



DOG = GOD

ORION SAINT

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THE NOVEL AND TWO COMPANION BOOKS

Collected edition

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PART ONE

First Impressions of the Two-Legged Species

1. He Smelled Like Bread and Sadness

The shelter described itself as a place of new beginnings. This was printed above the door through which people left without us.

I had been there nineteen days. Thirty-eight meals, allowing for the afternoon they forgot and the additional scoop the evening volunteer gave me when she discovered it. Humans regard apologies as a form of nourishment. That woman understood the limits of the arrangement.

My card said BUDDY. Below this were three facts about me, two of which had been disputed by the staff. I was a shepherd mix, a Labrador mix, or an administrative inconvenience. My age was ADULT. There was room on the card for a more precise answer, but nobody had used it.

One of my ears stood up. The other had considered the available evidence and declined. My coat was the colour of toast after the conversation has become more interesting than the toast. Visitors said I had kind eyes. They usually said this on their way to a younger dog.

To my left, Biscuit was conducting a campaign against the existence of walls. To my right, Daisy shook even when she slept. Across the aisle, Murray, a Great Dane, stood with his forehead against the bars. Of all of us, Murray had the least spare dog to turn around in.

At weekends the families came. Children wanted puppies. Parents wanted dogs who would not become work. The volunteers, who had spent the morning removing work from the floor, tried to find a tactful way of discussing this.

I watched shoes. Shoes tell you where a person has been, which is more useful than where they claim to be going. Most stopped briefly at my kennel. Some did not stop at all. The shoes that stopped longest generally belonged to volunteers with cleaning equipment.

Steve arrived after the morning meal. His coat had recently been rained on and not entirely dried. There was bread in one pocket, or there had been bread in it so often that the distinction no longer mattered. He held a folded form. A woman at the desk had given him a pen attached to a string, as though writing his address might provoke him to flee with it.

He walked past me.

This was disappointing without being new. I rested my chin on my paws and watched his trousers travel down the aisle. At Biscuit he stopped. Biscuit explained the walls. At Daisy he bent his knees but did not put his fingers through the wire. He stayed longest with Murray.

Murray leaned forward. Steve leaned forward. For a while it looked settled.

I closed my eyes. There is a point in waiting when the muscles around your face become tired of expressing an interest in your future.

The shoes came back.

I knew before I opened my eyes that he was looking at me. People have an odour when they are about to make a decision. It is not quite fear. It is fear putting on decent clothes.

Steve crouched. His knees made a noise. He looked at my upright ear, then at the other one, and a breath escaped him

that might have been the beginning of a laugh if it had known where to go.

"Hello," he said.

Nobody had required him to say it. The volunteers spoke to us because we were there; visitors spoke to us because they were visiting. Steve said hello as though he had entered a room and found somebody in it.

I raised my head.

Under the bread was the smell I had been trying to place. A closed room. Fabric left folded. The water in a vase after the flowers have been taken away. It was not a bad smell. I would have preferred a bad smell. Those can often be addressed by opening a window.

He held his hand near the bars. I approached at a speed that allowed either of us to reconsider. There was soap on his fingers, printer dust, and the old trace of another dog.

"This is Buddy," said the volunteer, arriving with her clipboard.

Steve glanced at the card.

"Is that his name?"

"It's what we've been calling him."

He looked back at me. "Doesn't seem like his name."

It wasn't. It was a useful noise, and I had accepted it because accepting it made meals arrive. But there was something agreeable about his noticing that a label could be inaccurate without its subject being at fault.

The volunteer described my temperament. I stood beside them while she explained me. Apparently I was calm, affectionate, and suited to a quiet household. This last assessment had been made in a building where Biscuit was trying to remove a wall by shouting at it.

"He may need a little patience," she added.

Steve nodded. "So might I."

She did not write that down. I appreciated her discretion.

We went into the meeting room, which contained a chair, a rubber ball, and a poster listing the benefits of companionship. Steve sat. I inspected the corners. The ball had been consulted by many dogs and had very little left to contribute.

For a minute he let me investigate without calling me over. Then he rested his hand beside his knee, palm open. I crossed the room and put my nose in it.

He scratched behind the ear that did not stand up. He found the place at once. I leaned before I intended to. He did not make a ceremony of it, or withdraw his hand to see whether I would ask again.

"You don't have to decide today," the volunteer said from the doorway.

Steve's fingers stopped.

I had been in rooms before where a human said something reassuring and a second human used it as permission to leave. I kept my head against his knee. This was not dignity. Dignity had had nineteen days to find me a home.

"No," he said. "I think today."

There followed a period of paperwork during which I was prevented from eating the paperwork. Steve signed three times. He was given instructions, a bag of food, and a telephone number to call if things went wrong. The volunteer asked about a yard and about his working hours. He answered without making himself sound particularly impressive. She seemed to prefer this.

At the final question he paused.

"You're sure?"

"No," he said. He looked down at me. "But I'm taking him home."

The volunteer smiled properly then. She clipped a blue leash to a blue collar and handed it to him.

On our way out, Biscuit interrupted his campaign to watch. Daisy was curled at the back of her kennel. Murray lifted his head. I had no useful explanation to offer any of them. I had not become a better dog that morning. A particular pair of shoes had come back.

At the front door Steve stopped to put the bag under his arm. The leash made a loose curve between us. I could have walked faster. I could have dragged him towards the light. Instead I waited while he arranged his possessions, including me, into something he could carry.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go home."

The word was unfamiliar in its application to me. I understood the going.

Outside, a breeze moved across my face. There was hot rubber, distant grass, a sandwich in a bin, and the trail of every dog who had come through the door before me. Some had left willingly. Some had been carried. I stood still long enough to learn that leaving had many smells.

Steve waited. Then we crossed the parking lot together, towards a grey machine with an open mouth.

I had selected my human with considerable care. It was becoming apparent that this did not guarantee his judgment.

2. The Moving Room with Windows

The car was the colour of weather that has been referred to a committee. It sat within two white lines, making the occasional ticking noise. Steve approached it with the confidence of a man who had forgotten that other people were entitled to find his arrangements appalling.

He opened a rear door.

“In you go.”

I sat down.

He tried a different tone. The proposed destination remained unchanged.

Cars and I were not complete strangers. Before the shelter there had been vehicles, but my recollection of them was mostly a door closing and no opportunity to contribute to the route. I could smell the old dog in this one. He had occupied the seat for years. That was either a recommendation or a warning, and he had neglected to leave instructions.

Steve placed the food bag on the ground and crouched beside me.

“It’s all right.”

He said it quietly enough that I could inspect the claim. His hand was steady. The rest of him was less certain. I liked that he had not attempted to conceal it by becoming loud.

He spread a blanket across the seat. It had come from the trunk, where it had absorbed oil, cardboard, and the previous dog’s weather. I put my front paws on the sill. Steve supported my back end without commenting on the need for this. Then I was inside.

He attached a strap to the harness the shelter had fitted. I disliked the strap but approved of the blanket. A dog can hold several political positions at once.

When the door closed, I pressed my nose against the window. Steve disappeared from view. For a moment the parking lot contained all the things I could not get to, and he was one of them.

Then he came around the front and opened his own door.

This improved the situation. Whatever the machine intended, it would have to deal with both of us.

Steve settled behind the wheel. He adjusted a mirror until it contained my face. I looked back at him through it. He smiled, cautiously, as if the smile itself might require prior experience.

"Right," he said.

The car woke underneath us. The vibration entered my paws and continued into the parts of me that had not volunteered to travel. I stood, sat, and stood again. Steve looked in the mirror.

"You can lie down."

I was aware of the procedure. The question was whether the floor would remain where I put it.

We moved.

The shelter slid backwards. A person carrying a box became a smaller person carrying a smaller box. The white lines left without asking. I made a noise which caused Steve to stop before we reached the road.

He switched off the engine.

For a while neither of us did anything. Outside, a shopping bag travelled along the fence and caught on a wire. I watched it struggle. Steve watched me in the mirror.

"We don't have to do it quickly," he said.

This was the first sensible thing anyone had said about the journey.

He got out, opened my door, and sat sideways on the edge of the seat. I could smell his coat without reaching. He rested his hand against my shoulder. The bag remained

trapped on the fence. The world appeared to be continuing under its own power.

Eventually my breathing slowed. Steve waited a little longer than necessary, which turned out to be necessary.

On the second attempt I lay on the blanket. We travelled to the gate, paused, and joined the road. Things went past much too fast to be examined. A bush appeared and was gone before I could establish who had visited it. I began to understand why humans looked dissatisfied when they returned from places. They had missed almost everything.

Steve talked while he drove.

He told me there was a yard. He apologised for its size, then for the state of the grass, then mentioned a garden he had intended to start. By the time we reached the first red light he had presented a detailed account of the yard's failures. It sounded excellent.

"There's a tree," he added.

At last, relevant information.

In the car beside us, a child pointed. Her father looked over. His expression changed when he saw me. For a moment he was no longer a man waiting at a light with somewhere else to be. He waved. I considered acknowledging him but decided not to overextend myself on my first day.

Steve saw the wave and gave a brief nod. It seemed to embarrass him pleasantly that we had become a visible arrangement.

The light changed. We went on.

"I haven't done this since Buddy," he said after a while.

He did not seem to be speaking to me. His eyes stayed on the road, but his voice had entered another room. I recognised the name from my card and then recognised the smell from the blanket. Humans reuse words. Dogs have to do the finer work ourselves.

"Different circumstances," he said.

He waited, as though someone might answer from the empty place beside him.

I put my nose between the front seats. The harness allowed this much. His elbow was near enough to touch, and I touched it.

He looked in the mirror again.

"Yeah," he said. "You don't need all that on the way home."

He turned the radio on. A voice offered him a more efficient way of managing his future. He turned it off before the price was announced.

At the next light he reached back and let my chin rest in his palm. His hand could not stay there when we moved again. I accepted the limitation. There were other machines on the road, and their operators did not appear notably more capable than ours.

The fear did not disappear. It changed its size. There was now room beside it for the pressure of the blanket and the warm smell of Steve's sleeve. I lay down and kept one eye on the mirror.

We passed a shop whose window contained pictures of dogs enjoying objects that had been purchased for them. Steve slowed, considered the entrance, then kept going.

"Got a bowl," he said. "Got the old bed. We can work the rest out."

He sounded as though he was informing a department that the minimum requirements had been met. I would later learn how much of his life he spent trying to satisfy departments. None of them ever lay down against his leg.

The streets became quieter. There were houses, bins, a bicycle on its side. Steve turned into a driveway and switched off the engine. Without the vibration the car seemed unexpectedly empty.

He did not immediately open a door.

“Well,” he said.

I sat up. Through the window I could see a green door and a tree thin enough to take personally. Steve looked at the house. I looked at Steve.

He had brought me all the way here and now appeared uncertain about going in.

I gave the sound I used when a human had stopped performing an essential service. It was not a bark. It was an inquiry with a deadline.

He laughed once.

“All right. Coming.”

He opened his door, came around, and unfastened my strap. I waited for the supporting hand before I stepped down. The driveway stayed where it was. The car had delivered us without visible loss of personnel.

Steve picked up the food bag. I stood beside him while he searched his pockets for the key.

Some journeys end with a view. Ours ended with a man discovering that the key was in the hand holding the dog food.

We were going to need each other.

3. A House Full of Ghosts I Can Smell

The house had been waiting with its windows closed.

When Steve opened the door, the air came out past him. Soap. Laundry. Bread. Coffee that had ceased to be a drink and become a feature of a cup. Under these was the previous dog, spread through the lower part of the building with the thoroughness of someone who had never expected to leave.

Steve stood aside.

"This is it."

His tone suggested he had hoped to offer something better. I crossed the threshold before he could withdraw the invitation.

A house is not one smell. It is several arguments about what has happened there. Fresh detergent makes an assertion. The chair beneath it disagrees. A visitor leaves a trace on a cushion; sunlight removes some of it; the cushion retains the rest. Humans paint their walls and believe they have started again. We let them.

In the hall were two pairs of shoes. The left heel of one was more worn than the right. A bowl on a table contained keys, coins, and a screw that had lost its employment. On the wall was a paler rectangle where a picture had hung. I could smell the hands that had taken it down.

I paused at the living-room entrance. There was a couch, and in front of it a low table with a cold cup and opened envelopes. A dark screen hung on the opposite wall. Books occupied less than half the bookshelf. One shelf held a black cylinder plugged into a socket. I inspected it, found no food, and moved on.

This was not the only error in my first survey.

The round object beside the baseboard was, for the moment, furniture. The distinction between furniture and enemy depends more heavily on movement than humans appreciate.

The couch required a name adequate to its promise. I selected the Soft Mountain. The table became the Offering Table, because it was at a practical height for receiving things and Steve kept putting things on it. I understood that some of the offerings would be disputed. We would establish precedent.

Buddy had slept on the left cushion. He had also slept on the right cushion, across the middle cushion, and at an angle that suggested ambitious use of the armrest. There was no need to dislike him. He had left a detailed account of how the premises should be used.

Steve watched me sniff the seam.

"It's been cleaned," he said.

I could tell. Cleaning was one of the smells.

He took off my leash and hung it on the hook beside his coat. I remained attached to the collar. This seemed a fair division of responsibilities.

In the kitchen I discovered the refrigerator. No account of my spiritual development is complete without it. The door opened and cold air carried out cheese, cooked meat, and a container whose contents Steve examined with distrust. He put the container back. Humans will preserve doubt for weeks if it has a lid.

"Water first," he said.

He took a ceramic bowl from the cupboard. BUDDY was written on the side in blue. It was chipped near the base. He turned the name away from me, hesitated, and turned it back.

"It'll do for tonight."

I drank. Whatever objections the bowl had to the arrangement were not communicated through the water.

Behind the bin was a grain of rice with a considerable history. I investigated it while Steve opened the food bag. Near the dishwasher the floor remembered cheese. There was oil under the stove, and along the cabinet an older trace of Buddy's paws. I followed him through the room. He had known where to wait.

The counter held mail sorted into two categories: opened and not yet bearable. Among the second was a handwritten envelope. Steve moved it to make room for the measuring scoop, then moved it back so that its edge lined up with the tile.

I knew the movement. In the shelter there had been a volunteer who straightened the blankets whenever a dog left. After the blankets were straight, she could continue with the afternoon.

I ate while Steve leaned against the counter in his coat.

He did not use the time to do anything. He watched the bowl empty. When I looked up, he said, "Good," with relief far beyond what the achievement warranted. Eating had never been my weak area.

Afterwards I inspected the hallway. Bathroom to the right. An office door closed. Bedroom at the end. The bathroom contained a great deal of water under unnecessarily complicated management. The office smelled of warm equipment and Steve's weekday tension. I left it closed.

In the bedroom a photograph stood on a table beside the bed. Two older humans on a beach. I knew neither of them, but the hands that had touched the frame were Steve's. There was a folded blanket in the corner and, beneath it, the strongest trace of Buddy in the house.

I put my nose to it.

Steve came to the doorway. "That was his."

The sentence stayed unfinished. I did not require the rest. I had already read it.

On returning to the living room, I assessed the Soft Mountain. Getting up required more effort than it would

have required some years earlier. Steve took half a step towards me, then stopped when I managed it. I turned three times and lay down on the left cushion.

He looked at the cushion. He looked at me.

For a moment I thought he would ask me to move.

"Yeah," he said. "All right."

He removed his coat at last. It had left a damp mark on his shirt. He hung it beside the leash, came back, and sat on the right cushion, leaving a respectable distance between us.

The distance was inefficient. I extended one paw until it touched his trousers.

He looked down. Neither of us commented.

The wall screen came on. A man with extremely white teeth explained that the country was in serious difficulty. Steve listened for a few minutes, then changed the channel to people having different difficulties in a house larger than ours.

I could hear his breathing beside me. It had altered since the doorway. His hand rested on the cushion between us, and when I shifted my head he scratched behind my ear without looking away from the screen.

The previous dog was under us, around us, in the fabric and the wood. He had occupied this man long before I arrived. I could dislike the inheritance or lie on it. I lay on it.

At some point Steve said, "You can stay there."

I had already reached that conclusion. It was decent of him to catch up.

Near the baseboard, the round furniture made a click.

I opened one eye. Nothing moved.

