

*S.J. Edelheit*

**Not Another Dog Story**

I had just returned from a trip to Florida to see my parents. My homecoming was apprehensive. My wife Nancy and I were not getting along and it was clear to me that she now had someone else in her life. I was anxious, confused, angry. At the time, Nancy was recovering from her first run-in with cancer, struggling with her health, her self-image, her uncertainties about her relationship with me. And in the middle of all this struggle, she had decided to adopt a dog. She had told me on the phone that she had just brought one home from a shelter. His given name, she said, was "Okemo" and we knew this would have to be changed. It reminded her too much of "chemo" and her cancer battle. We batted around possibilities and quickly agreed on "Max".

But as I left the cab from the airport and climbed the stairs to our apartment, this new addition was an abstraction to me, consumed as I was with unease at what kind of reception awaited me. Was my marriage truly coming apart? Were we in for another round of bitterness and misunderstanding? Suitcase in hand, I opened the door and began to step up the short flight of stairs to our living room. I could hear Nancy talking on the phone, and from her soft tone it was most likely to the "other one" in her life. My heart went cold. But then this white ball of fur flashed across the room towards me and I met Max for the first time.

He seemed ridiculously happy to see me, a complete stranger, perhaps an intruder. There was no caution, no hesitation. Max was there, a big smile on his face. I put my bag down and began stroking him, this funny, furry, oddly-shaped dog who immediately rolled over and let me rub his belly. What a happy, consoling greeting, the first of many, of thousands as it turned out. And so began our life together, the beginning of a bond that would break down all the barriers to my heart; here began my journey with this being who was to become the great spirit and soul of my life.

The card from the shelter said he was part Afghan hound, part Beard-ed-Collie. But he was probably a mix of a mix, most uniquely Max. At first, we worried he was too funny looking: A wildly-bearded, furry face, long Afghan nose, silky, fluffy white-beige-caramel coat; his rump seemed too wide, his walk at times oddly sideways, like Popeye's; his ears, of unknown, unplaced origins, were black, one pointing straight up, one flopping over. He was a 45 pound rumble of fur and jump-up energy; and in those early days we started out referring to this strange new creature of ours as "the Abominable Snowman".

This was the first of many names we would have for Max, many endearing, most based on his exuberant, sometimes exasperating behaviors. Those first weeks and months, we often called him either "the gangster" or "the little hooligan". What little we knew of his hard history had not really prepared us for the whirlwind that had entered our lives. We knew he had been through at least two families, the second having witnessed his being thrown out of a car window; they rescued him and then a short time later abandoned him as well. He was too much, apparently, for them to handle and according to the shelter people he was thought to have spent some months running mostly wild and uncared for in the northern sub-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

urbs of Boston. When we got him, he had heart-worm, did not know what a ball was and seemed totally unfamiliar with the idea of a biscuit. He was uncivilized and in the early photographs we took of him there's a hardness in the eyes, the eyes of an abused but thoroughly unbroken pup. In later pictures, the eyes are so soft, so full of love and trust and fun. But, as I say, that was later and only after some hard testing and a slow bonding of selves and spirits.

When my wife went to see him at the shelter, she says Max got up in his cage as soon as she walked in; he looked her in the eye and all but said "I'm yours, get me out of here!" And when she took him out for a brief get-acquainted walk, he bounded about with such happy energy and gently leapt up to place his paws on her chest and licked her face. Nancy was won over and Max came home with her.

That's not to say we didn't have doubts about this furious little being. The little gangster could not be left alone. What we now recognize as his "separation anxiety" was intense. Having been abandoned too many times, he couldn't bear to have us leave and took out his tension on our apartment. Whole rooms were leveled. And whatever training Max had previously had, he now considered optional. Walks with him were fun but exasperating. It turned out he was hugely strong for his size and he would drag us down the street after some dog or other like a powerful little tractor. "Heel, Heel, stop!" we yelled. Max ignored us. So, we quickly discovered, we couldn't safely leave him inside and taking him with us outside was, to say the least, an adventure. If we were going to keep him, we had to find some way to civilize the little hooligan.

