

COPING WITH COVID

A story of denial, inspired by Covid-19 and my border collie dog.

By River the border collie

River the border collie is a smart and highly energetic family dog. When she is not catching tennis balls or chasing squirrels, she loves to explore and learn new skills. This is the first time she has submitted a piece of creative writing.

Damn the virus. I'll be boarded for 3 weeks.

"OK River," says Mike, "this is the place."

The sign on the turreted building reads: Canine Olfactory Rehabilitation School.

My humans, Mike and Sunny, had muzzles on when we went for walks, but they left me at risk. I first thought it was allergies, from sniffing all the sidewalk daisies. Mild congestion and sneezing. Then Mike noticed.

"This is unusual River, your nose is warm," he said.

He added laughing: "I wish it would stay that way." For shame!

Don't get me wrong! I love my humans, Mike and Sunny.

Mike likes tennis balls and Frisbees. Sunny makes me play Easter Egg Hunt, with colored plastic eggs that snap open when you bite them. She scatters them around the house with treats inside. I quickly find them. "River is very sharp-nosed," she quips. Wrong. They are clearly visible in corners, or peeking under furniture. Then there is the baby.

I wonder what she is doing.

She has started walking. It is funny how she toddles chasing me. Wearing a diaper.

I always pretend to run away, but then I let her catch me.

I hate it when she poops, so I grab her diaper and drag it to the trash bin, or bury it in the yard. Her burping has a curdled scent, very unpleasant.

Sometimes she lies on my bed. She rests her head on my belly and clutches at my fur with her tiny fists.

I imagine she is a puppy, if I had puppies.

I never got a chance.

I did not run into the kitchen when Sunny was grilling steak. That's when we knew for sure that something was wrong.

Mike forced me to Sit and go through the Jelly Bean test. Go ahead, Google it. He blocked my nostrils, I could barely breathe. "Chew this," he said. Then he let go of my nose: "Can you taste a difference?" How could I? Jelly Beans? Let's have a Chicken Liver Test instead, then I may be able to tell!

It is strange that humans have many names for colors. Take blue for example: royal, Prussian, navy, teal, turquoise. What's up with that? Yet they have only 3 choices for odors: fruity, floral, or spicy.

Unless they are wafting wine, then they wax lyrical: "This Pinot Noir has a wonderful bouquet of freshly laid mulch with hints of tobacco and dark olives." Give me a break.

The vet diagnosed me with "anosmia," a big word for loss of smell. More than 90% of humans with the virus show it. It is likely the same with dogs.

Note to self: ask the other boarders how it happened for them.

We walk into the Admission Office. There is a huge Tiffany desk and William Morris wallpaper.

Mike speaks with the director.

I hear barking.

I'm greeted by the canine leader. Blood Hound of course. He sniffs my rump and I pretend to follow suit. A priori, this is how dogs greet each other. A posteriori, I smell nothing. Who cares?

Men's favorite smell is cinnamon buns. That's what National Geographic reported. Mike found an old magazine in the attic, from 1986. It had a photo of a woman sniffing underarms. Ew, that's worse than rump greeting. The magazine was musty. I promptly shredded it.

We're said to have 300 million smell receptors, while humans have only 30 million. Google it. I think they're jealous of us, what for? Mike wanted me to do "Nose Training", learn to follow scents like detective dogs. "You need a job, River." Nope. I am happy going on walks and playing with the baby.

It's my attention span that needs honing. Big time. Not my sense of smell.

I prefer touch and sound anyway. Even noises.

And I love words. I like to nuzzle on their laps and look at their screens. They think I'm cuddling, but I can read. It's not that hard. I'm a border collie, we're very smart. Look up Chaser, she knew more than a thousand words. They even wrote a book about her.

Mike has finished registering me.

We have the daily schedule for the next 3 weeks.

First period. We stretch with Down Dogs then lie on mats in a circle. We Stay.

We're a dozen, from Chihuahua to Rottweiler.

We're supposed to share backgrounds and feelings.

I admire the high ceilings, the crystal chandeliers. Pretty architecture. Remnants of elegant days. I'd like a game of chess on the checkered marble floor.

The German starts: "They call me Rex." Ha, unusual name. "I let through a camembert cheese, it was humiliating." He's wearing his work vest. Show off. He lowers his head in shame and whimpers: "I miss my airport job."

Sorry buddy, you're not the only one without a job these days. But honestly, have you ever sniffed anything other than food scraps? Keep a perspective. You're not military.

My turn comes: "My name is River, I'm a family dog". Then I blatantly lie: "I miss the aroma of baby vomit." They all nod and groan in sympathy. Suckers!

Second Period. We start various treatments. The human puts castor oil drops up our nose, saying it's "anti-inflammatory". You've read correctly. I thought to bite him but I am not a biting breed. So I just yelp.

Third Period. We lap honey with cinnamon. To open the nasal passages. What next? The Tiktok nutmeg challenge? No thank you.

Last Period. We go around sniffing human objects: shoes, scarves, underwear. Yikes. I am glad I detect nothing. Then onion and garlic, as if we were vampires. Don't they know that onion is unsafe for dogs?

The human in charge keeps a "SmellAbility© Diary Log" to chart our progress. I can't tell you more because it's copywrited. Google that too!

At last, we are free to run around. An expansive backyard with plenty of maple trees and squirrels. A real water hydrant. Meals twice a day. Naps and bedtime in spacious crates. No mail delivery. One of us volunteers to be the daily mail dog that we chase around. It can be fun.

Many howl at night.

We slowly make progress.

I befriend a beagle. He says this place is a scam. He jokes: "I smell a rat." I retort: "Something smells fishy." We talk of escaping but three weeks go fast. We both like our humans to be generous with treats. We agree that canine loyalty is first, then intelligence and playfulness. Smell is overrated, most odors are unpleasant. Anosmia is a nice respite.

Still, to be honest, I very much miss the baby.

Her fur-grabbing fist.

How her face crinkles when I lick it.

Her squealing.

And after her bath, such lovely scents: talcum powder and Damascene rose.