

CHAPTER 1

WE BECOME A FAMILY



Learning How to Learn from Dogs

My journey with animals started very early—with the dogs, cats and cows at my grandparents' farm in our village. Back then, my cousins and I were just excited about being in contact with animals, as most children are. Then my relationship with animals evolved to close friendships as my father started bringing home dogs and cats for us to care for as pets in our urban home.

Nishi walking into my adult life steered my journey in a new direction. The pressure to be a responsible pet parent obscured the organic nature of my connection with animals, and I set out on a mission to train my dog to be the best-behaved dog possible. However, a year into Nishi entering

our lives, my journey took a tumultuous turn and drastically changed my outlook on my relationship with animals.

Dogs are remarkable creatures with incredible social skills with an impressive ability for conflict resolution and an uncanny ability to read humans and cooperate with us. The street dogs of India gave me an insight into their rich and complex social lives and their unique desire to coexist with humans. I went from wanting to teach my dog how to be a good dog to realizing that dogs are dogs. And it is not our place to judge animals and plants as *good* or *bad*. All animals want to be the best versions of themselves, and my job is to enable it for the ones in my care. But to bring out the best in my dogs, I had to learn to listen to them, understand the needs they express and meet those needs. I had to learn to shed my hubris on knowing what was best for dogs and to have the humility to embrace the idea that the dogs know what is best for them. I simply had to ensure they were in an environment where they could think and communicate clearly.

I had gone from wanting to train dogs to wanting to learn from dogs, but I found that it was not easy. I had to learn to shut up and observe, but silence is not exactly humankind's forte. I had to learn how to learn from dogs. This book chronicles my learning journey.

The First Encounter

Uttam and I leaned over the gate, trying to get a better look at the dark furballs—three boxer puppies. One was cowering under a table and looking up at us with big blue eyes. The

other was in its own little world, fighting off imaginary monsters. The third was busy trying to figure out an escape route to come closer and examine us. I pointed at the escape artist and asked the man, 'What's her name?' 'Velvet,' he replied. Just one look at her coat glistening in the sun, and we knew why she had been named Velvet.

I looked at Uttam and tried to make as convincing a puppy dog face as the one that was hiding under the table. 'N.O. No! We are not taking home a puppy,' he said adamantly. 'You said we were here just to look at them, and that is all we are doing. So, look all you want,' he added.

The Rangapravesha

Around this time in 2010, I had just quit my corporate job, started working at an NGO and resumed my Bharatanatyam dance training. Indian classical dancers have one landmark solo performance called 'Rangapravesha', and mine was planned to be three hours long. Here I was, thirty years old, coaxing my adult muscles to move in ways they insisted were impossible. After months of practising for four to six hours a day, I was ready.

Eventually, the big day came. But my mind was elsewhere. I had managed to convince Uttam to bring home Velvet, and it was supposed to happen on the day after my Rangapravesha! But first, I had the daunting task of holding the attention of 200 people for three hours. And yet, every time I closed my eyes, I could only see the big blue eyes set in a ball of fur, eagerly scanning the compound to figure out how to escape and come to us.

When 4 p.m. came, I hit the stage shaking—half with excitement and half with anxiety. For the next three hours, my world was just that stage and nothing beyond. I gave that performance all I had to offer to the dancing part of my life, rather oblivious that I was living out the last few hours of my ‘old life’ and something new was taking shape. When the three hours were finally up, I walked in a daze and sat down exhausted, staring at my palms, my mind blank. I suddenly felt someone grab me and give me a big hug. It was Uttam. ‘You were awesome!’ he said. I snapped out of my trance. I had just completed my Rangapravesha!

The first sentence that slipped out of my mouth was, ‘Velvet! Can we now go get her?’ Uttam laughed and pointed to the audience. Friends and family were waiting. I dragged myself out and received their compliments with as much grace as I could muster. When I was finally done, out of my costume and into the car, it was 9 p.m. I asked Uttam again, ‘Can we go pick up Velvet?’ He laughed and said, ‘Just rest today. We’ll go tomorrow morning, first thing. I promise.’ I drifted off to sleep as Uttam drove and had dreams of a puppy and myself on the stage.

Velvet Comes Home

The next morning, I woke up with a start and yelled, ‘Velvet!’ Uttam smiled and got out of bed, shaking his head. I could not wait. I was too excited to eat anything. So, we skipped breakfast, showered and left. These were the days before we were aware of adoptions, so we had unwittingly decided to buy a dog from a breeder.

When we reached the breeder's, I obviously pointed at Velvet and said, 'That one. I want that one.' I picked her up and—*crunch!*—she bit my nose. I was taken aback and looked down at her face. She was thrilled with what she had done and wagged her stub of a tail and licked me. I giggled and held her close.

Uttam held her while I got behind the wheel of the car and started driving. I could not get my eyes off her. I was so fixated on her that I almost ran the car into an autorickshaw. 'You sit with the puppy, I will drive,' said Uttam, a bit exasperated. I got in the passenger seat, placed a few sheets of newspaper on my lap, spread a towel and gingerly held Velvet on my lap. We were prepared for a car sick puppy and having to deal with a lot of mess. We were not prepared for what happened instead.

After the first few minutes, she started squirming until I let her go. She jumped off my lap and started exploring the inside of the car. She seemed to approve of everything, except the music. She barked a few puppy barks at the speakers. We changed the music a few times. She finally stopped barking when we played something she seemed to like. She then demanded to climb back up on to my lap to stare out the window. I rolled it down, and she was instantly half out of the car, enjoying her ears flapping in the wind. I then remembered having read that this was not good for dogs, as particles could go into their eyes and ears. I pulled her back in. She finally settled down and fell asleep. I looked at Uttam, a bit apprehensive of what he thought of this little fearless puppy. He was grinning from ear to ear.

