



Lost and found

The panic of losing a dog is intense – but losing a former Kenyan street dog, who is scared of fireworks, in the middle of a three-day fiesta in Costa Rica really tests one's endurance and strength

AFTER CAMPING next to our favourite river, we drive five kilometres into town along Costa Rica's dusty, pot-holed roads, passing cattle being herded by caballeros wearing sombreros, and loose horses. It's 2.30 in the afternoon as we pull into the town of Samara. Despite parking underneath a tree outside the bank, it'll get hot inside the van. I debate letting Dog and Bruiser wait outside with some local dogs. But people from the city are beginning to arrive for the Easter holiday - there's more traffic than usual. Instead, I make sure all the van windows are open.

The queue inside is long and the bank-tellers few. We crawl forward. Finally, I'm the next person. At exactly 3pm a huge explosion reverberates - fireworks. We'd passed a fiesta on the way in, the local equivalent of a small carnival. Bruiser... Now 10 years old, he spooks more now than ever over loud

noises. I start to head to the door. The teller indicates it's my turn. I hesitate. I have no money.

After handing the woman my documents, another firework goes off. It sounds like an exploding bomb. I rush to the bank's front door and peer at my vehicle 25 paces away. All I see is the white van. I hesitate and return to the window. The teller proceeds to type data into her computer. The process is endless. With documents and money finally in hand, I rush outside and slide open the van's door. Dog, who usually isn't fazed by fireworks, cowers on the floor. Bruiser is gone.

After 15 hours of being lost, there is still no sign of Bruiser, despite combing this tourist town with neighbours and calling his name incessantly.

"We need to put up signs," a friend insists. I'm dubious. Though Bruiser has

the 'look' that makes people leery, a stranger's stares send him skulking away - a survival mechanism learnt from his street dog years in Kenya. I know in my heart that if he is to be found, I'm the one who has to find him.

As the day wears on, I tire from walking up and down the same streets.

"Where are you, Bruiser?" April is the hottest month of the year. Making sure Dog is comfortable in 32 degree temperatures with high humidity is stressful. Desperate to take action, I adapt a sign from the time Bruiser was lost over four years ago while living in Kenya. This time the sign's in Spanish.

Nights are spent at the river in the hope that Bruiser will return to the camping spot we both love. During the day I park the van outside the bank. After 40-plus hours Bruiser is still not with me. Despite my general feelings of panic, I awaken with the crystal clear

thought that I must email the animal communicator I'd used in Kenya. Then, as now, Bruiser is far from familiar territory. And just as confusing as before, there are three different places he could return: the camping spot by the river, the bank and surroundings, or home, a 45-minute drive away.

Ronni Hall was an animal communicator who'd admitted years before to not dealing with lost animals. Her forte, she'd explained when I was introduced to her by email, was communicating with deceased pets. I felt I had no choice. Statistically I knew my chances of finding Bruiser diminished with every passing day. Only later did I learn that perseverance can offset those statistics greatly. Too many people listen not to themselves, but to friends and family who suggest, "If he's not been picked up already, he's gone. You'll never find him." And inevitably, "You can always get another dog..."

Because Ronni and I had conversed in the past, and because she and Bruiser had too, there was no need for introductions or pleasantries. First of all, I have to know if Bruiser is alive. Along with this question, I give Ronni a long list of others. What is more helpful, I later learn, is to let the animals provide the details and guide the psychic.

Ronni's reply comes by email later in the day. "I felt very much in body. I had a vision of a small white house

and next to it a weird pole-like thing, which had two white wing shapes. (Maybe an antennae or a laundry line?) I was moving past it. When I first saw Bruiser's picture, I kept thinking 'by the river'! I felt very confused but not panicky and frantic - just confused."

"A small white house?" I think. "This is Costa Rica - there are a zillion small white houses! And how could Bruiser only feel confused if there are explosions day and night from this horrible three-day fiesta? He'll be a wreck!"

