

The Thanksgiving Puppies

Bob Mackreth

Prologue: December 6, 2004



Two a.m., my watch read in the flashlight beam; time to start mixing formula. I sat up from my makeshift bed on the basement floor.

A soft murmur of tiny grunts and cries arose beside me, from the plastic wading pool that served as the nursery. The tired mother was resting, and her puppies cuddled up into her fur. Some were sleeping, others squirmed restlessly about, searching for a teat that might have milk.

"Nothing there, little guys," I whispered. "Your mommy is sick. But I'll feed all of you very soon."

I did a quick head count: five black, four brown... all there. Sometimes the brown girl with the white paws went hunting to see if she could find a hidden nipple on her mother's back, oblivious to the risk that a sleepy movement might crush her.

Nine baby Newfoundland dogs, born ten days before in our hastily-prepared storage room. Five girls, four boys; there had been one more of each, but they slipped away in those first dizzying, horrible days.

Desperate, we'd wondered: would we lose them all? The worry was searing for a while, but by the tenth morning it had seemed the crisis was past. With round-the-clock attention, the puppies were gaining weight steadily. The latest round of antibiotics seemed to be keeping the mother's infection under control. Things were getting better.

And then, this afternoon, we got that phone call.

Eight hundred miles away, a stranger was saying that all the puppies belonged to her.

Chapter One

"There's A Puppy!"

The puppies came into the world on Thanksgiving evening.

Susan and I had just finished dinner, and taken our two dogs for a walk. Abbie, the young mother-to-be, kept up well enough with our four-year-old male, Nelson. We made the walk a short one, however; though the morning's temperature check did not suggest that labor was imminent, we didn't want to stress her unduly.

Soon after we returned home, it all started to happen. Abbie began panting and circling; then suddenly she arched her back and seemed to strain. "This has to be it," we realized, and led her to the plastic kiddie pool set up as a whelping bed. I ran upstairs to change out of my good shirt, but before I'd even undone the buttons, my wife yelled, "Bob, there's a puppy!"

I flew down the stairs to find Susan cradling a tiny, wet creature; mostly black with a bit of white here and there. The thought flashed that I'd missed our first-born, but there was little time for regret; everything was happening so much faster than we'd expected. We began the drill we'd been rehearsing for the past week.



First Of Eleven

A week... just seven days since we got the shattering news.

"She's pregnant, no doubt about it," said our new vet, Dr. Gretchen Gerber. "Pretty far along, too."

She pointed to the x-ray. "These are puppy skulls that you're seeing here, and here, and here..." She counted off eleven of them.

How could this be? We'd only owned the dog a month, and we'd had her vaccinated and examined right after we brought her home. She'd started behaving strangely soon after that, so we brought her back to the animal hospital again two weeks later.

How could our old vet have missed the diagnosis both times? We asked him specifically! We described her odd behavior!

"It can be pretty hard to tell for sure," Dr. G. replied diplomatically. We did not push the issue. Instead, we embarked on a crash course in canine midwifery, reading everything we could find and talking to everyone in town who'd been through the process. Most importantly, we made contact with the state Newfoundland Rescue coordinator. Not only did she promise to help find good homes for the puppies, relieving us of our greatest worry, but she also put us in touch with the nearest experienced Newf breeder. Our new guru lived too far away to assist us in person, but her advice and reassurance over the phone proved invaluable.

The puppy was breathing strongly; her air passages were clear. Our hands still trembled as we held her, but it seemed that all was well.

When we placed the tiny pup to her mother's breast, we began to worry, though. Abbie massaged the little girl with her tongue, just as we'd been told she would, but the puppy simply could not seem to latch onto a teat. We picked her up and set her back at different angles, but no luck. A nervous phone call to our guru brought the reassuring answer, "Calm down. She'll get it sooner or later."

And so she did. Time to catch our breath, take some photos, and interrupt Dr. G.'s dinner with a progress report. We called our wonderful new veterinarian many times before the night was over; she was always gracious and enthusiastic in response. When one delivery seemed to stall, she explained that most likely the placenta had not completely detached from Abbie's uterine wall, and she talked us through the process of drawing it out.

As puppy followed puppy, we began to get the hang of it all. Cradle the emerging pup, slit the sac with a fingernail. Surprising how hot the fluid felt as it gushed into our hands. Check the airway and towel the puppy down. That's when they started wiggling; amazing how full of life they seemed so quickly!

Do our best to hold the critter still and tie off the cord with dental floss. That was hard; should have used unwaxed. Make a miniature collar from a strand of colored yarn, to tell the puppies apart. Give the baby to Mom for a while and try to clean things up for the next go-round. The fluids came in

every color of the rainbow; thank God our mentor had warned us, or we would have been horrified as Abbie pumped out red and green and turquoise...

Here comes another one!

Move the last puppy to the Rubbermaid box where brothers and sisters huddle together on a towel-wrapped heating pad, then here we go again.



Pups In A Box

Abbie seemed completely calm throughout her labor, carefully examining each newborn puppy as we presented it to her, and tonguing the wet little squirmers in a way that somehow seemed both vigorous and tender. Such remarkable skill in a dog barely removed from puppyhood herself: Abbie's second birthday was still weeks away.

Nelson came down the stairs just once to see whatever was happening in the house that so recently was his alone. With a look that clearly announced, "I do *not* belong here!" he retreated to the top floor, to pass the long evening contemplating the Packers' chances for the Superbowl- not good, he decided- and other matters of manly import.

Finally, a little before midnight, it was all over. We arranged the puppies close to their mother and washed our hands for the hundredth time. Filthy with birthing fluids, several noisome placentas in a bucket nearby, I poured two glasses of wine to toast our success.

Eleven puppies in four-and-a-half hours. That wasn't all that difficult, was it? Great work, Abbie... fantastic job for such a young mom!

That's the last time anything about this process seemed easy.

Chapter Two

"Potentially Life-Threatening"

A young and unprepared mother, a large litter... as soon as the puppies were born it seemed we had a new, full-time job: keeping Abbie and her offspring alive. Eclampsia, hydrocephaly, struvite crystals... over the weeks that followed whelping, we learned a whole new vocabulary and got an education about the medical issues that can affect a mother dog and her puppies.

The morning after Abbie gave birth, Dr. G. discovered she had a serious, and well-advanced, uterine infection. "Potentially life-threatening," she said, "But it usually responds well to antibiotics. I'll put her on one which shouldn't affect the puppies."

That was the first sign that the road was turning rough. It would get much worse, very quickly.

Things spiraled downward over the next three days. The smallest puppy, the black female with light blue yarn, was not nursing well. Dr. G. met us in town on Saturday evening with puppy formula and a syringe. We started feeding Light Blue by hand, and hoped for the best.

At least the other pups seemed all right, especially the five brown ones. They weighed more, on average, than their black siblings, and were more assertive at feeding time. Was this part of some genetic pattern, we wondered? Five brown puppies, every one large, every one lively... this could hardly be a coincidence, could it?

Yet on the third morning, my wife found one of the brown males lying motionless. Lifting him up, there was no doubt; he was gone. How could that be? The brownies were all so vigorous!

To make things worse, Abbie's manner changed sharply as the day wore on; suddenly she seemed to lose interest in the puppies. Panting, pacing, whistling through her nose like a very unhappy dog. She took to hiding under the bushes outdoors, digging a hole in the cool ground and refusing to return to the nursery. The behavior rang alarm bells for our guru: "That sounds like eclampsia. Call your vet right away."

