

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and long hair tied back, wearing a blue bandana and a blue t-shirt. He is holding a black and white dog. A tattoo on his right arm features a sun and the words "Arizona R.D."

**MY DOG ALWAYS EATS FIRST**

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**Homeless People & Their Animals**

**LESLIE IRVINE**

Published in the United States of America in 2013 by  
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.  
1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301  
[www.rienner.com](http://www.rienner.com)

and in the United Kingdom by  
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.  
3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**  
Irvine, Leslie.  
My dog always eats first : homeless people and their animals /  
Leslie Irvine.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-1-58826-888-4 (hc : alk. paper) 1. Homeless persons.  
2. Animal welfare. 3. Human-animal relationships. I. Title.  
HV4493.I78 2013  
305.5'692—dc23  
2012030572

**British Cataloguing in Publication Data**  
A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements  
of the American National Standard for Permanence of  
Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1992.

5 4 3 2 1

# 4 Friend and Family

**"I've been homeless on and off for, like, fifteen years. I can't seem to settle down anywhere,"** the woman told me. She had arrived well in advance of the start of the VET SOS clinic, and while the volunteers set up, she agreed to pass the time talking with me. She had a warm and friendly way about her. After she signed the consent form for the interview, she tapped the pen on my clipboard by the signature line and said, "Only my parents call me that. You can call me Ree. Everybody does." Then she introduced me to Sam, a young, energetic Rottweiler mix, and Rascal, whom she called a "Jack-huahua," a cross between a Jack Russell terrier and a Chihuahua. The three of them made quite a picture. Ree is short and stocky with light brown hair in dreadlocks. In body type, she and Sam looked well matched, but their bulk accentuated Rascal's tininess by contrast. "They're my best friends," she said without prompting. "They're my children, too."

After introducing her two dogs, Ree showed me how she had transformed the inside of her old Chevy van to accommodate the three of them. She had put makeshift curtains in the windows and taken out the backseats. She had filled the cargo area with a futon mattress, a refrigerator, a DVD player, several duffle bags, a pile of clothes, and numerous water bottles. In the mix, I saw beds, bowls, toys, and bags of food for Sam and Rascal. The scent of bodies, both human and canine, filled the small space. Ree had a third dog with her at the time, a mixed-breed with poor manners and strong signs of German shepherd in his bloodlines. The dog belonged to a friend who had gone to do an errand before the clinic began. He had taken too long, Ree said, and she had put the dog inside the van with Sam for company. She held Rascal while we sat on the van's bumper to talk. Sam stuck his

head out of the passenger-side window to keep track of everything around him. His alert brown eyes did not miss a thing. As the starting time for the clinic approached, people and dogs of all shapes and sizes gathered nearby. Sam began to whine and yip, yearning to get out and play. “That’s probably his favorite thing on earth,” Ree said, “playing with other dogs. I want to make sure he can do that.” She had brought him to the clinic to have him neutered so that she could more easily allow him to interact with a mix of dogs.

While Sam kept lookout, I asked Ree to tell me more about her dogs and about her situation in general. She was in her early thirties and had grown up on the Northern Plains. She’d had no pets while growing up, because her parents had not wanted animals in the



*Photograph by Mark Rodgers, courtesy of San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium's VET SOS project.*

*“My dog is my family.”*

house. “They didn’t want pet hair,” she said, “and they didn’t think I’d take care of pets.” They did allow her to have goldfish, and she bragged that one had lived for two years. But everything changed just a few months before she turned eighteen, when she moved in with her boyfriend, who had a dog. “I’ve had animals ever since. Mostly dogs, but cats, too.” In the fifteen years that have passed since then, Ree had taken to the road many times, always with animals. She told me about a cat who had traveled with her to forty-six states. “I had to travel with a litter box and a lid. It was a pain in the butt, but I wasn’t going anywhere without my cat,” she said. The cat had run off when she stopped to pick up some hitchhikers, and after a long search she had to move on. Since then, she had opted for dogs, describing them as “more portable.” She kissed Rascal on top of his head and said, “Always have to have my dogs.”

Ree fits the description of what I call a “Straddler.” But unlike some Straddlers, who make it off the streets but become homeless again because of hard luck, unemployment, addiction, eviction, or other circumstances, Ree claimed to enjoy episodic homelessness. To be sure, not knowing the range of options available to her at any one time made it difficult to assess her voluntaristic portrayal of her situation. But Ree’s occasional rootedness made me think of her as a Straddler, rather than a Traveler. As she explained, “Sometimes I’ll work for a while, and I’ll have an apartment and everything. Then I’ll get anxious and want to go travel, and I’ll move into a vehicle. I love to travel and I love to live in a vehicle for a while, but then I always miss cable TV,” she said, laughing. “Once I get a job, it’s easy to get inside,” she added, using the term I heard from many of the homeless. “And having a home is always nice, but after a while I just want to hit the road. Like I said, I can’t seem to settle down anywhere.”

