

MISTRESS OF DOGS

By: Herbert Foster Kaufman

DECEMBER 2000

The fear generated by our silent circle was hot and thick in the bright Los Angeles sun. Even the sounds of the nearby freeway seemed to die down as a little black sneaker tapped impatiently at our cowardice. Six couples, comprised of Owner and dog, encircling a single dark figure on the flat concrete parking lot behind the kennel. Six couples struggling to survive the final moments of Sunday's dysfunctional dog training class.

"Well, come on. Any questions?" demanded Elsa, the only dogless member. Our alpha female.

During the end of every class, after an hour of walking our dogs back and forth while Elsa barked commands at us, she would sit us down and ask for questions. She only answered one question per class because after answering one question no one else dared ask another. It took a full week for someone to forget, but someone always did and she always got her one question.

Elsa was a wonderful dog trainer. Every dog loved her. Even the seriously disturbed dogs, like mine. She greeted every dog with a big smile and a lively Hello and they instantly felt love. She greeted every human with a frown and defensive stance. Elsa had an impressive defensive stance. She was 5'4", lean, hard muscled in a black t-shirt, black stretch tights, which disappeared into bunched-up black socks and puffy black sneakers. She had long blonde hair tied back and pushed through a black baseball cap. She wore small black sunglasses. Her thighs were seriously defined and obviously powerful. It always looked

as if she had just come from an underground gym or a bicycle race, but just when you got comfortable with this stereotype, she would light-up a cigarette and shoot the whole assumption to Hell.

Of all the disturbing things she did, and there were many, nothing caused me so much confusion as that cigarette. Not even when she would take my dog from me and produce the exact behavior we had just failed to pull off. This trick was her mainstay. If she wanted your dog to walk, sit, stay, lay flat on the ground, your dog did it. Jumpy dogs stopped jumping. Barking dogs stopped barking. Panicky dogs stopped freaking.

She never failed to shut up an Owner this way. As soon as one of us would object to being yelled at, or responded with, "But I did do that." She would take away your leash and show you that your dog loved a stranger so much more than you. Then she would return the leash and explain to everyone in the class that the problem was not with the dog, but with the Owner. She was ruthless, but calm and steady. You could always hear in her voice that she was carefully restraining her urge to kill you.

She succeeded with even the most fucked-up dogs, and we all had seriously fucked-up dogs. Dogs whose very behavior was endangering their ownership and most likely their lives. Which is why we were paying so much to Elsa.

My dog, Bash was seriously fucked-up. After I chose her, the people at the animal shelter told me that her previous owner was sent away to jail. What anyone could tell you was that this Previous Owner

had beat her because that was the look she gave every human who came near her, like you were just about to hit her. When I brought her home she went directly to the bathtub and got in, sitting with her feet close together, tail wrapped around the whole package. She refused to leave it, not for a biscuit, not for a walk, nothing. After a week of literally having to drag her out of the house for walks, I called Elsa.

She immediately refused to help me, said it was impossible, she had a class starting in a week but it was already full, she couldn't possibly add another person. Then she asked me to describe my dog's problem. I did.

"There are seven classes, one every Sunday at twelve. You got that? Seven classes. You have to show up for ALL of them. Your dog needs all seven classes. Is that clear?"

NOVEMBER 2000

"I love you," Ramona said.

I heard myself say it back and I meant it. I had not wanted to say it, but there it was, blindly torn from me and laid across 3,000 miles of phone cord.

If anyone had asked me that day if I loved her, I would have answered No. Not lying, I really did believe I was over her, done with

her, but when she said it and I said it, I knew it was true and that some part of me had suspected as much.

Stated or denied, the pain would be the same.

Ramona was my panic phone call, my 4 a.m. friend. When the situation became unbearable it was Ramona I called, the same went for her.

We had both survived so many panics, so many narrow escapes, that I associated her with survival, with confidence. We shared some of the funniest and dearest moments of my life, yet always at a distance, East coast to West coast. A face to face visit last Summer had changed everything.

