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A Dog's Life

Why are so many people so cruel to their dogs? My search to understand a hidden scourge.

Wearing a heavy chain, Gucci pants from the heat outside her doghouse in North Carolina.

By Gene Weingarten

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From the front, the one-story clapboard house looks dingy and dilapidated, and the lawn is cluttered with crap. The backyard makes the front look like Versailles.

The wooden stairs from the back door to the yard are rotted through and have collapsed. In the grass is a rusted-out 1990s-era Camaro. There are tangles of scrap metal, discarded car parts, a sodden mattress, corroded appliances, a deceased push mower, a toolshed boarded up with plywood. There are ripe piles of garbage and moldering pits of ashes where trash and food scraps have been burned. As a portrait of desperation, destitution and decay, the tableau is almost literary. Faulkner's Snopeses, meet Steinbeck's Joads.

No person lives in this house, which is in rural northern North Carolina, a financially annihilated area where many people are living thin. Let's call it No-No Land. The house has been abandoned since January, when the owner, an elderly man, died of covid-19. We are here in late July. The squalor seems lifeless, but, terribly, it isn't.

You hear the three dogs baying before you see them, and then you see them and recoil. Each is tethered to a metal cable, which is tethered to its own primitive wooden

doghouse. Each animal has only a few dozen square feet within which to move. The dogs can see and hear the others, but it is a tantalizing cruelty — they are so far apart they cannot touch or play. Neighbors never stop by. These three females have been alone outside, imprisoned apart in the same spots in this rotting place, day and night, for six months. Today it is 85 in the shade. They are panting. To Faulkner and Steinbeck you might have to add some Dante.

When the owner died, the house and animals were inherited by his daughter, who lives in another state. She has a relative who is supposed to stop in every once in a while to replenish the dogs' food and water, but his visits appear to be intermittent and momentary. For reasons that defy common sense and decency, the daughter has chosen this heartless system rather than adopt the dogs herself or surrender them to someone who will care for them.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals knows about this place, and, with the grudging consent of the new owner, the animal rights organization sends a team of field workers to visit from time to time. They clean and refill the bowls and distribute flea meds and chew toys and straw for bedding and skritches under the neck, but they can't alleviate the big problem, and they can't come here often. Their headquarters are in

Norfolk, 100 miles away, and they have hundreds of other mistreated animals to check in on, and new ones to find. And now the conditions here have deteriorated to this.

The three PETA workers fan out to take a look. The first dog, a youngish black hound and border collie mix, is named Sharon. Sharon is exuberant. Somehow her spirit is not yet broken. But her water bowl is filled with a noisome black, brackish liquid — what has fouled it, and for how long, is anyone's guess. Her food bowl, a big plastic pail, contains soggy, rain-drenched kibble, and roaches, maggots and snails. This squirming swill is her only sustenance. Still, she's wagging, starving not so much for protein but for affection.

The second dog, 100 feet away across the yard, is Lady, a small mixed breed with a tricolor, patchwork face. Her body is rat gray, but that's deceiving.
The PETA people know she is mostly mashed-potato white; among the few things nearby is an ash pit, in which she rolls obsessively to ease the torment of fleas. Even from several feet away you can see she is a wriggling carpet of parasites. The PETA workers have nicknamed her Pancake because when she greets people she playfully flattens herself against the ground. This dog's spirit is also not broken, but her

body is. She is emaciated. There is no food within reach. Her ribs protrude like barrel staves. In a photo PETA had taken just a month before, she was still adequately fleshed.

Roxy wears a heavy chain in North Carolina. Some dog owners use big chains to thicken dogs' neck muscles, making the dogs look bigger and tougher.

"She's lost a quarter of her body weight!"

This is Daphna Nachminovitch, PETA's senior vice president of cruelty investigations. Her domain is a part of PETA that is less familiar to the public than the organization's more notorious side, the provocateur side that has historically reveled in public confrontations and flamboyant stunts.

Nachminovitch is 50, a native Israeli with fine features, a faintly sibilant accent and weary, seen-everything eyes. As a PETA executive, she sometimes is a speaker at fancy fundraisers, where she rocks the evening-wear look under lush, shoulder-length silver hair. But in the field she mashes that hair into a bun and dresses in T-shirts, cargo pants and sturdy waterproof boots for trudging through turds, puke, pee, slop, chiggers, mosquito larvae, soil fungus and septic-tank runoff, so that she can get to animals trapped in grievously inhospitable places.

Nachminovitch walks on to find the third dog, Shortie, a little black and brown mutt. In the past year, in this place, Shortie has lost her heart and her mind. The deterioration has accelerated since she's been trapped here 24/7. She is hiding under a rusted automobile drive train and muffler, an aggressive snarl of weeds, and a big curved metal frame that might once have been a hotel luggage cart. When Nachminovitch approaches, the dog cowers and shrinks deeper into the junk.

Nachminovitch is a firebrand by nature, a diplomat by necessity. Her teams must try to work with the cooperation of the pet owners; if an owner orders them off the property, legally PETA must leave and cannot return, which means the animals are

often goners unless the organization can wheedle the cooperation of the local authorities. That is never a given, even where the conditions are unambiguously illegal — which, often, they are not. Local ordinances do not tend to favor the nonhuman. So Nachminovitch and her workers are unfailingly polite and ingratiating, even when confronting the obstinate, the ignorant, the hostile, the unapologetically inhumane. But right now, with this situation, and with the homeowner elsewhere, she is white-knuckled, pop-veined and ominously silent.

“I am not leaving these dogs today,” she says quietly to Jenny Teed, her deputy.

Teed, who is from Baton Rouge and whom everyone calls Gator, tells her boss that she has tried to phone and email the owner for permission to extract the dogs, with no luck, and the woman probably would refuse anyway. She has refused before.

“I. Am. Not. Leaving. These. Dogs. Today.” Nachminovitch repeats.

She means she is going to steal them.

And she does, after a brief cover-your-ass phone call with Ingrid Newkirk, PETA’s founder and president.

The chains are unlatched. Sharon is walked to the PETA van. Nachminovitch carries Pancake, the starving one. She looks at the two dogs, in cages in the air-conditioned vehicle, and says, “They’ll be more comfortable than they ever have been in their lives.” It is true; almost as soon as they are in they fall into untroubled sleep.

Nachminovitch has freed Shortie from the debris and is carrying her to the van; the dog seems too palsied by fear to make it on her own. The PETA exec’s face is stricken. She whispers into Shortie’s ear: “We’re not going to let you die here, honey.” The dog has gone limp from terror, scared beyond sanity, and empties her bladder and bowels all over her rescuer, who doesn’t even flinch.

