

Soup-Hound Tales

by Sharman Ober-Reynolds

My father named our first dog Soupy, short for Soup-Hound. Dad was an orphan, and to him, the only kind of dog food was leftovers. And leftovers in the 1960s were tuna noodle casserole, pork chops with mushroom gravy, chicken with rice, all made with a can of Campbell's soup. Soupy was a mix of cocker spaniel, dachshund, and Airedale Terrier, definitely not a designer hybrid. She had more of a Frankenstein vibe. Because of her long torso and short legs, sitting involved rolling around several times, like a kid's blow-up bop bag, before she settled askew on one of her haunches. Still, Soupy was an extraordinary dog, bossy and demanding of attention, comforting in her very presence. And she was ours.

My parents were unprepared when she went into heat. Mom refashioned my underwear by cutting a hole for Soupy's tail and used safety pins to secure them around her hindquarters to catch her bloody discharge. Before we could get her to the vet to be spayed, an amorous beagle tunneled under our fence and made whoopee with Soupy. When we chased him away, he howled with longing.

Far into her pregnancy, Soupy lay on her back, and her massive belly would slip to the side and writhe like a water balloon full of snakes. To a nine-year-old, this was fascinating and terrifying. Mom didn't help with the birthing, even though one of her grandmothers was a physician and the other a midwife. Mom was the Manager at our house. Her round face was wreathed in smiles as she provided helpful suggestions. She used encouragement to dissolve resistance. Dad, in his thick, black work boots, was the Fixer. A dog in travail fell into the same category as a broken washing machine.

Memories from that time can be elusive. Still, I'll never forget the night my dad attended the birth of Soupy's nine slick, potato-shaped puppies. The delivery happened in a cardboard box filled with old blankets in the bedroom I shared with my sister. My

father was square, strong, and had mastered the essential art of saying nothing. Still, he always knew what to do long before instructional YouTube videos. It turned out that Soupy also knew what to do. She ate the placenta for a little energy boost during her labor and to hide the scent from any predators prowling in Alhambra, California. After the last puppy was born, I went from one roommate to ten, and nine pooped in their bed. Soupy licked all her puppies' bottoms clean, a never-ending responsibility. Within a few weeks, Dad moved Soupy and her litter into our backyard playhouse. It was a close replica of our 1927 English-style bungalow, complete with a steeply pitched gable roof, wooden beams, and framed windows.

Soupy was a committed mother, but when her puppies got too much, she'd hoist herself off her blankets and stroll around the rose bushes and macadamia nut tree, squirting a stream of milk along the way. Several puppies, fighting for their fair share, clamped onto her great teats and were dragged around the backyard, bouncing over decorative bricks and tree roots. For my friends, my sister, and me, this dog drama was better than the circus.

Still, a circus is a circus, and I knew that a Frankenstein Dog and her nine puppies living in a miniature Tudor Revival were weird. I was a nervous child. Who could, who would, love those mixed-up mutts? I now recognize that we're all a bit mixed up. Still, sometimes I wonder how we can resemble our mother and look like our father yet have only one face. Surprisingly and luckily, over the next few weeks, the puppies looked more and more like their beagle father. They learned to sit comfortably on their hind legs, as appropriately proportioned dogs do. I breathed a sigh of relief when we found homes for every one of them.

Five years after Soupy's puppies were born, my sister drove us into the San Gabriel Mountains to admire the brightly tinted hills and woods. The autumn leaves were a rich, warm palette of reds, oranges, and yellows, and the air was laden with cedar and pine. We hiked through groves of cottonwoods and willows. As dusk approached, the sound of insects reverberated in the sharp air. Suddenly, Soupy froze, then took off after a squirrel. Sometimes, catastrophe is in the air a moment before it happens. There was a sudden flight of black birds. With an outburst of birdsong, they soared together with a

flourish, leaving one flaming tree and landing in another. Then I heard a howl that broke the silence and broke my heart, because I knew Soupy was hurt. We ran through manzanita and goldenrod, stumbling on rocks and navigating cervices, searching for our wounded dog. What I saw next comes back to me in flash-bulb images, so detailed that my stomach clenches. Soupy was hunkered down, whimpering, trembling, and pawing at her snout. A prickly bush had torn her left eye, which hung gelatinous-like down her muzzle.

