

# Rutherford, Canine Comic



John V. Madormo

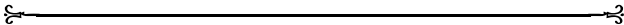


# **RUTHERFORD, CANINE COMIC**

**The Adventures of Rutherford Book 1**



**John V. Madormo**



ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS

AUSTIN TX

2020

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RUTHERFORD, CANINE COMIC

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**To all of the faithful and loving canines in  
my life: Penny, Frank, Coach, and Rita.**



# Chapter 1

## Canine Comic

*For as long as I can remember, there was only one thing I ever wanted in life. One thing that would have made me happy and content.*

All I've ever wanted was a chance to be a watchdog. A real watchdog. One who would stand guard and protect his owners from harm. One who would alert them in the event of danger. One who would save his family from a raging fire, from unwanted intruders, or from pesky squirrels and raccoons.

That's been my dream for the longest time. And someday I'll realize that goal. I just know it. You wait and see.

As each day passes, I wait for the call. Will it be today, I wonder? Or maybe tomorrow? There's nothing holding me back. I have all of the necessary qualifications—I'm fearless, hard-working, and loyal. I even meet the age requirement. In a few months, I'll be celebrating my second birthday—in people years, that is. I haven't quite fig-

ured out exactly how old that is in dog years, but as far as I'm concerned, it's nearly grown up. I like to think I'm mature enough to handle the job.

But sometimes I think I'm the only one who seems to think so. If people would just give me a chance, I could be a great watchdog.

I was telling my mother the other day about my ultimate goal in life. I can tell her anything. My mother Iris, a proud basset hound, was busy cleaning up after the puppies when I found her.

"Mom, you know what I want to be when I grow up?"

"What's that?"

"A watchdog," I said proudly.

I'll never forget her reaction. She chuckled. She actually chuckled.

"Oh, Rutherford, be serious," she said. "What do you really want to be?"

"I *am* serious. I want to be a watchdog."

She pulled me closer and licked my face. I love it when she does that. It's always so warm and cozy to lie next to her.

"Sweetheart, you're a basset hound. You're not a Doberman or a German shepherd. People don't get basset hounds for protection."

"Why not?"

She smiled weakly. "Well, we're just not built that way. Look at us—we have long bodies and short legs. We're not very strong, and we can't run fast. We just wouldn't be effective as watchdogs."

I sighed. I was hoping for a different answer.

"Rutherford, you have to accept the fact that we're here for a different reason. Mr. Davis breeds us to become the

best show dogs in the state. People don't come here looking for watchdogs. They come here looking for dogs they can enter in competitions who'll someday become Best in Show."

"I know all that," I said. "But it's not good enough. I want more out of life than beauty pageants. I want to make a difference. And I just figured that becoming a watchdog would do that."

My mother nuzzled my cheek. "Son, if that's what you truly want, I'm not going to stand in your way. But it's going to be difficult to convince others that you're watchdog material."

I appreciated her support. She was trying to let me down easy—just like a mother. But I'm determined, and nothing will stop me from reaching my ultimate goal. I'm well aware it will be an uphill battle. For nearly two years, I've been passed over by people looking for a show winner, and I knew exactly why. My mother would never say it to my face, but both she and I know I'll never be Best in Show.

Not that I even wanted to.

See, I was born with a little handicap that seems to scare people away. I'm not as fast as some of the others. Big deal. How important is speed, anyway? When you're a watchdog, you don't run away. You hold your ground—and I can do that just fine. So, the fact I have one hind leg an inch shorter than the other three shouldn't mean a thing. I've learned to live with it. Why couldn't they?

Heck, I've met plenty of three-legged dogs in my time, and they do just fine. I have all four of mine. That should count for something.

But whenever families show up here and see me limp around the yard, I know what they're thinking. I can see

it on their faces. They know a defect like mine would never win them a dog show. So, they want nothing to do with me.

And that's fine. I've learned to handle rejection. The ones that really bug me are the folks who feel sorry for me.

