

## GROWING UP WITH FUR

you. This applied to everything from moving furniture to rewiring your house to rescuing animals.

The bedraggled little poodle sat squarely at my feet, awaiting his fate and panting nervously when our bossy tabby, Tigger, strutted towards him sideways, hair follicles plugged up in attack mode. The hairless, scruffy dog who I later named Sampson when no one responded to our *Found—Bald Dog* signs, was fifteen pounds tops, fragile and mild-mannered. He wasn't the first dog I'd brought home, not even the first bald one, and yet there was something special about him and his soft spirit. He belonged with us. And that was that. A resigned hush was my mom's final response, so I knew I could keep him. Cat or dog, rat or hamster, it didn't matter. Each hard-won victory ended up in the bathtub, my way of celebrating.

I hoisted Sampson into the warm water, streams running between his ribs, sheets of soothing soap frothing down his legs and gathering at his feet. He blinked two or three times as I knelt beside him. Looking back, I probably appeared equally pitiful: a scrawny girl who barely dragged a brush through her long, thick hair. But I groomed the animals as though they were royalty. I wore an old dungaree apron and filled the pockets with the essentials: a pair of nail trimmers, a rusty flea comb and a few elongated cotton-tipped ear swabs. By the end of the bath, I was as wet as my patient.

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Sampson looked up at me, curious about all the attention. I plucked smatterings of black discharge from the corners of his eyes, checked his ears for mites and combed over his rump, looking for signs of fleas. I investigated every nook and cranny, leaning over my subject until my back ached. I didn't want even one parasite to escape, lest my mother put the kibosh on my new dog.

This ritual with my newfound strays commonly resulted in bruises on my knees, scratches on my arms and water running down my apron and splattering in my face. After grooming, I'd admire the combed-out new addition to our household as you would a flower garden after a day of weeding. But this particular poodle's bath only served to uncover additional red blotches, making my new dog appear even more tattered, with no remaining dirt to hide the evidence.

As I towed him off, I looked past his pustules to the possible champion that might emerge from this unwanted pooch. He might become a prized cancer-sniffer and save hundreds of people. We'd convince Westminster to start a mutt class. Then, we'd win every show. Despite the scattered, patchy tufts of fur, I imagined a valuable variety of poodle, the type a rich lady might tuck under her arm on the way to the hairdresser.

Other thirteen-year-old girls didn't understand. While it seemed perfectly normal for me to spend a lunch hour reaching into a dumpster to pluck out a feral kitten that would show its

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appreciation by scratching my arm and expressing its anal glands onto my shirt, girls at school were more apt to primp their hair in front of the mirror. While they spent the weekend trolling the mall for boys, I worked at a local stable in exchange for riding lessons. I cleaned stalls, swept aisles and scrubbed buckets, happily picking stones from hooves, probing for signs of thrush and cultivating a lifelong addiction to the smell of horses.

As long as they came from an animal and not a person, bodily excretions from any orifice were handled like a cluster of crumbs from a morning muffin. Yes, you needed to wipe them off, but there was no hurry. A smear of blood on my shirt from my cat's infected tooth was a badge of honor, as was the small patch of diarrhea on my pant leg from a nervous rat. It was nothing to get worked up over.

Fighting my animal-rescuing tendencies was a losing battle and my mom knew it. I was already on my life's path—first as a horse trainer and then, later, as a holistic veterinarian. My family might have preferred that I end up like my brother, Neil, who would become fluent in German prior to working on the Human Proteome Project. But instead, I fought for my rescued band of misfits: Tigger, our brown tabby; Cirrus, a long-haired white cat; Dolly Madison, an elegant black cat; Shadow, a Siamese the neighbors could hear howl at feeding time; Julietta, a basset mix who would follow me up ladders and down slides; and Rufus

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Aspirilla, a suicidal but ironically long-lived teddy bear hamster. It was here that most people became bored with my list of animals, so I usually stopped before I got to the goldfish: Loretta, Dimples and Jill.

I found most of my dogs and cats under a random hedge or through a neighbor, but I collected my rodents at an unlikely hubbub of animal adoption—the dentist’s office—sometime before the numb lower lip and the nifty new toothbrush. Once, another kid’s mom threatened to return her two small rats to the pet store. “I told you we have too many animals,” she complained in the waiting room. Immediately, I felt a kinship with the girl. We were victims of a great adult conspiracy. The girl hid her face in her hands the way I did when the world seemed violent and unfair. That’s when I piped up.

“Hey, do your rats need a home?” I asked. My mother looked up from *The Economist* and lightly knocked me on the arm with the rolled-up magazine, the way we reprimanded a puppy for peeing in the house before clickers and high-pitched baby talk became the norm. I whispered back, “Come on, Mom, you can’t let some boa constrictor get those rats.”

“When you leave home someday, guess who gets stuck with all these critters?” Mom said. For as long as we could remember, Neil and I knew that, at age eighteen, she’d kick us out of the house and out of the country. She frequently lectured us about the merits of