

Curls and Splinters

by Doreen Tamminga

~ PART 1 ~

They had been sledding all morning at the neighbours just across the road from their farm. Now they were coming home. Danny was dragging his snowboard behind him, and Rascal, his dog, was running ahead. He bounded joyfully over the drifts, his tail wagging happily as Danny threw snowballs for him to catch. They were almost at the neighbour's driveway. From there, they would race to the road where Rascal will wait panting for Danny to catch up.

"Race you to the road!" Danny shouted.

The dog stopped still in his tracks, waiting.

"Ready? Go!"

Like a shot, Rascal took off down the long driveway. His feet came together in a gallop like a horse, and his brown and white fur gleamed in the winter sun. Danny trotted behind, not even trying to keep up. At the end of the driveway, the dog skidded to a stop, then looked back panting, a long pink tongue hanging from the side of his mouth. He cocked his head as if to say, "Well? Aren't you coming?"

Still waiting, he started sniffing around in the snow by the mailbox. Suddenly he raised his head and pricked his ears. A truck was coming. He knew the sound of that truck. It was Danny's Dad coming home in the old pickup. Sure enough, the truck appeared around the bend in the road, then slowed to turn into their driveway.

For just a second Rascal waited. He whined impatiently at the pickup, hesitated, and turned to look back at Danny. Finally, the truck fast disappearing up the driveway was too much for him. With a bound, he dashed over the road after the truck, eager to chase it to the barn, eager to welcome Danny's Dad home.

"Rascal!" Danny shouted. "Wait!"

Just then a car came speeding around the bend. Too late the driver saw the dog crossing the road. Too late he swerved onto the shoulder of the road. He caught the dog with his bumper, then spun out of control and rolled the car into the ditch.

"NO! Rascal!" Danny screamed as the dog went somersaulting through the air. Danny tore down the driveway and across the road to where the dog had hit the side of the road. He fell to his knees and tried to help the dog to his feet. Rascal looked up at the boy with trusting brown eyes. He whimpered softly.

"Come on, boy," Danny coaxed desperately through his tears. "You'll be okay. Come on." The dog struggled to get to his feet,

but collapsed to the ground again, blood running from his side. “No! You can’t die! Rascal! Rascal!” Danny sobbed as he buried his face in the dog’s neck. The dog shuddered, gave his last breath, and laid down his head on Danny’s knees.

How long he sat there holding the dog, Danny didn’t know. As if through a fog, he heard another car stop and the driver call the police. His dad, hearing all the commotion, came out to the road to see what has happened and what can be done. *An ambulance is on its way*, the other driver told him. At last Dad came over to Danny and tried to tug him to his feet, telling him that the dog was dead.

“No!” Danny cried and pulled away from Dad’s comforting hand. Pressing his lips together to keep back another sob, he turned and ran down the long gravel driveway. His feet took him out to the back field – the field where he had spent so many happy hours with Rascal. His mind felt frozen. The thought pounded in his head that Rascal was dead. His lively, warm, friendly dog with the floppy ears and sloppy pink tongue . . . was dead. Lying still, on the side of the road. Danny could not believe it.

After lunch, Dad headed out to the back corner of the lawn, shovel in hand. Danny watched for a moment as Dad forced the shovel into the frozen earth to bury the dog, then turned away from the window. Going to his room, he sat on the edge of his bed. A few

snowflakes drifted past his bedroom window. Danny got up to look out at the sky. It had grown grey with the promise of snow. He watched the flakes settle on the windowsill, each flake with a perfect design of its own. He wondered how long the snow would last. With a warm spell coming up, all the snow would likely melt.

The flakes fell thicker and faster now, blocking his view. Danny could hardly see his Dad across the lawn, putting the shovel away in the shed. He pressed his nose against the cold glass, his thoughts whirling like the snowflakes. *Why even snow if it is just going to melt anyway?* he wondered. And his thoughts went back to his dog.

Tears slipped down his cheeks as he leaned his forehead on the icy window. “I don’t get it,” Danny whispered to himself. “Why can’t the good things last? Why did Rascal have to die? Why does anything or anyone have to die?”

There was a faint click at the door, and Danny raised his head. Mom carefully opened the door, then came in. She sat down on the edge of Danny’s bed. Her face looked sad too. She didn’t say anything, but just looked at Danny.

Danny sniffed and walked over to sit on the bed next to her.

“He was the best dog in the world,” he said softly, and tears fell down his cheeks again. “He was my very best friend.”

"I know," Mom said putting her arm around Danny's shoulders. "I know."

"Then why did he have to die?" Danny asked more loudly. "I'd rather never even have had a dog than have it hit by a car. Why did he have to die?"

