

Tommy

The first time I saw him I was there to take photos of some of the more adoptable dogs, and though that was true, I was also there to continue documenting the deplorable conditions that these 80 plus dogs were living and dying in.

There he was, a pretty little beagle mix, but he was camera-shy, so I couldn't get a photo of him. The man who 'owned' the dogs commented that he was an old dog, and had been there for about 8 years, and was an escape artist. I left there wishing he'd not been so shy, for I was sure he could be placed. It didn't surprise me that he was desperate to get out. I would be, too.

My camera and I went back the next day, early in the morning, when I knew the collector, who lived 20 miles away, wouldn't be there. Pulling into the driveway, I saw Tommy, and he was out.

Sometimes life is just too perfect. I spoke to him, and he came to me. I petted him and looked into his eyes, saying, "Stay right here." I quickly got out and started snapping photos of the filthy conditions and the desperate dogs, then rushed back to the little dog. I opened my car door and he jumped in, landing in my heart at the same time.

I took him straight to my vet, who was appalled at the infestation of fleas on him, and sent him immediately to be bathed. Then he was vetted, and I was asked what his name was. I didn't know what to name him, so just blurted out "Tommy." It seemed to suit him.

He fit like he'd always been there; my dogs accepted him without question, and it was clear that he's been someone's housedog before his luck had turned so terribly bad, and he'd wound up in the collector's clutches. He knew how to get up on a couch or my bed without being coaxed, and acted like this was where he belonged. He was right.

I only had him for 6 days when it all went horribly wrong. I'll never know exactly what happened or why, and I'll never really get over it, as it wasn't supposed to happen this way. Like the untimely death of a child, it shocks you and knocks you to your knees.

It was July 21, 2005; another ungodly hot day in the hottest summer I'd seen since I'd moved to the Missouri Ozarks. I was off that day, and asked a neighbor to come over to get some chicken feathers I'd collected for her. We were chatting outside when my phone rang and I went in to answer it. While on the phone I heard the dogs barking madly. *Jean must be talking through the fence to them*, I thought. I finished my call and walked outside to quiet them down, but all was quiet, the dogs weren't in their yard, and Jean was nowhere to be found. That was odd, so I called her name. She answered from inside the chicken house where she was gathering more feathers for her dream catchers.

I asked her if she knew what the dogs had been shouting about. She said she heard the commotion but didn't know why they were barking. "Come out and see my latest addition," I said. "You'll love this little dog; he's wonderful." She came out as I called Tommy and the other dogs. All but Tommy came out. Something was wrong.

We went inside, and I found him in the dog's room, huddled and shaking in a corner. He'd been mauled. I felt like I was going to faint, like the blood was draining out my toes. *They hurt Tommy. My dogs hurt Tommy. How could this be happening? No, no, no.* I was stunned, and Tommy was in shock, and badly injured. I picked him up and cradled him in my arms, sobbing and calling out to Jean that we had to call my vet.

It was a few minutes after 5:00 pm. I called and called. No answer. No answer anywhere, office or residence. I finally got through to a vet I'd never use except in an extreme emergency, but this was that, so off we went to meet him at his office.

After examining Tommy the vet assured me he'd be fine. He gave him several shots, his standard 'miracle cures' that seldom did. I had a very bad feeling. They wanted to keep him overnight. I let them; another mistake. I should have insisted on taking him home. He should have died in my bed if he had to die, not alone in a strange and lonely cold steel cage.

I called from work the next morning at 8:00 and got the news I dreaded, but already knew. Sweet, precious Tommy, who never hurt anyone, who suffered for years in the Abu Ghraib for dogs, who didn't deserve to die, was indeed dead. And my own sweet dogs had killed him. It was staggering, and felt like a knife in my heart. As the tears rolled down my face, I told the receptionist that I'd pick up his body after work.

That day was hell, in so many ways. I cried all day. I felt sick; I blamed myself. I couldn't accept something that was so unacceptable. It was unbearably hot, with the temperature hanging sullenly at 100, with humidity you could drown in.

I drove to the vet's and picked up the stiff plastic package they presented me with. The vet still insisted he should have been fine; he didn't know why he died. I knew Tommy's injuries were severe from the way he had acted; how could the vet miss something that obvious? It didn't matter. All that mattered was that Tommy was dead, and I needed to bury him. Once in the car, I unwrapped him. I caressed his sweet face, forever frozen in a gasp, his eyes surprised and questioning. I pulled onto the highway sobbing and apologizing, and made the long, sad ride home.

I picked a place under a Poplar tree, where the soil was soft, dark, and cool. I began to dig, thinking, "at least the digging will be easy." Wrong again. I began to hit roots. They refused to give way to my shovel, so I started attacking them like a madwoman, stabbing, hacking, swearing, sobbing, screaming, and crying. Drenched in sweat and tears, I had to stop twice, or collapse. I stared blankly at the hole, and it occurred to me that even the ground knew how wrong this was, and didn't want to take him. Wrong or not, it had to be done, so I went and got an axe. I fought with the ground

and its roots for what seemed like forever, but finally got the grave big enough to cradle him. I had to force myself to put him in it, and kissed his cold face before I did. I stroked him and told him how sorry I was, then covered him up, tamped down the soil, and dragged myself inside, where it was cool.

I cried for weeks, and cry still, every time I think of how he died. In the time since his death I've gone over every day he was here, searching for a sign I should have seen, a warning I missed, a reason it happened, but if there was one, I never found it.

If there is a lesson I guess it is that we who rescue must do the best we can, try to do better the next time, learn from mistakes, and when things go so horribly wrong, as they did for poor little Tommy, we have to try to forgive ourselves.

I haven't gotten there yet, but I'm working on it, and I'm still getting dogs out of that place and into a better one. I do it for those still living, and I do it for Tommy.