When Shortie is secured in the van, Gator — the PETA staffer who has made the most trips to this benighted place and has witnessed the dogs’ deterioration firsthand — is crying with relief. Nachminovitch looks satisfied but still grim.

On other days her teams have found dogs dead of thirst or heatstroke, still chained, with their owners inside their air-conditioned homes. Her teams once rescued a tethered dog who neighbors said was beaten daily with a hacksaw, a belt and a broom handle. PETA workers once found a

dog skeleton — almost no flesh remained — still on the chain.

The simple, dismal truth: Nachminovitch knows that what she has just witnessed might not even be the worst thing she will see *today*.

Daphna Nachminovitch, PETA's senior vice president of cruelty investigations, with Pancake, an emaciated dog in North Carolina.

It occurs all over the country, the pitiless 24-hour-a-day chaining of dogs to lifelong sentences of misery and madness. The practice is not the province of any race or any age or any nationality or any region of the country, though it is most prevalent, by far, in areas of rural America where resources are limited and opportunities are slender. Many states have enacted laws that attempt to limit how many hours a day it

may be done and under what circumstances, but none bans it entirely. Most of these compromise laws are halfhearted half-measures that are difficult to enforce. In the majority of states, there are no laws at all. Some municipalities have banned dog-tethering on their own, but they represent less than 1 percent of all cities, towns and counties in the country.

It would be tempting to call this an epidemic, except epidemics usually have a clear starting point, and they eventually end. This particular cruelty has been going on as long as anyone can remember, and no one knows when it will stop, or if it ever will. If you've never heard of it, or had no idea of its ubiquity, that's probably because humanity has ample tragedies of its own to report on, and because news organizations prefer to avoid these depressing, nonessential stories. They repel readers and listeners and viewers.

[Sweeping federal ban on animal cruelty signed into law]

Paradoxically, the chained dogs often have grandiose names, suggesting they are valued, even worshiped — Diamond, Precious, Princess, King, Glory, Angel — or names with perceived prestige, like Dior, Gucci, Lexus or Cash. These Preciouses, Diamonds and Lexuses tend to be tethered

to the cheapest unyielding thing that is available. With smaller dogs it's often just a cinder block. For larger dogs, a tree or a car carcass.

These rural neighborhoods are physically flat and economically attenuated. The least approachable homes, the homeliest ones, are the ones most likely to have "No Trespassing" signs. That's also where most of the tethered dogs in No-No Land seem to be.

The dogs' imprisonment often is located in what Nachminovitch calls "the backyard of the backyard" — as far from the house as possible, as though their existence is a disagreeable inconvenience. They tend to live at the center of a dirt circle with a diameter twice the length of the chain around their neck, which is often 10 feet or less. That's their world — the dirt universe they've carved out with their paws as they run in circles, testing centrifugal force, straining futilely to escape, like a moon corralled by gravity. Beyond the circle is grass they seldom if ever get to touch or sniff. Most of these dogs have been deemed unworthy of entering the family home.

The tethered dogs have common patterns of behavior. If you approach, they will joyfully run toward you, full speed until their chain snaps taut and yanks them back with a

stranglehold. They know it is coming, and that it will hurt, but are frantic for connection.

They are literally and figuratively at the end of their rope. Some are sullen and vicious, but most are filled with anxiety, and unnaturally needy: When you are there, they don't want you to leave. They will hold on to you with their front legs in a bear hug that seems to defy the natural limitations of a dog's skeleton and musculature. Unprotected by preventive medicines, they have fleas. They have heartworm. They swarm with maggots and flies, which opportunistically attack the softest and most vulnerable portions of their bodies — ears, eyes, mouth — and eat away the tissue, which swells and bleeds and rots. Many have open sores, and the necrotic flesh makes them stink. Sometimes you'll smell them before you pet them.

They will sometimes consume their doghouses, if they have one — gnaw off and digest the wood — simply because it is something to do during their stultifying days. The wood often grinds their incisors — the front, nibbling teeth — down to painful pulp.

It is not uncommon to find a dog in a collar that is slowly garroting him or her. No one has bothered to let it out a notch or three as

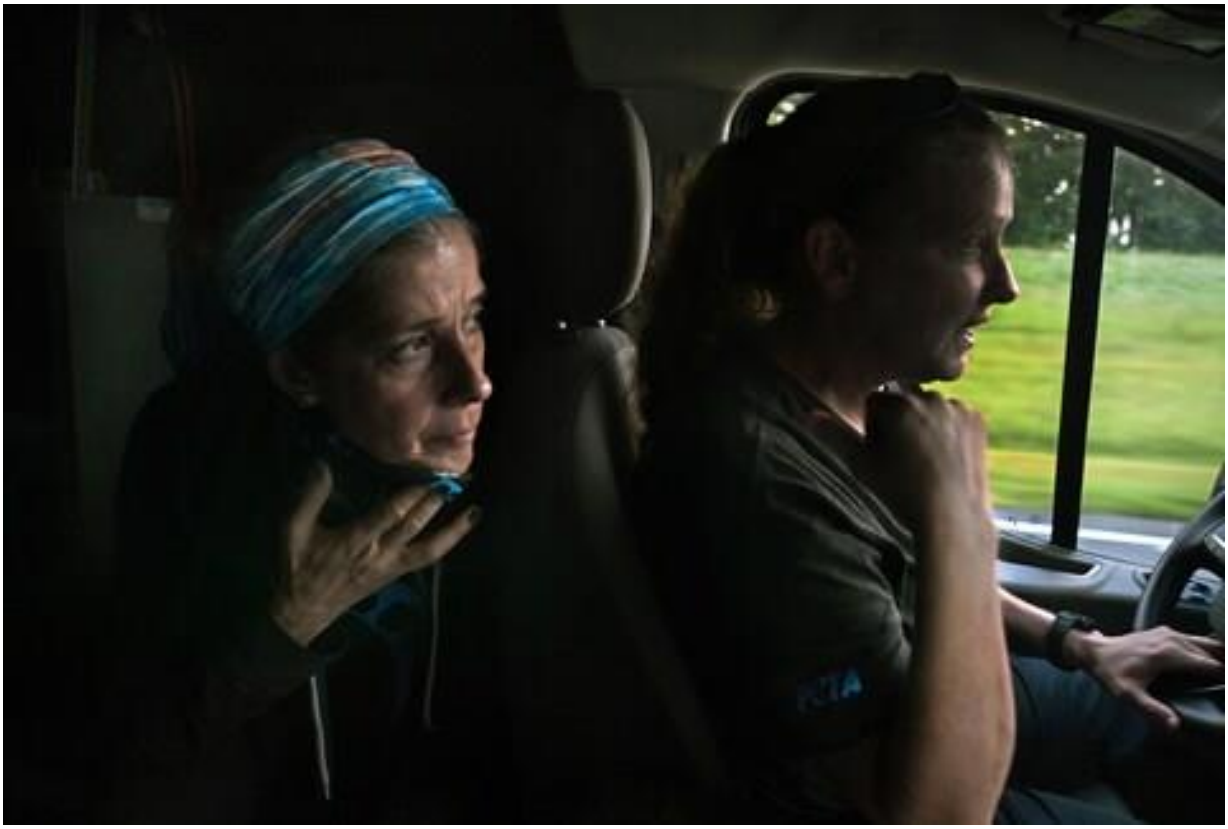
the animal grew. Sometimes you can barely fit a pinkie under the collar. Those are the better cases. In others, the collar has fused with the skin and must be surgically excised.