"How is her gait?" the veterinarian asked over the phone. Kind of stiff, we reported.

"That's enough for me. Bring her in." Off into the snowy Sunday night, another half-hour trip down back roads. Dr. G. opened her office, drew more blood, ran more tests, and shot the dog up with calcium. That settled things for a while.

Our troubles were far from over, though. The next afternoon, Light Blue weakened. I picked her up to hold her and warm her, but she died in my lap. We began to despair. Were we going to lose all of

them?

"These things happen in a large litter," everyone told us, "especially in the first few days." It hurt nonetheless. I kept trying to maintain perspective, telling myself that eleven puppies were too big a burden for an unprepared mother, and that maybe the remaining nine would do better now that the maternal resources were not stretched quite so far.

An autopsy on the brown puppy supported this hope; it showed that he had simply not received enough nutrition over those first two days, and his organs had just shut down. The vet consoled us: "In the first 72 hours, the slightest thing can take a puppy out."

The situation was different for Light Blue; her autopsy results were puzzling. Dr. G. sent tissue samples away for testing; the answer that came back was surprising. She had died as the result of an infection involving common, and usually fairly harmless, bacteria. "Her immune system was defective," the vet explained. "This puppy was never going to survive."

And still, we wondered... if only we'd known Abbie was pregnant sooner, would things have been different? Surely we could have enriched her diet, given her vitamins... maybe the brown puppy would have... I stopped myself. Useless to speculate now; what's done is done.

Chapter Three

Just A Couple Of Pet Owners

All told, we made six trips to the vet's office in the first eight days: a taxing drive over snowy country roads. The calcium injection helped Abbie, along with two more through the coming week, but not enough. The dog never had sufficient milk for her litter after that episode.

We commenced a round-the-clock regimen of supplemental feeding. Susan stayed up each night until two a.m., then woke me. I handled the graveyard feeding, then caught a nap on a cot by the puppy room door. With nine hungry puppies, each serving took a bit more than two hours, from mixing formula to washing up.

All but two of the surviving puppies took to the bottles fairly well. Jack - we called them by names now - had a mild case of something called mega-esophagus, and made frightful gurgling noises as he sucked the bottle and swallowed; Wallace simply refused to take the nipple. "Mom or nothing," he seemed to say. We arranged private sessions with Abbie for this pair, before the others had a chance to drain the tanks.

Each morning we'd weigh the pups on a kitchen scale, then run a spreadsheet to track their progress.

"Pink gained ninety grams!" I'd exult, or lament, "Light Yellow only put on forty." We made sure that any pups who hadn't gained enough weight got first chance at Mom, and special attention at bottle time.

To our great good fortune, we didn't have to do this all alone. Our next-door neighbor became nearly a full family member, spending hours every day helping with feeding, and offering a mother's hints on mixing lump-free formula and choosing nipples that wouldn't clog. After several days, she managed to convince the most finicky puppy that formula was worth drinking after all, and we were able to discontinue his special feedings. Other friends and neighbors pitched in, as well; even staff from the animal hospital came over on their days off to lend a hand.

Disappointingly, Abbie seemed indifferent to the puppies most of the time. We tried to encourage her to stay with them by feeding her ice cream whenever she was in the whelping pen. It became a ritual: Abbie would lie down with the crowd and look up expectantly, one of us would guide the puppies into place, the other would feed Mom gobs of Blue Bunny Vanilla with dripping, sticky hands.



We could not blame Abbie for her lack of enthusiasm; she remained a very sick dog. The first antibiotic was not effective against her uterine infection, so Dr. G. tried a stronger drug. This one controlled, but did not cure, the problem.

How long had this infection been growing inside Abbie? we asked. "Hard to say, but certainly quite a while," the vet answered. "It could go back as far as the day she was bred."

"That figures," I muttered to myself. She'd come to us with kennel cough... and pregnant!... why not a uterine infection as well?

Our veterinarian became more and more anxious to take the purulent organ out. Finally, two days before Christmas, the time was right. The puppies were lapping baby cereal from a pan; nursing could end any time. The hysterectomy went smoothly, and Abbie recovered without further problems.

Dr. G. instructed us firmly not to let the puppies suckle anymore; the drugs she was now giving Abbie would pass into the milk. The pups kept trying nonetheless, so until their mother dried up completely, she wore one of my old tee-shirts, cinched at the end to make a puppy-resistant chest protector. We still had to keep a sharp eye out whenever she was around the babies; the outfit was by no means "puppy-proof!"

Things got better slowly. The little dogs put on weight day by day; eventually they outgrew the kitchen scale, and morning weigh-ins ceased. That mega-esophagus cleared up on its own, as had been predicted.

Veterinary problems were far from over, though. There were respiratory infections and urinary infections. We learned the pros and cons of various antibiotics, and got skilled at giving injections to a squirming puppy. One little male's heart didn't sound quite right: "Normal-sounding, but muffled," said Dr. G, perplexed. It took an ultrasound exam to confirm he was okay, after all.

And five of the nine puppies developed yeast infections in their ears. How did that happen? "Almost certainly got it from their mother," said the vet.

"Swell," I thought, "Another souvenir from Ohio."

For more than two months, it seemed that our life was a constant blur of puppy formula, paper towels, pills, injections, ear ointments, and veterinary appointments. Still, there was always the nagging worry- is there something we're overlooking? A problem we're not seeing?

Several weeks later came a message that we must have been doing things right. The couple who adopted big brown Sinbad reported that at his first checkup, their veterinarian looked over the stack of medical records that came with him, then commented, "You bought this puppy from a very good breeder. They thought of everything."

They told us he was surprised when they corrected him, "No, just a couple of pet owners."

Chapter Four

"Adult Female Available"

It all began back in September.

"This one sounds interesting," Susan announced. "Adult female available to an approved home."

"I called the place up. They're in Ohio, about an hour from Cleveland."

We were looking for a dog that summer, but not just any dog.

We were looking for a Newfoundland who needed a home.

We've been Newf owners for more than 30 years, sharing our lives with a succession of big, sweet, goofy, wonderful dogs. For most of that time, we've been a two-dog household, as well: one Newfoundland, and one smaller dog.

It wasn't always easy: my wife and I are both park rangers, and our jobs required us to live in some challenging situations. We'd managed, though; our dogs had shared a small cabin in the Sierra Nevada, lived at an isolated island outpost, romped in Wisconsin's north woods and on the beaches of Cape Cod.

Now, though, we'd sunk roots. We had a place of our own, with a big yard. I was looking at retiring soon. We'd have room, and we'd have time, to indulge ourselves with two Newfies.

But rather than going to a breeder and picking out a puppy, we decided that we'd look around to see if there were any Newfies in need of rescue.

It had been a few months since we lost Lizzie, the little mutt who'd walked up our driveway on a rainy evening in 1989, cold, hungry, and lost. The time seemed right to begin looking for her successor.

One thing for sure, we had decided as much fun as it is to raise a puppy, we don't want to add to population pressure by insisting on a puppy for ourselves this time. Looking for an adult dog who needed a home just seemed the right thing to do.

We tried making contact with the Newfoundland Club rescue program, but that did not pan out. Sue began volunteering at the local humane society, keeping her ears open for any word of a Newf in need.