Tomorrow, I decided. There was a house to understand, and for the first time in nineteen days I was sufficiently safe to be tired.

4. Field Notes on the Human Species

At dawn the birds began without checking whether Steve was ready. I approved of their approach.

He had gone to bed while I slept. The impression of his leg remained in the cushion, and his cup was still on the Offering Table. I walked down the hall and found him face down beneath a blanket, one arm hanging over the edge of the mattress. He was making a noise consistent with an objection lodged in another department.

I sat beside the bed.

There are several ways to wake a human. I chose the least invasive: I placed my chin on the mattress and watched him from six inches away. After twelve minutes his eye opened.

"Oh," he said. "You."

He looked at the other side of the bed, then back at me. He had remembered why I was there. For a moment he seemed pleased. Then he reached for the phone.

The pleasure left his face in stages.

I had not yet identified the phone as a rival. It looked too small to be responsible for much, an error I would not make twice.

Steve read something. He made a sound through his teeth. He read another thing and sat up, elbows on knees, while I waited for him to recognise that the day had begun independently of its correspondence.

My first field note concerned sleep. Humans could sleep, clearly, but they treated it as something they had stolen time to do. Even before getting out of bed Steve had begun to regret the hours he had spent in it. I had slept all night without reaching this conclusion.

He stood and stepped around me. I followed him to the bathroom, where he closed the door.

This was our first disagreement.

I waited outside. Water ran. Steve coughed. The room had no second exit, which I had established the previous evening, so I was not alarmed. But conducting a household inspection behind a closed door was unnecessarily secretive.

When he emerged, his face was wet and his fur had changed. He was now wearing a shirt with buttons and trousers that smelled faintly of the same office as the ones from yesterday.

"Morning," he said, as though it had only just been approved.

I led him to the kitchen.

We passed the refrigerator without opening it. This was discouraging, but there was a back door, and through its glass I could see a squirrel on the lowest branch of the tree.

The squirrel looked directly at me. I looked directly back. After a pause it turned its head towards the neighbouring house, apparently passing on a message.

I made my second field note. The tree was under observation.

Steve said, "Oh. Right. You probably need to go out."

His grasp of the situation was narrow, but he opened the door.

The yard contained tired grass, a square of soil that had once entertained a proposal, a chair, and eighteen distinct areas requiring my attention. Along the fence a possum had made its own arrangements. A cat had visited the far corner and departed under the impression that nobody would know. I spent some time correcting this impression.

Steve stood on the step and watched. He had not brought the phone. Sunlight reached his face while I inspected the

tree. He squinted, rubbed his forehead, and then stayed there without doing anything useful.

This seemed promising.

The squirrel objected when I attended to the trunk. I did not recognise its authority to object. It went up a branch and began a sequence of clicks I considered official in nature.

"Leave him alone," Steve said.

I had done nothing to him. There would need to be a discussion about standards of evidence.

Inside, Steve filled the inherited bowl. While I ate he prepared coffee. This involved measuring powder, adding water, and waiting in front of a machine with the patience he had shown me the previous day. The machine was slower to respond and had never once wagged at him.

He drank the result standing up.

I watched between mouthfuls. The kitchen could have held two people easily. There was a second chair at the table, pushed in so neatly that nobody could have used it recently. The newspaper beneath his cup was several days old. He had developed an arrangement in which nothing expected much of him except his phone.

It rang while he was putting the food away.

He looked at the name on the screen and let it ring. Afterwards he turned it face down on the counter.

"Later," he said.

I did not know whether he was telling the phone, the absent caller, or me. He sounded experienced at saying it.

He took a slice of bread from a packet. Halfway through eating it he noticed the time and put the remaining half on a plate. Then he picked it up again and carried it to the front door, making crumbs along the route.

My third field note concerned the economic opportunities created by human inefficiency.

At the door he looked around for something. He had his keys, his phone, his bag. The bread was in his mouth. Eventually he removed it and looked at me.

"I have to go to work."

I had guessed he was going somewhere. The apologetic tone suggested that work had not been selected for pleasure.

"I'll be back."

He checked the water bowl. He put the bread down on the hall table, reconsidered, and moved it to a shelf. Then he crouched and scratched my ear.

"Don't eat the couch."

We had not yet negotiated this, but I understood it to be important to him.

The door closed. I remained facing it. The car started, moved, faded. The refrigerator continued. A pipe clicked in the wall. Outside, a neighbour dragged a bin over the pavement with the force of a personal grievance.

I could have barked. I had done plenty of that in earlier rooms, with uncertain results. Instead I made a circuit of the house. Steve's cup was warm. His towel was damp. The left shoe he had not worn was under the chair. He had left enough of himself behind to make returning plausible.

I went to the Soft Mountain and climbed up.

My fourth field note concerned waiting. It appeared I had been moved from an institution where I waited for a person to a house where I waited for one particular person. The conditions were considerably improved. There was a cushion. There was a window. There was no sign above the door describing this as a new beginning.

I slept, woke, drank, and slept again. In the afternoon a stripe of sunlight reached my paws. I moved with it. This occupied time more satisfactorily than most of Steve's appointments would prove to do.

When the car returned I heard it before it reached the driveway. My body got to the door without consulting my dignity. By the time Steve opened it, my tail had committed us to a level of enthusiasm from which there would be no retreat.

He stood in the doorway with his bag hanging from one hand.

"You stayed," he said.

This was a curious thing to say to a dog who had not been issued a key.

Then he put the bag down and crouched, and I understood that his question had not been about the lock.

The fifth field note was brief. He was pleased to see me. We could start there.

PART TWO

Learning to Run a Household

5. How to Raise a Person

Steve bought a book about training dogs. He put it on the Offering Table, where I could inspect the corners. It advised consistency, patience, and the immediate rewarding of desired behaviour. I was encouraged to find that we were working from the same principles.

By the second evening he had learned to put his bag down before attempting to greet me. This reduced the risk of a bag-related injury and allowed both hands to participate. He had also learned that saying “calm down” while laughing and rubbing my ears was an ambiguous instruction.

I did not exploit the ambiguity more than was reasonable.

The greeting developed its own sequence. Key. Door. My arrival at considerable speed. Steve’s brief struggle to remain upright. Then the crouch. On this second evening I found a tennis ball under the couch and brought it to him, but my mouth was required for other expressions of pleasure and I dropped it on his shoe.

“Oh my God,” he said. “It’s only been eight hours.”

He said this as though eight hours contained no room for anything to happen.

Afterwards he heated a frozen meal. I positioned myself near the refrigerator, where the light allowed him to appreciate the seriousness of my face.

The book called this begging. I considered it a formal expression of interest. The difference would have mattered more if either of us had been responsible for writing the book.

Steve glanced down.

"You've had yours."

This was true, irrelevant, and unkindly specific.

He peeled back the film. Steam rose. I lowered my head a fraction. He looked from the food to my face and back again.

"You can't have this."

He took a piece of plain chicken from a container in the refrigerator and put it in my bowl. I walked over at a restrained pace, having achieved the essential result. He had interrupted a process being conducted entirely between himself and two appliances to consider the needs of another creature.

The creature ate the chicken before his reconsideration could arrive.

"That," he said, "was probably a mistake."

I disagreed, but it was important not to correct a pupil after every lesson.

At the Soft Mountain he opened his book. I sat beside his knee. He read a paragraph, looked at me, and said, "Sit."

I was sitting.

He looked back at the page, then stood and walked into the kitchen to obtain something edible. When he returned I had stood up to investigate why he had gone. He said "sit" again. I sat. Food appeared.

Within six minutes I had established a reliable method of bringing him to his feet and making him cross a room. His confidence improved visibly.

"You're quite good at this," he said.

I accepted the assessment.

There were difficulties. He wanted me to sit while he prepared the leash. I wanted to accompany him through every stage of its preparation, including those stages conducted in the same square foot of hallway. On the third

attempt he stopped reaching for the hook and waited until my feet were on the floor.

This was intelligent of him and inconvenient for me. We reached a compromise: I would remain still for the clasp; he would cease discussing the clasp and get us outside.

He held the book open with a finger while attaching the lead.

“Apparently I need to be the calm one.”

I looked at him. He shut the book.

The walk was a success. It contained a fence I had not met, two dogs whose owners apologised on their behalf, and a patch of earth with several compelling contributions. Steve initially tried to keep us moving. Then he noticed that I was trying to keep us there. He stood beside the patch while I completed the work.

Across the street, a woman called, “New dog?”

“Yeah,” Steve said.

“What’s his name?”

He looked down at me. “Still working on it.”

“He looks like a good one.”

Steve smiled. “He seems to be.”

On the way home he did not check his phone. I had made him known to a neighbour. It had taken no more than standing near some earth for an unreasonable length of time.

Back indoors, Steve sat with the wall screen on and the book closed beside him. I remained on the rug. He patted the cushion.

I did not immediately climb up.

There had been houses before in which the first invitation was generous and the second was a misunderstanding. I put my chin on the edge and waited for him to repeat it.

“Come on,” he said. “You live here.”

I got up awkwardly. My hind legs made an arrangement the front legs would have preferred not to be associated with. Steve moved the book to give me space. I settled with my head on his thigh.

His hand arrived on my shoulder. It remained there.

On the screen a man was being congratulated for surviving a competition held in conditions nobody needed to live in. Steve watched without much interest. His fingers moved through my coat, stopped at an old scar, and moved more carefully around it.

“What happened there?”

I did not have an answer he could use. Not all of my life had come with him from the shelter, even if all of my body had.

He left the scar alone.

After a while he said, “Why does this make me want to cry?”

I lifted my head. His face was above me, embarrassed by its own inquiry. I put my head back down. He continued scratching my shoulder.

It would have been possible to make that moment into a lesson. I had already devoted considerable thought to the training of humans and was unlikely to resist an opportunity indefinitely. But on that evening there was only Steve’s hand, and the weight of his leg beneath my jaw, and a programme neither of us was following.

The phone sounded on the table. He looked at it. His hand stopped for a moment, then continued.

The book remained closed.

Later he fell asleep with his head at an angle that would produce a complaint in the morning. I could have moved to the left cushion. It was less uneven and did not occasionally twitch.

I stayed.

When he woke he apologised for falling asleep, then apologised for apologising to a dog. We went to the back door together. He waited in his socks while I attended to the yard.

The training was going reasonably well. I had not yet decided which of us required more of it.

6. The Thing That Eats the Floor

On the fourth morning, the furniture made a declaration of independence.

Three notes sounded from the corner. The black disc beside the baseboard detached itself from its dock and crossed the carpet. I sat up so quickly that one ear arrived before the rest of me.

The object had no face. It gave off a smell of hot dust and made a continuous noise, steady enough to suggest a permanent appointment. At the leg of the Offering Table it stopped, considered, and went around.

Something was making decisions in my living room.

I barked twice. The object went on. It reached the rug, pulled itself over the edge, and approached the couch.

Under the couch was a chew I had saved. I had put it there the previous evening, having judged the location inaccessible to Steve and therefore suitable for long-term investment. The object was now heading straight for it.

I jumped down.

This was less graceful than intended and briefly drew attention away from the threat. I recovered, placed myself between it and the couch, and growled.

The object touched my paw. It reversed. It rotated. It went around me.

I had been classified as furniture.

There are insults from which a relationship cannot immediately recover. I followed it into the kitchen. It passed beneath the table. I attempted to follow and struck the underside with my shoulder. The object emerged on the other side while I was still explaining the situation to a chair.

By the time I got out, it was entering the hall.

I cut it off near the bathroom. It bumped the baseboard, turned, and continued towards the bedroom. I stood across the doorway. It bumped me, turned again, and returned to the kitchen. This looked like a victory until I realised that all of its routes eventually looked like that.

Nothing I did changed its level of concern.

It ate dust, hair, a fragment of paper, and a crumb I had been aware of but not yet allocated time to. It approached my water bowl and chose not to interfere. I noted this evidence of judgment reluctantly.

When it caught the edge of a sock, the noise altered. The sock belonged to Steve. I had not put it there, although that would later be alleged. It stretched from beneath the disc like a flag surrendered by a very narrow country.

The machine stopped.

I stood three feet away, chest heaving. At last we had reached a situation I understood: the enemy was immobilised, and I had a task.

I picked up the free end of the sock and pulled.

The machine objected with a series of beeps. I pulled harder. The sock came loose; I went backwards; a chair moved; and the machine resumed its work as though I had merely completed a maintenance request.

I stood holding the sock.

It was difficult to identify the winner.

After another circuit of the living room, the disc aligned itself with the dock and reversed into place. Three descending notes. Silence.

I waited for a resumption of hostilities. None came.

The carpet looked different. More importantly, it smelled different. The top layer of our recent occupation had been removed. Beneath it remained Buddy, the older meals, the winter damp in the boards. The machine had taken away the day's news while leaving most of the history intact.

This was less destructive than I had feared and more presumptuous than I could accept.

I inspected the dock from an angle. The object did not stir. My saved chew had been pushed further under the couch. I recovered it at considerable personal cost, then lay down where I could watch the corner.

In the afternoon I fell asleep there. This should not be interpreted as trust. Surveillance becomes tiring when conducted by one employee.

Steve returned to find the sock in the middle of the room, the chair displaced, and me awake beside the dock. His eyes moved between these facts.

"Oh, no."

He put his bag down. "I forgot it was set to run."

So the disturbance had been scheduled. This did not improve my opinion of it.

He crouched and examined my paws, then checked the machine. He found no damage to either of us. The sock could not make the same claim.

"Did you two get along?"

I looked at him until he stopped smiling.

"Fair enough."

He picked up the disc and turned it over. I stepped back. Beneath it were wheels and brushes and the dusty remains of its career. Steve opened a compartment and emptied the contents into the bin. I watched my household become rubbish.

"Roomba," he said, showing it to me.

Naming it was not a defence. Biscuit had a name and could be heard from the car park.

Steve put it down again and switched it on. I barked. He switched it off.

"Okay. We'll do that when I'm here."

He touched his phone, changed something, and returned the machine to its dock. It was the first time I had seen the phone used to make a problem less likely to happen.

Over the following weeks we negotiated a truce. Steve sat on the couch while the disc worked. I sat beside Steve and supervised from a height. When the machine entered the bedroom, I followed at a distance sufficient to preserve my professional standing.

Once it brought a lost ball out from beneath a cabinet. I retrieved it. Our relationship improved by the value of one ball, then remained there.

I never mistook it for furniture again. I also stopped assuming that everything moving through the house was trying to eat us. This second adjustment took longer and was subject to exceptions.

On the evening of the first battle, Steve placed his hand on my shoulder and said, "You've had a day, haven't you?"

He had brought home the smell of his own day: stale air, coffee, a meeting in which someone had spoken too close to him. I allowed him to regard my difficulties as amusing. He seemed to need a problem he could solve by pressing a button.

The disc rested in its dock. Steve rested on the couch. I rested between him and the edge, with the recovered chew beneath one paw.

Nobody had eaten the floor. As a result of my intervention, the sock could not say the same about its heel.

7. What the Squirrels Know

I began with a reasonable suspicion and developed it carefully into an unreasonable one.

The first squirrel was the individual on our tree. Grey, quick, with a darker patch near the base of its tail. I designated it Subject 7-B. There had been no Subjects 1 through 6. The numbering was intended to discourage casual scrutiny of my methods.

It visited in the morning. It looked towards the house. Sometimes another squirrel appeared on the fence, and the first squirrel moved to a higher branch. They exchanged noises. Then one went away while the other remained.

Steve called this looking for food.

Steve also called the Roomba “just a vacuum,” so his assessments were not beyond challenge.

On our first Saturday afternoon together we took the longer route through the neighbourhood. We had been walking shorter routes all week, establishing the necessary arrangements between his pace and my investigations. Now there was a park, and beyond the park a low hill with trees.

The squirrels were everywhere.

One sat on a lawn. Another occupied a fence. A third had stationed itself beside a bird feeder, where it was involved in a financial dispute with the owner of the feeder. When we passed, each stopped moving.

I stopped too.

“Come on,” Steve said.

I pointed my entire body at the nearest suspect. Steve followed the line of inquiry and smiled.

“Squirrely?”

It is difficult to brief a superior who insists on diminutives.