I'm just as annoyed and incredulous as when I'd received her first email in Kenya. This time, however, I know she's not a phoney. She'd given enough clues when Bruiser was lost before, that it only took one trip to a town 90 minutes away to locate him. But I don't understand how Bruiser is only confused while I'm panic-stricken? How can I live without him? I've sensed some of his ongoing health problems are due to the humidity and have set a date to leave Costa Rica a month from now. Obviously, I can't go without him. But what if years go by and I never find him?

Despite my scepticism, I vow to keep my eye out for white houses with antennae-shaped objects. In my frazzled state, I don't see Ronni's pointed note, "... by the river." What I keep remembering instead is the voice of a friend who'd insisted, "He'll hide

out for a while, then go to places like restaurants where there's food." Dogs are not all the same. And this man did not know Bruiser. Bruiser will not want to be around people.

"Doggie, we need to keep looking." Dog looks up forlornly, unsure why her routine has been rudely disrupted. I spend the first few hours of each day bicycling up and down Samara's streets with Dog in tow, calling Bruiser's name. As in Kenya, I'm hoping that having Dog with me will increase our chances of finding Bruiser, though she is clearly not upset that the animal she mated with eight years before is gone. By nine it's too hot to keep dragging Dog with me, so I settle her in the van under a shady tree. I check on her frequently.

As each day turns into another, I ask the same people again and again if they've seen Bruiser. No one has. There are plenty of rubbish piles and restaurants - do I just keep missing him? Is he always at point A, when I'm at point B? I hope he's in Samara, but consistently I feel he is not.

I show Bruiser's picture to a woman who runs a massage school. I book an appointment for that evening. After

From a drawer I pull out an album of pictures from when we spent two years travelling the States. One photo jumps out. It's a desert scene of a dirt track passing through some hills. The sun glows on the horizon and shines on Bruiser's fur as he sprawls in the middle of the road...



...He's completely enjoying his freedom in the middle of nowhere. I focus on the picture with acute attention born from love and the intensely strong desire to find Bruiser. I fall asleep

three days of much worry, little sleep and fewer meals, I fear that if Bruiser is around, I might miss him from having become so run down. I decide to take the remainder of the third day off to regroup.

At my friend's, I do a load of washing and search the internet for lost-animal advice. I find nothing new until I read a note from a woman who searched for weeks before she found her dog. "That is me," I think. "I can't leave Costa Rica without finding Bruiser." My mind peruses various rental homes in Samara. I'm willing to relocate to be closer to where he was lost.

At dusk I reluctantly leave Dog with my friend for the next excursion. I plan on staying up all night long and want to trudge the streets without worrying that I'm causing Dog distress. All my energy needs to be focused on Bruiser.

The massage relaxes me and puts my mind into a heightened sense of

awareness. When I cycle the empty streets, my mind sees everything from Bruiser's perspective. "I knew him when he lived on the streets," I keep repeating. "Where do street dogs go? Where would Bruiser go?" Fields with tall grasses providing refuge reveal nothing. Restaurants, nothing. Construction sites where men drop morsels of food from their breakfasts, lunches and dinners, nothing. I know in my heart that he is not in Samara. Quite simply, I don't feel his presence. I see no point in continuing my search here.

I drive the van to where vacation homes back on to the beach. Methodically, I eat leftovers and prepare for bed. From a drawer I pull out an album of pictures from when we spent two years travelling the States. One photo jumps out. It's a desert scene of a dirt track passing through some hills. The sun glows on the horizon and shines on Bruiser's fur as he sprawls in

Clambering down the slope, my skin is torn by thorns. Blood runs down my leg. After an hour, I hear the distant, low drone of intermittent waves crashing to shore. The sound fills me with dread. "I am not near the ocean," Ronni had relayed. If I reach the sea, I'm at the end of my search

the middle of the road. He's completely enjoying his freedom in the middle of nowhere. I focus on the picture with acute attention born from love and the intensely strong desire to find Bruiser. I fall asleep.

At four in the morning, I awaken with the clear thought that Bruiser's by a river. "Wait, what did Ronni write?" I re-read Ronni's email. "I kept thinking 'by the river'." I've been so fixated on the white house, which I'd located next to the bank, that I hadn't read the rest of her note. "I wonder... maybe he's gone up a different riverbed, thinking it will get to our campsite? Which explains his feelings of confusion. It also explains why Ronni felt he was not frantic. He has not been around the fireworks." I'm not sure. I need more information. Still feeling some of the clarity from the previous night, I know there will be another email from Ronni waiting for me.

