

The Dogs We Love



pure joy

DANIELLE
STEEL

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Minnie in the Paris apartment kitchen, next to my desk, in her favorite bed
Alessandro Calderano

FOREWORD

Minnie and Me

There have always been somewhat comedic aspects to my life, although sometimes I don't see it that way. A family of nine children, eleven dogs at one time, and a Vietnamese potbellied pig was bound to create some unusual situations, which even I found funny at the time. Someone once suggested a weekly TV series loosely based on our family, and we declined. Us? Funny? Of course not! Well ... maybe a little. But it's only now, when thinking about these situations involving our dogs, that I realize how ridiculous some of them were.

Most of the children have grown up, the dogs we have now are divided between the homes and mine (I often babysit for my "grand dogs"), and we're down to more normal numbers. But it was only when a tiny eight-week-old, barely one-pound, long-haired white "teacup" Chihuahua snagged my heart that I was inspired to write about her and share some of the other dog stories in my life. And just looking at her, you know she's a star. Her name is Minnie Mouse, and her favorite pose is lying in one of her pink beds, with her tiny paws crossed, looking at me with big brown eyes.

I never thought I'd fall in love with such a tiny dog. When one of my daughters got a Chihuahua in her early teens, I objected strenuously to having such a small dog. I thought people would step on her, something terrible would happen, she would be too fragile, and insisted that you can't have a dog that size. I discovered that despite her size, Chiquita, our first Chihuahua, was sturdy, had a big personality, and we only just lost her at sixteen. She was full of fun, healthy, and lively right to the end. She came to visit me regularly in San Francisco, after she and my daughter moved to Hollywood. Chiquita was a star!

But I still never thought the breed was for me. Whatever we decide we *don't* want in life (whether it's dating, houses, neighborhoods, jobs, partners, or dogs), the fates usually intervene to open our eyes and prove us wrong. So on a cold November day, at a pet store in New York, thinking myself hardened, sophisticated (and opinionated), I fell in love.

Two years later, the love affair is still going strong. The object of my affections is my now two-pound Chihuahua, Minnie Mouse, who is the most adorable, lovable dog I've had yet. And the breed is even better than I thought. And she's taught me more about owning a dog than all the breeds that came before her. There's a reason why you see so many Chihuahuas on the street now (and cozily tucked away in apartments)—they are smart, fun, easy to take care of, and endearing in many ways. She warms my heart and makes me laugh.

While I turned down the weekly series about our family, all those years ago, I want to share with you all our slightly crazy and funny family dog stories, and tell you about Minnie and me and the practical things I've learned over the years about owning dogs.

As for Minnie, it is absolutely absurd that anything so small should own my heart, but she does. It just goes to show, never say never, or the next thing you know, you'll be doing what you said you never would, owning a dog you swore you didn't want and walking (or carrying) a tiny, totally enchanting little dog on a rhinestone-studded pink leash. You too could fall head over heels for a teacup Chihuahua, because owning a puppy, or a dog you love, is pure joy ... that's what Minnie is for me!!!



Gidget
Danielle Steel

The Dog(s) and I

In the classic sense, I have never considered myself a “dog person,” in that extreme way that some people are “dog” people, or “cat” people, or “horse” people, where they go to horse and dog shows, are obsessively dedicated to their animals, and know everything about the breed. On the other hand, I’m definitely not a cat person, because I’m severely allergic to cats. When I was a child, about five or six years old, I used to visit the next-door neighbor’s cats, and my eyes would swell until they almost closed, as tears streamed down my cheeks, my nose ran, and I couldn’t breathe. If I stayed long enough, I had an asthma attack, and then I would go home wheezing and coughing and barely able to see, and my mother would say, “You went to visit the neighbor’s cat again, didn’t you?” Immediate look of innocence from me between wheezes: “Me? The cat? No ... why?”

I finally stopped visiting the neighbor’s cat, and my allergy has prevented me from really getting to know cats, so all the delightful things cat lovers say about them are unknown to me. And probably my most noteworthy cat encounter was at the home of Elizabeth Taylor. She contacted me years ago, to discuss writing a screen treatment for her. I was incredibly impressed and even more so when she invited me to her home. Nothing would have kept me from the opportunity to visit her. I was dying to meet the legend and see where she lived. I showed up for the meeting, and she was very nice. I was in awe of her, and we talked about some ideas, and as we did, a cat sauntered into the room, and I thought, “Oh no, this is not going to be good.” Imagined or real, my eyes and nose began to itch instantly, and I said nothing and went on talking to her, just as another cat walked in. And within a few minutes there were four or five cats wandering around the room. I started choking and knew I would have an asthma attack any minute.