Ree still had ties to home, albeit loose ones. Her mother periodically forwarded mail—on the rare occasions when Ree knew where she intended to go and how long she would stay. She planned to spend the summer in San Francisco and then head to the Midwest to visit her sister and see her infant niece for the first time. She thought she might stay with her sister for a while; then again, she didn’t know. She named other places that called to her and places where she had friends who would welcome the dogs and her. She talked about some repairs the van would soon need, the registration that would eventually need renewal, and consequently the money she would have to earn. I asked her what kind of work she had done.

“All sorts of things,” she told me. “Nothing to write home about. Waiting tables. Bartending. Landscaping. Demolition. You name it. I don’t care what it is. If I need work, I can do whatever.”

“Did you finish high school?” I asked.

“Barely,” she said with a laugh, “but yeah, I managed to finish. Lot of good it did me, though. I still can’t figure out what I want to be when I grow up. But I don’t care, and my dogs don’t care what kind of job I have. Or if I even have one. Doesn’t matter what I do. I’ll stay inside for a while and work at whatever and then if I’m not working a job I’ll fly a sign.”

“What does your sign say?”

“Just ‘Need gas and food. Please help,’” she replied. I asked if she mentioned the dogs when panhandling, and her response was emphatic. “I don’t exploit them,” she said. “Never. I fly a sign, but I leave my dogs in the van when I go out and do it. I don’t want to use my dogs.” She explained that sometimes people would see her with the dogs, or see the dogs in the van, and ask if she needed food for them. But she seemed to want to distinguish herself from someone who would use dogs to arouse sympathy.

The clinic began, and Ree’s early arrival paid off as they called her name first. As we said goodbye, she opened the door of the van to let Sam out. I wished her well. “We’ll do all right,” she said. “My dogs, they’re always there. I might not know where I’m going, but I’m not going anywhere without my dogs. They’re my best buds, my kids.”

### **Stories of Animals as Friends and Family Members**

Many people I interviewed described their animals as friends. Others considered them family members—never a sibling or a parent, but often a child or even a baby, with all the dependency that those terms imply. The narratives frequently suffused the identities of friend and family (Spencer and Pahl 2006). Ree had done this in calling Sam and Rascal both her “best buds” and her “kids.” Stories that cast animals as friend or family respond to certain circumstances of homelessness, to uncertainty, liminality, and contingency in particular. In addition, friend and family stories reveal the ongoing construction of what I call the “promissory self.”

The narrative of the animal as friend or family has this story line: “I once had a home and a different kind of life. I no longer have

those things. I don't know what the future holds, but this animal will be with me." For example, when I talked with Gordon, whom we met in Chapter 3, we discussed what his dog, Radar, meant to him. He said, "We don't got a lot in life, you know? Like me, I had a lot. I had a house. I had all that. Now I don't have anything but I still have him." When Gordon "spoke for" Radar, he referred to himself as "Dad." "I call him my son all the time," he told me, adding that he often teased his biological son by calling Radar his "*good* son."

Overall, Gordon's personal narrative conveyed the tensions in his life, of having and losing, with his dog as a steady presence and source of consistency amid unpredictability. Similarly, in an interview at the Homeless Youth Alliance clinic, Katie also voiced these tensions. She described her dog, Luna, as "the one stable factor in my life." She described spending most of the previous year couch surfing with friends or sleeping in her boyfriend's van as they moved around, sometimes getting jobs for a while. "People are never stable," she said. "They come and they go. Cities—I'm always bouncing back and forth, and they come and they go. But I always have my dog." When Katie described her relationship with Luna as "like having a kid," I followed up with, "So, she's your family?" She answered, "Absolutely," but quickly added, "*and* my best friend."

Although several people suffused the identities of friend and family in their stories, as Katie and Ree had done, the analysis revealed subtle differences between the two. In general, personal narratives that characterize the relationship primarily as friendship emphasize the companionship the animal provides. They also emphasize the constancy of the animal's presence as a comfort. For example, I often heard phrases such as the following:

"You know, it's just company. It's someone that is with you all the time. You know, we're just there for each other. It's company."

"He provides companionship, comfort, the sense of not being alone."

"My cat is my best friend. He's pretty much my only friend. It's very hard for me to meet people and make friends, so he's basically my best friend. He makes being lonely not so lonely."

"I know that I've always got him, no matter what. He's always there for me and I'm going to be there for him, too."

In contrast, the narratives that depict the relationship in terms of family emphasize the depth and intensity of the relationship, especially as compared with human relationships. For example, Pete said, "I'm just incredibly attached to these dogs. I love these dogs more than I do most humans. They're my family. They really are." Another man, a Boulder Straddler, said of his dog, "She's my family. She keeps me happy. It's like having a child. I love her as much as people love their children." A young Straddler in Berkeley described his dog as "the only person that'll never turn their back on you. It's the only family that I've got. I have a couple other people that, I guess, would be considered family, but they don't do anything family-like. I talk to 'em on the phone, but that's about it." A young woman in Berkeley, another Straddler, echoed his sentiment: "Your dog is the only family you have when you're on the street," she said.

