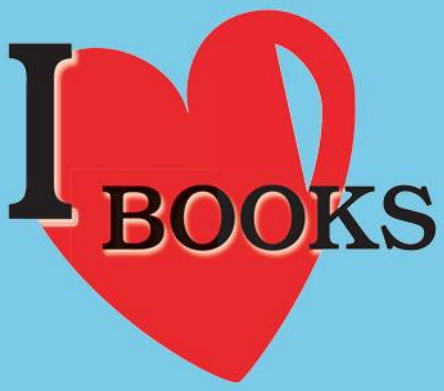


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Opening extract from

Good Dog McTavish

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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PUBLICATION DATE: **15TH APRIL 2017**

INTEREST AGE: **8-12**

Please note that finished copies will be typeset differently and will feature additional illustrations.

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BARRINGTON STOKE PROOF COPY

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First published in 2017 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

Text © 2017 Meg Rosoff
Illustrations © 2017 Grace Easton

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-683-7

Printed in Great Britain by Charlesworth Press

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1

McTavish Falls for the Peacheys

McTavish's decision to adopt the Peachey family was not the most sensible decision of his life. He could tell at once that they were not one of those easy families, the ones that fit effortlessly into a dog's life. He could tell they were a family with problems.

Whether they'd been traumatised early on, or were just difficult by nature, McTavish had no way of knowing. But he did know that adopting them would require patience, discipline and hard work. His logical mind told him to wait for the trouble-free family, a family with easy natures and

cheerful smiles. But there was something about the Peacheys, with their sad little faces, that clinched it for him.

Oh, McTavish, he warned himself. *Are you sure you're not making a mistake? Beware! This could mean years of heartache and frustration.*

But it was already too late.

McTavish had fallen for the Peacheys.



2

Ma Peachey Gives Up

McTavish might never have met the Peacheys, if Ma Peachey hadn't decided to give up being a mother.

"I give up," she said. "No more cooking and cleaning and finding lost keys. No more keeping track of your appointments and nagging you to tidy your rooms. No more boring thankless jobs. I quit."

At first, the younger Peacheys rejoiced.

"No more healthy food!" shouted Ollie, age 12, punching the air in triumph.

"No more matriarchal oppression!" crowed

Ava, age 14, looking up from the book she was reading (*The Family – A History of Despair*).

'No more nagging to get home in time for dinner,' thought Pa Peachey, though of course he would never have said such a thing out loud.

The youngest member of the family frowned.

"Mum," said Betty Peachey, "are you saying that you've ... resigned?"

Ma Peachey smiled. "Why, yes, Betty. That's an excellent way of putting it."

Betty looked concerned. "Is that legal?"

Ma Peachey shrugged. "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. But I'm sick and tired of everyone making a mess and expecting me to clear it up. I'm done with cooking meals that get cold because no one's home to eat them. And," she said, "I'm tired of having to shout at everyone to wake up, go to bed, put away the washing, say please, say thank you, clear the dishes, stop fighting."

"But –" Betty began.

Ma Peachey ignored her. "So yes," she said, "you could say I've resigned. For now, anyway. I am taking time out to pursue peace and quiet. From now on, the only person I am in charge of – is me."

And with that, she gave Betty a kiss on the head and went off to change into her yoga pants.

At first, none of the Peacheys really missed being told to clear the table or put the washing away. But as days turned to weeks and nobody made dinner or washed the clothes – ever – the sense of freedom wore thin.

The Peacheys ate ready meals and take-aways every night, wore the same clothes over and over, and arrived late to school and work each day. There was a great deal more squabbling and a great deal more squalor.

Betty, who was by far the most sensible member of the Peachey family (after Ma Peachey),

began to feel that some sort of intervention was required. And so, one Saturday afternoon just before Easter, a family conference was held.

"Due to the loss of motherly care in our family, I am feeling lost, lonesome and lacking in love," said Betty.

Ava and Ollie sniggered, but Betty ignored them.

"I have a proposal," she said.

The rest of the Peacheys leaned forward expectantly. Across the room, Ma Peachey hummed as she worked on her lotus position.

"We could ask Ma Peachey to come back," said Betty.

Ava gasped, Ollie snorted and Pa Peachey made a tut-tut noise, that did not commit him to any opinion, but still managed to express disapproval.

Silence fell.

"Well," said Betty at last. "If we are not

planning to ask Ma Peachey to come back, I have another suggestion."

Once again, the Peacheys all leaned forward to listen.

"I believe we should get a dog."

Ollie imagined a big handsome furry creature that might help him be more attractive to girls.

Ava imagined a large melancholy dog that would help her look more intellectual.

Pa Peachey did not want a dog. At all. And he said so.

A heated discussion ensued and, in the end, the three Peachey children managed to prevail. They would take a trip to the dogs' home.

"Not by any means to adopt a dog," Pa Peachey warned. "Just to browse."

"To browse?" Ollie goggled. "We're going to *browse* lonely stray dogs doomed to spend eternity locked up, sad and loveless, in cages?" He turned

to Ava and lowered his voice to a stage whisper. "I always said there was something heartless about Pa Peachey."

Ava scowled. "Nobody browses homeless dogs. Except perhaps," she turned to glare at her father, "a sociopath."

"Never mind," said Betty. "We shall go to the dogs' home to browse, and perhaps, just perhaps, we shall find the dog of our dreams."

Ollie rolled his eyes.

Ava carefully recorded this conversation in a brown notebook. She had hopes that her book, *Memoir Of A Broken Childhood*, would sell for a large sum of money and become an international bestseller.

Ollie went back to the book he was reading, feeling (perhaps correctly) that the last thing the world needed was another book, particularly one written by his older sister.



