

CHAPTER

The most common reaction Ella elicits from strangers is glee. Like a master comedian who needs only arch an eyebrow or cock his head to induce laughter, her mere presence inspires smiles in people who might otherwise be having a bad day.

Old men strolling through our neighborhood with their grandchildren pause to pat her head and coo at her in Russian. Slacker Hollywood dudes with tattoos and facial pierces interrupt their cataloguing of the world into things that are “cool” and things that “suck” to scratch Ella’s butt. And aspiring actress babes who normally would try mightily to not acknowledge my presence, lest they somehow dilute their marketable allure by talking with someone who isn’t a producer-agent-director-manager or member of an indie-label rock band, drop all pretense of distant unattainable-ness and profess to me that my dog is the most gorgeous-cute-adorable-sweet-precious thing they’ve *ever* seen. (My single male friends, who frequently borrow her for walks, refer to Ella as the Ultimate Chick Magnet.) Like one of the world’s great religions, Ella brings solace and happiness into people’s lives – and she doesn’t molest altar boys or declare *jihad*. She’s blessed, like so many dogs, with the capacity for creating joy in this world.

One day I was listening to a recording of the great depression-era entertainer Ted Lewis, whose bouncy signature song, “Is Everybody Happy?”, was at the time of its conception a palliative pick-me-up first and a musical number second. Here was a guy endeavoring with all his strength to “bring a little sunshine” into an otherwise gloomy time. Old Dr. Lewis had a prescription: cheer up; life ain’t so bad! (Even if you *had* lost everything in the stock market crash.) And it seemed to work for millions of dour

Americans, not to mention me seventy years later. I noticed concurrently that my mutt Ella was a lot like Ted Lewis – although she didn't play the clarinet and repeatedly utter the phrase, "Yes, sir!" She was adept at spreading around a little homemade sunshine.

Whenever we would run an errand, go for a hike, or loiter in the front yard, she effortlessly – and, to my mind, magically – had this salutary effect on people. After a lifetime of witnessing her good works I eventually had an idea. Ella (and her dad) could be spreading joy to people who really needed it, not just random strangers. (It only took me about eight years to make this realization; I was a little slow on this one.) We could take "Ella in Concert" to people who couldn't otherwise attend my mutt's impromptu performances.

I had read about dogs that participated in "animal therapy," visiting hospitals and nursing homes and children's shelters, providing needy patients with health benefits as profound as rediscovering lost motor skills or as simple as inspiring a smile. Ella Guinevere Konik, it seemed to me, would be a perfect candidate for such noble service.

Researching the subject via Internet, I discovered that being an animal therapy dog wasn't as simple as just showing up at a hospital and being cute. Dogs – and their human handlers – needed to be certified by an accredited organization which insured the animals, arranged visits, and generally promoted the cause of animal-assisted therapy. This certification involved attending workshops, passing a home study course, and successfully completing a 15-task behavioral test.

When I went to an orientation session at Create-a-Smile, the Santa Monica-based non-profit group that oversees therapy animals in the Los Angeles area, I learned that

Ella would be a perfect candidate for their program. Except for one thing: I didn't think there was the slightest possibility that she could pass the behavioral test.

Fourteen of the 15 tasks would be easy for her. But the other one – socializing comfortably with other therapy animals – would be impossible.

Ella, like every tragic hero, has a flaw, a defect that mars her otherwise perfect character. She's very mean to other dogs.

People? Nice as can be. Babies, children, boys, girls, men women – couldn't be sweeter. But dogs? Well, if they stay off her territory and far, far away from her daddy, she'll ignore them. But if they come close to her garden, or, even worse, within a few yards of me, Ella gets insanely aggressive.

It's only with me. I suspect she thinks she's "protecting" me from interlopers who might disrupt our pack. Or maybe she's just a jealous bitch.

Several years ago I rescued a stray mutt who was wandering the neighborhood tired and hungry. To Ella's chagrin, I welcomed this fellow into our home and named him Louis. It was not a duet she appreciated. Used to monopolizing my attention, Ella was furious that she was now being asked to share everything – her water bowl, her food, her dad's affection. And in the language of canines, whose vocabulary includes hackle-raising and fang-baring, she suggested to Louis that not only did she not consider their relationship "A Fine Romance." If she had her way she would propose, "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off."

Ella shed no tears when Louis departed our home a few months after he arrived. In fact, when he ran off to another owner, her demeanor noticeably brightened. But she

became permanently unpleasant to other dogs, fearful that any one of them might be the next unwanted intruder on her turf.

