

Nesting

By Laura Hayden

Larry and I first moved into our fixer-upper in 1981, the year after we married. We made sure we bought a house we could afford on one salary, so I could leave my teaching job a few years and stay home with the baby we hoped to have. As we moved in our living room furniture, a mourning dove slammed into the front bay window. It left feathers on a moist, pinkish splotch on the glass. I recoiled at the notion that a dead bird lay on the ground on the other side of the glass. After an hour or so, I went out to remove it and its mark on the window. The bird was gone. It must have only stunned itself on impact, revived, and flown away.

Over those first few weeks, the pine tree in front of the picture window filled with chickadees, cardinals, tufted titmice, and an occasional woodpecker. Serenaded by their birdsong every day, I grew accustomed to the occasional bump, collision, and resurrection of bird as, once again, one mistook its reflection in the pane for another bird and flew into the glass to greet it.

Larry and I had been trying to start a family for three years, but nothing was happening. In the midst of having begun fertility counseling, Larry suggested, "We should get a puppy." We had been in our new home for only two months.

I looked around to our house's chipped and faded exterior, worn rugs, and pink and black tile bathroom. House-hunting had confirmed my suspicion that all 25-year-old houses had pink-and-black tile bathrooms. But we had bought the house, like so many other things, for its promise, not its polish. A bit of painting inside now and pruning outside, in the spring, and we'd be well on our way to turning the needy, mid-fifties ranch into a rather pleasant home. With its fenced-in yard, it was already perfect for a dog.

“Well,” I said, “It’ll mean getting up earlier, leaving it alone during the day, and staying close to home most weekends.” *No* is a word not often used by a wife who revered, even envied, a husband’s spontaneity. But I had to be realistic, play Ms. Panza to Mr. Quixote. Plus, I knew if the social restraint did not dissuade Larry, nothing would. I ended with the frequent plaint of the working wife. “I can’t do it all.”

“You won’t.”

I thought getting a dog meant going to the pound for a homeless pup. Larry had other plans. This was to be a long-term commitment. He said type and temperament were of the utmost importance. A call to Nutmeg Dog Breeder Referral supplied us with the phone number of a West Highland white terrier breeder twenty minutes away. Larry phoned the Gingerbread Kennels and we were invited to see the pregnant pedigree, Jeanne, and her breeder Judy.

I wondered about a dog with a person’s name, but when Jeanne greeted us at the kennels, she was as licking, gnawing, and sniffing a terrier as she could be. Toto incarnate.

Judy the breeder greeted us with less fervor than Jeanne, but still warmly. A sweet face supported her thick glasses. Along with a pleasantly thick body, this made her appear to be the human facsimile of a thoughtful mongrel that would be easy to love. Amiable Judy, however, turned quickly staid over the business of choosing a home for one of Jeanne’s impending pups.

No one doubted that, as Judy stated, Jeanne would be a mother on May seventh. She had mated in March. With dogs, fertilization was pretty much a sure bet. Sixty-three days later Jeanne would give birth to, most likely, four pups. Thoughts of my own temperature charts, insidious infertility tests, and disappointing counseling sessions crossed my mind. I began to wish my name was Lassie instead of Laura. Maybe canine breeding odds would rub off on me.

“So you want a Westie?” Judy stared at me. Since I knew nothing about dogs I worked on camouflaging my cluelessness by tossing my head, relaying the stare and the question to Larry.

“Oh yes. I want a dog that enjoys people, is an exuberant welcomer, an intelligent learner.” Judy smiled. Larry knew what he was talking about. He continued. “Had a Scottie once. . . Merlin.” Larry paused, looking almost wistful. “Merlin was fun,” he paused again, “but I’ve always liked the personality of a Westie.”

Judy’s plump body shifts indicated she was satisfied with Larry’s knowledge of Westies, but I hadn’t passed the ownership test yet. She shot the next question directly at me. “So you know terriers too?”

“Ah, well.” I hesitated. “Larry does. I, err, you see, never had a dog. But Larry’s grown up with them.”

“I see,” said Judy. “And where do you live?”

This was beginning to sound like an adoption screening. Larry quickly answered, “We just bought a home – with a great yard. Over half an acre.”

Judy looked reasonably pleased. I summoned the confidence to add, “A fenced-in yard.”

Her eyeglasses slightly magnified her widening eyes. “The entire half-acre?”

“Chain-linked,” I said.

“Well then,” she clucked like a mother hen. “The litter will be here in early May. I’ll put your name on the list and call you then.”

Larry put out his hand. “Thank you, Jeanne.”

“I’m Judy,” she said, shaking on the done deal.

Three months later we brought our tiny Westie home. Piper's days filled with short spurts of puppy craziness and long naps. Like our home, he was needy. We ministered to first-night frights, encouraged his little body over steps, placed heartworm medicine down his throat, and rubbed, often, his wanting belly. If a puppy is, like a man, what he eats, Piper – named for the player of Scottish pipes – fit his portion of eight parts dry Puppy Chow to one part canned Mighty Dog.

As weeks passed the Mighty Dog share of the canine concoction increased. I grew more and more uncomfortable with the smell of greater portions of moist, meaty byproducts mixed with the less pungent pellets. Before long, a mere whiff of the dog's food nauseated me - which thrilled me! I made a special trip to the corner drug store – a long-time family business that use to give out free sundaes for good grades when I was in grammar school – and bought a pregnancy test. Actually, I bought three pregnancy tests, and within an hour *FACT. The home pregnancy test that gives the fastest possible results* confirmed I was expecting, once, twice, and then a third time. I called Larry when I was sure.

“Guess what?”