I then made one of those major life decisions: was I going to admit to my frailties and run out the door, or stick it out so as not to lose this opportunity with an icon whom I had wanted to meet for years? I decided that even if I died in her living room, I didn’t care. I stuck it out for as long as I could, eyes running, sneezing, and choking. I figured the meeting would end when she called 911, and I died of an asthma attack in her living room. By the time the meeting reached its conclusion, I could hardly breathe. The project went nowhere, but I got to spend an hour with a Hollywood legend. That was my last serious cat encounter. Since then, when I’m invited to someone’s home, I ask if they have a cat. It makes me sound hopelessly neurotic but spares them the annoyance of having to call 911 half an hour after I get there. So cats just aren’t part of the landscape for me.

Actually, I’m more of a “kid person,” as witnessed by the fact that I have nine children. I can never resist a child, especially my own.

But dogs have been part of my life ever since I was a child. Some have been better than others and more memorable. Until recently, I never had a dog with a real nose. We had puppies when I was a child. My first dog was a fawn pug named James, and I adored him. Unfortunately, he died the same year my mother left, when I was six, which must have traumatized me, in both cases, because although I had other dogs after that, I never got

seriously attached to another dog for many years, until I was an adult, even though there were always dogs in my life. And in a sense, I suppose I am a dog person because I like them. There are statues of dogs by assorted contemporary artists, in a multitude of colors, all over my Paris apartment.

My father continued to have pugs long after my favorite one died (of heat stroke, which was very sad). And after that dogs were not an important feature in my life for a while.

And then, as an adult, I decided to get a rescue dog, an adorable three-month-old basset hound puppy named Elmer (he came with the name). He was a “harlequin,” so he was black and white, and he was one of the funniest dogs I ever had, and had a personality to go with the sad, droopy eyes. As a puppy, he would trot along and step on his ears with his big paws, which made him bonk his nose into the floor, and he would sit down and bark at me with an accusing look, as though I had tripped him, which I swear I didn’t.

I had Elmer in my struggling days as a young writer, and my budget was pretty tight then. And Elmer’s favorite trick was that he learned to operate the pedal that opened my refrigerator. I would come home from work (as an advertising copywriter) to find Elmer sprawled out in the kitchen, exhausted after eating everything in the fridge. I finally had to put a gate on the kitchen, or he would have eaten me out of house and home, but I loved him. Bassets are basically hunting dogs, so the minute you open a door, they take off like a shot. He ran away dozens of times, and I would find him halfway across town. Another not-so-charming trait is that they “bay,” which is an agonizingly piercing howl, if you leave them alone for more than five seconds, which your neighbors will want to kill you for. I finally had to take him to work with me, because I couldn’t leave him alone at home.

Despite his voracious appetite and the howling, I loved Elmer, and he was a very sweet dog. He slept on my bed, had no idea he was supposed to be a watchdog, and could have happily slept through a war. I don’t think he knew he was a dog ... until ... a female basset came into his life, and everything changed. Peaceful, lazy, sleepy Elmer (who once ate an entire Gouda cheese, red wax and all, and had a stomachache for three days) suddenly woke up when he discovered the female sex!

My vet had a female basset he wanted to give up, and I agreed to try her for a weekend and see how they got along. I thought it might be nice for Elmer to have a friend. She was perfect for the entire weekend, impeccably behaved, and easy to have around. On Monday morning I called and agreed to adopt her. And by Monday night, her real personality emerged. Her name was Maude. She howled even louder than Elmer, was nervous and cranky, and a week later bit the neighbor’s child. And her clever previous owner refused to take her back (he didn’t think it would be good for her to be “rejected” for a second time ... ugh ... so I was stuck with her). She had to wear a muzzle, and overnight she turned Elmer into a dog, instead of the happy, easygoing guy he’d been before. Maude also had “issues,” she had imaginary pregnancies several times a year. She would adopt one of my shoes as her “puppy,” and try to bite me when I attempted to reclaim the shoe, which occasionally created a wardrobe crisis for me if she took over a shoe I needed for work or a date.

I kept the dogs as a pair for several years, but it was never a wonderful arrangement once Maude arrived. Together they were a powerful force, and once my daughter was old enough she would walk them, while they pulled her down the street. She looked like Ben-Hur driving

the chariot. Finally we all agreed that they needed a home in the country, and I found a family that was thrilled to have them. And I hate to say it, but I was relieved to see them go. They were a lot of work, and Elmer was never as sweet after Maude arrived. (Dogs sometimes act doggier when there is more than one of them.)

I was peacefully dogless then for a while and can't say I missed having a dog. Elmer and Maude had worn me out and took a lot of managing, between howling, running away, and eating everything in the house.

But when I married a man who was a serious dog person, dogs reentered my life en masse. He had a very old black miniature dachshund whom he adored, who had the incredibly bad timing to die during the weekend we got married, so my brand-new husband spent the days after the wedding crying and mourning his dog. This was not the happy scenario I'd had in mind, so I spent the next three days running around to breeders to find him a new dog, and I was thrilled to find a black miniature dachshund puppy who looked like the one he'd lost. (Fortunately we weren't planning to honeymoon for another month, so I had time to look for the dog.) She was a very sweet puppy, and I put her in a big blue Tiffany box that one of our wedding presents had come in and presented her to him that night. He was ecstatic and named her Sweet Pea. (Our nicknames for each other were Popeye and Olive, so she was our first "child.")

