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**Walks that change lives**

In the summer of 2012 Anchorage’s residents read about several ‘mystery deaths’ on the city’s elaborate trail system. The bodies of an older woman and those of a young couple had been discovered about 10min away from my new home, on a trail I made myself walk daily to break up the repetitiveness of transcribing the eighty hours of interviews I had collected during the year prior on a research-cation in Northern India. After completing all of the coursework for my MA in May, I moved from the hilly countryside in Belgium, where cows outnumbered humans, to urban Anchorage to live with then man I loved, Ryan. We temporarily moved into a small apartment that we shared with one of Ryan’s coworkers. I would get up early and spent my mornings transcribing interviews in our small bedroom-office with walls as grey as this particular summer’s skies, followed by an hour-long walk through the nearby park along the coast. The trail started behind our apartment building, meandered through the woods hosting birch trees, spruce trees, and homeless camps, and went all the way to an area where airplanes would fly so close above our heads that we could almost feel their draft on our faces. Tourists, locals, and moose frequented that trail throughout the summer, so I felt safe on my walks. Until I started reading the local paper regularly! The local news in Belgium typically highlighted uneventful and dysfunctional politics, sports, and latest farming technologies. A shoplifting report would have sent a wave of great concern through the community! I had lived in rural Belgium for ten years and the only deaths we had mourned during that time were that of an elderly neighbor and those of a couple of old cows. Perhaps an unfortunate barn cat that got hit by a car or a tractor. This summer’s local news in Anchorage was obsessed with reports of suspicious deaths. Anchorage had just suffered and had clearly not yet recovered from the works of its very own serial killer and subsequent homicides triggered symptoms of post-traumatic stress – each homicide was reported on in great detail and followed up on, an otherwise rare practice in mainstream media. Here, neither my busy writing schedule nor the effects of the local news encouraged me to delve into an active social life.

During this time, when I didn’t find the motivation or energy to be a ‘people person’, I learnt that I could perhaps be a ‘dog person’ instead. Growing up in a small apartment on the eleventh floor of a German concrete building and then travelling extensively, I didn’t have the chance or desire to take care of dogs. When I was younger I had observed older people following their little poodles and schnauzers around the block and collecting their poops in small plastic bags. They also often looked like their dogs. Taking care of dogs struck me as something that would keep seniors active and lonely people company. My life until that point had been too busy and engaged to make room for pets larger than parakeets or hamsters. But my move into a new world with limited social and academic responsibilities somehow inspired non-committal dog interactions. I woke up one morning with the clear vision of me volunteering at a local shelter. And since I don’t have clear visions about my life often, I decided to google local rescue groups and volunteer opportunities and to fill out applications. Have I just turned myself into that little old, plastic-bag carrying woman, shuffling behind a terrier or wiener doggy on their daily walks together?

It was fall when I took my first dog for a walk: during our volunteer orientation at the shelter I ended up alone in a room with the volunteer coordinator, a dog named Daisy, and the question ‘So, who wants to do their first volunteer dog walk?’. The room emptied quickly as people scurried out the door apologetically – perhaps characteristic of a group of new volunteers who like the idea of volunteering but aren’t ready to take on actual responsibility yet. Daisy’s wild, blue eyes that resembled the color of glacier ice and that contained an untamed obsession for freedom and snow locked on me and pierced through my desire to leave quickly. Her perky, pointy, and fluffy ears moved to catch even the subtlest and far-away sounds suggesting a life outside the confinements of the shelter that needed to be explored, and her neck fur was so soft that I wanted to forever bury my hands and face in it. While Daisy exhibited some flower-like gentleness, the name of an arctic wildflower – or a complex and diverse ecosystem of wildflowers – would have resembled her personality much better than the name of a girly Disney character or of a flower that teenage girls use to determine if a crush reciprocated their affection. She was loving, but not a predictable love story or an ever-happy character to cheer up kids. She was a three-year old husky who had come into our rescue through a program that partners with the abused women’s shelter*.* Women in abusive relationships were able to have their pets taken care of while they tried to break out of a seemingly endless cycle of violence and abuse. I learnt that the violence here wasn’t limited to the outside world, but also extended to families in their homes. The rates of domestic violence in Alaska were just as staggering as the number of annual homicides, and I was grateful to be able to assist victims unbeknownst to them. Pets oftentimes serve as an anchor for the abuser to keep the abused under their control, and providing a safe environment for such animals is one step towards uprooting those dynamics. Daisy, perhaps not unlike her Disney namesake, had provided hope and shelter for four toddlers and their mom who were now on their way to a better life, but unlike her Disney namesake she had clearly internalized some of their anxieties and had herself endured some of the abuse of neglect and prolonged confinement. While she was at the shelter waiting for her new family, shelter volunteers and boarding staff would walk her, feed her, yell at her for growling at ‘intruders’ (dogs), and occasionally put her under house arrest when she broke out of her metal kennel and closed windows in search of her people. Her stay at the boarding facility in a small, contained area was a nightmare, for her as much as for the boarding staff, and it became clear that her family might not be able to take her back. But how does one find a home for a dog with the heart of a tornado, at any moment capable of unstoppably and violently erupting and potentially destroying anything human-made? And how have I suddenly found myself on a mission to find a home for this dog?

