

Old Faithfuls

For years, our pets have made us feel loved and adored. Now, as they age, it's our turn.

ALL DAY, THE same sounds trail my footsteps through the house.

Click-click-click-swoosh.

Click-click-click-swoosh.

Each time, I hear the same paw give out.

"Gracie," I say, reaching down to scratch our pug's chin. "I'll be right back. You don't have to follow me."

Gracie is nearly 14. She is deaf and sees only shadows, but the scent of my hand is enough for her. She is a lap dog who takes her work seriously. She wags her curly tail and waits. I scoop her up, tuck her under my arm, and move on.

"We're running a nursing home," I tell my husband later. He is reading the paper, surrounded by Gracie and our two elderly cats, Reggie and Winnie. Sherrod laughs but only a little. We are both feeling the weight of their advancing years.

Eight years ago, during our short courtship, Sherrod warned me that he didn't like cats and also suggested my pug was an alien. "I don't know what that is," he said the first time he saw the sausage of a dog quivering at his feet. "But that is not a dog."

Gracie and the cats had arrived early in my single motherhood. My son was grown, but my daughter, Cait, was still little. She was having a hard time believing that one parent and one child constituted a family.

We found Winnie at the Animal Protection League in 1994. Two



years later, we adopted big-eared Reggie, after he latched on to Cait's sweater and refused to let go. "He needs me, Mom," she said.

Reggie meowed his gratitude all the way home.

Soon, Cait was cutting out pictures of pugs. I told her we couldn't afford one. Then my father found out. Gracie arrived at our home swaddled like a newborn in my giggling mother's arms. She has outlived both of my parents.

These days, Sherrod carries Gracie around the house like a football. He's become quite the cat person, too. His relationship with Winnie has always been fragile, as he is too boisterous for her delicate self. But he never stops trying to win her over. Lately, she has started leaving puddles whenever she is startled,

which is often. Sherrod approaches her with the timidity of a teenager on a first date, which suits her. Whenever she ventures onto his lap, I have to remind him to breathe.

Reggie is a guy's guy. When he was younger, he regularly leapt into bathwater, and a handyman once had to chisel him out of a wall. Now, he waits for Sherrod at the door and greets him by looping around his ankles like an eel. He plods around the house with the footfalls of a Clydesdale. When it rains, he limps.

Our kids are grown now, and so in some ways our pets have become the children of a second marriage. We've grown so accustomed to the ways they make a fuss over us for no good reason. We hover, too. When Gracie underwent surgery two years ago to remove a growth,

my husband called every half hour for an update.

Although our pets are increasingly frail, we fixate on signs of resurgence. Gracie barks at a squirrel, and we cheer. Reggie leaps onto the table, and Sherrod all but fist-bumps him before making him move.

Dr. Nick Trout, a staff surgeon at the Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston, is the author of *Ever By My Side*. When I called him recently, he reminded me that age is not a disease, for humans or for pets. He assured me it's normal to feel the tug of loss as we watch our four-legged friends decline.

"We've come to embrace our animals as family members," he said. "We are not meant to lose our children. And yet we take pets on, knowing we'll have to lose them. It's the package deal, to the very end."

It is our turn to be inexplicably loyal and ever-vigilant.

Last week, I heard Sherrod talking to Gracie. I almost reminded him that she couldn't hear him, but when I peeked at the two of them, it was clear that wasn't the point. They were nose-to-nose in Sherrod's favorite chair. Gracie licked his face as he scratched her ears and whispered, "You are the greatest dog in the whole world. There will never be another dog like you, not ever. . . ."

I sucked in a breath and tiptoed out of the room. Reggie followed. **P**

Editor's note: Gracie passed away on Sept. 8, 2011.