

The Naming Ceremony

By

Matthew Cory

The arrival of a new puppy brings many rituals that the new pet owner must perform, but these are always done with love and a near-holy reverence. There's the ritual of the New Toy, where the owner purchases various plastic bones or stuffed animals that the puppy will chew on briefly and then ignore. There's the ritual of the New Bed, where the owner will purchase adorable bedding that the puppy will sniff occasionally before deciding the owner's favorite chair to be the most comfortable spot in the house. There's the ritual of the New Food, the purchase of multitudes of bags of kibble in hopes that it will like one (and rarely does it choose any but the most expensive brand).

One ritual undertaken with each new pet - the most important one of all - is the Naming Ceremony. This ceremony is the beginning of the bond between pet and owner, a bond cherished for the lifetime of both, and it must never be taken lightly. With luck, the owner will instantly know the perfect name for the animal, a name found through instinct or divine intervention, a name that fits both of them like a well tailored glove.

If the Fates don't directly hand the perfect name, it may come through intense planning and several hours spent scouring books and web sites of names. The owner will sit at a desk or table with lists several pages long, crossing out names as they compare them to the new animal. They'll speak the names softly, with differing inflections and tones, trying each name until they find one that rolls off the tongue perfectly, the name created specifically for their animal. With solemn adoration they ordain their new puppy, and life continues.

There is the Personal Naming Ceremony, and as any pet owner will tell you, it is a good thing. The owner and the pet begin their bond together, and are destined for a happy life of drool and backyard landmines.

More often, however, the unfortunate owner becomes party to the Public Naming Ceremony. This is an unplanned and dreadful event, forced upon the unwitting owner by friends and relatives who don't have pets, and therefore fail to understand the importance of the animal's name.

It starts innocently enough, a phone call, or perhaps a chance meeting in the supermarket.

"Hey, we just got a new puppy," the owner states, beaming with pride, hope, and lack of sleep. (This is part of another ritual, known as the Display, where the proud owner wishes to share their joy with all who are willing or unable to get away quickly enough.)

The invitee is excited, as baby animals are enthralling to those uninvolved in the animals training, the purchase of its necessities, and the disposal of its waste.

"Oh really? When can I come over and see it?" they ask with a vicious excitement.

This is where the horror of the Public Naming Ceremony begins. The owner cheerfully tells the invitee that anytime would be great, bring the kids, we'll have drinks, I'll set out some finger sandwiches, and make a day of it. Occasionally, the original invitee will invite others as well: mutual friends or coworkers, community religious figures, political appointees. With a voraciousness that only arises with new found wealth or a new puppy, friends and family come out of the woodwork to join in the new owner's delight.

At the time of the Display, the Ceremony will lurk in the shadows for an indefinite duration. People will coo over the new puppy as it staggers around the rooms playfully. They'll force upon it toys that it's already tired of. They'll try to get it to sit or roll over (because, as any pet owner will attest, all puppies are born with those commands genetically ingrained; it is obviously through a lack of pressure in these vital first days that it loses these abilities and must be re-taught).

Then it begins.

The Ceremony starts innocently enough, and always with variations of the exact same question: "So, what have you decided to name it?" The wise pet owner will smile graciously at their guests and proceed to end the Ceremony at this point, before it has truly begun. It is possible to end the Ceremony politely, but social graces are immaterial when someone asks this question. In extreme cases, murder is not entirely unwarranted; most judges with a full understanding of the situation will show some lenience. However, most new pet owners, still in the daze of adoration and affection, make the mistake of responding to the question: "We haven't come up with anything yet."

From that point forward, the room is filled with a barrage of names, most offensively cute, some exceedingly pointless, and many quite cliché. Names such as "Rover," "Buttons," "Baby Girl," "Flower Patch," and similarly disastrous choices are thrown carelessly in every direction.

The pet owner who already has one or two other pets, especially animals of the same species and breed, fares much worse. It becomes a matching game, where the new animal's name *must* coincide with or play off of the existing animal's name; to do otherwise would be sacrilege.

Animals that are closely associated with a certain stereotype - an ethnicity, for example -

often face the toughest hardships during the Ceremony: Chihuahuas are inevitably bombarded with poor attempts at Spanish; Pugs have vaguely oriental words and syllables thrown dangerously close to them.

The owner will watch in horror as the group finds the name the unknowing animal feels it wants. This is a very noticeable event: the puppy, previously occupied with a shoe or other delicious article of clothing, jerks its head up at the sound of its new name and runs over to the vile fiend who had spouted the words. This is irreversible; once the puppy finds the name it wants, it will never answer to anything else. The owner is stuck calling it "Hotdog," "Whippy," "Mrs. Flugelhorn," or whatever foolish words were chosen.

