

RUFUS

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Except for one sad note, the holiday season was pleasant and enjoyable. To start it off, we spent a week in New England, visiting family and attending the opening of our younger son's graduate-study art show in Amherst at the UMass Herter Gallery. Then the older son and the twin grandsons arrived here to liven things up around the house over Christmas. The one sorrow was that Rufus, the dog, wasn't on hand to enjoy the activity. Finding his Christmas collar reminded us of how much we missed him.

Rufus joined the household almost twelve years ago, a trembling, brown puppy of four weeks, cupped in the grimy teenage hands of the younger son. He was a foundling, picked up on the River Road about ten miles north of town where he had wandered or been left to shift for himself. A bath got rid of the mud and grease, revealing soft, short hair, alert brown eyes, a pointy, black-tipped tail and a valgus deformity of the right front foot, which splayed out almost at a right angle when he sat or romped. His parentage, we decided, was indefinite and certainly mixed.

From the beginning, Rufus demonstrated personality, self-assurance and a mind of his own. He felt that the house belonged to him, and, fortunately, he seemed to have entered the world housebroken. There was no period of whimpering or pitiful puppy yelping. He liked to indulge in rough and tumble play with other larger puppies or adult dogs. But there was always a point of tolerance at which he drew the line, and at which he would stand his ground, growl belligerently, or even attack, as if to say, "Okay, cut out the horseplay. I've had enough."

Rufus grew in strange ways: first, longitudinally to such an extent that we were convinced of dachshund influence; then, vertically, but only about halfway in proportion to his length and girth, which, accented by his stubby, slightly bowed legs and large paws, gave him a beagle look. The deformed right front foot became more accentuated and Basset like. His head took on some of the noble characteristics of an Irish-English setter combination with a spaniel's long, floppy ears. The short, silky hair grew coarse and shaggy and turned dark and reddish with black streaks. The slim pointed tail blossomed into a magnificently feathered beige and russet flag.

In horse and racetrack parlance, Rufus was a good "doer." His appetite was ever robust, and he wasn't a finicky eater. Vegetables were not particularly to his liking, but he enjoyed the table scraps, vegetables and all, if the sauce was right. He could eat his weight in ice cream. Butter pecan was his favorite.

All his life he carried on a love affair with automobiles. He was an enthusiastic car chaser until well beyond middle age. He especially resented the family driving off and leaving him. Despite his short legs and orthopedic handicap, he was fast afoot. He knew all the neighborhood shortcuts, so outwitting his determined pursuits often entailed high speed takeoffs, careening around corners and improvising complicated escape routes. Most of all, he enjoyed riding half in and half out of a car window, nose to the wind and ears streaming behind.

Almost to the end, he kept a keen eye and sharp nose for lady dogs in need of companionship. According to reports, Rufus sired more than his share of litters. He was well known for his amorous activities, not only throughout his immediate neighborhood, but also in such well-separated localities as Hardaway, Edgewood and even Overlook. He waged a continuous war on squirrels, chipmunks and other dogs—patrolling his home grounds diligently and protecting his territory from all invaders.

We knew he was failing during his last year. The squirrels and chipmunks grew bolder on the lawn, often with Rufus watching them through half-closed eyes as he sunned on the terrace. He gave up his nights out on the town, and girls no longer interested him. His car chasing grew infrequent and sporadic. When he did deign to pursue, it was only to or just beyond the driveway's end. It became harder and harder on his aching, arthritic joints to make the jump into the car. He slept a lot and stayed indoors, preferring the comfort of a spot on the living room rug near the vent that air conditioned him in summer and warmed him in winter.

Rufus died while we were away last September. His two favorite old aunts who always house-sat with him during our absences wrote that he went peacefully in his sleep. Maybe he missed our not being there to comfort him at the end. This Christmas we certainly missed him.

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