

THE TALE OF SODAPOP - PART THREE - TRANSCRIPT

The moon has risen high in the sky by the time SodaPop gets a moment's rest. The barn cat leads him along game trails and over streams, and he follows at a plodding pace, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. This night has been very strange, and that makes him tired. Finally, the cat stops at a small thicket blanketed with fallen needles. SodaPop digs out a little bed, circles it a few times to make sure it's just right, and promptly falls asleep.

The barn cat watches him a moment, then saunters off to hunt. It's not clear why she's taken such a shine to the little dog. She doesn't care much for dogs, normally, or really any animal for that matter. Maybe she feels bad for him. He's so clearly a city dog, the smell of concrete and exhaust embedded down to the skin. He's quick and clever, but hopeless in the face of danger. He'd never survive out here on his own. But he also knows humans, or at least has all the trappings of a spoiled human pet, and that is one area of expertise that the barn cat doesn't have.

She catches a field mouse, plays with it a little, then eats it before going back to check on the sleeping dog. She taps him softly with her paw and he startles awake. See? Hopeless. You don't sleep deep in the woods, especially here on the ground. It's a great way to never wake up.

When SodaPop sees the barn cat, he stretches and gives himself a thorough, full-body shake. She blinks slowly at him. He wags his tail. Neither is quite sure what these signals mean, but they don't seem threatening, which is good enough.

It's still dark out, though it won't be for long, and the barn cat decides to put SodaPop's knowledge to good use. She guides him up a steep hollow to a wide, well-worn hiking trail. Beside the trail she finds a huge blackberry bush, wild and full of thick thorns, and slips underneath it. SodaPop tries to follow, but the thorns snag the feathery hair on his ears almost immediately. He whines, stuck, but the cat just settles deeper under the bush and turns around to watch him. He takes a careful step backward and manages to free himself, but the blackberry bush is clearly not a good hiding spot.

Far down the trail, they hear footsteps. Human footsteps. SodaPop tenses, then sits up and wags his tail. Humans! He loves those!

The cat gives a soft, warning hiss, which he ignores. He steps onto the edge of the path. There are three adult humans of varying sizes. In the pre-pre-dawn, he can really only make out their silhouettes. One of them is very tall, and that one swivels its head back and forth as it walks, keeping a constant watch on their surroundings. There's a short one, which stares at its feet as it walks. The third one smells strongly of sausages. It chatters to the others. It says the words "Lara" and "dog," and SodaPop starts to rush forward, then stops.

There's something wrong. Beneath the smell of old sausages, the humans radiate fear. Now, it's true that dogs can smell fear. But not all fear smells the same. There's the worried kind, which usually needs a soothing response from a dog. And the frightened kind, which means a predator's near. What emanates from these humans is something else. It's a slow, dangerous tension, the elevated adrenaline of someone attempting something against their better judgement. This is the smell of humans who are Up To Something.

Of course, while processing all of this, he's forgotten that he's supposed to be hiding. So before he can decide what to do, the tall human stops and points at him. Then the short one says "SodaPop," and all three look in his direction. SodaPop turns to run, but only finds the blackberry bush. So turns toward the humans, squares his shoulders, and barks.

This activates the humans, who dive in his direction. The tall one reaches for him first. He ducks under its big hands and takes a quick side-step, which sends it off-balance. The short one goes low, bending its knees and holding its hands out wide. It misjudges how narrow SodaPop is, though, and the dog slips between the short human's legs and out the other side. Then the sausage-y one grabs his tail. This solidifies, in SodaPop's mind, that these are very bad humans. He whips his head around and snarls viciously. The sausage one, not knowing that SodaPop is actually too good a boy to ever bite someone, lets go of his tail in a hurry. Still too close for comfort, SodaPop spins once and lets out a mighty battle cry.

[SFX: A cute doggy "Arooo" sound.]

What the humans soon discover is that SodaPop is an all-time master at the game of chase. The secret is not necessarily speed. Lots of dogs are fast. But when you're small, narrow, and long-legged, you just have to zig-zag and turn more tightly than your opponent and you win every time. There's not a dog alive who can catch SodaPop, not even that Border Collie that someone keeps bringing to the small dog side of the dog park. Clumsy, two-legged humans don't stand a chance.

He zips just close enough to the tall one to bait it into bending down to grab him, then feints and rushes at the sausage-smelling one instead. The tall one, bent over as it is, attempts to follow with its arms and accidentally clotheslines the short one, who's racing into the fray. Sausage man swipes at him, but SodaPop slips close to its legs and then fluidly turns around behind it. This leads the man in a small circle, which pushes it just off-balance enough that it must right itself before chasing after the dog. This buys SodaPop time to zip straight away and out of the little cluster of humans.

