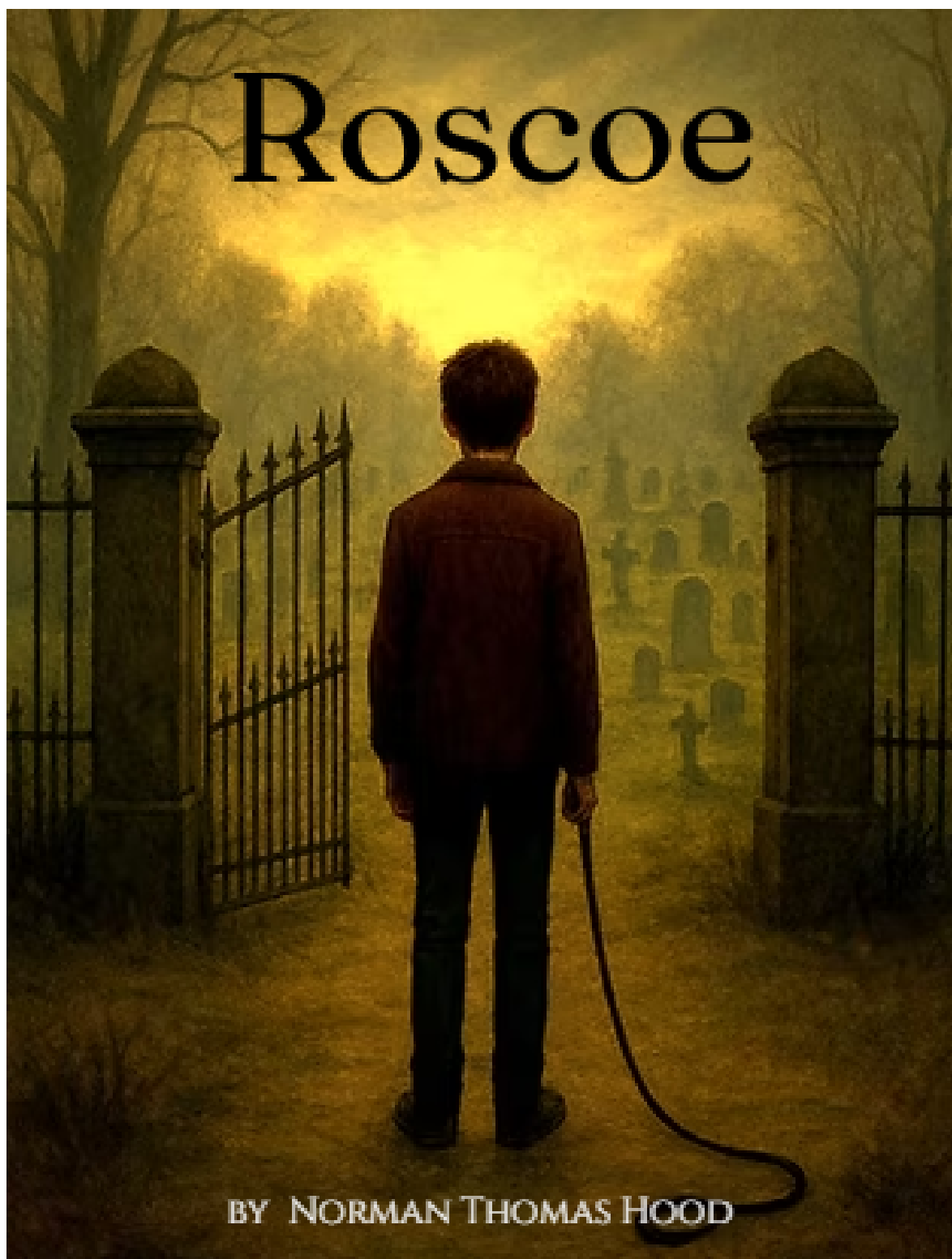




Roscoe

By Norman Thomas Hood

On a rainy Wednesday morning, Martin sat in a cold lobby holding his best friend of the last twelve years. The elderly beagle lay quietly, with his head across the boy's lap.

