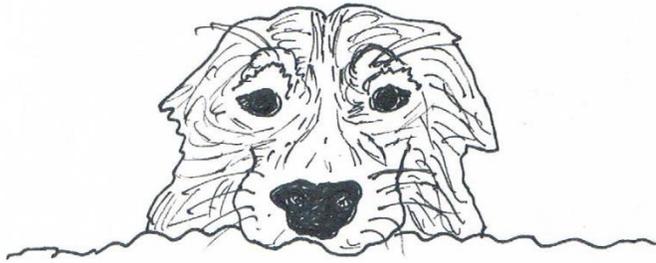


Love on Four Legs



A series of books chronicling the life of Rocky, arguably the best dog in the world

Preamble

These little books, intended for kids from one to ninety-two, were written to honour the amazing life of a beloved family dog. Rocky turned out to be more than just a dog, but that's how all families feel about their lovely canine friends. It started out as a trilogy of books, one for his early, intermediate and later phases of his almost-seventeen years of life. The trilogy was written out of chronological sequence, and is presented here in the order it was actually written. But then Rocky slowed down, and a bit later he slipped away. So a fourth book was written, a sort of epilog coda, to try to capture the emotions felt at the passing of this great soul. But we still feel him here, guiding us and loving us, because that's what great dogs do.

We love you Rocky, both now and forever. And we thank you for all the Love you beamed into this family...

With hugs and a kiss...

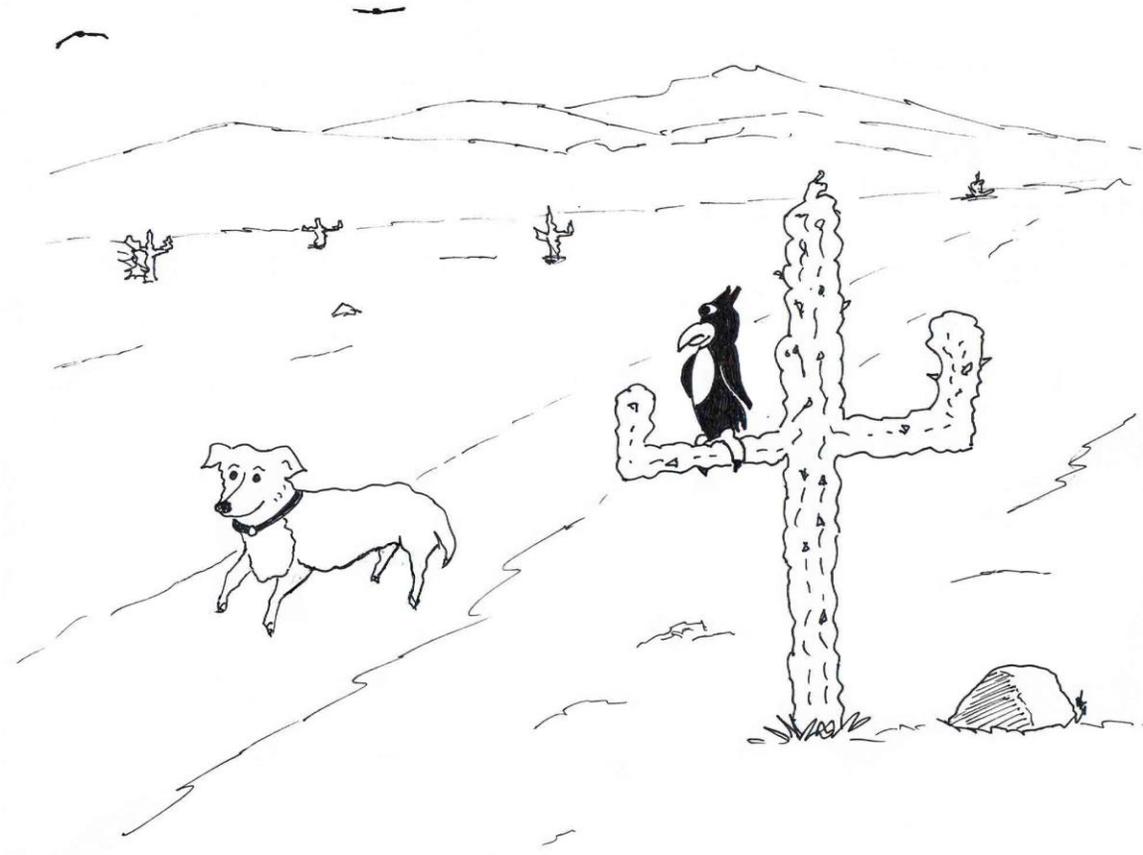
The Baetz Family

Dundas, Ontario

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Love on Four Legs



A Final Odyssey

Written by Brian Wilson Baetz and Jasmine Rachel Baetz

Illustrations by Brian Wilson Baetz



Dundas, Ontario

Rocky spends most days in a sort of slumber, stretched out on his pooch pad. He has a perfect spot to snooze in the living room of his family's old brick home. This spot catches both the morning light, streaming in sideways from a half-moon window, and the afternoon light filtering through the silver maple outside the bay window facing the street. From here, Rocky keeps a keen eye on the comings and goings of the household. He can see everyone going through the front door, running up and down the stairs, and sitting down to eat at the dining room table. It is a good vantage point for a dog.

Rocky is a Shetland Sheepdog or Sheltie, a breed that hails from the wind-swept Shetland Islands, north of Scotland. He still has the sheep herding instincts of his ancestors woven into his habits and movements. After sixteen years of happy existence, Rocky is lean and fit. His tri-colour coat of black, white, and tan is in very good shape.

Rocky came to his family as an eight week old puppy, making the family of four a perfect five. His parents were the regular loving sort of parents. The children were then only four and seven years old and Rocky knew they were special kids.

Now the brother and sister have grown up and moved away for school and work, and so the house is quiet. Still, he knows that his job continues: the job of extending love to all he sees, and to protect and guide his family.

His parents try to keep him happy, with little treats and regular walks and lots of pats on the head. His brother comes home from Toronto now and again, but it has been an awfully long time since he has seen his sister. He overhears her name from his parents' conversations, and it is often accompanied by the word *Mexico*. At first, Rocky wasn't quite sure what that word meant, but he guesses that it is a place, and one that is quite far away. His intuition tells him that he needs to find out where this place is soon, because he is getting very old. His dreams are telling him that he will not live much longer.

When Rocky was young, his sister was the apple of his eye. He thought she was an angel. She would hold him and communicate to him without words, just with her thoughts. Rocky feels the need to see his angel sister one more time, even if it means a long journey to this place called Mexico.

Rocky was never one for elaborate plans, and so he waits until an opportunity presents itself. One Saturday afternoon it does, when the front door is propped open for his parents to bring in the groceries. Rocky squeezes his eyes shut, slips out the door, and begins trotting down Park Street. He knows that his absence will be a great sadness to his parents and brother, but sometimes a dog has to do what a dog has to do.



Down to the Lake...

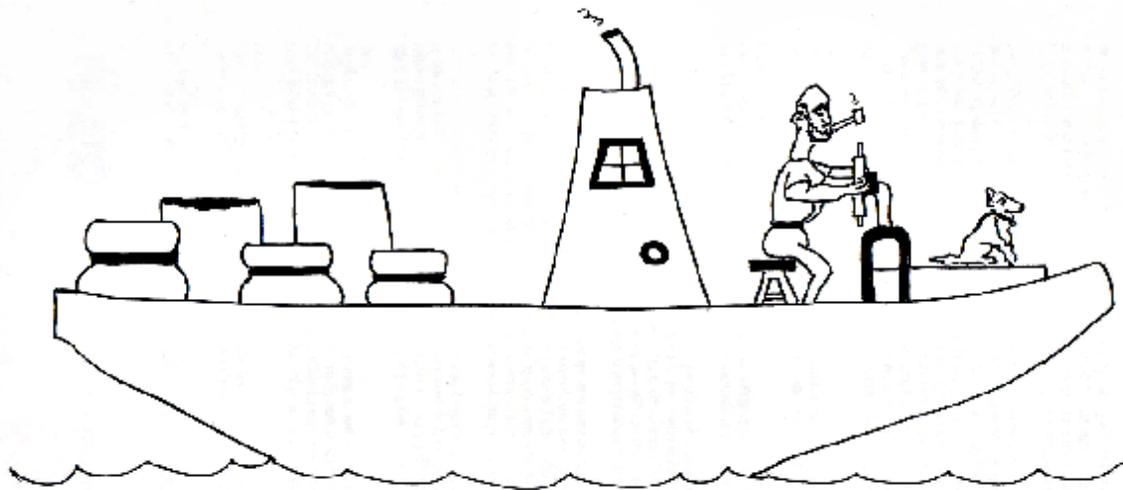
Instinctively, Rocky knows he will do best if he sticks to natural and rural areas. He'll have to keep his time in cities and towns to a bare minimum. A dog trotting alone, no matter how purposefully, will attract attention. So he weaves his way through the heavily forested Dundas Valley, taking advantage of familiar country to fine-tune his internal compass. Before ducking out the door, he had gone inward and focused on the essence of his sister. The still, small Voice within tells him which way he needs to go to find her. South-west: that is the answer he receives. So to the south-west he trots, across the area of Ontario referred to as the Carolinian Zone, where the plants and animals are remarkably similar to their sisters in the Carolinas to the South.

The days are gentle, and he drinks deeply from babbling streams and eats plants and berries from the sides of country roads. Rocky sees all sorts of different crops under cultivation, some in advanced stages and some still in their infancy. One brisk sunny afternoon, he stops before a great field of spinach as a curious sight catches his eye. Standing atop a small green plant is a little round gnome in the midst of an urgent conversation with a group of fire spirits, hovering overhead. Fire spirits are present in every aspect of a plant's growth such as warming and fertilizing the seeds that have not yet sprouted.

Rocky has heard his parents talk about these creatures, but he had never seen them before. Meandering towards them, he watches with great interest as the fire spirits flutter about, imbuing everything they touch and see with cosmic warmth. The gnome waves his hands about and motions for the fire spirits to follow him into a little hole in the soil beside him. "There is much that goes on below, you know," the gnome says to Rocky, before he and the fire spirits disappear underground.

After a number of days that seem to blend into one another, Rocky realizes that he is going to have to change strategies on how he is making this journey. Outside a quiet village, he spies a freight train that moves slowly and then stops. There is a car with an open door, and maybe just maybe, a running jump will get him into the rail car. Yes! With a twisting slide he makes his way into the darkened recess of the box car. Some loose grains are scattered on the floor, which he smartly fashions into a simple dinner. The train picks up speed and chugs south-west.

Following a night of fitful sleep, Rocky feels the train slowing down. Looking out, he sees a large lake. Upon consulting his Inner Voice, he leaps out of the rail car and takes a rolling tumble onto the ground below. None the worse for wear, he trots to the lake's edge and gauges the temperature of the water with one expert paw. He plunges in and paddles hard, being sure to hold his little nose high above the water. He swims across the lake, feeling both anxious and gleeful about what is to come.



...and on to the River

Rocky pulls himself ashore several hours later, looking like a wet water rat and feeling chilled and very hungry. He senses he is in a much different place than home. He trots along until he comes to a large town, which he would normally avoid, but right now he is too famished to be bothered. The outskirts have a row of fast food restaurants emanating wonderful smells of grease! He discovers a row of dumpsters behind one of the buildings. Rocky knows from his parents that fast food is not a healthy eating option, but he is in a pickle. Half an hour later, he stumbles out sideways onto the street and starts looking for a safe place to sleep.

The next day, Rocky resumes his journey through countryside very similar to what he had seen near his home. But this place has a different feel, a different energy. There are still a lot of farms, interspersed with small towns and forested areas. He moves along with great purpose, and feels he is being guided in the right direction. But he knows that he's getting old and all this walking will surely take its toll. So, just like back in Canada, he begins looking out for rail lines

pointing in the right direction. But after several days of watching high speed passenger trains whiz by, he starts to wonder if this is the right way to go about it.

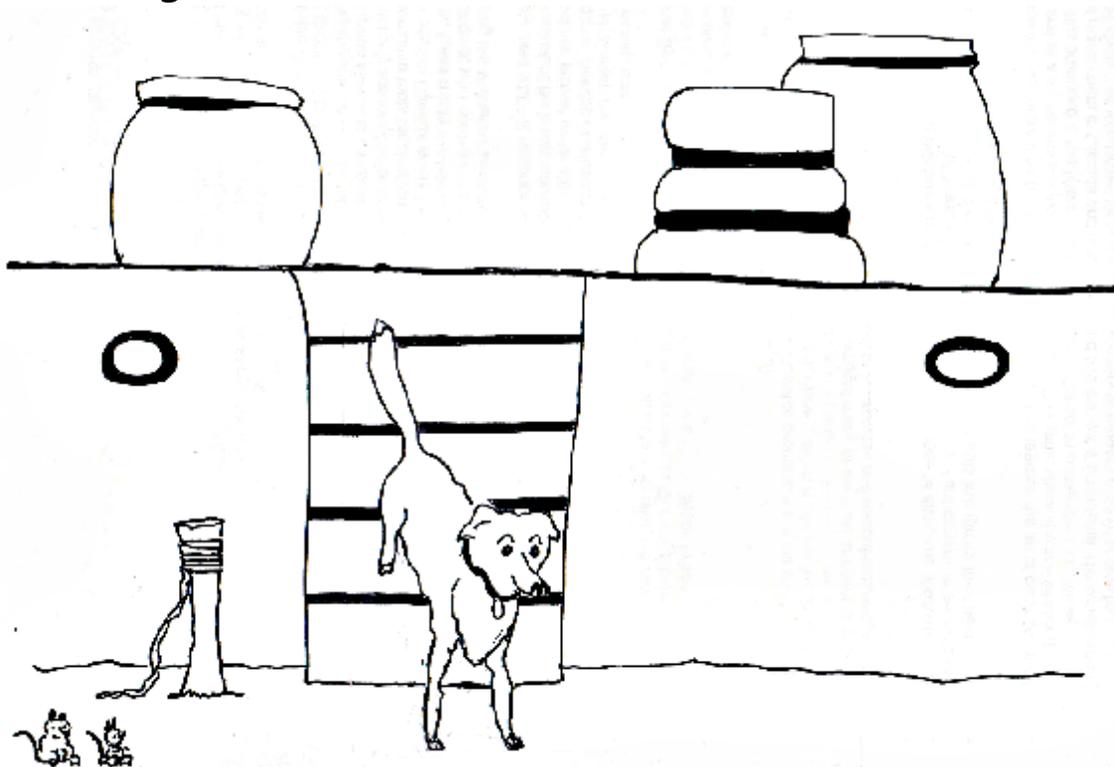
With great luck, he runs smack into a wide and fast-moving river, full of swirling eddy currents and white water turbulence. Rocky is an unquestionably brave dog, but this river makes him more than a little bit worried. So he makes his way along the river, looking for a better spot to transverse the wild current. After some time, he comes up to a cluttered port terminal, where barrels and logs are being loaded into flat bottomed barges. He realizes this may be his golden opportunity, not for simply crossing the river, but for being transported right down it! But this option certainly has its dangers: it would be the first time since leaving home that Rocky would have direct contact with humans. Being a dog of considerable grace and abundance of spirit, he surveys the dock for a sympathetic person. Some of the men loading the barge look a bit rough, but after a little while he spies a short, grizzled old man who appears to be in charge. Rocky approaches him tentatively; tail wagging and showing his best Sheltie grin. The old man notices him and leans down to give him a gentle pet. "Hey there, boy, what are you doing in these parts?"

Rocky does his best to communicate in the way animals do, without words but with love. "You look as if you are on a long journey, and could use a little food." Rocky likes the sounds of that sentiment and double wags his tail. "Our load is almost on, and we need to go way down river. But we could always use a wee deck hand, if you don't have a better place to be?" And with that, Rocky follows the old man up the gangway and the barge sets off soon thereafter.

The river flows wide and deep and fast. Rocky has little demands on his time from the crew, so he mainly sleeps at the feet of the gnarly old man, who seems to run the operation with equal portions of gruffness and warmth. As vast expanses and the occasional city roll by, Rocky lays on the deck, stretched out beneath the sun. Squinting up, he appreciates the light and warmth the sunshine affords him. Rolling over on his side, he watches the tallest trees and tiniest plants all reaching up and gathering their life and energy from the sun overhead. The most powerful thing that Rocky feels from the sun, though, is its love beaming down. Such incredible energy in the universe is a continual reminder of our connection to a Higher Force.



Another Night in New Orleans



As they float further south, the vegetation changes and so does the heat and humidity. Rocky remembers this climate from an earlier time, when he spent a year in New Orleans with his family. He didn't particularly enjoy that year, with a new home to adjust to, sneaky biting

insects, and bits of strange food in his bowl like chicken gumbo and crawfish etouffee. But he made the best of it, and since his primary job was to protect his family, there was really no other option but to stick it out and put on a brave face. Often that year, his parents took him on slow walks on the south edge of Audubon Park, where they gazed at boats just like the one he was now on, plying the mighty Mississippi.

So with a bit of luck, he reckons, he might even be able to spy a few sights of New Orleans on this journey. As luck would have it, a few days later the barge ties up at an off-loading terminal in Algiers, directly opposite the French Quarter of New Orleans. In the hubbub of landing the barge, Rocky is first off the gangplank. He steals into the sultry darkness of the Algiers night. He doesn't go far, bedding down in some green space near the Mississippi, allowing him to hear the rhythms of the mighty river as he sleeps. As dawn breaks he tramps through the quiet streets of adjoining Gretna, and criss-crosses his way through bayous and sleepy Cajun villages. He grabs a half-eaten poboy sandwich from a roadside rest area as sustenance and memories of tastes gone by.

