

The Lazy Pug Café

by William Arthur Holmes

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For dog lovers (especially of pugs) everywhere

Opening Day

As recently as a few months ago, the Lazy Pug Café was nothing more than a dilapidated old two-story farmhouse. Set back just forty yards from the road, it had a beautiful old weeping willow in front and a massive ancient oak tree out back. Abandoned years ago, the old estate's only purpose lately had been to serve as a sad but charming reminder of days gone by. Locals witnessing its resurrection these past few months were grateful someone was finally bringing the "old girl" back to life.

Despite the storm moving in from the southwest, people came from far and wide to "have a look-see" at the renamed, repainted and refurbished Lazy Pug Café. Originally white with a red tin roof, faded to pink, the newly dubbed Lazy Pug Café was now soft yellow with white trim and a solid black roof. From a distance, the "thin film" solar panels on top were invisible.

Between the Café and road was a long, gravel horseshoe driveway. Now in the middle of that stood Kirk Winley, one of the owners, six feet tall with thick brown hair and a full beard. His "farmer's tan" made his blue eyes stand out even more than they might have otherwise. There was a twinkle in those eyes.

He crossed his arms and soaked it all in with a deep, satisfied breath. He had wanted the Café to be tan or fawn-colored with black trim – like a pug! – but his wife and co-owner, Hope, preferred a more traditional look.

"At a glance, at least," she said. She also wanted a fountain, maybe with a sculpture, surrounded by a small pond in the center of the driveway, but that and so many other improvements would have to wait. Their shoestring budget forced everything to come piecemeal. Their applications for business loans were denied by every bank asked. There were too many other restaurants within easy driving distance, they were told, and neither one of them had ever run such a business before.

That didn't stop this pug-loving couple, of course. They simply turned to Kirk's "money bags" older sister, Cecilia. "She's family," he insisted, "so, it's okay."

Cecilia would have laughed at the "money bags" moniker, but she was always looking for a good investment.

Hope was reluctant to borrow from a family member but Kirk was so passionate, so desperate for "a cool place to hang out," so focused on the Café idea, his wife eventually agreed so long as she had final say on all design ideas. She humored him on several but had to say no to the idea of a sculpture of a bucking bronc and rider out front, where the "bronc" was a larger-than-life pug and the "rider" was a similarly oversized flea. One bit of exterior décor that Kirk was allowed to contribute was a sign hand-written in red, like blood, hanging from the side yard fence:

Beware of Pugs!

A stiff warm breeze rustled the leaves of the surrounding trees and pulled Kirk's attention in that direction, then to the sky. Ominous clouds hung ready to soak the Earth below. He loved the sound of leaves in the wind and could listen to it all day – preferably with a glass of lemonade on the porch swing out back – but it was time to get back inside.

From behind that warning sign, the pugs watched intently through the slats in the fence and wondered, *What is Dad up to? And, why weren't we invited? Whatever he's doing, we can help!*

Cars began to pull into the parking lot, and people were getting out of those cars. *What in the world!?! Dad's in trouble!* He obviously needed the pugs to bark as much and as loud as possible!

It started with a short, low, menacing growl, followed by a bark, then a howl. A hoarse, asthmatic second pug then joined in. Finally, a tenor blended his voice beautifully, barking and howling, as the pugs Daisy, Chandler and Joey – in that order – performed *a capella* for anyone who cared to listen.

Most humans would call it noise, but what do humans know? This was a beautiful cacophony of pug voices! Kirk liked to sing on occasion, and Hope teased that it sounded like the pugs barking but, if you asked the pugs, that was simply not true. Nothing can compare to the sound of three pugs barking. Everybody knows that!

"Quiet!" Hope shouted through an open window, though she knew there was no point telling the pugs to be quiet. They were too excited.

The alpha pug, Daisy, agreed. "That's right! With all these cars and people showing up out front? A pug would have to be crazy not to be excited!"

A peculiar feature of the Café was that the front looked almost exactly the same as the back. The double-doors on either end had the word "Welcome" in wooden letters above it. This was the original owners Eustace and Livonia Johnson's answer to county officials at the time taking "a coon's age" to decide exactly where to put the planned road on the Johnsons' land.

"I ain't waitin'," Eustace finally said one day in exasperation, "for those bickerin' bureaucrats to decide where they're gonna put the road!" So, he put a "front" door and porch on both sides so that, no matter which side folks passed by, they would feel welcome. It was "very important to The Missus" that people felt

welcome. And, for the next couple of generations, everyone surely did. It became quite the gathering place.

Those front and back stoops have since been connected to form a full wrap-around porch, and Myca was now out front receiving guests. He had known Daisy, the smartest and only female pug, since she was not much bigger than a field mouse. He was not a big fan of pugs but had learned to live with them. Pretty much had to. They weren't going anywhere, and neither was he... hopefully.

The Café's interior motif was something Hope called "Southern country shabby chic." Woven baskets and hat racks complete with hats hung on the walls. A tall dark wicker basket filled with old canes, walking sticks and golf clubs was in one corner. There were draft-animal yokes hanging on the walls, along with various and sundry early-1900s farm equipment in every corner, on every wall, or just lying along the edge of the hardwood floors.

The plaques, signs and framed posters – both philosophical and silly – were Kirk's domain, displaying favorite sayings by himself and others. One plaque toward the front read:

*Welcome to the Lazy Pug Café!
Where the Past meets the Future
In other words, the Present*

Nearby was an unequivocal warning to any uppity humans:

Pugs rule!

The Café staff stood ready for business. The smell of omelets, sausage, pancakes and coffee wafted throughout as the staffers moved around the kitchen, almost dancing as if choreographed. Head chef "Spud" danced and banged on pots and pans with a large wooden spoon while singing along to an upbeat 80s tune

now bursting out of the speakers. It wasn't long before his co-workers joined in, banging whatever makeshift percussion instrument they could find. In the kitchen, over the dishwasher, hung a plaque in which the health inspector found no humor, even after Kirk added a line:

*All dishes licked clean by pugs!
And run through the dishwasher, too!*

Not opening until the relatively lazy hour of 8 AM, Kirk had time for one last test of his computers. Located in the library, they were available for anyone's use – for a fee – and he attended to them now. Despite its traditional look and feel, the Café was technologically up to date. In addition to the solar panels on the roof, there was a modern turbine disguised as an old windmill out back. Either one of those could provide electricity, should the public power grid go down. And then, of course, there was the special insulation in the walls to keep Wi-Fi and Bluetooth signals inside and protect the surrounding wildlife from harmful audio pollution. Kirk was "all about" protecting the environment.

The café even had its own low-power pirate radio station, WPUG, broadcasting from the barn a mile in every direction. Some might consider this a different sort of audio pollution, but anyone tuning in, probably by accident, was encouraged by a recording of Kirk and Hope's smiling voices saying, "Make your way to the Lazy Pug Café!" Reception was spotty now due to the weather, but the playlist consisted of their all-time favorite songs from country music to new age; from opera to rock, pop and reggae. Anything but rap or metal, basically.

Kirk and Hope shared a smile across the room from each other. It was going to be a great day. This was not just another beautiful spring morning in the South. This was Opening Day at The Lazy Pug Café!

Ol' Lightnin'

Out back near the barn, the Ol' Lightnin' Tree stood in stark contrast to the happiness and good cheer inside. Burnt and bent but still somehow proud and erect, no one knew the exact age of that magnificent old tree. It had simply always been there. Stories dating back at least a hundred years mentioned it. Kirk guessed its age to be 150.

"I've got branches that old!" the tree scoffed at that, not that any humans could understand it. It would have spit in disgust, too, if it had lips and spit.

Something Ol' Lightnin' and Kirk had in common was that they had both survived lightning strikes. The tree had lost count of how many it had suffered through, but for Kirk it was "just" the one. Several years ago while out on a "golf date" with Hope – they were just friends at the time, and this was before Kirk decided golf was, as Will Rogers said, "a good walk, spoiled" – he had executed the sweetest swing of his brief career. With his head down and excellent follow-through, his ball had just left the club and was headed straight for the hole when lightning jumped out and struck him.

