

Christmas at Sea Pines Cottage

PROLOGUE

The big yellow school bus eased to a stop amid the squeal of air brakes. By the time the young boy jumped down from the bottommost step, the puppies were already at the gate jumping and yipping their collective greeting.

The child unlatched the gate and as he stepped through was besieged by seven wiggly pups. He fell giggling to the ground as his face and neck were thoroughly licked and nuzzled.

The sound of his name brought him to his feet with the puppies scurrying around him vying for a free hand to receive his pets.

The older boy stood outside the gate. “Mom wants you to go in and rest or you won’t be able to go trick or treating tonight.”

The small boy ruffled the ears of each of the seven puppies and then left, skipping alongside his brother.

The older brother, with some distain said, “Just because dad breeds dogs doesn’t mean the puppies are yours.”

Without responding, as young children are wont to do, he asked his big brother, “Are you taking me trick or treating or is mom?”

Shaking his head at the unheeded warning he conceded, “I am. Mom thinks I’m too old, the only way she’d let me go was by my agreeing to take you. So Jimmy, Bobby and their pesky little brothers are coming over and we’re all going together.”

Getting excited, “Are you going to dress up, too?”

Grabbing his little brother up and pretending to carry him off, “Yeah, I’m going to be a pirate. Argh.”

The little boy giggled with pleasure and expectation.

Night fell and the only sound was the wind rustling the trees that surrounded the kennels.

Snuggly warm in the embrace of his siblings, the young pup suddenly raised his head, his acute hearing discerning a sound other than the wind. He sniffed the air, his sensitive nose recognizing the older of the two boys who had visited them earlier in the day.

The puppy got up and trotted to the gate in anticipation of a treat or ear rub. The other puppies roused by his movement followed. They waited at the gate sniffing the air and milling around the locked gate.

Suddenly three human forms darted out of the darkness, causing the motion controlled lights to come on. As they ran past the puppies' enclosure, one of them tossed something into the center of the yard.

Expecting some tasty treat, the puppies rushed to where the object lay. One pup nudged the thing with his nose, in spite of the strange hissing noise it made and yelped when a small spark singed the fur of his muzzle. The other puppies stood back away from the thing as it continued to hiss and spark.

The light at the end of it grew brighter as it started to spin in a circle. As the puppies drew farther away from it, the objectionable thing started exploding, one small explosion quickly followed another. The animals running helter, skelter to get away from the horrid noise and find safety; piling into the deepest corner of the kennel. After what seemed an interminable time the loud popping finally stopped.

The puppies sensitive ears were still ringing when the three human boys rushed in through the gate and picked up the offending object.

The boy the pup recognized said, "Gotta get this out of here. My dad will kill me if he finds out about this."

Another boy said as they locked the gate and walked away, “Yeah, but did you see they way they all scattered and whined?”

METEOR

Meteor is my name.

That is, of course, my human name. Or, more precisely, since I am not myself a human, it is the name that was bestowed upon me by Robert on the day I first arrived here at the gray shingled cottage sheltered among the pines on the wild dunes of Cape Fear.

Though my keen hunter's eyes have since grown dim with the passage of too many autumns, each wondrous detail of the bright November afternoon when I was named remains as fresh and untarnished within my memory as if it had happened today.

It was the day after, what humans call, Thanksgiving. In the two weeks preceding, Sam had been able to sell 'as pets' my brothers and sisters. It disgusted him that we would never be of value as anything but household pets and he was glad to be rid of us. I alone remained.

After a whispered conversation with his female counterpart I was unceremoniously put in a cardboard box in the back of Sam's truck. But before Sam could drive away the woman returned and secured a red and green bow around my neck, saying I was now a Christmas puppy. Then she gave me some wonderful meat that she said was leftover from dinner the day before.

"Be good," she whispered as she kissed my nose.

Jumping down from the flat bed of the truck she walked around to the window and kissed Sam, gently reminding him that I was just a puppy. Sam snorted as the truck rumbled off past the sign identifying what had been my domicile, Prairiewood Kennels - Home of Champion Retrievers.

The truck came to a stop at a place with which I was unfamiliar. I could smell the sea and feel its mist on my fur. After peering over the edge of the truck I retreated again to the box, shivering from an unnamed fear rather than the fierce cold that was blowing in from the restless sea.

Robert, at twenty-four, was in the very prime of his youth then. Tall and tan and deep-chested, his tangled brown hair streaked gold from the white hot sun of the summer, he appeared like a young god to the bewildered pup he found shivering in the corner of a soggy corrugated box in the back of Sam Wilson's old pickup truck.

I was that frightened pup.

Sick and dizzy from the noxious exhaust fumes that had swirled about me throughout a long cold ride in the clattering truck bed, my future could not at that moment have seemed more dismal. Sam Wilson had made it clear that I was a disgrace in his eyes as well as those of any other human who knew and seriously bred dogs for hunting in the great marshlands that dominate this sparsely inhabited region of the Carolina coast.

My life was over before it had properly begun.

