

Case 14

“STELLAAAH!”

Stella was always a little irritable in morning, as Dr. White could attest. “The demands. The objections. Her unmet cries for attention. I wonder how he lived with her for so long. Thank God she’s gone.” But, she was, in fact, still there, just across the hall.

Stella, a 7 year-old purebred Saint Bernard, is Bubba Hart’s companion. She patrols daily in front of the elegant brownstones along Ovington Avenue, in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. The children in the neighborhood are protective of Stella and look forward to seeing her standing sentinel as their school bus turns down their street in the afternoons.

A silent sentinel, though, Stella was not. Her bark was tremendous. Stella’s extended vocal performances each morning (and each afternoon and each evening), forced Dr. White’s once simple pleasures—like the New York Post and a cup of coffee in her sunny kitchen—underground. Well, at least down the block to Starbucks. Bubba was exasperated, both by his inability to quiet Stella and the constant hounding by his neighbors in the building demanding he do so.

Finally, as if channeling Almira Gulch, Dr. White persuaded the co-op board to consider evicting Stella. The co-op board ruled in January that if Bubba could not keep Stella’s exuberant bark in check, either Bubba or Stella would have to go. The barking soon stopped and everyone, except for the children on the block, thought Stella was gone.

Bubba had been beside himself when he considered the likelihood that he must either leave his home or part with Stella. Moving would most likely just transfer the problem to another building and Bubba could find no one willing to take in Stella. Euthanasia was an unbearable option to Bubba.

Bubba tried everything he could think of to muzzle Stella. This included a muzzle (impractical), a collar that sprays malodorous citronella when Stella barks (toxic) and trips to an animal behaviorist (unsuccessful). His veterinarian, Dr. Robert Boyd, finally suggested a minimally invasive procedure called debarking. Debarking involves cutting an animal’s vocal cords, either through the mouth or through an incision in the larynx. Dr. Boyd claims that dogs recover very quickly and don’t seem to be any worse for wear. “My clients report that debarking has no effect on the animal’s personality.”

Dr. Boyd’s professional partner, Maggie Conley, made a scene in the lobby of their practice when she overheard Dr. Boyd’s advice. “No, please. How can you destroy an animal’s central means of communication!”

“Maggie. They almost always can still make sounds, their barks are just muffled and raspy,” Dr. Boyd interjected.

“Bobby, no! Last year I had to operate on a debarked dog after excessive scar tissue put her into respiratory distress.”

“One in a million,” Dr. Boyd protested. Finally, Dr. Conley pulled Dr. Boyd over to an impressively framed copy of the AVMA (American Veterinary Medical Association) Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics.

“There!” Dr. Conley insisted, pointing to paragraph IIa. It read: “Veterinarians should first consider the needs of the patient: to relieve disease, suffering, or disability while minimizing pain or fear.”

“How can you square debarking with that?” she asked.

“But Margaret,” pleaded Dr. Boyd, clearly exasperated. “Even the AVMA recommends debarking in some situations.” Dr. Conley waved him away. By the expressions on their clients’ faces, this conversation did not belong in the waiting room.

Bubba had Stella debarked on Saturday, after he read that the Westminster Kennel Club sanctions debarking for show dogs. Even so, it still seemed strange to Bubba that so many states prohibit it. It's probably just good politics, he thought.

Months after the debarking, Bubba still couldn't shake his nagging doubt over what he had done to Stella. He still searches her brown eyes every night for some sign that might lighten his burden.