

ANNE MARIE DUQUETTE

Wonder Dog's Tennis Ball

When our beloved family dog finally crossed the rainbow bridge, I knew he was gone forever...or so I thought.



I WAS WRONG! He miraculously, unbelievably, came back! To start at the beginning... Baron was our Wonder Dog, all the canine perfection that could be packed into a mixed lab pound puppy. I'd visited the animal shelter and fallen in love with the black-haired, brown-eyed pup. I brought him home the same day, much to the delight of our diapered daughter, son, and two other dogs.

Baron became a member of the family who continued to amaze us all. He grew from a pup into a shining gem—loving, loyal, protective, intelligent, and the best darn babysitter in the world! I proudly put him on one of my book covers. He was that special.

Yes, Baron was the perfect pet except for two things. One, he hated delivery men, and two, he grew old. When I knew it was time to end his suffering and said we were going to the vet, I was shocked to see huge tears fall from those big brown eyes. I had never, or ever since, seen a dog cry.

Baron didn't come home, and the four of us went into mourning. I placed his favorite toys, the five tennis balls he would never share with the pack, as a memorial on the fireplace mantle. My breaking heart knew our Baron was never coming home. Guess what? He did.

I started seeing him about the house, lying in his favorite places. I thought I was definitely losing my marbles until I heard the same from my now 11-year-old daughter. She was especially hit hard, for she had no memory of life without Baron like the rest of us. She didn't know whether to be frightened or not of "the dearly departed." When you're a kid, ghosts can be scary. But what about when it's not Halloween, and the ghost is real?



There will always be that dog that no dog will replace, the dog that will make you cry even when he's been gone for more years than he could have lived."

MEGAN DAUM

I was definitely out of my element here, but somehow, I knew what to say. "Don't be scared. I've seen him too, sweetheart. Baron knows we aren't ready to let him go. He's staying with us until we are." She soon felt comforted by his presence. I did, too. If my husband or son saw him, they never said, and I sure wasn't about to bring it up.

Weeks went by. The tears started to dry somewhat, yet our phantom dog remained. I finally suggested to the family that we get another lab. My daughter burst into tears. "No Barons!" she cried.

"How about a small dog?" I suggested.

She agreed, but only if she could make the final choice. At a no-kill shelter she finally found "my dog." At least, a sad shadow of a dog. Tivvy the terrier had belonged to a woman whose boyfriend had beaten the little thing, left her with broken ribs and tail, then thrown her into the ocean to drown. The woman had bravely rescued her pet—at great peril to her own safety—from the ocean and the man who abused them both.

For Tivvy's safety, she left her at our local no-kill shelter, along with five handwritten pages telling us every little thing about her beloved dog. Those pages were heartbreaking. She begged Tivvy's new family to please keep her safe and to love her very, very much.

By now, Tivvy was traumatized and terrified of people, especially men, and peed all over herself whenever anyone approached her kennel. No one had been able to make a connection.

My daughter swore Tivvy was "the one." My husband and I shook our heads. The shelter woman said the terrier had been spoken for, and the new owners were coming to pick her

up. My daughter broke into tears and pleaded, "At least let me hold her!"

The sympathetic shelter worker went to get the dog. My daughter begged me to "Do something, Mom!" When I didn't answer, she sank to the floor cross-legged and cried even harder.

Here came Tivvy, resisting the leash. Shivering and terrified, she pooped on the floor, and without squatting, wet herself again, urine dripping down her shaking legs. Then, to the worker's surprise, Tivvy yanked the leash free and ran straight into my daughter's arms, who hugged Tivvy close.

"Please, Mom, she loves me! Can't I have her?" Three pairs of eyes—spouse, shelter worker, and my child—looked toward me for the verdict.

Well, I am a mother, after all, and I'd walk over hot coals for my kids. I said, "I'm a writer and I work at home. This little dog obviously needs around the clock care and attention. She'll definitely get it from us."

The woman nodded her agreement. My husband heaved a heavy sigh. My daughter squealed with joy startling poor Tivvy who peed some more on my daughter's jeans. Tivvy's

scheduled adopters went home with another dog. It seemed meant to be... but no one except my daughter was happy about it. Not even Tivvy.