Mom was gazing thoughtfully out the window. "I don't know why, Danny, but I do know two things. The first is that nothing happens by chance. God is always in control, even when sad or bad things happen. He has a plan that is perfect. And the second thing is that God created this world as a perfect, beautiful, joyful place full of animals and plants and two people to take care of it. But you know how Adam and Eve sinned and chose disobedience instead of life. Because we humans are their children and are born in sin, we too must die one day. So you see that it was people who brought death into the world."

"But Rascal never sinned, so why did he have to die?" Danny asked. "It's doesn't seem fair. He never did anything wrong. Why did God let him die?"

"No," Mom agreed still looking out into the snow-filled sky. "Animals do not sin; they suffer and die because of us, foolish, sinful humans. We brought death into the world for animals."

She looked down at Danny and continued. "It is because of sin that animals die. But even through the sin of Adam and Eve, God is working out a good plan. The Lord never allows anything to happen for no reason.

He cares about everything that happens. You know that, don't you?"

Danny looked doubtful.

"Just think of Christmas coming next month," Mom said.

"What about it?" Danny asked grabbing a tissue.

"Well," Mom explained, "The only reason that we can celebrate Christmas is because God cares – cares so much that He sent His Son Jesus into the world to die for sinners. You see, Danny? God let His *own Son* be put to death so that there will be a new life for His children – a new life in a new world where they will never see death or sadness again."

Mom got up and walked over to the window. "Yes, Danny," she said again, "the Lord cares very much."

~ PART 2 ~

Somehow Danny made it through the rest of that terrible day. He did his chores out of habit, then wandered out to the back field to be alone.

The next day was Sunday, and with no school or extra work to do, the time weighed heavily on Danny. The hurting inside him didn't seem to lessen. Everywhere he went were reminders of Rascal. When he pulled on his boots, he expected to see Rascal there, tail wagging hopefully to go along with him. When

he walked to the barn to do his chores, he automatically kicked the ball for Rascal to chase. But there was no Rascal anymore.

That evening Dad stopped in Danny's room to tell him that they'd just heard that the driver had been released from the hospital with only minor injuries. "Although Rascal's gone, this is still something to be thankful for," Dad said looking at Danny.

Danny didn't answer. He felt angry inside. He felt like saying, "Thankful? For what? That he killed my dog? He was driving way too fast!" But he was afraid that if he said anything, he might cry. And so he just turned over in bed to look at the wall. Dad didn't continue right then. He understood that it hurt. Putting his hand on Danny's shoulder, he left as quietly as he came.

Before turning out the light, Danny reached for his Bible. Opening to the bookmark, he began reading. Tonight he was at the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors . . ." he read.

Forgive? Danny thought. *Forgive that guy who was driving so recklessly?* Without reading further, he snapped the Bible shut and put it away. *It isn't that simple,* he told himself. *That guy doesn't deserve to be forgiven.*

"It was an accident," his Dad had said. "Yes, Danny, he was driving recklessly, but it still was an accident."

Frowning, Danny clicked off the light, then flopped over restlessly to stare at the wall,

refusing to pray. He could not forgive his debtor, so he would not ask God's forgiveness. He didn't sleep well that night.

Monday, Danny had to go back to school. There he did his schoolwork as always and even forgot for a while the events at home. *Three more weeks till Christmas holidays,* he realized. *That's why all the kids are so excited.* For a moment the thought cheered him up too, but not for long. Getting off the bus after school, the loss hit him again when there was no joyful bark and wriggling dog bounding out to meet him.

At the supper table Danny was silent and sullen. Anger stewed in his heart, and bitterness was growing there. Dad tried to talk to Danny about letting go of the grief and forgiving the offender, but Danny just looked down at his plate.

Supper was finished and Danny headed up to his room to do homework. He was just coming down the stairs to get a textbook he forgot, when the doorbell rang. Danny opened the door. A boy stood there, about eighteen years old. He looked very uncomfortable. In one hand he had an envelope, and with the other he was tugging at the brim of his baseball cap.

"I, uh, are you Danny?" the boy stammered. At Danny's silent nod, he continued. "I've come to tell you I'm sorry about your dog. I...well," the boy stopped, then rushed on. "I was going to a party at my friend's place, and well, I was driving way too

fast. I didn't see him till the last minute, and then I hit the shoulder, and well," he looked down at the ground. "Well, the doctors say it's a miracle I'm alive..."

Danny just stood there and looked at the boy. So this was the boy that had killed his dog. *This* was the boy. Anger boiled up inside. He felt his face grow tight, and he couldn't say a word.

At last the boy looked up at Danny's white face. "But I'm guessing you wish it was a miracle your dog's alive..." A look of pain crossed his face.