I held Soupy on my lap, trying to comfort her, as my sister, with her newly issued driver's license, ricocheted around hairpin turns down the mountain to the closest vet we could find. His recommendation: a \$2000 glass eye. That was a lot of money to improve the looks of a rescue dog. And this raises the question of our responsibility to our pets. Would Soupy's life be better with an ocular prosthetic, or would this be our guilt payment for not preventing the accident that made it necessary? My sister was sixteen, and I was fourteen. We had strong opinions, limited sense, and no real responsibility for anything in our lives. The Fixer and Manager would have been the ones to pay for Soupy's artificial eye. They decided her long, ragged hair covered her eye socket just fine. And it did.

My parents believed keeping a pet would teach us responsibility. I learned other lessons as well. First, delaying fixing your dog has consequences. This bit of advice was right up there with the other bad things that would happen if I didn't do something, like not brushing my teeth, not telling the truth, not paying attention, and not doing the next best thing. When Soupy used my grandmother's dentures as a chew toy, we learned the consequences of not keeping things out of her reach.

I learned that bad things happen, by accident, on purpose, and because of carelessness. And sometimes, out of malicious merriment, the gods in the hills grin, lick their chops, and send storms and lightning bolts our way. I've also learned that when disaster strikes, it doesn't always matter why. All Soupy knew was that she had trouble judging the distance to the top of the couch and jumped headfirst into the side of it. But because she wanted to sit close to us, she practiced and persisted until she learned to compensate. Soupy began to see things in a new way and corrected her aim.

I was reminded that we are who we are, no matter what. Even with one eye, Soupy remained essentially Soupy, exploring the world from a new point of view, smelling bottoms, rolling in the most disgusting things she could find, and then sharing her affection with us, up close. Maybe I should have considered what she had been rooting for in the trash before she triumphantly bounded onto the sofa and licked my face. As I write this, I hear Lucy yelling, "AAUGH! I've been kissed by a dog." But we were celebrating Soupy's success in recalibrating her jumping skills.

Motivation determines almost everything in our lives. The passionate beagle dug his way into our backyard, panting with love. Soupy, a mother with a modern sensibility, escaped that backyard whenever she could, exploring the world with the fresh eye(s) of an adventurer. The desires of our hearts may take us exactly where we need to be. Or they may propel us to a shiny dream. There are many doors in our lives. Some lead us back to where we started, and others take us to the same destination, over and over, as if we're on autopilot. Soupy's forever destination was Alhambra Park. On summer days, when the air thickened with heat, she'd sit next to the concession stand in her idiosyncratic way, watching and waiting for dollops of ice cream to hit the ground. The rest of the year, there were picnics to clean up after.

Even though our home offered her soup-based dishes of every sort, Soupy still sought regular escape. When Soupy ran away, my sister, mom, and I would set out to find her. And when we did, frustrated, angry, and then relieved, we'd lift her into our arms before she ran into traffic and another bad thing could happen. We should all be so lucky to have loved ones protect us from ourselves.

Despite Soupy's one-eyed, beastly bad looks and her insistence on running away, once our family adopted a pet, we kept it. She belonged to us, and we gave her a place to belong. Soupy could be annoying and unattractive. But then, so could I. And sometimes I was ornery for no good reason at all.

All of this occurred almost sixty years ago, so why do I feel compelled to write about Soupy? Between then and now, as between mystery and meaning, there may be too great a gap to convey what I felt and learned when this one-eyed dog ran helter-skelter through my life. Looking back, I realize that in my childhood, everything was new,

my heart was open, and there were a few gleaming times when things were brighter, more intense, and urgent.

I've distilled experiences, selected images and events that mean something to me, so I can tell you about a Soup-Hound with an enthusiasm for leftovers. And, like you, I want all my stories to end well. Or do I? In the best tales, and certainly in those that are true, there will always be a kind of reckoning. Unlike our dog with the Frankenstein vibe, I still have two eyes, but there have been other losses along the way. I've lost people I've loved, certainty, health, the little bit of beauty I nurtured as a younger woman, and sometimes even my nerve. I've tried to fix and manage whatever comes my way, just as my parents taught me. But my life, while often amusing, has also been baffling and is constantly taking me places I would never willingly go. Still, with all these differing points of view, like Soupy, I've learned to see things in a new way.



Sharman Ober-Reynolds was born in Los Angeles and completed an MFA at Arizona State University. She worked as a FNP in autism research and is primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. Sharman received the League of Utah Writer's Olive Woolley Bert and Silver Typewriter Awards. She was a short list winner in the Essays category of the 9th Annual Adelaide Literary Magazine Award Contest. Her creative non-fiction has appeared in *bioStories*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and *Storyhouse Weekly Reader*. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle.