

*What's your idea of a hero? In this story of a boy, a dog, and a cougar,
the real hero will surprise you!*

G. TRUEHEART, **Man's Best Friend**

Short Story by James McNamee

Tom Hamilton liked his Aunt Prudence. She taught at the university. Tom's father said she was all brains. Her name was Doctor Prudence Hamilton. When she came to Tom's father's farm in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, she always brought presents. Tom liked her.

He didn't like her constant companion, Genevieve Trueheart, a dog.

Tom Hamilton was fond of other dogs. He had a dog, a bull terrier called Rusty, a fighter right from the word go. Rusty kept the pheasants out of the garden and the young grain. He worked for a living. Tom couldn't like Genevieve Trueheart. She was good for nothing. She never even looked like a dog. She was a great big soft wheezing lazy wagging monster, a great big useless lump.

Genevieve had been born a Golden Retriever of decent parents and Aunt Prudence had papers to prove it. But Genevieve had eaten so many chocolates and French pastries and frosted cakes that she was three times as wide as a Golden Retriever ought to be. She had the soft muscles of a jellyfish. She couldn't run. She couldn't walk. All she could do was waddle. She was a horrible example of what ten years of living with Aunt Prudence would do to any creature. She looked like a pigmy hippopotamus with hair.

Genevieve Trueheart gave Tom Hamilton a hard time. She followed him. She went wherever he went. She was starved for boys. She never had a chance to meet any in the city. Tom couldn't bend over to tie a boot but her big pink tongue would lick his face. She loved him.

At half past eight when he finished breakfast and started for school, there on the porch would be Genevieve Trueheart waiting for him.

She wants to go to school with you, Tommy, Aunt Prudence always said.

GOALS AT A GLANCE

- Analyse descriptive language.
- Use punctuation in dialogue.

I think she'd better stay home, Tom always said. It's almost two kilometres. That's too far for her.

Take poor Genevieve, Tommy, Aunt Prudence and his mother always said. You know how she likes being with you.

Tom could have said, Why should I take her? When I take her the kids at school laugh at me. They ask, Why don't you send her back to the zoo and get a dog. But he didn't say that. It would have hurt Aunt Prudence's feelings.

On this morning he thought of something else to say. He said, A friend of mine saw a bear on the road. She had two cubs. We'd better leave Genevieve at home. I'll take Rusty.

Rusty has to stay to chase pheasants, his mother said.

What if I meet a cougar? Tom said.

A fat dog like Genevieve would be a fine meal for a cougar.

Tommy, stop talking, his mother said.

A cougar can pick up a sheep and jump over a fence, Tommy said.

Tom Hamilton, his mother said, get to school!

So Tom Hamilton went down the woodland road with Genevieve Trueheart panting and puffing and snorting behind him. Twice he had to stop while Genevieve sat down and rested. He told her, Rusty doesn't think you're a dog. He thinks you're a big fat balloon that's got a tail and four legs. Tom said, Genevieve, I hope a car comes on the wrong side of the road and gets you, you big fat slob. He never meant it. He said, I hope we meet those bears. He was just talking. He said, Do you know what I'm going to do at lunchtime, Genevieve? I'm going to give the fried pork liver that I have for you to another dog, to any dog who looks like a dog and not like a stuffed mattress, and your chocolate, Genevieve, I'll eat it myself. This was a lie. Tom Hamilton was honest.

Every kid who went to that school came with a dog. Yellow dogs. Brown dogs. Black dogs. White dogs. Black and white dogs. Black, white, and yellow dogs. Black, white, yellow, and brown dogs. They were a happy collection of dogs, and had long agreed among themselves who could beat whom, who could run faster than whom, who had the most fleas. From nine o'clock in the morning until noon they scratched. From noon until one they looked after their owners. From one o'clock until school was out at three they scratched.

These dogs did not welcome Genevieve. They were not jealous because she was a Golden Retriever and had papers to prove it; they didn't believe an animal with a shape like Genevieve was a dog. A Mexican hairless dog, one of those small dogs you can slip into your pocket, put his nose against Genevieve's nose, and what did she do, she rolled over on her back with her

feet in the air. After that, there wasn't a dog who would have anything to do with Genevieve Trueheart.

The kids asked Tom, What's she good for?

Tom knew the answer but he never told them. She was good for nothing.

