



The Dog Lovers

The house was always bursting with love—of the face-licking, ear-tousling, “*who’s a good girl?*” variety. What would the two of them do when it was...just the two of them? **SALLY KOSLOW** confronts her empty nest.

OKAY, IT WASN'T THE EIFFEL TOWER in June but a humid August evening in Long Island, and my boyfriend pulled his car into a stranger's driveway. “Why are we stopping here?” I asked. His answer was in a black velvet box. I don't believe he officially asked me to marry him. The ring did the talking.

Robby slipped the rock on my finger, and we drove to his

parents' home, where we were met with Champagne and many relatives. Though I suspect the clan took bets on how quickly a marriage between two unformed kids would be over, no one anticipated that I might decline the ring. A reasonable assumption. Robby had probably told them that I woke every morning and, like a crazy woman whose mother strongly suggested that after >

Heavy petting
can keep a
couple together.

three years her daughter and college boyfriend should have *plans*, turned to his side of the bed and inquired whether this was the day we were getting engaged. This detail is pathetic and absolutely true.

On the drive back to Manhattan, I asked my fiancé if he wanted an engagement gift—a good watch, perhaps. Robby had something else in mind.

That is how Muzzy entered my life. He was a tiny fluff ball who quickly grew to be a large, menacing dog with dreadlocks and a bark so fierce I could hear it the moment I stepped off the subway a block away. In Hungary, home of his ancestors, pulis are prized as sheepherders. The sheep must fall in line because the species' screech is so annoying that the lambs simply throw up their haunches and do whatever Master Puli has in mind.

MUZZY'S ANALYTICAL thinking was acute enough to make a frozen T-bone on top of the refrigerator disappear. He would also pant by the side of whoever in the room hated dogs the most and drip saliva on her shoes, willing her to pet his head—which was easily confused with his rear, since his hair grew over his eyes. As for me, I respected Muzzy. I admired his cunning, yet when I tried to discipline him, he bared his shockingly white teeth, like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. This is not the foundation of a tender relationship.

Muzzy was madly in love with my fiancé, however. The feeling was mutual. Robby wasn't the sort to get up at our wedding—or any other time—and articulate his feelings. He's given to droll sarcasm, and in dark moments I've wondered if he wasn't in on those bets on how short our marriage would be. But there was no doubt that he loved Muzzy. Loved, loved, loved. He expressed his feelings to Muzzy all the time—not just through thoughtful gestures like buying his favorite kibble or taking him for romantic walks in Central Park but by showering him with the heartfelt sentiments I fantasized about being showered with myself. The conversations

may have been one-sided, but man, those two could talk.

Years passed. Children arrived. Muzzy turned out to be a protective pet who guarded our boys as if they were his herd. He freaked out most of the kids' friends, looking as he did like a *Sesame Street* character on a bad acid trip, but—like our marriage—he hung on.

And then he didn't. While I was on a business trip and the children were visiting grandparents, Muzzy suffered a massive stroke. Robby gathered

service in our living room. We were sad. But Robby was inconsolable. When his father died, even though we are Reform Jews, he said Kaddish for 11 months, putting on tefillin in Orthodox shuls throughout Manhattan. Unfortunately, that option was unavailable to him on the loss of Muzzy, nor could he duplicate what my friend Lisa did when her horse died—cut her long hair, as Native American women do. (Which, by the way, instantly made her look middle-aged. I do not recommend this practice.) Instead Robby fell into a gloom more silent than ever. He vowed never to get another dog, never again to open his heart to such wrenching pain.

He got no argument from me. Then in what seemed like a flash, our older son's 13th birthday arrived. During the demonic countdown to the Bar Mitzvah, my husband's sisters asked whether they could buy our boy a pup. To my shock, Robby got onboard—he's never been able to say no to his sisters. I found myself in the position of being the Witch Depriving Her Son of a Dog. I felt betrayed, but somewhere between the cantor and the caterer, I consented.

Our son named his puppy Blondie. Since that was what Hitler called his dog, I suggested he pick another name, and Blondie morphed into Maggie. When we called her at the park, 20 other Maggies came running, but no matter; she was, I had to admit, adorable. Despite papers proclaiming her pedigree, she was far from a perfect cocker spaniel. Maggie's nose grew pointy like a golden retriever's; her legs were too stubby and tail not stubby enough; her coat, far from luxurious. Maggie's ears, however, were glorious—long, blonde, and curly. If you looked at her in the right light, she had all the glamour of Kim Basinger.

