

A Dog Will Always Show Up

The best way to begin a visit with son Sean is dinner and drinks with his acquired family down at their favorite roadhouse. Hot-sauced-meat meals served in a timely manner, plates with no discernible animal hair. After I pay the bill we can all just leave the table and our meal's surrounding debris. It is a simple means of me merging into their weekend.

When I swing my small hatchback into the shabby dirt and gravel parking area, apparently a requirement for a roadhouse, his super-sized SUV is already pulled up under the overhanging shrubbery marking the border between civilization and the river. He is on his cell phone which he promptly shoves into his jacket pocket when I park next to him.

"She'll be here soon, she had to pick up the grandkids," he informs me as he leaps out of the car and gives me a big hug. Single until he married a foxy red-head ten years his senior four years ago, her grandkids are now his grandkids. They are four and six, Jack and Jimmy, and are human, as compared to my daughter Martha's "little boys", four Yorkshire terriers. These human boys even speak a form of English.

Sean's voice lowers. "They're going to be here this weekend. Their folks have to go to her father's wedding."

Don't try and figure this out, but if you must, it merely means that Jack and Jimmy's mother and her current boyfriend are going to her own father's wedding.

Why would I be surprised that of all weekends for them to be babysitting because of a single relative's fourth or fifth wedding, it is my long planned visit. But life is like that, at least mine seems to be.

Rather than come off like a total bitch, I need to explain that no one considers me a grandparent here. With double divorces all over the natural birth parents' families, grandparents and great grandparents abounded before Sean married into the clan. He's an accepted member, as are all of her former husbands. I am the outsider. No room for me, other than the one I sleep in a few nights each year. So, while not really a bitch, I am continually disappointed, with maybe a bit of attitude to match.

We find a table on the back deck, which hangs out over the river rushing along and is framed by willows and shrubs. It's chilly but private, a space for smokers, which they both are, and he sneaks a cigarette here and there. Fall is an iffy time in Portland and we're both wearing thick coats. Converse to what my kids say, I am flexible, having become like a limp strand of spaghetti among their households. Hence here we are sitting at a picnic table in coats able to hold off the 40 degrees damp weather, while lightly brushing away a strand of cigarette smoke here and there, freezing, me who doesn't care for the cold and refuses to be around smokers.

As we start with a pitcher of beer, she shows up with grandsons, along with her brother, whom we will call Mike, and three old friends from someone's past, a woman and two men, who can remain nameless. No one greets me by sniffing my crouch, panting in my face or barking unexpectedly if I get up suddenly and go to the bathroom, which is why I choose to start a visit without their dogs up in my face or lower regions. I don't even mind Jack and Jimmy playing under the table with their second hotdogs. This

is a typical lull of pleasant inebriation for the group, and my sociologist nature allows me to slip in and out of studying and participating. I'm reluctant to leave when the group calls it quits after the third pitcher.

My kids really don't appreciate my flexibility.

Have I said that?

A brief drive of a mile, three cars moving as a motorcade to my lodging for the next two nights. It was decided that we were one short of the the required number of sober adults, so my hatchback is left in the parking lot to be picked up in the morning. I can only concur with this decision.

The song "I will survive" is playing in my head. The little boys have insisted on riding with Sean, which means with me, and their wild child chatter from the back seat is about getting Sean's attention and keeping it all the way home.

Arriving, the group of nine merge awkwardly together out of cars and up the walk.

We cluster at this portal, the doorway into my second's child's home. From previous practice, I lean forward and become part of the rugby scrum as Sean, daughter-in-law, Mike, Jack and Jimmy, and these friends of somebody's make a dash together as the knob turns and the door is thrown back. We're inside, the door is shut.

My son starts shouting something over the mad howling coming from the back porch, where three gigantic chocolate labs are demanding to be let out of their individual big-doggie crates to greet us. Please don't ask me to name these dogs, because there are some things I choose not to do, such as learn the names of the rotating and changing animal population in other people's homes.

So why if they are sequestered, are we rushing inside and slamming the door? Not to be satisfied with the largest unruly and silly dogs it has been my displeasure to know, this club has adopted a set of baby potbelly pigs.

“Orphans” Sean is shouting how they came to be in their home.

How do people come into contact with a litter of potbelly pigs needing adoption? My question is ignored, but did I even say it aloud?

At this moment we are all still clustered together. Sean and I spot a suspicious pile on the landing. He grabs a plastic bag seemingly convenient in its location near the door and reaches down in one practiced scoop, shouting they’ve been assured the piglets will be house broken any day now. House broken?

