

London's No. 1
Dog-Walking
Agency

London's No. 1 Dog-Walking Agency

By

Kate MacDougall



First published in the UK by Blink Publishing
An imprint of Bonnier Books UK
80–81 Wimpole Street, London, W1G 9RE
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

facebook.com/blinkpublishing
twitter.com/blinkpublishing

Hardback – 9781788704298
Ebook – 9781788704281
Audio – 9781788704427

All rights reserved. No part of the publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or circulated in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing of the publisher.

A CIP catalogue of this book is available from the British Library.
Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Kate MacDougall, 2021

Kate MacDougall has asserted her moral right to be identified as
the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988.



Every reasonable effort has been made to trace copyright holders of material reproduced in this book, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers would be glad to hear from them.

This book is a work of non-fiction, based on the life, experiences and recollections of Kate MacDougall. Certain details, including names, have been changed to protect identity and privacy.

Blink Publishing is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

To Finlay – he will get around to reading it one day . . .

And my mum, for being such a good sport.

Contents

1	Frank	1
2	Winston, part one	19
3	Stanley, part one	39
4	Billy	57
5	Stanley, part two	73
6	Fabio	87
7	Winston, part two	101
8	Stanley, part three	109
9	Cleo	119
10	Zeus	131
11	Mabel, part one	145
12	Stanley, part four	167
13	Jelly and Bean	183
14	Mabel, part two	199
15	Huxley	215
16	Winston, part three	233
17	Mabel, part three	247
18	Stanley, part five	257

19	Dolly, part one	271
20	Mabel, part four	283
21	Dolly, part two	299
22	Lily and Lucy	313
23	Stanley, part six	333
24	Mabel, part five	341
	Afterword	351
	Acknowledgements	355

Frank

Jack Russell, five, Greenwich

October 2006

*Number of dogs walked by London's No.1
Dog-Walking Agency: 1*

It was pigeons that started it all, not dogs. Pigeons were the catalyst to the whole thing. A brace of them, garish and cheap, perched on my desk while they waited for an expert valuation. They were porcelain, mid-nineteenth century and exceptionally ugly. One looked pained, in anguish, as if it might be watching a lover depart for war, while the other was fat and mean with angry beady eyes and looked as if it wanted to settle a score with another pigeon. They wore pink bonnets and carried wicker baskets as though they were just popping out to the shops, an activity that seemed incongruous for a pigeon. Ducks or geese do shops and bonnets, while pigeons are more suited to flat caps and park benches. They were badly miscast, in appearance and execution, an unfortunate waste of time, clay and paint.

KATE MACDOUGALL

The pigeons had been in the owner's family for generations, passed down from mother to mother like an unfortunate genetic disease, and carried with them the heavy weight of sentimental value. Their monetary valuation would have been a disappointment to their current custodian, a sprightly retiree from Acton with a Saga brochure under her arm and a winter cruise in her sights. With no offspring to bestow them upon and a penchant for *Cash in the Attic*, she had decided that they must be worth at least a lower deck cabin to the Canaries and had dropped them off at the front desk of Sotheby's to see how they might fare.

There was of course a slim chance that somebody might have parted with their hard-earned cash for them. A camp pigeon fancier perhaps or an eccentric ornithologist. But that was before I smashed both their heads off. The first was whisked clean off the desk by my elbow as I leant over to pick up the phone, the second joining shortly after with a nudge from a lever arch file – both siblings not only decapitated but irreparably fractured on the purple carpet tiling in a splatter of ceramic dust and shards of beak and claw.

It was, of course, an accident and, certainly to my Sotheby's colleagues, nothing out of the ordinary. I was 'clumsy' Kate. Tall, gangly, butterfingered. There had been one or two porcelain mishaps in the past, a few broken bits of furniture here and there and of course the time I spilt an entire chicken Cuppa Soup on a very rare Persian

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

rug. My clumsiness extended to more than just the objects themselves: I had failed to master the telephone bidding system and frequently cut important people off, usually just as they were about to bid on something expensive, and I often forgot to press mute when needing to describe someone on the other end of the line as an arsehole. I was congenitally uncoordinated, committedly scruffy and not at all suited to the old-school poshness of the place, despite having the 'right kind of background', the right school, the right pronunciation of 'escritoire' and the prerequisite qualification in art history from a prestigious university. The demise of the pigeons was in fact just one more calamity of many in the four ineffectual and stagnant years I had spent at the auction house.

Simply put, I was bored. Stupidly so. As a back office helper in the antiques department, most of my days were spent answering enquiries, filing reports or sitting in pointless meetings. We supported the experts in their cataloguing and selling, but we weren't allowed to learn about the objects, to appraise and critique them, despite the fact that these were skills the job description had demanded when I applied. We ensured it all ran smoothly, that all the boxes were ticked and the forms filled in, with absolutely no room to use our ripe and expensively cultivated minds, no space to expand, to enquire, to advance.

Working life seemed to be one enormous con to me, a deception so brilliant that it had reeled in entire generations of wide-eyed graduates bursting with ideas and

energy and youthful enthusiasm, only to station them in front of photocopiers or laminators or shredders. It didn't really matter what your job title was or which company you worked for, most jobs seemed to boil down to moving bits of paper from A to B, appeasing unnecessarily awful people over the phone or email and staring incomprehensibly at spreadsheets. Even friends in sophisticated-sounding jobs like television or finance or the ones who did important things with computers would attest to a preponderance of repetitive software-based activities, interspersed with filing and highlighting and stapling things together. Our education, the years and years of hard study, the accumulation of endless facts and skills, the achievements, the goals, the quiet hopes and guarded dreams, all were seemingly pointless and redundant. The world appeared to be put together by nothing more than stationery and data.

