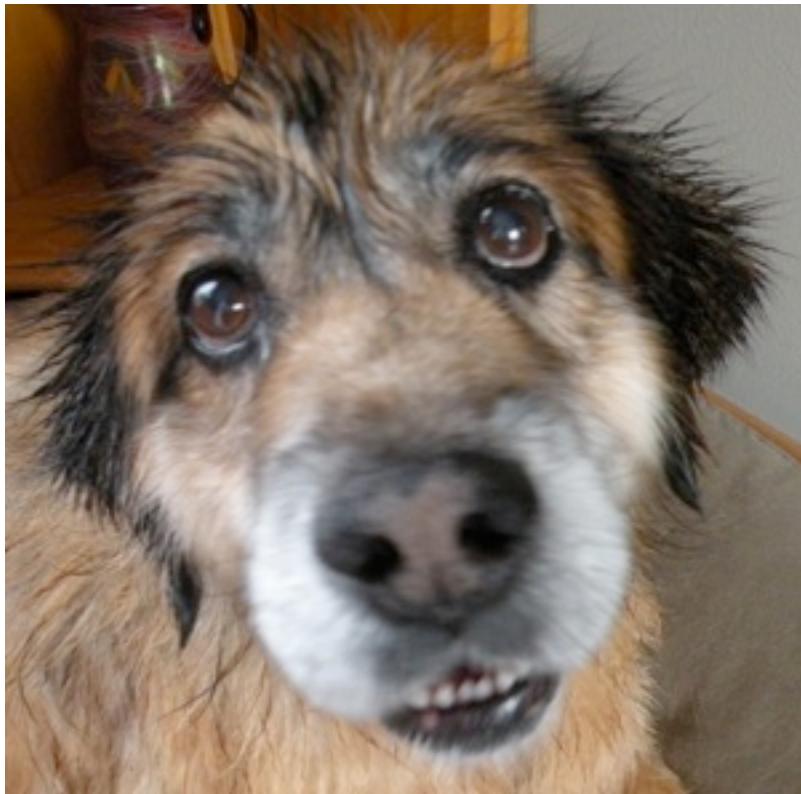


Darcy's Diary

Day One

My name is Darcy. Today begins the story of the rest of my life. My early years are shrouded in confusion. I vaguely remember the warmth of my mother's body. She licked me and nourished me. Then she was gone and I was alone. People came and went from my life. Most treated me fairly well, but then something went wrong. I was two or three and suddenly I found myself at the local animal shelter. It was so scary - dogs barking, crying, the smell of fear was everywhere. My cage was bare and cold. The food was tolerable. I tried my best to do what was asked of me, but I really didn't know the rules or expectations.



For some reason the people at the shelter seemed to like me. I do have good manners, if I say so myself. I have no aggressive tendencies. I never snapped, nipped or growled. I showed my appreciation through a slow and elegant wag of my tail. In time my situation improved. A very nice couple adopted me. They took me home. I lived with them for seven years. Life was good. I had so much food that I became obese. It made getting around

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difficult but I really enjoyed the constant supply of kibbles and treats.

I developed a skin allergy that troubles me to this day, but it's nothing that I can't endure. My people shaved me each spring to help me stay cool. Now that I am older my coat isn't growing in very well; quite honestly I am not as pretty as I once was. My hearing is weak but my eyesight still serves me.

I assumed I would continue in my comfortable world until the end. But this was not to be. I have never been one to ask much in this life. Given my circumstances I didn't feel I deserved much. I am content to be the last dog in line for treats and the last one out the door. Status matters not to me.

One morning my person gave me a pill that made me lose awareness. I vaguely recall being lifted into the back of the car. For some reason all my worldly belongings were with me. I slept fitfully as we drove. I had no idea of our destination. The car stopped next to a station wagon. A woman approached us. She said she represented Old Dog Haven. My person opened the door of our car. The lady extended her hand for me to smell. She called me sweet and told me everything would be all right.

All my belongings were loaded into her car, including my bed. I struggled to understand what was happening. My person gently lifted me into the station wagon. I thought he was going to cry. Where was I going? What was happening? I tried to get up but the silly pill made my legs like taffy. I could only grunt and fall back down on my bed. My person took a picture of me with the lady in the back of her car. And then he left. I was alone with a stranger.

For several hours I rode in the back of the station wagon. I listened to classical music and the news. At last the car came to a stop. The pill was wearing off, but my legs were still weak. A man carefully lifted me out of the car. I had to pee. He seemed to know that. He slowly walked me to a tree. Such relief. But I smelled the scent of others. I felt so vulnerable. What if the other dogs were mean? What if the people didn't like me? Would I go back to the shelter where it all began? I was hungry. Did they know that?

