



SUSIE FORRESTER

BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS

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*You touch
the right one and a whole half of the universe
wakes up, a new half.*
— William Stafford, “Choosing a Dog”

HERE'S THE FIRST THING you should know:

When I sit next to my dog, Abbe, right before she falls asleep, and I stroke her fine-boned head, she turns just enough that her nose nuzzles between my wrist and my sleeve. I keep my hand very still on the top of her head as she breathes in my scent and sighs. The whole house goes quiet then, everything in it just breathing: the cat and the couch, the tulips and the vase, the mirror and the broom. All of us under the spell of a dog — a puppy, really — who has known nothing so far in life but canine grace.

That's the first thing you should know.

A MILE FROM MY HOUSE in Bellingham, Washington, there's a Unitarian church with white siding and the requisite signboard out front, with fine, literary sayings posted

on massive sheets of paper. I have a postcard of one of those signs pinned to my bulletin board: “You are constantly invited to be what you are. — Emerson.” For some reason it's a message I need to hear often, this permission to be myself. I've passed by the Unitarian church many times and attended a few secular events there, but I've never gone to a service.

The other day I read a notice in the paper about the annual “blessing of the animals” ceremony this Sunday at the church. And because Abbe is six months old and full of vast enthusiasm for any enterprise that involves new people and dogs, and because I'm still in that eager new-dog-owner phase where I'm delighted for any opportunity to show off my puppy, I decide to take her. On Sunday morning I gather her collar and leash, her treats and poop bags, her water bottle and bowl; I give her a quick brush-down as she turns in tight circles, trying to grab the brush's handle in her mouth. “We have to look nice for church,” I say in that motherly tone I've taken to so easily, too easily, my voice a little hoarse from being elevated to such a high, unfamiliar pitch.

At the last minute I remember my cat, Madrona. Since it would not be a blessing to cart her to church, I quickly print

out my favorite picture of her: resting on my improvised altar, paws tucked beneath her chest, a tiny brass Buddha in the foreground — just Madrona being her prickly bodhisattva self. She often strolls into that room when I'm sitting in meditation, brushes against the curve of my crossed legs until I pet her, then settles down on the altar, assuming her place as a deity to be worshiped. No one has to invite her to be what she is. My cat knows she's bigger than the Buddha, that she could kick Buddha's ass if it came down to it, and I've often entered this room to find that serene little statue knocked on its side, its tiny hands still forming a perfect mudra of peace.

HERE'S ANOTHER THING you should know:

I've had only one other dog in my life, a Great Dane named Sheba. She was tall, of course, with a smooth, brindled coat. I remember her primarily from photographs: Here's Sheba, a puppy still, in the barren backyard of my parents' new home in the nascent suburbs of the San Fernando Valley, circa 1960. Eventually there will be tall eucalyptus trees in the yard, and a swimming pool, and a jungle gym that will start to rust the moment it's assembled, but for now there's just this big, skinny dog, a newly planted lawn, and some saplings lined up by the fence.

I can't yet talk, can't yet walk. In the photos I'm just a blob with big eyes and a spit curl quivering on top of my bulbous head. After my father has drunk his Ovaltine and Tang and gone off to work, it's just me and my mother and my three-year-old brother and this big, lanky dog stuck in a clean, new house, wondering what to do with ourselves.

The dog doesn't wonder too long. She knows her job is to protect us from whatever dangers present themselves. She follows my mother from kitchen to bathroom to bedroom to yard, barks at the sedans cruising up and down our cul-de-sac, cocks her head with suspicion when the phone rings. She nudges the little baby in my mother's arms when it cries.

That baby eventually begins to leave her mother's arms and get down on the floor to crawl, to walk, to run. This puts her at eye level with the dog, who herds her around the green shag carpet and away from the screen door to the patio. Sheba is just the right height for a toddler to pat her on the head with a fist, or walk under the archway of those enormous legs. Eventually the girl will haul herself onto Sheba's back and squeal, "Giddyap!" and the dog will comply, moving slowly, swaying like a camel. When the girl is ill with a fever, she'll recline into Sheba's belly, sweating and licking salt off her upper lip.