Stowaway Sheltie



The bayous open up a bit, with zones of marshland interspersed with stretches of grassland. As more time wears on, the landscape becomes considerably drier, meaning watering options are fewer and far between. One upside is the big sky, absolutely magical at night, lit by an infinite number of stars streaming down on Rocky as he sleeps. The views of the moon are equally stunning, and help him gauge the passage of time as he travels on. A deepening fatigue is setting in, and he realizes he will again need some help. A day later, outside a small and sleepy village, he spies two men loading up an old pickup truck with blankets and water. Rocky knows it might be a bit risky, but he jumps up on the tailgate and snuggles into a bunch of blankets while the men are inside a warehouse. The blankets are a touch on the dusty side, and he

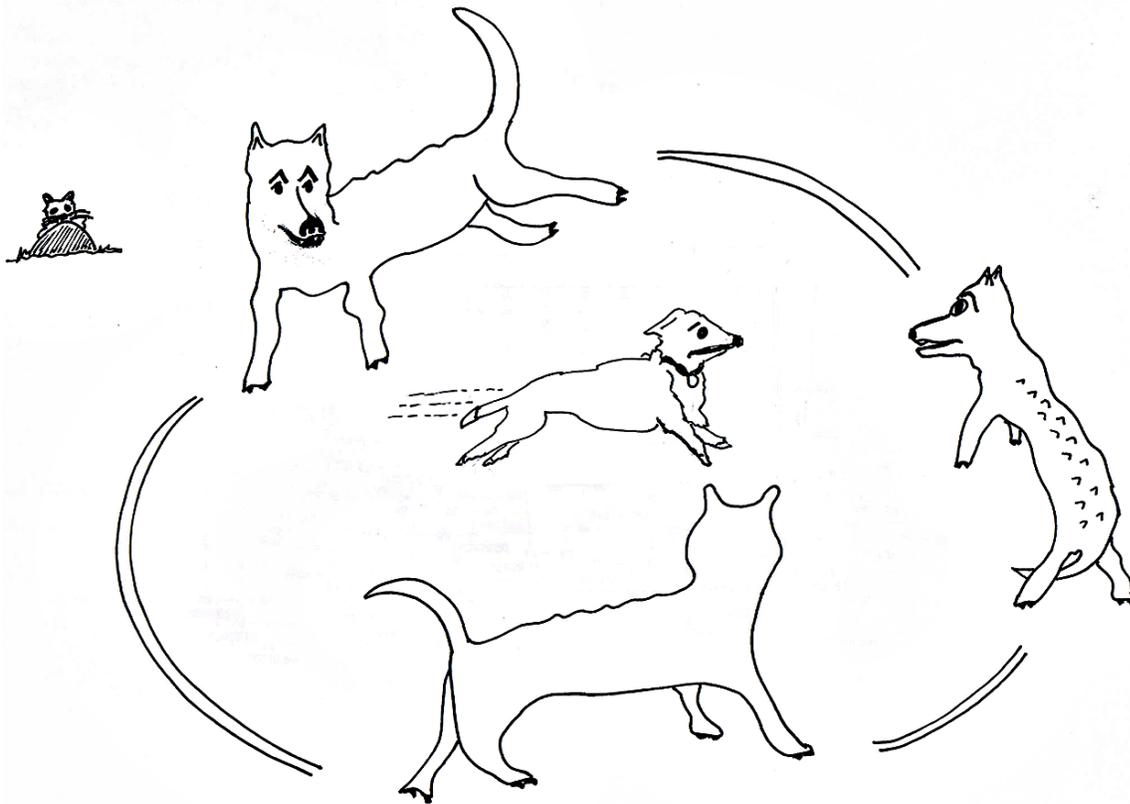
almost lets out one of his signature hearty sneezes, but in a matter of minutes the truck rumbles off.

They drive all day, through the night, and all the next day. The truck's speed is not fast, but far too fast to jump off safely, and Rocky nervously wonders if he has made a good decision. That evening, the truck rolls into a small town called Marfa, which Rocky had spied as the truck headlights illuminated the town's population sign. On the other side of town Rocky looks up at the sky and his jaw drops. The sky is lit up in the most wondrous and peculiar way, similar to the Aurora Borealis lights he had once seen in Canada.

Rocky feels absolutely awestruck on one hand, and oddly reassured on the other. The lights in the sky are communicating to him in a language that he once knew but had somehow forgotten. He takes it as a sign that he is on the right track, and that while he is journeying to complete his purpose, he is also being opened to a greater reality.

His reverie is broken with a start as the truck stops on top of a bluff overlooking a wide and mighty river. There is much commotion as more than a dozen men climb up the edge of the bluff and make their way quickly towards the truck. Rocky senses a whiff of danger and decides it is time to get off. He dodges through a flurry of legs and jumps off the truck. One straggler gives him an affectionate pat on the head as they pass one another, and Rocky takes this as a very good sign. He scurries down to the river's edge, and wades for some time to reach the other side. Exhausted, he wonders where he is. A place that men leave in the night, crossing a grand river for a long ride in the back of a pickup truck... but it has the feel of a very good place, a place full of heart and warmth, and he wonders if it might be... Mexico?

Traversing the Sonoran Desert



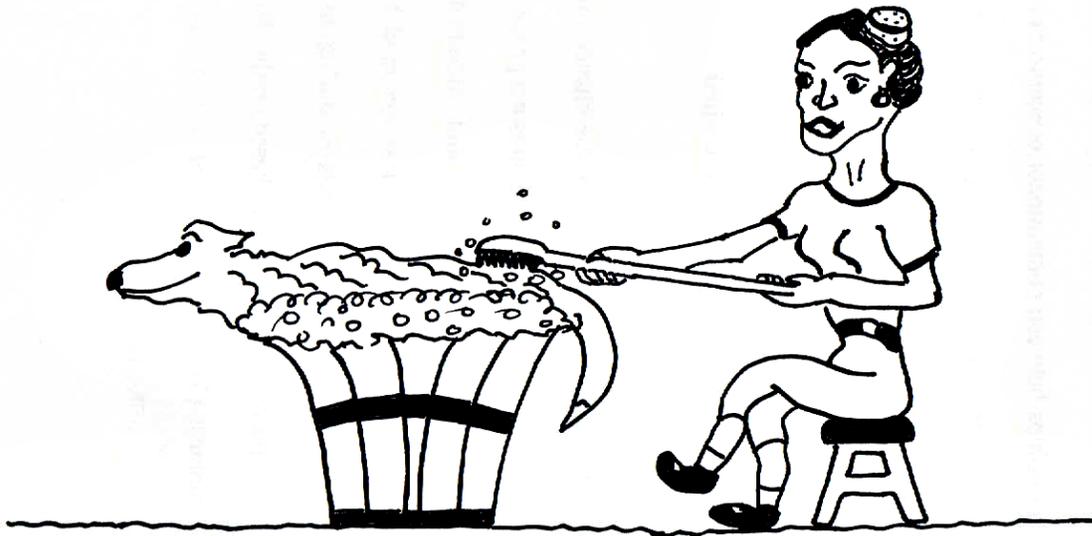
If it really is Mexico, Rocky is happy beyond belief, because this is where he will find his sister! But he has no idea how big Mexico is, or where exactly she is. And he knows quite plainly that she can't be anywhere nearby, because he is smack dab in the middle of a vast desert. He quickly realizes that it is best if he travels at night to avoid the withering sunlight, even if there may be greater risks from predators. A few uneventful days pass. Rocky finds rock outcrops to sleep under during the day, and walks purposefully through the night.

On the third night, under a full moon, Rocky hears noises that make the hair on his neck stand up. He whirls around and sees two adult coyotes and one adolescent. They have definitely seen him, and have concluded that their search for supper has just ended. The male let out a blood-curdling bark, followed equally in force by the female and rather feebly by the adolescent male. Rocky emits a low growl and quickly formulates his strategy. Three against one is unfortunate odds, even without considering the weight and size advantage the others possess. Rocky knows he'll only have one real shot, and that it will be against the adolescent. If he can inflict some real damage he might get enough time to sneak away while the parents tend to their injured offspring. And it'll have to be quick, because otherwise the adult male will attack him first. Rocky knows he hasn't come all this way to reconnect with his angel sister to die unceremoniously on a starlit desert plain, as poetic as that fate may be.

As the three coyotes circle him, Rocky reaches for reserves of strength he hardly knows he has, and makes a beeline thrust towards the young coyote. A cloud passes over the moon just then, affording another half second of surprise. Rocky dives under him, twisting his neck quickly to bite the soft underbelly. Rocky's teeth go deep and his jaws hold strong. The coyote screams out in pain, bucking and thrashing wildly. He tries to bite Rocky back but can't reach down far enough. They tumble and roll so frenetically the parent coyotes cannot keep up.

Rocky senses this will change very soon, so he quickly unclamps his jaw and speeds off towards a rock outcrop, leaving the injured opponent on the ground with his parents hovering over him. At the top of the outcrop, Rocky looks down and spies a rare running stream. He quickly runs to it, luxuriating in the water and washing off the residues of the encounter. Then he trots off downstream, hoping to diffuse his scent into the water, as he knows he might be followed by a revenge-seeking parent coyote. A quiet ending to a very traumatic night, one that makes him realize that he still has a bit of spunk left in him.

Running Away with the Circus



Early the next day, Rocky drifts by the edge of a mid-sized town, with nondescript buildings separated by low walls. He's looking for some kind of food, but what he sees through a large open door intrigues him even more. Young women in leotards are performing on large rings, and others are climbing up large swaths of silk and doing the most intricate spinning routines. Over in a corner, muscular young men are juggling and practicing gymnastic floor routines. What Rocky doesn't realize is that he has stumbled onto the training area of a Mexican circus, in the same tradition of Cirque de Soleil. He is transfixed, standing in the garage doorway until someone calls out: "Que lindo perrito!" (Spanish for "What a cute doggie").

One of the female gymnasts saunters over, pats his head, and asks, "Hey chico, are you hungry?" After her offerings of carnitas and papaya, Rocky walks over with her to meet the entire troupe. One of them says, "Hey, we've been talking about how we need an animal in our act... this guy is so cute, but do you think he can do anything?" Rocky sees his opportunity and spying a bunch of red balloons tied up in a corner, he dashes over and pulls them down from their post. "Hey boy, are you telling us you can do balloon tricks?" And with that, Rocky goes into his signature routine, swirling and twirling and bunting the balloons with his nose. This capacity was long ago unearthed at a birthday party, and the sight of a blown up balloon has thrilled him since.

The troupe members clap and cheer, and one yells out, "This circus now has a dog!" Rocky feels like one of the characters in Robertson Davies' *World of Wonders*, one of his Dad's favourite literary works. He knows it will mean regular food and water and lots of exercise, and he knows circus troupes travel the country. He reckons that this could bring him closer to where his sister lives, so that he can feel the pull of her heart and know she is nearby. Or she might even come and see his circus!

For the next few days he gets spruced up by the troupe, bathing and brushing and getting fitted out with a colourful sweater and matching beret. He also fine-tunes his balloon routine, the only glitch being that as he twirls faster and faster, his beret pops clean off his head. But at this sight everyone laughs, and his favourite troupe member, Esmerelda cutely sticks it back on. And so, the glitch turns out to be a true crowd pleaser. One day rolls into the next, and the troupe performs small regional shows to appreciative crowds. It always seems that the greatest applause is saved for Rocky, the Sheltie Circus Dog.

The Most Magnificent Circus Troupe in all of Mexico



The troupe plays different small towns nearly every night, from Chihuahua down to Guadalajara. They travel packed together in an old candy floss truck: tight quarters, but a lot of fun. One evening, after playing to a particularly exuberant crowd in the colourful town of Guanajuato, they used the proceeds from the show to take themselves out to dinner at one of the cafes lining the town square. There, on a display board, Esmerelda spots a sign that makes everyone very excited. "A Competition to Find the Most Magnificent Circus Troupe in All of the Republic of Mexico, to be held in San Miguel de Allende in the Teatro Angela Peralta on March the 20th. First prize is 100,000 pesos."

Immediately the troupe members make plans to enter this competition, only two weeks away and in the next major city to the south. Improvements to costumes, selections of music and choices of even more daring routines are hotly debated and discussed. The next two weeks fly by, and on the competition day, troupe members are ready and more than a little bit nervous. They register with the competition officials, and by way of a random draw, are informed that they will perform last out of twelve troupes. The theatre is full of enthusiastic patrons, as the circus in Mexico has a very long tradition. Rocky and his mates stand backstage and watch the

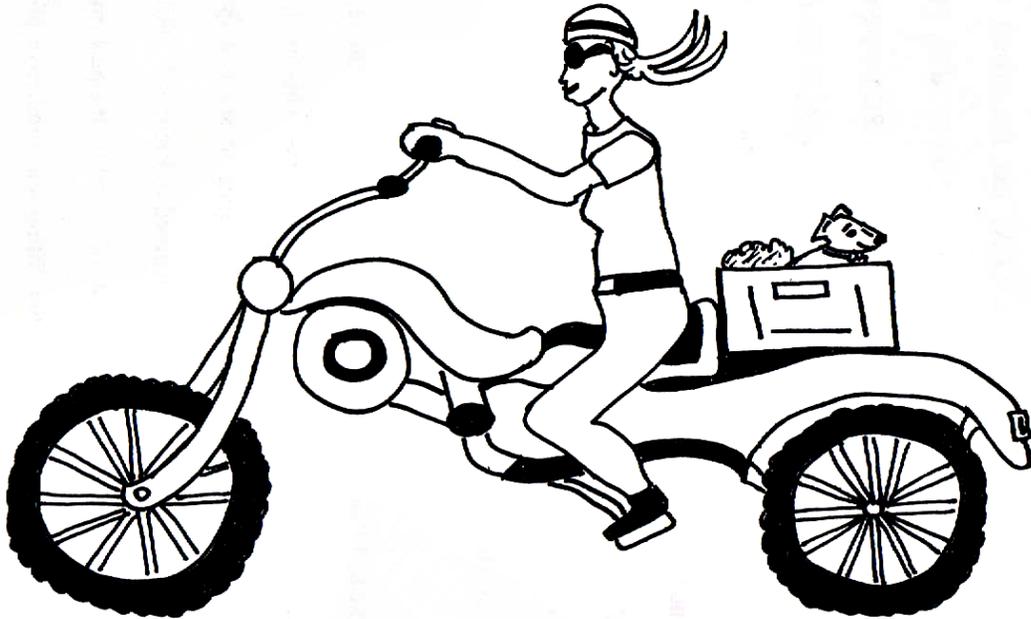
other troupes perform, with just the right mix of awe and we-can-do-better-than-that attitude. As the acts count down, he gets more and more nervous and Esmerelda continually readjusts his beret.

For the second-to-last act, a troupe from San Miguel comes out to thunderous applause from the hometown crowd. Their music is hauntingly beautiful, and five female performers come out and begin weaving their magic on hoops and silks. About halfway through their routine, Rocky gets a very good look at one performer, who is slowly and hypnotically spinning on a large ring. He has an instant flash of recognition, even with the circus makeup and costume, that this is his angel sister! But the show tempo picks up and someone partially blocks his view and he can't be sure. But then he remembers, that if this is his sister, he can tell by opening his heart and listening to her familiar vibration. The answer that comes back makes him weak in the knees – it is her! Excitedly he runs over to one of his red balloons and shakes it wildly.

As the performance ends and the San Miguel troupe comes backstage, Rocky runs up to his sister and bunts her in the calf with his nose, in one of his trademark greetings. She looks down and can't believe her eyes, and scoops him up in a warm embrace and swings him around excitedly. Rocky is beyond delighted, but always has stomach issues when held too tightly, and thus goes into a series of hacking coughs until she puts him back on the ground. Esmerelda calls out to him, "Rocky, we're on!"

Even though Rocky doesn't want to let his sister out of his sight, he realizes that he owes a certain loyalty to the troupe that has brought him to this place. So he goes onstage with great aplomb, and when it comes to his finale, he whirls and twirls like no other balloon-bunting dog in Mexico, and his performance brings the house down. When it was announced that his troupe is the winner of the grand prize, he jumps for joy with his compatriots, but he knows that the real prize is being reunited with his angel sister. He gives a farewell lick on each cheek to each of his troupe, and two licks on each of Esmerelda's cheeks, and runs to find his sister in the mob backstage. Together they go home to her place on Calzada de la Luz, and are as happy as could possibly be.

Home Again

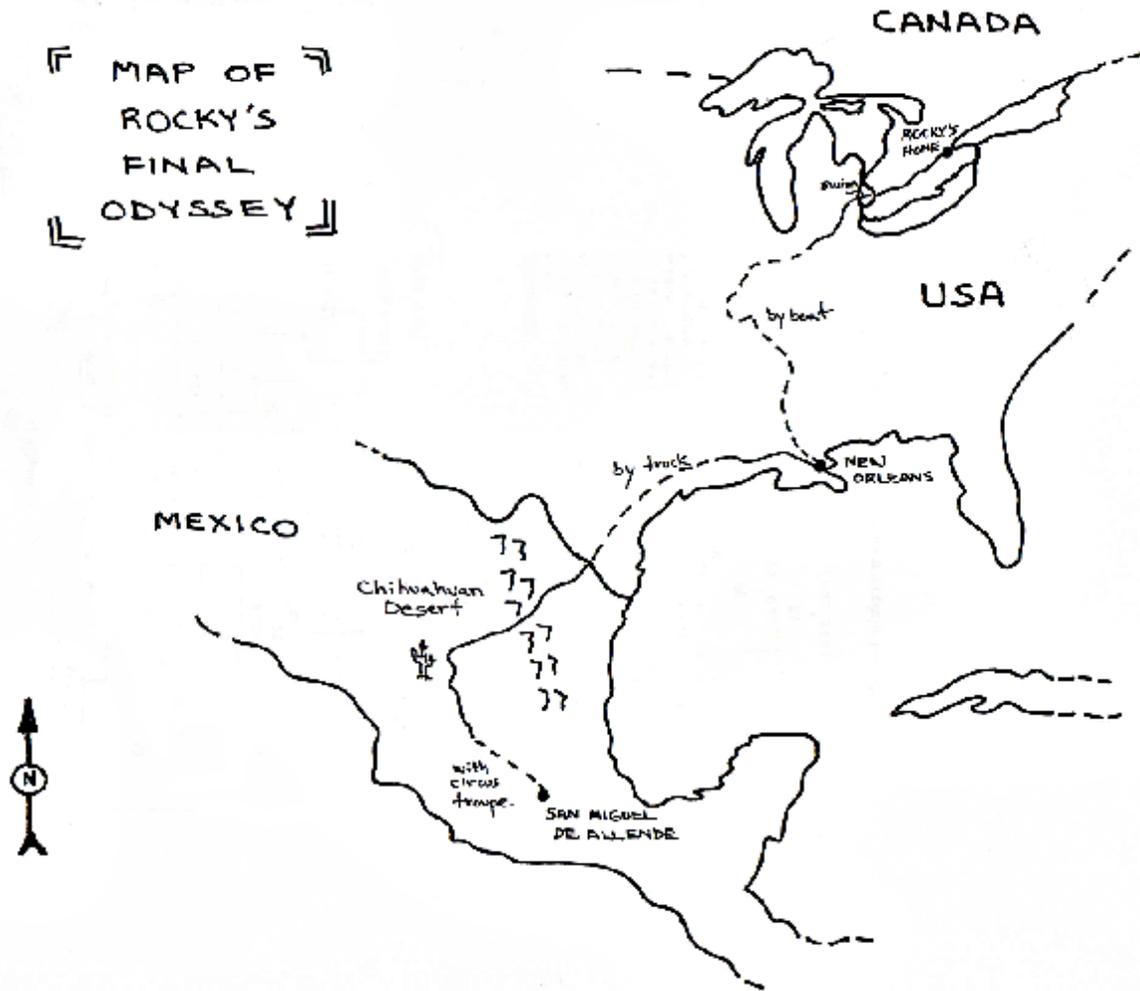


Rocky stands quietly in the front yard of his Park Street home, getting in touch with the flowers in the front bed and watching the odd car roll by. He came back from Mexico much more quickly than he had gone down. He caught a lift in a wooden box strapped to the back of a motorcycle, driven by his sister's friend. His parents and brother were relieved beyond words when they zoomed up to his house. When his absence had been realized, Rocky's Mom had put out an all-points bulletin with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and 243 local police departments across the country. These efforts were met with no resolution, as Rocky's journey involved little human contact, and he had left Canada quite swiftly after all.