The dogs will walk back and forth along the circumference of their pitiable circle, compulsively, like death-row inmates pacing their cells. At some point, inevitably, the chain will upend their water bowl, a mishap that can go unnoticed for hours or days, which is particularly perilous because they can't get to the early-morning grass and its dew.

You learn to keep your voice low; they tend to cringe at raised voices, which, in their experience, are often followed by discipline, and discipline can be corporal. Many cower at raised hands — even the pit bulls, shepherds and mastiffs, who could dispatch a tormentor with one strategic chomp and neck-whip but don't. They are too broken.

You can learn all of those things and witness each and every one of them, as I did, in just three days with the PETA team.

The "what" is manifest. It's the "why" that is mystifying.



Nachminovitch, left, and her deputy, Jenny Teed, head to Norfolk after working a 12-hour day in the field helping abused and neglected dogs in North Carolina.

About a year and a half ago in Northeast Washington, D.C., a family brought home a 3-month-old puppy they had named Lexi. She had no papers but appeared to be all or mostly a Plott hound — a handsome, affectionate, winningly headstrong, black-and-brown brindle, lop-eared hunting breed that happens to be the state dog of North Carolina. Lexi's new owners were a nice family; their children seemed well loved and well adjusted. But from day one, this puppy was mistreated.

Every morning at 6:30 she was let out into the small urban backyard and usually was not allowed back in until 8 p.m. She would

spend the day mostly alone, in summer and winter and in between, barking and wagging and begging for attention from passersby walking in a back alley. Lexi was unfailingly sweet-natured, and some neighbors who pitied her would throw treats over the fence that confined her: dog snacks they'd brought, sandwich meat, Cheez Doodles, whatever. Lexi, a gourmand, snarfed them all down. At least two neighbors watched Lexi's plight and telephoned animal control to report this benign neglect, but the complaints came to nothing; the legal threshold for abuse of animals is pretty high.

Over the months, Lexi grew into a sleekly muscled 55-pound adult. She never had the opportunity to run, was seldom if ever walked and got no real exercise except for bouncing up and down the back stairs from her yard to the second floor of the house, up and down, up and down. The woman who lived in the adjacent rowhouse turned this into a game to give Lexi something to do. In her backyard, the woman, whose name is Rachel, would stand at the bottom of the stairs. Fifteen feet away, Lexi would align herself the same way. They paused, watching each other, bodies taut, like sprinters at the starting line. Suddenly Rachel would bolt for the top. Lexi would do the same. Lexi always won the race, wagging and triumphant. Rachel and her boyfriend

would sneak two-fingered belly rubs to the dog through the diamond-shaped holes in the chain-link that divided the two properties. Lexi had learned to petition for this small intimacy by standing on her hind legs and bellying up to the fence.

I know all this because I am that next-door boyfriend.

I felt shame. With my silence, I decided, I had been complicit in abuse, and for months it gnawed at me until, one day, I went to the bank. Then I knocked on my neighbor's door and offered to buy Lexi — an unspayed, undisciplined, unhousebroken animal of unprovable pedigree and no commercial value — for a thousand bucks, cash, no questions asked. Lexi's owner understood the implication of the offer, and was offended and declined.

Months later, the family had to move out. Stiffly, the owner asked if I still wanted the dog. This time, with the leverage of his time pressure, I offered $500 and he accepted.

Two months later, in late July, I left for Norfolk to report this story. I decided to take Lexi. I could not have told you why, exactly, except that I suspected that her presence and Yes-Yes personality might somehow help me better understand what I was seeing out there in No-No Land.

Sometimes, people are so lacking in savvy, and so unaware of what constitutes animal abuse, that they inadvertently turn themselves in. On this day a woman has telephoned to ask PETA for help with a dog named Dora, who, the caller says, lives outdoors because her child has allergies, but is well cared for. She says Dora is scabby with fleas, and has lost chunks of fur, and the owner has little money, and is asking for free medical assistance. That is something that PETA does.

The PETA people arrive. Dora is a boxer mix. She is in a cage in a carport behind the house. She is in direct sunlight. It is 90 degrees. She has no water.

“Oh my God, she’s dying,” Nachminovitch says.

Dogs cannot sweat; they cool themselves by panting. Flat-nosed, short-tongued breeds like boxers are especially susceptible to death by heatstroke. Dora could not have lasted much longer.

She is spitting mad, locked in the cage, flea-bitten and sweltering and snarling. As the PETA people get water to her, one of them notices something on the periphery of this scene.

The house has a commodious enclosed porch, and on that porch are two dog crates — the sort of carriers you might use to take a dog on a plane or transport to the vet. In each crate is a dachshund. The wiener dogs, already low to the ground, can barely stand in there. But that is where they live 23-plus hours a day, according to Gabriel, 18, the only family member who is home. For a few minutes a day, he says, the dogs are allowed to trot in the yard to relieve themselves.

Jes Cochran, a PETA worker with a gentle voice, a soothing demeanor and a ring in his nose, leans in to look. Each dachshund has a spit of warm water in a dish, a tablespoon, maybe. Each growls. Like Dora, they also seem, not surprisingly, angry.

Gabriel is a well-spoken, polite young man. He explains, matter-of-factly, the circumstances: The dogs had once been tethered on chains outside, but this particular area — Halifax County, N.C. — has now outlawed constant tethering (PETA had lobbied for that for years and eventually won a rare local legislative victory). The family realized they were now in a pickle. They didn't want to get fined, so they decided to keep all three dogs outside but untethered.

Why not let them live in the house? Because Dora's blood stained the furniture when she

was in heat, Gabriel explains, and all three dogs destroy furniture. Ergo, Dora is in a pen in the carport, with the dachshunds on the porch.

Nothing about any kid with allergies.

