

“A Perfect Day”

By Lauren Rivers

Saturday mornings were always Sarah McKane’s favorite time of the week. It was the only chance she got to take her kids to the park before the area was crowded with the older kids. Her job at the factory meant she couldn’t often do things with them during the week so this was her chance to unwind and just be a mom. Every morning she would wake her children up early and get them dressed so they would have time to play before taking them home and cooking them a wholesome breakfast around ten. She enjoyed watching them from the comfort of the nearby bench, taking part when either Lucy or Davis requested her participation.

One of the realities of being an army wife meant she learned pretty quickly to be self sufficient. It was not that Arthur did not contribute, far from it. He sent money back for his family and came to spend time with them every time he got leave. Nevertheless it meant most of the time she was on her own when it came to the children, a fact she had accepted when she had taken his paw in marriage. Despite having managed her household pretty well on her own she nevertheless missed having someone to come home to when her husband was deployed.

Arthur was currently somewhere halfway across the world, a fact she used to teach her children geography. Whenever they asked where daddy was she would pull out the globe and place a little flag where he was supposed to be. Lucy was more vocal about it, but she suspected Davis missed his father more than she did.

Her son, eight years old, was full of energy. He had practically leapt into the bed that morning eager to get his time at the playground. She had hoped to get a few more minutes of sleep but her son was not cooperating this particular morning. Once she had gotten out of bed she threw on some presentable clothes and shambled out with her children towards her treat for the morning.

With Lucy’s paw in her hand she walked behind her son to the coffee cart that set up at the entrance to the park less than a block away from their apartment. It was a small operation run by a female squirrel that seemed to have an endless supply of cheer, something she often appreciated when she came to get her morning cup of fancy coffee. Sarah walked up to the cart with a smile and leaned down to look Lucy in the eyes. “Just stay put while mommy orders her coffee, all right?” she asked.

The young wolf pup nodded in response while her brother ran around within a few feet of the cart. She watched him for a moment wondering how children always seemed to have a perpetual supply of energy. Sarah smirked when she was certain he wasn’t looking and turned to the squirrel.

“What’ll it be this morning, Mrs. McKane?” She held up a pair of coffee cups of two different sizes, prompting her to examine the sign for a list of today’s offerings. On the right side of the cart was a chalkboard which had several different kinds of coffees listed along with the prices for each. After a moment, she set the coffee cups down and stood ready to prepare her order.

“I’ll have a vanilla latte with a splash of raspberry syrup,” she said definitively. Sarah then reached into her wallet for a crisp ten dollar bill, holding it gingerly between

her fingers while the squirrel set to work on her order. While waiting she kept her watchful eye on her two children both of whom remained at her side while she eagerly anticipated her order. Two children and a full time job meant she didn't have a lot of opportunities to treat herself, but her Saturday morning coffee was non negotiable. She looked forward to the tasty treat all week which she would enjoy while her children reveled in the freedom of being pups.

After a moment the squirrel presented a disposable coffee cup with the coffee bean logo featuring prominently on the side, along with one of those sleeves that kept you from burning your paw while you waited for it to reach a drinkable temperature. She took a moment to smell the aroma of the vanilla which blended perfectly with the raspberry flavor before she handed over the money. Absentmindedly she dropped her change into the center compartment of her purse. She would make her money neat later.

"Come on, mom, I wanna play!" Davis said insistently with his tail up in the air indicating his excitability.

"It'll just be a second. Mommy doesn't like to rush when she has her coffee. Besides, you'll have plenty of time to play. You have two hours." Sarah made certain her grip on her drink was firm before she reached out to take her daughter's paw once more. Even though they were inside the park she preferred to keep her children close until they actually arrived at the playground. Once the currently unoccupied swing set was in sight, Lucy pulled away from her mother to chase after her big brother who had already started sprinting towards the rather impressive setup.

"I want to ride the slide!" Davis shouted.

