Since forever, Dad was the first one up. Long before he had to show up at Rossetti’s Auto Body he’d brew himself the day’s first strong espresso. Then he’d grab the paper from the yard, sit alone on the old plaid sofa and watch the sunrise. Of course, he’d also be petting Charlie. After that ritual was completed and before the sun would be full up over the neighbor’s roof, he’d stand, stretch and put Charlie on a leash. By then other early risers would be up, walking their dogs.

Charlie would do his business and get his first social hour of the day. Charlie was always more ready to socialize than Dad was. Dad never knew the names of our neighbors - even Mrs. Polakoff who lived just two doors down and walked a fancy Bichon Frisé that she was always having to clean. Charlie, on the other hand knew all his neighbors, maybe not by name, but he sure was up close and personal with them. He’d tug at the leash furiously when he’d see the McDaniel’s Dachshund who was called Schnitzel, if I remember right.

Charlie was a handsome and tall Golden. His coat’s sheen and his proud, youthful posture was a visual anomaly with his master’s slouch and demeanor. I’d guess the contrast must have caused many a passerby to take a second glance at my father’s stocky, dark, central-European frame. Some say Goldens are the most friendly (and dumb) of all the breeds. Charlie sure was friendly. I don’t think he ever had an enemy in the world. But I never thought he was dumb.

Most days they’d be gone pretty much a full hour. You couldn’t miss his return. What with Charlie’s happy barking, and my father’s loud “Good fella, there, good boy!” he could have woken up Grandfather who was lying two miles away and six feet under. We’d all be up and Mom would have breakfast started.

Dad was a welder at Rossetti’s. They gave him a steady income and his addiction to espresso. If he’d been more sociable he might have used the bragging rights he earned by working only a few miles from home in a town full of commuters. He could leave at a respectable hour and come home pretty early most evenings. Of course, when home, he’d grab the leash and walk Charlie.

No doubt about it, Charlie was Dad’s dog. I mean, Charlie certainly tolerated Cal and me as we grew up. He was obedient on his afternoon walks. But often as we played, he’d move into another room. He’d wag his tail at Mom as she’d put down his bowl of water. But the rest of the time, when Dad was at work, Charlie would wait patiently on a scatter rug and ignore all of us. He never barked at the mailman, and left most of the adventurous humans alone as they entered the door. But when he’d hear Dad close the garage, Charlie would jump up, move to the front door and bark wildly. When younger, Charlie would get up on his back legs with his front paws on Dad’s shoulders and lick his face. In return, Dad would always be greeting Charlie first, then he’d nod to the rest of us. As Charlie would get down, Dad would kiss and then scratch Charlie’s big blond head.
When Charlie died, sometime after I followed Cal to college, Dad got real depressed. But after some months, he got another - this time a mutt - a Lab/terrier mongrel. He called it Chuckles - in honor of Charlie, I guess. Chuckles was also good natured and, unlike Charlie, he was rotund, a bit swaybacked, and lower energy. Dad still took those morning walks. I suppose the two of them looked more fitting together – Dad no longer being shown up by a lean athletic type.

Without Cal and me at home, while Dad still worked, Mom walked Chuckles in the early afternoon. Dad would take it over again in the evenings and nights. All the dogs were always really Dad’s. He loved his pets.

And once he retired, Dad was the one who walked Chuckles, almost always. He had his routes. Most mornings he’d go around a few blocks, so Chuckles could say good morning to everyone. He thought that like Charlie, Chuckles needed to have a strong social life. This was in sharp contrast to himself. Dad never seemed to need more companionship than he got out of his dog. He’d sit at the table with us, eating our meals. But aside from taking scraps and giving them to Charlie I can’t recall him having any sustained social communication with a living member of the household at the table.

Well maybe that’s a slight exaggeration, cause if we weren’t respecting Mom, we’d know Dad wasn’t going to tolerate it. But not much more. I know that sounds pretty extreme. Maybe I’ve forgotten a time or two. I’d have to check with Cal.

Even apart from meal times, I can’t remember him talking to Mom about anything. I mean, you could hear a ‘yes’ or a ‘no.’ Or some short answer to a question. And of course there’d be the standard questions:

“Did you see Chuckles’ leash?” or “Have you seen the car keys?” or “What’cha cooking, Sal?”

