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Opening extract from

One Dog and His Boy

Written by

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one dog and his boy



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1

Hal's Birthday

All Hal had ever wanted was a dog.

He had wanted one for his last birthday and for the birthday before, and for Christmas, and now that his birthday was coming round again he wanted one more desperately than ever. He had read about dogs and dreamed about dogs; he knew how to feed them and how to train them. But whenever he asked his mother for a dog she told him not to be silly.

"How could we have a dog? Think of the mess; hairs on the carpet and scratch marks on the door, and the smell. . . Not to mention puddles on the floor," said Albina Fenton, and shuddered.

And when Hal said that he would see to it that it didn't smell and would take it out again and again so that it didn't make puddles, she looked hurt.

"You have such a beautiful home," she told her son, "I would have thought you would be grateful."

This was true in a way. Hal's parents were rich; they lived in a large modern house in the suburbs with carpets so thick that your feet sank right into them and silk curtains that swept to the floor. There were three new cars in the garage – one for Albina, one for her husband and one for the maid to use when she took Hal to school – and five bathrooms with gold taps and power showers, and a sauna. In the kitchen every kind of gadget hummed and buzzed; squeezers and coffee makers and extractors – and the patio was tiled with marble brought in specially from Italy.

But in the whole of the house there was nothing that was alive. Not the smallest beetle, not the frailest spider, not the shyest mouse – Albina Fenton and the maids who came and went saw to that. And in the garden there were no flowers –

only raked gravel – because flowers mean earth and mess.

Although he knew it was silly to go on hoping, Hal decided he would have a last try. Three days before his tenth birthday he got up early and padded across the deep blue carpet, which was going to be replaced in the coming week because blue, his mother said, was out of fashion. He had said he liked blue but his mother had just smiled at him in that rather regretful way which meant that he had said something foolish.

Now he turned off his night light shaped like a flying saucer and wondered why he seemed to sleep just as badly with the flying saucer night light as he had done with the night light in the shape of a skyscraper.

Then he went into his bathroom and washed carefully, making sure that he didn't miss out any bits, and cleaned his teeth extra hard with his electric toothbrush before spraying his mouth with the high-pressure breath freshener fixed to the wall.

He wanted to have everything right before he wrote the note to his mother because it was important. If she took notice of it everything would come right, but if she didn't. . .

So now he sat down at his specially designed writing desk and found a pen and a piece of headed notepaper, because his parents hated anything to be scrappy, and wrote very, very carefully:

"PLEASE CAN I HAVE A DOG FOR MY BIRTHDAY? PLEASE?"

He wrote it out three times because he wanted the writing to be really good – his parents had moved him from his last school because they said he wasn't making enough progress – and then he padded across the corridor and pushed the note through his mother's bedroom door. There was no point in writing a note to his father because his father was in Dubai, or perhaps Hong Kong. Or even Tokyo. Hal could never be certain, though he tried very hard to keep track of his father's business travels. His father was a "frequent flyer" and more often in the air than on the ground.

Albina Fenton, Hal's mother, was in her walk-in wardrobe, trying to decide what to wear.

"Really, everything's in rags," she muttered, passing along a row of glittering evening dresses, then back along a line of tailored suits, opening drawers of frilly blouses and embroidered scarves.

"I'll have to throw most of it away and start again. Some serious shopping is required."

When she came out of the wardrobe, she saw that someone had pushed a note under her door and her heart sank. It would be Hal. She hadn't forgotten his birthday; on the contrary, she had made all sorts of arrangements. She had ordered a gift pack from Hamleys and another from Harrods. They would pick out presents suitable for his age group and deliver them the day before and they had never failed her yet. A well-known caterer was bringing in the food and she had booked an entertainer for the party – but Hal had been difficult about the party because they had moved him from his old school to another one which was more suitable in every way, with the right kind of children, and for some reason Hal had been slow to make new friends.

She picked up the note. If only he isn't on about the same thing, she thought.

But he was, and now she had to explain to him again how impossible it was and had to endure it while Hal turned away and bit his lower lip and looked like a penniless orphan instead of a boy who had everything he could want in the world.

"It really isn't fair," she said to her friends

when they came for morning coffee and Hal had been taken to his Activities Club by the maid. "I do everything for that boy and he is never thankful."

Her friends all had names which began with G: Glenda and Geraldine and Gloria – and they were quick to sympathise.

"But he does look a bit peaky," said Glenda. "I tell you what, I've read somewhere that they do kissograms for children on their birthdays. Or huggograms, I suppose they would be. They send someone dressed like a chimpanzee or some other animal, and he sings a funny song and delivers a message. Maybe they could get someone dressed like a dog?"

After her friends had gone, Albina rang her husband's office and asked his secretary to get a message through to him in Dubai. "Remind him that it's Hal's birthday on Friday," she said. "He'll be able to pick up a present for him in the Duty Free."

Really there wasn't any more she could do, thought Albina, and she picked up a furnishing catalogue from the pile on the coffee table. Everybody said that beige was the "in" colour this year; she'd have to get rid of the white carpet in the

dining room. . . Not that they'd be here much longer: she really felt quite shamed living in a house without a swimming pool.

Right up to the last minute, Hal went on hoping.

He would open his eyes on the morning of his birthday and hear a snuffling noise outside the door and the dog would come running in . . . sometimes the dog was brown and fluffy, sometimes it was white with a smooth coat. Hal didn't mind what it looked like; it would be alive, and it would belong to him, and it would be there when his father was in Dubai and his mother was out with her friends and he was alone in the house with the maid who changed every month and was always so homesick and so sad.

