

Chapter 1

How I Got My Name, But Not My Dog

I've wanted a dog more than anything I ever wanted. Again, Mom had said no. We had just finished dinner one fall evening. She seemed to be in a fairly good mood, so I thought I would go for it. It wasn't working.

I pleaded with her, "Mom, why can't I have a dog? I'm 12 now and in the 7th grade. I know how to take care of it."

She said, like always, "No, the answer is still no. Who's going to walk the dog twice a day in the rain and snow? Who's going to take it to the vet and take care of it when it's sick? Who's going to pay the outrageous vet bills? Did you know it costs more to take a dog to the vet than for me to take you to the doctor? Who's going to pay for its food? Me, that's who. We're already on a real tight budget and we can't afford to pay for dog food and vet bills!"

As always, I promised, "I'll get a part-time job. I can deliver newspapers, or cut grass for the neighbors, or bag groceries at the grocery store, something to pay for the food and vet bills."

Then I made a big mistake. "Maybe we could ask Daddy."

"Don't start that again. You know I won't ask your father for any more money than the child support check. I have a hard enough time getting that out of him much less more for a dog."

My mom is tall and thin with curly reddish-brown hair that always looks like she just slept on it. She always looks tired and unhappy. She has circles under her eyes that never seem to go away. She doesn't sleep much and often works overtime and weekends at the factory to make more money.

That evening, she wore a loose cotton dress that was wrinkled and frayed at the edges. I should have known I was pushing her too hard. I should have just stopped. I don't know why I didn't.

I made it worse. "But, Mom, didn't Daddy tell us that he would help us if we really needed it?"

She snapped at me, "We don't really need a dog, so I'm not going to ask."

"But I can ask him to do it for me." That was it.

"Henrietta," Mom said sharply. "Enough! I said 'No' and that's final! Now, go do your homework before I get really cross."

"Oh, all right. I'm sorry I even brought it up."

I knew I had pushed her too far. She never called me 'Henrietta' unless she was really getting mad.

I got up from the small, wobbly kitchen table and shuffled down the narrow hall from the

kitchen to my bedroom. I opened the door and slammed it a little too hard, just to make a point. I could get mad too. I threw myself down on my twin bed and the rusty springs creaked and screeched.

I rolled over and sank into the deep hole in the middle of the old mattress. “Mom can be such a witch! I know I would do great with a dog. I'd brush him every day and walk him twice a day and take care of him when he was sick. I just know it would be the best!” I grumbled.

I didn't know then I was going to find out the very hard way that getting a dog was going to be far more difficult and more dangerous than I could have imagined. I know now. You know what? I would still have done everything, endured everything I did for the dog I love.

By that night when I had irritated Mom—again—I had wanted a dog for more than three years. Mom and Daddy separated and divorced three years ago. I remember that when I was about three, one of my first memories was they had a screaming fight. I don't remember how I felt, but I must have been terrified. Their fights kept on and on.

I always knew something terrible was wrong, but I didn't understand until I was 8; my father was a drunk, a really bad one.

Mom and Dad had tried to hide the truth from me since I was born. They usually sent me to my room. It was upstairs in our large house in the St. Brendan neighborhood, one of the best in our town. I couldn't make out what they were yelling in the kitchen; it was on the far side of the house from my bedroom.

One late night, I was already asleep when my father came home hours and hours after he should have been home. My mother, of course, waited up for him so she could yell at him.

This time they were so loud they woke me up. Startled, I thought, fearfully, “Not again! I'm sick and tired of this; they're driving me crazy!” I decided to march downstairs and tell them exactly what I thought about their fighting all the time.

I left my room, marched down the long hallway in a rotten mood, and started to go down the stairs. Just then, Daddy lurched out of the kitchen and collapsed on the floor. I stopped and just stared down at my father like I was peering through the longest, most horrifying tunnel in the world. I plopped down onto the second step and curled up in the corner, hoping Daddy and Mommy didn't see me.

My Mom walked around the corner and stood over my father. She growled, literally growled, “You blasted drunk! Every freaking night! I am so sick and tired of your stupidity. You are the world's biggest fool, and I am done, done! I've done everything I can do to help you! I've done everything I can do to protect Henrietta from this craziness. I dropped out of college for you. I married you because I loved you madly.

