

Kiwi
By Frederick William Schroeder IV

Zippering up Route 9 in a blue Volkswagen Passat with the sunroof open, Luke was on his way to meet Jill for Sunday brunch at The Rose Garden, a fine little bistro a few miles from his apartment. Luke had been dating Jill for just a couple of months now, but could tell that she was *really* into him. Over the last few weeks, especially, she really turned up the attention she gave him. She would call and text him almost everyday, just to see what he was up to. At least three times a week she'd post on his Facebook timeline some stupid Buzzfeed list or a captioned picture of a cat. Luke hated cats. Jill also gave him gifts all the time. Weird ones, like hand-knitted mittens with the silhouette of a palm tree stitched on the back (to make him think of summer once it got cold out again, she said). One time, she baked him a chocolate cake, which she then personally delivered to him while he was at work. How embarrassing. The worst, though, was when Jill had a few too many glasses of wine and got all sappy and would talk on and on about how she's soooo sick of messing around and all she wants to do is find someone to spend the rest of her life with and she's already 29 and her biological clock is ticking and she doesn't know how much longer she can wait and yadda yadda yadda. Still, Luke continued to date her, exclusively for a little while now, and that came down to one essential reason: Jill was absolutely unbelievable in the bedroom, so unbelievable that in all of his 24 years, he'd never been with anyone who even came close to her sexually. Perhaps another reason he dated her was because it was nice to feel wanted by someone, sometimes. But, boy, was the sex amazing.

Luke took a sip of tea from his thermos as he thought about how long he could he could keep all of this up. Just as he did, some Tahoe-driving jerk merged onto Route 9 right in front of him. Luke reacted by pumping the brake, which made him drop his thermos. He didn't hit the Tahoe, but his tea spilled all over his pants. He grumbled under his breath. His pants were soaked in Earl Gray. There was no way he would go into The Rose Garden with a huge wet stain on his crotch.

Luke pulled off Route 9, into a strip mall parking lot. There was a Five Guys, a GameStop, a Just Pups, a crummy looking pizza parlor, and an Old Navy. He parked his car and dashed into the Old Navy. He was greeted by a kind-looking black woman at the door.

“Hi, welcome to O- oh...” she paused as she stared right at his wet crotch. A faint smile spread across her face when she looked up again. “Welcome to Old Navy. Let me know if I can assist you...with anything.”

Luke headed straight back to the men's pants section and grabbed the first pair of slacks that were his size. Luckily the store was nearly empty of other customers, so he didn't think anyone else saw his embarrassing accident. He was able to purchase the pants quickly and quietly.

On his way back to the car, something caught his eye. Through the window of Just Pups, next to a “Sale” sign, a fuzzy face was looking at him eagerly. It was a miniature schnauzer, propping itself up against the windowsill. Its light gray fur was a wild mess, and its beard stuck out in all directions. Its two ears were perked straight up, taller than Luke had ever seen on any dog. They were more similar to those of a rabbit. The puppy wasn't much bigger than a rabbit either. Unlike most dogs, this one had a tiny little nub of a tail that wobbled excitedly. The puppy blinked at him, its deep black eyes circled by what seemed to be unusually long eyelashes.

What a weird looking creature, Luke thought, before running back to his car, where he changed into his new stainless slacks. He made sure not to rip the tags off, so that he could come back and return them for a full refund right after brunch. There was no way he going to pay for a lousy pair of pants from Old Navy, of all places.

The first thing Jill said when she saw Luke was that she liked his slacks. She asked if they were new.

“Oh, these? Nah, I've had these for a while now,” Luke said with a roll of his eyes.

“Really? Do you leave the stickers on all of your pants?”

Luke looked down and saw that a sticker reading “Men's Regular Fit, 35” was in plain view on his right pant leg. He felt his face get hot.

“I can take them off for you...”

“No, no, don't be silly, here, have a seat,” he said as he pulled out a chair for Jill to sit down.

She raised her eyebrow at him, before brushing her curly red hair out of her face and taking her seat. Almost immediately she launched into a story about how she tried to bake cookies for him that morning but she had lost track of time working on her portrait of him. Luke told her it was fine, that he couldn't wait to see it. He noticed she was wearing a sundress. He didn't think he had ever seen her wear it before. Maybe it was new, or maybe he just never paid much attention. Oh well, he thought, she looks great in it. Instead of telling her that, he ordered strawberry crepes for two. Luke listened to Jill rave on and on about some of the *absolutely precious* shore houses she'd seen the other day in a real estate magazine.

“Wouldn't you just *love* to live down the shore one day?” Jill said with a dreamy look in her big blue eyes. “It must be so pleasant. The weather is so much nicer down there. Imagine having a house right on the lagoon in Barnegat or Lavalette. You could have a cute little skipper boat that you could take out on the bay and teach your children how to fish.”

Luke nearly choked on a strawberry when he heard her say children.

“It would be a perfect life, wouldn't it?” she asked.

Luke forced himself to nod as he swallowed down a strawberry.

Jill looked down at her crepe and picked at it a bit with her fork. Without looking up, she said, “You know, it's been three months now.”

“Has it really now?” Luke replied, feigning interest. He started to feel a little nauseous.

“Hey folks, how'd those crepes come out? Everything fine?” their waitress asked them, with

perfect timing.

“Oh, they're great,” Luke said, grateful for this interruption, “but do you think we could get another round of mimosas?”

After brunch, Jill asked what Luke was up to for the rest of the day. He told her he was planning on cleaning his apartment. In reality, he was going to return his new slacks, and then laze about on his balcony, maybe read a John Grisham novel.

“Oh, well let me know if you need help cleaning later. I have nothing else going on today,” she said coyly. He'd probably take her up on that, after he got a few hours of sunbathing in, of course. He kissed Jill goodbye and headed back to the strip mall.

After parking his car, Luke changed back into his tea-stained pants. They were still very much wet. It made him feel gross to be wearing them again, but he could change as soon as he got home. He exchanged the slacks quickly and as inconspicuously as one with a stain over their crotch can. He figured the eighteen dollars and ninety-nine cents he cleverly saved could go towards a snack on the way back, because those dainty strawberry crepes, while delicious, sure didn't fill him up.

Walking back to his Passat, Luke once again found himself coming to a stop right in front of the Just Pups window. There, again, was his little fuzzy friend waiting for him to stop in to play. The puppy licked at the window happily. Luke smiled. He hadn't seen a puppy so happy and eager to see him since he was a child. Rather than looking like a moron grinning through the window, Luke decided he could spare at least a few minutes to play with the little pup.

A twenty-something year old girl was squatting down, cleaning a mess up near the back when Luke entered the store. A bell chimed over the door, alerting the girl to his presence. She bolted right up, turning around to greet him with a huge smile on a face full of freckles.

“Hi! Welcome to Just Pups, where dogs are people too!” the girl said. The dog bone shaped

name-tag pinned to her green uniform T-shirt read “Pam”. She flipped her long, braided, brown hair over her shoulder and asked Luke if he wanted to play with any of the puppies in the playpen. Luke asked if he could see the puppy by the window.

“Oh! Ya mean Kiwi,” Pam said enthusiastically. “Just three months old. She's a miniature schnauzer.”

“Yeah, I know. My family actually used to have one kind of like her. When I was a kid, I mean. His ears never stuck up quite like *that*, though,” Luke said with a laugh.

Pam laughed, blushing, Luke noticed.

“Yes, well, she's got *quite* a personality. Very friendly!” she said, skipping over to the window display pen. Pam took Kiwi out and put her into a slightly bigger pen that Luke could go into as well. Kiwi sat on the floor, her head cocked to the side and looking at him inquisitively. Luke crouched down and reached his hand out to pet her.

“Hope ya washed ya hands, bigguy,” a squeaky, small voice said.

Luke looked up at Pam, but she was already on the other side of the shop, humming along to the radio as she cleaned up after a beagle pup. He looked again at Kiwi. Her bearded mouth started to move.

“Dere's Pur'e'oh right next ta ya, bebs. Use dat. I dohn' need ta get any germs...”

Luke squirted a drop of Purell into his hands and rubbed them together vigorously. Kiwi's nose twitched slightly at the strong smell of antiseptic. He began to pet Kiwi. He felt that her fur had the calming softness only a puppy's could have, before it is cut for the first time and grows back as more coarse adult fur. He somehow remembered the exact feeling from his childhood, when his parents had first brought home a miniature schnauzer on his eighth birthday. It too was probably only about three or four months old. Luke named him Ziggy, after the cartoon character. Ziggy always loved being scratched behind the ears. Luke tried scratching Kiwi behind her large, velvety ears. Her reaction was

almost immediate.

“Oh yeah, dere ya go, bigguy, das da spot! Whuuuuuh...” Kiwi said in her childishly squeaky voice. Her eyelashes fluttered and short tail wiggled with the simple pleasure that all dogs seemed to share.

Luke lost himself there, for a moment, scratching her fur. His thoughts wandered back to his childhood, much of it spent outside in his backyard with Ziggy. After another minute or so of scratching, he wanted to see if this puppy could fetch. Ziggy always loved to fetch. Luke picked up a yellow tennis ball from the floor and bounced it gently across the tile. Kiwi looked at the ball for a second before looking back at Luke.

“Sorry, bebs, fetch isn' really my 'sing...” she said with a slight lisp and a shake of the head.

Now that he thought about it, Luke didn't actually remember Ziggy playing fetch all that often. He was more of a sittin' type of dog. Luke looked around the store to see if there was some kind of rope so he could play tug-of-war with Kiwi. Pam glanced over to make sure the pair was all right. She gave Luke a shy smile, admiring how well he was getting along with Kiwi.

“How 'boutcha get dat girl ta gimme a biscuit, I'm starvin' here,” Kiwi suggested.

Luke looked back over to Pam. She was scraping doggie-doo out of the corner of a cockapoo's cage. What a job. She must really love these dogs to want to do that every day. He felt bad about interrupting her duties, but didn't want to leave Kiwi starving, so he asked Pam if she had anything he could give Kiwi. Surely her pockets were lined with dog treats. She just seemed like that type of person. But Pam just shook her head, giggling.

“Oh, no, is she pretending she's hungry again? Don't let her fool ya, I just gave her a biscuit a half hour ago! She's a sneaky little girl, isn't she? If she keeps eating so much, she's gonna get a biscuit-belly, aren't ya Kiwi?”

Luke chuckled.

"I'm not a fattie," Kiwi pouted. "Dose biscuits jus' never fi'oh me up..."

She started to sigh, but then she perked up, as though an idea had just occurred to her. She trotted over to Luke and placed her tiny paw on his lap. He noticed his crotch was still wet from the morning's tea fiasco. He wondered if Pam had noticed.

" 'Ey bebs, whaddya say we get outta here an' get a snack someplace?"

It was like she read Luke's mind.

"Sounds like a plan," he said. He stood up and said to Pam, "I'll take her."

Pam was surprised by his spontaneity. She opened her eyes wide so that Luke could see that they were a mystifying bluish gray.

"Uh, oh, of course! Oh, how exciting!" she said, clapping her hands together happily. She dropped her little pink hand shovel labeled "Pooper Scooper" on the ground in the process.

"Kiwi's a great puppy," she continued. "I'll miss her lots, but you're gonna *love* her!"

"Heh, ya got dat right, miss, I'm da bes'," Kiwi said with a smirk. She started to lick Luke's hand. "Huh, tastes like Pur'e'oh. Bleh."

"So sweet!" Pam gushed, skipping over to the cash register. She looked so happy she could cry. Maybe she would. Luke wondered if she reacted this way every time she made a sale. Maybe it was actually because she was sad to see yet another fuzzy friend leave her store.

