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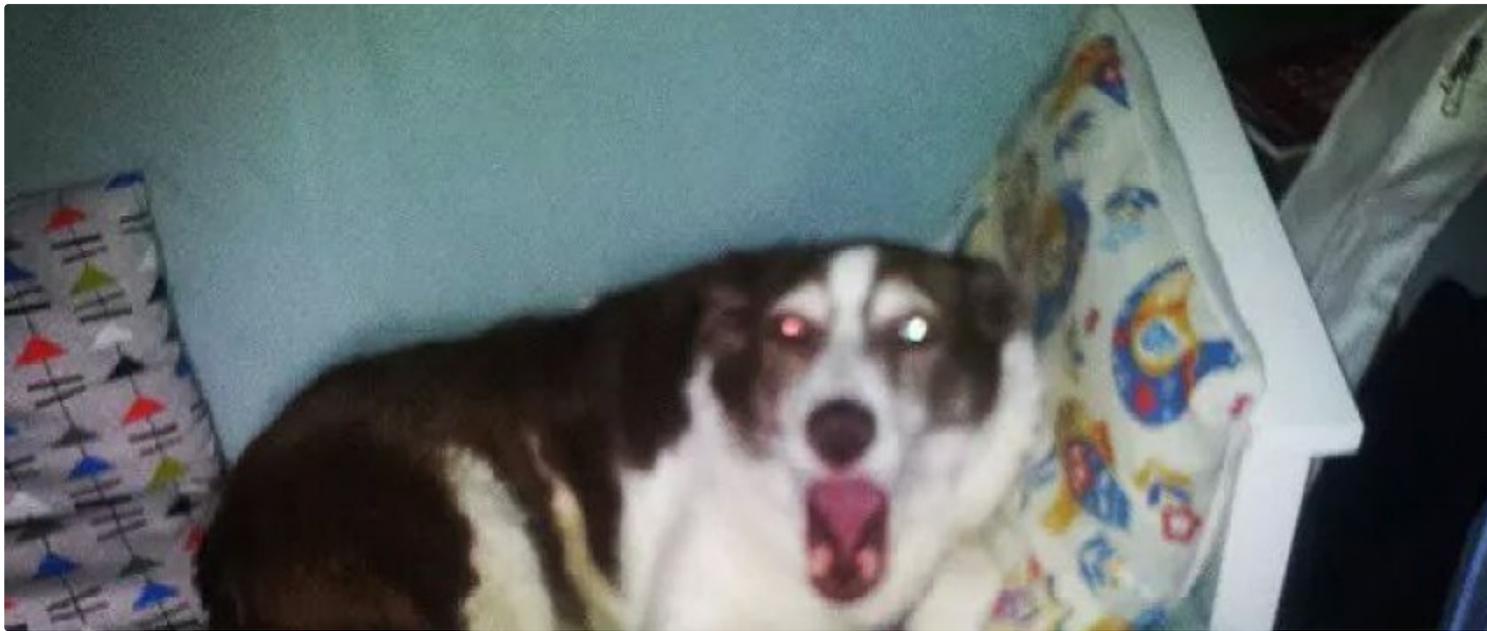
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ARTICLE CREATIVITY + IDENTITY

“I’m totally allowed to sit here” and other dog lies: a housesitter’s guide to Oxford



By
Danny Smith



Called as a last-minute dog-sitting replacement to the city of the dreaming spires, Danny Smith looks for his place in the town of gown and tourists, fighting a class war that's largely in his head.

When I arrive in Oxford it feels full, it's freshers' week but still warm for early autumn. The weather is no problem for the middle-aged couples carefully layered in all-weather hiking gear, mid-range digital cameras slung around their necks. I lurch from the coach station and my bag bounces off a few of these tourists, drawing worried frowns from the women and smiles from underneath the caps of the men. I stumble through a family taking a photo, proud parents, embarrassed daughter and bored sibling, I mumble an apology and collapse into a doorway. My reflection reminds me that my piercings, tattoos and blue hair make me look a little like a Fraggles with a meth habit - a look that back home

blends into the carnival of cultures and parade of the strange so much, it barely warrants a second glance.

