

GOOD DOGS, HEAVEN AND ME.

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When I was about six my Dad brought home a floppy-eared, curly-coated, black and white water spaniel cross called Smutty (after my Dad's jokes). She and I would 'talk' for hours. Dad used her as a hunting dog. 'Ducks!' he would say, and she would leap barking into the boot of his big old green Humber, off to the lake. Mum was not as keen, yelling 'Off my garden!' and banning Smut from the house when I broke my leg and the plaster evidenced too much hair.

Smut was family. She 'wrote' a daily diary – a commentary on the family's events - forged by my father, for years (I still have these treasures). She was a glutton - one winter day she snuck into the kitchen and pinched the roast from the stove. We came home to Smut, *in flagrante delicto*, tossing the hot leg of lamb onto the snowy lawn. The spoilsports took it away, and we had baked beans.

As she got older, Smut became very fat – she squeezed, audibly, into her kennel - and very placid. I can now see how absentmindedly cruel we were, to deny a normal lifespan to her by simply feeding her too much, exercising her too little, and excluding her from our company. She may have been lonely. She was certainly invisible. It is still exquisitely painful for me to recall that when Dad confessed over tea one night that he had 'taken Smut to the gasworks' because our neighbour said she had snapped at my baby sister, we had not noticed her absence over nearly two days (I still called him a murderer). How could we have failed to 'notice' the absence of the dog we had loved so much? Perhaps it was the distraction of our new baby sister; we had relegated her to a separate and solitary life. That's why I have never consigned my companion animals to the apartheid of yard and kennel: why have a dog, if not as part of the family? But really, we had simply become adolescent narcissists.

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My next dog, Flossie, came more than 13 years later. She was a big, black adolescent herself, part Doberman, inherited from a friend who had, in turn, rescued her from a life tied to a clothesline. Flossie and I bonded, because she came into my life a few weeks after I had thrown my husband out of it.

There is no companion like a sympathetic dog. Once, driving past the local cemetery, I lifted up my voice and wept aloud and was astounded when Floss lifted her own and howled in sympathy. She would travel with her head in my lap, sleep on my bed, and gently forgive the lack of regular walks in our first few years together.

Flossie generously shared her home. We formed a pack of people, cats and other dogs. Timbo, an apricot-coloured hyperactive and asthmatic Pug, was rescued from my boyfriend because his idea of helping him overcome his fear of water was to throw him, shrieking, into the surf. Timbo was baby-like. I would never have chosen a pedigree or a pug, but came to adore him. He died of a broken heart, I think, six weeks and two days after I had taken up a job in another State, intending to bring him over when I had a house. Pongo, a kelpie crossed with some curly-legged mongrel, a classically plain but very smart pup, came in the arms of a teenager who wanted something of her own to love, then left her behind. For two years my sister's German shepherd, Golda lived with us, too. By this time my Dad and I would take the three of them each morning either to the glorious beach, with an ice-cream container full of dog poo, or walking around the golf course, or the Park. They were very happy times.

Flossie had a bump on the top of her lovely head, and a habit of slipping silently behind you and introducing her muzzle into your hand, and leaning affectionately. She survived many illnesses and accidents: run over (shock, abrasions, neurosis); skin lesions (flea allergies); battle wounds (a friend's psychotic German Shepherd); diabetes (I would take urine samples, morning and evening, with a jam jar at the end of a long stick. It looked absurd,

because Flossie would be too embarrassed to pee); arthritis (gold injections!); and epilepsy (medication). Then she was unwell one Wednesday; diagnosed with stomach cancer; and in such agony, three days later, that I called our vet. Flossie's last act was to wag her tail for Dad. Her heart seemed to beat long after she stopped breathing. She and Timbo are buried together by the back gate. I can never sell that house.

For two years after first Flossie, then Timbo, died I could not bear to have another dog. But I could hear a puppy whimpering each night, from a house in the same street. We met at the front gate of this house of young sharers, one morning: a pup remarkably like Flossie: brown, not black; flat-footed, not elegant; male, but adorable. Weeks later Olly/Folly walked in my front door off the street. I left a message at the house, which provoked an offer from the kid, who was bored with his ex-puppy, to take him. I did.

We hit it off. Folly ('When lovely woman stoops to') was a Hound From Hell (very badly behaved) but also my companion of dawn walks through Fitzroy Gardens, where we met foxes, possums, cruisers and cops. I would take him to the long beaches of the peninsula where he ran, and ran, and smiled. At his first Equal Opportunity Commission picnic on the river, Folly chased a passing cyclist for a couple of kilometers (Flossie once chased a man in a wheelchair to the end of the street, while I was incapacitated by horrified hysterics). Folly lived noisily and cheerfully through the burglary ('Just as well he's no watchdog,' said the police: 'The last job, they rammed a screwdriver through the dog's head.' I shuddered and rejoiced in Folly's frolics).

Folly accepted the domination of cats, looked wounded when Justin bit him, fled Amazing Grace like a gazelle, and was my best friend when I was worried. We walked together for many dark hours. But he blossomed when the neighbour's puppy joined the home. It was obvious that the pup was energetic, and not well matched to her owner. Their mutual anguish was audible and distressing. We suggested our neighbour relinquish the dog to us.

That Saturday when Murphy was carried in, she just shook. Within an hour she was rollicking up and down the stairs, puddling and canoodling with an ecstatic Folly. They became and have remained a couple. Our relationship took longer to set.

It arose from disaster. Just before Christmas Eve in 1994 Murphy slipped past me at the front gate onto peak hour Hoddle Street. She played with me and six lanes of heavy traffic for ten, nightmare minutes, as I flagged down cars and trucks and buses and ran and pleaded and called her to the safety of the footpath. Then a 4-wheel drive mowed her down in front of my eyes.

Murphy survived. Her shattered back legs healed slowly and she required daily nursing for several months. I worked from home and did what I could. We talked. She became a mature and reflective companion.

I have gained much from my relationships with dogs. I have walked Folly and Murphy most mornings through darkened parks and gardens, Now, I am relatively fit – and my diabetes is well-controlled – because I was responsible for their health and happiness. I miss them, but as part of a household they do not seem to miss me. I have never had a ‘one-woman’ dog. I could not bear the responsibility.

I have learned an enormous amount from dogs: what unconditional love is; how dependency relationships are ethically complex; that making a dog dependent on a human is a responsibility. From Flossie, I learned that you always die alone. No-one can accompany you.

If it is true that dogs have no soul, I would not want a place in heaven.