

Reluctant Alpha Dogs

My youngest sister Kristen is funny, kind-hearted, adorable, and whip smart. Her one and only great flaw is that she is unable to understand or identify animals. It's like the part of her brain that should distinguish mammals from amphibians or cloven hoofs from paws was omitted in favor of loftier things, like how to order whiskey in a tapas bar in Spain or how to finance affordable housing that is actually functional, beautiful, and affordable. Evidence: one time in Vermont she mistook a cow for a dog. She argued with me, refusing to acknowledge the udders, size, and audible mooing were not canine characteristics. Plus, did I mention that we were in Vermont? Another time, in Spain on a very hot day, she worried, with her kind heart, how the tourist carriage horses could stand the heat. "Aren't their feet burning up?" she fretted. When I pointed out that they were wearing shoes, the gears in her remarkable brain whirred and she sputtered, "But, but...why do they make them wear high heels? That seems unnecessarily cruel." Ok, so we grew up in working-class Boston without the early influence of Vermont ski trips, Iberian tours, or high heels for that matter, but we always had dogs at home, and a day with our sire was usually spent running bets for him and his friends at the horse race track. We also, I am sure, played horseshoes. Never mind, Kristen's brain cannot process animals. In a family—as in any pack of animals—each member tends to specialize. Kristen, the youngest, was cute, funny and urban. I, the older sister, was the more serious and responsible one who looked to the natural world for solace.

I moved from Boston to Los Angeles in the 1990s, where I adopted—or more accurately was adopted by—an Australian Shepherd named Pasha. Australian shepherds are herding dogs, meant to control large herds of prey animals, especially sheep but they also work well with horses. Herding dogs help humans control the animals that provide us with food, clothing and shelter, and as such we tend to anthropomorphize them. Pasha was an alpha dog extraordinaire, smarter by far than any of the humans among whom she deigned to reside. Sadly, she had no sheep to herd so she made do with humans and canines. She could descend upon a dog park and in mere seconds have dozens of dogs (and their human companions) following her lead. This was the era when the "dog whisperer" convinced us that we should dominate our dogs, that we had to be the alpha in the pack. Both dogs and animals are pack animals, so some of us will be dominant but many more need to be willing to follow. Despite my training an older sister, it was

clear right away that Pasha would be in charge. Like all good leaders, she convinced you that you wanted to do what she wanted you to do.

I had moved to California not to do anything useful like build affordable housing or to herd hapless humans, but rather to study literature. Yes, I spent my young adult years getting into debt learning about eighteenth-century poetry and literary theory. It's a perfect career for a know-it-all (older sister type) who is also an introvert, comprising a skill set so vague and esoteric that no one could really refute me, or understand me. Pasha obviously thought such sedentary and virtual pursuits to be ridiculous, but she was an indulgent alpha dog who allowed me to imagine that such a career might prove worthwhile: I mean, who knows when there might be an emergency need to explicate a metaphor or when narrative theory might save a life? Still, Pasha did her best to get me out of the library, encouraging me to enjoy California's natural beauty, and under her tutelage I became an avid hiker. When Kristen would come to visit us in Los Angeles, we would usually take her hiking. Pasha intuited Kristen's unique disability, and she herded her ferociously whenever we hiked, not allowing Kristen near the downslope of the trail nor near anything resembling wildlife. Kristen really allowed Pasha to shine as an alpha dog.

By the early aughts, when I'm back in Los Angeles on sabbatical, having against all odds secured employment in this field, I'm also grieving Pasha, who after 15 years of diligent supervision of that inferior species known as academics, has at last retired. But I had a PhD and training as an older sibling, not to mention my internship with Pasha. I fancied myself a competent, if not totally enthusiastic, alpha dog. So one day, Kristen and I set out on an easy hike up Santa Ynez Canyon, a beautiful and relatively easy hike that traverses a glorious and diverse southern California landscape, a hike I had done many times with Pasha. What transpired would never, without a doubt, have happened on Pasha's watch.

