



Do I look Fat?  
Crave sweets and treats?  
Our quiz tests your  
noshin' knowledge. 3E

Monday  
December 19, 2005  
COMICS 6E, 7E  
CROSSWORD 4E  
LIFELINE 4E  
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## THE DECEMBER SERIES

Holiday essays from our staff



# Mugsy the unlikeliest angel



The little dog with jutting teeth  
and a nervous nature needed a home,  
and although they didn't know it, the  
residents of Barton House needed him, too

By MARY ROGERS  
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

Mugsy takes one look at me and knows I don't belong. He eyes the photographer's cameras, scurries to the office door and begs for someone to open it. Inside, he curls into his bed beneath the nurse's desk, shaking, his eyes watering. He peeks out occasionally to see if we are still there.

The photographer stretches out on the floor and croons to the little dog. Mugsy rolls on his back and lets her scratch his belly. She strokes his pointed, black-tipped ears. "Such a good boy," she whispers.

Mugsy sniffs the worrisome cameras, but when the photographer picks up the terrible black box, he panics again, trembling and panting. His black eyes are wet with fear, and he looks frantically for a new sanctuary.

"Maybe he thinks you've come to adopt him," suggests

More on MUGSY on 11E

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Barton House staff member Judy Whiteside tries to help Mugsy overcome his camera-shyness.



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## Mugsy: He gives love in return for a safe home

### CONTINUED FROM 1E

Arlene Hunsworth-Fox, community relations director at this assisted-living facility.

"I bet the next time you come, he'll be fine," says Delight Felps, the administrator.

But the next time is no better. Mugsy will not let my friend take his picture. I cannot coax him from his hiding place. The photographer returns later, but the result is the same.

On another visit, Mugsy sits in my lap. I smooth his wheat-colored coat and massage his spine. We watch the residents slowly hang ornaments on the Christmas tree. Mugsy's best friend, Judy Whiteside, comes in on her day off to help with the photograph, but the next photographer the paper sends has little luck getting the little dog's picture, either.

Mugsy is a mystery.

### Tiny sweaters, big heart

He came to live at Barton House a year ago — after his owner died in hospice care and after the people at this assisted-living facility on Fort Worth's southwest side had interviewed him. They saw the jutting jaw, the protruding yellow teeth that look so fearsome, and wondered if the little dog would frighten the residents, but they soon learned that the hospice worker who pleaded his case was right.

Mugsy does indeed seem to understand the particular rhythms of the elderly and the houses they occupy. He is a gentle spirit with a frightening countenance.

And so they agreed to give Mugsy a new home — and the dying woman some measure of peace on Earth.

Mugsy is of questionable pedigree: perhaps part cairn terrier with strains of other breeds, but like dogs everywhere, he is tied to man by some ancient covenant of the heart.

He arrived a few days before Christmas with all his worldly possessions: a little bed, a few tiny dog sweaters and some toys.

But Mugsy also came with a bro-

ken heart.

He wanted nothing so much as to hide beneath the nurse's desk and let the world go by, but Christmas is an insistent season. It bangs at the heart of great and small alike, demanding a gift to light the winter darkness. And like everyone else, Mugsy had to obey.

### Everybody's dog

Mugsy is about 7 years old, a staffer guesses. He has lived long enough to own many misfortunes, but so much of his story is lost now. No one can remember the name of the woman who pampered him and loved him before she died. No one can recall the name of the hospice worker who found a new home for him.

The names of the people who actually brought the little dog to Barton House may be forgotten, but many of those on staff there recall how the people cried and were inconsolable when they left the little dog.

No one knows which vet prescribed the anxiety medication, or why Mugsy is so terrified of thunderstorms — and cameras.

### The protector

At first Mugsy wanted to stay in his bed, but in a few days he began to explore the house. He smelled the lights on the shining Christmas tree, poked his nose into every room, looked into the beauty shop and the whirlpool room, and sniffed his way around the fenced garden.

One day he felt chipper enough to chase a squirrel and bark at a hawk that swooped into some tall branches above his yard. He enjoyed his outdoor rambles so much, a doggie door was installed so he could come and go as he liked.

He also began to visit the residents who seemed to need a visitor most — people who often trip on their tangled memories.

They were engineers, geologists, homemakers, teachers and doctors — but that was a lifetime ago, and now they see Mugsy and remember only

that once they loved a little dog.

"My dog," one will say with outstretched arms, and Mugsy will jump onto the bed. Trembling, arthritic hands will smooth his coarse coat and Mugsy will circle round and round, settling in for the night with a sigh.

Now Mugsy checks on residents each morning when the lights come on around 6 a.m. He walks with them in the garden as they shuffle along on walkers or take tentative steps on the pathway. He sits with them during naptime and noses his way into their rooms at night.

Twice each week, he allows the residents to bathe him and comb his scruffy coat.

One day a resident fell, and Mugsy set up a fierce barking that sent the staff rushing to the woman's room. Now he barks when an emergency light flickers on in a resident's room, alerting the staff that help is needed.

### Time for treats

The residents of Barton House keep little treats for the dog, and Mugsy, never one to disappoint, always takes the goodie and gobbles it down in spite of his jagged teeth.

Mugsy is also a visiting ambassador, traveling happily to see a resident who has moved to rehab. "Oh my, you should see their faces when they get a look at Mugsy. They love to have him come," says Arlene in her English accent.

Mugsy watches me wearily as he takes a treat from the woman who holds a basket of Christmas ornaments in her lap. He chews carefully while she pats his head. He is at last at home, surrounded by fragile people who need his devotion as much as he hungers for their love.

He turns his black eyes to me again, and scurries into the office without so much as a backward glance.

Mary Rogers, (817) 390-7745  
rog@star-telegram.com

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