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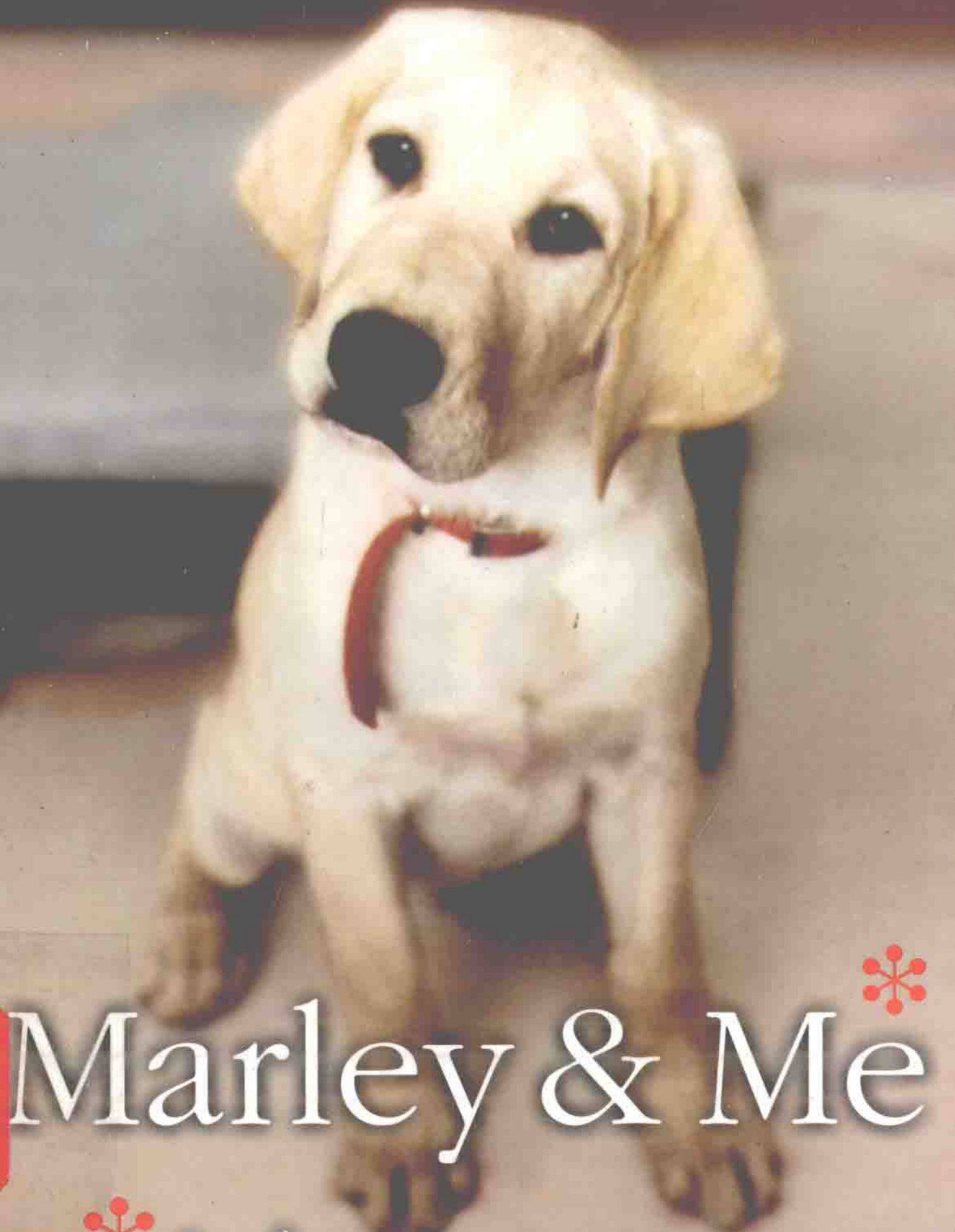
life and love with the world's worst dog



Marley & Me

john grogan

"Heartfelt and frequently hilarious." *Philadelphia Inquirer*

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EVERYONE LOVES *MARLEY*!

"You don't have to be a dog fancier to enjoy John Grogan's riotous memoir . . . [Grogan] sure knows how to write."

