

This story is for Jesse. Anyone who knows her will understand why.

Baby

... a love story

Cassie was two years old when we decided we needed a dog.

Two-year-olds can get into a lot of trouble. They have too much energy. So my wife Sam and I decided that Cassie might enjoy having her own puppy.

We'd talked about it first.

"Dave, do you think it's a good idea? Two-year-olds, especially ones as rambunctious as Cassie, can be hard on a puppy".

We decided to risk it.

We got the puppy from a breeder. It was an eight-week-old black Lab, and he assured us that it would be a good family pet. Good with kids. We were hoping it would be good with our two-year-old.

I explained our fears. He smiled. *"Don't you worry about it. A puppy is just what she needs. You can return the dog if it doesn't work out ... but I think it will".*

So we had our dog. Cassie held the small puppy on her lap the whole way home as it slept. She was afraid to move. *"I don't want to wake him up, Mommy!"*

I don't know where the name 'Baby' came from. It just sort of happened.

Right from the start, Baby and Cassie got along like they'd known each other forever. The puppy's energy seemed to calm Cassie down; her favourite thing was to snuggle on the couch with Baby after the two of them had spent an afternoon chasing each other around the back yard.

Baby was the most well-behaved dog I'd ever known, even as a puppy. She figured out the newspaper thing right away, and then it wasn't long before she learned to stand at the door when she needed to go out. Even Cassie wasn't that well trained.

She followed Cassie everywhere, and slept on her bed at night. She ate her breakfast when Cassie ate hers, and the two were inseparable.

But Baby was a family dog. She was just as affectionate to Sam and I, and would go for walks with us when Cassie was sleeping. But when Cassie was with us, there was no mistaking whose dog she was.

Cassie and I worked with Baby to teach her some things. She mastered 'come' right away, although when there was a squirrel in the yard, you could see her quiver when we called her ... she would much rather be chasing the squirrel.

One day Cassie called me out into the yard to show me a trick she had taught Baby.

"Watch, Daddy. Baby ... stand!"

She held one arm in the air. Baby stood on her hind legs and licked Cassie's hand.

By Cassie's fourth birthday, Baby was already full grown. She wasn't a large dog, but she was healthy. We made sure she got lots of exercise. Or, rather, Cassie did.

Cassie had taken on the responsibility of looking after Baby, and she took her job seriously. She gave him food and water every morning, and let him out into the yard. When we went for walks, she looked after finding the leash and the clean-up bags. She cleaned up Baby's occasional mistakes in the yard too.

Baby followed her everywhere.

Baby was very gentle-natured. The breeder had been right ... she was good with kids. When Cassie had friends over for a visit, Baby enjoyed the company as much as Cassie did. She never growled, and she seemed to know instinctively that Cassie's friends wouldn't hurt her, even when they yelled and screamed and occasionally got into wrestling matches.

Baby was so gentle, you could get down on the floor and take the food out of her mouth, and she would just wag her tail at you.

"Daddy, don't tease her!" But Baby thought it was a game.

Baby was very protective of Cassie. She wouldn't let her stay in the yard alone; there were vehicles that occasionally used the road out front, and Baby somehow knew that it wasn't a good thing for a four-year-old to be out there by herself. We wouldn't let Cassie be out there alone, of course, but she had learned to work door handles as soon as she could reach them. We had to keep our eye on her all the time. Baby helped.

We saw just how protective she could be when we had a bear in the yard.

Cassie was five, and she'd started school. The bus picked her up every morning in our driveway, and Baby would walk to the bus with her. She'd spend the day with us, happy to spend time doing whatever we were doing. And then she would trot out to meet Cassie when the bus dropped her off in the afternoon.

Neighbours had spotted the bear the day before, so we were pretty cautious about letting Cassie or Baby outside. That morning when the bus arrived, Sam walked Cassie towards the bus, and Baby followed.

But then Baby went crazy. She began barking hysterically, and placed herself in front of Sam and Cassie. She continued barking; I was watching from the front door, and it looked as if Baby was trying to herd them back into the house.

And then I saw the bear. It was coming down the driveway on the same side of the bus as the girls. Baby saw it too.

She attacked the bear.

There was no other way to describe it. She ran at the bear, barking furiously, and bit at its legs. The she backed off and did it again. And again ... all the while keeping herself between Sam and Cassie, and the bear.