"Aw, see that poor dog over there?" they say. "He's cute, but let's keep looking."

I hate that. I don't need their pity. I need a chance to show them what I can do. I'm not dog show material, but I can do other stuff—like being a watchdog—if they'd just give me the chance.

So, at the end of each day, I'm still here, and that worries me a little.

Mr. Davis is one of the best-known and most respected breeders in the state. He's in his eighties, I think; all I know is that he's been around for decades. At least, that's what I hear folks say. Mr. Davis prides himself on top quality basset hounds. He tells anyone who will listen that he raises the best show dogs in the country. Lately, I've started to worry how long he'll keep me here. If no one seems interested, will he eventually get tired of taking care of me?

What I needed was a skill—a real skill—some sort of talent to make me impossible to replace. I needed to prove to him and all the others I'm really good at something—and not just good, but the *best*. Then he'll have to keep me. Right?

Well, it made perfect sense to me.

So, I asked my mom one day if she could name one thing I did better than any of the other dogs. It took her a minute to think of something. That made me a little nervous.



“Let me see, now,” she said. “It’s really hard to come up with just one thing. You’re so good at everything.” Spoken like a true mother.

“Mom, I’m not talking about being *good* at something. Is there anything I do *better* than anyone else?”

She turned her head and smiled. Then, as it sometimes does, her back leg started thumping, and it slowly began moving in the direction of her head. I knew exactly what she needed.

“Let me take care of that for you,” I said. “That’s what I’m here for.” I reached up with my front paw and began scratching her ear.

“Mmmmm.” She put her head back and closed her eyes. “Now, *there’s* something you’re really good at.”

“Anybody can scratch an itch,” I said. “There’s gotta be something better.”

My mother was now in deep thought. “Give me another minute.”

This wasn’t going well. If your own mother couldn’t think of something—anything—that set you apart from the pack, then you were in big trouble.

She looked at me with a nervous smile. I could tell she was struggling to come up with something. It was starting to get embarrassing—for both of us. It was time to change the subject.

“Hey, Mom, did you hear about the dog who got too close to an electric fan and lost his nose?”

“Oh, dear,” she said. “Without a nose, how does he smell?”

I grinned. “He smells like all dogs—awful!”

She shook her head and started laughing. “Oh, Rutherford, where do you come up with this stuff? You never seem to run out of..” She paused. “Wait a minute. That’s it.”

“What?” I said.

“You’re the best joke-teller on the farm—hands down.”

I smiled. You know, she was right. As much as I’ve always wanted to be someone’s watchdog, I kind of knew it might take time to get discovered. And so, just to keep my spirits up, and to make the others think I was okay with being passed over, I went out of my way to learn new jokes to tell everyone.

It always made me feel good to see the others laugh. It took some of the sting out of rejection. And when I stopped to think about it, no one knew more jokes than I did—and if I have to say so myself—no one could deliver a punchline any better than I can. It’s an art, I’ll have you know. And it all has to do with timing.

“I do like telling a good joke,” I said. “And all the others do seem to enjoy them.”

“They love your jokes,” my mother said. “You have a real talent, son.”

It was nice to hear her say that. So, I *could* do something better than the rest. That was great.

But the more I thought about this talent of mine, the more I wondered how it would help me in the long run. I was flattered that other dogs enjoyed my humor, but was it enough to convince Mr. Davis I was a valuable asset here on the farm?

“I like entertaining everyone,” I told my mother, “but what good is it, really?”

“What good is it?” she said. “Rutherford, you single-handedly keep the morale sky-high around here. Everyone is always so happy to see you. You’re never without a smile and a funny story. That’s priceless.”

“But Mr. Davis is a human. He can’t understand my jokes. He doesn’t know I have this talent. Someday, he’s going to get tired of taking care of me, and he’s just going to dump me somewhere.”

My mother shook her head. “What are you talking about? Mr. Davis loves you. He knows that you’re...” She glanced at my short leg, “...special. He would never get rid of you. You’re one of his favorites.” She smiled weakly. “Of course, I wish I could say the same thing about his son.”

