

STAY, LADY, STAY

Nobody knows I understand human speech but just can't speak it. It is a terrible handicap and frustration not to be able to speak, if you want to be known to your owners; if you love them and want to warn them, as I did some time ago, when the leaves were brown and the air was turning cold and I was looking forward to a winter snuggling in our cozy condo and instead suddenly found myself down in the garage next to the Subaru, which had been loaded with my things, my crate, enough of my food to feed an elephant, my favorite toys, my leash, and my day bed. The Outback is the car we take on long trips. Despite my athletic tongue and perfectly functional vocal cords, I couldn't say, "Mom! Dad! What's going on? Big mistake!" Barking, whining, or growling would have meant nothing to them and sounded crass and inexact by then even to my own ears. My frustration made me nearly desperate.

Have you noticed that they say, "Dog is man's best friend," but they don't say, "Man is dog's best friend"? I'm just saying.

So that fall day my mom and dad opened the back door of the Outback, as

I sat there, full of foreboding and planting myself on the garage floor as if to grow into it, and they said to me, “Lady, hop in! Come on, Lady, hop in, hop in!” turning the enthusiasm dial up as if we were going for a walk in the woods or a carefree romp on the beach.

Now, I know that command “hop in” very well. I am a poodle. Though a miniature and a runt, I still have the superior intelligence of my breed, and I know all my commands even when I choose not to obey them. This one I certainly wasn’t going to obey. I knew something was afoot. They had to pick me up and shove me in, my body at a backward angle, my legs sticking out straight, body language at its most expressive, had they heeded it. But in I went all the same.

Mom wasn’t happy either as we drove along. “I don’t know if we should do this,” she said to dad, who kept his eye on the road but looked grim. “It’s not too late to change our minds. Maybe I can get her on as an emotional support dog. Being in cargo might kill her, she’s such a nervous, sensitive little thing, but if I could carry her on my lap—” She had lost me. I didn’t know what cargo was, or why it might kill me, but this much was clear: I obviously wasn’t going to the same place they were going to.

“We’ve decided on a course of action,” Dad replied, “so we need to follow through with it. If it doesn’t work, we’ll take her out there next year and deal with the wild animal problem somehow.”

Next year? This was going to keep happening? Things were getting worse and worse. I stared out the window, every sinew tightened, so I could memorize

our route, noting every tree, every street until we got to the highway, and then I didn't know what to memorize, and, as sad as if I had been filled with lead, I lay down and put my head on my paws.

“Look, Peter,” mommy said, her voice lighter, “Lady's sleeping! Maybe everything will be fine.”

I wasn't sleeping. My eyes were open, for God's sake, and I was tense as a strung wire. There are so many things people don't see.

After a long while we drove up to a gate that was familiar to me. We had been there twice before for brief visits. That, at least, was reassuring. It was a kind of farm, a house with some outbuildings for animals, and you had to get out of the car and open up the gate, drive through and then close up the gate again, fixing it with a bungy cord, which gave it a hapless look that befitted the place, the outbuildings strung together and jury-rigged and the house covered with sod, like a cave.

I forgot my fears for the moment when the puppy, Maddy, a Jack Russell (a breed whose intelligence, by the way, is vastly overrated, never mind that smartypants dog in the movie) ran out to me and touched noses and then ran toward the house as if I should follow. I hung back, though, near my parents. There is another dog on the property, Paco, big, with big jaws, but kindly, who was barking his head off. His job is to guard the periphery of the fence because of the wild animals that lurk in the woods beyond. Paco never comes inside the house. He just does his job in all weathers, a noble creature. I could tell from his

bark that he remembered me and was signaling he would watch over me, too, along with the others.

The problem with this family is not the dogs—it’s the other animals they have, so many of them, I don’t know why anybody would want or need so many. And each time I have gone there, there were more than the time before, and more outbuildings. The humans, Freda and Charlie, have the two dogs I’ve mentioned, plus five cats, not counting two barn cats, three tropical birds, a donkey, twelve goats (yes, twelve), and too many chickens to count, especially since they all raced around when I tried to count them. I am sociable and I like other animals, but this is way too many. I have heard my mother tell my dad that Freda can barely afford the feed for all of those, and is wearing herself to the bone taking care of them and should cull the herd. Of course my mom and dad lead such a quiet life; my mom said this life would be unimaginable to her and would probably drive her crazy.