A Mind of Her Own

At home, I had made meticulous preparations. The house was amply ‘puppy-proofed’. I had read up a lot on what to expect and what to do. I had read that the most important thing is to draw boundaries on day one and be very disciplined about enforcing them. I was adamant that I was going to be a good pet parent and took all of this seriously. Having diligently done my homework, I was ready.

Or so I thought.

When Velvet walked into the house, she explored every inch of the house, taking stock of everything. She then walked straight up to us and demanded to be let on to the sofa. The resolve to draw strict boundaries melted away when we saw those big blue eyes. After exploring the sofa, she found a cosy spot under the coffee table and fell asleep, showing us rather unambiguously that she had a mind of her own and would be fearless about exercising her right to an opinion. Uttam smiled and said, ‘Well! Thus, the puppy arrives.’

Uttam was thrilled with Velvet’s entry into our lives. He was fascinated by this puppy who had loads of oomph and attitude. I had become a little less enthusiastic about this ‘defiant puppy’. Imposing rules would be a lot harder on a dog that had a mind of her own. I started wondering if I would be stuck with an ‘untrainable dog’ who was going to cause more worry than bring joy. Was the honeymoon over? I wish someone had told me then that I would come to fall in love with this attitude and learn to work with it, not fear it.

For days prior to Velvet's arrival, we had been brainstorming what we would name her. 'Velvet' sounded like a stripper's stage name. We wanted to change that. We wanted something that was inspired by her dark colour. 'Nisha' in Sanskrit means the beautiful darkness of the night. But I wanted the name to end with an 'i' or 'y', because Indian names for girls tend to end in an 'i' or a 'y'. Basically, I wanted a name that sounded 'girly' because that makes a dog look less intimidating to people, and I wanted my puppy to have that advantage. We decided on Nishi.

I also wanted a name that could be drawn out when calling to her in a park: 'Neeeeeeeeeeesheeeeeeeeeee'. Little did we anticipate the various ways in which we would draw out this name—some seeped in pure joy, some out of complete frustration, some laden in pain and suffering. For now, Nishi-puppy was sleeping under the coffee table, blissfully dreaming puppy dreams, and for some reason, that just brought me a lot of joy.

The First Meal

Once she woke up, the first thing we did was take her to the garden to pee. Then, it was time to feed her. We had bought a bag of food that she was used to. We fed her some. She ate with enthusiasm, so much so that we felt she was still hungry. We fed her more. She gobbled that up too. We fed her even more. That too disappeared. She was now starting to look like a pregnant puppy. Uttam and I looked at each other. 'Should we stop?' 'Yeah. Perhaps. Let's go look up how much to feed

her.’ It had never occurred to us to have done that research before feeding her. Once we did, we found that commercial dry dog food expands significantly on soaking up water. We have also come to learn what goes into them and that it’s not so wonderful for our dogs. It has been a long, enlightening journey.

All of this happened in 2010. Now that I have studied dogs extensively for years, I see how so many of my early decisions were terrible. But that is all part of being a pet parent. From being the idiot who overfed her puppy, I have come a long way. Today, I am a qualified canine behaviour consultant and canine myotherapist. I now have a career in canine care and am a lot more educated on topics that stumped me back then. In this book, in addition to sharing my follies as a naive pet parent, I share my perspective as a professional. So, when relevant, I will do a deep dive into some of these topics, presented to you as essays. This first is meant to help you work out a good diet for your dog.

CANINE NUTRITION

The nutritional requirement of an individual is driven by several factors, including the species, the individual’s metabolism, other dynamic internal conditions like physical and mental health, as well as external conditions like weather and humidity.¹ In a tropical country like India, it is easy to see that some days are simply too hot for certain foods, while some cold days make us crave

specific foods. Our health, too, seems to impact our cravings and resistance to food. For example, stress is known to increase our craving for carbohydrates, while we may find some pain relief when we consume spicy foods.² Then, there are food items that are considered to have anti-carcinogenic properties, anti-inflammatory properties, 'brain foods', etc.³

My area of expertise is behaviour, and joint and muscle health. My concern with food is because food impacts the internal condition of the body, including gut health, stress hormone levels and inflammation in the body, all of which further impact health and behaviour.⁴ Food also impacts mood, which in turn impacts behaviour.⁵ There seem to be emerging interesting links between certain behaviours, such as excessive chewing and licking (oral stereotypes), and gut health and ulcers.⁶ Similarly, in my experience, digestive issues such as malabsorption can lead to severe anxiety around food and also result in biting. Food intolerances often seem to manifest as food faddism. Dental issues, ear infections and throat issues in dogs seem to make some foods impossible to consume. If not given an alternative, dogs may be seen fiddling with their food and nosing it around their bowl—unable to eat, yet unable to ignore their hunger.

All of these are dynamic, which makes the nutritious needs of an individual highly dynamic as well. My first recommendation is to move to a diet that allows

the conscientious pet parent the flexibility to alter and change it based on the changing needs of the dog. My next recommendation is to either seek the advice of a qualified canine nutritionist or to educate yourself on the latest in the field of canine nutrition and functional foods, so as to be able to understand the dynamic nutritional needs of a dog and tailor the food to serve their current needs.

