

The Naked Eye

Sustenance

BY WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

Relationships—even with four-legged, fur-bearing friends—change us in ways we can never imagine or anticipate.

Seven a.m. and pouring outside. Fred followed me back into the house after I let him out. Wet-furred and asleep on the rug beside me, he moves his legs slightly, like a not-quite-idle wind-up toy turned on its side. Scott says that when this happens, Fred's running in his dreams. I can't say if that's true, but I take his word for it because I have nothing to base my doubts upon. I've given up my doubts about Fred, along with my fear.

Fred doesn't know he's the first animal I've ever loved. It doesn't matter to him that he's changed my life, that because of him I have a wholly new respect for animals. And he certainly has no idea that he's the reason I stopped eating meat.

I'm one of the last people I'd ever have picked to become a vegetarian. I used to secretly resent non-meat-eaters for limiting the menu options when I had them over for dinner or making me feel guilty for ordering a hamburger. I was cynical toward animal-rights advocates—I even let one new friendship peter out because I couldn't imagine having enough in common with someone who refused to wear leather shoes.

My attitudes may have had to do with the fact that I grew up in a family without pets. For most of my life, my relationship with animals was reserved for teddy bears from my childhood and characters in *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The Wind in the Willows*. (I've always had a thing for fauna that wear waistcoats and have furnished homes in tree trunks.) When I was four, one of my sisters was bitten by a dog, and I rushed to the doctor with her and my mother. I have no memory of seeing my sis-

ter's wound; I'm not even sure I witnessed the accident. I remember little more than walking out of the doctor's office—my sister holding her bandaged arm in front of her as if it were about to explode. Even so, for years I had to remind myself that I wasn't the one who'd been attacked, and I've always regarded that day as the seed of my fear of dogs.



I had my own, more direct experiences with dogs as well. A St. Bernard roamed unleashed at the end of our street, part of a family we knew as "the Russians." If Ivar was out front when I passed by, I'd leap onto my brother's shoulders like a circus performer and he'd lug me up the hill to our house. Once, when I was in our front yard weeding the garden, a small dog appeared out of nowhere, sprang onto my back, and started frantically licking my head and face. I flailed as if attacked by a swarm of poisonous bees. For years, whenever I came upon a dog, I'd cower or run or clumsily back away, the animal invariably yelping and panting after me.

I was well into my twenties before I realized that not all dogs bark, relatively few of them bite, and their approach generally involves something more benign than being mauled. Then when I reached my thirties, all of a sudden men with dogs started catching my eye. I was drawn to something boy-like in their companionship with their pets. Of course, for most of my life, "boy" plus "dog" equaled "terror." My newfound attraction was, I think, a desire to refigure the equation, to capture a particular sweetness I'd missed.

Instead, the sweetness found me. More precisely, I met Scott; his sleepy eight-year-old basset-beagle, Fred, was simply part of the deal. When I let Scott into my life, I had no choice but to let Fred in, too. The surprise is that not only did I "let Fred in," but for the first time in my life I found myself loving an animal.

Fred was easy to love—quiet, slow-moving, nondemanding—the perfect starter dog for someone as inexperienced as I. At rest he was a veritable crescent moon of self-containment. Yet whenever I was more than touching distance away, his licorice-marble eyes would look at me and say: Ready for a petting anytime you are.

The first time I was alone overnight with him was a spring weekend when Scott was out of town. Ordinarily, when Fred was the third party in bed, I found his presence an annoyance. I'd endure the cramped arrangement, but wake up grumpy and sleep deprived. When it was just the two of us, though, there was plenty of room in bed and I took pleasure in him—his sighing, lip-

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Illustration by Tim Cook

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smacking, settling in on his own terms with no regard for my comfort, yet facilitating it all the same. Carelessness as heartfelt ministrations.

About a year later, I got into an argument with a friend about capital punishment. While I opposed it, he made exceptions, offering me the boilerplate challenge: What if someone had killed a loved one? I insisted my stance would be the same: Murder is murder.

"What about eating meat?" he said. "Or using animals for medical research?"

