

A Boy and His Dog

by Martha Brooks



- 1 My dog is old. And he farts a lot. His eyes are constantly runny on account of he's going blind. Sometimes when we go for his walk, he falls down. We'll be moving right along, I'll feel an unexpected tug on his leash, and then bingo! He's fallen over.
- 2 The first time it happened, he cried—sort of whimpered—and then he looked at his leg, the back one, the one that had betrayed him. I crouched in the tall grass and felt the leg, which was in a spasm. I told him that if it didn't work too well, to just give up for a while. He looked at me, whimpered some more, and finally flopped his head on my leg.
- 3 After a couple of minutes, he stood up and took off again in that businesslike, let's-get-the-show-on-the-road manner of his: sniffing and squatting to pee near every bush in sight. Later, I found out that he had fallen over because of arthritis. "Nothing you can do, really," said the vet, patting Alphonse's broad, flat head. "He's just getting old, Buddy." She gave me some arthritis pills and sent us home.
- 4 After that, whenever he fell, he'd look quite cheerful. He'd lick the leg a bit, hang out his tongue, pant, and patiently wait. Mom said, "He can't last forever. Everybody dies sooner or later. It's the natural course of events. And big dogs don't live as long as little dogs."
- 5 Alphonse had been a present for my first birthday. Dad brought him home, just a scruffy little brown pup someone was giving away. I still have a snapshot of him and me at the party. I was wearing a Donald Duck T-shirt. Alphonse was slurping

- strawberry ice cream off my face and hands. Which is why it's so unfair that I'm 14 going on 15 and he's 13 going on 94.
- 6 I guess I thought we'd just go on forever with Alphonse being my dog. When he goes, who am I going to tell my secrets to?
- 7 Last week, Alphonse had bad gas. Alphonse doesn't make much sound when he farts. Just a little phhhht, like a balloon with a slow leak, and there's no living with him. I swear, when he gets like that, it would be dangerous to light a match. For the next few days, he lay around more than usual. I thought perhaps he was just overtired. On Sunday, Mom said to Dad and me, "I don't like the way Alphonse looks. Better take him back to the vet, Buddy."
- 8 Monday after school, I walked him to the vet. It was the kind of fall day that makes you breathe more deeply—the field all kinds of burning colors; far-off bushes looking like little flames of magenta and orange; dry, wavy grass a pale yellow; and a big sky, that kind of deep fire-blue you see only once a year

- in October. Alphonse didn't fall down once. Eyes half-closed, he walked slowly, sniffing the air to take in messages.
- 9 A ginger-colored cat slithered under a wooden fence and into the field. It saw Alphonse and suddenly crouched low, eyes dark, motionless. For a minute there, I didn't think Alphonse would notice it. Then his ears went up, and his head shot forward. Next thing, he was hauling me along at the end of his leash, barking himself into a frenzy. The cat parted the grass like wildfire and disappeared under the fence.
- 10 Alphonse walked on, a little more vigor in his step, his tongue lolling out, his ears nice and perky.
- 11 At the clinic, I sat down with Alphonse resignedly backed up between my knees. To my astonishment, a resident cat sauntered over and actually rubbed against him. Alphonse sniffed its head and then ignored it (he only likes cats who run). He watched the door to the examining room and trembled. I wondered if his eyesight was improving
- 12 When the vet summoned us, I got to my feet, and Alphonse reluctantly pattered after me. Inside the examining room, he pressed against the door, willing it to open. I picked him up and lugged him over to the table.
- 13 "He's lost weight," said the vet, stroking, prodding gently.
- 14 "He was too fat," I said, patting his stomach.
- 15 She laughed, continuing her way down his body. "Has he been on a diet?"
- 16 "No. I guess older dogs don't eat as much—like older people."
- 17 She looked at his rectum. "How long has this been here?" she said softly, more to herself than to me.
- 18 "This what?" I looked.
- 19 "It's quite a small lump," she said, pressing it hard. Alphonse stood politely on the table, shaking and puffing. "Sometimes," she said, with a reassuring smile, "older dogs get these lumps. They usually aren't anything to worry about, Buddy."
- 20 Usually? What did she mean, *usually*? My heart began to race.
- 21 "Older neutered dogs," she continued, "very often get benign lumps in the anal region. But we'd better check this out anyway ..."
- 22 My dog has cancer. The vet, with strained, sad eyes, said the little lump is just a symptom of what's going on inside. Why didn't I notice that he was so short of breath? That he was peeing more than usual? That he didn't eat much? That his bowels weren't working? She tells me that when dogs are old, all these things become a problem; it's the usual progress of aging. Except not in Alphonse's case. But how would I know that? I shouldn't blame myself. She says there was nothing I could have done to stop it anyway.
- 23 So what do I tell him? Is he in pain? I couldn't stand it if he were in pain. Alphonse is here with me on my bed. He's going to sleep with me one last time. I'll hold him and tell him about me and what I plan to do with my life. I'll have to lie a little, fill in a few places, because I'm not exactly sure. But he has a right to know what he'll be missing. I'll have a good life, I know it, just like he's had. I'm going to tell him about it now, whisper it in his ear, and I won't leave out a single detail.

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Test Questions

Circle the correct answer.

1. Which sentence from the text best supports the idea that Alphonse was petrified at the vet's office?

- a. For the next few days, he lay around more than usual.
- b. Monday after school, I walked him to the vet.
- c. He looked at me, whimpered some more, and finally flopped his head on my leg.
- d. Inside the examining room, he pressed against the door, willing it to open.

2. Why did the boy spend the entire last night of the story whispering in Alphonse's ear?

- a. He was worried that Alphonse was having a nightmare, so he was trying to calm him down.
- b. He was upset that Alphonse wouldn't be able to experience the rest of his life with him.
- c. He was afraid that Alphonse would worry about him when he was gone.
- d. He was trying to make Alphonse feel better.

3. This question has two parts. Answer Part A first, and then answer Part B.

Part A: How are the boy and his dog most similar?

- a. They are companions.
- b. They love cats.
- c. They fart a lot.
- d. They are getting old.

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Test Questions (*continued*)

Part B: Which two sentences from the text best support your answer to Part A?

- a. Alphonse was slurping strawberry ice cream off my face and hands.
- b. His eyes are constantly runny on account of he's going blind.
- c. Alphonse didn't fall down once.
- d. When he goes, who am I going to tell my secrets to?
- e. Alphonse doesn't make much sound when he farts.

4. Read the following excerpt from the text.

Usually? What did she mean, *usually*? My heart began to race.

Select the best inference that explains how the boy is feeling in this moment.

- a. exhausted
- b. alarmed
- c. tense
- d. excited

5. Read the following. What is the best meaning for the word *vigor* as it is used in paragraph 10?

- a. violence
- b. peace
- c. strength
- d. sadness