

J. M. Jones

SKITTLES

Skittles was a rescue dog. That's what the owner told me the first time we met. Though met, I suppose, isn't the right word. We didn't introduce ourselves, shake hands, exchange names. We were simply heading the same direction, walking to the elementary school playground on a Saturday morning. It was hot and bright, mid-summer, and Ellie and I had visited the playground earlier that day, but I'd forgotten to put on her sunscreen, so we'd had to go home and apply it. Now we were coming back, and we'd just crossed the street when we ran into the woman and her dog. We walked along side-by-side for a bit. Then Ellie said hello—she's friendlier than me—and out of nowhere, the woman mentioned she could smell Ellie's sunscreen.

"That's good," she said. "You have to protect her."

I felt like a good parent, responsible. I didn't mention that I'd forgotten it the first time and we'd had to walk home. Ellie drifted toward the dog and hovered a few feet away. Skittles' owner pulled back the leash.

"Skittles is a rescue," she said. "He gets nervous around children."

I could hear pride in the way she said it—"Skittles is a rescue." I smiled and nodded, trying to be congenial. I leaned down and put my arms around Ellie, so she wouldn't reach for the dog.

“We have to leave Skittles alone,” I said. “He’s scared of kids.”

“Scared?” Ellie said.

“Sometimes dogs are afraid of people.”

I’d briefed Ellie on how to behave around animals, particularly dogs. Ellie finds dogs fascinating. Whenever we pass one, she drifts toward it and puts a hand out. Usually people walking their dogs see this and say, “Go ahead.” I told her she has to ask permission, but she doesn’t always follow rules.

“I’m going to play with Anna and Elsa,” Ellie declared.

“Who are they?” the woman asked. “Your friends?”

“No,” I said. “They’re characters from a movie.”

“Well, that’s okay. I was a teacher for thirty years. She’s what? Three? I wouldn’t worry about imaginary friends until she’s eight.”

I let the woman walk ahead. She led her dog toward the back of the school through the parking lot while Ellie and I took a paved trail around the other side. As we walked, I wondered, if Skittles was so nervous around kids, why was she bringing him to the playground? There was a field behind the school, but kids played in the field, too.

When we arrived, Ellie ran toward the slides while I watched Skittles. The owner had let him off his leash, down in the grassy area, a hundred yards away or so. Skittles was brown and white, mangy, with a thick coat. He had sad, gentle eyes and looked like he could have been a good dog with the right care. I hovered close to Ellie. I tried not being too protective—trial and error is how kids learn—but a stray dog, a rescue, loose at the playground, is different. A dog could tear her up. So when Ellie took off running toward Skittles, I was in pursuit.

The field was at the bottom of a hill, but Skittles was closing fast. I heard the woman calling him back, but the dog wasn’t listening.

“It’s all right!” she called, as Ellie approached. “It’s okay!” Though I couldn’t tell if she was saying this to Skittles or Ellie or me. The woman wasn’t running. Rather, she loped toward us.

“Ellie, wait!” I yelled. “Ellie, don’t pet him.”

But my daughter wasn’t listening. She careened toward him, hands out. They were only five feet apart now. I shot forward and stepped between her and the dog.

“Woah!” the woman said. “Now you’re coming, too!”

As if the problem was me.

I picked Ellie up.

The dog had ventured close, then backed away. The woman had warned us against him, but then let him off the leash. It was idiotic, but I didn’t want to argue.

“Come on, Ellie. We’re going home.”

And I turned and carried her off.

The woman had ruined our morning. She was a do-gooder of a certain type. I recognized this later. In the moment I’d been too concerned with making a good impression, taking the sunscreen compliment. On reflection, I saw her in my mind’s eye: that unkempt gray ponytail, her hemp-woven sandals. She was out to save the world one rescue at a time.

I’d taken Ellie to the park that morning to burn off excess energy. The day before when I’d picked her up from daycare, one of the teachers had said, “Doris asked if you could stop by her office before you leave.”

Doris is the program director. I’d never had much contact with her aside from our introductory tour. I wondered what she wanted. Had our credit card been declined?

