

**“Fantastic Dogs
And Where to Feed Them”**

**Life Among the Dog People of Paddington Rec,
Volume XIV**

By Anthony Linick

Chapter 9—February, 2018



Sparkie finds something lick-smacking good.

Thursday, February 1:

Well, rain and all, I *did* make a successful expedition to the bookstores of Covent Garden yesterday and I did see the famous super moon (super, blue and, in some parts of the world, blood moon as well) when Otto and I were out for our late night walk – there it was, hanging directly above the end of our street. I’m sure it did not have anything to do with the turbulent tribulations that marked the interior of my dog’s stomach – for when we returned from this vigil I could hear telltale rumblings issuing from this direction, only a foot away from where I had deposited my head. Needless to say I had a lot of trouble getting to sleep though I have grown used to the pattern of such attacks and I know that after a couple of hours they will subside without further incident. The dog had eaten none of his meals yesterday and this morning I will want him to digest only soft chews – which I add to my bag before we set off.

I have toyed with the notion of wearing my long underwear again – for it is bitterly cold – but in the event I make do with only a second layer on my head. Otto, who has already been running up and down the hall with his toys, shows no sign of any distress as we cross the green so that he can check out any action at the far end. Here he has a good romp with Maggie, a half-grown Lab pup. When Janet arrives with Daisy-Mae and Leonard the latter wants to join in the action but his fearsome growling assaults unnerve everyone. Otto decides to take off (with Maggie’s tennis ball) and I follow him as he nears the gym. I know he does a poo over here somewhere but my back is turned as I bend over to pick up the purloined tennis ball and I lose my chance to complete my usual forensic examination. Dan, Davide, Janet, Ofra and Georgie are seated in our compound and I am soon kept busy doling out the treats. Lucky manages to steal the piece of cardboard that we use to prop up the table leg and he taunts Otto with this prize in a far corner.

Dan and Davide are planning a visit to Ikea today and Ofra wants them to look for a baby-sized duvet for Bailey. I want them to take a memorial wreath with them for the founder of this firm, who has died recently – though I do suggest that the wreath has to come in a flat-pack and the staff have to assemble it themselves. Of course

the lads will be driving to Ikea but this leads to a discussion of the endemic travel problems caused by too many cars in London. Dan wants everyone to use a bicycle and Davide challenges his partner to use the bus for today’s expedition. Georgie, to lighten the mood, says that she has found a £5 note in a tree well. This will not brighten the mood of sister Jean, who explodes in disbelief every time Georgie makes one of her famous discoveries. Although the sun is shining brightly there is no warmth generated today and, amid many complaints about the cold, we make an early departure.

Friday, February 2:

Cold, sunny and fresh – today’s weather report reads just like yesterday’s. And, as yesterday, Otto and I run into Shane with Bullet as we reach the Morshead gate; yesterday he was just leaving but today he is entering and this gives me the opportunity to ask him for the exact spelling of his name. “You know why I am asking?” I say. He doesn’t and this means that I to have to explain why it is that I try to get such things right for my books about the dog people of Paddington Rec. He has heard nothing of this project, now in its fourteenth year – my pals seem to want to keep this a secret. Shane says that he knows a member of the Macmillan publishing family and that he has been asked to write a memoir based on his experiences as a concierge at Claridge’s. I encourage him to get on with it.

Otto loses track of where I am as we begin our circuit of the green but after lots of shouting and whistles he zeros in and dashes delightedly across the grass. As we near the bottom of Mt. Bannister he spots his pal Poppy coming down and so he has to rush up and I have to follow. Thus we approach the café from the Carlton roadway today and here we find Dan, Davide, Georgie, Hanna, Ofra, Ellie and the owner of Patsy, the Chihuahua – here to turn her pet over to Georgie for the next ten days. Lucky is the noisiest of the supplicants this morning but no one is more food-obsessed than Bailey, who scrapes away at my left sleeve until, in frustration, I wedge a serving tray against the arm of my chair in order to frustrate these attempts. Winnie and Otto are frequent customers as well and so is Teddy – who gets his pellets rolled

across the tabletop. Ellie, after her animal has had a meltdown over the presence of an Alsatian in the forecourt, says that her once regal pet has taken several steps down the social ladder since joining our lot – “It’s like he’s dropped out of Eton to attend Hackney High.”

Well, Dan and Davide have come through – now presenting Ofra with a baby duvet for Bailey from Ikea. (“Now go back and get a duvet cover,” I suggest.) The lads are discussing joining Janet and Georgie to check out the new Indian restaurant at the corner of Chippenham and Elgin Avenues, the successor to Maida Vale Tandoori. That’s Saturday night taken care of – Janet and Georgie always meet for a meal somewhere on Friday nights as well. For some reason Ofra presents Ellie with two rolls of cling-film but the gift is especially welcome since Ellie’s younger daughter has been using this product to wrap a burn before stepping into the shower. Ellie has also been dealing with carer problems since the woman hired to look after her Alzheimer-beset father-in-law wants Robert to hire someone to sit with the chap while she is on her twenty-minute breaks. I think we manage an extra five minutes in the cold this morning but now it is time to head for the comforts of home.

Saturday, February 3:

It is a gray, raw day in Maida Vale as Otto and I brave the streets for our morning in the park. Davide is just entering with Winnie and he shows me a bag he will soon turn over to me – it contains a lifetime supply of those pellets favored by his pet (and many other dogs). We continue on to the green and begin our traditional circuit; the place is strangely empty (and quiet) this morning. I do not hear a sound until reaching the Randolph roadway – where I can hear Janet calling for Daisy-Mae. (Later she reports that she did this for five minutes – while her dog, sitting on a nearby bench, made no move to advertise her presence.)

Janet, Georgie, Ofra, Hanna and Davide make up the only souls brave enough to face this morning’s unwelcoming prospect – indeed after we have been seated for a few minutes a light rain begins to fall as well; some think it is cold enough to snow. It is unusual for Janet to arrive with only one dog and Georgie doesn’t

do much better – arriving with Sparkie and Patsy only. The latter distinguishes herself by climbing onto the tabletop – but she won’t be tempted by any of Winnie’s pellets. Janet notes that every time I open my blue bag a strong fishy odor arises – it comes from all those salmon skin crispies I have broken into smaller pieces this morning.

Ofra says that she put his new duvet into Bailey’s bed yesterday but, after a sniff, he wouldn’t lie on it – until she had put it in the washing machine so that it could emerge enhanced with the fragrance of Lenor. She has brought with her this morning one of the mini-*challahs* she has been experimenting with – she has eliminated the gray tones of the interior dough – and we all get a taste. It is very good but it is curious that there seems to be a perfume-like aftertaste. This is a puzzle until Ofra remembers that she had covered these buns with a towel – fresh from the washing machine (and its fabric softener) as well. I suggest that if we begin to foam at the mouth we will be certain that this is indeed the explanation. Davide and I discuss my annual April trip to Stockholm, one for which he usually helps me obtain tickets, and then we all begin a more straightforward journey to the exits. As we near the gates Patsy pauses for a poo and Georgie says, “I’ve seen mouse droppings bigger than that.” No sooner have I got inside than I get a phone call from cousin Peter. I’m glad I made no further progress on my Stockholm flights for the annual Marcus reunion is to be moved to May 12 – when we will also celebrate the one hundredth birthday of the doyenne of the Marcus clan, Anna-Britta.

Sunday, February 4:

The cold is biting as Otto and I head down the street on a bright Sunday morning. This means gloves and a hat and two hoods for added warmth. The detritus from last night’s noisy party in Morshead Mansions is still visible – a plastic wineglass sitting on a pillar, fag butts all over the steps – I don’t know what to make of the pile of poo on the pavement. (And how did this block, which prides itself on its high-priced properties, come to this?) A hard-charging Oscar the Beagle arrives to spoil Otto’s concentrations on his own poo but we are soon underway on our

usual circuit. Vlad has just arrived at the café and wants to know where everyone else is. I know that Janet has taken Daisy-Mae to the groomer, and that Davide has headed for L.A., but I don't know where some of the others are. Georgie, Dan and Hanna are the only ones to make it in today.

