

BIG little DOG

By John Sheirer

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This story is pure magic—an absolutely wonderful unsentimental (kinda) tale told from a dog’s POV that will play your heart strings like Hauser plucks cello. Stuff like this can so easily go off the rails so reading it when it works is better than weed. Suffice it to say that after the six of us finished it we all wanted a ‘Ruby’ of our own—even Charles who’s an ordained felixophile. (We’re not sure how the cat feels.) Dimensional mainstream fiction written with a light touch and a sure talent, this one easily gets Five Stars. Quote: Ruby admired the way the human drew out the “f” sound at the beginning of the word and deepened his voice to almost sing the middle vowel before almost barking the “k” at the end. Ruby knew dozens of human words, but this one was more mysterious than “outside” or “sit” or “treat”.*

Big Little Dog

Ruby sat and stared up at her human lying on the couch. Usually, a few seconds of sustained eye contact was enough to alert the human of Ruby’s need for a trip outside. Sometimes the human stared his big human eyes into a book or at the television on the opposite wall, so Ruby would add a little whimper. She knew her whimpers sounded pathetic and undignified, but the call to go outside was strong. Whimpering always worked. The human was a good human who knew why Ruby needed to go outside and didn’t keep her waiting.

Ruby knew that all the humans in the house were good humans. The adult man and woman and the three younger humans took her out almost every time she asked. When the two teenaged human males were home, they played with her and walked her—although not as often as when

they were younger. Ruby noticed that human children seem to get busier and less playful as they get older.

The youngest human child was still too young to walk Ruby by herself beyond the immediate neighborhood, but she often played in the yard with Ruby. Ruby never saw the point of such a one-sided game as “fetch” with its servile subtext. But she would play “chase” for hours at a time. The youngest human would bring two tennis balls instead of just one. After Ruby chased one ball, the human child would kick the other ball in a different direction, and Ruby would chase that one as if it were a rat or mouse on a farm many centuries ago. Big dogs like Labs and Goldens needed balls tossed high in the air, but Ruby specialized in the first foot above the surface of the Earth, that zone where kicked tennis balls spend most of their time. Her instincts would send her sprinting after each ball for as long as the little human kept kicking.

This game turned out to be the best possible practice for the child’s youth soccer exploits. Ruby had become expert at lunging her little body to block the ball’s path, so the child had to learn to kick it at just the right angle to make Ruby chase it. The naps Ruby took after these sessions were the deepest and most restful of her life. Sometimes she would kick her little legs and yip softly, chasing and barking in her happy dreams. Ruby even went to a couple of games with the family and watched from the sidelines like a proud parent as the human child wove through defenses and snapped shots past goalies who were far slower to react on their two ungainly feet than Ruby was with her four quick paws.

The only time when Ruby didn’t bother the humans to go outside was when the two adult humans had the house to themselves and played naked on the bed upstairs. They closed the bedroom door when they played naked, and Ruby was content to lie next to the door, guarding against unexpected intruders and listening to their happy human sounds emanating from within.

When they finished and opened the door, they were always pleased to see Ruby, and they often spent a few minutes petting her affectionately. Ruby could sense the extra glow of contentment then, and that feeling seemed to flow from their hands directly into her furry little body. Ruby also sometimes watched them play naked on the living room couch, peeking around a corner rather than entering the room. She always felt that their game could be enhanced with the introduction of a rubber ball or a chewy toy. But the humans had their own ways of playing their own games, Ruby knew.

The adult male human was on that same couch now, but he was alone and sleeping fitfully, unusual for the middle of a weekday. He had his face turned away and buried in a pillow. To her great surprise and dismay, Ruby's repeated whimpers didn't get his attention. So she turned in a small circle several times, and then sat back down to stare with all her will. This had no effect on the human. Ruby then barked. It was just a clipped yip, not obnoxiously loud, not the kind of bark reserved for the neighborhood kids who like to skateboard up the street or the other humans who walked their own dogs within her domain. Oh, how she loved to bark at those dogs so loudly that her humans would call out, "Hey! Okay! We hear you! You saved us again!" Ruby knew she was a small dog, but she also knew it was her job to protect the man and the woman and the children. They each towered over her, even now the growing youngest child, the seven-year-old who arrived just a year after Ruby did. That once-tiny ball of human scent with blinking, wandering eyes was now nearly half the size of a full-grown human and still growing. But Ruby knew that she was their protector every bit as much as they were hers.

At her yip, the human stirred slightly, his wide shoulders hunching deeper into himself. Ruby had never seen the human look this small. His legs scrunched up in a way that reminded Ruby of how she would dig into her mother's soft belly and nurse all those years ago. This was a warm

and pleasant memory, but it didn't address her current need to go outside. Ruby could hold her pee for an impressive time period, despite the fact that her tiny body was home to a minuscule bladder. Now, though, that bladder felt as full as it had ever been. Several more yips only made the human curl more tightly into himself.

