**Patsy**

Patsy always comes with me when I go painting. She doesn’t paint of course but she is always happy to come along as I usually end up painting in some spectacular scenery. I’m not particularly thrilled to go painting with other artists and Patsy is just the right amount of company and she is very uncritical. She just hangs out near my easel and when I take a break I sit down on the ground and she comes over and I ask her what she thinks. Sometimes she lays her head in my lap and as I stroke her hair I look over the painting and decide what it needs. Sometimes I get paint on her hair or I will find hairs stuck in my paint but that’s no big deal. When she sees me packing up for the day and folding my French easel she becomes excited and I have to protect my wet canvas from her wagging tail. Patsy is an Australian Shepherd but never had her tail docked. Her tail can be like a giant paint brush so I installed a special sling in the back of my van to keep my wet paintings out of harm’s way so that even in all of her excitement she can’t accidentally destroy my work.

I spend almost twenty-four hours a day with Patsy, more time than I spend with my wife and kids. Patsy is easier to get along with and at least as smart. She’s always there and no matter what is happening in the house or who is there, we are in constant communication, at least with our eyes. Sometimes when I’m bored I’ll get down on the floor and roll around with her or scratch her in her favorite spots. Often out of the blue, I will look over at her and admonish her by saying, “Patsy! You’re just a dog Patsy. I’m sorry, but face it, you’re just a dog.” She looks up from her private reveries and turns her soulful brown eyes on me as if to say, “Ah Master, why dost thou provoke me so? Do I not know my lowly state? If I am not aware of my condition who would be?”

“That’s right Patsy, you’re just a dog, but what can you do?”

“Indeed Master. When the phone rings there is nothing I can do. Can you imagine being home alone here and hearing the phone ring and being physically unable to answer? Even if I could, it wouldn’t be for me. No, when the phone rings it is for you and probably means that you will be going out and probably not with me.”

Naturally when I eat my lunch Patsy is always interested. She approaches humbly, her nose twitching, and peeks at me from the corner of her eyes. “Alas Patsy, this is not for you. You know what it says in the Bible, ‘Render unto dogs what is dogs and render unto man which is man’s’.”

“Master, what is this Bible you are so fond of quoting? Why does the Bible always mean that my plate is empty?”

“You know Patsy, whatsoever is found upon the ground is of the domain of dogs and whatsoever is upon a table or bed or above the level of the floor is of the domain of man.”

“Master, must thou repeat this ad infinitum?”

“You know the seven deadly sins of dogs, don’t you Patsy? Thou shalt not crap in the house. Thou shalt not piss in the house. Thou shalt not get into the garbage. Thou shalt not get on the master’s bed. Thou shalt not tear up any of the master’s possessions. Thou shalt not bark at the master’s friends. And Thou shalt not scratch at the doors.”

“Master, thinketh thou that I would urinate or defecate in our dwelling? Thinketh thou that I could behave in so lowly a fashion?”

Raising a dog is no different than raising a child, the key to good behavior is consistency on the part of the parent or master. So Patsy only eats at breakfast and after dinner and not in between and begging is ignored so has mostly ceased to exist. Recently I broke that rule which I shouldn’t have but the results were so comical that the kids insist that we feed Patsy spaghetti. She loves pasta and this is how it started. We’d all finished our dinner but some spaghetti remained on the kids’ plates so I took a single strand and dangled it over the edge of the table for Patsy. She had been quietly awaiting for us to finish her dinner because her turn would come next, but seeing this single strand of spaghetti dangling over the edge of the table caught her attention. She came out from under the table and cautiously approached the spaghetti. Like the cruel bastard I am I raised the spaghetti out of her reach then lowered it so she could just reach the end of the tempting strand. She caught a bit of it in her teeth and pulled. The spaghetti stretched and then snapped off. My two daughters giggled in delight and encouraged me to give her more. So I gradually lowered the piece as she snapped and snapped at it. Unable to suck in the strand as a human would, she did the best she could with gentle little snapping motions. We laughed and laughed and now the girls had to try it too. My younger daughter laughed so hard that she peed her pants, a level of delight even the funniest comedians would die for. Patsy wasn’t too thrilled to be reaping such modest portions from this exercise but she continued to eat the spaghetti one strand at a time. She must have been thinking, “Go ahead and mock me one and all but I am eating the food of the gods and at least I don’t have to pluck thy victuals from the ground where thou tosseth them normally for me to lick off the ground covered in dirt and many unknown manner of things acquired from the floor. Alas, there is no thirty second rule for a dog. Mock me if you will but I beseecheth thee do not stop from dangling these lovely long strings for my delectation.”

