

Travels With Wizard

by Jonathan Baumbach

When Spring finally made its entrance on the scene, the hopelessness the biographer Leo Dimoff felt during the long excoriating winter persisted and so, sensing the need—at 59, at the cusp of 60—for radical change in his life, he decided to get himself a dog.

Why a dog?

For one thing, living alone after a lifelong failed apprenticeship in the relationship trade, Leo felt deprived, wanted companionship though without the attendant complications. The women in his life—former wives and lovers—had, so his story went, burdened him with unanswerable demands.

“You want a dog because they don’t talk back,” Sarah, his most recent former live-in companion, told him over dinner at Shiro, the very Japanese restaurant that had hosted their break-up. They had lived together for almost a year in the not so distant unremembered past and had remained contentious friends.

“Dog owners are never called chauvinists,” he said. “And certainly not by their dogs.”

“I love dogs,” she said. “though I’ve never had one. What kind

of dog are you thinking of, Leo?”

“I’ve been doing the research,” he said. “I may have read everything about choosing a dog the Book Loft had in stock. I may in fact have acquired more information than I know what to do with. What I’m in the market for is a medium-sized, aesthetically pleasing, low maintenance puppy who is affectionate, intelligent and, most importantly, faithful. What do you think? I’d be grateful for suggestions.”

“Whew!” she said, turning her face away to issue a brief secretive smile. “Well, I know it’s not for everyone but I’ve always been partial to the Russell Terrier.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “That’s a kind of circus dog, isn’t it? One of my dog texts—it may be *Puppies for Dummies*—says that Russells tend to be high strung.”

“Too high strung, huh? You want a placid, doting, drooling dog, is that it? Mixed breeds are thought to be less high strung than full breeds. Leo, you could go to a shelter and pick out a puppy.”

“I could,” he said. “Would you accompany me?”

“I might,” she said. “And then again I might not.”

That the heart has its reasons and usually poor ones represented a good half of Leo’s shaky acquired wisdom. On the other hand, as a biographer, he was generally esteemed for an empathic understanding of the wisdom and frailty of others.

Nevertheless, in careless love, he had come home one day with an odd-looking, long legged, long-haired, big-nosed tan and white puppy that had, said the shelter report, some terrier, some poodle and a soupçon of shepherd in its otherwise indecipherable makeup. The woman running the shelter, who reminded him of a former

grade school teacher whose name he sometimes remembered, said he could bring the puppy back in a week if it didn't work out. "It'll work out," he told her.

Leo stayed awake much of their first night together, concerned that the silent puppy, tentatively named Wizard after the subject of his latest biography, might suffocate without him there to monitor its sleep. The woman who ran the shelter had warned him that the infant dog, feeling displaced in new surroundings, might cry his first night away from the only home he knew. That Wizard's behavior defeated expectations gave the biographer, a worrier in the best of seasons, cause for concern. The puppy started the night in an overwhelmingly large crate at the foot of Leo's bed. In the morning, when Leo opened his eyes, unaware of having slept, his charge was on the pillow next to him. In fact it was Wizard's yelp, or perhaps it was only a high-pitched bark, that woke Leo from a dream in which the small dog he was caring for grew unacceptably large overnight.

At Sarah's advice and against his own predilections, Leo took Wizard to a local trainer, a friend of Sarah's also named Sara (without the h) for obedience lessons.

Rosy-cheeked, slightly pudgy, the trainer, the other Sara, seemed barely out of her teens. When Leo asked her age, she let him know with a shin-kicking glance that she considered his question impertinent. "I'm older than I look," she said. "And I'm excellent at my job."

Leo, only slightly cowed, resisted the impulse to apologize.

In the following moment, they had their second misunderstanding. It came when she asked him the puppy's name. "Wiz-

ard,” he said, not yet comfortable with the choice.

“Whizzer?” she said.

“Wizard,” he muttered.

“I understand,” she said. “Whizzer.”

