

BEVERLY CLEARY
Strider

Illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky

SEQUEL TO THE NEWBERY AWARD-WINNING CLASSIC
• DEAR MR. HENSHAW •

Beverly Cleary

Strider

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 HarperCollins e-books

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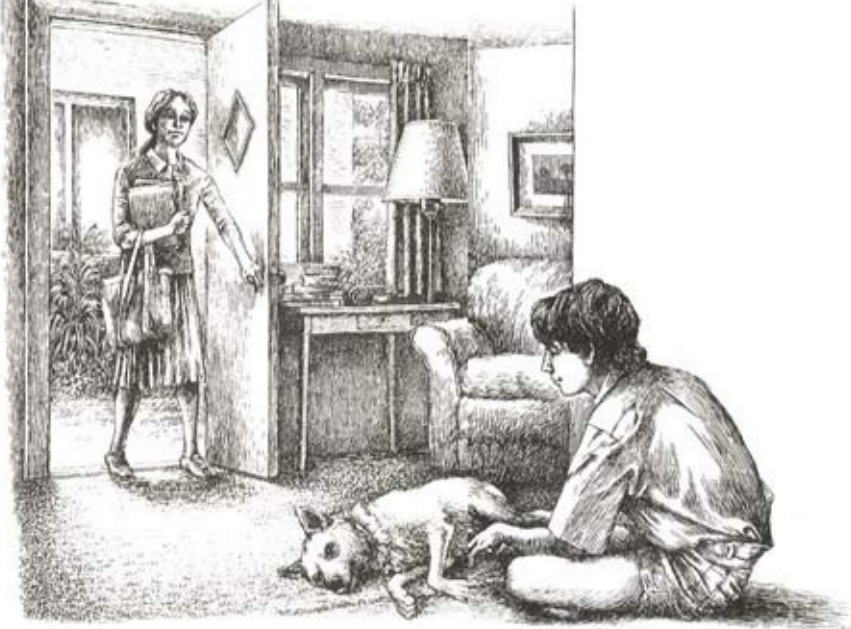
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From the Diary of Leigh Botts

June 6

This afternoon, as Mom was leaving for work at the hospital, she said for the millionth time, “Leigh, please clean up your room. There is no excuse for such a mess. And don’t forget the junk under your bed.”

I said, “Mom, you’re nagging. I’m going to Barry’s house.”

She plunked a kiss on my hair and said, “Room first, Barry second. Besides, where would the world be without nagging mothers? Everything would go to pieces.”

Maybe she’s right. Things are pretty deep in my room. I hauled all the rubbish out from under my bed. In the midst of all the old socks, school papers, models that have fallen apart, paperback books (one library book—oops!), and other stuff, I found the diary I kept a couple of years ago when I was a mixed-up kid in the sixth grade. Mom had just divorced Dad and moved with me to Pacific Grove, better known as P.G., where I was a new kid in school, which wasn’t easy.

I sat there on the floor reading my diary, and when I finished, I continued to sit there. What had changed?

Dad still drives his tractor-trailer rig, lives mostly on the road, and is late with his child support checks or forgets them. I don’t often see him, but I don’t get as angry about this as I did in the sixth grade. I no longer feel like crying, but I still hurt when he doesn’t telephone when he said he would. Whenever I see a big rig, excitement shoots through me until I see Dad isn’t the driver. I wish—oh well, forget it.

Mom has finished her vocational nurse course and works at the hospital from three to eleven because that shift pays more than the daytime shift. Mornings she studies to become a registered nurse so she can earn more money. We still live in what our landlady called our “charming garden cottage” but I call a shack. Mom is looking for an apartment, but so far no luck.

Twice a week I mop the floor at Catering by Katy, where Mom used to work before she got her license. Katy gives me good things to eat. I like earning my own spending money, but I feel I could use the squares of Katy’s linoleum for a checkerboard in my sleep.

Mom, who used to think TV was one of the greatest evils of the universe, finally had our set repaired because my grades were good and she no longer felt TV would rot my brain and leave me twiddling my shoelaces. At first I watched everything until I got bored and cut back to news and animal programs. Then I began to feel that every lion on the Serengeti must have his own personal hairdresser. That left the news, which sometimes worries me. If I see a truck accident with the tractor hanging over the edge of a bridge, or tons of tomatoes spilled on a freeway, I can hardly breathe until I see the driver isn't Dad.

One part of my diary made me smile, the part about wanting to be a famous author like Boyd Henshaw someday. Maybe I do, maybe I don't, but I'm glad that when I wrote to him, he said I should keep a diary.

I worry about what I'm going to do with my life, and so does Mom. Dad is probably too busy worrying about meeting his deadline with a trailer load of lettuce before it rots to even think of me. Or maybe he is wasting his time playing video games at some truck stop.

Until the last sentence, I enjoyed writing this. Maybe I'll go back to writing in composition books, but not every day, just once in a while, like now, when I feel like writing something.

