
Falling For Donovan:

How Letting An Old Brown Dog Steal My Heart Changed My Life Forever



It was his face.

Those chestnut eyes looking straight through me. The beautiful tight brown curls, his goofy grin. His slightly crooked teeth going every which way. Head cocked just a bit to the side, eyes beaming with joy.

Hoping for a cookie.

If you didn't know his story, you'd guess that Donovan had been lovingly and faithfully treasured by *his* people each and every day of his life. He looked that happy.

Instead, here he was. A homeless dog in an ordinary snapshot. An old man, with no family or bed to call his own. In need of rescue, and a second chance, at an age some dogs might never even live to see. He was fighting for his shot at a new life, alongside so many younger pups who were putting on their best smiles too. He was captivating and heartbreaking, all at once.



Donovan's Story

The irony is, it didn't start out that way. Far from it, in fact. This beautiful Irish Water Spaniel had been lovingly, responsibly bred and carefully placed into a suitable family who had promised to provide a lifetime of excellent care. Once placed, his breeder had continued to follow his life to make sure he was doing well - as she does with all her dogs. Until one day, she stopped being able to reach his family. They simply disappeared.

And so, it seemed, had Donovan.

Years passed. And then, in 2013, he appeared again. In Idaho, of all places. He was older, and thinner - a shadow of his former self. But still, so handsome and with such an indomitable spirit. After an unknown time fending for himself as an outside-only dog, subsisting on meager amounts of poor-quality food when he was given any at all, he was finally surrendered to a shelter along with a letter of apology for the life his then family had asked him to live.

The letter said he was a wonderful dog who deserved better than what they could provide, and how they hoped someone new would come to love him. It's easy to want to hate these people for what they did to him. Sometimes I still do, I guess, when I think of what he suffered through. But, hate accomplishes nothing. And sometimes, life presents obstacles and challenges, we can't begin to imagine until we find ourselves standing face to face with them and trying to stare them down. I don't know their story or what struggles they were living through. At the end of the day, they did the right thing. They surrendered him to people who could help. So, for that I'm very grateful and I trust that, like all of us, they were doing the best they knew how to do with the tools that they had at the time.

They gave him up. And Donovan's life began to change.

Eventually, the wonderful Irish Water Spaniel Club of America, and his original breeder, found that one of their own was in trouble. That the anonymous 'malnourished elderly dog' as he was described on his intake forms at the shelter not only had a name, and a pedigree, but also lots of kind people trying to find (and help) him after all. Because of an age mix-up, it didn't happen right away. The shelter initially said their dog couldn't possibly be the dog the IWSCA was searching for because that one was 10 and the one they had was, they wrongly thought, just 7. But finally, everyone agreed (and was relieved to find) that this baby-faced dog was indeed the missing Donovan.

Once lost, now found. The IWSCA took him under their wing, got him out of that shelter, and relocated him to a kennel that had space to foster him in Washington. He wasn't out of the woods yet - he still needed a home. But he was now warm, dry, fed, and one giant step closer.

Falling in Love

But back to that picture. That *face*. Those eyes. Those curls. That grin. This truly incredible dog. To look at him, all I saw was his spirit, his joy, and his heart. All he asked for was a chance.

It happened, as it does, in milliseconds. An instant that comes then goes - leaving you with the certain knowledge that you've found a piece of your heart you didn't, till then, even know was missing. I knew Donovan was coming home with us. He was clear across the country, on the opposite coast. We'd never even actually met him. We only had that picture. The one they'd taken once he was safe and sound in Washington. But I knew that Donovan was coming home. That was almost three years ago. He's nearly 13 now, and from the moment we met him - it has been an absolute honor, a true gift, to have him gracing our lives.

And here's the crazy thing. It isn't now, and has never been, about his age. It has always been, and will always be about his heart. And love.

Life With An Older Dog

There are a bounty of gifts that my husband and I have gotten from Donovan, living with him by our side as together we face each day with as much resiliency and spunk as we can muster. More gifts than I could ever mention here, if truth be told (and I'm still wanting to list them all so you can see just how lush this life with a kind, wise dog can be). He loves our rocky Massachusetts beach (especially the sunsets) and the seabirds, seals, and other wildlife that we share it with. He sometimes stands in the tide, not wanting to swim these days, but enjoying dipping his furry toes into the sand and letting the ripples swirl about as he watches the water roll in and out. He sat in the middle of the boat wearing his life jacket as we've gone kayaking. He is awesome.

Yes, he is older. He is slowing down. The walks are getting shorter, sometimes. The naps a little longer. But I am doing these things, too. And it's nice, comforting even, to share that journey with him by my side.

The other day, in the middle of a grassy hill, he plopped his butt down in a pile of wild-flowers, and dropped his nose in for a good long sniff before unceremoniously getting up to meander on again. He literally stopped to smell the flowers, reminding me to do the same. It made me giggle.



