Dawson knelt on the floor. With all the experience he had with pregnant dogs, he should have recognized Ginger's condition. Despite Jim's uncle saying she was spayed, it was obvious something failed during the procedure, and the dog had found herself a mate.

He was embarrassed. He felt as if he had let Ginger down. He wanted to touch her mewling puppies, but didn't dare put his hand near her babies until she accepted him.

As if Ginger understood his feelings, she thumped her tail, laying her muzzle on Dawson's thigh. Humbly, he patted her head and stroked the first-born puppy.

After a few minutes, Dawson stepped away to leave the new mother alone with her babies. He laughed at his own arrogance thinking he had everything under control and

realizing he didn't. There wasn't anything special he did for either Ginger or the beagle earlier in the fall. They were God's creatures guided not by him and his knowledge and experience, but by the forces of nature and their own instincts.

Dawson lay back down on his pallet and rubbed the stump of his leg. His instincts told him that nature had plans for him as well. The pain he'd been having for months probably meant another fight with cancer.

He closed his eyes and listened to the puppies taking their mother's milk, instinctively drawing in life as nature intended. Soothed by those sounds, Dawson fell asleep.