

Buck

by Al Czarnowsky

The banging noise woke me from a sound sleep on a mid-July Sunday morning. I was twenty-seven years old and lived in a small house on the dead-end section of Spruce Street in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, a town better known in 1978 for its surrounding ranching and mining activity than for the skiing that would convert the town into the upscale resort it is today. I worked as an assistant engineer at a nearby surface coal mine. The day before, I had spent a long twelve hours to conclude the expansion plans that my boss, the chief engineer, intended to present to the company's management in Denver on Monday.

A string of cuss word words accompanied the banging outside. I slipped out of the covers, walked to the bedroom window, pulled back the curtains, and spotted my obnoxious neighbor beating on a galvanized metal trash can. "What's he doing now?" I muttered. I glanced at my alarm clock. It was fifteen minutes after six o'clock.

When I turned back out the window, the fellow booted the can, tipping it, which allowed his golden retriever to escape and sprint down the street. More obscenities followed from my neighbor.

I abhorred bullies and being mean to a dog topped my repulsion list. I opened the window and yelled, "What the hell are you doing!"

My neighbor jerked his head toward my house. "That son-of-a-bitching dog got in the trash this morning."

"That's no way to treat a dog."

He flipped me the middle finger and retreated into his house.

There are people who should never have a dog. My neighbor topped that list. He kept the beautiful retriever tethered on a chain in the front yard. I had previously heard from the mine's surveyor, who had lived next to my current neighbor at another place across town the previous winter, that he had left his dog outside at night in the cold,

chained to a tree, and even failed to regularly feed the poor dog. I should have put my pants on, gone outside, dragged the bastard out of his house and thrashed him. But I didn't.

That evening, at a downtown dinner with friends, I explained the morning's scene. They all were disgusted at my neighbor's behavior. The wife of one of my friends was saddened that anyone would treat one of God's sweet creatures like that, reminding all of us that dog is God spelled backwards. Yet, she abhorred violence, saying a fist-fight with my neighbor would do nothing to help the dog, and might make it worse. She suggested that I suppress my anger and take a course of action that would benefit the dog, in spite of the neighbor. "Like what?" I asked, while thinking I still preferred a fist-fight.

"Maybe ask your neighbor about walking his dog when you get home from the mine."

I rolled my eyes and groaned. "Maybe I should bring him a six-pack of beer and a bouquet of red roses too."

"No flowers," she said and frowned at me. "Beer is okay."

The next Saturday afternoon, I saw my neighbor bent over the open hood of his car. Remembering the advice of my friend's wife, I suppressed the anger that had seethed me the previous Sunday, grabbed two bottles of Coors from my refrigerator, and went next door. The dog wagged his tail when I approached, and I petted him. When my neighbor looked up, I said "Problems with the car? Thought you might need a beer."

He snatched the offered Coors without a thank you, and complained about his situation. "This damn car. Must have a short somewhere in the wiring. Lights aren't coming on."

I wanted to say he had a short in his brain, but instead responded, "Did you check the fuses?" All the time thinking he should check his own short temper fuse.

"Didn't think about that." When checked, that was the problem. He gave me a short thanks. His dog barked, and he shouted, "Shut up. No barking." The dog laid down, still tethered to the chain.

“I had a dog growing up,” I said, looking for the opportunity my friend had suggested. “Used to take my dog for walks. I miss that. I know you work at night. Mind if I take your dog for a walk when I get home from work?”

He looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. “Whatever.” he replied and took another swig of beer. “Just chain him up when you get back.”

That was the permission I reluctantly sought. I bought the dog a bright red collar and myself a retractable dog leash. For the rest of the summer, every evening after I arrived home from work, the dog and I went for a long walk. In the nearby school playground, I’d throw a tennis ball, which he loved to retrieve. Sometimes, I’d take him in my open-air 1975 CJ-5 Jeep, and we’d get ice cream cones. He liked vanilla in a waffle cone. His whole rear end shook in joy when I came to get him. We grew to be great pals.



Al and Buck, 1978

As summer waned into fall, the mountain nighttime temperatures dipped. In early October with the first snowfall and below freezing temperatures, I heard the retriever whimpering when I arrived home after dark from the mine. This time I didn’t seek approval from the neighbor, went next door, unleashed the retriever, and brought him into my house. That became my habit every night. I bought good dog food and treats.

