
THE SADDEST DAY THE SUMMER HAD

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Here is a rite-of-passage or coming-of-age story, in which the kids behave in the ways kids often do—they quarrel. They quarrel to pass the time; they quarrel for the sake of quarreling; maybe they

quarrel to cover up any affectionate feelings they might have. At any rate, they quarrel until a major event, a loss, causes these same children to reveal entirely different feelings for one another.

Now I must write about the saddest day the summer had. It will be hard to write it and I may not write it well. It's about Sarah's dog. I haven't told you much about him, hardly mentioned him at all in fact, but I have my reasons. To write about him will break my heart.

But Raymond said this has to do with the summer, too. He said I should tell everything, not just the sunny parts. So I'm going to tell you about Sarah's dog.

As I said, his name was Eleanor Roosevelt, which was a dumb name to give a dog that's a boy. I had nothing against the name itself. Mr. Roosevelt was a nice President. I had nothing against his wife. I'd never met the lady. But I must be honest. I didn't care for Eleanor Roosevelt the dog. He was dumb. He didn't know enough to come in out of the rain. That's true. He would stand dripping wet in a cloudburst and wonder where the water was coming from. He wouldn't go inside. He figured it was raining everywhere.

Another thing: Sarah kept wanting him to bite us.

"Go bite 'em!" she'd shout at Eleanor. "Sic Raymond! Sic George! Sic, sic, sic!"

But Eleanor was too dumb. He'd look at her, bemused,¹ and wag his tail. Any dog that doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain doesn't know enough to bite people, either. All he knew was that Sarah loved him. That was all he wanted

to know. She was his universe. He'd tag after her—or sleep and wait for her return. He wasn't an angry dog. He was a lazy dog.

He was a red-haired dog who stared at other dogs in disbelief; he thought he was people. Once Sarah said he was a River collie but Raymond looked up River collies at the library and said he wasn't. Then Sarah said he was an English springer spaniel, then a Chesapeake Bay retriever, then an Irish setter, then a combination bloodhound, basset, and beagle. Raymond looked these up, too, and said she was nuts. She shouted she had papers to prove it. When Raymond demanded to see the papers she threw a stone and told Eleanor to bite Raymond on the leg, but Eleanor didn't. It was beginning to rain and Eleanor was staring puzzled at the sky, wondering what was making him wet.

Other dogs—and our neighborhood had lots of them—chased streetcars, snarled at the mailman, and pursued bank robbers through the woods, but

Slang. As Raymond and Sarah are teasing each other, Raymond says people think Sarah is "loony." She replies, "A fat lot you know." The word *loony* and the expression "a fat lot" are examples of slang. Some slang words and phrases fall out of use with time. As you read this story, which is set in the 1950's, look for slang expressions that might no longer be fashionable.

1. **bemused:** stunned and confused.

not Eleanor. No wood-running for him. He wanted no part of the forest. The idea of walking where there were no sidewalks was distasteful and uncivilized. He didn't know what a tree was. He used a fireplug. Whenever Sarah took him in the woods to play she had to carry him every step of the way. Otherwise Eleanor wouldn't budge. It was dumb. Raymond and I would be horsing in the woods, and along the path would come Sarah, her dog in her arms.

"I'm taking him for a walk," she would say.

"Then why don't you let him walk," I said one time.

She glared at me and stomped away. She was touchy where Eleanor was concerned. But the next time I saw her, she hit me on the jaw. That was three days later, but her memory and her left hook were fierce.

Raymond, of course, was forever teasing about the dog's name.

"Eleanor Roosevelt is a *girl's* name," he said one day. "You can't give a girl's name to a boy dog."

"A fat lot you know," Sarah said. "I happen to like Eleanor Roosevelt."

She looked for a rock to throw.

"It's not legal," Raymond said. "There's probably something in the Constitution that says you can't name a boy dog after a president's wife."

"The only thing the Constitution doesn't allow," said Sarah, "is drinking beer. And they're even changing *that!*"²

"Don't come running to me," said Raymond, "when Secret Service agents come and shoot you."

"My dog will bite them all," Sarah sneered.

"He doesn't know how to bite," Raymond sneered back.