Georgie has brought Sparkie and Patsy with her and both of these dogs are involved in incidents. First Patsy and Otto have a spat over a scrap. Then Winnie, from Dan's lap, begins a detailed protest over the presence of Sparkie in Georgie's lap. Sparkie has his back turned to his critic but he knows he is the object of Winnie's diatribe and he is soon looking back over his shoulder and answering in kind. There is one other dog in our compound, a little Sheltie who is here with a woman who, a stranger to these parts, has actually tried to sit down with her pet *inside*.

Dan is a bit depressed, having had to fire an employee yesterday – but evidently handing matinee tickets to visiting Spaniards who expected an evening performance was only the last in a line of gaffes. Dan has watched a program (which I had taped also) – for after giving us Britain's favorite dog breeds ITV has followed this up with our hundred favorite walks. In fact I have been on over forty of the latter, though only nine long-distance footpaths had been rated in this list and I had completed all of them: the Norfolk Coast Path at 71, the Great Glen Way at 64, the Coast-to-Coast Path at 54, St. Cuthbert's Way at 51, the Ridgeway at 46, Offa's Dyke Path at 41, the Isle of Anglesey Coastal Path at 32, the West Highland Way at 14, and the South Downs Way at 13. I describe some of Gavan's efforts to organize our summer's proposed expedition on the Cleveland Way, where the walk up Roseberry Topping came in at 23. My morning's walk must now include an expedition to Pinky's and the 123 Cleaners and so, it being too cold to linger, I make an early departure.

Monday, February 5:

Otto and I have had an expedition since our last appearance in the park for last night, for the first time, we were the guests of Linda and Rob at their new flat in St. John's Wood. Otto seemed puzzled by this new space, though he was happy to see Pepper, and he certainly seemed to enjoy all the dividends from a delicious roast

chicken dinner. Also present was a neighbor, Lindsay – whom I had met before. She too is a dog owner and when Linda took the Schnauzers out for a late night walk her American Cocker, Dougie, went along as well. Lindsay, incidentally, lives in the same block as Rob and Linda and next door to a flat Dorothy and I visited many years ago – when it was occupied by ASL work colleagues, Bruce and Bonnie Balas.

How happy I was not to have to undertake another walk when we got home, for it was bitter outside – I needed to turn the heat back on in order to make it comfortable enough in my house for sleeping. As it was, I had a restless night and this morning, as I make my preparations (and watch some of last night’s Super Bowl) the dog remains in a semi-comatose state on the bed. After putting on my long-johns I also slide Otto’s coat under his supine body and, after filling the treat bag and grabbing the recycling we head for the street. Everything they have said about how bitter it would be this morning is true. Otto has by this time revived enough to trot along slowly and after a poo on the green, we continue on our usual circle. He doesn’t want to play with any of the other dogs and that is worrying.

When I reach the compound Georgie is already present with Seamus and Lucky and Ofra is waiting for them to open the café’s doors. “I don’t think I want to sit out here this morning,” Georgie says and I have to concur. Ofra seems ready to head for home as well, though she must first find Ellie. We follow Georgie as she heads for the Morshead gate and soon we encounter Dan, just entering with Winnie. After hearing our excuses he denounces us as “lightweights” and continues on to the café. Otto seems puzzled by this quick return – after only twenty-five minutes in the park – but now I will have to keep an eye on him to see how he is doing today.

Tuesday, February 6:

Watchful waiting would be a good way to describe my day with Otto yesterday. He continued to sleep deeply on a living room sofa, rather than join me in my study, he showed no interest in food, and he showed little interest when I announced that it was time for our afternoon walk. He did seem to revive a bit during

this outing and I was encouraged when he did eat some popcorn as I watched TV in the late afternoon. Similarly he seemed to enjoy his evening meal – to which I had added some gravy from my lamb shank – and during our late night walk he certainly showed great interest in the disappearing figure of a fox, just ahead of us on the pavement. He was back to drinking water as well and, as I covered him for a while with part of the bedspread on a very cold night, I had reason to believe that the worst was behind us.

This morning, indeed, there is no hint of yesterday’s discomfiture as we begin our morning in the park. It is again very cold but there is some bright sunshine to cheer us up a bit. By the time we have completed most of our circuit we encounter Janet, on the Randolph roadway, with Daisy-Mae, Elvis and Fergus, and together we make our way to the café. We are soon joined by Ellie, Ofra and Dan – who did brave it out here yesterday – and by Wendy and Georgie. Janet is proud of Daisy-Mae’s new grooming but more than a little disturbed by her pet’s constant bum licking – it is back to the vet’s today. Lucky and Seamus are here with Georgie and this means that she has to patrol our compound in order to see that none of her charges has left a surreptitious poo, There is, indeed, a lot of this lying around. “I know it isn’t Fergus,” Janet says, “he pooped in my bedroom this morning.” I have offloaded much of my blue bag onto the tabletop – it is hard to pluck tidbits from this source while wearing gloves – and I am kept busy by Winnie, Bailey, Teddy, Elvis and Lucky.

Ellie reminds us that Peter’s funeral will take place on Thursday; she, Ofra and Wendy will represent us and Wendy is collecting money for flowers. There is some discussion of Peter’s relationship with his stepson, the London cabbie who has invited us to the funeral. Dan says the chap is such a UK patriot (for which read racist) that he once denounced pizza as filthy foreign muck. Ellie takes a crisis call from her mother, Elvis squeezes through the bars, Otto has a scrap over a biscuit with Winnie – it’s business as usual. As we head for home Linda arrives with Pepper and Otto is delighted. Fergus is loose out on the green and Otto also enjoys fending off the challenging forays of his younger cousin. It seems as though my pet wants to offer a second poo but after five minutes of grass sniffing and no outcome I decide it is time to go home.

Wednesday, February 7:

Temperatures remain just below the freezing mark on my outdoor thermometer as Otto and I make ready for our morning in the park. Cathy is here to speed us on our way; she complains of the chill and the first bite of the cold on my ears is indeed a shock. As we near the green we encounter Ellie walking Teddy. Otto takes a long time to squat for his first poo – with Teddy, seeing my pet still under the restraint of his leash, dancing around with great vigor. Of course as soon as Otto does find his spot and I unhook him Teddy loses all interest in the chase and we now make our way directly to the café. Ellie says that we will be first in the queue this morning but I remind her that on such mornings you want a long wait in the warmth of the interior before heading for our exposed table.

I also remind her that on Sainsbury’s days I need to make sure that I have a pound coin in my change when I leave – since I will have to use this to free a trolley when I get to the supermarket off Ladbroke Grove. These days I don’t need to purchase as many doggy supplies as in the past. Otto’s kibble comes from the vet – though last night I tried to stimulate his appetite by mixing in some tinned mackerel – and Dan and Ellie both supply me with extra treats for the dogs. Among the latter are some more salmon skin crispies and all the dogs, even the toothless ones, are soon chomping away. Only Ellie, Ofra and Hanna have made it in this morning. There is some conversation on the whereabouts of Janet (whom I saw leaving the park with Daisy-Mae and Leonard earlier this morning from one of my windows). Ellie remembers, however, that perhaps Janet has taken Daisy-Mae back to the vet for more work on her troublesome bum. Poor Otto, though snacking as feverishly as the other customers, has no one to play with this morning.

