

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

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“Good morning Ralph,” the dog said to his master.

“Good morning Sparky. How are you today?”

“Same old, same old, Ralph,” he growled. “Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!” Sparky whined, as he tried to scratch a place his back with his hind paw.

Ralph reached down and scratched Sparky between the shoulder blades.

“Yeh! Right there,” the dog said. “A little to the left, up a little. Yuh, right *there!*” His ears flopped, his tail wagged and his tongue flopped out. “Thanks!” he exclaimed in ecstasy.

“Don’t mention it, Buddy. I love you, you know,” Ralph said, roughly tousling Sparky’s pelt.

The dog reached up with both paws and began to hump Ralph’s left leg.

“Hey, Sparky! Down boy! I love you, but not in that way. I just wanna be friends,” he said chucking him under the chin.

Sparky put on that hangdog look, his tail between his legs, his back hunched, slouching away with red eyes looking back at his master.

“That’s the story of my life, Ralph,” he said bitterly.

“Don’t be that way, Sparky. You know we aren’t the same species.”

“Our common ancestor isn’t that far back, Ralph,” Sparky said. “I saw it on the Discovery Channel. We’re both placentals from somewhere back in the Cretaceous I think., if my memory doesn’t fail me.”

“Don’t be such a smart ass, Sparky,” Ralph said, wagging his finger..

Sparky waved his tail back. “I’m not a smart ass, Ralph, I’m a canid. Your just a ... ah ... a hominid.”

“Hominid enough to be *your* master, my pet,” he retorted. Got him *that* time, Ralph thought, grinning.

“I’m your best friend aren’t I, Ralph? Aren’t I? Aren’t I?” he pleaded jumping up and down and breathing rapidly.

“As long as you’re a *good* dog, Sparky, and don’t get too cerebral for me.”

Sparky had already forgotten the subject of conversation. Focus wasn’t his long suit.

“What’s for breakfast, Ralphy? Huh? Huh? ” the dog asked with mounting excitement, while drooling on the carpet.

“Well, *I’m* having oatmeal. *You’re* having Kibbles ‘n Bits.”

“Kibbles ‘n Bits! I *love* Kibbles ‘n Bits! I think I’ve had those before, haven’t I, Ralphy? Huh?” He was leaving a trail of slobber now.

“Every morning for the last eight months, boy,” Ralph said, enjoying the musical tinkle of the Kibble ‘n Bits dropping into the metal dog dish from the box.

“Oh yuh,” Sparky said vaguely. “I *musta* forgot. Do I forget a lot, Ralph? Do I? Do I?” Sparky asked, his tongue hanging out a foot, saliva dripping into the Kibbles as he dutifully awaited Ralph’s command to start eating.

“Now!” Ralph said.

Sparky immediately forgot his question about forgetting, and buried his wet nose in the colorful pile of dry dog food. In seconds it was gone.

“Good stuff,” he said, lapping from his water bowl.

“You shouldn’t wolf down your food, Sparky,” his master commented.

“What you got against wolves,” Sparky said defiantly. They’re my granddaddies. All of *canis familiarus* came from wolves, *canis lupus*, don’t you know. No, you wouldn’t know. You’re species centric, aren’t you, Ralphy.

“You don’t have to get huffy, Sparky. Dogs are man’s best friends, aren’t they. Aren’t you the only species that would fight its own in defense of a human?”

Ralph fluffed Sparky’s ears and held up the dog’s head looking at him nose to snout. “You have some Kibbles stuck to your whiskers, right here,” he said, pointing to the place on his own face. Sparky flicked the offending Kibble from his left nostril with his long tongue and swallowed. His jowls wreathed into a wide smile as he breathed loudly. “Did I get it, Ralphy, did I?”

“You got it, Sparky,” his master said. The dog began to turn and ended up chasing his tail all around the kitchen for a while, banging into the table leg and the stove.

“Settle down, boy,” Ralph said, “or I’m going to have to put you out in the back yard. Sparky had already forgotten the supposed offense he thought Ralph had spoken. His pointy ears popped up and his tongue changed sides when he heard the words, ‘back yard’.

“Back yard? I *wanna* go out in the back yard,” he said, all breathy.

“Oh, you *do*, do you? Okay, boy,” and Ralph opened the back door and let his best friend out.

Sparky’s tail wagged furiously as he turned around and said, “So tell me this, smart guy. Did *I* just do what *you* wanted me to do, or did *you* just do what *I* wanted you to do?”

Ralph wasn’t really sure. He just closed the door. He thought he heard a tiny growl that sounded a lot like, “Sucker!” but he wasn’t sure of *that* either.

Shopping had to be done, so he put on his jacket, locked the door, and sped off to the Piggly Wiggly.

It didn’t take much time to do the shopping. Bachelors just pick up what they want and go, at least that’s the way Ralph did it. Soon he was back on the road with Toby Keith blasting on the radio. He looked into his rear view mirror and saw a flashing red light. “Crap!” he said as he looked at his speedometer. Ten miles over the speed limit.

The cop was nice enough, but didn’t let him off with a warning. He signed the ticket and headed home once again. He got out of his car and carried the groceries into the house.

