

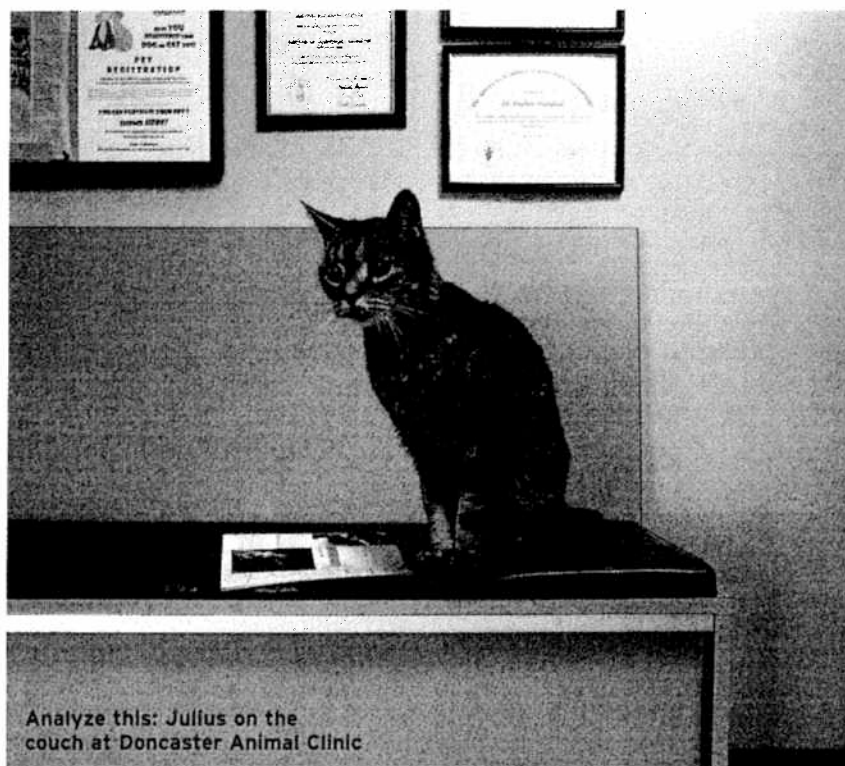
# Honey, I shrunk the cat

Desperate to find out what emotional trauma lurked behind my tabby's incessant howling, I forked over \$360 for a session with Gary Landsberg, Toronto's pet therapist extraordinaire. Thanks to him, I'm now learning to help Julius help himself

**JULIUS STREN IS NOT HIMSELF TODAY.** MY 16-year-old tabby was named for his regal bearing—as a kitten, he had oversized ears that stood tall, like the points of a crown he had not yet grown into—but this morning, sitting in the back seat of the car, whiskers poking through the plastic grate of his Pet Cab, his majesty is under threat. I'm chauffeuring Julius to the Doncaster Animal Clinic for his appointment with the internationally renowned veterinary behaviourist Gary Landsberg. But Julius doesn't want to be helped; he is meowing in violent protest, as if railing against the Fates.

A couple of years ago, Julius adopted a worrisome after-dinner habit; he began howling like an anguished wolf. His routine: he eats, begins his nightly ablutions, then heads toward his bed, stopping en route to let out his lupine aria. Concerned, I took Julius to his vet and even hired someone to come to the house to observe him in his natural habitat. Various theories were tabled—identity crisis, attention-getting ruse, senility, deafness, blindness—but none has proven satisfying. So I procured a referral to see Dr. Landsberg.

By all accounts, Landsberg is the city's leading expert on the neurotic and furry. He is the author of the *Handbook of Behaviour Problems of the Dog and Cat*, which has been translated into Japanese and Spanish, and he frequently lectures around the world. But his base is at Doncaster in Thornhill, where he has been in practice for 28 years. He does regular veterinary work half the time and behavioural counselling the other half, treating an average of 200 addled dogs and cats a year. He helped Amber, a two-year-old mutt, stop staring compulsively at the ceiling by putting her on antidepressants, and he cured the short-haired cat Junior of insomnia by identifying an undiagnosed thyroid condition. Each two-hour session costs about \$360



Analyze this: Julius on the couch at Doncaster Animal Clinic

(roughly twice as much as you'd pay for a therapist for yourself).