Still Danny said nothing.

"Well," the boy shifted his feet uncomfortably, "I guess I'll go then. I just wanted to tell you, I mean, you deserve to be mad at me. I know what a good friend a dog can be, and I wish I could somehow, I mean, I wish it hadn't happened." Tears came to his eyes, and he turned to go. "Here," he said, holding out the envelope. "That's for you."

Without thinking, Danny reached out and took the envelope. He watched the older boy turn and head down the front walk before closing the door. Only then did he look down at the red envelope still in his hand.

What's in it? he wondered. *Money? I don't want that guy's money. Or a card? Saying what? That he's sorry? Well, sorry won't bring Rascal back.* Tears filled Danny's eyes. Angrily he threw the envelope on the floor and ran upstairs with his textbook.

A little later Mom appeared in the doorway to his room. "Who was that at the door?" she asked. In her hand was the envelope. "I found this on the floor," she added. "You must have dropped it."

"It was...the guy," Danny said uncomfortably.

"You mean the one from the accident?" Mom asked and handed him the envelope. At Danny's nod, she added, "Well? Why don't you open the card."

With a blank face Danny opened the envelope and pulled out the card. He read it silently for a moment and then tossed it on the bed. "I'm not going," he said.

"Going where?" Mom asked.

"He wants me to come by his place sometime with Dad. He's real sorry and he wants to make it up to me. Well, I'm not going."

Mom picked up the card and glanced at it. "Well, it was very kind of him to come by. He really must be sorry. You don't have to decide today if you want to go, you know." She turned to leave, then stopped in the doorway. "You know, Danny, you've done wrong in your life too. For you to be able to ask God's forgiveness, you have to also forgive others." With that she quietly closed the bedroom door behind her.

There it was again: the Lord's prayer. *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*, ran through Danny's mind again and again as he tried to focus on his homework.

Nothing more was said about the invitation in the card. It seemed that Dad and Mom were leaving it up to Danny to make the first move. And in Danny's heart, the ache over losing Rascal was slowly growing less. Oh, he still missed his dog very much, but he had accepted that he was gone.

Two weeks had passed since that terrible Saturday, and today Danny went out with Dad to run some errands in town. Heading back home, Dad turned off on a side road.

"Where are you going?" Danny asked.

"Oh, I've got to stop in at the Jacksons," Dad answered.

Danny had never heard of the family before, but rode along in silence until they pulled in at a farm. Dad headed up to the farmhouse and told Danny to take a look around. "Mr. Jackson won't mind," he said.

Danny headed over to the shed. The doors were wide open, and in the dimness he could just make out a pen fenced off in the corner of the building. He headed on over and was greeted by a chorus of whimpers and wagging tails: a litter of puppies, maybe two or three months old.

A smile crossed Danny's face as he carefully cracked open the gate. A few of the puppies crowded away from him and some ignored him, but one brave little fellow came nosing out to smell him. Soon Danny had him chasing a piece of straw along the ground.

"You can have him," a voice said suddenly from behind.

Danny whirled around in surprise. There stood the older boy that had come to his house two weeks ago. The driver of that car. Danny jumped to his feet, letting the small pup slide to the ground. He didn't know what to say.

"I know it's not the same, a little pup instead of your old dog," the boy went on hesitantly, "but I thought you might like him."

Danny looked at the boy standing there so uncertainly. He saw the apology in the boy's face and the kindness in offering him a puppy. And at that moment, he finally saw the ugliness in his own unforgiving heart, the ugliness of his own anger and bitterness. He felt shame, and once again didn't know what to say. "I don't have any money with me," he began.

"No, no," the boy interrupted, "I'm not sellin' him to you. You can have 'im if you want 'im."

"Well," Danny hesitated. Just then the puppy, who had been tumbling over his shoes, began tugging with sharp little teeth on his shoelace, pulling it undone. Danny laughed, and the older boy smiled.

"Thanks," Danny said at last, reaching down for the puppy. "And I'm sorry about, well, not saying anything the other time. I knew you were sorry, but I was just so mad still... Now, well, I'm glad I came," he finished shyly as the

puppy began shoving its cold nose down his shirt.

The boy smiled back. "I'm glad you came too," he said. "It's hard knowing someone hates you, and that you deserve it. I...I prayed that God would forgive me for being so careless, and that somehow, He would help you forgive me too. And now you have."

Looking down at the puppy in his arms, Danny at last saw that maybe Rascal's death *hadn't* been for nothing. Oh, he still missed his old dog and would love to have him back, but through this accident, the Lord had shown him the hardness of his own heart and the blessing of forgiveness.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Matthew 6:12