

S.R.Glines

Pepper pulls a fast one

Pepper is getting old. She doesn't really show it but she's been with us for over six years. We think she was about six years old when she came to live with us. That would make her about twelve years old, late middle aged in dog years, that is, about as old as I am.

We have a deal. Once or twice a week we'll go for a long hike, the rest of the time she'll have to content herself with a stroll around Bumble Bee Park. In exchange we eat carrots together and practice whatever tricks we've been learning. The last trick I learned was how to dance the Argentine Tango but it's been a few years. Pepper's last trick is rolling over and begging for a treat. This is one she's almost mastered.

When we're on a carrot break I'll prompt her to "roll over." She'll give me a "get real" look but if I hold back on the flow of carrots she'll comply, gladly, until she's had her fill whereupon she'll get up, without so much as a 'how do ya do', and walk back upstairs to bed.

When Pepper needs a quick pee break she'll come in to the room and give a quick yap, bearing her teeth in the process. It looks menacing and she does it because it gets attention but she is just saying, "I have to pee and I have to do it now!" I've always been impressed by how many gallons she can hold back.

When she wants to go out for a walk, and not just into the back yard for a quick pee, or when she wants to make me dance, she'll put her nose under my hands and lift them off the keyboard. She won't take no for an answer. Of course, I'll try to get by with scratching her head and chin but that rarely works.

When I can't resist any longer I'll say the magic words, "OK, show me what you want." If she wants food or water she'll walk into the kitchen, making sure I'm following, and stare at her food or water bowl. If she wants carrots she'll stare at the refrigerator and whine. If she wants a cookie (for which she'll have to perform a trick) then she'll look at me with mischief and bark once at me. If she wants to go for a walk she'll stop by the front door and stare at it but if she wants me to dance she'll get me in to the kitchen, prod me with her nose and start to dance herself. Her dancing is more like prancing in place. I'll prance along with her for a few minutes too. Pepper thinks this is great sport and her smile will transform into a toothy grin. Dogs can smile, grin and even laugh. Dogs can snicker too when they make humans perform unnatural acts. Pepper does this with a grin and an accompanying "snort."

Walks are negotiated on the fly. Pepper is a big dog, about 75 pounds. When she acquired us she was a skinny 40 pounds and looked more like a greyhound than a German Short-haired Pointer, which is what she is. Most of that 75 pounds is muscle and since her toenails aren't clipped all the way back she can exert a lot of force when she wants to and she can be very stubborn. At every turn we negotiate which way we will go. We have our standard walks which have long since been negotiated and settled and she rarely puts up a fuss on these. Some walks like the circuit of Bumble-

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bee Park can be traversed in multiple directions. Pepper likes to mix it up so I cut her loose and follow on these short walks. Other walks are more problematic.

We live in a semi-rural environment. A walk around the shortest block is 3 ½ miles. Obviously it can be done in two directions and Pepper always chooses to go clockwise because that offers a lot more options. I, on the other hand prefer counter-clockwise for its lack of options. If we go counter-clockwise there won't be anything for Pepper to object to. Our first argument begins at the end of the driveway. Going right commits us to a counter-clockwise circuit of the block, a traverse of Bumblebee Park or a visit to the llama farm up the street. I always want to go that way; Pepper always wants to go the other. I usually win.

If we go left we pass the gauntlet of our neighbors' dogs. We pass them going the other way too but at the end of a walk Pepper is usually more interested in food and water than in interacting with her species. Going to the left makes these weakly caged dogs more interesting. Both neighboring dogs are also German Short-haired Pointers who break out of their electric fence and come visit Pepper on a regular basis. Her relationship with her friends is complex. When Pepper freely roamed the neighborhood she would stop at Mazy and Ginger's house every night on her regular patrol. Once I put a GPS locator on Peppers collar to track her and found that she walked the exact same patrol every night. When humans are around Pepper is usually more aloof. She will tolerate other dogs but will never express anything other than a passing sniff of recognition.

If we choose to go left Pepper will occasionally give in to the barks of recognition, mostly from Mazy, and run up the driveway to dance with Mazy for a few minutes. Mazy also insists on dancing with me which I find very annoying. This has become the signal to all that the visit is over. Pepper never complains. Our next challenge is only a few hundred yards down the road where Mill Street joins Foster. If Pepper is bored with the standard route she may politely ask to make another left turn and I will occasionally comply but it adds to the complexity and length of the walk. I usually say no and she doesn't object. Another hundred yards down the road is the major intersection where Foster turns left and Tahattawan Road goes to the right. Turning right means we are just going around the 3 ½ mile block clockwise. Pepper never wants to go that way.

