

The Story of Moses

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The Beginning of the End

Moses—9/20/2003–8/20/2009

This is the story of Moses—a spectacular, beautiful, brilliant, kind, strong, majestic, gentle giant who was ours for a time. Moses, perhaps, was the “best” dog I’ve ever had ... and I’ve had some amazing dogs (as you will see). Moses was a Great Pyrenees (the “big white dog”), and I learned so much from him. Moses didn’t chew or bite or jump the fence. Moses didn’t whine or paw or lick you in the face. Moses was a gentleman.

Unfortunately, for many reading this, Moses’s story will be all too heartbreakingly familiar. For most, though, I hope that you never have to experience the gut-wrenching sorrow of a furry-four-legged loved one’s life taken far too early ... by that menace—cancer.

We found out yesterday that our beloved Moses has

cancer—the clinical term is hemangiosarcoma. We’ve been told to expect only a few more days. We have to pick when we’ll say good-bye. And, as some sort of sick twist ... his heart seems lighter now, and he truly seems to have more energy. Maybe somehow he knows the die is cast and can enjoy what time he has to the limit.

I will chronicle these last few days as they unfold. I don’t know now what to do next—my mind is a-whirl; my stomach hurts—I feel like I want to throw up all the time; my eyes are swollen; and I feel like I’ve got a permanent headache. I feel totally helpless ... and there’s my strong boy staring up at me ... watching my every move as if he wants to make sure I’m still here. All I do know is that I love Moses immensely ... and he loves me.

My intent is for this work to be a testament to the endearing and enduring spirit of dogs ... our friends, companions, sidekicks, protectors, teachers, counselors in this life whose own lives are, in my estimation, entirely too short.

But, to tell the entire story of Moses ... we’ll have to go back quite a few years. ... Moses really came to us because of some other special dogs in our family. And, because of Moses ... another “big, white dog” captured our hearts and is blessing our family. Here are their stories. ...

1

Cleopatra



On a drizzly, cold winter day in 1988, my daughter Jessica was too sick to go to school. At the time, I was a single parent with two daughters (Andrea, my oldest, who at the time was 12 years old, and Jessica, my youngest, 9) and a

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full-time job. My grandmother would often watch the girls if they were ill. So, on this drizzly, cold, winter day, I took Jessica to Grandma's for the day.

Grandma lived in an old part of town where the interstate had come through and scooped right across their front yard—the on-ramp literally swiping across the yard.

As the story was told, Grandma heard some crying and she and Jessica went out to investigate. There in her yard—just over the fence lining the interstate on-ramp—was a tiny, black puppy. Someone had obviously tossed it into the yard.

Grandma brought the little one into her house, and she and Jessica began drying it and feeding it, and loving every bit of its precious puppy-ness.

When I got to Grandma's house after work that day, you can well imagine what I heard.

“Mama, pleeease, can we keep her? Pleeeeease? I'll take care of her. You can use MY allowance to buy her food. Pleeease, Mama, pleeease.”

Now, I must admit she was adorable. ... a little black Labrador puppy. I have a serious weakness for all puppies, and Labradors are some of my absolute favorites ... but we needed a dog (and especially a dog the size of a Labrador) like a hole-in-the-head. We were renting a house that didn't have a fenced yard ... and we didn't have much money to speak of.

Grandma said she'd put an ad in the paper if I could just take her for a while.

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Yeah ... right.

That day we went home with a precious little ball of black fur ... and named her Cleopatra—Cleo for short.

(Now, the kind reader should understand that I was raised with lots of animals—burros and horses and rabbits and dogs and turtles and birds and geese and such. Animals were so much a part of our lives.

In addition to my father's hunting dogs, we had German shepherds ... and the "mutt" or two ... while growing up. Our dogs were members of the family—in the house and a part of our lives. Big dogs were not an issue for me ... just a responsibility that I had been taught to take seriously. For that, I'm eternally grateful).

Since we didn't have a fenced yard, Cleo got very accustomed to a dog crate. I used the crate to house-train her (as I have with all my dogs since), which took no time at all—she picked up on all the nuances so easily. She stayed in her crate while we were gone during the day ... but once she was potty-trained ... slept in the bed with me at night or under the bed ... where, it eventually became obvious, she felt safe. The girls and I grew attached to her very quickly. She was so "Labrador"—silly and crazy and full of action. I used to take her with me everywhere I went (well, the places that would allow dogs, that is).

