

“PALLY”

A Christmas Story by Bo Wilson

for Family and Friends

and especially for Trouble, and Beckett,
and Sebastian and Anna and Bella and Sammy and Macy,
and most especially for Rambo

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The Saint isn't perfect.

This might be heard with surprise by any of the countless mortals whose lives have been brightened by the gifts he gives each year on that single December's eve. It might be heard as blasphemy by the thousands of Makers laboring in his service in the crystal caverns deep within the polar ice of his realm. It might even be heard with a chuckle of agreement by the Saint himself.

But however it might be heard, the truth remains: he is not perfect. Oh, his love of us is perfect. His intentions are perfect. His sight, which brings him understanding of each and every creature in his view, is perfect. But he is a single being, and even a view as expansive as his has its limits. He is the Saint of All Giving, and his powers are vast, but a single poor saint can only do so much. There came a day when he realized this, and felt the problem of how to decide what to give when you can't see what's needed.

This is why, on a frosty evening long ago, he decided upon a gift that might help to fill any of the world's spaces which might otherwise go unseen. He decided to give us dogs.

Well. That's rather poorly said. The Saint didn't give us dogs in any formal, presentational way; there was never a moment of "Hello, I'm the Saint, here's a dog, have fun and Merry Christmas." He didn't actually give us anything, if we're being literal about it. It was the dogs to which he gave something, but it was we who benefited; what he gave all dogs was a bit of the perfect love he already had for us.

On that night, he stood at the top of the world, and he thought of us, thinking as hard as he could, imagining each of us in every particular until his pleasure with us could not be contained, erupting from him in that famous, rolling laugh of his. He sent his joyous, loving laughter into the heavens, where it was swept up and born upon the winds that circle the world, making its way into every forest and desert, every meadow and mountaintop.

Dogs, as you know, have exceptional hearing, and on that night their ears perked, even in their sleep, at this sensation which rode the wind and left them filled with a new feeling. When they awoke, every dog in the world now had inexplicable love for the humans who had, up to that point, been viewed as uninteresting, slow-footed, hairless weaklings. Where once there had been disregard or even disdain, there was now boundless affection. This was half of the miracle.

The other half was the Saint's true genius in this gift, for he had understood that dogs enjoy tasks, need them in order to be happy.... and that Love, written into the soul of a dog, becomes a new kind of task, something for which dogs are uniquely equipped.

For everyone knows: Dogs can smell loneliness.

Glen Fletcher steps out of his house to bring in the paper, which ought to be at the end of his driveway, but isn't. He begins to trudge down his walk, resigned to a search which could end in a soggy newspaper retrieved from the drainage ditch by his driveway, or worse, no paper at all, which would mean a call to the circulation department. He sighs.

He seems a man made entirely of sighs, taking in good air and expelling weariness. He is not a crank, nor a curmudgeon; he is simply one of the many people for whom life is a thing to be gotten on with. This is, in fact, one of his most frequently repeated sayings, uttered to dentists and auto-mechanics and salesmen and the people who ring his telephone with surveys: "Well, let's get on with it."

The house from which he has emerged is too much house for a man living alone, but of course he wasn't always alone. Once, before the sighs had overtaken him, he was married to a wonderful woman who bore him two fine children. His back had been straighter in those days, his step more sure and less shuffling, and he had been a man who could laugh at a joke and even tell one in return.

But his wife had died suddenly. His children, still fine people, had moved far away, and somehow he had just... continued. He hadn't sold the house, nor quit his job, nor done much of anything, really, except get on with it. He had been getting on with it for almost five years now, sighing his way through the days, leaving the television on for the vague comfort of its empty noise, sleeping in his recliner each night until awakening to go to the bathroom and then shifting to the bed, too large for one person, but so what? He would awaken each morning close to seven, shrug into a thinning robe the color of rain, and trudge out to play another weary round of Find the Paper.

Ah. There it was, only a little bit off of the driveway, not so bad today; at least it wasn't under his car (a sensible sedan of no particular color.) He issues another great sigh, and bends to pick it up, wondering with a kind of distant curiosity why he even bothers to take the paper. It's more than half ads, screaming at him to buy Christmas trees and toys and turkeys and a thousand other things he has foregone in the last few years, why even bother himself with it? Habit, he supposed. What was life, after all, except a collection of habits, accrued over many years of getting on with things?