In the States, there are 33 veterinary behaviourists, many of them academics affiliated with top colleges, but in Canada, Landsberg is one of only two (the other, Dr. Diane Frank, is at l'Université de Montréal). Landsberg has appeared on *Dini Petty*, *CBC News* and *Canada AM*; he's even hosted his own show on Life Network, *Free for the Asking*. In other words, if you have a pet with baggage, chances are you already know about him—or at least your vet does. Ask a pet-friendly matriarch in one of the city's upscale animal toy shops if she's heard of Landsberg and she'll likely say, "Of course," the way somebody in musical theatre would answer the question "Have you heard of Barbra Streisand?" As in, "Are you insane?"

**I'M DEAF BY THE TIME WE ARRIVE AT THE clinic** (communication, at least, is not one of Julius's problems). As for the waiting room, I expected a slobber-swabbed asylum, but it's like any doctor's office: receptionists taking appointments, some well-thumbed periodicals—except instead of *Time* or *Newsweek*, there's *Pets* magazine. On the chair beside me, Annie, an excitable toy poodle, sits and trembles, occasionally letting out a high-pitched yelp, causing Julius's ears to swing back in irritation. Annie's owner is a middle-aged woman with freshly applied lipstick, decked out in head-to-toe Lululemon. Engaging in pet small talk, she proudly tells me about Annie's eating habits: "Of course, she'll choose salmon and broccoli over dog food."

A friendly nurse, about eight months

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pregnant, with the wholesome face of a kindergarten teacher, ushers Julius into the examination room. It seems he's peed in his carrier: part nerves, part rebellion, defacing that which he loathes. The nurse scratches him tenderly behind the ears. "It's OK, sweetie," she purrs. "Wow, you are handsome! You look great for your age." She cleans him off, swaddling him in terry—though not before Julius has shaken his wet paws, treating her ungraciously to a fragrant shower.

A receptionist calls out, "The doctor is ready to see Julius now." Landsberg appears in the doorway, clipboard in hand, and coolly asks, "OK? You ready? Come on in." The short, balding 53-year-old has the sober demeanour of someone who takes his practice seriously. He is congenial without being warm, and reveals a sense of humour only with his outfit. He's wearing a scrub top embroidered with the Doncaster insignia: a cat in a smock sits with a notepad next to a dog lying on a divan. "It's Freudian," Landsberg says with a smile.

He leads us into the consultation room, which is painted a woodsy green and has the two major trademarks of any psychiatric office: a box of Kleenex and comfortable seating. In the corner is a sink surrounded by Tupperware containers of treats (Whiskas Shrimp and Tuna Lickins', Pup-Peroni). Next to the doctor's chair is a TV (so owners can play videotapes of their pets exhibiting unwelcome behaviour and Landsberg can show tapes of good pet owner techniques). I take a seat on the couch, and Julius slinks underneath it.

Before we get started, Landsberg rifles through Julius's file. The doctor is already briefed on my cat's situation, since I have completed the clinic's obligatory nine-page Feline Behaviour Consultation form—an exhausting task that felt like a test of my commitment to therapy (if I can't bother with the form, then maybe I shouldn't be here). Determined to prove my worthiness, I laboured over the questions as I would a job application, fastidiously filling out subsections such as Grooming, Scratching and Kneading, and Family/Relationships. But on page two, I was asked to draw a diagram of each floor of the house, and I skipped it; Julius's mental state shouldn't depend on my prowess as an illustrator. Another loyalty-testing question in the General Information section left me feeling inadequate. I was quizzed about Julius's parents and "littermates." (Since I never had the pleasure of his family's company, I left it blank, but I imagine that Julius's

parents were unreliable bohemians since they abandoned their three-month-old son on the Danforth.)

Even with the completed form in hand, Landsberg needs more background. He wants to hear my take on the howling issue, a description of the first episode, details about Julius's past, as well as an exact account of Julius's daily schedule. He naps and snacks, I explain. A bit defensive, I offer, "He was more active when he was younger." Landsberg listens intently, occasionally chewing on his pen, but remains a frustratingly impassive



**GARY LANDSBERG (WITH BUFFY, HIS BICHON FRISE) SEES AN AVERAGE OF 200 TROUBLED PETS PER YEAR. HE TREATS THEM WITH TOYS, COUNTER-CONDITIONING PROGRAMS, AUDIO TAPES AND ANTIDEPRESSANTS**

sive audience. I wonder what it would take to surprise him. What if I said that Julius could dance the tango? Would I get a smile?