So he is back to stay, for as long as he lives. He feels content about his odyssey, and how he ultimately achieved the reconnection with his angel sister that he knew he would. Rocky discovered more of life's mysteries along the way, and learned to live more completely by fully opening his heart. Most of all, he was reminded that a dog has two purposes in life: to look cute, and to always love and protect its family.

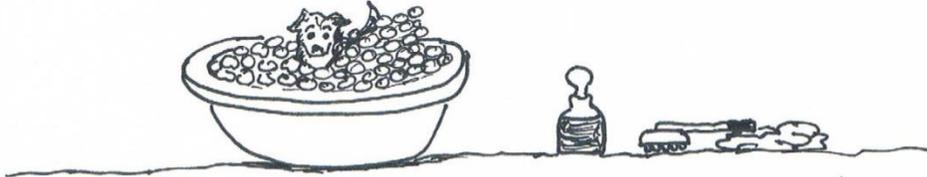
The End

MAP OF
ROCKY'S
FINAL
ODYSSEY



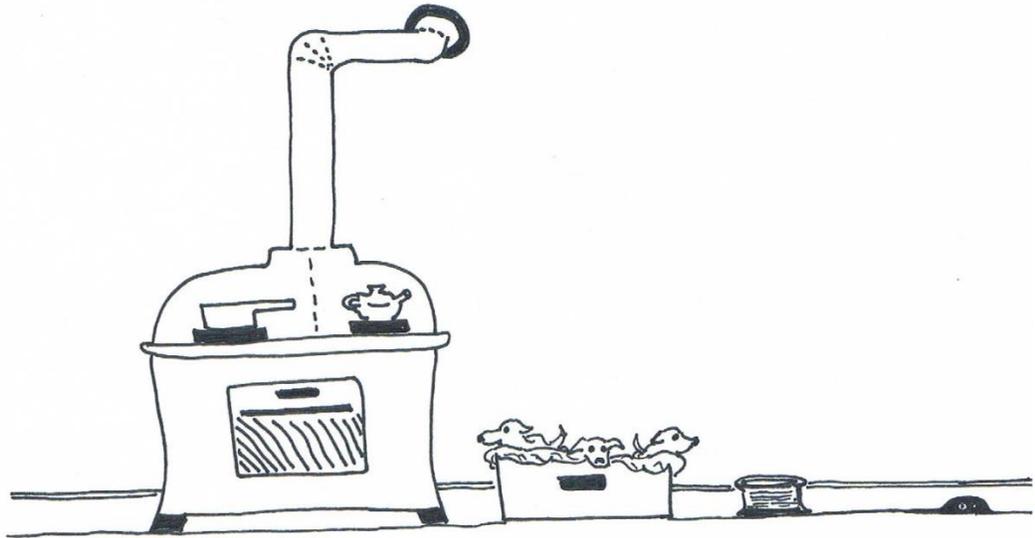
Love on Four Legs

The Puppy Years



Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

A Wee Puppy Is Born

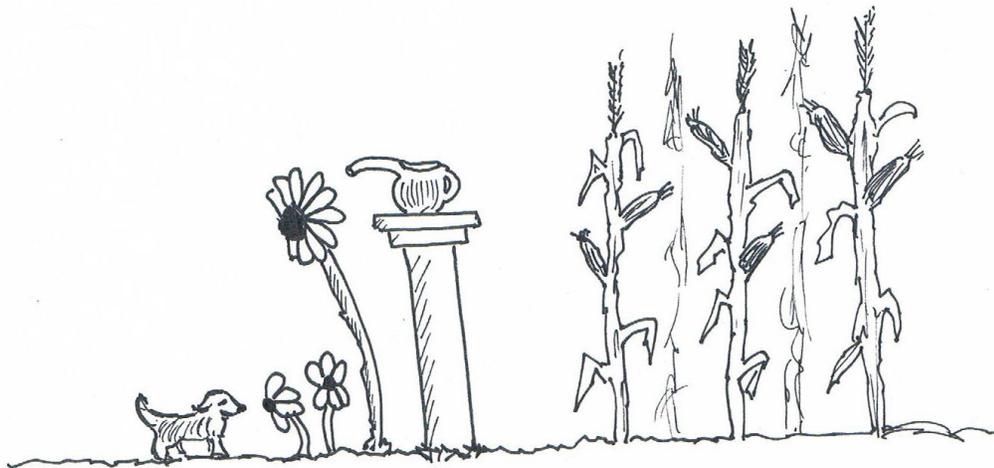


It was a day like most others in the small hamlet of Canning, where the Nith River curls its way across that swath of Oxford County. Spring was in full bloom, and the day dawned with an open sky and the promise of lovely weather. In the small blue house at the edge of the hamlet, the lady of the house stirred and went into the kitchen to put on water for some coffee. On a blanket near the woodstove lay Heaven, a female Sheltie dog who was carrying a number of tiny puppies inside of her. The warming trend in late May had not been good news for an expectant mother, particularly one with lots of fur and a dense undercoat. Something told her this might be the day, but she had felt that once or twice before and no babies had arrived then. So Heaven stiffly rose to get a drink of water and turned to her owner with hopes of getting an early breakfast. But the back door was opened, and she sashayed down the wooden steps to do what dogs have to do after a long night in the house. And on the way back up the stairs, Heaven felt a tug and a rumble inside of her that let her know that this would be the day she would see her babies. She yelped out in an excited way to her owner, who let her inside and immediately knew that breakfast would be delayed today.

Heaven's knees buckled and the first puppy appeared. The gentleman of the house was quickly summoned and the two humans started washing the puppy and then set it on the blanket where Heaven had spent the night. It was a cute little thing, but looked less like a dog and more like a rat, with closed eyes and wet, short-haired fur. After a few seconds of admiration, a second puppy popped out of Heaven and the process was repeated. This happened over and over again, in a dizzying but gratifying sequence, until eight puppies were wriggling on the tartan blanket. There were four boy puppies and four girl puppies, and they all looked very hungry. So their Momma, who had been through an exhausting interval in bringing them into

the world, was carried over to the edge of the blanket where she could lay comfortably and feed her babies. And when each one was satisfied, she curled her body and gave each puppy a playful bunt with her nose and a loving lick on their foreheads. And with that, they all snuggled together and had a well deserved nap. The planet Venus was prominent in the morning sky, and its influences of instilling beauty and affection into the Earth were encapsulated wondrously in the new family of puppies.

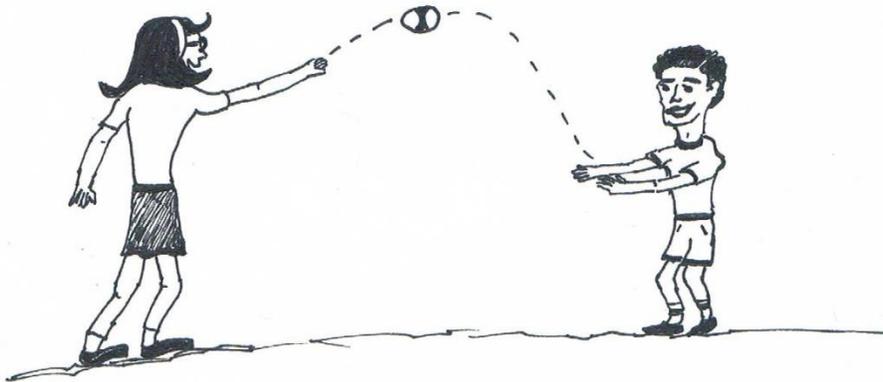
Preparing for his Family



The eight puppies grew quickly, and as the days lengthened towards the first day of Summer, they played and ran and generally wore each other out by bedtime. They were all very cute, and had charcoal black bodies with tan coloured legs, festooned with white feet and a white tip on their tails. All of them sported a white furry ruff, looking almost like a bib on their front chests. They and their mother Heaven were tri-coloured Shelties, a breed of dog that originated from the wet and cold Shetland Islands off of Scotland. A type of collie, but a miniature collie they were, and very distinctive at that. The four boys and four girls played together, wrestled with one another, and continued to enjoy regular feedings from their doting Momma. Their human owner was very kind to all of them, and would allow them to play in the yard by the cornfield until the lengthening shadows signaled the end of another day. One or two of the puppies were quieter than the rest, and one of these would often stand near the edge of the garden, taking in the rhythms of the day and the natural world around him. He felt deep within that he had just come from a very special place, a place where Time stood still and Love directed his every step. As each day went by in this new place he had been born into, it got a little harder to hold onto these memories. As Henry David Thoreau wrote “I was never as wise as the day I was born”, and this too was the feeling deep inside this particular puppy. But

he also had a distinct knowing that he had come here for a specific reason. He couldn't quite put a definite shape on this feeling, but it had something to do with a family. A family that he would soon become a member of, and a family that would benefit from his wisdom and love. So he just bided his time, feeling his legs get longer and his muscles get stronger, knowing that things were aligning nicely and he would meet up with his new human family at just the right moment.

The Family Arrives

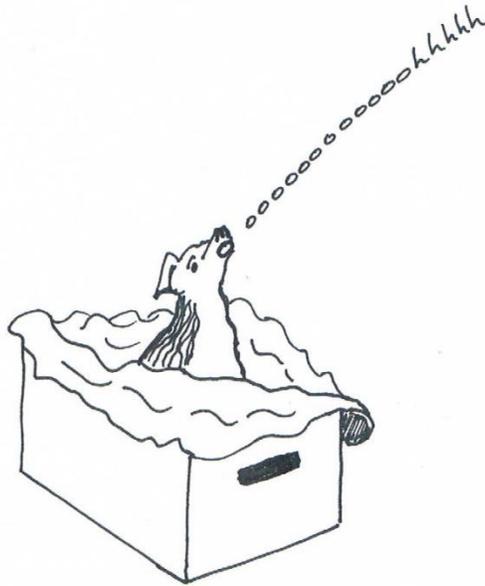


Eight weeks into life, the puppies had started to get an idea of the rhythms of the household throughout each day. Up early for a bit of play, then some breakfast, and on to a full day in the outside yard. The outside time was spent in the warmth of the sunshine and in the shade beside the wood pile. Lots of time was spent on admiring flowers in the garden, smelling a range of aromas emanating from the Earth, and listening to birds sing and frogs croak. Heaven the momma dog would give gentle reminders how to get along with each other, and how to stretch their growing muscles and how to keep their paws and fur clean. All the important points were communicated by her thoughts and the odd, sharp bark. She had formed these little ones into a cohesive family unit, and they all generally got along with one another and subtly understood the importance of family.

Heaven knew her work was almost done, as this was her third litter and she knew by counting the days since their birth that her puppies would soon be leaving her. Her owner was a dog breeder, and that meant that strangers would come up the stairs, have a look at the puppies, and then pick one to take home with them. This was a hard time for her, this time of separation, but she would give each one a bunt of her nose and wish it well in their new home.

That night was a Friday, and just after supper, there were a lot of strange footsteps on the wooden porch outside. In came a mother and father, and two excited children. One was a seven year old girl with cute glasses and a flower in her hair, and the other was a four year old boy with curly hair. Everyone seemed to really like the puppies, and all kinds of questions were being asked by the parents and answers were being given by the owner. The children bent over to pet all the puppies, and got to pick up and cuddle most of them with just a bit of supervision. The puppies were not exactly sure what was happening, but they certainly picked up on the excitement of the kids and started to run around the kitchen and play hide and seek around the wood stove. In the midst of all this hubbub, one of the boy doggies stood off to one side, calm and quiet. He kept a bead on both parents and both children, as if he knew he would be the one selected. One of his sisters, who was cute and charming but very excitable, seemed to be getting a lot of attention. The mother asked the owner "what is the main difference between a male puppy and a female?" The owner chuckled and responded, "the boys will follow you from room to room, but the girls are much more independent and will just come to you and say hi every now and then". This response seemed to make both parents think deeply, and they started to inspect the cute sister even more closely. "She is very pretty, but she seems to have a wee underbite to her jaw" the mother said. "HmMMM" said the father. "What about that cute little guy over there who seems to be the calmest of the litter?" And with that the quiet little fellow was scooped up and held by both parents at the same time. At that point, the three of them felt the very special bond that had linked them together in space and time. "Kids, what do you think of this little guy?" "He's really cute" said the little girl, and the little boy softly replied "I like him a lot". So after a quick dental check, the little boy puppy was wrapped in a blanket and put in his new sister's arms. "We'll need a name for the registration papers" said the breeder. The mother said "with his colouring, he looks like a raccoon.....do you remember that old Beatles tune, Rocky Raccoon?" And with that, Rocky joined his new family.

The First Night



The ride from Rocky's birthplace to his new home in the valley town was uneventful, save for the fact that crickets seemed to serenade him from every field as the car rolled past. He sat up front with his new mother, wrapped up in a small blanket. There had been a request by his sister to ride in the back on her lap, but then the brother put in the identical request, so in the pursuit of family harmony, Rocky rode up front for his maiden journey in a car.

They rolled up to their home in the suburbs, dark in the impending dusk as no one had left on any lights. Rocky made a brief stop on the front lawn and was happy to see lots of flowers and a mid-sized pine tree, a good sign for future outdoor play and contemplation time. He was then whisked inside, past toys and books on a hardwood floor. Rocky was given a soft biscuit by his new sister, and the father brought him a bowl of water. Then an announcement was made that it was far past bedtime for all kids, and the two children scampered upstairs after pausing to give their new puppy a goodnight kiss.

Just for a few moments, Rocky was left alone in his new kitchen. The place smelled different, it didn't have a wood stove, and everything seemed upside down at that particular moment. He thought of Heaven, with her bright eyes and warm fur, and he started to get a lump in his throat. At that point his new mother bustled into the kitchen and scooped him up and put him in a round basket at the top of the rec room stairs. She had set up the sleeping arrangements that afternoon in a frenzy of activity, instinctively knowing that the visit to the dog breeder would bring them just the right puppy. Rocky was patted and reassured, and the lights went out and he felt drowsy and was soon fast asleep. But in the middle of the night he awoke, and

he again missed Heaven and all of his brothers and sisters. The lump in his throat came back in full force, and he stood up and started to how loudly. Rocky howled as loud as any Turkish wolf on the Anatolian Plain, and he perhaps howled even louder. Both the father and mother came rushing in and took turns holding him, whispering sweet reassurances in his ear. Their earnest sincerity deeply touched him, so much so that he became embarrassed about kicking up such a fuss, and he nestled back into his blanket and went fast asleep.

The First Week in a New Home



Rocky's new home had a different rhythm to it than his original home, and this rhythm seemed to be heavily influenced by the two children and their needs and wants. Up early for peanut butter on toast in front of the old black and white television set with its two channel coverage, then playing inside and outside through the morning. This was followed by lunch with considerable commotion and dish clattering, on to a quiet nap time, followed by more playing inside and outside until supper time. Supper seemed to be an extended version of the lunchtime excitement, except that Rocky was given slivers of fruit or shards of raw vegetables, establishing a pattern of sensible eating that would serve him well over his entire life. The meal was followed by bath time and story reading, and then both children were tucked into their beds. Rocky did not know this was a summer schedule, which would soon be replaced by a school schedule, where the play components would be substituted for classroom time at the round school four blocks away.

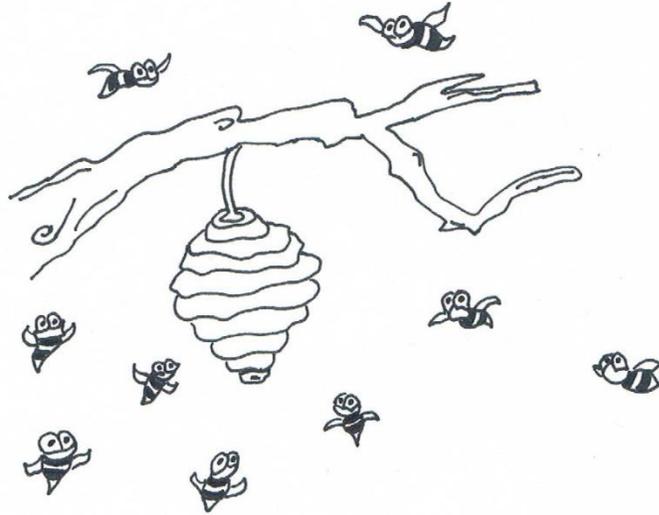
Rocky tried to get in tune with these rhythms, but it took him a few days before he started to feel at home. It was a bit like getting into a game of double-dutch skipping, where you have to stand on the side and feel the pattern evolving and then you just plunge right in. He adored the children, and they adored him right back. The odd time his new brother would get over-zealous and give Rocky's tail a sharp tug, but Rocky would just dash away unfazed and secretly hoped that the little chap would quickly outgrow this stage. Rocky knew that he himself was young

and still had much to learn. He seemed to be guided by an overarching sense of Love, and knew instinctively that this force was directly linked to forgiveness, so Rocky was quick to turn the other cheek and would forgive everything instantly. What struck him as he watched the children was the sweetness of youth, the fun with which things were done and how little things were so important to them, and this made Rocky feel very good inside.

