

# A D O G

BY JOHN HUGHES

I loved my mother. Everybody loves their mother, but I loved mine in a special way. I had to, because when I was thirteen years old she turned into a dog. It happened real fast, with no explanation, and it left our family, well, pretty upset.

The change started in the winter. Mom complained a lot that her nose was cold. She could be sitting in the warmest part of the house and it would still be cold. She could be leaning over the stove and it would still be cold.

"My nose is cold!" she complained

daily. "And wet."

"Warm it up and dry it off, for Christ's sake!" Dad would answer.

Then there was the moustache and sideburns.

They showed up one morning without any warning. I was sitting in bed looking at the calluses on my feet when I heard Mom scream.

Me and my big sister, Kimmy, who was seventeen, and my little sister, Jean, who was four, ran out into the hall. Dad came out of his room in his underwear. He pounded his fist on the bathroom door.

"Eleanor!" he shouted. "Are you all

right in there?"

Mom slowly opened the bathroom door. She was as white as a Kleenex tissue. She was holding a pair of hair pluckers and a hand mirror. If her face hadn't been so weird looking, I probably would have laughed. Her upper lip was covered with black hairs, like a walrus moustache. She also had big, thick, curly sideburns.

"What's wrong with me?" Mom whimpered, as Dad comforted her and looked down on the hairy stuff like it was making him sick to his stomach.

My sister, Kimmy, who had lots of sense in lieu of emotions, put her

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hands on her hips and shook her head.

"God, you guys are acting like it's the end of the world!" she said in a snotty voice. "It's just hormones!"

Kimmy and Dad snipped off the big hairs with toenail clippers and shaved down the fuzz and the sideburns with Dad's Norelco. He usually had a fit when Mom or Kimmy used his razor for their girl hair, but I guess it wouldn't have been very nice for him to have a fit about it then, with Mom as disturbed as she was. When they finished, Dad slapped Old Spice on

her cheeks and she screamed in pain.

"I'm sorry, hon," Dad said. "But if you're going to start shaving, you better get used to it!"

That made Mom cry, and she kept on crying until she got undressed and realized that overnight her leg hair had grown out and that from her ankles to her knees she was even hairier than Dad. Also, her arms were covered with the same kind of hair that her sideburns were made of. Kimmy told me later that her whole tummy was covered with little pink nipples.

All in all, it was a pretty lousy day for Mom. She spent most of her time locked in the bathroom running Dad's