While the internet cafe opens, I find an email from Ronni. It was written last night just after my massage. She alternates between Bruiser's perspective and her own. "I kept hearing 'STREAM'. I still felt scared but calmer. Bruiser said he's been trying to call you but you were too upset to hear. I looked down at my feet and there are small rocks. My feet hurt and I'm hungry, but otherwise, okay. I'm staying by the water. I learned that. The water is calming and good for both of us. I am not near the ocean. There's vegetation."

Ronni continued, "I heard 'follow the stream'. I've felt strongly, both check-ins, that Bruiser is near water. I told Bruiser to imagine a big cord between you, and to try to ring your ears and telepathically connect strongly so you pull each other together."

Just outside of Samara there's a riverbed that leads into a bigger pool before heading out to sea. I no longer feel Bruiser is here, but want to eliminate the surrounding areas. The riverbed is basically dry and the rocks are large and jagged, completely dissimilar to the smooth stones of our river. Nevertheless, I walk upstream and call Bruiser's name. Tick.

Next, I drive to the petrol station, fill up and put some oil in the engine. Tick. The river begins another hour east, but I'm certain he won't have walked that way. I drive alongside a road that runs within 100 metres of the river and pull over at a point where we've walked before. No. He's not here. I drive further. I think about stopping at the farm of a cowboy who has dogs. No. Keep going. This is not a decision I'm making. It's coming from somewhere else. I keep imagining the

cord between Bruiser and I.

I park where we usually camp and get out the bicycle, apply sunscreen, put dog food in a plastic bag, and eat a sandwich as if I have all the time in the world. There is a methodology to my actions, which seems important. I am no longer looking for Bruiser. I am making preparations for finding Bruiser. I pack my camera to photograph our reunion.

I head downstream into unknown territory. It's rocky and tough going. "Bruiser, Bruiser," I call constantly, while the sun climbs higher and hotter. I carry the bicycle across water several times. At a fence to keep cattle from wandering, I drag the bicycle between the wires. On the other side is a steep incline, and the barbs cut into my shins. Clambering down the slope, my skin is torn by thorns. Blood runs down my leg. After an hour, I hear the distant, low drone of intermittent waves crashing to shore. The sound fills me with dread. "I am not near the ocean," Ronni had relayed. If I reach the sea, I'm at the end of my search.

I trudge over the uneven landscape. Disheartened, I forget to call. There is nothing but the river, small rocks, and vegetation. And the sound of the ocean. I sink to the ground beneath a bush. Tears pour down my face, and I scream in frustration at the top of my lungs, "BRUISER! BRUISER!"

When I look up, 15 metres in front of me is a red dog. He is partially obscured by bushes. The dog stares at me, his mouth completely shut and appearing extremely serious. Is it my imagination? Have the mental visualizations transformed in front of me? I fear that what I see is only a vague apparition. But no, it is Bruiser.



Less than ten minutes after being reunited with Bruiser, I took this picture of the two of us

Revisiting the white house next to the bank with Dog and Bruiser. This photo was taken at 3pm, the same time of day Bruiser would've seen the house as he ran by in fright. The two satellite dishes appear translucent, not unlike wings

For long moments, neither of us do anything, both having difficulty comprehending we've found each other. From the silence, great guttural screams come from somewhere very deep inside me, my face contorting with a mix of love, amazement and joy. Bruiser whimpers again and again and again while he physically bumps against me, wrapping himself around my legs as I hug and caress him. I can't stop the sounds in my throat.

Food, Bruiser needs food. He's limping. Ronni had written, "My feet hurt..." There's also an ugly gash on his foreleg. It's clear the deep cut wasn't made by barbed wire. "I'm staying by the water. I learned that." Perhaps someone wielding a machete? Bruiser has that look that frightens people... I get out the collapsible dog dish and dry food, but he eats only a few bites. I add water, and he drinks and drinks as I keep filling the bowl.