If we turn left it means that we are headed towards Fay Park and Wilderness Road. This would also be our destination if we had gone left on Mill Street as well. It means that Pepper might insist on hiking into the woods and going for a swim in Long Lake and might insist on a race to the top of Wilderness Hill via any one of a dozen trails. Pepper knows these trails by heart or I should say by scent and always manages to pick the most complex route. She will run ahead then stop and look back to make sure I'm following. I sometimes insist on going back an easy way but if I follow her lead and head to the top of the hill I have to sit down for a few minutes to catch my breath and enjoy the view while Pepper explores the fringe of the mowed field at the crest of the hill. If we make it to the top Pepper will be kind enough to go home by the shortest, easiest route. We'll both take a long nap after an adventure of this magnitude.

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As I've said Pepper is getting as old as am I. The last two times we've turned left, towards Wilderness Road, Pepper has stopped at the gate leading up the hill and turned around for home. I'm grateful not to be dragged up the hill but I hope this does not signal Peppers impending retirement. I'd rather attribute her decision to boredom, she's been there, done that.

We do go on more adventurous walks. She once caught the fresh scent of a deer near the llama farm. It turned her into a maniac. I went along with it. For almost three hours we wandered through the muddy woods, often doubling back, following the scent trail until we found ourselves in the middle of a large grassy field. The grass was nearly five feet high but trails had been made, either by man or animal - I don't know which - that crisscrossed the field at irregular angles.

At the intersection of two trails Pepper froze, looked into the rush and pointed. It's genetic. She extended her nose in the direction she wanted me to look. Her right paw was off the ground and her tail stood straight out and motionless like a broomstick. The classic hunting dog gesture. I looked too and clapped, we had been silent until then. As the sound of my clap echoed from the surrounding trees an enormous eight point buck leaped to its feet from the grass he had been hiding in, not twenty feet away, turned and ran into the woods. Pepper and I both let out a yelp of enjoyment and success. If I had a gun, or a camera, I would have had an easy shot.



We have covered the neighborhood so thoroughly it's beginning to get boring for both of us I think. Only the change of season renews our interests. For me, it's the sights, of cycling through the seasons, spring, summer, fall and early winter. I'm sure it's the same for Pepper but it's the scents of each season that excite her. A dogs brain devotes as much white and gray matter to smell as a human brain does to sight. Pepper smells in Technicolor. At the height of Summer the sights and smells become unexciting to man and dog alike so we explore a little further afield than we would otherwise. Fortunately Littleton has many wild places a dog could love. Just down the street, on the next block, is another town owned woods that is not as well maintained as Bumblebee Park or Prouty Woods, through which Wilderness Road runs. It's unimaginative name is Long Lake Park and it lies across Long Lake from the landing (off Wilderness Road) where Pepper, in the past, has enjoyed her short swims.

Long Lake Park begins as a thin strip of woods that's wedged between an old housing development and an old farm that's been turned into a church and its associated parking lot. The path extends about a half mile

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into the woods along this thin strip before crossing a brook and branching out into a half dozen trails within a three or four hundred acre preserve. The trails are not marked very well and humans must remember that a trip doesn't look the same in each direction. It does, however, smell the same in each direction so Pepper has a very different perspective and a few drops of urine guarantee that Pepper knows exactly where she is at all times. More precisely, she can always find her way back to the entrance with ease.

The first time we explored Long Lake Park we only walked to the edge of the pond where a family of enterprising beavers have erected a dam tall and wide enough to have raised the water level of Long Lake by several feet. Pepper has encountered beavers before and for some reason doesn't particularly like them. She's finicky. She'll chase mice, rabbits, gray, red and black squirrels, turkeys and deer all day but is quite ambivalent about beavers and flying squirrels. I think her ambivalence to flying squirrels is a result of their ability to outwit her. When one got into the house and Pepper thought she had cornered it, it climbed the wall and flew right over her head. Pepper was utterly perplexed and has left the flying squirrels alone ever since. I don't know why she is equally ambivalent about beavers but she is.

