

Language and Literature Reading Assessment
Semper Fido Part One by Lt Col. Jay Kopelman with Melinda Roth
1,681 words

One scruffy puppy in Baghdad. One hardened Marine who couldn't leave him behind.

Lava

I remember being exhausted. The tiredness weighed more heavily on me than my 60-pound rucksack. As I walked through the door of our command post in northwest Fallujah after four days of dodging sniper fire and sleeping on the ground, all I could think about was sleep.

That's when I first saw Lava. A sudden flash of something rolled toward me out of nowhere, shooting so much adrenaline into my wiring that I jumped back and slammed into a wall. A ball of fur skidded across the floor, halted at my boots, and whirled in circles around me with the torque of a windup toy. Though I could see it was only a puppy, I reached for my rifle and yelled.

It was November 2004. In the days before our march into Fallujah, U.S. warplanes had pounded the Iraqi city with cannon fire, rockets and bombs. The bombardment was so spectacular that I -- and the 10,000 other Marines waiting on the outskirts -- doubted anyone would live through it. But plenty managed. Now, sniper fire came from nowhere, like screams from ghosts.

At the sound of my voice, the puppy looked up at me, raised his tail and started growling this baby-dog version of "I am about to kick your butt." Then he let loose with tiny war cries -- roo-roo-roo-roo -- as he bounced up and down on stiff legs.

"Hey," I said, bending down. "Hey. Calm down."

There was fear in his eyes despite the bravado. As I held my hand out toward him, he stopped barking. He sniffed around a little, which surprised me until I noticed how filthy my hands were after almost a week of not washing. He was smelling dirt and death on my skin.

I leaned forward, but he tore off down the hall. "Hey, come back."

The puppy looked back at me, ears high, pink tongue hanging out sideways from his mouth. I realized he wanted me to chase him. He was giving me the "I was never afraid of you" routine. So I scooped up the little guy. He squirmed and lapped at my face, which was blackened from explosive residue, soot from bombed-out buildings, and dust from hitting the ground. "Where'd you come from?" I said.

The puppy acted like he had just jumped out from under the Christmas tree, but meanwhile I called my cool to attention. It's not allowed, Kopelman. Marines letting down their guard and getting friendly with the locals -- pretty girls, little kids, cute furry mammals -- it wasn't allowed. But he kept squirming and wiggling, and I liked the way he felt in my hands. I liked not caring about getting home or staying alive, and not feeling warped as a human being because I was fighting in a war.

Born in Pittsburgh and a graduate of the University of Miami, I'd been a Marine since 1992,

when I transferred from the Navy. Now, in my second deployment to Iraq, I was looking at a starving five-week-old outlaw. Members of the First Battalion, Third Marines -- called the Lava Dogs for the jagged pumice they'd trained on back in Hawaii -- said they'd found the pup at the compound when they stormed it about a week ago. He was still with them because they didn't know what else to do with him. Their choices were to put the little guy out on the street, execute him or ignore him as he slowly died in the corner. The excuses they gave me were as follows: "Not me, man, no way." "Not worth the ammo." "I ain't some kind of sicko, man."

In other words: Warriors, yes. Puppy killers, no.

They named him Lava. The newest grunt was treated for fleas with kerosene, de-wormed with chewing tobacco, and pumped full of MREs. Officially called Meals Ready to Eat but unofficially called Meals Rejected by Everyone, MREs were tri-laminate pouches containing exactly 1,200 calories of food. Lava quickly learned how to tear open pouches that were designed to have a shelf life of three years and to withstand parachute drops of 1,250 feet or more.

The best part was how these Marines, these elite, well-oiled machines of war who in theory could kill another human being in a hundred unique ways, became mere mortals in the presence of a tiny mammal. I was shocked to hear a weird, misty tone in my fellow soldiers' voices, a weird, misty look in their eyes, and weird, misty words that ended with ee. "You're a brave little toughie. Are you our brave little toughie? You're a brave little toughie, yesssirree."

The Marines bragged about how he attacked their boots, slept in their helmets and gnawed on all the wires from journalists' satellite phones up on the roof. "Did anyone feed Lava this morning?" someone yelled out, as "I did" came back from every guy in the room.

He was always chasing something, chewing something, spinning head-on into something. He stalked shadows, dust balls and balled-up pieces of paper. He could drag a flak jacket all the way across the floor. But you couldn't yell at him. Even though you were an elite, well-oiled machine of war, you'd be considered a freak if you yelled at a puppy. So he was completely pampered and kept warm.

