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THE ODD ONE OUT

The sign on the front gate said “Purdy’s Pedigree Pets”. Now, in case you don’t know what Pedigree means, these pets were something special; at least the people who would be buying them thought so. Mr and Mrs Purdy were certain of it, and they believed their puppies came from parents which were the best of the best. Once these pedigree pets were old enough, because they were far better than the average ordinary dogs they could be sold for much more money. And that had made Mr and Mrs Purdy quite rich.

As a reminder to any visitors that their pets were from what was known as “good stock” there was quite a fancy building set aside from the main house. The sign above the entrance said “Napoleon’s Palace”, and this was where the dogs and their puppies lived. Inside it was very grand, with a lounge area for the customers to relax while they waited to be shown to the viewing room to decide which puppy they wished to buy. No-one was there at the moment, though, because there were no new puppies ready to be sold yet.

The latest batch were still not old enough and were huddled up to the mother getting their morning milk; except for one which had been pushed out by the others and couldn’t get close. “I knew it was an odd one from the start,” grumbled Cardew Purdy.

“I was hoping you were wrong,” commented his wife, Felicia, “And once the hair grew he’d be the same as the rest.”

“But he isn’t,” sneered her husband. “Just look at him – all scruffy and spiky, and that silly black patch makes it worse. We’ll never be able to sell him, and we can’t let him be seen by our customers. He’ll have to go.”

Standing behind the disappointed adults were Milly and Ben their children. On hearing the bad news, the young girl chimed in: “We think he’s cute. Can’t we keep him, please?”

“Definitely not,” growled Cardew.

“But we’ll take good care of him, Dad,” pleaded Ben. “He won’t be any trouble.”

“And we’ll make sure none of the visitors see him,” added Milly hopefully, “Promise.”

Knowing how their mother could be easily swayed, the two children worked on her for the rest of the morning until she agreed to have a word with their father. Reluctantly, Cardew eventually gave in. Milly and Ben were allowed to keep the little puppy in the house, so there was no way any outsiders could see him. “He needs a name,” said Milly while she was giving the puppy his bottle of milk.

“How about Fang?” suggested Ben.

“That’s stupid,” chided his sister. “For a start he hasn’t got any teeth.”

“But he will have one day,” said the boy.

Milly ignored him. “I thought about Patch because of the big one on his back, but that’s pretty ordinary. What about Pooch?”

Not really caring one way or the other Ben shrugged. "Okay, Pooch then. Do you like your new name, Pooch?" he asked the puppy. When the pup wagged his tail and gave the boy a lick they guessed he was okay with it.

Over the coming weeks Pooch settled in to his new routine, spending much of the day with the children. He was allowed into the play room where they all usually had fun; although Milly wasn't too pleased when he chewed one of her dolls. They also went out into the garden where he could run around and chase the children. At night when Milly and Ben went to their own bedrooms, Pooch was put in a small room at the back of the house. It was actually the laundry, but Pooch didn't know this; only that it had a funny smell that he didn't particularly like. This was also where a cat slept and it clearly didn't like *him*, judging by the way it would hiss and spit if he came close. He did learn something from it, though. That was about the cat door, a small flap in the main door to the outside which you could push through to go into the garden.

The first time he went out it was pretty spooky. What he knew of the garden looked very different at night because it was so dark. Things were better over time as Pooch got used to the big looming shadows; and he was becoming adventurous, going off to explore places where he never went during the day. One area he wasn't too sure about was a wide pathway that seemed to lead to somewhere else, and he'd seen a car or two driving on it. When he investigated where it went, he only got as far as the gate. Beyond there were more cars, lots of them driving really fast, and they had lights on. It was quite frightening, so Pooch decided to give it a miss.

Another thing in his favour was the fact that when the children put him in the smelly room there was something wrong with the latch and the door didn't shut properly. He found that if he bumped the door with his head a few times it would spring open, so he was able to sneak up to the bedrooms and sleep curled up on one of the children's beds. They didn't seem to mind this; but knowing their parents wouldn't approve, very early in the morning one of them would put him back in the laundry before the adults found out.

