



# Epilogue

## *Lessons from Benny*

In the days following Benny's passing, I felt like I was just existing, not really living. I simply couldn't believe or accept that he was really gone, and I continuously struggled to focus on anything other than memories of my sweet baby boy. Brad could usually find a way to make me smile and even laugh, and walking, getting out of the house, and attending virtual pet grief support groups helped (the closest one to Indianapolis was nearly an hour away). I certainly wasn't happy that the people in these groups had also lost a beloved pet, but there's something deeply comforting in communal grief. Hearing the group members' stories helped me realize that other people felt exactly like I did—that their fur babies were akin to children and they were grieving them as such. It made me feel seen and heard, like I wasn't alone and that nothing was wrong with me because of the intensity of my grief over losing Benny.

Day by day, a slideshow of Benny memories clicked through my mind as if I were peering at them in a ViewMaster, so I began writing them down so I wouldn't forget. I've always wanted to consistently keep a daily journal, but there never seems to be enough hours in the day. But in the spring of 2024, all I seemed to have was time—time to grieve, time to write, time to heal.

As the weeks crept by, I realized that my journaling could be the outline for a memoir about my time with Benny, so I sifted through photos and the recesses of my mind and started making notes to chronicle our journey together. Brad wholeheartedly supported my

endeavor, even though, to really commit to it, I'd have to forgo taking on any editing projects while I was writing, which would prevent me from contributing to the household finances.

As soon as I started writing the actual manuscript, the words effortlessly flowed out of me as I typed them on the keyboard. Instantly, a sense of peace radiated through my body, like that's what I was meant to do. Reliving my time with Benny—especially when he was younger and more playful and energetic—was certainly therapeutic, but there were moments when uncontrollable spasms of grief racked my body, causing me to tremble as I let out an anguished wail from the depths of my soul. When that happened, Brad would question whether writing was helping or hindering my healing process, so I'd reassure him that I knew from experience that I had to feel the pain in order to heal the pain. Whatever traumas we've endured, we need to take the time to properly grieve and feel those feelings—no matter how difficult it is and how much it hurts—because if we purposely suppress or unconsciously repress those emotions, they will manifest in other, unhealthy ways. In other words, as famed psychiatrist Carl Jung is attributed as saying, “What you resist persists.”



While researching for this memoir, it became evident to me in hindsight that after his first hospitalization in September 2020, Benny never fully bounced back. That summer, despite the chronic diarrhea and tummy troubles he was dealing with, he was still very vibrant, spunky, and energetic, vigorously squeaking his toys and dragging me on walks to chase squirrels and chipmunks near Brad's condo. But after recovering from his bout of pancreatitis, he lost some of his mojo. He was no longer interested in his toys or chasing varmints—although, in his defense, after we moved to our subdivision in the burbs, we rarely saw squirrels and never chipmunks. We certainly had many more good times as a family after that, but I'll always look back on the summer of 2020—when we were living together at Brad's condo as a blissful family of three and Benny was his chipper little self—as the last of the halcyon days.

Benny may have slowed down a bit and lost that puppy playfulness, but his love for Brad and me never diminished and his desire to be right next to us only increased. I never wanted to be away from him either, so I often joked that Benny and I had separation

anxiety for each other. It was true, though. That's why I know in my heart that Benny did not cross over to the Other Side willingly; he wouldn't have left me unless he had no choice. His physical body may have been taken away, but his soul is still here with me.



In reliving my time with Benny, I realized that, in many ways, I was reborn when he came into my life. The magnet I have that says: “Who rescued who?” is so true (albeit not grammatically correct). In her book *The Memoir Project*, Marion Roach Smith says, “Dogs do things for people that people cannot do for themselves.” That's exactly what Benny did for me. He was a beacon of light in a storm, entering my life during a sad, lonely, and dark period. When I was drowning in the depths of loneliness and lacking self-confidence, Benny was my savior, a furry little paw reaching out to pull me from the abyss and lift me above the water and into the light. He was my security blanket and a source of emotional support, but at some point, without either of us really noticing, he helped me brave the world and embrace love and life on my own, without the encumbrances of the anxiety and shyness that had held me back for so long.

All my life, I believed I couldn't be happy unless I got married and had children. Benny made me see that I most certainly could be happy without those things—that although I *wanted* them, I didn't *need* them. Taking a cue from The Beatles, he taught me that all I need is love.

