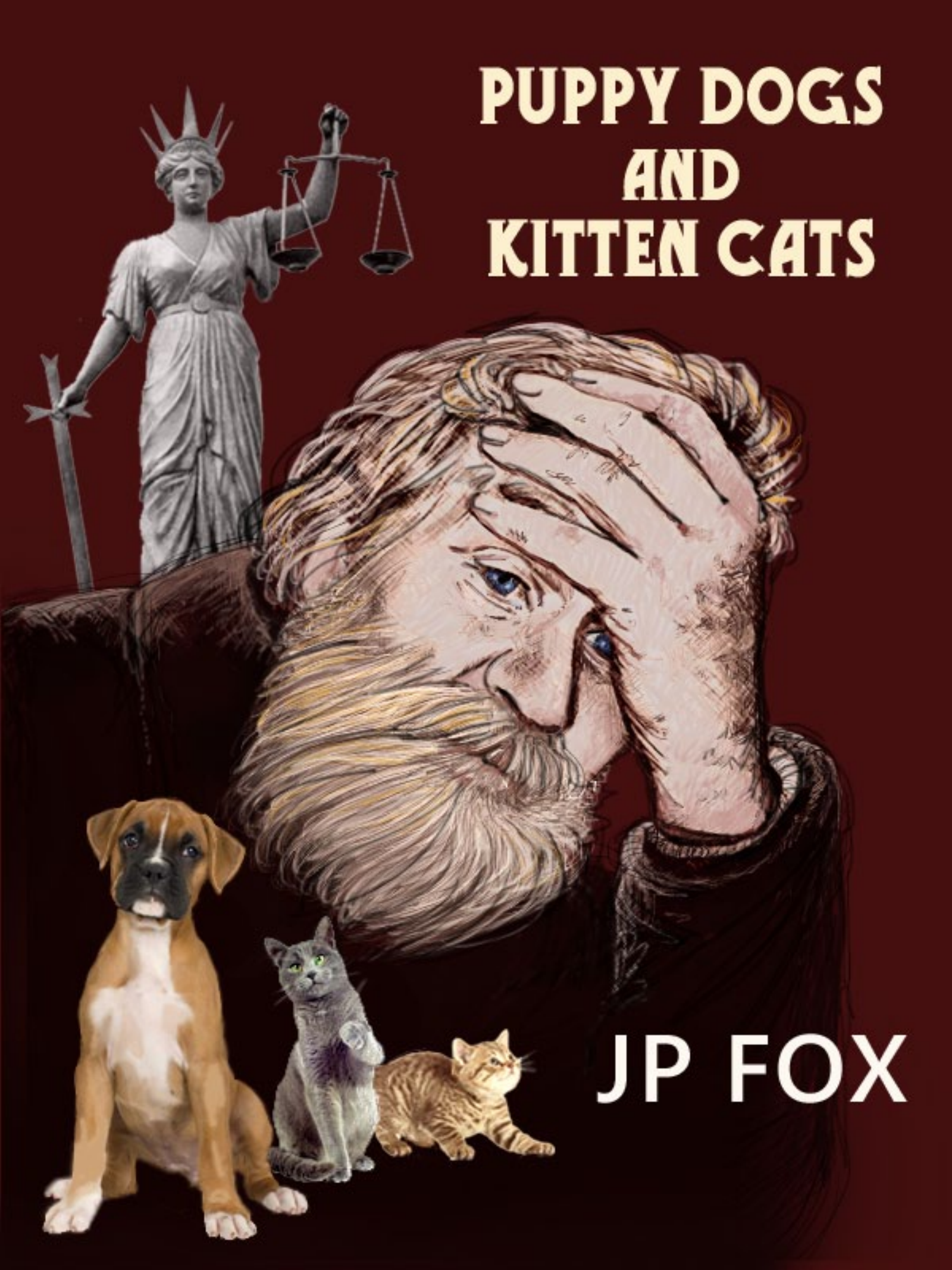
PUPPY DOGS AND KITTEN CATS



JP FOX

PUPPY DOGS & KITTEN CATS

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Page design and layout also by Nine Lives Studio.

