

## **Never Another You**

I named you Moxie because you were so very timid when I first got you. I figured you needed more spunk and hoped you'd grow into your name. And did you ever! Funny how it turned out to be ME who needed courage and you who helped me find it. You led me to discover the secret I was keeping from myself. I really don't know if I'd've had the guts to do what had to be done if it wasn't for you. You saved me, Moxie, me and Annie both. You gave us everything.

You are such a good boy, Moxie, the best boy ever, a once-in-a-lifetime dog. MY lifetime, you understand, since it's in the natural order of things for humans to have a much longer lifespan, just as parents hope their children will necessarily outlive them. So what I mean is, that in my lifetime, you are the best of all possible dogs. And to think that just the other day I was dismayed to notice your muzzle starting to turn gray, a reminder to me of your mortality.

I knew when I signed the papers that made you mine, I was also signing up to lose you. But that prospect seemed so far off into the future that it didn't register as real. At the time, I hadn't thought past the simple idea of getting a dog for company and protection while Jake was in the service. And the reason I picked you was because you picked me. I went to the pound and saw all kinds of sweet dogs (and some who weren't so sweet). Each of them frantic and pleading, their eyes shining with desperate hope. All of them needed a home and most of them were lovely animals that would make a wonderful pet for anyone.

But you were different. For me, it was love at first sight, a visceral thing I had no more control over than a thunderstorm, a storm in my heart that left you in possession of it. Like a lightning bolt, I was struck with love when I first saw you, just like I was with Jake, just like I was with Annie, even before she was born. Well, at least my instincts were right two out of three times, anyway.

You stood with such composure, no hope in your eyes. It wasn't like you were hopeless, though. More like you were reserved and holding back, too realistic to indulge in wild expectations. The gauze bandages wrapped around your front legs made you appear sporty, like a soccer player. But your demeanor was dignified and self-possessed,

not sporty. You locked your eloquent eyes directly onto mine, threw back your head and let loose a howl -- “YooWOOooo!” -- when you claimed me.

The shelter attendant was surprised. He had never heard you bark before, much less howl; word around the shelter was that you were mute. He told me more: that you’d been surrendered by the next-of-kin of your previous owner, who died. His best guess was that you’re a Border collie/some-kind-of-shepherd mix. I’d always admired shepherd dogs in general for their intelligence, looks and loyalty -- Border collies in particular. I figured you might combine the best of both of breeds, whatever exactly they were. I wasn’t wrong.

The attendant started in with a hard-sell pitch. As if that was necessary! He said your legs were wrapped due to “lick dermatitis” that they didn’t want you worrying at. The infection was just superficial, only a minor, temporary problem. You were calm and if not exactly friendly or outgoing, at least not agonistic. At first, I thought he said AGNOSTIC, and that kind of threw me. I didn’t know that dogs could be religious, much less question the existence of God.

Although the attendant clarified things by explaining that “agonistic” simply referred to certain aggressive behaviors, my initial misunderstanding stuck in my mind. Because it was funny, of course, but also because – in addition to not being agonistic – you turned out not to have an agnostic bone in your body. Everything you’ve ever done has been whole-hearted and unclouded by doubt. Unfortunately, I was the thing you placed your faith in. You deserved better.

Back then, you were a year old and fixed, the attendant told me. I knew he meant castrated, but that term “fixed” also conjured up imagery. The implication was that you’d been broken. You were so very skinny and sporting those gauze wrappings on your legs; it was no stretch to imagine that you’d been broken. But I was sure that more food, a bath, a healthy environment and lots of love would make you whole.

Most folks wouldn’t adopt a black dog, the pound guy added – don’t ask him why -- especially a large one. He shrugged and told me you were slated to be destroyed soon. That word “destroyed” really got to me. It sounded so much worse than “put down” or “euthanized.” And, having met you, I could never let that happen.

I knew you were the one when I met your steady gaze and saw such intelligence, depth, nobility, and much more humanity than many humans express, even as young, scared and undoubtedly traumatized as you were. What an incredible part of my life you've been, the finest companion and champion conceivable. You're my hero, Moxie, my bodyguard, an angel with fur instead of wings, a four-legged saint. You've been with me through everything, my one constant and only witness after things turned bad. I hate to think what my life might've been like if not for you. And I can't envision life without you. Because of you, I know I'll always have to have a dog, although I can't imagine one who could fill your place, you raised the bar so high. You're the gold standard of your species. So, try as I might to find a dog like you, I know I'll never succeed. There will never be another you.

