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Arthur

By Joy Birnbach Dunstan

His hair was the color of golden honey. His eyes were large, dark, and full of trust. He was my best friend for nearly thirteen years, never complaining, always happy to be with me, right up until his death. His name was Arthur, and there will never be another like him again.

Arthur was my dog, a proud canine of noble parentage. He was a love child, born of an unexpected affair over a backyard fence between his 40-pound Australian Shepherd mother and his 200-pound St. Bernard father. I picked him out of his litter of ten brothers and sisters because he was the biggest pup with the brightest baby blue eyes I'd ever seen. There was less than fifteen pounds of him the day I brought him home; he got high-centered on a small log in a parking area where I'd stopped to let him exercise on the way. His baby-blues soon turned brown, and he gained close to a pound a day until he eventually hit about 150 pounds.

My own life had been making some rapid changes at about this time as well. I'd left behind the city life I'd always known and was homesteading in the hills of southern Oregon. Arthur watched me

learn to handle an ax, fighting those first pieces of wood to the death as they resisted my pitiful blows. He sat by my side as I learned to milk my first goat, looking on encouragingly as my weak, city-girl fingers tried to coax the milk out of a not-so-patient doe. In time, my fingers grew strong and nimble enough that I could squirt a stream of warm milk right into Arthur's mouth. He'd lick it up saying, "See, I knew you could do it."

During kidding season, when all the does had their babies, Arthur was the day-care attendant. I'd put all the frisky baby goats out to play in the front yard, and Arthur somehow knew his job was to keep them from wandering somewhere they didn't belong. So many things that I was working hard to learn in my new life were instinctual for Arthur. He was an inspiration for me to just get out and do things instead of sitting around and wondering how.

Every night the chickens needed to be locked away in their coop, safe from raccoons and other hungry varmints. I'd shoo them in the back door, and they'd casually stroll right out the front until Arthur and I began doing this task together. He understood how to stand guard at the front door while I shooed the chickens in through the back door; it was teamwork that got this job done.

Teamwork was something I'd never known much about. I'd lived in more than a dozen places before I was even out of high

school; no sooner did I make a new friend than I learned it was time to say goodbye. Not surprisingly, I soon stopped forming very close attachments to anybody. Arthur was the first one I ever had a long-term relationship with, the first one I came to trust and rely on to be around tomorrow. His total faith in me inspired me to have more faith in myself and my own abilities.

Even when I had to do something unpleasant to him, Arthur knew I was trying to help. I remember the day he came home looking so battle-worn and tired. His big head and neck were studded with dozens of porcupine quills that had to be painfully pulled out one by one with a pair of pliers. He sat quietly as I plucked them, letting out an occasional cry but never once growling or complaining.

Arthur and I did a lot of growing up together. He helped me through a marriage, a baby, a divorce, single motherhood, and another marriage. I remember the depression and hopelessness during the early months after my divorce. Sometimes I wondered how I'd manage to keep it all together and not be a basket-case mother to my young son. Arthur was my only constant, and he kept reminding me in his special way to have faith in myself and be strong. When I thought nothing could make me laugh again, I'd look at Arthur, and his big barrel of a body with its too-small ears would make me smile. He looked like a cross between a golden retriever and a Sherman tank.

The last few years of his life, Arthur got slower and slower. He spent more time lying about the house and developed a real fondness for walnuts. I frequently kept a bowl of mixed nuts on the living room table, and Arthur, who'd never stolen any food before, took to selecting and shelling a few walnuts out of the bowl for his snacktime. He always avoided the pecans, almonds (my favorite), and filberts; he only like the walnuts.

By his last year, Arthur could hardly walk and lost control over much of his body. I refused to think about losing him, and I helped him get about as best I could. He never became grouchy and always wagged me a big hello, even when he could no longer get up to say hi. He was always so accepting of his fate, embracing the good, never complaining about the bad. When the sparkle in his eyes dimmed to a quiet sadness, I knew it was the end. Saying goodbye to my Arthur was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. No one else had ever been with me for so long or showed me as much trust and faith as that old boy. He's gone now, but certainly not forgotten, and his trust lives on a greater trust in myself.

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