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The sun was just beginning to light up the morning sky. Mark and Maggie Timmons had been on the road since four that morning. Mark had driven them off the highway onto sideroads and had ended up on a bumpy dirt road which they had travelled the last fifteen minutes. Maggie had no idea where her husband was taking them. He had just asked her to “trust him on this one.” Mark finally found the patch of nothingness he’d been searching for and pulled the car over to the side of the road and parked in front of a metal gate that said, “POSTED NO TRESPASSING”. The gate was locked.

Maggie looked at her husband and said “So, this is the place?”

“It is, indeed” said Mark.

They both looked in the backset of the car. Their kids were fast asleep. Tommy the four-year-old, who was almost a real life dead ringer of Elroy Jetson, was clinging onto small little LEGO figures and Emma, the six-year-old was just beginning to stir from sleep wiping her fine blonde hair out of her eyes to reveal a gently freckled face.

In between Tommy and Emma, was Mark and Maggie’s “first child”, Sally, the beagle. They had gotten Sally the week they gotten married. Sally had been part of the family for nearly 11 years. Sally had fallen ill in the past few months. She hadn’t been eating well nor had she any energy to move around. For the past two months, she had been showing little interest in going for walks or playing with the kids.

Mark had taken Sally to the veterinarian the day before. And as he suspected, the little beagle was sick and wasn’t going to get any better. The vet had said it could be two days, could be two weeks, maybe two months at the most, but the end was imminent. Of course, they recommended having poor little Sally put down.

But Mark couldn’t bring himself to do it. He couldn’t conceive how he could do that, go home and explain it to the kids what had just been done. Of course, when they first got the

little beagle puppy all those years ago, they knew that this process was inevitable, but nobody ever worries about those things that are so far into the future.

Mark had driven home from the vet, picked up Sally and carried her back into the house. He looked at Maggie when he came in. His look told her everything. There was no hope for their little dog. "I can't bring myself to do it, Maggie." He told his wife.

Maggie walked up to her husband, took Sally, gently placed her on the sofa and hugged her husband, "I know, Mark. It's hard, but it's got to be done, doesn't it?"

"But what are we going to tell Emma and Tommy? They love her so much. They'll never understand." Mark turned around and let out a sigh then continued, "I understand why my parents would never let me have a dog. They didn't want to deal with this exact same situation we're dealing with now."

Maggie moved back to the kitchen. "Well, we don't have to do anything tonight, Mark. Let's just get a good night's rest. We'll figure it out in the morning."

Mark shrugged his shoulder and shook his head in defeat. "I suppose so," he said, "I suppose so."

So, they put the kids to bed, made sure that Sally was comfortable, then turned in for the night themselves.

But Mark popped up from his sleep at two in the morning wide awake. He turned on his lamp. He had an idea. Maggie was still deep asleep. He put his glasses on. He made a movement to wake up his wife but pulled himself back. He was having second thoughts. Maybe it was a crazy idea. Maybe he should try to get back to sleep and forget about it. He went with his first impulse though. He shrugged and prodded Maggie to wake up. He nudged her shoulder "Maggie, wake up."

She rolled over and squinted at him, "What is it?"

"I've got an idea."

She yawned, opened her eyes wide, let out a heavy breath and said, "Oh no, not another idea."

“Will you indulge me?”

“I suppose I will. What do I have to do?”

“Get the kids up, get them in the car. I’ll get Sally.”

They both rolled out of bed and got to their tasks.

It was three o’clock in the morning when they left their Dallas townhome and headed southeast.

And that brought them to their present spot in the middle of nowhere in front of the gate that said, “POSTED NO TRESPASSING.”

Mark peered out over the endless pasture behind the gate and the barb wire fence lost in thought. On either side of the pasture were deep thick wooded areas.

Maggie sipped the last drops of her coffee that they had picked up at a doughnut shop at the last outlet of civilization that they had encountered over a half an hour of go. “Mark, “she prodded of her husband.

“Mark, “she said again.

He didn’t respond.

“Hey, you!” she said as she gave him a slug in the forearm.

Mark pulled himself out of his memories, shook his head and said, “Sorry, was lost in thought.”

Maggie smiled, nodded her head and said, “So what are we looking at here? In this cow pasture in the middle of nowhere?”

“This was my grandparents place. I used to come here every summer when I was a kid.”

“And why have you never brought me here before?”

“Don’t know. No reason, really. Land is not in the family anymore.”

“Who owns it now?”

“Don’t know. I haven’t been here in over twenty years.”