Boy! she's a ball of grease, the kids said.

She's a city dog, Tom said.

Why don't you leave her at home? the kids said.

Because my aunt gives me a dollar a week to walk her to school, Tom said. A lie.

Boy, oh, boy! a kid said, I wouldn't be seen with her for two dollars a week.

After school, Tom waited until all the others had left. He couldn't stand any more unkind words. He took his time going home. He had to. If he hurried, Genevieve would sit down and yelp. They came to the woodland road. It was like a tunnel. The tall trees, the Douglas firs, the cedars, and the hemlocks, all stretched branches over Tom's head. The air seemed cold even in summer. Owls liked the woodland road, and so did tree frogs, and deer liked it when flies were after them, but Tom didn't like it much. He was always glad to get out of it and into the sunshine. Often when he walked along this road he had a feeling things were looking at him. He didn't mind Genevieve too much here. She was company.

This day, Tom knew that something was looking at him. He had the feeling. And there it was!

There it was, all two and a half metres of it, crouched on a rock, above him, a great golden cat, a cougar, a Vancouver Island panther! Its tail was twitching. Its eyes burned green, burned yellow, burned bright. Its ears were flat against its head.

Tom's feet stopped. His blood and all his other juices tinkled into ice, and for a moment the whole world seemed to disappear behind a white wall. A heavy animal brushed against him, and at the shock of that, Tom could see again. It was Genevieve. She had sat down and, to rest herself, was leaning on his leg.

The cougar's ears were still flat, its eyes burning as if lighted candles were in them. It was still crouched on the rock, still ready to spring.

Tom heard a thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, and he thought it was the sound of his heart, but it wasn't. It was Genevieve beating her tail against the gravel to show how happy she was to be sitting doing nothing. That made Tom mad. If she had been any kind of a dog she would have known about the cougar before Tom did. She should have smelled him. She should have been just out of reach of his claws and barking. She should

have been giving Tom a chance to run away. That's what Rusty would have done. But no, not Genevieve; all she could do was bump her fat tail and look happy.

The cougar had come closer. A centimetre at a time, still in a crouch, he had slid down on the rock. Tom could see the movement in his legs. He was like a cat after a robin.

Tom felt sick, and cold, but his brain was working. I can't run, he thought, if I run he'll be on me. He'll rip Genevieve with one paw and me with the other. Tom thought, too, that if he had a match he could rip pages from one of his school books and set them on fire for he knew that cougars and tigers and leopards and lions were afraid of anything burning. He had no match because supposing his father had ever caught him with matches in his pocket during the dry season, then wow and wow and wow! Maybe, he thought, if I had a big stone I could stun him. He looked. There were sharp, flat pieces of granite at the side of the road where somebody had blasted.

The cougar jumped. It was in the air like a huge yellow bird. Tom had no trouble leaving. He ran to the side of the road and picked up a piece of granite.

Of course, when he moved, Genevieve Trueheart, who had been leaning against his leg, fell over. She hadn't seen anything. She lay there. She was happy. She looked like a sack of potatoes.

The cougar walked around Genevieve twice as if he didn't believe it. He couldn't tell what she was. He paid no attention to Tom Hamilton. He had seen men before. He had never seen anything like Genevieve. He stretched his neck out and sniffed. She must have smelled pretty good because he sat down beside her and licked one of his paws. He was getting ready for dinner. He was thinking, Boy, oh, boy! this is a picnic.

Tom Hamilton could have run away, but he never. He picked up one of those sharp pieces of granite.

The cougar touched Genevieve with the paw he had been licking, friendly-like, just to know how soft the meat was. Genevieve stopped wagging her tail. She must have thought that the cougar's claws didn't feel much like Tom Hamilton's fingers. She lifted her head and looked behind her. There can be no doubt but that she was surprised.

Tom was ashamed of her. Get up and fight! he yelled. Any other dog would fight. Rusty would have put his nips in before the cougar got finished with the job. But not Genevieve. She rolled over on her back and put her four fat feet in the air. She made noises that never had been heard. She didn't use any of her old noises.

The cougar was disgusted with the fuss Genevieve was making. He snarled. His ears went back. Candles shone in his green-yellow eyes. He slapped Genevieve between his paws like a ball.

