A Battle of Wits

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When I was two years old my father brought home an eight week old puppy that we named Prince. Prince was half Labrador Retriever, half Collie, and all hound.

At the time, we were living in a small two-story single family house in a lower middle-class neighborhood in Elizabeth, New Jersey, not far from New York City. In this unremarkable house with just one bathroom lived seven (soon to be nine) people. There were my parents and me, my aunt and uncle and their daughter, Rita, and our grandmother. Susan and Jimmy would arrive two years later. Also present most afternoons and for dinner was my great-aunt, Julie.

No one in the house knew anything about dog training other than housebreaking, *shake*, and *beg,* but that was okay because Prince was a master of people training or, at least, of using people to his advantage. Every afternoon Prince would perch himself on the staircase, which was in direct line with the front door, and wait for Grandma and Aunt Julie to come home from work. Grandma knew this and would always ring the doorbell before coming in so that one of us could keep Prince from bounding through the opened door. But for my Aunt Julie part of being in a family meant that you didn’t have to ring a doorbell before entering the house. So every afternoon Prince would wait patiently for Aunt Julie to arrive, and every afternoon (unless one of us happened to be there to prevent it) Prince would dash through the door to freedom.

Thus began Prince’s long career as an escape artist, orienteer, and Lothario.

By today’s standards Prince was a case study in irresponsible dog ownership. What can I say? It was the fifties. Everybody let their dogs roam loose, except perhaps those with pedigreed dogs who were interested in breeding, and even then… Pet dogs roamed freely through streets and yards. They showed up at playgrounds and schoolyards, and they pooped whenever and wherever they chose, usually on the most heavily traveled sidewalks on the way to school, perhaps explaining the short lived popularity of ripple soled shoes.

Once Prince discovered that he could escape, virtually at will, his adventures really began. His prey instinct manifested itself in the form of car chasing even though he would never fetch a stick or a ball. He wandered the busy streets of Elizabeth, New Jersey and beyond, gradually expanding what I’m sure he considered to be his natural territory. He had two neighborhood butcher shops that he frequented, one kosher and one non-kosher. Prince was ecumenical when it came to food. But usually Prince would return home in time for dinner unless he was pursuing a fair damsel. Then he might be gone for days.

His first love, which we knew of, was a pretty Dalmatian who lived down the street, named (what else?) Smokey. Smokey was a sweetheart of a dog who gave birth to a litter of three of the cutest puppies you ever saw. Picture little tan and white Lab puppies with randomly scattered black polka dots and you’ll have some idea of what they looked like. My mother almost brought one home, but by then we were nine people living in our small single family house and common sense, or perhaps my father, prevailed. But Prince had found his calling in life – *l’amour*. Unfortunately, this avocation led to an unending battle of wits between Prince and his arch nemesis, the Elizabeth, New Jersey Dogcatcher.

The dogcatcher in Elizabeth at that time was a rather unpleasant woman who used to drive around town in a modified 1949 black Dodge panel truck. Her first encounter with Prince came when she was called to a local family restaurant that Prince used to frequent. Prince had discovered one day that by locating himself in front of this eatery and sitting up and begging or offering his paw he could often persuade exiting diners, especially children, to offer him any scraps or left-overs they might be carrying home. The restaurant owners didn’t seem to mind at first. In fact, Prince became a minor celebrity. But once Prince began supplementing his handouts by exploring the restaurant’s garbage, the owners decided enough was enough and called the dogcatcher.

The first few rounds in this enduring conflict went easily to the dogcatcher. All she had to do was get within sight of Prince, hold a piece of meat in her fingers, and call, “*Here Brownie, here Brownie*” and Prince would happily trot over to her. After the first few incarcerations, however, Prince realized that the short term gratification was hardly worth the long term consequences. This became especially apparent to Prince once my father impressed upon him his displeasure at having to spend his hard-earned money to bail him out. To make matters worse, Dad had to drive clear across town, to a not particularly nice part of the city, to liberate this canine reprobate.

From then on Prince developed a game-plan that would serve him well for many years. He would always keep one ear perked, listening for the sound of the dogcatcher’s Dodge panel truck. At the first hint of trouble Prince would amble away, often within sight but not reach of his antagonist. The dogcatcher would follow him, either on foot or in her vehicle, but she rarely got close enough to corner him. Prince would happily make his way through the neighborhood streets and yards until he arrived back at our home. There he would sit or lounge comfortably on our modest front lawn, having seemingly been advised, perhaps by a jailhouse lawyer, that the dogcatcher was forbidden by law from trespassing on our property to secure him. The dogcatcher would stand on the city sidewalk, meat in hand, and try to entice Prince to stray from his sanctuary. Prince never did. He might sit up and beg or offer a paw, but he never crossed that inviolable line.

The coup de grâce came one summer evening, some years later, after we had moved to a nicer home in a nicer neighborhood. The family was gathered for evening dinner in the dining room. Prince lay in the sun in the adjacent living room. He perked up slightly as there was a knock on the front porch door. It was the dogcatcher. She breathed a sigh of relief as my dad opened the door.

“Oh, your dog is here,” she stated, obviously relieved.

“Sure is,” my father replied.

“You know, we had him down at the pound.”

“No,” my father answered, “he didn’t tell us.”

“Yep,” she continued, “we picked him up yesterday. He escaped from the cage when the kid went to feed him. Don’t know how he got past the chain-link fence.”

“All news to us,” my dad replied.

“Glad to see he’s okay. Ah, you know there’s a fine due on him.”

“Have a nice evening,” my father wished the woman as he politely closed the door in her face.

Prince lay his head back down in the sunlight.

Not long after we heard that the dogcatcher, after many years of dedicated civil service, had decided to retire.