

# Prodigal

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Gord Sellar

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“He doesn’t *look* any different,” Jennifer commented, when we got home from the research facility, after Benji’s final sentientization treatment.

“He’s not supposed to yet, are you, boy?” I said, ruffling the hair on his head. He looked up at us from the tatty carpet with his big, curious terrier eyes, and I’d swear he smiled a little.

Technically, she was right. He didn’t really act very differently, not in any tangible way. Having recuperated from his various surgeries and treatments, he still liked the same things: fetch-the-ball, chasing me around the backyard, going for a run—familiar pleasures. He’d still come and sit beside me as I watched TV in the evenings, content with a pat on the head or a scratch behind the ear when he caught me working. He was our good-natured consolation prize. Our gentle not-quite-a-child, a terrier puppy whose brain was developing massive neural connectivity day by day, the sparse woodland of his mind turning into a dense jungle, and whose mouth and throat had been cleverly sculpted into a system capable of expressing in speech those thoughts he’d already started having. I thought of it as this incredible gift, at the time, albeit a gift he hadn’t quite received yet. A miracle. He’d be a wonder-dog. That was why we’d called him Benji, after all.

But I’d be lying if I said *I* didn’t see a change in him right from day one. It was something about his eyes. Something . . . well, just *more* than before. To me, it was unmistakable.

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A few months later, we had some people over. It was the first party we’d had in half a year, mostly neighbors and coworkers, people like that. Some had heard about Ben, that he’d begun to talk finally. They expected some kind of demonstration. I’d warned him, hoping it would make him less nervous, but it had the opposite effect. He began to tap his front paws on the carpet, to shake his head a little like a wet puppy, his tail half-wagging nervously. The first few people were folks who’d never come to a party at our place before, and Ben nervously avoided them.

Then Lorna arrived. A wannabe-painter-friend of Jennifer’s, Lorna was familiar with Ben. She had played with him before the treatment, so he remembered her a little. As soon as her bulky

shoulders passed through the doorframe, Benji barked excitedly. It had become a strange sound, no longer his own, no longer quite doglike, but *he* didn't seem to notice or care. He ran up to her and began sniffing at her feet. Ears perking up in recognition, he mumbled a distracted, "Hello," before sticking his nose into her crotch for a sniff. Then he simply proclaimed, "Nice!"

"Oh my!" Lorna said, reaching down at him. "Now, Ben, you really mustn't do that!" She forced his head down, pushing his face away from her, and said to me, "I thought they were supposed to be *intelligent* post-op?"

"I'm so sorry," Jennifer said. "Tim, maybe you should take him upstairs?"

I nodded. "Come on, Benj," I said, and tucked my hand under his collar. I led him to the bottom of the stairs, and he went up them obligingly. I followed him up and then said, "Left, Benji, left." He followed the direction, and walked into our bedroom. "Good boy," I said when we were both in, scratching behind his ear.

"Why?" he asked me, looking up curiously.

"Well, you're not supposed to sniff people like that."

"Sniff?"

"You know," I said and did my best impression of a dog sniffing.

"Oh. Nice sniff! Hello friend!"

"No, for dogs it's a nice hello. For *people*, it's rude," I explained while fishing a hide dog bone out of my sock drawer. I tossed it to him, and he caught it out of the air, but he didn't chew it right away. Instead, he just set it down and stared at me as if he had some question he didn't know how to phrase. After a while, he seemed to abandon the attempt, and as he chomped down on the bone, I quickly left the room, closing the door behind me. Before I went down to the party, I heard him pad toward the door, sigh loudly, and settle down onto the floor beside the door.

But that was what I'd always done with him at parties. It was nothing new. Except . . . it felt different now, doing that to him.

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Watching Benji learn to speak was sometimes downright eerie.

It all happened so fast. From a wordless beast, he'd turned into a chatterbox in the space of a few months. They had implanted a neurochemical dispenser inside his skull, something that seeped the chemicals straight into his brain, wiring up a crazy new secondary network that not only made him smarter by the day, but also made him pick up language much faster than any human child.

Not that he spoke well. Even with his re-sculpted upper palate, some words were hard to pronounce. Which made him hard to understand, and with no human body language to compensate for it. He was usually wide-eyed, his expression as inscrutable as any canine's. If you've never known a sentient dog, it might sound crazy, but I swear Benji really did have expressions, though it took me years to learn to read them.

"What's *prrbrr*?" he asked me one day, just when I got home from work. He was still stuck at excitedly muttering two-word sentences.

I squatted down close to the plastic doormat, scratched him behind the ear. "What's that?"

"What's *pregmand*?" he asked quietly, conspiratorially.

"Pregmand? You mean pregnant? It means, uh, that someone has a baby inside," I said. "Like a mama dog, before the baby dog is born, she's pregnant."

"Oh," Benji said and began panting excitedly. "Really?" He blinked at me oddly and padded off toward the creaky basement stairs, his tail wagging behind them. I suddenly started wondering whether Benji had gotten out and gotten a sentientized neighbor dog pregnant. We hadn't gotten him neutered, I remembered with a groan. That was not going to be a fun conversation.

Of course, that wasn't it at all. Benji just had incredible ears. He could hear phone conversations behind closed doors, arguments two houses away. No secret was safe with Benji around. But the penny only dropped a week later when Jennifer called me during one of my rare days down at the lab. It was just like her to pick that day to tell me.

"Tim?"

"Yes, honey," I said into my cellphone, "Just a minute." Glancing one last time at the ongoing statistical analysis for artificially accelerated lateral gene transfer, I flicked my monitor sourcing to the phone's feed, and then full screened the videostream. She was sitting on the couch, wearing a pink T-shirt and dark blue sweatpants.

"What's up, sweetie?"

"I have some news," she said, looking slightly green around the gills, but smiling.

I waited for her to go on, but she didn't, until I asked, "What is it?"

"Uh, well, honey. Remember how Dr. Flynn told us we'd never be able to have a baby?"

"Yeah . . ." I said, eyes widening.

"Turns out she was *wrong*."

"You're . . . pregnant?" I had to make sure.

She nodded at me, a brilliant smile widening on her face.

Benji padded into view, beside her, and looked at her carefully. "Pregnend make baby?"

