

The Dog That I Hated to Love

By Madison Watai

It took a month and a half to convince Mr. Byron to rip up the lease on my mother's apartment. 50 days of arguing. 50 days of debating with his catty wife. 50 days of having to step into the same old apartment day after day and reliving every memory that came with it. I hated it.

What was worse was when Mr. Byron relented and gave me the contract. At first, I took this as a win until I realized that I would now have to sort through all of the junk my mother had collected over the years. I was tempted to just take all of it and burn it. I didn't want it.

Romere protested. He said I couldn't just throw it all away. "Let me come down and help," he insisted for the hundredth time.

I told him no. I didn't want his help unless he would do it all himself, which, of course, he wouldn't. He didn't have time and while he cared, he didn't care *that much*. And neither did I, but there was no one else to do this.

Our father left before I was born and my mother had few friends, no siblings, and no close relatives. She sent Romere and me to live with our grandfather two hours away when I was fifteen, so she wouldn't have to take care of him. Or us, for that matter. I guess she must have considered it a kill two birds with one stone situation. Romere got into college and left me until my grandfather died a couple of years later, but I never went back to my mother. Nowadays, I rarely saw Romere in person and I'd like to keep it that way. We lived cities apart and he hadn't come to visit our mother or me in over two years. He'd wanted to, but I told him to stay away and since he was busy with three kids and a full-time job, he didn't think to protest.

My mother spent the final few decades of her life collecting old decks of playing cards and channel surfing with her dog, Indiko, who was a lazy, old Affenpinscher that resembled a beat-up gray carpet when it was asleep. I hated both of them.

The dog lived with me, for now. I almost forgot about the thing until my mother's neighbour, who had been dog sitting for her while she was in the hospital, dropped the thing off on my doorstep just after I finished arguing with Mr. Byron. It sat on the welcome mat and we stared at each other in disgust for a good five minutes.

I tried to have the thing adopted or taken in by a shelter, but the staff and volunteers there told me that the dog was so old that no one was likely to adopt her and it would be better just to keep

her, as she wouldn't be around for much longer anyway. Now, the thing just sits on the couch - even though I've repeatedly told her not to - and stares at the door. I guess she missed my mother, but I can't sympathize and I have no love for the thing.

I asked Romere to take her because his kids had been begging for a dog for years, but he said the same thing as the people at the shelter did - he didn't want to deal with his kids' broken hearts when the dog died sooner or later. We argued about it because I couldn't take care of a dog - I was working most days and lived alone.

"If you want me to take Indiko, you might as well let me come down there and help," Romere said finally.

There was a pause because we both knew that neither of us was willing to agree to both of those things.

"No," I said finally. "It's fine. I'll take her." Then, I hung up and glanced at the dog. It looked like it was smirking as it laid its head down on the arm of my sofa, like an evil villain making herself comfortable on her newly claimed throne.

I went to the first pet store that my phone could come up with and grabbed the first bag of dog food I saw. It was a big bag, claiming to contain a mix of poultry, protein, and vegetables. I didn't ask how they managed to put all that into the tiny kibble pieces and just hauled it to checkout. What I didn't expect was that the food was almost 60\$ for that one bag. I asked the cashier if there was anything cheaper (because I didn't want to spend 60\$ on a dog, especially if it didn't live as long as it took to consume the whole bag). She asked what kind of dog I had and then how much it weighed and how old it was and what breed it was and whether or not it had any allergies and -

I cut her off. "I just want some dog food!" I exclaimed, my voice cracking with desperation, stress, and frustration, begging someone to understand and not be an idiot. She looked rather startled as I went on. "I just want some dumb dog food that no one can accuse me of killing the dumb dog with but doesn't extend the dumb life of the dumb dog because I don't even want the dumb dog!" I ended with that, suddenly feeling out of breath and a throbbing in my throat.

The cashier just stared at me and with that, I grabbed my coat and, flushing, disappeared out of the store, before embarking to the next pet store. I bought the first bag of food I found without

questioning the price (although it might have been for cats; I didn't think or care if there was a difference) and disappearing home.

That night, I shook a portion out into an old baking bowl I had and shoved it in front of the dog's nose. She just sniffed it and then lowered her head in dismissal, sinking back into the sofa. I wanted to scream in frustration but instead settled for throwing the dog food at the fireplace and staring at the dog in fury. It just looked at me and I knew that I was the only one that would be cleaning the mess up.

The dog didn't eat the next day, either and I ended up just leaving the bag open on the floor for her, figuring she'd eat if she was hungry. If she died of malnutrition or starvation, that was her problem and I wouldn't be sorry if she did.

I was supposed to return to work the week I dealt with the lease but then Mr. Byron told me that I needed everything out of the apartment by the end of the month and so I asked for another week off. I was told no and that they needed me at the parlour. Maybe it was good I was there because I had someone to vent to - someone being anyone who would listen.