Once we got inside and sat around for a while listening to Freda talk—Freda is a very big talker—my mom got up and said, “Well, if we’re going to do it, we’d better do it,” and tears started down her cheeks. I had been sitting so close to her you couldn’t have run a piece of paper between us, and now that she was standing, I stood on my hind legs and put my paws on her, tapping her thigh nervously with my toes. It wasn’t too late; they could still change their minds. But she squatted down and kissed me and said, crying, “We’ll be back, Lady, we’ll be back,” which is what they say when they’re going out back home, but I didn’t fall

for it because if they really *were* going to be back, then why was she crying? Not to mention why was there a neat pile of all my stuff, like a little pyramid, in Freda and Charlie’s messy, dusty house, covered in feathers and animal hair? My mom and dad’s house is shipshape. In fact if one little piece of dry food gets outside my bowl mom picks it up and puts it back in, even though I have taken it out for a reason, it is part of my eating plan.

Maddy was already playing with my favorite toy, my stuffed fox, still bright and beautiful though he’s lost his squeak. She was hauling it around the living room, shaking it and growling, but much as I wanted to teach her a lesson, I didn’t dare leave mom’s side. I was still hoping they would take me.

But out they went without me. It was shocking. I stood by the glass and watched them out of sight and then waited till I couldn’t hear the car any more before I went and got on the sofa and closed my eyes to anything and everything. I didn’t care if Maddy ripped my fox to shreds. I didn’t care about anything.

Freda was going on and on to Charlie about how they were going to buy another donkey, a miniature one this time, wouldn’t it be cute? A pregnant one so she’d give birth to others. Then they would take everybody around to children’s parties and even adult parties and charge a fee, kind of like a travelling petting zoo, featuring the baby goats that would be due in the spring and the baby miniature donkeys, and Charlie would be able to retire from his job which he hated, and they would be able to support themselves with their zoo. Happy Hooves, they would call it.

Meanwhile I couldn't help thinking about the cats. They live behind a wall of the living room that leads to the kitchen, so I was only ten or fifteen feet from them. Don't ask me why they want to live behind a wall or how they get in and out. But they have a way, I remembered, of jumping out when you least expect it, hissing, to attack you. The tropical birds are amusing because they can imitate sounds so perfectly you can't tell them from the real thing, like the alarm clock going off or a truck beeping to back up, which makes you run to the window every time, but those cats are far from amusing, let me tell you. I tried to sleep my sorrow away, but I couldn't drop off.

That night I whined in my crate next to Freda's bed, where mommy told Freda to put it so it would be just like home, but Freda disobeyed mommy, thank God, and took me out and settled me on her pillow, on top of her head, and Maddy, who was sleeping in between her and Charlie, didn't get jealous and growl at me, fortunately, and I went to sleep. By morning, receiving my breakfast in the bathroom so Maddy wouldn't eat it along with her own—Maddy is a greedy chow hound, whereas I keep my trim body exactly as it has been since I was eight months old—I was feeling some better.

Freda isn't a bad person even if she does talk all the time. She has a good heart. In fact I wondered sometimes if she had a better heart than my mom, who abandoned me so cruelly. Freda wouldn't do that. Of course she can't abandon all these animals she owns unless she dies. Who would take care of them? And she can't pawn them off on anybody else, either. Still and all, I think she's a good

person even though she has a loud voice and startles people a lot.

I haven't mentioned the chickens and the goats in any detail yet, but suffice it to say that though I liked Maddy and Paco, and the curly-haired donkey, who was quiet and gentle—he and I touched noses soon after my arrival—I had no love for those goats and chickens.