Stumbling blindly into the wide, murky pool of 'administration' was an easy mistake to make as a graduate of the early noughties. It started with temping, the arts graduate's first stop on the very bumpy road to forging some sort of career. A receptionist. Data entry. PA to a PA. Making tea, photocopying. I filed papers into a cabinet for one whole week and then shredded paper for another week in an office one street away. I hid the holes in my tights. I was 'chair number four' in a bank of ten receptionists, headsets on, nails to be painted ruby red, directing calls to brokers for eight hours a day, and once made 147

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

cups of Nescafé before 9am at an insurance company that needed an emergency 'refreshment assistant'.

When you couldn't stomach the temping anymore, you waded into even deeper administration, full-time positions, your own desk. You attended meetings, put things in your drawer and, before you knew it, you'd Tippexed your name onto a stapler and knew the names of everyone in IT. This was when it became harder to clamber out of the administration pool. Once you were in, nobody ever wanted you to get out again, as they didn't want to do the admin either, so you were stuck, wallowing in the mire, praying that some of your brain would cling on and not be completely eroded by the sheer tedium. Unless of course you wanted to submerge yourself to an even deeper level, to the admin apex: executive assistants, office managers, coordinators. And this is where I ended up. A fully immersed dunking into the role of 'Furniture Administrator'.

'Is this *it*?' I would occasionally say to my mother on the phone. '*This* is adulthood?' Despite her enthusiastic embrace of large swathes of twenty-first-century living, my mother had never fully shaken off her old-fashioned upbringing – the office was just a holding pen until a husband and children came along. Hers had been the interior of a British Airways cabin. It paid the rent and introduced you to eligible men. It didn't have to be *interesting*. 'Yes, darling,' she would reply. 'Parts of it are very dull indeed.'

KATE MACDOUGALL

Most people settled for it. Of course they did. A job is just one step on a career path, and perhaps they could all see that path more clearly and optimistically than I could. Plus, most people don't particularly want to leap into deep, dark vats of the unknown. But I was restless. I was discontent. And, as a result, I was clumsy, just one too many times.

Just over a week before the pigeon incident, I met a man with a dog at a barbeque. The dog was a beautiful stracciatella-coloured cocker spaniel with long black eyelashes and low-hanging tummy fur that made him look like he was wearing a valance. The dog was called Crumpet. The man, Dan.

'What a beautiful dog,' I said, as you do.

'It's not mine,' Dan replied, blandly. He was concentrating on his burger, while Crumpet ate a tub of taramasalata at his feet. 'I'm walking it. For a close friend.'

The friend was a famous actress whose name he dropped like breadcrumbs onto the grass beneath him. She was currently on stage, a lengthy weekend matinee, and he was a minor theatre acquaintance now elevated to 'close friend' status simply by doing a freebie.

'This isn't what I normally do of course,' he continued. 'The dog-walking thing. I don't *walk* dogs. It's a favour really. She's a close friend and she couldn't find anyone else to do it.'

'Dog-walking? Wow, lucky you. What an amazing job!' I said, giving the spaniel a scratch on the ears. And with that one sentence, a small idea started to form.

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

'It's not a *job*,' he retorted, spitting burger fragments into the air. 'Well, she offered to pay but I said no, of course. I mean, you don't take money from your *very* close friends, do you?'

I stared at those pigeon pieces on the carpet tiling for a very long time, the claws and the beaks and the awful beady eyes shattered into debris below me, and a calm and pleasant realisation came to sit down amongst my thoughts: not only was the pigeons' demise the best thing that could have happened to them, but how remarkable it was that two mundane and irritating life occurrences could smash into each other and be the start of a new beginning. For the first time in years, there was clarity about what I needed to do.

'Dogs? Crikey. Right. Well! Good luck with that,' said my manager when I handed in my notice soon after. He was signing off on the large cheque the lady from Acton had managed to extract from the insurance department and his grey, lipless face barely managed a smile. 'Might be easier than some of our clients, I suppose.'

'Well, let's hope so!'

'Righty ho! Well, do let us know how you get on with all of that.'

His response was fairly typical; over the next few weeks, while I worked out my notice period, I spent a lot of time repeating the word 'dog' to confused and concerned-looking people.

KATE MACDOUGALL

‘Dogs! Yes, dogs. Real dogs. Yes, I know, it is a bit of a surprise, isn’t it? Yes, walking them. Walking the dogs, to the park. For money. Yes, dogs. Yes, we walk them back again. Actual, *real* dogs. Other people’s dogs, yes. The world is a very funny place, I agree!’

Dogs. Saying it over and over and then over again. Dogs, dogs, dogs. The more I said it, the more I explained it, the more I keyworded it in the text for my new website, the more I began to believe in it all – this little idea germinating and blossoming and pushing its way towards the light. It had become something to get excited about. It felt like exactly the right thing to be doing.

But spontaneous and unpredictable career shifts don’t tend to go down too well, particularly with mothers. People like to digest things gradually in small, bite-sized chunks and as far my mother was concerned, anything that could not be explained cheerfully and succinctly over soup and bridge was an automatic non-starter. She wrote me a letter on blue Basildon Bond, her concerns laid out in numerical order. Number one said, ‘This is a GHASTLY mistake.’



Despite having a boy’s name, Frank was a girl. She was small in stature, even for a Jack Russell, but very solidly built, with a thick, strong back, smooth black-and-white fur and dark silken eyes. Always on high alert, her muscles

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

were taut, head cocked slightly to one side as terriers like to do and she vibrated ever so slightly with excitement.

