



The Heirloom
by Robin Atwood

Somehow it seemed appropriate that Amalie died during her favorite season. She loved autumn for its cool air, bountiful colors, mystical rituals and bewitching harvest smells. She said it was the most magical time of year.

Amalie, my companion of almost 70 years, is being laid to rest today under cerulean skies sprinkled with white puffs tinged in grey. She would have thanked the weather for cooperating. It was her way.

I made my way through the kirk yard, my tail drooped so far it nearly dragged on the smelly ground. I did not care about the scent of decayed matter, I just missed Amalie.

As the wind kicked up, it blew leaves all around the burial grounds triggering memories of Amalie calling out to me when weather threatened.

“Lena, my sweet pup, time to go in!” Amalie would shout ushering me inside of our home.

Long, low whines escaped me as the memory sliced through me. The gut-wrenching pain engulfed me again washing over and over me in waves. I wanted to



jump into the hole where Amalie's casket laid ready for burial. I wanted to crawl inside with her. I whimpered again but this time it turned into a soul-wrenching howl.

"Oh, how I wish Amalie was here," I thought as I recalled her trying to comfort me.

"Shhh! Lena, my beautiful girl, everything will be fine." Amalie would say to me softly like she had so many times before when we lost someone dear. She would hug me tightly while stroking behind my ears in an effort to comfort both of us. Her tears warm as she buried her face into my neck.

The memory became more vivid as I sensed the sorrow and loss arising from the family members who had already gathered for the service.

The sound of crunching leaves brought me back to reality as more family members arrived. I studied them as they found their places, which made me wonder who my next companion would be. Suddenly, fear stirred deep within me.

"Dark thoughts be gone. Dark thoughts be gone. Dark thoughts be gone!" ran through my mind as I tried to smother the fear starting to course through me.

I recalled the healing exercise she had me practice every day.

"Don't bury your memories or your feelings, girl," Amalie would say to me. "Let them rise to the surface. Remember them. Hurt with them. Fear with them. Sit in the



midst of them surrounded by all the darkness you can muster. And when you can't handle more, then open the doors wide welcoming in the darkest of the dark. It's here where you will find the healing light. Watch as it slowly overtakes every bit of the darkness. Let the light fill you up to overflowing."

I do not know how many meditations with Amalie took place before I started recovering. What I do know is that once I was healed, I could remember Byron without dread but not today, not without Amalie beside me.

The memories of agony marking my time with Byron surfaced unbidden in my mind. At five-years-old, a mere pup, I was taken from my mother and littermates to an estate in a place far away. Family members came from all around to welcome their new angelus custos. Several decades had passed since losing their last guardian angel. It was a privilege to be a chosen family.

Once gathered, Byron, was named my companion by the family. I knew only excruciating mental and physical pain with him. He punched and kicked me whenever I had an accident in the house or when I chewed up furniture or his shoes. There were times that he kicked me brutally just to hear me whimper and watch me scurry to a corner. He would laugh sadistically. I learned to hide from Byron when I heard his footsteps approaching. I was terrified of him. Even though I was scared, if he caught



me, I would bite him bringing blood. It was not long before he chained me in a cold, dark room. There he would beat me. Soon he stopped feeding me. I survived on water droplets clinging to the stone wall.

Members of the family became concerned when they were not allowed to visit me at the end of the month-long, bonding period. They immediately called the authorities who met them at the estate. They broke down the door when Bryon did not answer it. The family found me tied up in a filthy stone room next to the kitchen. They were appalled at my condition. I was emaciated. My body was covered with open sores. What was left of my coat was matted. I reeked of urine and feces. Their eyes filled with tears as they saw me shaking and huddled next to the stone wall where I was chained. I tried to stand but could not. I could barely manage a snarl warning them to stay away.

The authorities found Byron drunk and passed out in his bed upstairs. Justice was swift. He was arrested, tried by the family and exiled all in less than a couple of hours.

The next day, Amalie came into my life. She taught me that life could be good. She gave me love, affection and companionship. She healed me in every way possible. Yet, it still took a long time before I trusted her completely.



Weary, I laid down next to Amalie's grave. As I rested my head on the ground, I closed my eyes thinking about the first time we met. Amalie was 18 with a pleasing aroma of excitement swirling all around her. But, it was the bright light emanating from her eyes and the warmth flowing from the very center of her being that was so enchanting. I hoped that she would be different from the monstrous Byron. And she was.

Amalie, my second partner, lived to be nearly 90-years-old. I was grief-stricken over her loss. I feared what was to come. Another heartfelt howl escaped me.

I opened my tired eyes watching the family as they settled in around the grave waiting for the service to begin. They observed me in turn with concern etched on their faces. They understood my angst. They knew the abuse I had suffered at Byron's hands and they empathized with the depth of my feelings for Amalie. She had gone to great lengths to heal me including suffering countless nasty bites. Still she did not give up. She devoted her life to me.

Amalie told me on several occasions that because we outlived our companions by hundreds of years, dogs were considered as heirlooms that were passed down along generations. Heirlooms, she would say, were to be honored and treasured by the entire



family but that every now and then there would be a bad egg, someone who took pleasure from others' pain and suffering. Amalie said that Byron was a bad egg.

She shared with me that the family had put safeguards into place so that their guardian angels would not be abused again. Knowing this soothed my soul greatly giving me peace of mind for my future.

Amalie always reminded me how special I was particularly when my fear would rear its ugly head. Her attempts at mitigating the mental damage inflicted on me were successful for the most part. I started wagging my tail again. Amalie called it my butt, tail wag because she said it was so happy that it shot from the tip of my tail to my haunches causing my whole body to wiggle with joy. Sometimes I would gently yet repeatedly headbutt her knocking her to the ground where I would lick her continuously until she laughed joyfully.

Still there were times that nightmares would torment me. She would find me hiding under the bed shaking. Amalie coaxed me out with her loving voice and with tears in her eyes, she hugged me tightly until I no longer trembled.

Amalie was my love and happiness. She was a part of me that I would carry until the end of my days, but now it was time to say goodbye. Life needed to move on for the sake of those to come.



I stood up, closed my eyes and threw my head back bringing forth a progression of deep-rooted, mournful howls. Family members followed my lead by encircling me standing next to Amalie's resting place. They joined hands, swaying from side to side in unison with my howls. The memorial service had begun.

One by one, they paid their respects. Amalie had been the family matriarch, its sage and healer. Her loss left a gap in the family, one that would soon be filled by the next generation's leader.

After the service ended, we made our way back to the estate. It was there that we would meet my next companion. I was anxious but I remembered what Amalie told me about safeguards. It eased my fear.

When I arrived, everyone had gathered in the family room. They turned to me as I entered. I made my way to the center of the room. Standing there were a young man and woman. I stopped in my tracks. I had not expected two possibilities. They joined hands and approached me as beaming smiles spread fully across their faces.

"It's so lovely to meet you, Lena," the woman said enthusiastically. "I'm Aster and this is my twin brother, Archer. Amalie chose us to be your next companions so long as you agree that is."



Amalie had handpicked them for me! If I could have shed tears, I would have cried with relief.

They had the same smell of euphoria that she had when we met 70 years ago. They had the same warmth emanating from their eyes, indeed their very souls except this beautiful, warm light ran through and around them binding them together.

I moved to Aster and Archer rubbing my head against their legs, one by one, in a sign of acceptance. They were delighted, their light turning bright white with a bit of a rose-green hue as they reached down stroking the fur on my back.

They were my hope and the hope for the next generation of heirlooms, the angelus custos, which I carry inside.