

DEBBIE EISENBERG MERION

Doggedly Searching

NEVER HAD A DOG AS A CHILD, but I think dogs, as a species, sensed that I needed one. When a strange dog chased me home to our brick-sided duplex in Philadelphia, I ran as fast as I could, slamming the door before he opened his mouth to bite me or lick me or just to snicker; I'll never know his exact intention. I do know my mother wouldn't have welcomed him, because my brother and I made more mess than she could accept: clear plastic covers wrapped our soft flowered sofa and overstuffed chairs.

After that, my quickening pulse, like a Geiger counter, could detect approaching paws on pavement. When I became a parent, my kids' friends had dogs who gave me friendly welcomes with their wild, metronome tails. Not wanting to pass along my fear to my kids and allured by the pets' fur coats, I stroked them tentatively. It felt good. When one night my husband and kids sat up and begged at the dinner table for me to agree to a dog, I rolled their request over in my mind.

The next day I visited the local humane society with a friend who spoke Dog. I saw a quiet young guy with big paws in a corner cage. The sign labeled him as a former stray who was part Golden Retriever, part Shepherd, part everything else. I loved his lean, soft brush of a body, his uneven floppy ears. When I opened the door to put him on a leash and take him out on a getting-to-know-you stroll, he got loose. My Geiger counter was ticking frantically as he crouched, head down, butt up in the air, and stared at me with his big brown eyes, which were surrounded by permanent black eyeliner. I cowered behind my friend. "That means he wants to play," she translated.

We adopted him the next day and he swaggered out to the car to flaunt his escape from the humane society. We led him downstairs into a new cage that was big enough to share with a friend and play cards in. That would be his home when he was alone until he was housetrained. He started remodeling his bachelor pad immediately. I heard loud banging sounds coming from the basement. He was doing a Kung Fu maneuver he must have learned at the humane society and was kicking the door open. The next day I got a stronger cage, and then left him in it while I went grocery shopping. When I got home, he met me at the door panting. His open mouth looked like a smile.

The metal cage was totally intact, the lid still securely fastened. The next day

134

DEBBIE EISENBERG MERION

first. I'd feel safe at night or in the woods with him by my side, as long as he was on a leash and couldn't run off to find a skunk providing free samples of her perfume. Together, we became fit. I'd tell friends, "Chester ran six miles today" and I'd see them eyeing their own dogs, about to ask them accusingly, "why didn't you do that?"

I'll never know where Chester lived before I adopted him, and I don't know if he'll ever stop expressing his anxiety on my carpet. I do know we've created a messy, loving home, together. Like my husband and daughters, he was someone I was searching for and didn't know it. When he sits there on the floor and looks up at me, his exotic eyes alert and unblinking and gargling sounds come from deep in his throat, I listen. I think he's trying to form words, and maybe one day he'll tell me how grateful he is for the cold water always available for him in the toilet bowl, or maybe he'll tell me what's been missing in his life: "Remember that show we were watching yesterday? 'Will you PLEASE make me some boeuf bourguignon?'"

136

I bought a padlock and clicked it on to prevent the lid's clasp from being moved from the inside, but that proved no obstacle. Neither were two padlocks, but when I put six all around he finally stayed in. We considered naming him Houdini, instead we named him Chester and ended up teaching him a trick he didn't know: how to rub his nose against a jingle bell hanging from the door to tell us when he needed to go out and kill another green patch of grass. The bell thing was Pavlovian: he rang and I immediately responded. At least we were communicating, and I was proud that he'd learned to ask to go outside. When we went on walks I'd carry his creations in a warm, blue plastic *New York Times* bag, its end knotted and looped so I could carry it for miles like a little purse.

Still, Chester had a sneaky habit of peeing behind the couch where I couldn't see him. I reconsidered my mother's shower-curtained furniture. A dog expert explained to me that Chester had "separation anxiety" caused by his fear of losing us, as he had his first owners. I think it was repressed anger at the couch itself, that he couldn't just lie there on his back and unburden himself talking about his puppy days with his mother the bitch. The expert said, "Play down your exits," so I learned how to tiptoe out of the house, which I suspect might have been made easier by the fact that Chester was hiding from me, too, so he could hose down my drapes.

When the UPS man in his quasi-military uniform came to the door, Chester would bark trash talk and jump straight up, four feet in the air. I knew Chester was showing how he was there for me, should the delivery man try to bludgeon me to death with a package from Victoria's Secret. With Chester's geisha-style eyeliner and sparse whiskers over his large lips, he resembled a ferocious transvestite bouncing on a pogo stick.

He had the same deep, scary bark for the little paper boy, the blue-haired women pushing babies in strollers, and the dogs who tormented him by parading past our house. I tried to distract him by leaving the TV on the food channel, which he loved. Still, his bark was always louder than the instructions for delicious concoctions that I never found the time to cook, and I noticed people would cross the street before they got to our portion of the sidewalk. But once visitors were inside, Chester never bothered a soul. When our teenage daughter had parties and kids would pile their dirty sneakers at the door, he'd burrow his nose into half a dozen sweaty heels before putting his head on his paws to snooze blissfully within sniffing distance of his new garden of delights.

When the dog expert told me Chester needed more exercise to calm down, Chester became my jogging companion. Finally, I was running with a dog rather than from one. I'd hold onto his leash and let him pull me up hills, wondering why as a child I hadn't figured out there was an advantage to letting the dog go

135