Animal-as-family narratives also emphasize responsibility and caregiving, again in comparison to a human relationship of parent and child. For example, Sherri found herself homeless with her dog after coming out as a lesbian to her parents. She said, "I want to say it's like having a kid. Can't say it's a kid exactly. It might be harder with a kid. But they definitely give you a sense of, 'Okay. You gotta get the ball rolling because we can't be like this.'" Katie described how being homeless meant that Luna had to go everywhere with her. "It's kind of like having a kid," she said. "You can't just take off and do whatever you want to do." In many cases, the language of parent and child intersects with that of friendship. When Ree had said of her dogs, "They're my best friends," and added, "They're my children, too," I asked her to explain, and her response combined companionship and responsibility.

"I don't have any children," she said, "but they're always there. They keep me from being alone. They are a big responsibility. When I get upset or depressed, I don't have to think about that. It gives me something to do. 'You gotta take care of your dogs,' I tell myself. 'Go play fetch with Sam. He needs exercise. Quit feeling sorry for yourself. You have things to do. You have animals to take care of.'"

When I listened to Whit, an African American man in Miami who frequently acquired canine companions as he wandered the streets, he offered another way of distinguishing friends from family. Whit had a long history of heavy drinking and drug use, but he was clean and sober when we met. He had a gentle terrier mix he called Jack, but he recalled having had as many as five dogs hang-

ing around him at one time. He talked about some dogs as friends and described others as family. I asked him about the difference. He thought for a few minutes and gave me an example: "Sometimes you just walk down the street and you see this dog, and you start petting it, start feeding it, and next thing you know, he just follows you, and you got a friend. Then, another comes by, then another, and then I got five dogs following me. So for a while, you got dogs all over you. You got all those friends. Sometimes they'd be off on their own after a while. When they stayed with me, and slept with me, and kept me company, then they was my family. They *wanted* to stay near me."

The scholarship on friendship often points out one critical difference between friends and family: we choose our friends, but not our family. Whit had another way of looking at it. For Whit, the dogs' choice to stay or to wander factored into whether he considered them friends or family.

"On the street, did they sleep with you?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," he replied. "They slept near me and wouldn't let nobody come near me. When I got to drinking or something, the cops couldn't come and wake me up, because [the dogs] wouldn't let 'em come to me. And next thing I know, I woke up and had a ticket said, 'There's your dogs. Go down to 72nd and wherever and get 'em.'"

Wanting to understand, I asked, "So they would take your dogs to the pound?"

He nodded and said, "Yeah. And I'd say, 'But I ain't got no car and I can't get 'em on the bus!' They told me that after so long, they going to put the dogs to sleep. I couldn't go get 'em back. I never got to see 'em no more. They took my family away! To me, that was my family. That was who I stayed with and slept with every night."

Tears had come to Whit's eyes, and we both kept silent for a few moments. After he had cleared his throat and wiped his eyes, I asked, "What did you do when that happened?"

"I felt so lost without 'em," he said. "They was all I had. In those days, I'd just drink a little bit more. The pain would go away, and I'd say to myself, 'Okay. You're all right now.'"

It might be tempting to attribute higher value to my descriptions of the "depth" and "intensity" associated with narratives of family than to the "companionship" and "comfort" of friendship, but I do not intend to give any greater status to one relationship or the other. In the context of relationships in general, some people might rank friendship higher than family relationships because of its chosen and

autonomous qualities and the potential strains within families. At the same time, some might rank family higher than friendship, in line with the old saying that “blood is thicker than water.” I acknowledge that these hierarchies exist, but I have no intention to place either family or friend at the top, nor do I have evidence that the narrators intended to do so either.

### **Responding to the Problems of the Recently Dislocated and Straddlers**

I heard stories of friend and family most often from the Recently Dislocated and the Straddlers, or among those who were newly or episodically homeless. I heard the designation of friend more often than that of family. Overall, twenty-two people—eleven in each category—described their animals as friends. An additional sixteen described them as family members, with the Recently Dislocated slightly more likely than Straddlers to do so. To be sure, people in other categories of homelessness referred to their animals in these ways, too, but to lesser extents. Only a few Travelers, for example, described their animals as friends, and as Chapter 6 shows, they tended to assign their animals roles as protectors. Overall, the newly or episodically homeless showed a greater affinity for friend-and-family narratives than did those in other categories of homelessness. Men and women used the designation of friend equally. Men tended to define their animals as family members more often than women did, but both sexes used the construction of child in nearly equal numbers. One could speculate that the construction of the animal as child might reflect, and perhaps represent attempts to repair, the traumatic childhoods that many homeless people have in their histories, but the data do not allow me to draw that conclusion definitively.

At first glance, the narratives of friend and family simply represent culturally recognized vocabularies for talking about animals. Homeless or otherwise, people often depict their companion animals as best friends or members of the family (Cain 1983, 1985; Hickrod and Schmitt 1982; Sanders 2003; Voith 1983). Is it any wonder that homeless people, too, draw on these vocabularies? Perhaps not, but this easy answer misses the opportunity to understand what these animal identities accomplish within the narratively constructed worlds of the homeless. This, in turn, requires knowing something about the

unique circumstances faced by the Recently Dislocated and the Straddlers. The experiences differ slightly for each type of homelessness.