Nothing doing. We were glad to find out that homelessness among Newfoundlands did not seem to be a problem anywhere in our area, but we still had hopes of providing a good home to a deserving Newfie.

So we widened our search, and went online. On September 7, my wife made a discovery: the web page for a kennel in northern Ohio, called Lighthouse Newfoundlands. We picked up the phone to learn more.

Her name was Abbie, and she was two years old. Her coloring was black and white, the style Newf people call "Landseer."

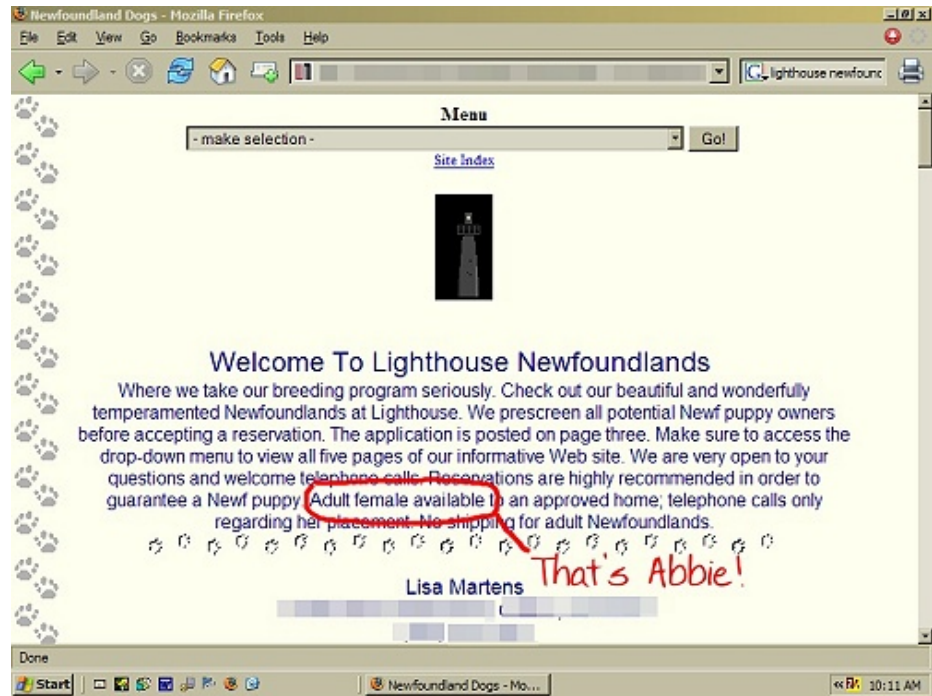
That would be a switch for us, I thought. All of our previous Newfies- Triton, Pilot, Nelson- had been black.

Why was she up for sale? we asked.

She's healthy, but her hips are only "fair," said the breeder, a chatty woman named Lisa. Abbie would be fine for a pet, she said, but not for breeding. Moreover, Lisa added, her husband had been dis-

abled in an accident, and she needed to reduce the number of dogs in her kennel. There was just too much work for one person to handle.

We thought things over for several days. A young adult female was just what we wanted, and we certainly weren't planning on breeding her. As far as the hip situation, we had plenty of experience with Newfies and their orthopedic problems, and figured we'd be as well equipped as anyone to look after her needs.



But what about this kennel? We could not find any information one way or the other about the place. Still, the elaborate web page made it seem like a well-established outfit, and included many reassuring notes:

"We take our breeding program seriously. ... We prescreen all potential Newf puppy owners before accepting a reservation."

The screening form asked all the right questions, then closed with a signature line below the promise,

"I understand and believe that owning a Newfoundland is a commitment for the lifetime of the dog."

Just the kind of attitude you want to see in a breeder. And the owner seemed personable and sincere over the phone. Over the next few days, we exchanged several e-mails and phone calls to firm up the details.

I'd take a week's vacation, and we'd make a leisurely trip to Ohio. It would be fun: we'd spend a week working our way south through Michigan, exploring the coastline and visiting historic sites, then pick Abbie up for the two-day drive to her new home.

I sent off a deposit, along with a letter proposing to pick Abbie up on the morning of October 15. A phone call several days later confirmed the arrangements. It was only then that Lisa explained that Abbie was not on her premises at the moment, but was staying at a place called Forest View Farms, a

kennel belonging to her business associate- a woman named Sandi. She'd pick the dog up and have her ready for us when we arrived, though.

Everything was set, it seemed. In just a matter of weeks we'd add Abbie to our family.

Chapter Five

"Maybe We Rescued A Newf After All"

The trip south went well; the autumn weather was perfect, and our plan progressed without a hitch. We spoke to Lisa on Wednesday to get directions and check for any last-minute news. She told us she'd be picking Abbie up at her partner's place the next day and would have her ready for us on Friday, as planned.

On Friday morning, October 15, we arrived at the kennel at ten sharp. We knocked at the front door, and after a moment, Lisa stuck her head out an upstairs window. "I'm not ready yet," she yelled down. "Could you just look around outside for a few minutes?"



Amused but not upset, we took up the invitation. The kennel facility was a large, garagelike building, with a set of outside runs enclosed by chain link fence. The four pens held a total of fourteen dogs, all but one a Newfie. There did not seem to be much in the way of shade for the dogs, and I hoped that they were not left there in the midday sun.

Lisa emerged after a few minutes, and invited us into the house. There were several more dogs indoors, including a Landseer confined to a crate. Could this be Abbie? No, we were told; Abbie was in the garage.

On seeing Abbie for the first time, I was struck with two things: she was beautiful... and she was a mess. Her face was incredibly sweet, and her markings were gorgeous. But oh, my Lord, I thought, *hasn't anyone been looking after her?*

This was not just a dog who'd been having fun and getting into the mud; this was a dog who'd been

neglected for a long time. Her coat was a mass of tangles and thick felt mats, and on her back legs, something that looked suspiciously like fecal matter.

Lisa caught our glance, and grew flustered. She doesn't normally let her dogs get like that, she quickly explained, but she hadn't had time to groom Abbie after picking her up at S___'s place. She felt so bad about it, she told us, that she was willing to knock fifty dollars off the price to pay for a session at the groomer's.

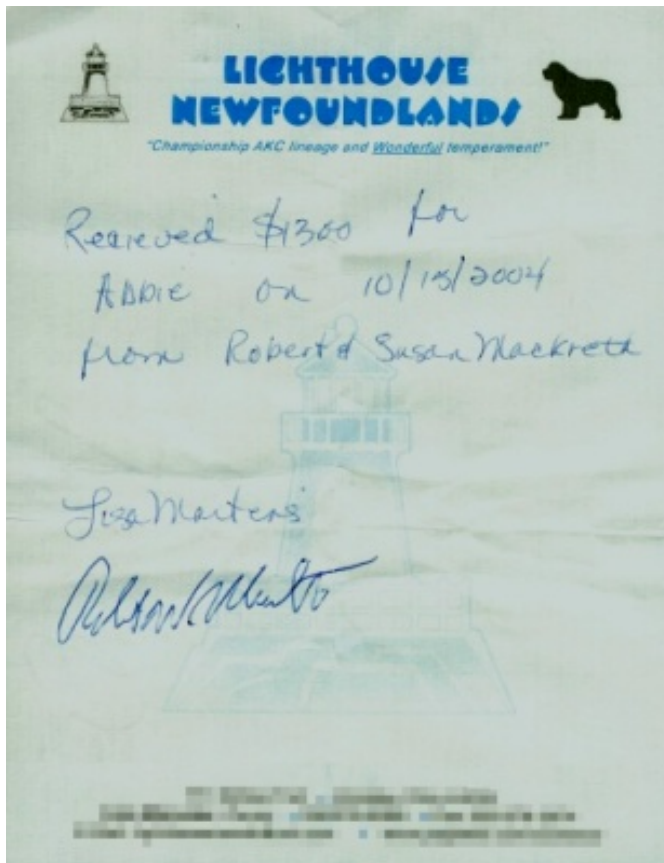
Remembering her sad tale about her disabled husband and her tough life, I made the mistake of feeling sorry for her. "A deal's a deal," I replied, declining the offer.

