You Had Me at Dum diddle dum dum

A couple’s relationship with their beloved mutt inspires an unusual dialect

by WADE ROUSE
the trainer screamed at me the second Saturday of puppy obedience class. Since the 6-foot-4 woman made Xena the Warrior Princess look like Kate Moss and had the voice and decibel level of a cement mixer, I promptly took a seat on the floor next to 20 other puppies.

“No! Not you! Your dog!” she bellowed, nodding her Amazon-sized head at our puppy, Marge, who was now sitting on my lap. “She isn’t listening! You should have her hearing tested.”

I stood, handed my partner, Gary, the dog and the leash, and walked over to stand in Xena’s shade. I motioned for her to lean down and whispered into her elephant ear, “Her hearing is fine. You’re not speaking her language.”

“Excuse me!” she yelled, so loudly, in fact, that her perfectly trained German shepherd, Hans—who to this point, I had begun to believe, was operated via remote control because he never moved without instruction—lifted his ears. “That’ll be enough, Hans!” she yelled at the dog, who immediately bowed at her boots.

“You’re not speaking Marge’s language,” I whispered again, attempting to sound as rational as I could. “Or using the right voice.”

“What, exactly, is Marge’s language? And voice?”

It was here that the Halti-dispensing behemoth smirked in my face, copping the same expression and tone that Eileen Brennan used in Private Benjamin the first time she saw Goldie Hawn in the Army.

“Go on! Tell the class!” she said and motioned with her tree limb. I turned to face roughly 20 other dog owners, all sucking down lattes and wearing North Face jackets, and their puppies, outfitted in bright bandanas and expensive collars.

“Well, it’s sort of a special lexicon that we’ve taught Marge.” I smiled creepily, as if I were standing in front of the judges in my Wow Wear performing my “Sassy Walk.” I smiled prettily, hoping these well-bred, by-the-book owners and pets might just suddenly forget what was happening.

“Go on!” barked the trainer.

And then, for the first time, just like she had hoped, I realized I had to explain this insanity to the world, retract the curtain and let everyone see that the wizard was actually Joaquin Phoenix, a mass of quirks and instability.

“Enlighten us!” Xena growled again, a mortified Hans seeming to smile at someone else’s predicament.

So, I raised my voice roughly four octaves, and said as rationally as I could in my Alvin and the Chipmunks falsetto, “Margie! Itty-bitty-boo!”

The yuppie crowd doubled over in laughter and applauded, like they were watching a seal perch a striped beach ball on its nose. But, above the din, our mutt, Marge—our little rescue Heinz 57, who fit in with these purebreds as much as me and Gary—did as instructed: She sat on my command.

“Itty-bitty-boo” means ‘sit?’” the trainer bellowed.

“Yes!” I said in my falsetto, before correcting myself. “Yes!”

“And how, pray tell, would you say ‘Come?’” Xena asked.

“Dum-diddle-dum-dum, Margie!” I chimed.

And our reddish puppy—her giant paws still too big for her burgeoning frame—rushed over to me, dragging her leash.

It was then that the crowd took on a different emotion, a mix of enchantment and disbelief, like fanatics do when they discover the image of Jesus in a Pringle.

“Enough!” the trainer yelled. “You have spoiled your dog. She will learn the commands as taught—the normal way—like the rest of us. Everyone here speaks the same language. Marge, sit!”

Marge looked up at the trainer and barked.

“Marge, sit!”

Marge looked over at me and barked.

“Marge, sit!”

And, with that, Xena walked over, bent to the floor, and forced Marge to the ground, yelling, “Sit! Marge, sit!”

Marge battled her every inch of the way, finally succumbing with a sad yelp.

“She only understands simple, direct commands in a forceful tone,” the trainer barked at me. “Have a backbone. You must be the leader of the pack. She doesn’t understand you. Say a simple, direct command in a forceful tone.”

“You’re a Nazi bitch!” Gary suddenly said.

Cue crickets: Everyone stopped breathing, even the energetic puppies.

That command, it seemed, everyone understood.


And, with that, our wacky little family left class. On the drive home, as I nuzzled my mutt with the soulful brown eyes, thick auburn fur, a white stripe going up her nose like a highway divider, and the fuzziest ears I’d ever felt, I seriously wondered if we had jacked her up right out of the gate, if she would be a rotten baby, churlish teenager, spoiled, selfish adult.

