

EGSM 6: Small friends (Pets)

Content warnings

Discussions of: pet injury & death, food, COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown

Mentions of: pet illness, anxiety, eye trauma, bears & wolves, guns

LYDIA

[To Raptor] Raptor, what is your opinion on your living conditions?

[Group laughter]

[Raptor clucks]

[To Raptor] Mmhmm. Mmhmm. And, and what do you think about the meaning of, of the pet human relationship, huh?

SUE

Not much!

[Group laughter]

[Show Theme - Intro]

Rusty Quill presents Enthusigasm.

HELEN

Hello friends and fans, and welcome to Enthusigasm, the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host, Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers, and today we're talking about pets! And I am ecstatic to be joined by Lydia, Sue, and Tessa. As always, we are going to introduce ourselves alphabetically, so Lydia, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

LYDIA

Pronouns she or they/them, and what do I do? I suppose, at Rusty Quill I have done Magnus and Rusty Quill Gaming, and, er, I hope they keep employing me, you know?

[Helen laughs]

See what comes in. I am as excited as you to find out!

HELEN

Well, I'll certainly keep you on the roster for Enthusigasm so you at least have that under your belt!

LYDIA

Yay! I've got so many things I'm thrilled about!

[Helen laughs]

HELEN

And Sue, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

SUE

She/her, erm, I was Gertrude on Magnus Archives, and I also happen to be the mother of Jonny, who wrote the thing. Currently, I am actually proofreading his and Sasha's new game book, which I think they have done via Kickstarter, which should come out, not immediately because it's still got to be proofed, but it's quite exciting, and I can say the mini game settings are absolutely fabulous and often quite hilarious as well, as you might expect. Right, that's enough promotion!

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

I was gonna say, that's some skills, just like, not gonna check if we're asked to promote anything at the end, it's gonna get right in there, right in there.

[Sue laughs]

HELEN

And last but not least, Tessa, can you give us your pronouns and tell us what you do?

TESSA

Whenever you say last but not least, I always am like, well who is least then?!
No one here is least!

[Group laughter]

My pronouns are she/they and I do sound editing for Rusty Quill, so I've been doing Rusty Quill Gaming sound design for two years...

HELEN

Wow...

TESSA

... and I'm just starting on the vocal cuts for Enthusiasm. So I might be editing this episode, in which case, hello!

[Helen laughs]

HELEN

Right, so! Let's leap into it, please. Everybody tell me about your pets so that I can vicariously live through them. Tell me what pets you've got, tell me their names, I want to hear it all. Would anyone like to start?

TESSA

I would love to start. I always want to talk about Tikka!

HELEN

Aww!

TESSA

So I have a dog, her name is Tikka, she's a German Shepherd mix. She's got little white spots on her paws, and the tip of her tail is white, and, and she has a black spot on her tongue, I don't know why, but it's just there. And anyway,

she's very cute. She always likes to lie on your feet. I taught her how to make eye contact so now she just lies there and stares at me...

[Group laughter]

...while I'm trying to work! But yeah, I really love Tikka, and I've always had dogs in my life, but Tikka is the first pet that is officially mine.

HELEN

Aww.

TESSA

Like, I'm paying for her medical bills, which are quite expensive because she's grumpy and eats everything...

[Helen laughs]

HELEN

Oh no. What's the worst thing she's eaten?

TESSA

The worst...I mean, she had lake water recently which meant that she ended up with giardia...

HELEN

Oh no!

TESSA

... but that's not, like, the worst thing. She's over it now! Oh, she also ate the plug off of a vacuum cleaner, and she ate my childhood stuffed animal!

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

No, no competition for Tessa's love! Only Tikka!

[Group laughter]

HELEN

Oh gosh! Sue, how about you? Tell me about your pets!

SUE

Well, at the moment we only have one. We have a cat, Cressida – Cressy. All our cats have had Shakespearean names. So Cressy is very very sweet, and everybody loves her, and she loves everybody. So when we have a visitor she will go and sit on their lap and make them stroke her, and they all think she's the nicest cat they've ever met. And she's very very sweet. The only problem is, she likes, like a lot of our cats have done, and I'm sure other people's cats, she likes to sleep with you...

HELEN

Mmm.

SUE

...but she's not a very – what shall we say – quiet sleeper...

[Group laughter]

...and, you know, every half an hour or so she decides she's a bit bored or has worries about the universe, or something like that, and so she starts walking around on you and pushing her whiskers against your face, which is quite, quite good at waking you, really.

[Group laughter]

We've had cats who were worse than that! We had one – Sebastian, Bastie – and, um, he had canine teeth which were rather like a sabre-toothed tiger's, they sort of stuck out of his mouth a little bit, you know?

[Group 'aww']

...and, um, when he was particularly keen on waking you, generally about four o'clock in the morning, he would very delicately insert one of those canine teeth up your nostril...

[Group laughter]

...I can assure you, it was very good at waking you up!

[Group laughter]

HELEN

I remember one time I was staying over at a friend's who has, I think they've got two cats now, but I was gonna sleep on the sofa, but I would, like, move around and, like when I opened my eyes, their cat just had his paw hovering over my face as if he was about to boop me on the forehead!

