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### **A Dog's Life**

My alarm goes off every morning at 7:15 am, which is to say, at that hour I feel a soft, pointy nose poking me in the leg. As I groggily open my eyes, I see the blurred image of an eager, smiling dog stretching his body hopefully at the side of my bed. He is medium size as dogs go, about 50 pounds, solidly built with a dark, reddish brown coat that is in vivid contrast to his chest and paws, which are highlighted in pure white. But his most compelling feature is his eyes: they are a marbled combination of blue and brown. "Is it morning time already, Simba?" I mumble. It is a question I ask rhetorically, since I know that, save for fire or flood, Simba will only wake me within a minute or two on either side of that precise hour, appointed back in the day when I actually needed an alarm to wake up. And since, on some level, I am also aware that I am talking to a dog.

Like the child a couple didn't plan on having but loved as much as any other, Simba was a mistake. My daughter Alex, then 16, had just won her first major show jumping ribbon in Wellington, Florida, the pinnacle of the sport in the U.S. She and my wife Lucia were feeling elated when they came across a somewhat sketchy breeder who was skirting both horse show regulations and state law selling puppies out of one of the barns. I had just driven back to our rental house when I got a breathless call from Lucia: "You have to come down here and see these Australian Shepherd puppies," she exclaimed. "They are the cutest things in the world."

Lucia and I had owned dogs of every shape and size in our 25 years together, sometimes two at once; so to say we shared a weakness for a cute puppy was something of an understatement. Alex, meanwhile, was a chip off of our collective block. Though she had been crazy about horses since she was two years old, dogs have always come in a close second, as is the case with many “horse people.” So Lucia’s call was not to be taken lightly.

For some months I had been beating back the notion that we should get another dog. We had only just adopted Dharma, a Collie with a variety of health problems, the previous winter, at a time when we already had a 12-year old terrier mix in declining health. To my mind, another dog at this juncture was a pet too far. But Alex had recently become obsessed with Border Collies, perhaps the world's smartest and highest-energy breed of dog. She had every Border Collie rescue site in North America bookmarked on her laptop, and was always the first to know when a new dog became available. Lucia, meanwhile, having helped numerous immigrants to find work and horses to find homes, was a sucker for a rescue of any kind – man or beast. I knew that ultimately I was swimming against the current. "I'll come to see them," I said. "But we are not getting another dog."

I made my way over to Ring 5, where the breeder was set up, and sure enough there were six tiny Australian Shepherd puppies surrounding a dish of dry kibble, battling one another for position. Aussies, as they are frequently called, are closely related genetically to Border Collies, so Alex was in her element. "Look at that incredible Blue Merle!" Alex exclaimed, referring to a tricolor puppy with black markings on a silvery grey and white coat. I bent down and reached out to pick him up when out of the melee raced a reddish-brown puppy that had to be the tiniest of the litter. Suddenly, without warning, he leaped what must have been three

feet off the ground into my arms and sunk his head into my chest. From that moment on, resistance was futile.

It is extremely unusual for a dog to want to leave its pack, especially one that is barely six weeks old. The puppy was obviously miserable at the horse show for whatever reason; adopting him would be one step removed from a rescue. By this time I knew it was inevitable there would be another dog in our lives at some point. While Aussies and Border Collies are equally smart and energetic, I thought, at least we would be taking home this small, quiet puppy, rather than adopting some high-strung Border Collie whose owner needed to be rescued. Within minutes, the puppy was ours.

I wanted to name him Sandy, after one of my childhood heroes, Sandy Koufax, a Hall of Fame pitcher for the Dodgers. But Alex held the naming rights to our family pets, by virtue of her proven ability to quickly size up an animal and come up with a name that just seemed to fit. "This dog isn't a Sandy," she informed me. "I think we should name him Simba."

As with previous pets, the name proved prescient. The puppy looked like a little lion. And tiny as he was, he was already able to give our big Collie Dharma a run for her money in games of tug-a-war and fetch. When we got Simba home to Connecticut and took him in for shots, we quickly learned why he was so small and needy: he was allergic to most common dog foods and had stomach parasites to boot. A restricted diet and months of antibiotics eventually cleared up the problems, and Simba assumed his rightful place at the head of the household pet pecking order - he was king of our beasts.

