



## Charlie and Ruby (the brave)

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When Charlie met Ruby, it was love at first sight. A little girl and her mother stood outside the grocery store with a large cardboard box. Charlie took a peek in the box. Inside were three round little balls of gray and white fur and fluff. Puppies. Charlie's mom and dad reluctantly looked inside and gave each other a glance that said, "We can't possibly, can we?"

"Dad, can we have one?" Charlie tentatively asked his parents.

"Mark, they are adorable." Mom looked at Charlie's dad and gave him a very long look.

Charlie's family had been dogless for over a year. The family had lost their super dog, Eli, and hadn't been ready to get another dog.

Charlie's earliest memories involved their shepherd, Eli. He was Charlie's best friend and constant companion. Smart and loyal, Eli was one of the family and went everywhere the family could take a dog. When the car door opened, Eli would jump inside, ready to go wherever the family went. It didn't matter where to Eli as long as he was with his people.

When Charlie's parents brought newborn Charlie home from the hospital, Eli stayed right by his side. Charlie's mom joked that Eli wasn't getting any sleep at night. He felt compelled to check the baby whenever he cried or made the slightest movement, and Eli had the red eyes to prove it.

When Eli ran, the wind blew through his hair and he hopped and jumped and looked as if he might fly. Charlie's mom wanted to write a story and call it "Eli, the Flying Dog."

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Mom never did write that story, and one day Eli fell ill. The family grieved the loss of their beloved friend and knew that some day they would get another dog, but not just yet. It would be a long while.

The girl with the box picked out one of the puppies and handed it to Charlie.

"Would you like to hold her? She's the friendliest," said the little girl.

"Dad, please?"

Charlie's dad was about to protest, but it was too late. He had fallen in love with this pup just as Charlie and Mom had.

The family named their little dog Ruby, for no particular reason other than it just seemed to fit. A trip to the pet store was quickly made to outfit their new friend -- food, collar, dog bed, and, most important for a puppy, chew toys. Then off to the vet to start Ruby's vaccinations.

"This is a very friendly little dog. I think you picked a winner," said Dr. Mary. "You can start puppy obedience classes at six months old."

Ruby and Charlie played, played, and played some more. Charlie quickly learned to watch out for Ruby's razor-sharp teeth. When Ruby really wanted to chew, he'd give her one of her toys. She chewed on everything in sight.

"Charlie, you're going to have to pick up all of your toys," Dad cautioned. "Anything lying around is fair game, as far as Ruby's concerned."

Ruby was pretty good about not destroying Charlie's toys, but the family soon found Ruby's weakness. Socks. Any time a sock was dropped, it disappeared immediately. When Mom would drop a sock while carrying an armful of laundry, off it went in Ruby's mouth.

"Ruby!"

Off she'd go, out the dog door, racing around the yard with the sock in her mouth. The more she was chased, the faster she'd run with that sock. This was great fun, and very exasperating for Charlie and his parents.

After a while, Mom figured out that the socks were pacifiers for little puppy Ruby.

"That sock is Ruby's binky!" Mom cried one day as if she'd had a great epiphany. The family decided to give Ruby a sock of her very own and she carried that sock around with her day and night.

That was when Ruby was a puppy.

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Ruby was not a puppy anymore. Ruby was now 80 pounds of sheepdog. Big, wide, and full of gray-and-white sheepdog hair, Ruby needed to be brushed and bathed regularly to keep her from becoming a giant mess.

When Ruby was a year old, Charlie's dad decided it was time to begin training Ruby to fetch the newspaper. This had been one of Eli, the super dog's, duties. Every morning, Dad would open the front door and urge Eli on.

"Get the paper!"

Eli would dash out and quickly return with the newspaper. He was always very proud of himself and Charlie's dad would give him a pat on the head and tell him, "Good Dog!" This gave Eli a great sense of accomplishment.

Dad took Ruby out to the front yard.

"Ruby, this is the paper. Your job is to get the paper."

Dad showed Ruby the paper, then put it in her mouth in an attempt to demonstrate her new job. Ruby immediately tore off around the yard with the paper in her mouth.

"Ruby! Come back here!"

Ruby did. The paper was a slobbery mess. Charlie's dad went out with Ruby every day. Every day the paper returned in pieces or was so wet with slobber that Charlie's dad soon gave up.

"Well, I guess you're not a paper dog, Ruby. We'll have to figure out just what your job will be."

While Ruby didn't have a specific job, there were many things she was good at doing. For instance, she, like Eli, was great at monster hunting. Charlie's dad would say, "Go get the monsters, Ruby," and out she'd dash, patrolling the back yard, barking the whole time. Ruby was an expert in monster abatement.

"How do you know she keeps the monsters away, Dad?" Charlie would ask.

"Well, have you ever seen a monster in the house?"

Well, no, he hadn't.

It was settled. Ruby's job was to keep away monsters and their ilk. There would be no disagreeable characters bothering the Williams household. This was a relief for Charlie.

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Raising and training a puppy had been challenging for Charlie's family, but Ruby had found her place as one of its members. Charlie's family would sometimes look fondly at their old family picture that included Eli, the super dog. He was so special.

One day, Charlie's mom slipped in a new family picture that included Ruby, the Brave. The two family portraits sat side by side.

Ruby didn't replace Eli; she never could. But Ruby was special in her own Ruby way. Ruby wasn't as clever as Eli, the super dog, and she would never have a career as a newspaper retriever, but Ruby was quite possibly the world's silliest dog and her friendliness knew no bounds. She never met a stranger; the world was her friend (except for the poor letter carriers).

Ruby was her own dog, and Charlie's family loved her. Just the way she was.

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