

Last summer I got a toothache, a gold crown, and a dog.

It's not Dr. Rice's fault, really, that her office at Domino's Farms is just a mile or so down Plymouth Road from the Humane Society of Huron Valley. It's not Dr. Rice's fault that while my lovely gold crown was being crafted, my temporary crown fell out repeatedly, necessitating five different trips out to her office for re-installation. (I apparently bite hard.) And it's not Dr. Rice's fault that when leaving her office, I kept inexplicably turning east, toward the dogs, instead of west, toward home.

ther's housemate, a morose former beatnik named Paul Z. My dad and Paul Z. shared an ancient *La Bohème*-style loft over a Chinese restaurant just off Times Square, and every time Dad and I trudged up the sour-smelling stairs and put the key in the door, Fab, a large schnauzer, would be on the other side, spinning in a hurricane of dog joy. Once we were inside, the rapture would continue for five minutes at least—licking, dancing, yelping, emoting—until I would yell, “Fab! Where’s your bone?” And Fab would take off on a hunt, grateful for some new direction, toenails skittering on the old wood floor. Sometimes, while my dad was in the kitchen making me a

sidling inexorably toward the front hallway, something strange began to happen. Late at night, as I sat at my computer, I would put my hand down by my side and expect a warm head to be there. I could almost feel it: large and bony, silky-furred and strokable. I’d pull my hand away and wonder, “Is this a dog I’m wanting? I’m not a dog person. I’m a cat person.” And I’d go back to writing.

Gato, our senior cat, would certainly not welcome a dog into her household. Born in 1979, she was beyond old, eventually achieving a degree of ancientness that led us to almost believe she would never die. Almost. Everyone in the household agreed that Gato deserved to live out her remaining days, years, or decades in pampered peace. Maybe then we would get a dog. Our other, more youthful cats could handle the change.

Then, one day last May, we took Gato to the vet, hoping for some rehydration and tips to get her eating and drinking again. We came home with Gato-in-a-box, and a very sad day it was. The vet said, compassionately, “The warranty on this cat has expired,” so we did what we had to do. We dug a hole in the front yard, festooned her box with flowers and commemorative words written in Magic Marker, and buried her. For one week after, can-

silience of the animals: the cats who purr and preen in their multi-tier cages, the pooches whose tails spring to thumping life the second you crouch down and lock eyes. Not to mention the devoted people, volunteers and workers alike, who sprint down the halls in their rubber boots, shoveling feces, washing towels, walking dogs, and doing other, unspeakable tasks behind closed doors, tasks performed only by the very brave and very compassionate.

And, for all the sadness and drama, I like to look at the dogs. Even the ugly ones—and there are many of these—are beautiful and funny at the same time. They’re kind of like Lucille Ball, always my personal standard of excellence. And so I wandered the halls, reading the blue cards stuck to the cages. Someone at the humane society spends a lot of time on those cards:

Name: Boofus  
Age: 1 year (?)  
Breed: Beagle/chow mix  
Needs: Clip nails, brush, LOVE!!!!  
Boofus was found behind the Maple Road Kroger. He is sweet, sweet, sweet! Won't you be his forever family?



J. ADRIAN WYLIE

I was a cat person. Yet late at night, as I sat at my computer, I would put my hand down and expect a warm head to be there.

I had never been a dog person, although I’d always wanted to be one. I grew up in a one-bedroom walkup apartment in midtown Manhattan. Desperate for pets, I befriended a cockroach and kept him (or her?) in a small box until my mother intervened. I had a snail named Fletcher with rhinestones glued all over his shell, and I loved him passionately until he ate through a Cray-Pas drawing titled *Me and Tulips* and proceeded to excrete my artwork in an abstract expressionist style with which I was neither familiar nor enamored. My mother finally relented and procured a cat named Venus, who quickly became pregnant, gave birth (to John, Paul, George, Ringo, and Blackie), “lost her mind,” and “disappeared” (so the grown-ups said). I accepted it all, sadly. These things happen.

