

THE CRY OF THE BEAGLE
by
Gregory Smith

My name is Missy, and I'm a beagle. Or at least, I was. I guess while I'm writing this I still am, though in a little while I won't be. At least, not *here*. Or rather, not *now*.

It's very confusing.

I used to live in a house in Florida with my humans -- Mom, Dad, and their son, Junior -- and three other beagles -- Bailey, Bailey's daughter BJ, and Sunni, who calls herself Princess of All Beagles. I was very happy there. My earlier life wasn't so happy. Sometimes I lived on the street, and had to struggle to survive. Once my tail was broken, and it healed crooked. But then Mom and Dad adopted me, and I was very happy in my new home with my new family.

I see that I've been writing in the past tense: "used to live," "was happy." But I plan to live there again, and be happy again. By the time you're done reading, you'll understand....

I need to go soon -- there's something I have to do. But I'll tell you how it started. At least, how it started for me:

One day I was out in my backyard, near the fence. This is a tall, wood fence that you can't see through. On the other side, behind our house, there's a field and a small

woods. Lots of animals live there. I was sniffing along near the fence when I picked up the scent of another dog. No... *two* dogs. Just on the other side of the fence. I was about to howl a warning when a voice whispered, "*Missy*."

"Who's there?" I barked loudly.

"Hush! Be quiet! It's Princess Sunni."

I looked back at the house. I had left Sunni inside.

"How did you get out?"

"I haven't been inside," said the dog who said she was Sunni. "The other Princess Sunni is inside."

"The *other* Sunni? What are you talking about?"

"It would take too long to explain right now, but we need you to get outside and join us."

"Us?"

"I'm here, too," said another voice.

"BJ? But I left you inside, too."

"I'm not the BJ who's inside. But I am BJ, and we need your help."

"This is very weird," I said.

"But I believe you're who you say you are, because no one besides the real Sunni (and our humans) would ever call her 'Princess Sunni.'"

"Hey!" said Sunni-on-the-other-side-of-the-fence. "I am a Princess!"

"Please," said BJ-on-the-other-side-of-the-fence, "try to find a way to slip outside. Then run around the house to the right. You'll see us. Run with us. We'll explain when we get to where we're going."

"Where are we going?"

"That's part of what we'll explain."

"Why do you need me?"

"There's trouble, and you're the only beagle who can deal with it. We'll be waiting."

Then they were gone.

I scratched to get back inside. Sunni was asleep in the papazan chair, and BJ was asleep in her kennel (the door was always left open). This was truly weird. I didn't know what to think.

But Mom and Dad had just come home from grocery shopping, and the front door was left open while Dad carried in the bags. Mom was in the kitchen, putting things away. Dad was outside, his head in the trunk. It was my chance. I dashed out the front door and ducked behind the shrubs to the right.

I rounded the corner of the house and ran towards the back. Suddenly BJ and Sunni were running alongside. I took a quick look. BJ looked like BJ, though something was different. Sunni looked like Sunni. This was weird!

Then BJ got ahead of me, and Sunni dropped behind. We ran single file past the back of the fence. Then BJ disappeared! I freaked and tried to stop, but it was too late. Sunni ran into my behind, knocking me forward. And then...

...I wasn't outside anymore. I was standing on a wood floor. And BJ was in front of me again.

I twirled. A couple of times. I was in a small, square room with wood walls. There was a pile of paint cans near one wall. Yellow paint. Sunshine came in through four tall, narrow windows, one in each wall, high above.

I looked at BJ and Sunni. I saw what was different about BJ: She looked older. More gray.

"What happened?" I said.

"Where am I? And who are you?"

So they told me....

I have to go now, like I said, so someone else is going to tell you the rest of the story, from the very beginning. But I swear this is exactly the way it happened. It's all true. I know. I was there.

* * *

The story had begun on a bright, warm Sunday morning. Mom and Dad had just come home from church, receiving a joyous welcome from two of their beagles: BJ and Princess Sunni. Their third beagle, the elderly Bailey, napped under the pool table.

"I just think it's strange," said Mom, "that Reverend Joe has stopped construction on the new church."

"He wants to review the design," said Dad.

"He wants to review the design? Isn't it late for that? They've already built the walls and roof. We even have a steeple."

BJ had crawled under the living room sofa for a nap, but now she crawled out again, and sat where she could be sure to hear. She was a fine-looking beagle, but her dark fur was turning gray.

Sunni had jumped into the recliner chair, but when she noticed BJ, she turned to watch Mom and Dad. Princess Sunni was a small but beautiful dog, whose white fur was marked with black and brown spots called "ticks."

"What's wrong with the design?" said Mom. "Why doesn't he say?"

"I don't know," said Dad, "but he's the Pastor. I think I'll clean the garage today."

Mom and Dad went to change their clothes. BJ padded over to Bailey. Sunni jumped down to join them.

Bailey was BJ's father. He was a very old beagle. There was a lot of gray in his fur, and he had trouble walking. But he still loved to be scratched behind the ears, and his spirits remained high.

"So," said Sunni, "why were you so interested in that conversation?"

"They're building the new church in the field behind our house," said BJ.

"You don't think we know that?" said Sunni. "When they first started working, I almost went hoarse howling at them."

"That's the same field where the alien spaceship blew up."

I should mention that some years before, Bailey, BJ, and Sunni had had an encounter with evil aliens in a flying saucer.¹ The adventure ended with the flying saucer exploding above the field behind their house. No one else knows about it. *Shhh...*

"Ever since they started work on the church," said BJ, "I've been afraid something from that spaceship might turn up. I've been listening for anything unusual."

