

I got a dog last week. My first dog ever, and this never should have happened. For one thing, I dislike dogs. Two, I'm afraid of them. And, three, that fourth week in July was my last chance this summer to make headway on two writing projects—one fiction, one nonfiction, both languishing on my desk for months. My son, Leo, and I were just back from vacation, and my university teaching duties hadn't kicked in yet. I was relaxed, refreshed, and my seven-year-old was signed up for a week of day camp at the Humane Society, which, after drop-off and pick-up, left me with three hours daily alone at my desk. On Day One of my writing week, I paid bills. On Day Two, I organized notes. By Day Three, I was all readiness, so there was no good reason for me to hesitate at the car, turn toward the entrance of the Humane Society and walk into those kennels.

So far, dog ownership has me feeling as shell-shocked as when I moved from New York City to Nebraska and bought my first house, as disoriented as that time I got married. Plus, my right shoulder has started hurting like crazy. It's not as if walking this dog is such a strain—he's not a German shepherd, just a two-year-old Shih-Tzu mix, twelve pounds with his hair cut short.

Regardless, this shoulder ache is intense and making me crabby. Maybe it's from struggling to fit that damn crate into the back seat of the Honda the night we brought the dog home. Maybe it's muscle strain from recoiling every time the dog tries to lick me: muscle cramps caused by psychic tension, my inner self rejecting what my outer self has put in motion. Whatever the reason, I desperately need a massage.

But for that I'd need a baby-sitter.

"You need your head examined," my mother says. She and I are of southern Italian stock—a breed (if you will) of peasants that does not have stamped onto its DNA a weakness for the house pet. In the Calabrian village where my parents were children, families lived in two rooms above the stall that housed the family's donkey, which was used for transportation and farm work. I never heard of those beasts being given names, let alone affection. My nonna kept hens in a coop across the road from her house. I remember watching her slit the neck of a fowl; a few hours later, we all sat down to a platter of grilled chicken. No one winced. We dug in. In short, I grew up believing that if animals were not useful or tasty they were in the same category with mosquitoes and ticks.

So why did I get a dog?

Because.

Which is pretty much the only answer I could offer years ago when my friends asked me, “You’re getting *married*?” One Monday in August 1995, my new boyfriend and I dared to mention marriage; by Friday of that week we were hitched. One Wednesday in late July of this year, I dropped my son off at camp. Several hours later, as the lights were going out at the Humane Society, we left that place with a dog.

And the crate, a five-pound sack of food, a collar and leash, a brush, some toy called a Kong.

Maybe my shoulder is strained from how frequently I’m pulling out my Visa card these days.

The truth is I’d been flirting with “dog” as concept for a while. Leo was, after all, enrolled in an animal-shelter camp; obviously he didn’t sign himself up for that. A few times I’d gone so far as to take him to visit animal shelters, where, gagging from the stench, I’d follow Leo cage to cage and pretend we were looking for our “doggie-to-be.” Really, though, how could there ever, even in a million years, be a link between my home and these hovels where the mangy beasts lay collapsed on old towels?

“Ah, Mom, look!”

“Yes, dear.” My son was born with an affection for animals that I’ve never understood nor approved of, but there’s that devotion thing dog lovers make such a fuss about. Leo is an only child; I am a single mother, having adopted him when he was four months old and I was a couple years divorced. Though our home life is so cozy we both hate leaving the house (we’d rather tuck into the couch with our books), I often wondered if a doggie buddy would make things even cozier for Leo. Hell, I thought, if the devotion thing is true, I wouldn’t mind a little of that for myself.

House Rule #1: No dog will ever set paw on the second floor of our house. When we got the dog home, I gated him into the kitchen. The next morning, walking downstairs, I could not remember his name, which made me feel

lousy since, the night before, as Leo got in bed, his breathy goodnight had been “Mama, is it true or is it a dream?”

If a dream, our new dog was a pretty nice one. I’d expected a nightmare—poop everywhere, the table legs gouged with teeth marks—but the kitchen was in order. Like a timid houseguest, the dog hadn’t even tasted his food. Still, I didn’t trust him. I wanted him and his tiny bladder and his mysterious digestive track out in the yard *pronto*. (“If you find an accident,” the Humane Society’s info sheets scolded, “it is YOUR fault, not the dog’s.”) Skipping my coffee, I rushed him into the backyard and led him by the leash (okay, I yanked a bit) to a rock bed under a pine tree. “Potty,” I commanded, trying to remember if the male does the hind-leg lift or the crouch. At least his name had come to me. “PJ! Potty!” Nothing. He did look up, though, at his name.