"Gods, Clarice, she's *dead!*" Eliza, the artist working in the chair next to me, finally burst out after I had gone on for a good half an hour to my client about my mother. "Let it go, will you?!"

Except I can't, as much as I want to. I mean, emotionally, I'm fine. I haven't even cried yet and it's been two months since I heard. It's the fact that I have to deal with the aftermath of her life that's bothering me. And the dog. The dumb dog that was probably chewing up my sofa at that very moment with that smug grin on its face.

I spent every day after work going through my mother's belongings. It took a lot longer than I thought it would because I had to drive from work to home to get the dumb dog and then to my mother's apartment. Altogether, it was about 45 minutes of driving, not to mention how slow.

The dog seemed happy to go back to the apartment. While I hauled cardboard boxes out to my car and sorted through my mother's collection of old playing cards, the dog sniffed around the apartment as if looking for my mother, and when it didn't find her, it retreated to the sofa and sat there, whining until it fell asleep.

"I'm sending you photos," I said to Romere over the phone, as I stood in the middle of a pile of my mother's stuff. I figured that it would be easiest for me to simply dump everything together and then go through it all. If it weren't for Romere, I would have just put it all in garbage bags and taken it to the dump. "Tell me if you see want anything and I'll mail it over."

“Or –“

“No,” I said firmly. “I just want to get this over with.”

“Maybe getting it over with isn’t –“

“Oh no, the dog is chewing something up,” I cut in lamely. “I have to go.”

“Clarice –“ Romere sounded exasperated.

“Bad dog. Now I have to go throw a slipper at you.”

And I hung up before Romere could say anything else.

Two weeks later, I finally handed over the keys to Mr. Byron after the apartment was clear of every trace of my mother and began to shut the door for the final time, the dog's leash in my hand as it stared sadly into the room. I paused as I started to close it and glanced back inside, feeling like I should have done something more. Like, say goodbye. Or thank it.

Thank it for what? For all the terrible memories? I wondered.

I scoffed at myself a few seconds later and shut the door as the lock snapped into place before leaving the building for the final time. Maybe the dog knew that was it, as well, because it refused to get out of the car when I took it home and I had - to my disgust - pick it up and carry it inside the house. I put it down the moment I stepped inside and ran to wash my hands as it sunk into the doormat sadly.

I opted to donate most of my mother’s belongings. Some of it Romere wanted, mostly for memories' sake, but I didn’t take anything except for dog supplies, which I vowed to get rid of as soon as the dumb dog was gone.

I asked a local charity if they wanted anything and they said that they could come to pick it all up in a few weeks. That made me frustrated because I had already closed the apartment and I didn’t have anywhere to store the junk except my house. I didn’t have any other choice, so I had to store it in my garage for the time being.

The following Saturday was the first I had free in two months and I should have gone out and shaken the stress out of my bones. But when I came downstairs, I noticed that the dog food bowl still looked full, as if it hadn’t been touched. The dog was still sitting on the couch, looking, once again, like a gray carpet. I felt an odd sensation creep into my heart and I realized it was concern. I tried to pull it off the couch but it refused to move. I could have easily picked it up but the very idea made me twitch.

I poked my hands through her coat, trying to figure out if she was any thinner than she was when I first got her but I didn't know if there was a difference, mainly because I had refused to touch her when I first got her. The dog's hair was matted and the feel of ribs made me feeling kind of grossed out so I pulled my hands back but the dog didn't even look at me. I figured it was just getting used to my mother not being around and let it be.

I began to get worried after a few days. I did a little research on dogs not eating and found way too many causes to narrow it down. I considered taking it into a vet but I had no idea how vets worked. Did you have to book an appointment? Did you have to have a medical file on the dog? Was there such a thing as pet insurance? I didn't know and while I was on lunch break, I asked Kyle, who was one of my co-workers and the only one I knew who had a dog, what the process was. He told me it depended on the veterinarian and I should call the clinic to find out.

"Why, though?" he asked, as an afterthought as we ate lunch in the back.

I glanced up at him as I bit into my cucumber and honey sandwich. "What do you mean?" I asked, hiding my mouth behind my hand as I asked.

"I thought you didn't even like 'the thing'," he imitated me on the last two words. "Why are you taking it to a vet?"

I glared at him and stuffed the rest of my sandwich into a container as I tried to find an answer. "Because," I said stiffly, after a moment, "it looks pathetic when I come home and it's taking up my sofa space."

Kyle looked at me and then hid a grin behind his potato soup.

The next day, I took Indiko to a clinic not far from my workplace. I phoned them the previous evening and they said I could come in and set up a membership and an appointment then. I wasn't eager about that, because I didn't really want to get any more involved than absolutely necessary. Besides, the dog was most likely fine. She was probably just being lazy and making me go out of my way for nothing...

When I came home to pick Indiko up and take her to the clinic, she refused to move, so I had to carry her into the car and then into the clinic, which I wasn't too happy about. I glared at her, but she didn't notice.