And in the ensuing months, Sweet Pea taught me a lot about co-owning a dog. According to John, she was half his and half mine. What I didn't know, when I made that deal, was that the front end was his and the back end was mine. She was very difficult to housebreak, and any "accidents" were my responsibility since the back end was mine. John had a rather creative way of draping paper towels over Sweet Pea's "mistakes," like flags, so I wouldn't miss them when I got home and had to clean them up. Owning her back end was not what I anticipated. Her front end wasn't so charming either, since she decided early on that she didn't like me (maybe for putting her in the Tiffany box, although it was only for five minutes for the presentation and to surprise John), and she snapped at me whenever she could. And when she slept in bed with us every night, she would sidle over to my side of the bed, pee, and then go back to John and snuggle up on the dry side. Sweet Pea and I had a somewhat rocky relationship after that.

Also, to a true dog lover, a really passionate one, their dog can do no wrong. (My father was one of those too. He had a dog that bit people regularly, and he always blamed the victim, not the dog.) In John's case, no matter what humor he was in, he was thrilled to see his dog. He would talk baby talk to her for hours and tell her how beautiful she was. Occasionally, confused, I would think he was talking to me, only to discover when I turned around that he was gazing into Sweet Pea's eyes. Okay, she was cute. But their love fest used to get on my nerves, and I had no dog of my own at the time. (But I couldn't imagine myself telling a dog how gorgeous he was, if I did. I mean after all, a dog is a dog ... sometimes.) So Sweet Pea and I coexisted like two women in love with the same man under one roof. And more often than I liked to admit, she won.

During and after Sweet Pea came a cavalcade of my children's dogs. True dog lover that he was, John felt that each child should have their own dog ... wow!!! That got to be a *lot* of dogs, because we had a lot of kids. My oldest daughter, Beatrix, had acquired a Norwich terrier by then, named Jack. He was very cute and had a weakness for candy and bubbly

gum. He particularly loved Easter and Halloween when he would eat all the jellybeans and trick-or-treat candy. Bazooka bubble gum remained his drug of choice. (No, he did not blow bubbles out the other end, but he would look like a basketball after his raids, and it took while for him to get back to normal again.) My two stepsons had two toy fox terriers, Paddington and Tilly. My son Nick had a miniature Brussels griffon (looks like an Ewok) named Molly. And when Sam got old enough, she got a black miniature dachshund of her own named Mia, who was incredibly mischievous and fortunately liked me a lot better than Sweet Pea did. Her weakness was for anything chocolate, which can be lethal to dogs. She would find it anywhere (particularly in my purse) and then have to be rushed to the vet to have her stomach pumped. Victoria had her tiny black teacup Chihuahua, Chiquita (who Sam later adopted), that she carried everywhere. Vanessa had a very sweet miniature Yorkshire terrier, Lola, and later Gidget. And my youngest son, Maxx, had a miniature Boston bull, Annabelle, who was a truly great dog, and we all loved her. One word of warning about Boston bulls, though. They can jump to amazing heights and spring straight up off the ground. It took me months to figure out who was eating all the food we'd leave in bowls on the kitchen table. I finally saw one of her amazing Superman leaps and watched her land on the table with glee. Maxx's current Boston bull, Nancy, leaps straight from the floor into our arms with no warning, and then kisses the face of the astonished person holding her. They are an incredibly loving breed.

Fortunately, my youngest daughter, Zara, was so fed up with dogs, she didn't want one, which was an enormous relief. We had a house full of dogs, each with its own personality, as well as the traits of the breed. The kids were very good with them, responsible for them, but let's face it, that was a flock of dogs! And their father was teaching the children how important it was to love dogs, which was probably a valuable lesson, but it seemed like an army of dogs to me!

One thing that always fascinated me was that if one of the dogs made a "mistake" somewhere in the house, everyone always reported it to me—and I didn't even have a dog. I would call in whatever kids were around, since the problem had obviously been caused by one of their dogs, and I expected them to clean it up. The kids would then arrive on the scene, examine the problem intently, and announce, "It wasn't my dog." Excuse me? Do the dogs sign it or what? How do you *know* it wasn't your dog? Please! "Nope," the owner of the dog would say with absolute certainty. "I can tell, it wasn't my dog." *How* can you tell? You *cannot* tell, and since I didn't do it, one of their dogs did. We had some real battles over that and no one *ever* confessed to their dog's mistakes. So either I'd have a fit and tell them to clean it up anyway (less often), or I'd just give up and clean it up myself (more often. I told you, I'm a total sucker for kids, even more than dogs). I will never understand how they could look me in the eye and say it wasn't their dog, but they did, regularly. The high (or low?) point of these disputes happened between my daughter Beatrix and son Todd, who each flatly refused to admit to their dog's guilt, and for once, I wouldn't back down. I told them to resolve the argument and clean it up! Their compromise solution was to get a disposable plastic knife and cut the "problem" in half. Each cleaned up half. Problem solved!

