

## **Puppy.**

*For Christina, and her puppy, Chaucer.  
RIP little bud.*

Before we arrive at the village, still climbing down the Greek mountain, drenched by the sudden thunderstorm but far from miserable, I tell Jenn of my hikes with my childhood puppy. She wasn't a puppy, really. If anything, I was the puppy. I was four, that is how the family legend goes. I was the oldest child, although that there would be others was still a thing for the future. For then, it was just me and the dog. My closest friend, my wise companion.

She died of old age and suffering when I was six and half. The vets who knew her for many years refused to take her life away, I cannot, said one, and then the other. She is like a person to me.

Two and a half years before she left me, twenty dog years younger, she was still strong and lithe, and if her body had already begun giving away glimpses of the toll of years, I had no eyes to see that, no ability to comprehend that. I knew only her presence, her body soft and warm against mine, her smell, her short golden hair. Comfort.

One Saturday afternoon, so the family legend goes, my parents were rudely awakened from their slumber: the phone rang. Still drowsy, they pieced together a story from the bits spoken on the other side. "There is a child here," someone told them, "and her dog. The two were wandering around, in the *wadi*, the canyon near the small village-town. Child and dog did not seem lost but also not particularly found. We asked them of parents, and home, and a way there. The child replied with a number. We called. They are both here. They have received water. You might want to come pick them up."

And so, my parents did.

Dog and I returned home. An adventure. In our minds, we weren't lost, not for a minute. We had many other adventures, strolling together, exploring the land and each other. When she died, my father buried her in the wadi. Alone, I would visit her grave.

Jenn and I arrive at the village, looking for our villa. Large village dogs come to sniff and bark their hellos. We can't find the place. It's a small village, not so many possibilities, someone tells

us. Kostas, whose daughter owns the villa, finds us. She sent him on a mission to show us the place. Behind our villa's gates a dog awaits.

The dog is old. Very old. It is large and furry and white. My eyes note things my brain will only register much later. A lesion above his eye. The matted quality of the fur. Dirty, but also of the lackluster of old age. The large testicles, dangling all the way down to his rear knees. A slight limp. A caved spine. The telltale mementos of age. Signs I find, I must admit shamefully but honestly, repulsive. Old age is not inviting as youth to explore. Who doesn't want to put their finger in the pink delicious cave that is the mouth of a puppy. But who wants to do that with an aging dog. Some, perhaps. Certainly not most.

I do not want to pet him, I do not want to play with him. I want him to be comfortable, to have food and water and shelter, I want someone to walk him for he seems keen, doing that dog thing: getting up, shaking out, a spring in his otherwise dawdling gait says in the language of dog - "let's go, let's go explore!" but you are old, and matted, and you've made a large stinky poo in the courtyard, I silently answer.

Who in their right mind would rent out a villa and not inform the guests it comes with the custodianship of a large aging dog, I wonder. The Greek Gods would, I suppose. On one of their many mountains. I am only a guest here.

I can tell the dog spends his days in the villa's yard. The yard is large, has a cherry tree, and beautiful rose bushes. The dog has spectacular views of the mountains, ample food, and a large pail of water. But he has no child at his side. Perhaps there once was, but she has moved. Perhaps to Philadelphia, where, as Kostas informed us, his daughter and family are. Inside the villa they solemnly stare at us from professionally captured photographs carefully placed in the hallways.

The dog is no longer a puppy. But in his heart, he is. I know it as soon as he runs towards me, limping, picking up a large stick, too large of a stick, beckoning me to play. He lowers his head, lifts his behinds in a perfect downwards dog, asking me to pet his head, scratch under the ears. To be his child. I do not want to.

The next day, I awaken inside a dream. I think of youth, and of old age, and of me in between. I think of this old dog. I decide -- no, I know -- today, my dear, you will be my puppy. We will be

a girl and her puppy. I will be all yours. I no longer see your old age, I see only youth, and age, and time, on you, on me, and not on the mountains who never waver.

I dress for you, puppy. When we are done I will be covered with your white fur. Your slight stench. My fingers will know dirt and grime. I will indulge you, and me, with heavy petting of the youthful kind, where every part of your body was wonderful to explore with love.

