

UNDER THE DOME CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION

Title: PACHA

Author: Tim Crosby

Every day at five, I go to a field on the edge of town. You know these sorts of open spaces: abandoned for so long that no one quite remembers whose land it is, and no one really cares, where the brown weedy grass comes up to your knees in summertime.

It's a tradition from before the Dome – I would bring Pacha there after school and we'd play fetch. I would throw the ball, and he would bound through the field, running just for the joy of running, jumping to catch the ball, occasionally hopping over those marshy patches common to untilled fields.

Now Pacha and I meet there, but I don't throw a ball and he doesn't run. We sit, and stare, and wish that we could touch.

I got Pacha when I was eight, and he was less than ten weeks. It was three months after Mom's lingering death, and Dad figured I needed some companionship. It wasn't that Pacha was supposed to be a replacement for Mom – more that a shy kid at the edge of a small town needs something to pay attention to besides his own thoughts.

As soon as I could, I was playing fetch with Pacha. Dad could never promise to be home before eight – the hazard of being the only electrician in town – which gave me lots of time with Pacha, even on the rare days I decided to do my homework. The field where we played was practically my backyard. It was perfect.

Not a lot can drag a young boy away from his dog, especially when the dog is as smart as Pacha. I know that everyone says their dog is special, but Pacha really is. He looks to be some spaniel, some shepherd, and some mutt. We're not entirely sure of his pedigree – he came from a box of puppies abandoned in Castle Rock, where Ted Johnstons's sister lives, and Ted promised to find a few of them homes here in Chester's Mill. What we are sure of is that Pacha learned all the usual doggy tricks in record time. As soon as he was housebroken, we put the kennel crate in the attic and he slept at the foot of my bed. Dad joked that an [a] dog is better than an alarm because you can't ignore a wet nose shoved into your face.

Our afternoon routine changed a little when I took up basketball in fourth grade. However, I was still almost always home by five, so Pacha and I still went to the field to play, even in winter when nighttime came before I made it home. Pacha wasn't enthusiastic about walks on the cold hard ground or the wet paw-clinging snow, but he was always eager for our visits to the field. At five 'till six his tail would invariably start wagging – as constant as a metronome, as reliable as an atomic clock.

We'd go out for half an hour or more, until his tongue was lolling languidly from the side of his mouth and he was panting in steaming doggy breaths. When ice covered the trees, and the world looked completely different to me, Pacha still always knew the way to the field. He never needed a leash, for there was only one place he wanted to go.

For nearly eight years, we maintained our daily tradition. Through winters, and long lazy days of summer when I worked at the McCoy orchard, and the cool, fragrant Maine springs, Pacha was always waiting for me. We played fetch after Trey Gilman moved to town and he showed me his collection of comic books, after Krissy Driscoll turned me down for a date once I finally got up the courage to speak to her, and after Trey Gilman showed me his collection of stolen Hustlers.

Every day, however good or bad it had been before, was made better by going to the field with Pacha. That is, until that one autumn day when the Dome came.

It was as normal a Saturday as you could have wished, not the sort of day that anything would worth remembering usually have happens. It was a warm, and the world was just starting to smell like dried leaves and woodsmoke. I found myself caring about little else except playing with Pacha. Shortly before noon we headed out the field to play fetch – a sort of weekend bonus to our daily ritual. We had been outside five, maybe ten minutes and I threw the slobbery tennis ball nearly to the other side of the field. Pacha ran after, cutting a wake in the grass, and caught the ball in his mouth after one bounce. He ran back to me, eyes shining and tail wagging hugely.

And then the Dome appeared.

I didn't know anything had happened until Pacha ran into the Dome, hitting his nose. At first I thought it must have been some hidden roughness in the field, or an optical illusion.

He had never been one to bark, or to whine, and he didn't do so now. He did drop the ball, and look as surprised as a dog can look, but he didn't cry out.

You'd think that seeing my dog run into the invisible wall would warn me, but it didn't. I ran to him, slamming into the same force field that he did. I landed hard on the ground, hurting my butt in addition to my forehead.

I put my hand to the Dome as Pacha scabbled against it. Impossibly, were separated by inches but couldn't touch. For the first time since I had gotten Pacha, we were in different worlds.

