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classic."
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I am REBEL



ROSS MONTGOMERY

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I am REBEL

ROSS MONTGOMERY



WALKER
BOOKS

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“You become responsible,
forever, for what
you have tamed.”

The Little Prince
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

THE LAST
PERFECT
DAY

1

HOME

The day begins exactly as it should.

It's summer, and dawn is poking its nose through the curtains. Our bed is still warm with the night of sleeping. I can hear a cockerel crowing outside in the farmyard. I can smell bacon downstairs, and hear the clatter of pans on the stove, and Tom's mum and dad talking to each other in soft sleepy voices.

I know, from the moment I wake up, that today is going to be perfect.

Tom is still snoring beside me. I stand up, shake out the last dregs of sleep, and snuffle over to him. He always smells most like himself in the morning: groggy and warm and sleep-drunk, all of him Tom.

That's my first job of the day: wake Tom up. I do it

by licking his face. I love licking his face. It's the best bit of the day.

"Ugh!" Tom groans. "*Yuk*, Rebel."

That's me. I am Rebel. It's the name Tom gave me. He wipes the slobber off his face and hugs me close to him. I love it when he does that.

"Silly old dog," he mumbles.

At this point, I should probably mention that I'm a dog.

But I'm *not* an old dog; I'm only five. And I'm not silly, either. I am a good dog. I know this, because Tom tells me I am good all the time, and Tom knows everything.

Anyway, we can't stay in bed like this. We have so many things to do! Usually I wait for Tom before I go anywhere, but the bacon smell means there might be some rind going spare in the kitchen, and I think it's important for me to find out. I jump off the bed and run downstairs and skitter across the tiles.

There's Dad, sat at the table and already dressed for work on the farm. I sniff his clothes as I run past, all rich with the smell of sheep's wool and sour milk and mud. I like that smell. Mum is hard at work by the

stove, wiping her hands on her apron and shifting a big copper kettle. She smells of tea and soap and potatoes and porridge and mutton and gravy, all mixed together. I like that smell even more.

“Ach! Rebel!” Mum tuts, shooing me away. “Take this and leave me alone, will you?”

She picks something out of the pan and tosses it on the floor. Bacon rind! *Yes yes yes yes yes*. I snaffle it straight off the tiles, smoky-rich and succulent, crackling with fat and hot enough to singe the tongue.

I was right. I knew that today was going to be perfect.

Tom comes downstairs, rubbing sleep from his eyes. We sit in the happy fug of the kitchen and eat in silence until the day can begin proper. I’m not allowed to beg at the table, but if I hide under Tom’s chair, he secretly feeds me scraps of his breakfast without Mum and Dad noticing. It’s the best bit of the day.

“Thank you for doing this,” I tell him. “I love you.”

Tom doesn’t understand me when I talk. He thinks I’m just barking or growling. But on a deeper level, I think he knows what I’m saying. It’s like how I can tell that he loves me when he scratches my head or pats my

sides or smiles at me. It's always been like that. We've never needed words.

The cockerel crows again, and Dad gets to his feet. "Right! Come on, lad. Let's not let the best of the day get ahead of us."

Dad says that every morning. "All right, all right," sighs Tom. He says *that* every morning, too.

He shovels down the rest of his breakfast, and we race outside together. And there it all is, in one big, beautiful moment: the sunrise over the fields, the first smells of the farmyard, the first fingertips of wind across the mountains, the whole length of a day spread out before us.

It's wrong, what I said before. *That's* the best bit of the day: the first moment I see the farm, and remember how lucky I am to be here.

I love the farm. I've lived on it every day of my life, ever since Tom found me as a puppy and brought me home to live with him. I've never left it, not once. I've never even been through the front gate.

Every day on the farm is the same as the one before it. First, we go to Bottom Field and see how the sheep

are doing. Tom and Mum and Dad are sheep farmers. Tom says that around here, everyone keeps sheep. People make clothes from sheep's wool and sell sheep's milk and cheese to get by. It's got harder to do that over the last few years, because of all the taxes that the King keeps collecting. Tom and Dad get milking and shearing while I bound around and see how everyone is doing.

"Morning, Agnes! How's the hoof, Beth? Looking good, Kitty!"

"Hungry," the sheep reply. "Hungry, hungry, hungry."

That's as far as the conversation goes. The sheep don't have very much to say for themselves, but I'm happy to chat anyway. It doesn't cost anything to be polite.

I know I'm not much of a sheepdog. I'm small and I've got stumpy legs and I can't run very fast and my bark isn't scary. Dad always says that he wishes Tom had found himself a *proper* farm dog instead of a scruffy old stray like me, but I know he doesn't really mean it, because whenever no one's looking, he scrunches me behind the ears and whispers that I'm the best dog in the whole wide world.

Bottom Field is where I usually find Priscilla, dozing under a tree. Priscilla is the farm cat. She's not allowed to go in the house – if she does, Mum chases her out with a poker – so she's lived outside her whole life. She smells like dust and old flowers.

“Morning, Priscilla!” I say cheerfully.

“Go away,” she mutters.

Priscilla is always like this. “Nice day for it,” I say.

She opens up a yellow eye and glares at me. “What’s nice about it?”

I have to stop and think about that. “Everything?”

“Rebel! Come on!” Tom shouts behind me.

Tom needs me! I’m a good dog, so I always come when he calls. I start running away and Priscilla gives me a knowing laugh. “Yes, off you go, farm dog. Your master’s waiting.”

I stop. I hate it when she says that. “Tom’s not my *master*.”

“Really? Then how come you do everything he says?” Priscilla sighs and stretches lazily. “Poor old Rebel. Not much going on upstairs, is there?”

Ha! Priscilla is so stupid sometimes. There aren't any stairs in the field! I dart after Tom, laughing all the way.

After the milking and shearing is done, Mum brings us lunch. Actually it's just for Dad and Tom, because dogs don't have lunch. I know this, because they keep telling me to stop begging and leave them alone. Lunch is always chunks of cold pie and fresh apples and sour sheep's cheese and it smells so good. Tom will wait until Dad isn't looking and then toss me some so that I can eat it. He's always thinking of me. He is so clever. I love him so much.

After lunch, we move the sheep from Bottom Field up to Top Field, because that's where the best grass is. Tom's job is to stay with them until sunset to make sure they don't escape, or get stolen by thieves, or eaten by wolves. I stay with him, even though I'm frightened of wolves, because that's my job. Wherever Tom goes, I go too. I'm his dog and he's my boy. I would die for him if I had to.

Soon Dad heads back to the farm, and that's it. It's just me and Tom and the sheep now for *hours*. We can

do whatever we want! First, I find a stick and drag it over for him to throw.

Tom sighs. “Rebel, why do you always have to choose the biggest stick you can find?”

“Uush hhrrow ihh,” I mumble through a mouthful of stick.

“Get a smaller one.”

I do as he says, because I’m a good dog. Tom picks up the stick.

“You want me to throw it?”

“Yes, please,” I say eagerly.

“This stick here?” he asks with a grin, waving it. “Really?”

My tail wags furiously. I love it when he does this. “Yes, throw it now, please.”

“Are you sure?”

This is so good. “Yes!”

“All right, all right, stop barking.”

Tom throws it and I bring it back, and we do that over and over again. Sometimes Tom chases me, and sometimes I chase him. Sometimes I’ll run around on my own barking, because I’m happy and it feels so good

to run, but mainly because it makes Tom laugh, and it's the best sound in the whole world. Afterwards I lie on my back so Tom can scratch my tummy. I love it when he does that.

"Little Belly," he says fondly.

That's his special name for me. It's a bit like Rebel, but it's also about my tummy. Tom came up with that. He is so clever.

Me and Tom, just the two of us. Now *that's* the best bit of the day. I mean it this time.

After that, we settle down until evening. By now, the sun is sinking over the mountains, ripening the sky in reds and purples. You can see the whole entire world from Top Field: all the other houses and farms, stretching right up to the mountains.

Tom pulls out a sketchpad and charcoal from his knapsack and starts drawing. He loves drawing – his pad and charcoal go everywhere with him. I lean against his chest and drink in his warmth while he smudges out a new picture.

"See, Rebel? It's you and me, climbing that mountain."

Tom always draws me and him together. That's the way it's meant to be. He talks as he draws, the words coming as easily as the lines come out on the paper. He's happiest when he draws, even more Tom than when he's asleep.

"They say there's a waterfall on the other side of that mountain, even bigger than the one in Brennock. They say wild flowers grow either side of it, like a carpet, stretching to the sea. Daisies all the way down! Can you imagine that, Rebel?"

I *can't* imagine it. I've never seen a waterfall, or the sea. I've never left the farm. I don't even know what a carpet is.

Tom has never seen the sea, either: the furthest he's ever gone is the market in Connick. He always talks about the different places he'll visit one day, but I don't think he means it. Why would he leave when everything we need is right here?

Then Tom stops drawing. It takes me a moment to realize that he's seen something.

Through the trees in the distance, you can see a little stretch of the road to Connick. There are two

men walking down it. They're both wearing golden jackets, and they both have shiny black boots and shiny black belts. They're both carrying muskets.

