Cats and Dogs

"Physical intimacy is often available only after emotional connection is made," the counsellor said. "I want the two of you to try a short-cut to this. I want you to look at each other once a day, or once a week if that's easier, and silently say to one another 'elephant shoes'."

The counsellor demonstrated how mouthing the words turned the tongue and lips into the same contortions required to say "I love you".

"Don't say it aloud," she instructed the couple. "Stay silent. Your mouth will appear to be saying 'I love you'."

"Sort of like feeling your leg is still attached even if it's been amputated" the husband said.

"Phantom love," the wife added.

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The couple's son and daughter suffered from angst, anhedonia, insomnia, anxiety, depression, and lethargy. On Sundays the wife took the kids shopping at the mall and then for lunch at a restaurant of the their choice. Neither excursion cost much because the daughter hardly ate and the son wore the same hoody and jeans every day. On Saturdays the husband dropped the kids at the movie theatre with a hundred dollars in their hands. He offered driving lessons to the boy, who'd recently got his learner's permit, and bought a Mini Cooper for them. The girl said she didn't want to drive a stick shift and was happy to have her transit pass renewed. The boy grunted, declaring his disinterest in cars, and said his bike was enough.

"I think the kids are better on Saturdays," he told his wife. " Movies are a drug-free way to feel better."

The girl was calming her anxiety with Ativan and Lorazepam and the boy was fixing his serotonin imbalance with Paxil.

"Shopping gets them to deal with people," his wife replied.

The kids' drugs birthed new problems that crusted onto their original ones. Now the boy couldn't sleep and spent an hour in the shower every morning. He refused to eat anything with corn syrup in the ingredient list and talked about a Paleo diet, but then refused to get off the sofa to eat the steak his father barbecued. The girl's feet started to swell and she wandered around the house at 3 a.m. looking for organic milk and organic fruit. She did, however, stop worrying about nuclear war and abandoned her fear that a cockroach was embedded in her nostril (she'd read

about a woman in some remote village in India whose doctor suctioned a live cockroach out of the woman's nasal cavity).

The husband blamed his wife's DNA; her mother was stored in a long-term care home, unrepairable after a lifetime of electric-shock therapy and old-school chemical interventions.

"It's your DNA that sunk their minds. The failing grades, the fleeing friends, the sullenness, it's all in your genes."

The wife clapped her hands. "Why are you turning us into high school students choosing teams for dodgeball," she said.

"Yeah, well I remember you never getting chosen."

They'd both chosen to work from home. Her office window looked over the white concrete driveway and the maple-lined street. His office, below grade and always damp, had one small rectangular window that allowed a brief glimpse of sky. When the kids were young they'd squat on the lawn and peek in his office window and yell "dadda", screeching and laughing when he banged on the window with a file folder. He eventually put a lock on his office door so they couldn't come downstairs after school and interrupt him during tax season. The girl and boy hadn't visited either parent's office for a few years and mom and dad were surprised when the kids slipped a note under their respective office doors, requesting a meeting in the family room.

The family met after lunch. The boy slumped into the sofa and the girl sat cross-legged on the mohair rug. The parents sat on two opposing armchairs purposely mismatched by the wife.

"We want a dog," the girl said. "A dog gives no-strings love."

“You can’t have a dog when you’re taking drugs,” their mother said. “You won’t be able to look after it.”

“We need a dog to make a family,” the boy said.

“We *are* a family,” the husband asserted.

“No, a real one. A family that gives us more the lowest rungs on Maslow’s Hierarchy.” The girl was parroting the therapist.

“Yeah, a dog gives unconditional love.” The son was also paying attention in therapy. “And will help me find my higher self.”

Their mother smiled. “Your father will find you a dog. Something smart and obedient and loving.”

“That’s right guys,” the father affirmed. “Leave it to me. I’ll do some research and find you a good dog.”

The smartest dog learns a new command in five exposures, while the dumbest dog needs more than eighty tries and even then, there’s a one-in-three chance that the dog will “sit” or “come” after training is complete. The dad narrowed his list to the two smartest breeds, the border collie and the poodle, and created a spreadsheet to compare their pros and cons, and picked the poodle. “Give me a week,” he told he kids. “I’ll get us a good one.” Lots of dogs were for sale on Kijiji, but they were crossbreeds between poodles and corgis, poodles and schnauzers, even poodles and greyhounds (the seller called it a “poohound”). The nearest poodle breeder was three hours driving and he couldn’t leave the kids alone; their mother had a freelance article to complete in a few days and she needed relief from the two invalids.

“How is the dog search?” the girl asked.

“Do we think another animal might be good?” he asked her.

“I knew it. You can’t climb higher than food and shelter.” The girl slammed the cupboard door and spilled granola on the kitchen floor.

The boy fell onto the sofa. He cocooned himself in the Pottery Barn throw his mother had bought for the new dog.

“Sometimes death would be better than this hell,” he muttered.

“This is hell,” she said.

“How about a beer guys? It always helps me.” His wife had locked herself in her office for the day so he took command of the family ship.

