



# The Ballooning Of Muffins

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FLYMF September 2006, The Drink Of Dear Leaders Issue, Volume 3 Issue 9

Clarence Thornton's dog was growing—wildly. This was alarming since Muffins, Mr. Thornton's fiercely loyal Doberman pinscher, was no longer a puppy. Muffins was nine years old. What's more, for the past nine years Muffins had kept a most trim and stately figure. Houseguests often made praising comments. Breeders called on most weekends. Muffins had even won Best in Show at the local doggy pageant, Dog Day and Afternoon.

Clarence immediately suspected something viral. Perhaps even a reverse tape worm. Yet, a trip to Dr. Bennington, the town's premier vet, yielded no such explanation. "Perhaps Muffins' metabolism is just slowing down," Dr. Bennington had hazarded, shrugging his shoulders. "Sometimes, these things just happen." But Clarence knew better than that. Muffins was exercised *religiously* each morning at six; her metabolism was fine. Dr. Bennington, Clarence thought, was the one who was slowing down. No, Muffins was definitely sick. Or perhaps gorging...

The pantry was immediately closed off. The once free-range Muffins was not allowed entrance to the garage—where items bought in bulk were stored—unless properly supervised. Walks were increased by half a mile in each direction. Meals were slashed from a princely three-a-day to the pauperish one. Clarence even switched dog food brands, opting for the chunks of tuna and chicken rather than the traditional beef and lamb. Alimentary rewards for tricks were eliminated.

Still, Muffins continued to balloon up at an unbelievable rate. Neighbors began snickering. The breeders just disappeared.

Clarence dragged Muffins once again to the office of Dr. Bennington. "Pituitary gland," he curtly opened. Clarence had recently read quite an interesting article concerning the pituitary gland and was now convinced that a malfunction had occurred in Muffins'.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Thornton. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Muffins' hormone levels. I have the blood work right in front of me. She's a very healthy, if not larger, nine-year old dog." This response, however, was not enough for Thornton the Perfectionist. At the life insurance office where Clarence had been employed for the last 16 years, he was considered by most to be ruthlessly efficient and indomitably thorough. Dr. Bennington's explanation was simply too incomplete for Mister Meticulous.

Dr. Woodridge, the town's second-tier veterinarian, was a little more receptive to Clarence's case. "We obviously can't staple Muffins' stomach," started the 32-year-old vet, "but, there *are* a number of weight loss drugs available."

Clarence was, at this point, open to suggestion.

That afternoon, Muffins began taking Dr. Woodridge's weight loss pills, and the effects were almost immediate. She began galumphing around the house at breakneck speeds, running into and trampling stationary objects with reckless abandon. The grandfather clock took a punishing blow to the chime. Vases and china teetered. Potted plants sloshed and sluiced.

Muffins had always been a powerful animal—Clarence had originally purchased her as a guard dog—and now, with the addition of 50-60 pounds, she took on the appearance and demeanor of a cyclone whenever she was excited. The pills seemed to excite her tremendously.

More than a little miffed, Clarence phoned Dr. Woodridge early that evening. "Try cutting the dosage," the Doctor replied, eager to be rid of the situation entirely, "Call me in the morning if there are further complications." One gaze in the direction of Muffins and one could see that things were getting pretty complicated already: At the moment, she was entwined in Clarence's brand-new stereo system.

Dr. Woodridge was a quack, Clarence concluded. A bona fide horse doctor.

Although he had left the good Dr. Bennington's office on what could easily be construed as strained terms, Clarence decided that the present severity of circumstances was above any paltry differences the two men might share, and he placed a troubled call.

To his credit, Dr. Bennington was very understanding: "Clarence, stop giving Muffins the pills. It's not safe for a dog her age. With a little bit of time, Muffins will be back to normal. I assure you."

Time was not, however, a solution he was prepared to accept. Clarence was exceedingly proactive. "Waiting it out" was simply not an option. No, no, it was back to the drawing board. Oh, crumbs, thought Clarence.

Despite already changing brands, Clarence decided that Muffins' dog food might still be the problem. He had always had his doubts about whether or not the makers of Doggy Bagged Chow took the nutritional content of their product as seriously as the packaging suggested. In a spurt of micromanaging, Clarence resolved to concoct the food himself: As per the suggestions of *Bon Appetit's* July health issue, whole grains and low-calorie fish would serve as the base. He would mix in vegetables to taste.

The following Sunday, Clarence began visiting Warren's Chop Shop, the town's premier butchery, to pick up the needed supplies—freshness was key. Benjamin Warren, Chop Shop owner and operator, was more than a little surprised to see Clarence suddenly taking such an active interest in the family errands. Usually Wendy Thornton, Clarence's wife of 17 years, took care of those never-ending odds and ends. "Shouldn't the Missus be picking up this stuff, leave you some time to watch the games?" Benjamin asked one Sunday, wrapping up four pounds of Orange Roughy in brown butcher's paper.

Clarence looked at him, distracted: "It's got 107 calories per 3 ounces; very low cholesterol. It's perfect." He exited quickly, holding up the package of fish in thanks and celebration.

