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## The Happiest Days of Our Lives

Roger E. Hawkins  
*Western Michigan University*

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ROGER E. HAWKINS

## *The Happiest Day of Our Lives*

### I. Orientation

- A. When—14 years ago
- B. Who—Duke and I
- C. Where—Small town

### II. The Day

- A. The Moment

### III. The Return

We shared this day fourteen years ago when I was ten and Duke was one. Duke was a beautiful, black English collie. We were constant companions. I was a child, and he was a child. We were young, excitable, and in love with each other. Our curiosities and imaginations responded simultaneously to the same things as though we were one.

We lived on the edge of a small industrial town; it was no different from any other Michigan town. Since our house was small I had to sleep on the sun porch. I didn't mind because this was my very own room, and sometimes Duke could come inside and visit me.

The day began when I sat up in bed and glanced about my dark room. A strange, weak, fluorescent glow filled the room. I stared at the window trying to determine what was different. I placed my bare feet onto the cold, linoleum-covered, concrete floor. The linoleum crackled as I tiptoed to the window. I could see deep white snow that was new and smooth. "It must be three feet deep," I thought. It was almost up to the windows on the hen house; it covered Mother's new rosebush; and it hid the hens' drinking pans. I pressed my face sideways on the cold glass and strained to see Duke's house. I could see the old plum tree, but I couldn't see Duke's house. Something came into sight. I wiped the steam from my warm breath off the frosty window. It was Duke! He was standing chest deep in snow. He was staring expectantly at the house, his ears perked alertly. Not caring what the time was, I began dressing swiftly and quietly. I put on two pairs of overalls, one pair of thin socks, shoes, boots, sleeveless sweat shirt, old red coat, stiff yellow leather mittens, and stocking cap. I slowly and easily opened the door. I carefully closed it, and stepped into the white stillness. The loudest sound was the fall of the snowflakes. Falling snowflakes make no noise. The piles of snow mysteriously grew deeper. They seemed to rise out of the ground. I dropped to my knees in front of Duke, and we exchanged embraces—silent, wordless greetings. I unsnapped Duke's chain, and he bolted into the deep snow. I followed him around the yard; we jumped high, bucking the piles of fluffy, white, chaff-like snow.

We turned and walked toward the garden as if drawn by some celestial magnet. I had not commanded, and Duke had not barked. We just went drawn by something that was present, but not visible.

We plunged into the snow, we ran, we kicked; we did not speak. We could not tell where the garden began or ended. We could not find the road or sidewalks. We were blazing the trail! We were the first to cross fields, break paths, and witness the arrival of new snow flakes.

We stopped to catch our breath. We embraced by rubbing our faces against each other's. Then, Duke and I galloped further into the white expanse. We could not see or be seen; we were oblivious of reality.

I wondered where we were and what time it was. "We must be near Fawn River," I guessed. Duke had run ahead; I followed his tracks. My foot brushed against something hard. I went back and swept the snow from it. It was a tombstone that read, "Jasper Cooper Born 1825 Died 1841." We were in the cemetery. Duke came charging back and cocked his head quizzically at the gravemarker. I rose and started running; Duke followed in my trail. We ran for a long time, and when we stopped I didn't know where we were. I didn't care. Since Duke seemed to want to keep going, we trotted further.

Then I stopped and looked around. For the first time since we had left the house, I really looked hard. The world had shrunk. The horizon had become smaller. The horizon was still a circle whose circumference was equidistance from me at any point, but now it was only a scant thirty or forty feet away. The quiet was so conspicuous that I could almost see it. The large, damp, white snow flakes were silhouetted against the dark sky. The flakes did not swirl or float, but fell straight and quickly to the ground. The sky was so full of snow flakes that it seemed they were not moving in any direction, but only milling around. There was no light except the fluorescent glow.

“Duke——Duuuuke! Here boy!” I called, speaking for the first time. Duke charged to my side, shaking and spraying snow. I kneeled and he sat in the snow. I slipped my arm around his lean shoulders, drew him close, and purred, “Atta boy.” Together we stared unseeing into the great stillness. I began to talk without realizing it. “Duke, this is perfect. Let’s call this the happiest day of our lives. Let’s not run any more. Let’s make a poem for today.” Together we strained to see that poem which was written somewhere out there among those snowflakes. The world stood still. The piles of snow, the snowflakes, the glow, the whole wide-world silently and breathlessly awaited the poem. We were the center of the universe.

“We’re as free as the wind,

And as free as the day.

We’ll never let anything stand in our way.”

These words poured out of me naturally, spontaneously, and simply. We felt as free as the wind and day that had chosen to stop and hear the happiness of a young boy and his dog. Nothing stands in their way. The blowing wind will always blow and the passing days will always pass; man will never stop them again.

I don’t remember turning around, but I knew we were heading back. Soon, I could see a tiny light far away. It was a speck at first; it grew larger as we approached it. The sky was growing light, and the snowflakes were smaller and harder to see. The speck of light became our kitchen window. The chimney was smoking; automobile tracks broke down the middle of the road; the old black rooster crowed; the sidewalks were shoveled into neat white trenches.