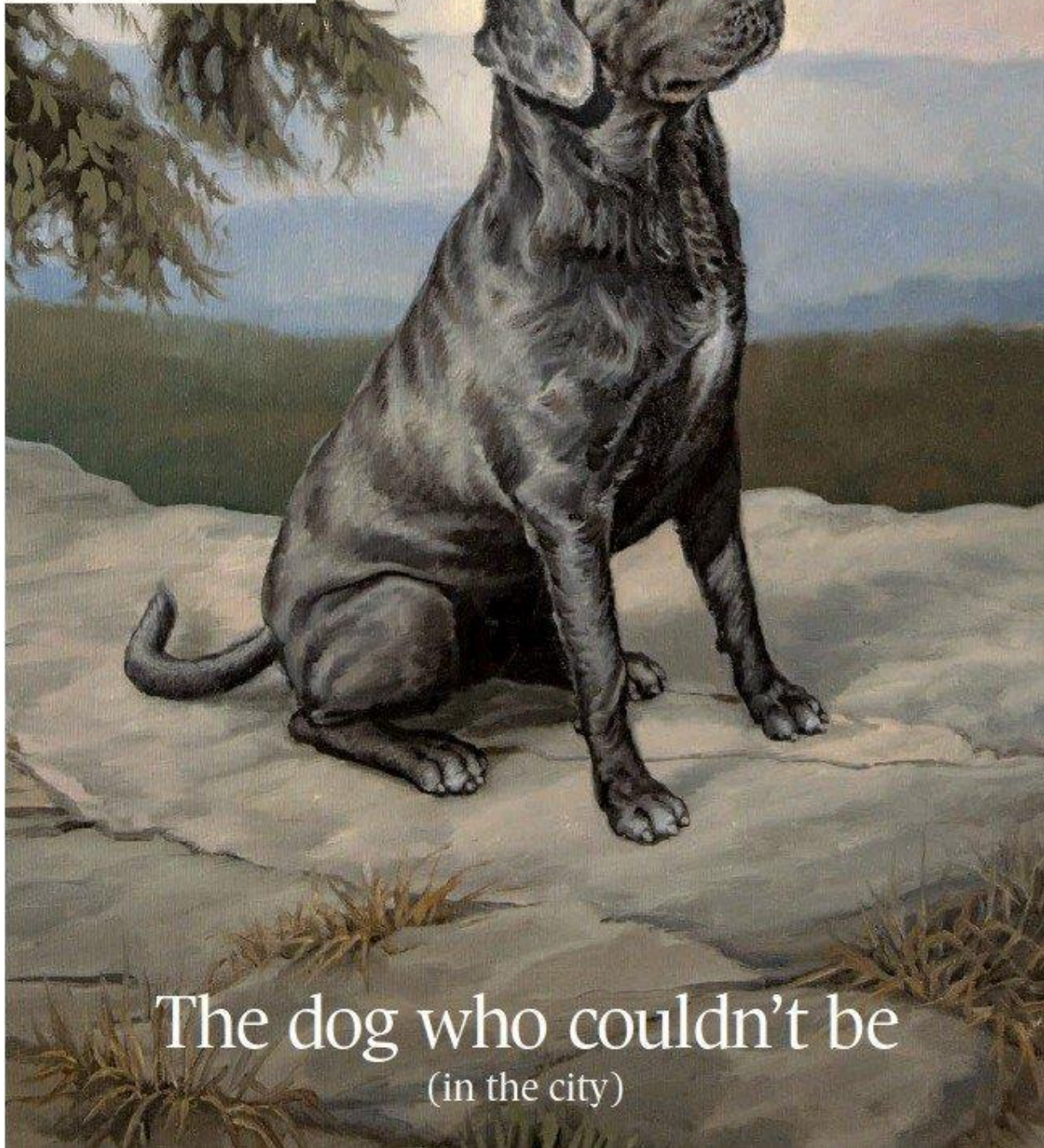


THE
GLOBE
AND
MAIL

Opinion^{*}

SATURDAY, AUGUST 20, 2022

GLOBEANDMAIL.COM



The dog who couldn't be
(in the city)

My family adopted a sweet puppy from a neighbour, but as she grew larger and more unruly, she taught us a tough lesson about canines' behaviours and non-material needs, Naomi Buck writes

Four years ago, our family got a dog. It didn't come from the humane society or a breeder or a rescue operation. Lucy was a gift, given to us by a big-hearted neighbour who thought a dog might fill the void left behind by an absent father. And she did, burrowing her way so deep into the bedrock of our family that we couldn't imagine life without her.

