

Tuscaloosa River Walkers

A sing-song tone erupts from the corner of the room and Mom wakes up, but Maggie has chewed on her delicious, plush duck for an hour already.

“Alexa, stop,” Mom yells. Maggie isn’t sure who Alexa is, but she can smell Mom’s disgust.

Maggie’s tail, Maggie’s butt and then Maggie’s whole body starts wiggling. She can’t help it, she’s just so excited to play. She also has to pee. Get up, Mom! Maggie licks her. Tastes like salt.

“Good morning, Maggie my most perfect puppy,” Mom coos. She always greets Maggie two octaves higher than she usually talks. “Potty!”

Maggie summons all the strength her little puppy legs can muster and leaps into Mom’s arms. Morning potty breaks means she gets carried to the yard, which is all for the best because she’s so excited to play that she would probably wet the carpet.

The smell of the grass is decadent. Maggie sneaks a blade or two while Mom isn’t looking. They walk back in and Maggie’s bowl is filled with kibble. Maggie’s teeth go crunch, crunch, crunch until she hears jingles. Jingles mean road trips.

They get in the car and it comes alive when Mom turns the jingle toy. It takes them to the same place every morning. When they arrive, Maggie hops out to explore the smells.

People. Water. Lots of water. Trees. Friends like Maggie. Friends like Mom. And, gross, the Enemy. Maggie hates the Enemy. They move too fast and their paws are so sticky they can climb trees. Their tails are too fluffy and bigger than their body. Their barks are too squeaky. Mom calls them “squirrels,” but Maggie thinks that’s being too kind. They can’t be trusted.

After a few times playing at this place loaded with smells, Maggie finally learned the right name. Everyone calls it “The Riverwalk.”

Mom starts walking, and Maggie knows to follow. She is confused at the rope attaching the two of them, because she only leaves Mom’s side to protect her from the Enemy and to make friends. Everyone should enjoy the Riverwalk as much as Maggie, so she makes sure to introduce Mom to her new friends.

Maggie’s first friend was at her favorite spot. She dragged Mom off the trail, down a pile of rocks jutting out from the grass, onto the blanket of pebbles and sand then straight into the river – and there she stood. Rosie.

Maggie knew Rosie was her age, but Rosie loomed over Maggie like one of the big rocks. Black spots were randomly strewn on her white body. They approached each other and the sniffing party commenced.

Rosie’s Mom wasn’t called Mom. Rosie had a Samantha.

“Rosie is an 11-week-old Great Dane puppy,” Samantha told Mom. “I grew up around them, and always wanted to get one of my own.”

Samantha chose Rosie because she needed a friend during her last year of college, and they play at the Riverwalk almost every day. After they met, Maggie got to wrestle with Rosie every week.

“Let’s run,” said Mom. That signals Maggie to speed up and match Mom’s trot. Trees, bushes, leaves and other people blur as the pair canters on the paved trail.

They meet Max and his friend Patrick. Maggie first met Max on the trail among a stretch of deep green bushes, a particularly sparkling part of the river and the buzz of the Tuscaloosa Farmers’ Market.

Maggie adored Max. He was black and white like Rosie but his fur was devoid of spots. She heard Patrick call Max an English Bulldog and a Boxer – two kinds of dogs meant twice the fun. Max was older, and Patrick found puppy Max at the shelter.

Most of Maggie's friends were rescues and even more were unknown mixes. Ivey's fur was black, brown, long and fluffed like Maggie's toy duck. Jojo looked like Rosie, but her spots were the same color as Maggie's fur – chocolate brown. Rudy's yellow and white coat shined next to the water. He was a lab like Maggie, but also something his owner did not know.

Maggie's friends were always in her favorite spots. By the big fountain and its ropes of upward-shooting water. On the fishing pier where she watches the lazy boats scooting on the river. The small, woodsy path with the bridge that creaks from age.

Maggie also had friends that were more like Mom. They say hi to Mr. Reed-the-teacher on early morning runs. The baby humans intrigued Maggie. She was gentle and resisted the urge to nip their chubby arms. The babies were older than Maggie, but they couldn't do anything. Maggie runs, barks, jumps and licks. Babies sit in their rolling seats while their mMoms push.

However, Maggie's favorite human friends lived near the boathouse. They looked like Mom, smelled like the river and squealed when they saw Maggie. One of them told Mom they were the University of Alabama Women's Rowing Team. They bounced around like Maggie's tennis balls and squeaked like her rubber bone.

After a long time, Mom takes Maggie back to the car for ice cold water and treats.

All of Maggie's friends and her favorite smells are at the Riverwalk. The runs, walks, drags and wrestles make for the best naps. And when she naps, she dreams of defeating the Enemy.