

GYPSY DOG

2007

Perhaps it's best that I say up front that I have never been a big animal lover, and I get bored by long conversations about pets. I have never been an animal rights activist. I have never given money to the ASPCA or the Humane Society because I generally prefer people to animals. When I donate time or money to a charitable cause, it is usually to reduce the suffering of humans, especially children; in fact, I spent many years working with an organization dedicated to saving children from poverty and abuse. I respected those who worked on behalf of hurt or abused animals, and I wished them well; it's just that they didn't interest me.

In fact, I'd always been afraid of most animals. They are too unpredictable for my quick-trigger startle reflex. Cats make me nervous, the way they can lunge and scratch with no warning, and though many dogs are wonderful, you never can be sure. I really really, really disliked the savage squirrels outside my kitchen, because they gnawed through the plastic of the garbage cans and the wood in our soffits,

trying to get into our house. I was sure they could get into my bedroom at night if they really wanted to. I am quite afraid of mice, because even though I know they are harmless and scared little creatures, they remind me of you-know-what. And I have a serious you-know-what phobia, and it is so bad I'd rather not discuss it.

I'd been fortunate to have a wonderful dog in my childhood, a Doberman named Charade. Everyone thinks their childhood dog was wonderful, and maybe they all were, but Charade was exceptional because she was so smart that she could read your mind and telepath back to you. My parents made arrangements—through channels I couldn't fathom—to breed her to another pedigree-perfect Doberman named Postmaster General, who was a virile-looking guy, according to his photo, standing in the AKA power pose with the choke collar high on his neck. The process fascinated my on-the-brink-of-adolescence mind—here they were packing up our dog and driving her four hours to Baltimore to have sex with another dog. This odd manipulation of nature seemed to me both absurd and thrilling, as well as a bit embarrassing. Whatever happened down in Baltimore was successful, because Charade's belly grew and grew. She had thirteen puppies in a whelping box my father built in our basement—one of the brightest moments of my childhood. We kept one of her pups, a red Doberman named Cognac.

I loved those puppies, but it wouldn't be accurate to say I was a dog lover simply because I loved *our* dogs. You wouldn't say that people "love children" if they love their own and have little concern for other people's children. And I had good reason to be afraid of dogs: twice in my childhood I was bitten. The first time I was quite young and taking horseback riding lessons at the county park. When I walked into the office at the stable to deliver an envelope with my tuition fee, I was greeted by a German shepherd that sank his teeth into my thigh. The second time was far worse. I was thirteen years old, in my Catholic-school plaid skirt and knee socks, delivering newspapers after school. At one particular house on my route whenever I came to

the door to collect, one family member paid me while another used great strength to hold back a dog, who barked and foamed and snarled and nearly choked himself trying to break free so he could kill me.

One day I walked around the back of the house to deliver the paper to its appointed spot and found the dog off-leash waiting for me. The dog and I looked at each other for a moment, and time stood still. We both knew full well what was going to happen.

I turned and ran for my life, and he was right behind me. It was winter, with ice and snow on the ground. I made it as far as the front yard, but then slipped on the snow and fell face down. He sank his teeth deep into my calf and mangled it badly before his owners pulled him off. In the hospital, when I dared to look at what lay beneath the sheet, I saw inside parts of the leg hanging outside where they weren't supposed to be. (I recovered fully, with only a couple of mild, permanent dents.)

But, anyway, didn't this fear of unknown animals, whether wild or domestic, make perfect sense? Aren't we *supposed* to be afraid of them? Aren't we *supposed* to keep our distance?

For many years I wrote about food and cooking. Animals for the most part meant meat, milk, cheese, eggs, fish. I believed they should be treated humanely, but they were food, nonetheless. I marveled over artisan prosciutto that my friend Lou made in his garage, and rhapsodized over perfectly braised meat. I spent years hunting down and perfecting a family recipe that contained both pork and beef. I believed, and still do, that the capture, cooking, and eating of animals was fundamental to the rise of human civilization. I was more sympathetic to Indians wanting to kill a whale to continue their tradition than to the whale. Traditions were important when they served people and bonded them to one another. I suppose we all have a circle of concern, and only so much could fit into mine.

Then I met an animal rescuer named Elizabeth. Of course, I didn't know this about her at first. I was selling an old appliance—a vintage 1920s

stove, to be precise—and I'd taken out an ad. Elizabeth was the only person to answer it, which tells you something about both her and me.