Tom saw smears of blood on the road and pieces of Genevieve's hide in the cougar's claws. He still had a chance to run away. He never. He threw the piece of granite. He hit the cougar in its middle. The cougar turned, eyes green, eyes yellow.

How long the cougar looked at Tom, Tom will never know.

The sweet smell of Genevieve's chocolate-flavoured blood was too much for the cougar. He batted her about like a ball again. Tom picked up another piece of granite that weighed almost five kilograms, and bang! he hit the cougar right in the face.

The cougar fell on top of Genevieve. The cougar stood up and shook its head. Then it walked backwards like a drunken sailor.

And at that moment a bus full of lumberjacks who were going into town rounded the curve. The tires screeched as the driver stopped it, and thirty big lumberjacks got out yelling—well, you never heard such yelling, and the cougar quit walking backwards and jumped out of sight between two cedars.

What did Genevieve Trueheart do? That crazy dog wagged on her stomach down the road in the same direction the cougar had gone. She was so scared she didn't know what she was doing.

Boy, oh, boy! that's some dog, the lumberjacks said. She just won't quit. She's a fighter.

Yah! Tom said.

She's bleeding, the lumberjacks said. She saved your life. We'd better get her to a doctor.

They put Genevieve Trueheart and Tom Hamilton in the bus.

Boy, oh, boy! the lumberjacks said, a fighting dog like that is man's best friend.

Yah! Tom said.

The bus went right into Tommy's yard and the thirty lumberjacks told Tommy's mother and father and Aunt Prudence how Genevieve Trueheart, man's best friend, had saved Tommy.

Yah! Tom said.

Then Aunt Prudence put an old blanket and old newspapers over the back seat of her car so the blood wouldn't drip into the fabric when she was taking Genevieve Trueheart to the horse, cow, and dog doctor.

Aunt Prudence said, Now you know how much she loves you, Tommy. She saved your life.

Yah! Tommy said. ♦

1. RESPONDING TO THE STORY

- a. What is the “turning point” in this story? What makes you think so?
- b. Do you think this story is funny? Why or why not?
- c. On page 95, the author says, “This was a lie. Tom Hamilton was honest.” Do you think this statement is true? Explain fully.
- d. Why does Tom feel such deep scorn for the dog?

2. LITERATURE STUDIES SIMILE

In a small group, discuss the way the author describes the dog. Read some of these phrases and sentences out loud and discuss the images that come to mind. Which description is your favourite? Why? Which of these descriptions use **similes**? What effect do the similes and other descriptions have? What mood do they help to create?

In your journal, record similes to describe the following:

- your feelings before a test
- how your favourite hobby makes you feel
- your best friend
- a pet (either your own, a neighbour’s, or friend’s)
- your favourite food

As you develop similes, remember that they often compare two dissimilar things to create a striking image. Use one of these similes the next time you write a short story.

A **simile** is a comparison of two different things using *like* or *as*. For example, “The swarm of mosquitoes hovered in the sky like a dark cloud.”

3. LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS PUNCTUATE DIALOGUE

Reread the story and think about how James McNamee has written the dialogue without quotation marks. Do you think this works? Why might he have done this? How else does McNamee use punctuation or sentence structure in a way that might be considered incorrect? What effect does this usage have? With your classmates, discuss the “correct” way to punctuate dialogue.

In your notebook, rewrite the following sentences from the story including the correct punctuation:

Aunt Prudence said, Now you know how much she loves you, Tommy. She saved your life.

Boy, oh, boy! the lumberjacks said, a fighting dog like that is man’s best friend.

Tom Hamilton, his mother said, get to school!

If you wrote to this author, what would you tell him about his use of punctuation? his sentence structure? his use of slang?

4. MEDIA MESSAGES ANALYSE STEREOTYPES

With a partner, discuss how dogs are often portrayed on screen. Use specific examples from sitcoms, dramas, and movies. Make a list of famous TV dogs and their characteristics. What similar characteristics are there among the different dogs? What is the dog **stereotype** that the media seems to use? How do you think G. Trueheart fits this image or stereotype? How doesn't she fit?

If you were going to produce a TV show that included a dog, would you like that dog to be like G. Trueheart? Why or why not? What type of TV show might a dog like this be best-suited for?

A **stereotype** is an oversimplified picture, usually of a group of people, giving them all a set of characteristics, without consideration for individual differences.

Benji and *Homeward Bound* are two movies that portray dogs as heroes.