[Sue laughs]

...like, every time I opened my eyes he was just about to do it! So, eventually, I put the blanket over my head and then he went away!

[Group laughter]

Lydia, tell me about your pets.

LYDIA

I have four chickens. They are called Raptor, Static, Bandit, and Beans.

HELEN

Aww!

LYDIA

Two of them are nearly a year old, and two of them are about eight months old. And we kind of have a half-pet, in that we agree to feed the cat that our neighbour fed when she went into hospital, but then she had to go into a care home afterwards so we still feed that cat, but that cat does not like people, so...

HELEN

Ah.

LYDIA

...er, she doesn't come inside, but she sits outside and she meows. She has her set food times and if we're late, she lets us know...

[Helen laughs]

...and a couple of times we've been away and so had someone, like, cat-sit, so they just come in and put food out at the right times and they make sure she's got her water and everything. And people sometimes have, like, a saviour complex where they're just, like, 'I will tame this feral cat that hasn't gone into a house', and then I get these, like, more and more disappointed texts over the course of a week being like, 'yeah, just, I tried to stroke her and now she won't come into the garden'.

HELEN

Mmm.

LYDIA

And it's just, like, yeah, some, some animals, it's like, you have a relationship but it is not a close one, and you accept that. But yeah, I spend a lot of my time out in the garden with the chickens and see the cat twice a day, but yes! I've talked a lot about this cat when, in fact, it's the chickens that dominate my life. Yell in the morning. Yell in the evening. Lay an egg. Squawk.

[Helen laughs]

Ask to speak to the manager.

[Group laughter]

You know, that's the general, general gist. They're, they're good, they're good chickens. They do good chickening.

HELEN

Aww.

LYDIA

I've never spotted them not being a chicken.

HELEN

Ah! Well, that's always good to know.

TESSA

I had one chicken that used to act like a duck!

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

See!

TESSA

Because we had, we had six chickens and six ducks for a while, and the...one of the chickens we got young at the same time as we got three of the ducks. And so it just went around with them and it would try to go into the water and stuff...

LYDIA

Oh no!

TESSA

...and get wet, and then it was, like, 'I don't understand why this is not working for me in the way it's working for my compatriots!' Yeah, so I had a chicken that acted like a duck.

LYDIA

So tragic, because they...

TESSA

It was tragic!

LYDIA

There's so much that they don't understand! Like, you can look at them and sometimes people are like, 'oh, they're surprisingly clever' when they work out, like, how to get some food out of your hand, but they don't see when the chicken runs towards a door and then accidentally overshoots and is on the other side of the door, like, you know, around the back of the door, and then they're kind of panicking because they're like 'why can't I get into my run?' And they can't work out until you shut the door or pick them up and take them

on the other side, and it's like, this is where the entrance way is, you just... you got stuck behind the door. There's, yeah, the, people are always like 'you know, since you got chickens don't you have more respect for them as complex creatures', and I...

[Helen laughs]

I look at my chickens and I'm like, you can love a creature and know its limits!

[Group laughter]

HELEN

Oh, that applies to, to a lot of things.

LYDIA

Yeah! Humans too I guess, yeah, but...

[Group laughter]

It's like that whole thing of, you know, you treat an animal best when you treat it as the animal it is, you don't just like, 'this is what a human would want, so I will do this...'

SUE

Yes.

LYDIA

They, they like routine.

SUE

Yeah, that's quite true. As far as chickens are concerned, my husband was telling me yesterday, in one of the games he was running, one of the players, when they were rolling up their characters, there was, erm, I can't remember exactly which quality it was, but he rolled very very low, so Paul told him that he could have the special gift of talking to chickens.

LYDIA

Amazing. Yep.

[Helen laughs]

SUE

The chap was very very pleased and said, 'oh, that'll be really interesting to know what chickens have to say'. And Paul said, no, no, no, no – you can talk to the chickens, but they don't talk back!

[Group laughter]

HELEN

Noo! Oh, that's such a curse!

LYDIA

Yeah like, I've become more and more convinced that chickens are basically saying just about everything that humans say to one another, they're just

being more efficient. Like, the way that they squeak to each other, it kind of means several different things. It's like, 'who are you?', 'ah I know you!', 'Do you know me?', 'I know you!', 'I know you?', 'I know you!', 'Who's in charge?', 'I'm in charge!' 'Who's in charge?', 'I, I think it's me... ? No, no – you're in charge!' That's basically what they're saying, and sometimes, 'I'm over here, I'm over here! Where are you?' and then, 'I'm over here, I'm over here, where are you?' in return. Like that's basically what they're saying, constantly.

HELEN

It's trying to meet someone at a London Tube station.

LYDIA

Yeah!

[Group laughter]

It's basically, 'Where are you?', 'Get out of the way'. Like, 'Do you know who I am?', 'I know who you are', 'Do you know who I am?'

SUE

I'm the boss!

LYDIA

Yeah, exactly! 'I'm boss', or like, 'I'm not boss, you're boss!'

TESSA

I found food!

LYDIA

Yeah, exactly! 'Get out of the way, that's my food!' I mean, they're most of the conversations I have in the day if you actually boil it down, you know.

[Helen laughs]

HELEN

Lyd, which of your chickens is the boss, then?

LYDIA

Oh, Raptor is the boss.