We brought Abbie inside and shared small talk for a few minutes over coffee. At one point, she mentioned a recent divorce. "So much for the disabled husband," I thought to myself. Things weren't quite adding up.

A bigger surprise came when we moved to conclude the deal. Having bought pedigreed dogs from established breeders before, I expected there'd be a contract for us to sign, registration papers for us to take home. There was nothing of the sort today.

Do you have her registration papers? *No, we were told, Sandi has them. But I'll mail them to you.*

Medical records? *No, but I'll get them to you.*



Do you have a contract for us to sign? *There's no need for a contract,* came the reply.

That was too much for Susan. "Let's write up a bill of sale, then."

Lisa rummaged around, and found a pad of paper, then quickly scrawled a receipt.

I wrote out the check, and exchanged it for the bill of sale. I folded the piece of paper, stuck it in my wallet, and gave it little thought for several weeks. When next it came to mind, I was profoundly grateful for my wife's prescience.

Okay, that's it, then. Abbie, want to get in the car? That's right, sweetheart, you can come home with us. Lisa, we'll watch the mail for those papers. Awfully nice meeting you... we'll keep in touch.

As we pulled out of the driveway, I reached back and ran my hands through Abbie's matted fur, looked over at my wife, and said, "You know, I think maybe we rescued a Newfie after all."

I was wrong. We'd rescued a dozen of them.

Chapter Six

"I Assure You She's Not Pregnant"

Our two-day drive home from Ohio went smoothly enough. That first night, once we settled into an Illinois motel room, I went out and found a 24-hour supermarket, and bought a pair of scissors. We spent an hour clipping the mats from Abbie's fur; once we finished, you could pet her without wanting to exclaim, "You poor thing!"

Back home, Abbie seemed to settle in well. She got on fine with Nelson, our adult male. On evening walks, she took a lively interest in the sights and smells of the neighborhood.

There were a few disturbing notes, however. For one thing, she acted as if she were starving. Most dogs love to eat, of course, and we've known our share of chow hounds, but this was something else. Abbie was flat-out ravenous, nearly all the time. We couldn't take her for a walk without her running into the bushes to eat grass and leaves.

She was coughing a lot, too, and tired easily. Out on our walks, she could barely keep up with Nelson, despite being two years younger.

A checkup with the vet was the first order of business. We still had not received Abbie's medical records from Lisa, so we gave her a call. "Do you know what vaccinations she needs?"

Lisa's answer astonished us. "You'd better get all of them. Sandi and I don't show our dogs, so they never leave the premises, and we don't need to get them vaccinated."

No vaccinations at all? Good God! Why didn't she just tell us this in the first place?

And to think of all those poor dogs, never leaving that place... Lord!

Digesting this news, my wife posed another question. Abbie had begun behaving strangely with her food- even though she usually seemed ravenously hungry, sometimes she'd push her dinner away and ignore it completely. Any idea why she might be doing that?

Lisa laughed. "That means Abbie thinks she's pregnant. But don't worry, she's not."

"I assure you, she's not pregnant," she added for emphasis.

Later that morning, our vet looked Abbie over, and diagnosed her cough as the result of a respiratory infection. He prescribed an antibiotic, then administered a full round of vaccinations. Just before leaving, I thought back to the phone call, and asked him, "There's no way she could be pregnant, is there?"

"Where'd you get her from?"



"A breeder in Ohio."

"An established breeder?"

"Yep." I could tell that he was thinking the same thing I was. There's no way on earth an experienced breeder could fail to notice that one of her bitches was in season. No responsible breeder could be careless enough to leave an ovulating female with a male.

He gave Abbie's belly a quick feel. "It's not always easy to tell, but I don't see anything for you to worry about."

But Abbie's behavior continued to worry us. After two weeks, it was time to bring her back to the vet for booster shots. Once again, we took the opportunity to ask, "Are you *sure* she's not pregnant?" and once again, he dismissed our concerns.

After a further week, the nagging question remained. Her fluffy coat made it hard to tell for sure, but it seemed to us that she was getting bigger. Time to try a new veterinarian, we decided.

An x-ray gave the answer: there were puppies, all right.

Eleven of them.

The new vet outlined our options. It was hard to tell just how far along Abbie was in her pregnancy. The puppies would probably be okay, despite the lack of prenatal care until this point. The antibiotics and live-virus vaccinations Abbie had received while pregnant would probably not cause birth defects, though one couldn't say for sure. She could probably terminate the pregnancy without harm to Abbie at this stage, she added, but the window was closing rapidly.

"When is she due?"

It's hard to say, the answer came. It could be a couple more weeks, or it could be tomorrow.

"Here's what let's do," she suggested. "You go home and figure out how you want to handle things. If you want to terminate the pregnancy, we'll need to do it right away. I'll book the surgery for you tomorrow- if you want to do things that way, bring her in. If you decide not to, just call in the morning."

So many uncertainties, so little experience to base our decision on. That evening, we stayed up late, doing research on-line, making contacts in the Newfoundland community, calling a third vet and every one of our knowledgeable friends.

Among the many phone calls we made that evening was one to Ohio.

Don't worry, Lisa told us. She'd take the puppies off our hands. She'd pay all of Abbie's medical expenses. She'd even come up, collect Abbie, deliver the litter back in Ohio, then return her to us once the puppies were weaned.

What is this woman thinking? I wondered. The dog is ready to give birth any day, and she wants to stick her in the back of a car for an 800-mile road trip?

"Lisa, speaking frankly," we told her, "our confidence level in your promises is pretty low. For one thing, it's been a month and you still haven't gotten around to sending us those registration papers you said you would."

"I have them right here!" she exclaimed. "I'm looking at them right now. I'll send them right away."

We'll get back to you, and let you know what we decide, we told her.

A few days later, Lisa sent us an e-mail. "Sandi has the papers..." It seems she *hadn't* been "looking at them right now," after all. That was not the first, nor far from the last, time we caught Lisa at variance

with the truth.

In the meantime, we came to some firm conclusions. Number one, we weren't comfortable with the idea of terminating the pregnancy at this late date. First thing the next morning, we called the vet and let her know: thanks for making all options available, but we're going to go through with this.

Equally importantly, we realized that Abbie and her puppies were our responsibility now. It was up to us, and no one else, to ensure their welfare. Given her past track record, we'd politely decline Lisa' offers of "help." We were through dealing with her, for good.

Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way.

Chapter Seven

The Puppy Room

There's nothing like a roomful of puppies.

