

Rescuing Morgan

On the morning when we were supposed to pick up Sparky, I woke up with a nervous pain in my stomach. I didn't really believe it was going to happen. I was fearful if we showed up late, they would refuse to give us the dog. I insisted we leave early. We rushed out of our apartment in West Hollywood for the ten-mile drive to Culver City. It's a good thing we did because in our excitement we got lost. By the time we arrived at the meeting point, my nerves were frayed. To my relief, we pulled up exactly at 10:30.

A young plump woman in blue denim shorts led a small Golden out to us in the parking lot. She introduced herself as Donna, then waved her hand downward and pronounced, "And this is Sparky." Just as I mentioned how adorable he was, he jumped up and grabbed my arm with his mouth. His grip was startlingly strong and his sharp teeth dug into my skin and it hurt. He didn't let go easily. Rescuing my arm from Sparky's clutches required some twisting and cajoling.

Without any attempt to control him, Donna calmly told us, "He does that." Her casual manner and lack of apology were surprising to me, more so than the dog's grasp on my arm. This time I knelt down so he wouldn't jump again and said hello to Sparky. *This could be my next dog.* It was as close to love at first sight as possible. He looked as though he'd gained a little weight since we saw his photo on the rescue website, though his ribs still protruded. I ran my hand along his back and felt the bones of his spine and cringed. He was small for a one-year-old male. For Golden retrievers, big is not necessarily better; it's more difficult on their hind legs and it's harder on the owner's back when you have to lift them when they get older.

Donna handed me Sparky's leash and led us over to her SUV. When she opened the rear hatch Sparky immediately jumped in. There were milk crates filled with bags of dog food and toys. She counseled us how Sparky still ate too fast and suggested when we fed him - she paused in mid-sentence while she rubbed Sparky's head - that we might put a ball in his bowl to slow him down a bit. There was a hint of sadness in her voice as she told us that when we leave the house, to make sure we went first. We should make him sit and wait until we were out the door. She said he needed to learn this. The tenderness in her instructions for Sparky made me realize that giving him away to us was difficult for her.

Then another car pulled into the lot. There was an older Golden in the back seat. His fur had turned white around his eyes and nose. I was familiar with this look. Sparky dove out of the SUV and lunged at the car, barking aggressively. Clumsily I gripped the leash, somewhat stunned, and dragged him back close to me.

Again, without any attempt to correct him, Donna offhandedly told us, "Sparky has trouble with other dogs."

When I glanced at James, the smile on his face was gone, and he asked, "What's the dog's story?"

"Sparky was rescued from a shelter in South LA. His owner had turned him in for biting. That's all we know," Donna reported. She went on to say, "Sparky had been in rough shape when we got him; however, with some basic training and lots of love, he'll be a great dog."

This interaction was worrisome. Still, her statement resonated with me. I'm a love-will-conquer-all kind of guy. With enough love, Sparky would be friendly; with enough positive

reinforcement, he'd behave. Our ride home was slow and cautious so as not to upset the new passenger sitting behind us. I couldn't stop looking around at him and repeating, "He's our boy! He's our boy!"

Outside our apartment building Sparky stopped and refused to go up the two cement steps to the first landing. He stood on the sidewalk and actually recoiled from the staircase. His behavior confounded me, and I urged him to try but he refused to budge.

James stood at the top of the stairs holding the entrance door ajar and questioned, "Do you think he's afraid of the stairs?"

"I don't know. He's afraid to even come near them. He's not even curious." What young dog can't go up two steps? No matter how much I coaxed him, it was futile. Finally, I slipped my arms underneath him and lifted Sparky up to the wide landing. Then abruptly turning around, I ran back down to make a game out of it, in the hope of exciting him to overcome his reluctance, yet he wouldn't follow me.

To speed things along, I picked him up and carried him to the entrance landing. He excitedly ran past the opened glass security doors into the atrium, but then suddenly stopped again at the narrow stairwell which led up to our second-floor apartment.

Neither of us had any idea what his aversion might be, since no one had warned us. I patted the stairs in hope of encouraging him. It was possible that the rescue group didn't know about his fear. Something must have happened to Sparky and now it was up to us to help him overcome his trepidation.

Since we were making no progress, I carried him up the thirteen stairs. His papers said he only weighed 55 pounds. Some Golden Retrievers his age can weigh 65 pounds or more. Yet, those were just numbers in my head. Only after I lifted him and felt his rib cage, did I fully comprehend what Sparky must have endured.

After I placed him down gently, Sparky raced into the master bedroom and back out. He bolted into the bathroom and out. We watched him sniff each and every corner, and we wondered whether he could still smell Willy even after five months.

“Are we going to keep his name?” James asked.

“No, I don’t think so. Kermit, one of my neighbors at the Russian River, had a Dalmatian named Sparky, who was always running off. There wasn’t a day when I didn’t hear Kermit shouting from his deck in his Guatemalan accent, ‘Spar-kay! Spar-kay!’ It always made me laugh because he sounded exactly like the houseboy in *The Birdcage*.”

