

Re---turned (!!!) (!!!)

...No! Say it isn't so!

Re---turned (!!!) (!!!)

...Yes! It is so!

By Amy Gilvary

WHY WE LIKE IT: *An insider's view of what it's like to work in an animal rescue shelter. There's lots of different ways to approach this topic but few would stand out as original as this one. Not only do we learn neat stuff we probably have no need of but we also get to know the narrator as she reflects on the experiences, both good and bad, that are part of her not so chosen profession. We liked the innovative structure of this narrative, the capable prose and the honesty of voice. Each issue we receive four or five stories about dogs or pets and most of these are quietly euthanized before they can damage our reputation as high-brow literary snobs (not!). This time we only got two such submissions and both of them, we're happy to report, found a home here. 'What's that, Amy? Oh, right, the flea powder. Here you go.'*

Five Stars

QUALITY QUOTABLE: *(for the love of language...)*

FRIDAY:

Turned away a concerned couple who handed me 7 ducklings that they found at their local pond and put in a shoebox and drove to us to get adopted.

SATURDAY:

Recovered from Monday through Friday.

SUNDAY:

Made a list of all the awesome people I know who don't make me want to bang my head repeatedly against a brick wall.

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Epilogue: Sometimes Puppies Lie

RETURNED

There's a lot of terminology and abbreviations and lingo and acronyms that are used in shelters. There are frequently used words entered into the computer every time we get a new face. Words like *transport, surrender, stray, and seized*. But this one word always carried the most weight for me.

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Returned.

It's a word we use every day when we come home from a vacation, or from the office, or to our former selves. It's a word used when making a phone call or doing a favor. It's also used to describe something not wanted or something you're unable to keep.

Things that are uncomplicated and painless to return:

- shoes that are too tight
- the wrong coffee order
- the ugly sweater Uncle Tommy gave you for Christmas
- the unopened pound of jellybeans you impulsively bought at the register

Things that are complicated and painful to return:

- a life

PRIME REAL ESTATE

A lot of people come in looking for an “apartment dog” under 25 pounds that can fit comfortably in their rented studio apartment in the concrete jungle.

A couple walked in today ready to fall in love.

The wife beelined it to Sam, a 95 pound Shepherd/Lab mix who is in his twilight years and just wants to retire to an empty lap.

“We don’t have a big place,” the husband reminded her and confessed to me.

I asked, “Is it bigger than this cage?”

FIRST WEEK AS RECEPTIONIST

MONDAY:

Intake a cat that was returned because he “didn’t meow enough”.

TUESDAY:

Intake a cat that was returned because she “meowed too much”.

WEDNESDAY:

Politely explained to a caller that her kitty litter donation was not a kitty litter donation. "Ma'am, a litter of cats is not the cat litter we meant."

THURSDAY:

Less politely explained to a caller who wanted to "donate their dog" that they were not doing us a favor.

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DEAR NIEVE,

Thank you for teaching me Spanish by doing all of your commands for Rosa and not for me. I'm sorry I thought you weren't smart.

You also taught me that you don't have to eat what you're served and that you can dump the kibble out and eat the cardboard tray it came in instead! The point is, you reminded me that we always have choices even when it seems we don't.

Atentamente,

Amy

TOM CAT

I'm not a complainer.

I'm an idealist by nature and have a strong aversion to complainers.

But if ever anybody had the right to bitch and moan, it is Tom.

He's a ten year old tuxedo cat, though I'm guessing he never had an occasion to truly sport his fancy attire. He's clearly been on the streets for quite a while.

He's missing his right eye and the tip of his left ear, has ringworm along with a urinary tract infection, and just tested positive for feline Leukemia. I put gloves on to pet him whenever I get a moment. He's a hot mess and overly affectionate in spite of his trauma. Or maybe because of it.

If he can make it another day, I can too.

THE BOXER

One of my favorite coworkers was a huge fan of Boxers. She loved all breeds (mutts included) but her heart belonged to those brindle masked faces with their signature white blaze stretching from their muzzle to between their big curiously soft eyes. Let's call her "I Love Boxers".