But … why the crates?

Well, Gabriel says, that is because the door to the porch has fallen off, so the enclosure is now open to the yard, and unless they are caged, the dachshunds would run away. But it's okay, he says — they'll be freed from the crates when the porch is re-doored.

Does the family need a new door? "No, it's right there," Gabriel says, pointing. And there it is, propped up against the carport. The original screen door.

How long has it been standing there? Jes asks.

"Uh …"

Just a nanosecond of hesitation.

" … about a year."

For a moment, nobody says anything.

Then a deal is worked out, with everyone remaining nice and reasonable and nonjudgmental and non-accusatory. Just

people working together to solve a problem that is apparently no one's fault.

Dora is a boxer mix. She is in a cage in a carport behind the house. She is in direct sunlight. It is 90 degrees. She has no water. "Oh my God, she's dying," Nachminovitch says.

PETA will take Dora and spay her for free, and then return her if she is healthy enough and emotionally sound. (For the family, no more staining problems, and the dog could, theoretically, live inside. For PETA, one fewer animal on Earth producing unwanted puppies.) Then, PETA workers — they are jacks-of-all-trades, by necessity — will return with hinges and power tools and rehang the door. No charge. The dachshunds will at least get their porch space back. It is a shaky deal and depends on voluntary compliance, which is never assured, but it is *something*. On-site triage. A situation presents itself, and PETA solves it as best they can.

The PETA people are improv artists. I witness this constantly. Every day in the field they change course when events arrange themselves differently from what they anticipated. That is what happened, eventually, with Sharon, Pancake and Shortie, the three abandoned dogs in the backyard strewn with garbage. There was an unexpected turn: The dogs had been loaded into the PETA van, and the team was about to drive off with them, and Nachminovitch was telling me that she would take her chances with the courts and stand trial for

theft, if need be. She trusted judges to be compassionate and wise. And just then, the owner of the home, the one who lived in another state, checked in. The house was equipped with a front-door voice camera, and she saw her animals were being carted away, and, bingo, she was there, over the intercom. Wanted to know what the heck was going on.

Nachminovitch said she was taking the dogs.

The owner bristled.

This was the critical moment. Here is how it played out:

First, the stick. Nachminovitch declared that what she had seen qualified as animal abuse, and that it was criminal behavior. Her people were behind her, on camera: Obviously, there were many witnesses, and also some guy with a Nikon who was working for The Washington Post and was, presumably, documenting this. It would be a strong case. For Nachminovitch, the firebrand by nature was stepping out from behind the diplomat by need.

Next, the carrot: Nachminovitch told the homeowner that if she gave permission to take the animals — verbal first, right now, then written, along with a solemn

agreement that she would get no new animals for this location, ever again — there would be no need to involve the police. “Our next step is to call the sheriff, but if you say ‘okay,’ we say ‘thank you,’ and that will be the end of it.” No complaints would be made to anyone, by anyone, over anything. It’s like nothing happened; no animals were starved or tormented or left to survive on maggots and snails and swill.

Only static over the intercom. Then a resigned okay. “I’ll sign the paperwork.”

So this was no longer a sort of heist. Instead, it was a sort of extortion. Sharon, Pancake and Shortie were out of the hellhole and on the road to Norfolk, asleep.

Tee Tee is so underfed the outlines of her bones are visible through her coat.

Anthropologists believe they understand the origins of the bond between humans and dogs. It is an ancient alliance, forged from mutual need in Paleolithic times. There is debate over the specifics, but, simplifying ruthlessly:

Prehistoric human couples had each other's backs, meaning you would sleep back to back, so you had eyes in the back of your head and a few extra seconds of warning from invading predators. But it proved mighty helpful to also have a wolf near the entrance of your yurt, one with fangs that was motivated to like and protect you.

Primitive people fed the wolves; the wolves stuck around. In time, a bond developed. You can call it taming, which sounds a little cold and manipulative, but you can also call it love. Modern science has shown that when people and their dogs look into each other's eyes, oxytocin levels spike in both species. Oxytocin is a hormone linked to positive emotional states.
This bond came naturally: Humans and wolves are both pack animals. We are both built to team up with others to survive.

How has this relationship gotten so corrupted, then, and so profoundly, and so often? Is it about promiscuous anger: lack of resources and social powerlessness, leading to impotent rage — the kick-the-dog

phenomenon? Are the dogs an emotional tool — something people can control in a life otherwise almost empty of control?

Maybe. Sociological studies have tended to confirm that as a factor. But it's a tenuous connection. Privileged people do cruel things to dogs, too. Some examples are notorious: Michael Vick, NFL star and multimillionaire, ran an illegal dogfighting ring and hanged dogs who underperformed; he served 21 months in federal prison and, upon his release, became a spokesperson and lobbyist for organizations that oppose animal fighting. Jay Fabian, a NASCAR exec, was recently arrested at his home and charged with killing a dog and nearly killing another, by willfully starving them. He has temporarily stepped down from his job to deal with the charges.

John P. Gluck, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of New Mexico, knows firsthand about the ability of anyone, at all social statuses, to rationalize cruelty. As a scientist, he once tormented monkeys for a living.

They were rhesus monkeys, kept in little cages, subjects of experiments in human behavior. One day Gluck noticed that one monkey — known to him as G-49 — was oddly energized, intent on examining a back

corner of her cage, which was a solid steel wall.

“She would run up to it, make facial expressions, then pull back, then run up again,” he told me. Gluck says he investigated, and it turned out that a bolt had fallen out of the rear wall, leaving a half-inch hole. Gluck looked through it, and he saw that it had turned into a peephole to other monkeys in other cages, animals G-49 couldn’t ordinarily see. “She was fighting hard against her limitations,” he says. “Monkeys are highly social.”

Gluck pauses. Many years later, this is still not easy for him.

“I recognized how much I was crushing a life. I had built an intellectual and emotional structure that allowed me to escape what I was doing.” Gluck is now an author and lecturer in human abuse of animals.

Some behavioral scientists see all of this as a Darwinian misfire, a hiccup in the system — an unfortunate side effect of meeting primal needs. Human brains are hard-wired to concentrate on one thing at a time and block out other things. We compartmentalize. We couldn’t really exist without this because it allows us to filter out distractions that could otherwise be crippling.

“If we couldn’t do it, we’d never get on an airplane or into a car,” says Melanie Joy, a social psychologist who writes about how humans rationalize cruelty. “We’d be focused on how vulnerable we are. So we have to engage in a degree of psychic numbing. It is an adaptive trait but can become maladaptive when it results in violence.”

