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## He and I (and Her Too)

Peter Witte

(After "He and I" by Natalia Ginzburg)

**H**E IS canine. I am human. Or, at least, mostly human. Probably I am 0.001 percent Neanderthal.

**H**E HAS a German-French heritage, Schnauzer-poodle. I have a German-Irish heritage, farmer-poet.

**H**E IS almost seven years old, middle-aged in dog years. I like to think of myself as not quite middle-aged. But, probably, I am.

**H**E IS from Takoma Park, Maryland. When my wife and I went to the home where he was born to choose a puppy from the pack of five or six others, he charmed my wife by the way he wagged his tail and looked in her eyes. She became his mother. I became his father.

**H**E HAS dark brown eyes. I have light brown eyes. Once, when I was younger, I heard someone say that people who have brown eyes have them because they are full of shit. I thought that that joke was funny and so I adopted the quip to "explain" my eye color because, for me, there was metaphorical truth to it. But his eyes are large and lovely, honest, wholesome.

**W**E LIVED in an urban neighborhood when he was a puppy. On short walks, constantly, I needed to extract items from his mouth that he had snatched before I could pull away on the leash, such as discarded pizza crusts, wax sandwich wrappers, chicken bones. Lots of chicken bones. Sometimes, though, I refused to remove the disgusting thing that he had picked up: a dead pigeon, hardened dog feces, a used condom, a bloodied maxi pad. On those occasions, instead of prying open his mouth to withdraw the items, I would yell at him until he either dropped or swallowed his find.

**A**S A PUPPY, he had playdates with another puppy, Peanut, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel-Bichon mix who lived in the same apartment building as us. The locations of the sessions would alternate between our home and Peanut's family home. For an hour, he and Peanut would run around the apartment, chasing and jumping on one another, wrestling, pouncing, mouthing, nipping. He burned a lot of energy during these sessions and, afterward, he would lie in the same spot for hours. We held at least one session every week until Peanut's family moved to a different neighborhood. A month after Peanut moved, we traveled to his new home for a visit and it was just like old times. But it was a longer drive than we cared to make regularly. Then we moved farther away. And his relation-

ship with Peanut ended.

**W**E NOW live in a quiet suburb. Before we moved to this suburb, I rarely considered his size. If anything, I had always thought of him as average-sized. But large canines are more prevalent in our current neighborhood and I realize that, in fact, he is rather small. I am not saying his size bothers me, but, occasionally, I wonder if other people consider him to be a feminine type of dog and, therefore, attach that feminine quality to me.

**T**HOUGH IT has grayed over the years, he has a beautiful coat of black hair with a patch of white on his chest and white paws. I used to have



blond hair. Now it is brown, but quickly graying. Months ago I was reading in bed, shirtless as usual, and I noticed a gray chest hair. I plucked it, examined it, said, "I'll be damned." I showed it to my uninterested wife (she was completely gray in her twenties and thinks I look in the mirror too much). I recalled how it was only a few years ago that I first noticed a gray hair on my head. Now, just like my head, my chest has too many gray hairs to pluck.

**H**E USED to get his hair groomed at home. Each time I ended up covered in hair and sweat and with a sore back from wrestling on the ground for an hour. But I felt that, however challenging it may have been to do the grooming myself, in the end it was worth it because, when finished, he looked good, plus we saved \$65, the going rate at the groomers. And it was worth it until the time when the clipper

blade cut the inside of his left leg. I did not need my wife to tell me to stop doing the grooming at home, the two trips to the veterinarian's office, or a \$150 vet bill. His scream of pain echoing in my mind was motivation enough. Now, Cassandra at Paws of Enchantment does his grooming.

**H**E HAS a weak stomach and was put on a strict diet as a puppy that he has remained on ever since. It is a semi-expensive, hard dog food that is good for him because there are not a lot of additives. It is mostly oats and chicken, but it also has carrots and split peas. If he eats too much of anything else he will have digestive problems. But because it seems to bring him so much joy, when his mother is not looking I still give him table scraps. I, on the other hand, will eat most anything. Except oysters. I do not like oysters.

**H**E DRINKS water, nothing but water. I, of course, drink water, but also absurd amounts of coffee, seltzer, apple-spiced tea, and non-alcoholic beer. Each day I make the choice to not drink an alcoholic beverage. I make this decision because I have a heart condition and alcohol consumption deteriorates the health of my heart. It is a

denim suspenders bought the Honda from me for seven hundred in cash and hauled it away on a flatbed trailer. Today, in my family, I am known as "shit and puke man." If someone gets sick in the car, I clean it up without much fanfare.

**H**E IS sensitive to noise. When his sister and brother were babies, he spent a lot of time in whichever room they were not currently in, meaning he spent a lot of time alone hiding under his parents' bed. He still likes to spend time under the bed, actually. It is his safe place. Whenever I raise my voice at the kids, he clears out from whatever room we are in together and heads to his safe place.

