

Warning! Please Read this Before Adopting a Pet

by S. Asher Sund

To be clear, I had wanted a fish. It was my wife's bright idea to get the dog, a Collie-Rottweiler mix. We called him Roger. We were doing a good deed. He was a shelter-rescue with a limp. Yes, there were some warning signs, things I should have picked up on right away. The dog growled, for instance, whenever I got within five feet of him. But my wife Shirley assured me that he would get better over time.

One evening I came home late from work to find my wife drinking white Zinfandel by the fireplace in the living room and reading Wallace Stevens poems out loud to the dog, curled at her feet. When I stepped into the living room, Roger growled at me. I asked my wife from the other side of the couch if I could speak with her in the entryway, where I told her that perhaps it was time to ask the dog to leave.

"But where would he go?" she said. "He has no home."

"I don't really care," I said. "He's dangerous. He's a threat to our safety."

"Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"No, I do not."

"Oh, honey," she said in a chirpy, sing-song voice, and patted me on the head. "It will all be good. You'll see."

"Why are you talking like that? And stop patting me on the head."

The next week when I came back from a business trip, I found Roger and my wife asleep in bed, spooning under the sheets. The TV was on. When I tried to lift one of Roger's paws off the remote to turn the TV off, he jumped out of bed and pinned me to the floor, his fangs hovering over my neck. My wife hurried to pull Roger away and asked me what I had done to set him off.

"Are you kidding? You're blaming *me*? That damn dog nearly killed me!"

"Honey," she said. "You really need to pull yourself together. I'm glad you're home and everything, but if you can please go sleep in the den, both Roger and I would appreciate it."

"Roger and you? So you two are a unit now?"

The dog, pacing behind her, began to snarl. My wife smiled at me sadly. "Be a good boy, go sleep in the den, and tomorrow you'll get a treat."

"I don't want a treat. And stop using that stupid voice with me. I'm a grown man!"

The next night when I came home from work, there were two wrapped gifts for me sitting on the table. I felt bad then. Perhaps I had been overreacting.

"Wow," I said. "What's the occasion?"

After a dinner of prime rib that I basically gulped down without mastication, it was so delicious, I unwrapped the first gift.

"Is this a collar?" I said.

"Of course not. Think of it more as a choker. It's very fashionable these days with all the men."

"Which men?"

"Oh, you know, men."

"But I've never seen a man wearing something like this. No man I know at least." The collar had a small, violet-colored piece of heart-shaped metal attached to it, printed with my name and number. "But thank you anyway. I appreciate the thought."

"For my sake, can you just try it on?"

"But shouldn't Roger be wearing one of these?"

"Why?"

"Because, not to point out the obvious, but isn't Roger the dog?"

I unwrapped the second box, the bigger of the two, and pulled out a small wire basket attached to leather straps.

"What's this?" I said.

"It's a muzzle."

"What's it for?"

“Well,” she said. “It's meant to prevent the wearer from biting anyone, and I thought it might be appropriate—”

Roger barked twice.

“Yes, sorry,” Shirley said to the dog, and turned back to me. “Roger and I *both* would feel more comfortable if you wore that over your face whenever you were in our presence.”

“But what for?”

“Frankly it's your anger,” she said. “You have some real anger issues, and we're concerned for our safety.”

“I DO NOT HAVE ANGER ISSUES!” I slammed my fist on the table.

Shirley said, “That's exactly my point. You can put the muzzle around your head whenever you're feeling how you're feeling now.”

One late morning when working from home, I heard my wife talking on the phone with the people from the shelter. When I clearly heard her discussing a return adoption, it felt as if my whole body were wagging.

When she got off the phone, I was going to tell her how glad I was that she was finally seeing things as they actually were, but I got distracted by a smudge of a brown something on one of her clogs. Chocolate, I thought. I bent down to sniff at it, and though my highly sensitive sense of smell these days let me know that it was only a dried swath of mud, I licked it off anyway. Yep, mud. And then as I was trying to get the bad taste out of my mouth, Roger came up to stand behind my wife.

“The dog is walking now?” I snarled from the floor.

“Please,” she said.

“Shirley.” Roger put his arm around her waist. When she looked over at him, he said, “Remember what the therapist said? Don't engage.”

“He's talking too?” I said. “And what therapist? Who has been paying for that?”

But they clearly could not understand me.

Roger poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table, in my spot, with the paper.

I sighed and went to my bed in the den where I also had a bowl for food and one for water, along with the TV and my toys.

Things were tense, to be sure, with our new arrangement, until one day without the muzzle, when Roger was out mowing the lawn, I don't know what came over me, but I bit Shirley's shin. It wasn't deep. I only nipped her. I didn't even draw blood. But it alarmed her, I could see.

"That's it," she said, and locked me in the den.

A few moments later, Roger shut the lawn mower off. Shirley was talking with him on the lawn. I could not hear what they were saying, but only their muffled voices, especially Roger's, which seemed to be escalating. I cowered in the den when Roger roared in, slapped me once on the nose, and two more times, hard. I whimpered each time, and my eyes watered. He pulled the muzzle over my head, strapped the leash to my collar, pulled me out to the car, and picked me up to throw me into the backseat. Shirley was weeping up front, in the passenger seat.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Roger threw the car into first and stalled.

"To a happy place. Think of your most happy place in the world," Shirley said in her best sing-song voice, through her tears.

Roger reached over to pat Shirley on the leg and say, "There, there."

I thought of my happy place. "Okay." My voice came at me in muffled response from inside the muzzle. "I think I've got it."

Roger restarted the car.

"Good," she said. "That's a good boy." And we all rode in silence the rest of the way.