I have a few hours to kill before I get to Jon's house. I need a drink and I suppose I should eat, too. Saying a prayer to the gods of silicon and spark, I check my beat-up old phone for recommendations and catch reference to a pub that was the place, it's rumoured, where Bill Clinton did not inhale. It's also where one-time Australian prime minister Bob Hawke set the world record for drinking a yard of ale. I set off.

The Turf Tavern is difficult to find. Following the instructions on my phone, I pass the Sheldonian Theatre onto a nondescript street. To the left is the side of a building made with large sandstone bricks, to the right are small houses with wooden doors. I get to where the pub is marked on the map and it's just a patch of wall behind a fence. CS Lewis studied and lived in Oxford and drew inspiration from its streets and landmarks, but I'll be very annoyed if I have to crawl through someone's bedroom furniture to get to a pub.

I head to an entrance of what appears to be a hotel. A sign points to an alley, which in turn leads to a beer garden. This is old England – where buildings have grown in the gaps of others, like moss, and cities spread like viruses rather than get “planned” in any real way.

After ordering food I look around. There's a table of Americans that don't quite

have their head around the difference between pounds and euros yet, and a group of German students that think I can't see them looking over at me and talking loudly. The word for "blue" in German is sometimes used as slang for "drunk" so I give them the benefit of the doubt when I hear it a few times. I'm a little paranoid, a symptom of how out of place I feel. Normally every town or city has its fair share of freaks, university towns especially, but so far, none of my tribe has been present.

I've drunk two pints before I notice I've stopped using my phone's clock and been going by the church bells.

Mess of favours

I'm here in Oxford to dog-sit for my best friend. We met on the fringes of Birmingham's 'creative' scene: both from working class backgrounds made middle by our degrees, but sensitive enough to never feel comfortable in either. We started a magazine together, travelled around the edges of the country on a dumb fool adventure looking at piers and, when he found love, I gave a speech at his wedding. Like all best friends, the mess of favours and secrets is so complicated and nuanced at this point we have both given up keeping track. So when he asked me to dog-sit for a week, I agreed.

My charges are a black cat called Fritz and a Welsh collie called Poppy. Poppy is greying a little with age and a little smaller than her heavy coat would have you believe. I've met her a few times before and we tend to get on, and not just

because it felt as important to Jon that I get on with the dog as it was that I get on with his wife, Libby. Poppy was the ring-bearer at their wedding, a situation made awkward because she kept getting up during the ceremony and coming over to say hello to me. So I know the dog. Plus I'm cheap.

Jon's instructions

Poppy: We feed her the raw food, which needs to be defrosted first, but kept in the fridge when opened. She has about 1/3 of a pack each meal (twice a day) - it has to be mushed up. If she's hungry, feed her more; she's not greedy. She's really good at being off the lead, but safer to keep her on the lead on roads.

She is scared of: loud noises, rugby, lawn bowls, groups of kids, the vacuum, anything really. Danger sign is if her tail goes between her legs and starts to trot off; she'll try to run all the way home.

Barks at the door if it's knocked or there is anything posted through, only way to really stop her is to distract her. One way is to get her to fetch letters; she knows the word letter and will give it to you. We usually pretend to read it to her, saying it's a message from another dog.

Make sure her water is always topped up, she sometimes forgets to drink. She's not great at remembering she can use the cat flap; "go through" is good at reminding her. She should go out into the garden for a wee before bed: she'll tell you when it's bedtime.

Tell her to stop licking, but a frantic licking of your hand usually means she wants something (water, a wee, some fuss). She will attempt to get upstairs onto the bed if the door is open and will always get on the sofas if they aren't covered. If you go out at night, leave a light on for her.

The worst punishment in the WORLD is a bath. "Do you want a bath?" will stop her doing anything naughty.

Fritz: Likes to be fed at 6am and 5pm, we try to make it when we get up and about 6pm. A feed is one pouch of food, we usually do it in two halves, to eke it out a bit. He doesn't really like dried food but we give him it as he will eat it if hungry. You can leave some out. He doesn't drink much water.