From what he could tell, Wizard seemed to be failing his first lesson, which embarrassed the biographer, who offered excuses for his charge’s slow-wittedness. “He tends to be shy with strangers,” Leo said.

“Oh he’s doing just fine,” Sara said. “And since we’re already friends, aren’t we, Whizzer? (chucking the puppy under the chin), we can no longer be considered strangers. I think we need to do this twice a week and you need to practice commands with him in the morning before breakfast and at night before he goes to sleep. If it will make it easier for you, I’ll come to your house next time.”

Leo reluctantly accepted her offer, having no reason—none he could find words for—not to.

For the next several weeks, on Tuesdays and Fridays, Sara appeared at his door promptly at 4:30 for Wizard’s lesson. At their first session, Leo offered the trainer a cup of coffee, which she declined. Thereafter he made her herbal tea, specifically the ginseng-chai combination she favored, and more often than not the trainer stayed beyond the forty minutes set aside for the actual lesson. Though he was at least twenty years her senior, Leo sometimes imagined that her extended stays had something to do with him.

“Whizzer’s very bright,” she told Leo, who, although pleased by the compliment, remained skeptical. Not only was the dog not toilet-trained after three weeks in his care, but he tended to leave his shit just off the edge of the paper—usually *The New York Times*

sports page—laid out to take its measure.

And then one day when least expected, Wizard stopped doing his “business”—that repellent dog-manual euphemism—in inappropriate places. Not one to believe in undeserved good fortune, Leo obsessively searched the three rooms available to his charge, sometimes on hands and knees, before acknowledging that the puppy, whose name he had been thinking of changing, was not as dim as previously suspected.

Whenever Sara arrived—at times her knock at the door would be sufficient—Wizard would do a pirouette in ecstatic expectation, which made Leo jealous despite the murmurs of his better judgment. It was important of course that the puppy be fond of his trainer. Still, the 360-degree turn, sometimes restated, seemed a little much. Although Leo fed the puppy, doted on him, walked him in good and bad weather, early and late, he sometimes imagined that Wizard, in his faithless heart, actually preferred Sara.

So after a while, after a particularly good training session, after herbal tea and cookies, Leo wondered aloud if Wizard and owner weren’t sufficiently trained at this point to go it on their own.

“If that’s what you want,” she said, her stern cherubic face in unacknowledged collapse. “He still has a few things to learn, you know. You said he pulls on the leash when he sees another dog. We might do a few outdoor lessons. It’s much harder to get him to obey when there are distractions around.”

It struck Leo that Sara, though otherwise a bundle of positive qualities, had almost no sense of humor. Possibly her sense of humor was so subtle that his own crude radar failed to acknowledge it.

“You’ve done very well with him,” Leo said, trying not to sound condescending. “We’re both pleased, you know, with his considerable progress.”

His compliment seemed to distress her. “If there’s a financial burden,” she said, “I’d be willing to cut my fee. Would that make a difference? I think Whizzer is on the verge of his next big breakthrough.”

“Look, why don’t we take next week off,” Leo said, “as a kind of vacation for all of us. I’m doing a reading from my book on Nikola Tesla in Rochester and I’m thinking of taking Wizard with me to see how he handles the trip.”

“I have a sister who lives in Rochester,” Sara said.

“Do you?”

“Yes, and she’s been having a hard time since her divorce. I’ve been planning to go up and see her but then something always comes up that gets in the way. I’ll have to check my schedule but maybe I could go along for the ride and give you both a hand. Have you considered what you’re going to do with the pup when you’re reading whatever it is in front of an audience?”

Feeling trapped, Leo improvised a barely credible explanation as to why it wouldn’t work for Sara to accompany him. “I appreciate your offer,” he added.

“I’d better go,” Sara said.

Leo awakes the next morning aware that it was a mistake to have rejected Sara’s offer, a mean-spirited, self-protective tic. He would have to be some kind of wizard himself to manage the puppy alone.

Wrestling with his choices—the last of which would be leaving

Wizard behind—he grudgingly decides to phone the trainer, apologize for his unintentional abruptness, admit that he needs her on the trip and ask her, virtually plead with her, to join them.

