

## **This Mascot Business**

Ingram's first time wearing the beagle suit was in a windowless office in the bowels of the stadium, two levels below the refreshment stands. The office had concrete walls and exposed trunk cables and smelled like tuna fish. It was just the two of them, him and a burly kid in pressed jeans and a football jersey, well-scrubbed and officious, a junior assistant athletic director for public relations. Ingram thought he remembered him, backup defensive lineman perhaps, two, three years ago. Wishing he'd brushed up a bit.

The suit was warm but not uncomfortable, the papier-mâché beagle head lighter than he'd expected. The ears were floppy but nonfunctional, and he had to listen through pinholes at the sides of the head. The lineman had him walk a few paces, turn around, walk back. When he was pretty sure he'd gotten the all-clear Ingram removed the head and placed it carefully on the desk, beside the brass desk plate with the kid's name and title, so that it faced the nearest wall. He stepped out of the torso and laid it across the desk, legs akimbo. It looked like it wanted its belly rubbed. He took a chair opposite the kid. It was all he could do to look at the kid, and not at the headless torso.

The kid scanned his résumé. Ingram mumbled, redundantly, that he was an alum. The kid grunted. It was in his favor, being an alum. But he was what undergrads called an "Old Dog," more than a little long in the tooth for a mascot. The kid perused the résumé, noted the absence of mascot experience, his lack of current employment. On the plus side, Ingram needed the job, was an excellent fit for the costume, and had never been convicted of a major crime. And the kid

was impressed by the firmness with which Ingram asserted, in reply to his question, that he'd never abused drugs or alcohol, which, at the time, he hadn't.

That was outstanding, the kid said. It was settled, then.

"You won't regret it," Ingram said. "Go Beagles."

"Go Beagles," the kid said.

"You hydrate through one of the eyes, with a straw," the kid went on, using a chewed-up pencil stub for a pointer. "That's where your mouth will be. You hear through these holes on the sides, and see out these holes at the top, which you probably know by now. You'll need to learn your moves. The Wag, the Scratch. That thing with the ears. There's a class. Here's the main thing. Stakeholders love the beagle. They're invested. You are not, under any circumstances, to remove the head in a public place. This protects the brand. Under no circumstances are you to be seen in public wearing the beagle body, but not wearing the head. Being seen in public wearing the beagle body, but not wearing the head, can and will result in immediate termination."

With extreme prejudice, Ingram hoped. He would rather die, he thought, than be seen in public wearing the beagle body, but not wearing the head.

The junior assistant A.D. for P.R. shook his hand. The grip was firm and Freudian, the kind of grip you'd expect from a former backup defensive lineman with the responsibility for hiring mascots. The kid folded the torso and lowered it into a duffel bag bearing the school's colors, black and brown and white, and its logo, a mortarboard-sporting beagle. Students of Asian descent, joined by a Native American or two, had once protested the color scheme, but had since come to accept it.

No one, it seemed, had ever protested the logo.

The head was too large for the duffel, which the kid zipped from both ends so that the

crown poked out of an opening at the top. He presented the bag to Ingram, who dutifully held out his arms to receive it. The bag smelled like tuna fish.

“Go Beagles!” the kid said.

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Ingram’s wife, when he told her the news, was not in a cheering mood. When he first noticed the posting online, she had urged him not to apply. When he was invited to interview, she’d urged him not to go.

Now that he’d landed the job, she urged him not to accept it.

But he already had, he said.

She was standing over the kitchen sink, washing vegetables. She let the faucet run for a while before turning to face him.

“No, uh-uh,” she said, brandishing a freshly rinsed carrot. “No way. A *mascot*? What is *wrong* with you? What are you, six? Dress up like a doggie? You need to grow up. But you’re growing down. You’ve finally hit bottom.”

That wasn’t so, Ingram said.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” he said. “It’s called being responsible. We need medical. Seen our bank balance? My unemployment checks? We need this. We need medical.” The job paid practically nothing, no better than Burger King, but came with a modest health plan. It was the only justification Ingram had for getting into the mascot business.

“We need medical,” he said again. “The baby and all.”

The baby was due in October, a month or so after the homecoming game. His

beagle-moves training would start in August, once he'd completed "Pregnancy for Expectant Fathers" at the teaching hospital. That was when their benefits kicked in. Until then he would keep looking. He was a human resources professional. In the final weeks of his last job he'd been forced to give pink slips to five employees, older ones, people with families and mortgages. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Then, instead of a bonus, he got pink-slipped himself. Said some things he probably shouldn't have said.

He did not expect to find work again in the field of human resources.

Now, at least, he was gainfully employed, or nearly. He settled in to a daily regimen, locking himself in the bathroom to placate his wife, who'd found him modeling the torso in the bedroom the day after he took the job. There were tears. He had not been wearing the head, and this only confirmed for him the wisdom of not being seen without it. The bathroom was windowless, like the stadium's concrete office, and the costume was warmer and stuffier than he remembered. He found it hard to breathe with the head in place, and harder to turn around in the narrow space between the sink, the tub, and the toilet. But it made him happier, somehow, wearing the head.