Details of tomorrow’s expedition to Luton for Peter’s funeral are discussed. (I hope the crematorium is warmer than it is out here seems to be a common sentiment.) Then Ellie, after fielding mom’s phone call – a package has arrived – goes on to bewail the lifestyle and extravagance of her elder daughter and to object to the boyfriend’s mother upping the ante by buying Georgia expensive treats. Younger daughter Ilana has found a dividend

in her treatment at the burns clinic – the offer of a week’s work experience with the doctor this summer. Ofra asks me if I will pick up some of those lilac nappy bags at Sainsbury since her local doesn’t seem to stock this necessity. I am very lucky that I don’t have to stand for long waiting for a bus but this luck runs out as soon as I arrive at the trolley queue; I have remembered my pound coin but the trollies are jammed together, as they often are, and I have quite a struggle to get one out.

Thursday, February 8:

Although the weatherman had suggested that today would be both grayer and milder than yesterday neither of these assertions seems correct this morning – for it is again bright, sunny and very cold. We pass the toddling Auralie, my upstairs neighbor, as we near the green – amazing how no sooner have they learned to walk than they are able to push a toy baby buggy around as well. Otto and I now continue on our usual circuit, eventually meeting up with Janet (who was at tennis yesterday, not the vet’s). She is accompanied by Daisy-Mae, who has some steroid cream for her bum, and Leonard in his new orange harness.

Heading toward us is Davide with Winnie and Georgie with Seamus – Lucky is soon delivered as well. I again dump all of the contents of my blue bag out on the tabletop so that I can keep my gloves on. Davide takes delivery on a toasted cheese sandwich and soon the dogs are lining up for portions of this treat. Winnie asserts her primacy but Seamus is also insistent. “Wait your turn,” Davide says, “try to behave more like Otto.” (“No one has ever said that before,” is my response.) Otto manages to get in a little play with Lucky and Georgie has to re-fit the little fellow’s tartan sweater after Otto manages to dislodge much of it. There seem to be two water bowls next to our tap and at one point Lucky and Otto are having side-by-side drinks.

I tell Davide that we envied his being in the balmy temperatures of Los Angeles recently and he says that it *was* lovely. He says that BA, after lodging staff near the airport in Santa Monica, then tried Long Beach, San Pedro and now Anaheim – presumably because lodging is cheaper out there. He adds that he returned to another stormy scene with his partner and that the kitchen was soon awash

with hurled water and wine. He has a lot of advice for Janet on her forthcoming trip to South America; I learn today that she will be visiting a penguin colony on the Falklands. Georgie says that tomorrow she will begin a half-term holiday and that an Easter break is not that far off. She is complaining now of the cold and so we make another early departure. As we reach the Morshead roadway we encounter Khalifa the Staffie, who has been accused of some anti-social behavior of late, but it is a dog he is walking with, a sort of Doberman-Rottweiler mix named Lizzie, who rounds on poor Otto when the latter shows an interest in her stick – and owners have to rush forward to head off any problems.

Friday, February 9:

Another problem dog, Jazz, is just exiting the park as Otto and I arrive for our Friday session in the Rec. We do so after another troublesome day – and by this I do not even include another daylong hunger-strike by the dog. No, my problems began shortly before noon when I noticed that my computer was not charging properly. I could see that the power cord was frayed beyond redemption and I knew this meant another visit to the Apple Store on Regent’s Street – where I have picked up similar replacements in the past. So after lunch I undertook this stupid mission and, a new power cord installed, the computer began to behave itself again. Then I began to detect a mysterious chirp, one I have encountered before when a fire-alarm battery needs replacement. I spent a great deal of time trying to figure out which of my fixtures needed attention, then I realized that the sound was loudest in the stairwell outside my front door. I contacted our manager, otherwise known as The Wiz, and he concluded that the sound was coming from an adjacent flat – over which he has no jurisdiction. He promised to notify the owner but we had chirping all night long – chirping and coughing, the latter my own contribution in spite of healthy dosages of cough medicine and nasal spray.

This morning matters do not improve markedly. Otto and I pass Ellie with Teddy and Janet with Daisy-Mae but we are heading in the opposite direction. On the far side of the green my dog pauses for a poo – though he doesn’t have that much inside him

to process – but it won’t come out. I wait patiently, soon joined by an inquisitive security guard – pulling out what I can with a Sainsbury poo poo bag and following the encrusted bum as we make our way to the café. I have brought an extra package of the lilac nappy bags for Ofra and I can present these to her as we wait at the coffee counter. (She pays for my coffee.) Davide and Georgie are waiting for us outside. Davide’s toasted sandwich again attracts a crowd and then the dogs all turn to me for sustenance.

After a brief report on yesterday’s funeral in Luton Ofra and Ellie begin a long conversation on the subject of their domestic regimes. Ofra says that she wants a locksmith to fit a lock on her bedroom door since, with a trip to Asia beckoning, she doesn’t want an invasion here by her own children, their friends or the friends of friends. She says that she often hides things here but then she forgets where she has hidden them. Ellie says she does have a lock on her bedroom door and that she hides the key in her slipper. Her complaints focus on the mess in her kitchen caused by younger daughter Ilana (who has been volunteering this week at a center for Downs Syndrome kids) and the latter’s boyfriend – who last night cooked spag bol and left all the pots and pans in the sink. Worse, husband Robert is cooking up a feast for some guests this weekend and there is grease everywhere. (At least peace has been restored in Davide’s house.) Georgie, who has six dogs waiting for her at home, complains of the cold and makes an early start for home. Otto and I soon follow but I know that as soon as we get home it’s into the bathtub for my boy again.

Saturday, February 10:

After a day battling what must be described as a real cold, with lots of coughing, I make my preparations for a morning in the park. I dose myself with a number of the nostrums left over from Michigan Janet’s last visit and cover myself in layers of clothing in order to withstand the chill temperatures that have persisted for days. No sooner have I entered the park then I am greeted by a blast of backbeat from the distant bandstand – a favorite locale for the personal trainers these days. A second chap is laying out an obstacle course for his charges on the public walkways and Otto

and I actually have to detour onto the muddy grass to avoid two pummeling boxers who have commandeered the footpath at the far end of the green.

Heading toward us as we reach the café a large party made up of Dan, Davide, Ofra, Georgie and Janet – and their dogs – is just entering the compound. It is true that I have some reservations about sitting outside in the cold with my cold but I am hoping that poor Otto will get in some exercise. Indeed, this part of the equation is solved when Nigel appears with Elvis and his daughter Anoushka. He takes Otto and Elvis out onto the green and I can soon see my pet romping about out there. Flora is here with Georgie and she, Sparkie, Bailey and Winnie (in her snowflake jumper) are soon scraping away at my knees. Daisy-Mae, in Janet’s lap, takes a gratuitous swipe at Sparkie’s head and gets a ritual scolding. There is soon a respectable Schnauzer turnout as both Fergus and Leonard show up with their owners. Leonard gains admittance to our doggy compound and succeeds in snaffling down a piece of toast left lying on the tabletop.

Conversation begins with a fuller discussion of the intrusive culture of the jock in our park. Someone suggests that all the wooden posts springing up are parts of a new cross country course – utilizing the public walkways – and rumors are repeated to the effect that the Carlton roadway doggy compound is going to be ripped up in order to expand the car park. Dan wants us to meet with park management on these issues – of course I’m not sure that the park has its own manager these days. Dan also suggests that there are now dates for a Highland expedition next August and I remind him that this expedition was originally mooted by Michigan Janet – who hasn’t been kept in the loop at all. Hanna arrives and says that she is outraged over the costs of a new Finnish passport. Anoushka, a student at Leeds, tells us about her job-finding efforts and says that she was a friend of the solo British walker whose body was found on an Argentinian glacier recently. Davide says he thinks he has been bitten by something and that he feels spaced out. He is actually trembling so, as we begin our homeward journeys, he is on his way to A&E at St. Charles – one of my old stomping grounds.

Sunday, February 11:

Another bad night for I do much better in the vertical position – not possible in bed – and I had coughing spasms throughout the hours of darkness. After a rainy day we have returned to clear skies and bright sunshine but such conditions, at this time of the year, do nothing to increase the temperature. There is also a stiff wind raking away at us as Otto and I head for the green. We have completed most of a circuit when Otto decides to check out the action at the eastern end – where half a dozen dogs are participating in a canine skirmish. I hook him when he relocates me and we head for the café, where the troops are foregathering.

