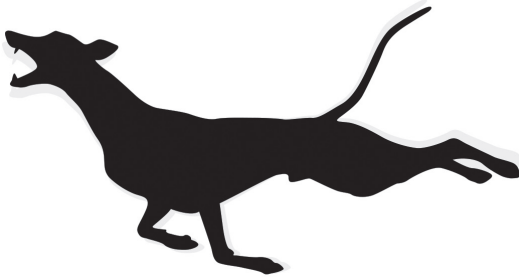


# *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*



*Jo van Hoogmoed*

A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety  
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*For Mom,  
always, always extraordinarily loving*





## FRIDAY: R (for Retirement)-Day minus 15

### Chapter 1: In Hawaii or On Mute?

*An orange-red sun melted into the horizon. Palm trees swayed in the distance as if waving tender goodbyes. He wiped her tears with the lightest touch of his fingers ... then drew her close. Strong arms comforted her, enveloped her, as she sobbed. His beautiful, mesmerizing voice whispered, "Portia? I will always, always cherish you and our time together. I never wanted us to end. But we've ... no, I've grown apart and ... I can't live with someone I no longer love with my entire heart."*

*Her heart shattered into a hundred pieces, but she knew ... she knew he was right. Richard was too honourable a man to live a lie. She would be grateful for the life and love they once shared.*

*He tightened his embrace. "I know you'll make a better man happy one day. You're ... an incredible woman." He kissed her softly on the forehead, letting his lips linger for a timeless moment. The two slowly drifted apart until only their fingertips touched.*

She furrowed her brow. No. That's wrong. Not Hawaii. Cottage country. On a dock. The sunset? Yeah, that's a keeper. And ...

*The setting sun cast a waning brilliance on the lake. Gentle waves slapped the dock's posts. A man, a woman faced each other, their hands loosely interlaced. The man brought his hand*

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

*to the woman's face then wiped her tears with the lightest touch of his fingers. He drew her close. His strong, tanned arms comforted her, enveloped her, while she sobbed. His deep beautiful voice whispered, "Portia? ..."*

"Portia? Any comments on the plan? Are you there? Portia? Po? Are you on mute?"

She snapped back to the reality of her home office, the video chat session, colleagues staring at her through the laptop camera. The palm-tree-swaying-wave-slapping fantasy lost mindspace as quickly as a popped balloon, knifed-in-the-back by her this-is-how-the-project's-gonna-roll persona.

She unmuted herself. "Sorry, folks. I was ah, sidetracked. Could you repeat the last little bit?" A summary ensued. "Thank you for that. Your operational plan? Sounds good. Really good. I think you've got all the bases covered. Now? In case some of you don't know?"

Her 'don't know' was said in a playful tone. No one, absolutely no one didn't know about her upcoming retirement. And for some, it was a prickly topic. She was abandoning a critical project at a critical time with critical impact. Yes, three criticals ... a critical trifecta.

Her playful tone continued. "I'm retiring in two weeks. So! This weekend is PINE. Your Po-Is-Non-Existent simulation. You're 100% responsible for the code's run and process step-through. No one calls, texts or emails me. And since this is a long weekend, we'll reconvene Tuesday to walk through the results and your actions."

Her replacement-in-training piped up. "Thanks, Po. Just to clarify? What be this thing called a long weekend, or for that matter, any old weekend? We've all heard the rumours. But like clean laundry and homecooked meals, it's not something we've encountered of late." Laughs and "Yeah right!" rose from the unmuted. Her replacement's voice turned serious. "And Po? We

appreciate all those hours you've put in to prepare us for PINE and beyond. I know I speak for everyone when I say, you'll be missed."

She smiled widely at his words and into the camera. "And, it's been a delight working with all of you too. But think of it! In two weeks or R-Day – that's R for Retirement, folks – minus fifteen, or 1111 for you binary numbering nerds, I'll be waking up and not logging onto a computer." She emphasized 'not'.

The unmuted chuckled at the sheer audacity of her statement. But Portia knew, neither she nor they had any concept of how such a life could be lived. Her forty-eight years of wake-up-and-logon to ... just wake-up would take some getting used to.

The meeting ended and laptop cameras turned off. She leaned back in her chair and reflected. Her replacement-in-training was right. The past months had been crammed with early mornings, late nights and a daily presence of take-out with its greasy taste, smell and wrappings. But now? For her? Just a few emails, a couple of texts, a call or two, then the long weekend. She would be PINE, didn't exist for three days, so this weekend would be devoid of frantic calls and code-and-process correction-and-testing. Time would be spent on normal people stuff. Things like ... like laundry, vacuuming, mowing the lawn, grocery shopping. A home-cooked meal? Maybe even some yoga? Non-nerd stuff. But, more particularly, long overdue stuff. Her backyard was practically a meadow. Her laundry basket spilled to the surrounding floor, and the dirty socks, shirts and underwear seemed to be slithering their own way to the washer. And the refrigerator? The mould cultures had formed a democratic society and were scheduling elections.

