

A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Literary Arts – Short Story

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From her hiding place, she watched the world pass her by. At times, people scurried in and out of view, much too busy with their lives to see her huddled under the dense green canopy of shrubbery and trees. Other times, an occasional car or truck passed by noisily, causing her to raise her head in alarm. In the shadows, she felt safe. No one would bother her here. She was exhausted.

How did I end up here?

A short time ago – *maybe, it was an eternity* – she had lived a comfortable life. Surrounded by people who made her feel safe and loved, there had been no break in her routine. Awake at the crack of dawn, she would walk in her neighborhood, bright-eyed, her white coat shiny and brushed, tail held high, her small frame swaying from side to side with each wag of her tail. Breakfast with the family would follow. Her morning eased into playtime with the children, who squealed in delight as they chased her around the yard. Afternoons always included time for a nap. After joining the family for dinner, she waited with anticipation for her evening walk.

Without warning one warm summer day, her comfortable world turned upside down. There had been a lot of commotion in the house that day. People scurried about nervously, whispering furtively as if someone would hear what they had to say. Packed suitcases lay scattered about, and children cried. With all the activity, she had grown increasingly nervous. That evening there had been no family meal. Instead, the man had placed her and her two pups outside with a bowl of food and water on the back stoop.

The food had disappeared quickly as the pups voraciously emptied the bowl. Bellies full, they soon snuggled down together, next to the concrete steps that led into the house. As evening turned

into nightfall, she had stared at the dark and silent house as if to will its inhabitants to let her and the pups inside. But there were no lights, no sounds of giggling children being put to bed.

What is happening to us?

As the sound of crickets rose to a crescendo in the oppressive heat, her heart grew heavy. Sadness covered her like a blanket. Raising her head, she sniffed the air. A storm was approaching. With a sigh, she closed her eyes.

Crraacckk, craccckk, BOOM! The night erupted in a violent display of thunder and lightning, startling the little family from their restless sleep. Quickly, she ushered the drowsy pups to the safety of the overgrown bushes that bordered the old house's foundation. Pushing the dead leaves, broken twigs, and dirt aside with her paws, she fastidiously fashioned a shallow depression for the family to nestle in. The pups, unsure why they were nesting in the dirt, whined softly as she comforted them.

Soon after, the rains came, accompanied by more thunderous claps that hurt her ears. A wind blew in, rushing and howling through the trees. Loud noises had always bothered her but tonight was different. There was no human to hold her and speak comforting words.

She shuddered with fear as the storm continued but stayed calm for the pups' sake. Despite the cover of shrubbery, the rain soon drenched them. The pups nestled closer to her, as they shivered together through the long night.

In the morning, they emptied the water bowl. There was no food.

In the days that followed, time passed slowly. Each morning, the pups played in the backyard under her watchful eye. Later, wandering around the neighborhood, she taught them how to seek out scraps of food discarded by the human. Obedient and following her lead, they avoided the most heavily trafficked roads and always approached humans with great caution. Sometimes they

would find a small bowl of food and water set out by well-meaning humans for their benefit. Several times, a human had tried to catch them. Each time, they managed to escape by running deep into the woods and underbrush. She had trained her pups well.

Despite their daily foraging routine, they always returned to the only home they had ever known. There, they huddled in their nest under the great bushes, growing weaker with hunger with each passing day. The days turned into weeks. The pups frequently whined with hunger.

One day, a man emerged from a white truck that had parked in front of the house. From where they were resting under the bushes, she watched warily as the man approached the family's hiding place. He carried a long stick with a loop at the end. Cornering her and the pups against the foundation of the now-abandoned house, he quickly caught the pups. Her furious barking and growling did little to deter the man.

After caging the pups in his truck, the man turned and returned to where she remained under the safety of the dense shrubbery. Alarmed at the sight of her pups being taken away, she backed away from the man's reach. Mustering enough energy to escape his grasp, she turned and ran for her life. Looking over her shoulder to see if he was in pursuit, she did not stop until she was deep into the woods. There, she collapsed in its dense shadows, exhausted from her ordeal, despondent at the loss of her pups.

Lonely days ticked away as she moved from the safety of one hiding place to another. Food was scarce, and she grew weaker with each passing day. She missed the pups. In desperation, she sought out the familiarity of her former home, seeking solace in the memories it brought her.

One day, the white truck returned, and a man alighted from the vehicle. She recognized him as the one who had taken her pups away. He carried his stick and approached her hiding place. She was too weak to run.

Her once shiny white coat was now matted, and flea and tick ridden. Her once bright eyes now expressionless. Emaciated and exhausted, she finally gave in to the man's cajoling and emerged from her hiding place.

Carrying her to the truck, he placed her in a cage where she cowered with fear as the truck drove off. When it finally stopped, they were met with a great howling and barking of dogs. The noise scared her.

Removing her from the cage, the man carried her into the building, softly cooing, "Little lady, we're gonna reunite you with your babies."

Inside the shelter, she was excited to rejoin her pups. Tails wagging excitedly, the pups pranced around her, happy to be reunited with their mother. Soon, the family snuggled together in their pen. The continuing sound of howling and barking dogs intimidated her, and she shuddered with fear. The smell of the place offended her, adding to her anxiety.

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Many miles away, a man walked slowly through his neighborhood, shoulders stooped, head hung low, lost in thought. The most recent death of his beloved four-legged companions had devastated him. All three had passed within one year of each other, leaving him in a dark and brooding place. Arriving home, he and his wife set on a search to fill their void.

By fate's design, the couple and the little dog met a few days later. The people who ran the shelter had separated the little mother from her pups so she could meet the couple. Soft words meant to reassure her did little to soothe the anxiety she felt of another separation.

Inside the meeting room, she quickly scurried to the safety of the closest corner. There, she cowered under a chair, afraid to let another human touch her. She watched warily as the strange man crouched on his hands and knees, softly calling to her. At last, she gave in to the man's coaxing, allowing herself to be scooped up into his arms.

On an orientation walk on the shelter grounds, she strained at her leash, happy to be away from the shelter's smell and sounds. As they turned the corner of the building, they were met unexpectedly with a great howling and barking of dogs. She began to run frantically in circles as the barking and howling grew into a great cacophony.

As the man gathered her up in his arms and held her close to his chest, she shook with fear. His voice calmed her. A short time later, she found herself in a small kennel on the back seat of a white truck. In the front, a man and woman talked quietly, occasionally turning in their seats to look at her and smile.

It would be several weeks before she would raise her drooping tail and regain enough confidence in her daily walks to emerge from her shell. At times, she remembered her pups and would withdrawn from her new caretakers. Each time, the humans would utter soothing words and in time, she would find comfort in their presence.

Fate had given her a new lease on life.