When I posed the quandary to my daddy, who knew all the tricks to get a dog to behave properly, he suggested a kind of immersion therapy in which I was supposed to take Ella to Runyan Canyon every day and force her to socialize with all sorts of strange dogs – and every time she snarled, growled, or snapped, I was supposed to impress upon her the extreme badness of her conduct. That training method lasted exactly one day. No matter how much I scolded and cajoled and punished, Ella resolutely refused to get the message. In fact, she seemed to be sending a message to me: “Accept me as I am, dude. I’m not going to change.”

Damn that infernal unconditional love! I brought her home from the canyon, muttering all the while how she could never be a certified therapy animal with her rotten attitude. She wagged her tail at me.

Like most people who play the game of golf, I’m an optimist at heart – even when my optimism is entirely unwarranted. (Unless you’re a dedicated masochist, you can’t play golf unless you retain some hope, no matter how slim, that it’s all eventually going to get a wee bit better.) I convinced myself that though Ella and I would surely fail the behavior test, our otherwise kind disposition would somehow earn us a waiver into the animal therapy program and we would redeem ourselves with good works and cheerfulness. Or a variation on that theme.

So I went ahead and did the home study course and attended the boring workshops and signed up to take the Test – reminding the poor receptionist who was booking the appointment that Ella was actually a really very nice and sweet dog who

made many people smile and whose lifetime of unintentional charity should somehow be rewarded by a passing grade even if she did, you know, sometimes sort of act like Cujo toward other dogs.

The Thursday morning we were scheduled to be evaluated at the Create-a-Smile headquarters, Ella nearly propelled herself through the antique iron fence that surrounds our front yard in an attempt to express her displeasure at a Great Dane who had the gall to walk on the sidewalk in front of our home. My optimism was waning.

When we arrived in Santa Monica, the first thing the evaluator, Daniella, asked me was, “How’s Ella with other animals?”

“Well,” I said, trying to come up with the right phrase that wasn’t exactly a lie. “She’s. . .”

“Because we have a lot of cats here,” Daniella explained. “Is she all right with cats?”

“Oh, she’s great with cats! She lives with a cat. No problem whatsoever with cats!”

“Good. So everything should go smoothly.”

“Right,” I said, swallowing hard.

We cruised through the first bunch of exercises. Sitting, staying, lying down -- this was child’s play for Ella. Heeling, walking through a crowd, remaining in place despite loud noises – easy for an old pro like her. Rough petting, ignoring a misplaced dog cookie, being approached by someone on crutches – all part of Ella’s standard repertoire.

Then, while Ella was demonstrating her ability to stay for two minutes on one side of the room while I waited on the other, Daniella said to me, “She’s doing great. After this I’ll go get Doctor Buddha, my pug, and we’ll finish up.”

“We’re ready” I said perkily, hoping that Buddha’s small stature would somehow present less of a threat to Ella’s 73-pound ego. Maybe my mutt would understand that the good Doctor wasn’t going to come home with us, because he was a pure-bred, and we were a home of mongrels. Maybe Daniella would interpret Ella’s patented lip peel, in which she steadily drew back her jowls to expose her incisors, as a smile. Maybe the Mohawk of hair down her spine would seem to our evaluator an innovative new doggie coiffure.

When Daniella left the room, I kneeled on one knee and put my lips near Ella’s peach-tipped ear. “Listen,” I told her. “This is really important. I’m begging you: please be nice to this other dog. I really need you to be a good girl now. Please, Ella. Please be a good girl for your daddy.”

Ella’s brown eyes met mine and she licked my chin. I didn’t know if that meant “OK, just this once,” or that I was excreting tasty nervous perspiration.

Daniella returned with Doctor Buddha, who panted and gasped in that peculiar pug fashion, as though he had emphysema. He was on a leash, but he never left Daniella’s heel, and he seemed only perfunctorily interested in the presence of a huge white Lab-Greyhound beast in his playroom.

Ella sat at my side, feigning aloofness.

Daniella and Buddha walked toward us and stopped two feet away. “Hello!” Daniella said, extending her hand. “I’m Daniella, and this is my dog, Doctor Buddha.”

“Hello!” I said, shaking her hand. “My name’s Michael, and this,” I said, looking cautiously at the impending disaster sitting beside me, “is my dog Ella.”

She looked straight ahead, still as a portrait model. Buddha looked up at her; she glanced down at him. I felt as though I were standing between two gunslingers waiting for the other guy to blink.