She says: “People will go to a petting zoo. They would never dream of harming a piglet or a chick. If they saw an animal suffering there, they’d leap over the pen to help. Then they’ll go to a grocery store and leave with bags of bacon and eggs.”

This, of course, identifies only the propensity for cruelty — but having a pet is elective. Why get a dog just to abuse it? If you talk to experts, and to the abusers, you get a constellation of answers, none entirely satisfying. To some people of limited means and meager possessions, dogs become a piece of property. If you think of an animal impersonally — as, say, a sofa — you are less likely to see it as being capable of physical suffering or having an emotional life. As property, they are something to be accumulated and guarded and abandoned at will, out there in the yard, among the rusty old cars, air conditioners, washing machines and toilets. That explains those “No Trespassing” signs in No-No Land. There

are eerie echoes here, I realized: Tethered dogs, rendered desperate and neurotic, tend to do the same thing. The phenomenon is called “resource guarding” — they’ll defend their possessions ferociously, however modest they are. Abused dogs will sometimes resource-hoard their water.

Some other owners see their dogs as protection, but when you point out to them that the animals, restrained by eight-foot tethers, are pretty useless as protection, they’ll tell you, without guilt or apparent self-awareness — or further explanation — that at least they can be a burglar alarm.

Some tetherers breed dogs for status: Supposedly fierce breeds, like pit bulls, convey power. And finally, some people tether because their dads and granddads did, too. You tend not to question it. No malice is intended.

Nicholas Dodman, a veterinary behaviorist who co-founded the Center for Canine Behavior Studies at Tufts University, doesn’t buy the Darwinian argument, or all the ancillary explanations, which he sees as excuses for the inexcusable. This sort of cruelty, he says, is, at its dark core, a heartless character flaw: Some people suck.

“There are people,” Dodman says, “who sell their home and move out and deliberately leave a dog behind. Days later someone

comes in and finds the dog starved." It's happened enough, he told me, that Maryland has legislation outlawing it. "The fact is," Dodman says, "there are people who have empathy and people who don't."

Dodman believes there is also a political component to this: Red states are more likely to have no laws against tethering, or laws that wanly attempt to limit the practice without addressing its inherent cruelty. Purple states, too: Pennsylvania "limits" tethering to an excruciating nine hours a day and primly stipulates that the tether must be at least "three times the length of the dog as measured from the tip of its nose to the base of its tail or 10 feet, whichever is longer."

The whole thing is sadly familiar — even universal. Under the rubric of being righteous and compassionate, some countries institute laws limiting how hard you can strike your wife to discipline her.

"People who mistreat animals," Dodman concludes, "are the same ones who mistreat people."

We are at a woman's trailer. Her name is June. She is on a back porch, holding an infant boy she is apparently babysitting. A second child, a toddler girl, is there. Three dogs mill at her feet. Two look okay, but there is something wrong with the third.

Brandy is mostly boxer. She looks too … scant.

The PETA team had gotten a report that the dogs in the house are perpetually penned and are being mistreated, and that one of them is “skin and bones.”

Virtually no accused abuser admits to wrongdoing, even where the evidence is palpable; it is one of the most routine and distinctive features of these cases. June denies it, too, though acknowledges that Brandy has been under the weather and not eating well, and has not been seen by a vet. The PETA team tells her that the dog needs immediate medical attention. Unconvincingly, June agrees to do this. But — this is another commonality — she is angry. She feels beset, furious that she has been ratted out. She decides that it is a neighbor who dislikes her. Just as June proclaims that Brandy is fine, the dog leaps out of the porch, through the vertical railing, thudding three feet to the ground, landing on her side. She then runs to Nachminovitch and snurfles furiously at her pants pocket, which has dog treats in it. It is obvious that Brandy is not off her food, she is famished. The rails she has easily wriggled through to get to the food are five inches apart. The boxer’s coat gave an illusion of some body mass. Under the fur, this dog is skeletal.

Nachminovitch tells June her choice is to surrender Brandy to PETA or to deal with animal control, which PETA would summon, which could result in criminal charges.

“Take her! Just go!” June snarls.

They take her and go. “She’s my favorite dog, the most loving dog I’ve got,” June tells me, tearfully, as they leave. Then, through gritted teeth: “My neighbors are going to pay for this, and they take drugs, and I am going to report them.”

In the van, PETA personnel pet Brandy and check her mouth. Her gums are not red or pink. They are chalk white. She is fatally anemic.

Kanan, one of several dogs that were kept separate from one another, PETA workers found, on a property in North Carolina.

We are gassing up and grabbing lunch at a place called Champs Chicken. As the PETA team walks in, a 30-ish woman walks out. The PETA people are instantly recognizable: They all wear PETA T-shirts. Their van, parked a few feet away, has huge signage urging kindness to animals. The woman coming toward them is smiling venomously. As she passes, she says, “Still killing animals in the back of your truck?”

“Have a nice day,” Nachminovitch calls back.

PETA is among the most controversial nonprofit organizations in the world, which may be an amusing qualification, but it is

hard to argue with. PETA tweezes people's guilt mercilessly to raise awareness in others, and money for itself, to do what it is convinced — with sometimes maddening certitude — is right.

Reasonable people can reasonably find PETA's actions to be sanctimonious, even obnoxious. Their audacious public campaigns, while emotionally effective, are often impolite, attention-grabbing, gratuitously sexualized, self-righteous, smug, outrageous. PETA has informed children that their parents assassinate animals when they go fishing or wear furs. In one notorious commercial, PETA tells a child that because her family bought a puppy from a breeder, they have murdered a dog in a pound; to the child's horror, the body, in a body bag, is thudded onto the table. PETA has un-smilingly compared meat eaters to the cannibal murderer Jeffrey Dahmer because both are known for storing corpses in the freezer. On Mother's Day, PETA once displayed naked pregnant women in gestation crates to demonstrate the cruelty of the factory farming of pigs.

Plus, PETA people tend to be young and healthy looking, trim vegans with clear complexions and a spring in their step. It's irksome!

On lunch breaks, I ordered ham or turkey sandwiches, and they ate meals like mashed chickpea and avocado on pita bread — which they said was delicious. They work on *my* guilt, too. Intolerable!

PETA members remain consistent to their philosophy, regardless of whether it will cost them support in hearts and minds. They want to shutter zoos. They hate circuses that use animals for entertainment, and publicly hectored the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus until it ended its popular elephant acts. PETA has expressed opposition to medical experimentation on animals, ever — yes, even theoretically if it could cure cancer. PETA embraces euthanasia because it believes that there are too many animals in the world sentenced to live dreadful lives, and that in many cases humane death is preferable. Each year PETA kills a lot of animals.

