

## THE DAY SPARKY DIDN'T DIE

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**M**uriel, with her slender fingers, plays the piano at Younkers every Tuesday and Thursday. She tells us that the black and white keys soothe her shades of grey. We think she needs to be tested for colorblindness.

Tony resides in a tent near the kitchen doorway. He claims that the refrigerator converses with him each morning at 3 AM and that he needs to be present to bond with it. Muriel's wine-basted tofu squares disappeared the other day from the vegetable crisper, so we've told Tony to stop bonding and to start laying the smack down.

Anne-Marie checks the closet every two hours for aliens. She's convinced they might be after her illegally imported snakeskin gloves, which she found at a garage sale in Queens.

Ron has a foot fetish. That's all that needs to be said about Ron.

And me? Some call me Sparky, others Toto. I realize that both are dog names, but I haven't the slightest clue how I came about them. However, I do like to catch tossed Fruit Loops in my mouth — so maybe that's part of it. One thing is for sure, though — of the four of us, I'm the only one with even a smidgen of sanity — especially after the events of the last few days.

It all started Monday, when I woke up with one hell of a hangover. Funny thing is, I was only drinking orange juice last night. Alone. Well, okay, so I had Mr. Livingstone with me.

Mr. Livingstone is our dog. He somewhat resembles a cross between a cocker spaniel and a hyena. I couldn't ask for a better drinking partner. Quiet. Attentive. Doesn't laugh at me. Then again, he doesn't laugh at my jokes, either. I tried to teach him how to fetch me more orange juice from the fridge, but he always ends up spilling it on Tony's tent. Anyway, where was I? Yesterday.

Anne-Marie had just finished her 5 AM extraterrestrial closet check, and I'm pretty sure it was the slam of the door that woke me up. The orange juice (frozen, from the can type — I despise that fresh-squeezed crap) hangover kicked in about six seconds later, and was followed by a subsequent orange juice puking.

Tony emerged from his tent when I began to swear, and he muttered something about offensive language not being good for his Fridgidaire. I told him to go to hell — if the Fridgidaire really cared, it wouldn't be serving me disguised alcoholic beverages. Tony said he would work on that.

Ron stumbled down the stairs sometime later, chanting Tori Amos lyrics and sucking on the end of a pipe. Not your ordinary, tobacco-filled pipe. Ron prefers the heavy duty PVC pipes — you know, the hard white plastic ones. He says that they keep his teeth from growing too long. I've decided he's part rodent.

All of us give plasma every Monday and Friday morning. It might be the only thing we really have in common, besides the fact that we obsess over "Xena: Warrior Princess" every weekend. But that's another story. Getting back to this one ... the plasma thing. Most of us do it for the money. Ron, though, goes for the saline rush. He donates his forty dollars a week to the Minnesota School of Podiatry. Big surprise there.

We all arrived around nine that morning, fully hydrated and sandal-footed. It was two days until Ron's birthday, so we figured we could please the guy. Even if it was the middle of January and we had to wade through foot high snow drifts, since Mr. Livingstone had neglected his snow-shoveling duty. Then again, I had neglected to clean the toilet that week, so I guess the dog and I were even.

We bring our own squeezies to the plasma bank. You know, those little round squishy balls. Mine looks like a Minute Maid orange. I swear, it's just a fluke. I'm really not that much of an orange juice fanatic, despite the way this story is leaning.

So there we were, the five of us at the plasma bank, furiously pumping squeezies in our right hands (all except for Anne-Marie, who always uses her left one — she says she needs the right to swat aliens with).

Tony was soon called to the front counter for a hemocrit test and immediately commenced flirting with the fifty-year-old nurse. Apparently they both enjoy Frigidaires. Or maybe she was just admiring his kilt, because I heard him say the words "Irish jig." Yeah, I know that kilts are Scottish and jigs aren't. Like I said, I'm the only sane one of the bunch.

Muriel didn't hear her name when it was called, because she was in the playroom trying to see if her butt still fit into one of those little kindergarten chairs. It didn't. I found her weeping, half in the chair and half out. I told her not to cry over spilt milk. You have to understand that Muriel spilled a lot of milk as a kid, and she's a bit sensitive about the topic. But it worked — she stopped crying and proceeded to beat me. I've always said that men don't roar, women do. Then they throw heavy objects. I was ecstatic to find that the playroom had very few heavy objects.

In the end, it took two nurses to pull Muriel off me. I thought

they might take me to the relative safety of intensive care, but instead they dragged me back to the donor floor. I'm telling you, those plasma people are ruthless. They'd suck the blood from a hemophiliac if it meant a profit.

So there we were, fifteen minutes later, all hooked up to the monstrous plasma-sucking machines, when it happened. I was doing good — about halfway through my eight cycles — when the room started going purple. You were expecting me to say black, weren't you? But it wasn't black — not really. It was more of a dark, prunish purple. Yeah, like a prune. Like a two hundred-year-old, shriveled, wrinkled prune. I was reminded of my great aunt Bertha, whose skin folds up like a Sharpei's. The only difference is that such an effect makes a Sharpei cute. Bertha, conversely, is uglier than a cross-dressing gorilla. Whatever that means.

Anyway, I'm getting off track again. I remember saying something like, "Wow, I didn't know Aunt Bertha was *this* prunish." And before I knew it, there were two nurses standing over me, bombarding me with questions. I think it was their bad breath, and not the actual questions, that kept me from passing into the unconscious realm of purple.

Pretty soon, all my friends had gathered around as well. I didn't realize at first that in order to be at my side, they had yanked the needles from their own arms, but I thanked them later for it. Muriel stood at one side, holding my hand. Tony ripped the plasma line from my arm while Anne-Marie beat off the nurses with her Pillsbury doughboy squeezie. And Ron? Ron was at the foot of the bed, tickling my toes. I was really beginning to be annoyed by Ron.

We raced out of the plasma bank like armadillos on hallucinogens, which is to basically say that we bumped into walls and desks until the exit finally appeared out of nowhere.

We're never going back to that place. Everyone refers to that Monday as "The Day Sparky Didn't Die." We all lost a lot of blood — it took weeks to recover. Perhaps we shouldn't have been so quick about yanking those needles out of our arms. Personally, I think the official title for the day should be, "The Day None Of Us Died."

It's been pretty quiet since then, except for the day that I was finally able to teach Mr. Livingstone to laugh. In retrospect, it was a mistake — he now laughs at whatever I'm doing, whether it's funny or not. Let me tell you, having someone laugh — especially a dog — while you puke your guts out into the toilet is *not* that funny. Stupid hyena.

Ron's foot fetish has gotten worse. We don't have to worry about him much longer, though, because he's headed up to Canada to hunt for the great Sasquatch. Godspeed, Ron. Godspeed.

Anne-Marie hasn't been able to check the closet for aliens for two whole weeks now. I think she's much more relaxed, and I'll take all the credit for that, since it was my idea to fill the closets up with concrete.

The refrigerator "attacked" Tony the other day, so he moved out of the tent and into a hammock upstairs. I haven't detected a trace of alcohol in my orange juice since then.

Muriel recently blew up our microwave. She was heating up one of those facial waxes, the kind with the color change meter on the side, and apparently didn't notice when the meter went from "lukewarm" to "radioactive." Her eyebrows are slowly starting to grow back.

And me? Well, like I told you — I'm the only sane one of the bunch.❖