Memories flood me. Not of the mind, but of the hands. The knowledge I had and did not remember until now, as I move my hands through the fur of a puppy who is no longer a puppy, yet is, to me, today.

My hands remember. What the body of a supple dog feels like. The musculature, the spine, the legs, the ears. I am flooded with the hours, who knows how many, I spent petting pets over the years, learning without words what they like, what I like, where we meet, how we rest together, limbs intermixed, how we play. There were many of them. Always dogs in my family. And I suddenly remember once more the body of dog.

I look at you for the first time. That lesion over your eye is not a lesion. It is a large mole. A thing of ugliness of old age, sprouted through fur. Without the decency to be a smooth half sphere, it is moon landscapish. Rippling ridges. I pet your head, I feel your ears. One is swollen, with puss, I know. I feel on you the swells of time, the spine as it curves, the muscles that have slackened, the enlarged internal organs. My mute knowledge knows the signs of your age, knows what is no longer there. What is there and once wasn't. I take it all, accept it all. It's your day puppy, you and me.

And then, tears flood me. Over what it is to age, to be in its pain, to enjoy life through it, the glory of it, the sun. Let's move from the shade and lie down in her light for a bit, you tell me. I now know - it is not me giving my attention and love to you for a special day of compassion. It is you who is giving it to me, it is you giving me permission and room to mourn and to accept.

And so I cry. And I sing to you a song, and another, and together we look at the roses, and the butterflies and the mountains. And we know: old age is like a wonderful garden. The memories of the rose bushes, the mountain vistas of a life. But the garden is gated. We cannot leave at will,

to taste youth, to taste the world renewing. Sure, we may go on a walk, a stroll, but we must return soon after. We are no longer the springhead of the now. We simply observe. We are guests.

Let us go on a walk, then, puppy. Once again, just like those many years ago, I am taken on a walk by a dog. This time we have both walked that secret pass of the mountains, we have long ago completed the climbing of youth, and are well on our way into the slow descent of age, downhill, into what lies there in the afternoon fog.

You show me paths I would not have known of, and you visit your favorite places. You were born here, and here you will die, happy. I admire you puppy, how you run downhill, limping through a sprint, your youth glowing underneath, in that subtle body that never leaves. I see your vigor, and your love of fun, fun, fun. You love life. You know and understand it. You relish in it, in the smells of flowers and your friend's urine, in covering theirs with yours.

At times, I see how hard it is for you to lift a leg in the proud canine declaration of territory, of status, and you opt to pee like a girl. But when the other village dogs watch, you summon up will and muscle for the deed. You poop on our way out of the village, without stopping to crouch and hold still. Poop bits spread out on the road.

I follow the puppy into young dog into maturity and when we turn back, he is once again an old panting dog. Coming back, the poop like breadcrumbs lead us back home from our little sojourn.

The day is hot, puppy is thirsty and tired, but the town square is calling, where there sits his rival village dog of many years. And also, Kostas.

Kostas, a Greek senator of the village, in this story I tell myself, sits at the tavern with his legs spread wide, on his throne. "This is an old dog. As old as me," he tells me with a broad grin.

"I am worried he will get in a fight with this dog," I point, "you said they fight."

"Ah yes, it's ok. Don't worry. And if they do, don't interfere."

"They've been at it for years," I suggest.

"Yes," he laughs, "and he knows the way back home."

I smile and walk by myself back to the villa, singing a song of life and death, youth and aging.

I think to myself perhaps when I am 66, I will get a puppy dog. And we will both die together, me at 82, the dog at 16. Good ages for us both. We will take long strolls and know the trees by their real names. We will tether ourselves to a place of our choosing, and observe the grand show. Not the passing fashions, and leaders and reigns, but the leaves, the pomegranates ripening, the cherries, ever darker, ever sweeter. We'll count the short-lived days of butterflies, eavesdrop on birds who incessantly talk of all they wish their friends to know, kiss the unending mountains behind.

The village is small, the mountains are glorious and awestruck by us and our petty concerns. I walk and sing and cry for the puppy that he was, and when he comes back, I see to it that he has water. He drinks, and then lies at what surely is one of his carefully cultivated spots, looking at the mountains, panting, breath in, breath out, until the last one comes our way.