Or so I had believed then. Less than a span of seasons had passed since I had been weaned from my mother's milk. But though I was bright of eye and swift of foot, and despite my noble blood and the fine, strong features that had seemed to promise a happy lifetime filled with the honors that, rightly, accrue to champion retrievers, I had become an embarrassing burden to Sam Wilson; a useless creature to be disposed of as quickly and as quietly as possible.

Cowering in the corner of my foul box that afternoon, I was unwilling even to look up at the curious young man who had climbed onto the truck to look me over. Instead, I curled up in my box and whimpered at the cruel circumstance that had so abruptly reduced my life to such a sorry state. Then, without warning, I felt myself being hoisted high into the air, held up and closely scrutinized by Robert's calm gray eyes.

Oh, those eyes! Warm and compassionate and wise beyond the years reflected in the smooth, unlined face that held them, they bored into my very soul, searching there for something--I knew not what--but betraying no trace of the naked contempt I had so lately seen in the eyes of Sam Wilson when he looked at me.

Suddenly, my soul was filled with an unreasonable hope. Perhaps this human would give me another chance to prove my worth. Although truly I dreaded the prospect of returning to the scene of my humiliation and was not at all certain that I would not fail again, still, I forced myself to cease my whimpering. And as pups will often do when they sense true goodness and compassion radiating from a human being, I lavishly licked Robert's square, handsome face.

To my great surprise and joy he laughed out loud, a soft baritone sound that made me shiver with such pleasure that I even forgot for the moment the terrors of the grim trial I had so recently failed. Then Robert set me on the sandy ground and tossed a bit of driftwood far down the beach. It disappeared among the curling green waves that were crashing onto the cold sands in advance of a waiting Arctic storm moving in from the east.

Gulping in a huge breath of clean sea air, I felt my sickness vanish as if by magic. And I ran after that twisted stick of wood as though my very life depended upon it, which, in a way, I was certain that it did. For, from the moment I heard Robert's exuberant laughter and looked into those placid gray eyes, I had decided that my only chance for happiness lay in gaining the approval of this young and handsome human.

Pounding into the chilly backwash of a receding wave, I pounced on the thrown driftwood with a spectacular splash. Then gripping the trophy tightly in my jaws I dashed back to where the men were standing, and heard Sam Wilson talking in low, serious tones.

My heart sank as I trotted up all dripping and salty to drop the stick like an offering at Robert's booted feet.

Sam Wilson--who, for all his understandable lack of warmth toward me, was a fair and honest man--was carefully explaining to Robert in his slow Outer Banks accent that he wanted it clearly understood I would never be useful as a hunting dog.

"He will not stand to guns," Wilson proclaimed, casting a disgusted look my way. What he meant, of course, was that the sound of a hunter's rifle going off just above my head did remind me of that horrible night.

For though Sam trained me to know that the dreaded explosion would come and not harm me, and I could always steel myself to point the game and stand rock steady, ultimately the awful boom of the rifle shot never failed to take me by surprise, hurting my sensitive ears and throwing me into a blind panic from which my only instinct was to flee.

On that fateful November morning, after endless working sessions on home ground Sam Wilson had taken me along with my brothers and sisters out of our kennel for what he called a test. A test of what we had no idea but leaving the pen that had become a constant reminder of our terror initially brought all of us joy. And we happily jumped into the bed of Sam's beat-up old pick-up truck.

The trip was fairly short although it was a place none of us recognized. Sam allowed us to run free amid the tall trees, frosty fallen leaves crunching under our paws. After a short time of sniffing out a banquet of wildlife we were all called back to the truck. Sam stood next to the battered old vehicle with a the shotgun on his shoulder. The sight made my stomach start to churn.

Once we were all standing at point around him, amid the strange surroundings, Sam raised the gun and fired a single shot into the air, a shot that sent all of us fleeing like frightened squirrels into the sun-dappled autumn woods.

His normally sallow cheeks as crimson as ripe apples, poor Sam had been forced to drag us all cowering from the woods, knowing that his months of breeding and training were a total loss and that not one of us would ever be a gun dog. His anger at the time, energy and money lost was palpable even to seven terrified pups. There would never be a champion hunter among us.

"I do not hunt," Robert quietly replied after Sam Wilson had said his piece. Then he bent and gently ran his fingers through the thick mat of wet fur just behind my neck. "Nor do I ever intend to hunt," he continued. "But I am going to be wintering over here on the Cape this year," He jerked his chin toward the gray shingled cottage half-hidden among the blowing pines, "and I think that I'd enjoy having this little guy around to keep me company."

Sam Wilson nodded and cast a dour look at the pair of us, the dog that couldn't stand to guns and the strange young man who didn't hunt and, to boot, was planning on spending a harsh Cape Fear winter in an isolated cottage on this remote coastal island, far from others of his kind. "Suit yourself," he said in a tone that seemed to imply that Robert and I deserved each other.