A day later, Rocky was whiling away the time in his new living room, and both parents came and scooped him up. They had been told by several people that a Sheltie's ear flaps looked much better if they were flat. A dab of adhesive was put under each ear and his ears were pressed tightly to seal the bond. Rocky did not like this feeling in the least bit, and spent the next few hours gliding and rubbing his ears along the Persian carpet and the red velvet loveseat. He managed to work one ear free, and ran to his mother to show her the results. She was aghast at the glue-matted fur, but had secretly felt guilty about doing the gluing in the first place, so the whole experiment was quickly abandoned.

This led in turn to the decision that Rocky must be given his first bath. A baby bathtub came out of a closet, warm water was run and a gentle shampoo was found. He was bathed on the back deck with a lot of excitement and splashing, and it took two full rinses to get all the shampoo out of his fur. A coarse towel was brought out and he was dried within an inch of his life, and then finally set free on the grass. Rocky started the after-bath tradition he would hold for the rest of his life. He started to tear around the yard in spiral-like patterns, running fast and looking for someone to play with him. This went on for a full five minutes, with the breeze and the sunshine only making the experience even sweeter. Towards the end, Rocky climbed the two stairs of the deck for the first time ever, and did a loop of the deck. He then ran down the stairs but misjudged the second step and landed very awkwardly, and gingerly moved forward with a very bad limp. All four humans were immediately upon him, massaging his sore leg and encouraging him to get better. An hour later there was no improvement, and even Rocky was starting to worry. He overheard his father say to his mother "If this continues, we may have to take him back to the breeder?" The three other family members chuckled at this, not fully sure if the father had been joking or not. Rocky understood, and chuckled inwardly too, as he knew all he needed was a good night's sleep to make his leg like new.

Exploring the House



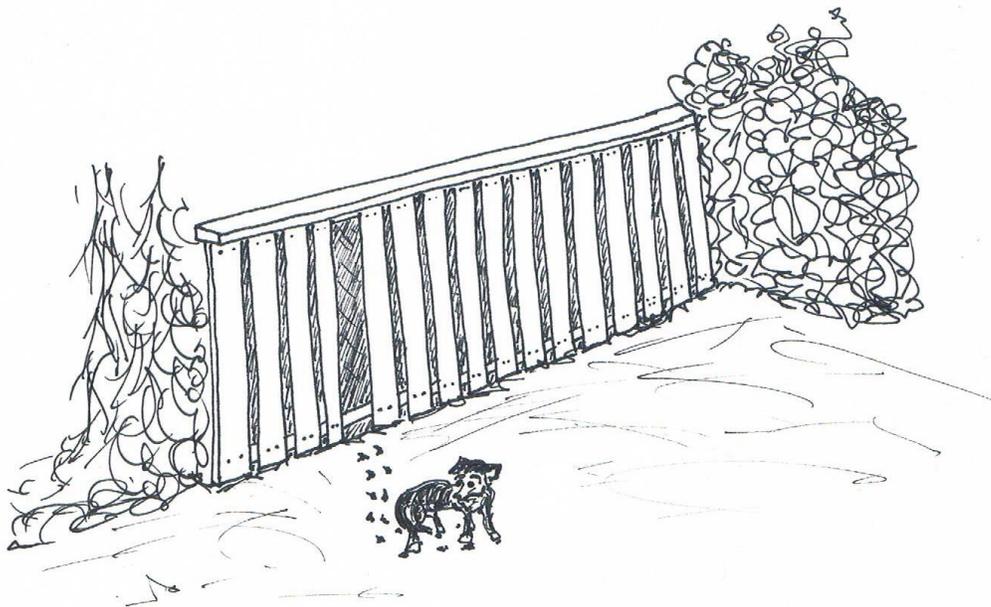
After some more time had passed, Rocky had shown to all that he had good behavior and could be trusted to explore beyond the main floor kitchen and living room. He liked sleeping in the corner of the dining area of the kitchen, since this gave him a complete picture of anybody coming or going in the home. Rocky's Sheltie lineage was that of a sheepherder, and he felt if he could keep an eye on his family he would be able to keep them all safe.

The stairs to the basement had a kiddie gate on them, and now it was left open from time to time. He would hear the children down there playing and it sounded like fun but the stairs looked steep. So one afternoon when Rocky was napping on his blanket his sister came up the stairs and left the gate open. Rocky tentatively hopped down a couple of steps, but then stopped, his heart pounding. He suddenly thought better of his plan to explore, but he couldn't turn around on the stair. So he took a few more steps, until he could see the bottom, and then he took the last five steps in rapid succession with his eyes closed. Whew, safe at last. He explored the long, carpeted rec room and saw that it had a fireplace on one end. He noted the presence of lots of toys and a good length of space to run and play tag in. He peeked into a storage room with a laundry room off of it, and heard the strange rumble of the clothes dryer. He then felt as if he had been away from the comfortable familiarity of his blanket for a long time, and retraced his steps to the base of the carpeted stairs. Looking up, he gulped deeply, as they seemed much steeper now than when he had come down them. He tried to muster up the courage, stopped, then tried again. Out of frustration he let out a plaintive yelp, which was

overheard by his sister who was in the kitchen pouring herself a glass of Kool-Aid, and within seconds he was resting safely on his blanket.

The next day, he mounted the shorter flight of steps to the bedroom area of the back-split suburban home. The first room on the left was his parents' room, looking tidy but lived in. The room on the right was his sister's room, holding a lot of toys and a small card table at which her beloved Richie Bear sat. The far wall was completely covered with wallpaper that had a Beatrix Potter design. Rocky sat and stared at this for a good long time, mentally stepping into the English country lanes with cottages and gardens and animals wearing aprons and hats. He then went further back in the house to the room on the left. This was where his brother slept, and it was painted with the most extraordinary shade of sky blue, with decals of a beehive and bees from a Winnie the Pooh story. Rocky made a mental note to return soon and fully take in the charm of these bees, and then padded to the last room on that floor, a den with lots of books. What intrigued Rocky most was the set of sliding doors that allowed him a full view of the backyard and the afternoon sky. This reminded him of the backyard where he was born, with the adjoining cornfield of his birthplace being replaced by a number of beautiful trees. Rocky promised himself he would return here often, to stand by the door and look out, and perhaps be allowed to go out into the fenced yard on his own.

Exploring the Outdoors



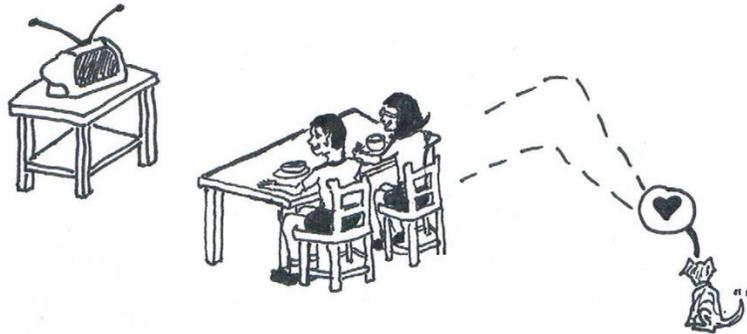
Rocky's family all seemed to love being outdoors, and this suited the growing puppy just fine. Rain or shine, windy or calm, the five of them would go for their daily walk. The suburb they lived in had a limited number of options for walking. The standard fare was a thirty minute

loop around Sunrise Crescent, past close-to-identical homes softened by considerable greenery and trees. On weekends and holidays, a longer loop was possible along the main ridge road where it was rumoured by the parents that Santa Claus owned a home. For either option, Rocky would be placed on his new leash and would be led by his sister. She would stop here and there to pick flowers for a wee bouquet. If the leash were dropped in the excitement, Rocky would always come to a dead stop. He was not a dog to tear around wildly, and he only felt safe if his leash were held firmly by one of his family. In those first few weeks, when he was still very young, traffic would often stop so that the people inside could marvel at the little puppy as he was that cute.

As the days went by, he would often be taken outside to get some fresh air with his mother or his father. One afternoon, when his mother had taken him out to the backyard, he decided to explore up the short hill at the rear of the property. When he looked back, he saw that his mother was fully absorbed in some potted flowers. At this point he felt himself overcome by a devilish urge to hide somewhere. To his immediate left was a good-sized forsythia bush, past the full flowering stage but still with good vegetation. Rocky nipped into its undergrowth, and snuggled through some leaves and brush to get to the back fence. He lay down and stayed very quiet. Rocky heard his Mom calling his name, but he pretended not to hear. The calling became more insistent, and he dug his nose even deeper into the brush. He spied some bees pollinating the remaining yellow flowers of the forsythia bush, watched a number of ants trudging home on a slat of the fence, and marveled at the web of life right here in his small backyard. At that point his Mom started to sound upset and perhaps even a bit worried, and Rocky bolted upright and dashed out from his hideaway. His Mom was relieved and amused, but scolded him in a good-natured way and whisked him inside for a nap.

A week later, Rocky was let out the side door to do what dogs need to do periodically. The phone rang and he was left alone, but the yard was fully fenced. Rocky sniffed here and there, did his business, and then he noticed something very interesting. One of the slats on the side fence appeared to be loose, and with a bit of luck and pluck a young dog might be able to slide through. Rocky crawled under the low lying branches of the conifer trees, and wiggled and slid by the loose slat. He was in the neighbour's yard! But instead of feeling free and excited, he felt panicked and fearful. He wanted to be with his family. But the way back seemed much more difficult and dangerous and he was unsure of what to do. So he just hugged the side of the fence, started to shiver, and then let out a few sad yelps. In a minute he saw the face of his Mom looking over the fence and having a good laugh, and a few moments later he was safely back home, eating an early supper.

Finding His Purpose



After some time, as Summer ended and Fall started, Rocky's life settled into a routine. The kids were both now in school and pre-school respectively, but the schedule was still pretty much the same as before, except that play time had been replaced by school time. Everyone got up around 7:00 and things got moving quickly. At night time, both kids were fed and bathed and read to by 7:30, at which point they were expected to be in bed for the night. Rocky also made it his business to be safely tucked into his blanket by the same time. He would typically do a review of the day's events, positively focusing on things that had gone well and considering how he might have better handled situations that were less than ideal. And with the day review done, the house would become very quiet.

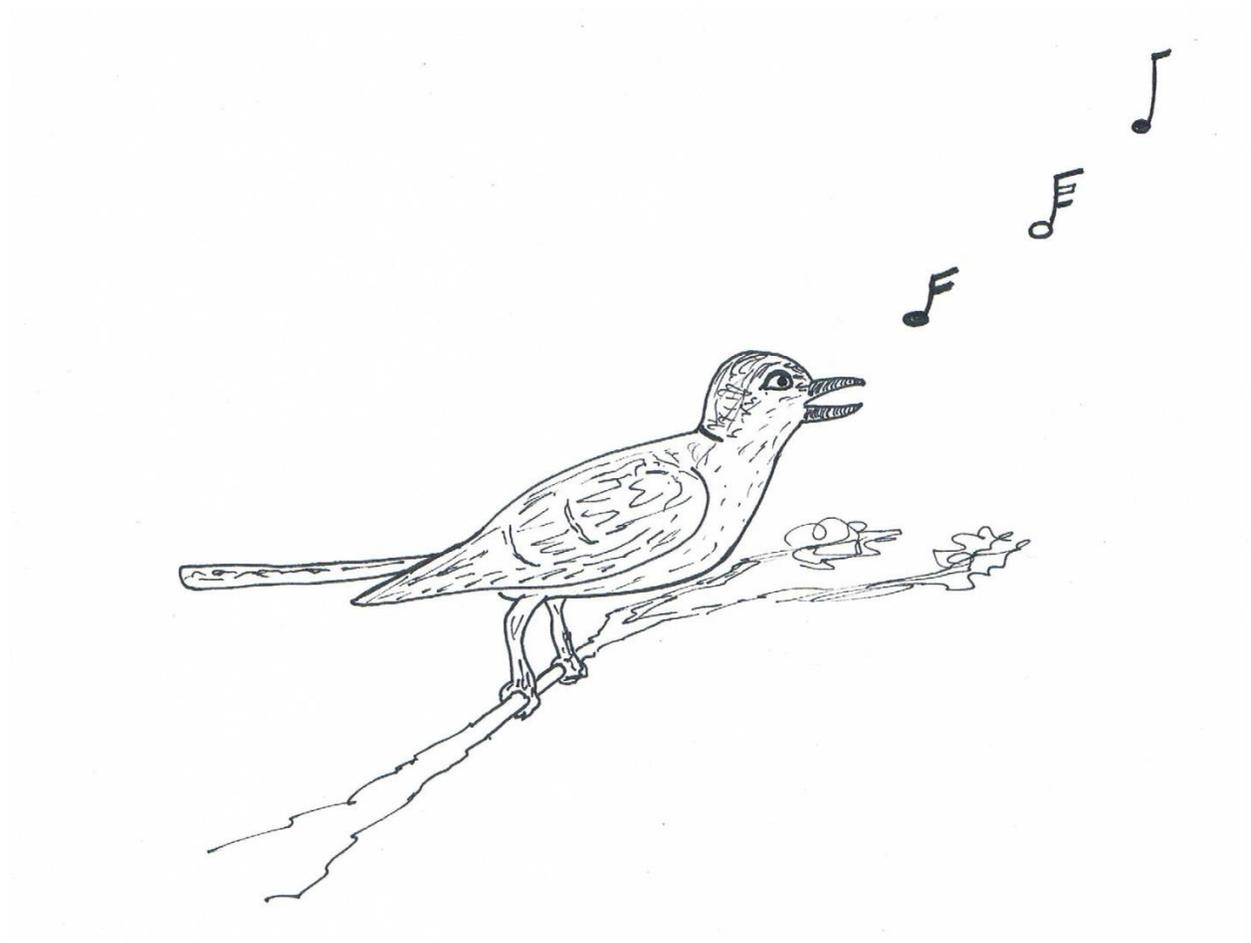
But as Rocky slept each night, something very special would be going on. He might snore softly or even twitch a little bit in his sleep, but the real activity was going on in his dream experiences. In his dreams, he would connect with his brothers and sisters from the small blue house at the edge of the corn field, and they would jump and play just like they had done back in June and July. Other nights he would connect with his doggie mother Heaven, and she would pass along love and affection that would sustain him if he ever felt lonely or afraid. This communication was done through morpheic energy fields which connect all living things, and combine to form a collective consciousness that can inform and guide animals and humans alike. On other nights, Rocky would be visited by some special friends who called themselves Spirit Guides. They were playful and had great senses of humour, but also took the time to pass on their wisdom to Rocky. They told him that animals had a great capacity to teach their human friends about love and commitment and about something that was much bigger than themselves. They also told Rocky of the role that animals can play in the healing of their human

families. Rocky absorbed all of these lessons from the dream state, and fragments of these memories would come to him during his waking hours.

So one day after school and before supper, alternating between snuggling with his sister and roughhousing with his brother, Rocky had an epiphany. Like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle filling into its designated slot, he realized what his special role was in his new family. He had been sent to protect them, and to show them love in every way possible. He was small in body, but mighty in spirit, and he knew he was up to the task. This knowing made him feel very special, and he realized it was no accident that his cutest doggie sister had an underbite, as this had led him to this family.

His higher level musings were interrupted by the unmistakable sound of his supper hitting his food bowl. Rocky had found his calling on this auspicious day, but he also realized to grow up and fulfill his purpose that he had better tuck into his food!

Moving to a New Home



The seasons tumbled by, with Rocky experiencing his first Autumn and his first Winter, followed by his second Spring. He was almost fully grown, and the white racing stripe on the middle of his forehead and the white tip at the end of his tail gave him a very jaunty flair. Rocky had witnessed the birthday celebrations for both the children, complete with cake and friends and loot bags, along with the quieter birthday celebrations for his two human parents. And when they all celebrated his first birthday that early June, he once again realized that he was a big part of the family unit, complete with related privileges and responsibilities.

He tried to spend a few quiet moments each day with every member of his family. Today he stood by the stove and watched his Mom cook supper, getting some admiring glances and a shard of raw broccoli to chew on. Then he went into the living room and sat on the lap of his sister, giving her hands and arms soft kisses while she watched the show "Join In" on TV Ontario. Rocky particularly liked the part where the handsome bearded chap sang "Lavender Blue" in such a beautiful way. Then he migrated upstairs and found his brother in his room, putting together a puzzle and softly chanting nursery rhymes to himself. Rocky rolled on his back and put his legs in the air, prompting his brother to gift him with a good old-fashioned tummy rub. Rocky then retraced his steps to the living room, putting his chin on the brown corduroy slippers of his Dad, while he sat in the easy chair and read the afternoon Spectator. Life seemed as blissful as the beautiful June day outdoors.

But as is often the case, as soon as things seem just right, along come the winds of change. After supper that night, he overheard his parents tell the two children that they would be moving next month. Rocky's heart fell, as this had been the first and only house he had lived in with his new family, and it seemed just about perfect to him. Somewhat irrationally, he thought he would have to leave and go back to the little blue house where he had been born. So just like he would do at a much later stage in his life, he stood by the front door waiting for his chance to escape. It came soon enough with his Dad taking out the compost, and Rocky deftly slipped through the slowly closing door. He tiptoed past the vehicle in the carport, and started to run as soon as he hit the open driveway. But something in his peripheral vision stopped him short, and these were beautiful red peony flowers in full bloom. Rocky had always loved flowers, so he slinked over for some deep sniffs of their delectable perfume. And just when he was about ready to resume his escape, something very significant happened. Out of the evergreen tree in the front yard came a beautiful bird call, loud and clear and a bit brash. After a few seconds of silence came a softer call, with a bit of vibrato. Over the next few minutes Rocky heard a dozen different bird calls, and he thought the tree was alive with a multitude of different birds. As he walked closer to the tree, he could see into an interior branch where one small bird continued to emanate this wide range of songs. For it was a mockingbird, and it cocked its head and Rocky could have sworn it winked at him. And in that instant, Rocky understood. All would be well, and he too could do many things and live in many

houses. The house he lived in didn't matter, as long as his family came with him. And with that understanding, he heard a knocking on the front glass window and he looked up to see his sister. And a moment later, they were running in circles around that beautiful bed of peony flowers.

~The End~

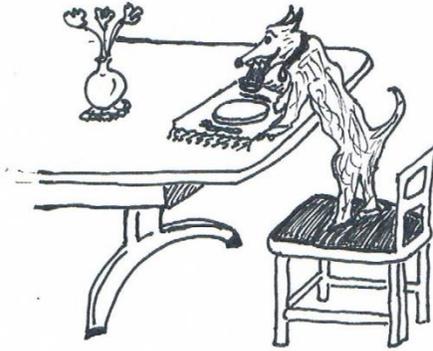
Love on Four Legs



JazzFest Y'All!!

Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

A Quiet and Comfortable Life Indoors



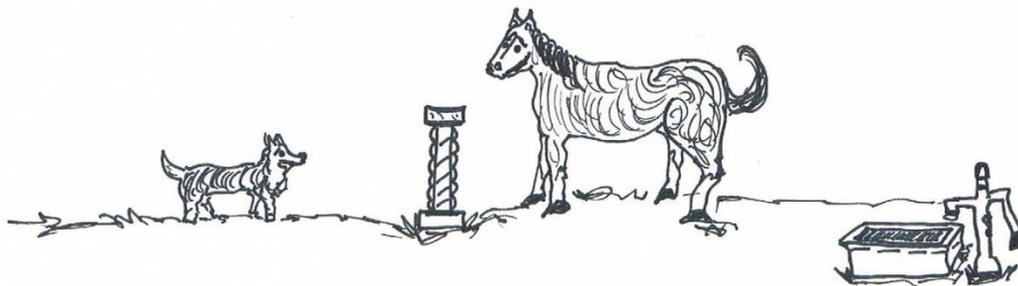
Rocky's family had moved into the large brick home in the old part of town, and a number of years rolled by uneventfully. He was fully grown and had blossomed into a very handsome tricolor Sheltie male dog, and he continued to get a lot of attention from his family and neighbours and the children who walked to the old elementary school right across the street. Rocky would always be taken out for his daily walk through the surrounding tree-lined streets, but his life was largely an indoor one, and that suited him just fine.

Sleeping arrangements had evolved to the use of a mid-sized green dog crate, housed in the back room that held the laundry appliances and a mud sink. He slept on a comfy blanket inside the crate, and the door was never closed so he could come and go freely. His parents called the crate his "cave", pronouncing it like the name for a French wine cellar, and Rocky appreciated the air of mystery this lent to his sleeping quarters. The adjoining sunroom was covered in windows, through which sunlight would spill all the way to the entrance to his cave. And he had an unblocked view of a beautiful church tower, from which lovely church bell sounds would emanate three times a day.

All homes have their routines, and Rocky blended into the routine established by his parents and the two growing children. After breakfast and the off-to-school clatter, he settled down into a day of sleeping interspersed with short periods of house guarding. In the early afternoon, a slot would abruptly open on the side door and pieces of mail would tumble onto the doormat, sending Rocky into a round of intense barking and growling. He would be given his supper around 4:00, just after the kids arrived back from school, but it was never quite enough to fully appease his hunger. A little later he could feel the return of his Dad from work, sensing this through a change in the morpheic field of energy that connects all pets to their human family members. Supper would follow a little while later, and sometimes Rocky would jump up on his brother's chair after his family had dispersed but before the dishes had been cleared, and deftly nab a morsel of cheese or a half-eaten burrito. This was always

done quickly to avoid arousing suspicion, but went a long way towards a peaceful slumber. A little while later, perhaps after chasing loose balls from the ping pong table set up in the middle of the formal dining room, he would be summoned to participate in racing up the front stairs with his Dad while his brother raced up the back stairs. Rocky always turned back halfway up, but enjoyed the thrill of the chase nonetheless. After that, he would have his teeth brushed briskly with a chicken-flavoured toothpaste, and he would saunter off to his cave for a night filled with sweet dreams.

Intermittent Adventures in the Outdoors



Ever since he was a wee puppy, Rocky always enjoyed any time he could spend outdoors. On hot Summer days he would always make it a point to retreat to a spot under the red currant bush in the fenced backyard, and dig a shallow trench for a good long time, luxuriating in the natural coolness emanating from the Earth and the maternal sap energy only animals can directly perceive. In the Fall he would love to chase leaves as they were raked up into a big pile, and he would delight in the actions of the kids as they jumped and dove into the musty leaves. In the Winter he would enjoy chasing the snow as it was cleared from the sidewalks bordering the home on the corner lot. And in Spring he would stand pensively in the garden, listening to the flowers being pushed through the awakening soil, and he particularly enjoyed standing under the flowering red bud tree that had been planted in memory of the kids' beloved granddaddy.

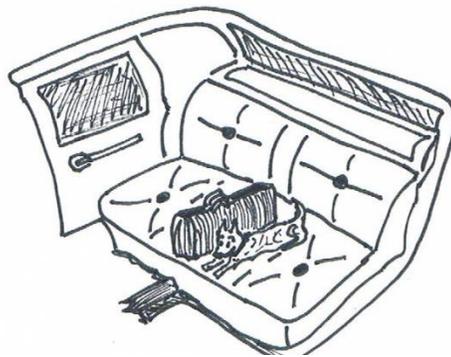
During the week, beyond his regular daily walks, he would always go with his Mom as she escorted the children to the schoolyard just half a block away. Rocky particularly loved children, and he would always be on the lookout for a child who would gift him with a special pat on the head or look deep into his eyes and make a special connection. One day, while his Mom was working in the flower bed before school let out, he saw Clare the Australian visitor making her way to the school to pick up her sisters. Rocky knew her and her family, and thought it would be perfectly fine to follow along behind Clare and perhaps get in a few extra minutes of interaction time at the schoolyard. Once the bell rang, his Mom started to look frantically for him in both the side and back yards. She spied over to the school and saw

Rocky standing with Clare and a gaggle of younger children. As cute as it all was, Rocky was encouraged by his Mom not to consider a repeat performance.

On weekends, Rocky would wait patiently in the backyard while his family got ready for their regular hike in the valley. He would sometimes see their neighbor, Mr. Easter, who always called out to him in an affectionate way. Rocky loved to hike in two places in particular, the area they all called “Wonderland” where he could run fast on the trails and try to herd all of his family, and the area near the hidden pond and the horse farm where Rocky did inter-species communication with these beautiful animals.

Rocky also had a good buddy, Max, who was a sable coloured Sheltie who lived nearby. The two families would share dogsitting duties so that they could go on vacations or day trips and know that their dogs would be in good hands. Rocky learned a lot from Max, and by the end of a stay they would be doing just about everything in lock step. The two kids loved when Max would be staying over, as they would each have a dog to take care of. And when Rocky would go visit the other family, the parents and the two boys would make him feel particularly welcome. But one time, when his family was on a long December vacation in California, Rocky got it in his head that they were really back home. So just like he had done as a puppy and as he would do later in life, Rocky slipped out one day and made his way seven blocks to his home, crossing a busy street in the process. His host family was very worried when they couldn’t find him, and the father had the presence of mind to drive over to Rocky’s home. There he was, shivering by the side door. He got extra supper that night, and was watched very carefully from that point onwards.

Packing Up and Moving On



Rocky was close to six years old by now, no longer a puppy but still exhibiting a lot of his puppy traits. He had grown in a number of different capacities, one being that he could see auras of light around people and trees. He would take a long look at these auras, and started to connect in his mind how they looked to him and the personality of the person or the beauty of the tree.

Rocky was what you might call middle-aged, and by coincidence so were his Mom and Dad. And middle age often brings some kind of change or shift, so Rocky wasn’t altogether surprised when his parents

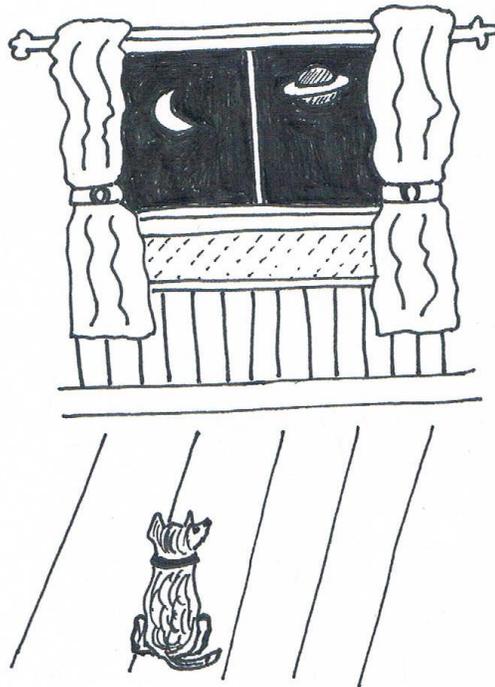
called a family meeting one warm evening in early May. “Kids, we have some news for you”, his Dad started out in a calm but somewhat quavery voice. Rocky felt a bit nervous so he took quick refuge under the ping pong table, but still within easy earshot. “We’ll be moving soon to New Orleans”, which was followed by a zesty scream from his sister, who promptly ran out of the house and up the street to tell her friends. The rest of the evening was a bit anxious for Rocky as he wasn’t really sure where New Orleans was, but he tried to listen as best he could to the reassuring answers his parents were giving to his brother’s questions.

The next couple of months were a whirlwind of packing and making arrangements for the kids’ schools and the movers and perhaps a few hundred smaller issues. During this period, Rocky spent as much time as he could in the back yard and the side yard, admiring the trees and flowers and generally taking in the rhythms and energy of this place he had grown to love deeply. His old friend the mockingbird, or perhaps its child or grandchild, would often lodge in the tree foliage and serenade Rocky with a wide range of different bird songs. He would never tire of the talents of this mighty little bird, whose ability to sing so many tunes reminded Rocky that he was one with all of nature and could tap into this collective consciousness any time he chose to.

Moving day came, and was very unsettling to Rocky with all the familiar arrangements of furniture being undone and tightly reassembled in a large moving van. After a night of rest at Max’s house, whose family was away on vacation, Rocky’s family started out on a four day trip to the South. Within ninety minutes they came to the immigration checkpoint at the border. “Citizenship?” asked the surprisingly affable official. “The ladies are Americans, and the men are Canadians” responded the Dad, who had a history of saying the wrong thing when crossing the border. The man leaned in and spotted Rocky in the back seat, wedged in between the two kids and their belongings. “What about the dog?” he queried. “Rocky’s Canadian” replied his Dad, and with that the man chuckled and bade them a good trip.

From that point on it was lots of driving, punctuated by washroom breaks and stops for meals and sleepovers in mid-range motels. Rocky always staked out the carpet zone between two queen-sized beds and remarked to himself how similar each motel was. He saw signs for “Pittsburgh”, followed by a whole bunch of mountains and a sign for “Knoxville”. They stopped there and visited an old friend of Rocky’s Mom, who said somewhat prophetically, “New Orleans? Now that’s a fast town!” The family stayed their last night on the road in Oxford, Alabama. The brother went off for a swim by himself in the pool, and after some time of unpacking and general commotion, Rocky sensed some danger near the energy field of his brother. He went over and bunted the leg of his Dad with his nose, and communicated his worry mentally. His Dad thankfully understood and quickly jogged over to the pool where the boy swam all alone. Across the road was a swamp fed by Choccolocco Creek, and something seemed ominous about it all. Always better to be safe than sorry, and Rocky’s perception had ensured that his brother was out of harm’s way.

The Crescent City



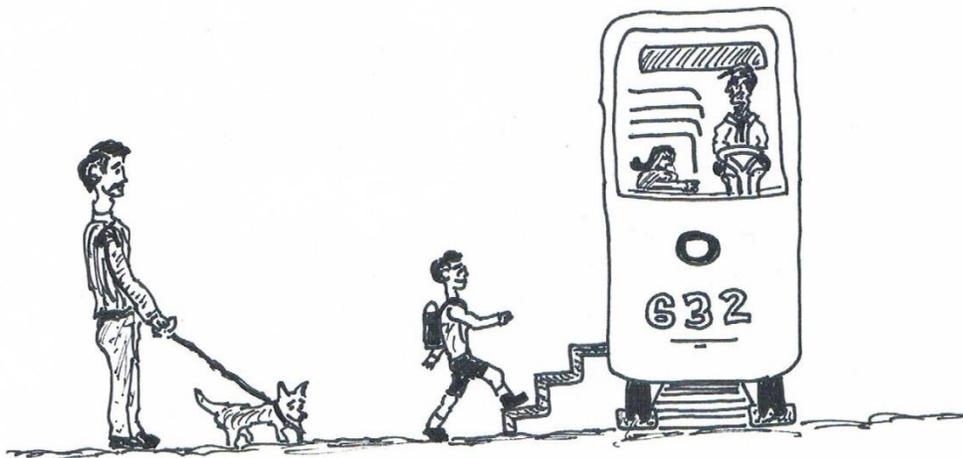
Rocky's family rolled past the New Orleans city line late on a Friday night, having driven for the last hour on an elevated highway above marshy bayous teeming with pelicans and alligators. New Orleans was nicknamed the Crescent City, as the mighty Mississippi flowed through in a snake-like way, and most of the city was built onto a crescent-shaped thumb of land extending below a massive lake. The family had bought a home in the Uptown area, which was upriver from the historic French Quarter. They exited the freeway and slowly drove through dark and unfamiliar streets, attempting to locate the real estate office. Their agent, Harriet, had told them she would leave their house key in a wicker basket hanging on an old cypress tree outside the agency office. This seemed somewhat unusual to their Canadian sensibilities, but when they pulled up beside the large old tree, they found a key with their name on it at the bottom of the basket. They had spied a nice-looking Italian restaurant on the way to the agency, so they retraced their route and went in for a celebratory first dinner in New Orleans. Rocky stayed in the back seat of the locked car, half-lit by the parking lot light standard. He pretended to sleep, but kept one eye half-open just in case some trouble arose. When his family appeared with smells of pizza and pasta on their breath, he was greatly relieved. They drove a few short blocks to their new home and eased themselves into the front door. The beautiful hardwood floors, made of sinker cypress, which had impressed them so much at the house-viewing were now covered in grit and dust bunnies. Since they would all be sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags until the furniture arrived, Rocky's Mom unpacked a

Swiffer and a lot of cleaning was done very quickly. Rocky was a bit groggy from the long drive but still managed to uphold his tradition of chasing any broom or vacuum, and barked madly off in all directions.

After a night of somewhat uneasy sleep on the hardwood floors, the family explored the house and yard the next day. The home was an Arts and Crafts beauty, situated on the Carrollton streetcar line, and had five outdoor porches and balconies. Rocky was in the front yard, communing with a flowering bush, when he heard a strange whirring sound. Through the slats of the white picket fence he could see a green vintage streetcar picking up speed on its way to Claiborne Avenue. He chased it the full width of the yard and barked excitedly—what fun!!

That evening, the family went off for one of their favourite past-times, to see a movie. They had read in the Times-Picayune that Planet of the Apes was playing at the Prytania Theatre, a neat old movie house in Uptown. This gave Rocky some time by himself, something that was in short supply over the last week. Here he was settling into his fourth home, having to learn new rhythms but also seeing that many things were in common. He got the feeling that life is a spiral, where you seem to revisit the same point but you have risen upwards in knowledge and in spirit, so that even familiar things take on a new feel. He could also sense the character of this city, the unique mix of darkness and upliftment. Rocky spent considerable time looking out through a gap in the lace curtain on the side window, and he could see many planets and stars in their revolving arrangements. He also had a vision beyond the physical, similar to his ability to see auras. He could see Saturn, the holder of darkness and our shadow sides, and Jupiter, the holder of jolliness and higher potential. He saw them beaming energies to this place he now called home, these energies intertwining to form a woven set of influences for this interesting but troubled place.

Hot Town, Summer in the City



The first few weeks crawled by very slowly, as August in New Orleans is characterized by deep heat and humidity. Rocky's fur and temperament were suited more for cooler climes, so he would go quickly out

the back door and do his business, and then beat a hasty retreat to the comfort of the air-conditioned house. It also rained a lot, which added to the humidity and helped the tropical plants in the front and side gardens to bloom profusely. On the odd cooler day Rocky would linger and absorb the essence of the vegetation, and he was particularly struck by the beautiful Passion Flower blooms highlighting the picket fence on the Panola Street side. He noticed many other elements in the web of life that was his new yard. The grass was very rough, almost spiky on his paws, and every so often an ant hill would rise up from the turf, teeming with thousands of crawling red ants. Rocky negotiated his way around these mounds, saw cockroaches and termites slithering here and there and also saw green lizards sunning themselves on the wood frame house.

In the early evenings he would always go for a walk with his parents, going off in various directions to explore their new neighbourhood. New Orleans was known as a checkerboard city, where a 3-4 block walk could take you from a well-heeled area to an area down on its heels. The poorer areas had smaller houses and no street trees, and Rocky often sensed some danger as they strolled along. Shoes would hang from the power lines and groups of young men would hang out idly on the street corners. The younger kids were always friendly and called out, "Hey Mister, is that there a Lassie dawg?" One night his parents had to drive downtown for a meeting and they took both Rocky and the kids along for the ride. They drove by a large string of run-down apartment buildings, known locally as The Projects, where even more people hung out on street corners and garbage was strewn everywhere. These sights had a strong effect on everyone in the car, and they all pondered the level of consciousness that would tolerate this disparity.