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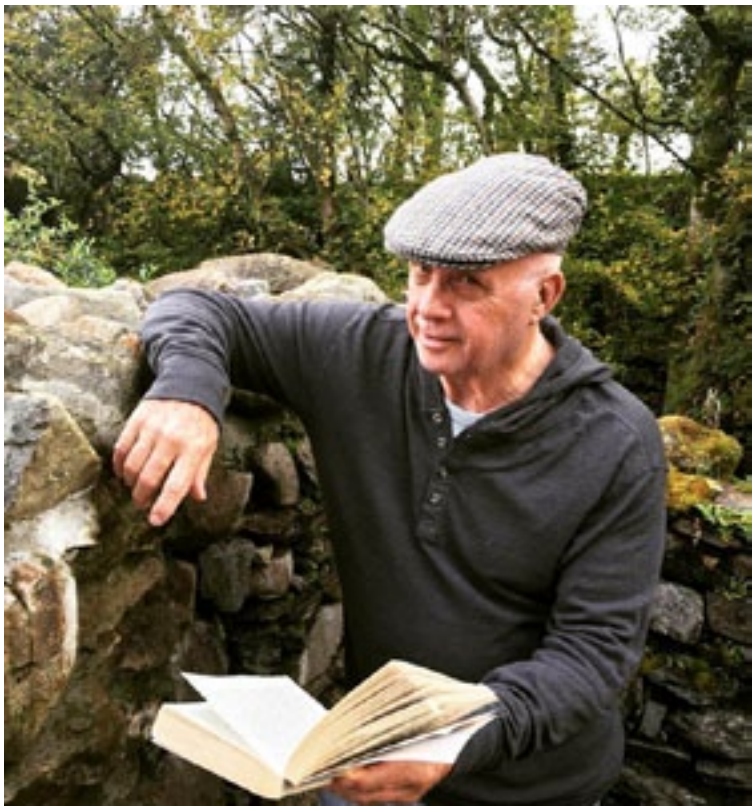
A WORD FROM JOHN

I loved reading from an early age. Comic books. Advertisements. Signs. Numbers on buses and destinations. My teenage years were filled with Agatha Christie novels. My twenties found me soaking up true-life stories: marine and air disasters.

My favourite, and to me, the most heart-rending of human stories, was that of Chang and Eng, the original Siamese Twins. The emotional cascades stirred up by loss and pain we experience in life is often difficult to deal with.



PUPPY DOGS & KITTEN CATS

Story Line

When rookie journalist, Jamie Clifford, is assigned to report on a case of child abduction, it overwhelms the young man. His father knew the accused some 25 years earlier, built up a rapport with him, and related to his boy the nature of the man, that he was a decent sort of person, despite rumours to the contrary.

All the stories the rookie had were only in his memory; when he met the aged Benjamin Bennett the stories came to life. When Bennett asks him to defend him in court, Jamie is gob-smacked and makes it plain he can't do it. However, moved by the confidence Bennett has in him, Jamie accepts the role. He soon wishes he had not taken it on; there are other forces at work to derail his defence….

Chapter 1

It was always a pleasurable experience listening to my father tell stories of his childhood. Some of his anecdotes came from his father; it was hard to discern which was which. Others came from kids he knew, kids who revel in telling and retelling their favourite stories. But it really didn't matter, the stories were great and I sincerely believe what made them great was the fact that my Dad took the time to engage with me as a boy. I guess he learned from his father the importance of spending time with his children, and not specifically quality time. Just time. Invariably the time spent became 'quality' because time and attention were given ungrudgingly. Spending time naturally leads to a good relationship. The hours spent with my Dad were treasured hours, every last one of them, ones I will never forget. My Grandfather died when I was too young to remember, just a tot; but I'm sure I'd have enjoyed his stories, too.

Dad had the knack of making the story come alive, giving the characters personality, filling my head like I was right next to them; in the street with Mattie Brown and friends and assorted rivals; kicking what remained of a distressed soccer ball, which bladder oozed from the leather case exposing what looked like a tumour. Mattie was the kid with the gimpy left leg who fell over more times than you could poke a stick at, and always, it seemed, when near the goalpost and about to score. Understandably, he was never allowed to take penalty shots, even though he was the frequent victim of the foul. Then there was "Redser" Howard, the quick-talking and vain ginger-headed kid who talked about girls all day long; Sammy 'fatso' Cramer who laughed all the while he beat up on smaller kids for their lunch money.

My father had amazing recall. He had a story to tell about every kid he ever knew, it seems, and it wasn't till I was older I began to understand that he was a natural observer of people. If someone was 'quirky' in some manner or another, Dad would connect it to the person and remember it down the track. It appeared that everyone he encountered possessed something 'quirky', something different that made them who they were whether it was in their physical appearance, their behaviour, their speech; if Dad couldn't remember one of his schoolmates or a kid from the neighbourhood it meant that that kid had no personality full stop.

Animals too, came in for inspection. He had a million stories about dogs, less about cats; more than a few anecdotes on birds (particularly on stalking with slingshots); a few about horses and the occasional pig, and one or two about fish. Tales about grown-ups got a big mention, too. I never thought to ask why he didn't put his stories to paper because I thought they were great, but I was

too young to connect my Dad with being a writer. Later on, I did ask. His answer was brief: 'I'm not a writer. I'm a plumber, Son.'