Until that moment, I had believed that I completely understood Sam Wilson's motive for bringing me out to this desolate island and its strange inhabitant. It had seemed obvious that he was hoping to recoup some portion of the feed and vet bills he had lavished on what had turned out to be a useless hunting dog by selling me to a lonely man who wanted only companionship. Therefore I was puzzled when the handful of wrinkled bills that Robert offered him were gruffly refused.

"Nossir," said Sam Wilson, sweeping his old felt hat from his pale, balding head and looking down uneasily at his feet. "I could not take money from a man who has given what you have given for your country. The whelp is yours if you want him." And with that, he clapped the hat back onto his head, climbed into his old truck and wished Robert a Merry Christmas as he drove away.

"Well now, you're the first good thing I've ever gotten out of that damned war and a Christmas present to boot," Robert laughed as we watched Sam's pickup disappear behind a line of dunes. When it was gone, he looked down at me with a grin.

"Now what shall I call you?" he asked and bent to retrieve the soggy stick of driftwood hurling it skyward once more. I joyously streaked down to the beach with the chilly November sunlight flashing like quicksilver against my glistening amber coat.

"Meteor!" I heard him call as I plunged headlong into the bone-chilling maw of a towering Atlantic comber. "Seeing you run like that reminds me of a meteor streaking into the sea."

Thus I got my human name. And thus began my life here at Sea Pines Cottage. It has been a life that I would not exchange for any other, even were the Maker in His wisdom to grant me an endless span of seasons in this world.

For mine has been a life that any dog would envy.

A life built on unconditional love.

SEA PINES COTTAGE

With the pale sun slipping behind the dunes and a bank of dirty storm clouds sliding ominously across the slate-gray sea, I trotted up a sandy path at Robert's heels on that long ago November afternoon. If I noticed then the odd stiffness in his gait or the one knee that seemed not to bend at all as he walked, I do not remember it. But then I was little more than a foolish pup at the time, and a very excited one at that.

At the top of the path we stepped into the shadows of a miniature pine forest sheltered among the dunes, and onto a soft brown carpet of fallen needles. Robert stopped there to lean heavily against the trunk of a tree.

"Well, Meteor," he said, "what do you think of the place?"

Raising my nose from its delightful exploration of the fragrant forest floor, which was rich with the tantalizing scents of field mice and hare, and more varieties of seabirds than I could name, I looked up to see my handsome young master gazing fondly at the weathered old cottage nestled in among the trees. Beneath a steeply peaked slate roof thickly blanketed in pine needles the walls of the little structure were sheathed in rough gray shingles of many sizes that reached right down to the ground.

Identical mullioned windows containing sparkling panes of wavy antique glass were precisely situated on either side of the scarred oak door, an attempt on the part of the original builder, I think, to impart some sense of balance to the ramshackle fisherman's dwelling. However, the placement of those two small windows equidistant from the cottage door only accentuated the wandering uneven lines of the hand-cut shingles. And I had the unsettling impression that the whole cottage was leaning drunkenly seaward and might tumble over onto its side at any moment.

Still, happy just to be away from Sam Wilson, I yipped cheerfully and rushed ahead to politely sniff the low front stoop. Grinning with pleasure at my seeming excitement, Robert

hurried up the path and opened the rounded oak door for me. I hesitated on the threshold, for I had never been allowed inside a proper human house before having lived a kennel existence up to then. But with Robert's encouraging smile prompting me to enter, I stepped inside and gazed about in wonder at the dimly lit interior of my new home.

What can I say about Sea Pines Cottage that will not sound like the mere nostalgic ramblings of a rheumy old canine? How does one describe comfort and snugness and elemental feelings of well-being that reach out welcoming arms to surround and embrace one's very soul? Sea Pines Cottage possessed those qualities, and more, exuding an indefinable impression that one could rest safe within its walls, protected there from all harm.

Unlike the dun exterior of the cottage, with its colorless shingled walls and sagging slate roof, the big main room on the ground floor fairly glowed with the richness of lovingly varnished woods and warm fabrics. Beneath the heavy ceiling beams, soft rugs woven from cleverly twisted strands of gaily colored rags dotted the polished floorboards like so many flower covered islands. The softly cushioned wooden furniture was draped with bright woolen throws and intricately patterned Indian blankets, a few of which also hung on the pine paneled walls beside groups of faded photos and one truly gigantic billed trophy fish.

But perhaps the very best feature of the room was the big stone fireplace at its far end. Broad and smoke-blackened with age beneath a heavy wooden mantle sawed from the cracked timbers of a sailing ship that had long ago perished on the rocks of Cape Fear, the fireplace had been built to serve as the main room's primary source of both heat and light.

As if to confirm its homely utilitarian purpose, a driftwood fire was crackling in the fireplace beneath a bubbling kettle hung on a stout iron hook that could be swung out over the hearth. And from the fire-stained vessel there issued the delightful smell of a hearty stew that was almost ready to be eaten.

In a far corner of the room, beneath many shelves of well-worn books, sat the wide table where Robert did his work. The table contained only a pressure lantern--for, back then, the cottage had no electricity or any other modern conveniences--stacks of paper and a tall, old-fashioned typewriting machine.

