

Zane in the City

The slate colored sky gave up its burden of rain without remorse for those of us who had to endure it. Fat drops pelted the windows of my ninth-floor apartment where I worked as a relationship therapist. I always enjoyed working from home, but today I longed to escape the confines of my den turned office.

Despite the rain, I clipped the leash to Zane's collar and decided on a brisk walk before my afternoon session. The Walkers were an older couple trying to save a troubled, thirty-year marriage. I would need a clear head to get all three of us through the hour-long consultation.

As usual, Zane began our walk with his nose to the ground looking for the scent that pleased him the most. In New York City, he had the lion's share of choice smells to follow. After two months of ownership, I was still unused to his habit of pulling the leash taut and bawling as he ran. I really couldn't blame him, though; he is, after all, a Redbone Coonhound.

My last dog, Mickey, was a chocolate Chihuahua who rode in a special purse with a mesh window. I loved that dog, and I loved that purse. Both perfectly matched my favorite high heeled shoes. Upon arrival at my apartment, Zane promptly tracked the purse and shoes to my closet where he bayed his success then chewed both to pieces. I guess he could smell Mickey on them.

Perhaps you're wondering how I ended up with a Redbone since I live in the city. Well, I can thank Wilson Rawls for writing such an excellent story. My first mistake was reading it right after Mickey died. My second was lying to the breeder in Virginia when I told him I lived in a cabin in Pennsylvania. I paid cash for Zane and gave the man my grandpa's address.

"He's a great dog," the breeder assured me. "My best friend's health has prevented him from hunting, and I agreed to help find his dog the perfect home."

"Oh, I'm sure my grandpa will love Zane. He's tracked with hounds all his life. I can't wait to surprise him," I said, confident in my ability to act convincingly.

The six hour trip back to the city was supposed to be bonding time for me and Zane. He was well behaved in the car, but as a three year-old, well-trained rescue, he had a few surprises in store for me; the first of which was his predilection for tracking. I still haven't forgiven him for the shoes and purse.

The second surprise was Zane's ability to bark loudly in a wide range of melodious tones. This habit has not made me popular with my neighbors. Mr. Gifford on the eighth floor pounds his ceiling with a broom when this occurs and Mrs. Chang on ten stomps her tiny feet. Neither realizes this only encourages Zane who believes he is defending me from the strange thumping noises.

Within moments of hitting the sidewalk, Zane found a lost red mitten and decided the scent on it was the one he wanted to follow. My job was to simply keep up. As I hustled behind my dog struggling against his leash, a battle of wills ensued. When the wind whipped my umbrella inside out, I gave up and let him track.

I must admit he was impressive to watch as he bounded toward the park. My running shoes ensured that I at least stayed within sight of Zane. When I caught up to him, he was baying at the feet of an elderly woman seated on a bench.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am," I said when I arrived. I was bent over, hands on knees trying to catch my breath. Thankfully the rain had abated.

The woman laughed and waved both hands at Zane to shush him. I felt the need to apologize yet again for his behavior, but paused when the woman took his large head in her elegant hands. She leaned forward and kissed him between his coffee-colored eyes. Zane was pleased by her affection.

"I used to have a Chihuahua named Mickey who sat quietly in my arms and was trained to fetch the mail from the door slot," I babbled by way of an explanation. "Zane is trained to track, but he and I haven't quite defined our relationship. He'd rather sleep beside my bed than on it, eat in the kitchen than in the dining room, and drink from the toilet instead of his water bowl. Mickey never did that."

"Zane isn't your Chihuahua, now is he?" she said.

"Well, no, but –"

"And you can't expect him to be."

I awkwardly shoved my hands into my pockets.

"Why don't you stop comparing Zane to Mickey and discover all the wonderful qualities this dog has to offer? Thank you for finding my mitten, Sir Hound."

The old woman stood, winked, and ambled away. Zane cocked his head, waiting for me to respond. I sighed and took his leash expecting to head home when the tail end of a scarf trailing out of a bush caught his attention. We were off.

