

## A Man and His Dog

It sounded like carrots being snapped in half. Two, possibly three of Jack's toes were broken. He hobbled over to lean against the wall to catch his breath, and looked down at his foot that was now bright red after he'd kicked the baseboard as he rounded the corner too quickly. His lips were pulled back in a silent snarl as he bent down and touched the throbbing toes. It didn't hurt to the touch, but he still winced and withdrew his hand quickly. Then with one hand on the wall, he limped into the bathroom and lowered himself onto the edge of the bathtub. Jack sat there contemplating what he should do next when he heard the sound of Mandi's nails clicking on the hardwood. The pitbull's head appeared in the doorway with a sad look in her eyes. She had been exploring the basement when she'd heard Jack's moan when he kicked the wall. In her old age she didn't move quite as fast as she used to, so it had taken some time for her to mount the stairs to check on her owner. "The house is out to get me," Jack said as he motioned to his throbbing foot. Mandi's head followed Jack's hand before she came into the bathroom. Jack laughed as she did her best to help by licking his foot. "Stop, stop," he said playfully with a little bit of pain as her tongue bumped the broken bones in his foot. He made a hissing noise as he pulled his foot up quickly and it knocked Mandi's muscular body. "Help me, I'm wounded." Mandi sat in front of Jack and let out a whimper followed by a bark that resonated off the tiled walls. Jack put a hand over her snout and shoved her away, "Okay, okay." With no assistance from Mandi, Jack rose to his feet, and limped after the dog as he walked back down the hall to the living room.

Jack sat on the hardwood with his wounded foot stretched out in front of him, Mandi lying against his thigh. He was unwrapping dishes, one plate at a time, and placing them in a neat stack on the other side of him. There was a growl from his stomach that made Mandi's head rise and look around the room. "Calm down, it's just me." Mandi's head lowered with a disappointed sigh. He was hungry, and he knew that she was hungry as well. Looking at the empty dinner plates piled up beside him didn't help anything at all. Jack thought about the last *real* meal that he'd actually had. It had been several weeks. It was before he sank all his money into the house; the house that *she* wanted. Now it was the last thing that she would ever want, and Jack was stuck with it.

Out of all the boxes, Jack didn't know why he'd picked the one with all the dishes he probably wouldn't ever use, but it allowed him to sit on the floor without moving his foot. He knew he would have to address the hunger situation, or else Mandi would bark him awake all night. It was a terrible attempt at a solution, but Jack walked to the kitchen, favoring his foot, and opened the refrigerator. Nothing but blinding white light stared back at him, and he closed the door. Mandi looked up at him with a hopeful look on her face. "I know, me too." Jack looked around the kitchen for an answer to their current problem, and his eyes fell on the phone. He knew it wasn't the best idea with his current financial situation, but he called in a pizza. When it arrived he left it on the counter to cool before dropping some slices onto the dishes in the living room for Mandi to eat. While Mandi loudly lapped at the dishes, Jack walked through each room of the house looking all around as if seeing them for the first time. He had looked at the house before they'd put money down, but not very extensively, so it all felt new to him. It surprised him how he actually found himself liking the way the house looked. He hadn't expected it, but he began looking forward to settling into his new home--maybe slapping a new coat of paint on

the walls to really give it a sense of belonging to him, but that could wait. The white walls would complement what little furniture he had quite nicely, and he rather liked the old soul the house possessed. From the glass doorknobs, to the arch doorways, and original windows, the house vibrated with the spirit of 70 years ago. Something in the plaster walls made it feel older--ancient even. *She* had boasted about how great it would be once they settled in, and really made it their own. Jack thought that he might not have liked all the work he would have to put in, but now it gave him a jolt of excitement. It would be something to distract him. Whatever he did, he didn't want to disturb the classic nature of the home. He found that he liked it more or less the way it was, though he could have done without the stale smell.

