

## Jim's Birthday Month

James Belcher



So many of you called yesterday and sent birthday cards (and even gifts) for Jim's "Big 80" --- it was "really something" ---- and we were very touched that so many remembered and took the time to send him some love. It has certainly been needed the last few months, with long hours for everyone here and regrettably, days spent apart as our duties make our paths diverge and often go in different directions to get the work done.

Apart from all the well-wishers and family members on hand, it was a lot less fun and family-oriented than the day we had planned for ourselves. Other things intervened.

What started out as a "simple errand" turned into a many-hours long marathon and I was away from home (and in a sleet storm) until well after dark. The party went on without me, but....

Not the day we wanted by a long shot, so..... let me tell you all what we do when a Birthday goes south.

It's a family tradition that started thirty years ago. And it began with a run away dog.

I got up on a beautiful bright June morning and thought it was another gorgeous day to have a birthday --- one of many such days I have been blessed with, as my birthday comes in early June when the weather is typically beyond compare in the Northern Hemisphere. Then I noticed that my dog wasn't in his usual place beside the bed, waiting for the "Food Goddess" to do her morning routine with The Dish.

Brett, our Brittany Spaniel, had nosed his way out of the house and gone to play with the neighbor's Black Lab, Sally. Then, according to the neighbor, he went running off down the street following a boy on a bicycle. My heart was in my throat.

I called out to Jim from the neighbor's patio, already at a jog-trot, and we both started searching on foot --- me, in a blue bathrobe and fuzzy slippers--- looking down every byway and alley for three blocks around. No luck. Not a hair, not a whisker, not a glimpse of the familiar flaming orange and white hide and gleeful brown eyes.

Jim got in his pick up and started slowly cruising the surrounding neighborhoods, making wider and wider circles and I went home to get dressed and resume the search on foot. I have no idea how many miles we each traveled that day, but by five o'clock I was foot-sore and sweaty and exhausted and turned homeward with that lump in my throat just getting bigger.

Brett was a clown and a philosopher, always ready to play or to listen, always cocking his head and looking at me expectantly, always dogging my footsteps, laying under my desk with his nose on my toe so that I couldn't get up and go anywhere without him noticing. He was also my constant protector, placing himself between me and any other dogs, the mailman, stray cats, bats, bullfrogs and any other threats.

It was a lousy birthday. The food we'd prepared stayed in the refrigerator uncooked. I had no appetite anyway. Not knowing the fate of a family member leaves a gnawing misery in the pit of your stomach. I trudged slowly homeward and finally rounded the turn and up our driveway. A friend of mine, Mia Rivera, had come by and left an ice cold bottle of Louis Roederer champagne on the doorstep.

An hour later, Jim found me in bed, propped up, scrunched up, a champagne glass in my hand and tears on my face. He came in with his face all red from sunburn and a certain dog tagging along on a shoestring. Brett looked tired as his Dog Mom and Jim had a look of triumph I can still see to this day.

"I found the dog, " he rushed, "He was playing with some kids in the park and stayed to have lunch with a family, but when nobody came to claim him, they took him to the dog pound.....honey, I had to write a bad check to get him out.... it was \$106....." he stopped and looked rather crestfallen. "And I didn't get a chance to bring your birthday present so, all I've got for you is the dog."

"The dog!" I burst out. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. That orange and white buffoon that ruined my birthday? That package of fur that slumped down on the rug beside the bed with a sigh and looked at me hopefully --- time for dinner? "Oh, no, no, no, no!" I blustered. "I am declaring a Birthday Week! This day was horrendous! I want a rewind! And if it doesn't get any better, I am declaring a Birthday Month!"

Jim gave me a wry little smile. He sat down on the edge of the bed, gathered me into his arms and gave me a big hug, whispering, "All I had with me was a check on the old closed bank account....we'll have to hot foot down to the bank and clear that up...."

Seeing that a love fest was underway, Brett shoved to all fours and nuzzled in for his share.

And, so it was, that just about six months later, on October 8th, when we were flat broke once again, Jim got Brett back as his birthday present. We continued to share ownership of the dog, six months on and six months off from then on, and he remained our birthday present to each other for the rest of his life.

He got used to wearing a bow on his head, like a birthday babushka, twice a year.

I often complained that I got the bad end of the deal, because the summer and fall is the time that a dog in Alaska gets into trouble, rolls himself in dead salmon carcasses or bear scat, steals beef briskets off the neighbor's barbecue, and similar misadventures.

"Things are always so much calmer....and less smelly in the winter...."  
"Yeah," Jim would agree, "but you didn't have to write a rubber check."  
"No," I'd mutter. "I just had to go pay the \$106 in cash the next day..."  
So that's how the tradition of "Birthday Weeks" and "Birthday Months" got established. Whenever anyone has a really bad unsatisfactory birthday, we just open up the calendar and go for it anyway.

And that is what we are doing with Jim's birthday this year. I may have gotten snagged up in doing work that reared its ugly head on his special day, but we will make it up, God-willing. And please know that all your good wishes cheered him on and kept him entertained while he was waiting for me, like the dog, to come home.

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