

Comet's Tale

How the Dog I Rescued
Saved My Life

Steven D. Wolf with LYNETTE PADWA



"Absolutely delightful!
A very good book about a human
whose life is transformed by a
greyhound. Makes me want to
adopt a greyhound right away!"
—JEFFREY MOUSSAIEFF MASSON

How the Dog I Rescued Saved My Life

STEVEN D. WOLF

with Lynette Padwa



ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2013

FOR FREDERIQUE,

a wonderfully rare woman who brought exceptional meaning to what is often considered a passé
promise—*In sickness and in health.*



CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[PART I](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[PART II](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[PART III](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[READER'S GUIDE](#)

[An Interview with the Author](#)

[Questions for Discussion](#)

[About the Author](#)

PROLOGUE

MARCH 2000—ARIZONA

It was just past 8:00 a.m. and the road winding through the foothills north of Flagstaff was deserted. The spring air was chilly, but I rolled down the window anyway, letting the fragrant scent of Ponderosa pine rush through the car. Every so often a vista would open up and the snowy peaks of Mount Elden would appear, etched and highlighted in the sharp morning sun like a woodblock print. Then the road would curve away, the view would close, and I'd lean forward, searching for the turnoff to the foster family's ranch.

Finally I saw it—a weather-beaten two-story house with a high-pitched roof and covered porch. It sat on a parcel of flat, grassy land the size of a football field, entirely surrounded by a high post-and-rail wire fence. I parked outside the gate and slowly got out, gripping my canes and bracing for the pain in my spine. Breathing hard, I leaned against the car. The air was still. At the far end of the field I glimpsed a spot of movement. In the same instant I noticed a faint rhythmic beat, like distant drumming. The spot moved closer, my eyes adjusted, and a pack of greyhounds materialized, jettisoning around the inside perimeter of the fence. The drumbeat deepened to thunder. A few seconds later they streaked past me, thigh muscles bunched, hind paws stretching toward shoulders, mud flying in their wake, individual dogs blurring into a mass of muscle that flowed like mercury.

Thrilled, I watched them rocket away, racing for the sheer exhilaration of it. *Just like children,* I thought. *Kids set loose on the first spring day after a long winter.* I could almost detect laughter.

"We never grow tired of watching," a woman's voice called from across the muddy field. I had been so focused on the greyhounds that I hadn't noticed the young foster mom ambling toward me, her hands shoved in the pockets of faded blue jeans. "So glad you decided to drive up after all," she said when she reached me. "I'm Kathy. Come on, I'll introduce you to the pack."

As soon as we turned back to the house, the dogs veered in our direction. Within seconds I was surrounded by panting, jostling greyhounds. The group seemed to contain every shade in the animal kingdom—soft fawns, striking brindles, deep reds, bold black-and-whites, and the famous steel grey often referred to as blue. Their only common marking was the white patch on each dog's chest. The hounds nudged and bumped each other as they vied for my attention, but the competition was friendly. No growling or biting. It reminded me of my yearly reunion with my own pack of cousins.

After weeks of hemming and hawing about it, I had come here prepared to adopt, but I hadn't realized what a pack of greyhounds really meant—the number and variety, each dog an individual with its own full-grown personality. It wasn't like choosing a puppy. Kathy and I stood in the yard watching them for a half hour, but no single animal stood out as "mine." At last, with some hesitation, I pointed out a fawn-colored hound who flitted on the fringe of the group. "What about that one?" I asked. The dog's caramel eyes were lively, and she struck me as a feisty yet refined lady who might be easy to live with and also play well with others. It was just me here in Arizona, in exile from my family back in Nebraska, where the winters were too cold for my degenerative back condition. Still, any dog would have to interact with our rowdy pair of golden retrievers when I returned home for the summers.

"Let's see how she does indoors," said Kathy.

It was warm and snug inside the house. A sofa and a few comfortable chairs were pushed back against the living room walls, leaving plenty of space for the greyhounds to romp. In a far corner stood a black wood-burning stove, heat shimmering around it. I made my way to the sofa and awkwardly settled in, letting my canes drop to the floor in front of me.

The fawn-colored racer pranced over to me, ready to play. She executed a short jump, landed directly in front of me, and lowered her head, inviting me to pet her. I stroked her gently, surprised by the wiriness of her sleek fur. She wagged her tail and I scratched between her ears.

“What would I need to do if I were going to take a dog home today?” I asked. While Kathy talked about adoption fees and vet care, I wondered what treats I could buy for my new pet. Did greyhounds like liver or did they prefer lamb?

“Then you just write a check and the hound is yours,” Kathy finished.

I hesitated again. A little voice inside my head—my wife Freddie’s voice, to be exact—protested. *Are you out of your mind? You cannot seriously be considering adopting a greyhound. You can barely walk. How are you going to walk a dog? A racing dog?*

As I struggled to bury Freddie’s questions, a flicker of movement behind the woodstove caught my eye. I turned for a more direct look and saw a lanky figure tucked on top of a thick blanket. The shape was partly camouflaged, blending in with the black stove, but I could make out a slender head resting on two front paws. The glint of reflected light in the dog’s eyes let me know she was watching me.

“Is that greyhound yours?” I asked.

“No, she’s part of the rescued group,” Kathy replied. “But she doesn’t want to socialize with the others. She’s sort of withdrawn. It’s like she’s depressed. We haven’t been able to coax her out of her shell.”

“Is she ill?”

“Not ill, but she was abandoned and left in a crate with her muzzle still on. She tried to scrape off to get food and water, so her mouth got infected. Her teeth were in terrible shape. We had to have several of them removed.”

I felt a genuine ache. While the other dogs celebrated their new freedom, this poor animal sat alone, unwilling to join in. What a shame.

With a shake of my head, I returned to the task at hand. “I have one question before I announce my coming-home party,” I said, stroking the neck of the fawn-colored girl in front of me. “What’s her name?”

Before Kathy could respond, a weight plopped into my lap. My eyes snapped down in surprise. A greyhound had leaped onto the couch beside me and laid her head on my thighs, focusing her gaze on my face. The cinnamon and black striped markings on her sculpted, muscular form made her look like half tiger, half dog.

“I can’t believe she just did that!” whispered Kathy.

“Who is this?” I asked.

Kathy stepped toward us but stopped a couple of paces away and softly said, “We call her Come Home. This is the one from over by the fire.”