“Step carefully, I guess they broke out of the service porch.” Daughter-in-law amazingly screeches this out in a way that almost sounds like she is whispering, but she is not. Helping the little boys off with their coats, her attention is barely held by their wrestling attempts to break free. I notice her eyes darting right and left, up and down.

Didn’t you shut the door? Someone must have shouted this in the mix.

“Do you train them to use a litter box?” As I mouth this, the image of a pig in a litter box causes me to chortle. Then at the thought of finding a piglet in a litter box in the bathroom I will be sharing, I stop.

At high volume, I am told they are being taught to go “on paper”.

Paper?

Yes, newsprint.

“It’s great,” daughter-in-law calls out as she bolts off, grabbing up under her arms two suddenly appearing piglets. The grandsons dart after her, squealing themselves in

time with the piglets, as they appear to be chasing a third one which has just disappeared around the corner and down a hall. My guess is they are going to corral the herd into the laundry room, or she's yelling something to that affect. Hard to discern.

The furious demanding howling continues from the back deck throughout this conversation. Part of me wants to holler something about letting the dogs out so they'll stop screaming, but I don't. They won't stop howling, barking, leaping until bedtime, even after they come into the house. There will be wrestling with every man and boy until lights are out. Then they will be outside and serenading the moon.

"We'll soon be able to leave them out all day and they won't mess the carpet." As he mouths this assurance over the continuing uproar, Sean stares forcefully down at me, as though he suspects what I am thinking.

This what they'd said about the labs when they were puppies, and I can't stop my skepticism showing on my face. After all, the dogs are caged all day on the back porch.

He attempts his hard stare again. He'd been such a silent child, is my thought, as he is forced to shout.

"They are only caged when you are coming."

Before I can react to this rather weak attempt to rationalize their need to sequester the three monsters outside being concern for me, daughter-in-law screams from the hall at her brother that one of the piglets just went down the stairs to the basement, where he has his bedroom. He turns and bolts in that direction. Admirably, the three nameless friends have stepped through all the commotion and found seats upstairs in the living room. I can hear the television set at high volume, a normal if vane attempt to drown out the dogs.

I want to point out to him that I thought “house broken” meant they did not go in the house. They will still be pissing and crapping in the house, even if he wants to feel better that it will be in the middle of newspaper on the kitchen floor. Instead I blurt out what I think is obvious.

“Don’t dogs kill pigs?”

His reaction is sudden and almost vicious.

“You know, Mom, I never knew growing up how much you hated dogs.”

I can sense he’d like to stand there and argue with me, but his grandsons have rushed back into the hall covered with a suspiciously brown substance and smelling, need I say it, like pig shit. Sean herds them into a warm soaking bubble bath. I believe this is a nightly ritual. Daughter-in-law brushes by, collecting odd clothes and bits which have residues of stuff on them, heading to the laundry room.

Pausing to catch my breath, my hand against the wall for balance in case a pig or dog or wolf rushes by, I think about what Sean has once again accused me. I do not actually hate dogs. Some dogs are acceptable, such as a near dead watchdog, deaf and unable to bark and tied out in the far back yard.

Mostly my somewhat ratty attitude is not so much about dogs but my own resentment that all my visits are merely sidebars to the demands and difficulties of a house in the throes of pet problems. Whatever we choose to do is always around what the dogs need, what the dogs require or want. And now it will also be about the pigs.

In the midst of this household’s chaos, we make it through to the next morning without any incidents to mar our visit, aside from an unidentifiable accident on the carpet of the spare room where I am staying, a room for which everyone had been

warned to not leave the door open. Unfairly, the entire household exhibits a unified front that only I could have left the door ajar to an intruder. No one else was allowed to enter the room is what is spoken and unspoken, as though Jack and Jimmy had never been found in my room in the past riffling through my bag searching for “their presents” or some candy.

But new mornings always promise new attitudes and second days are often better than first days in a foreign land. Hazy sunlight, coffee in hand and animals out of sight. After a rather messy if marvelous breakfast of waffles, sausage, juice, coffee, and eggs continuing to arrive from the stove to the table, Sean and daughter-in-law shuffling between, lavishing all of us with coffee and juice, I offer to wash the dishes. Dish washing can be mildly relaxing. It gives me a purpose, another opportunity to be part of the gang.

No, no, I am told, I am here to relax.

Which means I spend the next hour in the living room with Mike and Jack and Jimmy watching a movie I can never make any sense of, but which seems to be about bad robots creating tension between the hero and his girlfriend and their own pet robots. When I think to question the appropriateness of a scene between male and female robots, Mike assures me it is rated PG.