“We had a deal, and you've broken your promise thousands of times. The only bigger fool than you is me. I knew you drank too much in college. My friends told me you were an alcoholic and to stay away from you. I'm more stupid than you for believing every stinking, maudlin sob story,

every promise you made when I threatened to leave you. I believed every lie you told me. You are exactly what you say you are, a rotten bum, a worthless father! I'm done, I'm leaving."

I let out a small sob, and Mom jerked her head up and saw me curled on the top step.

"Oh baby, I'm so sorry," she said as she ran up the stairs. "Your Daddy isn't feeling well. He has a bad stomach ache. He's going to sleep downstairs tonight so he can be near the bathroom. Honey, it's alright, so let's go back to bed. I'll tuck you in and read you your favorite story."

She took my head, and we stepped up onto the hallway. I turned around and looked back down the stairs, as Daddy groaned and flopped over on his other side.

He wailed, "I'm gonna die. Get me a drink!"

"Is Daddy really a drunk? I thought only bums and the homeless were drunks?" I pleaded with my Mom.

"No, no! Daddy isn't a drunk. He just drinks a little too much sometimes. He's going to be fine, sweetheart," Mom said.

"But you just called him a drunk and said nasty things about him!" I protested as Mom gently led me into my room and shut the door.

"I just felt a little upset with him for coming home late. That's all. I don't hate your Daddy. I love your Daddy and I especially love you, my wonderful Henrietta," she cooed at me as she lifted me up onto the bed and pulled the covers back over me.

She turned on the Little Pony light next to my bed and started reading my favorite story about the adventures of Ramona Quimby. I loved her at that age because she had a funny name like mine and she wasn't very good at following the rules like me either.

I shut my eyes and pretended to fall asleep, breathing softly. Mom read a few more pages, put the book down, kissed me on my forehead, and whispered, "I love you Henrietta more than my own life. I'm always going to take care of you..."

After she left and shut the door, I lurched straight up, shocked by what I had seen and heard. My father WAS a drunk—he came home like he did tonight almost every night. They had been fighting about it for years, probably since before I was born. Worst of all, my Mom lied to me! How could she do that? Maybe she wanted to protect me, but she always insisted I tell her the truth! Doesn't she owe me the truth, too, now that I'm old enough to know the difference!

I felt betrayed! I was scared because I had only one other person in the world I could trust, Grandpa. But he lived on a farm more than 50 miles west of town and he wasn't feeling as well as he used to.

I felt enraged at my Dad for being a drunk! How could he do such a thing? Didn't he care at all about me and Mom! I was afraid the answer was a big, fat NO! I had heard some other kids at St. Brendan's whispering about their dads drinking too much and how their Moms had divorced their dads and forced them to give them more money than I could imagine!

My mom—of course, liar that she was—didn't leave my Dad then. She kept giving him “one more chance” for another year. Once I knew the awful truth, I started listening to their fights every time they got started—which was almost every day. It was always about the same thing—his drinking and coming home late. Usually he was broke so we never had enough money.

That didn't make any sense because he had a great job as the general manager of the largest department store in town. We lived in a large house in what I was told was the part of town where all the lawyers, doctors, and bankers lived. I had a huge bedroom and my own bathroom.

We had a large backyard with a 150-year-old oak tree. Dad built me a tree house where the enormous trunk split into five branches. I practically lived in that treehouse when the weather was warm. It was my private palace where I ruled a peaceful world of green fields and birds singing me to sleep every night.

I attended the elite Catholic elementary school, St. Brendan's. Our nickname was the Navigators or ‘Gators’ to make us sound tougher than we were.

The real name honored an Irish monk who supposedly discovered America about 500 years before the Vikings showed up in what is now Canada and a thousand years before Columbus tripped over the islands in the Caribbean. The dummy—Columbus, that is—thought he had reached India. That's why those islands south of Florida are called the “West Indies.” The ancient written records strongly favor St. Brendan and his hardy band of monks who sailed in a tiny boat, so good for them!