HELEN

Ah! I see! I should have guessed from the name.

TESSA

But everyone's afraid of Static.

LYDIA

Everyone is afraid of Static. Yeah! Like, this is...because I do stream them and I do tweet about them, I worry that I am already, I'm telling people things they already know. Like, even Raptor is afraid of Static when Static's in a mood! Static is the smallest chicken by quite a long way...

HELEN

Oh, naturally the most dangerous!

LYDIA

...but, but she's number two, and I think the only reason that she's not number one is that because Raptor has a big head crest, she can't always see where the treats are. So, like, Static can just get whatever she wants and she doesn't have to have all the bother of like being in charge, she just runs around after Raptor and, and nicks the treats anyway, so. She's very much the power behind the throne. She's got, you know, grand vizier vibes...

TESSA

It reminds me of how the small dogs are the ones who always think that... who are always, like, the ones with the most attitude...

SUE

And the boss! You see a German Shepherd walking next to a Yorkshire Terrier, you know who's the boss!

[Group laughter]

We had a Cocker Spaniel. He would eat almost anything; not cucumber, he didn't like cucumber. We found this out when we were on holiday and we were visiting a stately home, and we left Bilbo...

HELEN

Bilbo!

SUE

...in the car under a tree. Well, naturally Bilbo – he was, um, he had hairy feet and he was um, a burglar whenever it came to food!

[Group laughter]

So he had to be called Bilbo, it was the only possible name! So anyway, we left Bilbo in the car and I had made a whole round, several rounds of salmon and cucumber sandwiches. And when we got back he had eaten every single sandwich and every single thing in every single sandwich except the cucumber.

[Group laughter]

There were little rounds of cucumber strewn all over the back seat.

LYDIA

So Bandit is the lowest in the pecking order, so she often gets pecked. I bring her inside the house and I check that she doesn't have any actual cuts on her, and I spray her with anti-peck spray. And while she's doing that, she finds it quite stressful so I give her a handful of treats, and she does not like millet. And so she can be going through quite, like, an unpleasant procedure where I'll, like, I'll turn her upside down and I'll check that her foot's okay, because for a while I thought she had a cut on her foot and so I was soaking it and, and putting antiseptic on it, and it seemed to heal super-fast. Like, I was being very proactive and she didn't like it. And so she got quite a few handfuls of treats while she waited for the, sort of, thing to soak, and she'd be making these noises, like...

[Lydia makes chicken noises]

...in, in protest at having to stand in a bucket while her foot soaked. And I would have a handful of treats to kind of distract her every now and again. And it's the fact that she would go through and, like, peck through to find her favourite bits, like, enthusiastically – nom, nom, nom, nom, nom – and then occasionally she would just, like, drop a bit of millet that she might have accidentally pecked up...

[Helen and Lydia laugh]

Then she'd just go through it, like, she's just like 'this is torture, I hate every second of it, oh, but not millet.'

[Group laughter]

SUE

I think it's very cruel of you to try and give her millet. I think she ought to go to the chicken's union!

LYDIA

Well, it's in a mixed bag of treats, so...

SUE

I mean, I know, I know, but for heaven's sake, you mean, you haven't actually gone through and extracted all the millet?!

LYDIA

I know...

[Helen laughs]

SUE

What sort of owner are you?!

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

I know, I'm terrible!

HELEN

Now, Lyd, you offered to bring a chicken in.

LYDIA

Oh! I will go get a chicken, yeah. I'll get one before they put themselves to sleep.

HELEN

Very exciting! So glad we're recording this.

TESSA

Something that Lydia was talking about with the chickens running past the door reminds me a lot of...so Tikka is a smart dog, she's very good at learning, but er, she'll be on the deck and I'll be in the yard, and I'll be calling her and

she'll be at the railing closest to me and she'll, she'll just kind of look at me like 'how do I get down there?' Even though there's stairs, but to get down the stairs she has to move away from me first...

HELEN

Awww...

TESSA

... so sometimes she does that same thing, and I'm just, like, you know where the stairs are, go use it!

[Clucking sounds, gasps from Helen and Tessa]

SUE

Oh wait, have we got a chicken?

HELEN

The chicken has entered the room!

SUE

We have a chicken!

LYDIA

Yeah, Helen, I think you're going to have to put 'warning, chicken eating mealworms sounds' in the content...

[Clucking]

[To Raptor] ... yeah, baby? You wanna sing?

[Raptor clucks, group laughter]

...yeah, I don't know if you can see her...

HELEN

Yeah!

LYDIA

...but, like, she likes...she likes to sit on my arm, so you can see, I'm not actually holding her, she's just, like, literally sitting on my arm like a, I mean like a raptor, I guess! Yeah?

HELEN

Oh, is this Raptor?

LYDIA

This is Raptor. The other ones don't like being held as much.

HELEN

Aww...

[Clucking]

LYDIA

Like they, you know, Static likes to be held and stroked for like, precisely ten seconds.

[Helen laughs]

[To Raptor] Yeah, baby, I know, I know. There you go, bribery, yes! Mummy's got mealworms.

HELEN

Ohh, what a good bird!

TESSA

Makes me miss my chickens, even if they were evil.

[Helen laughs]

LYDIA

[To Raptor] Who's my baby?