Luke paid the \$1200 for Kiwi on his credit card. Pam even threw in a new dog owner's starter kit, complete with a bag of Purina puppy chow, a plastic bowl, a pink collar, a retractable leash, and a seat belt. Luke didn't even realize that they made those for dogs.

"There you go, you should be all set! You need anything else, *please* come again!" Pam said handing him a Just Pups business card with a big smile on her face. Luke took a quick at the card, which was dog bone shaped (naturally) and had the name, address, and phone number of the store on it, as well as the store slogan. After slipping the card into the back pocket of his pants, Luke and Kiwi

exited the shop with their goodies.

“Buh-bye, crazy lady!” Kiwi sang. She seemed to have an extra bounce in her step as she went out the door, pulling Luke along with the leash.

As Pam waved goodbye to them through the glass door of Just Pups, Luke noticed just how pretty she was. Yet, there she was now, alone in a store full of owner-less puppies. Luke couldn't help but to feel a little sorry for her. He wondered if she had anyone special back home. She had to have at least a dog of her own, right?

“Fee'ohs good ta leave, eh bigguy? Sme'ohs like a stinkin' zoo in dere,” Kiwi quipped.

At the car, Luke tossed the supplies in the trunk of the Passat.

“Les take dis stinkin' leash off now, too, bebs. Now dat we're free, I dohn' 'sink we're gonna need it much anymoh’,” she said, craning her small neck around towards the leash.

“What if you try to run away?” Luke said, a look of doubt on his face.

“Huhh,” Kiwi sighed, rolling her eyes so that Luke could clearly see the whites around the periphery. “Listen bebs, do ya really 'sink ya gotta worry 'bout dat wis me?”

Luke considered it for a moment. Kiwi wasn't exactly your average dog. Something about her was a little bit different. All he could do was shrug, and unclip the leash from her new pink collar. He opened up the back door but was stopped by the small, yet commanding, squeaky voice.

“ 'Ey! Whatcha doin', bebs? I coh' shotgun!” Kiwi exclaimed. What could he do? She called it, fair and square. Luke slammed the back door shut and opened up the passenger side door. He lifted Kiwi up, her small body able to be handled easily by just one of his arms, and plopped her onto the seat. He then proceeded to figure out the tangled mess that was a doggie seatbelt.

“No, no, dat strap goes dere...dat one goes 'round...click dose two...” Kiwi instructed helpfully.

“Is feelin' a li'l loose, bigguy, beh'er tighten it up. Don' wan' me ta go flyin', do ya?”

After finally securing her seatbelt, Luke pulled back onto Route 9, driving more carefully than

usual. Kiwi leaned forward in her seat, which seemed to eat her up, and pressed her tiny paw against the car's radio control panel. Luke wondered what kind of music she liked. After much searching, she finally settled on Fresh 102.7, which was playing a song by Queen that she seemed to know quite well.

“Dis 'sing, coh'ed love, I jus' can' handoh' it,” she squeaked, bobbing her fuzzy head along to in perfect harmony with Freddy Mercury.

Luke enjoyed listening to Kiwi sing. Back on either the third, or maybe it was the fourth date he'd gone on with Jill, they went to a park. She'd brought along a ukelele and sang a song she'd written just for him. He'd been kind of weirded out by that, to be honest. Listening to Kiwi sing, having some difficulty pronouncing her L's and T's like some children, Luke wondered how many songs she knew. She must have learned a bunch while listening to the radio in Just Pups, or wherever she'd been before that. She would have gotten bored sitting in one small confined area for such long time. At that point, Luke thought, what is there to do but take advantage and learn whatever you can.

Luke tried to think of something he could ask Kiwi about her experiences so far in her young life. Here he was, beginning a new relationship with a special little friend, and he just didn't know where to begin. The song Kiwi was singing ended, and she turned down the volume.

“So where we gonna stop ta get some grub?” she asked, patting her belly with her two front paws.

Luke and Kiwi's relationship began at the McDonald's drive-thru, where Luke ordered a Quarter Pounder for himself and the 10-piece Chicken McNuggets for Kiwi. They pulled up to the pick-up window and got their fast-food snack. He placed the red and white box of McNuggets on Kiwi's seat for her. The cashier was a slightly overweight man whose sausage-like fingers seemed to struggle in picking up the coins in the cash register drawer. Luke empathized. He remembered when his parents made him work at Burger King as a teenager. Man, that job sucked. Instead of hanging out with friends

after school on weekdays, he'd have to bike over to BK to work a five hour shift taking orders and deep-frying french fries which he served to ungrateful customers four days a week. He got paid scraps, but it was the only thing he could do to save enough money for a car. His parents sure wouldn't have bought him one.

“ 'Ey!” a tiny voice squeaked. “Dere's only nine nuggets in here! What kinda trick are ya tryin'a poh'?”

The poor cashier looked up in shock, dropping the coins he had spent so much time picking from the drawer. They scattered all over the greasy counter.

“Yeah, I'm talkin' ta ya, lard butt! I want my missin' nugget, and I want it NOW! Dohn' make come in dere!” Kiwi squealed, again pulling on her seatbelt. That flimsy thing was going to be broken by the end of the day, Luke thought.

“Shh, Kiwi, calm yourself,” Luke said, mortified. He looked apologetically at the frightened cashier. “I'm so sorry. Don't worry about that. Keep the change.”

Luke sped out of the drive-thru, more embarrassed than he had been in the Old Navy store.

“That was uncalled for,” Luke said plainly to Kiwi.

“I know, what kinda jerk skimps on da McNuggets?” Kiwi said with a huff.

Kiwi had finished all of her McNuggets before they got back to Luke's apartment. There, Kiwi pitter patted around the apartment mumbling to herself about what changes would have to be made to make it “Puppy Perfect”. She sniffed every corner of the living room, to the point where Luke was afraid she'd complain of the smell and walk out on him. Luckily, that was not the case.

“Sme'ohs like home,” Kiwi squeaked sweetly. As far as Luke knew, the only home she had known had apparently smelt like “a stinkin' zoo”. Before he could ask if he should stock up on air freshener, Kiwi plopped her fuzzy butt on the couch, sinking into the plush cushions. She looked more

than content as she turned the TV on with the remote, and flipped channels to Animal Planet. She sat just like a human would, leaning back with her soft white belly out and legs splayed out to her side. Luke took a spot on the couch next to her. A commercial for a local community college was playing.

“Jeez Louise, dey play moh' commerci'ohs den da actu'oh shows! Wha's dis for anyway? Everybody knows schoo'oh's for dummies!” Kiwi said with a snort.

“You mean you never went to school, Kiwi?” Luke laughed.

Kiwi froze up, looking at Luke from the corner of her eyes. The whites were showing again.

“Uh, well, ya see, uhh...I, uh, went ta schoo'oh for a li'l while... but it didn' work out da way dey soh't it would.”

“You failed out of puppy school?” Luke asked, wondering how tough the curriculum could have been.

Kiwi put her paws to her face to cover her eyes in shame.

“Les not go dere, bigguy. Dose were tough times for me,” she whispered. Then she put her paws down and Luke saw a glint in her eyes. She pressed her paw onto the remote and muted the TV.

“ 'Nough 'bout me, doe, how 'boutcha te'oh me what your deal is, bebs?”

“My deal? What do you mean by that?”

“Yeah, ya know. Wha's your deal? Ya got a job? Hobbies?” She was all ears now, quite literally. Her ears were pointed straight up, ready to catch every word that left Luke's mouth. He told her how he worked on websites for various companies, which allowed him to work from home a lot. Because of that, he had more time for day-trips

“Oh, yeah, good stuff! I like trips! Long as is not too brr outside...” Kiwi said. Then she glanced around his apartment. “But...how 'bout...ya got any other puppies, 'sides me?”

Kiwi had a worried look on her face, and her eyes got very sad. Luke patted her on the head.

“No! Of course not! I haven't had a puppy since I was a kid,” he said. He wondered for a brief

moment if he would come across as a dog person to people he met. He wasn't sure what “dog people” looked like, but he didn't think his family fit that stereotype. He had only one dog his whole life, until Kiwi, that is.

“You're the only puppy in my life,” he said with a chuckle. He thought that everyone should have at least one dog in their life. It seemed like the natural way to grow up.

“Oh. Well das good,” Kiwi said, relaxing her ears. Now she was staring at the TV, which was still muted. A commercial for Kay Jewelers was playing, silently showing fabulous diamond rings that sparkled across the screen.

They sat watching for a few seconds, before Luke added, “I do have a girlfriend, though.” Luke could see Kiwi tense up. She turned back towards him, and her mouth started to quiver as she spoke.

“A...girlfriend? Da heck ya need one of dose for?”

Luke shrugged.

“I don't know. I guess I don't really *need* one...they're just kind of nice to have, I guess.”

Kiwi huffed, unmuting the TV just as the commercial break finally ended.

That afternoon, Animal Planet was showing an in-depth documentary about the American Red Squirrel. Upon seeing the bushy-tailed creatures, Kiwi hopped off the couch and ran over to the TV. She pressed her two front paws against the flat screen, her tail wiggling wildly. Luke rolled his eyes and went into the kitchen. He brought the plastic dog bowl with him so that he could fill it with water for Kiwi. He was sure squirrel-watching would make her thirsty.

In the kitchen, Luke glanced at his phone. His mother had sent him a message saying she'd just gotten a Facebook friend request from Jill that morning and they had been messaging each other all day. His mother had never even met Jill in real life. The only way she'd know who she was would have

been from the two or three times he might have mentioned he was seeing her. It sure sounded like they were hitting it off, and Luke wasn't going to tell his mother *not* to talk with Jill, no matter how strange the circumstances. Without replying to the text message either way, he turned the cold water on in the sink and watched it splash into the bowl. He considered skipping work the next day. It was going to be a slow week anyway, so maybe it would be better spent bonding with his new friend. Help her adjust to her new life. She seemed a bit sassy and over-energized sometimes, but Luke figured it was just a classic case of “puppy-zoomies”, and she'd surely calm down with time. Maybe tomorrow they could take a trip down to the shore. Luke could pack a nice picnic lunch and they could spend the whole day sunbathing and splashing in the water, enjoying the tail end of the beach season. He'd have to clear it with Kiwi, first, of course.

She wasn't too keen on the idea when he brought it up.

“Da beach? Das no place for a puppy,” she said, turning her attention away from the TV. It was on a commercial break again. “ 'Sides, I dohn' even have a swimsuit,” she said, blinking her lashes.

The next thing that Luke knew, he was back in his Passat, driving all over Bergen County in search of a store that sold bathing suits for miniature schnauzers. Kiwi was riding shotgun. At long last, they found a Petco over in the neighboring county, Passaic. In there, Kiwi was quickly able to locate a large display of dog clothes for every occasion. As she searched for what would suit her, Luke took a moment to look around. Pet lovers grazed through the aisles. Some of them, like Luke, had their dogs with them. Luke hadn't been to a pet supply store in years, not since Ziggy... looking back the display stand, Kiwi was pulling down clothes and making a pile of what she wanted. It looked like she had sweaters, rain jackets, snow suits, pajamas, dresses, and, of course, a purple bikini. Luke didn't remember there being so many clothing options for dogs when he was a kid.

“You know, Kiwi, we're not buying *all* of those outfits,” he said.

“ ‘Course not,” she squeaked. “I gotta try 'em on first. Where are da changin' rooms for girl puppies?”

Luke asked that question to a sales associate. The man looked at him as if he were joking.

“That guy said you'll just have to eyeball it,” Luke said to Kiwi, his face a little red from embarrassment. Kiwi sighed and picked up the purple bikini and a couple of sweaters.