That night, Poppy climbs into bed with me. The house being strange and empty, I don't object. As I sleep, she keeps pushing her back against my legs like she wants to know I'm still there.

I wake up because the cat is fidgeting on my legs. Poppy has somehow got under the covers with me and I think the cat is trying to wake her up. Fritz must sense I'm awake; immediately he walks up my body, makes eye contact, and meows once, then walks out of the room. This, I come to learn, is his way of telling me I should feed him. I don't think he's even noticed I'm neither Jon nor Libby yet. It's grating slightly that I'm being trained by a cat, but I get up to feed him. Poppy is so excited at the thought of food she fights the duvet off and hammers down the stairs to wait by her bowl.

After I've fed everyone and checked my email, Poppy starts getting restless, walking around the house, her claws making a clack clack sound on the vinyl floor of the kitchen.

"What's the matter, Poppy dog?" I ask, a little taken aback at how quickly I have started talking to the animals. Poppy half-howls back. I've heard that cats don't meow in the wild, meowing is something they exclusively do when they're around humans. A cat's attempt to talk to us. Poppy does the same thing, it's halfway between a howl and a stifled yawn and often accompanied by a stretch of the legs and an arch of the back that looks incredibly like the yoga position "the downward dog". I get the message and fetch her lead.

Jon and Libby don't live in Oxford, but in a little village called Abingdon - cue Jon, Libby and countless others correcting me that "it's a town". If it is a town, to quote the classics, "it's a one horse town and the horse fucked off a long time ago".

Abingdon-on-Thames to give it its full name, is a "nice" place. Dodging major redevelopments, like the long-promised roofing of the small shopping centre, but sorting out the traffic flow through the town centre. It's well enough off to keep itself presentable and was a little horrified when a Wetherspoon's moved in a little under a year ago. On special occasions they throw buns off the roof of the building in the centre of town and the place is riddled with Morris sets. The fact it produced Radiohead, one of the dullest but most experimental and innovative

bands of this century, speaks to its safe eccentricism and understated vein of history.

Walking Poppy is a stop/start affair. If you're not paying attention your arm will be jerked as Poppy, showing more strength than her age and frame would suggest, stops dead to sniff and then wee on a patch of pavement. Something she does every four or so yards. Every so often I get a friendly "hello" or "good morning" from somebody walking past in exactly the same way people in my home town do not.

Abingdon is five miles from Oxford city centre and, strangely for somewhere so big, doesn't have a train station. It's late morning by the time I get on the bus. I marvel at the novelty of a bus driver who, unlike Birmingham drivers, is trusted to give change and isn't behind two inches of stab-proof perspex, although the warm feelings are soon forgotten when I see how little change I get back. Bus travel, like everything else in Oxford, is expensive. I learned exactly how much on my first trip to the shops to fill the vegetarian house with meat, my diet being largely made up of things that once bled, something me and Poppy both have in common. OK, I spent a little more than I should on bags of pork scratchings that I hid around the house, but I'm getting my money's worth because it's now two months later and they haven't mentioned them.

I, and 20 or so pensioners, settle onto the bus. Normally old people are not that bothered by my appearance but I can feel the discomfort of the lady sitting next

to me. I take a pinch of snuff and see her staring at the tin.

“Do you want some?” I ask.

“No thank you”, she says. I unwrap a sweet and pop it into my mouth.

“Sweet?” I offer. She pauses for a second, takes it and smiles.

“Thank you.”

I look around; the mood is pleasant, like everybody is going on an adventure.

When I get into Oxford I do what I always do when exploring a new city; I find the the public library. Oxford Central Library is a typical 70s dream of concrete and orange cream, balconies and low chairs, and is replete with a man who smells strongly of piss. It’s interesting, as it’s the only space I have seen thus far that’s only for locals, everywhere else either a landmark for tourists or a college building for students.