The other animals in Shaw's Animal Clinic were not so placid. By 10am, the noise level in the room had become unnerving. Martin's mother did her best not to show her distress, and for the most part, succeeded. Martin did not. There was a trail of tears that'd been staining his cheeks since the night before. Each trickle of sadness draped over the last, creating a seamless, lacquered effect.

This was Roscoe's second visit to the clinic within a week. He'd been having trouble walking, as well as having sudden bowel releases. Before this, the last time Roscoe caused a mess on the floor he was a puppy. Since then, Martin's four-legged pal would rather have died holding his water than make a mess in the house. Now, he'd lost the dignity of control.

During Monday's visit, it didn't take the seasoned veterinarian long to discern his future. He'd asked Martin to take Roscoe back to the lobby, then spoke privately to Caroline.

"Roscoe's organs are shutting down. It's natural for a dog his age. Part of the dying process. I'm sorry, but you're going to have a tough decision to make, and soon." Caroline discerned from his voice it was a speech he'd given many times before.

"There's nothing we can do, then?"

“He’s 16 years old. That’s a ripe old age for a canine. It’s his time... I’m really sorry. Best just to keep him as comfortable as you can and make the decision that’s best for him.”

When they got home from that visit, Martin set Roscoe down in his favorite spot by the fireplace. He rarely left that spot anymore, even with coaxing. Martin brought his food and water bowls over and set them down closeby. He encouraged Roscoe to eat, but he refused.

By the next day, Roscoe hadn’t moved an inch. He still refused any encouragement to eat or drink. Martin tried standing him up, hoping he’d walk to his bowls. The senior canine whined in pain, then collapsed under his own weight. It was then the family knew what they had to do. Martin literally cried himself to sleep that night.

A lady in blue scrubs opened the door to the clinic’s hallway and called Roscoe’s name. The dog didn’t react. Martin hesitated before standing, knowing his first step toward the door would begin Roscoe’s countdown. He looked to his mother for help, his lips quivering.

“I can’t do it, mom. Aren’t there some vitamins or *something* we can give him, to make him better?”

“I wish there was, Marty, but vitamins can’t fix Roscoe now. His body’s giving up. It’s his time. Every day he lives like this is cruelty to him, son. You know we have to do this.” She offered to take the dog from him.

“No! I’ve got him, Mom.” Caroline saw the pain on her son’s face.

Martin took a deep breath and followed the lady into the hall. When they reached the dedicated room, he noticed a large, steel table in the center. He was terrified, knowing the reason for it. An assistant asked him to place Roscoe on top of it. Martin reluctantly obeyed and felt the cold surface of the metal against his arms when he did. He asked the lady for a blanket to be placed under his friend.

After the dog was settled, the woman explained what to expect after the injection, and told them it was time to say their goodbyes.

Fifteen minutes later, the woman returned to give the injection. Martin held Roscoe down while she administered it, whispering in his ear the entire time.

“I love you, ‘Coe. I don’t want you to die! I wish you could just stay with me. You’ve been the best dog, and you’ve always protected me. I don’t know what I’m gonna do without you. I love you!” Caroline had to turn away for a moment, too upset to watch her son’s eventual loss.

With the boy’s face pressed firmly against his, Roscoe managed to lick Martin’s cheek twice before closing his eyes for the very last time.

Three weeks passed since Martin said goodbye to his friend. Summer vacation had just begun. He spent most of his time alone, watching videos in his room. Walter and Caroline gave him his space. They knew their son. He’d grieve on his own and reengage the world when he was ready.

“Hey honey, you gettin’ hungry up there?” Caroline asked him from downstairs.

“Yeah, Mom. What are we having for dinner?”

“Pizza casserole, in five minutes.”

“Cool,” he said, “I’m coming down.”

The three sat around the table together. Walter watched Martin eat his dinner and noticed him looking down and to his left ever so often. That’s where Roscoe would sit while Martin ate, hoping to share in the goodness.

