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THE TROUBLE WITH FIFI

LAUNZ BURCH

“It’s from Dad’s laboratory.” Bridie held up a clear tube, with something green in the bottom.

“What is it?” asked Sanjay. Bridie was his best friend in the world, even though she was a girl, and the smartest kid in the school. Other kids teased him because he didn’t talk the same way they did, and he came from a different country, but not Bridie. She didn’t think it was funny that Sanjay had chickens in his back yard, or that he wore a turban on his head — she even liked the spicy-hot curries he brought to school for lunch. She was a good friend, all right ... except when her curiosity got them both into trouble.

“It works on genetics,” said Bridie. “It *regresses* things.” She pronounced the word carefully. “That means they become like their ancient ancestors. I saw some mice that were the size of rabbits. They had long, shaggy hair. My dad said that was what mice were like, a million years ago.”

“Wow,” said Sanjay. “Hey — can we try it out on something?”

“Why do you think I snitched it?” A broad grin stretched across Bridie’s freckled face. “Dad says they’ve just about worked out how to reverse the process too, so whatever we do won’t be permanent. I’m going to give some to my mother’s stupid poodle.”

“Fifi?” Sanjay looked at the fat little dog on the living-room rug. “Won’t it hurt her?”

Bridie shrugged. “The mice looked okay,” she said.

Fifi just sat there, her breath wheezing as she panted.

Bridie fetched a saucer of milk, and poured just a few drops of the green liquid into it. The rest she put safely away on a high shelf. “Here, Fifi,” she said, putting the saucer down in front of the poodle.

Fifi sniffed at the milk.

“I don’t think she likes it,” said Sanjay.

“No — look, she’s lapping it up!” Bridie wriggled with excitement, dancing back and forth on the rug. “Look at her go!”

The fluffy dog drank all of the milk. Then she heaved herself upright, waddled into the kitchen and ate up her whole bowl of food. When she had licked the bowl clean, she sat up and begged for more. As soon as Bridie poured another helping of dog food, Fifi began to gobble it down. She ate all of the food in her bowl, had a big drink of water, and begged again.

“She sure is hungry,” said Sanjay.

“Yeah, but she’s still a dumb old poodle.” Bridie folded her arms. “Maybe she needs more of the serum?”

Sanjay looked at Fifi. She really didn’t look any different. She was still fat and wheezy, only now she was whining and tilting her head, trying to get more food. “Maybe she’s eating so she can grow,” said Sanjay. “You said those mice turned as big as rabbits. They must have eaten a lot of food.”

“Hey, yeah,” agreed Bridie. “I bet that’s it.” She grabbed up the half-full bag of dog kibble, and emptied it into a bucket from the pantry. Fifi whined, and jumped, and stuck her head into the bucket. Gobbling, smacking, slurping noises filled the air.

“Wow,” said Bridie. “You must have been right. I wonder how much she’s going to eat?”

“And drink,” said Sanjay. “She’ll want a lot of water.”

Bridie nodded. “You get out one of Mum’s big salad bowls and fill it with water. I’m going out to the garage. Mum and Dad get the dog food delivered in bulk, because it’s cheaper that way. I think there’s five or six thirty-kilo bags of the stuff.”

“That’s a lot of food,” said Sanjay doubtfully. Fifi still had her head in the bucket, chomping noisily at her food, but she didn’t look any bigger. “How will she fit it all in?”

Bridie shrugged. “The mice did it,” she said. “Maybe if I just lock her in the garage... I can pour the bags of food out in the back corner of the laundry, and I can blow up the little paddling pool and fill it with water. Mum’s away tonight, and Dad will never notice if Fifi isn’t around.”

Fifi stopped eating, and pulled her head out of the bucket. She looked around, and let fly an enormous burp. Then she whined, and cocked her head on one side again.

Sanjay looked into the bucket. “Empty!” he said. “That was really fast. I think your plan about putting her in the garage with the food is a good idea.”

Bridie frowned, and pushed her short blonde hair back from her eyes. “Does she look bigger to you?”

“I don’t know,” said Sanjay after a moment. The fluffy little grey dog did seem a little larger, but maybe that was just because he was expecting something to happen. “But her belly doesn’t look all full and round, the way it ought to. She’s just eaten a whole bucket of kibble!”

“That’s true,” said Bridie. She bent, and picked up the little dog. “Phoo! She’s heavier, all right. And she smells awful — but that’s nothing new. Come on, Sanj. Help me set up the garage.”

Sanjay followed Bridie through the side door in the kitchen, back into the laundry half of the garage. Fifi wriggled and whined and grunted the whole way. The instant Bridie put her down on the concrete floor, the little poodle bolted across the room and scratched at a tall wooden cupboard in the corner.

“The dog food is in there,” Bridie said. “I guess she’s still hungry.”

“Wow,” said Sanjay.