An element of peace competes with the activity of the television. My ears are ringing from so little activity.

The dogs are unusually docile, out on the back porch chewing on things. The pigs are in time-out in another large crate which takes up most of the laundry room. I do think I am going to finally relax. Therefore, can I be forgiven for not policing the

appropriateness of children's television shows? After all, as pointed out by Mike it is a cartoon on the children's Saturday morning channel; an amazing cartoon that captures the attention of a four, six, and 39 year old male.

Into this space free from anxiety, an abrupt change. We are all going for a walk along the river, it's announced, getting us out of the house and giving the boys some exercise. For a few seconds I wonder which boys are going for exercise, then it is made clear, both hounds and humans.

Can you picture it? Three dogs, two boys of four and six, Sean, daughter-in-law, and me trailing single file through the damp, the dogs running back and forth like maniacs, herding us along, abandoning us to go dashing into the brush. Any sounds and movement their perfect excuse. In my room to change clothes for the outing, I am haunted by anxieties I've felt before on just such excursions, anticipating one or more of the crowd ending up in the river. But I am also wondering about the outcome for the humans and robots with whom I've invested the past hour. These are my compounding thoughts as I change into jeans, sweater, thick socks, and shoes.

And shoes.

I cannot find the right shoe of my pair of leather walkers, foolishly expensive, but not as foolish as me bringing them to this house. I know I had not left it in the front hall, would never have left it outside, and yet it isn't anywhere. We search.

Probably when you left your door open, is the thought that hangs in the air until one of the little boys whispers it. As I again weigh disputing the idea I would ever leave my door open when visiting this house, the shoe magically turns up as one of the dogs

trots by with it in his mouth. Sean makes a good job of wiping it clean, but we all stare at what is more ragged than whole.

It's okay, I say, putting it down next to its lovely partner, putting on my tennis shoes instead. Not only flexible, but I am determined. Determined not to let anything undermine my visit. I am not leaving early; I am not leaving in a huff. I have survived living to sixty-seven, survived the death of spouse and multiple friends, as well the loss of my profession. The destruction of a beloved shoe is not going to derail the visit.

"You should have kept it safer," Jack or Jimmy says softly, as though he is repeating words he's heard more than once.

"You should have put it up higher," the other one adds in commiseration with both his brother and me, his little hand gently patting mine.

"We've all lost a shoe or two around here, haven't we," cajoles Sean to the group.

In the chorus of voices contributing what shoes and when, I remain silent.

It's the price of having dogs. Clearly I am waiting to hear someone admit it. But also know, because I am finally starting to grow wise, guests should not say such things in the midst of a visit. We have another night and a morning ahead of us. This is the pledge I make all the way to each of my kids' houses, I will not be my mother nor mother-in-law, no matter how ridiculous my children have become since they left home years ago to go out in the wide world.

Yet weirdly, for all my intent to be better than those long dead women, my visits are merely duty to my kids, and perhaps tinged for them with the same level of disappointment in my performance as I feel in the aftermath of these weekends. I

remain unable to unleash even a tenth of the wild pleasure they seem to experience at the sight or sound of their four-legged family members.

I am just as shredded as that chewed shoe, just as superfluous in the scheme of it all. Another grandmother will show up on Monday or next weekend, another pair of shoes will replace these leather troopers. At that moment I feel as alone in the universe as a single dog circling the earth in a single spaceship.

But I can at least prolong peace, one small thing I can do better than the dogs. I can. I can. I repeat it over again at just such moments, as I accept my alien status, merely tolerated until they sigh in relief at the sight of my taillights disappearing around the bend. I squeeze my heart and eyes tight shut, riding in the back of the SUV with a small boy on either side, scrunched between their booster seats, buckled in tightly between their padded thrones. Strangers to each companion, adrift. Adrift with the panting of dogs on my neck.

Then I remember, and dig into the pockets of my coat, bringing out small metal pickup trucks I'd found in one of Sean's childhood treasure boxes in my garage. A green one for Jack, his favorite color he'd told me on my last visit, and an orange one for Jimmy, who, amazingly, has orange stripes on his tennis shoes. They were Sean's when he was a boy I tell them. Don't lose them. At the sudden glow on their little faces, I instantly regret adding the latter, it was unwarranted.

The little trucks remain clasped in their hands throughout the day and into the night.

