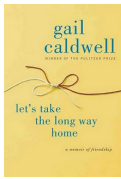


Let's Take the Long Way Home



What an incredibly moving testament to women's friendship. Two Boston area writers who met at a reading but only came to know each other when they were raising puppies at the same time and their dog trainer suggested that they would hit it off.

Caroline was a rower and essayist; Gail, a swimmer and book critic. Both were determined, competitive, tough, and shy. One of Gail's friends nicknamed her "the gregarious hermit." Caroline's dog was a shepherd mix. Gail finally adopted the pristine white samoyed she had always longed for. Caroline stayed in the Cambridge area where she had grown up, while Gail had left her beloved high-country Texas although she still pined for it.

Their friendship began walking the woody fire trails and at ponds in and around Boston. They had a lot in common: each shared an alcoholic past, each were or had been smokers, each loved living alone (or at least most of the time), and for each, writing was a way of experiencing and interpreting the world.

At one point, early in their relationship, Gail yelled to her friend, "Oh no, I need you." Daily, they put up with each other's neuroses: Caroline's endless checking of her watch, Gail's bizarre fear that the dogs would run out on forming ice and drown. Humor became their balm. "Well," Caroline said after the thin-ice remark, "We're going to have to start walking with a rope and ax, aren't we?"

They taught each other many things. Caroline taught Gail how to scull, how to read the wind and the river, how to use her abdomen muscles against the current, and not to worry about what's behind you, only to go forward. Gail taught Caroline another stroke, swimmer's freestyle. From Caroline, Gail learned that whenever emotional difficulty stuck, it was better to race toward it rather than withdraw and avoid it.

They met soon after both of Caroline's parents had died, when she was promoting her book *Drinking: a Love Story*. For a long while, Gail did not share her alcoholic past with her friend.

When other people bugged them, they tagged them with annoying dog breed names. Vain, entitled folks were dispensed as "apricot poodles." A disloyal friend received the epithet "beagle." They christened each other as smarter, more loyal breeds--Caroline was a collie; Gail, a young female German Shepherd, super-intelligent, controlling all the other dogs. "That's why I made you a young female. To soften it," Caroline added.

Gail Caldwell's short memoir is not only about friendship but about the violence and fog of grief. It will convince you to appreciate more those close to you, encourage you hug them more often and share confidences more readily, to experience together the joys and challenges of daily life. For folks who want to explore another deep literary friendship try Ann Patchett's Truth and Beauty. And if you loved the dog-human bonds described here, read Caroline's own book about dogs Pack of Two: the Intricate Bond between People and Dogs. You might also enjoy Mark

Doty's Dog Years: a Memoir , a book celebrating how much dogs add to our lives and how their sloppy presences can help assuage the pain of loss.

Posted by Dory L. on January 25, 2011

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