

THE BOY WITH ONE SHOE

By

By Richard Rimrodt

“Remember me? My name is Rachel.”

The boy looked up but did not move, continuing to sit with his legs stretched in front of him beneath the table. A mop of long brown hair hung thickly over his ears and onto the collar of his T-shirt. His dark brown eyes returned to the tabletop, then to his hands, which were folded in his lap, and finally to the dog lying beside him. The dog looked as soulful as the boy, its chin resting on its paws, its eyes staring blankly into the space beneath the table. The dog was tethered to the boy’s wrist by a darkly stained red nylon leash.

“Why won’t you tell me your name?”

The boy’s gaze lifted from the dog to meet hers, but he continued to say nothing. It was how her meeting with him had gone for the previous half hour before she had stopped, excused herself, and called her supervisor.

She had told her supervisor she thought he was around ten, but how did she know. She wasn’t a whole lot older herself, having just taken her masters and started this job six months earlier. She had also described him as a likely runaway, not clean

but not dirty, not someone who had been on the streets for months, but at the same time not someone who had had a good bath yesterday.

“Can you tell me how old you are?”

Nothing.

“I can’t help you if you won’t talk to me.”

She continued to watch him, hoping he would again lift his eyes and look at her, wanting to reach out and touch his arm, to somehow assure him she would help get him to a clean, safe place. When she had tried earlier, he had jerked his hand away as if he thought she would burn him.

“Can you tell me your mom’s name, where she is?”

The soft knock on the door was followed immediately by someone stepping into the room. The boy looked up, saw it was a woman with a tan uniform shirt and dark green pants, and looked back down. She had shaggy blond hair and a friendly face, filled with freckles. “Hi, I’m Jan from Helping Hands Animal Shelter. Janet, actually.”

“Rachel, from County Social Services.”

“So what’s going on?” Jan asked as she stepped closer to the boy and laid her soft leather courier’s briefcase on the table. Immediately, she squatted beside the dog and put her hand out to be sniffed, then patted the top of its head and ruffled the fur around its ears before taking its face in her hands and lifting it toward her. “Okay. How about you? What’s your story?”

The dog had no more to say than the boy, immediately dropping its head back to its paws as soon as she released it.

“So what happened to your other shoe?” Jan asked as she rose and moved toward the third chair at the table. “How did you lose it?”

The boy looked at her for a full twenty seconds. Rachel’s eyes widened, hoping against hope that perhaps he was going to answer. He didn’t as his gaze returned to his hands.

“Okay, then,” Jan said, glancing sideways toward Rachel. “I do like your shoe, though.” She was looking at the single red and black sneaker beneath the table. The other foot was bare. “I don’t often see people wandering around with only one shoe.” She moved her chair closer to the boy. “I work with lost and stray animals, kind of like a vet. We just want to help you and your dog. What’s your dog’s name?”

Nothing.

“Your supervisor called me,” she told Rachel as she reached for her bag, fumbling with the clasp to get it open. “This is an RFID scanner,” she announced as she took a small hand-held device from her case and powered it on. She also removed a tablet and turned it on as well. “Let’s see if we can figure out who you guys are.”

When the scanner was active, she moved it toward the dog. “Wow! We’ve already got a hit. Do you know about the chip in your dog?” When the boy did not respond, she continued, “Your mom had a small microchip implanted in your dog, probably when she bought her so in case anything ever happened you’d be able to find her.” As she talked, she began entering data into her tablet.

“Here we go,” she said. She pulled her mobile phone from her pocket and dialed, waiting impatiently, then pushed the off key. “Voice mail. Let me try this number.” She dialed again; then smiled broadly as she said hello and quickly explained why she was

calling. Ending the call, she immediately dialed a third number. Her conversation, mostly questions from her and answers from the other party, lasted nearly five minutes.

Closing the call, she returned her phone to her pocket. “Okay,” she said. “So your dog’s name is Jersey.” She smiled. “Which is kind of hard to explain since she’s actually from Philadelphia.”

“You’re kidding!” Rachel exclaimed. “That’s more than 200 miles from here.”

“It is,” Janet agreed. Looking at the boy, she said, “But she really isn’t your dog, is she? Or at least she didn’t start out to be your dog. Where did you find Jersey?”

The boy was watching her, his dark eyes focused on her lips. She could see him carefully processing her words. “The lady I spoke to, her name was Beth, is Jersey’s owner. Jersey’s a runaway too. I’m thinking that’s why you two are buds, peas from the same pod. She disappeared nearly two months ago. They have been frantic, trying to find her, doing everything they could think of to get her back. She couldn’t believe we had Jersey here, safe and sound.” Looking at Rachel, she added, “By the way, *her* son is safe and sound in school today, third grade.”

The boy’s eyes had not left her face.

“So now that we know about Jersey, what can you tell us about you. I bet your mom is just as frantic to get you back.”

Rachel frowned and leaned back in her chair. “Apparently not,” she said. “I’ve reached out to every lost child resource we have, and no one is looking for anyone even remotely resembling—“ Since she did not know his name, she could not finish her sentence, refusing to call him “this boy” or “this child” or worse “this kid.” Leaning toward

the boy, she said softly, "Okay. So what do we do next? If you can't help us, we can't help you."

He looked up from the dog, but he did not respond.

"Jersey!" Janet said, pausing as she put her tablet and scanner back in her bag. The dog immediately looked up, then leapt up, sitting attentively. "So you are Jersey," she said, reaching out to ruffle the fur around her ears when the dog came to her, its eyes alert and tail swinging side to side. "You're going to our place where we're going to give you a bath, get you fed, and make sure you're okay. Tomorrow your owners are coming to pick you up. How's that sound?"

Jersey tipped her head, cocking it to the side.

"You know I'm talking to you, don't you?" Janet said, laughing. She reached toward the boy and took the looped end of the leash off his wrist. He did not protest, simply letting her remove it before putting his hand back into his other hand in his lap.

Looking at Rachel as she moved toward the door, she frowned. "Sorry I couldn't be of more help."

"Me, too. I wish he had an RFID tag too. It'd make this a whole lot simpler."

"I guess it's been discussed, using them for troubled kids, runaways, the military, but the privacy advocates, the ACLU, the what-have-yous, they all just go berserk and that's the end of it. So what's next?"

"I call Family Services," Rachel said dejectedly. "They'll place him in a temporary foster home while they try to sort out who he is, where he came from, whatever." At Janet's frown, she added, "I know, but what can we do?"

Janet smiled as Jersey nuzzled her hand. "At least we have half a happy ending."

“I guess.”

“Well, we’ve got to get going. What about—“

“I’ll stay here with him until they get here. Maybe he’ll open up yet.”

“Maybe. I wonder what happened to his other shoe.”

Rachel shrugged. “Yeah, me too.”