“So, buddy, you’ve got about nine weeks of summer left before school starts. Any ideas of things you want to do?” Walter asked, hoping to take Martin’s mind off Roscoe.

“No, not really. Are we going anywhere this summer?”

“Well, we hadn’t *planned* on anything yet. That’s kind of why I brought it up. We could drive to the amusement park for a weekend if you want. They have more roller coasters than anywhere else. Maybe even stay there for a couple days?”

“Yeah, that’s okay.” Martin said.

“Well, don’t get *too* excited about it,” his father laughed.

“Sorry. Yeah, that’d be fun.”

Caroline looked at Walter before speaking.

“Marty, your dad and I have been talking. You know, we brought Roscoe home as a pup almost four years before you were born. In fact, the *day* we got you home from the hospital, Roscoe was your first visitor! I remember the next two or three years after that. Roscoe would run and stand between you and the front door anytime someone knocked. And if it turned out to be someone he didn’t know, he’d stay there until they were gone. He was always very protective of you.”

“Mom, can we not talk about him right now?” Martin said, suddenly putting his glass down.

“Marty, there’s a reason why your mom brought it up,” Walter said. “You’ve never *not* had a dog. Roscoe was by your side all the time, and it was good for you. So, we’ve been talking---”

“I don’t want another dog, Dad... ever! I don’t ever want to forget him!”

“You’re not going to forget him, Marty. How could you? You’ve spent your whole life with him. He’ll be in your heart for the rest of your life. And we know he could never be replaced. Look, just keep it in mind, okay? Someday when you’re ready, *if* you’re ready, we think a new puppy could be a great thing for you.”

“I *said* I don’t *want* another dog... not ever! Whenever a dog dies, the first thing people do is go out and get another one. I just want to be by myself and remember him like he was, that’s all!” He quickly scooted his chair out.

“Hold on, Marty. You’re not leaving the table like this. Finish your dinner, please. And listen... if you’re not ready for a new pup right now, that’s fine. And if you decide you *never* want another dog, that’s fine, too. We just don’t want you to rule it out yet.”

“Okay, I get it, Dad! Can I just go to my room now?”

“Sure. Just rinse your plate off first,” he said.

Martin did as he was told and walked upstairs, though at a slower pace than his usual.

“I’m worried about him, Walter. He never smiles anymore. I knew losing Roscoe would be hard on him, but I never imagined this! He stays holed up in that room of his all day. He only comes out to eat. When’s he going to get over this?”

“Who knows? He lost more than a dog, honey. Roscoe was more like a brother. You know they did everything together. But listen, he’ll be okay. It’s just going to take time. The kid will smile again... when he’s finished grieving.”

Martin refreshed his computer and sat down in his gaming chair. After an hour of watching random videos, he realized he couldn’t remember anything he’d seen. His mind was on Roscoe.

“They want me to get a new puppy, ‘Coe. Like I’d even *do* that! They said you went to Heaven, so I guess I’ll have to wait to see you there. I’d rather you were just here with me right now... until we could both go there together someday.”

As he leaned back in his chair, he noticed something yellow under his computer desk, near the wall. He crawled under the desk and pulled one of Roscoe’s toys out from a mess of dusty computer wires. He shook off the debris and sat in the chair again.

“Wow, ‘Coe, this has been lost for over a year now, and the whole time it was under the desk!”

Martin felt something press against his left leg. He looked down and saw nothing there. He figured it was a muscle cramp, but soon felt it again. It was cold and felt wet. Martin knew exactly what it was now. He carried the toy over to Roscoe’s bed and put it down, in the center.

“There you go, buddy... right where you always kept it.”

Martin went back to his desk and watched some old videos he’d taken of Roscoe, until he eventually fell asleep.

The next morning, Martin fixed himself cereal for breakfast. It was almost 10:30am. His mom walked into the kitchen, holding a cup of coffee.