She was quite smart, too, which she exhibited at a very early age. While still just a puppy, she had the ability to

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single out MY sunglasses ... lying on the counter with everyone else's sunglasses ... and snatch MY sunglasses and chew them up—but ONLY MINE. I rationalized that she knew I was the one “in charge” and that she was mad at me for being left behind sometimes. So, she was getting back at me. It was personal.

Another time I recall, I had been shopping and had bought two new pairs of shoes for work—some really nice leather pumps—a red pair and a black pair. Now, your run-of-the-mill puppy might chew up a pair ... and then you'd be out that pair of shoes, right? Not, Cleo. She actually went into my closet and ... leaving all the old shoes intact ... selected one of the new red pumps and one of the new black pumps ... and chewed them. So, that smart and crafty darling ruined not one but *two* brand-new pairs of shoes ... and, yes, I still loved her dearly.

Cleo grew out of the crazy, chewing-up-things habit (as most do—eventually)—though she never outgrew the love of chewing ... she learned to only chew on rawhides and other toys that were sanctioned as “dog-approved chews.”



When Cleo was about 2, a new position for me brought us on a new adventure in a new place. The entire family moved to Texas—my daughters (Andrea and Jessica), me, and Cleo.

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Cleo, though not needing to be in the crate any longer, still liked lying in her crate with the door open ... it was her comfort zone, I guess. So, if she wasn't playing outside or sleeping in bed with me, she was lounging in her crate. I'd never had a dog that loved the crate so ... and not had one since. It was truly one of her little idiosyncrasies.

Soon after we moved, I met the man who would become my husband—George. Now, I had been single for 10 years, and Cleo had quickly become my ally, protector, and companion. No one would come between me and Cleo—that was written in stone. Meeting Cleo was the litmus test for any man with whom I would even consider a relationship.

So, the first time George came to the house was the big test. I opened the door and—in keeping with the spirit of a young Labrador dog—Cleo came bounding up to greet us and jump all over George. George got down on the floor and rolled around with her, playing. I think Cleo fell in love the same time I did.

Not long after the move to Texas, I had a great scare. You'll recall that Cleo had not had a yard to stay in before we moved to Texas. The new house in Texas had a nice backyard with a 6-foot privacy fence—perfect. I was still very cautious with Cleo, though, as I was aware of the possibility of her getting out and not feeling she was

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“home” and trying to find “home” (i.e., Louisiana). And, one day, my fear was realized.

I had a yardman who was mowing the lawn and had left the gate open. Well ... of course ... what did the young, crazy, fun-loving Cleo do but run right out the gate to investigate the new world. It was a hot, hot, hot Texas summer day. Cleo was a fine athlete and took off with gusto.

When I noticed she was not in the backyard ... and discovered the opened gate ... I took off running. I ran blocks and blocks and never saw her. There was an elementary school not too far, and I checked all over that school ground—no Cleo. The kids were not at home this day ... they were in Louisiana with their father ... and I remember thinking that they would be so upset if they came home to find out Cleo was gone—it just could not happen. I just had to find her.

I had taken off in a panic and forgotten to put on shoes. Before long, my feet were covered with blisters from running on the hot pavement. Eventually—reluctantly ... and with a very heavy heart ... I headed back home.

Once I reached home, I looked out in the backyard ... and through tears ... saw Cleo ... lounging like she'd never been gone. We hugged and hugged, and I cried and cried. I don't know if it was as traumatic for her as it was for me ... but she never ran away again.

And I learned my lesson about running barefoot on

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hot pavement, as I couldn't walk on the soles of my feet for days afterward.

Cleo loved her kennel. She also loved sleeping in bed with me. I had noticed that when there were bad storms, however, that she really liked crawling under the bed to hide. Once I married George ... this became a problem.

George and I bought a house and set about furnishing it (as people generally do). The bed I had when we met (that Cleo was used to hiding under) was banished to one of the girls' rooms. George and I had a big new bedroom suit which was really nice ... but I hadn't noticed ... the bed was so low to the ground that Cleo could not scoot under. And George (don't get mad because, as you will see, he did change his mind in later years ... after Cleo was gone) did not allow Cleo in the bed with us ... so she had to find a new "safe" place.

When the storms would come, Cleo would frantically search for the other bed ... to run and scoot under it for safety. I felt like I had abandoned her. I should only have known how much.

