

The Dog's Tale

A Life in the Buda Hills

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In praise of The Dog's Tale

The 'person' who tells this story is a dog. A dog who (as he himself puts it) does not intend to give up his animal nature. Yet of course he understands human speech and is able – if not in speech, then certainly in writing, and entertaining writing it is! – to express his thoughts about the world. His world is an interesting one: it is the city of Budapest in Hungary, in central Europe, in the years right after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Rani Drew, in her animal guise, writes with attention, caring, and an easy-flowing style which will make this book a favourite with readers.

- Nádasdy Ádám, Poet & Translator (Hungary)

How does one summarize a narrative that conflates myth and history, fable and animal psychology, Magyar and Gypsy lore, to produce a multifaceted mosaic across which shimmer Confucian sages, ancient heroes from the Mahabharata, vivid wounds of the more recent Balkan wars, carnivals, picnics and canine mating rituals? Rani Drew directs her ensemble cast with the gentle wit and lightness of touch of a consummate puppeteer: her 'not so shaggy' dog's tale provokes without preaching.

- Jaysinh Birjepatil, Novelist (U.S.A.)

Few writers have risen to the challenge of asking the impossible question: What place do humans occupy in the canine imagination? It is this profound epistemological reversal that Rani Drew explores in a work that plaits Indian legend from the Mahabharata and the Buddhist Jatakas with Sufi myth and the modernist discourse of the RSPCA. The result is a rich hybrid that resists easy classification but achieves a difficult end – evoking empathy for a voice, a bark, that is radically 'other'.

- Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Poet & Critic (India)

This is our world through the eyes of a very special dog. The canine observer/narrator, unschooled as he seems to be, is a savvy purveyor of the human scene and an articulate critic of its pretensions and pettiness, codes and cruelties, though gracious enough to celebrate its acts of generosity, courage, and creativity. The wide-ranging novel, with its psychological and cultural insights, its reflections on the diversity and flux of modern Europe, and its interplay of Eastern and Western literary genres, emerges as an impressive tour de force.

- Riad Nourallah, Poet & Translator (UK)

Other works by the same author:

Around the World in Twelve Stories. (fiction)

Celestial Seductions. (poetry)

Cleopatra & Asia Calls. (plays)

Stories of All Ages. (fiction)

Asian Galaxy. (play)

Medea & Other Poems. (poetry)

Glimpses of the World: Stories, poems & letters from China

Chinese Women's Long March to Tiananmen. (play)

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To the desire for freedom in all living beings.



Introduction

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*In this ingenious novel, *The Dog's Tale*, Rani Drew, poet, playwright, university instructor, once again shows her commitment to values that should make this world a much better place than it is: friendship, respect, love, and, above all, a chance for everyone to have freedom of thought and movement.*

We read the autobiography of a foundling – one of the most salient narrative structures in the history of the novel – but this time the foundling is a dog who, in order to realize that he belongs to the wild, has to define himself against human characters, the young woman who finds him and her mother, who both lavish loving care on him. In his reluctant search for identity he acquires some understanding of most of our basic human affections, like love, hatred, anxiety, sense of loss, confinement and freedom.

Like the main hero, the novel is also a kind of a mongrel, a mixture of genres: tales, songs, plays, and puppet shows are inserted in the main body of the text as well as lively dialogues which come fully alive thanks to the neatly appropriate style and descriptions of places thoughtfully observed and sensitively rendered.

The story is set in Budapest. The author, who spent nine years in Hungary, has the flair to lovingly reconstruct the culture of a country that she learned to appreciate. Although the events are described through the eyes of a dog, the narrative has a leisurely tempo that allows room for a survey of the whole history of the country, at the same time convincingly re-creating the feel of life in Hungary in the 1990s.

