

FOREWORD BY DEBBIE MACOMBER

Always By My Side

LIFE LESSONS FROM MILLIE
AND ALL THE DOGS I'VE LOVED

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I can't imagine life without a dog to love.

The love between humans and dogs is not the same as the love between humans. We love our own differently, sometimes better and sometimes worse than we love our dogs. The bond between man and dog is unencumbered by much of the baggage we bring to a human relationship. Some might say it is purer. I'll leave it as being something different.

Dogs love us in a fashion other humans can't. They love us in a way we can't necessarily love back. Their survival—from the time man and canine forged their unique and miraculous bond—has depended on them seeing deep inside of us, into our thoughts and emotions and desires. Into our very souls. I know my dogs have understood me better than most people do, better than I often do myself. Like an instrument of heaven sent to guide me. The physically blind use Seeing Eye dogs to navigate their lives. But there are those of us who have been blind spiritually and emotionally, and who have discovered that a dog can help lead us into the light, a dog who grasps our deepest needs, who assuages our most profound anxieties, who uncovers both our faults and our virtues, a dog who believes in us. In short, a dog that makes us a better human being.

In my life, one such dog was Millie. And there is one fateful walk with her I will never forget, which is where this story begins.

Millie, aka Millie Jo McCallister (born in the deep South), aka Millicent Johanna de Flanders (her sire was Flemish), aka

Millicent!!! when she was bad (which was rarely) or just plain everyday MJ, was my eight-year-old “Devon cream” golden retriever, large and muscular, taking after her mother, but so decidedly feminine in deportment and temperament that it outraged me whenever someone mistook her for a boy.

Like all the dogs in my life, Millie seemed to be at my side the moments I needed her most, even if I didn’t realize it at the time. On occasion Millie led me to a world only she and her kind are blessed to glimpse, a world of discernment and insight and intuition and knowledge that can defy human comprehension . . . endowed, I believe, by God. I never cease to be amazed, and never more so than on that muddy March day.

I hadn’t planned to go to Massachusetts that weekend but my wife, Julee, a singer, had back-to-back rehearsals for an upcoming performance, so Millie and I ventured north from New York City to check out our little weekend place in the Berkshires, some 120 miles as the proverbial crow flies (we drove). I was anxious to see how the house had fared over the rude winter.

We took the serpentine Taconic Parkway, which once we got out of Westchester County was largely devoid of traffic. Millie sat in back, staring at the colorless landscape, all grays and browns punctuated by a ragged patchwork of dirty white. I’ve often wondered how the world looks through the senses of a dog. Did it look as monochromatic to her? As dreary? What did she see that I didn’t see? At one point I had to brake hard at the sight of a highway patrol car lurking in the trees. Millie braced herself against the front seat.

“It would be nice if you could alert me to these things, Mil,” I said with a laugh, reaching back to restrain her. I glanced in the rearview and saw her bright pink tongue drooping from the side of her mouth. We’ve taught dogs to do many things but not yet to detect sneaky New England speed traps.

A couple hours later we pulled up the steep dirt driveway to the house, the wheels of my Jeep spinning a little in the icy

slush and Millie glancing around in mild alarm at the whining sound, ears perked. Julee and I bought the house 15 years earlier to accommodate our cocker spaniel, Sally, and especially our somewhat crazed Labrador, Marty, who was hemmed in by city life. It was Marty who picked the house out. That is a story you will hear later. Millie certainly approved of his choice. She liked nothing more in the world than to hike the forested hills of Berkshire County.

For the moment I was grateful the place was still standing, its roof intact. There was a ton of snow in the yard and covering the rugged hill behind, where a few trees had fallen since Christmas. Millie leapt from the Jeep and bulldozed some paths through the drifts but it wasn't the same as being able to run free all over the place. I could tell she was a little downhearted as we hauled our stuff inside and turned up the heat. Later, when we went exploring we found all our favorite mountain trails impassable without snowshoes. Millie might have had giant paws but they were no match for the drifts, and it was dangerous for her to attempt, as I knew she surely would. Easy for a dog to turn a leg in deep snow.

"Sorry, girl," I said. I scratched her behind her ear. Her dense fur was already beginning to sop up the chill moist air. She looked at me plaintively. You must find a solution! Why else have we come all this way? her eyes said.

On an odd whim, I decided to try a woodsy little development on Steven's Lake where I'd never taken her before. It was just down the road. Most of the houses were closed for the season but I knew they had a plowed road that went around the lake. It wasn't all that exciting except for a little stretch of undeveloped land that rose above the water. Still, we could get some exercise there. Millie jumped back in the car, upright and alert, eager to carry on.

Mostly what we got at Steven's Lake was muddy. The road was potted with mushy ruts. My Devon cream retriever soon

looked more like hot chocolate. I would have much explaining to do when I got back to New York. And Goldens, sweet as they are, can smell pretty sour when damp. I reminded myself to pick up a new air freshener for the car when we headed back in a couple of days. Probably several.

