



Bodie

That first weekend, we weren't sure we were keeping him. It was a trial placement. As we drove the excited little terrier away from his foster-home—the two foster-dads waving fondly from their front step—he dashed frantically around our car's interior, clambering over everyone, scratching our legs, trying desperately to reach an open window—not to escape, it turned out, but so that he could experience head-on the full 45 MPH smash of wind in the face. In the

front passenger seat, the scruffy brown mutt perched on my husband's right thigh, curled his front paws over the lowered window, angled himself toward the side-mirror, and stretched out his torso and neck into the gale. The airstream peeled back the fur from his face, the lips from his teeth, and the unshorn bangs from his eyes until the wild-eyed dog with airborne ears looked like a demon flying beside the car.

At our house, the little demon—a knee-high wire-haired terrier mix (something like a Cairn, I thought, though the foster dads thought Yorkie), two or three years old—streaked up the hard-wood staircase and stumbled back down and flew back up and tripped back down. He flushed the two cats from their hiding places and chased them until they vaulted to furniture above his reach; he nosed the two elderly, bewildered dogs, where they lay curled together in a dog-bed; and then he ran upstairs and downstairs some more. He'd been captured by Southern Animal Rescue on a Wal-Mart parking lot, where he'd lived and foraged as a stray. Evidently neither the Wal-Mart parking lot nor the foster home had included stairs, for his interest in them was boundless. *I was down there! Now I am...wait for it...up here! Bark bark bark! Watch out—I'm coming down! Bark bark bark!*

He was enthusiastic about everything! He yapped at a peeved cat sitting on top of the piano and then pursued the other cat up the stairs lickety-split. He was getting good at stairs! The two elderly dogs, rousing themselves from

their autumnal haze, raised their heads and knitted their eyebrows with looks of concern. Theo, an 11-year-old miniature wire-haired dachshund, had pursued a lifetime career as first lieutenant to Franny, the stout freckled 13-year-old rat terrier. Now, imagining he needed to put a stop to these shenanigans (though Franny likely felt no such thing), Theo sprang into aggressive action and hurried to the bottom of the stairs where the new pup was playing Chutes & Ladders with himself. Canines bared, Theo tried to take a snarling bite out of the young terrier's leg on his next trip to the bottom. The new guy yelped and ran back up. A few of the humans suddenly couldn't remember why anyone had thought this was a good plan

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In the fall of 2012, we had five teenagers living at home (ages 15, 16, 17, 18, and 18), the two elderly dogs and the two amiable cats. Our 24-year-old son Lee—the third oldest of our nine children—had just been diagnosed, to everyone's astonishment, with a late Stage III colon cancer, so he had moved home, and his beautiful girlfriend Maya Selber flew down from Philadelphia to join us on the surreal Long March into cancer treatment. This made for seven young people, two middle-aged people, three frequently-visiting young adults, and four animals under one roof; there was also the deadline (for me) of a

book-contract, and the pressure (on both my husband and me) of trying to keep everything and everyone afloat emotionally and financially.

“Stay away from the internet,” the cancer-survivors among our friends warned us. “The projections, the statistics, won’t do you any good. They won’t apply to your son anyway.” Our son was a statistical outlier—a 24-year-old with a disease that typically appeared among people in late middle-age.

I had no trouble avoiding cancer websites! But I did have trouble working. It wasn’t just the demands of medical tests, consultations, and hospital visits, as Lee bravely and compliantly began chemotherapy, radiation, and daily self-injections—with two surgeries scheduled for the not-distant future. It was the fact that even if I found a free hour, I couldn’t think about anything else. And the fact that, as a family, we were sliding into a group depression.

