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DOWN THE PATH

I wiped damp, swollen eyes with my shirt sleeve as I looked down the well-trodden path to Bull's weathered hutch. A paw, the color of dried corn stalks, big and wide the way a Chesapeake Bay retriever paw ought to look, hung limply from the entrance. As a puppy, Bull had assumed a habit of hanging one paw out his house door while sleeping. It was one of life's constants at Ma and Dad's for the past thirteen years. Through blizzards or pounding rainstorms, that paw had comically dangled out of the house. But behind this wistful scene lay a dreadful truth--Bull was dying.

Dad brought Bull home to me when I was ten years old. At eight weeks of age, he was all feet and stomach, but what he lacked in physical stature was more than made up for in determination. The hayfields surrounding my parents' farm were our playground in those days. The dense alfalfa made for tough going for the pup, but his stubby legs never stopped churning in his desire to keep up with me. From day one, he was dead serious about everything. Games of hide-and-seek would end with Bull simply sitting or lying down next to me with no hint of celebration or fanfare at having found me. Even the most lavish praise could not coax his tail to wag. It was this raw single-mindedness of purpose that earned him his name.

From the steps of the porch where I sat, I heard Bull groan. I peered down the path to his hutch. An ache from an arthritic joint had roused him temporarily, but there the paw still hung. My eyes fell to the path itself, a shallow trough of packed clay traversing a lush lawn. Over the years, Bull had worn down this path coming to meet Dad or me on the porch. We had never bothered to tie him up--there never was any need. Bull's sense of loyalty was keen, and one of his primary concerns was the protection of his family. Weighing 100 pounds in his prime, he was an imposing presence for visitors. Bull never exhibited any hysteria, bared his fangs, or even barked. With his head held low, eyes fixed on the intruder, and legs stiff, Bull stalked up to an alien car in the driveway, threatening its occupant with a low rumble from deep within his throat. Our guests appreciated our hospitality all the more after running Bull's gauntlet. Dad joked that things would have turned out differently at the Alamo had Bull been there.

A clambering from Bull's house jarred me from my daydream. Both paws and his chin now hung over the lip of the entrance; his body's failing muscles would not allow him to join me on the porch. He gazed at me with big, mournful brown eyes, and I turned away. I didn't wish to see him struggle so, this mighty dog that had once so embodied strength and honor. His air of rugged dignity had pervaded all that he did, with no need of emotional affirmation. To see him cloaked in this feeble shell of himself--it defied logic that this was the same dog.

My eyes turned again to the path. Bull's health had gradually declined over the past month, and I wasn't the only one who noticed. Dad had begun wondering aloud if we ought to have him put down. He had cared for Bull--such as it was with a dog that disdained pampering--for the five

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years I had been in college. Ma told me that they were inseparable during those years, and Dad had done his best to ease Bull's recent failings. Once, Ma had observed Dad steadying Bull's balance as the dog lifted his leg to pee. When confronted by Ma, he claimed, testily, that he "wasn't about to watch the old boy resort to squatting like some pup." But Dad refused to address Bull's condition head on. Everything he had to say on the subject was in the form of a question or, at best, an insinuation. And being my father's son, I conspired with him to pussyfoot through a month of indecision. To complicate matters, Bull regained vigor in fits and spurts, providing justification enough for us to avoid dealing with the inevitable. Ma, normally a fount of opinions, remained eerily silent as to Bull's declining health.

Well, there was one here who would have no trouble deciding what to do, given the choice. Again, I looked down the path. As I did, so Bull coughed as if to hack up a piece of lung. He had never known indecision. But this wasn't his decision to make—it was mine.

"Damn you," I snarled at Bull. "Damn you for dropping this in my lap."

Two desires were at war within me. The first was to let him die as he had lived. After all, Bull was Dignity itself. Once a soldier, always a soldier. He would not die a coward's death but fight to his last breath. There would be no drugs, no needles for my friend. Period.

In my heart of hearts, though, stirred a second desire, that of Mercy. This sentiment seemed an odd fit for Bull. In all his years, he only required my direction. He had never needed me, never yearned for my attention. My emotional investment in Bull had been minimal, and he had thrived in this setting. But now as I sat staring at this ghost of my companion, part of me yearned to smother him with all the compassion foregone over the years in this, his final bout with life. I shook my head as if to clear it of some pesky fly. This was all nonsense, pure nonsense. A lifetime of benign indifference could not be erased with a few moments of teary hugs and kisses. Bull, even in his advanced state of decay, would not comprehend such outlandish treatment. Still, I longed to ...

As Dignity and Mercy bid for my soul, I was roused from my emotional spasms by a ruckus at the hutch. Once again, I looked down the path.

As he had done so many times in his spartan life, Bull backed life into a corner, forcing its hand. I watched, petrified, as the great dog groveled to leave his house, clumsily pouring himself out on to the path.

There he lay, a pitiful mass of trembling flesh, attempting and failing several times to raise himself to his feet. Each time he first lifted his head, then dropped it to the ground as he attempted to force up his front quarters. But the weight of the years bore down on his diminished limbs, and he sank to the path, unable to join me. I averted my eyes and stifled a sob. Then as I turned again to watch, Bull raised his head. This time it stayed up as he summoned all his remaining energy to his front legs. They quivered convulsively. But the betrayal of these once mighty limbs was complete. He slumped to the ground and rolled on to his side. And then it came, as if emanating from the bowels of some ghoul, a hideous moan, not of pain, but of death.

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Dignity fled. Mercy welled up in my breast as I ran to my companion, awash in tears. There was no longer anything noble about any of this, I knew, as I knelt beside him.

"Oh, God," I wailed, dropping my wet cheek on top of the big head, "I'm so sorry,, for waiting so long."

Then, drawing on the great dog's decisiveness, I swept my friend into my arms and carried him to the pickup. We flew down the gravel driveway and out onto the highway. I held him on the seat as I drove, his head on my lap. I caressed the big head that moaned no more; his breathing grew shallow and raspy. My timidity, something foreign to Bull, had caused this terrible moment. Could such an offense ever be forgiven? Bleary-eyed, I drove for several miles in stunned silence.

As I turned into the veterinarian's driveway, I felt the gravity of Bull's last hour, as well as my cowardice, weighing on me. From the anguish of my heart, I whispered a contrite, "That's a good boy."

And the angel of Mercy gave over to Bull one last decisive act, that of mercy itself--in quick succession, he offered one resounding thump of his tail and dangled a paw over the edge of the seat. I knew then, even in my grieving the great dog's demise, that all was as it should be.