"Wait for me!" Lucy called after him, hurrying after her sibling. Their time at the park was the only time her young daughter would ever leave her mother's side willingly. Lucy tended to be rather shy when not with her mother and always hesitated when it was time to go wait for the bus. She was fine once she arrived at school but Sarah knew that she was much more dependent on her than her brother Davis. The elder McKane child liked to be the man of the house when his father wasn't home and had no qualms about saying so. He was not able to help as much as he might imagine, but the gesture was appreciated and she found his enthusiasm heartwarming, especially during her husband's absence.

Early mornings like these were the only times they could be assured a private session at the playground. Sarah took her seat on her usual bench and took a test sip of her rather fancy coffee. She preferred this particular seat since it allowed her a clear view of the entire playground as well as easy access to the coffee cart if she desired a refill.

Emerald Park was a large public area complete with a playground, tennis courts, basketball areas, and a wide open field. A walking path ran the perimeter with a few routes cutting through the middle, allowing access to the food and drink options. A small lake filled out the options available which during the summer allowed people to rent rowboats for a couple hours at a time.

Sarah took her first sip of coffee while she watched her children gleefully ride down the slide for the first of what would likely be many such races to see which one of them could get there first. For the most part Davis won but on occasion he would slow down just enough to let Lucy get in front of him. She was proud of him for playing so well with his younger sister.

The coffee was nice and warm with a smooth creamy flavor she loved to let roll around her mouth for as long as possible. Swallowing the beverage, the warmth would spread throughout her chest to fill her entire torso. The gray wolffess crossed her legs at the ankles while she leaned on one of the arm rests, enjoying the peacefulness of the park.

Both Lucy and Davis seemed to be completely engrossed in their activities giving her a rare moment to herself. Such opportunities were rare with two young children so she always made certain to appreciate them. For at least fifteen minutes while her children played they knew to keep themselves entertained and within eyesight of their mother if they wanted to have their full duration of time in the park. Sarah McKane had made it perfectly clear to her two children if they could not agree to these conditions she would and could see to it they found some other way to occupy their time. Not wanting to find out what their mother would have them do, the two were content to enjoy the playground and leave the elder McKane in peace.

Putting her coffee down for a moment she pulled out her cell phone and pulled up the latest video message from her husband. Though he did not get many chances to speak to her in real time he always made certain to record at least a short greeting for his wife every week just in case they did not get time to talk during their respective busy schedules.

She searched through her messages for the right file and opened it, tilting her phone sideways so as to get the best view of her mate's face. The image came up with his smiling muzzle complete with his field uniform which had 'McKane' written on the patch of his breast and his army patches on the other. With a tap of her finger the message began.

"Hey, sweetie. Hope the kids are behaving for you. I got the pictures you sent of Davis and Lucy. I can't believe how big they're getting. You know, even though I love what I do, sometimes I would give almost anything for the chance to see them grow up right in front of me more than I do. I appreciate all the work you do to keep them happy and healthy and the pictures you send do me more good than anything else short of leave home. We're going to be out here for a while yet doing something or other but my CO assures me we should be back in the states in a few weeks. I've already told him I'm going to put in for some leave to hopefully be able to visit you guys. It won't be long, just a few days this time, but it's better than nothing.

"All I can say is that the weather out here is a pain in the ass. All the heat and the wind makes me want a shower in the worst way. I have sand in places I didn't know sand could be. It makes me long for the nice cool days I know you guys are probably having right now. Maybe it's sexist of me but I miss your cooking. It's not just the food but it's the fact that you made it and the way we enjoy it together. I love the guys in my unit but eating MRE's with the boys just doesn't hold a candle to a home cooked meal with my wife and kids.

"I wish I could tell you how much longer we'll be out here altogether but the best I can do is say hopefully not much longer before I get rotated to some duty closer to home." He turned around to look at someone behind him she could not see. *"Okay, I'll be right there. I'm recording a message to my wife."* Arthur McKane turned back to the camera pickup. *"Sorry about that, but you know how it is. Privacy is a rare commodity out here. Anyway I'll call you as soon as I can. Give the kids a kiss for me, okay? Love you."* He ended the call with a lick at the camera, which was his signature sign off since

they started dating. It wasn't quite a kiss, but it was the closest thing she was going to get until he returned from his current assignment.