Despite, or perhaps owing to, being married for 17 years, Clarence and Wendy Thornton did not see each other often. Their house was a large one, their hobbies dissimilar. Clarence had laid eyes only once, maybe twice on Wendy during the entire length of Muffins' ordeal. Both meetings were by chance. Both occurred on Sunday's concurrent trips to the Chop Shop. Clarence remembered being fascinated at his wife's indifference towards Muffins' burgeoning weight. "I see you got a new grandfather clock," she had said, quite flippantly. He shook with fury at the recollection.

After reading an article on the South Beach Diet, Clarence decided that further alterations to Muffins' diet needed to be made. Carbohydrates would be eliminated completely. Clarence began feeding Muffins tilapia, bacon, and eggs—which he cautiously devolved. Exercise was once again increased by half a mile in each direction. The pair now arose every morning at 5:30 to fit in the extra yardage before a light breakfast—for Clarence only, of course.

Still, Muffins continued to grow. Nothing seemed to halt the plumping—Clarence himself had lost 12 pounds without *any* alteration to his diet, yet Muffins had gained an additional five. She now weighed in at 168 pounds, massive for a dog of her breed. Friends were increasingly scared to come over. One old roommate described her as a lion. And it was true, Muffins was getting a bit...grouchy...in tandem with her weight gain. "Well, you can't show her anymore, but at least you can fight her." Comments like those drove Clarence Thornton up the wall. He was frustrated beyond belief, partly at the gorging of his precious hound, but mostly at his utter inability to amend the situation. He began slumping into a deep depression.

But Clarence was not the type of person to quit completely. He was disheartened, to be sure, but certainly not vanquished. As if sensing this, Muffins, despite her obliviousness to the cause of Clarence's gloom, began consoling him with tongue licks and soft whines. She was upset that *he* was upset. Clarence couldn't have asked for a

better dog. And it was with this spirit in mind that he decided to once again take up the dubious charge of slimming Muffins down.

Zealotry overtook him. Dr. Grover, the town's lone psychiatrist, could have aptly and quite quickly diagnosed Clarence with monomania. But, Clarence had no time to worry about himself—there was only the task, the course, and their execution. Fluff the rest, huffed Clarence.

Muffins' past dietary restrictions were unilaterally reinstated: Meals slashed; beef and lamb forbidden; access to pantry and garage denied. Exercise rose to exhausting levels: Seven, eight-mile jaunts; 30 minute intervals of intense fetching; daily sit/down/roll-over drills. Yet, Clarence Thornton remained indefatigable. And his beloved Muffins remained by his side. Clarence didn't know which was more overwhelming: the task or the loyalty of Muffins. It was too close to call.

Sacrifice, Clarence decided, was in order. If Muffins was willing to heel at her master's side no matter the consequences, then he must display some sign of loyalty to both the cause and Muffins herself. In a snap, Clarence had it: he would skip lunch. Instead of chumming around the insurance office cafeteria, Clarence would return home to console and exercise his afflicted pet. Solidarity might just be what the veterinarian ordered.

The next day, Clarence worked at a furious speed, tidying up the morning's loose ends with an inexorable fervor. Due to these efforts, he was able to slip out for lunch at 11:30 instead of the company-designated time of noon. Luckily, the Thornton household was only a stone's throw from the office, so Clarence was left with plenty of time for his midday mission. He made it home by 11:37—without breaking traffic laws.

Parking the aging Regal in the alleyway, Clarence zipped a beeline to the backyard to see immediately how Muffins was doing. Roaming free on the west lawn, Muffins greeted her master with the kind of affection that Clarence hoped he would never regard as commonplace. She seemed poised for their adventure. Her excitement was infectious and Clarence felt his spirits rise.

Then a curious thing happened: just as Clarence was picking up Muffins' sparkly Princess Poochie-Pooch leash, a sloppily-cut, 12-ounce steak sailed over his back fence, landing upon the ground with a peculiar "thwack." It sounded exactly as a punch might sound, Clarence thought bemusedly. Ignoring both the nuances of sound and the oddity of the situation, Muffins hurriedly rushed to her windfall.

Clarence looked on, speechless. He heard the juffle of a lock and blinked.

As Muffins tore into the latter third of her sirloin, Mr. Warren, the town's premier butcher, opened Clarence's iron-wrought gate and strode confidently into the Thornton's backyard. Benjamin, thought Clarence, was severely underdressed for any sort of butchery business.

Unaware of Clarence's presence, Benjamin roguishly called out:  
"Oh, Wendy!"

From the master bedroom onto the balcony, Mrs. Wendy Thornton hurriedly rushed to cry of her name. She was severely underdressed as well. Was that, Clarence wondered, Muffins' choke collar?

Clarence Thornton's glance turned from Wendy slowly back towards the advancing butcher.

Then up again at his wife of 17 years.

Finally, it fixed upon his dear, gorging Muffins. He heaved a resigned sigh.

From atop the balcony, Wendy Thornton suddenly spotted the slumping figure of her husband planted amongst her azalea bed. She gasped, drawing the attention of Mr. Warren who quickly aspirated his apprehension as well.

From the west lawn, a dog howled ominously.