[Raptor clucks in response]

[To Raptor] That's a microphone!

SUE

Don't eat it!

LYDIA

Yeah!

HELEN

Yeah, don't let her peck the microphone!

[Helen laughs]

TESSA

Yeah, it would make for an interesting sound!

HELEN

It would! Maybe we could use it for foley.

[Clucking sounds]

...Awww.

LYDIA

Yeah, I think you're getting a lot, a nice variety of squeaks.

HELEN

Yeah, they're lovely!

[Clucking]

LYDIA

[To Raptor] Who's my baby?

[Raptor clucks]

[To Raptor] Yeah, you're right! Yes, you!

TESSA

Oh, a tall bird!

[Clucking]

LYDIA

She's so, she's a very tall bird!

HELEN

So tall.

[Clucking]

LYDIA

Tall chicken!

[Helen laughs]

[To Raptor] Raptor, what is your opinion on your living conditions?

[Group laughter]

[Raptor clucks]

[To Raptor] Mmhmm. Mmhmm. And, and what do you think about the meaning of, of the pet human relationship, huh?

SUE

Not much!

[Laughter]

LYDIA

Silence...

[Clucking]

[To Raptor] There we are! Some squeaking. Have you got some squeaking? Are you spoiled?

[Clucking]

No, she says no. I don't know, I don't want this to dominate, you know...

HELEN

No, that's okay!

LYDIA

[To Raptor] I've just got a baby chicken!

HELEN

I think...I think on these interesting contributions from Raptor, we will go to a break!

[Group laughter]

[Clucking]

LYDIA

She's like, where's my percentage?!

[Group laughter]

HELEN

And welcome back. We're all very glad for those words of wisdom from Raptor there. Now, speaking of the wisdom of our pets, I'd like to ask, has anyone taught their pets any interesting tricks? Or, or seen a pet demonstrate – how shall I put this – unimagined mischief? Such as a dog figuring out how to open a door. Or, in fact, I saw a video of a bear trying to get into someone's house and, like, actually started messing around with the front door knob! And the person just ran up to it and quickly locked it and then ran away again.

TESSA

Oh my gosh!

LYDIA

If I go first because it will be very quick. Chickens are very trainable, I've heard, I don't know if mine are just then refusing. I've, I've taught Raptor 'step up', which took a while...

HELEN

Mmhmm.

LYDIA

...and for a while she just thought she needed to whack my hand with her claws and then she would get a treat. So I could really have gotten a handshake thing out of that as well, but the main thing is I, you would be hard pressed to find an animal that is more attuned to the sound of an opening plastic bag!

[Helen laughs]

Like, crisps, not safe. They don't want crisps, they want mealworms, but they know what the mealworm packet sounds like and they know roughly where it is in the house so they will, like...they can see when I've walked in the right direction and they get very excited! That's it. That's all the tricks they know!

HELEN

That's okay.

LYDIA

Oh! They do come when I whistle!

ALL

Awww...

HELEN

That's quite impressive I think!

LYDIA

It's quite funny seeing, like, the undergrowth wobble as they run towards me.

TESSA

We used to say, um, 'ducks, ducks, ducks', and then the ducks would all come waddling.

[Group laughter]

So, the funny thing too, is that hearing that your chickens come when you whistle makes me a little bit sad because Tikka is very stubborn about coming.

[Group laughter]

She kind of looks at me sometimes if she doesn't want to leave whatever she's doing, just to look at me and then go do something else, and I'm like, you know what I'm asking of you. I know you know it, we've done the training, you can do it, you're just choosing not to! But recently I've started to train her with a buzzword, so you're always supposed to have a buzzword that you don't frequently use where you give them a really, really high incentive treat every time...

HELEN

Ohhh...

TESSA

...so that you can call your dog to you in an emergency situation. So if they're, like, going toward the street and there's a car, or they're, you know, just something where you need them to come immediately, no questions asked. And that's supposed to be a different word than come because come is what you're using regularly, and they might choose to ignore it. You need a word that they will not choose to ignore. So I've started to train her with that and we're using the word 'hot dog' so I just go 'hot dog!', and then she comes running...

[Helen laughs]

...and it's so cute! And the other day, she was at the fence getting all antsy because there was someone passing with a dog, and I was on the porch looking down, and I said 'hot dog!' and I got a hot dog for her. And she, like, looked at me, looked at the fence, made this pitiful little whimper whine, and then ran to me.

[Group laughter]

So it is working, which is nice, but I have to retrain her on actually coming as well, but my favourite trick that she does that we've taught her is called 'go find'. I mean, I love 'in your place' where you point at her crate and say, 'in your place', and she'll go in and it's really cute, and then she'll wait for you to

let her come out again, but 'go find' is where you show her one of her toys, you let her sniff it, you make her lie down and stay, and you go hide it somewhere in the house. And it can be anywhere. It can be, like, on a chair, under a chair, behind a wall, behind a door, you know, you can put it wherever you want. And then you just say, 'go find', and she'll go off and she'll sniff it out and she'll find it, and it might take her a bit, she might ask you for a bit of help, but she'll go find it and then she'll bring it to you and be, like, 'look at what I did!' And you can always tell if she's found it because she does this little prance walk that you can hear her nails on the floor, like...

