

*J.O. Haselhoeft*

# **One Week, Six Stories, Fifteen Emotions**

Tuesday.

You drop your good friends at the airport and drive to their farmhouse a few miles from your own home. You are taking care of their dogs while they are away, an arrangement made months in advance. You anticipate tending to the dogs while sitting on the gracious, broad porches in the cool breeze. The many pots of flowers greet you at the front door as does the full-coated collie, one of three dogs for which you will care for the week.

As directed by the owners, you go upstairs to the front bedroom to retrieve the other two dogs. They told you the retriever and the setter wait more patiently when they are separated from the collie. As you open the door, they bolt out of the room. You smell something. It is not pleasant and you turn your attention not toward the canines, which have pounded down the stairs to the back door, but to the room they've just exited. At the door's threshold, the rug is white in the hall; in the bedroom, it is polka dot, perhaps like an animal print. You look closer. The impression is of dog paws, and it is not just on the carpet, but across the bed, on the dog pillow, even against the walls and windows. Dog shit.

It takes you another minute to figure out what happened. One or both of the dogs defecated and one or both of the dogs ran around the room, across the bed, and up against the walls. You note the pattern now continues into the middle of the hall and down the stairs. Closing the door, you follow the dogs to let them outside.

You are confused. You are frustrated. You are tired.

Wednesday.

You like pet sitting, as you worry about your own pet ownership when you travel. When your partner asks a yes-no question about getting a dog, you ask him if this issue can wait 'til after the pet sit. Your partner is determined. You acquiesce and he adopts from the shelter, a cute, curly-haired mix of miniature Australian sheepdog and terrier. Black and white. She's three years old and

has the breed-specific characteristic of two different colors of eyes: one black, the other sky-blue. She smiles, never barks, and raises up on her hind legs to dance.

When you walk with your new canine friend, you notice she growls at other dogs. The shelter made no mention of this. You and your dog meet another walker and his Labrador. She growls and then nips at the big dog, which remains calm.

She attacks the lab, three times her size and strength. You pull yours away before either gets hurt. You realize you cannot take her to the pet sit.

You are annoyed. You are concerned.

Thursday.

As you are driving to the grocery to pick up more dog food, you listen to the radio. You hear a report on the immigration crisis. You listen to the concept behind zero tolerance and eight minutes of tape in which children wail for their parents and cry to themselves.

In your car, you scream. You press against the horn. You push continually and then let up to start in again. You do so all the way from the beginning of the cornfield to the stop sign. You are overcome by your emotions and let loose a tirade of four-letter words, re-combine them, and yell them again. You punch the off button of the radio and continue driving.

You are disappointed. You are angry.

Friday.

The dogs are behaving well. You receive a text. The brother of one of your renters is trying to reach your tenant. He is at her apartment building, but she isn't answering her phone. He's unable to enter into the building and knock on his sister's door. He does not live in the area and has come some distance to visit. This isn't in your rental contract but she's a nice lady. She would do the same for you.

You leave the farmhouse and stop by with the key to the building entrance where the brother is waiting. He has dark hair and looks very much like his sister.

You open the front door and together, you go to the apartment where you tap on your renter's door. There is no response. The brother reminds you of the medical condition his sister has. Would you mind opening the door to check on her? No, of course not. You fuss with the keys. They seem to be incorrectly marked

and you're having trouble finding the one for #7. The brother is patient. He watches as you try each of the keys on your keyring.

Finally, finding the right one, you turn the dead bolt and then the lower lock on the door handle. You yell out your renter's name and take a quick peek into the bedroom, which you can see from the entry way. She's not there and you feel a moment of relief without recognizing you are worried. You walk to the living room where the broad Danish contemporary dining table has small piles of papers on it. Your renter is very neat and organized—that's what you hope for when you let out your property. You note the architectural rendering of a Frank Lloyd Wright building on the wall above the table, which reminds you that you like her taste in art. Simple. Determined. As your gaze moves from dining table to wall, to television, you see that it's on, tuned to CNN. The blinds are closed. And finally, your eyes reach the feet of the stretched-out form of your renter.

She is slumped onto the sofa, forearms on both sides of her thighs. Her jaw is tight, but her eyes are closed and you realize, finally, something's amiss. You say her name as if to wake her, though you know innately she will not respond. You exclaim loudly, "No, she's not all right," to the brother who stands next to you. You lean toward your renter, but maintain a distance of two feet, maybe more, as if there's a line you can't cross. It's the brother who says you need to call an ambulance and then reaches forward, gingerly, and takes your renter's wrist between his thumb and forefinger and tells you there's no pulse. You step back, find your phone in your pocket, and dial 9-1-1.

You are shocked. You are sad. You feel empty.

Sunday.

You spend the weekend at the farmhouse with the dogs, quietly noticing the perfect weather with blue skies and pleasant temperatures. You do not speak to others and avoid engagement with your emotions. You are snippy to your partner when he calls and occasionally intolerant of the hounds. You are well aware that the situations you experienced during the last few days were nothing compared to the pain of loss felt by the renter's family, or those seeking asylum, or even the dogs left by their humans. Your emotions were in response to each of theirs and you remember that Anne Frank said, "But feelings can't be ignored, no matter how unjust or ungrateful they seem."

Seize control, you think. Follow up the events of the prior

week. You use the carpet cleaner to wash for a third time the floor of the dirtied bedroom. You find articles on how to re-socialize your own dog. You note that others are as outraged as you by the president's actions and you promise to write a letter to your elected officials. You meet with the family of the renter.

You feel melancholic. You are enervated.

Monday.

A red barn down the street from the farmhouse brings your attention to a road on which you've never traveled, not by foot or bike or car. Your road bike has been waiting all week for this moment. You pedal it to the barn, past it, and keep going. The road is straight for miles, save for some small hills undulating in the distance. You continue on, watching red-winged blackbirds perching on the fence posts and a hawk soaring high above a huge oak. The foot-high corn flows like a carpet in every direction and barns, silos, and houses dot the landscape. They seem like toys forgotten when the child moved on. You stop your bike, look across the valley, and snap a photo.

No one is in sight. No cars, no tractors, not even any individuals tending to the small gardens surrounded by rabbit fences. No one. You breathe deeply and on the flat road, you let out a whoop. Taking in more air, you yell with glee the whole way downhill to a small stream that runs through a culvert from one side to the other. You smile. The road heads back uphill and momentum takes your bike so far and then, without hesitating, you pump hard, standing, to carry yourself to the top of the next hill.

You feel good. You are strong. You can begin anew.