"Watch out for some stray dogs down that way" a group of firefighters tell us, very shortly into the adventure. What is typically a very quiet trail (due to no parking lot at the trailhead— need I remind you that we are in Los Angeles?) today appears to be an action movie set: dozens of firefighters and two helicopters are practicing their rescue (or stunt) techniques. It's unbearably loud and testosterone-drenched. I'm excited to save Kristen from this dangerous situation, to

demonstrate my alpha dog training. So, after a bit of harmless flirting, we detour from the main trail toward a closed-off trail and the stray dogs about which we have been duly forewarned. I've poked around this trail before. You don't get the majestic views at the top of Eagle Rock, and you are sort of trapped in a canyon, so it's a-wander-around, not a sense-of accomplishment, kind of hike, but it's pretty and scrappy, with a lovely creek, and I like to imagine it suits the two of us today. Kristen, truth be told, may not be up to the climb up to Eagle Rock, and even though I'm typically goal-oriented, I can meander, I'm sure of it.

Very soon we come upon the creek and the dogs. Kristen trembles a bit, but I reassure her by inviting the dogs over. Soon they are splashing in the stream trying to entertain us. The sleek dogs, I notice, have expensive-looking electrical collars. Surely their owners are nearby. We should continue on our walk. "But they seem lost," Kristen says, "maybe they are seeing-eye dogs who lost their people?" We spy a phone number on their collars, but our flip phones do not have any service in the canyon. "Let's just continue on our walk, and if they are still here when we get back we'll help them," I intone sensibly. But as we head up toward the waterfall, the lovely dogs romp alongside us. They obviously need a leader, and I'm the only candidate. They follow us up the hillside, where Kristen dislodges a boulder that narrowly misses my debt-ridden brain. Unlike Pasha, these pooches do not seem concerned for our well-being or suspicious of our, or should I say Kristen's, outdoor acumen. But they are not convinced of my authority, so they waggle themselves back to toward the creek, looking for a less troublesome way to pass the day. These dogs really are very fickle. Pretty but fickle canine Kardashians. I miss Pasha.

We try once again to find the waterfall, but the trail is easily lost (it's been closed for decades now) and we don't make much progress. Kristen is very concerned about the dogs and their imaginary, disabled and distraught, human companions. "I think we should find some cell service and snacks," she says, "they must be hungry!" As the (reluctant) alpha dog here, I take her concern as an excuse to wimp out on a hiking adventure, but (being the indulgent big sister that I am widely known to be), I agree that we should head back to the trailhead rather than bushwhacking up the waterfall. Back at the creek, the two dogs do not seem to remember us, but they greet us once again as possible sources of fun. Feeling more fondly toward them but no

more impressed with their brainpower, I christen them Milli and Vanilli. Cute but hapless. Obviously, they need my help, so I shirk my top dog duties no longer.

We all pile eagerly into my little Honda hatchback and head off into the wilds of Pacific Palisades to find cell service. We call the number on the collars several times, but there is no answer. We forage some dehydrated organic beef liver treats and water sourced from melting Greenland glaciers, because canine runaways, like starving supermodels, have special nutritional needs. The four of us enjoy a lovely car picnic. “The car is kind of hot,” Kristen says, “maybe they need a walk or some shade?” Even though her suggestions about animal care continue in their usual ill-informed vein, I like to make Kristen feel useful. So—as if we haven’t just spent two hours walking with the dogs repeatedly past a creek—we encourage them to relieve themselves as needed or to enjoy the various shade options provided by the Palisades strip mall, while I periodically try the phone number on their collars.

“Oh for Pete’s sake he’s lost those dogs again!” the woman—when she finally answers the phone—rasps, with a resignation I would not have thought possible given that I’m in possession of these precious creatures. “Where are you?” I explain where we are and why we have rescued the dogs. She explains that the dogs are supposed to be helping her husband track a mountain lion. Abashed is what some people might feel in this situation, but I am very practiced in suppressing unflattering emotions, and I’ve been doing my best to help them. “Well honestly these are not very diligent tracking dogs! They were just hanging around a creek practicing their poses and pretending to be hungry! And why are they tracking a poor endangered urban mountain lion?” Well, she explains, her husband is with four park rangers because an adolescent male puma, in search of territory of his own, slipped his collar. They need to track him to prevent him from getting killed in traffic. Unsure whether to help the mountain lion escape or to help the dogs save their jobs, I hesitate. “Ok, what should I do? Please tell me what to do.” She responds laconically, “Oh just leave them where you found them. And if you see my husband, tell him I’m not holding dinner for him.”