**H**E HAS rotten, awful dog breath but is not self-conscious about it. I am often self-conscious about my breath: afternoons when I have drunk numerous cups of coffee on an empty stomach, nights when I have eaten pasta with garlic or a salad with red onions, although I rarely eat red onions anymore, ever since my wife, who at the time was my girlfriend, told me that she does not like red onion breath.

**H**E LOVES peanut butter. I love peanut butter too, but I rarely eat it plain. I combine it with bread and jelly, apple slices, celery and raisins, or, after my children have gone to bed, handfuls of chocolate.

**H**E EATS off the floor. I never do that, unless you are counting my ten-second rule, but even then I pick up the food before putting it into my mouth.

**I**N THE afternoon, he sits by the back door and whines until his mother or I let him into our fenced-in backyard. Inevitably, after a short time outside, something will send him into a state of frenzied barking, driving me half-mad. But when I open the door and command him back inside, he will have nothing to do with me. To keep the neighbors from hating us, I will go outside to retrieve him. But, always, he runs away, dodging me with little effort. There is no doubt that I look like a fool chasing him in circles around the yard, dancing this and that way, my arms reaching out, trying to grab him. As I think of these futile attempts, I am reminded of an old grainy video I once watched of a shirtless and overweight white-haired man chasing a hen inside a chicken pen. In the background, a crowd—country folk, farmer-types in straw hats—were slapping their knees, laughing in fits. The video ended with the man falling over, lying spread-eagle in the middle of the pen. Now, instead of chasing him, to coax him back inside I have resorted to food bribery or, really, food trickery.

**W**E BOTH like popcorn, but whereas I will eat handful after handful of it, he only eats pieces that I drop by accident or that I give him with an ulterior motive. When I am trying to lure him in from the backyard, I drop a trail of popcorn that starts at the first step and leads a few feet beyond the door on the inside of the house. Then I hold the door and encourage him to devour all of it. When he moves toward

the pieces past the threshold of the door, I quickly swing it shut with him on the inside, my trick accomplished. It works, usually. But sometimes he will eat all of the pieces up to the door, then turn and quickly run down the steps, escaping my trap.

**H**E CANNOT resist a spontaneous game of chase. I say his name, look at him playfully, then run away, and he chases after. Because I am not that nice, I especially like to reel him in when I see him content, in a resting position. Even when he looks so restful, as though a cup of tea on his back would not spill, even then, he cannot resist a game of chase. It is especially fun to do this on the main floor of our house because of the wood floors that make it slick for his paws. This makes it so that when I am running with him hot on my trail and stop abruptly, he cannot stop quickly, and so, even though he is trying not to, he slides toward me. I grab him and play-spank his rear, riling him even more. We go around the house playing chase until I get bored. I say, "Stop. That's enough." And I go back to what I was doing beforehand and he goes back to resting.

**H**E OFTEN is asleep. I would like to sleep more often.

**H**E OFTEN lies at my feet, slipping into position, unannounced, under the desk or table where I am absorbed in work. The usual result is an accidental kick, a high-pitched yelp, and me startled.

**H**E LIKES walks, but sometimes when his mother or I take out the leash from the closet, he runs under the table where we cannot get to him, as though he does not want to go. His mother or I will yell, "Goddamn it! What is wrong with you? Don't you want to go for a walk?" Then we must get on hands and knees to chase him out from underneath the table.

**H**E DOES NOT mind tracking his messy paws throughout the home. I am anal about keeping the dirt and damp from outside of the home on the outside. Usually there are no problems. If his paws get dirty or damp on a walk, I take paper towels and clean them before unleashing him. But sometimes, when his mother, who also does not seem to mind his messy paws, walks him, he finds his way to the bedroom where, inevitably, he finds his way to my side of the bed. I will scream, "Get off the bed, goddamned animal." But he will not budge. So I pick him up, gently toss him to the floor, and towel off his paws, cursing his mother.

**H**E IS quick to befriend strangers, to sit in the laps of people who he has met only minutes earlier. But he dislikes most dogs, new or old acquaintances. He growls, barks, his hackles rise up. I, on the other hand, am slow coming around to strangers, fast friends with dogs.

**U**NLIKE MANY dogs, he does not like belly massages. I would like a belly massage.

**H**E IS loyal. I am near certain that he has never considered leaving us. But after his sister was born, when it was time to take a walk one morning following a night when we were awakened on a half-dozen occasions, I said that I wondered if there are people out there who might adopt a dog from us. Sleepily, his mother said, "There are many people." I considered that as I walked him in my pajamas. By the time I returned inside and drank three cups of coffee, I pushed away the idea. We did not return to the idea again until after his brother was born. Then we brainstormed friends and acquaintances we might ask and even went so far as to put a feeler out there with family members, seeing if they would want to take him in if, in fact, we decided it was for the best. In the end, we never moved beyond words. I do not believe we would have ever given him away, but when I recall that we considered such a thing, I feel bad. I take comfort in knowing that it is not possible that he could have understood that we ever contemplated such a move.

