

Goodnight Bubbus J. Doghead

By Stephen Rusiniak

“Perhaps the hardest part of having a canine member of the family is knowing it’s time to say goodbye.”



I clearly remember my mom’s words on the night Spotty died. “No more dogs,” she sobbed, “No more dogs.” My parents had adopted Spotty, a mutt of questionable pedigree, their *baby*, two years before the birth of their first real baby—me. He would always have a special place in their hearts, their first child, even after three more human babies followed my arrival. But, at fifteen circumstances more than suggested that the time had come for this ancient pup to cross the rainbow bridge.

“No more dogs,” Mom had said, but of course, there were more. Dad had an affinity for rescuing unloved, unwanted dogs and brought several home over the years. And Mom’s reaction—she loved them all and when they were gone, she missed them dearly.

The thing is, I cannot imagine my life without dogs. I grew up with several. Some were pets—canine housemates, and some were full-fledged and beloved members of the family. Bailey was more than just our canine housemate and pet. Bailey was family.

It had been five months since we had lost our ten-year-old mixed rescue mutt, Ernie. My kids, Michael, 15, and Tracy, 13, missed having a dog and thought that maybe it was time for us to welcome another pup into the pack. And truth be told, I missed having a dog maybe as much as they did.

Tracy had spotted a flyer from an animal rescue organization offering free puppies to good homes and wasted no time sharing its contents with my wife, Karen, and me—emphatically reiterating her wish to claim one of the adorable little pups in the photo for herself. Like every kid who ever pleaded with their parents for a pet, Tracy promised that if allowed to become a *puppy mama* she would forever be responsible for her *fur baby’s* care, for its wants and needs, and of course, she said that she would love her puppy forever.

I wasn’t a hard sell—suggesting that she should call the number on the flyer and see if a puppy might still be available.

No sooner had the words left my lips before Tracy was on the phone and speaking with the adoption folks.

A few days later, we welcomed the newest member of our familial pack—an adorable long-haired golden retriever/lab mixed puppy. Tracy liked the name bestowed upon him by his adoption rescuers and so Bailey it was.

And true to her word, Tracy attended to the care and well-being of her new baby. For the first few nights, she slept in our family room, next to the puppy cage, doing her best to calm and quiet her



With his mama, no longer a tiny furball but still a puppy

sometimes not so calm and quiet baby, preventing him from disturbing the rest of the pack. On the third morning, we found her, halfway inside the cage, asleep, Bailey, however, was awake, snuggled tightly against his exhausted *mama*. From that point forward we took turns caring for him while Tracy caught up on some much-needed rest.

Bailey quickly ensconced himself into all our lives, but none of us more so than Tracy! It was with her that he bonded best, but their closeness, at least for him, came with a price. Tracy liked to dress him up—in a hoodie or a tee shirt, a hat, or a bandana. She painted his nails in a rainbow of colors and through it all—the new outfits or new nail colors, Bailey reluctantly acquiesced to his *mama's* every crazy-creative whim.

Bailey developed his own idiosyncrasies. Certain sounds invoked certain responses. The clink of a bowl on the countertop implied that it was time for ice cream—he preferred vanilla! The clicking of cooking tongs meant that it was barbecue time outside with Karen—a favored foray. The side door opening was his cue to greet whoever happened to be entering, be it friend or foe. Affectionate to a fault, our supposed guard dog would just as easily have nuzzled up to a family member or friend as he would to any home invader.

Besides Tracy, Bailey had another best friend—a stuffed rabbit named *Bunny*. While other toys and friends would come and go, Bailey and *Bunny* were inseparable to the point where every night, and just before his bedtime, he would find *Bunny* and bring him to bed. And likewise, every morning, just after Bailey took care of his outside morning needs, he would retrieve *Bunny*, and together they would begin the new day.

Bailey had a fearless streak too. The sounds of fireworks didn't bother him in the least while thunder simply meant another opportunity to watch the storm beside me—my brave companion, never once flinching as the crashes, flashes, and bangs raged on. He was fearless, sure, except when he came face to face with bike racks, mailboxes, street signs, bicycles, or while on a walk and losing sight of our home—all of which had the power to instantly transform my brave buddy into a full-fledged coward.

Around the time Bailey turned five Tracy left for college—their day-to-day connection suddenly over. She saw him every so often over the next four years—the love and affection each shared never wavering, but after college, Tracy moved to Hawaii. And while he missed her intently, their reunions remained emotionally heartwarming affairs for each.