“I was wondering when you’d make it down here, honey. You know, I miss the times you’d beg me to make eggs and bacon for breakfast. I think you’ve eaten cereal every day since school let out,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s just easier. Roscoe used to like this kind.” He held up a box.

“*Lucky Charms*? You know I never liked you giving that to him... too much sugar for a dog.”

“Yeah, but I never gave him the marshmallow ones... just the brown things.” He picked out a few pieces and tossed them on the floor, near his feet.

“Marty! I just swept in here.” She bent over to pick them up. “Where are they? Did you kick them?”

“No, they’re on the floor. I dropped ‘em right here,” he said, pointing.

“Well, they’re not there, Marty. Find them, please, before they get stepped on?”

Martin got on the floor and looked around. He didn’t see them anywhere. His mom pulled a chair out from under the table and knelt down to look as well. The floor was clean.

“Good Lord... just forget it. The floor vac will find them,” she said, getting to her feet again.

Martin waited until she was out of the room, then dropped two more pieces of cereal. He watched closely, but nothing happened. Then he pretended to go back to eating. After a few seconds, he looked down again. They were gone! He jumped out of his chair and got on the floor. It was clean, no bits of cereal anywhere! He ran to the family room.

“Mom! Roscoe’s still here! Like a ghost!”

“What? Marty, don’t say something like that.”

“No, really! I swear! I dropped two more pieces on the floor. Nothing happened while I watched, but as soon as I wasn’t looking, they were gone! Go look!”

She walked to the kitchen and looked under the table, hoping to put an end to his foolishness.

“Marty, this isn’t funny. Unless there’s a mouse in the kitchen, they couldn’t have just disappeared.”

“Exactly, Mom! That’s what I’m *saying*. Roscoe took them!”

Caroline wasn’t sure how to answer. This was the moment in weeks Martin seemed happy. She decided not to say anything more about it until she’d talked to Walter. Together, they’d figure out how to address Martin’s worrisome belief.

The next morning, Martin got up early to repeat the cereal routine. This time, everything he’d dropped on the floor remained where it landed. He even

retreated to the living room for a while, expecting to find them gone when he returned.

They were still there. Disappointed, he cleaned up his mess and decided to try again the next day.

The following morning, he set his phone up in the kitchen to record video. He hoped this time he would catch something. Again, no bits of cereal disappeared from the floor. Disheartened, Martin decided to tell his mother of his failed experiments. Caroline understood his disappointment, but felt inwardly that the problem had resolved itself. And it had, until Saturday afternoon.

“Marty! Can you come downstairs for a minute?” Caroline asked. He didn’t answer. She called up to him again. “Marty!”

He came to the top of the landing.

“Sorry... headphones. What’s up?”

“Come down here for a minute, please. I need to ask you something.”

He rocketed down the stairs, two and three steps at a time. “Yeah?”

“In the kitchen. Follow me, please,” she said.

When they got there, she turned and pointed to the hutch. Roscoe’s food bowl was sitting on the floor, next to it.

“Did you put that out?” she asked.

“No... why would I?”

“Marty, I *put* that in the cabinet, under the sink after Roscoe died. Now, it’s out here, where it used to be. So I’m asking you again. Did you put it there?”

“I already said no, Mom. I didn’t even know you kept it. But you know what that means, right? Roscoe must’ve done it! I told you, Mom... he’s still here!”

“Marty, listen to me. I didn’t say anything about the cereal thing the other day, but this is too much. You *have* to stop this. You’re not being truthful with me, and it’s not healthy to create these false fantasies of yours!”

“They’re *not* fantasies! I’m telling the truth, Mom! He even *nosed* me the other day, just like he used to... to get my attention. He did it *twice*, Mom, on my leg! It was cold and wet, just like his nose used to be!”

“Okay, that’s it, Marty! Go on back to your room. But if this continues, we’re having a serious talk with your dad!”

Martin went to his room, upset his mom thought he was lying.