Ágnes Péter,
Professor of English,
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

A Word First

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How did I, a dog, come to claim a place for myself in this comfortable home up in the Buda hills? A question that can be answered only by starting at the beginning. There is no life without birth, and although this house was not the place of my real birth, it became the place of my second. Since the story of my birth is a blank in my memory, I have to start with the story of my adoption as if it was the first, the beginning of all my stories. Call it a story within stories, but one which is necessary to tell. Yet even this one is not my story. It is a story about me told by my mistress - not only to me but to others as well. That's how all stories of childhood go. No one knows what it was like 'then'. We can only be revealed to ourselves by others. It's their memory that creates our childhood for us, which lies outside our perception. Yet we insist that our recollections are from our own memories. I am no exception to the general tendency and will tell the moment of my second birth, my adoption, as if nothing could be clearer in my mind than that event.

One fine morning, I found myself abandoned on a slope by the busy highway between Szentendre and Budapest. Not only do I not know who my parents were but I cannot even recall my previous owner, who left me to perish in a thicket by the roadside. I suppose I must have been a mere puppy. All I remember is that I woke up to a constant sound of whizzing and swishing of vehicles. Instinctively I felt I was in a forsaken state. Fear crept into my bones, and I shrivelled up to an even smaller size than the puppy months had accorded me. I have no idea how long I remained there without food or water. Nor how long after was it when I heard someone saying something to me, someone kneeling on the pavement above and making sweet sounds of encouragement to me to climb up the slope. Truly, I would not have lost a minute to obey the call, so compassionate was the face of the young woman, but I could hardly move my limbs from

weakness. Then I looked down the slope and knew that only danger and death awaited me at the bottom.

My survival instinct triumphed and I started to crawl up, bit by bit, what seemed like the summit of a mountain. The constant flow of sweet words were like a rope thrown at me to grab tight and heave my weak spirit up up up and more up and finally to the top. At my emergence from the abyss where fate had left me to perish, I was met with two outstretched arms and gathered up in a warm loving hug. I was out of the bush, out of the jaws of extinction.

After five years as I look back to that afternoon, I am certain that was the real moment of my birth. It was the preamble to a new life. A good home, two caring mistresses, and a house that looked up to the hills. In short, a life enviable by all standards, human and canine.

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THE FACT OF GENEALOGY

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In this country, people say 'what does a dog have to tell about its life?' Then they go into an ecstasy, 'O istenem, it's a wonderful life. This country is a haven for dogs,' they chorus, 'let all the dogs of the world come here to live: big and small, fierce and timid, wild and domesticated.' Others declare with even greater passion, 'We love every sort of dog. We are even called a dog culture. Every bit of our life is steeped in dog nuances: our language, our emotions, our neuroses and our fixations - all are rooted and fixed in dog responses.'

As a dog I listen to this passionate claim so often that I have almost come to believe in it myself. I am not exaggerating when I say that one single phrase of the Hungarian language can epitomise the national character of the Magyars. So, for example, when describing someone's predicament as 'kutya a baj', they mean to say (i) that the trouble is not real, but in the mind, and (ii) that having a family and home alone rules out the existence of any problems. Like its Magyar owner, the dog too has nothing to complain of. Now according to this view, I, a dog, should stop here and go no further as I have an excellent home presided over by the most charming mistress, live in the best part of Budapest, eat the best food and go for leisurely walks in the lovely woods just above our road. What need is there for an autobiography? This then could be the beginning and end of a dog's tale, making it the shortest story ever told.

The same people will go even further and say that animals cannot tell stories because they lack thinking and speaking faculties. The aesthetics of speech, they declare, are the prerogative of humans alone. Now I object to this claim and will expose its fallacy. But I will limit my defence to the dog community, since I consider other pets to be outside my discourse. Before I go into epistemological proofs of my assertion as a story teller, I must, true to all autobiographical modes, establish my genealogical

credentials first, since it is an important factor in one's social standing in this country. And though I am without the knowledge of my canine genealogy because I was found abandoned by the road side, even then I would say I am a Magyar breed - not a pedigree but a mongrel. I know I have no right to claim such racial roots, especially as I cannot back my statement with a clear hereditary descent. Moreover I cannot even prove my parental connection, let alone descent from dogs in King Mátyás' time, the beginnings of the Magyar nation.