He is wise, and patient. And funny! He has springs in his feet and loves to throw himself into snowbanks to make frenetic snow-dog-angels. His version of a dance party, on his back with crazy legs in the air going in all directions at once, is legendary (especially if he's found a warm blanket from the dryer to use as his partner). He has an incredible ability to know when people need him - and has, many times, led me to meet wonderful new friends simply by pulling me a bit towards them, dropping his head in their hands, and letting me listen as they tell me their stories, while they are gently stroking his head. He's even done the same for me, dropping all 65 pounds of him directly onto my lap to cuddle when somehow he knows I've had a rough day.

He can (and will) find (and take) anything meant for him (but ONLY those things meant for him) in grocery bags when they're left on the floor for his perusal. He lives in the now. At work, when I check the home-security camera to see how he's doing, more times than not, I find him happily meandering about the house, making his way from a nap in one bed to a snooze in another, all the while lazily wagging his tail. He loves car rides. And noodles. And us. He is happy. *We* are happier.

And you can experience this too.

It's as easy as letting yourself fall in love.

It's Not About Us



When people hear that we adopted an older dog, their first reaction is often to reflect on what they think that says about *us*. To say what wonderful people we must be. How lovely it is that we are sacrificing so much to take in an older dog. And these things are said with great compassion, care, admiration - they are clearly meant as compliments and we've always taken them that way. We're thankful for that kindness. It's just that, based on our experience loving Donovan, we do not feel that way at all. We simply did what anyone who falls in love would do - we followed our hearts, and have been deeply rewarded for it. While it's not always easy (and neither is life), living with an older dog is not a sacrifice - it's completely amazing!

And knowing you are helping a gray-muzzled pal find a safe and loving place to lay their head is a marvelous mission. It's the best! In fact, if that's the *only* reason why you choose to adopt an old soul, that's more than enough, and a most wonderful reason indeed! But there's so much more that you'll have to look forward to than just knowing your new friend is warm, and fed, and happy. There is so much more to the experience than you'd ever expect - richer extraordinary joy of the highest order you can't even begin to imagine, until you're living it.

The 'Thing' I Want You To Know

I know it's impossibly hard to lose your dog. Impossibly. Even the very idea, unsaid, is profoundly awful - and trust me, it's something I try desperately to avoid considering too. But it will come, I know. You see, I've been there before.

In a tragic turn of events that no one could have seen coming and was nobody's fault (as so often happens with loss in life), our dear (young) blind black-lab Angie died within hours of our adopting her, right before we met Donovan. One of those things that just isn't supposed to happen, but sadly, sometimes, does. After she died, we swore we'd never adopt again.

Unless.

Unless, there was a very special dog, who needed a home and simply wasn't finding it. And suddenly, thanks to an incredible friend who knew our story and Donovan's, thanks to a picture, his crooked smile and a million little pieces of a journey to us that lots of wonderful people helped make happen, well...suddenly, there he was. There he was jumping into the back of our Subaru at Logan Airport in Boston, on his way up north with us towards a brand new life.

Here's the thing. That 'thing' I ask you to remember if you find it 's time to bring a new friend into your life. That 'thing' to keep in mind next time you fall in love with a dog, or they with you, but you find your fear of losing them sneaks in and makes you question what you're feeling. You might wonder if you can bear that pain. You wonder if trying to find a younger dog might be a better choice. You may wonder all these things. And that's okay. But then, step back. Take a deep, long breath. Slow down, and really let that dog see you. See *them*. Let them into your heart, unguarded. And then, just trust in love. Trust in your ability to love this dog. In their ability to love you back with their whole soul, and then some. Which they will do loyally and unconditionally for as long as you both have together, in whatever time-frame that may be.

Death arrives when it damn well pleases. Offering no apologies or explanations. Whether we do everything right or everything wrong, it shows up unannounced and uninvited on it's own completely unpredictable and inevitable schedule.

So, turn the tables on it. Don't let the fear of it win. There's not a thing wrong with choosing a young dog in hopes that you will have a great many years of life together. Bringing a dog into your life when you are ready is always a life-affirming and life-altering (in the best way) choice. But there's also not a thing wrong, and a gazillion and seven thousand things right, with choosing to give an older dog a chance simply because you've accepted the fact that time is never guaranteed, and that having the chance to love and share your life with an old dog (especially the specific one you know is wrapped around your heart) for even the tiniest moment (and hopefully so many more) is truly one of the things that makes life worth living in the first place.

Donovan means the world to me. The world. The old soul who captures your heart will mean the world to you too.

You just gotta let 'em.

Bet on love, and give an old soul a chance. Trust me, I promise you, it's worth it ...