It was not long ago that I found myself caught in this ritual, though I had sworn to avoid it at all costs. I had promised - even before my wife and I decided our house needed a new puppy - that I would give any pet I would own the respect it deserved by avoiding the embarrassment and brutality of the Public Naming Ceremony. After seeing the ritual performed on many others (and, I am afraid I must admit, taking part in it as well), I pledged to take it upon myself to find the perfect name for a new pet before it could know such horrors.

Soon after John, our son, moved away for college, my wife and I found the house quite empty. Only months before, the noises of a teenager filled it at all hours - loud music, obnoxious but well meaning boys laughing, the sounds of his mother and me chiding him for keeping his room only marginally cleaner than the set of a disaster movie. After he left, we found ourselves staring at each other in expectation, waiting for the sound of cars to pull up, brakes squealing and engines revving.

It did not take long for us to see that we needed something extra to fill the void, and we decided a new puppy would be a delightful addition. We knew better than to merely go to any breeder at random, or to just walk into a pet store and take the first one we saw. A dog is a special addition to the family, and we knew we needed to find one that would suit us perfectly.

We scoured the internet for many minutes looking for the right breed. We needed something that was neither too big nor too small, eliminating many breeds immediately - the Great Dane, the Chihuahua, the Pug, the St. Bernard. All beautiful animals in their own rights, but we wanted neither an animal capable of towing small cars, nor one we might accidentally vacuum when we cleaned the house.

Soon we found the animal that suited us perfectly: the Beagle. The web sites we visited assured us that the Beagle was an excellent hunter, quite playful, and a loyal pet to a good master.

The animal's temperament was irrelevant though; my wife's heart audibly broke when the first images of Beagle puppies came on the screen. There was no need to search further: the Beagle was the breed for us.

A week later, an ad in the paper directed us to a local breeder with new puppies. A small, whining box greeted us as we arrived. We held each adorable pup in turn, my wife inspecting them carefully to determine how their coloring would match the carpeting and furniture. My wife picked up the last one in the box, a mostly black and tan female with a strip of white down her nose, who stared at us with her big, pleading hound-dog eyes. The mother Beagle came and went, and each of the puppies cried out for her except the one, who kept staring at us, wagging her tail when she noticed we were looking at her. My wife saw this, and knew that we had been chosen (luckily by one who would complement our living room perfectly). Moments later, we had written the owner a check and were driving home with our new puppy.

As I said, I had sworn to avoid the Public Naming Ceremony at all costs. I reiterated this pledge to myself as we drove from the breeders, trying diligently to find a suitable name as soon as I could. My wife, however, had made no such pledge, for (bless her heart!) she had never understood the embarrassment the Ceremony holds for both animal and owner. To a mild degree, I hold myself accountable for not informing her. I can, however, only take so much of the blame; she must be held responsible for some of her actions. We had traveled less than a mile from the breeders before I heard her talking to her sister on her cell phone.

"It's just the most *adorable* thing, Tracy! You and George just *have* to come see it! Today? Yes, that would be *perfect*. No, I'm sure Jack wouldn't mind, would you honey?" She glanced at me, but continued before I could say anything. "No, Jack doesn't mind. Yes, of course! I'm sure the kids would *love* it. No, if you think Pastor Williams would like to come, bring him along too. Maybe I'll put out snacks, you know, finger sandwiches or something. We'll just make a day out of it. Okay, we'll see you then Trace. Buh-bye."

My own, dear wife had betrayed me. I knew there was relatively little time, nowhere near the days I'd expected to have to name the puppy at my leisure, and my mind raced. It was no use though. As we pulled into the driveway, I still had yet to find a suitable name for the beautiful little pup that sat peacefully in the lap of my traitorous wife.

To further aggravate my mood, my neighbor was standing in his yard, waving at us cheerfully. By most other accounts, Richard Jameson was probably a great guy. Probably a loving father, devoted husband. Maybe even the kind of friend you could count on to change your tire at

three in the morning. I give him the benefit of the doubt in those instances.

Personally, I despise him.

For the past fifteen years he succeeded in antagonizing me at every possible opportunity. I'd plant a new tree; he'd plant two. I built a small deck in my back yard; he built a bigger one, with a roof and mosquito netting. Every year, my family and I would have a small fireworks show on the Fourth of July. His were always bigger, more dramatic.

One year, he hired a live band to drown out the large stereo system we had set up during our barbecue. Half of the friends and coworkers I had invited had eaten their ribs, hamburgers, and hot dogs, and walked over casually, "out of curiosity" they claimed. By night fall they had yet to return, and the fireworks display I had purchased - one of the bigger sets of rockets, fountains, and roman candles we'd ever bought from the nearby Indian reservation - was ooo'ed and ahh'ed over by only my wife and my son. Of course, until Jameson started setting his off. Then, even my dear family turned their attention away from the best fireworks display our house would have ever seen.