Even though she had eaten the pizza, Jack was still awakened by the sound of Mandi barking. She wasn't in the room with him, which was strange, and Jack made a tired grunt as he turned over and hoped that she would stop. But the barking persisted, and with a defeated sigh, he pushed the sheets aside, and rolled off the mattress that sat alone in the middle of what would soon be the master bedroom. In his sleepy state, Jack forgot all about his broken toes and cried aloud as they struck the hardwood on his way off the mattress. Mandi normally would come to him when she heard him make a noise of pain, but the barking continued. Jack grew frustrated with Mandi as he limped out of the room and down the hall.

The barking was coming from below him in the basement. As Jack thought about it, he realized that he hadn't actually been down to the basement since he'd officially moved in. It bothered him that, even when he'd looked at the house originally, he hadn't actually gone down to at least look around.

As Jack stood at the top of the stairs looking into the blackness, he felt the hair stand on end all over his body. He'd never liked going down into the basement of any house, ever since he

was a kid. And even though he knew that it was Mandi's bark coming from downstairs, he still didn't want to go. "Mandi," Jack called out, but the barking continued. "Hey, Mandi, cut it out!" There was stutter in the barking, and Jack stepped down one step. The wood creaked under his weight, and Mandi went silent. Then Jack heard the familiar sound of her nails on the cement, and her large, muscular frame materialized out of the darkness. Jack started at the sight of the dog, and then relaxed as she rubbed up against him. She whined the way dogs do when they want attention. Jack sat back on the landing at the top of the stairs and let her lick at the side of his face while he tiredly pet her boxy head. Mandi kept stepping into Jack's lap as if she couldn't get close enough to him. "What is it, girl?" Jack asked. He then became aware that Mandi's fur was wet. Earlier that night Jack had filled a salad bowl full of water for her to drink out of, but he doubted that it would have caused her haunches to get soaked unless she sat in it. He then took to examining her in the darkness like a blind person, feeling all over her body. She wasn't just wet like she'd been splashed; she felt as if she'd just come from having a bath. As she rubbed up against him, Jack could feel his sweatshirt and boxers getting wet as well. "Why're you all wet?" Jack asked, grabbing Mandi's head and making her face him. In the darkness of the stairwell, he could barely make out the shape of her but he knew that her eyes would give him that same sad look they always did. "C'mon, let's get you cleaned up." Jack stood up with the help of the handrail, and felt his way through the house with Mandi beside him to the bathroom, where he blinded himself by turning on the light. After he used a bath towel to dry Mandi off, Jack made a note that first thing in the morning he would go investigate the basement. There was a part of him that feared going down, even in the daylight, because that meant that he would have to own up to whatever was down there; an adult nightmare. A backed up sewer, faulty plumbing, leaking foundation, any number of things. Being a naive first time homeowner made Jack think that if he

didn't see it, it wasn't real. But he couldn't stop seeing puddles of water from some thousand dollar repair whenever he closed his eyes. He felt down for Mandi who was now lying at his side on the mattress in his bedroom. It wasn't long before he was back asleep in his new home.

The next morning, Jack had to use the hand railing to get into the basement. The broken toes were a dark purple, and black around the nail. There was a sharp pain in the bottom of his foot that made his calf ache as he limped.

The basement was just as he imagined, a low ceiling with the plumbing hanging dangerously close to his head, cement all around with small cracks spider-webbing the foundation. There were dark stains on the floor where there had been water at one point, but if it was from the previous night Jack doubted that it would be dry by the morning. Mandi was sitting at the foot of the stairs panting as she watched her owner walk the perimeter of the basement with his hands on his hips, and an eyebrow raised. "What were you doing down here last night?" Jack asked, more to himself than to Mandi who didn't offer an answer. He made a mental note to find the flashlight that was somewhere in the boxes stacked in the living room, just in case he would be making a midnight trek down the stairs after Mandi at a future date. If it happened once, he was almost certain it would happen again.