Baby Newfoundland dogs grow fast, and it didn't take ours long to outgrow the plastic wading pool that served as their nursery for the first few weeks.

People often ask how big the puppies were at birth, and I answer, "About the size of a squirrel, without the tail." Within a matter of weeks, it seemed more fitting to compare them to a full-grown Yorkie.

By that point, it was time to give the puppies more room, so we gave them the run of the storeroom. We lined the floor with heavy-duty plastic sheeting, and collected all the newspapers we could find to scatter over the plastic. Daily cleanups exhausted the paper supply pretty quickly, but a new friend from the next town - a Newfie owner herself- rescued us with the suggestion to go straight to the newspaper printing plant.

The folks there were happy to give us several leftover newsprint rolls- enough to last as long as we needed.

The kind people at the *Daily Press* were not alone in their generosity, though. As news of our surprise litter spread throughout the community, we received several offers of donations to help defray expenses. We declined these, with thanks, and asked that people donate to the local humane society instead. One gift that we did keep, however, was a set of eleven tiny Christmas stockings- one for each of the dogs- that came from a Newf-lover all the way off in Illinois.





Support and encouragement like that raised our spirits as one health crisis seemed to follow another. Now that Abbie could no longer nurse her babies, even the food situation became critical. We cleaned out every can of puppy formula from every animal hospital in town, then waited anxiously for the UPS man to arrive with more. "This is the best present ever!" exclaimed my wife, as the big brown truck pulled up on Christmas Eve, bearing a carton of formula.

It was just about then, though, that we were able to introduce the puppies to baby cereal: a huge relief. Cleaning up the mess they made as they jostled for position around- and often in- the food bowls was nothing at all compared the hours of mixing formula, filling and washing bottles, and hand-feeding all the hungry pups. It wasn't time to catch up on sleep yet, but we were no longer falling behind so badly.

On Christmas Day, we were able to look back and review the events of one month: since Thanksgiving- it seemed so long ago- the puppies had learned to walk, to eat from a dish, and as of that very morning, to play with toys. The pups were all gaining weight steadily, and Abbie was recovering from her hysterectomy. The worst of the crisis seemed to be past.

Except for one thing.

Chapter Eight

Along Comes Cruella

"I can't believe this," I exclaimed, and set down the phone.

"That was Lisa's boyfriend- some guy named Terry. He's saying that legally they own Abbie's litter, and if we don't turn over the puppies, they'll take us to court."

It was December 5, 2004. The puppies were ten days old.

A few hours later, Lisa's e-mail arrived.

"I guess she's not kidding; she says they've already hired a lawyer."

Great. We adopt a dog, we bring her home, we find out she's pregnant. Next thing you know, she delivers eleven puppies, and we're up at 3 am each night bottle-feeding them.

And now the dog's former owner pops up like Cruella DeVille and says she's taking us to court so she can get hold of the puppies.

Not on your life, Cruella. Not on your life.

We knew we'd found the right lawyer when the Golden Retriever jumped up from beside a filing cabinet and came over to sniff our trouser legs.

"Jake! Leave the people alone!" Scott Clarke ordered, without appreciable effect. "Sorry about that. I hate to leave him at home all day, so I bring him here with me."

It's all right, we assured him. We were walking in with the scent of a dozen dogs permeating every pore; Jake could hardly be blamed for taking interest.

"Now, how can I help you?"

We outlined the situation. Scott's look became more and more incredulous as I recounted the story of Abbie's surprise pregnancy, the shocking phone call and the email that followed.

"And now she's saying that she's the puppies' legal owner, and she wants them," I finished.

"What in the world gives her that idea?" he exclaimed.

"Beats me, but I don't want to take the slightest chance with the welfare of those dogs," I said.

"When it comes time to place the puppies in their new homes, I don't want this hanging over their heads."

"I can't see what gives her the idea she has any claim whatsoever to those puppies. Was there any discussion of puppies in the contract?"

"There was no contract, " I told him.

"Did you at least get a bill of sale?"

"Yes- we insisted on it."

"Good thinking."

He pulled down a handful of leather-bound volumes. "There's plenty of case law," he reassured us, flipping through the pages. *"The owner of the mother is the owner of any offspring."*

He sketched out a plan. We had no idea what sort of action L____ and S____ were taking in the Ohio court system, but just maybe, we could beat them to the punch by filing our own case first.

"All we need to do is ask the court to issue a summary judgment confirming that you are the puppies' legal owner. You'll present your side of the case, the other party will present their side, and the judge will make a ruling on who's correct. If the facts you've given me are accurate, you should have nothing to worry about."

It sounded straightforward enough, but I worried. How long would this all take? In a couple of months, it would be time to send the growing puppies away with their new families. Even if we had room to house nine extra Newfoundland dogs indefinitely - and who does? - it would not be fair to the pups and their eventual adoptive families to hang onto them too long.

Scott ran his finger across a calendar. "About two months, if all goes well. Longer, if the case goes to trial."

Two months would be cutting it close.

And if things didn't go well?

I didn't allow myself to admit the possibility.

"About the fee..." I asked. Scott mentioned a figure. I blinked, but told him to go ahead. Money was of no concern; I'd get a second job if I had to.

Chapter Nine

"We Have Every Intention Of Getting Those Puppies"

Nine hungry puppies.

A sick mother.

And a fight on our hands to keep them.

The day after our meeting, Scott filed the papers to begin the process of establishing our ownership, once and for all. His confidence reassured us, but life remained trying. Our days and nights seemed a constant blur of feeding puppies, weighing puppies, cleaning up after puppies. Sleep was precious and rare. Visits to the vet seemed to be a daily ritual. My colleagues at work were understanding as I burned through all my accumulated vacation time.

All this was tough, but the worst thing by far was looking at our mother dog and her puppies and realizing, "Someone's trying to take them from us."

Yes, Scott said it will never happen... *but what if he's wrong?*

To add to the uproar, the local newspaper sent a reporter over to interview us. I was leery of speaking to him, but Scott said to go ahead. "It couldn't hurt."

We laid out our case to the reporter. Then he phoned Lisa, who presented her side: "Sandi and I still own that dog," she informed him.

My eyes bugged out when I read that statement. "Has she forgotten the bill of sale she signed?" I wondered.

"Legally, according to AKC (The American Kennel Club), Sandi and I are co-owners," she continued. "Sandi and I are entitled, if we want, per AKC, to take Abbie and her puppies."

I read that again: "Legally, according to AKC..." *What in the world?* What law school did this woman go to?

She concluded: "We wouldn't take Abbie, but we are entitled to take the puppies. *We have every intention of getting those puppies.*"

Next thing we knew, Abbie was front-page news in our little town.

But that wasn't all. In a vivid demonstration of the power of the Internet, the story spread quickly to a world-wide network of Newfoundland breeders and enthusiasts. Within a few days, we were receiving e-mails of support and encouragement from all across the U.S., and from as far away as England, Ireland, and Australia. It was mind-boggling: Abbie and her puppies were famous.

Sitting exhausted at the computer at night, wondering if the turmoil would ever end, it was a god-send to find messages like these waiting:

- "Please know that you have the support of a huge community. We are all thankful that you removed poor Abby from the conditions she was kept in, and are doing the best for her pups."
- "All I can say is thank goodness for people like you and Susan. Abbey deserves a family like yours"

and the puppies deserve a chance which you are giving them, which they would not have had with that breeder."