Ruby noticed that the human smelled wrong today. Yes, that was the only word for it: *wrong*. Usually, the human had a soapy scent, even on days when he didn't shower right away. Most humans had some variety of a soapy scent. Even when the human ran or hiked or did whatever mysterious exercises he did on the machines in the obviously haunted basement where Ruby refused to enter, he still smelled mostly like soap. Soap cut through other scents and lingered on humans and dogs alike. Ruby suffered patiently as the woman human gave her a bath every few months, and the soap scent gradually faded until her next bath. She didn't enjoy the baths, especially the water running into her sensitive eyes, but the human's hands were so strong and reassuring that it was tolerable. Ruby didn't mind the soap scent, and she certainly liked the treats when the bath was done.

But today, the human didn't smell like soap as much as he usually did. Today, the human smelled wrong. Ruby wasn't exactly sure what his smell meant, but she knew he shouldn't smell this way. Two days ago, he had smelled strongly of soap. But the next day, he stayed home and the soap faded. Today, the soap was gone. The human smelled like sweat, but a different sweat that wasn't an exercise sweat. As the human groaned on the couch, Ruby suddenly understood. She recognized that today's scent was the scent of sickness. The human was sick.

Sick or not, Ruby needed to go outside. Out of options, she stretched up on her strong, little hind legs and pressed her front paws into the man's back. She scratched as if she were scurrying up a hill or digging in the yard. She held back her claws as best she could, not wanting to hurt the

human, but she needed his full attention. He stirred and moaned but didn't sit up, so Ruby reared back and thumped her little front paws into his back again and again, half jumping on the prone human. That worked.

“Ruby!” the human groaned as he twisted his neck to look in Ruby's general direction.

“What are you doing, sweetie?”

Ruby returned to her sitting position and stared as the human rolled over and sat up. The sick smell came off the human in waves, but Ruby tried to ignore it. She was glad to see the human sitting up and returning her gaze. Ruby knew that humans were supposed to sit up during the daylight hours. Maybe he wouldn't be sick for much longer, Ruby hoped. She did a little dance with her front paws, partly happy that the human was moving, but partly still worried about him.

The human rubbed his face. He grabbed his glasses from the coffee table and focused on Ruby. “Hey, girl. Outside? Need to go outside?”

Ruby jumped and made a quick happy gurgle. The human nodded. “Okay!” he said, seeming to try to pull his brain into the front of his head by an act of will. “C'mon, Let's go outside.”

Ruby backed off as the human tried to push himself off the couch with both hands. His backside cleared the cushions by a few inches before his momentum ebbed and he plopped back down. “Oh, crap.” He said softly. Then he looked at his phone on the coffee table. “Oh, crap!” he said, louder this time. “Ruby, I've been asleep for four hours! I'm sorry, girl. You must really need to go.”

This time, he pushed himself up with more force. For a moment, Ruby feared he might fall directly on top of her, so she scampered back a few feet.

“Whoa,” the human said, steadying himself with a hand on the coffee table. Once he regained his balance, he walked slowly, stiffly, through the living room toward the front door. Ruby

noticed him making small grunting sounds with each step. She had only ever heard him do that after some of their longest hikes into the neighboring mountains. On those days, he laughed after he grunted. Today, he didn't.

At the door, the human took Ruby's leash from the basket where it was always at the ready for another walk. Ruby didn't mind the leash. She knew that the times when she could run on the long, hilly trails during their hikes were special times. Ruby didn't know exactly why, but she accepted that the leash gave her a sense of safety in the wide world of big humans. Strange as it seemed, she knew the leash meant that her humans loved her, just as she knew the times they let her run free on those wooded trails also meant that they loved her. She loved them enough not even to consider running away in the woods. And she loved them enough to wait patiently for the leash.

"Come here, Ruby," the human said, his voice weaker and raspier than usual. Ruby was, as usual, at his heels when he called for her, but he always called anyway. He clicked the leash onto Ruby's collar, opened the door, and half-staggered into the springtime air. Normally, the human would comb his hair or tuck in his shirt when he stepped out into the neighborhood with Ruby. But she noticed today that his hair stuck out at odd angles in some places and was pasted to his scalp in others. His big flannel shirt was untucked, and his baggy sweatpants hung low on his hips.

Strangest of all, the human, Ruby noticed, stepped out onto the porch with bare feet. Ruby knew that human feet were nowhere near as tough as her own. The children's feet were close because they spent considerable time romping in the yard in bare feet. But, as they aged, the humans more and more depended on shoes. Ruby had never seen the adults or the kids beyond a

certain age neglect to wear shoes outside. She hesitated in the doorway, staring at the human's feet, but he gave the leash a gentle tug.

