

Anastasia Fish

Crimson Stains

The watery sunlight struggled through the high windows in the concrete walls; its weak rays battled the cool basement air, bits of dust dancing in chaotic fashion. The siblings wriggled behind the chain-link fence and pressed their wet noses against the crisscrossed wires that kept them from escaping. Their mother sat on a worn overstuffed pillow, yelping at her pups to quiet down despite the stench of mold and urine that was making them sick; a place, any vet would deem uninhabitable, and yet was their home. In the dark corners of the concrete room, water dripped into the same puddle leaving a staleness to fight for dominance over the room's rotten stench.

The oversized door at the top of the old creaky staircase rattled against the hinges as a rough hand turned it gruffly and shoved it open. The stairs groaned in protest as he descended, but this time there were two others with him; one more friendly and gentle, and the other uninterested.

"I would love to keep them all, but I just can't, Tom. I have been trying to take care of them but it's been such a mess and it's just not fair to keep them cooped up down here. I sold three of the others, but I still have these and can't keep but maybe two."

"Don't worry Charles, my wife and kids want a puppy, so I am glad to take one off your hands if that will help you out. Let's have a look shall we?" The voice was kind and gentle.

A sigh of frustration followed by "okay Dad, can we hurry up?" Her voice came out, dripping with annoyance. "Joe wants to see me this afternoon, and I didn't want to come. You just wanted to drag me here so that you could make me spend time with you."

"Willow, please, try to be civil, I know you are not happy, but this is for you."

And that's when Ginger saw her for the first time. Mind you, she was black and white and grey all over to Ginger, wreathed in a bright glow of light off the screen of the phone she was tapping away on, but nonetheless, there she was, small, slight and delicate. The man with her was tall and strong, and rugged. Their state was in peril Ginger could tell by the way the man held himself, and the way that the girl carelessly tapped at the screen. Nonetheless, his little body trembled with excitement and he yipped for their attention, his fat paws were too big, but his hind end stretched out under him and his front paws found the wire in front of him. His little pink tongue slipped out to the side, lolling carelessly, and he panted in excitement, tail moving back and forth powerfully enough to knock over two of his siblings who had tried to come closer to the strange gentleman and his daughter. A hand came towards the puppies over the top of the fencing and Ginger examined it as it dropped in front of him. He sniffed it. Its smell was not like anything he knew naturally, but was fresh and new. He took a quick lick to see if it would taste good and it did. Excited, he licked the man's palm, as another hand stroked his back, and then found its way under his milk-bloated stomach. The condition of the concrete room made it difficult for his mother to feed him and his siblings, and they often bloated after a good feeding, taking in as much as they possibly could.

"This little guy is pretty friendly; he should do well with our family."

"He is the best behaved of the litter. I am not sure why, but he is the only one that will go over on the newspapers."

"I'm glad to hear it." Tom pulled out a strange looking thin book and scribbled something on it, then tore it out and handed it to Charles. He held out his hand and they shook hands. Willow released a sound of frustration and slid her phone into her pocket.

“Dad, can you please hurry up. I’m really ready to get out of here...it smells...” she paused for a second looking disgusted, “...not great in here.” She stared at the puppy, chewing her bottom lip in anticipation before reaching out an arm to hold him. “Give him here.” She held the puppy gingerly, wrapping a leather collar around his soft orange and white neck before attaching it to a leash.

As they headed up the stairs, the sound of Ginger’s siblings’ muffled yips grew quieter and quieter until they ceased to exist. The door was shut forcefully behind them, and as they descended the stairs from the porch, Ginger was exposed to a whole new world. Again his body filled with excitement as the scents and sights filled his senses for the first time and he trembled with anticipation.

Charles called to them at the last second, “Oh, Tom, do be sure to keep him tied up when there is a storm or you go to wash him. They all got flooded in that last storm down below, and I think that they may not react so well to water immersion.” And with that, they left the old skeleton of a man on the porch watching as they got into their car, gravel crunching under the wheels that would carry Ginger to his new life.

After about fifteen minutes of silence, Tom attempted to engage his daughter: “So, Willow, you like Ginger? I chose him for you, hoping you’d spend some time training him with Molly and Ky-“

“Yeah whatever Dad, he’s great thanks. But you know that he can’t replace Mom.” She stared out the window, avoiding any eye contact with her father. Willow had given up any malice long ago; instead she just said in a matter of fact tone, “You gave up on her and moved on, you lost your job at the law firm because you chose to marry another woman before Mom

died, and I don't really want to get to know Sheila...she's not my mom and your new kids aren't my brother and sister, not really anyway."

"Willow, I am trying. Can you please try to forgive me?"