The kids tag-teamed a lecture about the perils of mixing alcohol with prescription drugs and the girl said she could die from even one drop and the boy said alcohol was a depressive and asked “why would you add fuel to my fire?”

“If you loved us you’d get us a dog. Not booze.”

The kids were at that particular age where drama and crises predominate. Later, when everyone was older, and wiser, the family would find peaceful love and a tender denouement before the parents’ death.

“OK, I’m off to climb your ladder. Play on your devices and don’t bother your mother.”

He drove a half hour to the big box centre. A Pet Mart sat beside the store where shoppers pushed oversized carts down tarmac aisles and gorged on free food. He parked the car close so the dog wouldn’t need to walk very far.

Pet Mart had a dozen cats in cages, pawing and swiping terry cloth balls, or curled into circles so tight he couldn’t judge their size. On the opposite side of the store were cages with

naked mole rats, hamsters, gerbils, and mice, all churning sawdust or running on wheels. Along the store's back wall sat dozens of glass boxes filled with crayon-coloured fish swimming in circles.

"Do you have any dogs?" he asked a salesperson.

"No. We don't have space for them. Do you want to see a cat?"

The salesperson took him to an orange cat.

"Do you want to hold him?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Some of them don't like it, but this guy does. Do you have kids?"

"Is there such thing as a therapy cat? Like a therapy dog?"

The salesperson reached into the cage and grabbed the cat by the neck.

"This is Harvey. He's very chill. I don't know about therapy, but he is comforting."

The father threw Harvey over his shoulder the way he used to burp his babies. Harvey looped around his neck like a scarf and purred.

"I'll take him. And his cage. And maybe some toys. A terrycloth mouse."

He carried Harvey to the car and buckled the cage onto the back seat.

"You'll be safe there fella."

He thought about how he'd introduce Harvey to the kids. The boy had wanted a BMX for his eighth birthday, but his wife insisted they buy a reliable mountain bike on sale at Walmart. On her eighth birthday the girl told them about her dream of dying in a fiery plane crash, but no one pays attention to dreams and for Christmas, when the father was tasked with buying gifts

because the mother had a writing deadline, he bought "Flight Attendant Barbie". He didn't want Harvey to resurrect bad memories for the kids.

He parked his car nose-to-rear against the Mini and opened the back door to retrieve the cat.

"OK, buddy. You're a little lion. They're going to love you."

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The boy hated Harvey.

"He's depressed! He's a living mirror. Why would I want that?"

Harvey slept most of the day and ignored his mouse. He picked at his food.

The girl loved Harvey.

"He's a homebody. He's a nester. He wants to be comfy and chill."

His wife called him to her light-filled office.

"What the fuck did you do? A dog! How hard is it to get a dog?"

Her entire world was binary. Cats versus dogs. Love versus sex.

"You try to get a dog that's perfect," he challenged. "Cats are easier. The kids will be fine."

The girl and Harvey bonded over the next weeks. His declawed paws rarely touched the floor, unless she was in the shower and she put Harvey on the bathmat. The boy sometimes flung the cat from the sofa when his sister wasn't in the room, a gentle toss, and

browsed websites for poodle breeders. “This breeder is only an hour away,” he told his father. “They have standard poodles. Do you know how much affection a standard poodle has?”

Harvey sat on the girl’s lap at dinner, although the cat and the girl shared a disinterest in food. Her parents ignored the calorie deficit; they were happy the girl had started using full sentences at meal time.

“I’m using Facebook to catch Kony, ” she announced.

“That’s wonderful honey.” Her mother ignored the cat. She had a plan to rescue the girl from her ineffectual meds and therapy.

“Do you even know who Kony is?” her brother asked.

“An African asshole.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll have him running scared through the African plains once he knows you’re chasing him on social media.”

“Maybe you should stop spending so much time in the shower playing with yourself.”

Their children didn’t mean these hurtful comments. The maladies and meds had clogged their filters; the drugs they took were brief bursts of colour, birthday balloons for brains, but they suffered. They really did love each other.

“Do you guys have enough money left over if you ever got divorced?” the girl asked.

The husband stopped eating. The wife chewed.

“Who’s getting divorced? Not us.” The father assuaged his daughter’s worry. He didn’t want his marriage becoming another cockroach-in-the-nose.

“Divorce doesn’t cost much money. We have a lot of equity in the house.” The mother thought that honesty was best.

“We’re not bitter enough to get divorced,” the father said. “Just jaded.”

“Well, keep some money no matter what because I’d like to study psychology at college.”

“That’s great honey.” Her mother thought self-help books written by psychologists were as useless as diet books and stock brokers.

“I mean animal psychology. Not humans. I don’t want to be a counsellor, not like the one you guys had.”

“Even better,” her father said. He and his wife hadn’t uttered elephants in weeks.

Her brother smiled. “Yeah, maybe you can figure out why you have no friends other than a cat.”

“At least I have a cat you loser. Where’s your dog?”

“Hey!”, the father shouted. “Everyone be nice. Don’t take us to where the ice gets thin.”

