

# Good Night, Sweetheart

High-pitched yelps pinged off the expanse of concrete walls that rose up two stories. Soulful baying thrummed along the corridor between the kennels. The noise was deafening. The Powers-That-Be had decided cathedral ceilings topped with skylights were the best use of funds for the recently built animal shelter. They could not have created a better echo chamber if they'd tried. An underlying pungency of urine with a hint of feces was somewhat masked by the smell of bleach from the morning's cleaning.

Clutching a pen in one hand and holding a clipboard against my body, I walked to the next kennel in the row. I adjusted my glasses and read the info on the index card affixed to the chain link. The card declared this particular dog as a 'lab mix'—code for medium-sized, short-haired dog of unknown parentage. Half the shelter was filled with so-called lab mixes.

"Hmm..." I glanced back at the card. "... 'Bonsai.' Oh yes, sweetheart. I remember you."

Bonsai sat her rump down on the painted concrete floor at the sound of her name, her tail swishing back and forth expectantly. A stainless steel water bowl sat by her paws. A yellow puddle of pee ripened in the back of her kennel next to the doggy door she hadn't used to do her business in the outside run.

I ran my finger along the words on the index card. "You've been here for ten days. That's your first strike." I looked away from the card down to the now-cocked eager face. "You're a mixed breed...Strike two."

Bonsai gave a small woof, tongue lolling, her whole back end wagging now.

“And you are not a puppy. How dare you?” I sighed. “Strike three.” I squatted down, shifting the clipboard to the other arm, and stuck two fingers through the chain link and wiggled them. Bonsai licked my fingers enthusiastically. I scratched under her chin, then stood back up and copied Bonsai’s kennel number onto the clipboard.

I remembered the day Bonsai arrived. I had been covering the front desk while the receptionist had gone to lunch. A woman came to the counter holding a dog leash in one hand and a toddler perched on the opposite hip.

“May I help you?” I smiled, then leaned over the counter, my eyes following the leash to where it led to a perky, black dog. “Hello, sweetheart.”

The dog immediately sat, looked up, and thumped its tail against the floor.

“I need to put my dog up for adoption,” the woman said, brushing loose strands of mousy brown hair from her face back toward her messy bun.

“How long have you had him? Her?” I asked.

“Her. Bonsai. Since she was born.”

“Why are you bringing her in now?” I began copying information onto the intake form.

“The kids got tired of her and it’s expensive to keep feeding her.”

“How old is she?” I continued my checklist.

“Um...two years.”

“When did she receive her last vaccinations?”

“She’s never had them. We can’t afford a vet.” Her chin thrust forward like she was daring me to comment.

The familiar sensation of tension began to build behind my eyes. “What breed is she?” I kept the tone of my voice even.

“Her momma is a purebred Labrador retriever mix...”

I raised an eyebrow.

“...and I don’t know who her daddy is. Momma got away for a day. Then, surprise!”

“Is the mother spayed now?”

“Nah. I like my kids to get to see the miracle of birth,” the lady chuckled, hiking the toddler up higher on her hip.

My eyes flicked over to a poster hanging on the wall. It contained two panels. The first panel said, “Experience the Miracle of Birth” and showed fuzzy kittens in various shades of cute, bright-eyed in the midst of play.

The second panel said, “Then Experience the Miracle of Death.” The same kittens were lifeless, limply piled on top of each other, eyes rolled back into their heads. The bottom of the poster pleaded, “Overpopulation is a crying shame. Please spay or neuter your pet.”

The Powers-That-Be hadn’t made me take down that poster yet, but I knew I would get in all sorts of trouble if I actually voiced the “miracle of death” part to a customer. My head was starting to throb too much now to tackle the issue with decorum so I moved on to the Spiel.

“Bonsai will receive all her vaccines and worming today. She’ll be checked for fleas and heartworm. Then she’ll be put up for adoption. If she’s adopted, we’ll have her spayed. We guarantee her seven days in the kennel. After that, she may be euthanized.” I looked up from the paperwork to make sure the woman was getting all this.

“Euthanized?” she asked.

“Put to sleep,” I said.

“Why would you put her to sleep? She’s a good dog, good with kids, still young!”

“So are the other fifty dogs back in the kennel right now...but we only have so much room and there is a serious overpopulation problem because people won’t spay and neuter their pets.” I grimaced. I hadn’t meant that to sound quite so harsh. I took a breath. “Seven days is what we guarantee.”