'She's a live wire, Kate,' said Lauren, looking exasperated. 'I don't think we have ever been able to tire her out, not even after a ten-mile hike up the Cairngorms, but I am sure you know *a lot* of dogs like that.'

'Right!' I chuckled, nervously. 'So, do you, um, think an hour's walk a day is going to be enough?' I asked, hoping I didn't sound too concerned. Frank had already been on a five-mile run that day with Lauren's boyfriend, Mark, but seemed barely able to contain a monstrous mass of energy.

'Well, we will just have to see how it goes. If you throw the ball for her you should be able to tire her out a little bit, at least till we get back from work, anyway.'

At the foot of Frank's bed was a yellow ball, about the same size as the tennis variety but made of hard plastic rubber and punctured with a myriad of small teeth marks. She guarded it with the dedication and ferocity of a lioness with her cubs, unless of course you were the Thrower, in which case it was regularly deposited at your feet with the urgent instruction to throw it again. And again. And again and again.

I was to be the New Thrower. The dog-walker. Frank was my first customer, signed up before I had even left the world of auctions behind, one foot still wedged into furniture and the other eagerly stretching towards a new life. I had met Lauren and Mark after work one evening

just before I left Sotheby's – office attire, deceptively professional. As far as they were concerned, I was a dog-walking expert.

'She just loves that ball. Takes it everywhere with her. She even sleeps with the damn thing. Not interested in teddies whatsoever. Or other balls for that matter. Believe me, we've tried.'

'Oh, right. Well that makes it easier, I guess? She knows what she likes!'

'Just try not to lose it, Kate. We don't have another one.'

'Oh.'

'They don't make that one anymore.'

Frank's first walk was on a Saturday in early October 2006, the day after I left my office job. Lauren was going to a wedding, an all-day church and marquee affair that the bride had outrageously decided was a 'no dog sort of event'.

'Are you sure you don't mind? It's ridiculous that we can't take her, really. She's no bother. I hate to impose on your Saturday but I know she will go nuts if she doesn't get some exercise.'

'It's absolutely fine. My boyfriend Finlay can come with me.' Finlay. My lovely, kind, funny boyfriend. The one who doesn't like dogs. At all.

'I know I said weekday walks only, but this is an emergency.'

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

'It's no problem, really. We'll make a day of it. Walk and then pub. It'll be great.'

Saturday was cold and damp and London was grey. It wasn't a great day for a wedding, or for a dog walk for that matter, especially as I was painfully hungover and had left my only sensible coat in a pub in Soho the evening before. Leaving drinks. A big night out.

We caught the train at Vauxhall around midday and thankfully found a seat. Finlay sank into the upholstery and closed his eyes, his hangover reaching its peak. He had needed some persuasion to get out of the door.

'Why am I here again?' he groaned.

'It's an adventure. The first walk! You'll love Frank. She's full of beans.'

'But I don't like Frank. I don't like dogs.'

'Don't be silly.'

'It's true. I don't like them.'

'You don't like your hangover. *Everyone* likes dogs.'

'I don't.'

'What, all dogs? You hate *all* dogs? You don't *know* any dogs.'

'I hate. All. Dogs.'

He put his head in his hands as the train rocked from side to side and screeched on its tracks on the approach to Waterloo. We changed trains and headed south east to Blackheath, arriving just as the rain started to fall in thick, cold drops. It was a short walk to Lauren's flat but our

KATE MACDOUGALL

progress was slow, stopping for emergency bacon sandwiches and coffee on the way.

Frank was waiting for us to arrive, sitting behind the door with the ball at her paws and her patience wearing thin. Lauren and Mark's flat was on the third floor of a beige-bricked Victorian house, once a large family home but now sliced into smaller homes for tighter budgets. It was a compact, one-bed – two if you counted Frank's – with a clothes rail in the bathroom and shoes stacked up behind the door. Newspapers and mugs were piled high on the coffee table and last night's washing up was balanced precariously in the sink. I'd been there only days before but it seemed so different now. Private. It was someone else's home and I felt like an intruder.

Frank looked Finlay up and down as he loitered by the door. She was ascertaining his throwing potential and, seeing something she thought she could work with, she trotted over and dropped the ball at his feet with a portentous thud. Finlay is tall and strong, Celtic, the sort of man you might expect to be throwing a ball for a Jack Russell, if only he liked dogs. They eyed each other up for a moment, both feeling unsure, before I quickly grabbed the lead and ushered everyone out.

'Come on,' I said, 'a bit of park air will do us good.'

They were both happy to be led, Frank straining ahead with the ball in her mouth and Finlay limping behind looking unwell. The cloud started to lift and tiny splinters of sunshine broke through to the pavement as we made

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

our way, lighting up the route across the heath to the top of Greenwich Park and the view down to Queen's House, the Thames and the shimmering city beyond.

When we finally got there, the throwing began. We threw and we threw and we threw until our arms ached and Finlay started to moan about getting a repetitive strain injury. Frank's inexhaustible joy and excitement at repeating the same action again and again and again was completely mesmerising. Humans would never be able to achieve this extended level of ecstasy, not unless something medicinal was involved. We would get bored or distracted or start worrying about what we were having for dinner. But Frank's endless reserves of energy, her focus and concentration, the delight she took in running and catching and running and catching were so wonderfully simple, so perfectly uncomplicated. It seemed to be the very purest form of joy.

'Can we go home now?' asked Finlay, like a small, cold child who has fallen in a puddle. He had given up throwing and was curled up in a sort of half foetal position on the grass while Frank sniffed his hair. We had done an hour and the time was up. We would have to take Frank home.

