

Junie Too and Grace: A Story

Junie Too is sleeping beside me on his bed as I remember back to the beginning. We have spent a lot of time together this last weekend before he leaves me for a new home.

Junie Too came to live with me on December 31, 2015, a beautiful male yellow lab puppy. He slept in the crate beside my bed, as I carried him up and down the stairs which were slick and scared him. It was very sweet to hold him and to have him sleep near me. The one time I put him in bed he peed on the bedcover and left his shit on the Oriental carpet! So that was not going to work.

I remember the beautiful winter night sky as I took him out to pee when he awakened and let me know he needed to go out during those first weeks. The idea that I could put him on a leash and teach him where to go vanished quickly. And he started chewing on the smaller bushes in my garden those same weeks.

He grew very quickly and soon the crate was too small and he too heavy for me to carry. The last few nights I put him on my lap in the chair lift and we rode up and down together.

And then he moved to the big crate in the kitchen where he had the freedom of the big kitchen during the day.

The challenges were many – my learning curve too slow. He was only 5 and a half weeks when I got him which I did not realize (not even the 6 weeks I was told). And definitely not the 8-10 weeks I learned are recommended. I learned that the mother dog teaches puppies not to bite during those crucial weeks and the puppies teach each other to play nice as well. He was too energetic to do well in the puppy training class I took him to as soon as it was available.

My hands and arms became the target with his sharp puppy teeth- but then we got beyond that. He is still mouthy and I tell him, “No mouth.” Which sort of works.

Junie is very smart. He knows sit and down reliably (when treats are available!) He can wait in the down position, looking at me carefully, when I put the Kong filled with peanut butter on the floor, until I say OK! And when I say, “In the crate” to put him to bed, he goes immediately, knowing I have the treat he likes best.

Junie is also very affectionate and loves me to rub his belly and all over – especially under his chin, along his neck. After his first big stretch in the morning, coming out of his crate, he often wants me to pet him in this way. He has loved soft toys and has many – as well as others. But he often chews the soft toys to take out the stuffing! And leaves the braided toys meant for chewing!

Junie sleeps quietly in his crate all night for ten to twelve hours, barking in the morning when he wants me to come. Only occasionally does he bark at night to go out, usually when he has eaten something he should not have eaten and is not feeling quite so well!

He went to training for two weeks when he was only four months old, when I was no longer able to manage him with our weekly classes. The trainer took him to his home and he did well even with his four year old daughter. But at the end, he said, "Junie has a mind of his own."

He learned to heel and walk with me very early but then as he got stronger, he started to "bolt" when he would see people he wanted to greet. I was not strong enough to hold him back so it was no longer safe to walk him.

At home, Vu learned he loved to catch the ball as we threw or kicked it over and over. Ramona would come for forty-five minutes – and he would finally be tired. If he got hot, he learned he could run onto the pool cover which would make the water come up and cool him off. He knew where the balls were kept in the cabinet and if we said, "Where is the ball?" he would go there - and learned to sit while I got the ball. There were many times he was telling me in the kitchen, "Could we play ball?" No matter how long we played – he was never happy when it ended – and let us know. When I said, "Later," he spat out the ball like the adolescent that he is!"

Gerry made a doggy door so he could go out to the backyard and back in as he chose. It has been wonderful for Junie. Since I work at home, it is safe for him to have that flexibility to go into our fenced backyard and come back in as he chooses.

Junie dominated the kitchen and family area as he grew. Everything had to be removed from the counter and if there was food, you turned your back and he had it! He competed with Bill over the loveseat where Bill sat to watch TV – and took it over when Bill left. He also chewed everything – the foam from his crate pads (so there are only rags and covers left to pad his crate) and finally all the pillows in the love seat, all I suspect when he was alone and bored. Outside, he chewed bushes in my garden, the ends off the garden hose so we had to hide the hose behind the fence, even pieces of firewood. His ball playing damaged my garden and wrecked the lawn. Trying to control the mud he brought in to the kitchen, Ron put down bales of straw!

Junie was quiet when I was seeing my clients in the library, but as soon as he heard me in the hallway, he would whimper, "Come play; it's my turn!"

Junie is now a big dog, almost 70 pounds. At some point in the midst of all our coping strategies, ways to exercise him, play, train him, it became clear, "I cannot manage Junie."

I love him. As you can tell, he has taken a lot of attention, thought, frustration, fear even and money, but he has also been company, entertainment, a project and challenge – but he will not be the dog I wanted to walk with me, to sit in the library with me. I was trying to fulfill a dream from the loss of the first Junie – but I am older, alone and it has not worked as I had hoped, despite my efforts. I work in my home which has helped to make it possible this long. But it is not sustainable.

I took him to doggie day care for a few days – as a last attempt to keep him. He had not been exposed to other dogs before but he did well. He came home exhausted – but that is not a quality of life for him.

Recently, a friend took him to her farm one weekend and walked him with her dogs. The next weekend I took him back and we walked together, Junie exploring with her dogs the way they walk regularly. I saw for the first time what he needs – that open space, his curiosity unleashed. I cannot provide that for him.

I am very sad to say good-bye to Junie, but it is better for both of us now. I will send his crate and toys – as much as I can of his familiar world, his food so it will be familiar and the treats he likes.

The Lab Lovers Rescue Group will find a new home for him. I hope there will be space for him to run and explore, as I saw him loving. I am grateful there are people who do this.

My friend gave me a book for reasons totally unrelated, but it fits, Necessary Endings.

Grace Harlow Klein

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