

Many of us have had a "starter home" - that first house we buy, maybe with our new spouse, before we know *exactly* what we want or need. We all have had a "starter car" - that first clunker we get for school, or just out of school, which gets us around until we can afford better. Some of us have had "starter marriages" - we swore that we loved them dearer than ourselves, and that this would last our entire life - until it doesn't.

More of us need "starter dogs."

She came to us almost by accident. My wife and I had discussed getting a dog when we moved into our new home, but hadn't made any firm plans. We had, however, mentioned this idea to our tenants down the street. One night, after my wife had gone to bed, and I was just on my way there, one of those tenants called and asked "Would you like this dog? She's real nice." I said that I would talk with Kathi, and went to bed. In the morning, I got up and left for work before she woke up (our usual timing). Not very much later, Julie came and knocked on the door. "Kathi, I know you are in there - I see your car!" My wife sleepily answered the door, and was met by Julie and a rail-thin black and white Lab mix, maybe six months old, who could not stop wagging so hard that her whole body shook. "You said you wanted a dog!" Julie exclaimed, and my wife, her resistance not yet fortified by coffee and further reduced by still being in bedclothes, took the dog in.

We called her Shadow, since in that first week she would not leave our sides for an instant. She had obviously been totally neglected; she was so skinny that you could see her ribs, backbone and hipbones without any meat to cover them. But she didn't seem to have been physically abused - she wasn't hand-shy or skittish, she never cowered or bolted from us when we had to speak sharply to her, she never showed any aggressive

tendencies. Since neither my wife nor I had ever had a dog before, we were 'winging it' with everything we did for her. How often did she have to go outside to do her business? How far, how fast, how often did she need to be walked? What should she eat? How much? What did she need from the vet, the groomer, any pet-sitters?

Yet Shadow was a *perfect* first dog. She was housebroken from the start. She relished whatever random cheap brand of dry dog food we gave her. She walked reasonably well on a leash, and she minded us as well as any dog could have been expected to. And she adored us beyond any measure we had earned from her.

Oh, she did have a few faults. She never learned that we wanted her to bark when someone came to the door, and **not** when a squirrel ran up our tree, or when another dog was walked down the sidewalk on the other side of the street, or when thunderstorms crashed through our neighborhood. And one time, when we had a guest over for dinner, and had cooked a smoked pork shoulder large enough to feed an entire family, there was a suspicious silence and lack of begging as we enjoyed our meal. I went into the kitchen, only to see that Shadow had pulled the whole roast off the cutting board, onto the floor, and had manage to bolt down about a third of it, before I banished her to her crate with many a cry of "BAD DOG!! BAD, BAD DOG!!" (She never did have the good grace to get sick to her stomach from *all* that very rich meat.)

I remember one magical incident our first winter. Shadow and I had gotten up very early one morning, and I went to take her for her morning walk before going to work. It had snowed about four inches the night before, and when we went outside, the pure white blanket sparkled under the streetlights. Ours were the first footprints. We walked up the block to the school at the end of the street, and crossed over to the open

field next door to it. I let her off her leash, and Shadow bounded away, running and diving in the unblemished snow. She would sprint, then suddenly stop, turn, and with her tongue hanging out of the side of her mouth, a doggy smile stretched wide across her face, bound back to me in ecstasy, nuzzling my glove as if to say "C'mon, let's play, Pack Leader!" then romping off again. We must have spent twenty or thirty minutes there, in the crisp, dark cold, as if we were the only two living beings in the city.

Shadow was always the kindest soul, and thought the very best of everyone. A stranger was just a friend she hadn't made yet. The preschool grandchildren of our next-door neighbor would come over whenever we were outside, and ask "Can we walk Shadow? Can she come out to play?" And whenever we let Shadow join them, they would innocently pull her tail and ears, or try to ride her like a miniature pony. Shadow took this all in stride, and never once snapped or complained about the friendly abuse she was receiving. She kept a bemused look on her face, as if to say, "I guess I ought to humor the human puppies."

Then there was the other next-door neighbor, a young man who we sometimes hired to do odd jobs. Shadow and he got along famously - until one night. We were all asleep in the wee hours, when I groggily woke to Shadow barking like she was promising mayhem and death, and a raucous pounding at our front door. It turns out it was this neighbor and another "drinking buddy," who were going to solicit us for more of whatever they were buzzed on. Shadow didn't stop her menacing manner until he had been carted off by the police in handcuffs. Surprisingly, when he walked back into the neighborhood the next day, Shadow greeted him with all her famous friendship. It seems she didn't mind him, just his thumping on our door at four AM.

And now it's a late summer's evening, and I'm sitting on the corner of my front lawn, Shadow lying at my feet. She looks up at me, and rolls over on her side to ask for a scratching of her chest and tummy. I comply. Then she rolls back up part way, and looks around at the neighborhood, then up at me as I scribble this out. Shadow is now fifteen and a half years old. She has such severe cataracts she must be three-quarters blind; I know she is mostly deaf. She is so lame in her hind legs that she cannot stand for more than a minute or two, cannot walk more than a few dozen feet in a drunken sailor's stagger, falling over time and again. A year and a half ago I built her a shallow ramp down the back steps, so she didn't have to fight to get into the yard. This evening, even with copious bribes of "dog cookies", she could not even attempt it. So I carried her - just as I have carried her these last few days, and as I will carry her back in later on.

This is probably her last evening on earth. My wife and I have known this day, this moment, must arrive. We have had a prescription from the vet for pain pills for almost two years now, and Shadow has religiously received a dose every morning, afternoon, and evening ever since then. We both said that we didn't want her to suffer, and that we would keep her going as long as she seemed to be enjoying herself. Just now, she wagged her tail vigorously - at me? At the people who drove by? Who knows? Is she *still* enjoying life? Who can say?

A little bit ago, when she seemed to struggle to get up, I comforted her, saying "Hey, Big Dog, it's OK. I'm your Pack Leader. I've got your back." And then, after a moment's reflection, I added - aloud but to myself - "Yeah, I've got your back. And

tomorrow I'm going to have you killed. No, I'm going to tell someone to kill you. And pay him to do it."

Is this mercy? Have I just gotten tired of carrying her in and out? Or is it selfish cruelty to keep her around, after all quality of life is gone, all gone except loyalty and trust in her "Pack Leader"? Does she trust me to let her go easy? To give her up?

I do not know what happens to us after the final breath, neither man nor beast. I believe, without any rational, objective evidence - I believe that there is an Afterlife, and lives to come - reincarnation, if you will, although I don't know if I will know myself "up there" or in the next go-round.

I hope so. I have some dear friends and family I need to catch up with.

And I would truly wish and hope and pray, with all my heart, that I could once more take a pre-dawn walk in the new fallen snow, with the most glorious "starter dog" in the world.