The woman outside the Champs Chicken — Jennifer Smyth, a public school teacher — thinks PETA people are world-class hypocrites, animal murderers masquerading as animal lovers. She was referring to an incident in 2005 when two PETA workers were caught shoveling trash bags of dead dogs into a public dumpster in North Carolina. The animals had been humanely killed to prevent worse fates at the hands of poorly run local kill shelters, but the means

of disposal was cold and horrific, a very public error in judgment, and resulted in a lasting stain on the organization's reputation.

Nachminovitch defends widespread euthanasia, and it is one of those stances you can either respect or abhor. She says that on any given day, she'd make a deal where, in return for being allowed to free every deeply abused animal she found, she'd have to kill all of them. She knows how this sounds but doesn't care. Ending their pain — psychic and physical — is the point, she says, bluntly: "The lives they are being forced to live are not worth living."

As the PETA people walk back to their van, a man approaches. Big guy. Toughie. His gait seems purposeful. Nachminovitch braces herself for another confrontation.

"You're doing a great job," he says. "Keep it up."

Guy's name is Randy Robtoy. He's 64. Out of PETA's earshot, I ask him why he feels the way he does.

"I drive an 18-wheeler," he says. "I go on all the roads here. I see so many animals and how they're treated. In the heat." He nods toward the PETA van. "These people are heroes."

Diamond suffers from fly strike dermatitis that has resulted in the edges of her ears being eaten away by flies. She was treated with anti-fly strike medicine by PETA staff and given water and food.

Three tethered pit bulls — big, horizontal heads and huge jaws with those broad, goofy smiles — are in one large yard, 60 feet apart from each other in a near equilateral triangle, not able to touch or play. The PETA people have arrived to deliver a doghouse. This is something the organization does, free of charge. Being consigned to a doghouse is crappy but better than being out in the elements 24/7. It's a complex continuum of suffering: Penning of dogs, usually in 10-foot-square enclosures, is marginally better than tethering them to a tree.

The first dog already has a PETA doghouse, but he has wrapped his chain around a tree

and cannot get to it. It is unclear how long he's been in that situation. The PETA people untangle him and give him a new chain, increasing its length from 10 feet to 15. "We've doubled his world," Nachminovitch says, sadly. Do the geometry. It's true.

Another doghouse has been upended and is on its side and unusable. For how long? Who knows. The PETA people wrestle it upright.

The third pit bull, named Gucci, is standing at the end of a huge chain anchored in the ground. This dog might weigh 60 pounds. The chain is elephantine; it might weigh 25 pounds. Gucci is lugging it around, trying to say hi to us. Big chains are something that some owners of pit bulls use to thicken the neck muscles, making the dogs look bigger and tougher. In No-No Land, pit bulls are sometimes seen as status symbols. That's what's behind some of the names: Gucci has a friend, Dior. They cannot touch but are chained near each other. I ask the teenager on the property about it: "It's because they're fashion dogs," he explains. It's cool, he says. They are on Instagram.

There are many reasons dogs are mistreated. One is some grotesque embodiment of status.

Gucci keeps whapping his head around, with the ears flapping loudly. Nachminovitch checks it out. Flies. Maggots. That's ordinary for a tethered dog, but something else is anomalous. His ears are raw and red and nasty and … scalloped. Nachminovitch has seen this before.

Pit bulls often have their ears cropped, a surgery many veterinarians refuse to do. It's unnecessary, purely elective, usually if the dog is being groomed to illegally fight, or if the owners want him to *look* like a fighting dog. Tissue is removed so the ear is smaller and stands erect. It makes the ear less of a target in a scrap or scrum. It looks tough. Ear cropping is major surgery, to be performed by professionals, with scalpels, behind masks, under general anesthesia, usually followed by two weeks' convalescence with antibiotics and painkillers.
"This was done with scissors," Nachminovitch says.

There is no sign any of these pit bulls has been a fighter. But there is status in making them look like they *might* be.
Iam back from a long day, and dinner with Rachel, who has been with Lexi all day, taking her on trips around Norfolk. I am typing up notes, and Rachel goes to sleep. When I am done, I go into the bedroom. Lexi has her head on my pillow, next to

Rachel's head, asleep. She has taken my place.

I go, *ahem*.

Lexi opens one eye, then closes it.

I go, *ahem*.

Lexi nestles deeper into her spot. This is a hotel bed, king-size. There is clearly room at the foot of the bed, she seems to be saying, ample room for me to curl up.

After two days in No-No Land, I now understand that Lexi had not been abused, as I had thought. She had been neglected, which is a less awful circumstance in the sad hierarchy of animal mistreatment. Lexi had been well fed and medically cared for. She was not fearful of a raised hand. Yes, in her new home she found a degree of affection and respect — even deference — that she hadn't known before, and was showing more confident, less neurotic behavior. We had freed her to be a pain in the ass, which should be every pet's birthright.

So here she is, informing me that I should go take my place at the foot of the bed.

I laugh to myself and try to move her. She opens both eyes now and baps me in the nose with her big, spatulate, silly Plott-hound foot. Then she rolls over, back onto my pillow, the nice pillow I have paid for.

She is now facing Rachel, and declaring the discussion over.

I drag Lexi to the foot of the bed. She squirms and protests the whole way, and when she gets there she grumbles thunderously, loud enough to wake Rachel, and then goes right to sleep.

I lie in bed for a while, smiling. Lexi's sense of entitlement is breathtaking. She feels she deserves a seat at the table, a place in the Room Where It Happens. She is not docile or servile. She has opinions to contribute. She believes she is someone. In effect, she exists because she thinks. She is an imbecile Descartes. It is glorious.

This is what was missing from almost all of the dogs I had seen in the previous two days: a true sense of self. Even the few who had withstood horror and survived through their own indomitability had done so at a cost. They were victims, begging for attention. Half-dying from the exhaustion of trying to survive, there was no time or energy left to develop a personality.

There is a terrible power that comes with being human. But there is a potentially beautiful power in that, too. In this brutally unequal world, isn't that part of the covenant with our pets? Don't we owe them that much dignity?

I didn’t get to sleep for some time. Lexi slept fine.

Nachminovitch in Norfolk with Bam Bam. A woman in North Carolina had found the dog and, after seeing the PETA van while stopping for gas, asked if PETA would take him.

This is a trailer park, double-wides, mostly. There are a lot of dogs, most of them tethered. The backyard has a few cement lawn angels and winged Madonnas. You see these in the most modest of houses here, like a plea for someone to watch over them, or a declaration that something better awaits them. A few dozen feet away, in the center of one of those dirt circles is a female pit-bull mix, and she embraces you with one of those impossible bear hugs.