She didn't say anything but instead examined her chipped pink nail polish and thought how badly she needed to redo her nails. She looked more like her mom than she had ever resembled her father, with long, soft blond curls falling over her shoulders and deep blue eyes. She turned her attention then to Ginger, examining him carefully. He looked up at her expectantly and wagged his tail gently when her hand found his ear and scratched behind it. His attention turned from her as their car pulled onto a long hard packed driveway that snaked its way amongst the foliage.

It began as a scant little building somewhere in a distant vision, squatting amongst the evergreen trees that nestled it in. Granted, everything looked better than the life he had known in the concrete room, but he didn't care much where he was as long as his new family was there. When they got closer, everything came into focus. The house was modest and safe looking. As they pulled up the driveway, the gravel crunched under the wheels of the vehicle. As they stopped in front of the house, its massive door swung open to reveal two young children who sprinted towards the car, and a gentle woman who trailed after them.

Ginger's tiny frame wobbled excitedly as the door next to him was yanked open. Four small hands reached towards him, and he yelped with surprise, but didn't move from his seat. Instead he gnawed on a tiny finger that poked at his face and crouched playfully facing them. His paws were too big for his body, and as he struggled to find a way down, Willow impatiently picked him up and dropped him from the car to the gravel below. One of the little ones grabbed his leash from Willow's hand as Ginger's bloated belly grazed the grass below his massive paws,

his deep brown eyes scanning his surroundings. His floppy ears perked up and his body became taut like a spring as he looked around. Without warning, he suddenly launched himself towards the house and the scent of meat and something sweet. His legs wobbled beneath him as he sprinted around his new home, his body unused to the unbound freedom.

“Molly, Kyle! Be careful with him! Don’t let him pull the leash from your hands!”

Willow called after her younger brother and sister. She shot her father a stern look of disapproval, as she brushed past Sheila into the house.

The kids and the puppy tottered around under Willow’s supervision that afternoon. Ginger had never experienced such attention before, and finally the exhausted puppy fell asleep on the soft mattress next to the stairs.

Sometime in the middle of the night, he woke whimpering, following the scents to find his master, Tom. He scratched at Tom’s door and cried for him to come and offer company. His mother had never left him before. A golden triangle of light spread across the hall behind him and Ginger started, spinning around to see the teenage girl standing in her doorway, looking at him inquiringly. She sighed and squatted down. “Come here Ginger.” She reached out a hand and waited. “Come on buddy.”

He sleepily trotted towards her, and she lifted him and carried him into her room where she set him on her bed and stroked his soft fur gently. Ginger curled himself into a ball next to her.

“You know Ginger, I wasn’t sure how I felt about Dad dragging me along to come and get you. He doesn’t like my boyfriend much, and has been trying to get me to like Sheila since he left my mom in the hospital to start dating her, and ditched his job because I’m not really sure why. I know my boyfriend Joe was never all that gracious with my family; he is known for

playing girls and hasn't always been respectful of my boundaries. I don't really know... I assumed coming to get you was another of Dad's tactics to control me. Like when he remarried. As if marrying Sheila would really make me like her," Willow scoffed, and shook her head, "but I like you pup, you're not so bad I guess." Her words meant nothing to him, but he curled closer to her and fell asleep amidst the sea of fluff and warmth on her bed...

That month and through the summer and autumn, Ginger went everywhere with his new family, and they treated him as one of the kids. He learned to lick tears away into giggles when Kyle or Molly fell and scraped their knees. He was older and growing into his body as he integrated into the family. Finally, winter came, and Ginger would still fall asleep early on his bed, but later wake up and wander through the halls until he got to Willow's room. He was soon strong enough to leap into her bed without help; he was too big for that anyway.

One night Ginger woke in a panic as rain fell in sheets outside the house, seeping through a hole in the ceiling into a puddle beside him. He struggled to get his paws beneath him, as he slipped and stumbled to Willow's room. She opened the door as Ginger crashed into it and then knelt down as he crawled into her lap and curled against her, shivering. Willow spoke to him in a soothing voice and scratched behind his ears, trying to calm him before anyone else got up to see what had caused the racket. That was when the dog saw the boy, sitting, dripping, by the window. Ginger's hairs rose on his back, his ears went flat against his head and a growl started low in his chest, and his lips curled back, showing his teeth.

"Ginger, no!" Willow wrapped an arm around the dog and he struggled against her tight grasp. He growled louder and scraped against the wood floor, heart rate increasing until he was panting.

“Go Joe; get out of here! Ginger has never done this, but he is frantic, I mean it, get out. I told you not to come here tonight.” At that, the boy slipped away into the darkness, pulling the hood of his heavy leather jacket over his head before Ginger could do anything detrimental.

