

WATER PUP

PETER PARNALL



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WATER PUP

written and illustrated by
Peter Parnall

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For Teenie P.

WATER PUP

Prologue

The air was very still.

Raven was still as well. He perched on the tallest dead stub of a boundary pine at the edge of a large field, watching.

Nothing moved.

No blade of brittle timothy grass swayed, and the dried cones of a sea of black-eyed Susans were still, just waiting for the wind to dance and help them spread their seed.

Near the center of the field lay a large pond. It nestled in a natural basin and was fed by runoff from the surrounding land and five small springs that welled up though the blue clay at its southern end.

Raven's end.

Throughout the year, except when ice sealed the view, Raven came. He came in the late afternoon, for he knew about reflections. He knew that when the sun fell behind the pines that bordered the field's western edge he did not see clouds or dancing light on the surface of the pond, he saw the bottom. He saw the bottom in the shal-

lows, around the edges, where tadpoles, frogs, and minnows lived . . . and sometimes made mistakes.

Raven's aim was to take advantage of mistakes.

But on this warm, quiet September afternoon he was, for the moment, content to sit and watch.

Four or five feet from the edge of the pond, where lily pads grew in deeper water, he could see young leaves that had not quite reached the surface. They had flattened out in anticipation of their final position barely inches away, and some late-hatching tadpoles rested upon them. Sometimes they fed on the algae that had already begun to form, sometimes . . . sometimes . . . they just rested.

No wind marred the surface of the water. No reflections. No ripples of light. The underwater leaves and their soft little hitchhikers seemed to float in midair.

Raven watched.

Others watched, as well.

Mouse and his brethren waited and watched for shadows to lengthen before venturing forth in search of an evening meal. Heron watched Bass, and from his lair beneath the cover of pickerel weed an old frog waited for mayflies to hover within reach of his sticky tongue. Two feathered jewels watched from high in the safety of a thistle plant. Goldfinches. They watched a mother fox teaching her three fat pups the art of catching crickets.

This was September. Cricket month.

Raven's attention was so taken by the activity of the cricket hunters that he hadn't noticed another who had entered the scene.

Halfway back up the family's route into the field lay a fourth pup. A yellowish tan. She was larger than the others, and her ears were different. One hung down, and

the other looked as though it wanted to stand up, but it folded a bit, and pointed to the side. There were shadows between her ribs. She was lean, and her coat did not shine like the fur of the roly-poly cricket-eaters.

The thin puppy had been observing the fox family for some time. She had seen them several hours earlier, when they were walking down a logging road near Raven's nighttime roost. At first she had wanted to run to them, for she sensed a kinship with the foxes, and she wanted desperately to share it. But something made her hang back.

The lop-eared puppy followed the family at a distance. The mother was aware of Lop's presence, and at one point, when her pups were strung out too far behind and she thought the ungainly puppy had ventured too close, she bared her teeth. After that, her own pups stayed close to her side.

The family unit was familiar to Lop, and the sight of it prompted an empty feeling in her heart. A loneliness. She missed her mother and brothers. She remembered the warmth, the fun, the good food that were always there.

Mostly she remembered her mother.

Chapter One

Late May—a cool, drizzly night. Too cool for mosquitoes to be searching for their first blood meal, but not so for blackflies. They had been emerging from their watery nurseries with a vengeance.

Cool, warm, sun or moon, they swarmed, drawing energy from anything warm that moved. Their bites drove even Moose to distraction, and Raccoon. Deer sought the protection of dense fir growth, but no one could escape the pesky flies.

An old dog stood by the side of a lonely country road, hardly noticing the tiny insects that attacked her nose. Her gaze was fixed in the direction she had last seen car lights. *Her* car lights.

She was a yellow-colored dog. Her mother had been a yellow Lab, and her father was a mongrel of particularly fine parentage. Royalty of sorts. *His* father had been a malamute who had seen the center of many show rings, and his mother had been a bull terrier. She had not only been shown throughout her life, but had walked away

with just about every blue ribbon her owners went after. They were more than a little angry when she got out one night and visited her malamute friend next door.

The old dog began to shiver. The light rain had begun to penetrate her fur, for she had not inherited the dense undercoat of her long-haired grandfather. Her gaze never wavered from the pavement where it disappeared into the night, and she did not understand. She expected her people to return. The minutes dragged by, then an hour passed.

She did not understand.

An emptiness began to creep into her heart. It joined the wet in her fur and the confusion that was beginning to overtake her.

She did not want to stray. Something *told* her not to stray, but after almost two hours standing in the rain she began slowly walking along the side of the road toward where her car lights had disappeared.

Dog was not large. She weighed perhaps sixty pounds. She was quite old, however, fourteen in fact, and had given birth to eleven litters of puppies during those fourteen years.

This night she walked as an old dog would, with short carefully placed steps. It was very dark, and she was trying to see down the road, while at the same time avoiding the numerous sharp stones along its edge. The rain and a heavy heart weighed her down as she made her way slowly through the dark.

An added weight made her anxious. For within her were six heavy puppies very close to being born.

Drizzle turned to rain. Then wind entered cruelly into the night and began to drive wetness against the lay of

her fur. Discomfort overtook confusion, and in the manner of her less domestic ancestors, Dog's instinct for survival quickened her pace. Those within her womb kicked and rolled as the unsteadiness of her gait broadcast a change in the condition of their world.

Somehow they sensed an urgency, for the blood that coursed through their mother's veins instilled in them new instincts, too, no matter how unrefined.

Warmth . . . safety.

Human words, but instinctive desires that contribute to survival on cold, rainy nights.

"Hurry."

The old dog had gone just a little way when she heard a faint motor sound. She wasn't sure of it at first, but each gust of wind brought it a bit closer. Dog stopped, turned, and strained to see through the sheets of rain.

Then lights—she saw headlights approaching, and her heart beat faster. They had come back! A sense of relief flowed over her, for now the rain didn't matter, the cold did not matter, she could concentrate only on the approaching lights and their promise of warmth and safety. Her tongue lolled to the side and her heart was full, as she anticipated the comfort of a warm car seat.

But the car did not slow down. It sped past her, and over the roar of the engine she heard,

"Damn dog!"

Her heart fell once again as this new set of red taillights disappeared through the rain.

Bewildered, Dog looked woodenly down the road in each direction, then turned and moved one foot in front of the other until the repeated motion seemed to have some purpose. She was totally soaked now, not only with