The dog had been PJ for only one week, named at the shelter, where he’d arrived as a stray, but I wanted to name him Ruben because his moustache is white on one side and brown on the other, and he has the expressive eyebrows of a Cuban *don juan*. PJ is all soft white fur with a brown splotch cleverly slipping off-center on his back. It was this spot—the size, shape and color of a pumpernickel bagel—that caught my eye at the shelter. His face is shades of brown, except for the white whiskers. Quite fetching. Definitely a Ruben. Maybe Raoul?

“PJ! PJ!” squealed Leo from the deck, then he ran to us.

“Honey, let’s think of a new name for him.”

Leo offered his face up for dog licks. “Not on your *mouth*,” I yelled.

“He’s PJ, Mom. We’re not changing it.”

“Whatever his name is, how do we make him poop out here?”

It was now Day Four of my Writing Week. If I got the dog in for a rabies shot and Leo to camp, I’d still have my afternoon to finish writing two books. We headed to an animal clinic I’d found on a list of vets who offer free first appointments for adopted pets. PJ still hadn’t pooped; the receptionists,

though, almost wet themselves over how c-u-t-e he is. “You’re so photogenic!” they cooed, snapping photos for his medical records. There was an assistant, then the doctor himself; a metal exam table, and my son’s hands all over it, and me hissing, “Don’t touch! Sick *animals* sit on there.”

During the exam, there was much serious silence, interrupted now and then as PJ was showered with self-esteem-building praise: “Good boy! Oh, *good dog!*” (Can dogs be trained to high-five?) The good news was I hadn’t picked a lemon. The bad news: this exam was creeping me out. In a simulation of a pediatric team examining a child, professionals in surgical scrubs were huddled over a tailed and four-legged creature. A week earlier, that dog had been roaming the world, un-neutered, digging out a living who-knows-where. I remembered a homeless guy in New York who used to beg on Midtown sidewalks while hugging his oversize mutt on his lap, their six limbs entwined in a way that never looked quite wholesome to me. PJ kept pawing away the stethoscope. Maybe he was wondering, as I was, Why are these grown-ups in dress-up playing doctor with a dog?

The needle, however, was real because when the shot was finally administered, PJ yelped (“Oh, poor doggie!”), and then I almost yelped when they told me that in three weeks PJ would need a booster shot, and the charge for that would be added to the doctor’s fee for a follow-up visit. And would I like to purchase a six- or twelve-month supply of flea medication? Plus six months’ of heartworm pills, one of which PJ was now spitting out onto the exam table. “That pill’s huge,” I said. “I can’t give him those.”

“Oh,” they scoffed. “You’ll just hold his mouth open like this”—they gripped his little jaw—“and drop the pill down his throat like this.”

We had three weeks before the booster shot to find another vet, and half an hour until day camp. “We’re doing Taco Bell,” I announced.

“Really?” Leo couldn’t believe his good luck: a new dog; and, without even begging, a fast-food drive-through. Normally, I can whip up a homemade lunch quicker than Leo can open a packet of ketchup, but now, with a dog installed in my kitchen, I kept stopping to scrub and sanitize my hands. “You’ll want to keep your dogs’ bowls clean,” the info sheet said. But where? Surely you don’t wash dog bowls in the dishwasher with coffee mugs and your kid’s spoons. I was mulling over these hygiene complications when I glanced up into the rearview mirror and saw PJ sprawled on his back, the

stitches from his recent neutering and his private parts exposed to the world, as Leo vigorously rubbed the dog's shaved belly, which was the mottled pink of raw chicken. "Mom, look, he loves this."

*That is incredibly gross.* "Honey, let's remember at home to keep the dog off the couch, okay?"

"This means he's being submissive and I'm dominant. See, I'm really dominant."

