

Juniper Knows Too Much

“Standard poodles are usually bright,” the puppy kindergarten teacher told me at the end of the final class. “But yours didn’t exactly graduate Magna Cum Doggy.”

True, Juniper didn’t quite get much beyond *sit*, and even there I had to give his bottom a gentle push. But any fool could see the intelligence blazing in his big brown eyes. “He finished first in the maze,” I reminded the teacher, an old friend of mine named Scott.

“Honestly, Amanda, even a broken clock...,” Scott said, flicking off the lights in the little gymnasium that had been our classroom.

“Who cares about sitting and lying down,” I told Juniper on the ride home. “Anyone can sit and lie down.” Juniper closed his eyes. He hadn’t liked school any more than I had. The social interactions had confused him. So many unruly dogs.

As a puppy, Juniper’s favorite activity was sitting on the couch watching tv with me. He liked animal shows and kid shows just fine, but his absolute favorite was baseball. He slept through basketball, football, and hockey but came alive during Twins’ games, barking at critical times. And, why not? Baseball is a thinking dog’s game. I spent hours explaining the rules, the strategy, the game within the game. You know that really cute poodle incomprehension look, where a dog turns his head sideways? Well, that was Juniper’s face when I tried to explain the difference between a two-seamer and a four.

Aside from Juniper, I lived alone. Used to be married. His name was Mike. Sweet, sweet guy. Bavarian. We met playing softball in some dumb co-ed league. He ran surprisingly well for a big man, but he never got the hang of the weight transfer on the swing and his throws were

totally herky-jerky. When you grow up in Munich and only take up softball at thirty-two to meet women, you're not going to look great up there.

I used to look great up there. In my senior year at Woodson High, I hit .637. But on the first day of spring training at University of Minnesota, I tore my labrum and pretty much sat out the rest of college. By the time I hoisted a bat in that dumb co-led league, I'm not sure I swung a whole lot better than Mike. My game was one big pile of awkward adjustments.

Nowadays, I'd give just about anything to run the bases again or walk without pain. Some days, I needed a wheelchair just to get around the Piggly Wiggly.

My nostalgia for glory days is always at my highest when I am at my lowest. My legs hurt like hell, so my fingers craved the feel of a softball. The ball was in my spare bedroom and I had zero desire to hoist myself into that wheelchair to get it. I said something like, "Juniper, be a dear and get me the softball. It's on the desk in the bedroom."

He nodded like a British butler and ran out of the room, bounding back a moment later to plop the slobbery softball into my hands. I was beside myself with praise, which Juniper took nonchalantly.

"You want to watch a game?" I asked, flipping on the Twins'.

He jumped on the couch and enjoyed the game immensely before petering out in the fifth, head in my lap.

Late the next afternoon, we headed to the dog park. Now, to get to the dog park, we had to cross High Street, which was a total pain. After you pressed the crosswalk button, you could sing the entire national anthem—holding "home of the" for an eternity—before the freakin' light changed. I had no patience that day, so I told Juniper to run ahead and press the freakin' button for me. He bowed subtly, sprinted ahead with standard poodle joy, and pawed at the crosswalk button. The light changed in my favor just as I reached the street.

“You will never believe what Juniper just did,” I gushed to the other dog parents when we arrived at the park. They listened politely. In fairness, Juniper had not previously shown much intellectual promise. A few months before, he had fallen into a ditch and got stuck so badly that one of the dog fathers had to lift him out. But hey, Einstein didn’t talk until he was five.

The prodigy of the dog park—a yappy shih-tzu in a red bandana named Ling-Ling—could dance and bark on cue.

“Go to Ling-Ling,” I shouted out to Juniper. He nodded and made his way across the field to Ling-Ling’s butt.

“That was pretty random,” Ling-Ling’s owner mumbled.

“Does he know my dog?” one of the other dog parents asked.

“Go to Shammy,” I shouted out to Juniper.

Instantly, Juniper left Ling-Ling and ran across the field to Shammy. Ling-Ling’s owner practically ling-linged in her pants.

I got Juniper back home in a hurry, eager to test his vocabulary. I gathered a bunch of items from the house and put them onto a little area rug in my living room.

“Juniper,” I said. “Find the banana.”

He nodded and then picked up the banana with his mouth.

I squealed and then asked Juniper to put the banana down and pick up the tv clicker.

Yep.

Turned out, he could identify at least a hundred fifty different objects. Flower vase, tea pot, coffee table, DVD, magazine, laptop...pretty much everything I had ever spoken out loud to him. And he was still only a puppy.

Before nodding off, I asked him point blank, “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He nodded.

“Can you speak?” I asked.

He shook his head, then ran into his crate and fell into deep doggy sleep. It had been a big day.

The next morning, Juniper stood over his kibbles bowl and shook his head repeatedly.

“And what would monsieur prefer?” I asked, arching my eyebrows playfully.

He looked at my plate of eggs and nodded.