There was no sign of what made Mandi bark the previous night, and Jack wished that he *had* gone down stairs to investigate. "I don't see anything," Jack said as he sat on the bottom step next to Mandi, and put a hand on her large head. Just then her attention snapped to attention, and she let out a quick bark at the corner of the basement. Jack's eyes followed her stare. He didn't see anything but the part of the house where the two walls met. At one point in the past, the owners of the house had painted the concrete walls grey, and that grey was faded, cracked, and peeling. But some parts of the wall were darker than the other. Jack got up to walk across the

basement, and Mandi came after him. Even with the light shining in through the small windows near the ceiling, the basement was filled with shadow. Jack had to get close to the peeling wall to see what he thought was water damage at first, but as he got closer he could make out streaks of color under the top coat of paint. Jack touched at the streaks of blue in front of him, tilting his head to one side as he did so. Then he examined more of the wall, even taking a few steps back to see it as a whole. His mouth turned up in a smirk as his eyes were able to make out an image that had been painted there many years ago. With the paint coming away from the wall in dry chips, he could make out an oceanscape of bright blue with white caps crashing in the foreground, and duplicate waves painted again, smaller by the horizon. Jack stepped forward and touched the portion of sky that was exposed. He picked at the edge of a crack and some paint flaked away onto the floor. Clouds were in view, and rays of sunlight shown on the water in brushstrokes of bright white and yellow. Jack picked a little more at the mural, showing more of the glittering water when he felt something touch his leg. He let out a cry of surprise before he remembered that Mandi stood by his side. She was sniffing the paint chips on the ground. Jack used his foot to gently nudge her away, “Stop, don’t do that.” Mandi looked up at him with her big, sad eyes. “Fine,” Jack said, “let’s go get some breakfast.”

Almost all the boxes were emptied, and deconstructed in the corner of the living room. Jack had moved all the pieces of his bed frame into the bedroom, but he had been too tired to actually build it. He’d gone to the store and purchased a bag of dog food for Mandi, and picked up some sliced turkey and bread for himself. He’d spent the better part of the day going through the things he’d unpacked, and spent more time reminiscing than actually *moving in*. Mandi lay nearby with her nose between her front paws watching Jack intently as he sat cross legged in front of the open boxes until he fell asleep. He woke up on the bare living room floor with a

severe neck ache, and the overhead light shining brighter than ever. He didn't know what woke him, because he felt as though he were sleeping deeper than he had in a while, but there was something that seemed to grip his whole body. His heart was racing and he didn't know why, as if he'd woken from a nightmare; only he couldn't remember dreaming at all. Mandi was sitting upright with her ears at attention. Jack wondered if she'd been awakened too.

It was night, but now that Jack had been startled awake he couldn't sleep. So he cleaned up as much as he could, then went to brush his teeth. The pipes groaned before the faucet made a burping noise as it dumped water into the sink. Jack splashed some cold water on his face, and then cupped his hands together and drank. He licked his lips and made a face. The water tasted strange, but he couldn't place it –or could he? Was it salty? He took another drink, a small one. Jack nodded his head as he confirmed that it was in fact salty. He shut the sink off and dried his hands on a towel before leaving the bathroom. Mandi fell in beside him as he walked into the bedroom. “Gotta call the plumber tomorrow, the water's funny,” he said as he fell onto the mattress. His wounded foot stuck out from under the covers. The broken toes were bright and swollen, and Jack was surprised that, with how bad they looked, they didn't seem to bother him the entire day.

Jack awoke to Mandi barking. Unlike before, he was prepared, and retrieved the flashlight off the kitchen counter before going to the basement steps. Pain was stiffening his foot, and the limp was severe as he hobbled onto the top step.

The barking resonated off the concrete walls and floor, and each time Jack winced. He hoped that she would stop like she had the previous night. Even with the dim flashlight beam, the darkness seemed to be pushing back at him. The stairs protested his weight as he made his way down, feeling along the wall, and the low hanging roof for anything to ground him.