“So why are we here now then? What’s the plan? No wait, let me guess, I’ll get the kids and you get Sally.”

Mark smiled and said, “That’ll do.”

Maggie gently work up Tommy and Emma then got them out of the car. Mark gently held Sally in his arms. They all stood behind the gate.

“Now what?” said Maggie.

Mark nodded his head and said, “Here’s now what.” He climbed over the gate. When he got to the other side, he said, “Now hand Emma to me.”

But no sooner had he said this than little Emma was climbing over the gate and falling to the other side at her father’s feet.

Maggie lifted Tommy over the gate and handed him to Mark. Mark put gently placed Tommy next to his sister.

“Now lift up Sally and hand her to me.” Maggie lifted Sally and very carefully handed their first child to her husband. Mark very gingerly cradled Sally in his arms. He gave a “come on over” motion with his head and shoulder to his wife.

Maggie sighed and climbed over the gate.

Mark walked forward with Sally. Maggie followed closely, pulling a kid in each hand. Mark stopped, kneeled on his knees and gently placed Sally on the ground. He held one hand on her and motioned to Tommy and Emma to come stand next to him. The kids came up next to him. Maggie kneeled and gently stroked Sally.

“You see kids, “their father began , “Poor little Sally has had to live her whole life in the city. She doesn’t know anything but our little house and the hard pavements of Dallas. But you see, deep down inside her is a wild wolf that wants to run through the woods and chase rabbits and be free. You see this field here and these woods? This is where my grandparents lived. This is where I used to play when I was a little boy. I thought we owed it to little Sally to let her roam around in the woods like her ancestors did and know what it’s like to be free.

“But Mark...” begin Maggie.

“Hang in with me here Maggie, hang with me.”

Maggie stood up, she put her hands on the back of her husband’s back. Mark took his hands off their little Beagle who was laying in the tall grass, seemingly unable to move.

The wind blew. Sally, the beagle, lifted her head and smelled the air. She somehow stood up and steadied herself on her weak and wobbly legs. She took a deeper breath of the morning air. Suddenly, she put her head back and gave a loud bay. She barked and bayed again and finally let out a long howl into the air that echoed off the back of the forest.

Mark encouraged the kids to pet little Sally and they did. Emma leaned over and hugged Sally around the neck. Sally began quiver and suddenly, she bolted toward the forest on the side of the pasture. She hadn’t run so fast in over a year.

They heard Sally’s howl moving through the forest, and suddenly she dashed out across the field in close pursuit of a rabbit she had rooted out of the underbrush. Mark smiled. Tears filled Maggie’s eyes. They held each other’s hands.

For a brief instant, Sally started to dart back towards her humans and to the memories of everything she had known, but before the rabbit could get out of her reach, the pull of the wilderness turned her back to the chase and she ran away from Mark, Maggie, Emma and Tommy Timmons. She ran away and ran with all her spirt and might. The Timmons family stood there together until their little Beagle could be seen or heard no more.

Maggie turned to Mark and said, “What do we do now, Mark?”

“We go home, Maggie, we go home. Let’s load up.”

“Just like that?” said Maggie?

“Just like that.” Echoed Mark.

“What about Sally?”

“Sally’s gone off to the Happy Hunting Grounds.”

“What?”

“She’ll die happy, Mags. She’ll die like a wild spirit.”

“Like a wild spirt.” Said his wife.

Mark paused. He looked around. He took in a deep breath, closed his eyes listening to his heartbeat and a hawk cry far away. He opened his eyes and said, “Let’s load up and get back to Big D, Maggie.”

They loaded up the car, pulled out of the ditch and casually made their way out of the wild down the dirt road. They turned onto the paved farm to market road. Mark looked at his little freckled blonde daughter in the rearview mirror and smiled. She saw him smiling in the mirror.

“Daddy?” she questioned?

“Yes, Emma?”

“Was that Dog Heaven we took Sally too?”

Mark’s heart almost flew out of his chest. He caught his breathe and said, “Yes, it was darling, yes it was.

The little girl looked out the window and smiled. The little boy had already fallen asleep again.

Fifteen minutes later, they turned back onto a paved road. The kids had already fallen back into sleep. Maggie was gently crying to herself, “Mark?”

“Yes, Mags.”

“Was that the right thing to do, really?”

Mark looked out over the vast endless pastures they were quietly driving through and let out a sigh, “It may not have been the right thing to do Mags, but it wasn’t wrong...it wasn’t wrong.”

He whispered one last time and said, “It wasn’t wrong.”

