

Going Home



By Ruth Y. Nott © 2007

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Two miles, three miles...how far had he run? Jason didn't know, didn't want to know, didn't care. His breathing was hard and uneven. Sweat had turned his once shining brown, black and white coat to a dirty, dripping mess. He wanted to keep on running and running ? as far away from home and reality and memory as he could go.

Slowly, however, without his realizing it, his body was taking control, forcing his pace to slow until, exhausted, he dropped at the side of the road, his chest heaving. His eyes were wild and red. His muscles twitched uncontrollably. It seemed an eternity before he could regain enough strength to crawl weakly into the thicket in anticipation of nightfall and the dangers it held.



This night, though, held no danger for Jason beyond the fitful dreams which again and again plagued his troubled mind. He awoke frightened and shivering when morning's first light made its way through the leaves overhead, gently nudging him back to meet another day.

Lady lifted her head and sniffed the air. The odors of early morning were drifting gently on the breeze ? bacon frying, coffee brewing ? breakfast was underway in the house above. She sniffed the ground beside her, but Jason's scent was a day old. He had not come home to join her in their sleeping place beneath the old porch. He had been gone much too long and she was worried.

Rising slowly and stretching muscles not quite ready for waking, Lady padded across the lawn to the corner of the rail fence to get a better view of the road. Jason was nowhere in sight. Sitting back on her haunches and easing slightly to the right, she prepared for a long vigil. She tried hard not to imagine that he would not return...he must! To lose them both within 24 hours would be beyond her endurance. She would wait and he would return. She would not allow herself to believe otherwise. And while she waited, she remembered...

There, just 300 feet or so down the rutted dirt road, was the place they had first seen Blue Babe (or Granny Blue as Jason so fondly called her). She had been trudging through the rain, head down, barely able to put one foot in front of another. Then, seeing the old house off to her left seemed to induce a small ray of hope. She turned and headed slowly in that direction. And she held her head just a tiny bit higher despite the pelting rain.



Jason was only six months old then. He was a frisky, playful pup who loved to play in the rain, running back and forth and ?round about. He seemed to be playing tag with the raindrops. It was one of these jack-rabbit passes in and out among the roses and across the yard, ever so close to a direct collision with the rail fence, that he spied Blue Babe. He tumbled to a halt and watched her make her way purposefully toward the open gate. Doing a clumsily acrobatic about-face, ran helter-skelter beneath the porch to cower at Lady's shoulder.

"Mama! Who's that?!" He yapped excitedly.

"I don't know Jason, but she looks like she's traveled a long way."



By the time Blue Babe stood before them, peering into the shadows beneath the porch, her eyes were only half seeing the haven it offered. "Beg pardon Ma'am," she rasped, "Have you room for a tired old traveler to rest?"

"Of course we do my dear," Lady replied. She spoke with a softness to her voice which Jason recognized, but he could not understand its use in connection with this bedraggled, drenched, and obviously confused stranger.

"Jason, show our guest that nice warm spot in the back where the warmth from the kitchen can be felt," Lady directed.

Blue Babe hesitantly followed the obedient pup to what was indeed a fine resting place. It was warm and dry and there she lay down. She rested her chin on her two front paws and wearily closed her eyes.

"Psssst!" Lady whispered. "Jason! Don't stare! It's not polite. Come back here now and leave her alone."

Jason hadn't realized he was staring. He was just overwhelmed by this visitor to their neighborhood. She had been such a surprise, and was such a mess, and looked so sad. He didn't understand the ease with which his mother had accepted her. He wasn't at all sure he approved. They didn't get many visitors here in Breslow County. Farm country created great distances between homes and his mother never let him roam far enough to meet much more than rabbits, opossums, birds and squirrels. And all of those could be found quite close by. As a matter of fact, this was the only other dog he had seen besides his brother and sister. He sure missed them since they had gone to live at George Grayson's place four miles south nearly four months ago.

Reluctantly, Jason lowered his gaze and turned to question his mother. "Ma, who is she? Do we know her? Where's she going? What is she doing here? How long is she staying? Will she be here at suppertime? How old do you think she is?" So fast came Jason's questions that Lady couldn't find any place between to answer even one of them.

Looking back on it all now, as she kept her vigil by the fence, Lady realized it could not have ended any other way. Although Jason was a little shy at first around this stranger, he soon was nuzzling under her neck, showing her all his puppy antics, and listening intently when she spoke to them of her long, eventful life. He came to love his "Granny Blue" in those few months she was with them. And Blue Babe gloried in his playful attentiveness. She relaxed, smiled more, and her appetite increased for a while. They were good for each other.



Jason and Blue Babe often went for long walks together on the farm. They wandered down the winding dirt road and occasionally Lady tagged along. She also liked to listen to Blue Babe's stories. They were exciting tales of days gone by and how she came to this place and into their lives.