Thousands of amps coursed through his body. The ball was obliterated as Kirk fell over, dead.

Hope had, thankfully, been standing several yards away due to Kirk's infamously wild golf swing, and she was unhurt. She immediately ran to administer CPR as he hit the ground. After a few seconds – though it felt like minutes – her future husband found the strength to sit upright. She sighed in relief when he sputtered, "What...? Were you... just kissing me?!?!?"

"Was it good for you, too?" she teased, happy that he was alive. "It's called CPR, Kirk. I just saved your life!"

"Oh," he mumbled, "okay, thanks." He tried and failed to hide how much he enjoyed her lips upon his.

From that moment forward, they felt very different about each other, but there were a few unfortunate side effects from that fateful day. Kirk began to suffer from memory loss and the

occasional inability to focus on anything for more than a few seconds. He was fine most of the time, but every once in a while his mind froze up, fogged over, then wandered. It got progressively worse over the years, and he felt like a doddering old man though he was only in his 40s.

It eventually got so bad, he had to take a leave of absence from his job. It was a nice hiatus, but not long before he felt like he had too much time on his hands. He was one of those who needed to feel productive. At some point since his "retirement," he came up with the idea for the Lazy Pug Café, though the idea was still in its infancy.

He felt antsy one day and took a drive alone through the countryside. It was one of his favorite ways to clear his head. Hope often asked "Where are you going?" to which he would say, simply, "Driving."

As he meandered through the beautiful countryside as slowly as traffic would allow, he ended up in front of the old Johnson place. This was not a conscious destination, it was simply where he ended up. With that weeping willow out front and the barn and huge old oak tree in back, Kirk decided right then and there that this was the perfect spot for his future Café.

Ol' Lightnin' wished – if trees could make wishes – that Kirk would move the rusty old tractor out from under its massive lower limbs and back inside the barn, *Where a tractor belongs!* Lightnin' thought he was rid of that metal monstrosity years ago, but Kirk – unaware of its history – had bought it at a salvage yard and brought it back to "add character" to the Lazy Pug's overall landscaping. Hope loved how picturesque that tractor-under-the-tree-at-sunset was. She was not crazy about the cigar store Indian that came with it, but it was a package deal.

Ol' Lightnin' could not have cared less about beautiful scenery. He was convinced that tractor attracted lightning. *It's a menace!* "It's not a tree's purpose in life to stand around being picturesque," it said to no one but two squirrels and a colony of ants making their way up its trunk. "Not *this* tree, at least. May-

be that weeping willow up front, or some of my old friends who were so ruthlessly cut down in their prime when this place was built, but a mighty oak like me, a real tree's purpose is to... uh... is to... um... what was I saying? Oh yeah, a tree's purpose is to sink its roots as deep into the ground as possible, take hold of the Earth, and keep it from going anywhere!"

Its most recent lightning strike happened, coincidentally, the same day as Kirk's. In fact, it was the same bolt. It had already hit Ol' Lightnin' before it danced across the land to the golf course a couple miles away, where it hit Kirk. Ol' Lightnin' was fairly sure that lightning bolt was aiming for the tractor underneath him but missed. He might have taken solace from a large branch coming down and severely damaging that rusty old piece of farm equipment – which it did, and that's how the tractor ended up in the salvage yard – but it wasn't worth losing a limb over. Especially such a large one!

The man living there at the time – a grandson of Eustace and Livonia Johnson – had found the limb the next day. He took it into his shop in the barn and made good use of it.

Ol' Lightnin' hadn't thought about that appendage in years but now found himself wondering whatever became of it. He had been feeling a familiar tingle in his extremities lately. That old branch was not too far away, he felt sure.

Its attention was then drawn to a more immediate problem: two pugs coming toward him across the freshly mowed grass, wet with the morning dew. Kirk had let them out to "do their business."

"Hey! You pugs!" Ol' Lightnin' shouted at them. "You don't need to water me! Especially with that!"

"Did you hear something?" Joey asked while lifting his leg on the tree, looking around nervously.

"Not sure," said Chandler, "but I think the tree is talking to us." He was taking it in stride as he lifted his own leg.

"Trees talk?" Joey asked. He stopped peeing as he craned his neck upward to gaze up its massive trunk. It seemed unwise,

not to mention rude, to pee on anything that could talk. "What is it saying?"

Chandler – the asthmatic, eldest, and only black pug – barked hoarsely, "How should I know? Do I look like I speak tree?"

He had never heard a tree talk before, either; he just took everything in stride. That was how he rolled. He was one cool pug. His adopted name was now Chandler, which was better than Pumba. Being named after the warthog from *The Lion King* never sat well with him. His name should have been Clint or Luke, he thought, or maybe Elvis. *Yeah, Elvis!* He did have black hair and was from Memphis, after all.

Chandler's extraordinarily high level of "coolosity" stemmed from being taken from his mother and siblings at the age of eight weeks, then made to sit in a pet store cage for another week or two before being bought – "Like a stuffed toy!" – only to be given up for adoption a couple years later. He was taken in by a second family, only to be given up yet again.

"With that sort of upbringing," Chandler said, "a pug just learns to roll with the punches!" His original people had to move into a new apartment and couldn't keep him. His next people didn't think they could handle him and the "baby on the way." Their stress over the impending birth became Chandler's stress, and he got into the bad habit of peeing on everything in the house, which sealed his fate.

As it turned out, he simply had a bladder infection. Once the pug rescue group sent him to the vet, they fixed the problem and he was the perfect pug again! But, it was too late. They had already gotten rid of him.

From that point forward, Chandler was a very well-mannered pug. He always asked please and said thank you. He got along well with everyone from Chihuahuas to Wolfhounds; from young kids to crotchety old humans; from birds in the yard to that chinchilla back in Memphis who got loose from the neighbor's cage. He even got along with cats, if you can believe it. He had a way of walking up to everybody and wagging his

"extra curly" black tail – without moving the rest of his hind end, unlike most pugs who wag their entire rear ends. He would smile that famous pug smile, touch noses if possible, and say hello. This pug had no need for charm school. He could give lessons!

"It all worked out in the end, though!" he finished his story. One glorious day, Hope and Kirk rescued him. He could remember it clearly. They said they came "all the way" from somewhere else just for him! "And I've been their 'Chan Man' ever since! Actually, Dad's got a bunch of different names for me." He then snarled at Joey, "Now, don't talk to me, boy, while I'm peeing!"

"Why not?" Joey asked innocently.

"Because you are at the bottom of the pack, and people at the bottom have to do whatever people at the top say. That's how things work. And, I say don't talk to me while I'm peeing!"

"Okay, grouchy."

Chandler was not generally the grouchy sort, but *Can't a pug have a little privacy?* All he really wanted from life was a settled home life; four or five square meals a day; the ability to take a nice long nap once in a while; and, of course, the privacy thing. The "settled home" part was covered. No problem. His people were skimping on that second one, though. A pug can hardly live on just two meals a day!

Otherwise, life was good. He had a sister, Daisy, and she was a good sister. And now, thanks to his people's soft-headedness, a little brother named Joey. Joey was actually the biggest pug, but ever since Chandler and Kirk met, Kirk would go on and on about how big Chandler was.

It was that ever-elusive satisfying nap that Chandler sought. Most humans thought he got plenty of sleep, but humans have no idea.

Just a few months into his own adoption now, Joey was still adjusting to it all. His original people had used the "baby on the way" excuse, too. "What is with people, anyway?" he asked.

"I don't know," Chandler replied. "Babies and pugs get along great! In some cultures, we're considered good luck! Oh well, their loss."

"Definitely their loss!" Joey agreed.

Ol' Lightnin', meanwhile, almost... almost wished it had a spare branch to drop onto the heads of the two pugs standing there at its base, shooting the breeze with not a care in the world. The tree was not quite mean enough for that, though. Grumpy, yes, but not mean. As a tree, one learns to accept being peed on, leaned against, perched upon, crawled all over, even having children build a fort on your branches as was done to Ol' Lightnin' by the previous owners' kids.