3

Browsing

The following afternoon, the Peachey family (minus Ma Peachey, who was working on her warrior pose) mustered at 2 p.m. on the dot and set off in Pa Peachey's van, which was so full of screws and springs and gizmos and stuff-that-might-someday-come-in-handy that there was barely any place for an actual human to sit.

Ava complained about the noise the van made but no one else seemed to hear, partly because it was so noisy in the van.

Pa Peachey pulled up in front of the Cuddles

Home for Unclaimed Mutts (C.H.U.M.) with a little flourish and a spin of the steering wheel. He set the handbrake with a loud squeak, and shouted "OUT OUT OUT" over his shoulder, as if the children had been sitting in the parked van for months.

All the Peachey children were excited by the possibility that they might soon acquire a dog. Even Ava, who was famous for being hard as nails and sentimental as burnt wood.

"I can't wait to browse the poor homeless doggies," Ava whispered to Ollie.

Ollie imagined the future Peachey family dog, waiting on the other side of that door, locked in a lonely cage. The thought made him feel quite light-headed.

Betty screwed her eyes shut with longing and terror. She did not want to browse dogs. All she wanted was to choose the smartest, waggliest, most shiny-eyed of all the poor doggies in captivity, take

him home and love him to bits. Maybe then the family could return to a time when Ma Peachey wasn't doing yoga, Pa Peachey wasn't angry, and Ava, Ollie and Betty didn't feel quite so much like orphans.

Inside the Dogs' Home, McTavish waited quietly, not barking, not making a fuss. Just ... waiting. Although he hadn't met the Peacheys, he had a dog's sixth sense about this family. He had a feeling they might be "the one".

Pa Peachey entered the Dogs' Home first, followed by Ollie, Ava, and Betty.

Betty was always last. Last was what happened when your parents decided to stop having children once you were born. There was no one less important to tease, annoy and torment.

Inside the Cuddles Home for Unclaimed Mutts, a stern-looking woman in overalls greeted the Peacheys. Her tag read, *Hello. I'm Ian*.

"Hello, I'm Alice," she said.

"Ian, surely?" Ava was a stickler for accuracy in the written word.

Alice/Ian looked confused for a second, then followed the direction of eight eyes and bent her head to peer at the tag with a sigh.

"The overalls may say Ian, but please look beyond that. I am not Ian. I am Alice." She paused to scan the family with a practised eye.

The family scanned her back.

"You are here for a dog," Alice announced, as if the thought had not occurred to the Peacheys. As if perhaps they had just stumbled into the Cuddles Home for Unclaimed Mutts on a trip to the shops, thinking it might be a good place to buy a newspaper and a carton of milk.

"Yes, we are," Betty piped up.

"No, we are most certainly *not* here for a dog," Pa Peachey said with a glare at his youngest child.

"We are here to determine the lay of the land. We are not in the market for a canine at this moment in time. We are here to undertake an initial foray into the acquisition of a family pet. At some future date. Going forward."

Ollie made crazy motions with one finger in the air by his left ear and Ava turned her hands into quacking ducks.

"We are here," Betty said in a soft and clear voice, "for a dog."

Despite all the time she spent complaining about being the youngest, Betty often forgot to notice that she held a position of great authority in the Peachey family.

Alice held up her hand. "I am getting a picture of this family," she said, looking down her rather long nose and out through her rather thick glasses. "I am getting the picture of a family that is not always in harmony with its desires. Is that what

you would call an accurate picture of the Peachey family?"

"Yes," said Betty.

"No," said Pa Peachey.

"Sometimes," said Ava.

"Rarely," said Ollie.

Betty sighed. "*They* are all confused. But I am not. I am here. For a dog."

From that moment on, Alice addressed all of her remarks to Betty. Who was, it is probably worth restating, not yet nine years old.

"Good," said Alice. "Because we have too many dogs and not enough humans to take them home and love them. Now, please sit."

Obediently, the Peachey Family sat.



4

Alice's Questions

"Now," said Alice. "I am going to ask you some questions, and I'd be grateful if only one of you answered at a time. You," she said, indicating Betty. "You seem the least lunatic member of the family, so I would like you to answer my questions. If any other person objects, please raise your paw." She paused. "I mean hand."

The Peacheys nodded.

"Excellent. Question one. Does your home have a garden?"

"Yes," said Betty. "Our home has a garden with

one apple tree, uncut grass due to arguments about whose turn it is to cut it, and many many squirrels for a woofy love-dog to chase."

Alice ticked box one.

"Question two. How much exercise does a dog need each day?"

Betty thought for a moment. "I would take my dog for a walk before school each morning, and Pa Peachey would walk him again at night. Ava and Ollie could take turns walking him after school."

Alice tapped her pencil on the desk and nodded. "Question three. What are the four most important things in a dog's life? You may all confer."

They conferred, ignoring each other entirely.

"Food," said Pa Peachey.

"Water," said Ollie, who had recently learned in Biology that you could go weeks without food but only a few days without water.

"A sense of philosophical autonomy," said Ava,

who always went for the existential option. Which nobody understood.

When they were done, Betty turned to Alice with quiet dignity. "The most important thing for any dog is love. After that, it's routine. Then exercise and mental stimulation and – last of all – healthy food."

"Thank you, Betty," Alice said. "You are very wise for a young person. Particularly for a young person who has obviously been raised by wolves." She gazed sternly at Pa Peachey.

"And of course a comfy bed," Betty added. "And not being dressed up in silly clothes, like snow boots. Or little raincoats."

"All good answers. And finally, I must ask each of you if you understand the commitment dog ownership entails."

"A painfully long one," said Pa Peachey, in a mournful voice.