From my perspective our first outing at Long Lake Park was not particularly interesting. It was just another trail through the woods: green, green and more green. Pepper, however, must have found it fascinating because the next day when we began our usual walk she balked at turning left or right at the end of the driveway and instead dug in her paws in and stared at the car. It only took me a moment to guess what she wanted and when I opened the car door she leaped in with a big grin. By the time we pulled into the parking lot at Long Lake Park she was prancing and spinning for joy in the back seat. I thought she just had to pee.

When I opened the car door Pepper jumped out and bolted up the path. I trotted after her. A hundred feet up the path she stopped, turned and waited for me. As soon as she saw that I was following she turned and ran, zigzagging along the path sniffing at every opportunity and object. She ran past the turnoff to the little bridge and I whistled her back. Of course, she forded the stream rather than take the bridge as I did. Just beyond the bridge the trail becomes unkempt and it was difficult for me to see exactly where it went but eventually a kept and marked trail emerged from the bushes and Pepper and I were on our way.

On the side of the stream we were now on, the trails were numerous, broad and well kept. I chose the trails that kept us close to the stream. Eventually we reached Long Lake itself, passing the derelict remnants of a collapsed cottage with a beautiful lake view. It was unclear how anyone reached this cottage which may explain its derelict status. The best I could guess was that the trail Pepper and I followed had, at one point, been a road. A few years, decades perhaps, erased all evidence of its existence and only those interested in walking to the lake maintained its path at all. I often wondered why the Roman roads of Europe we so readily abandoned. I see now why it's such a surprise to find one after all these years.

Pepper did her usual dip in the lake, getting wet as far up as her belly. She can't swim, or at least doesn't like to and I've never seen her try. Lately her dip marks the midway point in our walks. She often heads home after

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that and I'll follow along. In years past a dip in the pond was just one stop on an adventure that would continue until her human escort got tired. Now we both were tired. She knows this and headed back up the trail we came from.

As we were walking up the trail a herd of Black Labrador puppies, four of them, came bounding up the trail ready to sniff at and play with Pepper. Ordinarily Pepper would sniff back, then move on without much acknowledgement, she's aloof. If she were human she would be one of those gorgeous, fashionable women whose arctic social air identifies them as an A-list goddess. The attention of the paparazzi like Labs made her hackles go up and she froze long enough for me to brush the Labrador puppies aside like the bodyguard I suppose I am. She was not happy about the encounter and ran off the path and ahead of me.

At one point the trail ended. I had expected that but it also meant that the bridge was within fifty yards of where I was. All I had to do was thrash through the thicket until I found a path or the bridge. Until this point Pepper had stayed more or less with me. Off the path but within eyesight. As I began my search for the bridge I noticed Pepper peeling off to the left towards the Beaver dam. I assumed that she would rejoin me at the bridge or on the well defined pathway on the other side. I whistled for her to join me. Nothing. This is not unusual. She'll ignore me if she finds something specially "colorful" to smell but eventually, a minute or so later she'll come running by at full gallop, occasionally, almost, knocking me down. She thinks it's great sport to run past me as fast as she can, in stealth mode, then turn around and give me a "are you coming" look. She can be very quiet when she wants to.

As I walked up the path I whistled every fifteen or twenty seconds. Still nothing. I could feel myself getting dehydrated and anxious. Someone had stapled posters to trees all over the neighborhood about a 14 year old dog that had been missing for months. The woods are full of deer, coyotes and now a family of cougars. I assumed that a 14 year old dog missing for a month had been a good meal for a pack of coyotes. They have been known to bring down small deer. Several years ago Pepper and one of my daughters found the remains of a domestic dog deep in the woods while bushwhacking across our block. I called the police to report it but the dispatcher said something to the effect of "let dead dogs lie." That never sat well with me. If Pepper was lost I'd want to know what happened to her.

I resolved to walk back to my car, drink some water, eat a couple of cookies then retrace my steps to look for Pepper. I whistled every dozen steps and yelled her name. Nothing. After yelling Peppers name I'd stop and listen for the pitter-patter of her galloping stride and several times I thought I heard it but there was still no sign of Pepper. I was getting both frightened and angry. Frightened that something might have happened to her, (I pictured her stuck in the mud of the beaver pond while surrounded by a pack hungry coyotes) and angry that Pepper did not come when called. Just then the path widened and I knew I was very close to my car. As I turned the last corner Pepper stood in front of me with a huge grin and a look that said, "fooled you." I was too happy to see her to be angry. I swear, she snickered all the way home.

When we got home she asked me for a treat. I told her to roll over but her eyes just said, "shut up and give me the treat." I did.