A frantic woman had called to see if we would take her boxer without an official appointment and without our surrender fee. "I Love Boxers" kindly offered to use her hour lunch break as a meet up in our parking lot because No Boxer Gets Left Behind!

It was a snowy rainy afternoon with dark skies. "I Love Boxers" sat in her Jeep for an hour without lunch, with the heat on and the windshield wipers going and stared at her cell phone waiting to get a text or a call that the woman and her Boxer had arrived.

Nothing came.

She was headed back in when she saw the Boxer tied to her back bumper, hidden in the snowfall and her

foggy rear window with a note that said:

I am too embarrassed to face you. Thank you for taking him.

(The one-two punch in the gut.)

RAY IS BACK AGAIN

This is the second time this month he's been returned.

Ray is a Husky mix who loves mattresses.

Not sleeping on them; eating them.

Sometimes I imagine which tv shows these dogs would star in if they had their own reality series.

Ray would definitely be on an episode of this season's My Strange Addiction.

LEFT WITH GOOD INTENTION IN THE DONATION SHED:

- towels
- blankets
- sheets
- socks
- dvds
- an umbrella
- trash
- a bra
- an unfinished bottle of vodka
- another bra
- a cat

I BELIEVE I CAN FLY

It's 7 am and the air is permeated with constant barking and yapping of 30 hungry canines and chances

are if you're not a morning person, this will truly test how much you actually love dogs.

Shayla (aka Shay-Shay) the three-legged chihuahua gets ¼ cup of special canned food because she has allergies. Mable gets an extra cup of dry because she needs to gain weight. Nathan doesn't get any breakfast because he's going in for surgery later. (If you mess this up, he will have to wait till the vet is back in 2 days.) Furby gets 1 cup dry food with water on top, which technically turns it into wet food, because he just likes to be special and mess with your head. Luna needs to be hand fed because she's depressed and lonely. Everyone else gets the usual daily menu.

One morning, I was making the usual morning rounds.

Shayla ✓

Mable ✓

Nathan (*skip*)

Furby ✓

Luna ✓

"Be right back, Velma. I only have two hands. You're up next so start getting excited!"

I went to get her prepared breakfast and piled it on the top of 5 other bowls so she would be my first stop.

"Velma...Velma...VELMA?!!"

Velma had scaled the 6-foot cement wall, landed in the next kennel and stolen Furby's breakfast bowl (along with my sanity). Picture the cafeteria scene in Mean Girls when Cady goes primal. I instinctively threw the stainless-steel bowls crashing on the ground to distract and separate them. And here in writing I admit, Furby's recovery time was a lot faster than mine.

My dad always used to tell me how according to physics, a bumblebee should not be able to fly. But it doesn't know that.

Evidently the laws of physics don't apply to Velma either.

Sorry Isaac Newton, but R. Kelly would've been proud.

SWEET DREAMS

At 5 pm every dog gets walked once more before bedtime. Then everyone settles down and waits for their goodnight kisses and last-call biscuit.

In order to stay sane, we have fun being creative with each kennel's "décor". You'd be amazed how the little things that seem inconsequential can get you through the day. Great thought goes into selecting pieces from The Leaning Tower of Donations in the back.

No buttons. No zippers. No down feathers.

Tonight, I decided Apollo gets a lilac bath towel on top of a lavender sheet with a striped navy/periwinkle blankie.

Ginger got the Lily Pulitzer beach towel with the pink dog bed and the green comforter.

Harley scored the Minnie Mouse sheets that some little girl outgrew with a red comforter and a black and white polka dotted fleece.

Lucy won my dream room of tie dye flannel sheets paired with a paw print quilt and a rainbow plush toy with clouds on both ends that she uses as her pillow.

I'm not working tomorrow so I know that tonight was probably the last time I will ever see some of these beautiful beasts. Come Monday, there will be new faces in their place, piercing my ears and stealing my heart.

While they are in our care, they are our children. As I lock the main door, I hear Michael Caine whisper, "Good night, you princes of Maine, you kings of New England."

Lights out.

THANK YOU, NEXT.

Conducting behavior evaluations is such a nice departure from the mundane tasks and as much fun as it is necessary.

