

Aubrey's Uncle Gordon

story of the month

By Richard W. Jennings, the author of Orwell's Luck
"The Master of Middle American Whimsy"



Aubrey, the smallest kid in the fifth grade, had a favorite uncle who lived in a townhouse on nearby Tree Street.

Now well into middle age, Uncle Gordon, Aubrey's mother's brother, had done it all.

He'd been a steeplejack, a lumberjack, a flapjack cook, a driver for the President's wife - Jackie Kennedy - a jackpot dealer, a mud-jack engineer, a yellow-jacket rancher, a jack-of-all-trades, a jack-in-the-pulpit, an Italian leather jacket tailor, a jackhammer operator, a jack-o-lantern carver, a jack-lift repairman and a professional poker player who almost always held at least three jacks.

What he'd never done, however, was own a dog.

This changed when the widow next door was bitten in the lower lip by her twelve-week-old Jack Russell Terrier puppy, an attack requiring five painful stitches straight through her recently injected collagen.

"I was wondering," she said somewhat unclearly because of her swollen lower lip, "would you like a dog?"

"You betcha," Uncle Gordon responded. "Is it housebroken?"

"No," the kindly lady honestly replied. "But he's free."

"No problemo," Uncle Gordon answered. "I'm sure my niece can help train him. What kind of dog is he?"

"He's a pedigreed Jack Russell Terrier," she said. "He originally cost more than my lip surgery, but that is neither here nor there."

"And his name," asked Uncle Gordon.

"John," the wounded widow replied.

Hmm, thought Uncle Gordon. I'd have guessed something else.

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"Are you sure you want to part with him?" Uncle Gordon asked.

"Oh, I'm sure," Uncle Gordon's neighbor explained. "I bought him on impulse because he's so cute. But that's not a good enough reason to take on the responsibility of caring for a dog. This one is smart, young and willing to learn. I'm not."

"Sounds like the perfect dog," Uncle Gordon replied.

"Perhaps for someone," the widowed neighbor observed with a sigh. "Someday."

Hot, diggity, dog, thought Uncle Gordon, who was tired of living alone, knowing that seven hundred and fifty million people around the world have dogs. He was surely among the last.

That's a lot of collars, Uncle Gordon thought. Not to mention city dog tag fees.

That night John peed himself to sleep on Uncle Gordon's pillow.

"Tomorrow is another day," Uncle Gordon said as he stuffed the pillow into the washing machine.

It was also the first day of Aubrey's new job.

Home from his visit to Dr. Foster, John wagged his tail in excitement when Aubrey arrived at her uncle's townhouse straight from Mrs. Bastianich's fifth grade class at the Sunflower Middle School where that day's math assignment had left her dizzy.

Uncle Gordon had an after-school snack waiting for his favorite niece, plus a brand new parrot-blue collar ordered online complete with matching leash and fluffy round dog bed.

It was a lovely afternoon for a walk. John was in no hurry. He stopped and sniffed every flower, bush and tree, watering some, pooping near others. Aubrey cleaned up after him using plastic bags given to Uncle Gordon by an elderly clerk who, spying John's tiny wet nose peeking out from Uncle Gordon's poplin jacket, said, "I hope you got a guarantee on that dog. He's really quite small."

"He'll be fine," Uncle Gordon assured the clerk. "He's a brave, well-loved dog."

"If you say so," the clerk replied, ringing up the purchase of a pound of ground goose liver and a thin-and-crispy frozen pizza, one for the dog, the other for the girl.

All was going splendidly until a week or so later when Bob fell into the well.



The construction of Tree Street was an economic afterthought. The developer had used up all his available land for houses with front and backyards. This included the street that Aubrey and her mother Anne lived on, Cheery Street; a house they shared with a former neighborhood stray cat named Porchie. As well the house that backed up to theirs' from Plump Street, where Bean, also a fifth-grader, shared his home with his mother and father and three peculiar singing dachshunds named Sophie, Owen and Jozie.

Uncle Gordon's street, Tree Street, had no room for yards, so the developer built a row of lawn-free two-story townhouses, each with a musty, dark basement. To disguise their underground dankness the developer had constructed a single window in each basement around which he'd dug a four-and-a-half-foot deep window well surrounded by a thick vertical wall of rusting reinforced concrete.

For nearly an hour every day, the townhouse basements let in a shaft of sunlight. Otherwise, they were simply a catch basin for crinkled brown leaves and runaway trash.

It was into Uncle Gordon's well that Bob had fallen.

He could not climb out nor could Uncle Gordon reach him.

Bob was a possum in whom John took an immediate interest.

First of all, Bob seemed edible.

Secondly, Bob and John were the same size.

Thirdly, John's brain was twice as big as Bob's.

And fourthly, despite his long, strong claws, when faced with a vertical concrete wall, Bob was trapped like a rat.

"Good grief," said Uncle Gordon. "Now what?"

Out of kindness, he tossed a Braeburn apple into the well.

That afternoon, as Aubrey polished off her microwaved pizza, she heard John barking in the basement.

"What's John's problem?" Aubrey asked.

"Oh, thanks for reminding me," said Uncle Gordon. "Before you take John on his walk do you mind removing Bob from the well? Use this folding kitchen stool and be sure to wear these heavy leather gloves. Those things can bite."

"Excuse me?" asked Aubrey. "Aren't you leaving something out?"

"I don't think so," replied Uncle Gordon. "Anyway, you're a smart girl. You'll figure out what to do."



Aubrey downed the last of her pizza and milk then went outside to examine the situation. Inside, in the basement, John was leaping into the air from all fours and barking endlessly at Bob. Outside, Bob, trapped in the well, was hissing, snarling and baring his teeth like an angry Florida alligator.

"I get it," Aubrey said.

Back in the townhouse with her Uncle Gordon she announced, "Forget the kitchen stool. I'll need a fishing pole, two plastic bags and a twenty-dollar bill."

"What's the money for?" her uncle asked.

"Motivation," replied Aubrey.

The fifth grader attached the fishing line to John's new collar (without John in it) and went back outside where she slowly lowered the collar and the apple it was wrapped around, within reach of the fuming possum who'd already consumed the first Braeburn apple.

Immediately Bob clamped his teeth on the apple now held fast to the line by John's collar.

Quickly, Aubrey reeled in both apple and possum and dumped the possum into a double-wrapped plastic bag that she tied at the top with a square knot. The disappointed dog, not able to do battle with possum as he had planned upon the possum's release from the concrete dungeon, crawled through the bushes after a bloated toad.

"Be back soon," Aubrey told him.

Once inside she handed her uncle the thrashing plastic bag, grabbed the parrot-blue leash, and said, "See you soon. Gotta take a dog for a walk."

Uncle Gordon stared at his gift in surprise then headed for the house next door.

Aubrey and John enjoyed a leisurely walk through the neighborhood as she thought of what she could buy that afternoon for twenty dollars, undeterred by the scream that rattled the windows at the widow's house.

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