“Oh'right, but if dis 'kini makes me look like a fattie, is 'oh your fault.”

On the way to the checkout line, Luke spotted a huge bin full of stuffed dog toys. There were all kinds of cute and colorful creatures, many of which squeaked. Kiwi hopped up against the bin and begged to see what was in there. Luke hoisted her up and let her dig through the mountain of toys. At one point, he lost track of her as she buried herself beneath the fuzzy creatures. Just when he started to panic, Kiwi's little gray head popped out of the pile, sending a green elephant flying and bouncing across the floor. Her eyes were full of excitement, as Luke saw that she found what she was looking for: a stuffed blue hedgehog. The little guy was clenched tightly, yet affectionately, in Kiwi's mouth.

“Durss hurrgrgy durg hurdgrahh,” Kiwi mumbled through a mouthful of hedgehog butt.

“Excuse me?”

Kiwi spit out the blue hedgehog into their shopping cart, right on top of her new wardrobe.

“Das Harry da Hedgehog!” she exclaimed. Well, if it had a name already, Luke figured he had to get it. He picked Kiwi up out of the toy bin and placed her on the ground, when suddenly a voice called out to him.

“Yoo-hoo! Luke! Over here!”

Luke turned towards the checkout line, where he saw a woman carrying a basket full of cat toys. It was the bleached-blond hair he recognized first, then the orange tinted skin. The woman was beaming at him with a mouth full of pearly whites that just couldn't be natural.

“Hello, Jenna. How are you?” Luke asked, walking regretfully over to her. Jenna was a close friend of Jill's, a nosey woman whom he had met when she'd “coincidentally” run into them while they were at the bar on a date. Twice.

“Oh, I'm doing just peachy. Hey, how was brunch today? Jill told me she had a great time, and the crepes sounded absolutely *delicious*,” Jenna said. Barely taking a breath in between words, she continued, “She said you got a nice new pair of pants, but.... looks like you've already spilled something on them! Whoops!”

Luke looked down and realized he never changed out of his crotch stained pants after getting home. They had dried off a bit by now, so he didn't feel it, but the dark spot was still pretty visible...Wait a second, had Jill really told Jenna about his *pants* of all things? Christ.

Jenna giggled.

“Don't worry about it sweetie, it happens to everyone! Why, just the other day, Jill tagged me in a photo on Facebook from when we were at the town pool. It was up for nearly two hours before I noticed a very unflattering tan line. We had to take that disaster down, ASAP! Ha! Can you imagine?”

“Can't even begin to,” Luke said quietly.

Jenna peered into Luke's cart.

“Huh, Jill never mentioned you having a dog,” she commented. Then she threw her hands up, “Ah, I can't believe it's been three whole months already! It's seems like not too long ago that we just met!”

It really wasn't too long ago, Luke thought. And what was the big deal with three months, anyway? It wasn't like he and Jill were living together or anything. They were just dating.

After he was finally able to pry himself away from Jenna, Luke wanted to find Kiwi and get back home. She must have wandered off somewhere in between Jenna talking about brunch and her tan

lines. In all honesty, Luke almost wished he had done the same. It didn't take long to find Kiwi. She was hunched over guiltily near the back of the store by the aquariums.

“Kiwi, I've been looking all over for you. What are you-” Luke started, before he realized why she was looking so guilty. Not two yards away from her was a lake of yellow liquid on the tile floor. Right in front of the guppies.

Out of instinct, Luke yelled at Kiwi, making her shrink back even more. He immediately felt bad about it. How could he yell at something so small and defenseless?

Kiwi batted her eyelashes at him and pointed her long ears back.

Luke sighed and shook his head. What a pitiful sight. Not wanting to make any more of a scene, he scooped Kiwi up, placed her in the shopping cart, and got the heck out of there. One of the Petco employees would find the spill sooner or later and would take care of it.

From the cart, Kiwi looked up at Luke sadly.

“Sorry 'bout dat, bigguy. One of da fishies scared me, an' I let out a piddle.”

Luke couldn't stay mad at her. He apologized for yelling. Kiwi accepted his apology. Then she asked if she could fill a bucket from the doggie treat buffet.

The pair spent the rest of the day at home, watching Animal Planet documentaries on American red squirrels, bumblebees, sharks, and a show about a psychic who could apparently talk to horses. Luke munched on popcorn and Kiwi gorged herself on the various treats she had picked out at Petco. When evening rolled around, she let out a big yawn, a clue that it was time for bed. She claimed that she wasn't tired, but Luke convinced her that if they stayed up too late, they wouldn't get to go down the shore, and Kiwi wouldn't get to wear her purple bikini. Begrudgingly, she agreed, but before Luke could even lay down newspapers as a bed in the kitchen, Kiwi, with Harry the Hedgehog in her mouth, scampered across the living room carpet and into the bedroom. Luke followed after her, first turning

down the lights in the living room. When he got into the bedroom, he saw that Kiwi had already made herself comfortable on his queen-sized bed, curled up like a bagel on one of the pillows, Harry the Hedgehog still firmly held in her mouth. She looked up at Luke as if he were going to scold her. Instead he gave an exasperated sigh. He wasn't going to kick Harry out of the bed just because he was a hedgehog, stuffed or otherwise. He did make Kiwi brush her teeth before going to sleep first, though. Kiwi hopped from the bed and walked into the bathroom. In the bathroom, Luke picked her up and sat her on the porcelain counter, so that he could help her brush those hard-to-reach places in her mouth with one of the extra toothbrushes he kept in the cabinet for guests. There was one that was reserved for Jill that always made him uncomfortable to look at, sitting sadly in the corner of the cabinet.

Back in the bedroom, Luke stripped down and put on a pair of sweatpants. He helped Kiwi into one of her new pairs of polka-dot pajamas. He slid under the covers, making himself comfortable. Just as he realized that he forgot to shave, Kiwi curled up right by his feet with Harry the Hedgehog as her pillow. Luke rubbed his chin. He could survive without shaving tonight, he was only going to the beach tomorrow. Before turning off the lamp on his bedside table, Luke smiled at his new pal. She looked so comfortable. She looked like she was home.

The next morning, Luke called in sick to work. Before he was even off the phone with the secretary at his office, he was already packing up a beach bag. He filled it with everything he thought he and Kiwi would need for a day at the beach: sunscreen, towels, a beach blanket, a picnic basket (filled with ham and cheese sandwiches and biscuits, as per Kiwi's request), bathing suits, a Grisham novel for him, Harry the Hedgehog for her, and a change of clothes for both of them. He was also able to find a pair of sunglasses that Jill had left on his kitchen counter at some point. Sometime he thought she left things at his place just to have an excuse to come back. Just for fun, he put the sunglasses on Kiwi. Aside from pushing up against her eyelashes a bit, they fit pretty well, for a puppy anyway.

The ride to the shore that usually took about an hour felt much shorter to Luke. It also probably helped that they didn't have to deal with the weekend shore traffic. Most people were at work that Monday morning, plugging data into spreadsheets while he and Kiwi were singing along to pop music the whole way down the parkway. Kiwi changed into her bikini in the parking lot at the beach. She was very self-conscious about how she looked in it, as most girls are when it came to bathing suits. She refused to be seen on the beach until Luke convinced her that she looked beyond adorable, in between fits of giggles.

When Luke approached the Lifeguard shack, where they sold the beach badges, he noted the pricing of the different badges. The Adult Day Pass cost ten dollars, but the Children's Day Pass cost only five. That seemed odd to Luke, considering children, for the most part, probably got a lot more out of their shore experience than most adults would. He asked the lifeguard at the counter for one of each pass.

“Sure, that'll be fifteen dollars,” the tanned woman said with a smile.

“Whoa, das a lotta pennies...” Kiwi mumbled from the ground.

The tan girl grabbed two plastic badges and handed them to Luke in exchange for the money.

“Make sure you pin them onto your swimsuits securely so you don't lose them in the water,” she said.

“Thanks for the tip,” he said as he crouched down and pinned one of the badges carefully onto Kiwi's bikini. She flinched a little bit when she saw the point of the pin. When Luke stood up, he noticed the lifeguard was looking at him kind of funny. Maybe he was already getting a sun burn. He thanked her again and headed onto the beach with Kiwi to find a nice spot to lay their blanket and set up camp.

“Oh! Oh! Ouch! Hot!” she squeaked as they plodded through the white sand. “Ooh! My putties! Da sand *buuuurns!*”

Luke scooped Kiwi up into his left arm and carried her the rest of the way, not wanting her to burn her paws. He scolded himself for not thinking to buy her a pair of water shoes or sandals while he was at Petco. Now, between holding her, the beach bag, and the picnic basket, Luke had his arms full. He was relieved when they were finally able to lay out the big beach blanket and relax.

“Uh, hey bebs, dohn' forget da 'screen!” Kiwi reminded him just as he sat down. “Wis'out dat, I'll be a hot dog in no time!”

Luke pulled out the blue bottle of sunscreen, squirted out a blob onto his hand and started rubbing it onto Kiwi. He made sure to rub it in well, even through her fur. As he did so, he wondered what it would be like to basically wear a fur coat all year round, especially on hot days like this. Kiwi didn't seem to mind; in fact she seemed to be enjoying this impromptu back rub.

After Luke was done rubbing lotion on Kiwi and himself, he asked her if she'd like to go for a swim.

“Heck no! I'm not goin' in dere!” she squealed, flipping her sunglasses off of her face and onto the blanket.

“Well why not? What did I get you that bikini for, then?” Luke asked. He remembered whenever his family would bring Ziggy to the beach, he loved to splash around in the water with them. And he didn't even have a swimsuit!

“Not ta swim in, das for sure,” she said, matter-of-factly. “Girls jus' wear 'kinis ta look good, dere not 'sposed ta be practicoh!”

Luke considered this. Kiwi had a point, he thought, as he looked at the many beautiful women all around him wearing brightly colored bikinis.

“Buuuut, if ya really wanna go for a swim, I *might* consider it if I had a life jacket...” she mumbled, pawing gently at the blanket. Luke looked around again, this time not noticing the bikini clad women (as much) but looking to see if there was an extra life jacket laying around. He saw one

little kid wearing a pair of those inflatable orange swimming wings, but he didn't think that kind of thing was meant for a puppy. He wished he had checked for a life jacket at Petco. Luke seriously considered driving up to Passaic for a moment before turning to consult with Kiwi.

“Where'd you get that?” he asked the puppy, who was suddenly holding a small green life jacket in her mouth. It looked to be just her size. But how?

Kiwi dropped it on the blanket and said, “Oh, uh... a nicey li'l girl lemme borrow it. Yeah, das it! No charge.”

“Really, Kiwi? Or did you steal it?” Luke asked, not quite believing that anyone would be so nice as to give up such a great jacket. Kiwi's ears perked up and she glanced quickly around.

“W-why'd ya say dat? Was someone lookin' for it!?”

Kiwi batted her eyelashes nervously.

Luke laughed and helped her put it on, securing every strap of the vest.

“There ya go, pal, all set! Race you down to the water!” Luke exclaimed, hopping up from the blanket and sprinting down the sandy slope to the ocean. He kicked up sand behind him.

When Luke reached the water, and leaped high into the air and cannon balled into the waves. He made a big splash, and was instantly refreshed by the coolness of the water. When he broke through the surface again, he looked back to see if Kiwi was close to him. She was still on her way down the sandy slope. Children and adults were staring at her with mild amusement on their faces. She did look a little awkward, her life vest restricting her movement to a waddle. Luke cheered her on until she reached the edge of the water, where she came to a stop. Kiwi's eyes were locked on the dark blue-green waves. She didn't move.