Other than that, all the kids and dogs got on very well. It made for an incredible scene when we left for the weekends in a stretch van with all nine kids, their backpacks, sports equipment, musical instruments, suitcases—and dogs. None of the dogs ever fought, and a

were very sweet. The kids didn't fight much either, which is one of my theories about big families. With so many siblings to choose from, the dynamics of big families are fairly easy, and maybe the dogs proved that as well.

I took a slightly removed position about the dogs then. They were a sort of extension of the kids, and I had no particular preference or attachment to any of them. After all, they weren't mine—they belonged to John and the kids. So I felt responsible for them in a caretaking role but possessive about none of them. I had never really fallen in love with a dog since my very first one when I was six. And maybe his untimely death made me loath to get too attached to another dog myself. I hadn't really become a true dog person yet. (I should perhaps mention that John had also acquired a Vietnamese potbellied pig by then too, named Coco Chanel. We were promised that she would grow no larger than 35 pounds, but she made it to 250 pounds with ease. And let me tell you, that is one uncharming pet—their virtues are vastly overrated. The only amusing thing about her was that she had a vet named Dr. Bacon. Other than that, I did not enjoy her! So I am clearly not a pig person.)

I was happily rolling along, driving car pool, going to soccer games and ballet classes with the kids, shepherding my kids and their dogs, and writing books at night. Life seemed pretty simple then (to me, at least—I was used to the circus of our daily existence), and to be serious for a moment, they were the happiest years of my life and I knew it even then. I loved my big family and everything that went with it!!

One day John and I were browsing through an antique store, and the owner had a really sweet little dog, a small black miniature Brussels griffon. They have squashed-in faces and wiry coats and are really nice, very affectionate dogs. I admired the dog, said how cute she was, and we left. And the next day the antique dealer called me, sounding excited, and said, "She's on her way to you, she'll be here in two hours." Who will be here in two hours? I wasn't expecting anyone. He rapidly explained that his dog had a littermate, a sister, who had never found a home, came from Ohio, and he had had the breeder send her to me as a gift. *What?* Did I want a dog? *No!* Now what was I going to do? The dog was on a plane, on its way to me, and I thought it was an incredibly presumptuous thing to do. How could he send me a *dog* without even knowing if I wanted one? We already had a flock of dogs!

I was furious, but feeling somehow responsible for this unwanted gift, I went to the airport and picked up the dog, determined to give it to someone else or send it back. I picked up the crate and looked inside. The dog I had admired was small, cuddly, perfect, even beautiful. And when I opened the crate, I found myself looking at a gargoyle with fur. The poor thing looked at me with worried eyes. She was much bigger than her sister and noticeably overweight, and she had a massive underbite that made her look like a bulldog. It was a classic case of the beautiful sister (I had met) and the ugly one (I had just received). I felt so sorry for the dog, and she arrived with the name of Greta. But she was even sweeter than her sister. She looked embarrassed to be there, like an uninvited guest.

I took her home, and John laughed when he saw her and said, "Now there's a face only a mother could love," and I bristled. What a mean thing to say about my dog!! I had to take several of the kids to the orthodontist that afternoon, and took her with me, and the minute he saw her, the orthodontist looked at her with fascination. "Ah! She has a class-three malocclusion. If she were a human, I could fit her with braces for that." Great.

I don't know what happened, but beautiful or not, I fell in love with Greta that day. I had

managed to avoid dog-love for thirty years by then, even being married to one of the major dog lovers of our time and living surrounded by a gazillion dogs, but Greta had my heart instantly. And she turned out to be one of the greatest dogs I ever had, and surely one of the dogs I loved most. She had just a wonderful loving nature, despite her funny looks. And one of her other sisters came to me a year later, when her owner died, Cookie. But Greta remained my most beloved dog. She lived to be thirteen, and had a terrific life with us. She became the queen of the house—after all, she was Mom’s dog. So I became one of the dog lovers too.



My beloved dog Greta (with the class-three malocclusion underbite)

Danielle Steel

But everyone knows that, just like people, not all dogs are perfect, and there have been a few lemons in our lives. Sweet Pea remains on the debatable list. And in the No Good Deed Goes Unpunished category, John’s mother passed away two years after we were married. She had had a standard dachshund named Trixie who was fourteen years old, barked incessantly, and was unfriendly, but John insisted we take her, and he said, “How much longer can she live at fourteen?” I decided he was right and agreed. The answer to that question was: nearly forever. She lived to be twenty-one and spent seven years barking in my house.

