



‘God’

Spelled Backwards

Is

‘Dog’

Through a desperate sort of pain, we all learned love.

My husband and I, newlyweds at 19 and 20, wanted to have children right away. Not many would find that practical with our second year of college commencing a week and a half after the wedding. If we wanted to stay married, according to ourselves and our potential marriage counselors, baby number one would need to come after diploma number one, career number one, and house number one (no matter which order). But, sometimes, a woman has a need to nurture. My best friend in Fargo, married at 19, in college, got a fish. Her nurturing instinct wasn't satisfied, because, well, how attached can you get to something that can be flushed? To this day, she has fourteen aquatic animals, and will shortly be trying for a baby. I...wanted a dog.

With a sort of backwardly, maliciously twisted interpretation of my husband's *permission* to get a pet, his words, "we'll think about it," I was on my way to pick out a puppy from the local shelter. This wasn't the worst behavior from myself. I used to write my parents business proposals on why I should have rabbits. The dog I had gone to see had been put down before I had arrived; Petfinder.com had not been updated after the weekly "closed to the public" day. I decided to take the opportunity to tell the 40 other dogs, 20 cats, and one rabbit how lucky they were, and started into a room labeled, "Puppy Lane." There, in pen number eight, was the tiniest polar bear I had ever seen flopping around in its crate with a mouthful of newspaper. The tag on this crate said, "Lab X." Born in the shelter, this eight week old didn't look like any breed in particular, unless there is a breed known as 'glorified cotton ball'. Thinking *Lab X??* Cute now, 98 pounds later-X? Couch whole now, foam packaging material later-X?

"Sorry, girly, you'll be too big for me."

We lived in an apartment characterized best as a place for students, first-time renters, muggers, auto-theft criminals, crack heads, dope dealers, and mutated cockroach gangs. I should get a dog that doesn't bring attention towards ourselves. I walked away from pen eight, and heart-wrenching, blood curdling screams clung to my shadow pulling me right back to this dog.

"Oh my gosh, shh shh shh shhhhh,"

A shelter volunteer ran through the doorway. The moment I stepped back in front of Lab X, she stopped crying, and gave me a look. You know which look I mean. *Great, you got me in trouble.*

“Is everything ok? Oh...her. She’s the last of her litter, and ready to go. You should take her. It was too late for their mother. She wasn’t adopted. And this puppy is just available for two more days, or.... We just don’t have the room.”

Of course not, I thought. Animal shelter volunteers are car salesmen by profession.

“How big will she get?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, “I think her mom was about eighty.”

Oh, hubby will be thrilled. I had gone there to get 'DOG ID#4982', “small terrier mix.” To add to the dilemma, they were closing soon, and I definitely had my heart set on coming home with something. All puppies, like a new Ferrari, have the initiation or *test drive* phase of adoption going for them. They are programmed for instant good behavior until you sign your life away for them. “Let me chew on your nose and intrigue you with my puppy breath,” Lab X was saying. Well, she had me at first whiff of skunk breath.

I braced my husband for the shock by telling him on my way home that I fell in love with a BIG dog, and nothing could separate our love...between me and the dog. Just be warned, though, she was so big that she could only squeeze into my car by stretching between the front seat and the back.

“Oh, we don’t have room for that...”

“But I love her!!!”

“And... I love you, so I trust that it is a good dog.”

I surprised my very tolerant, open-minded, and patient husband when I knocked on our apartment door and pulled out a handful of puppy from behind my back. He was in love. No one could resist a yellow-white fuzz ball with eyes.

She was our new baby; a smart, no, brilliant baby. She learned ‘sit’ and ‘lay’ before she could wiggle up onto the street curb on her own. Lab X was actually a Golden Retriever, Sheltie mix according to the vet. He said that she would look like a miniature Golden Retriever when she grew up. We came up with a list of names. I narrowed it

down to 'Roxy' and 'Bonnie,' but Derek, my husband, liked 'Sydney' and 'London' (determined to name it after an international city).