"Someday he's going to bite you something awful," Sarah said, sticking out her tongue.

"You still can't call him Eleanor Roosevelt," Raymond said while her tongue was out. "People think you're loony. What other girl stands around, whistling through her teeth, snapping her fingers, and yelling 'Eleanor Roosevelt?'"

2. The story takes places in 1933, when Prohibition laws forbidding the sale and manufacture of alcoholic beverages were being struck down.

"A fat lot you know," she bellowed.

Raymond threw up his hands in despair. "They're going to come after you with a net!"

Before she heaved a stone, Raymond ran.

Eleanor Roosevelt—the dog, not the First Lady; see how Sarah confused things—didn't chase Raymond. He had been sleeping throughout their whole argument. When Raymond ran, the dog woke up, stared after Raymond, yawned, checked to see if Sarah was near, and promptly went back to sleep again. He worried about Sarah, but the rest of the world he took as it came. When freight trains rattled by our tenements, he dozed. Unable to solve rain, he didn't try to solve why the ground shook. He worried about Sarah. That was all. He didn't worry about streetcars, dogs, automobiles, rain, where his next meal was coming from, or fleas, which is one reason he had so many.

Sarah was his moon and his sun. When she was away he dozed fitfully, troubled, wondering when she would come back to him. He lay in the sun and dreamed worried dreams of a world without Sarah. But when she called or whistled, his worry vanished. His universe was complete again. He perked up, stretched, shook his head because her whistle hurt, wagged his tail, and ran to her—that is, he ran to her if she was on a sidewalk. If she was in the woods, that was another matter. He couldn't go there. Only animals ran in the woods. There were no sidewalks to run on. If that happened, he would crumble back to sleep and worry some more.

Oh, he crossed the street, of course. There was a sidewalk on the other side. But beyond the sidewalk was the woods. He would never venture there. To him, crossing the street held no danger. Automobiles slammed on their brakes, honked wildly, and swerved around him. He didn't give them the time of day. Streetcar motormen hated to travel his section of the street. They couldn't make their streetcars swerve and he ignored their clanging bells. So streetcars moved slowly through his domain. He had no time to think of traffic. He spent all his time thinking of Sarah.

But I have been avoiding the day I was supposed to write about. I can't avoid it any longer. It wouldn't be fair.

Well, nothing much happened that morning. We played baseball in Mount Echo Park and almost won. Sarah, naturally, hit three home runs, whistled through her teeth, and got dirty looks from both teams. That afternoon, after lunch, the three of us—her, Raymond, and me—sat in a tree and discussed the game.

"You freaks," said Sarah, "have got to keep your eye on the ball. That's the only way you'll learn to hit."

"Ha," I said, and meant it.

She looked at me with scorn. "The strikeout king," she snorted, and made a face at me. "You shut your eyes before the pitcher even pitches."

"I don't!"

"You do!"

There was a pause. I had to be honest.

"Well, not *all* the time," I said.

"See what I mean," Sarah said. "The strikeout king!"

"Quit picking on him," Raymond said. "He's the best outfielder we got."

I felt better.

"He's the only outfielder we got," Sarah said.

I felt bad again.

"Pick on somebody your own size," Raymond said.

That shut her up a minute.

"Anyway," Raymond said, "you got no reason to brag. Your dumb dog is afraid to get his feet dirty. He won't walk in the woods. He's afraid to." Raymond looked at me with pride. "George is braver than *that*."

I didn't know whether to feel complimented or not. I'd rather have been compared to Babe Ruth. I was about to tell Raymond this but I didn't get the chance.

"A fat lot you know," Sarah seethed. "Eleanor Roosevelt is afraid of *nothing*!" She glared at me. "You hide from thunder. Eleanor doesn't."

"Yes, but Eleanor is a dog and I'm . . ." I tried to say, wishing they'd leave me out of it. But Sarah didn't let me finish.

"Scaredy-cat," she brayed. "I'd rather have a dog than a scaredy-cat!"

"You don't have a dog," Raymond said. He was getting angry. "Real dogs go walking in the woods. You have to carry yours!"

"A fat lot you know," Sarah said. She was getting angry, too.

"I don't have to carry George," Raymond shouted.