We had a two week relationship six years ago, a muted relationship where the best feature was the talking which is no doubt why it survived the long distance, but we had not had sex since then, not even during my recent visit. Six years as Ramona's confidant had shown me how thoroughly cruel she was to her lovers. Tossing them off for strange and sudden reasons. She was still very much in demand. Ramona was beautiful, tall, blonde, thin, big teeth, but what she did best was create a home. When I asked her why her boyfriends were always so eager to move in, she sent me pictures. The house looked pretty ordinary, very little pattern to her decorating. Once I visited I realized it was designed to change based upon need, a far more complex pattern. Her house was pleasant to eat in, sleep in, to work quietly in, to stay in. Every room was always warm, well lit, full of nice scents. Every delivery driver knew her and wonderful food was constantly arriving. She had a

spare king-sized bed, spare robes, even spare fuzzy slippers, still in the plastic. There was always music playing in one room or another from the start of the day until its end.

It was the first thing I noticed when I left North Carolina, silence. It was a powerful house. And Ramona was full of compassion and a deep respect for life, but she ended everything violently, by moving out suddenly, by getting transferred to another city, once she dumped a guy at the airport because at the ticket counter she realized it was over. She bought two different tickets and explained it to him while waiting for his flight.

I was in deep trouble. She wanted nothing to do with her last boy friend. There was no new boyfriend, only a cat constantly tearing at the drapes. After three weeks of phone calls buried in love and need, she came to the conclusion that she must move to LA and live with me and have sex with me and we would finally be happy. Finally happy.

Even just a year would be exquisite.

But if this all blew up in typical Ramona fashion then I would be left with a horrible new loneliness. On the other side of the ring stood horrible new regret. Desire stood in the center, hands already raised in victory.

That day I was watching The Monkeys on TV and they were singing "I'm gonna buy me a dog, 'cause I need a friend now." And I saw in a flash that she was trying to pass her loneliness off on me, the silence

and scratching cat, and that my only defense was to buy a dog. Since I was stoned at the time, I laughed and paid the idea no mind.

The phone calls became more frequent, more I-Love-You's were being said, plans were edging into reality, plane tickets, closet space, sex toys. We'd even discussed the perfect morning: soft morning sun warming the bedroom, roll over and put on some music, hot coffee, scrambled eggs with refried beans and warm tortillas, and time, endless time to talk and enjoy ourselves.

But the reality was maddening. I was 80% sure she would bail on me, either just before or just after she got to LA. I could taste it in the back of my throat, but I couldn't prove it, couldn't be 100% sure.

I refused to blow my chance. It had to be a real try, not a fake try, but the real thing, faith, belief, trust, the whole package.

Forever? Once I hit that word my mind refused to let it go. Especially on the burnt days, the days after an evil deadline, the days full of leftover stress and the faint fear of no new assignment. Copy writing had filled my bank account, but the weird hours were draining my stability. The only jobs my boss would give me were those which were already overdue, making planning and relaxing almost impossible. I was desperate for hope and Ramona was providing it.

I did not have a large store of good deeds built up. I was not due for an upswing of any kind. I had bailed on my debts, landed a job I didn't deserve, was getting paid more than I had ever earned before, and now my long lost love was returning. I was in trouble. Things

never went this well, and it looked more like my long lost love was returning to destroy what I wasn't supposed to have in the first place.

Forever?

I needed a dog. Right now. By noon I was filling out paperwork at the animal shelter.

DECEMBER 2000

The young gay man took the bait. He was normally very self-assured and a little too neat, but now he was almost stammering.

"There's this spot under a low table that Petey goes under and I just wish he wouldn't. Its very hard to get to him and I can't see him under there." Petey was a frighteningly hyper Jack Russell Terrier.

"What happens when you yank him out?" Elsa asked.

"Well, usually I try to bribe him out. The spot is very hard to reach into and dragging him out is such a traumatic experience."

