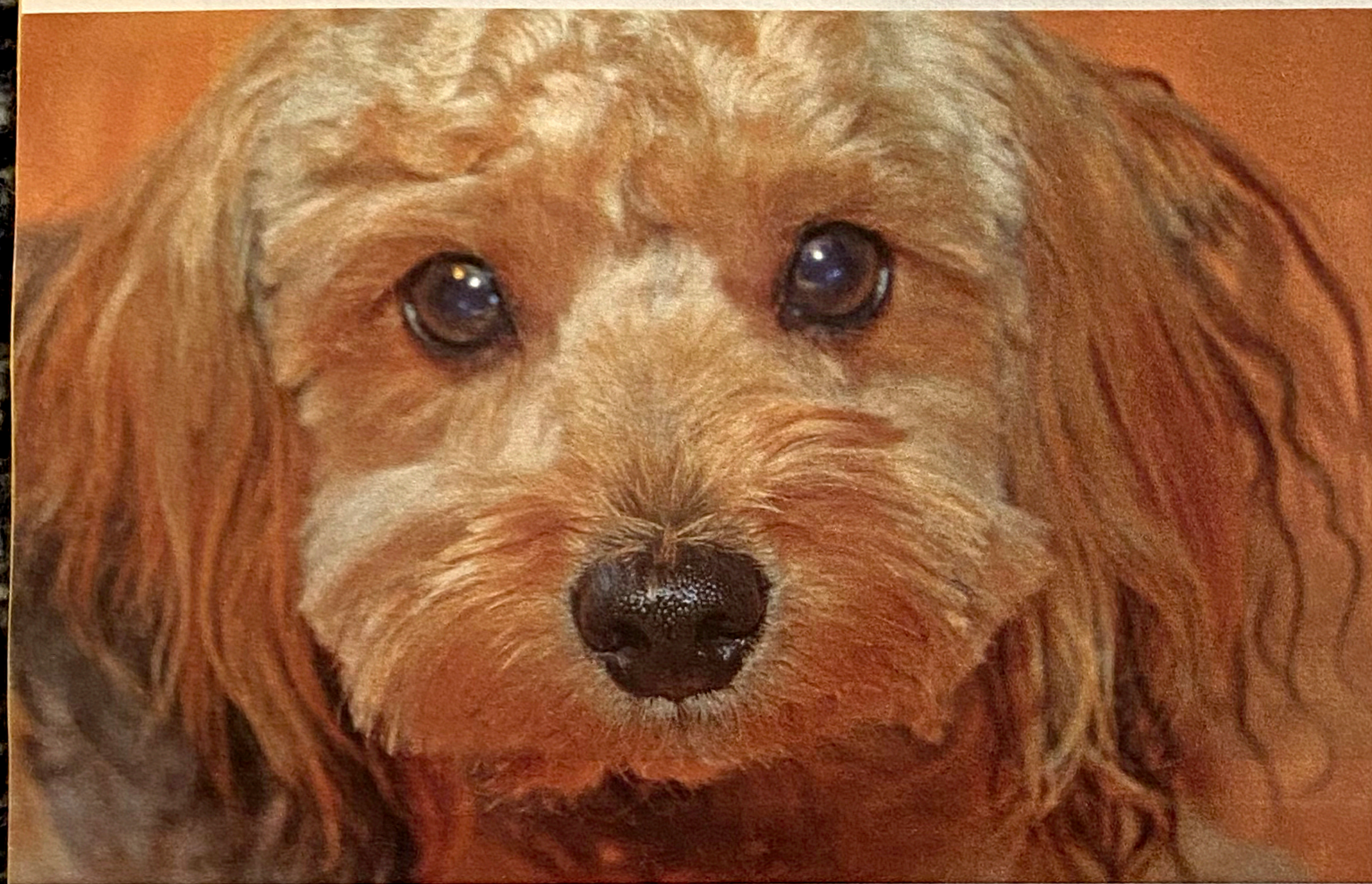


Are You My Mother?

by Virginia Foley



I really didn't love him at first and am not even sure I particularly liked him. He was cute, in the cuddly teddy bear sort of way, but what was I supposed to do with him all day? Was there room for him in my life? Had my days of doing whatever I wanted come to an abrupt end? At my age did I need more responsibility and less freedom? What had I just done?

