

A long, lingering stare held the dog's eyes between the dog and her face. The dog squinted his eyes and the girl could feel his body relax. She smiled and he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and exhaling, blowing back her loose hairs. She stroked his scruffy fur and the dog rested his head on the girl's lap.

"You're the one who's going to help me, then?" she croaked. "Daddy said that I was going to get a new friend, someone who would care." She felt for his ears and scratched them, smiling. The dog looked up at her and stared into her eyes.

"I know you're looking at me," she said blankly. The girl hugged the dog and the dog started to pant happily. He licked her chin gingerly as not to surprise her, and the girl giggled.

"Your tongue is warm," she laughed, "I read a book about dogs. I could read it to you if you'd like." The dog seemed to understand each word the girl said. As the girl got up to search for the book, the dog stood up, eager to help her search.

"It's alright, I know this room like the back of my hand. Well- you know what I mean," she pointed out. The dog looked up at her as she touched a book, rubbing the spine. She pulled out the book and the dog sat down, gently wagging his tail. She wobbled on her knees over to the dog and set the book down in front of her. She opened it and started to read aloud to the dog. The dog rested his eyes and slid his front feet down, lying on his belly with his head on her lap once more. She paused and took a hand off the book to pet the dog. He was breathing contently, which soothed the girl and kept her mind off of troubles. Soon after, they were both lying on the cold, hard floor, asleep.

The girl's father came into the room hours afterwards and put the girl to bed. She woke up, half asleep, half awake and said, "I want the doggie." Her father smiled. With a grunt, he lifted the dog, setting him on the girl's bed.

"Thanks, Daddy," she said happily and dozed off. He smoothed her hair and smiled sadly before leaving the little empty room.

The room in the attic was so small and empty that many wouldn't even consider it a legitimate room. There were two bookshelves set against the upright wall, along with an extraordinarily old chair pushed into a desk with a typewriter sitting on the surface. A twin bed stood against the other wall, accompanied by a miniature window with a view of the beautiful outdoors: a pointless window.

Three un lonely birthdays had passed. They would have been lonely if it weren't for the dog. The girl named her friend Wilbur after the pig from *Charlotte's Web*, one of the girl's favorite books. Wilbur had gotten a fancy vest soon after he and the girl met, so the girl could stay with him wherever they went. Wilbur was six now, and the little girl was eight. She was very intelligent and learned how to write poems and stories on her typewriter. She didn't go to school because her father said it might be too hard on her, but she would always read about kids that went to a public school and played with their friends and learned new things each day. She still was learning new things everyday, but she didn't have any friends besides Wilbur.

The girl loved to read. She would sit on her bed and reread the books that her daddy bought for her with his extra money. She always remembered the joyful days when her dad brought home the occasional book for her after a long day at work. He worked at the post, so he always smelled like a newly printed book or a fresh stack of paper. He didn't make too much profit, and the "bumpy books" as the girl called them were a bit expensive in comparison to the normal ones, so these days were rare.

Yet the girl sat and read the books over and over. She even memorized a few poems from her poetry books. The girl especially loved exciting fantasies and adventure novels, series like *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. She even began high-school level books, like Shakespeare. Even if she didn't really understand them completely, she enjoyed the stories. The father was proud of his daughter's high intelligence, but couldn't help but feel worried about every little thing that might hurt her, though the girl was strong and even stronger with Wilbur around.

One day, the girl asked her father as he was about to go out the door, "Daddy, can I have a babysitter?" He smiled at her, a crinkly smile that he used whenever he was sorry.

"Honey, we don't have enough money for that. Besides, Wilbur is here to protect you and take care of you. I know that you can take care of yourself, too." He looked at her with slight pity. "I know you can." Looking away, he didn't mention that it was unlawful and dangerous to leave her alone in the house.

She faced Wilbur and he looked at her understandingly. She said goodbye to her father, and she and Wilbur had another normal, boring day. Each day was exactly the same. Without school, the girl didn't have too much to do besides read and play with Wilbur. Fortunately, Wilbur didn't mind the occasional snooze while the girl read to herself; there wasn't too much

for him to do, either. He enjoyed lying on his side on the circular rug next to the girl's bed, against a blanket or on top of a book or toy. Sometimes, the girl would lie against him and read. Sometimes she didn't read at all, she just sat and thought about things until she dozed off.

Wilbur was the greatest dog ever. He was so patient and cooperative, and sometimes he would urge the girl to go on walks together. He wasn't the prettiest of dogs, a mixed breed with a scruffy face and uncombed speckled fur on his back. It looked like he lost his tail somehow; it could've been a dogfight back in his alley days, or he was just born with a little nub on the end of his bottom. Although his body wasn't much to look at, his eyes were stunning. A peculiar sun of electric blue grazed his right eye and his left was a deep, warm brown. The pupil of his right eye looked a little jacked up but his vision was still perfect. The girl's father said that sometimes eyes might look like that if the being was struck by lightning.