Wall Street Journal

"An astonishing achievement . . . This is not the standard animal-lover's portrayal of their pet. Rather, with a mixture of slapstick hilarity and searing honesty, Grogan . . . interweaves the antics of a rambunctious hound with his touching narrative of a young couple's life together."

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"Expect to laugh, cry, and shake your head as you read this book . . . Marley is a great and memorable dog, and in the hands of a writer as observant, unsentimental and piercing as Grogan, this is a human–canine journey dog lovers will want to take."

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Chicago Sun-Times

"It would take a heart of stone to resist *Marley & Me* . . . a multi-hanky, very funny story by John Grogan of one Labrador retriever's eventful life."

New York Times

In memory of my father, Richard Frank Grogan,
whose gentle spirit infuses every page of this book

Preface

The Perfect Dog

In the summer of 1967, when I was ten years old, my father caved in to my persistent pleas and took me to get my own dog. Together we drove in the family station wagon far into the Michigan countryside to a farm run by a rough-hewn woman and her ancient mother. The farm produced just one commodity—dogs. Dogs of every imaginable size and shape and age and temperament. They had only two things in common: each was a mongrel of unknown and indistinct ancestry, and each was free to a good home. We were at a mutt ranch.

"Now, take your time, son," Dad said. "Your decision today is going to be with you for many years to come."

I quickly decided the older dogs were somebody else's charity case. I immediately raced to the puppy cage. "You want to pick one that's not timid," my father coached. "Try rattling the cage and see which ones aren't afraid."

I grabbed the chain-link gate and yanked on it with a loud clang. The dozen or so puppies reeled backward, collapsing

on top of one another in a squiggling heap of fur. Just one remained. He was gold with a white blaze on his chest, and he charged the gate, yapping fearlessly. He jumped up and excitedly licked my fingers through the fencing. It was love at first sight.

I brought him home in a cardboard box and named him Shaun. He was one of those dogs that give dogs a good name. He effortlessly mastered every command I taught him and was naturally well behaved. I could drop a crust on the floor and he would not touch it until I gave the okay. He came when I called him and stayed when I told him to. We could let him out alone at night, knowing he would be back after making his rounds. Not that we often did, but we could leave him alone in the house for hours, confident he wouldn't have an accident or disturb a thing. He raced cars without chasing them and walked beside me without a leash. He could dive to the bottom of our lake and emerge with rocks so big they sometimes got stuck in his jaws. He loved nothing more than riding in the car and would sit quietly in the backseat beside me on family road trips, content to spend hours gazing out the window at the passing world. Perhaps best of all, I trained him to pull me through the neighborhood dog-sled-style as I sat on my bicycle, making me the hands-down envy of my friends. Never once did he lead me into hazard.

He was with me when I smoked my first cigarette (and my last) and when I kissed my first girl. He was right there beside me in the front seat when I snuck out my older brother's Corvair for my first joyride.

Shaun was spirited but controlled, affectionate but calm. He even had the dignified good manners to back himself modestly into the bushes before squatting to do his duty, only his head peering out. Thanks to this tidy habit, our lawn was safe for bare feet.

Relatives would visit for the weekend and return home determined to buy a dog of their own, so impressed were they with Shaun—or "Saint Shaun," as I came to call him. It was a family joke, the saint business, but one we could almost believe. Born with the curse of uncertain lineage, he was one of the tens of thousands of unwanted dogs in America. Yet by some stroke of almost providential good fortune, he became wanted. He came into my life and I into his—and in the process, he gave me the childhood every kid deserves.

The love affair lasted fourteen years, and by the time he died I was no longer the little boy who had brought him home on that summer day. I was a man, out of college and working across the state in my first real job. Saint Shaun had stayed behind when I moved on. It was where he belonged. My parents, by then retired, called to break the news to me. My mother would later tell me, "In fifty years of marriage, I've only seen your father cry twice. The first time was when we lost Mary Ann"—my sister, who was stillborn. "The second time was the day Shaun died."

Saint Shaun of my childhood. He was a perfect dog. At least that's how I will always remember him. It was Shaun who set the standard by which I would judge all other dogs to come.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

And Puppy Makes Three

We were young. We were in love. We were rollicking in those sublime early days of marriage when life seems about as good as life can get.