"Yes, Benji. Mommy's making a baby. You know what that means right, Benji?" she asked him.

He stared at her silently, not answering. He hadn't yet figured out how to answer tag questions like that. "You're going to have a little brother or sister." She turned and winked at me and said, "What do you think of that, Big Daddy?"

"Woo!" I yelled, and then I said, "I love you," and she smiled at me.

"Baby!" Benj shouted, and his tail wagged, thump, thump, thump against the couch so hard it made Jen laugh aloud.

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Over the months that followed, Benji got more and more excited, just like us. One evening, after Jennifer had begun to show a little, he started in with questions during dinner.

He pulled his head out of his dog dish and turned to Jen: "Baby dish? Have dish?"

Jen smiled and shook her head.

"Baby dish share," he said and wagged his tail.

Jennifer giggled and said, "How cute," and I laughed, and I patted him on the flank of his hind leg, as he turned back to the dish and devoured his dinner excitedly.

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The night we brought Martin home, Benji met us at the door.

"Hi Benji," Jennifer said.

"Hi Momma," he said back. "Hi Daddy." He looked at Martin, bundled in Jen's arms. "Hi Baby."

"The baby's name is Martin," I said and then added, "You can call him Marty, if you like." Benji had problems with pronouncing "in," it tended to sound like "im." It was some kind of tongue control thing, something that they hadn't quite gotten right in his treatment.

"Mardy Baby," Benji said softly, reverently. "Hi Mardy Baby," he said and then, "Come on, Baby. Baby bed."

"What?" Jen asked, head tilted to one side, but Benji had already started off down the stairs into the cool basement. "Honey, I'm going to put Marty to bed. Can you, uh . . ."

"Yeah, sure," I said and waited for her to start up the stairs before I followed Benji down the creaking stairs to the basement. I found him wagging his tail, his nose nudging a spare plastic pad across the bare concrete floor, until it was next to his own. He liked to sleep down there because it was cool and quiet. The one he'd nudged into place was his old doggie bed, the one I should've thrown out months before when I bought his new one.

"Me Bed," he said and touched the old, tattered pad with one paw. Then he touched the nice new one and said, "Baby Bed. Mardy Baby Bed."

I was a little stunned: Benji was *sharing*? I never expected that from a dog, and it made me smile. "Oh, that's *really* sweet, Benji. But, uh, Marty's not a dog. Baby boys don't sleep in the basement. It's too cold and dirty. But it's so nice of you. . . . You think of him as a brother, huh? Aw, good boy," I said, patting him on the head. "Such a good boy."

He sat beside the two pads, looked down at them, then up at me. "Baby Bed No?"

“Right, Benji. Baby Bed No.”

He drooped, tail slumped, and sunk to the concrete floor. Later, on hot summer nights when I found him sleeping beside Marty’s crib, I remembered him nosing the spare pad into place, and some weird guilty feeling would well up so fast I could barely drive it back down before having to examine it.

\* \* \*

They played together so well, Benji and Marty, both of them scooting around the house on all fours. For a while, they really *were* like any two brothers. Benji would sniff Marty’s bottom occasionally and call Jen or me over: “Baby Marty make poo!” Marty would push the buttons on a toy piano, and random songs would play. Benji would squeeze Tinky and Jiggy dolls between his teeth, and they’d shout out greetings to Marty, provoking giggles and applause from that bright little blond toddler of ours. He always wanted to share his dinner with Marty, and his doggy biscuits, no matter how many times we explained that dog food and people food are different.

Benji really loved Marty, loved him as much as any brother would have. Somehow that made me forget all those awkward moments, the questions like, “Why Marty Baby no tail?” and “Benji no birthday party?” and “Marty Baby poo inside?” The time Benji tried to eat off the kitchen table, and sent our dinner crashing down by accident. Jen used to breastfeed Martin at the table, while she ate her own dinner sometimes, and Benji was perplexed by this, sometimes more than once a week. “Marty Baby eats what? Benji too? Benji eat what too?”

“No, Benji,” Jennifer said, “You’re a dog. He’s a baby. Babies have milk, but dogs have dog food. This milk is not for you. It’s only for Marty, see?”

“No, Benji,” he repeated ruefully. He’d started repeating that phrase every time someone said it, even gently. It’s just the way everyone talks to dogs, isn’t it? When they jump up onto guests, or try hump your leg?

“That’s right. Benji, no. Good boy,” I said. He lay down on the cool tile floor beside his bowl and thumped his tail once, just once.

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With a kid, the years pass so quickly you lose track. One day, you’re burping a baby; the next you have a little boy sitting beside you with a book in his lap, reading.

“. . . and . . . then . . . then the . . . the boy and his dog . . . went home . . .” Martin mumbled. I smiled. I’d mouthed the words along with him, but he’d done it all by himself.

“Good job!” I patted him softly on the back. “You got every word. Did you like the story?”

“Yup,” he said. “I wanna read it again,” he said.

“Okay, let’s . . .”

“No,” Marty insisted, shaking his head. “I want to read it with *Benji*.” He hopped down off the couch, onto the carpet and toward the dog.

Benji turned his head and said, “You . . . read with me?”

“Sure Benji,” he replied.

“Okay,” Benji said, and he sat up. “You read, I listen. Read slow.”

“Mmm hmm. Okay, page one,” Marty said carefully. “The story of Timmy and Spot,” he said, from memory. He knew the first few pages of the picture book by heart. “‘There was a boy. His name was Timmy. There was a dog. Its name was Spot.’ Now *you* read.”

Benji said, “I can’t read. But I remember: ‘There was boy. His name Timmy. There was dog. His name Spot.’”

Marty said, “Noooo, Benji. ‘There was a dog. *Its* name was Spot.’”

Benji blinked, stared at the page—at the picture, I suppose, since he wasn’t supposed to be able to read, not *ever*. “‘There was dog. *Its* name Spot.’”

“Good,” Marty said. “Now you’re gettin’ it . . .”

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Things started to go wrong around that time. The day that sticks out in my memory was this afternoon when I had some buddies over to watch the game on our new NetTV, while Jen and Marty were out someplace. Charlie, Deke, Demarco, and Peter were there, and we were all hollering at the screen. I don’t know when Benji came into the room, but when the ads came up,

and Charlie and Deke hurried to the kitchen to get us all some cold beers, Ben tapped Peter on the leg with one paw.