There is a fine Sunday turnout this morning: Janet, Georgie, Dan, Davide, Ofra, Hanna, Nigel, and Wendy – with Vlad taking a little table behind us. While some of us are standing in the coffee queue a woman comes in to report that Bailey has just pooped on the pathway and Ofra takes off with her new bags, leaving me to bring out our coffees on a tray. Dan has brought some more Tasty Bites and they get added to the mix that I dump on the tabletop so I can keep my gloves on. Winnie and her assistant, Lucky, are soon barking at me for treats. There are other enticements this morning – since both Davide and Hanna have toasted sandwiches. Twice Nigel takes Otto and Elvis out onto the green for some spirited chasing.

Ofra says that she and Ricky have sublet their flat in Israel and that she may not be spending weeks there this summer, as she usually does. In fact she shows some interest in joining the Scottish expedition that Dan seems to be organizing. Janet says that they have changed the return flights following her South American cruise and have left her with an eight-hour layover in Madrid – a travel nightmare that she is trying to undo. I tell the others that Gavan has secured the last of the b&b reservations for our summer walk on the Cleveland Way and that by some strange chance it turns out to be at the same spot, in Osmotherly, that the Lees and I used in 2000 while walking the Coast-to-Coast Path. In health matters Davide says that he was told at A&E not to worry about his bite. Janet reports another dizzy spell as she was about to play badminton yesterday. No one has noticed that I have a cold. Dan chides Ofra for smoking next to Georgie, the quitter,

but Georgie says she doesn't mind. (One of the reasons Vlad sits at his own table is that he doesn't want his smoke to bother others.) Hanna's tabloid headline reports that Elton John's dog has scratched the face of a little girl – talk about a slow news day. We have been fortunate that we seem to be protected from the wind in our compound and that the sun can reach us under the umbrella. I do not believe that Dan is going to get that tan here, though he insists that this is what he wants.

Monday, February 12:

After another night of sputtering in bed I reach the conclusion, long mooted, that I am really not going to be in robust enough health to endure all those tests at the cardiologist's on Wednesday and therefore my first act is to reschedule this visit for early next month. As it is, my chest and throat are both sore by now – though I still seem to be able to function, albeit slowly, in most other categories of life. These include a visit to the park – with a cardboard box and a recycling bag now making their descent to street level with the dog. It is another bright but frigid morning as we make our way toward the green – soon encountering Ellie with Teddy. The latter always rushes forward in greeting these days – though Ellie insists that her dog's ebullience is occasioned less by a sighting of Otto than by the realization that the biscuit man is here.

Ofra joins us in front of the café's still closed front door and I hand to her a sack of £5 coins. Ellie has never seen this gesture and so Ofra, claiming that she once saved enough of these to pay for a trip to Thailand, explains its history. Only Georgie is yet to arrive and a discussion must take place to explain the other absences: Dan at work, Janet at tennis, Davide on standby at Heathrow. Georgie has brought Seamus and Sparkie and, in the latter's case, it is unusual to see him on a weekday – though, so Georgie reminds us – her schedule permits this because it is half-term. (There are a great number of kids in the park, but they have not arrived as part of school groups today.) The dogs are soon lining up for their treats – with an intrusive Bailey soon dumped from the empty chair on my left and Teddy, in Ellie's lap, waiting impatiently for me to roll tidbits across the table top. A bored Otto prowls the tiles, looking for someone to play with.

Ellie says that with both daughters away she had a great day in pajamas yesterday and she plans on an early retreat to her bedroom tonight – when Robert is entertaining two of his pals. Ofra says that her attempt to watch a program on how to avoid cake-baking mistakes was thwarted since she set a phone alarm for 10:00 *pm* when the show was broadcast at 10:00 *am*. Dog programs on TV are discussed: the latest on Supervet, Paul O’Grady’s *For The Love of Dogs*, and my favorite, the one on walks with your dog. Georgie again announces that after Sparkie she is not going to get another dog – though she will not lack for canine companionship if she continues to look after everyone else’s animals. She says she is cold and makes an early departure, leaving me with the other ladies – who are soon discussing the exact timing of this afternoon’s shopping expedition.

Tuesday, February 13:

Although I do not feel too rough in general, my cough persists and it is always worse when I lie down – which makes sleeping a bit of a problem, doesn’t it? It is supposed to rain today and skies are threatening so I stuff Otto’s raincoat in a pocket as we hit the streets at our usual hour, 9:15. Now I can feel a chill wind blowing at us we make our way up the Morshead roadway – where Teddy is waiting for us with Ellie. Together we make a circuit of the green. We pass Ziggy and Noli and Ellie wants to know what kind of dogs they are – always a puzzle that needs solving by someone. As we near the Randolph roadway Otto distinguishes himself by barking at a black man, though it is not the color of his skin that unnerves the dog but the fact that he is dressed from head to toe in black as well.

Anahita, back from another ashram visit in France, arrives with Elvis – to Otto’s great delight – and my dog even follows the Maltese into the café, though he looks guilty in doing so. Ofra is here with Bailey, Georgie is here with Seamus, and Janet is here with Daisy-Mae. Anahita has brought treats for man and dog; French biscuits for the humans, some homemade sweet-potato treats for the dogs. It’s just as well that Bailey is wearing his raincoat because Ofra manages to spill her coffee down her pet’s back. I spend a good deal of time rolling pellets across the table

to him and at Teddy – though the latter also jumps into an empty chair next to me and tries to help himself to the contents of my blue bag. Reprising an earlier theme Ellie now suggests that her dog, having learned all these bad habits from the other animals, has just made the transition from boarding school to borstal.

I have to share with the others news of an ordeal suffered by Michigan Janet, one I learned about only last night when I had a call from her son, Eric. Janet has suffered serious injuries, requiring several days of hospitalization, when she was attacked in her own home by a neighbor (on drugs, drink or both) who hit her on the back of the head, stole \$200 and broke some of her furniture. (He was arrested within five hours.) To add to her difficulties, though she no longer seems to be bothered that much by *her* cough, she is having breathing problems and carries around an oxygen supply now that she is at home. It is no wonder she hasn't been in communication for some time, though I sensed something was up, and all this news now causes considerable distress to her many friends here in the doggy compound of Paddington Rec.

Wednesday, February 14:

Well, I have only one thing to be truly thankful for today – the foresight in rescheduling my visit to the cardiologist, originally set for this morning. In fact I have spent another lousy night, with frequent coughing spasms – though I did discover that if I sucked on three Fisherman's Friend lozenges this did permit about an hour's sleep before the effect wore off. I am long in bed this morning, rising to make the last preparations for Cathy's visit, drinking a Lemsip, shaving, and discovering that my computer is still not charging properly – though I am able to fix this problem. Outside it is sunny but very cold. We reach the green in a timely fashion but I decide not to complete our usual circuit and head, instead, directly to the cafe.

Janet, Georgie, Ofra, Davide, Ellie, Hanna, Wendy and Yara are here this morning and there are lots of hungry dogs. Ellie has brought some little puppy pellets in a variety of shapes – and these include, appropriately, some heart-shaped ones for Valentine's Day. I dole these out and I only have to dip into my blue bag for the really fussy eaters – like Daisy-Mae. She is on patrol this

morning and squeezes through the bars on a number of occasions in order to drive off interlopers. Flora, Sparkie, Leonard and Otto are frequent visitors to my knee. Yara, who says she is not allowed a dog in her apartment block, has been taking videos of a cousin’s dog – a chap who, when faced with his own reflection in the mirror, buries his head in his dog bed, refusing to confront his own image.

