

Tracks

by Sheila Boneham

It all started when Alberta Shofelter asked me to shoot her dog. She offered triple my usual fee plus expenses and said that Jay could come along, so of course I agreed. Then the whole project whirled out of my control, and I found myself headed for an overnight ordeal in a Speedway motel.

Don't get me wrong – the motel was fine. More than fine. Alberta has plenty of money and knows how to use it, and the Belton Inn was the nicest motel I've stayed in since my first honeymoon. Not that I've had or wanted a second, although the way things are going with Tom, I'm terrified that he'll catch me in a weak moment and I'll end up swilling champagne and wondering what hit me. Alberta also treated us to an outstanding steak at a little place I'd never heard of in Carmel, an up-and-coming little burgh just north of Indy. CARmel – only newcomers or the nouveau pretentious put the accent on the second syllable.

No, the accommodations were fine. It was Alberta herself who made the trip from Fort Wayne an ordeal, gossiping nonstop during the two-hour drive to Indianapolis. I couldn't decide

whether to strangle her with a leash or run her down with her SUV when she made a pit stop somewhere around Muncie, so she lived to blather on while I chewed my cuticles raw and Jay snored in the back seat.

By nine o'clock Alberta was in her room, and I was tucked into bed with Jay and more or less off the hook until morning. Unless she called me. Again.

But maybe I should clarify why Alberta wanted me to shoot her dog. I'm Janet MacPhail, and I photograph pets, among other things. And Indy, spoiled rotten and petted silly, isn't your run-of-the-backyard pet Welsh Terrier. He was at the top of his game in the show ring and in need of a new photo portfolio. Or rather, Alberta, his campaign manager and doting "mommy," needed a new batch of photos as she prepared an all-out marketing assault in the big, slick show-dog magazines. Wanted to hit 'em hard before Westminster. I was, it seemed, photographer of choice, which was great news for my bank book. For my sanity? Mmmm, not so good.

Alberta wanted the shoot to be special, and she wanted the perfect location, so we had brainstormed a bit. Maybe the Lakeside Park Rose Garden? But when I drove down Lake Avenue to check the place out, there was scaffolding all over the park's giant pergola. Not all that picturesque.

We bounced ideas around for a while, and then one of us, I can't remember who (and hate to admit that it may have been me) said, "The museum at the track!" Meaning, of course, the Indianapolis 500 Hall of Fame Museum. Which made perfect sense because Indy's official moniker is Champion Welsho Start Your Engines. All of Alberta's dogs are named for the 500 –

Welsho Checkered Flag, Welsho Pace Car, and so on. Now, I can sit and watch dogs all day, but I'd be bored stiff watching a bunch of cars run around in circles. Not Alberta, though. No sirree. As she'd reminded me two hundred times since noon, she went to her first 500 in 1960 and hadn't missed a race in forty-six years.

I was just falling off the edge into lala land, my arm wrapped around Jay's warm body, when the phone jangled me back from the brink. *If this is another question about which lens I'm going to use, I'll shove my tripod....* I let the rest of the thought go as I put the receiver to my ear. "We can talk about this tomorrow."

"Uh, sure," said a voice much more masculine than Alberta's.

"Oh, Tom." Jay groaned, rolled toward me, and planted a big wet kiss on my cheek. I nudged him off so I could talk, a pang of guilt nestling into my gut. "Sorry I didn't call. I must have drifted off." I gave Tom an abridged rendition of my day, leaving out Alberta's gossip and her detailed instructions on how to conduct a photo shoot. "Indy's a cute little booger, though. How's Leo?"

Tom was cat sitting for me. His idea. Leo would have been fine at home, but he's so adaptable and social that Tom insisted on a sleep over. Besides, he helped save my life not long ago. Leo, not Tom. So we hold him in high regard.

At the sound of Leo's name, Jay's lids lifted and he gazed at me, the soft look in his brown eyes enough to break your heart. I ran my fingers lightly through the silvery hair behind his ears.

"Leo is cuddled up on the couch next to Drake. Jay enjoying the trip?"

I rolled Jay away from me, wrapped an arm around him, and wove my fingers into the thick hair of his chest. "Oh, I think so."