I made him a cheese omelet. He devoured it. Then, he curled around my feet and fell asleep.

Later that day, we drove over to Scott, the “broken clock” guy who had been Juniper’s puppy kindergarten teacher. We sat in his living room, while his dobermans barked like bazookas in the backyard. I caught Scott up on Juniper’s intellectual progress.

“Have you ever heard of Clever Hans?” Scott asked.

Both Juniper and I shook our head no in response.

“Well, you see, what just happened there was pretty much the Clever Hans story in microcosm,” Scott said in that know-it-all-voice I have hated since elementary school. “Hans was a horse that could allegedly answer questions, but it turned out that Hans was just really good at reading his owner’s body language. So, if someone asked Hans a question like, “What’s 1 + 2?” the horse would paw at the ground—once, twice, three times—until he noticed his owner’s body language change, and then he’d stop pawing. People went nuts over this horse, but he was just perceptive, not truly intelligent.”

“You’re very wrong, Scott.”

“Leave the room, Amanda.”

A few minutes later, Scott called me back in.

“Amanda, Juniper here is a normal dumb dog with the working vocabulary of a cucumber. Not only could he not recognize a single object, he didn’t even recognize his own name. Plus, he growled at me.”

Juniper had never had an unkind word for anyone before.

“I am telling you,” Scott continued. “This dog is just responding to cues from you. A really brilliant dog—a one in a thousand animal—can learn maybe two or three hundred words by mid-life.”

Juniper all but winked at me on the way home. Clearly, he only responded to nurturing souls. This was a dog who lived to learn, so I founded the Juniper Johnson School for gifted and talented poodles that very afternoon.

Juniper sponged up tangible nouns and common verbs like nobody’s business. He got a particular thrill from numbers and simple addition problems. Now, I’m not saying that Juniper understood algebra or parliamentary government or the infield fly rule, but he was a whole lot brighter than human kids of the same age.

As he got older, Juniper enjoyed the dog park less and less. Most days, he’d run laps by himself. I don’t want to sound like a snooty parent, but the other dogs seemed primarily interested in sniffing each others’ butts and peeing repeatedly on the same spot. Juniper could differentiate pinking shears from standard scissors.

When Juniper was five, some idiot left the fences on the dog park open and a pit bull named Roscoe shot out of the gates, ran onto High Street, and lost his battle with a Camry. He gave one terrible yelp before expiring on the median stripe.

Juniper was so upset that he didn’t eat for two days. He ignored the tv. He slouched. He wouldn’t come out of his crate. Finally, he crawled up on the couch and stared hard at me, pleading for the truth.

“Everyone dies,” I whispered.

He yelped, so I put him on my lap and told him that he wouldn’t die for a long, long time. Then, I talked about the weather, food, baseball...anything to move him forward. But poor Juniper kept staring up at me, his eyes asking the question of all questions.

“Standard poodles usually live to twelve or thirteen,” I said softly.

Juniper lost the spring in his step. His solo laps around the dog park began to look more like an old man jogging. He lost weight. He fell asleep during lessons. I even considered giving him puppy uppers, but my own experiences with pharmaceuticals and illicit have not always been positive.

Funny thing: as Juniper’s energy dwindled, my own shot up. A change in my pain medication might have helped. To burn off my own newfound energy, I dragged Juniper for long walks.

One night, we found ourselves by the field where Mike and I used to play softball. Being that it was a Tuesday in June, my old team happened to be playing against the Primes, who were an accounting firm. Around the third inning, I finally got up the nerve to go over and say hi. Well, my old teammates were just wonderful, throwing out hugs and kisses and “when are you coming backs.”

“You look great, Amanda,” our player coach said. “I’ll bet you could still outhit everyone on the team.”

My teammates chanted my name.

“Aw, I can’t play anymore,” I said. “Gimpy leg. Can’t run.” Or hit. Or field.

“We can get you a pinch runner,” the player coach said. “Come on. The other team won’t mind. My wife manages them. We’ll watch your dog.”

My teammates prodded me towards the batter’s box.

“Hold on a second,” I said, calling Juniper over. I whispered something to him and he nodded, his eyes burning for the first time since I had explained the facts of death to him.

“I’ll take my ups,” I said, “but only if my dog gets to pinch run for me.”

Dead silence. Very awkward.

“No, really. He’s well trained,” I explained. “Can we at least give it a try?”

Nobody said anything, so I grabbed the lightest bat and snuck in a few practice swings on my way to the plate. I positioned Juniper in a safe place so that he wouldn’t get hit by a foul ball. “Run on contact,” I told him.

So the first pitch comes in high and inside, a real sucker pitch, which I swung at and rolled foul. Juniper shot out like a cannon towards first base.

“Foul ball, Juniper,” I shouted.

To the amazement of my teammates, Juniper trotted back to his position just behind the backstop.

The second pitch was outside and couldn’t tempt me. Next came a borderline offering that I took for strike two. Come on, ump—give a gimp a break.

