

DELL AT CORNELL

1.

By the time I was reduced to an eight by ten room my brain had shrunk, my body sunk into an L.L. Bean camp bed through many setting suns. I was disabled by dread. The government agreed and sent me money to live on each month. But it was not enough to pay for Bose radios and mission oak. My credit card debt exceeded my yearly income. I visited my children at their father's houses because three little boys could not be wedged into an eight by ten room. Even my birds were too big for this space with their usual dive bombing activity. I could not bear to cage them. Yet here I was, caged. It seemed perfectly logical at the time, a Sunday afternoon, to drink a six pack of Mexican beer, gurgle a quart of vodka, and swallow forty Zanax. I was not feeling well and did not know why, but I think it was depression, maybe anxiety. I left a suicide note for Leo. My life passed before my eyes, each person I had ever known marching on a horizon. I was out, but not for good. Connor's father, who still carried the weight of our failed relationship like a barbell, broke down the door. Luckily it did not damage the furniture.

I was stretched away to a vast place, a light slice of body deposited on a metal bed with white sheets, tubes and drugs and doctors, comforts ebbing from involuntary commitment. My independence required attendance. What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this? the therapists asked. Actually, I liked the

place, stayed for six weeks, and did whatever they told me to do. I ate four-star meals (intended to entice anorexics) and participated in psycho-drama.

Space expanded, later, like a black hole bursting. I had planned for this moment, nursing my movement. I sat now, smirking, on the front porch of my new apartment. We lived in a good spot here, a giant gingerbread castle on the corner, a park with a hill a block away where I could see the house through dapple gray trees. I am connected to these streets, the heaving sidewalks, the salty sheets of ice. A paradise of custom and continuum. It was not easy, arriving. I had to have a contrivance. I needed a companion on the passage, one who would alert me to danger and teach me about loyalty.

2.

I got a dog. Dell. A Border collie. I got out of my eight by ten room into bigger gingerbread rooms by envisioning space for a dog. It had to start with a dog; the children were simply too overwhelming. Besides, I thought, the dog might make us a pack, single mother and three young sons rolling on the floor, licks in faces, at first, a substitute for kisses. When I got to the big gray gingerbread house I shopped for a dog, as if I was pregnant. At first I was restricted to interior spaces, terrified of exteriors, movements among humans in grocery stores and parking lots, public schools and picnics; these came later, when the dog yanked me out the door. Space was expanding.

I went to the Humane Society of Central Delaware County in Delhi. I On this day Dell was nameless, one of half a dozen two month old Border collies bounding behind the counter. There were many dogs here, but the only way to view them was to walk around the front of the building to one of two fenced runs in back. Compatible dogs were exercised together. When I approached, the dogs fought and barked, some hurled themselves at the fence like monkeys. The alpha dogs inspected me according to status; dogs lower in the pack remained seated at a distance. Their activity was daunting, a dog tornado, dust and swatches of colors airborne, thunderous barking and twisting. Inside, the visitor was allowed to “receive” a dog for inspection after interviewing with Lauren Beck, Delhi Humane Society manager, expert match maker. Lauren was well-built, firm in muscle and voice, short brown hair and sturdy denim trousers. A guardian of dogs.

I described the non-shedding adult female terrier type of dog I wanted. (I had to have a female; there was too much testosterone in my house already.)

“Hmmm,” she said, “I have a dog at home, a Cairn terrier, year old, housebroken. Only problem is she can’t see out of one eye.”

I told her no on the Cairn. Lauren went out to get a dog for me to meet. I sat on the bench in my full length forest green leather coat feeling over-dressed. I was trying to pretend it was casual and planned to let the dogs jump on it. After this visit I used it as a barn coat, hung it in the mud room.

The first dog Lauren delivered was a dog named Shaker, a Small, terrier-type with deformed lips. He had never been inside a house. His disgruntled owners dumped him at the kennel because he killed too many chickens. Shaker ran around on short legs ramming into things he was mad at--the counter, the wall, a chair.

“What else have you got, Lauren?”

She reminded me again of the blind cairn terrier. “I think he would be perfect for you,” she said. I wanted a more normal dog, but I didn’t want to appear uncharitable, or as if the dog had to match my coat. A part setter named Penny tore into the room. She had black and white feathery curls of fur. Another woman was in the room with me, also receiving dogs. She really wanted a Saint Bernard. The woman, Sue, looked so intelligent and crisp. I couldn’t imagine why she would want dog froth and slobber on her clothes.

Lauren trotted out a shepherd for Sue. It promptly jumped in her lap. “She’s doing that to show her dominance,” Lauren said, “She wants you to know she’s alpha. She’s got a real problem with dominance.” Sue balked. Then she left. I liked Penny. She was nervous, though, darting all around, not settling by me. She was also eight years old. Lauren said Penny was popular but no one would take her because of her age. Soon she would be put down. I wondered if this piece of information was manipulation, to test my true desire for a canine companion. The last dog Lauren showed me was an animal whose

head was bigger than its body. A cross between a hotdog and an Airedale. This was beginning to look like a freak show to me.

Meanwhile, the Border collie puppies were running around behind the counter. I leaned over and stared, struck by the abandon and fun. "What's the story with these guys?" Lauren said the whole family, father, mother, and six newborns were dropped outside the door. The pups, no bigger than gerbils, were frozen when Lauren found them, but she thawed them under a heat lamp. "Where are the mother and father?" I asked, feeling some excitement for the first time. Lauren stiffened.

"The father's taken, two of the pups are called-for, and you can't have the mother." Now I was really interested.

"Why can't I have the mother?" I stepped over the gate and sat among the puppies.

"The mother has bonded to one kennel worker. She won't let anyone else near her."