My skin popped with goose bumps. A buzzing tickled my ears, and my fingers tingled as I stroked the dog’s head. She nestled deeper into my lap but otherwise didn’t move.

I was not a novice to the world of dogs. I grew up spending summers on a farm where I worked and played with all sorts of dogs, from shepherds to terriers to the typical Heinz 57 farm mix. Most of my adult life I had kept dogs as pets, and I knew that unless canines were angry or scared, they approached humans in various stages of doggy excitement—sniffing, wagging, smiling, curious and eager to please, always alert to the possibility of a treat. Dog body language was a cinch to read.

Except this time. This dog simply lay still, her eyes focused on mine. She alone knew her reason. She had analyzed the variables, drawn her own conclusions, and decided to cross the room and quietly place her head in my lap. But in that quiet, a message reverberated: *Hello. I am Comet. I choose you.*

PART I

“You think I should retire,” I said, slowly repeating Tim’s bombshell. “You think I should leave the firm. Is this some kind of joke?” My partners sat stiffly in their high-backed chairs, their faces impassive. With enormous effort, I kept my voice low and controlled. “You might be frustrated with my unorthodox work schedule, but all my files are up-to-date and my cases and revenue are in line with those of every person in this room.”

“It’s not about any of that,” Tim said evenly. “We’re tired of wondering if you’re okay. We can’t plan for the future. We can’t anticipate. And because you’re squeezing a week’s worth of work into the three days you *might* make it into the office, we’re frantic about you missing deadlines and committing malpractice. How are we supposed to deal with your cases if suddenly you don’t show up anymore?”

“Who said I’m not going to show up?”

“Look, Steve, we don’t know what’s going on with you. But one thing’s certain: you’re a physical mess. You can’t keep doing what you’re doing. You’re killing yourself, and we’re not willing to risk everything while we wait for the funeral.” He glanced around the table and each of my partners nodded.

The office was deserted by the time I left. I rode the elevator down to the parking garage and tottered to my car, still trying to process the news. They can’t fire me from my own firm! *Can they?* I clambered into my SUV and merged uncertainly into the traffic on Dodge Street.

The western edge of Omaha quickly faded in my rearview mirror as I headed toward the rural lakeside village where I lived with Freddie and our daughters. The area hadn’t changed much since it had been Pawnee hunting ground a hundred years earlier. Majestic eighty-foot cottonwoods, with trunks as big around as a pickup truck, populated the banks of the nearby Platte River. To the west, rolling hills of corn unfurled to the horizon. The drive home had always felt like real-life time travel, and it was my favorite part of the day.

But lately the half-hour commute had become an hour-long grind, not because of traffic but because my back would spasm if I sat for too long. Each journey was my own private Lewis and Clark expedition—frequent stops with a lot of walking around looking at the ground. Today was no different. After one such break, I slowly straightened and found myself locking eyes with a red-tailed hawk perched high in an ancient hackberry tree across the road. His dark stare looked hungry. Predatory.

“I’m not roadkill yet,” I said out loud, returning to the car.

At home, I opened the garage door with the remote. Two blond balls of fur raced to greet me, leaping in circles and yelping, their tails thumping against the car as they spun.

“Sit!” I yelled out the window, desperate to exit. Cody, the golden retriever I had rescued from a puppy mill for the price of a broken shotgun, immediately slammed his haunches flat onto the concrete. His daughter, Sandoz, continued her whining, whirling dance and promptly stomped Cody’s paw. His low, pointed growl convinced her to sit down next to him. Then both dogs turned to me.

Cody's lolling, dripping tongue couldn't hide his smile. In his pale face, whitened by age, his black eyes and nose stood out like coals on a snowman. Sandoz squirmed and wiggled next to him like a schoolkid who urgently needed permission to use the restroom. "Careful," I warned, and they managed to stay put until I was safely inside the house. But despite myself I, too, was smiling, once again warmed to my core by these friends.

As I sank onto the couch, the dogs lay on the carpet in front of me. As usual, they strategically placed themselves in the exact spot I needed in order to stand and walk away. Escape was impossible without some type of physical contact, which I knew was the point. But today, instead of sighing contentedly and shutting his eyes, Cody studied my face closely, ears perked. No doubt he detected the disgraceful stench of failure.

"What's wrong?" My wife stood in the doorway, her face pinched with concern.

"They kicked me out."

"Oh, Wolfie. *Je suis désolé*," she said, reverting to her native French. "But you saw this coming. Didn't you?"

"No."

She sat down next to me, taking my hand and lifting it to her cheek. "What choice have you given them? They don't have a clue about how bad you really are, because you won't tell them. And the doctors have been warning you to slow down, anyway." I patted her knee but I couldn't look at her.

In the next few days, I learned that in spite of my denial and avoidance during the past year Freddie had done some thinking about the inevitable. "The doctors say that you're dramatically worse during the winter months because the cold won't let your body relax. And the nonstop stress of your job doesn't allow your mind to cope. The only way we're going to get through this is if you get away from here during the winter, which will also allow us time to emotionally deal with everything." I was puzzled by the emphasis on the words *we're* and *us*. This spinal condition was my problem, not Freddie's. The whole point of my relentless work schedule had been to shield my wife and daughter from the consequences of my illness.

"We could sell that lot in Arizona," Freddie was saying. A few years back we had bought a parcel of land in Sedona. "We could use the cash to buy a small house there, where you could live for the cold months. You always said you felt a healthy energy flowing through all those red rocks."

I know we discussed money—how could we not have, given the drastic slash in income that was to come? And I hazily recall the paralyzing anxiety we both felt about splitting up. Freddie could not leave her job managing the hospital cardiology unit she had helped establish years earlier. For one thing, she loved it, and for another, she was now the sole breadwinner of our household. She and the girls were my last life preservers, and if I moved to Arizona they'd be twelve hundred miles away. There were tears, lots of tears. But there are two things about that week that remain vividly etched in my mind: the totally overwhelming sense of shame, and the reassuring wetness of my dogs' noses pressed against my palm.

ONE WARM NOVEMBER day, about six weeks after I had been deposited in Sedona, I pulled into the parking lot of Weber's IGA supermarket. I kept these excursions to once a week, since it was getting harder to reach for food and push the shopping cart around. Leaning heavily on my canes, I slowly waddled across the lot. My tortured progress took me in a crooked line toward a small

commotion on the nearby sidewalk. I toddled to a stop and straightened to see what all the fuss was about.