His son—now, that was another subject. Horace Davis was nothing like his father. He always seemed to be in a foul mood. He never played with any of us. I don’t think he even liked us. He treated us like—well, dogs. And he never smiled.

Wait a minute—I take that back. Whenever someone pulled out his wallet to pay for one of us—then, and only then, would he smile.

I, for one, didn’t trust him. And I’m sure my mother felt the same way. More than once she warned us about staying away from him. I wasn’t sure why, but I didn’t want to find out.

He always made me feel uncomfortable. Whenever he saw me, he would shake his head and make this grunting sound. For the longest time, I’ve had a feeling that if Horace is ever running this place, there’ll be no room around here for me.

I decided that if I concentrated on my joke-telling and helped keep spirits high around the place, I could survive anything.

I went off by myself and tried to think of funny situations a dog might find himself in. Then, I worked them

into a joke. I recalled when a family with a bunch of kids came by one time. The kids were chasing some of the dogs and teasing them. I thought of a good one.

*Hey, what's got four legs and an arm? Give up? A Rotweiler in a crowd.*

I'm not sure whether or not humans would appreciate it, but since they couldn't understand me, I've never worried much about it. If I can get a fellow canine to laugh, I was in my glory. I'd forget about whatever was bothering me.



After that, when I wasn't thinking up new jokes or telling them, I would play with my brothers and sisters. There weren't any of them my age. When I was born, there were seven of us, but they're all long gone now. We only had three or four months together before they went off to new homes. As hard as it was to see them go, I was happy for them. It was their destiny to become part of a loving family, and to compete proudly at dog shows. I tried not to think about it too much. It always made me kind of sad—not the dog show part, but the new-family part.

I was okay, though. New pups are fun to be around—most of the time. Humans think puppies are so darn cute, and I wouldn't necessarily disagree with that. But there's one thing about puppies that isn't particularly attractive. Have you ever noticed that it's all about *them*?

I'm not saying they're selfish. It's just that their basic instincts early on are to be individuals, not team players. I don't blame them. They can't help themselves. They want everyone to do things for them. "Rutherford, get me this. Rutherford, I'm hungry. Rutherford, can you scratch my

ear?” They haven’t figured out yet that their mission in life is to serve.

What really bugs me, though, sometimes, is that most of them are just too immature to appreciate my humor. I remember one time when I asked them, “Hey, how does your owner know if you’ve been drinking from the toilet?”

They just scratched their heads.

“Cause your breath smells...better.”

A lot of the older dogs roar at that one, but not the puppies. I guess they haven’t had enough life experience.

But someday, they’ll think back to that joke, and out of nowhere, they’ll just start laughing. I probably won’t be there to see it, but that’s okay. I take comfort in the fact that, whenever or wherever it happens, they might think fondly of their big brother.

I still believed my dream of becoming a watchdog would come true someday, but in the meantime, I guess stand-up comic would have to do. And I was pretty certain I could make it work.

So, if I couldn’t offer protection, then I would become the best stand-up comedian I could be. Entertaining your fellow man—er, dog—might not seem like a noble effort. But, you know, you just can’t put a price on what a smile or a chuckle or a good belly laugh can do for a fellow canine. It can help them forget their troubles. I was happy to accept this new challenge.

From that point on, I held my head high, sat up on my hind legs, and was proud to call myself Rutherford—Canine Comic.

## Chapter 2

### Down and Out

*I was rudely awakened from a sound sleep by the shrieks of my little sister Daphne. She was standing in the open doorway of the barn.*

“Rutherford,” she said, “wake up. There’s something going on.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Look out there. See that car with the red light on top of it? What is that?”

I got up, walked over, and took a look. “That’s an ambulance,” I said.

“What’s that?” she said.