Blue Babe had been well known in these parts some 18 years ago, a champion beagle, born and bred on the Draper farm on the western edge of Breslow County. That was another 25 miles from where Lady and Jason lived. She had lived with the Drapers for 12 years and had favored them with many more champion pups than any of their other breeding beagles. She was happy there. Then, young Bobby, her favorite of all the Draper boys (and there were eight in all), took her to live with him and his new wife. They lived 300 miles away in North Cambridge County.

Blue Babe told Jason and lady how she had loved it with Bobby and Vivian at first. Then, as the years passed, Bobby's children were born and grew to take more and more of her master's attention. She was left alone in her pen most of the time. Time which was spent wishing she was back home on the old Draper farm.



Of course Bobby's children had loved her, but she was not used to their hyperactive, boisterous and sometimes thoughtlessly painful attempts at playing with her. What they needed, and received, was a younger, more energetic companion. Fritz, the German shepherd pup their father chose for them, was just that. He had more energy than she could ever remember having. She missed their attention, but she was more hurt that young Fritz virtually ignored all her attempts to become friends. So, Babe kept more and more to herself and spent long hours dreaming of those days back in Breslow County...of her youth...of her children. And one day the longing to return home became more than she could bear. She slipped unnoticed into the front yard, then into the street, then down the block... and on towards home.

One steamy summer day, the heat seemed almost overpowering. Even breathing was difficult. The three new friends, Lady, Jason and Granny Blue, lay panting beneath the great harvesting machine on the edge of the field. It was then that Granny Blue began the story of her journey home and Jason listened intently.

"I knew it would be a long, hard trip," she whispered. It was even too hot that day to expend much energy talking. "But, I guess I didn't realize just how long or how hard. I wasn't prepared," she mused.

"It was early November when I began. The days were cool, just right for traveling. It was hard to find any good place to rest at night, or any friendly home where I could beg a meal. Lots of times I went without eating or had to scratch through people's garbage to find a bite or two worth eating. And sometimes my judgment wasn't so good, and the few bites I did get made me very, very sick.

"All too soon, November faded, day by day, into December. Snow began to fall. Even though my feet were callused from long days of walking, it was hard to take the cold. I had to find shelter for several weeks."

"But where Granny Blue?" Jason asked attentively. "Where did you stay?"



"Luckily for me, I met the nicest lady right about then. Late one snowy night, I had crawled beneath the back steps of a house on Chestnut St. in Bakersville. It was so cold and I was really hungry. I couldn't help but whimper. I was curled up so tightly hoping to ward off the cold, but it didn't help much. I hadn't been there but a few minutes when the door opened and a gray haired old woman peered out and slowly made her way down the steps, almost tripping on her long chenille robe. She pulled it closer around her as she knelt and reached out a hand to touch my head."

"Ah, you poor thing," she murmured. "You're just like me, cold and alone. Come on now," she said as she tried feebly to pull me from under the steps, "Come inside with Susie and warm your bones. Maybe there's some leftovers from supper." At that point, Blue Babe stretched and yawned, the heat causing a drowsiness which she could no longer resist. She lay her head down between her paws and slept.

"Granny..." Jason moved closer and peered into her face.

"Mmmm?" she roused.

"What happened then?"

"Later boy...later." And her eyes closed again.

"Let her rest Jason" Lady whispered. "This heat is hard for her to bear. It's her age you know. We may not have her with us much longer."

"Will she continue on her journey then?" Jason asked.

"One journey or another, Jason. One journey or another." Then Lady also placed her chin on her paws and closed her eyes.

Jason couldn't sleep. He kept wondering what his mother had meant. Where else could Granny Blue be going?

Several weeks passed in Breslow County with little relief from the summer heat. Jason continued to spend most of his time at Granny Blue's side, but their long walks were reduced to leisurely strolls along the fence line near the house. Granny Blue's strength seemed to be lessening day by day. More often now, Jason had to be her eyes and lead her home as her vision dimmed. Granny found herself stumbling where once her pace was steady and sure.

One morning Granny Blue failed to meet Lady and Jason at the back door when Mrs. Gardner put out the breakfast leftovers in the old aluminum pie tin.

"Don't eat too much Jason," scolded Lady as the growing pup hungrily wolfed down the bits of bacon and scrambled eggs. "We'll leave what's left for Granny Blue."

Lady and Jason then made their way back under the porch to the corner Granny Blue had made her own, each taking turns dragging the tin plate of scraps.

"Mama! Look! She's not here!" Jason yelped excitedly. "Granny?!" He called, "G-R- A-N-N-Y!" But there was no answering yelp or whine, only silence.

"Mama, where can she be?" Jason asked anxiously.