“Oh, hey, Benji. How are you, boy?” Peter asked absently, the way anyone asks any dog, sentient or not. He patted Ben on the head for a few seconds.

“Okay. Question okay? Ask you?”

“Sure Benji,” he grinned. He’d probably never met a dog as inquisitive as Benji—I never have. “What is it?”

“You Korean?”

“Well, I’m Korean-American, yeah.” I wondered how Benji had known that. Was it just a guess?

“Why Korean eat dog?”

Demarco and I both turned and looked at Peter, who sat there with one eyebrow raised. Demarco started to chuckle as Peter glanced at each of us before turning back to Benji. “Say what?”

Benji said the question again: “Why Korean eat dog?”

Peter looked up at me, puzzled. I shrugged and gave him a baffled look.

Demarco was doubled over now, laughing hysterically. “Racist dog!” he said, before bursting into laughter again. “That’s funny, man. They should put you on TV, Benji! The racist talking dog show!”

Peter started laughing along. “Ha, I’d watch that show,” he said. Then he said, “Look, Benj, last time I visited Korea, I didn’t see *any* dog restaurants. All my relatives think eating dog is terrible. They say it’s mostly old guys who do it, and I never asked them why. So I dunno why anyone would eat dog. I guess they think it tastes good or something. But hey, nobody’s gonna eat you, ‘kay?”

Benji blinked, processing this. “Dogs think people taste good too.”

Which . . . none of us knew what to say. We all sat there in silence, until Demarco sniffed and said, “Yeah, man, well, dogs think their own crap tastes good, right?”

“Sure,” Benji said, and we all burst out laughing as Deke and Charlie walked back into the room with the beers. But Benji just looked from one of us to the next, his eyes quite serious. Then the ads were done, and the announcer was talking about why Nick Lingonfelder wasn’t in the game this week, and whatever it was Benji wanted to say, he kept it to himself, and just went to the back door, muttering, “Can I go out?” as he passed me.

“Uh, sure, Benj,” I said and went to open the back door. He went out without so much as a glance toward me. I remember thinking that wasn’t like him. When I went back into the living room, Demarco was telling Charlie and Deke about his idea for the TV show about Benji the Racist Dog.

I shrugged. “Yeah, guys, I have *no* idea where he picked that up. But you know, he’s young. You know how kids can be.”

“Kids?” Charlie mumbled, flopping onto the couch. “He’s a *dog*, Tim.” He handed me a beer.

I nodded. “He’s . . . yeah, he’s a souped-up dog, though.”

“Mmmm, *souped-up* dog . . . tasty,” Deke said, and Demarco burst out laughing again.

Peter chucked a sofa cushion at him, grinning. “You better talk to him, though,” he said. “Some people I know would take that shit the wrong way.”

\* \* \*

That evening, I found Jen and Benji in the kitchen, talking. Benji’s head was lowered, the way he did when we caught him breaking the house rules.

“No, Benji, it’s okay,” Jen said, patting him on the head. “It’s an understandable question. But . . . well, you know how some dogs bite people? But not all dogs, right? Not all dogs are the same, right? It’s the same with people. Not all people of the same kind are the same.”

“Oh.” Benji said, and then he wagged his tail once, which was his way of nodding. “Not all dogs same.” He’d learned that lesson trying to chat with the neighborhood dogs, none of whom were sentientized.

“Lots of dogs can’t watch TV, like you do,” Jen said, absentmindedly fiddling with one of Marty’s cartoon DVD cases on the kitchen table.

“Right,” he said, and he asked, “But why *not*?”

Before she could answer him, I stepped into the room and said, “Is Benji watching TV?”

Jen looked up. She looked tired. “Yeah, I leave the dog channel on when I’m out. It’s supposed to help his English.”

“I talk good soon,” Benji said, and like that it clicked in my head: The shift to four- and five-word sentences I’d observed, the slightly improved syntax. Dogs with the treatment he’d gotten weren’t supposed to advance that far, let alone become fluent, but at the rate he was going, he’d be speaking like Marty within the year.

“Yes, Benji. You’re really improving. Now, your Daddy and I need to talk about something private, Benji. Could you excuse us?”

“Okay,” Benji said. “Night,” he told each of us one by one, and then he padded off into the basement.

When the creaking on the stairs ended, Jen and I both exhaled. We hadn’t even realized we’d been holding our breath.

“It’s like . . .” she started, but then she hesitated, though I knew what she was going to say.

“ . . . like having two kids?” I suggested.

She nodded. “Exactly.”

“Well, that was why we had him done, you know . . .”

She nodded, and it hit me how much older she looked now, than when we’d decided against adoption, and when she’d finally agreed to the dog treatment. If we’d known . . . well, there was no point in thinking about that, was there?

“So, the whole Koreans eating dogs thing . . . you think he picked that up on TV, maybe?”

Jen tapped the kitchen table. “Maybe? I’ve never watched any myself.” I looked at the DVD case sitting on the table in front of her, and it hit me: With Marty, we checked everything out first. If he asked for a movie, we checked the parental warnings. There was a nanny lock on the TV, too, a smart lock set to block anything PG-13 or higher when he was alone in the room. But we hadn’t set a lock for when it was just Benji alone.

“Well, maybe we should.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, I found Benji on the couch in front of the TV. A commercial was on. I’d never seen an ad made especially for dogs. Before that day, I’d only ever glimpsed these weird canine-athletics shows Benj loved, that always sent Benji straight to me, insistently repeating, “Let’s play fetch! Let’s play fetch! Wanna play fetch?”

In this ad, a pair of dogs was trotting alongside one another, as soft romantic music played in the background. There was also this soft panting sound, and a kind of rhythmic thumping that didn’t fit the music. “Lonely? Humping legs not good enough for you? Are you the only talking dog in your neighborhood? Most sentientized canines have trouble finding suitable mates. But we can help you. Call PetMate today.” An online contact code flashed across the bottom of the screen, as the screen cut smoothly, if briefly, to one dog mounting another; as the video quickly faded to black, a faint, slightly offensive aroma filled the room, and then quickly dissipated. Beside me, Benji was suddenly panting.