I tried to make do with the dogs of friends and neighbors. There were Tessa and Timothy, the snorting pugs belonging to the friendly bachelor in the next building. Every day after school I would run down Second Avenue to an antiques store where the owner let me walk Clyde, his Rhodesian Ridgeback. One of my father’s girlfriends—very mod in her boots and minicoat—had Barnaby, a cairn terrier who absorbed much of my affection. I petted and petted them all.

Then came Fab. Fab belonged to my fa-

fried baloney sandwich, I would sit on the couch and stroke Fab’s soft ears, look into his shiny button eyes, and pretend he was mine.

But soon after, Dad got his own “pad.” Paul Z. moved out of the city, and I never saw Fab again.

That was all a long time ago.

When I became an adult, I became a cat person. My first real independent act was to move to Ann Arbor, where I got cats, spayed them, and cared for them. I was determined not to let them “lose their minds” or “disappear.” And in this I was mostly successful.

I like cats. They’re warm, soft, and independent. You can read all kinds of nonexistent emotions and human conditions into their blank stares. Wisdom? Oh, absolutely. Pride? Certainly. Scorn? So they say, although I have never had a scornful cat. And contentment. Lots of contentment. They don’t eat much. They play when you want them to play and sleep when you want them to sleep. What’s not to like?

For two decades my life was full of children and cats, and my dog dreams slumbered silently. But about a year ago, with one kid out the door and the other

## A dream fulfilled at the humane society.

by Whitley Hill

dles burned all night amid the daisies and zinnias—a vigil. It was appropriate.

Then came the toothache, the discovery of a cluster of eroding fillings, the temporary crown, the resurgence of the phantom warm, bony dog head in my hand, and the first of many post-dentist trips to the humane society out on Cherry Hill Road.

I like to go to the humane society. I’ve gone there for years, even when I’m not in the market for an animal. When I tell people I’ve been out there just for fun, they tend to say, “Oh, I hate it out there. It’s so depressing.” And it is that—room after room of frantic barking, sad and reproachful eyes, hopelessness, listlessness, scrappy intelligence peering out from under tufts of doomed, shaggy brown fur. But the other side of it is the inspiring re-

Name: Heidi  
Age: 3 years (?)  
Breed: Collie/shepherd  
Needs: Clip nails, run, brush, LOVE!!!!  
What a sweet girl. Her family had allergies and also had to move away. Heidi needs a home with no small children. She is spayed and ready to go!

Name: Dino  
Age: 2 years (?)  
Breed: Doberman mix  
Needs: Fenced-in yard, LOVE!!!  
Don't let Dino's gruff exterior fool you—this guy's a big hunka couch-potato love. Knows basic commands, but could use additional obedience. A little work and you'll have a gem 2 LOVE 4-ever! Take me home!!!!

The blue cards are really big on superlatives, exclamation points, the word *sweet*—anything to soften the image of the scruffy, decidedly un-Best-of-Show, sometimes snarling inmates. I read them carefully, hoping for nudges from fate, “signs” that would mean I should take one home to be my forever friend. But the only way to know is to take one out for a walk. I walked a few: Jasmine, a Rottweiler mix, and Trevor, a cute Lab-like dog, but felt no true nudges.



# vicki's

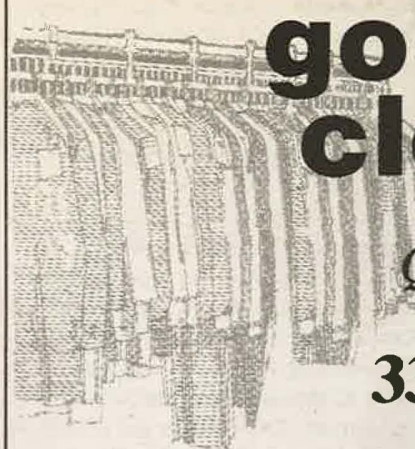
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# Dog Person

continued

Back home I began to confess my activities and broach the subject of actually adopting a dog. My husband was not against the idea, but cautious. There were the expected discussions of "being tied down," "vacation hardship," "expense," "cat hardship," and so on, but he emerged open to the idea, maybe even a little excited.