I took to hiding behind Freda's big red rubber boots when she went to feed the chickens, and then I would jump out and scare the living crap out of them—they never seemed to remember that I'd done the very same thing the day before. When I jumped at them, barking sharply, they would scatter feathers about and cluck and clack and flutter to beat the band; this gave me great satisfaction. I also wreaked havoc with the goats. They had stepped on me more than once because they, too, are very stupid, so I took to getting even by rushing among them and barking at their heels, sending them every which way in their barn until it was bedlam in there. Unfortunately these humorous actions of mine upset Freda because she is fond of those idiotic creatures, so she took to putting me in the bathroom with my toys whenever she fed the chickens or milked the goats. I barked the whole time I was in there, but Freda didn't pay any attention. I think she's going deaf. At any rate she didn't come and get me, even though I needed to follow her around closely because I didn't have my mom and dad to follow any more, and I couldn't forget how she let me sleep on her head that first

night and all the nights afterward, not to mention the other attentions she paid me, almost as if I were hers.

It wasn't long before the snows started to fall—the air is thin here, I think we're in the mountains—and Charlie dug pathways in this huge wall of snow in the back yard, so we could pee and poop without getting buried in the white stuff, and I began to loosen up a little and chase Maddy around on the pathways, and she would chase me, and I realized life wasn't all bad, and in some ways it was better than sitting on the sofa night after night watching television with mom and dad, who never think of getting any other animals, not even another small dog. Of course I'm glad they don't have cats and especially goats and chickens, but still a small dog to play with would be nice.

Freda had to have something done to her knee in the late fall. I think from what was said that she got it replaced by another knee, because the bad knee made her limp and hurt her shoulder, too, and threw her whole body off kilter. Charlie said she wore herself out working all the time, that he wished she could relax, but even I could tell Freda wasn't the relaxing type. Anyway, she was gone for a while, and Charlie had to do everything for the animals before and after he went to work so sometimes he fell onto the couch and slept there for the night, he was so beat. Then Maddy and I slept there, too, for the company.

Freda came back walking with the aid of two sticks. She couldn't do much

for a while, which was odd because normally she is a whirlwind of motion. She moaned, she groaned, she wept sometimes from the pain. I felt so bad for her that I got on the couch and nestled near her good leg all day long, and Maddy did the same, but when this therapy lady would come over and rub her knee and work it around this way and that, Freda would scream her head off—I have never heard so loud or scary a sound—and I and even Maddy, who has nerves of steel, would run for the back rooms. Oh, how I longed for my quiet condo then and my quiet parents! The longing was a deep ache inside me.

Gradually, though, the screaming got less and then stopped, and Freda went back to being Freda. She talked to Charlie, she talked to her visitors, she talked on the phone, and she talked to her animals, too, all of them, even the chickens. She was a democrat, my mother would say, not prejudiced against anyone. She laughed her head off when she wasn't crying. She never rested any more. She was always cooking or hanging up bags of goat cheese to drip last thing at night or trying to clean that impossible house or watching British murder mysteries on TV, the only thing, I heard her say many times, that ever calmed her down. More than once, I heard her say on the phone, “I'm so exhausted. You won't believe how exhausted I am. Yesterday I cried for three hours—“ or five hours or six hours—“I was so tired.” One day she said, “I have ADHD and PTSD”—whatever those are—“and bipolar disorder and dyslexia. Only my animals understand me. Not even Charlie understands me, but of course he's a man.” I puzzled that one over for a while, and I wondered—though their images

were getting fainter now—whether mommy felt that way about daddy, that he didn’t understand her. And did he feel the same way about mom? I never had any trouble understanding my three brothers, just as easily as I understood my sisters. People are strange, there’s no doubt about it. You simply don’t know what makes them tick.

On Presents Night, as I think of it, Freda and Charlie had a real tree, big and fat and loaded with pretty ornaments that Freda made, and smelling so pungent that I felt as if the outside world had been magically brought in. Maddy even peed under it, the silly thing. My parents have an artificial tree, a little one, which they put in a corner of our living room. Usually they agree ahead of time to save money and so they give each other something practical and inexpensive, or even nothing at all. It’s not as if they don’t have money. I can tell, living with Freda and Charlie, that mom and dad have plenty of money; they just don’t like to spend it. Freda on the other hand loves to spend money, and Charlie, who is her third husband after many trials and tribulations with the other two, is the only husband with a decent job, so she really went overboard this year. She even got something for me, a tiny plastic pig, bright pink, that squeaks. I was very grateful, even though Maddy started playing with it right away, despite having gotten a toy of her own.

