

Otis the Boykin Spaniel

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owner of The Cooperative Dog. With Vera's help, Otis has progressed enough to enroll in Obility (Obedience + Intro Agility) classes in a larger room at the MSPCA with another teacher, Kate Bigger, who excels as a trainer/competitor in the sport. Once Otis overcomes his fear of each new obstacle, he not only delights in hurdling them but also grows excited while he waits his turn with the other students. Kate has been incredibly patient and skilled in handling Otis' initial fears of Agility obstacles so that we don't imprint those fears. Watching Otis triumph over them, seeing how proud and excited he is when he finally conquers them, and how much fun he has when he does, convinces me that this training is important for Otis, even if his learning pace is slower than the others, and regardless whether he eventually competes in the sport or not. Kate has a lot of faith in Otis, and I certainly do as well. So we're about to start Otis' third-level Obility class now. Our new challenge in Obility is harnessing Otis' excitement into a controlled focus during his run in the course. Agility asks a dog to be excited AND focused all at once, which is not easy to do. Otis might learn more slowly than the other students because of his initial fears, but he does catch up to them eventually. I like to think of him as the underdog, and he just might surprise all of us yet. When it comes to long Stays and Go's, Otis leads the pack. Otis and I have been practicing those commands since he was a babe, so it's rewarding to see all that effort making a difference now.

What I'm treasuring the most about Otis right now is the sweet and affectionate companion that is emerging and our mutual bond that just grows deeper by the day. Otis was a real fiery puppy in the early months—all teeth and snap with a steely mind of his own. Like most young pups, Otis was all over the place and would barely listen to my commands. He fought the leash like a colt to a bridle. But as Otis leaves the puppy in him behind, he's communicating more directly to me in his own way. He's more focused, directly expressive, more soulful, if you will. And I'm getting better at understanding him. It's an incredible rite of passage to experience--this emerging language of love that we develop with our dogs. Otis is settling down just enough to earn some supervised couch time with me at night. It's a fantastic ritual, hanging out in front

of the television with our dog on our lap. Since Otis still is a hard core chewer, he's allowed on the couch for so long because he eventually tries to sneak his teeth into the upholstery while I'm not looking. I'm winning the war on that battlefield, and no doubt this behavior will disappear before I know it. It warms my heart to see that, in my Curly Boy, a wonderful couch-potato companion is just around the corner.



The Best Walk

A tired old hunter and his dog were walking down a remote dirt road with strong fences on both sides. They came to an over-view in the fence and looked in-it was nice, grassy with wooded areas. Just what a huntin' dog would like, but it had a sign saying 'No Trespassing', so they walked on.

Shortly they came to a beautiful gate with a person in white robes standing in the opening. Inside was a beautiful home with manicured lawns and tables laid out with food and drink. "Welcome to Heaven", he said. The old man was relieved and started in with his dog following him. The gatekeeper stopped him. "Dogs aren't allowed; I'm sorry but he can't come with you." The old man questioned, "What kind of heaven won't allow dogs? If he can't come in then I won't either. The man in the robes pleaded, "You don't want to give up your place in heaven do you? At least, not for a dog do you?" The hunter replied, "He's been my faithful companion all his life, and I can't desert him now."

"Suit yourself", said the gatekeeper, "but I have to warn you that the Devils' on this road and he'll try to sweet talk you into his place. He'll promise you anything, but the dog can't go there either. If you won't leave the dog, you'll spend eternity on this road." The old hunter paused, and then gently calling, he and his old friend continued their journey.

Much later and exhausted, they came to a rundown section of fence covered with hedges, and overrun with partridges and rabbits. There was no gate but a gap in the fence. Another man in simple overalls stood inside near a quaint old cabin and

homestead. Calling out, the old hunter said, "Scuse me Sir. My dog and I are getting mighty tired as we've been walking quite a ways. Would you mind if we came in an' set in the shade of that tree awhile?" "Of course," was the warm reply. "There's a rocker for you and a well with cool water. Make yourself comfortable." The old man puzzled, "You certain it's ok for my dog to come in with me? The other man down the road said dogs weren't allowed anywhere off the road." The kind gentleman asked, "Would you come in if you had to leave your dog?" "No sir," was the reply. "That's why I didn't go into Heaven...he said my dog wasn't welcome. I spec we'll be spending eternity on this road. As much as I'd love that cool water and some shade, I won't be coming unless my old friend can come with me, and that's final."