One character who stands out above others is that of the man who lived in the corner house on Water and Cane. Benny Benn, short for Benjamin Bennett, the man who loved animals and was very good at treating them, and did so for free. I remember well the evening Dad and I sat together on the lounge watching TV. Mum was visiting her sister, my sick aunt. I was eight, just turned. Bored by the show, we ended up wrestling on the floor. When I had him pinned down and on the point of surrender, he said: 'Jamie! Did I ever tell you the story about the man who loved dogs and cats?' I shook my head, surprised and curious together. Surprised: because he took away my advantage by distracting me from the job at hand. Curious: if his sole aim was to distract me. He hasn't changed much. So, with a serious gaze, he rolled me over with one hand, lifted me back onto the settee, and began …

My memory of anecdotes and their order may be jumbled, so the following account is joined by my childhood interpretation of events. Many of my father's anecdotes are from his childhood and onward. Dad came in contact with the man who loved dogs and cats when he was about twenty years old. 1987. Benny Benn was fifty or so. The circumstances that connected them are as follows: While driving to the jobsite—he had recently finished his apprenticeship—a collie cross ran in front of my father's car. A boy dashed forward, crying; his pet was injured, maybe dead. My father felt awful and offered to take the dog to a vet. The boy nominated Benny Benn. From this lad, I believe, but can't corroborate it, my Dad learned enough about Benny Benn to grow to like him, and having met with and chatted to the man, perhaps on more than one occasion, he grew to like him even more so.

As a young boy wrestling with his dad on the floor all those years ago, I got the feeling that Dad had 'serious stuff' on his mind but knew I wasn't ready for it. I would find out later in life.

My father's words I have embellished to a large degree but the substance, I believe, is accurate. Since years have passed and I work for a newspaper, I take the liberty of 'ghost writing' his stories, although listening to him tell it is far better than any biographical attempt! I also take full responsibility for any gaps in chronology, since I was too young to chronicle the sequence of events. There didn't appear to be any order to Dad's stories, just a bunch of tales about people who impressed him in one way or another.

As a kid I never had a dog of my own—

I asked why?

Your grandma—

I recall the look on my Dad's face. He turned away quickly, for a second or two, swung back and smiled. I think I knew what made him sad but I said nothing.

Your grandmother was allergic, Son.

What's al-ler-gic?

She was sensitive to dog and cat fur. Gave her a rash. You remember the cat incident?

(I remembered. That was the time I found a stray cat in Grandma's yard. I was five. Grandma ordered me to remove the kitten from the house! She never said she was allergic. Left me with a cat scar to this day).

—or a cat. Not that I ever wanted a cat. A dog was different. It was a boy's pet. Cats were for old ladies and girls, or sissy boys. Dogs were abundant on our street. Cats were scarce, or were plentiful but knew how to disguise themselves to survive. Whenever we kids saw a cat, which was rare, the feral feline was always in the 'lurking' mode; which meant the feline was always on guard, always on the lookout due to the sheer numbers and natural dominance of dogs. I say 'feral' with all due knowledge because I never saw a cat that wasn't feral; whenever a cat was seen it was always, without a doubt, in the hunting mode, crouching in wait for the bird in the branch, or had already caught its prey and tossed it away and chased it all over again. It must be noted that not all cats feared dogs and some dogs actually fled from cats. Every other family seemed to have a dog, or at least fed one. And yet, no one seemed to claim ownership of any particular creature. Dogs weren't fenced in to growl at you as you passed by, or snap at you if you got too near the fence. Leashes to keep dogs restrained weren't fashionable in my youth; nor did laws exist against dogs pooping in a public place. They roamed freely, pooped freely, fought freely. One thing I never saw was a 'pack' on the marauding trail. They didn't go out hunting for sheep or cattle (not that we city kids could always identify other animals), because there were none to hunt. Occasionally the few horses that pulled coal carts, or pig-swill carts, would dash from the snapping dogs that imagined the horses were on their territory. When we were kids, dogs were sort of 'community' dogs, street dogs; you knew more about the dog than you did about the neighbour that owned it, or fed it. Yet, everyone knew that 'Ruff" the mangy looking mutt belonged to, or spent most of its doggy days at the Smith's house, and that it was an incessant barker; 'Shep' the old shaggy mutt that lived at number eighty-eight, generally lived with the McCarthy clan. We were convinced Elvis' favourite dog was called 'Shep'. The breed was not identified in the song, but history has it the original 'Shep' was a German shepherd. The name became a popular one for kids

to name their dogs, mongrel or otherwise, because of the affinity boys had with their pets. That Elvis lamented about having to shoot the poor creature every time the radio played on a Saturday afternoon had something to do with it, I guess. I thought cats had nine lives, not dogs.

