

Harper

The miniature bulldog has absorbed minimal facts about herself in her nine years. The humans call her “Harper,” which means to the dog, come here. The fur on her paws and lower half are the same milky white, but she can’t see the brindle patch on her left eye. That patch, strand by strand, turns white, also. The dog fails at breathing. Her nose drags air through a short snout. “Oink, oink,” the humans say. That means the dog’s jagged snorts distract from their glowing screens. The dog likes to sleep. Half of every day is a twilight sleep. She likes to lie on dark carpet between the coffee table and the beige couch. The couch’s light fabric has small, crusted specks of the dog’s spit. The dog drools a lot. Spit hangs from her lip flaps like icicles. The dog loves to eat. Her silver food bowls are fixed into elevated feeder so the dog doesn’t suffocate while eating pink, meat-flavored mash. She pauses during meals to stretch her neck and point her nose up to refill her lungs. She heaves a mucus-heavy *ggggruh* that shakes her small sternum and skids through her nose. The dog maneuvers food, sticky with her saliva threads, with her tongue’s curling end. The dog often misses her mouth and lands mash behind the bowl or on the adjacent white wall. She prefers wet mash mixed with kibbles to kibbles alone. Brown circles or green crosses smell like dried dirt. The kibbles jumped from the dog’s chewing jaws onto the wooden floor or into her water bowl. The soggy, discolored shapes made water taste salty and thick. She preferred wet mash. It pasted kibbles to the side of the bowl. The food couldn’t move away as she approached it. For the first time in her nine years, she could lick her food up until her tongue touched only metal. Her sister would’ve liked this. The sister wasn’t around the house anymore to eat it. The dog absorbed certain facts about her sister. That dog had a brownish circle of fur around her right eye. The rest of her body was white like the dog’s. They lived together in a grassy backyard with other dogs who had the same snouts draped with skin folds. Her sister had red eyes then, and her pink skin showed. She moved slow when other dogs ran. These humans picked them up and took them to a new house. Other dogs stayed away. They stayed together. They traveled together to a new house. It was more wild than the grass backyard. Six little humans. Two big humans. Everyone wanted to touch the dog. Her sister’s balding revealed bumpy, rough skin. Her sister’s bottom eyelid flipped up into her eye’s white to show a watery, red underside. The little humans stayed away from her sister, but the dog and her sister walked together step for step. Those first times in the house, the biggest man in the house rubbed her sister’s naked skin with pungent lotion. The dog tried licking it off at first. The man forced pills in her sister’s mouth and held “the humidifier” up to her sister’s mouth to make her inhale fog. Humidifier meant breathing machine. Her sister hated it but couldn’t move her head from the machine’s shiny mouth. The dog stood next to her and sometimes barked at the machine. When the man house-trained the dogs with matches in their poop areas, the dog bit down on the match extended from her sister’s bum and yanked it out. Her sister’s fur grew back. It was white, like the dog’s, but speckled and uneven. Her new coat was softer than the dog’s. When the dogs slept in their crate, the dog lay flat. Her sister, whose eyes sometimes closed with the effort of long and rattled inhales, placed her head on the dog’s back. Throughout the night, her sister used the dog to prop her nose up and breathe. Like the dog did when eating. The dog now heard the rocky mixing of brown pellets and pink mash in a metal bowl and looked up. One of the little humans stirred this morning. She was a little bigger since the dog met her. The dog walked toward the place where the human rapped a spoon against the tinny bowl. This human had long brown hair, like other little humans. She wore brown frames on her eyes the color of her sister’s brindle patch. The dog sat watching her. She waited to make eye contact with the