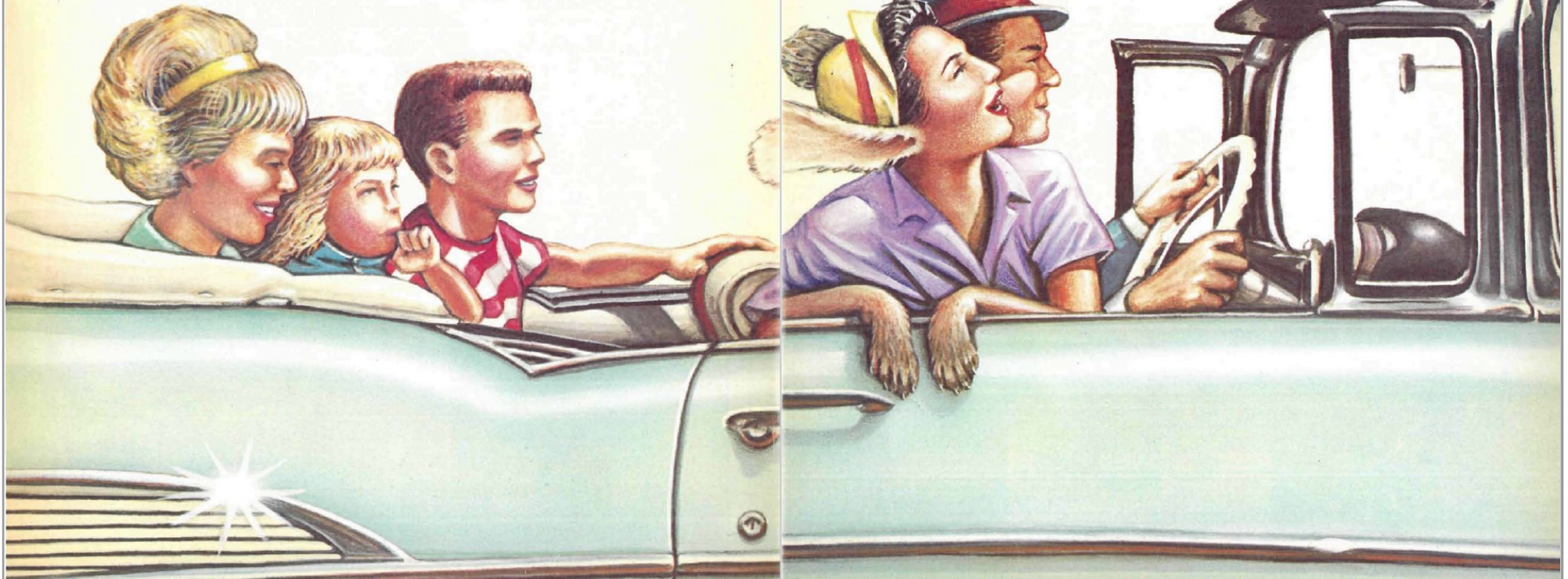
shaver up and down her legs and arms and plucking out hairs from her chin. Dad suggested that she see the doctor, but she said she wouldn't go out of the house looking like a gorilla. When Dad asked her later how she felt, she looked up and cocked her head.

"I think you left the radio on in your workshop," she said.

Dad gave me a look like "Boy is she cuckoo!" and then sent me down to the basement to check out the radio to make Mom feel better.

Mom was right. Dad's old black radio was on. I didn't know how she could have heard it. She was on the

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## DOG TALE

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second floor of the house and the radio was all the way down in the basement. It was on so softly that I didn't hear it until I picked it up. It looked to me that getting all that body hair did a lot of good for Mom's hearing. I thought it was real neat, and I went out in the backyard and said something. Then I ran into the house and up into Mom's room and asked her what I said.

"Who's the leader of the club that's made for you and me," Mom said, smiling for the first time all day.

We spent about an hour playing various games with Mom's new hearing power without ever thinking how weird it was. But later on it became a problem. Because her ears were so sensitive, the TV bothered her. We had to listen to it at very low volume or she got crabby. Also, when the "Bonanza" theme played, she threw her head back and yodeled.

After watching for a while, Mom leaned forward and squinted at the TV. She put on her glasses and squinted again.

"Where did the color on the TV go?" Mom asked.

Dad turned slowly and looked at her. "It's right there, hon," he said. "Plain as a jigaboo at a white sale."

"It's awfully faint, isn't it?"

Dad made me turn up the color. Mom kept pointing her thumb up, asking for more.

"That's all the way, Mom," I said, as the TV set glimmered with radiant color.

"Well, I'm losing my eyesight then!" she said, blinking and rubbing her eyes. "Everything is in black and white!"

Just then, Kimmy and her new boyfriend, Jim, came into the family room. When Mom saw Jim she got real mad. She straightened up in her seat and her hairdo rose up and bristled forward.

"Don't come into this room!" she snapped.

Jim looked at Kimmy. He was kind of nervous.

"Mom!" Kimmy said.

"Who is he? He smells funny. He's going to hurt us!"

"Excuse me, I have to be going," Jim said, backing out of the room.

Kimmy had tears in her eyes. She stomped her foot and gave Mom a dirty look.

"What on earth do you have against that boy?" Dad asked Mom. He was a little angry despite all the extra under-

standing and patience he had been using over the last few days.

"I just didn't care for the way he smelled!" Mom announced. "He smelled dangerous!"