I spent the next few hours walking along the Dome's perimeter, looking for a break in the invisible wall. Pacha followed, on the other side.

He carried the tennis ball with him. Occasionally, he would drop the ball on the ground and look at me imploringly, half-wagging his tail. When I just continued walking, he would pick up the ball again and follow. He dropped the ball less and less as we continued our walk.

I had gone a fair distance into the woods before I could admit that there was no way through. Heading back home, seeing if there was news, seemed like the best plan. I walked back along the Dome's perimeter, hoping futilely that I had missed a hole or invisible crack. When I reached the field again, I knelt so my face was level with Pacha's. "We'll try to figure this out," I said, more to myself than to him. As smart as he was, no dog fully understands English. "I'm going to go home, but I'll be back tomorrow. Assuming that there is a tomorrow."

Then I left my dog alone in the afternoon sun.

I went back that day at five. Pacha was there, waiting for me, the tennis ball just at soggy with slobber as always. He pressed the ball against the Dome as I sat on the other side

and tears rolled down my cheeks.

A lot of things happened in Chester's Mill over the next few weeks as the Dome changed everyone's life. For a little while at least, Dad and I were less disrupted than a lot of folks. Living on the edge of town means that sometimes people forget about you, and sometimes being forgotten is a blessing.

We tried to keep our daily schedules the same. Dad and I still got up in the morning, we still had breakfast, and dinner, and went to sleep like normal. School and basketball and work were out of the question, but we picked up a daily rhythm not so different from what we had before.

Trey was out of town with his family on Dome Day, and they didn't come back at all. Trey once said to me that his mom refused to have cut flowers in the house because their only option for the future was within in a vase. I think it's the same thing here.

Every day at five, I still go to the field and Pacha is there waiting for me. I don't know where he spends the rest of his time – it's clear that he's still eating, but he's dirtier and his fur is more matted each time I see him.

One day I went to the field early, and Pacha was nowhere to be seen. At five five o' clock exactly, Pacha appeared, his tail wagging, his lips forming that shape that I always think of as a smile.

Another day, I got to the field late, fifteen minutes behind schedule. I saw Pacha sitting patiently for me. His tail thumped on the ground when I approached.

He always brings the tennis ball.

Every day, he lays it gently on the ground on his side of the Dome, then looks up at me. If desire alone could have broken the Dome, then I would have shattered it a thousand times over. But instead, every day, I do nothing but stand as close as possible to my dog.

I always stay as long as I can, but never more than an hour. Once it gets to be six, both Pacha and I turn away – a tacit agreement that staying longer won't help either of us. He takes the tennis ball in his mouth, and I walk back to my house. We don't see each other until the next day.

Dad never comes with me. It's not just that he's busy trying to secure us food while trying to avoid the local politics spreading over the town like a black mist. He knows that this time is important to me, and I need to be alone with my dog. Dad says he misses Pacha too. But I know that it's still Mom he misses.

It's easy to see that things are getting bad real fast. Even away from the town center, we can see that things are falling apart. There was a poem about that that we read in school, about how the center cannot hold. Here in Chester's Mill, it's sort of a different problem. The center is held too tight, and things are still falling apart.

I hear that lots of folks have lost family members. Krissy's mom died on Dome Day, driving the second car in a pileup that hit the invisible wall. You'd think that maybe that would give us more in common, something to say to each other, but that isn't how it works. It seems that the only way we could relate is by talking about all the bad stuff that's going on, and that only makes it harder to speak. We don't have enough shared good times to be able to talk. On the rare rare occasions when we see each other in town, we do little more

than avoid each others' eyes.

I miss my dog.

As the days get shorter and the light grows less, I still go to the field. I now need to turn on my Maglite for the walk. I turn it off to conserve batteries once I get to Pacha. We sit there, in the dark, two dark forms illuminated by the faint glow of starlight.

I wonder if the Dome will ever disappear. I wonder if the madness of this town will consume us before that happens. I wonder if things would have been different if Mom were still alive. I wonder how much longer I will be able to come here.

And I wonder, when we've run out of food and air, if my dog will still come to the field every day at five.