### *Uncertainty and the Recently Dislocated*

The Recently Dislocated face the primary issue of uncertainty in their new situation. Every detail of life, whether finding shelter, parking, or the next meal, requires effort. More than one person used the term “skill set” when referring to becoming homeless. As Emily, a long-term Straddler whom we’ll hear more from later in this chapter, told me, the newly homeless “are not prepared for scrambling just to survive every day.” This uncertainty generates at least three responses, the first of which entails acquiring survival skills. In David Snow and Leon Anderson’s 1993 study *Down on Their Luck*, the Recently Dislocated often turned to social service agencies that could provide food and shelter. Many worked at the Salvation Army in exchange for a meal and a bed.<sup>1</sup> Homeless pet owners do not have this option and must devise other survival strategies. For example, Max, a Recently Dislocated woman in San Francisco whom I interviewed, rented a room in a house with her husband and her dog. The place was a “squat,” an unoccupied residence, but Max and her husband paid rent to the man who had found it and designated himself as the landlord. They preferred paying for an illegal squat to sleeping in Max’s truck. As she explained, “Finding a place to sleep is the hardest thing. But if my dog’s not welcome, hey, you know what? I only go where my dog’s welcome. I didn’t bring her into this situation just to dump her off in the street, or to put her in a kennel somewhere. It’s a lifelong commitment. We’re family.” Max’s account reveals how the narrative of friend and family serves as a form of what C. Wright Mills (1940) called “motive talk,” a way of explaining questionable acts and problematic situations. In answer to my questions about housing, she and other Recently Dislocated tellers described their arrangements in terms of their commitment to animals. Doing so helps to construct a moral identity, a topic I return to later in this chapter.

Along with acquiring survival skills, the Recently Dislocated cope with uncertainty by learning whom to trust. Snow and Anderson found that because of fear, distrust, and a belief that one will soon get off the streets, those recently dislocated tend to avoid socializing with other homeless people (1993:47, 178–179). This can backfire,

however, because those with experience on the street have survival skills to share. But for some of the people I interviewed, having a dog facilitated contact with what they saw as the “right kind” of homeless people, those who knew the ropes and shared their knowledge. For example, Kim and her partner became homeless after losing first their jobs and then their apartment in Sacramento. Both in their fifties, they moved to San Francisco to find work, and planned to sleep in their car with their dog, Maggie, for “a few nights, at most a week or two.” That turned into four months, which Kim describes as “the craziest times I’ve ever lived through.” She recalled:

The hardest thing is to find out how and where to get help. We went to a couple of different programs, and each one, they all have their little piece of the pie, and not knowing that, I’d go through the door, and they’re like, “Well, do you have this? Do you have that? Do you have G.A.?” Well, what’s G.A.? I didn’t know. I had no idea that you can’t get anything until you do that. So I was in perpetual meltdown. We were always trying to find a good place to park. Then the car broke down, and we had to stay right where we were. This old drunk guy who used to sleep near where we parked, he just died last week, but he liked Maggie and he said he liked the way we were a little family. He was the one who told us how to do that [apply for General Assistance]. Because we had Maggie, she attracted the right kind of person. We wouldn’t have known who to trust without that.

As Kim explained, getting any help at all requires knowing how to get help. A person would not know where to start unless she or he had needed help before. The man who admired Kim and her partner’s relationship with Maggie turned out to be a wealth of information. When the car broke down, Kim and her partner did not know how to get Maggie on the bus. The same man told them how to do that, too. Maggie helped them overcome their initial wariness of him. As a social facilitator, Maggie bridged the worlds of the newly homeless and the street person. When I met Kim, she had gained some survival skills that allowed her to navigate the social service bureaucracy. Her living situation had become more stable. She and her partner and Maggie had found a weekly rental in a single-room occupancy hotel and had made it onto a list for permanent housing. She stroked Maggie’s satiny black fur as she added, “There’s no way we would know the people we know, or be as comfortable in the circumstances we’re in, were it not for her.”

Another response to uncertainty involves trying to eliminate it by attempting to get off the street. The newly homeless often divide their energies between learning how to navigate a new and perplexing situation and trying to return to the domiciled life. In the role of friends and family, animals help in both aspects. For example, Maggie played an important role as a guide to material resources, but she also gave Kim and her partner a sense of emotional normalcy. As Kim said, “Maggie reminds us of what life can be like. She really is the whole thing. She’s my friend and family. She gives me that little piece of ‘I’m still here.’” Although many of the domiciled describe their animals as friends and family, too, few of us rely on them for this degree of existential certainty. For those who are newly homeless, having an animal in the role of friend or family member serves as a reminder of what life can be like.

Animals can also provide an incentive to get off the streets. At a VET SOS clinic, I met Isaac, an African American man in his twenties, and his dog, Raja, a tan pit bull. We sat under a tree and talked while Isaac waited for Dr. Strubel to examine Raja. Isaac explained that he was a cocaine and heroin addict. He had stayed clean for many years, but relapsed and “ended up on the streets.” Just within the month before we met, he had entered a treatment program. Raja, whom he called his “best friend in all the world,” had provided comfort but also motivated Isaac to get into treatment. “We were on the streets,” he said, “sometimes in motels. Always moving around. It was hard. I had to hide him ’cause a lot of motels didn’t allow dogs so I had to sneak him in. I got kicked out of a bunch of motels because when they came in and cleaned they seen him, and said, ‘You got to go. Got to leave.’ There’s only been like two nights that we actually slept on the street all night, me and him.”