Lee happens to be an ebullient, generous, playful fellow. He excels at *happiness* and at including everyone in the fun. From a young age, he has been our family camp counselor, holiday planner, and coach. He tells us when it’s time for touch football, when it’s time for Charades, and when it’s time to sit down and watch the Atlanta Braves on TV. He knows when we need to buy tickets and go to Turner Field instead. He knows when we need company (always), when it’s time to decorate the den for the start of the Falcons season, and when I must buy the Settlers of Catan Expansion Pack for Additional

Players. He knows when he and siblings need to go to late-night bowling. His professional life reflects his flair for play. He is a teacher and coach at a school for teens and young adults on the autism spectrum. Over the last few years, he has organized sports and games for Ethiopian orphans, for children hospitalized with heart defects, for teenage Sudanese and Eritrean refugees in Israel, and for destitute children in Haiti.

In the summer of 2012, Lee and Maya created a children’s recreation program in the town of Kenscoff, Haiti. When they returned, Lee, always slender, startled us because he’d lost over 20 pounds. He insisted he was fine! He’d lost weight from eating nothing but plantains all summer and from some kind of gastrointestinal bug. Everyone agreed it had to be an amoebic infection. Until it wasn’t.

The day the G.I. doc phoned with the definitive diagnosis of an enormous malignant tumor, I found Lee sitting in the dark in the living room. “How are you doing?” I asked.

“I just feel so...lucky,” he said.

“Explain?”

“If I were Haitian, I would die of this. If I were Ethiopian, I would die of this.”

That was his stance: gratitude—for family and friends, for Emory University Hospital, for Obamacare (which allowed him, at 24, to be carried by

my husband's law firm's insurance policy)—and humor. The day the surgeon estimated that the tumor must have been growing for a decade, we pondered the news over dinner. “Lee,” I said. “This means that middle school, high school, working in Ethiopia, gap year in Israel, college at Oberlin, college in Israel, working in Haiti, *everything* you have done, you have done with cancer. Now you're starting treatment. Sometime next year, you'll experience life without cancer for the first time since you were 13 or 14.”

“My Major League Baseball career! It's not too late!” he cried.

“Maybe you'll have musical or artistic gifts!” I said..

“I won't be the slowest of the six brothers anymore!” he yelled.

But Yosef, 15, our almost-six-foot-tall Ethiopian son, corrected him:

“No, Lee, you will still be the slowest.”

Lee established extra Fantasy Football Leagues so that far-flung siblings, cousins, and friends from Haifa, Jerusalem, San Francisco, Oberlin, Columbus, and Detroit could remain in daily touch without mentioning the one topic he didn't want to talk about. But, as chemotherapy and radiation took up more and more of his time, his energy flagged. Little by little he passed on pick-up football and front-yard soccer and driveway basketball. Then he began declining board games. Constantly obliged to fast or to follow a liquid diet, he stopped telling us when it was a good night for pizza, when we needed fresh bagels, and when he hoped I would make lasagna. Because five of his younger

siblings were adopted from Bulgaria and Ethiopia—and because the Ethiopian children in particular had experienced terrible loss, had been orphaned by disease, had lost siblings to disease—sorrow ran through our house. Behind closed bedroom doors at night, teenagers were crying.

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I began searching the internet for information. Not for information about colon cancer in 24-year-olds. For information about rescue dogs. It was pure fantasy to look at them and to imagine leading one away to a life of love and happiness, dogs and kids, fields and woods. Searching the shelter and rescue websites every day for an adoptable medium-sized dog became my great escape. Like Fantasy Football, it was Not Cancer.

In the animal world, there are few harder things to look at than photos of dogs behind bars, especially those at county shelters with significant kill-ratios. I don't know which are sadder: the lackluster eyes of dogs who have abandoned all hope, who sit with slumped shoulders gazing down at the cement; or the still-bright eyes of dogs who, with pricked ears and lifted eyebrows, believe someone is coming for them. Photos of dogs in foster homes pierced me, too, because the pups lolling across someone's lap in a backyard,

with wide-open smiles, clearly thought they had a family, while in fact they were still in limbo, their futures uncertain.