"They've found something extraterrestrial?" said Sunni, wagging her tail quickly. "That's the real reason they've stopped work? Do you think I'll get to meet Scully or Muldar?"

"This isn't *The X Files*," said Bailey, lifting his head, "but we should check it out."

'We,' in Bailey's condition, meant BJ and Sunni. Sunni scratched at the back door, and Mom let them out. They ran for the corner of the yard where Dad had his tool shed.

There was a narrow space between the tool shed and the back fence. Dad had wedged a concrete block into the opening, but BJ and Sunni jumped it easily.

At the end of the narrow space one of the fence's slats was broken at the bottom. They squeezed through, BJ going first, and they were standing at the edge of the church construction site.

What had once been a field and some woods was now a big rectangle of flattened and packed dirt. The church stood in the middle. As Mom had said, there were walls, a roof, and a steeple, but the walls were unfinished concrete. Windows and doorways gaped without glass or doors. It was just the hard bones of the skeleton of a building. It was surrounded by piles of lumber, bricks, and other building materials. One section had been graded to make a parking lot, but it wasn't paved.

Everything was very quiet. The beagles sniffed the air.

"It's deserted," said Sunni. "If they found pieces of a flying saucer, don't you think there'd be FBI, or Air Force, or scientists, or *someone*?"

"I'd think," said BJ.

They put their noses to the ground and swept for scents.

Sunni's nose led to a bag from a fast-food restaurant.

¹The Princess and the Alien Abductors, by Gregory Smith

"Food!" she cried, and began shredding the bag.

At that moment they heard a car pull into the 'parking lot,' its tires crunched the dirt.

"Hide, quick!" said BJ.

They ducked behind a pile of lumber. Peering out, they saw a big white Cadillac. A man got out, and they recognized him right away. It was Reverend Joe, the minister of Mom's and Dad's church.

The dogs had met Reverend Joe when Mom and Dad held a reception for the new minister. He clearly did not like dogs, and he made the feeling mutual by kicking Sunni when none of the humans were looking. ("I was just trying to say 'Hi,'" said Sunni, at the time.)

Reverend Joe went inside the unfinished church. The dogs gave him a head start, then BJ said, "Let's see what he's up to."

They ran inside. Reverend Joe wasn't in sight, but that means nothing to a beagle. They put their noses to the floor and followed him down a hallway to a room. There were no windows, but enough light filtered in that they could see a pile of metal pipes, and something else covered in a tarp.

The trail led from this room up a flight of narrow steps. The dogs followed. There were landings where the stairs turned, always to the right, so they went up in a squared spiral. The dogs realized they were in the steeple.

The stairs ended in a small, square room with a wood floor. Sunlight came through four high windows, one in each wall.

Sunni was leading as they followed the trail across the floor.

And then suddenly Sunni was gone! BJ spun in circles, and spun some more. She was nowhere to be seen. She had just been there, and now she was gone!

And then, just as suddenly, Sunni reappeared! She just stepped out of nowhere. She looked around and exclaimed, "Phew! I'm back."

"Where have you been?"

"I don't know." Sunni looked in the direction she had reappeared from. Some cans of yellow paint were stacked against the far wall. She walked towards them and...

...vanished again!

BJ's fur stood on end.

Sunni reappeared a second later. "I see how this works," she said. "Follow me."

BJ followed. She trotted toward the paint cans...

...and suddenly wasn't in the church steeple anymore. She and Sunni were in a field, at the edge of some trees.

"Where is this place?" asked Sunni.

BJ sniffed the air. "It's the field behind our house," she said. "But something's not right."

"You're not kidding something's not right. They're building a church in the field behind our house, remember? Do you see a church here?"

"Well, that's the back of our fence over there. And this chain link fence here is the back of our neighbor's yard. The family that used to live there had that little yipster dog... you remember, the one that used to drive us crazy?"

Just then a tiny bundle of fur with a black nose scampered across the neighbor's yard.

"Yip! Yip, yip, yip! Yip, yip, yip, yip, yip!"

"Yipster's back!" said Sunni. "Do you think he's here for a visit?"

"No," said BJ, "I don't." She turned a circle, slowly, taking everything in.

"The church isn't being built.... Yipster is back.... Sunni, we're in the past."

"Like a blast from the past?"

"You're not taking me seriously. We've traveled back in time. The explosion of the alien ship must have torn some kind of hole through space-time. The hole was up in the air, where the ship exploded, so no one noticed it until they built the steeple on the church. The steeple reached up to the hole. Sunni, it's a Time Portal."

At that moment they heard human footsteps.

"Quick!" said BJ. "Back through the Portal!"

They scampered back the way they'd come. Suddenly...

...they were back in the steeple again.

"What if it's Reverend Joe," cried Sunni, "and he comes through behind us?"

"Hide behind these cans," said BJ, but there was no space. The dogs just huddled against the paint cans as Reverend Joe appeared through the Portal.

Because the cans were behind the Portal, Reverend Joe's back was to the dogs. He stopped to look at something he was holding. They heard short swishing sounds: Swish swish swish swish swish. Then he put what he was holding into his pocket, and the dogs saw it was money.

He went down the stairs without turning around.

"That was close," said Sunni.

"I wonder how much money he had there," said BJ.

"The bill on the outside was a twenty."

"But we don't know how many there were."

"I counted twenty-five swish sounds."

"Well done, Sunni! That would be \$500, if they were all twenties. A lot of money."

