

Seasons of Courage

A True Story about Friendship and
Determination in the Face of Cancer

Patricia Pizarro

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For Dianne

Thank you for trusting me with the
story of your daughter.

Note:

When this story took place, the Canadian Kennel Club's official designation for Nikki and Dru's breed was Belgian Sheepdog. In the book I have used the CKC's current designation of Belgian Shepherd Dog.



Dru (left) and Nikki

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Introduction

Saturday, November 3rd
Red Deer & District Kennel Club Dog Show
Westerner Altaplex, Red Deer, Alberta

An assortment of impressions greet me as I enter the huge auditorium. Barking dogs and blaring loudspeakers interrupt bystanders trying to converse in normal tones. Rapidly striding competitor-canine pairs dash to and from their designated rings. The aroma of freshly shampooed, blow-dried dogs mingles with smells of rotisserie wieners and stale coffee. Although seasoned participants might find it to be an energizing atmosphere, for me, a newcomer, it takes getting used to.

I'm allowing myself two hours for this dog show, where I hope to revisit the mystique of a similar event I had attended as a child. On that long-ago occasion, magical teamwork of canine obedience competition had captivated me. Today, armed with my new video camera, I look forward to being captivated once again.

But opening the bulky show catalogue, I'm confronted by a maze of unfamiliar jargon. Skimming past full-page ads, breed-specific blurbs and long lists of pedigreed dogs with fancy names, I finally find what I want. At the bottom of page eight sits the judging schedule for today's obedience competition in Novice A, Novice B, Open A, Open B and Utility. Weaving past clusters of spectators, I arrive at the bleachers beside Ring 6, where Utility Class is in progress. That is what I came here to see: Utility Class, the show's highest level of competition.

A large white Standard Poodle prances through his paces with finesse. At least, that's how it looks to my untrained eyes. A disappointed murmur from the woman sitting beside me

indicates that perhaps my impression falls short of the mark. But the dog is having fun. Watching him makes me smile.

I lift my shiny new camcorder from its case, clip in the battery and settle the strap over my right hand... just as the Poodle sails over the last jump. Scattered, low-key applause follows dog and handler as they make their exit.

A slow shuffling of ten or twelve people outside the ring draws my attention. From the midst of this group emerges a tall, frail-looking young woman wearing a competitor's armband on which is printed "114." With laboured steps she approaches the entrance to Ring 6. A beautiful, medium-sized, tan and black dog walks beside her. Skimming through the page listing entries for Utility Class, I find number 114—a three-year-old female Belgian Shepherd Dog, Ch. Atim's Ste. Waudru, CDX TD. I have no idea what all those letters mean, but the dog's owner—Deb Klein—is listed as its handler.

The handler unsnaps her dog's leash. Waiting silently, she stands like a tall, thin statue. So intently, so reverently the people at ringside and in the bleachers watch her. A hush falls upon us.

With the camcorder cradled in my right hand, my thumb poised on the red power button, I struggle with a decision. Should I film her or not? This young woman looks anaemic, weak. Seeing her, I'm reminded of starving people in war-torn refugee camps. Somehow I don't feel comfortable pointing a video camera at her. But this is a Canadian Kennel Club Dog Show. An official event with hundreds of dogs. Other people are using their video cameras, so why shouldn't I?

I press the red power button.

With clipboard and pen in hand, the judge asks, "Are you ready?" The handler nods once, staring straight ahead, not looking at her dog, not glancing at the judge. "Forward," directs the judge.

Using the zoom lens, I notice the young woman's long, thin arms and her shoulders jutting out at sharp angles. A burgundy-

coloured maternity jumpsuit hangs loosely on her. But not at the waist. At her waist there's a bulge.

Could she be pregnant? Impossible! Someone who's that emaciated couldn't be pregnant.

Tension etches outlines on the woman's sunken face. Her will to remain focused appears to be fighting with...

Pain. That woman is in a lot of pain.

She walks inexorably forward, as if, having once started, she cannot stop. She walks, seemingly unaware of the dog heeling effortlessly beside her. Although Utility Class is performed off-leash, this dog's upward gaze holds an intangible bond between them.

Three or four minutes pass. Noises in the huge auditorium have faded. I feel my right hand cramping from its grip on the camcorder, but I don't trust myself to look away or even stretch my fingers. Ignoring the discomfort, I hold the pair in the centre of my viewfinder.

