



## 1. SURVIVAL OF THE CUTEST

*“The whole world reminds me of my dog  
My dog reminds me of the whole world.”*

Jane Siberry, *Everything Reminds Me of my Dog*

**I**n our second week at the rented cottage in Gaspé we set out on a July hike through the woods and up into the mountains, along a path that hid its memory of once having been a road beneath layers of grasses and shrubs. It might still be able to impersonate one well enough to fool a skidoo driver during the seven months Gaspésian winter. Rui was enthusiastically exploring all the strange smells he was picking up, so different from the Toronto scents he'd come to know in the last nine months, and he politely ignored Diana and me as we speculated about him.



We were musing over whether this urban dog could survive on his own, out here in the natural world, whether there was some ecological niche he could squeeze into if we both disappeared, perhaps suddenly sucked up by visiting aliens. I was dubious; neither his frozen reaction to a rabbit

crossing the trail, nor his panicked cowering when a grouse flew up in front of him gave any reason to hope he could compete with native coyotes, foxes, or bears whose prey he'd be after, or whose prey he might more likely be. It had been many generations since any of his ancestors, either poodle or Labrador retriever, had lived in the wild and taught hunting skills to their offspring. I was worried about his chances, and thought we'd somehow have to persuade the aliens to take him along.

Diana was smarter.

"He's learned to survive," she observed. "He'd just head back down this road, find some people, and be so charming and adorable they'd take him in."

I laughed; she was right, of course. Dogs survive in this dog-eat-dog world by appealing to humans and knowing how to fill our emotional needs. I suddenly flashed back to a survival course at Queen's University where I had taken my teacher training 35 years earlier. You had to survive a weekend in New York City after being dropped off with nothing but 25¢ in your pocket. One classmate coped by panhandling until he had enough money, then finding out from other street people where the cheap flophouses were, spending the night in one, panhandling some more for food the next day, and eventually getting through the forty-eight hours. Another classmate took his quarter and used it to phone Columbia University's Teacher's College. He explained where he was, told the story of how he came to be there, and after Columbia students came and picked him up, they partied all weekend.

Rui would survive in exactly that way, not by taking care of himself, but by finding people whom he could convince to take care of him. I was reassured; I hadn't felt at all certain about my abilities to meet the communication challenge of convincing the aliens they really wanted a ten month old puppy along.

Later that evening we were all back in the sitting room at the cottage. Diana was knitting a hat for her mother, Brenda, while I

tried to solve yet another New York Times crossword. Rui was playing with what was left of a bright yellow squeaky toy, after he'd gnawed off its legs, and killed its squeaker. It was really just a torn hollow rubber ball, but he would squeeze it in his jaws, then let it go, then squeeze it, then drop it, then pounce on it, then squeeze it again for hours. He'd held on to it through the entire walk that day, letting it go only to take a drink when he was crossing a stream. Unlike the kitchen water dish at which he usually drinks, the stream had a lively current which swept the squeaky toy away. Rui furiously chased it and caught it around the second bend. Perhaps he could catch mice in the wilderness, if they squeaked loudly enough and had their legs gnawed off.



That evening he was playing with it next to the mint-green couch I was on. Sometimes he'd bat it across the room and ferociously pursue it, or drop it in front of us so we'd toss it and he could pounce on it. He was absolutely focused on this game, the most en-

ticating part of which seemed to be chewing and batting at the toy while lying down next to the couch. There was a ruffled frill there that covered the six inch gap between the bottom of the upholstery and the floor. That meant the squeaky toy could easily roll under the couch, and it often did. Every time that happened, Rui would try to squirm his head under the couch, so we'd just see his rear end wriggling as he passionately tried to recover his Precious. Sometimes he'd succeed, but often he didn't, and he'd alternate trying to wiggle under the couch with staring mournfully at where the toy had last been seen, making little moaning sounds. Eventually Diana or I would take pity on his desperation, getting out the broom and batting the toy out where he could grab it. I was curious as to why he played with the squeaky next to the couch, the

only place in the house where he would keep losing it. Surely he was smart enough to understand that when it rolled under the couch he couldn't get at it, so why did he keep doing that over and over?

Suddenly the penny dropped. Of course he could get at it. He just had to look cute, and Diana or I would retrieve it for him. I remembered Roy, my long ago friend in the late 1960's when we were both at MIT. He was majoring in electrical engineering while I was studying psychology. We were working on modifying the standard issue telephone in my room, so it could connect to three separate phone systems rather than one, could flash silently rather than ring when I needed to sleep at unusual hours, could allow me to put calls on hold, and could patch different calls together. Roy had been teasing me electrical engineering was a more useful major than psychology because it had given him the skills to do those kinds of things, skills I didn't have. I thought about his point, and admitted those were indeed useful skills, but added perhaps psychology was the reason it was in my room that he had wound up using them.

I had been an undergraduate then, but Rui must be working on his graduate degree in owner psychology. Really, why does he need opposable thumbs as long as he can get us to use ours to give him exactly what he wants? I'd been superficially thinking of survival as a prey-predator competition for food. But besides physical needs, humans have emotional needs: to be loved, to give love, to be entertained, to be needed. New breeds like labradoodles are designed to fill those emotional needs, and they will survive and prosper in proportion to how well they do that. For the past nine months I'd been thinking we were training Rui so his behaviour would better fit our preferences, but at the same time he'd been training us just as assiduously to meet his. It was a sobering thought, particularly for a man who was lying on his stomach squirming to reach a yellow squeaky toy that lay just out of his reach under the couch.