From Benny's example, I learned to be my goofy, silly self, nap when I need to, love without limits, and enjoy my favorite things in life. Not only did he fill my life with unlimited unconditional love and unbounding affection, he also made me realize that I was worthy of love and taught me how to accept it. In all those ways, Benny literally changed my life because he helped me become the person Brad—my human soulmate—fell in love with and married. As a result, my lifelong dream of becoming a wife and mother came true—albeit not in the traditional sense. But Benny helped me see that being a dog mom can be every bit as fulfilling as being a mother to a human child.

At times I still feel like I don't know how to live in a world without Benny. I got 3,653 days with him (exactly ten years, including three leap years), but it was nowhere near enough. The

time Benny and I spent together blew by in a blur, like an IndyCar speeding by at 200-plus miles per hour. Benny gave me a purpose and a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Even during times when I was in between work projects and didn't have much to do, I felt useful because I had to take care of him. And just like my friend Nicole had predicted more than a decade earlier when she suggested I get a dog, I had to get dressed to take him outside, so I couldn't mope around all day in my PJs.

As these memories and realizations hit me, the most difficult thing for me to process was—and still is—the moment he passed away. Even though I can picture myself in the SUV, holding Benny in my arms as the light went out of his eyes and his soul slipped from his body, it's still difficult for me to comprehend that it actually happened. It feels surreal, like I watched it happen to someone else. And when I picture it in my mind, it's like I'm looking at us from above, as if I had an out-of-body experience. It's like *my* soul also slipped out of *my* body and hovered above, while his soul departed and ascended to heaven, taking a piece of me with him.



I've always believed that everything happens for a reason. I know now that the Desi Debacle and not being allowed to adopt other dogs I applied for in early 2014 happened because I wasn't meant to adopt them. The universe was waiting for me to find Boo/Benny because he and I were destined to be together. I firmly believe that. What I haven't been able to reconcile is why Benny was taken from us so soon. Why couldn't I have more time with him? What is the lesson there? To cherish each and every moment? I would've done that whether I had ten days with him, ten years, or a hundred. I know ten years is much more than a lot of people get with their pets, and I'm truly grateful for every single second I had with Benny, but I wanted more. If that makes me greedy or selfish, so be it. It's only human nature to want more time with our loved ones, especially after they're gone.

What I have realized is that time slips through our fingers like grains of sand. Losing Benny has made me keenly aware of how precious life is—and it's even more so for our beloved pets—so we need to suck the marrow out of each and every day. I've started making a concerted effort not to put things off and to start checking things off my bucket list. Since you're reading this, I've obviously

checked writing a book off that list, and Brad and I are finally planning to take a honeymoon. I'm making an effort to meet up with my best friend from high school more often too. We lost touch for decades and reunited a few years ago. Although she only lives an hour away from me, we don't see each other often, so I'd like to remedy that. I think it's important for me to make some new friends as well. I also need to get back to taking photos and videos of the people and events I want to remember and hold on to for posterity. And I always say "I love you" to my loved ones before hanging up the phone or going our separate ways—even if I know they know it—because you never know when it'll be the end of tomorrows.



Every night after Benny's passing, I'd look at his picture and tell him how much I love him, remind him how he changed my life, and ask him to send me a sign about which dog to adopt next. About a year after we lost Benny, Brad and I decided it was time to open our hearts and our home to another dog. As I dipped my toe into the search on Petfinder, I focused my attention on female dogs. I didn't want our next pooch to remind me of Benny in any way (other than in color so I could keep my business name: White Dog Editorial). Plus, Benny had indicated in a dream that our next dog would be a girl.

I also wanted an older dog because it's often more difficult for them to get adopted. When Brad saw my search parameters, he surprised me by saying he'd like to get a puppy. But I put my foot down and said, "Uh . . . no. You're not the one who'll be home all day and will have to potty-train a puppy!" He knew it was true, so that was the end of the puppy conversation.

Recalling Benny's severe separation anxiety, Brad and I also decided to get two dogs this time, hoping that having a sibling would make it easier for them when home alone. So, I kept an open mind about getting a male dog, as long as he didn't look like Benny, aside from the white fur.

In late March 2025, Brad and I were approved to adopt two female Maltese through a rescue group near Indianapolis. They weren't biological sisters, but they'd spent their entire lives together, so even though the organization didn't require them to be adopted together, we felt they should be. Besides, I'd always

dreamed of having twin girls. We set up a meet-and-greet with the girls for a Sunday afternoon. I was so excited that I brainstormed a dozen possible girl names and ordered pink and purple collars, leashes, and harnesses in anticipation of bringing them home. But I refrained from buying cute little dresses until I knew their sizes.

