

# White Russian

*It was the Nineties. They were each their own person. He was their dog.* —Contemporary greeting card

**P**icture a dog that's like a polar bear, with pointed ears but much the same black nose, melting brown eyes fringed by white lashes, and vanilla fur thick as yak hair, except on his face where it's short and cashmere, giving him the look of an Elizabethan gallant appraising the world from his ruff. Add a circle of black round each eye, as in images of Nefertiti, insert a wolf grin, the contrary intelligence of a Russian grand master, and haunches like a jackrabbit's. Finish with a tail like a centurion's plume and the high-stepping gait of a thoroughbred trotter.

*Voilà* Sam: a sled-dog who arrived as my children were leaving; who taught me new half-tones of love. That he also taught me all the mistakes I'd made raising my other kids was beside the point: I learned by repeating them. For offspring confirm identity. They show us, without much changing, what we are.

At 50, I no more meant to get a pet than swim the Channel. Neither my wife nor I had had a dog since what used to be called high school. Settled routines plus late-blooming allergies seemed to rule out most candidates. But with one son in college and another about to depart, something seeped in

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*Meet Sam,  
who's faster than the  
reindeer, if not  
the quickest learner  
in school.*

to fill this gap. Our friends said stupidity, an empty-nest syndrome out of control. Our boys insisted it was retrospective negligence, acquiring an animal they could no longer enjoy.

But whatever its name, it erupted one August, when my wife's broken foot revealed our heirs' inability to fetch even to minimum show requirements. By December, we found ourselves scanning the classifieds for hypoallergenic puppies. Huskies, we knew, ate the interiors of houses. Poodles were prone to nerves. But Samoyeds—ah, Samoyeds! Bred to herd reindeer by Siberian nomads, called “white ghost that breeds white,” impervious to the kind of severe cold where Arctic mules freeze solid, brought to the West by a Romanoff princess, Samoyeds were smart, gentle, affectionate, steady, strong. That they might also be stubborn and willful—thoroughly Russian—did not occur to us. What we knew then was they were beautiful, and oh-so-white.

So I found myself driving through rural Virginia one pale Christmas morning. I was blissfully unaware that libraries on dog psychology had erupted since my beagle days. I did not know that a buyer should inspect pups in their litter—and avoid dominant *alphas* like the plague. I did not even know that Samoyeds—if not their sellers—were famous as “dogs with Christmas in their hearts.”

BY MICHAEL LEVIN

## How's he different? What other dog rides in the rear seat, its arm on the door

But events soon fixed that. At the rambling house past Battlefield Estates, strewn with preschoolers, Christmas wrappings, and the debris of eight paper-trained puppies, the sellers had washed only the *alpha*. His siblings were gray balls of reek. But the Candidate appeared snow-white and mint-scented, still shivering from his bath. He took a few hesitant pads toward us, whimpering. His dark eyes shone. His silky ears flopped. He licked my ankle, poked an inquisitive black muzzle into my wife's pocket. When we set him outside to see him in sunlight, he trotted instantly to the door from which his brothers and sisters peered, yelping over his separation.



*Sam's handler barely managed to keep her Reeboks.*

That is the end of us. Steering home with that clump of fur curled inside a jacket sleeve, I drive tenderly, as when I returned our firstborn from the hospital. I keep half the speed limit, avoiding bumps, forgetting to erase the goofy grin from my face. Only later do I find that country pups are killed when they can't be disposed of. If we hadn't picked this one, he might be dead by now.

A family council convenes to name the puppy. One son proposes "Grendel"; the other "Crash." Though he's curled in a wine crate, his pink pads sweating from the stress of the move, this white mite, it is understood, will be huge and fierce, an *uberpet*. We settle on Sam, unaware that most Samoyeds in the country are called Sam or Samantha. The others all seem to be Misha, regardless of sex.

Then suddenly, I'm in the midst of child-rearing again, the house littered with chew-toys, retractable leashes, and six-inch pacifiers; rooms and stairs are gated against unlawful entry, the ground floor puppy-proofed, filling up with cable-stakes, slicker brushes, and other exotic equipment. We even have a bedsong for Sam, as we did for our toddlers. "In the tundra there's a dog," it runs, its notes dropping Slavonically, "Who likes to pull a sled./ In the tundra there's a dog/ And his name is Sam O. Yed. . . ." And so on, for 40 verses.