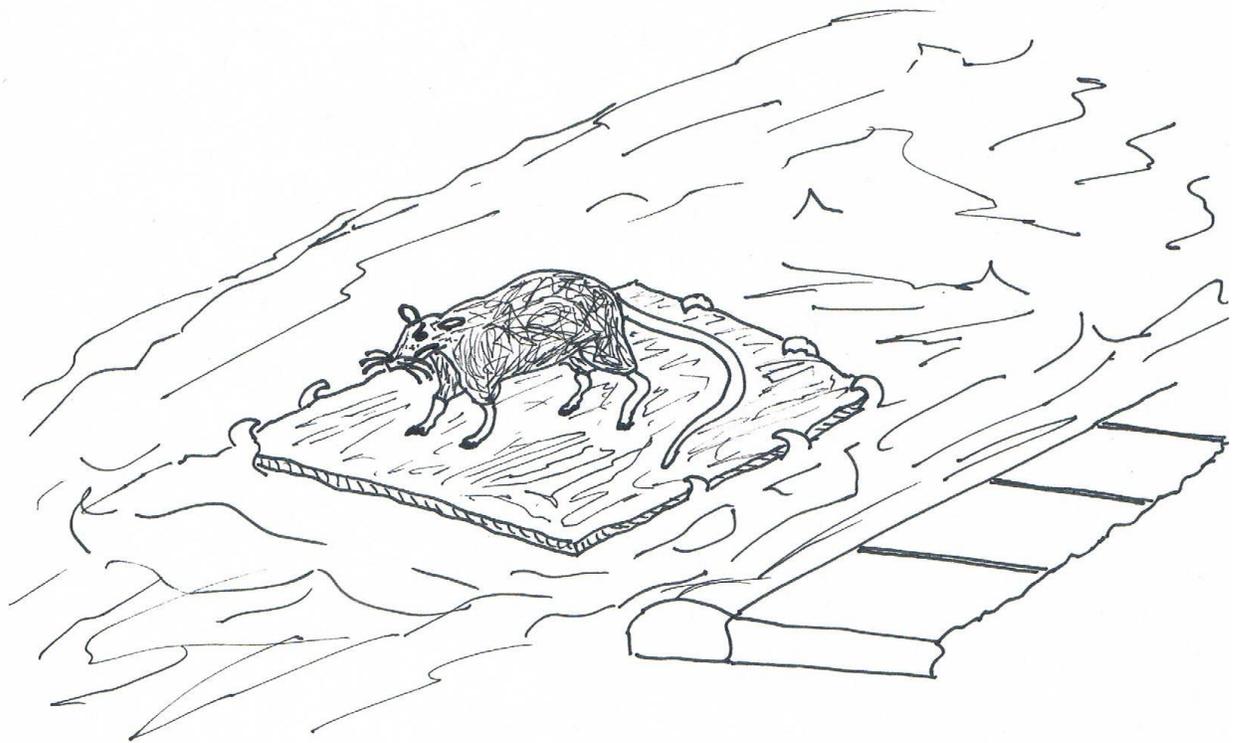
Overall, it was fair to say that Rocky was not adjusting well to the move. He felt trapped in his new home, and couldn't look out the window like he used to because the window sills were much higher and they were covered with full-length lace curtains. His Mom recognized this and tied back the curtains and moved the sofa near the window so he could jump up on it and watch the streetcar roll by. This helped to some degree, but he still felt down. That Saturday his Mom and Dad went out with some new friends for Thai food and jazz at Preservation Hall. Around 9:30 strange images started to float through the dining room and into the living room. Rocky didn't know these were ghosts, so he started to bark and chase them into the TV room. They cowered together and hid beside his brother's chair, who was quietly watching TV. Rocky ramped up his barking even more, throwing in intermittent growls and thrusting his body towards the chair. His brother got scared and worried, as he was not able to see the ghosts and was not sure why his dog was acting in this peculiar way. The parents were called home early, everything was deemed to be OK, and Rocky was administered a few chewy treats and some good-natured scolding for breaking up the evening's festivities.

But the evening and the days leading up to it had really shaken Rocky. He realized innately that he, and only he, was responsible for his thinking. So if he felt down or depressed, he would have to craft a way to reconfigure his thoughts to help his mind build a new perspective on life. Rocky has always been connected to Spirit in a meaningful way, but the move had bumped him a bit off-course. He trusted in the strength of a higher power, and this Strength gave him his answer. He started to lie down quietly, and connected to Spirit in a form of meditation. This evolved over several weeks, in which insights came

to him and he was able to bring back this calm sweetness to the more turbulent hours of his day-to-day life.

By the time late August rolled around, Rocky was feeling much more centered and happy, and would see the kids off to school with a real bounce in his step. His sister would go off in a van driven by Miss Kelly, to Ben Franklin High School up by the lake. His brother would go off by streetcar to Lusher Middle School, and Rocky would go every day with his Dad to see his brother off safely. Each day went by uneventfully until his Dad's birthday on September 11th. That morning the twin towers fell in New York City, and Rocky could feel the grief instantly. This was a morning that truly shook the world, and a small dog living a quiet life in New Orleans understood well that all living things on this planet share a deep connection. His Canadian family flew the Stars and Stripes from the second floor window, and this gesture was something that Rocky greatly appreciated along with Frances, a gracious neighbor with an infectious smile.

Sights, Sounds and Traditions



As September ended and the days cooled into a beautiful stretch of early Fall, Rocky heard something every morning that made his skin tingle and his heart gladden. At first he thought he may be mistaken, as there were many different birds down here. For example, in the palm trees out front were African parrots, having been blown in by a hurricane off the Gulf. But one morning, he saw it up close. A small bird, grey in colour, trilling off a dozen songs in rapid succession. It was his old friend, the mockingbird,

or his Southern cousin. Rocky listened deeply and knew that with this musical support he could handle anything.

The next day Rocky walked down the streetcar avenue with his Dad, off to the florist at the River Bend. A storm quickly arose, causing them to run into the fragrant shop. Given the plugged nature of most of New Orleans' catchbasins, a flash flood quickly arose and water teemed down the street. To Rocky and his Dad's amazement, they saw a large rat floating down the street on an irregularly shaped piece of plywood. Rocky did not particularly like the looks of this wet and scruffy rodent, and his Dad watched out carefully for any rats surfing as they strolled home with a nice bunch of flowers.

On Sundays, Rocky would often stroll the back streets of Carrollton with his parents and he used the Black Madonna statues in the front and side yards as navigational landmarks. They would typically wend their way into the grounds of Tulane University, where his Dad worked. This was a very beautiful and genteel space, with lovely trees and old academic buildings. From there they would often cross over to Audubon Park, where many folks would be walking or running the large loop road in the park. It was a tradition for many people to celebrate their birthday in the park, where picnic tables would overflow with goodies and bands would sometimes play for the gatherings of friends. Rocky took all of this excitement in, along with the quieter walks he would take with his Dad at the base of the park by the Mississippi River. He would look up at the stars, marvel at their amazing arrangements, and wonder how they might influence his life here on Earth. He heard his Dad once recount the saying of Edgar Cayce "the stars call the tune, but you decide how you dance", and pondered this during the quiet walks by the wide river.

Letting the Good Times Roll



New Orleans had been founded in the middle of a swamp, and had experienced high heat, stifling humidity, roaring fires and boisterous hurricanes over the years. There were many expressions used by the residents, and one with French roots was "Laissez les bon temps roulez" or "let the good times roll." This meant New Orleanians liked to have fun, and Rocky's family tried their best to uphold this tradition.

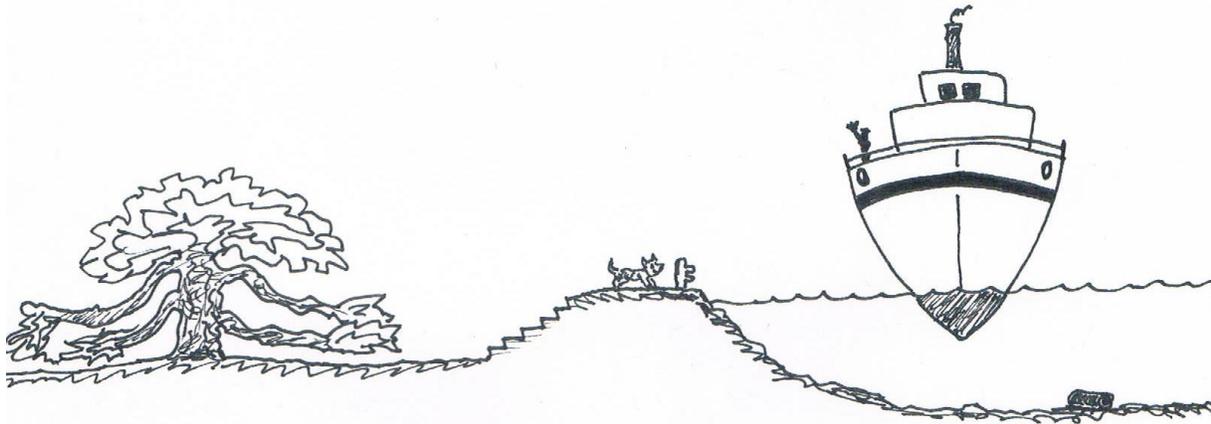
People were generally friendlier than in other places, with neighbours calling out a cheery hello from their porch swings as you walked by, even if you didn't know them in the least bit. Rocky's Mom got linked into an amazing group of people who did Reiki, the Japanese spiritual healing system that channels energy from the Universe to help people lead fuller and more integrated lives. The Reiki group would meet on Tuesday nights at Elizabeth's home, and every so often they would organize a potluck dinner. Because Rocky's family's house was well suited for entertaining, they would often be held there, and Rocky took particular delight in having the house full of happy folks, who often let delicious morsels slip from their plates to the Sheltie dog waiting patiently in the wings.

Halloween was a big deal, and so was American Thanksgiving and Christmas, with the stately homes along the streetcar avenue all decked out in the related decorations. As the time rolled over into the new year, the entire city seemed to gear up for the range of festivities related to Mardi Gras. This event had originated in Mobile, Alabama, but New Orleans had definitely put a firm claim on it since. Rocky's family would read about the evening parades in the Times Picayune, and would often go to watch them with many other families from a nice vantage point along Napoleon Avenue. This was not the wild Mardi Gras of the French Quarter, but one where three or more generations would come out and cheer on the floats and the amazing dancers twirling their fiery flambeaux. Rocky never got to go to an actual Mardi Gras parade, as there was far too much noise and commotion for his taste. But he would lay at home on the cool cypress floors, and contemplate the moon visible through the dining room window. He knew instinctively that the moon and its cycles were very important to our lives here on earth, and he would send loving and thankful thoughts towards it as he waited in the dimness for his family to return safely home. Then the children would rush in, faces flushed, bedecked with all manner of colorful Mardi Gras beads they had caught from the passing parade floats. Rocky would stand quietly, secretly thrilled at all the excitement.

One of Rocky's Dad's greatest loves was running, and he had linked up with a nice group of runners that left every day at noon from the steps of the Riley Athletic Center at Tulane. His Dad had been doing long runs on the weekends along the river, getting ready for the half marathon that would take place in late February. The day of the race contained a lot of excitement, and afterwards his Dad sat on a low-slung chair in the backyard and did a pen-and-ink sketch of their home, with Rocky sitting nearby and observing every minute stroke of the pen.

And a bit later, as springtime came in earnest and the heat started to ramp up, a huge event spanning two weekends came to the Crescent City. Jazz Fest was known all over the country as offering up the best music and the best food you would ever find at a festival. All of Rocky's family went, in various permutations and combinations of friends. Rocky again stayed home, enjoying the benefits of central air conditioning. But he would hear exciting snippets of what had happened each day at one of the main stages or in the Gospel Tent, and Rocky would drool when his parents talked of crawfish patties or shrimp remoulade. It all crystallized into one phrase for Rocky, the one his Dad recounted a particularly exciting funk musician kicking off his act by saying "JazzFest y'all!!"

Experiencing the Shadow Side



Raising kids has never been easy, and the challenges seem to increase when kids are in that stage called adolescence. Rocky's parents had different types of upbringings. His Mom was a Parsi from India, growing up in a professional household and coming to North America at the age of ten. His Dad was a sixth generation Canadian from a sleepy southwestern Ontario town, growing up in a blue collar household and eating meat and potatoes every evening. So they brought different sensibilities to the raising of the two kids, with a mix of cultural and religious traditions that reflected their backgrounds and their evolving interests.

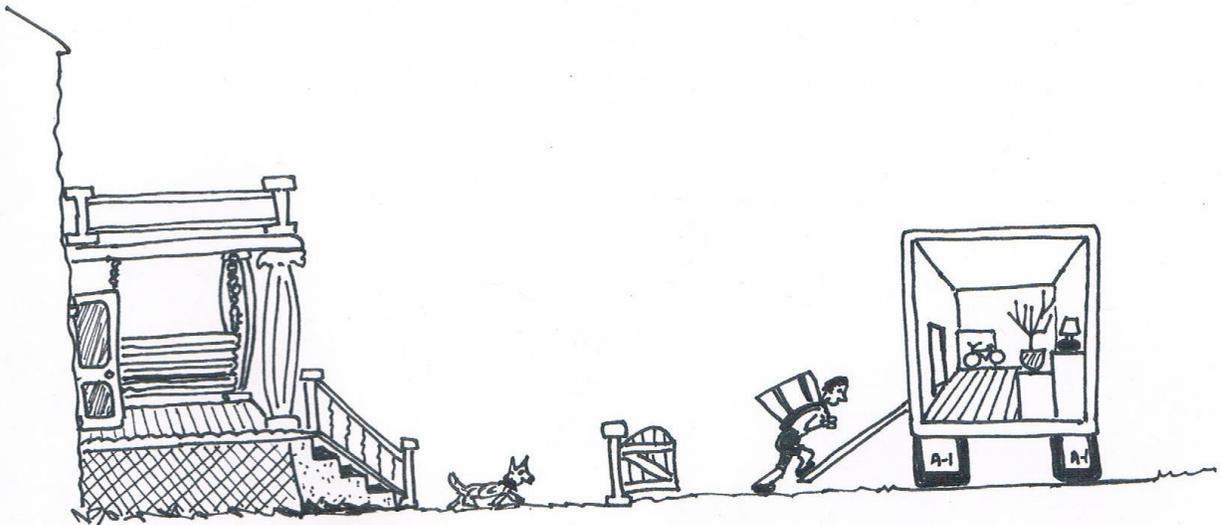
The two kids did not have an easy time of things as they were adjusting to the move and both schools were very rigorous with lots of homework. Rocky's brother was a homebody, preferring to hang out in the family room and do his homework and watch TV most evenings and weekends. He would sometimes go for a workout with his Dad at the Riley Centre, and they would inevitably stop afterwards at The Frostop for a root beer in a large frozen mug. The odd Saturday night he would go for a school dance at the Jewish Community Centre, and Rocky would go with his dad to pick up his brother at the end of the evening's festivities. His brother always seemed edgy after going to these dances, and Rocky would send him calming thoughts, mixed with love and affection. Another time, the brother attended a bar mitzvah for his friend Dave at a splashy club on the edge of City Park. Rocky also went along for this pickup, and found his brother to be in great spirits but with a pungent smell to his breath. What had gone on at the party, Rocky wondered?

Rocky's sister was much more socially oriented, and would spend a lot of time at her friend's house on Willow Street. She would spend most weekends there and seemed to have a lot of fun. But many times she wanted to walk after dark, through areas that were unsafe. These walks were sometimes done with Rocky in tow, and he saw many situations which made the hair on his ruff stand straight up. So his

parents put their foot down and said this was all very unsafe. But Rocky's sister resisted, as some teenagers will do, and voices were raised and doors were slammed. Throughout all of this, Rocky stood at the bottom of the staircase, shivering in fear but also sending out huge waves of love and support for both his sister and his parents. He would be hugged and cuddled later by everyone in his family, and he realized he was playing a very important healing role at this difficult time.

A few weeks later, when things were incrementally better between the parents and the swirling wave of adolescence, Rocky accompanied his sister and Dad on an outing to the French Quarter. The family had made the decision to soon return to life in Canada, so this outing was tinged with a touch of sentimentality. They picked up some boiled crawfish at the Market, laced with a spicy Cajun paste, and sat on a bench overlooking the Mississippi. Rocky got a few crawfish morsels, a bit spicy for his tastes, and sat and watched the boats ply the river. A lone musician played a trumpet down by the corner, in a hauntingly beautiful way. Rocky saw the charm of this place, but was still looking forward to returning home.

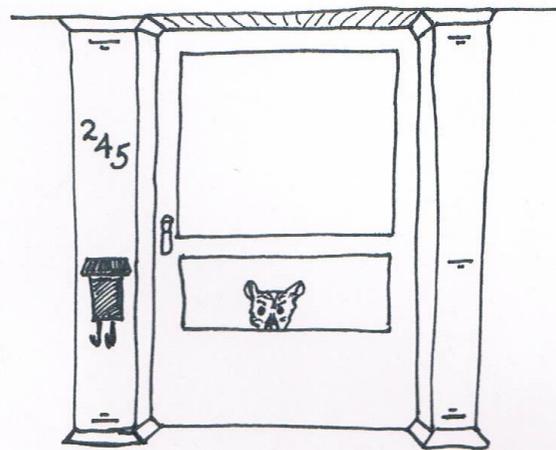
Moving, One More Time



The returning process went very smoothly, with the house selling in record time to a very nice family, and the same moving van driver who had delivered the household effects coming back to return it all to Canada. Goodbyes to all the new friends were tearfully done, and the family rolled out one day in late June, heading North. Rocky was boxed in between a lot of materials and the two children in the back seat. Scrunched but happy, he slept with half an eye open and was appreciative of any pit stops that were taken along the way. Places like Jackson, Oxford and Tupelo were part of his experience in that state named after the great river, and Rocky particularly enjoyed seeing the humble birthplace of the king of rock 'n roll outside of Tupelo. His family then rode the amazing nature highway known as the

Natchez Trace, pretty much all the way to Nashville. Rocky's presence in the car soothed any jangled nerves for the most part, and except for a lot of fuss in and around Louisville, the family rolled quietly northward. Rocky's favourite time was early evening, where the big sky views along the rural freeways were absolute masterpieces of clouds and setting sun. "God is quite an artist" suggested Rocky's Mom, and everyone in the car agreed. The beauty of the Earth in all its aspects was not lost on any of them, least so on the Sheltie with the beautiful fur markings, and this thought sustained them as they crossed the border and progressed to their new home in the valley.

Settling Into a New Home and a New Life



The new house was about five blocks away from the previous house where Rocky had lived. It had good cheekbones but was a tad smaller than what was needed for two boisterous teenagers, so the home was soon turned into a construction site with work going on in the attic, the basement, the kitchen and for a new family room out back. The space that Rocky claimed, in the original living room and dining room, stayed untouched except for coats of paint from a heritage paint selection. After a year or so, all this settled down into a routine that was comfortable for a dog in his middle years.