"So she's loyal," I said. Where was this dog? This Lassie of orphans. Lauren called to the kennel worker to bring her out.

I read about Border collies a long time ago. How smart they are. Top of the list. I had raised a few huskies for show and breeding purposes. But huskies are among the dumbest dogs on the planet. If you put a paper bag over their heads they just sit there, wondering what to do. Dog testers have rated all dogs from

smartest to dumbest. The smartest dog is a Border collie, followed by standard poodle.

I had been to sheep trials in Cooperstown every year for a decade. The Border collies were bullets, coarse wavy and white hair, some with half-prick, some with full-prick ears. Sheep herders preferred the dogs with half prick ears; those with full-prick looked too much like wolves and frightened the sheep. A Border collie responds to a series of three commands: come bye, walk on, away; and also to varied pitch whistles. They can run thirty miles an hour, stop on a dime, and run one hundred miles a day. The dog hugs the ground when it runs, poised. Sight is their strongest sense, the eye-lock, used to control a heard of sheep. Later, I learned that this crouching, creeping, and eye-locking is also used to control other dogs, children, bicycles, and UPS trucks. In green pastures, this dog could have been an arrow, flint shot from a bow.

The mother appeared with her wiry wonderful coat, teak black, emulsion white, curly wool like sheep shearing. I reached out for her and she snarled, threw her rear against her one human pack member, the only bond she trusted. I could not have her, and Lauren was adamant. "You may not even try," she said. The puppies stumbled along, a few hanging from taut plumb teats leaking milk.

I was brightening over the puppies, staring, like they were my own children. Why not abandon the plan for a small non-shedder?. I saw myself choking over clumps of fur, floating, agitated, brushing white hairs from black suede pants. But picture a Border collie standing by black suede pants, a white

silk shirt. I could brush her on the porch, maybe I could even vacuum her or shave her. I would rise every two hours as I did with my children, carry her outside to wet. Indeed, I would never leave her alone. She would be my really sleek companion, smarter than most people I knew.

“Look,” Lauren said, “Border collies bite children in the butt and herd them like sheep. When they’re bored, they will chase anything that moves. They have to have a job to do. Believe me, I’ve had them, and they make terrible family pets. You have three children. A Border collie is not for you. Think about that Cairn.”

“Okay,” I said. “No Border collie for me.”

I felt a wicked spark of wit. The idea of a dog herding my children was most compelling. Suddenly I forgot about the rumor of a family dog sleeping by my fake gingerbread fireplace. On the way home, which was Saturday, I thoughtfully obsessed over the scene of the menacing mother, hugging the leg of the kennel worker. The dog’s beauty; it had a snout like a fox. It attracted me. The dog was a loaded gun, but I knew she would protect me.

3.

I dream about making deals for a Border collie, a tenacious pet to dog me, rouse me from melancholy. I was looking for lessons in raising my tolerance level, a reason to acquire it by default, like larger rooms, a smoke free life.

On Monday, in my bathrobe, I stared at my computer screen for most of the day. Of course there was an Internet site for Border collies: The United States Border Collie Club. This was the mother link. Border Collie Basics warned against getting this dog for a pet: The most important use of the Border collie, the one to which we must all feel ultimately responsible, is the real working farm job. There is work around livestock that simply can't be done without a real working dog. All of us who use the Border collie for any other purpose, in the end, must always see the breed as belonging, in a sense, to the true working shepherd. But the articles offered hope, too: The Border collie can, in the right home, be immensely successful. Where someone is willing to put in the time to work with the dog, a Border collie can be a marvelous member of the family. On the other hand, Border collies are such obstreperous pets that most states maintain Border collie rescue leagues. These agencies rescue dogs from families that cannot cope with the Border collie's ill-tempered hyperactivity.

I called Lauren in Delhi. "Lauren," I said, "I've done some research and the Border collie will make a good family dog if I give it a job, take it with me everywhere, which I will, because I work at home."

"What kind of a job?" Lauren asked.

"Running. Six miles a day. And herding my children," I added, laughing.

"That's good, but it's not enough. Anyway, you can't have the mother. Not with children."

I was going to have to crack Lauren with a sledge hammer, offer some startling piece of research about Border collies that no one had ever heard before. I looked. My publisher friend faxed me information from books in his collection. Not all Border collies can be used successfully for herding; therefore, either we destroy the leftovers or expand their use as companion animals. Border collies left in a heap outside of a shelter are probably unsuitable for herding, and breeding was banned.

I called again. "Lauren," I said.

"You can't have the mother."

A few drops of sweat trickled down my arm. A few voices arguing in my head. You do not want a puppy, they said. Others insisted I wanted the smartest, the sharpest, a dog shaped like flint, a defensive sentinel. It never occurred to me to question these voices, or to listen to the original First Voice, which prodded gently for a full grown terrier-type. "Can I have a puppy?" It was, perhaps, my most cloying voice.

"There's one left, a female. The others died from parvo," she said.

Parvovirus contains DNA in a protein shell that causes disease in many vertebrates, especially mammals such as dogs and cattle. This was a deadly, nearly eradicated disease equivalent to human small pox. All the pups had been vaccinated against it, but four in the litter had contracted it, probably before their vaccinations. Lauren speculated that this rare disease surfaced during the 1996

Delaware County flood which destroyed many towns, raising bacteria and viruses like run-off in unsanitary conditions.

“Come in tomorrow and you can her,” she said. It did not even occur to me that a pup exposed to parvo presented a risk, deformity, aggression, cognitive problems. This was another loaded gun, attachment threatening detachment.