“Good,” Daniella said. “We’ll just stand here chatting for a little while and see what happens.”

“Sure,” I said, watching the clock on the wall behind her as though I were holding my breath underwater.

Doctor Buddha sat and panted, pausing once to investigate an itch near his butt. Ella watched, outwardly placid as a high-stakes poker player.

I took great care to focus my gaze on Daniella, and not the other dog – a self-preservation technique I’ve learned from walking around Hollywood with my girlfriend. It seemed to work well with Ella, too. She was convinced – or agreed to play along – that I had eyes for no one but her, that the panting pug sitting two feet from her powerful jaws represented nothing but a potentially interesting new thing to sniff.

“Wow. She’s *really* good,” Daniella commented. “I’m impressed.”

“Me, too,” I thought.

“That went well.” Daniella extended her hand again. “Nice to meet you. We’re going to go now. ‘Bye, Ella!’”

“Good bye, Daniella. ‘Bye, Buddha. See you soon!’” I watched them walk out of the room.

I turned to look at Ella. She smiled at me.

“Thank you! Oh, god, you are so good. What a good girl! I am so proud of you.” I felt tears welling in my eyes, so I stopped, fearful we might get downgraded for emotional instability. Ella wagged her tail and accepted a behind-the-ear scratch.

Daniella returned from her office clutching papers, sans Dr. B. “Congratulations,” she said, “you guys passed. Great job. You’re now an animal-assisted therapy team. Both of you did very well.”

I knelt down and hugged my mutt. “Way to go, partner.”

Ella licked my face from chin to forehead, cleaning up the teardrops I no longer had to restrain. “We did it,” I whispered to her.

And by the way she was licking my cheeks up and down, you would have sworn Ella Konik was nodding, “Yes, we did!”

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Being all-white, Ella looks good in almost any color. She has a collection of bandanas that she wears as scarves, including a fetching leopard-spot number that matches her eyes and lips, and an American flag motif that expresses her patriotism, and a menageries of solid colors that match the schemes of whatever sports team her daddy happens to be rooting for on a particular day. But I thought her new red service vest was especially flattering on her – and even more so with her title embroidered across the back and a “I Work for Hugs and Kisses” patch sewn onto one the side pockets.

After getting certified, I acquired all the accoutrements an animal therapy team needs to look and feel its best: official Create-a-Smile t-shirts; laminated identification

cards (featuring Ella sitting on my lap); and, of course, the red “therapy dog” vest, which made my mutt look very much like a professional guide dog or a waiter in a schlocky Italian restaurant.

After an orientation visit to observe an experienced therapy team, Ella and I were on our way to our first solo assignment at a Westwood nursing home optimistically called the Country Villa, despite its proximity to a Santa Monica Boulevard gas station and industrial furniture outlet. I was more nervous than she. Our training had covered nearly every circumstance that could arise, every catastrophe that could occur, and I was supposed to know how to handle all of them. But I wondered if all this joy-spreading business was worth all the mishigoss. Ella, I figured in a moment of panic, probably would prefer to be playing in her back yard, spying on tight-rope walking squirrels.

Then I looked at her in the back seat of my car, wearing her official red vest, looking preposterously cute, and I couldn’t help smiling.

And making people smile, I decided then, was definitely worth the troubles.

When we arrived at the Country Villa, I realized that much of my anxiety wasn’t about Ella. It was about me.

I have, among other quirks, a profound fear of death and decay, of mortality and decline. Places like hospitals and nursing homes scare me and depress me, possibly more than they do the average sensitive type. As far as sites go, they’re not my first choice at which to do volunteer work. But I knew that they’re also the places that most need a dose of canine happiness.

When Ella and I first walked up the stairs and into the facility, we were confronted with the Boschian specter of badly disabled septuagenarians, many of them in

obvious states of dementia, sprawled across mobile hospital beds and wheelchairs, staring into the distance, searching for their memories. I felt a wave of panic. Ella, though, regarded these people as a group of potentially affectionate human beings who might be fun to visit – which, I realized, was probably how they would like to be regarded if neurotic young men could be as egalitarian and kind as a nine-year-old dog.

“Thanks for being here with me,” I said to Ella, who was preoccupied with sniffing the Country Villa’s carpeting.

The activity coordinator, a smiling Filipino man, greeted us near the entrance and invited us to wander the hallways, popping into rooms with open doors. He didn’t think we needed an escort or supervision. “Everyone will be happy to see you,” he promised.