"I really like Bonnie, she looks like a Bonnie," to which he replied,

"I may never get to visit Sydney, so why not that, and I didn't agree to this dog anyway."

Sydney it was. We were very dotting parents, and provided the best. She was, however, a puppy and I wished many nights that she be strapped to the roof of the apartment. I know children will be different... Everyone thought she fully honored the definition of cute, and to our trainer, now good friend, Sydney was the brightest dog in class. She was my cuddle buddy, tear towel, and good friend. Sydney was turning into a gorgeous dog, and the perfect size for us. She had made it to six months old, and being such a happy family, I didn't think there could have been a better start to our marriage.

We lost our Sydney three weeks into training classes.

Sydney was stolen. Stolen from our apartment. We think by children, and I confronted every child I met many many times. We called the police, but they couldn't help us. Theft wasn't unusual in this apartment complex. Derek, managing a printing company while in school, printed about a thousand flyers, and attached them to almost every apartment door, every car. We both spent many nights combing the property, screaming her name. The logic was to unnerve the person who had taken her, or drive the other neighbors insane enough to help us get her back. We knocked on about fifty doors, and discovered several sympathetic, dog-loving neighbors who joined our search for hours at a time. They all shared our pain. It was a heart-burning, panic sort of pain. What was happening to her right now? I couldn't be there to protect her! Whoever is dirt enough to take her, couldn't possibly love her, couldn't possibly treat her like we did! Derek would hold me and rock me, as I would fight the passionate urge to hate mankind. Who would do this!?! There was no sign of her. I would walk into work, and with the words from my concerned coworkers, "have you found her yet?" I'd would become broken and cry. She was microchipped, and we were told that every vet scanned dogs. She would come up as "LOST/STOLEN," but I doubted that whoever took her would bring her to the vet. That very week, we started seriously looking for houses. We

weren't staying at the apartments any longer. This all took place the first week of December. Sydney had been stolen Tuesday, December 5th, 2006. We will never forget that horrible day. Derek and I had gotten married exactly four months before that.

My mom called me at work on Friday.

“Your father and I need to go to Atlanta, and we thought we would come by and see you on the way.”

I gasped, “You found Sydney! You have Sydney don't you?”

“Honey...”

My parents live in Dalton, an hour away.

“We do want to bring by something. It's yours, I believe, left at our house.”

I didn't think anything about it. I felt lifeless inside. Sydney, being like my baby, my actual child, was gone, and I had to accept it. I could only describe what I felt as deep depression. I prayed constantly. If God could give people the freedom to sin, He should take it away for the sake of me and my baby dog. I prayed that she would be home when I got home. I specifically did NOT pray that I would find her on my own. I didn't want that moment of discovery to be her on dead on the road. Derek was trying to be the stronger of us both.

“Yeah, we'll be home.”

Before they came over, I cleaned the empty-feeling apartment, and looked at our scrawny, thrift store Christmas tree. We had put it up right before the incident. It was completely bare. I cut out some Christmas pictures out of our wrapping paper, tied yarn to them and hung them to our now Ghetto looking tree. *My* parent's house was always beautiful for Christmas. There was a knock on the door, and my mom came in. With hugs and apologies, she greeted us and sat down on the couch.

“We wanted to give you an early Christmas present.”

“Ok.”

“Close your eyes.”

We both sat down on the couch, closed our eyes, and heard my Dad and jingle bells walk into through the door. In my father's arms was a small, golden-red colored dog wearing fuzzy Christmas antlers. Derek and I were dumbfounded. It wasn't Sydney, but we knew

it wouldn't be. My parents, who never would sign my business proposals in getting rabbits, had brought us a dog. In a very untraditional way, God had heard me. I have found that when miracles happen, they tend to be untraditional. My dad laid the dog in my lap. She was terrified. She was the polar opposite of Sydney's spunk. We were soon to learn that we were, in a way, meant for each other.

“What is this? Where did she come from?”

Derek and I were full of questions.

