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Two Lucky Dogs

by Darrell Petska

Fred ran right in front of my car. He wasn't even Fred yet, just some Heinz 57 mutt fresh from nowhere and destined for same.

I braked—too late. My heart sank, afraid what that “thump” portended.

His body lay just beyond my bumper. No blood, but no signs of life, either.

I looked up and down the roadway: only trees as far as I could see. What does one do in such a circumstance? Drag the body to the road ditch? Bury it? He ended up in the hatchback of my old Accord, alongside my suitcase and tent. I'd turn him over to a veterinarian.

The mishap occurred miles before “The Crossroads of the North,” as the fine people of Spooner, Wisconsin, brand their little town. Duluth and Lake Superior had been my goal that day, not what seemed the middle of nowhere.

Stopping in Spooner, I went into a McDonald's for a Big Mac and fries. When I returned to my car, in the back seat stood dog—unsteadily, but very alive!

How'd he pull that off? I cracked open the car door, unsure if he'd be harboring ill will against me, but his main interest seemed to be my meal. I wasn't about to share my Big Mac and fries with anyone. I shut the door and used the hood for my table, then went into McD's again to buy a cheeseburger for my surprise travel companion.

He wolfed that burger and bun, and a few seconds later heaved it up on the floor mat. Dammit, dog without a name! Craving some Lake Superior quietude after recently breaking up with my girlfriend, I didn't care to have my time away complicated by some careless canine.

So what to do? Surely, I owed him something. Fortunately, northwoods-y Spooner has a vet, who happened to be gone doing something to a cow—said the young woman watching over the office, a kindhearted redhead named Ellie, who stepped outside to have a look at my passenger.

Given the circumstances, he needed a name. I lugged “Fred” inside.

“Are you a student vet or something?”

“Something like that,” she smiled.

Fred seemed to enjoy her gentle manner as she checked him top to bottom. Ellie frowned: “There's a contusion on his shoulder. See? Right here.”

I leaned close to her face to inspect the injury. She smelled like a fresh Christmas tree.

“It doesn't look like much.”

She patted Fred's head: “Soon, your dog should be good as new.”

But I didn't want a dog!

Life on the rebound was new to me. This something-like-that vet with a fresh, homey demeanor flashed a smile worthy of Katherine Hepburn or Emma Stone—I'm all in for red hair.

Ellie didn't charge me for examining Fred. I decided to read something into that, which is why I took a room at pet-friendly Best Western.

Dogs seem content with a bag of dry food, a couple bowls, a leash, and a squawkable toy that substitutes for a shoe. Enjoying his Dollar Tree acquisitions that evening and fawning for attention, he'd begun working his doggie magic on me. The rascal was becoming an extension of myself.

Lake Superior began to look less attractive, with Spooner Lake and Ellie just blocks away. Next morning, I loaded up my new alter-ego and drove a few minutes to water's edge, where I tossed stones like bad memories into the brilliant blue water. That accomplished, I returned to the vet clinic a little before noon for an expert opinion on Fred's progress.

“Fred seems fine,” said Ellie, “but you should still watch for signs of internal injuries.”

“What kind of signs?”

She eyed me closely. “If you'll be in town awhile, I'll be happy to keep tabs on Fred.”

“I can't think of a better place to soak up a little nature.”

“It's lunch time,” she said. “I'm dying for a turkey sub.”

We picnicked on a boat launch at some tiny park and took turns flipping Fred pieces of meat from our sandwiches.

“You know,” I said, “Spooner has a lot more to offer than first meets the eye...”

Fred cut short my meaningful glance by begging Ellie for more turkey. After he gulped another piece, she kissed him on the nose, mussed his hair and said, “You're such a good boy.”

Then she leaned forward and wiped some mayo from my cheek. The crack in my heart began to heal on the spot!

That night, with Fred next to me on the motel bed, “The Crossroads of the North” proved so quiet I could hear my heart—too soon to imagine its throbbing was love?