human. This human was a sucker for the dog. The dog knew it. When this human sat at the wood table with a plate, the dog stood under her staring up. Usually the human threw down real meat or cheese or bread to her. The dog could catch it in her mouth. This human loved that and scratched the dog under the neck. Sometimes she made guests watch the dog push her front paws off the ground to hop and catch red noodles. This human often disappeared then came back unexpectedly. To the dog, it felt like years between visits. But the dog always noticed this human's light footsteps come through the door and the faint scent of something new the dog couldn't fully inhale. The dog always shook her rear end and stepped in place before running to this crouched human with arms spread like a flying bird. This human scratched the dog a lot, often behind the ears. The dog liked that. This human called to the dog with two slaps to the leg and a "c'mon." C'mon meant the human had to show the dog something over there. The dog moved, shaking her back legs side-to-side, wagging her tail knot. She walked to her bowl and sniffed it before eating. The human knelt behind her, watching. The dog looked over her shoulder sometimes to see if this human left. Still there. The dog continued eating. She liked being watched. She liked walking to the backdoor and sitting on the dark mat after her meals, because the human always opened the door. She walked to the backdoor now and sat on the dark mat. The human opened the door. It made a scratchy, windy sound. Outside, the dog examined the stone-covered dirt square. She sniffed it. It smelled like hers. She set her legs apart and released wet as the owner said "park it" from inside. Park it meant I'm watching you do this. The humans liked to watch their grassy backyard from inside windows. It was mostly empty beside white wooden chairs. Sometimes, the dog snuck under the gazebo by lowering herself into the dirt and moving forward. The dried dirt on her white belly could cause "baths," which meant standing cold and wet in a smooth, dark tub and not having long enough legs to climb out. The dog hated baths. Her sister had hated baths, too. They shivered together under towels. The humans thought rubbing them hard with the towels made them warmer. It didn't. The dogs carried water in their coats for an hour. Once the man pulled a wet, long-eared rabbit out of the gutter and stared at it for a while. The little humans with him wanted to tell the woman, but the man wouldn't let them. The dog sometimes barked at rabbits. She never wanted to chase them. But in warmer times, the humans watched rabbits and birds from the windows. Sometimes, the dog picked up a long-clawed paw and pressed it against their shins. They giggled and called the dog "needy." Needy meant I'll scratch you on the back for a little. Sometimes they didn't like it and told the dog "no." The dog didn't like watching them watch other animals. Outside, the dog looked at the human watching from the glass door and moved a nearby grass patch. It was so cold. She wanted to go back inside and sleep. She felt like she had a match in her. She set her legs apart again. Instead of leaning down toward the rocks, she curled her back to pull away from the released mud. The dog watched the human watching her. The dog realized she almost released mud on a white bench and hunched forward. When she finished, the human opened the glass door. The dog ran inside with a clumsy, left-leaning gait. She carried cold on her white fur but warmed to the human's hands scratching her back. "Good girl." That meant the dog had done her job. The human picked up the white blanket and flicked it up into the air. She then placed it on the ground in front of a glowing screen. The blanket lay flat on the ground with a few creases. The creases looked like bird-sized hills. The human grabbed a coat from the closet. The dog used her claws to pull at the creased ripple. She placed a paw down on it and scratched. She brought the blanket's edges closer to her. The human laughed and called it "nesting." The dog figured that meant creating a pillow. The dog continued to pull the blanket into the middle until it wasn't a flat rectangle big enough for the dog and her sister and more dogs their size. Now it was a bunched-up fabric swirl. The little humans twirled up their bed blankets in a similar way. Swirled, the white fabric wasn't

flat to the floor but piled up. It wasn't as high as the dog standing up, but the dog lying on her stomach was almost the same shape. The human ran up the stairs. The dog stopped to listen to her mutters of "keys" and "where are my cards." The dog's hearing wasn't bad but used to be better. When the human returned, the dog plopped herself on the blanket and closed her eyes. She didn't use it to hoist her nose up like her sister used her body. She moved her body beside it, like when she and her sister slept side-by-side. The human scratched the dog behind the ear. The dog woke. The human moved to the door. "Aw, Harper, I'll be back soon." That meant the dog would be alone now. The dog sat up and faced the human. The door closed. It stayed closed for a long time. Everyday at this time, after breakfast when the windows shined with outdoor light, the dog was always alone. She sat on that white blanket that matched her fur and watched the door.