

Prologue

Carrie and I were a combined 100 years old when we met and 102 on our wedding day. No human children have been born to the marriage, and none will be. We have, instead, the fur children.

Carrie and I were matched on eHarmony on May 8, 2010, and met for lunch nine days later. I proposed to her in September, and we got married at our home in Ridgeland, Mississippi, on New Year's Day, 1/1/11. I haven't forgotten our anniversary yet.

My father fell and broke his foot eight months later, two months before his 90th birthday. Carrie drove the three hours north to Tupelo, retrieved him from the home where I grew up, and we began searching for an assisted living facility. But Carrie, who's the world's best wife, daughter-in-law, stepmother, step-grandmother, and mother of fur children, soon decided that Daddy belonged with us.

Daddy's transition from living alone to living with us was smooth except at mealtime. Carrie doesn't eat beef, pork, or chicken, and Daddy ate mostly beef, pork, and chicken. When she presented him with an arugula salad with a homemade vinaigrette on one of his first evenings with us, he poked at it suspiciously and asked if she'd picked it out of the yard. She began cooking two meals every night, one for us and one for him.

Carrie and I both had full-time jobs, and we decided Daddy needed a companion during the day while we were at work. We were temporarily without a dog, so we planned a

trip to an animal shelter in Jackson called Community Animal Rescue and Adoption, CARA for short. Our goal was to find a dog that was grown, small, calm, gentle, and housebroken. We walked among the pens, wanting to adopt them all, and picked four that might fit the bill. The staff brought them one a time to the get-acquainted room to audition. My favorite based on looks alone was a male terrier, but he circled the room, marked it thoroughly as his territory, and disqualified himself. Carrie's pick was a cocker spaniel named Mollie. Carrie had two cockers before I met her and loved them both. Photos of them adorn our living room and her office. I deny Carrie nothing, so we brought Mollie home with us.

And when we did, Mollie hit the mother lode. Carrie immediately bought a plush dog bed, which she placed in the master bedroom alongside ours. Even that wasn't good enough on stormy nights. When it thundered and Mollie got nervous, Carrie lifted her up and put her in bed with us. I disapproved, but I deny Carrie nothing.

Carrie also bought Mollie the finest dog food and fanciest gourmet treats, which Daddy supplemented with a generous supply of human food. At the end of every meal, he saved his last few bites for her. He would lean over and hold his plate a few inches off the floor while she licked it clean. I disapproved of that as well, but how do you tell your 90-year-old father not to feed the dog? Daddy also shared his nightly ice cream with Mollie. She was living large and getting larger.

Daddy and Mollie spent their days watching reruns of *Law*

EXCERPT · BEDTIME WITH BUSTER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A HANDSOME HOUND

and *Order* and *NCIS* and entertaining each other with a tennis ball. From his recliner, he tossed and she chased. She learned to drop into a slide on our slick hardwood floors before slamming into the far wall. The game lasted until Mollie grew tired and declined to return the ball.

Daddy insisted that Mollie was a male, said “good boy” when she retrieved the tennis ball, and invariably used masculine pronouns to refer to her. More than once, Carrie held her belly up to show Daddy that he was wrong, but he was either unconvinced or forgot because Mollie was always a boy to him.

In the spring of 2013, Daddy’s health began to fail. He died at home on the first of July, two days before my 56th birthday and four months before his 92nd. He outlived my mother and all three of his younger sisters. Sweet Chris, his sitter for the last six months of his life, told us that being with him when he passed away was a blessing on her soul.

Taking care of the wonderful father who raised me was an honor and a privilege, and Carrie and I still miss him, but his death changed Mollie’s life more than it changed ours. No more food from the table and no more ice cream. No more spending her days in the living room lounging in her favorite chair. With nobody at home during the day, Mollie couldn’t stay inside. When we put her in the backyard before leaving for work a few days after Daddy’s funeral, she looked forlorn. It was July, the hottest month of the year, and Mollie was used to air conditioning. We tried to soften the blow when we were home by taking on Daddy’s role in tennis ball fetch.

Later, when the weather turned cold, Carrie bought an electric blanket to put on the couch on our patio. I disapproved yet again and reminded Carrie that Mollie was a dog. “Shhh,” Carrie said, “she’ll hear you.”

We had adopted Mollie because Daddy needed a companion, and now we wondered if Mollie needed one. We had not yet decided when we went to the local PETCO one Saturday looking for a pet door so Mollie could go in and out of the house while we were gone. But when we walked in, our plans changed. A different shelter, the Belzoni Animal Rescue Kennel, BARK for short, was having an adoption day. And there stood Buster, a handsome hound, much more my style than a cocker. He needed a home and was ready to be claimed. We brought him home, introduced him to Mollie, and they became fast friends in no time. Like her, he was calm and gentle. I wonder if Daddy would have thought he was a girl.

