

FICTION

The Final Walk



Wade Daniels knew it was time, but he didn't want to admit it. The old dog, a yellow Labrador, whined and limped toward the back door as Wade said, "Outside, Caleb."

by CHRIS FABRY

A LIMP LEASH HUNG on a wall hook, but Wade didn't reach for it. Instead, he yelled to the house, "I'm taking him out for a walk."

Wade's wife appeared and hurried to the dog and gave him a pat on the head. "You enjoy it, boy." She looked up, and Wade wasn't sure if she was talking to Caleb or him.

He had made sure with the vet the week before. He'd taken the dog in by himself, and the vet put it to him gently. "I think he's nearing the end of the trail, Wade. If you want, we can care for him now."

Wade shook his head. "I need a few days. You think that would be unkind?"

"Not at all, Wade. Just let me know."

Wade opened the back door to let Caleb out and held it there, even though flies and bugs flew inside. Caleb limped down the two steps and stopped, panting and looking at the green backyard and the hill beyond. Wade walked ahead of him and opened the gate. It seemed like yesterday that Caleb was bounding through the opening with Wade trying to catch up. Now he moved at a glacial pace. And that made Wade think about his own life.

"This is your day, buddy. Your walk. We'll go as far as you want. And you set the pace."

The dog looked up at him like he understood, the whites of his eyes a little yellow. He smiled with his eyes, though Wade had been told dogs didn't smile. Wade also believed that though a dog couldn't understand the English language further than a command or two, there was a

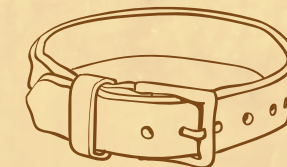
deeper connection that transcended language. He couldn't explain that, but he felt it.

The hillside above exploded green with maples and oaks in the June sunshine. The sounds of whippoorwills and insects filled the early evening. The gentle slope of the clover-filled meadow that led up to the hill seemed the perfect spot for Caleb to lie down and soak in the last rays of sunshine. Wade kicked himself for not bringing his phone to take a picture. But maybe it was better that he didn't have it.

Wade had made himself a promise before they got Caleb. He was not going to put himself through this pain again. And as he walked, he measured his lifespan by the animals he had known and loved. The family dog he had grown up with. The hunting hound he'd bought with his own money as a teenager. He'd passed him on to an uncle when he married, and the dog had lived out his last days on a farm. His uncle had called on the day Wade had gotten a new job. It was the best of times and worst of times on the same day. Why did they always come like that?

When the kids came along, his wife wanted an inside dog. He'd resisted, saying he couldn't stand some little yapping thing barking at every car that passed the house. But the look in her eyes and the eyes of his kids melted his heart, and he gave in. And he loved the yapping when he came home from work each day.

The week after Wade had gotten a bonus at work, Sugar, the little yapper, broke a leg. Wade joked that they spent more on the dog's healthcare than his own. The surgery had



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given them three more years with him, and Sugar died the day after their oldest left for college.

“Take your time, boy,” Wade said to Caleb as he reached the edge of the meadow. Below was a pond that Caleb had splashed through every trip up the hill. He wasn’t interested today.

Every time, Wade said he would not do it again. He would not put himself through the pain and the agony of getting attached to something that was just going to die. And then he’d come upon a quote by a theologian, C.S. Lewis, who had said something that hit him between the eyes of his heart.

Wade couldn’t quote it word for word, but basically, he said that loving anything makes you vulnerable to pain. Love means you risk a broken heart. But the alternative was to protect yourself and have a heart of stone.

As he began the climb up the hill beside Caleb, he saw the truth in the man’s words. In fact, those words had caused him to think about his wife and family. Was there any way that he was holding back, keeping a little distance to protect his heart in case it broke over them? No, it was better to jump into the pool of love, even though it might get hard and painful at times.

They reached a plateau of the hill, and through the trees, he saw the roofs of houses and barns below and the two-lane road that wound its way into the valley.

“You need to rest, boy?”

Caleb panted, looked up at him, and kept going.

“All right, you lead. I’ll follow.”

Caleb led him up the rocky path, picking his steps carefully, moving like a frog on lily pads. It was

both painful and beautiful to watch, and Wade wondered if his old buddy would make it to the top.

Trees blocked the sun, and the shade seemed to invigorate the dog. When he reached the smooth limestone at the crest of the final ascent, he laid down on all fours — then rolled onto his side. Froth and drool dripped from his mouth, and Wade knelt beside him.

“That was a good walk, boy. You did good.”

He patted the dog, and it pained him to see the struggle. The dog closed his eyes and panted harder, and Wade wondered if this was it. He loosened the collar and took it off, and the dog’s breathing slowed.

Wade heard something behind him and turned to see a kid on a mountain bike. When he reached the limestone, he stopped and stared.

“Is he dead?” the kid said.

“I think he’s resting.”

“How old is he?”

“Almost 16. And his name’s Caleb,” Wade said, anticipating the next question.

The kid let his bike fall and drew closer to the dog. He reached out a hand, and Wade nodded, and the kid petted Caleb. Part of Wade wanted to be alone, to have Caleb to himself, but something told him to allow it.

“I was taking him for his final walk. He loves coming up here.”

“You’re going to put him down?” the kid said.

“He’s in pain. And he’s been a good friend. I want to be the same to him.”

The kid grew quiet, and Wade waited until he spoke.

“The longer I live, the more I believe that life is not about avoiding pain.”

“It’s sad to see a dog get old.”

Wade nodded and thought of the theologian. “It is. And if you don’t want any pain in life, don’t love anything. The longer I live, the

more I believe that life is not about avoiding pain. I think God made us to experience all of it, the good and the bad.”

“Why?” the kid said.

“Maybe so He could show us how much we need Him. And He led the way. He loved us and became vulnerable so that we could go out and love others.”

Caleb lifted his head and sat up as if on cue. The kid clapped and cheered and rubbed his back, but Caleb set his face toward the top of the hill.

“Me and Caleb are going to the top alone, OK?”

The kid nodded and stood watching as Wade followed the dog into the tall grass. Caleb had to stop three times, but he finally made it to the top of the hill and looked back as Wade joined him.

“You did it, buddy.” He patted the dog on the head and then sat next to him with his arm around him, and they both looked at the view. The tree line ran below them, and below that, the little town with houses and yards and backyard swimming pools. To the west, the sun set orange among red and pink clouds.

He wished he could speak in dog language and say, “It won’t be the same around here without you, Caleb.”

But he didn’t. And the look on Caleb’s face made him think he didn’t have to. 🐾

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