There was also last night's call. Richard's ... proposal. She didn't know what to make of that. But the renewed mental image, even with his ... suggestion, brought back the waves-slapping, fingertips-touching fantasy and an on-the-dock Po. Her heart fluttered. Almost immediately, she was disappointed in herself

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

again. She pushed her shoulders back and said crossly, “Portia Weaver! You’re such a frickin’ idiot!” then glanced at her watch. *Hmmm, just enough time to start a load of laundry, bin the day’s take-out, have a shower, then ... dinner with Josh.*

### **Other Conversations: Charm versus Wheedling?**

Soos grinned ear-to-ear as she announced her intention. “Rick? I’m going to the house, our house, this afternoon.”

Last night’s call went so very well when her husband charmed-chided-wheedled-pressured his ex’s consideration of their proposal. Portia hadn’t exactly been enthusiastic. Her reaction was more like, “Ah, Richard? Wow! I’ll give it some thought, I promise, but ... wow! You’ll need to give me a few days.” But the fact she said she’d think about it ... meant there’d be a good chance she’d go for it. She always had before.

Soos giggled. “Can you believe it? Us! Moving to the ‘burbs. I’ve already talked to Julia. You know, my interior designer friend. She needs room measurements and pictures, and I’ll get those today. And between the two of us? I know this house will be,” Soos clapped her hands twice and sang out, “AWESOME!”

Although Rick planned on joining Soos for their house-in-the-burbs’ visit, work interfered. His uncle called shortly after Soos’s announcement and tersely asked, “Where are you? You should have been here fifteen minutes ago.” They were always messing up the schedule.



## **Divorce Counselling: This'll Be ... Fun**

*Two Years Ago ...*

“I know I’m not the first person to fall in love with someone who ... couldn’t, wouldn’t love back. I ... I know I won’t be the last.” Portia struggled on a bright smile. It was important to project a lessons-learned strength and coolly, logically turn the page to a new single life. A world of opportunity lay ahead of her. *It all depends on how you look at it. This could be ... No! This will be ... will be exciting.* She ... she would make it exciting. Fun even. Her mouth formed a thin line. Her chin began to quiver.

The therapist’s raised eyebrows met her client’s brittle façade, who was blinking furiously as tears welled in her eyes. “Portia? What in the world are you doing?” The therapist laid down her pen and notebook and nudged the tissue box closer. Her pointer finger swept into a slight arc, emulating her client’s strained smile. “It’s OK to cry. You don’t have to pretend it didn’t and doesn’t hurt.”

## **Chapter 2: You've Got to Think of the Baby!**

Soos's impatience grew due to an unresponsiveness to her audible and electronic demands. Her beautifully manicured hands (nails painted Natural Look Goldenrod) took turns ringing the front doorbell, texting and knocking. A pattern of ding-dong, ping (Are you home?), knock-knock-knock followed by ding-dong, ping (Where are you?), knock-knock-knock ... which only stopped when the house-in-the-burbs' knob turned.

Po, dripping from the shower and clutching a beltless robe shut, opened the door. Her six-foot height and width, two-hundred pounds on a good day, barred entry to Suzie's petite five-foot frame.

Po's ex-husband couldn't have picked a more diametrically opposed partner. Suzie was everything Po was not, including three months pregnant.

"Suzie? Suzie! Oh ... well ... hello. This is ... a surprise. I guess? I guess you're the one responsible for all those knocks, rings and texts?" Po's annoyance was evident, but Soos was immune to observation.

"Yes, guilty!" Soos did not look guilty at all. In fact, her smile was so wide, Po could have parked a car in it. She clapped twice then formed jazz hands. "I'm so over the moon about getting this house!"

Po's eyebrows shot up. "Getting this house?" She bit her lip as she mentally reran last night's call. "Um? Richard asked me to consider ... trading my house for your condo. That's what you're referring to as getting this house?"

"Yes. That's it, exactly. Our house-condo-swap-o-rama. I'm so excited!" Soos clapped her hands twice more then paused to put on a serious face. "But! I have to see what needs doing because nobody wants to have a little baby in an under-construction house. Right, Portia? You agree, don't you? You never had children. You

wouldn't know, but it's something us mothers-to-be need to be concerned about."

Po's left hand clutched the robe tighter as she raised her right palm to the over-the-moon, mother-to-be. "Suzie? Stop. This ah, your house-condo-swap-o-rama. What I told Richard was, while I'm not throwing out his proposal completely, something this big requires a great deal of thought. This is hugely life-altering."

Soos nodded enthusiastically, oblivious to anyone else's life-altering decisions, be they hugely or small. "You and I are so absolutely on the same page. The decisions I need to make are enormous, and there are so many of them. But, I need to start somewhere." She jabbed her pointer finger. "So I'm starting with Rick's old house. The last time I was here," she rolled her eyes, "things were dated, tired, boring. And those colours? Hoo-boy, don't get me started on those."

Po's head tilted to one side. "I ... don't recall you ever being in my house. When was that?"

Soos's eyes widened, but recovery was smooth and quick. "Oh ah, never! It must have been the pictures then." She smiled fiercely, displaying an almost terrifying nothing-up-my-sleeve expression. "Rick had a photo file we did a weed-out on. That must have been it."