"If he smells dangerous," Dad said, "how do I smell?"

"You smell tired; let's go to bed."

It turned out that Mom was right about Jim. He beat up his grandparents and then cracked up their car. Dad said it wasn't so much Mom's nose as it was Jim's being a rich Catholic kid. He didn't want to make a big deal out of Mom's nose, but it was kind of hard not to. Especially when she started sniffing total strangers.

"What in the world are you doing," Dad said angrily one afternoon in the supermarket as Mom leaned over and sniffed a woman's rear end.

"I think I know this gal," Mom whispered. "But I can't seem to place her face."

Dad told Mom that he would take away her car and her checkbook if she didn't stop it right now. This was the first time Mom had done anything weird outside of our house except the one time she went to the bathroom in the garage. But she kept on sniffing people all over the store. It was like a habit she couldn't control.

"He's got the flu; keep the kids away," Mom said after she whiffed a fat man in overalls.

"This one's a born liar!" Mom said of a stock boy.

"Pregnant," she mouthed as a teenage girl walked by. "I can smell

estrogen!"

That was probably the oddest shopping trip any of us will ever take, and Dad declared that it would be the last. Mom didn't seem to pay any attention. She rolled down the car window and hung her head out and snapped and bit at the air.

Dinner that night was the worst. Mom made a pork roast, a standing rib, a leg of lamb, and three steaks. No vegetables. No potatoes. Just meat, and it wasn't cooked very well. In fact, it was almost raw.

"Well, this looks dandy!" Dad said as Mom sliced him a slab of cold, pink pork.

"It's a delicious roast, dear," Mom said as she continued slicing the raw roast. "I ate some before I put it in the oven."

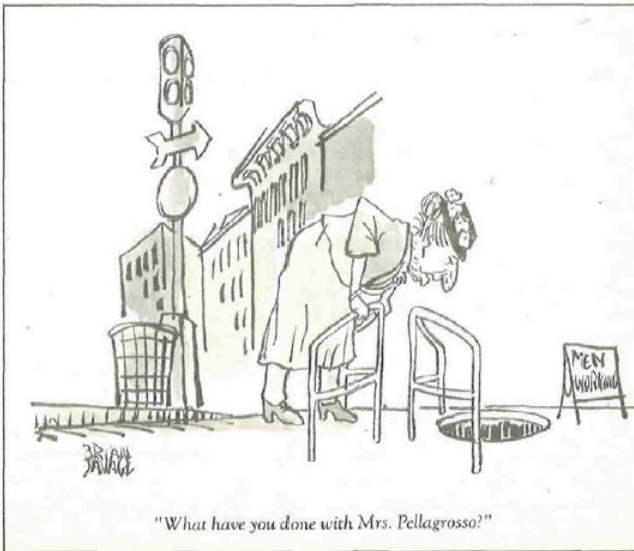
Kimmy and Jean wouldn't touch their food. Kimmy said it was making her sick just knowing it was on her plate.

"Okay," Mom said in a nasty voice. "All the more for me!"

She ate it all, too. She picked up whole slices of meat and pushed and stuffed them into her mouth. Then she snapped her head back and tossed the food down her throat, chewing only a couple of times. It was so violent and noisy that it scared Jean and she started to cry, and Dad excused her from the table.

"I must have a tapeworm," Mom said as she reached across the table and took what I didn't eat off my plate and

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## DOG TALE

continued

put it on hers.

"The way you're scratching yourself, you must have fleas too," Dad said.

"Mmmgrumph," Mom gurgled, with a long strip of steak hanging out of her mouth.

"And you're going to crack your bridge chewing on those bones," he added.

After dinner, Dad and I went into the living room while Kimmy and Mom did the dishes. Kimmy sneaked into the living room a few minutes later and waved for Dad and me to come into the kitchen. "Mom's licking her arms and legs," she whispered.