Back at the creek, for the 7th time that day, the dogs revert to cavorting around, and I try to abandon them, per the instructions of the sullen wife. I am in fact rather concerned about the

state of her marriage. The dogs try to follow us back to the car. “Oh for Pete’s sake these are the worst working dogs I’ve ever seen!” I say to Kristen. “Is it possible they have mistaken us for the lion? Can they be as bad as you are at identifying animals?” Then, I hear some voices coming from the ridge above me, and with the kind of determination only possible when I really need a situation to be over, I decide to scramble up the side of the waterfall to find the rangers. I’ve done it before, but it must have overgrown quite a bit because it really is almost impassible. I am struggling to protect my left shoulder, which has a propensity to dislocate, as well as my brain, a capital investment that is clearly underwater at this point. Milli and Vanilli ditch first, heading back to the creek. I can’t have any dead weight or loose boulders, so I tell Kristen to head back with the pretty pooches. I am much more comfortable without a pack to lead. I persevere, resolutely, until I hear voices at the ridge above. I call up and make contact with the rangers and the dog handler. They seem even more tired than I am, not grateful at all that I have rescued their dogs, but we manage to communicate that two of them are going rappel down while the others walk out on the main trail. After about a half an hour, I find the two rappelled rangers and we surmise that the dogs must have somehow chased the lion into the canyon and then could not get back to up the ridge to their leader. I’m trying to give those ungrateful pooches a good cover story. “That makes sense,” the ranger says, “but when you found them were they by any chance looking up into a tree?” I let loose with the humble brag known to all reluctant alpha dogs, “Jesus Christ I know I look like an idiot, covered in scratches and leaves, dehydrated because I bought water for these dogs but not myself. I know I stole your “highly trained” super sniffer search dogs....but I think I would have recognized a god damn mountain lion if I had seen one!” As soon as I say this, I realize that the mountain lion is known for its stealth, and while I may be better at identifying outside animals than Kristen is, I clearly have not established my wilderness bone fides today. We all silently slink back down the ravine to the creek, where we find Kristen reading a book and the Barbie dogs still acting as if they are shooting a commercial for bubble bath.

Obviously, Kristen and I should leave now, but the dogs don’t seem to recognize the rangers, so, what the heck— “in for a penny” and all that—we wait for the tracker, offering to share our snacks with the rangers. When at last the rest of the team joins us, I become suspicious that the dogs do not greet their master with anything resembling affection... or guilt for that matter. We repeat the

story of how we came to find the dogs, apologizing profusely for kidnapping them and taking them off the job. “Ok, ok, that’s ok,” the tracker grunts, “but just one more thing: were they waiting outside a cave or anything?” I can’t help myself. I double down: “Ok so I might never have seen a mountain lion but I can G-D- well assure you that those dogs, without a doubt, WERE NOT WORKING. In fact, these are the laziest canine employees I have ever seen. Seriously, did you check their obedience school grades before hiring them? Maybe their cousin Betty the Border Collie took the final exam for them? Or their uncle Vinny the Pit Bull forced you to hire them? Are you sure their application said ‘trained in cat tracking’ and not ‘creek snacking’? I mean, at least Kristen has an excuse, as her degree is in urban planning!” Milli, Vanilli, and Kristen turn their sweet faces towards me, wondering how they got stuck with such an unstable pack leader.

The next week, after Kristen has returned home, I decide to finally bury Pasha’s ashes. I remember that when I met her, she was the last of her litter to find a family. I wondered why, given how adorable she was. “No one wants the alpha females,” my friend told me. Oh but I did—I wanted one, because I didn’t want to be one and because, let’s be honest, despite Pasha’s years of training, I just did not have the alpha dog disposition. I thank Pasha for being my trusted canine companion for 15 years. I tell her I miss her infallible herding instincts, her perfect hair, and despite her vanity, her willingness to welcome me to her pack. I tell her that I now understand how lonely it is to be a boss lady. But, someone has to be in charge. Right?

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