

BEFORE WINSTON ...



One evening, the dog was suddenly there. It was not planned, or wanted, and I had never had a dog in my life before. I never stroked dogs, although I wasn't afraid of them: I just didn't notice them. I found dogs about as interesting as the cricket results or watching paint dry. I wasn't even bothered by the sight of dog poo on the grass verges. It was almost as if I had a sort of dog-blindness, in the same way that some people are unable to see certain colours or distinguish between different musical notes. I knew virtually nothing about the different breeds, and I hardly ever spoke to people out walking their dog – at least not about dogs. In the place where other people have a dog, I had a blank space.

When I was a child, I was bitten by a dog – as many other children are. The dog, a scruffy old black terrier, came running down a narrow track straight towards me and sank his teeth into my calf. It wasn't a big deal; the whole thing was quite perfunctory, almost as if pre-arranged. The dog wasn't looking for a fight, he just wanted a calf to bite and he found one; any other calf

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would have done just as well, so it wasn't an attack on me personally. Many people who have been bitten by a dog believe that they have been deliberately selected as a victim by this specific animal, and thereby singled out by the bite as future prey for other dogs, who will then launch brutal and bloodthirsty attacks on their arms and calves. Sometimes this even proves to be true, but I'll come to those stigmatized dog victims later ...

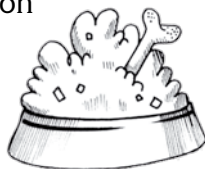
I didn't harbour any great resentment towards the terrier back then. The matter was sorted out by a tetanus injection, a bar of Toblerone, and some consoling words from my parents. In the years that followed, presumably, the terrier managed to replace the taste of my skinny kid's calf with other tastier, chunkier legs! So I can't say that a traumatic dog-bite experience caused me to have a lifelong fear of dogs, as is the case for many other declared dog-haters. A friend once told me about his childhood experience of a vicious dog. The events he related were certainly more dangerous than my meeting with the leg-obsessed terrier, and my friend was bitten severely on the face, sustaining injuries bad enough to worry anyone, let alone a child. Ever since, the anxiety and hatred caused by this event have resulted in his strong dislike of dogs.

A few years ago it happened that we were both in Beijing and went to a restaurant



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where dog meat was served, but on the quiet and only at the express wish of Western customers. On the spot, my friend absolutely insisted on ordering the dog meat. Because this meal took place in the pre-dog era of my life, I had a relatively neutral stance to the food. When the red meat was served, it looked good, but I didn't want to try any. With ever-increasing gratification, my friend ate the little red bits of meat, still containing dog bones and, when he had finished, announced his conclusive victory over the hostile canine world. He felt that he had got his own back. His fervour, negative as it was, both astonished and disconcerted me.



My relationship to dogs, as I have mentioned, was for many years – and in this respect they were carefree years – based on the principle of complete indifference. Every now and then, I looked out of the window early on a rainy morning and felt sorry for the owners, who, hastily washed and, probably still wearing their pyjamas, were guiding the pointless smell-searching of their poodles, who were encased in pathetic little dog raincoats, although I was less interested in the dogs than the fact that adult humans allowed themselves to be compelled into this kind of uniformity. Every morning they took the same route that the dog was used to: “Take the same route every morning that the dog is used to;” this statement, made by our dog trainer, is now one of my most important

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maxims, because the pleasant indifference to dogs, the era of inconsiderately fast walking whilst looking straight ahead, and my cluelessness about what happens in that busy little, knee-level world, and the constraints, laws and wondrous things it involves – that's all in the past now.

These days, I can give you an off-the-cuff explanation of dog agility; I know how clicker training works and can make mention of the benefits of dog dancing without looking in the slightest bit shifty. I always carry several little black plastic bags, and take my hat off to the freshness and originality of the Munich-based Human and Dog Forum's motto "Good will moves dog muck." In my trouser pockets, I always have little multi-coloured biscuit bones, and when I go shopping I pick up repulsive rubber chickens, chewy rings and little shoes made of tanned cowhide. It's all for the dog, because, these days, I belong to the five-and-a-half million-strong community of German dog owners. I pay 75 euros a year dog tax and have extended my third-party insurance to cover 'Pet/Dog.' I spend around two thousand euros a year on veterinary expenses, boarding kennels and training lessons, and that's not even counting the cost of dry food and the *Lekkerli* treats with their strange Swiss name.

My day is timetabled so that the dog gets as much exercise and mental stimulation as possible, as well as regular opportunities to empty his bowels. I know that I shouldn't stay

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away from the dog for longer than five hours at a time, because the dog's body just won't tolerate that. During the lunchbreak, I leave the office with my stomach rumbling and drive home to the dog. If I want to go away, I have to organize somewhere for the dog to be looked after.

Where is our minister for ensuring more dog day-care provision? How is anyone these days supposed to combine having a career and a dog? Strangely, in contrast to the issue of childcare, the answer to this problem is simple: you can take your dog everywhere with you, even to work, for example. Children have no business in the workplace, but dogs are tolerated. However, if I take my dog to the office, I can't get any work done because I am constantly preoccupied with the dog – as he is with me; when I am with the dog, he doesn't tolerate any activity that fails to place him and his interests centre stage, and so I leave him at home.

In spite of this, he is with me every minute, as I can't stop myself from imagining how he is sitting on the sofa and rearranging the cushions, or how, following a sudden flash of inspiration, he will run into the bedroom, drag the sheets off the bed and take them away because he thinks they would be better kept in the kitchen or the bathroom. Will the rug in the hallway still have fresh colours and be entirely intact when I return home, or will the dog have roughened up the fibres and rubbed the pungent extracts from his bone into the weave? Is the dog practising being calm, or is he barking as soon as someone walks

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along the hallway? Is he planning any major alterations in the apartment? When my phone rings in the office, just for a second, I think it's the dog calling. Sometimes it seems to me as if, for all these years, the canine world has just been waiting for me to pay it some attention. Because I didn't, the canine world took a drastic step, which meant that I didn't just get interested in said canine world but was completely drawn into it. Overnight, I became part of this crazy world, in which 'stay' no longer means having friends for an extended visit, and where the boundaries between human and animal become so blurred that there is doubt whether there are actually any differences between the species. A world, therefore, that you can leave only through death (the death of the dog, obviously).

You would, of course, be justified in asking – and I would probably ask myself – why someone who is really not interested in dogs at all can suddenly make a complete U-turn and follow a path which smells of wet fur, echoes with the sound of wild yapping and the shouts of a strange name, which initially sound friendly, then annoyed and finally desperate? With a suddenness that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, a powerhouse of a dog appears, running headlong, its tongue lolling out of its mouth like an ironic flag of friendliness, before finding its final target with a determined leap up to chest-level. The target is

