

The Dog with the Crooked Smile

“Everyone loves Charley. How can they not?”

That’s what my Mom would always say at my little league baseball games. There’d often be a crowd of people surrounding my Wheaten Terrier, Charley, so kids could continue the post-game tradition of running up to pet him. After the sea of little leaguers dispersed, it was my turn to say hello to the special pup. I’d bend down and blow on his shiny black nose for a bit, and he’d reply with roughly 10 million licks. *It was like our secret handshake.*

Charley came into our lives in 2003. He came from Chicago, which made sense to my 1st-grade self since he looked just like a Cub when we got him. Our first meeting with the five-month-old puppy meant we sat in a circle as he made his way to each of us, poking us with his sharp whiskers my mom would eventually cut off on accident while grooming him. It was a hushed, but an indicative beginning of what would become a great fifteen years of our chapter with Charley.

For the next fifteen (or fourteen, nobody is entirely sure) years, Charley was the first thing people thought of when someone mentioned our family. We’d run into people at the grocery store and people often asked us how Charley was doing before anything else. This was especially symbolic of how special Charley was, given if you’d seen my father at Stop N Shop, the first question you would ask would be: “Why are you holding enough bok-choy to feed an entire nation?” Instead, they focused more on our dog.

People probably associated Charley so closely with us simply because Charley *was* us.

As I grew older and eventually switched from baseball to basketball, so did Charley. The sound of a basketball bouncing on the ground became synonymous with me in Charley’s mind, and so every time he heard it, his tail would shake back and forth with fondness. Whether or not

it was my dribbling, Charley has me in his mind, heart, and tail every time a neighborhood boy was shooting hoops.

Another interest of mine Charley eventually picked up was storytelling.

After a big summer storm one year, my Dad and Charley went for a walk along the Pocantico River; Charley's favorite spot. As athletic and agile as Charley was, the strong current left over from the storm a day earlier interrupted his usually peaceful drink in the river, and instead, he had swept away. My Dad, all by himself, had to heroically dive into the river to rescue him, and thankfully did 30 yards later when he finally caught up to him.

But the highlight of this event comes a week later when we all took Charley for a walk as a family. As usual, we went down to the Pocantico River, Charley's first visit since his near-death experience. Instead of going in the river, however, Charley just sat down and looked at us. *It was like he had something to say.*

And so he did.

For the next ten minutes or so, Charley just barked... nonstop. We had never seen it before. We couldn't figure out what he was doing until we remembered what had happened last week. Charley was simply telling us what happened to him. He was probably telling us how close he was to death because we never taught him how to properly swim. Or maybe he was telling us about how funny it was to see Dad frantically swimming shirtless in the Pocantico River. Regardless of what his version of the story was, that dog got his message across: He wasn't ready to leave us.

In year twelve of Charley, we realized he shared another quality with us: resilience.

He was diagnosed with a tumor on his colon, which would need surgery. I remember dropping him off in Dobbs Ferry for his operation and thinking to myself on the way home that this *couldn't* be the last time I saw Charley. There was no way.

Fast forward a few hours to when I picked him up. He looked weaker than ever; like he was inches from death. But the good news was that the tumor was removed and everything had gone smoothly. On the drive home, Charley essentially passed out in the back seat, I couldn't help but think of how tough he was for making it through. At twelve years, you never know what could happen to a dog during a serious operation.

We got home, and I sat Charley on my lap just so I could hold him. He wasn't moving and seemed to be in a tremendous amount of post-surgery pain. But after the front door whipped open and my Dad walked in, Charley got a second wind. He remembered he had a job to do, and that was simply to greet us upon entry. And so that's what he did.

He took his brittle legs and stood up to see my Dad. He stood there, nothing moving but his tail. His body visibly ached with each movement, but he continued. Dad probably thinks he just wanted a piece of ham, but I like to think Charley was just doing his job.

And so here we are in year fifteen; the chapter which we say our final goodbye.

It was always so hard for me to understand what it was like when people lost a pet. A naive part of me once thought, "It's just a dog, you can always buy another one." But then Dr. Mendelson tells you that it's time for God to come and take Charley and suddenly it doesn't seem so easy to "just buy another dog."

As I've gotten older, I always think back to my Mom's words, "Everyone loves Charley. How can they not?" And I always thought that was what made Charley so special. But after fifteen years of love, loyalty, the best greetings, stories and kisses, I think of Charley a little differently.

Mom was right; you couldn't not love Charley. But after fifteen years of the best dog ever and one final goodbye via FaceTime, I came to realize what made him so special wasn't necessarily how much everyone loved *him*.

It was how much he loved all of *us*.