"Bruiser, so close to the river and you've become so exhausted you haven't been drinking..." I take pictures of him. Then a self-portrait of the two of us, my face still contorted with emotion. I sit in front of him, but he moves further away. I understand. Four days of isolation and being without food and love and suddenly this incredible intensity. I'm only too happy for Bruiser to have his space. After a few minutes I sit behind him, not blocking him, and we begin connecting again. Blessed moments.

I want to get us back to the van so he can really rest. It's an hour's walk. Bruiser is clearly in pain. We will go slowly. I vow to listen to him more closely - for this relatively short walk, and for the rest of his life. ::



Chat with a communicator

Lorraine Chittock talks to Ronni Hall, the animal communicator who helped to reunite her with Bruiser

LC: Working with you to find Bruiser two different times, on two different continents, felt like the dance you do with a physician. You can't go to a doctor and say, "Fix me." Instead, you have to work with them. With animal communication work, it seems both parties need to join their intuition, while working with the realities of both the seen and unseen worlds. Losing Bruiser, though horrible, was also a profound experience. I wonder how often both Bruiser and Dog try to communicate with me and I just don't hear them, especially when I'm too busy with other parts of my life.

RH: We seem to forget we can all do this with our animals - and because we don't, we lose such a valuable tool of communication!

LC: What is it you actually do to communicate with a living dog?

RH: I think animals communicate through feelings, pictures, and thoughts. My sense of empathy is quite developed - a blessing, but a curse to control. Sometimes I merge with an animal - feeling what they feel, picking up their thoughts and pictures they may send me. I feel what their personalities are like, and where it hurts on their bodies. Then I go back to being me, and hopefully release what was theirs along the way.

LC: How do you physically and mentally prepare yourself?

RH: I usually sit somewhere quiet, which is not always easy to do with four dogs, two birds, a husband and a child! So I have a special place. I try to relax and calm my mind as much as possible, taking deep breaths. I find mornings best or afternoon. I'm useless late afternoons or at night. I get a ton of information and messages at three in the morning. The most important thing is quietening my mind and relaxing so my own thoughts don't get in the way.

LC: But the sessions you did with Bruiser in Costa Rica - one was during the late afternoon, and the other was the evening.

RH: Yes, the first session was during the afternoon and I felt blocked. I felt I wasn't getting enough information and wasn't trusting much. I kept feeling I was near water, but that was all. Before the second session I thought I'd refer you to another communicator, but suddenly I heard very loudly, "Go and try it now," even though it was evening, which is not my best time. I clearly got information that session.

LC: Do you need a picture of the animal?

RH: I like to have a picture because I am a very visual person - I'm an artist, too. It's more of a preference than a need. Just like you would want to see who you are talking to, a photo helps me to visualize the animal.

LC: Why is it easier for you to talk to an animal who's on the other side?

RH: Now I can talk to someone who has crossed over as easily as someone in front of me. I think, if it's a spirit, they are right in the room with me. With a live animal, I visit them by bouncing my psychic self over to them.

LC: When we first emailed four years ago, you said you didn't usually deal with lost animals. Why?

RH: Lost animals are sometimes hard to connect with because they recount what has happened, and what will happen, all at once. Bruiser communicates in a quiet, understated way, so I questioned some of what I received. But I heard 'stream' so loudly, I knew he was there.

LC: Lost animals are also pretty upset, so communication can be pretty crazy - it's like talking to someone who is hysterical. When Foxy, our own dog, was missing from a thunderstorm fear, she would show me things she saw passing, and isolated visions, like a signpost or grass. You want to scream, "Look up at a sign! What road are you on?"

RH: There's also such urgency and pressure for right answers, and a sense of great responsibility to help find and save the animal. It's easy for me to get very caught up in the emotions.

LC: What advice would you give to someone who's lost a pet and is working with you or another animal communicator?

RH: The best way people can help in the discovery process is to ask open-ended questions. Let the animals provide the details and guide the answers. It's best to just let go. Whatever comes is good. Very specific questions aren't useful. And you need to trust strongly what you feel resonates. Your animal is your baby. You know him the best. That's what I learned with my own animal communication work with other psychics. It's about trusting ourselves.