

# Odin, King of Hearts

MARY OTIS

I like to say that Odin was fifty-five pounds heart, five pounds assorted dog parts. He was a pit bull, my neighbors' dog. At first. And then for a time he was mine.

Odin's chest was the width of a small bureau. Odin got stoned on sunshine. Odin caught bees in his mouth. Sometimes he spit them out. Odin drank tuna-fish water like it was fine wine. Odin wagged his tail so hard against chairs, tables, and walls that he knocked his fur off. Odin had a big handsome head, so handsome it could have been on a postage stamp.

Some were of the opinion that Odin was a little thick in the skull. One time Khaki Swings, the lady down the street with the pink stucco house where the shades were always drawn, used those very same words. And yes, at that moment Odin was trying to drink from my neighbor's sprinkler and getting whacked in the head, and yes, I was aware that Khaki had recently given her dachshund, Dirk, a dog-IQ test and Dirk scored 121, but Khaki was hardly in any position to weigh in on matters of good sense. Given that she ran a porn-film company out of her house. Given that sexy but tired-looking people were coming and going at all hours. But I digress.

Odin's owners, my neighbors Sylvie and Frank, were retired and consumed by activities of which I could never make sense. Sylvie

wore bejeweled caftans and always seemed on the brink of leaving their house to attend an important meeting or event. I pictured exotic women's clubs, strange and secret ceremonies. But her car never left the driveway. If she ever attended a single meeting, I couldn't tell you how she got there. Frank spent his days loading and unloading small green Styrofoam boxes in and out of his orange minivan. I imagined a cheese or jam mail-order business.

My apartment, a small cottage, was next door to their house, and our windows faced each other. I saw them, they saw me. I had only ever talked to Sylvie and Frank in passing, and I suppose they thought I was a strange girl who sat all day at her kitchen table, which was where I wrote. Sometimes I imagined us as characters in a kind of existentialist performance piece—Frank packing and unpacking his boxes, Sylvie running to the door only to never leave, and me sitting there at my kitchen table waiting for ideas.

I'd lived in my apartment for about a month when one morning the Santa Ana winds whirled in. This wasn't unusual for mid-October in Los Angeles, but there was something strange about the sun that morning. It lay on the horizon like an egg that didn't break right. Warm air frothed the palm trees in a sinister way, and there was a quality to it that was not unlike sitting next to someone who is about to burst into tears.

And then my mother called. She said she had some bad news. Bad news that was also wrong—as if there were a right kind of bad news.

"I'm sorry to say this, but he shot your dog."

"Who? Who shot my dog? You mean Ringo?" I said, even though there was only one husky that lived with my parents back in Massachusetts, only one husky that I'd left behind when I moved to California. And that's when he started to go "off" busting out of our yard, charging for miles, fighting with other dogs. My father was paying vet bills, sending out "I'm sorry our dog went nuts" cards. It

was a real problem. This time Ringo had broken out of the yard and cornered a neighbor's corgi under the patio.

And so the neighbor called the police department, and an officer was dispatched. But not just any officer. Officer Clarence Feeney, well known but not well liked in the small town where I grew up.

"He had it in for Ringo," my mother said, "besides which, he may have had a flashback." Around town Officer Feeney often alluded to being in an indeterminate civil war. A civil war that didn't go with any country. Sometimes the soldiers in his war trudged through snow, sometimes they died of heatstroke. Sometimes the year of the war was 1977. The Disco War, people said behind his back. Perhaps Officer Clarence Feeney did not get the respect he deserved. Perhaps this drove him mad. Perhaps instead of a husky with his head jammed under a redwood plank, he thought he'd captured the enemy from behind. But in any case he took out his pistol and shot my dog.

I did not cry. I thought of Ringo as I had last seen him, standing by the door to our house, watching me pull out of the driveway. Then he suddenly turned, sat down, and stared in the other direction, his back to me. As if to say, *You want to leave, leave.*

"Are you there?" my mother said. "Because there's a little more to the story." I heard her turn down the evening news, and then she cleared her throat. "Officer Clarence Feeney is also dead."

"He shot himself, too?" I said, and I must say that for a second I thought it served him right.

"No, he had a little accident with a noose." My mother paused. "When he got home."

"What kind of an accident?"

"Well, a sort of unplanned accident." She sighed.

"What do you mean, an unplanned accident?"

"Well, a bit of a sexual accident, you might say."

