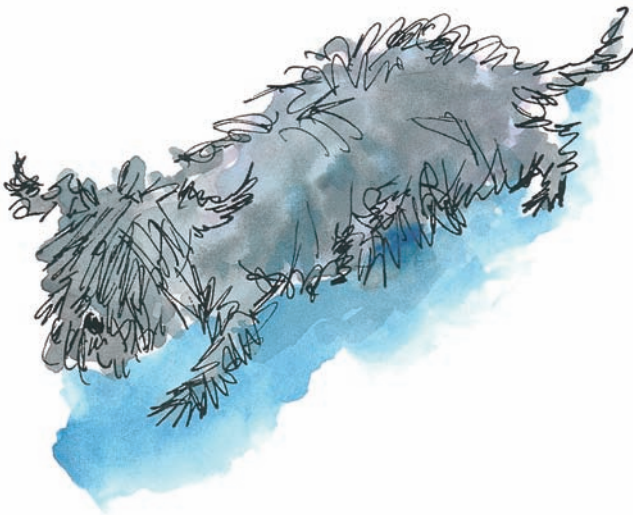


"NIMBUS"

Story by **YVONNE VERNON** / Illustrations by **KERRY MILLARD**



MONICA AND I had planned to tell Mum as soon as she came home from work — but she already knew. As her car slowly rolled along the driveway around the orchard towards the house, there it was, trotting determinedly behind, ears flapping, tail dragging along the ground. We waited until the car was parked in the garage then jumped around Mum, Monica talking so loudly I had to shout to be heard. Mum seemed not to take any notice. She stood there staring at the little grey dog, arms crossed, frowning. I suppose she was tired after such a long, hot day standing at the cash register.

Dad came to join us, smelling of oily metal because he had been working on the tractor all day. His hands were black and there were greasy streaks on his T-shirt, but it was an old one with holes in it, so Mum was not mad. Dad had blue eyes that crinkled at the corners and shone when he was happy, which I liked because it made him look friendly and kind. They also crinkled when he laughed and played with us.

Mum kissed and hugged us all and we walked inside, Monica still talking without even breathing so that I had to keep shouting. Then Dad turned and said, "Shhh!"

The screen door banged shut and the dog stood there, its ears lifting higher as we disappeared into the house.

It was getting dark, the sun had already gone behind the mountains, and Mum might have been annoyed that Dad hadn't cooked tea, but I think she was really annoyed about the stray.

We had sausages for dinner, and so did the dog. It crept close to Mum and took the food very gently from her hand. Then it ran out onto the lawn and ate it there, quickly, its ratty tail swishing against the grass. Mum stood watching it. She shook her head and sighed, then came inside for an old dish, which she filled with water. The dog looked a bit scared when she put the bowl down, and ran off a little with the rest of the sausage in its mouth. It looked

funny, but we didn't laugh. We had to go inside then. It was dark and Mum shut the back door.

I could tell Dad didn't like us feeding the dog, but Mum said no animal would go hungry at our place and we could look after it until Monday when we'd have to ring the council to come and collect it. Monica was only six and didn't understand, but I was eleven years old and remembered when the strays were collected last year. Three of them.

After tea, Mum sat between Monica and me on the lounge and explained that people bought cute little puppies, like the one outside must have been, and gave them as Christmas presents, probably to children.

"But," Mum said, and put her arms around us, "the puppies sometimes are not wanted after they grow into dogs and are not so cute any more, or the children are bored with them, or they bark and destroy the garden. The owners of these dogs can be cold-hearted and cruel. They take their pet in the car until they are a long way from home, such as out here in the

country, then they push it out onto the road and drive quickly away."

