

BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Memoirs
PETS / Essays & Narratives
FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS / Death, Grief, Bereavement

FOR FANS OF *MARLEY & ME* AND
MUST LOVE DOGS, *MOMMY'S BOY* IS A TOUCHING
MEMOIR THAT WILL PAW AT YOUR HEART, LEAVING
YOU SMILING THROUGH TEARS AND HUGGING YOUR
FUR BABY A LITTLE BIT TIGHTER.

At forty-one, Jennifer is shy, anxious, and frustrated with her dating life. After one too many broken hearts, she shifts her focus from meeting the man of her dreams to finding her four-legged soulmate. Left to fend for himself on the streets of Chicagoland, a sickly, scruffy dog gains a second chance at life when a rescue group scoops him up and nurses him back to health. When the little dog gazes into Jen's eyes on the day their worlds collide, she immediately knows he's "the one." After she brings home the wriggly ragamuffin and rechristens him Benny, he wiggles his way into her heart and takes up permanent residence. Despite his angelic face and calm demeanor, Benny harbors a mischievous side. He steals any food that isn't nailed down, chases squirrels with reckless abandon, unleashes a destructive streak, and battles chronic allergies and infections. He also eases Jennifer's "baby fever," becomes the spokesdog of her business, and is her constant companion as they zigzag the Midwest. But when Benny faces a life-threatening illness, Jen must face the reality that no matter what we do, our time with our pets is limited.

Mommy's Boy is the heartwarming true story of two lost souls forging an unbreakable bond of unconditional love and emotional support. It's a tender tribute to a special dog and a reminder to cherish every moment we have with our furry friends.

ISBN: 979-8-9922012-1-5



9 798992 201215

Mommy's Boy

JENNIFER HUSTON SCHAEFFER

Mommy's Boy

A Memoir

How My Doggie
Soulmate's Love
Rescued Me

JENNIFER HUSTON SCHAEFFER



Chapter 3

Boo Meets Girl

I woke up Saturday morning filled with nervous excitement, as if I were getting ready for a first date. Butterflies flitted in my stomach, my heart was dancing a jig, and my hands were shaking so vigorously that it took me multiple attempts to insert my contact lenses. Everything seemed to be going well with my *potential* adoption of Boo, but because of my previous disappointments, I was afraid to get my hopes up.

Around noon, I hopped in my car and drove to Ruff Haus, the pet store where the adoption event was being held. I parked on the street nearby, and as I walked toward the store, I took a deep breath and said a quick prayer to God, the universe, my mom, and all my guardian angels, “If Boo is meant to be mine, please let this meeting go well and let the adoption go through.”

As I pulled open the glass shop door, a string of overhead bells jingled, almost drowning out the clatter of an El train rumbling by. I stepped inside and turned to my left, where my eyes fell upon the shaggy little guy I’d seen in photos online. “Is this Boo?” I asked the volunteer standing next to him.

When she said yes, I introduced myself and explained that I’d been approved to adopt him. Then I crouched down so I could be more at his level, offered my hand for him to sniff, and said, “Hi, Boo.” As he placed his snow-white paws on my knees, relaxed his ears behind his head, and looked up at me with eyes like pools of melted dark chocolate, he seemed to say, “Hi. I’ve been waiting for

you. You're gonna be my mommy." In that moment, the wall of frost built up around my heart instantly thawed. To say that it was love at first sight sounds cliché, but it truly was.

I sat on the floor and played with Boo for a few minutes until the volunteer said, "He might need to potty. Would you like to take him for a walk?"

"Sure," I said. She handed me a leash, and Boo and I were off.

We stepped outside on the cloudy, crisp late winter day and headed down the street. As we made our way around the block, Boo was a perfect little gentleman on the leash. He didn't pull or put on the brakes; he just trotted around with curiosity and spunk. I was a bit surprised by the extent of his skin infection, though. His belly, butt, and armpits were all bald. I'd never seen a dog with alopecia before, but that didn't dissuade me. As we sat next to each other on a park bench on the way back, I said, "Whaddaya think, Boo? You wanna come home with me?" He returned my gaze with a look that said, "I thought you'd never ask."

When we got back to the pet store, I told the volunteer that I did, indeed, want to adopt Boo. But I decided to do a foster-to-adopt, which means that you take the dog home for a few days, maybe a week, essentially for a trial run before actually signing the adoption papers. Given what I'd already been through with Max and Desi, I thought this was the way to go. Plus, my sister Denise, who'd already adopted two dogs through a rescue group in Indiana, had told me that each time an animal is adopted and is then returned to the shelter or rescue, the pet gets a ding on its record, which makes it even more difficult for it to find a forever home. I didn't want that to happen to Boo, and even though I instinctively felt it was going to work out between us, I wanted to proceed with caution.