I looked out my kitchen window, and I saw Odin's big head staring back at me from what I thought was Sylvie and Frank's bedroom, his head framed by a royal blue satin headboard. As if he knew. As if he'd heard the entire story. His expression was resigned,

world-weary. I thought of Anubis, the mythical Egyptian dog who weighed people's hearts at the moment of death—weighed them for goodness and decided who got into heaven and who didn't.

I thought of Officer Clarence Feeney's pistol going off. Of Ringo being "off." Of getting off. And what some people won't do. Isn't that the phrase a person might use in this situation? *What some people won't do*. And why did he have to shoot my dog? I looked out the window again. And still Odin was staring at me, unmoving, un-dog-like, considering, it seemed, the weight of things.

That night I couldn't sleep. A gust of hot wind blew in my window and funneled around me. The air smelled like pennies and burned sugar. It was enough to make a person go crazy. In fact, there had been a story in the paper that day about a man who killed his wife and used the Santa Ana winds in his defense.

A parade of dead dogs trudged through my mind. I remembered my first dog, Darby. Darby was a beagle my father found wandering outside a filling station. He seemed to have been trained as a hunting dog, but it just wasn't in him. Or whoever taught him to point scared him so much that he just never got it straight. Darby shook a lot. He pointed constantly, but at all the wrong things—the school bus, the hair dryer, a photo of JFK. A hundred foxes could have blasted through our living room. No dice.

I got up and drank a glass of water. I looked out my kitchen window and saw a solitary light on in Sylvie and Frank's house. Occasionally I heard them laugh or argue. More than occasionally I heard them watching a local cable-TV program called *The Universe Is Saying Yes*. I suppose they knew my habits, too. Yet we all kept our distance. It's not that we were impolite. We weren't. Once Sylvie left me a note on my door that said "*Watch out for bees!*" A couple weeks later, when the bees had departed only to return, I taped a note to their door that said, "*Watch out, bees are back!*"

The night was even hotter than the day, as if the crazy winds had

blown the earth in reverse. A bird sat outside my window and wailed. I sat down at my computer and researched Officer Clarence Feeney's sexual mishap. Popular slang included "airplaning," "scarfing," "hangman." And then I thought of Officer Clarence Feeney standing on a chair stepping to the edge, and then whoops, just a little too far. Or maybe the error had been in the length of the rope. Just a little too tight. Or maybe he'd been off by a split second. And it appeared that if there was one thing hangman was all about, it was about timing. I wondered if Officer Clarence Feeney left a dog behind and what would become of it. I recalled reading about dogs in nineteenth-century France who committed suicide upon their owners' deaths by jumping off bridges and throwing themselves under carriage wheels.

Dead dogs. Dead people. I was no closer to sleep. It occurred to me that if there were some kind of conveyor-like contraption that transported Officer Feeney and Ringo to the great big ever-beyond, they'd arrive on the very same night.

Then I heard someone softly kicking my front door, if someone without much aim could kick a door. If someone had a paw instead of a foot. I looked out my window and saw Odin. I opened my door, and he bolted in. He did one quick circle of my place, then another, like someone about to leave for the airport. Then he ran to the side of my bed and jumped on it. He stood completely still before suddenly collapsing, and I would become very familiar with his crash-landing method in days to come. Odin's big, beautiful head lolled over the foot of the bed, and he had a dreamy, disconnected look, like he was listening to distant dog radio. I noticed that he had little blond eyelashes. He fell asleep within seconds, and I let him stay there. I heard Sylvie and Frank's back door shut, and I realized that they knew he was there, and that maybe they'd even sent him.

Well, let's just say I fell quickly. Let's just say Odin started coming to my place every day. Sylvie and Frank didn't appear to mind. In fact,

one day I saw them sitting on their front stoop, and Frank said, "Odin likes you."

Sylvie said, "Odin is like you." I took that as a compliment and felt she was precisely right. I was never a big gabber, and Odin would have been a man of few words if he could speak them.

"Thank you," I said, and I thought about asking her what time Odin ate dinner, because some nights he was at my place during what I thought might have been that time. But then I decided against it. No need for them to know at that moment I had a bag of dog food, really good dog food made with special dog vitamins, which I'd purchased that very morning, sitting in the trunk of my car. Just in case.

But the very best part of my burgeoning relationship with Odin was that when I wrote at my kitchen table, he fell asleep on my foot like a drunk with his head on the curb. Let's just say I did absolutely nothing to stop this.

And did I mention the color of Odin's fur, which changed in the light and which might be described as champagne, or the color of a milk shake with a shot of caramel, or bamboo that's been in the sun a while, or the color of white sand when it's wet, or even, on occasion, pig-colored?