One winter day, she showed up at my door to have a look at the stove. She was well into middle age, dressed in an unremarkable parka and snow boots. She had a big head of curly hair and piercingly serious eyes. In this simple transaction, when most people say as little as possible, Elizabeth communicated quite a bit. I learned that her husband had recently left her for a younger woman, that she'd lost a magnificent home and a career as a music agent, that she'd survived illnesses and at least one near-death experience after being hit by a truck while walking on a road in Ireland. Well, at least she still had the cottage in Ireland. Anyway, back to the old stove . . . she'd recently returned to New Jersey and was starting all over, a new life, a new little house not far from mine. She'd left everything behind and was buying furniture second-hand. She thought the stove would be perfect. She loved cast-off and vintage things that no one wanted. I got the feeling that this dark, edgy performance was not intended to entertain me, but to entertain herself, and I couldn't help but like that. She took the stove and we exchanged an email or two and eventually met for coffee.

Early on, Elizabeth told me she had a special dog that my boys (then five and ten years old) should meet. I said sure, and we put it on the calendar.

When the day arrived and the doorbell rang, we found her standing on the step with Daisy. We were a bit stunned. We'd never seen anything like this animal before. It was unclear that she was even a dog. She was tall and thin and wearing a sweater, and for a confused moment I thought "racehorse," imagining it was a saddle blanket on her back. Elizabeth stepped forward, leash in hand, and put the matter to rest. "Daisy is a greyhound," she announced, and from the exalted tone in her voice we were to understand that "greyhound" meant something better than a mere dog. Elizabeth then pulled a big cushion from her satchel and tossed it onto our living room floor, and

Daisy, on cue, cantered over to the soft spot then, bone by bone, lowered herself into a lying position with her long front legs outstretched and her rear knees hitched up high. She looked like an Egyptian sphinx. Elizabeth explained that she had found Daisy many years earlier, on a street in Ballycotton, Ireland, pregnant, with her head in a garbage can looking for food. We didn't know that she was dying.

My sons approached cautiously, and Daisy gently bowed her head to accept their petting. It didn't take long for her to fall over on her side and thoroughly surrender. She was a gentle, sweet creature and our friendship was immediate.

"The greyhound is the fastest dog on earth, and the second fastest mammal," said Elizabeth. "Only the cheetah is faster." My sons stared at Daisy, incredulous. They could not understand how such a still creature could possibly be a superhero.

This was the beginning of my greyhound education, and Elizabeth continued in a slow, calm voice, like Scheherazade settling into a long, wonderful story. Indeed, that's what it was, because thousands of years of breeding and history were writ upon Daisy's aerodynamic body—the powerful legs and deep chest that arced up to the sculpted narrow waist, the head, feet, and pointy snout all slender and narrow, to suit the single purpose of speed—and to use that speed to hunt.

After Elizabeth lost her beloved Daisy, I didn't see her for a long while. A year or so later, she showed up again at my house with a new dog. He, too, was a greyhound—kind of: wider and sturdier, his back thicker, his face less pointy. As he flew around our backyard tearing up the lawn, she explained that he was a lurcher, which meant a kind of mixed-breed sight hound made up of a greyhound plus something else. Lurchers were a specialty of the Irish gypsies.

"Irish gypsies?"

"Yes, but they don't like to be called that—and you shouldn't call them tinkers either. Today, they prefer 'Travellers.' They're not the same as the Romany gypsies of Europe. They've been in Ireland forever.

Some still live in camps and move around the country. They used to live in painted wagons drawn by horses, but now they've got campers."

Each time Elizabeth came back from her annual visit to Ireland she brought back lurchers, because they needed homes and no one there wanted them. It seemed utterly ludicrous to me that anyone would be flying dogs from Ireland to the U.S., as there were millions of abandoned dogs here. I said nothing, though, as it meant so much to her and I didn't want to offend. Elizabeth put me on her list of potential lurcher adopters. Before or after each trip, I received an email advertising the most recent Irish lurcher needing a home.

"We're not ready for a dog."

She ignored my words and kept sending emails.

And I kept deleting them.



ULTIMATELY, I got a dog for one reason and one reason only: my older son needed one. I delayed—first with a tank of fish and then with a couple of gerbils, as silly parents often do. Some time later, when the pressure was closing in, a big, thick dog encyclopedia found its way into our home, and I patronized my son and told him to study it and research breeds so that maybe, at some point in the future, when we were seriously considering getting an animal, we could make a good decision.

Whether it was the universal loneliness of childhood or his own particular version, I cannot say. But this quiet, dark-eyed boy of mine was the seven-, eight-, and then nine-year-old who did not find much fun in playing sports and games. He loved books but despised school. All too often he seemed to be standing at the gates of childhood, not going in. A sage person told my husband and me that childhood wasn't for everybody. "Some kids just don't make good kids. It will get better in time." And it did, though of course back then we couldn't have known.