We could not leave well enough alone.

And so on a January evening in 1991, my wife of fifteen months and I ate a quick dinner together and headed off to answer a classified ad in the *Palm Beach Post*.

Why we were doing this, I wasn't quite sure. A few weeks earlier I had awoken just after dawn to find the bed beside me empty. I got up and found Jenny sitting in her bathrobe at the glass table on the screened porch of our little bungalow, bent over the newspaper with a pen in her hand.

There was nothing unusual about the scene. Not only was the *Palm Beach Post* our local paper, it was also the source of half of our household income. We were a two-newspaper-career couple. Jenny worked as a feature writer in the *Post*'s "Accent" section; I was a news reporter at the competing paper in the area, the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel,* based an hour south in Fort Laud-

erdale. We began every morning poring over the newspapers, seeing how our stories were played and how they stacked up to the competition. We circled, underlined, and clipped with abandon.

But on this morning, Jenny's nose was not in the news pages but in the classified section. When I stepped closer, I saw she was feverishly circling beneath the heading "Pets—Dogs."

"Uh," I said in that new-husband, still-treading-gently voice. "Is there something I should know?"

She did not answer.

"Jen-Jen?"

"It's the plant," she finally said, her voice carrying a slight edge of desperation.

"The plant?" I asked.

"That dumb plant," she said. "The one we killed."

The one *we* killed? I wasn't about to press the point, but for the record it was the plant that *I* bought and *she* killed. I had surprised her with it one night, a lovely large dieffenbachia with emerald-and-cream variegated leaves. "What's the occasion?" she'd asked. But there was none. I'd given it to her for no reason other than to say, "Damn, isn't married life great?"

She had adored both the gesture and the plant and thanked me by throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me on the lips. Then she promptly went on to kill my gift to her with an assassin's coldhearted efficiency. Not that she was trying to; if anything, she nurtured the poor thing to death. Jenny didn't exactly have a green thumb. Working on the assumption that all living things require water, but apparently forgetting that they also need air, she began flooding the dieffenbachia on a daily basis.

"Be careful not to overwater it," I had warned.

"Okay," she had replied, and then dumped on another gallon.

The sicker the plant got, the more she doused it, until finally it just kind of melted into an oozing heap. I looked at its limp skele-

ton in the pot by the window and thought, *Man, someone who believes in omens could have a field day with this one.*

Now here she was, somehow making the cosmic leap of logic from dead flora in a pot to living fauna in the pet classifieds. *Kill a plant, buy a puppy.* Well, of course it made perfect sense.

I looked more closely at the newspaper in front of her and saw that one ad in particular seemed to have caught her fancy. She had drawn three fat red stars beside it. It read: "Lab puppies, yellow. AKC purebred. All shots. Parents on premises."

"So," I said, "can you run this plant-pet thing by me one more time?"

"You know," she said, looking up. "I tried so hard and look what happened. I can't even keep a stupid houseplant alive. I mean, how hard is *that*? All you need to do is water the damn thing."

Then she got to the real issue: "If I can't even keep a plant alive, how am I ever going to keep a baby alive?" She looked like she might start crying.

The Baby Thing, as I called it, had become a constant in Jenny's life and was getting bigger by the day. When we had first met, at a small newspaper in western Michigan, she was just a few months out of college, and serious adulthood still seemed a far distant concept. For both of us, it was our first professional job out of school. We ate a lot of pizza, drank a lot of beer, and gave exactly zero thought to the possibility of someday being anything other than young, single, unfettered consumers of pizza and beer.

But years passed. We had barely begun dating when various job opportunities—and a one-year postgraduate program for me—pulled us in different directions across the eastern United States. At first we were one hour's drive apart. Then we were three hours apart. Then eight, then twenty-four. By the time we both landed together in South Florida and tied the knot, she was nearly thirty. Her friends were having babies. Her body was send-

ing her strange messages. That once seemingly eternal window of procreative opportunity was slowly lowering.

I leaned over her from behind, wrapped my arms around her shoulders, and kissed the top of her head. "It's okay," I said. But I had to admit, she raised a good question. Neither of us had ever really nurtured a thing in our lives. Sure, we'd had pets growing up, but they didn't really count. We always knew our parents would keep them alive and well. We both knew we wanted to one day have children, but was either of us really up for the job? Children were so . . . so . . . scary. They were helpless and fragile and looked like they would break easily if dropped.

