



Winston's Boy

By late December in Anchorage, Alaska, the streets are sheeted in bumpy ice with crusts of snow mounding at the road shoulders. It made for tricky driving and tiring night shifts at work.

I was eager to fall asleep, glad to be almost home. Just before turning off the main road for the final blocks to home—I saw the body.

The little dog was at the edge of the street and appeared undamaged except for the smallest bit of dried blood on his nose. Undoubtedly, he'd been hit by a car and there his life had ended. His coat was a lovely cinnamon with thick rich fur. I checked the tag on his collar and learned that "Winston" had only been a couple of blocks from home when he died. He was small enough that I could have picked him up, but something made me hesitate and instead I left him there and drove alone to the address inscribed on the tag.

The front yard of the house had sleds and balls and assorted bright plastic toys. I went past these things with a lowered head, held my breath while I knocked, and sighed

with relief when no young faces, nor any adults, came to the door. I thought about leaving a note, but again hesitated, not knowing what to write. How could a note let the parents know what had happened and yet not tell the children?

Winston's tag had the phone number as well, so in the end, I simply left a message on the owners' answering machine, giving my name and number, asking that they call me about their dog. Before going to bed, I called the animal shelter and asked that they pick up the body.

The sad situation was gone from my mind as I awoke and went back to work, but when I came home again, there were messages waiting on the answering machine. A young boy was calling over and over, wanting to know if I had a dog.

Yes, I had a dog. Jack was a large, strikingly beautiful Golden Retriever, feathered in every shade of yellow from the palest silvery gild to a honey red as burnished as Winston's coat. With the dawning realization that the family must have called the shelter, I felt my mind lurch. Suppose the boy thought that I was the one who had hit his dog? I called him back with reluctance, dreading talking about his loss at all, hesitant to see his sorrow.

His voice sounded as shaky as I felt. "I was wondering if you have a dog," he asked. "And if so, if I could give Winston's Christmas presents... to your dog?"

Jack and I went over right away. The boy was older than I thought he'd be, maybe ten or eleven and he was alone at home. With the friendly enthusiasm typical of his breed, Jack went right up and plunged his face into the large grocery bag the boy was holding. Wrapped present after wrapped present came up, clasped gently in Jack's jaws. Dog treats, a rawhide chew toy, a ball. With tears on his cheeks, the boy helped Jack pull the paper off each gift and inspect them one by one.

I don't know if the boy told me his name. I couldn't have remembered, could hardly trust my voice not to crack when I thanked him and drove Jack home with his new belongings.

That boy's profound sense of Christmas, wanting to give gifts in his grief, was an experience to keep in the heart forever and so, while it was a brief encounter and I was sad for his loss, always treasure that time I had with Winston's boy.