

Andrea Rains Waggener Excerpt from Dog Memoir

Muggins was at first indistinguishable from the other white and black and white and liver writhing furry forms Brad and I encountered in Lynn Winchester's home's white utility room on November 23, 1992. Released from their newspaper-lined, 2 x 10 enclosure, eight floppy-eared, docked-tailed puppies swarmed me as I plopped down on the cool linoleum floor. They wiggled, yipped, licked, nipped, and wagged. I'd been crying for almost two weeks, but those puppies were better than several truckloads of tissues. My tears dried in a millisecond.

Soft, pudgy-bellied puppies in my lap. Squirming puppies crawling up my back. Puppies tugging on my shoe laces and the drawstring hanging from my jacket. Puppies licking my face, nibbling my ears, and nosing my neck.

I giggled.

Here was Muggins's most important lesson, right in front of my well-licked nose. But I didn't get it then. It would take, in fact, 17 years for me to understand what Muggins and her siblings showed me that day.

"A biologist friend of mine calls them fuzzy protozoa," Lynn said, watching the puppy mob engulf me. A dark-haired woman who looked to be in her early fifties, she was warm and friendly but not effusive. She was watchful, assessing.

The puppies began to distinguish themselves as I played with them. Three of the puppies, white and liver (the boys) were much bigger than the others. Those, Lynn told us, were absolutely spoken for. She said the five white and black puppies could still be available. She studied me as I played with them. I knew I was being evaluated. I didn't care. I was, for one of

the truly rare times in my life, purely focused in the now. I was totally immersed in the puppy experience, relishing every second.

I inhaled that faintly urine-like scent that is the signature puppy aroma. I slid my hands and face over silky soft fur and velvet pink bellies. I grinned every time a wet tongue or wet nose dabbed at my skin. I stared at puppy freckles, stubby puppy tails, whiskered puppy muzzles, bright puppy eyes. It was better than food to kill my pain. Heck, it was better than sex. Really.

Maybe I love dogs a little too much.

Lynn asked us questions: “Do you have a fenced yard?”

Yes, we told her. We described our large backyard, surrounded by a six-foot board fence.

“Will the puppy be an inside or outside dog?”

Inside, we said; but she can be out in the yard as much as she wants.

“Will you walk her?”

Everyday, I assured Lynn. I had walked Dizzy daily until one day she’d sat down in the driveway and refused to move. I’d yelled at her, thinking she was being stubborn. I’ve never forgiven myself for that. We found out, after a two-hour trek to see an orthopedic vet, that she had severe arthritis because of a bone chip stuck in her soft tissue — an old injury she’d never let on about until the day she decided walking hurt too much. After that, the only places she wanted to walk in were parks, where either the ground was easier on her or the smells were so good that she decided to, as sports fanatic Brad said, “play through the pain.”

“How long will you leave her alone each day?” Lynn asked.

Most days, not at all, I told her. I was trying to get my writing career going, so I wrote most of the day, and the rest of the time, I read or worked out or went on long walks. I'm not a joiner or a heavy-duty doer, and I like my solitude. I was home most of the time during the day.

“Where will you leave her if you travel?”

We'd take her with us when we could, we said. If we couldn't take her, we'd leave her with friends or with my parents, who lived in Olympia, a half hour south of Tacoma. My parents still had Corki, who had grown into a loving, happy dog.

The questions continued as I kept playing with the puppies. We talked about training, food, sleeping arrangements, socialization.

One of the fun things about puppies is that when they tire, they sort of fall over, as if shot with a tranquilizer gun. One minute, they're hopping over their brothers and sisters, all snorts and yaps and squeals, tripping over their oversized feet; and the next minute, they're flopped on the floor, asleep in whatever contorted or sprawled position they land in when they collapse.

Lynn's Springers started dropping. A couple snoring puppy pile-ups formed. One puppy, though, was still busy. Whiter than any of the others in the litter, this puppy had another distinguishing feature — she had no ticking (freckles) at all. She had a white muzzle, a strong white blaze streaking upward between her eyes and onto the top of her black head. Black markings flowed down her shoulders from her head and stopped above her front legs, leaving her chest white, as if she wore a small shawl. She had a small round black blob on her left side, behind her withers. A large black saddle-shaped marking slung across her back, and a black marking that started a couple inches in front of her tail engulfed the tail and either side of her butt. When her tail was down, her butt looked black; when it was up, her white back end was revealed. As Mabeth said later, “Her tail was down when her butt was painted.”

This puppy gnawed on my shoelaces while she watched her siblings wimp out. She studied one of her sisters for a moment before she crouched and inched her way toward the sleeping form. She froze six inches from the sprawled puppy. Then she pounced, wagging her tail when her sister shot up as if goosed. After her sister heaved a sigh and plopped back down, the pouncing puppy gave me a sideways, coy look that communicated how pleased with herself she was.

“Which one would you like?” Lynn asked us. Apparently, we’d passed her test. Mabeth had been right.

Brad and I looked at each other. He’d been watching the last puppy standing too. I could see his agreement. “That one.” I pointed at the puppy, which sat down next to her sleeping littermates and looked at them like they were world-class party poopers.

Why did I pick the most frisky, tireless dog in the bunch? Me, the solitary, love-to-curl-up-and-read-a-book-on-a-rainy day woman? Brad and I were reasonably active — we played tennis and racquetball, hiked, and played badminton and croquet in our backyard; but I loved my down time too. I had no reason to want a high energy dog. However, I wasn’t thinking about her activity level. What appealed to me was the mischievous spunk. She had the moxie and attitude I’d always wished I had. See? She was already teaching.