

BOULDER

a short story by: Jennifer Gordon

I was not what you would call a dog person. I actually hated dogs growing up. The only dog my family ever had was a German shepherd named Oscar. That dog was nothing but mean-spirited and he despised me. When I was six years old, he bit me in the behind so hard I couldn't sit right for an entire week. After that, I avoided Oscar and all other dogs the best I could.

My life without dogs was going just fine until the summer I turned sixty-five. That's the summer when my world was turned upside down.

It was a day in early July. My third wife had just left me so I was sleeping alone in my bed. I woke up and immediately knew something wasn't right. I was swimming in a pool of my own sweat and I couldn't catch my breath. My mouth felt like I'd been sucking on a bunch of cotton balls all night. I felt like I was dying. My first thought was the state of the ratty, old pajamas I was wearing. It's amazing what pops into your head when you think you're going to die. Instead of pondering the meaning of life or the possibility of an afterlife, I cursed myself for not wearing clean pajamas on my death bed. My second thought was that if I, Sam Walker, did manage to survive whatever was happening to me, I promised to give up smoking forever.

It was then that I realized the air-conditioner was not making its usual humming noise. Well, it was never really a humming noise, but more like a clanking sound. The good news was I wasn't dying in my dirty pajamas. The bad news was my air-conditioner was broken again. This was pretty bad news considering it was July and I lived in Florida. The sharpest carving knife in the world couldn't have cut through that kind of humidity. I dragged myself out of bed and did my cure-all approach to machines that refused to work properly – I kicked it. This did nothing but give me a sore foot. I decided to deal with the broken air-conditioner later and limped to the bathroom.

I splashed some water on my face and gulped it down by the handfuls. I put on my diner clothes and went downstairs. My apartment sat on top of my pride and joy – my very own old-fashioned, home-cooking diner. It belonged to my Pa before me. After he died, I moved down to Florida and took over for him. That's how I lost Wife Number Two. She apparently failed to see the glamour in running your own southern diner. She stayed in New York and that was the end of that.

I unlocked the door at the bottom of the stairs. When I opened the door, a wave of cool air greeted me. Thank goodness I had invested in that new air unit for the diner. As I inhaled bucketfuls of the refreshing air, a very raw smell reached my senses. What in the world could that horrible odor be? I walked past the restrooms and turned the corner which led to the counter seating. I flicked on the lights. The smell was getting stronger and a thumping noise was coming from the floor. I looked towards the location of the noise and was amazed at what I saw. A dog! A dog in my diner! It appeared to be a mutt, or at least I couldn't tell of what make or model it was. It was dark grey and extremely hairy. It had a long bushy tail which seemed to have a mind of its own - thump-thumping on my linoleum floor. I froze in my tracks. Images of Oscar chasing me and sinking his teeth into my bottom went zooming through my head. I slowly reached into my shirt pocket and fished out a cigarette and my lighter. My earlier promise forgotten, I began to smoke. I couldn't quit smoking even though I'd tried a million times. That was one of the reasons Wife Number Three left me. She had actually left me a list of reasons – an actual, detailed list of reasons why she left me. What kind of person does that? Smoking had been item number one.

I had more important things on my mind, though. For instance, what the heck was a dog doing in my diner? How did he get in? I know I locked all the doors when I closed up the night before, I always did. I tried my best to ignore the animal and walked gingerly past him. He didn't move, just kept wagging his tail. After double checking all the locks and all possible points of entry, I scratched my head in confusion. Everything had been locked up tighter than a drum and no one had keys to the place except for me. It was a damn mystery.

I went about my business, trying to forget about my uninvited guest. I made coffee, prepared for my breakfast customers, unlocked the front door and sat down to wait. I sipped my cup of coffee and smoked another cigarette. The dog never left his official spot which was directly in front of one of the counter stools. I sat at the booth farthest away from him and waited for Doc to show up.

Doc was a veterinarian and he came to the diner every morning at six-thirty sharp. We would eat breakfast together and talk about stuff. He was my best friend and we barely had a thing in common. The most obvious difference was that I didn't care for animals at all and he did nothing *but* care for animals. I didn't have to wait long before Doc walked through the door. He nodded at me and then he noticed the dog. He gave me a strange smile and walked immediately over to the dog. The friendly Doc scratched the animal behind its ears and then came to sit with me at the booth.

“Nice dog you got there. She's a beauty.” Doc said, pointing his thumb at the creature.

“It's not mine. You know I hate dogs.” I said, getting up to prepare our breakfast. I cooked a gigantic plate of fried bacon and eggs for me. I brought Doc his usual; a glass of orange juice, a bowl of fresh fruit and a piece of whole wheat toast.

“Whose dog is she? She’s very well-behaved, if you don’t mind my saying.” Doc said when I returned with our food.

“I don’t mind.” I said, shoveling the bacon and eggs into my mouth. “I didn’t even know she was a girl dog. I came down this morning and there she was waiting for me. I have no idea how she even got in.”

“Maybe she snuck in before you closed up last night. Perhaps, she just wanted a cool place to spend the night.” Doc said, poking his fruit with his fork like he was doing one of his animal surgeries.

“That’s impossible because I always double check every corner of the place before I close up. Remember when those Snoghead kids snuck in before closing and I didn’t know it? They had themselves a regular party at my expense! I always check the whole place top to bottom before I lock up.”

“Well, then you must have yourself a real life canine magician on your hands.” Doc grinned as he waved an imaginary wand around in front of him.

“Doc, you know I don’t like dogs. Could you help me out here and take the mutt?” I asked.

“No way, Sam! I have five dogs, six cats, three parakeets, four rabbits and a hedgehog over at my place! I can barely afford the animals I do have. Why don’t you just keep her?” Doc explained, wiping his mouth politely on a paper napkin.

“A hedgehog?” I asked.

“Don’t ask.” Doc answered quickly. He rubbed his thin gray moustache and thought a bit. “I’ll tell you what...since you feed me on a daily basis...maybe I could take the dog off your hands. I’ll clean her up, give her some food, and give her an exam. I’ll even try to find someone who’ll keep her. The condition, of course, is that if I don’t find her a home, you have to promise to take her back.”

“Yeah, sure, I promise. Thanks, Doc.” I said. I had absolutely no intention of keeping that promise. There was no way in hell I was going to take that dog back from Doc. Wife Number Three had listed lying as one of the reasons she left me. If I remember correctly, it had come right after smoking.

