

Travels With Michael  
March & April 2023

If he had lived forever, he would be 45 years old now. Had he such immortality, he would still be trailing a wake of chaos and mayhem, followed by sheer delight in any situation. He would still, I am sure, be ready for every adventure, every opportunity to mix things up a bit. He would overflow with optimism and love, oblivious to the fact that he was prone to mischief and havoc.

He was born during the Thanksgiving season, a wee fat little sort bounding with energy. His owners didn't want him, but even with the brief possibility of homelessness, the little pup grew neither sullen nor anxious. Even in infancy, that wasn't his style. How could I not take him?

And that was the thing about him. He always looked pleased, and one could not dismiss the possibility that he truly was. It read in his eyes. They were round and large, and even on cloudy days, they seemed to sparkle. The sides of his mouth drew up, not at all like a snarl, but just enough that you had to stop for a moment and register that the little fellow was indeed smiling. His ears created the look of a court jester. Small and stunted, they started upward and then flopped over as if relegated to serving as trap doors to the delicate inner sanctum of the ear. He looked like Yoda, from *Star Wars*. I once shared that with him, and the wag started out slowly and rhythmically, and then, as he warmed to the idea of being a *Star Wars* character, it burst into a rapid, joy-filled propeller whirl that made his entire body quiver.

I was to be married the coming spring, and the man I was to marry often drove from Laramie to Dubois, where I was teaching, to see me. I had been told by the owners of the wee round pup that he was part Labrador. John, who knew Labradors, studied the pup I had named Michael, after my great aunt Nan's Airedale, who had a predilection for quiet evenings that included beer in a bowl. John said, "No, I don't think so. I think you got tricked." A gleeful Michael slammed that ever-growing tail on the floor with energy that would have made Led Zeppelin drummer Jon Bonham jealous. From then on, Michael was a "Labrador Deceiver."

Michael worked on sustaining a high chaos level every minute of the day. He was a noisy sleeper, on a constant tilt with windmills. We didn't take walks; we danced at both ends of a leash. Once, while I was calmly parked outside the bank, Michael, who up to this point had always run errands with me, shot out my open car door and raced through the bank's open door toward a room where a meeting was taking place. When he promptly raced back outside, leaving behind shrieks of "I can't believe he peed—" and "Whose damn dog—", I swung wide my door, leaned back, and hissed, a la Butch Cassidy, "Let's go!" Like the Sundance Kid, he launched like a bullet and smoothly landed on the car's passenger seat, looking victorious. Once home, I considered disguises for us, but by Monday, it didn't matter. The entire town had heard the story.

On a Friday afternoon in March 1979, I left Dubois, headed toward Laramie, Michael riding shotgun. I was dressed to the nines in my new burgundy corduroy suit, wanting only to look my best for John's parents, and for John, who I would marry the next evening. About an hour into the trip, Michael ceased jumping about and barking at the landscape. Nearing Lander, he languished against the locked car door. If dog fur could change color, he looked a little green. What happened next was extensive and not pretty. Covered in Michael's breakfast, I lurched the

car into the quick stop shop at the edge of town. The woman behind the counter instantly turned maternal, quelled my tears, and ushered me into the back bathroom. She worked miracles on the corduroy, but let's face it, I was no longer ready for any Catwalk.

My soon to be mother-in-law greeted me at the front door with, "What's that smell?" Spying the forlorn looking Michael, she opened her arms and cooed, "Oh, who is this little muttsy?" But here's the thing. Driving toward the lights of Laramie, Michael's head cradled in my lap, I saw a shooting star, its tail trailing from one end of the black night sky to the other. I rubbed Michael's lethargic head and said that I was glad he and I were traveling together, toward a good life.

It was a good life. Love was plentiful, and Michael instigated his share of it. I suppose he thought that leaving doggie doo on the stairs was a way of sharing the love. John said it was not. That story aside, Michael adored his new family of John, John's dog Molly, and the family cat, Little. He grew gently protective, hardly leaving my side during my pregnancies and keeping a silent doggie-vow to stand as protector to our three young sons. He knew nothing but total loving bliss, even during his quarantine in the back yard after he tangled with a small but ferocious coyote. He even loved jalapeño peppers, but that is a separate story. If he had bad habits, I was certainly oblivious. He finally earned "gold stickers" from John when he chased off our neighbors' Siamese cat who habitually settled on our front porch late at night and set off a serenade of discordant yowls. And oh, how he loved to travel the hills with Molly, while John and I rode horseback, the two dogs racing so fast and far that they were soon gold and black dots amidst the gnarly sage. Like Butch and the Kid?

In the late 80s, we moved to Pennsylvania, probably Michael's longest journey since mountain camping trips. We stopped for a visit in Maryland with John's older sister and her husband. On their family farm for those weeks, Michael tasted of the pleasures of East Coast rural living and the immediate and effusive love offered by Carol and Harold to any animal who wandered to their home. John and I knew that the narrow, busy country road by the house we had purchased could be a danger to Michael, so after our goodbyes, when Michael crept behind Harold and would not budge, we did not argue with him. We were able to see him often, but his life became one of retirement: daily walks through the fields with his new family and ice cream on the porch in the summer evenings with Harold, who re-named him Mikey.

Years later, when Harold took me to the peaceful, grassy patch where Mikey, who lost the battle to a brain tumor, was buried, I stood quietly, tears starting. It wasn't until Harold turned away, though, his shoulders heaving ever so slightly, that my tears ran. Harold's voice touched with grief, he muttered, "Yeah, Mikey. A good dog, all right." Indeed.