"I don't know Jason," Lady answered. "We'd better look around. You look out front and I'll check behind the barn. She hasn't been feeling well lately. She may have wandered off and become confused."

Jason ran from beneath the porch calling all the way. "Granny! Granny!" and was back at Lady's side almost before she reached the barn.

"Mama, she's gone! Granny's gone!" he cried.

"I know Jason, but we'll find her. Come on, help me look," she said, trying to calm him down.

But Jason would not be calmed.

"No, Mama! You come with me...footprints...Granny's footprints...headed out the gate...down the road!" he gasped breathlessly and ran back toward the road with Lady trying to keep up.

"Jason, wait! You're too fast for me! No wonder Granny tired so easily. Slow down!"

"Look, Mama...that way..." and he ran to the west, following the trail Granny Blue had left in the dust. Jason trotted on, head down, oblivious to Lady panting along behind.



It was just this head down, searching posture which prevented Jason from seeing the tragedy which Lady saw as she loped along scanning the road far ahead. She saw Blue Babe making her way down the road, apparently unaware of the oncoming pickup truck, her mind probably wandering, again, into the days of her youth.

"Granny!" Lady called, but too late.

Lady's shout and the thud of the impact brought Jason to a halt, unable to believe his eyes as the truck sped on down the road, never stopping. His hesitation gave Lady just a little head start. But, after regaining his senses, he set out for Granny at such a pace that he still beat Lady to her side by a second or two.

"Granny!" he shouted, then whispered tearfully, "Granny?". He began to lick her bloodied face and push his nose into her warm neck, but she didn't move, and didn't answer him.

Lady gazed on Granny's broken form and knew it was no use. "Jason, Jason..." she coaxed..."Let her rest son. Granny's gone Jason. We can't help her now."

"Gone? Gone where? She's hurt Mama! Help me, Mama!" and Jason circled round and around, nudging, prodding, trying to get Granny to move...to answer.

Finally, Lady could stand it no longer. "Stop it Jason!" she shouted. "Stop it! She's dead." She caught Jason by the neck and dragged him away to the edge of the road.

Jason was confused and didn't know why Lady was pulling him away. He backed away and looked sadly into her eyes. "Dead? What does that mean?"

Lady thought hard. What could she tell him now that would make him feel any better?

"Jason, I...well...her body is no longer alive. It's of no use to her now. She can't walk or talk or open her eyes. But her spirit, Jason, that part of her..." He didn't let her finish.

"Can't walk...or talk...spirit...I don't understand," Jason interrupted in a wail. "Mama, I don't understand!" Crying and frightened, Jason turned and ran...not knowing where...just wanting to escape the pain and confusion and sadness which surrounded him. He ran...and ran...and ran...



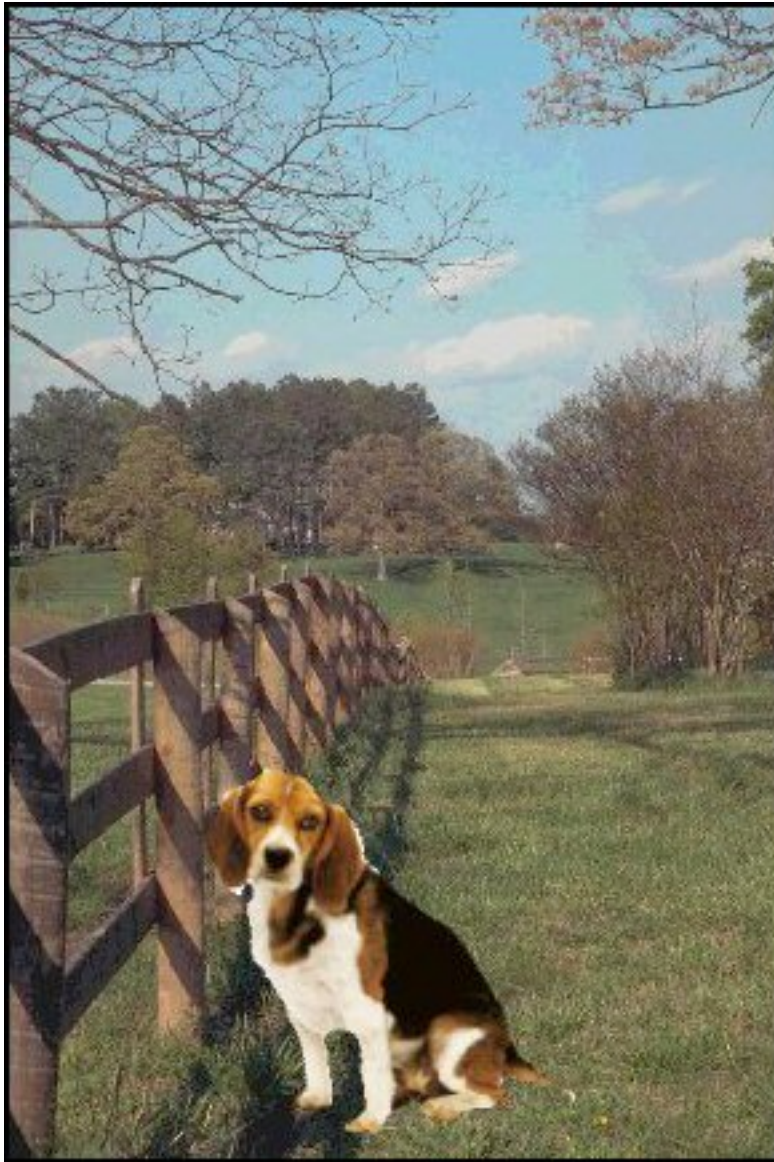
Lady watched him go, but couldn't stop him. "Jason!" she cried, but he didn't turn back. Lady remembered her first encounter with death. It wasn't like this. It had been easier. She had been prepared. Now she wondered why she hadn't talked to Jason about it before. She knew Blue Babe was ill. She knew how close Jason was to his Granny Blue. But even she had not been prepared for this. Lady slowly lay down beside the still form and began a lonely vigil.