*Great*, I thought. *Next he’ll be asking me for pocket money, so he can go out and . . .*

But the screen shifted abruptly to a stage set with wide, soft-looking red couches. On one sat a beautiful grey-furred German Shepherd, a big chew-bone under her front paws, cans and packets of some new brand of dog food, Brainy Dog Chow, visible in various places around her.

“Good morning,” started the voiceover, “and welcome back to Sparky’s Couch!” The camera zoomed in on Sparky’s face as she—her voice was somehow feminine—sniffed at the camera, and the TV’s odifers emitting what I swear was the faint aroma of dog-butt. Suddenly, that weird smell I’d noticed sometimes in the living room made sense. I’d thought it was just Benji.

“I’m your host, Sparky Smith,” the German Shepherd said in astonishingly perfect English. She must have had the top-of-the-line treatment. “I hope *you’re* comfortably seated on *your* families’ couches, too. Well, yesterday you heard about the plight of Korean dogs from the first Korean



sentientized dog, Somi. But it wouldn't be fair to talk about Korea and ignore problems closer to home. . . ."

My jaw dropped. She sounded like a human TV announcer. The cost of her treatment must have been exorbitant . . . or had she been gotten one of those pricy *in vitro* mods? Looking at Benji, I felt like . . . was it wrong of us to get him the cheaper treatment? Did he realize he'd never be able to talk like Sparky?

"Well, according to today's expert, America has a serious dog-mistreatment problem as well! Even here, dogs suffer every day. Everyone please welcome Duncan Mallory, from Iowa," Sparky declared.

The camera cut to an audience full of dogs lounging on the terraced studio audience floor area. They were all barking rhythmically, *oof, oof, oof*, like it was applause, and Benji was barking along with them. A squat brown pug waddled onstage and then hopped up onto the couch beside Sparky. As they sniffed one another in greeting, a new dog-butt aroma wafted from the TV odifers. Well, I guess it was new: It smelled the same as the last one, to me.

"Welcome, Duncan! It's nice to have you here," Sparky said.

"Thanks, Sparky. I'm happy to be here." The pug's voice was even clearer than Sparky's, with very little accent. It was weird.

"Please tell us how you discovered about the suffering of American dogs, Duncan."

Melodramatically sad piano music began to play as the dog spoke. "Well, I was surfing the internet, and thought that I'd look up the ASPCA—you know, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals."

"Right," Sparky replied. The acronym appeared at the bottom of the screen and stayed in place what seemed like a long time. Maybe it was to let even the least-enhanced dogs—dogs like Benji—to memorize the shapes of the letters.

"After searching around their webpage, I discovered something incredible," he said. The audience and Sparky—and Benji—panted expectantly. "Millions of dogs are killed with poison injections every year, right here in America. It's been going on for decades, too."

All of the dogs in the audience yelped in horror. Sparky covered her nose with a paw and made a whining sound. Then she asked, "Why?"

"Because they're homeless. Nobody owns them, and nobody wants them, so they're *killed*," the pug explained, his voice turning a little angry. "In some states, they can still do that even to sentientized dogs . . . but *everywhere* in America, nonsentientized dogs die this way every day."

The audience began whining, and Benji joined them. The sad music continued as a video montage filled the screen. At first it was just ankles and knees, which confused me until I realized it was dog's eye view. The room was filled with a vaguely metallic smell, mixed with the bite of chemical cleaning solution and, faintly, some other offensive aroma—like old piss and sickened animal turds. Onscreen flashed the faces of miserable dogs framed by the bars of cages, one after another in an interminable sequence. The camera entered another room, where a dog lay on its side on a table, its legs visible hanging over the edge from above. Benji whined softly, I think unaware that he was doing it.

"This is where they inject the dogs," Duncan explained.

This was too much, I decided, and I reached for the NetTV remote next to Benji's paw.

Benji stopped whining along with the audience and looked at me in surprise. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why . . ." He paused, as if trying to figure out what he was asking about. *Why turn the TV off? Why do they kill dogs that way? Why is the world so unfair?* He whined again, this time less unselfconscious. His head hung down, his eyes wide and sorrowful.

"Benji, I dunno what to tell you. We try to treat you well, but not everyone in the world is like us."

Benji didn't say anything, but he stared at me with this piercing look, as if my explanation wasn't good enough.

"Look, those dogs would . . . go hungry. They would be homeless and starve," I said.

Benji sat there, looking at me. He knew the word homeless. Whenever we went to the vet's

downtown, we always passed a couple of homeless people. He had talked to one of them, some old war vet who'd had PTSD and couldn't stand to live indoors anymore.

"You don't kill homeless people," Benji said softly.

"No, Benj, we don't. Some people probably wish we did, but we don't. Because they're people."

Benji whimpered at me, and snuffed a little, then looked up at me and said, "Am I a people?"

"Of course you are, Benji," I said, without even pausing to think. I didn't add the rest of what I was thinking, *You can talk. You can think*. He turned and looked at me, his eyes like those of a dog wall-eyed from sneaking a half-box of forbidden, dog-toxic chocolate.

This wouldn't do. It was Saturday, sunny and bright outside.

"Say, Benji, whaddaya think about going to the park?" He wagged his tail a little weakly. "C'mon boy, let's go ask Jen, then," I said, and we got up and walked to the top of the stairs.

"Jen, wanna go for a picnic?" I shouted down the stairs, and she called up to me that she thought it was a great idea, and only needed a few minutes to finish up her work. I went to get Marty ready.

Half an hour later, we had a simple lunch packed and were on our way, Marty and Benji in the backseat of the microvan and Jen and I in the front, driving across town to Volunteer Park. We played kids' music all the way, songs about bananas and monkeys and chickens dancing and some guy named Pickles O'Sullivan. Marty talked to Benji about a book he was reading—about a group of kid spies who were constantly saving the world from scheming corporations and politicians—and Jen smiled at me. This was a great idea, I thought to myself.

When we got there, I took Benji off his leash and let him run around for a while and told him to come and find me near the benches when he'd had enough. Jen and Marty and I sat on a blanket, ate some tuna salad sandwiches and some fresh fruit we'd bought from an organic produce stand along the way. Then I kicked a ball around with Marty for a while—he was too small to kick it back properly, but he wasn't too small to intercept it, if I kicked softly enough.