We weren't Catholics—we weren't much of any kind of religion—but my parents didn't want me to go to public school because they thought the public schools had bad reputations for not teaching very well. Actually, I think my parents didn't like poor people; they seemed kind of conceited that way. St. B's, as we called it, wasn't as expensive as the super prep school, Briarhurst Academy, but it had a solid academic reputation.

We had so many wonderful things, but I learned that nothing could stop my Dad from drinking. I listened when he was too drunk to get into the house by himself. Lots of times, he banged on the door for Mom to let him in because he couldn't find the key.

A few times, he fell down and passed out in the front yard. Or his so-called friends dumped him in the front yard because he was too drunk to drive and they could not get out of the car without falling over. It's a miracle they never crashed and killed themselves or somebody else.

Mom had to go out to the yard and drag him inside before he embarrassed us before the neighbors. But they all knew anyway—by the time I was 9, the kids at my school, even the ones whose dads were drunks themselves, used to torment me.

The time my Dad was passed out in the yard, and the sprinkler system turned on and soaked him became unbearable for me. He screamed and cussed so loud that he woke some of the neighbors. They stared at him from their front yards like he was a crazy man, which is exactly what he was at the time. And I heard about my Dad “going for a swim in your front yard” at St.

B's for weeks!

I also learned then that for a couple of years, he had been taking afternoons off from work to drink. He started missing more and more days of work. His bosses in another city often couldn't reach him when there was a problem at the store.

Finally, the headquarters sent someone to check up on him. They found out about his heavy drinking and how much time he spent drinking at his favorite bars instead of managing the store. Mom told me later that his bosses warned him time after time, but he never listened and kept getting drunk. When I was eight, it all hit the fan; his company got tired of his behavior and fired him.

That was the last straw for Mom. A few days later, while Daddy was out drinking with his buddies, she packed up our clothes and we left in the middle of the night. We went to stay with Grandpa at his small farm, the place I loved more than anywhere in the world!

That was more than four years ago. It seems like forever. I had hoped Mom would begin to get over their bitter divorce. But whenever I talked about asking Daddy for anything, Mom got very upset.

At least, I got to see my dad on Wednesday night, two weekends a month, and a month in the summer. He never drank in front of me when I stayed at his house. I sneaked around looking for his hiding places, but I never found any booze. I was happy he had quit drinking, but for a long time, I had no idea how that had happened.

Mom apparently knew he had stopped drinking, but that didn't help her feel any better. Once I heard her tell her sister on the phone, "I couldn't help him. I was such a failure as a wife. I'm so afraid I can't take care of Henrietta and lose her, too. Oh, Sis..." She cried softly into the phone.

Maybe she felt so bad because Daddy had been doing so much better for more than two years, she was working in a factory, and we lived in a small house in what we used to think was a "bad neighborhood."

Mostly, I think she was upset because Dad was about to marry Kim. Kim is nice to me, but it will be weird for her to be my stepmother. Kim is really young, maybe young enough to be my older sister. But she is pretty—long brunette hair, blue eyes, slim figure, fair skin. She looks really fit, like she works out at the gym all the time.

After Mom found out about Kim, Mom and Daddy got into a huge fight about Kim so she and I hadn't gotten to know each other very well. The fight was about me visiting Dad when Kim was there at the same time. He had started going out with her about a year after they separated, while Mom and he were still fighting about the divorce.

When Mom found out that Kim was staying over when I was there, she hit the roof. She stopped letting me go to Daddy's for the weekend. To retaliate, Dad refused to pay child support for months. Mom refused to let him near our house. They sued each other in court. Without Daddy's support checks, we had so little money we even had to get food stamps one month.

Finally, some guy they called a mediator got them together. Mom said he convinced them how expensive and painful it would be if they kept fighting with each other. Neither one of them could afford to spend thousands of dollars on lawyers to fight over me.

Mom said if Kim would not stay overnight, I could go back to visiting Dad on weekends. He wasn't happy, but he agreed. I felt relieved that he still cared about me since he wanted to see me more than he wanted Kim to stay over. After that, I only saw Kim for a few hours a month. Dad and I were almost always busy doing something by ourselves, so I didn't get to know her very well.