A group of people were crowded around a slim blond woman. Edging closer, I saw that she was holding the leash to a dog, and it was the dog that had captured the crowd's attention. Not that the animal seemed to notice. His pose was proud and indifferent—if he wasn't exactly bored by the admiration, he was certainly accustomed to it. He stood about forty inches tall, his head level with the woman's hip. His skull was elongated, tapering to a delicate muzzle. Both ears were perked in the same sideways direction above a small forehead. Oversized almond-shaped eyes serenely surveyed the group. The dog's sleek fur was black with a stippled reddish hue, and his deep chest rose steeply toward a thin, almost dainty abdomen. He was extremely narrow and lean, his ribs visible beneath the fur. Sharply defined muscles popped from his haunches, but his front legs were slender. All four legs ended in large, finely boned paws that sported long toes with thick black nails. The paws were slightly suspended above black pads, creating a distinct athletic appearance, like a basketball player bouncing on the balls of his feet. A slim tail sloped straight down from the dog's rear and ended in a small tuft slightly above the sidewalk.

"What kind of dog is that?" I asked the woman.

Smiling, she said, "This is Lance. He's a greyhound. I'm Maggie McCurry."

"Sorry," I stammered, feeling like a recluse who'd forgotten how civilized folk behave. "I'm Steve Wolf. But I go by Wolf. It's nice to meet you."

"You, too," Maggie replied. "Wolf. I'll remember that. Almost everyone around here knows Lance, but very few of them remember my name. I guess Lance is pretty distracting."

Entranced, I extended my hand toward the dog and allowed him to investigate my scent. "Is Lance always this quiet and laid-back?"

I had never met a greyhound in person. My only knowledge of them came from snippets of television footage I had glanced at while channel surfing. I assumed the breed was a bunch of skinnier hyper racing dogs. And I don't know why, but I was sure they were placed on the intelligence scale next to a bucket of hair. My mental image certainly had not included the amazing specimen standing in front of me.

"In general, greyhounds are calm to the extreme and very sweet. In fact, they're known as the couch potatoes of the dog world," said Maggie. As she talked, Lance leaned into her legs.

"Couch potatoes?" I started to ask another question but realized that Maggie probably preferred to get on with her day. "I must be holding you up."

"No, no. That's all right. I'm involved in greyhound rescue, so I like to tell people about the dogs. These racers have a rough life. At about four months of age, they're placed in a crate. After that, they rarely get any attention except to train or race." Maggie's voice softened and she patted Lance between his ears. "As a result, the racers only know how to act around other greyhounds or the trainers. Most don't know how to play or defend themselves. They don't even know how to climb stairs. They're strangers to the world outside their cages and the track."

"How long are they kept like that?"

"Well, they typically race for only one or two years. If the dogs don't win quickly and often, the owners don't want to spend one more dime on their food or anything else. At that point, they're just a

expense that needs to be eliminated. Rescue and adoption groups have been formed to keep the dogs from being killed. We really need people to adopt them.”

I instinctively stepped back, sensing a hard sell coming my way. Maggie picked up on it and laughed.

“We’d better get going. So long,” she said.

“Right. Bye,” I replied lamely.

Lance led Maggie through the parking lot, his muscles flowing and his spine articulating with each step. The languid movements reminded me of a cheetah.

The next day was rainy and cold—not Nebraska cold but chilly enough to keep me inside, immobile, and drowsy from pain medication. The rain pelted the concrete slab outside the sliding glass doors, and gas flames waved in the fireplace. I smiled at the thought of a sleeping greyhound warmed by the heat. *Do they ever miss racing? I wondered. Are they truly content being still? Are they strong or incredibly fragile, or both?*

AFTER FOUR MONTHS in Sedona I became more accustomed to fending for myself, but I never got used to how long it took me to do everything. When I lived at home, Freddie and the girls had always been quick to pick up items I dropped, and if they weren’t around, one of the goldens was happy to help. Because I required two canes to walk, I often needed a hand opening doors or an arm to grasp if I had to climb steps. It was only now, without that help, that I realized how much I had depended on them. I had always thought of myself as the original lone cowboy, the guy everyone else leaned on.

Even answering the phone was a hassle. Freddie and the girls usually called at night, so I was surprised to hear it ring early one February morning. After a hectic search that left me panting, I finally retrieved it.

“Is this Steve Wolf?” asked a female voice.

“It is.” I sat down to catch my breath.

“Hi, Steve. My name is Anne. I’m part of the greyhound rescue and adoption effort here in Sedona.”

Uh-oh. I had almost forgotten that a few weeks earlier, Maggie had cajoled me into filling out an application to adopt a greyhound. I had run into her and Lance at the IGA again. This time Maggie was fund-raising for her rescue group, Wings for Greyhounds. She owned a small plane that she piloted around the Southwest, retrieving greyhounds who were in danger of being disposed of by their owners. She then transported the hounds to foster families. Maggie told me she had recently helped rescue a group of dogs that had been abandoned at the Tucson racetrack. I was so moved by her story that I agreed to fill out the adoption application, but I had no intention of actually bringing a dog home.

“Good news,” Anne was now burbling. “The greyhounds rescued from Tucson were placed with a foster family on a ranch outside Flagstaff. The rescues responded and are successfully socializing.”

“Excellent,” I mumbled. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks!” With a hint of hesitation, Anne continued, “The greys all received veterinary treatment—their teeth were fixed and cleaned, shots brought current, and all were spayed or neutered.”

I could tell there was more, but I interrupted, “I really am happy about this, Anne. But I’m not feeling so great. May I call you another time?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just wanted you to know.”

I cleared my throat and prepared for good-bye. “Wait!” Anne almost shouted. “I also wanted to give you the phone number of the foster parents. You were approved to adopt, and I wanted to give you the first opportunity.”

No point in arguing. I jotted down the number and address and got off the phone.

I went back and forth about the whole outlandish idea over the next several weeks. What was I doing? Why would I lead these people on? I didn’t need any more hassles in my life, not to mention the fact that if I got a dog, Freddie would feed me to the fish. She had been at me for years about saying yes to every request and taking on too much.

Beneath all the uncertainty was fear. It was natural to be leery of the unknown, of course. How would a new dog fit into our family? What would happen if the greyhound just wouldn’t socialize? But those weren’t the issues that were making me so anxious. I was mad at myself for being a coward. I was afraid that I was no longer capable of taking care of anyone but myself. I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to cope with complex tasks. I was afraid that pain would keep me from caring for a dog who urgently needed love and attention. More than anything, I was afraid I would fail again.

