

Maggie and Me -- A Fun Beginning

by J. S. Williams

I love hamburgers. The problem is that hamburgers love me and they refuse to go away. I may as well apply them straight to my gut. But then I would not get the euphoria they always give my pallet. My compromise was to allow myself one trip to McBeefy per week. No car. If those calories were going to be consumed, I would walk for my burgers -- a penance which should have included at least three Hail Mary's.

I pushed open the door to McBeefy, a bag containing two of my culinary treasures in hand and stepped outside. As I crossed the parking lot, I heard a peculiar sound coming from the dumpster area.

Sniff, sniff, sniff. As I approached the dumpster, the stealthy sound grew louder. Sniff, sniff. A cardboard box sat beside the dumpster and it became apparent the sound was coming from inside it. The box began to rattle, then rock. One side pushed out and sagged a bit before the whole thing tipped over.

I eyed the box with some trepidation. My imagination rifled through the possible contents of that box. Perhaps it was a rabid wild animal of some sort. I felt the urge to run, but that would have made me look like a girly-man. Nonetheless, I quickened my pace...still walking, only faster. I glanced over my shoulder toward the imagined evil just in time to see it emerge.

It was a young basset hound, a puppy really, roaring toward me at full steam. Her nose was held low and her ears were dragging the ground. She got within two strides of me when one of her front feet found an ear and sent her tumbling. In a move that would have made an Olympic gymnast proud, she rolled a couple of times and ended up sitting at my feet, directly in front of me. She raised her head and put on her very best begging face. I could not hold back a chuckle.

Her coat was red. Well, almost red. She had white fur here and there which made her look like she was wearing four white socks, a collar and a cap on the tip of her tail. The skin around her

deep blue eyes sagged, giving her a pathetic forlorn look.

"Where did you come from?"

She cocked her head for a moment, as if she were pondering the question. Then she spun around and returned to the box from which she had escaped. Making a low fussy growl, she shook her head and tore off a piece of paper which had been taped to the box. When she had returned to me, she pawed my shoe and shoved the paper toward my leg. On it was written two words: "Free Puppies".

I groaned.

"No, no, no. You're a smart dog...and really cute. But I have too much going on in my life the way it is. The last thing I need is a dog hanging around," I said.

She dropped the paper to the ground and sat there with her big sad eyes pleading. I knew I was going to have to out think her. A simple thing to do. After all, she was just a dog.

I unwrapped a burger and tossed it to her. She snatched it out of mid-air and I beat a hasty retreat. As I turned the corner, she was relieving herself behind the dumpster. That had been an easy fix. I thought.

Two miles later I unlocked the door to my house and stepped inside. I had eaten my one remaining McBeefy burger on the way home and I was now holding the wadded bag in my right hand. I spied the trash can in the kitchen and set up for a fifteen foot jump shot.

Missed. Crap.

After fetching the rebound and making a not-very-impressive dunk shot, I went back to close the front door. As my hand gripped the doorknob, I caught a glimpse of something down the block. It was the basset pup.

Her nose to the ground, she was following my footsteps. She had tracked me to my home. I slammed the door in hopes that it would cut off the scent. It did not work. She sniffed her way up the street, turned at my walk-way, and came right up to my step. She nosed around my door for a

few seconds, as if to confirm that she had the right place. Then she plopped down on the porch. I had been made.

I figured that if I just ignored the dog, she would go away in search of some other sucker. I sat down on the sofa and found a baseball game on the television. Cincinnati was playing somebody, top of the fifth, three to nothing. Reds lead. Yawn. My eyes drooped and soon I was dozing. I dreamed of hamburgers...and dogs.

At length, I was awakened by a roar from the crowd. Swing and a miss. Strike three. Game over. Reds win three to zip. Ho hum. I never had cared about baseball.

I stood and stretched a bit, then decided to see if I needed to clean up any calling cards left by the dog. She would surely be gone by now. I opened the door and found her still curled up where she had first landed. Persistent little pest. I groaned as she popped to attention and sat looking up at me.

"Go away," I said.

She whined -- a pitiful pleading sound.

"Go home."

She cocked her head, her big blue eyes searching mine as if she wondered whether I had lost my mind. Then I remembered the box.

"You don't have a home, do you?" She did not even have a litter anymore. She had been the last puppy in the box.

"Crap. A homeless orphan." My brain fought to find a solution that would not leave me feeling like a heartless monster. When it reported back to me, I was not pleased with the findings. There was no such solution.

"Alright," I relented, "come on in. But this is only until I find another home for you."

She jumped up, her tail wagging as if she had understood every word, and bounced into the house. Her house.

