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Iggy, We Hardly Knew Ye

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I'm starting to think it was easier for Madonna to take her little boy out of Malawi than it is to find a home for Iggy.

As the nation now knows, Iggy is the shaggy, button-eyed mixed breed puppy that is competing for tabloid headlines with Britney's custody battle with K-Fed.

For those just back from the Amazon, it went down like this: Ellen DeGeneres adopted a dog from a shelter called Mutts and Moms. Her cats weren't amused. So she gave the dog to the very nice family of her hairdresser. Mutts and Moms was not amused. Re-gifting, it turns out, violated their contract. So they came to the home with the police and, despite the family's pleas, took the dog away and gave it to another family. Ellen went on the air to tearfully plead for the dog's return. Mutts and Moms said no. And now there are death threats.

It's a household drama that showcases the best and the worst of our intentions. The best is our affection for other species -- particularly ones with whiskers -- and the lengths we will go to keep them from harm. The worst is our uncanny default to behavior that is opposite of the affection, tolerance and acceptance these little critters bring to our lives.

I have to admit, when I started watching Ellen's on-air weep-fest, I first thought somebody died. And then my heart went out to her, the adopting family and little Iggy.

Then a quick check showed Ellen's shows are taped the day before. So her breakdown on Tuesday, actually happened Monday. And the second appeal Wednesday, actually happened Tuesday. Not that this makes her outpouring less sincere, but maybe a little more tactical.

And now, as day follows night, come the death threats. The obvious logic is: I love dogs, so you must die. I don't recall any contracts on K-Fed -- unless maybe from somebody who bought the album.

But hey, I know that when it comes to pets, you do what you gotta do.

My family shares a home with two Labs -- Stuart and Polly. Stuart has been having a rough go of it lately, and his medical bills are mounting. But we happily pay. I have a friend whose much-beloved golden retriever was hit by a car, but is doing quite well with a \$30,000 titanium-plated reconstructed pelvis, followed by major paw surgery and the removal of a tumor. Most vet emergency rooms now let you take out a credit card on the spot if you can't pay.

But in the very emotional tug of war for Iggy, a few questions come to mind that take us places beyond canine infatuation -- like dominance, lack of cooperation, bureaucracy, and old-fashioned, mean-spirited retribution.

In the three-day lag in Ellen tapings, it seems like there was time for a meeting of the minds. By all accounts, Iggy's second family are nice folks, with a nice yard, sweet kids and even another dog for Iggy to play with. They graciously invited TV crews right into their home to show the world that it's not like Iggy was shipped off to Michael Vick's place.

Why then, couldn't family number-two, come in to Mutts and Moms and do the interview, fill out the paperwork, and let Iggy stay? Did the FBI come up with something in the background check?

Why didn't Ellen write a nice big check to fund a Mutts and Moms doggie day-spa and make the whole thing go away?

For all those concerned with trauma to Iggy's psyche from living in three homes in a matter of days -- four if you count Mutts and Moms - animal psychologists say that dogs live their lives in 15 minute increments. That means that very shortly after arriving with family number three, the puppy was thinking: "Nice yard. Wonder where they keep the food. Got any squirrels?"

But this epic contest for canine custody is hardly unusual. A 2006 survey of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers found a five year rise in pet custody cases. Sometimes the battles are ugly. A California couple burned through \$150,000 in legal fees before they settled on joint custody of their pointer-greyhound mix.

Iggy will very soon be with family number three longer than he was with family number two. I'm sure he is quite happy, and they love him to death. What now? Rip little Iggy from their arms?

Perhaps family number two should take a family outing to the pound. I guarantee they'll find love again.

Iggy has moved on. Hard as it is, maybe everyone else should, too.