I check out the Modern Art Oxford Gallery a little way away and manage to enter through the gift shop and exit through the café without actually seeing any art, I take another pass and miss the galleries again. Too embarrassed to ask, I leave. At the entrance to the History of Science Museum a severe man with a badge and East European accent is making people wear their rucksacks on their fronts, making the other tourists look odd and pregnant with luggage. I have no real interest in the history of science, but it’s hard not to get turned on at an

aesthetic level. Bunsen tubes of unusual shape and brass-punk clockwork astroglobes. The Victorian body horror of early surgical equipment, flayed wax maps of nerves next to articulated iron limbs. All pretence of education and enrichment superseded by the instinct to nudge you in the ribs and say “wanna see something cool?”

“It’s weird, isn’t it?”

I’m walking Poppy, following a trail that starts by the house alongside the river Ock. I let her off the lead.

“Great”, she says. By now, I of course speak fluent Poppy, “Let’s play Stick River”.

“OK”, I say, “how do you play Stick River?”

“Well, I run in here”, she says, “and you throw a stick.” I find a stick and throw it. Poppy wades into the river and grabs the stick.

“Bring it back then, come on”, I shout. Poppy looks at me and chews the stick into small pieces, all the time holding defiant eye contact. “Oh, so you don’t bring it back then?”

“Why would I do that? I eat it, of course.”

“Why?” I ask.

“STICK RIVER, that’s why. Why would you want a wet stick?”

“Fair point”, I concede. “Now what happens?”

“You throw another stick.”

“And exactly how long does this go on for?” I ask with suspicion.

“STICK RIVER!” she shouts, and I throw another stick.

On our way back we walk past a woman and her daughter. The child ignores Poppy but openly stares at me as I pass. From behind I hear her

“Mummy, that man...” Her mum cuts her off saying, “I know honey – it’s weird, isn’t it?”

Poppy is still off her lead, when she just starts running. Seemingly with no trigger, she’s running flat out. I shout her name and whistle. She doesn’t look back once. I panic slightly and run after her, trying not to think about the busy main road between here and the house. To my relief I find her further up river, held by the collar by another dog walker. I thank them and they give me a tight-lipped smile as they wipe wet dog off their hand.

“What happened?” I ask Poppy.

“Got scared”, she says, looking meek.

“What of?”

“Dunno, forgot”, she shrugs.

Saint of the middle-class anti-cool

Eager to look at the nightlife, I settle on checking out Jericho, an area a short walk out of Oxford city centre. Originally outside the city walls, it was a place for people to hang out if they arrived too late to be let into Oxford proper. It retains a boho atmosphere with pubs and an indie cinema.

I go into the Jericho Tavern and a giant John Peel mural stares back, apart from which the pub is modern coffee-house bland. It’s pretty empty, so for something to do I search online for an connection to the pub — or Oxford in general — of John Peel. I find none, except that he was an early champion of the band Supergrass and the Jericho Tavern was supposedly one of their first gigs. But Peel fits the vibe, if not its history.

John Peel has long since been beatified as the saint of middle class anti-cool; a man who never tried to be any more or less than a well-educated nice bloke who wanted to introduce the world to music he loved.

A woman nearby slyly takes a cameraphone photograph and throbs bright red when the flash goes off. I smile and leave.

Over the road is an old church, deconsecrated and turned into a bar. It’s early and empty. I enter through the moss-covered columns and am taken aback by

the space inside. Around the bar tight young things wearing black busy themselves while European house fights against the ambience. I buy a drink and wander around looking at the white Jesus peering from the grime-coated stained glass windows.

In town, I go to the White Rabbit, it's nice in a small way, informal and cosy for a city centre pub. I perch on a table next to a big party playing a drinking game. Personally I try not to play drinking games, having never really understood a situation where drinking is a punishment. They start playing "I Have Never", a game difficult for me to join in with because, in general, I have. This devolves into a conversation about sex acts, with one man explaining the meaning for what I thought were fairly well-known terms.

"So what is a golden shower?" asks one, and they all giggle and squeal when he tells them. I leave before I feel obliged to describe the angry dragon, a Cleveland steamer, or the intricacies of the fabled Houdini.