The day before the meet-and-greet, Brad and I had to make a trip up to South Bend for a family function. Not wanting to risk missing our appointment to meet the girls, we weren't planning to stay overnight. However, on the two-hour drive to the family function, we received word that we'd been approved to adopt Cassidy, a two-and-a-half-year-old male Bichon in Fort Wayne, which is about two hours northeast of Indy and two hours east of South Bend. We'd been applying for dogs for a few weeks with no responses, then suddenly, we were approved to adopt three in a matter of hours! Brad and I talked it over and decided to stay overnight in the South Bend area, then go meet Cassidy on Sunday morning. If we didn't adopt him, we'd still go meet the Maltese "sisters" in the afternoon.

When Cassidy came out to greet us, he warmed up to me right away, but he was a little skittish around Brad. That reluctance evaporated when we took him for a walk around the property. As he zigged and zagged back and forth across the sidewalk, I said, "Maybe we should name him Ziggy." I liked the name Elliott, but Ziggy seemed to suit his personality much better.

By the time we finished our walk, Cassidy and Brad were buddies, so there was no doubt we were adopting him. But while we were signing the paperwork, my eyes fell upon a white puppy on the other side of a glass-enclosed room.

"Oh my God," I gasped, staring into a pair of soulful brown eyes that were so familiar to me. "He looks just like Benny!"

"Would you like to hold him?" the adoption coordinator asked.

Completely entranced and feeling like a powerful, invisible force was pulling me toward the pup, I replied, "Yes, please."

As we entered the room, my heart began to pound. When a volunteer handed me the twelve-week-old furball, he snuggled in my arms and licked my face. He was so calm and chill—just like Benny.

"I want him," I whispered to Brad, my heart overflowing with so much love for this tiny Benny doppelganger that I was practically choking back tears.

“Both?” Brad questioned, somewhat shocked and undoubtedly worried that I’d changed my mind about Cassidy.

“Yeah,” I assured him. “You said we could adopt two this time.”

“I know, but I thought you wanted a girl and you said you *didn’t* want a puppy,” Brad reminded me with a laugh.

“I know . . . , but forget what I said before. I truly believe Benny sent us here to find this little guy. And you know I always wished I could’ve gotten Benny as a puppy.”

“If you’re sure, then let’s do it!” said my awesome husband.

Unfortunately, we couldn’t take the puppy home that day, so I agreed to pick him up four days later, after he’d been neutered. However, before then, he was exposed to parvo and had to be quarantined for two weeks.

In the meantime, when we got the newly christened Ziggy home, it was as if he’d always lived there. He made himself comfortable on the couch, right between Brad and me, and gratefully licked our hands in exchange for rubbing his belly. Like Benny, Ziggy was terrified of our stairs and insisted on being carried up and down them. It also took him a couple days to accept the toys and treats we offered, but eventually he did and his kooky personality emerged. One night, just after he and Brad returned from a walk, Ziggy began barking and yapping as he enthusiastically ran laps around the kitchen and living room. The elation on his giddily grinning face was contagious as he spun in circles on the hardwood floor like a whirligig.

Brad and I just stood and stared at him wide-eyed, wondering what had gotten into the sweet little guy. “I’ve read about dogs doing ‘zoomies,’” I said. “Maybe that’s what this is?”

Brad replied with a laugh, “Either that or he’s gone completely loco!”

When Puppy was finally in the clear, Brad, Ziggy, and I drove to Fort Wayne and brought him home. Ziggy had enjoyed his time as an only child, so at first he wasn’t pleased with the idea of having a baby brother. But once they started playing, they quickly grew to love each other, albeit in a *Wrestlemania* sort of way. Ziggy showed him the ropes and taught him where to potty outside and how to play with toys, bark at the doorbell, and lift his leg to pee. (Although in his own unique fashion, Puppy preferred to lift his front leg rather than his rear one.)

Puppy taught Ziggy a few things too. Unlike Ziggy, Puppy had no fear of the stairs, hopping up and down them like a kangaroo. After a couple days watching the little tyke navigate the stairs with ease while he was being carried, Ziggy faced his fear and followed in Puppy's footsteps.

We named the puppy Joey due to the aforementioned kangaroo-like antics and because, when we first brought him home, I occasionally carried him in a little pouch strapped to my chest, like a kangaroo and her joey. Plus, he was born around New Year's Eve like Joey McIntyre from *New Kids on the Block*.