Farther away, in a neighboring yard, is another female. Her name is Tee Tee. She is

contained in a pen, a metal cage 10 by 10 feet, lying on a bed of soil and feces. She has two puppies. It's her second or third litter — the owners aren't sure. She's about 3 years old. She has oily black water in a bowl. Tee Tee's ribs, spine and pelvis are almost extruded from her body. She is cadaverously malnourished.

Tee Tee's puppies are beautiful and of normal weight. They look like Labradors, squirmy and brown and needy. They are about 4 weeks old, sucking plaintively on their mother's teats, which are distended but empty. Tee Tee is doing her best, but she's given all she has, and there is nothing left.

Chris Klug, a PETA guy, steps forward. He is a big, handsome, generously muscled bald guy with a lot of tattoos. You'd think he'd be aggressive or imposing, but he's not. He's a born negotiator. The dog's owner, whose name is Tariek, is shirtless and yawning.

Tee Tee’s puppies are of normal weight, but for the pair to survive, Tee Tee winds up with little nourishment for herself.

Give us the mom and the pups, Chris says. They are sick and could die. She’s not being fed enough, but she knows her job is for her pups to survive, so she winds up with nothing for herself. We’ll take them and get them medical care and find good homes, and we’ll give you food for your other dogs. Win-win.

“No,” Tariek says. He says he sells the puppies. He gets $150 apiece for them, or more. They are an investment, his livelihood.

“Just give us the mother and one pup. The sicker one.”

“No.”

“We have a lot of dog food. We will give you a lot of dog food. Just give us one puppy.”

“No.”

This sort of relentless, boneheaded bargaining sometimes works — people get exhausted and maybe embarrassed from saying no — but not here. Then Chris and Jes point out the dogs have round welts on their bodies. It’s ringworm, which can be transmitted to children, so if Tariek sells the pups to a family and a child gets sick, he could be legally liable. The PETA guys are improvising mightily.

“No.” This is a business, Tariek says.

Jes and Chris tell him that ringworm lives in the dirt, and that this mother and her puppies will be re-exposed to it constantly. They offer to move the pen to a different area. Tariek says okay, so the three PETA people — Jes, Chris and Nachminovitch — straining, grunting, lift the pen, which is ungainly and has to weigh 200 pounds or more, and shimmy it about 20 feet away. Its new location is also more shaded. Situational triage.

Jes and Chris whisper between themselves. They whisper to Nachminovitch. The two

men return to Tariek for one more conversation. “Let’s go,” Nachminovitch says to me, loudly enough to be overheard. This negotiation is apparently over. We go back to the van. In the van, she tells me Chris and Jes are trying something.

Trying something?

“They are going to offer $20 for each dog, from their own wallets. They are going to say it’s against the rules, which it is, but” — Nachminovitch meets my eyes — “they are going to say that they are doing it behind my back.”

They were conspiring, she says, guy to guy to guy, against the clueless, dumb boss lady.

The clueless, dumb boss lady is smiling tautly. She doesn’t care about the manipulative misogyny. She just wants the dogs.

Daphna Nachminovitch was an idealist who has become a realist. She joined PETA as a young woman, almost on a whim. She was just looking for a job, but it has become her life. And it’s a life she’s willing to jettison. If governments all over the country stop the chaining and penning of dogs, she says — “people won’t do what’s right because it is right, they’ll do it because they are forced to” — if all of the commercials, the lobbying, the

door-to-door work, the triage, the bargaining, the carrots and the sticks, if they wind up ending the horror, “then I’ll retire early, and I’ll be unemployed and happy.”

Five minutes later, Chris and Jes are back. No dice. When they made the offer, the guy said he didn’t need money and showed off a wad of bills. Had to be a thousand dollars in there. The mom and her puppies remained.

Three days later, the PETA people will return. They will find, in Tee Tee’s food bowl, lemon rinds, onions, grease and corncobs. Every one of these things is lethal to dogs.

When confronted, abusers give reasons for what they do, and as heartless as the reasons are, they tend to have a certain ruptured logic to them. My dog *prefers* it outside! This is a business — they’re not pets! It’s a tough neighborhood; I want people to see I have a tough dog! The most bewildering cases are the ones where there is no logic at all, ruptured or otherwise, where affection and affliction collide and explode.

Teed and Nachminovitch comfort a dog named Brandy, who was being euthanized. Brandy had a variety of untreatable issues and died a few moments after this photo was taken.

Afew weeks before I got there, a PETA team was driving in No-No Land when they noticed a dog in a pen in a garbage-strewn yard. He was mostly pit bull. From a nearby yard to which they had access, Chris Klug took a photograph of what looked like the saddest dog in the world in the worst place in the world. Big. Bereft. Slouching. Dejected. Lifeless, hopeless eyes.

PETA contacted the homeowner a few days later, and he agreed to see them and introduce them to Monster, who is age uncertain — at least 8, possibly 11 — and who, he said, is doing okay.

We are there now. Monster wags buoyantly. He's a sweet guy. He lives in a loathsome 10-by-10 backyard enclosure near an abandoned stove, an ancient rusted air conditioner, rotting lumber and, incongruously, a trampoline. His eyes are bloodshot and dripping with goo. His muscles are atrophied from disuse. His coat is sickly stiff, like a used Brillo pad. His pen is foul with garbage, his "water" a bowl of sludge, but the worst part is what happens when the PETA people try to clean out his pen. A shovel into the dirt produces a stench so overpowering they nearly vomit. Monster is living in a year or more of his own excreta, nearly a foot deep.

The owner of the house is a 50-ish guy named Alonzo. One arm is in a sling from an accident at the meatpacking plant where he works. It has slowed him some, he says, made it harder to care for Monster. Alonzo is a courtly looking man with a trim beard and an apologetic bearing. For some reason he keeps calling Monster "she" even though the dog is undeniably and emphatically an un-neutered male.

"He has a skin condition," Nachminovitch notes.

It's under control, Alonzo assures her: "I rub her up with burnt motor oil and sulfur."

Silence.

“Old family remedy,” Alonzo elaborates.

“That doesn’t work!” Nachminovitch says. She notes there are worms in his watery poop. Alonzo has that covered, too, he says. “I squirt Clorox in her water.”

“That’s very toxic to him!” Nachminovitch says.

“I sometimes give her Gatorade.”

“Please stick to water,” begs Ashley Beard, another PETA worker.

The PETA people are still shoveling out his pen, fighting nausea. In the end the filth will fill four 50-gallon trash bags.

Alonzo explains that Monster is always kept outside because his wife is a cook — she caters events — and the dog would get hungry and underfoot, and also the wife “is not a dog person.”