The woman’s face reddened. “The no-kill shelter over in Goshen doesn’t put them to sleep. This is barbaric!” She smacked her hand down on the counter.

“So take Bonsai to Goshen.” My headache was in full bloom now.

The lady paused, sniffed, and said, “I did...twice. But they weren’t taking any dogs.”

“Yup.” I knew for a fact that the shelter in Goshen hadn’t accepted a single dog or cat in over four months. So Goshen got the appearance of holding to the higher moral ground...while not actually being particularly helpful to the community as a whole.

I held my pen poised over the release document, waiting. The lady turned and looked at Bonsai. Bonsai cocked her head, seeming to listen in on the discussion. Then she said, “I could just let her go in a farmer’s field...then she’d have a chance at least.”

I knew I shouldn’t, but most of my brain-to-mouth filter had been obliterated by the now-raging pounding in my skull. “Right. Because dying of starvation, exposure, predation, or vehicular impact is a much kinder and gentler way to die.”

Oops.

The woman's nostrils flared. She pointed a finger, stabbing the air. "I'm going to write a letter to the editor about this. My taxes pay your salary and you're being rude...and killing people's dogs." The volume and pitch of her voice soared. "You should be ashamed!"

I sighed. "We are a private nonprofit, ma'am. We run by donation only, not taxes." I pushed the contract over to the woman. "Please sign here *if* you would like to release Bonsai for adoption."

She glared at me, but then picked up a pen. "Fine. But I don't have a donation." She scribbled her signature and thrust the paper back at me.

Desi, a kennel worker, came up to take the dog. The woman handed off the leash fast enough and turned to mollify her toddler whose face was scrunching up with an impending scream of outrage. Bonsai trotted down the hall behind Desi, head held high, ears perked, as if she were embarking on a grand new adventure in life.

That was ten days ago.

I walked by the remaining cages, tapping the pen against my front teeth, choosing the dogs to add to the clipboard. The shelter was overfull, and as manager, I got to do the selecting.

As I left the kennel area, the large double doors swished closed behind me, somewhat muffling the cacophonous barking. I tracked down Desi in the breakroom where she leaned against a wall smoking a cigarette. I handed her the clipboard. "Here's today's kill list." I tucked the pen behind my ear. "Let me know when you're ready and we'll get it knocked out."

"Okay, boss-lady. I'll be ready in just a few," she said, exhaling a plume of smoke.

An hour later, Desi and I stood in the euthanasia room gossiping about the various inter-employee relationships: who was annoying the heck out of whom, and who was crushing on whom. It was totally juvenile but sufficiently distracting.

A two-tier bank of steel cages covered one wall and a metal treatment table was situated against another. A single cabinet held stainless steel bins of syringes, needles, and various solutions. The back wall had a door that led to the walk-in refrigerator where we stacked the dead dogs in orderly piles on the floor. Across from the dogs, rusted barrels loaded to the brim lined the wall. Various colored furry cat legs and stiffened tails stuck up over the sides. (The phrase 'a barrel of monkeys' always brought this image to mind. Kind of ruined the expression for me.) The constant 34-degree temperature in no way masked the rank stench of decomp in this room. The other side of the walk-in fridge had a door leading outside to the crematorium.

A fluorescent light flickered over our heads. "Who's still left?" I asked as I turned and picked up the bottle of pink euthanasia fluid and began to fill a syringe.

"Just one more. I'll go get her." Desi left.

I leaned against the wall, my back twinging from exhaustion, but the day was almost over. Desi returned with the last dog and hefted her onto the table.

"Oh, Bonsai..." I leaned into her. Bonsai licked my face and put up a paw to "shake."

Desi stood behind Bonsai, wrapping one arm around to hold the dog's head aside and the other hand went to Bonsai's leg, still raised from "shaking." Desi cupped the dog's elbow to support the leg, and with her thumb, she pressed on the vein there to block the blood flow.

I scratched behind Bonsai's ear briefly, then focused on my task. I laid the barrel of the syringe parallel to the now-plumped vein along Bonsai's leg, then dipped the needle down, poking through fur and skin. It felt like a solid hit. I drew back on the plunger of the syringe and a cloud of red bloomed into the pink liquid.

I kissed the top of her head. "Good night, sweetheart." I pushed the plunger in slowly.

Seconds later, Bonsai's body crumpled, lifeless.