She took a step back so she was at the top of the circle addressing the whole class. She took a hard drag on her cigarette and started speaking before she had blown all the smoke out so her first words came out like dragon's breath.

"What have I been saying? What? If you had a baby and it crawled under a table you wouldn't wait and bribe and worry, you'd

yank it out of there, right away, every time. Or simply make it impossible to get under the table. I imagine this is not an acceptable alternative."

"No, definitely not, it would ruin the table to put a box under it."

"Then get down on the floor, have your traumatic event, drag him out, every time, right away. Its not like you'll be doing this forever. Petey is smart, very soon he will not want to go under the table. Do you understand what you have to do? Every time, right away. Drag him out. You don't need to have a talk with him, or yell, or use the leash. Just yank Petey out and put up with the trauma."

She ended her speech with her fists on her tiny hips, feet shoulder width. Her hands made good solid fists, like they were used to it. Probably from gripping leashes. Probably from clenching into tight little balls at night as she slept too.

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All you have to do is read someone's journal to realize that certain moments take up a disproportionately large amount of space in terms of ink and time. Ramona and I had shared too many of these moments.

Those few days in North Carolina had been incredible, but since the days before and after had been incredible they did not stand out for

me. She said they were the only incredible days she'd had in a long while, proving it was more.

I think the real glue was we both regularly reached a state of despair where we needed to speak to someone who had been there for the previous despairs, not nostalgic, simply a certain flavor of compassion, of confirmation. Yet it was not a healthy urge, not a good fuel to feed to love.

DECEMBER 2000

I asked the first question at the very first Question and Answer Period. I feel I was particularly traumatized because at the time we had no idea that she would in turn make each of us dance in pain.

Worst of all, cruel or kind, she was wildly attractive, somehow reminiscent of a female storm trooper, but in a good way. Powerful and tireless.

I asked her how to address the situation of my dog hearing a noise and climbing into the bath tub, and the shaking fits.

"What's your dog's bed look like?" She asked.

"My dog's bed?"

"Your dog's bed."

"My dog doesn't have a bed."

"Where does your dog sleep?"

I could already feel myself sinking.

"My dog sleeps with me," I said.

"In your bed?"

"On my bed."

She took a step back to the top of the circle.

"Now I know some people find this very therapeutic and loving and whatever. If your dog doesn't have a behavior problem then fine. Fine. But your dog does have a behavior problem and she can't sleep with you. Its giving the wrong signal right now. She needs discipline to feel more secure. Coddling only solves half the problem.

"Get a dog carrier, one with a door that locks. You understand that? It has to be able to lock and keep her in. Get one today, tomorrow at the latest, you need one of these badly. I can't believe your dog was sleeping in the bathtub. That's terrible. A dog doesn't need a canopy, but a corner with a rug, someplace she can back her ass into."

I had not said anything about her sleeping in the bathtub. I stared at her like the idiot I was. All the other couples stared at us. It was hard to read the humans, but the dogs clearly hated me. I had angered their Queen.

"Some people feel safe in their cars, on their porch, but dogs want to be as close to the ground as possible with their ass protected. A bath

tub. My God. Make sure you put the carrier in a corner, preferably one from which she can see you, wherever you spend the most time. Throw a blanket or two in it. You're not opposed to that, are you? Giving her her own blanket? And don't just cut up a card board box. Get a Dog Carrier, the kind they require you to have if you take your pet on a plane. One of those. Ask the clerk at a pet store. They're like \$70."

"I'll get her the box today, get it in a corner, a low corner, get her blankets. Sure."

My God, I thought, what if I hadn't been able to buy it today?

"You do that and you'll never see her in that bath tub again."

She was, of course, dead right.

NOVEMBER 2000

The first dog I chose looked like a Drug Dealer Special: a huge, 100 lb. black pit bull. Her name was Mamoo and like all the female pits I'd met before overly friendly, goofy and very lovable. Although Mamoo looked the part she could never make a drug dealer really happy since she would never attack on command, only in defense. The males were the great attack dogs. Fearless fighters. Mamoo would have to be defending a pup before she brought her weight to bear, but she was the perfect dog for me.