I thought I'd be able to take Boo home right then, but I was told that the foster mom wasn't at the event, and she had his meds and other stuff, so I'd have to wait. The volunteer told me to email Anna, the adoption coordinator, when I got home to let her know that I wanted to move forward, and she would work out the details.

"Oh. . . . Okay," I said, my smile turning to a disappointed frown. It hurt to leave Boo there, and I could tell he didn't want me to go. He had a look of sadness in his eyes that betrayed his fears, "Why are you leaving without me? Don't you wanna be my mommy? What did I do wrong?" I tried to reassure him that he'd

be coming home with me as soon as they'd allow it. I hope he understood.

The moment I got home, I emailed Anna. "I met Boo today at the adoption event. He sure is a sweetie. We took a walk and he did his business and was great on a leash. He seemed to really like me too and didn't seem to want me to leave. I would like to proceed with the adoption or foster-to-adopt process. Please let me know when we can make that happen."

Seven agonizing hours later, Anna replied: "So glad that you found Boo to be a great match; he sure is a sweetheart. I've copied Boo's foster mom on this email so you two can coordinate a time to pick up Boo (and his supplies) from her home and start the foster-to-adopt. Once he's been in your home for a few days, we can line up a time to finalize his adoption!"

My friend Karen and I had already made plans to do hot yoga the next morning, so I arranged to pick up Boo around noon, after the class. The foster mom sent me her phone number and address, and surprisingly, she (and therefore, Boo) only lived a few blocks from me. Had I dared to brave the bitter cold of the Chicago winter to take a walk, I might've actually run into them.



The next day, Sunday, March 9, 2014, I picked up Karen for hot yoga as planned. Quivering with excitement, it was difficult for me to relax during the class. I was like a kid on Christmas morning—literally, I was like my gleeful seven-year-old self when Santa brought Arnold to me.

After yoga class, Karen and I parked in front of the foster mom's building then rang the bell for her unit. She buzzed us in, then we made our way up a short flight of stairs to her apartment. As we stood outside her door, a large dog began barking, jumping, and making quite a ruckus on the other side of the wooden barrier. My pounding heart momentarily stopped as I gave Karen a wide-eyed, panic-stricken look and muttered, "I hope there hasn't been a mix-up and Anna sent me to pick up Cujo instead of Boo."

Finally, the foster mom called out, "I'll be right there. Let me just put this guy in another room."

Whew. Once Cujo was safely tucked away, she let us in, offered us a seat, and went to get Boo. I was bouncing with nervous

energy as Karen and I sat patiently (or impatiently, in my case) on the couch.

As soon as Boo skittered into the room, he recognized me, jumped into my lap, and smothered my face with kisses. He knew right away that I was there for him and that I was his mommy, not Karen. The foster mom had already packed up Boo's supplies, and once the leash was clipped onto his collar, he was playfully nudging me toward the door as if to say, "Let's blow this joint!" But the foster mom needed to go over a few things with me first.

She said Boo had just been neutered a few days prior, so he was on antibiotics and needed to wear an Elizabethan collar, aka a "cone of shame," to avoid licking or biting that area. He also had the aforementioned skin infection and an ear infection, so there were drops and other meds to treat those.

She also divulged a little more about his backstory: "In early January, animal control picked up Boo in the far western suburbs. He was found wandering the streets with another small dog, a poodle mix we named Cody. The two of them were taken to the humane society, and when their owners hadn't claimed them after the mandatory seven-day hold, we (meaning One Tail at a Time) scooped them both up. We believe both dogs are around seven years old and had been living on the streets for several weeks at that point."

My heart ached thinking about Boo—or any dogs or cats—living on the streets, especially during the harsh winter conditions in the Midwest.

"Because Boo and Cody were picked up together," the foster mom continued, "we thought they were a bonded pair, so they were placed in the same foster home. But when Cody began taunting and bullying Boo, they were separated, and, after that, both boys were much happier."