Then there was this startling reversal of an almost archetypal conversation:

**Mom:** Honey, guess what? We're thinking about getting a dog! A puppy, maybe? What do you think about that?

**Teenage Son:** Mom, I've told you before. How many times do I have to say it? If you want to get a dog, I'm not going to have anything to do with it. I'm not going to walk it. I'm not going to clean up after it. It's going to be your responsibility.

I took this as a yes, and the next day I brought my husband out to the humane society. This was, after all, going to be a family affair, even if some people had an attitude about it. Somehow I got sidetracked by some kittens I had no business looking at. When I finally found Al, he was in the puppy room, just off the lobby. "Look down there," he said, pointing to a cage at the far end.

I looked.

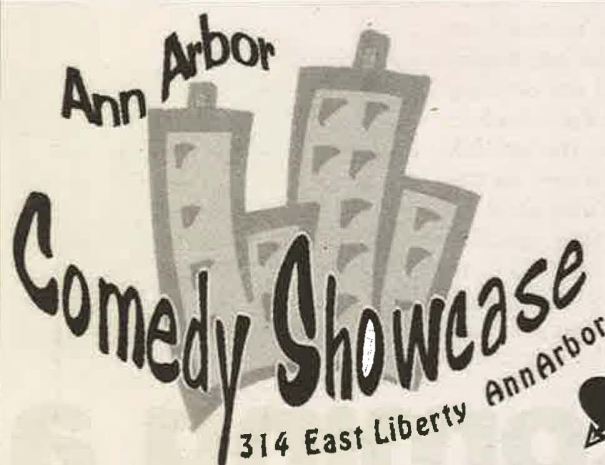
Nudge.

Amid the room's cacophony of shrill barks and yaps, a large black-and-brown pup sat, regal as a sphinx, looking right at us, not making a sound.

It's funny, but I can't remember much of this part, even though it was just last summer. I know that we were suddenly crouching by the wire mesh, that she was licking our fingers. I know that—flash—we were outside walking her with the ugly orange leash and collar she'd been wearing when she was picked up stray somewhere in Ypsilanti two weeks before. I remember that she liked to bite that leash and to prance proudly rather than walk, that she picked up every pinecone she could find. Our discussions were suddenly fervent and serious. Could we handle this? The blue card said that "Diamond" was a "Rottweiler/Lab mix." Was this too much dog for a novice like me? We sat in the grass and watched her. At four and a half months, she definitely had attitude and sass. "This is a great dog," said my husband. "What a great dog. Look at her, Whit." Fear and adoration tumbled through my insides. Adoration won. We decided to call her Dinah.

**W**e went through a very nice counseling session conducted by a lovely woman with an English accent. "You'll be fine," she said, soothingly. "Be sure to get a crate. Get her into some obedience classes as soon as possible. Give her lots of things to chew. Your cats? Your cats will be fine. Just give them time to adjust."

"So can we get her tomorrow?" I asked. "Will that give you enough time to



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call our vet and do all the paperwork?"

The lady looked confused. "Oh, you can take her now!"

"Now? But we don't have anything! We don't have a crate. We don't..."

I found myself holding back tears. What had we done? Who, what, was this large and unruly creature scampering through our once peaceful living room, chasing our cats and mouthing my hands,

J. ADRIAN WYLIE



Suddenly I was encountering the other reason I'd kept my dog-person persona under lock and key for so long.

"Don't worry," she smiled. "There's a Pet Supplies Plus on Plymouth Road."

"But it's Sunday..."

"Don't worry. I think they're open till six. We'll call them for you to be sure."

It was 5:30. A long pause.

"You *have* to take her now. Please," she said. "We need the space."

