

A tree. A demon. A best friend.

By Michael Milligan

It's the middle 1960s, and we have just moved to public housing in Alabama. My oldest brother and I are the adventurous type. (We're kids.) We explore all the areas within a five-mile radius of our apartment. The river is within a few hundred yards. Will this be our downfall? Probably, but who cares? (We're kids.)

The local fishermen secure their boats to the occasional tree along the riverbank, with chains of varying lengths. We find one that is to our liking and begin our first river adventure. We climb aboard and shove off to our great river boat escapade. The chain on this particular boat is about twenty feet long and when it reaches its end, the boat stops with a sudden jerk and my brother falls overboard. (He would later claim he saw a black rubber gloved-hand rock the boat, causing him to fall overboard. Something about skin-diving commandos training in the river from the military reservation just down the road. He was wet, muddy and cold, so I don't think he was thinking clearly.)

My thoughts were more focused toward what to tell Mom about him being soaking wet, muddy and, by this time, almost hypothermic.

As you might imagine, our great adventure ended with the daring explorers being spanked and grounded for life (or until Mom forgot about the latest adventure that two of her five boys had taken).

What to do when you're grounded? No nearby playgrounds. No new friends yet. But there is a tree at the end of our building, and though it's not huge, we can still climb to the top and maybe jump off.

My brother and I actually *ask* for permission to go outside and play on the tree. To our surprise, we are granted parole. As we run out the back door, a shout comes from Mom, "Don't get into trouble."

We laughed and rounded the corner, smack into the biggest, blackest, toothiest German Shepherd Dog we had ever seen in our lives. We stopped dead as she lunged at us. And, of course, time slowed down to about quarter speed. Life seemed really good until that point, when I thought it would end in a horrible gnashing of teeth that belonged to this black demon from hell.

As I turned to shout to my brother to run, the demon from hell reached the end of a tether, previously unseen by either of us, and proceeded to wag her tail and dance around in uncontrolled anticipation of new playmates.

"Holy cow, she's friendly. She wants to play," I finally stammered.

My brother was not so sure. He let me approach her first. Actually, he pushed me toward her, I found out years later, because I could run faster than him, so he wanted a head start in case it was a ruse on the part of the dog.

After that first tentative introduction, we began a friendship that only a dog and two adventurers could form. We played at Dutchess's Tree every day. We named the tree that because she was tethered to it every day while her owner was at work.

She became the "ferocious animal" in almost every adventure we embarked on. She could play any part we designed for her. One day she would be the lioness that had the two intrepid explorers cornered in an exotic part of deepest, darkest Africa – complete with roars that scared the neighbors into thinking we were being mauled by a real lioness. Another she would become the biggest pillow to lie on, as we used our imaginations to decipher what animals the clouds were shaped into.

She was my confidante. I could tell her anything, knowing she would never betray my trust. Never once was she ever mean in any way and, as we made and introduced our new friends to her, our adventures grew. She would even play the part of the firehouse Dalmatian while we fought make-believe (and once a real) fire on the field next to the housing area.

Dutchess's owner would never let us take her anywhere and she would bark and howl when we played close by, missing us. After making friends with the other kids, we found out that we were the only ones that had ever played with the 'demon dog.' Because of her size and color, almost everyone was afraid of her, and her owner was afraid she would bite someone.

I guess my brother and I convinced her owner through play that she was not the demon dog everyone said she was. Eventually, her owner began to take her on walks, introducing her to the neighbors. She became what I would like to think of as my first best friend.

In the summer of 1967, the neighbor with the demon dog Dutchess moved away. I never saw her again. But I thought of her often. Those were good times even though life was hard during the middle- and late-1960s. With the help of a demon dog named Dutchess, tethered to a tree, I've been a fan of the German Shepherd Dog ever since.

I now have my own Dutchess, a bi-color with a floppy ear, who is also too large for anything but being a good friend. She reminds me of my childhood Dutchess, and she scares the stew out of my oldest brother. I think she knows what my big brother was attempting all those years ago, when I met the demon dog and he pushed me to her, thinking he could make his escape at my expense.

My Dutchie loves to talk to me, too, which drives my wife up the wall. I think she is jealous because none of her dogs talk to her.

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