

IT'S A DOG'S LIFE
By Richard Taylor
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Now at 51 years of age, I've made the shocking discovery that I've become one of those old farts driving around alone in the family vehicle with his dog. Almost everywhere I go, he's with me, steadily looking forward into the oncoming traffic. A badass collie, checking out hostile pedestrians, or barking at cows, especially the artificial ones in front of Le Biftheque Restaurant on Greenbank Road. He's got a personal thing against bikers in helmets, and half dead commuters nodding off on loaded buses. Recently, my oldest daughter Sky said, "Shadow's your best friend, isn't he Dad?"



When I enter the house, no matter what time it is, or how many people are inside, the first thing I do is greet the dog. The second thing I do is grab Shadow's long nose and give it a good shake. He's always so deliriously happy to see me, but I know I'll never have the kind of money it would take to pay a human being to be that attentive.

I keep telling my wife Dale, "These are the good old days. We should enjoy them while they last." Even now while our life seems 'too full' and we're constantly driving our girls to and from basketball games and practices. Now when we have a dwindling cash flow, absolutely no free time, and our relatives and friends are getting old, some even dying. But with this cocky ten-year-old collie who replaced our other beloved collie, Ruby who passed away only a year ago, there is cause for much celebration.

In a house full of gnarly menopausal and pre and post pubescent women, a sensible, loyal male dog has tipped the balance in my favour. I realize that we're soul mates as I observe him in our back yard near the fence, savouring his solitude, and I'm sure, ruminating on his own gratitude. Often he'll just sit and stare out beyond the park, reflecting on who knows what deep memories about his other three previous owners. And whenever the end of his nose tries to curl up to one squinty, watering eye and he lets out the most painfully satisfying sneeze that nearly gives him whiplash, I rush over to comfort him by scratching his nose. I don't mind the drifting cauliflower-sized hairballs, too much. Or even his inability to do the amazing stunts that dogs on TV seem to perform so easily, like opening door knobs with their teeth. Because I'm so impressed by the way that he is hard - wired into the ancient rituals dogs have performed since they first began circling a few times before lying down - eyes vigilant in case a stone age man, a woolly mammoth or a sabre tooth tiger is lurking about to do them harm. So that in our house, he instinctively jams himself into the tightest possible corner with his back pressed against the front door, wedged in by someone's wet boots, safely protected while he dreams of dog bliss.

Of course, we never have to decide who is taking whom for a walk. We just leave the house together and disappear along the bike path that runs parallel to the train tracks, sniffing fresh air and enjoying the open sky and each other's silent company. With the trail covered in snow, he loves to lift one leg to calligraphy his initials, displaying the flamboyance of Salvador Dali. Then he's off bounding ahead, lowering his chops to scoop up a cold mouthful of snow for his aging gums. He's invincible until he approaches a section of the fence to take on an enormous Newfoundlander. Once they spot each other, he begins frothing at the mouth. Then he rushes face first into the steel mesh of the fence, a rabid brute. Why he goes berserk with this dog and ignores so many others, is obvious. As the black Newfoundlander lumbers up to protect his own turf, (safely behind the fence) Shadow reacts so unreasonably because the Newfie looks like an uncoordinated human dressed up in a very bad dog costume. Further along the trail we both pretend he's not really having a king dump, until he finishes and coyly moves on while I scoop and bag it, sauntering away as though we're an accomplished pair of shop lifters.

Although he is blessed with the flexibility to reach any of his body parts, we share the same propensity to psychotic behaviour - sensual fiends at the mercy of our noses, eyes, ears, tongues, and sensitive feelings. Suckers for an audience, affection or any frickin' bone thrown our way. Always keen for a nap, a walk, something to eat, a long drive or short one. Everyday at the foot of my writing desk, he sits or sleeps, a bloody wonder to behold.

But the true test of any dog is when each family member can declare, "Oh, he's my dog." Quinn, my youngest daughter, calls him Cha Chi or Chad and gets him so revved up they both have to be sent to their rooms for quiet time. Sky calls him Magoo, and always has a protector, a rapt audience of one. My wife will allow Mr. Magado up on our bed, then she invites the whole family in until he lies pampered among his harem of admirers.

All in all, the perfect chap. Irreplaceable, and profoundly loved. So that I'm happy to conclude, the older I get, the more I realize one should take nothing for granted. Especially when it comes to a good dog.

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