

TY TY

(An excerpt from *Coffee Break: A Special Blend*)

It is very early morning and the only other one up is my friend, Whoopee. We're both a little groggy in the early light. I asked her how she slept last night, considering I had taken her bed. I am visiting her and her sister, Tasha. Whoopee graciously answered me with a wiggle and a wag as I let her outside for her morning walk-about.

Tasha and Whoopee live in Colorado with my friend, Lucy. They are barking up a storm at the eager skiers passing by their window. I can hear Lucy stirring with an "okay girls" from deep inside her cocoon of blankets. Soon the coffee will be dripping its high tech good morning and one by one the household will be down for breakfast.

I cannot remember when there wasn't a dog in my life. Usually there is a collection of them. I raised poodles when I was a teenager. We had Siberian Huskies and Labradors and mutts of every variety. The names of my dog friends are descriptive and telling: TyTy, Choco, Scamp and Minnie, Molly and Prissy, Annie and Boo. The current residents are Candy, a shepherd/coyote mix and Miss Emma, a mystery breed with a whole lot of Beagle standing by. They bring so much personality and joy into our family, offering love at every turn.

It is Ty Ty's story that is vivid in my memory and deep inside my heart. He came into my life when I was nine years old. He was nearly two. Already full grown, his giant Husky body protected him in the cold winters of northern Indiana. In the spring, he lost his great coat in clumps around the yard providing wonderfully soft bedding for the birds building their nests.

My family moved outside of town in early June of 1959 and our new home offered a large yard behind the house. We had always had small dogs because we lived in town. This provided the perfect opportunity to get the big dog my dad had always wanted. He expressed his dog wish to Dr. White, the local veterinarian and within a month, we got the call to say there was Siberian husky needing a home.

Apparently TyTy was a vagabond. The previous owners tried for two years to get him to stay home. The strength of his wanderlust caused him to chew through inch thick ropes and sometimes his collars. He spent his days digging up stakes bored into the ground, dragging chain and stake with him on his travels. When he was just a pup, TyTy was badly injured and Dr. White saved his life during surgery. Somehow Ty always found his way back to his savior at the end of his run, and Dr. White would call the owners to say he was safe and sound and waiting in his kennel. They finally grew tired of Ty's running game and asked Dr. White to find him a good home. That's when Dad got the call.

When he arrived, Ty was greeted with hugs and an array of new dog products, a giant doghouse and a huge back yard. He lasted two relaxing days and on the third morning, he was gone, rope and all.

Dr. White called that afternoon to say Ty was there. We climbed in the station wagon and gratefully retrieved him. This pattern continued through the summer and I expected my parents to tire of it. They were convinced that love would win over all and continued their unselfish vigilance. The prodigal son was always welcomed home.

By August, the Indiana humidity brought a tired hazy look to our play days and TyTy seemed to be less active, preferring to lie underneath the grove of trees surrounding his house in a freshly dug hole of cool damp dirt. I would brush him for hours on end, massaging his back and great chest with secure and comforting strokes. Sometimes I would practice singing and Ty would join me, both of us exercising our upper registers. His favorite song was "Summertime" from Porgy and Bess. A love aria became a haunting melody as our voices joined in serenade and tribute to a season easy and slow. We were singers, TyTy and I. Our bond was great. He was my confidant, sharing all of my secrets both happy and sad. I draped my little body over his, feeling the strength of his spirit breathe in and out, over and around, speaking to its cellular wisdom in images I still receive. We shared the joy of exercise and play running with each other for hours in the yard. His golden eyes were bright and full of mischief. His words were clear and succinct when he nudged me gently to fill his water bowl, lifted his huge paw onto my knee asking me to continue scratching behind his ears. He laid his giant head on my leg and with a long and contented sigh, expressed his love most true.

The week before school began he ran away. This time when we called Dr. White, he hadn't seen him at all. Two days, three days, a week went by with no sign of him. We spent all day every day looking, walking and calling him for hours at a time. When school took away our daylight hours, we hurried through our homework so we could once again begin the search. Mom would drive us up and down neighboring streets and we hung out of the windows of the car calling his name, seeing shadows of his hulking frame, chasing them only to find black and white ghosts wishfully resembling our lost friend. We made flyers and posted them all over town. We told everyone we knew and some we didn't. We feared the worst, but Dr. White insisted that he would have heard if Ty had been killed on the highway. Such a striking animal is always the topic of conversation at the animal shelter and Dr. White was a daily visitor there. By the third week, my mother informed us that we couldn't continue our daily ritual. She would drive us around one final time, but obviously Ty had decided to live somewhere else. He wasn't coming home.

It was a somber ride as we drove up and down the now familiar route, calling his name, hope blatantly absent from our voices. The neighborhood adjacent to ours also ran along the river and was heavily wooded. This time of year brought mosquitoes and tiny black flies. It was hard driving with the windows open and so they were closed as we drove down the last street before giving up the ghost. It was like being in a hearse. No one spoke and the only sound was the cadence of the engine accompanied by the drone of the tires on the road. We rounded the final turn towards the highway that led to our house when I heard my brother gasp. "It's him," he whispered then shouted, "Mom, look! It's HIM!"

The tears that came forward then are here now as I write and I can see him in my mind's eye, walking slowly, then stopping when he saw our car approaching. We were suspended in slow motion for a moment, as one in disbelief, his as profound as ours. We rushed toward each other in the moment of recognition., only then did we notice the cuts and bruises on his legs and

face, the gashes and welts on his back, the three-inch collar with angry spikes protruding from around his neck. He fell onto the road, breathing heavily, his tongue white with dehydration. His body was half the size of when he had left us. He was so mutilated we had to call Dr. White to come there to minister to his wounds.

The pads on his feet were worn to the bone indicating he had traveled a long distance. The gashes and welts and torturous collar told the rest of the story. Dr. White had heard tales about a place in Michigan where huskies were trained for dog fights. They were beaten into submission, chained and starved by angry horrible humans who pitted dog against dog for entertainment and money. Dr. White took pictures as evidence and grimly promised to investigate. He told us the place in Michigan was nearly fifty miles away. I learned the power of love that day.

My friend Lucy has gone to teach fitness. Her pals, Whoopee and Tasha are sitting with me in the chair that faces the door she enters and leaves. She'll be home in an hour and they will greet her with dog smiles and the enthusiasm that comes with the joy of seeing your best friend. For the moment, they are giving it all to me. I think we could learn much from them, don't you?