Sparky let out a few barks and scratched at the sliding glass door. “Let me in. What did you get? Did you get something for m, Ralph?”

Sparky drooled on the glass until the patio door slid open and he barreled into the house, sliding wildly on some tile as he rounded the corner to the kitchen.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I’m tired of scratching for you, so here’s a flea collar. He fastened the strap around Sparky’s neck. The dog shook his head violently trying make the thing more comfortable.

“That’s it. A lousy flea collar? No Beggin’ Strips, \? No new chew toy? A lousy flea collar? Some friend you are, and us being so closely related on the evolutionary chart.” ‘Where did *that* come from, Sparky wondered. He didn’t remember knowing anything about the evolutionary chart.

Ralph had to admit the dog had a pretty good sense of humor, but he was still smarting too much from the traffic ticket to smile. He took the citation out of his pocket.

Sparky recognized it at once.

“Gotta ticket, huh? Son-of-a-bitch!” he growled.

“Hey! Watch your language, dog!” he said.

“Yuh,” said Sparky. “I know it’s politically incorrect for a dog to say son-of-a-bitch, but, you know, it’s like the ‘N’ word to black people. I can use it. You can’t.”

That made Ralph smile.

“Anyway, you gotta ticket,” said Sparky. “What for, driving without a brain? Driving while hominid?”

An audible laugh escaped from Ralph at that zinger. “Say, you are pretty funny, Sparky, maybe I should take you on the road.”

“Hey, buster,” he joked, “I stay outta the road. A dog could get killed out there. Besides, I hate cars. Dangerous. That’s why so many dogs chase ‘em. They’re trying to keep ‘em outta the neighborhood. I don’t chase ‘em though, you might notice. I say piss on ‘em, and that’s just what I do when I find one parked.” Sparky finished his act with a dry rimshot, “Da-dum!” Sparky thought he was hearing crickets. “Tough crowd,” he murmured.

“No, *really*, Sparky. I’ve been shy about letting people know you can talk. I’ll bet it’d be worth some money. I can see the marquee now, ‘RALPH AND HIS COMEDIC DOG, SPARKY!’

“How about it? We might both get rich! I’ll get you a two-story doghouse and maybe even a bitch to hang out with. No offense. It just came out wrong.”

Sparky laughed. “A bitch, huh? Yuh! I like that! Set me up with an audition at the local Comedy Club. I gotta million of ‘em, Ralphy boy!”

Ralph made a few phone calls and found a comedy club that would audition them the following Wednesday night at 7:00 p.m.

Sparky was really excited at the prospect of becoming a comedian with Ralph as the straight man. How could you lose doing standing on all four legs, six if your count Ralphys?

“We’ll be like Martin and Lewis, Abbot and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Huntley and Brinkley, Lady and the Tramp!” Sparky said with stars in his eyes.

“Huntley and Brinkley?” Ralph said incredulously, his forehead all wrinkled.

“You wouldn’t understand,” Sparky said. “I don’t want this to be one of those animal acts like the horse that counts our 10 stomps when you ask him what five-plus-five is. This has to have meat to it. Real Bite, you know? Take some notes, Ralph, we’re on our way to stardom!”

The hour of the audition came and one there was an immediate setback. The policy was that any animals used in an act had to be kept on a leash. Sparky almost didn’t go because he didn’t want to bow to ‘the man’, as he put it, but Ralph said that it wouldn’t always be that way, and in the end Sparky gave in.

When their turn came, the Master of Ceremonies announced, “And now you’re your hands together for Ralph and his Comedic Dog Sparky, ladies and gentlemen.

The air filled with hopeful applause.

Ralph walked Sparky out on the hated leash and sat down in the chair in the middle of the empty stage before the microphone, where a pool of light broke the darkness. Sparky hopped up into his lap to the further applause.

They had rehearsed a very edgy dialogue with pithy repartee about national politics, global warming, religion and race. All the controversial stuff. “Hit ‘em hard and early,” Sparky had said.

Ralph began.

“Well, Sparky, I read in the paper that Hillary Clinton is going to run for the Presidency in 2008. What do you think of that?” The comedic dog had come up with some hilarious material at home and this was going to kill them out there.

Sparky sat still for a moment then turned his head toward the darkness that was the audience. He opened his mouth. It opened wider and then expanded into a long yawn. Then he lifted a leg and began licking himself. Ralph reached over and pulled his leg down. Sparky licked his lips and looked up at Ralph with his big brown canine eyes.

“So what do you think her chances are sport?” he prompted, nudging the dog with his elbow.

Sparky just looked around and yawned again.

Precious seconds ticked by, seconds that cause people in the darkness to fidget and snicker nervously. No amount of prompting would get the dog to do his routine. He just remained silent until someone from the darkness yelled, “Next!” and Ralph led Sparky away to the car, crestfallen and confused. Sparky stopped at the curtain to take a leak.

“Why didn’t you tell your jokes, Sparky?” Ralph asked in a disappointed tone.

“Aw, I dunno,” he said. “I guess I forgot. Do I forget a lot, Ralphy? Do I? Do I? What’s for dinner?”