Along Came Dylan

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THE SILVER GRIZZLE LEAVES HOME

'D'you know what, I think he's thrown a litter of smooths!' says the breeder, Karen, as she rearranges half a dozen two-week-old pups, manoeuvering each of them into the optimum feeding position. Every time she moves one she looks closely at its minute ears to see if there's any sign of the feathering that distinguishes the ears of their mother, Tareefa. It seems there is not. Tareefa is behaving impeccably, lying on her side, quietly sanguine, while six mouths work away ferociously at her nipples. I've never seen pups this young at their feed before. They are no bigger than

gerbils, their eyes are closed, the only way they express personality is by being the hungriest. This is a keenly fought event, in which the competition is intense, and a winner is difficult to find, though the shy one is easy to spot.

By 'he' Karen means the proud father, Farid. It was the sight of Farid with his beautiful grey coat and his unfeathered, *smooth* ears, and with his relaxed and thoughtful attitude to go with the good looks, that inspired me to pursue an idea. The idea was one I'd been worrying at for a while. The idea was to get a second dog.

I'd had it in my mind for some time, that since Ollie (the subject of *Walking Ollie*) had become more or less normal, then what he really needed – to encourage and promote the normality – was a companion. Because I could already see him backsliding. Where, pre-normality, he used to be vaguely psychotic, post-normality he was beginning to show signs of going the other way, of becoming moody and withdrawn. I was not principally looking for a new dog for us, I was looking for a perk-me-up friend and companion for him.

It is not as straightforward as all that, though.

When Trezza, my partner, and I discovered Ollie in a rescue centre five years ago, I knew nothing about

dogs. While I am still no expert, I am more experienced than I was then. The long and short of *Walking Ollie* is that Ollie was a very awkward animal, one that I often wished could be sent back whence he came. However (the big however), I could never find it in me to load him into the car, turn the key, and drive him off in order to return him as if he were a faulty television. Dogs are not like that. Dogs get under your skin. After you have cared for one for a while (and you do have to care for them, they are not into looking after themselves) you find that, quite unconsciously, you have become absorbed into a cult: the Cult of the Dog Owner. In this way, it has to be conceded, you, too, have become slightly cultish – which is surely another word for mad – just like all the rest of them.

This is how, and why, you begin to think along these lines, the lines along which I had been thinking. Even without Ollie's incipient personality change into 'the loner', it had been crossing my mind that since he no longer runs away when he catches sight of me, since he sometimes returns to the call of his name, since he is less fearful of plastic bags and flies than he used to be, then what must happen next is a matter of inevitability.

Each time the thought appeared, I pushed it away

because it was a thought that would, in all probability, make life much more unnecessarily difficult than needs be. Keeping two dogs will not be any less trouble than keeping one, will it? And it's unlikely that it will turn out to be just double the trouble, either. No, without pausing to recollect those incidents you have witnessed, or been part of, or have started – incidents involving a pair of dogs simultaneously going missing in opposite directions – without bothering to recall moments of that sort, it's still easy enough to guess that two dogs will be trouble multiplied and squared.

But (the big but, bigger than the big however).

But: I looked at Ollie lying in his basket, bored and fed up, fed up and bored, filled with ennui and actually *sighing*. I looked at him day after day, and the more I looked at him, the more I convinced myself that the cause of his apathy was the lack of a playmate. He has me, he has Trezza, he has Jack, my teenage son, who sometimes comes round, and he has Jack's mates who also sometimes come round. He is not particularly interested in any of this group of individuals.

At least he sees the great outdoors twice a day, in fields and on beaches and round lakes. Here he has a number of friends (and enemies) to meet and greet

(or not). Here he can normally be relied upon to be fairly lively. It is only all the many hours that he spends indoors, like a bored teenager who has *nothing to do*, that seem difficult for him. I can keep putting off the search for a companion for him for as long as this remains the case. The rational part of me is capable of thinking of it in these terms: 'Tough shit, Ollie, here you are in the warm and dry being loved and fed and everything, what a hardship.'

It's when he starts to become surly, withdrawn and lethargic in the great outdoors that I really start to believe that something needs to be done.

