

## Shmel's Fall

**S**hmel had a flaw when we got him. The sellers told us: your boy is lacking one testicle, but otherwise he's fine in every way — so take him for half price.

Half the price was enough to feed our family for a month back then. But what's life without a dog? And is it life at all?

Shmel grew swiftly.

He slept in the corridor, and was always alert to the sound of his masters waking up.

From six in the morning he could already distinguish even the quietest of whispers — and with several attempts he would bash the heavy, firmly closed door with his forehead and barreled along into the next room where the people could be heard.

When he was still a puppy, he could only put his delighted head on the edge of the sofa: stroke me, bring me to the blankets, tickle me!

But in a very short time he grew so large that he could put his front paws over the sofa. Slipping on the floor with his back paws, as if the floor under him was on fire, he tried to climb on to it, but to no avail.

A month passed — and he could already throw half of his powerful body over the sofa without much effort, and

then after a bit of work he would climb up on to the bed, squeezing the sleeping people.

But this was not the limit either.

Once a day came when he no longer had to take a runup to open the door, but easily pushed it with his mighty shoulder, and then regally, without the slightest effort, he climbed on to the bed, and lay across his masters, without the least regard for their wishes.

Even climbing out from under him was no easy task.

From day to day Shmel became increasingly enormous, but we still did not know the size he would reach.

Deciding to share our amazement at our own dog with the rest of the world, we began attending competitions for St. Bernards.

The tall and enormous halls of the dog center greeted us with lights and noise.

Announcements were made over the loudspeaker. There was barking from all directions. Owners constantly gave commands to their dogs.

Walking past dozens of specimens of the St. Bernard breed, we laughed: Shmel surpassed them visually, clearly, without a doubt.

But our victorious, if concealed, arrogance, was immediately dampened.

At the first inspection — the medical one — he was refused participation.

“He’s unforgivably overgrown among St. Bernards,” we were told, in an almost apologetic tone. “We can’t allow your dog even to take part in the show: he exceeds the largest specimens of the breed by 30 centimeters.”

“What’s wrong with you, Shmel?” my wife complained jokingly, but with sincere regret. “You’ve got one testicle missing, and you’re too big...”

“Would Madame like her dog to have three testicles?” asked the second specialist, who had been sullenly silent until then, making indecipherable marks in his thick journal.

“What’s that?” asked my wife in bewilderment.

“I inspected your dog. He is flawless in all senses,” said the specialist.

That was how we learned that Shmel’s other testicle had emerged, and that was a consolation for us.

I winked to a foreign guest who came out after us — evidently a German, who was solemnly leading his dog, a degenerate with a moronic look and a head resembling a German soldier’s helmet.

“It’s not our lucky day,” my wife whispered to herself. “We’ll go back to the forest.”

Three minutes later, after we had already left the shining exhibition halls, representatives of the German delegation came chasing after us accompanied by rather flustered interpreters who had been dragged away from another meeting.

“The gentlemen from Germany would like to buy your dog,” said one of the interpreters, puffing and standing at a distance from Shmel just in case, moving his eyes from us to the dog, and then to the second interpreter, who was explaining something to the nodding German.

“Of course they would,” my wife said, smiling. “But no.”

“The gentlemen from Germany are prepared to discuss your proposal,” said the second interpreter.

I raised both hands with open palms and waved them as if drawing a cross: sorry, but we're not able to help you.

Then the German himself put a word in — quite clearly, and in Russian, he uttered a figure that exceeded the price of our city apartment.

Shmel looked at him with lazy eyes.

“We don't sell our friends,” I said to the German just as clearly, and to make myself understood, in separate syllables.

My wife noticed the gesture I wanted to make almost unconsciously to the German, and stopped it, grabbing my left hand which seemed to be preparing to cut off the right arm at the elbow.

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There were no other St. Bernards in our village, and in neighboring towns they were so rare that in the many years since we had never met anyone like him.

Shmel was already five years old, but — having turned 40 in dog years — the passions of love remained unknown to him.

He was innocent in all senses to such a degree that he even barked very rarely, as if he did not understand why he needed to.

He wasn't interested in cats.

When other dogs tried to bark at him, he gave them a long motionless look, completely unable to solve for himself the question of what this was all about.

Once when I went out into the yard, I found Shmel in all his Seraphic magnificence: from the bowl where we poured

him the rest of the milk, a huge, fat adder was drinking, and nearby magpies were pecking at the remains of a chicken leg.

Shmel looked at the birds and the snake from under his tired eyelids, too lazy to raise his head.

Even when he was hungry, he wasn't maliciously greedy about food, and when he was full he was happy to share with everyone who could reach.

When I appeared the magpies, making a vain attempt to carry away the chicken leg, flew off, and following them the heavy adder crawled past Shmel's snout into its crack behind the kennel.

"Oh, Shmel..." is all I could say.

...Another time someone forgot to close the door to the yard, and the neighbor's dog came to visit us, a curly-haired bitch of a breed unknown to me, owned by the retired prosecutor.

