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By Ania Payne

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Stories about animals raise a red flag because they are often sugar-coated with a sticky sentimentality that sticks to the roof of your neo-cortex. But this narrative, short as it is, sweet, is just a tender reminiscence of a rescue dog's reclamation to budding health. Nothing deep, nothing too profound but satisfying all the same.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE:

Dane people are lanky, and drive sedans with Great Dane magnets plastered on the back. They like to offer advice about Dane care, and they wear khakis. Malamute people enjoy comparing stories about the most extravagant ways their Malamutes have escaped from locked kennels and fenced-in backyards. They don't yell out of the windows of their 4Runners, but they have tattoos of their previous Malamutes in a memorial sleeve down their arms.

Courage

He comes with the name Courage – it’s cheesy but he’s already 7, so we would feel bad renaming him. Friends say he looks scary with his hungry wolf-like eyes, but his foster mom, a woman named Christina Aguilera, tells us he’s the sweetest dog she’s ever fostered and calls him “Mr. Fuzzy Pajamas.” We try out several nicknames: Curry, Cur-bear, Curr, something to help soften him around the edges. Nothing sticks.

On the adoption website, Courage’s online profile said he was 5 years old, and his profile only included close-up glamour shots that hid his bald spots and his curves. I’ve never tried online dating before, but I think that this must be what the experience is like: to expect a 5-year-old fit, fluffy Husky and go home with a 7-year-old, partially bald somewhat overweight Malamute. When we first meet him, we consider saying no, and telling Christina Aguilera that this dog might not be a good fit for our family, but we’re just not the type of people to say no to things, and if we don’t take this dog home, who will? Courage doesn’t seem thrilled about us either, and he doesn’t understand why he’s leaving his foster mom. As we pull him away, Christina Aguilera reassures us that Courage’s hair will grow back, and she says that if he can cut back on the treats he’ll trim up, too.

We adopted Courage to be a companion to our 2-year-old Great Dane, Baloo, but Baloo seems disappointed when he first meets Courage, like a kid who was expecting a pony for Christmas

and gets a hamster instead. At first Courage sleeps a lot, and Baloo bounces around him and piles squeaky toys on top of his head, making me thankful for having grown up as an only child. But week by week, Courage transforms: we take him on walks and runs and he loses weight. We research Malamute hair re-growth, and my husband, who has given up on some patches of his own hair, tends to Courage's daily, brushing tangles out and rubbing conditioner through the dog's new guard hairs. Soon, Courage can keep up with Baloo's pace, and they race around in circles for an hour every morning and evening, using our raised garden beds as ramps, their nails shredding through our spinach and squash plants so that they can leap onto each other and tumble across the yard.

After we first adopted Baloo, we realized that we had entered into a world of Great Dane People: frequently, we'd be out taking a walk, and someone would slow their car until they were driving at our walking pace, lean out the window, and yell, "Is that a brindle Dane? I've got several at home. You going to get him gastropexy? You know what happens to their stomachs, right?" Dane people are lanky, and drive sedans with Great Dane magnets plastered on the back. They like to offer advice about Dane care, and they wear khakis. Malamute people enjoy comparing stories about the most extravagant ways their Malamutes have escaped from locked kennels and fenced-in backyards. They don't yell out of the windows of their 4Runners, but they have tattoos of their previous Malamutes in a memorial sleeve down their arms. They probably compete in CrossFit competitions. Sometimes, I look at Golden Retriever people, listening to NPR podcasts through their headphones, walking with a reusable coffee cup in one hand and offering a quick wave with their other hand as they pass by, and I wonder how we ended up with these two breeds. When I first met my husband, he was living in a 1982 Volkswagen Vanagon. I'm still

driving a 2003 Pontiac Vibe. We have six egg-laying chickens in our backyard coop, and we try to grow our vegetables for the year in a community garden plot. I wonder how the Malamute and Dane people categorize us, with our rescue dogs and old vehicles.

When we run into Christina Aguilera on a walk a month later, she's in awe at how spry Courage is, how trim he's gotten and how much hair he's grown back. She's walking another new foster dog, and she tells all about the dog's yeast infection, the smell of her patchy skin, and the antibiotic pills that she has to hide in medium-rare steak, several times a day. "She needs a lot of attention," she says, "But she's such a sweetheart. I've never met a kinder soul than her."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Writing helps me make sense of the events and situations around me. There were moments when we considered re-homing Courage (such as when he ate 4 of our chickens, repeatedly tore down slats of our wooden fence and taught Baloo how to run across town, and cornered our cats on top of our bed), but we kept him and he learned how to fit into the family (although we still don't let him anywhere near the remaining chickens). Writing shows me how pieces of a puzzle fit together – as much as I might want to see myself as a Golden Retriever person, I'm really a Great Dane/Malamute person, and I can't imagine our bunch of furry, feathery creatures without Courage in the mix.*

AUTHOR BIO: Ania Payne lives in Manhattan, Kansas, with her husband, Great Dane, Malamute, 2 cats, and 6 backyard chickens. She teaches in the English Department at Kansas State University and has an MFA from Northern Michigan University. She has a chapbook, "Karma Animalia," forthcoming from The Beautiful Cadaver Project. She has previously been published in The Sonder Review, Punctuate, Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel, Whiskey Island, The Rumpus, and more.