With a small grunt, he stands again, and is about to turn around and return to his house when he sees the dog.

The dog's name is nothing either of us could pronounce, but he's not been given a people name yet... or if he has, it's something generic, some meaningless moniker dispensed by the shelter, "Rex" or "King" or some such empty marker. He didn't mind. He knew, as most dogs know, that minding things is usually pointless. You might say that the dog had, in his own way, been Getting On With It for most of his own life, just like Glen.

The difference-- and it was a big one-- was that the dog knew exactly why he was getting on with things: He was waiting. He was waiting for a scent, had been waiting his whole life, and three days ago the scent had reached him, arriving with rich potency. The dog had been instantly alert, without even the premise of uncertainty anywhere in his body. He was like a soldier whose mission papers had finally arrived, and he was now a small but powerful force of nature, aching with the need to be free in the world. He saw every seam in the shelter's construction, knew by scent which doors had poor latches, which handlers were tired or careless; he heard every approach, and he heard when the approach was focused and when it was distracted.

He was no longer a pup, so simply making a break for it was not his preference. Dogs know our very awarenesses, and they know where the gaps are, the way we can sometimes know whether there's time for one more car before the light turns red. This dog heard the frazzled handler approaching the door with at least five dishes of food arrayed across her forearms, and he heard that she was engrossed in one of the thin, glowing boxes the humans carried everywhere. He heard the click of the latch, and smelled her awareness slide over and past him as she struggled with her too-many tasks and her too-few hands.

She never saw him leave, and never even registered that he was gone. The other dogs, of course, knew what he was about, and he could smell their pride and their wishes for his success, and he felt lifted by their confident hopes for him. The scent was even stronger out here, and following it was as easy for him as it would be for you or I to follow a searchlight to its source. He padded steadily through the night, and the next day, and the next night, and had found the scent's home about an hour before dawn. He had waited, out of sight, for a short time, and when he heard the front door open and saw the man shuffle out-- the man!-- he had trotted to the top of the driveway, and had then sat, alert and waiting, trembling with joy.

Which is exactly how Glen sees him now.

"Hey," says Glen, without even knowing entirely that he has spoken. He doesn't recognize this dog... but he knows that this means nothing. He wouldn't recognize most of his neighbors if they stood directly before him, never mind their pets. He speaks again. "Hey boy-- you lost?"

The dog cocks his head, willing to do his best with these strange, miraculous sounds.

Glen sighs, and ponders his options. If the dog lives around here, then he'll probably return home soon. If he doesn't, then there's nothing much Glen can do about it. He could call animal control, but that feels... wrong, somehow. The dog's not hurting anybody. It's not making any trouble. It's just looking at him, panting slightly with that dog mouth that always makes them look like they're smiling. It doesn't look scared or confused. It's looking right at him.

But, Glen notes, there's no collar. No tags. He gives a tiny nod. That must be it-- dog slipped its collar, ran off, exploring the neighborhood, ready to head back home as soon as it gets bored. "Go on, then!" calls Glen in a slightly louder voice. "Go on home before you get into trouble!"

The dog sits, gazing at the man adoringly, he has never seen so splendid a man, and the lonely scent from him is so strong that the dog would cry, if dogs could cry. But dogs don't cry. (The time other animals spend on sorrow, dogs spend on love.) So the dog rises to his feet, and takes a step toward Glen, but then he smells a ribbon of fear spill into the man's scent.

"Hey now!" says Glen, taking a step back, and the dog freezes, and then sits again. He has sinned! He has frightened this perfect human!

Glen begins to feel unnerved. Something about this isn't right. He hasn't had a dog for over thirty years, not since he was a kid, and he no longer feels easy and comfortable around them, certainly not around a strange one. What if it gets aggressive when you get too close? What if it's sick? He doesn't have time for this. "Go on!" he says again, more forcefully, waving an arm for emphasis. "Get outta here!"

The lonely scent is still there, but there are other smells mixed in with it, a confused jumble, and the dog knows that Glen isn't quite ready. He fears he has done something wrong, but there's no point dwelling on it. It's okay. It'll be okay. He's been patient for a long time, this dog has. He's got time, and surely so wonderful a human will soon understand. The dog rises again, fixes Glen with one last, loving look and then turns and trots away.