“C'mon, the water's beautiful! Just step in slowly,”he said. “It'll be all right. Promise!”

Kiwi looked up at Luke, and he sensed her trust in those dark eyes. Timidly, she tiptoed closer to the water's edge, staring very closely at rhythmic washing of the tide.

Kiwi began to make her move.

“One puttie... den da other...den da back...Hey! Hey, I did it! I'm in!” Kiwi squealed in excitement once she was finally standing in the water. She pranced around triumphantly, and Luke came up and joined her, while onlookers shook their heads and went back to what they were doing.

After splashing around close to shore for a few minutes, without ever going much deeper, the pair decided that it might be best to have their lunch and then take a little nap while they enjoyed the sun, which wasn't nearly as hot and oppressive as Luke was expecting. It was turning out to be the perfect day. Back at camp with a full belly, Kiwi fell asleep wearing her green life jacket, flipped over onto her back like a turtle. Her head rested on Harry the Hedgehog, fulfilling his unofficial job as her pillow. Luke stretched across the blanket and dreamed he was ordering crepes from McDonald's. What a world that would be.

He was woken from that peaceful nap by someone kissing his cheek. Or rather, licking.

“Hey, uh, bebs, I gotta te'oh ya somesin'...”

Luke opened his eyes and saw Kiwi's fuzzy face, tan grains of sand now mixed into her light gray beard, which was now pressed right up against his. She had to pee. Luke told her to go down by the water and take care of business, so as not to upset any other beach goers. Kiwi seemed skeptical of that idea at first, until Luke informed that the ocean was the world's largest toilet.

“Heh. Das a good one, bigguy! I'll 'member dat! Heh heh,” Kiwi said before waddling on down the sandy slope.

Just then, Luke's phone started ringing. It was Jill. Before answering, he noticed that there were already three other missed calls from her. Uh oh.

“Yeah?”

“Luke? Is everything all right?” Jill said, sounding worried, as she always did when he managed

to go twenty-four hours without updating her on every aspect of his life.

“Sure.”

“Really? Because I stopped by your office this morning to bring you some breakfast but the secretary said you weren't in. She said you called in sick?”

“Oh, uh, well yeah, I am sick, just a li'l bit. Just a stomach bug, no big deal,” Luke said, laying back down on the blanket and shading his eyes from the sinking sun with his free hand. He wondered if she would alert his mother of his sudden “sickness” via Facebook message. Or maybe they'd already escalated their relationship to phone calls by then.

“Oh, you poor thing! Do you want me to come over? I can make you feel better...I'll bring homemade pea soup! How's that sound?”

The pea soup was a classic move right out of his mother's playbook when Luke was sick as a child.

“Eh, honestly I think I just need some rest,” he said, patting his belly, which looked like it was getting some late-summer color.

“Are you sure? I could be over there in no time at all!”

“I know,” he said. Just like his mother, Jill had a strange sense of devotion to attending to his every need. Maybe he should be taking better advantage of that. Before he could think of how, a child yelled.

“Luke? What was that? I thought I just heard a scream.”

“Oh, no, that was just the TV. I'm watchin' old horror movies to pass the time,” he said.

“Oh, Luke, you know how I hate those--”

“HAAAAAAAYULP!” A piercing yell rang out in the air. At once Luke sat up, and his eyes went straight to the water. To his horror, he saw Kiwi flailing in a part of the water that was easily over her head. Without hesitation, Luke jumped off the blanket, threw down his phone, and sprinted down

the sandy slope. On the way down he noticed that the yelling he'd heard before was coming from a little kid who had seen Kiwi's peril before him and didn't know what else to do. Luke passed right by the kid and dove into the water headlong, towards where Kiwi was bobbing helplessly in her life jacket, getting tossed around by the waves.

“HAAAY--” she squeaked out again, this time being interrupted by the salt water splashing into her mouth. Luke paddled with all of his energy to get to her. Where were the life guards? Did they not see Kiwi get swept into the ocean? Was she simply too small to see? Didn't they know she couldn't swim? Luke wanted to blame them, but he knew this was his own fault. He should have been paying more attention to her. Instead, he was distracted from his responsibilities by Jill and her dumb soup.

Luke finally reached Kiwi, but the pleas for help had stopped. He scooped up her tiny body and turned back to face the shore. He began paddling as hard as he could with his free arm to get back. As small as she was, the waves weren't making their return easy. Water was getting into his mouth now, the saltiness of it burning his tongue and nostrils. The ocean had been so calm before. When did the waves get so rough? At last, just when he thought his arm would give out, Luke made it to shore. He clawed into the sand and dragged himself and Kiwi onto dry land. He was heaving and spitting out water and bits of sand and shells. Kiwi wasn't moving at all.

Luke looked up towards the beach with desperation. He was disappointed to realize the reason that the life guards weren't there to help him. It must have been past five o'clock, and they had already gone home for the day. The beach was nearly empty, except for a few stragglers trying to squeeze the last bit of fun out of their beach day. The child who had yelled before was gone now. Luke looked down at Kiwi's still body, not sure what he even could do at this point.

In a desperate act, Luke unclipped the green life vest and tossed it aside. He looked down at his pal's now soaked beard. He'd have to try CPR. He pressed his lips down on Kiwi's mouth and blew into it for a few seconds. He lifted his head and placed both hands over her belly. He began to push. He

didn't want to push so hard, as he was afraid he'd break her ribs. But he soon realized he'd have to exert more pressure to have any chance of saving her. Better to have a puppy with broken ribs than a dead one, he thought grimly. He didn't think he could deal with another dead dog, so after a few more pumps, Luke attempted to breathe life into her once again. Still nothing. He was giving it all he had, but it just wouldn't work. He felt a salty sting around his eyes and wasn't sure if it was sunburn, the saltwater, his tears, or some mixture of all three. He pumped again. He breathed again. He pumped again.

A few more cycles of this, and Luke was ready to lose hope completely. If Luke couldn't save Kiwi, than no one could.

After a pump that sounded like it cracked something, a splash of water flew out of Kiwi's mouth. With hope restored, Luke pumped again, praying that he didn't break anything. After two pumps, Kiwi let out a belch.

"Uhhhh...'Scuse me," she whispered. Her lashes fluttered open. Luke let out an exasperated sigh of relief.

"Oh! Thank God, thank God, thank God!" He tried to exclaim. Luke was so out of breath that his voice was barely a squeak. Luke picked up his puppy and held her tight.

"Whoahh...Ow, take it easy dere, bebs," Kiwi groaned.

After that ordeal, Luke and Kiwi gathered up their things and headed back to the car. Luke was very gentle when buckling her into her seat. Kiwi coughed a little bit as he clicked it in place.

"Boy, sure was lucky I had my life vest on, huh, bigguy?" Kiwi remarked as Luke slid into his own seat. "Who knows, I mighta sunk right down ta da bottom and been eaten by da crabbies!"

Luke didn't say anything. His hands were still trembling, so he waited a minute before starting the car. He placed his hand at his side in an attempt to relax. A small wet paw soon rested on top of his

right hand.

He looked over at Kiwi, whose eyes told a story all on their own. She sniffled a little bit. Now the salty sting in his eyes came back, but this time Luke knew they were tears. Luke really wasn't much of a crier. Before today, the last time he could remember actually crying was when his parents sat him in the living room one afternoon to tell him that they had to put Ziggy down. They had done it while he was at school, to protect him from a painful memory. Luke hadn't even known Ziggy was sick. Even as a twelve-year old, he was angry that they never let him say goodbye to one of his best friends, a friend who had only been in his life for a few short years, but had a huge impact on him nonetheless. He yelled at his parents through a veil of hot tears before closing himself off in his room. Luke refused to leave for anything except to use the bathroom, even going so far as to skip the rest of that week of school. His mother had to bring food to his room wordlessly, not wanting him to starve himself but also not knowing if there was anything she could say that would make things easier on her son. Luke eventually started talking to his parents again, but he never quite forgave them. He even turned down their offer to take him to the pet store to pick out a new puppy. Luke never thought he'd find any dog worthy of replacing his pal.

Looking at Kiwi, now, knowing how close he'd come to losing her, he let the tears flow, and felt an exhausted sense of relief wash over him. Kiwi licked at his hand, offering the only comfort she knew.

Luke woke up one day to a call from Jill. Normally he would have ignored it, but he was so groggy that he thought the caller ID said Tim, the old man from the Petco over in Passaic County with whom Luke had been in contact with. Tim would be getting a new shipment of Beef and Kraut Rings, imported from Munich, Germany, and he said Luke would be the first customer he would let know when it arrived. He and Kiwi had been waiting anxiously for the protein-filled snack of choice of

miniature schnauzers around the world.

“Luke? Are you just waking up now?” Jill's unmistakable voice asked over the phone.

“No, I was jus' gettin' ready ta go, uh, pick up some groceries,” Luke groaned as he sat up in bed. This movement caused Kiwi, who was nestled on his legs in her purple polka-dotted pajamas with Harry the Hedgehog in her mouth, to wake up. She blinked sleepily a few times and raised her head. Her long ears pointed up to the ceiling in the position of alert. She was clearly annoyed that they were being bothered so early on a Saturday. It was hard to take her grumpiness too seriously, though, as the messy state her beard was in made her look like a looney. It was like her own version of having bed-head. Luke liked to call this unique look “Sleepy Beard”.

“It's Jill,” he mouthed. Kiwi seemed to frown and bit down on Harry the Hedgehog.

“Luke, did you hear what I just said?” Jill commanded. He didn't.

“Nah, sorry bebs, I was distracted for a sec. Run it by me again,” Luke said, rubbing his chin, where he now had a short beard. He could hear Jill sigh over the phone.

“It seems like you're always distracted lately. I haven't seen you in weeks. You've been really flaky.” Jill took a long pause. Luke thought he heard her sniffle. Then he realized it must have been Kiwi, so he grabbed a tissue from his night table and gave it to her. She wiped her shiny black nose on it.

“ 'Sanks, bigguy, is gettin' a li'l chilly out I 'sink. Maybe I jus' need warmer bajammies.”

“We can go ta da store today and pick some up if ya want,” Luke said.

“Who are you talking to?” Jill demanded to know. She paused again, and then asked quietly. “Is it another woman? Is that why you haven't wanted to spend time with me...”

“There's no other woman, I was jus' talkin' ta myself, never mind,” he said curtly.

“Are you on drugs or something? Your voice sounds strange. Do you need help, Luke?” Jill asked, sounding more and more concerned as the conversation went on.

“Never mind, I said!” he squealed, a crackle in his voice. “Crazy lady...”

“I’m not crazy, Luke! I just care about you. I worry about you,” she said. Luke was pretty sure she was starting to cry. “Your mother says she’s worried too.”

Luke hadn’t called his mother in weeks. He had been meaning to have dinner with her in her apartment over in Passaic, but had been so busy with doing his work from home and going on day trips with Kiwi whenever he had a chance. He sent her pictures of the various activities they’d been up to. His mother didn’t seem too concerned to him. She seemed glad enough he was enjoying himself.

“Why won’t you talk to me, Luke? Jenna said you were acting weird when she saw you a few weeks ago. She said you got a dog? I never had you pegged as a dog person.”

Kiwi started to make a low growling sound. She narrowed her eyes and her pupils locked in on Luke’s phone, the whites of her eyes flaring out around them. She was giving the phone her patented “Shark Eye”.

“Yeah, well,” Luke grumbled.

“Well, anyways, I was hoping we could meet up for dinner tonight. I could meet your new pal and-”

Luke hung up on her without saying goodbye, and put his phone back on the night table.