At the same time, everything I had learned about these racing dogs and their survival tugged at me like spring mud pulling at my boots. I knew that life was revealed mostly in shades of gray, but my upbringing had also taught me that certain issues were black or white, right or wrong. Killing healthy dogs in the prime of their life because they don’t make enough money is wrong. When you have the chance to right a wrong, in whatever small or large way, you have a duty to step up and do it. But that was the source of my conflicted feelings, I could simply volunteer to help with fund-raisers.

My attraction to greyhounds was something much deeper than duty. From the first time I saw Lance, sunlight sparking off his smooth coat while he calmly surveyed the world around him, my gut detected an attitude, a wisdom—an aura, if you will—that was Zen-like. I was left with the impression that Lance did not waste any thought or effort trying to correct the past, because he was too busy enjoying the moment. The softness of his eyes whenever he leaned for comfort against Maggie was proof he had moved on. That Lance could so obviously love a human being after being treated like a piece of meat was profoundly touching.

My head told me one thing, but my heart fought back. One evening, as I sat in my recliner weighing the pros and cons for the hundredth time, I wearily thought, *Oh, to hell with this*. I tossed a sleeping pill into my mouth and took a sip of water to wash it down. For some reason a quote by Henry David Thoreau flashed into my mind: “To be awake is to be alive . . . We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn.” That sudden thought rattled me. It made me realize how desperately I wanted, *needed*, to believe that the sun would keep coming up every morning. And I had a very strong hunch that the greyhounds could help.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to take a look,” I said to the walls.

One week later, I found myself sitting on the foster mom's couch, looking into the face of a cinnamon-striped greyhound.

"Comet seems to have made the decision for you," Kathy said. And with that, the greyhound went to mine.

If Comet's boldness inside the foster family's house had surprised me, I was equally startled by how willingly she jumped into the back of my SUV. Then I remembered that Maggie had told me racing dogs are transported in trailers. As we left the ranch, Comet remained standing, staring out the windows like a little kid on a school bus.

"I know you're not used to being able to see out," I said, wanting to get her accustomed to the sound of my voice. "But with your long legs, you're going to need to lie down before we start going too fast—it's easy to lose your balance."

Sure enough, as we rounded a sharp bend in the road, Comet fell down. She immediately jumped to her feet and shot me a hurt look, as if I had just played a mean joke on her. In very short order she lost her balance two more times, jumping up each time, unwilling to stay on the carpeted floor.

I pulled to the shoulder of the road and tried to soothe her. "It's okay, Comet. It'll take some practice before you get the hang of it." I may have sounded relaxed, but I was beginning to sweat. How could I get her to lie down? I wasn't flexible enough to climb around in the backseat and maneuver her into the right position. If I opened the rear hatch, I was afraid she'd bolt past me and be gone. But if I did nothing she was going to get hurt; the road back to Sedona was forty miles of mountainous twists and turns.

Fortunately, I had brought several blankets with me. I limped to the back of the SUV, balancing on one cane with the blankets thrown over my shoulder. Very slowly, I opened the hatch. If I weren't careful, I could lose this dog. Then, as if I needed another test, a truck went blasting past and the wind jerked the hatch door out of my hands, leaving me eye to eye with Comet.

"Whoa, girl. It's okay," I said softly. She just stood there looking at me with a touch of amusement. I reached out, petting her head and trying to offer reassurance. By all outward appearances Comet didn't need it, but I sure as heck did.

When my heart stopped pounding I began to gently pull on Comet's front legs, telling her to lie down as I helped her onto the blankets. She resisted, so I massaged her ears for a minute to calm her down. Finally she slid to the floor, and I quietly shut the hatch. Comet comfortably reclined on her blankets during the rest of the trip home.

The sky was growing dark when I finally pulled into my driveway, clipped a leash onto Comet's collar, and coaxed her through the front door. The moment she stepped inside, her long nails clicked sharply against the tile floor and she shot straight up in the air like a frightened cat. *What was that noise!* The dog had never walked on tile before. She scrambled another frantic step and leaped straight up again, looking terrified. Stifling my laughter, I quickly ushered her onto the carpet in the green room, wondering what sort of creature I had adopted.

Exhausted and not knowing what might set her off next, I led Comet to my bedroom, where I had placed a large wire dog cage. Since racers spend most of their life inside crates at the track, I hoped the cage would offer some type of security while providing a familiar place to rest—and this one had a nice soft cushion. Comet dashed for it like a ballplayer sprinting for home plate. I left the cage open but closed the bedroom door so she wouldn't make another shocking discovery while I was asleep. After giving her plenty of food and fresh water, I settled onto my own bed and shut my eyes.

The room was pitch dark when I woke up several hours later. I rolled onto my side, trying to see the clock.

“Holy crap!” I yelled and jerked back. Comet was staring at me from the side of the bed, utterly silent. She appeared to be more curious than afraid. My startled response didn't faze her. Then, without any visible effort, she glided off the floor and onto the bed, barely causing a stir in the mattress. She stood next to me for the briefest moment before simultaneously sliding her front legs forward and folding her back legs under her until she was sitting down. I spent the next half hour talking to her, telling her who I was and explaining the mess she had gotten herself into.

“You would not believe this, Comet, but I used to be an athlete, too.” My spinal degeneration had first been diagnosed when I was sixteen, and supposedly repaired at that time with a fusion. I went on to earn two college sports scholarships, for football and baseball. Back pain had flared up intermittently since then, but I had always managed it with bed rest and willpower. Just two years ago I had been in the best shape of my life. I was even training for a triathlon. Then, during a lunch-hour basketball game at the YMCA, I had stumbled after a ball and couldn't get back up. I had to be carried from the court and taken directly to the hospital. The doctors there informed me, “Your back's a mess. You've got dehydrated discs, bone spurs, and stenosis. And the bone around your old fusion has become deformed.” The remedy? There was none. “It can't be fixed. Surgery would only help with part of a very complex problem, if it helped at all.” I was forty-three years old.

Comet shifted to her side, stretched out, and shut her eyes. “So that's the story,” I murmured as I softly stroked her flank. “To be continued.”