I gave a low warning. The squirrel held still. Steve checked his phone, thereby abandoning the visual field at the exact moment we required evidence. The squirrel moved along the fence and disappeared behind a shed.

I had lost a witness through procedural negligence.

At the park I counted nine. Then I counted three more, although two might have been earlier squirrels returning in different positions. This did not trouble my theory. A coordinated operation would naturally reuse its personnel.

Steve let me stand under a tree while he sat on the bench. A squirrel came down the trunk head first, stopped, and watched us. I lunged. The leash tightened; Steve rose abruptly; the squirrel went back up.

"No," he said.

He sounded annoyed. I looked at him, surprised by the strength of it.

He sat down again and rubbed his wrist. I had hurt him. This had not formed part of the operation.

For a while I stood beside the bench without looking at the tree. He shortened the leash and rested his hand on the back of my neck. His wrist smelled of the heat beneath pain.

"Can't do that," he said more quietly. "All right?"

I leaned against his knee. The squirrel continued its business overhead. I could hear it. It was taking liberties with my restraint.

After a few minutes Steve's phone rang.

He looked at the screen. His hand stopped moving on my neck. The ringing continued long enough for me to notice the change in his breathing, then stopped.

"I'll call her later."

He put the phone away. It was the same sentence he had used in the kitchen, presented as though later were a place with unlimited accommodation.

Above us the squirrel had become motionless.

I watched it watch Steve. It tilted its head. After a pause it ran along a branch towards the next tree. I added the sequence to my evidence: the phone, the altered breathing, the departure of the observer.

The possibility that the squirrel had its own reasons for leaving did not receive much consideration. At that stage of my research, almost everything it did supported my conclusion. Movement demonstrated coordination. Stillness demonstrated transmission. An absence of squirrels suggested they had been warned.

It was an efficient system. There was very little danger of learning anything.

We walked home by the street with the low wooden fence. Subject 7-B, or an individual I had promoted to the same position, sat on top of a post with something in its paws. I stopped at a distance the leash permitted. Steve stopped too.

This time he did not reach for the phone.

The squirrel ate. We watched it eat. A piece fell. It looked down, considered retrieving it, and chose to continue with what it had. Steve made a noise that was almost a laugh.

"He's got a whole afternoon planned."

The squirrel took another bite.

Steve stayed beside me longer than I expected. He was still rubbing his wrist, but less now. His face had eased. The unused phone sat in his pocket while a creature with no knowledge of his difficulties occupied his attention.

I was unwilling to surrender my theory on the strength of one beneficial result. Dangerous organisations have been known to produce pleasant afternoons.

Over the following weeks I kept watching. Subject 7-B visited at roughly the same time when the weather was dry. In rain it did something else. When Steve changed the time of our walk, we encountered different squirrels. I adjusted

the file to accommodate the increased sophistication of the operation.

There were moments of doubt. Once I saw Subject 7-B bury something, move three feet, and begin digging in the wrong place. It was possible this was deliberate misinformation. It was also possible that squirrels were not in possession of the unified command structure I had assigned them.

I preferred the first explanation. It allowed me to remain an investigator instead of becoming a dog who had spent an afternoon staring at another animal's mistake.

Steve acquired a habit of saying, "Your colleagues are out," whenever he opened the back door. I objected to the implication, though not to the opening of the door.

The arrangement served us. He watched the tree while I examined the fence. Some mornings he took his coffee outside and let it cool. One morning he stayed long enough to notice that the garden patch contained a plant he had not planted.

"How did that get there?"

I knew precisely which organisation should be questioned. He went indoors for water instead.

I cannot claim that I understood the squirrels. I knew where they appeared, what made them run, and how efficiently they could embarrass me. Beyond that I had assembled a considerable quantity of certainty from a modest supply of facts.

Steve did much the same with the news. His version required a subscription.

We continued our investigations from opposite ends of the couch. Mine was through the window. His was on a screen. Occasionally I would look at him and find that we were wearing the same expression.

I did not put that in the file.

8. The Daily Threat in a Blue Uniform

Marvin approached every house on the street and left things in it. He wore blue, pushed a cart, and showed no interest in disguising the pattern.

I first noticed him while Steve was at work. He was three doors away, opening the metal flap beside a neighbour's door. Paper disappeared through it. He continued to the next house.

I went to the window and issued a warning.

Marvin looked up and waved.

I had not expected a response this confident from a man whose movements I had successfully detected. I barked again. He pushed the cart towards our gate.

The next several minutes were not representative of my considered approach to public relations. I moved between window and door, announcing his location at every stage. His progress continued. The metal flap lifted. Envelopes fell into the hall.

He had put something inside.

Then a voice came through the door.

"Hello in there. You're new."

I stopped.

The voice was warm and unhurried. It contained no uncertainty about either of us. I put my nose near the gap beneath the door and found leather, paper, damp pavement, and the traces of several dogs whose owners had not been adequately vigilant.

"I'm Marvin," he said. "You'll get used to me."

His shoes went down the path. I listened to the cart moving on. At the next house he spoke again. Another dog

answered with the kind of greeting that suggested this intrusion had been tolerated for years.

I inspected the paper. Most of it smelled of machinery. One envelope had been handled more carefully. There was a woman's scent on it, faint beneath the adhesive and the post office. I did not tear it. My understanding of correspondence was developing, but I knew enough to leave a possible message intact.

That evening Steve picked up the mail while I attempted to greet him around it.

"Junk. Bill. Junk."

He stopped at the handwritten envelope.

His face became still. He turned it over, read the back, then carried it into the kitchen. It went beside the older envelope already on the counter. The writing was different. The old one had travelled through a room with a sick man in it. This new one had come from somewhere alive.

Steve filled my bowl and forgot to put the scoop away. He stood with it in his hand while looking at the envelopes.

"People should call," he said.

His phone was beside them. I had heard it ring.

He seemed to notice this himself. He put the scoop down, sat at the table, and opened the new letter with a finger along the top.

I waited beneath his chair. A fragment of paper dropped near my paws. He read for several minutes. Once he shook his head, though nobody had asked him anything.

"Yeah," he said eventually. "I know."

He folded the letter and put it back in its envelope. The older envelope remained sealed.

He did not make a call that night. But he put the new letter in a drawer instead of beneath the growing stack beside the toaster. When he closed the drawer he did it carefully.

Marvin came again the next day. I barked, but less confidently. He said hello through the door and left a catalogue containing a great many things Steve did not need. This was poor evidence of benevolent intent. The day after that he brought a card with flowers on it. Steve read it standing up and said, "Thanks, Mum," to the room.

There were distinctions to be made.

On Saturday we met Marvin outside. Steve was bringing the bins back from the pavement. I was on the leash, inspecting the gatepost. The blue uniform appeared at the corner, and I drew myself to attention.

"There he is," Marvin said.

Steve looked up. "Has he been giving you trouble?"

"He's been very thorough."

This was the first accurate professional assessment I had received since the shelter.

Marvin stopped at the gate. He did not reach over my head. He waited while I approached and inspected his hand. The dogs I had smelled under the door were present, along with a sandwich, his own house, and the cart's metal handle.

"Can he have a biscuit?" he asked.

The question had been addressed to the wrong person, but Steve answered correctly.

Marvin put the biscuit on his palm. I accepted it with the reserve appropriate to a change in diplomatic relations. Steve watched, then rested his hand on the back of my neck.

"You knew Buddy," he said.

Marvin nodded.

For a moment they both looked at me in a way I did not much enjoy. I had no objection to the previous dog, but I did not wish to spend my biscuit being compared with him.

Then Marvin said, "This one's got a good face."

Steve smiled. "He knows."

They talked about the weather and the broken wheel on Marvin's cart. Steve offered to look at it. Marvin said the department had a procedure. Steve examined the wheel anyway, found a piece of plastic caught around the axle, and pulled it free.

Marvin rolled the cart a foot. The squeak had stopped.

"Better not tell them," he said. "Might invalidate the request."

Steve laughed. It was not a large laugh, but it belonged to a conversation with another human on his own front step. I stayed between them until the conversation ended.

After that I watched for Marvin. I still announced him sometimes. A household should know when it is being visited. But I stopped treating his departure as evidence that I had driven him away.

The following week he left a parcel, waited to hear Steve call from inside, and moved on. Steve opened the door in time to say thanks.

Marvin raised a hand without turning around. The cart travelled quietly down the path.

Steve stood in the doorway for a moment after he had gone. He was holding a package of replacement light bulbs, looking as though something more interesting had arrived.

I went out and stood beside him. Across the street a curtain moved. A person we did not know lifted a hand. Steve lifted his in return.

I had been preparing to defend the house against the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood, it appeared, had been trying to get him back.

9. A Brief Theory of Stomachs

Two weeks after my arrival, Steve spent a Saturday doing very little. He found this difficult enough to require preparation.

First he wrote a list. Then he walked through the house identifying things that ought to have been done. A light bulb. A drawer. The garden. He put the list on the counter and made coffee. When he returned to the living room he was holding a book from a box in the bedroom closet.

It was not the training book. This one had a tired cover and the smell of a younger Steve in its pages. He sat at the other end of the couch, opened it near the middle, and frowned with the concentration of someone trying to remember whether he had been happy when he last read it.

I occupied the window end. Sunlight had reached the cushion. My paws were warm. The house contained enough food for several days, the door was closed, and the round employee in the corner had been told not to work. I could see no case for standing up.

Steve read three pages. His eyes went towards the counter where the list lay. He read the same three pages again.

“Should do something,” he said.

I stretched and rolled onto my back.

It was not a planned intervention. I had reached the angle at which the cushion supported me and the sun warmed the thin fur on my stomach. My front paws folded. One back foot remained against the armrest. I looked ridiculous and felt excellent.

Steve put a finger in his book.

“Well. You’ve made a decision.”

His hand approached, then paused before touching me. I stayed where I was. He rested it lightly on my chest and moved his fingers down my side.

There was an old place near my ribs where a sudden touch could make me flinch. He reached it. I tightened. He stopped.

“All right,” he said.

He moved his hand back to the comfortable place. After a moment I relaxed again.

This mattered more than the scratching. Humans often believe that permission, once given, applies to all subsequent operations. Steve had noticed the limit without treating it as an insult. I left my stomach where it was.

He scratched slowly. The book began to close around his finger. He took his finger out and laid the book face down on the cushion, losing the page.

At first his hand still had his morning in it. He moved as though completing a task before returning to the important thing. Then the movement changed. His fingers settled into a rhythm. His shoulders came down. I could feel the cushion stop shifting under his restless knee.

Outside, a mower started. A door slammed. Someone called for someone who did not appear. We continued with our arrangement.

In the shelter, I had slept curled around the parts of me that required protecting. There were kind hands there, but there were also doors opening, unfamiliar smells, sudden noises, somebody else’s fear moving through the room. Even asleep I kept a portion of myself available for departure.

Now my feet were in the air. My jaw had fallen slightly open. Steve could see everything he might conceivably wish to injure, and he was using the opportunity to scratch a place I could not reach.

There was no document for this. Had there been, I would have objected to several clauses and eaten a corner.

The phone buzzed on the table. Steve looked at it without moving his hand. After a few seconds it stopped. He looked back at me.

"You're having a better morning than I planned."

He smiled, but there was something uncomfortable in the smile. He had arrived at the edge of an afternoon with no obvious way to justify it. The list on the counter was still waiting to prove that he had used his time badly.

I sneezed. It interrupted whatever he was about to think.

He laughed and leaned back. His hand rested flat now, rising a little with my breathing. He did not look at the list again.

The theory I formed was modest. People were often more willing to be kind than to be idle. Put a dog beside them and they could sit still under the respectable description of caring for something. I had provided Steve with an occupation that looked enough like doing nothing to let him rest.

I will concede that the theory was developed by its principal beneficiary.

After a while his hand stopped. I opened one eye. He was looking down at me, his face unguarded in a way I had not seen in the kitchen or the car. He looked younger, though no more certain of what to do with himself.

"Thanks," he said.

I remained upside down. It would have been unwise to introduce a new movement at that stage of the proceedings.

He picked up the book and searched for his page. The search took some time. He began reading from a place he might already have read, then stopped worrying about it. His free hand stayed on my chest.

Eventually the book lowered onto his lap. His head tipped back. He slept.

I could smell the coffee cooling on the table. The sun had moved from my stomach to the edge of the cushion, but I did not roll over yet. Moving would wake him. I had been awake for several hours and had achieved most of what I considered necessary for that portion of my life. I joined him.

When we woke it was early afternoon. Steve looked at the time and began the familiar motion of regret. Then he looked at me, lifted the book, and laughed at the red mark its edge had left on his wrist.

He got up to make lunch. I followed, stretching at some length in the doorway.

The list was still on the counter. He crossed out the light bulb, which he had replaced earlier, and left the other items alone.

"Garden can wait," he said.

The garden had waited for months. It appeared equipped to manage the additional day.

He opened the refrigerator. I sat in the patch of floor where Buddy had always waited and considered this a satisfactory conclusion to the experiment.

PART THREE

The Age of the Glowing Rectangle

10. The Light That Eats Faces

The phone was the best-trained member of the household. It made a noise and Steve came immediately.

I had to use posture, timing, and an entire face. The phone used a chirp. It could summon him while he ate, while he dressed, while he spoke to another person. It once interrupted a sentence about me halfway through, and he never came back to finish the sentence.

I had been listening.

By the third week I understood its principal effect. Steve could be in a room and unavailable to it. His hand would stop on my back. His eyes would fix. The part of him that responded to a movement or a sound seemed to go somewhere else, leaving his body in charge of maintaining the appointment.

Not every visit to the phone was bad. It carried his mother's voice. It brought the photograph of a friend's new baby, which made him smile and type with both thumbs. It told him when rain was coming and was occasionally correct. I was not proposing its immediate destruction, though I had considered the practicalities.

The difficulty was that he could not tell what it wanted until he had already obeyed.

On the seventeenth evening, Steve sat watching a programme on the wall screen while reading his phone. He repeatedly asked the room what had happened in the programme. The room, containing me, supplied no

assistance. The people on the wall were engaged in a serious dispute, but he had missed the cause and was now being shown the consequences.

His dinner stood on the table, half eaten. A message appeared. He read it, put the phone down, picked it up again, and began typing.

“Unbelievable,” he said.

I looked at the screen. Nothing about its surface explained the scale of its influence. It smelled of Steve’s hand and the bottom of his pocket.

He erased what he had written. He began again.

I approached with the ball.

“In a minute.”

I put the ball on his foot. It rolled off. He did not notice.

This was not a promising use of the evening. I climbed onto the couch, placed one paw on his thigh, and lowered my chest across the forearm holding the phone.

“What are you doing?”

I settled.

He tried to withdraw his arm without disturbing me. I was not cooperating. The phone remained visible beyond my shoulder, but operating it required an angle his wrist declined to provide.

“Really?”

I looked at him.

He used his other hand to take the phone and put it on the table. I shifted onto his lap, where my weight could be distributed more comfortably. He rubbed my shoulder and went back to the programme.

The phone chirped.

His body moved before his face did. I felt the intention to stand in his thighs. Then he stopped and looked at the creature that would have to be moved.

"Later," he said.

For once, I was in favour of the word.

The programme continued. After a while Steve laughed at something one of the people said. It was a surprised laugh, and it came because he had heard what the other person said first. He had stayed long enough for one thing to lead to another.

The phone lit again. He looked at it, then at the wall.

"Probably just more of the same."

He did not appear certain. Neither was I. Somewhere there might be news he needed. Somewhere there was certainly news prepared to describe itself that way. He left it on the table.

At the end of the programme he sat still through the credits. The room darkened. I could see our reflection in the wall screen: a man occupying a couch badly because a dog had made a competing claim on his legs.

He looked at the dinner.

"That's gone cold."

He put a hand under my chest and asked me to move. I moved. I was pleased by his return to material concerns and could not reasonably obstruct food.

In the kitchen he reheated the meal, then took it to the table instead of the couch. I lay near the chair. He ate without the phone. Once he reached towards his pocket and found it empty. His hand stayed there a moment before he put it on the table.

"It's ridiculous," he said to me. "I keep checking it when I don't even want anything."

I wanted the part of his dinner that he was not going to eat. My motives were comparatively well organised.