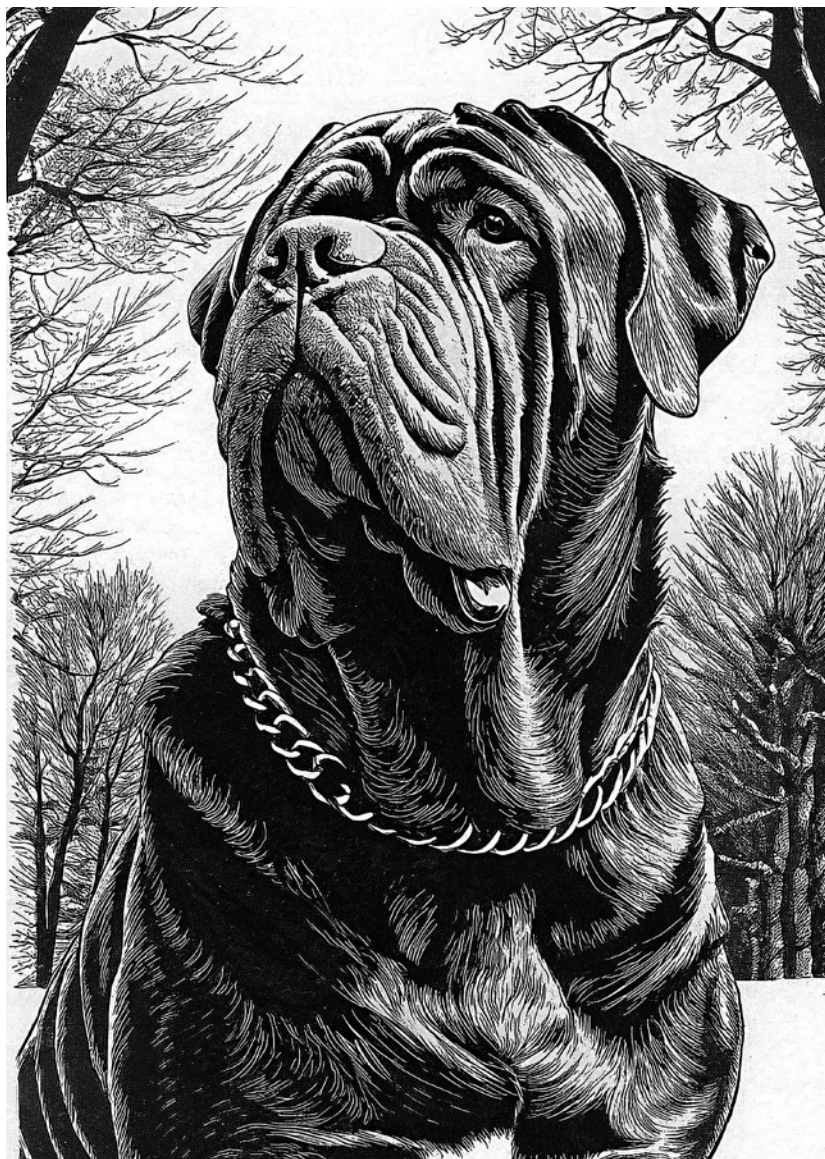
He let this dog go for a walk every day, and it did whatever it wanted.

Shmel wasn't particularly interested in her visit — although we thought he was obliged to watch over his own plot of land.

The guest was shrewd: first she spent a long time eating from the bag of dog food that had fallen over on its side — but when she realized that she would not be able to eat it all, she decided to take it away.

She dragged the heavy bag from the yard! She dragged it for about thirty meters!

Going out of the house, I saw a path of spilled dog food, and puzzled, walked after her.



*Blackie was blacker than coffee grounds. He was black like our winter forest at night. If you squeezed your eyes shut as tight as you could — that was how black he was. My heart lives in the same blackness.*

But even at the sight of a human the dog didn't despair — on the contrary, she gathered her efforts, and decided to keep pulling the bag until someone caught up with her. Sinking her teeth into the edge of the bag, kicking and looking at me with loathing eyes, she dragged it even faster.

I was taken aback at this impudence. Grabbing the first stick I found, I ran after her, shouting something incomprehensible.

When I had dragged the dogfood back to the yard — which I barely managed, as the bag weighed about 30 kilograms, Shmel greeted me with a feeble wagging of his tail.

“Are you back?” he seemed to be asking. “That's good. I was worried...”

...In summer Shmel lay on the beach without a leash, but the country bathers didn't dream of being afraid of him.

He wagged his tail at everyone he met, like Francis of Assisi. The sick and the lame, the elderly and infirm he adored just as the healthy, not distinguishing anyone in his love, but sharing it equally.

...The Georgian builder Vitaly, who once came to our home to do some building, couldn't take his black almond eyes off Shmel: we soon discovered that he owned a female St. Bernard.

Vitaly showed us her photos, and clicked his tongue so often that the forest birds responded. Just another minute, it seemed, and Vitaly himself would also sing like a bird.

Vitaly's colorful shirt was usually unbuttoned from the top by about six buttons, but when he started talking

about his St. Bernard, he began buttoning it up, as if his wife were about to appear. Then, not noticing, he unbuttoned it again, because his heart was beating too fast.

He didn't have to persuade us! We agreed immediately.

On that long-expected day, when Vitaly's black jeep delivered the bride in heat, I was absent, and learned of what happened from my family's stories.

Shmel was anxious.

The St. Bernard female proved suitable: with voluptuous forms and slightly bigger than standard size as well.

Shmel was so nervous that he couldn't do anything on the first day. But on the second day he gathered his efforts and everything went fine.

Vitaly stood in the corner, clicking his tongue very quietly and shaking his head.

...After that day Shmel became different.

We didn't know about this at first; and he also didn't guess.

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We didn't see Vitaly again, but we weren't particularly sad about this.

Shmel also seemed to have forgotten about his one-time girlfriend.

But something irreversible had taken place in his head: he had become a father. This is how he thought about himself, without seeing his children. His love for the world had not died, but responsibility for his close ones had acquired different qualities.