These were good times for the puppy. Every day seemed pretty much like any other to Pooch; except for one when he was in the garden running around with the children and something different occurred that confused him. Mrs Purdy came hurrying over and called to the children: "Take the dog into the house quickly! We've got visitors due to arrive soon." Naturally the children knew what this meant and that the visitors couldn't be allowed to see their scruffy puppy, so they went after him. Pooch imagined this was just another game of chasey and he took off with Milly and Ben running after him. Mrs Purdy groaned and she too tried to catch the pup. Luckily for her, Pooch ran straight at her and she scooped him up; but her handling of him was too rough and it hurt. With a bit of a struggle Pooch managed to break free. Then she was after him again, shouting: "Come here you little mutt!"

Something wasn't right. Chasey had never been like this before and Pooch couldn't figure what he had done wrong or why Mrs Purdy was so angry. Afraid of what might happen if she caught him, the puppy ran and ran, not really knowing where to. He just needed to get away. Unfortunately his flight took him down the wide pathway and into the main street. It was even worse than when he had seen it at night. There were many more cars and big noisy trucks streaming past as he continued in panic along the footpath. Then the part that he was on came to an end and he was facing another road. Pooch stopped and just stood there puffing and panting. He could hear shouting and turned to see Mrs Purdy running towards him. There was nothing else for it. Not realising how dangerous it was he dashed across the road in front of him. A car horn blared followed by a screech of brakes. Almost on the far side something bumped him. It was a person on a bicycle who tottered and fell off. The shouting and car horns blaring frightened Pooch so much that he just kept running.

Mrs Purdy had given up and returned home. "I'm sorry," she said to the children. "I couldn't catch him."

Her husband overheard. "Good," sneered Cardew. "Now we won't have to worry about him. Come on Felicia – our customers are here."

“Go off and play, children” said their mother. “And do not, do NOT go looking for the puppy!”

By this time Pooch had made his way off the streets and into some kind of big garden. There were grassy areas, lots of trees, and plenty of people. All of them seemed quite happy and might have been kind to him; but after what had already happened he wasn't game to approach anyone. Instead, he tried to stay out of sight. As he was weaving his way through the bushes he realised how dry his mouth was. He needed a drink, and when he saw a pond he padded over to it. The trouble was that the grassy bank at the edge was a bit too high. It was also pretty slippery, and as he leaned down for a drink he slid straight off into the water.

Worse even than being chased, this was terrible. He went under, swallowing water; then was desperately trying to swim, only he didn't know how. His little legs were running again, but there was nothing hard to stand on and he went under a second time, coughing and spluttering. In a panic he clawed at the bank, almost made it out, then slipped back into the water. It was no good; and although he didn't want to think it, Pooch was convinced he was done for. But it wasn't over yet and there was more to come.

A shadow descended on him from above. All he could see was something large and very hairy coming closer. A mouth opened baring huge, snarly teeth. In a second he could feel them biting him on the back of his neck. There was pulling and he was rising. Next, wonder upon wonder, he could feel solid ground beneath his feet. The teeth let go and a gruff yet pleasant voice said: “Lucky for you I happened by, kid. What did you think you were doing?”

Pooch looked up. The speaker was a dog, a really big one. “Um... I just wanted a drink and I fell in.” Looking around he asked: “What is this place?”

“A park,” said the dog. “Your owners probably brought you here. We'd best get you back to them before they start to worry.”

“If you mean the human people I live with, for some reason they don't like me anymore,” explained the soggy puppy, giving himself a shake to get rid of the water in his fur. “The children were okay – they were fun – but not their parents. One of them chased me, and that's how I ended up here.”

“Well, kid,” said the big dog. “Seems I'm stuck with you. I'm Boof, by the way. What's your name?” After Pooch had introduced himself, Boof said: “It's my guess you're hungry. Let's go get something to eat.”

“You have food?” puzzled the puppy.

“I don't,” said Boof, “But I know where we can get some.”