And many years later, when I remarried, I gave my new husband the dog of his dreams: a Rhodesian ridgeback, a splendidly beautiful, graceful, but enormous creature. Ridgebacks are trained to chase lions in their native South Africa and run like the wind. But they are also one-man dogs, and this one had some sort of personality disorder, and like Sweet Pea, he did not like me, protective of his owner perhaps and possessive of him. The dog slept on our bed, and if I moved during the night, he emitted horrifying growls and bared his fangs at me. From a dog that weighed more than I did and was taller, these were not welcome signs of affection. I gave that dog a wide berth. And he once chased Victoria’s Chihuahua, whom I rescued in the nick of time. I was very sad to see the marriage end several years later, but I was utterly thrilled to see the ridgeback leave. He was one scary dog, although he adored his master. He convinced me I was not a “big dog” person.



Samantha with Mia and Vanessa with Gidget, when both were puppies

Danielle Steel family photo

But on the whole, our experiences with dogs have been wonderful. And Greta had turned me into a dog lover again. Her eventual successor, Gracie, also a miniature Brussels griff, just as sweet. It's a breed that suited me perfectly for a long time. They're lovely, easygoing and sleep a lot, which works for me, since they sleep while I work. For twenty years, I couldn't see myself with any other breed. And although I thought my kids' dogs were very cute and had nice personalities, I couldn't imagine having a dachshund—they're too mischievous and bark a lot (which would drive me crazy while I write). Yorkies just didn't seem like "me" and were a little too cute. I couldn't even begin to imagine myself with a dog as small as a Chihuahua. My son's miniature Boston bull was way too active for me, since I write for eighteen and twenty hours at a time when I'm in the heat of a book or facing a tight deadline. My writing schedule can be very intense at times and requires concentration. So I was sure that Brussels griffs were the breed for me, until I moved back to Paris part-time and commuted to California and New York every three or four weeks. And after seven years of commuting, I decided that I wanted a dog I could take with me, so I could have a dog in Paris too, and my Brussels griffs were too heavy for the weight limit to take in the cabin of the plane.

Suddenly I found myself looking longingly for a smaller dog to travel with me. I was lonely in Paris without one. But I couldn't figure out a breed I wanted that was small enough. It was like dating as I read dog books, cruised pet stores, and visited breeders, hoping to find a dog I'd fall in love with. The search was on.



Minnie as a tiny baby in the pet store the day I found her
Victoria Traina

Looking for True Love (Again)

Once I decided I missed the warmth and companionship of a dog to take with me on my travels, and on the plane to Paris, I began a serious search. To me a dog provides someone to talk to, play with, take care of, and cuddle up with at night. Even if you have someone special in your life, a dog is a great companion. And watch out for men (or women) who don't like dogs. If you do love animals, someone who can't relate to yours may have an important piece missing that could matter to you. I've only had two men in my life who really disliked dogs, and I would have done better to avoid them both completely! I don't know many men who love dogs as much as my husband John—and with the arrangement he made, where I got the back end and he got the front end, he had a pretty sweet deal. But John always had room in his heart for a lot of kids and dogs!

I spent all my early years with pugs, and twenty adult years with Brussels griffs, and I just couldn't imagine another breed that would suit me. But pugs weigh about twenty pounds, shed a lot, and can be smelly, and griffs are fourteen or fifteen pounds, and there is no negotiating with the international airlines about their twelve-pound limit for a dog in the cabin, so I had to find a smaller dog. But none of the tiny breeds appealed to me. I looked at miniature Pomeranians (ugh—yappy!!), Yorkies, some of whom are really cute and some not so cute. Miniature dachsies, too barky though very sweet. Maltese were too active. Chihuahuas didn't appeal to me either, although two of my daughters have lovely ones, and they were the right size. And I looked at what I call the “poo” dogs, the current fashionable/popular combos of cockapoo, yorkiepoo, maltipoo, and a whole bunch of other “poos” that seemed unpredictable to me as to how big they would be, and what traits they would have of either breed. And I didn't want a French poodle, which seemed too fussy to me, and they bark a lot too. And all I needed was a dog that would bark for twelve hours straight on a plane. Two of my daughters fly for work constantly and take their dogs with them, a miniature Yorkie and a teacup Chihuahua, but I still wasn't convinced.

I looked at a Havanese, kind of a fluffball from Cuba, and several Japanese breeds, but I didn't fall in love with them either. I even went completely off the deep end with a very unusual breed, a “hairless Chinese Crested,” which looks like some kind of child's game where you put unrelated parts together. They have absolutely *no* fur, none, just skin with a lot of freckles, and at the end of their tail and on top of their head is a pouf of what looks like a bleached blond wig. It is the silliest-looking dog you've ever seen, and I loved the oddity of it, but it was so ugly that even I couldn't make myself take that leap, and it was going to be too big for the airline weight limit. I've written about a hairless Chinese Crested in a book, and really liked the breed because it was so incongruous. But the reality was a little too extreme. On top of it they frequently lose their teeth, and their tongues hang out! I often write dogs into my books, and have some real fun with it. It can add a wonderful element to a book.