Many Canadians will relate. Whether a function of urbanization, our estrangement from nature, or a millennial generation that is opting for pets over children, we are turning to dogs.

In 2019, the Canadian Animal Health Institute estimated that 41 per cent of Canadian households owned at least one dog and the number has only grown since. An April, 2021, survey commissioned by the pet food brand Purina estimated that 10 per cent of Canadians had taken on a new dog or cat since the beginning of the pandemic. And in a trend industry experts call "humanization," Canadians are spending unprecedented sums on their dogs – in 2020, \$2.8-billion on dog food alone, treating them as full family members, worthy of all the creature comforts.

Lucy taught us a tough lesson about dogs' nonmaterial needs.

Like many things about her, Lucy's origin story was unusual. In the spring of 2018, our neighbour Pat learned from a work colleague of a golden retriever that had been abandoned in Markham, Ont.

Pat took the dog in and quickly noticed her fear of brooms, basements and large men.

Scars on Lola's snout suggested that it had once been barb-wired shut. And then Pat noticed something else: Lola's girth was expanding.

Whatever lay in Lola's past, Pat was determined to give her a better future. On a hot June afternoon, she placed Lola in the plastic wading pool she had salvaged from curbside garbage for the purpose. And Lola began to whelp.

With each new puppy, Pat leaned out her bathroom window and announced its arrival to the kids playing street hockey on the crescent below. When Lola was done, Pat invited my sons in. They marvelled at the pile of seven black puppies nuzzling at Lola's teats.

Pat asked if they'd like to have one. I expected my mother, whose house we live in, to turn down the offer, but when those puppies started licking Granny's sandalled feet, she caved.

Lucy came to us two months later, the size of a small breadbox. She had sleek black fur with white splotches. Her sad eyes and wrinkled forehead gave her a look of premature Weltschmerz. She also had disarmingly large paws.

"What kind of dog is she?" we were asked at every turn.

I was agnostic about breed, glad to be giving a mutt a home. I liked dogs generally. Charlie, a genial salt-and-pepper miniature Schnauzer, had been the linchpin of our family growing up. But it was clear from the dog-owner pairs parading through our midtown neighbourhood that Lucy would not share Charlie's free-range 1980s lifestyle – ushered out the front door every morning to explore the wilds of North Toronto on his own.

We enrolled in a standard group training course at the local Pet Smart. Gathering weekly with other new puppy-owners, we learned the rudiments of sit, stay and come in the megastore: parking our wards between stacks of memory-foam dog beds and beckoning them down the aisle into the hypoallergenic kibble section.

Lucy passed with flying colours.

She was thriving. She played regularly with her posse of friends in the local park: a circus of chasing, nipping and tumbling interspersed with bouts of lolling and licking. We humans looked on, transfixed by the pure animal joy.

She was also growing. At Thanksgiving, my sons hoisted Lucy onto their wagon and pulled her to the butcher shop to pick up the turkey. By Easter half a year later, the roles were reversed; Lucy was harnessed and hitched to the wagon, pulling the boys down the street.

Lucy had become a beloved member of the family. My mother had long since forgiven her for chewing off the base of her grandmother's mahogany bachelor's chest. If the kids weren't playing with her or teaching

her tricks, they were patting her, confiding in her or lying next to her, wrapped around her impressive body. Every now and again, Lucy would stop mid-walk, sit and just take the world in.

She would watch the sky, as though she knew something we didn't.

