

What the Dog Did?

By Emily Yoffe

An excerpt from *Tales from a Formerly Reluctant Dog Owner*

The lowest point in my transformation into a dog person came one drizzly night at 11:00pm, three months after we got our beagle, Sasha. I used to laugh at dog owners when I drove home on late, wet nights, seeing them standing like demented courtiers holding umbrellas over their dogs. Now here I was, sodden and tired, waiting for Sasha to relieve herself.

After she squatted repeatedly without effect and with apparent distress, I finally bent down to check out the problem. Illuminated by the street light, I saw something white and stringy hanging out her rear end. As if slipping on a surgical glove, I stuck my hand into one of the plastic newspaper bags that now always fashionably bulged out of my pockets. "My chance to practice medicine without a license," I thought as I grabbed the object and yanked. It was long and stretchy, with a metal circle on one end, and when I finally confiscated all of it – to Sasha's ecstasy – I realized I'd seen it before. It was the strap of my favorite bra. The bra had vanished a few days earlier; both my husband and daughter denied any knowledge of its whereabouts (if my husband had stolen it, did I really want to know?).

"You're no longer a suspect," I said to him when I returned. "Sasha ate my bra."

"That shows how much she loves you," he said wanly. Since he was responsible for our becoming a dog-owning family, he was always trying to convince me how my life had changed for the better.

"How much do you love me?" I asked, thinking of which undergarments he could ingest to prove it. Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of Sasha tipping over the kitchen garbage can.

Many Buddhists believe that for a human to be reincarnated as a dog is punishment for being rotten in your past life. I am no expert in comparative religion, but I felt this conviction may have gotten things backward. It seemed more likely that as the baby boom was taking off a naughty dog died and came back as me. How else to explain the karma of being a middle-aged cat person whose life was now devoted to the care, feeding, training, and rectal maintenance of a formerly stray beagle?

How much of a cat person was I? During the hundred or so years I was single, my clothing was so covered with cat hair that I was afraid anti-fur activists would dump cans of paint on me. I spent hours baby-talking to my cats. Once as I was scooping the litter box, I heard through the heat pipe in the apartment bathroom my downstairs neighbor call to her husband, "Are you proud of my big poopie?" using exactly the same syntax and singsong cadence with which I praised my cats' daily functions.

Going from cat owner to dog owner made me realize that cats are private, dogs are public. To know your cat someone has to be invited into your domain. But when you have a dog, there it is on the end of your arm like an accessory, a statement about your self-image. I've always been told that my normal expression is one of grimness, my failed attempt at looking sophisticated and detached. But it's impossible to be grim, or sophisticated, or detached with a floppy-eared beagle pulling you along the street. Actually, when you're walking your dog, you're simply the means by which the dog presents herself to the world.

Sasha is lucky she's beautiful. Superficial as it is, it's hard to stay mad at such a gorgeous creature. Walking her has given me a glimpse of what it must be like to be married to a celebrity. People stop their cars and call out, "She's so cute!" Couples walking past will smile and nudge each other, making sure they each see her. Children stop and say, "Can I touch her?" Middle-aged people bend down to her and inevitably say, "A beagle! I had a beagle when I was a kid." (This makes me wonder if a message went out to everyone else about 30 years ago: "Don't get another beagle.")

She is small, only 13 inches high at the shoulder and 16 pounds. Because of her size, she has the look of a perpetual puppy. Nefertiti would be jealous of her huge, Kohl-rimmed eyes. Her head is fawn-colored, stippling to black at her neck. Her ears are silky and honey-brown. On her neck is a lightning-shaped blaze of white (we gave her Lightning as a middle name). Her back is rich black, her belly and tip of her tale white.

Walking a dog was a revelation. Who knew so many of my neighbors, most of whom I'd never seen before, owned dogs? It was like finding out that, at some nightly pre-arranged signal, people all around me were sneaking out to go ballroom dancing or form covens. I learned the strange etiquette of dog owning – we don't introduce ourselves, just our dogs. So Sasha knows Pundit and Woody and Linus, but I have no idea who their owners are.

After I got Sasha, the owner of Harry, the aged, decrepit schnauzer down the street, stopped me one day. Harry's owner and I talked for the first time in eight years of being neighbours. Harry's owner congratulated me on Sasha and said with the deepest gravity, "You will experience such joy." As he spoke Harry looked at me with rheumy eyes, his muzzle caked with dried dog food. Harry lifted his leg and urine dribbled down the stained fur. "Good boy," Harry's owner said tenderly. I remembered visiting nursing homes and seeing relatives in such condition – their senses going, unable to clean themselves, incontinent. "Joy" was not my primary emotion. But Sasha is young and vital, so I knew I would experience the joy, the lowered blood pressure, the reduction in stress hormones that you are told is a reward of dog ownership.

