



Smoke the Donkey: A Marine's Unlikely Friend

Cate Folsom

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On a U.S. military base near Fallujah in war-torn Iraq, Col. John Folsom woke up one morning to the sound of a small, scruffy donkey tied up outside his quarters. He was charmed by this scrawny animal with a plaintive expression. Folsom and his fellow Marines took in the donkey, built him a corral and shelter, and escorted him on daily walks. One night, hanging out with the Marines as they relaxed after work, the donkey snatched someone's lit cigarette and gobbled it up, to the laughter of all. Suddenly, the donkey had a name: Smoke. More than a conversation topic for troops connecting with families back home, Smoke served as mascot, ambassador, and battle buddy.

Smoke the Donkey recounts the strong friendship between Colonel Folsom and this stray donkey and the massive challenges of reuniting Smoke with Folsom in the United States following Folsom's retirement. After being given to a local sheik, Smoke wandered the desert before Folsom rallied an international team to take him on a convoluted journey to his new home. The team won a protracted bureaucratic battle to move Smoke from Iraq to Turkey, only to face a tougher fight getting him out of Turkey. Once in the States, Smoke became a beloved therapy animal for both children and veterans. Smoke's story, while tinged with sadness, speaks to the enduring bond between a man and an animal, unbroken by war, distance, or red tape.

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