The food place was another area of the park where humans went to eat. The big dog and the pup stayed at the edge of the picnic ground watching. “Best not let them see us,” warned Boof. “Some humans aren't keen on dogs around when they're eating. There's one good thing about them, though. They never seem to finish all of their food. So we wait till they leave; then we go in and have our pick of what's left.”

It was pretty obvious to Boof that the kid was tired because even while he was eating he kept dozing off. “Come on, Pooch,” he said at last. “Best thing for you now is sleep. I've got somewhere we won't be disturbed.”

Boof's place certainly seemed safe, and it was quiet. Warm and comfortable as he nuzzled up to his new friend, Pooch was asleep almost immediately. He must have been dreaming because he imagined being with his proper family; only they wouldn't ever have let him get anywhere near as close as Boof did; especially not his brothers and sisters. It didn't seem fair... When he awoke, Boof said: “Must have been hard for you; but it wasn't all bad. The human children sounded nice.”

Pooch frowned. “How do you know what it was like for me?”

“Talk in your sleep, kid,” said the big dog. “You also mentioned you wished you were back with them.”

“Well...” Pooch began uncertainly as he recalled some of the not-so-nice things that had happened to him.

“Tell you what,” said Boof, coming to a decision: “Once it gets dark we’ll go find where you came from. Maybe seeing it again will help you decide, one way or the other.”

That night the two dogs set off. Pooch couldn’t remember much about the route he had taken, only that he’d run in a more-or-less straight line. So that was the direction they went. Crossing roads was still scary, but Boof knew enough to wait until it was safe. Eventually they arrived at the gate to Purdy’s Pedigree Pets and Pooch declared: “This is it – my home where I was born. Come on.”

“I’d best stay here,” said Boof, “Seeing as your humans don’t know me. You go on, kid. I’ll wait for you, just in case you change your mind.”

Pooch padded cautiously through the gate. From what he could see, all was quiet, no-one was around and it seemed just like he remembered; except for something peculiar. There was a smell in the air that he didn’t recognise. Approaching the end of the wide pathway the smell was getting stronger. A few more steps brought him face to face with the source of the smell. It was made by smoke that was billowing from Napoleon’s Palace; and although he’d never seen anything like it before, he knew it wasn’t right.

Racing back to the gate he was so glad to see Boof was still there. “Something’s wrong,” the pup told him breathlessly. “There’s smelly stuff coming from where my Mum and Dad and my brothers and sisters are. It made me cough and my eyes were stinging. Can you come, please. I’m really worried.”

They were barely half-way along the drive when Boof announced: “I smell smoke.” Nearing Napoleon’s Palace, he added: “Your family’s in big trouble, kid. That’s a fire, and it needs to be put out quickly! Did you see any humans around?”

Pooch said he hadn’t. “But I know a way into the house. I could wake up the children.”

“Better do it then,” said Boof, and just as the pup was running off he called out: “Good luck, Pooch.” Then muttered quietly to himself: “Why wouldn’t human people like him? He’s such a nice kid.”

The pup went straight for the cat door and pushed through into the smelly room. The cat was there in its basket and was clearly surprised. It stood up, arched its back and hissed loudly. Pooch took no notice, just head-butted the door until it opened; then ran along the hallway and scampered up the stairs. Milly’s bedroom was first. In went the pup, jumped on the bed and began clawing at the covers. The girl awoke. “Pooch?” she said, unsure if she was seeing things. Realising it wasn’t a dream she said: “Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come back.” Sitting up she reached out with the intention of giving the puppy a big welcome-home hug; but in a flash he was off the bed and heading for the door. There he paused to turn, only long enough to bark a few times before leaving to repeat his performance in Ben’s room. Next stop was the parent’s bedroom. Their door was shut, so all he could do was scratch at it and carry on barking.

Meanwhile, Boof was outside also barking. His bark, however, was much louder than Pooch’s and he was directing it at the windows of the main house. One of them opened and a head poked out. “It’s a stray dog,” Cardew called behind to his wife; then out of the window: “Go away, you mongrel!”

