

# Duncan, Junior

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I turned fourteen about two months ago, and that's when I decided it was time to get a dog. After all, my family and I live way out in the country, and the place is about as close to doggie heaven as anywhere on earth. For shade, we've got bushy pine trees that go up a hundred feet into the air. We've got a wide, muddy river to splash in, and in the spring and summer the meadows are filled with purple and yellow wildflowers and tall grasses so soft they'd tickle a pup's paws. It's quiet enough to hear a cat meow a quarter of a mile away, and between the beavers and birds and old jackrabbits that like to come close to the back door and jiggle their whiskers, a dog can sniff all day and never get bored. It's perfect.

I explained my decision to my parents. They had other ideas for me, though, and none of them had anything to do with the word "canine."

"Jeremy," said my father. That's my name, by the way — Jeremy.

"Jeremy," dad said, "who's going to walk the dog in the middle of winter when it's five below zero and the sky is pitch black and the wind is howling and sleet is blowing into your face?"

I had a feeling dad would say that. I was prepared.

"I won't have to walk him," I answered. I'll just let him out and he can walk himself. This is the country, Dad. There's land everywhere."

My comeback was brilliant, if I do say so myself. And it was completely based on fact. Our house sits in the middle of a huge meadow that stretches, gosh, I don't know how far it really stretches, but trust me, this meadow is seriously huge. You can't even see any other houses from where we live. In fact, our closest neighbors are the birds that hang out in the pine trees.

My mother, of course, had her own strong opinion. You can always count on that with mom.

"Jeremy Gottlieb. Do you think I'm going to let an animal run around outside by himself, get filthy dirty, and then track mud and pine needles inside all over my clean carpet? I don't think so."

It was time for brilliant comeback number two. I'd really worked on this one.

"I'll make him dog boots, mom. Little rubber things with Velcro closings. That way he'll be clean when he comes in."

"Nice try," said my mom. "How about a fish instead?"

I couldn't blame my parents for being down on the dog idea. The last time we'd had a dog, we lived in New York City in a crowded two-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor of an old brick

apartment building. If you tried to compare the place we lived then to the place we live now, the only thing you could say was they were exact opposites. Here, we have nature, nature, and more nature. There, we had cement, cement, and more cement. Our street was just one six-story brick apartment building after another. There were no trees and there was no grass. The only things that grew were scrawny little weeds trying to bust out from the cracks in the sidewalks.

It wasn't exactly a good place for a pet who needs exercise. But my aunt was moving and couldn't take her 10-year-old dog Duncan with her. I remember the night I convinced my parents to take him. I begged. I promised to walk the dog every day. I did everything but have a tantrum, because I knew for sure that would backfire on me.

It was about 95 degrees that night. The humidity was high and we were all sweating like pigs. I think the reason my parents finally gave in and took the dog was that the heat had gone to their brains and they just wanted to go to sleep.

So Duncan came to live with us. He was a black poodle who'd never had a haircut and looked like a stringy mop that had come to life. He had a limp, and because of it, he'd trip sometimes and run into the couch or a table. But it never seemed to bother him.

Duncan and I became close pals. But I hardly ever walked him.

I can still remember the way my mother looked at me on freezing mornings as she put her woolly brown winter coat on over her pajamas to take Duncan for his walk. I got out of it by pretending to be asleep. I was never really sure why my parents let me get away with it, but I think it was probably because they came to love Duncan, too.

Duncan lived a long life, by the way. We had my mom to thank for that. She refused to believe the vet when he said Duncan had a slipped disc and should be put down because he'd never be able to walk right. She just marched the dog out of the vet's office, borrowed a baby's playpen from neighbors, and made Duncan stay in there with a heating pad wrapped around his bad leg. Duncan got better, and lived to be fifteen. But me, I never got better about taking him out.

So, to be honest, my parents had a pretty good reason for saying no to me when I said I wanted another dog. I didn't exactly have a great track record. But that didn't mean I was going to take "no" for an answer. I knew my parents loved dogs, and I've got a strong will just like my mom. So I just kept bringing it up, and bringing it up until, well, you get the picture.

When they finally gave in, I named the dog Duncan Junior.