As it was on that first day, the main room of Sea Pines Cottage remains fixed in my mind's eye as the most wonderful room that I have ever seen.

Robert led me to the hearth and bade me sit by the fire. I gladly complied, for I was thoroughly chilled from my recent immersions in the sea and my coat was still damp. As I sat there soaking in the delicious warmth radiating from the flat stones, Robert vanished through a low doorway that I later learned led to the kitchen, a modest affair containing cabinets, an old wood stove and a hand operated pump.

He returned a moment later, carrying a rough strip of toweling and a flat tin pan. My mouth watered uncontrollably as I watched him swing the heavy cauldron out over the hearth and transfer several chunks of steaming beef onto the pan. These he covered with ladles full of dark, rich gravy. Then, putting the pan aside to cool, he set about roughly drying my coat, toweling and rubbing the yellow fur until I fairly glowed all over.

When he had finished drying me, Robert carried the pan to a nook by the hinged woodbox at the end of the hearth and placed it there.

"This will be your corner," he told me with quiet authority. "When I need peace and quiet to do my work, this is where you must stay." He made a small gesture with his hand, indicating that I might attack the wondrous meal he had set for me, which I did with such puppyish enthusiasm that, afterwards, I confess, I had to be toweled dry all over again, in order to remove all of the gravy that had splashed onto me.

Daylight was quickly fading and the first strong gusts of the oncoming Arctic storm were bending the tops of the pines as Robert led me outside once more. Circling around behind the

cottage, he stepped into a large shed containing the canvas shrouded form of a little sailing sloop. Picking a big ring of keys and a lantern from a peg, he led me down another long path between the dunes and out onto the cold, windswept beach.

The angry green waves were advancing onto the sands with growing fury as we walked toward the imposing white tower of a brick lighthouse set high atop a jumble of massive granite boulders half a mile away at the very tip end of the cape. Squinting against the sting of the blowing sand and salt spray that filled the air, we passed a tumble-down lightkeeper's house with its empty windows rattling in the gale.

The house, Robert explained over the roar of wind and sea, was a relic from the days before satellites and radios, when keeping the lighthouses beaming out their lifesaving signals to ships in these stormy and treacherous waters was a vital and honored profession requiring the full attention of a lightkeeper and his whole family.

Nowadays, he added with a trace of sadness in his voice for something that had been lost and could never be regained, most of the coastal lights were automated affairs requiring only the occasional attention of part-time lightkeepers like himself, men chosen for no other reasons than that they lived nearby and could be counted upon to daily monitor the diesel generators that powered the beacons, and confirm the functioning of the lights themselves.

Jangling the big ring of keys against the locked steel door at the base of the round brick tower, Robert let us into the lighthouse, which was filled with throbbing noise and the stink of diesel fuel. After carefully checking the generator tanks and making a note on a chart attached to a clipboard on the wall, he craned his neck and peered up the rusting metal stairs that spiraled away into the top of the tall structure. "Well, come along," he said, climbing wearily onto the first step. "We have to check the beacon now."

Step by painful step, Robert climbed to the top of those endless winding steps without stopping. When we finally reached the cramped space on top, where the huge lenses of the

dazzling beacon swiveled silently behind their protective greenhouse of rain splattered glass, he sank onto a small stool, his handsome features drained of color.

After a few moments, he smiled and lifted me up to see the startling vista beyond the windows to seaward. As far as the eye could see, the ocean was a black, featureless desert topped by wind-whipped peaks of foam that were being shredded into long white streamers by the shrieking gale.

Trembling at the magnificent fury of the wild sea below, I was then let down to wait beneath Robert's stool as he circled the narrow catwalk around the whirling light, squirting dabs of oil onto the bronze bearings and measuring the rotations of the powerful beacon against a stopwatch.

When he was finished, he jotted some notes on another clipboard and laughed that rich, deep laugh that I was already coming to love. "Everything is working perfectly as usual," he sighed. "She turns exactly 360 degrees every one minute and fifteen seconds, and all the gears and bearings are running smooth and quiet. It never changes. I guess we could have saved ourselves that long climb tonight, Meteor."

I looked up at him and suddenly realized that my heart was beginning to pound. For something in his bantering tone as Robert spoke about the light--a nugget of truth emerging from the actual words that he had spoken--said that no matter what the cost to himself in terms of pain or discomfort, this human would unfailingly make the steep and arduous climb up the winding stairs to the lighthouse tower each and every night. Because that was his duty.

As a canine and a thoroughbred of champion blood, I had been taught from birth to respect devotion to duty above all else. And Robert's unspoken message told me that I had not been mistaken in choosing to cast my lot with this good man. For he was truly deserving of all the love and loyalty I could give him.

With his duty done for another night, we descended from the tower and made our chilly way back to the welcoming warmth of Sea Pines Cottage. I gratefully retreated to "my corner" by the woodbox as Robert prepared himself a plate of stew and a mug of coffee and lit the bright pressure lantern on his work table.

