

One of a Kind

By Madeline Male

“He’s truly one of a kind,” the volunteer on the phone had said. As soon as I had seen the little Weimaraner puppy, my heart melted, and I knew he’d be perfect for me. I’d been looking forward to this day for weeks — the day I’d get to bring him home. He’d grow up with my best friend’s puppy, and when they were older, we’d do lots of jogging with them on the trails backing up to our houses. I pulled into a parking space and smiled in anticipation as I walked into the shelter with a spring in my step.

“Hi, you must be Mia!” said a volunteer I’d never seen before, “Are you here to pick him up?”

“Yes!” I enthusiastically exclaimed.

“We are just so glad he finally found a home,” the volunteer thanked me, “he’s such a sweet guy, so overlooked.”

“Oh . . .” I said, momentarily forgetting that he was the last of his litter to get adopted, “well, I’m happy I found him. I’m all set up to give him a good home.”

“He really deserves it,” the volunteer nodded, “after being here for so many months.” They slipped back to the kennels while I paused in confusion. *A puppy here for months?* Just as I realized the math wasn’t adding up, the volunteer walked out with a dog that absolutely, positively, couldn’t possibly be a puppy. They offered the leash to me.

I awkwardly shook my hands and stuttered, “Oh, um, I’m actually here to adopt a puppy.”

“Oh . . . really? Lemme check our system.” They pulled out a tablet and started typing. Meanwhile, this new dog lay down on the floor and sighed in a way that almost made me feel like he knew exactly what was going on.

“There has definitely been some sort of confusion,” the volunteer spoke up, looking grave. You were intending to adopt the last weimaraner puppy?” When I nodded, they proceeded, “Unfortunately, it seems like there was a mix up. He’s actually already adopted, at a loving home.” My heart fell. *What?! I’d have to begin my puppy search from square one again!* I didn’t want to hear this news. But it was

clear when the manager came to apologize. The little puppy I'd been so looking forward to was . . . gone.

"Well," the manager sighed as he patted the new dog's head, "This little guy, Leo, is so sweet, and I'd hate for him to be here any longer. After we gave his slot away, our kennels filled up. We really don't have any room to take him back."

"Oh," I said, this new information hitting me. "He's a . . . ?"

"He's a miniature golden retriever. One of the sweetest dogs we've ever had."

"How old?" I asked, a little surprised I was even entertaining the notion that he could be a consideration. It didn't take me long to see that this question had struck a chord.

There was a pause, and at last, the manager said, "We don't know his exact age, but he's . . . certainly older, a little on the mellow side." I restrained from raising my eyebrows. That didn't fit with my life in the least bit; I needed an energetic companion for running!

Right then the volunteer said, "He's perfectly healthy, though, and already trained. And . . ." They trailed off, as if trying to think of more reasons, "and it would really help us if you could take him for just a few days, until we can find space to take him back." As if on cue, Leo lifted his head and rested it on my foot. He looked up at me with the kind of eyes that feel like they're looking into your soul. He did seem pretty chill and not too bark-y. He'd only be at my house a few days. And I really should help the shelter out . . .

"Oh, alright then," I said. Before I knew it, paperwork was exchanged, and I found myself riding home with Leo. In the car, all was quiet. "Still back there, Leo?" I joked. He answered with a little noise that sounded like "yup!" As we passed the pet supply store, I suddenly realized, "Oh! I don't have any food for an older dog like you. All my stuff is set up for a puppy!" I turned the car around.

As Leo and I walked into the pet store, I spotted a familiar face — Janie. Love her or hate her, she was the town-renowned gossip. "Mia!" Janie squealed, "and who do we have here?" She bent down and baby-talked to Leo.

"I'm keeping Leo for a few days," I gave a tight smile, hoping Janie had more important places to be. Alas, she was busy frowning at Leo.

“Didn’t I hear you were adopting a puppy? Doesn’t look like a puppy to me!” She gave a high-pitched laugh, “in fact,” she took a step back from Leo, “how old *is* he?”

“He’s . . . a little older,” I rested my hand on Leo’s head.

“A little older?!” Janie exclaimed loud enough for the entire town to hear, “Oh, he is definitely ‘a little older’ to say the very least. So how’d you end up with him? Off the clearance rack?!” She laughed, “Girl, don’t get too attached to him, “just sayin, just sayin,”” she smiled naughtily.

I sighed in annoyance and knelt down by Leo. “Hey, Leo is —“

“Well, see ya!” Janie waved, and was out the door. Leo looked up at me with a sorrowful look in his eyes. I felt my cheeks grow red. Poor Leo, with no one to stand up for him, not even me. I gave him a good scratch behind the ears.

“Don’t listen to Janie,” I told Leo, “she’s just trying to get under your fur.” While I chuckled at my pun, Leo tilted his head as if to say, “really, Mia?” So I got back on task, grabbed the best kind of senior dog food I could find, and we started toward home.

As I worked on cooking dinner, I quickly surveyed the state of the kitchen and living room: puppy-sized dog crate, puppy pads, and not to mention the case full of puppy food I’d stocked up on. Leo was looking curiously at a teeny tiny puppy-sized dog bed, and trying unsuccessfully to lie down on it. “Sorry buddy,” I walked over and leaned down to scratched Leo’s head, “We’ll figure something else out.” Leo must’ve realized the puppy bed just wouldn’t work, because he then started investigating all the other spots in the living room: the sofa, the armchair, the middle of the rug, under the coffee table, and by the fireplace. He decided on dragging a blanket over by the kitchen table where he could rest and watch me prepare food. “Do you want to review my cooking?” I joked, “I hope I get five stars!” He gently ruffed, all comfy in his new favorite spot. His ears perked up as I tore open the dog food bag, and scooped some kibble into a bowl labeled “Best Puppy Ever.”