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I surfed the internet, looking at the rescue sites. I saw numerous deserving cases, some of which I considered at length, repeatedly revisiting the relevant web page, downloading the picture to my desktop, emailing it on to Trezza's computer downstairs, but in truth I was never going to acquire a companion for Ollie from these sources because here were animals who could turn out to be even more trouble than *he* was. And this matter crossed my mind too: Ollie might not

appreciate a rival in the special needs stakes. What I was looking for was a pup, someone that Ollie could train into his ways. I did the mental checklist. Which breeds does Ollie most like; who does he play with? There is no definitive answer to this. He is selective; he has one Doberman he loves, a couple of terriers that he is always delighted to see, a pair of 57 varieties that he rates highly, and a continental sparring partner, an Italian Spinone (an engaging animal, but one that is the embodiment of the Who album title *Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy*). So: not an Italian Spinone, at any event.

Ollie is a lurcher, a crossbreed, half Saluki, half greyhound. Such greyhounds as we regularly encounter are, in the main, quiet, retired animals who do very little. Ollie will occasionally have a run with one of these, but only occasionally, because nine times out of ten the greyhounds can't be bothered. It's probable, in fact, that it's his greyhound side that is responsible for the incipient lethargy. I looked around my neighbourhood. In a (single sample) proof of this theory I noted that the one greyhound we saw every day was an idler who slouched along behind his Master, a curmudgeon who walks with a stoop and who is never

without a roll up that he spends most of his life relighting. To the best of my knowledge we had never, on any of our walks, met the other side of Ollie, a pure Saluki. Salukis are of Bedouin origin, they are somewhat greyhound-like to look at, but they differ considerably in temperament: people tell me that Bedouin tribesmen have two words for canines, one is dog, the other is Saluki. So far as Bedouin tribesmen are concerned, the Saluki is in some way distinct from the rest of its kind.

One way in which Salukis are distinct is that they are high maintenance, in the way that supermodels are high maintenance: the price to be paid for their aesthetic beauty comes in ludicrous demands and self-centredness. But though everything must be five-star in their world, they are not remotely fastidious: like Kate Moss, they will, as we shall discover, put more or less anything into their bodies, and like Naomi Campbell, they are martyrs to their unpredictable temperaments.

Though we have met no pure-bred Salukis, Ollie has frequently bumped into his fellow travellers from the world of Saluki-crosses. These almost always originate from a rescue centre, like Ollie himself. Without this source of supply, and short of breeding

your own, I don't know where you'd find one. Gypsies and travellers use and abuse them for poaching: that is how so many of them end up in rescue. It was this 'poacher-abandoned' category that was responsible for throwing up so many of the deserving cases that I had been looking at online. Ollie's view of his fellow Saluki-crosses is that he likes them more than most. They have a way of playing that is all their own, one that begins with bouncing on the hind legs combined with a zigzag scissor-action and much standing-off and shadow-boxing before anything actually happens. It's a kind of canine t'ai chi on fast forward.

So. I put two and two together, come up with five, and switch my search to Saluki websites.

It is here that I see the picture of Farid. I send a link to Trezza's computer. The picture of Farid is of a pose whereby his legs are splayed forward and his backside is stuck up in the air, a position that Ollie goes in for in moments of joy or happiness, or sometimes for no reason at all. Trezza is up to my office like a flash. My word, she says, he looks a nice boy, doesn't he.

'Are there any plans for this Farid to become a dad?' I ask the website via email.

A day or two later the reply bounces back. 'There may be.'

They're a cagey lot, breeders, particularly of the more marginal dog types. 'Who's asking?' That's the first thing they want to know. 'Are you thinking of getting into the breed and winning certificates in shows, *certificates that belong to me*? Or, worse, are you an agent for a rival, some scoundrel who is *already* in the breed and who is trying to pull a fast one.'

That's what they're thinking. Or at least, that's what I think they're thinking.