- "I just want to wish you well in your upcoming battles. Thank you for fighting for your girl and being such great Newf parents. Hold you heads up high, you are doing the right thing."

And dozens and dozens more. There was a Newfoundland community out there, we were learning, and they were cheering us on.

Chapter Ten

"Why Can't She Let It Go?"

We watched the calendar anxiously. Lisa and Sandi had 45 days to respond to the court and challenge our case. If they didn't reply, Scott explained, they would forfeit any claim, and the court would automatically rule in our favor. If they did respond, there would be a hearing, and then perhaps a trial. The prospect of a lengthy battle was daunting; I kept my fingers crossed: maybe those two would come to their senses and drop the matter. If they did really have their own lawyer- a claim I was beginning to doubt- surely he'd advise them against wasting their money on a baseless claim.

It didn't happen that way. As the deadline neared, and I allowed myself to hope that the struggle might soon be behind us, Lisa and Sandi finally responded with a long, disjointed letter, filled with bizarre assertions. They were the victims here, they told the court. They had generously offered to take Abbie and the pups out of kindness, and we had "vengefully" turned them down. They never had any intention of suing us, she said, and now their reputations as breeders were suffering from the publicity surrounding the case.

I shook my head in amazement. It would be easy to show the absurdity of these claims. Much of the letter contradicted emails that Lisa had sent us; for heaven's sake, in some places, it contradicted itself!

"Doesn't she realize I keep copies of everything?" I wondered. "If this case does go to court, we'll make her look like a fool. Why can't she let it go?"

Reading through the rambling letter, I could not shake a suspicion that one thing rankled Lisa most

of all: the money she'd lost when she'd sent Abbie off with a tummy full of puppies. According to her, we stood to gain several thousand dollars by selling the pups. "Several years ago," she wrote, "I purposely purchased a bred female, and I paid \$6,000 for the dam and her puppies. (The dog) had four puppies. Again, that was several years ago. On the other hand, they paid \$1,300 for Abbie, and now they have nine live puppies... I am certain they can make a profit of \$8,000.00."

Her contention was laughable. We had no intention of selling the puppies on the open market. Rather, we'd be placing the pups through the Newfoundland Club of America's rescue program. (Lisa knew this full well; she complained in the very same letter that our working with Newf Rescue was harmful to her reputation as a breeder.) The \$500 adoption fee this process would bring us per puppy would not even defray our veterinary bills, which eventually climbed past \$6,000.

Abbie was a very sick dog when she gave birth- there were lab tests, antibiotics, and finally a hysterectomy. Then there were x-rays and ultrasounds to try and figure out what was ailing the puppy we came to call Mary. One of the males needed an ultrasound, too, for a suspected heart problem. There were vaccinations, and there were antibiotics for all those ear infections, and.. you get the picture.

Throw in supplies -- we'd spent more than \$500 on puppy formula alone -- legal fees, court costs... well, those were some mighty expensive puppies when all was said and done.

Priceless, as a matter of fact.

Lisa was not alone, though, in focusing on the money angle.

Several weeks later, at the initial court hearing, conducted via conference call, her partner Sandi announced that she would drop her claims to the puppies if we paid her a \$1,500 stud fee for the "services" of her male.

Scott and I got a chuckle out of that one.

Her dubious offer spurned, Sandi blurted out, "I'm sure those people are making money here."

When Scott advised her that we were receiving a minimal adoption fee of \$500 for the pups, she snorted and exclaimed, "See! I told you!"

That reaction shocked me. Typically, a Newfoundland puppy from a reputable kennel will cost from one to two thousand dollars. A below-market price is normally a warning sign that you're dealing with a backyard breeder or a puppy mill.

I have no idea what it says about Sandi's kennel operation that she seemed so certain one can make a profit selling Newfie pups for five hundred dollars apiece.

There's only one thing I need to know about Forest View Farms: it's the kennel where they let Abbie get pregnant.



Chapter Eleven

Counting To Nine

"Five blacks, four browns... they're all accounted for."

"There's three here, four here, and two over there... we've got 'em all."

"I have six, you have two... we need another

brown one... here she is! We're okay!"

There are many ways to count nine puppies, and over the weeks, we nailed the skill down cold. First in the whelping pen, to make sure Abbie was not unwittingly lying on a puppy, then out in the yard, once the little Newfies were ready to enjoy a Northland winter.

And they proved themselves true Newfoundlands early on. It wasn't long before they were big enough and agile enough to make the storeroom-turned-nursery seem crowded, so we lined the carpeted rec room floor with plastic, and let them loose to play there during the day. They'd run and tumble and wrestle with each other, then suddenly, one by one, decide it was time for a nap.

Where was the favorite resting place in the big room? The cold, tiled section by the exterior door. Not only that, but the prize position of all was right at the doorsill, where the chilly draft blew over them.

These guys were Newfies, all right.

After several weeks, Dr. G. gave the word, "You can let them outside now." Ten or fifteen minutes at first, then an hour at a time: my wife and I and often a friend or two, all bundled and shivering, and nine happy, fluffy puppies crashing through snowbanks, rolling in the drifts, exploring the Northland winter world with delight.



After some time had gone by, it no longer seemed right to know the pups only by the color of their yarn collars-- "The purple puppy was wrestling with the cranberry puppy and then the pink puppy joined in!" -- so we gave each a temporary name. The boys got theirs from pictures of nineteenth-

century Newfoundlands in our history books, while the girls' names were more whimsical.

Personalities emerged as the puppies grew. Eleanor was an explorer, eager to probe every corner of the house when we opened the gate that blocked the puppy-room door. Jack didn't wait for us to open the gate; he learned to climb over it. He was the first to scamper out of the back yard and lead us on a chase toward the street, and he was the first to climb the basement stairs and invade the upper floor where the grownup dogs lived with the humans.



And Jack sucked. Hard. If Jack got hold of your finger while he was trying to nurse, you thought you were going to lose the nail. He even gave Susan a hickey: she must have taken the bottle away before he was quite full. When she lifted him toward her shoulder for burping, he latched onto her chin and cranked up the vacuum pump. By the time she pried him off, it looked like she'd caught a Mike Tyson left.

Jack explores

Bonnie was another escape artist, especially outdoors: she found every spot where she could wriggle under the fence. With a silky brown coat and spaniel-long ears, Bonnie was gorgeous, and I think she knew it. She had an air of self-assurance about her, and when she made up her mind on something, she'd stick with her decision. We resolved to make sure Bonnie went to a home equipped to handle her high spirits.

Robin was peppy and personable, full of joy; Katy was the most affectionate: a cuddler in laps and licker of faces. Wallace and Sinbad were large and dignified gentlemen, black and brown respectively, some day surely to be "Distinguished Members of the Humane Society" themselves.

"Which one is your favorite?" people would ask.

"You can't ask that question," we'd say. "How about if I asked which one of your children you liked best?"

"Well, then, are you going to keep any?"

How could we not? "Yes... one."

"Okay then, which one?"

A fairer question, and easily answered. Within her first week of life, Ernestine set herself apart. We gave her the name on the third day: the first puppy to distinguish herself with an individual personality. Last-born of the litter, she was big and beautiful, with a rich brown coat that a mink would envy, and snow-white paws for a touch of glamour.