**H**E DOES NOT speak English, but he grasps enough to get by. For example, he understands his name as well as the names of family members and his best friend, Edgar Allan Poe, an adorable-looking, grumpy dog who lives with my sister- and brother-in-law. But he also understands numerous words and phrases, such as treat, ball, sit, stay, down, go on a walk, get toy, who's there, and let's go, a phrase that freaks him out, causing him to follow around me or his mother, whining, hoping that wherever it is that we are going, we are planning on taking him with us.

**W**HEN I RETURN home from work or the grocery store or sometimes even from a brief trip to get something out of the garage, he greets me with unbounded enthusiasm. Often he is lying at the door with an article of clothing—a dirty sock of mine, his mother's worn underwear—that he has retrieved from the laundry basket to keep him company. I walk in the house and he jumps up. His front paws give high fives to the air, then my leg. His tail wags, bursting with energy. And through his stuffed-with-smelly-laundry mouth, I hear him moan with excitement, "Rrrrr! Rrrrr!" I have not been enthusiastic about anything since 1998.

**W**E BOTH like to play ball. I enjoy many kinds of ball games: baseball, softball, football, soccer, tennis, bocce, croquet, dodgeball, kickball. You name it, I probably have played and enjoyed it. The ball game that I am best at and especially love is basketball. The only game he knows is fetch. But he is excellent playing it. When he plays, his run is graceful and his attention, his focus on the ball, is admirable. He runs down the bouncing ball, and then he effectively catches it and efficiently returns it to my feet. He will do this until I tire. Sometimes I think he would run himself to death if I never stopped throwing the ball. Long ago I took a picture of him in the field where we were playing fetch. His eyes are all concentration, focused on the baseball in the foreground of the picture. This

photo is framed and sits on our mantel, next to a picture of his sister and brother.

**W**E BOTH enjoy sitting on the plush chair in the living room, staring out of the window. If a creature appears on the other side of the glass, I keep quiet and watch. He barks and barks until the creature is gone.

**H**E HUMPS his bed. It is intense to watch, actually. That might sound strange. And, really, I do not watch him. But once I did watch. And I do not like to talk about such things because they embarrass me, but so be it: the reason that the humping is intense is because he is neutered and it seems like he is trying and yet failing to pleasure himself. My wife hates that he humps his bed. She hates it so much that she threw away the bed. But years later, after he was injured and needed a place to sleep that was near the floor, we bought a new bed for him that, of course, he took to humping. This time I stopped her from throwing away the new bed. We agreed that so long as the bed is kept in my office, it could stay. So now, as I work in my office, my back turned away from him, he humps his bed.

**A**T NIGHT he sleeps on our bed, at his mother's feet. He used to sleep in his crate, but his mother suggested that we let him on the bed after we stopped co-sleeping with the last of our children. She wishes he would sleep next to rather than on her feet, but she puts up with this minor annoyance because time together on the bed, she has said, "is the only attention he gets from me." I, on the other hand, wish he slept nearer to me. In fact, I am jealous

of his mother that he chooses her feet rather than, for example, my belly. But even though I wish he slept on me, if his mother ever said the word, I would have no problem relegating him back to the crate because sometimes in the middle of the night he jumps down from the bed and goes to the kitchen for a drink of water, then returns to the bed and whines until his mother wakes me to tell me to pick him up and return him to the bed. Each time, I pick him up and put him on my belly. But always he moves to his mother's feet.

**H**E ALMOST died. Recently he, his mother, and I were on an evening walk near home when another dog, whose name we later found out was Rocky, was unleashed and roaming in an unfenced yard. Rocky darted across the street at us. And it all happened so fast. In a moment Rocky was in attack mode. There was growling, a scream of death, yelling. Then there was a frantic dance, spinning, more growling, more yelling. Finally I picked him up and we escaped the torrent. Eventually we looked under the harness collar and found the wound on his neck and brought him straight to the 24-hour emergency animal hospital on the far side of the city. The vet performed surgery, closing the gaping hole with strong twine. As he was in surgery, his mother and I were in the waiting room. I drank several cups of Keurig coffee and had a conversation about *Infinite Jest* with a woman who said that David Foster Wallace "didn't give a shit about his readers, so I decided to not give a shit about his book." After the surgery, the vet told us that his jugular vein was mere centimeters away from being punctured. She said, "He's a lucky one." I cried. I knew we were the lucky ones, too. □

## Safety

Don't use your dog's name as your password.  
And never write anything down. Keep your head.  
Don't pick up hitch-hikers, and don't stick out your thumb. You don't need to go anywhere.  
The first place they will look is in your nightstand.  
If you want to seem a little crazy for protection it is all right to whisper to yourself or into the collar of an oversized raincoat.  
Blow secret warmth into your hands and laugh knowingly. Give yourself a name.  
That man, frozen, was a child once, flying kites or having his lunch money stolen.  
You don't have to explain yourself to him.  
You don't have to tell him where you're going.

—Ruth Foley