

Milky Way

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I'm minding my own business, playing with my toys, when Mama gasps and says, "Oh, no! That can't happen in America!"

Something scary must have happened on the television. I drop my squeaky bone, jump onto the sofa, and run to her side.

"Aww, thank you, Milky Way," she says, petting me with one hand and calling her friend Allison with the other.

"Allie, did you hear what they said on the news? That awful virus is in the United States. They don't know how to protect us yet, but they're trying to find a way. And have you been hearing about all those sick people on the ships? I'm glad they didn't let them go back home and give it to everyone else. At the same time, I feel sorry for them."

I don't know what a virus is, but I know from the shakiness of Mama's voice that it's not good.

Absent-mindedly, Mama pets my back while talking to Allie. I lower my head onto her lap.

After the phone call, she pets me more, but she's focused on that virus thing and changing the television channels, one after the other. I stay by her side.

Mama and I have been together a long time. My first mother was a miniature Poodle, and my father was a Jack Russell terrier. Mama calls me her little white Jackapoo. She brought me home almost ten years ago, when I was just a little “whimper-snapper.” As I grew, I learned to take care of her, and she learned to take care of me. I’m not an official therapy dog, but she says I do the job just fine.

Mama isn’t broken. She just gets upset and locks up. It’s my job to pay attention to her moods and help her relax.

Tonight, Mama rushes off to the store for food and other stuff. After a long time, she comes home. I do my normal dance at the door and get out of her way. She has lots of toilet paper and food, and a couple of big bags of kibble, too. She’s a good mom, always remembering me.

After work a few days later, she calls Allie. They talk about that virus again.

Mama says, “All the schools, libraries, and churches have closed their doors. A while ago, President Trump said only the most essential companies can stay open.” After a sniffle, she adds, “My work had to close down. I don’t have any way to make money until they open again.” Before they stop talking, Mama says, “I’m scared, Allie. What if I get the virus? Who would take care of sweet little Milky Way?”

She doesn’t know I understand her words, but that scares me, too.

Mama stays home all the time now. Sometimes she cries. I used to play with my toys while Mama watched the news, but she shakes when she watches it now, so I sit beside her every night. I can feel her fear. If I ever meet that virus thing, I’m gonna tear it apart.

One day, Mama starts sneezing and wiping her eyes. She tells Allie that her nose and eyes are draining, she has a bad headache, and her allergies are much worse than normal. They don't stop now and then. They're constant.

After a few days, Mama stays in bed and coughs all the time. She's sad, hurting, and shivers a lot. I can feel the heat from her face when I climb on the bed and lie down beside her. She wipes her face and neck with a cold wet rag then puts it on her forehead to sleep for a few minutes. Then she dips that rag in a bowl of water and does it all again.

I'm worried about Mama. Allie put an ice chest full of ice by the front door. Mama filled it with Gatorade and water bottles, so she can remain in bed and grab a drink without going to the kitchen.

I'm thankful for my doggy door, so I can go outside when I need to. When Mama gets up to go potty, she checks to see if I need food or water, but my bowls refill themselves.

Mama coughs all the time, and she's still hot. She called the "people doctor" this morning, but he doesn't want to see her. He thinks she has that virus and says if she gets worse, she should go to the hospital. I don't know where that is, but I hope it's a good place.

In the afternoon, a whiny, box-shaped car with flashing lights pulls in the driveway. Allie lets the strange people in the house, but she stays outside. They're wearing funny suits and have masks on their faces. I lead them to Mama's bedroom. She's coughing and shaking real bad. They move her to a bed with legs and wheels, and take her out of the house. Her chest has been whining since yesterday—like she swallowed a puppy—but I know she didn't.

Before leaving, Allie makes sure I have food and water, then pats me on the head. "Don't worry, Milky Way. Mama's going to the hospital, and she'll be just fine."

I wonder how long it will take. I miss her already.

