

BLIND PUPPY FIVE DOLLARS

A Joyous Memoir of a
Rescued Golden Retriever

Loretta Scott Miller





Cooper and the Wall

THIS IS COOPER'S story, not mine. Still, a bit of background is necessary to set the stage.

I joined Northern California Golden Retriever Rescue (NGRR) in the fall of 1999 because of Boomer, our first golden, who died of old age that October. Boomer had been rescued by us, though not officially. We found him in the parking lot of the marina where we kept our boat; he was collarless, scruffy, and obviously abandoned. He was nearly starved and quite old. His face was white and he was deaf. I knew from looking at him he was a golden retriever, but that was all I knew

about goldens then — what they looked like. When I called the local humane society to report a lost dog, they referred me to golden rescue and that's how I learned of their existence. We returned home to Los Gatos, in the south San Francisco Bay Area, often referred to as *Silicon Valley*, to have our newest family member checked out by our vet. He was underweight, but they said he would be fine.

Boom must have been twelve or thirteen when we found him, but he lived a very happy two plus years with us, and when he died I was devastated. To make it worse, I never even glimpsed a golden retriever after that. It was as though they had all vanished when I lost Boomer. I would have given anything just to say hello and scratch the ears of someone else's golden if I had met them walking in a nearby park or at the marina, but they were gone — all of them. In desperation I finally contacted NGRR and volunteered – to do transport at first – just so I could be around some goldens.

Anyone who has ever brought a puppy into their

home knows that a certain period of mutual adjustment is required. This is also the case when adopting an adult dog, especially one whose former life had a few bumps in it, as is common with rescue dogs. They all have a story. Some just a little sad, others you'd rather not think about at all.

Although Cooper was only one year old when we adopted him, he had already been '*thrown away*' twice. His first owners acquired him by means of a classified ad in the local newspaper – *Blind Puppy Five Dollars*. I later found out after taking him to the vet he was only blind in his left eye, from a birth defect. The ad was answered by a woman and her adult daughter, both of whom worked all day. And they lived in a condo. The Rescue volunteer who accepted Cooper into the system from these ladies suspected he was the product of a puppy mill – unscrupulous breeders who mass produce puppies for sale while keeping their breeding stock in appalling conditions (caged, dirty, neglected). Left to his own devices, and very little room,

he naturally became way too much for these well-intentioned women to handle and was surrendered to NGRR at nine months old. Pam, the surrenders volunteer, told me when she visited for the first time Cooper (who's name at that time was *Stevie*, after Stevie Wonder) snuggled up with her on the couch. All he wanted was to get as close to her as he could, in her lap if possible.

Rescue found a seemingly perfect home for the pup – a nice family with three kids and a large fenced yard. After only three months, however, they too had given up and wanted to return Cooper (the name they gave him) to Golden Rescue. This is a stipulation in the contract signed by adopters; if they cannot keep the dog, for whatever reason, it must be returned to the Rescue organization for placement. No fobbing it off to Uncle Ned or cousin Sam or a nice neighbor. Rescue takes on the responsibility of finding a suitable home for each dog, even if it takes a few tries.

Once again, the problem was Cooper had been

left on his own. Both parents worked and the children were in school all day. Granted, he was in a large yard this time, but with no training or supervision he proceeded to chew his way through anything left within his reach. At this point, Carol, the placement volunteer, called me.

They knew my story, of course, and Carol was buoyantly enthusiastic on the phone.

“He’s a year old and absolutely gorgeous! He just has this little vision problem.”

“How bad a problem?” I asked, visualizing my golden bumping into furniture all over the house.

“Does he run into things or what?”

“Oh no, he just has trouble finding a ball if it goes into the ivy, stuff like that.”

“You say this family has only had him three months? Why are they giving him back?”

There was a slight hesitation.

“He’s destroying their back yard. They’re gone all day and he’s bored. He just needs some attention and

training, which I know you can give him. You should take him to obedience school first thing. I really think you'll love this dog. He's perfect for you."

I was recently retired and could devote a lot of time to a problem pup, so after discussing it with my husband, Todd, who was dubious but agreed I should go see Cooper and take a few Polaroid shots of him, I set up a visit. On a Thursday afternoon in mid-June, the hottest day of that year at 103 degrees, I arrived at the family's tract home and was able to park in the shade. I had brought Bear, our border collie mix, with me to meet the youngster. She was a venerable lady of fifteen at the time, and though she had been the most athletic dog I had ever known in her prime, she moved a bit slowly by then and needed help getting into my station wagon. It was paramount that she and Cooper get along.

The mom of the family hadn't yet arrived home from work, so Carol and I and Bear waited on the front lawn under a large shade tree. When she arrived a few

minutes later, we were all on the lawn introducing ourselves when the front door opened and the middle boy child, about eight or nine, emerged behind a – yes, *gorgeous* light gold retriever with the face of an angel – who was straining so hard on the leash the kid was nearly being pulled over on his face.

We were all invited in, thankfully, and I left Bear's leash on her, though she was perfectly behaved as always. She tried to remain a bit above it all, but this was hard to manage while a curious and devilish dog who'd been alone all day was trying to pounce on her leash. The older child, a girl of about thirteen, made Cooper perform the tricks she had taught him. He would sit perfectly. It was always his best behavior. On *stay* and *lie down* he was a little shaky. He had his own sleeping crate, where he spent the night, and the mother told me he went into it with no problem in the evenings.

