



THE STORY OF my family's life with the tribe of thirty-eight Dalmatians that romped through our years together is the story of a crazy kind of love affair. How was it possible to love, so relentlessly, this single, particular breed, one often described with words like neurotic, nervous, hyper, skitzy, over-excitabile, snappish, and downright nasty? The Sextons, however, believed staunchly that those who held such mean-spirited opinions were wrong. Instead, we used words like loving, companionable, lively, mischievous, happy, and smart. We had always rooted for the underdog, perhaps because we were underdogs ourselves, crippled by the shadow of my mother's continuing mental illness. As an artist who spent her hours creating a radical new kind of poetry, my mother always counseled us to look below the surface, to see the possibilities of every day around us. And these dogs fit into that category of unrealized potential quite neatly.

When I was a child, Dalmatians were the breed we adored, unequivocally; Dalmatians were the breed we always picked when one beloved dog passed on, and we had to choose another as quickly as possible, as was the custom of the times. No prolonged or cathartic grieving for us. When one member of the family was gone we filled the void, right away—preferably with a soft, cuddly pup who would undoubtedly pee from one end of the house to the other or chew up prized objects like slippers, glasses, baseboards, and rugs.

In a home where my parents were both inconstant and inconsistent because of my mother's illness and my father's anger,

the dogs became symbols of absolute love, of fortitude. If they could survive such difficulties, so could we.

My love for the intensely colored dogs did not wane as I created a new family of my own. I took it with me, the way one would carry forward a love of climbing steep mountain peaks or swimming in deep lakes. None of these dogs were perfect. All had their idiosyncrasies. But each and every one dropped into our lives much more happiness and joy than they did anger and frustration. As I brought my first dog home to my own children, it never even occurred to me to consider any other breed. Dalmatians were in my blood.

It is 2013, and forty years have passed since my parents brought home our first Dalmatian. Many things have changed in that time. For one thing, every month, the mailbox is crammed with stacks of catalogs, even though it isn't yet Halloween. I am sixty now, but I still haven't figured out how to unsubscribe from the thick glossy books. I keep only the ones specifically designed to tempt the dog owner—In the Company of Dogs, Fetch Dog, Pet Edge, L.L. Bean's for Dogs, Frontgate Pet—and even the one from R.C. Steele, which is directed toward breeders or those in the “fancy,” as dog showing is sometimes called.

I pore over heated dog beds with coordinating kidney-shaped pillows, dog ramps, dog hammocks. Cooler wraps, puppy weaning pans, hair ribbons for Poodle pompadours, shears with

interchangeable blades, and toenail grinders with diamond tipped wheels. Agility tunnels and weave poles for smart dogs, interactive puzzle toys for the couch potato. Grooming tables for the animals who will be shown in the ring, heavy-duty hair dryers for thick-coated breeds, snoods to keep longhaired dogs' ears out of their chow bowls.

These encyclopedic, slick “magazines” are as alluring and rich with goods as the stalls of a Middle Eastern bazaar. I can't wait to get my hands on each and every one. Just to look and laugh. Just to look—and sometimes buy.

I am a dog lover, a dog breeder, and I try to be a dog person, as well. As a dog lover, I enjoy *nearly* all dogs (no one wants a rabid Cujo)—despite matted coats and various peccadilloes. I often hang out with my dogs instead of my friends, eat peanut butter and jelly while my dogs dine gourmet, and think my dog is a good kisser. My dogs almost have more toys than my kids did when they were little.

I want to pat every canine coming down the sidewalk without having been properly introduced, and frequently cuddle up with other people's dogs even though I am getting covered in long, clingy hair. I don't mind getting the two-paw nice-to-meet-you jump—even though I draw the line at muddy feet—or having my ears washed with a long pink tongue. I can frequently be caught cooing “baby talk” to total dog strangers, and I have friends whose dogs have their own pages on Facebook, with pictures of their human families as well as their best canine friends.

