

Buddy the Cow Dog
By
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I see you there Bud, best dog in the world, eyes full of hope as you sit by the door, waiting for my step. A single call, "Bud!" and you with gladness struggle to your feet, hips rusted now with age but heart ever willing and ready.

How many times you've come when I called. Across the field, arrested in a headlong chase of angry black cows. "Bud!" You turn, paused in what you know your work to be. *Can't you see I'm busy?* And I bring you back to keep the calves within the fence.

Chasing a long legged jack, kangaroo hops between cactus and sage, an Indy sprint into the darkness of night, miles from home where we work on a dam. My cry disappears in the silence of the hills and I wait. Just before patience turns to worry, I hear your pad and rapid pant and the blaze of your face breaks the glare of my headlights. How do you keep from getting spines in your feet and find your way back across coulees you've never seen? Too relieved to scold, I wave you into the pickup and go for home.

Spying skunks, friendly little fellows, like us, out for a stroll on our way to the mailbox. You drop in behind the foursome, tail up, nose to the ground. "Bud! Leave them alone." And sorrowfully turn away from following this fun.

"Where a-r-r-r-e you Bud?" when our grandson, unused to open space and interesting farmyards, comes, and I know that where you are, there he will be, dragging along on the end of your leash as you pop around the side of the shop.

Thou Bud. Good dog that you are. Always between me and fear. A yard ahead, anxious, prancing if I command, "Heel!" and you stay, taut as stretched elastic by my leg that strides too slow. You are scout, surveyor, explorer, not meant to come behind but pace in front a measured length of land, examined and passed by your keen nose and eye before I set my step upon it.

If only I was wise and could teach you things, shape the instincts given by God and polish them to gold. Inadequate. I barely reach the "sit" and my son, lanky tall 6'4" of him, home only a week, had to draw out "shake...shake hands" which you solemnly proffer.

You know more about cows than I ever will. Just when to dart, pivot, run. You put them in the pen and on the go, away from the feed before their noses while Milton dumps it in their troughs. Through the gate and up the hill, when they only wish to turn and stand, challenge you like they have before, but they've learned. You do not quaver, but meet advance with advance. Dropping closer to the ground, a deliberate placing of each slow step and snarl, you sidle back and forth exploding in teeth and sound. They bawl, throwing dirt and snot, splitting the air with wicked back feet in an attempt to reach your head. They fail.

Quick. All teeth. Snapping at heels and tails, dancing back while in the air and smiling at their misses. "Ever kicked?" drawled out. "Never." I reply, proud, one hand dropped to your head resting by me knee. A million steps you've saved me, exhausted defeat, because they will always be faster than I am. Now I call and keep you back. "Bud!" Too old, stiff, your limp exaggerated when you try to run.

Lightfoot. One bound into the pickup, four wheel drive. On to the haystacks piled three high, big bales triangled against the sky. Inquisitive, climbing up to look down into the bowels of the mammoth hay grinder and the astonished eyes of Charley working on a chain. "That's the first time I've ever seen a dog up there!" Milton laughs, "He climbs up the ladder of the combine and watches from the cab."

How you love sticks! Chasing them, picking them, leaping high in the air to snatch them before they hit the ground. You drag a mammoth sagebrush out of the deadfall, plopping down like a conquering hero to reduce it to twigs, tearing off strips of bark and wood until it's just right, a perfect two foot length.

Then trot to my side to offer it at the end of my thumb. Quietly standing, waiting, just once bumping my hand. And if I pretend not to see, you flip it, one smooth cast out of your jaws to thump on my toes. I laugh, bend down to send it in a sailing arch, high above your head. You leap, eyes locked on its silent decent and grab it in the air, return to ask again.

Over and over you run, I throw, until worn out, you collapse in the shade of the truck, your stick held fast beneath the curled paw of one front foot.

Once a neighbor stopped, raised on sheep in the badlands of Montana, he chose two, held them behind his back, then tossed them in the air. You snuffed out the first. He watched, while you looked back, circled around, worked left and right, wove in and out until you spied it in the grass. Proudly brought them back. "A sheepherder would give his right arm for that dog." He turned to Milton. "I know." Milton smiled, himself the son of a sheepman.

We can't drive out of the yard without you. Somehow you know, and wait for us at the end of the step, tail wagging. *Can I go?* Usually we cannot resist, and allow you your spot, behind the driver's seat where you stick your face joyfully into the wind, ears plastered back against your head. Summer, winter, you delight in riding there while I shake my head. That Bud.

Panda that you are. Back and white fur drifting round my room, thick and just a little curly. I fight you in the tub, slather you with Ivory and you shake, spewing water over us all. How you hate baths! Rolling, racing, tearing over the grass, jumping, leaping grinding dirt and green into your snowy ruff.

When dry, you bounce, tail fluffed and curled, sweet smelling, handsome, number one at the dog show. Oh Bud, I know you would beat them all.

Amber eyes, old, knowing, full of kindness and joy.

Tulip tongue, dripping drops of wet in the hot cut fields of grain.

Busy nose, shiny black, inquisitive, searching clumps of grass and broken limbs.

Sharp bark. "Ruff!" So clear it hurts my ears, I wince and cover them with my palms.

Stocky legs, feathered white above the knees. Late at night I wake to sounds of your rhythmic licking, ferreting out the last of mud lodged between your nails.

Barrel chest, big to hold your heart and lungs. Weighted now with the extra prime of winter and thickened coat of fur. Who are you, Bud? Friend, companion, helper. A human in dog disguise. I know. Best Dog in the World.

The End

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