While he ate his meal, he sat leafing through sheets of paper from a thin stack beside his writing machine. Presently, he set aside his plate and rolled a fresh leaf of paper into the typewriter and began to strike the keys with a loud, monotonous clacking sound that reverberated through the whole cottage.

Though my belly was full and my backside pleasantly warmed from the fire, I soon grew restless in my corner. I endured the onerous clacking for some minutes before deciding that it was time to play. Scooting across the room with my nails beating a loud tattoo on the polished floorboards, I slid to a clumsy halt at Robert's feet and leaped playfully into his lap, upsetting the mug of coffee in the process.

I found myself being lifted unceremoniously by the scruff of the neck and was firmly deposited back in my corner. Robert's gray eyes flashed as he pointed to the dripping work table. "That table is strictly off limits," he warned. "And, unless you favor spending all your evenings out in the cold shed, you will not disturb me again when I am working. Understood?"

I did not, of course, understand all of his words precisely. I don't believe that any canine is ever capable of translating the many confusing nuances of human speech into direct thoughts. But, just as his tone in the lighthouse had confirmed for me the true nature of Robert's noble character, his meaning about the table and his work could not have been more clear: In exchange for being allowed to share his wonderful house and his life, I must somehow learn to endure the long, boring periods when he was clacking away on his machine and would have no time for me.

So I placed my head upon my paws and attempted to look suitably remorseful as I lay by the fire, silently watching and dozing for many long hours as Robert returned to his table and focused his entire attention on the dreadful machine.

Even now, after a lifetime of human companionship, I am hard pressed to fully understand mankind's fascination with those little marks that they so carefully impress on sheets of paper.

Oh, I understand well enough that it is a way they have devised of recording their thoughts and stories for other humans to see and study. And I will not deny that it is an admirable accomplishment, and one that no other earthly creatures have yet mastered. But what I cannot comprehend is how humans can bring themselves to shut out the truly wondrous marvels of the world that cry out for attention all about them, in order to stare for hours on end at those lifeless scratchings. How could a man like Robert ignore the entrancing blaze of a good crackling fire or the howling of the wind in the trees, or the mysterious rustling of tiny feet in the rafters that simply demanded investigation?

It is beyond me to explain such behavior, for, to my simple dog's mind, the sights and sounds and smells of the real world would always hold sway over mere lines and lines of words on paper.

Perhaps it is not a thing that dogs were meant to understand. But I cannot help but feel that human lives are all the poorer for it.

After an interminable period of clacking on that first night, Robert finally stood and extinguished the bright lantern. Then he stretched and took me to the door for a quick dash out into the cold rain.

When I returned from my business, all wet and shivering, he dried my coat again, then he lit a candle and led the way up a narrow wooden staircase to the top floor of the cottage. There,

below the naked rafters of the steeply sloping roof, I discovered what I now believe was my favorite feature of Sea Pines Cottage, as it was then.

At the foot of a massive iron bed covered with a colorful down quilt, a large bay window afforded a breathtaking view of the wild, storm-tossed seascape through a gap in the sheltering dunes. Every one minute and fifteen seconds the beacon of the Cape Fear Lighthouse swept the horizon in a full circle, for the briefest of instants as it passed, lighting the interior of the upstairs room bright as day.

Robert saw me staring out at the mesmerizing spectacle of nature untamed, and he smiled. "Like that view, do you?" he asked. When my gaze did not waver, he rummaged in an old trunk and produced a faded green blanket which he folded onto the window seat for me. "Then that will be your special sleeping place," he declared.

He lifted me onto the blanket and laughed when I turned away from the spectacle beyond the window to gratefully lick his hand.

Settling down onto the wonderfully scratchy old blanket that was to be mine alone, I reflected on what a wonderful day it had turned out to be. Once more I was filled with the certain belief that I stood on the brink of a happy life, perhaps far happier even than the one for which I had so long been trained and prepared.

Then Robert unbuttoned his shirt and sat on the edge of his bed. And by the flickering candlelight he began to undress. All joy fled from my heart as I stared in horror at the cruel mechanical extension he removed from the stump of his missing leg. I started in fright as the ugly thing clumped heavily to the floor, a dead weight of metal and hideous pink plastic possessing no life of its own. Robert must have heard my gasp, for he turned to regard me. Then his eyes dropped to the stump of tortured flesh he wore.

"Sorry, I know it's not a very pretty thing," he apologized, misinterpreting the fear and pity he read in my eyes for a revulsion that I did not feel.

"This is something that men do to other men in wars," he explained in a voice that seemed suddenly small and far away. Then he extinguished the candle and fell back onto his pillows with a sigh.

"While I was being medi-vaced out the day it happened, I was all doped up with morphine. But I remember hearing somebody on the chopper say the Bad Guys got another one," he whispered in the darkness.

"I thought that was kind of a funny thing for them to say, like I was an unlucky actor in a cowboy movie," he said. "Don't you think that was a funny thing for them to say, Meteor?"

