

**Barker and Jake
by Mark Zegarelli**

I

He was an old dog named Barker, a chocolate-colored weimaraner who lived a typical dog's life in the darkest heart of the city.

During the day, he wandered around begging for scraps from tourists and found food where he could in the alleys behind the restaurants. At night when it was warm enough, he usually slept outside in a small patch of grass and cement, hidden and enclosed by hedges. In the winter, he crawled through a broken window into the basement of an old apartment building and slept behind the incinerator, where the older tenants burned their garbage.

And for fun, he chased cats. Sometimes, he even caught one.

Barker wasn't happy. He hadn't had an easy life, and now that he was slowing down with age, he found he had more time to look back on it all. And he didn't like what he saw.

"So what's up?" asked a friend one day, who saw how unhappy Barker was. The friend was another neighborhood dog, a few years older than Barker, called Old Cheever. He was an old bag of fur and bones, blind in one eye, and looked like he wouldn't survive another winter. But he was wise and sweet-natured, and somehow everybody who saw him could see that. So, despite his ragged appearance, he always found people who would give him enough food for one more day.

"What's up?" Barker asked, "Nothing's up. Everything's down. I'd like to know the point of..." he stumbled for the words "the whole thing. Life."

"The point of life is living" said Old Cheever. "Next question?"

Barker frowned, "You joke about it, but I'm serious."

"What for?" his friend asked, "You've lived a good life."

“Ha! You wanna know the kind of life I’ve lived – go ask a cat. He’ll tell you the truth. And he’d tell you, too, my friend.”

“Who, me? I stopped chasing cats years ago. Couldn’t catch one now if I tried.”

“You’re a saint, old man” said Barker.

“Have you ever killed one?” asked Old Cheever.

Barker thought about it for a little while and said. “Fortunately, no.” Then he thought a little more and added “I don’t think so.” Then he grew quiet for a much longer time and said, “Honestly, I don’t know.” Both dogs stayed silent for some time until finally Barker asked, “What can I do?”

His friend was honest, too. “I don’t know, either. But there must be something, if only you can see it.” Then, the old dog turned his blind eye toward him and joked, “Maybe a new pair of eyes would help.”

Barker didn’t see his friend after that. That’s how it went sometimes. Soon after, though, he heard the bad news about Old Cheever from the other dogs in the neighborhood and thought, “Next time, they’ll be saying it about me.”

He went on missing his friend and feeling more and more sorry for himself, until something happened one day to change that.

II

For a while, he saw almost nothing around him, so trapped inside his own sadness was Barker. Then one day as he sniffed up and down an alley hunting for the day’s scraps, he heard the tiniest sound, high-pitched and barely audible, but persistent. “Eeew... eeew... eeew.” He looked around and noticed that it was coming from underneath a pile of rain-soaked, squashed old cardboard boxes.

Barker stuck his nose in between the cardboard and saw there in the dark a little black-and-white tomkitten, only 16 days old, abandoned. Apparently, an old dog doesn’t completely lose his instinct to spring, for his heart raced inside him, and

as cats go this one would be no challenge at all. But another instinct took over instead as he saw how defenseless the creature was, so new to life that his eyes were scarcely open. Clearly, the kitten could do nothing to care for itself. If its mother was gone, it would surely perish here.

“But if I stay here,” he thought, “Then its mother will have to stay away.” It was a dilemma. So Barker went on his way, with a promise to return to the same spot later to see if the situation was still the same.

Indeed it was. Later on, as the evening breeze started to blow down every street, Barker came back to the alley to hear the same sound at regular intervals. “Eeew.... Eeew.... Eeew Eeew” just as before, but now with a bit more desperation. With no further deliberation, Barker pushed his nose into the scruff of the kitten’s neck and picked it up gently in his mouth. Carried along like this, the creature stopped crying out.

Barker brought him back to his favorite warm place behind the garbage incinerator and placed him in a little box. He found a few scraps to feed him, but the kitten was still too small to take solid food. So the dog used his ingenuity and found a small milk carton with some drops still left at the bottom. It was enough for a start, and the kitten lapped up the all the milk that Barker poured in front of him, burped, and then conked out for a nap.

III

As he grew, the kitten came to be known as Jake. Winter came and went, and Jake stayed safe and warm, hidden behind the big iron contraption with a name he couldn’t quite pronounce. He kept quiet when people from upstairs came down to burn their bags of trash, and basked in the room’s warmth that kept glowing even after they’d left.

Barker left early every morning and stayed out most of the day. At night, he’d bring back tasty bits of food, whatever he’d found along the way, to share with Jake.

At the start of spring, Barker brought him outside to his favorite spot behind the hedge. Jake saw the bright blue sky for the first time. Then the next day the blue

sky turned gray, and Jake shivered and shook the rain off his fur. He huddled close to Barker as they slept and kept each other warm.