One thing we knew for sure was that in the presence of animals, our son was happy and at ease. He seemed to know intuitively how to

approach and speak to them, and whether a creature was stressed and needed space. He was one of those people who from the beginning of life have an eye toward the creatures of the world. He was a kid who could hold lizards and snakes without flinching, and he protested when other boys took frogs from the creek. He pitied my fear of small furry things, such as mice (which remind me of you-know-what). Once, when a mouse scuttled across my kitchen floor and I screamed and shrieked like an idiot, a friend who happened to be there captured it in a bag, then let it loose in the backyard. Gabriel came to see what all the noise was about and shook his head, clearly disgusted, then went outside to see about the mouse. The tiny thing was so stunned by the screaming and capturing and tossing out that it stood frozen by the backyard fence. He bent down and looked the creature in the eye, able to see instantly what I did not—that a house mouse might not survive in the outside world during the depth of winter. Ignoring me entirely, he came back inside and made the mouse a bed of cardboard and tissues for warmth, with a bit of food, then returned to the yard and set the mouse shelter outside by the fence, where he hoped the mouse would find it.

I saw my own selfishness at that moment. And I also saw it when he looked at me with his big black eyes and said, “I’m not looking in this dog encyclopedia anymore. Don’t lie to me. You’re never going to get me a dog.”

I was running out of time.

Not long after this, an email arrived from Elizabeth, who was about to go to Ireland. The subject line read: “Lily our beautiful Lurcher: How is she still alive?”

Underneath were horrifying photos of a dog skinny as death, bent over, scratching herself. She had barely any fur; her raw skin was pink and bloody. One of her eyes was infected so badly it was nearly sealed shut. The email explained that Lily had been found abandoned in this terrible condition. She looked like a greyhound, but slightly smaller and with floppier ears.



*Lily, as she was found abandoned in County Cork in 2006, and her progress over the following three months.
(Courtesy Limerick Animal Welfare)*

This time, it was hard to click delete. There was something about the dog's face. Her expression went beyond pain and hunger and had the odd quality I'd seen during my Catholic girlhood in the images of martyred saints who'd been humiliated and tortured, burned at the stake, yet looked outward beyond the physical world, enduring the wrongdoings of humanity with resignation.

The email took the form of a success story. Further down were photos taken three weeks later, at an animal shelter in Cork. The bleeding had stopped, and Lily's fur was growing back snow white, dotted with black. Her expression was calmer and happier. A caption told of her sweet nature and constantly wagging tail. I scrolled down. More photos—taken two months later—revealed a breathtaking transformation. She was an exquisite animal, with the most feminine face a dog could have. Her eyes appeared to be lined with black kohl eyeliner, one side smeared. She was a small, more delicate version of a greyhound. In the final photo, one of her ears was flipped back, like hair swept glamorously over her head. Her face toward the camera, she had the eyes of a doe.

I knew this was no way to choose a dog. What kind of sucker was I? But when I read the phrase "Lily is a real miracle dog," I knew she was our dog. I called my husband to come and see.

A few weeks later we were at Elizabeth's house, looking down at Lily sprawled out on the bed, more beautiful and weirdly leggy and thin than in the photos. She was jet-lagged and lying very still, having only arrived the night before after a long trip from Shannon Airport. I leaned close to her, and with some effort Lily lifted her head and looked at me. We held a glance for a moment, her amber eyes and mine, and then she lay back down in sleepy submission. In this way, we came into possession of Lily the lurcher.

Lily was a ballerina dog who pranced rather than walked and carried herself regally aloof. It was hard to imagine that she'd been born in the shadows of campsites and campfires and caravans, an outcast

among outcasts. Someone had found her by the side of the road in Ireland and taken her to an animal sanctuary, where they had bathed her, fed her, put ointment on her skin and got her veterinary attention, then arranged to get her out of the country because people in Ireland didn't want greyhounds as pets, and especially not mongrel versions of greyhounds. Elizabeth told us there were women in Ireland who devoted their lives to saving thousands of cast-off dogs like Lily.

Even stranger: now here she was with us, living in a New York suburb where many people venerated dogs. Though she was feared and unwanted at home, here she was seen as an exotic beauty. When we went out walking, cars would slow and heads turned to stare at her slim form and unusually elegant bearing. Everyone wanted to know what kind of dog she was.

“Oh, so regal!”

“Look at that beautiful creature!”

“Did she race at the track?”

During her first weeks with us, Lily maintained a blank-faced caution. She flinched when we came close, and, when in doubt, she immediately dropped to the floor, one cheek down, waiting to be beaten. She seemed afraid of her food and crept toward her bowl cautiously, lest another dog might race in snarling and push her aside.

It wasn't until we let her run that we understood her true nature. There was a double tennis court around the corner from our house, and the first time we snuck her in there and clinked the gate shut, everything changed. We took off her leash and watched Lily tear forth with a speed and form that astonished us. She was a cheetah dog and galloped in a broad circle around the courts, using a special mechanism for running known as the double suspension gallop, which meant she held herself in the air twice as long as other dogs, pumping her rear legs forward and then extending them back behind her, all in a single stride. The overwhelming effect was nothing short of flight. I understood then that she was more bird than dog, more air than earth.