I adjusted Ella’s red vest and checked her collar, and then I took a deep breath. “OK, old girl. Let’s go meet some new people.”

In less than a minute, I knew we were doing a good thing.

The first patient we encountered was parked outside his room, sitting upright on a wheeled gurney. His mouth was frozen agape, probably from a stroke, and his arms dangled at his side, paralyzed. He was bald and pale, and his blue eyes were rheumy. He did not look happy.

Ella and I approached the side of his bed, and just as the Create-a-Smile people had trained me, I cheerfully exclaimed, “Hello! I’m Michael, and this is my dog Ella. She’s very friendly and loves to meet new people. Would you like to say hello to her?”

The man’s eyes moved infinitesimally in my direction, but he didn’t move.

“Oh, Dick doesn’t talk much,” a uniformed nurse said, coming out of Dick’s bedroom. “Do you like the doggie, Dick? She’s very nice.”

“This is Ella,” I said.

“Can I pet her?” the nurse asked.

“Of course!”

The nurse knelt down and stroked Ella’s back while I stood beside her. Ella seemed preternaturally calm.

We exchanged the usual pleasantries about my dog – what breed, how old, how long have I had her, how did she get trained – and then the nurse took Dick’s left hand in hers and rested it upon the top of Ella’s head, slowly moving Dick’s palm back and forth across Ella’s brow.

He didn’t move. But when the nurse removed Dick’s hand from Ella’s soft fur, I saw something change in his eyes, as though a flicker of recognition and light had pierced the murkiness. “Nice dog,” he croaked.

The nurse gasped. “Dick!” She replaced his hand. And to me she said, “He almost never talks!”

“Wow,” I said, stunned.

The nurse cooed to Dick, “Do you like the doggie? She’s nice, isn’t she, Dick?”

Dick never moved. But the smile he couldn’t form with his mouth flashed in his eyes.

“You’re a good girl, Ella,” I told her. “You’re a very good girl.”

She looked up at me with a face that said, “I know.”

Indeed, Ella displayed a calm confidence, an assurance in this unfamiliar environment that I found oddly inspiring, as though she were trying to impart a lesson her daddy needed to learn. When we encountered a manic woman in a wheelchair, who was

orating in a language of her own invention that included bits of English, Spanish, French, and possibly Latin – I picked up a few references to Satan and the number 666 – I was momentarily nonplussed, and more than a little concerned. The woman seemed, well, crazy, and perhaps prone to upsetting outbursts. I looked to my mutt. As the babbler wheeled past, Ella sat calmly at my side and barely twitched an eyebrow.

We spent the rest of our hour at Country Villa meeting residents like Dahlia, a 102-year-old dog lover who accepted Ella's kisses on her hands as though they were a magic arthritis balm. We met Leonard, who was so overjoyed by Ella's visit that he occasionally broke into silent sobs. (First I thought he was laughing; then I thought Ella might have somehow hurt him; finally I realized that Leonard's emotions were as mysterious to him as they were to those of us not employing wheelchairs.) And we had the great pleasure of chatting with Mr. Strauss, who confessed he couldn't possibly remember my or Ella's name, but who, nonetheless, could still play virtually every Chopin Nocturne and Beethoven Sonata from memory – and proved it on a portable electronic keyboard he kept beside his bed. We sang "Someone to Watch Over Me" together while Ella, by now immune to her daddy's warblings, reclined at Mr. Strauss's side. "She's a sweetheart," he said. "I hope you'll come back again soon with her. I'm sorry. What's your name again?"

Before we departed, one of the nurses asked if we might look in on Johnny, who, she whispered, was "not doing very well."

I was not prepared for Johnny's condition. He appeared to be a man in his 40s who had somehow aged into an octogenarian. His face resembled a concentration camp

victim's, so sunken were his cheeks and so drawn his skin. Indeed, his entire body, tucked into a hospital bed, was not much larger than Ella's.

"He's got cirrhosis of the liver," the nurse informed me. "He's in bad shape."

I looked to Ella for comfort and steeled my nerves. "Hello, Johnny!" I said, cheerfully as I could muster. "My name's Michael, and this is my dog Ella. Would you like to meet her?"

He screwed up his brow, apparently in great pain.

"Johnny loves dogs," the nurse said, stroking his bony shoulder. "Don't you Johnny?"

Johnny moaned.

I positioned Ella beside his bed. "Would you like to pet her, Johnny? She loves being pet."

Johnny nodded slowly and moaned again.

"He has trouble moving his hands," the nurse explained.