Mom was all through with her arms and legs when we walked in. Instead, she had her dress up, and her head was between her knees. She was real embarrassed and stood up and tried to smile. "How about dessert?" she said cheerfully. "I bought bacon!"

She grabbed a handful of leaves off the windowsill plants and excused herself to go to the bathroom. Just before she closed the door, I saw her put the leaves in her mouth. Then she threw up.

"I guess maybe I should call the Reynoldses and tell them to count us out for bridge tonight," Dad said as Mom rinsed her mouth at the kitchen sink.

"Don't be silly," Mom said. "I feel fine. I ate too fast, that's all."

Mom went up and shaved her body and got dressed. Dad changed his shirt and cursed as he tried to clean all of Mom's hair out of his shaver so that he could shave his own face.

"I'm going to buy Mom her own razor for Christmas," Kimmy said to me.

"That's sick," I replied.

Mom and Dad told us to be good and to call if the house caught on fire or anything else bad happened. The Reynoldses lived only a few houses down, so it was a short walk. I hardly had enough time to smack Kimmy, when the front door opened and Mom ran in crying. She went right upstairs boohooing like crazy. She left a horrible stink behind as she went up the stairs.

"What happened?" I asked Dad. I prepared myself for something really terrible, and I got it.

"I don't know, son," Dad said as he tossed his hat and overcoat on the couch.

"Did Mom do something?"

"Yeah," he said in a tired and worn-out voice. "She rolled around in a dead squirrel."

When I went to bed that night I figured that things were about as bad as they could get. I painfully reviewed all the strange things Mom had done, and I convinced myself that way back in Mom's family somebody must have done something very sinful, like kill a minister or burn a flag. This had to be the end. There couldn't be any more. But I was wrong.

I was awakened the next morning by another of Mom's screams. As I ran out in the hall I heard Dad scream too. Was he going to be covered with hair, too?

I opened the door to my parents' room, and with Kimmy and Jean looking over my shoulder I saw Dad holding a lamp, about to smack Mom. She was standing on the bed engulfed in a giant nightgown. Only it wasn't a giant nightgown. It was her regular nightgown. Mom had shrunk. I think Dad thought he was in a nightmare and was going to club whatever the little thing in the bed with him was. He put the lamp down when he realized it was Mom.

"Oh, look at me now!" Mom sobbed.

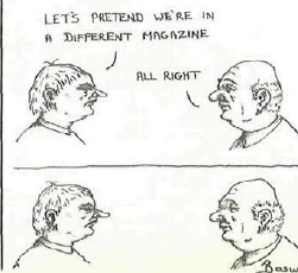
"Oh, my God!" Kimmy said, shaking her head with disgust. "This is turning into a monster movie right in my own house!"

While Dad figured out what to do, Kimmy went up into the attic and got down her old Cissy doll, which was about the same size as Mom was now—about three feet tall. She handed Mom one of Cissy's dresses. Mom went into the bathroom and put it on.

"Your mother is seriously ill," Dad confided with us.

"I feel like a big silly," Mom cried as she walked into her bedroom dressed up in the doll's fairy-princess dress.

"Here are the shoes," Kimmy said as she handed Mom a tiny pair of patent-leather party shoes.



Dad decided that we didn't have to go to school and that he didn't have to go to work because of the emergency at home. He called Dr. Wishrop's number, but Mom scrambled up onto the telephone table and pushed down the button.

"I don't want a doctor," she said sternly. "I don't want to end up in one of those grocery-store freak newspapers, nor do I want to spend eternity in a bottle of formaldehyde in a college biology department when I die!"

Dad hung up the phone. He picked up Mom and gave her a hug. He sat her down on the kitchen counter and kissed her cold nose. She put her tiny arms around his neck and said, "I have a taste for cheese."

