

Maggie Mae Hampton

When I got married three decades ago I inherited a unique menagerie. Along with my beautiful Terri came two elderly mixed-breed dogs, two cute guinea pigs and a diabetic tomcat called Kitty Kitty. I contributed my seven year old son Christopher and his bunny rabbit to the new household. In addition to being a hard working clinical pharmacist, Terri was also a licensed veterinarian so our furry family members were assured excellent medical care. But time runs its course, much too soon it seems for our treasured animal friends, and eventually we found ourselves without a canine companion.

Terri wanted to adopt a Doberman pup. I was hesitant, thinking of attack dogs and burglars scrambling over fences to escape them. Terri assured me they were very gentle and highly intelligent. They made excellent watch dogs because they were so reliable. I gave in, she had treated them in a clinic in the past and I trusted her counsel. Of course she was right. Porsche was loving, gentle and a perfect pal for our son Christopher. She was with us for about five years before tragedy struck. While outside, Terri had temporarily removed Porsche's leash prior to feeding her and turned away to grab a bag of dog food. When she turned back Porsche was gone. She had disappeared without a sound. Terri desperately looked in every direction, but Porsche was nowhere to be found. Then a loud screech of tires invaded the silence and Terri ran toward the noise. At the nearby county road a car was stopped and Porsche lay in the ditch. Upon tearful examination Terri determined Porsche was gone. Terri had only turned her head for a moment. Porsche had never tried to run away before, especially before being fed, but, this time, for some reason, she sprinted to an untimely death. Of course we were all devastated. But, most concerning for me, Terri blamed herself even though it was a freak accident.

I felt the best way to ease the grief was to get a puppy. So while Terri was visiting a friend, Christopher and I traveled to a farm a few miles away and came back home with Mollie, a cute little Border Collie, Springer Spaniel mix. It was Terri's birthday and I felt Mollie would be a welcome present. I was right for once. Mollie was a joy. We lived in the country and all of us enjoyed walking the fields and woods together next to a lively stream where Mollie would try to catch crawdads. She would also love to eat blackberries. Carefully threading her snout between the thorns she would only select the ripest berries. I had never seen a dog do that before. She also loved beer which made her man's best friend. Many a summer night she would beg me for another can, but I refused to let my girl become an alkie. Mollie was with us for only six wonderful years. Despite the best health care possible she succumbed to an ailment that is still a mystery to us. Again, we were all grief stricken, but I felt Terri was additionally burdened with a sense of guilt due to her impotence in saving our Mollie.

We were emotionally bereft without a dog in our family and the sadness in passing by Mollie's empty house and taking walks in the woods without her leading the way eventually prompted us to try and find another like her, even though we knew the chances were slim. We found a reputable Border Collie breeder near St. Louis who had a pup with markings eerily similar to Mollie, so we made the long journey and returned with Savannah. What a spirited little girl. She and Christopher would play for hours until they were both a spent heap. Terri also enrolled her in obedience and agility classes where she seemed to thrive.

She was just getting her stride in life when it was abruptly snuffed out. An avid gardener, Terri would always take her on a leash to wherever she was working so Savannah could join in the dirt work they both loved. Terri had pounded a tall section of rebar into the earth and attached Savannah's leash to it so her hands would be free. It had rained the day before and apparently softened the ground enough that Savannah jerked the rebar free when she lunged toward the sound of our neighbor's large SUV storming down the nearby road. She must have thought she could herd the huge beast as she never

even hesitated prior to getting struck by the vehicle. Terri screamed, and I came running from the house to discover Terri kneeling by Savannah's broken body. Terri examined her and found a spark of life so we bundled her up and drove vastly over the speed limit, dodging cars and trucks on I-44, to get Savannah to the emergency clinic. She passed away in Terri's arms as I pulled into the parking lot.