Doc gave me a raised eyebrow but before he could say anything, Tootsie waltzed through the door. Doc always made a quick exit whenever Tootsie showed up for the morning shift. Tootsie was a waitress of massive proportions, meaning she was great at waiting tables and she was also a big woman. Ever since Doc’s wife passed a year ago, Tootsie had set her eyes on him. I think Doc was flat-out scared of her.

“See you later, Sam.” Doc said as he rushed out the door with the dog in his arms.

“Bye, Doc.” I shouted to the already closed door.

“Doc got a new dog?” Tootsie asked as she tied her apron around her round belly.

“Yeah, you could say that.” I answered, glad that the smell of dog was beginning to fade from the air.

“That man is the sweetest creature to ever walk on this Earth, I’ll tell you.” Tootsie crooned.

“Get to work.” I barked as a few customers began trickling in. No way was I going to stand around chatting about Doc’s doggone sweetness with that woman. I ducked behind the counter and went into the kitchen as the diner became alive with the start of a new day.

Butch showed up late as usual, around eight o’clock. Butch was a high school drop-out that I had sort of taken under my wing. I had no kids of my own, mostly because I could never stay married long enough to produce any. Well, Butch was like that son I never had. He helped me in the kitchen and mopped the floors – stuff like that. He had no family and neither did I. It was a match made in heaven. He reminded me of myself when I was his age, so I took it easy on him when he messed up. And he messed up a lot. Tootsie summed up Butch when she said, “That boy is a disaster in the making.” They didn’t exactly get along too well. In my opinion, it made the diner life all the more entertaining.

I know this sounds crazy, but I loved the hustle and bustle of diner life. I loved the smell of coffee brewing and the stench of burnt toast. I loved the fantastically greasy, fried foods and the sound of the dishes. The customers and the gossip they brought along made it all worthwhile too. My overall favorite thing in my diner had to be the jukebox. I played old Patsy Cline songs until the customers or Tootsie started complaining. The music that came out of that jukebox was muffled and wonderful.

Before I knew it, it was closing time. Butch helped me clean up and then I did my lock up after he had gone. I made extra sure that there would be no more uninvited guests there to greet me in the morning. I opened the door to my apartment and it hit me – a cloud of dense, humidity. I never called the repairman for the stupid air-conditioner upstairs. I had been so busy in the diner that day that I’d forgotten. I was exhausted, so I climbed the stairs and peeled off my work clothes. I lay down on my bed and smoked a cigarette. I flicked on the television and fell into an uncomfortable sleep. I tossed and turned for a few hours, then gave up. I looked out into the alley from my bathroom window and couldn’t see a damn thing. The diner’s back light had gone out. Fine, I’ll go change the light bulb. What else was I going to do in the middle of the night in an apartment without air?

I threw on a pair of pants and grabbed a flashlight. I managed to find the ladder and a spare light bulb in the back storage room of the diner. I went out the backdoor and set up the ladder under the burnt-out light bulb. As I held the flashlight in my mouth and shined it ahead of me the best I could, I reached out to unscrew the old light bulb. That's when I lost my footing. After that, everything went black.

When I finally woke up, I saw a pair of eyes staring at me. I was a little groggy but those eyes looked like they were the same color as my own – the color of muddy water. When my vision began to focus, I realized that I was staring into the eyes of the mutt.

“She's got your eyes, doesn't she?” Doc said from somewhere in the room. He sounded worried.

“What happened?” I asked. I looked around and recognized my surroundings. I was on the very uncomfortable cot in my diner's backroom. Butch used it sometimes when he didn't have anywhere to stay.

“Well, I was hoping you could tell me.” Doc answered, coming closer to peer down at me.

“The back light was out, so I went to change the bulb. That's all I remember. Why is that dog back?”

“Well, *that* dog is the reason I found you. Around two o'clock in the morning, she started barking up a storm. I couldn't believe it because she had not made a sound all day and never fussed a bit when I bathed her and examined her. She was so well-behaved that I couldn't understand why she would be barking her head off in the middle of the night. I threw on a robe and went out back to the pen where I was keeping her. I opened the door to see if I could quiet her and that's when she shot out past me and took off at the speed of light. I stood there shaking my head and thanking heaven at least I had the chance to feed her and clean her up before she had taken off for who knows where. I headed back to bed, but not forty-five minutes had gone by before I heard her barking again. I put my robe on again and walked out onto my back porch. There was the dog barking like crazy. I knelt down to pet her and that's when she picked something off the porch steps and nudged my hand with it. I didn't know what it was until I held it up to the porch light. I couldn't believe what I saw.”

“What? What was it?” I interrupted.

“Well, it was a piece of your diner pants.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean she brought me a ripped piece from those grease-stained pants you wear every day in the diner. I was puzzled by this and by the way she was acting. She seemed frantic and she kept tugging at my robe. I figured she wanted me to go with her. I put

her in the truck and we drove over here. When I let her out of the truck, she bolted to the alley in the back. I followed her and found you lying unconscious on the ground. You must have whacked your head pretty hard on the way down, you have a nasty gash. Just when I was contemplating what to do with you, Butch came walking down the alley. I thought of calling an ambulance to take you to the hospital, but Butch reminded me of how much you hate hospitals so I decided to care for you myself. He helped me carry you inside and get you set up on this cot. I patched you up with the supplies from my truck.”

“Where is Butch now?” I asked.

“Well, your dog kept growling and snarling at him, so he decided to leave. She didn’t seem to like him one bit. He said he’d stop by later.”

“My dog? What do you mean, *my* dog?” I asked, avoiding those muddy brown eyes staring at me.

“She saved you, didn’t she? You owe her something.” Doc answered. I knew he was right, but I didn’t like it. “The thing that puzzles me is how she knew you were even hurt. She barked so that I would open the pen door and let her out. She ran clear across town to find you and then she ran all the way back to my place to get my help. Even you have to admit, that’s pretty darn amazing. It’s like she’s connected to you in some way. Goodness knows what would have happened to you if it weren’t for that dog. You’d still be lying outside bleeding. Or worse.” Doc shuddered.

“Well, I guess she needs a name, then.” I said, reaching my hand out and petting the dog gently on the top of the head. It was the first time in over fifty years that I had touched a dog. Oddly, it felt good.