"Sometimes I like to just sit with Lucy and breathe," my hyperkinetic nine-year-old once told me.

Speculation about Lucy's ancestry was continuing. Some pointed to the bump bone on her head as evidence of Great Dane, others saw Rottweiler in her barrel chest, but the majority opinion was settling on Cane Corso, an Italian breed of mastiff described by the American Kennel Club as "smart, trainable and of noble bearing.

Whatever she was, her dogness was asserting itself. She was becoming more territorial, barking when the doorbell rang and waking around 4 a.m. with a low growl, anticipating, through some sixth canine sense, the arrival of the newspaper delivery man a few minutes later.

In our backyard, she would converse with her mother two yards down, or bark at the family of raccoons nesting in the neighbour's shed. A Noisy Animal Complaint from the City of Toronto arrived in the mail, lodged by an anonymous neighbour.

Leashed walks were increasingly a test of brawn. Snout to the ground, Lucy jerked this way and that, reading our neighbourhood like an olfactory thriller. In the park, she crouched pantherlike to stalk squirrels, coming within millimetres of their tails as they scrambled up trees. It wasn't long before she had her first catch – a scrawny specimen whose escape route took an unfortunate turn into a hockey net. There were more to follow.

We decided Lucy needed more training, but it wasn't easy to choose from the reams of local trainers we found online. Most were booked for weeks, if not months, and their various credentials and approaches meant nothing to me.

We tried Don. Standing in our front hall, sporting a man bun and pouch of homemade beef jerky, he cast a spell of calm over us all. Everything he recommended – about rewarding good behaviour and punishing bad – seemed sensible, if a bit obvious. Lucy sidled down the sidewalk next to him, a model of canine obedience.

But Lucy's behaviour was only getting worse. Occasionally she would lunge, hackles-raised, at an approaching dog. The incidents were impossible to predict; no identifiable trait – breed, gender or size – triggered her. If you didn't divert in time, you would find yourself water-skiing behind her, or wrapped around a tree.

One September morning in Lucy's second year, as she was playing happily with a friend in the park, a third dog sauntered over to say hello. Something about the dog's abrupt entry, or the toy it was carrying in its mouth, set Lucy off. She flipped the dog on its back and bore down on it. I yanked Lucy back, but the other dog's retractable leash was ensnared on her collar; the dogs were attached at the neck. The other owner stood screaming, coffee traveller in one hand, leash unspooling in the other.

We eventually separated the dogs, but that owner never forgave me – and Lucy never forgave that dog. It became one of a small but growing number of local dogs that we needed to steer clear of.

Dogs are private property, but there's a collective dimension to dog ownership in a city. Some owners are alert to the sensitivities of other dogs and make eye contact or ask before approaching. Others consider reactive dogs not their problem and proceed without caution. Conflicts between dogs quickly become conflicts between humans. Walking Lucy was stressful.

We tried another trainer. He slipped a steel-pronged choke collar – one that constricts when pulled – around Lucy's neck and suggested we graduate to an e-collar that emits electric shocks as correctives. On a brisk walk through an industrial park, he showed us how to hold Lucy's head high and to yank her back whenever she attempted to walk ahead. She wasn't allowed to sniff or explore. These were the rules of engagement. I began to ask myself: Where does our right to shape Lucy end, and her right to just be a dog begin?

Over all, Lucy was still a boon. She was gentle with children, allowing little ones to ride on her back and lovingly licking my sons' perennial cuts and scrapes, and would lie quietly at the feet of anyone who was sick or sad. When we took her out as a family, she agitated if she lost sight of any one of us. As her forebears have done throughout human history, Lucy completed our social unit.

We were determined to domesticate Lucy without crushing her spirit. Sampling every harness on the market, we hitched her leash variously to her chest, back and snout, trying to maximize our control of her 90-pound frame.