They heard Reverend Joe's Cadillac start up and drive away.

They ran down the stairs and back to their yard, squeezing through the broken slat and jumping the concrete block. They found Bailey laying in the yard, soaking up rays, and they filled him in.

"What do we do now?" said Sunni.

"I have a bad feeling about Reverend Joe," said BJ.

"Something's not right."

"I wish Missy was still around," said Sunni. "She'd deal with this. She never backed down from anything. I remember once when Junior was taking Missy and me for a walk. Missy had hanging-back duty, and I had pulling-ahead duty. Suddenly a huge dog attacked us. Junior and I were terrified. (Well, *Junior* was.) We thought we were done for. But then Missy came flying by like a black-brown-and-white bullet. She lit into that big dog and he was so surprised he fell on his tail. Then he ran away. Missy would have chased him except her leash stopped her."

"Missy," said BJ, "would have known what to do if we had been caught in that steeple today."

Bailey raised his head. "If Missy's the best dog for the job, why not get her?"

"Daddy," said BJ, gently, "lay down and be comfortable."

"I'm not senile!" snapped Bailey.

"Daddy," said BJ, "Missy's gone."

"So? She *used* to be here. Do you have a Time Portal or not?"

BJ and Sunni looked at each other. Then they ran for the space behind the shed.

An hour later, Missy sat in the steeple, scratching her right ear with her hind leg.

"That's some story!" she said. "But my nose tells me that something funny is going on, so I guess it's true. It sounds like a job might need doing. Let's go!"

One thing about dogs is they accept truth when they see it, no matter how unusual it may be. This isn't the case with humans. Except for children. And Albert Einstein.

"Wow," said Missy, looking around when they were outside. "Things sure have changed."

They squeezed through the slat into the space between the shed and the fence.

"You can get out of the yard whenever you want?" said Missy. "That's so cool! Do you go exploring a lot?"

"No," said BJ, "Bailey is too old. And at my age, it really doesn't interest me, either."

"And I like to be near Mom and Dad," Sunni cut in quickly.

Bailey was waiting at the concrete block. "Hello, Missy," he said.

"Hello, Bailey."

They sniffed each others' nose across the block.

"It's good to see you..." said Bailey, his voice trailing off. It was as though he wanted to say more, but then just left it.

"You should probably stay behind the shed," said BJ, "so Mom and Dad don't see you."

"Where are you going to sleep tonight?" said Bailey suddenly. "I didn't think about that! You can't be outside while we're inside. I'll spend the night out here with you."

"You need to be inside," said Missy. "I'll find a warm place in the church to curl up. Don't worry about me -- I brought my fur coat."

"I should get back to the church now, in case something happens. Bye, Bailey."

It was comical to see Missy, BJ, and Sunni switching positions, so Missy could reach the broken slat. But Bailey watched with sad eyes as Missy disappeared through the fence.

Missy sniffed around the church until she knew the building well. Then she found a tarp in a corner, curled up, and went to sleep.

But a beagle always sleeps with one ear listening. Missy was awakened by the crunching sound of a car pulling into the parking lot. It was dark. Missy padded quickly to a doorway and peered out.

In the orange light of the streetlamps, she saw a white Cadillac. She knew the man who got out must be Reverend Joe.

He went inside by a different door than where Missy was standing.

Missy followed his movements by listening to his footsteps. Then she heard more tires crunching. Another car had pulled into the parking lot.

This car was a brown Buick. It parked next to Reverend Joe's Cadillac. A short man with a round, bald head got out of this car. He wore glasses. He looked old, but seemed vigorous. He wasn't smiling.

He switched on a flashlight and followed Reverend Joe. Missy scampered to see what would happen.

The bald man had found Reverend Joe in the room at the foot of the steeple stairs. Reverend Joe seemed surprised.

"Uncle Frank!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask you the same question, padre. I saw your car parked outside."

"Oh, I'm... I'm here to study the design. For the changes that we might need."

"Where's your flashlight?" asked Uncle Frank.

"Oh, I... I left it at home. Accidentally."

"If you don't have a flashlight, how are you going to study the design? It's dark."

"I... I don't need to see. Every square inch of this building is etched in my memory."

"If it's etched in your memory, then why did you come down here at all? You can remember just as well from home."

"I wanted," said Reverend Joe, "I wanted to experience the ambiance of the place while I thought."

"Ambiance," said Uncle Frank.

"Yes," said Reverend Joe. "Isn't it magnificent?"

There was a short silence.

"Well," said Uncle Frank, finally, "I have to get home. Good night." He turned away, but then turned back. "I don't suppose you've 'etched' every nail on the floor that might stick in your foot. Do you want to borrow my flashlight?"

"That's very thoughtful of you, Uncle Frank. I'll take you up on that offer. Here, let me light your way to the door."

Reverend Joe watched Uncle Frank drive away. Once he was out of sight, Reverend Joe switched off the light. In the darkness, Missy heard him say, "Without a light, you won't come back, you old sap." Then Missy listened as he climbed the steps to the steeple.

Missy gave him a head start before she followed. Once through the Portal, in the past, she picked up his scent. It led her across the field, through some trees, and finally to a street. There was an intersection, with a convenience store on one of the corners. Reverend Joe was talking on a pay phone outside the store. He hung up, and Missy crept closer.

Some time passed. Reverend Joe waited. Then a big, dark car pulled into the store's parking lot, and Reverend Joe opened the passenger door and got in. The car started away.

Missy raced after the car, but it was too fast for her. She ran desperately, but the car got further and further ahead. She ran even after she lost sight of its taillights, but it was no use.

