

Up All Night With the Dogs

By Paige Towers • October 3, 2016 at 10:47am

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It was a few weeks after moving to New York City when I started incessantly browsing through photos of adoptable dogs on the internet. Like a sleepwalker waking up while standing in front of an open fridge — confused and blinking — I'd be sitting in front of my computer, having intended to work on an essay, only to find myself staring at the profile of some skinny Shepherd mix or brokendown Greyhound named Macaroni or Charlie or Pablo or Molly. Then I'd wonder how I'd gotten here.

At first, I told myself it was simply a distraction. While some writers avoid the anxiety of having to produce sentences and paragraphs by scrolling through other people's vacation photos on Instagram or suddenly developing an insatiable interest in bread dough kneading techniques, my vice was Petfinder. Harmless, right?

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Yet it quickly transformed into something more: a quick look at my browser history was like staring at track marks. I even created a Petfinder account and began curating a collection of favorite dogs. I'm no breed snob; my list of what, at its peak, contained nearly 250 pets, had canines of all backgrounds and sizes — the smallest a rabbitsized Chihuahua mix, the largest a redeyed English Mastiff mix named, appropriately, Big.

I began using the photos as a gateway into an imaginary life.

The funny thing was, Macaroni or Big or all the other dogs that came before and after them might not have even been realistically attainable if I were able to adopt: I'd catch myself staring at photos of a dog that was fostered in the middleof nowhere, Alaska, or living in a rundown shelter in San Juan. It didn't matter though. My history of 'previously viewed pets' was like an insurance salesman's rolodex: undiscerning, desperate, impressively long. And it was growing longer and longer each day — sometimes by hundreds in just one evening.

Petfinder

To be fair, the chronic Petfinder browsing had started off as a practical task. For the first couple of months after moving into an apartment in NYC, my husband and I were under the impression that we were tenants in a petfriendly building. As we both adored dogs and could talk of little else, we constantly texted each other screenshots and profiles of potential pups for which we wanted to apply.

But we soon discovered that we'd been misinformed: the realty agent had just been happy to collect a quick fee, thus stating that our landlady was “totally cool with animals” — despite a lack of a pet policy in the lease. (Our bad.) Considering we'd depleted our meager savings in order to secure an apartment in NYC and couldn't afford to pick up and move again in a year's time, we realized we were facing at least two dogless — depressing — years.

11/10/2016 How Petfinder Took Over My Life | Van Winkle's My husband took it better than I did. As a firstyear medical resident, he was insanely underslept. When he wasn't working grueling night shifts, he was sitting in lectures or getting snapped at by attendings. He couldn't possibly have felt more emotionally depleted than he already was and anyway, two years or so wasn't that long to wait for a dog — or so he

figured. But in moving from Boston, I'd left behind my teaching job, my friends, my community and all the places I'd explored and walked to with my old dog, Gorby, who died the winter before we'd made the move.

When my dog died at age thirteen, I cried once and then spent the next six months existing in a sort of numb daze.

I'd adopted Gorby, a white German Shepherd, when he was nine years old. I chose the name, Gorbachev because of a brown splotch he had on his back that resembled the former Soviet leader's birthmark. A friend came up with it, and we thought it was perfect, hilarious, especially because the name offset his wolflike beauty. I was in my early and then mid twenties and had lots of time to spend with him — meaning, I spent all my time with him. Although initially he was stiff, bony and afraid of anything that moved (people, bikes, cars, a dry leaf skittering across the sidewalk), within months of

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bringing him home, I had him running two miles a day and playing fetch in the dog park. He wiggled in circles around me when I came home. He followed me around the city, offleash, his tail swinging. I ate my dinner sitting on the floor so we could be closer.

When he died at age thirteen, I cried once and then spent the next six months existing in a sort of numb daze — cringing whenever I opened the front door of my apartment, walking quickly through the empty space where he used to greet me and then straight into my bedroom.

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Petfinder

Later, when I was still preventing myself from the overwhelming task of actually grieving the loss of

Gorby, scanning photos of adoptable dogs became sort of a hopeless hobby. Or, rather, it became sort of a delusional obsession, because here I (an aspiring writer) was in NYC, skimming typo and smiley faceridden online descriptions of dogs instead of attending book readings or workshops or gathering writing inspiration from downtown streets. Still, I admired how much effort employees — or more likely, volunteers — at rescue organizations put into drafting lengthy, personalized descriptions about each dog. And while I occasionally shared a profile of a pup with a friend or family member who I thought should adopt it (they never did), the hours of scanning profiles was ultimately a selfish exercise: me staring at a screen didn't help any of the dogs waiting around in cages, hoping they'll get to go outside to pee sometime today.

Scanning photos of adoptable dogs became sort of a hopeless hobby. Or perhaps a delusional obsession.