There were three teachers in the room. They herded the kids here from all the different classes at the end of the day, the ones who remained, the ones whose parents arrived late. I didn’t know how the teachers did it—handling these kids

all day. At best, I could handle one, and there were nine or so left. I spotted my daughter in a corner, pulling a puzzle apart, scattering pieces. I waved. She ignored me, dismantled a second.

“We’ll watch Ellie,” the teacher said, “while you talk.”

Doris had seen me coming in. Her office is at the end of the first hall before the rooms where the children are. She’d nodded, said hello. She probably didn’t know me by sight or she could have called me in then. I popped my head in her office and knocked on the doorjamb.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Ah, Mr. Cole! Have a seat.”

It was less like an office and more like a cramped corridor they’d squeezed a desk into. Yellow walls. An opaque window at the end diffusing light. Papers scattered everywhere. There was no door to close, and aside from Doris’s swivel seat, the only two chairs were hard, black plastic.

The daycare is three-star, but it’s all we can afford. Still, three out of four is almost there, which is how my wife and I have lived the past few years: *almost there*. Car almost paid off. Mortgage, well, we’re making the monthly payments. Before Ellie, we’d discussed having two, but we weren’t sure we could afford it. It was almost within budget.

As I sat, I thought of how Doris looked like everything you’d expect a Doris to be. Plump, matronly. She’s kind to the kids with a no-nonsense demeanor. Spectacles dangled from her neck at the end of a chain.

Ellie had misbehaved before, but it was always minor. Something her teachers relayed. They’d inform me Ellie was eating Play-Doh off her shoes, which is disgusting, but something kids do. I’d say to her, “Ellie, don’t eat Play-Doh off your shoes,” and she’d ignore me, which is also something kids do.

“Thanks for taking the time to see me, Mr. Cole.”

“How can I help?”

“What I’m about to tell you is never easy.”

There weren’t any arms on the chairs, so I made a fist in my lap. I made two. I tried to hide them and threaded my fingers together and sat as still as I could.

“Ellie has become...disruptive,” she said.

“Disturbed?” I said.

“Disruptive,” she repeated.

Looking concerned and being concerned are different things, but I *was* concerned. I was concerned with anything having to do with Ellie, her well-being, her development.

“Do you think it’s a phase?” I said.

Doris explained that Ellie had started making loud noises at quiet time. During naps, she refused to sleep. She’d shout and squeal. When the teachers tried to calm her down, she’d get louder. During recess, she’d go to the edge of the playground and stare off into the woods. When they told her it was time to go inside, she refused, and when they tried picking her up, she’d writhe and resist.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Only the past week. I figured we should mention it. It may pass on its own, but it’s a cause for concern. She isn’t listening, and if this continues, you may want to have her assessed?”

“Assessed for what? Like, autism?”

“I don’t wish to conjecture. I just thought you should know.”

As we left, I watched Ellie for signs of what I’d been told. She seemed the same as ever. Doris had likely said this for insurance purposes. They had to cover themselves. If she didn’t say anything and something happened, they’d be liable. Ellie was spacey at times. At others, overly energetic. But that’s all this was, an excess of energy, the actions of an overexcited child.

I strapped her into her seat and wondered what my wife

Julie would say. She hadn't been well lately, and I wasn't sure I wanted to bother her with this. I figured I could handle it, the way I'd been handling most things lately.

"Have you been behaving?" I said.

Ellie nodded.

"They tell me you're not napping."

She looked past me, out the window.

"Ellie, you need to be quiet at naptime. You can't disturb the other kids. Hear me?"

Her face was blank. She wasn't listening, and on impulse, I grabbed her cheeks. I cupped her chin in the palm of my hand and turned her face toward me. My muscles had tensed. I hadn't realized how angry I was. She squirmed, and I released some of the pressure but kept my hand there. I wanted to tell her she had to listen, had to do what I said. If she didn't, I didn't know what would happen. I was scared. What if there *was* something wrong?

But no, I thought, it's her being a kid. It'll pass. She needs to get it out of her system. Run around a bit. So, that's what I tried to do. Get her out. Get her running.

I didn't think of Skittles for another week. I assumed things were going better at daycare. Doris hadn't summoned me back, nor had she spoken with my wife. At least, Julie hadn't said anything. I'd avoided broaching the topic. She had other things on her mind. I figured the walks were working. Ellie and I would set off after dinner. She'd amble along beside me, picking up sticks and rocks. We'd take long pieces of ornamental grasses from our lawn and chase each other, pretending they were magic wands.