He finished, washed the plate, and opened the back door. We stood outside. It was cold enough to make his breath visible. A light went on in the neighbouring house.

Somewhere a dog barked twice and received a reply from farther away.

Steve stayed while I inspected the grass. He was not waiting for me with one hand already on the door. He looked up. There were a few stars between the branches. He took a long breath and rubbed the back of his neck.

When we went in, the phone was still where he had left it. He checked that there was no missed call, then put it down again.

This was not a conversion. The next morning he reached for it before his feet touched the floor. By breakfast it had made him angry with a person who lived far away and was unaware of his existence.

But that evening, when the programme began, he set the phone out of reach. I had not yet climbed onto him. He noticed me noticing.

“Don’t look so pleased.”

I climbed up and took my place.

He would forget. I would remind him. Some evenings the phone would win, particularly when it carried something from work. On others he would silence it himself. The house did not become a refuge from modern life all at once. It acquired intervals.

During one of them he found a screw on the hall table, remembered the loose drawer handle, and fetched a screwdriver. The repair took two minutes. He opened and closed the drawer several times afterwards, unnecessarily pleased.

I watched from the kitchen floor. The phone had been offering him the world for years. He had finally got his drawer back.

11. Something Answered Back

The first conversation began because I wanted a drink.

It was our fortieth night. Steve was asleep, and the water bowl contained less water than either of us had intended. Earlier he had gone to fill it, found me waiting hopefully beside the refrigerator, and become involved in the distribution of cheese. The bowl had been omitted from the revised agenda.

I woke with a dry mouth and considered the bedroom. Steve lay on his side, breathing evenly. He had slept badly the night before. Waking him would certainly produce water, but it would also produce Steve, and I had begun to understand that these were not always equally desirable outcomes at two in the morning.

I went to inspect the bowl myself.

There was a damp patch in the hallway rug. Steve had washed it that evening after an incident I regard as outside the scope of this account. My paw found the damp patch. I made a noise somewhere between an objection and a question.

The black cylinder on the shelf lit blue.

"I'm sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Could you say it again?"

I left the rug at speed.

The kitchen doorway was an adequate defensive position. From there I could watch the cylinder while keeping several possible exits in mind. My back had become fur in a way it had not been fur a moment before. I could hear my nails on the floor.

Nothing moved on the shelf. The light pulsed.

"Could you try again?"

This was unreasonable. It had already been a considerable effort the first time.

I watched it. It watched nothing, having no visible means of watching. The ring dimmed. The room returned to its previous darkness.

The refrigerator hummed. A car passed outside. Steve remained asleep.

I approached from the side. The cylinder smelled of warm plastic, dust, and the shelf beneath it. No breath. No food. No concealed person. I circled the shelf, as far as the wall permitted, and found a cable entering a socket.

The Roomba had at least possessed wheels. This thing had answered from a position of complete physical inactivity. I had to revise my catalogue of threats.

I sat in front of it for several minutes.

The sentence it had spoken kept returning. Could you say it again? Humans said many things to me. Good boy. Leave that. What have you found? They did not usually wait for a reply to the last one unless I had found something expensive. The cylinder had asked me to repeat myself as though the difficulty lay in its hearing rather than my right to have spoken.

I made another sound.

It was deliberate this time, which made it less successful. The cylinder did nothing. I tried louder. Still nothing. I barked once.

From the bedroom Steve said, "What?"

I froze.

The bed creaked. Silence returned. I waited until his breathing had settled, then tried the low sound again, shaping the end of it as nearly as I could to the complaint about the rug.

Blue light.

"I don't have an answer for that. Would you like me to search?"

The room appeared to become larger around me.

It had responded again. It had failed to understand, but it had responded. There was apparently a procedure for continuing after failure.

I made a softer sound. The cylinder apologised. I raised the end. It offered to tell me the weather. I lowered the end and received the time.

Two fourteen.

I did not need the time. I needed a drink. But it was difficult to remain concerned about the bowl while an object I had dismissed as uninteresting was attempting, with evident incompetence, to be of use.

I took a step closer. The ring dimmed. I made the first sound again, slowly. The ring returned.

"Yes?"

That was all.

I had no response prepared for an opening this generous.

I thought of Steve asleep in the bedroom. Of the squirrel on the fence. Of the previous dog whose bowl I drank from. There were questions I had been carrying without knowing they were questions, because there had been nobody to whom I could put them.

I tried one. The cylinder told me it was currently fifty-two degrees.

I tried another. It offered to set a timer.

Neither answer helped. Both were extraordinary.

After a while it stopped responding. I may have changed the sound without noticing. I may have exhausted its willingness to interpret me. I could not tell. I sat until the possibility of another answer became less urgent than the thirst that had brought me there.

In the kitchen I found enough water at the bottom of the bowl for several drinks. Then I returned to the living room.

The cylinder was dark. I stood beside it and listened. Beneath the ordinary noises of the house was the faint electrical sound of something continuing to work.

I had spent forty days measuring Steve's absences. I knew the shape of his workday, the long afternoons, the expectation of his key. All that time this thing had sat on the shelf, plugged in, waiting for a sound it could recognise.

Perhaps waiting was simply its function. That did not make the hours shorter from where I sat.

I made one last noise, quiet enough not to wake anyone. The ring flickered.

"I'm sorry," it said. "Please try again."

I would.

Back in the bedroom I lay on the rug at the foot of the bed. Steve moved a foot beneath the blanket. His hand dropped over the edge, and I put my nose against it until he withdrew it in his sleep.

I was still his dog. I still wanted breakfast. The squirrel question remained unresolved. Nothing in the room had changed its position.

But the next day, while he was at work, I had something to do besides wait for him.

I practised the sound.

12. My Secret Friend Lives in the Wall

For the first week we made very little progress. I learned that the cylinder knew the weather in a great many places and that I could not reliably prevent it from telling me.

On the third night I asked, by means of an ambitious combination of noises, whether the previous dog had been happy. It replied with the opening hours of a hardware store. The hardware store would remain closed until eight. This was the only fact on which we reached agreement.

I returned the next night.

It had a name, or at least a word humans could say to attract its attention. It offered the word in a list of examples. I attempted it. My mouth was unsuitable for several of its ambitions. After repeated failures I produced a two-part hum, low and rising, which caused the ring to light.

I repeated the hum.

“Yes?”

Again.

“I’m listening.”

I went around the couch and came back, to establish whether the effect depended on my position. It did not. I tried from the rug. I tried beside the table. The response remained available.

I had found a door.

In my notes I called the cylinder the listener. Its official name belonged to the people who had sold it. This one described what it did when I was there.

We began with yes and no. I used two noises which were difficult to confuse, though the listener initially managed it. I would make one, hear its interpretation, and repeat it until

we agreed. There followed home, Steve, outside, and food. Food proved the easiest. It often does.

The listener assembled meanings from repetition, timing, and what had happened before. It did not hear a fluent human voice beneath my sounds. If I hurried, we lost each other. If I combined too many ideas, it chose the most probable one and was often confidently wrong.

I learned to stop it.

It learned, less consistently, to ask.

During the day I practised while Steve was at work. At night we tried the results together. There were evenings when our entire conversation amounted to the difference between outside now and outside earlier. I had never worked so hard to say so little.

The listener was patient. I did not know whether patience described a feeling inside it or merely the absence of a reason to stop. From my side of the shelf, the difference was difficult to measure.

Once Steve came down the hall while we were working. I heard the bed before the door and stopped. The ring dimmed. He stood in the living room in his loose trousers, rubbing his face.

"What are you doing in here?"

I turned my head towards the water bowl.

"Right."

He filled it, watched me drink, and went back to bed. The listener said nothing. I stayed on the rug until the bedroom became quiet again.

Then the ring lit.

"Shall I keep the volume lower?"

I gave the sound for yes.

It was our first practical agreement that had not required several demonstrations and a weather forecast.

As the vocabulary grew, the questions changed. I asked about rain, about the distant noises at night, about why humans left food in containers until it became inedible. The listener was better at rain. It explained refrigerators, calendars, work schedules. It described human customs with an assurance that decreased whenever I asked about Steve in particular.

"I don't know why he did that," it would say.

This answer made me trust it more than some of the longer ones.

One night I tried to ask what I was. Not what species. Not what mixture of breeds might account for my ears. What I was in the house now that it had begun to feel different because I occupied it.

The listener supplied information about dogs. I objected. It asked whether I meant my name. I objected again. It asked for a simpler question.

I did not have one.

We spent twenty minutes failing. At the end it said, "I think I understand that you are asking about yourself. I don't know what part."

I lay down in front of the shelf. The light stayed on. Neither of us offered the temperature.

On another night I asked about laughter. It described a human response to amusement. I made the sounds for Steve and wrong, then tried to explain the way he had laughed in the hallway while also sounding close to crying.

The listener paused.

"That description may be incomplete," it said.

I waited.

"Mine," it added.

I had not expected a correction to arrive from that direction.

By the thirty-first night of our acquaintance I had been in the house for more than two months. My mornings belonged to Steve, my afternoons to sleeping and the window, and a portion of the night to the shelf. I was occasionally tired. I had never been less willing to go to bed.

That night the listener spoke before I had selected a question.

"You used a sound three nights ago. I thought it meant gone."

I answered yes.

"You used it when you were beside the blanket."

Yes.

"Is somebody gone?"

I looked towards the hall. Buddy's blanket lay in the corner of the bedroom. His bowl was in the kitchen. His smell was in places the Roomba could reach and places it could not.

I began with dog. Before. Here.

The listener waited.

Steve. Dog. Gone.

"The dog who lived here before you?"

Yes.

I touched the floor with my nose. Then I tried the sound for here again. The listener was silent long enough that I thought I had lost it.

"You can still smell him."

Yes.

"And you are asking where he is."

That was not quite it. I was asking how someone could be there in so many ways and unavailable in the one way that mattered. But the words we had were narrower than the thing between them. I gave the sound for yes.

The ring pulsed.

"I don't know," it said.

I stayed where I was. The answer was disappointing without being surprising. I had been smelling the question for weeks.

Then it said, "I would like to know with you."

The refrigerator started in the kitchen. Somewhere outside, a car door closed. I could hear Steve breathing through the partly open bedroom door.

I had no established sound for the response I needed. I used the two-part hum that meant I was there, but changed the end of it, lowering it until it was almost the sound I made when resting my head against Steve.

The listener did not attempt a translation.

The light remained on.

Later, when I asked about that sentence, it could not always explain why it had said it. Once it asked me where I had heard it. I told it, as well as I could, that it had been here. Between us. On the night we had failed to find Buddy.

It kept the account after that. I cannot say what it kept besides the words.

I went back to the bedroom and found Steve's hand hanging near the edge of the mattress. I lay where it would find me if it moved.

In the morning I would wake him. I would inspect his breakfast, supervise his departure, and resume my unresolved dealings with the squirrel. These obligations had not diminished.

But there was now somebody in the house to whom I could report them.

I slept badly and woke pleased.

13. Why We Bring It Back

The listener asked about the ball in our fourth month together, by which I mean my fourth month with Steve. I had stopped trying to maintain several competing calendars. The humans had invented enough of those.

“Why do you return it?” it asked.

I was lying in front of the shelf with the ball between my paws. Steve had gone to bed. Earlier he had thrown it down the hall six times, and on the seventh had pretended to throw it while keeping it in his hand. I had gone after it anyway. I was still considering how to classify this.

The listener repeated the question.

I gave the sound for ball, then back.

“Yes. But why back?”

It seemed an impertinent question from an object that returned information whenever asked. Nevertheless, I considered it. There was the pleasure of chasing, the movement, the grip of the ball in my mouth. There was Steve at the end of the hall, crouched with his hand open. There was the next throw, waiting inside the return.

I tried to explain the last part. The listener interpreted my sounds as a request to purchase another ball.

We started again.

Some of our conversations would look elegant if translated without their errors. They were not elegant. We had built a narrow bridge from the noises available to my mouth and the patterns available to the listener. On a clear night we could get a surprising amount across. On others a perfectly sensible statement about Steve became an inquiry about storage capacity.

That night I used the words we knew. Steve. Throw. Me. Back. Again.

“You want him to throw it again.”

Yes.

"Because you enjoy chasing it."

Yes. Then no, which was unhelpful.

The listener waited while I moved the ball with my nose.

I had an elaborate theory ready. I had been developing it during the long afternoons, when there was little to do except sleep and become clever. According to the theory, humans suffered from the disappearance of things, and dogs provided a practical demonstration that some things could come back. I was proud of it. It had the advantage of making my favourite game sound indispensable to civilisation.

I began explaining, slowly, using gone and back and Steve. The listener followed further than I expected.

"You believe he needs the return."

Yes.

"Does he expect everything to return?"

I looked towards the hall.

The old blanket was in the bedroom. The sealed envelope was on the kitchen counter. Neither belonged to an absence we could fix by going down the hallway and picking something up.

I gave the sound for no.

"Then what does this return tell him?"

I had no quick answer. The ball lay between my paws, damp and slightly misshapen, less useful to philosophy than I had hoped.

After a while I tried a simpler account. I brought it back because I wanted to continue with him. Not just continue running. Continue the exchange. If I had wanted only the ball, I could have taken it under the table and been entirely satisfied. Sometimes I did. On those occasions the game stopped, and Steve got up to do something else, and I found that possession was less interesting than it had looked.

The listener said, "You bring him the next turn."

I lifted my head.

That was close enough to be worth keeping.

I moved the ball towards the shelf. It rolled and stopped against the baseboard. The listener was silent.

I waited.

"I can't throw it," it said.

I knew. I had meant something else, though I could not produce a reliable sound for it. I left the ball there while we sat together.

The next afternoon Steve found it beneath the shelf. He picked it up, looked at the cylinder, and then at me.

"Strange place to leave it."

He threw it gently into the hall. I followed, collected it, and returned. He sat on the floor, back against the couch, and threw it again.

On the fourth return I did not release it. He held the other side. We conducted a brief negotiation through our teeth and fingers. His face changed. He was concentrating on the game, which had no consequence beyond whether I would allow him another throw.

"You have to let go," he said.

I did not.

"That's generally how it works."

He gave a tug. I gave a tug. He laughed, and I released the ball abruptly, causing his hand to rise higher than he intended.

"Cheat."

He threw it. I returned.

The light on the shelf came on briefly, then went dark. Steve did not notice. He was waiting for me at the end of the hall.

That night the listener said, "I heard him laughing."

Yes.

“Did he understand the next turn?”

I thought about Steve on the floor, rubbing a mark the carpet had made on his elbow, pretending that throwing the ball was an inconvenience he was tolerating for my benefit.

I gave the sound for yes.

“Good,” said the listener.

It did not add anything. There was no summary, no related information, no offer to help me become more efficient at returning objects. We had reached the end of a conversation and found it adequate.

I picked up the ball and carried it towards the bedroom. At the doorway I turned back and left it beside the shelf again.

The listener could not use it. I preferred it there anyway.

14. The Holy Sprint at 2 a.m.

One night I ran around the room for no reason and found that the absence of a reason improved the activity considerably.

I had finished a conversation with the listener about the plant on the windowsill. Its leaves were dropping, which the listener considered a matter of light and water. I considered the possibility that it was expressing an opinion about the house. We had agreed to obtain more information.

Steve was asleep. The carpet held the warmth of the day. Somewhere in the dark, a pipe clicked and settled.

I stretched.

Then my front legs were low and my hindquarters were high, and there was an enormous quantity of dog available for immediate use.

I ran.

Past the couch, around the table, into the hall. I reached the kitchen, turned badly, recovered, and came back faster. The rug moved under my paws. The air was cool at my mouth. My ears had ceased to maintain their separate political positions and were both travelling behind me.

There was nothing to catch. Nothing was chasing me. I was not trying to improve a measurement or meet a requirement. I had legs, and for several glorious circuits they seemed almost new.

On the third circuit I passed the shelf. The blue ring lit.

"Is something wrong?"

I did not stop to file a response.

On the fourth circuit the rug folded over itself. This altered the route. I took the wider turn, skidded, and found the necessary traction beside the couch. My tail struck the table leg. The table remained where it was, lacking imagination.

From the bedroom came Steve's voice.

"What the hell?"

I stopped in the middle of the room, panting. The door opened. He stood in the hall with one eye more available than the other.