We soon learned two things about Buster: He had heartworms, and he was calm because he had heartworms. The treatment was a success, but when the heartworms were gone, so was the calm. We knew Buster was not a purebred, though we assumed he was all dog. But after he took the cure, we decided he was half-dog and half-Tasmanian devil, the one on Bugs Bunny.

Going for walks is Buster’s reason to live. The French would say it’s his *raison d’être*. Mollie likes walks too, but it’s Buster who’s a nut about it. Every morning he watches me anxiously while I eat breakfast, then follows me to the bed-

EXCERPT · BEDTIME WITH BUSTER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A HANDSOME HOUND

room in anticipation. If I get into the shower, he returns to the living room, head down, dejected. But if I put on shorts and a tee shirt, it's game on. He rushes out, shares the good news with Mollie, and they return together. As I don socks and walking shoes, the histrionics escalate. He jumps up on me and becomes more vocal, whimpering like a baby. By the time I get the leashes and he knows it's a sure thing, he's singing a canine aria and spinning like a whirling dervish. When I open the door, he leaps into the great outdoors, and we're off. When I put on shorts and a tee shirt for any reason other than to take the dogs for a walk, I dress in the garage. Dressing in Buster's presence would be just too cruel.

Not long after we adopted Buster, I was in the kitchen one Saturday having my morning coffee when I overheard a conversation coming from our bedroom. It was Carrie and someone with a high-pitched voice. I was pretty sure no one else was in the house, at least no other person. I tiptoed to the scene to investigate. What I witnessed amazed me. The conversation I observed from the doorway was between Carrie and Mollie, but Carrie was playing both roles. Carrie as Carrie would ask a question, then Carrie as Mollie would answer it, an octave higher. I cleared my throat to announce my presence and asked Carrie what on earth she was doing. I expected embarrassment, but I didn't get it. "Channeling the dog, of course," Carrie as Carrie responded. "Everybody does it." She looked at me like I was the strange one. I assured her that everybody doesn't do it and pronounced that she was

crazy. Mollie didn't take sides. I also reminded Carrie that Mollie couldn't understand a word she was saying for either one of them, what with being a dog and all. "Shhh," Carrie said. "She'll hear you."

Well, this was a brand new thing for me. I had never heard of channeling a dog, never seen it, and sure never done it. I was curious, so over the next several weeks I conducted an informal poll of our dog-loving friends and was astonished to learn that channeling is common, at least if my small sample group is any indication. A number of our friends admitted it, some frankly, some sheepishly. Positive responses ranged from "sure, doesn't everybody?" to "yeah, well, I guess maybe I've done that." Our friends may not have called it channeling, but they did it.

And since then, I've done it too. Have I ever! As Carrie will attest, I took to channeling like a duck to water. She often reminds me that I now do exactly what I laughed at her for doing. She says I've come so far.

My channeling is different from Carrie's. She asks the kinds of questions a person would ordinarily ask a dog. Are you hungry? Want a treat? Where's the tennis ball? Need to go potty? Our dogs don't actually use the potty, but still.

The dogs and I, on the other hand, discuss weightier issues. Mollie and Buster whine about the fact that she's been spayed, he's been neutered, they can't start a family, and they have no sex life. Sometimes they confess past sins. One evening Mollie sheepishly admitted that, on the day we adopted her from CARA, she slipped a diuretic into the ter-

EXCERPT · BEDTIME WITH BUSTER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A HANDSOME HOUND

rier's water bowl to sabotage his chances. We also do comedy, with me as straight man. The dogs are irreverent and occasionally profane. I wonder where they learned some of the words they use. I use the same high-pitched voice for both of them. It doesn't fit Buster, but I'm no Mel Blanc, and Buster's just had to get over it. (If you don't know who Mel Blanc was, Google him. He did all the Warner Brothers cartoon voices—Bugs Bunny, Foghorn Leghorn, Elmer Fudd, the works. A genius.)

Anyway, most of Carrie's channeling conversations are with Mollie, so in the interest of fairness most of mine are with Buster. But one night, as we sat down for dinner, I channeled someone else. Or, rather, something else. Our robotic vacuum cleaner had finished its route and was headed back to its docking station, but Mollie and Buster blocked its path. To get them to move, I raised my voice to channeling pitch and gave a command: "Out of my way, I'm coming home."

Well, that was too much for Carrie. "Did you just do what I think you did?" I looked out the window and pretended not to hear. "Do you remember when you laughed at me for channeling Mollie?" I shrugged. "And you just channeled *an appliance*." I hung my head.

Mom and Dad, the fur children, and the vacuum cleaner: We're a happy family, and we all have a say.