As often happens too soon for those who are older to handle, the little one now wanted to see what was out there, beyond the hedge and the little patch of grass where he was safe. "Show me where you go and what you do every day," he begged Barker.

"But you're not old enough," said Barker, because that's what we say when we're reluctant to see that our little ones are growing up so quickly we can't stand it. Of course, Jake certainly was old enough, and if he were alone in the world he could live very well in the city at his age just like all the other stray cats do.

So one day, soon after Barker had left for the day, Jake leapt up, stretched the sleep out of him in a long cat stretch, and hopped over the hedge. He found his way out of the little enclosed yard and spent the whole day exploring the city on his own.

When Barker came back and found Jake gone, he was beside himself with grief and worry. "I should never have left today," he said as he paced back and forth inside the hedge. "I knew he would do this – all the signs were there." He scanned the streets for hours and finally returned home, relieved to find Jake safe and sound – and angry!

"Why didn't you tell me?" demanded Jake.

"Tell you what?" asked Barker.

"What I would see out there!" he stammered, "What it's like for us."

"Who do you mean – us?"

"Cats," said Jake. "Don't pretend you don't know what goes on out there. All day long, cats hide in fear – from dogs. I saw it myself and the other cats told me everything. Dogs chase cats, and when they catch them, sometimes they kill them – or leave them for dead. And they don't think twice about it. You should be ashamed of yourselves, all of you."

Barker crouched down on the ground and buried his face in his two front paws. "I am," he said, "Very ashamed. I wanted to spare you this."

"Or maybe you wanted to spare yourself," said Jake, because merciless, sometimes, are the young on the old.

And all Barker could do was apologize again and then suffer some more as Jake turned his back on him and said nothing.

IV

Jake kept his distance that night. He wouldn't answer when Barker tried to speak with him, either to explain or simply to make small talk that might relieve the tension. Barker felt terrible and didn't know what he could do to make things right.

The next day, Jake went his way again. Barker didn't try to stop him. For the next few days, it was terrible for Barker as they dwelled next to each other and yet lived separate lives, no longer entwined.

Then one night, Jake came home and his mood has changed. Again, he asked "Why didn't you tell me?" and again Barker had no idea what he meant. "What I would see out there."

"What was it you saw?" asked Barker, "Something worse than dogs chasing cats?"

"Much worse. Ten times worse." At last, Jake said "I saw that cats chase mice. They chase them, then kill them and eat them."

"That's right, they do. That's how it is," said Barker.

"But it *shouldn't* be that way. Why do they do it?"

"Lots of reasons," answered Barker. "Because they're hungry and have nothing to eat."

“But there’s plenty to eat in this city,” said Jake. “You just have to look for it.”

“Maybe not for everybody,” said Barker. Jake didn’t understand, and he just plain didn’t want to. He sulked all night, but at least he’d let go of his grudge toward dogs, and that was good. That night they curled up together as they slept, but it was a restless sort of sleep for them both.

V

So this went on for a while and things didn’t get much better. In fact, they needed to get even worse. One night, Jake came back more depressed than Barker had ever seen him. He just slogged in and slumped down and didn’t want to move. By now, Barker was getting used to his moods, so he just let him sit there and at last Jake started talking.

“I see it all now. Now I see how it works. And it’s terrible – all of it.”

“What happened? Something worse this time than cats chasing mice?”

“Much, *much* worse. A *million* times worse. Dogs chase cats. Cats chase mice. Mice chase bugs. But I don’t even feel sorry for the bugs because they probably chase something smaller than them. And then, people chase dogs, too. But then something bigger probably chases people, so they’re not to blame, either. That’s how the world works. Everybody chases somebody and someone else chases them. And it never ends.”

What could Barker say? He’d known this for a long time, and maybe at one time it had bothered him – he guessed it must’ve – only he never really thought about it much anymore. Jake searched Barker’s face for some sign to tell him otherwise and found nothing there. That was a tough moment for both of them.

Later that night, as humbly as he knew how, Barker asked Jake again to forgive him. “What for?” Jake asked, “You’ve always been good to me. But that’s not the point. Cats chase mice, and mice chase bugs, and bugs chase whatever they chase. And as for dogs, men kick them and cars hit them. This world is a chain of misery, and it’s not for me. I don’t know why you saved me from that box and took me in. I know you meant well, but it was only cruel in the end.”

Barker didn't know what to do. For the next few weeks, he wandered around the city feeling a new kind of despair he had never felt, and thought "It was easier chasing cats than taking care of them." It seemed he'd forgotten all about the problem he'd started out with, which had been consumed by another.

VI

Something had to break, and soon. So if a dog could find no answers by himself, could one come in a dream?