A friend who went to a pet shop with me one day, in New York, was exasperated, and said, “*What* are you looking for?” I said I didn't know, but whatever it was, I would know it when

I saw it. I knew I had to fall in love with it, because otherwise all the work, time, energy and love I'd have to invest in it just wouldn't be worth it. I tried to explain that to me, a dog like a house or especially a person, has to be about "romance." The friend rolled his eyes at me. And by then I figured that I probably wouldn't get a dog to travel with me after all, since I had looked at dogs of every breed, and I was dogged (sorry!) about going to reliable pet stores and breeders I knew, and checking them out regularly for several months, but no dog had snagged my heart. Yet.

In early November, going through New York, on my way from Paris to California, I visited a pet store where I'd bought dogs before. I looked all the dogs over and saw nothing I fell in love with and was about to leave, when one of the salesmen I know well looked at me conspiratorially and said, "Wait." I stood there, wondering what he had in mind, nearly convinced that I'd be traveling alone forever, when he emerged with the tiniest dog imaginable in his arms. She was snow white, with enormous ears. She had ears and a face a bit like Yoda in *Star Wars*, big brown eyes, and a tiny milk-chocolate brown nose. She seemed very timid, but gazed straight at me. She weighed barely a pound, and fit in one of my hands (and I have very small hands, as I am a small person). He handed her to me, and she put her head on my shoulder and wrapped her mouse-sized paws around my neck. Bingo!!! It was love at first sight. She was a teacup Chihuahua, but small even for her breed. They said that she would weigh two or three pounds at most, full grown. She was eight weeks old. She was so tiny I was almost afraid to hold her—she looked more like a large mouse. Her ears were ridiculously oversize, and I kept reminding myself that I didn't want a dog that small. What if someone stepped on her? Even my daughters' Chihuahuas were hardier, this one was so tiny. I reasoned with myself as I stood there, telling myself that I needed something sturdier to travel with, that I never wanted a Chihuahua, that I would now officially become one of those weird old women with pink hair carrying a Chihuahua in a pink sweater. And as I told myself all the reasons why I didn't/shouldn't want her, I heard a voice say "I'll take her." Who said that? Omigod, I did! What had I just done? A Chihuahua? But you can't argue with love once it hits.

I had the same feeling I'd had about Greta all those years before, when she'd arrived uninvited from Ohio, with her funny face and class-three malocclusion underbite. I was in love, which was what I had said I wanted, regardless of breed. If I wanted to fall in love, that was it. And how could I fall in love with a dog? Don't ask me how, but I did. My daughter Victoria was with me, who encouraged me to get her, and at least two of my other daughters had warned me that I didn't need another dog and said it was a stupid idea. But stupid or not, I did it. Feeling dazed and a little giddy and actually guilty for being so self-indulgent, I handed them my credit card and bought her, as they told me she was too young to take with me, and I'd have to wait three or four more weeks to take her home.

Victoria, who was my partner in crime that day, offered to bring her when she came home for Thanksgiving, and I then proceeded to pick out pink water bowls, two beds, a bunch of collars that looked small enough for a hamster, and the smallest toys they had, which were bigger than she was. I was besotted, and my children's predictions were already coming true. I had owned her for five minutes, and I was already turning into one of those weird women I was terrified of becoming. I had become the owner of a tiny white long-haired teacup Chihuahua, and I had the frightening feeling that my life was about to change dramatically.

And with the same kind of exultation mixed with terror you feel when you meet someone you are instantly crazy about, I went back to my hotel, knowing I had fallen in love with a one-pound dog. But who could resist those tiny mouse paws around my neck? For me, a puppy promises love and cozy moments, companionship and comfort, and that feeling that a life is well in the world. In a way, it is a sign of hope.

It was late afternoon when I left the tiny white puppy at the pet shop, and I had dinner plans that night, and I came back to the pet shop alone that evening before dinner to hold her again. And as we saw each other and she snuggled in my arms, I knew I was hooked. She didn't even have a name yet. My daughter had suggested Yoda because she looked like him.

I was thinking of Blanche Neige, which is Snow White in French. And when I told a friend about her, he suggested Minnie Mouse, which seemed perfect for her. Minnie. I loved her almost as much as I loved the tiny white Chihuahua.

Life suddenly seems so simple when you fall in love with a puppy. I smiled every time I thought of her. And no matter how crazy anyone thought I was to get her, I knew I had done the right thing. In an imperfect world full of heartbreak and disappointments, after looking high and low for her for several months, Minnie Mouse and I had found each other. It was exactly what I had hoped for when I started looking, it was true love. What more could I want?



Baby Minnie comes home
Alessandro Calderano

THREE

Minnie Comes Home

Knowing that Minnie wouldn't arrive in San Francisco for a few weeks, it took me a while to confess to what I'd done. Puppy? What puppy? Where? We had taken a few snapshots of her with a cell phone, and I started showing them to friends. She looked so sweet nestled in my hand. I told my children about her, some of whom declared me officially insane. They reminded me that I had dogs in San Francisco—what was I doing buying another dog? Fortunately, Victoria kept assuring me I'd done the right thing and remained enthusiastic, which kept me from having second thoughts. I tried explaining to the others that she would travel with me, which made sense to one or two of them.

