

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Girl

ABSTRACT

“Girl” is a short story about the relationship a family has with their dog. Over the course of the dog’s life, the family grapples with a series of moral issues, including abuse of companion animals, euthanasia of companion animals, and the ethics of diet.

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Jason

My memory of Moe's fifth birthday is like the shifting images from a kaleidoscope—magical and vivid, yet fragmented:

Jess and I burst into Moe's bedroom, shouting "Happy birthday, Moe!" in unison. I handed Moe her squirming present, a collie I'd bought from a local breeder. The honor of giving the present fell to me because the idea was mine. I came up with the idea after introducing Moe to reruns of Lassie, which she watched, enthralled, over and over. Moe squealed and her eyes beamed with delight. The dog wagged her tail and licked Moe on the face, making Moe giggle. Moe gave me the most precious leg hug I've ever received and said those most precious of words: "I love you, Daddy!"

Psychologists speak of flashbulb memories. These are memories of salient events, such as 9/11 or my daughter's fifth birthday, memories that, despite their compelling vividness, are not especially accurate. Our brains, psychologists believe, aren't like video recorders, faithfully preserving the past. Instead, we interpret, amplify, distort, delete, invent. Sometimes what we remember bears little resemblance to what actually happened. Sometimes we don't know what we think we know.

The psychologists, I suppose, are right. Jess, for example, always calls our daughter "Maureen" rather than "Moe," so I don't think she said, "Happy birthday, Moe!"—even though that's what I remember her saying. If that part of my memory of my daughter's fifth birthday is wrong, other parts could be wrong as well. Maybe all of it is wrong. Still, it's what I remember, and it's what I choose to believe.

On that day, I was Best Dad Ever!

Gaia

According to Genesis, God granted Adam the privilege of naming the animals. In what language Adam named them, I don't know, but, growing up in the United States and speaking only English, I had always imagined that he gave them their English names. Thus, one kind of animal Adam called "cow," another he called "giraffe," and a third he called "dog." But a name, in whatever language it's given, isn't the neutral, innocuous label it seems to be. To name something is to assign it its essence, and to assign something its essence is to wield power over it. When human beings invented the words "hamburger" and "steak," for example, it was human beings, not cows, who determined what cows are for, what their *raison d'être* is—that they exist for us to eat. If I had been God, I would never have granted human beings this power. With this power, human beings have caused all sorts of mischief.

On the day Dad brought the dog to our home, we wielded our power as Adam wielded his. I wanted to name the dog "Lassie," because I had recently been watching reruns of Lassie on TV. I imagined that, bearing this name, our dog would be like the TV Lassie, a noble dog, a doer of good deeds. This was the kind of dog I wanted, my vision of what Plato might call the Form of Dog. Mom and Dad, though, didn't care for the name I preferred—lacking in originality, they thought. Mom suggested "Tranquility," because, ever since she gave birth to me, her life had been turned upside down, and she wouldn't have minded a little more tranquility. Dad, by contrast, had his heart set on "Kang." Kang was a character in an episode of the original Star Trek series, a Klingon warrior. The dog, it seemed to me, as she wagged her tail and licked me on my face, making me giggle, didn't much resemble a Klingon warrior.

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In the end, Dad got his way—as he always did. I was too young to challenge Dad, and Mom was too much of a wimp. It has always been like this. When Mom and Dad needed a new car, they got the car Dad wanted. When, after I was born, they moved into a bigger house, they picked the house Dad liked. When they dine out, they eat at Dad’s favorite restaurant. And so the family dog became Kang, Klingon warrior.

Ever since that day, I’ve felt a kinship with the dog, for, like the dog, I was given a name without being consulted. The name on my birth certificate is “Maureen.” This was Dad’s idea, naturally—wimpy Mom merely went along with it. When I was a kid, Mom called me “Maureen,” Dad called me “Moe” for short, and my classmates called me “Moron.” These names, like “Kang,” were attempts to wield power. Only when I reached high school did I understand this. That’s when I started to go by the name “Gaia.” Gaia is the Earth viewed as a goddess. To me, the name implies that the Earth is more than an inanimate receptacle, a hunk of rock, on which living things—the plants and animals—reside. The Earth is itself a living thing, and all living things are divine, and hence sacred. The name “Gaia” represents my deepest metaphysical and ethical convictions. It represents who I am and who I want to be. By adopting this name, I reclaimed myself. It’s too bad dogs can’t give themselves names—unlike me, Kang was never able to reclaim herself.