She clocked his time in the bathroom. "You've been in there an hour," she hollered, in a tone he recalled from puberty. "What are you doing in there?"

"I'm *acclimating*," his voice barely audible through his beagle head and the locked bathroom door. "Are you feeling sick?"

She'd spent much of the first trimester throwing up, but was all right now.

"I'm not sick. I just want you out of the bathroom. I want you out of that poodle suit. I mean it. Seriously, it's humiliating."

She was not a dog person. "It's a beagle suit."

She screamed something into a throw pillow.

“Sorry,” he said. “What?”

He could not make her understand. One day, after a baby shower at the home of a friend, his wife returned to the house to find him busting beagle moves in the living room, where he’d relocated the full-length mirror from the back of the bedroom door. He hadn’t heard the car door close in the driveway, through the beagle head.

The friend, laden with baby gifts, lowered her shopping bags. His wife stood beside her, belly distended, glowing and disgusted. She rested one arm across her belly, where the baby was, and her forehead on the fingertips of her other hand.

The friend excused herself, and he took off the head. He heard the car drive away.

His wife stood inside the doorway. After a while she waddled to the couch, where she buried her face in her hands.

He wanted to ditch the torso, but felt sure this would set her off. He remained as he was, sheltering in place, not speaking, wearing the beagle body but not the beagle head.

“I can’t do this,” his wife said finally. “Look at you. You’re a *poodle*. A *mandoodle*, whatever. I don’t know. All I know is I need a husband, and the baby will need a father. A human one.”

“It’s only a costume,” he pleaded. “A uniform. It’s a job. With medical. That’s why I’m doing this. You think I’m proud of this? You think I *want* to drink through a straw in my eye?”

She pondered this for a while.

“What?”

“Water, I mean. And Gatorade.”

“What?”

“To stay hydrated.”

“Hydrated.”

“Forget it.”

She stared off toward the beagle head, which sat in a patch of sunlight next to the potted money tree. The tree, a housewarming gift from her mother, was said to bring good luck.

“All I know,” she said, “is my child will not have a clown for a father.”

“I’m not gonna *be* a fucking clown,” he said, exasperated. “I’m a mascot. There’s a difference. Kids are afraid of clowns. Kids love mascots.”

She refused to return his gaze. Ingram instead took in her profile, her swollen belly, the matte-finish glow of the papier-mâché head. Its black eyes beaming, he thought, like giant martini olives.

“I’m doing this for us,” he said.

His wife, though, was already gone, down the hall and into the bedroom, deaf to everything but her own uncontrollable sobbing.

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Ingram was despondent, at first, when she moved in with her mother. It was several days before he could put on the costume again, and then only in bursts, while he watched daytime soaps on the set in the bedroom. He watched *The Young and the Restless*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*. If he was especially blue he stayed in bed for *General Hospital*, but this only made things worse. There was Tracy confronting Luke, Alexis confronting Shawn, Franco confronting Lauren. It made him despair, for himself and America. Plus it was hard to hear, through the

beagle head. But he needed the practice.

During commercials he drank Tropicana through a straw, alternating between the eyes. This, too, was harder than he'd expected.

His wife was confrontation-averse. She had her mother answer the phone. Horrible woman. She had never liked him, even when he was working. Didn't believe in answering machines. If she didn't pick up, there was nothing to do but call back later. If she did, he asked politely to speak with his wife. But her mother would say she was out, or resting, or too upset with him to come to the phone.

Sometimes he drove past her mother's place, the right half of a duplex on a tree-lined suburban street. He searched for his wife, her eyes, peeking out of an upstairs window. Once he knocked on the door. Her mother said she was out.

"That's her car in the driveway," he said.

"I tell you she's out," her mother said. "Now go away. Come back when you've got a job."

"I've got a job."

"One with dignity."

"One with medical."

"We're done here."

He wrote emails. Deleted them. "Monica," went one, "please." This was whiny. He changed it to "MONICA, PLEASE," which was belligerent. "Monica, I'm trying," went another. "I love you." He deleted it.

He forwarded a funny baby video he found on a parenting website. It bounced back with a "fatal error" message. He stopped writing emails.

There were no jobs. Even if he weren't blacklisted, which he was certain he was, the market was flooded with human resources professionals. And he wasn't qualified for anything else likely to come with medical.

Just the same, he devoted an hour a day—after he'd had his coffee and Cheerios, and before his soaps came on—to emailing his résumé to prospective employers, each résumé accompanied by a cover letter professing his passion for finance, or biotechnology, or social media outreach. Each cover letter included his salary history, and said he would be happy to provide references on request. This was not strictly true.

He hit the send button, then donned the beagle suit and settled in for his soaps.

His wife didn't call. Prospective employers didn't call. He'd lost touch with his older friends. Most of his friends now were couples, people he saw with his wife, who had always handled the social arrangements. They didn't call, now, either.

The linebacker, Brandon, called once, while he was sending out résumés.

“Only three months to kickoff,” he said. “Are you stoked?”