“What about Russell?” James suggested. We both repeated the name a few times and decided it was much too “button-down” for Sparky. We thought about a few other names and tried them out, but they didn’t fit. Then I suggested Morgan, after the spiced rum pirate, Captain Morgan. We both laughed and in unison exclaimed, “That’s it!”

James called out his name, “Morgan! Come on, Morgan!”

Of course Morgan didn’t respond. He dashed into James’ office and scampered out triumphantly with a sock dangling from his mouth. We tried to take it; however, he skedaddled away. We cornered him and played tug of war. It was a good sock so we didn’t want him to tear a

hole in it. He didn't give it up freely, so James pried open his mouth and pulled it out. It was clear Morgan needed toys so we headed off to Petco.

Getting Morgan down the stairs proved much simpler than going up. I knew that gravity would be our ally. To get off the landing, I placed his two front paws on the lower first step, then helped him down to the next one. From here, he slid down a few more and finally was on his way. At the bottom he galloped out the entrance door, blew past the outside stairs like a pro, down to the street. After this, Morgan's bathmophobia (fear of stairs) disappeared permanently. It was so strange, yet such a relief.

However, out on the sidewalk, things were tense. Morgan yanked on his leash, physically dragging me, as we made our way along Santa Monica Boulevard. I glanced at James, who was shaking his head in dismay. After several years together, you knew what certain gestures meant. He liked things calm and slow, without surprises. At the corner we crossed to the other side and strode along the tree-lined parkway into Beverly Hills at a fast pace, as Morgan strained onward. Eventually, my arm got tired from the battle, and I pleaded with James to take him for a while. He was amazed at how strong Morgan was, as he tried to restrain him from rushing down the sidewalk. When people with a Boxer came from the opposite direction, James handed me back the leash.

I grasped it firmly and we stood aside to let them pass. Morgan crouched and without any warning sprung towards the dog, barking ferociously. "No!" I shouted, yanking on the leash to hold him back. "Morgan, sit." Morgan didn't respond to my command. He continued to snarl and charged towards the huge dog. I gripped the leash with both hands to keep them from getting close. As the Boxer walked farther down the street, Morgan finally stopped growling. His breathing was heavy and his chest heaved in and out.

James scowled and uttered, “This cannot happen every time we walk by a dog.”

I agreed with him and didn’t like it either. Nevertheless, I explained, “This isn’t going to change instantly. It’s going to take some time.”

When we arrived at the Beverly Hills Petco, we were surprised to see the parking lot stacked with cages of dogs and cats of all sizes and ages available for adoption. There were no Golden Retrievers. It was sad to see so many animals needing homes and reminded us of why we had Morgan. To avoid an encounter we kept him moving. He dragged us right into the store.

I suggested we try a harness to help hold him back. I’d seen a lot of people use them and thought we should try one. James told me to get whatever I needed since I was the one who was going to be training him. Even though he was both of ours, with James now teaching screenwriting at USC, Morgan was going to be my responsibility. I’m the one he’d be with, day in and day out, and I was fine with that. Too many cooks in the kitchen kind of thing. However, if a problem came up, I could count on James to step forward, as he did years ago when Willy got sick on Cape Cod.

We kept Morgan away from other dogs as we wandered around the store, checking each aisle to see if it was dog-occupied before we advanced. All the employees wanted to meet Morgan and asked if they could give him treats. Other customers wanted to say hello and to pet him.

James joked, “Morgan has ‘moved on up’ from South LA to Beverly Hills in one day.” The staff laughed.

Morgan was going to attract people towards him just like Willy and Nicholas did, just as all Golden Retrievers do. Still, with Morgan, he was going to need lots of training before I could trust him around any dogs or people.

When we climbed into bed that night, Morgan leaped up onto the mattress and just as suddenly spun and leapt off. He sped out into the living room and rushed back into the bedroom, hurtling up onto the bed again and then shot off like a cannonball around the apartment.

In a bewildered tone, James asked, “What’s he doing?”

I didn’t have a clue. “Playing,” I suggested, as Morgan did it again and again. It was like watching the *Road Runner* cartoon. I expected to hear “Beep! Beep!”

For a puppy, this activity might have been cute, even this late at night. But Morgan was beyond puppy size. At the park, sure, sometimes a dog would zip around crazily for no apparent reason. I actually encouraged my dogs to do it by chasing them and making it a game, a great way for them to let off some energy. But bedtime, and indoors, was not the time for this. We really had no idea what was going on, yet we wanted him to stop.

Finally, I got his leash and tied him to the leg of the bed. At least now he couldn’t sprint around the apartment. In the dark, I heard a ripping sound. James moaned, “Now what?”

I turned on the light and there was an orange strip hanging from Morgan’s mouth. “He’s eating his blanket.”

James sat up and declared, “That dog is crazy!”