

IT'S JUST A DOG



"If you only read one dead dog book

this year, make this the one!"

- OLD YELLER

*"It's Just A Dog is not just for
dogs...It's for people, too!"*

- SCOOBY DOO

"If books could kill..."

- CUJO

A NOVEL BY

RUSS RYAN

"I loved this story. And I can't even read!"

- PETE THE PUP



*"Is this dog heaven? Nah, it's just
fiction--but I'll take it."*

- LASSIE

"This sweet novel was like music to my ears!"

- THE RCA DOG

IT'S JUST A
DOG

A NOVEL BY RUSS RYAN

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<http://www.muttville.org>

PROLOGUE
THE DOG STOPS HERE

When I was a boy, we used to visit my grandmother and I would stare mesmerized at an old, framed black-and-white photograph of a family dog that she had hanging above her fireplace. The glum-looking, overweight chocolate Lab had been dead for twenty years, which seemed like an eternity to me back then. I always thought it was kind of creepy, and wondered why my happy-go-lucky grandma still kept this sad, antique doggie pic up on her wall after so much time had gone by.

Now I know why.

My dog just died. Well, it's been six months. But I'm still not over it yet. His name was Pete (not Petey like from *The Little Rascals*—although he was a little rascal) and he was the cutest, crankiest, least affectionate sixteen-and-a-half-year-old Jack Russell terrier that you'd ever want to meet. He was also the love of my life—which, being a straight man on the express train to middle age is not exactly something to brag about. But what can I say? The furry little bastard really rocked my world. Of course, all dog owners think *their* dogs are the most unique, amazing creatures put on this Earth. Unfortunately, I didn't realize how truly special Pete was until *after* he passed away.

Don't worry, I'm not gonna get all *Marley & Me* on you—or pull a *My Dog Skip*. But I can't lie to you either: this losing a dog thing ain't for sissies.

It's embarrassing to admit, but I didn't even cry this much when my dad died—and that's no disrespect because I loved my father dearly. However, with a person, barring unforeseen tragedy, you can at least talk about death and try to come to some sort of peace with it and acceptance or whatever. But with Pete, I can only picture him during that last year, his fuzzy noggin engulfed by that super-sized plastic cone of shame that Pete's vet prescribed due to his deteriorating eyesight and propensity for bumping into things, day and night. Those sweet, sad almond-brown dog eyes, shadowed by hazy cataracts, gazed up at me forlornly, trying to figure out what happened to his once nimble body, puzzled and frustrated at how he couldn't jump up onto the bed anymore, or zip down the stairs, or make it outside without whizzing all over the carpet.

Now I've known plenty of friends who have lost pets and have seen that look of horror when they told me that their beloved dog or cat had been put out to pasture—but nothing can prepare you for that cruel blast of shock and bawl when it's *your* dog. You get so used to seeing them every day that it's doubly devastating when you wake up one morning to discover they're not there.

I tried to brace myself for the end, but the intense emotions easily sliced through my stubborn male keep-it-inside facade. I had no idea how loud my heart would howl when the finality finally hit that I'd lost my little buddy forever; I didn't expect the strange cries that would suddenly erupt whenever Pete's lovable mug would pop into my head. Pete had toughed it out through so many injuries and illnesses during his senior

years—arthritis, gastritis, conjunctivitis and a myriad of other itises—that I thought he might just outlive me. But alas, it was not meant to be.

Losing Pete felt like losing a child—although that's not really fair since I've never even had a kid, let alone lost one. In any event, all I can do is share with you the depth of my own personal painful experience, so please bear with me. Besides, loss is a contest that nobody wants to win.

Even I was surprised by how hard I took Pete's passing. How could I be so foolish and naive? C'mon, toughen up! Don't be such a pussy. You're not the first guy to lose a pet. Dogs live, and then they die. It's part of the deal. That's what everybody knows before you sign the contract to take home your new best friend.

And it's not like I don't have some prior exposure to losing an animal. My childhood dog, Starsky, a playful black poodle-schnauzer mix named after the 1970s TV cop show, *Starsky and Hutch*, bit the dust when I was in fourth grade. (Hutch, his sandy-haired Lhasa Apso partner in crime, lived down the street.) Coming home one day after school, I found my dad sitting alone at the kitchen table. It was unusual for him to be home so early from work. He broke it to me like a man, "We had to put Starsky down today."

"Down?" I replied obliviously. "Down where?"

"I took him into The Humane Society. They put him to sleep."

"Why, was he tired?" I said, still not getting it.

"No, he was very ill. The doctor said he had a tumor, so that's why he smelled funny. So they

euthanized him. He's dead."

"What do you mean dead? You *killed* Starsky, Dad?"

"No, they did. The Humane people. Sorry, kiddo."

I recall feeling pretty shook up by the news and somewhat distrustful of my father's account since Starsky hadn't appeared sick at all to me. But you wouldn't have known it by my reaction then, as I think I just mumbled something, then grabbed a bag of Doritos and scuffled into the other room to go watch the rest of *Scooby Doo*.

Looking back, my lukewarm response to Starsky's demise was not as considerate as I would've hoped, but in my defense, it's a lot different losing a dog as a kid than when you're a grown adult. All those days of getting up early for morning walks, picking up crap, preparing meals, playing with slobbery dog toys, clipping toenails, giving baths, emergency visits to the vet, and picking up more crap before snuggling into bed, and then having to get up and do it all over again. It adds up. It all means something, the responsibility, that another living critter is completely dependent on you for survival.

But let's go back to the beginning. I was living with Liberty, my ironically named performance artist girlfriend, who dumped me out of the blue one day because she yearned for her freedom from me and our slummy one room apartment. She claimed to be too sensitive to break up in person, so she left me a pretentious video message of her reciting some bad poetry, professing how she needed to spread her artistic

wings by moving into a 3,000-foot loft space that her parents had bought for her.