“What was that like?” I asked.

“Oh, it was . . . it was pretty bad,” he said. Then he shook his head and corrected himself. “It was terrible, actually, but I felt a little better because I had him with me. We had a blanket, so it was okay, but it was still rough. I didn’t want to stay rough like that, so that’s why I came into treatment, so we could have a better life. I got tired of living the way I was living. But me having him, I realized I didn’t want to live like this. I didn’t want to make the dog suffer, my best friend, living like this, homeless. I need to get myself together. I can have me a better life, and he can have a better life. That’s how I looked at it.”

Isaac decided to go into treatment and, after some difficulty, found a program that would allow Raja to accompany him. “The program people seen how much love I have for this dog,” he said, “and they allowed him to come with me. He brightens my day every day. He keeps me going. He’s a big part of my life. I really love him.”

For the Recently Dislocated, such as Isaac and Kim, the narrative of animals as best friends and family responds to and mitigates the problems that face the newly homeless. The emotional ties help the Recently Dislocated cope with the uncertainty of street life. They provide a reminder of life off the street, as well as an incentive to work toward the goal of getting back to that life, or even to a better version of it.

### *Straddlers and Liminality*

The issues differ for Straddlers, who have experienced street life before. As Snow and Anderson (1993) point out, Straddlers must cope with status ambiguity, or liminality (Turner 1967; Van Gennep 1961). The word “liminality” has its origins in the Latin term for “threshold,” and Straddlers indeed exist within this ambiguity, positioned “betwixt and between” the domiciled world and life on the streets (Turner 1967:93; see also Snow and Anderson 1993:52). Austin’s experience exemplifies the liminality of the Straddler status. He had found himself homeless multiple times. “I don’t know how to count them anymore,” he said. “Sometimes I think I have a home and then I find out I don’t, and I’m on the street again.” When we met, Austin was couch surfing in the homes of friends, but he sometimes had to sleep outdoors when friends could not accommodate him. He described his dog—the “super-cute” poodle mix we met in Chapter 3—as his family. He looked at me over the top of his glasses and said, by way of explanation, “I’m from Texas, and I never thought I’d say that about a little ‘foo-foo’ dog like this, but having him makes a world of difference because it keeps me going. It makes me feel like I belong.”

Emily, another Straddler, depicted the liminal status well. For over a decade, she had bounced on and off the streets with her dog, Hobo, whom she called her best friend. Now in middle age, Emily recounted how her homelessness began:

The first time I became homeless, what started this all out is, I was in an automobile accident, and I was in a coma for about two and a half months. And when I came to—see, I had been renting, and

my apartment was gone. I had been evicted while I was in the hospital in a coma. Everyone thought I was dead, except for my best friend. He said, "She's still somewhere." So he had put Hobo and my other dog in a kennel and was paying that bill. My friends put my car and things in storage. So when I got out of the hospital, I realized I was going to be homeless. I sold my car and bought a little truck with a trailer and we lived in the trailer. I thought it'd be just for a little bit. It was four years, because I couldn't find a place to rent with an eviction and the dog, no matter what. [Referring to Hobo. She found a home for her other dog.] So I'd gone downtown to cash my check, and I got mugged coming out of the check-cashing place. I went to the hospital because some of my teeth were knocked out. I was really a mess. Got out of the hospital. And when I'm coming down the street—I've got blood on me and my face is swollen—and I ran into someone from the old life, from when I was working and part of society, and they wanted to know what happened to me, and I told them in a nutshell, and two days later, they came back and said, "We don't have a house for you, but we have a place that can get you off the street with the dog." And they let me move into a junkyard. And I lived there for four years.

Pali Boucher, introduced in Chapter 2, came to visit Emily and heard gunfire from automatic weapons in the area. Pali posted a "Can you help my friend?" ad on Craigslist. The ad generated a living situation in a very rural area, where Emily could do some work in exchange for rent. She lived there another four years. But then she developed serious health problems, and in the course of treating them, doctors diagnosed her as HIV-positive. She moved back to San Francisco for treatment. "You need to be where it's cutting-edge," she said. "If you're going to take care of yourself, you need to be where they know what they're doing." She was living in another junkyard when we met. Hobo was now advanced in age, and she said, "What time we have left, I just want it to be quality. He is the most important thing to me. I'll live in that junkyard until he's gone. When the time comes that I lose him, I'll lose him. But not before."

"What then?" I asked her.

She had modest hopes, saying that she would want to get out of the junkyard and into a single room occupancy.

Emily's personal narrative manifests numerous liminal experiences, including a coma and encounters that contrast homelessness with her "old life" as "part of society." But if one lives on the streets long enough or often enough, even liminality can become routine and predictable. Over time, Straddlers usually make a number of friends

on the street, or at the very least become tolerant and unafraid of other homeless people. In addition, they find sources of food and places to stay. Thus, Straddlers do not face the same unfamiliar and often frightening world that confronts the Recently Dislocated.