Ofra has brought us a lovely homemade roulade, a sort of jam roly poly, and, slices of this confection are passed around, Ellie shares with us a Valentine’s card e-mailed by husband Robert; in return she says she is sending him, as a hint, a link to a tasty piece of jewelry offered by Van Cleef. Wendy invites us to a birthday party at her house on Saturday – dogs welcome but not in the garden, which has just received a coat of manure. (I tell her I don’t feel very sociable these days.) London Janet has brought in a get-well card for Michigan Janet and she also brings us up to date on her struggles to reduce the eight-hour Madrid layover on her return trip from South America. (Iberia is a partner of BA and they have a flight every hour to London but no one wants to help her make it onto an earlier plane.) Complaining of the cold a number of coffee drinkers make an early start for home; Davide needs to get home quickly for he is certain he has mis-inserted a contact lens. When I get home I remain for only a short time before beginning a series of errands on Maida Vale Parade: bank, *Radio Times*, and a new arsenal of anti-cough medicines from Vineyard Chemists.

Thursday, February 15:

I can’t tell if the herbal concoction offered me by Vineyard Chemists is truly effective – I think there were slightly fewer instances of sleep-spoiling coughing spasms last night but I do feel somewhat weakened by my lack of deep sleep. There can be no complaints about the weather today for we have milder temperatures and bright sun throughout our session in the park, a session that begins with the company of Toby the Bulldog and his owner as we make our way up the Morshead roadway. Today I do complete a circuit of the green before reporting to the café.

The ladies are already crowding the coffee queue. “Two days in a row – we’re not worthy!” I tell Yara, who says, “I know.”

Ellie and Ofra are here as well and so are Dan, Davide, Georgie, Janet and Hanna – with Vlad in his usual perch behind us. I try to get rid of the tiny pellet shapes passed on to me yesterday by Ellie – Winnie does a good job of helping me out with this task. Teddy, sitting in Ellie’s lap, is beckoning to me and this means I have to roll some treats across the tabletop for him. Dan, in an adjacent seat, teases the Cockapoo and Teddy takes exception to this treatment and snaps at Dan. Ellie says that if you are the second person into the bed at home then you will have to endure a growling reception from Teddy, who believes that he is already in a comfortable position and shouldn’t be required to share. This inspires Ofra to say that making room for Bailey in her bed is also troublesome since Ricky’s feet end up tangled with her own and, “Nobody touches my feet!”

I have several announcements to make. My cardiologist appointment has been shifted, the dates for my annual Swedish visit have been changed from April to May and now, after further consultation with Leonard the caterer, my annual spring party will take place not in May but in June. A second announcement follows from the publication of the materials on my doctoral dissertation a few weeks ago in *Beat Scene* magazine. James Campbell, who writes for the *Times Literary Supplement*, has written to me in part to complain that I should have lodged these materials with *his* publication and to say that he has written about my efforts in a column that will appear in the *TLS* today! Travel plans constitute a second conversational topic as Ellie and Yara agree that the Caribbean is not for them. Ellie says that she is off to Oman next year and Yara says she will soon be going to Muscat herself. Ofra, at the other end of the table, says that she is getting excited about her forthcoming trip to Japan but that she too would love to visit Moscow. It takes a while for the difference between Muscat and Moscow to become evident – though I suppose they have both, in their own ways, been beset by the red tide.

Friday, February 16:

Well, I seem to have had about five hours of uninterrupted sleep last night and so, amid the morning’s great expectorations I am wondering if I should not get more of Vineyard’s elixir. Otto is

bouncing around excitedly as I make my slow preparations for our morning in the park – he doesn’t seem to be fazed by my chronic coughing – even though he spends the night only a few feet from my head. It is another bright and comfortable day in the Rec. Davide is just entering with Winnie and we walk together toward the café. “Three pees in ten meters,” he says of my pet – but who’s counting?

The lineup this morning includes Georgie, Janet, Ofra, Ellie, Hanna, Lisa, Davide, and Anahita. Otto is delighted by the presence of his little pal and equally intrigued that Janet has brought with her Elvis’s little cousin, Toka-Boka. The latter is a fluffy white Maltese with a top-knot and an Elizabethan collar – Janet will be looking after this neighbor of Anahita’s while the family makes a visit to Iraq. Flora, Winnie, and Seamus are my chief customers this morning and I have remembered to restock my blue bag. There are lots of sandwiches on order this morning and so some of the other animals abandon me for portions of these treats.

I am in a bit of a daze and so conversation drifts a bit above my head. Isabella’s exams and auditions are discussed. Dan and Davide’s battle with damp is raised by Hanna – but Davide doesn’t want to talk about it. Janet reports that she locked herself out of her own building this morning – just as well that Georgie says she has a spare set of keys. I ask the latter if she did indeed send me a message on Facebook last night (I could never open the video) and she says that many people received this transmission in her name but she had nothing to do with this. I get up, after finishing my coffee, and ask the others to keep an eye on Otto while I visit the chemists. People are making preparations for departure when I return and I accompany a number of them toward the gates. To Anahita’s chagrin Elvis attacks a Staffie on the Morshead roadway and this fellow jumps on *her* as she tries to retrieve her little dog.

Saturday, February 17:

Well, my optimism over the curative powers of that herbal cough medicine has gone crashing down in flames as, in spite of dosing myself with this clammy liquid, I have endured a horrible night

of sleepless coughing. I was up much of the time, writing and listening to music and every time I thought I might nod off I would wake with a breathless spasm. Needless to say I am a bit drowsy as I make my preparations for a morning in the park. I am fortunate that temperatures have risen, the wind has died down, there is no sign of any moisture and, altogether it is a pleasant atmosphere than envelopes man and dog.

I arrive at the café several minutes earlier than usual and Hanna soon joins me outside the doors of the café. We are joined by Dan, Davide, Ofra, Janet, Nigel and Anahita. Again Otto is delighted by the presence of Elvis and together the two spend some time out on the green. Janet has again brought Toka-Boka and it is obvious that the little Maltese is now so at home that she insists on commenting on every passing moment with raucous barking. Winnie is not far behind, obsessed by her need for treats. Another couple take one of the corner tables and they have brought a lovely but unnamed Sheltie – while a second table is occupied by Franca, daughter Valentina and their dog, Rosie.

I give the others an update on Michigan Janet’s recovery, having heard from son Eric again last night, but much of our conversation is devoted to my own condition and I am soon suffering, as I feared, from an advice overload. Hanna begins by recommending the inhalation of inspiring vapors. I say that I have some Olbas Oil at home but she says she only allows Mr. Vicks to sit on *her* chest. I get advice on chicken soup, on the number of pillows I should be using, on remedies for my sore throat – indeed Hanna gives me some lozenges from her purse. We are a long time at table since the sun is so lovely on our winter-beset bodies, but at last it is time for us to make a move. If only Otto didn’t need to lead me into the muddiest patches of grass as he seeks the right spot for his second poo. At last we make it home, followed up the stairs by the postman and that copy of the *The Times Literary Supplement* with a discussion of my recent contribution to *Beat Scene* magazine.

Sunday, February 18:

After a day in which I fell asleep in my chair on numerous occasions I did have a much better night of it – though when I

do sleep I wake with the insistent desire to clear my pipes of the accumulated mucus and this results in spasms of coughing that increase in duration the longer I have been asleep. I manage to nod off over my computer this morning, waking just in time to shave, re-stock the blue treat bag and hit the streets on another quite acceptable sunny morning. A couple with a toddler stop so that the youngster can try to pet Otto – who is eyeing the little fellow’s pastry with intent. A few minutes later we are stopped by a chap who needs to borrow a poo bag for his hound – never leave home with only one bag is my vow. Finally we stop in order to greet Muffin, whose daddy has the lead of a new addition to his family, a wonderful Old English Sheep Dog puppy named Paddington. How much he reminds me of my Ozzie though, or course, this fellow has a long tail.