I remembered the only other time I could recall seeing an ambulance. It was when old Mr. Davis had suffered a heart attack. We were all really worried about him, but he managed to pull through, and was back on his feet in no time. That was about a year ago.

“An ambulance is a car that takes sick people to the hospital,” I said.

“What’s a hospital?” Daphne asked.

*Here we go again. These puppies don’t know anything.*

The ambulance had pulled right up to the front door of the house. The light on its roof was spinning, but the siren was off. Nothing else was going on.

“A hospital is a place where they take care of sick people,” I said.

“Who do you suppose is sick?” she asked.

“It’s gotta be Mr. Davis.”

Who else could it be? His wife had passed away before I was born. My mother used to talk about her sometimes. She really missed her. After that happened, everyone thought Mr. Davis might sell his breeding business, but in time, he decided to keep it running. I was sure glad about that.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Daphne. I looked around for my mother. I found her in a corner of the barn nursing some of the other puppies.

“Good morning, Rutherford,” she said. “Why the long face?”

“What’s happening out there?” I asked. “Is it Mr. Davis?”

My mom nodded. “It’s his heart again. I’ve been worried about him lately. For the past couple of weeks, he’s been moving around more slowly. And he looked pale to me the other day.”

“You never said anything.”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” she said. “None of us wants to think about what this place would be like without him.”

She was right. I didn’t want to think about it. I decided to check things out for myself.

I left the barn and walked up to where the ambulance was parked. Just as I got there, the front door of the house swung open. Paramedics wheeled a cart out onto the porch. Mr. Davis was lying on the cart. His eyes were closed. There was a long skinny tube attached to his arm, and one of the people was holding a plastic mask over his nose and mouth.

Horace Davis followed them to the ambulance. He watched as they slid the cart into the back.

“I’ll follow you over there,” he said.

I stared at Horace. I couldn’t bear the thought of him taking over this place.

“What are you lookin’ at, freak?” he said to me. He sneered and walked to the garage.

I watched the ambulance race down the dirt driveway. It was the last time I ever saw Mr. Davis.



The funeral was held a few days later. The procession drove by the farm that morning. My mother insisted we all stand on the side of the road and bark as the cars drove by. It was our own personal tribute to the man who had raised us and cared for us.

That day was a long one. Horace hadn’t fed us. The puppies were fine. They still had mother’s milk. We wondered if there would be more days like this one.

But to our surprise, in the days that followed, Horace never forgot to feed us once. I hoped it meant he had turned over a new leaf, but my mother set me straight.

“He hasn’t changed a bit,” she said. “He knows you can’t sell a dog with its ribs sticking out.”

She was right. We were fed each day, but we didn’t get the attention dogs crave. He couldn’t have cared less about us. All we were to him were dollar signs.



The place was filthy most of the time. Horace would only clean it up when he knew a buyer was coming through. Spirits were getting low. It had become more important than ever for me to concentrate on producing some sensational new material—great jokes that would take our minds off of our new living conditions.

On a Saturday night about two weeks following the funeral, my mom, my brothers and sisters, and some of the other basset hound families gathered in a corner of the barn for my performance.

“Hey, did you hear the one about the dog who went to the flea circus? Wouldn’t you know it—he stole the show.”

It was followed by a timely rim shot. I had taught Daphne how to make that sound. She held a stick in her mouth and banged it on the bottom of a coffee can for the intended effect. It wasn’t perfect, but it did the trick.

Sometimes you have to remind your audience that you just delivered the punch line. That’s where Daphne came in. The older dogs always knew when to laugh. It was those darn puppies who were clueless. Every so often I thought it might be a good idea to install an applause sign just for them. They were that dense.

I ended the show with one of my favorites.

“Hey, here’s one for all you wranglers out there. Did you hear about the dog who limped into town one day? His foot was all bandaged up. The sheriff walked up to him and said, ‘Howdy, stranger, what brings you to Dodge?’ The dog held up his injured foot and said, ‘I’m looking for the man who shot my pa.’”

Rim shot. Thanks, Daphne.