“Mandi, hey, cut it out.” His voice sounded small compared to Mandi’s loud barking, but he hoped that it would carry to her so he wouldn’t have to go all the way down. He was halfway to the basement when suddenly the barks turned to a growl. It was a sound that Jack had only heard Mandi make once or twice, and it was not a good sign. Jack took another step, and then another, the beam of the flashlight quivering in the pitch black. He took it in both hands to keep it steady as he descended. Mandi’s growls turned to ferocious barks and Jack debated on going back upstairs. He’d never been afraid of his dog, but he didn’t really want to get close to Mandi if she was acting as aggressive as she sounded. But he continued down the stairs. Once at the bottom, rather than stepping onto cool concrete, Jack’s foot touched water. There was barely any depth, but enough that he could feel the wetness on the bottom of his foot. There was no sound of running water, and the only explanation Jack could think of was that the drain in the floor had backed up. If he wasn’t planning on calling a plumber before, he definitely was going to now. Jack put both feet on the basement floor, and raised the flashlight beam in the direction of Mandi’s barking. The beam barely shed light on her, and Jack knew that he had to get closer to see what was the matter. As he walked hesitantly forward, his feet sloshed in the shallow water, and the sound set him more on edge than he already was. Just as the beam of his light caught the rear end of Mandi, she turned to face him. Then without warning, she bounded towards him. Jack jumped back in surprise, and dropped the flashlight. The light went out, leaving him in darkness. Mandi ran past him then up the stairs, leaving Jack alone in the silence of the basement.

Now that Mandi wasn’t barking, Jack didn’t feel the uneasiness that he had before. Instead it was replaced by annoyance. He was standing in the dark, with water covering the floor of the basement in his new house. Jack moved the foot with the broken toes out in front of him searching for the flashlight in the darkness, but his foot touched nothing but air. He sighed

heavily and was about to turn to feel his way back to the stairs when he heard something. It wasn't something that he'd heard before, but what Jack could only describe as a crumbling noise. Jack stepped towards the noise, so overcome with curiosity that he was ignoring the uneasy feeling that had begun to grip his gut again. His eyes were getting used to the dark, and he could make out a dark shape that was spreading in the corner of the basement by the mural. He put his hand out and felt the coolness of the wall on his palm, but it wasn't hard like concrete. His hand pushed through what *should* have been hard concrete and immediately was submerged in water. Jack pulled his hand back in alarm, and looked to the place in the wall where it had disappeared. He looked back the way Mandi had run, wishing that he had her by his side as he examined whatever it was that his wall had become. In the silence he could hear it, the sound of running water. But not like it does when it's inside a pipe, it was the sound of *free* water. It was the kind of water one would hear in an active creek, or possibly splashing on the river bank. Jack found the unmoving part of the wall with his fingers, and moved his hand towards the spot that was a deeper blackness than the dark that surrounded him. Just like before his hand pushed through, but there wasn't earth on the other side. At this point if he were to reach through the foundation of his home, he would grab at moist dirt and tree roots. But it was cool water that he plunged his hand into, only this time he felt it roll in droplets down his forearm to drip off his elbow. There was the pitter patter of water as it dripped to the standing water on the ground that Jack had forgotten about until he heard the splash. He looked down at the dark floor, and then he pushed further, his arm disappearing into the wall up past his elbow near his shoulder. His body shook with the chill, and his teeth clattered, but he grabbed at the wetness. Jack smiled at the wild curiosity, and thought to himself that there was the possibility that he was dreaming. If he *was* dreaming then it wouldn't hurt for further exploration, and he stepped closer to the wall. As he

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did so, his broken toes bumped against the solid concrete at his feet, and pain shot through his whole body. He wasn't dreaming, and as that thought crossed his mind, something touched his hand.

End