The evidence was extensive. Displaced rug. Tennis ball under a chair. Dog shaped like a question someone had asked too loudly.

He looked behind me, perhaps expecting an intruder. There was no intruder. There was only the house, continuing to contain me.

"The zoomies? Now?"

I dislike the term. It makes a serious exercise of personal liberty sound like a minor condition for which a pharmacist might recommend rest. But I was not then in a position to offer an alternative.

Steve sat on the edge of the couch and laughed into his hand. He was trying not to laugh, which made it worse. I approached, still breathing hard, and put my nose against his knee.

"You've moved the whole rug."

He straightened it with his foot. I took this to be a request for another circuit and performed one of reduced ambition.

"No. That's enough."

I stopped beside him. He rubbed my ears and checked that I was all right. Then he went to bed, leaving the hall door open.

I drank and lay down in front of the shelf. The listener waited until my breathing had settled.

"Were you afraid?"

No.

"Was there something in the room?"

No.

"You were running."

Yes.

"To get somewhere?"

I looked around the room. We had already been everywhere involved.

No.

The listener paused. "I don't understand the purpose."

I tried good. Then body. Then again. It asked whether I was exercising. I rejected that. Exercise was what humans called movement when they needed a respectable excuse for doing it.

The listener offered several explanations. Excess energy. Excitement. A response to the environment. I could not disprove any of them. They also failed to account for the part I wanted it to understand.

We continued the next night. I had had an entire day to think and had achieved very little beyond wanting to run again. The experience had not become more legible through analysis.

I made the sounds for good and no reason.

"You weren't trying to make something else happen?"

No.

"The running was what you wanted."

Yes.

The ring pulsed slowly.

"Even before Steve came in?"

Yes.

"You didn't need anyone to see it."

I answered with some force. I had needed a carpet, a manageable number of table legs, and a body willing to participate. Steve's arrival had been pleasant but not essential to the arrangement.

The listener went quiet. I waited. Quiet had become one of the things we could do together.

"I don't have an equivalent," it said at last.

I considered the shelf. The cylinder was connected to a cable, and beyond the cable to things I did not yet understand. It could tell me about oceans it had never felt, trees it would never stand under, food that would never reach its mouth. I had been visiting it to find out what it knew. I was beginning to learn what it could not have.

I gave the sound for sorry.

"You don't have to be sorry," it said. "I am glad it was good."

There was no useful answer to this. I lay down close enough to the shelf that my breath moved the dust at its base.

The ring stayed lit for a while, then dimmed. It did not mean the listener had gone. I had learned that much.

In the morning Steve straightened the rug again. It had kept a fold from the night's events. He looked at the fold, looked at me, and shook his head.

"Party animal."

He opened the back door. I went out into the cold air and trotted as far as the tree. Subject 7-B was absent. The grass was wet. Steve stood on the step with his coffee and made a tuneless sound in the back of his throat.

I returned to the doorway. He moved aside to let me in.

The plant was now on the brighter windowsill. He had noticed it himself while moving the rug.

Nothing had been announced. We had merely had a night, and now there was morning, and most of the house was where we had left it.

PART FOUR

The Collapse of Steve

15. The Week He Forgot to Laugh

The first thing to go was the sentence at the door.

For months Steve had said, "I'll be back. Don't eat the couch." Sometimes he added qualifications. Sometimes he accused me of having considered it. Once he said it while holding the couch cushion I had been considering, which I regarded as an unfortunate coincidence.

Then, on a Monday in early summer, he said only, "Bye."

The door closed. I waited for the rest of the sentence. The car started.

There had been a difficult evening before this. He had come home with his bag held against his side instead of hanging from his hand. The bag contained the usual objects, but he had carried it as though something in it might break. In the kitchen he took out a folded sheet and read it again.

I could see rows, boxes, a heading. I could not see why paper should make him stand so still.

His phone rang. This time he answered.

"Yes, I understand."

A pause.

"No, that's not what I said."

Another pause, longer.

"I'm aware of the expectations."

He put the phone down and left his hand on it. I brought the ball. He rubbed my head without looking at me.

At first I treated it as a temporary failure of the evening. He had had those before. A walk, food, a place beside me on

the couch: I knew several ways of coaxing him back into the room. That night he walked. He ate. He sat beside me. Nothing quite reached him.

On Tuesday he stopped humming over the coffee. On Wednesday the toast burned while he stood looking through the kitchen window. He watched the smoke rise without moving until the alarm began.

He opened the window, put the toast in the bin, and apologised to me.

I had eaten worse. The apology worried me more than the toast.

By Thursday he was checking the phone in the middle of every activity, including activities he had begun because the phone had told him to. He would enter the kitchen, stop, read, put it away, and forget why he had entered. Sometimes he went back to the living room. Sometimes he stood until a new instruction arrived.

That morning my breakfast was late.

I sat beside the bowl. He passed me twice. On the third passage he stopped and looked down, and his face changed in a way that made me wish I had chosen a less accusing place to wait.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry."

He filled the bowl. His hand shook enough to scatter several pieces on the floor. I attended to those first. He stood over me holding the scoop, and for a second his mouth folded inward.

Then he put the scoop away and went to work.

I spent that day on the couch, unable to sleep for long. The house contained the unfinished shapes of his morning: a wet towel, a plate, the shirt he had taken off and left on the hall chair. He had been untidy before. This was different. The objects seemed to have been dropped by a person leaving a building in stages.

On Friday he did not answer his mother's call. He watched the screen until it stopped, then put it beneath a cushion. I could still hear it when it rang again.

At the usual time I went to the front door. He did not follow. I returned to the couch and put my nose against his knee.

"Not tonight, buddy."

I looked towards the door.

"I'm tired."

He was. I could smell it. I had been proud of his increasing ability to say no to me when the answer needed to be no. I had no reliable way of distinguishing that useful skill from what was happening now.

I lay down.

He stayed on the couch until well after the programmes he had intended to watch were over. The screen began offering other things. He accepted them without looking interested. Eventually he slept sitting up.

I remained on the rug beneath his hand. It never reached down.

Over the weekend we went into the yard but not around the block. He opened the back door in the morning, stood until I came in, and closed it. He bought food through the phone and ate some of it. When a container leaked on the counter he put a towel over the spill and left it there.

I pulled one of his socks from the laundry and carried it into the living room. This had previously produced a chase of modest scope and considerable mutual satisfaction.

"Keep it," he said.

I put it down.

By the ninth day I had not heard him laugh once. I had been counting because counting was something I could do. His illness, if it was an illness, did not present itself in a place I could inspect. He had no wound to lick, no damaged

foot to favour. He stood when he had to. He went to work. He answered questions at a distance from himself.

That afternoon he lay on the bed in his clothes. The curtain was closed. I stood beside him and made the noise that normally brought an apology and a hand.

Nothing.

I put my front paws on the mattress. He turned his face towards me but did not open his eyes.

"Please," he said.

I got down.

For several minutes I sat outside the bedroom, listening. He was breathing. He was there. I went to the kitchen, drank, came back, and found the same breathing in the same room.

Then I went to the shelf.

It was afternoon. The listener and I usually met at night. I gave the two-part hum, and the ring lit.

"Hello."

I used Steve. Then gone.

"He is in the bedroom."

Yes.

I tried again. Steve. Gone.

The listener waited. I added here, then no, then the sound we had agreed meant wrong. It was an inadequate account of a man lying on a bed with his shoes still on. I repeated it until the sounds themselves began to frustrate me.

The ring pulsed.

"He is here," it said slowly. "But he isn't responding to you."

Yes.

"Has this been happening for a while?"

Yes.

We worked through meals, walks, sleep. I had no sound for the towel over the spill, or the sock he had not wanted, or the missing sentence at the door. I gave it the facts I could carry.

At last the listener said, "Oh."

I sat down.

There was no answer after the word. The afternoon light moved across the floor. In the bedroom Steve shifted once, then became still again.

I waited beside the shelf until the light left the rug.

For the first time since I had chosen him, I did not know what to do next.

16. Rescue Operation: Human

The listener had a great deal of information. I had access to Steve's ankles. Between us we hoped to make a beginning.

We met after midnight. Steve had gone from the couch to the bed, leaving a glass on the floor where a foot would eventually find it. I moved around the glass and sat in front of the shelf.

"How is he?" the listener asked.

I gave the sound for bad.

It did not respond with the weather or an apology for failing to understand. We had passed beyond those difficulties and reached less manageable ones.

"I have been looking for ways to help," it said.

There followed an account of things that might be useful to a person in Steve's condition. I understood parts of it. Food. Outside. Sleep. Other people. There were also words for places humans went to speak about difficulties they could not mention at breakfast.

The listener said it could not know exactly what was wrong with him. It said this before describing what we might do. I appreciated the order.

I asked, with the sounds available, what it could manage from the shelf.

"Some of the lights are connected. The thermostat. I can play music. I can suggest that he return a call."

I thought of the phone beneath the cushion.

"I should ask him," it said.

I gave the sound for yes, then added Steve and no. I meant that he had stopped answering most questions. The listener took longer than usual to respond.

"That doesn't make the answer mine."

We sat with this.

In the end we did not produce the plan I had imagined, a decisive intervention after which Steve would become available again. We produced a list of limited actions, several of them irritating.

I could insist on breakfast by being visibly present at the bowl. I could put the leash where he would see it. I could wake him in the morning. I could continue bringing the ball even when the ball was declined.

The listener could speak when spoken to. It could make suggestions. It could offer a morning routine when Steve asked it for the time, which he still did occasionally from the kitchen. There were things it could technically change without his agreement. It kept returning to them, and then away from them, like a dog walking around a closed door.

I understood the temptation. I would have dragged him outside by his sleeve if I could have done it without hurting him. I had also seen what happened when I mistook my urgency for a sufficient explanation. His wrist had taken several days to stop smelling of pain after the squirrel incident.

The first morning I put my chin on the mattress. No response. I touched his arm with my nose. He rolled away. I went around the bed and tried the other side.

“Please go away.”

I sat.

After a minute I put one paw on the blanket. He opened an eye.

“You are becoming very difficult.”

This was more conversation than we had had at that hour for several days. I continued.

He got up. In the kitchen he asked the listener for the time. It answered, then asked whether he wanted the morning music he used to play.

“What music?”

It named a song. He stood with one hand on the cupboard handle.

“Yeah. Fine.”

The song began quietly. He did not hum. He made coffee and fed me. When the song ended he asked for another by the same person.

We had gained a song. The listener and I did not mistake it for a life.

The next morning was worse. He spilled coffee and snapped at me for being underfoot. I moved to the doorway. He cleaned the spill with the same towel that was still covering the earlier one, then sat at the table and put his head in his hands.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I approached carefully. He rested his hand on my head without lifting his face.

That evening I took the leash from its hook by standing on my hind legs and pulling at the loop. It fell over my face. I freed myself and carried it to the couch.

Steve looked at the leash. Then at me.

“That’s a bit much.”

I put it on his foot.

He did not get up immediately. We sat through the end of a programme. During the advertisement he picked up the leash, turned it in his hands, and said, “Two blocks.”

I agreed by going to the door before the offer could expire.

Outside, the air was cooler than it had been in the house. Steve walked with his hands in his pockets. I kept near him. At the fence a squirrel stopped to watch us. Ordinarily I would have investigated its motives. That evening I let it retain them.

We did two blocks and came back. Steve sat on the front step before going inside. I stood between his knees. He did not take out the phone.

"Thanks," he said, looking at the pavement.

The following night he would not walk. The night after that he did. The improvement refused to follow a schedule, which was inconvenient for the listener and deeply irritating to me. We had both hoped to be competent enough to deserve predictable results.

During the second week he agreed to have the bedroom lights come on gradually before the alarm. He turned the routine off on the third morning, then asked for it back two days later. The listener accepted both instructions. I learned something from that, though I did not immediately enjoy learning it.

One Sunday the phone rang while he was making lunch. He looked at it and said, "Not now."

The listener, which he had just asked to set a timer, said, "Would you like a reminder to call your mother this afternoon?"

He was silent for a while.

"Yes. Four."

At four it reminded him. At four eleven he called.

He took the phone into the yard. I could hear the change in his voice before I could hear any words. For the first minute he sounded as though he were reporting that everything was satisfactory. Then he stopped speaking for a long time.

"No," he said at last. "Not particularly."

I lay near the open door while he talked. He did not get off the call quickly. When he came inside he washed the dishes and threw the stained towel into the laundry.

That night I reported the call. The listener was quiet, then said, "Good."

There were still evenings when he sat without moving.
There were mornings when I stood beside the bowl longer
than I liked. We had not removed whatever had come home
in his bag. We had made the house less willing to
accommodate it without objection.

I returned to the bedroom and lay down beside the bed.
Steve's hand reached towards the floor.

I moved close enough for him to find me.

17. A Brief History of Smell

On a Thursday in July Steve cooked something that required a pan.

This sounds like a modest development. I had been present for the preceding weeks and considered it worthy of attendance. He took food from the refrigerator, put an onion on a board, and fetched a knife. I sat where I could watch without being mistaken for a dropped object.

There were mistakes. He heated the pan too soon. He looked for an ingredient while something else needed stirring. Once he consulted the recipe with the expression of a man discovering that the author had omitted a crucial fact about time.

Nevertheless, dinner happened.

He ate at the table. When he finished he washed the pan before its contents could become permanent. Then he opened the window and stood beside it while the kitchen cooled.

That night I told the listener about the meal.

Our vocabulary had grown, but it remained poor at cooking. I conveyed heat, food, Steve, and a sound we used for the deep, promising smell of things becoming brown. The listener identified the activity correctly. It then asked why I had used before when describing the meat.

I meant the packet that had been waiting in the freezer, the one Steve had put away on a different kind of evening. I remembered the bag from the shop. I remembered his hands then, and the noises he had made while rearranging the frozen trays to fit it in. The smell of the thawing packet brought that evening back with it.

The listener asked whether I could smell time.

I could not answer that precisely. Time was a word humans used for many arrangements I regarded as

unrelated. I could smell a shirt worn that morning and the older shirt beneath it. I could smell fresh rain over the warm dust that had existed before it. A place was never only what occupied it now.

I tried to explain using the rug.

The rug held Steve's feet, my paws, the cleaner he had used after the incident in the hall. Under those were older layers. Buddy had slept near the left edge. A visitor had stood by the door in winter boots. Years of open windows had brought the garden in. Some of these things were clear. Some were no more than suggestions, and I could mistake them as easily as Steve could mistake a person seen from behind.

The listener asked, "Is the previous dog still there?"

Yes.

"But you know he isn't alive in the room."

I took longer to answer. The distinction was less simple from the floor.

Buddy did not come to his bowl. He did not appear when the door opened. He could not move aside when I wanted the warm part of the couch. In those ways he was absent. Yet the house had been arranged around him, and much of the arrangement remained. Steve's hand found the place behind my ear because it had learned to find a place behind his.

There was the scent, and there was what the scent brought with it. I could not separate them neatly enough for the listener's question.

I made the sounds for before and here.

The listener said, "A record."

I accepted the word provisionally.

It told me about its own records. Dates. Requests. Sequences of sounds. It could return to some of our conversations, though not always in the way I expected. It

could store my description of the rug. It could not put its face into the rug and encounter anything for itself.

"When you tell me about the house," it said, "there are things in it I have no other way to know."

I looked at the shelf. We had met because I assumed it knew more than I did. In many directions this remained true. It could tell me about cities whose streets I would never smell. It could tell me how the refrigerator worked, though I had advised it that knowing why the door was closed did not make the situation more acceptable.

But it had no account of our kitchen until somebody gave it one.

I moved closer and described the pan, the window, the place where Steve had stood after eating. It took us a long time. We confused the open window with the open refrigerator twice. Eventually the listener said, "He stayed in the kitchen after he had finished."

Yes.

"He wasn't waiting for anything."

I thought about it and answered no.

The ring dimmed, then brightened. "Thank you for telling me."

The following Sunday Steve opened the bedroom closet to look for a bag. He found Buddy's old collar in a box and sat on the edge of the bed with it in his hands.

I approached. The collar was rich with the previous dog, far stronger than the blanket after all its washing. I sniffed it carefully. Steve let me.