They explained to us that policemen in Hixon, Tennessee were patrolling a shopping center, and had noticed her. Outside of a storefront church and a Bi-Lo, they had noticed something covered in mud, drinking out of a puddle full of grease and dirt. She was a shell of a dog, scared and starving; mud encrusted her lips. Feeling compassionate at such an awful sight, they stopped. The patrol car stayed with her, and word quickly spread of her situation. It was sixteen degrees that day, and had snowed only a couple of days before. She showed many signs of abuse. This dog was terrified of people, and winced at approaching hands. She wouldn't have survived much longer. They had tried to feed her, but she refused to come near them. The men stayed in their cars to keep warm and watched the dog from a distance. One of the officers phoned his girlfriend, a teacher that my mother worked with. They wondered if “she would help their friend.” Ginger Farmer, who had been on her way home, muttered many failed excuses and reluctantly came by the shopping center. The dog ran to her in a heartbeat. I've heard that the dog that my parents greeted me with, and the dog off the streets could not be recognized as the same animal. This rescue took place Tuesday, December 5th, ironically the same day we lost Sydney.

Ginger, four hours from having to be up for work the following day, took the dog home, tried to feed her, and gave her a warm bed for the night. The poor dog had apparently been severely mistreated and dumped. Heartbroken at having to leave the dog, she left for school and emailed the school personnel asking if there was an open home; she had no room to keep the dog. My mom, feeling compelled at that moment, going only by a photo shot quickly by a cell phone, hit the reply button ahead of her coworkers. Not much later, the filthy dog was in my parent's garden tub covered in

shampoo. I knew she was ours when my parents walked through that door. She wasn't Sydney's replacement, but she was a God-sent remedy for the depression I felt.

I seem to have a pact with God when it comes to dogs. When I was fourteen, I lost my best friend Sparky, a Jack Russel, for four months. He had jumped into a contractor's truck across the street during a storm, and taken out of town. When the guy realized what happened, he dumped Sparky at an oil refinery, was picked up by a refinery worker who lived an hour away from us, cared for by him, his wife and foster child, and reunited with me four months later. One night, they had stopped at a grocery store to grab a snack, and saw an old "Lost Dog" sign. A phone call.

"Yeah, uh, my wife and I saw this flyer...for a dog. Is he small, black, brown and white?"

"MOM!!!!!!!"

My parents bought Sparky when I was four, and he lived until my first year of college. Some theologians question God's power and presence by discussing things like Heaven, death, nature, and evolution. My curiosity about Him is most deeply rooted in why He uses things other people consider trivial to change my life. With all the events happening in the world: people starving, cities and countries governed by corrupt rulers does He care about my happiness being rooted in dogs?

"What do you want to name her?" they asked me.

"I like the name 'Bonnie'."

"Bonnie it is," Derek said.

Bonnie was our hero as much as Ginger and we were to her. She was just as cute as could be. A Pomeranian/Sheltie mix. To me, even her breed had significance-- Sheltie, part of Sydney and part of our past; Pomeranian, sign of a brighter future. If I had a need to nurture, she filled that deficit ten fold. She wouldn't eat unless I locked both her and myself in the bathroom to stand guard over her food. I'd grab one of my books for class and sit on the closed potty while she ate. Our first semester of college as a married couple had ended, and we were waiting for the documents to be finalized so we could move to a house in Cartersville. Bonnie wasn't easy to work with, or let's just say, progress was slow. Her abuse had lead her to be very mistrusting, very scared. She

would come to you, but lay down with her tail tucked, shaking. Every time we reached to pet her, she would wince and cower. Unwilling to move on a leash, we would hold her and greet our trainer and PetSmart associates. They had known Sydney well because of training classes, and were eager to help Bonnie learn confidence. One day we had a breakthrough. She accepted a treat from one of the associates. We had been trying that for a while, and Bonnie had always refused. From that point on, Bonnie's shattered confidence was restored. Shortly after, we signed for our first home; a town home with a large fenced in backyard, in a quiet neighborhood, in Cartersville, GA...with no muggers, auto-theft criminals, crack heads, dope dealers, or mutated cockroach gangs.