Gary caught the look on my face and said, “No one there spoke our language, Wade,” before inserting a CD of the musical Chicago, which he knew would make me smile. As we sang the lyrics to “All That Jazz”—“I’m gonna rouge my knees/And roll my stockings down”—Bam! Bam!—I began to think of the opening scene in Terms of Endearment, where a baby Debra Winger is sleeping soundly, and momma Shirley MacLaine isn’t satisfied that her newborn daughter is OK until she pinches her, and the baby starts howling.

In essence, that’s how our dysfunction started.
that day at the shelter, after touring the facility in a group that included a hard-edged urban professional in a power suit, a redneck couple whose wife was so hungover she kept pulling her Busch beer bandana over her eyes to “squeeze out the damn light,” and a bosomy woman in a glitter tube top with a tattoo across her chest that read, “Big Enuf 4 Y a?” who was in the market for a dog to provide “a little protection.”

Thus, that day, Gary and I created Ne-ne (the successful, professional city woman), Connie (the hard-luck, hard-partying gal who couldn’t hold a job), and Trixie (the town whore).

Standing in front of Marge and her littermates, it was quite a while before we unconsciously began doing our characters, each of whom was defined by an oddly high-pitched voice and caustic, snarly, biting wit, almost as if Sarah Silverman had just ingested a helium-filled balloon.

Marge immediately took notice. And so did we.

“Mr. Tutwiler,” Gary said to Marge, as if he were Connie, “git-her hands off the forklift and back on my ass where they belong!”

“Twenty bucks? Twenty bucks!” I screamed à la Trixie, licking cake-batter-flavored gloss off my lips. “That won’t even get you a flash of my teats and a date to Taco Bell!”

“My God!” Gary screamed, as the tiny puppy scrambled up our chests and into our arms to kiss our faces, while the others hid. “She loves it! She speaks our language!”

It was a sign, because very few in either of our lives had, really.

My older brother, Todd, died when I was 13, and though he was the exact opposite of me—a true country boy who loved to fish and hunt and work on motorcycles—we had a special relationship, and often communicated via a secret language.

“If you ever get into trouble and I’m nearby,” Todd would tell me, “yell ‘Suzuki!’ (his favorite motorcycle), and I’ll be right there.”

And I did. Many times. And he was always there to protect me.

Gary lost every man he loved, in quick succession, all of whom used their words as weapons to wound Gary’s heart, kill his faith in himself, and whose boss used to always drop his pencil for her to stoop over and pick up.

Over time, our Marge-ese dictionary and cast list were given to friends and relatives as well as our vet, so they could communicate with our dog, understand her. But no one really took us seriously. That is, until Gary and I went on our first vacation since adopting Marge, and we gave our dictionary to the kennel where Marge was staying.

Three days into our stay in Puerto Vallarta, we received a call saying Marge had yet to eat, drink, or even sleep since we had left.

“Are you speaking her language?” we asked. “Or doing a character?”

“Ummm, we tried,” the owner said, more than just a hint of malice in her voice. “We’ve tried to get her to play with other dogs, but she doesn’t seem interested. And we’ve tried hamburger and rice, and special biscuits. She’s not responding to anything. Except cartoons on TV. She’s just looking around for you.”

“Put us on speaker,” Gary said.

And, in the high-pitched, cartoon voices only she could understand, we told her to eat, drink, and potty. Which continued the next four days.

I thought of Xena, our puppy trainer, while trying—but failing—to relax in Mexico. She was right. We had created a nightmare. One, now, that would never end.

From that point on, Gary and I really never left Marge. Whenever
we traveled—vacation, book tour, holiday—Marge was there, riding in between us. And if she couldn't go, Gary's parents—who were nearly as neurotic as we were—babysat, following our dictionary, word for word, performing characters left and right, as if they were doing improv on a Japanese game show.

Marge eventually—as dogs do—leapfrogged us in years. She is now 13.

She has seen us through our early 30s into our mid-40s. She has developed gray hair alongside us. She gets stiff after exercising. And, for nearly a decade and a half, this 80-plus-pound mutt has lain—day in and day out—on my feet, as I write and try to make sense of the world via words, my own language.

After four books, Marge is still the first person to hear what I write—yes, I read to her in falsetto—and she listens more intensely than any other reader or fan I've ever known.

Marge has helped shepherd me and Gary through a sea change of triumphs and traumas: a move to the woods of Michigan and a career as a full-time writer, along with the loss of my mother to cancer and the loss of Gary's grandmother. But I feel more capable of handling life now, thanks to her. Though I realize that life on this planet is but a blink of an eye, and that time is not the vast ocean I once believed it was—endless and infinite—but more like a creek, a quick swim from one shore to the other, Marge has taught me to appreciate the beauty of each day, to not think about time or the future, only to sigh, and kiss and play, and love and laugh without limit.