He has allowed himself to imagine Sara’s pleasure in getting this call from him.

“Sorry,” she says. “I’ve already made other plans.”

That is the not the answer he has anticipated, so he hangs on waiting hopelessly for better news.

“Is there something else?” she asks.

“That’s about it,” he says, noting out of the corner of his eye that Wizard has one of his shoes in his mouth, whipping his head ferociously from side to side as if it were a fearsome opponent.

“Stop that,” he calls to the dog.

“What are you saying?” Sara says. “What should I stop?”

“Not you. Wizard was chewing on one of my shoes.”

“Whatever. Leo, you never shout at your dog. A quiet command should be sufficient to deter him.”

“It’s only in the last few days that he’s started these life-and-death battles with my shoes. He gets so much pleasure out of it, it seems churlish of me to deny him.”

“I don’t know that you want to encourage bad behavior, do you?”

“Of course you’re right,” he says.

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There are a few timid out-of-season snow flurries when they take off in the morning for Rochester, but several hours into the jour-

ney, Leo finds himself driving in blizzard conditions. Losing traction here and there despite his all-wheel drive Forester, he considers pulling over to the side of the road to wait out the worst of the storm. That the others seem oblivious to any danger makes it difficult for him to concede to the weather. Trussed into the passenger seat next to him, Wizard is staring out the window like a tourist. Sara, keeping company in the back with her cell phone, has been trying to reach her sister in Rochester, the phone failing or the sister not available, Sara unnervingly patient.

When Sara finally completes her call, Leo learns that the reading in Rochester has been postponed because of the unexpected storm. Exhausted from his unrewarded efforts, he suggests they stop at the Wanderer's Motel in the near distance if only to wait for the storm to abate.

As they have no plans to stay the night, they agree for economy's sake to take a single cabin. So as not to set off any false alarms, Leo registers Sara as his wife.

"You must be totally worn out," Sara says as they move through the mix of sleet and rain to their accommodations. "Why don't you sack out and I'll get the pup from the car and give him his bathroom walk."

"That's okay," he says. "I appreciate the offer. It's just that walking Wizard is one of the unsung highlights of my day."

"Oh, go ahead, you look dead on your feet. I know how stressful it can be driving in treacherous weather, Leo. You don't have to prove anything to me."

So, feeling anything but grateful, carrying an overnight case in each hand, Leo lets himself into the motel room while Sara takes

the puppy on the stretch leash, the two wandering into the distance like snow ghosts. The boxy cabin is furnished—along with a low-slung three-drawer dresser and a writing table with a Bible wrapped in plastic on its otherwise virgin surface—with two three-quarter-size beds barely a foot apart. Not bothering to remove his shoes, Leo throws himself on the bed farthest from the door.

He dozes or imagines he has and wakes to find himself still alone in the room. Where are the others?

He should have insisted on walking the dog himself.

There is a heavy green curtain over what seems like a back window and, though it takes awhile, he finally locates a device that parts the brocaded cloth.

He is surprised to discover a back garden with tables under umbrellas—a place to picnic perhaps—overwhelmed by the blinding whiteness of the still falling sleet. He has no idea what he is looking for, but as his eyes adjust, he sees something that speaks to the worst of his expectations.

He closes his eyes as if to return to a dream from which he then might shake himself awake. When after a moment of inconsequential reverie, he allows his eyes to open, nothing has changed or nothing has changed sufficiently to put his original perception in doubt.

As near as he can make out, Sara is sitting under one of the umbrellas in the garden with her back to him. At first he assumes that she has returned Wizard to the car, but then he sees that she is not alone. Something—a head, Wizard's head most likely—is sticking out from the opening in her yellow down jacket and Sara's hooded head is tilted forward so that the two heads seem at some point to

converge. It is only when she returns to her original position that Leo can tell that Sara and Wizard have been—there is no other word to describe it—kissing. Sara’s head moves forward again and her mouth meets the dog’s—a suspicion of tongue flashing—which is more than Leo can bear to watch.