More importantly, she was confident, curious, and assertive. First onto the teat at feeding time, she'd suck until Abbie ran dry, then go exploring to see if there were hidden nipples on Mom's back or sides. Again and again we'd find her stuck between her recumbent mother and the whelping pen wall. When the wading pool became too small for the gang, Ernestine became Queen of the Puppy Room; when we introduced the pups to baby cereal, she was always at the head of the feeding line.

No doubt in the minds of these proud grandparents: Ernie was the pick of a very special litter, and she was not going anywhere. Today, as I type, she's snoozing in the next room, just a few feet away.

Along with Mary. I'll talk about Mary soon.

Chapter Twelve

Day Of Judgment

The wheels of justice turned slowly. There were more papers to file, more waiting periods to endure, court dates to schedule. It began to look like it might be April or even May before the case would be resolved. Scott had warned us that things would take time, but still, we wondered: How much longer would we sit in limbo, with Lisa and Sandi continuing to assert ownership of the puppies? Would the case drag on indefinitely, preventing us from placing the pups with their new families?

Perish the thought that in six months, we'd find ourselves saddled with nine half-grown Newfies to feed and house; there were other reasons we wanted to make sure we could place the puppies well before then. Most importantly, there's an ideal age to introduce a puppy to a new home; wait too

long and the transition is rougher on all involved.

We talked things over with Scott. There's a question of the puppies' welfare, we explained.

"In that case," he instructed, "go ahead and send the pups off when you think best. The defendant's case is so weak, they have no reasonable prospects for success. Just make sure you tell any prospective adopters about the legal issues so they can back away if they're not comfortable."

In the end, Scott Clarke called their bluff.

The first hearing took place on March 10, more than three months since Lisa first made her shocking claim. The purpose of the session was to set a date for the trial, should one become necessary. The hearing took place in the form of a conference call: the judge in his chambers, Scott and I in his office, and the others phoning in from Ohio.

And the lawyer that Lisa had told me she'd hired back in December, on the day she started the ruckus? He'd somehow melted away.

Funny thing about that.

The question remained, however: would they persist in their claims, or would they take this occasion to bow out gracefully? At first, it seemed they wanted to drag things out, rehashing the arguments we'd heard before. Lisa began a long complaint: not only were the puppies rightfully hers, but all the publicity was hurting her business. She wanted an apology from us - *really!*- before she agreed to anything, and Sandi wanted her stud fee. The judge had little patience for her lament and cut her short; instead, he noted that it was apparent that a trial would be required, and set a date for early May.

My heart sank. *When would this end?*

That was when Scott swung into action, and suggested that Lisa and Sandi stay on the line after the judge signed off.

In the informal session that followed, Scott presented a lesson in the relevant law, then made the pair an offer. "Your claim has no chance at all," he told them bluntly. "Drop it now, and we will not go after *you* for damages."

This was reality, staring them in the face: a reminder that they might still be called to account for their actions. This little scheme might end up to costing *them* some money.

Lisa and Sandi grabbed for the life ring Scott offered. In a matter of days, we had their signed statements, renouncing any claim of ownership. There would be no need for a trial after all.

And on March 29, four months and four days after the puppies were born, the court recorded its judgment. As Scott had reassured us, as we'd known in our hearts all along, Abbie and her puppies

were ours from the day she joined our family.

Chapter Thirteen

Forever Homes

"I don't suppose we can keep all nine," I mused.

"We've gone over that," my wife replied.

Rolling around on the puppy room floor with furry bundles of curiosity climbing all over me, I thought back to a story I once read about a magic watch that had the power to stop time. Just twist the stem, the tale went, and you could live in that moment forever. From what I recalled, the fellow in the story never got around to seizing his moment; he was always waiting for something better.

I'd have no such trouble if I had a watch like that, I thought. I'd crank that stem hard, right now. Nine healthy, happy pups to play with me for eternity- what could be more fun?

But all along we knew that a time would come when most of them went off to new homes. Making sure that they were the right homes was the most daunting responsibility we faced.



The phone rang.

Hello? Yes, this is Bob.

Oh, you saw the article? Yes, that's us all right.

Well, thank you. We're doing the best we can.

What? Oh, thanks, but we're doing okay. If you want to make a donation, we're asking that you send

it to the Chequamegon Humane Association. They're a very good outfit, and they really need the help.

Oh... oh, my. You'd like one of the puppies? Well, there have been a lot of phone calls since that article came out. What we're doing right now is collecting names so we can get back to you...

We got more than forty calls within a week. Everyone assured us that they had all the right qualifications to give the puppies a perfect home. People described the great big farms where they lived- with pond, of course; told poignant stories about the beloved Newfies of their childhoods; or described the handicapped little boy who desperately needed Newf companionship.

How to choose? All we wanted was to make sure the puppies went to loving homes that were equipped to care for them properly, but never having done this before, making the selection was daunting. A few candidates were easy to toss aside- the guy who wanted to surprise his girlfriend with a puppy, for one- but so many others seemed reasonable and sincere.

It was hard. One acquaintance- a friendly shopkeeper we saw nearly every week- was desperate for a puppy, and brought her two delightful little boys over to see the litter. She seemed like a lovely person and a good fit, but when we called the veterinarian whose name she gave as a reference, a whispered answer came back: "I wouldn't give her a puppy."

"Why?" I asked.

"I can't say too much, but I would not give her one of my puppies."

Cryptic, but damning.

And when I told the woman there wouldn't be a puppy for her, she cried.

Our salvation came by way of the Newfoundland Club of America rescue program. Two days before the puppies arrived, we'd managed to make contact with the regional rescue coordinator, who offered to help us find suitable homes for the pups. She'd screen the candidates to make sure they met her rigorous standards, then we'd make the final selection from the families she referred to us.

Finally, the sad day came to say goodbye to the first of the pups. The adorable Katy was the first to leave. I hated to see her go, but there was a great consolation: she really wouldn't be leaving our life completely after all.

Back in the early weeks when Abbie had too many puppies and too little milk, we needed all the help

we could get with the round-the-clock bottle feeding. Among the volunteers who came by regularly were one of Susan's coworkers and her eleven-year-old son.

Partly they were doing this because they're just nice folks, but there was also another reason. They were pretty sure they wanted one of the puppies, and we were pretty sure they would make a great forever home for one of our babies. What better way to test these hypotheses than by sharing several weeks of feeding, playing with puppies, cleaning poo, and all the rest?

Sure enough, the intensive scrutiny confirmed our hunches. As time to make decisions approached, the grownups conferred and agreed: one of the pups would be going home with this family. The question was, which one?

Here's where I'll confess, now that time has passed, to being a little devious. Though we had already committed ourselves to keeping Ernestine and Mary, there was one other little girl who had me wrapped around her forepaw. The puppy with the pink yarn collar- the one we were calling Katy- was the sweetest, most affectionate little darling you could ever imagine. There was something about her that just radiated joy, and spread happiness to all who met her. The thought of sending her away broke my heart.

But then I started thinking- maybe she doesn't have to go too far! Whenever these people came over, I made a point of steering her their way. "I think Katy really likes you, Austin," I'd tell the young man loud enough so everyone could hear. Eventually I let the other grownups in on my scheming. Thinking with their heads rather than their hearts- quite unlike me- they agreed that Katy would be a perfect fit for this household. By this point, Austin was as taken with the little girl as I was, and he was ecstatic when his mother told him, in our beaming presence, that Katy would be his.