Precisely because most Straddlers become adapted to homelessness, they usually spend a considerable amount of time waiting within the context of their routines (see also Snow and Anderson 1993). They may have found out where to eat, such as a soup kitchen, but they must wait for serving time and, if they have a pet, must also wait for a friend to arrive to watch that pet, since animals are typically not allowed in facilities that feed the homeless. They may have found out how to get SSI benefits or food stamps, but only by waiting for appointments, waiting for the bus to get to the Social Security office, and waiting for notification of eligibility. They wait for checks to arrive and housing to become available. For those with pets, they also wait at veterinary clinics, which is what gave me the chance to interview them and predisposed them to talk. In the world of the domiciled, most of us would become infuriated at having to wait longer than twenty minutes or so in a veterinarian's office. Those familiar with life on the streets, however, take it in stride. For homeless pet owners, the companionship of an animal helps them cope with what I call "the tyranny of waiting." For example, Austin explained that having a dog occupied the time between when he woke up (when he was outdoors, he was often rousted early from his sleep by police) and when the city became active and he could find somewhere to hang out legitimately. He said: "It's lonely when you have to find somewhere to be at six in the morning until like, nine, ten, when things are open, and if you have a dog companion with you it gives you something to do, somewhere to go. You can come out to the park here and sit out here longer than you could do if you were by yourself. If I didn't feel the way I do about him, I wouldn't have him, because it's a lot of hassle sometimes. But he's family, and so he's with me all the time and that helps."

Austin's account points out how homelessness involves not only waiting for specific things such as appointments to happen, but also just waiting for time to pass. In Elliot Liebow's ethnography of a homeless shelter in Washington, D.C., he found that "killing time" ranked "high on most women's lists of hardships" (1993:29). When the women left this shelter each morning, the reality of their homelessness hit them, as they had to decide how to spend their day. But,

as Liebow explained, when one is homeless, “You can’t decide what to do because it doesn’t matter what you do. You’re not needed anywhere, not wanted anywhere, and not expected anywhere. Nobody cares what you do” (1993:30). He noted that when the women had tasks to accomplish, they often spread them out rather than trying to accomplish them quickly, and would structure an entire day around a single appointment. What might look to most of us like laziness or procrastination in fact provided a way to “distribute structure and meaning” in an otherwise uneventful stretch of time (1993:31–32). Similarly, Jason Wasserman and Jeffrey Clair noted in their study that “for those on the street, passing time becomes something of an art” (2010:125).

When I interviewed Mike, a white Straddler in his late twenties whom I met at the Mercer Veterinary Clinic in Sacramento, he described the blurred distinction between waiting for things to happen and waiting for time to pass. Mike’s history included addiction and jail time. We talked as he waited for his dog, Ziggy, to be examined in preparation for neutering. I had seen Mike ride up on his bicycle long before the clinic was scheduled to start. His bike had a trailer attached, and in it he carried not only his few possessions but Ziggy, too. Mike had recently acquired Ziggy and the two had been camping in a tent, moving from park to park, evading rangers and the police. He described a typical day:

We wake up. [Ziggy] wanders around a little bit, peeing and what-not. I break camp and walk over here [Loaves and Fishes]. Get my lunch ticket. Go out to the street. Sit on Ahearn [Street] right there, because he’s not allowed in the kennel yet [until neutered]. And we wait for lunch. I’ll take a shower every two days, every three if it’s cool out. I’ve got only two people that I let watch him. I go over to the Mission after that. I get dinner over there. I can’t eat dinner in there because I can’t bring the dog in, but they’ll bring some food outside. . . . He occupies a lot of my time. A lot of it, and I love it.

Once neutered, Mike would be able to board Ziggy free of charge in the kennels at the Loaves and Fishes facility during the day. (Pet owners must walk their dogs twice each day and clean the kennel at day’s end.) He would then be able to eat and shower without first finding someone trustworthy to watch his dog.

In addition to waiting as a part of each day, Mike waited in a “bigger picture” sense, for a future that held a different kind of life.

At the time I interviewed him, he was soon to learn his SSI status, and he would be getting off parole in ten days. Ziggy figured heavily in his plans. I asked him what would change when his parole ended. “I’m not going to do nothing to go back! [to jail] I’m just not going to do anything to go back. I’m not going to do stupid stuff. And now, I’ve got Ziggy. The responsibility of just having a dog is a step in the right direction, you know? I finally feel like I know what I’m doing.”

For Straddlers, such as Mike, the friend-and-family narrative can provide a structure for daily life. For the Recently Dislocated, the narrative provides an anodyne for the uncertainty that accompanies their new status. In both cases, the animal represents hope. Consequently, possibility and promise characterize the stories of the self that emerge from these narratives.

### The Promissory Self

Whether Recently Dislocated or Straddler, the teller of the friend-and-family narrative portrays him- or herself in hopeful, if tentative, terms. Ree’s story illustrated this when she assured me that she would be okay. Kim, Mike, and others had plans for getting off the street. Those plans, however, depended on a chain of events largely out of their control.

