

# *Dear Pongo*



© D.A.Cunningham

*Dedicated to my loyal furry friend Pongo (May 1997 – 29 Jul 2014)*

## Dear Pongo

*Dear Pongo,*

*It is now more than seventeen years since we brought you home from the Dapto markets. You have filled our lives with joy and have given us so much more than we have ever given you. Many times, a simple cuddle with you would perk me up when I was down. I will miss that. And I know you love your cuddles too. You push back into our embrace as if it is the only thing that matters in the whole world. The way you cuddle your head into the nape of my neck is so full of love.*

*It is so sad to see you holding on to life with such determination. Your will-to-live is just about the only thing keeping you with us and we appreciate that so very much. I feel so mean wanting you to stay forever for purely selfish reasons. I can't bear to let you go, but I don't want to see you suffer.*

*I know the day is fast approaching when I will need to make a very painful decision to take you to the vet for that final needle. But please forgive me for delaying that as long as I can bear. Please help me make the decision and let me know when you are ready.*

*You have been much more than a pet to me. You will never be forgotten.*

*I love you my loyal furry friend.*

Dear Pongo

An overcast winter's day back in July 1997 saw your (soon to be) family deciding to go out to entertain themselves. Tamara, Brendan and Mitchell were then only eight, seven and five years old respectively. Little did we know how much our lives were going to change?

Off to Dapto we drove, to the open-air markets. Mummy and Tamara wondered off to look at girly things leaving the boys to wonder aimlessly at our leisure, there is so much to entertain young and old boys alike. We usually just looked and did not buy, but that was going to change.

"Puppies," yelled Brendan and ran off toward them with Mitchell not far behind. The enclosure housing you and your puppy brothers and sisters was roughly made from wooden stakes and chicken wire. The sign read "For sale, \$20".

As Brendan and Mitchell reached in to the enclosure and fell under the rapture of puppies' tongues and paws, the inevitable question sounded out.

"Can we have one? Please!"

I don't know how they did it, maybe it was ordained, but both of them seemed to ask exactly the same question at the same time. How could I resist? My hand, by now, was also wet with puppy slobber and I was keen to pick one up.

The puppy the boys had selected was a chubby little fur-ball of a pup, grey with black markings, with especially cute black patches around his eyes and ears. There was also a cute black splash on his back near his tail. I enquired about what type of a dog this was and was told he was a cross between a Cattle Dog, a Dalmatian, and a Keeshond. That last one explained the fluffiness whilst the other two

Dear Pongo

breeds explained the body shape, markings, and the spots. He certainly was a cute little fella.

“We’ll have to ask mummy first,” was my reply and we high tailed it toward where we last knew Carolyn and Tamara to be.

Coming back, we showed you off to mummy and Tamara. “This is the one we picked.” They both fell in love with you on-the spot so, without you leaving our arms, money exchanged hands and we were off carrying something we didn’t think we would be carrying home that day. You had become part of the family, a mandatory part in my eyes. A family is not complete without a dog!

With our youngest child now five years old, this was a perfect time to bring a dog into our midst. I could not imagine children growing up without a dog in their life and ours had waited long enough.

Before going home, there was some urgent grocery shopping that needed to be done. The boys used you as an excuse to needing to stay in the car as the girls left to get the groceries. That is when your name was decided.

The movie ‘101 Dalmatians’ was fresh in our minds so we could not resist the Dalmatian connection, and the name Pongo was decided upon. The kids soon afterwards burst out in song, “P-O-N-G-O, P-O-N-G-O, P-O-N-G-O, and Pongo was his name-o.” They had associated the sound of your name to a song they knew from pre-school.

When mummy and Tamara returned from shopping the boys told them of your new name. Tamara thought it was not a good name because of connotations to bad smells, as in pong. But the boys insisted that you had

Dear Pongo

already started answering to it and so it stuck. Personally, I think it is a cool name!

The kids fought in the back seat over who would get to nurse you on the trip home. But that battle had already been won as your new human mummy had you planted firmly on her lap. And you looked very comfortable and content to stay right there.

