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Duke

My father whistled and said, "Here, Boy." I thought he was calling me. As I went to him, a Boxer puppy ran between my legs, and we both fell in a tangle of limbs. That's how Duke and I met. I was four years old, and he was eight weeks.

I had a cold. Bad enough for my mother to let Duke get into bed with me. She was usually strict about that, but she must have felt sorry for me. And Duke too. Just about adult size now with a fawn coat, black muzzle, and white chest and paws, he sensed that I didn't feel well and wanted to stay close.

I was coughing and had a stuffy nose. My mother called the doctor to make a house call. I didn't look forward to his visits. His thermometer agreed with my mother's hand when she felt my forehead earlier. I had a fever. The prescription was Saint Joseph's Aspirin for Children and hot tea with lemon.

Then came the part I dreaded — he prepared a needle to give me a shot. Duke just lay beside me until then, but he must have read my face when I saw the needle.

A low rumble started deep in his chest as the doctor approached me. Duke, who was usually obedient, didn't respond when my mother tried to get him away from the doctor. She had to grab his collar, get him into the bathroom, and force the door closed. Although he resisted, Duke didn't hurt her. As fearless as he was, he might have been just a little bit afraid of my mother. His barking became a howl as he scratched at the bathroom door, trying to get back to me.

When the doctor left, it was safe to let Duke out. He ran around, sniffing and snarling until he determined that the threat had passed. He got back on the bed, laid over my legs, and stared at the door, ready to protect me from another doctor visit.

Dan said, "Boxer's ain't such tough dogs, Frank."

We were in an almost empty local restaurant, sometime between the lunch and dinner crowds — my father, Duke, me, and Dan, a neighbourhood guy who'd just finished his lunch.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Dan. I'm sure if anybody threatened my son, Duke would be all over them in a second." My father had faith in Duke.

"I doubt it, Frank," Dan said, "Boxers are pretty and playful, and even though this one's full grown, he ain't tough enough to be good protection."

As he got a tight grip on Duke's collar, my father said, "Dan, I'll show you what this dog can do. Take Robert to the other side of the room, and I'll hold Duke here,"

Dan did as he was asked. I wondered what was going to happen, and then my father continued, "Hold onto Robert with one hand and act like you're going to hit him with the other."

I knew Dan wouldn't hurt me, and I waited to see what would happen. He said, "I'll do it if you want, Frank, but I don't think that dog will even notice."

He roughly grabbed me by the shoulder and then raised his arm as if to swing at me. I heard a growl as Duke jerked on my father's hand with enough force to make him lose his balance and loosen his grip. He broke free and dashed across the dining room, leaped, and bit into Dan's raised arm. I heard loud snarling and looked up to see Dan, trying to seem calm, saying, "Down, boy." He was always cheerful and joking and a pretty tough guy too. It surprised me to see him so scared.

Afraid that my dog would get into trouble, I shouted his name as loudly as I could. He let go but didn't stop growling. I looked up at Dan and saw that a large part of his leather jacket's sleeve was ripped off. I took it

from Duke's mouth and gave it back to Dan. My father hadn't meant to let him go. He just wanted to prove that Duke wouldn't like it if anyone tried to hurt me.

"You look a little pale, Dan. Do you feel all right? Want a glass of water?"

"Okay, Frank, you win. That dog is really something."

For the rest of the day, Dan had to explain his torn jacket to a lot of people. And as he told them, he seemed proud that he'd been involved in a test of Duke's loyalty.

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My sister got home from school and found Duke dead on the living room floor. After she had calmed down, she called our father. He came home and was handling everything. When I arrived later with my mother, Duke wasn't there to greet us. I saw our family and some neighbours looking sombre, and a few were crying. Since I didn't see my father, I was afraid something had happened to him. When I was told it was Duke, I didn't feel any better.

Duke had died from a brain aneurysm. He was only four years old. We had other dogs after that. They were all good dogs, but none could ever compare to Duke.