Tivvy's first four months with us were a nightmare. She lived, slept, ate, peed and pooped on the carpet under my daughter's bed, only coming out when my daughter came home from school. She was afraid of almost everything and everyone, and my son sadly said, "She's no Baron."

Everyone agreed except our daughter. "She's perfect! She just needs time." She was right. One day, the light dawned in this poor little terrier's head. She wasn't in hell anymore! She had nothing to fear! Slowly her true personality began to emerge. I was glad to see it, but I still mourned my Baron who, now that my daughter had a new companion, continued to keep only me company.

I'd been the first one to see him as a pup. Unlike anyone else, I'd spent 24-7 with Baron for 13 years. He was my faithful office buddy, always there under my desk when I was writing. I just couldn't let him go.

I took in Baron's row of tennis balls on the mantle, the only things he ever refused to share with the pack and held one in my hand. Even with Baron dead, I wouldn't let the other dogs have them. They were Holy Relics.

Baron

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But should they be?

Sadly, I tossed the ball down the long empty hall, just as I'd done hundreds of times for Baron. Suddenly, Tivvy popped up from underneath the couch and chased it with unrestrained joy. She actually brought it back to me! Shocked, I held the ball in my hand, and she barked, eagerly urging me on. She'd never barked before, this silent, timid, frightened little dog, yet she was now. I repeatedly threw the ball, and Tivvy retrieved it over and over until she was breathless, then hopped into my lap, ball in mouth. She let me cuddle her for the very first time.

I never saw Baron again after that day with Tivvy and his old green tennis ball. Our beloved canine friend finally went to whatever reward The Creator has in wait. And I finally said good-bye, a very hard thing to do. Baron was an incredibly loyal dog who, even in death, chose to stay and comfort me until Tivvy learned to accept her new family... and we her.

Tivvy was dearly loved by us for 19 years. She and I both learned that second chances are possible if you dare trust in new beginnings. Every time I saw her with a tennis ball, I marveled at two miracles: her new lease on life, and Baron's afterlife with me.

Some people think I've stretched the truth about my Wonder Dog. After all, they say suspiciously, I AM a fiction writer, but I stand by my story. When questioned, Tivvy, who lived in the house with my phantom companion, always remained silent.

YOU decide... ■

P.S. Tivvy's former owner kept in touch with the shelter. I hope she finally found the strength to leave her abuser, and was comforted with the knowledge that, thanks to her fierce courage and selfless devotion, her beloved dog didn't drown, healed physically and emotionally, and found a loving, forever home with us.

Sixth Sense

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children. A short visit with one of them would surely lift her spirits and accelerate her healing.

A 62-year man lies in an ICU bed. Tubes hang from every orifice. Alarms sound but no one rushes to his bedside. I see the letters DNR written over his hospital bed. Visitors standing immediately outside his room are holding hands and praying. They are red faced, sobbing and scared. I sense these are his close family members. They are God-fearing country folks who don't understand what is happening. They pray for a miracle. They are too frightened to return to his bedside. Swelling and broken skin grotesquely distort his body. Someone asks that I go into his room. Compassionate hands place me on his bed. His fingers gently touch my fur. Through swollen eyelids, his squinting eyes stare at my face. I am grateful to be the only living being he sees before he dies.

A 14-year-old girl sits in a wheelchair flailing her arms with no purposeful movement. Her head bobs from side to side. Drool pours from her mouth. "I don't know what she wants," her caretaker shouts in frustration. I sit quietly in front of her and listen. I comprehend her thick and garbled speech. What I hear is a soft voice that speaks with clarity and perfect enunciation. She says, "I am a beautiful person trapped inside a broken body. I am a human being who wants to be loved. Please help me." I immediately rush to her side. My eyes are wide and shining as I extend my head to her eye level. A shimmer of hope adorns her face. She moves her tremulous hand towards me. I raise my head high to touch her fingertips.

I love my work as a therapy Cavalier. I treasure my moments with the sick. My role is to comfort and assist them. I exist for them. Each patient is special to me. If I could speak to humans, this is my message: "Cherish each day of your life. Live each day with meaning and thankfulness. Be kind to each other for you don't know when illness may besiege you and your family. Spend time with the sick because your presence gives them hope and courage as they struggle through adversity. Know that I love them all." ■

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