

ÉLOGE DE GAGA

by Alan Shapiro

French Bulldogs are renown as fun-loving, intelligent, and impossibly adorable. They are also the most popular and expensive dogs in America. My six-year-old, Joey, badly wanted one, however I refuse to pay for a dog when shelters are overflowing. I called our local rescue to inquire if they had any French bulldogs and the woman laughed at me. They *never* get Frenchies. And if they did, they'd be adopted tout de suite. She took my number.

A month later I get a voicemail from the shelter. A French bulldog was brought in and, curiously, nobody wanted her. This was the first clue something didn't add up. "Would I be interested in re-homing?" Re-homing is what breeders whisper when a dog is deemed unworthy to show or breed. I drove over to take a look. Her name was "Gaga". She was 11. And everything about her was wrong.

The French Bulldog Club of America, the Holy See of Frenchies, sets exacting benchmarks for the breed. Gaga failed to meet a\single one. To wit, a Frenchie must display "erect bat ears". Hers were less bat, more Dumbo. She was pigeon-toed, gimpy legged, one eye blind, nearly deaf, with a conspicuous underbite of lower incisors that made her look like a dwarf werewolf. Of course, none of this made her French any more than if she came fitted with a beret.

August 29, 2024

- 2 -

Joey was jubilant. Wasn't that what counted? Gaga sniffed around, inspected her new surroundings, then blithely dragged her butt across our Persian rug.

"What's her name?", asked Joey.

"Gaga," I confessed sheepishly. "We'll find a better name."

Joey went quiet. "But that's her name." His lip quivered. I caved.

"Then Gaga it is", I declared, knowing that I wouldn't be caught dead calling for "Gaga" in public.

As parents know, sooner or later the novelty wears off and your kid's pet becomes yours. So, the following week when Joey came home with a leopard gecko he named Bill (female), I knew Gaga was now mine.

In our backyard, a winding gravel path leads to a small bungalow where I work. It's an enviable short walk, particularly if you hate driving as I do. Gaga insisted on accompanying me, dragging her two bum hind legs in the gravel, leaving a trail of twin grooves in her wake. Tenacity was her superpower. If her front legs gave out, I suspect she'd pull herself with her chin.

Somehow, she'd make it up the steps onto the office porch, but refuse to come in. Rather, she'd position herself outside the door, facing out to the yard for a commanding

August 29, 2024

- 3 -

vista, like a mobster sitting at the back of a trattoria. What she lacked in girth, she made up in chutzpah. This odd little dog's mix of intelligence, moxie, and inexhaustible joie de vivre proved irresistible. She was Zorba the dog, and I was her putty. For years, we were inseparable.

One night I was startled awake to the sound of snoring. Knowing my wife was out of town, I pulled on the light, turned around to find Gaga, head sunk in a down pillow, the rest of her tucked under the covers beside me, snoozing. Very "Fatal Attraction", if Glenn Close was a jealous Frenchie. It was also very Gaga. We had so many moments like that.

But time was taking its toll; simply standing was a struggle. She could no longer enjoy the things she loved. Like walking. So, I pushed her around the neighborhood in a baby stroller. I took countless pictures of her with an urgency familiar to anyone with a beloved pet in decline. In her waning days, we were holding her together with shoestrings and chewing gum. And I began to question, was this level of care for her -- or me?

Dogs intuitively know when their time is up and are known to go off to die. Once she lost interest in eating, we knew it was time.

I held her in my arms as we drove to the vet, searching for words commensurate to the moment that didn't sound trite.

August 29, 2024

- 4 -

There are none. I wanted her to know how much I loved her, which I told her over and over. A half hour later, she was gone.

Thus began a period of unrelenting anguish that took me by surprise. I was heartbroken. I lay awake in bed a blubbering mess. Grief consumed me. I stopped going out with friends. I couldn't listen to their stale bromides about "closure". It's just a dog, I could hear people say. What qualifies as acceptable mourning? Why can't I get over this? What's wrong with me?

As it turns out, nothing. As the years pass, invariably people and places disappear, loss accumulates, and it's easy to despair. I'm reminded of Simon & Garfunkel's "Bookends", which concludes with a haunting yet comforting affirmation of the inevitable, like a lullaby.

*Long ago, it must be,
I have a photograph.
Preserve your memory
They're all that's left you.*

There is something exceptionally pure in a dog's love. Gaga, the Frenchie nobody wanted, was a force of life who brought me untold joy. I often recall those twin trails left in the gravel from dragging her bum legs. It struck me as a fitting metaphor for her tenacious will to live. A kind of graffiti proclaiming: "Gaga was here."

* * *