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*journey to life*

a short story by Angie Smibert • illustrated by Adam Hunter Peck

# THE OPTION

**I**t was D Day. Dog Day. Decision Day. Sixty-three days since we'd visited the Best Friends Forever clinic with a vial of Rufus's blood. The vet saved it for us after Rufus drifted off into the big sleep. Dr. Wilson couldn't do much after a truck hit my best friend except to make sure he didn't suffer.

I leaned against the warm metal of the car door. BFF called an hour ago, but Teddy threw one of his tantrums when Mom tried to get him dressed. Rufus had been my dog, and he'd left a Rottweiler-sized hole in my life, but Teddy was lost without him.

To me, Rufus was a big, goofy bundle of muscle and energy. We ran together after school. He played soccer with me and the guys. And he kicked me out of bed at night with those powerful legs of his when he had a bad dream. To my parents, he was a 135-pound security alarm. To my little brother, though, Rufus was a lifeline.

Teddy walked slowly down the sidewalk as Mom locked the front door. He stood at the edge of the driveway and rocked back and forth on his heels. Mom glared at me. She's always getting on my case about Teddy.

"Dude, you want to go see Rufus?" I asked.

Mom glared again, but the rocking stopped.

"Rufus?" he asked, not looking up.

I opened the car door, and he scooted in.

Teddy's what the doctors call high-functioning autistic. He can talk, but sometimes it's like he's stuck inside his own head, unable to connect to the outside world.

I fiddled with the radio stations, looking for something, anything to keep Mom from bringing up the decision I hadn't made yet.

We almost didn't get Rufus. When I saw him

at the animal shelter, I knew that was my dog, but his past made Mom nervous. He'd been found chained in the backyard of a vacant house. He was so skinny he could barely walk. And he'd been tied up so long the collar had grown into his neck. That made me want him more. Mom finally gave in but told me to watch him around Teddy.

I didn't need to. That dog knew how to be with Teddy. With my little brother, Rufus was patient. He let Teddy reach out to him. It was as if he knew the little dude was in there all along, straining against his own invisible chain to get out.

We pulled into the parking lot. I helped Teddy out of the car and held his hand as we crossed the pavement. Outside the clinic, we both stopped to look at the pictures of happy customers and their BFFs reborn. Teddy stared at a black lab being hugged by a blonde kid about his age.

"Rufus?" he asked, looking straight ahead.

"Inside," I said, opening the door. "He's being born right now."

We told the attendant we were there for Rufus.

"She got started without you," the girl said. She showed us to a cubicle marked Brood Mom 192.

A tan dog — part Shepard, part beached whale — was lying on bloody towels inside a white box with low walls around it. She was licking something black. A pup. A squeaking, slime-covered little Rufus, not much bigger than a sausage. She cleaned off the afterbirth and nudged it toward her belly, toward two identical brothers already chowing down.

"Ah," Mom said, sniffing a little. She pulled Teddy close to her as she sat down in one of the chairs.

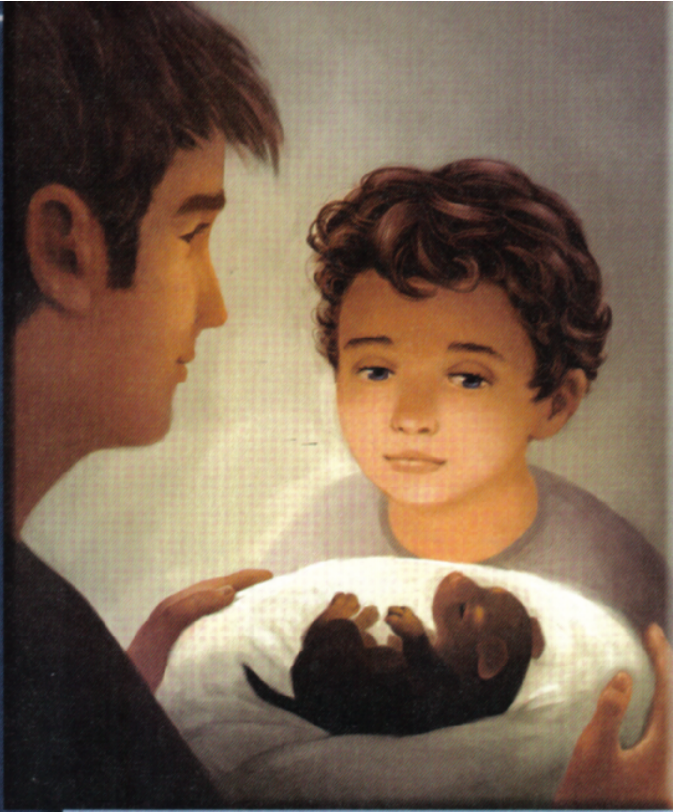
"Have you decided?" she asked me.

I shook my head and leaned against the counter on the far side of the cubicle.



# PACKAGE





"It's your dog," she said. "But you need to decide soon. The last ultrasound said four viable pups."

Teddy began rocking again, and Mom led him outside. After a few minutes, the mother dog started straining. And I started pacing.

I wasn't agonizing over the choice of pups. That was easy. They were all Rufus, or at least their bodies were. It was the option package that was killing me. BFF promised you could have Rufus again, body and mind. The brochure said they could recreate the conditions that made him Rufus. Nature and nurture. The nurture part, though, had to be done right after they were born.

The attendant came back to check on the mother's progress. And mine. "The option package doesn't hurt the puppy," she said. "Physically, at least. It's all done through simulated memories."

Great. The dog only *thinks* it was starving with a chain embedded in its neck.

"Why only four?" I asked, trying to change the subject. The brochure said they implanted the brood dog with a dozen embryos.

"Not all the clones make it to term," she said. "We sell the other survivors — without the option package, of course."

With a grunt, brood Mom 192 squirted out her last pup. She didn't make a move to clean this last little Rufus, though. And it wasn't moving. The attendant scooped it up in a towel and brought it to the counter. She dried the pup off with a towel and then suctioned out its mouth and nose with a syringe. The puppy squealed.

The mother lay on her side panting heavily. "What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"She's getting old," the girl said quietly. "This might be her last litter."

She handed me the newborn pup in the towel. "Keep this one warm and rub it gently. That simulates the mother licking it."

I sat down with the pup in front of the brood mom after the attendant left. This little Rufus wasn't much bigger than my fist. Its feet were tiny. Its eyes were closed, and I could feel its heartbeat through the thin towel. My Rufus must have looked exactly like this when he was born — before someone mistreated and abandoned him. I held the puppy tighter.

Mom and Teddy returned.

"Last one," I told Mom, holding up my charge. Teddy eyed the squirming bundle in my hands. "Rufus?" he asked, looking me in the eyes.

I saw that puppy reflected in his. And I saw something else. I saw Teddy reaching out to me. That's when I realized Rufus had done his job, and now it was time to do mine. We didn't need the option package.

"No, dude," I told my little brother as I held the pup out for him to touch. "This is Max. Our new dog." ☀

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**Angie Smibert** worked for NASA's Kennedy Space Center for over a decade, before turning to writing full time. Her work has appeared in *Pedestal*, *Alien Skin*, *Antipodean Science Fiction*, and several other magazines. She is a frequent contributor to *ODYSSEY*.