Denial struck. I shopped for her. I bought a sturdy gold crate, a sheep wool pad, and two blue and red Bouncing Congs, one with a rope for throwing. These were hard hollow rubber bee-hive shaped things for tossing off walls and mission oak. I bought a plush lamb, a yellow plush bear, Lucy and Linus plastic squeak dolls, a rubber horseshoe and spinning top, rawhide chews in many twisted shapes. The worst purchases involved leashes. I got confused, envisioned a huge full grown dog requiring two inch wide web restrainers with pound snap locks. I bought a collar big enough for a belt. I was thinking ahead. I went back to the feed store and found some puppy sized items, a choke and one inch lead. Use of the choke chain is a painful regret. The inhumane constraint of delicate bones and skin, the gray stains on white irked fur. I dreaded Dell's potential head size, diminished by the constant neck squeeze, like the feet of oriental women. And these dogs typically have very heavy heads because their brains are so big.

Lauren called to say the pup was ready, she tested negative for parvo. Would I like to adopt her, or just come and play? These were understatement. I had called her every day for sixteen days. “You’re saving them for me, right? Both of them, okay?” Or, “I was thinking of buying a Gummabone. Is this better than a Gummadisc?” The next day: “Do you prefer roar-hide or chunky chips?” Finally: “I was thinking about getting Chick-N-Cheez Chooz chew products, but I wondered about the cheese. Do you think it would it cause diarrhea? I could get the pop-pup potato bones instead.”

Lauren was quite gracious, given her hefty brawn. She simply said to feed the pup Purina Lamb and Rice. Pig and cow ear chews were fine. “But,” she added, “if you’re going to take the dog today, be sure to bring a note from your landlord, three references, an emergency contact, sixty-five dollars, the name, address, and phone number of your current and past vets, your license, proof of residence, and verification of children and other animals living in the house.

“But I haven’t had a dog in eighteen years,” I said.

“Then bring me a reference from the owner and vet of any dog you’ve lived with,” was Lauren’s flexible reply.

My four-year-old son was visiting, so I put him in the car and a puppy size crate we had borrowed for the occasion. I wanted Connor to come with me, maybe so I could say it was a family choice, maybe because little boys like puppies, but mostly because I felt obligated to give him the experience. I didn’t

intend to let him choose. The more I tried to make this a family affair, the less it became one. The boys discussed names for the dog, but each time I said no, to Rex, Bob, Bingo, Snoopy.

Connor and I arrived and sat on the floor in the cat room with the pup. (Puppies were kept with cats in the shelter.) The female had bat size full prick ears, black, brown, and white fur. Panda marked, Lauren said. Her back was black with a patch of white. The dog wanted Connor to play, eye locked him, crept around, and ignored me. She ran to him and he tossed her a treat. She was springing around the room like a goat, very content with herself, looking only for the company of little boys and cats in cages. I wanted this female, her reticence, balking, a well-defined range, her cleanliness, sudden hops over little piles of poop. She was independent. Her loyalty would exclude everyone but the master.

Lauren looked at me and said, "This female is a dog dog. She will make a bond, but this one prefers dogs to people." The dog threw up a heap of treats, then walked away, when another dog might have eaten it.

"Look, Mom," Connor said, "it's pink."

"Those are streaks of beef flavored dye," I said.

Suddenly I realized I couldn't handle the intimacy of any other dog. "Connor, what do you want?" He pointed to this female bucking bronco. I asked him why he wanted her, but he didn't know. He just did. If only he had known what I knew then; the female would be Connor's rival in the end.

Dell, there were no arguments about her name, went with us in the crate. On the way home she threw up again and had diarrhea. Her head rested in one pile, her rear in another. Connor tried to make a clean nest. When she hopped out of the crate, into a pile of snow, she played with a rock, despite the filth and strange new home. I felt the joy of something bursting. Dell took a bath while Connor played with her toys. My son Leo came over later, a short walk from his father's house, and rolled some balls in Dell's direction. He was plastered with smiles because she was a puppy, but he never bonded with her and never stopped demanding to know why I didn't get the dog he wanted, a yellow lab named Rex. Gable, middle son, walked from his father's house too. He pushed on her back and pulled his hands away whenever she snapped. Dell did not like to be held or restrained.

5.

I was not ready to receive the kind of dog Leo wanted, a lab. It is no wonder why labs are the most popular dogs in America: they are the only dogs that can withstand the chaos of family life. They are family dogs, spreading their love thin, equal in a pack of five. Labs modeled behavior I wanted to develop in my own life, or thought I should develop, but I felt the innate wariness of most Border collies as an entreaty. Perhaps it was detachment, inaccessibility, the willful independent dignity expressed as near intellectual allegiance, that fit. In this particular relationship I would not be required to fall in love, and if I didn't, no

one would pass judgment as they might, for example, if I failed to emotionally bond with my children.

On the other hand, there was always the possibility that I would fall in love. Not much was required in the beginning, other than carrying her outside every two hours, placing her in the snow, waiting for a few golden drops, a tiny plop, to appear. I drew a long black coat over my naked body during night excursions. In two years this dog had only two accidents in the house, both because she was ill. In between short walks Dell chewed pig ears on a rectangle of exquisitely expensive Indian wool.

We walk farther away from the gingerbread house, venture into a few more public places. Feelings of oddity, my body open in the street, diminish with this dog at my feet. It was the same with a baby in a stroller, people would pay attention to the infant like it was public property. A puppy was open for petting, although Dell sidled away from hands on her head, it took the focus off of me. No one was looking at me. Yet occasionally someone would, look and smile, and I connected peripherally, if only for a moment. In addition, Dell provided a kind of barrier, as with the baby carriage, a fort to push ahead and hide behind. Like a fork in the road, people part to let us go forward. The bakery is part of the range. I bring Dell inside. She is still small enough to be cute. Dell sniffs. She blinks through the sunny morning blasts of store front light, then stares but does not beg.