This poor baby's fear of storms grew as she aged. It got to a manic state. We had "doggy valium" to give her ... but the weird thing was ... if the storm came too quickly or we weren't around in time to get her "quiet" before it

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hit ... she could be in full-blown mania, and no amount of pills would help her then.

Sometimes, even before we knew that bad weather was coming ... Cleo would let us know ... because she started her frantic pacing and knocking her head against the walls. One time we weren't home when the storms started, and she actually chewed her way through the wood fence and got out ... only to stumble around in a crazed stupor. Luckily, we got home soon after and were able to contain her safely.

Other times that we didn't get the medicine in her soon enough ... I can remember trying to hold her and she ... with all her strength—pushing me away ... and the pacing. I can remember being out shopping and seeing the dark cloud wall approaching and hurrying home to get there before she was in full-blown mania.

It's a very strange thing how some dogs react to bad weather. My Cleo had a serious case of it.



The American Kennel Club (AKC) states the temperament of the Labrador retriever as: “one of a kindly, outgoing, tractable nature; eager to please and nonaggressive towards man or animal. The Labrador has much that appeals to people; his gentle ways, intelligence and adaptability make him an ideal dog. (... aggressiveness or shyness in an adult is not acceptable).”

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Cleo embodied the Labrador retriever. There was not a person who entered our home that felt threatened by her ... or a person we met on a walk either. She welcomed adult and child alike with wagging tail (okay—not just wagging tail but *entire* wagging backside) and unquestioning love. However, to the roofers that worked on our home and obviously were deemed to be invaders and hostile—she was ferocious.

When our first grandchild was born, baby Emma and mom came to visit. Cleo had not been around a tiny one before ... yet she was as gentle as she could be around Emma during that first visit to our home. They had come in from Phoenix. ... Emma was tiny ... a few months old. I have pictures of Emma lying on Cleo's belly ... and Cleo lying still—serene, pleased, comforting. She was such a little “mama.”



My friend Leigh Ann, who I worked with around this time, was not a dog person. She was a cat person. Not that she disliked dogs ... but she'd never really been around dogs. Leigh Ann began taking piano lessons from me ... which meant she came to my house on a weekly basis ... which meant ... she met my dogs.

By this time, George and I not only had Cleo, but also had another dog named Odin that you've not yet been introduced to. Each week when Leigh Ann came for her

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lesson, I had the dogs in the kitchen with the entry from the kitchen and the “music room” barricaded by a “baby gate” (when you have dogs, you get really creative with the use of baby gates). Here those two large dogs were ... wagging their tails like a long lost friend had just come through the door and waiting patiently behind the silly little gate for acknowledgment and a pet. It took Leigh Ann awhile to build up the courage to go up to them ... and especially to offer her hand to those great big heads with seemingly bigger mouths and teeth. But, suffice it to say, Leigh Ann became a huge fan of our dogs ... a great tribute to the wonderful souls they were ... Cleo as absolute emissary—the kindest and sweetest of all—as Leigh Ann would attest today. Eventually, the dogs no longer needed to wait behind the baby gate when Leigh Ann came for lessons or to visit ... but could greet Leigh Ann at the door and receive her ready pets and kisses and love. (Both dogs loved to lie by the living room and listen to the music, by the way. As a matter of fact, all of our dogs ... when I play the piano ... come from around the house into the music room and lie down to listen.)



Cleo did have a very odd trait—we never figured out why and have not seen it in any of our dogs since. It actually took us quite awhile to determine what the heck she was doing—but, she obviously was somehow alerted,

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concerned, afraid—whatever—of the vapor trails from the airplanes—the hundreds of which daily passed over our home on their way to and from the sprawling, busy Dallas airport.

I say it took us awhile ... because for so long ... we would be out in the yard and Cleo would just start barking up at the sky. We had no clue. We would look up at the expanse of blue and nothing ... no sound ... no nothing that we could see or notice that could possibly be worth barking about. Then, one day we noticed this very faint white line coursing across the sky ... and Cleo barking like she was after a predator. Finally, it sunk in—the airplane vapor trails. How she knew they were there—why they bothered her ... we have absolutely no idea. But what I do know is that she, most assuredly, felt the need to alert us to the fact that they were there ... for whatever reason. And, I've never known another dog since that had the same mission in life. But, Cleo did ..., and it was just one of the little things that made her special.



