

Reservation Dogs

She is a deep gray color. She looks like a greyhound mixed with a cattle dog. She has lighter highlights around her eyes and nose, making her eyes seem to jump out at you. Her ears stand straight up. The man who is walking her comes through the alley with a rope tied around her neck. Her belly is as wide as she is long. She looks miserable and seems to be focusing desperately on something internal. As they approach the stranger, her head is down and her mouth is open in a pant.

The man walking her isn't her owner. It is unclear if she actually has an owner, but there is a woman who cares about her. It is this woman's boyfriend who holds her lead now. They had moved the dog last night to his property. She wasn't allowed dogs in her trailer park and they were worried about the dog's safety and the safety of her soon-to-be-pups.

The couple calls her Sweet Honey and she certainly seems sweet. But she also seems desperate and maybe just a little resigned. Like she knows it is unlikely but she still holds out hope for something to change. She looks like she could give birth at any moment and if she stays where she is, her puppies are destined to die young and horribly, bleeding and in pain. It is likely she knows this. She has had pups before.

This land where Honey lays is rife with Parvo. Parvo is a terrible disease which usually kills without treatment. It causes bleeding out of all orifices, hypothermia and pain. Dogs are most susceptible to it when they are young and many don't survive it. Parvo is a virus that can thrive in

almost any environment, including on plastic, concrete floors, blankets, fur, and even in the dirt we walk on. When it infects a place, it can live in the dirt for up to seven years. It spreads to all the dogs who come in contact with it. This area, a rough and tumble trailer park in Dixon, Montana is known to be infected. Yet there are many dogs here, like Sweet Honey, and few of them are spayed or neutered. Puppies appear regularly in the streets of this little town and many of them die horribly. Honey is about to repeat the cycle and when you look into her eyes you could swear she knows it.

Filip is a good looking middle aged man. He watches Honey walk towards him. He has a crate in the back of his CRV. Filip asks the man who leads her to lift Honey into the crate and they maneuver her into his car.

They close the door and hurry into the front of the little SUV. Filip is going to try and meet up with a volunteer from a shelter which has agreed to take Honey, somewhere where she can birth her puppies safely and avoid Parvo. They pull out of the dirt road lined with broken down trailers and onto a two lane highway. They head out of town.

This land has been home to dogs for thousands of years. Long before the American flag flew, long before people sailed from Europe to land in the East and move West, dogs had a home here among the mountain valleys of Western Montana. They lived side by side with the Salish and the Kootenai people, running through camp, playing with the children, sleeping in the sun. It is unclear if the Salish and Kootenai people would have considered individual dogs owned as we think of them today. The people of that time and place had a different approach to ownership

than the Europeans who invaded their land. They found the concept of land ownership laughable. (You might just as well sell a cloud as a plot of land.) Did they also have a different perspective on the ownership of animals? Whatever their beliefs, dogs were partners in the business of tribal life. They were valuable additions to the clan.

Filip drives Honey to the nearby town of Arlee. She is restless in the back of his CRV. She shifts uncomfortably in her crate. When he arrives in Arlee, Filip pulls into a little parking area which leads to the Pow Wow grounds. He is meeting Brianna, one of his volunteers, and then will work on meeting up with the other rescue's personnel after. They have two other dogs that they are trying to take in today.

Brianna looks in at Honey. "She is awfully restless," she says. "I think she is trying to nest." They watch her for a moment and their concern grows. Something is wrong.

Filip takes the crate out of the car, hoping some fresh air might help. It doesn't and Honey is acting more and more frantic. He leans down to look closely at her.

Honey is shifting uncomfortably and there is a gray object protruding from under her tail. The object is a tiny head, eyes closed, tongue hanging out. Honey is having her babies.

Filip and Brianna rush to gather blankets and towels from both of their cars. They put the seats down in the back of the CRV and line it with everything they can find. Filip lifts Honey out of her crate and settles her in the back of the car. Then they proceed to deliver three of Honey's

thirteen babies right there on the dirt road in Arlee. They wipe the tiny black and white bodies and snuggled them into the warm blankets. Almost instantly the tiny creatures began to crawl, looking for food and warmth and a wet, welcoming tongue. Honey washes them each with her tongue and then nudges them back towards her belly. After three she seems to be taking a break.