When my classmates called me “Moron,” Mom tried to ease my anguish with that old nugget of wisdom: “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never hurt you.” Shakespeare’s Juliet, I learned many years later, made much the same point, only more eloquently: “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” But Juliet and Mom were both mistaken.

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Names matter. If roses were called “stinkweed,” they wouldn’t be nearly so popular on Valentine’s Day.

Jessica

Jase likes to get his way—always has. Early in our marriage, I occasionally tried negotiating a compromise or telling him “No,” but to no avail. He was as inflexible as a two-by-four. The long, draining arguments that followed each of my “Nos” took their toll on me. I thrive on tranquility, not drama. Confrontation, therefore, wasn’t a solution. But neither was passively giving in all the time. There had to be a third option, and, after much soul-searching, I found it. The key, for anything that was important to me, was to make it appear that Jase got his way when in fact I got mine. The key, in other words, was guile.

Jase believes that, on Maureen’s fifth birthday, he gave the dog her name—“Kang.” But he’s wrong. First of all, the naming of the dog took place on Maureen’s sixth birthday, not her fifth. Jase never remembers how old Maureen is—or, for that matter, when her birthday is. Starting a week before her sixth birthday, I gave him daily reminders. Without those reminders, he would never have gotten her a present, she would have been devastated, and the dog wouldn’t have become a part of our lives.

Second, even though the dog was officially registered as Kang, I made sure that nobody, not even Jase, called her that. “Kang” was the wrong name for a dog who couldn’t tolerate violence. Sometimes, for instance, our neighbor’s two cats would get into a brawl, hissing and scratching at each other. If the dog detected the melee, she’d rush over and poke her long snout between the cats, like a referee separating boxers. For a

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moment, the cats would continue scratching, until they realized they were scratching the dog and not each other. Then they'd make peace. Some Klingon warrior the dog was! So any time I was with the dog, I'd refuse to call her "Kang." Instead, I'd refer to her as "girl," saying things like "Come here, girl!" and "Good girl!" Maureen, who, as a young child, imitated everything I did, soon followed my lead. The two of us referred to the dog as "girl" so much that she became convinced that was her name, and she wouldn't respond to anything else. For a time, Jase tried calling her "Kang," but the dog wouldn't budge. In the end, he gave up and referred to her as "girl," too. And so Jase didn't really get his way—although he believes he did.

Jase similarly believes he got his way with our daughter's name. But "Maureen" was my idea, not Jase's. About a year after I was born, my mom became pregnant with my little sister. She and my dad were planning to name her "Maureen." Then my mom had a miscarriage. The miscarriage hit my parents pretty hard. So when, a quarter century later, I became pregnant, I wanted my daughter to bear the same name as the sister I never had. It would be as if a part of my sister were with me after all. But I knew Jase would want to name our child after a character from an old movie or TV show—he had an obsession with such things. After mulling on the problem for a few days, I pretended to develop an interest in *The Three Stooges*. We watched episode after episode together, Jase laughing at all the silly antics. I, too, laughed. I laughed hard, especially at anything Moe did—even though it was all I could do not to let my eyes glaze over. My laughter was contagious. The harder I laughed, the harder Jase laughed. When the time was right, I asked Jase what name we should give our daughter. He paused for a moment, and then said, "I like 'Maureen.' We can call her 'Moe' for short."

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Every now and again, a twinge of guilt tugs at my soul. Was it wrong of me to pull the wool over Jase's eyes? Perhaps. But I can live with the guilt. Deception—even deception of one's spouse—is sometimes necessary.

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Gaia

I hunched over the dog, who lay next to me on the couch, her head resting on my lap. With inexperienced six-year-old hands, I petted her clumsily, often in the wrong direction, so that much of her fur stood on end. She didn't seem to mind, though. The TV was on, showing an episode of Lassie, but I wasn't watching it. Now that I had a real dog, I'd lost interest in the TV dog.

When Mom passed by, a basket of dirty laundry in her arms, I asked what we were going to have for supper. "Hot dogs," she answered. It took three heartbeats for the horror of her words to register in my brain. Tears welled in my eyes, followed by uncontrollable sobbing. Mom and the dog both looked at me in puzzlement. "What's wrong, hon?" Mom asked. But the sobbing had rendered me inarticulate. I ran past Mom and out the front door.