To say tears were shed is the understatement of a lifetime and Terri was inconsolable. Most disturbing for me, I knew she once again blamed herself for another tragic loss even though any guilt was misplaced. Her love and compassion for all our dogs had instantly transformed them into family. I observed her crying silently the next day and wondered if we were somehow cursed? How can this happen? We provided the ultimate in care for our dogs...found the perfect, healthiest food, bathed them, brushed them, provided the best medical care, always kept them on a leash when they were not in their pen or in our house and LOVED them, still...we could not save them.

In the past Terri had always been hesitant to get another dog right away after losing one, the pain being much too deep and searing. This time; however, she agreed with me when I suggested looking for another to fill the void in our lives. I believe she was headed into a very dark place emotionally and needed salvation. Then it came.

Through the souls of our precious Mollie and Savannah we had found Border Collies to be such wonderful and loving companions that I started checking online to see if I could find another. I stumbled across some photos of Border Collie pups being offered by a breeder in a small town about an hour away. Unfortunately, all their pups were adopted and we would have to wait several months for an opportunity during the next breeding cycle. Disappointed, I idly scrolled down the page and noticed a photo of an adult dog. The text beneath the photo described the dog as a Border Collie/Australian Shepherd mix. It also said she was free. It didn't take a genius to realize she was a mistake. Apparently, one of the Australians got into the Border Collie pen or vice versa and voila, this is what happens. The photo was in profile, the sitting dog seemed to be calmly gazing at something of interest out of the field of vision. I was captivated. When Terri returned from work that day I brought up the photo on my computer and suggested we go take a look. She sighed and reluctantly said okay.

The next Friday we traveled to the small rural community and eased down a driveway overgrown with weeds to a ramshackle abode matching the address we had obtained. My immediate thoughts were puppy mill and I started looking for a place to turn around before being spotted. But, we were too far in so I pulled up to the front of the house. There were several dogs of assorted sizes roaming freely in an unkempt yard. One dog calmly lay on the ground watching as the rest rushed to our car. That dog was the one from the photo...the mistake. A woman, apparently hearing our approach via the cacophony of the dogs, was standing on the porch. We introduced ourselves and I mentioned a possible interest in the dog reclining on the ground. The woman chuckled and said, "She's a real good girl, she watches TV with us once in a while and gets along real nicely with the others, but we need to let her go to save on expenses since we don't want to pay to have her spayed. She ain't worth much so you can have her for free. She's about a year old, even had a litter of pups already. Her name is Maggie."

I smiled and averted my attention briefly to Maggie. She looked tattered and tired and my heart screamed out for her. Terri on the other hand was non-plussed and motioned me over to talk privately. She reminded me that she didn't want to be pushed into anything and wanted time to think before making any determination about adopting the dog. I agreed and told the woman that we would give her a call later regarding our decision. I knelt down and patted Maggie's head. She smiled, yes smiled, and stared at me. I had never looked into eyes like those before. They were hypnotic. After a moment her eyes released me and I wandered back to our car where Terri waited.

On the drive home our conversation centered mostly on the rundown appearance of the so-called breeding establishment rather than Maggie. I chose not to talk about her although it was difficult. The last thing I wanted was a feeling that I had somehow forced Terri into such an important family decision.

We were fortunate to have a lake home in Bull Shoals, Arkansas, about two hours away from our primary residence in Springfield, Missouri. We intended to retire there in the future and in the meantime tried to spend most weekends enjoying the property. We went there on Saturday after visiting Maggie and then early Sunday morning Terri said we had to go back right away. When I asked why, she tearfully said we have to go save that dog. We did. And we gave her the middle name Mae; however, Healer would be more fitting.

Terri is a traditional Catholic, I'm pretty much a mutt regarding religion. I've never found a denomination that I could solidly hang my faith on. Maybe the way I feel about dogs in particular has something to do with it. I firmly believe dogs can be angels that come to this plane of existence to help us in ways we don't even realize. That described Maggie perfectly. She sensed our sorrow and need and somehow directed us to her. She immediately merged into our lives like she had always been there. We train our dogs to be mannerly...don't jump on people, don't lick them, bark only when appropriate and dry the dishes with a clean towel. Just kidding on the last part.