I take him to the side and ask him a question I have not yet asked anyone else.

“Why do you love that dog?” The one kept in the stench. He looks at the ground, then at Monster.

“That’s my heart down there,” he says, quietly. “She saved my life.”

Alonzo says he has cardiac problems, and sometimes he has seizures, and once, when alone in the house, he fainted dead away in the bathroom, between the tub and the toilet. Monster found him and, for 20 minutes or more, licked him awake. He got up to find smoke in the kitchen: He’d had food cooking on the stove. He feels that without Monster, the house would have burned down with him in it.

Then, why …

The PETA team has gathered around, just watching and listening.

“I don’t know,” Alonzo says. He is wearing a T-shirt extolling Jesus. His eyes well up. He opens his mouth, then closes it again. He looks at the PETA people, one by one. “Thank you all for your love and concern. Sometimes criticism comes with love. I see that here.”

He crosses himself and tearfully agrees to surrender Monster to PETA. He is told he won’t see the dog again, and he understands that but says he doesn’t want Monster to die while in his care.

Now that the hot weather is over, caged and tethered dogs won’t be sweltering to death. Soon, though, they’ll be freezing to death.

He has another dog tethered out there, a little one named Cookie, and part of the deal is that PETA will take Cookie, too, to spay her. When she returns, Alonzo claims, Cookie will live exclusively in the house. He and Nachminovitch hug. Two hours later, Monster is in Norfolk.

“Let’s give him some sniffs,” Nachminovitch tells Beard. She means a final walk. Free to be a dog.

Something is about to happen here that all the PETA people are familiar with but haven’t fully numbed themselves to. Monster gets his sniffs. It’s a long walk. He blasts out his last slimy diarrhea. He is, for the moment, happy.

Michael S. Williamson, the Post photographer, has two Pulitzer Prizes. He is professionally impassive. He did not lose his composure when he took photos of the Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco, from above, in a plane, with the death and devastation below, but when he is told what is about to happen, he bursts into tears. It’s hard to explain, but with animals, you are overwhelmed by their innocence and vulnerability.

Nachminovitch feels that PETA has no choice but to euthanize Monster. He is at least 8 years old and very sick,

unpredictably emotionally damaged, big and potentially dangerous. He has a terminal case of heartworm — a test at PETA confirms it. He is unadoptable. Best-case scenario is that after a brief day or two of freedom he'd be put back in a cage, in a shelter, to his terror, and then euthanized anyway.

Beard walks back to the PETA headquarters with Monster, who will not go in the building. He stops in his tracks and sits. He looks at the PETA people, who encourage him, and because he trusts his new friends, he gingerly walks in.

Nachminovitch shakes her head and wonders out loud if he's ever been allowed to walk through a door.

The process is dignified and quiet, almost sepulchral. The PETA staff lowers the lights. Monster gets a tranquilizing shot — ketamine — and instantly, before it hits, he is given a whole can of cat food, which dogs love. Cat food isn't great, nutritionally, for dogs, but under the circumstances …

He wolfs the food, walks around for a few seconds, dazed, then drops to the floor. The killing shot, sodium pentobarbital, is next. Nachminovitch cradles his big old head in her arms, kisses his muzzle and, when he is gone, rolls back his lips. His teeth are

chewed down to nubs, the dentin and nerves exposed. He must have been in agony.

A day later, Cookie was spayed and back with Alonzo, who promised she would now be a house dog.

Weeks later, PETA went by to check. Cookie was not a house dog. She was in Monster's miserable pen. A police officer had told Alonzo that the dog could not be out there without additional shelter to escape the heat or rain. He complied, but not with a doghouse. He had dragged into the pen a rusted old washing machine, and tipped it onto its side so Cookie could enter it. If she did, encased by metal, she'd bake.

Updates: Shortie, the terrified dog living in car parts, was too emotionally shattered to be adopted and was euthanized. Brandy, the boxer who squeezed through a five-inch gap in a fence, was found to be dying of cancer and euthanized, too. Dora, the dog in the carport, was irreversibly psychologically damaged, too high-strung and aggressive for adoption, and euthanized. Pancake, the rib-thin dog, is now white again and living happily in a foster home, and … chubby. The other dogs are still where they were, most of them slightly better off, still in torment, except for one. Sharon, the border collie mix who survived on mush and snails, was adopted by someone who had already loved

her. She belongs to Jenny Teed — Gator, the PETA worker, her rescuer.

For having consigned his remaining dog to a metal washing machine, Alonzo was criminally charged with animal cruelty.

Now that it's November, the hot weather is over. Caged and tethered dogs won't be sweltering to death for a while. Soon they'll be *freezing* to death.

Monster, shortly before his death.

On the drive back to Washington, I was alone with Lexi in the car and noticed that my gas gauge was down to no bars. I pulled off the highway and stopped in a Wendy's

parking lot to ask directions to the nearest gas station. Was pointed toward a nearby Walmart, then came back out.

A guy was standing next to my car, watching me approach. Then he screamed at me at the top of his lungs.

"Did you leave this car running?"

No. I grew up in New York City. You don't leave a car running.

"You A--HOLE!" he bellowed. "You left a dog to die in the car!"

Well, I *had* left a dog in the car for about a minute and a half. That much was true. And it *was* 90 degrees.
Then the guy noticed something.

"You wear a PETA T-shirt and you'll do that to a dog?"

I was, in fact, wearing a PETA T-shirt Nachminovitch had given me.

"Okay," I said, "but you should know ..."

"GET IN THE F---ING CAR AND TURN ON THE AIR, YOU F---ING A--HOLE."

I did. Lexi wagged hi. The guy came up to the driver's window, his hands balled into fists. I rolled down the window.

“Listen,” I said. “We really should discuss …”

He was staring at the passenger seat. “YOU HAVE OPEN BEER IN THE CAR. I’M CALLING THE COPS!” he said, and backed away into Wendy’s, fast, glowering at me. The beer was also sort of true. During our excursions, in midday, in the summer, I was the guy who always wanted to get a cold one. The six-pack of Miller was a joke from Nachminovitch. It wasn’t open, but still. I drove away, a little shaken.

Here is what I would have told the guy had he let me speak: Lexi was in the car alone for less than two minutes. I kept the windows rolled up to conserve the cold from the AC; had I cracked one open, heat would have seeped in. Lexi was never in any sort of peril. I am actually an expert in death from heat in cars.

Had the guy let me speak, I would have told him that he was rude, obnoxious, bullying, willfully ignorant, stupid with anger. But it was an anger on this one particular subject, an essential subject, an essential anger, an anger I wish more of us had. Had he let me, I would have shaken his hand.

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