Later that afternoon, Mr. Gardner saw them there as he made his way down the road on his way to town. He pulled his old Buick to the side of the road. He lifted Blue Babe in his arms, placed her in the trunk. He tried to get Lady to ride back in the car, but she shied away.

Lady had never liked cars. She walked slowly back on her own and found the Buick parked out by the barn. Mr. Gardner was straining with a shovel, digging a final resting place for Blue Babe. Lady lay down at his feet and watched and prayed that Jason would come home safely.

Jason didn't sleep much that night. When morning came, his muzzle was still wet with his salty tears, but he breathed a little easier. He was so sad, but he knew that Lady would be worried about him and that he didn't want to stay out here much longer. He was lonely and he had so many questions to ask. And his puppy stomach was telling him it was breakfast time.

He got up, slowly stretching muscles sore from yesterday's long, wild run. He sniffed the morning air to get his bearings and then turned and headed home.



As Lady watched, a familiar shape emerged around the bend in the road. It was Jason. She was sure of it. It had to be Jason, but she waited, her tail wagging slowly at first, then

more and more quickly as she saw him more closely. When she could wait no longer, she jumped up and ran from her spot near the rail fence and met him before he entered the yard. She licked his ears, nuzzled his neck and yipped her greeting so loudly that Mr. Gardner pushed open the old screen door to see what was going on. Smiling and nodding in their direction, he closed the door and went back inside.

Snuggling together in the warm spot beneath the kitchen, Jason finally began the questions which he didn't really want to ask. "Mama, what is death? What is this spirit you talked about? Why is Granny gone? Where is she now?"

"Jason, how can I explain a spirit? A spirit is that part of each of us which thinks and feels and loves.

"Not long ago, when your body was still being formed inside of mine, long before your birth, God took your spirit from its home in Heaven and lovingly placed it inside your body so that you could experience life on earth. But our bodies don't last forever Jason. They get old like Granny did, and they get sick like Granny was, and then they just quit working. It's really sad that Granny was hit by the truck, but it only brought her death a little sooner. It would not have been long before her old body stopped working all by itself. And when that happens, Jason, whether naturally or by some terrible accident, then God takes your spirit back from that useless body. Your spirit never dies Sweetheart. God takes you home again to live in Heaven again with Him. That's where Granny is now Jason. She's gone home...not the home on the Draper farm in Breslow County where her memories were taking her, but her permanent home in Heaven. She's happy there. She has no more pain and there's lots of friends and relatives to talk to and tell all about her life here. And, Jason, it will be the same for us when it's our turn to go back home with God."

"Granny likes it there mama?" Jason asked timidly.

"You bet she does! And she'll be waiting for you there one day too. The two of you can run and play and she'll never get tired. You'll see Jason. You'll see."

"Will she Mama? But I miss her so much right now!" Jason whimpered.

"It's okay Jason. Go ahead and cry. You do miss her now, and you'll miss her tomorrow. But tomorrow will be a little easier and the day after that a little easier. We never really stop missing someone whom we loved so much... and we never forget them either. We just have to try to think of how happy they are now and remember that we'll be seeing them again one day. God loves us Jason, and He won't let us go on being sad forever." Lady snuggled up beside him then and licked his tears away with a big sloppy kiss.

And in the years that came after that, Jason remembered everything that his mother had told him and found that she was right. Happiness did come again into his life, and sadness too each time he remembered his Granny Blue. But, he would smile and say to himself... "She waiting for me," ...and a nice warm feeling would always fill his heart with joy.