Not that they weren’t happy. He’d smile; they’d hug. Sometimes if the radio played just the right music they’d get up, laugh and dance. But talk? Really talk? I doubt it. I think they never had a conversation. Not in front of us boys anyhow. Can you imagine my surprise hearing him talk to her after she passed? I’d come home for a holiday, or something and I’d hear him say things like, “Sal, don’t you concern yourself no more. All your boys, David, Cal and me, we’re truckin’ just fine. They got themselves good jobs now. Just like you always wanted.”

Another time it was about the garden: “Don’t you be too worried about me anymore. I got the bulbs in just like you like and the garden is going to be real pretty this year. You’ll love it - we’ll be able to look out the window and see all the flowers. Just you and me.”

Well, I was so surprised that I called Cal first chance I had, and he could hardly believe it. He made me tell him the story two times before he accepted it as ‘real’ information.

Big dogs may be fun, but they don’t live long, most times. And sure enough, not long after Mom died, so did Chuckles. Chuckles death just highlighted how alone Dad was. It certainly seemed to mark the beginning of Dad’s downturn.

He was unconsolable. Course, unlike when Mom died, and Cal and I came home, neither of us thought about going home for Chuckles. Probably should have. Maybe Cal was too far away – I’m not exactly sure where he was that day we each got the call from Dad. As a journalist he could have been sent anywhere. Maybe Cal was already in Libya, maybe he was just getting set to go. But I was in Chicago working for Sears. It took me a few weeks to realize how depressed Dad was. I mean, I’d call home in the morning and he wouldn’t pick up. Even at noon he’d just say he had been
sleeping – was just now getting up. It seemed like he’d never go out except to get food.

I asked for a transfer from Ohio so I could be nearer to Dad. I got it too. They set me up to manage the store in New Rochelle. Not the best place. Sort of an old store with problems, but just what I needed. I took an apartment in Larchmont. That gave me plenty of time to see him. At first, I’d get to his place and fix him breakfast so it’d be ready about an hour after sunup. I thought that would fit his natural schedule. Like Mom would have done. Like when he had a dog. But without a dog, he’d no interest in getting up. Even with me there. Since I had to go to work, I didn’t even see him those mornings.

I changed my routine. Stopped going by in the morning and went by to make supper. At first Dad would just sit there. His once black hair now snow white. Usually unshaved. Always quiet. Happy to see me though - I could tell. He’d get up, sometimes even give me a hug and a pat on the back.

Then one day, out of the blue, he said it, “Son, I gotta get me a pet. My life isn’t complete without me helping someone.”

“Sure, let’s get you a dog, Dad.”
“I don’t want no dog.”
“What d’ya mean, you always had a dog.”
“Too much responsibility.”

“Well, we can go to the rescue and get one that’s older. House broken already. A dog will get you out of your funk.”
“I don’t think so.”

But I didn’t listen. I went out and got him a mutt from the pound. It seemed to be a sure bet. But some days later, when I came one evening to make dinner, I noticed the dog wasn’t in the room.

“So where’s the dog?”
“I told you, I didn’t want a dog.”

“Maybe you should have picked your own dog. Dad, you need a pet. You said it yourself. You’ve always had a dog. It’ll get you out of the house, get you talking with the neighbors again.”
“I never talked to neighbors. And I ain’t starting now. I don’t even know if I’d like them.”

“You’ve walked your dogs for more than 15 years in this place. What do you mean you don’t know the neighbors? That’s impossible.”

“I’ll get my own damn pet.”

And so it was that one day the next week, I came over to cook dinner: pork and beans and salad. When I got there I noticed that the kitchen was a bit cleaner than when I usually started my cooking. There were only a couple of dishes in the sink and no grease or crumbs on the counters. When I mentioned the cleanliness to my father, at first he just smiled. Then he added, “I got some responsibilities, and I take em seriously.”

That got me thinking about his needing a dog again. And after we were sitting down to eat, I
raised it again.

“I thought you were going to pick out your own dog. When are you going to do that?” Dad just nodded in the direction of the bookshelf off to the left behind me. I knew he had a few books, including a couple on dogs. So I figured he was telling me he was reading up on breeds.