Suddenly, we're on everyone's mailing list. Three vets, who send Sam idiot newsletters ("Paws for Thought") and postcards like strip-mall dentists' ("It's time for your Parvo booster. Please ask your Mom to call for an appointment"). The Samoyed Clubs of the Potomac and America, transmitting show news and grooming tips. Mail-order houses proffering diet supplements, wholesale antibiotics, and jumbo travel crates,

in four-color catalogues. Spinners of Samoyed wool and weavers of dog cloth, offering French looms or new fur/fleece combinations. The Executive Pet Center, which sends Sam personalized letters pushing "spring cleaning" for Samoyeds ("with pedicure, body massage, and double comb-out"). Similar missives offering Christmas boarding deals ("including skylights, radiant floor heat, spacious suites, and gourmet meals for all our guests"). Summer camps whose rates exceed my

college tuition. And the *pièce de résistance*, the *Who's Who of American Pets* (A "red-bound, hard-cover book that lists each pet alphabetically by name, followed by the pet's home town, state, and biography. No special qualifications or pedigrees required. Get listings in early to avoid the last-minute rush").

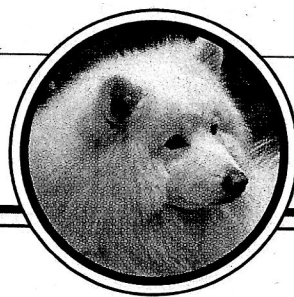
Not to mention the training schools certified to grant undergraduate Companion Dog (as in "Sam, CD"), graduate ("CDX"), and postgraduate ("Utility Dog") degrees. The psychiatrists specializing in canine neuroses, or Prozac dogs. ("Is your pet poorly socialized?" their flyers ask: "Afraid of people? Does she worry the same old bone?") The leaflets for pet major-medical insurance at Gold Tag coverage levels—pre-existing conditions excluded.

Or the anonymous notes from "we animal defenders" on Alzheimer's Support Group letterheads, stating they were "dismayed, disheartened, and angry to observe your beautiful dog languishing in discomfort in the sub-40-degree weather. . . . Perhaps you have not been made aware of the crippling joint, bone, and muscle afflictions large dogs get if exposed to wet, damp soil? Perhaps you are not aware of bedding materials, such as heating pads, for use outdoors? Perhaps you will make other arrangements. . . ?" Though Sam is most alive when winds pile three-foot drifts past our door. Those times, in fact, are his beach days.

And suddenly, I'm back in the pre-school cycle, driving car-pools, filing anxious applications. Puppy Kindergarten is a success, I reckon. After eight weeks, Sam knows *sit* and *down*—and where everyone's treats are hidden. Though he bolts for the door his first time off leash and is much more interested in play-time than *stay*, he gets his certificate based on charm and attendance. He almost neutralizes the director's conviction—which I am convinced violates Federal education laws—that Northern dogs are slow learners. He even overcomes my mother-in-law's triumphant glance when he plays *déad* before half a hundred



rest, like Macmillan going to meet Kennedy?



## White Russian

watchers. *Aha*, that satisfied glance says, *at last you've got a child as aggravating as mine*. My mother provides no glance; she's too stunned we've gotten a dog to respond.

But Basic Training is another matter. Sam bridles and regresses—acting out family tensions, one trainer tells us. Overstressed by our expectations, another adds. Our guilt weighs heavy when cheese and peanut butter make no impression. Sam continues to see his leash as his lunch. He views hand-signals as insults. He circles left when he should head right, plops down smiling rather than come. His figure eights are disasters, stretched to tetrahedrons by rocketing pulls that nearly rip my wife, the official handler, out of her Reeboks.

In the final obstacle course, Sam bypasses the barriers like any sensible boot-camp recruit. Instead, he heads straight for the cookie tray while Rottweilers and retrievers run steeplechase routines. At graduation, the chief trainer takes Sam's handler aside. The school has standards, he says, breathing earnestly. Sam will get his biscuit, but her commands are too weak for a certificate. "That's O.K.," my spouse replies in a burst of inspired diplomacy, "Sam and I have learned a lot. We've achieved *our* educational objectives."