As discussed, Straddlers must cope primarily with liminality, and for the Recently Dislocated, the main issue is uncertainty. For both groups, life remains very much up in the air. A better future, and perhaps even a life off the streets, is possible, but by no means certain. That future depends on a sequence of conditions falling into place. For example, I asked Kim how long she and her partner expected to have to wait for housing, and she said, “If all goes well, we think about a year.” They simply did not know, and would not know, until it happened. Similarly, Austin said, “I thought I was getting [an apartment], but that was then, and I was stonewalled. I know that I will be getting one, I just have no idea when.” Mike was counting on qualifying for SSI and getting off parole. Emily was looking forward to moving out of the junkyard, although she did not want to think about Hobo’s demise. But none of them could influence the outcome beyond taking the essential steps along the way. In the meantime, much can happen to derail hopes and plans for getting off the streets

(see also Snow and Anderson 1993:183–186). Time alone takes its toll. In Liebow's study, for example, he found that "the greatest threats to survival were discouragement and disappointment" (1993:178). To avoid these twin demons, the women he met kept their expectations low and developed a "one day at a time" philosophy. Although this staved off negativity, it also had its costs, including a failure to plan, even for the near future. Among the people I interviewed, I found that giving animals the identities of friend or family in one's narrative itself constitutes a form of planning. It helps dispel the contingent nature of daily life, this thinking that "I don't know what the future holds, but this animal will be there, and I will be there for him or her." Perhaps more accurately, the narrative *conceals* the contingency. Doing so, in turn, provides some of the normalcy enjoyed by the domiciled. Those of us with jobs and homes face contingency, too, but we can stave it off with schedules, insurance, savings, planning, diets, exercise programs—and denial. For the newly or episodically homeless, however, contingency has an "in your face" character.

The teller of the friend-and-family narrative gains elements of stability and predictability within an unstable, unpredictable lived experience. Ree, for example, contrasted her restlessness and her lack of interest in an occupation against her commitment to her dogs. Katie emphasized how people and places come and go, but how her dog was always there. Kim spoke of Maggie's role in learning how to get help and Austin told of how his dog helped him cope with the waiting. In these examples, as in others, the relationship with one's animal companion provides a refuge from uncertainty. Just having the animal to care for brings responsibility, reliability, and consistency to lives that have few conventional means of attaining these qualities. At the same time, the feeling of being needed that comes from the animal's dependence brings emotional benefits. For example, Ree found that the responsibilities of caring for her dogs lifted her spirits when she felt sorry for herself; the dogs reminded her that she had things to do.

As a self-story, the narrative of friend and family also conveys a sense of acceptance, an especially important element for selves that are *promissory*: neither what they once were nor what the tellers hope them to be. In the context of this tentativeness, the perceived unconditional love offered by an animal acts as a balm. The relationship with one's animal provides stability and certainty in the midst of

uncertainty and contingency. Because it exists in a realm apart from the street, the relationship provides a point of permanence in a shifting terrain of the self. Much as a toddler exploring a room repeatedly returns to the parent before venturing off again, the relationship with the animal offers a way for uncertain selves to check in and then rest in security. Although the teller may not know where his or her next meal will come from, the animal provides important elements of predictability and permanence.

Granted, everyone has a promissory self to some extent. Sustaining a sense of self is never a fait accompli. None of us can know the future, and we all face existential questions along the road. The homeless do not have a monopoly on the act of imagining and anticipating how life could change if only one thing or another were to happen. But subjectivity is always embedded in social structure, and the personal narratives told by those who are newly or episodically homeless show how the story of the promissory self emerges from the narrative of animal as friend and family, in concert with certain conditions of homelessness. The emphasis on having a reliable friend or family member both reveals and responds to the promissory self.

### **The Power and Limitations of the Friend-and-Family Narrative**

For the homeless tellers of this story, much of its power lies in its ability to bestow or restore a moral identity and a sense of self-worth, especially when resources for positive personal significance are in short supply. For those who are newly or episodically homeless, the promissory sense of self, with its hopes and goals for getting off the street, suggests that the person is directing him- or herself toward what one might generally call “the good.” By drawing on the discourses of “friend” and “family,” a homeless person connects this orientation toward the good with the self. The narrative suggests that the teller believes him- or herself to be a particular kind of person, one who is trustworthy and keeps his or her word.

Defining one’s commitment in terms of friendship or family ties accomplishes what Jack Katz described as turning *acts* into *essences*. As Katz explained, an essence is “some inner quality of being, distinct from and additional to” conduct or activity (1975:1370). The examples of the new wife, widow, and lawyer illustrate how people

can engage in actions without sensing that they “essentially possess those identities” associated with particular lines of conduct (1975:1370). In other words, one can act without seeing oneself as any certain kind of person. Yet the doing and the being, though distinct, are related. People tend to understand essences as providing the moral foundation for behavior. Consequently, people give moral significance to essences, believing them to capture and convey who a person really is.