Panting, she returned to the convenience store. She drank water

from a small retention pond. Then she waited.

Eventually, the dark car returned. Missy hid behind a hedge. The passenger door opened and Reverend Joe got out. But before he closed the door, Missy heard the driver say, "Don't you worry about the money. If you've got golden goods, you won't be disappointed with the price."

The door slammed. The car drove away, and Reverend Joe started walking back to the field. He looked over his shoulder every few moments, so Missy waited until he was gone before following. When she emerged from the Portal into the steeple, she could hear his car leaving.

She sat down to think about everything that had happened.

Meanwhile, back at the house, Mom and Dad were asleep, and BJ and Sunni were researching time travel on the Internet. You may not realize this, but dogs use the Internet a lot while humans aren't around. Besides using that part of the Internet that we know about, they have their own Dog Internet, that we never see, with their own Web sites, chat rooms, and e-mail.

One problem dogs have when online is the keyboard, which was designed for fingers, not paws. Dogs get around this by only using the bottom row of keys. I'll show you how it works. The common chat room greeting:

"how r u?"

...in a dog chat room would look this:

"nn...xxx vvv mmm?"

This question:

"i chewed up moms glasses. what do i do now?"

...comes out as:

"," ,,, cnccccxxxxccc cc mmm/// m...mxx bb..zzxx xxcccxx. xxxnnzzbbb cc... ,,, cc... n...xxx?"

See if you can figure out one helpful answer to the question just posed:

"nn,,cc ccc bbbnncccm mmmncc cccvvv bbbnnccc bccc cc"

The combination Alt-Ctrl-Delete is another problem for dogs. It requires the use of both front paws and a nose. Or the help of another dog.

Sunni was helping BJ that night by operating the mouse. BJ would say things like, "Point there, click," or "now right-click."

"Humans don't seem to have a lot of hard information on time travel," said BJ, after some searching.

"Hmmm. There's *The City on the Edge of Forever*. That's my favorite *Star Trek* episode."

"Wasn't there also time travel in *Lost In Space*?"

BJ snapped her head around. Her eyes bored into Sunni. "*Lost In Space*?" she said. "PUH-LEEZE! You aren't comparing *that* to *Star Trek*, are you?"

"Oh, never," said Sunni dryly.

BJ turned back to the screen. "Now I'm getting in touch with two friends of mine, Marie and Albert. They're Chicago beagles. Their mom is head of the Particle Physics Research department at Argonne National Laboratory, and their dad teaches graduate-level astrophysics at the University of Chicago."

"I'll bet they have some boring conversations at dinner," said Sunni.

"Albert says that his mom and dad talk about inventing sound baffles for toilets, so people can fart in public bathrooms without being embarrassed."

"I'm glad dogs don't get embarrassed," said Sunni. "Embarrassment seems like a terrible burden that humans bear."

The next morning, all the dogs gathered in the back yard. Dad was gone, and they knew Mom was taking a shower, so Missy came out from behind the shed for a quick sniff around the yard.

"Wow!" she said. "Smells from the future! How great is this!"

But then she returned to her hiding place. "I've got stuff to report," she said, and she told them everything that had happened the night before.

"I don't understand," said Sunni, when Missy was done. "If Reverend Joe has something made of gold, why does he have to sell it in the past? Wouldn't it be just as valuable now, in the present?"

No one had an answer.

"We know Uncle Frank," Sunni told Missy. "He was at the party that Mom and Dad had when Reverend Joe first got here. I don't think he's really an uncle. Everyone from the church just calls him Uncle Frank, because he's old and friendly. He's very nice. He slipped us more secret bites at the party than anyone else."

"My kinda guy," said Missy, thumping her tail between the fence and the side of the shed.

"We have information, too," said BJ. "Marie and Albert have a theory about the Time Portal. They think that the explosion of the spaceship tore a small hole in space-

time. Actually, their theory says that these holes may be common when spaceships explode. But the holes usually close up right away.

"They think that in this case a piece of debris from the explosion -- they call it an 'artifact' -- was blown through the hole into the past. This artifact is twisting space-time and keeping the hole from closing. They think that if we can find the artifact, and return it to the present, the Portal will close."

"Where do we look?" asked Bailey.

"Marie and Albert think it's near the spot where the Portal comes out in the past."

"Behind Yipster's house," said Sunni.

"They think that's the reason the Portal comes out there," said BJ.

"We need to find that artifact," said Missy.

"Sunni and I will take that job," said BJ. "We'll start this morning."

BJ, Sunni, and Missy made their way to the church.

"You stay on this side," BJ said to Missy, "and keep watch for us."

"Will do," said Missy, "and good luck."

"I hope Yipster's not out," said Sunni.

Once in the past, BJ and Sunni put their noses to the ground and began to sweep.

"What are we looking for?" said Sunni.

"Something that doesn't belong," answered BJ. "That's all I can tell you."

They wove back and forth and then circled around. They considered each scent. All of them seemed to belong. They expanded the radius of

the search. That didn't help, so they went back over the ground they'd already covered. Again... and again.

Beagles live to smell, and never tire of it. Well, almost never. When it seemed to BJ and Sunni as though they'd been searching forever, they knew they weren't going to find it.

They returned through the Portal and told Missy about their lack of success.

"I'm sorry," said Missy. "But I'll spend the rest of the day and tonight here, in the church, to see if anything happens."

"Are you alright here?" asked Sunni.

"Oh, I'm great!" said Missy. "This is a really super adventure." Her tail swished.