It was just part of the deal. The payoff comes when a storm gives a refreshing shower from your highest branches all the way down to your roots. Your leaves are then blown dry by the breeze that follows. It's all topped off when the sun comes back out and warms you like a soft blanket, all while feeling your roots taking a firm hold in the Earth. Now that's a good life for a tree!

A single leaf floated gently down and landed squarely upon Joey's head. It was all that Ol' Lightnin' could manage to shake loose on such short notice. What a shot, though! Bullseye!

With the leaf balanced comically on his head, Joey looked up slowly, barked at the tree, shook off the leaf, and trotted quickly after Chandler who was already on his way back to the house.

A powerful, wet gust of wind then came out of nowhere and knocked both pugs sideways. The nearby windmill spun wildly. Even one of the barn doors wanted to break loose from its hinges. Joey quickly regained his balance and glanced suspiciously back at the tree. He then hurried to catch up with Chandler who, he noticed with a smile, was slower to regain his footing. He laughed as he trotted past the "old man."

The pugs were all now back inside as Hope obsessively dusted and straightened up prior to opening the Café doors. Daisy gave her pug "brothers" a cursory sniff before allowing them to join

her as she performed the very important task of "supervising" Mom as they went from room to room. Daisy and Joey liked to plop themselves down nearby – getting in the way as much as possible, of course – and just lie there a few minutes with their chins on the floor and their eyes following Hope's every move. They would then get up and follow her to the next room, only to plop down again. That was how a pug supervised a human.

Not Chandler. While Daisy had long ago established herself as "Mama's girl," when Chandler joined the family he quickly became "Daddy's boy." He was not nearly as clingy as Daisy, though. She would follow Hope everywhere, even into the bathroom! And that was just not cool, if you asked Chandler.

Once he plopped down, usually with a loud expulsion of breath, he was "good" right there for a while. Yep. Why bother following them all over the place? They would come back around to him eventually. Chandler was the laziest – and, he liked to think, smartest – of the lazy pugs.

At exactly 8 AM, after a kiss for good luck – with Hope on the left by the cash register and Kirk on the right by the cigar store Indian – they pulled open the front double doors. The pugs were ecstatic. Pugs were like that. They could go from lazy to ecstatic in 0.2 seconds. Now it was Opening Day!

They bounced up and down as even Chandler wagged his entire butt. They had no idea what an "Opening" was, but, who needs an excuse to be excited? They loved having all of these new people around, but of course had to be careful not to get stepped on. Pugs are always getting stepped on. It would help if they stayed out from under people's feet, but that made no sense to a pug. Constantly under foot is where they're supposed to be! Everyone knew that! It was in the manual.

Quite a crowd had gathered on the front porch. Kirk felt guilty keeping them outside like that, with the wind now whipping up, but he really wanted to do that whole "door-opening thing." It was how he always imagined it.

Myca felt no guilt. He had been on the porch all morning, the perfect spy, keeping a watchful eye as he soaked in his surroundings while pretending not to care. Oh, he liked people just fine, but was not going to get all "happy" – like a silly pug – about their arrival.

Myca was a cat. An American shorthair male. Orange. One of the two "official" Café cats. The other one, Sunny, was a Maine coon mix female. She ran and hid when anyone unfamiliar showed up. She liked people, too, but just one at a time.

Kirk cringed when he smacked the base of his precious cigar store Indian as he opened his side of the double doors. *How did this get here?* he wondered. He could have sworn it was out front on the porch. Hope must have rolled it inside. Strange.

He had spent months searching online and every antique shop in the area to find that thing, finally discovering it leaning up against that old tractor at the salvage yard. The two items came as a package, the salvager had said. Kirk never particularly wanted a cigar store Indian, but seeing it with the tractor, he decided it would fit in nicely at the Café.

Hope was not happy when he brought it home. "You paid too much!" she complained as she eyed it suspiciously. Standing over six feet tall, counting its multi-colored feather head-dress, the wooden man had that stereotypical hooked nose, long black hair, dark skin, no facial hair, and a half smile.

"I'm honoring your heritage," Kirk explained. "I even named it Wally."

"How does that...?" she was confused. "Who's Wally?"

"Because you were born in Walla Walla, Washington," he elaborated, "which was named after the Walla Walla tribe. I know you were named after the Hopi, but..."

"Oh, I see," she pretended to see.

"Why were you named Hopi, anyway?" he asked. "I thought your mom named the kids after whichever tribe was native to the area you were born in."

"No, she named us after the area where we were conceived. Anyway, am I touched that you thought of me? Yes. Honored by

a creepy old wooden Indian?" She laughed and cringed. "Not really, no. And, by the way, I don't have any Native American blood in me. My crazy mother just named us after various tribes. We don't know why, other than because she was crazy!"

"I keep forgetting," Kirk said, "not that she's crazy, just *how* crazy. Anyway, I'm putting Wally inside by the front door."

"Oh no you're not," she was dead serious. "I swear sometimes that thing is looking at me! With that Mona Lisa smile, he's just creepy!"

Kirk got the same sort of feeling but had kept it to himself. Either way, that was how Wally ended up on the front porch. Hope was not crazy about that location, either, but Wally was such a low priority in the build-up to the Grand Opening that she let it go for the moment.

The wooden Indian gave Joey the creeps, too. Whenever he found himself confronted by Wally – who he swore jumped out at him during his bored "laps" around the house – he greeted it with his most menacing bark. And we all know how menacing a pug can be.

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Hope had invited all of her family, friends, neighbors and former co-workers to the grand opening. Kirk had no idea she had promised so many of them a free breakfast. He had invited people, too, of course, but had every intention of charging them full price.

His former boss Fred entered with his usual entourage. Tall, white-haired, almost always smiling, Fred had such charisma, he never went anywhere alone. Today was no exception, as several associates accompanied him.

"Hey, Kirk!" Fred half-shouted a friendly greeting from just a few feet away. "I hear the food's good here!"

"Best in town!" Kirk half-shouted back with a smile. In a normal tone, he added, "Glad you could make it, Fred." With an exaggerated Southern accent, he then said, "Y'all go an' find a

table over yonder... anywhere you like. We don't have a *maitre d'* for that sorta thang."

"Boy," Fred shook his head and smiled, "don't hurt yourself trying to talk Southern. Leave that to us professionals." He and his entourage then wandered off to "find them a table."

A younger woman in Fred's entourage asked facetiously, in her thickest accent, "Fred, what's a *maitre d'*?"

Kirk smiled, but said nothing as several more smiling, hungry people filed in. One of them was Hope's Granddaddy. Short of stature, but huge in spirit, so friendly and cheerful, he always brightened up a room. It was usually short-lived these days, unfortunately, when followed closely by his dark-cloud-of-a-wife, Dorothy.

She was Granddaddy's second wife, Hope pointed out to anyone who asked. "Definitely not my Nanny." Dorothy never had anything good to say about anyone, which caused nothing good to be said of her, thereby causing her to have nothing good to say about anyone. And round and round that went.

"I see ol' Queen Dark Cloud has arrived," Kirk said to Hope under his breath. "I guess that explains the gathering storm outside. I hope she's on her meds today."

"Oh, hush," Hope stifled a laugh.

Hope's sister Shonni and her three kids then appeared in the doorway. Two kids ran ahead while she carried the youngest on her hip. Her given name was Shawnee, but she had long ago changed the spelling. Hope changed her own name from Hopi in fifth grade. "I'm tired of being called 'Hoppy!'" she explained at the time.

Hope's musician brother Darren – née Shaman – lived in the area and would be providing entertainment later. His services for the night were free, so the price was right. Eight in the morning was too early for him, though. He was not expected until that afternoon.

The "stage" on which he would perform – just a raised section of floor connecting a side doorway to the stairs – was toward the back of the house in its largest room. Those stairs, like

so many things in this house, were another point of curiosity for Kirk to ponder. Not knowing the story behind it, he once asked, "Who puts the stairs in the back of the house? Don't they usually point toward the front door?"

"Maybe what we think of as the back was originally the front?" Hope replied ever so sweetly in that voice used when humoring him.

"Hmm," Kirk nodded grudgingly.

Taking up most of that "stage" now was a well-worn baby grand piano – nicks, dents, chipped keys and all – that Kirk had rescued from an estate sale. "Even our piano is a rescue!" Kirk liked to say.