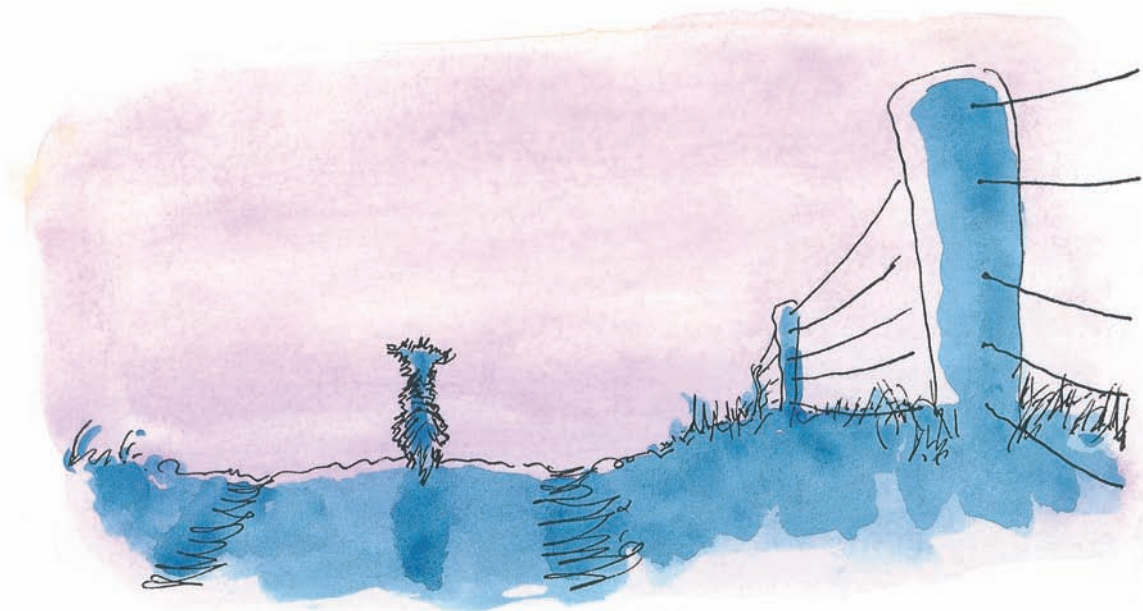
Monica's eyes had grown as big as saucers and for once she didn't say anything.

Mum gave Monica a squeeze. "Almost all of Aunty Karin's dogs were strays," she said.

"Those poor dogs," cried Monica, "chasing their owners' cars until they can't run any more! They must feel so frightened. And lost!"

That night, from my bedroom, I heard Mum and Dad talking in low voices in the kitchen and they sounded serious. They didn't laugh, not even once.

The next morning Monica and I watched the dog circling around Mum in the courtyard, its belly low, dipping its head and whimpering, wagging that scruffy tail. It was only a small dog, no bigger than my stuffed bear, but its coat was a nice dark grey with silver shades, sort of parted down its back, with long hair that had rolled into dirty dags. I couldn't see its eyes because of all the matted fur, but I could see its nose, like a twitching black button.



Mum crouched down on her heels and reached out a hand and coaxed the dog in a soft voice — sort of comforting, like the one she uses when we fall down and need a bandage or something. The dog crawled to her slowly, licking its face, ears dropped low, sliding along on its bottom. Poor thing, I thought. Then Mum put her hand on its grubby head and stroked it, talking all the time until the dog sat up straighter and wriggled. Its pink tongue darted about from its grey face as it tried to lick her. We laughed; then Dad came to the back door and we looked at him. There were no crinkles around his eyes.

All that Sunday, the dog played around Monica and me and our friends who came to visit. Our friends said “Yuk! Go away!” when they first saw it, but it kept right on bouncing around us as we rode our bikes and played on the tyre swing.



From the way it raced about us happily — a scrappy piece of shag carpet with flying ears — Mum said it must have once belonged to children. I wondered if they were still crying over the loss of their pet, and if they had gone looking for it in the dark, with torches, calling its name — like Monica and I would have done forever and ever — because they had loved it. I thought of the dog running along the road after the disappearing car until it was exhausted.

Mum warned us not to touch it because it would definitely have fleas. Dad looked up from the tractor and added “At least!” in a gruff voice. Clearly, we were not to forget that it was going somewhere else on Monday: to a place where people came to buy dogs and have them for always and never dump them on lonely roads.

Later, when we were having a drink and some cake, Dad went to the back door and we heard him say, “The dog’s sleeping on the mat!” That made Monica giggle, but Dad seemed sad.

When Mum gave the dog another sausage, it slipped away to bury what it couldn’t eat.

