

## Ode to Otis

Man's best friend is not my best friend. The first time I met Otis, he attacked the front door as if we were criminals rather than grandparents coming to visit. At sixty pounds, he could easily knock me over with a twist of his body.

My son and family have big hearts and love their dogs. On a whim, they visited an animal shelter where rows of enclosures held playful dogs and friendly mutts. The boys, Sean and Wyatt, went from cage to cage, enamored by the excited dogs.

Brian kept going back to the last cage. "Barb, look at this one."

A big brute sat in the back corner of his cage with his massive head hung low. A pit bull mix, his wide jaws were made for clamping down on a rope or stick or a leg. Yet, his big sad eyes would not make contact. He turned away.

"Come here, poor baby." Barb coaxed him with her sweet voice.

Rescue dogs often come with baggage. The shelter's vet suspected this one had been used as a bait dog in the fighting ring. The fierce-looking dog finally crept forward, low on his haunches.

"Let him sniff your hand." Brian knelt next to Sean, ready to intervene. "Reach out slowly."

Sean's gentle nature soon won the pit bull over. The dog allowed strange hands to scratch and pet him. Five-year-old Wyatt made him flinch and duck, but the two worked it out under Brian's watchful eye. After an hour of getting to know each other, the pit bull had a new home. They named him Otis Day for no particular reason other than my son loved the movie *Animal House*.

Otis was not a good house guest. His new parents kept a careful eye on the unpredictable dog and their boys. He ate socks and burst every ball in the house. Stuffed animals didn't stand a chance.

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Otis was caged at night but chewed his way out every time. He finally learned to sleep in the cage, as long as the door was open. When the family was away, Otis left gifts on the floor in odd places. It took a year for him to be house-trained.

In that first year, they visited us at our lake house. Otis kept crawling into Barb's lap. The extra people, the water, boats going by all scared him. She hugged and reassured him, and he repaid her by piddling in her lap. Later, as we sat on the grass talking and laughing, Otis sidled up to Barb and lifted his leg on her shoulder, twice. Barb is a kind and wonderful person.

Later, while we sat on the beach, our grandsons played in the shallow water. Wyatt wore his life jacket and laughed and splashed. Otis paced the waterline, watching and worried. Finally, he could take no more and swam out to grab Wyatt by the seat of his pants. He dragged the boy to safety, again and again.

I kept my distance from Otis, as I do with most dogs. I like obedient dogs, those that lay at your feet in front of the fireplace. I don't like dogs who jump, slobber, or sniff. Somehow Otis knew. He'd sneak under the table and lay his chin on my knee, waiting for me to scratch his head. He worked to win me over, and I eventually gave in.

A burglar would be insane to enter my son's house. Every odd sound caused Otis to attack the door. My son travels on business but could rely on the pit bull to safeguard the family. Otis's bark and menacing growl warned strangers he was on duty. When the boys played in the front yard, Otis was also on duty. He'd force his way out the door and station himself between them and the busy road.

After several years, I knew Otis's life's work was to protect my grandsons with fierce loyalty and love. He belonged to them. As he matured, he asked little in return: to follow them

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around, a bone to gnaw, to lay at their side. I sensed he would sacrifice his life for them. He became a dog I could admire.

In early 2020 the family noticed Otis wasn't himself. The four-year-old's energy, personality, and the sparkle in his eye were gone. He ignored the doorbell and wandered the house alone. He whined in pain.

A tumor behind his eye had taken over his brain. It would grow and destroy him from the inside. Surgery was possible, but the tumor would grow back within six months. Barb and Brian had to make a terrible decision, to watch Otis die inch by inch or let him go quickly.

The vet had one suggestion. Researchers at Purdue University had notified all veterinaries of their search for patients with Otis's rare type of tumor. The same sort of tumor afflicted John McCain. The best surgeons had removed the senator's tumor, but it grew back rapidly and killed him. Researchers searched for a cure ever since. Otis was a perfect test-patient for their vaccine, because he was young and otherwise healthy. The university offered the surgery for free.

The odds were not good. Brian and Barb wrestled with the decision of putting Otis through the surgery, commuting to Indianapolis for months, and prolonging their worry and grief, only to have their poor dog die anyway. Yet, the possible vaccine could save human lives by preventing brain tumors from growing back. That slim hope of helping human patients convinced Barb to subject her darling Otis to the surgery. She drove him to Purdue and gave him one last hug.

Barb and Brian gathered their sons to discuss the meaning of death. All their grandparents are still alive and they had never suffered the pain of death. Sean, at twelve, understood the circle-of-life well enough. His nine-year-old brother nodded as Barb explained all things are born, live, get old, and then pass away.

Then a realization hit Wyatt. "Do you mean Grandma Jeannie is going to die!"

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The sweetheart had to phone to confirm I was still alive and would likely have many years left on earth.

Otis got through the surgery very well. The relief I felt upon hearing the news amazed me. That big oaf had wormed his way into my emotions.

A week later Otis came home to a joyous family. He was groggy and thin. His head was shaved and stained orange with iodine around the incision. He was happy to be home but needed time to recuperate. His playmates sat with him, petted him gently, and let him mend.

The following week, Otis and Barb returned to Purdue for the experimental vaccine injection. She was to watch for odd behavior at home and return to the hospital each week for monitoring. Otis's doctor appointments would be part of the family routine and, after six months, he'd be in the clear.

In the fourth week after surgery, Otis stumbled. He wasn't himself. He wandered and became listless. Our hopes faded. This is what the researchers had warned. Still, it was a shock.

Barb and Brian rushed Otis to the vet to hear what they already suspected. The fast-growing tumor had returned. The vaccine had failed. They took Otis back home to live out his days in the care of his family. It didn't take long. Otis had a massive seizure one night and died while the boys slept.

An Alabama research hospital which works with Purdue University asked for Otis's body. As painful as it was, the family let him go again. Barb and Brian wanted his death to mean something, to help people and save lives.

The next morning, Otis was gone and the children were informed. They held a family ceremony to remember their faithful friend. Still, a few days later, Wyatt asked, "When's Otis coming home?"

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Loss is a lonely experience. We all grieve in different ways. Some shut out memory and let feelings fade. Others dwell in the pain. The most fortunate live and laugh with the memories of their passed loved ones.

My family chose to honor Otis by rescuing another dog. On their first visit to the animal shelter, they met an Otis look-alike. The pit bull had been recovering in the shelter for three months. Brian opted to call him Cash, a nod to the cost of adoption. He was outvoted. The new family member is named Jax, after the hero of a television series. Brian tells me Jax is calm, house-trained, and doing his part to fill a gaping hole.

I haven't met Jax yet, but if he protects my grandchildren and has the heart and devotion Otis had, I'll give him a chance. I'm not an animal lover but admit there are a few rare exceptions.

END