But the phantom dog remained a phantom. Nobody scratched on the door when Hal's birthday came and the sound of barking which made Hal's heart beat fast turned out to be in the street. Hal dressed and went downstairs, where his mother waited beside the breakfast table piled high with parcels. Hamleys was not the best known toy shop in London for nothing; they had sent the latest Xbox game, and a new board game and a laser gun and a radio-controlled metal-detecting car. Harrods

had sent an iPod and a giant chemistry set and a Roboquad. . .

"Now are you happy," said his mother, watching him as he opened his parcels, and he said yes, he was, and she told him that his father would be back that evening and would bring something from the aiport.

"Did my grandparents send me anything?" asked Hal, and Albina sighed and produced a small packet wrapped in brown paper.

Her husband's parents were poor and lived in a small cottage on the Northumbrian coast. They had come on a visit once when Hal was small, carrying their belongings in an ancient suitcase tied up with string – and really it had been impossible not to be ashamed of them. They hadn't come again, but they sent the most extraordinary gifts for Hal at Christmas and on his birthday. If one couldn't afford a proper present, surely it was better to do nothing than send a seashell or a piece of rock, thought Albina. Yet Hal always looked pleased with their gifts, and now he gazed at something small and brown and crumbly as he had not looked at any of his other things.

"It's a sea horse," he said, looking at the note

that came with it. “It got washed up on one of the rocks. The fishermen say that it brings luck.”

So Hal took his presents upstairs and played with them, and in the afternoon the van arrived with the party tea and the birthday cake shaped like a pair of trainers (because nothing that Albina ordered was shaped like itself, and a cake that looked like a cake would have bored her very much). Then the friends came – only they weren’t really his friends; he had left those at his old school – and played with his toys and broke the metal-detecting car and tipped the chemistry set on the floor.

But after they had had tea and watched a conjurer there came a surprise.

A van drew up outside; the bell rang – and then the door opened and a . . . thing . . . burst into the room. It was big and dressed in a yellow furry skin, and it had floppy black ears, a lolling pink tongue, and a tail.

For a moment it pranced about on two legs; then it dropped down on all fours and crawled towards Hal and an odd strangled noise came from it which sounded like “Woof, woof.”

When it reached Hal, it dropped a big greeting card from its mouth – and in a hoarse voice it began to sing.

"I am your Birthday Doggie,

Your Doggie for the day.

Just pat me and I'll—"

But the song broke off with a splutter because Hal had gone mad.

"Stop it. Come out of there," he yelled. pulling at the creature's head. "How dare you?" He gave a last tug, and the sweaty red face of the man from the Huggograms Agency stared at him. "How dare you pretend to be a dog!" And he began to kick at the man's shins. "You're disgusting. Get out. Go away."

But Alfred Potts, the man inside the suit, had worked hard at his routine. He hadn't had a fag for a whole hour, and he'd cut down on the beer before he came, and he wasn't going to be kicked by a flea-sized kid.

"Now you just pipe down, will you," he said, gripping Hal's arm. "Here's your mum trying to give you a bit of fun, you ungrateful little—"

But before he could finish, Hal slipped from his grasp and ran sobbing out of the room.

And that was the end of the party.

It was late in the evening before the big Mercedes came up the drive and disappeared into the

underground garage. A few minutes later Donald Fenton came in and was greeted by his wife.

"Have you got something for Hal?" she said hurriedly. "You haven't forgotten it's his birthday?"

Mr Fenton clapped his hand over his mouth. He had forgotten. "I was in a meeting till an hour before the plane was due to leave. I nearly didn't make it."

"Oh dear! He kept asking if you'd be back. Well, go and say goodnight to him anyway, he's upset." And she explained about Mr Potts and the huggogram.

Donald went slowly upstairs. He shouldn't have forgotten Hal's birthday, but he hadn't had a minute to himself all day – and the boy would have had tons of presents – Albina always saw to that. When he was Hal's age all he'd had for his birthday was a home-made fishing rod.

Hal was sitting up in bed waiting. He looked small and peaky and there were dark rings under his eyes.

"I've come straight from the airport," explained his father. "I'm afraid I haven't been able to get you a present, but we'll go shopping tomorrow. I can get away early. Is there anything you'd like?"

Hal shook his head. “All I ever wanted was a dog.”

But he spoke listlessly; it was all over. That horrible man smelling of cigarettes and beer had somehow destroyed his dream.

Mr Fenton looked at his son – and then he had an idea. “All right, Hal. We’ll go out tomorrow and get one.”

Downstairs, Albina Fenton heard a shriek of joy coming from Hal’s room. “What is it?” she asked her husband when he came downstairs. “What’s going on?”

Donald was smiling, looking very pleased with himself.

“I’ve told him we’ll get a dog. Tomorrow.”

“A dog! You’re mad, Donald. I’ve told you and I’ve told Hal, I absolutely won’t have my house destroyed by an animal.”

“It’s only for the weekend, Albina. They don’t rent them out for longer than that.”

“Who doesn’t? What are you talking about?”

“The Easy Pets people. It’s a place where they rent out dogs – it’s round the corner from the office. My secretary told me about it. You can get any dog you like for an hour or a day – people rent them when they want to impress their friends or go into

the country. They're very carefully chosen – house-trained and all."

"Yes, but what happens when it's time to take the dog back? Are you going to tell Hal it's only for the weekend?"

"Good heavens, no! By the time the dog has to go back, Hal will be tired of him – you know how quickly children get bored with the things you give them. He only played with that indoor space projector we got him for Christmas for a couple of days and it cost the earth.`

"Well, I hope you're right. I really couldn't stand any fuss."

"I am right," said Donald firmly.

And anyway, when it was time for the dog to go back he'd be on the way to New York.