In this dream, Barker finds himself in a serene and sunny place in the country where the world suddenly comes alive, so quietly, in bright gold and green, and the subtle smells of spring and summer breeze across his muzzle. He woke to find Jake snoring next to his face – that, then, would account for the breeze – but the dream stayed with him. Instantly, he knew what he would do: They would leave this filthy city with its cars and endless crimes and find their way out to the country where everything's full of beauty.

He talked his plan over with Jake, who still wasn't sure but said he was willing to follow. Over the next several weeks they worked extra hard finding food and fattening up for the long trek that might take them who knows where. Eventually, they were ready.

They left at sunset. Though they crossed the long bridge out of the city at the darkest time of night, they could both see just fine from the glare of streetlights and the headlights of the cars that passed but didn't notice them. Not that there was much to see. They were anxious to get gone and stay gone for good.

VII

They kept on walking and walking until neither of them could walk one more step, then plopped down in the dark wherever they were and slept. Barker meant to keep watch but soon relinquished his struggle against sleep and sank into deep blackness. He woke with a start and it was light. There was no danger, no city noise – and no Jake. But he had learned not to worry too much about his young friend, who was really rather grown up now, he had to admit.

He looked around, expecting everything to be different, and nothing was. Sure, the tall pines smelled fresh and cast their long, lovely morning shadows. He could hear birds singing and the rush of water somewhere nearby, and thought about taking a nice cool bath, then shaking himself dry. He figured they could find food somewhere – though he pretended not to think about hunting unless he had to – maybe they could find some folks who were safe and might take pity on a dog the way some of them did.

It seemed so perfect. So what was wrong?

Well, for starters, it wasn't what he'd thought. He'd had this idea that when they got outside the city, his heart would be unburdened once and for all. But instead, he had carried his heart with him in his chest the whole way and it still felt just as heavy as when they'd left. So whatever they were looking for, he started to worry for the first time that perhaps this wasn't it.

But where was Jake? Around here somewhere, he was sure. He stood up and shook off the dust from the road, starting to sniff him out. A little way down a nearby path, he thought he caught the cat's familiar scent, and followed along up a small hill. Sure enough, there was Jake just atop the next crest. He was just about to bark out a call to him, then stopped. Something strange was happening.

Jake was crouched down in a way that Barker had never seen before, stock-still, deep in the grass, pulled in tight like a spring about to snap. Then BAM! He shot straight out like an acorn off a loaded slingshot, up onto a nearby branch that hung low over the grass. And WHACK! Three birds flew off the branch in a sudden flutter of wings. The fourth was not so lucky.

Who knows what Jake went through in those moments just after, with the taste of blood on his tongue? He slunk back after some time and sat down very close to Barker, but didn't say a thing, just sat there sadly with his eyes wide open and a dot of dark blood still visible on his white whiskers and chin. At long last, he spoke: "Let's go home," he said, "Please."

Then to make matters worse, it rained on them all the way home. Not that the rain meant anything by it, but to them it felt like it was their own personal rain falling down in shame on both their heads.

Jake had sunk into a deeper despair than his friend had ever seen. Poor Barker didn't know what to do. He knew no words to use that could redeem this day so, soaked and shivering, they trudged on together in silence.

By the time they'd reached the bridge back to the city the rain, thank God, had stopped. They were still wet, but at least the clouds were parting a bit. You could see the last sun of the day trying to break through in a few orange rays beginning to shine off the city's glass skyscrapers. Without quite knowing what or why, they stopped in the middle of the bridge and just looked across the water without a word.

Then, slowly, they started to see it.

For Barker, this seeing began as a shimmering of light that continued as a constant hum of traffic he could feel on his haunches as the iron bridge buzzed and swayed. The whoosh of cars behind them tickled the back of his neck but everything seemed still inside this swirl he couldn't quite name. He looked out over the city and felt like he was floating above everything and yet somehow all the way underneath things. Not wanting to spoil it, but still needing to speak, he said to Jake, simply, "Look."

"What am I looking for" asked the cat.

"Everything" says the dog.

"I don't understand. What do you mean? And how is this going to help?"

"Just look," the dog told him.

The cat did as he was told. At first, he saw nothing. But then, slowly, he started to see it, too. From just where they were sitting, they could see the whole city and beyond all at once as one giant gray storm of light with a billion trillion intricate pieces. All these sights and sounds floated up to them as the sunset grew darker

orange, then red, then darker still to purple until they could see lights twinkling electric in the buildings. Every moment, the view seemed to shift as more lights flashed on and the sun sank slowly down. They both looked and looked and saw only beauty all around them as all the thoughts of trouble that had tormented them both for so long first slowed, then trickled and stopped.

“What is this place?” asked Jake.

“This is our home” his friend responded.

“But it’s not always like this.”

