

Home for the Howl-idays

When my husband Dave came home from work every day, he patted me on the head and kissed the dog. I got over it. There's no way I couldn't with a mutt as lovable as Chewbarka, tooth marks on the legs of my solid oak coffee table notwithstanding.

Chewbarka was a hairy mongrel and Dave would have it no other way. He doesn't need pretty or pedigree. He needs loyalty, and Chewbarka's was undying, owing to the man/mutt bonding time they spent together back when Dave was a self-employed contractor. Chewbarka was his daily companion charged with guarding his tools in the truck. More recently, Chewbarka's job was limited to guarding the snacks on the home front, and he had a pooch paunch to prove it. Toward the end, his only exercise was greeting Dave, but it was a calorie-burning frenzy that would make the most spastic Jack Russell look sedated.

Chewbarka's ears perked up the moment he heard Dave's car, even if he was in a deep slumber. We live in Pond Mills, but I swear Chewbarka could hear Dave at the 401 off ramp. He'd scramble to the door, his tail wagging his whole hind end, with eyes fixed on the spot where Dave would eventually appear. Chewbarka's chops quivered when Dave finally drove into view, then he'd start leaping up and down and dancing around in circles, his claws skidding wildly on the vinyl floor. By the time Dave stepped into the kitchen, Chewbarka had worked himself into tail-slapping, delirious doggie hysteria. The mania could only be broken by Dave's command: "Up, Chewbarka. Up!" Then he'd jump up and rest his paws on Dave's chest for sloppy dog kisses.

"You're the only one in the world who's always glad to see me," Dave always told him. It's true that our kids stopped being glad to see us as soon as we acquired the parental idiocy that comes when they reach 13, but Chewbarka hadn't noticed how dumb we'd gotten, and never failed to adore Dave like the dog-god he is.

I knew the end was near when Chewbarka just didn't have it in him to greet Dave with the complete canine berserkitude we'd all come to expect. I think Dave wasn't nearly as troubled by it as Chewbarka was. Pain slowed his step and stole his playfulness. Chewbarka had grown old and arthritic and sick.

By the end of last summer, Chewbarka was gone. If there's a heaven for dogs, he's up there patiently waiting for Dave by the snack table. But down here in comfortable suburbia, Dave was inconsolable.

"I'll never get a dog again," Dave insisted. "I can't bear to say good-bye to another one."

We all missed Chewbarka, but Dave's mourning was a deeper anguish, and none of us could lift him out his funk. The kids even tried to look at least a little bit perky upon Dave's arrival home, but grief over the loss of a pet is a special kind of pain. I was starting to wonder if there was no cure for it.

It was our daughter Abbey who suggested that maybe her dad might want to rescue one of the five pups the OSPCA had seized from a puppy mill. The dogs were purebred poodles. I knew Dave wasn't ready, especially for a fussy purebred that was probably yappy to boot. The kids and I convinced Dave to go to the Humane Society anyway, just to have a look.

Considering Dave's love of pedigree-free mutts, I was surprised he warmed up to an uppity puppy so quickly. He was smitten, and the cute-ish little yapper went home with us. By Christmas, Winnie the Poodle was an undisputed member of our family. Not that Chewbarka can be replaced, but I have to admit, a first Christmas with the love and energy of a new pet made it one of the best holidays our family has had in years.

Our poodle is much too dignified to greet Dave with the same frenzied bliss as her predecessor. He'll get over it. No doubt about it, Winnie is our new beloved, even though she keeps teething on the legs of my coffee table.