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Creative Nonfiction

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Bonding with His Human

Running around my backyard, playing hide and seek at night, I find my spot. Under a bush and in the shadows, even when they get up close they won’t find me. The flashlight of the hunter is coming around the corner and I freeze every muscle in my body. Then, as luck would have it, my foot twitches and snaps a twig. The light hovers above the bush but doesn’t go into it and eventually passes on. I breathe a sigh of relief then hear a jingle of metal. I promptly feel a cold wet spot pressing against my cheek along with the soft hair of his face. The light meanders back then focuses on him, and thus finds me. Dog is man’s best friend and Tracks is mine. No matter what, he finds me.

Tracks was born back in 2001. A purebred Havanese from West Virginia with black hair all over his body except for white patches on his chest and tops of his feet. The breeder sent out a picture of him and his litter and I knew he would be the dog for me. So from New York City off to the breeder we went, and it was that trip that helped my mom face her fear of flying post 9/11. My parents tried to tame the enthusiasm of their young son by saying that any puppy could be the right fit. But they were wrong. Running around the field with the litter they formed a V shape behind me and at the front was one dog. That same one that charmed me from the photo, and no matter where I went that day he was by my side. Every so often one of his brothers and sisters would wander off but not him. He knew where he wanted to be and I was happy to spoil him.

The downside to life as an only child: there’s a lot of alone time. Sitting in my room, doing homework or just talking to friends online or playing video games, I’d find myself wondering what life would be like if I had a brother or sister. Despite the fights and jealousies that stereotypically arise, at times it’s nice to have someone there to turn to. I grew to love the time as a lonely human because I wasn’t truly alone. During the times I wish I had a sibling, I’d hear scratches at my door.

If my door was slightly ajar, next thing I knew there’s Tracks up on my bed sitting next to me awaiting to be petted, wagging his tail and looking up at me. If I dared to take too long, he’d scratch the closest hand providing an example of what he wanted. Then once the hand wises up to his demands he’d roll onto his back to help get it into position. Tracks was always willing to be there for physical contact, and like all dogs always willing to listen. He always showed up when I needed him.

Being my parent’s only child led to some growing pains as time went on. Wanting to have later curfews, spending time at friend’s houses, getting in trouble for parties, deciding which colleges to apply to, the list goes on. All too often those fights ended with both sides upset with one another and in need of time apart. For me, that resulted – as always – in my room with the door shut. Yet, Tracks broke down that wall. He would push open my door, as he had done so many times before and sit next to me. Tracks was always on my side and never thought I was immature or ungrateful. I always thanked him for showing up and gave him his customary rub down.

Over the years I, like many children, found myself sick and out of school for a day. In 7th grade was the worst bout of sickness I’ve ever had to go through. Lying in bed I wasn’t be able to breathe through my nose. Hours slipped by only of note based on which nostril was closed due to flooding. Wave after wave of cold and sweat came over me. My mom said my temperature read 103 degrees and that I was to be kept in bed until the fever broke. Most people would have wanted to stay away for fear of catching whatever had put me on the brink of a deadly high fever. Tracks, on the other hand, was in my room and only left to be fed and when he was taken out for walks. He stayed in next to me, pressing himself against my shivering body, for the three days it took until I was back to a normal temperature. Selfless as always, Tracks made sure that his human was back to full health as best he was able.

Since I’ve been in college the times I’ve been able to see him – as to be expected with hundreds of miles of distance – became scarce. He was only only able to celebrate my arrival home on holidays. Provided of course that the holidays are spent at home instead of in some far off land. A Christmas present itself were the days when I walked in the door and got to hear Tracks barking hellos, feel his wet nose against my skin once more, and bestow upon my truest friend a hug. The sad thing about Christmas presents is also in what makes them so wonderful: they come once a year. As time went on my parents offered to have me home if I ever needed it, yet it was always a question of how long could I go without seeing Tracks. The only guaranteed has been that we are reunited for the summer. And that was the last time I saw him.

A sunny day in summer 2012 Tracks and I spent it running around the back yard. He always seemed to revert back to being a puppy when we ran out there, smiling and keeping up with me no matter how fast I sprinted. That little dog’s legs became a blur as he bounded across the grass. After each sprint I bent down and feel his soft, now peppered, hair, amazed that despite my longer stride he’d be there with me. I couldn’t tell if he was tired or not but I took him with me to the hammock we have in our backyard. Swaying there with Tracks was an easy way for me to forget about the stresses of everyday life and after he fell asleep I swiftly followed.

I woke up to my mom telling me it was time for dinner, and she led her two “boys” to the kitchen for their respective meals. Despite being older, Tracks still faded into the darkness like he had for so many years and I smiled knowing that my little shadow would stay close to me. My dad recounted the story of how we went to get Tracks and how happy he was that the two of us become a pair. He also talked about how much Tracks misses me during my stints at school, yet how happy he is every time I come home. He was more active, wagged his tail more, and barked more. And even with the annoyance of the barking it’s worth seeing boy and dog reunited. We finished our meal, then I took Tracks to my room for the night. As I was due to leave for RIT in the morning, I wanted to make the time last.

It was hard to leave my old friend but that is the life of a college student. As time went on I realized that I miss him more than anyone else back home. Whenever I talk to my parents I always ask about how Tracks is doing. At first it was in jest but that was how I first learned about Track’s heart murmurs. Thankfully my parents knew that I would worry about him and made sure to keep Tracks on the medication as the vet prescribed. Anything less than how he treated me when I was ill would not be tolerated.

The next few months had passed and I went to my girlfriend’s family home in Northborough, Massachusetts for Christmas. A place with two Bernese Mountain dogs and three cats and now five humans, her home was alive with the holiday spirit. On December 23rd I couldn’t get to sleep until after 3am. When I finally woke up at around noon my parents gave me a phone call. The quiver in my mom’s voice told me that the holiday wasn’t so happy. The call was the one call I had been dreading to hear.

Track’s heart condition had caught up to him and he passed away. He went to my room and was lying down next to my bed as my parents spent that time with him. My mom got him a dose of medication and Tracks’ breathing seemed to calm down which put my dad at ease and let him go to bed at around 1:30am. My mom stayed with Tracks until about 2:30am at which point she couldn’t stay awake anymore and thought he was going to pull through the rough night. My parents awoke with a start at 3am to a noise coming from my room and went to go check on him. As Tracks was struggling to breathe, he was in a room belonging to someone who wasn’t able to be there. The dog who always found his human when in need didn’t get the same luxury in the end.