Once we had all of Boo's supplies and were filled in on his story and treatment protocol, it was time to go. As much as I love dogs, I can't imagine fostering them because it would be so hard to say goodbye. I'd heard that the dogs are usually reluctant to leave the safety of the foster home they likely thought was their forever home. It can also be difficult for the foster families to say goodbye. However, in this case, it seemed like the foster mom and Boo hadn't really bonded because she seemed rather aloof when it was time for us to go. But about a year later, when my sister Denise

started fostering dogs, I asked her how she could give them up. Denise, who doesn't often show her emotions, said it's not easy, but she's just happy to see the dogs go to a good home. So that was probably the case with Boo's foster mom—or maybe she was just putting on a happy face for us. Either way, one thing was clear: Boo was ready to get out of there and get to his new home.



Before going to my place, Karen and I decided to take Boo on a shopping spree. We headed to a nearby pet store and picked up a few things for him, including a new collar and leash, some toys, treats, and a bag of food. (I'd already purchased bowls and a bed for him.) Back at my apartment, I gave Little Boy Boo, as I called him, the run of the place. He joyfully romped around, exploring his new digs, and instinctively knew it was home. He was bursting with exuberant energy and had a huge grin on his face as if saying, "Yay! I've finally found my forever home and have a mommy again!" I giggled with glee at his playful antics, amazed at how he instantly warmed my heart and my home.

As Karen and I sat on the floor and played with Boo, I removed the cone. It quickly became apparent to me that they might've misjudged his age. I'm no expert, but the little guy had a LOT of energy. The foster mom said he liked his naps, but I had a difficult time believing he was seven. His age didn't matter to me, but he seemed like he was definitely under four, perhaps only one or two. In addition to gleaming white teeth, he had quick reflexes and loved to play with toys, particularly plush ones with squeakers. As much as he liked to make them squeal, it was his mission to tear apart the toy, remove all the batting, and rip out the squeaker. By the end of the day, he'd already destroyed one of the toys I'd bought him, a little blue monkey. With his goal accomplished, he cuddled up next to me on the couch, lying on his back with his arms limply bent at the wrists, in what soon became known as "rub-my-belly position," and quickly fell asleep.

Karen—or Auntie Karen as she was soon dubbed—spent an hour or so at my place, playing with my new bundle of joy. During that time, we discussed names for him. For years, I'd planned to name my next dog Wrigley. But about half of all male dogs in Chicago (at least on the North Side) are named Wrigley, so that was starting to lose its appeal. Although it was certainly fitting

because he was a *wriggly* (and wiggly) little guy—another sign that he was most likely younger than seven.

I considered a handful of other names, including Albert, for his plume of fluffy white hair à la Einstein; Ronnie, for Cubs legend Ron Santo; Benny, for Benny Goodman, aka the “King of Swing” (I love swing dancing and big band music); George because he had a little swagger when he walked, like George Jefferson; and Scooter because he did a “Boot Scoot Boogie” on the rug when I first brought him home. I’d also considered calling him Freddie after my Uncle Mike (whose real first name was Frederick), who had recently passed away.

As Karen and I played with Boo in my dining room, we tried to gauge which name he liked best. I almost went with Freddie because when I called him that, he stood up on his hind legs and did a little cha-cha, like he was performing on *Dancing with the Stars*, which made me think of Fred Astaire. Over the next few days, I even conducted a poll on Facebook for my friends to help me choose a name, and as expected, Wrigley won (by a single vote). But ultimately, the deciding vote was mine. A few days after bringing him home, I looked at that adorable little face and gazed into those deep, soulful brown eyes at the sweet gentleman who had already captured my heart and said, “You are a good man.” Right then, I knew he was a Benny. He looks like a Benny, don’t you think?

But on that first day, he was still Boo. After Karen went home, he and I snuggled on the couch while I posted photos of him on Facebook and emailed friends and family members to introduce them to “the new man in my life.” With the guys I’d dated, I often waited months to let my family and friends know about them because I wanted to make sure they were keepers. (Spoiler alert: They generally weren’t.) But with Benny/Boo, never once did it cross my mind that I was being presumptuous—that maybe it wouldn’t work out. Just as he seemed to know that I was his mommy, I knew that he was my little boy. We were simply meant to be.

In fact, until Benny came into my life, I didn’t realize how sad and lonely I was. From day one, he filled my world with so much unconditional love and joy and happiness that I wondered how I’d ever survived before him. He ignited a spark in my heart that had been dormant for years, and he brought so much light into my life

that I felt like I was Dorothy Gale, stepping from the black-and-white of Kansas into the vibrant technicolor world of Oz.