If you have never had such a neighbor, I'm sure you find my distaste for him petty and childish. At one point, I would have agreed with you. But fifteen years of succumbing to incessant one-upmanship puts even the slightest detail into a different perspective.

I smiled and waved back at him, however, because for once I was actually ahead of him. Not the puppy - a pet is too dear an item to use in such childish games. No, I had something that I knew he would never attain, something he could never best.

A close friend of mine happened to own a small nursery not far outside of town. Days before the arrival of the puppy, I was visiting the nursery and I happened upon a beautiful, elegant rose bush. Its petals were such a delicate pink-red, with slight veins of lavender and violet, so soft and fragile that it nearly broke my heart to touch it. I asked my friend about it, as I had never seen such a wonderful work of nature's art before.

"Ah yes," he responded, setting down three large pots he'd been moving. "That's a very rare rose from Africa. Only grows natively on one side of a mountain in Kenya. I was very lucky to get that one bush - they aren't exported much nowadays."

I had to have it. It was beautiful, yes, but it was also something that Jameson couldn't have. He would just die of jealousy! I purchased it, and my friend offered to have it delivered due to its fragility and rarity. I declined, not wanting to waste his staff's time for a single rose bush. I drove it carefully to my house, and planted it proudly in the center of my yard that very day.

So I waved back at Jameson as my wife and I exited the car with our new puppy, then

hurried inside to avoid any of his attempts at neighborly small talk. I had much more important matters at hand: I had a puppy I needed to name, and time was growing short.

Quite short indeed, as it turned out. No sooner had I set my keys on the kitchen counter when a knock came at the door. I grimaced. This was too soon! The poor darling had barely gotten her feet on the kitchen floor, and my family was going to pelt her with obscene attempts at a name. There was nothing I could do about it however, only brace myself and hope for the best.

"Watch her while I get the door honey," my wife said. The little puppy looked up at me, wagging its tail as though knowing of the coming travesty and hoping I could prevent it. It stumbled towards me, stepping on its long, Beagle ears and tripping itself. I pledged right then I would *not* allow anyone else to name it but myself. Perhaps my wife, as it was hers as well, but most certainly it would not fall prey to the Ceremony at hand.

No sooner had I made my promise than the sound of children filled the house.

"Puppy? *Puppy!*" High-pitched voices rang through the living room. The puppy cringed, but still wagged its tail, frightened but trying hard to be brave. The children found us and fell to the ground in playful admiration. Their parents and my wife joined us shortly. Unfortunately, the Pastor had been unable to attend; his presence would have been useful as a reminder that avenging any name chosen for the darling animal would have eternal consequences.

After my wife had served drinks and forced me to ensure our grill was in working order, the Display began with its usual questions: When did you get her (though my wife had told them over the phone)? How old is she? What breed is she? Is she full blood or mix? They circled close around the question I knew was coming, but like vultures they bided their time. We talked weather and work, sports and celebrities, politics and other crimes, waiting for the question to arise. The children played with the puppy, tugging its ears and its tail, laughing as it tried to chase them and stumbled or walked on its ears. They told it to sit, roll over, and lie down, disappointed to see the puppy wag its tail and stare at them, the commands already faded from instinct.

Nearly an hour of distracting them had passed, and I was starting to gain hope that the dreaded question would die before it was born. Then one of the children spoke.

"So, what are you gonna call it?"

Never before has the murder of a child seemed like such a pleasant idea. I grimaced, but no one seemed to notice; the Ceremony had begun, and all of them, my dear wife included, were beginning their parts.

"Call him Fluffy!" one of the other children cried out, much in character with the Ceremony:

as anyone who has suffered through it will affirm, the first few names suggested are clichés like "Fluffy", "Rover", "Rex", etc., and most often the gender is wrong, as the puppy has yet to establish itself as male or female in the common eye.

"*She* isn't very fluffy though," I corrected, trying to sound patient and calm, knowing I failed miserably at it.

"How about Princess?" one of the other children said. The child looked at the dog and bellowed: "Princess! Are you 'Princess'?" The dog did not reply, other than sniffing at the ground and wagging her tail.

Thus it began. Someone suggested "Cookie," which started a barrage of food names - "Cream," "Milk," "Candy," "Cookie" again for some reason. My wife's sister saw a CD of classical music lying on the table and that started a short battery of composers names, with the prefix "Ms." thrown in front when they remembered it was a female puppy: "Ms. Beethoven," "Ms. Mozart," "Ms. Bach." Similarly they approached the names of past political leaders, with the same prefix thrown in where appropriate: "Victoria," "Ms. Churchill," "Cleopatra," "Elizabeth," "Ms. Lincoln." There was no true logic behind the name choices, as there never is during the Ceremony. Someone would find a subject that might suggest several words to name a puppy, and the group would exhaust the list as it came to mind.