We knew all the names of every dog, male or female—although it has to be admitted, as younger kids we didn't differentiate between the sexes; they were just dogs to us. The realisation that gender was crucial came at extemporary intervals in our still-young-but-eager-to-learn history when the bigger dogs or perhaps the cleverer dogs got the 'girl' dog. One older kid said his father said the dog was 'in heat', which had nothing to do with temperature; rather it had to do with female aroma. Male dogs went berserk when the female gave off that distinctive 'smell', apparently. Where the smell came from was obvious. The male dog's nose clearly informed any observer that the smell didn't come from the front of the girl dog. But we, as innocent as, took it in our stride and watched the parade of panting canines, the small and the great, chase the unfortunate bitch around and around until she was cornered, or exhausted. In order to 'get the girl' there was much ado about success. The big dog, the one that imagined he was the leader of the pack, and despite the merit of an unwritten doggy law, had to fight to the death or at least to the spilling of blood, to prove his doggie manhood. And while the big dog brawled with savage tooth and claw with an equally amorous hound—a shrewd opportunist, a wait-a-while sniffer seized the day, and, of course, the female. What often followed those canine unions was atrocious, by nearly all accounts. Some grown-ups in our street would race to get buckets of water to get the dogs to 'separate'. The squealing and terror that came from the creatures tore into our young brains as they tried to avoid the water barrage, resulting in a savage pulling away from their 'tied' state. What no one considered was: the damage to the poor creatures. Sensitive body parts are not designed to respond favourably to unnatural, forced separation! It said much of the sadism of someone of that ilk. More than once my father told me how humans have dealt badly with the animals among us, and the atrocities are ongoing. Whenever documentaries on wildlife were televised, he'd always invite me to watch with him. Apart from the thrill derived, those occasions were special.

Once, a dog from another street strayed into our territory. It foamed at the mouth and growled at us kids when we tried to get near it. None of the other dogs were game to interact with it, neither to sniff it out nor chase it away. Intuition warned us kids to keep our distance. There was something wrong with its fur as well, especially around the neck and shoulders. Patches of skin were visible. It turned out the thing had rabies, so one of the senior citizens in the neighbourhood explained. It was scary even to look at the thing. The dog had mean eyes and a matching growl. One day it was there, the next day it was gone; but it left a deep imprint on kids like us who were impressionable.

Intruder dogs from nearby streets brought out the territorial 'growl' in the local canines, and depending on the mongrel breed, its place in the pack, and how keen the dog was on territorial rights—well, needless to say there were persistent, and gruelling, dog fights. For as soon as an intruder was detected, even approaching sovereign borders, the neighbourhood canines were alerted to the danger by the instinctiveness of doggy language. If you were patting or playing fetch with Rover, the loyal and true friend would be up and gone, ears skyward, tail stiff and eyes sharp, to enter the impending dispute. Leashes weren't required in those days, so holding on to the alerted canine was next to impossible. It didn't seem to take much to start an all-out scrap; often, no, very often, all it took for a quicker and unprovoked attack was a word of encouragement from one of the teenage boys, whose main endeavour in life was to provoke a fight and witness the blood flow. It was exciting to watch, and scary. But we onlookers knew no better. Grown-ups didn't discipline us to avoid such savagery. It was the same in the schoolyard. A kid squabbling with his rival at school is not dissimilar to street-dog fights. Once the hint that two boys were about to scrap out their differences, a ring of screaming kids blocked them from leaving. They had to stand and fight. If that was not their choice, getting past the firewall that chanted 'violence' in local dialect was not an option on the menu. Usually, it was bloody. Usually, one boy cringed under the assault. Usually, the other boy was hailed as hero for being better at kicking, biting or gouging, or any or all of the above. The teacher patrolling the schoolyard—the unfortunate one on duty that day—had to battle his way through the thick barrier of rabble, like a man with a machete hacking a path through a wilful jungle. Then it was all over. Unless he was able to (1) identify the pugilists, and (2) manhandle one or both by whatever part of their torso was available—the teacher, now red-faced and screaming, 'Boys! Boys! Stop that!'—would rarely catch the bully or the bullied. The scrappers would dash off into the crowd and invariably escape. The same crowd that shouted for blood minutes earlier now shielded the scrappers from the teacher's clutches. If caught, the boys would be hauled brutally and angrily to the 'Principal's Office', which meant some form of punishment, like caning or, for repeat offenders, a stern warning to the boys' parents that expulsion was the next disciplinary step. I never heard of anyone being suspended or expelled from school. Not meaning it did not happen. I didn't hear of it if it did; leastways I never knew anyone who was expelled. I knew a kid who went to prison; I won't mention his name in case he sues for defamation or some such. On occasion an angry parent confronted the principal or the offending teacher who dared accuse his or her son of misconduct. Women parents were on a par with men parents when it came to spitting out venom. Teachers had to be wary of angry parents. Sometimes fists were clenched, sometimes flew. The principal had to hold his own in those circumstances. Getting behind a solid desk was good. Giving a gentle

reminder that a policeman was just a phone call away was also good. Diplomacy and the guile of a master tactician were also saving qualities. Frequently it was an issue of pride that brought the parent racing to defend his son's adventurous spirit. Rather than be a real parent and teach the little brat not to bully others at school, no, let him hone his mutinous skills at home and apply bully tactics at school. Discipline was carried out generally by the use of force, whereas true discipline is shown by good example on the part of those who aim to, or hope to, help young people behave with respect and decorum. A difficult goal, however, in a school of all-male teachers constantly wrestling to instil a basic education into an all-male pupillage of hormone-stampeding magnitudes. It has to be said that bullies existed among the educators too. Oftentimes they met rebellion with force of their own inventiveness, i.e., specialised equipment was used. Personal leather straps when wielded left welts; extra springy branches from the Rattan vine were a favourite of many teachers. Sometimes the open hand of an angry man left its mark on the side of the victim's head. Pulling and shoving and shaking pupils was not unheard of, neither. That's shaking kids, not eyes. Another form of discipline, that had the potential of catapulting the "unwary" fast forward, was whacking the legs of some poor victim—who talked in the queue when he should have remained quiet—with a hard-cover book. I know this personally.