In the yard, next to the garage, was a tree with a treehouse. Dad had built the treehouse for me the year before. It was a cool treehouse, with a lower level that was easy for a little kid like me to climb into and an upper level for when I wanted a panoramic view. The treehouse was my sanctuary. I hid out in it when I felt sad, or when I wanted to get away from my parents. I spent much of my childhood in that treehouse. That's where I ran now.

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Mom followed me there, poking her head inside. She didn't normally do that, out of respect for my privacy, but my peculiar behavior must have alarmed her. "What's wrong, hon?" she asked again. She wrapped me in her arms, waiting patiently for an answer. Finally, between choking sobs, I was able to blurt out the words: "I can't eat a dog!"

Mom laughed. She explained to me that a hot dog wasn't really a dog, that it was just the name people gave it. She said she wasn't sure what hot dogs were actually made of, but she thought maybe pork or beef. It was okay to eat pigs and cows, she added. That's what they were for. Dogs, by contrast, were for companionship. We wouldn't eat a dog. Ever. She gave me her word.

Mom's explanation was comforting. With soothed conscience, I dined heartily that evening on a hot dog.

I continued to eat hot dogs—and hamburgers, bacon, drumsticks, and other meat—for another ten years. Then I asked myself a question. What is the difference, really, between a dog, on the one hand, and a pig or a cow, on the other, that justifies my eating the latter but not the former? I couldn't think of a satisfactory answer. The similarities among all these animals were obvious—for example, they were all sentient and they all had feelings, interests, and some level of intelligence. But I couldn't think of any relevant difference. As far as I could discern, my parents ate pigs and cows but not dogs for two reasons: first, that's the way they were raised, and, second, they had befriended some dogs but no pigs or cows. But I didn't find these reasons logically compelling. And so, when I was sixteen, I turned vegan.

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In some parts of the world, people are raised to eat dogs. If, when I was six years old, I had lived in such a place, and if Mom had served me dog meat, explaining to me that it was okay to eat dogs because that was what they were for, I suppose I would have dined as heartily on the dog meat as I did on the hot dog. When I was six years old, I believed whatever my parents told me. I didn't yet understand that all life is sacred. I wasn't yet Gaia.

Jason

I hunched over my workbench, tools in hand, the invigorating scent of sawdust hanging in the air. I was building a doghouse. Although the project was small, I paid close attention to every detail: the entrance would be just large enough for the dog to get through easily, the roof would be waterproofed with shingles, the floor would be raised a couple of inches above the ground, and any nails poking through to the interior would be filed down. Only the best for the dog! My doghouse, like my house and yard, would be the envy of the neighborhood!

The dog was with me in the garage, peering with curiosity at my work, as if preparing to pass judgment on it. Every now and again, I took a short break to pat the dog and ask her how she thought it was coming along. In response, she wagged her tail. On that day, I, like the dog, was happy. If I had to spend the rest of my life in just one place, that place would be my garage. My garage is my sanctuary. It's the place where I build things, do my clearest thinking, and escape from family or work stress. Sometimes Jess complains that I spend too much time in the garage, that I should spend more time with her and Moe. But her complaint is unfair. I spend quality time with my family, but I also need to spend quality time with myself. "Need" is

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the right word—the time I spend in my garage isn't a luxury. I won't let anybody, not even Jess, take away my sanctuary.

Everyone should have a sanctuary. That was why I had built the treehouse for Moe the year before. I wanted Moe to have a sanctuary just as I did. It worked out, too. Moe spent much of her childhood in that treehouse. But if a treehouse could be a sanctuary for Moe, I thought, why couldn't a doghouse be a sanctuary for the dog? And so I built the dog her sanctuary.

Jessica

I hunched over the kitchen sink, wrinkled fingers immersed in greasy water, the shrill scent of lemon dish soap hanging in the air. Jase refused to wash dishes, arguing that he already did more than his fair share by mowing during the summer, raking during the fall, shoveling during the winter, and taking out the trash year round. Maureen also didn't wash dishes, because she was still too young—at six years old, she dropped things a lot, and I didn't want her dropping the fine china. So I was stuck with the dishes while Maureen played in her treehouse and Jase played in his garage. I sighed, wishing Jase would spend a little more time with his family. Aside from sharing our meals and our bed, I hardly saw him.