"Lucky dog." I smiled. One of the things I like most about Tom is that he understands my love affair with Jay. He feels much the same about his own dog, Drake. "Tell him I hold him responsible for your well-being. And try to stay out of trouble."

I'd met Tom three months earlier, back in May, when I got tangled in a web of murders involving members of our dog-training community. I wasn't keen to get into a situation like that again. Had I known that history was threatening to repeat itself, I probably wouldn't have gotten any sleep.

As it was, though, I conked out as soon as I hung up the phone and bounced out of bed at 5:30, pulled on some jeans, a T-shirt, and a pair of low rubber boots for the dew-laden grass. My involvement in the murders I mentioned had shown me how useful a good tracking dog can be, and I'd gotten serious about training Jay to follow human scent trails, something best done before the humid heat of Indiana summer days. I took Jay out for a quick pee, then grabbed his breakfast kibble, already stashed in a plastic container, plus my orange flags. I ignored the "you're not taking me with you?" look on Jay's face as I shut the door.

I had scoped out a field just east of the motel the night before. Most people would call it an eyesore, filled as it was with weeds and grass grown to mid-calf height. For my purposes, it was perfect. I laid out a 540-yard track with four turns, left and right. I put the container with Jay's breakfast at the end of the track. Finding it would be his reward. I wanted to age the track at least thirty minutes before we ran it, so I figured I'd hang out in the room for a little while and catch the news. But when I approached my door, I found Indy sniffing at the threshold while Alberta pressed her ear against the metal, testing it with a steady pattern of rap-rap-rap, listen-listen, rap-rap-rap.

“Hiya!”

Alberta jumped, and Indy wriggled and snorted around my ankles. I bent to pet him.

“Oh, Janet! I thought we could go over the plan before breakfast.”

And at breakfast, and on the way to the museum, and at the museum, I thought, but I buttoned my lip. She was paying me pretty good money, after all.

“Okay, Alberta, we can do that in a few minutes.” I opened the door to my room, put a leash on my dog, and grabbed his harness and longline. “But I want to run a track with Jay, and I’ve already laid it. Will that work?”

She started to protest that we should get ready, but I pointed out that since the museum didn’t open until nine, we had three hours, and Jay would run this track in less than five minutes. Besides, I was halfway back to the start of my track and Alberta was too busy trying to keep up to argue further. She’s maybe four-eleven if she pulls herself up straight, and not in the best possible shape. The little baby cigars she smokes don’t help.

“Why don’t you watch from here and catch your breath?” I smiled at her. She panted and gasped at me, nodding and pressing her palm against her heaving bosom. Indy bounced in happy circles at her feet, then gave up on that and started dancing around Jay, darting under his belly and between his legs until his retractable leash was twined and tangled with Jay’s short leather one. By the time I separated the dogs and put Jay’s tracking harness and long line on him, the track was half-an-hour old. At least we weren’t bored while we waited.

Jay beat my estimate and ran the track in four minutes. He sat beside the food container, his way of indicating that he’d found

something. He wriggled and bounced while I removed the lid, and sucked up a cup of kibble in the time it took me to arrange his forty-foot line into a tidy coil. The air was heavy with August humidity and the temperature climbed with the morning sun, so we crated the dogs in our motel rooms and headed for breakfast.

Twenty minutes later, I shoved a fork full of cinnamon French toast into my mouth and listened as Alberta went over the pictures she wanted. Again. Then, to my surprise, she said, “Jay’s good.”

“Yeah, he’s a good boy.”

“No, I mean tracking. I was impressed.”

I smiled at her. Flattery concerning my dog is always welcome.

“No, really! If I were lost, I’d want you and Jay looking for me. You should join a SAR team.”

High praise indeed, but search and rescue isn’t something you do as a hobby. It’s a lifestyle commitment, and I didn’t think it was one I could make. “Tracking is just a hobby for us, but thanks. He is pretty good.”

A half hour later we pulled into the museum parking lot. A pot-bellied little man with a fringe of straight gray hair encircling a shiny scalp rushed out to meet us as we approached the building’s entrance. He took in the two dogs, the camera bag, and the tripod, and said, “You must be Ms. Shofelter? I’m Nelson Parker. Call me Nelson.” The name tag pinned above the Ralph Lauren pony on his shirt confirmed that, and identified him as assistant museum manager to boot.