One morning while I was at the pet store buying Odin presents, I found myself wondering what he was doing back at my apartment. It was a pleasant thing to ponder. And basically I knew what Odin was doing. He was following the sun around my hardwood floor, dozing as it moved with every passing hour from the rug to the kitchen table to the bookcase to the back door, upon which each afternoon it appeared to slowly melt.

Odin's schedule fit perfectly with my own, which involved writing in the morning, then eating, then writing and drinking tea, then writing and washing the dishes, then writing and standing by the kitchen door to read out loud what I'd written that day. It wasn't

exactly like I read to Odin, but I'd be lying if I said he didn't appear to listen. If Sylvie and Frank ever missed Odin, they kept it to themselves.

Though Odin's napping habits dovetailed with my writing, I began to fret that he wasn't keeping fit. Sylvie and Frank had a small yard within which he could roam, but his main source of exercise involved planting himself directly under the power line that ran from the roof of my cottage to the street—the domain of particularly taunting squirrels. There Odin would sit in amazement, his head going back and forth, back and forth, while the squirrels appeared as if by magic on one end of the line and then the other. He never thought to look straight up.

And so the next night when Odin was at my place, I tried to walk him. I'd bought a leash earlier that day, a good, sturdy black one that I thought would complement his fur. I didn't mention this to Sylvie or Frank, because really, who would mind if their dog got a free walk? Besides, he could use it.

Trying to walk Odin was like trying to walk a Fiat. I've since read that you should multiply your dog's weight by 2.5 prior to attempting a walk. And if that weight is more than your own, you're in big trouble. Because that's how much a dog can pull, and by my belated calculations Odin had me beat by the weight of a first-grader.

Though it was seven o'clock that night, it was still eighty degrees. The Santa Ana winds had yet to pack up and leave, and red bougainvillea leaves and dust swirled around our legs. Odin dragged me past Khaki Swings' pink house of porn, past a pack of "cheerleaders" smoking cigarettes in her driveway, past Dirk the dachshund, who waddled at a diagonal across the yard at us, and for the first time I noticed that while Dirk could have been a member of doggy Mensa, that was nothing compared to his physical endowment. Let's just say the image of an anchor came to mind. Let's just say I hope he wasn't working for dog food.

Odin and I picked up speed as we headed down a hill, crashing

through stacks of fallen palm fronds. We went three more blocks, as far as a dilapidated mansion that was rumored to have once been owned by Chuck Berry. The only vestige of finer days was a metal deer on the lawn, rusted but still standing. We're talking lifelike, as far as cast iron goes. This was a deer not to be messed with. Odin came to a complete stop and then stared at it. If he had an internal dog clutch, then he downshifted and popped it into first. And then Odin rammed the deer. Hard. And there the deer lay, its flat metal deer eye peeking up at me, as if to say, *It was bad enough already. Why do you treat me so?* Odin tried to push the deer up with his nose. I tried to rock it up, pull it up, lift it by its legs. No go. I remembered a time I found Ringo the husky curled up in a snowbank and thought he was gone, but of course he was only sleeping. Odin sat down and contemplated the deer, as if the deer were a very special case. Dead-like, but not dead. And how could the heart of such a thing ever be weighed?

Time passed. The Santa Ana winds blew out of town. One day my friend Drea stopped by on her way to work. Drea was a food stylist, the person at a photo shoot who sprays Aqua Net on fruit so that it looks wet and shiny. I realized I hadn't talked to her in a couple of weeks. Or any friends for that matter. She stood in my doorway, and I realized I was reluctant to let her in. Odin was napping in the kitchen, and I didn't want to disturb him. I hadn't seen him the previous day, and I was glad to have him back.

Drea stood in my doorway, lit a cigarette, and blew the smoke out in one short stream, pursing her lips in a way that always reminded me of someone about to play the trumpet. "How's your dog, Otis?" she said. My heart leaped. *Your dog.* Then sank. As if. As if I had a dog I'd give it my own name. What did she take me for? My God, did she think we were married? Did she think he was my dog husband or something?

"It's Odin," I said. "Odin. And he's not my dog. Okay? He just



visits me sometimes, okay? Not my dog. Not mine.” Odin lifted his head from the floor and looked at me. “Maybe we should step outside to talk,” I said.

“Look,” said Drea, “I think you’re getting a little strange about this dog. She took another drag of her cigarette, exhaled. “I think you’re getting in deep.”

My phone rang, and I said we’d have to chat later.