I wished he hadn't shouted that. I wasn't his dog. I was his friend.

"*Eleanor* wouldn't shut his eyes when he's at bat!" Sarah shouted.

"*George* doesn't have fleas!" Raymond shouted back.

They argued like that for a half hour. Sometimes I was ahead, sometimes her dog was. Sometimes Sarah offered to fist fight Raymond. Sometimes he offered to fist fight her. They were careful not to offer to fist fight at the same time.

"I won't fight a girl," Raymond would say.

Another time Sarah would say:

"I won't fight a boy. I hate to see boys cry."

It was an awful afternoon.

"I'll bet," said Raymond, "your dumb dog doesn't know enough to save your life. I'll bet . . ."

"He's fierce as a tiger," Sarah said. "Watch your mouth."

"On *sidewalks*," Raymond sneered. "He scares people with his snores!"

"A fat lot you know!"

"If you were *really* in trouble," Raymond said, "here in the woods he wouldn't lift a finger. There are no sidewalks here."

Sarah put her hands on her hips. She almost fell out of the tree doing it.

"He'll save my life whenever I want," she said.

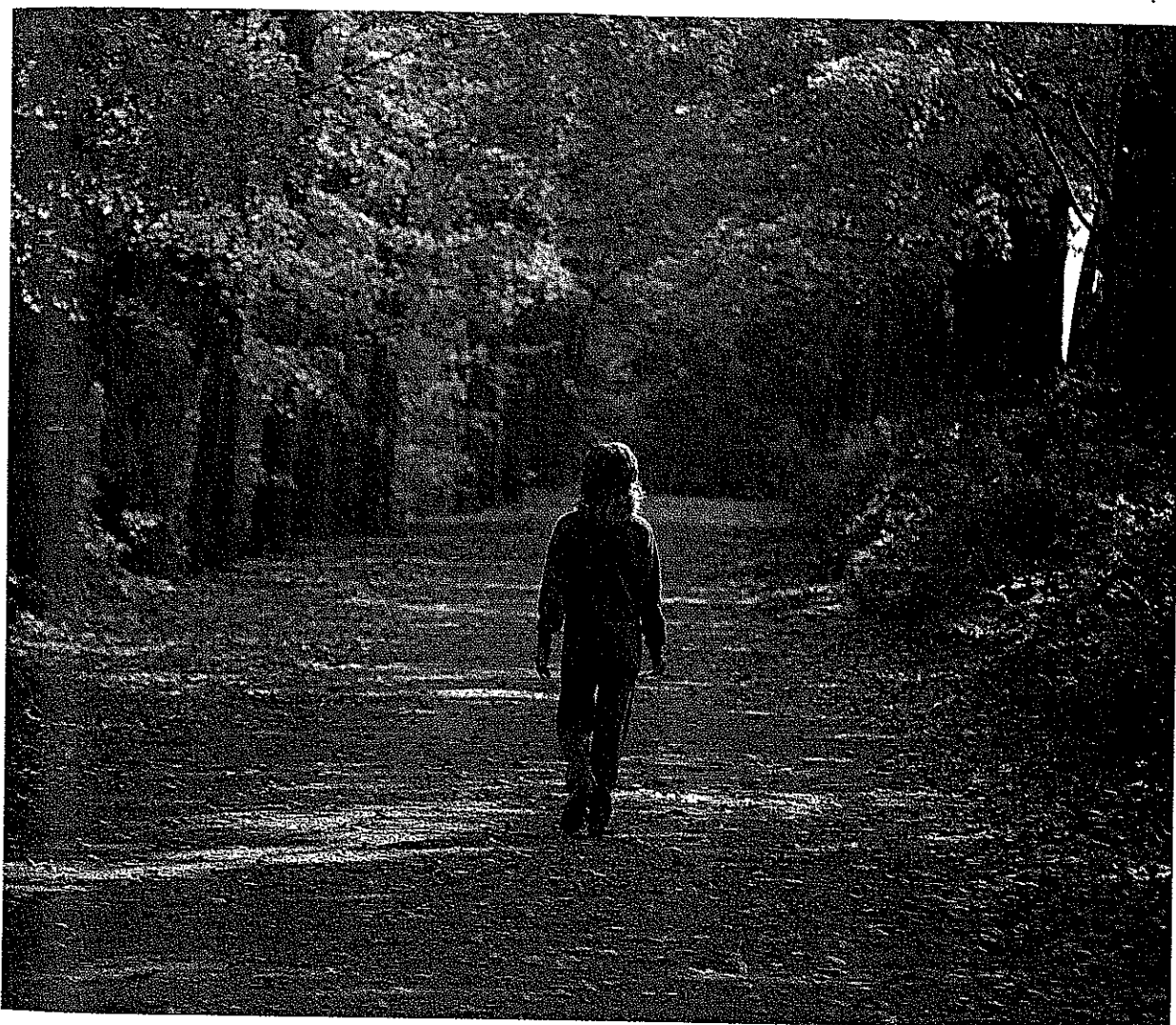
Raymond laughed at her.