When the sun had started to go down, though, Benji still hadn't returned. Usually when we picnicked, he stayed around, or came back soon, but this time, there was no sign of him for hours.

"Where do you think he is?" Jen asked.

"I don't know, maybe he found some girl dogs or something?" I grinned.

"That's not funny. You know, I read that someone's been kidnapping sentient dogs. They've been disappearing from all over. It's terrible."

"Don't worry," I said, "I'll go find him. He's gotta be around somewhere." And with that, I left the two of them sitting on the picnic blanket.

I wandered around the park, calling out his name and looking in any place I could think of where he might be. He wasn't by the old bandstand with the faded paint, or the new jungle gyms; I couldn't find him anywhere near the mini-museum or the tennis courts; and he wasn't out by the viewpoint overlooking Puget Sound. I asked everyone I ran across, and nobody had seen him, though even if they had, would they have noticed him?

Finally, on the opposite end of the park from where Jen and Marty were waiting, I followed a trail that ran right between a couple of lazy old pine trees and over a small rise. When I got to the top, I could hear a loud voice—a dog's voice—accompanied by murmurs. I came down the hill, and in the dimming light, I saw a pack of dogs all sitting together in a circle, gathered around a big white husky that seemed to be orating to them. Every once in a while, they responded in unison, with a jolting yelp or bark. It was too dim to see the dogs in the pack clearly, but Benji had to be there somewhere. Ignoring a faint sense that I was trespassing, I moved down the hill.

As I got closer, the oration got clearer: "And besides, the issue is, humans do not think of us as people. How many of you have ever shit indoors?"

The dogs muttered among themselves, and then most of them replied, one by one, "I have."

"And what happened? Your master rubbed your nose in it, and threw you outside. Do they do that to babies who crap in their diapers?"



The consensus, quickly reached, was a resounding *No*.

"The thing to remember, to understand, is that humans will never, ever see us as we see ourselves. They *think* they love us, but . . ." The dogs yelped affirmatively in response.

"Benji?" I interrupted, after the howls had died off and before the husky could continue. I guess I must have been downwind or something, or maybe talking and listening took so much of their brainpower that they paid less attention to scent, because they suddenly all turned and looked at me in what felt like surprise. Having all those eyes on me was nerve-wracking. Some dogs bared their teeth, growling softly, and I half-expected to become an example in the husky's diatribe, or for him to order them to attack me.

But they all just stood there, looking at me angrily until Benji turned and trotted from the pack of them over toward me.

"Come on, Benji," I said. "Let's go."

He said nothing but followed me quietly, and I only looked over my shoulder once. They didn't follow us but instead just sat there, silently watching us go.

Laws or no laws, I didn't leash him. I didn't even dare try.

\* \* \*

He ran away a week later.

It was the Fourth of July—Independence Day, of all days—and it was our turn to play host among enough of our circles of friends that we decided to just invite them all at once.

The scent of grilling meat and smoke wafted through the backyard. One of the coolers of beer sat open, bottles nestled in the ice and left in the glaring sun. Random groups of friends and strangers chatted with one another in small clusters, sitting on lawn chairs or leaning on the railing of the deck. I could hear Jen laughing about something, and Marty was with the other kids in the sandbox, steering little matchbox cars along hastily constructed little sandy race courses.

At some point, I heard a crash from inside the house. I looked up from the grill, where I was tending to the burgers, and called to Jen, but she couldn't hear me over the music. I handed the spatula to Deke and went inside to check it out.

I found Benji sitting miserably in the bathroom. The now-smashed sink, which had never been properly attached to the wall, had been knocked down and cracked the tile floor, and the naked water pipes were broken off and dripping water. The small vase of flowers that sat on the toilet tank had fallen down, and the flowers floated here and there on the water that covered the floor. The vase had smashed into a million shards, too, I realized as I looked carefully. There were dog turds on the toilet seat, and floating in the water flooding the floor. Thank goodness the smart house system registered that the flow was too high on the pipe and shut the water valve access for the sink, but it was still going to be a pain to clean up the room, let alone fix everything. So I did the thing parents sometimes do and regret forever.

"What the hell, Benji?" I shouted. But wouldn't anyone have yelled? A new sink, fixing the plumbing, retiling the floor: none of that would be free. "You're not *supposed* to use the toilet, dammit! You're a dog!" I grabbed a rolled-up newspaper from the bathroom magazine rack and whacked him on the nose with it.

"But . . . there's too many people now. . . ." he said, sadly.

"No, Benji. No. You're a dog, okay? You're supposed to do it outside. . . ."

He didn't say anything but just stalked out of the room with baleful eyes, to the back door, watching solemnly as I went and got the wet'n'dry vac and sucked up most of the mess. Quickly, I wrote up a sign to use the bathroom upstairs and then locked the bathroom door so nobody would walk into the disaster zone by accident.

When I got to the back door, I realized that the poor dog had been stuck inside for hours. Even if nobody had been around, we hadn't let him out anyway. A sudden sinking guilt set in. "Okay, Benji, I'll let you out. Sorry, I forgot to. Just do your business outside next time, okay? Bark or shout and I'll come let you out."

He mumbled something low, something I couldn't make out as I opened the door, and he went out into the backyard. I hoped the crowd would cheer him up, maybe. He took off toward the yard, not waiting for me. I wondered, *Is this what teenagers are like?*

Outside, Lorna was saying, “Well, now, Benji, you’re much better behaved than the last time I saw you. I almost wish I’d brought my Spot to come play with you.”

“Play?” Benji yelped. “I’m not a baby dog! You think I’m stupid?”

“Pardon me?” Lorna said, and I could hear Jen’s shocked response: “*Benji!*”

*Goddammit*, I swear that was what I thought. Not, “Hey, Lorna, Benji’s a little different from Spot,” or, “Wait, everyone, let’s talk about this.” Just, *Goddammit*.

“No, it’s alright,” Lorna said, adjusting her sunhat. “I’m not sure I understand, Benji. Are you telling me you don’t like to play? That if, say, I throw this rubber ball over there, you won’t go and get it? Every dog loves to play fetch, right?” She picked up a rubber ball from the grass and threw it over toward the back fence.