Hope used to play quite well, but all of her time and energy these days was spent on the Café, the pups, and her husband, in that order. Feeling guilty for not putting such a beautiful instrument to good use, she placed a sign on it:

Please play me!

Darren would not be tickling the ivories tonight. He might bang on it now and then, but his primary instruments were harmonica and guitar. His style was something he called flamenco-blues-country fusion.

Kirk originally wanted to stage a play he had written on opening night in the barn out back. He had plagiarized several stories and blended their ingredients so thoroughly that no one could file suit. The "playhouse," however, was not ready. It was still just a barn, consisting of mostly empty stalls and a hay loft. Its stalls would eventually be converted into booths with their walls lowered so people could see the stage.

Something Kirk was able to accomplish prior to Opening Day had nothing to do with the Café. He called it an "Electric Shoulder." Unapproved and certainly not "up to Code" – if a code even existed – it was a warning system he had come up with to alert animals to oncoming cars. It ran contrary to Kirk's noise-

pollution stance, but his dream was to "make road-kill a thing of the past. Vultures will hate me, but I'm no fan of theirs, either."

It was a metal strip along the edge of the pavement that vibrated when it detected an approaching vehicle. It then let out an ultrasonic repeating chirp – similar to a "singing" hand saw, but only audible to animals. And, it had worked beautifully so far. Not a single dead animal. The only problem was that whenever a customer arrived with a dog, it and every other dog at the Café started barking.

Hope called it "Our customer detector," then added, "Let's just hope it doesn't become a customer deterrent."

Pets were more than welcome at The Lazy Pug. A dog owner, after all, would not feel at home without their little buddy at their feet, begging for food. The only rule was that animals had to stay out of the kitchen. For diners uncomfortable with animals at their feet, there was a room marked "No Pets." It had a Dutch door at each entrance to keep the animals out while allowing people, Wolfhounds and Great Danes to see in.

When Daisy first learned of this "no pets" room, she was shocked and appalled. "No pets!?" she cried to her pug brethren. "Are these people crazy?!"

"Yes," said Chandler, stating the obvious.

"Just let 'em try and keep me outta there!" Joey growled. "If they close the door, I'll just scratch until they let me in. Works like a charm!"

"Not gonna work," said Daisy.

"You just watch," Joey was undeterred.

"Pfft," Chandler opined.

"If scratching doesn't work," Joey had another idea, "I'll just bark and howl nonstop. That works, too!"

"Knock yourself out," said Daisy, "but don't blame me when they hit you in the head with a frying pan."

"They'll need to find a spot more sensitive than his head," Chandler chimed in.

"They wouldn't hit me!" Joey was aghast. "Would they?"

"Probably not," Daisy admitted. "They're too nice. But I might."

"Ha! You don't have hands!" Joey countered. "How are you going to...?" A thought then occurred to him. "Hey, frying pans usually have food stuck to them, don't they? I wonder if..." He then licked his lips thinking about what might be stuck to the bottom of that imaginary pan.

In the "No Pets" room now, with a loud, boisterous song playing overhead, Dorothy (a.k.a. Queen Dark Cloud) sat in conversation with Granddaddy. She glared at everyone around her, until they glanced back, at which point she smiled her sweetest smile. Most people saw right through her.

Chewing her food as she glowered at the Café's décor, in general, and one of Kirk's plaques, in particular, she spat, "I don't like pugs!"

That was bad enough, but the overhead music had at that moment gone quiet for half a beat, long enough for everyone to hear her. The entire room turned toward her in disbelief. Caught red-handed hating pugs, she hissed and snarled like a cornered animal, but recovered quickly. With arched eyebrows, she said "Hmmp!" and sipped her coffee.

The plaque she had a particular problem with was a quote from Abraham Lincoln, never a favorite around here, though this particular sentiment was one of Kirk's all-time favorites on the subject of religion. Hanging nearby, it read:

When I do good, I feel good.

When I do bad, I feel bad.

That's my religion.

Seeing Kirk standing in the doorway holding a fresh pot of coffee, Dorothy waved him over for a refill, but he had heard what she said about pugs, so he walked away.

"I don't like Kirk much, either," she added. "Making us wait out there on the porch before letting us in this morning? That's just rude! A storm is coming! And these... these sayings on the walls... I just don't see the humor. Some of them are a bit naughty, almost blasphemy!"

Granddaddy shook his head. He grew tired of her "naughty this," "blasphemy that," and overall negativity. Having her around, though, was better than having no one at all. He went two long years alone after his wife died and had resolved then to find someone to keep him company. Dorothy knew him from church and "swooped in" – as Hope put it – to be that special someone.

"He's not from around here," she said, as if that alone rendered Kirk untrustworthy. "Where's he from?"

"Somewhere out west. Oregon, California. One of those."

"California!?" she shrieked. Those near her wondered what her problem was now. "That must be it. The land of fruits and nuts!" She gave a cackling laugh. "How did someone as sweet as Hope end up with him, anyway?"

"She was raised out there," Granddaddy explained, "after my daughter moved for a job. It's only been the past few years that she had the good sense to live down here in these parts." He had, with his typical wink and a smile, said this to Hope herself, and she laughed.

"The way they met was funny, though," he continued with Dorothy now. A twinkle came to his eyes as he told the story. "They started dating after he was struck by lightning. It zapped half his clothes clean off!"

"That's right," Kirk overheard and came over to finish the story. "I was lying there on the ground with no shirt." He smiled wickedly at Dorothy, who turned away, blushing. "Hope, of course, instantly fell in love!"

Granddaddy tried not to laugh but couldn't help it. He liked Kirk.

An especially strong gust of wind then slammed into the Café, rattling the windows and wall hangings.

"Hoo-wee!" Kirk's old boss, Fred, bellowed from the neighboring room. "Batten down the hatches! A storm's a-brewing! I hope this place is built solid!"

"It is!" Kirk said with a smile, loud enough for everyone to hear. One of his employees, a dark-haired young woman named Marie, came up and stood by him, showing solidarity. "This house has lasted this long, hasn't it?"

To Marie, he said, "Would you mind seeing what Queen Dark Cloud, I mean, what Ms. Dorothy over there wants? I can't bring myself to serve her."

"Sure!" Marie agreed happily.

Kirk's WPUG radio station was piped in through the Café speakers via network wiring which was not affected by the anti-wireless shielding in the walls. At the end of the "Make your way to the Lazy Pug Café!" tag line was Chandler's bark serving as an audible exclamation point. That "signature" was Chandler's idea. He was there while Kirk and Hope rehearsed voicing that line, repeatedly, before choosing the best one. Chandler would bark at the end so reliably that the humans decided to keep it in the recording. Chandler liked to think of himself as a marketing genius.

One day a few weeks prior to Opening, he heard something curious coming out one of the Café's many speakers. It was the one in the most misshapen room, downstairs, strictly interior. Chandler figured the angles in the room combined with its lack of windows to somehow influence the harmonics of this one particular speaker. He would have to mull it over it and get back to everyone at some point with a fully formed hypothesis. Until then, he would investigate.

He tilted his head to one side – as one does when pondering a conundrum – as he stared at the speaker. After he had decided there was no imminent danger, he sauntered over to the speaker.

With their heavier chest and shoulders, boy pugs have a definite bounce to their gait. They saunter. Unless chasing a cat, of course. Girl pugs typically walk, trot or gallop.

Anyway, Chandler got the distinct impression this speaker was communicating directly to him. And, being a friendly and polite sort of pug, Chandler talked back. Every chance he got. For several weeks. He was surprised Kirk, being handy around the house, never fixed that speaker. Maybe he couldn't hear it? Humans were severely disabled in that area compared to pugs. All areas, really, come to think of it. If not for humans' opposable thumbs, Chandler was fairly sure pugs, not humans, would rule the world.

Kirk and Hope thought Chandler had gone crazy, standing there barking, warbling, "talking" into the speaker. Of course, Chandler thought the same of them. Back on the pugs' home planet of Pugtopia, they were receiving Chandler's messages. They took his transmissions and broadcast them on a radio show called, "The Adventures of Chandler on Earth!" It was a huge hit. Due to the lack of compatible banking systems between the two planets, however, Chandler never received a penny in residuals. That was the industry execs' excuse, anyway.

