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# Chester and Me

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## CHESTER AND ME

Richard Goodman

Sometimes he looks up at me from where he's lying on the floor with a gaze that seems to say, *Is this all?* Yes, Chester, I'm afraid it is. You and me, Buddy. Mr. and Mr. Older Single Guys. The loners. I'm a man, and he's a dog, but in a way, that hardly matters. We're growing old together, Chester and I. His collar is getting too big for his neck, and I haven't bothered to take it in a notch. The collars of my shirts are getting too big for my dwindling neck, too. That's one of the genuine signs of growing old—not so distressing as shrinking two or three inches, but in the same ballpark. Chester has some white hairs on the tip of his tail, some above his eyebrows and some on his muzzle. I have white hair creeping up my temples and mixed in with my eyebrows, and if I grew a beard it would be white and gray. He groans a lot. So do I. His bones are beginning to show through his fur. Mine are showing through my skin, more and more.

So, here we are—Chester and me. I'm not sure who's taking care of whom. Just two senior males, living in New York City. Alone. There hasn't been a woman living here with us in six—or is it seven?—years. Just visitors, and not even that recently.

They say dog owners look and act like their dogs, or is it vice-versa. We've all seen the cartoons where dog owners walk by, one after the other, with their dogs that look absurdly like them. Do I look like Chester? I don't think I'd mind if it were true. He's a medium-sized mutt, about fifty pounds, with some obvious German Shepard in him. But he has enough of other indeterminate breeds to cut the regimented ears and the black hair. He has cloth-like, floppy ears, and a tan coat that feels like soft bristles. He has a sweet, almost female face. I never thought about a dog's face being either male or female, like a person's, but now

I do. Chester has in fact been mistaken for a female dog by people who don't bother to look down below. He's pretty more than he is handsome. Do I have a feminine face? I don't know. Someone recently said I look like Mayor Bloomberg. Someone else said William F. Buckley. Now, there's a range. I do know I've had trouble being a man.

Chester's missing a tooth, one of those dagger-like incisors that poke out from under a dog's upper lip. I have a missing front tooth, though I have a fake one as a stand-in. Chester just has a gap. I got mine knocked out in a football game. I don't know how Chester lost his. He came that way. I think it gives him a slight buccaneer look.

Physical similarities aside, I think we're alike in many deeper, more significant ways. It seems providential to me that we ended up together. When I got Chester from his foster home, the young woman who was taking care of him said to me, as a parting word, "All Chester wants is to be loved." That's all I want, too. I crave it. I'm yearning for it. Chester had been beaten by his former owner, a brute who lived in the South Bronx. Someone alerted a shelter in Manhattan, run by two passionately driven women, and they went to the South Bronx where Chester was being harmed. When they asked the man if they could take the dog, he kicked Chester and said, "Go ahead. He's useless." Something like happened to me when I was a boy. Something I've never gotten over. My own father. Chester's done better than I in dealing with this. Now, he's fine. I try to learn from him.

He wasn't fine when I first met him on the East Side of Manhattan. He shivered and shrunk. It was almost as if he were trying to make himself invisible. The only person he wasn't afraid of was his foster parent, a young woman named Jody. He averted his eyes. Oh, I've done that, too! He lowered his head deferentially. His tail was as far between his legs as it could go. I'd never seen a dog so afraid. I was there that day to take Chester on a date. That's the term Gretchen, from the shelter who found him, used. The idea was that the two of us, animal and human, would spend a few hours together, take a walk, hang out, go to Central Park, and see if we clicked. Should I bring flowers? A chewy bone?

In fact, the whole thing resembled Internet dating, something with which I have some familiarity, though not much success. It's remarkably similar, in fact. I had been searching for a dog for some months online. There is a site, Petfinder.com, that allows you to search for almost any kind of pet you want—snake, horse, spider, dog, cat, whatever—on their database. If, like me, you were looking for a dog, you could search by breed, size, color, age, geographical location, and even temperament—e.g., loves (or doesn't love) children. When you put in your parameters, profiles of dogs pop up with photographs, stats, and, normally, a little bio of the dog. Something like, "Sparky is an energetic Jack Russell who is just waiting for the right home!!!! He's a loving and loveable little guy who will keep you entertained for hours at a time!! He's housebroken and obeys basic commands. Sparky's ready to be your lifelong companion!!"

I'd seen scores of dogs online before I found Chester. For some reason—I guess it's like finding love between two people—nothing clicked. I wanted a dog for myself, but also for my daughter, who was six at the time. We live in New York. I'd grown up in Virginia and had a dog when I was a boy. I love dogs. I always have. I wanted my daughter to live with a dog, to see how wonderful they can be, to feel comfortable around dogs, and to learn from them. I had recently gone through a divorce, and so I thought this would be a good idea for both of us. A companion for me, and some extra love for my daughter, who needed all the love she could get, especially after the divorce.

I told my daughter about the dog I had when I was a kid growing up in the small, tender beach resort of Virginia Beach, Virginia. Her name was Nikki. She was a Chesapeake Bay Retriever, big, strong, sweet and courageous. She had thick, curly brown hair that was slightly oily, like lambs wool, and long heavy ears. She had a good, intelligent face that opened with joy when she saw me come home from school. She waited for me on the hill in front of our house in the afternoon on school days. When the bus pulled up, and I got out and saw her, I called out: Nikki!

Nikki! Nikki! She was already tearing toward me. Such ecstasy in greeting from both of us! You would think we hadn't seen each other in ten years. Little whimpers would come from her chest as she licked my face and I bent down and held her and breathed in her doggy smell. Then we were off to drink in the rest of the day together.