There was no freaking way that I was going to strike out, so I swung at the next pitch, even though it was clearly going to be low.

Contact! The ball streaked over the second baseman’s head. Juniper was so excited that he touched first base practically before the liner hit the outfield grass.

“Go to second,” I shouted, and instantly Juniper was on second. The right fielder bobbled the ball, which is exactly why you hit the ball to right field in co-ed league. So I told Juniper to keep running. He hit third hard and there was no stop sign in the universe red enough to hold him to three bases. When he crossed home, my teammates practically smothered him in hugs.

“He’s kind of shy,” I explained, pulling him out of the scrum, only to be enveloped myself.

Me and my pinch-running poodle rejoined the team. I played first base, sometimes ranging as much as a half step to my right. Absolutely pitiful. More importantly, Juniper’s happy appetite returned and he found the weight that he had lost during his battle with existential despair. Yeah, I was ragingly sore after every game, but Juniper was born again.

I knew Amanda from elementary school. Even then, she was always spouting crazy shit. When we were kids, she was certain that airplanes were extraterrestrials, that lemons were poisonous, and that our neighbor Mr. Turner had bad secrets. Crazy shit, I tell you. Granted, she turned out to be right about Mr. Turner.

When Amanda met Bavarian Mike, a lot of the crazy disappeared. He was a good guy. But driving home from a softball game, Amanda and Mike got t-boned by an F-150. He lost his life. She lost everything but. Then, some idiot felt sorry for her and gave her a standard poodle puppy. A toy poodle might have been okay, but a standard was a ridiculous choice. Standards are energetic, crazy, and pretty much untrainable.

Amanda’s my-dog-is-a-genius story should have warned me that her crazy had returned. Genius? That dog could barely figure out how to eat kibbles.

Still, Amanda was my oldest friend. So, when she overdosed on pain pills, I knew I had to take care of that dumb dog. Juniper was six when I showed up at her house, but he had the energy of a twelve-year-old. He was so lethargic that I had to pick him up off Amanda’s area rug and carry him to my van.

I have two dobermans: Tom and Jerry. I do not like docile dogs. In the summer, I keep them in the backyard, where they can chase game. When I set Juniper in the yard, Tom—he's the alpha—knocked Juniper down within a minute. He didn't mean anything personal by it. Just wanted to show who was boss.

For the rest of the summer, Juniper gave Tom and Jerry a wide berth. But dogs are dogs, and my dobies still knocked Juniper down every day. Juniper lost so much weight that he was like a stick figure of a dog. Sad, but not all dogs are destined to live out their life expectancies.

One moonless night in early September, I heard Juniper barking, which triggered deep growls from Tom and Jerry. Then, I was stunned to hear Juniper bark ferociously. I heard the dobies sprinting, then a crunching sound, and then terrible yelps.

I ran outside in my pajamas and saw Juniper standing at the edge of a deep hole. Tom and Jerry were in that hole, yelping like there was no tomorrow.

Now, I had been in the backyard that very afternoon and I can assure you that no hole had existed.

I raced my broken dobies to the vet. Jerry was pretty bruised up. He'd walk with a serious limp the rest of his days, but he had gotten off easy compared to Tom.

"Your call," the vet said. I held Tom while the vet put him down.

When I finally got back to the house, I checked in on Juniper. He was sleeping peacefully. His dish was empty.

That hole? Completely filled in. Had everything but fresh sod planted over it.

After the accident, Juniper started eating enough food for three dogs. He filled out. He sprinted. He slalomed between the pine trees. He barked like he meant it.

He started each day by knocking down Jerry.

One summer day, when the rain was coming down pretty good, I jokingly asked Juniper if he'd like to come inside.

Damned if he didn't nod his head. How weird was that? So, I let him in and told him to wipe his paws on the mat. And that's exactly what that dog did.

We stared at each other. It was, um, eerie. To break the tension, I asked, "What would you like to do?"

He ran into my family room and grabbed the television remote with his mouth. I took it from him and flicked through the channels. British people baking lemon cakes? Juniper shook his head no. Pre-season football? Head shaking. Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint? No. Twins vs. Cubs? He nodded enthusiastically and jumped on my couch.

Now, I am mainly a hockey and football guy. If the Twins' catch fire, sure, I'll watch a game here and there, but baseball's too damn slow. Juniper did not share my views; he sat at the edge of my couch, reacting to every pitch. When the Twins' pushed across a run on a wild pitch, Juniper ran a happy lap around the couch.

"You can understand me, can't you?" I asked.

Juniper nodded enthusiastically.

"You like baseball, don't you?"

Big time nodding.

"Two plus two is how much?"

He pawed the carpet four times.

"Did you kill my dog?"

He stared at the tv.

"Juniper, did you kill my dog?"

He twisted his head towards me very slowly, looked me straight in the eye, and then did that poodle incomprehension look.

THE END