“Yes it is.” Barker told him, and knew as he said so that it was true. “Every day.”

“Then why don’t we ever see it?”

“Because we never look for it.”

“So we should come here every day to see it” asked the cat.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” answered the dog. “We’ll see.”

They left the bridge and went down into to the street again toward home, but this time with new eyes. They could still hear the rush of traffic and car horns, but now they sounded like a subtle symphony. Everything looked different. They saw the neon lights reflected off of windows and steam rising off the wet streets. The people walking by were no different than they ever were, and yet everything about them now was different. The two friends noticed their faces as they passed and each one had its beauty, its sadness, and its knowing that could be seen so clearly. For the first time ever, Jake climbed up on the Barker’s back to get a better view.

“Show me more!” he asked the dog.

They walked around the streets like this, and everything looked as if it had been illuminated especially for them. They even passed a place where one car had crunched into the back of another. The two drivers were shouting at each other,

though neither was actually hurt, but both of them were acting crazy, and it seemed so silly, so real – and so human.

Throughout the night, the cat kept saying “It’s so beautiful – show me more!”

They walked around together like that for hours until finally, exhausted, they went back home. “Why didn’t you tell me the world was so beautiful?” the cat asked. “I will see it in my dreams tonight.”

“Me too” said the dog. “And I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know it. I don’t know how I missed it.”

So they slept and then went back to their lives and in some sense things returned to normal. But then, at the same time, things were never the same. Although sometimes they forgot to look, whenever one of them was having a bad day, the other would remind him to look around for evidence of what a beautiful world it is. Then they would see something – maybe just the rainbow of an oil slick in a muddy puddle – but something that would let them know that this beauty was still around them, always there, ready to be seen and appreciated. Sure, their troubles were still there, too, but somehow it didn’t matter as much.

IX

And now, for the very sad part of the story. Because I told you at the beginning that Barker was an old dog, and he only got older as the story goes on, as we all do. At a certain point, he was no longer able to go out and find food for himself and Jake. Fortunately, by this time the cat knew how to find food for them both, so their roles switched: Jake now took care of Barker, who never left their little area behind the hedge.

When fall became winter, Jake helped him limp very slowly through the broken basement window and take up his place behind the incinerator, their winter home.

Each day, the cat would bring him not only food, but some little thing from outside that he could carry to show him the beauty of the world – a silver gum

wrapper, for example, or a piece of bright blue glass. Something to show him and remind them both, and they would smile.

One day, Barker told his friend that it was time for him to leave.

“Where?” asked Jake, “Take me with you. I don’t want you to go alone.” But then he understood and he felt a shock in his heart he had never felt before, like it had been cut in half with a knife while still in his chest. “No,” he said, and kept repeating the word, as if this could hold back what was about to happen. “No. No. No....” He buried his face in the dog’s neck and began to cry without consolation.

“Please listen to me,” said the dog, “I need you to hear this. Before I found you, I didn’t think I had lived a very good life. All I could remember was the pain I’d caused others. And it was true, but also it wasn’t. It’s only since we met that I can see that the whole time, even before we met, there has always been a lot of good.”

“What do you mean?”

The dog thought about his whole life. He remembered playing in the sun as a puppy, rolling around with his mother and his brothers and sisters. That was before the others were taken off somewhere in a truck but, through some luck he himself was somehow spared, though he never knew why. So he had learned to survive as we all do. That’s just how it was. He didn’t know how to sum it up, so he simply said, “I’ve done some bad in my life.”

Jake thought of the bird he’d killed and eaten, then said “Haven’t we all? But you did a lot more good than bad.”

“Really?” asked the dog. He didn’t know whether to believe it or not.

“Of course,” says the cat. “Why would you think anything else? You’ve lived a good life.”

“There was a time when I never imagined I would hear those words – especially from a cat.” He thought about it for a moment, and then said them again: “I’ve lived a good life.”

X

All that night they stayed together. Jake cuddled close to Barker and kept him warm. Then, sometime during the night, the cat drifted asleep just for an instant. It grew very cold all of a sudden, and Jake knew without knowing that it was done. He didn't want to believe it, but he knew.

He stayed there like that until the sun came up. He still didn't want to believe that his dearest friend and protector was gone for good, so he stayed there next to him, hoping his warmth would come back with the sun. He stayed and stayed.

At last, reluctantly, he stood up and took a short look back toward his companion, who lay there in such peace you could almost believe he was dreaming. Jake felt such deep sadness in his heart, but knew there was nothing left to do but be still and let it be. He leapt up onto the window sill, turned around for one last look, then walked out into the quiet of the morning, before the day's noise had quite begun.

And then he found a way to smile just for a moment, because he saw the beauty of it all.

MTZ

10/31/10

For our own Jake, of course.