She was at her best on the beach and in the ocean. She was a breed meant to be in the water. She dashed back and forth on the beach, overwhelmed by the vastness of it. She sniffed and snorted into sand fiddler holes, then ripped the sand apart looking for the occupant. The sand would fly out from between her back legs. If we made the mistake of standing behind her, we were splashed with sand. Sometimes we did it on purpose, like standing within a water sprinkler's circumference. Nikki would dig down furiously, pausing two or three times to shove her nose into the hole and make sure it was indeed occupied. Then she'd start clawing the sand again, her powerful paws pulling out sand and more sand. Finally, she would reach the hapless sand fiddler. The creature, its claws poised in defiance, would make a futile stand. But Nikki would bite onto it, pick it up, and shake it until it was either dead or senseless. Sometimes the crab would succeed in biting Nikki, but that only delayed its fate.

Nikki was a strong and tremendous swimmer, bred for swimming in the wintery Chesapeake Bay to retrieve the ducks a hunter had shot down and fallen into the water. She was at her best, her most fulfilled, when swimming, preferably going after a stick we had thrown. She could swim better than any mammal I knew, except a porpoise. When we threw a stick out into the water, she bounded into the ocean, often making a jump and splash into the surf. Once out beyond the waves, she was in total concentration. Her eyes never once diverted from the stick in the water. She coursed her way toward it, making a wedge of wake behind her, her strong body pumping, and then she clamped it into her jaws with one sure gesture and then turned around and swam directly back.

We would ride her in the water, too, which was not fair to her, but it was wonderful for us. One of us would go into the water while the other would throw a stick out for Nikki to retrieve. When she swam to the stick, I would be waiting there, and when she latched onto it and turned to swim back, I grabbed onto her coat and she pulled me back to the shore effortlessly. She was a noble dog, and a free dog, the best dog a Virginia boy who lived near the ocean could want.

This is what I wanted my little girl to have—or something close to that. I wanted that dogginess in her childhood.

And so one day, cruising Petfinder.com, I saw him. When he popped up on the screen, he just looked right. That sweet face, those soft hanging ears. Chester. Did I fall in love, at first sight? Well, maybe so. I read all about him, and it all seemed good. Then I contacted the shelter. Gretchen was very protective. “Getting a dog is a big commitment,” she said, sounding like a marriage counselor, which I suppose she was. “We’re careful. We screen potential owners carefully. We don’t want the dog to go to a home and then go through the trauma of being returned in a few weeks because the owners decided they didn’t want a pet after all.”

Thus the date. In fact, Gretchen required we go out on two dates before she would allow a decision. So, on my first date, I took Chester through Central Park and back to my apartment. (This wouldn’t happen with a woman, and I felt slightly odd doing it.) We just sat there, the two of us. I talked to Chester, mostly about my daughter. I told him how beautiful and sweet she was, and how much he would like her and how much she would like him. I told him we would both love him, and that he would feel safe. He seemed to listen. By the end of the two hours of our date, I was sure I wanted him. A week or so later, I took him home for good. My daughter was thrilled. I had kept it a secret. I didn’t want to tell her about it until I was absolutely sure we had the right dog. When she saw Chester, she was in heaven.

And that’s how he entered our life.

It wasn’t long before Chester lost his shyness, began to trust me and my daughter, and opened up to become the splendid dog he is. This beautiful orphan didn’t know how to fetch and had no desire to. Remember where he’d grown up. My daughter and I taught him how to fetch. His former foster parent, Jody, came over one day, and we showed her Chester racing after a ball, and she burst into tears.

If you have a dog in New York, you take him out in all sorts of weather, and I did, in heat, cold, rain, sun, and darkness. The best, most splendid time was after it snowed. On a number of occasions while I had Chester, it snowed heroically in New York. I would get up very early and take him with me to Central Park. We were normally the first ones there. It was still dark, but the park’s old, heavy black iron lamps lit the way. We walked into a wide expanse of unmarred foot-thick snow. Chester would bound into it, cutting trail, up to his chest, becoming Alaskan. He would open his mouth, shovel-like, and scoop up big bites of the white stuff, biting into virtually nothing. The air sparkled with the explosions of crystals his rampage caused. I never saw him in more ecstasy than that, pushing into the soft, deep snowscape.

We were gallant explorers then, a man and his dog braving the elements, in treacherous knee-deep snow, in the heart of Manhattan.

My daughter and I took Chester out to the beach one weekend, and when he saw the ocean, he barked at it in astonishment, fear and warning. He had no idea what it was, and so the only thing he could do was bark. He wouldn’t go near the water. But gradually, bit by bit, he began to encounter the water, first by walking on the wet sand, then by letting the water wash over his feet, and then even going in up to his chest. Now, he’s a beach maniac, and wants to spend hours down there. A dog from the Bronx!

My daughter spends a few days a week up here with me, and Chester is gaga about her. He sheds years when he sees her. But there are more days a week when she’s not here, when it’s just him and me. The two older guys. I’m sixty-one. He’s about ten—even the vet couldn’t tell

## CHAUTAUQUA

exactly. So, we take our walks together, two, three times a day. Chester loves people. He's exuberant and boyish around humans when we encounter them on the street. But around other dogs, around his own kind, he can be aggressive, warning them with low growls, and even hostile. This makes him a kind of loner. I'm trying hard to teach him to open up, to see that meeting other dogs can lead to friendships, to fun, and that it will enrich his life. I'm trying to teach his owner, too.