SodaPop sprints a few yards away and turns to see that the humans have largely recovered from their mishaps. The tall one now holds a cloth sheet it got from somewhere. This could be a problem. "Come here, doggy," the short one says, as it fans out to block an easy escape route on one side of the trail. SodaPop hesitates just a half-second, then races toward the short one. Just as a grin spreads on the human's face, SodaPop jukes hard and whirls off in another direction. The tall one is waiting for him here, though, and it spreads the sheet wide to try to catch him. SodaPop skids into a hard turn and just manages to get away, but the awkward movement makes his bad knee ache. He needs to get out of the open.

SodaPop does a quick zig-zag across the trail to try to scatter the humans a little, but they're ready for him. He scans the surroundings, but can't see a good hiding spot that won't require leaping over a fallen tree limb or two. While there's always a chance that could make a human trip, it could also pop his bad knee. Therefore, he takes the one option that's demonstrated to work. Powered by desperate adrenaline, SodaPop lowers his head and runs as fast as he can into the blackberry bush.

Thorns tear at the hair on his ears and muzzle, poke into the gaps between his paw pads, embed themselves in his fluffy tail. Despite this, SodaPop lets the

momentum carry him through to nearly the center of the sprawling bush — and right into the barn cat's hiding spot.

The barn cat, now faced with a thorny, dog-shaped rocket, lets out a piercing yowl —

[SFX: Cat scream]

and flies out of the bush — directly toward the short human. Neither have time to get out of the way, and both scream as cat collides with human, claws first. The barn cat slashes savagely in all directions, landing several vicious scratches before she disentangles from the short one. Then she ricochets off the tall one, digging her claws into the human's leg so that she can springboard onto a nearby tree. She climbs up several levels and stops to lick the blood off of her claws. Humans are just so *gross*.

The humans are in chaos now, all shouting and running around. Meanwhile, SodaPop is fully stuck inside the blackberry bush, held in place by thick snarls of thorns. He tries to lift his head, but that just twists the thorns even deeper into his hair. He makes a few more cautious moves, but it's hopeless. He can only whine for help. The smell of sausages floats ever-closer as the one uninjured human tries to part the thorny bush without cutting itself. It's only somewhat successful, though it does manage to thrust an arm in far enough to reach SodaPop's ear.

Then suddenly, there's a cry in the distance.

[SFX: Monster cry]

SodaPop has heard this sound a few times since Lara brought him to this place, and it always makes him nervous. It rattles down his spine and into his gut. His lips curl into a growl almost before he actually hears it. But as the sound pierces through the pre-dawn forest, the humans stiffen. They smell of pure panic and anticipation now. As SodaPop finally extricates himself from the blackberry bush, the humans fall to their knees and press their faces into the ground, arms stretched out ahead of them.

SodaPop chews a thorn out of one of his feet, shakes the brambles he can out of his hair, and turns toward the sound.

It's hard to make out what it is, exactly. It's something huge with long, pulsing limbs that reach across the sky. The non-smell from earlier seeps out from it, erasing all the other scents in the air, confusing his senses again. Wherever the shape's long arms spread, the sky disappears. It's not that it's dark. If you have a good nose, you never confuse darkness with nothingness. This is like a hole in the world. Emptiness.

As it approaches, SodaPop feels his own terror rise. The humans are motionless now, eyes shut tight. Up in a tree, the barn cat also sits frozen, her eyes so dilated they've gone completely black.

SodaPop has run far too many times in the last few hours. He wouldn't run now, even if he could. Instead, SodaPop looks down at the frightened humans, and he knows what he must do. He is, after all, a Good Boy. He's always been a good boy. He comes from a long line of good boys and girls. And right now, all that breeding says that good dogs protect others. So he gathers himself, growls deep in his throat, and steps past the humans, toward the nothing-thing.

The long limbs radiate out from a thick, confused mass at the center. Between the pre-dawn shadows and the lack of smell, SodaPop can't tell what shape it is. Its edges seem to ripple and change. Wherever it touches the ground, the plants shrivel and die. Other than that soft rustling, it makes no sound. SodaPop lowers his head, trying his best to look intimidating as he blocks its path to the humans. Then he lets out his deepest, most intimidating bark.

[SFX: Dog barking (mean)]

The thing actually seems to hesitate for a moment. It stops moving, and its limbs stick straight out in a curious gesture. The humans on the ground writhe and scream in response, and though SodaPop isn't sure how the being hurts them, he barks frantically for it to stop.

[SFX: Dog barking (scared)]

The empty limbs flicker a little, like the being is thinking of what to do next. Before it can act, though, pre-dawn shifts into dawn. The sun crests over the hill, sending bright, clear beams through the trees. The gray mush of the landscape

transforms into a mosaic of light and shadow. SodaPop winces only slightly as the light hits his eyes, and in that fraction of a second, the monster is gone. It doesn't wither or sizzle. It doesn't cry or run or hide. It's just there one moment and gone the next, a cluster of dead plants the only sign it was ever here at all. The forest smells rush back in again, knocking SodaPop a little off-balance as he adjusts back to the regular world.

Behind him, the humans stop screaming and groan softly instead. They roll onto their backs, breathless, and lie on the ground. The short one says that they've been "blessed," a word that SodaPop remembers as a good thing. The tall one laughs, wild and incredulous. The smelly one just stares into the sky, motionless.