[Group laughter]

...so proud!

HELEN

That's really cool.

SUE

That's sweet. Cressy doesn't have any tricks at all, but we do!

[Group laughter]

She's trained us. This is the point, you know. She um, she very rarely does very much meowing, but we put food in her dish and if it's not the food she wants, the flavour she wants, she'll stand there and look at us with a particular look, and we know we have to try and find some more food for her. A better flavour, you see.

[Group laughter]

Tuna, for example. She's very happy with tuna, but not so happy with other sorts of fish. So, yeah, I don't think she's got any tricks at all but, as I say, we've got quite a number now!

HELEN

What about, er, Bilbo? Did he have any?

SUE

Oh, bless him! He would do anything as long as he was rewarded with something edible. So, he would lie, he would sit, he would wait, he would give his paw to shake, you know...

LYDIA

... break into a mountain and...

[Helen laughs]

SUE

...oh, absolutely! You know, Fort Knox! Although, I think Fort Knox has only got gold in it. If it had had, I don't know, hamburgers or something, he'd have been there!

[Group laughter]

But on the other hand, if you didn't have a treat for him, and he knew perfectly well, of course, whether you were holding something or not, he wouldn't do anything really. He'd sit, I suppose. That's about it. Yeah, he was a very clever dog when food was concerned and really stupid for everything else!

TESSA

Or perhaps very clever because he knew he wouldn't get anything for it, so...

SUE

Well, exactly...

TESSA

...he's like why would I do this?

SUE

Exactly! Spaniels, of course, are gun dogs...

HELEN

Ohh...

SUE

...and so we thought it would be a good idea to train him and get him really obedient and so on. So we took him when he was very young to a huge open air leisure centre near where we lived, which did dog training classes. And unfortunately it also had a gun range a little way off, and whenever he heard a gun, he just dropped to his belly and cowered, and gave little tiny whimpers...

HELEN

Aww!

SUE

So, you know. And then we tried to get him to retrieve and he'd run after a ball or whatever it was you threw, a stick or whatever, no problem, and then he'd get to it, and then he'd sit there, and if you approached him to try and get it, he'd sort of, it wasn't exactly a growl, but he wanted to keep it, you know. He wouldn't bring it back. So you had to go and, sort of, wrest it away from his jaws and then throw it again, and the same thing would happen again. I mean, really, as a gun dog he was utterly useless.

[Group laughter]

Oh, and he hated water, as well. He fell in a canal, well, there's lots and lots of canals in Birmingham, more canals in Birmingham than in Venice, and when he was a very tiny puppy, we were walking him along, there was no one around so we let him off the lead, and he didn't realise that water was different from land.

HELEN

Ohhh...

SUE

So he just sort of walked straight into the canal. And it was the world's work to get him out again, because, of course, he doggy-paddled, he was swimming

alright, but the bank was very, very steep, almost vertical, and he was about two foot down. We got him out in the end, but after that he hated water and if you took him down to the beach, he would look at the water, look at the waves, and then he would run at the waves barking at them.

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

So, when you say he hated water, it wasn't like he avoided it, it was like he had a grudge...

SUE

No, he did avoid it, he wouldn't go in...

LYDIA

...he had a grudge!

SUE

...he would just stand at the verge and if the water came anywhere near him, he'd retreat very fast.

HELEN

Aww!

TESSA

For the first time in my life I have a dog who does not mind- okay, no she doesn't really like water, but she doesn't mind it at the same time. She'll go in

up to, like, her legs and stuff, she won't go in past where she can't stand anymore. But I have the cutest videos of her when we first got her and we went camping, and we were at this little lake that had nice little waves going, and she was, like, biting at the bugs that were above the water. And so she'd go into the water, she'd go and she'd be biting at the, at the bugs or she'd be trying to bite the waves that were coming at her because they, like, did little foam tops and she thought that that was very interesting. And then, every once in a while, she was attached by a rope to, like, a clip because we didn't have a leash for her yet, and so it was this big carabiner with a big rope knot on it, and she'd look down while she was in the water and she'd see this red thing hanging there, and she'd grab it by, like, the end of, by the knot, and she'd carry it out. So she kept, like, grabbing her own leash in her mouth and carrying it out of the water, and then she'd go back in and be going for the bugs again, and then she'd see the rope again and she'd carry it very carefully out of the water and it's just the cutest...

LYDIA

...oh, baby!

TESSA

...thing, and her little muzzle was all wet. And recently we went to the beach with her and she was dragging bull kelp out of the ocean and we kept putting it back in, like, 'stop trying to, you know, destroy the local ecosystem', and then she thought it was a great game and she would go and take it out again and drag the bull kelp along the beach. She's very cute.

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

I was thinking, when, when you said, Sue, about Bilbo being very clever about food and not much else, that is the thing where the chickens won't necessarily listen to any command until it's, you know, I've done it a million times. But they are so aware of whether I actually have a treat in my hand...

SUE

Yep!

LYDIA

...or, or whether I'm faking it. Like, sometimes they get a bit stuck coming back, like, when I whistle for them to return, and I always whistle and give them the treat at the same place at the entrance to their run, so they come back, they know where to go, and I've kind of taken them out carefully to, like, a few of the places that they might escape to in future, and shown them the way back, so they could potentially find their way back or, at least, you know, find their way nearly back so I can, I can grab them if they do escape or they get lost. And sometimes, if one of them's late and the rest of them are in there and they're demanding treats for having been so good and turned up, I have to, like, pretend I'm throwing more treats in because I only had one handful and like, you know, a dog would fall for that, but a chicken...