The first order of business was to keep Max, in his hyper-anxiety, from destroying the house whenever we went out. Crating him was the obvious answer. So up from the basement storage room came the old heavy steel cage my wife had used for her previous dog, a large German Shepherd named Gretchen. The cage had always worked for the much larger Gretchen; we were sure it would solve our problems with Max. We were wrong.

I set the cage up in the living room and introduced Max to it. He sniffed it over but clearly wanted no part of it. When the time came for me to go off to work, I gently pushed him inside, locked the door and bid him a smiling good bye. He seemed to smile back. And when I returned from work, I knew why. I opened the door to the apartment to find Max waiting on the other side, greeting me with his usual jumping happiness. I walked up the short flight of stairs to the living room in amazement. The apartment was torn apart as usual. And the cage? The top grate was apparently secured only by a flimsy latch and Max had quickly figured out how to pop this open and leap right on out.

Okay, one up for the pup. Back down to the storage unit I went and came up with a bicycle chain and lock. With these I lashed the top grate and fashioned an ultra-secure home for our wayward guy. There was no way out now for this clever little dog. Or so I thought.

The next day I confidently went off to work and waved to Max secure in his cage. As usual, he eyed me with an apprehensive smile. When I returned that evening, and opened the apartment door, there was Max

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

again happily greeting me at the bottom of the stairs. "How did you..." I sputtered. Maxie jumped around with joyous abandon as I warily climbed the steps to examine the unbreakable fortress of a crate. Of course it was utterly broken. The top grate was in place, the bicycle chain and lock undisturbed. But the side bars of the cage were bent and twisted as if an 800-pound gorilla had easily pulled them apart.

As we were to learn over and over in our life with Max, he had an eerie, unnatural strength to go with his dogged persistence and staggering intelligence. Somehow he had managed to bend and destroy the cage bars and then step through to freedom. Round two went to Max, but I was determined to match his persistence with my own. Gretchen's demolished box went out in the trash and my wife and I went off to the kennel supply store to consult with them on a replacement. They recommended a large molded plastic crate with a steel door and double-loaded spring locks. "These are the kind the airlines use," the kennel clerk told us smugly. "No dog can get out of this. We guarantee it."

We shrugged, paid our money, and took the thing home. Max took one look at it and seemed to sigh in frustration, as if to say: "You guys still don't get it, eh." The unbreakable, airlines-guaranteed cage did last a little longer; but only long enough for Max to figure out that while he couldn't undo the double-loaded spring locks on one side of the door, there was nothing to stop him from chewing away the plastic that held the hinges on the other side. This did take him a few days, but later that week I came home from work and Max again happily met me at the bottom of the stairs. The crate sat forlornly in the living room, its steel door collapsed and undone.

Of course, I should have stopped right there. But this had become a battle of wills, a test of persistence and smarts and I was determined to establish some sense of rule of order in this house. So back we went to the kennel shop. The all-knowing clerk stared in numbed silence as we placed the formerly impregnable crate on the counter. He nodded at us, took the destroyed model away and disappeared into the back storeroom. When he returned, he was carting a new, shiny, heavily-barred steel contraption. He placed it in front of us and pointed at this machine of confinement. "This is our most expensive, super deluxe model," he said. Like a Cadillac salesman, he circled the crate singing out its admirable features. Bars *both* vertical and horizontal; again, two heavy-duty spring-loaded locks. "If that doesn't work, nothing will," he called after us as we hefted the crate out the door.

For the next ten days, all went according to plan. We locked Max up in his new home when we left, and when we returned, cautiously opening the apartment door, we were relieved to find him still in his crate, anxious as always, happy to see us, but safe and secure. The apartment was untouched. No pillows scattered over the floors, no shards of vases or pottery littered about, no chewed newspapers strewn down the hall. We had won this battle at last.

And then the weather turned beastly hot. We only had one air conditioner at the time and that was in our bedroom. As we were about to visit some friends for most of a July afternoon, we decided to move Max's cage to the air-conditioned space. Otherwise, we knew we would worry about

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

him in this heat. I could tell Max did not at all approve of having his crate moved to the back of the house. This change of venue seemed to raise his already over-the-top anxiety. But what could we do? It was barely 11:00 and already we were drenched with sweat on this humid morning. We placed Max's cage on a large, beige throw rug in our bedroom, a rug coincidentally the same color as him. On went the AC; into the cage went the nervous pup; the spring-loaded locks were set and we said our goodbyes as we shut the door to the cooling room.

