

## **At That Age, There Was Drama**

by Terena Elizabeth Bell

The girls were six when Holly's dog died. They'd been friends since kindergarten, their teacher making them naptime partners the first day — a mistake, she'd quickly learned, as Holly and Maren were prone to talk, but then again, thought Holly's mother, maybe Holly would have made friends with any little girl she was paired with so thank goodness it had been Maren.

Maren was level-headed — a little too serious for her age (which made Holly a good friend for her), but with a calming presence (that made her a great friend to Holly). Left to her own devices, Maren would read a book, but Holly needed go-carts and slides. It wasn't that Holly was hyper — she just liked to move.

Not only were the girls good for each other, but their mothers got along — something that didn't always happen, Maren's mom telling Holly's, "You can't control who your child falls in with, even at their age," explaining she'd never dictated who Maren could befriend based off of whether she did or did not like their mother: "You can't help who your parents are. Every child deserves to be graded on her own merits."

But lots of parents did that. This was why Holly wasn't close with Penny Haynes (another girl in their class), Maren overhearing Holly's mom on the phone one day say "I just can't stand her mother."

"You don't understand," she told Maren when she asked about it, "I wish you hadn't heard that."

Then when Maren did not apologize for eavesdropping (yes, she'd been listening, but not on purpose, "I just needed to go to the bathroom and heard you on the phone before I closed the door"), Holly's mother explained that when grown-ups have young children, they don't get to choose their friends — not really — "your kids chose them for you," parents naturally spending time with the moms and dads of children their own kids like.

"Think about it, you've seen how the grown-ups all sit together at y'all's parties," and Maren nodded because she was right. "I'm lucky," she said, "that your mother is so wonderful," then asked if she'd like some lemonade.

(Still, this did not sit right with Maren. She could see it in her face — the judging. Maren was a bright child, smarter she hated to admit than Holly, smarter she refused to admit than herself, and even if Maren didn't say it — trained not to sass her elders, unable as a child to quite know the words — Holly's mom could tell Maren saw something wrong in a system where children chose their friends but mothers didn't, with the effort parents put into foisting certain kids upon each other.) "Is this," Maren asked, "why Penny doesn't have more friends? If you didn't like my momma, would Holly still be my friend?" and that's when she told Maren, "Shouldn't you be outside?"

If it had been Holly, she thought, her daughter who'd overheard, there wouldn't have been a problem. Holly just had this knack for understanding some things were simply the way the world worked.

"It is kind of ironic the girls fell together," Maren's mother once said (early in their friendship, kindergarten?), and Holly's mother laughed, "They are their own little Oscar and Felix" — joined not at the hip as the expression goes, but at the leg, running all over each other's yards, racing down Foothills Drive.

Gatlinburg itself was a tourism town, but at the same time, a mountain one, which made it unlike other places. You could live within city limits and still be remote (residential streets so narrow they did not have stripes, lined with trees and winding). The tourists pretty much stuck downtown, staying in hotels along US-441. There were no cul de sacs or subdivisions — that required flat land. Now, when the girls got older, developers would take an acre here and an acre there, plop fancy chalet near chalet, but the Gatlinburg of their youth looked more like a rural area than any town.

Basically, what this meant was that Maren couldn't just walk over to Holly's — or Holly to Maren's — their parents had to drive them, which was part of what Holly's mom had been trying to get at when she told Maren it was important to like somebody's mother. Even if you were dropping your kid off for a couple hours, parents still had to invite each other in, visit on their own a little while to be polite. Once your kid got older, you could leave them at a friend's for longer — run to the grocery or take time for yourself — but that was after you knew your and the other child got along. And this just went for play dates. Mothers always stayed for parties.

Birthday parties were full of drama. One of the kids might fall during red rover, another get sick from eating too much cake. There was always someone who wanted to stay, somebody who wanted to go, and — by the end of any good event — at least one child who'd locked themselves in the bathroom.