Not wanting to eavesdrop any longer than he has, he closes the curtain and goes into the bathroom to wash his hands. For a moment, he has difficulty recognizing the face in the mirror over the sink that answers his troubled glance.

Perhaps ten minutes later, Sara enters the room alone, reporting that she has left the dog in the car because of the No Pets Allowed sign they hadn’t noticed before.

“Did you get some sleep?” she asks, pulling off her boots. “I stayed out for awhile so as not to wake you.”

Lying on her back, eyes flickering shut, the whisper of a snore in counterpoint to the indeterminate hum of the room, the trainer is apparently asleep before the biographer can frame an answer to her question.

A few hours later, the weather has quieted sufficiently for them to return to the road. Unaccompanied in front this time around—Sara and Wizard shoulder to shoulder in the backseat—Leo feels deserted. A sadness he hasn’t acknowledged in months, perhaps since the dog entered his life, holds him in its sway.

Could they have missed a turn? They have been driving a while now—he has lost track of the time—and the passing scene, what he can make of it from the badly lit road he has been following slavishly, seems unfamiliar.

“Are we lost?” Sara asks him.

“I don’t see how,” he says. “We haven’t left the route we started on.”

“Whizzer is getting anxious,” she says. “He senses something’s wrong.”

They are approaching a restaurant called The Helden Inn on their right and Leo wonders out loud if it might be a good idea to stop for a bite. “What do you think?” he says to no one in particular.

“If that’s what you want to do,” Sara says. “I can’t speak for everyone but I suspect we’re all a bit peckish.”

There are an impressive number of vehicles, mostly high-end SUV’s in the restaurant lot, which suggests, given the deterrence of the weather, a devoted local following. “I think we may have lucked out,” he says to Sara.

Sara calls his attention to a sign on the parking lot side of the Inn rising out of the white ground, which offers the modest recommendation, “Just Good Food,” the remark in quotes, the speaker unattributed. Underneath the quote in smaller letters it says, Pets and Children Welcome. “I think that’s funny,” she says.

Leo parks the Forester at the far end of the lot—he feels fortunate to find a space in the crowd of vehicles—and they have to wade, Wizard in Sara’s arms, through several inches of slush to reach the Inn.

As they find their way inside, an elderly couple, oddly costumed (the old man in lederhosen, the woman in frilly blouse and apron), seem to be waiting for them (or someone) in the cavernous foyer. “Do you have reservations?” the woman asks, her broad smile welcoming them.

“We don’t,” Leo says. “Is that a problem?”

“There are only problems if we make them problems,” the woman says, her accent vaguely foreign, the smile seemingly frozen on her face. “We’ll do our best to take care of you. Please to follow.”

She leads them into a spacious dining room—thirteen tables by Leo’s quick count—in which surprisingly there is only one other diner, a fat man in a three-piece suit, at the far side of the room, working at what appears to be an elaborate cream-filled desert.

Leo dries Wizard off with his rumpled cloth napkin while Sara inspects her menu. “There isn’t anything here I can eat,” she says. “I don’t eat meat.”

“What about a salad?” Leo says. “They must have salads.”

“The truth is,” Sara says, “—and I hope you won’t mention this to anyone, okay?—though I don’t eat meat, I don’t really like salads.”

Wizard, who seems to have grown during the difficult trip, barks from under the table at some unseen menace.

The proprietress, her perpetual smile a kind of rictus, returns with a basket of sliced rye bread and three glasses of water. She seems poised to take their order when someone or something whistles from the kitchen and she hurries off.

Coming out from under the table, Wizard has taken residence on one of the padded chairs, accomplishing the feat with an impressive jump.

The fat man on the other side of the room lifts his head languorously from his dessert long enough to clap.

When Leo has a chance to go through the menu, which is several pages long, he has a greater appreciation of Sara’s concern.

