



## Be Still, Oliver

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By John Loofbourow, MD

Oliver Twist is a found dog, an orphan of the universe, like all living souls. Someone rescued him on the freeway as a pup and left him at the pet store. Seeing him there 15 years ago, we could neither forget nor refuse the appeal in his shining golden eyes, and we brought him home.

He became the best behaved, most predictable, and most affectionate member of the family. Now, with the children grown into young adults, he has become a child again who still retains his mongrel health, Chesapeake-Shepard-whatever formation, and thick dog-scented, rust gold coat. His only known illness was an exuberant hematuria following a delicious snack of rat poison.

Though we live on a wooded creek, we have never given him heart worm prevention, and his blood tests have always been clean. He keeps his teeth sound and polished by chewing on pine cones, and by not eating table food. Except for a three-week outing when he followed an exquisitely compelling scent to its timeless source, he has lived in our one dog family in post-operative celibacy.

Oliver has always been a timorous soul. He is deferent to strange dogs. When a puppy, he leapt into the pool and almost drowned because he couldn't find the step to get out. Since then, the closest he gets to deep water is to delicately squat at the shallow end in three digit heat.

He was always frightened by noise, but now the 4th of July explosions or the occasional thunderstorms have no terror for him because he is deafer than the average oak log. He probably sees well, yet his expressive yellow eyes are slightly milky; he guards the house from his bed by the sliding glass door, and his deep bark sounds only when sight arouses it.

He has visible arthritic swelling of the wrists and ankles. A few years ago, he started to yelp occasionally while sprinting after a ball, and has gradually stopped fetching, even though it was once his chief remaining physical joy. He seems a bit confused at times, and has begun to scratch at his bed or the kitchen floor, as if to dig a hip hole.

In early summer this year, Oliver took to his bed and refused to eat. When I lifted him to his feet, he peered at me accusingly and walked reluctantly, unsteadily, his hind legs splaying and slipping on the smooth floor. The vet came, examined, tested, and opined:

He is old. He has degenerative arthritis. It hurts. His heart, lungs, blood, and chemistries are fine. An "NSAID" may help, and if that doesn't, try some prednisone. He gave a shot of cortisone. An antibiotic "just in case". Indeed, after regular doses of Carprofen, Oliver improved physically.

But not animically. These days he has a need to never be alone. He often paces about anxiously, restlessly searching for...what?

I wondered. Has he been around people too long,, exposed to human concerns too

heavily? Has Oliver accreted from all these books and all this talk an inner existential burden, an undoglike need for answers to the unanswerable? A vague and oppressive awareness of age and decay and the unknown? An ineluctable doubt about doG, the immortal, the omnipotent creator bitch? Perhaps he needs to believe that there is some marking of his passage, his territory in this limitless illusory plane of time.

Last night he wandered through the house complaining plaintively until I got up to speak with him. He was troubled without knowing why. After a while, we went outside and mutually confessed uncertain truths and lies in the summertime predawn air.

I sang him some snatches of the song Peggy Lee did so well. "If that's all there is my friend, let's keep on dancing." He told me what dogs dream of when they thrash and run while asleep. "Good night Oliver; be still," I said. "We are what we are, and this is our home, at least for now."

We returned to our beds, and slept quietly, soundly, while the heedless earth raced purposefully round the sun turning to a new day.

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