Nelson stood just out of handshaking range and kept an eye on Indy and Jay. He looked like he was ready to turn tail if either of them made a move toward him. Intrigued, the two dogs leaned

against their leashes to poke their noses as close to the nervous little man as possible.

As we moved onto the main floor of the museum, Nelson's cell phone played a tinny rendition of "Lil Deuce Coupe" and he excused himself. I put my bag and tripod down, and Alberta and I looked at the seventy some cars that surrounded us. Dust motes danced in the light from the glass canopy above our heads, and a faint potpourri of fuel, rubber, and wax crawled into my nose. A handful of early birds wandered through the museum.

Most of the cars on display have raced flesh and dreams around this track at America's crossroads and elsewhere in the world, and about half of them are Indy 500 winners. Some Indy pace cars and vintage models of special note round out the collection. Among the visitors was one feral-looking character, gaunt and reptilian. Years of working with dogs have honed my sense of body language, and my instincts told me the guy was nervous. I watched him for a minute or two, but he could hardly pocket a car, so I turned back to the task at hand.

Alberta couldn't decide which would suit Indy better, Ray Harroun's yellow Marmon "Wasp," winner of the first Indianapolis 500 in 1911, or one of A.J. Foyt's four winning cars. I was about to suggest that I just shoot him in whatever cars we could and sort out the best shots later when Nelson's phone conversation turned both our heads.

"But I have Alberta Shofelter here for a photo shoot."

Pause.

"How long?"

Pause. Sigh.

"Okay, stall if you can." He pocketed the phone and turned back to us.

"I'm sorry. Um, we have a sort of, um, problem."

Jay, Indy, and Alberta all cocked their heads, two to the right, one to the left, and listened. I wished I had my camera out.

"There's been a scheduling mix up. We have a field trip of third graders coming in."

"In August?"

"Summer-school group." Little sparkles of sweat danced across Nelson's wide forehead. "I'm so sorry."

"Not a problem. You can just keep them back from whatever car we're using at the moment." Alberta is rich, famous in certain circles, and accustomed to being obeyed. "We'll be fine. Won't we, Janet?" The tiny black curls across the top of her face bounced as she nodded her head at me. She looked back at Nelson. "When will they be here?"

"They're outside. But they're going for a bus ride around the track, so you have maybe half an hour."

Alberta had brought a suitcase full of mats, rugs, and assorted fabrics to protect automobile finishes from Indy's smoothly dremeled nails. She busied herself selecting the perfect piece to complement each car. Indy, it turned out, was quite the ham, and in the next twenty minutes we got some great shots of him in, on, and in front of various cars. My favorite prop wasn't a race car at all but the 1935 four-door convertible Duesenberg JN passenger car. It's one of three ever built, and it was one snazzy ride in its day.

We were just wrapping up a series with Indy and the '57 Corvette when the museum filled with the patter of sneakers and high-pitched young voices oohing and aahing and settling on, "Look! Dogs!"

I knew I wouldn't be able to take photos and keep an eye on the kids swarming Jay, and it was too hot to leave him in a closed car, so I suggested a half-hour break. The kids would have had enough of the museum by then anyway. I stashed my camera in my bag, hoisted the bag to my shoulder, tucked my folded tripod under my arm, and headed out with my dog.

The man in gray stood round-shouldered against the wall just inside the front door, hands shoved deep in his pants pockets as he watched the kids and flicked the tip of his tongue in and out between narrow lips. Our eyes met for an instant before he looked away. My own body reacted with no conscious direction from my brain, arcing my path away from the man, and I heard a low rumble rise from my dog's throat. I was not surprised.

Ten minutes later, Alberta bustled out with Indy tucked tight against her. She did not look happy. "This is impossible. Let's go. We'll have a cup of coffee and come back and finish later when those kids are gone."

I couldn't convince her to wait it out at the Speedway, so we loaded the dogs and set off in search of coffee. Not just any coffee, mind you. Alberta had to have Panera's "Dark and Vibrant" along with one of their ooey-goey double-chocolate calorie bombs. My hopes of getting home by early afternoon raced away.