Roars of laughter were followed by applause. It had been a good night.

Barney, one of the grown-up male dogs, slapped me on the back. "I gotta tell you, Rutherford, you never disappoint." It was high praise coming from one of the veterans.

"Thanks, sir, I appreciate it," I said.

"So, when's your next performance?" he asked.

"I'm not really certain. I'll have to get to work on some new material."

"Well, you be sure to let me know, you hear?" he said.

"I will. I promise."

Barney turned to rejoin the others, but then he stopped abruptly. He leaned in, as if he only wanted me to hear what he was about to say.

"Kid, let me give you a little advice." He looked around to make sure we were still alone. "Things are different around here now. You gotta look over your shoulder at all times. Do you know what I'm trying to say?"

"I'm not sure," I said. But I knew exactly what he was talking about.

Barney lowered his voice even more. "I don't trust Horace. Nobody around here does. He could start cleaning house any time now. No one is safe. Heck, I'm getting up in years. He may have no use for *me* soon." He had a serious look on his face. "Just be careful out there, okay?"

I nodded.

"Good boy," Barney said. He winked and joined the other members of his family.

Daphne ran up smiling. "You were great tonight, Rutherford. The crowd loved you."

"Thanks," I said with a forced smile.

"What's wrong?" she said. "You don't look very happy. Did I make a mistake with the drum or something?"

“No, you did just great. And let me tell you—you have a real musical flair.”

She grinned.

“Listen,” I said, “I have to be somewhere. You better go back with Mom and the others. I’ll see you later.”

She scampered off.

I really had no place to be. I just wanted to be alone. I decided to walk around in the barnyard for a while to think things through.

I guess I wasn’t completely surprised to hear what Barney had said. I had known that if Horace was ever in charge my days around here would be numbered. To him, I was just another mouth to feed. And since no families seemed interested in taking me home with them anytime soon, he was getting nothing in return.

I wandered into the garage, pushed a stepstool up to the back of a pickup truck, and hopped up onto the bed. Horace had returned from town a few minutes earlier, so the back of the truck was still warm. It was time for bed, my favorite time of the day. There was nothing like settling down for the night and a few Zs. If you never noticed, we dogs do love our sleep.

I rolled over onto my side—my favorite position—stretched out my legs, and was soon in dreamland.



About an hour or so later, when I woke up, I could tell by my surroundings that life as I had known it was about to change. I was still in the back of the pickup, but it was moving. We were traveling on an old dirt road that seemed unfamiliar. I peeked through the back window to see into the cab of the truck. Horace was at the wheel.

A moment later, we turned off the road into a wooded area. The ride for the next mile or two was bumpy and uncomfortable. I couldn't maintain my balance for more than a few seconds without falling over and being tossed from side to side. I had no idea where we were headed, and I didn't know what was waiting for me once we got there.

It didn't take more than a few minutes longer for me to find out. The truck came to an abrupt stop. I slid forward and hit my head on the back of the cab. I got to my feet and looked around—trees, trees, and more trees. It was dark—really dark. The only light came from the headlights on the pickup.

The driver's door opened, and Horace stepped out.

"This is the end of the line, pal," he said. He walked around and opened the tailgate. "Well, don't just stand there," he yelled. "Get out!"

Not only had Horace known I was there, I had apparently done him a huge favor when I decided to seek out a little warmth and hopped into the back of the truck.

"Let's go, let's go," he said impatiently.

I knew that if I decided to stay put, he would just drag me out. I reluctantly hopped down onto the dirt. I looked up at Horace. I couldn't believe what he was doing. Was he actually abandoning me like this?

I did my best to make eye contact with him.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "You knew this day was coming. What do you expect? You're worthless. Why my dad ever kept you around as long as he did, I'll never know."

I stared a hole right through him. I wasn't going to make this easy for him. Maybe if I looked pathetic enough, he might change his mind about leaving me out here.

Yeah, right.