#

That afternoon you were the best toy our children could have. They spent hours playing with you and even lay beside you when you succumbed to sleep. The TV did not get switched on that afternoon.

The very first thing you did was to run off and find a small stick that you brought back to us. You looked so proud of yourself as you dropped the stick near us. One of us conned on to the idea of what you wanted and threw the stick for you. We were awestruck when you pranced off after it, full of puppy energy, and brought it back to us for a repeat. You already knew how to fetch. Fantastic! Little did we then realise just how big a part of your life the game of fetch was to become.

Dear Pongo



#

We intended for you to be an outdoors dog as we knew you would grow into quite a big dog. That first evening we couldn't stand to leave you outside, we didn't yet have a kennel for you anyway, so a bed was made up for you in the laundry. We just grabbed a whole heap of old sheets and blankets and arranged them on the floor that had also been covered with newspaper.

You obviously did not want us to leave you all alone. It probably was the first time you had been alone in your entire life. I can image how scared you must have been. Trying to close the sliding door with you crying, and nosing the closing gap, was heartbreaking. So much so that I felt an insistence to sit in there with you. Your human mummy told me I should leave you alone, she even drew an analogy to me doing the same with my kids when they

Dear Pongo

were young. I thought my argument of 'I wanted to' was quite sufficient.

You did end up going to sleep and woke a few times during the night. And yes I did come down and comfort you each time. I was not always alone either. Sleep was deemed not that important for that particular night, I would rather spend the time with you.

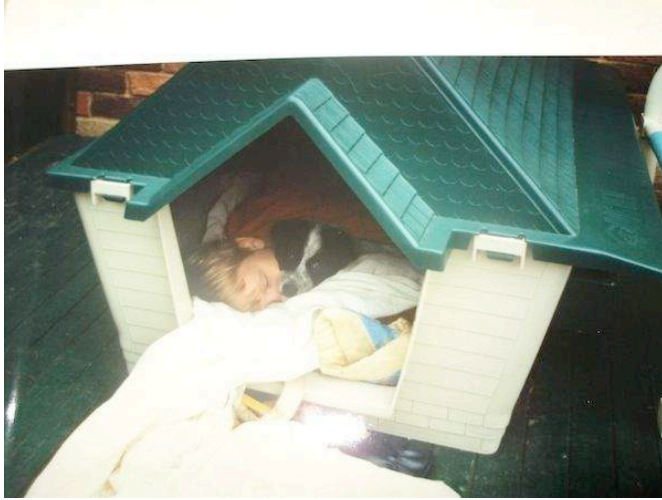
A restless couple of hours later, having continuously strained my ears for fear of you crying, I was woken at around four or five a.m. by the sound of play coming from the rumpus room. Tamara, Brendan and Mitchell had snuck down to visit you. How could I be mad? With only a few hours of sleep myself, I marvelled at the energy you had that morning. It did not matter that it was still dark outside you simply wanted to play. Half an hour later you were back asleep and so we could all go catch a little more shut-eye ourselves.

Eventually we bought you a kennel and you moved outside. To help the transition, we placed the kennel on the back verandah where you had direct line of sight into the busy area of the house. This seemed to work very well as you soon became accustomed to lying in your kennel and watching for people passing by. We would walk into the kitchen and hear the rhythmic beat of your tail against the side of the plastic kennel and at most times this would remind us to go out and give you a pat.

Your kennel seemed way too big. I knew you would grow and hence bought a kennel for a large dog. It was even big enough to hold you and a child.



Dear Pongo



You loved your kennel right up until just a few years ago when your arthritis prevented you from getting in and out freely. It was sad to see you half in and struggling to lift your back leg over the lip. I contemplated cutting off the lip but I noticed you were also struggling to bend you back in under the roof. From then on you took to sleeping on your lounge with such gusto, it was like a light bulb went off in your head. Hey these things are comfy.