I had nearly given in to homicidal urges when there came a knock on the door. I hurried to answer it, hoping that the Ceremony would dwindle before I would find myself in need of legal counsel. They continued as I walked, now harassing the animal with floral names: "Rose," "Violet," "Blossom." I opened the door with hope that it would be someone able to engage me in a more pleasant situation, perhaps an IRS agent or door-to-door salesman.

A young man stood at the door, wearing a light green uniform and a name tag indicating his name as "Chip".

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I'm Chip, from the nursery. I have..." He looked at a pad of paper in his hand. "Eight rose bushes for a Mr. Richard Jameson."

My heart stopped.

No, I thought. *He couldn't have. He wouldn't have.*

I knew better though; he likely could have, and he most certainly *would* have. I took a deep breath to steady myself.

"I'm sorry, Chip. He lives next door." The boy stepped back, looked at the number on the

side of the door, and then smiled apologetically.

"I'm really sorry about that," he said. "They gave me the wrong address."

"Not a problem," I said, then watched him walk down the side walk. I stepped outside the door, hearing the ceremony continue from inside - "Jewel," "Ruby," "Emerald." Even shutting the door behind me I could hear them bludgeoning the dog with names.

Perhaps he bought regular roses, I told myself, hoping against all hope that it was true. Chip climbed in his truck, drove it forward the short distance to Jameson's house, and stopped it as Jameson walked out to greet him. I watched impatiently as they discussed something I couldn't hear, and my impatience turned to horror as Chip pulled out a rather large rose bush from the back of his truck. The delicate pink-red of the blooms and the lines of lavender and violet that I could only barely see from my porch told me what I already expected.

Jameson waved at me as Chip unloaded more of the "one-of-a-kind" rose bushes. I forced a smile and a slight wave, then walked back into the house. The sounds of the Ceremony greeted me like the buzzing of a mosquito that will not die.

"*That bastard Jameson!* He's done it again!" I shouted, forgetting the presence of children in my anger. I started back to where I had left the poor puppy with our family, and took only a couple of steps before I realized that the Ceremony had stopped. I looked up, and my eyes fell on the puppy.

It was running to me. Its tail was wagging, and though it was still tripping on its ears as it came, it was showing more excitement than it had since we'd gotten it. My family looked at me, stunned, and I shook my head in disbelief.

No, it can't be, I thought to myself. *It must be a mistake.* The puppy looked up at me, wagging its tail with fierce happiness. Someone had finally stumbled across the collection of syllables the puppy had decided was its name. I looked at my wife, she looked at me, and I looked back down at the puppy. The room was utterly silent, save for the swishing of the puppy's tail on the carpet. I tried random words from my previous sentences again, hoping that the puppy would not react to any of them in particular.

"He's? Done?" The puppy sniffed my shoe. "Again? It?" Nothing. I started to sigh in relief, and my wife stopped me.

"No, dear, you said something that caught her attention. Say it all again."

"That-bastard-Jameson-he's-?" The puppy's head jerked. I looked at my wife and shook my head again, as though I could negate what that simple motion declared. "You try it honey," I said, hoping it was my voice and not my words that she responded to.

"That Bastard Jameson? Come here That Bastard Jameson." The puppy turned and ran to my wife. My wife's sister tried with the same result. Her husband tried, and the puppy ran straight to him. One of the children started to try, but a stern look from his mother reminded him that the name was hardly polite.

I could not believe it. Had the puppy been a boy, the name could be considered humorous. I would still despise such light heartedness in the naming of the animal, but I would have felt somewhat more at ease. For a female puppy, however, it was far from ladylike.

It was decided though. A name that is forced upon an animal can be changed at an owner's whim, but when a new puppy decides for itself what word or collection of words it will answer to, that is what it will ever be named.

The Naming Ceremony thus complete, my family left my wife and me with our new puppy. Life continued on much as we expected (save the name, of course) with all the trimmings of life with a new puppy: midnight bathroom walks, shoes and valuables discovered half-chewed, bags of food discarded after a single bowl served and left sitting for hours. My wife, That Bastard Jameson, and I are well on our way to a happy, pet-filled life.

If you are of a curious heart, you may be wondering what happened to the rare, "one-of-a-kind" rose bush I planted with such pride in the center of my yard. It died. In spite of daily watering, trimming the dead blooms and branches as necessary, even giving it top-of-the-line rose food, it has become little more than a collection of thorny sticks decorating the grass.

That bastard Jameson - the human one - has had no such luck. His are blooming beautifully, all eight of them. I can see them perfectly out my window, every day, and if the breeze is right I can even smell them as I take my That Bastard Jameson out for her morning routine.