



A TALE ABOUT A DOG

A parable about a family's journey into exile

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To Ring Lardner

The other night, among our dinner guests was a childless couple, recently installed in the village. We were finishing our desserts when someone asked the gentleman what had brought them to this part of the world, isolated as they were in a small town where nobody knew them? What was it that had impelled their decision to move here? After a pause, gently stroking the glass of brandy in his hands, he reflected that it could only have been an attack of temporary insanity, one of those spur of the moment decisions that end up affecting you for the rest of your life and you end up wondering how it all began. The pleasant table talk that had gone on throughout the dinner suddenly ceased, and with all eyes upon him we listened to him carefully as he told his story.

“My wife and I were in the car, edging between traffic under the freeway overpass, intending to attend the opening of an art exhibition in the Peninsula and looking for the onramp to the freeway. Overhead, screwed to the overpass read a sign, Animal Shelter, with an arrow pointing left.

“Let’s go have a look!” I suggested, thinking back to all the dogs I’d had since childhood, filled with fond recollections of some of my dearest friends.

“But what about—?” inquired my wife.

“Not a problem! We’ll just pop in, have a peek and continue on our way. It’ll only take a minute,” I replied, turning left. We parked and entered the shelter, where we were shown into a large, cage-filled room full of dogs in all sizes and shapes, each trying its best to impress.

“Choose me!” said one.

“No,” said another, “me!”, jumping ecstatically.

We looked at puppies and old mongrels, torn by the choice on offer until, on the grinning face of a nine-month-old shepherd mix, we noticed a row of bright front teeth that stole our hearts.

“Look, it’s a smiling dog! That’s the one!” I cried with enthusiasm. “Smiling dogs are rare and this one is sure to be a winner!”

Striding up to the counter I told the lady we’d found our dog. She was delighted, handing us the adoption papers with a complimentary lead as we all walked out to the car. Settling into the back seat, he seemed happy to be out of the cage though, by the fourth block, I noticed that his fawn-coloured coat was in sharp contrast with the car’s black interior and the back seat was now densely matted with dog hair.

“Maybe we should consider getting a car with a tan interior,” I mused. My perplexed wife sat in silence, which I interpreted as acquiescence, and I drove home, thinking of our next car.

After spending hundreds of dollars on bowls, dog food, a new collar and lead, some goodies and toys, we pulled up to the driveway. Holding the dog’s lead, we entered the house.

“Welcome, old boy! Here are your new digs!” I said.

Unsure of when he had last done his business, I decided to take him out for a walk around the neighbourhood. I’ve always felt that collars and leads were symbolic of slavery and doubted any dog worth its salt would appreciate having to wear one. So once safely across the street, I untied him, hoping he wouldn’t run away. I was pleased to see that he’d dash ahead for a few metres and stop, checking to make sure I was behind him before continuing on. This guy had already bonded! He was leading me on a journey of discovery that I was only too glad to follow. At that moment his name flashed across my mind like a neon sign: Pilot. Perhaps I had been unconsciously influenced by the Brontë novel, but this dog was a leader and that would be his name. Over the next weeks and months we concentrated on his training, getting to know each other. It soon became clear that Pilot was exceptionally intelligent. Not only did he learn to obey voice commands like sit, heel, stay, roll over and others after only a few tries, but he soon responded to hand signals as well. Each morning, an hour or two after the regular commute, we’d drive over the Golden Gate Bridge to San Francisco, spending the day together at work.

But Pilot came with a problem. Euphemistically known as separation anxiety, his behaviour shifted dramatically when left alone to his own devices. It wasn’t anxiety, it was revenge! The first time we left him at home we returned to find the roman shades in our living room reconfigured into shreds. A beautiful cashmere pullover I had received from my wife for my birthday lay in pieces, dragged from my closet to the doorstep.

This simply wouldn't do. We needed a strategy. My wife was becoming anxious and she called round and spoke to dog psychiatrists (this is Marin County, remember), all of whom had fanciful ideas for curing the dog of this behaviour. Although expensive, she was willing to pay any price, as long as he stopped destroying things. For her first meeting with the dog shrink she was told to leave the animal at home. They would work on her first. She returned home having been told she needed to be more assertive. If she couldn't be the Alpha dog, she should at least try being the Beta. But Omega! Bad thing to be. She needed to gain the dog's respect.

"Don't worry about a thing! These are just growing pains. You'll see, he'll be right as rain in no time!" I said, as we prepared to leave him alone a second time. "Let's just put him out on the front balcony, where he can watch the activity on the street. He'll be fine!" I assured her.