While his love for his puppy mama never waned, reluctantly, at the ripe old age of nine, he found a fill-in mama, Karen, and a brand-new surrogate bestest buddy, me. And with our newfound relationship came a new name!



Bailey and his beloved “Bunny”



No matter the time between Tracy's visits from Hawaii, their reunions were always emotional



An older, white-snouted former puppy with his other mama

It is a wonder that he ever responded to his puppy-given *Bailey* designation because while most dogs are referred to by their newly assigned name, our pup, upon joining our pack, was referred to by several. Michael and Tracy routinely called him *Bubs* or *Bubby*, *Bubbus*, and occasionally even *Bailey*, but for reasons that I cannot recall, I began calling him *Bubbus J. Doghead*—as well as all of the others routinely uttered by my kids!

But every night, and just before it was bedtime, I would kiss the top of his boney-bumpy head while softly whispering, “*Goodnight Bubbus J. Doghead*” as he drifted off to sleep.

As he grew older, besides the gray hairs becoming more numerous on his formerly golden snout, Bailey began to suffer from minor but manageable ailments and eventually canine diabetes. It was Karen who faithfully managed Bailey’s twice-a-day injections—these shots allowing for my buddy’s continued happy presence within our little pack of three.

While Bailey’s age-related ailments were, for a time, kept at bay, we understood his time with us was indeed growing shorter.

Perhaps the hardest part of having a canine member of the family is knowing it’s time to say goodbye. While his issues were for a while manageable, early one morning it became apparent that my *bestest buddy* deserved better.

As the veterinarian administered the first injection, I gently stroked his silky-soft golden coat while Karen knelt before Bailey—his beautiful brown soulful-looking eyes looking directly into hers, reassuring him that he was loved and that he was not alone. And when he received the final injection I gently kissed the top of his boney-bumpy head and softly whispered, “*Goodnight Bubbus J. Doghead*” as he drifted off, one last time, to sleep.

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My *bestest buddy* and me, just a couple of graying-old dogs



Our ancient fourteen-year-old pup



(continue for backstory)

The backstory:

One of the many reasons that I enjoy writing is that, on occasion, it becomes the perfect vehicle from which I can travel back in time and remember, revisit, and reflect upon my past. This then allows me an opportunity to spend some time, otherwise impossible, with the people and places that I have loved, with friends and family—some of whom have simply moved on, out of my life, while others, sadly, are no longer with us. And for me, this would certainly have to include some of my beloved furry family members too—this time, none other than *Bubbus J. Doghead* himself, my beloved Bailey!

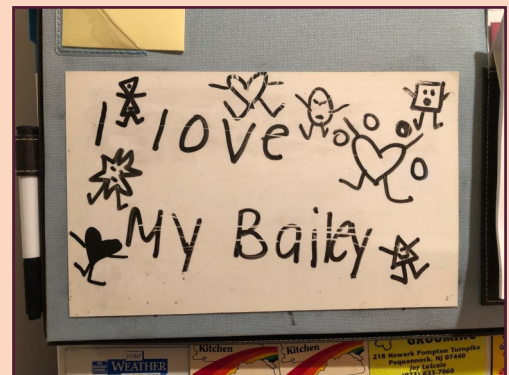
I have mentioned this previously: I am not one to write puppy pieces. Such stories I leave to those more inclined, and more interested in doing so. However, I knew right away, after Bailey had left us that there were so many good memories of him, and somewhere within them, a story.

When I knew that Bailey was going to be the star of my new piece, I asked my kids, Michael and Tracy, to share with me some of their recollections and photos of “Bubs.” It was for them, as well as for me, a truly enjoyable experience to share memories of our beloved pup!

After he was gone we wondered what to do with my *bestest buddy’s* ashes. And then, I remembered a line from my *Bubbus* piece: *The clicking of cooking tongs meant that it was barbecue time outside with Karen—a favored foray.* There’s a garden next to our grill—the perfect place for *Bubbus* to always be near Karen when she grills! It was there that he was interred along with his favorite blankie and with his beloved forever friend, “Bunny.” A beautiful marker created by our sister-in-law, Donna Rusiniak marks this special place.



A very old and tired *Bunny* is now resting, as he always did, with “*Bubbus*”



Tracy wrote this on the whiteboard on our refrigerator some years ago. It’s still there.



In addition to the marker, Donna created this memorial for our *Bubs*