[Helen laughs]

...you do, you throw it and they look down and they look at you, and they're, like, 'we're, no, what do you think we are, fools?! I have a PhD in this, no!'

And I've tried really hard to, like, generalise the command, so it's not just when Lydia goes into the house, grabs something that sounds like rustling plastic, then walks back to the run, then whistles, then you get a treat, because then they might pick up on any part of that. Like, so I try to, like, hide some treats in my hand and then walk around the garden doing other things, and then go there and whistle, but they're like, 'oh no, we know there's treats there. We know!' So they're just following me around like stepping on, underneath my feet or I'll, like, go in and I'll walk to another place and then I'll walk somewhere else, and then I'm, 'oh no, what's over here'... or, like, sometimes, I've hidden treats above the run so that I can go there, grab the treats, and then whistle. And they're just, like, they are baffled, but they're impressed! It's like a magic trick! 'Wow, you did half the command. I know it's a, like, three-stage thing. There's the walking bit, there's the rustly bit...' I don't know if they've got the whistle as the actual reason yet, but we're getting there.

HELEN

So. Here's a question that's just occurred to me. Now I, I've never had a pet apart from a mouse that I caught for a few hours...

[Group laughter]

I managed to catch it and I put it in a bucket because that was the nearest available, in fact no, I think, I think I said 'Dad, where do I put this mouse?' and he gave me a bucket. And then I put a turnip in the bucket for the mouse to eat, but the turnip was, was like, long and thin enough that it could be used as a ramp and the mouse immediately ran away.

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

Oh, poor baby Helen.

HELEN

Because my mum doesn't like animals. She said I could have a goldfish but, obviously, I wasn't going to settle for that. So, I'd like to know, like, what do you think is, like, the best thing about having a pet?

SUE

That's a good question.

TESSA

I can speak for the best thing about having a dog specifically...

HELEN

Oh yeah?

TESSA

...because, I mean, I've had, you know, ducks and chickens and stuff, but they were really more for the farming aspect, so I didn't ever really consider them pets. The reason why I think that having a dog is just, like, the best thing in the world is because it's an unmatched level of complete adoration and trust and love...

HELEN

Mmmm...

TESSA

...and receiving that from another creature, it makes me feel like I'm worthy of it in general because, like...

HELEN

Ohhhh...

TESSA

...providing for this creature and she just looks at me and I know she loves me so much. And I think that that's something that's really important, is to feel that kind of love and know that, like, I deserve this and I deserve it from the world, and I am loved and I love equally back, and I would, I would murder for this creature, you know!

[Helen laughs]

Anyway, that's, like, the reason why I love Tikka so much, and dogs in general, is just that amount of care.

HELEN

That's so nice. Aw, Tessa.

LYDIA

So, like as a kid we had pet rats, and, like, I mean ones bought from, like, a pet rat breeder, like...

HELEN

Not ones that you just caught in the garden!

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah, yeah! And I just have to say that for, because obviously we lived in a small place in the inner city and so having a dog was not, like, we didn't have the money for a dog, and people nearby did sometimes like keep a massive German Shepherd in their tiny flats and it was just, like, that's not okay!

TESSA

Yeah!

LYDIA

I know it, like, it's different when you've got space. So we had pet rats and, so rats on, like, puzzle-solving intelligence tests tend to do a bit better than cats and a little bit better than smart dogs, so they're around the level of, like, a medium intelligent dog, and they play such clever games with you and they're so interested in you. And I think it's a wonderful thing as a child to not be the smallest one in a household, and to have someone that is vulnerable, that you need to be careful of, and around, and someone whose wellbeing in part relies on you, and you see your behaviour reflected back, and I've got friends where they've got small children and cats. That has to be very carefully supervised, especially when the kids are small, but it's so valuable to have, I, oh, you know, 'as the child, I'm not the only one who gets their needs met when they ask' without, like, necessarily having power in the place. There's, there's other creatures here that I have some power over and that might scratch me if I do

something wrong – they're not...like, there's creatures in this household that are not caregivers to me and that I have to work out my relationship with. I think at almost all ages, that's super, yeah, I think at all ages that's super-valuable for kids, whether or not it's like them being very small or, as they get a bit older and... Like I just remember marvelling at the intelligence of this tiny creature that had, like, worked out how to climb up the back of a, like, chest of drawers and weave its way through the insides of a printer and then swing its body backwards so that it pulled out the drawer at the top of a filing cabinet, which was where we'd had to hide the treats as a last resort. And this rat was blind that had managed that...

HELEN

Oh, wow!

LYDIA

...it had done it all by sound and feel. Like, because a lot of rats, albino rats can't really see so, yeah, it was, like, the fact that marvelling at the intelligence of them, marvelling at the, the fact that they'll play games, like, you know, hide and seek, and you can train them quite complex sets of behaviours and, you know, you can give them a little bath to swim in and they hunt out the little peas, and, oh and you can race them up the stairs. It's great!