I mentioned that Cleo (true to her Labrador genes) liked to chew. She had quite an affinity for rawhide chews (much better than furniture or shoes)—which I do sadly admit that I think probably caused (or were a big contributor to) the big fatty tumor that developed on her belly and grew to be quite large as she aged. We never had to

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have surgery done, though, as it wasn't life threatening and she was quite old by the time it popped up and got so big. At any rate ... back to the chews. She (and Odin) would get a small chew (like a chip of rawhide) any time I left the house (I had read that one way to alleviate separation anxiety that some dogs get and to keep them from tearing up the house due to this anxiety was to give a treat any time you were leaving ... so your leaving was a "positive" experience for them. I have done this for years with all my dogs—no rawhides any more ... but a little treat—and it's worked like a charm). And, they'd get a chew when I came home ... and one at night after dinner. Eventually, the rawhide chews were only given at night ... and other more healthful treats given during the day. However, one Christmas I was in the store and sighted these huge, 3-foot-long rawhide bones. Well ... it looked like the perfect Christmas gift for two special dogs ... so, of course, I bought two and hurried home to proudly show them to George.

Oops—need to provide a little background here.

When George and I bought our house, the previous owners had a tiny dog ... and a tiny dog door that provided access to the patio and backyard. I had never had a dog door before ..., but I tell you it was a WONDERFUL thing. Except this tiny dog door could not accommodate our big guys so we eventually had to buy the mondo-size which worked like a charm for the dogs to pass through (makes for lazy humans ..., but it's great not to have to

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worry about letting dogs out to potty or back in during bad weather).

So, Christmas morning ... we open gifts and take down our stockings (the dogs each have their own stocking too, of course). Then, we give Odin and Cleo their “big” present—the 3-foot-long rawhide bones. They were absolutely beside themselves with excitement and joy. Cleo ... grasped the middle of the bone in her mouth (so get this picture) with over a foot hanging out either side of her mouth ... ran a circle around the den and then headed straight for the dog door. When she hit the dog door, the physics—needless to say—stopped her. She tried turning her head so the bone would go through more diagonally positioned—didn’t work. We laughed until our sides hurt ... it was the funniest thing. Of course, we did finally open the “big” door for her so she could run out in to the yard with that huge bone ... but, oh ... how funny to see her trying to get it through the dog door.



There is a red, knit dog-sweater—it belonged to Cleo—in my closet. No one has worn it since Cleo. George’s sister bought it for her and had it sent to our house. I had mentioned to Sharon how Cleo loved to lie in front of the fireplace when we had a fire going. Most of the large dogs I’ve known aren’t usually much affected by the cold and certainly don’t take to lying by a fire ... but Cleo did.

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When it got really cold (as it's prone to do here), Cleo loved that red sweater ... She'd wear it in the yard, on walks, and in the house. She looked quite smashing with the red sweater on her black coat.



Dogs definitely, by nature, are aware of and react to “unseen” things much more than we superior humans. Cleo's level of empathy was unmatched.

Other dogs you will meet in this book ... I have loved and have loved me (and those still living ... love and do love), but as a companion, Cleo remains unmatched. For instance, perhaps many of you have experienced a loving pet's sensitivity to you if you are not feeling well—how they somehow sense your sickness and so maybe lick your hand or lie with you awhile or are just calmer than usual—not wanting to be their totally crazy self while you're not feeling well. All of my dogs have had/do have this innate ability, as I'm sure do most. However, all but Cleo ... when offered a better deal (i.e., something happens outside to go bark at; a human who's not sick to watch TV with or go outside with ... etc.) will take it in a heartbeat. Cleo never would. Cleo stuck by my side like glue when I was ill. And, whether sweltering heat or frigid cold ... if I was outside, Cleo was as close to me as she could be. Always unwavering, she was truly my devoted friend and companion.

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For all the sweetness that Cleo was, she was also the alpha dog of our little pack of two. I mentioned Odin (who you'll meet formally next). Well, Odin was a very big guy—over 100 pounds—and was very intimidating and formidable. We got Odin when Cleo was about 2–3 years old. Though, as I've said, Cleo was a Black Labrador retriever ... she was not a large one and was certainly, physically, no challenge for Odin. She was a rather dainty girl—only about 65 pounds. But there was no doubt who was in charge. The first time Odin ventured over to Cleo's food bowl while she was eating set the tone for the rest of their days together ... and Odin never once challenged Cleo. I fully expected the reign of power to change as Odin grew and matured ... but it never did. Cleo was first and foremost—queen, ruler, mother, alpha—Odin bowed to her wishes their entire time together.