By the time the paddling pool was blown up and filled with water, Fifi had eaten her way through one full sack of kibble, and was starting on the second. She was noticeably bigger now. There was no denying it. Her nose was longer too, and her hair was thicker, and less curly.

“She’s definitely changing,” said Sanjay.

“Too right,” agreed Bridie happily. “Mum’s going to have kittens when she sees this! Hope Dad finishes work on the reversing agent soon!”

Sanjay glanced at his watch. “I’d better get going,” he said. “Mum’s expecting me home soon. You’ll let me know what happens, won’t you?”

“You bet,” said Bridie, watching Fifi lap frantically at the water in the paddling pool. “This is going to be *cool as!*”

Sanjay wasn’t exactly sure of that, but it had been interesting so far. Most of Bridie’s ideas turned out to be interesting. With a last wave at his friend and her not-so-little-any-more dog, he let himself out of the house — but not without a short stop in the kitchen, first.

The next day, while Sanjay ate his breakfast, the telephone rang in the hallway. Sanjay’s mum was busy at the stove. “Can you get that, Sanjay?” she said.

“Sure thing,” he said, and put down his roti.

It was Bridie on the phone. “Don’t say anything to anyone,” she said. “Just get on your bike and get over here as fast as you can.”

Sanjay glanced warily around the hallway. Nobody was watching him. “Did something happen to Fifi?” he said quietly.

“You might say that. Just hurry up.” With a click, the phone went dead.

When Sanjay reached Bridie’s house, she rushed him through the front door. “Hurry up,” she whispered, looking nervously around. “She’s playing in the back yard.”

“What’s happened?” asked Sanjay as Bridie slid the bolt on the door.

Bridie just shook her head, her blue eyes wide. She led Sanjay to the living room at the back, and pointed out the window.

Sanjay’s knees turned to jelly. He sat down with a thump. “What is *that?*”

Bridie sat down on the floor, and covered her face with her hands. “It’s Fifi,” she whispered. “I think.”

Sanjay stared. In the back yard, by the clothesline, stood an enormous, shaggy beast. On all fours, it was as tall as a man. Its eyes were yellow as fire. Slobber drooled from its long snout. Sanjay shivered, noticing the huge white teeth that chewed on Fifi's squeaky rubber ball. "No *way!*" he said.

Bridie looked up at him and nodded. She was pale underneath her freckles. "I think she's become a tyre wolf."

"A what?" Sanjay stuck one finger in his ear and twisted it back and forth. Surely he hadn't heard that right.

"A Dire Wolf," Bridie explained. "I read about them. They were huge wolves that lived thousands of years ago. They were very fierce."

Sanjay looked out the window at the monster. Fifi the Dire Wolf growled in a voice like thunder. With a toss of her head, she threw her squeaky ball across the yard and raced after it with great, bounding strides. "It still acts like Fifi," Sanjay said. The great beast caught up with its squeaky toy and pounced on it with a terrifying snarl. "That is so weird," marvelled Sanjay. "Like seeing Jaws in a goldfish bowl, or something."

"It's true. She does still act the same," said Bridie. "That's the worst bit. She finally caught the cat next door this morning, after chasing it all these years. It ran up a tree, but the tree wasn't tall enough."

Sanjay tore his gaze from the creature outside, and stared at his friend. "What happened?"

Bridie snapped her teeth together with a click. "One bite."

Sanjay whistled. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," said Bridie. "But we'd better figure out something fast. The postman is coming soon."

It was like someone poured ice-water down Sanjay's neck. The hairs all over his body lifted, and he got huge goose-bumps on his arms and legs. "Fifi *hates* the postman," he said, slumping to the floor next to Bridie. "We should call the police."

"Get real! We'd *never* get out of prison. I'm going to get into enough trouble from my dad. I'm not calling the police." Bridie shook her head. "I figure we have less than an hour to think of a way to keep Fifi from eating that postman alive."

Bridie glanced at the back door. Sanjay looked too, and laughed when he saw Fifi's leash hanging on a hook. "That will never work

now,” he said. “Even if she still had her collar and we could hook it up, she’d just drag us around like a couple of water-skiers.” He pushed his hand up under his turban and scratched his scalp. “Maybe we could lure her inside and lock the doors?”

Bridie shook her head. “She’d hear the postie’s motorbike and just go *crazy*! I bet she could smash right through the front door if she tried. And besides, do you really want to be in the same house with that?”

Sanjay shuddered at the idea. “How do zookeepers do this sort of thing?” he wondered out loud.

“Drugs,” replied Bridie, staring out the window at the monster wolf. “*Drugs*,” she repeated. “Of course! That’s it, Sanjay — we’ll put sleeping pills into some meat, and feed it to Fifi. Then, when she falls asleep, we can tie her up.”

“Will that work?” Sanjay asked doubtfully. “You’d need a lot of pills, wouldn’t you?”

“Only one way to find out,” said Bridie, springing to her feet. “Mum keeps a whole bunch of sleeping pills in her office, with her other samples. I’m not supposed to go in there, but I think this is an emergency, don’t you?”

