

*Initially I intended to include these stories about our incredible dog in the body of the Not the Kennedys manuscript but as the story unfolded, I found that they pulled the reader too far out of the flow of the family story, so I edited them out. Still, there was part of me that thought some readers might enjoy some of the antics Chubby got up to and why, much to my surprise, I ended up with such deep feelings for him. – John O’Hern*

## CHUBBY STORIES

I’ve seen wooly haired German Shepherds as an adult and although they are large dogs they are not Great Dane or St. Bernard large. Even still, after just a few years with us I think Chubby’s size even took Dad by surprise He was almost totally black with just the slightest brown fringe around his ears. He was also fat, born fat in fact and for the first year of his life he sashayed his hindquarters when he walked with a pronounced waddle which is how we came to name him Chubby, after Chubby Checkers, the pudgy black performer whose fame was in full bloom in the 1960’s. There wasn’t much about the dog we didn’t like. All of his characteristics were heroic in nature. He was fierce, protective, powerful, loyal, brave and smart. You could get on the ground with Chubby and wrestle him as hard as you wanted and he would growl like a lion, swat you with his paws and grab hold of your arm with his sharp teeth but never once leave a mark.

Chubby was intimidating as hell not only because of his roaring, earsplitting bark but also because in the fullness of adulthood he acquired the appearance of a small brown bear. When he charged at the mailman or at milk and bread delivery guys, even though they knew he was tethered by a two-hundred-pound test chain, they all bravely fought the instinct to run.

Coming out of the woods at the end of our street one afternoon on my way home from middle school I spied a man walking through the neighborhood going door to door delivering what turned out to be samples of Folgers Compressed Coffee Rings. I froze at the edge of the woodlot and watched with growing alarm as he approached our driveway. He had a large brown cardboard box over his shoulder when he turned onto our property, from my vantage point it appeared his lips were puckered in a happy whistle. I heard the explosion of Chubby's roar and though I had a sinking fear of what was going to happen next I was still taken aback when I saw the bushes that bordered our lawn shake violently, then over the bushes came the box of samples, dozens of Folgers rings flying through the air and landing in the road like giant snowflakes followed by the terrified Folgers Man himself. I slipped back into the woods and waited until he gathered what he could of his samples and drove away.

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"Come on Andy," Dad gave a casual shout to our mailman over the roar of Chubby's bark, "he won't bite, I promise."

Andy Mullin, lived in terror of our dog—I'm certain Chubby had a starring role in all of the poor man's nightmares—inched his way across the driveway until he came to the foot of the stepladder where Dad was painting the side of our garage.

"I think you need to know, Doc," Andy was quickly flipping through a stack of mail and pulling out letters addressed to us, "I'm licensed to carry a twenty-two-caliber handgun." That got Dad's attention and his brushstrokes came to a halt. "If that dog gets off the chain I'm gonna shoot him, I promise you that."

Dad looked down at the quaking postman and as his painting hand came back to life he let out a little laugh, “Let’s be clear, Andy, if the dog gets off the chain you’d better have something bigger than that.”

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One spring day the phone rang and Dad picked it up and said hello. Our ears picked up when he dropped into his professional tone which we recognized by its studied diction and dead serious calm. Almost immediately the conversation escalated into a heated exchange with Dad using a voice we thought he only used on us. “Hey, hey, slow down Ma’am, I don’t even know who I’m talking to!” It was frightening to hear Dad talk in that tone to a non-family member and it was a rare event, but when it happened, it made you freeze in your tracks until you were one hundred percent sure that the heated exchange wasn’t about you. The tension dropped from everyone’s faces when we heard him say, “Yes, yes, that’s our dog. I’ll come over and take care of it.” There was a dark storm gathering on his face when he hung up and headed for the back door, throwing his arms in the air and shouting as he went, “Who in the name of god let the damn dog off the leash.”

I slipped on a pair of shoes and along with Charlie, Danny and Debbie we followed him out, all of us pleading our innocence as we went. “Not me,” we cried at the back of Dad’s head.

“That’s right, that’s right,” Dad snarled back over his shoulder as he jogged up the street, “it’s never anybody’s fault around here. The man in the moon did it, that’s who!”

