

Lassie

We couldn't believe it. My four sisters and I are out playing in the yard this last day of May, when dad screeches into the driveway. He jumps out of the Fargo pickup truck, big smile on his face.

'Hey kids, come here. I want to show you something.'

We're kind of surprised and excited. My father is not an expressive man, more cool and authoritative with his children – old school. But here he is grinning like a kid. What's up? As we come to him he waves us around to the back of the truck. Out she springs – a DOG!

'Kids, this is Lassie. She's here to stay.'

A dog for us? Never in a million years were we expecting this. We start screaming and chasing her. A young and frisky collie, she's running in and out, jumping on this one, licking that one. My dad finally grabs her collar and she sits, tail flopping like a landed fish, eager to please the big dog, my dad.

Story is he won her on a bet at the tavern a few weeks back. He'd just picked her up. She's of pure blood lineage with official papers from the International Collie Society where's she's listed as "Cottonwood Lassie Lauzon". There's a bluish tattoo in her soft left ear to prove it. And now she's ours!

It was love at first sight for all of us. She's a three month old collie, beautiful two-toned coat of white mane and brown body, lovely long nose and kind eyes, full of fun and frolic.

Lassie gets to sleep in the house. My dad was raised on a farm so he insisted that she must have a function, as all farm animals do. Of course we're not living on a farm, just a three acre property on the edge of the village, beside the woods that eventually open out to the lake.

It is decided that Lassie is to be the guard dog, and as such her bed is in the mudroom next to the kitchen. The rules are simple: she mustn't go

to the rest of the house, unless invited, and she must never ever jump on the beds or the couch. Every few nights I'd awake to hear my mother call from her bed,

'Lassie, back to your bed!'

Lassie would try sneaking off to the living room couch in the middle of the night. Unfortunately for her, the doggy nails would click, click, click on the kitchen tiles and that would awaken my mother. A pin couldn't drop in the house but my mother would hear it. All those nights of nursing and burping and rocking five children had made her vigilant, as if she always slept with one eye open.

Lassie soon became the darling of the family and the wonder of the neighbourhood. We kept chickens in the garage that year and Lassie would herd them all around the yard. Crouching low and growly barking, probably pretending they were sheep. It was comical to see the rooster fluttering about his girls and talking back in his 'bawk, bawk, bawk' to the big furry newcomer.

We had some rabbits running about the yard and on hot summer afternoons you could see them all cozying up and sleeping with Lassie, she awake and guarding them. Lassie protected all creatures that belonged to the yard, children, chickens, rabbits, nesting doves. She fiercely chased away all four-legged invaders – raccoons, groundhogs, cats, other dogs, horses, muskrats. If any stranger came to the door she'd bark, better than a doorbell really. Otherwise, she was the friendliest soul on the planet.

One day in early fall I was playing with Lassie, wrestling her to the ground, laughing and rolling the way boys and dogs do, when a truck pulled into our dooryard. Lassie stops and stands, nose in the air, then lets out a piercing cry, beyond all sadness and joy, a cry of heart connecting to heart. An answering wail as a big black collie leaps out of the truck. The two dogs run towards each other in yips of joy and soon are up on hind legs stroking paws in an amazing tarantella of canine ecstasy. It was her brother, her litter mate. Even after months of separation they recognised each other as belonging to each other.

The seasons passed and Lassie was one of us, party to our ups and downs, the confidant of our most precious secrets. My youngest sister Jeannie would sit and play cards with her, Lassie lifting her paw from the deck when a card should be dealt, Jeannie keeping score.

We went on a trip one January to visit relatives up north. Lassie was left behind to guard the house. Our neighbour Helen agreed to feed and walk her. When we came back a week later Lassie was a wreck. She hadn't eaten or touched a drop of water the whole time we were gone. She just lay there, depressed. She was so weak she couldn't get up. It took her a month to recover. We never left her behind again.

She turned three years old one autumn. My parents decided it was time for her to become a mother. Oh, the wonder of seeing those furry pups, we were all so excited! Then a terrible thing happened. One by one, all the puppies died, something bad in her milk. My father took the little ones way back into a clearing in the woods, and buried them under a rock and soil. Next day, Lassie was crying at the back door, carrying one of the pups in her mouth; and the next day and the next. No matter where my father buried them, she would bring them home. Where he finally took them, he never said. Lassie carried a wandering and lonely look in her eye you would catch every fall.

Lassie's claim to fame came in the winter of her sixth year, that's $6 \times 7 = 42$ human years. She was quite vocal at times, especially if anything stirred outside at night. It was the night of December 23rd, two days before Christmas.

Wind was swirling, snow falling, mercury dropping. With everyone in bed, Lassie is restless, pacing. I get up, open the door for her, but she wants me to go with her.

'Oh, come on back in then, silly dog!'

She comes back in, but she won't lie still, she's pacing, now barking louder and louder. My dad wakes up.

'What's wrong girl? Something out there?'

Dad, raised on a farm, trusts her restlessness. A dog doesn't act like this unless something is wrong. He bundles up and heads out, Lassie racing ahead of him. I watch them as they disappear into the swirling night, dad calling out, she barking.

Twenty minutes later, all the lights are on in the house, my mother and sisters are up, waiting and watching. The storm is worse, heavy snow falling, you can't see a thing. Mom is getting worried. Forty-five minutes pass and finally here they are at the door, Lassie barking, dad stomping his boots, and with them a stranger. He's an older man and he's in bad shape, can barely stand and wheezing loudly. He's half frozen.

Story is, Lassie lead dad to our neighbour Curry's barn. This man, a Danish sailor, made it ashore and up the cliffs at Rocky Point, leaving the other shipwrecked men below while he went to get help. The howling winter winds had driven their lake freighter, *Emerald Queen*, onto the rocky shoals offshore, where the tremendous waves proceeded to break her apart. This man James Larsen made it up over the cliff and as far as the barn where he lay down from exhaustion, thinking he was going to freeze to death that night. It was Lassie that saved him. Actually, she was the one who really got the ball rolling to save all 26 members of the crew. The local fire department crew came out right away with lines and halters and hauled everyone up the cliff to warmth and safety. What a night! We saw the wind die down and morning come. I can still see Lassie standing tall by the trail, each man petting and talking to her when they came past. She made the front page of the *Evening Standard*. I swear the features writer had his tape recorder on while he interviewed her. I guess he figured that any dog that smart could probably talk.

The longest, saddest day when she was fifteen and couldn't climb even the lowest step without great pain. She just stopped eating. My mother woke to find her in the mud room, face resting on my father's gum boot, not breathing, sunbeam lighting up the hair on her golden head.

'It's always hard to say goodbye' – that's what my father kept saying.