“Yes, she does.” Doc said, looking pleased with my sudden change of heart.

“Boulder.”

“Boulder?”

“Yes, Boulder.”

“But why?”

“Because her fur coat is the same color as a boulder.”

“But Boulder is the name of a city in Colorado. I don’t think that is a proper name for a dog, especially a female dog.”

“Have you ever heard of a dog named Boulder?”

“Certainly not.”

“Good, so it’s original. Besides, you said so yourself, she’s my dog. Doesn’t that give me the right to name her anything I want?”

“Fine. Boulder it is.”

“Fine. Now, how do you take care of a dog?”

Doc laughed and Boulder thumped her tail against the floor.

The diner was closed up for a good three days. Not only did I need time to recover, but also the place was a wreck. While I was half-dead in the back alley, those Snoghead kids apparently went through the open backdoor and had themselves another party. It must have been a whopper of a party too because they cleaned me out. I had to restock a good portion of my supplies and it cost me a pretty penny to do so. Those good-for-nothing Snogheads had been vandalizing businesses in town for years but nobody could catch them. They were a group of four teenage brothers with no father and an extremely tired mother working her fingers to the bone just to put food on the table. They lived down the road from Doc and he would say the noises that come from that place were “extremely disturbing.” They never messed with him though because he took care of the countless animals they had on their filthy property – for free!

While I was recovering on that stinking cot in the diner’s storeroom, Boulder barely left my side. Doc would stop by a couple of times a day to take care of us. Every time he came by, he insisted that Boulder go with him outside in order to do her business and get some exercise. This gave me a decent chuckle because Doc had to pick her up and carry her away from me. She didn’t want to leave me alone for a second. None of my wives ever cared that much about my well-being. I was amazed at her loyalty.

I hate to admit this, but I couldn’t stop myself from talking to Boulder. Me! I was the one who so readily poked fun at those crazies, Doc included, who chatted away at their pets as if the animals could actually understand the human language. Now, I was one of those people. I couldn’t help myself, mainly because she was such a willing audience. Boulder never laughed at me or contradicted me or even answered me. It was far better than talking to another person. After a while, I even started to believe that she did indeed understand me. Her reactions were subtle – a small tilt of her head, a slight wag of her tail, a twitch of her ears. It was official – I was one of those crazies!

That summer, Boulder became a permanent fixture in my diner. Tootsie absolutely adored her and fed her way too many sweets. That dog was so mellow and friendly that even the customers looked forward to seeing her. Sure, there were a few patrons who absolutely could not eat with a dog around so she’d wait outside until they left. Butch kept his distance. Boulder still growled and fussed whenever he came too close to her. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what she had against that fellow because when it came to everybody else, she was right on.

A lot of people would have trouble believing this, but Boulder had a special sense about things. Before she showed up in my life, I would have been the first to laugh my butt off at the idea. A dog knowing someone was hurt or needed help just by sensing it? Before Boulder, I would have condemned a person to the mental hospital for such a thought. That night she fetched Doc to come and help me when I was bleeding in the back alley – that changed my way of thinking. She had earned my respect and my belief in her abilities to see things that others couldn't.

One day, about two weeks after I'd recovered from my fall, Boulder went to the diner's backdoor and scratched the wood with her nails. Figuring she had to do her business, I opened the door. Instead of going out, however, she took my apron in her mouth and yanked hard. The look in her muddy brown eyes gave me a strange feeling, but the diner was packed with customers. It was lunch time and I didn't have the time to figure out what she wanted. I removed my apron from her mouth and returned to flipping burgers. After the lunch crowd had dwindled down a bit, she came to me again. This time, she let out a howl which sent shivers down my weathered spine. Tootsie came running, wanting to know what I'd done to the poor dog.

"I didn't touch her, I swear." I said, holding my hands out in front of me protectively. Tootsie was a large woman who was not afraid to punch a man when she felt the need.

"Well, what's the matter with her then?" Tootsie asked, petting the top of Boulder's head.

"I don't know, maybe she's constipated." I said.

"Maybe, you're right. Looks like she wants to go outside." Tootsie said as Boulder made her way to the backdoor again.

"She did that before but when I opened the door, she wouldn't go." I said.

"Try again. I can't stand that howling. It makes my stomach knot up something awful!"

"Fine. Come on Boulder, I'll take you for a walk." I said, removing my grease-splattered apron.

I went to the door and opened it. Boulder didn't move. "See, she won't go out." I said to Tootsie.

"Try going out the door first. Seems to me, she wants to make sure you're going with her." Tootsie explained.

I rolled my eyes in Tootsie's direction and walked out the backdoor first. Boulder immediately followed me outside.

“See! That dog’s smarter than the two of us put together. Now, take the poor thing around the block.” Tootsie said, clapping her pudgy hands together.

It felt like we were walking right into the middle of a four hundred degree oven. It was that hot. The thing I wanted to do most at that moment was to go right back inside the air-conditioned diner, but I didn’t. I plowed through the humidity like an idiot. As soon as we reached the sidewalk in front of the diner, Boulder grabbed a hold of my pant cuff and yanked on it.

“What do you want from me, Boulder?” I asked out loud. “I came outside with you, now what do you want?”

She answered my questions by howling again. She then took off running down the sidewalk. I didn’t know what else to do, so I followed her. I felt like a complete fool, running after a dog like that. I was a grown man for heaven’s sake. I followed her down ten blocks. Every two blocks or so, she’d stop and make sure that I was still following her. When I came within ten feet of her, she’d howl and start running all over again. I was about to give up on the whole situation when she finally allowed me to catch up to her. I stood next to her trying to catch my breath. Sweat was pouring out of me.

“That was interesting. What are you trying to do, give me a heart attack or something?” I said, still breathing heavily.

Boulder gave a sharp bark and trotted over to the front door of a nearby house. The house was small and quaint. There was a neat row of bushes out front and a small stone walkway. I wasn’t sure who lived there and I didn’t really care to find out either. I wanted to get back to the diner and guzzle an entire pitcher of Tootsie’s famous iced tea, smoke a cigarette, oh yeah, and get ready for the supper customers.

“Come here, Boulder. We need to go back to the restaurant.” I called to her. I made a mental note to purchase a collar and leash at the local pet store as soon as I had a chance. Then maybe we could go for a walk at a decent pace next time.