We walked a lot—with both dogs together. About half a mile from our house was a park. We loved to go on Saturday and Sunday mornings when no one was there. When it was empty like that, we could let the dogs off their leashes and allow them to run and play—they loved it so. They never ran off and stayed right close with us ... though they had room to run and play and sniff. There

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were canals that ran around the park and after a big rain they'd be full of water. Cleo and Odin both loved jumping and swimming in the water, and we enjoyed the park for many years before age started taking its toll.

Around 11-ish, Cleo blew out her knee and had to have surgery. I was mortified. I couldn't stand the thought of dropping her off at the vet's with the knowledge that they would put her under and perform surgery ... not knowing if she would make it or not. She was not a young dog ... and it was frightening.

I remember vividly going to pick her up. She was brought out to me, and I saw her coming down a hall. I dropped to my knees and let her lick and kiss me. I knew in that moment that she was every bit as happy to see me as I was to see her. Cleo and me ... we were definitely close.

After the surgery, we had to take it rather easy on the walks. I'd take Cleo down to the park in my car. George would walk Odin down, and we would hook up at the park. That way, Cleo only had to make it around the park ... not all the way down, around, and back. That plan worked pretty well for a while.

But, by the time Cleo reached about 12 ... we started staying closer to home—opting to walk around the block instead of around the park. Walking is so important for dogs ... not just for the physical exercise (which they and we need) but the mental exercise that they get by sniffing is just as important. I'd read once that a dog's sniffing is

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to them like reading the newspaper is to humans. In addition, walking on a leash reinforces that fact that we (the humans) are the pack leaders—another very important fact to support with our canine friends ... so we walk ... as regularly as possible.

On December 23, 2001 ... George and I were walking Cleo and Odin around the block. We had just gotten home from church. It was a lovely day. My daughters were due in the next day for the holiday and George's stepdaughter and husband due in later in the week. As we were walking—about halfway around the block—Cleo suddenly fell and could not get up.

We were able, after some time, to get Cleo up and home. But, by the time we got home, she could no longer use her legs at all. I asked George to take a picture of Cleo and me together. ... Cleo was 13, and I was afraid that this was the end. I had to have one last picture of us together.

We located a 24-hour emergency vet hospital and took off with her. The news was not good. Cleo had suffered a stroke and had lost the use of her legs. While she was lying on the table at the emergency clinic, she had a bowel movement ... didn't flinch or try to move or even acknowledge that anything had happened. Our poor baby.

Our vet was closed. It was a Sunday—the day before

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Christmas Eve. The emergency clinic wanted us to leave her there until after the holidays when our vet would be open. There was no way I was going to leave my baby alone at the emergency clinic—not at her age—not like she was. It was quite likely that she would have additional strokes ... and not get any better. I couldn't stand the thought of her having another stroke and being alone and afraid.

We talked ... we tried to call my mother, but she wasn't there ... We called George's sister who had been a vet tech for many years ... and after some agonizing hours at the emergency clinic ... made the decision to say good-bye to Cleo. At the time, that was the most difficult decision I'd ever had to make in my life.

Cleo had taught me about love ... because she loved so strongly and completely. Cleo had taught me that I had a forever friend; and in the end, Cleo taught me to let go.

After we said good-bye to Cleo, we rode home in complete silence only broken by both our crying. I remember sitting in my chair, staring at the TV, and sobbing. My daughters arrived the next day. They were very worried about me ... as they knew how much Cleo had meant to me.

I pretty much sobbed most of that week. I didn't want to wash the shirt I wore the day we said good-bye ... as it smelled like Cleo—I truly knew her smell—I would bury my face in it and breathe in deeply—afraid of losing my memory of Cleo. I would get in the shower in the morning

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... and cry uncontrollably. Her loss not only caused a hole in my heart, but caused a hole in my life, my psyche.

It took years to get to the point where I could talk about Cleo, reminisce, and not burst into tears.

During that Christmas week of Cleo's death, my mother said to me, "... you need to get a puppy."

But, I'm getting ahead of myself here ... I haven't yet introduced you to Odin ... who shared most of our years with Cleo; who was so dedicated to Cleo; would love Cleo to the extent of agonizing over her loss ... and who was my big, strong guy ... whose loss would ultimately lead me to ... Moses ...