I was still on a leash when the female house dog was introduced. Her name is Tess. She is a rescue too. She is the prettiest girl I have ever seen. Her coat

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is a rich mahogany and white. Her face is equally divided into her two colors. She has long eyelashes. She approached me with some rigidity, her tail held straight out. But I offered no resistance. After a few moments she wagged her tail and ran off.

Next came Asher, the man dog. He barked when he saw me and postured. Oh no, I thought. What if he attacks me? The lady told him easy and he seemed to relax. I stood perfectly still and let him sniff me everywhere. He knew instantly that I was no threat to his position in the household. In a flash he raced down the fence to bark at the neighbor dog. This was my first day in my new life.

Day Two

I didn't realize the severity of my own condition until I saw what other dogs could do. Asher races around the property as if he has wings. The lady lovingly calls him flyboy. Even Tess can run. She can't leap the low fences like Asher, but she almost keeps up with him when they run. I can barely lift my aching old haunches off my bed.

I suppose I am at least twenty pounds overweight and my joints have been complaining for years. The lady is most concerned about my incessant scratching. I am ashamed to admit that when she first encountered me, I stunk terribly. I am proud to report that I had no toilet accidents my first night. I was walked more than I wished, but I know it was to make sure I had emptied my bowels and bladder.

I was allowed to sleep in the master bedroom with the other dogs, but because my snoring is so loud, I have been asked to sleep on my pad in the hallway. The door is open so that if I become afraid or have to ask to be let out, I can approach the sleepers.

My adventure in this new home continues. I have made good progress. I am comfortable with my circumstances. The lady worries about my itching, but I have been this way for so long, I hardly notice. I will write more after the vet has seen me, but for now I am hoping for a long and happy future at Asherpark.

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Day Three

How my life has changed. I no longer sleep until mid morning. Apparently the woman is used to getting up early and the house dogs expect their morning meal by 6am. We all eat the same thing - kibbles made from duck and sweet potato and the food she cooks for us. Ash calls her home cooking the bucket. I call it heaven. It seems to be a mash of brown rice, vegetables and the most wonderful meat I have ever tasted. It's like canine caviar.

There is a discipline to feeding times. Ash eats first in the privacy of the mud room. Tess eats next in a corner of the kitchen. And finally it is my turn. I am sequestered in the pantry where I can take my time and enjoy every bite. While I adore my food, I am a slow and tidy feeder. I like to take the food from the bowl and chew it thoughtfully before swallowing. My portions are rationed and I feel a little lighter already.

The son tested me to see if I have any food aggression. He could have asked me and I would have told him I don't, but he wanted to see for himself. So while I was eating he sat on the floor with me and played around my food. I stepped back, thinking he might want some himself. He laughed and handed me a morsel. He lifted my bowl up and held it briefly. I sat down and looked at him, wondering what he was doing. After a few moments he returned my bowl to me and I continued to eat. He praised me for my very mellow disposition and called me buddy. I like him.

Yesterday the woman took me on a walk. We walked all the way down the road and back. I enjoyed it. She walks slowly and lets me sniff when I want. I am very good on the leash. I rarely pull. Usually I walk a foot behind on her left side. I think once upon a time I was taught to heel, but I am not sure. I surprised everyone by walking nearly half a mile. I almost feel like I have a little more spring in my step, but it may just be that I am getting over the terrible sadness and confusion of losing my people.

Last night we had a guest dog. She is a long time friend of my new people. Asher and Tess were very happy to see her. At dinner we all picked a spot under the table and slept while the people ate. I do not beg from people while they eat. That would be rude. I do forget myself in the kitchen and beg a bite

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or two, prancing up and down and wagging my tail. But if I am asked to stop, I do. I was very well behaved around the guest dog. She was nice to me and I was equally pleasant to her.

Today I shall visit the vet. The woman collected my morning stool. This is such an odd habit some people have, but she assures me it is necessary to see if I have alien creatures living in my gut. I have adjusted to my new food and my stools are fairly solid. She is pleased with that. Because I am still heavy I will have to be assisted into the car. The man of the house is coming with us to the vet, so he can lift me. I hope some day to spring into the car like Asher, or at least climb in under my own power. I suppose only time will tell, but for now I am content to have found a home where I have company and am treated well. I will tell more as time permits.

Day Five

They told me I was going to see the vet. I didn't believe them. She put the leash on me and started to lead me towards the car. Where was I going? I didn't want to go to a new place where I would be afraid all over again. Had I done something wrong? I panicked and pulled as hard as I could. I sat down and went limp. They struggled to lift me into the station wagon. Were they sending me away because they didn't want me?