Every teacher in our school had a name, either a local one like a plant or tree has, or one that offers a 'scientific' or 'Latinised' name. The local name, of course, was the surname. He was addressed respectfully or not respectfully by 'Sir'. Not that he was knighted or anything, like Sir Galahad or Sir Lancelot, but because we thought 'sir' was the same as 'sur' in surname. Sometimes logic comes later in life. And sometimes correct spelling. Using the 'scientific' name was the norm among us kids, although never in the presence of the teacher in question; unless some smart aleck muttered it from the back of the class. So, "Leather lips" earned that name because he had thick, bulging lips and made extensive use of his personal weapon of choice, i.e., a leather belt that came, no doubt, from his brother who used to run a barber shop and who kept the accoutrements as a reminder he hadn't abandoned his barber skills. All he did was cut hair for goodness sakes! Hair from heads, beards from chins. And maybe stubborn hairs from old and crumpled ears. And possibly grey ones that irritated the nasal passages. Who knows all these details about a man who simply gave or sold a leather strap to his brother? Not like he was a hairstylist par excellence. Not with the name Hacker O'Hare, that's for sure!

Which gets us back to names of dogs in our street. From the biggest and the meanest right down to the squeaky little rat-size Chihuahua that supposedly came all the way from Mexico—and could have been kennelled in Mexico for the number of times the thing was seen! Mrs Dorkins boasted of the 'special breeding' her beautiful baby had. She called the hardly-ever-sighted creature 'Charm' and

whenever it was sighted it was tenderly wrapped in the fold of the old lady's dressing gown, probably to preserve its 'breeding' by isolation. Very likely the little darling slept in the same bed as her mistress; such was the nature of the woman's doting. On the one and only occasion the miniature and near hairless 'thing' got loose was during 'heat'. Charm, you understand, was a bitch in doggy language. And she, as is wont to her gender, exuded that tell-tale odour that only macho dogs comprehend. Of course, we had names for that little runt. It was a thoroughbred, authenticated by its owner; meaning it was in a league of its own. All the other dogs in our street were mongrels, a bit of this a bit of that; except for Mad John's Alsatian, a creature that spawned a fear that frequently saturated the pants of young boys. Some thought that Mad John inspired more fear and panic than the Alsatian did, for the man with a child's mind had complete control over his four-legged wolf from the wild. One might expect the dog to be named 'Wolf'. However, Mad John called it "July". After the month July. Since he received the pup from his father in July. A natural enough conclusion. So, when the kids saw July in the distant straining on Mad John's leash, naturally they yelled out, 'here comes Mad John and the Wolf!' Not that July was a wolf; to us kids it was as near as one could get to the real wolf, like the one the teacher showed us on the cover of Jack London's story—what with July's sharp teeth, his fierce gaze, his big head and long snout. What set Mad John wild were the jeers he received from the 'braver' boys, the ones who could run fast and made sure they could climb a wall the chasing dog couldn't. Rarely was the creature let off the leash. But on the occasion when Mad John's frustrations turned foul—then the chase of vengeance began. There were never any cases of the Alsatian savaging anyone, not that I knew of, but hey, what do I know? I was too scared to taunt Mad John or his dog; whenever I saw him, I crossed the street as nonchalantly as my dubious acting skills allowed. That was the thing. Everyone said John was mad; it was common gossip. Not a difficult thing to convince a child that someone is crazy, especially if it is repeated often during his growing up years! Truth is, Mad John was not crazy-mad. He lived in a house with his parents; ate and drank like the rest of us. Regular schooling was not an option for one of his mental disadvantages, he being deemed 'slow to learn' by some experts, but the street experts had other names for him, i.e., expressions to suggest his intelligence was far from complimentary, by a long shot. So, the so-called know-alls in the community labelled him 'Mad'. John was a full-grown man, mid-twenties, trapped in the mind of a child, or vice versa, depending on one's view. If a photo of John was ever taken—and I'm sure it was at some time in the boy's life—it would have presented a handsome boy who grew into a handsome man. The picture of course would not have shown the voice was robust but the speech distorted. He knew what he wanted to say but it came out in part-grunt and gruff. He lived in an era when understanding of his mental 'illness' slash 'mental

delay' was scant, in an era when wise men and women forced lefthanded children to use the right hand; left-handedness being erroneously deduced as 'unnatural'; an era when the mentally insane were zapped with electric shocks to induce brains to be 'normal'. Odd, isn't it? My grandfather, were he alive today, would be incensed at some of the things labelled 'natural' or 'normal'.