"I learned the strange etiquette of dog owning – we don't introduce ourselves, just our dogs."



I'm glad, however, that I didn't have on a blood pressure cuff the day I saw Sasha emerge from the basement – the territory of the cats – licking kitty litter pellets from her snout. It wasn't the equivalent of discovering a crack pipe in my child's underwear drawer, but it was disheartening to realize my dog considered cat feces an amuse-bouche. Nor did my diastolic reading take a dive the day, while walking Sasha down the block, I noticed she had something in her mouth and was vigorously chewing on it. I bent down, pried her jaws open, and extracted a used condom. This made me worry not only about dog ownership, but about my neighbors.

Dogs have evolved to be scavengers, experts say. But dogs aren't just scavengers, they're indiscriminate scavengers. How is it that a species could be so successful, yet not know it's a bad idea to eat condoms?

After I told some friends about Sasha's desire to make me wear strapless bras, one said I had to talk to his sister. I called Clarissa who told me that her two-year old Labrador retriever, Marley, had a passion for baked goods. Knowing this, Clarissa figured out just how far Marley's reach extended at every point in her kitchen. One Sunday morning she was baking bread. While the dough was rising in a glass bowl, she pushed it to the back of the stove, and left to run some errands. When she returned the bowl and the dough were no longer on the stove. On the floor was shattered glass, a few small lumps of dough, and blood. Clarissa located Marley hiding behind a couch, her face cut and bloody. She had eaten the dough off the floor, broken glass and all.

Since it was Sunday (Sunday is dogs' preferred day of the week for deadly ingestion) she took Marley to the emergency animal hospital, where Clarissa told the receptionist her dog had eaten a pile of glass. As she sat in the waiting room, Marley draped over her lap, she noticed that her dog's midsection appeared to be expanding. Marley let out a thunderous belch and the room was filled with the enticing aroma of baking bread. Marley was rising! The belching and the baking continued until the vet showed up to take Marley off for an x-ray. Marley's problem was not glass – she hadn't eaten much – but dough. Because of the warmth of Marley's stomach, the bread was going to rise until it exploded. Marley went in for surgery to have, at a cost of \$3,000, the world's most expensive loaf of bread removed.

My bra story reminded someone else of a malamute who made Sasha look like a picky eater. It turned out that as a year-old puppy Tina, already 75 pounds, was kept in the kitchen during the day while her owner, Karl, was at work. Even a malamute can't do that much damage to major appliances, he figured. This appeared to be true until he came home one day, walked and fed Tina, and went to the refrigerator to start dinner. When he opened the door he discovered the gasket – the rubber tubing that keeps the refrigerator door sealed – was missing. All of it. Had Tina hidden it? A search turned up nothing. It was hard to believe she had been able to eat such an impressive tube of rubber, but if she had, it wasn't bothering her.

The next morning Karl took Tina for her walk, and she ended the mystery. It took Karl about five minutes of pulling to unspool from Tina the entire, intact, many feet-long gasket, which he described as being "like a large piece of dental floss." While one mystery ended, another has never been solved – how did she keep it in one piece? It was lucky she did. Instead of a \$3,000 vet bill for gasket removal, Karl had only a \$200 repair bill for gasket replacement.

When you have a dog, crazy stuff happens. I started clipping newspaper stories about just how crazy. There was the one about the bull terrier puppy in Liverpool whose owner noticed that he didn't curl up to sleep anymore. It turns out the puppy had swallowed a seven inch knife – plastic end first – that was the length of its body. He recovered completely from his cutlery removal.

Then there was the hunter in South Dakota who got shot by his English setter. After bagging seven pheasants the hunter lined them up for a photograph, leaving his 12-gauge shotgun nearby. His year-old hunting dog, prancing around, stepped on the gun, discharging the pellets into the hunter's ankle. His ankle was patched up. I imagined, however, after your dog shoots you your dignity suffers a fatal blow. I thought I had found the only shot-by-your-dog story. But a few months later I read an article about a man in Florida who decided the best way to get rid of a litter of unwanted three-month old puppies was to shoot them. While he was holding two of the doomed puppies, one pressed its paw on the trigger, causing a bullet to go through the man's wrist. I realized then that guns don't injure people, puppies with guns injure people.