#

Back to fetch. You were a natural at it. We decided to see if you would chase after a tennis ball like you did with your beloved little stick that you found on your first day at home. As you were so small we decided to roll the ball along the ground to give you a fair chance. You instantly set off after it. Your mouth was not big enough to reach

## Dear Pongo

fully around it but your needle sharp teeth could 'kind-of' get a purchase of it as you half carried, half dragged it back to us. The ball fell from your grasp a couple of times but you finally brought it to us and thought it was a grand old game to chase off after it as we rolled it away.

I don't know who got the most enjoyment out of this game. You seemed to love bounding awkwardly off after the ball and we loved the fact that you would bring it back to us.

Playing fetch ended up becoming such a massive part of your life. You thoroughly enjoyed playing fetch, but now only ever with a tennis ball. Tennis balls seemed to fascinate you and you soon lost interest in chasing sticks. You only played fetch with a tennis ball. I think you simply preferred the feel of a tennis ball. The odd Frisbee or two was actually chased down as well, but nowhere near as many times as your beloved tennis balls.

## Dear Pongo



Playing cricket was so much more fun when you joined us. Sure the tennis ball got wet with your drawl but you were such a good fielder. No matter where the ball was hit to you would be off after it. You would stand mid-pitch as the bowler delivered the ball, and intently watch the batter to see where the ball would go. Sometimes you waited on the pitch and we had to coax you to move off. You nervously watched the bowler as you were called away from the pitch, you did not want to miss a delivery.

Tennis balls became somewhat of a security blanket for you. It was a rare occurrence to venture out into the yard and find you not chewing on a tennis ball. And if perchance someone did wonder outside and find you in the unusual state, you would run off to find one before racing over to meet them. As you ran off to find a tennis ball we would usually call out to you "No I haven't come out to play fetch" or "I've just come out to give you a pat" or

Dear Pongo

something similar. On meeting us you politely dropped the ball at our feet and prepared yourself to run after it, anticipating it getting thrown. It was like you were greeting us with "Cool someone has come out to play fetch with me."

Tennis balls do not need to be complete either, sometimes you retrieved the smallest fragment of a chewed up tennis ball, even as small as about two square centimetres. Sometimes this made us laugh at the pathetic excuse of a tennis ball, but even that was sufficient for you to play fetch with. You did not mind. You would run up to us, with a seemingly empty mouth, and spit out an excuse for a tennis ball. If we picked it up and threw it, you would run after it as if it was a prized possession. That was so very cute.



And boy could you catch. This was something else that came very naturally to you. From the first time we evolved the ball toss from a simple roll to a bounce you always endeavoured to catching the ball in mid air. The ball rarely had an opportunity to roll to a stop.

## Dear Pongo

Eventually you mastered the art of catching a ball thrown over the house. You would sit beside me in the front yard as I would throw the ball over the roof of our house. I would try to get the ball to bounce off the far side of the roof to stop it bouncing out of our yard. You watched were I threw it and set-off after it, anticipating where it would land. From the front yard I could hear the loud smack of your mouth closing on the falling ball. You would race back around the front, ball in mouth, and politely wait for a repeat. You were so fast on your feet.

Sometimes the ball got stuck in the guttering of the roof and someone had to go and get it down. All the while, you nervously waited underneath for it to drop. We sometimes got away with tossing another tennis ball, but not always. You usually knew exactly where the original one was and remained fixated on that part of the roof. You seemed to be saying, "Its there. Look, it's just there. Someone go up there and I'll show you where to go."

The game of catch would continue until either we grew tired of it or you signalled an end by lying on the ground just short of returning the ball. When you were young you rarely gave up first. As you grew older, the distance the ball was thrown became reduced and you signalled a halt earlier and earlier. Until late in life, when arthritis had fully set-in, you eventually gave up the chase completely. I can't remember the actual day but I can remember that final time when I rolled the ball past you and you simply let it go by. You even didn't attempt to pick up a ball that bounced off your feet or stopped at your feet. You told us when you had finally had enough.

Dear Pongo

#

Mummy hanging out the washing was another favourite time for you. She needed to learn how to peg up the clothes and kick a tennis ball every time you dropped one at her feet. She even stubbed her toe a couple of times doing this, but she did not mind. I know mummy loved this little game, this was her special mummy-Pongo time. It was a game that only you and her shared.