I cannot quite explain the magic of how a dog worms her way into your heart, because sometimes it doesn't happen. It never happened to Muzzy and me, despite the fact that we shared a bed for 14 years. Lick by lick, walk by walk, Maggie enchanted CONTINUED ON PAGE 148

The author and her husband, Robby, with Muzzy in 1974.



Dog owners say all the things to their pets that they can't say to each other.

him in a blanket and rushed to the Animal Medical Center.

"What do you think is wrong?" the attendant asked.

"I think my dog might have died," my husband answered. If you ever want to get immediate medical attention, my friends, show up with a dead body. Muzzy disappeared, from the waiting room and from our lives.

All that was left was the mourning. With the boys, we staged a memorial

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 144 every member of the family. She was off the charts in emotional intelligence, a four-legged people magnet. In *Lady and the Tramp* fashion, she took adults back to their childhood and was the storybook dog little children wanted to pet. At obedience school, Maggie was deemed a "pet quality" dog—which is how your student gets gently categorized when she can't get the hang of even one command.

Maggie wasn't a jock and never wanted to chase a ball. Instead she was an eater and a cuddler. She hung with the boys as they did their homework or watched *The Simpsons*, dozed by my side each evening as I plowed through manuscripts for work, and slept between my husband and me on chilly nights. Perhaps because she was such a girlie dog, the four of us talked to her constantly, in that over-the-top way that makes non-pet-owners want to barf.

It's demented how much time dog owners log talking to and discussing their Barneys and Maggies. "You're beautiful, you know that? You're so-o-o pretty!" "Wasn't it cute the way she ate that treat?" "Who wants a nice, big kiss?"

Dog owners say all the things to their pets that they can't—and sometimes wish they could—say to each other. I'm not sure whether this goes on with cat owners, never having been one; from what I know of cats, I suspect their owners might worry that the cats would make fun of them if they acted like fools. But dog owners lay it on thick, and dogs soak it up. Our dogs become a magic mirror that shows our best selves—our kindness, our compassion, our softness.

This becomes even more apparent as dogs age. One day you notice your dog has become a bit arthritic. The next year, she can't jump on the bed. Six months later, you realize you could set off a firecracker by her butt and she wouldn't blink. And when you turn around, you find your kitchen shelf so crowded with canine meds you can't find your vitamins.

The dog becomes, to the world, not so cute. But to an owner, a beloved animal is always adorable. You look at your Maggie and wonder whether you will be able to be as kind to your partner as you are to her when he is old and not so cute. You worry about what he's going to think about you, too, but you're glad to know

he's the kind of guy who will bury a pill in peanut butter.

Last week Robby and I had to make the big decision about Maggie. Her medical problems compounded, and we each privately began to wonder if the humane choice wouldn't be to end her life. I didn't want to keep her alive just to postpone the pain of losing her. This was the hardest decision I have ever had to make, and I think Robby felt the same way.

With the Bar Mitzvah boy—now a law student—at our side, the vet tranquilized Maggie. The drip for the lethal injection was covered with a pink bandage. Maggie looked as darling as ever.

The three of us gathered round her, hugging her, as the vet did her thing. Maggie looked peaceful at the end. As we walked out of the vet's office into the bright Manhattan sun, I turned to Robby and said that when it's time for me to go, I'd like him to take me to the Westside Veterinary Center.

I'M SURE YOU'VE HEARD THE joke about when life begins: Ask a priest and he tells you life begins when the sperm fertilizes the egg. The protestant minister says life begins when the baby is born. The rabbi: Life begins when the kids graduate from college and the dog dies.

Since before we were married, Robby and I have always lived with a dog or children, often both. When other women grew depressed about the empty nest, I couldn't relate. My nest has never been empty.

Now the dog has died. Robby and I want to try life with just the two of us and taste this freedom we hear about. We will have to say all the things to each other that in the past we have channeled through our dogs, who have returned our affection with unconditional love. With a pet, you lay your emotions bare because you risk nothing—no possibility of rejection or indifference that makes you hold back in other relationships.

With another person, you have to work for your love. Having been trained now by two dogs, I am willing to give it a try. My nest is emptier, but my heart is full. ●

Sally Koslow's first novel, Little Pink Slips, will be published next year.