6.

We expand the range, walking several times a day, and run, too. But Dell develops a startle reflex, a hyper vigilance. She prances around in the wind chasing leaves. Fluttering, whipping, upheavals of objects trajecting her scent and sense of danger or delight. She hugs my ankles as we walk, rankled by the motion. A tree falls on a house and she plants herself, immovable, reliable in the storm. I coax her, reassure her that the world is still safe.

Wilber Park is two blocks from the gingerbread house. As we walk I watch her mark the park with pee, every bank and path belongs to my dog. A log with green fungus bears her tag. She lags over a rock near the stream while a cool fog rises in a beam of light. There are prizes everywhere. She tracks them with dog radar on each new adventure and makes a fresh mark to fence her territory.

Dell makes friends in the park by barking and rolling, extolling submissive innocence. Her sweetness is a lure, teasing other dogs to lead and lose her. I meet their masters in a dance of faster, slower down the path, to see who will vanish first around the bend. Our dogs decide, sometimes offending solitude by bolting, not heeling, in the latitude of choices. We fall into step with pets and talk about their habits, not ours, how they chase rabbits, their ages and stages, how they bite and fight; until we come to the clearing and tether our companions for the hard parting.

Running is an ordeal to be endured. I loop a leash around my waist, attach it to a choke. Dell understands heel, sit, down, come, and stay perfectly well. Border collies tend to learn these commands immediately. I do not run as fast as a Border collie, but I could have used the incentive. Dell trots along just behind my heels, Border collie style. Will she nip at my heels, I wonder. No, this behavior only occurs in groups. She plants herself like a concrete block on a well-manicured yard and poops. I look away, lacking appropriate plastic bags, make a geographic note of the pile. In case anyone asks, I can say I'll get it later. I snap the choke to get going, but now she is a boulder. I detach the leash and run away. She freezes like a lawn ornament in the middle of the sidewalk. I keep running until she recedes into a black and white spec. Out of her defined range. Now she bolts beside me, but repeats the bolder-in-the-road trick until a car stops just inches from her nose.

Our slow courtship turns into a battle of annoyance. After all, running was her prearranged job. Her ticket out of the shelter. She won't do it. I call Lauren.

"The dog won't run," I say.

"You've ruined it for her. Bring treats. Lure her with treats." I keep stinking hotdog discs in the pocket of my two-hundred dollar running jacket. She doesn't want them. She would rather sit in the middle of the road than eat hotdogs. I call Lauren again.

"The dog needs formal obedience immediately," Lauren says, "and don't call me again until she's graduated."

I am reluctant. I make excuses. I yell and hang her with the choke when we run. It is not fun and friends and strangers are beginning to comment. "Hey, I saw you dragging that poor dog on one of your marathon runs." And from an old man in the street, "What the hell are you doing to that dog? Can't you see she's exhausted?" Never mind the fact that Border collies can run up to one hundred miles a day, thirty miles an hour. This was a stand-off, and a voice told me that Dell was going to win.

I remember making Leo walk from my house on Chestnut Street two miles into the city when he was two years old. He cried and collapsed on the side walk, but I thought he could do it if he would just stop whining. His father cuddled him and said he was too cold to walk. I tried cuddling Dell at her inflexible stops. At first I didn't like her muddy fur on my slick jacket, but she grew still and seemed to like being hugged and carried, so I melted into the task, slid her inside the Gortex, zipped it, and walked. I whispered her name, Dell, Dell.

Dell wasn't going to run so I made her hike mountains. Actually she made me, since it would never have occurred to me to hike mountains unless I had a dog that needed a bigger range to roam. This was a bursting expansion in my relationship with Dell. After seven months of quiet companionship in the small city, subtle movements, quelling the quivering currents of anxiety, feeling happy when a pool blue star of fungus grew on a root and caught the light, I left.

I started hiking on days when I did not have visitation with my children. At first I went with Karen and her Chihuahua-like dog, Doby. We decided to hike the Escarpment trail in the Catskill Mountains, a three day backpacking trip. Neither of us had ever engaged in such an activity. We planned it for July when there was sure to be thunderstorms in the mountains, sweltering days of lead heat breaking into electrical jolts. We bought packs for the dogs and rolled around on the lawn laughing at them as both dogs stood, very stiff, and eyed each other. Karen put toilet paper in Doby's pack. I put Dell's food and thirty-five dollar Gor-Tex dog bowels into her pack. Karen and I each carried one third of our body weight in supplies. I could not hoist the pack weight without sitting down. Karen fell over backwards while donning her pack. Doby learned that if he ran full speed down the trail and stopped abruptly he could throw the pack forward straight off his head, which was a good thing, because the back strap snapped over his penis. Dell behaved in her pack; instead of leading us, she heeled. Without the pack her behavior was abhorrent: herding other hikers, biting their ankles and Gor-Tex rain pants. I noticed that anyone who happened to fall into our pace was considered part of the pack. One man kicked her across the trail.

I checked brands of Gor-Tex pants, calculating how much money I'd have to pay if she ripped a pair. When Karen and I stopped to rest Dell barked at us and snapped at Doby to get us moving. Her bark was shrill, incessant, Karen called her a fish wife. Other times, Dell would stand, inflexible, back rigid, and stare at the ground.

“She’s exactly like you,” Karen said, “too many personalities.”

Dell led the way, a sashay on the trail. A Border collie’s feet barely leave the ground as she trots. Dell carried her tail up, but not curved over her back. The long coarse white fur on her flanks swished, a perfect pair of pantaloons.