On our first night together, when I took Boo out for bedtime potties, I quickly learned a secret he'd been harboring. As we crept down the sidewalk in the dark, all of a sudden, he yanked on the leash and took off running, scraping his cone of shame on the ground and dragging me behind him as I desperately stumbled to keep up. I didn't want to let go of his leash, lest he get lost or run into the street, but he was choking himself and gasping like a smoker with a three-pack-a-day habit. After a few seconds, it dawned on me that he was in hot pursuit of a bunny who'd emerged from the bushes when we walked by.

"Slow down, buddy!" I hollered. But he was unable to reel in his primal instincts, and I worried that he'd break his neck or asphyxiate himself. When he finally settled down, I announced, "We're getting you a harness tomorrow."



The next morning, I awoke with a furry little cuddle bug nestled by my feet. It had been my intention to have Boo sleep in his bed on the floor, but he had other ideas. As soon as I'd turned off the light, he started whimpering, so I lifted him into my bed and said, "Oh, all right. You can sleep up here."

I had wanted to let him sleep in my bed all along, but I'd read that it could be disruptive for romantic relationships, so I thought I'd try forcing him to sleep on the floor. But when he cried, I thought to myself, *Screw it. I have no romantic prospects on the horizon, so any guy who wants to be with me is just going to have to accept that this little one sleeps in the bed too.*

Fortunately, the stars aligned in a way that enabled me to work from home my first week with my baby boy. At the time, the publishing company where I worked didn't allow employees to work from home on a regular basis. We all had laptops, though, so if we were feeling under the weather but well enough to work, we could do so from home rather than take a sick day or infect others at the office. But in this case, I'd asked my boss to let me work from home for the full week. Such a request was a bit unprecedented, but it was

perfect timing because in addition to my regular editorial duties, I was also writing a children's book for the company on my favorite band, U2. I consider myself somewhat of an expert on the history of the band, so the company was basically saving money by having me write it, rather than hiring someone to do it. The least they could do was let me work on it from the comfort of my home so I didn't have to schlep all my reference materials (books, magazines, CDs, and DVDs) on the El train and into the office.

To help Benny socialize with Bella, Edwin and Eva brought her up to my apartment and I watched her during the day while they were at work. Benny and Bella got along like peanut butter and chocolate, although Benny was a bit shy. Whereas Bella wanted to play with him, he seemed content to play with his toys.

Having that first week at home with Benny was a godsend. As I worked on the first draft of the U2 manuscript, I stretched out on the couch, sandwiched between Benny and Bella, which strengthened the bond between mother and son. I also got Benny into a routine with his meals and walks, and, putting my newfound knowledge of how to nip separation anxiety in the bud, I spent a little time each day leaving him at home alone for increasingly longer periods of time to get him used to me being gone and reassuring him that I'd always return.

During the week, Anna from OTAT reached out to see how things were going with Benny and me. I told her that we were doing great, that he was such a sweet little guy, and that he'd made himself right at home. We made plans to meet on March 17, to finalize the adoption.

The night before we made it official, I decided it was time to give Benny his first bath. I didn't know how he'd react, though. Despite being a "water dog" and loving the swimming pool, Arnold hated getting a bath. He'd shake and spray me with water and try to jump out of the tub any chance he got. But with Benny, I needn't have worried. As usual, he was a perfect little gentleman. After filling the tub with a couple inches of warm water, I placed him in it without incident. He stood stone-still and let me lather him up and pour large cups of warm water over him to rinse. When he was all clean, I wrapped him in a towel and cradled him in my arms like a baby. When he started to shiver, I blow-dried his long locks to warm him up.

On Monday evening, we met Anna at the veterinary clinic where Benny was due for a follow-up visit. There, we saw the doctor who'd originally estimated that Benny was seven years old. He also gave me some shocking news.

"Benny has a slight heart murmur," he said.

"Oh my God! Is that serious? Do I need to make sure he doesn't run or get too excited?"

"No," the doctor replied nonchalantly. "It's just something you should be aware of, particularly if he needs anesthesia at some point."

After the exam, I signed the adoption papers, paid the \$150 fee, and Benny was officially mine. It was the best \$150 I ever spent!

Anna also turned over all the paperwork OTAT had on Benny Boo. I'd suspected all along that he wasn't Westie-bichon but perhaps Westie-Maltese. To my knowledge, bichons have tight, curly hair, whereas Maltese have more straight or wavy hair. At the time, Benny's hair was about four inches long and stick-straight. Plus, a couple other dogs that I'd inquired about on Petfinder bore a striking resemblance to Benny, and they were both Westie-Maltese. And when I started looking through the paperwork Anna gave me, I noticed that the suburban animal control that had initially found Benny noted him as Maltese. That he was part Westie was obvious from his barrel chest, the shape of his face, and his perky pointed ears, so from that point forward, whenever someone asked his breed, I told them he was Westie-Maltese.