I noticed from my spot on the sidewalk that the front door of the quaint little house was slightly ajar. I couldn’t believe what happened next. Instead of coming when I called her, Boulder proceeded to push on the door with her head and go inside.

Could I be arrested for a crime committed by my dog? Trespassing was a serious offense. I was new to the world of pet ownership, but I didn’t think I could be arrested for something my dog did, could I? These thoughts and more ran through my mind as I helplessly watched Boulder’s bushy gray tail disappear into the house.

I walked up the stone walkway and stood at the front door. “Boulder, come here now!” I hollered into the open doorway. She didn’t come. I started to get annoyed. “Boulder,

you come here right now, or no supper for you!” Did that tactic work on dogs? I doubted it, but I was desperate.

I surveyed the inside of the house. From my position, I could see that the place was filled to the brim with antiques and items not of the modern world. Whoever lived here was old, very old. An ancient picture frame hung close to the front door and something about the photograph it held caught my eye. I’d seen that photograph before. Just then, I heard a faint cry coming from the backend of the house. It was a human voice, but weak.

Bam! It hit me where I’d seen that photograph before – at Tootsie’s house. This information gave me the will to enter the house. I heard the cry again, this time a little louder.

“Hello! It’s Sam Walker from Sam’s Diner. I’m just looking for my dog. She came in here just a second ago.” I yelled down the hall. I didn’t get any response so I started walking down the hall. I glanced into every room as I passed, hoping to spy Boulder, but she wasn’t anywhere to be found.

Finally, I reached the last door at the backend of the house. It was opened so I looked in. It was a tiny bathroom covered from floor to ceiling in flowers. “Boulder, are you in there?” I asked.

“Oh, thank goodness!” An old, quivering voice answered. It came from behind a thick shower curtain covered with purple violets. It sounded like a woman, a very elderly woman.

“Oh, excuse me. I was just looking for my dog. I’m sorry to disturb you. Your front door was opened.” I explained to the woman behind the curtain. I was embarrassed as hell and I just wanted shrivel up and disappear.

“Boy, your dog’s in here with me.” The voice said.

“What?” I asked. Surely, I hadn’t heard correctly.

“Your dog, is it a gray mutt?” The voice asked.

“Um, yes she is.” I admitted.

“Well then, Boy, she’s right here in my bathtub with me, licking away at my skin.”

“Oh.” I said. The image burned a permanent scar on my brain.

“I think the dog’s trying to lick away the soap, so that I can move and get out of this stinking tub. You see, I fell down some hours ago and the soap dried on my skin, making it feel like glue. I’m stuck to the sides. Worse yet, I can’t even get up to reach the water

faucet to wash away the soap. My niece, Tootsie, bought it for me and it's mighty nice smelling soap and all, but I'm not particularly fond of it at the moment."

"You're Auntie Nellie, aren't you?" I asked. Not waiting for an answer, I continued. "You're that aunt of Tootsie who she brings food to every night. I can't believe this..."

"Listen, Boy, I really need you to stop talking and go get my niece for me. I am in a real pickle here and I can't let you see me in my skivvies, now can I?" My bald head pumped up in down in a silent, but affirmative answer.

"Yes, Ma'am." I couldn't remember the last time I had called someone Ma'am. I couldn't, for that matter, remember the last time someone had called me Boy. "I'll go get Tootsie for you. I'll be right back. Should I take the dog with me?"

"No, it's okay. The dog can keep me company until you get back." The old woman replied.

I hurried back to the diner to get Tootsie. She didn't exactly understand what I was telling her but she rushed back to her aunt's house with me anyway. I waited outside the little floral bathroom to make sure Tootsie didn't need any help. Boulder came waltzing out of the bathroom shortly after Tootsie went in. I bent down to pet her, "Good dog, Boulder." I even allowed her to lick my face even though the image of where that tongue had just been still made me a bit queasy. I smiled down at her and promised to follow her willingly the next time she led me on some wild goose chase. And that was one promise I intended to keep. Take that, Wife Number Three and your stupid list!

Auntie Nellie turned out to be just fine. She and Tootsie took it upon themselves to shower Boulder with appreciation. Every morning, Tootsie brought in a brand new bone or treat for that dog, paid for by Auntie Nellie. Boulder also went to visit the grateful, old woman as often as she could.

Boulder didn't have much free time now, you see, because she was too busy dragging me all over town helping those in need. That dog took her charitable work seriously.

Almost every day, she'd release that horrible canine howl which meant she wanted me to go with her somewhere. Tootsie and I would exchange a knowing look. She, Doc and I were the only ones who knew about Boulder's ability. We didn't talk about it much, probably because we thought people would not believe us and also because we didn't want everybody to know about it. I guess maybe we wanted to keep Boulder to ourselves and protect her.

Sometimes, Boulder led me to someone who needed some serious assistance, like in Auntie Nellie's case. Most of the time, however, she led me to people who just needed a good meal or some real old-fashioned company. Before Boulder, I had never been a real giving kind of guy. I had always been what you would call a taker. I took and took and never gave anything in return. Boulder changed all that. I gave away more food during

my time with Boulder than I care to admit. It got so bad that I would carry a few wrapped sandwiches in my pockets just in case Boulder led me to someone who was hungry.

I even quit smoking because of Boulder. I didn't have a choice. It was impossible for me to take those long, hurried walks when my tobacco-filled lungs wouldn't function properly. One day, I just stopped lighting up. It was not an easy thing for me to do. It definitely helped having Boulder around because she kept me so busy. My breathing improved and I felt better than I had in years. Shove that one where the sun doesn't shine, Wife Number Three!

Boulder made things happen which seemed utterly impossible before her arrival at the diner. Not only did she help me quit smoking, but she also played match-maker as well.

After closing one night, Boulder got it into her head to walk across town to visit Doc. It was a quiet, breezy night, so I didn't mind all that much. She led and I followed, which is how it always was when we took our walks. I never did purchase a leash for her – she would have hated it anyway.

I thought maybe Boulder sensed that Doc was feeling lonely and that's why she wanted to go visit. Once we arrived there, I realized that I couldn't have been more wrong.