I know I am on slippery ground here, and can easily be challenged by the vigilant pure breeds in this country, yet I won't retract a single syllable from my statement. I feel so strongly of this soil that I am prepared to take all risks. I may get branded by the experts with having only the blood of some minor breeds that were brought across the borders by immigrant communities who arrived in waves in the Carpathian basin; I may even be declared to descend from the wild canines of the Gypsies who forced their way into the homeland of the Magyars from the east. Well, let them say what they like about my descent. After all, I stand to lose nothing.

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A DECLARATION OF RIGHTS

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It is common knowledge that the origins of modern western philosophy stem from the time of the Renaissance. 'I think, therefore I am' became the foundation of European humanism. If you reverse this paradigm to 'I am, therefore I think', it becomes perfectly valid for all beings. Now don't get me wrong when I use the word 'humanism' for non-humans. I do not intend to give up my animal nature, but having lived in proximity with human beings, I'm afraid I have developed - for better or worse - a desire to articulate my perception of this world, in a non-animal way. This then establishes my claim to the two most important faculties that humans are privileged with: one, the ability to think, and two, to use speech to translate thoughts. In fact, I cannot be accused of hubris since there have been plenty of writings where animals think, speak and evaluate human actions. I am talking not only about the great tradition of fables, but also of stories where insects, birds and animals give an impartial view of difficult events in human life. What I am about to relate is certainly claiming something more far-reaching than humans assert about animals.

I have given much thought to the question of how closely dogs are related to humans. And I would say that compared with other animals, dogs are much humanised and hence could be considered their poor relations. Now the proof of that is a chance discovery I happened to make the other day. I was carrying my mistress's letter to her one morning, when my eye fell on the stamp. Believe it or not, it had the picture of a dog speaking, actually speaking, and not too happily either. Words were flying out of the dog's mouth, 'Do this, do that', it was grumbling, 'why don't you ask the cat?' That's it, I thought, that's what makes dogs a part of human society. Work! the work ethic. 'Thou shalt live by the sweat of your brow' was handed down to the first man, according to the Christian religion. Now tell me why does a cat not do things? If you look around, you'll find that among all the house pets, the dog is the most domesticated, and

happily so, I will add. And the funny little things called birds, they chirp and flutter around the house, dipping into water and grain provided for them in idyllic surroundings and in containers, but do they do anything for their patrons? No. Nothing whatsoever. Cat, it's the cat I begrudge most her luxurious living since she goes on her fours as I do, yet she goes scot-free from having any obligation whatsoever to her owners. Oh, yes, I know, I know I have called Cat a she, and you would accuse me of sexism, but is it my fault or society's which has passed on these macho attitudes to me? Cats are always regarded as she's whereas dogs always as he's. Hence, I can't be blamed for using the language so prevalent these days which I have to admit is sexist through and through. Now, she (I'm sorry I find it difficult to shake off my gender bias towards the feline species) - the cat - never involves herself in the household. She comes and goes wherever she likes, and whenever she likes. If you ask me she has no sense of obedience and loyalty, which is the first principle of the human family.

While I am at it I might as well air another grudge I have against this cat who seems to think she can share this terrace with me even though she does not belong to this household. Now, I wouldn't mind if she showed some gratitude and humility. On the contrary, she abuses the peace and quiet of my space. One thing I cherish outdoors is listening to birds, but does she respect that? No, she lies in wait for them, fixing her eyes on every hop and flutter of their downward movement as they come to pick bird-seed put out for them. But ill-fated is the one who is too slow to elude the vicious pounce of the stealthy killer. And it's always too late when I run to make her let go of the poor victim. By that time the creature is squeezed out of most life and left there to breathe its last. Oh, it's savage to kill birds! How tragic that these noble ariel dwellers, sky-goers or twice-born, as some cultures call them, fall prey to such a pernicious animal. Forgive me, cat-lovers, for my rant against cats, but unfortunately I have my reasons. If you witness the gruesome grisly hunting habits of this cat, as I do, you would understand my stand against the whole feline community.

Now to return to the people who boast of their dog culture and stand by the domestication of even wolfish canines, and think there would be nothing for me - a dog - to say about my life up here in the hills, they have a surprise coming to them. I have a lot to say, and that too not always about myself, but about what I see and hear around me.

