

Louise

The story of my life was written here in Newmarket. North Carolina was an empty journal to me. The blank pages both frightened and excited me. What kind of story would end up filling those remaining pages of my life? It was easier to predict in my own safe and familiar world.

While Mummy and Daddy negotiated the moving strategy, Laura and I enjoyed our remaining days in Newmarket. I looked at our neighborhood, our school and my room differently. I used to groan, thinking I'd be stuck in our hometown forever. Now I worried over never seeing my hometown again. Would my friendships survive the long distance? Often my feelings flip-flopped from excitement to sorrow, never knowing how I should really feel.

Returning to Canada, my parents consulted every night regarding moving plans. The Barretts were in the process of building their new house, and my parents doubted the Barretts' house project would be completed by the time we moved in. An arrangement was made for the Barretts to continue living in their house through the summer. Ready or not, we would move in August, in time for the school year to begin.

Mummy would start her North Carolina job in June, about the same time Laura and I finished our final year at Meadowbrook Elementary.

That year's end was approaching quickly. As June approached, mud puddles formed in the playground and soccer field. Daring students discarded their jeans, determined that summer had come already. I clung to my habitual wardrobe – my fuzzy-lined sweatpants and long sleeved shirts. Pulling up my sleeves worked in a pinch if the temperature ever did peak above 20 degrees Celsius.

There were only a couple weeks left before the end of school. For some reason it seemed easier to get out of bed in the morning which made my mom happy because I would finally have time for more than a few bites of breakfast before going out the door.

One morning Laura and I came into the kitchen for a bowl of Shreddies and found our parents pacing in the kitchen. As we entered, they stopped and looked at us. Mummy's hand stroked the side of her cheek nervously. Daddy leaned against the counter without his coffee cup. Something was up.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"You girls better sit down. I'm afraid we have some bad news," said Mummy.

"Did we lose the new house?" Laura asked.

Mum sat at the table with us. Daddy remained at the counter, staring at the floor. *Was he sad or angry?* It was hard to tell.

"You know Louise is a very old dog. She was a grown up dog before either of you were born..."

Oh, no...

"She's in bad shape, and there's no way she can make the trip with us down to North Carolina."

This isn't happening...

"Daddy's taking her to the vet today." Mum concluded.

Laura's face was hopeful. "The vet can make her better, right?"

Mummy swallowed hard. Daddy turned into the counter, his back to us.

"No, honey, I'm sorry. She's suffering."

Laura's eyes filled. "No she's not... She's not!"

"Remember all the messes she makes around the house?" Mum tried to hold back her own tears. "She can't control herself anymore. She's very sick."

"No! The vet can make her better!"

"He can't, sweetie, she's too old."

Laura stood, almost knocking her chair over. "No! You won't even try to fix her! It's not fair!"

Mummy rose and followed Laura to the kitchen doorway. She knelt so my sister could reach around her neck. Laura collapsed in her arms, soaking Mum's shoulder with tears. Mummy stroked Laura's long, sleek hair.

I let them have their moment. I didn't know how I was feeling. I felt horrible for not breaking down like Laura. What was wrong with me? Bingo the cat was my

favorite pet in the house. I never paid too much attention to our dogs. Guilt overcame me. *Poor Louise. Poor, poor Louise.*

I looked over to Daddy when I noticed him turn slightly to look at us. His expression, I decided, was angry. I remembered that look from the last time he gave me a spanking. I felt I could hear his thoughts: *I hate that I have to do this. Why does it have to be me?*

While Mum and Laura wept and embraced, I went to him and said, “Daddy, I’m sorry.” He put his hand on my head and I hugged him around the waist. It was a quick gesture – Mum and Laura were still hugging when we were done.

Daddy finally turned to the coffee maker to pour his morning cup and I left the kitchen to look for Louise.

I found her napping under the rocking chair in the living room. This chair was strong and chunky, wearing teeth marks from Louise’s litter of pups, but mostly from Elizabeth, the one puppy my parents kept.

I had several goldfish die under my care, as well as several other small pets: salamanders, frogs, white mice and gerbils. However, they were all set free to the wild or eaten by the cat before I could watch them get sick and die.

I knelt down and reached under the rocking chair to touch Louise’s fuzzy black head. She was part Beagle, her face seal-like with orange markings turned white and gray from her years. As my hand stroked her head down to her muzzle, my tears finally came. I actually couldn’t remember the last time I petted the dog. I laid down to get as close to her as I could and kissed her soft, long muzzle. Her big orange-brown eyes looked into mine and made me smile. I kissed her again and nuzzled my face against hers, whispering, “I love you, Louise.”

Laura and I rode our bikes to school that day. My class gathered as usual for the morning announcements, stood to sing the national anthem in English and French, followed by a reading from the Holy Bible. It was my turn to read aloud to the class. I was terrified, which was helpful – it kept my mind off Louise for the moment.

We had reached the Book of Psalms, chapter thirty-nine. I began to read, trembling from stage fright.

“Let me know, O Lord, my end and what is the number of my days, that I may learn how frail I am. A short span you have made my days, and my life is as naught before you...”

As I read the words, my stomach knotted. I could feel the taunting eyes of Shane and Wayne. Briefly I scanned the class, looking past my two nemeses. My eyes rested for a moment on Jason, the freckle-faced boy who made my heart race. He was eyeing me strangely, and I realized there were tears in my eyes. Oh, no, I thought. Please, God... help me not to cry in front of everyone. I held the Holy Book higher to hide my face and completed the verses:

“... And now, for what do I wait, O Lord? In you is my hope. From all my sins deliver me; a fool’s taunt let me not suffer.” I glanced again at Shane and Wayne, catching them in a snicker before closing the Bible.