And mute? Little did the guy at the pound know that you're the closest thing to a talking dog there is. Not only did you quickly learn my words, but you also taught me yours. I never needed to see what you were seeing to know what the object of your attention was and how you felt about it. And though your body language is also rich with information, I didn't even need to see you to know what was going on.

A regular bark meant simple acknowledgement of something distant that was neither threatening nor enticing. Your big-dog bark was reserved for nearby humans that might be threatening, like the mailman or Jehovah's Witnesses.

An idle howl was for prey that was out of reach, like a squirrel up a tree. A prolonged spate of enthusiastic howling indicated a human you were fond of and greeting, like the Farm Service guy who filled the LP tank.

And then there were all the nuances in between, all clearly communicated. You extended my senses so far that I was always forewarned, never surprised.

Though we immediately clicked in so many ways, we sure got off to a rough start in other respects, didn't we? You were easy to housebreak, but you broke the house in another way. Did you ever have a taste for heirloom furniture! My grandmother died not long after Jake and I wed, so we ended up with some of her furniture, furniture that was precious to me because it had belonged to her. I was so mad at you! And you didn't make the connection between my anger and your furniture chewing until I caught you in the act. You didn't understand that it was your BEHAVIOR I didn't like, not you yourself,

poor thing. I am so sorry I treated you that way. Things went much better when I praised you for doing right instead of punishing you for doing wrong. You gained in confidence then.

It's pathetic to realize how much longer it took for me to feel I deserved decent treatment, too. And then only when I was forced to, and only with your help. Here it is 1974 already, and liberating changes have been taking place all over the country. They just haven't made it to Jasper County, Iowa yet. Maybe it's the isolation, our nearest neighbor our landlady, an elderly widow a quarter-section away. You remember Myrtle, don't you? You just wagged your tail a little, so I know you recognize her name. She always fed you meat scraps when you appeared at her kitchen door each morning, bless her dear old heart.

Oh, but I remember one sign of the times I cherished: that pair of smiley-face hair elastics I used to wear. Just a cheap dime-store acquisition, I know. But for me those smiley-faces represented some kind of hope. They were bright yellow icons of wishes for nice days. Remember that? No, of course you wouldn't, at least not from my perspective.

Anyhow, one of the set of hair elastics went missing and I looked all over and just couldn't find it. I figured it had gone the way of many small things, like ink pens and Scrabble tiles: batted into a heat grate by Enola Gay. She was a grate cat, ha ha. But seriously, she was a great cat. You didn't care much for her, but I loved her, my snuggly bedtime buddy since I was a girl. She'd slip under the covers and fit herself under my arm, positioning herself so she could press the side of her face against my cheek. It was probably as soothing to her as it was to me to drift off to sleep with our breaths commingling.

So I was just devastated when Jake ran over her. How I wish she'd died outright, instead of yowling and flopping around, trying to drag her broken back half to a safe place that didn't exist. Jake was already gone, his Charger spewing gravel and throwing up a rooster-tail of dust half a mile away as he took off for his current favorite bar – one he hadn't yet been banned from. The closest possible instrument of death was my garden spade and I used it. I miss poor old EG to this day, but not as much as I'll miss you. Damn.

Oh, but about the missing smiley-face hair elastic. That was funny! A day or two later, we were walking around the section – going to visit Myrtle to see if I could help her or one of the other Grange ladies with something, if I recall. Well, you stopped on the side of the road to relieve yourself and what did I see beaming up at me from your turds but a smiley-face, its relentless cheeriness none diminished by the intestinal ordeal it had undergone. Oh, that was funny! I laughed so hard I almost puked and you looked at me ready for fun, but sort of puzzled too. Needless to say, I did not recover my hair accessory. Instead, I switched from two braids to one.

Or the tinsel you ate off the Christmas tree. Boy, did you ever have some festive-looking turds there for a while! I can't believe the tin didn't poison you. The guy at the pound must've neglected to mention you were also part goat.

Dogs are such funny people! We have such a bond and understand each other so well. It's easy to think there's not much difference between us, you act so human in so many ways. But then you'd go and blow the illusion by acting like a dog, eating things that aren't food or rolling on dead things or drinking out of the toilet. I remember you coming up to me for a kiss with cat litter caking your nose – and the breath to match. Did that solve a mystery! I was worried the cat had stopped pooping for some reason. That, or I had a miraculous self-cleaning litter box! Some real charming habits you've got there.

Occasional gross behavior aside, those first couple of years – before Jake came home – were probably the best years of my life, the closest to heaven I'm ever likely to get. And it was all because of you, Moxie. That's how I know there are dogs in heaven; without you, it wouldn't be heaven. I wonder if we'll meet again there. I know they'll swing those pearly gates wide open to receive you, Saint Moxie. But I doubt I'll qualify for admission, though I'm damn well sure you won't be seeing Jake there. Just watch out for Annie, will you? And please, please take care of her in heaven as you did on earth.

How I wish I'd had the grace to realize I had it so good at the time. But no, I was worried about Jake and pining for him. All the while, I was just marking time until he got home – if he ever made it back from the war alive, an outcome his harrowing letters from Viet Nam made seem almost impossible. I'd go to work each day, putting in my time, daydreaming about how wonderful things would be in the future, when Jake got back. I had a whole big scenario worked out in my mind, pieced together and rehearsed while I

automatically put two cardboard support corners, then two more, on top of each boxed Maytag washer that came down the line, over and over and over again.

We would move from this little country house to a bigger, nicer house in town. We'd fill that house with children and there would be a fenced-in yard for them and you to play in. Jake would go back to his job at Maytag and I would quit mine when the first baby came. Everything would be perfect. Boy, was I wrong!

How I wish that, instead of wishing my life away, I'd learned to live in the here and now, like you. There's all that stuff about transcendental meditation and enlightenment and the Maharishi and such, people working so hard for peace in the world and peace in their own heads. They could've saved a lot of time and trouble by just following your example, Moxie. You really had it going on.

Except when it came to the vacuum cleaner, that is. You went nuts every time I used it, barking your fool head off and lunging at it. And heaven forbid one of your toys was on the carpet! Of course that happened often because I'd no sooner clear the rug of your toys than you'd start right back in repopulating it. Once I fired up the vacuum cleaner, you'd dart in and snatch your toys away from whatever horrible fate you imagined might befall them. In high school science class I learned that nature abhors a vacuum. But nature can't abhor a vacuum more than you.

And thunderstorms. I never understood how such a big, brave boy could be such a sissy when it came to storms. But everyone has their weak point, don't I know! Yours was thunderstorms. You got so nervous! Pacing and panting and plastering yourself against me. You were so much better at predicting the weather than the forecasters on the radio. Forget about barometric pressure and the rest – all I had to do was look at you, the much more reliable weather indicator, the Moxometer.

I laugh, but it was really hard to see such a fine, magnificent beast brought low by a thunderstorm. You were so scared! Sometimes you'd even chew on yourself like you did at one point not long after I got you. And if it was raining when I had to go to work, I had to DRAG you to the door so you could potty before I left. You couldn't have reacted worse if I was dragging you to your death. The only thing that made you feel better was me holding you close, like you needed to be contained lest you flew apart with fear. Or maybe it was the comfort of one who loves you, the physical contact, the words of praise

to remind you what a good boy you are. Like now: You are SUCH a good boy, such a brave boy, the best boy ever.

Oh, no! As if the mere mention of storms could conjure one into being, I just now noticed that it looks like rain. But don't worry, Moxie-boy. I won't let those big bad raindrops touch you if they come. You won't feel a thing, I promise.

Your storm sensitivity came in real handy that one time, however, when you convinced me we had to go to the root cellar for shelter. Bless your jumpy heart, were you ever right! The sky was a spooky green and the wind had suddenly picked up big-time. The entrance to the cellar was outside, though, and I had as hard of a time opening the big heavy doors as Dorothy's family did in the "Wizard of Oz." Geeze, that was scary! We huddled in the back of the low-ceilinged dirt-floored room I feared might be our grave.

Aside from the furnace and water heater, there were only two things of note in the cellar: a braced tree-trunk support I prayed was sturdier than it looked and the shelving that held my home-canned goods. One dangling light bulb illuminated the earthy-smelling room and it swayed crazily, casting eerie light and shadows that gave me vertigo. To steady myself, I started counting jars: tomatoes, pickled cucumbers and apple butter mostly, but I was happy to note that there were still a couple jars of the pickled string beans that turned out so well. As I watched, a quart jar of tomatoes vibrated off a shelf and shattered on the hard-packed ground – splattering wet red tomato pulp everywhere – just as the electricity went out.

In the absolute darkness underground, the storm doors shuddered like mad and an even worse sound arose. The roar of the tornado was like a freight train going over the top of us. We fought so close I didn't know who was trying to shield who.

The whole thing probably took place over just a few minutes. But it seemed like an eternity before the world became quiet again. Too quiet. I cautiously felt my way over to the entrance, guided by a thin line of light between the doors, for once not recoiling from the touch of ancient dust and spider webs. I pushed one half-door open and stuck my head out. You wanted to run out right away, but I motioned you back.

Outside the cellar was a different world than the one we'd taken refuge from. The sky was tentatively clearing, revealing downed trees, some still attached to their entire

unearthed root balls, the remaining trees twisted, torn and festooned with misshapen sheet metal that had been the tough skins of outbuildings only moments before. I was awed by the spectacle of such wholesale destruction. The house itself appeared undamaged except for one broken window and all manner of debris imbedded in the north-facing wood siding. Over the next couple days I learned the extent of the damage to the area and realized what a close call we'd had. The absurdly minor thing that sticks in my mind was the fact that a book I'd been reading on the porch only moved two feet. But pages 79 to 106 were missing! Luckily, I'd already read those pages, but I still had to reimburse the library for the book.

That was the first time you saved my life.

That was also when I recognized the fallacy of thinking that I, being the human, always knew best. In the case of that twister, it was clearly YOU who knew better and I was right to follow your lead.

I sure had you buffaloed about that knowing-best thing though, didn't I? Until you proved otherwise, I had myself and you both convinced that I knew best. And you STILL buy that load of crap! I can't believe you trust me in spite of all my many wrong actions. When it comes to faith, you're a true believer, Moxie, all the way. Even after that time I cut half your ear off. I still feel sick about that.

Here I thought I'd been going to do you a big favor by cutting off the knotty tangles of hair that were starting to create a hot spot behind your ear. You'd gotten into some burrs I couldn't entirely comb from your coat. You'd been trying to scratch them off and that was just making the problem worse. So I got out the upholstery scissors because they were super-sharp and heavy-duty, just the thing for making short work of those thick snarls.

You were so good! You sat still with such a look of reliance on your face – even after I betrayed that trust by cutting away not only the hair clumps, but part of your ear as well. Your expression never changed throughout the whole ordeal. It was like you felt no pain and were simply happy to indulge my unaccountable whim to cut your ear off. Only when I saw what I had done – holding the hideous heel of your ear in my hand – and started crying with mortification did your eager-to-please expression change to one of concern. Then it was YOU who tried to console ME!



Oh, Moxie. How did one as intelligent and noble and faithful as you come to place himself at the mercy of someone like me? Especially when I didn't give you all the attention you deserved. I'm sure that's what made you resort to the ploy of "crying wolf."

That was pretty cute, actually. Although, again, I ultimately failed you. After all the guilty attention I gave you after I cut off part of your ear, you turned up limping from time to time. I would always check out the "injured" leg, turning it this way and that in the light, looking closely and feeling along its length. After each examination, the "injured" limb would have miraculously healed, just like a "kiss it and make it better" thing.

I'm not so dimwitted after all; I caught on in time and started ignoring your lame pretenses. Until the time we cut cross-country on a walk and went through a barbed-wire fence, me stepping on the bottom strand and lifting an upper one to help you through. Evidently I didn't do a good enough job, because your right foreleg was ripped open along its entire length. But you gave no sign of injury at the time and I didn't think to look. It was only later – while I was balancing the checkbook at the kitchen table – that you pawed at me, trying to pull your old "crying wolf" trick. Or so I thought. I told you to go lay down, not even looking at your leg after all your false alarms. I didn't think about it again until I finished my calculations and turned my attention to the next task (cooking supper). That's when I noticed all the blood and comprehended the situation. Geeze, Moxie!

But somehow during all of that, we became each other's best ally. Well, you became mine, anyway. I don't think I did you any favors, only treated you unjustly and subjected you to danger. But you! From the start you appointed yourself my Minister of Security. YOU should've won the Nobel Peace Prize, not that Kissinger guy. You always came between me and danger, not just today but every day. I wish there was some way I could repay you for your loyalty and sacrifice. You're such a brave boy, Moxie, such a good boy, the best possible boy ever. I love you like crazy, Moxie. I love you to death.

Knowing you, I should've anticipated your ill-timed body block. But, in the heat of the moment, I didn't. I am SO SORRY I shot you, Moxie-boy. I only meant to shoot Jake.