When we pulled back into the museum parking lot ninety minutes later, the school bus was still there. That was startling enough. The flashing lights of the three Speedway police cruisers parked in front of the door were absolutely hair raising.

Nelson paced back and forth outside the entrance, wringing his hands and swiping a sodden hanky across his slick forehead. When he saw us, he scurried over and addressed Alberta.

"I don't think they'll let you back in. Not now, anyway. Oh, it's just terrible. Terrible." Beads of perspiration flew into the air as he shook his head.

"What's happened?" I couldn't think of anything third-graders could do to attract three police cars.

"One of the children has disappeared."

Alberta clapped her hands to her mouth.

"Disappeared?"

Nelson shifted his round-eyed stare to me. "When they loaded the kids to leave, they did a head count, and a little boy is missing. We've looked everywhere."

I thought about the layout beyond the entrance and couldn't imagine anyone hiding in the wide-open display area, unless the kid had crawled under a car. The two gift shops might offer possibilities, I supposed, for a small child to hide, although it seemed unlikely. "Could he have gotten into one of the offices in back?" I scanned the clusters of people gathered in front of the museum, looking for the shifty-eyed loner who gave me the willies earlier. He was nowhere to be seen.

Nelson shook his head. "I don't see how. No one's here, really. I mean staff. Everyone's out for vacations or other things, and the offices are locked unless someone's working." He appeared to be trying to wring one of his hands right off. "Except now, of course. The police wanted them all opened so they could search."

A giant in brown slacks and a blue shirt with wet crescents under his armpits joined us. He was at least a foot taller than my 5'4" and somewhere between slim and fat. He ignored me and Alberta in favor of Nelson. "We've called for a K9 from Indianapolis."

Never one to be ignored, Alberta shoved her hand in front of his tie tack and introduced herself, adding, “And this is Janet MacPhail, and Jay.”

“Garza. John Garza. Detective, Speedway PD.”

I had no idea if it meant anything, but I told him about the odd character I’d seen lurking in the museum earlier and how my dog and I both got bad vibes from the guy. He pulled a radio from his belt and passed the description along to the other officers, then gave Jay an appraising look. “She’s a pretty dog.” Jay gets that a lot, probably because he *is* pretty. “Border Collie?”

“Australian Shepherd. Male.”

Our dog talk was interrupted when a red Cavalier whipped up to the curb and a tear-streaked young woman leaped out almost before she had fully stopped. She was built like a runner, long and lean enough to look good in her turquoise spandex shorts and coral tank as she sprinted to the nearest cop. Her brown hair hung in a wild tangle to her shoulders, and she didn’t seem to know what to do with her hands. The mother. The officer pointed toward Garza, who met her half way. One of the teachers moved to her side and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. Grief and guilt and fear buzzed around the little group like hungry bees, and I had to look away.

Three-quarters-of-an-hour later I sat on the warm concrete in front of the museum with one hand on Jay’s panting side, the other holding Alberta’s Tweetie Pie umbrella for some shade. I hadn’t seen Alberta for a while and was just wondering where she’d gotten to when I heard Detective Garza shouting into his cell phone.

“How long?” Garza scowled into the distance. “Dammit!” He punched the air with his phone. “Then I need more people. We have to find this kid.”

He listened for a moment, grunted something while gesturing for one of the uniformed cops, and shoved the phone back into its holster. “The K9 is working a scene in Madison County. Can’t get here for at least another couple of hours. We need to search this whole place.” He waved his arms as he spoke. “Track, bleachers, the works.”

I struggled to my feet, one of which seemed to have disappeared. Hard surfaces have gotten harder since I turned fifty. I winced as I got my feet under me and forced myself to ignore the needles scampering up and down my flesh as I tottered toward the detective, stomping a little more life back into my foot with each step.

“Excuse me.”

He looked down at me like I was a gnat. Small, annoying, and irrelevant. “What?”

“I heard what you said about the K9 being delayed. Maybe I can help.”

Garza lifted one eyebrow in a “yeah, sure” look, but I pushed on, gesturing toward Jay.