Back to the walk. While I struggled to place the harness’ holes near the correct body parts of the dog, she knew the routine well: slip head through the small hole of the harness, lift left front leg and insert it through the large hole in the harness, get the no-pull leash clipped on the small ring at the chest, and rush out the back door. In the meantime, pant hard, buck like a horse, scoot butt across floor in eager anticipation of a ‘W’, and put on crazy eyes. I had never walked a dog in my life and now followed Daisy around the neighborhood. Straight out the door, make a right turn behind the trash bins, hurry through the ally, and definitely turn left at the lake – a right-turn would have taken us right back to the shelter, a left-turn ensured a lengthy route around the lake! She had been at the rescue for several months, so she knew the area well. She knew which trees to rest under and which turns to take to extend the time outside of her kennel. When I initially wanted to make that right-turn at the lake, she flopped over, growled, and showed me her teeth. I had no experience wrangling dogs and was entirely dependent on her decision making skills, so of course we turned left. I had to make sure that our power dynamics changed and had to learn quickly to project confidence and authority, which came as natural to me as following directions did for her - we both needed to up our game if there was ever going to be hope of a new home for her. During the next summer we would often extend our walks and take her hiking in the nearby mountains. While I loved hiking with Daisy and understood that any time outside her kennel was essential to her mental health, one of my goals was to find that perfect, active, and understanding person with a lifestyle that would allow her to thrive and burn off her tornado-energy in a safe environment. Wasn’t her family hiking up these mountains somewhere? And how had this mission turned into a self-help project where a dog suddenly mirrored all of my own insecurities and anxieties, and her success depended on mine?

During one of our walks in the mountains Daisy had found herself a family who was willing to adopt her. She had lived with them for about a year when they could no longer tolerate the various levels of destruction in their house and the constant anxiety the dog exhibited and projected unto them - What would be torn this time when we get home? Would she still be in her metal-wire kennel by noon? Would she again rub her nose and teeth so hard against the kennel that we need to take her to the pet ER, bleeding and mutilated? After adopting her, their lives had undergone more changes than they were ready to make. They wanted a hiking companion and friend, and got a Tasmanian devil they were hardly able to contain. So after a year of doggy therapy, multiple rounds of Prozac, and too many home repair bills, they gave up and returned her to the shelter. And this is how Daisy moved in with us. We knew that she couldn’t spend another year at the shelter, and that nobody was going to invite a tornado into their homes. We renamed her Tundra to help her transition into a new life, we patiently replaced multiple blinds and window screens that she destroyed during various break-outs, and we went through years of doggy therapy that taught us more about ourselves and our relationship dynamics than about Tundra. The homicides from 2012 were resolved: the media followed up on each of the victims’ story and we learnt that the couple’s death was the result of a domestic dispute, and that the older woman suffered a medical condition while walking on the trail and died of exposure to the elements. When I walk now, I feel safe again. Tundra is very friendly and social, and will run up to anyone she sees or hears in a mile’s radius. But she is also fiercely protective of us, and I know that if there were any signs of aggression towards me or Ryan, she’d unleash her inner tornado and wreak havoc. She became an inseparable part of our family, as the sweet and smart and stubborn little companion she was meant to be all along, and that I needed to settle into my new life. I do carry poops in little plastic bags now, and if I ever start to look like Tundra, it’ll be an upgrade!