"Not here," he said. "No sidewalks."

"Up here, too!"

"Prove it!"

She looked at him, furious. But her glance wavered. I saw it and so did Raymond. We knew why. Right then, at that exact moment, her dog was asleep on a sidewalk somewhere, waiting for her to come back to him. Sarah could whistle and he'd cross the street like a blur and zoom to her, unnerving motorists and making streetcar motormen cringe. But would he run into the woods and seek her out? That was the question. He was a sidewalk dog. Would he, perhaps, wait where the sidewalk ended, whining for someone to carry him to the



rescue in the woods? This was why Sarah's glance wavered. Raymond had backed her into a corner she didn't want to be in.

"Why should I prove it?" she said. "There's nothing but sissy-britches here. There's nothing to be scared of."

"If you call him and he comes," said Raymond, "I'll eat dirt."

That was the supreme challenge. Sarah couldn't refuse. Raymond had put his honor on the line and was waiting for hers.

"Tomorrow," she hedged.

"Now," said Raymond.

He climbed down from the tree.

"Well?" he said.

There was an awful pause.

"I hate you," she said.

She was distressed. But when she looked at Raymond her distress went away. Anger returned. She climbed down from the tree and started along the path.

"Get ready to eat dirt," she said.

We followed her.

Moments later, Sarah, Raymond, and me stood in the shadows at the forest's edge. Our tenements were down the path and across the street. I watched Sarah as she looked from behind a bush and saw, across the street, her dog sleeping fitfully in the sun.

This was her put-up-or-shut-up hour. Would Eleanor Roosevelt come to her—or stop where the sidewalk stopped?

Her eyes narrowed with worry.

"It's your move," said Raymond. "Whistle for Eleanor."

She closed her eyes.

Was she praying?

"I'll show you how wonderful my dog is," she said, putting two fingers to her mouth, and the neighborhood was deafened by the force of her whistle. "Watch," she said. "Now just you watch."

We did.

Her dog stirred, raised up, cocked his head, and with a look of surprise and doubt searched the hillside for the whistle's source. First his tail thumped with gladness. Sarah had come back. Then it slowed and thumped with hesitation. Sarah had never called him to the woods before, his tail said. He got up, shook himself, and studied the hillside some more. She's never called me to the hill before, his look said.

"Well," said Raymond. "He's not coming."

"He is!" said Sarah—and whistled again.

Her dog couldn't locate Sarah but he knew she was there and she wanted him. Love replaced doubt. Need replaced reason. He was a red smear—tail wagging, body low, feet flying—as he zoomed across the street, ignoring cars, ignoring everything, following his heart to seek his one true north: Sarah behind a tree.

"There!" she shouted gleefully.

But her shout died on her lips.

I can still hear the thud. The car that hit her dog wasn't going fast. The thud was noisier than any noise that ever was. I can still see her dog sailing through the air to crash against a curbstone, dead.

Her shout died when her dog did.

I can still see her running down the path, stumbling, and I can still hear the moan she moaned. I can still see her pick up her lifeless dog, cradle him in her arms, and talk to him words of regret he didn't hear.

As Raymond and I approached, the driver of the car approached. He was a nice man, shaken; he didn't mean harm. I heard him say:

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. . . ."

Other people came. They always do. They cited where they had been when it happened.

