

A Dog Named Rufus by D. Cowdrey

Mari (to her mother): "Rufus keeps bringing home animals. Sometimes they are dead, and sometimes they are alive."

Mari stands in her kitchen with the phone against her ear. Rufus is by the back door, looking at her with his tail wagging.

Mari: "I know dogs do this. I know it is natural. I just do not know. It is starting to worry me."

She looks at the table. A small box sits there. Inside is a bird she tried to help earlier. It had been breathing when she found it. She did what she could.

Mari: "Sometimes I can save them. Other times I cannot."

Her mother listens.

Rufus walks over and sits near her feet. He looks up at her, happy.

Weeks pass.

One afternoon, Mari hears a voice outside.

She walks into the yard. Her neighbor Shelly is at the fence.

Shelly: "Keep your ugly dog out of my yard. He keeps barking at my cat, and I am nervous your dog is going to attack her."

Mari feels these words in her gut. "Ugly." "Attack."

She looks at Rufus. He is beside her with his tail wagging.

Mari: "Okay. I will keep an eye on him."

Shelly walks away.

Mari stays in the yard for a moment. Then she goes back inside.

After that, Mari pays closer attention. She watches what Rufus brings home and how he does it.

Rufus keeps bringing animals home.

One morning, Rufus walks into the yard with a bunny.

Mari feels her chest tighten.

Mari: "Rufus, drop it."

He does.

The bunny sits on the grass. The bunny hops and looks happy to be around Rufus.

Mari walks closer. She looks for blood or injuries. There are none. The bunny does not run. It stays where it is.

Rufus stands nearby with his tail wagging.

Mari does not understand it.

Later, she calls her mother again.

Mari (to her mother): “Mom, something is not making sense. He brought home a bunny today. It was completely fine.”

Shelly is at the fence again, watching.

A few days later, Mari walks into a café.

She hears Shelly talking with friends.

Shelly: “My cat, Puma, used to bring home all kinds of dead animals. Birds and mice. It was awful.”

Mari slows down.

Shelly: “But since Mari’s dog started going after the animals around the house, my cat does not bring them home anymore.”

Mari stands still for a moment.

Then she keeps walking.

That night, Rufus lies near her.

There is no animal this time.

Mari looks at him.

Mari: “Rufus keeps bringing animals home. Sometimes they are alive.”

She says it quietly.

Mari: “What if I have been looking at this the wrong way?”

Rufus lifts his head. His tail starts wagging.

Then one day, Mari notices something.

Rufus stops bringing home animals.

Instead, he brings home rocks.

At first it is one rock. Then another. Then more.

One day, Mari walks outside and sees a pile.

Rufus has stacked them.

She stands there, looking at it.

Then she sees movement.

Puma is near the rocks. The cat is trying to get inside.

Mari runs over.

“Puma, no.”

She shoos the cat away.

She kneels down and looks between the rocks.

There is a tiny mouse.

The mouse is scared of the cat, but it stays tucked inside the spaces between the rocks.

Mari looks at Rufus.

He stands a few feet away. His tail is wagging. He watches her closely.

He looks proud.

Mari reaches down and gently picks up the mouse.

She holds it carefully in her hands.

She looks back at Rufus.

Mari (softly): “Were you trying to protect them?”

Rufus’s tail wags faster.

Rufus keeps bringing rocks home.

Now Mari understands why.