During the first few days at my house, Comet encountered many curiosities. The television confounded her. For minutes at a time she would stand directly in front of it, watching the action with a tilted head and unblinking eyes. Then she would push at the screen with her nose. Finally, after not receiving so much as a wave from the tiny characters, she abandoned her attempts at communication.

Darkness brought different mysteries. The second night we were home, Comet suddenly rushed from the kitchen into the great room and squeezed behind my recliner. Odd. The next night she did the same thing, and I got a little worried. I sat down in a kitchen chair and called for Comet to join me. She crept out from behind the recliner and stood in the great room staring at me but refused to enter the kitchen. The house had an open plan, with the kitchen's sliding glass doors visible from the great room. I saw her wide eyes repeatedly looking at the glass doors, then back to me. Maybe it was something outside. I went and stood next to her, determined to spot the demon. The darkness of the covered patio had created a shimmering, exaggerated reflection of Comet in the glass, making her look like I had another dog in the backyard. I laughed when I saw the reflection, and Comet nudged my leg, letting me know my humor was not appreciated. Properly chagrined, I tickled her ears, saying, “That is scary, Comet. I'll make her go away by closing the curtains.” Problem solved!

Some of Comet's reactions were unlike those of any dog I had known. For instance, my golden retrievers hated it when I left them at home, but Freddie assured me that they moped only until they caught the scent of a new adventure. When I returned, their greeting was a massive celebration primarily because they had forgotten I was gone. Comet took it much harder. She soon realized that when I grabbed the keys from the peg by the garage door, it meant I was leaving. Instantly the sparkle in her eyes would vanish, to be replaced by a lifeless wooden stare that reminded me of one of the deer heads mounted over a fireplace. Her tail would droop between her legs and she would turn around and slowly walk off, never once looking back at me, like a prisoner on death row. Maybe she acted that way because when she was left in her crate at the track, she never knew when or if her trainer would return. Eventually she was abandoned. Comet was probably convinced this life would be more of the same. I only hoped she would soon understand that I would always come back, and that her life had truly changed.

THE ADOPTION APPLICATION had hinted at many of the unique challenges a new greyhound "parent" might encounter. The dogs' upbringing made them brilliant at racing but stunted in terms of human interaction, sort of like canine aliens. They would require a lot of TLC and would need to be taught social skills that the average pet absorbed by growing up with a family. Greyhounds couldn't be kept in an outdoor kennel, because their low body fat made them extremely sensitive to heat and cold. They needed a place to run on a regular basis. As comprehensive as the application was, however, it didn't spell out the daily trauma of a racer's life, which could have a permanent impact on the hound. I uncovered those details on my own, using the nascent Internet.

My interest was piqued when I spied what I thought was a birthmark inside Comet's right ear. I looked closer, and saw that it was a faint tattoo: 11-8-C. She pulled away from me when I tried to glance at the longer markings in her left ear. Racers are identified by those tattoos, I learned. A dog's registration number is tattooed inside its left ear. The numbers and letters inside its right ear indicate its date of birth and order within the litter. (Comet was born in November 1998, third in the litter.) So for the first two years of her life, Comet didn't have a name, only a number. It was a far cry from the pedigreed show dogs with their aristocratic titles.

I was certain that I had seen greyhounds in the Westminster Dog Show, which I watched religiously every year. But it turned out that most greyhounds never enter the mainstream world of families or dog shows. A few are registered with the American Kennel Club (AKC) and compete at events like Westminster. However, the great majority of greyhounds are bred and raised as racers and registered as such with a different organization, the National Greyhound Association (NGA).

What are racers? They are the same greyhound in style, appearance, disposition, and ability as nonracers, but because they are registered as property of the racing industry, they are commonly raised like livestock. Greyhounds are treated more like cattle or hogs in a 4-H project than like beloved family pets. It's true that many racing-dog owners are kind to and admire their greyhounds, in the same way that a rancher is kind to and admires his brood stock. It's just that from birth, racing greyhounds are seen as a commodity: raised, bought, sold, and even slaughtered as the economies and the gambling industry dictate.

In an average seven-puppy litter, only a few are tattooed (by three months) and registered (by eighteen months). In the days before rescue, the dogs that were not registered were presumed dead.

destroyed because they were deemed unsuitable for the track. Of the registered greyhounds, some are held for breeding purposes, and the rest enter the racing cycle. It takes only a few races to pick out which dogs have a future as winners and are worth pampering. The “losers” are transported from racetrack to racetrack in tiny cages built into trailers, where they run the risk of dehydration, weight loss, and injury. The only reason the losers are kept around anyway is to give the featured racehounds bodies to compete against. The trainers spend as little as possible on their upkeep.

The animals that survive the travel are forced to live in wood-and-wire crates at the track. The crates are stacked one on top of another and don't have enough room for many of the larger animals to turn around or to stand with a raised head. Their only creature comfort is the shredded paper on the floor of the cage. Crowding so many dogs into such a small space causes extensive flea, tick, and worm infestations. The greyhounds are often muzzled for the twenty or more hours a day they spend in this spartan confinement. Sometimes they are able to drink, but not to eat, through the muzzle. They are mainly fed cheap “4-D meat”—meat from diseased or destroyed animals, which can't be used for human consumption. Their only exposure to life outside their prison comes when they are released a few times a day to relieve themselves and to train.

Throughout most of their four-thousand-year history as human companions, greyhounds have never been trained to race in a circle competing against other dogs. They were initially bred to run long distances over varied terrain in order to chase down game such as deer, which provided food for the owners. When racing on a short oval track with a lot of other greyhounds after being confined and mistreated, bad things are bound to happen. Hips and legs are shattered. Spines are severed. Brains are scrambled. And dogs are electrocuted by the charged inner rail that operates the bunny lure.

Even if a racer survives these risks, the dog's long-term prospects are grim. Hounds who never place in the money far outnumber the winners, and even the winners will start losing one day. Most of the losers are three years old or younger. Because food and care cost money, no racing kennel wants to keep them around. Since greyhound breeders produce tens of thousands of dogs every year, it's easy to obtain a replacement. The president of the Pensacola Greyhound Association summed up the industry attitude when he said, “That's just a bad part of the business, unfortunately. I compare it to owning a professional sports team. If you have one of your star players who isn't putting out, then you have to make other arrangements.”

The “arrangements” are what lie at the end of the road for hundreds of thousands of greyhounds. Some are killed legally by veterinarians hired by the dogs' owners. I suspect that the vast majority of vets would never agree to or condone euthanizing young, healthy dogs, but you can be sure there is someone at every track who has no such qualms.