That happened about a year ago. Things got better between Mom and Dad mostly because after the divorce was finalized, they avoided each other and hardly ever talked to each other.

My Dad must be almost 40 by now, really old. But Kim and Daddy seem to love each other a lot, though I still wish Daddy loved Mom. I guess that Mom still loves Daddy.

I can tell she still feels hurt and angry because she endured so many terrible years and she could never get him to stop drinking. Now, Kim gets to marry Daddy when he is sober and has a new job managing a small clothing store.

I feel sorry for Mom. She's had a very hard time of it. We could have stayed at Grandpa's. But he died two years ago just after they finally got divorced. He just had a heart attack one day while he was pulling weeds in his garden. He fell over and died and no one was there with him. I was in school and Mom was out looking for a better job.

There were all kinds of serious problems because he didn't leave a will. Grandpa didn't leave us much money. Mom said the state took a lot of that in probate taxes, that is, taxes the state collects from the money someone leaves when they die. If we had kept those taxes, we could have lived on the farm for at least a couple of more years.

After Grandpa died, Mom found a full-time job as a machine operator at the car parts factory to try to save the farm. She took care of a machine that she said did nothing all day but press out different sizes and shapes of superplastic, like parts for bumpers. Any time they needed a different size, shape, or color of a superplastic car part, she had to change the attachments and push buttons on the machine's computer.

She said the job was boring, but it was a job she had to keep. I had learned when I was 10 Mom had dropped out of college not long before I was born. I believe I was the reason why she never completed college. I often feel really guilty about that.

Mom tells me all the time she is doing the best she can for us right now. I know she is, but she has had a very tough time.

My Mom tried as hard as she could to keep the farm, but we lost it because my Dad's small alimony check and her factory job didn't pay enough for her to keep up with the monthly mortgage and the annual property taxes. No way she could afford to keep me at St. Brendan's and Dad was struggling as much as we were.

So we had to move and the bank took back the farm. Last I heard, it was still unsold, sitting there vacant.

Like I said, I love that farm more than any place in the world. Since I was a baby, I had spent summers there with Grandpa. He taught me how to ride a horse, drive a small tractor, plow straight rows, plant seeds correctly, and fertilize and water them in the right amounts so they would thrive.

He was amazing! He grew three crops a year—broccoli in the early spring, corn and beans in mid-summer, and kale and cabbage in the late summer and fall. He even raised tomatoes and lettuce in a small greenhouse throughout the winter. He also had a small orchard with apple, pear, and apricot trees.

The most delicious thing in the world is a fresh apricot pulled perfectly ripe from the tree in late July. You bite into it and the sweet juice dribbles off your lips and onto your hands. The soft flesh melts in your mouth and slides down your throat. Wonderful! I climbed into the trees every July and ate all the apricots I wanted.

I also helped Grandpa sell his vegetables at a little stand by the side of the road. People who had known my Grandpa for years would make special trips from town to visit and buy his vegetables and fruits. They told me his were the best in the area. I felt very proud that my Grandpa could grow from a tiny seed and some black dirt something so delicious and that so many people enjoyed.

After we lost the farm, Mom rented a small rundown house in what we used to call an “iffy” part of town. At first, I felt blown away and depressed. The house needed a “deep clean” of its filthy, moldy vinyl siding, the lawn was mostly bare dirt and weeds. The inside walls were paneled in a godawful fake pine, the kitchen was tiny with old appliances, and the bedrooms were tiny. I had about a foot on each side of my lousy bed to move and only a few feet at the foot for a small desk.

Our neighbors lived in the same kind of houses, but you could tell the owners from the renters. The owners tried to keep the yards up and the outsides clean while the rentals were a lot more like ours. Mom said the landlord was a cheap so-and-so and expected us to take care of everything out of her nearly empty pockets. Not likely.

We had moved at the beginning of summer so I mostly hid out in the house all summer and helped Mom clean the place up. Sometimes, I felt angry and betrayed that I had had to leave both our big house and much worse, my Grandpa’s farm.