Fifteen minutes later we were lassoing our velvety new charge down the bright linoleum aisles of Pet Supplies Plus, a store I had never been in before. My eyes were as wide as Dinah's. Imagine: all these products I'd never thought about before, much less purchased. And, oh, we purchased. A crate, leashes, toys, high-priced puppy kibble, balls, stuff to chew...

Dinah really seemed to like her new home. She wandered the rooms, her black toenails clacking on the hardwood floors, sniffing everything: the place where some coffee spilled a year ago, our exercise mat, the corner where we put our Christmas tree, the spot on the sofa

where Gato used to sleep. It was pretty cute, but any rosy fantasies of cuddling up on the sofa with our new puppy were quickly laid to rest. Dinah was, in a word, mouthy: she bit—sometimes hard—any hand that came her way. It wasn't mean, aggressive biting, but it was completely unacceptable.

I am totally, 100 percent behind Ann Arbor's dog poop laws. However, my Old West Side neighborhood is filled with people who apparently disagree with them.

nipping at my skirt and anything that moved?

That night we put Dinah in her crate in the living room. She cried briefly, a pathetic bit of music, and then curled up and went to sleep. I stayed awake all night, listening for trouble. Would she bark at every passing car? Would she get tangled in her blankets and strangle? Would she pee or worse in her crate? *What had we done?*

The next morning Dinah was up at a reasonable hour, crying softly for release. We scampered downstairs and inspected the bedding. Dry as a bone. We hustled her outside, where she peed like a racehorse. And pooped.

Ah, yes.

Suddenly I was encountering the other reason I'd kept my dog-person persona under lock and key for so long. Owning a dog means becoming intimately involved with dog poop: anticipating it, watching it emerge, cleaning it up.

I am totally, 100 percent behind Ann Arbor's dog poop laws. However, my Old West Side neighborhood is filled with people

who apparently disagree with them and who have brought about some testy feelings in me as I try to cross my extension to my car. It got so bad that I started spying on the most frequent offenders. One woman I confronted said, "No problem. I'll pick it up on the way back."

Sure. I had my son and his friend fol-

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## Dog Person continued

low her—unseen and at a distance—and they reported that she had indeed pocketed some shit, but it was some other dog's, on someone else's extension.

Then there was the night I happened to go outside to bring our empty garbage cans back to the garage. There by the curb,

nine will to please? Why didn't I feel anything for her? Weeping, I told my husband that I'd give it another week but if I couldn't handle it, would he help me find a good home for Dinah? He looked stricken but agreed.

I prayed for guidance. It came, in the form of dog trainer Sue Gehrke.

We called Sue at about 8 on a Monday night. Perhaps she heard the desperation in my voice, because within an hour we were pulling into her driveway. She led us into a basement workroom festooned with literal-



J. ADRIAN WYLIE

The shelter is filled with room after room of frantic barking, sad and reproachful eyes, listlessness, and scrappy intelligence.

poised like a toy ballerina on a music box, was a dog owner from down the street, his arm extended over our hapless garbage can, dangling his choice morsel over the abyss. He looked up and tried not to look guilty.

"Uh, do you mind if I put this in here?"

"Actually," I said, "that probably won't work for me. It'll probably get mashed down into the bottom of the can, and our garbageman might not appreciate it."

I might not have said this quite so nicely. He harrumphed his way down the street, muttering under his breath.

My point: I'd had some issues with dog poop. Now here I was on the other side of the fence. I stashed blue *New York Times* delivery bags into every jacket pocket and made a vow to do my best.

**A**fter a couple of days Dinah seemed happy enough, but I was a mess. As I walked her up and down the summer streets, I felt like an impostor, as if I were walking someone else's dog—a dog over whom I had only tenuous control. She was big and crazy. She pulled on the leash. She picked up every piece of trash on the street and growled at me when I tried to take it away. She nipped at my ankles and hands if I tried to pet her, to love her. Otherwise, she hardly seemed to notice me.