“He'll do anything for a *jerky*,” the daughter added, referring to a specific type of beef dog treat.

I took a few Polaroid shots and asked all the

pertinent questions, but it was just a matter of form. I was a goner when I first saw that beautiful face looking up at me on the front lawn in that peculiar way he had, because of the vision problem, of tilting his head and seeming to look over your right shoulder. I had to have him.

We were going to the boat that weekend, so I explained I couldn't pick him up until the following Monday, and in deference to Todd I told them I would give him one week's trial. This is generally not allowed by Golden Rescue, but since I was one of their volunteers and my husband hadn't seen him yet, Carol relented.

I was overjoyed until I got home and showed the pictures to Todd. After looking through them without speaking, he had one comment.

“That's not the dog you want.”

Looking back, I must admit the Polaroids were not all that flattering; Cooper had that yearling quality,

and with his big head and skinny legs looked more like a coyote than a golden retriever. We had both loved Boomer more than we had ever anticipated, and were caught in that grief-driven dilemma on getting another dog. We wanted a Boomer clone. When you're in that position, a mere picture – that doesn't even come close to resembling your former love – simply doesn't do it. It takes a face to face meeting to get you to realize that you'll never be able to replace what you have lost, even if you find a dog whose looks are close, because they all have unique personalities.

I had seen Cooper and fallen hard for him. Todd had only the pictures to go by, and they weren't really representative.

My marriage is one of the good ones. In more than twenty-five years I can count the number of serious arguments we've had on one hand and have fingers left over. But given the importance of this particular disagreement, we spent a somewhat chilly weekend on the boat. By Monday, however, I had obtained Todd's

agreement, albeit reluctantly, to give Coop a week and see how it went.

When I arrived to pick him up Monday afternoon, I found him lying on the floor on his back, playing happily with the youngest boy. After loading his possessions in the back of the station wagon (the dismantled sleeping crate, some dry food, a couple of worn toys) I snapped the leash on Cooper and he jumped into the car readily enough, eager for a car ride. It didn't sink in until we were almost home and I stopped at a local pet shop to buy a choke chain. When I parked the car and looked in the rearview mirror I saw the saddest face I have ever seen. The expression in his eyes was clear . . . he had been thrown away *again*, by the three kids he loved. I wanted to cry I felt so sorry for him, but instead I assured him heartily that I would be right back (the sad face had changed to alarmed when I opened the car door and started to get out).

His sadness was replaced by intense curiosity

and great interest when we arrived at our house. He greeted Bear fondly and was introduced to Todd, who was charmingly reassuring as he always is with dogs. I let Cooper explore the entire house while still on his leash, then took it off. Carol had suggested I leave the leash attached to his collar for the first few days, but I really didn't see any reason to do that – then.

I had never been an advocate of the crate and Todd was firmly opposed to putting a dog in a *cage*, but because everything was new to Cooper and it was a safe place he was familiar with, we decided to put the crate in our bedroom, at least temporarily. Bear slept on our bed and I positioned Cooper's crate next to my side. It was a very tight fit. He slept in it all night the first night even though we left the door open (one of Todd's stipulations). Because our house is fairly small and the crate was huge, it lasted only a few days before being relegated to the back yard.

It had been many years since we'd had a puppy

and I hadn't given any real thought to puppy-proofing the house. After all, I was home all day, how much trouble could he get into with me there all the time? I was soon to find out.

Cooper at that age was a *power* chewer. If it had been football, he would have been an All American. He not only chewed on anything he could get in his mouth, he decimated it. What he couldn't swallow, he tossed in the air and caught, playing with the pieces of broken whatever. Stuffed dog toys were quickly shredded, de-stuffed, and the stuffing strewn around the room. To say he was *mouthy* is an understatement.

I got toys for him; sturdy, rubber, seemingly indestructible ones. He chewed them happily (well beyond their design limitations in most cases), but it didn't stop him from glomming onto anything else that was in his reach. Eyeglasses, Todd's cherished University of Oklahoma caps, one of my collectible Steiff teddy bears (he had one eye out but I got to it before he could de-stuff, and the eye popped right back in,

thankfully). Pencils, Kleenex, underwear, you name it; if Cooper got hold of it, the item rarely escaped termination. It took about six months to train him to recognize what was acceptable chewing material and what was not. But it was in his first week with us, his trial period, that he achieved his magnum opus.

After his crate was removed to the back yard, Cooper usually spent the night on the carpet next to my side of the bed. He generally slept on his stomach with his head wedged between the bed frame and night stand, an often used position we would later term “docking,” like a boat being nosed into a slip.

In that first week, he also spent a good deal of time on the other side of the night stand, with his head facing the wall under the air conditioning unit (an old one built into the wall that had come with the house). I thought little about this until I noticed he was *licking* the wall. By the time I checked it out, he had licked/chewed a hole, about three inches in diameter, in the drywall

under the air conditioner. I was horrified. Not at the damage to the wall, but at the prospect of Todd finding it while Cooper was still on probation.

The damage to the wall was hard to see unless you were looking for it; it was only about six inches above the baseboard and mostly hidden by the air conditioning unit. But, inevitably, Todd discovered it. To say he was angry is not really adequate. He fumed, and rightfully so, over a dog that would “*chew a g-d---- hole in the wall,*” but in the end he grudgingly repaired it. And Cooper, while not exactly forgiven for some time, was allowed to stay. It is Todd, after all, who has always said we can never foster a homeless dog because if it stays with us for more than a day, it’s ours; he could never give it up.