

Spring 2011

It's a Doggie-Dog World

Mary Jane Bradley-Smith
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr>

Recommended Citation

Bradley-Smith, Mary Jane (2011) "It's a Doggie-Dog World," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 32: No. 2, Article 68.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol32/iss2/68>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

It's A Doggie-Dog World

Mary Jane Bradley-Smith

*How much is that doggie in the window?
The one with the wagglely tail?
How much is that doggie in the window?
I do hope that doggie's for sale.*

—Patti Page 1952 hit song

My “first” dog was a string toy that made a clackety-clack sound as I dragged it around our Chicago apartment. The dog was made of wood, with the long, low-slung body of a Dachshund, the spots of a Dalmatian and ears like a Labrador. My bare-footed, two-year-old self, dressed in diapers and a t-shirt, also walked him down the long, dark, carpeted hall that led to my grandparents’ unit on the same floor.

There was no room for a real dog in our two-room apartment. My parents slept in a Murphy bed that pulled down from the wall in the living room; my older sister and I doubled up in another Murphy in the kitchen. My father had returned a few years earlier from fighting the Japanese in the Pacific. He was a mechanical engineer and soon had a job at Western Electric, expanding the nation’s phone system after World War II. My parents dreamed of buying a home in the suburbs, but every time they had saved enough for a down-payment, the prices went up. Finally, in 1951, Dad clinched a deal with a builder in Downers Grove, a south-west suburb of Chicago. We moved into our very own tri-level home on a lot with a large black walnut tree in the back yard.

One evening that Christmas season my parents took my sister and me to a pet store. It was filled with cages of puppies – all sizes, colors, breeds. I walked around looking at all the dogs, sticking my fingers in cages, getting licked by pink tongues. My sister, an eight-year-old, was cradling a puppy with black and white markings. At four, I didn’t quite understand what was happening, but Dad paid the owner and we walked out with our first dog.

We think he was part fox terrier and part hound because he looked like the former and bayed like the latter. Dad named him Skipper.

In those days, no one locked their doors at night and there were no leash laws. As long as they behaved themselves, dogs had free run of the neighborhood. Skipper played in the yards and on the street with us and we wrestled with him inside until my Dad would yell, “If you want to rough-house, go outside!”

Skipper’s only vice was chasing cars. We tried to break him of it, for fear he’d be run over, but it was no use. Along would come a Studebaker, or a

Chevy, or a Mercury, and Skipper would be racing after, baying in swift-footed glee, his nose breathing in the tailpipe fumes. When he'd chased it off of our street, Stanley Avenue, he'd lope back home to rest, panting on our front porch, until his next vehicular prey drove by.

He liked to chase our car too, especially when we were going somewhere without him. Usually he'd go a block or two, then Mom or Dad would step on the gas, leaving a disheartened Skipper in the rear-view mirror. Every Sunday, Mom, my sister and I piled into the car for noon Mass at St. Joseph's. In our summer dresses, hats, black patent shoes and white gloves, we headed out the door. This day was no different. Skipper followed, as usual.

"No, Skipper. Stay," my Mom ordered. Skipper sat, smiled, wagged his tail and then tagged along anyway. We got in the car, shut the doors in his face and backed out the drive. Skipper was marching alongside, keeping the pace.

"We're late. I can't stop to put him back in the house," Mom said. "He'll give up in a bit."

She stepped on the accelerator and when we looked back we didn't see him. By the time we found a parking spot and walked into church, most seats were taken, so we climbed the dark wooden stairs into the choir loft. The organ pealed, Monsignor Kiley started the Mass, his back to the congregation in the old Roman ritual. We opened our prayer books and recited the liturgy in Latin and Greek.

Halfway through Mass we heard whispers and some stifled laughter from the back of the church. Enter Skipper, nonchalantly walking down the aisle, looking for a place to lay down after his long run to church. He headed all the way up the nave and then lay down on the padded step of the Communion rail. After the consecration, Monsignor Kiley turned toward the congregation to give Communion, and there lay Skipper. He obligingly stood up to let communicants kneel and when they left, lay down again. When all the hosts had been received and Skipper sprawled at his feet, Monsignor addressed the congregation.