I remembered from my training a technique employed by highly experienced animal-assisted therapy teams. Although it was our first day in the field, I knew Ella could do it – and that somehow she'd be happy to have met the challenge.

"If you'd like," I said to Johnny and his nurse, "Ella can get in bed."

"Oh! Well!" the nurse exclaimed looking at my 73-pound partner. "Would you like that, Johnny?"

He nodded slowly and moaned.

"OK. Sure," she said.

I traced my hands over the sheets, feeling the outline of Johnny's withered frame underneath the fabric, clearly delineating where his legs and torso stopped and where open space began. "Do you want to pet the doggie, Johnny?" his nurse implored.

Johnny screwed up his brow, evidently in great discomfort, and squeezed out the word, "yes."

I led Ella to the foot of the bed, keeping one of my arms between her and Johnny's frail appendages. "OK, Ella," I said, tapping the mattress. "Get up!"

In one powerful bound, she leapt onto the bed.

At home, when Ella comes to bed she normally circles herself two or three times in that peculiar canine fashion, making a nest among the comforter and blanket. On this day, somehow sensing the delicacy of the circumstances, she laid down immediately, directly at Johnny's side.

"What a good girl," I reassured her. And then, without any bidding, Ella gently placed her muzzle across Johnny's torso, beside his hands.

His brow unfurled momentarily and he stroked her white neck with his knuckles and his wrists. Ella sighed.

"You like that, Johnny?" his nurse asked. "You like the doggie?"

Johnny nodded and closed his eyes, resting his hands upon Ella's warm fur. A certain peace enveloped him, and his breath seemed to slow.

The nurse and I watched them rest together, and I felt like a very proud papa.

When it was time to let Johnny have his nap, I asked Ella to stand straight up, and then, cradling her under her butt and her shoulders, I carefully lifted her down to the

ground, where she gave a prodigious full-body waggle, the kind that usually accompanies my announcement that we're going on a walk.

“Goodbye, Johnny,” I said, knowing this probably would be the last time I would see Johnny. “I'm very glad we got to visit with you.”

Johnny took a few labored breaths and said, “Thank you.”

When we said our farewells to all the residents of the Country Villa and arrived at the parking lot, I threw my arms around Ella and finally let myself cry. As I removed her vest and her collar, leaving her in her natural “naked” state, impossibly white and irresistibly pettable, I said to Ella, “You were great today, old lady. Can you please explain to me why you're such a good girl?”

Ella licked my chin and wagged her tail, and I got the feeling that she knew she'd done a *mitzvah*, even if she couldn't quite define in human language what that word meant.

* * *

Every week, once or twice a week, Ella and I visited nursing homes and hospitals, battered women's shelters and abused children's sanctuaries – any place where smiles were usually a rare commodity. Allowing dozens of strangers to pet and pat and poke her, Ella dutifully visited human beings in need – even when she probably preferred to be in Runyan Canyon, sniffing old urine markings in the dirt.

One morning we went to a clinic in Culver City that treated Alzheimer's patients. There, in a community activity room, Ella performed some of her best tricks: playing

“dead” until I told her that some guy with a net (the dogcatcher) was going to lock her up in the pound, at which point she awoke from her coma and jumped up to my lap; refusing to eat a dog cookie I proffered as “junk food” but gobbling it up when I assured her it was “healthy food”; demonstrating the difference between her right paw and her left, and then taking a bow. The patients adored her and seemed to understand everything Ella did; indeed, they asked to see her tricks again. And again. And again -- until I figured out that they were not so much impressed with Ella’s antics as they were unaware that they had made the same request five minutes earlier. (Ella didn’t mind. She got extra cookies.) When I offered a soft-bristle brush to one smiling lady, hoping she would enjoy helping me “groom” Ella (an animal therapy technique that encourages fine motor skills and the completion of a goal), she nodded vigorously and began to style the silver hair of the perplexed gentleman sitting next to her.

Working with the elderly and the confused, Ella (and I) became accustomed to repetition. Repetition of questions (How old is she? What kind of dog is she? How long have you had her? Is she nice?), repetition of activities (petting, grooming, kissing), and repetition of troubling visages (disfigured limbs, damaged skin, demented faces). Confronting unwell people every week was much harder on me than an Ella. I found it exhausting to remain upbeat and positive while surrounded by so much misery. Ella never seemed to mind. Strangely, she seemed to find it comforting and reassuring to have a weekly visitation routine, even if the strangers we were encountering were unlike the people she was used to playing with back home.