As I scrubbed, I gazed out the kitchen window. To the left were the garage and treehouse. To the right, if I craned my neck far enough, I could see half of the doghouse. The dog wasn't in the doghouse. She was with me, hoping I'd toss her a scrap of half-eaten food. I could usually accommodate her, because Maureen rarely finished what was on her plate. Today, I was able to give the dog a quarter of a chicken nugget.

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For the dog, the doghouse was a prison. Each night, just before Jase and I went to bed, I'd announce to the dog, with as much faux enthusiasm as I could muster, "It's bedtime, girl!" But the dog would turn away, wandering to some remote corner of the house. To coax her out of her corner, I'd offer her a treat—a Hershey's Kiss—which she'd glumly accept. Then slowly—with frequent pauses, as if hoping for a reprieve—she'd follow me out the front door and to the doghouse. When I'd leave her there, chained by her collar, she'd whimper for the next half hour, as if convinced I had abandoned her forever. This nightly routine was heart-wrenching, but I couldn't let the dog stay in the house. Jase and I had tried it for a week, but we discovered that, if we left our bedroom door open, the dog would hop up on our bed, waking us up, and, if we closed our bedroom door, she'd still wake us up by scratching at it and barking.

Ever since Jase built the doghouse, I've felt a kinship with the dog, for I too sometimes feel imprisoned. Over the years, I've spent most of my time in the house, with only the dog to keep me company. Jase is either at work or in the garage, and Maureen, now in college, was before that either at school or in the treehouse. In the house, I engage in drudgery of two sorts: the unpaid labor of housework and the paid labor of composing messages for greeting cards—cards for birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, etc. The paid labor consists of writing heartfelt sentiments on behalf of people I've never met, people who, like Jase, are either unable or unwilling to express their own heartfelt sentiments. I sing the birthday praises of sons I've never had and express undying love for lovers I'll never know. Of course, it's all generic drivel. But at least it pays the bills. Writing novels and short stories—what I'd really like to do—doesn't.

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Jase built a pretty doghouse, and I keep a pretty house. But a cage is a cage, even when its bars are encrusted with diamonds.

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Gaia

A commotion intruded on my quiet play on the lower level of the treehouse. Someone was screaming, a terrifying rage. Noiselessly, I climbed to the upper level of the treehouse for a better view. The source of the commotion was Dad. He was at the far end of the yard, near the doghouse, screaming at the dog. I could make out some of his words: “Bad girl,” “vandal,” and a string of obscenities. I had never heard Dad shout obscenities before, but I knew what they meant, because some of my fifth-grade classmates used them. Mom advised me not to use them myself. The spewing forth of obscenities, she said, was a sign of a deficient vocabulary.

When Dad exhausted his deficient vocabulary, he resorted to physical violence. The violence lasted but an instant, a single kick launched with such suddenness that the dog had no way of evading it. The kick was hard—a yelp reverberated in my ears and a limp was discernible as the dog retreated several paces. With incomprehension, the dog looked up at Dad. But Dad’s fury had already come to an end. Dropping to one knee, Dad called the dog to him, arms outstretched. The dog didn’t move. He called her again, and a third time, his voice pleading. She still didn’t move. He took a step toward her, but she shrank away from him. Then, turning his back to the dog, Dad strode into the house.

The primary emotion that gripped me as I watched the episode was fascination. It wasn’t moral outrage. My prepubescent

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sense of right and wrong, only nascent, amounted to an unquestioning faith in my parents. If my parents did something, it must have been right. It thus didn't occur to me that the verbal and physical abuse Dad heaped on the dog was unethical. For this reason, I did nothing to intervene. I hadn't yet arrived at the conviction that all life is sacred and should be protected. At age ten, like at age six, I wasn't yet Gaia.

Later, I discovered that the dog had chewed on the doghouse, causing minor damage. Why she did that, I don't know. Perhaps she was bored, nothing more than that. But I like to think it was an act of sabotage, a political act. Like the Luddites, who destroyed the machines that they believed, with some reason, were the source of their oppression, the dog, I like to think, tried to destroy the doghouse, in which she was imprisoned every night. Of course, the plot had no chance of success, any more than the Luddites could have put a stop to the Industrial Revolution. But it was an admirable try, and maybe it was this—not so much the damage itself, which, after all, was trivial, but the reason the dog caused the damage—that enraged Dad. On the other hand, I may be anthropomorphizing. Is a dog capable of a political act?

