Childhood Buried

Wilbur Reschly*

*Iowa State University

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NELS carried the stiff body of the dog over to the hole he had dug. The white tongue was sticking out between the long tearing teeth on the right side of the dog’s mouth. Blood, that had turned black and then dried so that the cracks made it look like a poor paint job that had blistered and peeled, covered the dog’s nose. One of the ears had been turned inside out by the impact of the car when it had hit the dog yesterday. Nels wanted to fix it but he knew that it would hurt him to feel the coldness of the dog’s body. He broke off a small dead branch from the peach tree. He used it to turn the ear right side out but the ear slowly returned to its former disgrace. Nels sat down on a roll of rusty fence wire.

Everything that had been green and living only a month ago was now brown and dead. The peach tree had only a few shriveled leaves that defied death by clinging to the branch. Grass that had been knee-high during the summer was already a matted brown carpet. Nels shivered from the late-afternoon coolness. In the grove a congregation of black birds had assembled to argue over the best route south. But they would be back next spring.
Nels wanted to awaken the dog with a whistle. But Nels knew that this time the ears wouldn’t shoot up and the eyes wouldn’t blink open just before the head jerked up from off the front paws.

Nels got up from the uncomfortable roll of wire and picked his way through the noisy leaves. Normally he liked to hear the racket the leaves set up.

Nels had gone through his growth spurt early. Already his shoulders were filling out and giving him the look of a man. Nels’ nose was small and slightly turned up. His blond hair didn’t match his dark eyes and eyebrows. Usually the corners of Nels’ mouth were tilted up in the happiness that impending manhood brought but now they were straight and expressionless.

Nels sat down at the base of the pear tree. He buried his face in his arms.

Nels had been four when Uncle John gave him the little puppy. Puppy was the name Nels always used but Nels’ mother called him Sport because of his eagerness to join neighborhood baseball games. Nels’ name won out. Puppy belonged to the farmdog breed, not recognized by the AKC. The farmdog invariably contains indeterminate proportions of Collie, English Shepherd, German Shepherd, and traces of less common breeds. Puppy had the thick tan coat of a Collie but his muzzle indicated bulldog ancestry. Puppy’s ears were too short to stand up straight, yet not long enough to hang gracefully. The upper half of his ears folded down in front of the lower half.

On his fifth birthday, Nels got a B-B gun. He and Puppy went rabbit hunting in the grove. Puppy knew what Nels was after and soon he flushed a rabbit from a clump of grass. Nels didn’t know that the B-B’s couldn’t kill the rabbit. It didn’t matter because Puppy caught the rabbit.

Nels hated kindergarten because he would have much rather spent the time that he was forced to spend coloring, exploring the banks of the muddy Skunk River with Puppy.

One day that first summer, Nels and Puppy went fishing for channel catfish. Like the other days, Nels was only catching bullheads but Nels and Puppy knew that sometime a big channel cat would be enticed by the wriggling worm. Puppy
and Nels were sitting side by side on the bank waiting for the big cat to hook himself when Puppy let out a short bark and the cork bobber dipped beneath the surface ripples. Nels slipped down the muddy bank as he kept his eye on the line that was slicing the water in a dizzy path. He was winding his level-wind bait-casting reel so that his hand and the crank were a blur and the spool of line expanded rapidly. Just before Nels was ready to step into the water Puppy saw something. He growled and leaped down the bank. The growl scared Nels and he jumped back. He looked a little closer and he saw the white mouth of a cottonmouth. Coiled in the slimy mud was the thick body of the snake.

Nels' father was the only one who had priority over Nels when it came to handling the dog. At chore time or when they were sorting cattle, Puppy became businesslike, and he displayed an uncanny ability to see what Nels and his father were trying to accomplish.

Like Nels, Puppy seemed to enjoy most of all the long summer days when the crops were in and there was plenty of time to build a raft from oil drums and use it in the pond as a diving platform. Nels and Puppy never fought or got tired of each other. Most of the time Nels thought of Puppy as a fellow explorer. He chuckled to himself when Puppy let his tongue hang and trotted beside him as he ran. Puppy always trotted sideways in a peculiar gait.

Once Puppy knocked over a pail of milk that Dad had set down. A kitten had jumped up and was clinging onto the rim of the pail with its front paws, Puppy shoved the kitten a little too hard with his front paw and the pail of milk spilled. Nels' dad came over and scolded Puppy. Puppy's tail dipped between his legs and his whole body sank low. He slinked along the ground, occasionally turning his sad eyes back and whimpering apologetically. Nels felt just as sorrowful as Puppy felt ashamed; not because of the spilled milk but because it hurt him to see Puppy scolded.

The time that Nels had gotten in trouble at school and his parents only scowled at him, he went out under the peach tree where Puppy slept when Nels was at school and Nels'
father was in the house. Puppy was elated that Nels had come home from school just to see him. But Puppy sensed in Nels' trudge that he wasn't happy and Puppy instinctively knew it wasn't the time for exploring. Nels sat down on the fencewire and Puppy put his head on Nels' knees. Nels turned Puppy's ears inside out and watched them return. He told Puppy how much he hated old Mrs. Cranston. Puppy neither agreed nor disagreed—he only listened. Before long Nels realized that he didn't hate Mrs. Cranston as much as he thought he did. That evening they caught thirty mice by turning over bales of hay so that Puppy could snap up the mice and swallow them in one quick gulp.

Nels got up from the base of the pear tree. The dog's body was still cold and lifeless. Tenderly he put his hands under it and lowered the cold, stiff body into the hole. A piece of dry sod crumbled from the side of the hole and landed on the dog's eye. A bit of it stuck on the glazed eye. Nels blinked to hold back the tears as he wiped the bit of dirt out of the dog's eye with his handkerchief. The first shovelful of dirt landed with a dull thud. Nels shuddered and turned away. He said a silent prayer even though he knew Puppy didn't have a soul. Rapid shovelfuls quickly filled the hole.

Nels' mother's voice broke the reverie. "Nels, you had better get in here and clean up for your date with Julie—it's six o'clock already."