By March, we had three dogs in all. I wouldn't say that I had become a collector, but I really wanted these three dogs. Bonnie, and a Dalmatian named Gabriella Enchilada were in runnings to become certified therapy dogs. Then there was Sara, the bull-in-a-china-shop dog, an Aussie mix, a man's dog. Derek said that she understood him. (?) Oh, and my Bonnie? She had become princess of the roost. She believes that she holds the world in her tiny paw. The once beaten and neglected mutt on the street had become a boss of the house. We have many rumors of the neighborhood politics that she's involved in. She had learned to love people, and acted as a walking ice-breaker between us and strangers. We worried that she would be one of those pillow decorations, too prissy to be fun, but learned her true nature. One of her favorite things to do is ride at the tip of my kayak, jump onto an embankment and plaster herself in mud and sand. I've taken Bonnie to see Ginger twice. I know that it's a painful reunion for Ginger. She had seen Bo at her very worst, and had given her up without third or fourth thought. Both times Bonnie has seen Ginger, it had been during school hours at Dalton's City Park Elementary School. Bonnie loves meet and greets with the kids. The best moment for me was when a child, wheelchair bound, could not reach down to pet her, and Bonnie sat in his lap therapeutically. Now at 21 and 22, Derek and I had the same feeling as before. It had been the greatest two years of our lives. What a happy family! Things couldn't get much better than this.

We had another accident.

It was a beautiful September morning in 2008. September 11th. Derek had headed on to work, and I thought that the dogs should enjoy the fresh air and get to play outside while we're gone. I put them outside, and went to work. We had put them outside many times before that. This morning was different. From what our neighbors had said, it wasn't an hour or two, and they had broken out. They were having the time of their lives, I'm sure. Sara, Gabby, and Bonnie. The Three Stupid Muttqueteers. We came home that evening, discovering their escape. At that same second we ran out of the house, and searched and searched for them—calling for hours. This was a very closed-off neighborhood; they had to be ok. Derek took his car, and went looking around the neighborhood. An hour after we had been home, Bonnie came running as fast as her legs could take her, straight into my arms. She was badly out of breath. I kept hugging her,

“You're such a good girl, good girl. Oh thank you God!”

She was exhausted and trembling. I called Derek, and let him know. He said,

“I'm going to try out on the main street. Make sure Bonnie gets enough water.”

Bonnie wouldn't drink. She definitely wasn't acting right. A phone call.

“Ana, don't panic.”

My heart dropped in my shoes. Those words mean something tragic happened. Were all the dogs this exhausted? We may have to lay cold cloths on them.

“Sara is dead.”

“GOD!?”

“There were police lights, and I wanted to see what happened. It was Sara.

They're blocking the streets. Don't come out here, ok?”

“No, GOD, OH GOD, I'll be right there.”

I dropped the phone, left Bonnie in the house, and ran out. The bigger two, Gabby and Sara, heard us calling and tried to cross the main street to get into the neighborhood.

They didn't make it. Sara was right at the entrance. On my way out of our neighborhood, I called my mom. After a million rings, she picked up.

“Hey sweetie!”

“Uh...OH...GOD...THEY...Sara....she's....OH GOD!”

“Honey, oh whats wrong. ANA TALK”

“SARA'S DEAD”

“I'm coming. I'm coming right now. Oh, honey, I'm..I'm so sorry.”

I parked, took a half look at a black body in the road, then collapsed on the grass on the side of the road in violent sobs trying desperately not to throw up. UGH, this only happens to bad pet parents. The policewoman looked like she wanted so badly to come comfort me, but she had to block traffic. Derek came over to me and just held me as tightly as he could. Sara was more of Derek's dog. He was sobbing as well. Where was Gabby? OH, God, please let Gabby be safe. Gabby, the rescued, full-blooded Dalmatian had become a certified therapy dog through Therapy Dogs Inc. She had made visits to City Park Elementary and to two nursing homes. She had a need to love on people; especially me. I left my car where it was, and Derek took me home. He was going to go look for Gabby.

