

## **J**oining the Pack

By Robert Gehl

Before I met Lily, I didn't care about dogs at all. When I was growing up, my family had one, but he lived outside. I got along with him well enough, petting him briefly every morning as I brought him food. He would jump up and down happily and follow me from the food bin to his house. This was all the company he would get for the day. I would leave for school, my hands smelling of dog if I forgot to wash them.

When he died, I was in college. My parents called to check in on me and let me know that he disappeared. We never found his body. It was as if, after being fed one day, he evaporated as my mom walked away from his house, leaving behind a few fuzzes of fur, a water bucket, and a musky smell.

After he died, it never crossed my mind to get a dog of my own. I didn't have room for one anyway. Also, I was a bit of a loner, not a pack animal. Often, I would stay for hours in my room in my third floor apartment, practicing my guitar, reading, or lazily looking down on the parking lot out the window. I read, and I napped a lot.

While in college, I fell madly in love with Jessica, a woman who was beautiful and very alive. She and I would stay up all night, going to 24 hour burger joints, driving around and listening to Ani DiFranco and Jeff Buckley, and playing video games. She would call me up, and I could join her for any number of adventures, and then retreat to my apartment. It was a good arrangement.

After a while, she invited me to her parents' home for dinner. Her parents, however, were out of town. In their place were three house dogs:

two Shi Tzus and one backyard-bred, stump-tailed, liver-and-white Springer Spaniel named Lily. When I walked through the door, Lily's tail began to wiggle faster and faster. Her whole behind began to shake violently. I patted her head, and she promptly squatted and peed on the floor. "Don't pet her!" Jesse warned. Too late. Jesse went into the kitchen, got some paper towels, and mopped up the mess.

During the weekend, Jesse and I stuck to our adventurous routine. We played basketball at midnight at a nearby elementary school. We ran around a sprinkler in the yard. We made love all night long.

The only difference was that Lily followed us all over. Jesse insisted we bring her to the school. When we would shoot the ball at the hoop, Lily would bark incessantly until we let her play with the ball. When we ran around the sprinkler, Lily ran through it, too, and then she would rub her face in mud puddles, turning her white patches as brown as her liver spots. When Jesse and I made love, the damn dog kept jumping on the bed and sniffing us, her whole back end wiggling madly. I asked if we could put her out of the room. "No," said Jesse. "She'll scratch at the door." If I pushed Lily away, she would squat and pee, and we would have to climb out from under the covers and get a towel to clean it up.

Still, I had fun until I had to go. As the weekend came to a close, Jesse and I did our goodbye ritual: I said, "Well, I'd better go home," looking forward to a little time to myself. Jesse responded by wrapping her arms around me and pulling me down to the carpet, saying, "No." She would never let me leave without a fight. This time, Lily got involved. When she saw me struggling to free myself from my lover's vise grip, she pushed her masked muzzle into my face, sniffing and licking, pawing my legs and barking.

This was a bit much. I hated being subdued and tickled and prodded. I violently struggled to break free, clawing at the carpet and the couch. I got

loose, pushed the dog aside, and curtly said goodbye. As I walked out to my car, Lily barked at me and Jesse watched me through the window. I remember thinking that it was odd that the dog barked when I left and not when I first came. "Bass-ackwards dog!"

Even though I was a bit of an ass at times, Jesse stuck with me. We eventually decided to move in together. When we did, Jesse kept asking if we could get a dog. Thinking of her parents' potty-dog Lily, and of the carpet in our home, I gently expressed my reservations.

She was very insistent. For some reason, she loved dogs, and missed living with one. These debates happened for several weeks, with no side budging. Then, as women do, she won.

When her parents found out "we" wanted a dog, they volunteered Lily. Jesse loved the idea, and tried to justify it to me. "She's a good dog! She only pees when you pet her, and then it's not so bad, 'cause you know where the pee is! It's not like having a boy dog that pees in places and you don't know it!"

