

Veterinary Hell

July 24, 2003

Every once in a while, when you are the owner of a pet, you find yourself in a place you don't want to be – the vet's office. Such is the case for me on this day when, thanks to a less than attractive sore in my cat's mouth, I have coaxed him into his carrying case and endured his forlorn meowing in the car ride over. I can't blame him. I hate coming here, too.

It doesn't matter what time of day or day of the week we wind up here...we will always have a long wait. It's no different than going to my doctor, where a four o' clock appointment really means she'll see you when she's damn good and ready.

I understand it with my doctor. I know that in this day and age of managed care, she probably sees 800 patients a day and as soon as just one of them starts yapping away, the whole schedule's shot. This is our punishment for making her office do all the insurance paperwork so that I can get in and out for ten bucks.

I'm not so sure why my vet's always running behind. Unexpected ringworm, perhaps? Surely, surely, surely it must be easier to time manage when most of your patients are mute. On the other hand, I realize, their owners aren't. God knows they aren't. I know they aren't, since I get stuck in the waiting room with them.

We're in a space not larger than a jail cell, just me and every dog owner in the world. I'm crowded by two Great Pyrenees, one golden retriever, a mid-size black lab, a mutt of indiscernible origin and four humans. This would be comic if it weren't missing that one crucial element – it's not funny.

It's not that I'm not a dog person. In the first place, I like to think of myself as entirely too sophisticated to sum up my persona by allegiance with one species from the animal kingdom. Unless, of course, we can expand the playing field and instead of being a dog person or a cat person, I could be a Northern hairy-nosed wombat person. Which, for all I know, I may well be.

It's just that dogs can be somewhat invasive and it never fails that their owners find their behavior perfectly acceptable, if not downright darling. Here comes Lassie with her muddy paws to mark up your clean pants and – goodness! – there's her face in your crotch and her owner's just muttering, "Isn't she adorable?"

This day at the vet's office is no exception. The two Great Pyrenees keep trying to make a break for the door, pulling the owner they outweigh by 300 pounds off her seat. She smiles and shakes her head repeatedly as she rubs her dislocated shoulders. But nothing compares to the mutt, who clearly has no manners. He is the victim of an owner who has mistaken obnoxious for precocious, alarming for charming.

As his owner shares with another dog owner that Sammy here is prone to chewing up her belongings, the pup in question jumps up on and wanders across the chairs in the waiting room

before nudging his way onto his owner's lap. "You chew things up," she says to his hairy mug. "Ess oo doo. Ess oo doo. You chewed up my bible." Lady, I'm thinking, if your dog is taking to chewing up the holy text, then clearly we have all the evidence we need that this is Satan's four-legged spawn.

Fortunately, the canine Damian and his owner are called in soon enough, only to be replaced by two more dogs of cutesy breed. At least they're well behaved and, as far as I can tell, not heathen.

The worst part about waiting at the vet's office is that unless you're a fan of Cat Fancy or ancient issues of Highlights, there ain't much to do here. Which leaves me to think evil thoughts about other people's pets and inhale. While the former helps pass the time nicely, the latter is probably why I don't like being here in the first place.

The vet's office smells like pets at their worst, every slightly disturbing odor surrounding animals, strong enough to seem piped through the air vents. It smells of damp hair, strange medicines, cat pee, sickness and death. Every time I breathe in, I'm sure I'm taking in some airborne pet funk that will, at the very least, affect my disposition.

I get depressed here. Partly, of course, because the girls at the counter don't know the first thing about customer service and I always find that depressing. But also because of JoJo. Or someone just like her.

It never fails that while I'm waiting here, someone brings in a pet who is not much longer for this life. Today, it is JoJo, a grey poodle, wrapped in a towel. Her owner whispers her purpose to the clerk at the counter, I guess so JoJo won't know. And I think how sad it is that they're having to put down a dog who completely understands English.

Still, JoJo knows. I can tell. As the clerk responds with, "How's she doing?" Death Row JoJo is shaking like a leaf. I'm sorry for her and sorry for her owners. I'm sorry, because I know how much pleasure pets can bring you, along with all the collective pains and troubles, such as waiting here for someone to take a look at your cat's mouth and charge you an arm and a leg for it.

I know that no matter how much I curse the cat hair my two felines deposit around the house, no matter how bad my allergies get, I'm absolutely 100% not prepared for the sinking feeling when the vet examines my cat's mouth and tells me she's worried. Worried? He's got an ulcer or something, I'm sure, I tell her with my veterinary expertise.

"Probably," she says. "But at his age and with the tissue looking strange here, I'm worried it might be cancer." Cancer? Allie, who sheds white hair all over my black clothes? Allie, who wakes us up at four every morning to be fed? Allie, who waits for us to open the back door so that he can dash out for a momentary feel of freedom? Allie, who before I met my husband, was the one man I could count on to be there for me every day of my life?

Yeah, I'm not ready for this and, looking at my kitty, I'm pretty sure he isn't, either. The vet is taking swabs of his mouth to examine under a microscope, to check for cancer cells. "Okay," I tell her, "but I'd really prefer if it could not be cancer. Just so you know." She smiles at me. She's a good vet, every bit as kind to the owners as the patients. "I'll do my best," she tells me. "But you just never know with a cat of his advanced age."

What? My cat's old? I mean, he was a stray when I took him in, so we don't exactly have a birth certificate, but we have him pegged at nine or ten. Which, my vet informs me, is pretty old. Which I guess I knew but I definitely don't want to think about.

But the cells are not cancer. Just an infection that a steroid shot, an antibiotic and \$150 will clear right up. But what about me? When we're done in the examination room and Allie, who's not pleased with the undignified way he's been treated, has returned to his carrying case, what am I supposed to do when faced with the mortality of my own pet?

Out in the waiting room, there's no sign of JoJo, no sign of her owners. She's gone, I'm sure, and even as my ass is being invaded by one of the Great Pyrenees, my heart is breaking, slightly. For JoJo, who put in a good many years, I'm sure. For Allie, who's got a few more to go. For all the people feeling the void left behind by the loss of a damn good pet.

As I'm waiting – and waiting and waiting – for someone to check me out, it occurs to me that we're all here in this place I hate to come because we love our pets – some more than others, but all enough to want them well and with us. And suddenly it doesn't seem like such a bad place after all.