A few of the staff sit in a room to observe the incoming dogs one at a time. We even have a script and a small costume rack. It reads like an acting audition complete with headshots and bios.

Once the dog is present, one of us enter cloaked in a trench coat with a hat and a cane. The rest watch closely how the dog reacts, if at all. We bring in fake babies and stuffed animals and just observe, readily prepared for any shift in the energy of the room.

Most of them pass with flying colors and don't get a callback.

SAME DAY DIFFERENT SHIT

I know I am qualified to do other things.

I have a BM from Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music.

(I am just now realizing the irony as I type this.)

I've had to navigate my way through and around piles of shit for years.

Shit disguised as promotions, auditions, friendships, marriages, whatever.

At least I know what I'm dealing with here.

Maybe I've lost my sanity.

Maybe I've found it.

SWEATER GUY

Today was crazy emotional.

A young gentleman stumbled in and tried to tell me something.

Then he abruptly turned around and walked back out.

Then he walked back in and said he needed to surrender his best friend who was waiting in his truck.

“I’m being deployed and don’t have anyone who can take him.”

He filled out the forms and went to get his buddy.

He handed him over to me and right as I was turning the corner, I heard his shaky voice again.

“Is there anything else I can do?”

I turned around.

“Can leave him with a shirt or something that smells like you?”

As if on command, he pulled his sweater over his head, tossed it to me, and walked out of our lives forever.

I placed the sweater in his boy’s kennel and told him he was loved.

The sweater that smelled of memories.

The sweater that smelled of safety and friendship.

Of sorrow and guilt.

And hope and loss.

Sigh, sigh, Sweater Guy.

Don’t cry, Sweater Guy.

Bye-bye, Sweater Guy

Bye-bye.

THIS HOLE IS MY HOLE

“What is he guarding?” I asked.“

He’s guarding that hole in the ground,” she replied having witnessed this before.

The term high-valued item is used a lot in shelters (and prisons) when protecting possessions. You would be highly sensitive to protecting your bone too, if it’s all you had.

I’ve seen this behavior before but never over a hole- literally the absence of something.

He would defend this cavity he dug in the dirt like a mama bear would defend her cub.

This hollow little ditch he created was his fortune not to be shared.

Everybody needs to know that something belongs to them and that they belong to something.

It’s primitive and fundamental and it must be honored.

DEAR HARLEY (& MATTHEW WILDER)

You are the first blind dog I ever met and I had to be told you were blind, because you didn’t show any signs of being without sight. You are my dog hero and ironically impressively better at playing fetch than most of the dogs here.

On our walk today, I thought about the SATC episode where Charlotte wonders how hard it must be to navigate New York City without the benefit of vision and pretends to be blind for a few blocks.

I almost tried that once.

Almost.

Anyway, someone’s interested in you and I just put the “Pending Adoption” card on your door and when I come to work tomorrow, you won’t be here. You’ll be off to your awesome new life exploring the world ‘cause ain’t nothin’ gonna break your stride. Nobody gonna slow you down.

HERSHEY’S KISSES

All life and death is arbitrary.

Hershey was a handsome pit bull who spent 3 years in the shelter undergoing training and boy did he graduate with flying colors. He quickly became one of our favorite long-term residents. Hershey was ready for an adopter who could handle his strength and infinite slobbery kisses. That day finally came on Christmas Eve.

The staff threw a little sheet cake party in the downstairs breakroom in celebration of this Christmas miracle!

Two days later Hershey died on the operating table during surgery to remove a glass ornament he ate off the Christmas tree in his new house. Everyone obviously was devastated and just emotionally deflated.

It was a horrible accident but I am glad that he got the chance to be someone's pet.

Even if just for a day.

THE TRANSPORT VAN

Imagine waiting for (insert your favorite band here)'s tour bus to arrive in your driveway. Basically, we all stand around like crazed groupies, our arms draped in leashes, waiting for the doors to burst open so we could get right down to the business of falling in love at first sight.

While it's understood that they are all the cutest, it's clear we each have "a type".