Things sort of slowed down a little after that. All that happened the next day was that Mom's nose turned black and the skin got kind of like suitcase leather. We felt a little better and were getting used to Mom's new size. In fact, I thought she looked kind of cute in Cissy's ballerina outfit with the tights and tutu. I guess she either felt better or felt so bad that she didn't care enough to even worry anymore. She took a phone call from a friend of hers in the Junior League.

"You're kidding me!" she said into the phone. "Bumpy Houten married *him*? Well, I guess taste doesn't run *that* family! I suppose she wouldn't have even looked at him if he didn't have all that Chrysler money!"

Mom was acting like she always did on the phone. She puffed on a Pall Mall and wiggled her foot. She doodled on the phone-book cover. If I closed my eyes, I could pretend that she was back to normal.

"Well, you see, her mother was a Seattle Kaiser and her brother married the Chapman girl from Shaker Heights," Mom continued.

Dad came up from the basement with an armload of old toys. He set them down on the kitchen table and sorted out tiny tea sets and regular-size doll clothes.

"I figure Mom can use these plates," he said. "They're more her size." He handed a little nightgown to Kimmy. "You better iron this, in case Mom shrinks some more."

Jean started to cry. She grabbed the tiny garment and threw it on the floor. "I don't want Mommy to be that small!" she cried.

Mom covered the phone with her hand and said in a loud, angry whisper, "Will you please be quiet! I'm on the phone!"

## DOG TALE

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"Come on, everybody," Dad said softly, as he shepherded the three of us across the kitchen and out the back door. Just as I was walking out I turned back and looked at Mom. She was laughing about something her friend had said. As she laughed she ran her hands through her hair, pulling it back, off her face. Underneath I saw her ears. They were covered with brown fur and they flapped over at the top. When Dad said good-bye to her, they perked up.

We were gone for several hours. Dad kept making up side trips. I think he was happy to be out with the normal members of his family and away from the house. After Dad bought a bird feeder and some manure at Sears' Garden Shop, we ran out of things to shop for, so we went home.

About a block from our house we heard sirens.

"Fire! Let's go see where," Dad said, delighted to find another excuse to stay away from the house.

Dad pulled into a driveway and turned around. We stopped at the corner we had just passed. The sirens were coming down the cross street. A police car came by first, followed by an ambulance, a pumper, a hook-and-ladder truck, and Mom. She must have been running twenty-five miles an hour.

"It's Mom!" I shouted. "Look at her go!"

Dad jumped on the accelerator. We whipped around the corner and raced after the sirens. We gained on them enough to see for sure that it was Mom. Her tiny legs were moving so fast they were just a blur. All the firemen on the hook-and-ladder truck were turned around, looking in disbelief at Mom. She was also screaming dirty words.

"Stop! Stop, you shithead! Hurry up! I gotta hurry up!"

I wasn't surprised that when they reached the fire, one of the firemen jumped off the truck with an ax and got ready to swing it at Mom. Can you imagine not knowing about her and all of a sudden seeing a tiny ballerina with a black nose and hairy face running twenty-five miles an hour down the middle of the street swearing at you? He must have thought she was a witch.

Dad slammed on the brakes, ran around the front of the car, scooped Mom under his arm, and ran back to the car. He tossed her on the front seat

and pulled away as fast as he could. We zigzagged around until we were sure no one was following us, then we went home.

"I'm exhausted," Mom said as Dad carried her up the stairs. "And my behind hurts."

When Mom got undressed that night, she discovered why her butt hurt. The new tail she had grown was all twisted around and bent.

"Maybe we better call Reverend Mundell on this one," Dad said as he rubbed Absorbine Jr. on Mom's tail.

"No!" Mom snapped. "I'm all right. Woof!"

"What did you say?" Dad asked.

"Woof!" Mom answered.

"Woof?"

"Woof!"

Dad slapped Mom's face lightly. She was in a trance, just staring and rubbing her neck.

"Eleanor? Talk to me. Are you all right?" He shook her.

"Woof, woof weeeeooff!" Mom said.