“What a crazy lady,” Kiwi said, with a slight growl still audible in her voice. She tossed Harry the Hedgehog off the bed, as she did every morning. It was amazing how much abuse that little guy could take. The plush doll bounced and rolled until it hit the closed curtains on the far side of the bedroom.

Luke’s phone began ringing. Was it Tim? No, just Jill again. He turned his phone to silent mode.

“So what are we gonna do today? ‘Sides get me some new bajammies, I mean,” Kiwi said, blinking thoughtfully. Luke suggested they go apple-picking in the orchard. His family used to go all the time when he was younger, and when they got home they’d make a big batch of applesauce

together. He and Kiwi got out of bed to further discuss the day's plans over some breakfast sausages.

After picking up a couple of new pairs of warm pajamas for Kiwi (one of them spotted with a candy corn pattern, just in time for Halloween!), Luke took his pal to Mac's Orchard. It was the perfect time of year to pick some deliciously crisp apples from the reddening trees. There was a slight chill in the air, but the pair had come prepared: Luke wore a fleece quarter-zip and Kiwi wore her favorite pink sweater. Together they spent hours scouring the rows and rows of apple trees, seeking out the very best specimens of each type of apple, from Cortlands to Red Delicious.

“'Ey bigguy, 'sink ya could gimme a lift up ta dere?” Kiwi squeaked, nodding her head up to a high branch that was way out of her reach. “Got my eyes on a McIntosh wis my name on it.”

“No problem, bebs,” Luke replied, scooping her up.

“Carefoh' dere, my ribs sti'oh hurt a li'l bit,” Kiwi said. Luke didn't need to be reminded. Seeing all of those poor sick dogs at the veterinary clinic after their day at the beach was hard for him to handle. In the waiting room, he saw a mother and a young girl with reddened eyes sniffing as she flipped through a copy of *Dog World*. Luke had wondered if they had just said goodbye to a four-legged family member that afternoon. After that, Luke remembered how relieved he was when he found out that Kiwi's ribs weren't broken. They were however, bruised and it would take a few weeks for the pain to subside. Until then, Luke was to be very gentle with her.

He lifted her carefully, making sure not to press too hard on the bruised parts of her ribs, so that she could snatch the pristine fruit from the tree in her mouth. When he placed her back on the ground, she sunk her teeth into the apple, which was bigger than her head, letting the tart juices soak into her beard. She crunched on her prize happily while her tail wagged.

“Holy moley, das good stuff! 'Ey, ya gotta try dis!” Kiwi said, picking up the apple and holding it up to Luke. He took the apple from her mouth and took a bite gratefully. Wow, he thought, dat was

good stuff!

“You weren' lyin', das da bes' darn appoh' I ever had! 'Sanks for sharin' wis me!” he said. A nearby middle-aged couple looked at Luke with disgust. He wiped the juices of the apple from his beard self-consciously while Kiwi trotted off to find the next perfect apple.

Later that afternoon, when Luke and Kiwi got home, they got the pots and knives and ladles out and got to work. While they made their applesauce, Luke and Kiwi sang along with the radio. Luke drank wine and Kiwi munched gratefully on extra apple slices he cut for her. Together, they made a beautiful mess of the kitchen. The happy scene was interrupted around 6:30 by a loud knock on the door.

“Da heck could dat be?” Kiwi asked. She was perched on the kitchen counter, checking to see if the sauce needed more cinnamon. Now she was looking towards the door, her large ears perked up straight. Luke picked a bit of apple from her beard and shrugged. He took a sip of his wine before placing his glass on the kitchen table and heading for the door.

After unlatching the lock, Luke swung the door open to a face that looked like it hadn't gotten a good night's sleep in weeks. The eyes seemed sunken in, dark bags forming not far below what were once radiant blue eyes. Now they just looked tired and full of worry. The lips were pursed tight and quivering. The woman's red hair was pulled back in a sloppy pony tail that a pink bow attempted to draw attention from. Frizzy, wild curls crowned her head without much symmetry or restraint. Luke would have barely recognized the woman who had always made it such an important point to look her best for him. That is, if it weren't for the familiar scent of her specialty dish: angel hair pasta with homemade tomato sauce and meatballs.

“Hi, Luke,” Jill said, her voice small and unsure. She was holding a bowl full of delicious smelling pasta that Luke couldn't take his eyes off of. It was his favorite dish, and she knew it.

“I couldn't get a hold of you to make plans, so I thought I'd just try to drop by to see if you wanted to eat. I hope you don't mind,” she said, holding bowl out to him so that he couldn't resist the savory scent of a home-cooked meal. Luke took the bowl.

“Whoa, thanks.”

Luke took a big whiff of the pasta. He could smell the perfect balance of garlic and tomatoes. It reminded him of when he and Jill first started dating, and she'd invite him over to her apartment to cook for him. From the beginning, she knew that the best way into a man's heart was through his stomach, and she took every opportunity she could get to work her way through that mysterious passage.

“I thought if you weren't too busy, we could sit and enjoy a nice meal. Maybe talk for a bit,” Jill suggested warily. “I also brought you a gift.”

Finally able to pry his attention from the pasta bowl, Luke took another look at Jill. She held a large rectangular object under her arm, wrapped in blue paper. She really wasn't looking too hot, he thought. She looked like the last few weeks had added several years to her life. Could that have been his fault? He didn't think it was possible. So he didn't talk to her for a little while... was that really so big of a deal? Did she not have anything better to do than stress out over what he was doing every single day? That seemed pretty unhealthy to Luke. Still, Jill was there now, and she had brought pasta. The least he could do was let her eat it with him. Jill smiled as he invited her in. Luke saw that her teeth were just as white and straight as always. Her eyes seemed to brighten up, too. Even in her imperfect state, there were some qualities about Jill's beauty that just couldn't be ignored for long. He began to remember what attracted him to her in the first place.

“ 'Ey bigguy, whas da hoh'd up? Who's dat at da door?’” Kiwi's voice yelped from the kitchen. Jill looked surprised to hear her.

“Was...was that your dog?” she asked, sounding a little nervous.

Luke nodded, saying, “Yep. That's my new puppy. Come on in, I'll introduce you two.”

After putting her gift down on the couch, Jill followed Luke through the living room into the kitchen, stepping carefully over a minefield of half-chewed rawhide treats and stuffed toys scattered along the way. She came inches from rolling her ankle on a stuffed alligator whom Kiwi lovingly named “Gator”. They walked into the kitchen to see Kiwi perched on the counter next to the pot of applesauce.

“Kiwi, I'd like ya to meet my...girlfriend....Jill. Jill, this is my puppy, Kiwi,” Luke said, pausing as he said the word “girlfriend”. It sure seemed to make Jill happy he called her that, but could you really call someone your girlfriend if you've deliberately been avoiding them for weeks?

“Oh, hi there Kiwi! So nice to meet you! That's a great sweater,” Jill giggled. Then she looked back at Luke, raising an eyebrow. “I see you two have matching beards now, too! Ha!”

Luke didn't know what was so funny about that. He just hadn't really felt the need to shave over the last few weeks. He wasn't trying to impress anyone.

“Kiwi was just helpin' me cook some applesauce,” Luke said, changing the subject. “We went to the orchard today.”

“Oh! That is just too *cute!*” Jill exclaimed. Then she walked over to the counter and picked up the wooden spoon. Kiwi sat, annoyed, next to the pot of applesauce she and Luke had worked all afternoon on.

“It sure looks good! Mind if I taste test?” Jill asked innocently.

“ 'Ey, paws off my sauce, lady,” Kiwi grumbled. Her ears were standing straight up. Luke shrugged.

Jill looked at Kiwi and giggled when she saw her ears. “Gee, her ears sure are big! Don't think I've seen anything like *those* before! Hehehe.”

Offended, Kiwi folded her ears back down besides her. She cast a crestfallen look over at Luke

and blinked her eyelashes.

“Dere not *dat* big, are dey?”

Luke tried to laugh it off.

Jill took a small taste of the applesauce with her spoon. “Mmm! That's pretty yummy.”

She smacked her lips, enjoying the treat.

“I'm kind of surprised you got a dog,” Jill said, helping herself to another spoonful of applesauce. Kiwi gave the ol' “Shark Eye” to Jill, but didn't move. “Did you know that Jenna just got another cat last week? It was a rescue. Now she has six! Six cats, can you believe that? I think that maybe three or four would be plenty for me, don't you?”

Zero cats is plenty for me, Luke thought, sipping from his glass. He looked over at Kiwi, who seemed uncomfortable with the current conversation. He figured they probably felt very similarly as far as cats went.

“Oh, huh,” Jill said. She grimaced as she walked over to the sink and spat. “That bit of applesauce was crunchy. It tasted kind of like dog food. I suppose Kiwi had something to do with that.” Jill winked at Kiwi and giggled.

“Whas wrong wis dog food? Dose kibbohs are real good for ya,” Kiwi mumbled, defending the secret ingredient she had put in earlier.

Luke simply shrugged, not having any issue with dog food himself. It was actually a nice alternative when corn chips and pretzels got boring.

Once he set the places at the kitchen table, Luke was more than ready to dig in to a big plate full of pasta and the other bottle of Merlot that he'd opened for the occasion. But first, he made sure to show his manners. He pulled out the chair opposite of him so that his companion could be seated. When Jill sat down instead, however, he couldn't help but blurt out, “ 'Scuse me, that's Kiwi's...”

Kiwi pranced around Jill impatiently, concerned that she now wouldn't be able to reach the dinner table. Jill giggled, not taking them seriously.

“Oh, stop. Have a seat and eat some pasta. I know it's your favorite.”

Luke paused, looking down at Kiwi. He shrugged at her.

“Sorry, bebs, I'll go getcha another seat,” Luke said, disappearing momentarily into the living room to grab a folding chair he kept behind the couch. He unfolded it next to the table, unaware of Jill's shocked expression, and patted the seat so that Kiwi knew to hop up. She did so, but was not very happy about it. Still, she sat obediently, staring at her empty plate, and waiting for Luke to serve her a helping of the pasta. After letting Jill serve herself, Luke took the serving spoon and filled Kiwi's plate with sauce and noodles. Jill couldn't help but to ask,

“Is this a joke? Do you seriously let your dog eat at the table with you? And you give her people food?”

Having just plopped down a sauce-covered meatball on Kiwi's plate, Luke was confused at this question.

“Well, sure, I'm not gonna make her eat on the floor, am I? That'd be unfair,” Luke said, taking a big gulp of wine. He had a feeling that the freshly opened bottle wasn't going to last long.

“Oh! Dat reminds me,” Kiwi squeaked before hopping down from the chair and scampering out of the kitchen. Jill rolled her eyes.

“Anyway...How have you been, Luke? I feel like I never see you anymore.”

He felt the same way. Probably because he hadn't.

“I've been fine. Just keeping busy,” he said, taking a bite of a meatball.

“Oh? Is it work? Have you just been stressed out?” Jill asked, eager to know.

As he chewed his meatball, Luke thought of just replying with a simple “yes” so that they could leave it at that. But that wouldn't even be close to truth would it?

“Not really. I've actually been able to work from home a lot. It's been nicey.”

“Oh, uh...so what have you been spending all of your time doing, then?” Jill asked, probably hoping that the explanation would be simple. Unfortunately, things weren't quite so simple anymore. As Luke opened his mouth to answer, Kiwi came running back into the kitchen, with Gator firmly held in her mouth. She hopped up onto her chair, and spat him out onto the table. His tail landed right in a small pool of tomato sauce that had collected in the corner of Jill's still-untouched dinner plate.

