

In the Beginning Was the Ad



Larry was always amused by the way dogs and their owners appeared as a perfect match. They could look astonishingly alike, as if identical twins were manifesting in different forms—like a Mozart symphony and a perfect sunset. He wondered if they started out so—people unconsciously drawn to themselves in their pets—or if animal and human found common ground over time as their relationship deepened.

He also wondered if others could see how much he and Zeus had in common. Zeus was a genetic marvel—part everything. He was a shade too big for a border collie, but nowhere near the size of a German shepherd. He had the hunting instincts of a springer spaniel and the intelligence of a French poodle. He was part all of them—and probably more. The vet declared him as decidedly “something else” and said the dog definitely would not win best of breed in any AKC event, although he could probably be entered in at least four categories, maybe six.

Larry had had absolutely no intention of getting a dog; the idea had never crossed his mind. Even in retrospect, he couldn’t fully rationalize the improbable series of events that brought them together. The odds must have been a billion to one. But in fact the outcome had already been determined; Zeus and Larry were destined to be together. In a very real sense, the fate of the world depended on it.

On the third of May, 1999, a freak tornado tore through the Wistful Willows trailer park some thirty miles southwest of Norman, Oklahoma, leaving several people dead, over eighteen mobile homes destroyed, and a litter of three six-week-old puppies stranded with no mother. The pups were rescued by Lucille Douglas, a volunteer emergency medical technician assigned to the team serving Norman Regional Hospital. She was at home glued to the TV set, like almost everyone else within a hundred-mile radius, when she took the call from the EMT team. It was well into the early hours of Tuesday morning. The call came as no surprise, as both KFOR and KWTV had been broadcasting tornado watch warnings and preliminary damage reports for the past twelve hours. Luckily, most people in the storm's path had plenty of advance notice and were able to get out of harm's way. But not everyone escaped what was later classified as the most damaging twister in U.S. history.

It rated an F5 on the Fujita scale, with truck-mounted Doppler radar clocking wind speeds of 318 miles per hour—the highest ever documented anywhere on earth! Several days later, after James Lee Witt, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, declared eleven surrounding counties eligible for federal aid, the local officials began finalizing the tallies: over thirty dead, more than three thousand homes severely damaged or destroyed, and losses exceeding 1.5 billion dollars.

Lucy threw on her EMT overalls and drove the short distance down Porter Street to Norman Regional to join one of the ambulance crews assigned to the disaster scene. Bridge Creek was less than sixteen miles from the hospital. The drive down I-35 to OK-9 should have taken no more than forty-five minutes. This trip, even with the flashing lights and sirens clearing the way, took the team over an hour and a half. The state police and sheriff's department had their hands full providing access to the

disaster scene for the highway maintenance, phone, power, and emergency vehicles while keeping the press, curious onlookers, and distraught relatives at bay.

Lucy thought herself lucky to be on a team with Roger Thornton, widely acknowledged as the state's most experienced disaster specialist. Roger was also well-versed on tornadoes and gave the group an insider's view of these quirky weather patterns as they picked their way along rubble-strewn roads. He was obviously concerned about the storm-chasing "tourists" whose only training, he surmised, was viewing the movie *Twister*. "These idiots will get themselves killed for the chance of having one of their homemade videos make the six o'clock news. They not only risk their own lives, they put the real pros in jeopardy by clogging up the roads." On the other hand, he couldn't heap enough praise on the way the people at the Storm Prediction Center and the press were handling information dissemination. Thanks to their cool professionalism, he estimated, hundreds—if not thousands—of lives were saved.

The last stretch of road leading to Bridge Creek off OK-9 was ironically called Lovers' Lane. The current scene of tangled debris and fallen branches made a mockery of the twisted road sign—a biting reminder of gentler times. Roger's calm voice provided welcome assurance. His last piece of advice concerning the "four P's" of emergency evacuation turned out to be prophetic.