At the café there is a lively turnout with Janet, Ofra, Dan, Davide, Nigel, Anahita and a woman named Cathleen at our table and at a little one behind us Franca with two friends, Rosie and a chocolate Lab. Cathleen is the owner of the Shih-Tzu, Maya (once called Mabel) – whom we have met once before. Janet has again brought the noisy Toka-Boka. I am kept busy doling out treats to Winnie (naked this morning), Sparkie, Bailey and Otto – though the latter is soon occupied with Elvis and Anahita takes these dogs out onto the green for some extended chasing. Many of the dogs seem to be captivated by the visiting Lab – who, in his turquoise collar, maintains a lofty disdain for our small fry.

Dan and Davide are studying the menu that will be on offer at the wedding of Dan’s sister in May and Dan is trying to offload tickets to the Ideal Home Show – an event that will take place while he and Davide are on a trip to Sardinia next month. Cathleen owns a property in the south of France and she is asked for recommendations on where the lads might spend a night before boarding their ferry. Dan engages Franca in conversation about her proposed move from London to the countryside between Worcester and Malvern, a migration scheduled for this summer. The abandonment of London itself seems to me to be a worrying trend among many of those who were once part of our society in the Rec. Ronnie and Susie, Claire, Ellen, Saskia – I could name several others – so why is there still a housing shortage in

London? Nigel and Anahita are the first to depart this morning – since Nigel’s son Jenson has a football match in Watford at noon. As Otto and I make our way toward the gate (serenaded by the Sunday bells from St. Augustine’s) I note that again my dog has a clogged bottom and that a trip to the bathtub can’t be put off much longer.

Monday, February 19:

Well, that appointment with the shower spray was met shortly after our afternoon walk yesterday when Otto, always a patient patient, submitted to his hydrotherapy. It was in other ways a quiet day, with only a little throat-clearing coughing, but a more earnest effort was necessary as the night wore on and, although I kept falling asleep, I was often startled awake by the urgent need to clear my pipes before I ran out of air. Not surprisingly, therefore, I must now carry through with a long-standing plan – after ten days of coughing it is time to see a doctor. I am greatly surprised, therefore, when at 8:30, I get straight through to the Randolph Surgery and get slotted in for a 2:50 appointment.

A light rain is falling as Otto and I and the blue recycling bag hit the streets. Ahead of us on the Morshead roadway I can see Davide with Winnie and Georgie with Seamus. There is plenty of time to do a complete circuit of the green before reaching the comforts of our blue umbrella. Indeed Hanna and Ofra are still waiting to be admitted to the café. Lucky is delivered to his Auntie Georgie and he gets an obligatory mugging from Otto. Winnie and Bailey are my most loyal customers but I am less busy in this category than usual.

Hanna is in a rather manic mood this morning, with first an account of her struggles with the giant washing and drying machines at the 123 Cleaners, then her summary of feuds with some of the other lady dog owners. She also tells me that she once had a cough for six weeks and that I mustn’t expect any medicine from the doc this afternoon. Davide is asked how his mother is bearing up after her recent bereavement. He says she seems better and that she has a new dog whom she takes everywhere. Ofra says that she has now concluded her cycle of facial peeling and that she has inspired several of her girl friends to undertake a similar

regime – though many, like Yara, report they haven’t the patience. Not surprisingly there is little benefit in an extended session on such a damp and unwelcoming day and so, even before 10:00, the troops begin to scatter.

Tuesday, February 20:

Well, as Hanna had predicted, I didn’t get any medicine, as such, when I made my visit to the Randolph Surgery yesterday afternoon, but an inhaler was prescribed as a way of cleaning out my pipes and so we will see if this has any effect. I can say that I have been able to sleep through the night, with only a few moments of wakefulness. Otto and I are soon passing several workmen, here to modernize a flat upstairs – so we will have noises that will drown out my coughing. Davide is half way up the Morshead roadway with Winnie and I unhook my dog so that he can rush forward in greeting. It is a gray and damp day and soon we have a genuine light rain in the Rec. Otto keeps moving across the green, hoping for some action from any of the half dozen dogs under the watchful eyes of Zoe, and then we head for the comforts of our blue umbrella.

This morning we have Janet, who played an hour’s worth of sodden tennis yesterday, Georgie, Ofra, Ellie, Davide, Hanna and, hiding from the rain, Vlad. Lucky is delivered early on, long before Georgie arrives with Seamus, and he and Otto get in some good-natured skirmishing. I have brought with me a venison version of those salmon skin crispies and even the toothless dogs seem to enjoy having a go at them. Teddy is sitting in Ellie’s lap, encouraging me to roll treats his way. At one point he jumps down in order to get even closer to the treat bag. When he jumps back into his lap blanket a second time he hits his head on the table rim. Janet has removed the Elizabethan collar from the neck of the noisy Toka-Boka – who is evidently as assertive as Daisy-Mae. Now she is sitting *atop* the Shih-Tzu on Janet’s lap – Daisy-Mae seems to tolerate this, to our great surprise. Otto, in his search for treats, is gradually soaking my trouser legs with his wet paws.

Janet complains that she has left behind a box of After Eights while attending Wendy’s birthday party this weekend; they were a gift to her in return for some previous favor but she has had

to accept the notion that Wendy will just assume that they are just another birthday gift. Not so, we soon learn, since Wendy now arrives with this prize. Janet opens it immediately but many present say they can't eat such sweet things this early. “Well it is after 8:00 am,” I suggest. Ellie says that my voice sounds less congested while Hanna complains that she has been made most uncomfortable by having to wear a 24-hour blood pressure monitor. Ofra has been to a Turkish bakery in Kilburn and we share out a giant sesame-covered “bagel” (or its equivalent). Ellie says that daughter Georgia, after risking more broken bones on a skiing holiday, has actually done well on her university exams – after dad told her that if she left uni she would have to get a job immediately. For some reason Ellie and Ofra now turn to a favorite topic, childbirth, with a number of unsettling details. “Don't expect me to put any of this in today's journal,” I conclude, “this definitely falls under the category of too much information.”

Wednesday, February 21:

It's a very busy morning in Maida Vale. John the Window Cleaner arrives with Cathy and we confer on repairs to the ceiling in the TV room. Down in the basement they are drilling away, a noise so pervasive that my study may not be the best place to entertain James Campbell of the *Times Literary Supplement*, who is due for a visit this afternoon. At least it is bright enough outside and Otto and I can soon make our way up the Morshead roadway, where Davide, Ellie and Ofra are already walking with their dogs. The ladies are soon so intent on examining photos on Ofra's phone that I am actually able to jump ahead of Ofra in the coffee queue – talk about role reversal.

No Georgie on Wednesdays, it would seem, but in addition to the already mentioned trio we do have Janet, Anahita and Hanna. Janet has brought Daisy-Mae, Leonard and Toka-Boka and the latter is again the noisiest of our animals, so much so that poor Janet has to get up out of her chair in order to grab the little madam on several occasions. Teddy is not far behind in the noise department and Ellie says she is going to have to muzzle him soon. He sits on her lap, a lofty perch from which he can bark at

the passing scene and demand treats from me. I discover a new way of satisfying the latter demand. I put a pellet at one end of a serving tray, lift up the end closest to me, and the pellet runs downhill and right between the Cockapoo’s paws. Otto gets in some good exercise with Elvis, sometimes out on the green and sometimes with my pet on the inside and Elvis on the outside – as they run back and forth in great excitement.

I have already saved another bag of £2 coins for Ofra. Ellie has brought two packages of biscuits – some digestive and some coconut rings and these go very well with our coffee. (Hanna feeds some of the former to the dogs when no one is looking.) Ellie has been on a fruitless voyage to Hornchurch in Essex. She needs a new aluminum door but all they had on offer was PVC. Hanna says that they have replaced the beautiful Victorian doors in her building with white and gold Essex models. Ellie gets in a good laugh when Ofra refers to a beauty parlor as a “saloon.” Davide says that he is off to Delhi this afternoon and, after enduring all the warnings about Delhi Belly, he says that the real problem is the dire air quality in the Indian capital. (I remember this as well.) He says that the air stinks as soon as you get off the plane but, just so we can get serious about this issue, you are not allowed to smoke poolside at his hotel.