We'd had this argument before. We both ate meat, and as for lab animals, I thought we agreed that as long as the conditions were as humane as possible, finding cures for human ailments was justification enough. But he was goading me to verbalize the contradiction, so I fell back on the assertion I'd always relied on: Okay! If you have to make a choice, humans are more important than animals.

Yet for weeks afterward, a feeling nagged at me. I no longer believed my own words—the way you find yourself singing along to a song on the radio that you don't like anymore. I'd go over to Scott and Fred's house and find the two of them locked in a private face-to-face on the floor, Fred mutely taking in his caretaker's words of love, absorbing all those everyday, answerless questions about his well-being. Nearly a decade's worth of intimacy, devoid of self-consciousness or strain. Later the same evening, out of the corner of my eye, I'd glimpse a rubbery dog yawn. Fred would catch me looking, pause, lock eyes, then lay his head down on his bed. Taking some of me with him, leaving me with more than I had before.

How do you describe that moment of recognition that there's something to be valued, something of substance, in an animal's being?

In the summer of 1997, I came across a magazine essay—brilliant, argumentative, nearly strident in its passion—by the writer Joy Williams. At one point she evokes a dismissive

skeptic challenging a so-called "animal person": Does she really believe that animals have souls?

"Yes, I do. I do believe that," Williams imagines the advocate responding. "Their natures are their souls."

Some things seem too embarrassingly simple to state in words. Surely, we think, it's got to be more complicated than that. Their natures are their souls.

Nothing could have expressed more straightforwardly the fumbling sense that had been growing inside me like a crush that threatens to bloom into something bigger—and permanent.

If Fred was capable of expressing love, fear, curiosity, impatience, loneliness—all of which I had witnessed in his posture, his gaze, his step—who could say that other ani-

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mals, whether wild or captive, didn't? If the human soul was both our defining essence and the eternal shared by us all—indeed, if having a soul required nothing more of us than being human—couldn't the equivalent be said for animals?

For most of my life, anytime I saw photos of wide-eyed monkeys strapped into chairs, electrodes stuck to their skin like burrs, or pictures of overcrowded chicken coops, the birds' faces barely visible through masses of matted feathers, I'd recoil but also feel manipulated: They're going for my heartstrings and my wallet. Sure, this stuff happens, and it looks awful. But that's the world. What does it have to do with me?

Now it had to do with me. With strange and immediate clarity, I acknowledged something as unadorned as Fred's nature, and it felt impossible to separate it from that of any other animal. That's what I was responding to each time he looked at me. From that moment, buying and cooking meat felt nothing less than hypocritical. In short, I had to act

upon the disjunction between what I'd found without looking (the love of and for an animal) and what I'd taken for granted (that some animals deserve affection or reverence while others don't).

I know that plenty of people have pets and don't feel compelled to swear off meat; one doesn't logically lead to the other. But my own shift in awareness jarred me so profoundly that I had no choice but to respect it. The mind, that slow learner, is often one step behind the heart.

I don't expect to convert anyone, nor am I trying to. I ate meat for what will probably amount to half my life, so who am I to get sanctimonious? What's more, I'm not a perfect vegetarian. I've been known to eat meat if served it by others who don't know my preferences, and I'll order seafood if there aren't any meatless choices in a restaurant. I just try to be true to my beliefs: As far as my own diet is concerned, I'm not interested in contributing to the business of slaughter.

Not long after I stopped eating meat, Scott did as well. I've been giving Fred all the credit, but it was also because of Scott that my lifetime of detachment from animals ended. In his joyous, unguarded voice greeting Fred in the morning—"Hello, little boy!"—in his patience with me as I've come to walk in step with a creature who takes the world in slowly but whole, I've learned what I may be capable of. I'm glad I could return the favor by starting my feet on a road that Scott chose to follow.

The three of us live together now. Fred is twelve and has had several operations in the last year. He has trouble climbing the stairs, so sharing the bed with him is no longer an issue. Instead, he curls up on his own bed at night, still a crescent moon—shining more dimly, but shining all the same. As I say goodnight, I take his soft light in, nourishment I'd never have imagined would fill me up.

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