

# A Brief Biography of Rio Jones

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People who own greyhounds are weird.

Categorically strange, and not a little obsessed with their dog of choice, life revolves around the hound.

Even now, I can ask my mother who her favourite child is and she will say Rio. If he was on ‘his’ sofa, we (my brother - Gareth, father – Martin, and I) weren’t allowed to ask him to move. He was given extra treats when Mum thought no one was looking. He was allowed upstairs, and Mum would arrange the expensive, pink coverlet in her room on the floor so he could lay on it. There is a picture of him next to her bed, in an Art Deco-style, luminous pink frame.



On Mother’s Day, Christmas, her birthday, Rio always bought her a present – usually a tub of minstrels, as they were like his big brown eyes. I went out and bought these gifts for him, and never did get thanked for my efforts.

I’d been to a rescue home once before, when adopting our first greyhound in 2000. I don’t remember much, except a field where the dogs could run around, and a litter of puppies watching excitedly from a pen. The man was very nice, and there, we gained Jimmy, the hound that started the obsession with these leggy, ungainly, quirky dogs.

My perception of rescue homes prior to this had long been of over-crowded cages filled with lost, over-eager, tragic faces of unwanted or abused dogs, with the pungent smell of dog urine pervading the air. Hershams Hounds was nothing like the aforementioned description, unless it rained; then, there was definitely a strong ‘wet dog’ smell. But not the musty, hamster-ish smell most dogs harbour. The strength of the smell came from the large number of hounds in one place, I think.

Rio was hound of the month in June 2006. He had been there for six months, and suffered from depression.



It was as if a black cloud of mourning hung over Mum and I; the sun attempted to break through the clouds and patches of light appeared on the ground, but a chill wind pushed the grey clouds across the sun, reminding it of our loss and the inappropriateness of the warming, cheerful rays. Summer might have begun but a wintry loss followed us.

As we entered, I saw two large male brindles stood together. My whole body seemed to sigh internally; they looked like Jimmy.

There was a loud, infectious cackling. A short-haired lady appeared from one of the offices. *That* was Denise.

“Can I help?” she enquired, in a broad London accent. Every person I have ever met with a *real* London accent, including my grandparents, can be heard by anyone, including the deaf, within ten miles. Denise was no exception.

Mum introduced us and explained, “I rang up last week; we’re here to see Rio?”

Denise disappeared through a small door. It was inconspicuous, like Alice’s rabbit hole, and if I hadn’t watched her leave I wouldn’t have noticed it.

Rio was big, and dark. I was reluctant to have another brindle male, but, to an extent, it wasn’t my choice.

Psychologists believe that dogs are like their owners. My horse-riding friends believe you muck out how you eat. *I* believe horses and dogs choose their owners: the friendship forms instantly, but there is still a period of wariness as the boundaries are established. Rio must have known Mum, or Mindy as he came to call her, was his saviour. Maybe a halo of light was around her head as he looked up at her for the first time, and whenever he looked at her after that Gareth and I would sing in a Godly, chorus-like fashion.

We took him for a walk. He walked quietly beside me, until we reached a grassier area, with tufts clustered together on little mounds. It looked like a giant mole hang out. Rio walked a few paces, then dived into a patch of tall grass. I turned to look at Mum; all we could see was a striped bottom in the air.



He came home with us that day.

Rio became Pio: he urinated up *everything*. The fireplace, the bin, the doorways, Gareth's bed. In fact, we soon learnt that his means of protest was to always attack the bin. If Mum went out more than once in a day, the bin would be sprinkled.

His first unprecedented visit to the vet came after a couple of weeks. Greyhounds are like models; tall, thin, elegantly muscled. However, when they fall, they fall further and often harder than the rest of us. On the morning of my Spanish GCSE, Rio tripped over his food bowl, smashed it into the wall, and fell on it. Cue a large gash, blood spots on the kitchen floor, and one dozy, stitched up hound.

Perhaps we attract unusual animals. A bald hamster. A three-legged cat. A greyhound with a habit of diving into bushes, pulling out unsuspecting hedgehogs, and carrying them along delicately.

Mum caught him once, mid hog-carry.

“Martin!”

Dad yanked the lead, Rio's head whipped around, and before Mum could move, the hedgehog flew and landed in, or on - I'm not sure which - her ankle.

Dad was scolded for not paying attention.

The cluster of prickles was there long after the event, a rash of red dots about the size of a fist. Hog-carrying became a habit of a lifetime, but, thankfully for Mum, not hog-tossing.

Like most grandchildren, Rio loved his Grandma. His tail would wag, he might even bark. Well, it wasn't a real bark, even Mum admitted that. It was a hybrid of girly yelp and semi-loud girly bark.

“Rio, you're a gayhound.” Gareth and I taunted.