Jessica

A commotion intruded on my train of thought. I was in the house, pretending to compose a message for a greeting card, but in fact I was worrying about the dog. A few days earlier, I had noticed her limping. Initially, I assumed she had broken up another fight between the neighbor's cats and one of the cats had bitten her leg. Yet I couldn't find any bite mark. She must have gotten the injury while I was out grocery shopping, because she wasn't limping before then. Jase had been home

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while I was away, so I asked him if he knew what had happened, but he said he didn't.

I peered out a window to check on the commotion. The source was Maureen. She was at the far end of the yard, near the doghouse, screaming at the dog. I could make out some of her words: "Bad girl" and "vandal" and ... was that an obscenity she shouted? Then she attempted to kick the dog. Was this how the dog had been injured? How long had Maureen been abusing her? But Maureen's kicking technique was pathetic. None of her kicks hit their target, and, even if they had, they weren't hard enough to cause any injury. For her part, the dog did nothing to evade the attack other than occasionally retreat a pace or two.

I had never before been angry with Maureen, no matter what she had done. Although I'd had to punish her from time to time, because she needed to know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior, I had never punished her out of anger. Now, however, I was angry. I ran into the yard, shouting "Stop it!" at the top of my lungs. But Maureen didn't seem to hear. She aimed another kick at the dog. When I reached the scene, I grabbed Maureen by her arm, spun her around to face me, and again shouted "Stop it!" Maureen looked startled and confused, as if she couldn't understand why I would want her to stop. Then she started crying.

My anger unabated, I delivered a blistering lecture. I had never been so eloquent and forceful as I was at that moment. My eloquence persisted one minute, two minutes, five minutes, Maureen crying the whole time. When I finally exhausted my eloquence, I gathered Maureen into my arms and hugged her

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tightly. As I hugged her, I asked her why she had done this to the dog.

It was difficult for her to answer, because she was still crying. But at length she forced the words out: "I did it because I saw Dad do it."

Jason

After giving the dog her Hershey's Kiss and taking her out to the doghouse, Jess padded into the bedroom. In silence, she undressed. During the twelve years of our marriage, she had gained some weight—fifteen or twenty pounds—and her skin had acquired subtle sags and creases. Of course, the same was true of me. Yet we still found each other attractive. I lay in bed, wanting to make love to her. I waited for her to join me.

Still in silence, she turned out the light and slipped under the covers. But when I put my arm around her, she pushed it away. This was unexpected. Jess didn't normally rebuff my advances. Sitting up, I asked her if something was wrong. She said there was. Her voice was quiet, calm, almost monotone, and her face was devoid of all expression, like a stone. She told me what Moe had done to the dog that day. I told her I was sorry to hear that. She said she asked Moe why she had done that, and Moe answered that she'd done it because she had seen me do it. My heart dropped to my bowels.

A silence ensued—a minute, perhaps two. During this time, Jess' lip quivered once, almost imperceptibly, her only display of emotion. Then, stone-faced again, she said quietly but with conviction, "You fucking sonofabitch!"

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That was the end of the conversation. Jess turned onto her side, her back facing me. Her words had cut into me, an even deeper injury than I had inflicted on the dog. I sat in bed for a long time, silent, unmoving. I didn't defend myself, because I had no defense. Nor did I apologize, because, even though I had regretted kicking the dog from the moment I'd done it, no apology could undo that kick. My best course of action, the only thing that would make any difference to Jess, was to improve my behavior in the days and months and years to come. And even that wouldn't wipe clean the indelible stain on my character.

On that night, I was Biggest Asshole Ever!

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Jason

I sit with my family on a bench, which I constructed the other day with this moment in mind. The bench is in our yard, facing a cluster of forsythia bushes. The bushes are still in bloom, even though it's well into May. Buried underneath the bushes are the remains of the dog. My family and I are paying our respects.

My thoughts drift to that frigid February morning when Jess and I took the dog to the vet. The dog had been lethargic for several days. Normally, the word "walk," spoken with but a modicum of enthusiasm, would set off a tail-wagging frenzy, the dog instantly abandoning whatever she was doing to race in anticipation to the front door. During those lethargic days, however, we had to resort to lengthy and histrionic displays of coaxing, wheedling,

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and cajoling. Only then would the dog, with great effort, rise to her feet and stagger to the front door, as if taking a walk, far from being one of the great joys of life, were a burden, a duty undertaken merely to please us.