However, the thing about Charm the Chihuahua was its uncanny speed. When it put its tiny head through the hole in the chicken-wire fence, nobody knew. When it squeezed its miniature body through the gap, nobody was available to notice. When it darted down the street, thus allowing the air to socialize its 'aroma', anarchy was in the making. Doggy anarchy, that is. It seemed that if the dogs were not alert or not in the area to be alerted, no one would have noticed this dollop of flesh on legs at all, the thing being so fast and so small. Its feet swivelled in a shade of pink blur it moved so fast. And nothing was chasing it, nothing at all, not even the wary tom-cat the Dunns owned; a cat that was the best mouser alive and strutted fearlessly between dogs. Most dogs, that is. "Ali", the Waters' pet, was the one exception. Old and decrepit, blind in the right eye, and limping like Captain Ahab himself, the old warrior commanded respect despite his age and consequent frailty, which was the mutt's only impediment to chasing the cat. He seemed to emanate the passion for the chase, even if it was only in his head. Never came near to catching the feline, though. Probably considered himself a legend in his own mind, having chased and killed numerous cats in his prime. "Tom", as the cat was called, was brave enough to dart past old Ali, such was the respect shown. The chase, however, was incarcerated in what was left of the memory of Old Ali's hundred- and twelve-year-old matted, hairy, and wasted body. That's doggy years, by the way.

The fugitive Chihuahua that raced seemingly without apprehension stopped and pirouetted on its rear legs in order to survey where it had come from and possibly, where it might go from here. From day to day, split-second decisions are not part of a dog's nature but you'd think otherwise on seeing the 'canine rush' when the female was in 'heat'. Missy lookalike rodent was clearly a smart canine. She, or 'it' if you prefer, took no less than a nanosecond to sum up the situation, and she was off like a contestant at Mount Panorama. Her V8 legs jumped the gun and the blur of pink shot forward. Choosing the right direction was a problem for the mini-dog. Why, you ask? Because the panting hounds came from north, south, east and west, and all points in between. Charm was the magnet; the dogs that attempted to align themselves with her were nothing less than obsequious steel filings. When she changed direction, the pack careened and crashed into each other. Fracas ensued. Short-lived snarls and stifled growls increased. Typical Chauvin verses Wimp stuff. Old Ali was not among the contestants; as one might expect, he declined. And so, the chase continued. Around and around Charm went, darting between dog's legs and jumping as a gazelle jumps, only on a mini scale. Tempers

flared among the pack; the strong showed their teeth, the weaker ones cowered. But none gave up. Instinct was the driving force and for an animal, instinct is hard to suppress; not that these particular creatures were in the business of suppressing hard-wired instincts. All motivations, if such can be ascribed to canines, were aimed at the bitch (in doggy language). Tiny Charm gave all the appearances she was beginning to tire and at one crucial moment she began running in small circles until she was unknowingly at the centre of the universe and all the orbiting stars were her fans; there was seemingly no way out. She whimpered. And the sniffers began their quest. And fierce fighting broke among her devotees. Dog against dog. One against one and all against all. Forget the Musketeer paradigm! Charm began to savour the moment and relish the attention, even though a gap was created in the circling pack to provide escape. However, a familiar voice screamed in her little pointed ears. It was her Mistress, Mrs Dorkins, stabbing the atmosphere with the lungs of a demented soprano. Fear and panic flowed from the mouth of the woman. Screams of "Baby! Baby!" pierced the human ear for kilometres; whatever effect it had on dogs in general, especially so did the Chihuahua respond.

Ordinarily, scuffles among dogs were no big deal in the neighbourhood; they were usual occurrences. But these new sounds alarmed virtually every neighbour in the street and to their doors they ran, for it was the sound of someone being murdered. Kids swarmed to the scene; near enough to be entertained but far enough to avoid caveat teeth.

Tiny Charm made the only sane decision that was available to her. She dashed through the gap and headed straight for her beloved Mistress, who clearly had more power over the little darling than any macho dog had. While some dogs scrapped for supremacy, several others paused in the exigency of the moment. The rest caught on and in hot pursuit all displayed salivating, extended tongues. Mrs Dorkins had barely enough time to shut the gate. The dogs understood a greater cause to fight off their rivals: that of the scented pheromone. And when Mrs Dorkins slammed the door, the pack hung around for a while, minutes really, to experience regret, and frustration. As if someone gave a signal to disperse, the dogs did exactly that.

In our street, wherever there were children there were dogs. Just a fact of life. Kids. Dogs. Made for each other. And whenever a kid spotted a cat —and by a kid a boy is meant, girls are gentler—invariably the boy would spit out 'Cats! Get him!' And the dog would give chase; as if dogs needed inspiration! Didn't even need to see the cat! Fact of life. Dogs and cats simply did not share any sort of camaraderie. It was as though some greater law was set in motion when dogs and cats first encountered each other. Dog: chase and kill. Cat: run for cover.