Returning a couple of hours later, we found the balcony chewed to pieces, little toothmarks embellishing the entire structure.

"Must have been hungry," I murmured as I swept up the debris.

My wife was not amused. Luckily, I hadn't told her of the time the week before when, stopping at a pet store for "goodies," I had left Pilot briefly in the car, only to return to find the door panel of the passenger side completely destroyed. I spent the morning phoning auto-wreckers until I found a replacement part, having it installed on the sly that very afternoon.

The next time we left him alone, we had to go to a wedding and it would be a much longer absence. I was aware by now of the damage he could do, so I decided that this time we'd lock him up in the garage. We'd take the cars out and tie him to a central post, one that held up the house. Since it was made of wood, I figured he could chew through it and feared we'd return to a house collapsed upon itself, so I went to a builder's supply and bought some sheet metal and chain. Screwing the sheet metal to the central post like a sheath, I secured the chain and tied the dog to the post. There! What damage can he possibly do now? Upon our return several hours later, we zapped open the garage door to find Pilot, chained to the post, wearing his most endearing smile. The house was intact, though not the rest of the things in the garage. My wife's business required her to keep her clients' tax files in storage for the number of years required by the statute of limitations and she had stacked them neatly against the walls. Pilot's chain, being a few links too long, had allowed him access, and strewn across the floor were thousands of little pieces of paper, torn to shreds from the jumble of boxes that lay about. It took my most persuasive efforts to keep her from killing him.

A friend of ours was an expert. Although her expertise was in cats, she proclaimed that the dog simply needed crate training, another euphemism, this one for locking him up in a cage. By this time, he had destroyed the other door panel, the headliner, the back seat of our other car (twice), and we were desperate for any advice. She lent us a steel cage with bars, large enough for him to move around in, assuring us that after a few times in the cage, he'd get used to it and lose those bad habits. I assembled it on a rug in the half bathroom near the living room, placing in it his bed, his goodies and several toys. Pushing the dog into the cage, I shut the door.

"There! See how he can get out of that!" I told my wife as we headed out for lunch.

We ate on pins and needles, worried to death. Will he be all right? What can he do? Skipping coffee, we ran back to the house to find Pilot still in his cage. It was made of steel, after all! But in his distress to get out, the poor fellow had bent back the bars and his nose had swollen like a lightbulb from the effort. The rug I'd placed beneath the cage was now inside, scattered in stamp-sized pieces on the floor.

"Poor guy!" I said as I let him out of the cage. This wasn't going to fix the problem. We would just have to trust him and, if it meant re-decorating more frequently, so be it.

He was sweet-hearted and generous by nature. He would bring his toys in and place them, one by one, on our visitors' laps; he liked sharing his "goodies" with visiting dogs. Yet he occasionally gave us cause for concern. A young girl on roller skates who had passed too close to our front door was rewarded with a nip to her butt for which we had to answer to her irate mother. Another neighbour threatened to sue us, arguing that Pilot had "ruined" her bitch in heat, who now, in order to preserve her papers, required an abortion. Then there was the case of the delivery guy at work. And the postman at home, who knocked one morning, showing me a mark on his arm and demanding \$200 compensation for pain and suffering. To me, it looked like a scratch, most likely done by Pilot's paw in an effort to play while he sat chained in his "office" in the back of the Jeep parked in the garage. The postman had no business entering the garage but, never more aptly put, I decided to pay and "let sleeping dogs lie."

The second postman who claimed Pilot had bitten him threatened to sue. We put him in touch with our insurance company who paid him off, though my wife was kept busy putting out fires after they warned us that they were ready to cancel our policy. I didn't want any trouble from the Post Office but it was obvious these shenanigans amounted to little more than extortion. Several months ago, I had wanted to ship a case of wine to a friend in Germany. Entering the Post Office with my case I asked the young Chinese attendant,

“How much to ship this box to Germany?”

“Wha? Chamanie? Wha fo?” she asked.

“Airmail to Germany! How much for this box?” I repeated.

“Whafo you want, hey? You wanna stamps, hey?”

I put out my arms like the wings of an aeroplane and mimed a transoceanic flight.

“Europe! Far away! Vroom vroom! How much?” I said, rubbing thumb and forefinger, the international code for money. I couldn’t get through to her. The dozen or so employees in the Post Office were all Chinese, relatives I presumed, and not a single one of them spoke enough English to understand my query.

“I want to talk to your Chief. Where’s the boss?” I asked. She showed me to a door in the back through which I found a sullen woman hiding behind stacks of files who refused to assist me in any way.