**D**espite academic angst, Sam continues not just to do and go, but to grow and grow. Six pounds on arrival, he weighs well over 50 a few months later, though he seems much larger, given his multilayered coats, like a nose tackle wearing three parkas. Nevertheless, he streaks like a greyhound, haunches surging in the drive of an animal born to mush miles each day, with an exuberant final bound as he chases terrified squirrels. Eventually, he learns to pee like a boy instead of squatting—there are no bushes or hydrants on the tundra, I realize—though he sometimes lifts the wrong leg.

And one day, the world expands when he decides on his own to come. Leaping over deadfalls, flashing through the underbrush, he explodes onto the forest trail before us, a dazzling white fuselage with ears and tail erect, proudly leading his pack. Which is where, like any *alpha*, he will prefer for the rest of his life to be.

Dogs are not supposed to have rights, according to the authorities: they should let you take even food from their mouths without a growl. But either Sam is not a dog, or he's arrogated a slate of rights anyway: The right to poke me awake with his



*Sam's daddy or Sam's son—sometimes it's hard to tell.*

paw each morning, signaling time to get out. To sleep upside down on air-conditioning vents, pads skyward, a white blur broader than the staircase, its belly at the mercy of fate. To swipe any handkerchief from my trouser pocket (long snout easing the fabric free, then shaking it like a mouse to make sure it's dead), because handkerchiefs are there.

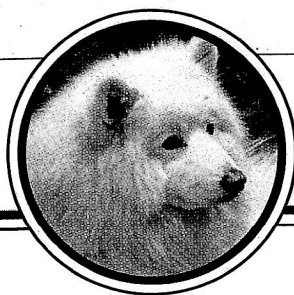
So what, some may say. How's that different from other dogs? But other dogs don't shell peanuts or pick blueberries,

rolling them delicately between an upper and a lower tooth. Every other dog doesn't ride the rear seat with its arm on the door rest, like Macmillan being driven to meet Kennedy. Few dogs greet Holsteins with that exuberant ritual drop to the elbows which says *Let's play!* Or housebreak themselves in a week, using a precise vocabulary of yips and murmurs to signal *Let me out . . . let me in*. And no other dog I know causes pile-ups in parking lots, as drivers screech to a halt gawking.

Taking Sam for a walk is like chaperoning Miss America. I first suspected something when I found him in the playground at the corner, getting a whole-body massage from a clutch of giggling first-graders. Then, I discovered corner-school graduates visiting from all over the city. I've grown accustomed to the gifts deposited on our lawn, the drop-bys by total strangers, the pangs of being defined by this new relationship ("Oh, you're *Sam's daddy!*").

I've even gotten used to the compulsion that seizes otherwise reticent adults to recite their life stories while running their fingers through his fur. "Liver!" wheezes one oldster, sidling up outside a supermarket. "Boiled liver! He'll live 20 years, like mine." A dozen times each month, passersby pull their cars to the sidewalk, exclaiming that they grew up with a Sammy, or drive sleds with them in Minnesota, or took one as the trophy in a divorce settlement. A city councilwoman wells up in tears when she spots Sam at a Fourth of July parade. She's had two, she confides, and has never gotten over them.

Understand, life with Sam is no bowl of cherries. For one thing, he's usually three steps ahead of me. I have to beware putting on baseball caps, if I don't want to be seized by the wrist and hauled outside to go running. I'd best pay attention when he lunges for the car and halts imperially by the passenger handle, meaning *Drive me to the park*. And there's no point closing the front door when others can be nudged open. Sam understands latches.



## Sam's Gift of Self

Greater love hath no woman for her dog and her child than to knit a scarf from one to warm the other. So when our son went off to a college that gets 200 inches of snow each year, leaving behind five sacks of fluff from Sam's brushes, the deal seemed made in heaven. Like most such matches, it was more difficult to sustain than my wife supposed. But the prospect of a blue ribbon for crafts ("miscellaneous knitting" category) to go with Sam's blue for best-of-breed proved a powerful lure.

Like the stages of a folk tale, the first hurdle appeared when this quest started. What Rapunzel would spin Sam's wool? It needed carding, swift, washing, skeining, and scouring—over an hour's hard work per ounce of knittable fiber, even with appliances. And only six spinners, all elderly Hoosiers, were listed in our 20-year-old *Complete Samoyed*, the family's new Bible.