But for the most part my kids shook their heads, and one earnestly said to me, "Now don't go all weird on us." But let's be realistic. In today's world having nine kids already makes me "different." How many people do that nowadays? And if being crazy about a puppy would make me officially eccentric, did I really care? Probably not. Why not? I find that as time goes by, Why not? is often the right answer. Why not do something you love? Why not take a chance and do something new, or stick your neck out, or even fall in love with a puppy? Why was I hurting by stretching my heart to include one more tiny being? Was that really so terrible? I think not.

Also, more than most of us like to admit, it's a lonely world, at every age. My kids have grown up and have their own very busy lives, and many of them have moved to other cities and now so have I. I am only at home in San Francisco part-time, and even when I am, my kids in the same city are too busy to spend much time with me, which is as it should be. They have jobs, careers, spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, lives. I don't expect them to sit around holding my hand. Once upon a time my house was filled with my kids, and their army of friends, and their many dogs. I was married and juggling an overfull life like a high-wire act balancing a salami on my nose. Now my house is quiet, only one "child" lives at home—she recently graduated from college, and she works all day and is out every night. And what kid in their twenties wants to hang around with their parents? None that I know. But that leaves the parents to fill their lives as best they can. It works better (I think, but who knows?) if you are married or have a partner to share your life with. If not, it makes for some very long quiet nights, compared to what it was when married with kids at home. As one friend says, "That was then, this is now," allegedly a Chinese proverb. And the last thing I want to do personally, is hang on my children and expect them to fill the voids in my life. They have their own lives to live and destinies to follow, and I have mine. I had those same busy years in my twenties, discovering the world that they are entering now. I don't expect or even want them to drag me along like so much baggage. They need to be free to pursue their own paths. But then I have to follow my own, and change is not always easy when, for one reason or another, unexpectedly, you are alone.

In the game of life's musical chairs, you don't always get a chair, and then it's up to us to figure out how to fill our time and make it a good life. I'm very fortunate to have work that I really enjoy, good friends, and wonderful kids. But I find that no one who is still married

in partnership realizes or remembers how incredibly silent and lonely life can be when you're alone. Can a dog take the place of a person you love? No. A dog is not a person. But lacking a human to spend your time and life with, a dog can be a wonderful companion, warm your heart, and make you feel good about life. A dog can be an antidote to depression, a good excuse to get exercise, someone/something to take care of, to dedicate yourself to, even something to worry about. A dog can make you smile, or just snuggle with you at night. They make the elderly feel loved and teach the young to be responsible. There are many, many good reasons to have a dog.

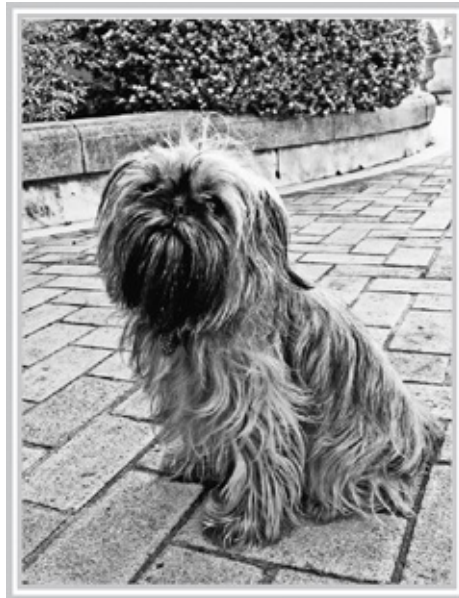
And loneliness is not unique to the elderly or even the middle-aged. I think solitude and loneliness are the new *mal du siècle* and affect every age. I see young people who are extremely lonely now. It's a tough subject, but suicide is more common now among the young than ever before. Something is missing in our lives. And some of the technological advancements (texting, e-mail) have made it fabulously easy to communicate, but they leave people without companionship and the everyday contact with other humans that has been an important constant in our lives, or even the sound of a human voice. (Most young people text each other, and don't call.)

More and more, young people are doing independent studies in college, which is probably more interesting than sitting through boring lectures, but it removes them from daily contact with other kids their age. Similarly, many jobs are done by computer from home now, and businesses are started from home to keep overhead low, which again means no daily contact with other people. And the sudden appearance in recent years of online dating services is a strong indicator that people are having a hard time meeting. Romances begin and end online often with too little contact in between. Texting has almost replaced the phone, so suddenly you don't hear the voice of someone you care about. Young people actually end romances and "dump" each other by text. (What incredibly bad manners!!)

We have lost a lot of contact with other living beings. (And I know for myself that I get far more work done at home, without distractions, than I ever did in an office, but it is much more solitary, and you meet fewer people that way.) The world has changed. And many young people prefer urban colleges and universities to campuses in rural areas. And once in an urban setting, they are alone in studio apartments at eighteen or nineteen, leading the lives that used to be reserved for twenty-three- and twenty-five-year-olds after college. For a multitude of reasons, many people are isolated now, have less opportunity to meet new people of either sex, at every age. And they need companionship in that void. A dog won't change all of that, but it provides undeniable companionship, affection, and even humor in circumstances where people find themselves alone.

