

## A Dog of One's Own

By Anica Mrose Rissi May 25, 2015 6:55 am

Menagerie: Just between us species.

I'd come to this party to make out with the host, but his attentions were someplace blonder. So when I turned and saw the guy in the old leather jacket — his earnest dance moves, his hopeful smile — I smiled back and danced away. He followed.

We spun around each other, not touching, but weaving and dipping and twirling in sync, linked by our chemistry and intentions. Outkast spelled it out: "Don't want to meet your daddy, just want you in my Caddy."

A drunken friend came over to observe. "This is a beautiful thing," he declared. It was.

An hour later, as we walked toward Prospect Park and the possibility of a first kiss, Ethan told me about himself: his M.F.A. in poetry, the two high-school kids he tutored, and his dog, Goldie. The dog caught my interest. I pictured a big mutt with huge paws and a swishing tail — the kind that leans its full weight against your legs and looks up at you with loyal, soulful eyes. The kind that throws itself into the pond with a splash and shakes water all over you when it returns with the stick. The kind that's smart and well trained but still sometimes chooses mischief. The kind a boy I might fall in love with would have.

But. "What's the story of her name?" I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral. It seemed an unoriginal name for a poet to give his dog. I assumed he wasn't a good one.

His father had named her, Ethan explained. Goldie was initially his parents' dog but he'd taken her over when she'd proven too much for them. He'd rescued her, sort of. I liked that in him.

He had a dog. I love dogs. I would see him again.

We kissed.

Twenty-eight hours later, my phone rang. It was unspeakably early on a Sunday morning, but Ethan knew I'd be awake for the AIDS Walk. He was going too, he said, meeting up with his men's group. They were interested in service. Did I want a ride?

"You're driving to Central Park?" I said, thinking, *Men's group?* "Why not take the subway?" Because, he said, it was easier to drive there with Goldie along. I stopped worrying about the impracticalities of parking. If the dog was coming, I was in.

Ethan pulled up moments later in his father's Mercedes, a small, fluffy dog on his lap. My mind immediately placed it in quotes: a "dog."

"Hi, Goldie," I said, masking my surprise as I lowered myself into the passenger seat. Goldie shook the little nub where her tail should have been and wriggled onto my legs, splaying her Muppet paws. I stroked her long ears and pushed back the bangs that flopped into her eyes like Ethan's did. My disappointment receded. Goldie wasn't a real dog by my definition, but she was undeniably adorable.

We'd have to do something about that name, though.

It's dangerous territory to rechristen a boy's dog on the second date, so I treaded lightly, with a nickname close to the original. The name fit, and soon Ethan was calling her Goldstar as well. I gave Ethan a nickname too, one that was fond but dismissive — a reminder to myself and whomever I was talking to that this relationship wasn't meant to last.

"He's too pretty to be called Dogboy," my friend Andy said after meeting him. Ethan objected too — he thought he should be *Dogman* — but I laughed that off, even though he wasn't kidding.

I laughed or shrugged off a lot of things about Ethan that, had I been taking us seriously, might have caused me to walk away. Just as Goldstar had only a loose grasp on basic rules and commands — at over a year old, she wasn't fully house trained — Ethan's interpretations of social cues and situations frequently seemed off to me. He was often not on speaking terms with close friends and family members, over perceived slights and deep grudges. But like his dog, he had a good heart. They were sweet, these two. Affectionate and fun. And besides, I assured myself, it was just for the summer.

Summer stretched into fall, which cooled into winter, with the three of us still together. Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with dog and Dogboy both. Never mind that neither was the type I'd thought I would have chosen. Love can be surprising. Right?

I wanted to be someone for whom love conquers all, but I wasn't. The problems I could pinpoint seemed trivial at best, yet when I imagined us together several years down the line, my heart skipped with panic. I knew I still needed to end things. But breaking up with Ethan would mean losing Goldstar. When Dogboy begged, I stayed.

Our differences were a good thing, I told myself. We balanced each other out. I would try to be more of a romantic and maybe learn not to be so judgmental.

We moved in together, painting the kitchen walls green and the bathroom yellow, and stapling chicken wire around the deck to make sure it was dog-safe. We hosted elaborate dinner parties where he cooked and I baked; we traveled to Italy, Iceland, Mexico and Brazil, and cuddled and coddled our dog together. Good Enough for Now was proving to be good — so why did I sometimes want out?

Ethan wanted to get married. "The problem with us," he said, "is that you won't commit." I leaned my face against Goldstar's and worried he might be right. If I didn't want this relationship, why was I still in it? "Love," the most comfortable answer, was also the least.

I started working longer hours at my office. Looking at real estate listings online. Imagining what it might be like to return home to a new apartment with no boyfriend and no dog, no comfort of an "us." I signed a solo lease, threw up in the bathroom, and canceled the deposit. No relationship is perfect.

A childhood friend wrote me a letter. She'd been thinking a lot about commitment and love, and had a theory about what makes these things work. It was the Theory of Essential Acceptability.

*You might ask yourself if you accept Ethan, she wrote. I think you do not. You like him. You love him. But ultimately, he is not acceptable to you, essentially.* What makes a person fundamentally acceptable to another is difficult to delineate and impossible to change, she cautioned. Meaning: I couldn't talk myself into it, no matter how much I cared for him or his dog. *The funny thing is that some random guy, some inferior being, might come along and be acceptable before you know it, she added.* But I couldn't see it. Our lives were as matted as Goldstar's tangles. I didn't know how to cut my way out.

In the end, it wasn't some other guy who came along that I found more acceptable. It was another dog.

Walking Goldstar around the block one day, I passed an animal shelter adoption bus that was parked on our street. There in the window, I saw her. Her perked ears and alert eyes. Her unclipped tail, sleek coat, and long legs built to run. Her nose for trouble.

My heart immediately recognized her: This was my kind of dog.

Adopting another dog was a bad idea. A recipe for chaos, at best. But I signed the papers, leaving Ethan's name off them. As she'd been from the moment I saw her, Arugula Badidea was mine.

By then Ethan and I had spent almost five years crafting an "us," with Goldstar the unofficial mascot of our relationship. The introduction of Arugula caused a stark divide. Now Rooga and I were the "us" and Ethan and Goldstar were "them."

If I was walking both dogs and someone stopped to admire Goldstar, I was quick to disown her. "She's not mine," I'd say. "This one is." The small-dog person would eye my rambunctious hound with an "oh" and walk on.

"Roogie is the only dog in the park that notices the birds overhead," I reported after off-leash hours. "Goldie is smart too," Ethan replied. When the dogs squabbled in

our apartment, he tried to intervene: “Goldstar should get to be the alpha.” I refrained from rolling my eyes.

It was clear the four of us did not belong together. “This was a terrible mistake,” Ethan said. “We have to give her back.” But Rooga and I had other plans.

We unclipped the leash and shot free.

*Anica Mrose Rissi is the author of the children’s book “Anna, Banana, and the Friendship Split.”*

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and on Twitter, and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.*