The next thing for me to do is to establish my right to tell my story. Again, I can hear the same people say if I have all the worldly comforts of a Magyar home and have no problems, what stories could there be to tell? But I will prove that good stories are not made of personal well-being, they come from the life of others. Moreover, a comfortable life, such as a dog's, does not exclude observations of the forces that mould our perceptions. If we look closely, we will discover that the most assiduous human thinkers led rather comfortable lives, looked after by their devoted wives and patronised by the rich. Of course, there were also thinkers in whose cases this was not true, but by and large I would say my statement does hold about what makes one tell stories. I will show that this privilege applies not only to humans, but to animals also.

As I said above, the most important philosophical paradigm which proved the humanity of the homo sapiens was 'I think, therefore I am.' Now, nowhere does the statement specify the type, content and the range of the faculty that performs this function. And the assertion of being an organism in itself would develop and stretch the faculty of perception and hence of thought. This is how it happened with humans, and might with other beings too. You will witness in my autobiography that not only can I think but also analyse and oppose my own thoughts, and all this because 'I am, therefore I think'.

This may seem simplistic, even nonsensical to you, but to my mind the statement plumbs great wisdom. It widens the sphere of awareness to all beings. And with the increase of environmental concerns and animal rights, no living being's claim to knowledge can be invalidated, least of all mine which rests firmly on empirical observations.

The notion of labour too is considered special to humans only. Animals, it is claimed, exert themselves only when they need to. For the rest of the time, they enjoy the feel of living, luxuriating in their surroundings. Humans, on the other hand, claim they have a spiritualised notion of the body. To prove whether they are right or wrong in setting themselves apart from other organisms is not the point of my discourse here. I don't want to involve myself in the ethics of work, nor am I keen to come up on the side of the humans against animals. I am merely stating that the faculties of thinking and speaking are not the prerogative of humans alone.

I apologise for this digression from the dog-cat rivalry I was dwelling on earlier, given rise to by the stamp on the letter I carried. I am afraid some of the human limitations have rubbed off on me - the result of my long association with them. I cannot help making some typical differentiation between domestic pets, a Magyar tendency to make pedigree distinction among animals and people. Yes, back to my obsession about cats and dogs! Now, if you analyse the statement of the stamp which I spoke about above, it concludes that the dog is in the same category as the human, whereas a cat is not. Why not? you will ask. Because, I say, a cat does not involve herself in others' affairs. She remains aloof and detached from all things. She performs no function in the house. She does not guard the house against thieves and burglars, nor does she do any chores like carrying letters or wood logs for the fire, or fetch a ball, or clap, or ask for food and so on. She does not involve herself emotionally with happy or solemn occasions in the family. I think a cat is a sad case when it comes to thinking and speaking. Yes, yes, cat lovers may resent my claim, but they cannot disprove it. They may also assert that a cat has her own speech, i.e., she miaows, she arches her back, rubs her body against you and many other things, but here I am not talking about private speech. A speech is not speech if it is not understood by another. Now, in support of dogs, I can produce a human witness who claims that dogs speak a language that is clearly understood as a syntactical formulated string of words.

A little girl called Zsófi, who lives up on the next road above us, stops by my fence every morning on the way to her school. I make sure that I am there at the fixed hour, even if I have to disobey my mistress as I do not want to miss my usual chat with her. Don't ask me what we talk about. One can never reproduce what one talks to people. But we do and it can be anything under the sun. Once I heard her tell her mother,

'You know, Mummy, that dog tells the most interesting stories'- which I do as you will soon find out - but would her mother believe her?

No. 'Come on, Zsófi,' she said in an irritated tone, 'don't be silly, darling, dogs don't talk.' And pulled her daughter away from the gate.

'But this one does, Mummy. I can tell you some of the stories it has told me, shall I?'

'We'll miss the bus if you don't hurry,' the mother said, stepping up the pace.

Here was the truth then, straight 'out of the mouths of babes'. But if you also don't believe Zsófi, then there is no point in going on with listening to me talking about my life in my new home, with my new owners. You can stop here.