“Jesus, Dad. You don’t need to read about them, just get one.” Again, Dad didn’t say anything. He just shrugged me off and nodded toward the bookshelf. I was annoyed, but didn’t turn around. After some more long silences, I picked up the dishes. Turning and getting up to put them in the sink, I couldn’t miss the addition to the bookshelf.

“You got yourself a pet gold fish, Dad? Is this some sort of joke?”

“She’s Charlemagne. And she isn’t a gold fish. She’s a Sailfin Molly.”

“Sorry!” I exhaled and took in his seriousness. “Well, so much for the house-breaking and dog walking.”

A few days later I arrived and Dad’s welding gear was on the kitchen table. The rest of the kitchen was still clean. Dad still looked scruffy but seemed less depressed - almost alert. “Hey Dad, are you selling this gear?”

“Hell no, David. I’m using it.”

I didn’t think to ask for what. But over the next days I watched as the projects proliferated. First there was a ramp up the stairs to the front porch. I wondered about that. Dad certainly didn’t seem headed for a wheel chair anytime soon. When I asked why he built it, he just shrugged. Soon thereafter I found the welding gear outside, along with my old American Flyer red wagon.

My attempts at communication about the changing debris on the porch yielded no response. Of course, this aroused my curiosity. Over the next week a rather extensive steel and glass project was being built as an attachment to my wagon. When it was done it had a sealable top. It occupied the entire base of the wagon. A few days later nary a trace of Charlemagne was left on the bookshelf.

“Where’d the molly go, Dad?”

“Front porch. Watching what’s happening.”

“Fish don’t watch what’s happening.”

“Charlemagne does.”

I got worried. My Dad was always a bit different. But this was extreme. I was thinking of contacting Cal. He knew I was seeing Dad regularly, but he was so far away, he couldn’t really get involved. So I let it go. And then, for about a week, maybe more, I couldn’t get back to the house. I was dealing with complaints about customer service in the appliance department. That was the meat and potatoes for Sears and Chicago had called about it. All I could do is call. I’d ask how things were and I’d get a one word answer. I only hoped that the calls were telling him I was there if he needed me.

But then I got a call from Mrs. Polakoff’s son in law. He and his wife had moved in after Mrs. Polakoff had died. Ed was worried that my father had lost his way. Neighbors had noted that he had returned to walking every morning, afternoon, and evening. They were concerned because he was wheeling his fish in an aquarium attached to an old wagon and apparently talking to the fish as if
it were a dog while he walked the fish around the neighborhood. I told Ed I’d get back to him.

As I ratcheted up my worries about Dad, the customer service problems were iced. I couldn’t deal with two emergencies at once. First, I called Cal. But the call didn’t go well. After the filial pleasantries and preliminaries I remember something like this:

“Tell me again, why are you concerned, David?”

“Dad’s walking his fish around the neighborhood and talking to it like a dog.”

“Is he hurting or disturbing anyone? Destroying property?”

“No.”

“Is he disoriented in other ways?”

“No.”

“How does he possibly walk a live fish?”

“He built an aquarium. Welded it, you know, and placed on my old wagon.”

Perhaps Cal went silent as he absorbed this detail, but I rather think he was suppressing a laugh. “Well he surely doesn’t exhibit dementia, does he?”

“No, probably not.”

“Dad’s walking his fish around the neighborhood hardly cut it as a reason for me to get off assignment at this moment. Good luck David!” and he hung up.

I got to the house that night. Dad was well shaved, fully dressed and in good spirits.

Digging into the tomato soup I’d made I began, “Dad, I hear you are taking Charlemagne out for walks.”

“Yup. She loves it.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s much more lively and less depressed. And her color is better.” I put down my spoon and walked out the front door and checked. There was the fish, still atop her red American Flyer throne. The molly did seem perky, but I couldn’t see a change in her color. I came back in.

“Dad, do you really think the fish is better off with the walks?”

“Of course. Fish are social animals. They live in schools. You know that. She’s got to know her neighbors.”

“But fish don’t even live out here in air. They only know the world in water.”

“Of course. Charles is in water. Always.”

I hadn’t heard him call her Charles before. It took me aback. Charles was legged, not finned.

“You mean Charlemagne?”