Halfway up the street, neighbors were gathering in front of a prim white ranch house with a picture postcard front yard. In the center of the lawn Chubby had mounted and was engaged in a ferocious, rampaging sexual display with a meticulously coiffed, all white French Poodle. The owner of the poodle, a shut-in of an old woman I barely recognized stood behind her screen

door, wiping tears from her cheeks with a tissue and pleading at the top of her frail lungs to anyone who would listen, “Please make it stop. I’m breeding her with other poodles. Please, please, he’s ruining her!”

Dad grabbed a garden hose on the side of the woman’s house and sprayed the dogs until Chubby finally disengaged. Delighted to see us, Chubby ran up and rolled onto his back on the grass at our feet, entreating any of us to scratch his stomach and congratulate him. Dad grabbed Chubby by his collar and headed back to the house past a gathering of gawking neighbors, wagging a finger at him and yelling “bad dog,” until we were out of sight of the old woman. Later that afternoon Dad dropped his paper in his lap and let out a laugh from the chair at his desk. “Well, I have to admit that old woman was right,” he said, winking at the four of us who’d witnessed the dog sex with him, “that poor poodle sure got ruined.”

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A half an hour before dismissal a knock came at my sixth-grade classroom door. It was our principal, Mr. Falvey. He scanned the class until he spotted me sitting at my desk then made my heart freeze when he curled his index finger at me. He walked me outside to the bicycle rack where I had parked my bike that morning. Sitting next to my Schwinn with its two wire paperboy baskets slung over the rear wheel, was Chubby.

“You can’t bring your dog to school, John,” he said, jamming his hands into his pants pockets and jingling loose change.

I was a practiced liar by now, able to concoct any wild story on my feet to avoid getting blamed for anything. My first impulse was to deny ownership but that would have been outright insanity because almost everyone in town knew what family the giant Shepherd belonged to. While my liar brain grinding gears Chubby got up, tail wagging so ferociously it seemed to

propel him in my direction and started licking my hand. “I didn’t bring him,” I said, looking everywhere but at the dog, “he must have followed me, I guess.”

“Has he been here all day?” Mr. Falvey frowned and looked at his watch, it was dawning on him that Chubby had been guarding my bike for almost seven hours.

I shrugged ignorance. The truth was I had spied Chubby guarding my bike at recess after lunch but I’d hoped he’d get bored and head back home.

“Do you need anything from your cubby?” Mr. Falvey said.

I had a jacket in my cubby and my homework assignments too, but I was so nervous about getting into trouble I just shook my head no.

“Well, why don’t you hop on your bike and get him home then.” Mr. Falvey abruptly turned and headed back into the building.

I cycled home through suburban streets I knew like the back of my hand, while Chubby trotted fifty yards behind me, stopping occasionally to claim a tree or a bush with a lifted leg. I was so preoccupied thinking up the lie I was going to use to explain my early dismissal to Mom I’d almost forgotten about him when suddenly a full grown brown Boxer, teeth barred and growling shot out from behind one of the houses and tore after me. Fear and adrenaline jolted me like an electric shock and I began pumping the pedals for all I was worth but I was no match for the dog. I could hear the click of its paws on the tar and gravel roadway, its growl growing louder as it closed in. I was whimpering with fear on every panicked breath, my thighs stinging with effort when there was a screeching yelp and the clatter of claws suddenly faded out. A terrific dog fight broke out behind me but I didn’t dare look back until I reached an intersection where I had to make a sharp left turn to get to our house, a quarter mile down the street. The Boxer lay prostrate in the middle of the road with Chubby standing over it. “CHUBBY,” I

screamed. He paused for a moment looking down at his conquest and I thought for a moment he might lift his leg again but then he took off in my direction at a comfortable trot. The Boxer did not get up.

I told no one of the incident for fear of being accused of taking Chubby off the leash and letting him follow me to school; or worse, having to take the blame for the injured or possibly dead dog left lying in the street. That night, when no one was paying attention to what I was up to, I took the wire dog brush out to Chubby's doghouse and gave him a good brushing and thanked him for saving my life.