Still, whenever I begin to become a turtle again, Marge coaxes me to get up and walk with her and talk to her. She forces me to take pause and look up at the sky with her, to chase seagulls on the beach with her, to swim in icy Lake Michigan with her—our dueling, dog-paddling shadows on the sandy surface below giving me hope that everyone can find that special someone with whom to swim through life. She, like Gary, has retaught me that it is OK to love, no matter the risk.

Recently, one evening, after eating her dinner, after a day of playing in the snow and chomping at snowballs, Marge could not seem to get comfortable. She followed me and Gary around so closely that her nose became part of our thighs.

I bent down and looked Marge directly in her big brown doe eyes.

She let out a sad, mournful yelp, put a paw on my chest, and then dry-heaved three times. I felt her nose. It was ice cold.

"Call the vet!" I yelled à la Alvin.

Twenty minutes later we were at the vet's office. Diagnosis? A turned stomach, just like in Marley & Me. Prognosis? Fifty-fifty chance of survival, less considering her age.

"Marge has taught me to appreciate the beauty of each day, to not think about time or the future, only to sigh, and kiss and play, and love and laugh without limit."
As the needle slid into Marge’s furry arm, and the vet scooted Marge away on a gurney, Gary and I looked at her and said, “Wuboo! Seepy weepy!”

Her tail lazily thumped the stainless steel a few times and then she was off, but not before I could grab the gurney—just as her eyes began to glaze over—and tell my mutt, in a bizarre falsetto and the only words I could muster, “You cannot leave me, do you understand? It is not time. I need you!”

Marge gave me one last kiss.

The vet called at 3 a.m., after four hours of surgery, and said, miraculously, that Marge had made it through. But the worst was not yet over. She had been open for a long time, and was now under heat lamps to warm her body temperature. Three hours later, the vet called again. Marge was awake, alert, and looking for us.

“I’ve never seen owners get a dog with a turned stomach into the vet more quickly. You saved her life. You really do speak the same language,” the vet said. “She’s looking for you. Better come take her home.”

We picked up Marge—who was cut from here to kingdom come—and Gary said, in Marge’s helium-filled vibrato, “I got the tummy tuck you boys will never afford!”

Day by day, as Marge recovered, we found ourselves in the same position as we had when she was a puppy. Lying on the floor, holding her, speaking bizarre words in a high pitch only the three of us could understand. When Marge would wake and hear us, or catch us staring at her, her eyes would immediately widen, brighten, and her tail would give off a pathetic but telling thump, thump, thump. I don’t know how much time I have left with her, but Marge has taught me to cherish each day, each kiss, each falsetto word, rather than fear the final outcome.

Marge has trained me, you see, to be a stronger person.

Ironically, I happened to see Xena, Marge’s puppy trainer, not long after Marge’s miracle recovery, while doing a book event in our former city. She was in the big dog park, training two German shepherds, and I was talking to Marge as if she were Ne-ne and missed her days as a big-city career gal.

My falsetto must have been the key that unlocked some past trauma for Xena, for she approached me, after 13 years, and said, “It is Marge, right?”

I nodded.

“And did she ever learn to sit properly?” she asked.

“It depends on what you mean by ‘properly,’ ” I said. “Itty-bitty-boo.”

And Marge sat.

“That’s just—well—amazing,” she said, looking at Marge as if she were an idiot savant. “Amazing she was able to learn so much.”

“No, what’s amazing is how much I was able to learn.”

Her face took on that bemused Eileen Brennan expression again, and I asked, “When did you lose Hans?”

“How could you tell? Everyone thinks my dogs all look the same.”

“Hans used to smile,” I said.

“Itty-bitty-boo,” Xena said, out of the blue, her expression suddenly bright. And Marge sat.

“That’s just amazing,” she said once again.

Marge and I took off running through the grass, in the brilliant sunshine, me chatting to her in our bizarre lexicon. Finally, I took a seat in the shade of a giant oak, and my best friend put her paws in my lap and gave me a kiss. I cradled Marge’s giant old head in my hands—because that’s how we roll—and the two of us chatted about this strange world, this world of strays, of mutts and men, all of whom have to overcome great odds to find that perfect someone who loves us unconditionally, who embraces our quirks and neuroses, that special someone who, quite simply, speaks our language.