The animal shelter manager refused. She said Mamoo had to have a backyard and all I had was a big apartment. It had never occurred to me to lie on the adoption form. She led me away from the Large Dog Cage to the Medium Dog Cage. Twenty medium dogs threw themselves against the chain link fence facing us, all of them barking, jumping, excited and desperate for attention. One dog remained in the back, looking at us only in brief sideways glances. She was mostly red with black and brown details, part red pit, part grey hound, square head, pit snout, skinny legs and ass, 30 lbs. at most. It was a bit of an impulse buy. My dog, Bash, short for Bashful.

At this point I was still unaware that my dog was a retard.

I began to write the check. They told me I would have to wait a week before I could actually bring the dog home. I almost freaked. A week! I could have gotten a handgun faster, a thought which distressed me on many levels. I was just barely able to realize that these were not the people I should freak on. They had too much power, they had my dog. I chilled. In a week their power would be gone. It was hard to leave there quietly.

I'd just gotten the phone call that morning, the one from Ramona telling me she wasn't coming to LA. She was staying in North Carolina and marrying her last boyfriend, Werner. The news she was leaving the state for me helped bring a proposal out of him.

Ramona was timid when she presented the news, but she avoided apologizing and even suggested that I should be happy for her.

It was a good thing she was out of physical reach so I couldn't break all of her bones and go to jail. I was yelling, she was scared, it was as bad as my worst expectations. It all hit like a falling building and I could hardly move.

I knew we'd wrecked it good and proper the first time through, I just couldn't be sure about, Never. Now I was sure and it stung, sinking in deep and heavy like a hundred failures.

DECEMBER 2000

Another disadvantage to having been the target at Question and Answer Period was that she continually made reference to your humiliating episode. For instance, any mention of bedding got the comment, "Well, at least it's better than a bathtub." Any objection for a lack of discipline got, "You can't just leave the dog under a table." By week seven she had a whole string of insults to mutter. No one was left out, every one got a chance to be the idiot. 6 students, 6 idiots.

Did I mention that the dogs got vastly better? She sculpted us in her image and the dogs loved it. They became calmer, attentive, happier.

"The hardest part of my job is trying to switch your perspective from, 'Why is my dog getting into my groceries?' to 'Why did I put the

groceries where my dog can reach them?' People don't like to make that shift. It moves them from the center of the Universe.

"If your dog cannot stand to be left alone for twelve hours at a time, don't leave your dog alone for twelve hours at a time. Get some sleep for God sake. The dog won't care if you sleep during your time. What's more comforting than your Alpha soundly asleep? Alter your work environment to accept the dog without effecting your co-workers. Of course your dog is going nuts. She's lonely."

No one interrupted Elsa. She spoke evenly, without hurrying, clearly aware that while she was speaking no other words were worthy enough to fill the air.

It was so easy to envision her defending her mate.

JANUARY 2001

After seven weeks of class and eight weeks of Ramona-pain, I was going to be saying good-bye to Elsa. We had never even had a human conversation, yet there I was asking her out and bracing myself for the venom.

She simply said, "No," then waited, frowning hard, to see if I would persist. When I didn't, she left, drawing out the silence in a strange, disconcerting manner. Yet as the quiet continued I could feel my attraction for her dying away and it wasn't so awful. It was still

embarrassing, but without my trust, she couldn't do much damage. It even lessened the Ramona-pain. The despair which said, "There are no more chances. Only failure."

Only half right now.

Plenty of Dog Nazis in the sea.

I pulled my dog over to me. I hugged her.

"You're my safety net, Bash."

She looked at me very seriously, edging closer, her soft brown eyes big and deep, we were almost nose to nose.

"All the extra love and attention, the fact that you're the only smart move I made all year, the fact that—"

Bash sneezed directly into my face. Right squarely into my face.