*That's obvious, or I wouldn't be sharing my kitchen with a dog.*

Long ago, the day after I decided to marry, I was having second thoughts. I didn't want out, I tried to explain to my intended as we made plans at his dining table. I just wondered if we should wait, but he gave me a melty look he was particularly good at and I let myself ignore my thoughts. Years later, I recognized that dining-room moment as my last chance to step off the road that eventually led to much heartache. With PJ, too, there'd been a clear moment at the Humane Society when we could have turned back. Our counselor was giving me a cram course in dog care (memory of this woman's valiant efforts call to mind the advisors prepping Sarah Palin for her TV debate with Joe Biden). Listening to instructions on how to feed, train and live with PJ, Leo and I held and petted him. We tossed toys but mostly he just wanted to curl up atop my black sack purse. Clearly, PJ had decided that Leo and I were his ride home, and I was just about to sign papers when our counselor discovered a medical note in PJ's file. "Hmmm," she said, "why's he on antibiotics?" A vet assistant explained that on the day PJ was neutered, some of the surgical instruments hadn't been sterilized and, as a precaution, all the animals operated on that day were put on antibiotics.

My first thought: *Canine infections! In my house, near my child?*

My second thought: *Yeeess! This is my out.*

It would have been easy to leave PJ at the animal shelter, except I knew, as I'd known the week of my wedding, that if I hesitated, my fears would escalate and there'd be no moving forward. And by Thursday afternoon I was glad I'd brought him home. At last at work in my office, with PJ at my feet, I looked

down at him and he cocked his head. I patted my lap, and with one leap PJ was in the hammock of my skirt, curled up as tight as a Times Roman comma, with serifs.

And I continued working, one hand petting PJ's brown spot, feeling my heartbeat slow, just like those wellness pamphlets on blood pressure say it will if you get a pet. *I'm a dog owner. I'm really a dog owner.*

Then I checked my email. A friend had written, "Have you looked into buying pet insurance? Probably you should."

"Eventually he'll poop," a neighbor assures me. "He's been through a lot." Which is true. Tuesday: neutered. Wednesday: adopted by a woman who doesn't like dogs. Thursday: rabies shot. Friday morning, something is wrong. When we come downstairs, PJ is not in a frenzy of excitement as he was yesterday. We put out his food, but he turns away—a houseguest with bad manners. In the afternoon, PJ ambles into my office but won't curl up at my feet like he did yesterday. He won't even sit. "What?" I ask him. "I'm not fun enough?" Perhaps PJ's previous owner was a more exiting writer. Clearly, this dog is disappointed in me already. Pet ownership is turning into another of those experiences—like parenting, teaching, publication, home ownership, Sudoku and Latin dance class—that smacks me right up against my limitations.

There's this part of the writing process no one likes to talk about: you've got too much material, you can't find a through-line to save your life, and you're bored silly with the whole thing. Friday afternoon driving to Leo's day camp, I'm tracing a route of strip malls and traffic that I've driven eighteen times within five days. PJ, who still has not pooped, is in back on a stack of newspapers. Better he messes up my car than my kitchen, but either way, I know I am ruined.

On NPR, some novelist is talking about his characters' convoluted life journeys, the tricky turns in their plot lines that were unexpected (for both character and writer) but that ultimately took the characters exactly where they needed to be. In his elegant African accent, the writer describes these as lives that follow "the drunkard's path." His eloquence makes me heartsick. My own fictional characters aren't moving forward on any path at all and neither am I. My precious writing week has been swallowed by a dog. Driving, I tally up the other disadvantages I've invited into my already complicated life, and,

as PJ and I enter Leo's classroom, my mood is not helped by the posters: ADOPT A FOREVER PET!! Loaded language, especially for a family like ours in which a child has been adopted. "This is my dog," Leo tells his campmates. "We just adopted him."

Driving home, aware of the widening scope of the tragedy I've set in motion, I head toward the home of a dog-enthusiast friend. Maybe her excitement about PJ will re-ignite my own. "Oh my," she says as Leo and PJ leap from the car, and I can tell she really is taken with PJ. Relieved, I smile. *Okay, she's right. He's adorable.*

I walk around the car to join my friend, who, unsmiling, is staring at PJ. "Oh, Anna," she whispers, "he's bleeding."

PJ's long white tail is matted red with blood. His rump is bleeding. I am horrified, terrified.