"This is probably the hardest hit area of the most devastating storm ever recorded in Oklahoma, if not the entire United States. I understand the trailer park's been hit pretty hard. From what the sheriff's people reported, it won't be a pretty sight. The good news is we're not the first on the scene, but we're going to have our hands full. Hope for the best and be ready for the worst, and don't forget to take care of the four P's, the possessions that people value most: pets, pictures, pills, and PCs."

Lucy subsequently told Larry that she heard the puppies long before she saw them and that the gut-wrenching pain caused by their cries will stay etched in her body memory forever. She followed the shrill sounds to three little bodies huddled against each other, pressed into the lifeless form of their mother who had birthed and nurtured them in a shallow furrow beneath a tangle of brush under a black willow tree, some thirty yards from the nearest structure. Mama would probably have been fine except for the unlikely shard of glass embedded deep in her neck. In Lucy's mind, she died saving her litter, and that made her a super mom and each of her puppies one of destiny's chosen children.

That thought—and Lucy's flair for the dramatic—explained the rather strange ad Larry saw in Sunday's paper, less than one week after the tragedy:

PHOENIX RISING! Three miracle puppy survivors of the WW disaster, ascending out of the ashes to help us embrace the winds of change. Each will be placed in the partnership/care of an equally special human. You will know. Reply by e-mail only: PhoenixPups@aol.com.

Everything about the ad was strange. It appeared under "Employment Opportunities," sandwiched between job offers for a paralegal and a plumber's assistant. It made no mention of breed. It contained none of the usual clichés like cute, adorable, needs a good home, loves children, and the like. It almost challenged response by providing no contact information beyond the e-mail address.

Larry was hooked the instant he read it, even though every part of his rational mind yelled at him to turn the page. Even from the vantage point of ²⁰/₂₀ hindsight, he never understood what made him notice Lucy's ad in the first place. Larry had

started that particular morning as he had begun each day during the eighteen months since his divorce became final. He retrieved the paper from wherever it was tossed, poured a glass of ruby-red grapefruit juice, and scanned the sports pages.

This mini ritual was simply a prelude to the real business at hand—matching wits with the grand master expert play in the bridge column and doing the daily crossword puzzle. Every so often, for reasons Larry could never understand, he was drawn to the horoscope on the facing page—almost as if there was a secret message waiting. Today was one of those occasions. “Now that spring is on the descendant, it is time for you to clean house like never before. Summon the resolve and courage to surrender the old and emerge like the Phoenix, from the ashes of your past. Prepare for great adventures. Your time has come.”

The horoscope reminded Larry briefly of Marianne, and without bitterness he wished her well. Their seven years together had opened like a heart-stopping Disney A-ride and gradually faded into two people conversing in different languages across a widening chasm. They both deserved better. Unlike Larry, Marianne knew exactly what she wanted out of life, and her meteoric career as a clinical psychologist eloquently confirmed her ability to get it. Her many articles in women’s magazines and regular talk-show guest slots had made her a minor celebrity, caught in the whirlwind of her own success.

All Larry knew with any degree of certainty at the time of their divorce was that he was somewhere between his thirty-seventh and thirty-eighth birthdays and his life wasn’t working. His partnership with Cresswell, Timmons, and Baker paid well but offered little else. There was the little cabin in Idyllwild, two cars, a substantial investment portfolio, no children, and a community property state. Although he and Marianne still loved each other, both knew it was time to move on. This made the mechanics of

the divorce relatively easy. It was completed almost before it began; Marianne never missed a beat, and Larry lost his codependent crutch. The last eighteen months had been, as he liked to call it, a prolonged time of healing.

The horoscope hit home. He briefly toyed with the idea that it was a plant, paid for by Mark Marston or one of the other goofballs from the Poker, Drinking, and Quipping Society—a group of intelligent, successful, and otherwise dignified men who met monthly on the first Thursday after the full moon to relive college memories of their misspent youth.

Any one of the PDQ Society's six members could have paid the newspaper to load Gemini with secret messages for a year. But they hadn't. Nor had they paid off Ming's Chinese Palace to give Larry a rigged fortune cookie the night before that read: "Good fortune, like Phoenix, arise in proper time." Larry briefly cultivated the notion that the world was covertly run by the Peking Noodle Company, whose clandestine messages were delivered by undercover agents, disguised as Chinese waiters, informing us on a need-to-know basis. Last night he had added the fortune to a small collection of $\frac{7}{8}$ "x $2\frac{7}{8}$ " coated white papers inscribed with Chinese wisdom that he kept in a beige suede pouch along with Indian sacred objects from Taos in his desk's top right-hand drawer. After reading the horoscope and the classified ad, he got up to check. Sure enough. Last night's Phoenix message was still there.

Larry was keenly aware that for the third time in twenty-four hours the word "Phoenix" had played a prominent role in his consciousness. If it was a conspiracy, it had to involve a lot of people, including whoever had caused America's most devastating tornado to trigger the events culminating in the appearance of the four-line ad in the *Los Angeles Times*. The instant he read it, Larry knew the ad was meant only for him.

✎ In the Beginning Was the Ad ✎

He went to his laptop and composed the first of many e-mails to Lucy:

Dear Phoenix Pups,

I too am an arising Phoenix preparing for the next phase of my adventure. I have been waiting for this transformation and your arrival for thirty-seven years. Please let me know when we can meet. Reply by e-mail at earliest convenience.

A slew of e-mails followed, in which the two shared thoughts on life, philosophies, favorite foods, movies, and the wackiest political moments throughout history. Over the next few days, Larry confided more to Lucy about his personal life than he had to close acquaintances. Somehow, the anonymity of electronic mail and the sincerity of Lucy's perceptions made it easier. Lucy also learned much more than the facts Larry chose to share. She delighted in his offbeat sense of humor, his display of tenacity and flexibility in playing her "take-away" e-mail game, and, above all, his genuine desire to make a difference on this planet.

What Lucy didn't share with Larry was that she was reading his e-mails alongside those from other respondents. She explained later that she had been "informed" by some inner voice to keep one of the puppies for herself and give away the other two to "special people" who were waiting for them on either coast. Lucy claimed this inner voice had directed her to place the same Phoenix Rising notice in the "Employment" section—once only, and definitely not under "Pets"—in the May 9 Sunday edition of the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Seattle Times*, and the *Savannah Morning News*.

She must allow the puppies to choose their own partners. This, she was told, especially applied to the puppy she was

eventually to keep for herself. Her next task was to name them. Because of the unprecedented magnitude of the tornado that had torn through their collective lives, Lucy was inspired to give each the name of a god. The sole female in the litter—the one that ultimately became hers—Lucy named Sekhmet after the Egyptian goddess of fire, who has the body of a woman and the head of a lioness and is typically portrayed seated on a throne. The two males she named Rama, to honor the attributes of the Indian warrior god who conquered the demonic Ravana; and Zeus, who ruled Olympus as the Greeks' supreme god of the sky and was thus directly responsible for the terrible twisters that had begun this improbable chain of events.

As e-mail responses arrived from the four cities, Lucy felt like the International Olympic Committee accepting bids for future venues. Any doubts or concerns were swiftly allayed by some higher awareness deftly instructing every aspect of the process. Lucy was comfortable surrendering herself to this higher knowing. She was too intuitive to allow her ego to override the extraordinary flow of events sweeping her along.

At Lucy's suggestion, her final communication with Larry, nine days after the ad appeared, was by telephone. By the time Larry learned that Lucy and the pups were half way across the continent, he was too far gone to care. He would gladly have traveled to Panama if that was part of the deal. Lucy also laid out for him three final "challenges"—a mini version of the trials of Hercules, as she laughingly likened them—that would prove, mostly to himself, his degree of commitment.

One: He could not fly. He had to make the 1,350 mile journey by car, driving alone. Certain processes—Lucy used a few new-age buzz words like "reprogramming," "frequency tuning," and "downloading"—needed to take place during the journey to attune Larry and his partner to their new relationship.

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Two: He and his pet must first see each other within twelve hours of the full moon, which would occur in Norman, Oklahoma at precisely 6:40 a.m. on Sunday, the thirtieth of May. By Larry's calculations, then, he had to arrive at Lucy's house some time between 6:40 p.m. on Saturday and 6:40 p.m. Sunday.

Three: The final selection process was up to neither Lucy nor Larry. If one of the puppies did not clearly select him, the deal was off and he would have to return home alone.

Larry arranged his work schedule so he could take extra vacation time, padding the long Memorial Day weekend into a six-day trip. He decided to allow two days for the journey east, one day to visit Lucy and pick up his new companion, and three days to return home. If some arcane force was tampering with his inner circuitry while he navigated the endless ribbon of concrete interstates constantly receding before him, he wasn't aware of it. All he knew was that the smooth jazz of 94.7 FM was soon replaced by country music and stayed that way until he reached his destination. He made a mental note to stock CDs on his next trip.

Lucy appeared pretty much as she had described herself: in her late forties, pleasant-looking, with a trim, athletic build and strawberry blonde hair that she kept in a pony tail. However, certain qualities transcended her physical appearance and spoke volumes about who she really was. Her eyes were grayish-green, and when she looked at Larry, he felt he could trust her implicitly. She managed to convey a highly improbable mix of guilelessness and impeccable discernment. Her smile could turn an iceberg into a gentle puddle.

The two liked each other instantly. It appeared both had been completely honest in their communications, and they were comfortable dealing at a level of trust uncommon in the first twenty years of a "normal" relationship. Perhaps the fact that they con-

nected only at the level of the Phoenix Pups, with no innuendo of personal relationship, helped.

Their get-to-know-each-other cup of coffee was interrupted by the sound of scratching at the back door. “Ah, the time has come,” Lucy said, “to meet the brood. Apparently your arrival has not gone unnoticed, and one of the puppies appears to be anxious to meet you firsthand.” With that she opened the door to her back yard and a little ball of fur scampered in, jumped up on the couch, and began licking Larry’s face.

“Well, I guess that takes care of the third condition. Larry, meet Zeus. Zeus, it seems you already know Larry. I had a feeling the two of you were destined to be together. I’m glad I was right.”

Larry was introduced to the other two members of the litter, who, however, seemed more interested in playing with a blue ball that jangled as it rolled. Zeus, on the other hand, never left his side. The three spent the rest of the day driving out to Bridge Creek, tracing the route Lucy had covered with her EMT team nearly four weeks earlier. The roads had been cleared of broken branches and downed power lines, but visible reminders of the devastation were everywhere. The badly bent pole with the hanging road sign identifying Lovers’ Lane was exactly as Lucy recalled it. So was the Wistful Willows trailer park. Unfortunately, not one of the graceful thirty-year-old trees for which the lower-income community was named remained undamaged. Jagged, broken trunks provided poignant proof of the F5 twister.

They walked through the remnants of destroyed lives in reverent silence. Zeus quietly left Larry’s side and disappeared behind a pile of twisted rubble. When they found him, he was sitting next to what was left of the black willow tree where Lucy had discovered the litter. He didn’t move a muscle. He sat mutely,

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doing whatever dogs do when they know the exquisite sadness of losing the one presence they loved most.

They left the little puppy there alone, allowing him whatever he needed to create closure. Somehow, Zeus seemed to know his life was about to move in a decidedly different direction and he would never return here again. The three exited the trailer park without saying a word.

It struck Larry when he first met this funny-looking little puppy that he was no ordinary dog. It would take almost two and a half years to discover how much of an understatement this was.