“What are you waiting for?” he said. “Get out of here.” He bent over and tried to slap me on the hind end.

Even with one bad leg, I was still faster than him. I darted to the left, and he missed. I won’t repeat what he said after that. He tried to kick me. Strike two.

I knew it would be in my best interest to cut my losses and run, but I decided to give Horace something to remember me by.

Now, you have to understand that, normally, I’m considered pretty nonviolent, but I guess the wannabe watchdog inside just got the best of me. I stood my ground, bared my teeth, and growled. It was slow and deep and menacing.

Horace jumped back. “What’s gotten into you?” he said.

My growl became noticeably louder.

“You’re acting crazy,” he said as he backpedaled.

*I’ll show you crazy.* I leapt forward, bit down onto his pant leg, and began to gnaw on it.

Horace let out a scream. I refused to quit. I was relentless. I eventually pulled him over onto the ground.

I think it’s safe to say I got his attention.

When I was sure I had made my point, I let go. He crawled away, tail between his legs (so to speak), and pulled himself into the driver’s seat, fumbling for his keys. I hated to see the fun end so soon, so I jumped up against the driver’s door, barking.

Horace started up the truck, put it into gear, and peeled away.

As the taillights faded into the distance, I found myself all alone with no idea of what would happen next. I

had kind of enjoyed seeing the fear in Horace's eyes, but he was now free of me. He had won. My new life had begun, whether I was ready for it or not.

I thought for a minute about trying to find my way back to the farm. I figured, with my superb sense of smell, I might just have been able to do it. After all, I'm a member of the hound family. It's one of the things we do best.

But what good would it do? Horace would just find me and bring me back out here—or someplace worse. I didn't want to think about the *someplace worse*.

I looked for a place to lie down and get some sleep. Most of the ground was pretty damp, but I found a dry spot under an evergreen. I closed my eyes and tried to doze off, but it was no use. I was worried about my future.

I had no idea what was in store for me. I was on my own now. Where would I find food and water? My mother had never taught me how to fend for myself in the wild. Who in his right mind would ever expect a dog bred to compete in shows to survive on his own in the middle of nowhere?

I thought about my mom and Daphne and the others. I probably would never see them again. I knew the same thing happened when you went to live with a new owner, but this was different. I imagined Mom waking up in the morning and looking for me. She would get worried when she couldn't find me. Then she might think about it long enough and figure out what had happened.

I didn't like to think about her being sad. I thought again about trying to make it back to the farm, just to let her know I was all right. But if I managed to get caught by Horace, he might do something awful to me, and I knew Mom would never be able to handle that.

If I was going to survive out here, I needed to get some rest. Tomorrow was going to be a big day for me—the next chapter of my life. I wanted to have a clear head. I had to make good decisions.

I closed my eyes tightly and tried to imagine happier times—snuggling up to my mother, playing with my brothers and sisters, telling a killer joke and leaving the audience in stitches. Within minutes, I could feel myself relaxing. My heart wasn't racing anymore.

I tried to tune out the noises around me—the crickets, the owls, and other sounds I couldn't identify and, frankly, didn't want to. Before long, I fell fast asleep.





## Chapter 3

### Lost and Found

*When I woke up, I could hear voices all around me. I was afraid* to open my eyes. From the sounds of the birds overhead, I could tell it was daytime. I must have been asleep for hours. And someone was whispering just a few feet away.

“I don’t know what it is,” a tiny voice said.

“I sure hope he’s dead,” an older voice replied.

“It looks a little bit like The Demon,” the tiny voice said.

“Don’t even joke about something like that.”

I slowly opened my eyes. I found myself nose-to-nose with something totally unexpected. I was staring into the eyes of a furry raccoon, who was sniffing me. When he saw I was awake, he jumped back, showed off his set of crooked teeth, and made a hissing sound. A younger raccoon scooted behind a hollowed-out tree stump.

“Papa, let’s get out of here,” the younger one said.

The older raccoon appeared to be sizing me up.