The handler says, "Hup!" as she points to a high jump on her right. The dog dashes toward it, sails over the top, trots to the handler, then sits in front of her. After the judge signals for completion of the exercise, the handler's left hand motions slightly. The dog pivots to her side.

"Exercise finished," states the judge, marking her score sheet.

"Good girl!" says the handler. Her dog hops joyfully upward, almost bumping the waistline of the burgundy jumpsuit. I hear a sharp gasp from the woman beside me.

Leaning toward this person, I whisper, "What's wrong with...?"

"Deb has cancer. Cancer of the stomach."

The judge calls for the final jump. Responding to the handler's signal, the dog prances—with such lightness, such élan—to the far end of the ring.

“Druey...sit!” the handler calls. Instantly her dog turns, sits, waits for the next command. Pointing toward the jump on her left, the handler says, “Hup!”

The dog clears the top bar, trots to the handler, then sits in front of her. The judge checks the dog’s position. Dog and handler remain absolutely still. When the judge says, “Exercise finished,” the young woman’s head and shoulders slump. Now she looks up. A smile stretches her pale, gaunt face.

Around the ring and in the stands, the crowd claps and cheers and whistles. My video camera is still running when I hear a little girl ask, “Mommy, why is everyone crying?”

After packing my camcorder into its case, I buy a cup of coffee. I wander past other rings, glance at other dogs. Nothing holds my attention.

Then suddenly that handler—that Deb Klein—appears. She’s being pushed toward me in a wheelchair, flanked by a tight group of three women. Their short bursts of laughter seem muted by veils of tension flickering across their faces. Up close, Deb Klein looks sicker, more jaundiced than she had through my viewfinder. I can plainly see the ravages of cancer. How incomprehensible that she had been able to complete those grueling paces in the ring.

I want to say something about her incredible performance. If I don’t do so, right now, before she passes by, I will always regret it. Our paths are unlikely to cross again.

When she’s about a metre away, I speak. “That was really amazing, what you and your dog did out there.” My words embarrass me. They sound so trite and inadequate.

Glancing up, she says, “It’s not over yet. We still have the Group Stand for Examination.” Then she and her small cortege move on.

I had not realized there was another part still to come. Tugging my camcorder out of its case, I dash toward the bleachers

facing Ring 6, where the crowd has grown larger. I squeeze into a spot at the end of the second row, snap in the battery and once again press the red power button.

For that final part of Utility Class, Deb Klein and her dog stand in line with the other dogs and handlers. After commanding their dogs to stay, all the handlers walk across the ring.

It seems to take forever as the judge proceeds down the row, checking each dog one by one. But the counter on my video camera ticks off a mere three minutes from the time the handlers leave their dogs, until they return and the judge calls out "Exercise finished."

Standing at a table, the judge punches keys on a calculator and writes on sheets of paper. Everything moves in slow motion. I have no idea how long this could take. Five minutes? Half an hour? Finally the judge approaches the group waiting at ringside. She calls out the teams that have earned passing scores. Five teams qualify. One of them is number 114.

Seated in the wheelchair with her dog on a leash beside her, Deb Klein joins the other qualifiers in Ring 6. The judge begins by announcing fourth place and presenting a ribbon. Then she calls out third place and presents a ribbon. By the time she comes to the second place winner, I realize that although each of these five teams has earned qualifying scores, only four teams will receive ribbons. Through my viewfinder I see the beautiful dog standing next to the wheelchair, gazing up at her owner.

A blinking red light warns that the battery on my camcorder is about to die. I pray it will hold out for one more minute.

Waving high a huge blue-and-white rosette, the judge heads straight toward the wheelchair. She calls out the highest scoring entry, first place winner, team 114.

Through my tears I see the red light blink one last time. The battery dies and the scene in my viewfinder disappears.



Three weeks later, after spending American Thanksgiving with relatives in the States, I drove back to Alberta in a blizzard. Two kilometres from home, I stopped at a convenience store and bought the weekend edition of the *Red Deer Advocate*.

Because I had been away for five days—is that why I picked up a local newspaper that I rarely buy? I can only explain that if I had not bought it, I never would have known what was tucked in the middle of the newspaper on the “Obituaries” page. Deborah Elaine Klein of Calgary, Alberta, passed away on November 22. She was twenty-eight years old.

One morning at a dog show in Red Deer, I had been a spectator with a video camera. My plan had been to film a few performances before continuing on my way. But I had stepped into the world of Deborah Elaine Klein; for several fleeting moments, our paths had crossed. It is Deb’s story that I tell.

