

## **PATIENT PAL WHEN HER LIVE-IN COMPANION BARKS, IT'S ONLY TO WELCOME HER HOME**

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Herbert and I celebrated our one-month anniversary last week. It's the longest I've spent with anyone since I left home 16 years ago-which makes it some kind of milestone, though I'm not sure what.

Herbert is my dog.

The day before I went to the shelter, I admitted to the owner of my neighborhood pet store that I was clueless about how to pick a dog.

"Dogs are like guys," he said.

"If I'd been any good at picking guys, I wouldn't have to get a dog!" I snapped.

In the not-so-deep recesses of my heart, I believe this. I'm in my early 30s. My life has not turned out the way I thought it would.

I grew up with two ideas, both based largely on Mary Tyler Moore's TV personas, about how my adult years would be spent. In both scenarios I'm thin and pert and pretty. In both I wear smart, snappy clothes.

In my MTM fantasy, my life unfolds effortlessly: beautiful home, loving family and just enough glamor to gratify my ego.

In my other fantasy-working title "You Might Just Make It After All"-no man is ever good enough for me, but it doesn't matter because there are so many of them around I get to do most of the rejecting. I have a glamorous career and a lot of wacky friends conveniently located at the office and in my apartment building.

For some reason I haven't come close to either pipedream, but I think I know at least part of the reason.

For many of us women who came of age in the '70s, to seek a relationship and family was a sign of weakness. Look for love from another person? That's needy; that's desperate.

We were encouraged to be our own best friend. If we were missing some inner something, it was our own fault. True fulfillment would come from a career outside the home. I call this the Super(single)woman Syndrome because just as it's not feasible for one person to run a home, raise kids and maintain a successful career by herself, it's tough for any one human being to give herself all the companionship and support it takes to muddle through a lifetime.

So for me, getting Herbert means admitting I'm not Super(single)woman. I cannot fulfill my every need. I get lonely.

As Herbert and I begin to experience the landmarks in our life together-his first bath, his first cab ride-I realize that living with Herbert is about something else too.

Cynthia Heimel once described Manhattan as the destination of misfits who want to reinvent themselves, and wrote that New Yorkers wear a protective layer of Teflon that allows them to slide off one another, never connecting or getting hurt.

It's not just New York. We who have moved from small towns to other American cities may not have been driven or cool enough to take Manhattan, but something made us go where we might shed the skins that never had fit while keeping the Teflon firmly in place.

Which is why getting Herbert was no small step. I've invited him beneath the Teflon, 24 hours a day. And sometimes it gets ugly.

"Nothing's ever anywhere it's supposed to be in this apartment!" I wail. Herbert follows me around as I try to remember in what novel spot I could have put my keys/wallet/sunglasses/mail/shoes. To my astonishment he never seems bothered. He offers his shoulder when I need it too.

Don't get me wrong: I know he's only a dog. But I still think it's no small thing to learn that a companion won't reject you if you let him see you at your most wretched. It makes you think you might be acceptable after all.

I'm aware that MTM-as-Laura-and-Mary never got a dog; she didn't need to. But you've got to start somewhere. And if dogs are like guys, as my pet shop owner says, then Herbert has given me hope.

And did I mention that he has a really nice veterinarian?

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