“Who are you? And what do you want?” As I got to my feet, he backed away.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said. “I won’t hurt anybody.”

“How’d you get here?” the older raccoon said.

“I was brought here...by a bad man.”

The raccoon looked at me skeptically.

“It’s the truth,” I said. “I’m a basset hound. I’m from a breeding farm a few miles from here. People go there to buy show dogs.”

The tiny raccoon stuck its head out from behind the tree stump. “So, you’re a show dog?”

“Well, kind of,” I said. “You see, I’ve got a bum leg. So, no one’s ever wanted me.”

“That’s kind of sad.” The little raccoon scampered toward me, but the older one put his arm out to hold her back.

“Not so fast, Chrissy. How do we know he’s not working for The Demon?”

“He looks friendly, Papa.”

“The Demon? Who’s The Demon?” I said.

The older raccoon narrowed his eyes. “Don’t try to tell me you’ve never heard of The Demon? Everybody in these woods knows about him.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” I said. “I’ve never heard of him before.”

Chrissy leaned over to her father and whispered something in his ear. The older raccoon never took his eyes off me. A moment later, he stood up on his hind legs. Apparently, the interrogation wasn’t over.

“What’s your name?” the father raccoon said.

“Rutherford.”

“So, *Rutherford*, what brings you to our little forest here?”

“Well, like I told you,” I said, “the new breeder didn’t think anyone would ever buy me, so he drove me out here last night and dumped me.”

“That’s terrible,” Chrissy said.

“What do you intend to do now?” her father asked.

We were interrupted by the sound of flapping wings and loud quacking from overhead. A mallard duck dove down and landed on the tree stump. He stood at attention, then ducked his head and raised one foot in what looked a little like a salute.

“What’s going on here, Ralph?” he asked the raccoon. “I was on a reconnaissance mission and thought I heard the sound of an intruder.”

“That’s exactly what you heard, Colonel,” Ralph said. “This dog claims that somebody abandoned him here last night. I was trying to find out what his plans are.” He looked in my direction. “So, what *are* your plans?”

“I don’t have any plans,” I said.

“No plans?” the duck said. “Well, don’t think you can stay here. You’ll have to leave. This is *our* forest. Everyone here has a job, and I’m afraid we don’t have any openings. Sorry.”

I didn’t know what to say. All of this had happened so quickly. I knew one thing for sure—I couldn’t go home. And I didn’t necessarily want to stay here, but it might be nice to stick around for a few days before I decided where exactly I was headed.

“I don’t know where else to go right now,” I said. “Would it be okay if I stuck around here for a couple of days just to plan my next move?”

The duck slapped a big webbed foot down on the stump. “Absolutely not. We will not tolerate freeloaders.”

"I'm not a freeloader," I said. "I'll work. You'll see."

"What can you do?" Ralph said. "What was your job on this farm of yours?"

My job? I wasn't expecting that question. And I wasn't sure if I should really tell them what my specialty was. I doubted if any of them would find it very impressive. Then I had an idea.

I held my head up and tried to appear confident.

"I was sort of what you'd call the official morale officer on the farm," I said.

"Morale officer?" the duck said. "Are you suggesting you're in the military? If so, you're a disgrace to the service. Where's your uniform, soldier?"

"I'm confused," Chrissy said. "What's a morale officer?"

"I can tell you that, little girl," the duck said. "A morale officer is somebody who tries to keep the troops in a good mood...to keep their spirits high." He turned to me. "So, what unit are you in? Where are you stationed?"

"Well, I'm not exactly in the service."

"How do you go about keeping morale up on a farm?" Ralph wanted to know. It seemed to be more of a challenge than a simple question.

Before I could answer, another resident of the forest appeared. A bullfrog hopped up to the group.

"Ribbit."

"Hi, Leonard," Chrissy said.

"Hi, sweetie," Leonard replied. Then he pointed at me. "What's *he* doing here?"

"He got dumped here last night," the duck said. "If you believe his story, that is."

