

# ONE

I spend a lot of time looking up. My parents aren't short. My mom's even on the tall side. But my grandma Mittens (we really call her that) is tiny. I'm not good at science, but sometimes the genes from another generation sneak in and scramble the action. This might be to help you bond with the old people in your family.

One night when I was in the third grade I felt a sore throat coming on. I went down to ask for an aspirin or at least warm salt water to gargle. If there was a peanut butter cookie left on the dessert plate, I thought that might also help. My parents were hanging out in the living room, and I heard my father say, "Well, we're lucky Julia's a girl. What if she was a boy and that short?"

I stopped moving. They were talking about me.

I waited for my mom to say, "Come on, Glen, she's not *that* short!" But she didn't. She said, "Right? It's my mom's fault. Mittens did it to her." And then they both laughed.

Something had been done to me.

Like a crime.

It was someone's fault.

I know they love me like crazy, but I'm short and they aren't. Until that moment I didn't realize my size was a problem for them. Their words made a heavy feeling on my shoulders and I wasn't even wearing a bathrobe. It was like having sand in wet shoes or a knot of tangled hair that can't be combed through because there's gum in the middle. Plus part of their statement was sexist, which is also wrong.

I went back up to my room and didn't even ask for pain help. I climbed under the covers next to my dog, Ramon. He was asleep with his head on my pillow. When we first got him he was not allowed on the bed. But rules with dogs don't count in the same way as with people. I whispered in Ramon's ear, "I'm never going to say the word 'short' out loud again."

I didn't know how hard it would be. The word is everywhere.

These are the facts: In school I'm always in the front row for group pictures. None of the kids—even my best friends—want me on their team when we split up for basketball. I have a good shot, but it's too easy to block.

When we're on a family trip, I sit in the third seat, the one all the way in the rear. It's easier for me to curl up next to suitcases, plus I don't mind riding backward.

I need a stepstool to reach the water glasses in our kitchen, and I'm still small enough to fit through the dog door at home if we accidentally get locked out, which happens more often than you'd think.

Grandma Mittens calls me the family terrier. She says that terriers might be small dogs but they are also tough. I'm not sure if that's good or bad, because the only terrier I ever really knew was named Riptide, and he bit people.

Until seven weeks ago we had Ramon.

He wasn't a terrier.

He had black and white spots and was a mixed breed. Another way of describing him is to say he was a mutt. Only I don't like that word. It can have "negative connotations," which means it can come with bad thoughts. People think he was part pit bull because his head was big and he had a similar shape. But I don't want to label him.

We adopted Ramon from a rescue place that meets on Sundays in a parking lot next to the farmer's market. He was pretty much the best dog in the whole world. We had him for more than five years, and then only a month and a half ago he climbed up into my dad's chair in the living room (even though I don't know why it's called my dad's chair, because we all sit there, even the dog if no one is looking). Anyway, Ramon got up into the chair, which was the only place he wasn't supposed

to sit. It was okay for him to be on the couch because we put a blanket there and it can be washed. But dad's chair is made of leather.

I came in and said, "Ramon, get down!"

He knew a lot of words, like "treat" and "sit" and "walk" and "squirrel" and "down," but that day he acted like he'd never heard a single sound in his life. His eyes kept looking straight ahead, and then his whole body sort of snapped. Like an electric shock happened.

We found out later he had heart disease. What happened in the chair was because of that.

Ramon died that night wrapped in my favorite green quilt at the vet's office.

We don't really know how old he was because of being adopted. What we do know is that we loved him with everything we have in us.

One thing that's still happening is that I'm looking all the time for Ramon. I walk into the living room and I expect to see him on the couch. Or maybe in the kitchen, where his favorite thing to do was sit on the little blue rug right in front of the refrigerator. Ramon's specialty was knowing how to get underfoot, but it was really that he figured out all the best places.

My grandma Mittens loves the obituaries, which is basically the dead people news. When she's visiting

us she reads them aloud to me. I wish they had a pet section. It would be filled with interesting stories like:

**LOCAL CAT DIES IN TWO-CAR CRASH**

Or:

**DOG WAS GREATEST BEAUTY OF HER TIME**

Or maybe:

**HAMSTER PIONEERED THEORY  
ON EXERCISE**

Maybe even:

**NOTED GOLDFISH LEADER DIES UNDER  
SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES**

Grandma Mittens read that headline to me when I was little and I've never forgotten. Only it wasn't about a goldfish. It was about a military leader in South America. I don't remember his name because I'm not good at storing historical facts.

One thing I've decided is that life is just one big, long struggle to find applause.

Even when people die, they are hoping someone writes a list of accomplishments about them.

Pets also like praise.

Well, maybe not cats, but I know whenever I said

“Good boy, Ramon!” he just filled up with happiness.

Ramon Marks’s obituary would’ve read:

### **BEST DOG IN THE WORLD LEAVES BROKEN HEARTS AND AN EMPTY HOME**

Since the night of the heart attack in the leather chair I’ve been trying to get over losing Ramon. My parents tell me: *Time heals all wounds*. But that’s not actually true, because all kinds of things aren’t healed by time. An example of this would be if you break your spinal cord in two, which means you would never walk again.

So I think what they mean is that one day the ache will feel not as achy.

The better expression might be: *Time has a way of making pain hurt less*.

That would be more accurate, but it’s not my job to fix these kinds of sayings.

My school year ended ten days ago. I don’t know why the school year and the regular year don’t stop and start at the same time. The New Year starting on the first of January just seems all wrong. If they put me in charge, which no one ever has done, I’d make a year start on June 15 and I’d let kids off from school for two months to celebrate.

Now that school is finished, I’m hoping I can break free of feeling sad about Ramon, because it might be holding me back.

But I'm not going to forget Ramon.

Ever.

I asked for his collar, and I feel like my parents weren't that happy when I put it around the lamp right by my bed. If you look really close you can still spot his hairs stuck to the inside part. Also, it still smells like him.

It's not a great smell, but it's his smell, so that's what matters. I keep the metal name tag facing my pillow so I can see *RAMON* every morning when I wake up. It's important that I start my day by remembering him.

To be honest, I'm guessing *he* always started his day by thinking about his food bowl. He really loved to eat.

I'm the one who fed him.

I'm not saying that's why I was his favorite. But it was probably part of the reason.

Besides the collar I also have a small wooden carving that my uncle Jake made me. It looks just like Ramon.

Uncle Jake was once just a regular insurance salesman in Arizona living with Aunt Megan. One day they got in a car accident. Uncle Jake hurt his back and had to lie down in bed for a long time. Aunt Megan was worried he'd go crazy because he was a twitchy person, so she went to a craft shop and got him a whittling kit, which means carving stuff out of wood.

The first thing he made was called The Old Sea Captain. The kit gives you a block the size of your hand

and it's already in the right shape for the project. You just take the tool and carve away because they show you where to put the little knife by giving you a stencil. This isn't cheating. This is how you learn.

Uncle Jake went from doing *The Old Sea Captain* to all kinds of things that I guess were more complicated, and then he settled on carving birds. There are people who do this and enter contests, and he became one of those guys. He is now a world champion woodworker specializing in waterfowl.

It turns out that his secret talent is knowing how to very carefully move a sharp knife.

All of this happened before I was born, but he makes his money now carving sculptures instead of selling insurance.

Two and a half years ago he made me *Ramon* out of wood. I loved it then, but I really love it now.