I looked up onto Doc's front porch and received quite a shock. I saw with my own two eyes a most disturbing sight. Doc, my best friend and Tootsie, my waitress of massive proportions were sitting hand-in-hand and sipping tall glasses of iced tea. I was speechless, to say the least.

Boulder gave one her famous howls and ran up the steps to greet the unlikely couple. I couldn't move off of Doc's front lawn. I just stood there staring at them.

"Hello Sam! I guess you were going to find out soon enough." Doc said.

"Come on up here, Boss. We don't bite, you know." Tootsie crooned. She gave Doc a very wet kiss on the cheek.

I still said nothing, just stood there like a fool letting the mosquitoes eat me alive.

"We didn't mean for this to happen, Sam." Doc said, carrying on with a conversation even though I gave no indication that I wanted one. "Everything fell into place quite by accident...you always running off with Boulder to help someone...it kind of forced Tootsie and I to spend more time together...get to know each other more. Turns out we really have a lot in common. She's a great person." Doc explained. Tootsie planted another wet one on his cheek.

"I told you, he really is the sweetest creature to ever walk on this Earth!" Tootsie sang out. It was time for me to leave.

“I am happy for you.” I said with not much enthusiasm. “Boulder, let’s go!”

Boulder actually came when I called her. She probably sensed my agony. I yelled good-bye over my shoulder and hurried off as fast as I could.

I scuffed my shoes along the sidewalks like a pouting school boy. How could Doc fall for Tootsie? I felt betrayed and angry. We were almost home when I unleashed my feelings on Boulder.

“How could you? All those times you dragged me out of the diner just as Doc was coming in to eat! You planned the whole thing – you evil dog! I can’t believe you!” I yelled at Boulder. She cocked her head to the side and perked her ears up. She whined. “Don’t give me that innocent look! I should make you sleep outside tonight – you stupid gray mutt!” I said, regretting it as soon as the words left my mouth.

Boulder’s ears immediately fell flat against her head and her tail drooped. Her muddy brown eyes looked watery. I felt bad, but not bad enough to apologize. She was still guilty for setting Doc and Tootsie up.

I had no intention of making her sleep outside. It was merely a threat. I guess Boulder didn’t understand that because she refused to go inside with me when we reached the diner. She sat down stubbornly on the sidewalk out front and would not budge. I swallowed my pride and apologized for yelling at her. I even tried to coax her in with a handful of dog treats, but nothing worked. She laid down and placed her head on top of her two front paws, looking very much defeated and unloved. She was very successful at making me feel lousy. I sat down next to her and tried to wait it out. That walk to Doc’s had really worn me out though, so I started nodding off. When I couldn’t stay awake any longer, I tried one last time to convince Boulder to go with me.

“Please, Boulder, come with me. I said I’m sorry. You’re not a stupid mutt, I was just angry. Stop being stubborn and just come!” I pleaded with her.

She remained firmly planted to the hard, dirty sidewalk. That’s when it occurred to me that I was fighting with a dog! What in the world was I doing?

“Fine! Sleep out here if you like! I’m going to bed!” I said, stomping my feet. I opened the front door and walked in. I closed the door and waited a half a minute. I opened the door and waited to see if she had changed her mind. She didn’t move. I closed the door again and waited one minute. I opened the door again. She didn’t move. That’s when I gave up. I locked up the place and then slowly climbed the stairs to my apartment. I wondered how in the hell I was going to sleep without Boulder. Damn that animal! She had turned me into a crazy dog-loving fool! I had to stop myself from looking out at the front sidewalk before going to bed. She would be fine. She would be fine. She would be fine. I said to myself over and over again until I finally fell into a restless slumber.

I woke up the next morning feeling as if I had run a marathon in my sleep. I didn't feel rested at all. I rolled over to pet Boulder when it hit me – she wasn't with me. Oh no! I had actually left her outside all night! Why hadn't I just picked her up and dragged her inside with me? I felt terrible, even worse than terrible.

I threw on my clothes and hurried down the stairs. I looked out of the front window of the diner but I couldn't see Boulder. Maybe she had moved to a different spot during the night. I went outside and searched around the outside of the building for her, but she wasn't there. I couldn't believe it. I thought for certain that she'd rush inside as soon as I opened the door.

“Boulder!” I hollered. “Boulder, Come here!” I couldn't believe she wasn't ready to come back inside yet.

I needed coffee. I went back inside and made a fresh pot. I poured myself a giant mug of it and sat down to wait for Doc to arrive and for Boulder to come to her senses.

At six fifty-five, it occurred to me that Doc wasn't showing up, due to the manipulations of a certain waitress, no doubt. Boulder was also a no show. I felt miserable, but customers started trickling in so I had no choice but to feed them. Tootsie strolled in fifteen minutes late and winked at me. I wanted to wipe the glorious grin off her face with my dirty washrag. However, the sheer size of her stopped me from doing it.

“Where's Boulder? I want to hug the delights out of her for bringing Preston and me together.” Tootsie said, her voice laced with lumps of sugar.

“I don't know. She wouldn't come in with me last night.” I answered through gritted teeth. Preston? I thought to myself. Nobody called Doc by his real first name. It sounded ridiculous.

“Where did she go? You didn't do something to her, did you?” Tootsie asked, putting her big self right in my line of vision.

“No, I didn't touch her. I was just angry and said stuff which she might have taken the wrong way.” I answered. Did I have an actual, real-life argument with a dog? Is that even possible?

“You're nothing but a big meanie! You'd better grovel on your hand and knees when she comes back. You'd better apologize!”

“Yeah, sure! Get back to work!” I barked. Boulder was a dog, for heaven's sake! A DOG! I was upset over an argument I had with a DOG! There was something seriously wrong with me. And as for Tootsie, well, at that moment, I felt like chopping her large body into pieces and sticking her in the deep fryer. Yeah, I was that mad!

The rest of the day did not improve. Every time the door to the diner opened I expected to see Boulder bounding in with the next customer. My heart began to sink all the way down to my ankles, however, when evening came and she still hadn't come back. I was all too eager to see her matted gray fur and dirty brown eyes again. Her tail thumping against the linoleum floor would have sounded as good as Patsy Cline's sweet voice. I was a mess!

"Where could she have gone?" I asked Doc and Tootsie after closing. They sat across from me in one of the booths. I was so upset that I didn't even mind that they were holding hands. I had a bigger problem.