The bear was a lot bigger than Baby, and probably could have killed her with one swipe of a paw. But it was so startled by Baby's onslaught that it turned around and ran.

Baby chased it until it was off the property, but she immediately came back when we called her. Despite her obvious agitation, she immediately went to Cassie and licked her hand. Cassie laughed. The kids on the bus cheered.

Baby got a second breakfast that morning. Eggs on toast. It had been meant for me.

By the time Cassie was eight she was doing things with friends after school. Often a group of them would visit us, and Cassie and her friends and Baby would play in the front yard.

Baby's favourite game was chasing a ball. If you threw it, she would chase it and bring it back. We didn't have to teach her to do that; she just did it naturally. I think it was the chasing she really enjoyed, and she knew she wouldn't get to chase it again unless you threw it. So she always brought it back.

That didn't work out so well when Cassie and her friends played baseball. It didn't matter who hit the ball or where it went, Baby would always get to the ball before anyone else, and she would only bring it back to Cassie.

"Daddy, can you look after Baby for us?" We had to keep Baby inside when they played ball. She sat by the front window and watched, with a sad look on her face.

The most fun was watching Baby chase squirrels. When she spotted one, she didn't bark at it; she was completely silent as she stalked it. When the squirrel would eventually notice her, she would streak after it as fast as she could run. But she never caught one. I don't think she would have known what to do with one if she'd caught it!

We took Baby with us everywhere. You have to understand that, to us, Baby wasn't just a pet. She was a member of our family. God entrusts us to look after creatures that are weaker than we are, and Baby was our responsibility. But she was more than that. She was our friend.

Trips in the summer meant finding motels that would accept dogs. We'd tried boarding Baby at a kennel once. But the look on her face when we picked her up a week later told us that she felt like she had been deserted. It took her several days to trust us again after that; every time we left the room she followed, unwilling to be left behind for any reason.

When Cassie was ten, she asked me "*Dad, how long will Baby live?*"

Baby was eight, and in the prime of her life. She could live to be eighteen, if we were lucky. I told Cassie "*She'll be around a long time yet, honey. You'll be an adult gone off to college when she dies*".

That was so far into an unimaginable future for Cassie that she accepted it without question.

Cassie was eleven when it happened.

She'd been throwing a ball in the front yard for Baby, and one of the throws had ended up on the road. Baby, in her single-minded determination to get the ball, hadn't seen the truck coming. Neither had Cassie.

The front wheel of the truck hit her a glancing blow, and she went flying. The truck didn't stop. I heard Cassie's screams from inside the house.

When I got to them, Cassie was kneeling beside Baby, who was lying still on the road. I cradled Baby's head in my lap. She wagged her tail, and looked up at me, as if to say "*What happened?*"

Cassie said, through her tears "*Is she going to die, Daddy? Please don't let her die!*"

Baby's hindquarters were mangled, and I was sure that both back legs were broken. She must have been in a lot of pain. There was a lot of blood.

"I'll look after it, honey. *You stay here with Mom while I take her to the vet, OK?*" I was crying too.

She helped me carry Baby to the car. Baby was alive, and the occasional beat of her tail against my arm told me that she was fighting to hold on. But I wasn't very optimistic that she'd even survive the trip to the vet's office.

But she was still alive when I got there. Her occasional whimper told me she was hurting badly.

The vet immediately took her into the examining room, while I waited in the outer office. He returned in about fifteen minutes. Bob was a family friend, and he knew all about Baby and Cassie.

“Dave, it’s pretty bad. Both back legs are fractured, and her pelvis is broken. There’s some spinal damage. She’s in great pain. Probably the kindest thing you can do for her is to put her to sleep”

I wasn’t ready to hear that. *“Can you fix the damage? I don’t care what it costs!”*

“Well, we can certainly set the bones in her legs. And the pelvis will heal if it’s immobilized. But she’ll never have the use of her back legs again. It wouldn’t be much of a life for an active dog like her”.

“If you do all of that, will she be in pain?”

“Once it’s all healed? No, I don’t think so. The spinal damage will help with that. But, Dave ... it will be expensive”.

“I don’t care what it costs, Bob. Do it!”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Just do whatever it takes. We want Baby back”.

How could I go home to Cassie and tell her *“I’m sorry, honey, but we couldn’t save Baby. It would cost too much money”.*

I couldn’t.

Baby was at the vet’s for four weeks. She was immobilized in a cast that covered the entire part of her lower body, and sedated much of the time for the pain. She was fed intravenously.