Canine nutrition experts aren't the only ones you can rely on. Interestingly, you can turn to dogs themselves for some guidance. Animals are known to be highly intuitive and in tune with the needs of their body. It has been observed that animals in the wild have not only an inherent instinct around what is the right food for them and what is toxic, but also the ability to build a 'pharmacy' by using different medicinal plants in their ecosystem to alleviate common health issues.⁷ It is not uncommon to observe street dogs exhibit similar discretion in their consumption of medicinal plants. The emerging field of Applied Zoompharmacognosy is the study of this knowledge in companion animals, and it is interesting to note that many of our domestic and companion animals seem to retain such abilities.⁸

Of course, esoteric herbs and oils must always be used with adequate input from all relevant qualified professionals. But we can still learn to pay heed to the dogs' input on their daily dietary requirements, especially when working with fresh, natural, unprocessed,

whole foods. For example, my dogs, especially when “recovering from” mild ailments, clearly demonstrate what they prefer—be it kefir, healing bone broth, regular bone broth, spices, complex carbohydrates, certain protein sources and specific textures. The only area I have seen their instincts fail repeatedly is when it comes to simple sugars and highly processed foods, or when they are in a frenzy. So, yes, don’t feed your dogs sweets, refined breads, chocolates and such, irrespective of what those puppy-dog eyes seem to be telling you. Pet parents do need a basic understanding of what dogs can and cannot be fed. I have a collection of recommended readings on a dedicated website, which includes one on canine nutrition.⁹

One last thing on self-selection of food: Do not expect a hyperactive dog or puppy to be paying close attention to what their body is telling them. Pet parents must also be investing time and effort into calming their dogs down, getting them to start thinking and taking good decisions for themselves. We will revisit this topic repeatedly in the book.

Ayurveda says that all health starts with gut health. While this may be an oversimplification, we cannot underestimate the role of good food in the physical and mental well-being of a dog.

Being a pet parent is not easy. After feeding Nishi poor-quality food in inappropriate quantities, which would make

her tummy bloat, we, rather appropriately, started freaking out, worried to bits that her stomach would burst. Nishi, of course, seemed happily oblivious to our worry and was half-running, half-rolling on the floor—thrilled for no apparent reason. And thus, we made our first of many frantic calls to the vet.

Puppy Foraging

Over the next few months, we learnt that puppies explore the world with their curious little minds and pearly teeth. But when something disturbs their exploration sessions, they can get excited or agitated, and their developing instincts can fail them. They then end up doing strange things like running away with and gulping down the object of our attention. We once found a bulletin board pin in Nishi's poop. She must have been exploring it when we were exiting the lift. In our eagerness to leave, we must have rushed her, causing her to grab it and gulp it down! So there we were, making yet another frantic call to the vet.

Life was a non-stop adventure with Nishi. She came to us bang in the middle of mango season. Having watched *Marley and Me*, we were inspired to let her try out a mango. We too love mangoes and were eager to share with her something we loved so much. We picked the perfect day and the perfect mango for our perfect puppy. We excitedly trotted off to the garden and found the perfect spot to let our puppy explore this perfect fruit. You guessed it ... it was going to be far from 'purrfect'.

Nishi was very excited about this new experience. For a long time, she fiddled around with the mango, not even breaking open the skin. It looked like she was just taking in the smell, shape and texture of this new object. Then, she bit in with her little sharp puppy teeth. The syrupy juice oozed out. She licked it up and her puppy eyes lit up. Quickly, she started peeling the fruit open and stuffing her face with the sweet mango pulp. Uttam and I smiled at each other, held hands and sighed like silly young couples do, gushing over the puppy and getting her overly excited about all of this.

At some point, we got lost in our ‘silly new-couple conversation’, saying sweet nothings to each other. Both Uttam and I lost track of what little Nishi was up to. Eventually, our sense of responsibility returned, and Uttam glanced at our mango-faced puppy. ‘Erm ... where is the seed?’ he asked. Feeling like idiots—not for the first time since we got her—we frantically searched for the seed. No seed!

By now, the vet was on speed dial. We called him, late in the night, sheepishly explaining to him what had happened. He told us that we had to watch her closely for the next couple of days. The seed was too big for her to poop out. She would have to vomit it out. If not, we would have to get it surgically removed. He asked us to watch Nishi for loss of appetite, in case the seed got stuck in her digestive tract. We watched her like a hawk the next day. No vomit, no seed, no loss of appetite. We watched her the day after. And the day after. We watched her a whole week. No seed. Weeks passed. Still no seed. And yet, not a dent in her appetite. To this day, we have no idea what happened to the seed!

The mango seed was enough for me to freak out. So I went about puppy-proofing the house. I identified all objects that were of value to me or dangerous to my puppy, kissed them tenderly and told them that they all needed to go away for a few months. We set aside a room that we planned to leave her in when we went to work. The room had a balcony that she could pee in, in our absence. We cleared it of anything that she might possibly destroy. We moved all the furniture out of that room. However, puppy-proofing was only a part of the equation. If she had to manage without us at home, we would have to toilet-train her and teach her to stay alone. Nishi had entered a brand-new world entirely unfamiliar to her, and we had to gently induct our new puppy into our way of life.

A Whole New World

Uttam and I had saved up all our leave days. To welcome and induct Nishi into our family, we decided to use them all during this time. Between the two of us, we managed a month of someone being home and helping Nishi learn how to be part of our family.

Often, we don't realize what a big deal this is for a dog or a pup. Imagine having your world turned inside out overnight, no explanation given, and having to figure out every detail, starting with, 'Why am I here?' As humans, we can be made to understand that we are relocating, even if we don't really want to do it. Dogs need to figure out, at their own pace, that the new place is 'home' and that they are safe. We wanted to be there for Nishi while she figured this out.