We stocked our pockets with treats to distract her from any possible provocation. And we hired a dog walker who, twice a week, piled Lucy into a van full of dogs and drove them to a stretch of wilderness to run free. I was also taking Lucy regularly into Toronto's ravines. For every kilometre I walked, she ran 10, bounding up and down the embankments, leaping over fallen trees, charging into swamps and wrangling the biggest branches she could find out of the bush to present to me like trophies.

It was on one of those walks, on a December afternoon, that Lucy got into her first real bit of trouble. Wild temperature swings had turned the Don Valley into a skating rink; the footing was treacherous and there wasn't a soul around. Then we rounded a bend and came upon a woman with three small brown dogs. Just as I called Lucy to put her on leash, the woman threw a stick and one of her dogs came bounding toward us to retrieve it.

Lucy pounced and the dogs skidded across the sheer ice, Lucy on top. Lucy was at least twice the other dog's size. By the time we had separated them, the other dog was limping.

The owner filed a complaint against Lucy with the City of Toronto's Animal Services. As laid out in Toronto's Municipal Code, the City will investigate reports of "any bite, attack, act of menacing behaviour" to determine if the perpetrator merits designation as a "dangerous dog." The label brings with it severe restrictions: The dog must be muzzled in public and isn't allowed in offleash parks.

Jasmine Herzog, manager of enforcement with Toronto's Animal Services, says that investigators take the designation very seriously; in recent years, only a fraction of – roughly one in 20 – complaints have resulted in the issuance of dangerous dog orders. Lucy was one of those exonerated, deemed to pose no risk to public safety.

In a city as dog-dense as Toronto, the potential for conflict lurks around every corner. Since 2018, there has been a 33-percent rise in the number of dangerous dog complaints filed in Toronto, from 1,680 in 2018 to 1,167 in the first half of 2022 alone.

Toronto trainer Kelly Munro says this has less to do with the increase in dogs than in firsttime owners: People who were looking for uncomplicated companionship during the pandemic and have been overwhelmed by the complexity of real live animals.

But while some pandemic dog owners have given up, the broader trend is a deepening commitment. People are willing to do just about anything for their dogs. **Toronto-based animal lawyer Jennifer Friedman estimates that a good third of her practice is given over to owners seeking to have dangerous dog designations removed or contesting charges levelled against their dogs under the provincial Dog Owners Liability Act. In the past two decades, she has seen the field of animal law move from virtual non-existence into the mainstream.**

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We were willing to do just about anything for Lucy, but we didn't want to involve lawyers or to live in constant fear of something she might do. It's deeply unsettling to be responsible for something you don't understand.

Dog trainers draw a clear distinction between protective and aggressive behaviour and the ones who met Lucy were convinced that hers was the former; that she was motivated not by a lust for combat, but a bred-in-the-bone instinct to protect. Cane Corsi, if that what she partly was, served as bodyguards in ancient Rome.

But this line of reasoning – a kind of canine mens rea – only goes so far. Other owners don't care why your dog had gone after theirs. They just care about their dog. Thankfully, Lucy seemed able to calibrate her physicality, to make her point without doing damage; she never broke skin.

I found myself travelling farther and farther afield to avoid any encounters whatsoever. Walking Lucy along abandoned rail beds and overgrown paths in the Don and Humber Valleys, I discovered a subculture of fellow outcasts: 150-pound Neapolitan Mastiffs, ex-guard dogs, traumatized rescues. We owners would

cautiously allow our dogs to sniff each other while exchanging tales of their particular quirks and pathologies.

One day in early spring, on the wooded slope above the North Toronto Wastewater Treatment plant, Lucy was frolicking happily with a shepherd mix when a switch flicked and the play turned into a fight. I flung myself on top of the dogs and grabbed hold of Lucy. The other owner made no recriminations, just acknowledged that this was the reality of owning a large, reactive dog.

I was tiring of that reality. I began to contemplate the unthinkable. Other dog owners were appalled: you can't give a dog away, you'll destroy it. Myriad suggestions came my way: canine CBD oil, dog psychologists, boarding and training camps in the country that cost \$5,000 a month.