The whole time, I kept her close, watching for signs she was zoning out. We walked to the creek near our house. We watched the clear water stream past, the sunset glinting off the ripples, the water spiders zipping back and forth, minnows

wagging their tails against the current. We threw sticks and watched them float away. I held Ellie's hand and we stared at the water and listened to it bubbling, and our problems ceased to exist.

The whole week, Ellie behaved. Whenever I asked her a question, she answered. Whenever I told her to do something, she did it. The following Thursday, I took her to see my parents after I picked her up. I sometimes need my parents to help entertain her on days when I don't have the energy. I bring her there and sit and store energy for when we go home and I have to make dinner and bathe her and brush her teeth.

The weather was pleasant, sky blue, and when we arrived, my parents were on their porch, watching the late-day traffic pass. Their porch is homey, bordered by hydrangea, decorated with wicker porch furniture. Ellie leapt up the stairs, and I followed, more slowly, limping into the end of the week. Ellie threw herself into my dad's arms and then hugged my mom as I sat across from them. My parents are in their late-fifties: my dad thin, wiry; my mom overweight. At times, she reminds me of Doris. Or Doris reminds me of her. Caring, tough. My parents have lived in their house thirty years. It's a quarter-mile away from us, and they help when they can—my mom, mostly. She takes Ellie when I need a break. I've told her Julie has migraines. That's all she needs to know.

As I sat, I took my eyes off Ellie. My parents are the only people I do that with. Ellie went to play in the front yard. The house next door has a small dogwood out front with a baby swing chained to its lowest branch. Ellie pushed it gently. The neighbors, a married couple about my age, own two dachshunds. They'd been out walking them and were just getting home. As soon as the dogs saw Ellie, they started barking, a high screeching assault, pointed brown noses rising from the sidewalk with batting, chomping maws of razor-sharp teeth. Ellie turned, and I expected her to back off, but as

she'd done with Skittles, she drifted toward them, hands out.

"Ellie, no!" my dad cried out. "They don't want to be petted."

His voice was soft—admonishing but measured— but Ellie kept on.

"Ellie, no!" I yelled. But she didn't stop. She was only a foot or two away. The owners were trying to pull the dachshunds back, but the dogs strained their leashes. I stood to run for her, as I had with Skittles, but my mother shouted, "Ellie, you stop right now!" And my daughter froze. Her voice made me pause as well. It always had. The tone she used with Ellie made me think I was being chastised. I stood at the top of the steps and saw Ellie stop in her tracks. I thought of Skittles. I couldn't control a dog. I couldn't control my daughter. I couldn't control my life. My mother could handle it. Certain people can handle anything. I wanted to be like that, but given what was happening with my daughter at school, with my wife home, I wasn't sure I could.

The next night, my wife and I had an argument. I'd taken Ellie to the park. She'd played in the creek. She'd sifted the dark brown loam of its banks through her fingers, and the grime was entrenched beneath her nails. Smears of grass and earth covered her shorts. Her shoes and shirt were damp. I'd watched from the banks and found nothing wrong with this. It was summer. She wasn't in danger of catching cold. It was bath time afterward, and since I usually give her baths, I figured it wasn't a problem.

"Do you know how hard it is to get grass stains out?" Julie exclaimed when she saw her.

I'd expected her to be sleeping. I don't really know what's wrong with her. Migraines is her excuse. She's never bothered consulting a doctor. Depression's what I think. But who am I to say? The one time I suggested this, she didn't speak to

me for a week. I only know she hasn't always been this way. The migraines started after Ellie was born, so I think they're real enough. And they've gotten progressively worse. She's irritable all the time. I try to make up for this by keeping Ellie quiet, taking on more responsibility. I don't bother her with unnecessary details, but this doesn't always curb her anger. She picked up our daughter's shorts and held them out.

"Here, give them to me," I said. "I'll soak them."

When Ellie and I had come inside, we'd tiptoed upstairs. I'd shushed Ellie, and even though she'd been quiet, the sound of water running into the tub woke my wife.

"You'll soak it?" she said. "Like you've ever gotten a stain out of anything. When you wash her clothes, the stains set, and I have to scrub them. You take her out to play and leave me with the dirty work."