The noises had woken Felicia too. “A dog outside, you say? There’s another in the house, barking and scratching at our door,” she said in confusion. “What *is* going on, Cardew?”

The man left the window and hurried across the room to the door which he yanked open. Seeing Pooch there at his feet he declared: “I don’t believe it. The scruffy mutt’s back... Now he’s running away.”

By this time the two children were in the hallway, puzzled frowns on their faces. Milly barely asked the question: “What’s the matter, Pooch...?” when the pup scuttled past, skidding to a halt at the top of the stairs to turn and bark a few times as he had done before. “I think he wants us to follow him,” suggested Milly. So they did, all of them.

Once out in the yard it was obvious what the problem was. "There's a fire in Napoleon's Palace!" said Cardew unnecessarily. "Keep the children away and call the fire brigade. I'm going to try and get the dogs out."

As Cardew was racing off, Boof ordered: "Stay with the children, Pooch. I'll see if I can help the man."

Pooch watched, as did the children. Having phoned the fire brigade, their mother joined them. "Where's Dad?" she asked. Both Milly and Ben pointed. Felicia saw her husband and gasped.

Cardew was already at the door of Napoleon's Palace. As he opened it a plume of smoke billowed out, covering him and the rather large dog at his heels which he hadn't even noticed. For an age all that could be seen was more smoke blanketing the front of Napoleon's Palace. Finally there was a shape coming through it. Cardew stumbled into the open, coughing and spluttering. He had a puppy in each hand. Placing them at his wife's feet he said breathlessly: "I've got to go back in for the others..."

Felicia was looking over his shoulder. "You won't need to," she announced. "Look."

Cardew turned to see two adult dogs padding out through the smoke, each carrying a puppy by the scruff of its neck with their teeth. A moment later another shape emerged. It was Boof with the last of the pups. Taking it over to Pooch's Mum and Dad, he placed it with the other pups. Then something strange happened. The puppies' mother gave Boof a lick on the cheek. Seemingly a bit embarrassed, he looked around for Pooch and noticed him standing off a ways, apparently reluctant to join his doggy family. "Come on, kid," he said. "You'll be okay with them, now. I had a quiet word."

Boof was right about that, and at long last Pooch's family were more than glad to welcome him, especially as Boof had told them how he had helped to save them. The brigade arrived and eventually managed to put out the fire, and the Brigade Chief was explaining: "It's a bit of a mess in there. Just as well you noticed the smoke and got the dogs out when you did," he said to Cardew.

"Actually, the dogs saw it first," Cardew admitted. "The pup came into the house and woke us up."

"A pup did that?" exclaimed the Chief in surprise. "I wouldn't mind a dog like that myself. I don't suppose you'd consider selling him?"

Before he could stop himself, Cardew declared: "Oh, no. I couldn't do that. Pooch is one of the family. There was another dog, though. I don't know where he came from. He wasn't one of ours, but he woke us up with his barking; then, believe it or not, he came in with me and helped bring one of the pups out." Looking around he saw Boof standing on the driveway. "That's him over there with Pooch."

"Well," Boof was saying, "I guess I'm done here."

"Aren't you going to stay?" asked Pooch in a pleading little whine. "I'm sure it would be alright with my humans, and you could have a proper home."

"Already got one, kid – in the park." Then he added as he started walking away: "I'm not good with people, humans or otherwise; and I like being my own boss. Bye little fella."

Sadly disappointed, Pooch called after him: "Will I see you again?"

Boof hesitated to glance back. "Could be. If you're in my neck of the woods, drop by. You know where to find me." Then he continued padding along the drive and into the street.

The scruffy pup was left staring at the empty driveway and felt so alone; until Milly and Ben rushed over. "Come on, Pooch. It's time you were in bed," said Milly. "Which one do you want, mine or Ben's?"

And that was the beginning of Pooch's new life: no more sleeping in the smelly room with the cat; and always in the hopes that he would see his friend Boof again, one day....