Oozy-gooey pizza follows what was a long, wet muddy outing. No one was badly injured, though my left ankle is aching, and we all sustained a few scratches from the

berry vines permanently plastered along every path and waterway in western Oregon. The two grandsons, mud wiped off hands, faces and shoes, are free to roam around a quite large pizza-barn. Their challenge is how many bites of pizza can they cram into their mouths before being allowed to go back to haunting the video games and machines with other small people. Individually and collectively they are all yearning for the chance to pretend they are driving a car or going to the moon in a spaceship.

I lean low over my beer and ponder how people survive in the damp of this land, thanking the gods that Portland still holds to the health laws separating animals and food service. The three labs are hanging out in the back of the SUV, slobbering over something they'd found in the rushes and refused to release. I suspect Sean will wait until we are back home, all humans in the house, before he goes through dealing with reminding the gang who is Alpha in their relationship. They are his dogs, daughter-in-law never hesitates to remind me. I always bite my response that he bought them for her at her pleading, but I don't. Instead I say something about what an amazing dog whisperer he has become, regardless of any evidence otherwise.

For now, I am focusing on beer, pizza and watching an Oregon State football game on the giant screen. My feet are wet and cold, my nose is running, but I am being fed fats of cheese, oil, pig sausage, all heating me up from the inside out. I don't need to sort out how to contribute to the conversation, the music is loud, and her brother and their friends have joined us for this American-Italian themed bacchanal. Mike and friends always arrive to share the meals for which I feel duty bound to cover the costs. But I have begun to even welcome this. If this is my role, than I have a role.

The next morning at the car, we hug, Sean and I, our only time entirely alone since I pulled up at the roadhouse. We transfer dog and pig hair back and forth, and then he puts his hands firmly on my shoulders, looking down at me, squarely into my eyes.

What will he say, this child sitting so close under my heart? This man who travels in a different pack now, a pack which I can only visit as a sidebar to his story, what is on his mind? I wait, my eyes slightly filled with tears.

“What you need, Mom, is a dog,” he tells me, adding how his dog had found my shoe. But his implication is clear, I need someone.

Flabbergasted. Big word, messy word, but fits the bill for what I feel.

“I mean it, Mom.”

As I peel away from the curb, a skill I’ve recently been working at acquiring for just such occasions, I call out to him.

“Did you find all the piglets? I think they were chewing on one last night!”

If he made a verbal response it is lost in the squeal, but I did catch his disappointed look in my rearview mirror, his mouth open, an expression of worry and disbelief on his sweet face. Damn, why is it when you really want to be less than a saint for your kid, their five year old face swims up at you?

I don’t think they even knew how many piglets they now had or whether or not the odd hunk of something their pack of slobbering beasts was worrying over last night down at the corner of the fence was a gopher or a pig. Wouldn’t they look just a bit alike?

Then again, it was probably only my shoes. I'd tossed them out the door onto the deck last night. What was the point of not leaving them with the hounds?

Once I reach home five hours later, I shower, wash my clothes, and then settle down with a bottle of cognac and my favorite movie. I weep freely throughout *Old Yeller*, the story of Mom and her two sons and a dog. Dad is fairly absent in this Texas tale, regardless of the star power of Fess Parker at the time. Instead, it is Mom and sons who face the world together with a dog. A single dog. It is a story of the natural order of things.

Boy makes friends with dog. Dog lives outside and patrols the boundaries. Bear threatens boy, dog fights bear, saves boy. Pigs threaten boy, dog fights pigs, saves boy. Rabid wolf threatens family, dog fights wolf and is bitten by said wolf. Boy must shoot dog dead. We all weep as boy buries dog. New dog shows up. Because somehow a dog will always shows up.

Just not at my house.

Then the phone rings. Did I make it home safely? He thought I was going to call when I arrived at my house. Did something happen?

All good questions, and my only answer is I was so tired I fell asleep on the couch. I should have called him. I shouldn't leave loose ends dangling. It's midnight. I picture him exhausted, waiting to know I am okay because he loves me.

I tell him I am sorry I didn't call earlier, that I miss him, and how much I enjoyed my visit.

"Mom, that means a lot. We all enjoyed having you here, too. Stephanie feels bad about your shoes, and looked them up online. She's going to send you a new pair."

Stephanie? Oh yeah, his wife, and now maybe finally my daughter-in-law.

There is a sudden happy silence between us.

“It was the little trucks, wasn’t it?” I merely breath this into the phone, the certainty and a great swelling of relief flooding through me, I’m close to fainting.

“Yes, Mom.”

One small step for Stephanie, and a really big chance for me.

That’s all I really need. I don’t need a dog.