Julie does a lot despite her migraines. She drops Ellie off at school in the morning, packs her lunch. But when my wife gets home, more often than not, she goes to her room and pulls the shades. So this rankled. I like to think we split duties. She takes care of Ellie in the morning, I do the evenings. But she likes to think she does more than her fair share, and she talks like this whenever I do anything she disagrees with. I took a deep breath and spoke as calmly as possible.

"I'm fully capable of taking care of our daughter," I said. "I'm not one of those men who becomes hopelessly incompetent when his wife isn't around."

She walked away with the shorts.

When I finished putting Ellie to bed, I went out to the porch and stood at the edge with one foot perched on the wrought-iron railing. I picked at the chipped green paint. The sun was setting. It stood fat and bright at the end of Sycamore Road. At the top of the hill stood the elementary school where I'd taken Ellie the week before, the morning we'd met Skittles. I watched the sunset and tried to calm myself. I

gripped the railing and leaned back, stretching my arms, and as I did, I spotted them at the top of the street—Skittles and the woman. At first I couldn't tell it was them. The last of the sun's rays blinded me, but then I recognized the owner from her silhouette: thin bony legs jutting from faded pink shorts, the gangling awkward stride of the long-limbed. She was taking her dog to the elementary school, but at least it was late. There wouldn't be kids.

Maybe she's learned, I thought. But the next day was Saturday. As the morning rolled around and I took Ellie to the park, they were there again. It was eight a.m. So maybe the woman thought no one would be there. At first, we kept our distance. Ellie played on the jungle gym and kept going down the slide. The dog was leashed in the field. But after a few minutes, the women let him off, and he dashed over to see us.

"Ellie, come here," I said.

"Why?"

"Just do as you're told," I snapped.

I pulled her close to my legs, and we stood near the swings, watching, as Skittles circled us. The woman was coming up, long strides against the incline. I didn't like her. She couldn't control her dog, which meant we were at her mercy. The dog was unpredictable. He seemed harmless. He wasn't barking. If the woman hadn't reacted in such a manic fashion when we first met—warning us he was scared of children, then letting him off the leash—I wouldn't have questioned his presence. But here he was, galloping toward us.

"He just wants to say hello," she said.

I didn't respond.

"We're training him with my granddaughter. He probably saw your little girl and thought it was her. Skittles is a rescue, you know?"

The sun beat down. We were in the midst of a heatwave. By afternoon, it would be in the upper-90s. I watched the dog

and clutched Ellie to me.

“We’ve met before, haven’t we?” the woman said.

“Come on, Ellie. We’re going.”

It was rude, walking away without acknowledging her presence. Yet, I knew if I started talking, I’d shout, “What’s wrong with you? Why are you here? This is a playground! For children! It’s not a canine rehab, you fucking numbskull!” And this would set a bad example. I couldn’t have my daughter yelling at people, Doris calling me in, telling me she’d called her teacher a fucking numbskull. So, we walked away. I had to show her what was right, and walking away was right. It’s a big world, I thought. This woman could have the park. Her and her dog. My daughter and I would find somewhere else.

“When were you going to tell me?” Julie said.

“When was I going to tell you what?”

I pushed open the screen door, and Ellie squeezed between us.

“Go wash your hands,” I told her.

“You know what I’m talking about. Doris pulled me aside this morning when I dropped her off. She said it’s been going on for weeks.”

“What’s been going on for weeks?”

I hadn’t forgotten about it, but I’d assumed Doris would have told me if it hadn’t stopped, not gone to my wife. “You mean the shouting at naptime? I thought that had stopped?”

“And why did you think it stopped? Did you follow up about it? Ask again? Or did you just ignore what was happening like you always do?”

“I took actions, measures. I didn’t ignore it.”

“Oh? What did you do?”

To say that I took Ellie outside and tried to wear her out so she wouldn’t have as much energy to act up at school sounded stupid now. So I held my tongue.

“She thinks Ellie might have ADHD. She said we should get her checked.”

“That’s extreme. I’m not sure she’s qualified to make that assessment.”

“She has an advanced degree.”

“It’s an EdD!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s not a medical doctor. I’m not going to put my three- year-old on Ritalin because she likes singing at naptime.”