“Sure,” said Ingram, who was still in his Jockey shorts. “I guess.”

“You haven't told anyone, right? Outside your immediate family, I mean?”

“Mum's the word,” Ingram said.

“Don't forget, it's important,” the kid said. “To protect the brand.”

There were plenty of calls from telemarketers, always during his soaps. He spoke to them through the beagle head and they hung up. His brother-in-law phoned one weekend, wanting to reclaim the potted money tree. Ingram did not want to talk to him, and especially did not want to see him. He told him the tree was dead, which was probably true, and the brother-in-law hung up.



He was spending more and more time in the suit. He was getting acclimated, as promised, a process abetted by alcohol. His custom was to switch from Tropicana to Tanqueray, the kind with a zesty lime tang, midway through General Hospital. This was about the time he started to feel another day slipping away, spiraling down the sinkhole after his job and his wife and his unborn child.

He was a cautious tippler. His rule was to drink only while wearing the beagle suit, lest his mother-in-law, anticipating a custody fight, start looting his recycling bin in the predawn hours of Thursday morning. There were not so many bottles, but enough, perhaps, to be used against him. He took pains to consign them to the bottom of the recycling bin, under the Tropicana containers. He found it surprisingly easy, now that he was acclimated, to sip lime-flavored gin through one of the eyes, with a straw.

He rehearsed in the living room. He'd picked up the rug and moved the furniture back to the walls. He invented steps for the Wag, the Scratch, that thing with the ears. He assumed these would be modified later, in his beagle-moves class, in the interests of continuity and school tradition. Stakeholders loved the beagle. Meanwhile he found it invigorating, prancing about in a beagle suit. He kept the blinds drawn, and the full-length mirror turned to the wall. Seeing himself in the mirror, which he'd relocated again from the back of the bedroom door, reminded him why he had opted for a career in human resources.

That had turned out badly. But this, too, was a dicey business. His class was still months away. He'd barely noticed the beagle during the handful of games he'd watched on TV, or the one he'd attended sometime during his freshman year. The linebacker, Brandon, would never reveal the identity of a former mascot, and Ingram would never ask.

Nor could he seek advice from his college chums, being sworn to secrecy, even if he'd

had the remotest idea how to reach them.

His only hope was a video.

YouTube, he discovered, was the Golconda of beagle videos. This was a mixed blessing. The videos were boorish and cruel, mainly, a streaming sewer of beagles falling gracelessly on their keisters, usually with the help of student sociopaths. Some featured mascots hydrating furtively through a big olive eye, and one—the most popular, by far—showed a beagle retreating down an underground stadium passageway, holding what was unmistakably, despite the poorly lit cellphone footage, a hip flask. The comments, almost without exception, were semi-literate and inhumane, and shared an unseemly joy in piling on. Nearly all invoked the flask and the notorious “boozer beagle,” which they took to be representative of the breed. Beagle-move mavens, who claimed to detect subtle variations in style and choreography from one season to the next, or even one game to the next, were sure this explained the high turnover in mascots.

It was all so unfair. Ingram had watched dozens of videos, and could not tell the beagles apart. There could be no reliable data on turnover, no possible way to know why a particular mascot had passed the torch, beyond the natural lure of career opportunities, which were admittedly scarce. Even if it were true, though, who were these people to judge? People who spent their days chained to computers, eyes glazed, cooped up in cubicles, offices, factory discount outlets. Others without jobs at all, who passed the entire week in a Barcalounger, clutching a beer, pecking out ungrammatical witless abuse and looking ahead to the weekend, when they could torment you in the flesh.

People who asked you to offboard your colleagues, then forced you to walk the plank. People who didn't know the meaning of dignity, or the value of even a modest medical plan, and whose potted money tree he was glad was probably dead.

People who took beagles for poodles, who couldn't distinguish a clown from a goddamn mascot.

Ingram sucked on his Tanqueray. He drank with assurance now, using a jumbo straw, and his dancing was fueled by a newfound passion. He felt, in fact, like a new man. In a moment of fearlessness he had flipped the full-length mirror back to the room, and when he caught his reflection now it seemed to him the very image he'd seen in the videos, the cruelty-free ones at least, graceful and effortless. It was beautiful. He barely recognized himself, there in the rugless expanse of the living room, ringed by the sofa and chairs and the upended coffee table and the probably dead money tree and three or four hardy perennials, which formed an irregular broken circle along the walls and windows.

His wife was still always out, or resting, or too upset with him to come to the phone.

He tried not to think about that.

It was the kids that mattered. Kids loved mascots. The kids, once he'd perfected his beagle moves, would wave to him in the aisles, holler for him to dance their way, beg for a hug, wonder if they might nuzzle his nose or rub the top of his head. He would nod his assent, waggle his ears and tail, and the kids would jump and laugh and squeal with unbridled childish delight.

It wasn't the stakeholders. It was the kids. No matter how hateful their parents, how crude or vicious or pitiless, Ingram knew the kids would still love the beagle, and would never, ever be frightened.