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From Basenji Into Gargoyle

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Imagine that you are standing before a great cathedral, atop the highest hill in our nation's capital. As your gaze roams over the vaulted roof and noble spires, it is drawn to one of the carved stone figures that in the medieval tradition serve as waterspouts. You note the beast's proud head and pricked ears, the long legs, the neatly curled tail. Can it be? It is, indeed — a BASENJI!

This story begins with our love affair with Kuja Mtote of Chesterbrook in February, 1958. A lovely, red and white creature, she captivated us from the first, and soon had us completely trained to come when called, to retrieve, and to respect her half of the bed—the middle, of course!

In the fall of 1959 a small story appeared in the daily newspapers: officials of the Washington Cathedral were appealing to all amateur sculptors to submit designs for gargoyles—not really a contest—no prizes would be awarded—but the models selected for carving would be translated by stone-carvers into imperishable stone, high up on



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the outer walls of the great cathedral. As I read the article, I began to visualize a Basenji-gargoyle. The more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became and for several weeks I sketched and mulled over various Basenji poses. I requested a set of gargoyle specifications and blueprints. Scanning them, I was somewhat dismayed by the complicated blueprints as well as the specifications to the “armature,” the “moulding” at the back in which the figure must be incorporated, and many other

unfamiliar terms. Now I must confess that I undertook the project with one tiny handicap—I had never “sculpted” before, nor in fact, ever had an art lesson. I guess my only real assets’ were nerve and boundless affection for the Basenji.



Ignorance, in this case, was truly bliss; if I had understood the problems involved, I would have given up at once. I soon realised that the problems involved were architectural as well as sculptural; each block of stone, of fixed dimensions, was already in place, high on a wall, with a drain pipe, 3 inches in diameter, already inside. The sculptor’s problem was to design a Thing that would be within the bounds of the stone and arranged in such a pose that the drainpipe would be well covered on all sides with a layer of stone. Kuja was very patient with me as I measured her dimensions carefully and made quick sketches of her in the very limited range of positions she could assume that would meet all requirements.

Now I felt ready to plunge into the actual model-making. The instructions said the models could be submitted in plaster or in plasticine clay. The latter sound easier, so I bought 3 pounds from an art store, thinking if I needed more to finish, I could always pick it up later (the final model required 30 pounds of clay!) and some small whalebone tools to work it with, selected at random from a bewildering assortment—actually as work progressed, hands proved the best tools. Someone suggested coat hangers for an armature, so I used 2 or 3 twisted together, plus a small roll of paper towels for the torso. I worked hard for a month and a half late at night, in the morning, and on weekends, since I have a full time job at the Pentagon. I had selected the typical Basenji play pose, down on the forearms in front, a rear high in the air, hind legs braced for a quick spring, old tennis ball firmly clutched in forepaws, and chin lowered over it protectively. To accommodate the mammoth drainpipe, the beautiful slender neck had to be thickened, the mouth wide open. As I worked, scraping off here and adding there, changing the position of the ears over and over again, and lovingly furrowing the red clay forehead into the proper wrinkles; it was a thrill to feel the familiar shape of our darling come to life under my hands, even though in a “monsterized” version. With a husband and 3 children constantly peering over my shoulder, I had plenty of free advice; to keep me humble; they began calling me Grandma Moses.

When to anxious and pessimistic eye, it appeared that there was nothing more that I could do for the Beast, we photographed it from various angles, and as the rules required, submitted the pictures to the Clerk of the Works at the Cathedral. Weeks passed with no news and I had resigned myself to writing the episode off as recreation, when to my great surprise I was notified by the Clerk that the judges were impressed by the photographs and would like me to submit the model, but first, would I please confer with the Cathedral’s sculptor, Carl Bush, about a few minor requirement changes.

With a dark mental picture of what "a few minor changes" would entail (like rebuilding everything from the ground up!) I hurried to the Cathedral to consult with Mr. Bush. The changes were really too drastic; mostly thickening the back half of the torso so that the gargoyle could have proper support and wouldn't come crashing down on innocent spectators; filling in any hollows on top to prevent rain from collecting and rotting the stone; adding material around the top of the ball and inside the ears to make it easier for the stone-carvers, and to quote the Clerk of the Works, after all, except for the underside, nothing else will be seen "save by the Holy Spirit and the pigeons!"

I had thirty days to make these changes before the final judging. When I had finished, I wrapped the Beast carefully in a sheet, drove cautiously to the Cathedral, and left her with a final loving pat.

More waiting...then one Sunday in June there were pictures and stories in all the local papers announcing that the final decision was to be made the next day and that there were 16 finalists. Tuesday night Mr. Bush was quoted as saying that the judges had eliminated a swan, a frog, and a "well, you name it," which still left us

Kuja Mtote of Chesterbrook was sired by Marlise's Red Ink and her dam was Marlise's Black Enchantress and in the next generation is all Of The Congo breeding. Kuja was born 5 December 1957.

It isn't recorded how the female model turned into a male in the final product.

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guessing. All we were sure of was that 13 had been chosen for caring, out of more than 400 entries.

At last on Thursday came a letter from the Clerk of the Works telling me that my child had been accepted and would be carved, with my name inscribed next to it, sometime in the next two years.

So, if you happen to be in Washington next year, stop by the Cathedral and enjoy its solemn beauty and incidentally see the unique position occupied by one small Basenji.