Joey and Ziggy reignited a spark in me that was extinguished when Benny passed. Sometimes I still do a double-take, thinking Joey is Benny. Like Benny, Joey is very affectionate and loves to smother my face with kisses. But the calm and chill demeanor he displayed when we first met, which reminded me so much of Benny—it's gone. With his boundless energy, Joey bebops around the house like Tigger, loves to eat paper, and plays in his water bowl as if he's bobbing for apples, even blowing bubbles through his nose. I'm amazed at the wonder in his eyes as he discovers new things, and as a puppy, literally *everything* is new to him. I can't wait to see how he reacts when he encounters his first squirrel.

Every day, Brad and I still wish Benny were here with us, but it's so wonderful to be dog parents again and be on the receiving end of the unconditional love they offer so willingly. I truly believe Benny is here with us in spirit and that he guided us to Joey and Ziggy. I didn't think I wanted a puppy, another male dog, or one that reminded me of Benny, but, as always, God and the universe provided exactly what I needed.

## *Photo Gallery*



**Welcome home, Little Boy Boo!**  
*March 9, 2014*



**Watch out, Bono—there's a new kid in town.**



**Benny's first haircut.**  
*March 2014*



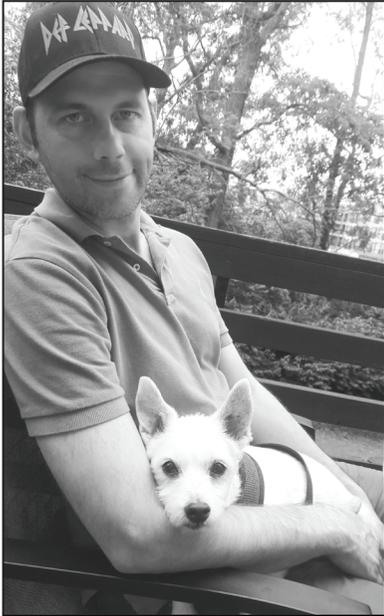
**Mommy and her  
baby boy.**



**We're getting married!**



**Basking in the sun and about to do roly-polies.**  
*Summer of 2020*



**Benny and Braddy,  
soon-to-be Daddy.**  
*Summer of 2020*



**Our handsome boy in his  
wedding suit.**  
*September 25, 2020*



**Benny could've been a model.**



**Showdown with a squirrel.**



Morning cuddles.



Rub my belly! Rub my belly!



I'm watching your  
speed, Dad!



I'm all ears!



Benny and Monkey.



Mommy's Boy in his Mommy's Boy sweatshirt.



The day Benny walked through the snow tunnel.  
*February 20, 2021*



**Thunderbolt gives Daddy kisses.**



**Mommy gets Benny kisses.**



**Hi, I'm Benny and I'm a Pisces.  
I like chasing squirrels, eating, sleeping,  
and cuddling with my parents.**



I'm all ready for bed.  
Goodnight!

# Acknowledgments

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To the rescue groups that wouldn't let me adopt because I worked full-time outside the home: you were right, those dogs weren't right for me, and in the end, it all worked out for the best because it led me to Benny, the best dog in the history of the universe. But let's be honest, you could've handled the situation better.

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Heavenly thanks to my dad's beloved dog Sweetie and all the dogs I've had throughout my life: Arnold, Snoopy, Candida, Mopsy, Fezzy, and Gigi, my first dog, who may have actually been my imaginary dog since nobody else in my family remembers her.

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And last, but certainly not least, Benny, my sweet baby boy, you enriched my life in countless ways and filled my heart with more love and joy than I ever could've imagined. Your love truly rescued me, and you were and always will be my sunshine.

# About the Author

Jennifer Huston Schaeffer is an author, editor, and the owner of White Dog Editorial Services. She grew up surrounded by corn-fields in a bucolic small town in southwestern Michigan, where she developed a love for reading, writing, and, of course, dogs. After graduating from Purdue University, Jennifer moved to Chicago and began working in the publishing industry in 2002. She adopted Benny, her doggie soulmate and the inspiration for *Mommy's Boy*, in 2014. When she's not editing other people's books, she enjoys reading, writing, crafting, and watching true crime documentaries and classic game shows. Jennifer is a member of the Indie Authors Association, the Midwest Independent Publishers Association, the Central Indiana Writers Association, and the Editorial Freelancers Association. She is also the author of *U2: Changing the World Through Rock 'n' Roll*.

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It would mean the world to me because it helps other readers discover the book, builds my connection with readers like you, and motivates me to keep writing. Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts.

With gratitude,

—Jennifer Huston Schaeffer

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