In between helping with the births, Filip has been on the phone to the rescue that has agreed to take Honey in. Prairie Song Rescue already has a volunteer on the way and they are soon able to get to Arlee and meet Filip. The two of them struggled to line the rescue's truck with blankets and hurriedly move Honey and her babies there. Honey gives birth to ten more pups on the drive to the rescue. The driver stops every few minutes to check on her and help in any way she can. When Honey finally arrives, the rescue's people clean her up and finish drying the last of the pups. They snuggled the new family safely into a kennel with soft pillows and warm blankets lining the floor. Honey seems to sigh with relief. She lays limp on her comfortable bed, her puppies all snuggled close to her side, nursing. She is warm. Her tail gives a soft, thankful thump.

Once upon a time, the Salish and Kootenai tribes crossed these lands, setting up camps by the lake and hunting the Buffalo that roamed the vast open valleys between mountain ranges. Their camps rang with laughing children, and voices calling friends and family to share meals or work or simply to share the news. And always, weaving among the teepees and running by the sides of the people were the dogs. The camp dogs. These dogs lived with the tribe, providing protection and acting as sentries when danger approached. They were shot when war came, attacked by wild animals and in danger from the hardships of the land. But mostly they lived happily with

their people, helping to carry gear, helping to protect the camp and sharing the life of the people as it came, both good and bad.

Honey is safe now. She will get good food and her pups will grow up strong and healthy. They will all find good homes and so will she. The woman who loves her knows she can't take her back. She is not allowed dogs in the trailer she rents. It was her neighbor's call on her behalf that mobilized the help for Honey. Filip runs Arlee Rehabilitation Center. Honey's person was desperate. She knew what was coming if the pups were born at home. She couldn't bear to see another litter die. But the poverty in this area is crushing. When a family doesn't even have the money to put enough gas in the car to get their child to a doctor when needed, how can they do more for a dog? Add to that the fact that this area is Reservation Land and most of the residents are of Native American heritage and you can see why they might be unwilling to call their white neighbors for help. They have been betrayed too many times by the white people who come through offering help with their dogs, their children, their lives.

It is a wonder that Honey's person called at all. And it is largely due to Filip's work in building the trust of his neighbors over years of working to help people and animals in this corner of the world. Filip listens when people talk, not just rushing in to overrun the lives of those he purports to serve. The neighbor of Honey's person had worked with Filip to save one of her own dogs. She trusted him and the organization he ran and she finally convinced Honey's person to trust him too. The neighbor called Filip and told him about Honey. Filip spent the morning trying to track down the dog that needed help. Honey's person didn't own a phone, and it was unclear which trailer she lived in, so Filip knocked on doors at 8:30 in the morning, hoping to stumble

upon the right house. Along with helping Honey, Phillip put in a word or two about his organization's ability to help with food or medical treatment now and in the future.

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A month ago, Varada was walking down to her barn to feed her horses. Varada lives twenty miles from Arlee, one of the many non-Native people who now own land on the reservation. After years of broken treaties much of the Salish-Kootenai Reservation has been sold off to Non-Native Americans. Some parts are owned by families farming or ranching or just raising their kids in this mountain paradise. Other parts are owned by some of the wealthiest people in the country. And side by side with these are the descendants of the Salish and the Kootenai tribes, often called the Flathead Indians. Many of them live in some of the worst poverty in the nation. The disparate groups avoid each other carefully. And yet they share in common the plight of the Reservation Dogs. These dogs run wild through towns and country estates equally, though in the towns they are less likely to be shot as trespassers. Still, they go where they can have a chance of finding food, to garbage cans or chicken coups or the occasional sympathetic human.

As she approached the barn, Varada sees the dog. The dog is skinny, with the elongated teats of a recently weaned mother, her ribs showing through her rough and dusty coat. She wags her tail and greets Varada like an old friend. Varada puts out water and the dog laps it up. She sets out a bucket of dog food and the dog eats every bite. She eats like she hasn't been fed in a very long time. By the look of her ribs sticking through her muddy coat, she hasn't. As Varada makes her way back to the house the little dog watches from the barn.

Varada has three dogs of her own. They barked in greeting as Varada heads home. The rough looking little stray doesn't seem worried but also makes a point of not encroaching on their territory any more than she already has.

For three days the stray hangs around Varada's yard. Varada reaches out on facebook to see if anyone is missing the little dog. On the third day, as she is driving home, Varada sees the little dog by the highway, covered in mud and looking more forlorn than ever. It is clear the dog has no home to return to, and is at risk of being hit by a car. Varada coaxes the dog to follow her home and once again puts out food. The next morning, she puts word out on Facebook again: *A stray dog needing a home. Was anyone interested in rescuing this girl?* She also calls Filip and he says that if she can't find a place for the dog, his rescue may be able to help. They are strapped for resources and overrun with need. But they will try.