"I don't know, Sam. I'm sure she'll turn up though." Doc said, fidgeting a bit in his seat.

"I can't see her just running off like that. It seemed like she had made this place her home and all. You gotta remember though, she did show up here mysteriously...so maybe she wanted to leave the same way. Maybe she had some other people to go to...you know...she wanted to help out in a different town or something." Tootsie reasoned. Her pudgy face looked worried and sad. She really loved that dog too.

"No!" I said. "I'm going out to look for her and when I find her, I'm going to make her come back." I said, getting up and heading for the door.

"Listen, Sam. Sometimes, you just gotta let things go." Tootsie called out just before I closed the door.

I walked for miles that night, asking every single person I saw if they had seen Boulder. I stopped by at Auntie Nellie's and visited a lot of the other people Boulder and I had helped over the last year. Everyone was sad to hear that she was missing, but nobody had any information about her. I trekked back home feeling exhausted and defeated. Tootsie and Doc were still there waiting for me. I could see the disappointment in their eyes when I arrived back without Boulder. Like me, they had let themselves believe that she could be found - that she wanted to be found.

Days went by and still no sign of Boulder. Days became weeks and I started to feel like I'd lost my fourth wife. Granted she was a dog and not my actual wife, but technically speaking, we could have been married. We slept in the same bed, we ate our meals together, and we shared memories. Life in the diner dragged and I became more and more depressed. Tootsie and Doc spent a lot of their time trying to console me, but nothing worked. I did become accustomed to their couple status, though. I could see that they blended well together in a bizarre sort of way. Doc was a lot less lonely and Tootsie was not quite as obnoxious when they were together. Somehow, it seemed to work.

Even though I began to wonder if Boulder had simply moved on to another town or to a new life, part of me couldn't accept this. I had this perpetual knot in the pit of my stomach that told me something about her disappearance just wasn't right. Unfortunately, Doc and Tootsie didn't agree with this notion.

“Sam, it’s been two months since Boulder left. You have to let it go. I know that she was a big part of your life, but it’s time to accept the fact that she didn’t want to stay here any more.” Doc tried to reason with me early one morning. “I could see if someone has a puppy that you could adopt?”

“No!” I said, slamming my fist down on the table. “I am telling you that Boulder is coming back. I can’t explain it, but it’s the truth. I just know it.”

“Come on, Boss. Preston’s right. You should get a new dog. It would help you move forward instead of dwelling on the past.” Tootsie added.

“No! I don’t want any other dog, and that’s final.” I said, slamming my other fist against the table. Not wanting to continue with the conversation, I got up and started making pancakes for the customers who hadn’t even come yet. I knew that I was being unreasonable, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t get Boulder out of my head.

That night, I went to bed feeling drained, physically and emotionally. I couldn’t remember ever feeling that horrible, even when I was going through my divorces. There was something about Boulder leaving that wouldn’t settle. As I drifted off to sleep, I couldn’t help thinking that the knot in my stomach was beginning to feel like an actual boulder. The strange feeling I had was growing heavier and heavier, and I couldn’t shake it.

At two o’clock in the morning, I heard a dog howl so loudly that it made me jump clear out of bed. Boulder! I immediately became excited. I ignored my tired bones and put on some clothes. I went down the stairs and into the diner. My heart was practically jumping out of my chest as I opened the front door and walked out onto the sidewalk. I knew it was crazy, but I expected to find Boulder there waiting for me. She wasn’t there. The howl must have been part of a dream. Something stopped me from going back inside, though. I don’t know how to explain it, but something told me to start walking instead. As I began to walk away from the diner, I realized that my stomach felt better, lighter. The boulder that weighed me down was gone. My feet carried me to Doc’s place. Without knowing exactly why, I knocked on his door in the middle of the night and asked to borrow his pick-up.

“What in the world are you doing, Sam? Are you alright?” Doc asked, clutching his robe to his chest.

“Yeah, Doc. I just need to borrow your pick-up right now. I gotta go right now.” I said.

“Why don’t you wait until a decent hour and I’ll take you wherever you want to go? Why don’t you come in and we’ll talk.” Doc said. I don’t think I’d ever seen him look so concerned before. I must have appeared absolutely loony to him, showing up in the middle of the night like that.

“Who is it, Preston?” Tootsie hollered from inside the house.

“It’s just Sam. Go back to sleep. I’ll be right there!” Doc called back.

“Listen, Doc, just give me the truck keys. Please.” I pleaded.

“Alright, Sam, here they are.” Doc said, handing me the keys which hung on a hook just inside his front door. “Take care!” He yelled as I slid into the pickup and started the engine. I gave him a quick wave and pulled out of his driveway.

I had absolutely no idea where I was going, I just knew I had to get there fast.

Next thing I knew, I was on the highway for a few miles and then something told me to get off. I still didn’t know where the hell I was going but some strange feeling was pulling me forward, telling me what to do next. I drove along the deserted main street of a small town – one very close to my own. I had been there before with Doc when he was visiting the animal hospital. I thought I’d been there one other time but I couldn’t remember exactly why. I drove Doc’s beat-up truck to the edge of town and for some reason stopped suddenly in front of an old, ramshackle house. I was starting to remember why I’d been to that town and to that particular house before. Some things were starting to become clear and I jumped out of the vehicle and walked up the driveway. I raced up the worn front steps and pounded on the splintered door. There was no answer.

A dog howled loudly. My heart pounded fiercely behind my ribcage. This time, it wasn’t a dream. I had to get inside that house. I tried the doorknob, but it was locked. I went around the house and tried the back door, but that was locked too. I was desperate, so I started trying to open windows. Fortunately, I found one of the low front windows slightly ajar. It’s a good thing there were no houses nearby to witness my next move.

I thrust the window open all the way and forced the window screen out. I climbed through and landed in a pile of garbage. Actually, everywhere I stepped, there was garbage. Dirty paper plates, crumpled take-out bags, used pizza boxes and all sorts of litter were strewn throughout the house. It smelled so badly, I gagged a bunch of times. A sad, desperate howl came from behind a door next to the vile kitchen. I stepped through the collection of filth and swung open the door. It was pitch black so I groped along the wall and found a light switch. A faint light came on and I was able to see that it was a large walk-in closet. I took a few steps forward. The closet was full of used furniture, cardboard boxes, and broken appliances. The light was dim, so I inched cautiously forward. I heard a scuffling noise in one corner so I went towards it. It was a small cage wedged in between some boxes. My heart sounded like bongo drums in my ears by then. I went to the cage and bent down to peer inside.