Millie was undeterred. She ran and splashed and occasionally threw herself on the ground. She didn't care how she smelled. I suspect she enjoyed it. Her breath preceded her in puffs and she kicked up her hind legs like a colt when a breeze whipped off the lake. Every once in a while she'd turn and pause, tail erect, waiting for me to catch up. Come on, her stance said, I'm not going to wait for you all day.

We turned around eventually, though it took a little coaxing on my part. "Come on, MJ. Time to go home. I'll cook you a burger on the grill." On the way back up the road Millie, bored covering the same ground in reverse, ran off to check out one house or another, sniffing around for signs of life (and food, probably) but always galloping back at my whistle, splashing through the icy puddles and causing me more angst—almost deliberately, it seemed to me. She had a little of the devil in her and I couldn't help wondering how long it would take just to get her clean enough to come inside.

Then, all at once, she took off up a barren hillside toward a darkened house I had not noticed before. I could barely see it through the naked trees and the lowering sun. Millie strode purposefully up the steep, curving driveway. I whistled. I shouted. She trotted on. Finally I followed, more curious than perturbed as to why she would ignore me.

Millie disappeared around back. I was slipping and sliding at this point and calling her name, shocked she could be so oblivious...or willful. Then I thought, Not a deer carcass! and began running.

Actually it was the main entrance to the house, tucked in the rear so as not to obstruct the lake view. Millie was sitting

patiently on the little porch giving me a grave look.

“Millie, come on!”

She stayed.

“Now!”

Wouldn’t budge. Suddenly a man opened the door. As soon as I recovered from the surprise of seeing that someone besides Millie and me was populating the area, I apologized profusely for my dog’s behavior.

“That’s all right. I have one myself. He’s pretty sick right now or I’d ask you in.”

So we got to talking. He was a New Yorker too and like all New Yorkers we felt immediately compelled to trade neighborhood info. He lived in the Village and I told him I lived in Chelsea.

“I have my practice in Chelsea, at Penn South. I’m the podiatrist.”

Of course. I’d seen his sign a million times outside one of the buildings belonging to the sprawling apartment complex between Eighth and Ninth Avenues.

“Maybe your dog knows mine. I used to bring him to work with me all the time when he was young. Buzz. A mastiff mix.”

I thought for a moment, realization dawning on me. Could it actually be? Buzz? Really? Buzz and Millie had the same walker when Millie was a puppy and they would stroll the neighborhood together or hang out at the dog run, sometimes for hours. I hadn’t seen Buzz in ages, and certainly never dreamed I’d see him anywhere outside Chelsea, let alone in another state.

“This is Millie,” I said. “They used to hang out.” Millie edged forward.

“He’s real sick,” the man said, “and pretty frail.” I peeked through the door and saw Buzz, gray and ancient now, inert on a pile of blankets, his chin resting on an old pillow. “I’d have Millie come in,” he continued, “but I’m afraid she might want to play and Buzz’s hips are shot. I thought he’d like it up here with the

fireplace and all. It's so quiet this time of year."

He was telling me his dog was dying. I felt terrible for him. It's as bad as losing a person you love, worse sometimes, since some people don't seem to understand how painful it is. Some of them treat you like you just got rid of an old boat.

Millie nudged the door open a little wider and stared in at Buzz. She was very still. Silent.

"How 'bout I put her on her leash and let her say hello," I said softly, knowing hello would really be goodbye because dogs know these things in a way we humans never will. The man nodded and I leashed Millie up. She padded over to Buzz, who had come slowly awake, his rheumy eyes blinking. He lifted his head and it was obviously an effort. His breathing was short.

Millie glanced back at me. She wanted me to know. Then she leaned in and nuzzled his ear. Buzz's tail flopped against the old blankets. It was all he could manage.

Millie stepped back, turned and gave me another look, eyes turned upward. We can go now, it said.

And so we went. I thanked the man and wished him luck and said a silent prayer for Buzz's peaceful passing. Millie was already quite a few paces ahead of me, head to the ground, following her nose, zigzagging down the hillside. I caught up to her, slipping and sliding as I did, and dropped to one knee, hugging her and not minding the wet and the mud and the golden aroma at all. I felt her lean in to me. She stayed perfectly still. That stillness, I eventually came to understand, that whole amazing episode in fact, was a message. A message that would break my heart, though I didn't know it then. I think that's how it is supposed to be. Our dogs teach us great lessons and often at just the right moment. They teach us about love and much more: empathy, resilience, leadership, loyalty, compassion, humor, courage, joy, vigilance, forgiveness, serenity, respect. They teach us about life and about death.

Millie and I dried off in front of the woodstove, staring

at the dancing flames. I didn't know what she was thinking but I wondered if someday all of this would be explained to me...probably in heaven. Not that it mattered. Nothing really mattered except that one moment, alone with my dog, soaking up the warmth and feeling so connected and content, so present. For that one all-encompassing moment, I was content to be amazed. I had no idea that I was being prepared for what was soon to come.

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