Thirty miles down the valley, just as Varada was noticing the little stray, Christie Goodman is sitting on her front porch enjoying the freedom of a Friday evening. She is talking with her friend, Jess, who is staying with her for a few months. Jess broaches the subject of dogs. "How would you feel about me getting a dog while I am here?" she asks. She hasn't had a dog in her life for a long time and has been feeling like it is time again. They talk about what kind of dog she would choose: Medium sized and easy to get along with people and other dogs. The ranch already has 4 dogs living there and people coming and going on a regular basis, often with dogs in tow. Jess would need a dog that could share her nomadic life, not needing one house to settle down in or one place to call home. A dog that would bond to her and make her its home.

They talked about breeds. In particular, they love German Shepherds and Rottweilers and are partial to dogs with some of those breeds in them. Temperament is important with those breeds, as aggression can sometimes be heightened, but they both agree that the right dog with that ancestry would be perfect. They finish their tea and hot chocolate as the sun begins to set and go inside.

Later that evening, Christie is browsing Facebook. She is friends with Varada, having met her through a mutual friend, and that friend tagged her on one of Varada's posts. *"Young female Rottweiler/German Shepherd mix stray in need of a home."* She looks at the pictures and as rough as the dog looks, there is something in her eyes. They seemed to know what is going on and they seem to be searching for something. Christie sets her computer aside. She is in no position to adopt a dog right now. And Jess had only been talking theoretically...

Two days later Christie still can't get the little dog out of her mind. She goes and finds Jess. "I don't suppose when you would want to look at a dog today, would you?"

They call Varada. She offers to bring the stray up to Christie's ranch the next day if it is still around and she can catch it. When Varada walks out of her house the next morning, there is the stray, waiting hopefully for food. She feeds it and opens her car door, calling to the dog. The dog trots easily over to the car and hops right in. She sits patiently as Varada puts a collar and leash on her and travels well as they make the forty minute drive to Christie's ranch. At the ranch she

waits as the other dogs sniff her, causing not a bit of fuss with the established crew. There is no fighting, no posturing, no growls of warning.

Varada has seen a lot of strays in her days of living on the Salish-Kootenai Indian Reservation. They call them Reservation Dogs. In this area of intense poverty, dogs are rarely spayed or neutered. They run loose, alone or in packs, and traverse the reservation, dotted as it is with small towns and large swaths of pasture and open land. Talk to any vet or animal rescue worker in the area and they know what is meant by "Reservation Dogs." Though Reservation Dogs are the definition of mutts, these days they are almost their own breed.

They are medium sized dogs, usually 40-60 lbs. They are descended from German Shepherds, cattle dogs, labs, pit bulls and huskies. Probably every other breed is in there somewhere. They are often shorthaired and either black or white with opposite colored patches, usually colored something like a cattle dog, but can come in any color and type. But what sets them apart is their temperament. This population has been breeding for generations at the mercy of natural selection. And natural selection has selected for gentle, willing, adaptable dogs who are unafraid of new situations and friendly to everyone. These are smart dogs who are very, very good at reading both people and other animals. They know what you are thinking before you do and they know how to manipulate any situation to their advantage. They are peacemakers. And they are survivors.

Why this mix of traits? The aggressive dogs don't live to breed. They get sick or are injured in dog fights and left with wounds that get infected. They die young. The same is true of those not

unusually smart and good at reading body language. They get hit by cars or shot by people or they misjudge another dog and push it too far. The dogs that survive live cautiously side by side with people and are smart and skilled enough to find their own food and shelter when they need to. They have a sixth sense for danger. And they know how to avoid trouble.

These dogs are all over the reservation. Go to any small town in the area and you will see strays wandering the streets side by side with family dogs who belong to a specific person. In fact, there is often not much difference between the two populations. This is partially because in this poverty stricken area, a family may own a dog but that doesn't mean they can always afford to feed it or get it medical attention. And with many people living in rented trailers or houses, with restrictions on having dogs inside, the owned dogs often spend most of their time outside of the family home, running with the strays.

Another reason there is not much difference between the strays and the owned dogs is that historically, Native American culture has had a very different relationship to dogs (to animals in general) than their white neighbors. And while much of this has been lost, ripped away along with so much else that has been taken from these people, some of the old ways still remain. Deep inside perhaps these people simply don't view dogs as property. Perhaps they view them as brothers and sisters, companions, meant to make their own way to some extent, meant to have an independence which is foreign to white culture in this day and age.

