

Dance Me

They found them lovingly entwined. Stella's body was curled around Rita, who was curled in repose. I see them in my mind's eye: Rita, a 70-pound cinnamon-chocolate cashew, her long spine a perfect arc, slender legs neatly folded beneath her, muzzle tucked under her tail. Stella, lying on her side, free arm hugging Rita, torso, abdomen and thighs pressed against the Rita cashew, lips kissing Rita's soft forehead beneath a cascade of her own sable locks.

I had observed their concentric embrace many, many mornings when Stella would rise gracefully from our bed and lower herself onto Rita's to begin the day with this physical testament to their love. A creature of extraordinary dignity, Rita was never needy or demanding of affection, but she clearly took great pleasure in their morning ritual, leaning into Stella, and as Rita became more vocal with age, responding with a happy little groan.

I tell myself it is fitting that this is how they met their end. I imagine them obviously happy in my idyllic mental snapshot. That is, I try to. As soon as I let my guard down, and when I close my eyes at night, I see the grey. I see the black. Lovely Stella. Lovely Rita. I failed you both.

Grey and darkness is how it all began. That was years before I met Stella. Stella rarely spoke of life before Rita, but as she grew to trust me, she fought back tears to tell me about the moment Rita changed her life. Stella had hoped the darkness would lift as soon as she adopted Rita. Instead, in those initial days, Stella was an exhausted new mom, trying to balance her demanding job with the care of a sentient being.

That Rita never complained or misbehaved only made Stella feel worse. She felt undeserving because Rita could have been adopted by someone with a huge house, a yard and other pets to play with. She even briefly found herself considering returning Rita to the shelter. Stella's stubborn perseverance and her fear that Rita would end up with someone cruel kept them together as they adjusted to their new life together.

A decade before Rita, Stella had finished graduate school and had taken a new job in a new city with the kinds of dreams we all have for our lives. Time passed in the blink of an eye, and despite her intense work ethic, Stella could not seem to get ahead. Outside, the Southern California sun continued to shine, but inside, her world was becoming tinged with grey. Then she found herself betrayed in love, and darkness abruptly closed in from the edges.

Pushing through the weight of numbness to go through the motions of life was grueling. The misguided people in her life who told her to "just move on" or "just smile" only made her self-conscious on top of the sadness. She began to avoid leaving the house except to go to and from work. She lost her appetite for food and everything

pleasurable. She ruminated about ending her life but carried on through brute force of will.

One day, a voice in her head asked, “Is there anything within your power that could make you happier?” Her reflexive answer was “no.” When she mulled it over, it was easy to identify one thing that would make her happier, but it was impossible with a full-time job, a townhouse with no yard and a no-pets clause in her lease. The inner voice challenged her, “Impractical, yes, but impossible?”

Her landlords turned out to be fond of animals, and in a desperate act of self-preservation, she decided she could make the rest work if she selected the right four-legged companion. A long-distance runner, she needed an athletic partner who would go, go, go outdoors and sleep, sleep, sleep indoors. It was a lifestyle most suited to a gundog breed. As Stella applied to adopt from pointer rescue organizations, a flicker of hope drove back the numbness.

In the following weeks, that flicker would be snuffed out as the breed-specific rescue organizations deemed Stella unsuitable. Stella had already searched the local shelters, but gundogs were in short supply in California. Shelters in the Southeast, overwhelmed with unwanted hunting dogs, did not do out-of-state adoptions. Pessimistic about her chances of finding a match, she nonetheless kept checking the local shelters’ websites. Fate intervened. Rita’s listing appeared, and Stella knew instantly that she was the one.

The sleek two-year-old pointer mix was an owner surrender due to financial hardship. Her previous owners had taken the time to list the commands she already knew, to note that she was potty trained, good in the house and car, and friendly with other dogs. At night she liked to be tucked under her blankie, and she was “born to run.” She did not have any naughty behaviors but would steal a shoe if she did not get enough exercise. They wrote, “Remember: A tired dog is a good dog!”

On paper, Rita was exactly what Stella was looking for, a perfect blend of stamina to keep up with a human endurance athlete and good manners needed to adapt to an urban lifestyle. What really stopped Stella in her tracks was Rita’s luminous green eyes, staring from the photo into Stella’s heart. I am by no means a dog person, but when I first saw Rita’s eyes, they took my breath away. They made most everyone who met Rita marvel and exclaim, “Her eyes!”

