

## Henry

Crazy wild  
Golden Child.



**A** BOOK ABOUT SURVIVING AND RECOVERING from Traumatic Brain Injury would be incomplete without paying tribute to one of my best therapists, my golden retriever Henry, who I sometimes call, only half-jokingly, my Golden Child. Henry came into our lives two years before my accident, when our beagle, Lucy, who we had adopted from the local animal shelter a couple years before, passed away of old age. While we all loved Lucy, and she had been a great dog, she was with us only a short time and I wanted to get a true family dog for our boys, a dog who would grow up with them, who would go through its own doggy childhood at the same time the boys were going through their childhoods.

About six months after Lucy died the woman at our local pet store told me about an elderly couple with a nine-month old golden retriever they couldn't control, and they were looking for a good home for him. I called them up, and they interviewed me extensively over the phone. They asked if I had kids, and when I told them I had two boys, ages

three and seven, they said no, we weren't the right home for Henry, since he was too crazy and rambunctious for a three-year-old child and would just run the poor boy over and leave him crying.

What they didn't know was that my three year old was a rambunctious hellion himself; Henry was about to meet his match. I pleaded with them on the phone to at least let us come visit and see what happened. They finally relented, and we drove over immediately. When we arrived, Niall and Chas tumbled out of the car, ran straight to the dog and in minutes Henry and Chas and Niall were all running around in the backyard, chasing and tumbling over one another, and the owners looked at me with tears in their eyes and said, "He's yours."

The boys were still too young to properly care for Henry, so I became his new alpha male, feeding him, running him, and most importantly teaching him some discipline and manners. He was as crazy and unmanageable as advertised when we first adopted him, but it was an exuberant craziness, born of a golden love of life, a boyish doggy enthusiasm that one couldn't help but love.

With patience, daily training and a lot of exercise to release his energy, he was, if not a perfectly behaved canine, at least somewhat manageable, and he was my constant companion, accompanying me to work, to pick up the boys at school, on my daily runs, and at the end of a long day, lying by my feet at night as I read on the couch.

When I had my accident, I suddenly disappeared from his life; one day I was there, and the next day I was gone: in a hospital, then shipped off to rehab in Florida. Who knows what he thought, but it must have been confusing and upsetting to him to lose his master and friend, especially since he had lost his previous masters only two years before.

After several months I made my first trip back to my house to visit my boys, and when Henry saw me I thought he was going to knock me over and cause another head injury; he was so excited he couldn't stop jumping up on me, licking my face, running around in circles—I wish everyone I knew was so unabashedly happy to see me. Several months after that I got word through a friend that Belinda was looking to get rid of him and was going to give him away without telling me. How she could contemplate giving away her children's dog was beyond me, but I was not about to let it happen. I got on a plane, flew up to Long Island and rescued him before he could be exiled from our family forever.

In Florida Henry became my therapy dog. I would take him for long walks in the morning before the day became too hot; I would sneak him onto the Gulf beaches in the early morning hours before the beach patrol began their rounds (no dogs were allowed on the beach). He wouldn't let me out of his sight if he had any say in the matter; after losing me once, he wasn't about to lose me again. I had very little social life; I was too exhausted after therapy each day to do much of anything and my mild aphasia and dysnomia made it difficult to communicate effectively with humans. Before the accident I had been a very outgoing person, enjoying people's company, but now I felt cut off, different, unable to communicate in normal social situations: a cocktail party, a restaurant, a health club, or a bar—like on my date with Cheri. Even noise from a television in the background made it difficult for me to hear, understand and speak. When I did find myself in conversation with others where environmental noise made it impossible for me to comprehend what was being said, I became very adept at nodding my head and saying “mmm” and faking it, pretending that I understood.

But Henry didn't care. He didn't speak English. We had always communicated on a different level anyway. I would come home from therapy and he would wag his tail and give me a big lick and let me know that I was okay with him, language problems or no language problems. I spoke dog just fine. A nod of the head, a look in the eyes, a woof from him or me, and we understood each other. He didn't give a damn if I sometimes got confused, or forgot things, or acted a little spacey; just the fact that I was there in his life was good enough for him.

When I moved back to Southold the house that I rented had an attic room on the second floor that I turned into an office. It was the perfect room for both Henry and me: big enough for a desk, bookshelves, a table to hold my printer and files, and space in the corner large enough to fashion a small Zen altar and meditation space. Perhaps the best feature from Henry's point of view was that the window was only a foot or two off the floor, and so he could easily gaze out over the farmer's fields surrounding the house, watching the birds, rabbits and deer that populated the grassy meadows and would emerge out of the tall waving grass onto our lawn.

I would sit at my desk for hours, staring at the computer screen, sobbing because the words just wouldn't come. Even though my

dysnomia was improving over time, and even though I had surrounded myself with every dictionary, reverse dictionary, thesaurus, flip dictionary, style manual and writer's reference book known to mankind, I still had great difficulty doing what I had always done best: writing.

But just when I would be feeling the most down, wondering how I had ended up all alone in this house, with no social life, my children gone, my ability to write gone, Henry would get up off the floor and nudge my elbow with his snout, knocking my ineffectual fingers from the keyboard, telling me to just forget the whole thing and take him for a walk. I would put on my boots and coat and walk through the muddy fields, surrounded by waving grass and blowing clouds and flocks of birds wheeling in the trees in the distance and Henry running and jumping and chasing his ball, and everything would be all right. He was the best therapist I could ever have, my Golden Child, worth more than all the gold in the world.