Even now you still keep mummy company when she goes outside to hang the washing, you do not play fetch with her any more but you still get excited when she walks outside carrying a basket full of washing.

You respected our clothes too. You never pulled anything off the line, tempting as that must have been, and if ever anything found its way onto the ground you brought it to the back door where we could find it. The clothes that we did find by the back door were in a state indicating they had not been played with or chewed on in any way. Mummy was so proud of you every time she found one of these little presents and you seemed very proud to point it out to us when we stepped outside.

#

You love your lounge; it is both your bed and your day chair. You are a bit reluctant to share it with friends, but that is OK. You're old now and set in your ways.

I remember once trying to rotate the lounge through ninety degrees so that it was in a position that was less effected by the weather. In response you lay on the cold pavers in the spot from which I moved it. I got the point

Dear Pongo

and quickly moved it back and erected a shelter to turn your preferred spot into one that was 'less effected by the weather'.



There are some friends that you are happy to share your lounge with — Tutti-turtle and Sponge Bob. These stuffed toys have been so lovingly treated. I can't believe you have had sponge Bob for about six years now and all he has lost is his nose and his hat. Tutti-turtle could be placed back on the shelf and sold as 'slightly soiled'. You have owned Tutti-turtle for about four years now.

Before these two stuffed toys every toy was quickly dispatched to stuffed toy heaven, some even on the day you were given them, but that all stopped with these two. When Brendan gave you these, your attitude changed and you have never ripped open another stuffed toy since. You seem to have real love in your eyes when we play with you

Dear Pongo

with these two treasured toys. I would love to know exactly what is going through your mind.



#

Living close to the ocean gave us ample opportunity to take you down the beach where you appointed yourself head of the seagull police. I don't know what you had against seagulls but whatever you did have, you had it with a vengeance. You must have had some inbuilt belief that seagulls had no rights to the beach and made it your job to chase every single one of them away. They would fly fifty metres away and land, as if to mock you, and you would dutifully go chase after them.



## Dear Pongo

You must have thought the waves were some huge living, roaring animal. Each wave would roll in and you would charge at it with bravado, snapping at it and sometimes being rolled head over tail. You would run back to us to tell us you got that one and then charge back out as the next one crashed. This was particularly brave behaviour for a dog that cannot swim.

Your lack of swimming ability astounds me. You simply never could get the hang of lying flat and kicking with your hind legs. Instead you held your body at about a forty-five degree angle and lashed out, panic stricken, with front legs held perfectly straight and stiff. We tried to teach you how to swim in our swimming pool, your human brothers and sister did so long for you to join them in the pool. But this was to no avail and only resulted in scratches down our chest as we rescued you time and time again. You did seem very satisfied to run around outside the pool and bark at us.

It was absolutely adorable how you used to drop tennis balls into the pool whilst we were swimming. You could not join us in the water but you still wanted to be involved. Playing fetch was your answer to everything. With a tennis ball in your mouth you would position your face between the bars of the fence and then with a flip of your head, let go of the ball so it bounced once and then hit the water. How could we resist when you went to so much effort? Mummy used to encourage whoever was in the pool to try and catch the ball before it hit the water. She was concerned about grass coming into the pool. But that is what filters are for, right!

You would sit patiently for a little while and then let out a polite little yelp if nobody noticed the ball begging to be thrown. This game was fun but sometimes was a little

Dear Pongo

bit annoying. I'd give almost anything for you to annoy me one more time like that, but I'm afraid it just will not happen.

Even though you could not swim we continued to take you to the beach. Yours and our favourite dog beach is Little Austinmer beach, or Little Austi as we refer to it. We would picnic there with friends who also have pet dogs and you dogs could sniff butts and run around until your hearts were content.

Our picnics almost always involved a BBQ chook. When everyone had finished I always took pleasure in pulling the remaining chicken off the carcass and handing it out to the dogs. You and your pals would sit patiently in a line and eat the chicken out of my hand. That was the best time wasn't it Pongo. I'm hoping we can do that one more time. We went to Little Austi last weekend, for what I thought might be your last time, maybe we can go again this weekend.