Buoyed from the sound of his voice she returned the phone to its usual place as her daughter ran up to her seat on the bench. Sarah leaned forward to get closer to her level and smiled. "Are you having fun sweetie?"

"Yes, but I want to go on the swings and we need someone to push us!" Lucy could be cute when she wanted something. She was never a demanding child but she had a way about her that said she would burst at the seams if her request wasn't acknowledged. Amused by her daughter's enthusiasm she followed her over to the swings where Davis already waited in one of the three seats. She set her purse off to the side and waited for Lucy to get into position.

The young wolfess hopped into the seat, which was little more than a curved band of thick heavy duty rubber, and proceeded to giggle. Looking up at her mother she smiled in a way that always reminded her of her youth when she was a young pup herself. Drawing the swing back with both paws she pulled until Lucy was as far back as she could possibly go and released her. Gleeful laughter burst out from her youngest child as she stepped to the side to repeat the process with her son.

Davis was more reserved than his younger sister but he was no less excited by the experience than she was. With a wide grin he let out an excited yip, wind blowing through his hair as he sped forward and then back again.

An experienced paw at this, Sarah always timed it so that one was swinging forward when the other was coming back. This allowed her to switch arms and avoid tiring herself out as she pushed them one at a time. Giving each of them a gentle push when they arrived in her vicinity she gave Lucy two quick licks on the cheek before she once again was out of her reach.

The expression of maternal affection earned a little blush from the girl but Lucy simply kicked her legs out, her attention entirely focused on the activity at hand.

Davis giggled to Lucy as they passed each other and said, "I bet I can swing higher than you!"

"No you can't," she replied, and Sarah took it to mean her services were no longer required. The wolfess took a step back while her kids began to compete against each other with each trying their level best to swing higher than the other. She chuckled to herself pulling out her cell phone and recorded a little video of the two as they played, knowing her husband would appreciate a little taste of home on their next exchange of messages.

By this time of day a few of the early birds had made their way into the park to begin their own daily routines. Runners usually showed up to do a few circuits around the various foot paths that lined the park along with a number of business people looking to get some coffee from the cart set up at the entrance. A few people had the same idea as she had, bringing their kids to the park for some early morning fun.

One of the people that were usually here every so often was one of her neighbors, a young squirrel and single mother who lived in the house next door. Wearing a flower dress and having her hair loose and wavy she looked a bit more together than Sarah. With a genuinely friendly smile and a nod of recognition the woman came closer with her little girl in tow.

"Sarah, how are you?" she asked.

With a sheepish smile and a gentle gesture with her coffee she acknowledged her arrival. "Doing okay, taking the kids out for some fun in the park. You?"

"The same," the squirrel said, sitting on the bench at an angle so her tail wouldn't get in the way. "Go play with the other kids for a few minutes," she told her young child, who eagerly ran off to join the others on the swings. "So how are things?"

Sarah looked down for a moment as she generally disliked that particular innocuous question. Most people were well meaning but it could get rather frustrating since often times the answer was the same. She considered giving a noncommittal answer but most people weren't satisfied with just a simple reply so she took a sip of her coffee and shrugged. "About as well as you could expect, Davis and Lucy are healthy and doing well in school. They miss their father but so do I. He's supposed to be back for a short while in a few weeks but I never know until he actually walks through the door."

The squirrel looked like she might say something but then thought better of it and merely nodded. Most people said they understood but it was difficult to really comprehend unless you were a military family. The majority of people were used to doing what they wanted and only being in service to others for short periods such as going to work or volunteering on the weekends, but it was quite different when you had a loved one in the service. In that case it wasn't just them joining the military, it was the entire family. Sarah knew what she was signing up for when she had married him and had his children, but what bothered her most was the way people said they sympathized but she knew they didn't really understand. Most of them meant nothing by it other than to be supportive so she usually let it go, but now and then it did get tiring.

"Do your pups like their teachers?" the squirrel asked.

Sarah let out a deep breath, grateful for the change of subject. "They both seem to adore their teachers this year, which is always a blessing. So far they seem to like who they've been assigned. I'm supposed to meet them on a parent teacher night sometime next week."