Thinking of the postman, Sanjay bit his lip and nodded.

Bridie retrieved a dozen sample packs from her mother’s office. Meanwhile, Sanjay pulled three roasts out of the big freezer and slammed them in the microwave oven. As soon as the meat was soft enough, they cut deep slits in the red, oozy flesh and stuck the pills inside. Finally, they opened an upstairs window that looked onto the back yard, and threw the drugged meat down to the enormous wolf.

They watched in horror and fascination as Fifi gobbled up all the meat, crunching the bones with her great big teeth. When it was all gone, she sat down and scratched behind her ear.

“That went well,” said Sanjay. “I think. How long will it take, do you suppose?”

“I don’t know,” said Bridie. She looked at her watch. “It had better be fast. The postie is due any minute now.”

Sanjay frowned. Was that...? He listened again, and his belly did flip-flops. “I think I can hear his motorbike,” he said. “What will we do?”

Bridie’s eyes opened wide. “It *is* him,” she said, and looked out the window again. Fifi the Dire Wolf stood, legs braced, her ears up.

Deep in her throat, she growled. "It's not going to work," Bridie said. "We have to go out and warn the postman!"

"No way!" cried Sanjay. "I'm not going out there!"

"We have to!" Bridie yelled, and she clattered down the stairs with Sanjay on her heels. At the bottom, they stopped to peer through the window in the back door.

"Look!" shouted Sanjay. "It's working!"

Fifi the Giant Killer Poodle Dire Wolf didn't look well. Her head and tail hung low, and her long red tongue lolled. She took one slow step, then another. Suddenly, she lost her balance and staggered sideways into the hedge. With an effort, she freed herself, only to fall nose-first onto the lawn. Lifting her huge, shaggy head, Fifi opened her powerful jaws and gave a long, sad howl.

Then she passed out.

"Finally," said Bridie. "Good thing, too. That was all the sleeping pills Mum had!"

Sanjay's heart pounded, and his hands were slick with sweat. He watched the fallen beast as the buzz of the postie's motorbike swelled, then paused ... and then, as it faded into the distance and the wolf remained still, Sanjay heaved a huge sigh of relief. "Quick," he said. "Let's get her tied up before those pills wear off!"

Bridie searched the house for things they could use to tie Fifi, while Sanjay put his Boy Scout training to good use. Even though the huge wolf was fast asleep, she was still awesomely scary up close. She even smelled scary, somehow — musky and dangerous, not just stinky like a small, fat dog. Sanjay felt strong ropes of muscle underneath her rough fur as he worked, and her teeth were wicked, jagged white knives. Sweat trickled down his forehead, and stung his eyes, but he didn't dare pause to wipe his face. His hands shook as he made sure his knots were extra tight.

At last, Bridie put her hand on his shoulder. "That's it," she said. "There's nothing left. Not so much as a shoelace." They had used every piece of rope in the house, and all the electric cords that hung in the garage. They had even wrapped Fifi's terrible jaws with four rolls of strong tape, and a ball of string from the kitchen drawer.

"She looks like a mummy," said Sanjay, wiping his forehead. "What will we do with her now?"

“Leave her there,” answered Bridie. “My dad will know what to do. I’m going to get the rest of the serum and flush it down down the toilet. No—” she paused. “First I’m going to mix it up with bleach, and then flush it. Don’t want any gigantic Dire Rats coming out of the sewers!”

“Wait!” said Sanjay, but Bridie was off like a shot. With a sigh, he dragged himself into the house after her. As he made his way through the lounge room, Bridie staggered back out of the kitchen. Her face was whiter than he’d ever seen it. Even her lips were white.

“It’s gone!” she yelped. “What happened to the rest of the serum?”

Sanjay scuffed at the floor with his shoe. “I took it home,” he admitted. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d mind. I fed it to our chickens, as a surprise for my family. Now we’ll have great, big, tasty birds for our feast days.”

Bridie took a half step, and put her hand to her face. She swayed, and then her legs just seemed to fold up under her, and she sat down with a crash. “You ... you didn’t!” she whispered.

“Sure I did,” said Sanjay. “It’s not like they’re going to turn into Dire Chickens or anything. I figure we can handle a few wild jungle birds, or whatever.”

Bridie put her head between her knees, and covered the back of her neck with her hands. “Oh my God,” she moaned.

“You don’t look so good,” said Sanjay. He was starting to get that sinking feeling again. “What’s wrong?”

“You didn’t know?” One blue eye peeked up at him from under a curtain of sweat-lank hair.

“Know what?” Sanjay frowned. The feeling in his belly got stronger.

Bridie shook her head. “Chickens are birds, Sanjay. And birds evolved from *dinosaurs*.”

For a moment, the two looked at each other. Then, in the distance, something *roared*.

“Uh-oh,” said Sanjay...