

waiting room | Karen Zemanick

Now that I wear these glasses, I see new details of each gray whisker springing from Jasper's snout. I advise him that his breath still stinks like fish, then set him on his feet. I remind him for the three-thousandth time, "You are not a lap dog." I guess we're both getting old now.

He wanders the room until he's stuck between a plant stand and the corner, confused now in the house he's known for fourteen years. I reach down to guide him into reverse, and he rubs his cataract-clouded eyes into my legs. "You're a silly puppy," I say.

Each rib and vertebra protrudes beneath his black coat. Friends see how frail he is and shake their heads, thinking I'm dragging things out. He paces in circles until I hoist up his arthritic hips and lay him on a folded blanket. I watch for Jasper to give me a sign that he's ready to rest for good, but he doesn't.

Each night, we sleep in spurts until he makes a low cry every hour or two to ask me to carry him outside. I sigh and throw off my covers.

I groan as I squat to slide my arms under him. Each time I lift him, he buries his head in my neck, and I hold him for a moment. I tell him, "You're funny looking, indeed." I open the back door and get my balance before we descend the stairs.

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He was six months old, waiting in a dripping wet crate at the Chicago city pound. A filthy, scrawny pup, not barking like all the others—just sitting, with eyes wide and fixed on me, splashing the floor with his tail and shifting his weight from one front paw to the other. I gave him a ride that day, a collar, and a name.

One morning that next summer, as I opened the door wearing my job-interview suit, he squirted past. He made me chase him in the rain, then leave him, muddy and rank, on the basement floor until evening. When I returned, he forgave me for leaving, no differently from any other day, with his two-ears-down greeting and the dance of joy (a certain side-to-side step of the hind legs). I told him I was sorry for being angry, but that I had gotten the job. I added, "Don't pretend I don't know you just slept all day."

Five years later, at Thanksgiving, five hundred miles away

from home, he ran off. I combed silent streets for him, calling his name into the valleys of Pittsburgh until a snowstorm hastened dusk. I didn't expect to find him; I just needed to know I had tried as hard as I could. I dreaded returning to my father's empty house. But the phone rang; Jasper was waiting at the police station. I brushed my eyes and informed him, "You are a rascally rabbit."

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We frequently don't make it down the back stairs before the warmth seeping through my shirt tells me he is letting go of his bladder. When he squirms, I know it's his bowels too. I change my soiled clothes while I wait to carry him back inside. I put my mouth on the top of his warm head, which is now the most reliably clean part of his body, and murmur into his fur, "You are a silly, silly puppy." He flicks his tongue on my chin. He accepts a sponge bath and the rub of a clean towel. I put another load into the washing machine.

One bleary night in November, I fall back to sleep on the couch forgetting that he is still outside stumbling around the yard. When the dawn wakes me, I see that Jasper is not on the folded blanket. I throw the door open to find him standing with stiff front paws propped on the bottom step, waiting. When I scoop him up, instead of complaining, he buries his head in my neck. I clasp him until his ears feel warm again. I realize I'm not going to get a sign.

I call the animal hospital to tell them we're on our way, so other people won't have to watch us wait when we get there. For Jasper, it makes no difference. He knows all there is to know about my tears.

The doctor closes the door behind us.

She pulls her stethoscope from her ears, nods to me, and leaves. I coil Jasper's collar and put it in my pocket. I pass through the waiting room, this time with empty hands.