Her dad found Wilbur behind a dumpster by an abandoned building, curled up in a pitiful pile of fur. The messy dog was licking wounds and seemed to have a sad look in his heterochromatic eyes. His head hung low and he was shivering occasionally. The girl's father, a kind man, couldn't help but to take him in. He used the spare bits of money that he had left over from his profit to clean him up, take care of his cuts, buy a collar and get a microchip in his shoulder. The father came home late and broke that day, but the dog really changed both the girl's and her father's lives.

One sunny morning, Wilbur was lying with the girl and suddenly became tense. Someone had pulled into the driveway. Wilbur led the girl downstairs so he could peek out the window.

"Can you see anything?" the girl asked. The dog gave a soft huff as he watched a woman with a pinstripe women's suit and her hair pulled back into a tight bun. The stranger strutted towards the front door in five-inch heels as Wilbur led the girl to the other side of the door. The woman rang the bell and the little girl looked at her dog intently before opening the door.

"Hello young lady, is your father home?" The woman's stern look softened slightly as she caught sight of the girl.

"Yes," she lied.

"Ah, may I speak to him?"

"Um, he's sleeping," the girl said anxiously.

“Don’t you know not to answer the door to strangers?” the woman said worriedly.

“I know.”

“Then why did you answer the door?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Everything is my business. It’s my job to make sure you are safe,” the woman sniffed and looked down at the dog looking up at her. “Who’s your little pet?”

“That’s Wilbur, my friend,” she patted Wilbur’s head.

“I see.”

“Okay, come again later,” the little girl closed the door on her offended face and began to walk away with Wilbur when the doorbell went ballistic. She opened the door again to see the woman hitting the doorbell over and over.

“Ah, thank you,” she said, flustered. “Let me apologize for my rudeness and introduce myself. My name is Helen D. Sylvester, and I’m a social worker of the Department of Children and Families, or the DCF of Connecticut. I would like to talk to your father about some... grown-up things,” the woman explained.

“Okay, are you going to raid my house or something?” the girl asked sarcastically.

“Well, no, but I need to see your dad.” She was getting annoyed.

“You can’t see him right now.”

“This is serious matter, if he is just asleep you need to wake him up so I can speak with him.”

“Sorry.”

“Young lady, I am a *government official*.”

“I know that, did you think I was stupid?” the girl frowned as she pulled out the guilt card. The woman sighed.

“Well, no, but I didn’t expect a... what are you? Four? Five?”

“I’m eight.”

“Ah, yes, well... I really need to have a word with your dad.” She started tapping her foot impatiently.

“Fine, I’ll go see if he’s awake. Wait here. Or, if you want, you could leave. That would be fine too.” She slammed the door on the woman and the dog looked up at her. They just stood there for a bit and then she opened the door again.

“Oh, you’re still here. Well, my dad is unavailable right now. Please leave.” She slammed the door on her again and locked it. There was a combination of doorbell ringing and loud banging on the door. After a while, the girl heard a roar and the car pulled out of the driveway and angrily sped away. Wilbur seemed to understand what was going on perfectly while the girl was clueless.

The social worker would be back to take the girl away, and Wilbur knew it.

When the girl’s dad came home that night at 9:23, earlier than usual, the girl told him that the social worker came to visit. He looked at her with fear in his eyes and told her that it was nothing and that she shouldn’t be worried. He told her that if the woman came by again, not to tell her that he is out and to call him straight away. She understood, but something about his reaction made the little girl stressed.

The very next day, the girl awoke to the annoyance of a sound of the cheap doorbell. Wilbur whined and the two trotted down the stairs. She opened the door to the tall, stern-looking woman again.

“What do you want today?” the girl spat.

“I need to speak to your father,” the woman spoke with great annoyance.

“One second,” the girl mumbled. She closed the door on her and ran to the phone and speed-dialed her father. All the while, Wilbur hovering silently beside her.

“Honey, what’s going on? I’m really busy.”

“Daddy, the lady is back again,” she said, trying to keep her voice down. “What should I do?” There was a pause and some ruffling of papers from her dad’s end.

“I’ll be right over,” the dad huffed, “It might take a few minutes, though.” He hung up and the girl twisted her tangled hair nervously. She made her way back to the door and opened it again.

“He will be ready soon, would you like to come inside?” the girl asked, knowing that if the woman saw the father’s car pull in she would know he was out. She led her into the dark, musty house and into the kitchen. Paint was peeling off the walls and there was a goliath pile of dirty dishes sitting in the sink, flies darting around grime spots on both the dishes and patches on tables, counters, walls, even the ceiling. The girl felt around and flipped the light switch, which

took a few seconds and flickered on. The woman looked extremely disgusted and was careful not to step in any unknown puddles.

