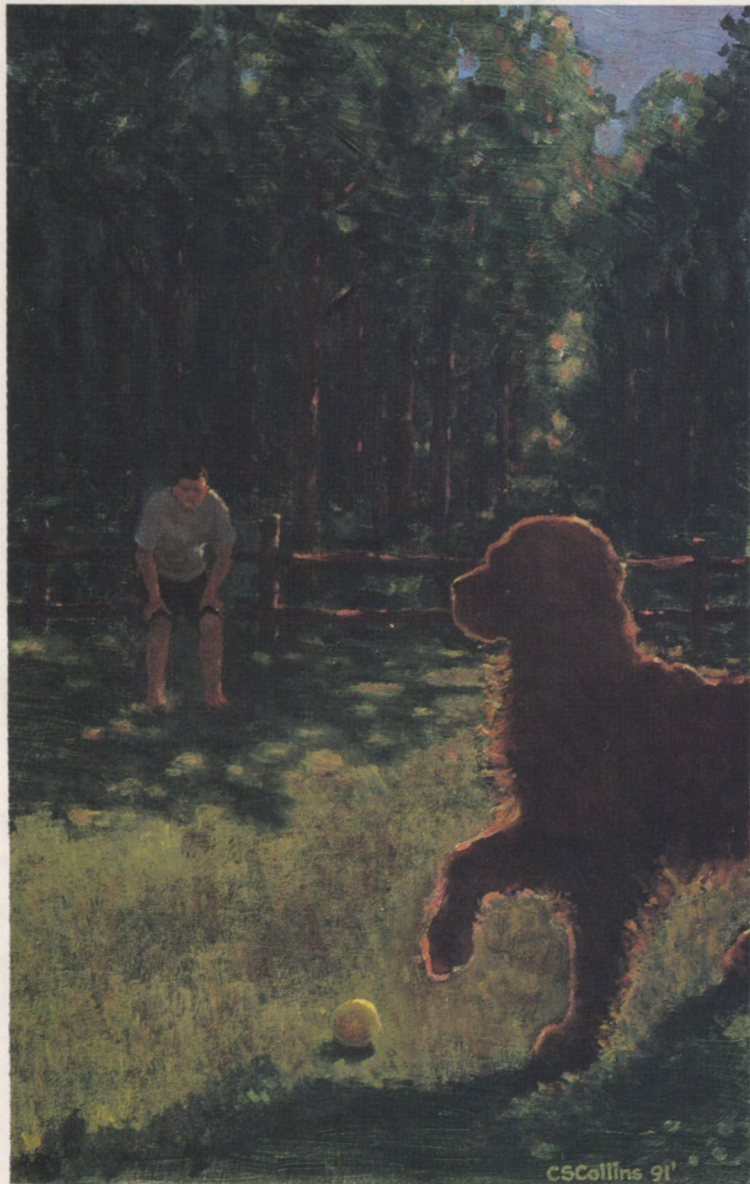


# Puppy Love

What do you get when you add one dog to a family of three?  
A family of five.

BY JOHN SEDGWICK



CHRIS COLLINS

AT THE FOOT OF THE LAWN BEHIND MY FAMILY'S ANCESTRAL house in the Berkshires stands an ancient dog cemetery that, to judge by the blurred inscription for one dog named Flower, dates back to 1903. About two dozen dogs are buried there in a cluster, each grave marked with a small, tilted headstone bearing the dog's name and a few kind words of remembrance. Like all such comments about pets, these epitaphs must seem a little dotty to outsiders. He Only Lacked Speech and Nous N'irons Plus Jamais au Bois are two valedictories that I have always liked.

But a favorite stone of mine is the one for my cousin Ellery's Irish terrier, Dunster. A literary scholar, Ellery worked for years in an upstairs study while Dunster curled up by his door, waiting patiently for his master to finish so the two could go for a walk. And long after Ellery died, Dunster continued to wait for him there. Dunster's stone is marked Ellery's Dearest Companion.