We drove for about twenty minutes. I could hardly catch my breath. Then the car stopped. They left me in the car alone for a few minutes. Soon they returned and I was walked into an office. It smelled of dogs and cats and medicine. They put me on the scale. I was so embarrassed. I wouldn't look. Eighty two and one half pounds, the receptionist announced to the entire waiting room. Everyone gasped in disbelief.

Oh I must look like some hideous thing. Obese, hairless over much of my body, with skin lesions and bumps everywhere. Maybe they would put me out of my misery. Surely no one would want me in this condition. I felt faint. I sat down. I expected the worst.

Next came the vet tech. She asked me to pee into a plastic dish. I refused. They violated me by sticking things in my private places. After amusing themselves by looking under my tail and in my ears, I heard the tech say

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everything was normal.

I was just starting to relax when the doctor entered the room. He had a pleasant way about him. My lady told him I was a mess. The vet agreed but said I could probably be saved. They took my blood. I was very brave, they said. I did everything asked of me. They said they wished all the dogs were as good as I.

Then they all stood up. I held my breath and closed my eyes. I so wanted to go home to the lovely Tess. The man took my leash. Come on big boy, I think he said. It's time to go home. I could hardly believe my ears and feared my weak hearing had deceived me. Home? He said home... Did I really have a home? Was I really going back to Asherpark, to the beautiful Tess?

We walked out of the office together. The man holding my leash, my lady with a collection of antibiotics, anti-fungals, ear drops, and medicated shampoo. I didn't care how many pills I had to swallow. They could put drops in my ears forever, and three baths a week or once a day. I would do anything to have a home.

I tried to help them get me into the car but my legs were weak and I collapsed like a sack of potatoes. They carefully lifted me into the car and arranged me so I would be comfortable. I fell asleep during the drive, and when I awoke I was indeed at Asherpark. There was Tess to greet me. I was home to stay.

The Second Month

It must be a special time. They put up colored lights and my lady is in the kitchen more than usual. That's fine with me because I have an urgent need to know where she is at all times, and when she is in the kitchen I do not have to get up and down to follow her around the house.

She laughs at me and tells me that I look too serious. I'm not sure what she means. I have always been an introspective dog. I often had too much time to myself and learned at an early age to develop a life of the mind. Having been in and out of shelters in my early years, I allowed myself few expectations. A

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warm place to sleep, something to eat, the kindness of strangers was all I could hope for.

When my lady took possession of me in November, I prepared myself for the worst. As old and fragile as I was, I had to learn to live a new life. The Aussie twins perplex me. They race around the yard barking at imaginary sounds. They play tug with a dirty old rope. Tess uses her feminine wiles shamelessly. She always wants to go for a ride with anyone who will take her. I prefer to stay with my lady.

I mastered the routine of the household after several weeks. Breakfast is served at 6am; the evening meal is usually around 5pm. The twins pester my lady relentlessly for their evening meal. How she puts up with them, I don't know. I am required to take six short walks each day. Sometimes when I see the leash I run to my bed. But in the end I go for my walk because it pleases my people. The twins race out ahead while I walk sedately in search of a suitable spot for toilet.

At bedtime I move deliberately to my assigned spot. My lady makes sure I am comfortable in my soft bed and then she tells me stories to help me sleep. On Christmas night the man told me that he loved me and I would stay with him and my lady forever. He said that was my Christmas present and we would work out the details of my adoption in the new year. I was so overcome with joy I could not respond. I had just received the most wonderful gift - the gift of love and a forever home.

The Time of Troubles

It began slowly and was perplexing to my people. I started to resist my daily walks, gently at first and then with more insistence. The man didn't know what to do with me. He thought I only wanted to walk with my lady, but that was not the case. I only wanted to go outside when I absolutely had to attend to my toilet.

I could still force myself to move around the house in search of my lady, but that required great effort. I panted hard and often. My lady was becoming worried. I wasn't worried. I knew I was loved.

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On the first day of the new year I was bathed. My lady took me in the shower with her while Ash and Tess watched. I was embarrassed but secretly pleased with the attention. Then the man came with a towel and dried me. Feeling a little miffed, I shook water all over him. He laughed and mopped up around me.

My lady followed me to my favorite bed and took my picture. My hair still wet and spiky, I raised my head in protest. She burst out laughing when she saw the image. Even I laughed at the sight.

On January 2nd special friends came to visit. I had met them once before. They liked me on their first visit and asked if I could come for a sleep over in the city. I wasn't sure I wanted to leave my lady, but did agree to consider the invitation. They called me Mr. Darcy and said I was enchanting.

My lady scheduled an appointment for me at the vet the following Wednesday. She hoped to discover why I had so little energy. On Tuesday I was feeling indisposed. My itchy skin condition was beginning to flare up. Soon I was like a dog possessed, chewing and scratching myself. It so distressed my lady. She tried everything to make me more comfortable. She put an ice pack on the worst spot, dressed me in a T-shirt and physically restrained me when I attacked my armpit.

My people stayed up with me most of the night. I was panting so heavily my lady feared I would have a heart attack. At one point the man lay with me on the rug and massaged my neck. For a few hours I was able to rest and stop scratching myself. At 4am I asked to go outside. I performed my toilet with some urgency and then returned to the house.

Once in the house I became nauseous and vomited on the dining room rug. I was humiliated and ran to my bed in shame. My lady wiped the spittle from my face and kissed me. She told me not to worry and quickly cleaned up what I had done. I was panting harder and could not stop scratching myself. My lady awakened the man and told him I should be lifted into the car to carry me to the vet.

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I found myself unable to stand. They placed a towel under my belly and helped me stagger to the car. The man heaved me into the back of the station wagon. My lady hurriedly called the vet to say we were coming early. Once at the vet I was able to walk with assistance into the office. I clambered onto the scale and heard my lady gasp as the scale read 61 pounds. That cannot be, I heard her say. "He weighed 83 pounds less than two months ago". The tech said the scale had been recalibrated and there was no way to know whether my first weight was accurate.

By now I was feeling weak and sat down heavily. I was beginning to share the alarm my lady felt for my condition. They left me at the vet for x-rays and other exams. I so hated to be without my people. It brought up all my insecurities from years past. Would they come back for me? I was too sick to ponder this for long and in a few hours they did indeed come back for me.

I was made up to look like a fool. With a short lampshade on my broad head I felt like little red riding hood. I also had a bootie on my foot so I couldn't scratch myself. The vet seemed intent on robbing me of what little dignity I had left. Once again my lady left the vet with a bag of medications in hand as I wobbled out of the office and down the ramp to the car.

I could tell my lady was very concerned about my condition. I was beginning to fear the worst myself. But I was on my way home, which was all I really cared about. Once home I collapsed on my bed. My lady put a towel under my snout to catch my drool. She said she did not want me lying on anything wet.

The next few hours were a blur. I had no interest in food or broth. I drank a little when the water was brought to me. I didn't have the energy to get up from my bed. I developed the dry heaves. For several hours my lady lay next to me trying to comfort me and moving me from the bed I most recently fouled to a clean, dry bed.

How I loved the touch of her hands. She wondered if I could hear her words of comfort since I am largely deaf. I told her I did not require hearing to know the meaning of her words. We were able to speak from heart to heart. The gift of hearing was not necessary. In the wee hours of the morning she called the emergency hospital and made arrangements to bring me in. As I was

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beginning to lose consciousness, I felt her warm tears on my face.

I arrived at the emergency hospital after a lengthy drive. I was lifted onto a stretcher and carried into the hospital. My lady stayed with me. The tech took my temperature and soon the doctor came in. She said my condition was very grave. My lady stroked my nose and made soothing sounds. She gave the doctor strict instructions that if I had to be put to sleep she was to be present regardless of the hour, unless my condition was so painful that I could not bear to live another moment.

Later that day my people came to visit. I lifted my head and looked at them. I was embarrassed for them to see me in my wretched condition. I was in a large cage in the hospital. I had fouled myself with urine and did not have the energy to clean myself. My lady crawled in the cage with me and took my head in her hands. The man stroked me on the neck and soon I was making little chortling sounds. They did not want to tire me, so after a short time they left hoping the IV fluids would stabilize my condition and allow me to recover.

The End

Now comes the part of my story I so regret having to tell. I did not fear to lose my life. After all, I had been a shelter dog, a stray, a throw away. I've said before I had few expectations about my place in this world. But in the end, in my wildest dreams, I never thought someone would hold me as I took my last breath and wish me god speed into the next world. But that is exactly what happened.

My people returned to the hospital later in the day when they learned there was no hope for my recovery. As they approached my cage I lifted my head towards them and wagged my tail. Exhausted, I let my head drop onto my paws. First my lady then the man stroked my head and told me how much they loved me, that they desperately wished I could have stayed longer with them at Asherpark.

They said I was a full member of their family and even after death I would remain with them. They explained that when my spirit was no longer trapped

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in my failing body, my physical remains would be cremated and my ashes returned to Asherpark. My lady whispered that my passage from this life would be very gentle and I had nothing to fear. All the pain and suffering was behind me.

She told me that as I took my last breath my spirit would be transformed into wonderful memories that they would keep for all time. It was indeed as she described. With their tears falling on my tired old body and my head cradled in their hands, I took one last breath and passed away.