Glen watches until the dog is out of sight.

He sighs.

Glen returns home from the office a bit later than normal because of a last-minute meeting called by management. His lights cut an arc as he turns into his driveway, and they illuminate two tiny gleams on his front porch. Eyes.

That damned dog!

Glen sets his jaw, which is an odd thing for it allows no sigh to escape, and he turns the key, shutting off the car and opening its door, lurching from it with uncharacteristic energy as he strides toward his door calling "Hey! Hey dog!"

The dog is on its feet, and it thinks it has never seen anything as wonderful as this man, stalking toward him. The dog knows Glen is upset, even angry, but the dog's bliss at the

sight of him cannot be contained, everything about this man is better than the best sounds, the best smells. A quick yip of joy escapes the dog's mouth.

Glen is shaking his head as he moves closer. No. Absolutely not. Whatever this dog thinks is happening, this dog is wrong, this is not a scene of happy greeting, this is not a reunion, this is a confrontation, soon to be a dismissal, a banishing, this mutt can't just stroll onto his porch and decide that--

The dog is whining. He is worried that he has offended this man, and he is ready to offer his belly in sacrifice, but of course Glen doesn't know what the whine means, only that it could signify pain of some sort. Glen's anger leaves him in a rush. Is the boy hurt? Did someone do something to this dog? He is now very close, and squats down, his face worried. "What is it boy, are you okay? What's wr--"

He cannot finish the sentence because the dog is now licking his face, whimpering and quivering with sheer pleasure as he laps excitedly--to be so close, to actually be *touching* this man, this best of all creatures, oh, how he adores him!

Glen turns his face aside, and the noise he makes might be surprise, and it might be laughter, and it might even be alarm....

.... but it's not a sigh.

He lets the dog enter the house, letting him go first; the dog moves in slowly, carefully, with frequent looks back at Glen. Glen interprets this as caution or uncertainty, but he is wrong. It is reverence, and disbelief that he might be permitted into the inner den of this splendid man. He stays close, often bumping Glen's legs, gestures that Glen again mistakes for fear, but it's simply the dog's version of pinching himself to see if he's dreaming-- except instead of needing to touch himself, it's Glen he needs to touch, this magnificent person whose reality needs to be confirmed and then reconfirmed every few seconds. Here? Yes? Still? Now?

Really? Really truly?

Glen has no dog food, of course, nor anything else related to dog ownership, but he has a few hamburgers he fried up over the weekend, so he crumbles a couple of them into one bowl and runs some tap water into another, and puts both down onto the floor. The dog looks at him in wonder--Really? Really truly?--and then lowers his snout to the food and takes a quick bite before stopping and glancing up again. Glen smiles without knowing he's smiling, and says "It's okay buddy, go ahead."

Approximately eight seconds later, the hamburger is gone and the kitchen is filled with the sloppy slurping sounds of water being eagerly lapped. The dog looks up, water dripping from its jowls, and Glen laughs outright before the dog resumes drinking. He's

been a long time without anything to eat or drink, but as much pleasure as the food and water give him, they're nothing to the pleasure he feels at the man's smiles and laughter. Oh, how handsome he is when he laughs!

Glen's thoughts are jumbled in a kind of pleasant, low-key chaos. There is a part of his mind that thinks he should be making an effort to find the dog's owners, maybe he should take a picture and then put up fliers... but a larger and more certain part of his mind knows, without questioning, that this dog belongs to no one, except perhaps to him if he'll have it. He moves around the kitchen, rinsing the food bowl and refilling the other with fresh water before replacing it on the floor. He hasn't seen to his own dinner yet, but he doesn't really notice it because he's busy wondering where the dog will sleep. Not outside, surely-- it's cold in the evenings. He remembers a couple of old quilts that are up in the attic, and he goes to the end of the hall and reaches up to pull the cord, opening the trap door to let the stairs unfold to him.