When school started at the end of an always-hot August, it turned out, though, the kids in my 7th grade class and the school were okay. St. B’s had been “lily white” with the occasional minority sprinkled in to make them feel “diverse.” Ha!

Compared to St. B’s, my school, George Washington Carver Middle, is a United Nations of kids. There are all kinds—blacks, Latinos, Vietnamese, Korean, whites, even real Africans from Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

I was told as soon as I enrolled, the school is named after a famous black scientist who invented, or advocated for, hundreds of ways for poor farmers in the south to make more money by growing peanuts and sweet potatoes. Born as a slave during the Civil War, Carver endured serious discrimination as he fought for a college education. But his genius overcame all obstacles, and he became the first African-American—and descendant of slaves—to earn advanced degrees at white colleges and receive accolades—awards—from white institutions.

He is credited with doing more than anyone else to save the peanut industry in the south, improve the lives of farmers who followed his advice, and create thousands of new jobs. He was considered a tremendous asset to the entire country.

St. Brendan's was supposed to be "the" school to go to in our town, even more than the even snootier Briarhurst. Maybe, maybe not. The girls in my class at St. B's were a lot more selfish and snotty than the Carver girls. All the popular girls at St. B's did was hang out in their cliques and gossip about each other, or text each other about which boy liked which girl. Who had just broken up with whom. All kinds of junk.

I certainly wasn't one of the preppies. I wasn't even a geek, a Star Wars junkie, a techie, a gamer, or a skater. I just liked to play sports, so I guess I would have been a jock. But St. B's didn't have any organized girls' teams at my elementary school. I was good at every sport I played at recess or after school on the playground near my house. Mom said Grandpa had been an excellent athlete in high school and college. He played basketball and baseball and could run faster than anybody else on his teams. I guess I got my love for sports and my speed from him.

In elementary school, I always made the boys mad when I outraced them, or outthit them in softball, or won every kickball game at recess. They didn't like me much, and some of the popular girls thought I wasn't really a girl. They spread a rumor I liked girls, but that was stupid. I just wanted to play sports, and my favorite—and best—sport was soccer.

At Carver, I felt a lot happier at first because they have an after-school program with a mixed boys and girls soccer team nicknamed the Redhawks. We play in the spring and the fall in a league against other after-school teams scattered across town in the "iffy" neighborhoods. The other teams call us the "Peanuts" when they want to try to make us mad. The Redhawks never get mad, we get even.

During that fall, I was making good grades and our soccer team was winning. I was one of the best—well, I thought I was the best—player on the team. I felt pretty happy most of the time, even with Mom feeling so tired and so depressed. I really missed Grandpa and I didn't see Dad as often as I would have liked—now that he was sober. But I did my best to shut all that out of my mind.

That's how we got to where we were that evening when I had pushed Mom too far about getting a dog—again!

That night, I felt angry at myself because I hadn't meant to push Mom so far. She seemed so

mad I was sure she would never let me have a dog.

Sitting on my bed after my fight with Mom, I looked across my room to the picture of Grandpa on my small desk. His round, smiling face always made me feel like he was looking down on me from heaven, if there is such a place. I hope so just so Grandpa can be there when I get there—IF I get there! I love every line on his round face; they look like the longitude and latitude lines on a globe. His pale gray-blue eyes are almost squinched out of sight from his wide smile. His head is bald and his body is pear-shaped. With a white beard and mustache and the right red suit, he would have been the perfect Santa Claus.

Grandpa had promised me that he would buy me a dog on my 12th birthday and keep it for me on the farm. Then he had died just after he had made his promise and just as the worst of the divorce reached a peak.

Now, I'll never have a dog to take to our farm and run in the fields and harass Grandpa's old cow. His old cow Gertie and pony Shelly are long gone. Mom told me she had found good homes for them, but I wasn't sure. I tried not to think about butchers and glue factories; I hang onto my memories of milking Gertie and drinking the milk right out of the pail and pulling myself onto Shelly's saddle and falling off and getting on and falling off until I could stay on by myself.

So many memories raced around in my head, reminding me how wonderful it had been before it became so awful. Now with Kim and the marriage, the nightmare, at least my Mom's, is starting all over again.

