

## **Saving Sadie and Sasha**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

It took one year, endless loads of laundry, crazy amounts of hot dogs, one amazing husband, one 3,400-mile road trip in the middle of winter, one canine hitchhiker, about two dozen other terrific people, a good portion of my savings and a lot of luck; but I saved Sadie and her sister Sasha. Or they saved me. I get confused. It was that kind of year. I never set out to have an adventure. Or a book. The dogs were only supposed to come home for the weekend. Two days. 48 hours. That is how an impatient optimist thinks.

They say one dog year equals seven human years, and I believe it. The year I spent with Sadie and Sasha was easily worth seven regular years, and I have the gray hairs to prove it. Still, what I did wasn't special or particularly hard. It certainly had hard moments, and it offered some pretty special memories, but I am not unique. I am just average. Anyone can do what I did, and many could do it better. Sadie and Sasha are not unique either. They are in every shelter everywhere. Go see, and fall in love for yourself.

But before we get fully into this story, there are some things you should know. This is not a dog-training book. Nor is it a book about how pit bulls make the greatest pets. Many times they do – and for me they do - but sometimes and for some people, they don't. It depends on the dog. As the folks at Animal Farm Foundation preach, "all dogs are individuals." A dog's behavior is not determined by his or her looks, just as with people. (Animal Farm Foundation is a wonderful organization whose mission is to "secure equal treatment and opportunity for "pit bull" type dogs. They helped enormously with Sadie and Sasha's journey.)

No, this is a book about what it means to provide a foster – or temporary - home for a dog in need and how the shortest chapters of our lives can sometimes have the biggest impact. It is about what it was like to take the time to really look at a couple of dogs who looked back and ended up taking me on the biggest roller coaster ride of my life. You see, I learned that looking at a dog is like listening to a person, only better. If you look long enough and carefully enough at a dog, you will see who the dog is, you will see into every corner of her being, into her mind, her heart and her soul. On the other hand, some people can tell you a thousand stories and you will never know a single true thing about them. Or yourself.

This is a book about loving dogs and making a gradually larger space in your life for the ones who really need you. It is also about finishing what you start. And finally, with apologies to Charles Dickens, this book is also a "Tale of Two Shelters." They are the Charlottesville Albemarle SPCA or CASPCA in Virginia (which gave Sadie and Sasha their first chance) and Longmont Humane Society in Colorado (which gave them their second). These two shelters may differ in their approach at times, but they share the same goal: to find loving homes for as many animals as possible.

I wrote this book mostly because I think the story is happy and sad and funny and universal. I also wrote it because I needed to make a memorial to Sadie and Sasha and to all the people who helped them. Finally, I wanted to provide some inspiration and courage for anyone curious about how to help dogs in shelters. Just go, open the door and walk in. Shelters are not bad, scary places and shelter dogs are not bad, scary dogs. They just aren't. You don't need the "clean slate" of a puppy to find joy with an animal. We don't insist on only having relationships with people we knew from the age of eight weeks, right? We all have baggage, and dogs carry theirs more gracefully than most people I know.

Even now, looking at the photo of Sadie and Sasha on the cover of this book (something I do waaayyyy too often for it to be a remotely healthy activity), my knees go weak and I get a lump in my throat. Yes, you are reading a book written by a dopey, sappy, crybaby. Sorry. Stop now if that bothers you.

My husband Rob and I went on such a journey with these two sweet, terrified dogs that their absence has left a permanent hole in our house. A necessary hole, but still a hole. That is the nature of fostering: you love, they leave. Sadie and Sasha were so intensely here in our house, though, that in some way I believe they shed part of themselves. (And I don't just mean the dog hair and pee stains and chewed up rocking chair which I will never, ever get rid of.)

In the end, I believe we are most human when we interact outside our species. I also believe – no, I know - that loving difficult dogs taught me better how to love people and myself. It hurts sometimes, but that's okay. Call it what you will: magic, the universe, collective unconscious, God. Maybe it is something inside us that sleeps through most of our lives but wakes up a few times to give us these flashes of intense meaning and connectedness. But "it" showed up in the form of Sadie and Sasha, and I am grateful.

I miss the way Sadie wagged her tail in a circle. Always clockwise. I miss the way Sasha beat her front paws on the ground to show her joy. I miss the way the two of them would charge down the narrow hall in the morning, a reckless mass of legs and tails and heads careening into each other and the walls. They looked like they would fly apart with the force of their happiness.

This quote from *The Outermost House* written by naturalist Henry Beston about a year he spent living on the Cape Cod coast, sums it up perfectly:

Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees there a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, given with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth.

For a wonderful time the girls and I were "fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth." Here is what happened.