"It's true," I said.

Ralph the raccoon held up his arms. "Let me handle this, guys." He turned to me. "So, about this job of yours on the farm. What did you do, exactly?"

"Well..."

*Here goes nothing*, I thought. I could only hope for the best.

"I'm kind of a stand-up comedian."

They all looked at each other. I could tell they were a little surprised by my answer.

"That's a job?" the duck said.

I nodded.

"A stand-up comic? Really?" Leonard the bullfrog said as he made a face. "Let's just see if he's telling the truth." He turned in my direction. "Okay, pal, make me laugh."

What? Just like that? Did he actually expect me to come up with a joke here and now?

By the looks on the faces of my interrogators, that apparently was exactly what they expected.

I immediately tried to think of a joke a frog might like. Most of my material was reserved for dogs. I had never entertained an audience quite like this before. I smiled nervously as I racked my brain for some killer material.

"I'm waiting," Leonard said.

And then all at once, it hit me. I smiled.

"Hey, did you hear about the frog who would only eat fast food?"

"No," Chrissy said.

"Whenever he went to McDonalds, he'd always order a burger and flies."

At first, there was no response. I was looking into a sea of confused faces. Where was my rimshot when I needed it? I missed Daphne.

Then, all at once Chrissy began laughing hysterically. It had taken her a few seconds to get it, but that was fine with me. Her dad caught her just as she was about to fall over.

“Not bad,” Leonard said. “But I’ve heard better.”

“Is that it?” Ralph said. “You only know frog jokes? How about raccoons?”

Oh, boy. The pressure was on now. I thought hard, but nothing was coming. I couldn’t recall ever writing or even *hearing* a raccoon joke before. But I knew I needed to come up with one, and quickly. If I failed, I was sure to be banished from the forest.

And then, all at once, I got this brainstorm. Maybe I could just convert a dog joke into a raccoon joke. Heck, I had tons of dog jokes. It might just work.

But which one? Which one would make this crowd beg for more? I thought for another minute.

“So, I take it you don’t know any raccoon jokes, huh?” Ralph said.

“He’s no comedian,” the duck said.

A second later, I had it. I imagined myself in front of a room of adoring fans.

“Hey, has this ever happened to you?” I said. “I went to the movies the other day, and this guy walks in with his pet raccoon. And wouldn’t you know it, they sat down right in front of me.

“Then the strangest thing happened. During all of the sad parts of the movie, the raccoon cried his eyes out. And during the funny parts, he laughed his head off.

“Afterward, I went up to the guy and said, ‘That’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. Your raccoon seemed to really enjoy the movie.’

“It *is* amazing,’ the man said. ‘Cause he hated the book.”

I glanced at the crowd, grinned, and made a rimshot sound with my mouth.

Like before, Chrissy was beside herself. This time she did fall over from laughing so hard.

Her dad was smiling. “I kind of liked that one. Got any more?”

“Wait just a minute,” the duck said. “What about me? You have to tell a joke with a duck in it now.”

This was one tough audience, let me tell you. I wasn’t sure if I could come up with anything.

“Give me a second,” I said.

“Sure,” the duck said. “Take all the time you need.”

I tried to imagine a funny situation that a duck might find himself in. And before long, I had something.

“I happened to be in a drugstore the other day when this duck walked in. She went right past me down the aisle.

“Now, get this—she went over to the cosmetics section, picked up a tube of lipstick, and then walked up to the front counter and set it down. As you might guess, the clerk was a little surprised to see this.

“He said, ‘Just how do you intend to pay for that?’ The duck looked up, smiled, and said, ‘Ahh, just put it on my bill.’”

I was unprepared for the reaction that followed. The duck started laughing uncontrollably. Chrissy was already rolling on the ground. Ralph was chuckling. And even Leonard the bullfrog smiled and gave me a thumbs-up.

It was at that precise moment I knew I’d be able to stay here as long as I wanted—or until I ran out of jokes.



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