I am beginning to get very worried about Mom because she is even more depressed and more upset than she has been since the divorce. She is cranky and snaps at me all the time. I feel bad when I push her buttons when I know I shouldn't. But she just doesn't seem to like being around me much.

I am afraid she blames me for not graduating from college so she could have a much better job and live as well as she used to. She's never said this to me, but like I said, I have heard her complain to her sister about my birth and what it did to her.

All she does is get up early and go to work, come home late and exhausted, throw some dinner together, and go to bed. Day after day, that's all she does. She often works on Saturdays and Sundays too. If she is too wired to sleep, she sits in front of the TV watching whatever blood-and-guts cop or doctor show is on that night. She often falls asleep in front of the TV while I do my homework, or she stays awake way past midnight. She never goes out, she never has any fun, and she never spends much time with me.

All she does is tell me what to do and when to do it: "Get up, eat breakfast, get ready for school, hurry up—you're late, wash the dishes, do your homework, brush your teeth, go to bed." Every day the same thing.

At least now, she calls me "Harry" and not "Henrietta." I hate that name with a passion. It's so...so...uncool. It sounds like I'm somebody's crazy great grandmother who lived 100 years ago!

My Mom named me “Henrietta,” over my father’s objections! I was sort of named after my grandpa. His name was Henry Hazzard Stephens, but he had always been called Harry.

I knew that I was named 'Henrietta' after him. I had been called 'Hetty' since I was born. I hated it every time anybody called me “Hetty” or “Henrietta.” Yuck, but I couldn’t do anything about it—until the day of Grandpa’s funeral.

I didn’t feel anything most of that awful day. I didn’t even cry. Mom wouldn’t stop sobbing. At the viewing in the funeral home, I hated it when my Mom grabbed my arm and took me to look at Grandpa in a tacky coffin. He didn’t look like my Grandpa at all; he looked like some fake, pasty caricature stolen from a creepy wax museum.

After that, I only remember being in a daze. Some of Mom’s co-workers from her job came, sat with her, and hugged her. A lot of Grandpa’s old friends came, patted me on the head or shoulder like I was a little girl and told me how sorry they felt for Mom and me. They said nice things I couldn’t bear to hear. At least, I didn’t have to smile and pretend to be grateful. I think I even saw Daddy in the back of the church out of the corner of my eye, but he never came over to me, so I’m not sure.

During the service, I didn’t even listen to what the preacher was saying. Lots of people got up to speak about my Grandpa. I guess they said what a great person he was, but I knew that. I didn’t need to hear them say it. I just sat there, dressed in an itchy black dress Mom insisted she had to buy for me to wear that dreadful day.

Grandpa would have been happier if they had buried him in his overalls instead of a cheap-looking suit. I would have been happier if I had worn jeans and a T-shirt. I wanted to break a hoe in half and put it in his casket since he loved his garden, but Mom forbade that. She just didn’t get what was truly important to Grandpa and me.

After the service, we drove out to the cemetery in our old compact car because we couldn’t afford the traditional limousine the funeral home wanted Mom to rent for some outrageous price. They put Grandpa’s casket in the ground after the preacher prattled on a little more and said a prayer that didn’t mean much to me. The preacher didn’t even know my Grandpa. God loves him, I love him, and Mom loves him. There wasn’t a lot the preacher, who was obviously reading from some script, could say that meant anything at all.

After we left the cemetery, we returned to our farm with some of Mom’s friends and relatives I didn’t know. There were tons of food—That’s what other people do when somebody dies. They bring food for the get-together after the cemetery and leave some for us to eat. It is a traditional way to show us that they care.

Practically, all the food helped Mom so she didn’t have to cook for a few days, but I really had NOT looked forward to eating sweet potato casserole or green bean casserole for a week. Mushroom soup and greasy onion rings on beans?! Who thought of that awful idea?

As people mingled around Grandpa's house, I sat down in a chair out of the way. I wasn't moving. I was hardly thinking. People spoke in a quiet buzz around me.

Suddenly, for some reason I still don't understand, I stood up and announced loudly: "From now on, my name is Harry."