The gas station next door has stopped ping-pinging, which means it's after ten o'clock. Mom gets home about eleven-thirty, and my room is still a mess. No problem. Except for books and my diary, I'll dump everything in the trash.

I just remembered. I forgot about Barry.

Today I have something important to write about! The summer fog was so low the whole world seemed to drip. Mom went to class, and our shack was so lonely, I climbed the hill to see Barry. I like to go to his big old house, built on a slope so that it has a view of the bay when the fog lifts. Everything in the house is shabby and comfortable. There is a smell of good things cooking. Barry's stepmother, Mrs. Brinkerhoff, is plump, but she doesn't worry about it the way Mom's friends worry about gaining one teeny ounce.

Barry's house is full of cats, hamsters in cages, and little sisters. I once saw a tortoise under the couch but I have never seen it again. Sometimes a grandmother is there. She knits sweaters out of beautiful soft yarns in wild designs she makes up as she goes along. Barry says she sells them to an expensive boutique for a lot of money. Watching her needles move so quickly in and out of beautiful yarns fascinates me.

The basic Brinkerhoffs are the parents, Barry, and five little sisters. Two girls belong to Barry's father, two to his stepmother, and the little one, who crawls and likes to play peekaboo around corners, belongs to both parents. Sometimes the girls seem like more than five because their friends come over, and they all dress up in old clothes Mrs. Brinkerhoff keeps in a big box.

This morning a bunch of girls were kneeling on chairs around the kitchen table, popping corn in the electric corn popper. When they dumped it out in a bowl, Barry and I reached for some.

The girls tried to slap our hands away. "This isn't for eating," one of them said. "This is for shrinking."

That stopped us. Whoever heard of shrinking popcorn?

The girls were busy dropping perfectly good popcorn into a bowl of water, one piece at a time, to watch it shrink until nobody would eat it except maybe a hamster.

"That's a stupid thing to do," Barry told the girls.

"It is not," said the oldest sister. Betsy I think is her name. "We are performing a scientific experiment to prove that popcorn has memory. Drop it in water, and it remembers it is supposed to be little and hard instead of big and fluffy."

Barry and I helped ourselves to more popcorn. "You're being mean to popcorn," said one of the girls which made me wonder what popcorn remembered when I chewed it.

Barry and I went to his room to work on a model of an antique car with many little parts. If we put glue on one piece and couldn't find where it belonged right away, the plastic melted, and the piece wouldn't fit. That happened a couple of times. Then I got glue on the hood. When I tried to wipe it off the shine wiped off, too. The funny part was, I didn't much care.

I looked at Barry, and he looked at me. I could see we both had the same thought at the same time: we *had outgrown models*. Without saying anything, we threw the car pieces into the wastebasket, and as

we went through the kitchen, we snatched some more popcorn.

Here comes Mom's car, it's almost midnight, I'm supposed to be asleep, and I haven't even come to the good part. I'll write more about today tomorrow.



Back to yesterday. There are so many places our moms won't let us hang around, like the Frostee Freeze and the video arcade, that we headed for the beach, not for any special reason. The beach was just a place to go. The damp air gave us goose bumps below our cutoffs. Fog dripping off the eucalyptus trees made them smell like old tomcats.

The beach was so gray and chilly the only person around was a rugged old man we call Mr. President because he is always saying if he were president he would make a few changes in this country. He patrols beaches and parks, dragging two gunnysacks, one for broken glass and beer bottles, the other for aluminum cans, so kids won't cut their feet. Some people think he's nutty because he lives in an old bread truck, but we don't. Sometimes we help him.

At the foot of the steps to the beach, beside the seawall, a dog was sitting in the soft sand. He was tan with a few white spots and a white mark in the center of his face. He looked strong for a medium-sized dog.

"Hi, dog," I said and thought of my ex-dog Bandit and the fun we used to have before the divorce, when Mom got me and Dad got Bandit.

This dog looked worried and made little whimpering noises.

Mr. President came dragging his gunnysacks through the sand. "Dog's been sittin' there since yesterday," he said. "No collar, no license, no nothin'. Just sits there in sorrow."

"Come on, fella," I said to the dog and patted my knee.

The dog didn't move. I scratched his chest where Bandit liked to be scratched. This dog looked up at me with his ears laid back and the saddest look I have ever seen on a dog's face. If dogs could cry, the dog would be crying hard.

"Come on, dog," said Barry. The dog wagged his docked tail. It wasn't a happy wag. It was an anxious wag. Dogs can say a lot with their tails, or what people let them keep of their tails. If he still had a tail it would be between his legs.

"Seems like somebody told him to stay, so he's staying," said Mr. President. "If he sits much longer, that dog jailer will come along and haul him off to the dog bastille."

"Come on, boy," I coaxed. The dog didn't budge.

"If I were running this country, I would hang everyone who dumps animals," said Mr. President and went back to picking up beer bottles people leave on the beach.

Barry and I slogged through the dry sand to the wet sand, both of us hoping the dog would follow, but he didn't. I couldn't forget the look on that dog's face. I know what it feels like to be left behind, so I probably have the same look on my face when Dad and Bandit drop in to see me and then drive off, leaving me behind.

