

"We'll Take Him," She Said.

Sometimes in marriage, a man can be blissfully unaware of the details that surround many of his wife's decisions. Like why some towels in the bathroom are not to be used, they're just for show. I understand this without question. Steff's decisions around our family dog were much like those towels. In love and marriage, you must choose your battles wisely. Towels and dog breeds are battles that just can't be won, and surrender is the only real choice.

There was probably some logical reason for choosing a Labrador Retriever as the new addition to our humble house, but I never asked. I assume Steff liked them for their lumbering grace and steadfast loyalty—but that may only be my retrospective experience talking.

On the Monday night following our baby-vs.-dog conversation, Steff announced that she'd found a dog in the paper, and we were going that night.

In my old work van, we drove to a lower-middle-class home in a neighborhood on the West side of town. As I pulled up to the house, I knew it must be the place because in the front yard there was a yellow Lab chained to a tree. He was the father it turned out, and what a magnificent dog Duke was—beautiful. I still have an impression of him. The most majestic Labrador I have ever seen. He stood tall with a very wide chest—muscular and proud. I regret not taking a picture of him. Then again, it was 2002 and camera phones were nonexistent.

A husband, wife and a shy little girl told us that all the puppies were gone, except one. They brought out the last pup. We were told he was the runt of the litter.

And there he was, cradled in the arms of that little girl. This little guy had a broken tail that couldn't be explained. I mean this tail had a nearly 90-degree break in it.

The man of the house was sorry, but all the other puppies had been long taken. But they would have another litter soon. He explained that the mother was very healthy, though we weren't allowed to meet her.

A broken tail was no deterrent for Steff. She picked up that puppy and smushed him up to her face. She held him while the group of us chatted about Duke and how masterful he looked. We were told he had papers, but none was offered. As we chatted, we all noticed the little guy had fallen asleep in Steff's arms. She did not set him down for six months following that first meeting.

So, \$75.00 later and it was done. Our puppy shopping started and finished in record time. April 15th was his official birthday. Problem solved. No babies and a happy wife. I remember experiencing the first overwhelming sense of gratitude for this broken puppy that night. He would bring back that sensation more times than I can count.

At the time, I wondered how emotionally similar dogs are to humans. If they feel like we feel. If they hurt like we hurt. If they yearn like we yearn. What must it be like for puppies to be taken from you and never be seen again? How did it feel for the majestic father and mysterious mother on that day when their last puppy, the least capable to defend itself, was taken by strangers that stopped by for less than 20 minutes?





"Ben," She Said.

When we were discussing the baby-vs.-puppies decision, Steff had told me that if we had a baby, and it was a boy, she would like to name him Ben. So Ben is what we named our little, broken-tailed puppy.

The name Ben turned out to be the perfect name for him. When I envision what a "Ben" would look like, I picture a strong, American Boy. Blond hair, stocky build and known for his fierce loyalty and good nature. Handsome as the day is long, but he never notices. His warmth meets people before he does and his smile is disarming. He never speaks poorly

of others, and he's instantly searching for what he likes in a person. Ben would grow into his name in many ways. People say that their pets are their family. With Steff, Ben was truly her son that she would never have. Ben was meant to be the companion when I was not there. He was bought to fill a lonely space in our home. Ben had a job to do and expectations to meet in regards to taking care of his new family.



"He Has to Sleep in the Crate?" She Said.

If there was one thing that Ben hated, and I mean HATED, it would be a crate. All the obedience books, dog trainers and friendly guidance tell you that a crate is imperative to a well behaved dog. They say crate them early and often. Crate them while you are not at home. I am quite certain that none of the experts have met the likes of Ben. For if Ben had a middle name it would be Tenacious. Ben Tenacious Parker.

It became clear that Ben would never yield to accepting the crate as his den. His place was with people. And with people he will be, at all costs. But we tried. And oh, how he cried. Now babies cry, but they only have a certain amount of energy and at some point they will chill out. But Ben, he had the energy and the tenacity to go at it for hours.

As I mentioned earlier, work was consuming for me during this period of our life and for weeks I had been working an intense amount of hours with only a few hours of sleep each night. So much of Ben's crate training is a blur to me. I do remember one night, following a particularly long day. We

had him crated for the evening in the living room of our very small house.

Steff's sister, Gabi, is staying with us in Rachael's bedroom. We were all asleep and surely dreaming of the things that tired people dream about. All of us slept, except for one puppy. Not that dog, he is awake and crying as if from the depths of hell at the top of his fire-filled lungs. He was the gate keeper of Satan himself. Satan's whinny ass little bitch of a puppy. He wakes me up; he wakes everybody up. There was no way to sleep with such an unearthly sound coming from the living room.

After about an hour of trying to ignore this, I just couldn't take it anymore. I got out of bed in a fit of rage, loudly cussing and stomping my feet across the house in my underwear. Accusing Ben of doing unholy things to his mother, I picked up the crate and took him outside, setting him in the middle of the front yard.

The thought of taping a sign that simply states "FREE PUPPY" came to me, but I knew it wouldn't be of any use.