

## The Guide Dog

When the novel virus emerged on the other side of the world, no one was thinking about what we'd have to do to wage war on the invisible killer. It still was so far away and non-disruptive of our convenient, material-driven lives. No one realized that death was about to knock at our doors, and even if it didn't take many of us, it would attempt to transform us all.

We blinked and our city was a deserted hub of fear. Told to stay in our homes and distance ourselves from others until the authorities said the coast was clear, no one could predict when we would roam freely again.

We could wear masks to protect ourselves from infection, but there was no protection against the great enemy that living in isolation unleashes: ourselves.

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The early days of the lockdown were awful. Anxiety crept up on me at every turn. The media only reported the rising mortality count and stories circulated about the virus hanging in the air just waiting for us to inhale. Terror overtook my perceptions of the world. Though the media fed me this fear, the media was all the connection I had to anything anymore. I lived alone.

If I didn't pay attention to the news, I felt listless. I would lie on my rug looking at the ceiling hoping something would happen to move my mind away. Loneliness and boredom scared me more than death. I had a void inside me and I was afraid of finding out how big it was.

Time was stretched out so far that one day it felt much too large to fill up with only me.

"Every hour of every day has been stressful," I tweeted. That tweet went viral and got four thousand likes.

Everyone was feeling it. We were alone together. Coworkers joked on video meetings about days blurring together and drinking their last four bottles of tequila. My friends on social media reminded others repeatedly about the importance of mental health.

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I was losing track of what my regular schedule used to look like. I forgot what made me get up every morning. Or maybe there never had been a reason at all.

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After about fifteen days straight of staying indoors, I felt like a deviant when I chose to venture outside for a walk. I found myself meandering through a park where there was a two hundred year old cemetery. The headstones of those completely forgotten were themselves fading into nothing, covered in weeds, and many were nothing more than blank flat rocks slanting in the afternoon sun. I stood in front of one that still had legible engravings. It said:

GO TOWARD THE LIGHT

Something moved in the overgrown foliage as I absorbed the moment and the meaning of the message. A regal golden retriever emerged from behind the headstone. It wore one of those service animal vests. It came out with vines and thorns stuck to its fur

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as if it had crawled through oppressive thickets to get to me. Its owner was nowhere to be seen.

A tail wagged.

A pink tongue licked its jowls as I took a step closer.

Kind eyes met mine with a slight downward bow of the head.

It couldn't see my smile through the mask I was wearing, so I made reassuring sounds of greeting. The tail wagged with more vigor. When I walked past it, it followed me through the cemetery to the sidewalk, off the curb and across the street, keeping six feet or so of distance between us. It followed me around three more corners and all the way to my apartment building. I did nothing to stop it.

Before I went inside, under the front awning, I knelt down in front of this dog. I was afraid to touch it at first, thinking that viruses can attach to fur. As I allowed myself the pleasure of patting its floppy, soft ear, I fell into the novel idea that I could allow myself some happiness by letting go a little of my fear.

It rubbed its muzzle into my shoulder affectionately. I gave it a hug. And that was it. It was love.

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I felt a tag on a collar under the fur and pulled it around to look at it in the sunlight. "Moksha" was the only word inscribed on the metal there.

"Is your name Moksha?"

The dog lifted its haunches and moved one inch closer to me on the pavement, tail wagging furiously.

"Do you want to be *my* dog?"

She barked once happily, panting with a pink tongue hanging out.

I looked around one last time, knowing that this dog couldn't be ownerless. Was that *possible*? I stood up and adjusted my jacket, as dignified as a person could be who was about to steal a dog.

"Let's go home, Moksha."

#

As soon as she was in the door, Moksha found the center of my studio one-room apartment and sat in it. With her tongue dangling in the air, she looked as if she was smiling.

She was steady and sure, when I was anxious and vulnerable. I opened the fridge to find a snack that could satiate me and

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get me through the next few minutes. Moksha appeared between my outreached hand and some day-old takeout macaroni and cheese. Her nose moved to intercept and thwart my attempts to grab it.

"What are you doing?" I said to her.

She pushed the door closed with a paw.

I stopped everything. A shiver rippled over my neck and back. My focus sprung back to the present moment and I felt relieved, though stunned.

"You're right, you know? I really shouldn't be eating."

#

The neighbor downstairs was spotted on day thirty-two of the pandemic. I was sitting at my kitchen bar working on my laptop. Moksha held my hand in her gentle jaws and guided me to the window. I rubbed her head with my palm. "You see something out there?"

Below our window on the second floor, inside a room of golden light, I could see a man inside his apartment meditating. He had pillows around him and his hair was in a knot on top of his head. His hands faced upward and open. So serene.

Moksha eagerly eyed me.