“My dog tracks. If you have something with the child’s scent, he could track him.”

“Ma’am, I’m sure she’s a nice doggy.” Jay cocked his head, and Garza let out a long, tired breath. “Look, I appreciate the offer, but we have a sick child out there. We can’t afford to waste time with an untrained team.”

Alberta bustled up with the same suggestion I’d just made. “Janet, why don’t you see if Jay can track the little boy?” She looked at Detective Garza and went on. “Jay is a wonderful tracker.”

“Yes, ma’am. As I was explaining to Ms., uh,” he glanced at his notebook, “MacPhail, I appreciate your concern, but we need a trained search team, not somebody’s pet. So we’ll just go on with the search as is.” He started to turn away, dialing his cell phone again.

“Excuse me, Detective Garza.” He looked at me. “Did you say the little boy is sick?”

“Diabetes. Mom says he’s overdue now for a blood sugar test and will need insulin soon.” He walked away, phone to his ear.

“Damn fool!” Alberta looked apoplectic. “Come on!” She took me by the elbow and steered me toward the child’s mother, who stood with Nelson Parker and one of the teachers. The teacher tried to run interference when she saw us approaching, but Alberta pushed past her and introduced the two of us. Then, pointing at Jay, she announced, “And this is Jay, and he’s going to find your son!”

I groaned inside. I hate to make promises we may not be able to keep, and I really hate it when other people make them for us.

“Billy.” The young woman whispered the name and choked on a sob, then gathered herself and, turning her dark eyes toward mine, held her hand out. “Julie Wentworth. Can you really find my little boy?”

My heart climbed into my throat, but I tried not to let my doubts show. “I don’t know. But my dog is a pretty good tracker, and we can try.”

“We have to find him soon.” Her face was chalky, her eyes wide. “If he doesn’t get his insulin he could have a seizure.” She sobbed. “He could die.”

“I need something that smells like Billy.”

She frowned, then brightened. “The car! I have something in the car!” She sprinted for the red Cavalier, and I got Alberta’s keys and took Jay to the Lincoln to get his harness and line. On my way, I invoked every deity I could think of and placed a special request with St. Roch, patron of hunting dogs. We needed to find this quarry.

Our only real hope was that Billy had walked away from the museum on his own two feet. If someone had carried him away, it was doubtful that Jay could track him, even though all human beings shed tons of scent-loaded skin cells and other gunk all the time. I didn’t share my doubts, though, or the King Kong of worries that loomed in my mind – that someone had loaded the child into a car and driven off. I’d have felt better if the creepy character I’d seen earlier were still lurking within sight.

I cast Jay in front of the museum doors in hopes that he would pick Billy’s scent out from all the others. He swept his nose back and forth over the concrete, pausing here and there to clack his tongue against the roof of his mouth as he tasted the scent. He moved toward the museum doors twice, which of course made perfect sense, but I called him back and encouraged him to try again.

After four or five minutes of that, I once again showed him the little boy’s shoe that Julie Wentworth had brought from the car. It was well worn and grubby, and saturated with Billy’s. Jay sniffed with interest, looked at me, and whined as if to say, “Yes, that’s the kid I’m searching for.”

“You have to try to find him, Bubby.” I stroked the dog’s copper cheek and, holding the back of his harness with one hand, led him off the curb and onto the track. “Go track!”

Jay began again to work his nose along the ground, moving away from the building in widening arcs. Then without warning he took off, nose skimming the hard, hot surface and tail nub wagging like mad. He had the scent. I let the nylon line glide through my hand to the knot I had tied twenty feet from the slide bolt, giving my dog plenty of room so I wouldn't overrun him if he stopped.

As it happened, my immediate problem would be keeping up. Now that Jay had the scent trail, he ran, nose about nine inches above the ground, shoulders bearing into the harness with what felt like twice his fifty-four pounds. I scrambled to keep up, letting another ten feet of my forty-foot line play out between my fingers, then grasping the thirty-foot marker knot with both hands.