We returned hours later, numbed by the heat, but having spent a happy day swimming with our friends at Walden Pond. I marched down the hall to the bedroom and opened the door. And there was a sight that mystifies me still: Max was out of the crate; the spring-loaded door remained closed and locked; and the beige throw rug was rolled up and inside the cage. There were tufts of fur scattered about and some traces of blood on the cage bars, but no clue how Max had pulled off this Houdini trick. I was stunned and decided there and then that the game was up. We would confine this break-out artist, this Willie Sutton of pups, no more.

I've told this story of Max's last and greatest escape many times over the years, with growing pride I must admit at how smart, how strong, how utterly clever and magical this beloved being of our's turned out to be. We were often asked if Max was a good guard dog. "No", we truthfully replied, he was too friendly, curious, and affectionate for that. But he was, as our local minister had said on hearing the story, a "God-dog": a powerful, wise, and mysterious creature who was worthy of all our love.

Max was the Michael Jordan of pups. Though funny-looking, under all that fur he was a finely-honed athletic machine. Our vet, on examining him one day, off-handedly commented on Max's unusual muscular development. We didn't know what that meant at the time. As we discovered, it meant that he was uncommonly strong and wiry--and fast.

Because he was so fast, we were always nervous about letting Max off the leash; he was so attuned to greeting other dogs, and heeded our calls so little, that we were afraid he would run off and get into fights or, worse, into traffic. Unclipped and free, he could bolt and disappear from view in an instant. We spent a couple of early, distraught walks literally beating the bushes for Max, calling fruitlessly, after he'd hightailed it around a corner or beyond some trees. So we put a quick stop to leash-less ventures except in large open fields or parks. And there we let him run. As soon as the leash was undone, he shot forward across the field, searching out other dogs, other people, any other beings of possible interest. He was a sight to behold. We'd wave our arms and call and eventually he'd see us and shoot back in our direction at a fantastic clip. We'd kneel to give him a target and he'd head straight for us, swerving only at the last possible moment. Then he'd quickly circle us, throw a smile over his shoulder, and race off again to the far end of the field.

Once, at Nancy's brother's old farmhouse in New Hampshire, we were out in the fields for some of this racing fun. At the far, far end of the property, a neighbor had a corral with several horses. It didn't take Max long to notice that something interesting lay in that direction. Off he went at rocket speed, ignoring our calls as usual. When he reached the corral and the horses, he did a quick U-turn without breaking stride and streaked



## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

back to us; when he got close, we could see he had a huge grin on his face, as if to say, "Those were some big pups, eh?"

Max proved to be a much more versatile athlete than just a runner. He was adept as well at incredible leaps and twirls. It was not unusual, when we took him for his evening walk, for Max to race full-force down the four flights of stairs from our apartment and wait for us to catch up. And when we finally arrived, he would do 360-degree helicopter spins, his feet completely off the floor, his body in joyous rotating flight.

But his true athletic wonder appeared only when we took Max climbing in the mountains. Each Fall we had taken to making the long drive up to the Blue Hill Peninsula in Maine where we rented a rustic cabin on a lovely meadow overlooking Blue Hill Bay. For Max, this was paradise. He loved romping unleashed through the fields, a riot of smells everywhere. The one deep unhappiness for him our first few years there was our leaving him behind when we left to make the 40-minute drive to Acadia National Park. We hiked the mountains there, which we loved; but watching Max's sad, concerned face through the cabin screen door as we pulled away always made us sad and guilty. But for some reason we had convinced ourselves that climbing mountains would be too much for Max; after all, there were sheer rock cliffs and steep trails. In retrospect, it's hard to believe how foolish we were.

Our third year in Maine, my wife convinced me to try taking Max along. After an easy, not very challenging climb, we decided to move on to a harder trail. About ten minutes into the hike we came to a sheer rock wall about 15 feet high. We'd forgotten about this impasse. Nancy and I paused and exchanged looks. Max didn't break stride. He clambered straight up the rock face, his powerful back legs finding enough small cracks and ledges to quickly propel him to the top. There he stopped briefly to wait for us and when we finally, slowly hoisted ourselves up to reach him, he bounced away along the trail and out of sight.