When I'm eight years old, my family will go on a long car trip to a place like Carlsbad Caverns or SeaWorld or Sequoia National Park. Sheba is too big to go, so we leave her at a kennel. I remember watching the closed gray doors of that kennel from the back of the station wagon as we pull away.

I remember, too, that Sheba dies while we're gone. I remember driving up to the kennel, the heat rippling up from the black asphalt; I remember waiting in the car as our father strides through those gray doors and stays gone longer than seems necessary. My brothers and I roll down the windows and whine for ice cream; my mother fans herself with a map.

My father finally reappears, sans dog, his face white, his mouth set in a grim line of displeasure. He walks slowly, too slowly, back to the suddenly silent car.

But now I know this whole scene is a figment of memory. My mother tells me it happened at home: Alone in the house with Sheba, who was vomiting bile, my mother wrestled the 130-pound dog into the car by herself, sobbing and telling her it would be all right. She took the dog to the vet, who called later in the day to say Sheba had died from a twisted colon, a common ailment among big breeds. I must have come home from school — where I'd recently been admonished *not* to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" with my classmates because my voice was off-key; where my only solace was quiet reading time; where even the games at recess had become dangerous, the heavy rubber ball bouncing at me with more force than necessary. I must have come home wanting to bend my whole body over Sheba's back and lie there like a rag doll, allowing the memory of school to subside, and instead I saw my mother's red face, her eyes rimmed with smudged mascara. She told me, in the way you tell a child such things, that Sheba had been "put to sleep."

Put to sleep. It's such a kind phrase. After all, I was put to sleep every night of my childhood with kisses and hugs and promises of a good day tomorrow. And every morning Sheba lifted her ponderous head and turned her caramel gaze on me as I woke. For those few moments — before the world rushed in to let me know my place — I existed as nothing more than an object of her adoration, a body to be loved.

LET'S RETURN TO CHURCH, or not even the church yet, but the parking lot, where already there's a certain giddiness in the air: *dogs in church!* For the short ride in the car Abbe has curled herself onto the Navajo blanket and gone to sleep. (She hates car rides and has learned simply to pretend they're not happening, a skill I've come to use in my own life as well.) But as soon as the car stops, she's up and wiggling in the back seat. Have I described her yet? She is a short-haired Havanese, a toy breed, with an apricot coat and a narrow, black-tipped snout. She looks, my vet says, like "a dachshund in a golden-retriever suit," with her short, slightly out-turned legs, her triangular ears that flop over or stick straight up depending on her mood. Her eyes are dark and big and shaped like Spanish almonds.

As I clip on her leash and pull her from the car, I watch out for other dogs — the border collies and huskies and golden retrievers trotting up the sidewalk, pulling at their leashes. Everyone who sees me smiles, even those not tethered to an animal. One woman says, "It's so nice to see who's coming to church today." I'm not sure whether she means me or my dog, but it doesn't really matter — we're one unit for now. Abbe has her nose to the ground, sniffing away. She knows something's up, something that involves dogs and more dogs, and she really couldn't care less about me on the other end of this leash. When we get to the front steps, I pick her up and carry her inside.

I'm shy, and when I arrive at new places, I usually avert my gaze until I know what I'm supposed to do. But with Abbe

in my arms, I don't have to worry; people look at her first. She nudges them with her nose, sniffs deeply, and finds everyone extremely worthy. In the vestibule, church volunteers with name tags exclaim over Abbe, saying how cute she is, what a good dog. All I have to do is agree. Nothing else is required. It's as if I were holding in my arms some small, furry portion of myself, a micro-me who knows exactly who she is and where she belongs. This self radiates *confidence* — a word that means, in its purest form, simply to go with faith.

YOU SHOULD KNOW, TOO, that for a long time, without quite realizing it, I blamed my parents for Sheba's death. For years I kept that erroneous memory of the kennel in my head and, using kid logic, even suspected that they had brought Sheba there to die. I thought they'd grown tired of her; that there had been some kind of *arrangement* made, a notion I'd probably picked up from daytime television programs. It was not a suspicion I ever voiced, or even was aware I carried. My parents were gentle, loving people who would never do such a thing. But all I knew was that we never got another dog. Shortly after Sheba died, we kids were trundled into the doctor's office and given allergy tests that came up positive for canines, cats, horses, ragweed, and dust. We became a household without a dog, the backyard empty save for the pool, the jungle gym, and the now-plush grass that rippled against the eucalyptus.