Then Monica came running in, upset. “Where’s our dog?”

Dad said, “It isn’t *our* dog.”

I took Monica’s hand and showed her where it had buried the sausage. The dog appeared from beneath a bush and came back to the house with us, trotting behind as though it had always owned us. Monica kept looking behind her to watch it following. Then she stopped and patted it just once, quickly, before Dad could see.

That afternoon after our friends had gone home and we were putting away the bikes, Monica went to stand beside Dad in

the garage, among all the nuts and bolts, and burst out crying.

“I want the dog for my birthday!”

Dad looked at her, wiped his hands on another old T-shirt, then bent down and said, “Your birthday is not for two months yet.”

She tucked in her chin and made her mouth all tight so I went to stand beside her and held her hand, because that’s what you do when you’re the big sister.

Dad sighed and sat down on the old apple crate, which was his chair in the garage, and leaned his elbows on his knees.

“Your mother and I kept a stray once,” he said softly, looking at the floor — a girl dog like this one. Then one day it was run over and we cried a lot. We don’t want that to happen to you.”

“B-b-but I’m already crying!” Monica wailed and Dad threw his rag onto the tractor seat. He told us how these poor, starved dogs go begging at the farms and kill chickens or get shot or attacked by other dogs. He looked disgusted.

“You girls have to understand that there are only so many strays the farmers can afford to feed, no matter how sorry they may feel for them. The rest go to the pound.”

Dad turned to look at me meaningfully because I was eleven, and then I knew what happened to those dogs that nobody wanted. I felt sort of desperate and hot and wanted to run away but I couldn’t because Monica was still holding my hand.

“I want the dog as an early birthday present,” Monica sobbed. She could be very stubborn, “Just like her mother,” Dad used to say. Then I was crying too. Dad tapped my nose. His hand smelled of



kerosene and his eyes were grey-sad.

On Monday morning Monica ran to open the back door and there was the dog, sitting on the mat with its ears lifted up and its head cocked sideways. It wriggled when it saw her. She crouched down and put her hands against the screen and the dog licked them so that she had to wash them before breakfast.

Mum drove us to school, the dog trotting behind the car all the way along our driveway until we reached the gate. Then it stopped and watched us and did not go out on the road. Monica sat silently looking into her lap and I felt sort of empty inside, as though I was still hungry. When we reached school, Monica got out right away and shuffled off towards her classroom with her head down.

Mum smiled at me and kissed me as always, then said, “Have a good day, Clare, and don’t worry about the dog.”

But I thought about it all day. At recess I saw Monica sitting alone on the bench, digging her toes into the pavement with her back all slumped. I was not supposed to be with her as she was in Infants and I was with the Big Girls, but I sat beside her anyway, even though we didn’t say anything.

Mum collected us from school in the afternoon and when we arrived home, Monica just got out of the car and walked off towards the house. Then I heard this great squeal and laughter and lots of snuffles and whimpers. There was the dog, springing around Monica in a circle, wagging its tail right up to its head.

But it was so different! Gone were the filthy dags of hair, shorn away with the horse clippers. Now it had a spiky crew-cut all over, and you could see its bright little eyes and floppy, pink tongue. It had been washed and brushed until it was soft and silky and shone like the silver foil you get on lollies. You could also see how thin it was. My throat was so closed up I couldn’t say anything.

It wore a bright red collar and Mum told us that she had named it Nimbus, after the big, grey rain clouds that pile up on the mountains after the summer heat when a storm is coming. But Monica didn’t care about any of that. She just wanted to run around the lawn with our dog and pat it forever — if it would just stop wriggling. I put down my bag and ran to join them and Mum didn’t say anything about taking our bags inside. She watched us, smiling, and pretended she didn’t see we were still in our uniforms.

A huge bang came from the garage, followed by a steady chugging noise. The tractor was fixed. Dad came out and stood there wiping his hands on his T-shirt.

“Your grandfather used to say, ‘What’s life without a few dreams?’” he said with a slightly crooked smile.

Nimbus crouched at our feet, bottom in the air, wagging that little tail. She must have felt loved again, as if she was coming home.

Our dad’s eyes were sparking blue and crinkled at the corners.