We decided to try a "behavioural modification specialist." Deena Cooper exuded serenity as she entered our home. Ignoring a furiously barking Lucy, she moved in slow motion into the kitchen, where I was baking a cake for my son's birthday while fending off work calls. Dogs respond best to calm energy, she explained. It occurred to me that calmness was not our family's strong point.

Like many dog behaviouralists today, Deena did not subscribe to the one-time tenet that an owner needs to be an alpha; she dismissed my creeping suspicion that we would be having no trouble with Lucy if there was a man in the house.

Deena advised me to rein Lucy in; no more off-leash walks, no more playing with other dogs. She was to wear a leash in the house. And several times a day, we were to put Lucy in a sit, stand in front of her and stare into her eyes. It was all about connection.

I did a lot of staring in the weeks that followed. Holding a piece of freeze-dried liver under

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my chin, I looked deep into Lucy's honey-brown eyes, wondering what was going on behind them: if she had any inkling that her future with us hung in the balance.

It only took one more incident. Disembarking from her walker's car, Lucy charged an Australian Shepherd walking down the opposite sidewalk. Its only sin was to live on our street. The dog was fine, the owner forgiving, but a line had been crossed.

Surrendering a dog implies defeat. I was determined not to frame it that way. We would find a better home for Lucy, one that offered her the life she deserved. We wouldn't hand her over to the Humane Society or a rescue organization; they were already swamped with pandemic puppy rejects and returns. We would give her to someone, just as she had been given to us.

I put the word out with friends. A family soon contacted me, friends of my aunt. They lived on 50 acres an hour northwest of Toronto. They'd only ever owned big dogs and were looking for a companion for their black lab. They invited us to visit.

On a frigid April day earlier this year, my sons and I drove Lucy to their farm. They were extraordinarily warm people, a semi-retired couple with two young adult daughters. Lucy ran huge arcs over the windswept fields and retrieved one stick after the next from the woods, offering them in a friendly tug-of-war to their lab. The dogs got along, so did the humans. It felt undeniably right.

A week later, I packed Lucy's bed, blanket and most beloved pig femur into the car. My kids left the house, unable to watch her go. At the farm, we walked the fields again. Lucy's bliss was infectious. I had stopped questioning my decision. And then, standing inside the front door of the farmhouse, preparing to leave, a scream came from a back room. One of the daughters appeared, holding a lifeless cat.

We had discussed the cats. They had perches and flap doors; the family were convinced they were dog-proof.

Ten minutes later, Lucy and I were Toronto-bound. I briefly wondered if she had consciously sabotaged the plan, but decided no, she was just being a dog.

In the months that followed, I felt like we were harbouring a fugitive. I reinforced our back fence to ensure that Lucy could never escape. Deprived of ravine walks, she ran manic circles around the backyard and dug crater-sized holes in our euonymus bush.

Then John called. Married to a former classmate of mine, he had seen a private post I had shared on social media. John and his family lived outside Ottawa. They were riders and hunters, country people. John, who

once served in the Canadian military, said he connected with the animality of powerful dogs. In each of Lucy's vices, John saw virtues.

On a grey June day, I drove Lucy eastward along the 401. She stood panting in the trunk. She often refused to lie down on long drives, as though in protest. By the time we arrived at our meeting-place, a dog park in a small eastern Ontario town, it was beginning to drizzle.

Lucy leapt out of the trunk and ran into the fenced park. John's two daughters were all over her – calling her, throwing sticks, offering her treats. They took her down to the river to chase some Canadian geese. They were as excited as she was.

When we returned to the cars, John called Lucy into his. She trustingly hopped in. She stared at me through the rear window as the car pulled away.

Lucy wailed through her first night; John described it as the saddest sound in the world. When she was let outside, Lucy went straight to the car and sat next to it, waiting to be taken back to where she belonged. But after a few days, her tail wagged. She began chewing bones. Soon she was barking at squirrels out their back window.

We still miss Lucy: the wet nose that nudged us out of bed in the mornings, the whole-body wag that greeted us when we came through the front door. But Lucy is still there. She was never really ours anyway.