“Course. Look, she needs her social time. You can’t just isolate a pet.”

“But her social time would be with other fish, under water.”

Charlemagne © Joe A. Oppenheimer, June 4, 2015
Dad just sat there, taking this in. Then he said “Isn’t there gonna be more than soup?”

“Aren’t you concerned about what the neighbors think? I mean taking a fish for a walk could be seen as a sign of lunacy.”

“I don’t even know the neighbors. Fuck ‘em. Why would I care if they thought I was crazy? What’s for the rest of this meal? Stop giving me the fourth degree.”

“We got tuna salad, and it’s third degree.” Then I dropped it. The next day I called Ed, told him not to worry, my Dad was doing fine, better than any time since my Mom died in fact. And I went back to my store’s problems.

The next weeks were easy. Things were going smoothly. Charlemagne was getting her socials. Dad was getting out and getting exercise. So what if he had some idiosyncracies? He wasn’t out to win the esteem of his neighbors.

But then one day, while working on a sales projection report, I got a call from the Mamaroneck police. “We’ve got your Dad. You’ve got to come down and get him.”

“What? Is he locked up?”

“We didn’t lock him up, we pulled him out of the Long Island Sound.”

“Jesus, is he OK?”

“Well, he’s a bit damp behind the ears. He may need a little care.”

“But where? Was he swimming?”

“Why don’t you just get down here and we can discuss it. Be sure to bring him some dry clothes.”

So I picked up some dry stuff and went down to the police station. Dad was a sorry sight.

“What happened Dad?”

“They left Charlemagne in the middle of the Sound. She’s going to die if we don’t pull her out.”

The police dispatcher rolled her eyes. “Who the fuck is Charlemagne?”

“A fish,” I replied.

“Well, your father was drifting off the Larchmont Manor Park shore. He was holding onto something that had weighed him down. A crowd of people had gathered and were telling him to come back. He said he couldn’t get out because of a wagon. Mr. Plixit jumped in to help him to shore but he started fighting Mr. Plixit. Almost drown him. They called the police, and we got him out. I don’t know what this wagon crap is all about. You’d better make sure he gets into some kind of home - gets evaluated if you know what I mean.”

After Dad got on the dry clothes we left the station and I got Dad’s side of the story. Plixit wouldn’t help him pull out the wagon and tried to force him to let it go.

“David, we’ve got to rescue Charlemagne. She’s out beyond the gazebo. About 10 feet, I think. We should be able to find her.” He looked desperate. All the improvement I had witnessed was lost.
“Why’d you do it Dad? Why’d you put the wagon in the water?”

“You told me I had to. You were right. Charlemagne wasn’t interested in her neighbor’s dogs. She needed the sea.”

So of course we went to Abe’s sporting goods, picked up a scuba mask and then went to the Manor Park. As I stripped to my skivies, I specified my conditions.

“Look Dad, I’m doing this for you. Not for Charlemagne. But you have to agree, if I save her, you don’t go into the water with her anymore. Deal?”

“You get her, and it’s a deal.”

I looked into his eyes: he was sincere.

I waded in. It was cold, but bearable. There was a lot of sea weed, and not much light. It took a good fifteen minutes or so to locate the wagon. It was only visible when the sun peaked out from the clouds for a minute and shone on the stainless steel frame of the aquarium.

I dove down, found the handle and struggled to get it to come toward the shore. Once it got close I realized it was far too heavy to pull over the rocks. Luckily, a crowd had gathered around Dad, and when I got the wagon up on the first rocks, about half out of the water, they stared in amazement. I must have been a sight. Balding, greying at the temples, already with a beer belly more appropriate for someone twenty years older, pulling on a wagon handle, over the barnacles. Dressed in my skivies and a big black diving mask with a yellow breathing snorkel.

I looked at them and asked for some help. After a half a minute of hesitation, a couple of young guys pulled off their shoes and pants and came down into the water. The three of us were able to land that weird contraption on my American Flyer. Once up on the grass, I inspected Charlemagne. She was quite alive.

The next day I began to look into nursing homes. I visited a few. What can I say? We all know what those places are like. I couldn’t do it. But I’m a manager, someone who is supposed to think creatively. So I tried.

I put the ad on Craig’s list.