“The Coleco stock finally rebounded,” he said, one of his many attempts to make light of his investment, gone sour, months earlier.

“Better,” I said.

“Reeeaaally?” There were almost three syllables in his exaggerated articulation.

“Reeeaaally.” I imitated his emphasis. “We’re having a baby.”

We celebrated that night, clinking chilled Perrier in crystal goblets. I just glowed.

“Good timing,” said our friendly veterinarian, herself heavy with child. There must have been a range of two octaves between Piper’s high, excited yips as the vet calmly administered four vaccinations and the guttural tones the puppy directed to the tabby in the waiting room. “A puppy in July, a baby in March,” continued the vet. “If you keep him out of the nursery now, he won’t resent the baby later.”

It was difficult to imagine Piper resenting anything. Even when we scolded him with a stern “No,” he would lurk by our heels like a repentant sinner. He liked to wrestle with the give-and take of leather shoes - another no-no. Sometimes he would roll on his back and gnaw a rawhide chew as if he was a floating otter enjoying a precious piece of abalone. Each week Piper napped less and played more, the way a baby would, I thought. Now and then the thump of a misguided mourning dove on window glass drove him to a barking frenzy.

And he did stay out of our baby’s waiting room, never looking as if he really understood why the “No,” by the nursery-in-waiting was so emphatic.

A misguided mourning dove smudges a window. A puppy accident on a rug. These became the least of my concerns.

I was spotting.

Bright red stains on my summer shorts interrupted our bliss. Doctors and medical books offered no remedies for symptoms that indicated my baby was about to slip away. Instead, they gave odds: a fifty-fifty chance that the pregnancy would miscarry. The books stated a lost fetus is a sick fetus. A sick fetus would continue to develop into an abnormal baby. Most often, a miscarriage eliminates a fetus that would not have lived very long if brought to term.

My doctor ordered bed rest. We would have to wait and see if our baby would survive the sign of internal stress.

Larry took on the kitchen duties. He served his first meals with panache and flair. Fat tomatoes from the garden stuffed with cold chunks of white tuna, our own squash steamed to a still-crisp perfection, and the windowsill parsley garnishing it all. By week's end Larry would be heating frozen dinners.

"I'm tired," he said.

"I know," I would reassure him, as we traded our private ironies: Larry, the weary, working house-husband; me, exhausted, from bed-rest and worry. At night we hugged hard, as if hoping the tight embrace would keep our baby intact. Piper slept under our bed. A trace of blood appeared on the sheets.

In a few days Larry opened the door to the nursery that, after the miscarriage, reverted back to spare room status. Piper frantically sniffed at its threshold and then curiously peered. The variegated rug, as thick as his double-coated fur, contrasted with the flat pile of the worn hallway rug. A bright latch-hook hanging of a koala bear caught the attention of his black eyes. He did not enter, but moved his hind legs in a bicycling motion while his forelegs remained stiff and still. We heard an almost imperceptible growl.

"Good dog," I said, bending down and patting him.

Through the next few weeks our daily routine lacked meaning and momentum. Larry and I no longer talked of cribs and changing tables. We didn't compare canary yellow paint samples to goldenrod. The neutral ecru tint on the wall in the empty room would do.

Conversation remained in the present, avoiding the immediate past and any hopes for a future that would include a child. Larry went to work. I would have to wallow in more worrisome places at home, with the dog, until my teaching job restarted after Labor Day. Though my body had healed after my miscarriage, the mind still oozed. I felt empty. I felt robbed.

One late August morning I was about to let Piper out into the dewy yard as I did every morning. Tall, thick pines, like the one outside the front bay window, lined the inside of its chain-linked perimeter. Piper must have thought these trees were, truly, the boundaries of the world. He took his customary, slow hop down the step. But, today, his usual sleepy walk halted. Ears up, snout frozen, Piper heard first, what I heard next.

A robin's sound.

My puppy hurled into a blurry, barking streak at the bird in the grass. This would not have been an unusual scene, except that the robin did not fly away. And quicker than I could throw balls, bones, anything to distract Piper from this creature, Piper was atop the helpless, hopping prey.

Growls overtook peeps. Then, in one striking snap, silence.

A community of birds screeched, the usual early-morning chirps of birdsong replaced by quick piercing cries of nesting baby birds, distressed by the predatory scene below. A long shriek followed each avian SOS, the dual notes of adult birds sending out alarms. The sight and sounds drove my hands deep into my ribs, just above my empty womb.

On the ground the bird lay lifeless. It had not been able to fly above and away from its predator. What should have played out as an amusing scene – dog pawing upward, dancing on hind legs, a tiny bird safe in flight – turned into a natural catastrophe.

The screech-filled sky grew louder as the dog examined its victim, sniffing the stench of blood, rolling the feathered carcass with a paw. Oak leaves swished like protesting placards against the sky. The bird could not fly, I kept thinking, even before the attack.

In his scissors bite, Piper carried his prize to me and placed it, as if a gift, at my feet. I fell to my knees. Tears streamed down my face, some dropping on the dog's evenly clipped white muzzle. Twisting his snout, right to left, right to left, his eyes swept mine as if confused. Where was the pat, the treat, the praise for this flawless execution of hunter instinct?

“Good dog,” I said, still sobbing. I placed my hand on his stretched neck. I stroked down to his back and lifted my hand up again to his neck, over and over in a circular motion, acknowledging not his act of brutality, but its message. Had the dear yet flawed fetus I carried, just weeks earlier, survived its passage from womb to world, the baby, like the bird, would still not have been able to fly.

“Let's go inside,” I told the dog. He trotted obediently in front of me.