The big present that night was a miniature live piglet, who cost \$850 and

came from Texas. Freda had been talking about wanting one for weeks, and Charlie must have thought she didn't have enough animals already. The pig, whom they named Frank, weighed only six pounds and came in a box. He was a house pig, Freda said. He was to sleep with us, though we were already having trouble fitting on that bed, because some of the cats had been coming out of the wall to join us (they were different at night, thank heaven, they were peaceful then), and we were quite a crew, with noises and dreams and migrations all night long. The pig would only get to be twenty-five pounds full-grown, which Freda seemed to think was still small and adorable, but it sounded ominous to me. I was just barely clinging to that bed as it was.

That night something very strange happened. Freda put the phone to my ear and I heard my mommy, sure as shooting, in that black phone or somewhere, saying, “Lady, lady, I love you lady!” My heart nearly stopped. I looked all around the room, in every corner, while Freda made a noise like a hen, cackling, but mommy wasn't there, so when Freda hung up, after saying to the phone, “We'd better not do that again, she's looking all over for you,” I went and lay down near the potbellied stove and stayed there all night long. I didn't want to sleep with the rest of them. I didn't understand and I still don't. How could mommy be here and not be here? And was she playing a game or had someone stolen her and made her a prisoner? My brain hurt, thinking about it. The next night I went back to their bed, though, because it was too damned lonely by the stove.

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By now the snow was starting to melt, but still when I got up on the couch and looked out the window I didn't see my mom and dad's car. There were even some signs of spring, a few flowers, and lots of mud. I will tell you the truth: as the sun got warmer and winter retreated, I began to give up hope. Maybe they had been eaten by those wild animals they mentioned way back in the car, that lived wherever they were going.

Then something bad happened, at Freda's, I mean. One day when Freda was out, Charlie started jerking and stumbling and then fell down on the floor and didn't move at all. Maddy and I circled around him, sniffing. I could tell he was alive, but he didn't say a thing and his eyes were closed. When Freda came in carrying packages, she dropped the bags and said, “Oh, my God! Charlie!” and ran over to him and checked his mouth, for some reason, and put a pillow under his head. Then she called Sally, and Sally came over along with her old demented father whom she brings every time because she doesn't have anybody to take care of him at home. Freda told Sally she couldn't call 911, whatever that was, because the authorities would find out Charlie had had a seizure and would take his driver's license away and then he couldn't drive to work and earn them any money so they would be broke. They just had to wait until he woke up. Freda sent Sally out for pizza, and put a cool washcloth on Charlie's forehead and sat on the sofa and waited. For once she didn't talk, but of course Sally's old father

doesn't speak and couldn't understand her if she had. By the time Sally was back with the pizza, which made me salivate like mad because Freda had forgotten to feed us, Charlie was awake, and boy, did Freda give it to him! “How can you forget your medicine like that?” she said. Charlie was very embarrassed and said in this funny, slurred voice he never would again, but Freda said, her face furious, that she wasn't sure she could trust him again, and what would happen to her and all the animals if they lost him? Couldn't he give a thought to her when he neglected his medicine like that? I felt sorry for him, to tell the truth, because when he stood up he wobbled and held his head and had to lie down because his headache was so bad he thought he might throw up. After Sally left Freda got on the phone with one friend after another, telling them about it. I could tell they all thought she should have called 911 because she kept giving that excuse about the money over and over and saying, “Well, what would you do? What would you do in my place? I have a Post-It on the bathroom mirror about that pill, but he forgets to look at the Post-It. He daydreams and forgets what he's doing. I take my medicine”—she does, too, a heap of pills every day, enough for a horse—“why can't he take his?”

The next day Charlie was fine, except for some bruises and a lump on his head. Freda wouldn't let him go to work that day, though. I didn't know if she felt sorry for him or she was just afraid he would be caught. But by the day after that life went on as before. Except now there was a Post-It on the pillow, too, and on the headboard of the bed, and another at Charlie's spot at the breakfast table,

and every morning Freda would say, “Have you had your pill?” He must have been taking it, because he spent no more time on the floor.