On the last day of our back packing trip we camped on the summit of North Point Mountain. I have never seen the view from this peak. Our tent flapped in a shroud of fog and wind. There were no people on the mountain, just spiders. We built a fire, somehow, and sat in the smoke. Dell ate a rock the size of a golf ball. It was a piece of quartz I had carried and chucked. I did not know this until the next evening when she awakened me, heaving, erupting at timed intervals until, thunk, the wet quartz hit the oak floor. There were no more hiking trips with Karen, who found a boyfriend, but I ventured out alone, nearly every week for a year.

Dell and I expanded our range to include peaks above timber line, the Adirondack mountains. It was a long drive and I could not make these trips in a day. Most hotels and lake side cabins will not accommodate dogs, especially herding dogs. I tried a few by paying extra, but Dell crouched, waiting for guests coming to or leaving other rooms. She followed their feet with her eyes, then locked the target, and charged. People screamed, Dell made fish wife throaty noises, snapping at hiking boots and gaiters. This was not working. I gave up when the nips left imprints. No one had bled yet.

8.

The local paper ran a feature article on a local woman who had been prevented from entering the mall with her service dog, a large malamute that carried a pack. I knew the woman. We had the same psychiatrist. The State of New York was suing the mall for discriminating against people with disabilities. I had a disability. The next time I saw her I asked about service dog status for Dell. "How do I get it?"

"Have your doctor qualify your disability and need for assistance. The dog can be licensed as a companion. Have him write a letter, then take it to the City Clerk who will give you a service dog license."

I talked this over with my psychologist. "I won't do it," she said. "You don't need a service dog. It's a lie and a con, designed to get you into public places other people can't go with their dogs." I agreed. But how many of those people were disabled? How many of them had just emerged from an eight by ten room?

"How does your disability qualify the need for a service dog?" she asked.

"Panic disorder. Dread. Fear of people and public places. I can't, I won't go alone. I will not hike alone. I have to be able to stay at the Adirondack Lodge, mingle with hikers, eat good food, listen for snoring instead of for bears."

“I won’t do it,” she said. So I spoke to my other doctor, the psychiatrist. He thought it was a great idea and gave me some Valium, too, just in case.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a service animal as any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability. If they meet this definition, animals are considered service animals under the ADA regardless of whether they have been licensed or certified by a state or local government.

I didn’t even need a license, although I did want a token of authenticity, probably because a part me needed further justification for fear of fraud, of going too far around the mountain.

How would I identify Dell as a real service dog? And what, exactly, was her job? To carry the Valium? I had to get her trained as a service dog. So we met with Carol, obedience trainer/behaviorist, and a group of ornery dogs whose antics warranted harsh chokes.

Dell knew the commands, but she seemed to perform them like a whipped dog, slinking, waiting to spring at a rollicking Jack Russell. Carol wore a little leather pouch on her belt, the treat keeper. She bought odorous pepperoni, the dogs sniffed and followed. I put semi-moist beef treats in my barn coat pocket. Dell rebuffed the little pink stars of compressed chemicals. She worked the rituals perfectly during class. I could leave her in a down-stay and walk the length of a

football field, around a building and back again, before she would break the command.

At home, she barked at doorbells like an attack dog. Certain friends were afraid to enter (men mostly) because she menaced them, stalking and balking, growling. I reflected upon her choices in men, examined their demeanors. Were they dog-haters? Did high levels of testosterone flow toward violence, a smell for Dell to keep in check? The mail carrier refused to come on the porch. The Fed Ex delivery people threw packages at the house and ran. Dell once braced herself in the road and snarled at a UPS truck, she was a predator of trucks. This was not herding conduct. Dell was establishing a vicious boundary, an electric fence with me in the center.

9.

Dell's blue back pack was emblazoned with white letters on both sides "Service Dog." I used an iron to apply them. Carol thought her pack was quite slick. We went to Walmart. By now the local merchants pretended not to see a service dog coming. Shoppers were another problem. Everyone wanted to pet the service dog. Dell ducked whenever a hand lowered above her head and I reflexively yanked her metal choke. She sidled next to me in a perfect heel, no matter how big the shopping carts or how vexing the toddlers. I ran into a few friends. "I didn't know you were blind," one said. And another, "Oh, so you're a dog trainer." We went to the mall and sat on a bench with pretzels and coffee.

Dell sat, too. Carol pulled her up into a stand and told her to stay. Dell sat again. Carol made me pull her up. But Dell refused. “Your dog is so fuckin’ stubborn,” she said. Carol didn’t swear, she was a born-again Christian, so I was appalled at my dog’s obvious failure to serve. “She’s got to be trained to do something,” I said. “Besides heel.”

“What’s your disability?” Carol popped the question.

“Fear of public places.” The mall was making me nervous, ghastly lighting, sharp edges, dizzy angles. The stimulation of commotion was damaging in a way I couldn’t define. I could not draw a line between me and the noise, the darting movement. It was too much to inventory, as if I needed to count every spec into consciousness, a kind of hyper vigilance. Sometimes a discount store felt like a mountain storm, a bear false-charging. I had survived such episodes, but there were no people on these peaks, only me and my dog. This seemed easier than a jaunt through K-Mart.

We went to Wendy’s. Dell thumped onto her side with a sigh in the aisle while Carol and I ate taco tarts. A man walked around her. Then another. Dell roared up, snarled, and lunged. All eyes were on me, then whispering.

“Correct your dog,” Carol yelled.

What? What the hell am I supposed to do, I wondered. The deed was done. She got away with it, nearly spearing a guy’s leg with her incisors. The critical moment was lost. Later I learned you have to face off an aggressive dog

at the instant of attack. Dell was learning a very fine trick: she could defend her slice of space by menacing without consequence.