On cold nights, he curled up next to my wood-burning fireplace on the dog bed that I bought for him. Sometimes, he’d follow me into my bedroom and find a spot beside the bed. The next morning, when I left for work, I’d take him outside and re-attach him to his chain. One morning, my neighbor saw me, questioned what I was doing, and I curtly told him his dog stayed inside with me at night. My neighbor responded with another “Whatever,” but he said that dogs belonged outside.

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I should have stolen that dog. I considered that possibility the night before I left for my Christmas vacation to Montana to see my folks. I had invited the furry fellow to sleep on my bed that cold and snowy night, and he moved several times during the darkness, each time making sure he rested right against me.

Early the next morning, I fed him a bowl of his crunchy dog food, punctuated with small pieces of left-over steak and sprinkled with shredded cheddar cheese. I filled his water bowl, and he enjoyed a long drink.

I left him inside my house while I loaded my duffle bag, briefcase, a canteen of water, and my sleeping bag in my Jeep, now with its winter top on. When I returned, the dog greeted me at the back door. “Time to go,” I said, and he barked, with affirmation that his answer was yes to either a walk or a ride. I pulled a dog biscuit from the box on the counter. I knelt next to him, fed him the treat, and then hugged him. He nuzzled against my shoulder and licked my face. “You can’t go with me this time,” I told him, but the word “go” was met with a wagging tail.

As much as I wanted to take him—steal him—and transport him with me to Montana, I didn’t. My dear mom would tell me that stealing was stealing. A sin. She would demand the retriever be returned to his rightful owner, just as she had made me, when I was five years old, return a pack of gum that I pocketed from the local drugstore and apologize to the store’s owner.

I could lie to her. Tell her the owner gave me the dog. But lying was a sin too. So, I took the retriever outside, hugged him again, and chained him to the tree in his front yard. “I love you buddy. You be good. See you in a week.”

As I drove west on State Highway 40, I felt an empty sadness. I almost turned back, to “borrow” the dog for the week, but didn’t and rationalized that we’d resume our routine when I returned. I remember a tiny flicker sparked somewhere deep inside me as I drove northward in Wyoming that my neighbor would decide as a new year’s resolution that the dog would be best with me. It was a comforting feeling but one I knew arose simply from wishful thinking.

A week later, when I returned to Steamboat Springs and went outside to greet the dog, he was not tied to the tree. The chain was gone. There were no dog paw tracks

in the snow. The neighbor's car was missing as well, and there were no tire tracks in the driveway or footprints to the front door. I walked through the snow and knocked on the neighbor's door. No answer. I peered in the front window. The place was dark inside and empty. The elderly lady who lived across the street came out when she saw me. "He skipped town," she shouted to me from her porch. "He left last week without paying his December rent."

"And the dog?" I shouted back.

"Haven't seen the dog. Probably went with him."

"Where'd they go? Do you know?"

The lady shrugged. "My husband thinks they went back to Texas."

I loved that dog. As darkness engulfed town and my sad heart, I started a fire in the fireplace. I found a can of Campbell's tomato soup in the cupboard, but had no appetite. I opted for a mug of hot tea. The box of dog biscuits remained on the counter. I walked to my front door and opened it, harboring a desperate hope to hear the dog bark. The neighbor's house was dark. I returned to the fireplace and sat in my old wooden rocking chair. As I slowly rocked, I stared at the empty dog bed illuminated by firelight. Buck loved that bed. That was the dog's name. "Oh Buck," I said, closed my eyes and cried.

I never learned what happened to my former neighbor or Buck. But I promised myself that someday I'd get a dog of my own. I'd name him Buck, and I'd care for him with all the attention and love I could muster.

Author's Note:

In the summer of 2007, I welcomed a beautiful yellow Labrador retriever into my life. He became my second "Buck" and lived with my wife Sally and me for fourteen years. Throughout his life, he was our constant companion. He found his heavenly reward in 2021, but not before receiving all the attention and love I promised many years earlier.



Al and Buck, II



Al Czarnowsky is a 1975 graduate of the Colorado School of Mines with a degree in mining engineering. He has worked at operating mines and on mining projects throughout the western United States, including Alaska, as well as at mines in Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Colombia. Although his work demands considerable technical writing, Al also pursues non-engineering writing. His novel *Dear Katy, Love Dad* was released in 2005. He is writing a historical novel that he plans to finish in 2022.