“Gator didn' wanna eat on da floor, he wan'ed ta eat wis da pee-poh at da tabe'oh...” Kiwi explained, before hopping off the chair again and back out of the kitchen. Luke loved how when she ran, Kiwi's long ears pointed straight back, just like a bunny rabbit. It made him smile every time he saw it.

“I've just been spending a lot of time with that little one,” he said, already pouring himself another glass of wine.

“The crocodile, you mean?” Jill said, as she picked the now sauce-covered stuffed animal off of her plate and placed it away from her side of the table. She looked peeved.

“It's an alligator. His name is Gator.”

Jill rolled her eyes.

“I meant that I've been spending a lot of time with Kiwi. Just hangin' out, goin' for walks, that kinda stuff,” Luke clarified.

“Yeah, I can tell,” Jill said, looking past Luke and towards the refrigerator. Luke knew without even turning around that she was examining the many photographs of he and Kiwi's many adventures that he had stuck on the fridge door with magnets. Jill was probably trying to see if there was a picture, even just one, of she and him. Maybe one from the bar, or from the park, or anything, really. But Luke could have told her that there weren't any photographs of their -what was it, four months now?- relationship. Not on the fridge, not in the living room, not anywhere in the apartment. He had never

even considered putting any up.

“Huh,” Jill muttered, still studying the photographs behind Luke. “You brought her to the Museum of Natural History? I didn't know they let dogs in there.”

Luke smirked. They didn't. He had to sneak Kiwi past the museum guards by hiding her in his sweatshirt. When there weren't a lot of people around them, he'd let her peek out at the different exhibits. She especially loved the reconstructed dinosaur skeletons.

“Dose are some big ol' teef, eh bebs?” he remembered she had remarked about the Tyrannosaurus Rex.

“That photo's kind of cute,” Jill said, pointing. Luke looked over his shoulder and saw she was referring to the photograph of Kiwi wearing a miner's helmet in front of the Faery Hole Cave down in Warren County. The helmet was way too big for her, but Luke wanted to make sure she was safe while they went spelunking.

“She's the cutest puppy I've ever seen,” Luke said. “Ya know, I have some more pictures in the album. I could go grab-”

Jill held her hand up, and Luke stopped. She picked up her fork and began twirling the angel hair pasta on her plate.

“That's okay,” she said quietly. “I don't know. I guess I've just never been a dog person. They're kind of cute, but... I've always thought they were kind of gross and slobbery.”

Luke couldn't help but to let out a small gasp. He was glad that Kiwi wasn't in there to hear that. She hardly ever slobbered on him. She usually had the decency to at least use a napkin or a towel.

Defending his pal, he said, “Ya know, some dogs are actually cleaner than most humans.”

At this Jill raised her eyebrows. Before she could retort this claim, however, Kiwi was back, this time with Harry the Hedgehog accompanying her. After hopping back up to her folding chair, he, too, was dropped onto the kitchen table, right next to Gator.

Jill sighed.

“It's getting a little crowded in here, isn't it?” she said.

Luke laughed. At least Baby Lewis, the stuffed monkey toy, wasn't there too.

“The more the merrier,” he said, lifting up his glass before taking a sip.

“Yeah,” Jill said, visibly disappointed that this wasn't turning out to be the romantic date she had planned on. “Well, in case you were wondering, I happen to be doing *very* well.”

“Oh yeah?” Luke asked, finding that claim hard to believe, based on the state of her normally well-kept hair alone. It was looking a lot like the tangles of angel hair pasta he was stuffing into his mouth. Then again, she was already looking better than when she had first arrived at his apartment. He liked to believe that seeing him was so important to her that it had a profound effect on her physical appearance. On the other hand, he had been drinking a decent amount of wine that evening and hadn't been laid in weeks.

“Mhm! I've sold five houses this month,” Jill said, excitement building in her voice and posture.

“Oh! I also want to give you the gift I brought. Excuse me, I'll be right back!”

Jill sprung up from the table and went into the living to get her gift. When she left, Luke looked over at Kiwi who was laying her head on the table, looking up at Luke. Her beard was smooshed against the wooden surface, making her face look like a puff ball.

“Whassup, bebs?” he asked her.

“I didn' wanna interrupt while the lady was here, but...I need someone ta cut my 'sghettis. Dohn' wanna choke,” Kiwi said, blinking her long eyelashes at Luke.

“Oh, sorry 'bout dat, li'l guy. Lemme cutt'em for ya,” Luke said, picking up his fork and knife and cutting up the pasta on Kiwi's plate into more manageable pieces for a puppy.

“Luke? What are you doing?” Jill asked, now holding her wrapped gift for him.

“Jus' cuttin' dese 'sghettis for my pal,” Luke squeaked in response. He didn't want her to choke

after all.

“What's that thing you're doing with your voice though? It's kind of weird,” Jill said, beginning to look concerned.

“What 'sing? Das jus' my voice,” Luke said. He was starting to feel a little tipsy and didn't get what Jill's problem was.

“Is that like your baby voice you use with Kiwi? You keep doing it. Cut it out,” Jill said, more sternly than Luke was used to getting from her. “Anyway, I made this for you a little while back. I hope you like it.”

While Luke unwrapped the gift, Kiwi, was happily pigging out on her bite-sized spaghetti noodles, without a single care that her light gray beard was now covered in red sauce.

Upon removing the wrapping paper, Luke saw that the rectangle was actually a framed portrait of him...with Jill. In the painting they were having a picnic in the park. Luke smirked. He didn't look half bad. His arms even looked more toned than usual. Right beside him, however, sat Jill, her hair painted as a swirl of reddish color, and a ukelele in her lap. Luke began to feel nauseous.

“I've been meaning to give this to you for a while now. I just haven't had a chance,” Jill said timidly, still waiting for some kind of verbal response from Luke.

“Wow. Das...really somesin',” he squeaked. He placed the portrait under the table, safely out of view for the time being.

“You know, I really think we need to have a serious talk. As adults. Not kids. And not puppies,” Jill said, shooting Kiwi a glare. Kiwi stopped eating for a second, and licked some sauce off of her black nose.

“Whassamatter wis talkin' like a puppy...” Kiwi said, looking up at Luke for support. Luke knew that Jill had a point. He took another sip of wine.

Jill reached across the kitchen table, passing right over Harry the Hedgehog and a sauce-

covered Gator, and held Luke's hand in hers.

“Luke, I've been very patient with you. I've done everything I can to be the perfect girlfriend. But at some point, I'm going to need you to reciprocate, okay?” she said.

Luke nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kiwi open her mouth around a meatball and bite in, squirting even more sauce onto her beard. Jill looked disgusted, but Luke wasn't concerned. He'd be giving her a bath that night, as he did every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. He would just have to use a lot of bubbles this time, which Kiwi would love.

“I think we've gotten to be quite intimate over the last few months, but there's still one thing I just can't figure out,” Jill said. Luke was definitely feeling the wine going to his head now. He started feeling nostalgic for the times where he and Jill would lie in bed after sex. He'd massage her naked back while she would ramble on about something or other. Actually, he could probably do without the rambling. But the feel of her smooth body, glistening with light perspiration and radiating passionate heat just inches from him his own naked body...that was something he wouldn't mind having again. Without realizing it, Luke gave her hand a firm, sensual squeeze.

Jill closed her eyes and shook her head, letting out a mixture of a sigh and a laugh.

“You're so confusing,” she said. “I just can never tell what you really want from me...or from anyone, for that matter.”

Propping herself up onto the table with her front legs, Kiwi peered into the pasta bowl. She poked her nose around for a moment before Luke told her to sit back down.

“She's going to get fat if she keeps eating people food, you know,” Jill said with a frown.

Kiwi gave her “Shark Eye” before going back to licking the sauce off of her plate.

“I wish I didn't have to put so much pressure on you, and for that I really am sorry,” she continued. “But, I just don't think I have much patience left.”

Luke noticed tears beginning to form in those big beautiful blue eyes of hers.

“I turn thirty next month, Luke. I'm still trying to come to terms with that, I guess.”

Slurping up a particularly long spaghetti noodle, Luke stared up at Jill. He didn't get what the big deal was. So she was turning 30 next month? He was turning 25. The big silver birthday. And was he freaking out? Nope. Luke was just as stable as ever. After finishing slurping up his noodle, he tried to console Jill by offering to take her out to a nice restaurant for a birthday celebration.

Kiwi seemed to be on board with the plan. Jill, not so much. She pulled her hand back from his in frustration, placing them on the table in front of her. She tapped her nails against the wooden table. Luke thought they looked like she had been chewing on them a lot recently. He remembered her telling him once that she did that whenever she was upset about something, ever since she lost her father in a car accident as young girl.

“That's not what I want, Luke,” she said, her face getting very serious. She took a deep breath. “I wish I didn't feel so strongly about this, but I just can't help it. Luke, I love you. I really do. But I never know if you feel the same about me. You have some sauce on your beard, by the way.”

Jill reached across the table with a napkin to wipe Luke's face, but he pulled away. He was still in shock that she had finally dropped the L-Bomb.

“Oh, Jill,” he said, stalling so that he could think of an appropriate response. Jill looked hurt that he had pulled away. What did people usually say to someone professing their love to them? He looked at Kiwi desperately for help, but it was no use. She was patting her paws on her plate, now empty except for the tiny bits of tomato sauce that she missed while licking it clean.

“All you have to do is tell me that you love me, too,” Jill said, practically pleading now. Tears were now starting to run down her face and onto her plate of half-eaten pasta. She wiped the tears from her cheeks with the napkin in her hand. “I'm not asking you to be the perfect boyfriend, or husband, or whatever. I never have, at least I don't think I have. I just need to know that I'm not wasting my time here. I need to know that I'm something more than a placeholder for you.”

Luke could hardly stand to look at her like this, her face damp with tears and mucus forming a tiny drop at the end of her nose. He stared instead into his empty wine glass. He wanted another drink. Then he wanted to get laid. Was it really fair to lead Jill on like that, though? Could he realistically devote himself to her in a more significant way than a friend-with-benefits? Luke was already spending all of his free time with Kiwi, and rarely felt that he missed Jill. But at the same time, how could he go through the rest of his life, having only one really close relationship... with a spunky little puppy with big ears and eyelashes, no less. Though, it would be so simple...but he couldn't do that, could he? That would be just crazy. Kiwi cared about him, Luke knew that, and he cared about her. But here, sitting right in front of him, literally *crying* for him, was someone else who cared, someone who had just told him she loved him. And all Luke had to do was let her.

“Just three words. That's all I need to hear,” Jill said one final time, her voice shaking.

The pressure was on. He had to say it, didn't he?

“Jill...I love you, too...I 'sink,” Luke squeaked out, a hesitant crackle in his voice.

Jill snapped.

“You... you 'sink!?” she screamed, shooting up from the table. “What the *fuck* does that mean?”

The table seemed to be shaking from the loudness of Jill's cry. Her eyes no longer seemed to Luke to be a vivid blue, but rather a stormy gray. Her curls burst free from the pink bow, which flew from her head to the kitchen floor. Red curls now surrounded her face like a fiery mane. Luke was sure she would strangle him. With those chewed-up nails of hers digging into his neck...what a way to go out. Sensing the imminent danger, Kiwi grabbed both Harry the Hedgehog and Gator protectively in her mouth and dove down under the kitchen table to hide.

“Is this all some kind of joke to you? Am *I* a joke to you?” Jill yelled, grabbing her jacket from the back of her chair. “After four months... is that all I am?”

“Jill, wait,” Luke managed to choke out. He wasn't able to get up from his seat. He was frozen

with fear and confusion. Jill bared her perfect white teeth at him like a wild animal.