Learning to Stay Home Alone

The first time we left Nishi alone was to attend a dinner at a friend's house upstairs. We waited until she was sound asleep in her bed and tip toed out of the room and out of the house. Just a few minutes after our arrival, Uttam and I were looking at each other with one question on our mind: Is Nishi okay? Gah! We could not take it any more and decided to go check on her.

Uttam was about to unlock the door when I stopped him. 'Don't! It'll wake her up. Shh. Listen.' There was not a sound in the house. We took that as a sign of her being asleep and went back up. This was ten minutes after we had first arrived. Over the next hour, one of us kept going down every ten minutes to check on her. Finally, our hosts saw our plight and let us off the hook. We ran down, opened the main door and burst into the room Nishi was in, only to find her passed out, all four legs in the air, blissfully unaware of the trauma we had put ourselves through.

After that, we gained the confidence to start making small trips outside the house during the day. Nothing more than five minutes at a time—downstairs to take a call, or to the local store to pick up chillies. Eventually, five minutes became ten, ten minutes became twenty, twenty minutes became an hour. After that, it was smooth sailing. We increased Nishi's 'alone time' by twenty additional minutes each day, until our month was up and we had to go back to work. I went to work early and returned early. Uttam went to work late and returned late. So we made sure that Nishi was not home alone

for more than six hours at a time. She managed just fine. I suspect she just slept.

Working Parents' Guilt

In the beginning, I felt terrible about the idea of Nishi sleeping all day in the apartment. Like many others, I believed that dogs needed a lot of space, lacking which, they at least needed something to keep them engaged. My father and grandfather kept dogs outside their houses. So, in my mind, being 'indoor dogs' in an apartment translated to dull dogs that were bored out of their wits all day. Then, I learnt two things about my guilt. First, my guilt was translating into behaviours and body language that made Nishi anxious and excitable, which was becoming a roadblock in teaching her to stay at home alone. Second, I learnt that the guilt was entirely unnecessary, because many dogs can benefit from some 'alone time' to catch up on sleep!

UNDERSTANDING SLEEP

Sleep is not an indulgence. Sleep is sometimes likened to an upgrade from economy to business class. It's not. It's not even an upgrade from economy to first class. The critical thing to realise is that if you don't sleep, you don't fly. Essentially, you never get there, and that's what's extraordinary about much of our society these days is that we are desperately sleep-deprived.'

—Dr Russell Foster, Neuroscientist and Head,
Sleep and Circadian Neuroscience Institute¹⁰

We all know that sleep is essential for wellness, but it is more than just that. Sleep is essential for *survival*. The brain is a fuel-guzzling organ that consumes 20–25 per cent of the total calories utilized by a person, even though it counts for only 3 per cent of our total body weight. All the organs in the body that consume calories for metabolism generate by-products that need continuous clearing, which is done by the lymphatic system. However, the brain has its own housekeeping system that requires the organ to shut down. Cerebrospinal fluid resides around the brain and enters the brain for clearing the metabolites and toxins that build up. This scheduled ‘maintenance shutdown’ is sleep.

Think of a massive power plant that is shut down for housekeeping. As you can well imagine, that is not a simple process. The same is true of sleep. More than half of sleep goes into powering down the brain and shutting it down slowly. This part of sleep is called ‘shallow sleep’. Interestingly, of the remaining, only about half is used for housekeeping, which is called ‘slow wave sleep’, indicative of the slower nature of the brain waves during this period. The other half is called ‘REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep’, which is dedicated to memory consolidation and learning. The brain does most of this by replaying the actions of the day, making sense of it and selectively storing what it deems are the most important lessons learnt. During this phase of sleep, the brain suddenly becomes very active.

New neural pathways are created—building a library of knowledge ranging from mundane activities, such as walking or driving, to more complicated tasks, such as social interaction with others and problem-solving. These are refined over time. This complicated process is what we come to recognize as dreaming.

That's right, dogs dream too. So do rats.¹¹

Of course, most pet parents have always suspected that animals dream. We have noticed the classic tell tale signs of dreaming, which look like they are running, whimpering or eating in their sleep. Often, when in REM sleep, they may stretch out to enable these movements.

So, how much sleep do dogs need? This is quite subjective, not only varying from individual to individual but also influenced by several extrinsic factors such as age and health. However, there is a common consensus that the human requirement for sleep averages somewhere around eight hours. With dogs, this requirement seems to be almost double.¹² This could be attributed to the fact that they spend less than 10 per cent of their total sleep in REM sleep,¹³ which is less than half of that in humans. What happens if we don't get enough sleep or good quality sleep? Of course, we are all aware that if we feel like we have not slept enough, we tend to get cranky or are not very productive. However, the long-term consequences seem far more dire.



Dogs assume different positions. Some may curl up during deep sleep or stretch out during REM sleep. But sleeping positions may also depend on the ambient temperature or internal physical or emotional health of the dog.



Dogs exposing their belly makes them extremely vulnerable. They only dare to sleep like this if they are feeling completely relaxed and secure. But if they do this when they are awake, it may be communicating extreme fear and a sign of begging to not be hurt. Read other body language cues to see if they are relaxed or tense.