Every dog has his own personality. Which is my way of saying Duncan Junior turned out to be a lot different from Duncan Senior. He was a big guy, very muscular and strong. He had a short shiny coat and was all white, except for two black ears. DJ, which is what I called him for short,

had more energy than a tornado, and his favorite thing in the whole entire world was running. We got him in the spring, and he and I would spend every afternoon and weekend running near the river. He'd run along the muddy river bank, leaping over the limbs of willow trees that had blown down in the spring winds. There was my big white dog, practically up to his little black ears in muddy water, following the current, trying to pick up every stick and tree branch that floated by, brown eyes shining, the happiest animal you'd ever seen. When he finally came back to shore, he dropped a stick at my feet, like he was bringing me a gold medal from a swimming event at the Dog Olympics.

By the time winter came, my puppy weighed a hundred pounds and took up an awful lot of room on my bed. He kept me pretty warm, though, and that's probably why I didn't notice how cold it was that October morning when I woke up to see we'd had our first snow. It was a big one. When I looked outside my bedroom window, everything was white. Not the pretty kind of white, but the kind of white that's still coming down, the kind that stops you from telling the difference between the ground and the sky and the trees and the cars. Total white-out.

The clock-radio came on and the announcer told us it was twenty-five degrees and we were in for the worst winter ever on record.

DJ was smart, of course, but not smart enough to understand it was too cold to go out. So when he whined, even though I knew exactly what he wanted, I pulled the covers up over my head. It was a Sunday morning and the reason I remember exactly what happened is that I wrote it down.

- (1) DJ whined.
- (2) I ignored him, and pulled the pillows over my head.
- (3) DJ pawed at my face.
- (4) I turned over, face down.
- (5) DJ barked.
- (6) My mother yelled from the other room, "Jeremy, take your dog out."
- (7) I pretended to be asleep.
- (8) My father yelled out "Right now!"
- (9) I kept pretending. After all, it worked in New York City.
- (10) My mother groaned and said to my father, "Here we go again, Sam."
- (11) My father said, "Helen" (that's my mom) "don't do it."
- (12) My mom said, "I'm doing it just this once, and never again."
- (13) I thought: "Yes!"

What happened next wasn't very pretty.

I heard my mom's slippers on the floor and heard the back door open.

"Let's go, DJ," she said. Then her voice got louder. "DJ, let's go now!"

DJ whined. I heard my mother shuffle back into bed. DJ came back into my room and whined again.

My mother called out, "Jeremy, we know you're just pretending to be asleep. But you'd better get up. Your dog won't go outside with me."

You can only listen to a dog whine up to a certain point, and that point is exactly four minutes and 11 seconds. When DJ reached that mark, I faced the awful truth. My dog wouldn't go out of the house with anyone but me. Not only that, but he wouldn't even walk if I was at the back door waiting for him. I had to walk with him.

"You're carrying loyalty too far," I said to DJ the next morning. It was 6 A.M., and I was outside walking my dog. I was wearing at least three sweaters, and my teeth were chattering because the temperature was so low the snow had turned to ice.

But DJ just smiled and ran along, waiting for me at every turn. You practically couldn't see him in the snow. His white body blended in to everything else, and the only reasons you could spot him at all were those little black ears and hot doggy breath and that smile he smiled when I'd finally catch up with him.

So that's how my life has turned out so far. I've got a dog, and the dog walks me. Sometimes I hear my mother whispering to my father how good it is that this dog has taught me responsibility. Maybe she's right. I'm not sure I even know what she means. But what I do know is that walking with DJ, I've seen some very cool things I wouldn't have seen without him. Like the day he started squealing, took my coat jacket in his mouth, and dragged me to a tree to show me two tiny kittens, meowing and hungry. Do the kittens live with us now? What do you think? Or the day DJ suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, let his favorite chewed-up stick fall out of his mouth, and motioned for me to look up to the sky. High above us, floating on the wind current, was a golden eagle-with wings so broad he moved like he owned the sky. DJ and I just stood there watching him until he floated out of our view and we headed home.

Of course, it's not all perfect. There's still the getting-up- before-the-crack-of-dawn-and-walking-him part of this story, and I don't like it any better than I used to. I keep having this dream that one day, my parents are going to take over the job again. I don't know how I'm going to get them to do it, but believe me, I'm working on it.