“Oh! Now he can use his real voice! Isn't that just perfect. He ignores you for weeks, and you bring him a delicious dinner. You slave for hours, making the sauce *just* how you know he likes it, hand-rolling the meatballs, and he can't even talk to you like a normal *person*. He talks to you like your some kind of...like some kind of goddamn mutt!”

“She's not a mutt,” Luke said meekly.

“Oh, oh course not,” Jill laughed at him with a snarl. “What is she, a pure-bred? You treat that dog like more of a person than me. Open your eyes, jackass, dogs aren't people.”

“I can be a pee-poh, too,” Luke heard Kiwi whisper quietly from under the table.

“Dogs can be people, too,” Luke said softly. As soon as the words left his mouth, he felt like even more of a jackass. He felt like the king of all jackasses. Luke felt his ears get hot, and wished he could hide them, just put them down, just like Kiwi would do.

Jill huffed sadly.

“Why don't you just marry your dog, then? I'm sure she'll do a great job taking care of you. Your mother will love that,” Jill said as she stomped towards the doorway of the kitchen to leave.

“Jill, please,” Luke pleaded. Jill stopped, right in front of the doorway. She waited for him to say something incredible, something that would sweep her off of her feet, something that would erase this whole mess, something that would make up for all of the crap he put her through.

Before Luke had a chance to say anything, the silence in the kitchen was broken by a trickling sound coming from under the table. He knew exactly what it was, but looked down anyway, just in time to see Kiwi relieving herself, probably out of fear, right on the portrait. The extra liquid was making things look even more distorted, particularly over Jill's face. Luke looked up to see Jill with an equally twisted look on her face. His intoxicated mind scrambled to think of something he could say to save himself.

“Don't forget your pasta bowl,” was all he could think to say.

Jill's face went blank. Then she smiled at Luke. Her eyes locked with his as she slowly approached the table again, her eyes on him every step of the way. Once she got to the table, Jill leaned down to pick up the bowl, which was still half full of pasta.

“It really was a delicious meal. Thank you,” Luke said politely, hoping she would take the compliment without murdering him.

“I appreciate that,” Jill said, with an odd pleasantness to her voice. She turned around briefly, bowl in hand, before turning back to Luke. She smiled that beautiful smile at him again. Her eyes shone like a cat's. Luke couldn't help but to be attracted to her, at least physically.

“You know what, Luke. On second thought,” Jill started, her eyes now sparkling. She bit down on her lip, which definitely looked more plump and inviting than when she had first arrived.

“Why don't you just keep it,” she said serenely, dumping the bowl full of spaghetti and tomato sauce all over Luke's lap. When it was emptied, she tossed the bowl at his face. By some stroke of luck he managed to move his head out of the way just in time. The bowl shattered on the tile floor somewhere behind him.

“Think of it as a token of my affection, darling,” Jill sang as she left his apartment for the last time. Luke thought he heard a squeak as she stepped on one of Kiwi's many toys strewn across the living room floor. She cursed in frustration just before she slammed his front door closed.

Luke sat at his kitchen table, unable to move. His lap was covered in spaghetti and tomato sauce. He thought about what a pain it would be to wash the red stains from his pants. He thought about how if he still lived with his mother, she'd probably just do it for him. But he didn't live with his mother. He didn't even have a girlfriend anymore. All he had now was Kiwi, and it was all Luke's fault. He didn't know how he expected Jill to act with the awful way he treated her. Of course she'd flip out on him. He was only using her when it was convenient for him. He never had any intention of a long-

term relationship, at least not with her.

Warily, Kiwi peered out from her hiding space under the table, dolefully casting her dark eyes at Luke, surveying the damage. When it appeared she determined that the coast was clear, she timidly crawled out into the open, sniffing along the floor through the ruins of spaghetti noodles and tomato chunks. At last she found what she was looking for, right under Luke's chair.

"I soh't I sme'ohed another one," Kiwi mumbled as she bit into the last meatball, which at this point had gotten cold, but she didn't mind.

Luke silently watched her wag her tail as she enjoyed her treat. Kiwi probably *was* going to gain weight if she kept eating like that, he thought.

When she finished eating, Luke hoisted her onto his sauce-covered lap and sat her down. He was definitely going to have to give her a bath, he thought as he picked a spaghetti noodle from her ear, which was pointed back now. He'd use lots of bubbles. He also made a mental note to toss out the urine-soaked portrait that was sitting at his feet. He couldn't even be mad at Kiwi.

Kiwi looked up at him and batted her eyelashes. As she cuddled up to him in his arms, Luke was reminded of how his mother used to comfort him as a child when he was upset. He wondered what she would have done had she witnessed this moment. He didn't think she would have been too proud of her son. Kiwi began to lick tomato sauce from Luke's beard. Luke's mother never did *that*, but it made him feel just a little bit better.

Luke was grateful to have Kiwi in his life. Without her, he imagined it would have taken way longer to get over the whole Jill incident. In life before Kiwi, when a girl would break things off with Luke, he'd be distraught. When his highschool sweetheart broke up with him right before they left for college, she had told Luke it was because he couldn't expect her to devote herself to him while they were living such a long distance from each other. Luke was willing to try and make it work, but she

didn't think their relationship was meant to last very long anyway. Luke handled this less than ideally. He had been with that girl for so long (almost six months!) that he didn't know what to do with himself. He spent the entire first month and a half of college sitting in his cramped dorm room, just reading, listening to depressing music, and sleeping. He slept a lot then, and barely took care of his appearance. He lost a good deal of weight from not eating very much. All this, while he had what was essentially a buffet of newer, prettier women all over campus.

He didn't get over his ex-girlfriend until his roommate finally intervened and basically forced Luke to go to a party with him. Somehow, even in his miserable state of emotions and appearance, Luke hooked-up with a junior. Granted, she wasn't anything special to look at, but neither was he at the time. His much-too-thin body was capped with an unbrushed head of hair that should have been enough to repel any female from him. Yet, he was apparently able to appeal to that junior enough to convince her to come home with him. His roommate didn't even mind that he was going to be sexiled that night. He just wanted Luke to get his confidence back. And he did! After that night, Luke was finally able to forget about his highschool sweetheart and pursue other girls in a new setting. He dated plenty of girls over the next several years, some who'd broken his heart and some to whom he did the same. No matter who had initiated the break-up, however, Luke was always left feeling empty and upset with himself until he found a new girl. The rebound was his only way of healing. His mother of course, didn't like to hear about how many girls he was dating. She wanted her son to find one girl who cared about him enough to keep him happy for his entire life, but Luke wasn't having much success in that venture.

Now, however, he had Kiwi. She was not going to allow for Luke to sit around his apartment feeling sorry for himself. She wanted to make sure he got out and kept active. The morning after the Jill incident, when Kiwi was sure that Luke would try to sleep the whole day away, she woke him up nice and early at 10:00.

“ 'Ey dere, bebs! Da sun is out an' 'oh is well,” she squeaked, happily licking his cheeks. Luke scrunched up his face and tried to hide under his covers. Kiwi didn't like it.

“I *said*, da sun is out an' 'oh is well,” she repeated, more seriously in tone this time. Luke groaned.

“Ugh, not today, Kiwi, leave me alone.”

Kiwi sniffed and realized he reeked of wine. The bitter fruity scent was not appealing to her, and she imagined his head was pounding right now. She stared at the grumpy, stinky lump under his covers. She blinked and tried to think of what to do to get him up. She propped her two front paws onto the spot where she thought Luke's chest would be. He let out a small grunt.

“I was 'sinkin' we could swing by Jus' Pups. Ya know, for oh'd time's sake,” she suggested. Kiwi didn't really know why they'd go there, but figured if one puppy wasn't enough to cheer Luke up, then surely a whole store of them could! Of course, Kiwi knew she would still be the cutest.

Luke didn't answer.

“Maybe we'll see dat crazy doggie lady. Bet she'd wanna see us,” Kiwi suggested.

Luke started to snore, but Kiwi knew he was faking it. Luke had tried that trick before, if he didn't want to take her for a walk when it was too early. She took her paws off his chest and sat down. She looked over at Harry the Hedgehog and decided he needed to be bitten. As she did so, he let out a high-pitched squeak. Luke groaned. Kiwi considered this sequence. Harry da Hedgehog, you're a genius, she thought. She released her hold on him, took a deep breath, and started to sing.

“What wouldja 'sink if I sang outta tune...wouldja stand up an' woh'k out on me? Len' me ya ears an' I'll sing ya a song, an' I'll try not ta sing outta key...” Kiwi started squeakily. As she went along, her voice got stronger and she could tell by the movement under the covers that Luke was listening.

“Oh, I get by wis a li'l hayulp from my friends, gonna try wis a li'l hayulp from my friends...”

With another groan, Luke lifted his head from underneath the covers. Kiwi stopped singing at

once and blinked at him thoughtfully. His hair was messier than her beard got after a long nap on the couch. She wasn't sure if he was mad at her for making so much noise. She braced herself for the worst, as he began to grumble.

“Ya 'sink ya could try ta be a li'l cheesier, bebs?” he said, a smile spreading slowly across his bearded face.

As they entered Just Pups, Luke was disappointed to see that Pam wasn't there. In fact, strangely enough, there wasn't a single other person in the store. Just owner-less puppies. Luke wondered if the store was even open. Before he could fully figure out the weirdness of the situation, Kiwi, who was wearing a magenta colored turtleneck sweater, started pittering across the tile floor to a cage against the wall. She peered in, and Luke did as well. To his amusement, the cage contained a pudgy little pug puppy with a curly tan tail. He had a smooshed looking face and snorted at the pair as they looked at him sitting in his cage. He was like the canine equivalent of a piglet.

“Heh. Lookit dis guy. Nice face, pal. Ya run inta a wall or somesin'?” Kiwi mocked with a laugh. The pug seemed to frown.

“ 'Ey now, das not very nicey,” Luke said to Kiwi. He thought the pug was kind of cute.

“Sure is not, he's a pug. Dere what we coh' pugly. Pug-Ugly! Heh heh,” she said.

“Yeah, well, ya not too hot lookin' ya self, Dumbo,” the pug replied.

Just as Kiwi was about to respond, a door slammed in the back of the store. Luke looked back and saw none other than Pam, the girl who had first introduced him to Kiwi. She looked just as out of sorts as she did the last time they met, her long brown hair pushed out of her face with a bright yellow hair band. Upon seeing Luke, she brightened up immediately.

“Oh! Hi there!” she exclaimed with a big smile. Luke noticed she seemed embarrassed for some reason, blushing as she brushed dirt and what looked like doggie-doo off of her green uniform shirt.

“Sorry, I had to step out for a sec. We usually don't get a lotta customers this early, so I figured I'd take the trash out back,” she said as she picked off some dirt and flicked it away. “One of the bags broke on me again.”

“Don't worry about it. Kiwi and I were just browsing for a bit,” he said, trying not to laugh. While he said this, Kiwi trotted over to Pam.

“ 'Ey! Crazy lady! Hi! Is me! Kiwi! 'Member me? Hi!” she squeaked happily.

Pam squatted down to pet Kiwi. She had a smile so big that her freckles looked as though they might pop right off.

“Hi Kiwi! I missed ya, girl! Wow, this is just making my day,” she said.

Kiwi licked Pam's face gleefully.

“Ya sti'oh sme'oh da same! Das good!” she said. Then she sniffed at Pam's pockets.

“Sme'ohs like ya got some treats for me, too! Whaddya say?”

Pam laughed and grabbed a biscuit from her pants pocket, which she held out for Kiwi, who snatched it from her hand without hesitation.

“I knew that's all she wanted. It's always 'bout the treats with this one! Not that she needs 'em...”