She sensed that the fun was over and her tail dropped, the muscles relaxing as she prepared for the walk home and confinement once more. The autumn sun was now blazing in the sky and it had turned into a beautiful afternoon. A beautiful afternoon for a wedding. A beautiful afternoon for a dog walk.

KATE MACDOUGALL

‘I think I feel a bit better,’ said Finlay as we headed back to the tube.

‘There you go, you just needed a bit of fresh air. A bit of dog. Everyone needs a little bit of dog.’



After that first Saturday outing, my old life now tucked in just behind me, Frank and I walked together every weekday and it wasn't long before we became good friends. She was in many ways the perfect first customer: delighted to see you, even more delighted to be going to the park and wanting nothing more than a ball to be thrown for her and a farewell tummy rub.

Her owners too were what I might have planned for had I taken a moment to sit down and visualise my archetypal client: hard-working, busy young professionals, met through mutual friends, similar interests, similar goals, similar jobs. Working in PR, in finance, in property, they're out three times a week, after-work drinks, takeaway on a Friday, sex on a Sunday and all the enjoyment of having a dog, but only really at the weekends and only after 11 am. Life is hectic, life is fast, but that doesn't mean they were willing to compromise. If they want a terrier or a holiday to Morocco or an enormous flat screen telly, they will squeeze it into their life somehow and somewhere.

London was filling up with women and men like Lauren and Mark, forging ahead with careers, climbing up

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

corporate ladders and putting future children firmly on hold. They had disposable income in a buoyant housing market and had started to set up home. Having a dog *and* a full-time job was no longer seen as complete lunacy or the preserve of farmers, shepherds and the blind. In fact, it was often now seen as a sensible, logical first step in creating a family unit. A dry-run child who could help rein in the all-night benders and introduce you to morning get-up-and-go starts, to *Saturday Kitchen* and *Steve Wright's Sunday Love Songs*, to the way the sun climbs slowly over red London brick and the eerie quietness of early morning parks. Dogs show you fresh air, exercise and open spaces but also bring the sense that there is someone other than yourself to think about.

I only met Lauren and Mark once on the day they introduced me to Frank, but before very long I knew everything about them. It was all there, laid out in front of you, a book just waiting to be read. It was in the new gym shoes and the Tupperware and the stack of unread issues of the *Spectator*. In the dying fern and the half-eaten croissant and the piles of neatly ordered receipts. It was in the Post-it notes scribbled in biro saying 'Sorry' and 'I love you' and 'Frank needs more Chum'. They were us, Finlay and I, reaching the cusp of fully fledged adulthood, sifting through all the many thoughts about who you want to be and what is really important in life. Only Lauren and Mark seemed far more evolved than us, the various minutiae of their lives slowly stitching together over the

KATE MACDOUGALL

days and weeks to create a far more sophisticated picture of living than the one we had created. They had both cheese *and* ironing boards and they had real, proper jobs. And the dog, of course. They had something to look after. They had responsibilities.

But sadly I didn't get to know them for very long. It was only a snippet of their lives after all. Just as I was starting to get the hang of it all and to feel as if I might not only know my customer but that I might actually be able to do the job, it all ended, abruptly, three weeks in, when an enormous Rottweiler ate the yellow ball. It was my fault of course, a momentary lull in concentration and a very bad throw which saw the ball land directly in the Rottweiler's mouth, an opportunity he was far too pugnacious to squander. Frank and I looked on aghast as he ripped large chunks from it, ingesting the ball almost entirely before I even had a chance to protest.

'Soz about that,' chuckled the dog's owner as he ambled over. 'It's not a favourite, is it?'

'No, no, not at all,' I replied cheerfully. He seemed like a man that you might not want to quarrel with.

Frank was fine at first, coolly shrugging the whole thing off by nonchalantly trotting back towards the park gates. But as we got home she started to look a little restless. 'I will get you another ball, Frank, I promise,' I said as I shut the flat door behind me. The full gravity of the situation must have only sunk in later when she consoled herself by eating five pairs of Lauren's shoes.

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

'She's eaten five pairs of shoes,' read the email. 'Bits of heel everywhere. Bite marks on strappy sandals. Sole ripped off trainers. Mark's untouched, annoyingly. What happened to the ball????'

I wondered just how many pairs of shoes you needed as an adult and how many you might have spare if your dog ate five of them? Based on Lauren's moderate to mordant reaction, I surmised she'd had around eight or nine pairs in total as she was fairly cross about the whole thing, describing it rather damningly as a 'disappointment', even after my detailed and somewhat dramatic description of the Rottweiler and his enormous, savage jaws. These things could happen to anyone, although somehow they always seemed to happen to me. I only had three pairs of shoes after all, not nearly enough for serious adulthood.

I never saw Frank again. Lauren's job was changing and she had more time to walk her she said, although I am fairly sure the diminished shoe collection might also have had something to do with it. It wasn't the greatest of starts. After all, there is nothing quite as bad as being a disappointment. It implies a level of expectation – the expectation of others and also the one you should have of yourself.

If Blackheath hadn't been quite so far away, if it wasn't all so new and different and if I hadn't already acquired one or two new clients much closer to home, my upset about Frank might have lasted a little longer. I may have started to wonder if I had made an enormous mistake.

KATE MACDOUGALL

That would all come later, once the reality of just how bonkers and difficult what I was attempting really was. In those first couple of weeks, when I had just recently been released from the confines of the office, it all felt manageable. It felt exciting and freeing and full of possibility. I hadn't got around to thinking about word of mouth or client retention or the consequences of a dog eating too much pleather. I hadn't got around to considering whether I needed a cheese board or a mortgage or maybe even my own dog.

