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The pack smells

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Saturday night.

I was alone in the living room, reading a book, minding my own business and not looking for trouble.

Nellie, our Yellow Lab, stirred. She stretched out of her nesting cup and into a downward-facing dog. She came over to me, stuck her head in my lap in place of the book, looked me in the eye, huffed and shook.

She was telling me that she needed to go outdoors. You might say that she wanted to “go to the bathroom,” except that our bathroom is upstairs and not outside. (We also have indoor electric in grounded wall outlets.)

I opened the kitchen door, and, suddenly, she blasted out into the cold night.

I went back to reading since Nellie has never needed my assistance in her doings.

A few minutes later, I opened the door and called her. Nothing. I called some more. Nothing. I called louder. Nothing. I called with some urgency. Nothing. I called with mounting impatience. Nothing. I called with threat and menace. Nothing.

Finally, I heard *stirring* outside the front gate.

Nellie had jumped the fence, which is as big a no-no as there is in our pack of two.

For reasons she’s never explained, Nellie refuses to jump back into any yard out of which she has just jumped. She preferred that I fight my way through the wintry mix to open the gate for her.

As I trudged through the dark over sheet ice and sleeting snow, I directed a few observations toward her that were, admittedly, saltier and more scolding than “Oh dear me!”

I opened the gate. Nellie rocketed past and skidded to a stop at the kitchen door. She looked back at me, upset, helpless and embarrassed.

Even through the collapsed cartilage of a twice-broken nose, I recognized the odor.

I considered shipping her to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria to demonstrate America's most potent chemical weapon.

Despite my many warnings, Nellie had vaulted the fence to mix it up with a skunk.

Well, I couldn't leave her outside to freeze, could I? And I couldn't wash her up outside, could I? And I couldn't ship her to the Islamic State at that time of night, could I?

Which meant...in she came—into the kitchen, the living room, the halls, the stairs, onto the second floor and into the bathroom and, finally, into the tub.

On the way, she rolled on the Oriental rugs, rubbed against the furniture, polished the wood floors and sideswiped all of the low-shelf books.

At that moment, I realized that our treasured bottle of commercial skunk-scent remover had not been replaced.

So Nellie was booted into the cold while I raced to the Blue Grass Mercantile before it closed and bought every bottle of hydrogen peroxide in stock.

Hydrogen peroxide is a molecule of two atoms of hydrogen with two of oxygen. It's a disinfectant, bleach, propellant and oxidizer. It comes to consumers as a three-percent solution in water, in brown plastic bottles to keep it from breaking down in light.

I mixed one quart with one-quarter cup of baking soda and a couple of teaspoons of liquid dish soap.

And then Nellie and I did the rub-a-dub run a second time up to the tub.

Nellie does not like water despite her ancestral claims of having retrieved needy Labradorians from lake and surf.

She loathes, in particular, warm, clean water coming from a faucet. She prefers bathing in liquid field droppings.

I wrestled her 90 pounds into the tub and starting working in the hydrogen-peroxide mixture. I held her collar with one hand while I washed her with the other.

She kept trying to leap out.

“Who is the Alpha dog in this bathtub?” I shouted.

She shook.

“Do you see me trying to run away from being wet?” I shouted.

She shook, soaking me.

“Who of the two of us is the one who stinks?” I shouted.

At that point, I would say we were about even.

Skunk scent is a thiol, a sulfur-rich compound with some other stuff. You find thiols in human sweat and waste, among other not-too-attractive places.

The oxygen in the hydrogen peroxide bonds to the skunk thiol, which eliminates the odor.

I explained all of this to Nellie while she fought me tooth and washcloth in the bathtub.

What’s the Alpha dog supposed to do when his pack of one doesn’t heed his warnings to stay away from skunks and then resists scientific remediation?

The Alpha dog growled and got on with it.

After 10 minutes of soaping and rinsing, I dried her with my own bath towel. She shook from nose to tail more than a dozen times and then looked at me with distrust and hurt.

She thinks that I should have fixed her predicament in some non-liquid way, say, for example, by issuing a triple ration of treats.

After four days, we are still on the outs. She’s still a little skunky around the ears.

As I write, Nellie sleeps peacefully. Maybe she’s a Labrador Sleeper.

If we had porcupines in Blue Grass, I’m sure I would be pulling quills out of her muzzle.

Nellie, a rescue dog, has yet to retrieve anything of value, but she is an outstanding sleeper and generally likes me...in dry conditions.