We didn't have to instruct Maggie on anything. Amazingly, for being raised hardscrabble, her manners would impress at the Queen's high tea. She just instinctively had a humbling class about her. By this time Christopher had left home and was/is serving in the Air Force as a fighter squadron medic. So Maggie only had to concentrate on Terri and me as she deeply embedded her love in an intractable way. She seemed to always know what we wanted or expected of her. You could give her a look and she would read your mind and accomplish the task. She would actually get frustrated when you gave her a command, she didn't want to be told what to do. She wanted to accomplish things on her own. I had never seen anything like it before.

Friends, neighbors and kin usually make polite remarks about a new dog. You know..."Oh what a nice doggie." "Oh, she is so pretty." "She minds so well." etc. With Maggie every person meeting her was dumbstruck by how remarkable, smart and loving she was, and all the comments were obviously sincere. She drew people like a magnet. Delivery guys wouldn't even hesitate in giving her a pat on the head and she would always smile in return. On top of all this she was a mole dog. She would catch the destructive varmints and mercifully dispatch them quickly. She would always take time to watch them for a few minutes afterward to make certain they were truly dead and not suffering.

Maggie preferred being outside and I built her a doggie mansion. A huge double-wall insulated building with an igloo type entrance as a windbreak and a large window so she could see what was going on when she was in residence. Of course, we brought her in our house probably as much as she spent in hers. We just couldn't stand to be away from her for long. Shortly after Maggie joined us we bought a home surrounded by almost forty acres divided equally by pasture and trees. We loved it so much we dropped the idea of retiring to our lake house and sold it. I think Maggie had a paw influencing this decision...she loved the place.

We have two ponds, one of them very scenic so I built a dock on it. On summer evenings we would take our side by side vehicle out to the pond to feed fish from the dock. Maggie insisted on escorting us there and back at the highest velocity possible. She loved to run and was lightning fast. When

Christopher would visit on leave Maggie became a puppy again and they played relentlessly. And the years went by. And nothing happened to Maggie.

Terri and I couldn't help but recall the awful fates of our other dogs and we instinctively tried to protect her like helicopter parents. Maggie would give us a look that said, "C'mon, I know what I'm doing." And she did. For twelve years she did. We knew what was inevitably coming, but we kept putting it out of our minds as Maggie began doing run/walks instead of mad dashes to the pond. We started keeping her inside our house most of the time, just to be able to savor every last ounce of her while we could. And we did.

Then one evening in January she collapsed on her side while stepping on her bed. I watched it happen and a cold knife buried itself to the hilt in my chest. She was already on heart meds so I assumed she had a stroke. I called Terri into the room and we comforted her with tears flowing down our cheeks. She gave us this despairing look like we were going to tell her to do something and she knew she could not comply. We brought her and her bed into our room for the evening and I suffered with her all night, listening to her labored breathing and knowing there was only one thing that could be done for her.

Terri's best friend from veterinary college had a clinic about an hour away. She had been Maggie's doc since she came to live with us. We called early the next morning and told her we were coming and why. I wanted that hour long trip to last forever, but that was not the case. As the miles flew by Terri and I reminisced about our life together with Maggie, the dog that "...ain't worth much." The joy she brought to us, just when we needed it most was immeasurable. And now we were going to have to say goodbye.

Maggie knew what was going on, she was an angel after all. When we arrived she even gathered all her remaining strength to toilet in the grass before going into the clinic so she wouldn't leave a mess. I nearly collapsed in tears as I watched. Later, as Terri and I held her, Maggie Mae turned and fixed those gorgeous brown eyes on mine, hypnotizing me as she had when we first met, captivating my heart. She never made a sound. She never moved a muscle. Maggie Mae's angel left while I gazed in her eyes. I saw her go. I know where she went. I will see her again.