By the time I came around, he already knew the two most important rules of boot camp: You don't chew on bullets and you only pee outside. Lava gave the Marines something to be responsible for above and beyond protecting their country, and getting their brains blown out -- or worse -- in the process. He gave them a routine. And somehow, I became part of it.

Every morning we fed Lava and then piled out of the house to various posts across the city. Some Marines patrolled the streets; some cleared buildings looking for weapons; some got killed. Me, I supervised three wide-eyed Iraqi soldiers who, in their new, U.S.-issued, chocolate-chip cammies, waved their rifles around as if clearing away spider webs. They were untrained, out of shape and terrified, these members of the Iraqi Armed Forces, coaxed by the United States to help root out insurgents.

At night we all gathered back at the compound, where we covered the windows with blankets and sandbags, cleaned our weapons, and made sure Lava had dinner. After that, we would bed down and review the day's events.

"We found a weapons cache..."

"Yeah, well, we got caught in the alley..."

"Yeah, well, we had to transport wounded and then we got hit..."

As we talked, Lava would paw through our blankets. Then he would sit between my crossed legs

and stare out at everyone.

Scary, Uncertain Fate

As I untied my boots, Lava bit at the laces. As I pulled a boot off, he grabbed hold and tugged. I tugged back. The dog growled. I growled back. "Hey, what's with this puppy anyway?" I asked. "What are you guys planning on doing with him?" No one answered me.

Lava crawled out of my lap and turned a few circles, flopped down and fell asleep with his nose buried in my empty boot.

Like everything else in Fallujah then, nothing but the immediate was really worth thinking about. But when a puppy picked my boots to fall asleep in, I started wondering how he'd die. Especially when I knew I'd be leaving the compound soon and heading for Camp Fallujah about 12 miles away. In February, I'd be leaving Iraq for good and returning home to California.

I just knew the little guy was going to die. *This one won't make it because he's too damned cute.* As a lieutenant colonel, I also knew military rules as well as anyone, and every time I picked Lava up, they darted across my brain like flares: Prohibited activities for service members under General Order 1-A included adopting as pets or mascots, caring for or feeding, any type of domestic or wild animals. The order was taken pretty seriously. The military didn't want anything like compassion messing things up. Our job was to shoot the enemy, period.

Most nights, Lava slept on the roof of the compound with a group of Marines, but once the weather turned colder, he came inside. He looked wide-eyed and cute, all paws, snuffles and innocence. In reality, he wasn't innocent at all. I personally saw the little monster destroy several maps, one cell phone, five pillows and some grunt's only pair of socks.

One morning I woke up and found Lava sitting near my sleeping bag, staring at me, his left ear flapped forward, and the remains of a toothpaste tube stuffed in his mouth. "Morning," I said. He replied with a minty belch.

Another time, I woke up to see his entire front end stuffed into one of my boots, his butt and back legs draped out over the side. He wasn't moving. I thought he was dead -- probably from all those MREs. "Oh, no," I said, cursing. But when he heard my voice, his tail started wagging like a wind-kissed flag. I decided that from then on, he wasn't eating noodles, biscuits or beans in butter sauce. No more toothpaste. Only meat.

And then another morning, I thought someone had short-sheeted my sleeping bag because I couldn't push my feet to the end. It was Lava, who'd managed to crawl in during the night and curl up at the bottom in a ball.

I pulled the dog up under my chin. He snorted and snuffled, and I scratched his ears. "What's going to happen to you once we leave here, little guy?"

The puppy thumped his tail on my chest. I realized that I could no longer sleep at night unless some little fur ball was nestled up against me. Though from day one Lava had been a group project, I was now considering him my own. I made his safety and well being my mission.

1. According to the exposition, where was Lieutenant Colonel Kopelman, and what was his job there?

2. When does the exposition of “Semper Fido” end, and our main character’s problem (narrative hook) begin?

3. Does this section have a resolution?

4. If “Semper Fido” has all the elements of a short story, why isn’t it considered to be fiction?

5. According to the first word of this selection, what is the “point of view” (first person, third person, or omniscient)?

Did the author write this narrative to inform, explain, or entertain? You can choose more than answer.

6. Why was the dog given the name of Lava?