I made a small whimpering sound, hoping to ease the deep seated anguish that I felt emanating in waves from the bed across the room. Then I lay there for a long time, counting the intervals of light and darkness as the great lighthouse beacon traveled through its tireless circle, and trying to imagine how good it would feel to get my teeth into the evil Bad Guys who had done that terrible thing to Robert.

I did not sleep that night, but remained alert on my warm blanket, listening closely to the rush of wind and rain through the swaying trees and the distant booming of the waves on the beach. For I was determined that, for as long as I lived, no Bad Guys would ever enter Sea Pines cottage to make war on Robert again.

A SPAN OF SEASONS

Autumn turned to winter, with the fierce Arctic gales sliding down from the far north one after another to vent their icy fury on the rugged beaches of Cape Fear.

No matter how foul the weather, Robert and I made our way out to the lighthouse at the end of the cape every day to check the generators and climb the steep winding stairs to the beacon above.

And when that duty was done I dozed in my corner each night while Robert labored over his typewriting machine, and later kept watch over him as he tossed and turned in his lonely bed. Sometimes he cried out in the night, shouting urgent warnings to comrades named Vic and Sarge and Billy. But, more often, he just moaned softly in his sleep, then rolled over and was silent again.

As difficult as those long winter nights were for me to endure, all of my days with Robert were filled with wondrous activities and accomplishments. For there was always driftwood to be gathered on the beach and dried behind the cottage, shingles to be split and replaced after each storm, and a hundred other things that had to be constantly tended and mended in order to keep our cottage warm and snug under the ferocious assaults of wind and rain and cold.

As a change from those challenging everyday activities, we would sometimes climb into the old green jeep that Robert kept covered with a heavy tarp behind the shed. Then, with me sitting proudly on the seat beside him, we would make the long and bumpy drive across the dunes to the narrow paved road that led across a low stone causeway to the little seaside hamlet of Thunderbolt.

There Robert would take his carefully packaged sheets of paper into the tiny Thunderbolt Post Office to be sent away. And he would collect the slim white and tan envelopes containing papers that other humans had sent to him from far off places. Next, we would go to the dark and musty general store to buy all of the things we needed to maintain our lives at the cottage, and

the curious eyes of the other humans would follow us as we moved along the aisles of canned goods and shovels and coiled rope.

When at last our purchases were all piled in the back of the jeep and we were ready to return home, we always would stop at a little roadside stand for the delicious burgers that a jolly fat man cooked for us on a sizzling black grill.

How can I express the happiness and pride I felt on those trips to Thunderbolt? As a useful and respected companion, it was I who guarded the jeep while Robert went off on his other errands.

As my reward I was always given my own juicy burger, served on a soft bun with plenty of catsup and a thick slice of yellow cheese, but without the green leafy stuff that Robert had added to his. My mouth still waters at the memory of those burgers, although I cannot now recall the last time that I had one.

Which is not to say that Robert enjoyed our trips to Thunderbolt nearly as much as I. Because, except for the few words needed to make our purchases, seldom did he speak with the other humans he encountered in the town, though it often seemed clear to me that many of them, especially the young unmarried women, wished to speak with him.

Robert always changed in their presence, though, his easy smile vanishing behind a grim expression, like the sun slipping behind a bank of dark Atlantic storm clouds. And the jovial banter that I had come to expect from him on a daily basis was reduced to a few muttered phrases when he spoke to others of his kind. It was my impression in those days that Robert somehow feared other humans, rather than actually disliking them. But whatever emotions he was feeling about his fellows then, the end result was the same; Robert had no friends or companions.

And he had no woman.

I think I was the only living creature to whom he revealed his true voice, and this he did frequently when we were alone, explaining to me everything he knew of nature and the sea, the workings of machines and a hundred other things. And, sometimes, on long winter nights when a big Norther was blowing up around the snug cocoon of our little cottage, Robert would read to me the stories that he wrote on his clacking typing machine. Many of the stories were beautiful tales of his life on the Cape, surrounded by the constantly unfolding miracle of the wild creatures that lived in the pine forest, the changing of the seasons and the whimsical moods of the majestic, unpredictable sea.

But the story that stayed longest in my memory was the tragic tale of his three friends, Vic and Sarge and Billy, all of whom had been lost on the same terrible day in the war; the day that the Bad Guys took Robert's leg away.

I did not like that story at all, for it left me feeling very sad and angry for many days afterwards.

By slow degrees, winter turned to spring. The fierce Arctic storms became fewer and were gradually reduced to chilly, infrequent squalls. Certain colorful birds that had not been seen on Cape Fear for many months returned to screech and chatter as they built their nests and found their mates among the pines of the miniature forest. And gradually the blustery spring storms became the gentle rains of summer.

As the weather grew milder, Robert and I spent more and more of our time out of doors, painting and repairing the damage the harsh winter had wrought on the cottage.

One fine day when the blue sky was dotted with puffy little clusters of white clouds and a warm offshore breeze riffled the tops of the pines, Robert opened the shed behind the cottage and uncovered the little sailboat that he kept there.