And they are independent. Family owned or stray, Reservation Dogs need an active life and if a human doesn't provide one, they will go searching for it themselves. And certainly it is true that

few of the Native American people on this Reservation have fenced in yards. So any dog they claim is left to wander any time it gets out of the house, finding its own purpose as it can.

The little stray is medium sized. She has floppy Rottweiler-like ears and a face colored like a German Shepherd. She is black with some white patches and points of brown. Her coat is dull and dusty and she stinks. But Christie was right. There is something about her eyes. She just has soul.

Jess names her Kya. The first thing they do is give Kya a bath. Her life on the streets comes through strongly in the smells attached to her rough fur. Christie and Jess spend a very unpleasant hour holding Kya in the bathtub and scrubbing her down. They aren't sure about subjecting a dog to this treatment when it hardly knows them, but they know they have to get a fresh start. Kya clearly hates the bath but bares it stoically. From there she latches immediately onto Jess, content to be leashed to her side. She never pulls at the leash or complains about her lack of freedom. The next evening as they sit around a campfire in the yard, the other dogs jump up and start barking at something on the periphery of the ranch. Kya stands and barks as well until Jess tells her, "That's enough. Stand down, Kya," at which point she sits quietly by Jess's side watching through the darkness for any indication that more is needed. At night she cuddles on Jess's bed.

It is as though Kya has been looking for just such a home, as though she had decided she was done with the life of a stray, done with starving and huddling in barns trying to get out of the rain. She made up her mind that she would find a different life. And she did.

The only issues Kya has are around food. While she isn't adamant about it, if someone leaves food laying around she will steal it off a counter or out of the pantry if she gets the chance. And the first time Jess lets her fully off leash she kills one of Christie's chickens. You can hardly blame her. She has probably survived on birds like that from time to time. So Jess keeps her on leash much of the time, taking her off leash for exercise and hiking or when in the house. "I can't believe I found her," Jess says, "Its like the Universe sent her to me. She could not have been a more perfect dog for my life right now."

A month in and Kya has adjusted beautifully to her new home. Her eyes have an almost human intelligence and she and Jess have bonded hard. Kya is spayed and vaccinated and given regular food. Her once dull coat now gleams. She is brushed, she has toys to play with and bones to chew on and she spends every hour of every day with her new person. Her ribs no longer show. They laugh about how Kya seems to understand everything they say and so clearly wants to do anything they ask.

Meanwhile, the rescues in this area overflow with dogs much like Kya, much like Honey. And the streets do as well. Filip spends his days raising money to support these dogs and taking in any that he can. His rescue is committed not only to helping dogs in crisis but humans as well. They have a vision of someday creating a center for healing where people and dogs will come to help each other recover from trauma. In the meantime he builds his bridges with his neighbors and helps every dog, or person, that he can.

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Winters in this part of Montana can get down to negative sixty and below from time to time. During the summers the highways and back roads team with drivers on their way to Glacier National Park or heading up into the Mission Mountains for camping or climbing. From those highways, as they drive through, most people see beautiful little farm houses and big log lodges. They see the occasional colorful tee-pee sitting outside of a gift shop or a local motel and in the distance there are huge, modern mansions and extravagantly wealthy ranches stretching out across the landscape. Half the drive up to glacier follows the outline of Flathead Lake, with its fancy houses dotting the shore. The fields are green and the mountains tower over everything with their vast white caps of snow set against a bright blue sky. Once upon a time, it was assumed that this area was too remote, too far from civilization ever to amount to anything. The breathtaking beauty was overlooked, dismissed because of the wild nature of the place. Until it wasn't. Now much of the land that use to make up the Reservation is gone, owned by white people who never see the poverty of their Native neighbors. Alcoholism runs rampant among the Native people, women disappear and children live in squalor. And for many people, the only visible sign of all this poverty is the dogs.

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A three year old in a Spiderman costume waits anxiously for his chance to enter the room. There's a crowd of kids around him waiting for the same thing. Inside the room are three dogs, each with his or her handler. But the three year old has eyes for only one. When the doors are

opened, he rushed into the room, spotting Blue immediately. Blue sits patiently and his tail thumps as he waits for the boy to reach him. They greet like old friends. The boy has a book tucked under one arm. When its his turn he hurries over to the blanket Blue is laying on and sits down beside him. Though he is too young to read, the boy has memorized this book and brings it every time he comes to see Blue. He has also memorized Blue's schedule and knows exactly when Blue will be here for Reading With Dogs. The boy begins "reading" out loud to Blue, one hand holding the book and the other hand petting the dog by his side.