When we reached the water, Barry said, “Remember that movie Dad took us to that began with all those guys in track suits running through the waves at the edge of the beach?”

I got the idea. We both pulled off our shoes and socks and began to run up and down the beach, splashing through the little waves that crawled around our feet. The water just about froze our toes. As we ran, I could almost hear the movie sound track.

When we began to pant, we pretended we were running in slow motion the way the movie showed the actors. All the time I thought about that sad dog waiting for someone who didn’t come, maybe was never going to come. People can be pretty mean sometimes.



Suddenly the dog came racing across the sand and began to run along with us. We speeded up, and so did he.

“Good boy, Strider,” I said, no longer playing a part in a movie. I guess I called him Strider because there is a track club called the Bayside Striders, and Strider seemed like a good name for a running dog.

When we reached the shoes and socks we had left on the beach, Strider shook himself and slunk, drooping, back to the place by the seawall where we had first seen him. He looked miserable and guilty.

“Poor old Strider,” said Barry. “Something’s sure bothering him.” I wasn’t surprised when Barry called the dog Strider. We usually agree.

“Let’s take him home,” I said as I tried to wipe the sand from between my toes with my socks. “Maybe we could find his owner before the animal control officer gets him.”

When we got our shoes and damp socks on our sandy feet, we called, coaxed, and whistled, but Strider wouldn’t budge. He just looked worried and confused, as if he wanted to follow but knew he shouldn’t.

Strider can't talk, but he sure can act.

The sun was coming out. So were surfers, who were struggling into wet suits beside their vans. We asked, but no one had ever seen the dog before.

We gave up and walked to my shack because it is closer than Barry's house. Walking in wet sandy socks wasn't much fun.

Oops. Here comes Mom. I'll pretend I'm asleep. I didn't mean to write a novel. More tomorrow.

Writing all this, I don't feel so lonely at night, and when I am busy, I forget to listen for funny noises.

To continue, Mom still wasn't home from class when Barry and I got back from the beach. We sat on the bathroom floor with our feet in the shower to wash sand from our toes. We didn't say much.

"I bet Strider's hungry," said Barry finally.

"And thirsty," I said.

We raced back to the beach with a couple of hot dogs (sorry, Mom), a bottle of water, and a bowl, feeling as if Strider was going to be hauled off to the gas chamber if we didn't get there in time.

The dog was still there! He slurped water, gulped hot dogs, and looked at us as if we had saved his life. Maybe whatever he has been through is what people mean when they talk about a dog's life.

Barry and I tried to coax Strider to follow us. We didn't touch, we just coaxed. We could tell he was thinking about what he should do, and finally he made a decision. He took a few steps toward us, and a few more, and then he was following us.

Mr. President came along dragging his gunnysacks. "A gentle deed in a naughty world," was all he said.

"What are we going to do with him?" Barry asked on the way back to my place.

"Keep him," I said and remembered how Mom says, "Leigh, always do the right thing," so I added, "just until we phone the SPCA to see if anybody has asked for him."

"Nobody who tells a dog to stay and then leaves him is going to phone the SPCA," said Barry, but admitted I was right.

The lady at the SPCA said no one had inquired about a dog of Strider's description, but wouldn't we like a companion for him? She took our telephone number, just in case, but didn't seem hopeful, which pleased us.

Strider, after sniffing around the shack, flopped down on our thrift-shop rug and slept as if he hadn't slept for a week. Barry and I sat on the couch staring at him. Even if Mom would let me keep Strider until school starts, I knew there was no way I could have him for keeps when we are both away so much. Besides, there was our landlady, Mrs. Smerling, to think of. Mom says I mustn't refer to her as an old bat, even if she is. When we moved in, it seems to me she said something about no pets. We're lucky she didn't say no boys.

"If nobody claims him, who gets him?" Barry asked the question that had been eating at me.

I really wanted that dog. Wanted him? I needed that dog.

"Would your mom and dad let you keep a dog?" I asked hoping Barry would say no.

Barry shrugged. "We've got everything else running around the house, and we're out of dogs right now."

Strider twitched in his sleep. Sliding off the couch, I petted him gently. I didn't care if that dog barked, bit, chewed up slippers, or chased cats, I loved him and somehow I had to keep him.

"Hey!" said Barry so suddenly that Strider opened his eyes and lifted his head.

"It's all right, boy," I said. He relaxed.

"We could have joint custody," said Barry. "You keep him nights, we both have him days, and when school starts, we can leave him at our house because we have a fenced yard. After school, he would belong to both of us."

"And we can split the cost of dog support!" I was getting excited. "But what about when you go down to Los Angeles to visit your real mom?"

Barry made a face because he likes living with his dad and Mrs. Brinkerhoff more than he likes visiting his real mother. He said, "He'll be all yours for a month, but you could still park him in our yard when you can't be with him. My folks wouldn't care."

Here comes Mom. This is one night I'm not going to pretend to be asleep.

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