The sight made me draw in a very sharp breath. I was so shocked that I couldn’t move. I just stood there like a statue. Like a damn statue in a museum! I stared dumb-founded into a very tired, very hungry set of muddy-brown eyes. Boulder! She was thin, dirty and barely recognizable, but I would have known those eyes anywhere.

She howled one more time even though it took all of her strength. It was enough to jolt me out of my comatose state. I tried to yank open the cage door, but the damn thing was jammed. I looked around for something with which to force it open. It was then that I realized how scared Boulder must be so I began talking to her.

“It’s okay, girl. I’m going to get you out of there. I found you! I actually found you!” I said as I slammed a two-by-four against the cage door. It took a lot of effort for an old man like me, but I eventually busted the cage door enough to get her out.

She was so weak and sick, I had to lift her out and carry her against my chest back through the filth and garbage. She was covered in her own waste and she smelled awful, but I still hugged her tightly. I was just so happy to have her in my arms, I didn’t care that she smelled like a sewer!

I raced back to Doc’s place with her on the seat beside me. Her head rested on my lap the whole ride.

“What...” Doc started to say when I knocked loudly on his front door for the second time that night. He looked down at Boulder in my arms and stopped talking at once.

“She’s in pretty bad shape, Doc. You have to help her.” I said. He held the door open wide for me and I went inside.

“Bring her over here, Sam.” He said as he spread a warm blanket on the floor in his living room. I wasn’t sure but I think I saw a hedgehog crawl underneath the couch just as I laid Boulder down.

“What’s going on in here? Can’t a woman get any beauty sleep?” Tootsie said as she came down the hall, wearing a large fluffy robe. She let out a snort-filled yawn.

“It’s Boulder. Sam actually found Boulder.” Doc explained as he knelt down beside the dog. “Where did you find her? She looks like she’s been abused.” He said to me.

“Well, you’re not going to believe it.” I started to explain, but then I paused. How did I find her? I didn’t even understand it myself. I was too tired to sort it all out just yet.

“Believe what?” Tootsie asked when Doc disappeared down the hall.

“I found her in this house where Butch took me once. I think it was his girlfriend’s house. The place was disgusting and I found Boulder locked in a closet. They had her in a cage.” I said as Doc came back into the room carrying his medicine bag.

“Butch is responsible for this?” Doc asked as he pointed to Boulder’s crumpled gray body.

“I don’t know, but I think so. I knew that he didn’t always do the right thing, but I never knew he was capable of something like this. Plus, what would he want with Boulder anyway?” I asked.

“Oh no!” Tootsie said suddenly.

“What?” Doc asked. He was putting a needle into one of Boulder’s legs. She didn’t even flinch. I think she was too weak to even know what was happening. He hooked her up to an IV bag to get some fluids into her dehydrated body.

“What is it, Tootsie?” I asked.

“This is all my fault! It’s my big, stupid mouth! I can’t ever keep it closed when I’m supposed to.” She cried. She fell dramatically into a nearby arm chair with her face buried inside her pudgy hands.

“Tootsie, what are you talking about?” I asked.

“It’s okay, Honey, tell us.” Doc chimed in.

“Well, I just remembered a conversation I had a while back with Butch.” Tootsie said, pausing to wipe the sweat from her brow. “He came in one afternoon and asked where Sam was. You and Boulder were off on one of your good charity adventures, so I tried to cover for you. I told him that you went to visit Doc. And then, wouldn’t you believe it, Doc chose that time to drive by in his pick-up. Of course, Butch knew that I was covering for you so he pressed me to tell him the truth. You know that boy could be very persuasive. Anyway, I told him all about Boulder and how she saved you, Sam. I told him how she helped my Auntie Nellie and all those other people. I just couldn’t stop myself once I got started.” She paused again. She was crying and Doc went to fetch a box of tissues for her.

“Then what happened?” I asked. I was anxious to hear what else she had to say.

“Well, when I finished running my big mouth, Butch asked me whether Sam had contacted anyone about Boulder. He got this look in his eye – a look of the devil. He went ranting and raving about how a lot of money could be made. Boulder could become famous and people would pay to see her or some crazy stuff like that. I told him no way! I said no way would Sam let a bunch of strangers get their hands on his dog. I told him not even to mention it to you, Sam. I wished I’d never opened my big, fat mouth!” Tootsie started sobbing and Doc had to put his arm around her.

“You think Butch took Boulder so that he could make money off of her? That’s insane!” I said.

“Boulder knew that boy was no good! She growled and carried on every time he came anywhere near her.” Tootsie moaned between her sobs. “I am so sorry!”

“It’s not your fault, Honey. Now calm down...it’s okay. She is safe now.” Doc tried to make her feel better. He shot me a look of desperation.

“Yeah, Doc’s right. It’s not your fault, Tootsie. I don’t blame you.” I said, trying to help Tootsie feel better.

I walked over to where Boulder was on the floor. I lay down next to her just so that I could hear her breathing. I had missed that sound. I felt myself relax for the first time since she had disappeared. I fell into a deep, restful sleep.

After Boulder had been back for about a month, the Snoghead boys attempted to break into the diner in the middle of the night. At least, I thought it was the Snogheads.

Boulder and I woke up to the sound of glass breaking. We both hurried down the stairs and found a very stoned, very desperate Butch. His eyes were crazed and he held a baseball bat in his hands. While I was contemplating what to do next, Boulder pounced into action. It was like a scene from a movie. That dog wanted revenge! She jumped full-force at Butch and knocked him down. The bat went flying out of his hands and he was out cold.

I know I should have called the police, but first I wanted some answers out of this kid. I had treated him like my own son and he had betrayed me. It just wasn’t right.

When Butch woke up, he was tied to the cot in the back room of the diner. Boulder stood over him with a look of fury in her eyes.

“I think you have some explaining to do.” I said calmly when Butch opened his eyes.

He looked at us and then he burst out crying. When he had calmed down a bit, he said, “I’m sorry. I am really, really sorry.”

“That’s not good enough. You need to tell us everything.” I said, holding the bat up in the air menacingly. I had no intention of using it, it was only for effect. But Butch didn’t know that.