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We drive a hundred miles to where Farid lives, to meet him and Karen. I go along wearing my most innocent demeanour, I am just a regular punter looking for a pup, that's all. We are greeted warmly, with a complete absence of any of the suspicions that I have invented. There are five or six Salukis at the house, and really, it is they who interview us. 'Are you fit people to own a dog from our noble lineage?' This is what their expressions say. If they were feline, rather than canine, they would be the Aristocats. At some point

during this interview, Farid climbs up and sits next to Trezza on a sofa. While we are drinking tea and being given smoked salmon sandwiches and talking with Karen, Farid secretly removes the scrunchy from Trezza's hair using the 'stealthy teeth' method. We are won over. A couple of weeks later we return, this time with Ollie accompanying us. The plan is for Farid and Ollie to go out for a walk. I feel I have to apply this test, because, though he generally likes other running dogs, there *are* exceptions, and I want to make sure that Farid is not one of these. He is not. In fact, Ollie bosses him about a bit, which is perfect; I want him to be slightly dominant: I can't have a kid coming into the house and usurping him because that would have catastrophic consequences for the delicate Ollie psyche. Now, I feel that I have carried out as many safeguards as I can think of without applying a proper measure of common sense and abandoning the idea altogether.

'Yes,' I say on the phone a few days later. 'Yes: we would like a pup from the noble lineage of Farid.'

So here we are… leaning over the whelping box, looking at the litter of six, wondering which one to choose. Half the decision is made for us: three are bitches, and they are already spoken for. Of the dogs,

two are a more traditional black with cream highlights (similar to Doberman markings), the remaining one is a grey like Farid.

He is a 'silver grizzle', says Karen, giving me the technical term.

He is a greedy little silver grizzle too; he is going for the Suckler of the Week Award, and he is definitely going to win it. He is also the one we fancy. Can we have him?

As it turns out, we can. The bitches are all black and cream too. Our boy is the exceptional one, colour wise. I feel quite elated. Trust me, breeders have it all planned out in advance, and I can only assume that it is because we were on the scene so early – before Farid had even got intimate with Tareefa – that we have been honoured by being allowed to purchase, for a healthy fee, the dog that we actually want.

We make a return to see 'Ghali' (his 'kennel name') who we have by now decided will be known as Dylan (I *cannot* stand in the park shouting, 'Ghali! Come here you little sod!'). We have named him after Bob. This will turn out to be a prescient and appropriate choice when you hear his wide range, and variety, of tuneless singing. The litter are six-week-olds at this penultimate

visit. I sit on the floor of Karen's kitchen while each of them comes along to bite my fingers and let out a little warm piss into my lap, so that they can remember where I am, for next time. Their teeth are like needles; I note that Tareefa will pick any of them up in her mouth and launch them out of the way if their suckling becomes too enthusiastic. You can hardly blame her. I note also that Dylan's belly is covered in pinprick marks from sibling teeth, as well as a plentiful number of scratches (as indeed are all of their bellies). They are certainly keen on a bit of rough and tumble. This can only stand him in good stead for the future.

We visit Karen for the final time. They are twelve weeks now. Dylan has been washed and shampooed. He looks and smells lovely as he sits on a towel on the kitchen floor waiting; for what, he cannot know. His siblings are behind a wrought iron gate in the utility room, some asleep, some keeping watch. Dylan trembles slightly and looks very lost and lonely. He is the first one to be separated, and for a moment I think it's cruel, that we should just leave him there to live with his family. But then I have the counter thoughts: this is a family that is going to be broken up imminently in any event, and a pack of dogs left to mature would

surely just fight each other all day long until only the pack leader is left alive. We are not being cruel, we are being kind!

Trezza sits Dylan on her lap in the back of our battered estate. Karen turns away with a tear in her eye as I wheel the car round and take to the road on the way to introduce the pup to his new life in Norwich. He looks very nervous, and as if to demonstrate that this is not just an act – that, in fact, he really *is* very nervous – he projectile vomits a couple of times somewhere around Thetford Forest.

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Ollie, who increasingly models himself on Howard Hughes, lives alone in a penthouse flat, in his basket in Trezza's office. He never stirs when the postman rings the bell, or when the door opens, or when visitors arrive. It's no different when his owners return home, and it's no different now.

'Ollie!' we call. 'Come see who we've got!'

It's a bit of an imposition, but he manages to tiptoe to the top of the stairs. Dylan is in my arms at the foot of the flight. Ollie pauses. You're joking aren't you, he

seems to say, as he turns on his heel and goes back to his bed. He is certainly not going to dignify this unseemly turn of events by coming down for a closer inspection.

'That was your big brother,' I say to Dylan. 'He's a bit weird.'



Dylan as a pup: 'I would never pee on this rug very often.'