

Live, Love, Fetch

I'm digging holes in my garden for the California lilacs I brought home from the nursery this morning. I picture how they'll look in a few years when they've filled in the blank spaces on my hillside with their small dark green leaves and delicate blue blossoms, so attractive to honeybees and butterflies. Lost in my imaginings, I don't hear Lola run up behind me. She nudges the back of my leg with the tennis ball she carries in her mouth, her signature move. I'm caught off guard, so my knee buckles and when I reach for the ball, I miss. She inches closer to tempt me and I wait for my moment, then go for the ball again but Lola dances away. I can almost hear her giggle.

If I tell her to sit and give me the ball, she will, but she loves her game, so I keep playing. A feint and dodge, then she sidles up to me, leaning her shoulder into the side of my leg. I grab the ball and throw it. She takes off after it, nimble and swift. One bounce and it's in her jaws. She turns to look at me, proud of her success, then lies down in the shade for a quick rest, her ball between her front paws.

I kneel and grab a lilac, work it out of the nursery pot, untangle a few roots and set it down in its hole. Then I fill in the empty spaces with the soil I've dug up, pushing it down with my fingers, ignoring the tears in my glove even though I know I'll end up with dirt under my fingernails. I'm patting down the soil when Lola trots over and sits close to me. I scratch behind her ears; she ducks her head. She doesn't mind the dirt, but affection isn't what she wants right now. She's eyeing the plant pot. I can use it for cuttings and seeds or I could get a little discount if I take it back to the nursery. It's a cheap dog toy, though, so I toss it and she leaps up to catch it.

She snarls and shakes the pot like it's a rat. Her growl goes from ferocious to comical and back as she bucks and tosses her head. I chuckle and tell her she's a good girl. She pushes the pot into my

shoulder and tips me off balance, but I manage to snatch it and throw it for her again. This time when she grabs it, she races off around the edge of the yard. She comes back without the pot or the tennis ball and sits next to me again, panting, tongue lolling, her face wearing that infectious canine grin. This time when I rub her neck, she leans into my hand. I wrap my arm around her shoulders and she tucks her head under my chin. She smells like maple syrup and I know she's been running through the sweet everlasting again. I'll put off her next bath a little while longer to enjoy the scent of the plant on her fur.

I finish my yard chores and put away my tools, taking a few more breaks to play with Lola as I go. I have work to do inside, too, but the afternoon is still warm and I can't bring myself to go indoors quite yet. I find Lola resting in her favorite patch of grass by the back door and I drop to the ground, stretch my legs out and lean on my elbows beside her. Heat from the grass and the sun seep into my bones and I close my eyes to enjoy being. I would forget to do that if I didn't have Lola to remind me. She rolls onto her back and cranes her neck to sniff my face. Then we both lie flat, our sides touching and I think how lucky I am.

A moment later, a hawk flies overhead and she jumps up to bark at the invasion of her territory. I know it won't be too many years before she can't hear or see the birds and animals that visit our yard. Her athleticism will wane and her energy will fade. For a second, I'm angry that dogs' lives are so short. I dread the future that she won't be a part of, fear the ache I'll feel when she's gone. Then I remember that her greatest gift is the lesson she teaches me every day. Worrying about the future, or the past, is a waste of time. I stand up, brush the grass off my pants and call Lola to me. She gallops back and follows me inside to curl up on the couch. I steal a few minutes to snuggle with her before I get back to work.