When we returned to Wellington the following winter, Simba amazed us with his athletic prowess and endurance. Barely a year old, he could keep up with the horses that Lucia

and Alex would gallop for miles along Wellington's ubiquitous canals, even while losing ground here and there from diving into the water – alligator infested, we later found out – to cool off. Once back at our rental he would collapse on the floor and be indistinguishable from an animal rug for a spell, only to be ready to go again an hour later. At that point, he and Alex would typically go off on a five mile run through the farms and fields leading to the horse show. One day Simba managed to annoy Alex's big jumper Carayan, who was grazing calmly out in a huge paddock, by nipping at his hindquarters. When Carayan turned and bolted off after him, Simba found gears we didn't know existed to outrace the horse to safety outside the fence. Googling afterwards, I learned that Aussies can run at speeds of up to 35 miles per hour, faster than all but the very fastest land animals, not to mention the fastest humans.

Aussies are a bit like Secret Service agents - they tend to get attached to one person, whom they make it their job to protect and defend. In our household that person was Alex, who took on the not-inconsiderable task of channeling Simba's immense energy and intellect into productive activities. They went everywhere together. There was dog training, where Simba would typically complete his task before the other dogs figured out what was being asked of them. There were dog agility classes, where he learned to complete complicated courses incorporating tunnels, chutes and see-saws. And there were hours on end spent at the barn, where Simba would lie inches outside the ring whenever Alex rode but never go in and get in the way. At night he would sleep on the floor next to Alex's bed.

Simba also developed some unusual talents that were not part of the dog training curriculum. If you gave him a large bottle of water, for instance, he would hold it between his two front paws, put the top between his teeth and spin the cap off. Then, while continuing to

hold the bottle, he would bite down hard on the edge of the lip, flattening it, until the grooves for the cap on opposite sides interlocked. Then he would stand the bottle up on the floor and show you his work. You could pick up the now-capless bottle and turn it completely upside down without a single drop of water spilling out.

On numerous occasions, Simba demonstrated the truth of Yogi Berra's adage that you can observe a lot by watching. He showed a keen eye for imitating human behavior. Like many dogs, Simba enjoyed riding in the car with his head sticking out the window, which had been cracked open slightly so he could take in the surrounding sights, sounds and smells. On some days, of course, it was simply too cold to drive with a window open. But this did not pose a problem. After staring at the driver for several minutes with pleading eyes, he would take his front paw and swipe at the switch controlling his window until he had lowered it enough to assume his usual riding position.

Simba also had a squirrel's instinct to save for the future. He would hide a wide array of toys and treats in or under sofas, or bury them outside, retrieving them again days, weeks or even months later. On the long drive from Connecticut to Wellington a year later we decided to stay at the Ritz Carlton in Palm Beach the final night. Feeling exhausted after 10 hours in the car for the second day in a row, we ordered room service for dinner, including a plain burger for Simba. He seemed to wolf it right down because it was there one minute and gone the next. The following morning, when Alex got up and opened the curtains, out flopped half of Simba's burger, which had been crammed into a decorative cuff in one of the curtains in case we stayed a second night.

Late one summer when Simba was two, things began to change around the house. Clothes from Alex's closet were laid out in the spare bedrooms. Big moving boxes arrived. When the suitcases finally came out, Simba knew his worst fears were being realized. Alex was going away. After she packed up her car and left, Simba spent days on end sitting on the sofa gazing out the window, awaiting her return. But Alex was off to college at Emory University in Atlanta, and would not be back until winter break.

This was a difficult transition for all of us. Alex had always been close to home due to her nearly life-long struggle to overcome some severe medical conditions. Nonetheless, she probably handled the challenge best. She threw herself into college life, making friends, joining clubs, riding on the Emory Equestrian team, all while taking on a challenging pre-med curriculum.

Meanwhile, those of us left at home struggled with her absence. Lucia sorely missed their daily conversations about school and typical mother-daughter stuff, as well as trips to the barn and to horse shows, which were a family activity. I had work to distract me somewhat but evenings were particularly tough. I missed the nightly routines I had shared with Alex: watching a little baseball, checking her arithmetic (her math was fine), proofreading her papers. And more than anything I missed the passion she exuded for the thing she cared the most about: horses and the "horse world," as the micro-culture is known to those who compete.

Lucia and I had been through the college transition once before with Alex's older brother. But Jeffrey went to school in Boston, a short drive from Connecticut. We also still had Alex in the house to care for. Alex being in Georgia made it feel like she was on another planet. Eventually, though, life goes on. Lucia and I resumed old activities that had long been shelved:

traveling on the spur of the moment, attending antiques auctions, reconnecting with old friends who did not have a child in boarding school or “winter” in Florida.

Simba too resumed a semblance of a normal dog’s life, going to parks, chasing balls, riding in the car with my wife as she did her errands. I did my best to provide a substitute for Alex, giving him lots of attention, but he remained loyal, seemingly afraid to grow as attached to me or Lucia as he had been to her. Where before he would be at Alex’s side whatever she was doing, now he would hedge his bets, situating himself equidistant from the two of us, even if that meant not being in the same room as either of us. A few months after Alex’s departure for school, we moved to a house on a large pond that was favored by several flocks of Canada geese. I made it Simba’s job to keep the geese off the lawn, and he embraced it with fervor: he had been heartbroken by Alex’s departure, and the geese would pay the price.

Now that I had given him a job to do, Simba was warming up to me, and I to him. He slept in our bedroom at night, and he soon learned my sleeping and waking habits well enough that he was at the bedside poking me at the appointed hour every morning. We soon developed a morning ritual that has lasted until this day: the dogs go out while I make their breakfast, then they eat their breakfast while I make my own. Once they’ve finished eating, Dharma gets pills for her arthritis and incontinence and the terrier gets pills for her heart disease, each delivered in large balls of cream cheese that everyone gets a taste of, me included. Only then do I finally sit down to eat my own breakfast. Everyone gets a taste of that too.

I always used to laugh when childless married couples would say, oh, the dogs are our children. It’s a common refrain up in Connecticut where I live and always seemed preposterous

to me. You just don't know the difference because you've never had kids, I always thought. But now that we were "empty-nesters" I was beginning to understand.

On weekends, Simba and I began going for a long walk down the road, just the two of us. On special days, we'd take a trip to the schoolyard or a nearby dog park. He loves nothing more than to roam through a school's open fields, sniffing the grass for the previous presence of other dogs, and then marking each spot as his own. At the dog park it is more about maintaining order. Like the referee at a boxing match, he watches for dog play that seems to be getting out of hand, then races in between the pugilists to break things up. Even large dogs do not intimidate him. Once when he was only a puppy a two-year old German Shepherd at least twice his size made a menacing move towards Alex. In an instant, Simba had the dog on its back with his teeth on its neck. To this day he has it in for German Shepherds and I need to remind him to "be nice" whenever one is around.

On work days we move to my adjacent office after breakfast. Simba lies on the floor and wrestles with a chew toy while I catch up on email and the news. When it is time to head off to work, I walk over to Simba, give him a pat, and say: "I have to go to work today, Simba. But I'll be back." He immediately drops his toy and moves to the sofa, where he assumes a mournful pose, head resting on the arm, his entire face seeming to droop and his mouth turning downward into a frown. Over time he has come to equate the phrase "I'll be back" with my departure for a considerable period of time, and whenever I use it he will retire to the sofa in my office from wherever he is and assume his dejected pose.

About a year and a half ago I came down with an illness that left me feeling weak and light-headed much of the time. I couldn't go into the office. Indeed, I could barely eat without



becoming nauseous, thanks to the impact of high potency antibiotics on my stomach. I passed day after day on the couch in my office, trying to stay current with work and what was happening in the world. From the start, Simba sensed something was very, very wrong. During the entire month I was laid up, he barely left my side. His growing loyalty to me made it immensely easier for me to handle it. At night, once I'd worked my way upstairs, Simba slept on an area rug by my bedside, eschewing his favorite sleeping chair on the other side of the room. And 7:15 came and went each morning without any attempt by Simba to rouse me. I was deeply touched by what seemed like his display of empathy, an emotion most experts say a dog cannot feel.

Eventually doctors concluded that surgery would be required to correct my condition. Alex flew home from Atlanta to watch the dogs and Lucia and I traveled to Manhattan for the surgery and recovery. We were in the city for five days. For the first time, Alex's arrival home was not greeted with bounds of joy from her former puppy. Instead, Simba spent nearly the entire time up in our bedroom softly whimpering, sitting in his chair gazing out the window during the daytime and lying on his small rug at night. Almost no amount of cajoling could get him to come downstairs to rejoin the living.

When we finally returned home, Alex made sure that all three dogs were there to greet the car. Lucia was the first to get out and was mobbed with grateful licking from all concerned. Still feeling weak from the surgery, I watched from the passenger's seat. As soon as Simba noticed me he ran to my open door and whimpered, pawing the ground, imploring me to get out. But I just didn't have the energy. Suddenly, as he did the first time we laid eyes on each

other, Simba leaped into my arms and burrowed his head into my chest. I hugged him tight to my body. And neither of us moved for at least 30 seconds while Lucia and Alex looked on.

I held back the tears that were welling in my eyes. Simba was my dog now.