

Pets

When I mention pets to my foreign students, particularly Southeast Asians, I get blank stares and need to explain at some length. Their culture does not recognize the role of pets in people's lives. But the mention of the word to most Americans gets an immediate reaction. Even persons who have never had a pet recognize the important role of pets in our culture. Frequently one especially loved dog or cat comes to mind, but sometimes more than one pet name vies for attention. In my case, the names are Beans, Ironlung, and Snoopy.

Beans was a feisty Boston terrier, an outdoor dog when I was a small child. I think the name arose when he first came to us as a tiny puppy, a scant handful that reminded Daddy of "a mess of beans." Apparently, no one felt the need to search further for a name. He grew, but his breed kept him small. Perhaps because he was an outdoor dog, he never became a close friend of any of us children. He was fun to race around the yard and to throw things to. He had an intelligent face, with his alert little ears and his distinctive black and white markings. His tail is what I remember best: it was hardly long enough to be honored with that designation; what he had was bent several times to a kind of tortured screw. Daddy nearly always referred to him as a Boston "screw tail." I have few memories beyond those. I don't even remember what happened to him.

Ironlung was a stray kitten, a tiny tiger with a strange green cast to her coat but a voice that commanded attention. She adopted us during a serious polio epidemic. By some sort of association, we decided that her vocal power reminded us of the iron lungs we read so much about in the polio epidemic. The name, awkward as it sounded, stuck. Soon after she had reached her maximum growth, we moved. In the confusion, Ironlung was left behind. Martha and I struck out on foot to cover the two miles to our old house on Morningside, rescued Ironlung, and walked her back to her new home. She was not happy in the new location. When the new owners of her former home asked if they might keep her, we reluctantly agreed. The decision really was made for us. She had no intention of living on Belmont Street. Morningside was her home.

No other pet made its appearance until we had two young children who campaigned for a dog. Paul's allergies made the wisdom of a dog doubtful, but we agreed to try a short-haired breed. A dachshund was the unanimous choice of the boys and their parents. We began the search for the right pet, and the exact right one appeared while Paul was out of town for several days. He was an eight-month-old miniature male, already named Snoopy. The boys and I liked the playful, friendly dog but agreed that Snoopy's residence in our house was dependent upon Paul's favorable non-allergic reaction to him.

First, we took him to our friend, a veterinarian, who declared him a really fine prospect for a pet. In fact, he urged us to complete his registration with the American Kennel Club and allow him to be listed for breeding. Then we went to a pet store for a collar and leash. The day being moderately warm, we left the puppy in the car with two windows lowered a couple of inches for ventilation. Returning with the leash and some food, we found him

wagging his tail enthusiastically beside the car. We were appalled at the very real possibility of having lost him so soon after we had found him. At home the ecstatic boys and puppy quickly got acquainted. The love was mutual from the first. But what was going to happen when Daddy came home? I'm sure that thirty years afterward they still remember their anxiety. Two days later, George and Roland found their happy reunion with their father somewhat dampened by the possibility of an adverse reaction to the hopeful new member of the family. Two more days went by with no sneezes, no sniffles, and it was obvious that Paul was as happy about Snoopy as the rest of us were.

There followed nineteen years of growing up with Snoopy with many adventures along the line. The stories are endless, but a few stand out:

Snoopy developed an insatiable appetite for the light blankets on the boys' beds, always consuming the lower reaches where the holes were not discovered until well after the damage was done. We were usually alerted to his misdeed by finding strange piles of damp orange lint in the floor. Eventually, I took the two mangled blankets, cut away the ragged parts, and made one whole blanket of the two surviving parts, making a blanket the boys vied for. Mysteriously, Snoopy's desire for fuzzy orange and white checked blankets was satisfied and the patched-together blanket survived for a later incarnation.



We initially made several rules for Snoopy's behavior, for example: no lying on sofas and upholstered chairs and no sharing the bed with a boy. We abandoned the first one when it became obvious that every member of the family enjoyed sitting and stroking his silky ears. The bed sharing crashed too when George persuaded the not-reluctant dog to sleep with him. Roland was jealous but couldn't seem to capture a sleeping companion for himself. Snoopy occupied more and more of the bed, snuggling closer to George, forcing him to move over until finally George found himself repeatedly ootched out of bed onto the floor. To solve the problem, he simply closed his bedroom door when he went to bed. Roland joyously welcomed Snoopy into his bed. But very quickly, he too found himself on the floor, with the result that he also closed his door firmly at night. By this time, Snoopy thought a cozy bed was his birthright at night and he found his way into Paul's and Mary Frances' bed. We immediately copied the strategies of the boys. Our door shut him out, but not his indignant complaints. So, he got his own bed, which was moved at night into one or another of the bedrooms. This custom continued the rest of his life.

Moving from Dallas to Richmond was as traumatic to Snoopy as the former move had been to Ironlung, but because he was fonder of the people than the place and the distance was more formidable, he learned to like his new home. He soon accommodated to living on two floors instead of one. Every night at 10:30 he would leave the family room for the foot of the stairs, look back at the inhabitants, and finally decide with some disgust that he might as well ascend to his bed without company. He entered his bed, circled the old patched, fuzzy, orange and white blanket, tossed his head a couple of times to cover himself, and settled down for the night. The blanket, incidentally, was later replaced by an afghan. I had begun crocheting the afghan for Paul, but Snoopy, who liked to sit in my lap in the evening, decided that the afghan was what he'd always wanted. When Paul used it to cover his cold feet, Snoop moved in and contested its new location. In a short while the afghan belonged entirely to him. The afghan then replaced the tattered blanket in his bed. He could cover himself as efficiently with the afghan as he had been able to do with the blanket.



In no time at all the boys grew up, went off to school, established their own homes and separate lives. Snoopy continued contentedly with two members of the family instead of four. As he aged, he became more of a care. We would hurry home from school to walk and feed him before continuing with our evening activities. Finally, his nineteen years became too much for his frail body, and we no longer had to rush home to walk him. We discovered then that parents are not liberated when the children leave home but they are truly free only when the dog dies. We missed him and still do fifteen years later, but we have no desire to surrender our freedom to another pet as long as we enjoy leaving town for the weekend or a week or two.