But mostly I feel completely found out. *I am so busted.* There really is no messing with God. Some powers-that-be have, apparently, discerned my ulterior motive for entering into this *folie a deux* with a dog. Now the truth is being revealed, and in such a graphic way that even I can no longer remain clueless. Over the past six months, my mother's health has declined. She's been falling and can't play as she used to with Leo, who is powerfully attached to his grandmother. I'm dizzy when I think of all he stands to lose, and dizzier still when I look ahead to the care my mother may need. *What is going to be expected of me? What violation of human dignity will we witness? Years ago, I saw my father delirious from anesthesia gone wrong, his mouth forced open for the breathing tube. But I was an adult then; Leo is just a kid. I never admitted to anyone, not even myself, that I chose this summer for PJ's entry into our circle because I hoped he would trump the ugliness of what is probably coming toward us; but, of course, the body will insist on itself. Even a doggie's body. Staring at PJ's bloodied ponytail, I understand that my mother's body will weaken, as will mine. And not even the perkier pet in the pound, not even for Leo's sake, will help us sustain the big pretend that family life really is an endless frolic. There really is no salvation. Not on this earth. Not on this night.*

Unless, of course, I return the dog. *Maybe this is my out.*

But it's seven-thirty, Friday night, too late for the Humane Society or the vet's. Feeling more alone than I have in ages, I drive my little family off into what I will later refer to as the Night of the Bleeding Butt.

YOUR ADOPTED PET! YOUR FOREVER PAL! I am in very deep. Money-wise, every-way-wise. I look into the rearview mirror, and now it's my son who is scaring me. Scooted far away from PJ, Leo won't meet my eyes. I hear myself say, "We'll take care of this." I can't have the kid turn away from something he loves at the first sign of trouble. "We'll get PJ help."

Silence—the unnatural quiet we hear out here in the Midwest before a tornado.

"Honey, are you afraid PJ will have to go back?" I glance into the mirror and see Leo's face crack with relief as he plunges into the tears he's been holding in. "PJ is *not* going back," I say. "He's ours. We'll do whatever we have to do to take care of him."

*Cha-ching, cha-ching.*

I call in the troops: a teenager, Meaghan, who volunteers at an animal hospital; then my neighbor who once had a dog and will not, I hope, be grossed out by the sight of my bleeding pet. Mostly, I call my neighbor as an excuse to open a bottle of wine.

On his right flank, PJ has a raw quarter-size wound. Everyone ventures a guess: He sat on broken glass? Something bit him? Meaghan rinses the blood, cleans him up, does all she can, which is much more than I would have been willing to do. As PJ rests, I hear Leo murmur into the crate, "We'll take care of you, PJ. Whatever it takes."

*Cha-ching.*

My neighbor and I go back to our wine and, trying to pretend I still have a life beyond this dog caper, I ask about her work. A public defender, she tells me a bit about the difficulties of jury selection.

I nod sympathetically. A *jury of one's peers*. So many people will never forgive me if I return that dog to the shelter whence he came.



As dawn follows the dark, so the Night of the Bleeding Butt gives way to the Saturday of Sanity. A few phone calls lead me to a vet whose office is nearby and open. No photo session here, no gushing, but within seconds of looking at PJ, the doctor tells us, “He has an infected anal gland. Want me to flush it out?”

“How long will that take?” I ask, meaning, How much will that cost? “Does he stay overnight?”

“Overnight? This’ll take five minutes.” I like this vet.

Still, I can’t believe I’m getting off so easy. “Are his stitches infected? He keeps licking his stitches.”

“Yeah, he’s going to lick them. He’s a dog,” he says, and I know that, following the drunkard’s path, we’ve managed to find the right vet, and—who knows?—maybe this dog will be right for us, too.

Good as his word, the vet has PJ back in the waiting room within a few minutes but I hardly notice because I’m busy getting an eyeful of a half-shaved cat that has a tube pierced through his skin to drain a wound he got in an alley fight. It is gross. And so interesting I can’t stop staring. “Was it a really bad fight?” I hear myself say, and I catch myself before asking, “Did the other cat end up looking worse?” It seems that PJ has escorted me across a threshold, into the land of the unsqueamish. Who knows what I’ll be capable of doing next?

Back home, within an hour, we hear PJ’s collar tags clicking against his metal bowl: he is eating.

