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JO VAN ARKEL



IN DOG YEARS

IN DOG YEARS, she was 329 years old. This explained everything. She did the math at an extra long stoplight (actually one of those that is long for the cross traffic but short for her) which was good because she needed the extra time since she was never strong at math, especially when it had to be done in her head.

She did the math and because she was thinking so hard about multiplying and carrying the four and multiplying again and then adding two, the light turned green and then yellow which she noticed just in time to pull through the intersection but not in time for the man behind her to make it, so he was stuck at the light in an existential crisis and as she pulled away she could see him in her rearview mirror cursing her body and soul and she mouthed him a sorry but he didn't see it which just served to confirm that math was as a rule something to be avoided because it brought conflict and distress to her and people around her except for this one time, when she derived a profound but inexplicable comfort from this one

simple mathematical equation: She had been feeling 329 years old for some time now but hadn't put a number to it, hadn't quantified it so precisely.

She told her husband later that evening, told him how old she was in dog years. Three hundred and twenty-nine. The magic number.

"What does that mean?" he said. He shook his head. "No, no," he said. "You can't translate it like that. You're talking apples and oranges."

They had a dog who during this conversation was lounging in the window seat. A small brown dog of unknown origins, wily-looking and thin with a curly tail. He was likely to live a good long time.

"A dog doesn't perceive the difference. Think relativity here," her husband said. He looked over at the dog as if for confirmation. The dog was nibbling intensely at the inside of his hind leg. He didn't look up.

"Besides," said her husband, "I've read about this. The seven-to-one ratio doesn't really work for dogs. The first year or two, yes. A one-year-old dog might be like a seven-year-old kid, a two-year-old dog might be like fourteen. But then it's one-to-four for a while and at the end one-to-twenty." He doesn't want her to think like this. It feels like she's shifting away from him, like they are growing apart.

In dog years, they had been discussing this for hours. In dog years, she had been grieving for a century the loss of her loved ones and friends. In dog years, they were already way beyond their own life expectancy.

"It works for me," she said. Because they had been married 175 years, she didn't hesitate to tell him what she really thought. She took the leash from the hook in the hall, shrugged her way into a

coat. The dog leaped from the window seat. He was already on her side, was tap dancing at her feet.

"Listen," he said, "look here." He was following her, putting a coat on himself. He didn't want her to win this argument even though he wasn't sure what they were arguing about, but he was afraid she might advance to even more ephemeral things and soon she would be stretched way beyond her capacity to endure any more living. *For God's sake!* he thought. *Fruit Flies!*

They were outside in the cool night air walking along a sidewalk, him and her and the dog. The dog trotted along thoughtfully, paused, sniffed, marked things. They all three felt better.

They passed along side a row of old live oaks. "We could sometimes be trees," he said hopefully. "Then we would be ten again." She raised her head, seemed to consider this, as if his words had a scent which could be detected on the air.