

Roberta Down Deep

By Paul Heinz

To most, the dog had simply been Roberta, a standard poodle, obedient, friendly, not too noisy, a good neighborhood dog. To Oliver, she'd been The Tripod, a three-legged beast who woke him at sunrise, kept him up at sundown, and begged incessantly during the hours in between. To his kids, she'd always been "mom's dog," the one member of the family who needed to be treated with respect and given attention. And to Judy, Roberta had been a daughter. A companion. A confidant. The one person who'd never let her down.

Ode To Roberta

Your soul was my soul

A playful laugh, a heartfelt cry

A longing for goodness in the world

A spirit of unyielding grace and gratitude

It wasn't as if Oliver had hated the dog. Yes, she'd been annoying, begging for scraps of food during dinner and licking his toes when he read the paper. But The Tripod's year-long struggle to recover from a severe break of her fibula before submitting to amputation had been admirable, possibly even inspiring. And the way she'd closed her eyes blissfully when scratched behind the ears was kind of cute. Even her freakishly muscular front leg, able to sustain the front half of her

husky body where two had once done the job, was something Oliver could appreciate. No, as far as three-legged dogs go, Roberta had been all right.

It was his wife, whose devotion to this animal, as if compensating for the daughter she'd always wanted in addition to (or instead of?) the two sons she bore into the world, who bugged him. Utterly unable to separate dog-world from people-world, Judy probably wouldn't even admit that dogs and people inhabit two different worlds at all, but rather share an intertwining, codependent realm, where human hand and canine paw join together as one. Oliver's attempts at conversing with Judy over the years had been persistently peppered with a high-pitched "*That's my girl,*" or "*Hi, my bootsy wootsy Berta. Does my little girl want a treat?*" He'd hardly been able to get a hello out of his wife, unable to eat a meal, engage in sex, read a paper, go to the toilet—nothing without a gnawing reminder that he was playing second fiddle to Roberta's concertmaster. If she was the front page, he was the Sunday insert from Walgreens.

He'd once figured out a way to get rid of Roberta, at least for a while. After Judy came home from work, greeted her husband perfunctorily, swooned over her dog, and ascended the stairs to change out of her work clothes, Oliver whispered just above the threshold of hearing, or so he thought the threshold of hearing was for a dog, "Car. Park." And Roberta rocketed toward the broken screen door, swung it open, and limped her way to the car in the garage. There the dumb dog sat patiently for close to an hour. Oliver and Judy actually engaged in conversation for a while, and he was happy. And so was she it seemed, before realizing in mid-sentence that her surrogate daughter was missing. "I ...uh...hey! Where's Roberta?" Oliver promised never to pull that stunt again.

I remember a walk on a sunny day

*Far away from cars and honking horns
You were free to listen to your instincts
To run wild and free
Free to run, but always close enough to return to me*

Now, fighting the instinct to roll his eyes, Oliver looks to his sons sitting awkwardly beside him on a pair of foldout chairs, wobbling on the unlevelled ground beneath them. The boys' faces are sullen. They know better than to do anything except watch the crazy lady they call mom with eyes of understanding, masking their obvious confusion. Oliver would do well to do the same.

Seven hundred and fifty dollars. That's how much the funeral is costing him. Three months of college savings lost in the forest dirt of Wisconsin. Killing me softly with her song, he hums silently, and shakes his head slightly in an effort to jar his mental jukebox to a less offensive tune. The Roberta Flack song has been playing inside his head almost nonstop for the past seven years.

*And now you rest in God's green earth
Able to meet your maker
And run in the great dog-park in the sky
Unequaled in splendor, unparalleled in beauty
Where trees are plentiful, yearning for your mark
Birds are watchful, longing for your chase
And friends are hopeful, waiting to make your acquaintance

Goodbye, my canine partner*

Goodbye

Judy finishes the eulogy she'd spent most of last night composing and steps aside. The two boys are next. They approach the podium with squinting eyes against the low sun, clear their throats self-consciously, and begin.

“Um. Well, bye Roberta. You were a good dog.”

“Yeah. We had a lot of fun.”

They turn to their mother and she nods approvingly and offers a thinly stretched smile, apparently pleased with her sons' gift for heartfelt efficiency.

Oliver hoists himself from the makeshift pew of the funeral home's courtyard. But as he motions to begin a speech of his own, a little something for The Tripod—but really for Judy—he glances toward his wife who glares at him with pursed lips.

“Don't even think about it,” she says sharply and walks away, losing the composure she'd kept during the ceremony.

* * *

Oliver clutches the wheel and stares blankly ahead, the lines of the highway steadily consumed beneath him. They are still an hour away from their home in Milwaukee, the tail end of what was to be an enjoyable three-day fishing trip. Four hours have passed since they left the funeral home in northern Wisconsin, and no one has said a word. The boys know better than to open their mouths, even if it's a plea to use the bathroom. Judy, seated in the passenger seat, continues to

dab at her red and swollen eyes with a tissue, a low level whimper emitting from her quivering lips. Oliver doubts she'll be as upset when it's his time to go. God willing, it'll be sooner than later.

The Tripod's demise came suddenly, the result of a collision with a Ford pickup truck traveling at about thirty miles an hour. Oliver had been out with Roberta on a walk of all things, the direct result of his wife's inexplicable allegiance to a canine over her own children. The kids had asked their mother to play a game of *Life* with them, and she'd automatically dismissed their request. "Roberta needs her morning walk," she'd said, not bothering to invite the kids along. Oliver recognized the disappointment in his sons' eyes and insisted that he take the dog out for a walk while Judy play with the kids.

