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Short Story  
Approx. 2500 words

(PARTY LINE collection)

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No punctuation in title

~~Survived by Muffin~~

Before the morning sun could glance off the tin of her car shed and spill through the crack in the kitchen door, she would rise and tend to her needs, first.

The bed springs would creak, and her feet would drag across the floor to the tacked-on bathroom. Often she belched and mumbled to herself. There was no one else to mumble to but Muffin, her dog, who was allowed to sleep on the bristly mat by the door.

Water gushed; the pump clicked, hummed and died; she cleared her throat.

When finally she had done all she could, or cared to, to make herself presentable for the other nurses where she worked, she would mope in to the kitchen. Smelling of talcum and sulfur, she would rinse the coffee pot and put it on the blue gas flame whooshing to meet it in the gray room.

Usually she drummed her fingers on the stove while she waited for it to boil, as if she were late for work. She never was. Her white nylon uniform, snug as a stocking, rustled as she ambled from the stove to the table, blowing foul breath into

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Too much margin }

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the mug. The steam softened the lines on her bunched brow. Her hair, the color of denim fade, had been thinning for five years.

Muffin would close his eyes and wait - before he became allergic to fleas. Then, he kept up a steady rhythm, drumming on the floor as he scratched, gnawing at his tail at the same time.

Click, click, click! Knock, knock, knock! Click, knock! Click, knock!

She rose from the paint-slick table and opened the door, saying, "Git!"

Allergic! One of her nurse words. She was only a practical nurse. But she told the veterinarian in Valdosta before he told her, crossly reminding him of her position. That's when she started the abrasive scrubbing and dousing with chemical dips, which made Muffin's eyes smart and his skin raw. All summer. The houseflies wouldn't even light on his back! But the fleas kept on, burrowing deeper till his hair fell out. Then she really set in. He rode with her in her old blue Chevrolet to the Feed and Seed store, too, tolerating her fussing over the shelves of acrid cures. The costs were out of reason! So was the vet. But she took him anyway.

Too many marks

"Miss Addie, I ain't never seen it fail," Doc Grover said in a stentorian voice, thumping playfully at Muffin's ears. "Soon as a German Shepherd gits about five years old, they git to where they can't stand the fleas."

"I want him shed of them things!" she shouted, like a shout would make him give.

His pat droll face would grow serious and his bald head would shake, causing the flourescent light above to skate off the sides.

"Yessum, I can imagine," he'd say, looking down at Muffin's balding backside.

"He smells like he's been eating carrion," she snapped, sticking her calloused nose up in the antiseptic room.

"Yessum," Doc agreed. "Same thing as burned flesh.

"Yall' just keep up what you been doing awhile longer. Dip him re'glar and lets see if we can't git some results before we do away with him. I know you need some protection out yonder where you live. You living by yourself and all."

He stood and the shadow of his belly put Muffin in the shade.

"He ain't much protection no more. Can't do nothing but scratch," she said, scowling at Muffin.

Muffin demonstrated for her, the sounds gathering like an approaching band.

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"That's a mess. Ain't it?" said the Doc.

"Keeps it up all the live long night!" she griped. "And on my pay I can't afford running back and forth to no fancy dog doctor."

"Well, if worse comes to worse, we'll git shed of him," he said, jovially, opening the door for her. "Tell you what, they's calls coming in every day from folks trying to git rid of dogs just like him. Dime a dozen!"

"Miss Aimy, see if you can't check on a new dog for Miss Addie," he yelled down the hollow green hall at his receptionist.

"Well, let me see if I can't git some results from this here," Miss Addie said, bouncing the green bottle in her rough hands.

"Dip him ever two days and see if that don't do it," Doc Grover said, ushering her out with Muffin lagging behind on the leash.

"If it don't, you'## hear about it!" she said, grating on the drone of the airconditioner.

"You could send him off to Florida or Texas if you could find somebody'd take him. Georgia climate just ain't good for this kind've dog. I declare!"

*Why so much margin?*

"Muffin"

"I ain't got that kind've cash money," she said, turning back to face him. "If I did, I'd git my house painted. Besides that, I ain't got no connections with nobody nowheres else."

"Maybe some of your friends do," he said, looking back at a Collie howling at the light in the waiting room.

"What friends?" she scoffed, going out toward the car.

To her credit, she would make sure Muffin got turned out each morning before she left for the hospital: she would dutifully fill his mended pan with food, too. Cheap chunky dog food. That was before his teeth wore down from gnawing at his hair. After that, she started soaking it in water till it puffed up like toads.

At night she would stroke his head as he lay on the couch while she watched television. Once she even patted his fine head for barking up a rattlesnake in the woodpile where she gathered kindling. Before the fleas.

She had switched him for killing a mocking bird, then told him to sic a squirrel caught stealing her pecans in the orchard.

He was given an old shoe to play with - when he was cute - then spanked for playing with her terry bedroom slippers with the roses on the toes. <sup>FOR THAT</sup> Then he had to endure a sour kiss on his head.