As we sat in the reception room, waiting for the vet to examine the dog, Jess picked up a pamphlet entitled “Dogs and Chocolate.” According to the pamphlet, one of the ingredients in chocolate, theobromine, is poisonous to dogs. How much harm it causes depends on a variety of factors: the size of the dog (larger dogs being able to withstand larger doses of theobromine than smaller dogs), the amount of chocolate the dog ingests, and the type of chocolate the dog ingests. White chocolate, containing the least theobromine, is the least dangerous, followed by milk chocolate. Dark chocolate and baker’s chocolate are the most dangerous. Symptoms of chocolate poisoning, which may not appear until several hours after a dog has eaten chocolate, range from vomiting and diarrhea to pancreatitis and seizures. In rare cases, a dog will die.

The more Jess read, the more panicky she became. She wondered whether the dog was suffering from chocolate poisoning. For years and years, she had fed the dog a Hershey’s Kiss every night. Perhaps the toxicity of all that chocolate was finally manifesting itself? She said she had no idea she was harming the dog she loved. To reassure her, I pointed out that a Hershey’s Kiss is small and made of milk chocolate, one of the less dangerous types of chocolate. Moreover, the dog, weighing fifty-five pounds, was no little yapper easily affected by a bit of theobromine,

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and she didn't exhibit any of the symptoms, including hyperactivity, that the pamphlet highlighted. Jess, however, was still nervous. Stroking the dog gently, she said, "Sorry, girl. No more Kisses for you!"

When the vet examined the dog, he said nothing about chocolate poisoning. Instead, he said that the dog had cancer, that it had spread throughout her body, that treatment was unlikely to be effective, and that the dog would live at most for another month or two. He concluded that we might wish to consider putting her down.

Jessica

In many respects, the dog was like any other dog—she chewed on bones, played fetch, enjoyed walks, barked at strangers who rang our doorbell, and stuck her head out the window when we took her along for a drive in the car. But she was more than a generic dog. She had a personality—gentle and generous—that was all her own. When we took her to the beach, she tried to bite the waves that came crashing on the shore, but she never bit a living creature. When one of the neighbor's cats caught a rabbit, she chased after the cat until the cat let go his prey. Then she stood guard, waiting for the rabbit to recover from its shock and bound away to safety. This was the dog who had been a member of our family for almost thirteen years. She was so entwined in our lives that I couldn't imagine being without her.

But I also couldn't bear to see her in unremitting pain. Her lethargy gave way to whimpering, her tail stopped

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wagging. She didn't have the energy to walk to her water bowl, so I brought the bowl to her. She crouched over it, without drinking, her snout a centimeter above the water. Bit by bit, her snout, as if too heavy to hold up, drooped. When it touched the water, she jerked in startlement. Then, bit by bit, her snout drooped again, the cycle repeating. I told Jase I thought it was time to put the dog down. He agreed.

Maureen, I knew, would not agree. She had been a vegan, and called herself "Gaia," for nearly three years. She believed that all life is sacred and that killing, no matter the circumstances, is therefore morally wrong. I imagined her arguing as follows. "Putting down" is nothing more than a euphemism for "killing." Since killing is always wrong, it follows in particular that killing the dog is wrong, even if it's done for the dog's sake. Just as the law recognizes that euthanizing a human being is wrong, because human life is sacred, so it should recognize that euthanizing an animal is wrong. What, after all, if the vet made a mistake, diagnosing the dog with cancer when in fact she had no cancer or predicting that the dog had at most two months to live when in fact she'd live another two years? What if we were to put the dog down and the next day researchers found a cure for her condition?

Jase and I respected Maureen's beliefs. We never pushed her to eat meat, and I even learned how to make several vegan dishes, which, I confessed, tasted excellent. We also called her "Gaia" when she was with us, though, when Jase and I were by ourselves, I continued to call her

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“Maureen” and Jase continued to call her “Moe.” Neither of us was a fan of “Gaia.”

But while I respected Maureen’s beliefs, I didn’t agree with them. First, I didn’t agree that all life is sacred. The syphilis bacterium, for example, is a form of life, but it seemed to me hardly sacred. If I could, I’d wipe syphilis from the face of the Earth—and do so without the slightest twinge of guilt. Moreover, the way Maureen grounded the sacredness of all life—with an appeal to the Greek goddess Gaia—didn’t make her position any more palatable. I was raised on Christian mythology, not Greek.