That evening, just after supper, the doorbell rang at the dogs' house. BJ and Sunni howled at the top of their lungs. Even Bailey barked hoarsely. They were saying, "Someone's here! Someone's here! Listen to us! Listen to us!"

It was Uncle Frank. He and Mom and Dad sat down in the living room. BJ crawled under the sofa. Sunni sat next to Uncle Frank's chair, and he absently scratched her head (as she had hoped he would).

"I'll get right to the point," said Uncle Frank. "I've come to talk with you about the Pastor. He's acting very peculiar, if you ask me. He won't give the Board a good reason for stopping construction on the new church, except that he might want to change the plans for the steeple. The steeple? And do you know he was at the construction site last night, after dark, without a flashlight? And he couldn't give me a good reason why."

"He's our Pastor," said Dad. "He doesn't owe us a reason for his every action. Uncle Frank, you haven't liked Reverend Joe from the beginning. You won't even call him 'Reverend Joe'."

"It's true," said Uncle Frank, "that I was the only member of the Board to vote against hiring him. But once he was hired, I backed and supported him one-hundred percent. And as for calling him 'Reverend Joe'... well, I'm an old man, and to me, calling someone 'Reverend' and then their *first* name just sounds disrespectful. It's hard for me to do. Though I guess it's what the young people want."

"See," Mom said to Dad. "Uncle Frank's not using 'Reverend Joe' is actually a sign of *respect* for him. Not disrespect. And I for one would also like to know what's going on. I haven't mentioned this to you before, but during his welcoming reception Reverend Joe kicked Sunni when he thought I wasn't looking."

BJ and Sunni looked at each other.

"I think we can at least agree," said Mom, "that the Board has a right to an immediate explanation of why construction has been stopped. An explanation that makes sense."

"I guess I can agree with that," said Dad, and Uncle Frank left soon after.

Over at the church, Missy had had a quiet afternoon. She spent some time sleeping in a sunbeam that came through a window. When darkness fell, she went to her tarp, curled up, and slept some more.

She was awakened by the sound of a car. Peering out of a doorway, she saw that it was

Reverend Joe, dressed completely in black. Even black sneakers. Missy remembered having once chewed on a sneaker like that.

She went to see what he was doing. He didn't climb the steeple stairs. Instead, he seemed to be looking for something. He had a small flashlight, and he went from room to room, until he spotted a small crowbar that a worker had left. He took the crowbar, switched off his light, and left the building, feeling his way in the dark.

Missy, who was not slowed by the darkness, made it out before him. She hid behind a pile of bricks, where she could watch his car.

Reverend Joe opened the driver's door and got in. With the door still open, he leaned over to put the crowbar on the passenger side floor, and spent some time arranging things over there.

"I need to know what's happening," thought Missy. "I need to be in that car."

Missy ran for the car. Reverend Joe was still looking at the passenger side floor, but his hand was fumbling with his door handle. Missy's tail had once been broken when it was caught in a closing door. She slowed for a moment, remembering. But suddenly she decided this was no time to be afraid. She ran as fast as she could.

The door was closing! Missy leaped for the space behind the driver's seat. As her feet touched the floorboard she tucked her tail between her legs. The closing door hit her rump and knocked her on her chin, but she wasn't hurt. And the slam of the door covered the sound of her crash landing. She was in!

They drove for a while, Missy on the floor in the back. Then they stopped and Reverend Joe got out. Missy heard his footsteps on grass as he walked away.

A few minutes later she climbed on the seat and looked around. The car was parked by the side of a road. There were no buildings, just trees lining the road on either side.

The driver side window was open. Missy scrambled into the front seat and leaped out.

Reverend Joe's scent led into the trees. Missy followed it until the trees ended abruptly. It was the edge of someone's back yard. Missy had come up behind another street, this one with lots of houses.

This back yard had a swingset and a wading pool. The house had a back window that was open, but the room inside was dark.

Just then a leg swung out of the window. A leg wearing black. Then the rest of the person followed: A masked person, carrying a small, wrapped bundle.

A mask doesn't hide a scent. Missy knew it was Reverend Joe. And she knew what was in the bundle, too. It was what the humans call a 'baby' -- a human's puppy.

Reverend Joe ran across the yard and into the trees, not far from where Missy stood. She wondered what he was doing. She followed as he hurried to his car. She stopped at the edge of the trees, watching as he opened his door. Suddenly she realized he was stealing the human puppy! Taking it from its mom and dad! Missy quickly lifted her nose.

"AARROOOOOOO!" she howled, so fiercely that her front paws

lifted off the ground.

"AARROOOOOOOO!"

Reverend Joe looked up and saw her. Then he jumped in his car and sped away, taking the human puppy.

"AARROOOOOOOO!" Missy cried. "Come help! Come help!" She tried to chase the car, but it was gone in seconds. She dashed back through the trees to the street with the houses.

"AARROOOOOOOO!" she cried, running up and down the street. "AAROOO! AAROOO!" But no one came to help.

Missy saw a house with an open window, and lights inside. She ran to the window.

"AAROOO!" she cried.

"AAROOO!"

"SHUT UP!" a man yelled.

"I can't hear the TV!" said a woman.

Missy ran to another house.

"AAROOO! AAROOO!"

The front door opened. A man stood there with a stick in his hand.

"Dog! Get outta my yard!"

Missy ran back into the street. She ran around in a circle. She felt completely alone. She sat down, pointed her beagle nose to the stars, and sadly cried, "Aarroooooooooo."

