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Skunk

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Noxious Fumes
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“Mom, you better get over to Grandma’s right away. Something smells really funny over there.”

Jeremy’s pronouncement was all it took to launch me out of the driveway, headed full tilt for my mother’s house three blocks away. I had moved my parents closer to our home in order to care for them during their eighties. Dad’s senility had made him harder to deal with than my mother. Mom had remained independent, living in her own home, only requiring weekly trips to the store, doctors, and other minor chores. Mom still cooked her meals on her own gas stove, and as I had feared, she must have left the gas on. Thank goodness, Jeremy had ridden his bike over to cut her grass. I envisioned opening all the doors, dragging mother outside and then permanently turning off the stove. No more cooking for Mom. It was too dangerous. She would just have to eat what we ate.

I had hopped out of my car and was standing on the threshold before opening the door when I knew exactly what had happened. It wasn’t the stove or a gas leak; it was a skunk.

I confronted my mother in her reclining chair, “The dog must have gotten sprayed by a skunk in the back yard.”

“No, you must smell a skunk that someone hit on the road. The dog is right here, and she doesn’t smell a bit.”

My heart sank. The skunk smell was so strong that I was taking shallow breaths and becoming light-headed. The smell of skunk in a closed house is worse than sticking limburger cheese up your nose and sticking your head in a paper bag. Not only did I have a nasty-smelling dog to deal with, I had to fight my mother to get her to believe that the dog had been sprayed by a skunk in the first place.

“Your nose is too sensitive. There is nothing wrong with the dog.”

My legs were buckling, but I couldn’t dare sit down. The smell was too overpowering. I stumbled for the back door, to lure the foul-smelling animal outside—where I could deal with it later.

My mother loved her dogs. We had gone to the shelter once a month for three months to adopt a small dog for her after her previous dog had died. We had received an older, hyperactive Jack Russell Terrier with more than a few drawbacks. This dog had a bladder control problem which meant that it didn’t just pee on the carpeting surreptitiously; it would pee whenever it fell asleep—which was on mom’s lap or in bed with her. We had to give it hormone pills every day to keep the problem manageable. Lucky wanted to play night and day and would run in circles begging to play fetch unless the ball was kept hidden out of sight. My husband and I would rather have gotten rid of pesky Lucky, but Mom loved her and every dog that she ever met.

As a child I remembered Mom adopting every stray dog that wandered through the neighborhood. Some I loved, but Mom’s love for her dogs was more extreme than mine. She always overfed them and would make sandwiches for them and feed them whatever she ate as well as insisting that they eat their daily dog food. Her last dog came close to exploding from over feeding with Mom continually coaxing it to eat more. Sometimes, she even cooked her dog an entire meal when it would refuse to eat what she was eating.

At times I even felt like Mom loved her pets more than me. There was a picture of me as a toddler, trying to steal the dog’s food from its bowl. I remember hating that fat, smelly dog. I shared my resentment with my older brother, and he confirmed that he had felt the same way about a dog that our parents had had when he was a little boy.

“You weren’t named after a dog like I was,” my brother protested.

Maybe that must have been why he insisted that everyone call him "Robert" when he became a teenager. He had gotten tired of not knowing whether they were calling him or the dog when they yelled for "Bobbie." I remembered the story that I was told about "Bobbie," the super, intelligent Boxer, who had gone after a wasp inside of a little girl's sock that was stinging her repeatedly. My brother never felt as special as that legendary dog.

Mom's current dog was no legend. This pissy Jack Russell Terrier needed to be let outside day and night in order to keep the house from becoming its personal toilet. Even Mom had become tired of its nightly trips outside and had relented to let it use a doggie door installed in the patio room at the back of the house by the previous owner who was also a dog lover.

I snapped out of it when I remembered the doggie door and the Funniest Video clips in which raccoons and other animals had come in through doggie doors to wreck havoc in people's households.

"Mom, did a skunk come in through the back dog door?"

Mom's face fell flat. "I remember the dog had something cornered in the back room one night. I saw its little foot. I called the dog away and whatever it was went away and was gone the next day."

"When did that happen?"

"The night before last."

My jaws were hurting from clamping my mouth shut.

The smell that I could hardly bear to breathe was two days old, and my mother had been sleeping with a stupid dog that had tried to attack a skunk.

Fortunately for her, Mom had lost all sense of smell, and I was going to have to bathe them both and scrub everything down.

I wanted to sink to the floor and crawl into the corner myself, but I wanted to breathe fresh air more. I told Mom that I would get cleaning supplies and come back later.

Although I had touched nothing, I smelled nothing but skunk for days. My sinuses ached, and I worried that others would smell skunk on me.

After a trip to the grocery and pet stores for skunk cleaner, I returned to Mom's house in my old clothes prepared to scrub everything that couldn't be thrown away.

First, I tackled the dog. By now, I was so angry that I actually enjoyed holding the squirming little rat and dousing it with tomato juice. Regretfully, Lucky greedily licked the red juice as it dripped down over her snout. Lucky actually enjoyed being covered in food.

Eventually, everything was cleaned: the bedding, Mom, the furniture, the carpeting, and the noxious little dog. Things returned to normal for whole month until Lucky crawled under the back shed and lost another fight with the skunk again.