

The Magnificent Dog Days of Summer

From the start, he wanted to please. Not like his five other siblings dashing about in yapping chaos, he settled comfortably across my lap like a fuzzy, nubbly shawl. German short-haired pointers are speckled like the brown thrasher, white and brown. They have a mournful hound face with ears the soft brown color of molasses and a coat typically marked with flat, brown liver spots the size of pancakes. This round-eyed puppy with the baleful stare had two such spots. So the owner called him “Two Spot” to distinguish him from “One Spot” a sister and “Three Spot,” a brother in this half-dozen passel of pups.

Surveying the other vigorous hounds, my husband Charles frowned.

“Maybe he’s a wimp,” he said.

“Oh, no,” interjected the owner, eager to unload one yelping mouth to feed.

“They are hunters. Bird dogs,” he nodded encouragingly. My husband folded his arms across his chest.

“This one’s cute,” said Son #2.

“I like this one,” said Son #1.

“You can have them all,” grinned the owner. “I’ll make you a deal. On a farm it doesn’t matter how many dogs you have“

“Can we?” Son #2 was an eager 12-year old.

“Yeah!” Son #1 was a maturing 17.

“Nope.” Charles pointed to the pup on my lap. “We’ll take that one,” he said.

“Well, he’s a good one,” the owner nodded as I wrote out a check. “You should have seen his daddy. He was magnificent!”

Driving home with the “magnificent” dog’s canine son gangly splayed in the back seat across the laps of two human sons, Charles and I gazed as the sun set across the hills surrounding Afton Mountain. In October’s cool the contours rippled in burnished reds and golds. We heard the puppy contentedly sigh from the back.

“Hard to believe it’s been a year,” Charles said.

“Yes.” I knew what he was thinking. We had been married little more than a year, having met mid-life. In 1993, Charles had taken on me and my children “just in time”—I teased—“for teenagers and tuition.” Recently we had moved to a farm and the boys, raised mostly in suburbia, were confronting rural responsibility and a new stepdad. They weren’t sure they liked either.

The first night in a new place, the puppy howled unmercifully. Charles did not buy my remedy of the clock in the blanketed box to mimic the missing mother’s heartbeat. He gathered the pup in his long arms and sat in a rocker facing the kitchen porch shaded by a giant golden maple tree. The creature snoozed, but when Charles put it back in the box, the pup cried. By morning, my exhausted husband knew all about night infant care.

That first week as a family with a pup we struggled over his name.

“‘Two spot’ is stupid,” said Son #1.

“He’s German. We should call him Johann, like Johann Sebastian Bach,” Charles offered.

“Yeah, and when we call him, we can say, ‘Hey YO!’” I laughed.

“Yuk!” exclaimed Son #2.

We launched a contest, “Name That Dog!” The poll went wide, circulated via class notes among our boys’ friends at Burley Middle School and Albemarle High. As I remember, Hunter Lynn suggested “Tracer.” His sister Stuart, over the phone from the College of Charleston, suggested “Cowper,” for the Cowper River in South Carolina. Nial Little thought about Bogart, or “Bogie.” Tom Swanson mused that “Chester” might do. Before long, the list of twenty favorites included names like “Albert, Chase, Cowper, Johann, Prancer, Regal and Trax.” Ultimately, Fate named the winner. After a fierce tie between “Johann” and “Cowper,” a coin toss crowned “Cowper,” spelled “Cooper,” as the family’s “ Super-Duper-Cooper Dog.”

As the weather grew colder the giant maple outside the kitchen where Charles and Cooper had spent the first night began shedding its golden leaves. The boys thought raking them was a waste of time. They complained, bucking Charles’ authority, testing his will. Cooper splashed through the leaf piles with yelping delight. But he was also an obedient son.

“He does what I say,” Charles planted his leaf rake and addressed the grumbling brothers. “I say ‘sit,’ he sits. I say, ‘come,’ he does. I can trust him. You boys should take notes: Discipline is the first step to freedom. “

That January, the snows were deep, encircling the farmhouse, burying fenceposts and covering cars. The boys built snow tunnels to the front porch. Cooper, a vocal hyperdog, and now a long-legged “teen” himself, scooted—a brown dart--in and out of snow piles. He ended his romps on the front porch with a tremendous snow shake, ringing his dog tags like jingle bells.

Around that time, we confronted a mystery. Unaccountably, we often found the farmhouse front door standing open. Around a sizzling warm fire one afternoon in the den, the denials went like this. . .