It's the King's guardsmen. You often see them patrolling the roads in twos or threes like this. Tom once told me that they're checking that everyone on the road has a permit. He said that if you don't pay the King's taxes on time, the guardsmen take away your permit, which means you can't use the roads, which means you can't sell at market, which means you make no money, which means no bacon at breakfast.

That's not all the guardsmen do. They make sure that no one ever leaves their home at night. They make sure no one says anything against the King, either. If they find out you've been bad-mouthing him, they take you away and you don't come back. I've heard Mum and Dad talking about it in hushed voices when Tom's not in the room.

Mum and Dad say that it didn't use to be like this. Before the King, folk could say whatever they wanted. But then the King took over and decided that he needed everything for himself. There were people who tried to

fight back, called the Reds, but they were no match for the guardsmen and their guns and they all got taken away. So now no one fights back, and the guardsmen patrol the roads, and that's just how it is.

I hear a sharp brittle *snap* beside me, like a tiny bone being broken. Tom has gripped his charcoal so hard that it's crumbled to ash and smeared black powder all over his lovely picture.

"Aw, heck," he mutters crossly.

"Tom! Dinner!"

I hear Mum before Tom does, because my ears are better than his. I run around and bark because this is very, very important.

"All right, all right!" he murmurs. "Calm down, Rebel."

I can't be calm. I *won't* be calm. Our work is over. Now the best bit of the day – the *real* best bit – can begin.

Tom gathers up the flock and drives them back down to Bottom Field. I charge ahead, my nose raised until I find the scent I'm looking for. And there it is, weaving out of the chimney like a golden ribbon and twisting across the fields towards me.

Stew. Lamb stew: deep, glossy, rich, lamb stew, simmering on the stove with a skin on top. Lamb stew with carrots and gravy, ladled into thick stone bowls. Lamb stew means lamb bones. Lamb bones mean bone marrow. And bone marrow means amazing, delicious dinner for good dogs like Rebel.

I was right all along. Today is absolutely perfect.

By the time Tom catches up with me, I'm already scratching at the farmhouse door and whining. He pushes it open and I scramble inside. The kitchen is golden and glowing with the smell of lamb. I run to my bowl and there it is! A lamb bone plucked straight from the pot, curling with steam and glistening with blobs of fat. I'm so happy I spin in circles and lick every inch of the bone. Stew, stew, stew, stew, *stew!*

"Stew again, is it?" says Tom with a sigh as he slumps into his chair.

"Hush," chides Mum, hitting him lightly with a spoon. "You're lucky we have anything. There's plenty around here that don't."

"I know," Tom murmurs quietly.

“Guardsmen were on the road tonight,” says Dad, eating cheerfully.

Mum shrugs. “They’re always on the road.”

“But never *this* often. Not so many. Not around here, so far from the High Castle.” Dad scrapes his bowl with his spoon. “Something important must be happening.”

“That’d make a change,” mutters Tom.

“Eat your stew,” snaps Mum.

Once dinner is over, that’s us done for the day. I scamper upstairs before Tom, so I can warm the bed for him. That’s another of my very important jobs. Tom follows more slowly and takes off his work clothes before flopping into bed beside me. He doesn’t blow out his candle straight away like he normally does. Instead he just stares at the ceiling.

“Daisies all the way down,” he sighs.

He’s thinking about sad things again. He’s doing that a lot nowadays. I snuffle closer to him so he knows I’m here, and that I’ll *always* be here, because I’m his dog and he’s my boy and I love him. He places his hand on my back, and the soft weight of his palm is the most perfect weight there is.

When Tom's breathing becomes slow and steady and his body sinks soft in the bed, I know that my day is finally done and I can go to sleep like a good dog.

I was wrong all the other times. *That's* the best moment of the day: me and Tom, back in the blankets, safe and warm, knowing that today has been kind to us and tomorrow will be just as good. That we have everything we need, and we always will, because nothing on the farm will ever change.

Why would it change, when it's already so perfect?

THE
DAY IT
CHANGES

INTRUDERS

I know that everything is wrong from the moment I open my eyes. Someone is shouting downstairs. A man. “I *said* you don’t have a choice!”

I jump off the bed and scramble downstairs as fast as I can. I don’t recognize the voice. That means there’s a stranger in the house. I have to get rid of them. I have to protect Tom.

When I get downstairs, Dad is standing beside the table with his hat in his hands, looking small and frightened. Mum is pressed into the corner of the kitchen, glaring at the intruders in her home.