Her eyes were expressive and brimming with emotional intelligence. After their meet and greet at the shelter, when Rita had to be returned to her kennel while Stella went to sign the paperwork, Rita did not bark or whimper. She stood behind the kennel door, her eyes glowing with disappointment until Stella returned to take her home. Then her eyes glittered with joy. Those soulful green eyes would soon change everything for Stella.

From their first full day together, they ran 5 miles before breakfast daily and twice that on weekends. Although that was Stella’s usual routine, Rita upped the ante by pushing Stella to cover stretches at full speed. On top of the morning miles were the

walks at lunch, after work and before bed. Instead of being able to relish Rita's company, Stella remained in the rut of treating all she had to do, including time with Rita, as a list of tasks to be checked off.

One night after dinner, Stella sat wearily on the floor of the living room with her aching legs outstretched and her back propped against the couch. Rita brought her a toy, wagged her tail, looked at the toy, looked at Stella, looked at the toy, looked at Stella. Stella, feeling sorry for herself, ignored Rita. Undaunted, Rita brought her another toy and then another and another.

It was too much for Stella, who retreated into a fetal position and began to sob. Stella had done everything in her power to bring joy into her life. Yet, when it was there in front of her, it was not a balm to allay her pain but a spark that ignited it. She tried to fight the pain with the anger bottled up within her, which only fueled the suffocating hurt until she gave in to let it consume her. In that moment of acceptance, her breath returned to her.

When at last Stella unfurled herself, she looked up to find Rita lying in her beanbag across the room staring at her. Those beautiful green eyes held no judgement, only pure concern. The depth of compassion in Rita's gaze made Stella's spirit rise like a Phoenix from the ashes. No longer weighted down by the burden of her grief, Stella was able to step into a beautiful life with Rita.

Making Rita the center of her universe forced Stella back into the world. In addition to their runs, hikes and walks, they attended obedience training to earn Canine Good Citizen certification and took classes in nose work and agility. Within the first few months, Stella had met more neighbors than she had in the previous decade in the same neighborhood.

Rita blossomed as the mental and physical challenges built her confidence. Stella thrived too because the four-legged companion at her side removed the human scrutiny that had made Stella a wallflower. Dog people carry on long conversations barely glancing at one another, admiring each other's dogs and watching the dogs' body language. Even dogless humans interacted with Stella through her gorgeous dog.

Observing Stella and Rita, I quickly learned that human-canine interactions are a dance, or more accurately, a series of dances. Stella and Rita had been dance partners for nearly seven years when I met them at a charity 5K. Their agile footwork to avoid obstacles and race ahead of the crowded field was the first of many of their dances I would witness.

The second came just a week later and revealed a different side of Rita, and of Stella. That dance also changed my view of someone who would not go on a first date without her dog. It had not occurred to me that Stella would feel unsafe getting in a car with someone she had just met. Stella did not need protection from me of course, but by the time the evening ended, I was grateful for their protection.

After a dinner of multiple courses on an outdoor terrace walled with greenery, we opted to aid our digestion with a stroll around the unfamiliar neighborhood. It was a crisp, starry night, and before we realized it, we had left the main restaurant district and were surrounded by commercial properties deserted at that hour.

What happened next comes to me in flashes. Stella wordlessly turning us around to retrace our steps... a mob of punks shouting at us... looking over my shoulder to see them advancing with beer bottles raised threateningly... Stella turning back around to face them... a deep, menacing snarl as Rita emerged from behind Stella and crept toward the danger, baring her teeth.

I hate to think what would have happened if Stella and I had only our wits to reason with the delinquents. Rita's language bypassed their alcohol-sloshed frontal lobes and spoke to the primitive part of their brains, limbic systems hardwired to respond to a growling carnivore. The punk closest to Rita uttered expletives about the size of the dog and looked over his shoulder nervously to see if his pals were there to help him. They were inanimate, eyes glued to Rita.

Gently, sounding sincerely worried about their safety, Stella said, "Please back away slowly so she doesn't attack you." She raised her hands, palms facing Rita's quarry to emphasize that she would not be able to control the growling beast if it decided to lunge.