Second, even if all life is sacred, I didn’t see how it follows that killing is always wrong. All that follows is that we should respect all living things, and respect, it seemed to me, is sometimes compatible with killing. Thus, I knew the dog was in pain, I knew she didn’t want to be in pain, and I knew the only way to end her pain was to end her life. How else could I respect the dog and her desire to end her pain except by ending her life? Euthanizing a dog is sometimes acceptable, and, despite what the laws say, so is euthanizing a human being. While the length of my life matters to me, so does the quality of my life. If I were in the dog’s position, I’d be begging to be put down.

Third, the probability that the vet who examined the dog made a mistake, or that a cure for cancer would be announced the next day, was practically nil. Maureen may have believed that miracles abound, but I preferred to be realistic.

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Finally, because of her belief that all killing is wrong, Maureen had turned vegan. But if all killing is wrong, wouldn't it be wrong not only to kill an animal for food, but also to kill a plant for the same purpose? Perhaps it would still be okay to eat peas and corn, because eating those need not involve killing the plant. But carrots and potatoes—and many other plant foods—would have to be off limits. I couldn't help but notice that carrot cake and baked potatoes were among Maureen's favorite foods. Maureen's behavior wasn't always consistent with her professed beliefs.

Maureen, however, was away at college, in her second semester. She didn't yet know that the dog had cancer, or that Jase and I planned to put her down—and I intended to keep her in ignorance until her semester ended in May. The less she knew, the better she could concentrate on her studies. If she sent me an email or gave me a call asking about the dog, I'd make something up. I was used to making things up. I did that for a living, composing blather for greeting cards.

Gaia

Plato describes prisoners in a cave. They've been there their whole lives, in chains, facing the back wall. Behind them is a fire, providing scant light, and between them and the fire are artifacts—statues of people, animals, and other things. Catching the light from the fire, these artifacts cast shadows on the back wall. The shadows are the only things the prisoners see. They have no idea that artifacts are behind them, or that a whole world of people,

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animals, and other things exists outside the cave. The shadows, they're convinced, are what's real. Because they think they've already discovered the truth, it doesn't occur to them to seek the truth. They're content in their chains. They have no desire to escape.

According to Plato, most people are like the prisoners in the cave. As children, they're instilled with a set of beliefs and values. Some are instilled with a belief in God, some with a belief in progress. Some are instilled with patriotic sentiments, some with racial bigotry. By the time they grow older, their beliefs and values have become so entrenched they never think to question them. They live what Socrates, Plato's beloved teacher, called the unexamined life, thinking they know much but in fact knowing little.

During my second semester in college, around the time the dog died, I read Plato's story about the cave for a philosophy course I was taking. How true the story was! It captivated me, reminding me of my parents. Mom and Dad were raised as speciesists. Everyone around them was likewise a speciesist, and so of course they never thought to question their speciesism. To them, it was obvious that chickens existed for them to eat, sheep to give them wool, and dogs to give them companionship. How lucky I was! Somehow I was able to question my upbringing. Somehow I was able to learn the truth. Somehow I was able to become Gaia and escape the cave.

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That's what I thought when I read Plato. But I was wrong. In fact, I hadn't escaped the cave, any more than my parents had. There the three of us were, chained side by side, with all of the other prisoners, contented smiles on our faces! None of us questioned as deeply as we should have. None of us knew as much as we thought.

I didn't realize this until I returned home in May, after finishing my spring semester. That was when my parents told me what had happened to the dog. I was furious. My parents shouldn't have put the dog down, and they should have told me sooner. To me, morality was simple. Killing was always wrong, and deception was always wrong. There were no exceptions. Then Mom explained to me why she and Dad did what they did. Her reasoning was carefully nuanced, and she raised several points I had never considered. Although I disagreed with much of what she said, I had to admit that my own position wasn't impregnable. Perhaps morality wasn't so simple after all. I needed to think more carefully.

Mom, Dad, and I sit side by side on a bench. In front of us is a cluster of forsythia bushes, under which the dog is buried. My thoughts drift to the day, many years ago, that the dog chewed on her doghouse. She wasn't able to escape her prison, but at least she tried. I, too, may never escape my prison—the climb out of the cave is rocky and steep. But like the dog, I will try. With the help of my family, I will try.

Rest in peace, girl.