

A Proper Greeting

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I'll admit it was a little warm for the little old man, but we both could use the fresh air, and I could use the distraction. I figured he'd be fine in the shade where I'd leashed him across the pavilion to the knee-high iron-wrought fence. In his independence he was content a few good yards from my bench in the sun. I closed my eyes to the sun's warmth and tried to relax. But my breathing remained shallow and ragged, and I itched for a smoke to relieve some of the tension in my own aging limbs.

Even when I heard the rustle of some newcomers to the pavilion I tried to keep my eyes squeezed tight, but the impulse to guard my beloved Little Man forced them open. I blinked into the sunlight and took in his tiny body, only mildly interested in the couple stepping past him. The man looked from the dog to me and gave an almost imperceptible nod. I quickly looked away from them and pretended to focus on the obelisk, but their presence kept my nerves on edge.

In their fifties or sixties, they were clearly tourists with their crisp new daypacks, sun hats, and telescopic metal walking sticks. As fond as I was of the Park, I never got used to the outsiders in the spaces I considered my own. They were too friendly for my tastes, and treated my everyday life with too much awe.

Take this woman, for instance. While her companion lowered his seat onto the other bench to my left, she circled the obelisk, face heavenward, *ooing* and *ahhing* over its “magnificence.” Her excitement scratched at my skin as I glanced back to my baby so as not to look at them, and I wondered if the husband, whose quiet mood contrasted with his wife's bubbly disposition, was at all irritated by her exuberance, too. If he was he was good at concealing it, as far as I could tell from the corner of my eye as she seated herself beside him, beaming outwardly and humming quietly.

My Little Man stirred as a fourth now approached the pavilion and beelined straight for him, cooing softly with her hand outstretched. My breath caught in my throat. He flopped before her onto his back, exposing his tender belly. I felt the heat rise in my chest as this forward young 20-something in her knee-length skirt and self-assured tank top, clearly no bra behind it, knelt beside my little dear and caressed his skin.

Just relax, she's doing no harm, I scolded myself, as his eyelids sank shut happily—still, if she wasn't careful she might pet too hard, the spot from his surgery when he was just a pup! In fact, how could she? She had absolutely no idea how she could hurt someone! They were just ignorant, these animal lovers, who thought they could take whatever love they were missing in their own lives from other beings who had better things to do.

As she scratched him, he spread his legs, revealing wisps of yellow-tinged white from his last urination. I clenched my teeth, feeling this young woman must be watching me out of the corner of her

eye even while her attention appeared devoted to my precious little one. I made my hands into tight white fists around one of the bench's wooden slats, vowing to keep myself in place and not deign to waste my breath on her.

“What a sweet little puppy you are,” she sang. My mind begged me to inform her, quite icily, that at fourteen he was hardly a puppy. But I held my ground as calmly as I could and pretended not to be watching their sickening little interlude.

It wasn't until her grubby hand went for the bone-shaped tags on his collar that I had no choice but to intervene. I jumped up, barking, “That's *my* dog!”

The girl's ashen face swung around even as her fingers stayed glued to the metal tags, preventing them from jangling with her frozen grip when my Little Man righted himself to see what was wrong. “Oh, I'm sorry,” she choked out. “I just wanted to see what his name was so I could give him—”

“I wouldn't abandon my dog somewhere,” I growled.

“I'm sure you wouldn't, I just . . .” She looked down halfway at my little guy, hiding her face behind her hair. “Thanks for letting me say hello,” she murmured.

She stood from her crouch, still hiding me from view as she turned her attention to the obelisk. I slumped back on the bench in utter exhaustion from the tension in my body. I could see in my periphery the tourist couple exchanging looks, though of course in their polite tourist way they exchanged no words. But they were no longer the object of my anxiety. Where did this girl get off, wanting to save the world, and looking for the opportunity in any clearly leashed pet stationed only a couple of yards from a very capable human being? I had given her a very generous chance to back off, and her presumptuous enjoyment of *my* animal had transformed into presumptuous concern for his well-being, simply because I hadn't asserted myself sooner. Well that certainly wouldn't happen again. Not if I had anything to say about it.

My Little Man sat eyeing my quizzically as his newfound friend, back to me, circled the obelisk, appearing to nod slightly at its heiroglyphs as she suffled away from him. I wanted badly to go to him, but a weight in my chest kept me frozen in place.

“You about ready to go?” the man inquired, arising from the tourists' bench and nestling into his pack.

“Yep, sure,” said his companion, following suit.

“How did you like your obelisk?” My face drained as the young woman spoke, still facing away from the benches toward the obelisk.

“Good!” replied the older woman, stepping forward and standing beside her a little awkwardly. “Not quite what I thought it was going to be, but good.”

“Good,” echoed the young woman softly.

“Okay, then,” said the man, heading out of the pavilion.

A tourist. She was a flipping tourist. Making me the worst example of the undeserved New Yorker stereotype.

If only because I'm so fond of the city, I stood quickly as the young woman turned to follow her parents. "Look, I'm sorry about before. I guess I was just protecting my baby."

Her chin was quivering but somehow she mustered a smile as she glanced at me sidelong. "I understand," she managed waveringly. "I guess I just missed mine." She swallowed. "You all enjoy your afternoon."

As she passed my little one she hesitated just briefly enough to say, "Goodbye, Little Man."

My ears burned as she hurried to rejoin her travelling companions. Contemplating her innocence bubbled a rage up inside me as they moved gradually towards the horizon, undoubtedly analyzing my indiscretion all the while. But *my* indiscretion? Had *she* bottle-fed him as a baby? Had *she* scrimped and saved to afford the surgery? Had *she* lovingly given him his baths, his walks, and his twice-a-day needles? No! That was me, me from the beginning, and how dare she trespass against that?

I let me eyes fall from them to Little Man's dejected pose. He was lying down, facing them, chin on his paws. He sighed.

As soon as the tourists disappeared, I strode to him. He leaped up, wagging his tail, even pawing my calf, letting me know he wanted up. A wave of relief melted the tension in my face. "You still love your old lady, don't you?" I chirped, unbuckling the leash and lifting the little guy to my aching chest.

Little Man responded with a chorus of joyful kisses. I chuckled quietly at the familiar feeling of his warm little tongue on my face. But I couldn't be sure if he was trying to reassure me or satisfy a taste for salt.