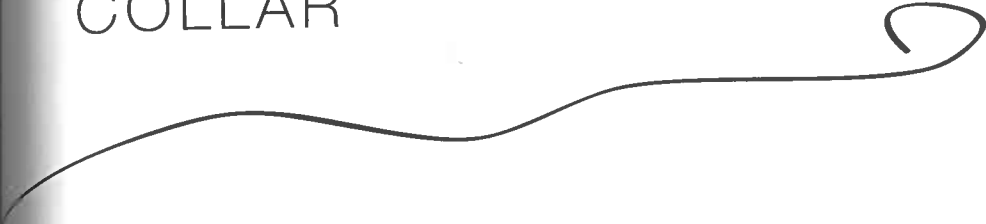


COLLAR



THIS CIRCLE OF dirty red canvas and nylon hangs from a hook on a mirror in the bedroom, alongside a couple of baseball caps and Gertrude's plummy scarf. An inch wide, a quarter-inch thick, buckled on the first of four holes, heavy duty and over-sized. Fred brought it home the day we left her at the vet to be cremated, and retrieved (in a box) a week or so later. And here's the thing: it smells of her—of Roxy, our first dog—a chocolate Lab with a narrow head, the last of her litter, so tiny when Fred picked her up at the Labrador farm in Sierra Madre that she nearly fell between the seats in the Beast (our old wagon) before he got her home. This is her collar, removed eleven years later and still faintly sour: that odor, greasy and rotten, foul and sweet—it used to stick to my fingers, I remember; poor thing, she suffered in the heat.

And I suffered, too—held my nose and made faces and begged Fred to bathe her. Which he did. Soaked her with a cold hose in the front yard and lathered her up in the street. She stood there, head hanging, feet planted in the gutter, braced against the water rushing down Princeton Avenue, facing downhill—in spite of our efforts to turn her around, so as

to keep the soap from running into her eyes. After he dried her off, he'd tie the towel around her head like a babushka; and she'd pose for a moment, forlorn, bewildered, as if straight off the boat (from the shtetl)—a William Wegman plus-size model. Then she shook off the towel and shook herself out; superdog in reverse; revived and revved up, she ran circles in a frenzy, spraying water this way and that, although it took her hours to really dry, so thick and oily was her coat.

But this collar—coated with dust inside the buckle, and three tags hanging from a ring near the last notch: the first, tinted orange, from the Los Feliz Small Animal Hospital; next, her permanent license (from Animal Regulation, City of L.A.); and the third—a perfect disk worn smooth and dull and difficult to read—our last name and address on one side; *Roxy* (the X rubbed to nothing but a backwards slash) and our phone number on the other.

Roxy. How did we pick her name? Now I am tired of diminutives —of dog-gies—tired of my own voice shouting for this old boy (Sully: Fred's choice) who will loiter and roll in something dead if he gets the chance—and this pup (Elphie—short for Elphaba, the name with which she came to us), who runs ahead into the tall grass only to reappear with foxtails buried between her tufted toes and in that extra hair hanging off of her ears like payos. But Roxy—we came up with it together because we liked Sting, for one thing—and because we didn't have children, not yet, and it wasn't a name we'd have held in reserve for a girl. And how did we decide we wanted a dog in the first place? It had something to do with growing up with them, both of us, and with buying the house—our first. Something to do with us as newly married; with three bedrooms, two baths, and a big backyard (but with only a couple of toes in that water, not all four feet, not yet); and something to do with announcing that we really and truly lived in California. Weren't going home (back East, that is) any time soon.

Fred, fixed as he was on the breed, combed the Classifieds and located a litter less than an hour to the east. No question he'd come home with a dog—how do you visit a bunch of puppies and not bring one home? Although by the time he got there, only Roxy was left, who knows why?

The smallest, we figured later on, plus her head wasn't as square as most: a bit pointy in the nose, Roxy was, such is the privilege of pedigree—features that end in a point. She came with a rag, a piece of burgundy towel—her security blanket. And until she was trained, she lived in an old bonus room at the bottom of the house—now Fred's office, now carpeted, with floor to ceiling bookshelves, a free-standing globe, an oversized desk made of pine; posters on the walls as well as a couple of framed black and white photos by Margaret Bourke-White (inherited); home to complicated communications systems, telephones and computers and fax machines. But back then it was empty and lined with linoleum. Fred would take her down at the end of the day and sing her to sleep. I'd hear him crooning from our bedroom on the floor above: "Something in the way she moves, attracts me like no other puppy . . ." and "There are puppies I remember . . ."

Upstairs by the fireplace stood a white stone pig with empty eyes that I'd found in a junk shop on La Cienega, and Roxy spent her evenings lying beside the staring, blind thing, absently licking its rough, no-color hooves. "She thinks it's her mother," my motherless husband would say. "She thinks no such thing. She doesn't know what it is, she doesn't recognize it by sight, it doesn't smell or feel like a mother to her. It's probably salty," I said. But I couldn't dissuade him.