It took her hours to find her way back to the church. Once there, she sniffed through the entire building. There was no scent of the human puppy. And Reverend Joe had not been there since Missy had last seen him.

There was nothing more she could do. She curled on her tarp and went to sleep.

The next morning, Mom was reading the newspaper at the

breakfast table. "This kidnapping is unbelievable," she said. "Someone climbed through a window and snatched a baby right out of it's crib. The parents were out, and Crissy was babysitting. You remember Crissy -- her family belongs to our church."

"Do they have any clues?" asked Dad.

"It doesn't look like it. They can't even fix the time. Crissy was on the phone with her boyfriend..."

"...Why doesn't that surprise me..."

"...and didn't hear a thing.

There was a report of a dog running around the neighborhood and howling, but they don't know if that was connected with the kidnapping."

Sunni scratched for them to be let outside. Missy was waiting behind the shed. Soon everyone was filled in on all the developments.

"So Reverend Joe has a plan," said BJ, "to make a lot of money using the Time Portal."

"If he wants to make money," said Sunni, "why take the risk of human-puppynapping? Why not go back and bet on sporting events where he already knows the outcome? Like the Westminster Kennel Club Show. Or the Iditarod sled dog race."

"He can make small amounts of money that way," said BJ, "and that's probably how he made the \$500 we saw him with. But he can't make a lot, because humans have laws that say if you make a lot of money, you have to be reported to the government. And he can't risk being reported to the government, because he doesn't really 'exist' in the past. He's there physically, but he isn't in their computer databases."

"Of course he is," said Sunni, "because he's alive then, too. It's just that he's younger."

"He can't use the identity of his younger self," said BJ, "because there'd be a chance that his younger, past self would realize it, and find out about his older, future self."

"So?"

"If his past self had contact with his future self, that might cause his past self to do something different, changing future history so that he wouldn't become pastor of this church today."

"But if he doesn't become pastor of this church," said Sunni, "then he won't discover the Portal, and then he won't be able to go back to change history so that he doesn't become pastor of this church. So then he *would* become pastor of this church, and discover the Portal, and... this is making my head hurt."

"It's called a 'time paradox,'" said BJ, "and no one else understands it, either."

"Okay," said Sunni, "so Reverend Joe's going to puppynap humans in the present, take them into the past, and sell them for lots of money."

"Exactly," said BJ. "You know human pups can be adopted just like dogs...."

"I was adopted by a great family," said Missy, wagging her tail.

"...but there are some humans who can't adopt a pup legally. But if they have lots of money, they can buy one illegally."

"This is really the perfect crime. Reverend Joe can't be caught in the present, because the evidence -- the puppies -- aren't here anymore. It's like they vanished -- which they

did, into the past. Of course they really *are* here somewhere, but they've grown into small children, and no one will suspect they're the missing puppies.

"And Reverend Joe can't be caught in the past, because in the past the puppies haven't been puppynapped yet..."

"They haven't even been whelped!" said Bailey.

"...so there's no record of a crime. Even if someone suspects that something's wrong about a pup, they won't be able to find a mom and dad who are missing it."

"That's what 'golden goods' meant," said Sunni. "Not that they're made of gold, but that they're untraceable. They're perfect."

"He'll steal more human puppies," said Missy, "and sell them to that man in the dark car. Once he takes them through the Portal, the pups will never be able to find their moms and dads again."

"His 'perfect' plan has just one flaw," said Bailey.

"What's that?" asked BJ.

It was Missy who answered:

"We're on to him."

A yellow butterfly fluttered along the fence. In the distance, an airplane droned.

Sunni said, "What do we do next?"

"We need," said BJ, "to find the artifact and close the Portal. It's too dangerous to leave open. Aside from deliberate misuse, we don't know what will happen if a time paradox is accidentally created."

"Let's go look some more," said Sunni. She and BJ squeezed past Missy and through the fence.

"Bailey?" said Missy, after they were gone.

"Yes?"

"I'm not here, in the future, am I."

Bailey's chin dropped an inch.

"No, you're not."

"Why? What happened?"

"You... you died, Missy."

He stopped, but she waited.

"You had cancer, Missy. Mom and Dad did everything they could. You had to go to the vet over and over, and they gave you lots of medicine. And the medicine worked for a long time. It was like you weren't sick at all."

Bailey stopped again, but Missy still waited.

"Eventually the medicine stopped working. And you got sick again. And that was what happened."

"What was the last day like?"

"You wouldn't eat," said Bailey.

"That's how Mom and Dad knew it was time. The vet came. We were all out here in the back yard. Mom held you in her arms, and the vet gave you a shot. You licked Mom's arm, once, and then you just went to sleep. Mom cried and cried. She loved you very much."

"I love her, too," said Missy.

"It was hard for me to say goodbye, too."

There was a silent moment. Then Missy said, "Junior's not here, either, though his scent isn't gone."

"Oh, Junior's at college. He's doing really well."

"Junior? Doing well in college? Junior? Are we talking about the same Junior?"

"I know it's hard to believe. But it started the day you died, Missy.

Your bravery had a amazing effect on Junior. He told Mom and Dad that he was going to be a vet, and do important research. He started doing his schoolwork, and we found that he's actually very smart, when he isn't lazy.

"His grades went up, and he got into the University. He got his first degree in record time, and now he's in graduate school, and he's a research assistant. They're expecting great things from him. Mom and Dad are very proud."

"Junior?" said Missy. "I'm having trouble with this picture."

"It's the same Junior, Missy."

