

## **Red-Eyed Dog**

**By Katie Vosgien**

One foot in front of the other, then switch quick and hold your arms out to balance yourself. I watched Jessica's white shoes switch as she easily walked along the concrete barrier, her balance never off like mine. I always swayed precariously, arms flapping as I tried to right myself back to center. Despite the dance lessons, I didn't make a very good ballerina. The crippling stage fright certainly didn't help.

Mom tried to find activities for me to participate in; something I was good at and enjoyed. I had so much energy it felt like I'd burst from the seams if I wasn't always in motion. I was too busy running around and playing pretend to sit down and eat a full meal. My legs would sway at the table and my mom would reach down and gently bat at my thighs, telling me to stop kicking the chair legs. I would stick out my tongue at her and hop up, declare that I was done after barely touching my food and run off to wreak more havoc on the neighborhood.

I didn't take well to any organized group, though I did try. I kicked the soccer ball backward over *our* net, threw up on stage, ran the wrong way in softball, and got a hook stuck in my thumb and pointer finger three or four times before I gave up on the Girl Scouts fishing badge. Instead I opted to ride my bike up and down the street while being chased by bad guys (usually orcs and trolls). My unicorn guardian—named Steve—would gallop up and run them off with his pointed alabaster horn.

At this juncture, I was turning nine. Steve still trotted beside us. His silver mane and tail glittered in the setting sun. His white flanks turned blueish as twilight soon set in. It wouldn't be for another year or two that he'd fade away from view, becoming a distant memory until my daughter asked about my imaginary friends.

“Imaginary!” I declared with a laugh. “Steve was as real as you and me, it’s only that I no longer needed him that he left. Now it’s your turn, Amelia! Don’t you see him standing at your door, guarding you against the monsters and bad guys as you sleep?” and there he was once again, a light in the shadowed hallway.

I tried to keep up with Jessica but couldn’t stay afloat on the narrow concrete, so I gave up and stepped off, opting instead to walk beside her tightrope act. I skipped over cracks in the asphalt to avoid breaking my mother’s back. I couldn’t stand my mom sometimes. She didn’t let me play video games or watch TV all day, *and* I couldn’t even eat ramen and chicken nuggets every meal. I had to eat weird *healthy* stuff, like broccoli and creamed spinach. Still, I would feel awful if her back broke and she couldn’t sit comfortably at the kitchen table with one of her thousand-something-piece Thomas Kinkade puzzles.

We were making our way back to my house after playing at Mountain View Park with some friends from school. I was supposed to get home before dark so I told her to hurry up. She made a face at me—I wasn’t the leader, so she wasn’t accustomed to my giving orders—but hopped off the concrete and walked quicker alongside me.

“Heeeeeey giiiiirls!” a male voice called from behind. We both turned and stopped at the sight of a bright cherry red Mustang, adorned with black flames on its hindquarters. Steve’s withers shook and his nostrils flared. Another male piped up: “Need a ride? We’ve got room!” The car coasted close to us and I peered inside. There didn’t *appear* to be enough room. The passenger seat was occupied and three men were packed in the back like sweaty sardines. The AC didn’t appear to be working and it was a hot summer night.

“No thanks,” said Jessica, frowning at them. She looked like she was trying to place their faces, but couldn’t. Yerington is a small town where everybody knows everybody. We would’ve recognized a Mustang with black flames, but neither of us did. I thought the car was cool and maybe if there’d been enough space in the back I would’ve hopped in.

“We won’t all fit,” I told them matter-of-factly, like they were too dumb to see it and needed a little kid to point it out for them.

“That don’t matter! We’ll make it work,” he assured me, flashing a bright toothy smile.

“My dad is the sheriff,” Jessica said, huffing. “Go away.” Her temples and jaw clenched as her temper flared. She was quick to hit and slow to forgive. Our fights would escalate to punches and bites and teachers would have to pull us off of each other on the playground. It took weeks for us to get back together again but when we did we were thicker than thieves. She was as likely to deck a kid for bad-mouthing me as she was to flip out over any minor transgression. She was my best friend until we ultimately fell out in second grade and stopped speaking to each other for years. Now we check in on each other on Facebook every once and awhile. She’s raising her boys in Yerington, surrounded by siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins. We lightly entertain the idea of meeting up in person, whenever I’ve made a trip over to visit with family there, but it’s never come to fruition.

The man’s friendly face—handsome, chiseled even—contorted. He slammed the shift into park and paused, his hand tight on the wheel. “I *won’t* hurt you,” he growled, his words mashing up with his tone. Neither of us was reassured, and we shook our heads *no*. One of his friends laughed through his nose. He slipped out of the door, towering over us as we froze solid. I’ll always remember how sinister his smile was—a mix of anger, determination, and something else I couldn’t understand. He reached over and quickly pulled up his seat, folding it so his friends could unfurl out of the back. My breath hitched in my throat and I wanted to scream, tried to scream. Jessica, usually fearless and a small but fierce force to be reckoned with, was for once lost for words.

We were beside the Catholic cathedral parking lot. The cathedral towered over every ranch-style, single-level home in the neighborhood, casting shadows that consumed us against the twilight. I knew no one would see us in time to help. The neighbors who might’ve been out on their porch watching the summer sunset were already back inside the house, watching a

two-hour-long season premiere of American Idol instead. I wished so badly to be inside, too. I wanted to be safely curled up on the couch with Jessica and my parents, listening to Kelly Clarkson belt her heart out. I shivered, despite the heat, and closed my eyes tight.

Before the driver's calloused hand could close over my shoulder (I felt the tips of his fingers on my skin) a growl ripped through the quiet. It was deep and its rumble seemed to echo in the air. My head shot up and I looked around for the source of it. Out from a lock of blooming lilacs a large, dark, and shaggy figure slinked. As it approached I realized it was a massive black dog, its fur thick and matted. Its amber eyes glinted red in the dark, catching the headlights.

White teeth were bared. It moved quicker than the men could, leaping at them from a distance I thought impossible even for its size. They cried out and scrambled back into the car, cursing and shouting. The driver slammed the front seat back into the knees of his friends and sat hard into the Mustang, yanking the door shut before the dog could reach him.

We found our voices and shrieked, clutching at each other in terror as the creature turned its gaze on us. Its entire demeanor changed. It sniffed at us, cocked its head to the side in a very doggish manner, then started toward my house. Although confused at first, we both accepted the odd situation and followed it. Steve shrugged as well as a unicorn could and agreed that we were now in good hands—*paws*, he corrected. As if it were an everyday occurrence to be walked back to one's home by a strange gigantic K-9.

Once we arrived the black dog slipped back into the shadows, behind the neighbor's large hedge of overgrown weeds. Although we most certainly should have, I never did tell my parents and, from what Jessica relayed, neither did she tell hers. It felt like a secret we needed to keep between us. The red Mustang disappeared then and we never saw or heard of it again.

I do wonder if it ever really happened, or if it was only a vivid nightmare that a nine-year-old's mind imagined up. I've yet to corroborate the story with Jessica and, truthfully, I don't think I ever will. I want the dog to be as real as I willed Steve to be.