But Adam begat Seth, and hope begets possibility; it turned out that such spinners were having a renaissance. It also turned out that we did not attend our first meeting of the Potomac Samoyed Club just to play with the puppies. My wife was on the trail of a flyer from "Bobbi" ("Samoyed knitting, design and Obedi-

ence Club member"). She had warps rather than woofs on her mind.

Bobbi had answers to every question. Did we save Sam's combings? They should be kept in paper bags, to avoid accumulated moisture. Did we want luxury fabric? It should be spun half with merino wool, since Samoyed fur was too fine. The long guard-hairs must be removed, unless we planned tufts for a rug ("It never shows dog hair, says proud Mrs. Duffy, pictured with her Samoyeds on the 8 x 10 foot rug she made of their fur"). Tummy down was frowned upon; the soft undercoat from shoulders was preferred. But best of all, insisted Bobbi, was the chance to learn about Sam through his wool. She would know him better than his mother after that, she said.

The next day went out by U.P.S. seven sacks of Sam fur, including two secretly collected by his sitter. A month later, just in time for my wife's summer birthday, the first half returned as three skeins of white yarn, accompanied by a printed card which announced—as though we might mistake it—that this was "Sammy Stuff. Hand Loomed by Bobbi."

But how should the scarf be designed? My wife consulted the Heath Hen

("Yarns & Quilts"), whose staff convened to debate the question. They recommended knit one, purl one, a pattern that would highlight the texture of the wool. They also recommended round bamboo rather than aluminum needles, as "more intimate, comfortable, and warm."

In a mere five weeks, Sam's leavings were transformed into a Gorgeous Garment, 18 inches wide and six feet long, thick, silky, and luminescent. Unfortunately, Sam thought it was one of his brothers and constantly tried to rattle it. We instituted measures to protect it from sneak attacks.

Even more unfortunately, we had flunked the guard hair test: it was warm but scratchy, especially when wrapped high on the neck. A lining seemed required. Polyester was out of the question. So, for opposite reasons, was cloth of gold. But should it be silk, or wool? In two pieces or one? Where should the seams fall, not to rub?

My faithful wife consulted the Decorator Fabric Shop, which convened another conference. Resolved, they concluded, only silk would do. My spouse balked at wedding-gown moire for \$70 a yard. Silk jacket liner at \$7 did not measure up. Silk thread was also rejected:

it was too strong, could cause puckers.

Finally, that huddle settled on a bolt of Indonesian weave five feet wide. At \$26, after an hour of fabric review, this swatch seemed a bargain, since a couple of yards would suffice.

But this choice raised another hurdle. The swatch required curving. With what, and by whom? Not my wife, who can't snip straight and foresaw a mountainous discard pile. Not the saleslady, a gray chignon who protected her inventory with a curt, "Silk rips, you know." "It's only cloth, don't let it intimidate you," injected one customer. "When I have to cut, I talk myself into it," added another. "This makes my day," a third remarked. Finally, the shop manager grasped the swatch in both hands and tore it with a single jerk.

Another month later—after bastings, muffled curses, mule praises, and brays—we had a finished scarf to deliver at Parents' Week. That it cost \$200 plus thousands in labor no longer mattered; by then, my wife was running on glory alone. That its recipient would have been equally happy with a \$9 school muffler was beside the point. For that garment was already on its way to the agricultural fair. If it didn't get lost first.

M.L.



cars, leptosporosis, and canine laws, the thousand shocks dog flesh is heir to.

For another thing, misjudging someone who accelerates like a *Katyusha* rocket can have consequences, as numerous sprains attest. That's especially true because Sam's dog desires are not always easy to decipher, though they're stunningly obvious to him.

This usually means I'm supposed to respond a quarter-second after they're expressed. In the beginning, for example, why did he fasten himself to my cuff like a sea-anchor, but only on the return leg of walks? It developed he'd learned *home now*, and wanted to carry his leash.

