

# MY LIFE WITH SAM

A memoir by Stephanie Waxman

**W**hen I was six years old, the neighbor boys promised my little brother and me a surprise if they could tie us to their garage. It was a hot, lazy summer afternoon, and this diversion seemed exciting. They wrapped twine around our wrists and tied the remaining length to the curved handle on the bottom of their garage door. We waited obediently, anticipating ice cream or candy or Popsicles. Suddenly, one of them came out of the house with a large dog straining at a leash. “Sic ’em! Sic ’em!” both boys yelled. The dog growled ferociously and leapt to attack us. When he was inches from our terrified faces, they yanked him back laughing. Then they let out the leash and again shouted, “Go, King, sic ’em!” This was repeated and repeated until, finally, our tormentors yielded to our tearful pleading.

From that point on, whenever I saw a dog, I hid behind my mother’s skirt. When I got older, if I spotted a dog on the sidewalk, I crossed to the other side of the street. If a friend had a dog, I asked if it wouldn’t be too much trouble to keep him outside while we visited. You see, I had this childhood trauma . . .

It wasn’t until my late 20s, after I married, that things began to change. My husband loved dogs. He helped me to stay on my side of the sidewalk. When a dog approached, he’d say, “Here, boy,” and hold out his hand for the dog to sniff. The dog seemed friendly, until he noticed me. Those dogs always smelled my fear and that awful low growl would set my heart racing. For my husband’s sake, I didn’t bolt. I was determined to conquer my terror.

Years later, when my children were school-age, they began to lobby for a dog. It took months of begging, and finally—as a challenge to myself and with the understanding that if it didn’t work out, we would give him back—I relented.

---

The people at Pet Adoptions said that Sam had been found at a bus stop. He had no tags, was unbathed, and eaten up by fleas. They suspected abuse, that he'd been kicked or beaten by his previous owner. But he was young and smart and had somehow found his way to freedom.

He was a Border collie/Gordon setter mix—a handsome dog with a black coat that had streaks of orange at the neck and legs. His face was narrow with black eyes surrounded by wisps of pale yellow. He moved gracefully, almost regally, although the day we brought him home, he tore through the house like a hurricane. He leapt onto all of us, panting and slobbering. He barked at the neighbors and scratched in the dirt and devoured all the food put before him. “I think he likes it here,” said my youngest, beaming a smile. I bit my tongue. What’s not to like? He has the run of the place.

As the days passed, it became clear that any plan I had of considering this a temporary “wait and see” experiment was hopeless. The rest of the family was willing to accommodate his every whim. I was not only outnumbered, I was outfoxed. It was the oldest canine trick in the book: lick anyone in sight and you’ll get your creature comforts met. Sam eyeballed me. “I’m calling the shots here, Sister.”

Weeks turned into months. Months turned into years.

This can’t last forever, I reasoned. No one knows for sure how old this dog is. Surely he’ll die one of these days and life—my quiet, well-ordered, no fleas on the carpet, no dog hair on the couch, no barking at 5 a.m. life—will be restored.

But waiting for someone to die is a tedious occupation. Time slows down. Holes get dug in the front yard. Dog nails rake the wall-to-wall carpeting. Marking of territory includes the newly-planted garden.

One day it occurred to me that this dog would never die. He was in my life as another canine torment. He would not attack me or take a bite out of my face. (In fact, he was more likely to bite someone else if they attacked me, and for this I was grateful in an abstract kind of way.) He was not straining at the end of his leash to get at me. But he was getting at me by his mere constant, large, messy, needy presence. He demanded attention, whining incessantly until he got it. His whine reached a decibel level that even other dogs found irritating. When he wasn’t whining, he was talking. He growled in syllables. His favorite time to do this was when the family was at dinner. He’d take a bunch of dried food in his mouth, carry it to where we were sitting, drop it on the floor, and eat along with the rest of us. Then he’d roll around on the rug and sing his little post-meal song. The others laughed at his antics, finding him charming. To me, it was just another ploy for attention. The truth was, I was simply not a dog person.

Then it occurred to me that maybe he had come into my life to teach me lessons. Perhaps

---

---

I was supposed to learn something. Learn to let go. Learn to embrace the unexpected. Learn to enjoy his lust for life, his boundless energy, his agility, his graceful gait, his handsome face and shiny coat. Maybe I was supposed to learn how to love a creature whose ways were so different from mine. I was supposed to feel this dog's presence as a comfort, not a torment.

One by one the kids left the nest. Little by little I mellowed into middle age. Since my husband was gone during the day and since I worked in the home office, Sam and I ended up spending most of the day together. He trailed behind me, bouncing up to follow me from room to room. When I settled, he settled. When I headed for the door in my walking shoes, he'd be there—alert, anxious, hopeful. More often than not, I'd grab the leash, taking secret pleasure in the joy that washed over him. Together we roamed the neighborhood—he barking to clear the way, he pooping on the sidewalk and waiting patiently for me to clean it up, he running free when at last we reached the dog park. I watched him romp with the other dogs, feeling pride in his athletic prowess. It occurred to me that I was no longer afraid of dogs. When they bounded up to me, I simply put out my hand for them to sniff.

One day as I was heading off to do errands—by this time Sam went with me on my errands—as I lifted the backdoor of the van so he could jump in, I noticed that there was no spring in his step. He faltered at the edge. I actually had to lift him. All at once I realized, this dog is old. I looked carefully at his face. His eyes seemed a little rheumy. Where there had once been orange fur, there were now wisps of gray. He seemed thinner. Gradually his age began to show in other ways. His back legs stopped working. His appetite dwindled. He lost control of his bowels. My husband and I realized this was no life for him. We wanted him to die with dignity. I called the vet.

The appointed day arrived, one of those fiercely windy days in September with dazzling blue skies and the harsh sound of the wind everywhere. I hadn't slept well. Sam was curled up by my feet as I drank my coffee. My husband and daughter were waiting at the vet's. This is the right decision, I kept telling myself. When he heard me opening the drawer where I kept his leash, he dragged himself up, following me with expectation in his tired old face. I crouched down next to him and ran my hand over his coat, once so rich and shiny, now dull and dry. He looked at me, tail wagging. "It's time to go," I whispered, choking back tears.

Now Sam stares out mutely from a snapshot on the refrigerator. I have given away his leash and brush and water bowl. The garden is thriving. The couch is clean. The neighborhood dogs are quiet now that Sam is no longer loudly guarding our property. There is an unnatural silence that follows me from room to well-ordered room. It is filled with the echo of Sam's playful dinner song. ■