“Don't. You leave my dog alone.” Mum replied. Rio walked head first into her legs, ran his face along them and leant against her, turning his head to look up at her. “Yes, you're my dog aren't you?” She cooed.

He learnt, gradually, how to get on the sofa. At first, he would throw his body forward and



lunge just his head, shoulders and front legs on to Mum's lap. I would then lift his body on to the sofa. By now, a name had been given to the evening occurrences when Rio would sit, either on the chair or rug, and gaze at Mum. Gazing time. In his rich Brazilian tones (me) he would ask her when gazing time was that evening.

“You can gaze for hours tonight, because I am going to sit on my arse and do nothing.” His eyes widened and tail wagged, and he would lean on her. It made it very difficult to move away, a tactic I'm sure he was aware of.

She ironed in the living room for an hour once – which was surprising in itself – and he watched her, lovingly, the whole time.

Owning a dog is not like owning any other household pet. Seeing a head resting on the baby gate, a tail wagging, and the little jumps as you cross over into the hall, are not something a cat can do as lovingly as a dog. Soon after Rio had stopped urinating on everything, he had settled in and we came to accept the favouritism Mum bestowed on him as a mark of his initiation into the Jones family.





Mum came downstairs one day and Rio whined, “Mindy, Gareth kicked me!”

She marched into the kitchen, where Gareth was stood, smiling.

“Gareth! Did you kick Rio?”

“No!” He was shocked, and started laughing, looking at me in disbelief. Mum and Rio retreated upstairs to the sanctity of her room.

Whenever Gareth or myself were away from home, we would text Mum to ask what Rio was doing, or to send us a photo. He would usually be outside her study, lying down behind her chair, or lounging across as many pillows on her bed as his frame could reach; this usually meant all of them.

His fur was dark but dull in the first few months; it seemed as if one day he shed his old self and a healthy, if not slightly portly, greyhound appeared in his place. His coat was soft and shiny, as if he had been dusted. The only indication of his previous mistreatment was the brown chips that were left of his teeth, although there were a couple of gaps where some had gone missing in action.



One unmemorable day in August, a couple of days before my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, Rio had another accident.

“Pip, come and look at this.”

“What?” I walked into the living room.

“Rio’s cut his paw quite badly.”

Gareth was leaning over Rio, who looked up calmly at us from his seat. He was holding Rio’s paw delicately, and indicated the wound on his pad. I gently touched it. No squeak of pain. Even more gently, I held his paw and pulled the cut apart slightly.

It widened easily, the blood surfacing and filling the neat cut. I always wondered if when blood left the body it made a noise, too quiet for any human to hear.

On his return from the vets, he walked into the living room and lay down, facing away from everyone. I bent down by him and stroked his head. He didn’t respond.

“I think he’s in shock.” Mum said, stood in the doorway.

“Why?”

“Well, I don’t think he expected to come out with no teeth.”

I pushed his lower lip down gently – between his canine teeth was a distinct lack of incisors. The gum was blood red.

I laughed. Gareth laughed. In fact, we all had a bit of a snigger. Rio refused to look at anyone for the next week. On my birthday, Grandma put a jar labelled ‘Rio’s soup’ in the fridge.

“Hey Rio, how’s your bottom teeth?” Gareth teased.



I checked on him periodically, and placed a towel under his chin because he kept dribbling. His eyes drooped with the discomfort and he stayed in the same place - the sofa - for hours.

He recovered, of course, and adapted to life as Rio the Gummy Bear.

He died on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2011, from a cancer called osteosarcoma. I’ve heard fifty percent of greyhounds are eventually diagnosed with it, and after Jimmy and Lassie I felt our fifty percent was complete. The family weren’t there to say goodbye to him.

“I couldn’t have him brought round just to have him put down.” Mum explained. So he died peacefully whilst he was dozing, probably thinking about his Mindy, maybe running through a field of corn together.

I posted a brief memorial message on his Facebook page, which I had set up a few months before. The next day, there were several kind messages and a couple of pictures Gareth’s friend had taken.

I drove from Winchester to Basingstoke shortly after he’d died, and it felt like my insides were swelling until I burst out, “I miss you so much.” I didn’t know if I was speaking to him, imagining he could hear me, or just wanted to vocalise how frustrated and angry and upset I was.

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The inevitability of death does not ease the passing of a loved one, whether that is a mother, father, dog, hamster, or goldfish. We eased this by continuing as if Rio was still alive; interrupting our conversations with his voice, flapping our arms to demonstrate how he floats on his fluffy cloud.

I regularly talk to Rio in the car, speaking in his voice and being thankful that if anyone saw me, they'd think I was singing along to the radio.

A few weeks later, Mum felt ready to call up Hersham. "He was my soul dog," she explained to Denise. "But I really miss having a boy."

Then along came Claus.

### **Bibliography**

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