While my thought processes froze, Stella knew what she needed to do in the heat of the moment. She was so convincing that I forgot Rita was attached to Stella's waist by a hands-free leash hidden in the darkness. Our intimidators were intimidated. The punks slunk back down the alleyway from which they had emerged. Rita stood statue-still glaring after them. Her hackles remained raised even after we had returned to the car.

Generations of Stellas and Ritas living through tens of thousands of years of threats in the darkness had honed this protection dance. Having my skin saved by it had begun to make a dog person out of me, or at least a Rita person, and our subsequent dates were planned with Rita in mind. I quickly came to accept the physics of a universe in which my life revolved around Stella, and both our lives revolved around Rita, like a moon revolving around a planet revolving around the sun.

Rita was effortlessly present in the world. Most uncanny was her ability to pick up on Stella's emotions and watch her body language for cues that were imperceptible to me. Slow dancing with me was awkwardly comedic because I could neither read the cues to follow nor provide the cues to lead. Stella and Rita waltzed around the living room like professional ballroom dancers. It was sublime to behold.

Although Rita was a senior by the time I met her, for a while her only sign of age was the white flecking like powdered sugar on her muzzle. Gradually she slowed. Her daily runs became contemplative walks, and she needed a warm jacket, protective boots, extra-soft bedding, home-cooked meals and therapeutic massages. The grace with

which she accepted the aging process and these tender ministrations only increased Rita's gravitational pull on me and Stella.

Rita was 16 when the evacuation orders came. It was a late autumn day before the rainy season after a summer of drought. Gusts of hot Santa Ana winds kicked up dust and shook the trees. Bone-dry fallen leaves made scratching noises as they skittered around the pavement. The back country areas were on high fire alert. Although our coastal neighborhood had never been affected by a wildfire, the blowing Santa Anas filled us with foreboding.

We did not hesitate to evacuate, but our townhouse was at the back of a community with many hundreds of units and only one exit route narrowed by parked cars and construction projects. We were immediately walled in by cars. Before I could grasp the situation, Stella leapt from the passenger side and scooped Rita from the back seat. Her voice straining with the effort of hoisting Rita, she ordered, "Go get help!"

They retreated down the alleyway, Rita's soulful, serene eyes staring back at me over Stella's shoulder. I was frozen, torn between following Stella and following Stella's order. Then a neighbor grabbed my arm, pointed to the orange glow and yanked me in the opposite direction. I followed, hijacked by fear, toward the fence, embankment and highway below.

They called it a conflagration, a word I had only come across in history books describing devastating fires that had swept through cities of the past. Fires that should

have taught civilization lasting lessons. The fires zigzagged through our community, jumping between structures. Some were barely damaged. Others burned to the slab. I believed Stella and Rita would be spared until I saw the arial photographs. Even then, I wanted to believe.

In the weeks since they were found, the fateful moments of the evacuation have tormented me running endless loops in my head, as though I can still figure out how to save myself from failing them. Stella could not have predicted the outcome of her actions, but she swiftly surmised that we could not carry Rita out. No matter what the stakes, she never would have abandoned her. I never would have abandoned Stella and Rita. Yet, I must live with the monstrous fact that I did.

Approaching the evacuation zone, my nose stings with the acrid smell of the omnipresent soot. The neighborhood is unrecognizable with missing and collapsed structures, hulks of burned cars in the ashy streets and debris strewn about by the wind and fire. Here and there are recognizable remembrances of lives lived. I see a running shoe, one of the laces scorched.

It takes time to orient myself to find the remains of the home I shared with Stella and Rita. It is mostly rubble, except for the chimney and sections of the stucco wall. The arial photograph has not prepared me for the horror of standing before it. I want to

look away, but I cannot break my gaze. I feel outside myself, observing myself observing.

In my peripheral vision, I glimpse movement, a scrap of dusty paper rippling in the breeze against a chunk of fallen stucco. As I retrieve it, expecting it to be trash, I am jolted by the sight of Stella's handwriting. It is a charred fragment from one of her journals.

*And all our embers lit the sky,
Swirling upwards, you and I.*

The tears blind me, and I am no longer gazing upon the ruins of our lives. I am watching Stella and Rita swirling around the living room to Leonard Cohen's "Dance Me to the End of Love," and Stella is singing the refrain to Rita. Stella is laughing, but she is also crying.

I am crying too because I know Stella is thinking about Rita's mortality. I am crying because they are achingly beautiful. I am crying because I cannot imagine a world without them. I am crying because love has no end.