Most patients, human and animal, tend not to display themselves truthfully couchside—especially on a first visit. Even at home, Julius will only howl in private (should you creep up behind him, he quickly purses his lips and looks at you as if he's never uttered a sound in his life). So, naturally, today he keeps his howling to himself, silent as an angel. Anticipating this, I had recorded the evidence, and now play it for the doctor. To the sound of his own voice, Julius emerges crazed from under the couch, his pupils narrowing to inky staples, ears cocked in hysteria. The doctor listens, unfazed, jots some notes, then offers clinically, "It's called vocalization. It's not uncommon in elderly cats." Landsberg does not pass judgment. He wears the blandness of someone who's seen it all. And he likely has.

Of the thousands of symptoms he has encountered, aggressiveness is the most common: dogs who bite strangers at the door; dogs bullying the family cat or other dogs in the park. There are also the garbage rummagers, the shoe maulers and the closet marauders. Cats—solitary creatures—tend toward more passive-aggressive behaviour: hunger strikes, withdrawal, soiling, general despondency. There are felines who won't go near the new baby or the new boyfriend (delicate cases). Anxiety is also a major issue: separation anxiety, insecurity problems and house trashing. But most dramatic are the compulsive disorders. There are the tail chasers, the spinners, the chewers and suckers (Landsberg once saw a Burmese that sucked through sports bras—"Sucking behaviour is most common in the oriental breeds," he says). There are those that can't take a step without licking the floor and those that stare at imaginary objects.

Then there are the phobics: wind-phobic dogs that lost homes in storms and are panicked by the slightest gust; pets fearful of fireworks, microwaves, vacuums and laughter. For some extreme cases like these, Landsberg prescribes Valium, but that's just a Band-Aid; antidepressants like Prozac, Paxil and Zoloft—although not officially licensed for use in animals—are more effective long-term mood stabilizers. Nugget, a golden retriever who pants and paces across her owner's pillows during thunderstorms, for example, has been prescribed a cocktail of anti-anxiety and antidepressant meds, along with a counter-conditioning program: her owners are advised to play a thunderstorm soundtrack (on a canine desensitization CD) while simultaneously providing treats. The idea is that Nugget associate storm noises with happy thoughts.

**YOU MIGHT IMAGINE THAT LANDSBERG'S** passion for animals began with a beloved childhood pet, but his parents were not pet people. He comes from a medical family (his grandfather was a dentist, one uncle was an orthodontist, another an orthopedic surgeon) and grew up in North York and Forest Hill (his father was an accountant, his mother a grade-school teacher), but he was never allowed a dog or cat in the house. It wasn't until he became a horseback-riding instructor at Wahanowin summer camp that he discovered his affection for animals. He acquired his first pet, a mutt named Gail, from a shelter, after he had moved away to attend university. He has been married for 28 years to Susan, a fellow Wahanowin



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counsellor, now a schoolteacher like his mother, and together they have three kids and a dog—Buffy, a three-year-old Bichon Frise.

Landsberg attended U of T, where he studied zoology. In his third year, he transferred to Guelph's prestigious vet school. He graduated in 1976 and opened the Doncaster six months later, which he now shares with two general vets and an animal dermatologist. His decision to focus on behaviour was largely practical; there were few vets at the time willing to deal with the complexities of therapy. "I realized almost immediately that this was an underserved area," he says. Soon, he began accepting referrals from other vets and giving lectures at obedience schools and breed clubs.

Like the field of human therapy—populated by Jungian psychotherapists, psychologists, social workers, cognitive behaviourists, Gestalt therapists—the field of animal behaviour counselling varies widely. Abnormal behaviourists like Landsberg are considered the shrinks of the pet world, but Landsberg is impatient with the comparison. "The difference between psychiatry and being a veterinary behaviourist, and why we purposely don't use the word," he says slowly, as if hoping it's the last time he'll have to deliver the spiel, "is that we can't analyze the pet's mind. We can't deal with the pet's thoughts. We can only deal with the pet's responses."

His form of therapy is predicated on the idea that animals can be retrained to want to behave in a certain way. It's a bit like raising a perpetual preschooler: proper rewards, environmental enrichment (fun toys and a stimulating domicile), consistency and routine. And just as good parents respond to the needs of their children, owners sometimes need to adjust their expectations. Don't demand exuberance from a laid-back basset hound; you need to love your pets for who they are.

Though the field is subject to accusations of New Age quackery, pet therapy's roots are not easily debunked. Its origins can be traced to the early-20th-century conditioning theories of Pavlov and Skinner. Until recently, most serious animal scholarship has been focused on "normal" animal behaviour; the field of abnormal behaviour is quite new. It was pioneered roughly 10 years ago by eight American vets and is now a board-certified discipline, one of 20-odd vet specialty areas—up there with dentistry, radiology and ophthalmology. Vets were mostly generalists until the early '70s. Landsberg explains: "Today, there are more pet



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owners who can afford treatment and who are asking for it." Plus, we live in a world where being neurotic is nothing to be ashamed of, even if your name is Snowball.