The sun comes up and goes down many times while Mama is gone. I sleep on the bed at night, and I curl up by the front door all day. When Mama left, she and Allie promised she was coming back, but it's been a long time. I miss her touch and her voice. It's quiet here at home.

When I went in the back yard earlier, I saw the whiny car with lights next door. I asked the dogs over there if they had seen my mama. They said no, but their daddy was leaving in the noisy car, and they were worried about him. He was coughing a lot, and their mama cried when the strange people took him away.

Later, someone rattles the front door knob. I jump up to see if it's Mama, but it's Allie.

"Hi, Milky Way," she says, bending over to pet me. It feels good, and I'm glad to see her.

"I came over to check on you. Can I look around for a minute?" She stands up and walks around the house.

After checking every room, she sits on the sofa and pats her thigh while looking at me. I jump onto the sofa and climb to the top cushions, then I put my head on her shoulder. I want her to know how much I miss Mama, but I don't know how to say it.

"I know you miss your mama," Allie says. "She's still at the hospital and worried about you, so I came to ask if you'd like to stay at my house for a few days. What do you think?"

It would be nice to see Allie every day, but what if Mama comes home and needs me? I really should be here for her.

"I promise to bring you home when your mama comes back. She loves you so much, Milky Way. She would never want to be home without you.

Happy with that answer, I hop down, wag my tail, and bark twice. I hope Allie knows that means I'll go.

After loading my dog food and bowls, Allie connects my leash and we go outside. When she locks the door behind us, my stomach knots up. For a moment, I want to run back inside and wait for Mama, but I remember Allie's promise, so I go with her. I look back at the front door before I jump in the car. I want to remember how sad my home looks without Mama.

On the way to Allie's house, I press my wet nose against the window. I'm trying to memorize the route, in case I have to find my own way back. With the window closed, I can't smell the scent trail, so I'll have to rely on my eyes.

Allie takes good care of me at her house. I struggle to sleep on the first night, but she finally says I can sleep on the bed with her, so I won't feel alone. That helps.

The next afternoon, Allie calls Mama on the phone. She puts it next to my ear, and I hear Mama's voice.

"Ahh-hoooo!" I sing. I'm so happy I jump off the sofa and back again.

Mama sounds weak, but her voice is beautiful to my ears. "I miss you, too, my sweet Milky Way. I've been getting well at the hospital. They're taking care of me here, but not nearly as good as you would. For now, you stay with Allie. I'll be home in a few days. I'm going to be so happy to see you again." She starts a coughing fit that scares me. I lick the phone to see if she's hot, but I can't tell.

Allie takes the phone back and promises to take good care of me.

Mama's coming home soon. I'm so happy. I may be old, but I'm full of energy, and I can't sit still. Allie helps me settle down and we watch some television.

A few days later, Allie packs my things and tells me we're going to meet Mama at home. I rush to the car and jump in. My nose is against the window all the way there. Allie turns down all the streets I remember from the day she took me to her house.

At home, Mama is settling into the bedroom. I jump on the bed and run to her. She needs a big hug, and I'm not going to make her wait for it. My back end won't be still, and she laughs.

"It's going to be a few days before I can do much again, Milky Way, but I'm happy to be back. We'll get through this together."

I love her so much, and I'm so glad to be back home that I'm about to pee on myself, so I rush out the doggy door to the back yard.

At the side fence, I see the dogs next door. They seem kinda down, so I share my good news. I tell them Mama's home, and I'm so excited.

That's when they tell me their daddy isn't coming home anymore. He died at that hospital place.

Now I'm confused. I'm so happy to be home with Mama, but I'm sad that my friends won't get to see their daddy anymore. What if Mama didn't come home? That would be terrible.

I tell my friends I'm real sorry about their daddy, but I'll be glad to share Mama with them. Anytime she's out in the back yard, they are welcome to come to the fence and let her pet them, because she likes them, too. I'm glad they still have their own mother. I'll be a good friend and visit them often, but for a while, I'm mostly helping Mama get well. That's my job.