So after receiving the extortionist’s visit I immediately called the Chief informing her that under no circumstances whatsoever was the postman ever to come near our house again. All mail deliveries would henceforth go to our Post Office box or to our mailbox, which I would reposition that very day on the green in front of the Post Office itself, eliminating any need for the postman to even travel to our house. In the States, mailboxes are semi-cylindrical boxes that are affixed to a post stuck in the ground, and it would be no trouble for me to simply pick it up and move it into its new place in front of the Post Office.

“That mailbox is property of the United States Post Office and if you move it I will have the police on your doorstep before you can say boo!”, she replied, with her inimitable charm.

I pulled up our mailbox and replanted it down the street, so the postman would no longer be required to come near our house. It was amusing to watch his deliveries from then on. He would back up the drive to our neighbour’s house on the right, deposit his mail and drive back down to re-enter the drive from above, where he could access the mailbox of our neighbour on the left before backing out again, avoiding our house in the middle altogether.

These had been simple growing pains. Granted, it had taken time to adjust, but by now, Pilot was a fully integrated member of the family and no longer bent on destruction when left alone. We enjoyed doing things together and he was a formidable companion on the sailboat, a great swimmer, loved our camping trips, our walks into town...Late night farewells to dinner guests, however, had to be carefully monitored,

since Pilot had a remarkable ability to root out skunks, and he had been sprayed so many times that I could only conclude it was a smell he enjoyed, like a badge of honour. The number of midnight baths we had to give him were simply too many to count.

His keen sense of smell and delight in fetching a tennis ball even made us money. Sitting on a neighbour's back porch one night over beers, a friend kept tossing the ball deep into an ivy-covered hillside, which Pilot dutifully fetched.

"I bet you I can stump him," boasted the fellow. "I'll throw the ball, and if he doesn't bring it back in 20 minutes, you pay me \$50. Bet?"

I took the bet and he threw the ball as hard as he could, a long lob disappearing into the darkness. We started on our dinner, Pilot scrambling to and fro across the ivy and the guy staring intently at his watch.

"I'm going to stump him yet!" he gloated.

Ten minutes later, Pilot deposited the ball at the guy's feet and he reluctantly pulled out his wallet.

One Sunday morning I rose early and took Pilot out for his constitutional. I had grown accustomed to his early morning walks and enjoyed the peace and quiet of the neighbourhood at that time of day. Returning to the house, I crossed the street and noticed a police car parked out in front.

"Nice dog! Is he yours?" he asked.

"Yes, he is, thank you," I answered.

"Do you know it's against the law to have a dog off-leash in this town?" he asked.

"Why, I had no idea, officer. Really!" I replied, calling to Pilot who was off sniffing in the bushes.

"Well, it is. But this time I'm only going to give you a warning. Just don't let me catch you again. Next time, I'll have to write you a ticket!"

"Thank you, officer, have a nice day!" I uttered, heading towards my house.

"Not so fast there! I have to write up the warning, so please give me a minute," he said, pulling out his notepad.

I have to confess that I'm not at my best in the early hours, not as sharp as I would like, so when the officer asked for my identification, not wanting this to go down on my record, I replied that I didn't have my wallet with me.

"What is your name, sir?" he asked. In front of me at eye level, his name tag read Of-

ficer J. Stenger and I blurted out “Stengel!”

“Very well. First name?”

“George! George Stengel!”

“And what’s your dog’s name?”

“My dog? He’s eh, Lighthouse! Yeah that’s it, Lighthouse!”

“Nice name! Very well, Mr Stengel. How tall are you?”

“Five foot eight,” I replied, knocking six inches off my height.

“Weight?”

“About 289 pounds, I would say.”

“Address?”

Now some friends of mine had just sold their house up the hill, on another street, and I knew it was empty, so I answered, “55 Marin!” citing their address.

“Just a minute, sir” he said, slipping into his car. After a few minutes he stepped out and remarked that they had no record of me on file at this address.

“Don’t you have a driver’s licence?” he asked.

“No, I don’t, sorry.”

“Don’t you have a car?” he asked.

“I don’t drive. Too expensive,” I replied.

“Very well, sir. Please sign here and have a nice day!” I scrawled G Stengel on the paper and watched him drive away.

Entering the house, I met my wife coming down for her breakfast. “You’re not going to believe what just happened to me out there!” I giggled, explaining how I’d just received a warning from the police for having Pilot off-leash.

“How many times have I told you that they’re serious about fining owners of loose dogs!”, she replied, exasperated.