As Kirk made his rounds through the Café and happened past the row of computers, he found his sister Cecilia sitting at one of them. Being some sort of government intelligence agent – she never did say which bureau or agency she was with – everything she did was conveniently "top secret." One of those secrets, of course, was her silent majority partnership in the Lazy Pug Café. Kirk wondered if her money was "clean," but they needed it, so he asked no questions.

As he entered the room, Cecilia seemed embarrassed for some reason. "I see you made it," he said.

"Yep," she smiled, not bothering to get up. "Arrived this morning. Walked right past you with the rest of the crowd. Didn't you see me?"

"I guess I was distracted. Where are you staying?"

"A hotel nearby."

"There are no hotels nearby."

"Near enough," she smirked.

"You could've stayed here, you know. We have the room."

"So, how've you been, baby brother?" she changed the subject. "Charming little nothing-to-do part of the world you've found here."

He gave her a dirty look. He may not have originated from "around here," but it was home now, and he loved it.

Chandler had been asleep nearby. Hearing Cecilia speak, he perked up and prepared to escape. She seemed angry, and Chandler had learned long ago to avoid angry people. As Kirk reached down and rubbed his neck reassuringly, he spotted Wally, the cigar store Indian.

"What?!" he pointed at it and asked Cecilia, "Did you move that in here?"

"Not me!" she seemed surprised before smirking and waving goodbye. "Later, bro!"

He was suspicious, but let it go. Hope's sister, Shonni, then walked past, taking one of her kids to the restroom. Pointing at Wally, Kirk asked, "Did you move this here?"

"What?" she gave him an incredulous look. "No! That thing's bigger than me!"

"What do you think, Chan Man?" he asked Chandler. "Did my sister move Wally in here? It didn't move by itself."

Chandler took one sniff and immediately knew the answer. Cecilia's scent was all over the wooden man, and he told Kirk all about it. All his human heard, however, was what his vet called Chandler's "snorkelopugus" sound, like a dog clearing its nasal passages while gargling, gagging and snoring, all at once. At the back of Chandler's throat, his soft palate rubbed up against his air passage, creating that signature sound as well as making it hard to breathe. He'd had two surgeries to help – and it did help – but also ruined his once-beautiful singing voice and his hoped-for opera career in the process. He could've been another Luciano Pugarotti.

"Is he growling?" a young female customer asked as she passed by.

"Oh," Kirk laughed, "no, he's just trying to breathe. It's tough being a pug."

"It *is* tough being a pug," Chandler agreed, and took this as his cue to explain just how tough it is. "The day starts badly because you have to get out of bed. It gets better right away, of course, because it's breakfast time! If you're lucky, your people take you for a morning walk. Well, other pugs consider that lucky. I'm not real big on walks. Too much like exercise. I'd rather just go out back, do my business, maybe take a nap in the sun, come back inside, and take another nap. I get plenty of exercise with all that coming and going between naps."

The humans didn't understand a word of what he said, but Daisy overheard and, not wanting Chandler to get all the attention, came over to add her two cents' worth.

"Puppy girl!" Kirk greeted her happily. She was such a happy dog with beautiful, soulful eyes, her mere presence made everyone smile.

"Hi, Dad!" she smiled and wiggled her butt. Addressing the customer now petting her, Daisy expounded upon what her brother had said. "I've heard from dog friends that their humans leave the house for most of the day. Not our humans. There's no telling where those other humans go or what they do, but you have to assume they're going for walks, eating, and taking naps."

She glanced at Chandler for confirmation. Chandler just stared at her. He didn't pretend to know what people did when they left the house, or why they ever left the house at all. People were crazy.

Kirk was surprised to find Darren now on stage in the "music room" at the back of the house, untangling cords and cables. He was not expected for a few hours yet, but there he was, preparing for his upcoming performance. His "audience" was his sister, Shonni, and her kids on one of the couches.

With one cord mostly untangled, Darren tugged at to get it the rest of the way out. He freed it momentarily, but its tail end

soon caught on another cable. Pulling it free again, it caught again on another loop. This knocked him off balance and sent him crashing into Wally.

"Aaaagghhhh!" he cried out, with a sheepish glance at his audience. "If there's any way to snag something," he said with a grin, "I will."

His audience was unsympathetic to his plight. Shonni was trying to simultaneously flip through a magazine while nursing the baby. Darren quickly looked away before any inappropriate sisterly body parts popped out.

As Hope passed through, making her rounds, Darren was grateful for the distraction. "Hey, uh, Hope? Is there any way we can move this Indian off the stage? There's not much room up here as it is, and..."

She looked behind him, confused. "Indian? What in the world?"

Joey looked up and growled. The fur along his spine stood straight up. As soon as Daisy joined him, they both barked as viciously as possible.

Kirk then glanced over in surprise. After hushing the barking dogs, he said, "How did that get there?!"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Hope shrugged. "Last time I noticed, it was up front."

Kirk shook his head, walked up to Wally, and looked into his wooden eyes. He wanted to make absolutely sure there was nobody inside. "Okay," he said, "somebody's messing with me." He then pursed his lips and tipped the Indian at a slight angle and rolled it along its round base toward the back door.

To the right of the door was a small, narrow sunroom with a couch, end table and lamp. Between that lamp and the door, Hope had placed a "female" mannequin, dressed in overalls, a plaid long-sleeved shirt, over-sized boots, and topped off with a blonde wig. Its arms had been extended out and upward to serve as a hat and/or coat rack. "Sally," as she had been dubbed, was Hope's tongue-in-cheek answer to Kirk's Wally. She could be silly, too, when the mood struck.

Kirk now wondered – not seriously, but, okay, semi-seriously – if Sally was where Wally was headed all along. With that in mind, he rolled it a few feet farther and set the two inanimate humans side by side. Maybe now Wally would stay put? Shaking his head, he dusted himself off and returned toward the front of the house to help with the customers.

Finally untangled, plugged-in and settled, Darren began strumming his guitar. "I'd like to start off with an original composition," he said. "It goes a little something like this..."

*Beer and cigarettes
ain't no substitute
for... love, but it's
better than nothing.
Whoa, whoa, whoa.*

Kirk raised an eyebrow as he came back through the room. Shonni grimaced. "It doesn't even rhyme," she whispered to her kids. As Kirk hurried out of the room – this close to plugging his ears – he smiled when he caught sight of one of his own plaques. It read:

*The meaning of life is...
yours to give.*

He always liked that one.

Feeling the need to get off his feet a minute, he found a comfortable stuffed chair in the next room. With Chandler's theme song of *I'm Too Sexy for My Shirt* playing overhead, Kirk's "Best Puppy" followed close behind.

Chandler stopped at Kirk's feet and stared up at his human. He obviously wanted something. He crouched down as if about to jump onto Kirk's lap but didn't. He repeated this several times before Kirk finally picked him up and set him on his lap.

He could hear Chandler's stomach churning. This happened every time "The Big Man" ate something – usually unmentiona-

ble – that didn't agree with him. Chandler made sure it never went unnoticed, and Hope and Kirk – his round-the-clock nursing staff – were always there to treat it with antacids. Normally the most independent, almost aloof, of the three pugs, Chandler stayed close to them whenever his stomach noises started.

Kirk looked deeply into Chandler's eyes and spoke in that cartoonish, baby-talk way he used when having a conversation with the pugs. "What's wrong, Big Dog? Did Darren's singing give you an upset stomach?"

The cat, Myca, was lounging nearby. He teased Chandler, "Can he *be* more condescending?"

"I never know why it happens, Dad," Chandler ignored the cat, "but you need to make it stop growling at me. A pug's stomach is, like, the most important thing there is!"

"You got that right," Joey agreed as he sauntered up and sniffed the air. "Does somebody have food?"

"You don't want your stomach angry at you," Chandler explained further. "Frankly, I'm worried."