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It had been months since daylight savings time pulled the shade on any hope of seeing the sun after five in the afternoon and it was pitch dark outside when Danny came in the back door just before dinner hit the table. His face was beet red from the cold and his eyebrows frosted with a dusting of fresh snow. "Oh my god, it's cold out there," he shouted, "and snowing like you wouldn't believe." Those of us sitting in front of the television jumped up, ran to the kitchen windows and peered out at the hypnotic patterns of dense falling snow swirling around the street lamps. The next day was Monday and immediately we began jumping up and down, whispering back and forth, thrilled at the possibility of getting a snow day from school. "We live in the Northeast for Christ's sake," Dad snapped from his throne at his desk when our excitement had gone on too long to suit him, "what the hell do you think is going to happen in January?" When we turned our frowning faces at him, miffed that he'd cut our thrill over the blizzard short, he doubled down. "Try paying the oil bill a couple of times, you won't think it's so fabulous then." Sometimes, on nights like this, when the temperature dipped below zero with a howling Hudson Valley wind, we'd remember the dog, then rush to the back room window at the rear of the

house. From that vantage point you could look directly into Chubby's doghouse, just making out the smoke of his breath and the faintest light reflected in his eyes. One of us would go to Mom in the kitchen, where she was either putting dinner together or cleaning up after and beg her to intercede with Dad on Chubby's behalf.

"Hon," Mom called out to the living room, "do you think we should bring the dog in?" this was usually met with silence until she added, "For heaven's sake, honey, it's almost twenty below out there."

Letting the dog in the house went against a fundamental tenet of Dad's that animals were naturally suited for outdoor life and did not need to be coddled. What he did with those poor dogs at the hospital certainly impressed on us that he felt they were utterly expendable. Some nights if the dog was sure to be damp from the rain he'd just say no and that would be the end of it, but other nights when the temperature dipped below zero, he'd shake his head as he felt himself going against his better judgment, then he'd relent.

"Danny?" Dad shouted up the stairwell.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Go outside and let the damn dog in."

Danny came thumping down the stairs in a hurry and as he passed the living room Dad snapped at him, laying a little polish on his orders, "Put him down in the basement. I don't want him up here."

Hearing us run around on the floor above him would get Chubby whining and barking and fearing that Dad would banish the dog back to the frozen outdoors one of us would have to step up. Whoever went to Mom about the dog to begin with, it fell on them to slip down to the basement with a handful of dried dog food, a bowl of water and his fur brush. He'd eat the food

from your hand, lap his water then lie at your feet, his big brown eyes pleading. Rubbing your hands over his coat, offering him a warming massage was the best you could do for him but you had to wear mittens or a pair of Dad's work gloves because his fur was so filthy that your hands always came away black with dirt and stinking of dog. Still, when any of us rubbed him like that Chubby'd turn his big head and grin at you, tongue hanging out, his tail beating a drumbeat against your leg. Later, looking for any opportunity to distract me from homework, I'd sneak back down and give him the brush. It was as close to getting a bath that poor dog ever got, the brush coming away from his coat with chunks of hair full of dirt and dander after just a few strokes. It was hard work, his long fur a tangled mess but he loved it, especially when you raked the brush along the flanks of his hind legs or over the top of his head. He'd follow you to the bottom of the basement stairs when you went back up and when he looked up at you before you turned out the light, the look on his face let you know you had a friend for life.

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In the winter we'd bring Chubby sledding with us. There were a few small hills behind the middle school athletic fields that were neither big nor steep enough for thrills but on a snow day from school when the roads weren't fit for a parent to drive us to the local golf course where the real sledding could be found, we made do with the kiddy slopes just to get out of the house. It was a hike, dragging our sleds and toboggans up our street, then a quarter mile through the wood lot that bordered the school property, but we were young and bored silly. "Take the dog with you," Mom would shout out the back door as we made our way through knee high drifts in the driveway, "he'll cry the whole time you're gone and I don't need that."

We had mixed feelings about taking the dog with us. The responsibility of looking after Chubby would keep us from devoting our minds completely to horsing around with our pals and

if Chubby wandered off to explore in the woods, which he always did once he was off the leash, tracking him down later was such hard work we always gave up, shouting his name a few times then just waiting for him to come home on his own. In the end, he so enjoyed getting off the chain and running free it never failed to lift our spirits just watching him jump for joy. As soon as we started riding down the hill on sleds and toboggans Chubby wanted in on the game. He'd chase us down the hill panting in the deep snow as he went. At the bottom he'd bound from kid to kid, barking and wagging his tail, looking for a pat on his massive head or someone to wrestle with. Occasionally he'd get ramped up, and if one of our pals fell off their sled or toboggan on the way down Chubby would pounce and start leg-humping his captured victim until one of we O'Hern's came to the rescue. My best friend Dave's older brother, Jim, got snagged by Chubby for an extended leg hump once and though we could have jumped in sooner and pulled Chubby off, it was too funny to watch Jim on his back, flailing and terrified, pinned to the snow as Chubby ground away at his thigh.