Thursday, February 22:

Well, the noise continued throughout the day and, indeed, it did seem better to employ the TV room for my visit from James Campbell, which was most enjoyable. But Otto added some of the contents of his stomach to the carpeting of this room both before and after the visit and so I have begun a period of therapeutic starvation for the dog – who seemed to have no rumbling tummy problems when nightfall came. This morning I have received an email from a former Michigan State colleague who had read the article in *TLS* and now wanted to recall a party at my house in East Lansing all those decades ago. At 9:00 John the Window Cleaner arrives to begin work on the TV room ceiling and I leave him to get on with it as Otto and I head for the park. It is a miserably gray and frigid morning.

Otto makes no efforts at pooping, not surprisingly, as we head for the café – where we are soon joined by Dan, Janet, Georgie, Ofra, Ellie, Hanna and, near the end, by Anahita, her sister and nephew Aaron. I tell the others not to offer any foodstuffs to Otto, who is most perplexed by this ruling. Dan has brought a bag of Tasty Bites and I let him undertake most of the feeding duties this morning. Teddy is into self-help. First he tries to rake the bag with the digestives and coconut rings his way, then he switches his attention to my blue bag, eventually succeeding in sliding it off the table – so that he and Seamus can get their noses into its open mouth. It is restored to the tabletop and Teddy manages to get his snout into it a second time. Meanwhile Daisy-Mae is barking at me imperiously (so is a shivering Winnie) but the Shih-Tzu evidently wants nothing from my blue bag. She wants a digestive biscuit.

Janet, who has been lucky enough to find a £10 note as she walked around the park this morning, is scandalized by President Trump’s solution to the latest slaughter of innocent school children in Florida – teachers should carry guns. (This might make requests for quiet in the back of the room more likely to succeed, however.) Dan’s nose is out of joint because, after reserving a room for Ofra for this summer’s Scottish expedition, that lady says she is going to a wedding in Israel instead. Ellie wants to see a show in Covent Garden but she doesn’t believe that it is only a five-minute walk from his ticket office to the theater – though I’m sure Dan is right. Georgie reports that during her recent visit to Hereford grandson Oliver, who plays both rugby and football, got confused and used a rugby tackle during a football match. I am by this time so cold that I welcome the decision to head for home. When I get there John has already gone but the post has arrived. It contains a voucher to be used in summoning the needed services of Mr. Jenkins, the carpet cleaner.

Friday, February 23:

Normal dinner service resumed last night for the dog – I had starved him for a full 24 hours and he was ravenous. His stomach now seemed to be okay but I would certainly have to deal again with another problem at the other end of my animal – the

congested backside. It is bitterly cold outside, though there is some sunshine, palely loitering. I follow Otto across the semi-frozen green and soon he is straining away – with most of his efforts adhering to his already unsavory bottom. I actually have to pluck this contribution off like some overripe fruit before we are able to head for the café.

The morning’s lineup includes Janet, Georgie, Ofra, Ellie, Hanna and Dan. Dan says that he has just clipped Winnie’s toenails and she is surprisingly calm after such an ordeal. Janet has brought Daisy-Mae, Leonard and Hank – and the latter and Otto manage to get into a number of food scraps under the table. I have dumped the contents of my blue bag out onto the tabletop so that I can continue to wear my gloves on such a bitter day. This means that when Teddy starts raking away at the bag he is actually going to end up with nothing. This doesn’t deter him and by the time he has secured this piece of plastic he has torn a hole in its bottom. Georgie has both Seamus and Lucky with her and the latter provides some good sparring practice for Otto. Everyone has seen Otto’s backside and asked me if I know about the state of my dog’s bum. I can only repeat that famous remark of Inspector Barnaby, when his new assistant said, “Haven’t there been an awful lot of murders in a place as small as Midsomer?” “It’s been commented on.”

Georgie now undertakes something we refer to as “the walk of shite” – as she patrols the pavements looking for the usual morning poo from Seamus. At home she has bigger problems since, as Dan has discovered when he tried to leave Winnie off this morning, her door key is knackered and she may have to call a locksmith. Dan suggests that some of our lottery funds need to be invested in tonight’s EuroMillions draw and Janet agrees to do this – Georgie will be undertaking such purchases on our behalf when Janet begins her South American holiday on Sunday. Janet and Georgie flip a coin about where to have their Friday night meal (the Cochonnet wins) and we begin to head for home or, or more specifically in our case, my home’s bathtub.

Saturday, February 24:

It takes a long time to add all the layers needed to face the chill temperatures we have been enduring lately – my window thermometer says that it is well below the freezing point this morning. The sun is again present – what makes life in the Rec truly difficult is the wind. I am on my way across the green before long and, after retrieving a poo, Otto and I head over to the Randolph roadway, where Janet is sitting on a bench with Daisy-Mae and Hank. In the coffee queue a woman with a Border Terrier on lead is asking innocently if it is alright for her to sit down inside the café with her pet – if it were we would all be in here these days.

Our morning ensemble includes Dan, Davide, Janet, Georgie, Ofra, Nigel and Anahita. Georgie has brought Sparkie, in a red sweater, and Chester, and she soon takes delivery on the sweet-faced Rex – whom she has looked after before. Otto would like to play with Rex but the fellow remains in Georgie’s lap so Hank and Elvis offer some opposition. I have a new blue bag and I am kept busy dispensing treats. Daisy-Mae finishes the last of the venison crispies (aka Bambi burgers) and Sparkie wolfs down half a dozen pink Shapes. Meanwhile Bailey and Winnie, the toothless ones, make do with softer fare. Georgie reports that they took Winnie to Le Cochonnet last night and she demanded so many treats that her carrier bag was full of pizza shards.

Dan has had another fight with his mother about financial matters. His suggestion that we repair our own fortunes by an investment in the EuroMillions has also foundered; for our £30, we won £2.60. Davide reports that it took an hour and forty-five minutes to get from airport to hotel in Delhi – at least he didn’t get stuck behind any elephants, as we did in 2004. Georgie reports no success with a hairbrush passed on to her yesterday by Hanna. She will now inherit many of Janet’s doggy responsibilities, including care of Daisy-Mae, as the latter’s mum departs tomorrow morning for South America. Anahita says that she has a new phone app – one that allows her to keep track of Elvis’s position, the number of steps he has taken and his distances covered – a FitBit for dogs – and this is demonstrated for us as she circles the table with her

phone. In Georgie’s lap Rex is now setting up such a ruckus that she decides it is time to leave – and we are soon on our way home.

Sunday, February 25:

Again I can see that the thermometer has fallen several degrees below the freezing point and this must mean that additional layers have to go on before Otto and I can hit the streets. The sun is shining brightly but there is a bit of a wind to depress the scene even further. I unhook the dog as we reach the green and he rushes forward to greet one of his Beagle pals. The owner of Poppy is sitting on a park bench facing the sun but Otto and Poppy seem to show no interest in one another these days. Instead Otto is heading up Mt. Bannister in pursuit of several other dogs. I have to go up here to retrieve a second poo and by this time we are so near the top that we might as well head downhill onto the Carlton roadway.

In our compound at the café we already have Dan, Davide, Georgie, Ofra (who changes chairs in order to keep the sun out of her eyes) and Hanna – though Nigel eventually arrives with Elvis. Georgie has already begun her assignment as Janet’s surrogate, having brought both her own Sparkie and Hank with her this morning. Otto is kept busy with Elvis, of course, and they spend some time outside our bars – indeed Elvis, resuming his personal trainer role, rushes back and forth outside in order to wind his pal up. There is one incident. Elvis, standing just outside our compound, takes exception to one of the groundsmen – who is holding his pick-up stick and wearing a lurid lime green jacket. The fellow endures a barracking from the Malteser and Nigel has to rush outside to retrieve his dog. (Always the fear that such incidents will be taken as racially motivated.) In fact there has been another dog-meets-man problem this morning, one witnessed by Dan. It seems that Dolly, a dog sometimes walked by Georgie, has had a collision with a jogger – who was sent flying, cracking his head on a bench.