“Let's go, Ruby,” he said. “The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get back on the couch.”

Ruby moved through the doorway and out onto the porch. The man reached above her and pulled the door closed behind them. Ruby sensed that something was strange about that action, some usual part of the routine missing, but she could only stare at the human's big, pale feet.

“What the ...” the human said, more to himself than to Ruby. “I forgot my shoes.” He reached for the doorknob and leaned in to step through the opening door. But the door didn't open. The human lurched against it and staggered back onto the porch. Ruby skittered backward herself, afraid that the human might step on her. She was an expert at walking close to human feet without being stepped on. The memory of heavy shoes on her tiny paws when she was an inexperienced and curious puppy taught her well to predict human movements and avoid their giant feet.

The human said a word that Ruby knew humans weren't supposed to say but sometimes said anyway. Once, the youngest child had said the word at dinner, and the adult humans raised their voices as if they had never uttered the word with the children listening from the next room. Ruby knew that pups learned to bark from the big dogs.

The human grabbed the doorknob and twisted it again. He said the bad word again, this time louder. Ruby admired the way the human drew out the “f” sound at the beginning of the word and deepened his voice to almost sing the middle vowel before almost barking the “k” at the end. Ruby knew dozens of human words, but this one was more mysterious than “outside” or “sit” or “treat.” Humans had such a range of things that they could do with their voices. Ruby enjoyed

her own language of woofs and yaps and howls. But she sometimes wished she could learn the whole range of human expression and share it with her canine friends at the doggie daycare she attended once a week when the adult humans had long workdays.

“Ruby,” the human said. “We’re locked out. The keys are inside. And so’s my damned phone.”

Ruby didn’t know all of these words, but she understood the general meaning. Even so, she trotted down the steps and pulled the retractable leash to its full length, long enough to take her across the brick patio and allow her to squat in the grass yard beyond. She usually had more control and enjoyed finding just the right spot to spray her pee. Her favorite spot was anywhere Bandit, the Airedale from down the street, had left his foul-smelling urine. Ruby wondered what was wrong with the water at Bandit’s house to make his pee smell so disgusting. She knew that her own scent was powerful enough to counteract his reeking spots on the lawn near the street. Ruby growled and barked the most when Bandit’s humans walked him by her house. Ruby was friends with every other dog in the neighborhood, but something about Bandit brought out the wolf in her.

On this particular trip outside, Ruby had to go so badly that she just relieved herself without being picky about the location. Once she did, she turned back to the human, who was staring at the door. She wondered if he thought he could open the locked door with just the power of his big human brain. Ruby knew that humans were smarter than dogs when it came to many things. But she also knew that this human wasn’t smart enough to avoid getting locked out of the house. Ruby wondered if being sick affected human brains just as it affected their big bodies, making them think as slowly and awkwardly as they moved.

Ruby trotted into the yard and tugged on the leash. The human looked out at her. Ruby looked back and tugged again.

“Oh, Ruby,” the human said. “I don’t have the energy to take you for a big walk today.”

Ruby loved her big walks, of course. She loved the soft grass and hard streets and the chatty birds and the wide sky. She loved the snow and the sunshine and the wind parting her fur and tickling her from head to tail. She didn’t love the rain, and she certainly didn’t love the silly raincoat the humans sometimes made her wear.

The house was nice, and Ruby enjoyed having a soft bed to sprawl across and watch the endless events happening just outside their window. She loved that the house was warm in the winter and cool in the summer and lighted through the early parts of the dark night. But she loved the outside most of all. The house was contained, calm, ordered, and controlled. Outside was random, sometimes noisy, often unpredictable. Animals that didn’t go inside the human houses lived outside, just beyond the back yard tree line. The outside was wild. Ruby sensed that she was once far more wild than she was in this life. She sensed that she once roamed vast expanses of land, fought for her pack, killed for her food. She felt this in a way that she couldn’t quite understand deep within herself. She wished she could tell the humans about her wild past, especially during those nights when she snuggled into their warm laps on the couch, but she knew this was a mystery she could never share across the deep gulf between their different species.

Now, though, Ruby didn’t tug at the leash with the hope of a big walk. Now she tugged because she realized that the human needed her help. Yes, he had a bigger brain than hers. She knew this. She knew that she would never drive the car or build a fire or understand what was happening in the shimmering screens of the humans’ phones and laptops. That was okay with

her. She also knew that there were ways that her brain worked better than a human brain. She knew that she could smell dangers that the humans could never detect. She could remember many things the humans would forget every time, like the location of the best chewing stick that she returned to time and again. She knew that she could track the flight of a bouncing rubber ball and calculate the timing of her jump to catch it in midair far more efficiently than the adult humans could.

