

HE[♥]RT DOG

LESSONS LEARNED FROM A LIVELY AND LOVING IBIZAN HOUND

BY EMILY MOTT-MILLER

Occasionally, someone comes along who changes your life forever. They profoundly impact you in a way that can't be truly measured. Sometimes they leave, sometimes they stay, and sometimes they just exist in your world for a fleeting moment. My someone just happened to be a dog. A dog named Nick. A goofy, overbearing, benevolent dog that shook my existence and left me all the better for having loved him.

Nick was an eight-week-old Ibizan Hound puppy that came to me from our long-time family friend, Susan Fegan of Gryphon Ibizans. I can still remember delivering a borrowed crate to Susan and sitting down for coffee at her house as a litter of puppies romped and toddled around the yard. As our conversation progressed, there was one puppy that seemed to get increasingly wilder and bolder the longer they played. As we were saying our goodbyes, Susan asked me which puppy I liked the most in the litter. Immediately, my attention went to the adventurous, bold puppy. His conformation was outstanding, and he seemed to show no fear with the new things he encountered in the yard. With a smile and a wink, she looked at me and said, "Good, take him home." Thus, my adventure with Nick began.

Life with Nick did not start out easy. He tested my patience daily. He chewed up all my right shoes, brought live wild animals into the house, and constantly jumped the six-foot-tall fence to explore the countryside. Though he seemed to know his actions were wrong, he always assumed an air of superiority over his lowly human counterparts. His favorite way to annoy me was to tear out of his crate at night and destroy random items in the house. His antics drove my husband and I to the brink of insanity, until one day he became my hero, my protector, and my best friend. The dog that will forever hold my entire heart.

Nick and I had been sitting in the living room when, suddenly, he abandoned his latest illicit chew toy as if it had bitten him. He walked across the room, looked directly into my eyes, and dug his nose into my armpit. Of course, my first reaction had been that Nick was up to his everyday "weird Nick things" and brushed him off. He was insistent. He continued to dig his nose into my armpit, with me trying to shove him away while muttering several curse words repeatedly. Finally, with a canine look of exasperation, he lightly bit my right breast. In my shock, I clasped the area he had sunk his teeth into and that's when I found it. A lump the size of a baseball. My crazy, erratic dog had alerted me to what I would soon come to find out was breast cancer.



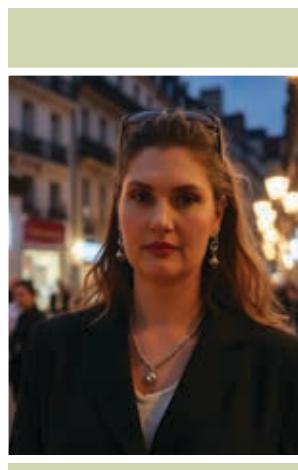
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From that day forward, he became my self-appointed protector. He sat quietly with me hugging him while I cried on the day I received my official diagnosis. When I came home from chemotherapy appointments, he would sniff every inch of me, then curl up next to me while I slept away the exhaustion of the life-saving drugs. At times, the chemotherapy treatments would make me ill enough to vomit for days on end. And who was right there next to me? Nick. He would follow me to the bathroom and lean against me while I clung to the toilet for what I thought was dear life. He refused to leave my side. Despite his abhorrent dislike of water, he would stick his head inside the shower curtain when I took a shower, resting it on the side of the bathtub. Each time I had to leave the house for surgery, he would run out to the car and stubbornly refuse to move an inch until he was able to see "Mom" off at the hospital doors. His loyalty knew no bounds.

We became inseparable. When I was especially under the weather, he would do anything to cheer me up. He would roll around on the floor, grunting like a wallowing hog, or pounce on imaginary bugs like some fearsome predator to make me laugh. When I returned to work, he came with me, still acting as my protector. Unfortunately, as tends to happen, I got better and Nick grew older. He started to slow down. Walking became more challenging for him. He could no longer easily navigate the stairs to do something as simple as going outside. I began carrying him down the stairs onto the grass where we would sit for hours, watching the birds flit through the trees or just staring up at the clouds. Both of us simply living for the moment. I made sure I was there for him, like he had been for me. Inevitably, the day came when it was time to say goodbye. That was the last time I held my boy.

Nick has been gone for four years now. I miss my four-legged friend every day. Someone once said, "Dogs teach us how to live." And I have yet to find a sentiment any closer to the truth. He showed me how to look past the undesirable things to find someone's amicable qualities. How to forgive and love with my whole heart. Through his unintentional lessons, I learned how to love unconditionally, trust unequivocally, and live like there's no tomorrow. He taught me loyalty and patience. I strive to apply his teachings every day to everyone I meet. I just hope I can make him proud. There will never be another dog like Nick; he will always be my "heart dog." ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Miller started showing dogs in 1995 with a Greyhound from Heather Spak, of Helicon Hounds, and Stanley D. Petter, Jr., of Hewly Greyhounds. Emily has bred, shown, and coursing with four different sighthound breeds in her long love affair with the Hound Group. In 1997, Emily found her love for wire-haired Ibizan Hounds while helping Susan Fegan, of Gryphon Ibizans, show a litter of puppies. Emily co-owned several Ibizans with Susan throughout high school and college. Today, Emily owns her own mobile grooming salon, and has taken a hiatus from dog shows to assist her children in their schooling, 4-H, and Future Farmers of America (FFA) ventures.