As long as both parties are talking there’s hope, the counsellor had said.

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Harvey didn’t meow. He’d move his mouth and bare his three good teeth and the family expected he’d blurt an appreciative mewl at dinner time or sing a plaintive cry when a dove strutted on the backyard patio. The pet store explained that had Harvey suffered an illness that silenced him. The father asked the salesperson how they would know if Harvey got into trouble, say, if he went up a tree. “Put him on a leash,” the salesperson said. “Harvey won’t mind. He likes to stay close.”

His daughter asked him if Harvey could go outside. “Are you sure pumpkin? You’re not worried he’ll run off or be snatched by an owl?”

“You’re not an ornithologist dad. And I have a leash. He’ll stay with me.”

The girl spent long summer days laying with Harvey on the Pottery Barn blanket. Her mother screwed a stake into the lawn and looped Harvey’s leash though the stake’s eye. For three blissful weeks the husband watched TSN, the wife wrote, the son played video games, and the cat purred beside the girl. They’d fallen into a therapeutic rhythm. Clouds were absent, the sun shone, the pool gurgled and glimmered, and the butterflies that flitted and the bees that helicoptered scarcely disturbed the idyl. The father wrote in his notebook “we are reconstructing the family ”. The mother wrote in her notebook “the ennui is killing the children”.

“The kids aren’t a distraction,” his wife said. “ If anything, they focus us. We could spend more time working on them, maybe each of us take on one as our own rehabilitation project.”

He thought this might be a good idea. “Divide and conquer.”

“Yes. I’ll take Emma and you take Matt. Let’s give it a month, to the end of summer, and see if they’ve improved.”

The wife started her intervention the next afternoon and sat outside with Emma and Harvey. Emma surprised her mother with extraversion and judgements. Emma loved Harvey and thought the cat was superior to any dog. “Dad would have chosen a bad dog.”

“Yes. Probably.”

“He’s a good cat, mom. He reduces my stress. He sucks it out of me, like it was venom.”

The wife thought that in every relationship one partner either sucks the venom or injects it. Her daughter deserved this cat.

The husband started his task and shut down the router and Internet. Matt moved off the sofa to find his father and complain. His dad suggested they spend the afternoon together and drive to a dog breeder, “just in case Harvey dies since he’s pretty unhealthy and you never know.”

“Can I drive the Mini?” Matt asked.

“You bet,” his father said. “It’s way more fun to drive manual. We’ll leave the automatic for the girls.”

The breeder’s kennel was two hours out of the city. Matt took a circuitous route through backroads, a less challenging path for a new driver. He stalled the car at three stop signs, rode the clutch, ran the engine at too-high RPMs, and ground the gears through misaligned shifts. His father reserved comment and decided that he’d drive home once they’d seen the dogs.

Matt didn’t like any of the dogs. The miniature poodles were too small or the wrong colour. The teacup versions insulted his incipient masculinity and the lone standard poodle wouldn’t sit on command. “These dogs are losers. I want a dog that’s as good as it can be. These are all rejects. No wonder they’re still available.”

His father agreed. The breeder’s failures weren’t his fault; Harvey proved that he could make a good choice. He resolved that Matt would drive them home.

Acquiring a new skill takes time. The wife told her husband that ten thousand hours of practise were needed to play guitar or write a decent sonnet. Matt needed a few decades to become the competent driver his father already was and, falling short by nine thousand, one hundred and ten hours of practise, no one could blame Matt for what happened to Harvey.

What does a therapy cat want? Harvey spent his day providing affection to Emma; clutched to her body for all hours, a silent and compliant attendant to her infinite emotional needs, a feline balm for her mental wounds. Harvey's fundamental nature—introversion and contemplation—fell away in tiny pieces every time his daughter squeezed Harvey or cinched the leash to the stake. Harvey spent ten thousand cat hours learning to give solace.

The cat slipped from its leash while Emma slept. Perhaps his disdain for food had shrunk his scruff or maybe the girl forgot to close the clasp. Emma's mother looked out her office window towards the white concrete driveway and saw Harvey lying on it and saw Matt come too fast around the hedges. Matt shifted the gears hard and the car bucked twice and flattened Harvey beneath the right front tire. The girl ran around the corner of the house and screamed at her brother.

"You asshole! You did it on purpose! You wanted a dog so you killed Harvey."

The father and son stood beside the car, looking at the flat cat. The mother put her head out the open office window and said nothing.

The boy's sister clipped the leash onto Harvey and dragged him to the lawn. She stroked his wet fur.

"I'll get a bag for him," the father offered.

"Why is he allowed to drive? Why doesn't he stay on the sofa? I hate him."

Her brother opened his mouth to say something, to defend himself or offer comfort, but he was speechless.

“I know you can’t speak,” the father said to him. “I know you’re in shock so here’s what you’ll do. Look at your sister and say ‘elephant shoes’ without making any sound. Just move your mouth.”

His son. Her daughter. They owed it to each other to make amends, to preserve a bond, bear witness to one another. They could be poster kids for happiness.