Except for the year Holly got the dog. That was a party that — save this one thing — had gone exceptionally well. It was Holly's sixth birthday (one week before school) and the reason Holly's mom hated Penny's: "What kind of mother buys a kid a pet without checking with her parents first?" and Maren's mom said, "Well, maybe her heart was in the right place," because it was — Holly had wanted a dog for as long as she could remember.

(In fact, that very first naptime — fifteen minutes when the girls were supposed to be resting — Holly said to Maren, “Do you like dogs?” and when Maren said, “Yes,” Holly grinned and began bobbing her head, sliding it on the mat with her tongue sticking out, making tiny panting sounds.) Anybody who paid attention could see it, Maren’s mother saying before the party, “Why don’t you just get her one?”

“I will when she’s older, I swear. You know how it is. She gets one at this age and you know I’ll wind up taking care of it.”

But she was wrong. When Penny Haynes gave Holly that sweet cocker spaniel (“Just like Lady and the Tramp,” Holly squealed), she didn’t have to do a thing. Holly became the most responsible six year-old in all of Sevier County, taking Lady out, teaching her no, making sure her water bowl stayed filled. Holly loved that dog from day number one, just as she had Maren.

Maren was there when it happened. She and Holly were in the living room when Holly saw the mail come through the window, route carrier pulling up outside.

“Ooo,” she said, “I wonder what she put in there,” then just like that, Holly ran outside, Miss Always-On-The-Go, Lady darting out the door beside her.

If Holly had been any older, she would have stopped. She would have stopped running sooner, would have known that wherever she went, that dog went too, would have realized Lady ran even faster than she did, so to take care of Lady she’d have to look ahead (such beautiful brown ears the girls liked to play with, round little chestnut eyes), Lady darting in the road right as Holly stopped, a too-fast tourist car winding down the drive.

The driver stopped. To his credit, he did stop — not so much as to make sure Lady was okay, he didn’t see the dog, only a little girl. If she had been a better mother — Maren’s mom, perhaps — Holly’s mother would have paid more attention, would have ran out with the girls

instead of sat inside, drying her nails. She did rush out when she heard the screech (anything could have happened), “You could have killed her,” she yelled, “driving so fast in a residential neighborhood,” taking Holly in her arms, “Don’t you know we have kids here,” the man apologizing, having finally seen the dog.

Meanwhile Holly pulled, trying to wrench herself away, screaming “Laaaady” as she wrestled, one arm forward then the next, “Laaaady,” as big as the mountain. But her mom would not let go. “It’s alright,” she lied, “Everything’s alright,” stroking her daughter’s hair — then, “Maren, go in the house and call your mother,” while the man who’d killed Lady stood there, not knowing whether to comfort or just plain drive away. (“Looks like a beautiful dog,” he said, muttering “I’m sorry” again.)

Holly was still in the yard, pulling against her mother, “We can’t just leave her out there, Momma. We can’t leave Lady in the middle of the road” (her mother afraid to let Holly go, not wanting her own child to run out).

“What if the tourist came back?” she later asked Maren’s mom, “What if somebody else came too fast down the road?” telling her she didn’t know if she could ever let Holly outside, allow her to go get the mail again. (“You know it’s all my fault.”)

“These things happen,” Maren’s mother said, not adding “dogs get run over all the time,” because even if they do, you shouldn’t say it, even if they do get run over or run away or whatever it is bad that happens, even if something does happen a lot, you don’t rub it in. You don’t tell somebody they aren’t a special case when they’re hurting.

And Holly was hurting bad. For weeks, she refused to watch her cartoons, cried every time someone even started to say a word beginning with that /dɔ/ sound — like Dawahares or dolphin or doll. Everything reminded her of dog.

The girls were in third grade before Holly was ready to try again — or maybe before her mother was, unable to trust neither child nor dog to not get run over (retrieving the mail herself, disallowing Penny Haynes from future parties).

“You can’t protect them from everything,” Maren’s mother finally said, sitting in the kitchen with Holly’s, sliding her arm across the counter to hold her hand.