∞ PART I ∞

Building Blocks

“Deb’s first words were, ‘I do it!’ She liked to work with her hands. First it was the building blocks. Later there were the jigsaw puzzles. She told me once that computer programming was like doing jigsaw puzzles and cross-stitching, where one part relates to the other so much. Deb always loved making things, seeing them work out to be something special.”

-Dianne Klein, Deb's mother

Chapter 1

“He’s mostly mats and mud.”

Four years earlier...

“That girl would do great in obedience competition if she could just get a different dog,” trainer Tubby Miller commented after classes one night at Calgary’s Heel-Away Obedience School. For three weeks Tubby and his co-trainer had been shaking their heads over one of their new students, a six-foot tall young woman with her solid black dog, Nikki. The woman herself seemed eager and capable, but every time she gave her dog a collar correction, he’d let out a yelp.

“Honest, I don’t beat him! I love him!” she would say, embarrassed by her dog’s noisy antics. On the other hand, when Tubby worked with Nikki, all was calm and quiet.

“Hey, Deb,” Tubby said during the fourth class, “Nikki sure has your number. The first few times he pulled that yelping stunt, he got your sympathy. Now he knows when you’re going to correct him, but figures he’ll keep up the sham anyway.”

Tubby’s all-too-accurate observation did little to encourage Deb Klein, who had dreamed of owning a top level obedience dog since she was a child. She had hoped that Torbrook’s Nikki of Jewel, her first dog, would become that success story. But so far, “sporadic” was the best word to describe his progress.

Deb had recently completed an intensive two-year computer program at Southern Alberta Institute of Technology in Calgary. With little financial assistance, Deb had juggled an evening job with her classes. She graduated from SAIT and landed a full-time position with a Calgary oil company. Putting a failed love affair

behind her, she turned her attention to that childhood dream of owning a dog. This—a completely different endeavor—appealed to her desire for new horizons and surely she would find more success training a dog than managing an unreliable boyfriend.

Researching various breeds by attending dog shows, poring over breed standards and making lists of her priorities and preferences, Deb zeroed in on the Belgian Shepherd Dog. Although there are four varieties of this breed, the two that interested her were the long-coated Groenendael and the Tervuren. While the Groenendael's coat is solid black, the Tervuren's usually is a rich mahogany and black. Deb liked everything she read about this intelligent breed whose success in search and rescue, sheep and cattle herding, as well as police work, clinched it as her dog of choice. Deb put her name on a waiting list with a breeder of black Groenendaels, fully expecting a year's wait for an available puppy.

However, before long a three-year-old male was returned to the breeder. Abused and frightened, Nikki desperately needed a new home. Although people Deb knew from the dog scene were openly skeptical about being able to achieve high-end obedience with such a dog, Deb looked forward to the challenge.

Acquiring a dog meant moving out of her apartment. She didn't mind that. Her apartment manager had not objected to Deb's two cockatiels, Randy and Mindy, but he had allowed her to keep her cat Snoop only on the condition that other tenants didn't find out about the feline's resident status. A dog would enjoy no such privilege.

As a twenty-four-year-old single woman beginning her career and already saddled with car payments, Deb knew she'd have a very tight budget with the addition of a mortgage. On the other hand, owning a house with a fenced-in yard fit perfectly with her long-term plans. The black dog was a sorry sight when Deb took him home. "He's mostly mats and mud," she told her friends. Nevertheless, the underweight, scruffy Groenendael

offered an important step toward Deb's long-held dream of training and breeding purebred dogs.

Of immediate concern was how Nikki went berserk when allowed to run loose in the back yard. Spinning in circles, confused and panicked, the young dog had no idea how to act when not anchored by a two-metre long chain.

One veterinarian's prediction of a shortened life span for the severely neglected dog spurred Deb into doing everything she could for Nikki. She prepared soft food because of his badly diseased gums. Meals of rice, cottage cheese and stewed meat boosted Nikki's weight to a normal twenty-eight kilograms. That special diet, along with the hours of Deb's gentle grooming, transformed Nikki's dry, sparse coat into a shiny, full one.

In spite of his rapid physical recovery, Nikki continued to exhibit several lasting effects of psychological trauma. For instance, he refused to play with any of the chew toys Deb bought for him. Even after his gums had healed, Nikki always associated biting semi-hard objects with a once-painful mouth.

