

Wild Rover

There it is.

It looks at me through the cage. It looks at me like it knows what I'm thinking, but I know it doesn't.

It disturbs me. I feel bad for it.

"Here he is!" Carla, my wife, places the cage down. It barks. And then it barks again.

My daughter, Rosie, runs toward the cage. "A puppy!"

It is springtime, the time for new beginnings, for growth—for Rosie's birthday: her tenth.

I argued with Carla for weeks over it. I told her that I do not want a dog and that I don't like them. I am allergic and they trigger my asthma. They bark and they poop and they can't take care of themselves. Rosie is still learning to manage her own barks and poops, let alone another's. She is too young to take care of it herself, I said. I tried to use money as an excuse but we both know we can afford it, at least I can. But Carla thinks it's a good lesson and something that will teach responsibility.

Worst of all, it's a pug. It has short hair, stumpy legs, and a pig's tail. Its face looks like it has been flattened by a waffle press. *Look at that fucking thing.*

"Isn't he cute, Dad?"

"He's adorable, honey."

It has been a week since it arrived.

Its name is Rover now, apparently. *Why Rover?* Rosie thinks it sounds cute. All I can think of when I think "Rover" is that Irish folk song "The Wild Rover":

*And it's No, Nay, never,
No, nay never no more
Will I play the wild rover,
No never no more.*

It barks and I lose track of the song in my head. *Motherfucker.*

Rosie tries to pour food in its bowl, but the bag is too heavy and she pours a mound of kibble that spills onto the floor. "Oops!"

It looks electrified, storms the mound, and uses its smashed skull to bite through as much food as it can before I start scooping it off the floor and back into the bag. I'm not supposed to help her.

Three weeks: that's all it took for it to become my responsibility. Rosie sleeps in, as she has been doing for the last few days, which means I don't have to put the purple sweater on it this time. I think Rover and I are both happy about that.

It is yanking, stopping, starting, and jumping, completely oblivious to the tragic length of the tether. We walk for about three minutes and it is already panting. I am panting in my own way, too, and take a puff of my inhaler. I haven't wheezed like this in years.

It stops to defecate and looks at me, still breathing hard. It looks like it's smiling, but its eyes tell me something else: they are embarrassed. I turn away.

As we pass a man on the street, it makes sure to smell him.

"Hey, boy!"

It wags its tail faster.

"What a good boy! You're such a good boy!"

I don't know what to do. I look at the man and smile.

"New to this?"

"Yes."

He points at the bag of poop in my hand. "Those bags suck. They leak. Pay the extra buck for the others. It'll save that from happening next time." The bag is tearing.

"Thanks."

"What's his name?"

How long do I let this go on for? "His name? Oh, yes. His name is Rover."

Rover looks up at me with a mindless smile.

"We have to go now. Have a nice day."

"Buy those bags!"

We walk away. I mutter "fuck off" and Rover looks happy.

"What do you mean it can't swim? Can't dogs swim?"

"Not Rover! He's a pug!" Rosie screams.

He wouldn't stop following me, so I decided to put him in our pool. I don't know why. I guess I was bored, thought it would be funny.

Rover is sprawled out, panting beside the pool. He is a little stunned. I scooped him out when I saw his little legs couldn't keep up and he started to sink.

"You almost killed my dog!"

"Oh, come on, I was here the whole time! He's fine!" Rover looks at me with his waffle face, affirming that he has no idea what has happened and holds no grudge.

Rosie's eyes begin to water.

"I'm sorry."

Rover pants. *Is he smiling? Do we think they're smiling because of Disney movies? Is he just trying to breathe?* He walks over to me and starts licking my leg.

Carla comes outside and scolds me.

It has been months now since his arrival. I spend 45 minutes in the shower thinking about how I want to go far, far away and find something new even though I have it all right here—all that we look for—dog, wife, and daughter. It's all perfect.

In the living room I find Rosie and Rover on the couch.

"Look, Dad, he's snoring," Rosie whispers. "Look at his tongue."

He is sleeping. His small tongue hangs out of his mouth and his eyes are left slightly open. He makes a horrid, congested noise repeatedly. Rosie giggles. "He's so cute."

I can't help but smile. "He's something!"

He wakes up. I've spoken too loudly, but he looks at me adoringly and runs to my feet. He licks my legs.

Rosie looks astonished. "He sure does like you."

"I guess so." I look at him. We meet eyes. I can't tell if he knows everything or nothing at all. I look away.

The snoring wasn't cute. After the swimming incident I decided to do some research and read online that pugs have extreme breathing problems: they suffer from Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway

Syndrome (BOAS). His waffle-pressed face and compact skull make it hard to breathe. The breed's nostrils are too small for it to get sufficient air or something. That's the reason he can't swim—that in combination with stubs for legs. Pugs have to tread so fast that they run out of breath almost instantly. Staying afloat is too stressful.

He pants—gasping because he will never get enough. This animal is bred to suffer.

We meet eyes again.

"Look, listen to this: 'Neutering eliminates the occurrence of testicular cancer. It markedly reduces the incidence of benign hyperplasia of the prostate gland, prostatitis, and perineal hernias in dogs. Male dogs display hormonally influenced aggression toward each other...'"

Carla and I are lying in bed. I am reading *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale with a Rover-like look on my face and she is on her phone looking at "Top Ten Reasons to Spay or Neuter Your Pet." *What would it be like to have my balls chopped off? Would it feel the same as having to live with Rover?*

"...male dogs will cease roaming to find a mate because the hormonal urge to do so has been removed. It'll help. He'll be less work. He'll be easier for Rosie to handle."

"No," I say, surprised by my own words.

"No?"

"No. I don't think we should neuter him."

"What? Why?"

"Because I wouldn't want to be neutered."

"Yeah, but, honey, you're not a dog. You are a human being. It's different."

"How so?"

She chuckles. Her brow furrows. "How so? Hmm... you can love. You love me." She puts her hand on my thigh.

"Do I?"

"I think so." Her hand moves up.

"He's not getting neutered."

She caresses my crotch.

Rover loses in the morning.

I don't know how long it's been. I sit outside in a lawn chair by the pool, staring into the water. Someone opens the back door and closes it. I hear a pitter patter coming toward me: Rover appears and lies down. I start to put the leash around his neck, but he just sits, staring. I stop and pet his head. He looks fine. He's been fine. He's changed since the chopping, but not to an extreme extent. More docile, but he still pants. He still suffers.

He doesn't even know what's happened to him. He doesn't even understand that he can't have sex anymore, that he can't reproduce, that he can't grow — that he can't breathe.

I pet his head some more. He looks up at me with those eyes. *Does he know everything or nothing at all?* I pick him up and walk into the pool. We can barely stay afloat.

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