Dan has spent hours making cardboard mock-ups of all the furniture he wants to install in the new house in Sardinia. He now passes around a video he has made of the result, with a previously recorded Davide having been spliced into the kitchen. The lads are off to a lunch in Richmond this noon – I tell them I don’t

want to hear that Winnie, like Fenton, has been chasing any deer in Richmond Park. Dan’s nose is a bit out of joint because he now learns that Daisy-Mae (and not Winnie) is the cover dog on the latest published volume in the “Dog People of Paddington Rec” series. I tell the others that I actually received a proof copy of the printed version of *Dog Day Aftermath* yesterday but that the volume still needs a little work since I had asked that title and author be printed on the spine –and they printed the subtitle instead. When I get home I do not permit myself to get comfortable in the warmth of the flat since I have some errands to run. When I get to the 123 Cleaners the Sunday staffer who always greets me by name sympathizes with me over the omnipresent cough. I tell her I have had it for over two weeks now. She says that she had it for over a month.

Monday, February 26:

Snow flurries are flying as I have a look outside – the snow itself is melting on the manmade surfaces but on the grass of Paddington Rec we have a fluffy white coating. In spite of this unusual weather life seems to be going on as we might expect. The workmen, having exhausted their drilling in the basement, are pounding away preparatory to adding a new flooring, gardeners are yanking foliage from the front of Morshead Mansions, blue bags await the recyclers, the cleaners are heading our way with their vacuum cleaners and the red van of the postie is not far behind. I have strapped Otto’s coat on and I have covered my own head with three layers: wool hat, sweatshirt hood and the hood of my winter coat as well. In spite of all this I am in a reasonably content mood; the coughing is less intense and, overnight, I have had another piece accepted by *Beat Scene* magazine – a memoir of two trips to San Francisco, the first of which is now sixty years in the past.

Vlad is just arriving at the café and we are the first to join the coffee queue. Outside there are other arrivals...Georgie with Seamus and Binky, Dan and Davide with Winnie, Anahita with Elvis, Ofra with Bailey and, of course, Hanna. (Ellie is at home waiting for an electrician.) Winnie is wearing her Snoopy raincoat and Dan soon has her swaddled in a puce blanket as well. She

and Bailey share a chair next to mine, intent on their culinary demands, but someone notes that this pair now resemble John Lennon and Yoko Ono – and so they do. Binky keeps helping herself to tabletop treats; these are on offer because I have dumped out the contents of my blue bag so that I can wear my black gloves again. The weather is volatile; there is a clear patch with sun and then we get more dancing flakes blowing in on us. Hanna says she loves this; Georgie says she hates it. Evidently Hanna has quarreled over the source of this latest weather front with Poppy’s Russian owner. The latter says we have gotten this weather from Finland; Hanna says we have gotten it from Russia.

Dan says he has so much good advice to share with us but no one will listen – I tell him that this role has been assigned to others. He is dieting and refuses even a bite of Davide’s sandwich, preferring to get up and establish his selfie-stick on a nearby table – where it takes a picture every minute. Everyone is quite envious of Janet, now in Rio, especially Georgie, who wishes she were in Spain. I tell the others that I am a bit uncertain about my schedule tomorrow since the carpet cleaner is coming at 9:00 and Otto (in a classic case of mistiming) is scheduled to have his hair cut at Primrose Hill Pets. A snowless interval presents itself and we decide to make a move for home. Winnie, who hasn’t done a pee yet, is made to follow Dan across the grass, Otto seeks out Tom, the owner of Max, who always has treats for the other dogs, and at the entrance gate we encounter both Muffin and the newcomer, puppy Paddington. The owner of these animals is more than a little happy that Muffin has accepted the pup into the household, assuming the role of mother in the canine hierarchy.

Tuesday, February 27:

I am a bit concerned about the effects snowfall may have on the arrival of the carpet cleaner but an early look reveals no evidence of any of the white stuff on our streets. In fact Mr. Jenkins does experience some serious traffic delays and it isn’t until 9:30 that he comes with all of his equipment. We discuss what to clean – included are the dog’s favorite living room throw rug and the orange sofa that Otto likes to use to dry his face and fur. This leaves little time for our usual park rituals but we start off anyway

– it is again sunny but my outdoor thermometer registers seven degrees below the freezing mark. Mr. Jenkins says he can’t begin immediately because his chemicals, kept in his van, are frozen.

We make our way up the Morshead roadway and the dog pauses to deposit the first of three poos. Then we make our way over to the café where a brave contingent of dog owners is seated at our table: Dan, Davide, Georgie, Ofra, Ellie, Hanna and Vlad. Elvis has been searching the horizon on the lookout for his pal – as Otto so frequently does looking for Elvis – but there will be no play-time today. We use the back passage for our return journey. At the head of the running track the boom box is broadcasting a bouncy ditty – all you can say in defense of this intrusion is that at least this time the exercisers are doing a dance routine.

As I near my front door I can see Linda, ten minutes early, with Pepper, and so Otto is handed over and gets in more walking in the park. A few minutes later Linda rings the doorbell and I descend with the dog’s coat – which he will certainly need after his clipping at Primrose Hill Pets. I am full of self-congratulations over today’s arrangements. Otto will not have to endure any of the noise and disruption of the carpet cleaning process and, since Cathy is due here tomorrow, she can help me put things back in order.

Wednesday, February 28:

Well, Otto had only five minutes of carpet cleaning to endure yesterday – and the whole process unearthed a number of balls and other toys hidden beneath long ignored surfaces. The dog had received a spiffy short haircut but this meant that his coat had to go on as early as our afternoon walk in the park. At nighttime this was repeated over treacherous pavements, with the far side of the street offering better traction than the near side. Now, much to my surprise, another substantial snowfall has arrived during the night and I am wondering if any of our lot will show up for coffee in the park. I take my walking stick with me for better support and we begin a slow march up the Morshead roadway, then circling the white-covered green – where there are lots of dogs at play. It is sunny but very cold.

At the café I stand for almost fifteen minutes in our compound – without sighting any of the regulars. Shane is out on the green with Bullet and Hanna, having had one fall already, eventually comes – but that’s it. Hanna notes, of course, that Georgie doesn’t come on Wednesdays, that Janet is in Brazil, and that most of the rest arrive at the Rec by car – the use of which may be embargoed today. We do bring our coffees outside and brave it out for the next twenty minutes or so and then I head for home. Otto’s feet are bothering him – either because of the cold, or impacted snow, or the salty grit they are scattering on the walkways – and as soon as I get home I apply a warm wet cloth to each of his paws.

On such a morning it would be nice to bask in the warmth of the flat but I decide to head for Sainsbury’s anyway – since Cathy has assured me that the buses are running and I know that I can’t delay this errand until next week when I have a doctor’s appointment on Wednesday. So, abandoning my stick, I start off for the bus stop on Chippenham Road, moving very slowly and having to endure a fifteen-minute wait for a 228. The first thing I do when I reach Sainsbury’s is make sure that the mini-cab service is working normally – I don’t want to wait out here for long with a loaded trolley in this weather. The latter, incidentally, is about to take a turn for the worse for while I am inside the supermarket an unscheduled blizzard begins – surely I’ve never had a shop under these circumstances. Fortunately there is a cab available when I emerge and we make our way gingerly home as the white stuff continues to fly. I do have a feeling of accomplishment when all the groceries have been put away – I won’t have to do that for another three weeks and by then it’ll be spring, right?

For Chapter 10, **[click here](#)**.