She had a panicky look on her face. She pointed to her throat and shook her head.

"You're thirsty?" Kimmy said, misinterpreting Mom's signal.

"You can't speak," Dad said.

"Yip! Yip!" Mom barked excitedly.

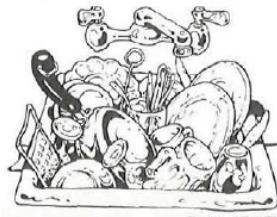
"Your voice is gone?"

"Yip!"

She never said another word. From then on, the only sounds she made were barks. They were interesting barks, but we couldn't understand what she meant by them.

It was becoming more and more obvious what was happening to Mom, but no one wanted to say it out loud for fear that if we heard it said, then it would definitely be true. But by the following morning the transformation was complete. She was in the shower on all fours when I saw her. Her face was drawn out into a dog's snout. The fur, which she hadn't shaved, was silky brown with white spots. Her bosoms were gone, and her behind was now just a pink spot under her tail.

"Eleanor," Dad said very calmly, "I think you're turning into a dog!"



RICK GEARY

"Yip!" Mom barked.

"You gotta be kidding me, Daddy!" Kimmy said.

"Waaaaaa!" Jean howled.

That night we had a family council meeting to decide what to do. Dad popped popcorn and Kimmy made hot cider with cinnamon sticks. I set chairs around in a big circle and got a pad of paper and a pencil so that I could take down the notes of the meeting. It was at these meetings that we decided things like where to go on vacation, who would do what chores, and what to get Grammy and Bumpo for Christmas. The first order of business was what we would tell our friends and neighbors. We unanimously voted to not tell the truth.

"We'll all end up in the loony bin if we tell anyone what really happened to Mom," Dad said. Mom barked in agreement. "So let's tell them that Mom went back to college to get her teacher's degree! Good enough?"

That sounded fine.

Kimmy brought up an interesting point. "We can't call Mom 'Mom' when we're outside or when people are over," she said.

"Well," Dad said, stroking his chin.

"Let's give her a dog name. How about if we call her Brownie? She's brown."

Mom growled. She didn't like that name.

"Jeepers!" Jean offered.

"Jinx!"

"Bomber!"

"Rose!"

Mom didn't like any of those names. She stuck out her tongue and blew spit on the floor to let us know how she felt. Then she ran out of the room. She came back a moment later with my baseball glove in her mouth. She dropped it on the floor in front of Dad. She put her paw to her ear, like in charades.

"Okay," Dad said. "Sounds like?"

"Yip!" Mom barked.

"Sounds like...glove?"

"Grrr!" Mom growled.

"Mitt!" I said. "Sounds like mitt!"

"Mitt, pit, hit, fit, lit..."

Mom held up her paw again. Then she pranced up and down in front of the couch. She did a couple of simple dance steps and Dad figured out what it was she wanted to be named.

"Mitzi Gaynor!" he shouted, as he slapped his knee. "You want to be called Mitzi!"

With that decided, we voted to share the responsibilities for letting Mom out at night, after school, and in the morning; feeding her; combing her

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## DOG TALE

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coat; and lighting her cigarettes. When we got to the subject of housework, Mom ran out of the room again. She came back in, pulling the broom in her teeth. She tried to make a sweeping action with it.

"You want to do the housework yourself?" Dad asked Mom.

"Yip! Yip!" she answered.

"What a dog!" Dad said proudly. He reached into his sweater pocket and took out a dog cookie. He gave it to her and affectionately scratched behind her ear.

We went back to being a regular family after that. Dad cut the handle off the vacuum cleaner and made a bar attachment that allowed Mom to push it with her teeth. He adapted all the faucets so that they could be turned on by mouth. He raised the pedals on the sewing machine and had her Ford Falcon fixed with special controls, so that if an emergency came up, she could drive.

She only drove a couple of times. Once was to drive herself to the vet after she swallowed the buckle off her chewing shoe. The other time was to pick up Grampa Bill at the airport. She wanted to surprise us, and she sure did.