#

What is it that you have against birds that are predominantly black? Other than seagulls, which are mainly white, you do not seem to mind white or colourful birds. You happily let them share your water, your food, and your shelter. But you detest birds that are black, or that are predominantly black. When your eyesight was clear, and you could still hear, you would bark at crows that flew over our house, even those at least half a kilometre up in the air. God forbid it that a crow or magpie land on our TV aerial, or the one next door.

Dear Pongo

#

Going for walks was a great pleasure that I shared often with you. I miss our walks Pongo. Sure you used to stop and sniff every tree we passed and would try to mark everything bigger than a blade of grass, but geez they were fun.

When you were young you used to pull a lot on the leash so we needed to get you a Haulty Collar — the one that went around your nose. You did not like this but at least it meant we could keep going for walks.

When you settled down a little, we could revert back to a standard choker collar. You had taught yourself to walk on my right and would go to great lengths to quickly get back on my right hand side if ever you found yourself elsewhere. You have always been particular in your ways. That is just something else I love about you.

As arthritis started to hit you, our walks became shorter and shorter. Then they became non-existent. A course of arthritis medicine, about eighteen months ago, did wonders for you and allowed me to once again take you for walks. The last one was of only about two-hundred metres duration to meet your human mummy on her way home from work. She was so happy to see that you had come out to meet her and you looked so excited to see her too. You looked like you suffered on that walk but you also seemed to enjoy it.

Eventually, even with a daily dose of Meloxicam (pain killer and anti-inflammatory medicine), walks became a thing of the past. It was a very sad day the day I realised that.

Dear Pongo

#

You have always loved your food, especially when it's people food. You did not take too kindly to dried dog food and often left your dog biscuits for the birds to eat. I persisted and left them out there for you to nibble on during the day and even soaked them in beef gravy. But I think you must simply have not liked their taste or texture. We gave up on feeding you dried food many years ago, about the time we discovered 'dog log'. You do love your 'dog log'.

I think you feel that breakfast is the best time of the day. For years breakfast consisted of two-hundred grams of 'dog log', five 'dog chocs' and three Schmachos broken into pieces. You used to love rooting through the meat to find the 'dog chocs' and Schmachos. I even believe you counted to make sure all five 'dog chocs' were there. I know that, on some occasions, I even questioned myself when you looked up at me as if to ask (politely I must add) "Where's the fifth one?"

We had to stop giving you the 'dog chocs' when the vet told us off for letting you put on weight. You had only slipped up to about twenty-four kilos. I thought you looked fine! Anyway, now you are back down to a more healthy twenty-one kilos, and I am tempted to slip the 'dog chocs' back in. Actually I will, starting from today. I have noticed that you have started to lose weight so it should not do any harm.

I remember a test we once did with you when you were about four years old. We wanted to see if you could ever get full so decided to give you dinner after dinner until you stopped eating. We conceded defeat when you hungrily gulped down the third dinner in a row. You ate it

Dear Pongo

with the same gusto as the first. I think you could hurt yourself if we presented you with more food so we had to stop. You loved to eat and still do today. Losing your appetite will be a sure sign that you are in distress.

#

Everything was not all plane sailing as far as you were concerned. We got very disappointed each time you slipped through the open gate and took off. Often refusing to come back even with us yelling your name and running after you. We were frightened that you might get hit by a car but you were hell-bent on a moment of freedom.

You would return half an hour later totally exhausted and with a huge smile on your face.

We had to punish you for that, to try and keep you safe, but I often wondered where you had been and what you had gotten up to. Maybe you had a little girlfriend somewhere, or maybe you just went and sniffed all those spots that we held you back from when out on our walks.

You were quite determined and often tested the side gate. We would hear it rattle as you pushed and pulled on it with your paw. Very clever, but very naughty as well! I used to smile and feel proud of the fact that you had the gumption to try.