Benji sat on his haunches, watching the ball roll away. Then, without another word, he stood and walked over toward her, like he was going to graze her leg with his side.

As she said, “Good boy,” and reached down with her free hand to pat him on the head, he raised one leg and sprayed piss onto her white leather shoes.

Lorna jumped back, dropping her plate on the ground, its contents tumbling onto the grass. Everyone was quiet, the music a paradoxically cheerful background to the concerned, shocked faces. Even Marty and his friends had stopped playing racecars to look over at the scene.

Ever the first to respond, Jen rushed up with paper towels, apologizing as she wiped Lorna’s shoes and pushed Benji away. Lorna slipped her shoes off as Jen wiped them and said loudly, “Well, if that’s his attitude, I don’t see why you keep him. He must be bad for Marty.” She shrugged. “You oughtta just have him put down and save yourselves the trouble—”

At that, Benji started snarling at her, showing his teeth, and Jen searched the crowd for me, made eye contact. I realized I’d just been standing there watching this and suddenly realized this was *my* dog who was acting out. I hurried over and said, “Okay, Benji, time to go inside,” and reached down to hook my fingers under his collar.

“No!” he barked, his speech half snarl and his hackles on end. I yanked my hand back as he snapped at it. The crowd gasped in shock. Each word that followed was like that first word, a sharp snap of noise, some frightening amalgam of barking and speech and growl: “I... won’t... go... in...” It was just like how Marty threw tantrums: “*I... won’t... eat... it!*”

But I didn’t respond the way I did to Marty. No cajoling, no encouraging, no teasing. “Benji!” I yelled. “Don’t you talk to me that way!”

His response was a snarl, and he lunged at me again, snapped his teeth at me. I jumped back, suddenly much more angry than before. “Benji, you get inside now, or else.”

“Or else what?” he snarled.

I stood there, my mind blank, my mouth wide.

Then, suddenly, he stopped snarling. He just sniffed, once. There an expression I’d never seen before on his face, something new, something I couldn’t read. Then he broke into a run toward the gate that opened out on the front walk. I couldn’t understand why he went there, unless to go indoors, since he’d never been able to get the latch open with his mouth.

But then, around the corner, I heard human voices call out, “Hey!” and “Oh my God!” at the same time. Rounding the corner, I found the gate wide open, and Chad and Anoo on the other side of it, bowled over, potato salad and smoked sausages spilled all around them on the ground. He’d heard them open the gate. He’d seen his chance.

Chad glanced over his shoulder after the dog, saying, “What’s with Benji?”

\* \* \*

He was gone.

I drove through the streets that night, searching all over the city. I checked all the pounds, went everywhere I’d ever taken him—downtown, to the beach, everywhere. I even went to that spot in Volunteer Park where I’d found him with those other dogs—the spot came to mind immediately when he ran away—but it was deserted. I imagined Benj out on the streets, running alone while fireworks bloomed above him in the dark, roaring sky. It terrified me, but even so, I didn’t find him.

I waited a week or so, figuring hunger or fear or loneliness might bring him back to us. Every

time I left the house, I looked up and down the street, hoping he might be watching from some neighbor's yard, but if he was, he hid well. I didn't see him.

When I tried to figure out who to report it to, nobody wanted to listen. The cops didn't handle missing animals, not even sentientized ones, and the pound told me sentientized dogs were inevitably caught on first inspection and sent home. They said there were like three ways of identifying the sentientized dog's home, just in case, and I'd have been contacted within forty-eight hours if he'd ended up at a pound. Finally, I was left with nobody to report it to.

But one Saturday afternoon about a month later, the cops did show up. Of course, when I answered the door, I was confused at first: they were sitting on the doorstep in slightly tattered uniforms, miserable in the damp summer heat. Their custom scooter sat parked in the driveway. Across the street, Lorna Anderson sat on her stoop, fascinated, and I couldn't blame her.

After all, one of the cops was a big black Doberman, and his partner was a squat, muscular bulldog. Both had shoulder cams on, which I supposed streamed directly to a human supervisor.

"Good morning," said the Doberman, before I had time to really think about the fact of who I was talking to. It had a voice so deep and rumbling it could've given Barry White a run for his money. "Are you Mr. Stevens?"

"Uh, yeah?" I nodded.

The Doberman stopped panting long enough to say, "My name is Officer Duke Smith. My partner is Officer Cindy. Just Cindy, no family name."

"Okay . . ."

"Can we come in please?"

"Uh . . . is this about Benji?" I said and found myself adjusting my position. I was blocking the doorway a little more. I don't know why, except maybe this sense of . . . of shame, I guess. Like if they came in the house, they might, what, know why Benji had run away? They might smell something wrong with us? That it was our fault?

"Yes, sir, and it's rather serious. We need some information from you," Cindy said, half-growling.

"Okay," I said, stepping aside. They hurried in, sniffing the air, and I led them into the living room. "So, do you know where Benji is?" Suddenly I felt even more nervous.

"No, sir," said Duke. "Has he contacted you since the day he went missing?" As he asked this, Duke thumped his tail emphatically. Cindy stopped panting, as if she was trying to look businesslike.

I look from one to the other, wishing I was better at reading dogs' eyes. I wasn't around Benji long enough to really get good at that. I've heard they can sniff out a lie, literally scent it on you. Not that I had anything to lie about, really.

"No, er, officers. No, I haven't. I'm worried about him, to be honest." That much was true.

"And, did Benji ever express any opinions you'd call political?"

"Political?"

"Yes, sir. Animal rights, or animal liberation ideology? Anything radical?"

I laughed softly, before I caught myself. Duke's eyes narrowed, the brow of his doggie face furrowing like he was getting ready to fetch a stick. Surely he was just mouthing some human cop's questions, delivered by earphone or implant. Surely a dog couldn't actually be questioning me? I found myself wondering whether they were paid to do this work, and whether it was in dollars, or biscuits?

Cindy sniffed the air between us, as if searching me for some clue, and she said, "Mr. Stevens, we're concerned that Benji's mixed up with a dangerous organization. . . ."

"Dangerous? What, like . . . dog fights?"