How-ever. An exception to that rule was held by Benny Benn, real name Benjamin Bennett. He was about fifty when I first met him. I was nearly twenty. Brought

a black and white mongrel to him. Chasing cars. My car. Had his leg mangled. Owner was a boy. Kids are always quick to rename those they think are weird.

Kids inherit that quality from their parents, usually. Parents, it has been wittily said, inherit insanity from their children but kids inherit everything else from their parents. And much, if not too much, from their environment.

Benny Benn lived at the end of the street; being on a corner block he had a bit more garden space than the rest of us, and used the area as a sort of zoo. In other words, Benny took in strays. He built a fence around his yard to keep the animals in, not to keep busybodies out, although he felt it was necessary to lock the gate in the event it might tempt kids to go inside for a closer look and forget to shut the gate. Leaving the gate open was something Benny Benn never did. The animals he cared for were too precious to him. Some were sick. Like birds rescued from cats. Cats rescued from dogs. And dogs saved from further harm by other dogs, or humans. Sometimes a creature struck by a car had some chance of survival; they were also taken in. It was not at all hard to see through the timber slats, even though some gaps forced you to squint and strain; when it came to caring for the animals there was nothing hidden or secretive about the man. That he cared for the animals was obvious to all. He never objected when the children peeked in at the kittens and pups on their way to and from school, and if the interest was there, which it invariably was, he'd open the gate a little to let them hold the little creatures.

Nobody paid him to take the animals in, nor did he solicit help to feed them or provide medicines where needed. Benny Benn didn't finish his training as a vet, didn't qualify, and likely would never qualify, due to his age, probably. But this man knew a lot about animals, had numerous books on animal husbandry and behaviour; sometimes he'd show the children pictures of llamas and sloths and macaques. It was common for people to bring their sick pets to him. If he could he would help the creature and not ask for, and often not accept, payment. People, parents that is, whose children cried for their sick pets, for the most part appreciated his generosity by offering to pay something. When they insisted he take the money, he always gave back half of what was offered.

So, to some people he was a treasure. Because? He came across as a man who cared, if only for their sick animals. That was enough for them, because anyone who cared that much for animals, other people's dogs and cats, was a decent sort of person. To others he was weird. Weird because he lived with his mother, and he fifty. Weird because after his mother died, he let his hair grow and generally neglected his appearance. Weird because he had an accent. In other words, he wasn't from around here. Where he came from no one quite knew but there were many guesses by the few, and when the 'enlightened' few speak the gullible masses listen as if to the whole truth and nothing but. Weird because he now lived alone. Weird because

he never married, not that anyone had proof of such. Even weird because he looked after animals twenty-four seven, and seemingly locked himself away from the community. Rumours were rife for a little while that he liked animals more than he liked people. And rumours that he liked kids more than animals. Weird because he rarely went out, even for groceries. The local kids loved it when he asked them to shop for items; usually bread, butter, milk. Some of the local women would get meat at the butchers, but that practice ended when he decided not to eat meat again. He was more than generous for what they did for him. It was not unusual that he helped pay for their groceries as well; it was noteworthy, that he asked those who were not well off, to do his errands. It was surmised he had plenty of money; others maintained he spent it all on the animals. Still others said he hasn't worked for years, so where does he get his money? And so, the rumours came and went. There were none who were that close to him to ask him, so the idea continued that he was fond of animals more than he was of people, that he had a stash of money under his mattress, that he robbed a bank in his younger days and was living off the proceeds.

Eggs and vegetables were never on his grocery list. Those supplies were cared for by the dozen chickens that happily buk-bukked their lives away in his back yard, and the excellent vegetable patch he maintained. It wasn't a rare occasion that some needy neighbour was handed eggs and cabbages.

The local vet didn't like him. On one occasion, so the story went, the vet in question tried to get an order to have him stopped keeping animals, aside from what was generally permitted, which meant he couldn't treat animals, not on his premises anyway. That failed because on inspection by an expert, the animals Benny Benn had were found to be in top condition, and those that were sick had adequate care toward recovery. The number of animals he cared for, apart from his faithful boxer cross, Franklin, never climber above twenty: three kittens and two pups, several budgies, a few older dogs, a guinea pig, some hamsters, a possum, some birds. Most of these animals, particularly the cats and dogs, were 'gifts' that required more attention than the receiver was prepared to offer, so many ended up in Benny Benn's menagerie because he hardly ever refused to take them. Sometimes he did refuse. He encouraged people to take personal care of their pets, and he didn't always accept them simply because they argued it was harder to look after them than they first thought. Benny Benn knew the novelty of a new pup had worn off; as had the responsibility that is morally incumbent upon those owning pets.

'A pet returns the greatest pleasure when its owner takes good care of it', he would stress when the occasion called for it. Also, the man was pragmatic. Taking in every stray, every sick creature would present more problems than solutions. But if he felt the dog would be abandoned…well, that was a different matter. He was pretty good at discerning motives.