I know that my own children, previously in urban colleges, and now in the early years of their careers, have derived enormous comfort from their dogs. Our dogs become an important part of our lives, not to replace people, but as an added solace and support system that is not negligible. To non-dog-lovers, that affection for their dogs may be hard to understand, but I think it has strong emotional and psychological value, which cannot be denied. And studies have shown that the elderly derive great joy from dogs too. We all need love, it doesn't always come from the sources we hope for, but if it can be provided by a devoted, loving animal, what harm is there in that? For me, my loving puppy can really take the edge off a bad day, when she makes me smile or laugh.

So although many people, or even some of my kids, may not have understood why I'd wa the inconvenience of a new dog, it made perfect sense to me. And yes, any other living being in your life can be an inconvenience. But love is inconvenient, life is inconvenient, even a canary is inconvenient. (You have to clean its cage.) But along with the chores and responsibilities comes the incredible blessing of loving and being loved. It sounds like a good trade-off to me. And as someone wise said, "Love is messy." What isn't? A puppy is messy. But I think the "messy" part is worth all the great stuff that comes with it. My kids were "messy" too, my marriages and the men I was married to, but I wouldn't trade a minute of the life I shared with them. But there is no doubt for me, the love of a dog is a great consolation prize now that the kids are gone!!



My current Brussels griffon, my favorite: Gracie
Cassio Alves

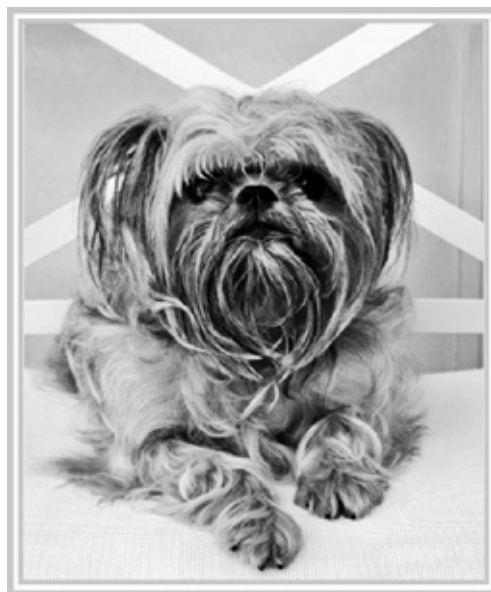


Ruby, one of my Brussels griffs
Cassio Alves

So I began preparing for Minnie's arrival. I felt considerable remorse toward my other dogs. Every time I left Gracie to go to Paris, she always looked so sad when she saw my valises come out, although I leave her with good people at my home to care for her. But I feel guilty not being able to take her or my other griffs with me. Try explaining to a faithful dog that she is three pounds over the weight limit for Air France! And introducing Minnie seemed like bringing a new baby home. She was going to be an interloper, an intruder, and being so young and tiny, she was going to get all the attention for a while. Ugh. I felt like a beast. Worse yet, this wasn't an ordinary-size puppy I could introduce to my other dogs. True confessions: I have four miniature Brussels griffs. Gracie is very much a lady, gentle to the core, and I knew she would cause no harm even to a one-pound puppy. One pound? I have shoes that are bigger and weigh more than that. A Big Mac is bigger than that. Which is also why I had never wanted such a tiny dog. I literally had nightmares, imagining her slipping into some tiny space on the airplane when we traveled, or getting stuck under my bed at home. She was soooo small!!!

And while I trusted Gracie with her, I didn't trust my other dogs. Ruby, the youngest, bigger than Gracie and exuberant, and loves to swat things. One fast-moving paw, even in play, could have broken Minnie's back. It was definitely more like having a mouse than a dog! And my two other griffs, Meg and Hope, were older and crankier and were not likely to take kindly to her, and I was not willing to take that risk. So Minnie would have to be separate from the other dogs, which took some planning and organizing as to who would be where when. Minnie had to be protected from the other dogs.

I was also worried about people stepping on her, and the solution I came up with was a baby playpen to keep her in, to keep her safe. Now she is full grown at two pounds, and she runs around freely, but whenever I want to keep her safe if there are too many people around (like a Sunday-night casual dinner party in my Paris kitchen), I put her in the playpen and she's happy there. The vet had also warned me that I couldn't sleep with her—I could roll over on her and kill her, or she could fall off the bed—so I still put her in the playpen to sleep at night. It is a perfect place to keep her safe. I cuddle with her before I go to sleep, but then I place her in her bed in the playpen. I wish I could put her in bed with me, she's so cozy, but I just can't. (Gracie spends the night on my bed, and sometimes Ruby too, hopping on and off occasionally.) A dog as tiny as Minnie is a big responsibility.



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