They attached great importance to this. They recited what each had seen. They compared notes. They managed to turn the death of Sarah's dog into an event as ordinary as rain. They indexed and catalogued the happening and were done with it. Then they stood and talked of other things.

But Raymond, his face white and his soul in torment, said:

"It was my fault."

Sarah looked at him. The hurt in her eyes showed the hurt in her heart.

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "I called him when I shouldn't have."

She gazed around at neighbors who had ceased to talk of her dog's death.

"I better bury him," she said.

No one moved forward.

They compared the death of this dog with other animal deaths they had witnessed and filed.

"I'll help you," said Raymond.

"No!" she cried, stricken.

Then she looked surprised. She shook her head and tried to smile. It wasn't the day for smiling.

"Please," she said. "But no."

She walked away from the crowd. They hardly noticed her go. She carried her dog across the street into the woods. She walked slowly. There was no need to hurry. It was their last walk in the woods together. Last walks require goodbyes.

I started after her but Raymond touched my arm.

"Not yet," he said.

She vanished in the shadows of the trees. The driver drove away. The people laughed and talked of other things. A streetcar passed, slowed, then speeded up. Soon motormen would spread the word: No need to slow down there again; the dog is gone.

Raymond and I sat on the curb and watched the hill.

Finally, Raymond sighed a terrible sigh.

"Let's go to her," he said.

We didn't know exactly where she was. We took the main path up the hill. We didn't go too far. Raymond, in front of me, motioned me to stop. He pointed.

But I had seen it, too. It was a fresh-dug grave,

fresh-covered. It was a little grave but he had been a little dog.

I looked up—and there she was.

Sarah, forlorn, sat in a tree on the highest branch that would hold her. Her hands, black from digging, were in her lap. She didn't swing her feet. She didn't say hello. She stared up to where God was. She didn't look down at us. We were of the world and the world hadn't been too good to her. It had taken her dog away.

Raymond motioned me to follow him. We went along a path. Once out of her sight, he stopped. He looked around. He found some sticks and

made them into a cross. He tied the cross together with grass. He worked swiftly and silently. I stood by and said nothing. Then we walked back to where the dog was buried.

Without a word, Raymond forced the cross into the ground to make the grave complete.

Sarah, hearing this, looked down.

"I tried," she said lonesomely. "But I didn't know how to make a cross."

Raymond and Sarah stared at each other the longest time.

Then Raymond said:

"Come on. I'll take you home."

Responding to the Story

Analyzing the Story

Identifying Facts

1. Who are the three main **characters** in this story? How does each one behave toward the others?
2. List three characteristics of Eleanor Roosevelt that make him different from other dogs.
3. After the baseball game, Sarah and Raymond get into an argument. What are they arguing about? What part does George play?
4. What challenge from Raymond does Sarah accept, and why?
5. Describe what happens to Eleanor Roosevelt.

Interpreting Meanings

6. The events of the story bring **discovery** as well as sadness. Explain what lessons about life and about themselves the friends have learned during the course of this summer day.
7. Find at least three places in the story where the writer tells us what Eleanor is thinking or feeling. Where is Eleanor described as if he is a human being?
8. How did this story make you feel about the dog, the children, and the accident?
9. At the beginning of the story, the writer says he "may not write it well." Do you think he has written it well, or not? Why?
10. Who do you think was responsible for the dog's death—Sarah or Raymond? Or was it no one's direct responsibility?

Applying Meanings

11. After the accident, what do other people say and do? Why do you think they want to turn the tragedy into "an event as ordinary as rain"? Have you seen people respond like this to a tragedy?
12. Explain why people sometimes do not want to talk about a painful event immediately, but instead want to think privately about it.

Writing About the Story

A Creative Response

1. **Writing a Journal Entry.** In a paragraph, write one of the following journal entries. Use the first-person pronoun, *I*.
 - a. Sarah describing how she feels about the accident.
 - b. Raymond describing his feelings about the part he played in the accident.

A Critical Response

2. **Describing a Character.** In a paragraph, write a character sketch of Eleanor. Before you write, list the ways in which the dog behaves, how he feels about Sarah, and what the narrator says directly about him. Open your paragraph with a statement telling, in general, what kind of a pet Eleanor was. You might organize your details in a chart like the following: