

Don't underestimate the dog!!   December 1998, pp. 18-19

Dear Russ, What a wonderful story!   You certainly didn't waste your time flying to Philadelphia.   I could not help wondering how one would advise CJB if he consulted one about his strategy if he wanted to enter JF's household.   He would not want to meet the fate of his predecessor at the hands of Mati.

Looking at it from Mati's point of view, there are three things she could object to.   She could object to an attempt on the part of CJB to dominate her, Mati.   Then, she could object to an attempt by CJB to dominate JF.   Thirdly, she could object to the closeness between CJB and JF.

The first possibility seems the most likely and also the easiest to deal with.   On the whole, dogs don't mind being dominated.   After all, they have been bred to be submissive for over ten thousand years.   That must be one reason why they are so popular.   However, I would recommend an organised plan of action on the part of CJB in relation to Mati.   First of all, the objective should be clear.   CJB must be dominant to Mati.   I have seen families in which the dog is dominant to the people, and they do not work well.   Then, the relationship between CJB and Mati should be established in the absence of JF.   He should take Mati for long walks, and encounter many adventures together.   Their relationship should be hammered out well away from the emotional complications of JF's apartment.   The crunch must come.   A decision must be made.   And the guiding force should be respect on the part of Mati rather than intimidation on the part CJB.

Then, having established a benevolent dominance away from home, CJB should consolidate on the home base.   Mati should be made to be completely dependent on him for food, water and affection for a period, with JF preferably going and staying with her mother for a bit, leaving man and dog together.   I think this plan would work.   It may sound a bit "too much", but the question is, does he want her or not?

Would Mati object to CJB being dominant to JF?   This is an interesting question to which I do not know the answer.   My hunch is that dogs have lived in hierarchies for so long that they have the mental capacity to make this sort of appraisal.   Their thinking might go something like, "If there's got to be a new group member dominant to me, let him at least be controlled by someone I know and trust to look after my interests."   So Mati might try to gang up with JF against CJB, but JF might not recognise what was happening - partly because she might not object to CJB's dominance, and partly because she might not see Mati's behaviour as being relevant to her own dominance struggle with CJB.   It is an argument for CJB being particularly nice to JF.   However, if he is too nice to JF, he runs the risk of Mati's third possible objection, that she might resent the closeness between the two humans.   In other words, she might be jealous.   The ultimate reason for jealously disruptive behaviour on Mati's part might be the strategy of preventing JF becoming pregnant, and producing a child who would impair Mati's fitness.   Mati's behaviour sounds rather like the "terrible twos" which has been suggested to be a child's contraceptive device after the effect of non-nutritive sucking wears off.   I do not think it would help for the two humans to try to convince Mati that they were practising "safe sex" - there is a limit to the intelligence of animals, even dogs.   I think the best answer for this problem is for JF to be as affectionate as possible to Mati while CJB is moving into their lives.

Of course, Mati's situation is not unlike that of children contemplating the addition of a step-parent to the family.   We can say that S joins a situation in which A and B are closely bonded and A is dominant to B.   S wants to join the hierarchy above B, regardless of whether he is dominant or subordinate to A.   We must all have seen families in which determined children have driven out potential or actual step-parents.   I think, on the whole, the strategy for dealing with a potential step-child is the same as dealing with Mati.

Yes, I think Mati should join the ranks of those who have fought on with courage and determination, in spite of being weaker than the opposition to begin with, and in spite of being further handicapped by de-escalation on the part of their reptilian brains.   Mati should be up there with Satan, Milton, Darwin (?) and Job.   And hopefully Mati may be won over by CJB and you may get asked to a wedding.

Hedonically, John