“Is... this how you live?” she asked after clearing her throat awkwardly. The lady scanned the room in worry of the girl’s health.

“Yep,” the girl answered casually. The girl climbed on top of the counter and took out a heavy-looking kettle the size of her head. She started to boil some water and asked the lady, “Would you like ‘English Breakfast’ or... um... ‘Cozy Chamomile?’” feeling around the holes poked in a small tin box of teabags.

“‘English Breakfast’ would be great, thank you,” the woman said politely. She pulled out the chair that looked the least beaten up and invited herself to sit down. The girl handed her a chipped mug full of hot tea and the woman looked at her with great concern, then took out a little notepad and wrote something down.

“In the meantime, may I ask you a few questions?” the lady asked, pen ready.

“Okay,” the little girl sat down across the table from the lady.

“First of all, what do you do in your free time?”

“Well, I like to read and spend time with Wilbur.” At the sound of his name, Wilbur’s ears perked up and he looked at the lady, listening

“And do you leave the house often?”

“Sometimes I walk Wilbur around the block.”

“So you don’t go to public school?”

“No, my daddy teaches me things.”

“Do you have any friends?” the lady questioned. The girl sniffed and squinted her eyes angrily.

“Wilbur’s my friend.”

“Right, right. Okay, have you ever been left alone in the house for more than an hour before?” the woman asked, watching the little girl intently.

“Well... not often,” the girl lied. She winced guiltily.

“So you have before?”

“I guess.”

“Mhm... okay,” the lady said mid-sentence as the back door opened and the girl’s father strode in, trying to look like he wasn’t just at work and patting his messy hair down.

“Hello, ma’am. Are you the social worker?” the father asked. He forced a friendly smile.

“I’m Helen D. Sylvester, and I’m of the Department of Children and Families. May we speak in private?” the lady smiled slightly as she shook the father’s shaky hand. He nodded nervously and whispered something into his daughter’s ear. She took Wilbur up to her room in silence.

“Would you like to see the house?” the father asked her. She nodded and he led her into a small room that he called his ‘office,’ which was a desk, a chair, some books and sloppy paper piles made up of layers of dust and old letters, paperwork and bills. Then, they entered the living room, which consisted of a couch and a large, bare bookshelf as well as some dog essentials. All the while, the woman was interviewing the father.

Upstairs, the little girl was sitting on the floor with Wilbur, listening. With the house’s size, she could hear a lot of what they were saying. Every one of her father’s replies sounded as if he was about to go skydiving for the very first time. Extremely anxious. She was worried for him and wondered why the lady was even here in the first place.

After a while, the girl heard some arguing and begging and the word ‘goodbye’ and she went down the stairs to her father.

“What did she say?” Suddenly, he broke down in tears. “Daddy? Are you okay?” she whimpered, listening to his sobs.

“She’s coming to pick you up in the morning.”

It would’ve been a good idea to spend the last night with her family with quality time together, but neither the girl nor her father really felt like it. Wilbur seemed to understand what was going on, and he acted more subdued and down than normal.

When morning came along, so did the shiny black car in their driveway. The lady, as well as two other social workers came knocking on their door once more. The girl opened the door, looking like she was about to cry. The scruffy-haired dog was standing next to her, staring up at the people as if he was speaking for the girl. He stared intently up at them without moving his head or tail as to not show vulnerability or obedience to the strange people, a piercing glare set in his eyes.

“Good morning,” the woman said as she forced a friendly voice, trying to seem as unthreatening as possible to the young girl. The girl simply handed the woman her suitcase and asked if she could have a moment to say goodbye. The woman nodded, then realized and said, “Oh, certainly.”

The girl turned and kneeled down to Wilbur’s eye level. She started crying and Wilbur licked up her salty tears reassuringly. He nuzzled her and the girl suddenly stopped and got up.

“Ma’am, can Wilbur come with me?” she asked. The woman and the two other officials looked shocked, and even Wilbur seemed a bit surprised.

“Um, I don’t actually know,” the woman looked back at the two other officials, who shrugged and shook their heads, clueless. The dog’s tongue lolled out, most likely in nervousness. The woman looked at the girl with sympathy in her eyes, and then looked down at her feet, thinking for a bit. “I don’t really see why not,” she said, biting her lip. The girl beamed with joy, and Wilbur’s face lit up. He stopped sticking out his tongue and looked up at the girl with excitement.

The girl wasn’t as sad now; she had Wilbur by her side. Yes, she was going to miss her father dearly, but all she gave him was stress and hardship, so she felt it was the best for both her and her father. The girl and her faithful companion trotted blissfully to the shiny, black car and climbed into the backseat without hesitation. Their new life awaited them, and they had nothing to lose except each other.