A little smile broke out on Jenny's face. "I thought maybe a dog would be good practice," she said.

As we drove through the darkness, heading northwest out of town where the suburbs of West Palm Beach fade into sprawling country properties, I thought through our decision to bring home a dog. It was a huge responsibility, especially for two people with full-time jobs. Yet we knew what we were in for. We'd both grown up with dogs and loved them immensely. I'd had Saint Shaun and Jenny had had Saint Winnie, her family's beloved English setter. Our happiest childhood memories almost all included those dogs. Hiking with them, swimming with them, playing with them, getting in trouble with them. If Jenny really only wanted a dog to hone her parenting skills, I would have tried to talk her in off the ledge and maybe placate her with a goldfish. But just as we knew we wanted children someday, we knew with equal certainty that our family home would not be complete without a dog sprawled at our feet. When we were dating, long before children ever came on our radar, we spent hours discussing our childhood pets, how much we missed them and how

we longed someday—once we had a house to call our own and some stability in our lives—to own a dog again.

Now we had both. We were together in a place we did not plan to leave anytime soon. And we had a house to call our very own.

It was a perfect little house on a perfect little quarter-acre fenced lot just right for a dog. And the location was just right, too, a funky city neighborhood one and a half blocks off the Intracoastal Waterway separating West Palm Beach from the rarified mansions of Palm Beach. At the foot of our street, Churchill Road, a linear green park and paved trail stretched for miles along the waterfront. It was ideal for jogging and bicycling and Rollerblading. And, more than anything, for walking a dog.

The house was built in the 1950s and had an Old Florida charm—a fireplace, rough plaster walls, big airy windows, and French doors leading to our favorite space of all, the screened back porch. The yard was a little tropical haven, filled with palms and bromeliads and avocado trees and brightly colored coleus plants. Dominating the property was a towering mango tree; each summer it dropped its heavy fruit with loud thuds that sounded, somewhat grotesquely, like bodies being thrown off the roof. We would lie awake in bed and listen: *Thud! Thud! Thud!*

We bought the two-bedroom, one-bath bungalow a few months after we returned from our honeymoon and immediately set about refurbishing it. The prior owners, a retired postal clerk and his wife, loved the color green. The exterior stucco was green. The interior walls were green. The curtains were green. The shutters were green. The front door was green. The carpet, which they had just purchased to help sell the house, was green. Not a cheery kelly green or a cool emerald green or even a daring lime green but a puke-your-guts-out-after-split-pea-soup green accented with khaki trim. The place had the feel of an army field barracks.

On our first night in the house, we ripped up every square inch of the new green carpeting and dragged it to the curb. Where the carpet had been, we discovered a pristine oak plank floor that, as best we could tell, had never suffered the scuff of a single shoe. We painstakingly sanded and varnished it to a high sheen. Then we went out and blew the better part of two weeks' pay for a handwoven Persian rug, which we unfurled in the living room in front of the fireplace. Over the months, we repainted every green surface and replaced every green accessory. The postal clerk's house was slowly becoming our own.

Once we got the joint just right, of course, it only made sense that we bring home a large, four-legged roommate with sharp toenails, large teeth, and exceedingly limited English-language skills to start tearing it apart again.

"Slow down, dingo, or you're going to miss it," Jenny scolded. "It should be coming up any second." We were driving through inky blackness across what had once been swampland, drained after World War II for farming and later colonized by suburbanites seeking a country lifestyle.

As Jenny predicted, our headlights soon illuminated a mailbox marked with the address we were looking for. I turned up a gravel drive that led into a large wooded property with a pond in front of the house and a small barn out back. At the door, a middle-aged woman named Lori greeted us, a big, placid yellow Labrador retriever by her side.

"This is Lily, the proud mama," Lori said after we introduced ourselves. We could see that five weeks after birth Lily's stomach was still swollen and her teats pronounced. We both got on our knees, and she happily accepted our affection. She was just what we pictured a Lab would be—sweet-natured, affectionate, calm, and breathtakingly beautiful.