

Tippy and Denny - Companions in Heaven

By

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I was eleven years old when my first pet died. It was my first encounter with death and the most difficult one. To lose Tippy, especially when he was in the prime of his life, was particularly devastating, because I knew in my heart that his death could have been prevented if our lives had been different. It was the one time I felt the isolation of our poverty.

Although we were poor in comparison to others in our society, we somehow flourished in riches of the simplest kind. In 1953 there were no computers, no internet, no video games, no gangs, no dealers, no hidden evils, lurking, waiting to entice children into their web of intrigue, murder, drugs, and pornography. There were only the simple pleasures of eating ice cream at the local soda fountain; lemonade stands and neighborhood parades abounded. It was a *Leave it to Beaver* neighborhood and a time of modest pleasure. We played house under a drooping weeping willow tree, dressing up my youngest brother, Douglas, like a little girl, fluffing his curly hair around his face. My brother, Patrick, was always *Annie Oakley*, a choice today that would raise eyebrows of sexual innuendo but wasn't even a thought in 1953. I recall fondly our neighbor whose small son, Chucky, was fastened in his harness and secured by a chain that led to the back door. His severe wanderlust had forced his parents to use the only practical method of control they knew, yet no one screamed *child abuse* or *cruelty*. It was accepted. A neighborhood friend lived with her brother and an alcoholic father in an old converted boxcar. That was okay too.

When we became bored with our neighborhood parades and lemonade stands, my sister, Karen, would share her babysitting money, and we would spend an entire afternoon riding the bus into Robbinsdale and having a soda at the Rexall Drug. Mama didn't bat an eye or worry about us being attacked or kidnapped. The excursion cost a nickel each way for the bus and the decadent ice cream soda a meager fifteen cents. A quarter was a gold mine in 1953. The world was a safe place in 1953.

I was eight years old in July of 1953 just before the bank forced us from our home in Circle Pines, Minnesota. Our new home, if you could call it that, was like going from an elegant dinner to a knapsack lunch and was a devastating heartbreak for my mother.

The rundown shack, in the suburb of Robbinsdale, sat on the alley side of two vacant lots, conveniently nestled behind an over-sized weeping willow tree that hid its ugliness from the street's view. My mother, baby Douglas, born in October that year, and my two-year-old brother, Patrick shared the lone small bedroom.

My fourteen-year-old brother, Robby, was awarded the honor of sleeping on the scratchy nylon sofa, while my sister, Karen, and I snuggled together on a roll-a-way bed. We spent our nights listening to the cracking and popping of an archaic oil-burning stove, its heat rising and giving only a pittance of warmth to the bare linoleum floors. The treasured antiques of today were the travesty of yesterday as they decorated the decaying tile floor in our bathroom. The huge claw-footed tub was ensconced along the back wall next to a toilet flushed by a pull string. My twelve-year-old sister would stand for hours before the pedestal sink staring into the one mirror that was part of our home, daydreaming of a better life to come.

Mama wasn't happy anymore after we moved into Robbinsdale. Daddy visited us occasionally, and Mama prayed he would come to his senses. She was numb when he eventually left for Mexico with a girlfriend and a new son in tow. It was then that Mama would sit in the rocking chair with Douglas, with tears rolling down her face.

Even though we were poor, Karen and I determined not to let life become drudgery. We adopted a stray cat we named Tuffy, and he would come and go, almost like Daddy once did, and us never knowing when he'd return. Karen loved animals and when she saw an ad in the paper for free puppies, she begged Mama to let us get one. Mama was apprehensive about getting a new dog after what happened to Pal, our Golden Retriever. When we lived in Circle Pines, Pal was the perfect babysitter, never allowing Patrick near the road. Patrick's screams would bring Mama running to find the big dog blocking the little tot's way. When Daddy left us, Mama had no food to feed us, let alone Pal. He was forced to wander the streets in search of food. Mama became so distressed looking at his emaciated body that she sent him to live at Grandpa's farm in Brainerd. He died three years later after being hit by a train.

Mama said we couldn't feed another dog, but Karen promised the little terrier wouldn't eat much, and she would help buy food with her babysitting money. Mama eventually gave in, but sadly for Karen, Tippy soon attached himself to my side. His energy and playfulness became an integral part of my days, and I loved him with all my heart. The experience of loving a puppy was new to me as I was too young to really enjoy our dog Pal before he was sent away.

Karen soon began to beg Mama for a pet of her own and used her babysitting money to buy a beautiful green parakeet. She spent hours teaching Denny to speak his

name and all daylong he'd whistle and sing, "Denny's a pretty bird". Karen was so proud of him.

Tippy was two the year Mama found droppings and gnawed boxes in the kitchen. Mama was sure we had a mouse. Of course, Tuffy wasn't a house cat, and we often went weeks without seeing him. Mama panicked and tied Tippy to the bedpost at night, convinced his presence would keep any rodent from approaching Douglas or Patrick. We guessed she thought Karen and I could fend for ourselves.

Denny's cage sat on top of our roll-a-way bed during the day and at night Mama would open the bed and move Denny's cage to the top of the refrigerator, covering it with a cloth. Several mornings Mama found feathers scattered around Denny's cage and couldn't imagine what was making him so restless. She was puzzled when Denny's eyes widened in fear when she placed his cage on the refrigerator, but never in her lifetime could she have guessed the reason.

We awoke one morning to find Denny gone; just a few feathers were scattered haphazardly around his cage. Karen was hysterical, and Mama was overwhelmed with grief and shock. Why hadn't she realized that something had been trying to seize poor Denny several times before it accomplished its goal?

We quickly put out traps and poison and soon the culprit was found dead beneath the house. The largest sewer rat we'd ever seen in our lives had climbed the up the coils on the back of the refrigerator, opened the door to Denny's cage and devoured the little parakeet. Mama was sick just knowing the danger that had been so

close. We all wept realizing Denny had given his life to save us. If only Mama had left Tippy loose in the house, the tragedy might never have occurred.

Tippy never seemed to mind and was such a happy little dog despite the tragedy going on around him. Robbinsdale leash laws demanded he not be free to roam so we tied him to the tree outside our house. Soon we discovered that Tippy was infested with fleas. Mama quickly bought some flea soap as that is all we could afford. We placed him in the large claw-footed tub and washed him down. You've heard the expression "from head to toe"? Well, it was meant to be exactly that when it came to fleas. Unfortunately, none of us had experienced such a thing, and we soon discovered that Tippy's ears had become infested with the nasty intruders. We did everything we could for him, but his day and night crying; begging someone to rub his ears and stop the pain was too much to bear. We had no money to take him in for treatment. My heart was ruptured at the seams, and I wept bitter tears the day I arrived home from school to find Tippy gone. Mama had called the Humane Society and they came and took him away. In those days, they didn't euthanize them, they only put them down. I couldn't blame Mama as she had no other choice. Poor Tippy was suffering, and it was the only humane thing Mama could think of to do. If only it happened today, there would have been someplace we could have taken him for help. In 1953, dogs were considered expendable. It was the first time our poverty had really destroyed my happiness. I was eight years old when my daddy abandoned us and eleven years old when Tippy crossed over the Rainbow Bridge.

Mama had a stroke when she was 81, and she spoke often about Denny and Tippy for five years until she died. When dementia set in, she called out for Tippy,

commanding him to come to her. After 50 years, Mama had never forgiven herself for either loss.

“Do you think pets go to heaven when they die?” I listened as my little brother questioned his Sunday school teacher.

I turned away as I knew in my heart what I wanted the answer to be. I knew I wanted to go to heaven because I was sure Tippy and Denny would be there waiting for me.