DHARMA THE CAT by David & Ted

Early in my life with Sasha I wrote a piece for Slate.com about the shock of dog ownership. I expected to be denounced, but I was overwhelmed with emails of encouragement. This confirmed my impression that dog owners are among the nicest group of people I'd ever encountered. Or at least when you encounter people with their dog, they tend to be nice. Since dogs force you into social situations, even owners who aren't naturally gregarious are obliged to be sociable. I even know two couples who met because they were first attracted to each other's dogs. This doesn't happen with cats. During my dating years my cats were less an enticement than a screening device. Potential suitors' reactions ranged from hostility to indifference.

Even I was becoming friendlier because of Sasha. One day, while visiting Manhattan, I stopped two men – both dressed in black leather and covered in body piercings and tattoos – who were walking a beagle. I told them I had a beagle at home, and we immediately bonded over our shared experience of urban beagle life.

The Slate readers promised me life with a dog would get better, and it has (or else I've simply forgotten what life was like before Sasha). They also sent many 'I can top that' anecdotes. Like the one about the puppy who by his first birthday had punctured a lung, been rescued from drowning in the goldfish pond, and had stomach surgery to remove a swallowed rock.

"It wasn't the equivalent of discovering a crack pipe in my child's underwear drawer, but it was disheartening to realize my dog considered cat feces an amuse-bouche".

I realised almost everyone I knew with a dog had a story. Maybe companionship and someone to lick your feet isn't what really motivates people to have dogs. Maybe being able to tell dog stories is. A friend told me she had a friend who went through an unusual burial ritual each time one of his dogs died. So I called Michael, who told me that even though he and his siblings were grown, they feel that a dog is not in peace unless it is interred in the family's informal pet burial ground at their childhood home in Milwaukee. This has sometimes required long-term planning. Michael, who owned a ski lodge in Colorado, said one of his most recent dogs, Windsor, was a too-clever Welsh terrier who was constantly getting into mischief. He was an escape artist who could be found on top of ladders, or taking off down the road. He was destined to be hit by a car and when he was, Michael decided although Windsor had never been to Milwaukee, it had to be his final resting place.

The problem was that it was the height of ski season and the lodge was fully booked. There was an obvious interim solution: Michael stuck Windsor in a snow bank. When spring came, before Windsor started to get soggy, Michael moved him to the freezer in the kitchen, which fortunately was off-limits to guests. Finally, the guests thinned out and Michael booked a plane to Wisconsin. Windsor seemed solid, so Michael got a picnic cooler, put the late terrier inside, and checked him through as luggage. All was fine until Michael stood at baggage claim. As the cooler came off the belt, several suitcases smashed into it, causing the top to come off, and Windsor, still icy, to pop out. Michael kept his cool, replaced his dog and the cooler top, and without making eye contact with the rest of the passengers, left the airport. Windsor now has a special place by the stream out back.

As I started collecting dog stories, I was stunned by how many friends I had whose dog had saved a life. And how many whose dogs' eating and regurgitation rituals had required them to redecorate the house.