Snow began to fall soon after that night as December arrived and brought with it the chill of the deep winter months. Blankets of it spread across the yard and left a serene sparkling frost over everything. Ginger was fully grown by then, and would watch the children play out in the yard, building their snowmen and tramping new paths through the powder. The ice that seemed to float in the air left icicles in his lungs. The moisture at the end of his black nose felt like a chip of ice, but he didn’t mind much. He lay on the rug next to his family and barked at the children if they got too rough out in the snow. From time to time, he ventured out to them carefully trudging in their footprints to make his way easier. As Christmas neared, the family began to take outings, but Willow always stayed home, saying she had too much homework to get done or that she wasn’t feeling well. She had become sullen in the months following Ginger’s first encounter with Joe, and Ginger knew his teenage mistress was unhappy. She frequently asked to keep Ginger with her, and he sensed that she was avoiding something or someone until the day Joe arrived without warning. When Joe entered the house, Ginger reacted as he had before. He dropped back on his haunches and growled, showing his teeth. Willow pet him gently, and made him lie down next to her.

“Babe, we need to talk, you can’t keep avoiding me.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

Joe raised his voice “We are going to talk about it, now. You owe me that; we’ve been dating long enough. And get your stupid dog out of my way.”

“You know what you did.” Willow spoke quietly and her hands curled into tight balls, she felt every drop of sweat on her palms and her strong pulse forcing blood to the back of her eyes, roaring in her ears. Finally, all she could see was his face, round, dripping, and proud. He was in the right, and was going to make sure she knew it. But, she didn’t want to speak. The one overwhelming thought was that she couldn’t fire back. He would only yell louder. Joe’s face twisted, enraged by her silence, until she almost didn’t recognize it anymore.

“Why? Why do you always make me the bad guy?” he screeched “you know that I hate it when you get quiet like this, you always do this when you’re upset!”

Before realizing it, her fist slammed onto the table hard and fast, knocking the glasses from the edge and to the floor where they landed ungracefully with a defiant shatter in response. Ginger leapt up, hackles in the air and teeth showing. His heart pounded, drowning out everything, a growl beginning to escape again from his chest.

“You aren’t always right you know. You don’t know everything about me,” she snapped back, “sometimes I can stay quiet, sometimes I don’t need to speak, and what’s more, you need to allow me to make my own mistakes for once in my own damn life instead of trying to micromanage my life because you can’t deal with your ego and the fact that I am more independent and resilient than you. You’re like my father, you can’t move on from your own stupid mistakes. But since you asked, sure I will tell you. You had sex with me, without my permission, and then, oh wait...” she scoffed and continued, “I’m not blind either, when I cut you off completely, you found someone else to satisfy your disgusting desires. Oh yes, I am not blind. I know more than you think. The rumors are true.”

She instantly regretted those words. His face fell and suddenly, he looked like an old, defeated racehorse about to be put down. She wanted to eat her words. She had taken a swing and it hit hard and fast right where she wanted. A sickening feeling rose in her belly and up into her throat like a ball until it forced the tears out of her eyes. She spun around to retreat, fist stinging as the adrenaline drained from her muscles, leaving her hollow and sick to her stomach. But before she could disappear around the corner, his hand caught her arm and held it like a vice. The room hung in silence for a moment. In a split second, without any time to respond, Joe's fist came up in a tight ball and descended upon her jaw, landing squarely with a crack as Willow's jaw slid over to the side and back. Ginger leapt up as a second blow smacked into Willow's arm, then her side and face again. There was a flash of orange as Ginger launched himself across the room at the assailant. The only thing the dog could think about was defense of his mistress, and the one who had taken care of him when he was afraid. His jaws snapped and in a flurry, both dog and boy were on the floor with a sickening thud as they landed clumsily against the wall. Ginger's teeth planted firmly into Joe's arm but the boy punched the dog in the side, cracking a rib. The dog yelped in surprise as pain shot through him. He fell backwards away from Joe, his growls intertwined with a whimper. Joe spun around the corner and out the door which creaked halfway closed behind him.

"Joe, wait!" Willow forced the words after him as she peeled herself away from the wall. Ginger shivered slightly and looked up at her, seeing her desperation he limped to the door, ignoring pain that shot through his body. He needed to pursue the boy and finish this. Upon nudging the front door open, he sniffed the air and took off across the field towards the woods where he knew the boy had gone. Determined, he lowered his head and ignored Willow's calls, speeding through the trees and after the scent, ignoring the pain that threatened to take

dominance and pulsed through his limbs. When he got close, he slowed his pace until he stopped altogether. He had lost the scent somehow and spun around, scanning the trees and lifting his nose, desperately searching for any sign of Joe. Then he heard the faintest crack behind him and spun, tail a flurry behind him as he faced the boy who had attacked his beloved Willow. He growled, low and deep from within his chest, cautious. His instincts took over and he knew how to attack, but he also knew this boy was strong enough to crush his ribs in.