My wife, Megan, and I both write at home, and we always envied my cousin's friendship with Dunster. It seemed so cozy to type away while a soft, furry, obedient dog snoozed nearby. Unfortunately, in the early years of our marriage, we lived in a small Beacon Hill apartment that didn't seem a hospitable place for a dog. Then we had a child. We moved out to Newton and, as we surveyed the fenced-in backyard, our dog fantasies returned with a vengeance. Still, we thought we should wait a little longer and have another baby first.

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## Social Relations

But that "little longer" stretched on and on. For two and a half years we tried to have that child. We put ourselves in the hands of infertility specialists and underwent endless rounds of insensitive questions and painful tests, all to no avail. Finally we decided to give up on the child and get the long-desired dog instead. After everything we had been through, the thought cheered Megan and me, and it thrilled our daughter, Sara, then four.

The three of us passed many happy evenings leafing through dog books in search of the Perfect Dog for Us. We were tempted by English setters and clumber spaniels just for the sake of originality, but in the end our hearts were captured by golden retrievers—the preferred breed in Newton—and specifically by one golden-retriever puppy offered by a breeder in Portland, Maine.

**I**N AN ODDLY FORMAL WAY, WE MET HIS parents first, and I was completely impressed with his father, Ducky, who seemed so regal and self-assured, he might have passed for a U.S. senator or a five-star general. Little Sara had a more intuitive means of sizing up a dog. She climbed into the puppy's cage and took him in her arms. Far from minding, the little golden retriever eagerly licked her face. We knew we had found our dog. On the way home, he slept in the back of the car with his chin resting on Sara's lap.

My wife named him Keeper, after a mastiff owned by Emily Brontë, author of *Wuthering Heights*. And Brontë's dog was the kind of noble Sedgwickian dog we had in mind for our Keeper to be. He seemed quite promising, with his tender brown eyes, his soft, kindly face, and, auguring impressive size, his four leonine paws. They were so big, it seemed as if he were wearing snowshoes, and he nearly tripped over them as he trundled about. His fur was quite blond for a breed that tends toward russet colors, and it was wonderfully soft and silky.

But Keeper had his own ideas about what kind of dog he wanted to be. From the first, he was rather frisky. He loved to jump up and lick people's faces, returning their affection (I imagined) in the only way he knew. He probably thought his last name was Down, so often did people scream at him, "Keeper, down! Keeper, down!" He chewed everything in sight. And he was crazy for any kind of ball. Sara liked to bounce a tennis ball into a corner of the kitchen, and then laugh hysterically as he skated after it across the ceramic tiles, toppling all the chairs that weren't being sat in.

I took Keeper to puppy kindergarten to try to civilize him a little, and to my amazement managed to teach him several commands, the most impressive being "Leave it!"—to be used when he spotted a sandwich lying at nose level on the kitchen table. He wasn't so good at following other, possibly more useful, instructions like "Come!" or "Stay!" But no dog is perfect, right? And besides, he was still young.

Actually, I came to appreciate Keeper's renegade spirit. Keeper simply didn't care about the expected order of things, and he had no respect at all for the laws of property. Anything he could grab was his.

And, surprisingly, that was okay. Truth to tell, we had turned a little gray from the frustrations of infertility, the endless cycle of doctors and tests and monthly disappointment. Keeper brought some color back into our lives. He wasn't *trying* to annoy us; he was just having fun. And for the most part, it *was* fun: Keeper getting his head stuck in the flour jar; Keeper discovering snow; Keeper barking at his reflection in the window. Keeper, in short, being a dog. I loved to dig my hands into his fur, to let him lick my cheeks, to watch him sprint about the yard, his long blond hair streaming behind him. He revitalized me, you might say. I think he did the same for Megan. At least she smiled a lot more.

And then around Christmastime, just two months after Keeper came into our lives, something quite miraculous happened. Megan got pregnant.

ONE HEARS STORIES ABOUT INFERTILE COUPLES who finally adopt a child and then surprise everyone by producing one of their own. I suspect that Keeper served the function of the adopted child for us.