"Whatever you do, don't roll over, Jim," we all shouted.

While we were hauling our sleds back to the top Jim gave me a pretty good whack on the back of my head.

"When my parents ask me if I had a good time today," he yelled in my ear, "I'll tell them, 'I sure did, except the part where I got raped by the O'Hern's dog!'"

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We were all huddled around the television as the NBC peacock spread its wings on a Sunday evening in February, a night so fiercely cold and wet that Dad brought Chubby into the basement of his own volition. No one jumped up to rub or brush the dog because our favorite show of the week, the *Wonderful World of Disney* was on. Patrick McGoohan, as *The Swamp*

*Fox*, had us riveted in front of the set while the gale outside sent waves of frozen sleet clattering against the picture windows in the living and dining rooms, making a racket so loud that we had to close the curtains and turn up the volume. Halfway through the program a low menacing growl came up from the basement. We were all familiar with the message behind that sound; it was a preliminary threat, a warning shot from Chubby fired at any unwitting deliveryman or a stray dog that entered his domain. At the first sound all heads swiveled to Dad at his desk. He had his feet up, a book in his face and didn't even lift his head. A few minutes later Chubby's growl turned into a roar. What got our attention was the savage, feral sound to it, the kind of bark he gave when the fur on the back of his neck stood straight up. Most of us had witnessed Chubby in a dog fight at least once and the roaring coming from the basement sounded a lot like that. Dad looked up this time, one foot lifted off the corner of his desk, but then it got quiet again so he eased his foot back down. "He sees a mouse is all," Dad shrugged. Just as we refocused our attention back on the swashbuckling adventure before us, an explosion of noise erupted from beneath us. Chubby was on the move, his roaring accompanied by the sound of tools from Dad's workbench crashing down on the basement's cement floor. Dad leapt up, and with quick strides went to the front porch just off the living room. It was an enclosed porch with large hinged windows shuttered against the cold but unheated and in the winter was used mostly for storage. Dad reached inside the doorway and pulled a baseball bat from a canvas bag of little league equipment that had found its way there in the fall. With bat in hand he headed towards the back door, his face set in a grimace of angry determination; the same face he wore when his belt came sliding off his waist with a hiss. "Everyone stays here," he yelled back at us, plenty loud enough to be heard over the racket of the driving sleet, the clashing of swords on the television and the animal riot taking place below.

There were other sounds now, totally un-dog like. A hissing, high pitched squeal not unlike a cat, but definitely not a cat either. Barely audible over the animal sounds Dad was shouting down the basement stairs at the dog. “Chubby!” he yelled, “Come here.” The instant our show broke for commercial we jumped up en masse and in tight formation tiptoed to the backdoor that led to the basement stairs. Dad stood by the open doorway that led to the basement, clearly alarmed, his face deadly serious, the bat held in readiness above his shoulder, waiting for the ruckus to die down. Behind us we heard Mom come down from the second floor with an empty laundry basket in her hands and when she stepped into the kitchen we waved her towards us.

“What on earth is going on,” she said, craning her neck over us and peering down at Dad.

All ten of us stood still, listening to the crescendo of howling snarls from Chubby and the other creature’s, desperate, hideous squeals.

“Well, it’s not a burglar,” Dad said, lowering his bat just slightly. Then, as quickly as it had erupted, the basement became still. After a few tense breaths, Dad took tentative steps down the stairs, looking back at us as he closed the cellar door behind him. A few minutes later he raced back up, shot past us and rustled in the corner of the kitchen where Mom kept the trash basket and a three-foot stack of folded paper bags from the A&P. He came back our way wearing his dirt stained gardening gloves and holding an empty bag.

“Chubby just eviscerated a muskrat,” he grinned at us as he went past “Man, oh man,” he said coming back the other way, shaking his head in astonishment as he headed back down, “that dog is something else.”