I have never liked running. My memories of gym classes are dominated by the agony of stabbing pain under my ribs from gasping my way through JFK's presidential fitness six-hundred-yard torture test on the cinder track behind Kekionga Junior High. But there I was, trying to keep up with my four-legged speedster on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Just when I thought I'd blow a gasket, or whatever the cardiovascular equivalent might be, Jay reached the stands and slowed to a trot. I gasped and panted as I watched him search for the scent. Julie Wentworth and Alberta jogged up behind us, Alberta wheezing and panting enough for both of them, and I called to them to stay back at least ten yards.

My breath was still coming in gasps and my heart threatened to beat its way out of my chest when Jay spun once around, sniffed, wriggled his nub, and moved up to the next row of seats. And then the next. And the next.

We worked our way up the risers until we were at the top of the stands, and then Jay set out between the top bench and the one below it, his nose to the concrete. The knots in my line swung and

threatened to catch in the bleachers, so I did something I almost never do when tracking. I stopped my dog.

"Down!" I figured that if he just lay down, Jay was less likely to lose the track he was on. In any case, he kept running. "Jay! Down!" He slowed and, with obvious reluctance, sank to the ground and whined. I caught up, leaned across his body, and unhooked the nylon line from the harness. "Okay. Go track!"

Jay took off again at a slow run. I glanced at Alberta, pacing in front of the stands below us, and heard Julie come up behind me.

"You let him go?"

"He's faster in these bleachers without me." As if to confirm that, Jay bounded over the bench to his right and raced along the concrete in front of the uppermost row of seats. We followed on the path we were on.

Jay stopped. He was about thirty feet ahead of me and a row of seats higher, and all I could see was his rear end. Then he lifted his head, and looked back over his shoulder at me. One bark, and his head went down again. He'd found something. I let myself breathe.

"Billy!" Julie's voice was raw with fear. Unable to pass me in the narrow space, she shoved me forward, pointing through the space beneath the bench. A blood-red flash was just visible beside Jay's snowy leg. As I came closer, I saw brown hair and an arm. A little boy, and he was down. Julie screamed her son's name again. My breath caught somewhere deep in my chest, and my heart stood still again.

And then Jay was whining and wriggling, and I knew.

The red morphed into a T-shirt. A lock of brown hair, lighter than his mother's, lifted and fell in the hot south wind.

Billy slowly rose to his feet, smiling and petting my beautiful Jay. “Hi, Mom. Isn’t this a great dog?”

Two hours later I called Tom to tell him we were on our way home. The AC in Alberta’s Navigator felt like heaven as we left the Hamilton County congestion north of Indianapolis and shot northeastward on I-69. Jay was stretched out and dozing on the back seat. I had just told Tom how scared I was that the man in gray had kidnaped Billy. Or worse.

“He ran away?”

“Yeah. I guess they had a big fight that morning, and he said he was going to find a new mom who would let him have a dog. I thought for a minute he was going to adopt me.”

Tom chuckled. “Maybe you *should* do Search and Rescue.” As Tom knew, this wasn’t Jay’s first find. A few months earlier my mom, whose mind isn’t what it used to be, wandered away, and Jay found her. “So you think his mom is going to cave in to his demands?”

“She was a bit incoherent, but I wouldn’t be surprised. The little booger played up the idea that a dog saved him so much, no one seemed to remember that he kidnaped himself.”

“And I bet you told her that dogs can be trained to signal when a person’s blood sugar is low.”

No wonder Tom scares me. He knows me way too well.

Indy’s Indy-car shots were a huge hit. I won’t take credit, but the little guy raced to another string of big wins after *Dogs in Review* published his Marmon Wasp portrait. Jay was nominated for a hero award, and his picture was in several newspapers.

A special delivery package arrived in early October, addressed to “Janet and Jay MacPhail.” In it was a frame with race cars circling the glass, and a card in childish scrawl that said

simply, “Thank you. Your friends Billy + J.J.” Another note from Billy’s mom said they’d contacted the Australian Shepherd Rescue and Placement Helpline after they met Jay, and the framed photo showed Billy in front of the Motor Speedway gate, an enormous grin on his face. Next to him, with a matching grin, sat a blue merle Aussie named after my best friend and me. That was the best shot of all.

For more about the author, or for reprint permission, visit www.sheilaboneham.com.

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