

Together
by Katya Balen

I am twelve and Max is seven and he is singing. There are no words but there is a tune that sounds like birdsong or an orchestra or whispered secrets. He runs his fingers along the car window and he spins his spinner and he points at the blue cars and the red cars but not the yellow cars because they're not his favourite today. I turn the number plates into words with my codes and I tell Max the words with my hands and with my mouth and sometimes he says them back but mostly his hands are too busy pointing at endless cars.

Max's favourite word is his first word and today it's coming true because we're getting a dog. A grey puppy with a shaggy wolfy coat and big paws and I am so excited I can't keep still and I fidget and fiddle until Dad says I'll wear out my bones and fall apart.

We arrive at the house and Max tries to get out of the car too quickly and he's a tangle of seatbelt and car seat and boy. His singing gets lower and more frantic and I think we might be in trouble so I point with one hand and I say dog with the other and he sees Elvie in the front garden and everything is going to be OK.

Janis opens the gate and a thousand dogs bark and Max curls his fingers into his ears but he's watching and waiting and his elbows are flapping like a bird. Elvie rushes to the front in a scribble of wiry wool fur and pink tongue and Max sings again.

I scratch Elvie's ears and then I stroke the other puppies because they're swirling around my feet a bit like hairy sharks and then they're exactly like furry sharks because quick as a flash one nips my hand with bright white teeth and I shout and Max looks up.

There are two perfect red dots on my hand and I blink and Janis says I'm so sorry he's only playing he hasn't learned yet and I know I know I know and it's silly and it's just a shock but before I can say a single word Max is there and he's rubbing my hand with his and he's holding out his very best spinner to me and I take it.

In the car on the way home Elvie sits between us in her brand-new blue harness that Max and I chose together and she pants and yawns and so Max and I stroke her scruffy fur until she falls asleep and tomorrow we'll take her for her first walk, together.

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