Where were the adoring looks into each other's eyes? Where was that famous ca-

ly hundreds of dog obedience ribbons. Sue was kind but no-nonsense as she listened to our concerns. Number one on our list: mouthing and nipping. One spritz with a spray bottle and Dinah was suddenly thinking about mouthing in a whole new way. We learned about the value of food treats, about our tone of voice, about being consistent, and most of all about being *the boss of this dog*. Within an hour, Dinah was sitting on command, lying down on command, coming on command. It was sobering, liberating, fascinating. When we left, Dinah was so exhausted she peed on the floor, but I was filled with hope.

Just outside of town is a secret place where dogs gather to run. As you approach it from a distance, the rolling fields look like a Grandma Moses painting, pricked with trees and with the tiny figures of standing people and dogs, midbound. On any given afternoon there might be anywhere from five to thirty dogs there, playing wildly, running in magnificent arcs that tumble in on themselves and then form again. When not running, they sniff each other and fake-bite each other and sidle over to whichever owner might have a treat.

I both like and hate this place. I like it because it allows Dinah to be a dog, to socialize with dogs and people, and to use her beautiful muscles. I'm no expert, but this seems important. I hate it because I know that every time I take my dog's leash off, I am running a terrible risk. The road is far away, but Dinah's a dog, with a dog's



pea-brained logic. She could run away. I don't think she'd ever leave the "pack," but some other dog might, and she could follow. Ann Arbor needs a safe, enclosed dog park. I never knew that before, but I know it now. I am becoming a dog person.

After about 1,000 pieces of hot dog, two obedience courses, and hundreds of walks and training sessions, Dinah is a good dog. Of course, time has played its part. At eight months, she's still a pup—a very big pup—but the months have turned her calm and sweet. We can see clearly now the dog she will grow to be.

One of the most transformative aspects of this whole business is just being outside. Since adopting Dinah I've spent more time outside than I ever have before. I've calculated that I've walked about eighty miles in that time, mostly through my neighbor-

Where were the adoring looks into each other's eyes? Where was that famous canine will to please? Why didn't I feel anything for her? Weeping, I told my husband that I'd give it another week but if I couldn't handle it, would he help me find a good home for Dinah? He looked stricken but agreed.

hood. And I can't believe how beautiful it all is: the changing of the leaves, the pitch of these old roofs against the sky, a pair of bright pink rocking chairs on someone's porch in the early morning sun.

It was full summer when we found Dinah, and now the snow has fallen, melted, and fallen again. Dinah leads me through it all every day, sometimes ahead of me, like an explorer, a navigator, sometimes by my side. When I call, she comes quickly, so at home in her sleek, strong body, and sits before me, looking into my eyes. And at night, when I'm working at my desk, hers is the head in my hand.

I call her my Beauty Queen—not surprising, since this all started with a gold crown.

And thank you, Dr. Rice. ■



## IT can be confusing.

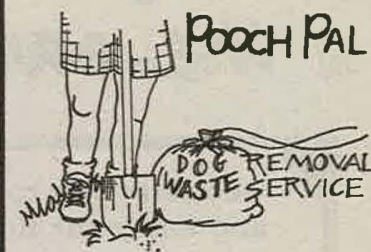
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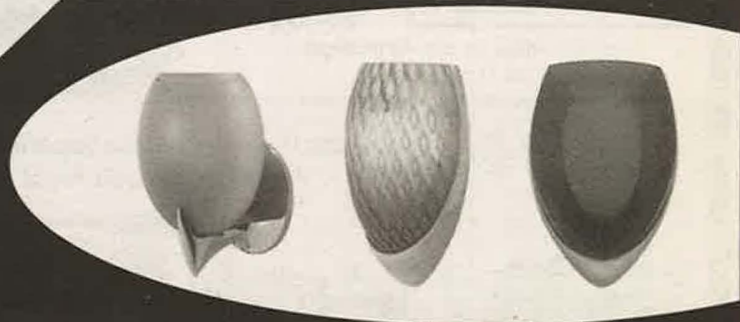
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