Then there is another option, known within the industry as “going back to the farm.” A man named Robert Rhodes operated one such farm—eighteen acres in rural Alabama where he admitted to shooting thousands of greyhounds during his forty-year career in the racing industry. An aerial photograph revealed an estimated three thousand greyhound skeletons scattered around his property. Rhodes, a security guard at a Florida track, said dog owners and trainers had paid him as little as ten dollars per animal to dispose of their greyhounds.

Something similar had happened in Arizona. In 1992 the rotting corpses of 143 racing greyhounds were found after the bodies had been mutilated and scattered in an abandoned citrus orchard. After

shooting the dogs, the killers had cut off the tattooed ears, hoping it would prevent them from being identified. Good police work led to the discovery of some of the ears, and an Arizona breeder and kennel owner was convicted for his part in the massacre. He was fined twenty-five thousand dollars, sentenced to thirty days in jail, given eighteen months probation, and ordered to perform four hundred hours of community service. Compare that to the punishment of Michael Vick, the professional football player who in 2007 was convicted of animal cruelty and served a twenty-three-month prison term for his part in a dog-fighting ring that resulted in the deaths of several pit bulls. The disparity between those two sentences may point to how differently “pets” and “livestock” are valued.

In addition to the massacres, there are a multitude of documented cases where greyhounds have simply disappeared. Thousands have been “donated” to medical research, and many more have been transported to other countries. Advocates for the Greyhound Protection League say that twenty-five thousand is a conservative estimate of the yearly number of greyhound killings that occurred during the racing industry’s heyday from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s.

“If there’s anybody to be indicted here, it’s the industry because this is what they’re doing to these animals. The misery begins the day they’re born. The misery ends when my client gets ahold of them and puts a bullet in their head.” That is how Robert Rhodes’s attorney attempted to defend his client’s actions as late as 2003. The defense was ridiculous, but his observations about the industry were on target. A racing greyhound’s misery does begin the day the dog is born. However, owing to growing public awareness, greyhounds are being rescued and adopted in ever increasing numbers. By 2008, eighteen thousand retired racers were being placed with families each year. Unfortunately, that still left seven thousand hounds who were needlessly put to death. While the numbers might be fewer today, the percentages haven’t necessarily improved.

Watching Comet asleep at my feet, I tried to erase the image of this gentle creature being raced, abused, starved, and abandoned. I could not predict how well she would adapt to her new world, but I could do my best to ease her into it slowly.

When I first brought Comet home I had been concerned about getting her socialized, but as it turned out, I was the one who needed lessons. Comet's insatiable curiosity about all sights, sounds, and smells in the neighborhood included every human being we passed on our walks. I had carefully cultivated a self-pitying solitude all these months, returning my neighbors' greetings with a curt nod of my head. Not Comet. She didn't gush over people like the golden retrievers did but instead approached them like a well-mannered foreign diplomat. First she'd observe from a distance, giving the neighbor ample time to size up the elegant dog and her less stylish owner. After a few moments, Comet's curiosity would get the best of her. With that unique greyhound dignity, she would stroll over to the neighbor, her head held high and her eyes so wide and inquisitive that the person would melt on the spot. Within a week I was on a first-name basis with all those neighbors I had so stubbornly avoided.

That was how I met Bill and Jana. Although my backyard adjoined theirs, I had made a point of not engaging in any extended conversations. But shortly after Comet's arrival, while she was gleefully poking her long nose into the dozens of mole tunnels in a nearby vacant lot, Bill called out to me, "What's that your new dog?" I wasn't totally over my pity party, but neither was I rude enough to simply nod and turn away. Who could blame Bill for wanting to meet Comet? It wasn't long before I found myself joining him for a drink and a cigar on his patio and then accepting Bill and Jana's dinner invitations.

I was pleased with the way Comet was settling in, especially after some of the horror stories I had heard about other rescued greyhounds. Some could never adjust to the noise level out in the real world. Like a deaf person whose hearing has been restored for the first time, they were overwhelmed by the onslaught of everyday sounds. In the same way, the background activity of normal life caused some greyhounds to become so anxious that they would regularly try to hide in the dark or run away. Other greys had trouble adapting to different dogs or to children because they didn't understand how to playfully join in.

The most tragic tales involved greyhounds who ran away, not because they wanted to but because they were compelled to. The dogs can spot moving objects up to a half mile away, so if they see a distant cat or squirrel, their chasing instincts—reinforced at the track—immediately kick in. If not restrained by a leash or fence, many greyhounds are gone within seconds, and they don't know to stop until they're thoroughly exhausted. With no remaining energy and no experience finding their way home, the dogs are lost. Even worse, they're not used to traffic and don't understand that cars and trucks are dangerous.

Perhaps Comet had so few problems because of the gradual way she had been acclimated to normal life. She had several months at the ranch, and then I adopted her. Life with me was slow, to put it mildly, and there were no other adults or children around to distract her or complicate our routine. Whatever the reasons, Comet displayed an uncanny ease and graciousness with the neighbors.

What surprised me the most those first weeks was how little actual training Comet required. I was used to teaching a dog through discipline and commands. *Sit, fetch, come here, lie down, no.* That was

the dog learned what you wanted and what behavior was expected. In contrast, Comet learned intuitively. She watched how people, especially me, talked and acted. After several days, I realized to my astonishment that she was doing most of this observation while I thought she was asleep. A greyhound's speed requires an incredible amount of energy that must be available at a moment's notice. Greys are not endurance runners who rely on fat for extra stores of fuel. The only way to ensure that the energy will be there when they need it is for the dogs to rest when they're not running.

But resting is not sleeping. Within just a few days of surreptitiously listening to my phone calls and hearing me talk to friends and neighbors, Comet could detect what mood I was in by the tone of my voice. When we were on a walk and I said, "Slow down," she could tell whether I was amused by her excitement or in pain from exertion. If I was in pain, she would wait and patiently walk by my side. Comet's tranquil demeanor was a welcome change from the boisterous goldens and their sweet but exhausting need for attention. She was always alert, even when resting, yet she rarely barked. I was starting to think she was a cat in a dog's body. It seemed she was always watching me, sizing me up as a potential student rather than the other way around.