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MY NEW HOME

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It was about five years ago that on a cold December morning I was brought to my new home. I was received by an old lady with noises of surprise and delight. She took me in her arms from the young lady and made sweet comforting sounds to what must be a poor little rag-bag of fur and bones. She rubbed down my back and smoothed my ears, snuggled me into her coat.

‘It’s your gift from Szent Miklós, Zsuzsi,’ she said.

‘Yes, mother, but he forgot to leave it in my stocking. I had to fetch my gift myself, didn’t I?’

‘True, true, but worth all the trouble,’ she said lovingly to me, ‘aren’t you? Where did you find it?’

‘Long story. First some coffee.’

And while making the coffee the young lady started to tell her mother how she retrieved me from a ditch. I was snuggled up in the bosom of the old lady while all the details were unfolded about my terrible plight that morning.

‘Never mind, it will be all right now, yes, it will,’ she informed me lovingly.

‘Where are we going to put him?’

‘Tomorrow I’ll get a kennel, but tonight he had better sleep in the warm here.’

‘I want him to sleep in my room. Would you like that, eh?’ I was asked to give my consent, which I’m sure I did by giving a weak yelp. Thereupon, the old lady started to sing a Christmas carol to me.

‘He’s a wee little thing, but crafty enough to milk so much sympathy out of you. But first he could do with some real milk, mother. You do that, and I’ll bring some blankets down.’

‘Oh, yes, let’s go and have some warm milk, little one, before you kip

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down.' And with a flourish she took me to the kitchen. The way I lapped up the warm white liquid it must have been my first meal in days.

Such was the love and adoration with which I began a new life in the Buda hills, in the home of a beautiful young mistress and her equally young-hearted mother. An hour after arriving, welcomed with love and warmed up by hot milk I snuggled down into a well-blanketed bed and was asleep instantly.

Next morning I opened my eyes to bright sunlight. Immediately, I was taken out to the terrace by the old lady for training and orientation. It was a cold day but the sun was shining brilliantly. The old lady followed me around, talking and chatting to me as if I was a child. 'Now, listen, drágám, I'm your grandmother, Nagyanya, and you are my grandson, unoka. So, remember, always, always.' I was over the moon to have her attention, and to please her I performed my ablutions promptly. Having done my bit, I headed for indoors again, was fed and returned to my cosy place for more rest. I looked for the young lady but she didn't seem to be around.

After a little while the old lady took me on a tour of the house upstairs and downstairs; I stopped at every object, sniffing and smelling things, which brought warnings of one sort or another from her against doing this or that. I couldn't believe my good fortune. All this amidst chatting and singing a line here and there. Then I was asked to go down to my bed and have another lie-down. This was to see if I remembered where my corner was. Of course I knew. Who would forget the place of rest and sleep? Here I am, I whispered to myself, my small body burrowing into the blankets, from rags to riches by some stroke of luck - or 'szerencse', as the Magyars would say.

I don't know for how long I had slept before I woke up to the sound of people talking. A man was standing with my mistress and her mother and they were all looking at me.

'He must be about a year old, looks a mixed breed, hard to tell, really.'

'We are not bothered about the breed, are we, Zsuzsi? Anyone can tell he's not pedigree,' she said putting the man in his place.

'Quite, mother, but I am interested in his background,' my mistress said, trying to tone down her mother's sharpness.

I got up and started to sniff and lick everyone's feet. Immediately the old lady picked me up and took me out for my toilet training. The young lady and the man followed us. I was aware that I was being watched closely by the man. So, as the old lady was guiding me to make sure I did the right thing at the right place, I pricked up my ears to hear what the man was saying about me. Would I find myself back in the thicket again? The smell of misfortune hung over me.

'About a year, yes, I think no older than that.'

'And abandoned on a highway. He could have died of cold.'

'It happens often. People get puppies as a gift for their children and when the children's interest wears out, the poor animals are left anywhere.'

'So young and vulnerable? Oh, people.' The young lady was incredulous.

'You'll be surprised what's done to animals. Now, that one has a very interesting side to it.'

'That's the sort of thing I want to know.'

'From what I can see he may be a hedgehog breed,' the man deliberated.

'Hedgehog? What can that mean?'