Blue looks and feels like an old soul but in fact he is not yet two years old. He is mostly white with black spots and speckles painted all over his body. His ears, which seem stuck somewhere between standing up and flopping down over themselves, are black. One eye is rimed in black, with white over the rest of his face. He is short haired and clearly has some cattle dog in him.

A year ago, Blue lived on the Reservation. He was one of close to fifty dogs that lived on a farm outside of town. A handful of those dogs were family pets, but none of them were fixed and the population had exploded in recent years. The family was overwhelmed and the dogs mostly had to find their own food.

Blue knew how to fend for himself. He knew to avoid the coyotes who sing their alluring songs as if asking a dog to join their pack, then turn on them and rip them to shreds when they have lured them into the trees. He knew to avoid cars and he roamed far and wide to find enough food to keep his body going. The day before the rescue came to gather up the dogs, he and some of his siblings were attacked by a grizzly bear. They were still hiding when the rescue arrived and Blue

almost missed his chance to go. It was a big project, taking in fifty dogs at once. Those that the family wanted to keep were spayed or neutered and returned to them, vaccinated. The rest went into foster homes. This was what happened to Blue.

When he was brought to his new foster home, Blue was in shock. He lay for two and a half days, unmoving, on the dog bed Theresa had placed him on when she first carried him into the house. Blue had never been away from home before, never been anywhere without his many brothers and sisters all around him. It was as if he had given up. Theresa and her husband were getting desperate. What could they do to help this dog adjust to his new home?

These dogs, like the people they live side by side with, have been traumatized by loss and homelessness, poverty and purposelessness. They have been betrayed repeatedly by outsiders. But they are as strong as the natives of this land, surviving by their wits and their indomitable will, and struggling every step of the way.

Just after school let out on the third day, two neighborhood kids knocked on the door. Theresa often babysat these kids so they had known that she was taking in a dog. They had been waiting eagerly to meet him. They asked a hundred questions as they rushed inside. Suddenly Blue lifted his head. As the sound of children's voices rang through the house he pulled himself up and stumbled towards the door. He met the children half way across the house and pushed his body against theirs. His tail began to wag.

Blue is almost two years old now, and lives with Theresa and her husband permanently, not as a foster dog, but as their own. Blue is quiet and well behaved but loves to play. He has blossomed into a happy dog who confidently goes anywhere and meets new people like its no big deal. He has enough to eat and a warm home and a dog bed to sleep on. His favorite part of the week is when he gets to go to the library to spend the afternoon with kids, listening to them read.

Years ago, in the days when the Salish and Kootenai tribes thrived in this part of the world, these dogs had a purpose. They proudly partnered with the people in creating and protecting the life they all shared. Somewhere in today's Reservation Dogs there echoes a piece of this old relationship. They live by their wits, straining to stay alive. And they watch. Do they dream of days gone by when their people lived in plenty and poverty was unknown to them? Before alcohol stole their souls? Do the dogs remember, in some small part of themselves, guarding the camps that rang with laughter and song and sitting in the evenings around the campfire as the people sang and danced and told stories, and the dogs watched, content? Do the dogs remember and ache for those times as they skirt metal trailers that sit in disrepair in yards covered with trash and old tires, as they dodge around rusting cars and hunker under falling down porches to get out of the rain? Are they waiting for the people who once knew them as partners to rise up and live again the lives they use to know?

Kya sleeps on a soft mattress, snuggled against Jess's body atop a soft comforter. Blue sleeps on a dog bed by Theresa's side, ready to wake if danger comes and sound the alarm. Honey rests contentedly in a kennel with warm blankets lining the floor, her puppies piled atop and around her, snoring and suckling and sleeping through the night. But on the streets of Arlee their

brothers and sisters hunker down in ditches to keep warm and wander the gravel roads, looking for a meal. On the streets of Dixon and Plains and Pablo, they move around the falling down homes like feral children, unsure who to trust, unsure where their next meal will come from. Their coats are matted and dull. Their ribs show. They stare longingly at the lighted windows at night and wish for a home to guard, a person to love, a partner to center their lives around. But for now, they slink through trash covered yards, down dusty back allies and hunker against walls and outbuildings to sleep. And they wait for their people to call them home.