**A Beautiful Lie**

Richard LeBlond

Pets in our house were mostly short-lived while I was growing up in Portland, Oregon, in the 1940s. As in most houses, we failed to read the labels carefully, and the fishes, frogs, turtles, birds, and dogs found themselves in an environment where improvisation and tough-love were the functional equivalents of natural selection. Only the guppies prospered, something of a miracle, as they were under my care. I must have assisted in the live birth of a thousand newborn, transferring them from tank to tank so they would not be eaten by the adults. That may be the ultimate measure of fecundity, that you can afford to eat your young. (We are on track with overpopulation and Christianity’s symbolic cannibalism: communion.)

One of my earliest memories is watching in horror as Mom flushed a dead goldfish down the toilet. It had died from over-feeding. I think she let me watch as a life lesson. Things live, things die, you flush the toilet and move on.

The first real tragedy was the baby chicken. There were two of them, mine and my sister’s, and they managed to stay alive with us for a few weeks. One day Mom, the chicks, and I were out back working in the garden, Mom shoveling while I helped the chickens find bugs in the freshly overturned soil. Mom had her mind on the garden and didn’t see the little chicken – my little chicken – behind her as she stepped back. It squeaked loudly, and blood oozed from the base of its beak. Mom instantly put it out of its misery and into mine with a forceful whack of the shovel. A quick burial followed. I ran into the house and bawled all the way to my bedroom. Another death, another tough lesson: mothers can kill the things you love. (Only in adulthood could I appreciate her grit. She was the daughter of farmers.)

The *uber*-pet, the one who became a beloved family member, was Mike the dog. We found him one evening as we pulled into the driveway. There he sat in the headlights, as if he had been waiting for us, eyes wide, but not startled. He looked like a wolf pup, maybe six weeks old, mostly German shepherd with a dash of collie, or so we surmised. He had no collar. We gave him water, and he was still there in the morning.

Sis and I pleaded to keep him, offering to perform all required maintenance. Dad and Mom relented, as they were quickly taken by him too. No one ever came to claim him. He must have been cast off from an unwanted or too-large litter.

Like all wolves, he was a pack animal. Mike knew that Mom and Dad were the alpha dogs, and sis and I were more-or-less his equals, though she and I had far too many unfair privileges. Like who got to sit at the dinner table and who didn’t. He slept at night in the basement, behind a closed door. I was the first one up most mornings, and the day began with a dog fight. I went to the basement first thing, where Mike and I would wrestle on the cement floor. We were fairly equal in applied strength – that is, neither of us tried to maim or kill the other – but his weapons were sharper than mine. Most days I went to school with scratches and bites on my forearms and hands. They were badges.

Mike’s pack behavior ultimately was his doom. He had to be restrained in the presence of strangers. It took several visits for him to accept friends of the family, and their arrival was always greeted with an attack-mode bark. He barked at passers-by on the sidewalk and was under restraint outdoors. Mom tried to rid him of this quite natural territorial behavior with a rolled-up newspaper and whacks to his long nose.

But his instincts were too strong. Outside, he would bark as viciously as he could, and then immediately assume a defensive position, sprawled on the ground, both front paws covering his nose even before Mom came out of the house with the rolled-up newspaper. What intelligence that reveals: remembered experience, anticipation, cause and effect, predicting another creature’s behavior.

One day Mike got loose and bit a passerby. The victim reported the incident to the police, and that evening two patrolmen came to the door. Mike did a terrible job of arguing his innocence and was led to the basement. Sis and I were shooed out of the living room. After the police left, we were told the verdict. Guilty. Mike had been sentenced to the dog pound. Sis and I were too young to know what that meant.

The next morning, Mom and Dad took Mike to the pound while we kids were in school. When we got home, we could see that Mom had been crying, maybe all day.

A few days later, Dad told us a beautiful lie. He said he had called the dog pound and found that Mike had been adopted by the owner of a ranch in eastern Oregon. Many nights followed with me thinking of him running with the horses and cows, of endless plains and hills where barks could be hurled with impunity. And for a long time, even into my adulthood, he would return in a dream, the first of lost loved ones to do that.