The dog's eyes shine with admiration. The human is able to make the house itself change its shape with a wave of his hand! There are no stairs, and then there are stairs! Was there ever a more magnificent creature? Glen starts up the stairs, and the dog puts one paw on the bottom rung, testing. Glen sees it, and shakes his head, lifting one hand: "No, boy. You stay there, I'll be right back."

The dog instantly retreats a pace and sits. His posture is that of a sentry who would hold this position for a hundred hours if so instructed, and Glen feels a completely irrational sense of pride, as though he himself had trained the animal. What a good dog! The dog catches the scent of this thought, and nearly faints with pleasure, to have pleased the man. His tail thumps against the floor, and Glen smiles at the sound.

He has smiled more in the last half hour than in the previous month.

There is a bit of comedy in Glen's attempt to make the dog's bed. He begins in the kitchen, but the dog ignores it and simply follows him to the den; Glen picks up the quilts and moves them to the den, but the dog simply stays at his side. Later, the dog follows him to his room, and Glen realizes that the dog is not likely to sleep anywhere more than a few feet away from him. This too gives him a kind of unconsidered pleasure, and he is soon arranging the quilts at the foot of his bed. The dog stands on them, and again Glen mistakes the tentativeness of Really? Truly? for caution, so he pats the quilts and gently presses the dog to lie down. Oh, the pressure of the man's hand! The joy of his touch! The dog immediately lies down, in a kind of swoon, and Glen pets the dog for a long, long time before moving to bed.

They both sleep better than they've slept in a very long time.

The next day is about basic logistics. Glen takes a day's vacation because he's unsure how the dog will do if left alone in the house, and he brings the dog along -- a ride! A

ride in the car! Smell the smells! Look the man command the giant metal beast!-- as he goes to a local pet store for dishes and food and a collar and a leash. There is a machine near the door that creates tags, and he pauses, thinking this is a good idea but realizing that he does not know the dog's name. Without really thinking about it, his finger is moving over the touch screen spelling out "Pally." He cocks his head, looking an awful lot like the dog. Pally. Kind of old fashioned, something a sharp guy might say to a friend in a black and white movie, "Let's go, pally." He smiles. He likes it. He pushes the button marked "Make Tag."

He returns to the car where the dog has its paws up on the door, tongue lolling, tail wagging, the man came back! He's back! Is the world not an amazing place?? Glen opens his door, and laughs as he is buried by the dog's kisses, and then he puts on the collar with its new tags right then and there, and the dog has never felt more thrilled by anything in its entire life. His name is Pally. He has a people-name. He is whole.

On the drive home, Glen stops on a whim and picks up a small Christmas tree; he had stopped decorating for the holiday years ago, his only concessions to the day being the checks he sent to his son and daughter no later than December 10 each year... but this feels right, the place could use a little Christmasing. When they get the tree home, the dog cannot contain his astonishment. The man's powers are truly unequalled in all the land-- he has brought the forest into the house!

Glen returns to the attic, again conjuring the magic stairs, and ascends for a moment before returning with an old box of ornaments. He has not even touched this box since his wife died, and he is a bit afraid of what will happen when he handles its contents, but he is surprised to find that he willing to face those fears now that he has a friend. He begins withdrawing the pieces, and and is soon telling Pally the story of each one. This cut out tree is something his son made in preschool. This tiny, tarnished angel is the first ornament he and his wife bought together. At some point, Glen realizes he is crying, but it does not feel like sorrow-- it feels like love, and it feels even more that way when Pally licks the tears from his face.

It is Christmas again at last.

There are other stories. There are the phone calls he makes to his kids the next morning, "just to check in," and their delight at the change in their father's voice. He tells them he has a dog, and even though they can't see him, they are sure he is grinning.

There is the story that Pally might call "The Miracle of the Man's Return," which is enacted at the front door every single day, any time the man has to leave for more than three minutes.

There is also the story of Sheila, and her dog Tequila, who are both walking in the park one day at the same time as Glen and Pally; the way that Tequila and Pally recognize,

instantly, how correct it would be for Glen and Sheila to meet, and the ways in which the two dogs almost effortlessly arrange this.

Dogs know what is good for us.

And when, on Christmas Eve, Pally hears something passing with magical speed overhead, he gives a single bark.... and high overhead, the Saint hears him, and chuckles, and Glen smiles in his sleep without even knowing why.