I notoriously fall head over heels for the scruffy wall flowers who pee on me out of excitement. The more disheveled, the better. I always seek out the underdog with their coarse fur pointing in every direction, with one ear up and one ear down, and one leg missing. The discount pity puppy that looks like they're on the Clearance rack.

There's litter mates and crate mates comprised of puppies and adults coming all the way to New England from Tennessee to start their new lives at our version of Ellis Island.

I can't imagine the stress and curiosity and fear and joy and delirium and upset stomachs they're experiencing. As white dust begins to fall out of the sky, we see them witnessing snow for the first time.

I should be filing all their paperwork but I can't stop taking pictures.

CHINESE CRESTED

Two naked siblings came in today.

A stringent little couple with their pink and grey spotted skin and their matching outdated wispy combover tufts. Damn, they're oddly gorgeous.

They have to get adopted together because the nudist sister is painfully shy and dependent on her nudist brother.

They're maintenance intense and have stolen everyone's attention here. Nora Ephron would suggest they're the worst kind of maintenance: high maintenance who think they're low maintenance.

They require sunblock rubbed all over them to avoid sunburn in the summer and thick warm sweaters to avoid wind burn in the winter. Just to get them out the door for a walk can take upward of 15 minutes.

After I massage SPF 30 into grandma's crinkly birthday suit and grandpa's corrugated epidermis, we head out for a stroll, no longer unprotected or vulnerable.

Heads held high, toupees flying in the breeze.

THE QUEENSBOROUGH BRIDGE

I acquired the attention of PR at the shelter and agreed to be the spokesperson for adoptable puppies on the WB Ch 11 Morning News segment.

Every other Tuesday I'd leave my apartment in Queens at 5am, get to the shelter on Long Island by 6am, select 3 pups and drive to midtown Manhattan and be in the tv studio airbrushed and ready to go live at 7:30am.

My chosen trio of 8 week olds were dancing in their crates in the backseat of my Hyundai as I rehearsed my sales pitch, which was easy since these guys obviously sold themselves. They were perfection and I couldn't wait to show them off.

(plot twist)

The power of suggestion is real folks. Just ask any teacher who's dealt with one squirmy Kindergartener raising their hand asking to go to the bathroom followed by the whole class suddenly realizing they have to go too.

Only there was no asking permission here.

No time to stop.

No place to pull over.

No three pink passes to write.

That's the day The 59th Street Bridge became The Number 2 Bridge.

Let's just leave it at that.

OVERNIGHT DROP

When we show up to work in the morning, sometimes this is what we find:

Left in the rain.

Tied to a tree.

With just a note.

For someone to see.

But now the rain

Has washed it away

Who was it to?

What did it say?

Left in the dark

Me and a tree.

Maybe they're coming back

I'll just wait and see.

Me and a tree

And a note.

And a chain.

Left in the rain.

STARTER CHILD

A young couple walked through the door today with a dog.

I stopped them to say they could not bring their dog in the shelter because it would upset the resident dogs and was a health and safety violation.

I recognized them from 2 years ago.

"We're here to return Hank."

Ah yes! I definitely remember them and Hank's face, although he was twice as big now.

"We had a baby and we don't need Hank any more for practice."

SEEING RED

Getting bitten unfortunately happens.

Today, Kallie, an Australian Cattle mix redirected and bit Courtney's ankle.

I cut her jeans open with scissors, grabbed the nearest piece of towel to make a tourniquet, and off to the hospital she went.

She was back an hour later.

She said they took her immediately to the ER because the towel that I grabbed was deep red and the attending staff thought it was a blood-soaked wound.

I'm pretty sure that's what saved her life.

You're welcome, Courtney.

HAPPY TAIL

It's a term that sounds wonderful.

It's not wonderful at all.

I learned this new phrase by arriving at a horrific crime scene this morning.

Blood on the floor.

Blood on the walls.

Was I expected to draw a chalk outline of the body?

I would come to know this mysterious serial killer throughout my years at the shelter.

His name was Happy Tail.

It occurs when a dog's tail repeatedly hits solid objects with strong force during a wagging session, resulting in the thin skin of their tail splitting open.

