

I am not, I should say at once, in any formal relationship with a dog. I don't feed a dog, give it a bed, groom it, find kennels for it when I'm away, delouse it, or suddenly arrange for any of its internal organs to be removed when they displease me. I do not, in short, own a dog.

On the other hand, I do have a kind of furtive, illicit relationship with a dog, or rather two dogs. And in consequence I think I know a little of what it must be like to be a mistress.

The dogs do not live next door. They don't even live in the same—well, I was going to say street and tease it out a bit, but let's cut straight to the truth. They live in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which is a hell of a place for a dog, or indeed anyone else, to live. If you've never visited or spent time in Santa Fe, New Mexico, then let me say this: you're a complete idiot. I was myself a complete idiot till about a year ago when a combination of circumstances that I can't be bothered to explain led me to borrow somebody's house way out in the desert just north of Santa Fe to write a screenplay in. To give you an idea of the sort of place that Santa Fe is, I could bang on about the desert and the altitude and the light and the silver and turquoise jewelry, but the best thing is just to mention a traffic sign on the freeway from Albuquerque. It says, in large letters, GUSTY WINDS, and in smaller letters MAY EXIST.

I never met my neighbours. They lived half a mile away on top of the next sand ridge, but as soon as I started going out for my morning run, jog, gentle stroll, I met their dogs, who were so instantly and deliriously pleased to see me that I wondered if they thought we'd met in a previous life (Shirley MacLaine lived nearby and they might have picked up all kinds of weird ideas from just being near her).

Their names were Maggie and Trudie. Trudie was an exceptionally silly-looking dog, a large, black French poodle who moved exactly as if she had been animated

by Walt Disney: a kind of lollop that was emphasised by her large floppy ears at the front end and a short stubby tail with a bit of topiary-work on the end. Her coat consisted of a matting of tight black curls, which added to the general Disney effect by making it seem that she was completely devoid of naughty bits. The way in which she signified, every morning, that she was deliriously pleased to see me was to do a thing that I always thought was called “prinking” but is in fact called “stotting.” (I’ve only just discovered my error, and I’m going to have to replay whole sections of my life through my mind to see what confusions I may have caused or fallen afoul of.) “Stotting” is jumping upward with all four legs simultaneously. My advice: do not die until you’ve seen a large black poodle stotting in the snow.

The way in which Maggie would signify, every morning, that she was deliriously pleased to see me was to bite Trudie on the neck. This was also her way of signifying that she was deliriously excited at the prospect of going for a walk, it was her way of signifying that she was having a walk and really enjoying it, it was her way of signifying she wanted to be let into the house, it was her way of signifying she wanted to be let out of the house. Continuously and playfully biting Trudie on the neck was, in short, her way of life.

Maggie was a handsome dog. She was not a poodle, and in fact the sort of breed of dog she was was continuously on the tip of my tongue. I’m not very good with dog breeds, but Maggie was one of the real classic, obvious ones: a sleek, black and tan, vaguely retrieverish sort of big beagle sort of thing. What are they called. Labradors? Spaniels? Elkhounds? Samoyeds? I asked my friend Michael, the film producer, once I felt I knew him well enough to admit that I couldn’t quite put my finger on the sort of breed of dog Maggie was, despite the fact that it was so obvious.

“Maggie,” he said, in his slow, serious Texan drawl, “is a mutt.”

So every morning the three of us would set out: me, the large English writer, Trudie the poodle, and Maggie the mutt. I would run-jog-stroll along the wide dirt track that ran through the dry red dunes, Trudie would gambol friskily along, this way and that, ears flapping, and Maggie would bowl along cheerily biting her neck. Trudie was extraordinarily good-natured and long-suffering about this, but every now and then she would suddenly get monumentally fed up. At that moment she would execute a sudden midair about-turn, land squarely on her feet facing Maggie, and give her an extremely pointed look, whereupon Maggie would suddenly sit and start gently gnawing her own rear right foot as if she were bored with Trudie anyway.

Then they'd start up again and go running and rolling and tumbling, chasing and biting, out through the dunes, through the scrubby grass and undergrowth, and then every now and then would suddenly and inexplicably come to a halt as if they had both, simultaneously, run out of moves. They would then stare into the middle distance in embarrassment for a bit before starting up again.