“Do you think we should get another dog?” I asked my husband one night in a high-pitched voice as if I were expressing a sudden passing thought.

And he, Don Samuel—the man who had agreed every step of the way about adding another child until we ended up with four by birth and five by adoption, and despite the fact that we were in the midst of a major medical emergency—said: “Yes.”

“Three dogs aren’t too many dogs?”

“Nope.”

“Franny and Theo nap most of the time now.”

“They do.”

“And they say dogs are a great consolation for people going through cancer treatment.”

“I’ve heard.”

“You know Maya never had a dog? This would be such an amazing experience for her, so much more fun than sitting in the chemo infusion room.”

“Definitely,” he said, wondering why I offered so many supporting arguments for an idea he’d instantly liked.

I returned to the internet the next morning with zest. I studied the names, genders, back-stories, estimated ages, and guessed-at breed-mixes of scores of dogs. I attended weekend pet-adoption events. But I came home only with pet food.

I didn't rush into a commitment because actually *bringing* home a dog would mean I'd have to give up my fantasy-life of *browsing* for a dog. I wasn't sure an actual dog would replace this vicarious escape.

Then I saw a picture of the little brown terrier. The photograph was blurry in the foreground—because he was pushing his trembly wet black nose



too close to the camera—and blurry in the rear—because his tail wagged so fast. He looked boyish, mischievous, something like *Lady and the Tramp's* Tramp. *There he is!* I thought.

Without thinking, I emailed the rescue group (from which we'd adopted our black-and-white kitty the previous summer) and said, "We're interested! Is he still available?"

I held my breath. How could someone so cute still be available sixty seconds after his photo went up?

He was still available!

"Do you want to go meet a dog?" I asked Lee.

"What??!! Really?" he cried. "Really?"

All the kids yelled: “Really? We’re getting another dog?!”

“I don’t know, I don’t know!” I said. “We’re just going to meet one.”

That Sunday at the foster home, the first thing I saw was a curious black nose busily poking here and there through the slats of the backyard fence. I recognized that nose! And here he came, tearing into the front yard, frisking through the grass to meet everyone.

It wasn’t love at first sight for me. For me it was more: *OK*. And something like: *He looks nicely-proportioned*.

It wasn’t love at first sight for anyone. “What do you think? What do you think?” we all asked one another.

“Let’s give him a try,” said Donny.

“Do you have a clue how he is with cats?” I asked.

“Take him home for a week,” said one of the foster-dads. “The rescue group knows your family. See how he does with your cats.”

So we led him into the car and he squashed over everybody trying to get his head out a window.

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He rampaged through the house all weekend. He sprinted into my bedroom, saw me reading on the bed, jumped up and bounced off the bed, and

tore out of the room. He was a steel ball in a pinball machine. We were the levers.

“Are we keeping him?” we asked one another.

“If we’re keeping him, he needs a name,” I said. I felt unsure. I felt: not in love. I felt: I can’t even fall in love with him if he doesn’t have a name. I felt suddenly aware of the work involved in assimilating a stray dog into the household. The two cats and the elderly dachshund had already signaled thumbs-down. The 12-year-old rat terrier, Franny, was fine with him, though; she had accepted his polite licks and gestures of youth and respect. But then Franny was a saint. I wasn’t. I thought: *Can I—should I—really take him on at this time?*

But he needed a home. We offered one.

God knows we needed an infusion of *joie de vivre*. He offered that.

“Let’s keep him,” I said.

“What are you thinking? Of course we’re keeping him!” my husband laughed.

Lee and Maya assumed the responsibility of choosing a name. By Monday night, the little fellow became Bodie. By Tuesday morning it was as if he’d always been Bodie. Maya touched him only gingerly at first—his rough fur felt greasy to her. (She’d grown up in one of those families in which a parent pretends to be allergic to dogs; she’d never gotten this close to a dog before).

