

Case 1: Dog Gone

Julia and her family decided that they could now get a pet. They had just settled into their new house with its fenced in yard. Julia was excited about her daughter having the experience of a pet like she'd had when she was a kid. The family talked about what a big responsibility a pet would be. A friend had told Julia about a local shelter that switched to a no-kill policy because its board was upset with the hundreds of animals euthanized in recent years. Julia really liked the philosophy of finding animals homes rather than euthanizing them.

Julia and her daughter Katie visited the shelter the next day with great anticipation. While they waited briefly in the front area, a man came in gently leading a stray dog he had found wandering in his neighborhood. The receptionist told the man they had no room to take the dog. She called a few volunteers who foster shelter overflow pets, but she found none who had room to take the dog in. The receptionist apologetically explained that the man would have to find another solution. He left with the dog, muttering about not knowing what he was going to do. Julia sadly wondered what would happen to the dog.

After a few more minutes, Julia and Katie were asked to move into a side room to wait. They watched through a window as a volunteer coaxed a very large dog on a leash through the waiting room and out the front door. After the dog went out, Julia and Katie were led back to the kennels. Ethel, the volunteer who helped people adopt pets, explained that the big dog had been abused and was considered very dangerous. She said there were only a few other volunteers brave enough to take it for an occasional walk. Julia was puzzled, wondering aloud about the dog's future. Ethel proudly explained, "because this is a no-kill shelter and the dog is unadoptable, it will live here for its natural life."

On the way to the dog section, they passed through a room in which all manner of cats were napping in cages or running around frolicking. They were very amusing to watch. Ethel explained that there are thousands of cats needing homes in the community, with more born every spring. The shelter could infrequently take any because most of the cat spaces were taken up by animals that were not adoptable.

Finally, they arrived at the dog kennels. Almost immediately Katie found a very cute small grey dog sitting alone in a cage. Ethel quickly said that the dog was not up for adoption. When pressed she explained that the dog had an incurable viral infection. When Julia asked what would happen to the dog, Ethel said the shelter would take care of it for however long it lived. Because of its infection, it had to be kept separate from the other dogs but would be walked almost every day by a volunteer. Katie didn't understand and begged to pet the "cute doggie."

Julia and Katie wandered through the kennel area but Julia had lost her enthusiasm. She looked at the animals, noting a few more that were marked as not available. Finally, she and Katie found a very sweet brown mixed-dog that seemed perfect to them. They filled out all the forms and took their new dog home. Julia also made a donation to the shelter's spay-and-neuter fund. That night Julia told her husband about her very disconcerting shelter visit. She wondered aloud why animals that could never be adopted were being kept in enclosures with minimal human interaction. She worried about the infected dog Katie had liked, pondering how lonely it must be.

She remembered the big dog that might bite. She hoped the man who had tried to do the right thing by bringing in a stray had not just turned the poor dog loose again. She began to rethink the apparently noble no-kill philosophy.

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