Just at the edge of his vision, SodaPop catches a little movement. Something large, but living, with wide, quiet footsteps. Its eyes glint in SodaPop's direction, and then it sprints off into the woods. SodaPop doesn't care to follow.

He considers the humans for a moment. He protected them, but that doesn't mean he trusts them. In fact, if he's going to get away from them, then he should do it now while they're distracted. So he sniffs once and trots away into the forest. Far above, the barn cat leaps from branch to branch and then scrambles to the ground. She walks next to him, her steps heavy but quick. SodaPop's tail wags slightly. The cat twitches an ear in his direction. They disappear into the brush.

The walk back through the woods is long, not least because SodaPop doesn't actually know which direction to go in anymore. The smell of home is long gone. The barn cat seems to trust him, though, and the two range across the hillside amiably. SodaPop's jangling collar and general enthusiasm ruin the barn cat's attempt to stalk the just-awakened field mice, but his keen nose is good at finding clean streams to drink from. At one such stream, the barn cat sneaks away and returns with the remains of a bird. She drops it in front of SodaPop and steps back. This one cannot hunt, but it doesn't deserve to starve, the gesture might say. SodaPop doesn't really know what to do with a dead bird, though, and the cat looks on in horror as he rolls on it instead of eating it.

SodaPop is a true denizen of the woods, he thinks. His hair is full of thorns, twigs, and leaves. He's got a few scratches from the blackberry bush, but

nothing serious. There's a layer of dirt settling in against his skin. And now, best of all, he is cloaked with the alluring, complex scent of dead bird. What could be better?

He can't help but think of Lara, though. Will she be okay without him? Can she find him out here? He thinks maybe she's at the bottom of the hill, but he can't be sure. And there are so many smells crowding his senses that he's not sure he could even pick her out.

The barn cat notes his tension but continues to saunter casually beside him. He is new here, but he will learn. Maybe he can be a barn dog. There's a small cat colony in her barn back home, but she can take them on if she needs to. This dog has few useful skills, but he is brave, and that's something. He could probably scare raccoons away from the food bin, if he really works at it.

Before she can decide whether to adopt him, SodaPop stops walking. He's frozen, tense all over. The barn cat tenses too. Has the monster come back? The nothing-thing from the night before? But no, this — this seems different.

SodaPop takes a few steps back and forth, sniffing the air. He's urgent, attentive. Then in a second, his entire demeanor changes. He comes alive. He was always alive, of course, but this is something different. It's like a spark ignites at his nose and courses through to the end of his tail. His heart speeds up, and every muscle readies itself.

She's here. The human who is the sun. His person. He's sure of it.

Pinpointing the exact direction of her scent takes just another second. He's not really much a tracker, generally more interested in a scent's complexity than its trail. And there's no emptiness here to mute the other smells, so he has to pick her out from fir trees, birds, bear scat, barn cats...

The barn cat sits back, exasperated. She knows not to trust these woods. She thought she taught him not to trust them either. But here he is, taken by yet another new sensation.

Then a branch snaps on a tree somewhere uphill from them. The sound is like a starter's pistol. SodaPop lets out a wild, desperate bark, like no sound he's made all night, and he bolts toward the crest of the hill. The cat has seen him

run many times at this point, but never like this. This time, SodaPop runs with the whole force of life driving him, something stronger than hunger or fear. He sails over fallen branches, navigates thorny bushes like they're hardly there. He is unstoppable.

There's no point in following, the cat knows. Part of being an apex predator is knowing when and where to spend one's energy, and whatever SodaPop's after doesn't seem to be in her interest. So she watches him instead, a little streak of white barreling uphill and out of sight.

She waits a few moments, just in case he calls for her or comes back. He does neither. So she carefully licks her paws and smooths her fur, then walks off in the other direction. Her barn is just past the base of the hill. Along the way, the trees grow mossy and thick, excellent for stalking prey. She can hear a Bluejay calling from somewhere. She's always wanted to catch one of those bastards.

Above her, the sun glows softly through a blanket of clouds. A dark squirrel with red, glittering eyes settles into the hollow of a tree, where it will sleep until nightfall. The breeze speaks of coming rain. And somewhere in the forest, a little dog runs desperately toward his truest love.

OUTRO

Thank you for listening to the Tale of SodaPop.

This episode was written, edited, and narrated by Julie Saunders. The role of SodaPop was played by Archie. The Barn Cat was played by Lulu. Music for this episode was provided by Epidemic Sound -- please see the show notes for titles and composers.

Production is about to restart on this show, starting with a full-cast prequel episode and then moving on to the rest of season one. Patreon supporters will get sneak peeks and behind-the-scene looks at that process, as well as early access to all new episodes. Find out more about Patreon and other ways to support the show at believerpodcast.com/support.

Until next time, I leave you with the wisdom of Mister Fred Rogers: "I like you just the way you are." Bye now.