

# *The Art of Racing in the Rain*

By Garth Stein

## Chapter 1

Gestures are all that I have; sometimes they must be grand in nature. And while I occasionally step over the line and into the world of the melodramatic, it is what I must do in order to communicate clearly and effectively. In order to make my point understood without question. I have no words I can rely on because, much to my dismay, my tongue was designed long and flat and loose, and therefore, is a horribly ineffective tool for pushing food around my mouth while chewing, and an even less effective tool for making clever and complicated polysyllabic sounds that can be linked together to form sentences. And that's why I'm here now waiting for Denny to come home—he should be here soon—lying on the cool tiles of the kitchen floor in a puddle of my own urine.

I'm old. And while I'm very capable of getting older, that's not the way I want to go out. Shot full of pain medication and steroids to reduce the swelling of my joints. Vision fogged with cataracts. Puffy, plasticky packages of Doggie Depends stocked in the pantry. I'm sure Denny would get me one of those little wagons I've seen on the streets, the ones that cradle the hindquarters so a dog can drag his butt behind him when things start to fail. That's humiliating and degrading. I'm not sure if it's worse than dressing up a dog for Halloween, but it's close. He would do it out of love, of course. I'm sure he would keep me alive as long as he possibly could, my body deteriorating, disintegrating around me, dissolving until there's nothing left but my brain floating in a glass jar filled with clear liquid, my eyeballs drifting at the surface and all sorts of cables and tubes feeding what remains. But I don't want to be kept alive. Because I know what's next. I've seen it on TV. A documentary I saw about Mongolia, of all places. It was the best thing I've ever seen on television, other than the 1993 Grand Prix of Europe, of course, the greatest automobile race of all time in which Ayrton Senna proved himself to be a genius in the rain. After the 1993 Grand Prix, the best thing I've ever seen on TV is a documentary that explained everything to me, made it all clear, told the whole truth: when a dog is finished living his lifetimes as a dog, his next incarnation will be as a man.

I've always felt almost human. I've always known that there's something about me that's different than other dogs. Sure, I'm stuffed into a dog's body, but that's just the shell. It's what's inside that's important. The soul. And my soul is very human.

I am ready to become a man now, though I realize I will lose all that I have been. All of my memories, all of my experiences. I would like to take them with me into my next life—there is so much I have gone through with the Swift family—but I have little say in the matter. What can I do but force myself to remember? Try to imprint what I know on my soul, a thing that has no surface, no sides, no pages, no form of any kind. Carry it so deeply in the pockets of my existence that when I open my eyes and look down at my new hands with their thumbs that are able to close tightly around their fingers, I will already know. I will already see.

The door opens, and I hear him with his familiar cry, "Yo, Zo!" Usually, I can't help but put aside my pain and hoist myself to my feet, wag my tail, sling my tongue around, and shove my face into his crotch. It takes humanlike willpower to hold back on this particular occasion, but I do. I hold back. I don't get up. I'm acting.

"Enzo?"

I hear his footsteps, the concern in his voice. He finds me and looks down. I lift my head, wag my tail feebly so it taps against the floor. I play the part.

He shakes his head and runs his hand through his hair, sets down the plastic bag from the grocery that has his dinner in it. I can smell roast chicken through the plastic. Tonight he's having roast chicken and an iceberg lettuce salad.

"Oh, Enz," he says.

He reaches down to me, crouches, touches my head like he does, along the crease behind the ear, and I lift my head and lick at his forearm.

"What happened, kid?" he asks.

Gestures can't explain.

"Can you get up?"

I try, and I scramble. My heart takes off, lunges ahead because no, I can't. I panic. I thought I was just acting, but I really can't get up. Life imitating art.

"Take it easy, kid," he says, pressing down on my chest to calm me. "I've got you."

He lifts me easily, he cradles me, and I can smell the day on him. I can smell everything he's done. His work, the auto shop where he's behind the counter all day, standing, making nice with the customers who yell at him because their BMWs don't work right and it costs too much to fix them and that makes them mad so they have to yell at someone. I can smell his lunch. He went to the Indian buffet he likes. All you can eat. It's cheap, and sometimes he takes a container with him and steals extra portions of the tandoori chicken and yellow rice and has it for dinner, too. I can smell beer. He stopped somewhere. The Mexican restaurant up the hill. I can smell the tortilla chips on his breath. Now it makes sense. Usually, I'm excellent with elapsed time, but I wasn't paying attention because of my emoting.