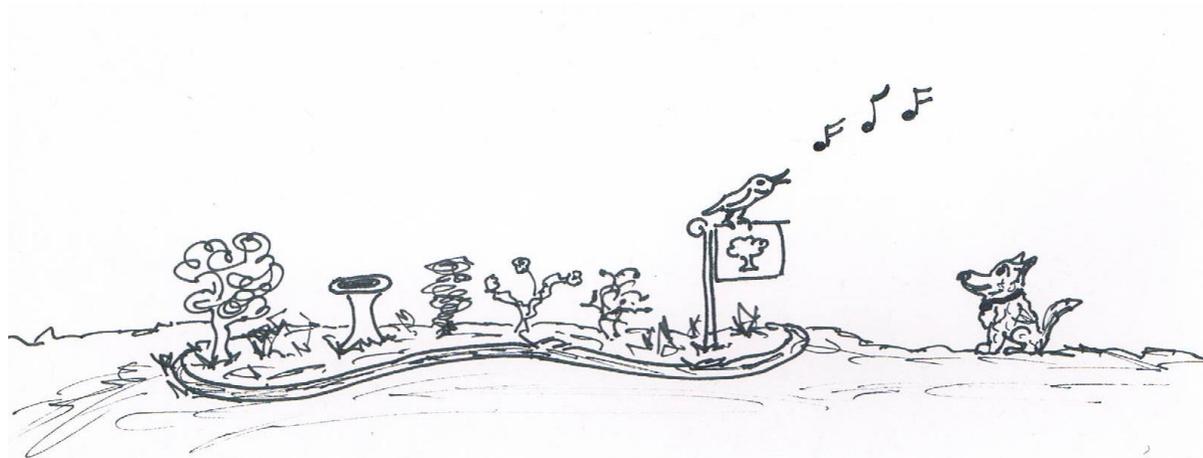
Rocky would stand in the front yard, under the shade of the silver maple tree, and gently connect with the flowers and plants in the kidney-shaped flower bed. Since he had been a puppy he had an affinity for flowers, and he could see and feel how they were connected to him and to the Light that illuminates all life. Rocky sat and contemplated this notion of the Luminous Ground connection that holds all of us, at the same time hoping his girlfriend Amber might walk by with her owner. Amber was a pretty little thing, a sable Sheltie with an easy smile, who always seemed delighted to stop and say hello. Today was not an Amber day, so Rocky took a last draw of the flowers' perfume and catapulted up the stairs and waited to be let inside.

Breakfast, napping, looking out the window from a perch on the sofa, getting kootchee-cooed by his brother and sister, supper, a nighttime walk with his parents and an early bedtime. With this as the backbone for his schedule, the days rolled by and the years rolled by, and Rocky continued to hold the energy of the household and extend love to all who came in its front door.

But life brings change, incrementally at times and at other times in sudden shifts. One fine September day Rocky realized his sister, the one family member in the early days who actually thought he was her dog and no one else's, had suddenly gone off to university. He pined and moped until he finally realized it wasn't going to change anything. No one had told him that these little ones would eventually grow up and leave, and he couldn't quite figure out where she had gone. And three years later it happened again, with his now muscular young brother flying the coop for college.

In the midst of all these changes, Rocky lost his girlfriend Amber and his old buddy Max. After a bit of time, Amber's owner got a new dog by the name of Poppy, who was a blue merle Sheltie and very cute and friendly, with Rocky considering her to be his new girlfriend. His parents' friend Margaret, who came for tea to discuss crop circles and earth energies, got a bouncy new puppy called Star, who also came to be a friend of Rocky.

The Puppyish Older Years



So life went on, the middle years merging into the later years, with Rocky slowing down a bit in terms of quickness and flexibility. He couldn't climb the steps on his own anymore, and needed help getting up and down. He also couldn't jump up on the sofa anymore, so his Mom would leave the front door open so he could enjoy the passing parade of life on Park Street.

His parents found him a homeopathic vet, who gave him a range of Chinese herbs with his food and also gave him acupuncture treatments that he was not particularly fond of. They also found a chiropractic vet, who would gently work on Rocky's posture so that he could keep going on the walks that he loved so much. Rocky's appetite went down a bit, so he fell into the practice of first decanting the water and

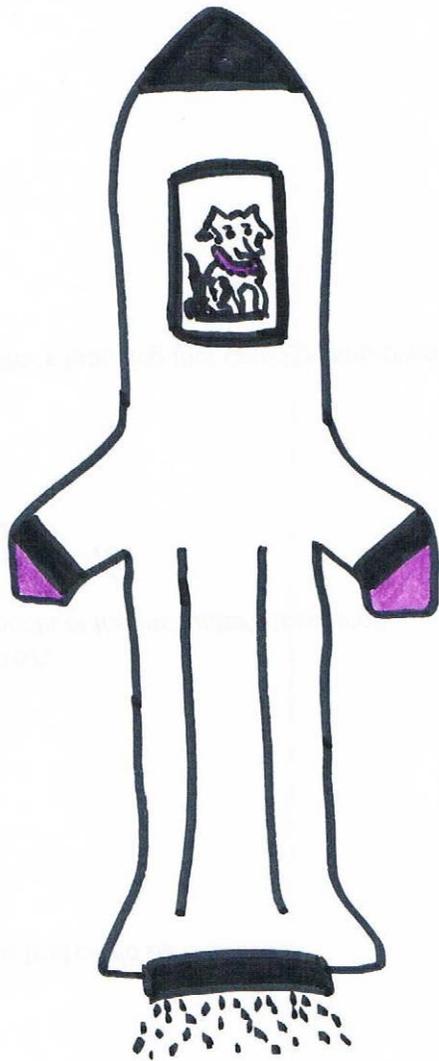
herbs off the top of his meal, and then came back several hours later to gingerly masticate the remaining solid food. His walks became even slower, and he would often wear his new black raincoat with the reflective stripes, to keep out the rain and the wind. The neighbourhood dogs would still bark at him madly, as if they could see or sense the huge angels that would hover around Rocky on his walks. At times he would resist going further away from home, so his Dad would pick him up and spin him around quickly to throw off his internal compass, and he would then happily trot off a few more blocks mistakenly thinking he was returning home.

One day, his Mom took Rocky to get his nails trimmed, as the chiropractic vet had said this was very important for both posture and mobility. This was done at a local veterinary clinic, and as Rocky entered it he picked up on the accumulated energies of scared and unhappy pets and he himself began to shiver and shake. The lady at the desk gave him a dog cookie to take his mind off being at the clinic, but he couldn't hold onto it since his teeth were chattering so much. Thankfully they were called in quickly, and Rocky snuggled in his Mom's lap as he put up with the nail trimming. Finished, he literally bolted out the door and walked briskly up the street. This was in sharp contrast to the manner in which he had gone to the clinic, where he had dragged and limped so much that he had elicited considerable sympathy from passerby pedestrians. It dawned on Rocky's Mom that he had the spirit of a puppy, and even as he was getting old in body his mind was still young. So at times he could banish the spirit of old age and call in the spirit of youth, as he had come to realize that youthfulness was a state of mind.

Once home, Rocky was taken down for a bath in the mud sink. He had a bad experience once while being bathed by a dog groomer and he plugged into that memory and immediately felt his body starting to slump sideways. His Mom whisked him out of the sink and set him down on the floor, and suddenly the spirit of youth came roaring back. He spryly jumped over the stair landing and ran into his sister's bedroom. Everywhere he could smell her scent, which then became indelibly imprinted into his consciousness. His Mom wrapped him in a towel and picked him up, allowing him to look at himself in a mirror. The more he stared into his own eyes, the more his physical body seemed to melt away, and he became nothing but Light. Rocky realized he was much greater and stronger than the little body he was in, and his own aura got bigger and bigger and he in essence became a Being of Light. After a few seconds where time stood still, he was carried upstairs and outside, where the spirit of youth again got stronger and stronger, and he was able to tear around and do laps of the kidney-shaped flower bed like he did when he was younger.

And a few moments later, while hanging in the front yard waiting for a lift up the stairs, Rocky heard his old friend in the silver maple. Six beautiful and different calls later, Rocky was sure it was the mockingbird, coming to give him a sweet serenade with a special message. Rocky was reminded that life was like a spiral, with us going around in a circle game with events that seem the same but are experienced differently, because we are a bit different than the last time around. Rocky looked up and sent his friend a warm thought of loving gratitude, just before his Dad came out the door to take him in for another tummy rub, another supper, another walk and another dream-filled sleep.

~The End~



Liftoff Into the Light

by

Brian and Rashné Baetz

Illustrations by Brian Baetz



It's Later Than You Think

His life was quite simple by conventional measures. He went to bed early and stayed snoozing until the first stir of life in the house;

a short walk in the morning, followed by a simple breakfast; more napping throughout the day, with an early supper with fresh fruit as an appetizer. Perhaps some standing in the kitchen to watch food being prepared and dishes washed. The greatly anticipated event of each day was the full evening walk. This was typically done in the company of both parents, and was conducted through the familiar leafy streets of the old town, regardless of the season or weather.

Rocky was a Shetland sheepdog, or Sheltie, as they are affectionately known. As a tricolored Sheltie, Rocky sported a coat of black fur, with patterns of white and brown that would make an artist envious. Born in a small hamlet in southwestern Ontario, he left his mother, Heaven, and seven siblings to live with his human family as a wee spark of just nine weeks old. Rocky had helped so much in raising the two children of the family, in ways that no one could really comprehend. He had lived in four different homes with his family, but the last one in Dundas, Ontario was for the longest time of all and he loved this house the most of all.

The children had grown up into young adults, and had moved on to seek adventure and education as part of the process. Rocky never gave up hope that they would return, even if it was only for a short visit. He would rest in the living room at the front of the house, and keep a watchful eye on all movement within.

He knew each day of the week by its special rhythms, and Sundays were his favourites. For on Sundays, his parents would go for a hike in the conservation areas. On these hikes Rocky sniffed the many different smells of the trees, bogs and crevices in rocks. He loved the birdsong of the Dundas Valley, and observed the web of life in nature. On this particular Sunday, his parents decided to go for a hike in the Spencer Gorge. They climbed up the hill, crossed the hot and flat plain beside the railroad tracks, and entered the cool Carolinian forest. The trail wove up and down, giving beautiful views of Spencer Creek tumbling down below. Rocky's special spot was where Logie's Creek meets Spencer Creek; and this is where they all stayed for a good two hours. He felt the creek speaking to him, in a language that only

animals can fully understand. It called him to stand in the rushing waters, to absorb their special energy and to listen for instructions for a journey he would be making soon. He did not want to leave the creek that day, as much as his Dad tried to coax him. Rocky had to eventually be lifted out of the creek, soggy fur and all.

He went to bed that night with the normal rhythms. But in the middle of the night, a number of special beings started to form a circle around him while he slept. They whispered out sweet and mysterious words to him, and sang ancient songs in a language he had not heard in a while. This stirred him, and he cried out to his Mom that he needed to go outside. She jumped out of bed and lifted him down the stairs, and he walked over to the other side of the kidney-shaped flower bed. And in a moment, his legs grew weak and he fell over on his side. Rocky could look down and see his furry little body lying in the morning dew, and saw his Mom and Dad rush out to his side and start to pet him and whisper into his ear.

Rocky could hear his parents' voices in distress, but he also heard other voices. Doggie friends he once knew, other owners he once loved. He felt very calm, had an all-knowing sense of Love, and many things were communicated to him in a number of ways. He saw his Dad pick him up and take him into his favourite spot in the living room, and he saw his small body being placed on his Dad's chest. Both his parents were crying, and both had their healing hands on his chest and head. He saw this for a long time, perhaps thirty minutes or more by the clock on the fireplace mantle. Rocky was readying himself to say goodbye and join his friends in the beautiful place he had gone to; but a shuddering sob from both his Mom and Dad stopped him in his tracks. For now, he could choose to return. So his spirit came swooshing down back into his body, and stood up in a flash on his Dad's chest. Time for breakfast!

A Language Without Words

As the day settled into its rhythm, both parents could hardly believe what had happened with Rocky. He began snoozing a bit more than usual, so they kept an eye on him all day. Dr. Lisa, Rocky's special vet, had told them about a lady with a unique gift of being able to talk to animals without words. Rocky's Mom decided to call this lady, the animal communicator, so they could talk to Rocky in case he might leave the earthly plane some time soon.

As luck would have it, the lady with the special gift, Christine came over the very next evening. She sat down near Rocky's favourite spot in the living room. Rocky went off to take a long drink of water and to check if any scraps of food had made their way to the kitchen floor during the supper cleanup.

His parents called out to him, and although he could not hear well, he got the feeling he needed to come over to the living room. When he came around the corner and saw Christine sitting on the love seat, it was love at first sight. He smiled his Sheltie grin and she smiled back at him. He was very excited and knew immediately that Christine could understand him directly and clearly. Rocky loved his parents but often they couldn't hear his messages or would misunderstand him. With them he tried to let



them know what he was thinking by bunting their leg with his wet nose, or using his eyes to give them his love. But with Christine, Rocky knew in his heart that he would be understood perfectly.

Christine was moved to be in sweet Rocky's presence. Her eyes teared up, and she couldn't stop smiling. She said she was honoured to communicate with Rocky, who was a very special being. She said he was much more than a dog; at his essence he was a wise spiritual master. He had chosen to come to earth as a doggie so he could share his love and light as well as wisdom with his special family for over sixteen years.

Christine asked Rocky the questions his parents had for him. He answered Christine telepathically from his mind to her mind. The communication session was recorded so it could be shared later with the two children. Rocky gave specific advice to each member of the family on what they could do to make the world a better place, and also how they could each stay in touch with him after he passed on.

Rocky's advice to his brother about how to make decisions was simple and beautiful. If the decision was the right one, his brother would feel good and his body would feel expansive; if it was not the right decision his body would contract and he would not feel good. Rocky told his sister to keep going with the things she was exploring, like pottery and circus, as she was listening to her heart and to her Inner Voice.

Rocky said he had crossed over to the other side – heaven - the previous morning, to check on the preparations that were being made for him. He had no fear of crossing over to the Light and Love that was waiting for him, but he was concerned that his family would be very sad. He did not have much time left on Earth but there were a few things he still had to do, so he would stick around for a while longer.



Rocky also solved the mystery of why these days he rarely left his special spot in the living room next to the red sofa. It was a special spot that had lovely energy pouring into it with the beams of light that came in from the crescent window and the large bay window. The Light carried guidance from Source that he used to help his family.

Much More Than a Dog

After Christine left, Rocky's parents sat in the living room, amazed at all the things they had learned from Rocky. Rocky seemed happy that he had just spent an hour with someone who could read his every thought, right down to the smallest

detail. For a dog who was so quiet, he seemed to have a lot to say!

Things now seemed clearer to his parents. They always knew he was a very special dog, but now they understood that he was much more than a dog. As a puppy Rocky was calm and centered. In fact, it was his calm manner that attracted his family to him in the first place. He only needed one obedience training lesson, after which he walked perfectly with his parents, like their shadow. He seemed to know their desires before they were spoken, and now they knew why.

As many children know, you don't have to be old to have a lot of wisdom. Rocky certainly proved this truth. He knew so much about the big picture of life even as a young puppy, and learned so much more as he aged. Slowing down in his older years gave him a chance to develop patience and grow even deeper into his spiritual mastery.

The family would joke that Rocky didn't think of himself as a dog. Although he liked other Shelties, he was not too interested in other dogs. When they tried to play or pick a fight with him, he just looked away. Many dogs would bark madly at Rocky when he walked by their homes, as if they could sense the powerful energy he contained within his little body. His parents used to joke that Rocky had a protector angel floating above him at all times, and this is what other dogs sensed before they went into a barking frenzy. Perhaps this was true, or perhaps Rocky himself was just one big angel.

So as a few days passed by, the shock of almost losing Rocky lessened a bit. The information passed on through Christine was being slowly understood. Both parents took more time each day to sit with Rocky and caress his white ruff. One day when his Dad was holding him, Rocky snuggled into his chest, his Dad had a profound realization. Rocky the spiritual master could have come to Earth in many other animal or human forms. Perhaps as a great eagle, flying high above the Earth, spreading love to all that lay below him, or as a great teacher, spreading truth about life and its real meaning. But this family would never have had the direct experience of living with him daily and experience the depth of his great love if he had chosen one of these other forms. So the great spiritual master squeezed himself into the tiny body of a Sheltie puppy, as he knew this particular family would be looking for a dog to round out their household. Rocky had said to Christine that he had been with this family in past lives, and he wanted to reunite with them to help them in this life. So as much as this family chose Rocky, he chose them too by being in the right place at the right time.

Things to do and People to See

After what happened to Rocky, and what had been communicated to his parents, they knew that they would have to make the most of every day together. They didn't know how many days there would be, but they intended to make each one count.

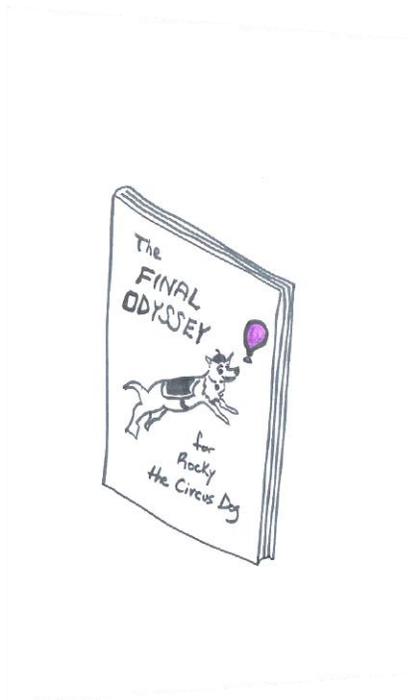
Rocky came back from the other side to spend more time with them for a reason; there must be things he wanted to do before he would leave for the last time. His Dad went away to spend time with family in California, and while he was there he received an inspiration, from the Cosmos or perhaps from Rocky himself. The inspiration was to write a trilogy of children's books about Rocky. Dad mentioned it to his daughter, who was immediately excited to lend her artistic and writing talents towards the project.

The first book was an odyssey of older Rocky trekking across North America looking for his sister, who had joined a petit cirque de soleil circus troupe in Mexico. The book flowed out of Dad's hands with silent transmission from Rocky and pretty much wrote itself. The next month, a second book about Rocky's adventures as a puppy flowed out the same way. And a third book came a month later, about Rocky's mid-life transition when he moved to New Orleans for a year.

Beyond the help with the books, Rocky wanted to spend more time with his brother to guide him along his path. His brother was busy at college in Toronto, and didn't get home a lot. But when he did, Rocky snuggled up to him and connected with him deeply on the heart level. During his session with the animal communicator, Rocky had offered specific suggestions of what his brother could do to accelerate his personal growth and find success in life by being guided by his Inner Voice. He did the same for his sister, even though she already had a university degree, and had found her twin passions of pottery and the circus. Through Rocky's communication, it became evident he had a unique relationship with every

member of the family and that he took his role as a teacher and healer very seriously.

Something Rocky had asked for through Christine was the opportunity to go around the neighbourhood and say goodbye to special friends and neighbours that lived around him and cared deeply for him. These were the people that saw him going for walks every day, and who had noticed he was slowing down more and more. So his Mom gradually did the rounds with Rocky and took photos of these special friends like Sandy, Elaine and Margaret who had lovingly cared for him when his parents were away. They had the opportunity to pet Rocky and hold him, and perhaps share a few words and





thoughts with him that they could take with them as a memory after his transition.