But you can't avoid being a grown up forever. You can't hold back life, not when it hurtles along at such a dizzying pace. I had been allowed a trial run. Now I had to do it all for real.

Winston, part one

Labrador, six months, Vauxhall

October 2006

Number of dogs walked: 2

Winston was a beautiful, deep chocolate Labrador with a dusky pink nose, bright chestnut eyes and enough energy to power half of south London. His daddies, Joe and Carl, lived on the top two floors of a pretty terraced house in the smarter end of Vauxhall. The house had shiny black railings, hand-painted window boxes and a bondage shop around the corner.

This was also the corner where we lived, Finlay and I, tucked into the basement of a large Victorian house, once proud, clean brick but now creeping with grit and fumes and with windows that everyone had long given up cleaning. Next to the bondage shop was a caff that made great peanut butter toast and over the road was the all-night chicken shop where angry teenagers gather in

KATE MACDOUGALL

the glow of the red neon hen, gnawing on bones and yanking their Staffies' leads.

Our flat was narrow and damp and very small with ceilings that skimmed our heads, stubborn black mould in the bathroom and easy burglar access at the back. We had been broken into twice in the space of a couple of months despite there being nothing to steal and a kid with a rusty bread knife had threatened to kill me on the front doorstep of our building when I asked him not to kick his dog. The windows shook with every passing bus and the floor rumbled with tube trains below but the rent was cheap and central London only minutes away by train, and when you live month to month, ready meal to ready meal, that's all that really matters.

Even before my career shift, we were already broke most of the time, living off tiny salaries that barely sustained us to the next pay cheque as we eked out the last dregs of our twenties before all the grown-up decisions had to be made. Finlay had recently chucked in a career-for-life type job in the City, mainly due to his colleagues being awful and the work utterly soul-destroying, but also because the hours trespassed a little too far into time at the pub. He moved to a cosy 9.15–4.45 research role for a friend's dad at St. Bart's hospital and was enjoying a period of procrastination. Out most nights, beers in the pub, in to eat, sleep and wash. We were hovering in that middle bit between the spinning

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

giddiness of first falling in love, needing to be with each other every second of every day, and the slower calm of commitment and domesticity. It was a seesaw, back and forth, exciting and impetuous, then still and ordinary. The wall we kissed against on the way home, the weekends in bed, then the weekly shops, the routine, bills we struggled to pay, laundry. At times it tipped too far one way, with shouting and fights and half-day break ups, followed by periods of comfortable quiet with long hugs and times when we didn't need to say a word.

Joe and Carl, deep into their thirties, were fully established in adulthood, their seesaw tilted to homely. They had careers, not jobs, and gym memberships and money in the bank. They had matching towel sets and coordinated kitchenware while we had one chipped pan and a green and orange duvet set that my mum had kept from the 1970s and which smelt vaguely of bananas.

'Winston. DOWN!' a voice shouted from the top of the stairs as I came in through the door. This was Carl. He was Bad Cop. 'You mustn't let him do that.'

'Oh, sorry, I didn't really get a chance to—'

'You must say, "Down, Winston," immediately or he will have the better of you.'

'Oh, right. Sorry. Winston, down. Down, Winston. Down. DOWN!' Winston bounced around my feet like a hyperactive toddler. He wasn't interested in listening. At least not to me.

‘Winston, DOOOWWNNNN!’ boomed Carl, at which point Winston reluctantly perched at the foot of the stairs, still panting frantically.

‘Don’t look him in the eyes. He has to earn your attention.’

‘Right. OK.’

‘He will not respect you if you look at him. Ignore him. Decline him. Reject him, until he does what you ask.’

I tried my best not to look at him as I made my way up the narrow stairs to the flat, but he bounced up and started twirling around my feet and I ended up stepping on one of his paws. He yelped, loudly. Carl tutted, also loudly.

Their flat was petite, expensive and immaculately tidy with almost no sign of normal, messy human life. Most strikingly, it was almost entirely brown, like a very chic mole hill. The carpets and rugs, the leather sofas, the cushions, throws, the kitchen cabinets, kettle, the wooden floors, curtains, the teak knick knacks bought on foreign holidays, even the mug that my brown tea came in. And the dog, of course. Also brown. Bought to match the decor or the pivotal inspiration for a very bold refurbishment. Either way, Winston was the ultimate accessory for a modern happy family.

Joe was warm and friendly, the Good Cop in the dog-parenting scenario, and offered me the tea while telling me about his PhD. Carl did not smile, not even once, and sat bolt upright on the edge of his brown chair as though there might be something uncomfortable under

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

his bottom. He had the air of someone who might have been bullied as a child for being a bit puny or crap at PE and then spent considerable amounts of time plotting disproportionate revenge. He was excessively serious, contemplating Winston's welfare with the utmost gravity, and, as such, I was to be given a vigorous grilling.

'So why should we choose you to walk our dog?' was the opener.

'Well, I love dogs. Had them all my life and I really believe I can help give them a good day. Break up the boredom a bit.' I was nervous and could feel my hands start to tremble. This was only the second interview I'd had for a position of dog-walker, but even the most skilled and experienced of interviewees might have felt a little toasty under the collar in the presence of Carl and his list of questions. I realised almost instantly that my cheerful meeting with Frank's owners was almost certainly an exception and not having prepared even the most basic of backstories was woefully shortsighted. Expect everyone to be aggressive and anal, I said to myself, and then you can at least be pleasantly surprised if they are not.