At the very least, I should have manipulated her immediately, rubbed her paws and ears, her tummy and snout. Border collies are acutely sensitive to touch; as a rule they do not like to be handled. They respond to soft tones and feather strokes. Carol was incredulous when I told her that Dell never slept on my bed, did not sit in the front seat of my car, and never, ever, put a paw on my mission oak maroon leather.

“Uh huh,” Carol said. “You work on snuggling with your dog and I bet your children will come closer to you, too.”

Carol declared Dell completely trained, in obedience, anyway. We decided that her official service would be companion mountain climber, specifically, this individual assistance: when I came to a cliff that Dell could not jump from a standing position, she would piggy back with me, front paws wrapped around my neck in the manner of a small child. At the point of scrambling, she would use my back for a bridge. In this way Dell could clamber any obstacle like a goat, reassuring her sagacious companionship in dangerous places and potential panic situations. Dogs do lower blood pressure, alleviate depression, and can cure agoraphobia. This is a true and useful service for a dog to perform. Dell had expanded my space, to elevations and distances I would never have braved alone, especially in the company of other people.

Under the ADA, privately owned business that serve the public, such as restaurants, hotels, retail stores, taxicabs, theaters, concert halls, and sports facilities, are prohibited from discriminating against individuals with disabilities. The ADA requires these businesses to allow people with disabilities to bring their service animals onto business premises in whatever areas customers are generally allowed. Under New York law, no person shall be denied admittance to and/or the equal use of and enjoyment of any public facility solely because he or she has a disability and is accompanied by a guide dog, hearing dog or service dog.

In my travels with Dell during her active service tenure, I did not meet a single person who was familiar with the term “service animal.” I had the Service Animal Guide for Business Owners published by the State of New York Attorney General reduced and laminated. I carried it in my wallet, gave it to the manager of any business which questioned Dell’s status. I pointed to the 800 number to the U.S. Department of Justice, said it would behoove the business to train all employees in service animal legal etiquette, or risk getting sued for millions of dollars. Most people seemed to understand the delicacy of the situation, and stopped just short of asking me about the nature of my disability.

Once, at John’s Brook Lodge, the director winked at me and said, “You might say she’s like a therapy dog, huh?”

“Hey,” I said, “You just might say that, especially if I was in a nursing home.”

Our most charged experience was at the trail head to Nippletop Mountain in the Adirondacks. This mountain is approached from private land belonging to the Ausable golf club, which owns thousands of wild acres surrounding state land and the high peaks. The club has graciously offered to maintain some of the trails leading to peaks through golf course land and allows hikers special access. As long as hikers obey the following rules, posted bill board size at trail heads: NO CAMPING; NO FISHING, NO BOATING, NO MOTORIZED VEHICLES, NO BIKING, NO SAMPLING, NO LOITERING, NO DOGS, NO PETS OF ANY KIND: READ THIS.

One had to hike an average of eight miles before state land was reached, peak base. Dell and I walked a mile on golf cart roads to the trail head from hiker parking at the Ausable Club. A few women were playing golf. They wore white shoes with fringe and lime green polo shirts. One screamed at me about no dogs on the golf course. Dell was not wearing her pack. We came to the gate where three forest rangers and a wizened man were signing people in at the trail register. On state land, registering is advisable, but optional. Here it was mandatory. The scene seemed odd, since in the whole State of New York one is unlikely to find three forest rangers in one place at the same time. Most of them have been ecologically downsized.

The rangers were there for me, Dell actually. Apparently they decided it would take three men with guns to deter us. One got out of a truck.

“Sorry, miss, no dogs allowed.”

“This is not a pet,” I said. “She’s a service dog.”

“I don’t know anything about no service dogs. All’s I know is, no dogs allowed.”

“It doesn’t matter whether you know anything about them or not,” I said. Once I state that she is a service dog, it’s illegal for you to ask me any more questions.”

“I’m sorry miss, no dogs allowed.”

“Who’s the director of this elitist club?” I asked.

The wizened guy, an employee of the club, rightfully defended his turf. “We pay the taxes in Keene Valley! Who do you think supports this town?” I thought he would cry.

“That’d be Mr. Fox,” one of the rangers responded.

“Well please get him on your cell phone. Tell him I either walk through now, or he will be hearing from the State Attorney General.”

The ranger spoke on the phone for a moment. “Mr. Fox says we’re not in a position to be stopping handicapped people from hiking through.” The ranger then asked me to step aside. “Look, I gotta ask you, you don’t look disabled, are you really telling me the truth?”

“My car is parked in the lot. It’s a gray Justy. Look in the back seat and you will see her pack marked service dog. I didn’t bring it because I didn’t think I’d need it for a day hike in the wilderness.” After forty-five minutes of this detention, we left. A woman jogged down the road beside us, a club member.

“How’d you get that dog in here?” she yelled.

I gave the usual reply. The women then said that I didn’t look disabled, so what was wrong with me? “I’m psychotic,” I said. And what about you, I thought? Are you a person of color, are you heterosexual, are you homosexual, or what? Suddenly the Americans With Disabilities Act became as important to me as the Second Amendment, the First Amendment, certainly as the preservation of forever wild places. I was ripe for a battle. I embarrassed my friends, quoting from my laminated card where ever we went.

The ADA incorporates the right to privacy, even dignity: Some service animals wear special collars and harnesses. Some are licensed or certified and have identification papers. If you are not certain that an animal is a service animal, you make ask the person. However, an individual who is going to a restaurant or theater is not likely to be carrying documentation of his or her disability. Therefore, such documentation generally many not be required as a condition for providing service to an individual accompanied by a service animal. Although a number of states have programs to certify service animals, a

business, public or private, may not insist on proof of state certification before permitting the service animal to accompany the person with a disability.