Just when I would get carried away thinking Comet must be a guru in disguise, able to sense my moods and impart the wisdom of the ages, she would remind me that she was first and foremost a dog. And most dogs are crazy about kids. When Comet met Emily, the red-haired little girl next door, it was love at first sight. The two of them bonded instantly, nuzzling and communing on a private dog/kid wavelength while I dawdled at the other end of the leash. Within days they had struck a deal. Emily and Comet would get together three times a week for an after-school walk. My only role involved paying Emily a stipend.

At the first scheduled walk, I tried to explain to the excited ten-year-old the unique qualities of a retired greyhound.

"Comet is a racing dog—she's been bred to chase things, especially animals that are running away from her."

"Got it."

"If there's a sudden quick movement down the block, she's going to be off like a rocket, so you've got to hold on tight to that leash."

"Got it."

"She doesn't know how to find her way home like other dogs do. She could be lost in an instant."

Emily nodded impatiently. "Can we go now?"

Chuckling, I nodded back. She grabbed the leash from my hand and marched out the front door calling, "We'll be back in a jiffy."

Her words swirled in Comet's jet stream as the greyhound shot through the open door before Emily got a chance to attach the leash.

"Uh-oh," she whispered.

Comet was gone. I frantically hobbled to the sidewalk shouting her name, and neighbors quickly joined me in a frenzied search. Shouts of "There she is!" and "She went that way!" sailed across backyard fences. But at forty-five miles per hour, "that way" could be Flagstaff in a flash.

An hour later I returned to the house. Flustered and dismayed, I limped through the still-gaping front door, snatched the keys from the kitchen counter, and headed for the garage. I would continue

the search in the SUV. It was going to be a long night.

I was just about to leave the room when my vision snagged on a pair of black ears sticking straight up from a sleek triangular head. Comet was outside, peering in through the sliding screen door. Her amused expression asked, *Where have you been?*

That night I sat half dozing in my recliner, bone-tired and intensely relieved that I wasn't out driving around Sedona. Comet lay on the floor in front of me, her rib cage rhythmically stoking her contented fire. Poor Emily had been almost as traumatized by the day as I was. Comet, however, seemed fine.

ABOUT TWO WEEKS after I brought Comet home, the phone rang just as the sun was dropping behind the nearby cliffs. It was Freddie.

"What's that sound?" she said in response to my hello.

"What sound?" I nervously replied, glancing at the sliding glass doors in the kitchen.

"That noise. It sounds like a barking dog."

"Oh, that. The neighbor's dog is outside. The weather's gorgeous, so I opened the doors."

"What's wrong with your voice?"

I noticed the higher pitch and corrected. "Might just be some early spring pollen." Grabbing my canes, I hustled across the room to pull the curtains on Comet's reflected twin, which had materialized as the sky darkened.

"So how are you and the girls doing?" I huffed. "Tell me everything."

"*Woof woof woof!*" Comet barked three quick warnings—totally out of character for her.

"Where are you? That barking sounds like it's in the house." An edge of skepticism crept into Freddie's voice.

"The neighbor's dog. He's standing by my door," I stammered.

"Which neighbor?"

My mind went blank. I had only known the neighbors' names for a week, and I couldn't recall a single one of them now.

"Steve?" *Wolfie* was Freddie's preferred name for me. *Steve* was not.

"Steve, are you still there?"

A good trial attorney is a good storyteller. I knew the same skill was not as highly valued in matrimony, but I scrambled for a persuasive tale anyway. No luck.

"Yes, I'm here," I finally admitted. "That was my dog."

"Your what?"

"I have a new dog. There's this greyhound adoption agency, and—"

"Wait! What? Did you say greyhound? As in 'racing dog?'"

I felt a head softly brush against my leg.

"How long have you had this dog and when were you going to tell me?"

The floodgates burst and I launched into a breathless monologue. I started with Maggie and Lancelotti, proceeded through Flagstaff, and ended at the sliding glass door. "Comet thinks the reflection is some sort of ghost. She hardly ever barks," I concluded hopefully.

I could hear Freddie breathing heavily, trying to stay calm. "But, Wolf, a *greyhound*? How in the world are you going to care for a racing dog? I can't—I just can't even fathom it."

“Comet chose me. What was I supposed to do?”

“How about not going up there in the first place? *C’est vraiment con!* I thought you told me you have a hard time shopping for food and you never even cook yourself a meal. I worry about you a night. Meanwhile, you adopt a racing dog! I’ve got to go. I’m too pissed off to talk to you now.”

Formidable. In French it means terrific, in English it means fearsome. Both described my wife. Twelve years earlier I had met this petite, dark-haired woman while on vacation in Scottsdale, Arizona. In a thick and unrecognizable (to me) accent, she had introduced herself as “Frederique, but most people call me Freddie.” She told me that she lived in the United States but had been raised in France. I was entranced by the way Freddie spoke and looked—the warm olive skin, boyishly short haircut, hazel eyes, and quick, startlingly bright smile. She was full of life, ready for any dare. When we exchanged phone numbers and realized that we shared the same Nebraska area code, I could almost hear the swell of an off-screen orchestra.

Freddie and I dated for two years before marrying and moving in together along with our children, my young daughters, Kylie and Lindsey (their mom lived in Omaha and we shared custody), and Freddie’s two-year-old girl, Jackie. The five of us settled into the house on the lake where my daughters and I had been living. Despite some initial clashes, we eventually melded into a new family. Freddie was exuberant, smart, and not at all shy. When she was around the girls, she managed to restrain her penchant for swearing. Was cursing a national pastime in her country? If so, I didn’t mind. *Merde* sounded so earthy and poetic.

Freddie’s boldness was fine when in service of her *joie de vivre*. It could turn a little rough when she got stressed, and to be fair, things had been stressful for several years. I didn’t really blame her for her harsh reaction to Comet. I just needed a little more time to make my case. After several tense conversations, my wife and I struck a compromise. I would not immediately return “the mistake,” Freddie called Comet. In a few weeks Freddie would come to Sedona and meet the greyhound. Once then, if she still thought “the mistake” was a mistake, would I drive Comet back to the foster family.

On a warm April afternoon Freddie arrived via the airport shuttle—a godsend for me, the Phoenix airport being a four-hour round trip from Sedona. She entered the house and set her carry-on inside the door. Several days seemed to pass during the next few moments as Freddie spied Comet, who was sitting stiffly next to the fireplace like a statue from Tut’s tomb. The greyhound eyed us cautiously. My wife’s face softened infinitesimally as she said, “It is sort of pretty.” Then, before I could exploit any potential weakness, Freddie kissed me and said, “Let’s talk.”