“Geez, ‘Coe... thanks a lot! Now, Mom thinks I’m making stuff up! I guess... just don’t do *anything* around her. But I’m still glad you’re back. I really missed you, buddy.

The next weekend, the family left on their trip to the amusement park. Three hours later, Walter pulled into a restaurant to eat lunch before they’d check into their hotel.

“That’s your second glass of chocolate milk, Marty. Have you been missing it that bad?” Caroline asked. “I guess I need to add that to my grocery list again, huh?”

“It’s good energy for the rides, Mom. And yeah, you can add it,” he said.

“After we get settled in at the hotel, what do you want to do first?” his dad asked, already knowing the answer.

“Rides,” he said. Caroline cleared her throat and gave Walter the *look*.

“Oh... well, we’ll have plenty of time for that,” his dad said, “Why don’t we hit up some shops around here first, so your mom and I can walk off some of this lunch?”

“Yeah, that’s fine, but not for too long, okay? I wanna do the coasters today and save the water park for tomorrow.”

By the time the family walked through the park’s gates, it was after 3pm. Martin was more than ready to ride the coasters. Caroline rode with him, but Walter’s fear of heights left him on a nearby bench, watching. Three hours later, Caroline was watching from the bench as well. Martin rode all the big coasters twice, then worked his way through the smaller ones.

“I wanna ride the wooden one next,” he said, pointing to the coaster.

“Really? Those wooden coasters will shake your ribs loose!” Caroline laughed.

“I don’t care, it’s fast!”

“You’re on your own again, buddy. Knock yourself out!” she said.

Ten minutes later, Martin's group was next to fill the seats. The coaster entered the hub and came to a sudden stop before easing forward to drop off its battered riders. The kids exited in a normal fashion but the adults got out of their cars much slower, rubbing their necks and shoulders as they stepped out.

The line gates soon opened, and everyone hurried to fill the open seats. When Martin started through the gate, something caught his shorts, stopping him from going through. The kid behind pressed him forward. Martin pushed him back, yelling that he was stuck. He looked down and saw his pants leg being held by something, but he didn't see anything there!

"Hurry up, retard, before we miss it!" The kid behind him yelled.

Martin tried his best to get loose, but whatever had him wouldn't let go! The boy pushed him again. When he did, an angry growl was heard by both of them.

"What's wrong with you? Go!" the boy yelled.

Suddenly, the gates locked again. Martin and those behind him were forced to wait until the next run. The coaster pulled out of the loading platform without them.

"Thanks a lot, stupid!" the kid behind him said.

Martin looked at his shorts for any rips. There were none. A minute later, something shook the entire platform! Martin heard screams coming from outside the loading area. He turned around to see everyone scrambling to get back down through the line. He was the last to make it down from the platform. Caroline was there to meet him.

"Thank God! Marty!" she said, running to him. Walter was right behind her.

"We thought you were on that coaster!" she said.

Martin was just about to ask what happened, but noticed some of the coaster's cars were dangling over the tracks, above everyone's heads! Anyone left in the cars by now were hanging on for their life! Martin saw the riders struggling to keep their arms and legs wrapped around the retention bars as they screamed for help!

Suddenly, a man yelled loudly before falling from one of the cars. He landed on the ground with a terrifying thud! All those watching were horrified. The crowd of onlookers quickly surrounded him. The man didn't move. Caroline forced her son to turn his head away.

Martin saw another man hold up a broken wheel assembly he'd found lying on the ground. A park employee shouted for everyone to move out of the way as a park ambulance carefully made its way through them. People from all over the park were gathering at the scene of the accident.

Soon, a fire truck arrived to assist the remaining people down from the coaster. Caroline covered Martin's eyes as a bloody victim was loaded into the ambulance.

"There he is!" a boy shouted from across the crowd, "That's the kid who kept me and my sister from getting on the coaster! His pants were stuck in the gate!"

Martin's parents were confused at the boy's words, so he told them *his* version of what happened. It wasn't at all what they expected to hear.