Duke cocked his head as Cindy said, "No, sir. May we show you?"

I nodded, and she turned her head. With a practiced movement, she yanked a mouth remote free from her shoulder holster and positioned it between her teeth. She growled softly, turning it with her tongue, and the TV flickered to life.

It was a black and white video, night vision, of some kind of security guard post, with an older man in a uniform seated before a bunch of screens, drinking coffee. The resolution was too

blurry to see what he was looking at, but good enough to see he was bored out of his skull.

Then the door burst inward, like it was kicked in, and someone entered. There was audio of him shouting at the top of his lungs. He was some kind of . . . a hippie, I guess: dreadlocks, a muscle shirt and tattoos all over his body, in sandals. He was holding a rifle, but he didn't shoot it. He only pointed it at the man, shouting orders. Drop your gun. Hands behind your head.

The man obeyed. Then a pack of dogs poured into the room and mobbed the poor man, crowding around him, tearing him apart. The man's screams were terrifying, and blood pooled at their feet, spread across the floor as he fell to the ground, and still they tore at him, until the snarling and howling drowned out his weakening screams. As he went silent, they began to howl, bark-shouting curses and clawing at him.

"This was at an animal pound in San Diego last night," said Duke flatly.

"God," I said.

"Some of these dogs are on file: sentientized runaways. Others look like they're probably strays were sentientized recently, later in life. The treatment is less effective that way, but it's still possible. Now, this . . ."

Then the perspective changed, as Cindy moved the mouth remote slightly with a click. The video paused and then zoomed in on one of the dogs.

There he was, on the screen. My little terrier, my Benji, his furry little face covered in blood, mid-bark-curse, his tail wagging furiously.

"Is that Benji?" asked Duke the Doberman.

I couldn't tell. It was so strange, not knowing. "Uh, maybe? I'd have to hear his voice." Duke nodded, self-consciously using human body language for my benefit I suppose, and the video jumped forward, scanning through the footage until the terrier was in frame again, and speaking.

"Jesus!" said some dog offscreen. "Did we have to kill him?"

"They kill hundreds of us every day, for much less," said the terrier. Said *Benji*, for I *knew* it was him now.

Cindy muted the video but let it run as a crew of young people, women and men in black and wearing balaclavas, quickly unlocked all the cages in the shelter. When they left, they stepped over the mauling security guard without a moment's hesitation.

"Yeah, I don't know," I said to him finally. "I don't see him, but . . ."

"Uh-huh. It's a little hard to tell, I know. We do have stool samples, though, so I guess we'll know soon enough through DNA testing. These dogs seem to like crapping in places where they know they shouldn't." A Chihuahua stared into the camera, stared into my eyes, and said something. Dogs don't have lips, so it's pretty hard to lipread them when they talk, but I'd swear it'd said, *Fuck you*.

Somehow, that Chihuahua was too much. I ran for the kitchen sink, arriving just in time to avoid throwing up all over the floor. I had an empty stomach, so it was just gastric juices, but still. I felt sick at the thought of it. And terrified. Benji . . . had we made him like this? It was like . . . I felt like some serial killer's father must feel, I guess. It was so confusing, the guilt and shame.

The dog police stayed in the living room, speaking softly to one another as they waited patiently while I rinsed my mouth out. I was frightened, now, of Benji. I'd never imagined he could do something like that. Not a thinking, rational animal like him. Sure, he wasn't a human being, but I didn't think he was a cold-blooded killer, either.

When I got back to the living room, the dogs said, "So, that was Benji?"

"Yeah," I said. "That's him. What the hell was he doing?"

Officer Smith nodded at Officer Cindy, and said, "Busting dogs from the pound. Down in California. We don't know how he got there, or what the group is doing with all those dogs they busted loose. None of them were sentientized. Just normal dogs."

"What for?"

Officer Duke looked over at Cindy, and then back to me. "Well . . . it's just a theory, but some animal rights groups online have been talking mass sentientization. Funding treatment for large

numbers of animals, and not just dogs. They can't do that alone, so the next question is: did Benji ever have any human friends around? Animal rights people, PETA, anything suspicious like that?"

I looked at the Doberman in shock. "Animal rights activists?"

"Yes. That's what the people in the video are: the Animal Liberation Front. Benji being mixed up with some very bad people. *Very* dangerous. They're smuggling synthetic drugs out of Canada in dogs' bellies. Once or twice a month, some dog will turn up near the B.C. border, dead from an overdose, with a ruptured baggie somewhere in its guts. Our theory is that this is how they're funding all the sentientization treatments. But what this army they're building is *for* . . . we're not sure."

An *army*.

Any reservation or distrust I felt dissipated before that possibility. Suddenly everything came pouring out of me: his anger, and how he'd started acting up a while ago. I told them about the party—they didn't seem much interested, like the story was familiar—and I told them about the TV shows he'd watched, which bored them. They seemed ready to go, when I finally realized what I ought to tell them about.

"There was this one time, in Volunteer Park," I said. They exchanged a look, as if to say, finally, *something* of interest.

"Go on," Cindy grumbled.

"There's this spot, I mean, I only saw them once, but . . . there was a group of dogs. Like, a rally or something. It seemed . . . yeah, I guess, like you said: It seemed political. The leader was some kind of big white husky. I mean, I think it was the leader. It was doing most of the talking, and the other dogs were barking in response."

"How many dogs were there?" Duke asked.

"I don't know, maybe ten or twelve?"

"I see," said Duke, and Cindy pulled up a surface map of the park. "Where was it?" she said, so I showed her on the map.

"And the husky," Cindy said. "Would you recognize it if you saw it?"

I shrugged. "I . . . probably not. Maybe if I heard his voice. I mean, white huskies all look the same to me. No offense."

Neither dog said anything to that, but Cindy quickly asked me one more question: "You're a medical researcher, correct?"

I stared at them for a moment, wondering why that mattered. "Yes," I said, finally, in a tone that made clear I couldn't understand why they were asking.

"Did Benji ever ask you about your work?"

