

My relationship to dogs started with crippling fear. There was something about their loud barks and snarls, their furry, four-legged bodies, their overall wild, bounding nature that terrified me. I have a distinct memory of walking along a beach in Port Townsend one time. I was five, maybe. And all of a sudden, this huge golden retriever puppy thing ran up to us. It was probably just seeking attention, a few extra pets from friendly-looking strangers. But I would not be a friendly stranger to the canine beast wagging before me. I screamed! My heart raced. I took hold of my mom, trying to climb up her body, away from any potential contact with the dog. Its owners must've groked my reaction. They started yelling after it. "Abby, Abby come back! Abby!" Abby's floppy ears swung around, and the happy beast pranced back towards them.

Bullet. Dodged.

Everyone around me knew about my fear of dogs. "Anti-Dog Girl." Apparently, my preschool teachers had a code word they'd use on field trips when they saw a dog in the distance, so they could distract me long enough for it to pass. When I was a toddler, and my mom walked me around the neighborhood in a stroller, I cried when I saw dogs. Someone later on (A neighbor? A friend? I forget) asked my mom if my fear of dogs came from inherited Holocaust trauma, because my great grandpa was chased down by dogs in the camps. Must've been a pretty close neighbor if they knew the intimate details of my grandpa's internment... Jesus.

Anyways.

Things started getting a little better when Sadie, our friends' Portuguese water dog, got old. Usually when we came to visit, Sadie would get marched to their car, and she'd patiently wait in the passenger seat until we left. All the decorative masks on our friends' walls had to be covered up too, but that's beside the point, except to prove how very sensitive and fearful I was of most things. But dogs, especially. Yet, when Sadie got older, our families renegotiated this "arrangement," and Sadie could stay in the house with us as long as she stayed on a leash—just in CASE, for my sake. I remember sitting on the couch in our family friends' living room one day while my mom held on to Sadie. I remember wearing pink for some reason? And with one impulsive flick of her wrist, my mom let go of the leash. I gasped, out of a sense of betrayal that my mom would do such a thing, and simultaneously, out of surprise that when the leash dropped, Sadie didn't attack me. She just laid there.

Later that evening, I gathered enough courage to gently place my hand on Sadie's soft belly. It rose up and down, up and down, just like my belly does each night when I stare at it rising from under my bed sheets. Up and down, up and down. I didn't stroke Sadie's fur or let her lick me. I just kept my hand right there on her belly and let my own little body start to feel her warmth.

Fast forward.

My mom scored a month-long sabbatical from work when I was six, so we (along with my aunt, cousin, and grandma) booked a flight to Paris. Of all the places. I'd never been outside the country before. When I got there, everything looked, smelled, and sounded so different that I cried. That's when I learned what culture shock was. When I took my first bite of lemon sugar crepe and saw God, I forgot about how different Paris felt from Seattle and started leaning into the differences of the culture. The smells, the language, the cobblestone streets. At this mere age of six, I began to understand what it felt like to be swept up by the romances of an ancient city.

About halfway(?) through the month, my aunt, cousin, and grandma left for the states while my moms and I continued on our European adventure. I loved the overnight trains and the parisian breakfasts they served. Off the train, I found myself in Southern France—not as many noises or bustling subway goers. Still, plenty of crepes in sight. I remember we stayed at this chateau-looking place. It had a big, grassy lawn out front and tall green trees that created speckled patterns in my room when the sun set each evening. And, most importantly, this residence had a dog. A very old dog named Jimmy, but in French, pronounced “Zzzhimmy!” Jimmy just laid there, on the sprawling lawn each day. No leash. Thank god I had had some practice with Sadie, otherwise I'd be running frantic sprints every time we left or came back to the chateau. I knew to walk by Jimmy with a sense of calm.

One day, perhaps prompted by my mom again, I stopped by Jimmy. And I gently placed my hand on his stomach. Up and down, up and down it went. Like the big willow tree outside my bedroom window, when its leaves breathe up against the glass. Up and down, up and down. I felt that familiar warmth and this time gave him a few pets. No licking yet though.

Throughout the rest of our trip, when we moved on from Jimmy and the quaintness of Southern France, to the coast of Italy, bursting with more flavors and colors I had never

experienced (goodbye crepes, helloooo gelato!), I discovered more dogs. Some were tiny and fast, others were bigger and bounding. But one thing became clear: I loved me those geriatric pups. I remember my moms commenting on my dog fear in Italy– how far I’d come in such short a time, how all it took was being around some gentle, aging beasts to ease me out of my terror.

It’s true, I thought.

Apparently (and I have no recollection of this), it was on the Europe trip when I said to my moms in our rental car, “You know, the only way I’m really going to get over my fear of dogs is if we get one.” Okay, smarty pants six-year-old. Done.

After we got back to the U. S., the doggy search began in full swing. I was in kindergarten at the time. We didn’t know what we wanted exactly, but we did have some criteria.

The dog had to be:

Small

Hypo-allergenic

A puppy (we thought, given the delicacy I required around dogs, going through a breeder would be a better option this round than finding a rescue with an unknowable past)

Lastly, he had to be cute. And he had to be a HE. We were told that female dogs tended to stick to one person in the house, but we wanted equal amounts of doggy love.

That’s how we found you, Spud. “Boy #3,” according to the website. I remember debating names on our living room couch together. For a while, I was dead-set on the name “Francis,” because it would work as an homage of sorts to how “France” (and Jimmy) had changed my mindset around dogs. But you were too cute and small to be named Francis. You had perfect, splotchy brown circles of fur on your back. They looked like little potatoes. And I guess when I was in the womb, I was called “the spud.” So, Spud you would be named.

When you arrived at the Alaska Airlines Service Center (all the way from Texas!), we could hear you barking from inside your crate. When we opened the door of the crate, we gasped. You were so small! Your big brown eyes looked at ours a bit wearily, a bit confused. I remember you had tiny poops in your crate. You had been lying on a yellow cream towel the whole time, and you had a silly round green squeaker that your breeder had sent you off with for comfort. On the way home, Mama Jude held you in the back

seat next to me. Your whole body was pressed against her chest. As we drove home with you, we cried. Bearing such witness to you was the first time in my life that I ever cried of happiness...and slight trepidation, if we're being honest.

For the first week or so, I was still apprehensive of you being in the house without a leash. But both moms made it very clear to me: you were not a Sadie that I could order to the passenger seat of our car. You were not a Jimmy who was so old he couldn't move. You were a puppy. A baby. Our baby. The first time we gave you a bath, Mama Mar did it in the kitchen sink. Her hands wet, preoccupied with cleaning up the mess, put you on my lap. I sat on the kitchen floor with you. You were swaddled, this time in a blue towel. And from some quiet impulse inside me, this time not prompted by my moms, I placed the palm of my hand in front of you. And you licked me. Finally, a lick! It felt softer and warmer than I ever imagined. From that moment on, I fell completely in love with you and all dogs.

There are too many memories to describe in such detail, my glorious childhood, teenhood, and early adulthood with you. Things that come immediately to mind are the smile on your face, as you'd bound towards me from the end of the block after being let off the leash. Or the way you'd lick my toes as I sat at the counter doing homework. Or the walks on the beach, when you'd chase the waves and the flying birds. Or how you'd calm down when I'd sing "You Are Woman, I Am Man" from Funny Girl. I convinced myself that you loved that song. And I loved singing it to you because of how well you fit the lyrics: you are smaller, you are softer...let's kiss!"

And when the time came for me to go off to college, another adventure full of new sights, smells, and noises, you rode with me to the airport, your head pressed against my chest, just as you had done years earlier with Jude, as we drove you back from the airport. You were such an intuitive little man. I had a feeling that morning that you knew I was leaving. It gutted me but made me love you and your breed of beautiful beasts that much more.

As I came back for breaks during the college years, you were a bit slower every time I saw you. Just a bit though. You still had that "spark," as so many people acknowledged. Even so, you stopped chasing birds on the beach. You had to be carried up and down stairs. And you couldn't bound so easily towards me. Your world, of wildly different, ever-changing sights and smells and noises, started getting smaller. And every time I left

back for college, I wondered with dread if it would be my last time saying goodbye to you.

I coped, well enough. By petting any dog in sight around me, letting them lick me, giving them pets. My peers know me now, not as Anti-Dog Girl, but Pro-Dog girl. Dog-Obsessed Girl. We laugh together at the thought of me being scared of you once in a blue moon ago.

Today, however, I was with you. Not in college, thank goodness. I graduated! That's right, you not only got to see me graduate from my six-year-old fears. You saw me through college freakin' graduation. Today, you bounded up and down the streets a little more than usual. And you came back so tired. We knew it was your last morning with us, so we sat in my bedroom together as you laid on my sheets. I laid beside you. And the willow tree leaves breathed against the glass. I placed my hand on your belly, but I didn't pet you. I just let my hand feel you rise up and down, up and down.

At one point, my moms left the room briefly (I think they were making some call to get our car serviced later in the week, something mundane like that). But I'm happy I got a moment with you, just us. I sat up and looked at you from the head of the bed. My door was open, and right then and there, I imagined a little girl, dressed in all pink, timidly walking in, looking at you with trepidation and curiosity. I literally waved to her as you snored at the edge of my bed. I nodded, telling her it was okay to touch you. And I watched her place her small hands on your soft, old body. She lit up, happy that you didn't attack her. And I smiled. I felt your whole impact right in that moment, Spud.

The loss I feel now is all too overwhelming to write about because I could continue outlining every story and memory for many, many days, only to come back to the remembrance at the end of those days that you're gone, chasing birds in a different dimension.

Still.

For the first time ever, today, I beared witness to you as, not just my baby, but the gentle, aged beast who eased me out of my terror and into my light for sixteen whole years. Thank you Spud. Thank you, thank you. We love you.