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K260 Anthology

The Loss of Mango

Ingrid Nix

I used to have two dogs, Greta (a Giant Schnauzer) and Mango (a Mini Schnauzer). I got both dogs (two year olds) from my mother who bred them. In that sense, they also represented a part of her life (and obsession). My siblings, each in different ways, valued the dogs because of this link which bound the family.

I got Mango two years after Greta, so that they could be company for each other. Greta was my favourite, my wonderful trusty companion, my first experience of unconditional love. She paid me the compliment of noticing when I was absent and welcoming me when I returned. She lived through many of my adventures and trials and was my steadfast solace when things went pear-shaped. When she started to age I didn't molly-coddle her. I always took care of her during bigger illnesses but I think the smaller, day to day developments perhaps got absorbed into the bigger events of my own life. Perhaps because she was big, like me, I expected her to tough things out.

When on holiday in France Greta had an accident, falling in the dark in unfamiliar terrain, it was clear to me within hours that she was not going to recover, due to paralysis. I had a couple of terrible days on my own trying to decide what to do, with one of my sisters on the phone supporting me through it. Eventually I did the terrible deed, and had her put down in the back of my car. I wept and howled on the way back home without her but somehow in the weeks and months ahead managed, with Mango there, to focus on the new way forward. Suddenly Mango came to the fore, having been obscured by Greta's larger presence.

The next few years I got to know him on his own. Sadly he developed physical problems and I had to care for him, see him through difficult operations and gradually more and

more debilitating conditions. I started to feel I understood what it must be like to look after a human long term. He was dependent on me, I was his principle carer. Every aspect was mediated through me acting on his behalf. As time progressed I was constantly faced with the torment of watching him, wondering if or how he was suffering. Each day or part of a day I had to work out logistics, who would care for him while I was at work, or for example, whether I could leave him while I went out for a meal. In fact I took him everywhere, including to work, weather permitting. I'd be thinking about where I could find shade to park him in and how I could take him for a walk (or hobble) between meetings.

Eventually, I had to face making the decision to have him put down. By this time I was exhausted and raw from the emotional strain. The weekly deadlines I kept setting myself, to see how he managed, now became days. Eventually I set it to be a Friday afternoon. I wanted to have time to recover so I could face work on Monday. How awful to think of something so practical. I arranged to have the vet come to my home. The night before, I had slept with my head at the foot of my bed so I could be closer to Mango's basket. I slept with the blind up so we could lie in the moonlight. That hot summer morning I'd put him out in the garden under the shade of a tree on the patio so he could be in nature. Poor thing wet his bed. I had, for months, had to hold him on his legs to help him go to the toilet. This was the first time he had soiled himself. For me it was a sign that his body was giving up. I freshened his bed. When the vet and her assistant came I put him in the cool of the kitchen. What touched me was that the assistant also wept. When she picked him up afterwards she wrapped him in a towel they had brought and carried him like a child away in her arms. I was so grateful she understood some of my pain so I didn't have to apologise or feel self-conscious.

The days and weeks ahead I walked along our frequented paths. I wanted to remember and relive, in private. I would sit on the bench where we would stop. I was afraid of the process which would come, of losing, forgetting. With time it has become too painful because I can't go there without seeing him struggle on his weak legs, or see him fall without being able to get up.

Instead I have photos of him in my bedroom, in a CD case in my car, on the wall of my study. I use his and Greta's names as my computer passwords. When I accidentally drop pasta on the floor, when I chop the ends off carrots, I think of Mango who would have been given these in his bowl. Strange thing is, I have barely any photos of my mother on display. I do use her date of birth as one of my PIN numbers and have things from her house, such as crockery and furniture, and some clothes.

I wonder whether my deeper sense of loss for Mango was because I perceived him as more vulnerable and therefore felt a greater sense of responsibility for him. I feel a bit like a parent who has lost a child. The sense of smallness of Mango puts him in a different relationship to me than Greta, who was big. Also because his illness and condition eeked out of him, instead of Greta's accident which almost dictated what should happen, it made the process a drawn-out period of slow pain and approaching loss.

I wrote a poem the afternoon of his death, sitting on our bench, and then a year on to mark the anniversary. This year I didn't – I was overseas on a holiday, something I seldom managed during fifteen years of having the dogs. Although I feel bad that I am forgetting to make specific dates for remembering them, I can tell you that writing this has caused a pile of tissues to appear alongside me on the desk.