There must have been other dogs on our street, but I have no memory of them; in my mind, after Sheba died, our block became strangely dogless — as quiet and barren as a scene from *The Twilight Zone*. To fill the void, our parents got us a family of gerbils, one of whom bit the palm of my hand and hung there for several seconds while I screamed. Another ate her babies right in front of me. Then there were the turtles and the hamsters and the goldfish, none of whom lasted long enough for me to form any attachment.

And then there was the duck. Why we had a white duck in our backyard is still a mystery to me, but there he is, swimming in the pool, waddling beneath the walnut tree, bright orange beak clacking open and closed, webbed feet slapping the wet pavement. And always quacking, quacking, quacking, as a duck is wont to do. I kind of loved him. We named him, not very imaginatively, "Daffy the Duck." His feathers were sleek and slightly oily, and he stretched out his neck and flapped his wings like an ungainly hummingbird when he saw me coming. I'd slide open the screen door, and there he'd be, lifting himself out of a metal washbasin, waddling as fast as he could to greet me, the curve of his bill a duck's version of a smile. He was no Sheba, but the quality and consistency of his greeting won me over and made the walk home from school more bearable.

Naturally the neighbors complained: All that quacking! And at 5 A.M.! So one day we hoisted Daffy into the station wagon and brought him to the pond at Reseda Park. I'm sure I cried, because all the way there my father wove tales about how much *fun* Daffy would have with his brethren, how he would make new friends *in no time at all*, how he would fly to

fabulous, exotic places in the wintertime. My mother nodded in agreement, but reached an arm over the front seat to pat me on the head, as if in secret commiseration.

In the back of the station wagon, the duck fluttered and quacked and drew stares from passing motorists. He seemed quite happy, actually, to be on an outing, and kept poking his cool, heavy bill over the seat to say hello to me. When we reached the park, we opened the tailgate, and Daffy jumped out on his own, ruffled his feathers like an old lady straightening her bonnet, and immediately waddled toward the edge of the water, where dozens of nondescript ducks milled about on the shore. We had brought a loaf of Wonder bread and, like innocent park-goers, threw bits of bread to the assembled waterfowl. Our duck poked at the waterline, and we watched carefully to see when he would take off swimming.

Once Daffy seemed happily occupied in his new home, we made our escape, strolling with exaggerated nonchalance to our car. "Don't look back," my father said — that ancient edict. But of course I looked; I couldn't help myself. And there he was, *our* duck, waddling after us as fast as he could, head up high, wings splayed. He didn't look particularly distressed, no sense of *Hey, where are you going?* His bill still looked as though he were smiling.

"He's following us!" I yelled, and I stopped in my tracks. "Just keep walking," my father said, resolutely facing forward. I know now he hated this, that we were probably doing something vaguely illegal, and that leaving an animal behind, no matter how misguided the impulse to keep him had been in the first place, was anathema to him. But he was a father who needed to take care of a complicated situation in full view of his children. And he worked as an engineer, and like all good engineers he had come up with a plan, and we needed to see it through.

I hesitated, stuck between an awkward love for this white-feathered creature and my love for my father, my fervent wish to ease his discomfort, to make everything OK. I was stuck between the imperative to move forward into the future, where a duck in the backyard no longer existed, and my desire to stay a little bit longer in the past, where a duck had feathered that empty yard and made me feel cherished. I was a child, with a child's distorted sense of obligation, so I did both. I took a quick run back in the duck's direction, flapping my arms and shouting, "Shoo, shoo, shoo!" Daffy appeared truly startled. He looked up at me with his bill open, wings frozen in midflap, and I knew he understood that things between us had changed. He sidled down to the pond, his waddle a little slower, and glided onto the skin of the water. I ran to my father, took his hand, and didn't look back.

(end of excerpt)