"OK ... for now. And ah, to clarify," Po spoke slowly, firmly to aid in her visitor's comprehension, "this is my house. Not Richard's house. Not your house. My house."

"That's what I said. Listen! I need to measure the rooms and windows and snap some pictures. But? Do you have the floor plan? A layout with each room's length, width and window placement? I'm sure you do. While you get that for me, I'll bring out the fabric swatches. You know, from our current furniture and drapery. I want to see how well they play in the light and where to position the couch and chairs. And you remember Julia, my friend, the interior designer? No, I suppose you don't. Well, never mind. I've booked her to draft up a few modernization suggestions. Maybe even an A-to-Z renovation. Some of the rooms are ... well! We'll

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

be coming Tuesday. Probably the morning.” She took a slight step forward, eager to enter her future house-in-the-burbs. A house that undeniably needed a serious decor intervention.

“No.”

Soos frowned. Paused. Portia wasn't ... standing aside? Wasn't ... inviting her in? And ... was that a ... no she heard? She saw, as if for the first time, wet stringy hair, a beige robe clutched tightly around a large body, water pooling around bare feet, unpolished toenails, thick ugly ankles. She raised her eyes, took a slight step back and cooed, “I'm not disturbing anything ... am I?”

Po's eyes ran down her clutched robe, the puddle, then back up to Suzie. “Ah, yeah. Yes, you are. I've got plans. Starting with returning to my shower.”

Soos persevered. “A glass of water then? It was such a long drive from the condo. Traffic was ... awful, just awful. You'd think the city planners would do something about that. Oh, and you don't have to bother. I can find my own way to the kitchen. And while I'm there, I'll just take those pictures. After all, the kitchen is the heart of the home, and other than the baby's room, which, no surprise, we'll do first, the kitchen would be the next thing on the reno list. Well, maybe the main floor powder room would be the second project. That'll be a quick fix. But that doesn't matter. Julia and I will figure everything out. We're the dynamic duo, Julia and me. So, um ... if you'll just step aside, I'll snap my pics, and ah, then I'll be on my way. So you can get back to whatever,” Soos circled her finger at Po's chest, “thing you're doing. I'll come for the other rooms later. Tuesday ... with Julia. You remember? My interior decorator friend.” To seal the deal, she displayed another fiercely toothy smile, the girl guide salute and ended with a chirpy, “Cross my heart!”

Po, a self-inflicted girl guides' reject, was unmoved physically and sympathetically. “Not today and not before I make my, yes my, hugely life-altering decision.”

The salute faded into Soos's pocket. Her smile became a hard thin line. "I guess that's your prerogative. I don't suppose you could tell me when you'll decide? I don't want to keep coming here only to be turned away at the door."

"You didn't text or call ahead, and ... you've never visited me. Never been to my home before." Po tilted her head. "Although that seems ... debatable now." Irritation crept into her tone. "And, it's ridiculous to think I can make this big a decision in hours."

Soos bristled. Portia was not on the same page after all. "I didn't realize I needed an appointment for a neighbourly visit," she responded testily. "But if I have to, I suppose I could wait a day or two." The phone was quickly unpocketed, and the schedule scrolled. "Monday won't work. Tuesday? Wednesday?" A sigh. "Wednesday? Afternoon? Yes, Wednesday afternoon. That gives you four days. I'll have to move Julia to ... oh, I don't know, maybe Friday or the following week?" She furrowed her brow then looked up from her phone. "Do you think four days would be enough for your decision? The house needs work. We know that. And like you and I just agreed, it wouldn't be right for Rick's ... ah, Richard's little baby to be in an under-construction house."

Before Po could challenge Suzie's assessment of her house's disappointing interior, tired furnishings, peculiar colours, Soos tugged on her satchel strap and started down the porch steps. She stopped mid-step, turned, widened her eyes, smiled that fiercely toothy smile and tilted her head coyly. "Portia, this is so super nice of you to consider what's best for Rick ah ... Richard's little baby. He's so over the moon about this and can't stop talking about how great you are and your awesome generosity. And the swap is good for you too. The condo is no work whatsoever. It has lots of old people and multiple elevators. It's also on the bus route and near the hospital. Perfect for people like you."

## **Other Conversations: Welcome to Canada**

*Ten Months Ago ...*

“Folks, the last one! After this, we can all go home. Essie? Can you do the honours getting him out?” Patrick Cheng, Save-A-Grey-North’s Director, tapped his clipboard while Essie opened the crate’s door, gently coaxing its occupant. The same occupant who had, and was still, loudly and insistently crying a high-pitched, mournful ooo-oooo-ooooooooo followed by long gasps of aaaaarrrrrrrrrrrr.

Patrick clicked his pen a couple of times. “This should be JZP ... On-The-Bend.” He put a verbal flourish to On-The-Bend. “Let’s start with the right ear tattoo. The numbers are?”

Essie sighed wearily. “Aargh! He’s at the back. Gone rigid and locked his legs. Do you have any enticements? I don’t have anything left.” She stuck her head in the crate. “And there’s blood. It looks like it’s his paw.”

Patrick patted his pockets. Empty. He mimicked his colleague’s sigh and shook his head. It had been seventeen greyhounds and a long night. “I don’t have anything left. Not even a liver treat. Essie? Let’s do this. Could you ask around and see if anyone has ... anything. And I’ll try and get him out. Oh, and the first aid kit? Could you get that for me too?”

He knelt by the crate’s opened door. His tone was soft, reassuring. “C’mon On-The-Bend. You’re safe here. You’re home now. And it’s a really good home. You got to trust me.”

*Nine-and-a-Half Months Ago ... Save-a-Grey Kennel:*

The dognapping human lied.

*Nine Months Ago ... Placement – Foster – Placement:*

The dognapping human lied again ... and again ... and again.

*Eight Months Ago ... Kennel – Placement – Foster – Kennel:*

The dognapping human lied again ... and again ... and again ... and again.

### Chapter 3: Hello Diminishing Abilities!

Po wiped the mirror's fog. Her grey eyes calmly evaluated her reflection, her ageing image. She'd always been ... too. Too tall, too wide, too smart, too able and now? Now, she's too old. Her shoulder-length brown hair had swaths of grey. Her face had wrinkles beyond the usual eye and mouth laugh lines. And, was that breast sag? Ahh, more breast sag than usual? She quietly snorted and a broad smile appeared. In ten days, she'd celebrate her sixty-fifth. Cake and candles celebrate, maybe even party-hat celebrate. But, regardless of the birthday's frills, she had catching up to do.

After Richard moved out ... two years ago, Po's first act was to reinstate her birthday's celebration. While married, Richard pooh-poohed that event. "You're not a kid anymore. Nobody celebrates birthdays after you turn fifty. Besides," his beautiful, mesmerizing voice oozed, as he smiled that wickedly wonderful smile and snaked his arms around her, "in my mind, I celebrate you every day." Then a playful kiss to her forehead.

So, in keeping with his poohing and daily mindful celebrations, the over-fifty Po received no cake, no candles, no party and certainly no hat. And as years passed, his celebrations dwindled, going from daily to weekly to monthly, eventually achieving not-at-all. Well, except for one hastily scribbled, envelope-glue-still-damp, I-love-you-Richard card. And by then, Po mused, the card's scribbling was just declaration of his own self-love.

But, regardless of how Richard celebrated her, visibly, mentally or not-at-all, she adored him. And Richard? He loved her adoration. At least, she thought he did.

They met at a wedding. The bride's maid-of-honour brought a boyfriend. While she sat with, doted on and attended to the bride,

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

her boyfriend sat (but was neither doted on nor attended to) at the singles' table. The same table where the groom's father's boss, Portia Weaver, also sat. They started chatting, laughing, dancing, a little more laughing, some more dancing and then a fumbled kiss or two. The maid-of-honour witnessed these indiscretions and stormed up to the slow-dancing and playfully groping couple, glaring at her and slapping him. She shouted terrible names then stomped off in a fury. The evening had become awkward. Richard Kaczynski shrugged. "My crazy, now ex-girlfriend." He decided it was time to go. He asked Portia for her phone number and "Maybe a lift home?"

In a few days, Portia referred to him as her new boyfriend. He may be the one. And Richard? He referred to Portia as Portia to her face but never by name to others. His family and co-workers initially knew her as rich-girlfriend or RG, Margie after they dated a month, and Largie when he felt cruel.

They married within six months of meeting, much to the surprise of her family, friends and work colleagues.

"If he makes you happy then I'm happy."

"That was quick considering Po's fifty-two and never been married." ... "He's in his thirties, isn't he?" ... "Po said he was thirty-seven." ... "Wow. That's a big age difference." ... "If the he-she ages were reversed, you wouldn't be saying that, now would you?" ... "Probably not."

"Her new husband? Not a geek?" ... "I wonder how she explains what she does for a living?" ... "Why would a job matter?"

Almost from the start, their eleven-year marriage became a repeating pattern of waning interest, sometimes within months, sometimes weeks, the talk about feelings and needs, protests ... "Don't blame me, it's your fault too!" ... and brief returns to interested Richard. In later years, marriage counsellors joined the



pattern, attempting to guide but yielding once it became apparent the marriage consisted of only one person.

It took Po ten years to accept he couldn't love her the way she needed because he didn't love her.

It took another six months to convince herself there was nothing she could do to change that.

She filed for separation and divorce. The ex-husband decamped to a Toronto apartment with a sack of pre-paid alimony, sole ownership of the new truck, lakefront cottage, ATV, motorboat, big screen TV. And Po? She resumed her maiden name and was granted sole ownership of her seven-year-old car, kayak, step-counter watch and the Orangeville house.

Also granted was Planet Richard's orbit, a recurring demand of an item, a piece of art or furniture or some household thingamabob, which she always bestowed. But Planet Richard's latest orbit? She didn't know what to make of that.

Yesterday's call started like every other Planet Richard call. When she heard his ringtone, she answered with a soft-toned "Hello, Richard."

"Hi-Portia-how-are-you-doing-today-well-I-hope." Friendly, warm, concerned Richard. He launched into his spiel without waiting for her wellness response. "Soos-and-I-were-thinking." Po sighed and took a big swig of coffee. "You're sixty-five, and our old house is probably a huge bother. In a few years, you won't be able to keep up with the gardening, mowing, snow shovelling, general maintenance. And what Callie's got? It might be genetic." Rick referred to Po's mother, Calista Weaver, once startlingly brilliant but always extraordinarily loving, and for the last five years, a resident at Oakwood Long Term Care's Alzheimer's facility. He paused briefly to let the genetic probability of Alzheimer's sink in.

"Since Soos and I are younger than you, and we're pregnant, we've decided to take on a house, and we thought about you right

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

away. You've got a house with a backyard that's really meant for a young family. We've got a condo that's perfect for older people who live alone and will have eventual, I'm not saying right now, but eventual diminishing abilities. So, we're going to do you a big favour and name you 'first advantage' to our premium property. That means you're first in line to buy our condo! But here's where the deal gets even sweeter. We'll do a home swap, our condo for your house. You can thank Soos ah ... Suzie for that. She's always thinking of your well-being."

Po raised her eyebrows and bit her lip. *You're doing this in consideration of my diminishing ... eventual diminishing abilities? Really? That's the sales pitch?* Instead of stating her thoughts aloud, she stammered, "Wha-wow! That is one colossal ask. I ah ... I ... I don't even know what to say."

"Say yes. You know it's the right thing to do."

"Richard, I don't know if a condo is the right thing for me now. And ... I'm not saying yes right away."

Exit friendly, warm, concerned Richard. Cue belligerent Richard. He followed the script to the letter.

Jeez! They weren't demanding. They were asking. Just asking. When did she become so suspicious, so untrusting? They were only thinking of her well-being. Only she would think it was some crazy plan to rip her off. Is that what she's saying? She's accusing? Were they trying to rip her off? They weren't asking to be given the house. The deal would be a fair, mutually beneficial swap. What's the big deal in considering their proposal? Would a day or two be so outrageous for her to think of her future? They were thinking about that, considering her options. Why wouldn't she? She's not getting any younger. Old age is just around the corner. Oh! Or is this because she was too important to consider their suggestion? Yeah, how could he come up with any good ideas? She was always doing that ... undermining him. Never supporting him. Jealous of his happiness. Jealous of Suzie. Whatever happened to the nice-kind-considerate Portia? The one

who liked and trusted people. Gave them a chance. Where did she go?

Richard finally drew a breath then more-or-less repeated the rant's key points, emphasizing her 'big job', her unrelenting undermining, his never being given a chance. When he paused for his second mid-rant breath, she squeezed in ... she wasn't trying to undermine, wasn't suggesting that at all, and she would give his proposal a think, but she'd need a few days, maybe even a week. This was hugely life-altering.

### **Divorce Counselling: Four Tissue Limit**

*Two Years Ago (continued) ...*

With eyes red, nose running, and post-cry hiccupping, Portia wiped the tear tracks with wadded tissues. Her therapist raised both the tissue box and wastepaper basket. "You know you can take more than two tissues, but I'll have to charge a premium if you take too many."

Portia withdrew four, immediately used and discarded three. She smoothed the fourth on the coffee table.

"I'll bank this one. You can stuff it back in the box if I don't use it or ... don't use it much. I think my Ebola contagion might just be in its dormant stage."

The therapist grinned, "Good to know. I love a frugal approach that also rolls the life expectancy dice for subsequent patients. It adds excitement to my day."

Portia returned the grin, then took a deep breath, partially to quell her hiccups but also to speak aloud the startling-to-no-one-who-knew-her-and-Richard insights. "I look back, without those lovestruck eyes of mine and I ... I realize how little I mattered pretty well from the start of our marriage. Day two, I'd say."

She bit her lip. "I just never saw what I wasn't looking for."

## **Chapter 4: Adoring Cat Rescues ... It**

Po and Josh were passionate about their work despite neither understanding what the other did nor interested enough to dive beyond job titles. Po was Senior Architect, Automation & Robotics for a national telecommunications firm. Josh was Senior Vice-President, Corporate Compliance for an international bank. Their mothers were sisters. Po was Calista's daughter and Josh, Beatrice's son.

The cousins were also passionate about their friendship and once a month shared commiseration over an excellent dessert preceded by some inconsequential main course. They met at a Toronto steak house, midway between their northwest (Po) and southeast (Josh) homes.

Po was parking her car when Richard's ringtone sang out. "Again? Already?" Usually, there was a decent interval between orbital demands. At that moment, she decided she'd change his musical ringtone to that annoying cash register sound, those chachings. She cackled wickedly and uncharacteristically sent his call to voicemail. She turned off her phone.

Josh stood from their table as she approached. They hugged warmly. Po squeezed his arm, "How are you doing? I ... I can't imagine what you're going through."

He shrugged as they seated themselves. "Oh, I'm alright. We all knew about Mom's heart condition. The doctors' prognosis. I should have been more prepared." He took a hard swallow. "It's difficult knowing I can't swing by her place for her hugs. Those hugs. I thought they'd always be there. I will miss those." Beatrice's bear hugs, hugely dispensed by the tiny septuagenarian, upon arrival, departure and any time you were at arm's reach, delivered the message you were deeply loved, body and soul.

He smiled sadly, "I shouldn't miss her ... treats ... that coffee, those muffins, but I'll ... I'll even miss those." Beatrice's

visitor treats were always ... toxic. Multiple teaspoons of instant decaffeinated coffee ladled into a small mug of tepid water, joined by perpetually stale muffins. It didn't matter the time, season or year. Beatrice's offerings were consistently available, never changing and always unpalatable.

"You are a wonderful son, and you did her proud. The funeral, the music, your speech ... so moving, respectful, and kind, so ... her. Everything was perfect."

"Thanks, Po. And, I'm sorry. I've been so ... distracted ... and busy. How are you and Aunt Callie?"

"Do not apologize. I'm good. And, Mom? So is she. Mind you, she took me to task about the green beans last week. Apparently, I was the chef, who I happily played, complete with a French accent and an abundance of concern. I promised never to overcook them ever, ever again. The facility is great, despite this year's Great Green Bean Incident. She feels safe, cared for, and ... that's what it's all about. Isn't it?"

He nodded. She patted his hand and changed the subject. "How's Mu-Mu?"

Josh brightened. He was always delighted to talk about Mu-Mu, his muse and adored Siamese cat. "Oh, what can I say. Mu-Mu? She saw my future. Saved my life last week." He described his cat's prescient heroism. Serious injury, perhaps even death, had been prevented. His departing hug to Mu-Mu, her vomiting on his suit, his subsequent clothing change and delayed departure allowed him to avoid a highway pile-up that occurred minutes earlier.

It was an incredible story. Mu-Mu's heroism was probably just a hairball, but Po wasn't one to dampen her cousin's enthusiasm for his marvellous pet.

Their conversation moved to topics other than Mu-Mu's life-saving vomit.

- Josh's upcoming business trip ... "I've added a vacation day to the trip. Paris was Mom's favourite city, and she always

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

told me I had to see The Louvre Museum and Eiffel Tower, drink wine in a little café. So I'm doing just that." ... "Josh? One day won't be enough. I've been to Paris, and you need to go for at least a week. A month would be better." ... "Oh, I don't want to be away from Mu-Mu too long. She misses me terribly when I travel. One day should be enough for all the highlights, right?" ... "No, Josh. One day in Paris will not be enough."

- Richard and Suzie's house-condo-swap-o-rama idea ... "Po? You're not seriously considering that, are you?" ... "I don't know yet. Some of his comments make sense. Maybe not right now, but eventually. I told them I'd think about it." ... "Before you do anything, anything at all ... talk to me. Promise me that." ... "I promise."
- Mu-Mu's latest behaviour ... "She's licking my toes now! Another sign that ... she absolutely adores me."

They chatted until the plates were cleared and the meal's star attractions, black coffee and small wedges of French Canadian tarte sucre, sugar pie, were served.

Josh pointed his dessert fork at Po, waving it as he spoke. "Your retirement's coming. Tell me, are you going to miss high-tech? Your nerdy projects? And what are you going to do? What's on the slate? Travel, adventure, love affairs?"

Po waved jazz hands enthusiastically. "Oh, I am so glad you asked!" Her voice raised an octave as her words excitedly tumbled out. "My automation project? The one I've been working on for the last three years? My autonomous network-wide component configuration? Well, it's nearly complete! And oh-my-gawd, oh-my-gawd, what a game-changer. It's probably the first in the industry! Multiple and diverse vendors, manufacturers, equipment, functions, operating systems, yeah, and the kitchen sink too!" She flattened her hands then spread them apart, acting out the project's benefit. "All are on a levelled playing field. It's

the super manager concept ... but on steroids!" Another octave rise.

She caught Josh's eyes. If he were Mu-Mu, his inner eyelid would be ... closed. Dear Josh, a whiz at risk assessment, fiduciary duties, and all things finance-cy, a bored pre-schooler when it came to technology. She changed course. "Um, but onto more important matters and to your question. I haven't had time to schedule any cross-border intrigue, polar expeditions or meaningless sex, but I'm excited about retiring in ten ... business ... days. And when I'm officially retired, I'll seek out some man with a penchant to dicker to fill the void and ... well ... other things."

Po was pleased with her dangerous little wordplay. Josh grinned wickedly. And both eagerly gobbled their dessert. The pastry was crisp, flaky. The filling was creamy, delightfully sweet, perfect. Po sat back in her chair, raised the coffee cup to her lips and took a satisfying sip. She smiled fondly at her cousin then reached to touch his sleeve.

"I know Aunt Bee's, your mom's death must still be difficult. If there's anything? Anything at all I could do? Let me know. I'm here for you."

He patted her hand then leaned forward and cleared his throat. "Well, if you really mean ... anything? There's something Mu-Mu and I would appreciate. If it's not too much trouble. You see ... there's Obie."

### **Other Conversations: Gargoyle Mean to Pregnant Woman**

It had been such a challenging, frustrating, disappointing day for her. "Rick?" Soos mewed, paused, then pulled from her husband's comforting embrace to further detail his ex-wife's

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

transgressions, lack of cooperation, impoliteness, and cruelty considering her delicate condition.

“Largie refused the slightest, tiniest courtesy ... a glass of water! Yeah! A glass of water!” And, the drive had been so very long, and she was so thirsty. And, access to the house? Well! She’d have none of it. It was like Soos had asked for the PIN to her bank account! “And all I did was drop by for a neighbourly visit! That was all.” She wasn’t even invited in! Portia just stood there, right there at the entrance like a gargoyle blocking entry. And Soos would have only been inside minutes, maybe just seconds. It was only to take a few pictures. How long would that have taken? No time! No time whatsoever. She wouldn’t even have known she was there.

“And if that wasn’t enough, that ex-wife of yours hasn’t responded to any of the calls, texts or emails!” She jabbed a finger at her husband. “Not even your emails, your calls. Not even your texts!”

She wound down with a commentary on Portia’s appearance. “Wet stringy hair and a ratty bathrobe!” And the pièce de resistance? “She came to the door. The front door ... practically starkers!” Soos held up both hands. “I know! I know!” Largie really had no pride of appearance.

Soos crossed her arms. “So, what are you going to do about her?”

Rick frowned. Not at Soos, but at the disgraceful way Portia acted. “Don’t worry. I’ll go to Orangeville tomorrow. She treated you awfully, and I know she knows she did. But I’ll make sure she won’t ever treat you like that again.”

He reached for her hands, uncrossed her arms, gave a quick embrace, then after a playful kiss on her forehead.

“Soos, don’t worry. I’ll bet, in a few days you’ll not only be taking pictures but planning our move-in date. She’ll do anything for me,” he confidently shrugged. “She loves me.”



## Chapter 5: Specifically Needy

The uproar began the moment Po's front wheels left Josh's driveway. It was sustained, breaking only briefly for quick swallows of air, then returned to its high-pitched, mournful ooo-oooo-ooooooooos followed by long gasps of aaaarrrrrrrrrrr. The misery was profound ... and loud. The radio offered no relief. An exponential increase in the dog's volume met all attempts at the dial.

On its fifteenth, or was it its fiftieth, instance of ooo-oooo-oooooooo and aaaarrrrrrrrrrr, Po started to question her spur of the moment, best-friend-good-cousin decision. She spoke to the highway in front of her. "I know nothing about dogs. What-in-the-world-was-I-thinking? Taking on a dog? This dog?"

She looked to her rear-view mirror. With its snout in the air and no appreciable tune, the dog belted out its song of misery.

But, she really didn't have a choice, now did she? Josh confessed Obie's future was bleak. Bringing the dog back to greyhound rescue wasn't an option. It was Po or disposal. Pre-Beatrice, every one of its forever homes returned it within days. "A monster!" each proclaimed as they gleefully forfeited the \$500 adoption fee in exchange for peace, serenity, undamaged bric-a-brac.

Only Josh's mother, found via a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-greyhound-rescue-worker, happily said yes to ... the monster and, incredibly and almost instantaneously, the hound became her little treasure. And so they lived in calm harmony until Beatrice's sad and untimely passing.

Josh attempted to make a home for ... the treasure, but it was evident from the get-go the treasure wasn't on board being his or Mu-Mu's housemate. For the past three weeks, Josh spent his pre-work hours isolating the cat and other valued possessions from the dog. Evenings were reserved to discover newly chewed doors, table and chair legs, books, baseboards, and empty

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

whatever footwear held Mu-Mu's displeasure. And just today, a neighbour stopped by with your-damn-dog-cried-and-howled-for-hours followed by you-need-to-do-something-before-I-call-the-city's-bylaw-office.

"Well," thought Po gripping the steering wheel with increased intensity, "all I've promised is to try it out for a few days. If I can't manage, I'll return it to Josh, and he'll make the arrangements." She felt a bit guilty, despite a replay of yet another set of high-pitched, mournful ooo-oooo-ooooooooos followed by long gasps of aaaaarrrrrrrrrrrr.

After the dog, kibble and its paraphernalia were struggled into her car, Josh gave his cousin a final parting gift. Advice gleaned from his vast, three-weeks-of-experience with this dog.

"You need to set the rules, right from the get-go. Sofas, chairs and beds are all off-limits. No chewing. Punishment, a slap on the nose or ah, locking it in the bathroom, needs to happen immediately after undesirable behaviour. And, set its hurry-up times to accommodate your schedule." As per Josh's vast experience, hurry-up was the canine bathroom call.

He shook his pointer finger, to stress, not scold. "Remember Po, consistency and correction. You need to be firm, strong, unrelenting. That's the only thing dogs understand."

And with that, Po drove home amid an implacable serenade of ooo-oooo-ooooooooos and aaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrs, and Josh returned to the loving attentions of his adoring cat.

Po opened the liftgate and peered inside. The dog stood rigidly, wedged deep inside her SUV. Coaxing fell on deaf ears. It only shuffled forward, head down, when she mentioned ham, but with the enthusiasm of an impending root canal.

Once inside the house, she opened the kitchen's sliding glass door and said in a firm tone, "Hurry-up". The dog cocked its head to one side, stared hard at her, then slid into the blackness of night and her fenced backyard. While the dog attended to its bathroom

needs, Po retrieved the Josh-supplied essentials. A huge sack of kibble, two metal bowls, a paw-printed sweatshirt, a quilted winter coat, four boots, an enormous dog bed and a thick blue folder were wrestled into the house and dumped in the entrance.

She filled one of the bowls with water and set it on the kitchen floor. As she rose, she noticed the dog's silent arrival. She slid the door open. It walked to the bowl, sniffed it suspiciously and lapped thirstily.

It sat back on its haunches, licked its lips, then returned to its earlier cocked head and intense stare.

Po felt its scrutiny. *The only thing that's missing is it taking a seat at the table, folding its front legs into a crossed arm position, and asking me, "So? What now?"* That made her smile despite her recent interminable drive with its non-stop vocals. She spread her arms apart, hands wide. "Well ... we're home. This is it." Quickly followed by an "Oh! Your ham. I nearly forgot." She reached into the fridge, grabbed the opened package, removed the last three slices and rolled two into cigars. It swallowed them whole. No chewing.

Its scrutiny returned. She spoke aloud to lessen her growing unease. "Sooo. Let's go on a walk, but it'll be just around the block. We'll do a neighbourhood walk tomorrow. When we come back, we'll do a house tour and, ah, figure out where you'll sleep tonight. OK?" She gave it a tentative pat on the head. The dog's jaw quivered and clicked with what Po believed to be pleasure. It seemed a friendly enough gesture, but it could, just as well, be preparing to bite her. She rolled the last ham slice. It gobbled it with the same speed and lack of chew.

Po purchased the house years before meeting and marrying Richard. She wanted green space to offset her high-tech world and moved to Orangeville, an hour from Toronto but only minutes to reach the best, in her opinion, of Ontario's field, lake and forest.

But Rick? He wasn't pleased. The house was too small, the neighbourhood too ordinary. With Po's salary, he could easily

## *A Beginner's Guide to Separation Anxiety*

afford a swanky address, two or three acres, a ride-on mower, a swimming pool, triple-car garage. But she insisted on keeping it. Insisted! It was her only rebellion to his wants and whims. After months of grumbling, Rick realized this was a battle even he couldn't win. He solved his house anguish through acquisition: cottage, boat, truck, ATV, beach vacations, high-end electronics, luxury watches.

They seemed to help.

Post-walk, the dog's house tour took only minutes.

Main floor: a galley kitchen, powder room and combined living/dining room. Second floor: two bathrooms and three small bedrooms, the smallest – her home office. Basement: a TV/exercise room and a workshop.

Returning to the main floor, Po positioned its enormous bed beside her small piano. "We'll put it here for now and figure out what to do permanently tomorrow. Goodnight," she said its name hesitantly, "ah ... Obie. And, ah ... welcome home."

She patted the dog's head, tiredly scratched her own then padded her way to the stairs.

"Human. I have specific needs."

She froze. Her foot hovered above the first step as if paralyzed. She spun around as her eyes darted frantically around the room. "What?! Who?!?" Her darting eyes finally landed on ... the dog.

Obie casually sat back on his haunches. Speaking slowly and distinctly, as if to a confused child, he repeated, "Human? I have specific needs."

### **Other Conversations: Fussing about Monsters**

Josh cheerfully waved goodbye as the car pulled from his driveway. A muffled but overly familiar ooo-oooo-ooooooooo followed by a long gasp of aaaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrr began just as he

turned to re-enter his house. He stood for a moment, examining what he had just done to his cousin and best friend. *Will Po be alright? Yes, yes ... she'll be fine. She's intelligent, capable, patient. She'll know what to do.*

But his confidence wavered. He did alert her to all the greyhound's ... issues. But ... he knew he should have driven that animal to her house. To see it settle in and only leave it in her care when she felt comfortable with her new responsibilities. But her immediate and surprising acceptance of his problem at dinner was ... was too good to pass up. She said she'd happily take Obie. "How about right now?"... "No. Really. It's OK."... "Stop fussing, Josh. Really! This is very OK with me."

He couldn't resist. He paid her supper bill, a 'thank you', and practically raced home, she trailing behind him in her car. He gleefully loaded the hound and its things into her SUV and felt, for the first time in weeks, a breath of ... freedom.

He looked at his phone, his finger hovering over her displayed number. He pressed the side button; the phone turned off.

"I'll let them ... settle in, yes ... settle in together ... tonight. And ah, I'll call? Yes, I'll call tomorrow morning to make sure she's OK."

But he knew. He knew exactly how that animal and its settling was playing out.