Oh it was a beautiful thing that sleek little boat. It had a white wooden hull with darkly varnished trim and a tall, tall mast that had to be set upright and then fastened in place with wire stays. On a cart with fat rubber tires, we hauled the boat down the steep path to the water's edge where we stepped her mast and hoisted her snowy sails. Then, as I stood nervously in the bow, barking out useless advice, Robert pushed the boat off into the swell of an incoming wave, and we were afloat with another great wave towering over us.

I yipped in terror as a fresh gust of wind suddenly snapped the billowing sails taut as drumheads. And before the next rising wave could descend to crush our frail craft, Robert had jumped into the stern and we had somehow turned and were skimming out to sea with a fine salt spray blowing back into our faces and the wire stays singing in the wind.

We sailed out to the smooth waters beyond the cape and cruised along the treacherously beautiful Carolina coast all that afternoon, and I cannot say that I had ever enjoyed a more glorious day.

After that, scarcely a day of fine summer weather passed that Robert and I did not sail the little sloop. Oftentimes, when we were safely offshore away from the lines of breaking waves, he would let the sails down. Then as we drifted on the backs of glassy swells with screeching gulls wheeling above our heads, Robert would fish with a hand line for our supper. On those occasions he seldom failed to pull in a shining red snapper or a fat grouper, or another of the countless varieties of bottom feeders that grazed among the deadly rocks just beneath the surface.

Invariably, the day's catch would end up sizzling over an open fire on the beach that evening, the fresh, tender fillets sizzling and sputtering on wooden skewers while Robert drank cold beer from frosted cans and we watched the silent meteors plummeting into the sea, or pondered the mysteries of the starry universe spread across the velvet sky above.

Through all of those wonderful days I continued to grow and mature, until I had reached full size and my golden coat had taken on the silky luster that in purebred retrievers only comes

with adulthood. By that time also, I had been thoroughly trained in the special ways of my good master.

Though I believe I was as happy then as I had ever been in my life, still my happiness could not be called complete. For most nights Robert continued to suffer from his restless tortured dreams of the war. Though I did my best to be as good and faithful a dog as any master ever had, Robert still had no other human being with whom he could truly share his innermost thoughts or the product of his fevered writings.

And he had no one to comfort him in those long and lonely hours of the night.

STORM

Almost before it had begun it seemed the magical summer was coming to an end. The lingering traces of the wonderful season vanished one day in late August when we awoke to discover that a hurricane was racing with a vengeance toward Cape Fear.

All that morning Robert had huddled anxiously over the little portable radio that was our one reliable connection to the outside world. Listening to the ominous marine weather reports through bursts of crackling static, he drank endless cups of coffee and kept stepping outside to squint worriedly at the darkening sky.

The storm, according to the radio, had already wrought untold havoc in the West Indies, killing hundreds and leaving thousands more homeless. Now it had turned toward our exposed coastal island and was churning northward, preceded by deadly squalls that were filled with blinding rain and high winds. The lines of crashing surf had been rising higher and higher on our beach since well before dawn, and a record high tide was predicted for later in the day.

"We'll have to move the boat back up into her shed right away," Robert told me at the conclusion of the latest weather report, "or else we'll lose her to the tidal surge."

Robert's decision to return the sailboat to the protection of the shed behind the cottage underscored for me the seriousness with which he regarded the threat posed to us by the oncoming storm. For, while the little craft had rolled easily on her cart down the long steep path to the beach months before, getting her back up between the dunes quickly would be another matter altogether; one that would require an enormous amount of work, even with the aid of the powerful winch bolted to the front of the jeep.

Once the little boat had been laid up in the shed behind the cottage, I knew, she would not be brought out again that year. And so our idyllic summer would pass into memory.

During the fine weather that had prevailed all summer we had kept the sloop pulled onto the sand above the high tide mark, protected by a flimsy canvas lean-to that left only her mast

exposed. Another line squall was approaching as we hurried down the path between the dunes and stripped off the canvas cover preparatory to unstepping the mast and loading the sailboat onto her wheeled cart. The waves were advancing faster than Robert had calculated, and a frighteningly short distance away mighty green combers two and three times taller than Robert himself were rearing their frothy heads to hurl countless tons of water ever nearer to our frail craft.

With the canvas lean-to down, Robert climbed inside the hull and ducked into the sloop's little forward cabin in search of the tools with which to unfasten the taut wire stays that held the mast in place. I leaped up onto the foredeck and turned to regard the progress of the monster waves, which were crashing uncomfortably closer to our exposed position with each advancing set.

Then a monstrous breaker--taller than any I had so far seen--collapsed onto the shore with a thunderous roar, sending a foot of boiling froth to lick at the very stern of the little boat before retreating back to sea. Barking furiously at the receding wave, I ran back to the cockpit and, braced my front paws on the transom beside the tiller, prepared to warn Robert if another such giant should threaten.

That was when I saw the small dark object bobbing in the foam far out among the lines of approaching waves.