The squirrel nodded. "That'll be fun."

"I'm hoping they'll have good things to tell me but they usually do. Fortunately for me my kids love their father and they know if their teachers tell me something they'll get it twice, once from me and once from their dad so they usually behave themselves at school."

"I find it hard to believe your kids would ever do anything to get themselves in trouble." The squirrel pointed to her little girl. "Mine, on the other hand..."

"All kids get into trouble at some point. I think it's hard wired into their DNA." She shifted position to face her friend. "Come on, did you do some crazy things when you were their age?" she asked.

The squirrel looked like she might lie for a moment, but then nodded. "I once put glue all over the fireplace."

"Are you kidding me?"

"I was seven!" the squirrel said in protest. "I can't be held responsible for the things my little brain came up with at that age."

Sarah laughed. "I'll have to remember that." She smirked. "I don't know if that qualifies as a valid legal defense."

“It didn’t according to my parents. They grounded me for a week. It would have been two but fortunately mom was able to get all of the glue off,” she said.

“Lucky you.” Sarah took another sip of her coffee and looked at her phone. Apparently the Army had tried to contact her. For what reason she was not certain, but they had neglected to leave a voicemail. She found it somewhat odd as most times news from the military was always filtered through her husband. It was rare they would contact her directly. The reasons that possibility suggested was not something she cared to contemplate, but it was likely she was worrying over nothing. All the same, she stood up and smiled sheepishly at her friend. “I know you just got here, but something came up. I’ve got to get the kids home. Maybe we’ll see you next week?” she asked.

“Sure,” the squirrel said, smiling at her daughter as she jumped down from the swing.

Sarah walked closer to the playground equipment and held up a paw. “Davis, Lucy, it’s time to go.”

Davis was the first to protest. “Mom, it’s barely been an hour. We still have plenty of time left to play!”

“I know, but mommy has something to do this morning, so she wants to go home early today. I promise I’ll make you some raspberry pancakes, and to make up for it you can play for three hours next week.” Sarah bent down to hug Lucy as she ran up to her mother.

Davis seemed to consider her proposal for several long seconds before he finally decided it was worth the sacrifice of playtime. “Okay.” He turned to his sister. “Time to go home. Mom’s going to make raspberry pancakes.”

“YAY!” Lucy shouted, throwing her paws up in the air in excitement.

Sarah smiled and held out her paw to take Lucy’s in her outstretched palm while Davis followed a few steps behind before taking up a position in front of them. The walk back to their apartment was short and uneventful, but perhaps because of the feeling in the back of her mind she hurried them along a little faster than usual.

Once they were inside she set her purse on the counter and noticed the army had tried to call her again. Had she turned off her phone’s ringer? Perhaps she had just been so busy paying attention to her children that she simply ignored it. She set the device on the counter and discarded her purse beside it while her two children took up seats at the kitchen table.

Sarah slipped on some rubber gloves and began working on the pancakes, placing the skillet on the stove allowing it to warm while she prepared the batter. She glanced occasionally at her phone but so far there had been no additional calls. Stirring the mixture together it had started to look like actual batter as she set the bowl onto the counter beside the stove. Pulling the plates from the cabinet she set a stack of three of them plus a serving plate out when she caught the sight of movement at the front door.

With the bowl of batter in her paws she walked towards the entrance and pushed the metal door open to the sight of two uniformed officers, a wolf and a giraffe. The giraffe stood with his hat against his chest, while the other carried what she knew was a folded flag.

Oh, please no.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” she asked.

“Mrs. McKane, I regret to inform you that your husband was killed in the line of duty...” His eyes met hers as the pain filled his expression contained only by his military discipline.

She heard nothing else after that as her muscles lost all power and the bowl full of batter clattered to the floor. Her chest tightened and she dropped to her knees, rocking herself back and forth as a pitiful wail escaped her lungs. She could not hear the sound she was making, all she knew was that the world around her was noise. Her only awareness was the sensation someone was talking to her as a uniformed man knelt to take her arms in his hands.

And it was such a perfect day...