By way of giving the girls a little responsibility I allow them to feed Patsy, that is, place a little dry dog food in her bowl and pour a little warm water over it. My younger daughter is a little devil and after she has prepared Patsy’s bowl she likes to lead Patsy around the kitchen table in endless circles chanting in a sing song voice, “Patsy, Patsy, Patsy, Patsy!” Patsy trots around in a circle after her until I call a halt to the proceedings and say “Ok, ok, that’s enough; give Patsy her food.” Patsy glances up at me as if to say, “Master, must we repeat this comedy every night? Am I but a buffoon in this house?”

I feel a little guilty about humiliating Patsy in this manner so to make it up to her I take her along to the drugstore after dinner. “Hey, Patsy, c’mon, let’s go to the store.” She immediately jumps up and practically knocks me out of the way in her haste to go outside. She has to ride in the backseat of course but I put the window down for her. She has an insanely delighted look on her face and her muzzle spreads into a wide grin exposing her teeth with her long tongue flapping out. (Of course Thou shalt not ride in the front seat is one of the cardinal sins but that makes eight, an awkward number.) When Patsy was a young dog her delirious need to be loved caused her to be an incessant licker. If you left your arms dangling at your side chances are they would get a good tongue bath by Patsy, not something everyone appreciates. This simply could not go on so I had to be very firm with her. “Put that tongue back!” I’d command, and she would quickly shut her mouth and look guiltily up at me. “Master, why dost thou refuse my love? Am I not worthy? How have I offended thee?” Eventually she got the idea and the excessive licking stopped.

Patsy trotted out to the car and I opened the back seat for her. “Patsy, I’m sorry for humiliating you at the dinner table with the spaghetti.”

“Don’t trouble thyself master, when I hear but the words “Go for a ride,” my soul shall be healed.”

So all was forgiven. That’s the beauty of a dog; they quickly forgive and forget all offenses. Let’s face it, even Hitler’s dog forgave him. Is that ignorance or divine love?

Sometimes when I go out in the evening or the family is invited out to dinner to a non dog lovers’ house I walk Patsy out to her dog house in the back yard and attach a long chain. She gives me the look of a prisoner who has to walk the Green Line but offers no resistance. “Sorry, Patsy, but no dogs were invited. The invitation specifically said, No dogs, and let’s face it, you’re a dog.”

“Master, I comprehend not. Why wouldst thou care to go somewhere where dogs are not welcome?”

I clicked the chain onto her collar like a prisoner on the chain gang. She looked at me in a disappointed way as if to say, “And where would I go if I were not attached to a chain? Thinketh thou that I wouldst go with any Tom, Dick, or Harry that might come along? Am I but a bitch in heat? You know that is not the case. You had the surgeon arrange that for me (without my permission, I might add). I would only lie on the porch and guard thine castle against all intruders. This chain is completely unnecessary.” She turned, entered the dog house and laid down with a loud audible sigh meant to inflict guilt on me. “Patsy, I’d take you but you’d have to stay in the car and you’re better off here anyway.” She let out another loud sigh, “As thou wisheth Master. Your will is my command.”

Another thing about owning a dog is letting them out frequently to “do their duty.” Most of the time this is a good thing as having a dog forces you to go for a walk more frequently than you might otherwise be inclined. And one can make pleasant acquaintances in this manner. But one is not always in the mood to go out, especially in foul weather. Patsy doesn’t particularly want to go outside unless it means we are going somewhere together, for a ride, or at least a walk. But simply to go outside and pee is of little interest. She’s really not too thrilled with the great outdoors. To her credit, this dog was born with amazing bladder control, far better than my wife or kids. So I’ll let her out and she will simply sit down on the porch and lean against the door waiting for it to reopen and allow her to rejoin the gods in front of the TV. (I’ve even caught her licking the TV whatever that means!) So I will go outside with her to offer encouragement. “Go on Patsy, take a pee.”

She looks up at me with a disgusted look and looks back at the door handle , the meaning of which is clear.

“No Patsy, we’re not going back inside until you pee.” I walk out into the yard a bit to encourage her to get away from the door. “C’mon Patsy, take a pee.”

“Master, do not let me discourage thee from performing this noble deed thyself.”