“Not to worry!” I beamed. “I gave him the wrong name!” I then went on to describe my entire encounter with the law, play-by-play.

“You’re mad!” she said. “Don’t you know it’s against the law to lie to the police? That you could get in serious trouble for that?”

“Relax, it’s only a warning! And besides, what a ridiculous law, not letting dogs run free! Where’s the land of the brave and the free? In my country dogs run free like the wind and nobody says a thing.” I haughtily replied with a smirk.

The rest of the week went by uneventfully. We each went to work our separate ways, I with the dog to the City, my wife to her office up north. The incident with the police

had amused me, or maybe it was due to indignation, but I repeated it several times to friends, all of whom agreed that the Sausalito police should have more important things to pursue than dog walkers off-lead. By the weekend, I had forgotten the entire episode and on Sunday morning, again took Pilot out for his usual constitutional.

Concentrating on avoiding any skunks that may lie in ambush along the way, we were strolling down Bridgeway when a police car came driving past at high speed. Screeching to a halt, the driver put the car in reverse and backed up, stopping right next to us. Calling to Pilot, I yanked off my belt and was fitting it around his head when Officer Stenger walked up with his notepad in hand.

“Good morning, sir! We meet again! This time I’m going to have to write you a ticket. Don’t say you weren’t warned!”

What could I say, I had been caught in flagrante. Again, he asked me for my particulars and I was faced with the quandary of whether to repeat last week’s fictional identity or to come clean with my real name and address. If I came clean, I would be admitting to having lied to the police, a serious matter indeed, so my only option was to continue with the charade. Fortunately, having repeated the story so many times during the week, the vital specifics were clear in my head and I was able to recite my particulars exactly in the way I had done the week before. Name: George Stengel. Address: 55 Marin. Height and weight: five foot eight inches, 289 pounds, etc. Once again, the officer had me sign the ticket and bid me a good day.

“By the way, officer, how much is the ticket?” I asked.

“No idea,” he said, stepping into his car, “They’ll send it to you in the mail.” A dark pall suddenly settled over me. If the postman delivered the ticket to an empty house, it would only be returned and the policeman would then know I had lied. He knew my neighbourhood and would be on the lookout for me. Nothing good could result from it. With my mind spinning in circles, we walked into the house to find my wife reading the paper over her coffee.

“Guess what!” I began.

By the time I finished telling her the story she said, “Oh, man. You’ve really done it this time. I’m washing my hands of this whole affair; you’re on your own here.” Not to be discouraged, I continued, “No, hear me out! I’ve figured out a way to fix this. I simply go down to the Post Office and put in a forwarding address request for George Stengel at 55 Marin to have all his mail redelivered to your office! What do

you think of that?”

“Are you crazy? You want to get me involved too?”

“Sure, I can’t forward it to my own office because my name’s on the door, but you work in a corporate structure so it’ll be easier to hide your identity. Besides, many of your clients receive mail at your office, so one more wouldn’t be noticed. What do you say?”

“You’re going to be the death of me,” she acquiesced with a sigh.

Next day I was in the Post Office filling out the forwarding address form. I would pay the ticket with a cashier’s cheque drawn from the Post Office to the name of George Stengel and all my troubles would finally be over!

Or almost. It just so happened that my new car was a white Porsche 911 (with tan interior) whose throaty rumbles turned heads at every red light. On a couple of mornings en route to work I stopped at a light downtown and noticed Officer Stenger standing near the intersection, admiring the car. Pilot was in the back seat with his head out the window. “Pilot down!” I hissed, as I grimaced, trying to make a face the officer wouldn’t recognise. Will he put two and two together and discover that I lied? That I actually have a car? Some days later I ran into him, walking on the street and he called out to me, “How are you Mr Stengel? Sorry about that ticket, I just follow orders!” The poor guy was overcompensating his sense of guilt by trying to befriend me, which was worse! What to do?

All of which brings me to the end of the story. Or perhaps back to the beginning. Unable to continue living with the constant fear of discovery every time I ran into the friendly Officer Stenger, we could think of no alternative but to move. We simply couldn’t stay there any more, the risks were just too great. Any day, the whole edifice of cards, built on a false identity, could come crashing down over our heads and ruin our lives forever. For our sanity and peace of mind we had to leave.

Over the years, friends have often asked us why we left Sausalito, when our lives seemed so perfect, the paragon of the happily married couple. So now, years later and thousands of miles away, I write this confession with a word of advice to all prospective dog owners: get a cat. “



Text and photographs by Michael Dunev
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