“Because you’re right and everyone else is wrong.”

I was tired. I’d just walked in the door and felt cornered. When I feel cornered, I can get vicious, say mean things. I stood in the door and looked at my wife.

“No, darling. That’s how you are. It’s the way you’ve always been. No one can get grass stains out but you. Why don’t you go back to your room and hide out? Leave this to me.”

Dangers lurk everywhere. Skittles didn’t teach me this. He was only the most recent manifestation of a lesson I’d learned long ago. The world’s a frightening place, beyond our control. We can try to carve out a little niche, protect what’s ours, but the world encroaches. I didn’t want to say what I’d said to Julie. I didn’t want to fight. What I’d wanted to say was, *Help me. I can’t do this on my own. Our daughter’s having problems and I don’t know why, and I’m scared of taking her to a doctor and finding out it’s worse. I’m tired from being the only one who does anything with her after school. And there’s a dog up the street who comes to the playground and drives us away, and I hate the woman that owns the dog, and I don’t want to. I’m worried it’s my fault I’ve driven you away, and is there something I can do to make you whole again, happy? Can I bring you back to us, and why are you always so angry all the time?* I wanted to say all this, but it wouldn’t come. I was afraid. Afraid of the world. Afraid of everything.

Instead, we stopped speaking. Julie made an appointment with a child therapist without consulting me. The only way I knew about it was that she'd marked it on our calendar. We went through the motions, drop off, pick up, packing lunches, making dinners. We slept in the same bed, but the gulf between us was wider than the space we observed as we kept to our own sides of the mattress. I considered divorce—what it would mean, dividing up the house, the car, custody, seeing this woman I'd once loved and thought I'd spend my life with in passing. But I didn't want that. I didn't want to apologize either. She thought Ellie needed outside help. I didn't. I'd accused her of acting like she knew everything, but she'd done it first. It was childish to hold onto that, but I couldn't let go.

Outside, the heat continued to blister. I kept looking up the street, searching for Skittles. I hadn't seen him since the Saturday I'd turned away from his owner, but I'd been thinking about them—how rude I'd been; how, if I saw them again, I'd be friendlier; how, if you don't know you're doing something wrong, it hurts to be treated like you are without any explanation.

Mosquitoes, bred from the creek, floated into our yard. Every few seconds, I smacked my arms, shooed them off. On the porch, I saw them hovering above Ellie's legs as she drew on the pavement with chalk. I swatted at them, but her legs were marked with large, circular swellings, pink and itchy, and I had to apply cortisone cream so she'd stop scratching. Even after the sun set, the air was oppressive, and eventually, Ellie and I stayed in. No more running and jumping, no more ornamental grass wands. We were confined, and silence reigned in the house. I pictured my wife upstairs in bed. I wanted to go and ask her to join us. I wanted to say, "Ellie's fine. We've got nothing to worry about. She's going to be all right." But this wasn't the case.

On Thursday, I got to daycare late. I'd been running behind all day. The crawlers' room was right inside the front door, and I overheard a couple of teachers talking.

"...what did you say happened?"

"...Ellie...hit on the head."

The air conditioning was on. I stood at the threshold listening but only caught this bit. Did they mean my daughter? Had she finally done it? Hurt someone? I'd feared this since the day Doris talked to me. That it wasn't just misbehavior but something more—that she'd lash out, hurt another kid. I wanted to grab her and flee. Instead, I passed the crawlers' room and turned down the hall to where I knew Ellie would be. But it wasn't Ellie who'd hurt someone. It was Ellie who'd been hurt. I saw her sitting on a mat with her teacher Ms. Jessie standing above her, holding a bloody paper towel to the back of her head. My daughter's face was contorted. She was crying uncontrollably. I rushed to her and picked her up and held her.

"Shhh, it's okay," I said.

I turned to Ms. Jessie.

"What happened?" I hissed.

She stepped back, looking for help. Ms. Tasha, Ellie's other teacher, stood across the room.

"We didn't see," Ms. Tasha said. "We think that someone pushed her."

I set my daughter down and checked her scalp. There was a small, vertical gash down the back of her head.

"Why wasn't anyone watching?"

I had to breathe deep.

"It was Mona," Ms. Jessie said. "She'd been bothering Mona all day."