I sat next to Linda most of that day. I told her our dog was being put to sleep. She gave me a little hug as I wiped a tear away. I knew she understood after what happened to her puppy, Sheba.

That whole day, Linda and I bonded like magnets, more than usual. She kept me laughing, trying to help me forget the depressing scene she knew awaited me at home that evening. At recess that afternoon I found Laura in the schoolyard to tell her I’d be riding my bike home with Linda. This meant I’d be taking the long way home, which was kind of the point anyway. I wanted to delay the journey home as long as I could that day.

Unfortunately the day’s end came – the three o’ clock bell rang and Linda and I were the only pair not scrambling out of the building. We unlocked our bikes and walked with them to make our time last together.

“So when will your family actually move down to the States? Pretty soon now, eh?”

We walked side by side, our bikes rolling along to fill the sidewalk.

“My dad and one of his buddies will be driving down to North Carolina with the moving van while Laura and I stay with Nana and Soupy for a few weeks.”

“Where do they live?”

“Actually, we won’t be staying at their condominium. We’ll be staying at their cottage up North at Horseshoe Lake.”

“Neat-o. It’ll be a few months before my mom and I move. We’re looking into this new development place.”

I thought back to the days when my dad would drive us around looking at grand houses we could never afford. “Do you mean you’ll be moving into one of those brand new houses that nobody’s ever lived in? Fresh new carpet and everything?”

Linda smiled, feeling special. “Yeah, I guess so. That would be pretty neat living in a brand new house.”

A loud voice from behind interrupted. “Hey, it’s Wendy and Fartley!” I knew the voice immediately. It was Shane – and surely Wayne was right there with him. I didn’t realize this was their route home as well.

“Ah, nuts.” I muttered.

“Just ignore them,” Linda nudged me. “That’s what I do. They always stop after a couple blocks.”

I stared at her, gaping “You mean...” I stopped mid-sentence. So all this time Linda was the brunt of most of their teasing, having to endure the same route home with them.

Linda read my thoughts. “Why do you think I ride my bike every day?”

I touched Linda’s hand. “Jeez, sorry, Linda. I didn’t know they were such creeps to you, too.”

“Aww, look! They’re holding hands!”

“Must be a couple of lesbos!”

“Ha! Yeah – Wendy and Fartley sitting in a tree! Kay-eye-ess-ess-eye-en-gee!”

My Irish fury began to stir, hands tightening into fists. Linda noticed. “Forget about them, Wendy. They’re just idiots.”

I can’t forget, I thought. I can’t forget that I’ll be leaving my best friend to walk alone every day with those jerks who continue to taunt her. I can’t forget that I won’t be there to... to...

“Oh, watch it, Wayne. I think Weendee’s getting mad!”

“Oh, boy! Look out, man! Whoa!”

They were getting closer. I could hear the voices right behind us. *A couple steps... just a couple steps closer. I dare you!*

“Come on, we’re almost at the crosswalk. They’ll stop when we get there. That’s where I cross to go home. They never go out of their way – they just keep on walking.”

That’s it, no more. I’m giving them a piece of my mind once and for all! I whirled around to face them.

Shane was surprised. “Hey, we’re just fooling around.”

“Not as fun when my back isn’t turned, eh, Shaaayne and Waaayne?” I mimicked their trademark *Weendee* whine.

“Sure isn’t, ugly-face!” Wayne mocked.

“Yeah, especially freckle-faced Fartley here.”

I gasped.

“Yeah, turn back around, girls. I think I’m gonna puke!”

As they began their gagging noises I lost it. I screamed the two most horrible swear words I had ever or would ever speak in my life and stomped on Shane’s foot with every ounce of my weight.

Instantly I fled the scene, hopping on my bike and pedaling as fast as I could. A flash of pride came, telling me, “I did it! I finally stood up to them!” But the ego was quickly crushed when I heard the sound of laughter behind me.

Pedaling faster and harder, no longer was I escaping the scene of my rage – I was fleeing from shame and embarrassment. Tears streamed down my face and soaked my hair as they flew back from the wind force. Between sobs I prayed heartily for God not to smite me for those two words I let loose. Hearing them come from my own mouth felt like I had unleashed a demon. I felt sick to my stomach. The words from this morning’s Bible reading flashed suddenly through my mind: *From all my sins deliver me; a fool’s taunt let me not suffer.*

Before I knew it, I reached the crosswalk to my street. I stopped, and suddenly remembered Louise. I wiped my face with my sleeve, but could feel my tell tale swollen eyes. This one time, arriving home with swollen eyes would not be

questioned. Everyone would assume I'd been crying for Louise. What a shame that isn't the reason, I thought.

Getting off my bike, I walked the rest of the way. When I got to the house, Daddy was leaning against the car, hugging Laura.

My chin trembled as I watched Laura cry again. My little sister rarely showed her vulnerable side, especially to Daddy. I let my bike drop to the driveway and joined them.

When Mummy came home we said a special prayer before dinner for Louise, thanking God for giving her such a long and happy life with us. I added a silent prayer of my own, asking forgiveness one last time... and for Shane and Wayne to get hit by a school bus.