It doesn’t happen on the next walk or even the one after that, but Sunday morning, we take the dog out and I am at last confronted with the ultimate challenge: PJ’s two curls of turd, all mine to pick up. Staring into the grass, breathing hard, I am suddenly returned to a summer when I was ten, in Italy visiting family, and shocked to learn that instead of toilet paper I was expected to use pages from old magazines, which, when soiled, went into a bucket that gathered flies. My mother had to talk me through it. “You see,” she whispered, “why I never wanted to move back to Italy?”

Now it's my son whispering. "You can do it, Mom."

Covering my hand with the blue biodegradable bag a friend gave us, I hesitate, afraid that once I complete this act—show my son that in addition to all the other crap I take care of I can also do this—the deal will be sealed between PJ and me. But that's crazy. I escaped New York, I managed to leave marriage a bit wiser than I was going into it. If this dog and I need to part ways, we will. On the other hand, if I back out now, Leo and I will likely never come this close again to having a dog in our family.

Do we need a dog?

"What's it *feel* like?" Leo asks.

The pile is tiny, soft but not squishy. I'm fast enough that there's not much odor. It comes up clean.

Then I'm walking down Happy Hollow Boulevard swinging a blue bag with a bit of heft to it, praying that no one I know sees me, but also feeling a little citizen-proud. Again, I think of that long-ago summer in Italy, a day in the countryside with a bunch of cousins when one of the littlest kids had a bathroom emergency, and a boy not much older than I was knew how to advise our little cousin on how to use big leaves to wipe himself. I waited on the path, avoiding the cacti, repelled by the whole procedure, grateful it wasn't me behind those olive trees, but also impressed by, and a little envious of, our cousin's know-how. Now, as I walk with dog leash in one hand and blue bag in the other, I'm not sure if I'm moving our immigrant family more deeply into the heart of America or if I'm taking a step backwards in the assimilation process. It does feel good, though, to be in full command of my native peasant ability to get the job done.

"Hey, Leo, wait up."

"No way. That bag *stinks*."

Six months have passed. Leo still is not visible anywhere in the vicinity of PJ's waste, which is no surprise. There have, however, been other surprises. I thought I'd been a sap, falling for the boy-needs-dog cliché; instead, I've tumbled into the most unexpected narrative: Middle-age Woman Saved By

Her Pet, a story in which the protagonist finds what she needs by chasing down something she neither wants nor likes.

It's so easy in middle age to let yourself become a workhorse, to submit to the whip of the list of things that need to get done. PJ refuses to let me do that. A couple times a day—not often; he really is an unfussy companion—he insists I step outside. Once out there, he forces me to wait; and while I wait, I turn my face to the sky. My dog has succeeded where my doctor, with her yearly exhortations, failed: With PJ, I now take long walks daily, and I just bought ugly thermal boots so even snowstorms can't stop us.

During the evening walk, lingering half-a-block behind PJ and me so he can avoid the doo-doo bag, Leo loosens slabs of ice from the sidewalk, holds them aloft like Moses with the tablets, then smashes them on the frozen ground, and it occurs to me that, yes, the rules governing our home life have been rewritten. At night, PJ no longer howls from the kitchen; he's asleep in Leo's bedroom. We bathe our dog in the bathtub, and then he smells really good all stretched out on the couch, warming our feet as Leo and I read. I still refuse to pick the thread of black gunk from PJ's eyes, but Leo likes doing it. So I let him. After all, I never want my son excluded from whatever exotic world stretches out on the far side of a bathroom door, simply because he can't tolerate the primitive conditions.

In his early days with us, PJ met a group of my colleagues, and one woman, someone I respect, said, "Living with another species changes your DNA." And I thought, That is one of the creepiest things I've ever heard.

Then one morning not long afterward, I was trying to hurry PJ along his route of tree trunks, but he tugged hard. He seemed intent on identifying the scent of every animal that had preceded him that morning. It still kind of grossed me out, the dog's need to poke his nose deep into dirt. PJ was so in thrall to the task, his leash quivered in my hand. And that was the moment when the last walls between my pet and me broke down. Sniffing, urgent, PJ reminded me of myself and my writer friends tearing into the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*, checking to see whose book has claimed a few inches of territory, gauging who is Alpha dog this week.

In other words, PJ, *c'est moi*.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that with this dog I've found my life's mate. He is, as our vet pointed out, a dog. PJ throws up often, his upkeep costs money, and he tracks mud into the house, so it's not that my life is any easier—it's just better.