HELEN

Oh, of course!

LYDIA

They're, they're very, they're very clever things. But, yeah, I think in a, in a, it's a related thing to what Tessa's saying of, like, you...I think kids often feel quite powerless and so to have another creature that's trying to find its way in the world without completely controlling its situation is super important. And then, when you're older, it is good for humbleness. It can be, like, 'I think of myself as a quite intelligent and capable human person, but I cannot understand why this chicken is dissatisfied.'

[Helen laughs]

I have to make sure that their life is good and they, in return, they get to yell at me. And they give me breakfast, which is cool, you know, like I tell people who make other pet choices, you know, when did your cat last make you brunch? Has your dog ever contributed to dinner?

TESSA

Well, she's tried!

[Group laughter]

SUE

There's one other thing as well which related to pets and children, which is, I'm not sure whether I ought to say this, but I have to say it really. It teaches children about death. Because pets, for the most part, die before we do...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...unless you have a parrot or a tortoise, their lifespan is pretty short, unfortunately, and of course the smaller the animal, you know, your rats, your mice, your rabbits, they don't live very long. Cats and dogs live a bit longer but, you know, it's still not massively. Children have to learn to cope with death and cope with sorrow, and so do we all, you know? I've talked about Cressy, and we don't know quite how old she is because she was a rescue cat, but, you know, we don't know how much longer she has left and we've lost many, many cats and, of course, Bilbo and rabbits and Mynah birds and lemmings and all the other animals that we've had. And in the end...I think that, too is part of, because it's part of life I think it's very valuable.

TESSA

Yeah.

LYDIA

It's really interesting to be able to look back and think about how much you took from a relationship with a creature that wasn't human, like, I had three pet rats, because they lived about, they lived between three and four years for us which our, the vets told us was extraordinary, they hadn't seen a rat over two. Rats aren't supposed to like when you turn them upside down because that's a dominance thing, but like, ours knew that they would get tickled so much that like they were fine when they got a bit older and the vets needed to give them check ups, so they were all, 'oh, they're a delight!'. But it's the fact that, you know, there's...I, I think about Buttons and his like, the way he kept his baby fur when he was older and he was so soft and he liked to just lie on

you and be soft. And his brother, Cloud, that was like the blind one that would run around solving puzzles all day and, like, it was just, it's that, that kind of, like, the way they were so different and, yeah, the way that Emmy would just...she was just so dainty. She would hold her tail up over the ground whereas rats often let them drag in the, like, drag along and so they can sometimes get rashes and stuff, even if you keep things quite clean, because they will drag their tail along the ground. She was just so dainty. She would just hold her tail up, and she was very picky about the food that she ate, and that was something we had never seen in another rat! And they're, like, these tiny things that have a whole kind of inner world of politics, they have their relationship with you, they have their own little routine. And I, I think one of the weird things is that you can get that very much from a relationship with wild animals as well. Like before I got the chickens, I fed the wild birds around here and I, I put quite a lot of effort into making sure it was good mealworms and good stuff, and it was in a nice position. So we got, like, loads of birds, and this is central London, but like, you know, robins, great tits, blue tits, too many starlings, obviously parakeets...

HELEN

Yeah.

LYDIA

...and that's, like, after, you know you've got all the other kind of bigger ones that are interested in trying to hunt the smaller ones, so like the magpies and the crows are kind of wandering around, and the seagulls go past and everything goes silent. It's just so lovely to learn, like, the routine of a wild animal. I knew when the robin was coming round, that's, that's his time of

day. I knew when it was robin mating season because, goodness, they would fight violently in my, in my back garden. I knew the two different families of great tits that were going through, and they had two different routines – there was the big family that would come through in the morning, and then there were two, I think, males, that came through very quickly and very nervously in the afternoon, so I think they were, like, intruding on the other ones' territory because they couldn't, like, hold their own space. And it's, it's those kind of... those animals get to learn who you are and you learn who they are, and it, it just reminds you that humans, they change the world, right, like they're, they're big clonking things that make big technology, but there, there are other ways of being and living and existing and having, and they're very important and they're just as complicated and interesting often.

HELEN

Now, we're nearly out of time, so I have one quick-fire round question to ask, which is, what is the non-domestic animal that you think would be a fun pet to have? Obviously, do not try and have an exotic pet if you cannot care for it, obviously, and I would argue there are many animals that should never be kept in captivity, but, like, it would be really cool, maybe not to, like, have in the house, but like, to have, like, a wolf...

[Lydia laughs]

... who came by to visit. I think wolves are really, really cool.

LYDIA

Yeah, somebody read Robin Hobb repeatedly at key points in development!

HELEN

Thanks for calling me out, Lydia! Like I just...

[Group laughter]

It's a very good series of books, that one!

[Lydia continues laughing]

I thought wolves were cool well before I read about Robin Hobb and Nighteyes, and all that! One of the first short stories I ever wrote was about a wolf and another wolf having a fight. That was when I was reading Jack London books!

SUE

Ah, yes. Jack London!

LYDIA

Yeah.

SUE

Call of the Wild, White Fang.

LYDIA

That's, that's basically yeah, a series of books about how wolves are cool.

HELEN

Yes, I, that has totally influenced me! And like, I, it would be cool to just, like, if there were wolves in the same way that there are foxes in London...