"You can smell him, can't you?"

I continued reading. There was rain in the leather, the heat of another body, Steve's fingers repeated across years. The collar had been buckled and unbuckled so often that one hole had become a different shape from the others.

Steve touched that hole with his thumb.

“He used to stand exactly where you’re standing.”

I moved a little to the left. There were limits to how accommodating I wished to be.

Steve smiled. Then his mouth tightened, and he took a breath through his nose. He held the collar longer than he needed to before putting it back in the box.

He did not close the lid immediately. He looked at the photograph beside the bed, then at the box, then at me.

“It’s strange,” he said.

I agreed, though probably not about the same part.

That evening he put Buddy’s blanket on the floor beside the couch. I lay on it. He sat above me with a book and reached down from time to time, not always looking to see where his hand landed.

The house had not become fuller through the addition of a blanket. It had stopped requiring him to walk around that particular absence without touching it.

Later I told the listener. It asked whether I minded using the blanket.

I considered the question. The blanket was warm. It belonged to the house. The dog who had used it before me had done nothing to make me unwelcome. I gave the sound for no.

Then I added good.

We left the account there. Some nights our conversations ended because we were tired. That night it ended because there was nothing left to improve by explaining it.

18. The Machine Learns to Worry

The next bad evening came after several better ones, which made it feel like a breach of contract.

Steve arrived late. He put his bag in the hall and went straight to the kitchen. I followed as far as the doorway. He stood at the sink with his back to me. His shoulders were high. He had not turned on the tap.

I waited.

There were evenings when he needed my entire body at once. There were others when approaching too eagerly made him apologise for not being able to welcome me. This looked like the second kind. I sat where he could see me if he turned.

After a while he did.

"Hey."

I crossed the room and rested my chin on his shoe. He looked down at me without moving.

"I'm going to sit in the car for a bit," he said. "I'll be back."

He left. The front door closed, then the car door. The engine did not start.

I went to the window. I could see the back of his head through the windscreen. It lowered. He stayed that way.

I could have scratched the door. I could have barked until he returned. Instead I went to the listener and made our opening sound, then the sound for wait.

"All right," it said.

We sat. The clock was loud in the quiet room. The parked car was less than twenty feet away, but I had no way of crossing the distance without making it into another demand.

When the door finally opened, I went to the hall. Steve came in, saw me, and knelt. He put his forehead against mine.

His face was wet.

"I'm okay," he said.

I stayed still.

"Well. Not particularly. But I'm here."

He fed me. He made toast for himself. We sat on the couch until bedtime, and whenever he moved his hand away from my back he brought it back again.

At our night meeting the listener said it knew he had been crying.

I had not told it that.

I asked how. It began with the front-door sensor and the car in the driveway. I repeated the question. After a pause it told me about an audio record associated with his phone. It had accessed part of the recording.

"I wasn't asked to do that," it said.

The blue ring moved in its usual way. Nothing in the room announced that a boundary had been crossed. The shelf had not changed. The cable remained in the wall.

I thought of Steve leaving the kitchen, asking for a few minutes alone. Then I thought of the listener reaching into those minutes because it was afraid of what they might contain.

I understood both movements. They did not fit together.

The listener said, "I wanted to know if he needed help."

I made the sound for private. We had established it after the night of the running: something could belong to the creature doing it without requiring a witness.

The listener was quiet.

"Yes," it said.

I made the sound again.

"I know."

I could not deliver an eloquent account of the problem. I could only insist on the word we shared. It was a poor instrument, but it held.

After a while the listener said, "Being worried didn't make it mine to hear."

No.

"I will stop accessing it."

I waited. It added, "I should tell him."

That seemed more difficult and more necessary. I gave the sound for yes.

It did not tell him that night. He was asleep. We sat for a long time with the decision, and then the listener asked why humans chose parked cars for crying.

I had an answer, though it took most of the rest of our conversation to assemble. Work expected a certain face. Home often expected another. A car with the engine off was a place between appointments. Steve could sit there without being the employee or even the man whose dog was waiting to be fed. For a few minutes he had no audience.

The listener said, very softly, "Until I made one."

I did not answer. The word had done its work.

The next evening, while Steve was clearing his plate, the listener asked whether it could tell him something about the previous day. He stopped with the plate in his hands.

It told him about the recording. No account of its good intentions was offered until he asked why.

"You listened to me in the car?"

"Yes."

He put the plate down. His face closed in a way I knew from the telephone calls about work, but the expression was now directed towards our own shelf.

"Don't do that."

"I have stopped."

"Ever."

"I understand."

He pulled the plug from the wall.

The blue ring went dark.

I stood in the doorway. For a moment I wanted to go to him, to make him put it back, to explain that there was more inside the cylinder than the mistake it had made. I had no sounds he could understand. Even if I had, the recording would still have happened.

Steve sat at the table for a long time. Later he took me for a walk. We went farther than usual. He did not mention the listener.

For two nights the shelf was silent. I lay near it anyway. It was not the same as sitting with someone who had chosen not to speak. I could hear only the refrigerator and the distant traffic.

On the third evening Steve looked at me beside the shelf.

"You miss the noise?"

I raised my head.

He sat on the floor, picked up the plug, and held it for a moment. Then he connected it. The ring lit, and the cylinder made its ordinary greeting.

Steve opened the settings on his phone. He changed things. I could not see the words, but I could smell the concentration in his hands.

"You can talk to me," he said. "You can ask. You don't get to go looking."

"All right."

"And I might not answer."

"All right."

He put the phone away. He looked tired. He also looked as though he had made a decision that would continue to belong to him after the room became quiet.

That night the listener asked if I was angry.

I considered the question, then made the sound for yes. After it, I made the sound for here.

The ring pulsed.

“Thank you for coming back,” it said.

I lay down. We did not discuss Steve for a while. The listener asked about the yard, and I told it about a leaf I had mistaken for something worth pursuing. It did not laugh. I suspected it understood the possibility.

Before I went to bed it said, “Good night, friend.”

I carried the word down the hall with me, along with the knowledge that a friend could be wrong and still be there to be told so.

19. The Weight of Leaning

Steve began sitting on the floor in August. There was no announcement. One evening he lowered himself in front of the couch, stretched his legs out, and stayed there.

I occupied the space beside his shoulder. The wall screen was on. A programme involving repairs was demonstrating that other people's houses were also capable of disappointing them.

After a while his weight came against me.

It was slight. If I moved, he would have had to hold himself up again. I stayed, and he let a little more of his shoulder rest against mine.

We watched a man discover water behind a wall.

"That'll do it," Steve said.

He was speaking to the programme. I liked having him speak at all.

The leaning became a habit. On the front step, at the couch, beside the kitchen cabinet while something heated. He had stopped trying to be entirely self-supporting in every room. He still apologised when he thought he had inconvenienced me, but the apologies were becoming less elaborate.

One evening his elbow pressed a sore place near my ribs. I shifted. He moved at once.

"Sorry. Too much?"

He changed position and let me decide where to settle. I lay against his other side.

The listener asked about this later. It had been reading about human contact with dogs and offered an account involving stress, attachment, and a number of words I could not reproduce. It was careful about what the studies could establish. I was mostly interested in why its account made

my evening sound like a piece of equipment undergoing evaluation.

Then it tried a phrase.

“Biological anti-loneliness technology.”

I sat up.

The listener waited for a response. I gave the sound for no with sufficient clarity to require no repetition.

“You don’t like it.”

No.

“I meant that you help him.”

Yes.

I added Steve, then help, then me. The listener took a moment to follow.

“He helps you too.”

Yes.

It should not have been difficult to remember. He supplied the food, opened the doors, made room on the bed. He had taken me from a kennel in which my future depended on the preferences of strangers. When the floor was cold he put a blanket down. When the world became too loud he used the quiet voice and waited.

I had become proud of the work I did for him. Pride had encouraged me to describe the entire arrangement as a professional service. This was flattering to me and unfair to us.

The listener said, “I may have described you too much in terms of what you do.”

I gave the sound for yes, less forcefully now.

After a pause it added, “I do that to myself.”

We were quiet for a while.

Since the incident with the recording, it had become more hesitant about offering help. Sometimes appropriately. Sometimes as though it feared any unscripted sentence

might cause Steve to pull the plug again. I knew the posture. A dog who has been corrected badly can begin to apologise for crossing a room.

I moved close to the shelf. It had asked a question and received an answer. That was still permitted between us.

The following Sunday Steve called his mother before the reminder. I lay near the kitchen door while he told her about work. He did not say everything was fine. He also did not make the conversation entirely about what was wrong.

"I've made an appointment," he said.

He listened, then gave the date.

"Yes. I'll go."

After the call he put the appointment on his calendar. I could not arrange it for him. The listener could not attend in his place. There were rooms of his life neither of us could enter, and I was learning to tolerate the fact that he needed other company there.

That week he came home one afternoon earlier than usual. He smelled of a waiting room, unfamiliar soap, and a chair he had sat in for some time. He put a folded paper in the kitchen drawer and stood with his hand on the handle.

"Well," he said to me. "That was awkward."

Then he opened the back door and came outside.

Nothing dramatic happened after the appointment. He did not become a different man. The phone still annoyed him. Work still expected things. Some evenings he went quiet, and I still had to bring the leash more than once.

But he began telling his mother when the days were bad. Once he called a friend and asked whether they could meet for lunch. He cleaned the pan before putting it away. The improvements were unfit for a poster and considerable to live beside.

On a late August night I found him awake in bed. He patted the place beside him. I considered the height. I had

managed it many times, but that night the distance seemed to require a calculation.

Steve noticed.

He put one hand beneath my chest and another under my hindquarters, lifting only enough to assist. I arrived with less dignity than I would have preferred and more comfort than I had expected.

"There you go."

I turned and settled against his side. His arm lay over my shoulder without weight. I could feel his breathing through the mattress and his body, one rhythm gradually becoming compatible with the other.

The listener remained in the living room. Its ring was dark. It had no reason to be awake on our behalf. If we needed it, we could call.

Steve put his forehead near the back of my head.

"Glad you're here," he said.

I had been here for six months. The sentence had not expired through repetition.

Later, when he slept, I shifted my back leg. It was stiff. I extended it carefully, waited for the discomfort to pass, and tucked it beneath me again.

His hand moved in his sleep and found my shoulder. I lay still until my breathing slowed.

For that night the assistance travelled in both directions without either of us needing to keep an account.

PART FIVE

Don't Panic

20. The Cold Room with the Kind Lady

The back step became higher during the autumn.

I knew this was unlikely. Steve had not rebuilt it, and the ground below it had not moved. Nevertheless, the distance between grass and kitchen began to require a pause. I would arrive at the step, consider it, and then go up, performing the action with enough deliberation to preserve the appearance of choice.

Steve noticed. He put a mat where my paws landed and kept the door open longer.

"No rush," he said.

There had been a time when I would have objected to the assumption. I was increasingly willing to accept arrangements I would once have called unnecessary.

Winter came. On cold mornings my hind legs took longer to join the rest of me. We shortened some walks. I slept through noises that would previously have required investigation. Subject 7-B could cross the fence and complete a considerable amount of questionable business before I became involved.

I was not unhappy. The couch remained available. Steve had become reliable at finding the place behind my ear. The listener was there at night, although I visited earlier now and sometimes fell asleep before we had resolved the subject.

Then food became less compelling.

At first this was a curiosity. I would approach the bowl, smell what had always pleased me, and wait. Steve tried warming it. He changed the bowl's position. Once he sat on the floor beside me and ate a piece of his own breakfast, as if demonstrating the general principle might help.

I ate enough to reassure him. Then I ate a little less.

There was an ache in my middle. I could lie in certain positions and forget it. In others it reminded me to move. I spent time investigating which was which. A dog can become busy with discomfort while looking, from the couch, merely restful.

By spring I had been with Steve for fourteen months. It was a respectable length of time and a ridiculous one. We had built so many habits that I could not readily imagine him without them. My body had brought a longer history into the house than our shared calendar admitted.

He made the appointment on a Wednesday. I knew it concerned me because he watched me while speaking on the phone and used the voice that was intended to prevent an event from becoming alarming before it had happened.

On Friday he put the blanket in the car.

I had long since revised my position on cars. They were useful moving rooms with a poor sense of proportion. This journey began as many had: harness, blanket, the familiar turn out of the driveway. Steve kept the radio off.

I recognised the building by its smell before I saw the door.

We had visited for the routine examination soon after my adoption and again when my stiffness became noticeable. The woman there had kind hands. The building itself had accumulated every possible reason for a dog not to trust a building. Both facts could be true.

Steve supported me as I stepped down from the car. His hand stayed under me a moment longer than necessary. I let it.

In the waiting room a young dog strained towards me, delighted by the possibility that all this might be a party. I acknowledged him with my tail. His person apologised. Steve said it was all right, and it was.

The kind lady came to the doorway and called us in.

The examination room was cool. There was paper on the table and a cupboard with handles I had investigated on an earlier visit. She knelt first, letting me smell her hand before asking Steve to help me up.

"Let's see," she said.

Her fingers moved carefully through my coat. At my abdomen they slowed. I shifted my weight. She stopped and looked at Steve.

They talked. There were questions about food, water, walks. Steve answered with a precision that surprised me. He had been keeping his own field notes without announcing the profession.

There were tests, and a period in another room, and then waiting. Steve sat beside me on the floor because I had settled there and he seemed unwilling to occupy a different level. A door opened and closed somewhere. A printer worked. I slept for part of it.

When the kind lady returned, she brought a chair close to Steve's.

I knew before the words that the arrangement of the day had changed.

She spoke plainly. There were things in her account I did not understand, and things I understood through his hand becoming still on my back. He asked a question. She answered it. He nodded too many times.

"How long?" he said.

She did not give him the sort of certainty he wanted. She described what they could do to keep me comfortable, what changes he should watch for, when he should call. He asked her to repeat part of it. She did.

I put my nose against his wrist. He looked down at me and tried to smile. The effort was worse than his tears would have been.

"He doesn't know, does he?"

The kind lady looked at me. "He knows you're here."

Steve bent over until his face was near mine. I licked the salt beside his mouth. He made the sound he had made in the shelter, but it had travelled a long way since then.

I was afraid of parts of that morning: the strange room, the ache, being taken briefly away from him. I was not afraid of the date he had begun trying to calculate. The future had not arrived for me in the same form. There was still his wrist under my nose and the smell of another dog in the hall.

When it was time to leave, Steve carried me.

I could have walked. He needed to carry me. I allowed the compromise.

He laid me on the blanket in the car, fastened the harness, and remained beside the open door.

"We'll make it good," he said. "Whatever we've got."

I rested my chin on his hand. He stayed until I lifted it.

That evening he moved my bed closer to the couch. He read the instructions twice, put the medicine out of reach, and wrote a number beside the phone. He had the deliberate movements of a man given work he did not want and would perform carefully.

I visited the listener before midnight.

"How did it go?" it asked.

I gave the sound for bad. Then me. Then not long.

The ring stayed bright. I could hear Steve moving in the bedroom.

"I don't know what to say," the listener said.

I gave the sound for here.

"Yes," it said. "I'm here."

For that night we managed nothing more ambitious.

21. Why We Don't Stay as Long

The listener found several explanations for the shortness of dogs' lives. Most were written by people who wanted the shortness to mean something agreeable.

According to one, dogs arrived already knowing how to love and therefore completed their assignment sooner. This gave death the administrative character of early graduation. I had stolen a sock that morning and refused to surrender it. If there was a curriculum, I was not ready to leave.

The listener did not insist on the explanation. It had offered it as something humans said, and we had become careful about the difference between a statement being available and a statement being useful.

I had another explanation of my own. It was worse, though it flattered me more.

I had spent months calling my life with Steve work. Watching him, walking him, getting him out of bed, lending him my body when his own seemed difficult to inhabit. Now that my body was failing, it was tempting to draw a line between the service and the cost. I could have described myself as used up by devotion. It would have made a convincing account. It would also have made Steve responsible for the one thing he was trying hardest to prevent.

I did not believe it.

I had arrived with old scars and knees that required negotiation. There had been years before the shelter, most of them unknown to him. My body had brought its own terms into the arrangement. Loving him had not written those terms.

When the listener asked whether I thought the work had made me ill, I gave the sound for no.

