

Homer's (Largely French) Odyssey

Few dogs have matched their names as perfectly as this.



CFlisi

Feb 15 · 8 min read ★



by C. Flisi

“In the Odyssey we may liken Homer to the setting sun: his glory remains but the heat of his beams has abated.

Longinus, *On the Sublime*, c. 250

Few dogs have matched their names as perfectly as Homer de la Pinède de la Côte. He might have been born to it, though the “Homer” part came about by happenstance. The “de la Pinède de la Côte” was part of his pedigree, and by purest chance we lived in a villa on the Côte d’Azur called “la Pinède”. Homer was born in Nîmes, France, and every French dog with a pedigree must have a name that starts with the letter of the year of birth. Homer’s birthday was November 10, 1992, and that was the year of “H”.

“H” doesn’t offer a plethora of possibilities. There was Harley (my sons liked that one at first) and Hoffa and Hector . . . and Homer. We didn’t know about Homer Simpson back then, living in France, but the Homer we did know about seemed to fit.

Like the blind poet, our new Weimaraner puppy was classic and noble, characterized by exquisite lines and sculptured grace that would become more apparent as years went by. Like an ancient treasure, he gleamed gold and silver — golden eyes that saw beyond sight (like his namesake) and a silver body that rivaled any Greek statue. (Not surprisingly, his photo is on the home page of a canine website, his picture has appeared in a magazine, stories mentioning him have been published in three countries, and our home boasts not one but two oil

portraits of Homer).

But every Weimaraner is beautiful; that's a virtue of the breed, not of the individual dog. And almost every dog is about affection everlasting and love unconditional; that is what makes dogs so special in the animal kingdom (and far superior to their masters).

Our Homer was about more than beauty and love. He was special in other ways too. For one thing, he was a dog who could smile, actually smile. In the mornings when he came to greet me, he would bare back his gums and show his teeth, his mouth half open. When I gave him a bone or a special treat, he would smile for that too.

He was a dog with a sense of humor, a playful guy. Sometimes when we were together in an open field and I would call him, he would come running towards me . . . and then continue right past me, turning his head slightly as he passed me and almost winking one golden eye. "Thought you were in control there, didn't you? Well, catch me if you can, hahaha."

But he always came back. In the countryside, or the French or Swiss Alps or the Italian Dolomites, he never had to be held on a leash like some hunting dogs whose owners feared they would follow an animal trail and not come back. He would run ahead all right, disappear into the brush or behind the rocks, but systematically, every five minutes or so, he would reappear, scan the trail until he found me, lock eyes as if to say "I'm okay you're okay," and then would scamper off again.

When he was two years old, he found a way to escape from the backyard of our home in Southern France, climbing over one fence or under another. We would come back from an outing and see him standing on the road in front of our gated entrance, half-smiling from the joke he had played. He always returned intact from those meanderings, but the thought of his wandering on the narrow winding roads of our little hillside neighborhood — and the speed of the cars that traversed these roads — frightened me, so eventually we would lock him in the house when we had to go out.

Homer had a gentleness and sweetness that was evident to everyone who ever stopped me to comment on his beauty — and we are talking literally thousands of people over the course of the last decade. Dog owners recognized these qualities immediately; what was striking is that people who didn't own dogs, didn't "know" dogs very well also sensed the caliber of the gentleman in him. "You can tell he is a good dog," they would say. "You can tell by his gentle eyes and kindly manner."

My father, who died less than a year ago, was sometimes described as the last of the true gentlemen. Well, Homer was the last of the true gentleman canines.

So much of a gentleman that when thieves broke into our home in France, with my husband, my sons, and myself all asleep in our bedrooms, Homer did . . . absolutely nothing. He had been won over by a piece of cheese the strangers had pilfered from our refrigerator (and perhaps spiked with a sleeping powder) and never made a sound.

A watchdog he wasn't. But he was a good, if untrained, hunting dog. He managed to bag innumerable lizards in his fitful career, plus a bird, a rat, a snake, and two chickens. Those chickens got me into quite a bit of trouble because they weren't exactly wild chickens, if you catch my drift. Homer might have realized that because, both times, he acted almost sheepish once the stupid hens had stopped wiggling in his mouth.

Weimaraners have a reputation for being high-strung, but Homer was a very accommodating guy. When we moved from our spacious villa in Southern France (he was the *etoile d'Eze*) to a small apartment in Treviso, Italy (he was the toast of Treviso) he adapted more easily than I did. Two years later, when we moved again, to a larger apartment near Milan (where he became *il bello di Busto*), he again adapted. He shifted his habits — toilette, sunbathing, exercise — from the rhythms of a house with garden to those of an apartment with balconies. He never stopped trying to assert himself in “forbidden zones” like our bed and the living room sofa, but he learned what was off-limits in each home, and he would pretend to respect those limits — at least until our backs were turned.