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I thought of my coworkers who had recommended meditation apps on our company slack. They raved about them. Did I need one? I opened my phone's app store to find one with at least four stars. Moksha whined softly. The urge toward consumerism and mainstream convenience wouldn't stop, even when I had been pointed on the road to non-attachment.

I put the phone down.

Cross-legged on my bed, I took a deep breath. The internal silence and the lack of stimulation was foreign. At first I felt a slight sense of panic, but I resisted the pull to distractions. And my journey into bliss began, if just for a fleeting few moments.

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"What have you been doing that gives you comfort?" my friend asked me on the phone.

"What were you doing *before* for comfort?" I asked back.

We changed the subject, but after the call it lingered with me as I sipped my coffee and looked out the window again. Maybe it was the comfort I was adding to my life that had been the problem *all along*.

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Out for a walk, on day fifty-eight, we neared one of those Free Little Libraries - weather-proof boxes that house used book exchanges - in someone's front yard on the corner of Belmont and Eighteenth Street, and Moksha took a sharp turn directly toward it.

"What - what are you up to, girl?"

Moksha huffed. We were right in front of the little box.

"Why are we here?"

Between the novels and political non-fiction, my eye was caught on a paperback with a white cover and large letters of a title: *Journey to Bliss*. I pulled the little glass door open and took the book out. I flipped to the first page, where it said:

When you let go, you realize you never had the things  
you were grabbing in the first place.

I got the book home and read the first chapter entitled *Non-attachment is Freedom*. It was beautiful. I could see where I was going wrong, expecting and feeling entitled to things, and



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placing value on the material when I would have been happier placing it on the immaterial.

Being trapped inside didn't seem so bad for the first time. In fact, it didn't seem bad at all. I had only taken it for granted my whole life that I was able to be outside my house. I had taken for granted my freedom. But attachment to worldly things was the opposite of freedom, and I was beginning to see that with my inner eye. I had never been truly free.

A feeling of glowing overcame me. From then on, I was meditating for hours each day and the world was beautiful.

#

When I ate, Moksha took my spoon away in her mouth after three bites. Every meal. When I used my phone, she nudged it away after a few minutes. She was guarding me against indulgence. Each time, my mind would come back to center and take heed of presentness and gratitude.

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## 10 - The Guide Dog

After weeks of meditation, I felt the light. It was indescribable. I no longer have it, but certain memories of bliss will never leave me. I could more than face each passing moment in lockdown; I cherished the present and stayed with it to feel its fluidity.

#

One morning, six months into the pandemic, I awoke to the sound of Moksha whimpering a little and looking outside. I opened the curtains and a black dog in another, adjacent apartment was revealed. It was pacing, scratching at the window, and its tail was low. We couldn't look away. What if it had been alone in there for days without food?

I went downstairs in a quest to find the apartment where that dog lived. I put my ear to a door and heard claws scratching on a wooden floor and high-pitched whining. I put my hand on the doorknob. I looked beside me and Moksha was there with droopy, concerned eyes.

"I have to rescue him if he's in trouble," I said. Some trace of panic was back in me.

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Moksha walked away with diminished vigor in her tail and disappeared around the corner.

The door was unlocked, so I pushed it open. Inside was another studio apartment, identical to mine, but containing a stench of a dog that had been relieving itself for a long time. A blanket was folded in a corner with hair all over it, and the dog was curled up on it. It perked up when I entered.

I tried beckoning the dog to me, to leave that place. "Come on sweetie," I said, tapping the tops of my thighs to encourage the dog. It wouldn't budge. "Come on!"

The dog put its head back down and exhaled as dogs often sigh. It was desperate, trapped, weary, purposeless, yet it chose to stay. There was nothing I could do to get that dog out of there.

After trying for half an hour, I closed the door quietly and came back to my apartment, where Moksha was waiting. She appeared a bit fizzled out. A notification lit up my phone. It told me that the pandemic was over; we didn't have to wear masks anymore and we were free to do as we pleased.

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## 12 - The Guide Dog

The mayor opened our city up after months and months of killing it to kill the virus. Like everyone else, I went outside.

Moksha and I glided with mindful, fully-present steps down the busy street. People all around were happy, with the *other* kind of happiness. One of my favorite cafes was packed with patio patrons on that sunny afternoon. I thought of the delicious croissants that they served.

I stopped.

A deep breath was expelled from Moksha's nose, and it was a sound of deflation.

"I'll just be a minute, Moksha," I said, wrapping the leash around a sign pole. I still remember the look in her eye. It was a look of fading and losing something. She had begun distancing.

I went into the cafe to get the croissant, and when I returned she was gone. I never saw her again. And, most sadly, I never even looked for her.

The End