'Your website says, and I quote, "I have experience with many breeds, including Labradors." How many Labradors have you walked?'

'Er . . . a few,' I blurted. Walking alongside them as a child counted, surely, even if I was in a pram for some of it? 'I grew up with them. So all my life really. And I have recently been walking a very energetic Jack—'

KATE MACDOUGALL

‘How many have you walked, *exactly*?’

‘Um . . . three?’ Three seemed like a reasonable number of Labradors.

‘I shall need to speak to the owners.’

‘Right. Of course.’

He didn’t take a breath. ‘What are the most significant traits of the Labrador and how would you be mindful of those while walking Winston?’

‘Well, I—’

‘A Labrador has very specific requirements. Are you aware of what those are?’

I thought back to our old Labrador Sultan, a huge, hulking black dog who lived only to eat and would often dig up raw potatoes and sugar beet from my grandparents’ farm just to have something in his mouth. He once ate half a sofa and a Sunday newspaper, supplements and all, in the space of an hour. ‘Don’t sleep in too late,’ my mother would say as my brother and I approached the teenage lie-in years. ‘Sultan has only had a light breakfast and is feeling a bit peckish.’ The Labrador’s greed was renowned but Winston was lean and trim, just like Carl, so I decided to mention what I felt were the breed’s more appealing traits: loyalty, adventure and a fanatical love of swimming.

‘Winston is *not* to go swimming,’ snapped Carl, as though I might have suggested taking him clubbing or ice skating. ‘He is not to get wet, under any circumstances, and he is definitely *not* to get muddy.’

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

'Oh. OK. That's fine. No problem.'

'He is to be kept away from puddles. *All* puddles. And *all* mud. Do you understand?'

'Yes. Of course,' I replied, wondering how on earth this was going to be possible in one of the worlds wettest countries with a breed engineered almost entirely for that purpose.

He asked a further time if I fully comprehended what he was saying about the mud before I was ushered out of the door so they could 'deliberate'. As I walked back down the stairs, writing the whole thing off in my head, I looked up to see an enormous five-foot square canvas of Winston on the wall. It was surrounded by a few smaller framed photos of the family all together, cuddling on the sofa, out in a park and one where they were dressed as the Three Bears. Winston was not only a dog, he was the most precious and prized of children. Looking after a dog was one thing – challenging certainly, but it felt within the realms of my capabilities. A dog child was a whole other matter.

'It's not going to happen,' I said to Finlay when I got back to the flat. 'I am a total amateur. They could see right through me. They know I'm a fraud.'

At the time, it felt like being a fraud would be the end of my business before it had even begun but, in fact, it was absolutely the best thing I had going for me. Not having any concrete dog-walking (or, more crucial still, business) experience really just meant ignorance. Sweet,

blissful ignorance. The kind of ignorance you still have in your twenties, the one that piggy-backed a ride from your teenage years and is now sitting on the end of the bed twirling its hair and wondering what ‘net’ and ‘gross’ mean. The kind of ignorance that you might generously call optimism but is, in fact, I know now, hopeless naivety. The ignorance that can’t possibly conceive of how awful the clients might be, how complicated the accounts, how unreliable the dog-walkers you hire or how difficult the decisions you will have to make on your own on some wet Wednesday afternoon when you can’t get hold of your mother on the phone.

Without this ignorance, without the childish belief that all dog owners must be intrinsically kind, good people and that anyone wanting to work with dogs would be dedicated and reliable, I would never have taken that first step or knocked on those first clients’ doors. I would have talked myself out of it with great ease and patted myself on the back for having swerved such a colossal nightmare. I would have stayed in that office, shackled to that desk. Luckily, it propelled me out the door and unsuspectingly into clients’ lives – clients like Carl and Joe, who looked to me like they knew exactly what they wanted and in fact had everything they needed. Though I’d soon learn that most adult of truths: very few people have everything they want and even fewer know what they need.

‘We’re all frauds,’ Finlay said simply. ‘We are all amateurs. None of us knows what we are doing.’

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

'But the dog is like a baby! He has likes and dislikes and fancy dress outfits!'

'Well, there you go then,' he replied. 'They don't know what they are doing either.'

An email appeared the following morning. After much discussion I had been 'accepted' and was to start next week. It was followed by a separate, longer email about 'hygiene' that had a lot of things underlined and the word **MUD** repeated again and again in bold.

During my first week walking Winston it rained solidly and Kennington Park, Winston's local medium-sized municipal space, turned into a large, wet bog. It was mid-October and London was pelted daily with stubborn horizontal rain. Autumn had arrived. Winston was thrilled and rolled blissfully in the mire, despite my best efforts to stop him. You would have to be Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime to hold back a Labrador with its heart set on finding the perfect puddle and for Winston, it was vitally important that each and every one was tested for squelchiness, viscosity and dankness of aroma. Winston was completely besotted by mud.

Whether Carl had known this in advance and was simply shifting the responsibility for Winston's cleanliness onto his dog-walker or had yet to encounter such boggy park conditions was uncertain. Joe had intimated that Winston's previous walks had mainly been street based with the occasional weekend jolly up to Hampstead Heath so it was quite possible that they had absolutely

no idea how devoted to dirt their dog was. A fantastic irony when you are quite so uptight about the cleanliness of your house.