There are two of them. One is standing blocking the doorway; the other is leaning back in Dad’s chair, his muddy boots on the table and his musket resting in his

lap. They're both wearing jackets made of gold thread.

Guardsmen!

I sense right away that they're dangerous. The one in the doorway looks like a slug – the one in the chair looks like a rat. They both smell mean, and wrong, and bad. I know what guns can do. I've seen Dad kill rabbits just by pointing the barrel and pulling the trigger. I growl at the men and Rat whips around in the chair, fixing me with his mean little rat eyes.

"Get that dog out of here!" he snaps.

Dad nods quickly. "Yes, sir. Right away, sir." He tries to drag me back by the scruff of the neck, but I keep growling and pulling against him. I can't let Dad take me away. I have to get the danger out!

"Rebel, no!"

Tom bursts into the kitchen behind me and scoops me up in his arms. He glances around, confused. "What's going on?"

Mum points at the intruders. "They want more taxes – *that's* what's going on!"

Tom grows pale. "But we've already paid for this month. And the next."

“Not any more, you haven’t,” says Slug with a smirk.
“New orders from the King. Double taxes.”

Tom splutters in shock. “We don’t have that kind of money. No one does!”

The two guardsmen chuckle.

“Tough luck, sonny,” says Rat. “No taxes, no road permit. Starve, if that’s what you want.”

I can feel Tom squeezing me tighter as he grows angrier. “You can’t do that!”

Dad stops him with a wave of his hand. “We’ll pay up – just give us a few more days.”

“Glad to hear it.” Rat stands up and shoulders his musket. “And while we’re here, we’re looking for a man in a wolfskin. He’s been spotted in the area. He’s dangerous – a troublemaker. Wanted by the King himself. Anyone found harbouring him will be shot on sight.”

No one has anything to say to that. Rat nods curtly to Slug, and they turn to leave, the squeak of their polished leather boots cutting through the silence.

“We’ll be back at the end of the week,” says Rat over his shoulder. “Make sure you have the money. The last

farmer that refused had his house torched and his fields salted.”

He’s halfway out of the door when Tom finds his voice again.

“You won’t keep getting away with this!” he cries. “Sooner or later, people are going to make the King pay for what he’s done, and then you’ll be sorry!”

The room freezes, like a startled cat. Nobody moves. Then the guardsmen both turn to face Tom.

“What did you just say?” Slug’s voice uncurls like an eel from a cave.

“Sounded like Red talk to me,” says Rat. “You a Red, boy? Calling your dog Rebel and talking treason?”

I have no idea what Rat means – I didn’t know that “Rebel” meant anything bad.

Dad jumps in front of Tom, panicking. “No! He’s just a stupid boy – a kid.”

Rat shoves Dad aside and leans in close to Tom. I can smell the menace thrumming from him like a hot iron. I’m terrified, but I have to be brave. I have to protect Tom! I bark and bare my teeth, but the guardsman just keeps staring at Tom.

“How old are you, boy? Sixteen?”

People always think Tom’s older than he is. Mum says he’s tall for his age.

“T-twelve,” he whispers.

Rat smirks. “You know what we did to the last Red we caught? Shooting him would have been a mercy, boy. Think you’re old enough for that, do you?”

Tom shakes his head. Rat nods to Slug, and a wordless message seems to pass through the air between them, because Slug instantly walks to the crockery cabinet and raises the butt of his musket.

“No!” Mum cries.

Slug brings the musket down and smashes all the plates inside the cabinet, every single one. Dad rushes to Mum, holding her back while she clenches her fists and tears run silently down her face. Rat doesn’t take his eyes off Tom the entire time. When it’s done, he turns and strides out of the kitchen, crunching shards of broken crockery beneath his boots.

“End of the week,” he repeats, “or the tax is tripled.”

Slug spits on the floor and then follows him out of the farmhouse.

Tom finally releases me and I tear after the guardsmen, barking at their backs as they stalk out of the farm. I can't believe what has just happened – I'm shaking all over with fear, from my head to the tip of my tail. I didn't protect Tom when I should have done, but I can protect him now. I have to make sure that the guardsmen never come back. I bark and bark at them, but they don't even falter. They just keep strolling away, as if they have all the time in the world. My voice sounds small and hollow as it echoes through the farmyard.

"I'm Tom's dog and he's my boy. And if he's stepped right inside the jaws of death, then I'm going to follow him into them and bring him back out."

Rebel is a good dog, and he loves his simple, perfect life on the farm with his owner, Tom – until one day the war comes too close... Now Tom is determined to join the rebellion to defeat the King's men. But Rebel knows war is dangerous, and he will stop at nothing to save the human he loves.

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