Dell processed our congruency in a different way. The more serviceable she became, the more exposed to social situations I became, her warmth and loyalty a confident comfort. I even smiled when she bit the ankle of a staff member at John's Brook Lodge in the Adirondacks. I smirked when, approaching the summit of Marcy, I ran into another guy who remembered being bitten by Dell, also at John's Brook Lodge. Without fail, every time she was in the work or stay mode, she growled, lunged, and struck. But she had not drawn blood or ripped pants, yet.

Then one day in front of the bakery, all hell broke loose. I did not take Dell into the bakery, a very small space. She did not sport her pack on Main Street in Oneonta, I did not want local people to know that I was officially disabled. Unofficially, they seemed to know. But I was inside the electric fence that Dell had defined, sitting in the window of the bakery, gazing at her tethered to a lamp post.

A creamy-skinned guy, thick sinew of muscle, marched a mattress out of a store and passed just inches from Dell, trapping her against the post. She lunged from the limits of her space, defaced her intruder, lashed a bruised and bloody gash through tendon and denim. It must have hurt. This guy was a body builder, but he was dancing around on Main Street crying and swearing. The police came. The vet was called. Names were exchanged. I marveled at my homicidal

dog. Did I really require so much protection? Later I would learn that it was not me she was protecting, but herself. I still saw the dog as an extension of myself.

11.

I brought Dell to Cornell. We met with Vint Virga, DVM for five hours in an eight by ten room at Cornell University's recently completed fifty million dollar Animal Behavior Clinic inside the College of Veterinary Medicine complex. Dell was seen by a team of dog doctors, interns, and trainers. Some were visiting veterinarians from Japan and China. Her head was examined by the most famous dog neurologist in the world. He charged seven dollars. Dell, it seemed, was free of organic brain disease, including schizophrenia.

Dell was set up to display biting behavior, to be seen snapping at chucks of muscle in the thighs of men. We brought her outside and tied her to a tree where doctors took turns running past, growling. Nothing. We brought her inside and locked her in an eight by ten examining room, glinting with steel and tile. We tied her to a door handle and gawked from a tiny chicken wire window in the hall. A big trainer man was sent into the room to menace and yell. Dell just stared.

Finally I said, "Sometimes she'll bite if I'm hugging my children or a man." Vint, DMV, gaped. We all looked at each other. The only man besides Vint in the room was the big trainer.

“I’m game if you’re game,” he said. Everyone laughed except for Vint who said he thought this wouldn’t be appropriate. He disappeared and came back with a huge garish doll.

“Here, this can be one of your children,” he said.

After four and a half hours, Dell had not attempted a single bite. I was beginning to feel odd, a little sweaty, and fearful that the doctors might think I was fabricating a story. I took some Valium. Dell swished around the circle of doctors and sweetly threw her rump into their calves for some petting, nudging from person to person. All responded to her bossing except for Vint.

Unexpectedly, Dell was not so sweet, Dell at Cornell in the fifty million dollar Vet Med with Vint, sharp as flint in the shrewd silence. He got her to lunge in anxious aggression, snapping like an alligator, barking ferociously. Now, gently, he talked to her, a command, now two, no reprimands. Lull her or walk away, he said. Nothing in life is free; this is the protocol for deference. Everyone cheered.

“What did you do?” we cried.

Vint said, “I stared at her. I had a hunch. Now I know exactly what she’s doing.” The doctors left the room for about thirty minutes to discuss his theory. They filed in and formed a circle in the steel seats and Vint said, very softly, “We feel that we need to know what your disability is so that we can make some recommendations about Dell. Now I know this is not normally asked, but we think it’s important to our diagnosis.”

“Panic disorder, depression,” I said, quite matter-of-factly. Vint was thrilled. He said they were forming a team at Cornell to investigate the uses of companion dogs for psychiatric disabilities. Dell was a gem, a shining example for Vint to investigate. Except that she bit people.

Everyone agreed that Dell suffered from anxiety, too. Fear aggression was the formal diagnosis. I was given instructions: the big trainer dropped a rock. “If you don't discipline her before that rock hits the ground, don't do it,” he said. “Get rid of the choke.” They sent me a special comfortable horse halter for dogs in black to match her fur. “And never, ever, raise your voice to her. If she doesn't obey a command, ignore her. Never give her treats or even pet her until she performs a command. Nothing in life is free. This is the protocol for deference,” said the trainer.

“I want to come to Oneonta and film her in her own environment,” Vint said. “This is a good case for my board residency.”

I was stunned. Dell was just an animal shelter dog. “Yes, that would be nice,” I said.

12.

Vint arrived at my house with a heavy camera, another doctor from Japan, and a student intern. The doctor from Japan sat stiffly in a mission oak chair holding a duffel sack in her lap. The intern sat on the floor and played with Dell. Vint Virga gazed lovingly at Dell. “Let no municipality destroy her for biting. I will

take her. I love this dog. You must let me know.” Dell, he said, was fearfully aggressive. Is she picking up on her Mom’s anxiety? He posed a question. Not a generalized state of anxiety. It was not about me, he said. If a dog is going to be aggressive it emerges in adolescence, around age two, which is right on target for Dell.

I thought of Dell as a sponge, expanding in size as she soaked up my pathology. I had seen it in my own children. Leo was shy and reticent; Gable so tactically sensitive as to be autistic; Connor displayed a verbal belligerence, an intellectual shield. Just at the point Dell became trained to provide full companionship, full protection, the electric fence fused us both and she burst, while I got a little better. I soaked up confidence. Dell was acting out behaviors I had only dreamed about, snapping at intruders. I carried images of intruders from another life time; if only I could have incised their thighs, blood-let, and sent them to the hospital. In one way this dog had performed a job. I was ready to reverse it.

