

Distracted

When I was nine years old there were three dogs named Lassie in our neighborhood. Well .. OK ... maybe only two at the same time. The first Lassie was run over by the Salvation Army truck that came to pick up Mr. O'Reilly's furniture after he died of Malaria. In truth he probably died of a heart attack or some disease we kids couldn't pronounce. But we did know how to say Malaria and our young minds needed drama to balance the unbelievable fact of death, even a death from old age. Drama may be why we believed Mr. Belcher was eaten by a tiger in Mexico and why Mrs. Lambertini was rubbed out by the mob.

Lassie was a popular dog name because of the famous canine movie star. Rin Tin Tin was also a famous movie star, but I never heard of anyone in our neighborhood calling their dog Rin Tin Tin. Or even Rinty, that particular dog star's nickname. How Rin Tin Tin came to have his name in the first place was a mystery to me. I asked Mr. Banaszewski who ran a butcher shop where I was often sent on errands by my mother.

"Who would name a dog Rin Tin Tin?" I asked of the man. "Only a Chinaman," he replied.

"You think Rin Tin Tin is Chinese?" I asked, aware that the dog certainly looked like a German Shepherd.

"His name could be Chinese," said the butcher, distracted by a long drive to left field that he was just hearing about on the radio that played constantly on the shelf above his blood-stained butcher block. "Look at all the letters in Rin Tin Tin," he added.

"Doesn't Banaszewski have more letters?" I asked.

"Maybe so," he replied, "but they're not separated into three words that rhyme ... Rin, Tin and Tin."

"Why would a German shepherd have a Chinese name," I asked.

"International trade," said Mr. Banaszewski. He turned the volume on the radio up another notch and then added, "The Germans and the Chinese exchange tea and ... strudel."

You could hear the crowd roar over the radio now as a line drive shot out away from the batter toward second base. I sensed Mr. Banaszewski was no longer fully involved in our conversation.

"This is from my mother," I said and held out a folded slip of paper.

He turned from the radio immediately and stepped over to me. Taking the note, he raised it to his face while pushing his rimless eyeglasses up on his forehead. His brows furrowed as he squinted to read my mother's handwriting. A smile now grew on his face and he looked up at the ceiling, as if enjoying a private reverie. Then he turned and bent over his butcher block. From the upper part of his apron I could see him pull out a black grease pencil and he used it to write on the back of the paper I had given him. Then he handed the note back to me. I'm not supposed to read other people's notes, but I could see his answer in big block letters, two of them. "No," was all it said.

Arriving home, I found my mother in the kitchen listening to our small radio that was tuned to the soap opera, "Young Doctor Malone." "If a dog's name has three parts that rhyme," I said to her, "is there a chance he's Chinese?"

She smiled at me and said, "Why would you think so, darlin'?" "Mr. Banaszewski said so," I replied as I watched her reach across the kitchen cupboard and turn up the radio. An organ blared from the speaker and a voice droned on above the music to bring us up to date on how many women were in love with Young Dr. Malone.

I held out the square of paper. "Here's his answer to your note." Her eyes widened a little as she took the slip of paper from me and read the butcher's message, "No." A look of concern came over her face and she said aloud, "What was the matter with her?"

"Her?" I asked.

"Aunt Lydia," came the reply. My mother's sister, Lydia, worked at the butcher shop. Mom handed back the note. It read: "Darlin', can you come over tonight?" I handed the note back to Mom.

"Was the note for her?" I asked. But seemingly more concerned with Young Doctor Malone's admirers, my mother didn't answer. Staring at the radio, she absent mindedly placed the note into the drawer in which we kept bottle openers and soup ladles. Dad found the note that night before he went out to his bowling league.

Young Doctor Malone was now performing an emergency appendectomy on a woman he had met the day before in the hospital cafeteria. Did Mom tell me who the note was for? Did I see Aunt Lydia at the butcher shop? I didn't remember. I was still trying to figure out why someone would name their dog Rin Tin Tin. And by the way, what's a strudel?

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Saugerties, NY**

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