Sam, Cassie and I visited her every day after school, and on Saturdays.

When I picked up Baby for the trip home, Bob gave me the bill. He’d been right; it was expensive. We wouldn’t be going anywhere on our next summer vacation.

But the look on Cassie’s face when I walked in the door, with Baby in my arms wagging her tail ferociously, told me it had all been worthwhile.

Eventually the cast came off. Baby's injuries had mostly healed, but she couldn't use her back legs, or stand up. Her bodily functions still worked the way they should ... things were a little messy for a while until we figured out how to solve the problem ... and she could still wag her tail.

Bob had told me what I needed to do for her. In order for her to get around, and to do her business without getting it all over herself, her back end needed to be up off the ground. And on wheels.

I made the little wagon for her in a day. It strapped around the middle like a harness, and the back end sat on a cushion on the wagon.

It didn't take her long to figure out that she could get around by walking with just her two front legs. And it wasn't more than a day after that before she was racing around the yard with Cassie, chasing a ball.

All her life, it had been Baby who was protective of Cassie. Now the roles were reversed. Cassie made sure she always knew where Baby was, and that she was happy. She played with her in every spare moment. She unhitched her from her wagon and sat her on her lap when she was doing her homework. She lifted her onto her bed at night, and down again in the morning.

It wasn't long before we'd forgotten all about the accident. Baby was a member of our family ... one who had to get around on two legs and two wheels. We hardly noticed any more.

In Cassie's fifteenth year she started going out with boys. I was sort of hoping that Baby would exert her protective influence and maybe chase a few of them away. Particularly the ones with nose rings. But it didn't happen. Anyone Cassie brought home was fine with Baby, and became her friend too.

But Cassie drew the line at taking Baby on dates with her. Even though I said I thought it was a good idea.

Cassie was still very protective of Baby. They walked together out to the bus every morning. All the kids loved Baby, and she loved it when Cassie's friends would come over for a visit. More people to throw the ball for her!

There was one boy who Cassie brought home once, after school. When he saw Baby, he frowned. "*That's the stupidest looking thing I've ever seen! Why don't you have him put down?*"

We never saw that boy again.

Baby could still chase a ball, but her squirrel chasing days were over. She could move pretty fast pulling her wagon, but I think she knew she had no hope of ever catching one. When she spotted one in the yard now, she pretended to ignore it. But you could see her nose twitching.

Cassie turned eighteen, and left for college. That was a sad time. Cassie was in tears, knowing it would be Thanksgiving before she could come home again. I'm sure she was going to miss us. But she had trouble saying goodbye to Baby. I think she would have taken her with her, if the dorm had allowed it.

Baby took it hard. For the first week she spent most of her time pacing between the living room window and the front door. When we'd let her out, she'd stand in the yard, as if expecting Cassie to return at any moment.

She got over it eventually, and returned to her playful self. But she was often sad, especially in the evenings when we went to bed. We tried to get her to sleep on our bed with us, but Baby wasn't interested. We had to lift her onto Cassie's bed at night, and off in the morning. That's where she slept.

Thanksgiving finally arrived, and when I returned from the airport with Cassie, Baby was beside herself with joy. The two of them played in the yard for an hour, just like they'd done when Cassie was two.

For a few days, Baby was in heaven! Cassie was home, and she got to sleep with her!

When Cassie left to return to college, it wasn't so hard on Baby this time. Maybe she knew she'd be back. Or maybe she knew it didn't matter.

We all had noticed that Baby was slowing down quite a bit. She still loved to chase a ball, and would come promptly when you called her. One of the wheels on her cart had developed a squeak, but I decided to leave it, so we always knew where she was. She was eating a lot less, and sleeping more.

The vet diagnosed it as simple old age. Baby was getting tired. And her heart was weak.

We still took her for walks. She had trouble keeping up. Her front legs could barely pull the wagon. But she still beat her tail frantically when we relented and lifted her into our arms.

It was two weeks into Cassie's second semester when Baby died peacefully in her sleep, on our bed.

Cassie and her mother cried together on the phone for half an hour. Cassie wanted to come home, but we wouldn't let her. There was nothing she could do for Baby now.

That was four years ago. Baby is buried in a small plot out at the back of our yard. Cassie is now studying to be a vet herself, and we're very proud of her. When she's home on vacation, she always spends a few moments out at the spot where Baby rests.

We never got another dog. How could we?