

Kansai Time Out
July 1994

An appreciation

Elizabeth Oliver mourns the loss of Semi, a stoic and affectionate friend

Seventeen years ago I found a tiny stray white pup, alone under my car at a railway station. In May she died peacefully of old age, surrounded by human and doggie friends who mourned her passing. Sem or Semi as she became known, was a special character. Neither fawning nor demanding affection she summed up people from a distance. To those she chose as friends she was very affectionate. She disliked kids running noisily through her territory and would occasionally nip their behinds. Now adults, they still remember her with awe. She particularly hated delivery men and especially the gasman. Many times I had to rescue him from the corner she'd pinned him in. She loved long walks, and always accompanied the horse when we rode around the countryside. We travelled at least 10 kilometres each day and I'm sure this gave her the strong heart which kept her in such good health all those years. She never had a sick day in her life.

The day I found her I had taken the train to Osaka to attend a symposium where I gave a speech. I can't remember the details now but the initials of the meeting were SEM. A professor who lived in my direction offered to give me a lift back to the station where I'd left the car. It was there I first saw Sem. "Goodness, there's a puppy under the car." Before I could get to her, he picked her up roughly and dumped her some way away, saying I shouldn't touch her: "She's a *nora*" (a wild or stray dog, no relation of course to the irresponsible human who'd probably dumped her there). His remark incensed me so much that I immediately went and picked her up and told him I was taking her

home. “But she’s a nora” he kept repeating, as if he were warning me she had some contagious disease.

I never intended to keep her as I already had two big dogs; Waku, a Tosa and Amzel, a rejected German shepherd policedog. A week or two passed and she failed to find a home because everyone said she had Kishu blood and was likely to be vicious. She must have sensed I was trying to get rid of her so she behaved impeccably. From the day I decided to adopt her, she began a rampage of destruction chewing everything in sight. Her puppyhood and adolescence seemed to last for ever. She learnt to trail behind the horse with the others but one day she got too close and the horse stepped on her. She gave a sharp cry and I thought that was the end of her but she stood up holding a damaged paw. I heaved her up onto the saddle and rode home balancing her in front of me. Her foot was badly bruised but undamaged. Despite the pain she never whimpered or cried, that was her stoic trait.

Sem came into her own in winter. Her white coat grew so dense that she began to resemble a polar bear. She clearly had Kishu or Akita blood as she was a clever hunter. A favourite pastime for all the dogs was trying to catch field mice which used mole runs in the paddy banks. They would run themselves silly up and down the length of the bank, digging frantically only to discover the mouse had gone to the other end. Not Sem. She positioned herself at one end and waited patiently. She would carry off her prey before the others knew what was happening. In the woods she let the others do the chasing and sometimes they killed. When Sem ambled up in her own time to inspect the body, the others would immediately back off as if the Godfather had arrived. In silence they would watch Sem pick up the booty in her mouth to carry home, all following at a respectful distance hoping she’d get tired and drop it.

Her favourite gourmet treat was a new-laid egg. It was some time before I discovered that she was stealing eggs from the chicken house. I had thought the chickens were off laying. She actually stole from under

sitting chicken without a squawk of protest. She was also telepathic. All dogs get very excited when they hear the sound of my car returning home. Only Sem showed signs of restlessness an hour or more before I actually arrived home, in fact when I was probably leaving Osaka. At night she slept next to my futon, and on it when I wasn't there. In her last year she found the stairs too difficult so I moved downstairs to sleep with her instead.

A vet once wrote about his own dog which was getting old. He had decided that if it could no longer negotiate the stairs, he would put it to sleep. When that happened he moved downstairs. When it becomes incontinent, I'll put it down, he decided. He couldn't do it. When it can no longer enjoy its food and eat by itself, that's the end, he resolved. But the dog continued eating to the end. That was how I felt with Sem. If she had been suffering at all I wouldn't have hesitated to take that decision but like an old soldier she peacefully faded away.

When their pet dies people often say they could "never get another one." I am surrounded by dogs but the loss of any one of them grieves me just the same. A week or so before Sem's death, a six month-old pup we had rehomed was involved in a traffic accident due to the carelessness of the new owner. We sought out the best vet in Kansai who could perform the delicate surgery on her spine. I told him that if he found the spinal nerve had been severed, to euthanize her under anaesthetic. The nerve was intact so now all that remains is the long slow process of rehabilitation.

She may not be able to romp and jump as a young dog should and she's lost one eye, but she'll have a secure home here as one of the family. Her name is Crystal. She's smaller than Sem was, but with Kishu blood. I don't know if Sem would have approved of her but at least she'd have understood.

Elizabeth Oliver