In the case of animal companionship, the behaviors involved in providing care, taken alone, do not indicate any essence within the person enacting them. One could have a companion dog or cat without inherently sensing oneself to be any particular kind of person, moral or otherwise. The behaviors require a story in order to have meaning. As Katz explained, this meaning is created using nouns rather than verbs, but he referred “not to grammatical forms but to forms of understanding or meaning” (1975:1374, n. 4). For example, to say that someone drinks a lot is different from calling him or her an alcoholic. As a noun, the word “alcoholic” connotes an essence, and one with moral significance. Similarly, the designations of “friend” and “family” convey an essential morality. When a homeless person describes an animal companion as a friend or family member, the teller becomes a moral actor, someone worthy of friendship and family ties. For example, I heard the following from a young male Straddler: “Every day, all day long, I’m doing something for this dog that she can’t do for herself. She is the closest thing that I think I’ll ever have to a kid. This is my baby. And that makes me feel real good, real validated about me. She does not want to be apart from me, and that’s really cool. It’s unconditional love on both our parts, both sides of it.” In this case, the speaker connects his acts as a guardian, indeed, as virtual parent, with a positive sense of self-worth. His account conveys a message about his essence: essentially good and caring, despite any feedback to the contrary he might receive from others or through self-judgments.

For tellers, this narrative has at least two limitations. First, although it bestows or restores moral agency and self-worth, it remains unclear—at least in my analysis—how far these benefits reach. The validation expressed by the Straddler just quoted, while valuable for his sense of self-worth, does not solve any of the material problems of life on the streets. Moreover, validation in one context might not carry over to other parts of one’s sense of self. By

connecting the telling of a friend-and-family narrative with a *moral* identity, I make no claims about the state of the tellers' lives and conduct outside of their relationships with their animals. I do not want to portray the narrators as angelic beings who never engage in any wrongdoing, nor do I want to romanticize homelessness or human-animal relationships. Rather, my claims about morality apply only to how the friend-and-family narrative supports a positive identity, especially within the context of the orientations of those who find themselves newly or episodically on the streets.

A second limitation of this narrative has to do with the imposition of the rhetoric of unconditional love and other experiences associated with friendship and family membership onto animals. This rhetoric appears in other narratives, too, but the closeness implied by friendship and family relationships made it especially common here. What we sense as "unconditional love" from an animal might have a better explanation, one that reflects the animal's reality more accurately. When we say that an animal loves us, we risk mischaracterizing the animal's ways of knowing, and we set human limits on its already complex social and emotional arrangements. As Arnold Arluke has put it:

These views of perfect love from our pets persist, despite evidence to the contrary. The "one-person dog" is a myth. Animal behaviorists point out that the focused attention given to us by our pets is just the animal's pack behavior, orienting itself to the available human alpha male. Switch the owner and our pet's "loyalty" and "love" for us get switched to the next person. Cognitive ethologists add that while animals experience a range of emotions, we are on thin ice to assume that animals experience the same emotions felt by humans; even if they did, the intensity and meaning of these emotions would probably be different. Moreover, when owners are pressed to explain this perfect love, it is one-way because they put their own conditions on this idyllic relationship, imposing financial, physical, temporal, and emotional limitations on what their pets can expect of them. (2010:35)

Donna Haraway has called the imposition of "unconditional love" on dogs "pernicious." She claims that the emotions people feel for dogs "might be properly called love if that word were not so corrupted by our culture's infantilization of dogs and the refusal to honor difference" (2003:33, 39). She points out that we place a heavy burden on animals when we enlist them as friends and family members.

A person who claims to love his or her animal companion unconditionally today might face circumstances that set conditions on that commitment tomorrow. If I were to undertake a longitudinal study of homeless people and their pets, I would want to see how many “best friends” and “family members” remained with the same guardians over time. To be sure, the same commitment issues affect the domiciled, too, as evidenced by the numbers of animals surrendered to shelters annually (Irvine 2003). But the larger point here is one artfully made by Erving Goffman: what we know as the Thomas Theorem—that what we define or interpret as real will have real consequences—is “true as it reads but false as it is taken.”<sup>2</sup> Goffman wrote that “defining situations as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute very marginally to the events in progress” (1974:1). To put this in the context of the narrative of animal as friend and family, defining animals in this way does have consequences, but the hardships of the street, along with other challenges faced by those who must live there, constitute “events in progress” that four-legged friends and family members can neither change nor resolve.

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At one of the VET SOS clinics, I talked with a woman who lived in her car with her cat. We discussed the various roles that animals can have in our lives. Our conversation turned to the stereotypical images in television commercials, in which the affable Golden Retriever plays with the children in the well-manicured yard or lounges with the family in the comfortably furnished living room, or the handsome cat curls up with the attractive couple on the couch. The woman said, “You know, when you have a home, your relationships with animals take place *at home*. But when you’re homeless, they *are* your home.” This image of *animals as home* struck me deeply. I listened carefully during other interviews, but no one else expressed it quite so well. Whatever the pitfalls in the language of “friend” and “family” may be, tellers do not use these terms to describe casual acquaintanceship. The narratives of animal as friend and family attest to a felt sense of emotional support, consistency, and predictability, qualities not easily found on the street. The narratives also serve as a reminder that we can only understand and meet the needs of the homeless if we take their relationships with their pets seriously.

## Notes

1. Snow and Anderson point out that because the Salvation Army prohibits those who work there from socializing with other homeless people, at least at the time and in the location of their research, “the antipathy of the recently dislocated toward other homeless makes them prime candidates for jobs” at the organization (1993:181).

2. The Thomas Theorem claims: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928:571–572).