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Before the fleas, she had confided in him about the stupid doctors and nurses, bragging about what she knew that they should have known, the sounds trundling about in his head - her voice was like a nail raked across a chalkboard. Taxes, bills, hypocrites - all the things she loathed, she told him about. Even men.

The new dip smelled like the creosote on the fence posts she made Mr. S.B. replace after his cow broke in her garden he'd planted that spring. He came around every morning, that summer, after she had gone to work, with his cap bill turned up to the sun.

Muffin tagged behind him, grateful for the pat on the head, even when he said, "Pore ole mangy dog!" and wrinkled his sun-burned nose. "I bet she shore gives you a hard time, stinking like that."

While he dug the holes for the posts with his pincher post-hole diggers, he let Muffin lay on the fresh earth, gently sliding him aside with his brogan to scrape the dirt back in the hole.

"Yessiree, I bet she ain't atall pleased with your ailments!"

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Muffin scratched wildly, fanning dirt in the hole while Mr. S.B. packed it around.

When the sun beamed down from overhead, Mr. S.B. gave him bits of his bologna sandwich.

"See if you can't chew that, ole feller," he said, moving over on the grass a little. "Come on, boy! You laying smack dab in a ant bed!"

He jerked his handkerchief out of his back pocket and flapped at Muffin's back. Muffin slunk away to his mat she had tossed under the edge of the house.

"Pore ole feller!" said Mr. S.B., dropping the handkerchief. "R'arend looks like a possums."

That's when he got sorry for Muffin and dunked him in a vat of sulfur and burnt motor oil - eyes and all.

"Now!" he said, his squinty blue eyes full of hope. "See if that don't do it!"

"THAT S.B. needs a cussin' out! Calls hisself acourtin', I expect. I wouldn't have him on a Christmas tree!" she shouted after she drove up and Muffin had sidled up alongside her car, leaving brush-strokes of oil - on her white nurse's stockings, too.

"Git on away from here yourself!" she shouted and threw a clod of dirt from the base of the fence post.

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Muffin dodged it and scampered under the house, bumping his head.

"I swuannee!" she stormed. "I ain't got no choice!"

She cast a remorseless glance Muffin's way, and he watched her white shoes pounce up the doorsteps.

The next morning she called early. He watched her shoes from where he still lay.

"Here, puppy!" she called. "Chum on!" she coaxed in an old voice. "Muffin, come! Come here, right now! I see you laying up under there."

He could see her also: her eyes and her shoes, her upside-down face sagging to the dirt.

"If I git ahold of you, I'm gonna wear you out! You hear?" she shouted, reaching now towards Muffin's face. He scooted back and still lay his head on his front paws, facing her, blinking.

"If I have to come up under there after you, it's gonna be too bad. You hear me? All right! I give you your chance!" she threatened, stopping to examine the effect on Muffin.

He twitched his ears, lying placid in the powdery dirt.

Watching her white shoes move away, he dozed. Suddenly water shot straight in his face, and he sprang up, dashing out the other side with his head striking all the beams, like a



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stick across a picket fence.

Stopping to shake, he saw her dart around the corner of the house clutching the leash. Her face, compressed with fury, made him hesitate, and she swooped down on him like a buzzard, looping the chain around his neck.

She set out around the house with Muffin struggling behind. The more he tugged and stalled, the tighter the chain drew, but her pace never faltered. At the car, she crawled into the back seat, covered with newspapers and a plastic shower curtain, and tugged him through, slamming the door before he could pop out behind her. He turned back to exit through the side he had entered, and she shot forward, slamming the door, scowling at him through the window. She jerked the door open, pressed the sole of her shoe in his face and twisted around to the front seat, slamming the door behind her.

Muffin could see her ashen face in the rearview mirror, drawn and huffing. She placed her head on the steering wheel and the clotted blue-gray curls on the nape of her neck stuck out.

The keys jingled; she swore, tried another, and sighed as the engine sputtered and caught.

She sped onto the highway without looking, raising herself up to the steering wheel, peering ahead. Once she glanced back

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at Muffin lying on the rattley plastic and paper.

Her eyes filled with tears, trickling along the creases of her long cheeks. Her head slumped forward; the car veered to the left, to the right, indecisively. Of its own volition, then, it shot straight out across the ditch and rammed into a pine tree. Pine straw rained on the roof. She peered up at the ceiling, like she was inspecting for fly specks, and her face fixed in a startled expression. Her mouth gaped open just as the door swung wide.

Muffin waited, panting, watching her set face from the front seat beside her where he had settled after the impact.

As blood began to trickle from the corner of her mouth, he hopped into the back seat and out the door, in two beats. He whined once, looking back at the vacant road.

In front of the car, sunlight strobed the pasture from a passing cloud. He romped across with yellow butterflies flowing south, circling back to the highway.

When he reached home, he entered the door she had at last forgotten to close and curled up on the couch.