“Ok Patsy, let me show you.” I unzip my pants and relieve myself, thinking that she won’t be able to resist, much like watching someone else yawn, but no, she remains on the porch like a statue. Now I’m getting a little peeved. “Ok Patsy, now c’mon over here.” She walks over reluctantly and follows me languidly around the yard making a few desultory sniffs here and there but no squatting down. Finally I am getting cold and I relent and we go back inside. Patsy pushes me aside and goes back in front of the TV. She’s not really interested in what’s on TV but by lying in front of the TV we are obliged to be looking at her at the same time as we watch the TV. My wife asks me, “Did Patsy take a pee?” I don’t want to go back outside so I lie and say “Yes.” I give Patsy a dirty look but she quickly looks away. “Master, do not blame me for declaring a falsehood to the cooker of food. It is thou who speaks false, not I.” I’m determined that next time I will stay outside until she pees, come hell or high-water.

There is nothing so delicious as to sit in the yard in the summer months and listen to the Tigers’ baseball game. Of course Patsy is always near at hand, happy to be hanging out with the Master. The beauty of listening on the radio is that you can follow the action of the game while still being aware of your surroundings and interacting with others. Ernie Harwell, the Tigers announcer, painted such a perfect picture of the action that is was almost as good as being there and sometimes even better. There are some enormous poplar trees in the yard and their gentle rustling adds to the charm of the scene as I gaze down the street at the lake beyond. Occasionally one of the neighbors will stroll by and we will exchange greetings and they might even ask about the game. Inside is the sound of my wife doing the dishes. There is still a lot of daylight as summers in Northern Michigan remain light until ten or later. My mind is on the game but my eyes wander around the yard at the birds, flowers, the house and anything else which captures my interest. I might spot a squirrel in the yard looking for something to eat.

“Hey Patsy, who let that squirrel in the yard?”

Hearing her name she glances up at me. Her mind must have been elsewhere because she doesn’t take my hint to chase the squirrel.

“Patsy, what’s that squirrel doing in our yard?”

She looks at me keenly so as to decipher the intention of my words. She can interpret a thousand gestures and read a face better than a psychologist but her vocabulary is limited to a few dozen words like car, dinner, go for a walk, go for a ride, etc. I point out the innocent little beast prancing about our yard. “That squirrel is dissing you Patsy.” She looks a little more keenly now but not so interested as to rise from her resting spot. “Are you a dog or not? Are you going to let that squirrel mock you?” She glances at the squirrel to determine its offense and then looks up at me. “Does that little beast offendeth thee Master? Is it really so important? Are we not so comfortable here in our yard side by side, you with your guru soothing you with your master’s voice coming from the box and I , minding my own business, dreaming my private dreams? Let us allow this little creature to go about his business. Surely he is beneath our attention.”

“Patsy! What’s that squirrel doing in our yard? C’mon Patsy, he’s *mocking* you!” Of course the squirrel is doing nothing of the kind but Patsy can tell by the tone of my voice that I am not going to drop the matter so she gets up and makes a half hearted charge at the squirrel who easily escapes and nimbly scampers up one of the huge poplars. She trots back to her place by my side but gives me a look before lying down. “Well Master, are thee satisfied now? Have I done my duty to your liking?” But I was ignoring her now. The Tigers had two men on and I had to focus on the game. I tend to find things for Patsy to do between innings when I hate to listen to commercials. Talking to Patsy is better than listening to commercials. The batter strikes out to end the inning and Patsy hears me groan and looks to see what has caused my displeasure. “It’s too bad you can’t understand the game Patsy but you’re just a dog. Sorry.”

The evenings are pretty peaceful. To keep the kids from fighting among themselves I sit on the floor and play board games with them. Patsy wants to be a part of the scene so she lies as close as possible, often rolling over right onto the playing surface of the board disrupting the pieces and their arrangements. I drag her a few feet away where she will be out of the way. She gives me a look and when she thinks we aren’t paying attention she inches closer. Every once in awhile I am forced to mildly scold her and pull her away again. “Patsy!” I’ll say, more disappointed than angry. Then the little one chirps in, “Patsy! You’re just a dog!” There, she’s said it. Already they are imitating your bad habits. “Face it Patsy; you’re just a dog!” Patsy gives me a lugubrious look.

“Master, is it not enough that you, the lord, should scold me so, but now dost thou permit the little one to mock me so? Cannot I be part of the game? Am I not part of the family?”

“Patsy, you can’t play;” the little one mocks, “you don’t have hands to roll the dice!”

“Now, now, she can’t help it.” I intervene because Patsy looks so sad. “She’s just a dog,” I say, “but she’s a *good* dog!”

Patsy, hearing a kind word from the Master takes this for a cue and rolls over on her back in order to offer her stomach to be scratched. Her tale swipes the pieces off the board and the kids yell but I scratch her stomach and all is forgiven once again.