

“A Battle of Wills”
An Excerpt from Chapter 8, *Marley & Me*
By John Grogan

When Marley was not quite six months old, we signed him up for obedience classes. The course ran eight lessons and cost fifty dollars, which we thought was a bargain, especially considering that Marley could destroy fifty dollars’ worth of shoes in thirty seconds. At registration we met the woman who would be teaching our class. She was a stern, no-nonsense dog trainer who subscribed to the theory that there are no incorrigible dogs; just weak-willed and hapless owners.

At the first lesson, before we were fully out of the car, Marley spotted the other dogs gathering with their owners across the tarmac. He leaped over us and out of the car and was off, dragging his leash behind him. He darted from one dog to the next, sniffing private parts, dribbling pee, and flinging huge wads of spit through the air.

The instructor was staring at us with a look that could not have been more withering had I decided to throw off my clothes and dance naked right there on the blacktop. “Take your place, please.” And she added, looking at my wife Jenny and me, “You are going to have to decide which of you is going to be trainer. A dog can answer to one master.” I slinked off to the sidelines with my tail between my legs, leaving Master Jenny in command.

Miss Dominatrix was only a few sentences into her introduction when Marley decided the standard poodle on the opposite side of the class deserved a closer look. Jenny was fighting valiantly to bring Marley to a halt, but he lumbered on, tugging her across the parking lot in pursuit of hot-poodle-butt-sniffing action. Everyone stared. Some snickered. I covered my eyes.

Miss Dominatrix announced calmly, “That, class, is an example of a dog that has been allowed to think he is the alpha male of his pack. Right now, he’s in charge.” I winced, and gave thanks that it wasn’t me out there.

The instructor began running the class through the sit and down commands. At one point I opened my eyes to see Jenny lying on the pavement face-down and Marley standing over her, panting happily. As class ended, Miss Dominatrix intercepted us. “You really need to get control over that animal,” Neither of us breathed a word. We just retreated to the car in humiliation and drove home in silence.

The next week Marley and I were back, this time without Jenny. The night’s lesson was walking on heel. Miss Dominatrix handed each of us a short length of chain with a steel ring welded to each end. These, she told us, were choker collars and would be our secret weapons for teaching dogs to heel effortlessly at our sides.

On the count of three, I was to say, “Marley, heel!” and step off with my left – never my right – foot. If he began to wander off course, a series of minor corrections – sharp little tugs on the leash – would bring him back into line.

“Marley, heel!” I commanded. As soon as I took my first step, he took off like a fighter jet from an aircraft carrier. I yanked back hard on the leash and he made an awful coughing gasp as the chain tightened around his airway. He sprang back for an instant, but as soon as the chain loosened, he lunged forward

again, I yanked back again and he gasped once more. We continued like this the entire length of the parking lot. He was coughing and panting; I was grunting and sweating.

“Rein that dog in!” Miss Dominatrix yelled.

“For God’s sake, Marley,” I whispered, “Our family pride is on the line.”

“Here,” she said impatiently, “Let me show you.” I handed the leash to her. With a smart yank of the lead, Miss Dominatrix set off with him. But almost instantly he barreled ahead as if he were pulling the lead sled in the Iditarod. It looked like he was going to pull her arm out of its socket. I should have been embarrassed, but I felt an odd sort of satisfaction that often comes with vindication. My classmates snickered, and I beamed with perverse pride. *See, my dog is awful for everyone, and not just me!* I had to admit the scene was pretty hilarious. The two of them, having reached the end of the parking lot, turned and came lurching back toward us in fits and starts, Marley, frothing at the mouth, clearly enjoying this excellent new tug-of-war game his teacher had called on him to demonstrate.

When he caught sight of me, he hit the gas with a near-supernatural burst of adrenaline, forcing Miss Dominatrix to break into a sprint to keep from being pulled off her feet. Marley didn’t stop until he slammed into me with his usual *joie de vivre*.

When the lesson was over, she asked if I could stay after for a minute. She turned to me and, in a newly conciliatory voice, said, “I think your dog is still a little young for structured obedience training.”

“He’s a handful, isn’t he?” I said, feeling a new camaraderie with her now that we’d shared the same humiliating experience.

“He’s simply not ready for this,” she said. “He has some growing up to do.”

It was beginning to dawn on me what she was getting at. “Are you trying to tell me –“

“He’s a distraction to the other dogs.”

“—that you’re –“

“He’s just too excitable.”

“—kicking us out of class?”

“You can always bring him back in another six or eight months.”

“So you’re kicking us out?”

“I’ll happily give you a full refund.”

“You’re kicking us out.”

“Yes,” she finally said. “I’m kicking you out.”

As if on cue, Marley lifted his leg and let loose a raging stream of urine, missing his beloved instructor's foot by mere centimeters.