After I cleaned up dinner, I plopped on the couch. With surprising agility, Leo jumped right up and settled into his new self-proclaimed second favorite spot in the house. I found a good movie and started it. About halfway through, Leo sighed in

content, and I finally noticed that I was scratching his head without even knowing it. I smiled a little, and soon started to dose off . . .

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I woke up to a paw gently resting on my hand, as sunlight streamed in the window. I could see that my alarm was just a few minutes from going off, so I groggily got out of bed. Leo led me downstairs, then patiently sat at the backdoor. I let him out and began making breakfast.

After I got ready for the day, the doorbell rang. Leo wagged his tail and bounded into the foyer. From all the way in the kitchen, I could hear a persistent puppy yipping outside. That gave away who it was: my best friend and next door neighbor Olivia, bringing her puppy, Bear.

As soon as I welcomed them in, Olivia spotted Leo and exclaimed “Whoa! Your puppy sure did grow up fast!” I playfully rolled my eyes. Before I could explain, Bear self-assigned himself a mission to chew up the rug, so we all stepped out onto the porch instead. I explained the situation to Olivia and finished, “But considering Leo’s age, I’m not sure we should go on our walk today.”

“Oh, pfft,” Olivia shrugged, “The best way to make sure a dog is not fit for a walk is to never go on one. We’ll just take it one step at a time. If it’s too much for him, we can stop and rest. And it’ll be great to have an older dog to teach Bear how it’s done. Lemme tell you, Bear has a long way to go. Sometimes it feels like ‘heel’ means ‘go chase the nearest squirrel!’”

I laughed and agreed, “okay, let’s give it a try.” I clipped on Leo’s leash, and we were off. The pace seemed easy for Leo, who attentively stayed at my side. With all this cooperation between us, it felt like we could’ve gone faster, if not for Bear’s wanting to stop and sniff every dandelion.

We arrived at a neighborhood park, and had just sat down at the pavilion when Ella ran up to us. She was a little girl who lived on our street. “Hi Mia, hi Olivia!” she said, “who’s this?” She looked at Leo.

“This is Leo,” I said, “He’s staying with me.”

“Hi Leo,” Ella rubbed his head, “You’re so cute, you don’t even need a bandana!” As Ella reached over to greet Bear, he got so excited that he jumped up and nearly nipped her. “Oh!” Ella exclaimed, stepping back.

“Yeah . . . “We’re working on it,” Olivia chuckled, “but I bet Leo would love to play. Here, I have some spare treats,” she handed them to Ella.

“Okay, Leo! Sit!” Ella requested. Leo sat. “Down! Leo went down. “Roll over! . . . Speak!” Leo did everything Ella asked. I’d admit, I was astonished by how much he knew. By the end of this little talent show, we’d figured out that he even knew “shake” and “play dead.” “Leo’s awesome,” Ella laughed, “Can I come over and play with him again?”

“Sure, anytime,” I said spontaneously, before realizing I couldn’t live up to that, “well, at least for the next few days,” I muttered under my breath.

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When we got home, Leo took a nap as I made lunch. All afternoon, he rested at my feet while I worked on my laptop. I brought a blanket into my home office and set it up in the corner with a few plush toys, and he was loving it. What a great day it was — until the animal shelter called. Suddenly, for some reason, my stomach dropped, my hands felt cold, and I considered not picking up the phone. But I pushed my hesitation aside and answered.

“Hi, Mia!” A volunteer said, “we were just calling to ask how things are going.” I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding in.

“Oh, things are going great,” I nodded.

“That’s good,” they said, “but not so much on our end. We haven’t found anyone to take Leo yet.”

“Oh! Oh, that’s OK — “

“Really?”

“Oh, no, no — it’s fine to take your time . . . no, nope — just keep me posted, whenever you can would be great.” We hung up and I was able to collect myself as my thoughts fought each other. I bent down and hugged Leo. He leaned into me, and

time seemed to pause for a moment. Then I felt a tear welling up in my eye, and I noticed that Leo even seemed a little down.

Until it was time to go to bed, I busied myself with chores to shut out my thoughts. *No, it would never work . . . Absolutely not . . . I need a dog I could go running with . . . Right?* Leo also seemed intent on distracting himself with something or another: rearranging his blanket, greeting every toy in the bin, and finding the best napping spot in the last few rays of sun.

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The next morning, I got the dreaded call.

“Great news!” said the volunteer on the end of the line, “We found a shelter that can take Leo!”

My eyes widened and I gripped my chair for extra support. Across the room, Leo sprang up and ran to me, sadness in his expression. Nevertheless, I put on a courageous face, and started gathering a few of his favorite things for the hour-long drive. “Here Leo, I’ll let you keep this blanket, and this toy,” I said, stuffing them in a bag to drop off at the new shelter. He gazed at me, as if to tell me that blankets and toys were not what he cared about most.

As we got on the road, a tense quiet descended upon us. I began reflecting on all the fun little times that Leo and I had over the past few days . . . What a shame that we couldn’t keep making memories . . .

Hold on, why was I torturing myself by returning Leo, when I didn’t even have to? Why was I trying to “search” for the “right” dog like it was on a shopping list, when the best dog landed right in my lap? “Oh Leo,” I sighed, so softly I almost didn’t hear myself. His collar jingled as he sat up.

“Leo, I say we turn things around and go home.” As soon as I could, I made a U-turn and started driving back. I drove for awhile in quiet, but this time, it was calm and satisfying. Now things finally felt right.

When I got to Main Street, I realized I needed to make a stop along the way.
“Leo, we’re going to pop into the pet supply store — to get a bed that fits, for the best dog I know.”

“Woof!” he barked in agreement.