Liberty and I had discussed getting a dog together, so to get over her departure, I ventured out to the local pound to find a new roommate. It wasn't as if I needed a puppy to lick my wounds even though, in hindsight, I guess you could call it fate. Walking into the ASPCA that day was like entering a maximum-security prison. There were wild, untamed dogs of all shapes and sizes barking and bouncing off the walls inside their dank, dimly lit cages. *Pick me! Pick me!*

And then I came to the end of the last row and found a dignified little guy just sitting quietly at ease, glaring up at me with a look of contempt: *What took you so long?* This was Pete.

Judging by the condition of Pete's teeth, the ASPCA staffers guesstimated that he was either two or three years old; nobody there could verify his official birthdate. To paraphrase a well-known line from *Casablanca*, of all the dogs in all the dog shelters in all the world. Considering the formidable lineup of available dogs that day at the kennel, one might assume that I saved Pete's life. But the honest-to-God truth is that he saved mine.

Unlike most household pets, I pretty much owe my whole career to that darn dog. I was a starving artist when we first met, and he turned my fading hopes of becoming a professional painter into a full-fledged cottage industry. He was not only my precious pal—he was my meal ticket. Before Pete, I had arrogantly envisioned myself as the next Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko by painting these humongous abstract paintings

with big, bold splashes of color, but quite frankly, nobody gave a shit. So, desperate for cash to pay the rent, I was commissioned by the friend of a friend to do a portrait of their Mack Truck-sized Great Dane. It turned out well evidently, because one thing led to another, and I was soon thrust headfirst into the dog world, deluged with freelance gigs, and became known as Charlie Keefe, Painter of Dogs, aka “The Picasso of Pooch Portraits”.

I knew next to nothing about dogs until I started painting them, but thereafter I became a self-taught connoisseur of breeds, quickly discerning the differences between Pit Bulls and Bull Terriers; Cocker Spaniels and Springer Spaniels; Bernese Mountain Dogs and Portuguese Water Dogs; Shih Tzus, Shar-Peis, and Shiba Inus; You get the Pointer—and don't even get me started on the designer hybrid dogs!

Soon enough, my busy schedule forced me to give up my highfalutin modern art designs to exclusively do dog pictures that became so much in demand that I was able to focus my work solely on one dog—Pete—who himself became a minor star on the pet celebrity circuit. (He once even got to sniff the butt of Eddie, his fellow Jack Russell from the popular TV sitcom, *Frasier*, at a Hollywood dog show.)

In fact, you may have seen my commercial work somewhere as Pete's face has been plastered on everything from limited edition prints and posters to calendars, greeting cards, T-shirts, onesies, beer koozies, smartphone cases, and whatever else Donny, my marketing mastermind business partner, could cook up.

Obviously, this isn't high art and hasn't been

rewarded with much critical praise as most art pundits are reluctant to jump on the pet portrait bandwagon. For example, one prominent New York critic snarled that my series of *Sunday in the Park with Pete* paintings were “so kitschy and mediocre that Animal Control should unleash a pack of rabid dogs into the gallery to urinate on them,” which Pete, being a megalomaniacal marker of his territory, took great offense to.

But a few unkind words never hurt our business—or pleasure. Pete and I shook off the snooty highbrows by doing showings at Petco, Costco, and other major retail outlets. We did live TV talk shows, book signings, and dog charity events (Pete always gave back). This astonishing windfall afforded us a modest home and studio gallery in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, a quaint coastal village originally founded as an artists colony in the early 1900s, that has since developed into an upscale tourist destination, the home of retired movie stars, C.E.O.'s and Pebble Beach Golf Course, teeming with luxury boutique shops, picturesque cottages, and windswept Cypress trees.

Interviewers used to ask if I ever felt guilty for exploiting my dog for fame and fortune? Hell no! We were a team. We celebrated our victories together, and we commiserated in our defeats. And I always spoiled Pete with the spoils of our success. Pete certainly never complained when he went from a diet of generic kibble and table scraps to USDA Prime Sirloin—and even got miffed when I dared to police his red meat intake.

Having said that, his fluctuating weight hardly affected his popularity. Everywhere we went Pete would get stopped on the street by admiring fans for a hearty

pet or belly scratch. "Where have I seen that dog before?" they'd say. "He looks just like the one from those paintings!"

Although Pete wasn't the most expressive mutt, he loved being the center of attention—until he got older and I had to cut down his public appearances to only a handful of events a year. Like a fine Cabernet, Pete got better with age, which made it all the more excruciating when he unexpectedly died on me. Just when I had gotten adjusted to life with my boy as a slower, frailer, elderly dog, he mysteriously disappeared.

It is with great regret that I now fully understand why some owners are reluctant to pull the trigger on a sick, older dog. I used to watch these melancholy masters dragging their poor, blind, deaf, crippled companions down the street using contraptions made of straps, harnesses, and wheels—and think to myself how cruel, how weak, how selfish these people are for keeping their dogs alive. It's over. Just let them go. Now I get it though. There's a huge difference between your dog being sick and old versus being *dead*. You just want to hang onto your pal as long as you can.

Surely, if my father were here today and heard me going on and on about all this dead dog stuff, he would sit me down and say, "C'mon, it's just a dog, son. It's just a dog."

But this time, he would be wrong. My Pete ~~wasn't~~ isn't just a dog. He's a ghost. And he still haunts me every day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RUSS RYAN has written screenplays with the Hollywood producers of *American Pie*, *Final Destination*, and *Fireflies in the Garden*. He was also a writer on a really bad teen comedy, National Lampoon's *Repli-Kate*, starring Eugene Levy and Ali Landry. This is his first novel.

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