He places me gently in the tub and turns on the handheld shower thing and says, "Easy, Enz."

He says, "Sorry I was late. I should have come straight home, but the guys from work insisted. I told Craig I was quitting, and . . ."

He trails off, and I realize that he thinks that my accident was because he was *late*. Oh, no. That's not how it was meant. It's so hard to communicate because there are so many moving parts. There's presentation and there's interpretation and they're so dependent on each other it makes things very difficult. I didn't want him to feel bad about this. I wanted him to see the obvious, that it's okay for him to let me go. He's been going through so much, and he's finally through it. He needs to not have me around to worry about anymore. He needs me to free him to be brilliant.

He is so brilliant. He shines. He's beautiful with his hands that grab things and his tongue that says things and the way he stands and chews his food for so long, mashing it into a paste before he swallows. I will miss him and little Zoë, and I know they will miss me. But I can't let sentimentality cloud my grand plan. After this happens, Denny will be free to live his life, and I will return to earth in a new form, as a man, and I will find him and shake his hand and comment on how talented he is, and then I will wink at him and say, "Enzo says hello," and turn and walk quickly away as he calls after me, "Do I know you?" He will call, "Have we met before?"

After the bath he cleans the kitchen floor while I watch; he gives me my food, which I eat too quickly again, and sets me up in front of the TV while he prepares his dinner.

"How about a tape," he says.

"Yes, a tape," I reply, but of course, he doesn't hear me.

He puts in a video from one of his races and he turns it on and we watch. It's one of my favorites. The racetrack is dry for the pace lap, and then just after the green flag is waved, indicating the start of the race, there is a wall of rain, a torrential downpour that engulfs the track, and all the cars around him spin out of control into the fields and he drives through them as if the rain didn't fall on him, like he had a magic spell that cleared water from his path. Just like the 1993 Grand Prix of Europe, when Senna passed four cars on the opening lap, four of the best championship drivers in their championship cars—Schumacher, Wendlinger, Hill, Prost—and he passed them all. Like he had a magic spell.

Denny is as good as Ayrton Senna. But no one sees him because he has responsibilities. He has his daughter, Zoë, and he had his wife, Eve, who was sick until she died, and he has me. And he lives in Seattle when he should live somewhere else. And he has a job. But sometimes when he goes away he comes back with a trophy and he shows it to me and tells me all about his races and how he shone on the track and taught those other drivers in Sonoma or Texas or Mid-Ohio what driving in wet weather is really about.

When the tape is over he says, "Let's go out," and I struggle to get up.

He lifts my butt into the air and centers my weight over my legs and then I'm okay. To show him, I rub my muzzle against his thigh.

"There's my Enzo."

We leave our apartment; the night is sharp, cool and breezy and clear. We only go down the block and back because my hips hurt so much, and Denny sees. Denny knows. When we get back, he gives me my bedtime cookies and I curl into my bed on the floor next to his. He picks up the phone and dials.

"Mike," he says. Mike is Denny's friend from the shop where they both work behind the counter. Customer relations, they call it. Mike's a little guy with friendly hands that are pink and always washed clean of smell. "Mike, can you cover for me tomorrow? I have to take Enzo to the vet again."

We've been going to the vet a lot recently to get different medicines that are supposed to help make me more comfortable, but they don't, really. And since they don't, and considering all that went on yesterday, I've set the Master Plan in motion.

Denny stops talking for a minute, and when he starts again, his voice doesn't sound like his voice. It's rough, like when he has a cold or allergies.

"I don't know," he says. "I'm not sure it's a round trip visit."

I may not be able to form words, but I understand them. And I'm surprised by what he said, even though I set it up. For a moment, I'm surprised my plan is working. It is the best thing for all involved, I know. It's the right thing for Denny to do. He's done so much for me, my whole life. I owe him the gift of setting him free. Letting him ascend. We had a good run, and now it's over; what's wrong with that?

I close my eyes and listen vaguely in a half sleep as he does the things he does before he sleeps each night. Brushing and squirting and splashing. So many things. People and their rituals. They cling to things so hard sometimes.