“Sure. Sure we will,” she said. She shot a look at Odin, as if he’d placed the call himself.

I picked up my phone and heard the sound of a power drill. My father didn’t like to waste valuable work time when placing a call.

“I’m on!” I shouted. The drill stopped.

“How’s the writing business?” said my father. I could picture him in the barn at his worktable, Frank Sinatra playing on the radio.

“Fine,” I said.

“If a person were to ask you to write about a specific thing, could you?” he said. I knew he worried about the logistics of a writer’s life.

“Are you saying you want to hire me?”

“Just curious,” he said.

“Well, if I were to write a story specifically for you, what would you want it to be about?” I asked. I watched Odin move from the patch of sun by the rug to the patch of sun by the bookcase. He sighed. I felt that he understood the difficulty of claiming oneself a writer. It was like telling people you were psychic. Events could take a while to shake out. “I mean, if it could be about anything at all, what would you like it to be about?” I added.

I heard my father pull his chair back from his worktable, and I knew he was giving this real thought. “I like to read about dogs,” he said. “Dogs and the Mafia.”

“One day,” I said, “I will try to write you a story about dogs and the Mafia.” But I knew it wasn’t true, because really, the only dog I wanted to write about was Odin. A series of linked stories featuring Odin as the protagonist in every story. But I didn’t want anyone to

think I was getting *strange* about Odin or that I was *getting in too deep*, so if I were to ever write said book, I'd give the dog heroes (that were actually all Odin) other names, like Bill, Scooter, and Jake.

Outside, I heard Frank calling Odin. Odin opened his eyes, though he didn't move a muscle.

A few days later, I didn't see Odin. He hadn't been out of his house all day, and I thought maybe he was sick. Though later that afternoon, I saw him sitting under the telephone line as usual, watching the squirrels like they were the Cirque du Soleil. I propped my door open, and about an hour later he came through it. Since it was almost dinnertime, I gave him some dog food. Then I heard Frank whistle, one of the few times I ever had, and Odin bolted out the door. I stood in my doorway looking after him, and when he ran into his own house, I must say I felt a pang of jealousy. Then I saw Sylvie in profile, a rhinestone-covered aqua caftan, a hand on the doorknob. "We would appreciate it if you would not take it upon yourself to walk our dog," she said. She never turned to look at me.

I thought, *Give him back, he's mine, and besides, he likes me better.* Although instantly I knew that might not be true. And then I realized that in some way they'd been trying to wean me off him. Maybe they never meant to let things get this far. Maybe they didn't know what to do. Maybe I could steal him. Maybe Odin and I could move to Nebraska, and I could buy a place with a field for Odin, because I was always reading articles in *Parade* magazine about how in places like Nebraska or Iowa there were affordable homes with porches and shade trees that one might purchase. *I could do that*, I thought. *I could do that with Odin.*

But in the end I had a problem, and the problem was that Odin was a dog, not a person, and he couldn't cash out his stocks and run away with me. He continued to come by my place in the afternoons, but I

was careful to put him out before nightfall. Some days, before his circuit of the sun was complete, he would abruptly get up and leave. It almost seemed as if he understood our dilemma and didn't want to get either of us in trouble. I let him in, I let him out, my head and heart in civil war.

Shortly thereafter Frank pulled off the white shutters next door, repainted them in what I considered an overfriendly shade of yellow, and put them back up. I heard vacuuming. I heard hammering. A professional window cleaner made an appearance. And then, a few days later, Sylvie and Frank put up a For Sale sign. The house sold that week, and off they went with my dog. Because, after all, he was their dog.

I received a Christmas card from Sylvie and Frank the next year. I imagined Frank saying something like, "Maybe we should tell that girl who liked him so much."

"Oh, the one who sat at her kitchen table staring into space?"

"Yes, that one. I think she was a little off."

"I think she wanted to run away and marry Odin."

"Yes, I think she did."

"What some people won't do, given half a chance."

"Yes, what some people won't do."

The card said that Odin had died on his birthday, June 10.

I still think of Odin and his big dog head, and his heavy heart, and how he appeared to me like Anubis that first afternoon. And like Anubis, I can imagine him conducting similar business in that great big ever-beyond, weighing the hearts of both people and dogs, and in the end allowing one and all to enter, those that were good and those that were bad, and even those, like Officer Clarence Fee-ney, who didn't mean to come to the party so soon. I see him forever leading his troop of the dead and gone—dead dogs, dead people, the line extending back and back and back until finally one day he turns his head, and I, too, take my place.