"Most dogs are dogs," a friend once told me, "but Roxy is a duchess." Was it true? Was Roxy some kind of royalty in our midst? This dog who once shat all over the backseat of a car (never did get it completely cleaned up, attracted flies for two summers running, before we traded it in)? This dog—the one who quietly went through a wheel of brie on the General's coffee table, while ten of us ate our soup and salad on the other side of the room? The cur who systematically cleaned my kitchen floors with her tongue? Where's the dignity in any of that? But however singleminded and insatiable, noble she was: also a comfort—endlessly patient when we finally had a baby, and then another; when each of them jerked on her ears and her tail, and climbed over her back, and pulled her legs out from under her. Ever stoic—the dog with the soap in her eyes—I never heard

her growl, not at them, not once. She'd get tired (those Labrador hips) and plop down in the middle of Go Fish or Monopoly, but she was, for the longest time, affable and game—up for a run or a chase, or to laze in the grass; to wait for the muse from under Fred's desk; to cheer me on from under the Steinway; and if one or the other of us retreated in anger or hurt, it wouldn't be long before we'd hear the clicking of her nails across the floors—the jingle of her tags on her collar—then feel the nudge of her nose behind a knee or in the crook of an elbow, evidence of her concern, her inclination to commiserate should we imagine ourselves lonely or alone. Eventually, of course, she started to gray around the muzzle—was less inclined, if we weren't evidently in distress, to follow us from room to room. Eventually, it got so she slept away most of the day; and as time went on, lame and creaky, riddled with lumps and bumps the way old dogs get, she began to seem not only tired but listless—not just resigned but down in the dumps; at which point we decided to find her some company.

This time, wisened up and politically correct, we didn't even think about *breeds*; we adopted an abandoned mutt with soft ears and big eyes, a beagle-dingo mix, with a red brindle coat. Fred named him Sullivan—Sully for short. The first few days were harder than we'd have predicted: there we were cavorting upstairs with our adorable pup, and the old girl wouldn't deign to join the party. Instead, she skulked down the spiral staircase and moped under the piano: *What betrayal was this?* she half groaned, half sighed. *How could we have done this to her?* she said with her eyes before she turned them to the wall. But towards the end of the week she came round, hobbled up the stairs one step at a time, one paw meeting the other like a crone with a cane, to check out the action. Within days, we were coming home to the two of them grooming each other like an old married couple. "Geez," Fred would say, "get a room." Peace then for a while—that is, after Sully went through two sets of Venetian Blinds and all the upholstery in the living room, Roxy, watching ruefully, no doubt, from the middle of the Kilim, her head between her paws. *You're gonna get it*, she'd have told him if she could. On the day that Sully went for sofa cushions—the feathers swirling and drifting out at us when we

came home and opened the front door—Fred took out the vacuum, while I sat on the stoop and sobbed with Roxy's wet nose in my neck. Roxy. Solace. Solace. Roxy.

But she wasn't my dog, not really. She was Fred's all along. Would I have saved this collar? I don't know. And her ashes in a tin on a shelf in his office downstairs, wouldn't I have scattered them by now? Not up to me, thank goodness, collar and dog both just where they belong.

Meanwhile, Sully's grown old and white-faced, has lumps of his own, one runny eye, and a permanent growth, black and misshapen, under the other, from some old wound that never healed as it should have. And if Roxy broke us in, Fred and I—taught us how to worry, and love, and laugh, and grieve, it's Sully who raised up Eliza and Jake, who spends days in her room and nights in his. And it must be acknowledged: Roxy was unflappable, yes, but Sully is smart—multitalented in fact. He opens screen doors all by himself, and, if we neglect to take him to the park, hides our shoes in protest. He's as fast as any squirrel; can catch a ball on the fly; and Sully can sing. Gladly, he followed Eliza out to the decks to practice, back when she played the alto sax. With gusto, he howled along to "Take Five" for all the neighborhood to hear. However—of late he's less vocal, and also less spry; generally less engaged. A few weeks ago, because I decided he needed company—or maybe because I did (Eliza having left us for the other coast)—we adopted another mutt, a herder this time (she nips at our ankles, and takes Sully's leash in her mouth when we walk), partial to single socks, and given to squatting and peeing right in front of us like it's performance art. Skinny young thing, she kept slipping out of her collar (brown), until Fred, ever resourceful, poked through the leather with a lobster pick to make a new hole. She's an anxious creature, can't seem to settle; sniffs my heels as I write, half circles my chair, paces behind me, puts her snout in my lap. When I finally look up, she cocks her head as if to ask why we're sitting around: are we going to waste the whole day or what? I pick up Roxy's collar in both hands, and Elphie sniffs, grabs hold, and tugs; we face off then, I very stern, she duly admonished. Except she's not one to give in easily, no, and she can-

not resist a tentative lick. Not that she knows it's a collar, or whose, or to pay proper respect. Nor does she think it's her mother, oh no.

It's me she looks to; and waits on; and loves.

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