

## Gretel the Improv Artist

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I was tossing a frisbee up the sidewalk for Gretel. Typically she barks for me to throw it until she is satisfied that I get the hint, and then she runs ahead in anticipation. I waited until she'd dashed twenty feet, and then threw it - and hit her. The frisbee landed nearly squarely on her back before bouncing to the ground.

A series of events then happened within one second.

I thought I might have hurt her, and felt concerned and remorseful.

Gretel did not so much as flinch; she took off toward where the frisbee had ultimately landed.

Watching this, I realized that I had not hurt her.

But my brain had already sent instructions to my vocal chords to emit a pained "Ohhh!", and I guess once that message is en route there's no retracting it. The sound emerged from my mouth. Gretel arrested her trajectory toward the frisbee and, seamlessly, turned back to meet my eyes while simultaneously warping her back concave-upward to indicate that it was about to cave in.

Clearly my "Ohhh!" had prompted her fake, but I certainly wasn't going to call her on it. Besides my guilt, I also found the fake to be endearing and impressive. So I followed the "Ohhh!" with "I am sorry, my sweet girl, come here," and bent down. She had already begun to approach me – waddling awkwardly in order to maintain her back's concavity – to garner what she knew would be tight hugs and kisses. Once the embrace was over, her back was straight as an arrow again and she bounded back to the frisbee.

The fake was endearing for the complexity of its two intertwined components: the emotion and the intellect. And I found both to be rather mysterious.

First the emotion: why did she do it? Perhaps to snag the opportunity for hugs and kisses? She has an insatiable appetite for affection. Or did she do it to protect *my* feelings? To acknowledge my genuine remorse as well-intended, rather than brush it off as irrelevant? She is remarkably considerate of others.

Still more intriguing is the *how*. Gretel has never been injured by an object falling on her back; never been injured on her back at all, as far as I can remember. So she had to *imagine* it. Think about the mental dexterity involved there - the sheer intelligence and predictive calculation. She had to imagine what it would feel like, *and* how that feeling would manifest visibly. And she nailed it. She was spot on.

What a talented little improv artist.