Although this dog-rescue project had started out for Nikki's benefit, it soon unveiled new landscapes for Deb to explore. And explore them she would.

Chapter 2

“You’re just a litter mate to him,
nothing more.”

“That’s a beautiful dog,” Joan Shilling said, admiring Nikki’s photograph from where she stood in the doorway of Deb’s office. This was the first time the two women had exchanged more than brief greetings at their workplace.

“He’s a blockhead,” Deb responded.

“No way! I think he’s beautiful.”

“Nikki can be a brat,” Deb said, pushing a chair toward Joan and motioning her to sit down. “Your kids are cute. I’ve noticed their pictures on your desk. And it’s nice to see a photo of your dog. Or,” she added without changing expression, “whatever it is.”

“Yeah, that’s my dog,” Joan said with a nervous laugh. “He’s just a mutt but I love him.”

“Terrier cross?” Deb asked.

Joan nodded.

“What do you call him?”

“Tuffy.”

Deb chuckled. “I might have guessed.”

“What kind of dog is Nikki?” Joan asked.

“Groenendahl, which is a type of Belgian Shepherd Dog.” Deb passed a framed photograph to Joan. “This is when Nikki got a ribbon in an obedience trial, but he’s also earned points in conformation.”

“Conformation?” Joan looked puzzled. “I thought that was something you do in church.”

The corners of Deb's mouth curled slightly as she chuckled again. "No, that just means letting the judges tell you your dog is beautiful, even if it's dumber than a sack of hammers."

In the weeks to come, Joan made regular stops at Deb's office, where their conversation often turned to dogs.

"Tuffy's kind of aggressive when he meets other dogs," Joan confided one day.

"What does he do?" Deb didn't sound surprised.

"A big dog chewed him up once and he's never forgotten it."

"But what does Tuffy do?"

"Well, uh, he barks like crazy and tries to bite the other dog's legs."

"Yeah? Tell me more."

"Tuffy doesn't obey me unless he feels like it."

"Which is when he's napping, I suppose."

Joan took a deep breath before her next admission. "He pees in the house when I go to work. I have a feeling he doesn't even wait till I'm out the door before doing it."

"Joan." Deb sounded like an exasperated school teacher. "Nikki and I are coming over to see about this little terror who's got you wrapped around his probably unclipped nails."

Several days later Deb and Nikki arrived at Joan's front steps. The ringing doorbell set off a round of barking inside the house. Joan's greeting was muffled by the racket.

"Aren't you going to invite us in?" Deb asked through clenched teeth, glaring at the pint-sized dog at the door. Nikki, with his ears perked forward and tail waving amiably, looked down at the plump creature trying to nip his legs.

"I'm afraid Nikki's going to hurt Tuffy!" Joan whimpered.

"Don't be ridiculous," Deb scoffed as she and Nikki marched by with Tuffy close behind.

Nervously biting her nails, Joan followed the trio to the living room. Deb glanced back and said, "Joan, please quit doing that

to your fingernails!" Then, fixing her eyes on Tuffy, Deb again clenched her teeth and looked as if she were about to snarl.

Tuffy eventually wore himself out. After issuing one final bark, the little dog slunk to the far end of the living room, where he sat stiffly and avoided eye contact with the newcomers, especially the tall two-legged one with gritted teeth.

"That's better," Deb said, then turned to Joan. "Now, if you had just trained Tuffy right in the first place...", and she proceeded to explain the pack leader theory. She summarized it by saying, "Guess where you are in Tuffy's pack, Joan? If you think you're at the top, dream on. You're just a litter mate to him, nothing more."

Joan winced.

Glancing at Tuffy, Deb chuckled. "Did you pick Tuffy because he's so cute?"

"Well, yeah..."

"It figures. And what do you feed him?"

With a hint of pride Joan named an expensive brand of dog food found on most grocery store shelves. Deb snorted. "If you ever get a real dog, I hope you won't feed it that junk. Go to a pet store and buy something decent."

Before leaving, Deb offered one more piece of advice. "Look Tuffy in the eye whenever he does something bad. Joan, you have to be the pack leader. Don't blink and don't look away. I know you love him, but the next time you get a dog, you've got to do obedience training right away and make very sure your dog listens to you."

That was not the last time Deb visited Joan Shilling, but never again did Tuffy waste energy trying to stand up to the only person who had ever stared him down.

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