“It was me. I’m the one who stole all that food and stuff from you, not the Snogheads. I’m the one who knocked you off the ladder in the alley that one night. I’m the one who stole your dog. I did it all. I’m sorry!” He confessed to everything.

“You knocked me off the ladder? I thought I’d lost my footing! You left me there to bleed to death? What kind of monster are you?” I asked. My voice was barely above a whisper.

“No, I came back. I took the stuff to my girlfriend’s house and then I felt bad so I came back to make sure you were okay. That dog and Doc were already here. I helped Doc

bring you in. I swear that dog knew. She kept growling at me and I got spooked, so I left again before you woke up.”

“That’s why you told Doc not to take me to the hospital. You didn’t want anyone figuring out it was you. I guess you do have a brain in there somewhere.” I said. I had to ask him one more thing. This thing bothered me. It bothered me a lot. “How could you leave Boulder in a cage to die like that? You don’t just leave a defenseless animal to starve to death like that.” I said, smacking the side of the bat loudly against my palm.

“That wasn’t me, I swear. That was Rita, my girlfriend who did that. She’s the one who had the big idea to steal the dog in the first place. When Tootsie told me about the dog’s skill at knowing things, I told Rita all about it. She said that we had to take that dog so that we could get on T.V. or something. I told her that I didn’t think it was a good idea. But one night we were driving by and there was the dog sitting right out front of the diner. Rita got out of the car and just snatched the dog right up from the sidewalk. She put her in the backseat and we drove away. It was that easy.” Butch explained.

“But why did you leave her in that disgusting cage?”

“I told you, it wasn’t me. I had to go visit my mother up in Georgia and so I left the dog with Rita. I thought she would take care of it.” Butch said. Boulder bared her teeth at him and I saw terror in that boy’s eyes.

“So, I guess you and Rita didn’t make it on T.V. then?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“No, we didn’t. That dog wouldn’t do a damn thing for us. She just sat in the cage and howled nonstop. I couldn’t stand that sound, so Rita put her in the closet. I made sure she had food and water, I swear. But when I left, Rita must have taken off too and left the dog behind. Like I said, I didn’t know she was going to do that.”

“You deserve to die, you know. I could kill you right now and nobody would care. You broke into my diner, so I have every right to defend my property. Isn’t that right, Boulder?”

Boulder released a sinister howl right into Butch’s terrified face. It was somewhat satisfying to make him feel the same fear that Boulder must have felt in that cage.

I untied the worthless kid and threw him down on the floor, next to the broken window. With Boulder standing over him and the bat back on the floor, I went into the kitchen and called the police. Let them have him, I thought to myself. Let the police throw *him* in a cage.

Boulder and I continued performing our good deeds around town for many years to come. We even made a special trip out to the Snoghead farm with enough food to feed an army. I apologized to the entire family for accusing them of stealing from me. For a

good minute, they just sat and stared at me. I thought for sure that they were going to beat the living daylight out of me. Finally, the mother of the clan stood up and toasted me with the beverages I had provided. She made a speech about how I was the most honest, but also the most stupid guy she had ever known. After that, they insisted that Boulder and I stay and party with them. Even Doc and Tootsie came over and we all had a blast that night at the Snoghead farm. What an interesting night that was!

A day or two after the Snoghead party, Boulder and I were still recovering. I still had a whooper of a headache and Boulder was still permanently fixed to her dog bed in the corner of the diner. It was after closing and we were just about to go up to the apartment when there was a knock at the door. I looked out the window and couldn't believe who was standing there. I immediately opened the door for a well-dressed, good-looking woman slightly younger than myself. The sweet smell of her perfume entered the diner before she did and I almost melted away with pleasure. She walked in and sat down on one of the counter stools. I closed the door and turned around to stare at her lovely back. Then, she spoke and all the magic faded away as reality hit. There, in front of me, smelling like heaven and looking gorgeous, was Wife Number Three.

"Sammy, darling, how are you?" She said with her voice dripping with honey. She spun around in her stool to look at me. Not waiting for a response, she continued, "I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd pay you a visit. I see the diner hasn't changed much and neither have you." Her eyes scanned the inside of the diner. I saw her gorgeous blue eyes stop and stare at Boulder in the corner. A huge grin spread over her flawless-skinned face. "You actually kept her? You know, something told me you two would get along. It was the eyes. I looked into her eyes and saw your muddy brown eyes staring back at me. It was actually kind of creepy, but those eyes told me that you two belonged together. I can't believe you still have her." She said, laughing at loud.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I moved a little closer to the stool where she sat.

"I am talking about your friend over there. She arrived on my doorstep years ago, a dirty gray mutt. I looked into those pathetic eyes of hers and that was it. Something told me to drive the two hundred miles to this stinking diner. Something made me open the diner's front door with my key and deposit her on your linoleum in the middle of the night." She explained, examining her painted nails as she spoke. "I just walked back out the door and locked it behind me. I threw the key away in the nearest trash barrel because I was finished with you, Sam Walker."

"How did you get a key to the diner? I never gave you one. And why would you give me a dog when you knew I hated dogs?" I asked. I couldn't believe she was the one who had brought Boulder to me. It felt like I was in the middle of a dream.

"First of all, I stole the key from you one day and made a copy for myself. I was your wife, for heaven's sake. Didn't I deserve to have a key to this pathetic dump? Secondly, I know you hated dogs and that made it all the more pleasurable to give you one as a present." She said. As she spoke, all of her beauty and loveliness faded away. I

remembered how utterly evil she was. At least, the mystery of how Boulder got into the diner that night was solved.

“I am famished. Sammy, darling, fetch me a chef salad from the crisper.” She commanded.

Instead of throwing her out on her shapely behind, I quietly went to the kitchen and made her a chef salad. I realized that if it wasn't for her, Boulder would have never come into my life. If it wasn't for this vile woman, I would have remained a dog-hater my entire life.

I brought her the chef salad and a glass of Tootsie's iced tea and I said, “Thanks.”

“For what?” She asked, looking surprised.

“For the dog.” I said. And I really meant it.

Jennifer Gordon enjoys writing poems and short stories. She grew up in Eastern Pennsylvania and has always been a dog lover. She currently lives in Florida with her husband and their three young children.