I am also a breeder, devoted to preserving the specific characteristics of our particular breed—while raising carefully timed litters of the spotted variety. Breeders attend seminars on everything from puppy rearing to correct structure to evaluating temperament and wolf down most books on the subject; often we have traced our dogs' family trees back further than our own. We usually belong to several organizations—some local and some national—that educate and promote the ethical guidelines that ensure the welfare of all dogs, and of our breed in particular. Recently, I have begun to participate in rescue work, ready to drive a long distance to transport an abandoned puppy or an old-timer to his lucky “forever” home, and also to make financial donations. Last, but not least, I always accept my own puppies back when placements just don't work out.

Though Dalmatian breeders do sell their puppies, they usually do so at a loss, as the asking price for a pup rarely equals the costs involved in raising a litter: expensive stud fees; round trip air fare for transporting the prospective mother back and forth to her mate; vet bills for both regular prenatal checkups and any kind of complication that may develop; dewclaw removal for prevention against tears further down the line; two sets of shots; having the litter both hearing tested and micro-chipped; and all the daily expenses such as bedding, cotton balls, and puppy chow. I am often asked why a sane person would take on so much expense for so little return, and the answer is an easy one. For the love of it.

Finally, I am a “dog person,” someone who tries to understand why dogs do what they do. A dog person does more than just love.

She tries to discipline and reward in a way her dog can truly understand; she tries to lead just the way a parent does; and she tries to appreciate both the young pup's exuberance and the adult dog's wisdom—even when it is frustrating to do so. Perhaps most importantly, a dog person tries to recognize that if she can be humble enough—like a dog—even a table scrap can be a full and tasty meal.

I was nine when my family got our first Dal. We had two cats, and my sister and I watched three litters of kittens be born in the darkness under my parents' bed. But kitties weren't sufficient—a dog it had to be. The reason it was a Dalmatian was definitely complicated: certainly it was for the joyful demeanor of the breed, their innate sense of humor, their sweet devotion to their human counterparts, or just their striking good looks—characteristics that run contrary to the popular misconceptions that all Dals are deaf, or only make great fire truck mascots, or are to be prized solely for their lush and extraordinary coats, courtesy of Cruella de Vil.

But even more importantly, my parents adopted our very first Dalmatian because my mother's best friend had one, and they were prone to imitating one another down to the smallest of details. If it was good enough for her family, it was good enough for ours. We romped with these dogs at their summer farm and cuddled them in our laps. As with so many other people, this first introduction to a specific breed of dog spun outward throughout our lives. My family went on to own a series of Dalmatians, and when my sister got her first dog, it was also one of the spotted variety. It was inevitable that

I, too, would follow their lead. At this point in my seventh decade, I can't even imagine leaving this life without a Dalmatian's head on my lap as I pass on to wherever I am going.

At my twenty-fifth college reunion twelve years ago, my friends and former roommates—and I, of course—pulled snapshots of our children from our wallets, displaying them in their sports uniforms, holding up their trophies. However, at my thirty-fifth reunion two years back, it was photos of our dogs on cell phones that made the rounds after dessert, accompanied by the same muted sounds of appreciation and delight—and the inevitable competitiveness. “Your Golden chases a Frisbee?” one friend repeated, a self-satisfied smile on her face. “My Otto loves to charge his water dummy—but then, labs are just natural born bird dogs.”

I myself succumbed and showed off my elderly male Dal, who could manage no trick in particular, except to look distinguished. I admitted to being a Dal breeder, aware that many looked down on fanciers of a particular full-blooded breed, as well as the American Kennel Club, preferring to rescue mixed dogs from shelters. While I had respect for their choice, there appeared to be a stigma against the purebred breeds, and so I grew quiet about the subject.

On the flight back home to California, I thought about both those dinners ten years apart and wondered: kids then, dogs now. Why? For the first time in decades I finally had the opportunity, freedom, and wherewithal to travel, stay out late, or even just sleep in on a relaxing weekend. Gulliver, the family Dal the kids had

grown up with, was just becoming a senior, well settled and easy to care for, and still not at the stage where he would have special needs. And yet this was when, like so many of my peers, I chose to tie myself down once again to the schedule and needs of a new puppy.

