

Lazy Boy Felix

by Dave Doroghy

As a widow raising two kids on her own in Vancouver in the 1960s and 1970s, my Swiss-born Mom had to rely on her wits to find enough work to support us. An experienced artist who sketched runway models in Paris in the 1930s, in Canada, Mom imported and resold cigars from Switzerland and rented out rooms in our basement to university and college students. For more than 20 years, while my sister and I were growing up, she also boarded pets at our house. The main boarders were cats and dogs whose besotted owners couldn't bear to leave them at a kennel or with a veterinarian. Over the years, we came to know many of these pets, and their owners, as good friends. One dog, however, a mongrel named Felix, stands out among them all. This is a story about how he earned his enduring, oh-so-appropriate nickname.

Caring for animals was a natural way for my Mom to support our family. First, my Mom loved animals and even sat on the Board of Directors of the SPCA. Second, we had a large house with two spare bedrooms Mom converted into cat hotels. (The dogs got prime treatment with a spot on my Mom's bed.) Finally, my Mom had a very engaging personality that earned the love and respect of the animal owners. Mom was a true character with a thick Swiss accent, sparkling eyes, a quick laugh, a warm heart and a very practical nature. Most of the relationships she had with pet owners lasted for many years.

Truthfully, the pet owners were a bit of an odd breed themselves. Many of them planned their holidays exclusively around Mom's ability to take in their pets and Mom kept a well-used day timer handy by the phone to track their reservations. It seemed as if people were always knocking on our door to drop off pampered pets but often, the delivery didn't go swiftly. Some owners found it very difficult to be separated from their pets even for a few weeks and I can recall owners who broke into tears as they departed our house, distraught at the thought of being away from their beloved cat or dog.

Most owners felt confident in my Mom's ability to love, pamper and care safely for their pets until they returned but some would call periodically, to check in on Rover or Fluffy during their boarding stay. Once, a woman who had traveled to Hawaii for a holiday actually called long distance and wanted to talk to her dog on our phone. Mom, eyes rolling, cheerfully obliged. Thankfully, the protective owner was an extreme case.

Since most of the pets were repeat customers it didn't take long for them to feel like family. Like a mother of picky toddlers, Mum knew exactly what they liked to eat and how they preferred to spend their days. She took them for long, slow walks three times a day. I remember as a 12-year-old wanting to pitch in and take a dog out for an afternoon walk but Mom declined my offer, explaining that only she knew exactly their preferred pace, sniffing times and routes. It was a mark of my approaching adulthood when she finally deigned to allow me to take "easier" dogs on supervised walks.

Mom never took in more than three small dogs at a time. That meant we shared our home with lots of poodles, terriers, and corgis, many of whom became almost honorary members of our family. I remember a pair of Dachshunds --Hansy and Rolfy-- who stayed with us twice a year over the course of 15 years. Hansy had some type of nervous personality disorder and always hid under our china cabinet. Another frequent guest was a small, hairless Mexican Chihuahua named Hercules. I think you would call most of these dogs lap dogs and that's exactly where they spent most of their time, on Mom's lap. I have many fond memories of coming home from school to find Mom watching television while relaxing in the easy chair nestled between three dogs and a couple of cats.

Since my sister and I were a pair of active kids with lots of friends, security at the house became a big issue. Having a boarded dog escape is far more serious than the family dog "getting out". A family pet would likely know the neighbourhood and find its way back home but a paying guest dog that escaped might never be seen again. My mother would have lots of explaining to do if that ever happened.

To prevent dogs from escaping, our house became a mini San Quentin prison with an elaborate series of wire gates to pass through. As you opened the front door you hit gate one. At the foot of the stairs to the main floor was gate two. Up the stairs into the living room brought you to gate three. Gate four was at the kitchen entrance. Other secondary gates were strategically placed throughout the house so that getting from one part of our family home to another was never easy. Still, Mom lived in constant fear of an outside door being left open and a dog getting out and so her standard greeting when we arrived home wasn't a sweet "how was your day?" or "did you have a nice time?" but rather a bellowed, "close the door!"

Partly because of her labour-intensive security system and her consistent "greeting," we never lost one animal. Returning pet owners would show up at our front door tanned, relaxed and overjoyed to see their darling little ones exactly as they had left them. They would pay Mom the \$7 a day that they owed her and some even offered her a small gift of some macadamia nuts or other token to thank her for her caregiving. We'd hear a bit about their trip and then they would book a boarding space for the next family vacation.

During the 20 years that she ran her boarding business, Mom's canine and feline clients suffered a couple of mishaps. The Hargrave's white toy poodle named Major was a cute, yappy little mutt whose owners always displayed an inordinate amount of affection. One summer we had Major tied by his leash to the deck on the second floor of the house. Something happened and Major inexplicably discovered the ability to jump the four feet up onto the rail of the porch. He could jump but he couldn't balance and he quickly tumbled off the railing hanging, suspended in mid air, by his choke chain and leash. Thankfully, the leash quickly broke and Major fell to the ground, still breathing. Unfortunately, he broke his shoulder from the fall. The Hargraves were notified and came home early. The next time Major came to stay for a visit, he was wearing an upper body cast, the most visible reminder of the owners' \$4,000 vet bill. But Major recovered and went on to stay with us frequently for at least 10 more years and without any other accidents.