For the rest of the day, I sang Smooth Criminal.

On repeat.

In my head.

Annie, are you okay?

Are you okay, Annie?

FOSTER FAIL

27 minutes.

That's how long it took for us to say out loud what we both were thinking.

"You know we're keeping her," I threatened.

“Obvi,” he replied.

And that’s how she went from foster to forever and officially became our *Miss Mississippi Mable Walnut Mables the Babes Mabledee Babledee Boop Boop*.

LAST WORDS

The vet told me that she had to euthanize a stray this morning.

She didn’t know his name. She just knew that he presented as a victim of serious neglect and possible abuse.

She said that his tail was wagging joyfully on the hospital bed table while she gave him the injection.

Used by 63% of all speakers, “love” is the most common word in death row inmates' final statements.

I think what he was trying to say with his tail was “Thank you for paying attention to me. This is the most loved I’ve felt in my entire life.”

A MATTER OF TRUST AND A LITTLE PATIENCE

Outside of Time, I believe Trust is the most valuable of all commodities.

Unlike Father Time, Trust is earned.

Day 1: I meet Nathan, a hound mix who will not make eye contact with anyone here.

Day 2: Nathan’s tail is tucked. No eye contact.

Day 5: Nathan’s eyes meet mine for a split second and he breaks contact.

Day 10: Nathan looks at me when I say his name and steps toward me.

Day 16: Nathan lets me pet him.

Day 17: Nathan wags his tail happy to see me. He holds my gaze for more than a split second.

Day 19: Nathan looks at me as if he just met me for the first time.

Day 20: Nathan is my buddy for an hour at the front desk in his crate. He is scared but trying.

Day 21: Nathan looks at me as if he just met me for the first time. Again.

Day 25: Nathan lets me take him on a long walk and flood him with smells, sights, sounds and every day experiences.

Day 29: Nathan lets me pick him up and he sits semi comfortably on my lap. (see jacket photo)

My heart is full.

THE ODD COUPLE

Before one of our dogs can get adopted, they must meet the entire potential family and their resident dog.

This either goes remarkably well or it ends in tears.

Today a gentleman walked in and wanted to adopt a dog that he hoped was a good fit for his resident cobra.

His beloved snake was in his car while I got someone other than me (because I was hiding in the supply closet now) to bring out the dog he was interested in.

“Good luck. Let me know when it’s over.” I yelled through the crack in the door.

Dogs tend to be fascinated by snakes because they look like self-powered toys so my imagination ran away with my anxiety hand in hand down the dark rabbit hole of all the horrific possible outcomes.

All went surprisingly well.

Why can't we all get along like this?

(According to Chinese zodiac compatibility: Snake and Dog can provide each other with a stable home life and a lot of encouragement. Both can make great friends.)

RTO

This stands for Returned To Owner and it's always a joyous reunion.

Dogs get loose sometimes. It happens. We had one dog that would run away from home and make his way to our shelter several times a month. He was an adventurer and he was hilarious.

His humans always came right away apologizing and thanking us profusely and often we'd waive the fee because he was only there for 30 minutes. RTO was typed into his profile on the computer.

There was that word again: *Returned*. But this time it was to a family and not from.

I grab the nearest Sharpie on my desk and scribble on a Post-it that I stick to my computer screen to remind me why we do what we do day after day. Month after month. Year after year. Case after case. For all the lives we saved. For all the lives we lost.

I write:

LOVE GIVEN IS LOVE RETURNED.

SAFETY & SURVIVAL & SACRIFICE

The day I put in my resignation was an emotional one on many levels. It was a typical Sunday at the receptionist desk when a woman walked in with palpable urgency. She was young and beautiful and holding back tears as she handed me the leash to her dog. She was shaking. Upon looking at her more

closely, I saw her arms covered in black and blue bruises that were turning to purple and green. "I'm begging you please take my dog!" Hiding behind her, a little girl peaked her head out, as her mom proceeded. "My dad is in the parking lot waiting to take us to a women's shelter but we can't bring our dog and I know my husband will kill her if I leave her at home." My heart broke into a million pieces as I brought her into a private room to fill out the forms and take her beloved best friend. She saved her dog's life that day in the midst of fear for her own life and her daughter's life. The most selfless act in the most devastating time. That lucky dog will never know how her owner's bravery and compassion spared her life. But I knew. And I will never forget it.