On another Saturday morning a year or so after I caught Carrie conversing with our cocker, I found myself in the midst of a deep conversation with Buster about the advan-

tages of having thumbs. Buster's very opinionated, at least for a dog, and he was irate about the hardships caused by having to go through life thumbless. He listed all the things he couldn't do because he had no thumbs. To rub salt into his wound, I looked at him, smiled, and snapped my fingers. Carrie smiled too, quite pleased with herself for converting me into an enthusiastic dog channeler. After reminding me for the umpteenth time that I now do to a far greater degree what I made fun of her for doing to a far lesser degree, she made a suggestion. She said I needed to write down my conversations with Buster and preserve them for posterity. And so I did.



A Great Man

I wish Buster and my daddy could have known each other. A great man who loved dogs and a great dog he would have loved—I would have enjoyed seeing them together. Though their paths never crossed, I found out last night that Buster agrees with me that Daddy was a great man. We disagree, however, about why.

BUSTER: Dad?

DAD: What, Buster?

BUSTER: Mollie says your dad was a great man.

DAD: He was. The finest I've ever known.

BUSTER: Really? What was so great about him?

DAD: Well, for one thing, he always told the truth.

BUSTER: Always? Really?

DAD: Always. I don't think it ever occurred to him not to. And he always did the right thing.

BUSTER: Always means no exceptions. How can you be so sure?

DAD: Because I got to watch him nearly all my life. He died two days before my 56th birthday. He was almost 92.

BUSTER: You said he always did the right thing. What right things did he do?

DAD: I guess the main thing was his work as a Boy Scout leader. He was a leader of Boy Scout Troop 12 in Tupelo for 60 years. He started when he was 25 and kept at it until he was 85.

BUSTER: That's hard to believe. I wonder if anybody else has

EXCERPT · BEDTIME WITH BUSTER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A HANDSOME HOUND

ever done that.

DAD: Nobody I've ever heard of. He devoted hundreds and hundreds of hours to the Scouts every single one of those 60 years. And he did it all for free.

BUSTER: For free? Why didn't he get paid?

DAD: Because he always did the right thing. If he spent 500 hours a year working with the Scout troop, and he probably spent more than that, he gave the equivalent of 15 years of his life to the Boy Scouts.

BUSTER: Sounds like he was some kind of hero.

DAD: He was my hero, that's for sure. Other men have told me he was their hero too. You asked if anybody else has been a Boy Scout leader for 60 years. Here's something I'm sure nobody else has done. In 1951, one of the boys in the troop told Daddy they should go camping every month. He agreed and, starting in August of that year, that's what they did. And they haven't missed a single month since.

BUSTER: Did I hear you right? They haven't missed since 1951?

DAD: That's right. They've now gone camping every month for nearly 70 years.

BUSTER: That's amazing. Were you even alive in 1951? Who was president then?

DAD: That was six years before I was born. Harry Truman was president. Troop 12 has gone camping every single month while America has had 13 presidents, from Truman to Trump.

BUSTER: Unbelievable! What else?

DAD: Eagle is the highest rank in Boy Scouts. Four hundred boys in Troop 12 became Eagle Scouts while Daddy was a leader. At his funeral in 2013, the congregation was filled with them.

BUSTER: I wish I could have known him.

DAD: I wish you could have too. He loved dogs. He loved Mollie. Plus he was a wonderful husband and father and grandfather. A wonderful great-grandfather too. He loved my grandchildren. We have a painting of him with them.

BUSTER: I know. It's in the dining room where I like to lie in the sun. Sounds like he was one of a kind.

DAD: He was definitely that. He was the most unselfish person I've ever known. And it wasn't just the Boy Scouts. He served on the Tupelo City Council and was the interim mayor, he was chairman of the Tupelo Parks and Recreation Commission, and he helped build homes for poor people with Habitat for Humanity. He was always doing things for other people. One year he was named Tupelo's outstanding citizen. He was also active in the First Methodist Church his whole life. Until he was in his mid-80s, he drove the church van to a retirement home to pick up residents and bring them to church. He was older than some of the people he drove.

BUSTER: Was that safe?

DAD: Sure. Daddy was a young man physically until he was very old. He was still camping after he turned 85. On his 90th birthday, a congressman read a resolution honoring him on the floor of the House of Representatives in Wash-

EXCERPT · BEDTIME WITH BUSTER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A HANDSOME HOUND

ington, and the mayor of Tupelo gave him the key to the city.

BUSTER: Cities have keys?

DAD: Not really. The key doesn't unlock anything. Giving Daddy the key was just a way to honor him.

BUSTER: You ever gotten a key to a city?

DAD: Not a chance. Daddy was the great man, not me. But I'll tell you this; he never channeled a dog.

BUSTER: Then he missed out. But even if your dad didn't channel dogs, it sure sounds like he was a wonderful man. And I'm sure glad I asked you about him. Mollie didn't tell me any of this.