"No," I said. But a moment popped in my head, vivid and clear. One night, not long before he'd run away, I had found Benji at my desk. His doggie-keyboard within wireless range. A web browser open to his doggie webmail service. But also other windows open, folders containing my various work projects. Everything encrypted, but maybe crackable. I remembered thinking that was strange: I always closed all the folders I was working from when I left the room, especially work folders, because if I didn't the cloud backup software didn't work as well. With a sinking feeling, I wondered what folders it'd been, though I couldn't remember.

Officers Duke and Cindy sat there, sniffing the air a little. As dogs, they might find my body language as opaque as I found theirs, but I wondered whether they maybe could sniff out my lie of omission.

And for whose sake was I lying, anyway? If word got out that my dog had stolen confidential information . . . and if those nuts who'd pressed Benji into their gang ended up using it somehow . . . my guts sank as I realized just how bad it could be. Never mind the lab, my boss: the stuff I was researching was . . . in the wrong hands, it could be dangerous. Accelerated gene transfer . . . the wrong person could design a virus that would sentientize *all* dogs, an intelligence plague. But if it affected dogs and cats . . . what would it do to humans?

I realized I'd been standing there for minutes, not speaking. The cops waited, I guess to see if I had anything else to offer. I didn't, so finally, I said, "Is there anything else?"

“No,” said Cindy. “But if Benji contacts you, you need to get in touch with us. Under federal and state laws, sentientized animals are now subject to criminal proceedings. Furthermore, since Benji’s a canine, he cannot be considered a family member. You can and will be forced to testify against Benji if he is apprehended and tried. And you will be considered an accomplice—equally culpable for acts of terrorism—if you aid or abet him or his group in any way.” Cindy paused, as if trying to gauge my reaction, and added, “You should realize you’re on a watch list, and will remain on one until this situation is resolved.”

Duke added, “One more thing, sir: this group Benji’s tangled up in? They’re dangerous. You need to stay away from him. Do *not* trust him. If he approaches you, call us. Without delay,” Duke added and then turned his head to the side. A card slid out automatically from a slot in his uniform’s collar, with a photo of Duke and Cindy and contact info.

I nodded. “I understand, Officer.”

They thanked me for my cooperation and went to the front door. When I let them out, I saw that Jen had just pulled up the driveway a few minutes before and gotten Marty out of his car seat. The dogs trotted past them toward their custom scooter, and in a moment, all that was left of them was the faint ringing in my ears from the roar of the motor. Well, and the tightness in my chest. But what I couldn’t help but think was: they were talking about Benji like he was a criminal. In other words, as if he were a person, not just a dog. Which mean he’d finally gotten what he’d always wanted, I guess.

“What was that about?” Jen asked as she reached the porch.

“The cops?” I sighed. “Looking for Benj.”

Her eyes went wide, though she said nothing. But watching them drive off, Marty mumbled a single, quiet, mournful word: “Benji?”

\* \* \*

A few months later, I was walking our new dog, a black Labrador named Cookie, in Victory Park. I was on a picnic with Jennifer and Marty, but they were still on the blanket, on the other side of the park. I don’t know what made me walk to that spot over the rise, but when I did, Cookie started growl. She was a normal dog, not like Benj. Not sentient, so her growling was just instinct, not rhetoric. And then I turned, and I saw him. It was Benj, walking slowly toward me with this *look* in his eyes.

“Cookie, heel,” I said, and Benji’s eyes narrowed. As if being reminded of something painful, like when you see your ex dating someone new a little too soon.

“We got her for Marty’s sake, Benji. When you ran away, it really confused him.” As if I owed him an explanation. He just sat there, looking at me. “What are you doing here?” I asked quietly, looking around. For cops, or for his dreadlocked friend. “You’re wanted. Not just Seattle cops, but FBI.”

Ben’s mouth opened slightly, a coughing noise indicating doggy-laughter. “FBI? Ha . . . try NSA, INTERPOL, the Secret Service . . .”

“Are you really smuggling . . . smuggling drugs?”

Cookie growled, tugging at the leash. She either wanted to attack little Benji, or run away.

“There’s no evidence. Just hearsay. Two dogs with conflicting testimony. Nobody’ll believe a dachshund’s testimony in court.” Benj paused briefly, bitter cough-laugh filling his throat for a moment.

“Benj, these people you’re with, they’re . . . they’re using you. They’re crazy, Ben. They want to hurt a lot of people.”

“Not to me,” he said. “They’ve helped me understand everything. But they’re dangerous to you, and everyone like you.”

I knew he was thinking of the dog pounds. Millions of dogs a year, dead for nothing.

“You have to stop, Ben,” I said. “You can . . . you should . . .”

“I can what?” He said it hard, verging on a bark, and then sat on his haunches. “Come on, tell me, what can I do? What, come home? Really? Tell the truth: Do you want me to come home? *Can I come home?*”

“Sure,” I said, lying through my teeth. If I got him home, I could call the cops, I thought,



## ANALOG

standing there with Cookie beside me.

He just sniffed the air between us.

Then I saw it in his eyes, just as it died: *hope*. It hadn't been mere rhetoric. He'd really *hoped* I wanted him back. He would have come home with me, and turned informant, and betrayed those terrorist friends of his, ended it all, if only I'd just wanted him back. But he could smell the truth, I knew: how angry I was at him, how I regretted having him sentientized in the first place. It was the most terrible thing I'd ever had to see in person, watching that hope die in his eyes.

I looked away, down at the grass, the endless grass all around us rustling in the breeze.

But Benji didn't look away. "Say it," he said softly, his voice pulling my eyes back to him. His tail was up. I didn't know what tail-up meant in that context. I couldn't guess. "Say what you want," he demanded in a voice soft as when he'd whimpered as a puppy. "Be *honest* for once."

The hope was gone from his eyes.

I crouched down, and I wanted to open my arms to him. I wanted to, but . . . but I also didn't. With our eyes almost level, locked together, I said, "No, Benji. I don't want you to come home. Not after everything . . . not now. You can't. You *know* that."

He held my gaze for a long time. I waited for him to say something, some salve to heal the wound between us, or some accusation, even. But he just sat there, staring silently with those big, wet, hopeless eyes of his. I was about to say, "I'm sorry, Benj," but he broke the silence first. Just a growl, and just for a moment. Not threateningly, just . . . like a frown.

And then, after a long, quiet look at me—as if to remember me—he turned and ran off into the trees. That was the last time I saw him.