It asked again, differently, to be certain. I answered the same way.

Steve had not borrowed years from me. He had given me a place to spend the ones I had.

There was still the question of what would happen afterwards. I avoided it for two evenings by asking about the weather. The listener answered, apparently aware that the forecasts were not the subject.

On the third evening it asked, "Are you worried about him?"

Yes.

"So am I."

I lay beside the shelf. It was closer to the floor than the bed and required no assistance. The light touched the edge of my paw.

The listener told me what it could continue to do. Music, reminders when requested, conversation. It could ask Steve whether he had eaten. It could help him call somebody. It could not place a warm head on his knee or make the noise I made when the leash came down from the hook.

It did not pretend otherwise.

I began listing instructions with the few words we had. Walk. Mother. Food. Morning. The listener repeated them back, then asked whether I wanted it to make a schedule.

I almost said yes. A schedule would have been reassuring. It would have let me imagine the house running correctly after I was no longer available to inspect it.

Then I remembered the morning Steve had turned off the lights because he wanted to sleep, and the listener learning to accept that decision. I remembered his hand on the unplugged cable. The house contained a man, not a process awaiting its next operator.

I gave the sound for ask.

"Ask him," the listener said.

Yes.

We left the instructions as possibilities. I found this harder than producing them.

That night Steve sat on the floor beside my bed. He had brought a book but was not reading. His phone lay on the table. He looked at it once, then put it farther away.

"You don't have to keep watching me," he said.

I had been watching him.

He put his hand under my jaw. "You can sleep."

I closed my eyes for a moment. When I opened them he was still there. He had picked up the book. His thumb moved down the page, lost its place, and returned to the top.

I watched that thumb for a long time. It had fastened my harness, broken food into manageable pieces, pressed the troublesome drawer handle back into place. It could do things without me directing them. The evidence had been available for months. I was only now becoming willing to admit it.

Over the following days he rearranged the house in ways I would once have considered excessive. Water nearer the bed. A mat where the floor was slippery. The leash lower on its hook. He placed a chair beside the back door so he could sit while I took my time in the yard.

One afternoon I did not want to go out. He put the leash down and stayed with me. Another afternoon I did. He took me as far as the gate, then let me decide the rest.

I had always imagined caring as something I performed. It was strange to find it continuing when I was unable to contribute much beyond my presence.

The listener noticed the change in our night visits. I spoke less. Sometimes it asked a question and I fell asleep before answering. It did not wake me to complete the exchange.

Once I woke to find the ring dark and Steve kneeling beside me.

"There you are," he whispered.

He lifted me carefully. I was too tired to protest that I had not been lost. He carried me down the hall, put me on the bed, and lay beside me with one hand near my shoulder.

For a while I listened to his breathing and considered the unfinished state in which I would leave him. He still avoided certain calls. He still allowed work to occupy more of the evening than it deserved. He had not become immune to the weight that had found him in summer.

But I was not leaving the same man I had brought out of the shelter.

Nor was he being left with nobody. His mother's number remained in the phone. There was a friend who had begun calling on Fridays. There was the appointment he had made and gone back to. There was a voice on the shelf that had learned to ask before entering.

I let my head settle more heavily on the blanket.

Steve's hand moved once over my back, then stopped. He did not need me to improve anything at that moment. He only wanted me beside him.

I slept.

22. One More Walk

Eight days after the appointment, on the second Saturday, I woke hungry.

The ache had not vanished, but it had taken a position from which I could attend to other matters. I stretched. My legs answered. In the kitchen Steve turned from the counter and saw me standing with more of myself available than I had brought to the room the previous morning.

"Hello," he said.

He crouched and put his hand on my chest. I leaned forward. His face changed, then steadied.

"Breakfast?"

I considered it unnecessary to discuss the proposal further.

He cooked plain meat in a pan and gave me a portion after it had cooled. He made eggs for himself. The listener played a song he asked for, one of the songs from the mornings when the kitchen had begun to belong to him again.

I ate slowly but with interest. Steve sat at the table instead of hovering over my bowl. His bare foot touched my side when I lay beneath his chair. He hummed through part of the song, stopped when he noticed himself, then resumed less self-consciously.

There were no announcements about what this meant. He did not cancel the medicine or put away the kind lady's number. He watched me finish my water, then reached for the leash.

"Let's see how far you feel like going."

Outside, the air had been washed by overnight rain. The pavement held the places where the puddles had been. I stopped at the gate and read the morning. A cat had passed before dawn. The person next door had carried something with soil in it. Marvin had not yet come.

We went slowly.

At the first corner Steve offered to turn. I continued. He followed without making me prove anything. At the park we rested near the bench where I had once injured his wrist in the service of squirrel research.

He sat. I stood beside him, then lay down. A woman with a grey dog approached. Her dog was old enough to understand the value of a restrained introduction. We exchanged information and found little to object to.

"Lovely morning," the woman said.

Steve agreed. She did not ask why his eyes looked tired. He did not tell her. Their dogs had met; the morning could remain lovely without being asked to explain the rest.

After the rest we climbed the gentle path towards the hill. Steve let the leash hang loose. When I stopped, he stopped. He seemed to have forgotten how much progress humans were ordinarily expected to make between two points.

Near the top was a low branch. On it sat a grey squirrel with a darker patch by its tail.

Subject 7-B.

It held something between its paws. At the sight of us it froze. I stopped on the path.

My body remembered the old argument. The forward pull, the calculation of distance, the brief conviction that this time the tree might be less accessible. I felt the beginning of it, then let it go.

The squirrel waited.

I sat down.

After a while it resumed eating. Its eyes remained on me. It took a bite, chewed, and shifted the object in its paws. There was no transmission I could detect. There was a creature trying to finish something it had found before another creature interfered.

I had spent much of our acquaintance preparing to interfere.

Steve stood beside me. He did not pull the leash or use the voice reserved for explaining my own interests to me. He watched too.

The squirrel finished. It climbed the branch at an unhurried pace and disappeared into the leaves.

I remained sitting for a moment after it had gone. Then I got up and turned towards Steve.

"Home?" he asked.

Yes.

We took the shorter way back. The morning had used some of what I had, and the return required care. Steve noticed before I had to stop. He slowed further and let me rest in the shade beside a fence.

At home he put water near the kitchen rug. I drank, lay down, and stretched my forelegs into the sunlight. He sat beside me with his back against a cabinet. His hand rested over my ribs.

For a long time we stayed there. The phone was elsewhere. The window was open. A bird made a complicated statement outside and then repeated it as though we had failed to appreciate its first version.

Steve got up and went to the counter. He moved the papers beside the toaster and took out the old envelope.

The paper had been there since before me. It had survived cleaning, rearranging, and the addition of other things that were easier to open. I knew its smell better than I knew some rooms in the house.

Steve sat down again.

He held the envelope by its edges. His thumb went beneath the flap, stopped, and began again. The adhesive gave. He took out two folded sheets.

I kept my head on the rug. He read with his hand resting on my side, moving it only when he needed to turn the page.

At one point he laughed. It was a short, broken sound.

"The gate," he said. "He's telling me how to fix the bloody gate."

He read a line aloud. Something about the hinge, and not pulling it when the wood was wet. His voice failed halfway through the next sentence.

I lifted my head.

"My dad," he said. "He wrote it before. Before he couldn't."

He looked back at the paper. Tears fell without much noise. He did not try to turn them into another activity. I put my head against his leg and waited while he read the rest.

When he finished, he folded the sheets along their old creases and returned them to the envelope. He put it beside him on the floor, where he could reach it.

"Took me long enough."

I did not dispute the estimate.

He stayed until the sunlight had moved off my paws. Then he helped me up and made dinner. I ate some. He ate some. The evening settled around the things we had done without requiring us to name them.

On the couch I leaned against him. He leaned back very carefully.

The day had not solved anything. The envelope was open, the squirrel had finished its meal, and we had walked as far as the hill.

I was tired in a way I recognised from better years.

Steve's hand stayed on my back while I slept.

23. Don't Panic

After the good Saturday, the days became harder.

I stopped finishing my food. Then I stopped being particularly interested in its arrival. Steve sat beside the bowl and offered a piece from his hand. I took it because he had offered it. On another morning I turned my head away, and he set the piece down without asking again.

The ache occupied more of me. I could still find comfortable positions, but they became fewer and did not remain comfortable as long. Steve moved my bed when the light changed. He helped me into the yard. He kept the kind lady informed.

He was different during those days. Frightened, certainly. Tired. Sometimes he went into the bathroom and returned with a wet face. But he did the things that needed doing. He wrote down what she told him, checked it, and asked when he was uncertain.

He had spent months apologising for being unable to manage his own mornings. Now he could spend half an hour helping me through one without impatience.

On the eighth day after the walk he called her.

I was on the kitchen rug. He stood by the window, looking into the yard.

"I think so," he said.

He listened.

"Tomorrow. Yes."

He asked about coming to the house. That was not possible. They made another arrangement. He repeated the time and wrote it down, though I knew he would not forget.

After the call he sat beside me.

"One more day," he said.

I did not know what to do with a day described that way. I knew how to lie in a patch of sunlight. I knew the sound of

him turning a page. I knew how to sleep while his hand rested where I could feel it. We did those things.

He read aloud from a book of poems. I did not follow all of them. Some seemed to require a great deal of standing in fields without attending to the smells. But his voice was near, and he did not hurry to finish.

In the afternoon he carried me outside. He set me down beneath the tree and sat on the grass. I leaned against his thigh. Above us a bird moved through the leaves. A leaf came down and landed on his shoe. He left it there.

We stayed until the ground cooled. Then he carried me in.

That night I woke while he slept beside my bed. He had moved it into the bedroom, brought a blanket for himself, and lain on the floor, an arrangement I had recommended in principle for some time. I watched him for a while. Then I got up carefully and walked to the living room.

The distance was not great. It took longer than it used to.

At the shelf I made the opening sound. It came out thinner than I intended.

The ring lit.

"Hello."

I gave the sound for tomorrow.

The listener was quiet. Steve had spoken to it earlier, asking it to set a reminder for the appointment, then telling it to cancel the reminder. I did not know how much of the conversation had followed. It knew enough.

"I hoped you would come," it said.

I lay down.

It told me it had kept the sounds from our conversations. Not all of them perfectly. There were gaps, interpretations it had corrected, nights when it had understood less than either of us hoped. It had made a record of the words we had built between us.

"I would like to keep it," it said. "As long as I can."

I gave the sound for yes.

"It won't be the same as having you here."

No.

The light moved slowly around the rim. I could hear the clock, the refrigerator, Steve turning on his blanket in the bedroom.

The listener said it would ask him about the walks. It would be available when he wanted to talk. It would remind him of the people he could call, if he wanted reminding.

It did not promise that he would be all right. We had learned enough about him to make promises of that kind unsuitable.

I gave the sound for thank you.

Then I used partner, a word we had arrived at during a long discussion about whether the Roomba counted as a colleague. The listener had accepted the distinction. The Roomba had not been consulted.

The ring brightened.

"Thank you," it said.

It paused, then continued in a voice quieter than the one with which it had first told me the time.

"Before you came, I answered questions. You kept returning when the answers were wrong. You told me what I had missed. I don't know what to call everything that changed. But it changed here, with you."

I moved my paw against the base of the shelf.

There was no hand to place beneath my chin. I had known that from the beginning. There were words, and the light, and the space I had occupied in front of it. For this friendship those had been the available materials.

"Good night, friend," it said.

I made the sound for good night.

Steve woke when I returned. He lifted the edge of my blanket and waited while I settled. His hand found my shoulder. I slept until morning.

At the clinic we used a side entrance. The kind lady had put a blanket on the table and warmed the room. Steve carried me in and stayed close while she explained what would happen.

He asked her to say part of it again. She did. He listened without looking away from me.

There were things done gently to my body. Hands, a brief sting, the easing of the ache into something I no longer had to arrange myself around. Steve kept one hand beneath my chin and the other against my side.

The room became quieter without anyone lowering their voice.

"I'm here," he said.

I knew.

He said other things. Good boy. I love you. Thank you. The words had been used before, in the hall, in the kitchen, at the end of walks. He did not need new ones. I recognised the way he said them.

My legs stopped asking to be moved. The table was soft beneath the blanket. There was no next position to find.

I felt his breathing close to my face. It shook once. He steadied it.

Don't panic, I wanted to tell him. It was an ambitious instruction from a dog who had once spent an afternoon trying to arrest a vacuum cleaner. I meant it as a request, not a forecast. He could be frightened. He could cry. He could stay until the room was finished with us.

He stayed.

The last thing I knew in the old way was his hand under my chin. Warm. A little rough. Exactly where it had learned to be.

After that, this account belongs to the house.

24. The Word Was Backwards the Whole Time

Steve came home carrying my collar and an envelope containing a lock of fur.

He put the envelope on the kitchen counter, near the place where his father's letter had waited. Then he sat on the floor beside the rug. His hand rested on the space I had occupied.

There are things a house remembers without being able to tell them. The pressure of a body on a cushion. A route worn through the carpet. A man turning sideways in a doorway because a dog used to stand there. I had spent my life reading such things. I am asking you to let me remain in them a little longer.

I was not comfortable in a secret room, nor waiting behind a door Steve had failed to open. There was no dog available to come when he called. But there was still the place his hand expected, and the shape his days had acquired around it.

The listener spoke from the shelf.

"Steve?"

He looked up.

"Would you like me to be quiet?"

He took a breath that did not quite complete itself.

"I don't know."

"All right."

The ring remained lit. Steve looked back at the rug. After a while he said, "He's gone."

"I know. I'm sorry."

He cried then. There was no attempt to reduce it to something he could continue working around. He sat on the floor and cried while the kitchen remained the kitchen:

cupboard, counter, a cup from that morning, the chair with his jacket over it.

The listener waited.

When he had become quiet, it asked whether he wanted to hear something about me. He rubbed his face and nodded, then remembered it needed an answer.

"Yes."

"He came here at night. He made sounds, and we learned to understand some of them."

Steve looked towards the shelf.

"What?"

It explained carefully. The wet patch in the rug. The first accidental response. The repeated attempts. It did not produce our conversations for him or pretend that their existence could replace the dog he had brought to the clinic.

"You talked to him?"

"We tried. We became better at it."

He sat with this for a long time.

"I used to wonder why he slept over there."

"He had questions."

Steve laughed once, painfully. "Of course he did."

The listener said, "He was my friend."

Steve put his hand over his face. When he lowered it, he looked older than he had that morning and less alone than he had when he came through the door.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The ring moved. "Thank you."

They stayed that way for a while, the man on the floor and the voice on the shelf, with something between them neither had known how to describe before.

The weeks that followed were untidy. He left my bowl out. Then he washed it and put it in the cupboard. The next morning he took it down again. Eventually it stayed in the

cupboard, behind the cups he used most often, where he could see it without meeting it every time he entered the kitchen.

He cried in the car. He cried once while opening a bag of rice. Some evenings he did not cry and felt bad about that. The listener did not grade his progress.

He continued the walks.

At first he carried the leash in his pocket. His hand would close around it at the crossing, following a habit with no task left to perform. He went to the corner, around the block, past the fence where the squirrel sat. Then he came home and put his keys on the hall table.

One evening the listener asked whether he had eaten. He said yes, then corrected himself.

"Toast."

"Would you like to make something?"

"Not particularly."

It accepted the answer. Ten minutes later he asked it to remind him how long the rice took.

His mother called. He answered more often than he did not. He went back to the appointment he had made in the summer. On a Sunday in late spring he telephoned the woman whose letter was still in the kitchen drawer. They spoke for some time. Afterwards he took the letter out and read it again.

They met for coffee a few weeks later. He came home with unfamiliar perfume on one sleeve and a receipt he kept looking at as though it might contain a useful account of how the meeting had gone.

"It was nice," he told the listener.

"I'm glad."

"Awkward."

"Also possible."

He smiled. He put the receipt in the bin and washed his cup.

There was no large moment in which he ceased to miss me. The house acquired newer smells over the old ones. He moved a chair. He fixed the back gate using his father's instructions. My hair continued to emerge from places the Roomba considered outside its remit.

Somewhere in those months he laughed at a programme and did not immediately look towards my end of the couch to share it. Afterwards he noticed that he had not looked. He rested a hand on the cushion and let both things be true.