DAD: I thought she told you he was a great man.

BUSTER: She did.

DAD: But if she didn't tell you any of this, what did she say was so great about him?

BUSTER: Ice cream.

DAD: Ice cream?

BUSTER: She said he always shared his ice cream with her, that every night he would hold the bowl a few inches off the floor and let her finish it. What a great man!

DAD: It's true. He did that. I told you he was unselfish.

BUSTER: I wish I could be like that, but I wouldn't share my Pup-Peroni with anybody.

DAD: I'm your dad, right?

BUSTER: Of course.

DAD: That makes my dad your granddad, right?

BUSTER: I guess it does. I'm the grandson of a great man.

Cool.

DAD: And you should try to be more like your grandfather, Buster.

BUSTER: We're talking about him, Dad, not me. Mollie said he shared his meat and potatoes with her too.

DAD: Sure did.

BUSTER: Bread?

DAD: He shared everything with her. I tried to get him to stop, but I didn't try very hard. I was his son. It wasn't my place to tell him what to do.

BUSTER: Why'd you try to get him to stop? That's mean.

DAD: Because Mollie got fat.

BUSTER: Still is.

DAD: You're not exactly skin and bones yourself, Buster.

BUSTER: This is not about me, Dad. I just told you that.

DAD: So why are you so interested in the food Daddy shared with Mollie?

BUSTER: Eating nothing but dog food day after day gets old, Dad.

DAD: I see.

BUSTER: It gets real old. How would you like to eat the same thing day after day?

DAD: But Mom gives you Pup-Peroni. She makes you eggs and bacon on the weekend. She gives you cheese.

BUSTER: But not ice cream. I love ice cream, Dad.

DAD: Me too. What's not to love?

BUSTER: And I love meat and potatoes too. And bread. Those Sister Shubert rolls are the bomb. And pasta, that may be my

EXCERPT · BEDTIME WITH BUSTER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A HANDSOME HOUND

favorite. Fettuccini alfredo, lasagna, spaghetti and meatballs, ravioli, I love it all.

DAD: Buster, I don't think they had fettuccini alfredo on the menu at BARK. How do you know you love it?

BUSTER: Uh-oh.

DAD: Tell the truth, Buster.

BUSTER: Okay, okay, I wasn't supposed to tell, but Mom lets us have a taste sometimes when she's cooking. But just a taste. And I want more than just a taste.

DAD: No, Buster.

BUSTER: Your dad was a great man, true?

DAD: Very true.

BUSTER: And he shared his meals with Mollie, didn't he?

DAD: Yes, Daddy shared his meals with Mollie. I told you that.

BUSTER: And his ice cream? He shared that too, did he not?

DAD: I can't believe I'm being cross-examined by a dog.

BUSTER: You need me to repeat the question?

DAD: No, I remember the question. Yes, he shared his ice cream with Mollie. I told you that too. He was very unselfish.

BUSTER: And a great man.

DAD: Yes, for the umpteenth time, Daddy was a great man, a wonderful man, the best man I've ever known.

BUSTER: You want to be a great man too, don't you, Dad?

DAD: Wow.

BUSTER: Well, you do, don't you?

DAD: And you think the way for me to be a great man is

to share my meals with you?

BUSTER: That would be a good start.

DAD: And my ice cream too?

BUSTER: That would be a good finish. He shared his ice cream, and he was a great man. Just sayin'.

DAD: He wasn't a great man because he fed ice cream to a dog, Buster.

BUSTER: That's entirely a matter of perspective, Dad.

DAD: And you're looking at it from a dog's perspective, I suppose.

BUSTER: That's the only perspective I've got, Dad.

DAD: Ice cream's not good for you, Buster. The last thing you need is to add something fattening to your diet.

BUSTER: You told me I should try to be more like my grandfather. Well, you should try to be more like him too.

DAD: You're right, I should, but not by feeding ice cream to you.

BUSTER: C'mon, Dad, have a heart. Mollie says the grand-kids called him Big Paul. Whenever you have to make a decision—like what to do with your ice cream, let's say—you should ask yourself, What would Big Paul do?

DAD: Is that right?

BUSTER: It's exactly right. You could even get yourself one of those bracelets. Yours would say WWBPD. And every time you face a decision, you should look at the bracelet, then do exactly what Big Paul would have done. And give me your ice cream.

DAD: Nice try, Buster, but not a chance. Go to sleep.

BUSTER: How about an ice cream sandwich?

EXCERPT · BEDTIME WITH BUSTER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A HANDSOME HOUND

DAD: No, Buster.

BUSTER: Can I at least have a Dreamsicle?

DAD: Go to sleep, Buster. You can dream of a Dreamsicle, but you can't have one.

The story continues. Buy your copy today online.

BROOKSEASON.COM