One time we thought we lost you when you picked up a paralysis tick and lost control of your hind legs. It was the Monday of a long weekend when I noticed your poor state. Actually that was a bit of a trend. Whenever you got sick and needed to be taken to the vet it was always on a public holiday or on a Sunday. As a result, every time we went to

Dear Pongo

the vet it was to the emergency vet in town, we simply made them your regular vet and they still are to this day. Anyway, back to this tic. As is usual on Sundays or long weekends we were having a family BBQ so I was taking the meat out to the deck to cook it. You were up on the back verandah, as usual, and came down to greet me when you heard me go out onto the deck. I felt total pity for you when I noticed the struggle you went through to drag yourself the necessary thirty metres, and down thirteen stairs, to meet me. Your back legs were useless and dragging on the floor behind you, but still you greeted me with your normal smiling face. I could here you saying, "Hi daddy, there seems to be something wrong with my back legs, but it will all be all right soon."

The vet was able to save you that day but it was touch and go. Ever since, your hind legs have not been 100% and they are once again forming the bane of your existence in this final stage of your life.

#

Wollongong is not a cold place, but in the middle of winter it can get a bit nippy. Your human sister felt sorry for you and hence designed a coat for you to wear. We call it your 'girl's blouse' because we have a standing joke that you're being a bit sooky if you need an extra layer on top of your fir in Wollongong. This was before dog coats were trendy. You were a trendsetter! You took to wearing your girl's blouse like a duck to water. I think it may have been more a fact that pulling it over your head preceded dinner by a few minutes, but I also believe you appreciated its warmth on those cold evenings.

Dear Pongo

You have had this coat for several years now and it is still as good as new. Like the good dog you are, you have not chewed on it or destroyed it in any way. Occasionally you get caught-up in it and have to be rescued but that is very infrequent (only happened twice). It works so well with your colouring too.



#

Now that your human siblings have grown up, some of them have their own puppies. You love your puppy family who respect you as the boss. When they come for visits you cry with anticipation when you first see them. You try to run around with them but they lap the yard

Dear Pongo

twice before you stumble one or two steps. It is a bit pitiful to watch but we know you love them being around.



#

Your hearing was the first of your senses to desert you, this started to go away about four years ago and now is just a distant memory. I wonder what it is like in your silent world. When I whistle real loud I know you can hear it softly but you look around as if trying to work out where this distant sound is coming from. Somehow you know when my daughter is coming home; I think you must be able to feel the reverberation of the sporty exhaust in her husband's car. You also seem aware of when doors slam, possibly a percussion effect as well. At least this helps you work out when people are coming out doors. Who knows it might signal food.



Dear Pongo

Your eyesight comes and goes. Some days you have obvious cataracts and sometimes your eyes are completely clear. But at all times your peripheral vision seems non-existent.

One thing that is not failing you is your sense of smell. This seems as acute as ever. I have been sitting with you out the back and you have been aware of someone visiting before I am. You start sniffing in the air and then I hear someone talking around the front.

Sniffing your way around the backyard, that you must know every single inch of, is a favourite pastime of yours. I love it when I look out the kitchen window and spot you prowling around your domain. You look so happy and alive.

Where did you learn that bottom jaw quiver? Only recently, about two years ago, you have learnt to greet us with a quivering bottom lip. It looks so adorable. I know it is your way of telling us you are extremely happy to see us and it fills us with joy. It is your unique way of greeting us, only family get that greeting. We cannot help but give you a warm cuddle every time we see it.

I have already mentioned your will-to-live and from this I believe that if life-expectancy was based solely on will-to-live, then you would never die. That is what is making it so difficult for me in these your last months. Your body is failing you and I know you must be in pain but your dogged determination to put on a brave face is confusing me to thinking that everything is fine. I just hope that you help me make the right decision before you suffer too much.

I love you Pongo and have already lived your passing

Dear Pongo

a thousand times in my mind. I have picked out the spot in the garden where I will put you to rest and avoid that spot like the plague. I do not know what I will think of it when you are buried there.

Every day I think is the day I will need to take you to the vet to get put to sleep. But every day you greet me so full of life and happiness. If only your body would heal. But I know that will not happen.

Goodbye my very dear little friend.