

The Writer's Workshop '17 Memoirs Contest - Honorable Mention

AUTHOR RESERVES ALL RIGHTS

An Unforeseen Hero by Cara Perciaccanto

Huddled on the hardwood floor of the veterinarian's office, I clung to a furry old soul whose time grew short. Jackie, our rescue golden retriever, suffered a stroke and I had to make a heart wrenching decision. Tears rolled down my face and onto her fur as she lay in my arms panting.

Two veterinarian technicians desperately sought out a vein to deliver the heart stopping medication. After being unsuccessful on a second leg, the worried technician apologized. "I'm so sorry, but I think her blood pressure is low because we aren't able to find a vein. We'll have to get the vet."

My body filled with a mix of anger and sadness over the soon-to-be loss of my late mother's dog and close companion. Grief overwhelmed me. While waiting for the vet, I hugged her neck and slowly rocked her back and forth, back and forth. I whispered, "You're doing so good Jackie- Girl. It's gonna be okay. I'm gonna help you feel better. It's gonna be okay, I promise." Deep down I knew she was not the only one I was trying to soothe.

* * *

Four years earlier, our family was forced into an unexpected battle. We were ill prepared to fight. Within a six-month period, my healthy fifty-three year old mother, was

diagnosed with severe congestive heart failure, which disabled her from working, followed quickly by a grizzly metastatic breast cancer. She fought for her life through the cardiac crisis, leaving her with little left to give. The bear of cancer had her cornered. Her oncologist explained her chance of survival through a deluge of numbers, percentages and terms. I watched the glimmer of hope wash away from her eyes in the tidal wave of daunting information.

As the only child to a widowed mother, it was my duty to have our weapons at the ready, to help find her fighting spirit and take on the beast. Our support group of friends and family surrounded us with love, but this proved to be a much tougher battle to beat for my mother. She tried to put a brave face for her treatments. Though most days she would retreat to her couch wrapped in a blanket of denial. My pep talks were useless. Her beloved gardens were left unattended and her effervescent personality faded along with her smile. The mother and friend we all knew and loved struggled to pull herself out of a depression.

It was time to bring in the big dogs (pun intended). Through the advice, and love of my mother's best friend, Jeanne, we decided to track down a furry companion for my mother. My mom told Jeanne that the idea of having a dog again sounded appealing. However, knowing the up keep and training involved in owning a dog was something the energy-zapping chemo treatments wouldn't allow. Jeanne replied, "So you basically need a stuffed animal."

Jeanne, who volunteered her dog training services to a local Golden Retriever Rescue, kept her eyes peeled for any furry candidates. We were looking for a very

specific type of dog- lazy. We ruled out a puppy, because a puppy would require too much training. We wanted nothing hyper or too spry-- Mom had no energy for that. The very next week, “Jackie”, a rescued golden retriever waddled into our lives. Jackie was an obese and arthritic old girl, but as sweet as they come. The type of dog who focused on three things only: eating, sleeping and belly rubs. Jeanne called mom from the rescue event and said, “I found your stuffed animal!”

We met the Golden Retriever Rescue staff on the type of sunny, crisp day that said new beginnings. Jackie slid down out of their car and stood for all of 30 seconds before rolling onto the ground hinting at a belly rub. Right there, in the parking lot, Mom’s spark reignited.

Jackie’s eyes served as gateway into her beautiful old soul, and she always seemed to be smiling. Her heart of gold, love for food and very short walks helped form a connection between her and Mom. Their bond was the missing piece of the puzzle. Not long after Jackie joined our family, we saw pieces of my mom slowly return.

Mom was excited to go dog shopping for food bowls, toys and a leash, which is funny because only one of those items was useful--the food bowls. Jackie had no interest in fetching or chewing anything unless she could digest it. The leash served only for show, because long walks were a joke, and Jackie never ambled fast enough to get away. Her waddling pace quickened when food was involved or when small animals came into view. She played deaf most of the time, yet somehow could hear a bag crinkle or someone chewing in the next room, and she would come hoofing it in search of a snack.

For whatever reason, this 110-pound dog loved small animals. On Pet Smart visits, her chunky legs would teeter as fast as she could to the little chinchillas and

hamsters scurrying around in their small glass houses. She would sit there in awe of them. It seemed as though she was watching a doggie version of *Seinfeld*; we had a hard time tearing her away.

Mom loved to take Jackie to the reservoir park near our home. Jackie couldn't be deterred when she caught sight of the park ducks, and we'd often find her in the reservoir trying to get a very close perspective on those ducks. She never touched the feathered critters; she was just a large canine version of *Curious George*.