So when the day came to send this little sweetheart off with her new family, the pangs were not as severe as they might have been: she was only moving a few miles up the road. Katy- who now goes by the name of Ellie- has thrived in her new home, and every visit brings me new tales of the joy she adds to their lives. Her eager greetings suggest that she still recognizes me, too, and I have been known to make an utter fool of myself on chance encounters: a grown man and a big dog, rolling in the grass along Main Street to the amusement of passers-by.

Another puppy who would not travel far was the original Eleanor, whose name became Sophie. (Are you still with me on the names?) Sophie stayed right here in our town, and we see her frequently, at the park or supermarket, or walking down the main street with her humans. We even get to dogsit her, too, now and then.

Feisty Bonnie was a challenge to place. She had a mind of her own, always getting into trouble, and finding ways to sneak out of the enclosed yard to go exploring. Trained properly, she'd be a wonder dog, but it would take firmness and patience. "This is not a dog for novices," we agreed. "She has to go to someone who knows Newfies." The perfect match came in a family way off in Iowa, with two Newfs in their home already and a river for swimming right outside the door. Bonnie became their beloved Sawyer, well-known in online Newfie circles for her adventures and her flamboyant, "floofy" coiffure.

Something special happened when we placed Jack with a family who lived several hours away. We found we had a lot in common with the mom and dad- we shared interests, grew up in the same corner of the world, and three out of the four of us even attended the same college. What were the chances? Their little boy and girl were charming, and- we were soon to learn- in need of some grandparent figures in their lives. Before too long, Sue and I found ourselves happily filling that role, and we get together several times a year now, and receive regular updates on piano recitals and karate tournaments.

The others? Every single puppy went to a good, caring home. We still miss them, but we get pictures, we get letters, we get e-mails. Most importantly, they are well-loved and well cared-for, and that's what matters.

Epilogue

"There's Something About Mary," Indeed

We noticed that our firstborn puppy was different the day she was whelped. Five puppies were black, with modest white highlights. Five puppies were brown, with similar markings. But though the first one out of the gate was mostly black, she had a white ruff that nearly encircled her neck. We called her the "attempted Landseer," and named her- temporarily, we thought- after my eldest aunt, the matriarch of the family.

Just minutes old, Mary takes her first meal

Mary's head was narrow, with pinpoint eyes and a sharp, foxy muzzle, and she was by far the smallest of the nine surviving puppies. At every morning weigh-in, we'd watch the needle anxiously. How many grams has the little one gained? We gave her extra bottles and extra sessions with her mother, but she remained the runt of the litter.



At least she seemed full of energy. When we let the gang out of the puppy room, Mary would run around the basement at warp speed, sometimes barking, sometimes whimpering; but always, always on the move.

When we began letting the puppies outdoors, eight of them would scramble down the walkway to frolic in the snowbanks, explore pathways, maybe chew on a bush. Mary would spend several minutes running frantically back and forth along the wall of the house. She'd eventually make her way to the open yard, but rarely to the spot where her brothers and sisters were playing.

For a while, her chief amusement was a game called "barking at the corner." She'd sit with her face in the southeast corner of the room, nose inches from the wall, and scold the paneling without letup. I have no idea what that spot on the wall did to offend her, but she was angry at it, for sure.

And one other thing... Mary never looked up. She'd swing her gaze to either side, she'd look down, but she'd never, ever look upwards. Not if you stood above her and called her name, not if you held a treat in front of her nose and gradually raised it past her plane of view. Not ever.

Were there problems with her eyesight? Her hearing? Was there a structural defect in her neck that prevented her from raising her head? Test after test left us all puzzled. Her eyes and ears worked, an x-ray showed her neck to be normal. Blood tests, cultures, urinalysis: they only deepened the mystery.

One thing that urinalysis did show: Mary was having kidney and bladder trouble. Though she showed no signs of discomfort, her urine contained large quantities of crystals called "struvites," showing evidence of bladder problems. Granular clumps of cast-off kidney cells were even more worrying; they hinted at a chronic malfunction in those vital organs. When the first two courses of antibiotics had little effect, we found ourselves FedExing a bottle of puppy pee halfway across the country to a university veterinarian with specialized expertise.

Seven weeks old.



And the reasons for all her puzzling behavior? The most likely answer finally came from an ultrasound exam. Pushing the equipment to its limits, the radiologist finally got a glimpse inside Mary's skull. Pointing to dark blotches, he gave us the news: "That's fluid. I'd say I'm more than fifty percent sure that she's hydrocephalic."

That's not the sort of health bulletin you want to hear. Surf around the web and you'll quickly find passages like this:

Hydrocephaly results from an accumulation of fluid in the brain, and it causes the brain to degenerate. The afflicted dog often becomes disoriented or runs into objects while walking. Sadly, dogs with this condition don't usually live long. For those who survive, treatment often is ineffective. Hydrocephalic dogs often are euthanized.

Bummer.

Bummer, bummer, bummer.

Even before we got that bit of bad news, we'd realized that Mary was not suitable for adoption. Whatever time she had, she'd be spending it with us. Though we'd initially planned on keeping only Ernestine for ourselves, what's four Newfs when you have three? Her "temporary" puppy name became permanent.

Meanwhile, we consulted an army of veterinary specialists to see how we could provide her with the best life possible. These encounters were not always encouraging. One vet offered to operate and take an inside look at her urinary tract. "With all her other problems, if I find something wrong in there, we can just not let her wake up."

We said, "No thanks."

One snowy winter day, we drove four hours to visit a big-city neurologist. "I could operate on her, but

it wouldn't do much good," he advised us, then casually added, "You know, you shouldn't feel obligated to keep every puppy alive."

It's not a matter of obligation, I thought; it's a matter of love.



All grown up, October 2006

Now here it is, four years since she showed up, and Mary's not doing too badly at all.

She's still a shrimp by Newfoundland standards, substantially smaller than her sister and her mother. But she more than holds her own in wrestling matches with the other dogs

I suppose some would say she's a bit funny-looking: her head seems small for her body- and as her coat grew in, the white ruff faded from view. I think she's cute, but I'm biased.

She's a slow learner, and she still makes more than her share of mistakes in the house. But modern carpet cleaners work very well.

Mary may never earn a "Versatile Newf" degree, but she has learned to walk on a leash. She likes to hold it in her mouth as she walks, and we're happy to let her. She knows that doing a "Sit" in her crate will cause the humans to bring out her dinner bowl.

With an adult body and the mental age of a young puppy, she's frisky and playful as she gambols in the yard. Swimming and fetching may be beyond her capability, but she's the tug-of-war champion of the family. "You want to play, Gramps? Let's get it on!"

Happily, the urinary problems are history. She does have occasional bad days marked by frenzied

barking and circling, but they don't come that often, and we've found ways of calming her down. After trying several medications, we finally found that the best treatment was lots of tender loving care. Several minutes of cuddling with Grandpa works wonders, we found... for man and beast.

More than anything else, Mary is sweet.... everybody who meets her loves her. Kids take to her in particular; the youngsters who visit invariably run past Nelson, Abbie, and Ernestine to spend time with Mary.

Whatever happens in the future, we've had four good years with our special girl, and with a bit of luck, there will be more to come.

Mary's message, it's clear, is, "Don't be too discouraged when you get bad news."

And never, never, never give up easily.



After a swim, October 2007