

A Dog I Never Wanted

I learned a few things from a dog I never wanted. A friend saw a news report that a local animal shelter was overcrowded and would have to put many dogs to sleep if no one adopted them very soon. The friend adopted 1-year-old black Shepard mix and asked me to watch it until he found an apartment that took pets. That was 12 years ago and he still hasn't been back for the dog.

I never wanted this dog and tried to pawn it off on friends and family but no one wanted a wild, skinny mutt from an animal shelter. She wasn't a puppy anymore and the cuteness had faded away. She was a fence jumper, digger, barker, chewer and escape artist. She couldn't be trusted alone in your house because she would destroy things with her constant chewing and scratching. I was a young guy working, going to college, paying tuition and did not want the responsibility or cost of a dog. I seriously thought about putting her to sleep or taking her back to the dog pound, but I could not bring myself to do it. I was a practical person and killing a perfectly healthy young dog seemed like a waste to me. I decided to tolerate her and named her Poopy for the most obvious reason. She shit like an elephant!

Poopy's basic needs like baths, walks, food and water were an inconvenience to me. She destroyed things in the house and I yelled at her and I even hit her. Yes, I was mean to my dog. On the other hand, she was a quick learner. I took her for walks, fed her, and taught her a few tricks. She even learned to climb a stepladder and fetch a ball from the top. She was easy to train and I sometimes thought she could read my mind. She had pitiful big brown eyes, a bent tail, and she made me laugh. So, maybe having a dog wouldn't be so bad after all.

Over the years, Poopy and I developed a routine and grew to understand each other pretty well. I fixed up old houses and Poopy always came to work with me. We were constant companions and could be seen riding around in my pick-up truck on any given day. She would follow me around inside various old houses just to stay near and would not take her eyes off of me. If I went into the next room to get a saw, she followed. Then she followed me back into the first room. She couldn't stand to have me out of her sight. At times I would trip over her because she stayed so close. Poopy wasn't just my dog now; she was one of my closest friends. We had become... "a pair".

As years passed, friends came and went, family members died, others were born, new presidents were sworn in, I got married, the new millennium came, September 11th happened and

Poopy was always there with me watching it all. She was older, more mature, and I treated her with more respect and dignity now. I gave her the patience she deserved. I rarely had to correct her. I wondered, had she matured, or had I?

When she was ten-years-old her health began to decline and I had to give her medicine regularly. In her twelfth year she also needed steroids for her joints. I noticed she did not spin like a top when I grabbed her leash for walks. She no longer chased the squirrels at the park with great enthusiasm. Her joints were worn and she fell down once in awhile. Our walks grew shorter and shorter because she was not able to keep up even at a slow pace. After half a block of walking she would begin to limp and pant. At nearly 13, her hearing was going and she developed a tumor that would require expensive surgery to remove. My young crazy puppy had grown old in what seemed like the blink of an eye. On a visit to the vet he told me that if I wanted to put her to sleep and be present when he did it, I would need to make an appointment. Otherwise, I only had to drop her off and leave. He said option two was best because it was better if I did not see her die. Maybe I am strange but I wanted to see her die. I wanted to be there for my old friend at the moment of truth. I took Poopy home from the vet and thought seriously about putting her to sleep because it was cheaper than the tumor surgery and her quality of life was declining rapidly.

Stairs were a problem for Poopy and her old joints. However, as long as she was able to get up and down the stairs to go outside, I would keep my friend. The stairs became more and more of a problem for her and I had to nail strips of carpet on the stair treads so Poopy could get enough traction to climb them. The stairs were the only way to the outdoors and also to the basement where she had been trained to use the bathroom when I was not home. I decided that when she couldn't manage climbing the stairs anymore, I was going to have her put to sleep, but would definitely be there with her when it happened.

My wife and I thought this summer might be Poopy's last so we spoiled her with all her favorite human foods. We called it, "The Summer of Poopy." We fed her steak, corn on the cob smothered in butter and a lot of restaurant leftovers.

Last Labor Day weekend I found Poopy lying on the basement floor with her head raised and a strange look in her eyes. She had collapsed and her legs were folded oddly underneath her body. Her breathing was shallow and her body felt cold. I rolled Poopy on her side to free her legs and she put her head down on my lap one last time. I knew she was dying so I petted her

and talked to her. I thanked her for over a decade of companionship, fond memories, and in a few minutes, she was gone. She had made it up and down those basement stairs every day except her last. It was almost like she knew I would have her put to sleep when she could no longer climb the stairs. I swear she could read my mind. I had to carry her up the basement stairs only once. She had one last ride in the back of my truck and one last trip to the vet for cremation. I made arrangements and paid extra to get her ashes back. I am not particularly religious but I believe all creatures have a soul of some kind and getting the ashes back seemed like the fitting thing to do.

She had picked the perfect time to leave us. I was at home with her, it was the end of a beautiful summer, and a holiday weekend. We would all have time to mourn her without distraction. It almost seems like she planned it that way. I always thought Poopy was lucky for ending up with me since her life could have been far shorter and much worse if she ended up with the wrong humans. After she was gone that I realize I was the lucky one.

I never thought I would be so upset by the death of a dog and I missed her terribly. I miss Poopy most when I come home and she is not there to greet me at the door. I miss her sticking her head under my arm when I am working on the computer. Her leash and worn collar still hang by the back door for old time sake. Her short life is captured in pictures that hang on our walls. She no longer follows me from room to room just to stare at me with her adoring eyes.

I had taught Poopy a few silly dog tricks and in return she had taught me about life, kindness, compassion, friendship, grief, reflection, patience, responsibility, and loyalty. She taught me that life is too short and not to waste any of it.

I learned you should live your life in dog years, seven at a time if you hope to squeeze in all the good stuff.

I learned that if you like to chase squirrels, do it while you are young. Don't wait until you are old or retired because you won't have the energy.

I also learned that for some reason, many of us humans treat the people we care about badly and are nice to strangers. Poopy was smarter than that. She barked at strangers and wagged her tail only for the people she knew. We should all take a lesson from Poopy and treat the people we care about a lot better. Lick your loved ones on the face and save the barking for the strangers.

I learned all of that from a dog I never even wanted.