Below are some of the consequences of sleep deprivation on organisms:

1. **Cognition:** When we don't get enough sleep, particularly REM sleep, there is insufficient memory consolidation. 'Learning' is a process of progressively building on top of ideas, which is not possible if the previous ideas were not consolidated and stored properly. Thus, overall learning is altered.
2. **Immunity:** A big part of the immune function of the body is carried out by white blood cells, the release of which is dependent on the internal sleep clock of an animal. Consequently, poor sleep unravels an organism's immunity. The extent of this can be understood by considering that the WHO has officially declared 'night-shift' as a carcinogen!¹⁴
3. **Stress:** Stress and sleep have an unholy relationship and can create a vicious cycle. Any surge in stress and excitement increases adrenaline and cortisol in the body. Cortisol impedes sleep.¹⁵ A decrease in sleep time reduces the amount of cortisol cleared in the body, which in turn makes the individual more susceptible to feeling stressed in everyday situations.
4. **Growth:** When the brain is in its housekeeping phase, growth hormones are released which help in the repair and replacement of body tissues. Additionally, brain cells are constantly being

replaced by a process known as ‘neurogenesis’. Sleep deprivation negatively impacts both.

5. **Death:** Sleep deprivation can cause death by auto-intoxication of the brain. In the case of dogs, this can take anywhere from nine to fourteen days.¹⁶

WHAT IMPEDES SLEEP IN DOGS

1. **Disruption:** Dogs need almost sixteen hours of sleep, and a large part of it happens during the day. As pet parents, we often keep waking our dogs up. Sleep occurs in stages and an organism moves from stage to stage, falling deeper and deeper into sleep and gradually coming out of it, over a cycle of 90–110 minutes (in humans), which keeps repeating itself.¹⁷ The exact duration of this cycle in dogs is currently unknown, but the pattern is believed to be similarly cyclical.¹⁸ So, if a dog is being woken up constantly, they are not completing a full sleep cycle and may remain in shallow sleep. We’ve already seen the importance of these deeper stages of sleep.
2. **Hormones:** Adrenaline and cortisol impede sleep. These are typically generated because of excessive excitement, anxiety or fear, all of which seem to dominate urban life.
3. **Discomfort:** How many times have we woken up saying we have had a bad night of sleep because we were either lying on a bed that was too hard, the weather was too cold or too hot, or we were

not able to stretch enough? Feeling safe and secure also seems to be an important determinant when it comes to feeling comfortable.

4. **Light:** The body maintains an internal clock called a ‘circadian rhythm’ which dictates when an animal should be sleeping and when they should be awake. This clock is closely related to the exposure to various components present in natural light. Change in light—either insufficient exposure to natural light or untimely exposure to artificial light—can alter the circadian rhythm and thus affect the quality of sleep.

HOW TO IMPROVE SLEEP IN DOGS

1. **Provide comfortable beds:** Comfort is highly subjective and is based on personal preference. Some dogs prefer elevated surfaces, while some prefer the cool floor and yet others prefer cosy corners. Some days, a dog might find their usual bed too hot to sleep on, while on others they may feel the bed isn’t warm enough. Sometimes, they may want to curl up, and at other times, they may need to stretch out. Since there is not one right answer to the kind of bed dogs prefer, the best way to enable good sleep is to provide a host of different options and provide the dog the freedom to be able to choose.
2. **Reduce cortisol:** Cortisol can be a direct result of either excitement or fear in dogs. So, both

hyperactive and anxious dogs will struggle to get sufficient sleep, which in turn can exacerbate their excitement or anxiety. Avoiding an adrenaline-inducing lifestyle is the first step. In addition, activities such as sniffing, chewing and eating as well as a few foods are known to reduce cortisol. These are discussed in a later essay.

3. **Don't wake them up:** While this might seem obvious, it's harder than you would imagine. Humans get their eight or nine or ten hours of sleep at one stretch, when we turn off the lights, shut off all distractions and put ourselves in the most comfortable, secure situation to get our sleep. However, dogs sleep almost twice as much, and this is spread across the day. Thus, they are sleeping in an environment filled with sounds of the doorbell ringing, phone ringing, footsteps of people walking up and down the house, the inescapable screech of the pressure cooker going off ... the list goes on. This is why we should not feel guilty about leaving our dogs home alone for a few hours during the day.
4. **Give them a sense of security:** While leaving a dog home alone can give them some peace and allow them to sleep, leaving them outdoors or confined is not advisable. Left outdoors, their alerting instincts kick in and they simply cannot sleep in peace. It can also get too noisy and distracting. However, even indoor dogs need

access to a range of spaces where they seem most comfortable. Interestingly, while our presence during the day could hamper their sleep, during the night, it could improve it. Dogs are social sleepers, sharing the responsibility of keeping watch. Sleeping alone may mean shouldering all that responsibility by themselves. Our presence in the night can often help them relinquish that responsibility, which can improve sleep.

5. **Provide sleep-inducing food:** Some foods (complex carbohydrates, certain fats, foods containing tryptophan and melatonin) are known to induce sleep¹⁹ and may be good temporary solutions to highly stressed-out or hyperactive dogs. A few herbs and essential oils are known to help, but these must be used with caution. A dog's sense of smell is very powerful and such scents can have undesired consequences. Your dog must always have the option of walking away from these herbs and oils. For particularly restless dogs, a vet may be able to prescribe drugs as the last resort.

It is a healthy habit to periodically do a sleep study on your dogs to objectively track the number of hours they sleep and how many times they are woken up in a day. The first step to improving anything is to understand it.

Crate Training

We got Nishi a crate. I had read about it being very important in training. Growing up, we had never heard of crates. I was not really sure what to do with it or what kind of crate I needed. I went to the store and got her the biggest, fanciest one I could find. I had read up about how it kept them safe and helped with toilet training, simulating the comfort of a den. It sounded so amazing that I wondered how I had even managed to have dogs without this magic contraption.