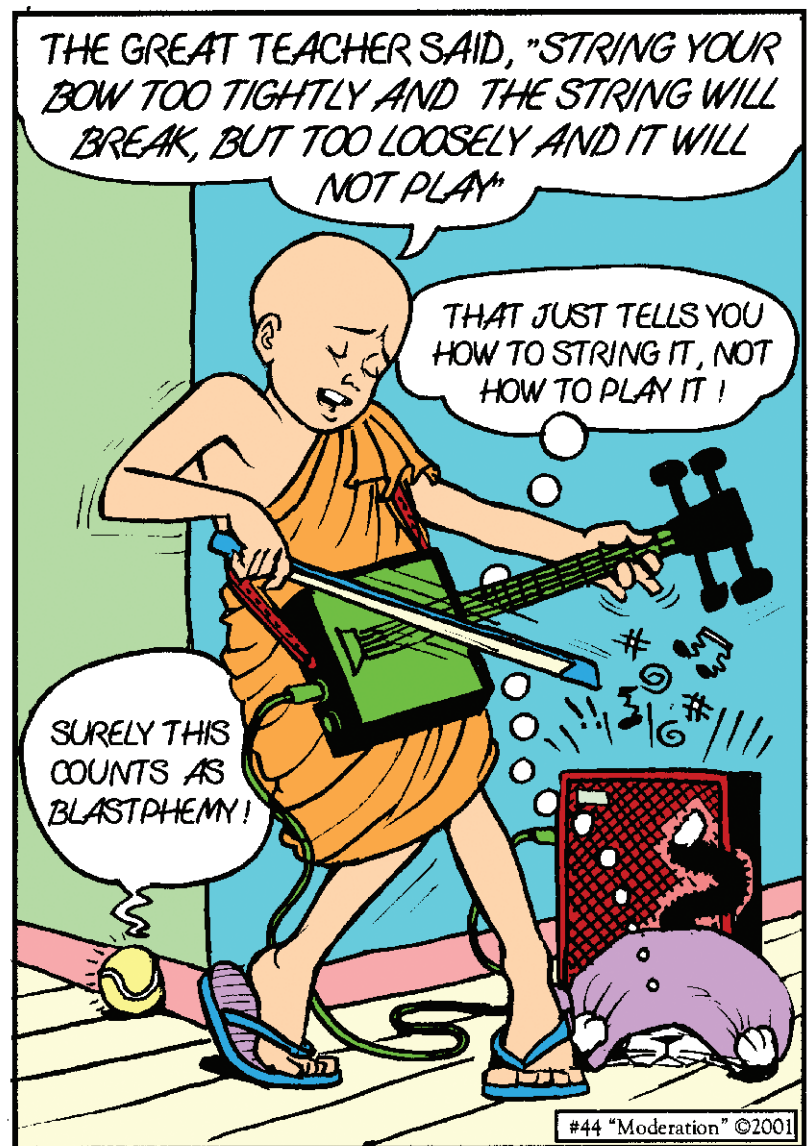
I also discovered that it wasn't always the dog's fault that previously important components of one's existence – family, work, running a home, sleep – became subordinate to the needs of the dog. I was talking to a dog owner who told me how his Dutch shepherd drove him and his wife crazy with a wake-up routine that started at 5:30 a.m. The dog, Riley, ran an ever-faster circuit around the bed, panting loudly, then bumping the mattress. When I asked how Riley was able to get all the way around the bed, his owner explained that the bed was pulled out from the wall.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because Riley likes to run around it."

This book is also an account of my unexpected journey to becoming a dog person. How else can I explain how I ended up being the foster mother to a series of homeless beagles? Not that I don't still love cats. As Winston Churchill said, "Dogs look up to you, cats look down on you." It's just that I discovered that being looked at from both those perspectives is where I want to be.

This article first appeared in Urban Dog Magazine and is used with permission. <http://www.urbandogmagazine.com>



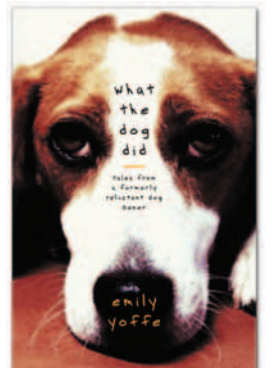
What the Dog Did by Emily Yoffe

A playful look at all things dog.

Emily Yoffe never thought she'd find herself extracting her bra strap from a dog's rear end; in fact, she never thought she'd have a dog at all. This cat devotee was in for some unexpected surprises when she took in a neurotic rescued beagle named Sasha to satisfy her daughter's desire for a dog.

What the Dog Did chronicles Yoffe's journey from cat person to dog lover. The transformation begins with consternation and culminates with real affection: she becomes a foster mother to a series of homeless beagles; she studies (without success) to be a pet psychic; she visits the Department of Homeland Security to watch sausage- and incendiary device-sniffing canines in action. Everyone who has ever owned a dog, has a story to tell and Emily unwittingly becomes the repository for modern-day dog lore. Filled with adventures of heroic dogs, lovable and lazy dogs, malodorous dogs, phlegmatic and incontinent dogs, What the Dog Did delivers some of the most outlandish and certainly the funniest dog stories on record. But at its heart, What the Dog Did tells the story of how Yoffe's family turned Sasha, the skittish stray, into a wonderful pet—and how Sasha transformed Yoffe into a dog-lover for life.

Emily Yoffe is a contributing writer to Slate.com, and a widely published journalist. She has written for Esquire, Health, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, Newsweek, O magazine, among many others. She lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband and daughter and their beagle Sasha.



Greenies
the original smart-treat

TREAT-FOR-ALL
Smart Treaters Rewards

www.treatforall.com

Here's how it works.....

Visit www.treatforall.com and refer Greenies to friends and family who have never tried the product. They'll get a free sample tailor-made for their dogs. And you will learn coupons for Greenies®...and even FREE Greenies® when you make referrals. The more you refer, the more coupons you'll receive. More and more dogs will be treated to clean teeth and fresher breath. That's what we call a Treat-For-All™!

www.greenies.com.au

Available from,
...Veterinarians and all leading Pet Retailers!