Mom looked at me in shock. She burst into tears and covered her face with her hands. Her friends and relatives stared at me with weird looks and gave little nervous laughs.

I repeated, "From now on, my name is Harry. Don't ever call me 'Hetty' or 'Henrietta' again."

Mom walked over me and hugged me. "Okay, Henri--, eh, Harry, we'll talk about it later."

"No," I said. "There's nothing to talk about. My name is Harry, not Hetty or Henrietta."

I walked straight out of the living room through all the people to my bedroom at the farm. My bed was covered with people's coats and jackets, so I dumped them out in the hall and shut the door.

Since that day, I have done my best to make everyone call me "Harry." At St. B's, I had to fight some of the boys—no big deals, just a few scuffles. Some of the girls called me names like "lesbo" or "dyke." I didn't care.

At Carver, my new school, the only time "Henrietta" was said formally was the first day of school during roll call. I stood up and told Ms. Andrews, my homeroom teacher, "My name is Harry. You have to change the roll." She looked stunned but said she would consider it. After school, she called my Mom and confirmed that I had to be called "Harry." I felt happy that Mom had stood up for me—for once.

So, except for that time or when my math teacher Mrs. Jackson gets mad at me, everyone at my new school calls me "Harry." Oh yeah, some of the kids tease me, especially Rory, the other "best" soccer player on the Redhawks, and "Peanut, Butter, and Jelly."

That's what I call his trio of groupies. The "PBJs" are Peter, Bu, and Jorge. I'll give the PBJs credit for one thing—they do know how to play hard-nosed soccer.

"Peanut" is a tall, thin African-American the color of a roasted peanut; he is a tough defender who protects our goalie, a tall, awesome Ethiopian girl named Magda.

Magda must have been born to be a soccer goalie because her name means "high tower" and she blocks every shot that comes her way. She's given up only one goal in 15 games. She's taller than I am, about 5 feet 10 inches, and she's only 13. The high school basketball, volleyball, and soccer coaches are already fighting about which elite high school she gets the best scholarship to attend.

"Butter" is a Vietnamese named Bu. He is as slippery as his nickname. He steals the ball from the other attackers before they even know he's there.

"Jelly" is Jorge, who is as bouncy and as funny as his nickname implies. He is our best player at intercepting passes and bouncing them to Rory or me as we attack the other team's goal. Jorge is first-generation Latino. The country his family comes from is kinda vague; he never talks about

it and says he doesn't know since he was born here and his parents never talk about their homeland.

The PBJs follow Rory around like a bunch of puppies and do whatever he tells them to do.

They are the core of the team, and thanks to Coach Bill, we have gelled into an awesome team. I wish Grandpa could see me play so he could laugh his deep laugh and take credit for giving me his athletic genes.

I miss Grandpa so much, especially days like today when Mom is so unhappy and Dad is about to marry Kim. Whenever it got bad between Mom and Dad, or I just needed to talk to someone, I could always sit down with Grandpa and talk to him. He always listened and knew just the right thing to say. He'd crack some dumb joke about why the chicken crossed the road—and he always had a different silly answer. Like to get to the corn on the cob on the other side or chase the wayward rooster back home.

Or he'd ask me which came first, the chicken or the egg? He'd always answered, "What difference does it make? I loved fried eggs and fried chicken!"

Or he'd just listen until I finished spilling my guts, usually something about my Mom being so unhappy or the teasing I got at my elementary school St. B's for being a good athlete.

He never tried to tell me what to do. He always said, "You'll know in your heart the right thing to do. When you figure that out, just go do it, and it will turn out right in the end."

That night, I believed with all my heart the best thing in the world for me was to have a dog. Not a fancy purebred like the ones the kids at St. B's used to show off at our silly annual dog show. Instead, a stray or rescue dog that needed somebody to love and care for him and treat him like a real dog instead of a furry pampered prince.

I thought all I had to do was bide my time and wait out my Mom. She'd come around sooner or later. Maybe after she'd calm down after the wedding and I'd started earning some money doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. That was the right thing to do. I knew Grandpa would think so, too.