“Did you leave the front door open?”

“No.”

“Who did?”

“I didn’t.”

“I was the last in, and I *know* I closed it.”

“That makes four. How many of us live here?”

Suddenly there was the shuddering ringing of tags and an explosive thump on the door. In a burst of snow, a triumphant Cooper, tongue lolling with glee, came streaking in, huge wet paws sopping the den floor.

“He jumps up and hits the door latch!” exclaimed Son #1.

“Smart dog!” said Son #2

“*You* left the door open, didn’t you Cooper?” shouted Charles.

The pup released two joyful barks.

“See?” said Charles. “He doesn’t deny it. He tells the truth. You can trust him.”

- By spring Cooper had sensed his bird-dog destiny, bringing us a wild turkey he had snared and a quail now and then. He pursued deer only for the joyous chase and pointed hiding rabbits with a trembling stance. As March brought warmer days, the boys inveigled Charles to throw them baseballs. They rotated pitcher, catcher and a new position. . . .

- “Fetch it, Cooper!” yelled the boys as they’d hit a deep one. “Good Boy!” Charles exulted wrestling the retrieved baseball from Cooper’s playful soft mouth.

- By May, the farm work resumed in earnest. The boys by now, could drive the tractor, a macho thing for them, guided by Charles' insistence on safety. One afternoon, Charles said he'd need their help to cut the dead branches broken by winter storms in the sheltering maple tree. To reach them, Son #1 raised the front end loader of the John Deere carrying my husband. Son #2 handed up the chain saw. Cooper paced back and forth, as if his protective presence somehow could forestall disaster. There was minimal mumbling as this task involved delicacy and danger. From the kitchen I looked out the window as the last branch safely fell to the buzzing saw. I beheld a cameo: three men and a dog, a working team.

- A few years went by. The boys left for college. In 2000, Cooper moved with Charles and me for a year in New York. By now a magnificent adult in appearance, this gentle dog literally stopped sidewalk traffic.

- "Look at that dog!"

- "Can I pet him?"

- "What kind is he?"

- A lover of Virginia rural woods and pastures, he now became an early morning galloper through the city's landscaped Riverside Park. Allowed off-leash by Manhattan ordinance only until 9 a.m., Cooper ran many a happy mile in the early mornings. At night, walking him by myself on errands to the food market, I was comforted by his protective presence, his size and dignified gate inspiring cautious distance from sleazy-looking passersby.

- But by spring, Cooper began to manifest troubling symptoms. He drank gallons of water. He had unexpected accidents in our apartment. He suddenly lost ten pounds. We took him back to Charlottesville for a visit with our veterinarian.

- "I'm afraid of kidney failure," Dr. Teresa Olivo leaned back from kneeling over our pet, adjusted her stethoscope and gazed at us with unwavering brown eyes. "When you go back to New York, you might get a sonogram. There is a wonderful animal hospital in Manhattan."

- "You see this diagram?" Dr. Joshua Tumulty of New York's Animal Medical Center pointed at two irregular circles on a sonogram. "His kidneys are smaller than they should be. A congenital condition, I would guess. They are working only at 25 per cent capacity."

I called the boys, away in separate cities, one at college, the other at a new job. They responded to the news with the same concern.

"Oh, Mom. Charles *loves* that dog."

We returned to Charlottesville for the summer. The days were steamy, the heat close. Cooper traced the farm land more slowly now and circled back to us more often. He drank gallons of water. He ate less and less.

On July 31, our older son came home for a visit. Our younger son returned from a task out on the land. Our veterinarian Dr. Olivo pulled into the drive. We had a family conference with a very sick, very weary Cooper in the den. Cradling him carefully, tears dripping from our cheeks to his silky brown ears, we said good bye. Cooper sighed.

On the land, our younger son, now 19, maneuvered the tractor near the hole he had dug earlier that afternoon. Our older son, 23, contoured the shape with his shovel. Charles tenderly laid the limp blanketed bundle in the hole. I tucked the covers over Cooper's head. The tractor bucket spilled red Albemarle County clay covering the site in a mound.

We stood in a circle over this joyful gentle pet that had accompanied us during the six years we had fused as a new family. We said the Lord's Prayer. Then words for our Super-Duper-Cooper Dog came haltingly:

"He was a great dog."

"He loved his freedom."

"You could trust him."

"He was our friend," Charles said. Then he raised his eyes from the earth, to our faces, to the blue Virginia hills. "I would have liked to have seen his daddy," he added quietly. "He had a magnificent son."

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