"It was Roscoe! He pulled on my shorts and wouldn't let me go through the gate. That kid kept yelling at me to go, but I couldn't move!"

"Marty, the boy said you were *caught* on the gate," Walter said.

"Yeah, I know! But I looked down and I *wasn't* caught on anything! My pants weren't hooked on any metal or nothin'! Roscoe even growled at the kid when he yelled at me. I promise, I'm telling you the truth. It was Roscoe!"

Walter and Caroline looked at each other, unsure of what to say. Just then, a man approached them with his two children.

"I don't know what the hell happened up there, but thank you, kid! If you hadn't gotten stuck like that, and stayed where you were... well, just thank God for you!"

Caroline pulled Martin to her side, visibly upset as the three walked away.

"Let's go, Walter... please! I've had enough of the rides *and* this park! I want to go back to the hotel now," she said.

After they got to their room, Walter turned on the TV. Several local news channels were covering the accident at the park.

"Wow, Caroline. Three people died and seven others were injured. They shut down everything except the waterpark!"

"Turn the channel, Walter. I don't even want to *think* about it anymore. Seeing those people falling was just too much!"

"Well, hell dear... I don't know what we should do about tomorrow, then. Marty, do you even *want* to go to the waterpark tomorrow?"

"I'd rather just go home," he said.

For days after their trip, Martin continued to attest to his account of the incident. One night, he overheard his parents discussing whether or not to send him to a psychologist. After hearing that, he decided to keep any thoughts about Roscoe to himself.

Life in the Henderson home eventually returned to normal. Martin turned thirteen, and informed his parents he wanted to play soccer for the school team. Two of his friends were trying out, and he wanted to do it, too. His parents were excited with the news, as he'd finally be involved in something outside his bedroom.

Martin made the team and stayed busy with his friends, on and off the field. Any talk of taking him to a psychologist soon disappeared.

Late one afternoon, Martin burst through the front door at his usual time, after soccer practice. His dad was already home from work, and dinner was on the table.

"Hurry up, or you're gonna miss out, Marty! Your dad's about to eat your lasagna," Caroline teased.

"Better not! Coach ran us to *death* today! Said we were too slow and got beat to the ball too many times last Friday."

"We noticed, but to be fair, most of the other team's players were 8th graders, and you only have three older players. So, don't get too down on yourself," Walter said.

"Oh, I'm not. I'm the fastest one on the team except for Steven, and his parents don't even allow him to eat sugar."

"Yeah, I don't think that'd work for you," Walter joked.

After they'd finished dinner, Martin's mom found him looking through the refrigerator for more food.

"I bought some popcorn today, Marty. Why don't you microwave some and take it to your room?" his mom suggested.

Martin sat in his game chair eating popcorn while playing video games. Every now and then, he'd drop a piece on the floor, only to find it gone seconds later.

When 9pm came, he noticed that Roscoe's toy wasn't in his dog bed. He looked around his room and found it lying on top of *his* bed now.

"Oh, so you've been playin' up *there*, huh? Fine, I guess I can't get in trouble. Nobody can see you, anyway."

Martin went to sleep with Roscoe's toy near his feet. Soon, all lights in the house were off but one. Martin slept hard, worn out from soccer practice and killing too many zombies.

Around 3am, smoke began to rise from Martin's floor vents. As it became thicker, the sheet covering Martin was suddenly pulled off his body! Martin's left arm was nudged as well, but he was sleeping too soundly to be awakened.

Across the hall, his parents' door, which was cracked open just an inch or two, suddenly sprung open! Seconds later, Caroline sat up in bed and shook Walter's shoulders.

"What is it?" he groaned, lifting his head off the pillow.

"Barking. In our room! Just now. Did you hear it?"

"Probably just a video Marty's playing... or you were dreaming," he said, burying his face in his pillow again.

"Videos at three in the morning? And no, I wasn't dreaming. It woke me up, Walter!" Just then, three loud barks were heard by both of them.