Cruising along Interstate 94, Oliver charts the chain of events that followed his poor decision: he and Roberta taking off down the road toward the convenience store, his repetitive two-step crunch in time with her three-step gallop; purchasing a coffee and a couple of donuts for the kids; taking her off the leash just as they were turning back on the road that led to the cabin; yelling at her when she started to dig at a decomposing stump off to the side; following her to said stump, only to have her dash back up the incline strewn with roots and branches; and hearing a sickening thump followed by the grinding of tires along the stones of the unpaved road.

"Oh God," Oliver had said out loud upon surveying the damage, uncertain if he was truly horrified by the event, or merely of the impending consequences. "Oh dear God," he repeated and massaged his temples.

The truck's driver, shaken and apologetic, offered to give Oliver a ride back to the cabin and make a quick phone call to the DNR to see how Roberta's remains should be disposed.

“My wife’s not going to settle for anything less than a full-service funeral. Could we use your truck?” Fortunately, the man had a tarp and cinder blocks in the back, and together they lifted the dead beast and placed her gently in the truck’s bay.

The silence in the car is deafening, and Oliver knows it will be matched at home unless they can clear the air now. Time to make amends. The boys can observe first-hand how married couples make-up, conflicts leading to reconciliation.

“I’m really sorry about the accident,” he says. “She ran so fast, I couldn’t stop her.”

“You took her off her leash on a highway!” she blubbers.

“*Not* a highway,” he says calmly. “An unpaved road. A half a mile away from the cabin.”

“With cars going fifty miles an hour! You always had it in for her. You always...”

“Oh come on. I didn’t want her to die!”

“Oh *really*.”

“Judy, why would I want her to die? To make you miserable and put me in the doghouse...oh...sorry. I meant...”

“I know *just* what you meant!”

Oliver’s mind races with smooth comebacks and tirades, the kind of intricate quips he could never conjure in the heat of the moment. He presses the gas pedal harder, and the Chevy Lumina speeds angrily passed a police officer’s radar gun. Flashes of red and blue lights signal him to stop at the side of the highway, and Oliver experiences the same sinking feeling he’d felt the day before when he’d heard the thud of canine hitting car.

While the officer busily writes the speeding ticket, Judy leans toward the window and butts in, prolonging the humiliating process: “He killed our dog.”

“Hush!” Oliver responds, hoping to limit the damage. “I did not.”

“Sir,” placates the officer. “Sir, calm down now.” Then, peering into the open window in clear shot of Judy, he asks, “What was that, ma’am?”

“My husband here killed our dog. Took her off the leash on a highway.”

“It was *not* a highway!”

“Sir,” the officer says now with more authority. “Calm down.” Then, in a peaceful tone, “I’m truly sorry, ma’am. Some people are just careless around animals.”

Oliver wrinkles his forehead. Another dog-lover. He needs an Advil.

“That’s so true, officer. So true.” Judy dabs at her eyes again, and Oliver thinks for a moment that she might be smartly playing the sympathy card to garner enough mercy and avoid getting a ticket. “Do you have a pet?”

“I do, but I lost my first dog a couple of months ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

The officer grimaces a little, looks down and nods. Oliver tilts his head backwards and sighs.

“It was tough,” the officer says, leaning his arms on the open window, probably breaking every rule in the policeman’s handbook. “It’s really like losing a member of the family. I wish I could say the worst is over for you, but I’m afraid the grieving process lasts a long time.”

He gives them the minimum fine, and says that if they come to court to contest he’d see to it that the judge would cut the fine in half.

“How am I going to get up here on a weekday to contest the ticket?” Oliver grumbles, more to himself than to anyone else.

“Well sir, I don’t know,” says the officer. “Maybe you should have thought about that before you killed your dog.”

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Back at home, Oliver methodically unpacks the car, placing fishing gear and suitcases temporarily on the driveway. As he hoists the last of the luggage from the trunk, Judy storms out the back door with the two boys and a suitcase that hadn't made the trip north with the family.

"Where do you think you're going?" Oliver says loudly, unable to handle any more excitement for one day.

"To my mother's. She's agreed to watch the kids for a few days and I need to get away."

"What? So that's it? You're leaving me over a dog?"

Judy shakes her head. "Not a *dog*! You know better than to call her a *dog*! I can't stand the sight of you right now, and you need to be by yourself so you can think about what you've done."

"What the hell did I do?" he shouts, lifting his shoulders and holding out his open palms. "I took The Tripod out for a walk so you could play a game with the kids! The kids you don't give the time of day because you're always doting on the goddamned dog! And this is how you treat me?"

Roberta glowers at him and shoos the boys into the car.

"If that's all you think you've learned in the past twenty-four hours, then you've got some real soul-searching to do." She slams the Lumina's door behind her and accelerates in reverse, dodging the debris of their fishing trip before stopping abruptly at Oliver's feet. The window opens and she leans out the window and says through gritted teeth, "And her name wasn't The Tripod! It was Roberta!" The car screeches down the driveway and out of sight.

Oliver stands alone on the concrete, his suitcase still at his feet, and surveys the yard as if he's been ambushed, unable to fathom where his attackers have fled. Scattered along the lawn are

remnants of Roberta's existence: a water bowl. A rubber toy. A nylon rope turned upon itself like a hangman's noose. Oliver studies the rope and carefully reconsiders things. What if he'd underestimated the dog? Maybe she'd always recognized that it had been a competition, two vying for the attention of one. And if she couldn't ensure victory while living, she would prove triumphant in death. Buried in the soft, warm earth of the north woods, memories of her would heighten, stories would grow into legends, recollections of obedience would swell into fables of saintliness. Her ghost would forever haunt the home, a little canine soul swooping in and out of the rooms, passing between Oliver's and Judy's moments of intimacy, within conversations at dinner parties, and hidden in the spaces between two souls headed on different courses.

To the great dog-park in the sky. Killing him softly with her song.