Walking around the city centre at night you get a glimpse into the old buildings, the parts the tourists can snapshot but never enter. Forgotten lights left on reveal oak-panelled libraries of old books and spiral staircases. Huge portraits of white men in heavy frames, through velvet curtains. A Britain as out of reach for me as for the tourists who fill the city looking for the odd glimpse up the skirt of the establishment: a snatch of immaculately kept lawn, or a long, hard, banqueting table for dinners they'll never attend.

Between two magnets

With a couple of days to go, I'm beginning to feel trapped and bored and the responsibility to be back at the house at prescribed times has me annoyed and antsy. Oxford city centre is too far to just pop home and — unless going for “a nice walk” is on your list of things you like to do every single day — Abingdon holds little to do.

So my body does it what it likes to do whenever I'm uncomfortable or out of sorts – it withholds sleep. I'm still awake at five in the morning and I see the cat come in to wait to be fed. I decide to blow his tiny mind by feeding it an hour early rather than wait to be told to do it. I catch myself in the mirror and laugh at the notion that I'm rebelling against a cat.

Poppy can't believe her luck, I hear her run down the stairs and a scrabbling, scratching sound that I recognise as Poppy's excited feet try to find purchase on the smooth floor. A little later I hear the post drop through the letterbox. Poppy barks so I try to distract her.

“Go get it”, I say to her. She raises her head from where she's lying but doesn't move. “Poppy, letter, Poppy”, I say. Showing more theatrics than are strictly necessary, she gets up and goes to the front door. Seconds later, she pads back empty-mouthed.

“Nearly, Poppy!” I encourage “Get the letter.” She looks up with faint disdain and

disappears again, this time returning with an only slightly chewed letter.

“Well done Poppy! Good girl”, I say genuinely impressed. Remembering Jon’s instructions I pretend to read the letter: “Oh it’s from the Good Girl Adjudication Board. It’s a letter of commendation. ‘Dear Poppy T Dog, we are writing this letter to express our delight about what a good girl you are. We had a big meeting and decided you are A VERY GOOD GIRL! Your sincerely, yadda yadda yadda’. Well, that’s nice, isn’t it?” I say and give her some fuss and belly rubs.

She gives me a dog smile and goes to lie down. Minutes later I hear ripping. When I get into the front room, Poppy is attacking another letter from the comfort of her bed. Snatching it out of her mouth I can just about make out “IMPORTANT” in big red letters. Poppy looks at me with that same dog smile.

“You know they’re going to take that commendation letter back now, right?”

Walking Poppy has become a problem: every jolt of the arm is a personal attack. Every friendly “good morning” is a sarcastic jibe. I lack sleep and perspective and not even a rousing game of Stick River can pull me from my funk. Again, without warning, Poppy runs off. Again I give chase; luckily she’s run towards something equally as scary. I find her down the path, tail and ears down like she’s caught between two magnets.

Later, I’m sitting in the house and the cat comes in to the room, meows once and climbs onto my lap. He writhes and fidgets until I start stroking him and he

settles into a steady purr. Poppy has taken to sleeping on one of my feet when I'm in the house. I look down and she seems happy enough. I realise that I'm lonely, and it's a strange feeling.

I've travelled a lot. Across India on a camel, I've surfed with whales off the western Australian coast and floated down the Delaware river on a inner tube. But a week with a dog in suburbia and my mind is rusting closed.

But the small houses are not just a places to sleep, they're home. Nests built with the people they're choosing to be with. I'm the cuckoo. The nest, the routines, are not mine. I don't fit in, not because of my class obsession, or my appearance, but because I don't fit in anywhere yet, I haven't chosen a nest. Or, to put it another way, wearing another person's trousers and expecting them to fit is a fool's errand. No matter how much you love the stupid dog.

Poppy - if Jon is reading this to you, which I expect he is, you are a *GOOD GIRL*.



About the writer

"My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order."
Danny's work has appeared in Vice, Fused and Area magazines. He typically writes about culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He's worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New

Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.

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