One Saturday, Jackie acted extra spry, inspiring Mom and I to take her on a longer than usual walk around the reservoir. She almost made it too. About three-fourths of the way, Jackie slowed down on a thickly wooded trail not populated with its usual runners. Her gait slowed to a crawl before she put the brakes on. She paused only a moment to survey her surroundings, then laid down. As if to say, "Well that was fun, but I'm done. You may carry me now, ladies." No amount of coaxing through sweet talk or treats could get the old girl up. We needed a chinchilla, and swore next time we would carry one as a backup plan for the next "Code F.G.D." (Fat Girl Down).

After the initial moment of panic, we fell into a fit of giggles at our predicament. Why did we ever think an ancient, arthritic, heavysset dog could walk that far in the first place? I'm sure Jackie agreed. Eventually, a male jogger breezed past us, and in true female form Jackie got up and shook her sassy hips after him.

When visiting my Mom, I smiled at her gardens flourishing from the new flowers she planted along the path. Because of her furry companion, she was more engaged in life again. I noticed Mom buying pink items for Jackie, and I told her she was subconsciously making Jackie a breast cancer mascot. Surprisingly, Mom didn't seem to mind the idea.

Soon after, Mom wrapped a breast cancer bandana around Jackie's neck to strut around town. Mom dressed herself more often in pink and wore a breast cancer pin on all her shirts. I was impressed with her outward signs of acceptance. She seemed ready to growl back in the face of cancer.

I was thankful to witness the change happening in my mother, change brought about, at least somewhat, I felt, by the love of her golden retriever. Having a cuddly companion by her side made her less lonely and therefore happier, but it wasn't just that. Jackie gave her a purpose. She no longer had a child to rear or a career to excel at, but she did have a dog that **needed** her. Jackie needed Mom to get up and feed her and let her out. Mom enjoyed brushing her dog's long straw colored hair and cleaning her floppy ears. Together, the endurance challenged duo, took their daily walk-- to the mailbox and back.

Even though she was engaging in life more, Mom still had her dark days, ones when the menacing bear got the upper hand on her psyche. She was never one to call and tell me she was having a bad day. I'm sure most people facing depression prefer being alone for fear of embarrassment or being seen as weak. But, Jackie made sure she was never alone. She was a cuddly moose of dog, serving as a symbolic bodyguard, keeping Mom safe and her spirits lifted on low days. Friends made industrial-strength doggie steps to enable Jackie to climb into Mom's bed and snuggle with her. Jackie would lie beside Mom and let her cry and hug her close. Jackie became a silent partner in my mother's grief.

Mom once opened up to me about having her depression setbacks. She said,

“There are days when getting out of bed seems impossible. It’s hard to explain, but when those days come, I have Jackie now, and she helps me get through those times. She allows me to cry and express my anger, with no questions asked.”

I was moved when my mother shared that poignant truth with me. How true it is that a dog is much more than an animal, but a friend, therapist and family.

Jackie served as my mother’s sidekick, waddling beside her throughout her final journey. There wasn’t a car ride, vacation or short walk that Jackie wasn’t included in. Her loyal furry companion was beside mom’s bed, as my mother drew her last breaths. Jackie provided love and comfort for a peaceful passing.

* * *

As I sat there rubbing her fur over and over and whispering in her ear, I thought of how familiar this must have felt. Instead of my mom seeking comfort, I was now, in turn, trying to comfort Jackie. Moments later the vet came in to help with the procedure. He apologized for the wait. After the injection, he used his stethoscope to check for a heartbeat. I couldn’t bear to watch. I buried my head beside her floppy ears, wanting to be as close to her as possible. Slowly, she became quieter and eventually still. The vet checked for the now absent heart beat and gave me a nod to say it was over. Grief flooded my entire body.

“I can tell she must have been a good one.” The vet said softly.

I nodded. “She was a rescue dog. But really, she did all the rescuing.” I said, tears streaming down my face.

The kind vet painted a tranquil picture of the lake he owned on a large property

where he could spread her ashes. I thought of the reservoir and how she loved getting in the water to visit the ducks.

“She would really love that,” I sniffled “Thank you so much for your time and kindness.”

“That’s what we are here for. I’ll leave you alone. Take as much time as you need.”

No matter how much I wanted to leave, I felt grounded. The tears seemed to have no end. I knew it would be sad to let her go. But it wasn’t just the family pet I would be leaving behind. This was an earthly guardian angel that put life and courage back into my mother in her darkest days. A friend that always made sure my mom was never alone. A canine reminder for me that my mom was never truly gone, as memories of her are always near. Having something so close to my mom’s heart with me every day provided a comfort that I didn’t even realize I depended on.

Jackie taught me that my support group was not solely made up of human beings, but also an unforeseen hero-- who loved belly rubs.