So what part did I play in all this? Well, none really. They completely ignored me for the whole twenty or thirty minutes. Which was perfectly fine, of course, I didn't mind. But it did puzzle me, because early every morning they would come yelping and scratching around the doors and windows of my house until I got up and took them for their walk. If anything disturbed the daily ritual, like I had to drive into town, or have a meeting, or fly to England or something, they would get thoroughly miserable and simply not know what to do. Despite the fact that they would always completely ignore me whenever we went on our walks together, they couldn't just go and have a walk without me. This revealed a profoundly philosophical bent in these dogs that were not mine, because they had worked out that I had to be there in order for them to be able to ignore me properly. You can't ignore someone who isn't there, because that's not what "ignore" means.

Further depths to their thinking were revealed when Michael's girlfriend Victoria

told me that once, when coming to visit me, she had tried to throw a ball for Maggie and Trudie to chase. The dogs had sat and watched stony-faced as the ball climbed up into the sky, dropped, and at last dribbled along the ground to a halt. She said that the message she was picking up from them was “We don’t do that. We hang out with writers.”

Which was true. They hung out with me all day, every day. But, exactly like writers, dogs who hang out with writers don’t like the actual writing bit. So they would moon around at my feet all day and keep nudging my elbow out of the way while I was typing so that they could rest their chins on my lap and gaze mournfully up at me in the hope that I would see reason and go for a walk so that they could ignore me properly.

And then in the evening they would trot off to their real home to be fed, watered, and put to bed for the night. Which seemed to me like a fine arrangement, because I got all the pleasure of their company, which was considerable, without having any responsibility for them. And it continued to be a fine arrangement till the day when Maggie turned up bright and early in the morning ready and eager to ignore me on her own. No Trudie. Trudie was not with her. I was stunned. I didn’t know what had happened to Trudie and had no way of finding out, because she wasn’t mine. Had she been run over by a truck? Was she lying somewhere, bleeding by the roadside? Maggie seemed restless and worried. She would know where Trudie was, I thought, and what had happened to her. I’d better follow her, like Lassie. I put on my walking shoes and hurried out. We walked for miles, roaming around the desert looking for Trudie, following the most circuitous route. Eventually I realised that Maggie wasn’t looking for Trudie at all, she was just ignoring me, a strategy I was complicating by trying to follow her the whole time rather than just pursuing my normal morning walk route. So eventually I returned to the house, and Maggie sat at my feet and moped. There was nothing I could do, no one I could phone about it, because Trudie didn’t belong to me. All I could do, like a mistress, was sit and worry in silence. I was off my food. After Maggie sloped

off home that night, I slept badly.

And in the morning they were back. Both of them. Only something terrible had happened. Trudie had been to the groomers. Most of her coat had been cropped down to about two millimeters, with a few topiary tufts on her head, ears, and tail. I was outraged. She looked preposterous. We went out for a walk, and I was embarrassed, frankly. She wouldn't have looked like that if she was my dog.

A few days later I had to go back to England. I tried to explain this to the dogs, to prepare them for it, but they were in denial. On the morning I left, they saw me putting my cases in back of the 4WD, and kept their distance, became tremendously interested in another dog instead. Really ignored me. I flew home, feeling odd about it.

Six weeks later I came back to work on a second draft. I couldn't just call round and get the dogs. I had to walk around in the backyard, looking terribly obvious and making all sorts of high-pitched noises such as dogs are wont to notice. Suddenly they got the message and raced across the snow-covered desert to see me (this was mid-January now). Once they had arrived, they continually hurled themselves at the walls in excitement, but then there wasn't much else we could do but go out for a brisk, healthy Ignore in the snow. Trudie stotted, Maggie bit her on the neck, and so we went on. And three weeks later I left again. I'll be back again to see them sometime this year, but I realise that I'm the Other Human. Sooner or later I'm going to have to commit to a dog of my own.

—*Animal Passions* (ed. Alan Coren; Robson Books; SEPTEMBER 1994).