I also recall a standard poodle that once had an epileptic seizure and had to be rushed to the vet, other dogs that got sick and threw up or had diarrhea and other animals that required emergency visits to the vet. On the whole, though, things ran pretty smoothly which is remarkable considering that over the years we had literally thousands of overnight pet stays.

But then there was the Felix incident. Felix was one of my favorite dogs. I think of him as a Heinz 57 variety who was a cross between a beagle, terrier and collie, I think. He was good natured, energetic and super friendly. His owners the Andersons were nice too and they brought Felix to our house for regular, frequent visits over the years.

During this visit, I was 16 and had just earned my driver's license. That particular spring day, I returned home from school at about 5:30 pm, shut the door as had become reflex, and tackled the labyrinth of gates to get upstairs. There, in the living room, was Felix who was wagging his tail in excitement at seeing me. At that time, Felix happened to be our only guest.

I had a typical early evening at home sitting in our Lazy Boy recliner to watch the television news, eating dinner with my Mom and then chatting about school with her as we watched the Newlywed game show. At about 8 o'clock, Mom looked at me and asked, "Where's Felix?"

I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen him for a couple of hours. We both got up and checked through the entire house but we couldn't find him. Naturally, my mother immediately launched into the third degree, questioning me on whether or not I had closed the door when I got home. I was sure I had. Then I was grilled on whether or not I'd followed precisely the standard gate shutting procedure all the way up to the living room, so that Felix could not have escaped. I passed both barrages of questioning so we figured he must be hiding somewhere in the house.

We searched harder combing through each room, every nook and cranny, in the closets and under the beds while calling and whistling to arouse his attention. After half an hour, as we got more and more desperate, there was still no sign of Felix and we slowly had to admit he must have gotten out.

By now, it was 8:30 and not quite dark outside. We dashed out the front door calling his name and whistling. We started to sweep through the neighbourhood but after walking together for the first few blocks, we realized we could cover more ground if we split up. We lived on 23rd Avenue so I agreed to search from 19th to 23rd while my Mom would cover 23rd to 27th. We went up streets and down lanes, cut through peoples' lots, searched in bushes, poked through garages and asked passersby if they had seen the little dog. Nothing. Where could he be?

At 9:30, I went home to get a flashlight and ran into Mom, who was also just returning. Even from half a block away, I could see that she was very upset and that she wasn't carrying Felix. At this point, Felix had been missing for about three hours and Mom was starting to wonder what she should tell the Andersons.

I tried to be positive and told her not to give up, saying we could just keep on searching but my poor Mom was really worried. The Andersons were among her best clients. More importantly, they really loved Felix and now Mom was fretting about the "what ifs": What if he got hit by a car? What if someone stole him? What if he didn't show up by the time they returned in two days? What would she tell them?

All we could do was cast a wider net and keep searching. I realized that by this time, Felix could have traveled quite a large distance so we needed to cover more ground. I took the car to search the entire neighborhood while Mom revisited areas closer to home. As I drove away I reassured her that we would find him.

For the next hour, I drove through every street within a few miles of our home. I rolled down both windows and kept shouting, "Felix!" every few minutes. As it got darker, I realized the chances of finding Felix were getting slimmer and I just hoped like crazy that my Mom would have found him by the time I arrived home. At 11, as I pulled up in back of our house and saw my Mom standing on the back porch, I could tell from her body language that we were still short one dog.

By now, Mom was in distress and starting to get a bit hysterical. This was her nightmare, the one thing she'd vowed would never happen to an animal in her care. She kept questioning where he could be and she repeatedly accused me of leaving the door open. My adamant denials did no good since Felix had obviously, somehow, escaped.

We decided to start working the phones. We called the SPCA, the pound and the police. We called local paper to take out a lost pet ad. We made plans to put lost-dog posters up around the neighborhood the next day. Most of my Mom's clients left their vacation phone numbers where they could be contacted in case of an emergency and so we discussed whether or not we should call the Andersons, who were vacationing in Germany. I knew that was a call she didn't want to make and we decided to wait until the next day to reconsider when to place the call.

At midnight, I couldn't sleep and I couldn't just sit around so I decided to go out for one more walk, to search near our home. By this time we had been searching and fretting for more than four hours and hadn't seen the dog for about six hours. After about 20 minutes, I realized it was too dark and the effort was futile. When I returned home, still dogless, I found my Mom in tears and distraught with worry. I didn't know what else to say or do.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, I plunked myself down in the living room easy chair. I sighed and shoved the chair back to a reclining position asking out loud, "Where the heck is Felix?" Just then, as the chair tilted back, little Felix scampered out from underneath the Lazy Boy where he had been trapped all night. Lazy Box Felix. We laughed until we cried.