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| 15 Jenny Apostol Nonfiction Miracle Dog  |
| Annie, our 15-year-old yellow lab is walking again. For nearly 10 months last year, both of her hind legs were paralyzed. There’s been no saintly intervention, though there was frequent laying on of hands — massages and physical- and hydro- therapy sessions, plus a series of needling treatments from a veterinary acupuncturist until we ran out of money. And yet our dog’s mobility returned on its own. One August morning, she simply organized her body for forward motion. Stood up, took one step and then another, as if by grace. It was a remarkable reversal, all but impossible until it was done. Annie has succeeded where most of us humans have failed: she’s re-entered her own “before times.” The previous October, Annie came home from her daily visit to the park, leapt for the treat my husband routinely tossed her way, then collapsed to the floor with a loud thump. She couldn’t stand up. She didn’t yowl, no bone or ligament had snapped, and her tail still wagged. We carried her to her bed and petted her for a while. Her dark eyes had sunken into her face and she looked humbled, perhaps even ashamed. As if she were asking, is this all there is? We borrowed a fleece sling. When we hauled Annie outdoors to pee, her back paws dragged on the ground, as lifeless and pathetic as a doll with broken limbs. To poop, Annie lay on the grass then dragged her body forward with her front paws like an infant learning to crawl. To keep the leg muscles from atrophy, my husband stood Annie upright for meals, making sure she wasn’t knuckling her paws. She could remain balanced just long enough to eat before woozily listing sideways and tumbling onto the rug like a drunk. Our dog did not get better. After a few days, we called the veterinary sports medicine clinic and made an appointment with the neurologist. He confirmed Annie hadn’t suffered a stroke but an X-ray and manual exam identified five degenerated discs in Annie’s spine. Neurological signals from her brain telling her legs to move were blocked. If her condition was temporary, we’d see an improvement soon. Given her advanced age and the sheer amount of inflammation up and down her spinal column, Annie was not a candidate for surgery. We had to accept it: our dog would likely never walk again. It's amazing what people conclude when they see an immobilized animal. They label her, put a value on her future. Even my husband thought Annie’s condition spelled doom. “She’s not dying!” I kept telling friends who’d stop by the garden gate to coo at our dog as she lay peacefully in the dirt, under the fronds of a hedge. Honestly, such nonchalance is typical of our girl. She’s always been the world’s worst Labrador retriever. Rarely runs after a ball or frisbee unless it belongs to another dog. Then she’ll eagerly steal it away to where leash-on pets are not allowed. Ignores canine company to sidle up to humans she knows will hand out treats. People assume she’s smiling at them. She works beauty to her advantage.Annie could still register sensation in her lower body if you tickled her paws. When we left her outdoors, she’d drag her 63 pounds across our entire yard, traversing front to back. It’s a deep lot, littered with vines, rocks, and pieces of slate that have never been leveled to the ground, not to mention various garden hoses, shovels, rakes, a wheelbarrow, and the occasional ax all dropped willy-nilly after use. Every once in a while, Annie lifted herself to take a step. We cheered her on. We figured she missed the stimulation of exercise and the thousands of scents traceable along the sidewalk. She needed air. I heaved the pooch into a kid’s wagon found on Craig’s List and ferried her down the block. Tried out an expensive dog stroller a friend gave us. Both were unwieldy. Then I posted a query on a list server for a hand me down wheelchair so Annie could “walk” with her back legs suspended on wheels. My husband, a life-long dog person, was not in favor; he complained the rig would be a crutch. “That’s exactly what it is!” I replied. He and I were out of the country when our son texted us a video on WhatsApp. Beyond a curtain of bamboo, an image slowly emerged: a white dog fishtailing away from the camera along a garden path. “Good girl!” our son’s voice can be heard in a whisper. “Go, Annie!” we shout into the phone. “She’s been doing this for several days,” our son proudly declared when we called home.  |
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| Negative associations are thought to linger in canine memory longer than positive ones. If you’ve ever watched a dog freak out while being dragged to the vet, you understand. But lately, Annie seems eager to forget her disability ever happened. During the first few months of her recovery, she abandoned the soft green dog bed with its whiff of infirmity and opted to nap on the hard floor underneath a corner sideboard where she couldn't be reached. The wood was slippery and unforgiving; her nails scratched for purchase as she tried to rise, her hips threatening to cave in. Annie over-does it outdoors too, venturing around the property multiple times a day until she’s worn out and covered in ticks. It’s as if ambition has entered her being. I think she likes to be alone with her thoughts. Around 40,000 years ago, wolf dens near humans flourished on the food people supplied and a new canine culture developed. Like most co-evolutionary narratives, it’s not clear which species gained the greater advantage. Annie points to the front door (snorting, jerking, stomping feet) not only when she needs to relieve herself. She’s calculating how many times she can head outside so she can come back in and get a treat. Like her wolf ancestors, Annie’s been trained on reward, yet it is we who follow her lead. You could set a watch by her inner 5 o’clock dinner chime. “Maybe I give Annie too many snacks,” my husband remarked out of the blue one morning over coffee. “It’s a little late to pull back now, don’t you think?” I say mostly to myself. Our family debates whether Annie is smart or driven by instinct. Who cares? She’s an expert at getting what she wants. To me, she’s the cleverest of us all. Smart enough to allow 10 months of bed rest and copious amounts of CBD to work magic along the neural pathways of her spine. So active now it’s like she’s experiencing a second puppy-hood, back to a time when the rush of hormones would send her flying out the back door after squirrels, disappearing into the woods until someone phoned from several streets away: “I have your dog.” There’s a saying in rehab circles: “Fake it till you make it,” or simply, “Walk the walk.” Even if you don’t believe in the process, showing up can prove therapeutic. Annie lobbies for the leash and amazingly, a year after we thought she was a goner, we resume twice-a-day strolls up and down the street. On a recent winter morning we met a neighbor walking his terrier. “Wow, a true miracle recovery!” he says smiling in Annie’s direction. This January, Annie reached the age when her mother died (105 in dog years). The pup who rolled in the compost pile with the same gorgeous face and affectionate nature as her mum is the sole survivor of her maternal line. Yet she seems to be growing younger. Living her best life during its final stage. I’m at an age when even yoga or swimming leave my muscles sore. Our kids are launched and out of the house. The past three plus years have sucked for everyone and the future looks bleak. No one gets a second chance, except apparently, our dog. Annie brings hope. She’s restored people’s faith in what’s possible, that what you wish for may come true. And it makes me wonder, how akin is reality to what we imagine? More than hunger and cunning has restored Annie’s ambulatory nature. Her eagerness to go back to the way things were makes me think mammals are hard wired to bury painful memories the way women forget the trauma of childbirth. That dogs cannot recall the past is considered their secret to happiness. Or perhaps Annie doesn’t see herself as fully dog anymore but part human – the entitled part. She dreams big. Jumps on furniture, wants to eat when we do, demands attention around the clock. Keening toward the heroic narrative of her life. Annie lopes at a slant then shuffles out the front door sideways. Ten minutes later, I stand at the backdoor tapping the glass to call her in. She glances left to the yards adjacent then stares back at me as if making a huge decision: delay the treat she knows she’ll get once home? Or go for unknown treasure – the detritus and other dead things she uncovers for a snack on her walkabouts next door? This stairwell is too tall and steep for her to safely manage so I pantomime for her to go around to the front. She hesitates a moment at the foot of the steps. Steps she used to climb. Maybe this time. 12-15-23<https://www.mockingowlroost.com/blog/unexpected-delights-triannual/> |