“Free room and board for dog walker who is willing to take elderly man on the walks, call Sears in New Rochelle (914-698-4300) and ask for the store manager or dial extension 073.”

The ad got a lot of bites. I interviewed about five or six of them and chose Debbie. She was 67, strong, healthy and fourteen years younger than my father.

She cooked lasagne, meatloaf, sauces, desserts. A far better cook than I am. Dad put on weight again. They got along. I even heard them talking a few times. She walked with my father. Pretty soon she was walking most of the dogs in the neighborhood, and Dad was pulling the wagon. Charlemagne was still healthy, and I moved on.

When Sears offered to put me in charge of a K-Mart back in Ohio I took it. It may not be my preferred reassignment, but it removed me from the everyday watch of my Dad. I worried less.

I was going to see Debbie and Dad about once a month. It would just be for an overnight so I didn’t witness all the day to day routines. Because I hadn’t witnessed it, or heard about it, I assumed
Dad had given up some of the more bizarre behavior that had brought on the crisis.

But last time we got together it was for a big shindig called by Dad for Charlemagne’s third birthday. Cal even got there; flew in from somewhere abroad. There was cake and ice-cream and Cal’s imported prosecco. He also brought an unusual fancy and expensive fish food for Charlemagne. Charlemagne seemed pleased with her treat. Dad even swore he could see her wag her tail. Anyhow, after Cal presented Charlemagne with her birthday present, he popped open the prosecco, poured each of us a glass and toasted the fish:

“Here’s wishing you, and your master, a wonderful year of companionship!” We all assented and drank up.

Soto voce, Debbie informed Cal and myself that we should get a second fish now, before Charlemagne’s demise, “After all, how long do you think the life expectancy of a goldfish is?”

“A molly,” I corrected.

“Whatever.” But she had a point. So I made the next toast.

“Happy birthday, Charlemagne. Here’s hoping we find you a wonderful partner and tank mate to keep you social and happy during your fourth year.” Dad did not take my toast well. He was dead set against my implication of another fish.

“What are you talking about, David? How can you expect someone my age to take care of two pets?”

“Well, you’d have my help,” Debbie pointed out.

“What do you mean you couldn’t feed two fish?” chimed in Cal.

“It’s not the feeding, Cal. It’s the walking. I might not be able to build another tank or even if I could, I couldn’t handle two tanks on that little wagon. What if Debbie gets sick or we’re snow bound? I can’t do it.”

Cal and I glanced at each other in surprise. This was the first we heard that Dad was still walking the fish. Anyone looking at us would see we were both horrified.

But before anything more could be added, Debbie said a second fish would take some pressure off; after all, it would let Charlemagne be social all the time, even on days she wasn’t walked.

“I’ve heard with more than one fish in a tank, the more aggressive ones kill the others. What makes you think Charlemagne won’t be eaten alive by your ‘partner?’” countered Dad.

“Or even that Charlemagne might be the most aggressive?” I put in.

“Don’t be ridiculous, David. Charlemagne is obviously not aggressive.”

Taking out his phone, Cal said this was precisely what one could discover on the web. “Let’s see now. Is the plural of Mollys ‘y-s’ or ‘i-e-s’?”

“You’re in the word business.”

“Come on bro, don’t be a smart ass – you know its all video now. Ahh, i-e-s. Mollyfish.com nifty. And there it is - I can click directly on ‘tank mates,’ what could be easier? Holy sheez! Debbie’s right. Right here it says your Molly could be getting lonely! I can’t believe it.”
“Come on Cal, let me see that,” insisted Dad. Cal handed him the cell phone. Of course, Dad didn’t have the right glasses on, but Debbie grabbed the phone and read it out loud. Then she got to the part about how some fish, including mollies, give birth to live, swimming babies. I was amazed.

“Yeah, but what about the aggression factor?” Dad asked.

“It discusses that too,” continued Debbie. “Here it says mollies are very laid back and easy to get along with. They’re communal.”

“Just like us,” Dad said.

Cal and I glanced at each other, raised our eyebrows. I gave him a thumbs up.

Last Sunday Dad called to ask whether I could come down to help with the selection of the next molly. So I'll be going back to pick Charlemagne’s partner next weekend.