He called a few minuets later. He said that Gabby had not made it either. She had gotten caught on the truck that hit her, and taken down the street. She rested in front of a high school where some teenagers had stayed to hang out for a while. Seeing the whole thing, they bravely brought Gabby to the side, and waited for Derek. Animal control helped Derek with both of my babies. I never had to actually say goodbye. At home, I held Bonnie, squeezing her too tightly, and sobbed into her fur until my parents got there an hour later. Bonnie was there when it had happened. I say to this day that it was her life on the streets that taught her how to cross streets safely. I would never want to imagine what she had seen that night.

My parents stayed with us for hours consoling us. Unlike Sydney, we knew what happened. I now could answer the question, “Is it better to know, or not know what has happened?” It's better not knowing. Bonnie went through a horrible depression. She refused to eat for several days, and did nothing but sleep. We would catch her sitting in the very center of the backyard, staring at the sky. We were really worried about her. It was very strange to have such an empty house.

“What do you think of our first two years of marriage? Would you think it's been worth all of this trouble? All of this heartbreak?” I asked my husband.

“All I can say is that I *think* that we will be facing harder times than this, but I *know* that we are stronger as a couple because of it,” Derek said.

The three of us did get through it. Many people sent us cards and nice emails. We didn't feel alone this time. Again, Bonnie had been there during my ultimate time of sorrow. I brought myself to ask God (after I quit telling Him that I hate mankind), why He saved Bonnie. Both times, not just this time. Why did He just handpick this dog out of millions to be with us? It was just meant to be.

Then... it occurred to me:

Sparky disappeared, a season later he was brought back.

I thought of God. I thanked God. I talked to God. I cried with God.

Sydney was lost. Bonnie was found. A new family all learning to heal.

We thought of God. We thanked God. We talked to God. We cried with God.

A family destroyed. A life saved. A family restored.

We cried with God. We thanked God. We talked to God. I talked to God.

The dogs were just a ploy all along. He had been using these dogs as a *physical symbol and reminder* of His love. HA! Being the creator of the Universe, I never consider Him the inventor of psychology. Now that I can step back from my little world, I see God as the type that would use anything He could to get through to people. To let me know that He cares about me, sees a need in me, and hears a cry for help, He shows me. Dogs aren't expensive, but they are valuable. Perfect. Now, where is a dog that needs a home....Fuzz ball you will do, Bonnie, you're on death's leg, Sara, Gabby...Go be with Ana, she needs you. Who do I turn to first, “Oh, hey God...!” You were there the whole time!?

And that is my story.

I know I went out on a limb to tell this one. This is the first time I've ever retold the accident stories. I am also not so bold about voicing my beliefs. I used to be. I might be again. Whether or not people deny or accept the Christian faith doesn't mean that we, that I, have to reject the possibility that there are things that were put in our paths to get our attention off, well, the path. For me, it's a chance to breath and look next to me and

find that someone has been walking beside me the whole time. For me, it's Jesus. For others, it could be the idea of their stronger self.

“Pretty neat, huh Bonnie?! You had no idea...”

She's licking my toe as I type. She's not alone any more. Not too long after we lost Gabby and Sara, we went to our new local shelter and adopted a Siamese cat, Leila. Though I had never like cats, I wasn't willing to get another dog. Leila seemed like a dog-cat. She was; she has a dog-like heart. It was Leila that really lifted Bonnie from her depression. I've read *Where the Red Fern Grows*; I knew that there could be an unnecessary consequence of the accident if Bo became too depressed. Then, in December, (against the will of my mother-in-law), Derek and I went to a breeder and picked out the dog of Derek's dreams; a Weimaraner puppy. We could afford this, because puppies like houses in this economy, aren't going for too much. Like all puppies, he is a tyrant unless sleeping, and threatens the good name of dogs several times a day. So, here we are. A big family again—don't tell Derek, but I'd gladly give back his Weimaraner.