DEAR WILLOW,

Everybody wants you. There is a list with 5 peoples' names on it already waiting to see you. Everyone thinks you're going home with them. But I know you're coming home with me.

You are a gorgeous super model of a dog and you come with a back story that makes any decent person want to be a hero and save you. But I'm more qualified than anyone here. I earned you. I know drama comes with trauma and I see you. You can trust me.

"Be aware that she may never show affection", the adoption councilor warned us.

You were pulled from a hoarding house with 100 dogs and you look like you're done with this disappointing life. My dad was a hoarder and I tried for 25 years to help him. I couldn't. But I can help you.

Here's what's going to happen:

We are walking out of here together. We are both going to take our anti-anxiety medication and your fur will grow back and you'll learn how to be a dog and accept my love and we are going to live happily ever after. Non-negotiable.

(And we did.)

IN THE TIME IT TOOK

to read this book, 61 shelter dogs in the US found their forever homes.

That's if you're an average reader.

If you're an exceptionally slow reader: Congrats, I think that means you just saved more lives!

SOMETIMES PUPPIES LIE

I was cleaning the crates of the new transport puppies and knee deep in soiled newspaper when I looked up and locked eyes with the boy that would be my best friend for the next 17 years. He was the most unique looking puppy I had ever seen. He was a blue merle mix and on several occasions throughout our time together I was stopped by strangers who told me lovingly how he looked like "something Dr. Seuss would draw."

I named him Napster and brought him to work with me at the shelter every day where he was spoiled and trained while I helped to get other adorable dogs adopted into loving homes. His companionship healed my broken heart after 9/11, losing my dad to Cancer, and getting through a break up with the man I almost married.

Napster was loyal and funny. He was sweet and cuddly. He was smart and spunky. What he wasn't, was honest.

When he was old enough to be left alone for a few hours in my Brooklyn railroad apartment, I took to rearranging the furniture to create walls. I moved my tall couch across the doorway from the kitchen (his territory) to the rest of the open layout. I would kiss him and tell him to be a good boy while I was gone. He kissed me back. He whimpered. Then I hopped over the couch and out the door. I promised to be home soon.

When I arrived back for the evening, he would faithfully be right where I left him. Tail wagging. Tongue

flying. Ears flapping. Whimpering “Come here Mommy! Get over here right now and move this couch out of the way so I can kiss you again.”

More than once, on the way to me granting his wishes, I stepped in a pile of poop. I could almost hear him explain “I have no idea how that got there since I obviously can’t get over this barrier of a couch!”

He pleaded not-guilty night after night until I caught him in the act on the wrong side of the couch.

Napster and I had a long discussion about pretending to be a good boy versus actually being one, while my Russian Blue beamed from ear to ear like a Cheshire delighted that her inferior canine brother was finally busted.

After that night, I let the couch just be a couch instead of a dysfunctional wall.

And he never lied to me again.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

I wasn’t looking to get into the business of compassion. It found me. In a parking lot of an animal shelter. I’ve always believed that while it is a precious and amazing gift to create new life, it is every bit as amazing and far more rare and noble to be able to complete a life that already exists.

It’s an endless cycle of ABUNDANCE AND DESTRUCTION.

While lives are being manufactured, lives are being discarded, to make room for the ones that are being manufactured, to replace the ones that are being discarded.

Please consider Adoption. We are all mutts.

AUTHOR BIO: Amy is a songwriter and shelter dog advocate who has worked at North Shore Animal League and The Humane Society for Greater Nashua for a cumulative of 4 years. She would like to give fair warning that her musical references are a testament to the fact that she is a child of the 1980s and if you don’t recognize them, you should hide your head in shame. Her original mini-musical "Shelter Me" made its debut in 2019. Her works have been published in Litro UK magazine. She lives comfortably inside herself alongside her trophy husband and their rescues Willow and Mable. This is the first book that she's written. She's read a few.