Once we got in, the vet asked me what symptoms the dog was experiencing and how long they had been happening. He also asked a lot of other questions but I didn't know the answers to most of them. Eventually, he seemed to realize that I wasn't going to be of much help and told me that, if

I signed some forms, I could wait in the lobby and he would examine Indiko. It sounded easy, so I agreed.

About half an hour later, the vet came out carrying Indiko. He looked a little troubled but he smiled as he came out and told me they were done.

“Great. What’s wrong?” I asked, taking Indiko. I wasn’t sure if it was concern or impatience I felt.

He told me that they had done some x-rays and that they would phone me when they had results.

“For now, you might try feeding her something easy – some people like to use soup broth and rice,” he told me. He saw my skeptical look and added, “Try it.”

That night, I made some of the soup he’d recommended and mixed it with some white rice. I shoved it under Indiko’s nose and it sniffed the bowl for a second but didn’t move. I frowned and pushed it towards her more but she refused to eat it.

“Come on,” I insisted softly. “Eat. Romere’s going to think I did something to you...”

I dipped a finger in the soup and dabbed it on Indiko’s nose. Indiko twitched and then licked it off. Encouraged, I tried again and she continued to take the soup in tiny portions off my hand. I wasn’t even disgusted by her slobbery mouth I was so relieved, but after about half an hour, she was done and refused to open her mouth again. I glanced at the bowl, but it looked as if it had been barely touched.

The next morning, I tried again but she wouldn’t eat as much this time and that evening, she wouldn’t try it at all. After this became clear, I sat on the carpet and rested my head in my hands, trying to figure out what to do.

Spirits, Mother, I thought. You could have warned me Indiko was sick...

But then I realized she probably hadn’t known (and even if she had, she wouldn’t have told me and I wouldn’t have wanted to know). My mother had been in the hospital for a few months before her death and only saw Indiko for small amounts of time. I wondered if her neighbour had known, the one who took care of Indiko during that time, but I didn’t have her contact info. She’d offered it but I had declined, wanting no relations with my mother’s friends. I regretted that, now.

I remembered that the neighbour had dropped off Indiko’s toys and other things along with the dog and wondered if there was any medication, instructions, or anything that might help.

It was freezing and nine at night. Shivering, I turned on the lights in the garage and located the mountain of garbage bags and the pile of furniture that sitting in the corner. I hadn't marked any of it so I had to open all of it until I found the right bag. Except, when I opened the first bag, I remembered that I hadn't sorted it all really, either. I had just shoved everything that fit - bag after bag until it was full. Still, I didn't give up. There had to be something here somewhere. But there wasn't. At least not that I could find after forty-five minutes of ripping open bag after bag, scattering everything everywhere. Memories flashed before my eyes as I searched. My high school yearbook. A picture of my mother, Romere, and I at his college graduation. Stuffed animals and dolls I once cherished. CD cases from the family movie nights Romere tried and failed to initiate. Years worth of memories just sitting on the freezing ground of my messy garage.

I finally stopped after cutting my hand on a can opener that I remembered throwing across the room in a rage when I was fourteen and sunk to the ground, beginning to cry. Cry over lost years. Cry over old grudges. Cry over my carelessness.

Some part of my mind wondered if this was going to be like a movie scene and Indiko would come out and try to figure out what was wrong. I'd like to cry into her matted fur right about now. I kept looking up, wondering if she'd come.

But she didn't.

No one did.

Indiko died a week later. The vet gave me the short answer, saying it was mainly old age, but I cut him off, saying I wanted the whole report. He printed it off for me and I couldn't make sense of most of it, but I promised myself I would. I needed closure this time.

I called Romere a few days afterwards. I was relieved that he picked up.

"Hello?" I heard his voice say.

I wasn't really sure what to say, but then I realized there was only one thing *to* say: "Want to come help?"

There was a long pause. Then –

"I'll be there first thing tomorrow."

I apologized to him when he showed up the next morning. Apologized for everything, not just for the last few months. It was hard and I kept almost backing out, but I knew that if I didn't

know, I would regret it for the rest of my life. He, being the infinitely better person, accepted immediately.

We sorted through our mother's belongings together and I slowly came to accept that, even if my mother hadn't been the best person, that perhaps she had meant well and regretted sending us away in later years. I ended up keeping some of the stuff, after all, mainly the things that belonged to me before I lived with my grandfather, but a few things of my mother's, as well. Like the photo album that she finally developed ten years after the pictures in it were taken. And a couple of the card decks. I even kept one of Indiko's favourite toys just because.

We asked for Indiko to be buried with our mother, as I thought they'd both probably like that. Romere and I made a promise to come back to the grave at least twice a year and meet with one another every few months. He had to leave after a week. Work and family called, but we made plans to meet up soon. He was all I had, now, I realized.

The night he left, I lay in bed and as I fell asleep, I felt my heart clouded with sadness but shining with hope for the future. There was no more lasting anger, and I promised myself that there never would be any again.