This time, I decided to let Zane lead, not that I really had a choice. I probably should have exerted some control or insisted on his obedience, but I was somewhat humbled by the woman's advice. With scarf in hand I followed, choosing to trust in Zane's instincts.

The scent trail led us to the quarry just as the man was stepping onto a bus. The doors closed when we were within five steps of victory and Zane was poised to *chop* his target with the customary bark. Defeat stopped both of us in our tracks. We watched as the man, who owned the scarf, walked to a seat near the rear of the bus.

I looked down at Zane whose disappointment was evident all over his handsome face. His eyes frantically scanned the windows and he would have belly rubbed the bus if I had allowed him to do so. Chuckling from behind caused both of us to turn.

"Guess you lost that one, buddy," the police officer said to Zane. "That's okay, my friend, you'll soon learn to make the most of these missed opportunities."

"Are you a hunter?" I asked the officer.

“No, but my brother is, and I can tell you that dog won’t be satisfied until he’s caught what he’s after.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Then just hang tight because another chance will be along shortly whether you’re ready for it or not.”

I sensed the officer’s kind voice reassured my big red dog because Zane’s whole demeanor changed. His ears perked up, nose twitched, and muscles tensed as he readied himself for another prospect to come along. With spirits renewed, he was prepared to give it another try. He didn’t have to wait long before a piece of paper blown across his path provided the next scent trail. We were off and running as the November rain resumed.

I clutched the paper in one hand and Zane’s leash in the other. By then we were both a cold and soggy mess, but we didn’t care. Our feet pounded the pavement as Zane led us down several questionable allies. His barking changed when he spied his target; the steady sound signaled his success.

His quarry was a distinguished looking gentleman in the process of locking a metal door. The man turned at the sound of Zane’s baying only to have soggy paws planted on his shoulders.

“My goodness, young fellow,” the man laughed as he pushed Zane into a sit.

“I’m so sorry, sir. My dog is a natural born tracker, and he believes you’re the end of his scent trail. We were following this,” I said as I held out the paper.

The man took it and smiled. “Ah, yes, this is one of ours. See?”

He pointed at the paper which turned out to be a play program.

“I own this ramshackle theater,” he said jabbing his thumb toward the building behind him. “This was the last performance in which my wife, Constance, starred before she left me. I have a thing for younger leading ladies, you know.”

He shrugged his apology and I nodded my understanding.

“What I wouldn’t give for a second chance with my wife right now,” he said.

Without further comment, the theater owner saluted then drifted away leaving me and Zane standing in the drizzle.

“Let’s go home, fella.”

Zane heeled perfectly with slack in his leash, content with his day’s tracking.

Back in the warmth of my apartment, I reclined on the loveseat, sipping cocoa while Zane slept on the rug at my feet. His snoring reverberated softly throughout the room. The chewed shoes and

purse lay on my desk reminding me of my stubborn heart. I threw them away without regret since they served no other purpose than to drive a wedge between me and Zane. I certainly didn't want that.

I realized if I had never read Mr. Rawls' book or learned about Redbone Rescue, I might have missed out on experiencing Zane. I suppose I could have lived with that, but now understood that I didn't want to. He was nothing like Mickey, but in many ways Zane would take me on a new adventure; one I didn't want to miss.

The telephone rang while considering all that I had learned during our excursion today. It was the Walkers calling to cancel their appointment. Mrs. Walker explained that I had been helpful; however, she and her husband believed too much had transpired over the past thirty years to rectify. She wasn't the woman her husband truly loved, he was beyond her forgiveness for his many dalliances, and neither could find their direction together outside of the individual desires they both longed for. Somehow this neither surprised nor shocked me.

I bid them good luck with their decision and hung up. When I turned to Zane, his eyes were bright with expectation.

"Want to see what's on the scent trail for the afternoon, big boy?"

A bawl to wake the dead was Zane's answer to the affirmative.