

Therapy Dog

I first saw her when I delivered a package at the house of a colleague of my wife. She was a small coarse haired dog with over sized canine teeth staring at me. Her simian eyes locked on to me before I knew she was there, perched on a snow bank next to the driveway. I stopped my truck and glanced to my side and there she was, waiting for my next move with her spooky great-ape eyes burning at me.

I never liked dogs. I have a large ugly scar across my ankle that I received from 3 big nasty mutts that cornered me in a neighbors' house when I was five years old. Traumatized, I clung to cats in my youth and as I grew older, I went out of my way to pet almost any cat.

I knew I had to get out of my truck. I only hoped that the black beast would just sniff me and move on. I opened my door just a crack and she leaped. "Ught-Oh" I thought. But to my surprise, the dog approached me fast and flopped on her back at my feet. "Scratch my belly", her now friendly eyes said. I did scratch her and she followed me to the house door and soon trotted in, out of sight.

That dog stayed in my thoughts for weeks. Her eyes had pierced mine and seemingly searched my soul. "Remember me" I heard her say. Weeks later after my wife had expressed my amazement of this dog to her friend, I learned that the woman and her four children needed to move to a smaller place and her youngest had developed allergies to animals. She, in fact, had taken the dog to the humane society the day before I knew of this change, but the pound was closed. I learned later that this would be the second time in the dog's life that she would be rescued from the pound.

I texted my daughters and asked for their opinions. "Should I get a dog?" I asked them.

They all, and independently, responded "YES" in capital letters, the text equivalent of a shout. They knew something of my needs.

I went to the woman's house that very evening to fetch the dog, still not knowing her name or even her gender. The babysitter was expecting me and rapidly gave me all the accoutrements that follow a gift of dog: metal bowls, half a bag of Puppy Chow, a few chew toys and even a cage.

"Here take it all", she said. I gathered she wasn't a fan of dogs. "Come on Shadow, out of the house", she said.

"Shadow is her name?" I said. "I didn't know".

Shadow is black. She follows me wherever I go. She rarely barks and only at a squirrel that she has cornered up a tree without escape. She wasn't even a year-old when she came to live with me. House training took some time, frustrating others in my family, but not me. I had changed

when Shadow came. I spoke to her long and often about whatever was happening. I never raised my voice, unless she neared danger: the road or a moving car. She learned fast.

I had been told, and I had read myself, that physical training is the best way to relieve post-trauma and grief. Natural endorphins flowing through your body are the best medicine. Shadow and I leave the house everyday, very early, 5 a.m. sometimes, and walk to the park. I let her off her leash after I have scanned the area to be sure no other 2 or 4 legged walkers are nearby. I do my steady walk and day dream of better things. Walking and viewing trees, open spaces, corn fields, cows behind their fences and deer in the hills in the distance ease my soul, and I can forget the troubles for awhile. Shadow runs and runs. She is a natural sprinter and rodent chaser. A few whistles guide her back my way when her hunting leads her too far. I make my circuit and ask Shadow if she has pooped if I haven't seen her remember to do so. We return home, and I leave for work, coming home at lunch for another quick romp. Later in the day she receives extended belly and jowl rubbing and goes on more squirrel chasing. I will talk to her at length about nothing at all really. I ignore the teasing that my daughters and wife give me for loving a dog.

Shadow will sleep on the floor at my side wherever my bed may be. If I lie on the floor or on the grass, I have been known to do the cuddle that she initiates. She will yawn loudly in the morning and anxiously pushes me to once again do the morning walk.

Just lately, now 15 months since she came to live with me, her character has changed. Shadow still stays at my side or nearby, but she no longer suffers miniature lap dogs gladly. Before, she would just ignore any pesky dog that came her way. She will attack any lap-rat that dares to growl or snip at her. If she wishes to remain outside, or if she is on a patient squirrel-watch when I call, Shadow will give me the slow head turn and the squinty eyed look that says, "Not now. Can't you see I'm busy?"

I too have changed. I no longer need to know where Shadow is at all times. Dogs usually live but 1/6 of human life-spans. My dog came to me when I needed her and her, me. She has shown me that we can move on from the troubles of the past and live a "regular" life again. I fear the day when she dies, for chances are that I will out-live her. But my greatest fear now is that I will move on so far that I don't need the daily walk. Probably that will never happen. Therapy Dog will nuzzle me each morning for as long as she is capable. And I will continue to feign other things I need to do first until she gives me The Look. Then off we go to the park once again.

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