As one of the field's luminaries, Landsberg is invited to speak at a dozen or so dog-and-cat conferences a year. He recently toured Australia, Greece, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, lecturing on animal Alzheimer's. Business has also taken him to Kansas, Italy and Japan. He is the president of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists and lists 40 publications on his CV. Among his current commitments are a book review for the *American Veterinary Medical Journal*, an article for *Puppy Basics* (a new Canadian pet glossy) and a conference in Hawaii.

Lionel Goldstein, a veterinary optometrist at the Forest Hill Animal Clinic, who offered Landsberg his first out-of-college job, has nothing but kind words to say about his apprentice: "Gary is friendly and amiable and very able." Over the years, Goldstein has sent many clients to Landsberg—including one cat who peed on his owner's hair at night. Goldstein explains that many of the people who go to Landsberg are on the brink of abandoning—or even euthanizing—their pets. Landsberg is the last hope.

**AS FOR JULIUS, LANDSBERG'S DIAGNOSIS** is two sided: physical (perhaps arthritis) and mental (maybe kitty Alzheimer's). Of course, ennui could also be a factor. What we might be facing here is an existential crisis. Julius's career as a cat is over: he's lost his game. No longer able to function as a self-actualized outdoorsman, too old to hunt for birds and mice, he feels purposeless. Naturally, the sentiment is intensified at bedtime. Despairing and bored, Julius howls, maybe for attention, maybe out of confusion. Like your great-aunt who thrives on Thursday night bridge tournaments at her seniors' residence, Julius should have something to do besides sleep and eat. "You know what they say: use it or lose it," says Landsberg. "Julius is like a bedridden retired person, lethargic and frustrated." As if in approval of this theory, Julius begins to rub his cheeks against the legs of the couch. Landsberg continues: "You hear, 'Ever since I retired, ever since I got divorced, I haven't been myself.' What it should be," he says suddenly, with the passion of a courtroom litigator, "is, 'Ever since I retired, I've never been busier.'" Then he gets provocative: "Let's face it. This cat's house is sterile, his motivation is down, his life is boring." A bit harsh, I think, but



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I try not to look slighted. After all, this session isn't about me.

To provide Julius with the stimulation he needs, Landsberg suggests novel chasing toys, a treat-dispensing Kitty Kong, new intriguing perches—hell, even some Catnip Ravioli. Life is short: let's give him something to live for. I might also want to consider restyling his sleeping area with mood lighting to keep him relaxed. I could even use some natural meds. Feliway, a cat pheromone that has a calming effect, can be sprayed near his usual howling spot. I am amazed by the intricacy of this prognosis, but I'm also wounded. I've tried to provide Julius with an exciting home. If he's bored, what does that say about our relationship?

On strict orders, I go to PetSmart to buy some toys. I get a stylish new cat bed, a bite-sized stuffed lamb (with catnip in its belly) and some faux mice. On a sunny afternoon, we have an impromptu play session. I swing a mouse teasingly before his eyes, and he doesn't so much as bat a paw. I place the catnip under his nose. He gives it an indifferent sniff, then begins cleaning his ears. Determined to elicit at least a pounce, I try to seduce him with pellet-sized seafood Temptations. After a long inspection, he eats. Victory. I give him some more. He eats them, too. Minutes later, he throws up. Then he goes to bed—stopping, en route, to howl.

About a month after this incident and a subsequent string of (painfully contrived) play sessions, Julius continues his vocal theatrics. Perhaps I should be more patient: therapy is a lifelong process. In the meantime, I prefer to look at Julius's outbursts as the impassioned gibberish of a curmudgeonly old man; in other words, I choose denial. Nonetheless, our therapy has taught me to think differently about the pets in my neighbourhood. The other day, I saw a middle-aged calico rolling around on a sunny patch of sidewalk, and I wondered if her childhood had been as carefree. I met a handsome, congenial Lab at a coffee shop and imagined what his parents were like. There's a particularly obese tomcat around the corner who looks like a cross between Buddha and Elwy Yost. He sits and stares at the world from his stoop and never seems to move; he must be depressed.

Last night, I approached Julius in his cat bed. He was sound asleep as usual—classic escapist behaviour. I gave him a sympathetic pat behind the ears, waking him to ask if he was feeling OK. Through sleepy emerald eyes, he looked at me as if I were crazy.



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