When Hope once again whooshed by – seemingly doing laps throughout the house as she tended to everyone's needs – Kirk asked her to wrap an antacid pill in some cheese. She gave him a look that conveyed *Why can't you do that?* But, she merely smiled at her "favorite black pug" and disappeared toward the medicine cabinet.

Chandler perked up at the words "cheese for Chandler." That was one of his favorite phrases. Hope quickly disguised a pill in a slice of cheese, came back, and finagled it down Chandler's throat. He didn't want anything going into his stomach when it was churning like it was, but the antacid was the only thing that soothed him.

"Thank you, honey!" Kirk made a show of thanking her. After that look she gave him, it was better to be safe than sorry. When he moved in to kiss her, he was relieved she allowed it.

Half an hour later, Chandler was back to his old self again. He and Kirk were in the "computer room" when Hope happened by again. "The ice maker," she said, "is not making ice fast

enough. Could you maybe run to the store and get four or five bags?"

"Sure!" he said, always happy to do her a favor. Chandler was right on his heels as he headed for the back door, not about to let him out of his sight.

Granddaddy and Dorothy had by that point moved to the music room to join Shonni and her kids. Nodding at Granddaddy and ignoring Queen Dark Cloud as he passed, Kirk briefly considered letting Chandler – The Big Man – come with him. But, at the last second, he changed his mind.

"You stay here, Big Man," said Kirk. "You need to be the man of the house while I'm gone." With a wink at Granddaddy, he wagged his finger at Chandler and said, "Don't make me regret my decision, Big Dog!"

Dorothy shook her head, sneered, and said to Granddaddy, "He talks to those dogs like they're people."

"You got it, Dad!" said Chandler, ignoring Dorothy. He was proud to be entrusted with such a huge responsibility. "I won't let you down!"

The rain was coming down in buckets now, and Kirk got soaked as he ran from the back porch to his old white Ford pickup. The long red stripe along the truck's side was nothing but a blur as he made his escape along the muddy, unpaved driveway between the barn and the road.

Tornado

Darren was having a cigarette on the back porch a few minutes after Kirk left. Kirk's sister, Cecilia, soon joined him. They had been introduced once before but did not know each other well. He nodded politely. She smiled. They were just two people, indulging in the same nasty habit.

The pouring rain then abruptly stopped, and an eerie calm set in. Darren crouched down to get a better look at the sky out

from under the porch roof. What he saw made the still-lit cigarette drop from his mouth.

The edge of the porch was soaking wet, which immediately snuffed out the burning cigarette, but Darren didn't even notice. He was focused on the tornado – and what looked like the beginnings of two more – just a few miles behind the house and headed toward them. With terror in his eyes, he stood up, turned, and shouted, "Tornado! Coming our way!"

The two of them ran back inside to warn the others, where Darren repeated at the top of his lungs, "Tornado! Headed this way!" The pugs had been asleep but now perked up and looked around for the source of the shouting. They heard the tornado warning sirens in the distance now. Those sirens were nothing new but, to the pugs, it was just some random, occasional sound they heard from off in the distance. Nothing ever came of it. They had no idea that was simply the monthly "test" at noon every first Sunday.

Along with several other dogs accompanying their humans at the Café, the pugs guessed it was their cue to start howling. Pugs were not big howlers – the howling mentioned earlier was more like an extended bark, really – but pugs were nothing if not sociable. If everyone around them was howling, then, by golly, they would howl, too.

Finding a room located centrally enough to be heard throughout the house – despite the howling dogs, though Daisy was now quietly, faithfully by her side – Hope shouted, "Everyone? We need to go outside and into the storm cellar! There's room for everyone down there."

"Bring your plate," Darren suggested. "It might be your last meal!"

"You're not helping!" Hope rolled her eyes at her brother, but he was already out the door and headed for the storm cellar entrance, located inconveniently outside at the base of the porch.

As Granddaddy and Dorothy walked past, Hope shook her head. She got the distinct impression the old woman was enjoying this.

"I hope their cellar is stronger than their coffee," said Dorothy, unconcerned with being overheard.

With a mouthful of food and plate in hand, Fred smiled and said, "I'm not about to leave this behind. Dee-licious!"

Hope couldn't help but laugh. She had never met Fred before, but it helped to ease the tension. Kirk could have told her his former boss was always good for that.

"You want I should put it on a paper plate first?" Fred offered.

"No, no," she smiled as she touched his free elbow. "You're fine."

As everyone worked their way out the back door and across the porch to the storm cellar entrance, Hope literally did a double take. There was Wally out on the porch. She knew for a fact Kirk had put it next to the door, inside, not out on the porch. But there was no time for that now. She had to escort everyone into the cellar.

Cecilia was there on the porch, seemingly oblivious to the wind and rain violently whipping around her. When she and Hope made eye contact, Cecilia nodded and dutifully retreated to the shelter along with everyone else. Hope then had a severe pain in her belly. She stopped and reflexively put a hand to it, with her other arm extended in the opposite direction, for balance. She stood frozen for a moment until the pain passed. Cecilia looked back with concern and, as soon as Hope recovered from whatever had hit her, the two of them hurried to the storm shelter together, arm-in-arm.

Kirk had just pulled into the store parking lot in the center of the nearby small town of Ash Grove – its "downtown" a few miles away – when the tornado warning sirens had started. He heard them at full volume as he stepped out of the vehicle and ran into the store to take cover. The store's cellar entrance was indoors, unlike the Café, thereby allowing its occupants to stay dry. He knew he would have to do the same for the Café at some point.

Chandler, meanwhile, had wandered off to that special room to revisit Pugtopia. He had completely lost track of the goings-on at the Café as he, cautiously at first, walked *through* that one speaker and across a multi-colored bridge in the clouds that took him straight into that magical place. Behind him where the speaker should have been was nothing but scary darkness, so he kept moving forward to the shining city on the horizon. *Always go toward the shiny object*, he remembered his mother telling him all those years ago. *Good advice!*

He saw several other bridges in the distance leading into that amazing city, and he began to saunter, with his hind end bouncing as only a pug's can. Getting closer to the shining city in the distance, he realized there was at least one pug on each of those other bridges. They all bounced to the beat of a song just now coming into range. He couldn't understand the words at first. They sounded foreign. After a moment of bouncing along to the beat, however, he was suddenly and inexplicably fluent in their language. *His* language. He was caught up in the rhythm as he sang along. He would have to get Dad to put another plaque on the wall back home with the words of the song...

We are pugs!
Doh De Doh!
We bounce as we walk!
Doh De Doh!
We sneeze in your face!
Doh De Doh!
Pugs rule!!!

It rhymed in pug language. Then he remembered that Dad already had a plaque with "Pugs rule!" on it. *Dad must've visited Pugtopia!* Chandler thought. It was the most likely explanation. If he could get a recording of the song they were all now singing, he could have Dad play it on WPUG. It would be a huge hit!

In the Café cellar, Darren tried to light another cigarette, but everyone shouted him down. Granddaddy was happily in conversation with Fred and a few others in the corner of the small room. They were all putting on a brave face in a scary situation.

Hope then realized she had lost track of Chandler. She saw him with Joey earlier, but now Joey and Daisy – even the cat Myca – were with her while Chandler and the other cat, Sunny, were nowhere around.

"Has anyone seen Chandler or Sunny?" she asked. "Little black pug and a fluffy, multi-color Maine Coon mix cat?"

The answer was a resounding "no," and her heart sank. She was not going to send anyone into a tornado to go look, but Darren surprised her when he volunteered to do it. He saw it as an excuse to have that cigarette.

"Y'all stay here, people," Joey barked as he followed Darren up the stairs to the door. "We need to go find the old man!"

Hope grabbed him before he got past the first step. Daisy was staying close this whole time and now scolded her larger brother, "Are you crazy? We need to stay inside!"

"Please find him," Hope urged Darren, "but don't get yourself killed trying, either."

Daisy knew Chandler would be offended by the "don't die trying" attitude, but at least Hope cared enough to say something. She didn't even mention the cat. Daisy would have to tell Chandler all about it next time she saw him. Hopefully, there would be a next time.

Darren nodded soberly at his sister as he lit his cigarette, then hurried out into the storm to find Chandler... and maybe the cat.