It turned out Max was a natural for hiking, strong and clever, always leading us back to the right trail when we got lost. And when there was an impediment, he found a way around it or, as in the case of the wall, rocketed over it. His stamina was daunting. For every mountain we climbed, he climbed two. He would disappear up a trail as we toiled on only to rush back down and reappear with a joyous grin that said, "What's taking you so long? Isn't this great!"

Once we reached the top of these Acadia hills, we usually paused to take pictures of the beautiful water views: Frenchman's Bay, Blue Hill Bay, and the Atlantic. Of course, Max is in photo after photo, nuzzling close, golden-white fur blowing in the wind, eyes full of spark and mischief. The only climbs we didn't take him on were those with walls so sheer one had to clamber up iron rungs hammered into the rock face. But perhaps we should have brought Max to these obstacles and let him have a go. It wouldn't have surprised me if he found a way to get himself up and to the top.

It wasn't only in the mountains that Max's athletic prowess came in handy. Early in his sojourn with us, we got an invitation from friends of ours who lived out in the country. Mike and Laura had a large Chow

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

whose fearsome nature would prove itself over the years. But at that time, we expressed only mild uncertainty when they asked us to bring Max out to meet their pup. Of course, we all should have known better. A big male country dog was bound to be territorial and aggressive and introducing another, strange male on his property was in retrospect a very dumb move.

But we swallowed our caution, threw Maxie in the back of our Toyota and kept our fingers crossed that he wouldn't get car sick, something he did with alarming regularity. But this trip he was fine, happy to stick his nose out the window and snuff in all the delightful new country smells. When we arrived, Mike and Laura came out and fussed over Max while we all got reacquainted. After a brief chat, Mike suggested we take Max around the side of the house to meet their Chow. He saw our hesitation and quickly reassured us. "Not to worry, he's locked in his pen. They'll be fine."

As soon as we rounded the corner of the house, it was clear all would not be fine. The "pen" turned out to be just a five-foot high wooden gate and their big Chow took one look at Max, growled menacingly, and easily leapt the fence. He came charging forward and this was a scary sight to behold. This dog was lion-like, thickly muscled and fiercely mean in temperament. He outweighed Max by a good 40 pounds and rushed on him instantly. We all froze; fortunately, Nancy had the good sense or instinct to let go of Max's leash. The muscle-bound Chow leapt, but by the time he landed our agile pup had rolled out of the way and was no longer there. The next few minutes were an astonishing exhibition of Max's ability to outrun, out turn, and outwit the larger dog. The Chow would growl, pant, flash his teeth and chase after Max who would turn on a dime and dance out of the way. Again and again, the furious Chow charged and came up empty and bewildered.

Max continued to play the matador to the Chow's bull and seemed to be enjoying himself enormously. But the rest of us were in shock. Finally, Mike stepped between the dogs and grabbed his guy by the collar. He started to admonish the dog and was in the middle of shaking his finger at him when the frustrated Chow jumped his master, biting him on the arm. Mike staggered back, yelled and cursed; again he shook his finger and again the dog leapt, this time nipping the man's chest.

The appalling standoff between dog and owner continued until Laura managed to come up behind the Chow, snap a leash on him, and pull the dog away. We left soon after and as I drove home I peeked at Max in the rear-view mirror; he was curled softly in the back, his eyes dancing. And as I studied him, I knew in my bones that, no matter what, Max would never hurt me, never turn on me. That was part of our bond. I would trust him with my life and he would do the same with me. And that's the way it was with us always.

While we loved Max's exuberance, it occasionally got out of hand. We got tired of being dragged down the street after him and of his reluctance to come when called. So we decided that some training was in order. Nancy found an obedience class at a local kennel and off we went with Max in tow. I didn't have great expectations for this venture. The trainer was a large, rough fellow, an ex-marine he assured us; but, still, my confidence

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

was low. The motley mix of other pups were all over the place in their focus and abilities. But Maxie did fine. When we returned to pick him up a few hours later, the marine told us Max was tops in his class, acing all the tests and getting his certificate. No problem.