I was taken aback. I didn't expect they'd tell me. I figured they kept these things internal to avoid repercussions, grudges among parents. But Ms. Jessie looked flustered. She was clutching the side of the changing table, leaning against it.

“Ellie was bothering Mona?”

She nodded.

“So you let Mona push her?”

“No,” she said.

“You think Ellie’s at fault? So you, what? Allow retaliation? Look the other way?”

I was sweating. Even the walk from the car to the front door had made me perspire. My shirt clung to my skin. There were other parents coming into the room, but they ignored us. They saw the tears and bloody towel and steered clear. We were silent now, me and Ms. Jessie and Tasha. They were scared. They should have been. I was scared of myself. I couldn’t speak. Nothing good was going to come out. I wanted someone to pay. I wanted Mona kicked out of daycare. I didn’t give a damn that she was three. I wanted someone held responsible. I wanted to take this whole incompetent world—the world where dipshits could take on damaged dogs as casual projects and let them run wild, the world where Mona could push my daughter and make her bleed and her teachers found this acceptable because my daughter had been bothering Mona, the world where my wife withdrew her affection for reasons I couldn’t discern and I was afraid I’d never get it back—I wanted to take this world and smash it to bits. But that would have meant smashing myself to bits. Because I was part of this world, and I had to figure out how to get along in it. So the only option was walking away.

Ellie and I drove toward home, which was also the direction of the pediatrician. I didn’t know what to do. I’d looked at the wound as I strapped her in her seat. It had stopped bleeding, but it gaped like a winking eye. Open, cavernous. I thought I could see her skull, but it wasn’t that deep. As I placed her in her seat, she clung to me, arms and legs.

“Daddy, it hurts,” she said.

She’d stopped crying. She was being brave. What should I

do, I wondered. If I brought her home like this, it would make things worse. I wasn't sure she required medical attention. Maybe a bath and some antiseptic cream. But better safe than sorry. I drove to the pediatrician's and parked in the lot. I considered calling Julie, but she was in transit, commuting, and wouldn't answer. Then I thought of calling the pediatrician from the lot, asking their advice. But then I thought, she's going to need stitches, and they can't put them in here. I might as well drive to the ER.

I put the car in gear and started toward the hospital. Even then, I wasn't sure if this was what I should do. We'd been there once when Ellie was young. She'd stopped breathing for a few seconds. It had happened when Julie and I were still getting along. Ellie was three months old, and Julie had just finished feeding her. Ellie started convulsing. Her legs and arms flailed. She turned blue. I was in the kitchen, and Julie was in the living room, and she called to me, and I came running. We didn't know what was happening. My wife started pounding on Ellie's back. I reached for the phone to call 911, but just as suddenly as it started, it stopped. Ellie could breathe again. Her color returned.

At the intake room, my wife held Ellie as they took her vitals. I stood and paced, and every so often, I'd reach out and take Julie's hand, and she'd squeeze back. I'd tell her it was okay, though I didn't know. We sat and waited. They checked us in.

"The cause isn't readily apparent," the doctor told us. "We'd like to keep her overnight."

My wife placed Ellie on the bed and curled up next to her. The room hummed with the soft drone of air conditioning, and I placed a blanket on them. I pulled up a chair and watched them sleep. I'd never been so vulnerable. I'd never cared for anyone so much. I vowed I'd protect her, protect them. I'd never let anything hurt them. I knew that saying this was a lie, that it wasn't possible, that it was beyond my power. But it

wouldn't stop me from trying. And as I watched them, mother and daughter sleeping, a feeling of tenderness overcame me and I wept.

"Acid reflux," the doctor said. "Scares the bejesus out of parents. But that's all it is. We'll give her a prescription for the next few months. She should outgrow it."

We were relieved.

That morning, as we left the hospital, the light shone bright through the windows, full of warmth and life. Whenever you leave a hospital, you never give a thought to coming back. Our daughter's health was good. We were happy, alive. And though I knew that what I'd promised was a lie, I pretended it wasn't. I pretended that Ellie would always be safe, that Julie and I would always be in love and able to protect her. If there was any reason I couldn't, I'd do my best to ignore it and avoid it, to put it out of our way.

My wife says I do that with everything.