According to Vint, Dell was responding to the uncontrollability of her situation. She felt trapped by people coming into her space. (Didn’t he know he know he was talking about me?) This was a normal response to that type of threat. She is not a dog that doesn’t want to be approached by people, but she can’t be put in unreasonable situations, unreasonable, that is, for her personality.

Did this mean it was okay for me to live alone? Could I give up the irrational expectations I held about myself? That I should be happily married, that

I should enjoy crowds, that I should have a nine to five job, that I should make Playdough and stitch Halloween costumes.

Dell and I were congruent. Of course, this is why I chose her. Perhaps my fear was her reality, perhaps not. She was, after all, a detached pup, a creature with boundaries. She matched my emotional limitations and fulfilled them, too. For the first time I began to contemplate the nature of Dell. The fact that dog deeds can't be judged by usefulness to humans.

Suddenly, I felt like a good-enough mother. Standing alone, inside my own electric fence was good enough. Humans and dogs were entitled to their own boundaries. I did not have to allow anyone into my own range who wasn't invited, or use a dog to stalk and bite. Dell, too, was the master of her own range, now that she had matured. What transpired next felt redundant, now that I glimpsed Dell, as a dog, rather than a hoop of steel.

We went with Vint to Main Street and tethered Dell to the infamous lamp post. I stood inside the bakery and watched her from the window. Dell wore her Gentle Leader (the horse tether), looking miserable. Vint held the video camera while the intern and the doctor asked people to walk a wide sweep past Dell. Life on Main Street seemed to stand still. Vint looked important. Some people volunteered to stroll a little closer to Dell. She stood, she growled. I looked around the bakery. People I knew were having coffee, sitting alone, reading the

paper—my psychiatrist, my gynecologist, Connor’s father, a teacher, an attorney. I had lived among these people for twenty-two years.

My friend Art parallel parked beside the lamp post. He is big and lumbering. His eyes were on me as he stepped over Dell, overlooking her. The doctor and the intern yelled for him to get away from the dog. Too late; this was the most vicious attack to date. Blood pours from puncture wounds, Art’s ankle. He does not seem rankled, but I am shaking as I clean the blue and green bruise, sop the blood. What am I thinking? Vint has turned his back as if this scene has nothing to do with him. It was not what he intended. Some people make rude comments about big doctors from Cornell.

Vint took me aside. “Look,” he said, “that guy was tromping over her and pinning her. Dell had no choice. Unquestionably, this is fear biting. Any dog would do that in her situation.” We went back to my living room. Vint said the camera was turned off when Dell bit Art. I could see how relieved he was that this mishap did not occur on film, dog suit evidence. He gave me final instructions: He could not guarantee that Dell would never bite in these types of situations, even with retraining. She should always wear her muzzle, but the snapping should not affect her service status. “Never raise your voice,” he said, and left. I thought of my children, speaking to them in tender tones, cooing, in love with little boys. I had become so soft that I did not agree with Vint’s verdict: not every dog will bite when a human steps over the dog.

13.

Later that afternoon I took Dell to the daycare center to pick up Connor and Gable. I had already been asked three times not to bring her there. (I brought her once with a muzzle and it scared the children.) This was definitely my fault. I had asked my ten year old son to hold her (with the Gentle Leader tightly fit around her snout) off to one side of the path on the grass, away from people, while I got my boys from inside. A day care worker walked by while Leo was holding her and Dell ripped his pants from the knee down, badly bruising his leg. The police came and put her in quarantine.

The worker at the daycare center gave me a bill for his Abercrombie and Fitch barrel pants: sixty-five dollars. Cornell sent me a bill for two-hundred and seven dollars. I paid forty dollars for the body builder's shorts.

Dell has not been in a public place since the daycare event. She seems much more relaxed. Leo taught her shake and catch. Dell respects him, he is third in command after her, followed by Connor, and Gable. Each child endures Dell, they do not seem to love her. And who can blame them? Their living room is a swamp where a crouching crocodile waits for bait, skinny skipping limbs, quick clench of pants and skin. They do not understand their place in the pack, or the fact that she would protect and fetch, warn us of approaching danger.

Dell has a new pack with a patch that warns, Do not pet me, I'm working. But I have not been hiking or stood in a crowd or wandered around Walmart. Isolation is good sometimes, a detachment from influence. I crave the nuance of stillness and a sleeping dog. We go for walks, away from neighbors and their tethered dogs. Dell flings herself like a warrior at my legs. Throaty talk, a threat of rip, instead she nips, Border collie bravery. Sprung for movement, she is a proving ground of guarded space, end of tether, a forced range upon the rural plain.

Grass glistens with diamond ice droppings. Dell's back shimmers, waves of sun, like rippling liquid black light. I came upon some water overflow from the reservoir. It fell gently down a wide concrete slide coursing through pebbles below. I could cross easily, but not without fear. What if the vast deep body of water rushed the bank? A pounding wall of water where we clung and grabbed and sank. I projected my fear onto Dell. "Come, don't be scared," I said, and carried the wet dog across the clear bubbles of clean water.

14.

It is day light savings time, Halloween eve. I walk with Dell before dinner as I do every day, Connor and Gable come along. They wear boots. On this day it is dark at five thirty when we arrive at the park. The lamp above the basketball

court goes on and off, a misty glow and then, caliginous gray. Spooks, I say, and we play.

It was tag all along, the missing function. Connor showed me, how we run, touch, reverse, chase. The dog's game, Dell's job; to chase and herd us into laughter, a sudden rapture of connection.