'Well, once I had a visitor from Greece and on looking at the dog I was taking care of for some friends, he said, "That's a hedgehog dog." Now, like you, I asked him what did that mean in real terms. And he told me the following story about his own dog. I'll tell it in his own words.

"My dog," he said, "had a mania for catching hedgehogs. She used to bring them to me first, never minding the prickles, but when she found I either released them over the wall, if still alive, or disposed of them if dead, she took to burying them herself, to mature for her future delectation. I usually managed to find the tell-tale mound and remove the body while she was shut up indoors, but sometimes she would stand guard over it all night, growling if I approached, only two green eyes to be seen in the dark." When I saw your puppy, I was reminded of this man's story.'

'Goodness. Did the dog eat them ever?' The question betrayed a nervousness in the young lady.

'No, no. That was the interesting thing. The dog was going through the motions of old, from when it used to hunt for its masters.'

'Like dogs fetch balls these days?' the mistress prompted.

'Exactly,' the man confirmed. 'A mere ritual now of what was once a necessity for survival.'

'Might he have been a hunting dog?'

'Very much so, but a different sort. Now this hedgehog dog, the one I told you about just now, probably had something of the breed that came to Europe with the Gypsies. As they were always on the move, the Gypsies trained their dogs to hunt hedgehogs for their food. According to anthropologists some nomadic tribes keep only dogs as pets. And I think the Gypsies followed the same practice as they moved westwards.'

'And this dog, you think has something of that breed in him?'

'From his movements, yes, I would say that. Just now when he came out, he ran straight for that tree, sniffing the undergrowth.'

'And hedgehogs dwell under trees?'

'Well, hedges and thickets. A tree would only be a substitute memory of the original growth.'

'How interesting!' A pause in the conversation. I stopped in mid-motion. What's she going to do with me? I felt paralysed. Would I be taken back to the highway thicket and left to the four winds?

'Ah, so I have an authentic dog, if not a pedigree?' she said, at last.

'That has to be seen yet, but certainly your puppy meets that description on first impression.'

'Very interesting.'

'Have I disappointed you?'

'Not at all. As I said, I have an authentic Gypsy dog here. And as long as the Gypsy community doesn't come claiming him as part of their ancestry, I shall be proud to have him. It is a him, isn't it?'

'Oh, yes, an authentic Gypsy "him",' he laughed. 'No, jokes apart, it may all be too far-fetched, and too early to predict, but he's a nice puppy. Your mother seems delighted with him,' he said looking at us. 'Do you think you should tell your mother? She might not like the idea.'

'What, about him having Roma ancestry? I wouldn't be her daughter if she didn't.'

'That sounds good. I'll be off then.'

'So, I'll bring him over for vaccination. Oh, yes, any idea of a good authentic Gypsy name?'

'Béla. I've always felt Béla to be a Gypsy name.'

'Like Bartók Béla or King Béla?' A shock wave stirred the air.

'There may be a connection?'

'In the 11th century? The Gypsies hadn't even set out for Europe by then.'

'A mystery, indeed. Still the name is found in India, a very common

one too, and generally among low-caste people.'

'Excellent,' she burst out laughing and then turning to me, called out. 'Béla, Béla, gyere, gyere, come here, come here.' The call was enough to unhinge me from my paralytic state and I ran to her. The old lady was surprised by this sudden naming. She picked up the call, rolling the name off her tongue in a sing-song – Bé..la...Bé..la Bé..é..l..a. The sound filled the air with my name, making my existence unique, one among billions.

'See, it has brought an obedient response. Well, if there's nothing more you want to know, I'll push on now.'

'I'll bring Béla around, probably tomorrow or the day after. Oh, yes, how long is the life span?'

'Between 12-14.'

'Long enough,' said my mistress, seeing the man off at the gate.

I was relieved to see him go. You never know what he might have said next. I was still in the grip of the trauma triggered by his words. All that speculation about my breed and ancestry could have brought to an end the short spell of a comfortable life for me. Words are dangerous things. So, when I saw the young lady turn to me and call me, I didn't care what the name was, I ran to tell her I would be the best dog in the world. She picked me up and I heard her tell her mother about my breed, my origins, and my life-span.