There was another moment. Then Missy said, "I should get back to the church, in case something happens."

"Take care, Missy."

Back in the past, BJ and Sunni weren't any closer to finding the artifact. They'd been searching and searching.

"It's *got* to be here," said BJ.

"Why can't we find it?" She plopped down and scratched furiously at her left shoulder.

"Maybe its at *our* end of the Portal," said Sunni, "in the present."

"That makes no sense," snapped BJ. "When the alien ship exploded, it opened a hole into the past, and an artifact blew through."

"How do you know that?"

Sunni snapped back. "How do you know the hole opened into the past? How do you know it didn't open into the future?"

"What an idiotic thing to say!" said BJ, her bark rising shrilly. "I know because... because... because..." then she stared at Sunni

in astonishment. "You're right!
You're right! That's it!"

"I am? It is?"

BJ was spinning circles in her excitement. "That's it! That's it! I've been such a cat!" She stopped spinning. "You know when there's a road from where you are to somewhere else, you always think you're at the 'beginning,' and the other end is the 'end.' It goes from 'here' to 'there.' Because Marie and Albert and I are at the future end of the Portal, we just assumed it started at our end and went into the past. But that must be wrong. The explosion must have been in this time-stream (the past), and propelled the artifact into the future, into our time. Come on!" She dashed away. "Wait 'til Marie and Albert hear about this!"

"My head is spinning," said Sunni, as she dashed after.

They ran back through the Portal and down the steeple steps, passing Missy at the bottom.

"Come on!" said BJ.

The three girls ran out of the church and toward the back of the construction site.

"If I'd known you were going in this direction," panted Missy, "I could've led you out a faster way."

"Use the fences to orient yourself," said BJ. "We need to find the same spot."

"What a mess!" said Sunni, as they skirted a pile of construction trash.

A bulldozer had left a ridge of dirt at the edge of the construction site. Beyond this, some trees had been left standing. The beagles scrambled over the ridge, and Sunni's nose instantly darted to the ground.

"Hey! Look!"

She pawed at the earth, then used her teeth to gently tug something free. It was a charred strap of woven nylon: red, with blue hearts.

"It's my old collar!"

The others sniffed it.

"It's the collar I was wearing that night! Remember, BJ? You chewed it off my neck, and we left it under the console in the tractor beam room."

"It must have blown out through the open hatch," said BJ, "when the rest of the ship was destroyed. If we can get this collar back into the past (and Marie and Albert are right), the Portal should close."

"For now, we need to make sure nothing happens to it. We can hide it under the shed."

She and Sunni dashed off with the charred collar. Missy looked thoughtfully after them. Then she went back to the church.

Later that day, at the time when afternoon is just ending, and evening is just beginning, Reverend Joe arrived. Missy watched him get out of his car. He was carrying a small bundle.

Missy ran out through a side door and sprinted to the fence behind the house.

"Help!" she barked. "Help! He's taking the human pup through the Portal! We have to do something!"

"There's no one to help," said Bailey, from the other side. "I'm the only one here. Dad took BJ and Sunni on a walk."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I'll come over and help!" cried Bailey.

"Oh, Bailey!" said Missy. "You are so brave and impractical. Stay there, so I don't worry about you, too."

"I'm sorry, Missy. It's up to you. But you're a beagle. Remember a beagle can do anything, once she sets her mind to it."

Missy turned and raced back to the church, thinking desperately. She felt almost as alone as she had in the street after the human-puppynapping. But Bailey's words kept her going -- thinking, thinking, thinking....

Then she heard the crunching of another car pulling into the lot...

...Uncle Frank's car.

"Ha!" she said to herself, turning one quick circle. "I can do this!"

Missy ran inside. Reverend Joe was on the first step to the steeple.

Missy stopped so fast that her tail end lifted a little in the air. She tilted her head back, and, hearing Uncle Frank's door slam, HOWLED: "AARROOOOOOOO!"

In the bare concrete room the sound was ear-splitting. Reverend Joe jumped backwards off the step and spun around, using words that a minister shouldn't. But then he saw Missy, and froze.

"You?" he said. "You? What are you? A demon sent to haunt me?"

"AARROOOOOOOO!" said Missy again, her front paws bouncing off the ground.

Uncle Frank came striding into the room. "What's all this racket? I stopped because I saw your car

again." Then he noticed what Reverend Joe was carrying.

"What have you got there? A baby? What are you doing with a baby in a place like this?"

"Uh, it's not my baby."

"I know it's not your baby. You're not even married."

"It's a friend's baby. I'm taking care of it. For a few hours. Only a few hours. I didn't want to leave it in the car."

"AARROOOOOOOO!" cried Missy.

"I can't get that dog to shut up!" said Reverend Joe hysterically.

Uncle Frank looked at Missy, and then at Reverend Joe.

"Well," he said, "it's good that you didn't leave the baby in the car. That's dangerous. Can I hold it?"

"No! I mean... why? I mean... it's just that it's not my baby."

"Oh, come on," said Uncle Frank. "I've got grandkids. I know how to hold a baby. I love babies so much more now that I'm a grandfather."

Reluctantly, Reverend Joe handed the baby to Uncle Frank. The older man made gurgling noises and walked a few steps away.

When he turned to face them again, he was casually cradling the baby in his left arm. His right hand was in his pocket.

"This," he said, looking Reverend Joe in the eye, "is the baby that was kidnapped last night, isn't it?"

"WHAT! That's... that's... You've gone nuts! Why would you think such a thing?"