Having completed the initial training, I decided to use it to confine her for a bit when the housekeeper was mopping the house. I put her in there. She cried. She barked. She protested. I tried everything I had learnt about crate training ... nothing worked. She kept at it until the lady was done mopping and I let Nishi out. She walked out, gave me a long stare, took two tiny steps with her tiny paws, walked away and sat facing away from me. I felt miserable. I sat next to her and tried to play with her. She got up, sighed, walked away from me and sat facing away again. This happened a few times, and I suddenly realized, 'Oh my goodness! This puppy is actually angry with me.' She had suddenly gone from being a cute, furry playmate to having actual emotions, opinions and the right to disagree with me.

Nishi's message was very clear: 'I do not like being put in that box.' When I was growing up, I saw my grandfather and father express a general distaste towards confining animals, explaining to me that animals did not like that. So, it did not seem to be a particularly unreasonable request from Nishi, and I gave in. I'll admit that I did not really put effort into

crate training her properly, but I am glad I did not. I no more see any need for it, and advocate against it.

A CLOSER LOOK AT CRATES

An article published by PETA tries to trace back the history of using crates and says, 'Crating began as a way for people who participate in dog shows to keep their dogs clean, but they did not take into account their dogs' social, physical, and psychological needs.'²⁰ Subsequently, the use of crates may have become more prevalent during the world war, for transporting war dogs and further more in the context of air travel in more recent times. But it is only rather recently that there seems to have been a push to introduce crate usage at homes in some countries, perhaps as a way to expand to new market segments. Today, crates have almost become mandatory for dog owners in the US. However, they are not as popular in many other countries, and in some countries, there are restrictions around confinement areas. In Finland and Sweden, crates are illegal. People who continue to use crates today do it for two main reasons: to keep the puppy out of trouble and because it is believed that dogs are den animals who feel safer in crates.

During my street dog studies, discussed in Chapter 6, I noticed that some streeties tend to dig out den-like structures in sand piles or opt to sleep under cars or inside drains. Some scared dogs retreat under a bed or a table. But they don't seem to want to use these nooks all the time. More often, streeties prefer to sleep on

elevated surfaces or in open spaces where they can have plenty of company. Typical 'den animals' live most of their lives in dens, but free-ranging dogs use these spaces sparingly and only when they have a choice to walk in and out at will.

As a part of my education, we did sleep studies on our own pet dogs and found that dogs are polyphasic sleepers; given the freedom to do so, dogs get up between their bursts of sleep and move about. In the previous essay on sleep, I explain that comfort is important to improve the quality of sleep and the dangers of not getting sufficient good-quality sleep. Dogs use the surface they sleep on for temperature regulation too, which they cannot do unless they can move out of the confines of a crate. There are studies that show that confinement increases stress and lead to behavioural issues.²¹

It's true that keeping a dog in crates can keep them out of trouble and possible self-harm. However, given the damage it can do to their sleep, health, behaviour and musculature, I find puppy-proofing, puppy pens and lifestyle changes to be safer options. This is not really very difficult for us in India, because we have traditionally never used this piece of equipment.

The only scenario where it may be impossible to avoid using crates is during air travel. In such cases, it is important to slowly and systematically get your dog used to tolerating the crate without getting overly stressed. Since dogs are not really den animals, most of them are not naturally comfortable in crates and need a gentle

introduction. Crates can get so stressful for some dogs in this situation that they might not make it through the long journey. So exercise extreme caution and take time to gently and gradually get your dog used to this piece of equipment.

Suiting Up

Through all our learnings, Nishi was growing up rapidly. As she started getting faster on her furry little paws, we could no longer take her to the garden without a leash on. She would take off the minute we reached the garden and run into the hedges. As much as we would have liked following her, scurrying off under the hedges was not possible. Not that it kept us from trying.

When the little escape artist we had on our hands was contemplating the world outside our compound with curiosity, we realized that the puppy that had tried to escape the breeder's premises a few months ago to come meet us was now growing and wanted to meet the world. We could not prevent her from doing that. But it had to be done with her safety in mind. So, we went hunting for walking equipment. It was time to suit up!

The first advice we were given was that we had to get Nishi on a choke collar. We were told that she would soon get big and strong, and that I would not be able to handle such a big dog. We were recommended to give the 'tough' lessons early on, so that it could be 'tough enough'. Except, we just didn't know how to be tough on a puppy. On our first walk with a 'choke' collar, we saw it do exactly that—*choke* Nishi. The

first breath that she struggled to take made us gasp too. She was too small and frail a pup to be experiencing something like that. That was that. We took the collar off, picked her up and walked back home. The collar became only ornamental, to hang a name tag on it when we went swimming—making her look like an '80s Kannada movie villain.

The next thing we were told was to put Nishi on a flat collar. We did. We headed out on our merry walk. By now, Nishi had started to get a hang of 'walks' and was excited by the idea. This made her dart out. The collar stopped her by yanking back on her neck. I am sure that hurt her. I have tried putting a collar on my neck and pulling at half that strength—it hurt! I have since learnt about the anatomy of the dog enough to know that there's no reason it should not hurt a dog as well. No wonder she stopped dead on her tracks and turned and looked at us with a look of surprise, as if she did not know where the pain came from and why it hurt. To this day, that look of hers haunts me. By now you know our drill. We took off the collar, picked her up and brought her back home.