And today, Ruby knew something else that the human didn't know, something that would make the human very happy—at least, as happy as he could be while sick. Ruby could remember something from the many times that the other adult, the woman human, took her for walks. The man human liked the front and street side of the yard where he might meet neighbors for conversations while the woman human liked to take her to the more secluded backyard especially when the kids joined the walk.

Ruby tugged harder now, putting her strong, little legs into action. “Okay,” the human said. “I'm coming.”

He stepped awkwardly, unused to feeling his bare feet on the hard, wooden steps and rough, brick patio and cool, squishy grass. Ruby pulled him along, trying without success to get him to avoid the spot where she had peed. He didn't seem to notice as he followed her, slowly at first, but then building speed as they passed the front corner of the house, along the row of windows where Ruby watched the world go by from her comfy bed, down the slick bank where the human had to turn his big, bare feet sideways to keep from slipping. At the back of the house, Ruby took him to a back door that was almost hidden under an awning and between two large bushes. Ruby pulled the human straight to that backdoor and scratched against it, much as she scratched the

inside of the front door as a puppy when she needed to go out. She had never scratched to go back inside before today, but today was a different day.

The human stepped slowly behind her and reached for the door. As Ruby knew it would, the knob turned in his hand.

“Oh, Ruby!” the human said as he pushed open the door and moved inside. “Thank you! How did you know this door was unlocked?”

Ruby knew because the woman human had also locked herself out once long ago on a hot summer day when Ruby was just a small puppy and had only been with the family for a few weeks. Ruby remembered that the woman human had tried the front door just as the man human had today. She remembered the woman sweating in the heat, her hair falling limply to the sides of her shining face as she carried the smallest human child, then just an infant with a cloth wrapped around her to catch her poop and pee. The child cried for the whole hour that the woman wandered around the house, looking for a way back in. The cloth filled with poop and pee, some of it spread onto the woman’s clothes, making her cry a little herself. The two boys, then so young and small, tried windows and doors without success. Eventually, the woman sent them to a neighbor’s house for help. Ruby was as relieved as everyone else when the neighbor came with a metal bar and gently pried the back door open without even leaving a scratch.

After that day, the woman human always secretly kept that back door unlocked to avoid another afternoon of struggling to get back inside. Ruby didn’t know enough numbers to know how many times she had gone outside since then and didn’t need the back door, but she knew that it was good that she remembered. Today, she knew that she was smart.

Back inside, the human gave Ruby a special crunchy treat, the one that tasted like bacon and blueberries. Ruby didn’t know how the human knew that this one was her favorite, but it was.

Then the human gave himself some small, white treats that he washed down with a glass of water. He slowly padded back to the living room, his bare feet at home on the soft carpet, and flopped down on the couch. Ruby followed close behind. This time, he didn't turn his back but faced out and curled enough to open a small space on the couch cushions. This time, he patted that open space.

“Up!” he called out softly, some of the rasp gone from his voice. Ruby bounded up onto the couch and licked his wet nose before snuggling against his warm chest. He still smelled sick, but Ruby didn't mind. She knew it was better for him to be sick while lying on the couch with the dog who loved him, rather than staggering around outside where, even with a dog as smart and tough and big as Ruby, the human might be too sick to deal with all that wildness out there.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The inspiration for this story began one day when I was home sick from work and walking my dog outside while trying not to pass out. I wondered what my stumbling illness looked like from her perspective. Ruby in the story is based on my wonderful dog Libby, an eight-year-old Border Terrier. We love her tenacity, courage, and intelligence, and it's always a fun challenge to try to understand what's going on inside her mind. We can be gone for five minutes, and we'll laugh when she celebrates our return as if we were lost at sea for a year. And then she'll do something that shows she remembers an event or place from years ago, and we'll marvel at her super-human mental abilities. “Big Little Dog” is a tribute to Libby, and the story is part of a book-length manuscript of linked stories called “Stumbling Through Adulthood” where characters from one story often pop up in other stories. Ruby and her family members all appear in other stories in the collection.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *John Sheirer (pronounced “shy-er”) lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his wonderful wife Betsy and happy dog Libby. He has taught writing and communications for 27 years at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, Connecticut, where he also serves as editor and faculty advisor for Freshwater Literary Journal (submissions welcome). He writes a monthly column on current events for his hometown newspaper, the Daily Hampshire Gazette, and his books include memoir, fiction, poetry, essays, political satire, and photography. His most recent book is Fever Cabin, a fictionalized journal of a man isolating*

himself during the current pandemic. (All proceeds from this book will benefit pandemic-related charities.) Find him at JohnSheirer.com.