There were no limits as far as his stomach was concerned. Once on a hike in Southern France, we stopped at an inn in a mountain village. At every rustic table there were decanters of wine, bottles of water, baskets of bread and a plate of cheese. Homer decided that the welcome extended to him, too, and a huge serving of cheese was missing from one plate before we had sat down.

Another time we were invited to dinner at a friend's home in Treviso. It was summertime and the tables were set outside. The doors to the kitchen were unlocked and people moved in and out, serving themselves and bringing their plates to the table. Homer decided to do the same, though we didn't realize it until our hostess looked around wildly and asked us, "Has anyone seen the pecorino? I brought it back from Sardinia. It is supposed to be for dessert." He was never invited back to THAT house again.

He didn't take himself too seriously. When strangers on the street would stop to pet him, cooing and fawning over his beauty, he would maintain a dignified pose for a few minutes, as if receiving the adulation of his fans. Then he would shake his head, and in fact his whole body, causing his ears to snap with a loud noise, as if to say, "Basta. Enough now. I am bored with the whole thing. Let's WALK."

Or he would bump me on my arm with his patrician nose, or lean against me, or — if he were totally fed up — jump up on me gently and say, "Why are you being so stupid? Don't you understand? Time's up."

And then, all too suddenly, time really was up — for him. On his 10th birthday, I realized I had to start thinking about what life might be like After Homer. Unthinkable, but I HAD to start thinking about it. A Weimaraner's "normal" life expectancy can be 13, 15, or a bit more, but every year after 12 is a blessing. Homer's annual checkups had always been excellent, his weight perfect, his form superb, and the vets always made the

mistake of thinking he was half his actual age, but his heart at the age of 10 wasn't QUITE what it had been the year before.

It was almost impossible for me to imagine my life without my constant companion. More faithful than a spouse, more devoted than a child, he was my best friend. When I heard the news that my sister had died, he comforted me. When I broke my wrist and had to manage by myself for a month, he supported me. When my parents died, he sustained me. All with the force of his constant devotion and unceasing love.

By the time we noticed the aberrant growth on the right side of Homer's back at the beginning of December, 2002, it was already too late. An hemangiosarcoma is a highly malignant tumor; by the time it is identified metastasis has occurred. There was no change in Homer's behavior till the beginning of January, and then the downhill slide was rapid. Joy, energy, and exuberance were replaced with fatigue and melancholy.

The occasional spurts of optimism and energy became fewer and fewer, in spite of pain killers that (hopefully) attenuated the worst ravages of the disease. I went to bed every night with clothes on, not knowing if Homer would have a respiratory crisis in the middle of the night and we'd have to make a frantic dash for the veterinary clinic.

True to his namesake, Homer signaled the end with poetic irony. A dog usually lets you know that the time has come when he cannot get up anymore. Homer let us know when he could no longer lie down, especially at night. The pressure from

internal hemorrhaging was so great that he spent many nights of his final three weeks wobbling on his feet, head drooping, rather than face the increased stress to which he'd be subject in a prone position.

He was contrarian up to the last full day of his life. We were going to see the fish in the local fishpond, less than a kilometer away, because he was fascinated by those fish. It was too cold for lizards, too early for turtles, but the fish were swimming around and he spent up to half an hour on each visit, trying to figure out how to reach them without getting his paws wet. We had almost reached the main piazza in town near the fishpond when Homer's rear legs buckled under him and he collapsed. He tried to get up, but couldn't. He kept falling. When I tried to support his rear legs to head home, he insisted on facing the opposite direction, the direction of the fish pond. That is where he was headed and by dog that is where he wanted to go!

The sun set for Homer on February 21, 2003. He ate well in the morning and died with his paws on. Though the heat went out of that magnificent body, his glory — the glory of love incarnate — will beckon to me always with each rosy-fingered dawn.

Learn more.

Medium is an open platform where 170 million readers come to find insightful and dynamic thinking. Here, expert and undiscovered voices alike dive into the heart of any topic and bring new ideas to the surface. [Learn more](#)

Make Medium yours.

Follow the writers, publications, and topics that matter to you, and you'll see them on your homepage and in your inbox. Explore

Share your thinking.

If you have a story to tell, knowledge to share, or a perspective to offer — welcome home. It's easy and free to post your thinking on any topic. Write on Medium

[About](#)

[Help](#)

[Legal](#)