"I hope he finds Chandler," Daisy said to Joey. "I've gotten used to that old pug."

"Yeah," Joey had to agree. "He's cool... for an old man."

While the storm door was open, everyone heard the infamous "freight train" roar of a tornado. It had arrived and was making its presence heard, storm door or not. That brief mo-

ment when the door was open made it that much more terrifying. A palpable dread fell upon the humans, dogs and one cat all crammed into that cellar.

Kirk was taking shelter at the grocery store in Ash Grove. The tornado's deafening roar could be heard there, as well. A few women and children had tears in their eyes while the men tried to remain calm and reassuring. Some of them even made jokes. For his part, Kirk grimaced, a lot.

An agonizingly indeterminate amount of time later, there was a break in the tornado's roar. Kirk knew it was still not entirely safe to leave the shelter, but he had to get back to the Café. He had to get back to his loved ones. As he sped home, he saw damage where the tornado had touched down: trees down and debris everywhere, including at least one entire double-wide trailer tossed like a child's toy.

Phone service was out. He had heard back at the store that two or three cell towers were destroyed by lightning and/or the tornado. It was sobering, downright terrifying, to see such destruction. They didn't have tornadoes in northeastern California, where he was from. He dearly wished he could call Hope, but all he could do was shake his head, feel lucky to be alive, and hope his wife and animals were okay.

He then spotted a survivor: a short-haired stray black and tan mixed breed dog. It was obviously scared and disoriented as it wandered near the road, probably looking for landmarks no longer there. Without thinking, Kirk slammed on his brakes and reached over to the other side of the cab to open the passenger door. He was impressed that the mutt was smart enough to jump right in. He wasn't so impressed when it shook the water out of its fur.

"Thanks a lot, Tornado Dog!" Kirk gave it a name without thinking as he and everything else in the cab got soaked. He ran a sleeve across his face, put the truck back into gear, and quickly headed home.

Back at the Café, he was greatly relieved to see the "old girl" still standing. Pulling in around back, he parked next to the porch steps. Letting "Tornado" out, Kirk watched him immediately find a dry spot on the porch. Panting as he lay on his belly – his hind legs sticking out behind him and front legs straight ahead – he wagged his tail nervously while keeping a constant eye on Kirk, his rescuer.

Kirk got the impression the dog was claiming the porch as his own, probably hoping his new human – and the porch itself – never left him. Kirk clambered up the wooden steps and opened the back door for a peek inside. It appeared to be empty. He shouted "Hello?" but got no answer. He assumed everyone had escaped to the storm shelter.

He was returning to the porch when Darren came out of the Café right behind him. "Chandler's missing," he said very casually, not raising his voice.

Kirk turned and stared at his brother-in-law. "What?" He was surprised by his conversational tone more than anything else.

"Chandler," Darren explained, "the little black one."

"Yes, I know who Chandler is!" Kirk snapped, then immediately scanned everything within sight, hoping for a glimpse of that wonderful little black dog. His heart was in his throat as the wind picked up and the rain started coming down hard again. Potential twisters were still very much in the air. He knew they would be wise to take shelter underground, but not just yet.

Darren spotted Sunny hiding in the doghouse in the far corner of the porch. He hurried over to pull her out, but she refused his help. He didn't want to be clawed, and so didn't force the issue. She was alive. That was all that mattered for now, he decided, so he left her there. Kirk had his back to him the entire time, looking for Chandler, and Darren never mentioned the cat.

They then saw something very strange. Wally, the cigar store Indian, was in the middle of the back yard, halfway to Ol' Lightnin', just standing there – with "that Mona Lisa smile," as Hope would say – in the middle of the downpour, getting soaked.

As Kirk and Darren re-entered the storm shelter, the stray dog, Tornado, followed close behind. *Smart dog*, Kirk thought. He was starting to like this mutt, though he was still heartsick over losing Chandler. Once fully into the room, Kirk took stock of who was there with them. He immediately hugged Hope, but was of course happy to see that their customers, staff and family members were all doing well, given the circumstances.

Joey spoke up, "Dad, that's not Chandler!" To Daisy, he said, "Dad must be losing it. This dog doesn't look anything like Chandler!"

Daisy had no response other than to walk up to the new dog and sniff him. "He's cute!" she said to Joey over her shoulder as she wagged her butt.

The new dog sniffed her, too, and smiled. Daisy was fairly cute, herself. Joey rolled his eyes. "Puppy love!"

Chandler, meanwhile, was still in Pugtopia. The ancestral home of all pugs, it is also where pug spirits return to after leaving their Earthly bodies. Coming around a corner, distracted by all the amazing things around him, he bumped into an elderly pug who then sneezed (pug-snotted) in Chandler's face. Given the name Beast, this stranger was the spitting image of his pug father. His humans called him BB because it had a nicer ring to it. He was no beast, they said. Gargoyle, maybe, but really "just a puppy" no matter how old he got.

Chandler never had much interaction with his pug father – taken and sold at the tender age of 8 weeks, as he was – but he would always remember BB's frighteningly lovable, gray-muzzled, snaggle-toothed face.

"It's about time you showed up, youngin'!" the elder pug said with a wheeze to his voice.

"You know me?" Chandler was confused.

"Well, of course I recognize my own flesh and blood!" the scary-looking salt-and-pepper pug said. "Lucky for you," he

added with a laugh, "you took after your mom more than me in the looks department! Boy oh boy, was she a looker!"

"Father?"

"Your one and only! Not counting your human Dad, of course."

"But what are you doing here? I would've thought you were... um... I would've thought you'd be..."

"Dead?" his father finished for him.

"Um, yeah... by now. No offense."

"I *am* dead! But, obviously, not really. It was just my Earth body that finally gave out... years ago now. But, as you can see, the rest of me is alive and well!"

"Wait!" it was all now hitting Chandler. "Does that mean I'm...?"

"Dead? 'Fraid so, youngin'! But, don't fret," his pug father softened his tone. "It ain't so bad here! We get all the kibble we can eat! Other pugs to play with. You can even watch your pug friends still on Earth through these special screens. It's like the humans' TV, only better because you can smell and feel what they're smelling and feeling. Last but not least, you get all the naps you could ever possibly take!"

Chandler perked up at that one.

"You can even," Beast continued, "hire a cat to chase around the house! Oh, that's another thing, everyone gets their own house and yard, or you can share with someone else. And it can have a fence, of course, so you can 'fence fight' with the neighboring dogs, which has always been one of my favorite things. Come mealtime, human and/or cat servants come out of nowhere and bring it out to you!"

"Wow," Chandler was amazed. "Sounds like..."

"Heaven? Yep. Pug Heaven. Also known as Pugtopia!"

"Well, that's great, and all," Chandler explained, "but I promised Dad – my human Dad – that I'd take care of the house while he was out. He said I was 'the man of the house!' and I can't let him down! I promised!"

"Ooh," his pug Father was taken aback. "You promised, and there's nothing more sacred to a pug than a promise. Not counting dinner and a nap, of course. But, that does put a wrinkle into things, doesn't it? Maybe you should go lie down over there in the corner while I think about this."

There were fluffy pillows everywhere in this place. Chandler noticed a certain twinkle in his Father's eyes but wasn't sure what to make of it. Like the Good Boy that he was, Chandler did as he was told and lay down in the corner on a fluffy pillow.

The Aftermath

Once the storm passed and everyone returned inside the Café, Chandler reappeared. He was coming out of the room that Kirk and Hope decided must be his favorite for some reason. He looked a little groggy, walking like he had just woken up.

When Kirk saw him, he smiled huge and rushed toward him. He picked him up and half-shouted, "Chandler! Where were you?"

Chandler smiled and licked Kirk sweetly – and, he never licked anyone unless he was extra glad to see them – as his human Dad held him tight. "Well," he began, "I went into that room where the radio talks to me, you know?"

"I know the one," Daisy nodded as she trotted up, also very happy to see her brother alive and well.

Kirk then noticed that Joey was gone, and he started to panic. He was still wound up tight from all the recent stress. Joey soon reappeared, though, licking his lips.

"Where'd you go, Joey?"

"The kitchen!" said the youngest pug. *Stupid question.*
"There's some really good trash in there."

"So, anyway," Chandler continued his story as Kirk set him back down, "that room is a portal to our ancestral home, Pugtopia. And it is absolutely amazing! I'd say you should go sometime, Dad, but they don't allow humans except as servants,

and they have to sit in a crate until their pug lets them out. I'm not so sure you'd like that."

"You were not in Pugtopia," Joey argued. "On my way to the kitchen, I saw you in that room, asleep under the couch!"

"I was not!" Chandler objected. "I might have had my eyes closed, but..."

"Yes, you were!" Joey insisted. "I saw you! It was all just a dream. Pugtopia! Ha!" As an aside to Daisy, he added, "The old man's gone senile, just like Dad. He probably just needs another antacid."

"My home planet is right here," Daisy nodded in agreement.

"I'm telling you," Chandler insisted, "I went through a worm-hole or something to Pugtopia, the planet where pugs originally came from!"

"Sounds like the *Wizard of Oz* to me," Daisy was having trouble believing such a tall tale. "Did you have to click your heels three times to get back home?"

"No," Chandler was very serious, "but I'm glad you mentioned it. I had to spin around three times. You know, like we do before we lie down for a nap?" That caught the other pugs' attention. "Uh huh," Chandler nodded knowingly. "That's where that comes from."

"I thought we were checking for snakes when we did that," said Joey.

"Ha!" Chandler laughed at his younger, clearly less experienced brother. "That's just an old pug wives' tale. It goes all the way back to our ancestors on Pugtopia. I learned first-hand that spinning around three times is how you get back to Earth! My pug Father told me to go lie down in the corner for a minute, so I did. Because I'm a good boy. I spun around three times, you know, and the next thing I know, I'm back here in that room! Here, let me sing the song. Maybe it'll stir something inside you, like it did for me."

"Can't argue with that," Daisy reluctantly agreed.

"If humans aren't allowed," Joey was unconvinced, "it can't be much of a 'topia!"

"Wherever you were, Chan Man," Kirk bent over and patted Chandler on both sides, now playfully beating on him like a bongo drum, "I am so glad you're back!"

When Hope joined them, she thought Joey looked like he was feeling a bit left out. "You, too, Joey!" she said as she picked him up, hugged him, then set him back down.

Chandler's strange tale aside, Joey was happy to have everyone okay and back together again. He didn't know what he would do without his fellow pugs.

Chandler then led them all in the Pugtopia song, "*We are pugs! Doh De Doh...*"

They all then retired to the back porch, joining the half dozen or so people already there. The wind had died down to a mere breeze. Hope leaned forward, resting her weight on the porch railing, and looked out at Ol' Lightnin'. Pointing at it in disbelief, she said to Kirk, "Um, what's Wally doing up there?"

"Up where?"

"Up in the tree?!"

"Huh?!" Kirk cocked his head to one side like a pug. "The tornado must've somehow sucked it up into the tree! And, is that..." he leaned forward for a better look. "Those are the metal strips from my 'Electric Shoulder' wrapped around it, holding Wally in place! Well, now I've seen everything!" He stood and stared at it a moment. It was truly a sight to behold. After a moment to let it sink in, he added, "Wally looks happy now, at least. Even Ol' Lightnin' looks happier."

"How can a couple of inanimate objects look happy?" Darren wanted to know.

"I don't know," Kirk shrugged, "they just do." Wally fit perfectly where Ol' Lightnin' once had a major limb. "I guess that's where he was going this whole time?"

Whaddaya mean 'inanimate objects'?! Ol' Lightnin' wanted to know. Darren and the rest of the silly humans failed to understand him, of course, and therefore did not respond.

Kirk then recalled that time when, seemingly out of the blue while mowing the lawn, he had decided to buy that "decorative" tractor. He had no way of knowing at the time that it would come with an accompanying cigar store Indian. Did he get the idea from the old tree? Did this tree know? He knew his mental faculties were a bit off these days but this, he told himself, was bordering on insane. *Okay, crossing the border.* He decided not to voice any of these thoughts aloud.

Once everyone was gone and it was just Kirk, Hope and the animals lounging in the music room, Hope turned to her husband and smiled.

"What?" he asked.

"I have some good news," she said. "Are you ready?"

"I'm always ready for good news."

"Well, this might be... let's just say it's a good thing you're sitting down."

"What is it?!" He could not stand the suspense. "Tell me!"

She reached out, took his hand, and placed it gently upon her belly. With a big smile, she announced, "I'm pregnant."

Kirk's jaw dropped, then he laughed out loud, he was so happy. Daisy was also happy to hear the news. She stood up and began to lick Hope's now-exposed belly until Hope giggled and pushed her away.

The cats both got up and ran away as the humans hooted, hollered and hugged. Too much excitement.

Tornado – lying on a separate chair, not yet comfortable enough to join everyone on the couch – had also stood up with his tail wagging constantly. There was nothing better than happy people, he thought, smiling and laughing.

"I've got the perfect name," Kirk suggested, "boy or girl: Three Pugs Barking." Trying to keep a straight face, he added,

"It's in keeping with your mom's Native American naming scheme."

"Ugh," Hope rolled her eyes, "no offense to Native Americans, but I'm thinking something more traditional like Elizabeth or Alexander."

"Sure, those are good, too."

Joey stood up from his spot on the couch, walked over, and sniffed Hope's belly. With serious concern, he looked back at Chandler and said, "You hear that, old man? There's a baby on the way! You know what *that* means!"

Chandler slowly opened his eyes. "Huh? What? What's all the shouting about?"

"Never mind," said Joey. "Go back to sleep."

A young brunette woman in her thirties then hesitantly entered the room. Tornado popped his head up and started wagging his tail furiously. For some reason, he stayed put in the chair, looking down around the edges as if it was suddenly too high to jump down.

"There you are!" the woman cried as she rushed toward her dog and hugged him tightly like a long-lost soulmate, which of course he was. "I am so happy to see you, baby boy!" she added through her tears. The dog, meanwhile, was doing contortions and squealing with delight, he was so happy.

Finally turning toward her fellow humans, the woman wiped away tears and said, "Thank you so, so much for keeping my baby safe through all of this... mess today."

"You are quite welcome," said Hope. Pointing at Kirk, she added, "You can thank my husband, Kirk. He's the one who found him."

"Well," the newcomer said hesitantly, "I should be going. Gotta go find a, um," she stopped herself, on the verge of tears, "a new place to live."

Kirk and Hope were shocked. "Oh, my gosh," Hope spoke for the both them. "Did the tornado take your house?!"

"Fraid so," the woman shook her head. "Trailer, actually. You know what they say: God hates trailer parks!" She tried to laugh but couldn't.

"Well, in that case," it was Kirk's turn to speak for the both of them, "you've come to the right place. We've been thinking about making this place a bed and breakfast. I guess today is the day! You'll be our first guest!"

The woman literally gasped. "Oh, I couldn't. I can't afford to pay you much..."

"No cost," Hope piped up.

"Um, yeah," Kirk wasn't so sure about the "no cost" thing but went along with it now that it had been offered. "At least until you get back on your feet."

"You are both too kind! I'll do it, but just a few days or so."

"Deal!" Kirk shook her hand. "We'll even let the dog stay free of charge... until he gets a job." And the women laughed politely.

"Here," said Hope, "let me show you to your room."

As the women, Tornado, Joey and Daisy all went upstairs, Chandler stayed put and went back to sleep. Well, first he checked to see what Dad was doing. When Kirk took off his shoes, Chandler knew he wasn't going anywhere, so then he went to sleep. The first pugs he saw as he closed his eyes were Mother and Father, his pug parents. And they smiled and pug-snotted each other. It was beautiful.

THE END

About William Arthur Holmes

Originally from Sacramento, California, I have been calling Tennessee home for almost half my life now. I am married, with a young daughter, an old cat, an even older pug, and now a Boston terrier. My available titles are *Temporary Insanity*, *Lottery President*, *Operation Detour*, *Last Train Out*, *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*, and *The Lazy Pug Cafe*. They can all be found at WilliamArthurHolmes.com.