Rocky's main job for the time remaining was to give as much love as possible to both of his parents. He knew it would be hardest on them, as he was the last child remaining at home; their furry son as they liked to call him. He wanted to be with them as much as possible, to rest his chin on their knee, or give them his trademark Sheltie grin. Occasionally if there was a lot of excitement or if his Mom sang to him and clapped her hands, he

would muster up a feeble wag of his tail. He knew he was winding down and would soon lift off into the Light, but he wanted to make the transition as easy as possible on those he loved so dearly.

When the Winter Winds Howl

The Summer ended quickly as it always does, the days shortened and the gardens and trees turned to their autumn splendor. Autumn was one of Rocky's favourite times of the year. But as the days grew cooler, he found the season tinged with a certain sadness of the approaching winter.

There were many challenges for Rocky that particular winter. The first one had to do with food. Rocky had always enjoyed his two meals a day, eating them in his slow and steady way. Now each meal took him several hours to consume. First he would drink the water off the top of the food with his little pink tongue. After decanting the water he walked away for a while and would nap for a bit. Then he sometimes came back to eat some of the solids in his food bowl, followed by more napping. This entire process meant that he would often finish his morning meal just about the time for his evening meal. Eating was no longer a priority.

Rocky still went for a walk in the morning with Dad, and an evening walk with both of his parents. His legs were stretched gently by his parents as shown to them by Leslie, the chiropractic vet, to help him get limbered up for his walk. The walks got shorter as he tired more easily. The morning walk was just around the block. The evening walk was reduced to five or six blocks around the neighbourhood. The pace was now much slower, although he sometimes warmed up by the second half of his walk and at times even seemed to trot home.



Another change for Rocky was getting up several times during the night to pace on the hardwood floors. Sometimes he would go around in small circles, especially when it was a full moon. This would wake up his parents, who would come down and put him out in the yard. As he could no longer go down the

porch steps, they would pick him up and carry him down. The winter wind seemed especially biting this year for an old Sheltie struggling to keep body and soul together.

Because Rocky's hind legs were stiff and he found it hard to get down onto the ground to lay down, he would often take many minutes going around in circles before he fell to the floor in one swoop. This was hard on his old bones and difficult for his family to observe.

As winter progressed he shivered in the cold and it was very hard for him to get warm outside. His parents always put his coat on him and made the outings as short as possible. At times even inside the warm house, he shivered and shook at times.

It was clear to his parents that Rocky's body was winding down. They wondered how long he might stay with them, and they wondered if they would have to help him fly free by calling the vet. But at this time he was still eating a bit and going for short walks, and did not seem in unbearable pain. He was suffering to some extent and so were they. But the decision was made to let Rocky carry on, as everyone knew there were still lessons to be learned from this additional time with his family.

One More Conversation

The winter winds eventually lessened as Spring slowly returned, with snowdrops and crocuses starting to bloom in the yard. Rocky's parents began to feel sadder as they saw Rocky was continuing to decline with each passing day. So they thought, perhaps for one last time, they would call back Christine, the animal communicator.

This time it was like two old friends having a chat, and the insights were recorded as before. The parents sat, transfixed. The first point Rocky made very clear. He stated that the end would come quite soon, but there was no cause for any fear. He had been through this many times in previous lives, and death was not so much an end as like walking through a door into another place. He asked his parents to let him to die in his own way. He did not need to be fixed or cured as his spirit always was and always

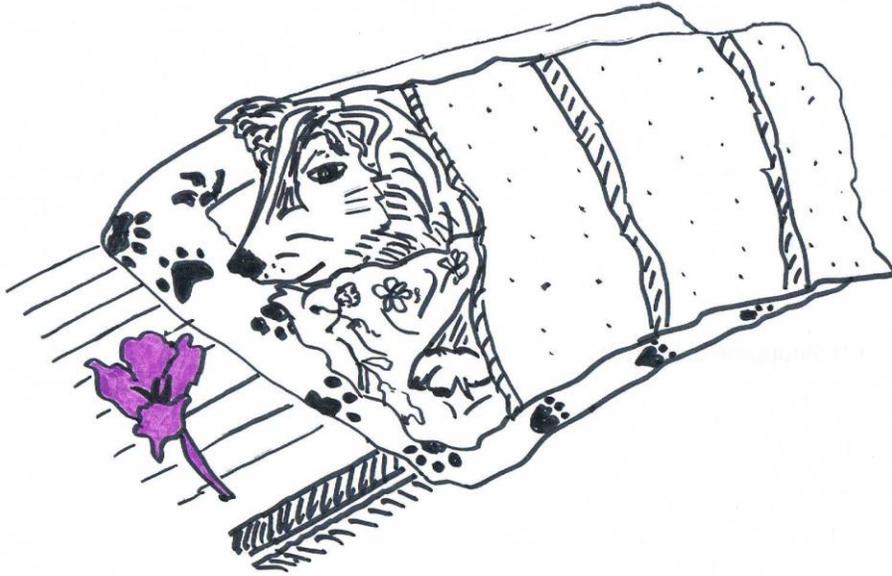
would be perfect and whole. The events of the past year had allowed him to fully complete his inner healing so that he could lift off to continue his life in an another way. He knew it would be hard on his family, and that the house would feel very empty without him. He said they could call on him at any time, and he would always be there to help. His love would be ever-present and he could help them and others from the heavenly plane.

Rocky went on to explain what was going on during the nights when he wasn't sleeping well. He said that in the middle of the night, his essence would journey far away from his old body sleeping in the living room. He would jump and play with other spirit dogs, running in meadows and forests. The spirit dogs were the doggies of his Dad's childhood, Bootsie, Tiffany and Trixie, who showed Rocky how things would be when he made his transition. All the dogs, including Rocky, were always vibrant and healthy as they played together on the other side.

When Rocky woke up from this experience, he was suddenly thrust back into his old body which made him disoriented and confused. He asked his parents to play some soothing music each night, something calm and melodic, so that when he returned from his journeying the music would anchor him back to where he had returned.

The other thing Rocky communicated was that he wanted to feel the hope of another Spring one last time, as he had been born during this season. He loved the Earth rebirthing, the smells emanating from a warming flower bed and the birds returning to sing in the garden. Hearing this, his parents let him simply stand in the front garden and absorb as much as possible of this beautiful season.

For his final point, Rocky let them know through Christine that although the last few years had been very challenging and hard for everyone, he wanted to thank his parents for making old age fun. With that, Christine left and the parents sat holding Rocky, with tears in their eyes and smiles on their faces.



A Rainy Day in May

The weather was getting a bit nicer each day, in a Spring that had been quite cold and wet. Rocky was still hanging in there bravely. He enjoyed Mother's Day with his Mom,

and just a few days later he was happy to be there for her birthday. His parents were trying to make him comfortable so that he could enjoy each day as fully as possible. Part of them wanted to deny the inevitable and hang on to him a lot longer.

The following Saturday was grey and rainy. Mom went to the gym and Dad for his long weekend run. Rocky was sleeping on his pooch pad on just another day. After lunch his parents were getting ready for their weekly shop, checking the cupboards and the fridge and making up a grocery list. Rocky got up and went for a drink of water from his favorite pot made by his sister. Suddenly his parents heard a loud thud and ran over to find Rocky flat out on the floor and breathing very heavily. He couldn't move and his body was very weak. They got a blanket for him to lay on something soft. They stroked his furry body over and over. They didn't want to hold him back from his transition if this was the time for his spirit to fly. They whispered to him about their great love for him and told him they would be okay if it was his time to go. His breathing got slower and slower.

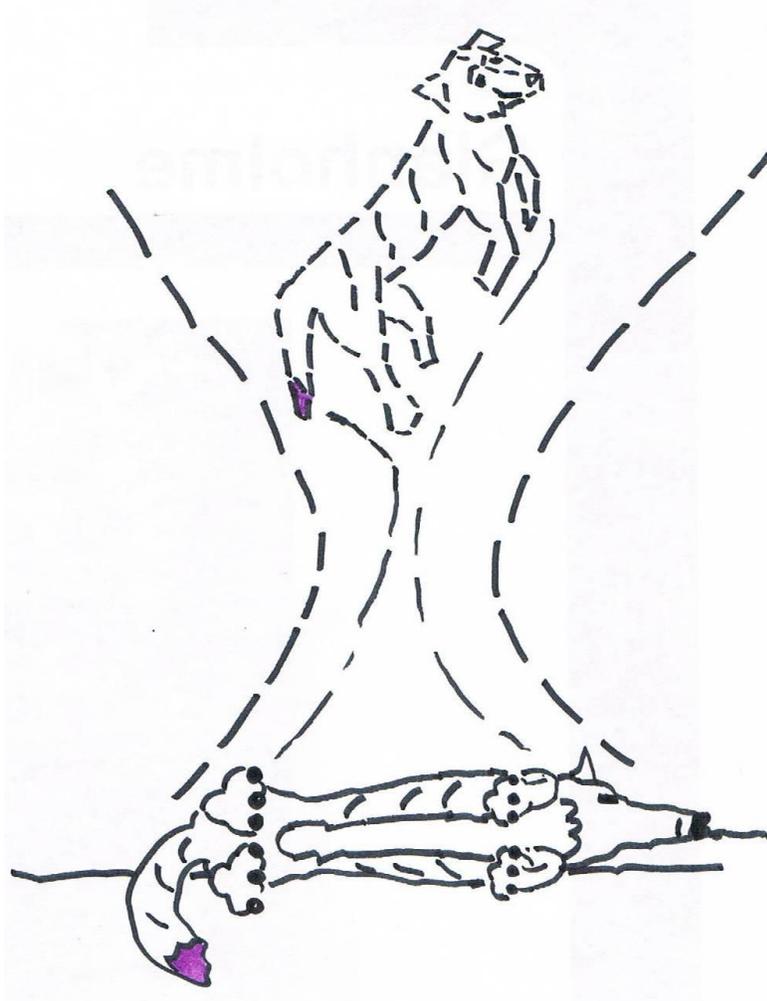
More time went by and his Dad lifted him out to his pooch pad in his favourite spot in the living room. His body was stiff, and it was like carrying a sack of potatoes. His parents covered him with a soft blanket, with just his head peeking out. He couldn't lift his head, but he would follow their movements with his eyes, sending light and love to both of them as they paced around the living room.

His Mom got on the phone and called Rocky's brother in Toronto, asking him to come home quickly so he could say goodbye before Rocky slipped away. At that point, his parents decided that they would just keep Rocky as comfortable as possible, as there was no need for food or medicines. His brother's arrival cheered him up, and when he was lifted onto his brother's chest, he even mustered up a Sheltie grin.

The late afternoon spilled into the evening, and the brave little dog rallied a bit and was able to stand with some support. He was carried outside where he walked strangely. The signals from his head were not getting to his body. He spent time laying very still and took little sips of water from a teaspoon.

In the night, Rocky got up and got stuck behind a potted plant in the living room. He let out a plaintive howl, which brought Mom and Dad jumping out of bed. They hadn't heard him howl that way since the first night he had come home as a puppy, when he missed Heaven, his furry Mom.

The next day before his brother went back to college, he gave Rocky one final embrace and Rocky wrapped his paws around his brother's arm. Tears were shed. That night Rocky cried out again. This time he was trying to stand up, but he could not stand. His Dad held him and calmed him, and went back to bed with a very heavy heart.



The Very Last Day

Rocky's parents awoke on Monday morning, with both receiving the same thought overnight. They felt that Rocky may need some assistance to cross over to the other side, but they wanted to get help from Christine to see if she could ask Rocky what he wanted. She tuned in to his thoughts and said that he was definitely ready to go and wanted some assistance to help him.

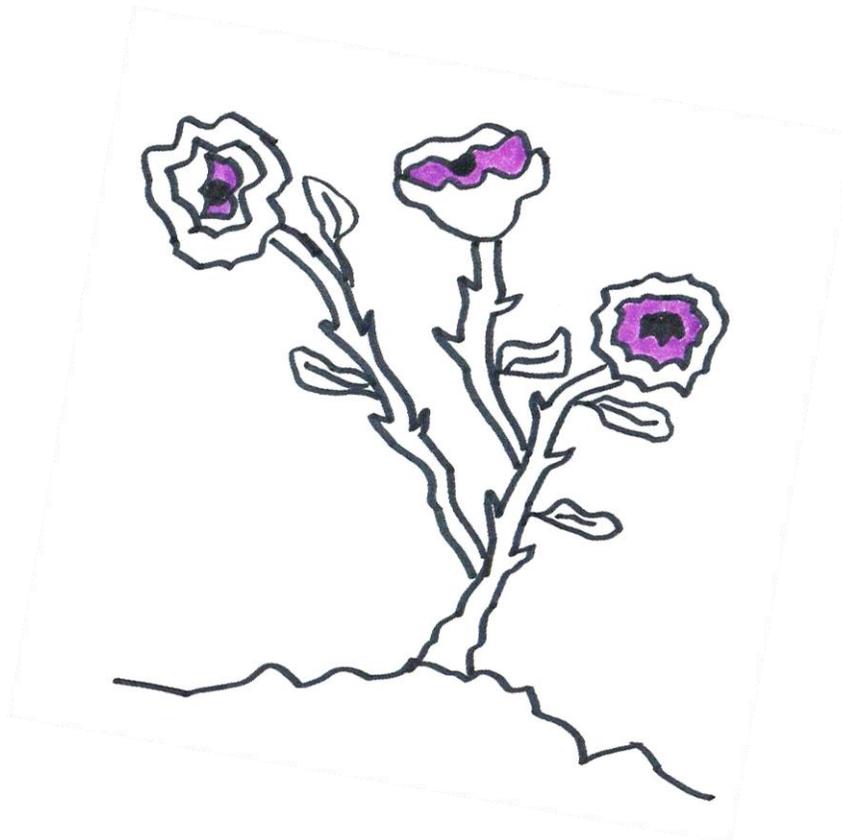
So Rocky's parents reluctantly called Dr. Lisa, who said she would come over at 5pm. Rocky was kept covered with a blanket on his pooch pad. A magenta tulip was placed by his nose as he seemed to love flowers. Dad biked home at lunchtime to spend as much time as possible on Rocky's last day. All day Mom

and Dad gave him the healing touch of Reiki and Rocky was blissed out by this loving energy.

Rocky's sister phoned from Salt Spring Island, BC throughout the day; Rocky's Dad had to go back into work for an important meeting, but by the grace of Divine intervention, his meeting was cancelled and he came back home right away to spend an extra couple of hours to hold dear Rocky and look deeply into his kind eyes, communicating a silent goodbye and a thank you for a life well lived.

Dr. Lisa came late, affording a few more precious moments of deep communication with their dear friend. She was calm and loving as she pet Rocky. She asked for his favorite treat, and his Dad brought him a slice of banana. Rocky was then wrapped in a lovely old embroidered white tablecloth. He was very peaceful as he lay on the sofa with Mom and Dad's arms around him. Dr Lisa gave him a muscle relaxant and a moment later another needle that helped him slip away quickly. His jaw relaxed and his life force lifted off into the Light.

On May 16, 2011 at 5:50pm an almost 17 year old Sheltie dog named Rocky went on to the celestial meadow to play with his pals. At that very moment three thousand miles away, a pot suddenly collapsed on his sister's potter's wheel.



Rocky was carried out to Dr. Lisa's SUV, as his parents sobbed and kissed him goodbye. A light rain started falling. As the SUV pulled away, the St. Augustine church bells began to toll.

Gone But Definitely Not Forgotten

The days immediately after Rocky's passing were difficult ones. As paths crossed with neighbours and friends, the news of the loss diffused out into the neighbourhood and beyond. Many kind folks dropped by with a card of sympathy. One fellow down the street brought a beautiful bunch of flowers. The postal

delivery lady, Marlene, was so thoughtful and dropped off a rose bush and a solar-powered prayer candle. The 'Roses for Rocky' bush was planted in the flower bed in the front yard. The stained glass prayer candle, placed beside the rose bush, glowed wondrously through the nights. All the cards and Rocky's photos were woven into a memory album.

Within a few days, Spring finally arrived fully, and many more birds appeared in the yard. They brought beautiful birdsong from the surrounding trees and bushes, and quick flashes of colour. It felt as if Rocky was orchestrating this display of winged beauty and song, knowing that his parents would be delighted and that this would fill in the void they were feeling.

Another magical occurrence was that a number of the neighbourhood dogs began spending more time with Rocky's parents, wagging their tails, and making eye contact. Mrs. McFarlane's dog Cheyenne who had always looked out for Rocky was now jumping up to be petted. Rocky knew that his parents were severely dog-deprived and he nudged some of these dogs to open up their hearts to his grieving parents.

A few weeks went by, and things got a little back to normal on the surface, but not really. When the parents would come home to an empty house, they would still call out 'Hi Rocky' and look to the living room, truly thinking he was still there for a split second. At nights when the wind moved the branches of the trees outside, they would awaken and hear noises in the old house. Half asleep, it would sound like the soft strike of a paw on the creaky hardwood floors, or the reshuffling of a furry body on its pooch pad. These were not real sounds, but were dredged from a lifetime of memories, yet they were still savoured in a wistful kind of way.



Beyond the Veil

Beyond the phantom sounds in the night, and the feeling upon coming back home that Rocky was still on his pooch pad, his parents felt Rocky's presence in their lives. He had gone beyond

to a place they could not see, but they felt that his love was still with them.

One day after Rocky passed, his Dad was running and with about a hundred metres to go, he mentally called out to Rocky for help. Suddenly he could see the light body of a dog running just ahead of him, and moving like the wind. At the finish line, the dog disappeared and out of a thicket came a young deer.

Another day, Rocky's Mom and his brother went for a walk and stopped at the garden of St. Augustine's church in front of a statue of Mother Mary. They both felt Rocky standing right near them.

Rocky was cremated in a special facility in Guelph, and his ashes came back in a beautiful wooden box. When his sister came home that Summer, the family planned a special ceremony for Rocky. He had asked that part of his ashes be spread in the waters of the Spencer Gorge. Each family member took turns saying their final goodbyes as they let go of his earthly remains. Some of his ashes were spread in the garden near the rose bush and prayer candle given by the kind lady who brought the mail each day. The rest of his ashes went to his sister, to incorporate into a clay pot.

Rocky's sister brought back a beautiful wooden statue of Rocky, made by a folk artist on Salt Spring Island, which now sits by the fireplace.

That summer, many different butterflies flitted by Rocky's yard, and many more birds than usual came to sing in the trees near his house. His parents understood this was Rocky's way of letting them know he had transformed into a being of Light and that all was well.

~the end~