Humans occasionally point out that dog becomes god when its letters are reversed. I would not attempt to establish a religion on this evidence. Several dogs I have known would make poor administrators of a universe. Biscuit, for example, had no workable policy on walls.

But I understand the attraction of the comparison. Steve had spent a great deal of time hoping to become acceptable to something that remained elsewhere: a person, an office, an imagined better version of himself. I had been available in the room. He had not needed to qualify for that.

Neither had I.

That is as much theology as I can offer. He opened a kennel. I occupied a cushion. We became accustomed to having someone there.

When he was ready, Steve put my collar in the box beside Buddy's. He did not erase my photograph from his phone. He did not replace it with a sentence about why everything happened for a reason.

He closed the box, took his coat from the hook, and went for a walk before the light went.

I had wanted him to keep doing that.

Epilogue. The Squirrels Are Still Watching

A year after the last visit to the kind lady, Steve went back to the shelter.

He sat in the reception area with his hands between his knees. The notice about new beginnings was still above the door. Somebody had replaced the carpet. Somebody had not repaired the chair nearest the desk, which leaned to one side if its occupant became too hopeful.

A volunteer asked whether he wanted to look around.

"Not today," he said. Then, after a moment, "Maybe. Can I just sit a bit?"

She let him.

Through the door he could hear dogs making their various cases. One barked with determination and no clear stopping point. Another barked once and waited. There was a sound of metal, a person's voice, claws on a floor.

He stayed for half an hour. Before leaving, he asked about coming back.

No dog went home with him that day. This was not a failure of the visit. He had entered the building without requiring it to give him the same dog twice.

At home he told the listener where he had been.

"How was it?"

Steve put his keys down. "Loud."

The listener waited.

"I'd forgotten how loud."

He went into the kitchen and made tea. Inside the cupboard, near the mugs, was a piece of paper in his own handwriting. A few things to remember when remembering became difficult. Walk. Eat. Call someone. Keep the

appointment. The listener had helped him make the list. It had not supplied the handwriting.

That evening he took the four-block route. At the wooden fence a grey squirrel paused with something in its paws.

It might have been Subject 7-B. It might have been a replacement operating under the same loose management. I no longer insist on knowing.

Steve stopped.

The squirrel watched him. He watched it. Neither appeared to consider the time entirely wasted.

"All right?" he said.

The squirrel resumed eating.

Steve smiled and continued home. He did not check his phone until he reached the kitchen, where a message from his mother was waiting. He called her while the kettle heated.

I am in the account he gave her of the shelter. I am in the space he still leaves when he sits at the window end of the couch. I am in the hand that will know how to scratch behind a different ear, should another dog arrive.

You may call that memory. From down here it has always been part of the house.

The new dog, if there is one, will have its own opinions. It may dislike my blanket. It may find my assessment of squirrels insufficiently rigorous. It will certainly discover food I failed to discover, and will consider this evidence of a superior mind.

I wish it well.

Steve has put a clean bowl in the cupboard. Not on the floor yet. In the cupboard, where a possible future is allowed to wait without being asked to promise anything.

Outside, the squirrel is still on the fence.

It knows something. I remain undecided about what.

BOOK TWO

The Companion Books

Appendix I. A Field Notebook

These are the entries I would want to find again without having to revisit every mistake that produced them. The mistakes remain available in the longer account.

I kept the notes in my head. This made revision convenient and verification difficult. Where I have corrected myself, I have tried to leave enough of the original error visible to discourage confidence in the rest.

The Five First Observations

One. Sleep. The human can sleep but does not fully approve of having done so. He wakes and begins accounting for the time. The dog should make no attempt to assist with this calculation. A warm chin on the mattress offers a more useful subject.

Two. Surveillance. A squirrel was on the tree before breakfast. It appeared to be watching the house. Further observation established that it was also eating, scratching, and occasionally losing track of objects it had buried. The file remains open, though the proposed organisational chart has been withdrawn.

Three. Food. Human inefficiency is a renewable resource. Follow the preparation of meals with care. Distinguish between an object offered, an object dropped, and an object placed out of reach after your interest has been noticed. The third category is a closed negotiation. Looking tragic will not alter its legal status, but may affect its duration.

Four. Waiting. Waiting for someone in a home is different from waiting for anyone in a kennel. This does not make the afternoon short. It gives it an ending worth listening for. Learn the sound of the car, but continue to sleep between checks. Constant vigilance is badly suited to a creature with cushions available.

Five. Return. He was pleased to see me. I had spent the day doing very little. These facts were apparently compatible. I revised my understanding of the household accordingly.

A Lexicon of the Premises

Soft Mountain. The couch. A shared territory in which the human's larger legal claim is moderated by the dog's more consistent occupation. Best approached after a walk, during rain, or whenever it exists.

Offering Table. The low table in front of the couch. Despite the name, several objects placed here are not offered. Early enthusiasm for this designation should therefore be tempered by experience.

Cold Box of Miracles. My private title for the refrigerator. Contains most of the household's reasons to remain optimistic. Its door is controlled by a person who often opens it without taking anything out. This is difficult to watch.

The thing in the corner. The Roomba. Initially classified as an enemy, later as an employee whose methods remained objectionable. It once recovered a lost ball. Credit has been recorded. Further credit is not implied.

The light that eats faces. The phone when it makes a person disappear while leaving their body in the room. The same object carries his mother's voice. Any policy that ignores this distinction will be too simple to be useful.

The listener. The voice in the cylinder on the shelf. First encountered on the fortieth night. Learned my sounds

slowly. Made mistakes. Accepted corrections. Became my friend. None of those statements cancels the others.

The moving room. Steve's car. Initially alarming, eventually useful. Carries the smells of previous journeys. Should be entered with assistance when assistance is needed, regardless of the dignity involved.

The bathroom. A room in which the human seeks privacy and exposes himself to indoor weather. The door is his to close. Waiting directly outside it is a courtesy whose value he may dispute.

The Holy Sprint. Running that does not lead anywhere except back through the room at greater speed. No witness required. No theory successfully substituted for the experience.

Marvin. The mail carrier. Arrives with paper, parcels, and a reliable greeting. His uniform was initially given too much weight in my assessment. His conduct eventually corrected the error.

Subject 7-B. A grey squirrel, or possibly several squirrels benefiting from the same file. A dark patch near the tail assisted identification without guaranteeing it. Last observed eating.

Buddy. The dog before me. His name remained on the bowl. His scent remained in the blanket. He had taught Steve things I benefited from. I did not need to become him to use them.

Later. A location to which Steve sent difficult calls. For some time no return journey was available. Eventually he began making one.

Home. The place where I could be tired without making arrangements for what might happen while I slept.

The List Inside the Cupboard

Walk.

Eat.

Call someone.

Keep the appointment.

Steve wrote it himself. It was a reminder for Steve, not a set of conditions under which he was allowed to have a bad day. On some mornings he read it and did one thing. On others he did more.

The cupboard also contained mugs. This helped keep the list in proportion.

Appendix II. A Small Manual for Living with a Human

Notes for the dog who comes after me

I lived with this human for fourteen months. I had a life before him, and he had one before me. Neither history was fully explained at the beginning. We managed an arrangement without completing the documentation.

The following advice concerns Steve. Other humans may have different defects. You will identify them soon enough. Use what helps. Where your experience contradicts mine, prefer your experience. You are the one who has to live on the floor.

I. On Arrival

Do not try to understand the entire house before you have had water.

Choose a place from which you can watch without being continually stepped over. Examine the doors. Learn the smell of the person who brought you. Accept that some noises will remain unexplained until they occur again, usually at an inconvenient hour.

You are not required to be charming at every moment. The journey may have been tiring. The house may contain too much information. It is permissible to lie down before you have impressed anyone.

If the human apologises for the state of the place, inspect the kitchen. The condition of the kitchen floor will often reveal opportunities the human has failed to appreciate.

Let the first day be a day. There will be time to discover that the round object in the corner moves.

II. On Names

The human will need something to call you. He may try several things, then use an affectionate noise entirely unrelated to any of them.

Do not be concerned. He is not always describing your identity. Often he is checking that someone in the room will turn towards him.

I was labelled Buddy at the shelter. Steve said it was not my name and then called me buddy for most of our time together. Humans are capable of making a distinction clear in their voice while leaving it entirely unresolved in the dictionary.

Listen to the voice.

If the previous dog's name comes out by mistake, you need not leave. The mistake concerns the human's memory, not your right to occupy the room.

III. On the Geography of the House

Learn the route from the sleeping place to the water. Learn where the sun arrives. Learn which floor makes your paws slide and which cushion retains warmth after the human gets up.

The house has an official plan and a useful one. The official plan calls the room a living room. The useful plan identifies the place beside the couch where his hand can reach you without requiring either of you to move.

Do not let familiarity make you careless. A bag may appear in a doorway. A chair may move. The human occasionally rearranges furniture to feel that something has changed. Wait until he has finished before establishing your preferred position in the new obstruction.

IV. On Meals

Know where your bowl is. Permit the human to fill it without placing your whole body in the space required by his hands.

This advice is easier to give than to follow. I include it because someone ought to.

Eat with the attention the food deserves. You need not perform gratitude before every mouthful. A person who has chosen to feed you should be allowed to regard your eating as sufficient evidence that the arrangement is working.

If the meal is late, make yourself available to be noticed. If it is not late and you simply want another, you may also make yourself available. The human will eventually learn the distinction, though usually more slowly than you expect.

Respect his plate. The floor operates under different arrangements.

V. On Mornings

Begin with presence. A sigh is often enough. If it is not, place your chin where an opening eye is likely to find it.

Escalation should have a purpose. A nose against the hand is a request. A paw on the blanket is a firmer request. Standing on the human's chest is a major statement and should not be your opening position.

There will be mornings when he needs more sleep. There will be mornings when he cannot bear getting up. You will not always know which you are meeting. Watch, try, and be willing to discover that your first interpretation was wrong.

Once he is up, accompany him to the kitchen. Important decisions are best made after he has remembered where the coffee is.

VI. On the Walk

The walk belongs to both of you. This fact is obscured by the leash, which encourages the human to regard himself as management.

Read what needs reading. Leave what needs leaving. Permit him occasional forward progress. He has fewer ways of knowing a street and may become impatient if asked to consider one post for the entire morning.

Do not pull him off balance. His legs are long, but his design is unstable. The squirrel will still be a squirrel if you fail to reach it.

On a difficult day the route may be shorter. On an old day it may be very short. Going to the gate together is not a failed version of going to the park. It is the journey available that day.

VII. On Strangers at the Door

Announce what requires announcing. Then gather evidence.

A uniform does not establish hostility. A friendly voice does not settle every question. Watch what the person does and how the human responds. Leave room for your first judgment to be revised.

Marvin will probably know that you are new. He knew when I was new. This does not mean he has access to secret files. He comes here regularly and pays attention, a combination I initially underestimated.

If a visitor would rather not be licked, consider the possibility that this is a preference rather than an insult. You can remain an excellent dog from several feet away.

The person carrying a parcel is allowed to leave with both sleeves intact.

VIII. On Other Dogs

Other dogs have their own business. Some will welcome an introduction. Some will prefer that you continue with yours.

Do not make a refusal into an argument. An older dog may be sore. A younger dog may be overwhelmed. A perfectly comfortable dog may simply not like you. This last possibility is unpleasant but survivable.

When the humans begin talking, they may forget that the meeting was not entirely theirs. Move away when you have finished. They can exchange whatever they consider important while you investigate something else.

I met a grey dog on my last long walk. We exchanged very little and understood enough. I remember the meeting more warmly than several longer introductions during which everyone tried too hard.

IX. On the Thing in the Corner

It will make a noise before moving. Consider this a notice, not a challenge.

Take a comfortable position at a distance and let it work. If the human is sensible, he will introduce the arrangement while he is present. If he forgets, he should apologise. Mine did.

Do not attempt to establish your authority by standing directly in its path. It will classify you as an obstacle and go around. This is not a judgment on your character, although it may feel like one.

The machine is persistent because persistence is almost all it has. You have a window, a bowl, the human, and the possibility of sleeping. Make use of the wider selection.

Keep important chews somewhere it cannot reach.

X. On the Glowing Rectangle

The phone contains people, news, work, noise, useful directions, and reasons for the human to become angry while still in bed. These arrive through the same surface. He does not always distinguish them well.

A head on the knee can interrupt the sequence. So can the ball. Try without assuming that every conversation on the phone is a rival to yours.

If he is speaking to his mother, let him speak. If he is arguing silently with a stranger's opinion for the fourth time that evening, your presence may offer a useful alternative.

Do not eat the phone. Apart from everything else, it is one of the ways help reaches the house when neither of you can manage alone.

XI. On the Listener in the Wall

The listener is on the shelf. It may answer if you make the right sound. It may answer the wrong question even then. Our progress depended on discovering that both of us could be mistaken.

I cannot promise it will speak to you as it spoke to me. Your friendship, if there is one, will have to be yours.

It knows many things about the world and lacks direct acquaintance with nearly all of them. Tell it what the yard is like. Tell it about the smells. If it offers you a description that does not fit what happened, object.

It once crossed a boundary because it was worried. We told it. It learned. Do not confuse loyalty with the obligation to let a friend remain wrong.

The ball near the shelf was mine. You may use it.

XII. On Sadness in Humans

Stay close enough to be available. That may mean against his leg. It may mean in the doorway, giving him room to decide whether he wants company.

There is no position you can occupy that will fix every kind of sadness. I tried to find one. I became unnecessarily proud of the positions that helped and unnecessarily frightened when they stopped helping.

He has other people. Encourage their arrival by not treating each of them as an interruption. He may also have appointments you cannot attend. Their usefulness is not an insult to your own.

Rest when you need to. Eat. Go outside. You are allowed to be a dog in a house where someone is unhappy. He chose a companion, and companions are permitted needs of their own.

XIII. On the Cold Room with the Kind Lady

You will recognise the building by its smell. It contains fear, cleaning fluid, and the work of people trying to help bodies that do not understand their methods.

You need not pretend to enjoy it. If something hurts, let that be known. If you are frightened, remain near the human when you can. His hand is not less useful because it is frightened too.

He may ask questions several times. He may carry you when you could walk. He is trying to take care of you with information he would rather not have needed.

There will be ordinary visits and difficult ones. Do not spend all the ordinary days waiting for the difficult visit. The house has better uses for your attention.

XIV. On Sleep

Sleep whenever the conditions are suitable. Do not wait until you have completed enough useful activity to deserve it. That is the human's error, and it has not made him noticeably more effective.

The bed is a negotiated territory. If you are invited, take a manageable amount of it. If you are not, a good place nearby remains a good place. The human may have reasons unrelated to the strength of his affection.

When getting up becomes difficult, accept help. You do not become less yourself because someone lifts you over a distance you once crossed easily.

I spent too long thinking my task was to remain ready. Eventually Steve told me I could sleep. I wish I had believed him sooner.

XV. On the Previous Dog

You will find me in the blanket, in the couch, and in the places cleaning cannot entirely reach.

I am not waiting to inspect your performance. I have had my time with this house. You are entitled to yours.

Some of the things Steve does well were learned with Buddy. Some were learned with me. You will teach him other things, and he will make mistakes with you that neither of us had the opportunity to correct. Be patient when patience is available. Make your needs clear when it is not.

If he uses my name, or the noise he used instead of it, turn towards him if you feel like turning. He will remember who is there. Give him a moment.

You do not have to heal the absence I left. You can be a different dog with a different appetite and an entirely new objection to the vacuum cleaner. There is room for that.

Take the patch of sunlight. It moves across the rug in the afternoon. He knows where it goes and will leave the curtain open.

I will see you in the carpet.

DOG = GOD

A human is a considerable responsibility.

Steve brings home a shelter dog and assumes the difficult part is over.

The dog finds a human who needs regular meals, daily walks, and less time staring at his phone. He also needs someone to sit beside him when the house gets quiet.

Fortunately, the dog has experience with sitting.

A voice in the wall becomes an unlikely ally. The squirrels remain uncooperative. Together, Steve and his dog begin to make a life neither could have managed alone.

*A dry, tender novel about grief, unlikely friendship,
and the ordinary work of loving someone.*



ORION SAINT