I ceased my frantic barking and narrowed my hunter's eyes, attempting to determine what the thing was. Though I had spied countless pieces of flotsam being swept in from the sea on other stormy days, this strange object was no piece of driftwood. Nor was it a resting seabird or a stray fisherman's float, or any of the dozens of other things I was used to seeing on the water. Round and dark and glistening, the subject of my scrutiny rolled in perfect rhythm with the motion of the swells, as if weighted from below by an unseen pendulum.

Another towering breaker rose up to disrupt my view of the thing. When that wave had crashed beneath the stern of the boat, soaking my fur with spray and nudging the hull ever so slightly, I saw that the floating object was closer than it had been before. Then it half turned toward the beach, and I glimpsed a small, pale face and the orange collar of a flotation vest rising scant inches above the roiling waters.

And I realized that I was looking at a human being adrift in the deadly surf.

I set up such a furious yapping that I must have telegraphed to Robert the helpless sense of terror I felt at the sight of that pathetic dot of humanity caught up in the raging sea. Before I could turn to summon him to see what I had found, Robert was at my side, staring in horror at the doomed castaway. Seconds dragged by like hours as we lost sight of the bobbing head behind another towering wave. When again we finally spotted it, we saw that it had moved no closer to our beach. Instead, caught in the strong riptide that paralleled the beach, it was rapidly being swept toward the jagged black rocks that jutted into the sea from the base of the lighthouse half a mile away.

Before I could fully comprehend what he was doing, Robert was racing to the bow of the boat and lifting a large coil of light manila hemp from the anchor locker.

For one heart stopping moment I believed he was going to launch us into that deadly surf, a foolhardy move that was certain to bring about our instant destruction; for no vessel could possibly survive such sea conditions.

But Robert had something else in mind, something even more dangerous than launching the sloop. Opening his pocket knife, he slashed at the manila anchor line--the longest that we had on board. With the freed anchor line in his hand, he ran back to where I stood and quickly made it fast to the orange, horseshoe-shaped rescue float on the stern.

Robert next pulled on a life vest. And with the heavy rescue float on one shoulder and the coil of anchor line on the other, he dropped to the sand and ran-hobbled down the beach faster than I would have believed possible for a man with only one leg.

Another great wave smashed down just below the stern, and the hull of our boat lurched sideways in the race of foamy water that shot up onto the sand. I raised my voice, frantically attempting to warn Robert that our little craft would surely be swept away if something was not done immediately to save her. But Robert was by then a misty figure far down the beach, and my futile warning was carried away in the roar of wind and sea.

Halfway to the lighthouse there stood half buried in the sand a great concrete bollard with a rusting metal ring set in its top; a relic from the days when passing ships sent supplies and mail to the isolated lightkeeper in small boats that were hauled through the surf by ropes. I caught up with Robert there and found him looping the end of the manila line through the metal ring.

Looking out to sea, I suddenly understood what he meant to do: He had run ahead of the human who was being swept along toward the deadly rocks at the end of the cape, and now he was limping into the surf himself, reaching up to activate the flashing strobe light on the rescue float.

I flopped down onto my belly and whimpered at the sheer madness of Robert's plan. For it seemed obvious even to a young dog that if he somehow managed to get out beyond the line of breaking waves without being drowned or crushed to death, the chances that he could reach the castaway were pitifully small. And if by some miracle Robert did snag that poor unfortunate before the other was swept onto the rocks by the deadly riptide, the odds that the light manila line would hold, or that Robert would have the strength to haul them both out of the cold, powerful current were even more infinitesimal.

I raised my head and howled a forlorn protest as Robert disappeared into the sheer, glassy face of an approaching breaker.

The manila line went as taut as one of the wire stays on the mast of our boat as I held my breath, waiting for him to reappear. Long seconds dragged by--far too many seconds--with no sign of my beloved master. I felt the rapid thudding of my breaking heart and wondered what my life would be like without my dear Robert.

Then, far out among the waves, the flashing strobe on the rescue buoy flared above the swirling foam and I saw that Robert was still hanging on. Much farther out, the other human was being rapidly propelled toward him, but it seemed certain that Robert could not get out that far before the other was swept past his position.

Three more times I endured the agony of seeing Robert disappear beneath lines of incoming waves. And each time when he finally reappeared both he and the castaway seemed nearer to certain doom. I danced helplessly about on the damp, cold sand, barking feeble encouragement until my throat was raw.

Then Robert vanished beneath the waves one final time.

An agonizing eternity passed until he reappeared, floating in the boiling trough between two huge swells. When the strobe light on the rescue buoy flared again, I saw that only a few feet separated Robert from the other human. Then, suddenly, he had the castaway in his arms and was struggling to pull them both back to shore.

Many minutes later, a huge green wave crashed onto the beach, depositing Robert and his bit of human salvage at my feet. He lay there gasping like a beached dolphin, his lips blue from the life-sapping cold. And beside him, unmoving in the flat, sunless daylight, lay the sodden form of the pitiful human that he had risked his life to rescue.