

Caesar's Way

Out of the WOODS

A near-death drama restores one man's faith in his fellow humans.

BY JOHN STARK

The high-pitched yelping of an injured animal filled the late afternoon air. My heart stood still. I knew immediately that something terrible had happened to my dog, Goldie.

I charged into the woods, running through prickly vines and over crunchy leaves. When I spotted Goldie, she was lying on her side next to a fallen birch tree. Her upper left leg had been sliced open by one of its branches. A thick stream of blood was pumping out of an artery. Her eyes met mine: "Help me."

I was alone, and it was growing dark.

"Oh, God," I thought, "You can't die. Not on our first day."

I had rescued Goldie at the Danbury Animal Welfare Society that very morning. From Boston, where I live, it's a three-hour drive to Danbury, Connecticut, and three hours back.

Well worth it. When I met Goldie, I couldn't resist her charms. When she greets people she smiles. Although I didn't give her the name Goldie, it fit. She has short hair the color of gold. A Doberman-golden retriever mix, she's as solid as precious metal.

For our first walk together, I decided to take Goldie to a wooded area two blocks from my Victorian apartment. For 10 years I had been taking my late Doberman, Monty, there to run and chase squirrels. About the size of two football fields, the woods are on undeveloped land that's owned by a historic cemetery.

After Monty died, I vowed, like so many other dog owners: no more dogs. I couldn't again go through the pain of loving something so much and losing it. Besides, dogs are a huge responsibility. Without Monty I could go shopping after work. I could travel again. I was single, and free.

But I wasn't getting out. There were no summer evening walks with my friends and their dogs. On winter mornings there was no going to an iced-over baseball field, where I'd stand around shivering and conversing with other dog owners. Without Monty there were no spontaneous get-togethers. No "Come on over for dinner, dogs too!"

Where'd everybody go?

A year after losing Monty, I lost my job and my parents. Bad news followed me like a bloodhound. At night I didn't have the soft, comforting weight of Monty's head in my lap as I watched TV on the couch. When I took walks by myself in the cemetery, I'd carry his leash in my coat pocket so I could still grasp its cool leather. I know I had vowed no more dogs, but every day it was becoming all too obvious what I needed to make me happy again.

From the moment I put a leash on Goldie, I felt as if I'd never been without a dog. As we walked toward the woods, her gentle tugs felt as natural as heartbeats. Once in the woods, we walked for 30 minutes along a dirt path. Seeing how well-behaved Goldie was, I decided to let her off the leash—I know, it was foolish, as I didn't really know her. For the next 10 minutes she stayed obediently beside me, seemingly exhausted from her adventurous day.

I had, however, forgotten how fast dogs can shift gears. When a bunny scurried in front of us, Goldie let out a series of chesty "woo-woo-woos!" and bolted after it. Although I quickly lost sight of her, I wasn't worried. The cemetery is fenced in. She couldn't go far.

Moments later, though, I heard those piercing screams. Without help, Goldie didn't have long to





The author with Goldie, post-recovery

Like a host of heaven-sent angels, they surrounded Goldie and me.

live. I knew that when I found her. From the way she was trembling and the fear in her eyes, she knew it too. Gathering all the strength I could muster, I lifted her thick, heavy body. I was able to carry her as far as the path before I had to set her down.

Directly ahead of us was a spiked iron fence that separates the woods from a recreation area. Through the bars I could see young men playing a spirited game of dodgeball on a concrete basketball court.

Goldie's piercing howls caused the young men to cease playing and look in our direction. I could see that they were teenagers of varying ethnicities. That diversity is why I love my neighborhood. They were Goldie's only hope.

"Can you help me?" I pleaded. "My dog's dying." If I know anything about teenage boys, it's that they're easily distracted. Would they ignore me and resume their game? Hightail it out of there so as not to get involved? I held my breath, praying.

Without hesitation, the entire group rushed toward the fence and climbed over the spikes. And like a host of heaven-sent angels, they surrounded Goldie and me. A young man in a Red Sox cap took off his T-shirt and made a tourniquet for Goldie's leg. Another got on his cell phone and called our local animal hospital. When I said that I didn't have a car, a young man with short

black hair volunteered to go home and get his.

Goldie's shrill cries summoned people from blocks away. Strangers rushed from their homes

to see what was the matter. Somebody threw a first aid kit over the iron fence. A man who was pushing his little girl on the playground swings came running down the path. "I'm a doctor," he said, ordering the boys to hold Goldie steady while he disinfected her wound with hydrogen peroxide. When he poured the bubbling liquid into the open cut, her howls could have woken the whole cemetery.

When the young man with short black hair returned with his car, the doctor and several dodgeball players carried Goldie to it. On the way to the hospital, a young man in wire-rimmed glasses sat in the back seat and held her.

While Goldie was in surgery, all the team members hovered about me in the waiting room. And when a surgeon in green scrubs appeared and announced that Goldie would make it, the team members leaped to their feet and high-fived each other, and me. Then they dashed off, saying they had a pizza date.

News of Goldie's accident traveled fast. Over the next few days, all of my former dog friends called or e-mailed: "When can we meet the new dog?"

Two weeks after Goldie's accident, I got a call from a volunteer at the shelter. "Just checking in to see how our girl's doing," she said.

"We are doing great," I told her, and we were. ●