"Whose dog is this?" he asked.

My mother stood up in the gallery. "He's mine, Father."

"Is he Catholic?" Monsignor asked.

"I don't know, Father. He doesn't tell me everything."

Everyone laughed and Skipper thumped his tail. After church he found us and we found him and he rode home in style. We figured why we hadn't seen him from the back window or the rear view mirror when we left the house: He'd raced *alongside* us, beneath the side mirror next to the running board. By the time he did drop behind, we had stopped looking. From then on, Skipper crossed his paws and prayed at home, keeping my agnostic Father company while he read the Sunday *Chicago Tribune*.

Did I mention that Skip was a hunting dog too? He ran down rabbits and dropped them at my Mom's feet, but he also had a taste for more elegant fare. Given the opportunity, Skipper poached frozen capons and chickens from front porches where unsuspecting grocers and butchers had delivered them.

Skipper also gave me my first lesson in male anatomy. One spring day our second-grade assignment was to draw a sheep. When all the pictures were hung above the blackboard, mine was the only which was obviously male. Skipper's anatomy was my muse.

He was a male dog, in every sense of the word. He liked exploring and he liked the ladies, and we politely did not inquire when he'd take a day off from time to time. Skipper was a big fan of Duchess, one of our neighbor's boxers, but his sense of adventure sometimes led him farther afield. He had a good inner clock, though: He'd usually be home in time to eat dinner from his red rubber bowl and greet my Dad when he returned from work.

But one summer night, there was no Skipper. We went outside calling his name, expecting him to come home any minute, but the hours went by. No dog. I went to bed, confident he would be home by morning, but still no Skipper. We spread the word through the neighborhood about our missing hound, and then piled into our hunchbacked, beige Chevy sedan. We drove through the streets, calling his name, but there was no answering bark. Two days. Three. We were all sick at heart. Had he been run over by a car? Did he lay sick and dying somewhere? Was he hungry, thirsty, lonely? Missing us as we missed him?

Four days after his disappearance, about two a.m., Mom heard that unmistakable voice. He was baying in joyous, clarion, victorious cadence, running east on Chicago Avenue, turning north on Stanley and then miraculously pawing and howling at the front door. Mom threw it open and Skipper jumped up, his dirty paws imprinting her nightgown. He was filthy, wet, disheveled and he dragged a thick rope which he had chewed through, somewhere, to get home to us. My Dad said someone stole him because he was such a good hunting dog. How many miles had he run to come back to us? He was our own Lassie Come Home.

He was a hero, too. One winter the snowfall was heavier than usual, the streets slick and treacherous. I was playing outside, encased in my red snowsuit, stiff as the shell of a scarab. It kept me warm but immobile. If I fell over I was literally helpless as a beetle on its back.

I was standing in the middle of the street when a car came skittering down the avenue. My Mother was standing in the living room, watching me from the picture window. She ran to the front door and opened it to yell a warning. Our neighbor across the way, Mrs. Quaid, did the same. Then they saw Skipper race to my side, grab my arm and drag me off the street. Mom said she wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes, and no one else would have believed it without Lilian Quaid as a witness.

The next year Skipper developed a painful tumor. He was a young dog, only three, but I could trace the lump on his right side with my finger. He became cranky and one fateful day he growled at my mother.

"I won't have a dog that might turn on me," she declared.

Two days later, when I came home from first-grade, Skipper was gone. My Mom was crying. She poured a small juice glass of beer for my sister

and me, as if that might ease our sorrow as it eased hers.

“I had to put him down,” she explained. “He was sick. He had cancer. He was in pain. It was the right thing to do, but it was a hard thing too. He was a good dog.”

At seven, I didn’t know how to ask if there had been other choices. Would surgery have saved him, or was the cancer too far gone? Or was such an expense something my Depression-hardened parents couldn’t justify? When I was older, I never thought to ask, so I don’t know the answers now.

There are scores of things I wished I had asked my parents before they died, but regret is a useless emotion. They answered most of my questions about life by the way they lived it, and gave me wonderful memories as parting gifts. One of them was the love of my first and most exceptional dog: Our Skipper.