The man smiled a warm welcoming smile and said, "Welcome to Heaven." The old hunter seemed stunned. "You mean this is Heaven? And dogs are allowed? How come that fellow down the road said they weren't?" The kind man's face turned more serious, and he said, "That was the devil, and he gets all the people who are willing to give up a life long companion for a comfortable place to stay. They soon find out their mistake, but then it's too late. The dogs come here, the fickle people stay there. God wouldn't allow dogs to be banned from Heaven. After all, He created them to be man's companions in life; why would He separate them in death?"

- Earl Hamner, author of *The Waltons* & *The Twilight Zone*



In Loving Memory

Argus (or Gus as we called him) was acquired from Hollow Creek Kennels in 1996 by my parents, Ken and Marge Avram,

Gus was a loyal, happy, energetic companion for his 13 years of life with our family. His flushing abilities and determination to find birds in the field humbled most of the other dogs in the club we hunted.

- Andy Avram of OH

THE GABRIEL CHRONICLES

by Doyle Bickers



CHAPTER 4

Growing Together

I owe you an apology. If you have followed along this far, I have given you the wrong impression. My previous entries would lead you to believe that Gabe has lived up to his name – Gabriel, an angel. Well, that’s only partially true. By approximately week ten, I was fairly sure that an evil alien had entered our home one night, exchanging our dear sweet puppy for a monster – an alien creation hell bent on the destruction of humanity by making us insane. Chewing, peeing, aggressive growling, biting, and attacking my beard with cobra-like speed – all while he was asleep. Just kidding. His sleeping is a blessing.

Shoes – My wife has a shoe fetish. There is a sign above her closet that says, “A Woman Is Known By The Shoes She Wears.” It is signed “Dorothy.” Gabe shares this obsession. Frankly, I don’t completely see the problem. As far as I can tell, there are nine pairs of black shoes with pointy toes and heels that are exactly the same. WRONG!!! Apparently, a 1/16” difference in the width of the strap that goes around the heel makes the difference in whether a woman is socially acceptable or condemned to feminine perdition. Stupid me. Would you like to guess which shoe he chose? Now, it appears that we will never make the ranks of the social elite. All because of that shoe.

It is 3:30 a.m. I am a light sleeper and I hear him stirring. He stirs for a reason. He needs to pee. He is a good dog. He is trying to tell me. I struggle from the warm covers, grab him up (he doesn’t pee while

I’m carrying him), wrestle myself into my robe and slippers and head for the back yard. I make it to the den door. I have forgotten about the doggy gate that we installed to contain him. The bruises from the fall will go away. I did manage to keep him from hitting the floor. Lucky him.

OK, things are getting better. He appears to be moving beyond this stage. He still grabs a toy, charges at me, and shakes it growling. But he is growing, maturing, and bringing that sense of peace and pleasure that can only come from a dog.

Today we went to a local lake. It was drizzling and chilly. The water was low as it is in the winter. We walked along the extended shoreline. He grabbed clam shells and sticks, charging off with his treasures. In the winter, the deer wander along this beach. We encountered some very fresh tracks, so new that the rain had not softened their edges. He stuck his nose into a track and clawed at it. He moved to the next track. He followed them until they entered the woods along the edge of the lake. His nose is good.



I towed him dry and we returned home. I am enjoying a good book, and I settled into my recliner for some reading. Gabe came to the chair and sat up – his sign that he wants to join me. I lifted him up, extended the foot rest, and he settled down. After a short while, he was snoring. His warm body feels good against my calves.

CHAPTER 5

Interlude 1

My name is Gabriel, but everyone calls me Gabe. Don’t know why. I know my



full name, but they think Gabe is cute or somehow fits me better. For a while, I thought I had a last name - Dammit. I have since learned that this is a vitriolic curse applied to such poor innocent items as shoes and dog pee. Not sure why they call me before they say it unless they want me to contribute my voice to the outburst. Occasionally, I bark or growl to make them feel better.

I have been living here for a short while. I understand that this is a place called Alabama. I came here from another place. I can’t remember much, but there was this really nice lady who let me snuggle up next to her neck and lick her. She tasted good. I had a family – a mother and some brothers and sisters. Again, I can’t remember much about them. My brothers and sisters bit and clawed me a lot. It was just play, but I can’t say that I miss that part. Sometimes I miss the warmth at night.

The “people” came to the place where I was living. One morning when I came out to play they were sitting in the yard. I can’t give them too many points for smarts since they were sitting around the yard that was covered with a lot of little piles of puppy poop. My brothers and I ran around for a while, and then I got bored. They seemed nice, the people that is. They made happy noises and seemed to be fun. When I walked over to them, the sweet one rubbed me gently. It felt good. The other one, he’s older and grumpy. He wrestled me and mussed up my head. I can handle him. There was something about them. For some reason, I understood that they needed me. I knew that I had to go with them, to take care of them.

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