I got an eight-week-old to keep my older one company, even though it meant more sleepless nights, gritty-eyed mornings for the six a.m. kibble run, and leaving parties earlier than others to go home and walk the animals. I used dog-training manuals as I had once used Dr. Spock. Again I had puddles on the carpets and tiny teeth marks in my sofa legs. The baseboards were gnawed upon till they ceased to have corners. Getting a companion for Gulliver was the excuse I dreamed up for myself just when the reign of dog hair drifts and stinky cow hooves was nearly at an end.

With embarrassment, I confided to a close friend that perhaps the real reason I had brought another Dal into my house was partially because I was really scratching another itch altogether. I had been cooing at babies in strollers, admiring small-sized booties and knitted caps for quite a while. I wondered, would this relentless urge ever leave me? Was it permanent? As my children hit their thirties and I climb wearily out of the pit of menopause, I discover I have a touch of what my friends and I now call “Grandma Lust.”

In a *New York Magazine* article, writer John Homans talks about the increase in oxytocin levels that we undergo while gazing into our dogs’ eyes, which mimics the increase in the same hormones in our systems when we bond with our human infants. Dog owners recover at a faster rate from heart problems than do

non-pet owners. Pair bonding such as this stimulates social affiliation and trust, and in this way dogs become our role models. Eighty-four percent of dog owners consider their dog a child.

So I got a puppy instead of doing a late life adoption. Bringing this different kind of joyful youngster into our home, I traded housebreaking for toilet training, obedience classes for detention, and a dog nanny for a babysitter—wildly unlike any of the things my family had done with our Dalmatians when I was a child. At the six-month marker, I signed us up for “puppy kindergarten,” a modern invention that socialized my new offspring just as I had once entered my sons in a similar institution that had taught them to cope with their peers. And just as I had felt nervous about my sons’ first days at school—would they behave, would they have separation anxiety—I now worried about similar things for my pup. Later on, being lousy at a retrieve would be the equivalent of being lousy at figuring the angles of isometric triangles in math.

Maybe I have dogs now because they tap into that part of my maternal instinct that had only gone into hibernation when my kids took off for their own apartments—that part of my personality that I am often unable to lavish on my friends or my new husband. Dogs have always provided a special kind of love and companionship that I often experience, only some of the time, with humans. They have a strong sense of character and live the way we ought to: dogs neither compare you to your sister, nor make judgments in her favor. Dogs

never know what is coming and so live purely in the moment, savoring the good, doing their best to endure the bad—and they offer up this miraculous example so that we can learn from it, becoming role models of a sort. Dogs are radically different than the partners who sometimes give up on marriages, or the friends who get angry over real or imagined slights. Dogs never just get up and leave.

It is no surprise, then, that 78.2 million dogs live with owners in the U.S. today, and that there are more dogs in American households than there are children. The advent of a new dog in my home has always been a way of staying connected to life—a life that can, at times, be lonely or difficult.

Isolated behind the keys of our computers, we live enmeshed in an age dominated by email and social media, both of which purport to keep people better connected—even though there have been times when I have learned that my son has a new squeeze over the internet. Sometimes I wonder if Facebook and all its spinoffs really only demonstrate how far apart we have actually grown, as we desperately create daily bulletins of meaningless activities for all the world to see: I don't really want to know that the schoolmate I haven't seen in fifteen years had meatloaf for dinner last night, or even that a close friend packed her car for vacation in less than an hour. It is much more satisfying to have some communion with my dog instead.

As columnist Ben Stein says of his relationship with his German Short Hair Pointer: “When I want a peak experience, I just lower the shades and get in bed with Julie and my Mozart discs, and

I am in heaven.” As my husband observes, “When I die, I want to come back as one of Linda’s Dals.” Or as my stepdaughter puts it more simply: “Dogs rock.”

My life has been blessed with ten adult Dalmatians, as well as three litters of eight each and a fourth of six. A total of thirty-eight spotted dogs, when you tally them up in this particular way—without double-counting those who were born into my household and who then stayed on. Each of them shaped my life in one important way or another. I have loved enough of them to know quite a bit about the unusually devoted disposition of the breed. Not enough to be an expert, for as far as Dals go, there are no experts. They are always surprising you—occasionally for the worse, but most often, for the better.