The other thing was, when viewing a profile, I didn't simply click through the photos, skim through the description and then move on to the next. I began using the photos as a gateway into an imaginary life in which I was the adopter of that dog. Every

dog was like a portal, in which I was a different version of myself: While staring at a photo of one of many Rottweilers I frequently checked in on, I would envision myself walking down a New York City street — me in my black pleather jacket, my Rottweiler trotting along confidently next to me, her shiny black coat reflecting the sun, and both of us feeling so much purpose. There was no reason to feel bored or lonely or depressed — we had shit to do. People to see. Dog parks to visit.

Once, a Petfinder profile of an adoptable Malamute mix that reportedly had “extremely high energy” caused me me spin off into nearly two hours of intense daydreaming. I watched as my imaginary self bought some \$1,500 used Dodge truck, packed up my books and moved to a little home in Vermont roughly 20 miles from the nearest gas station. The more I clicked back and forth between the husky’s three semiblurry, inmotion photos, the more detailed the scenario became:

I would become an avid, morethanadept skier (upbringing in the flatlands of Iowa and debilitating fear of downhill sports notwithstanding), and the dog would run along offleash next to me, her tongue flapping in the cold wind, her feet darting around trees and shrubs, her eyes making contact with mine, and I'd be thinking, “this dog is tireless, yes, but at least she keeps me in shape, hahaha!” and once we reached home — barely beating that incoming blizzard some wise, grizzled mountain man had warned us about — I'd kneel down and throw my arms around her because I loved her and she adored me and this is all we really need in life to be happy, right?

Several months into my Petfinder habit and my husband finally caught on to what I was doing on my phone all the time. He told me to try getting outside more, to make some friends who weren't coworkers. To go to a museum instead of staring at photos of Dobermans. To delete "Petfinder" off my bookmarks bar. To go talk to a therapist about why I couldn't move past losing Gorby.

Like a good little addict, I did none of those things and instead started staying up until 3, 4 or 5:00 am on the nights he was busy admitting patients at the hospital. It didn't matter whether I had to be up in the morning to get to my new, uninspiring job or not. Exhaustion be damned — I was in too deep.

If this whole thing seems sad and pathetic, it's because it was — something I can only say now, through the prism of the present.

With Netflix on to serve as background noise and a drink always poured sitting somewhere nearby, I'd scroll through every dog in the tristate area and beyond. Sometimes I'd get really fancy and use Petfinder's "Breed" search option to work through every Australian Cattle Dog or Jack Russell Terrier or German shepherd or, more likely,

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random mixes of those breeds that were up for adoption in the entire United States.

If this whole thing seems sad and pathetic, it's because it was — something I can only say now, through the prism of the present. I spent countless hours scanning through profiles of adoptable dogs, noticing every little detail, most often of those that seemed least adoptable or those that reminded me most of Gorby. How they reminded me of him wasn't always immediately clear — a gaze or expression in one of their photos, perhaps. But I obsessed over these dogs the most, imagining the moment I would first bring them home, instead of experiencing any real joy, instead of interacting with the real world in any meaningful way.

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Petfinder

Yet, one morning while scrolling through my favorites list on my new Petfinder app, a wave of nausea rolled over me: this thing I was doing was the definition of futile; this wasn't the fix I needed. None of these dogs would be mine. None of them would walk or hobble into my life and change the fact that I couldn't seem to get myself off the couch, or the rest of the shit that needed changing. And none of them would replace Gorby — or the fact that I'd still not found any sane direction since uprooting myself from my previous life. Like a kid who flips through the pages of a car magazine so much that the corners turn translucent, I'd let myself live vicariously through pictures. is what I was always Life would be so wonderful,

thinking, instead of coming to the terms of what was actually facing me: You are mostly alone; you are very sad; you have to fix yourself first.

I immediately deleted the Petfinder app that day, got rid of the internet bookmark, told myself I was done. And like any addict, I wasn't done — at least not at first. Yes, I wrote more, I saw the sun more, I pulled on clothes other than sweatpants and one of my husband's large tshirts. But for several months afterwards, it still felt like I to know what new dogs had popped up that week. The longer I denied myself, the more I worried that I was missing out on the dog that I was supposed to adopt, the one that needed me the most (or realistically, the other way around), the one that would magically make life okay, despite the impossible circumstances. But it got better; I got better.

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After nearly two years of living in the same apartment, I made the calm decision to write my landlady a long letter about how a dog would likely help me with my longstanding depression — it had helped me in the past — and slid it under her door; and when she sent me a text a couple weeks later that simply said, "Okay," I didn't open my computer or take out my phone. My husband and I just took the subway down to Brooklyn that weekend, walked into a shelter, peered into the cages, paused in front of one, smiled at each other — nearly crying — and knew.