

barking mad: a love story

Sparkles was ill-mannered, maddening, neurotic and destructive. In other words, terribly human.

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The black Labrador is grinding her shoulder against the walls of the grey concrete cell, taking advantage of the rough surface to enjoy a good scratch.

“Sparkles!” I say. A look of surprise brightens her grizzled face. “Yes, that’s her,” I tell the city dog pound employee.

“We have paperwork to do,” the woman responds firmly.

The night before, while I was heaving my 11-year-old son’s bag of hockey gear through the door, Sparkles dashed outside and disappeared into a dreary Vancouver downpour. One hour later, drenched and worried, I returned from looking for her. Alexander was in tears. “What made her take

off like that? She was offended by the smell of the hockey bag?”

“You allowed your dog to run at large,” the woman at the pound announces.

“I didn’t allow her to run at large,” I protest.

“That is a \$150 fine and \$35 for a licence, bringing your total to \$185,” she says.

Sprung from the hoosegow, my convict prances on tippy-paws out to the car. I add this latest \$185 hit to the tally, which so far includes \$110 for each bag of dog food (Sparkles is on a special seafood diet for allergies), \$1,100 for boarding when I had to leave the country for work and \$450 to treat a cough at the vet’s. >

The financial – and emotional – upheaval started four years ago when, against all instinct and common sense (I am a single parent), I succumbed to Alex’s pleading for a dog. “I’ll walk it every day, and feed it too!”

“Come rain, shine, hockey practice or ‘The Simpsons?’”

Pause. “Yes, I PROMISE!”

Labrador retrievers have a reputation for being smart and child-friendly dogs, so I began a two-year search for one. Then, one summer day, I was at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) when a black dog jumped up in her cage and began wagging her tail like a flag of truce. I was smitten.

She vaguely resembled a Labrador, but was sickly, with infected skin and ears, and a suppurating head wound. She was so thin that the skin caved in between each rib. Alex, who, at nine, was one year younger than the dog, thought she was beautiful and named her Sparkles. “Can’t we name her, uh, Sparky?” I asked,

trying to find the sparkle in this gaunt, red-eyed, flaky-skinned dog that snarled and snapped at the SPCA veterinarian.

“No, it’s Sparkles,” he insisted.

Sparkles was given medication for her ears, which discharged black ooze, and antibiotics for a raging case of kennel cough. She needed to be housebroken and, worse, she suffered from separation anxiety, a psychosis that manifests as dire panic when left alone. She would race around the dining room and living room, shredding curtains, leaping on the couch and chairs, chewing pillows and gnawing on baseboards. She ripped up the carpet and underlay. She pulled toilet paper down the hallway like parade bunting. Due to a long period of starvation, she was an indiscriminating and prodigious eater. If she smelled something that had been thrown away in the bushes, she’d lunge for it with a force that often flung the person walking her to the ground.

One night, Sparkles leaped into the middle of the road and gulped down an empty pizza box that was dissolving in the rain. Another time, she ate a kilogram of birdseed. She also consumed an entire box of homemade Christmas goodies hidden high in a cupboard. And she launched herself at a little girl eating an ice-cream cone, inhaling the treat in midair.

The consequences of such intestinal insult were dire. The following morning would see Sparkles, spine hunched, with a curve of diarrhea shooting out of her butt. I would try to keep her on the lawns during our walk, but at some point we always had to cross the sidewalk and road. To the many employees of the nearby Vancouver General Hospital who

stepped in this disgusting matter as they walked to work, this is my apology – and confession.

I began to hate Sparkles, dreading whatever fresh disaster awaited me when I returned home from work or shopping. I dreamed of a home renovation. I fantasized about giving her back to the SPCA.

Then, one day, I overheard Alex as he played with Sparkles. “I’m the luckiest boy in the world. I love you; you’re my best friend.”

Those words were Sparkles’ 11th-hour reprieve.

One unseasonably cold day in Vancouver, while portly snowflakes drifted down from the iron-grey sky, I joined a solitary dog owner throwing balls for her chocolate Labrador retriever at an off-leash field. She looked at Sparkles quizzically and asked if I had gotten her from the SPCA last summer.

I answered in the affirmative and she said, “I recognize her.” The woman explained that she and her husband had rescued Sparkles from a basement-suite marijuana grow-op. Sparkles was the guard dog, her deep-chested roar superior to any alarm system. The pot grower would come once or twice a week to feed Sparkles, and sometimes would let her into the backyard for exercise. On one of these occasions, the woman and her husband nabbed Sparkles and spirited her off to the SPCA.

I came home and told Alexander the story, and we hugged Sparkles and kissed her grey muzzle. And I apologized to Sparkles for thinking about getting rid of her, for yelling at her when she chewed the baseboards and for not trying harder to understand or imagine the suffering behind her behaviour.

We have had Sparkles for four years. She is 14, slender, glossy and full of joie de vivre. She has learned numerous tricks, and indulges Alexander’s demand to do at least four sits or shake-a-paws to earn a treat. Meanwhile, Sparkles and I have achieved a mutual understanding: She will only strew garbage about if I am stupid enough to leave it under the sink. And she chews the new baseboards, but only a bit, and the teeth marks are easily covered up with paint.

What Sparkles has destroyed is nothing in comparison to what she has given. It has been a daily lesson to Alexander that love and relationships are not easy. He has learned, in a world of omnipresent consumerism, that spending money on a living thing is more important than a topped-up bank account. Alexander has also learned that, no matter how imperfect or annoying another creature is, she is still lovable. Sparkles makes mistakes. She makes messes. She can be embarrassing, but she is never, ever unworthy of being loved. And, somehow, that makes her terribly human.

Such lessons can be learned only one way: by cultivating tolerance when the easier path – giving up – beckons. Adopting this ill-mannered, diseased dog from the SPCA was hands down the greatest gift I will ever give Alexander. Undertaking such a challenge will make him a better man, a better partner and a better person.

Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to buy some shampoo to get rid of the fleas Sparkles brought home from her last visit to the pound. Oh, and take her for a walk. Alexander is busy watching “The Simpsons.” **hm**

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