I also found out that he'd been neutered back on January 29, not in early March as the foster mom had told me, which I found strange. He didn't seem at all interested in licking or biting the surgery zone whenever I gave him some cone-free time, so I stopped making him wear it, which he seemed to appreciate.



After that first week at home with Benny, I had to go back into the office. My heart ached when I had to leave him, and I know he wasn't thrilled with the arrangement either. But I hoped that due to our practice runs with me going away for a little bit each day, he'd feel confident that I'd come back.

Each weekday morning, I cordoned off the kitchen with a baby gate and placed Benny's bed, food, water, and some toys inside,

giving him a ten-by-ten-foot space to himself. Even so, whenever I'd leave, he'd start whimpering and then crying within moments of me closing the door. It broke my heart to leave for work, but what choice did I have? I would wait downstairs for a few minutes and then go back up and linger outside the doorway to see if he was still crying, and usually by then, he'd settled down.

Edwin, who got home from work around two or so, was gracious enough to take Benny outside to do his business and then keep him in his and Eva's apartment until I got home. They were the best neighbors/landlords I could've asked for.

It wasn't long before Benny and I settled into a routine. I'd rush home from work, eager to be reunited with him after a long day at the office. Just like my childhood self would run up the driveway, antsy to see Arnold after getting off the school bus, I'd practically sprint home from the El. Knowing that Benny was waiting for me and would be bursting with joy when he saw me made me feel so special and loved, something I hadn't felt in the longest time.

After picking up Benny from Edwin and Eva's apartment, we'd go for a stroll then head back to our place and play fetch. Our apartment was what's known as "shotgun" style, where you can see straight from the kitchen at the back of the unit out the living room windows at the front. Altogether, the distance from the back door to the front window was probably over fifty feet, so I'd grab a toy and chuck it down the long hallway. I loved watching Benny's adorable little "wobblebutt" gallop across the hardwood floors in pursuit of a toy. Unfortunately, he didn't quite grasp the concept of returning the ball to me, so I'd invariably end up walking the length of the building to fetch the toy myself then toss it back down the hallway for him to, once again, chase after. (In his defense, he was a terrier, not a retriever, so he was probably thinking, *Why does she keep taking the toy away from me and throwing it back down the hall?*) We'd spend twenty to thirty minutes doing this every day until both of us were panting, worn out, and ready for dinner. It was a nice workout for me, which was good because I never went back to hot yoga—or any gym for that matter—after adopting Benny because I wanted to be with him as much as possible.

From the get-go, I treated Benny as if he were my child rather than merely a pet, and I didn't care what anyone thought. Perhaps this was due to the innate nurturer in me or the fact that I had no prospects for a husband and couldn't afford to adopt a child on my

own (or freeze my eggs, which I'd researched). But I also treated Arnold like my son, particularly after he and I moved away for college, so maybe that's just my nature.



A week after his adoption was finalized, Benny got his first haircut. The veterinary clinic also offered grooming services, so we made an appointment there for late March. I wasn't really sure what to ask for, but after consulting with Felipe, the groomer we were assigned to, we decided to go with a puppy cut. I was floored when I first saw him. Not that Benny wasn't cute before, but he looked so handsome with his new do! Felipe had done an amazing job transforming Benny from a little ragamuffin to an adorable pup who could've graced the cover of magazines. After that, the puppy cut became Benny's signature style.



As the temperatures warmed up and winter thawed into spring, two things became crystal clear: Chicago has a lot of squirrels, and Benny had a love-hate relationship with the little critters. After our initial foray going outside after dark, when Benny nearly broke his neck—and almost dislocated my shoulder—I did, indeed, buy him a harness. It was a lifesaver because whenever he saw a squirrel, which was pretty much every day, he'd take off chugging down the sidewalk, chasing after it with me in tow. He'd let out a shrill, ear-piercing shriek to announce that the chase was on, then he'd track the bushy-tailed rodent up a tree, sometimes attempting to climb the tree in his manic pursuit, all the while rapidly whipping his tail back and forth like a flag in a hurricane. I often wondered what he'd do if he actually caught a squirrel (or a bunny or chipmunk) but, then again, I probably didn't want to know.