In a sense, *he* had become the child we sought. Sara played with him in a big-sisterly way: she gave him bear hugs and lectured him when he misbehaved. I played sports with him as though he were my son. I threw him balls and Frisbees, and I even played a little one-on-one basketball with him at the park. (His shooting wasn't too hot, of course, but he did play some tough defense and was quick to pounce on loose balls.) And I felt a kind of parental pride toward him. He was such a handsome dog—I liked to think that he even looked a little like me.

The pregnancy proved to be a difficult one. In the beginning, Megan had terrible morning sickness, and toward the end, she had to lie down for two months to ward off premature labor. I took Keeper out for a walk or a run every day, but otherwise I was too busy being Sara's dad and mom to spend much time being Keeper's master. He took to lying forlornly on the porch table, waiting for someone to come out and play. Sometimes, when I was busy cook-

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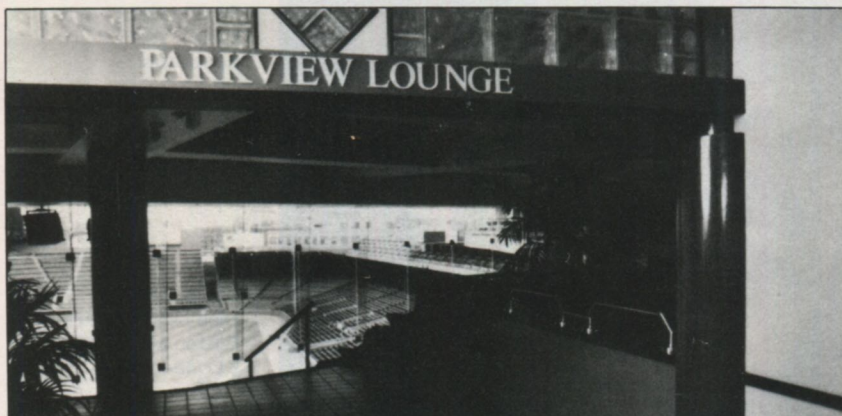
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## Social Relations

ing, he would brush against my leg and lie down with his back against my shoe. And occasionally he would sit beside me, raise his paw, and rest his front leg on my arm while he gazed up at me—a solemn, old Norseman-like gesture of solidarity.

**T**HE NINE MONTHS PASSED WITHOUT further incident, and Megan gave birth to a darling little girl we named Josie, who immediately took Keeper's place as the center of attention. We didn't even think to show Josie off to Keeper for several days after we brought her home from the hospital. When we did introduce them, he approached her warily. He sniffed at her foot and was about to lick her face in his standard greeting when I nervously pulled him away. I put him outside and shut the kitchen door. He jumped up to watch us through the window.

We relented a few days later and let Keeper in with us. While I sat holding Josie, he tried to squeeze his snout under my arm, to get me to stroke him the way I always had before. This time I sternly told him to sit and wait. He hunched down obediently, then slid across the floor over to me, as though to say, Look, I'm still sitting, in an effort to win back my affection. Finally he gave up, found the tennis ball, and took it over to Sara. But she preferred to play with the baby.

I took pity on him one weekday afternoon a few days later and brought him upstairs to my office in the hope that he would fulfill that old dream and lie down quietly by my side as I worked. To my surprise, he did curl up on the rug by my desk for a little bit. But then he got restless. He started to gnaw on an eraser that had fallen on the floor. I plucked it out of his mouth and returned to work. Then he pushed a notebook across the floor. In mounting frustration, I snatched that away from him, too. He got up and stood by the door, obviously asking to leave. I took him out to the yard, threw him a ball for a few minutes, and then left him outside to chase the squirrels.

I don't know if we'll ever get to the point where Keeper will lie quietly in my office, but I've come to think that maybe I don't want that anymore. I like him pretty much the way he is. After all, it wasn't his calm obedience that revived us, but his friskiness, his rampant joy. That's what makes him our Keeper. And I hope that on the sad day when he finally takes his place among the other family dogs in the graveyard behind the old house, his essential spirit—gleeful and loving—will remain with Megan and me, and with our expanded family. □