As Kiwi chomped on her treat gratefully, Luke commented about the latest batch of pups in the store.

“Sure got some cute one's in here. Like dis li'l guy,” Luke said, motioning over to the pudgy pug puppy behind him.

“Oh, ya mean Peanut! He's a chunker, for sure, but that silly face of his makes me laugh every time I see it! I shouldn't say that in front of him, though,” Pam giggled.

“How much is he goin' for?” Luke asked without thinking. He wasn't sure why, he supposed he was just curious if the smooshed face lowered the pug's value at all. Maybe he'd get a deal.

“He's only nine hundred! A steal for sure. No way he's gonna be stuck around here much

longer,” Pam answered. Her light gray eyes lit up at once with manic interest. “Were...were ya thinkin' about gettin' another puppy?”

If he was, Luke wasn't conscious of it. Still, he answered politely, perhaps because he had a feeling that it would break poor Pam's heart if he shunned the possibility outright. He asked if she could let Peanut out of the cage for a little bit to play. Pam happily obliged and placed Peanut in the play pen with Luke. Kiwi looked on from the outside, giving Peanut “Shark Eye” as he was being pet by Luke.

“Ya know, I've always thought that every puppy should have a buddy to live with. Besides the owner, I mean,” Pam hinted. “A li'l friend for when the owners have to leave 'em all alone, for work, or vacations, or whatever. Can't have them feelin' like they're being abandoned.”

Luke couldn't really think of a whole lot of times where he left Kiwi on her own. Now that he was working from home, he could code websites while his pup watched TV or napped on the couch. Every vacation or day trip he'd taken since meeting Kiwi, he'd brought her right along with him. Heck, she even followed him into the bathroom most of the time. She wouldn't look at him while he did his business, of course, knowing that he might get stage fright, but she'd be right there with Harry the Hedgehog or Gator. Just in case something went wrong and he needed her help.

“I think Peanut would get along great with Kiwi. If ya could handle all the personality, that is. They're pretty similar, I think,” Pam continued. Kiwi took offense to this, hopping up against the outside of the play pen.

“Da heck ya sayin', lady?” she squealed. “I'm nussin' like dat puddin' face!”

“Yeah, I 'sink dey'd be cute together,” Luke said with a smirk as scratched Peanut behind his ear. The little pug snorted with delight.

“Ya dohn' really mean dat, do ya bigguy? Ya not really 'sinkin of gettin' another pup, are ya?” she said with a pitiful blink of her lashes. Luke shrugged with a sarcastic smile.

“I dunnooo,” he said, scratching his beard thoughtfully. The more he thought about it, the more

fun it sounded to get another puppy.

“Ha! Looks like Kiwi agrees!” Pam giggled, covering her mouth with what Luke guessed might not have been the cleanest of hands. He hoped she used a lot of Purell after taking out the trash.

“I 'sink so, too,” Luke snickered. “Whaddya say Kiwi? Why dohn' we get another puppy? Ya could share your toys an' every'sing!”

At this, Kiwi's dark eyes widened to an extent Luke had never seen before.

“Share! Uh-uh,” she squeaked in protest. “Dere's no way dat muffin face gets ta play wis my toys!”

Kiwi looked as though she was going to knock down the wooden play pen to put a stop to the charade.

“I betcha ya could even lend Peanut ya sweaters till we get 'em some of his own,” Luke continued jokingly. Pam giggled along with the act. Kiwi, however, wasn't picking up on the humor of the situation and was taking it all very seriously. Her ears were now pointed straight back, and her eyes looked sadly at Peanut, who was snorting happily away in the pen as Luke continued to shower him with attention.

“He can' do dat, he's too tubby ta fit in my sweaters, an' definilly not pretty 'nough,” she moaned.

“Ya know, if ya really are serious 'bout gettin' another pup, I could give ya the two hundred dollar 'Returning Customer Discount',” Pam said with a wink. That was a lot of money that Luke could put towards buying new clothes and toys for his pups. Peanut started doing a funny little jig.

“Heh, sounds like a deal ta me,” he commented.

“It'll be fun ta have a new baby 'round da house, eh, Kiwi? We can spoil him like crazy!” Luke said.

Kiwi didn't respond to this with words. She just laid down on the tile, her ears pointed back, and

covered her eyes with her two front paws. Luke heard her snuffle and figured maybe he was going too far with this. He couldn't realistically own two dogs at once, could he? He sighed.

“Well, we should probably head out now. We'll be sure ta stop back in when we're ready for a new puppy,” Luke said as he stood up. He picked up Peanut and handed him off to Pam. He couldn't help but notice the disappointment in her face as he did so. Did she really believe he was going to buy another puppy? He'd bought Kiwi just two months ago. He knew there were people that had multiple dogs, but...they weren't *normal*, were they? They were the kind of people that had TV shows on Animal Planet and TLC. As much as he wished he could have two, three, maybe even four dogs, he couldn't help but worry that it might drive him crazy.

“Oh okay, well... if ya ever feel like ya ready, the discount still stands for one year after the date of purchase, with a receipt of course,” Pam said, with a squeak of sadness in her voice.

“Of course,” Luke said. Kiwi took her paws off her face and gave Luke “Shark Eye”. Pam sadly placed Peanut back in his cage.

“Ya know, I wasn't makin' it up when I said I think dogs are happier when they have a friend. It wasn't just a sales pitch or anything like that,” she said. “They're very loving animals, and a lotta people take their affection for granted.”

Pam smiled at Luke, flipping her dark hair over her shoulder.

“I don't think you're one of those people, though. To tell the truth, I think this world could use more people like you,” she said, shyly, her freckled face blushing.

At this compliment, all Luke could think to do was nod and thank Pam for Kiwi's treat. He said goodbye to Peanut the pug, who snorted at him in disappointment, and left the store.

Walking through the parking lot, Kiwi finally spoke up again.

“Sorry I was bein' so grumpy in dere. I was jus' getting' scared dat ya were tryin'a replace me,” she said sadly, casting her dark eyes up at Luke. He stopped walking and squatted down next to her. He

wasn't worried about cars, as the lot was nearly empty. He put his hand on her and scratched her velvet ears to make her feel better. It made him feel better, too. About everything.

“Ya know nobody can ever replace ya, bebs,” he said. He leaned in and kissed her on top of her head. She was his family. As he kissed her, he glanced up, back towards Just Pups, and noticed that Pam was looking at him through the big display window. When she saw that he noticed her, she quickly turned away, back to the cages and cages of owner-less puppies. Maybe they were her family. Luke wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He sighed deeply before getting into his car, so that he and Kiwi could catch brunch at The Rose Garden.

That Friday, Luke was working on his computer at his kitchen table. He was finishing up a website for a New York based start-up that sold protein bars. Kiwi had just bit off Harry the Hedgehog's left ear and was about to start working off the right one when there was a knock at the door. Luke went to the door, and when he opened it, he was met with the face of the woman who had raised him. It was a face he hadn't seen in weeks.

Luke's mother wrapped him up in her arms wordlessly. He was amazed that for such a small, gray-haired woman, her hugs held so much power. He embraced her right back. After a hug that made up for all of the time apart, his mother pulled away and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“Not a big fan of shaving these days, huh?” she said slyly.

Luke brought his mother into the kitchen and they sat down. Upon seeing Kiwi, his mother scooped her up onto her lap and remarked at how cute she was.

“Well, I'm glad you aren't living alone anymore,” his mother said jokingly. She scratched Kiwi behind her ears, instantly winning her affection. “I worry about you being on your own so much. I don't want you to go crazy in your solitude. You can always move back in with me, you know.”

Luke smiled at this. There was more of a chance of him going crazy living with his mother into

his 20s. He was an adult, after all.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll just stick around here with Kiwi.”

“Of course,” she said, looking past Luke towards the refrigerator, examining the pictures there.

“We can’t have pets in our building anyway. Well, besides fish, but they’re no fun.”

“Ya know what I oh’ways say,” Kiwi squeaked, “A home wisout da pitter-patter of putties is hardly a home at ‘oh.”

“I can’t imagine living without a dog in the house,” Luke said.

His mother looked at him peculiarly.

“You didn’t seem to have too much of an issue with it for the past decade or so,” she commented. Luke shrugged. His mother laughed before continuing. “I suppose that’s because you’ve been so focused on your career...not to mention your special lady friends.”

Kiwi rolled her eyes, and Luke began to feel awkward. He started to wonder if his mother had only come here to talk about Jill. Jill had probably messaged his mother as soon as she left his apartment the other night to tell her the news.

“Well, I think I’m done with ‘lady friends’ for a little while,” Luke said, brushing off his mother’s comment. “I’m going to focus on myself for now.”

Luke began to wonder if he was perhaps spending too much time focusing on himself.

Stroking Kiwi’s light gray fur, Luke’s mother let out a sigh.

“That’s fine honey, I just don’t want you to be isolating yourself too much, especially now that you’re working from home. Are you still in contact with all of your friends?”

Luke hadn’t thought about his friends. He had been so occupied with Kiwi that he hadn’t met up with his friends at the bar in weeks. Finding a babysitter that he could trust to watch Kiwi while he went out seemed like too much of a hassle to even consider.

“I’ve been talking to Jill, Luke. Really sweet girl. She told me about what happened the other

night,” his mother said, shaking her head. “It’s such a shame you couldn’t make that work. I thought she was really good for you.”

Luke rolled his eyes. His mother was staring him down from across the table. He felt like a teenager again being grilled for staying out too late on a school night. Kiwi was keeping her mouth shut. How convenient, he thought.

“You barely even knew her...” Luke complained.

“Even still, you shouldn’t neglect people like that, Luke. It’s just not fair.”

His mother’s wise old stare was boring guilt into Luke’s heart.

“Mother, it was never going to last,” Luke said, trying to justify himself. “Jill had too many emotional issues that I just couldn’t deal with. She’s crazy.”

“I just think lately you haven’t been putting the amount of effort into relationships that you need to in order to make them work. Crazy or not,” his mother said. “I’m not saying you should have married her, honey. But at least give these nice girls a fighting chance before you shut them down.”

Luke didn’t have a response to that. His mother made a fair point.

“I have to go to a hair appointment now, but I just wanted to check in with you.” his mother said as she placed Kiwi back on the floor. She stood up. “I wanted to make sure you were okay after everything that happened.”

“I’m fine, mother. I’m moving on,” Luke said. As much as he wanted to believe that, he still wasn’t where he was in his rebound process. His mother smiled at him reassuringly.

“You’re going to have to keep working at it,” she said. His mother leaned over and pet Kiwi one last time before heading for the door. “As wonderful as pets are, they can’t be here with us forever.”

Luke sat in silence at the table as his mother left. Kiwi pittered over to him, her ears pointed back.

“ ‘Ey bigguy, what’s she talkin’ ‘bout? Why can’ I be here forever wis ya? Ya gonna replace me?’”

she squeaked sadly.

As much as he hated to admit it, it was inevitable, wasn't it? Pets were meant to be replaced by one thing or another. They left a big hole in the heart when their time passed. All one could do was love them while they were still around. After that, it was time to move on.

Luke got up from the table. His mother was right, just as she always was. He'd have to put in the effort to make sure he didn't end up alone one day. Luke walked over to his kitchen counter, with Kiwi right behind him, suddenly unsure of her own future. He opened the top drawer of the counter and pulled out a card he had saved.

Just Pups, where dogs are people, too!

Luke remembered Pam had said that the first time he walked into the store. That was two whole months ago. And maybe that was more than just a store's slogan. Luke stroked his beard as he dialed the number printed on the dog bone shaped card. As he put the phone up to his ear, Luke felt that for the first time in a long time, he knew what he wanted.