The problem was that for Max this was all a game. As soon as school was out and he was home, he reverted to his usual behavior, dragging, pulling, and generally running amuck when the spirit took him. So we decided some graduate level training was in order. We found the name of a highly recommended trainer and author of dog-obedience books. The trainer seemed serious, intelligent, and mildly disparaging of both us and our dog. We were obviously too laid back for his tastes and Max, in his analysis, was lacking in self-confidence. We didn't quite agree on either diagnosis but arranged for a course of private training sessions. It soon became clear that while the trainer had his carefully thought-out strategy, so did our dog Max. Once again, he became the model pup, dutifully going through the motions and behaving impeccably. And back at home, with no apparent lack of confidence, he briefly tolerated our repetition of the trainer's lessons, and then again did what he wanted to do.

Down through the years, Max obliged us by learning and performing a few engaging tricks, especially if there was a biscuit involved in the bargain. But he never agreed to stop pulling us like a diesel tractor on his walks when he wanted to get somewhere quicker than we could manage. As he got older, though, he did come when called. By then, while the bolting instinct was still there, I like to think Max placed a greater value on sticking close to us. And so when we called, he would hesitate a moment and look around, then trot back to us with that happy grin we loved.

My wife had been a cancer patient for more than 15 years. She had the BRCA-1 genetic mutation, but she was tough and resilient and so survived first a bout with breast cancer and then, five years later, a much more serious and savage struggle with ovarian. Through most of those years and the worst of times, Max was her steady companion, her silent consoler; he was our well of joy who could always break the spell of doom that hung over us. But then, long after we thought the ovarian battle was won, the cancer came back, this time metastasized to the liver.

This news was grim enough, but now Max began to fail as well. He was old (14) and slowed. The powerful tractor who had dragged me down the street now kept to my side or came to a stop, waiting for me to pull *him* along. As the months went by, he could no longer run or jump; the bouncing, leaping spirit had turned into a little old dog who could only haltingly climb the stairs without help. And then, within weeks, Max seemed to become more and more disoriented, cautious, and unresponsive to us. When he stopped meeting us at the door, we realized he could no longer hear us come in. Tests revealed a brain tumor which soon brought on vestibular disease that took his balance and meant he could no longer manage the stairs at all. I carried him up and down for his "walks" which became more and more "leans". He could only move outside by pressing against my leg as we shuffled along. And his beautiful fur, always golden in the sun and fluffed in the wind as he ran, became matted, his muscled body haggard and bony, his usual fresh, outdoorsy smell musty and stale.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

As Max's condition worsened, so did my wife's. Running out of options, with much fear and dread, Nancy had decided to undergo an experimental double stem-cell transplant. This was a horrible, hellish, last-ditch kind of treatment that many of her doctors thought she would not survive. And after spending nearly the entire summer in the hospital, Nancy came home. And she weighed 90 pounds; she'd lost all her hair; and she looked like a holocaust survivor. But she had survived. She was still here, and she was more determined than ever to go on.

And then three weeks later Max died. We had begun to hand-feed him bits of salmon when he could eat at all. And soon, when the time came, we made a final appointment for him at the vet for a Monday morning, hoping to have one more weekend with him. But Monday never came. When I tried to rouse him at the foot of the bed for his Sunday morning walk, he was glassy-eyed and unconscious. When I lifted him, his poor, frail body flopped like a rag doll's. We took him to the animal clinic and the nice, emergency-on-call vet placed Max on a metal table and then left the room to give us some time alone with him. We stroked his long Afghan nose which seemed now like furred stone. We kissed him, said our goodbyes and words of love, and then the vet came back in and stopped his great heart.

On the way home from the vet, both of us were lost in our silence and sadness. And then Nancy put her hand on my arm and told me that all summer long she had felt the Angel of Death was waiting at our door. And she thought He had come for her; but Max had gone in her place. And she said she believed that just as Max had always gone ahead on our hikes in Acadia, had always found the right trail, he had gone ahead again to find the path for her into the next world. Now, my wife was a believer, and when we debated the afterlife, as we sometimes did, I would ask: "Nance, what is this you believe in?" And she would shrug and say: "I'm not sure. But I know it's a place where when I get there, all my dogs will be waiting for me." And, as someone once said, that's as good a definition of heaven as any.