

HEATHER VOGEL FREDERICK

It Was Love at First Bark

by Heather Vogel Frederick

Let's get one thing straight right off the bat: I am so not a "dog person." Oh sure, we had dogs when I was growing up, but they were my father's pets, not mine. Retrievers mostly, great galumphing things that traipsed about after him on hikes and fishing trips. They were good dogs, don't get me wrong. But I much preferred the company of my cat. She was fastidious. She was serene. She didn't drool, or jump all over me, or try and lick my face. Also, she was happy to tag along when my sisters and I went for walks in the woods behind our house. Who needed a dog?

Fast-forward several decades. The girl with the cat is now the mother of two teenage boys. "A puppy" topped my younger son's Christmas list for five years in a row. Didn't matter. Wasn't going to happen. No way. Dogs tie you down. Dogs need to be walked. Above all, dogs are messy – especially for those of us who live in the Pacific Northwest, where winter rain spills from the sky by the bucketful, and weather forecasters speak rapturously of "sun breaks." All those muddy paws! All that wet fur!

The mess wasn't the only thing. It was also the strange metamorphosis I'd seen many people undergo upon acquiring a dog. Otherwise sensible adults indulge in "baby talk," for instance, and coin insufferably cute nicknames for their precious pooches.

Before you know it, the dog is featured in family photos and on Christmas cards. Sometimes the dog even signs the Christmas card. Cars belonging to dog people tend to sport bumper stickers such as "My dog is smarter than your honor student." And don't get me started on the clothes – doggy sweaters and little hair bows and rhinestone collars.

The real clincher for me, though, has always been the plastic bags. The ones dog owners bring with them on walks, for carrying home – well, you know. This was where I drew the line. I was not going to become a "plastic bagger." Ever.

Then came last Valentine's Day. I was out of town on a business trip, and when I arrived home, there on the sofa waiting for me was a Shetland sheepdog puppy.

"Do you like her?" asked my husband, holding his breath.

I couldn't have held my breath if I'd wanted to – I didn't have any left in me. The exquisite little lassie staring up at me with beseeching brown eyes had completely swept it away. Talk about love at first sight. I could only nod in response, my own eyes brimming with tears.

We named her Bonnie, short for "My Bonnie Valentine," in honor of her Scottish heritage and my sweet husband's thoughtful, romantic gesture. (He was concerned that I was lonely, since I work at home.)

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Bonnie stole all our hearts in the wag of a tail. My sons were smitten from the start, and as for my husband, Bonnie had him wrapped around her dainty white paw faster than you can say “puppy love.” Clearly I have serious competition, and she’s younger and cuter than I am.

Going to work has never been so much fun. Bonnie follows me to my studio every morning, curls up at my feet, and naps while I’m writing. When she feels we’ve both had enough solitude, she coaxes me back into the real world. Sometimes she takes me for walks, and sometimes we play fetch in the backyard. I haven’t had this much fresh air in years.

Nicknames? Guilty as charged, though I’m proud to say we’ve held the line at three: Bonniecakes, Miss Bon Bon, and, when she’s feeling particularly frisky, the Bonz. (OK, there’s one more if you must know – Fluffmuffin – but it’s my husband’s exclusive property and therefore doesn’t really count.)

Sure, our pup has her own toothbrush and Christmas stocking, but not for us the siren song of canine couture – well, except for a sheltie-size raincoat. (Did I mention that it’s wet here in the Pacific Northwest?) At least I’ve managed to resist donning a matching one – yes, they make them – much to the relief of my teenagers.

As for your honor student, sorry, but he or she doesn’t stand a chance. My own honor students hardly stand a chance. I happen to be the proud owner of the world’s smartest dog, a virtual four-legged wonder who whizzed through basic training and went on to master a host of other words, including “dog park,” which we have to spell when she’s around or risk furniture-endangering bouts of glee at the prospect of an off-leash romp.

The mess? Please, I’m the mother of boys. What’s a little extra mud and untidiness? It’s a small price to pay for 40 pounds of pure joy, and besides, a real honest-to-goodness home shouldn’t look like a stage set anyway. I’ve even resigned myself to carrying “plastic bags” for – well, you know.

What I know is that dogs melt your heart in an instant and change your life forever.

Looks like I’m a dog person after all.