[Lydia laughs]

...I mean, it wouldn't be, it would be terrifying, but also...

LYDIA

...I'd be a little more nervous about late night commutes, yeah...

HELEN

Because I always love it when I see a fox running around.

LYDIA

I used to.

HELEN

I think foxes are really cool as well.

LYDIA

Now, nemesis.

HELEN

Anyway!

SUE

I doubt that Lydia would agree with you about foxes.

LYDIA

Look, foxes are absolutely fine. We actually have quite a good agreement with the local ones, and that sounds like a joke, but there is absolutely no point in harming a fox in London because the population density is so high that if you in any way hurt one its, like, territory will just be replaced by another one. Not that I intend to ever, I just, I just think there's both the moral and the logical argument, right? So I just have a water gun. And we also put down chilli powder. Like, I've never trapped a mouse, but we got rid of mice very effectively by just mixing chilli powder into the chicken's feed because birds can't taste peppers.

HELEN

Oh!

TESSA

That's really smart!

SUE

That's interesting.

LYDIA

It's a defence mechanism evolved against mammals to stop us from eating things the plants want birds to eat and to disperse.

SUE

Right.

LYDIA

So, they're very tasty to birds if they can taste them at all.

HELEN

That's really cool!

LYDIA

Yeah, so, like, now we just don't have mice or, at least, the mice are hiding from me. But like I've never hurt them except, I suppose, probably their, their little eyes ran a little. It was very spicy in there for a while, like...

[Helen laughs]

Very spicy in the chicken run!

HELEN

But what, can you think of a non-domestic animal that you think would be cool to have around?

LYDIA

So the awkward thing is that my immediate thought was a parrot, but obviously people keep parrots, but I would really like to have an ongoing friendship with one of the local parakeets, you know. I can't really because there's the contamination risk if I encourage wild birds in the same area as there's chickens, it's not a great idea. But if I did not have the chickens, I would

be putting out food and interesting bird toys and things, and seeing if I could establish a friendship, a non-demanding friendship with the local parakeets. Or crows, it's just that the crows are a bit more stand-offish around here!

HELEN

Yeah, they can be!

LYDIA

And you've got to have actual jewels to, to like...

HELEN

Oh, yeah!

LYDIA

...tempt a crow around here.

HELEN

You've got to bribe the crows!

LYDIA

Exactly! Exactly, whereas parakeets will make do with, just, you know, a shiny mirror and, and a bit of corn on the cob!

HELEN

What about you, Sue. What do you think?

SUE

A rhinoceros.

[Group laughter]

I love rhinos. Yeah. I mean, obviously, as domestic pets I don't think they would be terribly good...

[Helen laughs]

TESSA

Not the most convenient, either.

SUE

No, but they just, I just love rhinoceroses, and they're so threatened in the wild and, you know, one or two species are more or less vanished now. They're just not there. Poachers go for them because of the horns. So...

LYDIA

So you would like, instead of those pesky little certificates that say you have adopted a rhinoceros and it's just sponsoring one far away, you want one in the back garden!

SUE

We have, we have – we, we do sponsor a World Wildlife Fund rhinoceros and we get updates occasionally, and it seems to be doing quite well. It's a black rhino. But if I had a huge estate, like Longleat, you know, I wouldn't bother with lions, I'd just have rhinos.

HELEN

And what about you, Tessa?

TESSA

Oh, my mind immediately went to, like, a whole bunch of mythical creatures...

HELEN

Ooh!

TESSA

...and then I couldn't stop thinking about them, so I was just, like, man, I would like a phoenix or, like, a baby dragon, a sphinx, but er, circling back, something like a squirrel, a flying squirrel would be cool just something that could kind of crawl up in your sleeve, hang out there and then...I don't know, I want a small companion. I would want a small fuzzy companion.

LYDIA

Tessa, have you, have you heard of Sugar Gliders?

TESSA

Yes, I have, but they need a friend so you would have to have two, and I want a creature that loves me more than anything else in the world, so...!

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

Okay! Cool!

TESSA

That's why I have a dog!

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

Whereas I like to have pets that are, at best, indifferent to me!

[Group laughter]

HELEN

I think that brings us to the end and, do you know what, we've made it through the entire episode without me talking about my horse girl days, but maybe that's, er, for another time!

TESSA

Ohhh, that's a bummer!

[Group laughter]

I would have liked to hear about that.

HELEN

[Laughs]

We'll do an episode just about horses!

LYDIA

I think that might come up in the, like, identity politics episode more!

[Group laughter]

HELEN

We are not doing an episode on identity politics, Lydia, how dare you!

[Group laughter]

LYDIA

It's not your favourite thing.

HELEN

No! So, on that, thank you all so much for talking about animals and your pets with me. This has been oddly serious at points...

[Helen laughs]

TESSA

Yeah.

HELEN

...but super, super interesting, as always. Thank you so much. Listeners, I hope you have enjoyed it as much as we have, and I'll see you in the next episode.

But for now it's goodbye from me, goodbye, and it's goodbye from all of them.
Do you want to say goodbye, everybody?

ALL

Bye!

Bye everybody! Yay!

[Show Theme - Outro]

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[Show Theme – Outro Ends]

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