As the months and years went on and I met more and more customers, I developed a good sense of who might be more trouble than they were worth but in those early days I had little appreciation of how tricky people could be and what to look out for. I learnt, often awkwardly, which characteristics are not compatible with a stress-free work life as a dog-walker. Rudeness, while unpleasant, is depressingly common but usually manageable. As is flakiness and abject stupidity. Cruelty should always be rejected, although this often only presents itself a bit further down the line when it is much harder to extricate yourself. Obsessive traits, particularly ones relating to the home or the dog, are also best avoided. You can never win against an obsession. This was the lesson Carl and Joe taught me.

As we left the park after his first walk, Winston didn't look *too* bad. Soggy around the edges but basically fine. As you would expect a dog to look after a good autumn walk. How a dog *should* look. Once puddle testing was complete, Winston had moved on to his secondary hobby of stick commodities, trading up from twig to branch as he wandered around the park until he had a nice sizeable chunk of tree to proudly carry back home. He was tired but seemed happy and content, his tail wagging slowly.

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

It was only when we reached the flat that it became clear how utterly plastered in mud Winston was. His brownness had, of course, disguised it perfectly. The ultimate camouflage. I brushed some of the mud off with my coat sleeve outside the front door, but, as he shook himself dry inside the kitchen, half a bucket of Kennington Park detritus rained down onto the floor, leaving a thick brown soup all over their shiny ice-white tiles.

The kitchen floor was in fact the only white thing in the entire flat and it dazzled so brightly with cleanliness and prosperity against the multiple shades of tan and russet that you would have happily eaten a full meal off it. I tried my best to clean the mud up with a brown tea towel but Kennington Park mud is tenacious stuff. I had to finish the job with a packet of 'Andrex Washlets', which I pilfered from the bathroom. Not only are they the perfectionist's choice of post-poo bottom cleanser but can also wipe kitchen floors in an emergency. I had to use the entire packet but, with a bit of elbow grease and a lot of determination, the floor gradually turned from brown to beige to cream and then eventually back to white. It was exhausting.

An email later that day confirmed the obvious: Carl and I had very different benchmarks on kitchen hygiene and even if I had spent the rest of the day on it, it would never have reached Carl's meticulous standards.

KATE MACDOUGALL

Subject: MUD

Kate. I suspect Winston was allowed in mud today. There were traces in the kitchen. Winston is NOT allowed in mud – as you know. I presume this was an awful accident? Please do not let it happen again. Ever. Carl.



The expectations and demands of clients were always challenging. Further down the line I would encounter dogs who needed a full bath and blow dry after every walk, dogs who only drank Evian and wanted a bedtime story, dogs who absolutely had to walk on the left-hand side of the road or who only understood Welsh. Just when I thought I had seen it all, that nothing could possibly faze me, a client called to ask if I wouldn't mind leaving the lead at home and using the Baby Bjorn instead. 'Toots is so tired this morning,' the caller continued, 'he had a heavy weekend.'

Winston's list of requirements now seems minimal compared to some, although Carl's infatuation with order and neatness, his dog's passion for mud baths and the relentlessly miserable weather made this situation particularly trying. Every walk became a puddle gauntlet as we tried to duck and dodge potential hazards. I became fixated on the weather forecast, the really detailed one: moisture levels and precipitation and rainfall in inches. If it looked very wet we would avoid the park altogether and cross

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

over Vauxhall Bridge, turning right along Millbank to Tate Britain where we would sit on the cold stone steps and look back across to MI6 and the scaffolding at St George's Wharf and wonder what on earth we were doing with our lives. At least on some very basic level, Winston knew he should be in a park somewhere, preferably reclining in a big, beautiful quagmire. I couldn't say for certain where I should have been.



Getting to grips with the new job was proving harder than expected. It wasn't just the walking that was problematic. Yellow balls would be eaten and Labradors would shake buckets of mud onto the floor but that could be dealt with in the moment. A short-term panic that could be soothed with alcohol later if necessary. It was the creeping, longer-term panic that was more of an issue.

As office life faded into the distance and the novelties of fresh air and morning television started to wane, panic would regularly drop in for a visit. Panic with a capital 'P' – the kind that keeps you awake until three in the morning and then rouses you again at five. Panic that makes you feel sick and dizzy and takes lungfuls of air away, leaving you winded. Panic that easily lets itself in and makes itself at home because you now spend most of your day alone, without human interaction, and your thoughts rapidly metastasise into doubt and self-criticism.

KATE MACDOUGALL

I had met Panic before. We were formally introduced at university but had caught glimpses of each other for years, right back to childhood. I always suspected it was there, tucked behind the door, waiting for its moment. Sometimes Panic would appear when life was tricky, but often, when things were just merrily ticking along, it arrived with little notice and plonked itself on the sofa, giving me a quick run down of my failures, mistakes and flaws before settling in for a long uninvited stay. Sometimes it would lurk in the shadows undetected, before pouncing on to my back without any warning, squeezing the air from my lungs and shaking me to the core so violently that I was forced to sit, paper bag to mouth, until the terror and the trembling subsided.

Then it would be gone, just as quickly as it had arrived. I would look for it, try to second guess it, but it was always cleverer than me. So clever that I couldn't tell anyone else about it. It made me keep quiet, berating myself for being unable to tell it to go away, to leave me alone. So it remained a secret, something dark and shameful, which is exactly what Panic likes.

This time Panic was here to remind me that I had absolutely no idea about how to run a business. It wanted to convince me that I would fail and I fell for it over and over again. There were many times in those first few months that I questioned what I was doing. The future suddenly seemed so terrifyingly unknown, so alarmingly unregulated. It seemed lonely. When you have spent most

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

of your young adult life surrounded by people and cushioned by structure – at school, at work, following timetables and deadlines and familiar routines – the abrupt silence that comes with working from home is utterly unnerving. At work, the chorus of little worries that sings to us throughout the day is muffled by chatty colleagues, mugs of tea, Friday drinks. When you are alone, the whispers of Panic are deafening.