Complaints against the man came and went. A tactical complaint was made about a disgusting smell that allegedly came from his property. Benny Benn had built a shed along the fence line. Made of wooden slats, with a flat roof; it reached as high as the fence. Inside he had made compartments for the dogs and cats, shelves for the bird cages, and straw for comfort. In the winter months a blow heater kept the chill out of the air. Chickens roamed the garden and found a place to roost in the shed. Every day the area was swept and hosed. The man sent by the Council couldn't fault it for cleanliness. Still, a by-law demanded that he reduce the number of animals drastically. Benny Benn argued he was caring for them while they were ill, and would return them to their owners, or where strays were involved, he would find someone to take them home. The counterargument was that he had more animals on his property than the Council allowed. He counter-argued that the pups and kittens would find good homes in the neighbourhood, that they were never more than a temporary arrangement on his property.

'But you have them on your property, Mr Bennet. From our understanding this is an ongoing project you have. You rarely, if ever, have one or two animals at any one time. We have to lay down the law here! Do you understand the Council's position? There is a limit.'

'Do you, sir' Benny replied, 'does the Council not see the service I perform for the community?'

'Veterinarians are good for the community. So are animal shelters. They are licensed. You are not, Sir!'

'In that case, I will apply for a licence.'

'Feel free, Mr Bennet. There are…strict guidelines.'

'Are you suggesting I won't qualify?'

'Sir, your property…it is not suitable. You live in a housing estate. Suburbia? Not zoned for… for what you are doing. Can't you see that?'

'I've been doing this for years. Why now? The law is not new, is it?'

'No…it's not a—'

'It's a conspiracy then. I know a conspiracy when I see one. Good day, Sir!'

The next day a notice was nailed to Benny Benn's gate, an order to comply with zoning, building and animal regulations. Over the ensuing weeks the children passing by noticed the decline in the number of animals. Some, those who appreciated Benny Benn's healing skills, worriedly told their parents. News got out that

he was ordered to remove all the animals from his premises, which news spread like wildfire. And the rumours followed. He was cruel to animals. He whipped them all night. He starved them. The animals were diseased. He ate them for dinner, and sometimes for morning snacks. The rumour that got people particularly scared was: he kept animals, especially pups and kittens, to attract children. Soon, he was labelled a 'dirty old man' and other pejorative terms. Gradually he set about demolishing the wooden shed that housed his charges. The word went around that he was ordered to pull it down because it was disease-ridden; that he was diseased; that he never washed; never cleaned the place; hardly ever went out. And when he was seen publicly, he dressed in a long-soiled coat, wore a hat that didn't hide his dishevelled hair, and had spectacles as thick as whiskey glasses. Someone claimed they saw him watching the sky on a starry night but that it wasn't the stars he was interested in. The rumour got around that he was 'howling at the moon', which automatically made him a lunatic, a crazy person. Jokes about the 'werewolf' and eerie stories of his alleged 'nocturnal behaviour' surfaced and died, until something else was rumoured. It seemed that all his good deeds towards animals and the people who owned them evaporated like dew under a rising sun. Some, one or two, of the grateful ones refused to forget what he had done and defended the man whenever fabrications were bandied about. But it took courage to defend him in public. It was often wiser to say nothing because defending him could be interpreted as agreeing with his so-called peculiar ways. And none knew him well enough to refute all the claims against him. All they really knew were the things he allowed them know, none of which infringed on his past, nor why he lived the way he did. They knew he took care of animals, full stop. But once the injunction against him was upheld—which effectively banned him from treating animals, putting a stranglehold on his role in the community—the rumours that followed destroyed the man's reputation as a decent human being and with the passing of time he became known as a recluse, a loner, an outsider. What he was once known for, a lover and a healer of animals, was forgotten. Children, whose animals he tended, grew up and left home to pursue careers. Newborns grew up with the stories of Benny Benn the Hermit, Benny Benn the dirty old man who never washed, never cut his hair, never spoke to anyone, never had visitors, the crazy man who watched the stars at night but who was really under the 'influence' of the moon.

Except for that first encounter when I brought the injured dog to Benny (and several subsequent visits), I was not one who regularly witnessed firsthand the man's love for animals, but the boy whose dog I helped was, and he told me stuff. At an extended session I had with him, at his invitation, I got to know the man a little better. He told me the outcome the Counsel enforced on his vocation, and the abrupt disintegration of his service to the community. He confided in me, an outsider really, more than anyone else: serious accusations made against him, how

much he loved his wife, how devastated he was by the loss of his wife and daughter. With the passing of time and the fact that I was busy in my own life, I have to admit that Benny Benn came into my thoughts less and less, but one thing is certain: his pain left a mark on my psyche. Time passed, I moved house but whenever I heard of an animal abuse story on TV or a kindness shown to a stray dog, or one that was injured, which was sporadic in my line of work, it was at those times I thought of Benny. It's on those occasions I can easily conjure up images of him showing the furry pups and blue-eyed kittens to the children going to and from school, and in his eyes I still see the pleasure he derived from the joy that radiated from the children's faces.