It had been a particularly warm Sunday in early April last year, and my husband and I were flipping through the newspaper, reading aloud snippets of this and that while sipping our morning tea. All was calm; the way lazy Sundays should be, until my better half spied an advertisement for puppies at a kennel about an hour away.

We had touched on the subject of getting a canine companion for me since Steve had been traveling a lot, and all of my family lived north of the border, but it was never much more than idle chat. When I was a kid I'd always wanted a dog, but my asthma prevented me from having pets. Then, recently, I discovered that the animal world now included new and improved breeds of non-allergenic pooches!

No dog is one hundred percent free of allergens but some score lower on the sneezing/wheezing scale. Most are crossbreeds and often a mix of one part poodle, but this ad in the paper listed several combinations of "designer" puppies.

"Let's take a drive just to see what these guys are like!" said Steve. "It doesn't cost to look."

A mere three hours later we were on our way back home, the back of our SUV piled high with a crate, dog food, toys, pee-pee pads, harness, leash, bedding, doggy treats and books on potty training, and in the front

seat, curled up on my lap, a five-pound bundle of cuteness. What madness had just transpired?

From under long lashes, two big brown eyes looked up into mine. Pup seemed to be asking the Dr. Seuss question, "Are You My Mother?"

It had been instant love between puppy and hubby. Steve had even come up with a name for this mixture of Shitzu and Bichon Frise. We'd recently spent time in Arizona, doing research for a book I'd been writing about the Hopi Tribe.

"Here, Hopi!" Steve had tried out the name at the kennel, and an apricot-colored puppy came running, the same one that was now keeping my lap warm.

After Hopi's first few days with us, we installed a baby gate in the kitchen; his puddles were much easier to clean up on a tiled floor. If I left the room, Hopi cried as if his mother had deserted him. So I pulled a chair up to the counter, piled my laptop and books on it and resolved to spend the rest of my life within the confines of this one room.

When Hopi had been with us for about a week, Steve returned home from work announcing that he had to leave the next morning for an unplanned business trip and would be gone for ten days.

"Isn't it great that you'll have Hopi for company?" He thought that would soften the blow.

All day long I'd been mentally preparing a speech to tell Steve, in the gentlest way possible, that we'd have to take Hopi back to the breeder. Maternal love had not kicked in, and I didn't think I was cut out to be a doggy-mom. I'd been empty-nested for six years now and had become used to my freedom.

Steve was calm and rational, his usual style when it comes to major decisions.

"How about giving this ten more days and when I get back, if you feel the same way, then we can find a home for Hopi. I'll support you 100% in whatever decision you make."

Steve looked at me with his own puppy-eyes. "Does that sound reasonable?"

It didn't. I wanted my life back! But, reluctantly, I agreed.

The next morning, Hopi and I were alone. Deserted. I sat on the kitchen floor and did something very uncharacteristic for me. I sobbed. My sense of loneliness was as strong as it had been when we'd moved away from my homeland and family six years earlier. Ten days with just puppy and me. Ten days of clean up, isolation and pure tedium. I was stuck. Confined. I'd be up to my elbows in pee and poop. Tears rolled down my face.

Hopi, who'd been dragging one of his (wet) pee-pee pads around the room between his teeth, shaking it back and forth like prey, suddenly stopped. He sprinted across the room and bounded into my lap. He put his paws on my chest, stretching to reach my face. His tiny tongue licked a tear, then another. I picked him up, held him away from me and stared into his big, liquid-brown eyes. I'm not sure what happened, but at that moment I felt my heart flutter. I was falling in love.

"It's just you and me, little buddy," I cooed.

His wet black nose nuzzled against my damp cheek. With one more sloppy puppy kiss, Hopi curled against me, laying his head into the crook of my arm.

Gradually we made the move out of the kitchen and into the big, wide world. Over those ten days, Hopi was my constant companion, my buddy. When Steve returned home he was greeted by not one, but two excited souls, hugging him, licking him, barking with delight and snuggling into him.

Although it did take Hopi a few days to find his mother, I now, of course, can't imagine life without him, and I think he probably feels the same!