“What are you going to do, dog?” Joe sneered at him. “Go on then, don’t just threaten me.” Ginger weighed his options and then rocked back on his haunches and leapt at the boy, digging his teeth into Joe’s arm, and then ripping them out and biting into Joe’s face. Ginger tasted the blood as it began to drip out from the bite marks and Joe cried out in pain. Joe threw him off and Ginger hit a tree, yelping as the pain increased in his body. The feeling in Ginger’s legs went out and left everything numb as Joe dragged himself to his feet and advanced on Ginger. The dog lay whimpering in the snow, struggling to lift his head and lock eyes with the boy, big brown pools of sadness engulfed Joe’s vision. He let out a weak growl to try and warn the boy off, but Joe’s face twisted through the blood into a sick smirk of a smile. The dog let out a beastly noise in a final attempt, but Joe grabbed the softness of the dog’s struggling body and lifted it. Ginger’s body engulfed itself with pain and he howled only to be cut off as Joe dropped him gruffly against a rock that jutted out next to a crusted over pond. Body writhing in a desperate attempt to get free, Ginger gave up as Joe punched a hole through the ice and held the dog’s head under the water until he quit struggling. Joe found his feet, and wiped the blood from his hands down his pants in long crimson streaks before with a sniff, he staggered away.

Willow trudged through the snow as her family pulled up in the minivan, just in time to hear the desperate, guttural howl that broke loose from her dog. She broke into a full sprint

across the field, waving to her family as they stumbled out of the car. Her father leapt out of the vehicle and examined Willow's battered and bruised face. Willow cradled her jaw as tears mixed with blood and she struggled to motion that they needed to find Ginger. Tom pulled out a phone and dialed 911, speaking rapidly to the person on the other line about his daughter's bruises that were forming and their missing dog. Snow began to fall in a soft, steady downfall and Willow broke loose, leading her family through the trees as the darkness began fall.

When she reached the pond her face drained of color as she examined the scene in front of her. Every thud of her heart rattled in her chest and punched at her ribcage. She dropped to her knees next to Ginger's body and a sob ripped itself free from somewhere deep within her. When her family reached her, they found Willow cradling Ginger's head in her arms, tears streaming down her face red with anger, crimson stains dripping into the snow and mixing with the water that was beginning to frost over again.

Tom spotted the dark figure of Joe hiding in the trees. He crossed the clearing in three swift strides shoving the boy into a head-lock, and dragging him backwards through the snow to a tree where he planted the boy firmly.

"What the hell have you done to my family?" His voice trembled slightly on the word family and threatened to break with the tears that were pricking the backs of his eyes.

"I just...that dog it...I – I didn't realize," Joe mumbled. Tom glanced from dog to boy and back to dog again, then his jaw clenched and he shoved the boy into the snow.

"Ginger, wake up, stop sleeping." Kyle knelt down and began stroking the soft fur. Willow placed a gentle hand on her brother's shoulder and bit her lip to keep from letting loose another sob. "But why is he sleeping? He doesn't sleep till after dinner. Molly help me try and

wake him up.” Molly pet the dog’s soft fur gently and the two began shaking him desperately, pulling him away from the water.

“Ginger doesn’t like the water Willow, why is he trying to swim?” Kyle’s grey eyes found hers and searched her face for an answer.

“Molls, Kyle...he’s gone.” She shook her head and the two looked up at her, bottom lips quivering slightly. “He...died...” Her voice broke on the last word and Molly and Kyle began to cry.

“Willow, you’re lying. It isn’t true,” Molly protested “I just need to wash his fur and he will be okay. The red will come out; it’s like when I scraped my knee and Mom just washed my white shirt to get the stains out. We were going to feed him ham on Christmas and Santy Claws was going to bring him a bone for his Christmas present...” She kept repeating that Ginger was alive, looking to her mother for affirmation, but instead received a sad glance away. The whole family began to huddle together, all in tears.

When the police arrived, Tom dragged Joe along with them, and Willow bent down to hoist Ginger’s body, soft and cold, onto her shoulders, carrying him back to the house and remembering when she took the puppy from her father in the basement of Charles’s house. She stumbled slightly through the deepening snow and set Ginger on the porch, gently, wrapping her arms around herself. Tom mounted the porch, huddling his family close together as the tears streamed from their eyes.

Soon after, the family buried their beloved family member and protector, saying goodbye as Joe began his two year sentence of incarceration. Christmas came and went without the usual cheer, as the family mourned their loss. Willow drew closer to her family, seeking the same support that she had found in them when Ginger had been alive. Her jaw healed in time, but she

carried the scar of it on her cheek and refused her father's suggestion to get another pet. Ginger had brought them together and protected her, and Willow believed that even in death, Ginger managed to draw them closer still.