My sister's husband (then boyfriend) told us to consider this thing called a 'body belt' or a harness. 'It does not go around the neck. It goes around the chest, which is really a much stronger part of the dog's body,' he told us. With my current understanding of canine anatomy, I can verify that his reasoning was sound and am ever grateful for his inputs. After we got her a harness, we have not looked back. We did toy around a lot with the types of harnesses and have settled on what we like. At the end of this chapter, I have added an essay on harnesses, approaching it from a scientific perspective rather than just us gasping at our puppy gasping. At this

point, I'll just move on with the story because the next part is interesting.

The Date

One evening, after we had taught Nishi how to stay home alone, Uttam suggested we take a break and go out on a dinner date. 'Just a nice date, like we used to when we first started dating,' he said. I reluctantly agreed. I hated being away from Nishi. 'Wear something nice,' Uttam said. 'Oh! Where are we going? Can't we just go to the local bar? I'll come in my jeans and tee,' I snapped. He smiled and said, 'It's a surprise. It will be my treat.' I decided to relax, take it easy and go with the flow. I wore a nice red dress and got into the car with him, which smelt of dog and was lined with 'dog glitter', more commonly known as 'dog fur'.

Uttam took me to one of the fanciest restaurants in the city. I looked at him and smiled. A puppy had not been all fun and games. It had been hard work. It had been about poop and pee and drool. It had been about early-morning and late-evening walks, without the luxury of missing a single day—not for drinks with friends, not for a hangover. It had become about dead social lives. This was a welcome break.

A little after we were seated, Uttam went down on one knee! 'Oh no. Oh no. Is this what I think it is? No no no!' I said and burst into tears. 'No?' Uttam looked surprised. He cocked his head to one side like Nishi does when she hears strange sounds. 'Is this what I think it is?' I asked again. 'Sindhoo, will you marry me?' he asked, looking a bit nervous and confused. 'Of course I will!'

After I had managed to get over my crying, announcing to half the restaurant that I had just been proposed to, calling my sister and finally settling down for that dinner we had come to have, I asked Uttam, ‘I have a nagging suspicion that Nishi has something to do with this proposal. Am I right?’ ‘Yeah. She does. I’ve known you since college and I thought I had seen every facet of you, and I loved it all. But she has brought out yet another side of you that I love. I want to be with you for the rest of my life.’ I cried again. For the hundredth time or so that night. And I was not done. I came home, sat next to Nishi and cried again. She had given me the best gift of my life—my marriage.

WALKING EQUIPMENT

Fastening restraining equipment around animals’ necks is a very ancient idea. However, the impact of this practice on the animal had not been sufficiently studied until recently. Today, there is enough evidence to suggest that the use of restraints around the neck has severe short- and long-term implications.²² I have listed several of these studies in the reference section on our website, but we should not really need studies to tell us what common sense can.

If you think about it, the neck is the most vulnerable part of a vertebrate’s body. It has some very important functions, and yet, unlike the heart or the brain, it is not encased in a bony cover. Animals exploit this exact vulnerability when hunting and going for the kill: it’s almost always the neck. Without having to read the

rest of this essay, you surely know that the only way to strangle someone to death is to go for the neck. What makes the neck so vulnerable? Let's examine the anatomy of a mammal's neck to understand this better. I invite you to start this discovery by placing your finger on your neck and feeling around it a little bit.

Start with what is right under your fingers, beneath the skin. The easiest to feel is perhaps the windpipe or the trachea, which feels like a flexible ribbed pipe. It is a critical structure that carries oxygen from the nose and the mouth into the lungs. The trachea, made of cartilage, is quite soft and can collapse easily when pressed. Even the slightest pressure on it feels uncomfortable. A compressed trachea is easily audible as laboured breathing, which is noticeable when dogs are wearing collars and are pulled on the leash. This tells us that the trachea is exposed to mechanical damage not only in humans but also in dogs.

The neck is the highway that carries blood—and thus oxygen—to the eyes, ears and the brain. These important arteries and veins are exposed on the neck such that any pressure can cut off circulation, as evidenced by the tongues of dogs turning blue when they pull too hard on a collar and leash. Unfortunately, unlike most other parts of the body, the brain and eyes are very sensitive to oxygen being cut off, even for very short periods of time. A study by A.M. Pauly, E. Bentley, K.A. Diehl and P.E. Miller concluded that 'pressure in the eyes' increased

significantly from the baseline values when a force was applied to the neck via a leash to a collar. This does not happen with harnesses.²³ Julia Robertson, a canine anatomy expert and the pioneer of Galen Myotherapy for dogs, says, ‘Reducing good flow of blood to and from the brain will have an impact on hormonal delivery, which can be catastrophic for the function of the senses: eyes, ears and nose.’²⁴

The neck is also home to several very soft organs. The lymph glands and the thymus have to do with the immunity of the body. Mechanical damage to these organs can compromise the overall immunity of the body, exposing dogs to several diseases. The thymus is particularly enlarged in puppies, making the gland even more vulnerable to damage.²⁵ The thyroid gland is a butterfly-shaped soft organ located at the base of the neck, without much protection. Physical damage to this organ can impact its functioning, typically resulting in hypothyroidism in dogs. The condition is irreversible and has far-reaching consequences on the dog’s health and behaviour for the rest of its life. More bad news here is that subclinical hypothyroidism is not easy to detect in its early stages. In her book *The Canine Hypothyroid Epidemic*, Dr Jean Dodds argues that the incidences of hypothyroidism are so high in our companion animals, the condition can be fairly called an ‘epidemic’.