We sat at the kitchen table. Comet moved toward my chair to lie down. First her slender front legs buckled, and then her haunches sank until her rear made contact with the floor. Her front paws inched forward until her deep chest touched the ground, and finally, when her entire body was stretched out, her head very gently came to rest between her paws, and her large eyes closed. The slow-motion performance always reminded me of an old building being demolished.

“That was different,” said Freddie. “Now tell me why she shouldn’t go back.” Encouraged, I rushed to fill in the details about Maggie, Wings for Greyhounds, and the treatment of retired racers. Freddie was mildly interested in the flying taxi service, and her face registered shock when she learned of Comet’s condition at the time she was rescued. But she zeroed in on the foster family ranch, interrupting my story to point out, “So the greyhounds actually have a perfect home on the

ranch, with lots of room to run, which is what they like to do.”

“But it’s only temporary,” I objected. “The family can’t keep all the dogs they foster.”

Freddie sighed and got up, heading for the bedroom. I followed. Spring sunlight warmed the pillows. Comet trotted in after us and, with a flicker of movement, leaped onto the bed and stretched out. Eyes closed, body relaxed, her pose signaled snobbish disinterest in our guest.

Freddie sat on the bed and reached for Comet’s face. The greyhound’s liquid eyes snapped open and she glared at Freddie with an expression of hurt and confusion. A loud, low-pitched growl curled in Comet’s throat. Freddie instantly jumped up. “What just happened?”

“No, Comet,” I said in a stern tone. I walked to the bed, gently pushed Comet onto her back, and stroked her belly. In the same firm voice I repeated, “No,” several more times. I was well aware that dogs are hierarchical animals who vie for position within the pack. It was essential that Comet accept Freddie as her superior. Comet rolled to her stomach as I sat next to her. She snuggled her body next to mine and tried to bury her cold nose behind my back. Freddie softly asked, “Has she done this before?”

“No. It’s just that you weren’t part of the original deal. Maybe this is too much too soon.”

To Freddie’s great credit, she immediately understood. “Poor thing. She’s scared, isn’t she? Why don’t we leave her alone and let her get used to having someone else in the house.”

Late that afternoon, Freddie and I sipped wine on the back patio. I caught up on news about the girls and grilled Freddie about the spring arrival of eagles and herons, the number of neighborhood gloves the goldens had picked off the snow over the winter, and the activity on the lake as boats were returned to their lifts. Freddie had questions, too. She asked about the not-so-tidy house, my worsening limp, and my wince whenever I got to my feet. In the growing darkness, the biggest question descended like fog: with my health steadily declining, how was I going to care for myself, much less a greyhound?

As if to lift this blanket of uncertainty, Comet slipped out to the patio and stood about ten feet away from us, proper as a debutante. Her soft eyes regarded us for a brief moment, and then she seemed to make a decision. She glided forward to a quiet stop directly in front of Freddie. Comet stretched to full height and tilted her head forward, her ears angled to the side. Her eyes focused on Freddie’s, and she waited. I have witnessed this ritual countless times since, and I am always struck by its intelligence and purpose. The formality of the greeting seems to slow time and relax the person to whom it is directed. It is a near-human gesture, an armless hug.

“I think Comet likes me!” Freddie declared.

Soon after that introduction, my wife informed me that Comet’s decision to join the family was a great idea. Freddie also made it clear that my part in this whole venture was highly irresponsible and bordered on lunacy. I was very lucky the end justified the means.

Much too soon, Freddie prepared to return to Omaha. The ladies, new best friends, eagerly anticipated their next meeting. As she waited at the front door for the airport shuttle, Freddie advised Comet, “Be patient with Wolfie.” Then, after a pause, “Keep an eye on him for me.”

The shuttle delivered Freddie to my doorstep again in the first week of May. During her brief absence, spring had arrived in Sedona. Electric blue rosemary flowers in my front garden buzzed with bees, and the tangy scent of new sage drifted across the yard. Walnut-sized quail chicks waddled in the lac shadows of a manzanita bush, as momma quail encouraged a quicker pace. A twelve-foot agave standing bursting with fuzzy yellow nest-shaped blooms towered overhead. Freddie stepped from the van and stood for a moment admiring the desert diorama. She inhaled deeply, then hoisted her luggage from the back of the shuttle and headed for the house. I stood in the shadowed doorway, wishing I could leap to the sidewalk and grab those bags from her hands. While I balanced on my canes, Comet spun in gleeful circles behind me.

“Wolfie! Comet! Hello!” Freddie shouted, laughing as Comet squeezed past me to greet her. It was a scene straight from a Hallmark card, but my only thought was, *Comet’s never that excited to see me*.

Yes, I was grumpy. More accurately, I was worried. Freddie had come to drive me and Comet back to Omaha, where we would gather for the summer at the lake house with our three daughters (and now three dogs). Kylie, soon to be twenty-one and living mostly at college, and Lindsey, who would be high school senior in the fall, lived and held jobs in Omaha from June through August, but they loved spending weekends at the lake. Jackie was fifteen and still lived at home. According to the master plan, the family would enjoy the same kind of carefree summer we always had in the past. But I had strong suspicion that my homecoming might be more like a bad high school reunion, the kind where the star athlete returns as a balding blob of middle-aged mediocrity. I couldn’t imagine how the girls would react to my bent spine and crooked gait, which were much more pronounced than they had been the last time they saw me. Freddie had carefully avoided discussing my health with them for the eight months I had been gone. The girls had not pressed her for details.

Sedona was safe because people only knew me as the broken-down neighbor who owned Comet. Home was different. I treasured my daughters. I was far from perfect, and they were the first to point out my weaknesses, especially my inability to dress myself tastefully. But before my fall on the basketball court and subsequent decline, I had always tried to be a man they looked up to, their own flawed hero. I wanted to be the man in the poem “He,” written by a much younger Lindsey during one of the girls’ childhood adventures to my law office:

He is like a sun that brightens up my life
He can always make me smile when I am down
He always encourages me to do my best
He loves me for who I am
He is the best man I have ever known
He is my best friend
He is my Dad

I was scared that I would never be He again. I was petrified that my family might decide that the old memories of me were more comforting than a reunion with a disabled shell of a father.

“Did you make sure the neighbors have keys so they can check on the house once in a while?”

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