The biggest problem we had was with the other dogs in the neighborhood. Even though Dad had the diamond from her wedding ring mounted on a baby blue collar he ordered from a gourmet dog shop in Beverly Hills, California, Mom hated to wear it. When we took her out, she ran free. We had to be careful that she didn't get roughed up or attacked. Dad almost killed the Grigsbys' German shepherd when he climbed up on top of Mom once.

After that, Dad had Mom fixed. It made her really mad, but he explained that it would be a terrible thing for my sisters and me to have puppies for half brothers and sisters.

"I wouldn't want any wife of mine huddled in a closet somewhere birthing a bunch of pups," he said. "I know it's selfish, but that's the way I feel."

After about a year, things started to get very difficult for all of us. The school psychologist told Dad that Jean was about three steps from a real big childhood psychotic attack and that she exhibited some very odd behavior in school, like biting people and eating chalk. Kimmy complained constantly about Mom grounding her for not giving her table scraps, which the vet said

Mom wasn't supposed to have because she was overweight. Dad missed a big promotion at work because he wasn't outgoing enough. I guess all the other guys went to each other's houses and played golf and did things together with their wives, and Dad couldn't very well do that. It was also very difficult for him to discipline Mom when she needed it.

"Swatting your mother with a newspaper is the hardest thing I've had to do since I fought in the Pacific," Dad told me once.

Me, I didn't mind too much. I didn't have as many friends as I might have had. I worried about having guys

my age around my mom. One time a friend of mine put a rubber band over Mom's mouth and it hurt her. Another time this girl I liked fed Mom a button off her coat as a joke and I got real excited and called her all kinds of names and she told everybody at school about how fruity I was about my dog.

Mom wasn't all that happy either. She used to be real social, and since she had to quit the Junior League she was lonely. She couldn't talk on the phone or go shopping, and that bothered her. It was also much harder doing housework as a dog. Sometimes it would take her all day to iron just

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## DOG TALE

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one shirt. Many times she was up past midnight doing the dinner dishes.

Dad and I were out in the yard one Saturday, cleaning with the poop scooper and filling in the holes Mom had dug in the lawn. Dad flipped an old white poop over the fence into the Grigsbys' yard. He turned to me and said, "We have to do something about Mom. I don't think she's very happy."

I told him that I thought he was wrong, but deep down I didn't believe myself. It had been a long time since she pranced around the yard with a ball in her mouth or jumped up and down slobbering all over the living-room window when Dad came home.

"I think she wants to be a dog full time," Dad said sadly.

"No," I replied.

"I think so, son. She'd never come out and say it, but that's what she really wants. If she can't be a person, she wants to be a dog."

I knew Dad was right. I hated to admit it to myself, but I wanted her to be happy more than I wanted her to make me happy. Dad felt the same way, so we sold her.

That was the hardest thing anyone ever had to do. There were tears in all of our eyes as we watched Mom climb into the station wagon of the old Belgian farmer who bought her. But she understood, and she knew she would be happier running around on that big dairy farm down in Ohio than trying to be a mother and a dog at the same time. But still it was a sad moment.

"Be sure to write us!" Dad called out as the station wagon pulled away.

"She probably will!" the old Belgian shouted back. "She's a smart pooch!"

"You can bet on it, Mr. Popard!" Dad hollered.

We stood in the street watching the station wagon until it was out of sight, then we walked slowly back to the house. We sat down on the porch and Kimmy began to cry. Then Jean started to cry. Then I started to cry. Dad got up and went inside. When he came back out we had stopped crying and were hugging each other. He had a big cardboard box in his arms. He set it down on the porch.

"Remember this stuff?" he said with a sly smile.

"The firecrackers!" I gasped.

"But Mom said we..." Kimmy stopped in midsentence, remembering that Mom was gone.

Dad raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"Got a match?"