The Helden Inn is celebrating something called Carnivore Days and all or virtually all of the dishes offered have some kind of animal meat as its base. Even under “Starters” Leo can find nothing that seems like a green salad. Under the Carnivore Days Specials, there is a quote in italics as a kind of epigraph:

“The carnivore loves his animals so much he is willing to eat them.”

—THE MANAGEMENT

“If you don’t want to stay,” he whispers to Sara, who has been negotiating a slice of stale bread, “I’m willing to leave.”

His offer seems in equal measure to puzzle and please her. “Leo, wouldn’t it be rude to just walk out after they’ve gone to all this trouble on our behalf? I was actually thinking of ordering my first burger in about six years. Did you notice that they have a puma burger on the menu?” She smiles self-deprecatingly, almost seductively. “I’ve been known to compromise in emergencies.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he notices that the suited fat man has fallen asleep face down in his desert. Sara, intent on the menu’s extended narrative, seems not to notice.

An odd muffled cry sounds from behind one of the walls.

Wondering, and not for the first time, where the people from the parked cars have gone, Leo takes a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and leaves it under the white enamel matching salt-and-pepper shakers. “That should pay for the service,” he says. “Did you notice that they actually have a ‘Bow Wow Burger’ on the menu?”

“They don’t!?” she says, rising from her chair.

Sara is in the process of putting the puppy under her jacket when the proprietress, her smile unaltered, returns with a tray of unidentifiable appetizers. “I apologize for the delay,” she says. “The help isn’t always what you want.”

Leo is about to offer an explanation for their abrupt departure, but instead takes Sara’s hand and heads to the door that leads to the cavernous foyer.

The old man in the lederhosen is standing by the register as they hurry past him. “Come visit us again,” he says in an uninflected voice. “And don’t forget to drive safely.”

Since almost all the vehicles in the lot are covered with some residue of the weather, it is hard to determine in the dark which car is theirs.

In his hurry to get going, Leo, using the sleeve of his coat, clears off the front window of the wrong Forester.

A Lexus SUV, pulling out from the row behind them, startles them with its horn. The driver, who could be the younger sister of the proprietress, rolls down a window and offers them a ride.

In the chaos of the moment, Leo is tempted to accept, but Sara who is clearing off another car, says, “Wait a second. I think I found ours.”

They pile into the Forester Sara has cleared, though Leo is not at all sure it is the one that had brought them there.

This time, Sara drives while Leo and Wizard sit next to each other in the back, a larger space between them than the one Leo observed between Sara and the puppy when he was at the wheel.

Still he is pleased to be alone with his charge without other responsibilities and he reaches out awkwardly to rub the puppy’s

head. Closing his eyes, Wizard accepts Leo's homage. When, after awhile, Leo reclaims his hand, Wizard turns to look at him, the dog's wise face making unspoken judgments, seeing through to the very bottom of the biographer.

For an unguarded moment, Leo's considers apologizing for his failings, promising to do his best to transcend his limitations in the future. While these thoughts pinball about in his head, Wizard leans over and licks his hand.

At some point, at Leo's request—the gauge registering empty—Sara pulls into a Mobil station to gas up and to find out where they might be in relation to where they are going. The news is bad. Apparently, they have been heading for the most part in the wrong direction and are farther away from home than ever. The source of their information, an overeager teenaged attendant, says he knows of a shortcut and he draws them a not quite decipherable map on a coffee-stained napkin.

“What do you want to do?” Sara asks Leo, showing him the makeshift map. “We could stop at the motel we just passed and start out fresh in the morning or we could turn around and drive through the night. Either way, honey, is okay with me.”

Instinctively, he turns to Wizard, but the shaggy dog, head pressed against Leo's leg, eyes mostly shut, merely smiles.

As Leo considers his options, he imagines them—the three of them—moving on in whatever direction, stopping to get advice again and again, letting the trip take them where it will, the hand-drawn map, the various maps, just an excuse to pursue space and distance, and the more lost they seem to get the closer they are to some place unknown to him he has never been to before and has

never hoped to reach.