How could I argue with this logic? Besides, I realized that my objections to Lily would probably slide down the same slope that my other objections seemed to slide down. I gave in. We drove to her parents' house, and we prepared to take Lily with us. I carried her travel kennel to my car. Lily watched me intently. When Jesse walked through the door to carry a bag to my car, Lily bolted out the door and jumped in my car, trying to get to her kennel. When I grabbed her collar and tried to get her out, she peed all over the backseat.

We were able to put her in the kennel, and we took the two hour drive to our house. She whined and barked the whole time. She sounded like a cross between the "Three Stooges" character Moe and Popeye. I was driving, so I was very agitated by this. I dug my fingernails into the steering wheel, gritted my teeth, and turned up the radio.

With Lily in the home, things began to change. When Jesse and I went out to the bar, we came home to a sad looking creature sitting quietly on the sofa. When we tried to go to bed, she scratched at the door and whined to be let in. When we tried to sleep in, she would paw at us to take her outside.

We would take Lily for walks, and she would spin in a circle and poop on the sidewalk, often in front of people. Jesse would gag if she had to pick up poo. So, I had to carry little baggies and carry the fresh pile to a trash can if Lily took a crap.

Every morning, when I would leave for work, Jesse would whine, "Tell them you're sick! Stay with me!" After I would explain to her that we needed the money to pay the rent, I would head to the door. Then, Lily would try to slip out the door to get into my car. Sometimes, she would make it past me, and then she would run to the car and scratch at the door.

One day, I came home after a hard day of work. I was tired and wanted to take a nap. But both Lily and Jesse were sitting on the couch, and they both jumped up to greet me after I walked through the door. They both pawed at me and Lily barked happily. I was cornered, and I hissed, "Leave me alone; I'm tired!" They got the point and walked away, Lily with her stump-tail between her legs, Jesse to her study, both dejected. I escaped into the bedroom.

I took my clothes off and climbed into bed. I closed my eyes. It felt good to stretch out and relax, and I didn't want to get up for any reason. Not even if the boss called to give me a promotion.

*Scratch, scratch.*

Except that. I opened my eyes, got up, and let Lily into the bedroom. She sniffed loudly at my legs because I was smelly from a day of working in the sun. I lay back down. She hopped on the bed, slunk over to me, and put her paw on my ear. I brushed her paw off and pulled the covers over my head. When I pulled the covers, one of her toys, a rubber T-bone steak,

squeaked. It was under the blankets. I could hear her move excitedly, sniff, and start digging, trying to uncover the toy. She couldn't free it. She started to bark. "Lily!" I yelled. "Stop it!" I uncovered my head and saw her: butt up in the air, tail wildly wagging, her ears perked up, barking at a lump in the blanket. "Dammit!" I threw the blankets off of me, and grabbed her collar, hoping to drag her into the study so she could bother Jesse. Sure enough, she dropped her butt down and peed all over the bed.

I blew up. I dragged her out of the room, went back into the bedroom, and tore the wet blankets off the bed. Bare-naked, I carried them to the study, opened the door, and threw them down. "This is too much!" Jesse looked at me, startled, and then she started laughing. "What are you laughing about? The damn dog peed all over the bed!" She just giggled and giggled.

I wanted to fight, because I was angry. I got vicious and bared my claws: I told her to get rid of the dog. She got defensive. Any attack on her family dog was an attack on her.

The fight went nowhere. I grabbed the blankets, stomped back to the bedroom, slammed the door, and lay back down.

*Scratch, scratch.*

It's funny how the mind works when it is stressed. Instead of a pointless rage, I began to remember those early days, living alone. There are two ways to look at those days. I can get nostalgic and remember the freedom, the independence. But, as I lay under the damp blanket, hiding from the dog...

*Scratch, scratch, scratch.*

I remembered the other side of being alone: coming home with no one to talk to, no one to care about. There was no Lily, no Jesse. And, if I wanted to keep them, I had to change my ways.

I decided, finally, to join the pack for good.

I got back up, put my clothes back on. I opened the door, and Lily snaked her way in. "Lily," I asked. Her ears perked up. "Go outside?" She stopped, dead in her tracks, and then instantly came alive; her butt wiggled faster and faster, she ran to the door, stretched, and barked happily. "Let's go!" I said, grabbing her leash, and off we went.