

Max  
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On these warm summer nights they lie nose to nose, gazing contentedly into each other's eyes. Sometimes we wonder why we allow it. After all, we're not sure about his parentage. His social graces are definitely lacking, and his breath stinks. Still, they are so good together. How can we say no?

This is all Catherine's fault. Catherine was a feisty fourteen-year-old with a sweet heart and a free spirit. She loved us desperately, she loved God, and she loved to have fun. On a cold winter day several Januarys ago, she and her youth group zoomed through a Sunday afternoon on snowmobiles. Had she not died, we could have lived without a dog just fine.

But she did die; death by barbed-wire fence, buried under the snow. Snow continued to fall on the high backcountry of western Colorado, quietly burying the crimson stain as we prepared to bury our daughter. The gaping hollow in the frozen ground that held her casket beckoned us to join her, my husband and me. We didn't climb in because we couldn't leave Jesse. He was only eight.



Walking the road of grief with others is like trying to follow a friend's car in an unfamiliar city. You stick together as long as you can, but there comes a point where you have to focus on your own journey. Hopefully, you will find each other at the end.

Kevin and I grieved differently, but from the same perspective as parents. But as spring came and went, and summer waxed and waned, we had no idea how to comfort the boy who had lost his best friend.

In the fall, I suggested we get a dog. Kevin, however, was (and is) known for his famous saying, "Have I ever mentioned that I hate dogs?" He barely spoke on the way to the pound, and even less so when we found Max.

We were looking for a small, short-haired, quiet breed. We came home with a large, shaggy-haired mutt that appeared to be a cross between a German Shepherd and a Rottweiler. His bark scared the living daylights out of friend and foe alike, and we couldn't bathe him well enough to eliminate his doggy scent. Jesse was over the moon with joy. For Kevin and me, Max kept us occupied, and we were grateful for the diversion he provided for Jesse.

Oh, but he was sneaky. While we weren't looking, he was blending into our family. Worming his way into our hearts and home. Infiltrating our affections. Even Kevin, who still professes to hate dogs, can be found playing with Max when he thinks no one is looking.

This abandoned animal has become our strong protector, for he walks with us as we face our old memories. They sneak silently over the fence whenever we are starting to live again. We can't face

them alone for the pain they bring. We can't send them packing, for they are all we have left of Catherine. To heal, we must blend new memories with the old; a patchwork created, in part, by Max.

Camping without Catherine was camping without laughter, until Max showed us how to toss rodents skyward and swallow them whole on the way down.

Thanksgiving is about sharing, but turkey skin doesn't agree with the dog.

A late night chemistry lesson provided us with some much-needed spontaneity as we frantically searched for a homemade "skunk" remedy. Indeed, Max provides comic relief and comfort beyond our ability to repay, until the storms of summer blow in.

We have always loved thunderstorms. Catherine was a devotee of extreme weather excitement, and wanted to be a storm chaser when she grew up. In the summer, we always gather as a family and watch the lightning like other people watch television.

For those brief moments in time, the empty spot against my heart is occupied by my best protector, who shudders against the terror of thunder. We huddle together, not nose to nose, but heart to heart. Our family has a funny dog-shape where the hole once was; but we are a family, once more.

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