

Hounding Out Dog-Lovers

One pays a price for fame – being invaded by people is one penalty, being inundated with unwanted pets is another. A warning of some kind, a letter perhaps, or a phone call gives one time to prepare. But many just arrive on the doorstep, accompanied by slavering Doberman straining at the leash and expect us to keep it. I'm not criticising the telly company or the fairly good piece they did to put us on the map (albeit inaccurately, as many lost visitors testify) but we were somewhat unprepared for the overwhelming response we got. One would assume that the viewer-rating for a programme shown after midnight on the subject of stray dogs would be pretty low. Not so. And many of our callers were people who switched on by chance – thousands, if not millions, watch TV regularly into the wee hours.

There are two types of callers: those who want to help in some way and those who want you to help them. In the latter group it's difficult to weed out the genuine cases from the ones looking for somebody or some place to off-load their problem (i.e. a pet of some kind). Housing has become number one culprit in pet abandonment. Virtually every rented house or apartment in Japan forbids the keeping of pets. People dutifully sign the tenancy papers containing this clause and then promptly forget it when their heart goes out to some moggie or doggie. From then on they live the life of fugitives, waiting for the dead of night before taking the dog (for example) out for walks. A family I know in Minoo all used to get up at 3 a.m., children standing guard at doorways and lift so that father could smuggle the dog, wrapped in a blanket, out of the apartment for his nightly pee. Quite a feat with a large desperate canine. Inevitably

the whole family became highly stressed from this cocktail of sleepless nights and fear of neighbours' reprisals should they be discovered. Not surprisingly too, the dog became thoroughly hyped and anti-social from this pantomime. Now with me, he's slowly becoming normal again.

Another man arrived with an eviction order in one hand and his dog, Donkey, in the other – a rather ludicrous name for the most perfectly mannered, immaculately brushed canine you could ever meet. Her fate was sealed when she barked (only once) at the gas man and a rotten neighbour reported it to the landlord who threatened to have Donkey killed if she wasn't removed. Another kept five strays in a car beside a park in Osaka, until the city unceremoniously told him to remove car and contents or else.

Apartments or houses allowing pets are snapped up instantly; waiting lists of two years are not uncommon. Pet-phobia is growing. There are hundreds of persecuted animal lovers out there, problem is they don't know of each other's existence otherwise they could band together and fight the anti-animal brigade. People have rights to happiness and contentment in their lives and if animals help to fulfil this they should be allowed too. It's an established fact that animals often ease loneliness especially amongst the elderly – but even on these grounds pets are not allowed. Witness another case. A family bought (not rented) an apartment for Grandma and one cat. They had to spend an extra million soundproofing the floor 'in case' the cat jumping around would disturb the people in the flat below. Cat is aged 11 and Grandma is in her 70s, hardly a combination to pose a menace to national peace. No prohibitions however, on toddlers in tantrums nor drunken husbands. Even piano torturers are more tolerated.

Of course many landlords see a relaxing of their stance as the thin end of the wedge. There are 'animal collectors' who spoil it for others by keeping menageries of matted moggies or flea-ridden grubby mutts of indeterminate breed and gender. These types are the most resilient, hard

to eradicate because they believe their 'love' over-rides what is in fact neglect. Evict them once and they'll pop up again in a new place with even more in tow. One had me nearly weeping on the mat with her tales of wicked landlords and her declining health, the result of years of court battles. When I actually saw the airless prison in which she kept her 'family', my heart switched over to the landlord who had put up with this tenant for so many years.

Cities or municipalities behave as if the problem doesn't exist or at least they refuse to acknowledge it. They talk an awful lot about greening the concrete, and when they can't entice real birds to share the pollution they have ingenious ways to simulate bird sounds in underground catacombs. Why then, since they want people to have more nature in their lives, don't they encourage those who want to, to keep pets, thus filling in the natureless gap in their city lives?

People should be encouraged to take pride in keeping pets properly, to care for them correctly rather than face ostracisation and eviction. In the present climate people out of fear or distress dump them like garbage. The city for its part picks them up and disposes of them as such. All across the board people close their eyes pretending the problem doesn't exist. But for the animals which experience the trauma of being torn from security and love, of being dumped on the street or a distant mountain, or dragged to the *hokensho* slaughter cells, the reality all too clearly exists.

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A picture from the summer issue of ARK, A Voice for Animals, the newsletter of Animal Refuge Kansai.

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