Even so, my nerves remained on edge and that night I slept badly and had nightmares. I saw myself crawling about in the middle of a road where cars were coming and going at break-neck speed. But somehow I escaped being crushed under the wheels of any of them. I was whimpering and squealing as I tried to cross the road to a safer place and was failing to do that. I could hear myself whining. Then I was awake and the young lady was holding me in her arms, and the old lady was saying 'Mi a baj? Mi a baj, drágám?'

'I'd better take him to my room. He's scared and nervous, poor thing.'

But all through the night I kept on having dreams of being left alone in different places to perish one way or another. I found the old lady by my side whenever I woke up whimpering. Eventually she took me to bed with her and I slept snuggled up to her.

I must have alarmed them so much that next day the young mistress took me to a vet psychologist. I sat in my mistress's lap while she was asked all sorts of questions about me. I heard her explain that I was new

to the house but seemed quite happy and full of beans earlier in the day, then something seemed to have upset me which left me traumatised. The psychologist asked what else happened in the evening, whether someone had visited them. A quiver passed through me as the mistress told about the dog expert who was called by her to examine me. I began to tremble and gave out some squeals. The lady noticed my condition. Immediately she administered a pill to calm me down. 'Are you planning to neuter him?' she asked, while holding my mouth clamped against my expelling the pill. 'We haven't thought about it yet, he's just arrived,' my mistress informed her and then added, 'I suppose we will eventually. Is it a good idea?' The psychologist was rubbing my neck now to make sure the pill did go down. 'Oh, yes, it's absolutely necessary,' I heard her say. 'The reason I asked is to let you know that he will have traumas on that account, from time to time.' The pill was beginning to have its effect, their voices were fading out.

Next thing I knew I was in the old lady's lap, and my mistress telling her about the psychologist's analysis of me: that I had taken a scare from the expert's words about my breed and was suffering from insecurity. The way to get me better, the psychologist told her, was to reassure me in every way that I was very much wanted here.

'That's easy', the old lady said, planting a kiss on my head, 'I can do that all right. Oh, yes, I will do that most happily. I will tell you stories every night and sing a lullaby to make you sleep soundly.' Then looking at me intently, she reminded me, 'Now listen, drágám, from today I'm your granny and you are my grandchild. So, you call me Nagyanya and I will call you unoka. Yes, agreed?' She then turned to her daughter and said, 'What about you, Zsuzsa, do you want him to call you Anya? We might as well sort out the relationships now. What do you say?'

'No, I don't want to be called Anya,' her daughter sounded quite definite about it.

'Whatever you like then.' The old lady said to me, 'Now, listen, Béla, while er...er...the mistress is away at work, you and I will have a lot of fun together,' and lowering her voice, pretending we were going to share a secret she added, 'while the cat's away, the mice will play, oops!'

The young mistress laughed. 'You don't have to be mice, Anya, since I won't be a cat. I don't mind what you do, as long as he – your unoka - doesn't chase or kill my beloved squirrels. I won't stand for it. So, watch out, little doggie, let me warn you, yes, you little puppy, don't you dare, okay?' She bent down and gave me a pat on my nose.

'Why would you do that, Béla, eh?' I was too small to enjoy the banter between mother and daughter. But I could sense that it was a good beginning and that I had come to the right place.

'Remember, I am your Nagyanya, always and always,' and she gave me a tight squeeze. I licked her hand to say how secure I felt in her care.

'Now then, Nagyanya promises she will tell you stories,' she put on a strict tone, 'on one condition that you will always do as she says. Agreed?'

I gathered that she believed in negotiating her every move. I had no objections of course, since I had no option other than doing as I was told. I gave a sniff, as a sign of my agreement to all the conditions laid down.

Well, that was five years ago. Since then, I have gone through five seasons, but still I have not caught a single hedgehog for my mistress. Nor have I shown any sign of ritual performances or compulsive mania for killing and burying my kills. Only once did I pounce on a squirrel and unwittingly injured it. That was when the old lady died, two years after I had settled into the comfort and love of the wonderful mother-daughter home my good fortune had brought me to.

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