Then I started having a health problem of my own, for the first time in my life. It is astounding, a healthy dog like me. I am only seven, not very old, but I started leaving spots of pee on the bedspread, which is white, so it showed, and in a few other places as well. Freda said my bladder muscles must be giving way, and I thought maybe she told my mom, because I heard her say Ann to someone on the phone, and how many Anns does she know who would care about my bladder? My first reaction to this was Thank God my mom’s alive! My next reaction, though, was to get a case of nerves. If she was hesitating about picking me up and owning me again, then hearing about the spots of pee wasn’t going to help. My parents have a snow-white sofa and beautiful Oriental rugs that dad said cost them an arm and a leg. And I would ruin those if I kept doing this. Now personally, I didn’t think my bladder muscles were giving way. My theory was I was a nervous wreck despite how amusing life at Freda’s could be. But it had also been nerve-wracking, not knowing when the cats would pounce—I got a bad scratch on the nose one day—or when Freda would get upset with Charlie or some other thing or when she would go on and on about Happy Hooves until you wanted to say I have heard enough about Happy Hooves to last me a lifetime. I’ve always been a nervous, jumpy dog, from a puppy, and I think that’s what was making the pee dribble out. I couldn’t help thinking that when I got home, if I ever got home, it would stop. Either that or the vet, who scares the bejesus out of me

when he jabs me with needles, would have a pill that would do the trick. He’s very smart and nice, my vet, but even so I shake whenever we go near his building.

There was another, more hopeful part of me, though, that thought, Now mom will want to rescue me for sure. *This* will bring her here if nothing else will.

One night Freda was watching television, and Maddy and I were cozied up on the couch with her, me at the far end, and all of a sudden, Freda lunged for me. I was sound asleep and dreaming I was back with my breeder and my sibs and my real mom and dad again, all curled round each other, fur on fur—and suddenly Freda was grabbing me, reaching for my bangs, wielding a pair of scissors. (I was very shaggy because she never did get me a haircut in all this time, mistakenly thinking poodles didn’t need one. I looked like a Yeti.) Anyway in my half-sleep seeing her come at me with the scissors, I thought she was going to kill me, and as I leapt away I showered her with pee. Not just a little spot but a gush. I should have been upset and embarrassed, but frankly I was glad. She never should have gone after me like that. It’s bad enough when I have to go to the groomers, and they tie you up and talk to you in a soothing voice the whole time they work on you, with their gentle, soft hands, and even so I can’t wait to get out of there and am still shaking when my parents pick me up.

That night, too, I slept in front of the potbellied stove.

Not two weeks later, I heard a sound that made my heart race so hard I thought it would burst. My head came up, my ears flared. I said to myself that I

might be imagining things—Freda had on another murder mystery, so I thought maybe there was too much background noise for me to be sure. But it got louder and louder, and then I knew it was my parents’ Subaru, coming down the road and turning in at the gate. I leapt off the sofa and twirled around in little circles in front of the door until they came up to it; I could see them through the glass. I barked and barked, a whirling dervish. They pushed the door open without ringing the doorbell, and I was up on first one, then the other of them, I was dancing, I was dancing on my hind feet and putting my paws on them, tap tap tap. My mom picked up me and said, “Lady, we’re taking you home,” and I put my head in the crook of her shoulder and kept it there, and then dad wanted to hold me, and I found his crook, too.

“We’re never going to do that again,” mom said on the way home as I lay in her lap just the way I did long ago when we drove home from my breeder’s. “When we go to Arizona we’re taking her with us, period.”

“Agreed,” said dad, and then he said, “And don’t worry about this peeing business.” My heart soared then, as if it wasn’t high enough already. “I think it’s a case of nerves. But if it isn’t, we’ll cover the couch and get a good detergent for the rugs. Lady’s more important than mere things. I had no idea how much I would miss her. I bet she didn’t miss us half as much as we missed her.”

Once again, if I could have talked, I would have told him a thing or two, but it didn’t matter—I settled into my mommy’s soft lap and closed my eyes because I didn’t have to memorize the route this time, there was nothing for me to do but

feel her hands on me and let myself sleep, the way I slept in that basket with my siblings and my real mom, in a circle of love and without a care in the world.

I had one last thought before I slept: I intended to sleep in my parents’ bed, not in that lonely, lousy crate, and though I couldn’t tell them this, I was confident I would find a way to make it happen.