

Tails of Love

Can it be called puppy love if one of the dogs involved is 16? And if her boyfriend is significantly younger, can she be called a cougar and still maintain her species' identity?

Such were some of the questions raised when my elderly dog, Reka, fell (and that includes sometimes literally) for a younger dog named Cane on the romantic banks of the Russian River in Northern California's West Sonoma County. There, near the town of Guerneville, Reka met Cane in a small parking lot near the beach. Cane appeared as out of nowhere, though it turned out he lived across the road. He was large, muscular and wildly enthusiastic to make his introductions to my passengers: the elderly Shepherd mix heroine of this story and a younger, golden lab mix named Saralee. Though many males prefer sweet, young blondes, Cane set his sights on the more mature female of the two, darker in both spirit and coat.

Reka was a difficult dog and stubborn. The only nut she would eat was pistachio. She felt entitled to curl up in my lap although she weighed 75 pounds. The only thing worse than being woken up by her in the middle of the night, after she'd gone out to pee just before bed, was the bittersweet realization that such awakenings wouldn't last forever.

Reka and I once walked miles and miles almost every day. As she got older, however, I'd often drive her to places like this beach to get more of a bang for her

walking buck. We'd walk to the river where she used to swim and where, she could now sit a reflecting on memories of sticks once chased. In one moment years back, she'd deferred stick retrieving forever to an adopted sibling Rottweiler named George-- not because he was aggressive but because Reka was the type that, as she aged, passed on her skills and her wisdom to others as if she thought that she might live on in them after her body's passing. Saralee owes to Reka the ability to lecture puppies with an assertively firm, non frightening bark that sometimes scares people, but delights the "student" puppies involved.

Reka may have had overly large ears, a stubby tail and an ultimately lumpy body, but she always maintained a regal attitude. Shepherds are known for their easily displaced hips, and Reka, whose legs were also arthritic, did not always get out of the car when we reached our destination. Sometimes, especially when it was too cold out and as she became so old, she'd opt to stay in bed and forego the afternoon outing altogether. The only word I could say that would get her out of bed on those days was "Cane." With that as impetus, she'd heave herself up on her old wobbly legs with their swollen toes and head determinedly out the door and toward the car, readying herself for her date with destiny.

Sometimes, by the time we got to the place I came to call Cane's Beach, Reka would be fast asleep and seemed to have forgotten the purpose of our trip. She'd comfortably ensconced herself on a Mexican poncho kept in the backseat for her warmth and would roll her head away from me as I said encouragingly "C'mon Reka, here we

are!" I'd open the back door of our small grey car to give her egress but she wouldn't budge.

But then Cane would arrive, having sensed or seen us coming from the vantage point of his deck across the street. Cane had been a Christmas gift to two young brothers -- hence his name "as in candy" one said. The kids' care of their dog seemed as lax as their own parents attention seemed to be for them. As Cane stuck his enormously wide, part Great Dane, part Pit-bull head into the car, taking up a good portion of the back seat with it, Reka would finally notice. Her ears pricked up—many had called her the Flying Nun in this pose—though it's not a good metaphor here—because she also let out, at this point, a hearty, amorous moan from the depths of her chest.

Over and over again, she would rise up, with obvious difficulty but just as obvious determination. Cane would back up politely as his lady descended from her carriage. And suddenly those otherwise stiff arthritic legs were dancing. Reka would jump backwards and to the side on all fours and cock her head sideways. Cane did the same in the opposite direction. Around and around they'd go, cavorting playfully entranced with one another and acknowledging no one else. (even when other cars tried to park) They were Cathy and Heathcliff on the moors, Cinderella and Prince Charming at the King's Ball.

Once Cane tried to hump Reka from behind, but she fell over sideways under his weight. And Cane, who was nothing if not gentlemanly and courteous, never tried that move again.

I kept telling myself to bring a camera to record that charming May/December (if not May/ New Year's Eve) romance. But I'm not sure a photo could really have

captured the spirit of the relationship Reka had with Cane, the lightness in the air as they frolicked, the pleasure I felt watching them enjoy themselves and each other so much.

Besides, Cane's family always seemed suspicious of me. If I'd snapped photos, it might have been worse. I told them the story of Reka and Cane connection as they worked on the cars in front of their house, but I worried that they thought I might be spying on them. True, there did seem to be some suspicious traffic around their ramshackle dwelling—scruffy, toothless people going in and out for short periods of time. But I was no Narc, just an agent of Eros, trying to give love another opportunity to express it...

There came a time, however, when Reka could no longer get up out of bed, when the sound of her beloved's name only seemed to make her feel sad and frustrated by her body's increasing pains and limitations. Her moans were no longer joyful ones. When Reka's existence seemed to be overwhelmingly uncomfortable for her, neighborhood vet came to the house and ended her life as I held her on my lap with our nearest and dearest around us and Saralee nudging the vet jealously as if Reka were getting something she wanted.

Saralee and I now return to Cane's beach once and a while. We've seen Cane from time to time and have heard from his kids that he's had trouble with the law. Banned from the beach, he has to lay low near home or risk getting busted again and maybe worse... When we do meet, Cane just nods and walks on by. I wonder if his heart aches like mine at the reminder of the old girl we both loved.