She startled when Bodie nestled against her leg, or when he sat up and looked her straight in the eye, apparently asking for something. To be petted? She touched the top of his head gingerly with one finger and he settled back down with a groan of contentment. When Lee bathed Bodie for the first time, Maya stood back, taking pictures with her iPhone. She laughed at his slicked-down mournful look in the bathtub, screamed when he escaped and scattered water through the house, and marveled when his fur dried to a remarkable and colorful silkiness. (According to a doggie-DNA test, the foster-dads would prove to be right: there was no Cairn in him, but one parent was purebred Yorkshire Terrier). He wasn't a monochrome brown dog: he was streaked with hues of wood-brown, grey-brown, khaki, and gold, growing lighter as you moved from his back to his front as if he'd been held by the nose and dipped in chocolate-brown pigment which then ran off the length of him. The soft down on his narrow chest was champagne-colored.

He adapted easily to home-life, to family life. He was naturally house-trained; he was of the modest type, preferring to conceal himself behind a distant tree or bush for elimination. He made peace with Theo and the cats within the week. He waited for permission before jumping up on our beds: he sat and waited for a word or gesture. If you forgot to invite him up, he gave a few soft reminder-yips. He joined the teenagers on their soccer fields and stole the ball. His dog-manners were excellent. Somewhere I've read that stray dogs

are often the best socialized. He was instantly popular at dog-parks, glad-handing everyone, chatting everyone up. He could have run for office.



When Lee was laid up for hours or days, Bodie snuggled loyally with him. He laid his face across Lee's sleeping body with a melancholy look and refused to

leave the bed. When Lee felt a little better, he pulled himself together in order to take Bodie for a walk; through the months of intense treatment, Lee's walks were dedicated to Bodie's health and happiness, as if they had nothing to do with his own. He had major surgery in March 2013. On the fourth day after surgery, Lee was able to leave his hospital floor and ride the elevator down to a small park on the hospital grounds. We brought in Bodie to visit him. Such joy all around!

Maya fell head-over-heels in love with her silly pup. Watching her made me wonder if it was almost worthwhile to grow up without a dog so that, at 24, you could fall in love with your first one so boundlessly and breathtakingly.



Whatever he did became her little nicknames for him: "You little licker," she

cooed. “You little barker. You little muddy-face.” He was smart and eager to learn. She taught him to sit, to stay, to come, to shake, and to roll over.

Bodie was happy all the time. He trotted, smiled, and wiggled with happiness. He loved every person in our family. In parks, he ran so fast, with such freedom and joy, he nearly took flight. From the prick of his ears to the loft of his tail, Bodie had *Not Cancer* written all over him.

One night Lee announced: “We don’t think it’s possible to love anyone more than we love Bodie. Are you saying people love their children more than this?”

“Hmmm, probably,” I said.

“That’s not possible. Bodie is the cutest thing on earth,” he said.

I agreed completely! Bodie is the cutest thing on the planet! My very first instinct—my lightning-fast reaction when I first saw his photograph—had been accurate. How on earth could I have thought only, ‘He’s OK’ and ‘He’s proportional’ when I first met him? How was it possible, that first weekend, that we hadn’t realized we were in the presence of someone so adorable and so incredibly gifted and special? Love was absent then, so we couldn’t see clearly. Now that we’re in love, we understand that Bodie’s gifts are just like Lee’s. He lives to make friends, to have fun, to share his extraordinary sense of everyday joy.



Lee's cancer is in remission now, the 14 months of struggle, pain, and treatment nearly finished. He, Maya, and Bodie moved to their own apartment (situated *on* a dog-park and next-door to a park and jogging trail). Bodie visits our house every day and (when Lee and Maya are out late with friends) he sometimes sleeps over. Thanks to his doctors, family, friends, Maya, and Bodie, Lee feels that the past year—on balance—has been a great one.

<http://thebark.com/content/bodie>