"Walter! I *know* you heard that. It sounded like it came from in here!" He quickly sat up next to her.

"It couldn't have, dear. Look... I'll find out what he's doing, but I'm telling you... if he's still on that computer, he's losing it for a week!" he said.

Walter climbed out of bed and marched into Martin's room. When he turned on the light, he found Martin sound asleep, and his computer off. Confused, he turned out the light and started back to his bedroom. He didn't get two steps into the hall before suddenly stopping in his tracks.

"Babe! I think I smell smoke!" he said.

Caroline jumped out of bed. Walter was already on his way downstairs. "It's coming from the kitchen!" he said, running.

"No, it's coming up from the basement door, honey!" she said, right behind him.

Walter grabbed a fire extinguisher and ran downstairs, to the basement. A work lamp hanging from a floor support was on fire! Some of the wood around it

was burning, too. Walter pulled the extinguisher's pin and sprayed everything down until the flames were out.

Caroline got Martin out of bed and onto the front porch before going back inside to check on Walter.

"Caroline, call 911! I have it out, but call 'em anyway!" he shouted.

Caroline made the call, and the three sat on the porch, waiting for the fire department. Soon, a truck arrived and several firemen were working in the house. When the firemen were satisfied there was no chance of reignition, they started packing up their equipment. The fire chief came out and sat down to address Martin's parents.

"You were lucky to catch that when you did, Mr. Henderson. A few minutes more, and that electrical fire would have gotten too far ahead of you. That kitchen fire extinguisher of yours would have made no difference. Did a smoke alarm wake you two, or were you just up, anyway?"

Caroline and Walter both looked at each other, realizing the truth of the matter.

"Maybe it was just the smell of all the smoke," Walter answered.

"You can count yourself lucky it woke you, Mr. Henderson. That usually doesn't happen."

After the firemen left, the three of them went inside and opened all the windows. Eventually, they tried getting to sleep again, finding it impossible. Caroline grabbed some blankets, and together they watched TV in the family room until sunrise.

Martin got dressed for school and came running downstairs, excited to get to school and tell his friends what had happened the night before. His parents were waiting for him at the kitchen table. Walter motioned to him to sit down.

"Don't worry about the bus today, Marty. I'll take you to school in a few minutes. We want to talk to you about last night... and apologize." Martin sat down next to his dad, confused.

"Me first," Caroline said. "Marty, remember when I got upset about the cereal on the floor? You said Roscoe ate it, and I didn't believe you." He nodded. "Well... now I'm thinking you were right. I believe it really *was* Roscoe." Martin's eyes widened. His dad cleared his throat before speaking.

“Marty, last night we woke up hearing barking,” Walter began. “It sounded just like Roscoe’s bark. I thought you were still on your computer, watching old videos of him. Well, the barking happened again and it was much louder this time. It sounded like it was coming from inside our bedroom! Your mom heard it first,” he said.

“Was it Roscoe?” Martin asked.

“Well, we’d love to say there’s another, well... *natural* explanation, but we can’t. It sounded *just* like him, Marty. I even went to your room to check on you. You were asleep, and the computer was off. But when I came out of your room, I smelled the smoke. If the barking hadn’t woken us up, we could have *all* been in real trouble. We’d probably been trapped upstairs.”

“I don’t even want to think about that!” his mother added.

Martin was silent now.

“Are you upset with us?” his mother asked.

“No, I’m just glad you *finally* believe me,” he said, wiping tears from his face.

“We *do* believe you, Marty... we do!” she said. “We don’t understand it, and we can’t explain it. But somehow, Roscoe’s still here. He’s still with us.”

Walter noticed the time then looked at Martin. “You’d better eat something, buddy. Then I’ll drive you to school.”

Caroline opened the pantry and pulled out a box of cereal. Just then, she felt something cold pressing against her left leg. She looked down, but saw nothing there. She felt her leg with her hand and found it was wet! She quickly looked up at Martin, who was laughing at her from across the table. He had seen it all, and knew *exactly* what had happened.

The End