Then there is the hyoid bone, also known as the tongue bone. It is a dainty bone, and looking at it, it

is not difficult to imagine how easily it can crack or break. Unfortunately, this goes unnoticed most times because pet owners rarely suspect a broken hyoid bone. When this bone is broken, it manifests as strange behaviours, such as abnormal appetite, abnormal water consumption and general irritation, which very few people associate with collar damage. Apart from discomfort when drinking water and eating food, the tongue is also important for movement. ‘There is a muscle just above the dog’s chest that stabilizes the tongue; if this muscle is disturbed or damaged it will affect the position of the tongue and this will impact the dog’s total’s balance,’ says Julia Robertson.²⁶

If you continue inwards, you will reach the very core of the neck. This is the vertebral column. It is a misleading term, because one might picture a column. However, this is not a solid bone but a delicate chain of interlocking bone pieces—highly vulnerable to shear forces that can damage the interlocking, causing osteoarthritis of the spine or herniation of the disks. Julia explains, ‘If a dog wearing a collar is being pulled sideways, this can cause something similar to whiplash injury which is due to the weight of the head and a sideways thrust. This type of force is not something the head can cope with from a functional perspective, and can very easily be damaged. This can leave dogs with permanent or in some cases a repetitive whiplash pain.’²⁷ The vertebral column houses the spinal cord.

The spinal cord is the information highway of the body, connecting the brain to the rest of the body. Nerves exit this highway on either side of the vertebrae, starting right at the base of the skull. Mechanical damage to this part can impinge on the nerves, causing pain. It can also impair other neurological functions.

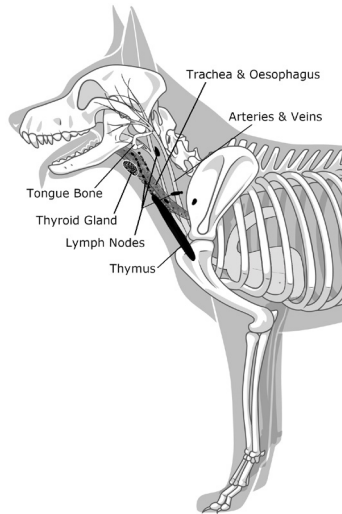
Surrounding the vertebra in the neck are several muscles connecting the head to the chest, shoulders and legs. Despite being strong, these muscles are not immune to mechanical damage, as found in a study conducted in 1992 by Anders Hallgren.²⁸ ‘The clearest correlation in the study was between neck damages and jerk pull. 91 per cent of the dogs who had neck injuries had also experienced jerking of the leash.’ Mechanical pressure on the belly of these muscles can not only damage the fine muscle fibres in it, but also have a cascading effect on all other parts of the neck and the parts that these muscles are connected to, including the head and the legs. This can lead to referred pain, and later, in a tingling sensation in the paws, which might also lead to dogs licking their paws.

Julia explains this cascading effect thus:

Damaged muscle fibres shorten during their self-healing mechanism. The shortening of the muscle length surrounding the vertebrae will draw these vertebrae of the neck closer together; in turn compromising the gap between each of the vertebral bodies, thereby impinging on the structures. This

can have a devastating effect on the major nerves and the vessels supported through and around these vital vertebrae, with a high potential of severe dysfunction, pain and referred pain. Manifestations include deep physical and psychological effects; anyone who suffers from headaches from a bad neck will know how this feels.²⁹

At this point, indulge me by placing two fingers on your neck and start pressing into your neck. It is likely to get quite uncomfortable quite quickly. Pain and discomfort are nature's way of preventing us from doing



The neck is a very sensitive area with several critical organs that remain exposed to external damage. This is why we do not wear a seatbelt around our neck.

potentially harmful things to the body, like perhaps strapping a car seat belt around our own neck.

Now that you understand the anatomy of the neck, you will appreciate its fragility. The neck is just as valuable to a dog (and to all animals) as it is to us. Therefore, I do not recommend any equipment that needs to be fastened around an animal's neck. While I recommend harnesses as a safer alternative, it is important to point out that not all harnesses are safe. The following are some of the important considerations to make while trying to pick an ergonomically superior harness for your dog.

1. Dogs requires a full range of movement of the various joints and limbs. In Chapter 8, I have included an essay on the front leg that explains how the front legs of a dog are actually floating limbs, with the shoulder blade gliding over the ribcage. A harness that has straps that pass over the shoulders of a dog can restrict this gliding movement and result in improper loading of the joints, which can lead to long-term muscle and joint pain. A good harness, therefore, will steer clear of the shoulder blade.
2. Some harnesses tend to pinch under the armpits, which can cause chafing and irritation. It is better for a harness to move its straps further back down the rib cage, leaving the front limbs completely free.

3. Some harnesses have a metal clasp for attaching the leash on the front of the dog's body rather than the back. This can cause inadvertent damage to the spine, especially when the dog bolts. Even the most well-trained dog may bolt if there is a sudden loud noise or perhaps a cat or a squirrel in sight.
4. A good harness should not ride up high on the neck, since that can pinch on the neck like collars do. The whole point of using a harness is to shift the load down towards the sternum, which cannot be achieved by a harness that rides high on the neck.
5. For countries such as India, there is an additional consideration that harnesses must be as light and minimally covering as possible, so as to not overheat dogs. If you put your hand under the harness after a walk, it should not have heated up.
6. Some harnesses restrict the movement of the head and impose a certain head carriage. Unnatural head carriage causes muscular issues, as discussed in the essay on 'The Floating Limb' in Chapter 8. This type of harness can also cause neck injuries in dogs. 'I have seen some of the most awful whiplash injuries from these,' says Julia. 'The leverage potential on the dog's head through the joint where the skull meets the neck vertebra is huge! And the dog is anatomically really unprotected in this region.'³⁰