

2/23/2021

Touch in the Time of COVID

by Rita Dragonette

Name one *joyful* thing? Seriously? Um, does the Grubhub delivery boy with the abundant hair count? The fact that I'm wearing a bra for the first time this week? Which is a good thing because it's always so cold in this condo.

I don't know. Joy's such a big, aspirational word. Can I break it down to something smaller, easier? Like a smile? Because I did actually smile today, now that I think about it. It was when I went down to get the mail. Not because of the mail, even though that's my big daily activity, but . . . this woman I know from the health club in the basement, back when it was open, she held the door for me. Not everyone wants to share an elevator these days. We're all so touchy . . . as of course we should be. We don't know if it's really safe yet.

Anyway, she was carrying this puppy that looked just like me. Really. It had auburn hair, a few shades lighter than mine. We could have been in the opening scene of *101 Dalmatians*; you know, the cartoon version from when we were kids? Where all the owners are walking their dogs that look just like them? We fit like that. And suddenly it lunged for me, you know how they do when they see a new set of hands that can pet them. And I just grabbed it like it was a present just for me. And I was rubbing it all over and it was licking my face, which I usually don't like. It actually got a lick in my mouth. I laughed. When was the last time I laughed?

And then it squirmed around in my arms with its white belly up. And the belly was perfectly round, like they are. And I rubbed it and the puppy panted with delight—like we were *both* laughing. And then I stroked the line along the side of that little belly right where the leg connected to the rest of him. It was so warm and through my fingers I could—I could feel his heart pulsing, the blood rushing beat after beat. And I was transfixed—touching that spot and thinking that the owner has been able to feel all that life and warm her fingers for all these months while I . . . I haven't touched anything but inanimate objects for over a year. And I'm always so cold.

That feeling of warm, living flesh, it was . . . it was pure joy coming back to me. It was like the puppy was warming me back to life.

That's when I realized it was making a different sound and so was the owner. And I might have been holding it a little too tight. It started to howl and push off against my chest.

The elevator slowed and I thought about how I could just back out into my corridor, and the doors would close . . . And I'd have the puppy.

But there was this ear-splitting yelp and the puppy lunged toward *her* this time. I held it tighter and it squealed, and I realized it was afraid . . . of me.

Suddenly, she had the puppy and we were staring at each other as the doors closed and I saw that she was afraid of me, too. I looked down and my arms were still cradling the shadow of the puppy. I could still feel it, for a while, as I stood there, in the corridor . . . until everyone came.

Oh, don't worry. I'm okay. I'm sure it will just be a restraining order, not an eviction notice, not after all the years I've lived here.

But everything's fine.

I mean, it's not like I have to worry anymore about a sick husband, or children to homeschool, or a mother in a nursing home, or a business on life support. I never even wanted a pet. They're so needy. I've even got a delivery coming from Grubhub later.

I've got everything that's essential. I'm . . . privileged.

Right?

And everyone's safe again.

Damn, it's cold in here. My fingers are like ice.

Anyway, who's next? Kathleen? What brings you joy? Yes, we want to know. Seriously.