Without taking his eyes off Reverend Joe, Uncle Frank nodded at Missy. "The paper said there was a howling dog at the kidnapping,

trying to get peoples' attention. I think *this* is that dog."

"This... this is a stray dog that wandered into the church!"

Missy planted herself in front of Reverend Joe and said:

"AARROOOOOOOO!"

"Demon!" he shrieked, and bolted for the door. Uncle Frank swiftly stuck out a leg, sending the minister sprawling to the floor. In the same deft motion he removed his hand (and cell phone) from his pocket. By the time it reached his ear, he had dialed.

He spoke quickly: "Hello, 911? My name is Francis Monahan, and I'm holding the baby that was kidnapped last night. I'm at the church construction site on Waldo Drive. The kidnapper is the church's pastor," he paused, "Reverend Joe."

Reverend Joe jumped up. He grabbed a metal pipe from the pile on the floor. There was an expression of hatred on his face.

"It looks like I don't have much time to talk," said Uncle Frank into the phone, as Reverend Joe swung the pipe back to strike.

Suddenly the minister screamed. The pipe rang on the floor. Missy had sunk her teeth into his calf.

"I have all the time in the world, now," said Uncle Frank.

Reverend Joe collapsed, sending Missy sliding across the floor. He tried to stand, but fell again. He took out a handkerchief and tied it around his leg. Then he got up and limped away, leaning on the wall.

Missy and Uncle Frank followed him down the hall, at a safe distance. He limped to his car. Missy and Uncle Frank watched him from

an empty doorway. He climbed awkwardly into his car. He was just backing up when the first police car arrived. Blue lights swept down the concrete wall.

Uncle Frank bent down and scratched Missy behind the ears.

"You're a good little dog," he said. "If you don't have a place to stay, you can live with me."

The next morning the story was all over the newspaper. "MINISTER SUSPECTED IN KIDNAPPING," said the headline.

"Can you believe this?" said Mom, holding up the paper. "Our minister, a kidnapper!"

"You and Uncle Frank were right about that guy," said Dad. "They've found evidence."

"Crissy's mom even told Reverend Joe that Crissy would be babysitting," said Mom. "They think that's how he knew the parents would be gone. And what about that dog? Isn't that amazing? You know, if she isn't found, Reverend Joe will have to get rabies shots."

"Why did he do it?" said Dad.

"He's not talking," said Mom. "According to the paper, the only words he'll say are 'haunted by a demon.'"

"We have unfinished business," said BJ.

Sunni scratched to be let out. Dad leaned back and opened the door. BJ and Sunni ran out, with Bailey hobbling after them.

Missy was waiting behind the shed.

"Bailey wants to come with us," said Sunni. Bailey was trotting as fast as he could. He paused for only a second at the concrete block,

scrambling up and then falling chin-down in the dirt on the other side.

"You know," he said, "it's always harder coming down than climbing up."

Sunni retrieved the artifact-collar from under the shed. One after another, the four squeezed through the broken slat.

By the time Bailey reached the foot of the steeple steps, Missy and Sunni were already at the top. Bailey looked up and saw BJ looking down from the first landing.

Any other creature would have given up on the spot, but a beagle can do anything he sets his mind to. Bailey started up.

The steps were hard. He often slipped back. But he never stopped, never took a break, and never slowed. "All I see is the step right ahead of me," he told BJ, "the step I'm looking at right now."

Then they were all together in the steeple: Missy, Princess Sunni, BJ, and Bailey (laying down and panting hard). Bailey raised himself on his front paws.

"You don't need to do this," he said to Missy. "You don't need to go back. We could throw the collar through, somehow. And Uncle Frank said you could live with him."

"I'm going to get sick whether I stay here or go back. That's not going to change."

"Medicine has advanced since then. Maybe the treatments will be more successful. You can't pass up this chance! Uncle Frank will take great care of you."

"I know he would, if I stayed. But I can't. I have to inspire Junior, so he'll turn his life around, and do

great things. And besides, Mom and Dad are probably worried about me."

"Humans worry too much," said Bailey.

Missy's nose almost touched Bailey's. Their nostrils twitched.

"It was so hard to say goodbye the first time," said Bailey. "How can I do it again?"

"A beagle can do anything he (or she) sets his heart to," said Missy, gently.

She picked up the collar and turned. Without a backward glance, she trotted toward the paint cans...
...and vanished.

Bailey didn't move. Sunni and BJ crept forward, sniffing. Then BJ walked straight at the paint cans and...

...didn't vanish.

"The Portal is closed," she said.

Bailey stared at the cans, unblinking. A beagle never loses hope -- not until every last shred of hope is gone. That's why a beagle will stay by the dinner table until every last morsel is cleared. And then stand and watch Dad until every last dish is washed.

"Daddy," said BJ to Bailey, "every last dish has been washed."

"If you don't mind," said Bailey, "I'd like to stay behind for a few moments."

About half way down, Sunni stopped at a landing.

"*That*," she said to BJ, "was the bravest thing I've ever seen anyone do."

Later, after they were gone, Bailey came down the stairs, stumbling and falling a few steps at a time. Then he padded slowly out of the church. He scrambled through

the slat in the fence and climbed over the concrete block. He crossed the yard. His yard, where the blades of grass knew the pads of his paws. He stood at the back door and looked through the glass for Mom or Dad.

"I'm home," he barked.

*This story is dedicated
to the memories of
Francis Monahan
and
Missy the Beagle*

*Sit tibi terra levis
(May the Earth lie
lightly on you)
-- Sir Walter Scott*

THE END