I think she came to understand that when I brought out her red therapy dog vest it meant we were going to work, and that required her best behavior and most serene

temperament. Usually, any journey outside our front door, whether to the dry cleaner around the corner or for a bike ride into the hills, inspires in Ella the kind of jiggling paroxysms generally seen in pubescent girls at an O-Town concert. But when it was time to leave the house to be a therapy dog, Ella seemed to understand that unrestrained exuberance wasn't appropriate. She seemed to know it was time to be a lady.

Her placid demeanor was put to a stern test one week when we visited a facility (hereafter referred to by the acronym ECF) that provides day care for severely developmentally disabled adults, people society used to refer to as "retarded." Populated by dozens of men and women with Downs syndrome and other maladies, the ECF campus, near downtown Los Angeles, provides supervised activities like personal grooming, games, and art to fill the days of citizens who otherwise cannot function in society. Nonetheless, to a visitor who has been conditioned by decades of media exposure to produce a relatively narrow definition of physical beauty and normalcy, a place like the ECF can be frightening in the magnitude of its Dickensian institutional suffering. Many of the clients had simian features and were no larger than an elementary school child. Many of the clients had severe dental problems and lacked oral communication skills. And many of them had vision problems and weight problems and, not the least of it, severe emotional traumas that someone like me could never fully understand. Despite the therapeutic activities the ECF staff had arranged for the clients, many of them spent their day staring uncomprehendingly into space, mute and seemingly present in body only.

Into this horrific atmosphere, enter Ella Guinevere Konik.

Even as her dad struggled with the shroud of sadness that threatened to envelop his heart, she did what she knew she ought to do: bring some joy, regardless of how fleeting or permanent, into the lives of everyone who seeks it, no matter what they look like or how they scream or any other irrelevancy that distracts us from the essential truth that dogs seem to know -- that every human being has a soul, and every soul needs some sunshine.

We visited every client of ECF that day, all 118 of them. One man, Alex, appointed himself Ella's official leash holder. Another fellow, Claudio, who the staff claimed had not previously interacted with his peers, took great care to instruct every new person we encountered how to "properly" pet Ella's back. (It involved stroking in a certain direction and pattern.) And one high-energy woman, Linda, who inexplicably vacillated between screams of exuberant pleasure and abject agony, made sure Ella got a fresh hug around her neck every five minutes.

At one point, Ella was in the "senior center," where ECF's older clients congregated. At the behest of their counselor, the entire group -- about a dozen -- swarmed around Ella in a tight semi-circle, alternately laughing and crying at her, chanting phrases I could not decipher. I looked to my mutt for signs of distress -- nervous panting and tail-wagging, hair-raising, pinning her ears back -- but she looked as regal and calm as a grand dame taking her seat at opening night of the opera. These were people, after all. And though they were unrecognizable and strange to the prejudiced eyes of someone like me, to Ella they were simply another group of two-legged creatures who wanted to touch her and talk to her and maybe play a game with her, just like every other two-legged creature she had ever met. That was her mission, wasn't it? To be the locus of attention, the furry

outlet for the human impulse to express affection and feel sensual pleasure. She was just doing her job, and doing it without the bigotry and judgmentalism that infects so much of our human intercourse.

As Ella sat at the center of this crowd of observers, a little man named Rodney emerged from the pack with his arm extended and a huge grin on his face.

“You want to pet the dog, Rodney?” his counselor asked.

Rodney nodded vigorously and lumbered toward Ella on increasingly unsteady legs.

“Watch out, Rodney!” his counselor warned, moments before Rodney tumbled sideways.

He crashed on the floor inches from Ella’s feet and tail.

She never moved.

Instead, as Rodney struggled to his knees and threw his arms around Ella’s broad shoulders for support, she served as an anchor to which Rodney could attach himself and regain his equilibrium.

Once righted, Rodney hugged Ella for a long and loving time.

I scratched behind one of her ears and looked her in the eye. “You’re so good, Ella,” I whispered to her. “I love you.”

And I decided then that my therapy dog, my inspiring teacher – my friend – deserved a reward, however small and inconsequential when measured against a life spent bringing happiness to all she meets. She should have more than dog cookies and extended fetch-the-ball sessions. I decided then that Ella Guinevere Konik should, if only temporarily, experience the world not as a hairy beast but as an elegant lady. I watched

her accept Rodney around her neck and Alex pulling her leash and Linda screaming in her face and all the rest of the strange strangers surrounding her, and I knew Ella had earned everything I wanted to give her.