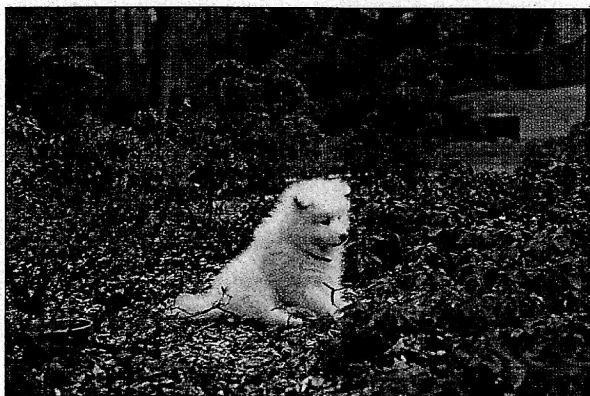
More puzzling were the angry growls when I sat down nights to catch up on office work. These were not, as my wife insisted, hostility to workaholism. Nor were they pleas for quality time. Instead, Sam was herding me like a reindeer, and would go peacefully to sleep when I climbed into bed, doused the lights, and pretended to snooze. That's when his herd was settled for the night.

Most mysterious was the way Sam met me each evening with furry affection, then changed into Hyde and attacked. No one else was treated to that schizophrenic combination of joyous chinlicks followed by a menacing rush. It turned out my nonauthoritarian tendencies had betrayed me again. Sam had decided once and for all who had the biggest teeth in the family. He'd determined I was his puppy, and was trying to keep me in line.

"Your last kid's going to college, and you got a *dog!*!" a novelist friend exclaimed. "You don't *want* to be free!" Now, novelists are our experts in relationships. But this half-serious reaction missed the deeper freedom of mutual obligations, those dependencies that reward because they constrain.

It's true I've had to find sitters once more, that I have to get home to let Sam out, that some routines are now verboten. It's also true that I seem to have repeated with Sam all the errors I perpetrated on my other sons. For instance, he puts on his brakes—neck arched, forelegs locked—with the same stubborn willfulness my older son shows in applying to just one graduate school. He eats my younger son's favorite caps for the same reasons that son once threw back a fish I caught. Sibling and Oedipal rivalry, psychoanalysts might say. But power, glee, and revenge would be more like it.

Of course, these resemblances might be accidents; my children have Russian blood, too. Those freewheeling, openheart-



*Does this not look like a dog with Christmas in his heart?*

ed, scorekeeping, naysaying character traits—the Russian temperament, always ready to bristle and argue and defend itself first—might be sufficient explanation. But I know where the parallels arise. I know why Sam is just as spoiled, acts just as entitled, is even less broken to responsibility than they. Unabashed adoration is not the best parenting technique. Some steel is required, too.

So it's not really an accident when, unloading my younger son's freshman possessions, I

happen to call him "Puppy." Or that Sam received college application forms in the mail last year. Or that my wife begins a recent conversation, "You know, when Sam was a dog. . . ." My mother-in-law inadvertently calls her daughters after a poodle that died decades ago: the roles get fused, transposed.

Yet, children wheel through our lives on rails of growth and ambition; we're merely their custodians for a while. That Sam will never grow up and fly away confers a special sweet poignancy on our affairs. If my wife and I went down in a plane crash, would Sam starve before the house was opened? Who would his new family be? If he got lost in another town, would I find him before the seven-day limit when most pound dogs are, as they say, destroyed? I am his shield against kidnappers, speeding cars, leptosporosis, and canine laws, the thousand shocks dog-flesh is heir to. Of these dark forces, he knows nothing, though they could transform his existence in an instant. Nor should he. It is a blessing, and my privilege, that he thinks the world his friend.

None of which explains why I dream of Sam on business trips, his light-footed form enlarging out of a void like the Pegasus holograph in Tri-Star credits. Or why my heart swells when he wins his second blue ribbon for best-of-breed at the agricultural fair, though he's also the only-in-breed. Or why blurbs about *The Aging Samoyed*—whose "greatest gift is spending his declining years at his master's side, a reward earned by a lifetime of intense participation in the whole of our existence"—bring the same tears to my eyes as Milne's lines about that enchanted place where the Boy and his Bear will always be playing.

If this is the Nineties and we are each our own person, we are also—and increasingly—our dogs'. For beneath such companionships lies something taut and shining, half-savage but innocent, the more precious because it will never be mutually articulated. Call it bonding, that rush of charged joy and excitement Sam sweeps into my rooms. If you like, call it love. END