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This was the biggest pet shop I had ever seen -- not that I had seen that many. But this one was huge. I was actually worried about getting lost in this place. I had chosen this store because it was the only pet shop in town that allowed dogs inside.

The pup sat in the child seat of the shopping cart as I pushed from aisle to aisle in search of doggie supplies. I found puppy food and dishes. Then there was a poop scoop with convenient plastic travel bags. Of course some treats and a chew toy. Input-output taken care of.

Then I remembered the town's leash law, and we went off to find items to placate the local fascists. I found the proper aisle and parked the cart well to the side so others could get past.

"What kind of collar are we going to put on you," I asked as my eyes scanned the monstrous selection. I rubbed the back of my neck. I was tired and just wanted to grab something that would work and get out of there.

"Yap! Yap!"

I turned to see what she was barking about and saw that she had made her selection. I took from her mouth a nylon collar. Not just any nylon collar -- this one was bright pink and sporting three red glass 'jewels' shaped like hearts. I rolled my eyes.

"This one? You're kidding."

She whined, her sad eyes working their magic on me once again. I tried it on her. It fit.

"I cannot believe I am buying that . . . thing."

She pranced a bit, obviously proud of her new adornment. I shook my head and grabbed a much more conservative leash.

"We're out of here."

We paid for our stuff and were just clearing the exit when a woman walked up. She was in

her late forties and looked like she was on her lunch break from from a local brothel.

"What a cute little puppy," she drawled. "And such a pretty collar. I'll bet you're a mommy's boy, now ain't you?"

The pup jumped into my arms and hid her face between my bicep and my side. I thought I heard a muffled growl. A forced smile crossed my lips and I kept on walking.

"Good girl." I stoked her head.

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We were in my car on the way home. The dog was in the passenger seat. Our newly purchased goodies were on the back seat and I, of course, was driving. The dog was too short to reach the pedals.

Glancing at her, I asked, "So what are we going to call you?"

She made a sound something like, "Mmmm".

"How about Princess? You act like one, you know."

"Mmmm."

"Your collar even kinda has a tiara look. Yes, Princess would be a good name for you."

"Maggie."

I nodded. "That's not a bad name."

Then it hit me. My eyes stretched wide as I slammed my foot to the brake pedal. I swerved the car to the shoulder of the road, just missing a telephone pole as I slid to a stop. I turned to the dog in disbelief.

"What did you say?"

"Maggie."

I swallowed hard. This could not be real. My mind searched for what medicines I had taken

-- something that might induce hallucinations. Nothing. I had taken nothing.

"Say it again."

"Maggie. Maggie! Are you hard of hearing? I said my name is *Maggie*." The last time was louder and drawn out like she was speaking to someone in an old-folks home.

"Maggie," I repeated.

"How long is this gonna take? 'Cause I'm getting hungry," she said.

"You can talk." I was astounded.

"Give the man a Kewpie doll."

Tap, tap, tap. The sound was a police officer's knuckles on my driver side window.

"I'm guessing he wants to chat," Maggie said. I rolled down the window, trying to remember what laws I might have broken recently.

"What can I do for you, officer?"

"You stopped kind of . . . quickly. Is anything wrong?"

I remembered my panic stop and knew I would have to explain it. My mind devised a novel plan -- tell the truth.

"Officer, you just have to see this." I looked at the pup. "Maggie, speak for the policeman."

"Yap!" The cop lifted one eyebrow.

"No. I mean speak, Maggie"

"Yap! Yap!"

"Cute, " said the cop. "Real cute." Then he proceeded to admonish me about reckless driving. Five minutes later my paperwork had been checked and we were back on the road with only a warning.

My mood teetered between anger and amazement. The discovery that she could talk was the biggest event in my life. But she had humiliated me in front of that cop. We rode in silence for a while before she spoke again.

"Thank you for the collar. It's beautiful." Her eyes examined her toes, only peeking up for a second and bouncing back down.

"Why didn't you talk for the policeman?"

"No way."

"What? You think it's okay to make me look like an idiot?"

Her head dropped even farther. "Sorry. That's not what I meant to do. Just . . ." She looked up at me. ". . . Mom told me not to let humans know."

I considered this. She had a point. If this hit the news, there would be a whole media circus on our front lawn. Our life would be turned upside down and shaken. And then would come the inevitable medical experiments -- God only knows what they would do to her.

"Mom was right. Do not let humans find out. You took a huge risk even talking to me."

"I know. But I thought that if you were going to let me live with you . . ." She gave me a look of expectation while she paused a beat. ". . . then we should be talking."

I stroked her head. "Your bathroom is in the backyard."

I swear I saw her smile. "Do you think we could get some pink nail polish?"

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