My mother was not helping. She would often call to see whether I had changed my mind. ‘Have you changed your mind, darling?’ No, I would say. Not yet. She would then ask if everything was ‘OK’ between Finlay and me. ‘Hang on to him, darling,’ she would say gravely, as if having a normal, respectable office job meant he was somehow floating off to some higher ground.

In her book, the path to adulthood was straight and narrow and any deviation from the tried and tested route was cause for great alarm. School (private), followed by university, preferably an old one, and certainly not a polytechnic. Then a move to London and an administrative or marketing-type job at a reputable firm where career progress was preferable but not essential as you would want to start thinking about husbands and babies before too long. As I had been generously given the tools and the opportunities to embark upon this traditional, innocuous journey, gratitude was to be shown by towing the line and any sort of a rebellion was at best self-sabotage and at worst a slap in the face of her parenting and her values.

She would try to steer me back to convention by firing alternative career options at me; something a friend might have suggested, or a cutting pulled straight from the job pages of her local rag, the *Shropshire Star*.

‘PR? What about PR? Everyone does PR these days.’

‘I don’t know anything about PR, Mum.’

‘Right. Here we go, here we go: “Local Enterprise Partnership Support Officer?” It’s £25k pro rata!’

‘What?’

‘OK, forget that, forget that. Ah! What about architecture? You’ve always liked houses.’

‘Everyone likes houses, Mum. Plus I think you need a qualification for that.’

‘Fine. Fine. If you say so. What about cookery? I could even help you with that. Show you a few recipes?’

‘No.’

‘Well, you’ll never know until you try. You have to give things a go.’

‘That’s exactly what I’m trying to do Mum. I’m giving *this* a go.’

‘How’s your typing? Is it fast?’

‘It’s OK. It’s two-handed.’

‘There you go. No shame in being a secretary. You could work up to being a PA. There’s good money in that.’

‘But I don’t *want* to do that.’

‘Well, you have to do something. You can’t just do . . . *dogs*.’

LONDON'S NO. 1 DOG-WALKING AGENCY

Animal care in her view was decidedly subclass, particularly in an urban environment where her need for comparability had placed it somewhere between scullery maid and pet shop Saturday girl.

To be fair to her, dog-walking wasn't a proper job in 2006. We hadn't quite caught up with the Americans who have had professional dog-walkers in New York since the 1960s and have developed it into a wholly legitimate career for anyone who fancies wielding multiple Chihuahuas in pink sweaters down Park Avenue. If you had a dog in New York, you also had a dog-walker, in the same way that if you had parents you had a therapist or if you had working limbs, a personal trainer. Americans are clever like that. They see a problem and then fix it with a sensible service while we tend to struggle on and tell ourselves we don't need the fuss.

Here, typically, your nephew on his gap year or your unemployed cousin would help out with your dog for a bit of pocket money and the rest of the time you muddled along while your dog crossed its legs, twiddled its paws and got stuck into an existential crisis. Although dogs were clearly in the ascendant, most owners hadn't elevated them to the level of needing their own carer – an extraordinary omission when you consider that dogs have been our right-hand assistants for thousands of years and we really should have worked out what their basic needs are. If you had a paid dog-walker you most likely found them by

chance, say a random meeting with one in the park or your neighbour had one once in a while. And even then you would really have to be desperate to use one. The vast majority of London's dogs were still bored and lonely and sat at home all day.

But all that was about to change. The canines were slowly taking charge, demanding gluten-free diets, weekly grooming appointments and tartan bowtie collars. A multi-million pound pet industry across the pond had started drifting over here and egging them on, encouraging play dates and pedicures and a choice of winter coats. I wonder if dogs ever miss the straightforward days of pack life, where time is structured around the simplest and most basic requirements with no need for over-complication. Humans really are unparalleled in their ability to interfere, to tinker and to fuss.



A few weeks after Winston's walks started, he was taken to the vet to be neutered and the walks were put on hold until he had recovered. When our walks together resumed, something was different. Winston was listless and melancholic and kept turning round and round in circles in the kitchen.

Joe and Carl, already racked with guilt about putting him under the knife, were understandably worried and

asked for regular updates on his mood and energy levels. Winston didn't seem to be in any pain or to feel unwell and would bound towards the park with his usual eagerness but, once there, his behaviour started to become unusual. Instead of looking for sticks or testing out puddles, he spent most of his time frantically digging up random patches of grass or sniffing through the flower beds as though he was searching for something. The hunt would then continue back at home as cupboards were pawed open, the dustbin turned over and every inch of tiling sniffed and then sniffed again.

'Has Winston lost a favourite toy?' I asked Joe on the phone. 'He's definitely looking for something.'

'Oh, *that*,' he replied. 'Yes, we've been keeping an eye that. The vet thinks he's looking for his balls, if you can believe it. It's quite common after the snip, apparently.'

'His . . . *balls*?'

'Yes, those ones. He can't understand where they have gone. They are not in the cupboards, I can tell you that much.'

On the advice of a very expensive and shrewd dog psychologist, Joe and Carl eventually bought him a pair of fake testicles. As a drastic measure, you can have them surgically implanted into your very confused dog but Winston preferred to use his as chew toys. They were so successful at calming his post-snip distress that they ended

KATE MACDOUGALL

up buying multiple pairs in a variety of colours and sizes, all of which could be found in various states of angst-fuelled disintegration on the kitchen floor.

They were in fact the only colourful things in the whole flat.