Dolly and John: A Love Story.

The phone rang in the other room while I was cleaning. I dropped what was in my hands and ran to answer before they hung up. The phone identified the caller, and I felt a moan come from deep within me.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Gail, it's Nancy from the Hospice House. You sound like you're busy, but I wonder if you and Dolly might be able to come and visit John. I just left his room, and his daughter followed me out. He's close to death, and she thinks Dolly’s presence might help make this transition a bit easier.”

Dolly was my thirteen-year-old Golden Retriever and therapy dog. We were one of the volunteer teams that stopped by every week to see the patients and families. The nurses had told me Dolly was his favorite therapy dog, so John's room became a special stop on our rounds.

“As you know, he's been declining for the past few weeks. But I think at this time the end will come soon,” Nancy told me. His daughter Carole and others were visiting, and she thought all of them could benefit from seeing Dolly.

My voice cracked, and my heart was broken as I replied, “Sure, we'll be there in about an hour. Just need to change and get ready.” Although I wasn't surprised to receive this news, tears formed as I thought about John's life coming to an end.

I had been a hospice nurse for many years. In that role, getting a call from a family member of someone I was caring for was common. I often tried to amend my schedule so I could be with them when their loved one died. It was one of the gifts I felt a call to give. Sometimes things would go very fast, and other times the end lingered for a long time—only God knew this final chapter of their life. I knew hospice from a professional point of view, and I also knew it from a personal view. While it is heart-wrenching, it can also be a kind of beauty and peace.

I squatted down, took Dolly's face in my hands, and looked deep into her eyes.

“Oh, Dolly, what an honor to be asked to share this special time with John and Carole. It means all the time we've spent with John was meaningful, not only for him, but Carole and the nurses also appreciate our efforts.” I patted her head, and we began the task of getting ready to see our friends.

Even though today was going to be different from our regular “workday,” we still went about our usual routine. A good brushing was followed by a thorough cleansing with doggie wipes. Then on to brushing her teeth (Dolly's favorite part), putting on her collar reserved just for work, and finally her official volunteer nametag. She was an old hand at her job as a therapy dog and seemed to understand that these grooming tips were part of the bigger picture.

While we prepared for today's special visit, I reflected on John and the times we had spent with him. It usually started with “Where have you been? It's been weeks since I saw you last.” He said this almost every time we visited, even though we'd been there just the week before.

We would arrive at the Hospice House and hear from the staff, “Dolly's best buddy is waiting for her, so you'd better get in there.” Sometimes, our stop with John lasted so long that Dolly had only an ounce of energy left to see the rest of the patients and families. I felt guilty, but he loved seeing Dolly, and I had a hard time cutting our stay short.

Most of the time we visited, he was sitting up in a chair with one of his books. John loved dogs and had dog pictures around the room. He was also an avid reader. When we arrived and he’d hold up a book, I knew we were in for a detailed synopsis of his favorite parts in the book. Now and again, he’d save a magazine for us because there was a dog on the cover. “This one reminded me of Dolly,” he’d say.

John was quite a character and liked to tell stories of the many adventures of his ninety-plus years of life. He had worked in marketing, traveled all over the United States, and worked for a time as a radio disc jockey. He liked to brag about his occasional major league baseball game broadcasts.

Occasionally, I’d hear him drop a few well-known names. “Did you ever hear of Al Capone? Well, I met his brother-in-law one time when I was out in Los Angeles, and . . .” I never knew if the stories were true or not, but I enjoyed hearing him tell his tales. “Do you ever listen to WJVD? I was on that radio station from time to time, and I interviewed . . .” and on he would go.

As John talked, he would often have Dolly sit between his legs and rub her face and head and speak to her as he reminisced. Dolly was happy to oblige as she loved nothing more than someone to give her their full attention and a good massage. And if he stopped talking or rubbing, she would turn and look at him as if to say, “Don't stop now.”

One topic that never failed to be part of our conversations was his dog, Chance. Chance was a small dog that John rescued and had for nearly fourteen years. “Took him right off the street,” he told me. John made sure Chance never had a bad day after that. Said he took Chance everywhere he went and never left the dog alone. When he needed to be out of town, Chance simply moved with his daughter, and then she took him everywhere.

“Do you need to leave already?” was what Dolly and I heard each time we prepared to depart.

“John, there are other people here we need to see today too.”

“Ach, they can wait. We aren’t done talking yet,” was his standard response.

While it was hard to say goodbye, after each visit, my spirits would lift when I heard him pick up the phone, call his daughter, and tell her, “Dolly was just here.” The nurses told me he called Carole every time after we stopped by.

Today, when Dolly and I arrived at the Hospice House, we signed in as usual. Then we went to the nurses' station.

"Hi, Nancy. We're here and ready to see John."

"Come on with me. As we walk, I'll tell you what's going on."

As we headed to this room, she gave me a few updates. Even though the nurses never gave me confidential information, I appreciated that they respected my background as a hospice nurse.

We walked to his room. Nancy knocked and softly opened the door.

"Hi, everybody, Dolly is here to visit," Nancy spoke softly as we walked in, and she introduced us.

I went over and hugged Carole. We had met a few times before, so I felt comfortable making this contact.

"Carole, I'm so sorry about your dad. Please accept my deepest condolences. He has a very special place in our hearts." I nodded to the other in the room.

I looked at the person lying in the bed, and tears came to my eyes. We had been here only a week before. Although John was not able to be in the chair the last few weeks, he had been upright in bed with the same silly smile and stories. But not today. Today, he was lying flat on his back; his eyes were closed, and his breathing was shallow

Even though Dolly was not supposed to be on the bed, for the last few weeks, John had insisted she be up on the bed and lay next to him. He had lost a lot of weight and was only skin and bones, so there was plenty of room. I was careful to make sure Dolly did not step or sit on him. She had fallen asleep alongside him the last time we visited while he petted and patted her, slowly massaging her soft coat.

Carole knew Dolly had lain on the bed next to her dad the last few times we visited, so she asked if we could do the same today. Once I placed Dolly carefully on the bed, Carole asked me to help arrange John's arm around the dog. Dolly was a willing participant. After all, this was her good friend.

We stayed for more than two hours. Dolly seemed to know that this was where she was needed. She slept much at the time, but occasionally would open her eyes when people were talking, or someone came or went from the room.

When it was time for us to slip away, Carole started to cry when her father's arm fell softly to the bed without Dolly there to hold it. She hugged us as before we left

"You have no idea what it means to me that you and Dolly would come by to see my dad. I'm convinced he was aware that she was here today. He loved dogs, and he loved his little Chance,

but he especially loved this dog. He talked about her all the time. I have peace in my heart right now. Thank you for coming today."

Later, the nurses told me that John passed away peacefully in his sleep that night. Carole was with him when he died.

I had given John a copy of my book in his better days, signed with my name and stamped with a paw print from Dolly, with *Love, Dolly* written beneath. Carole had asked the nurses to give it back to me the next time Dolly and I came for our volunteer work. Inside was a heartfelt thank-you note from Carole placed in the book on the page where I had written Dolly's and my names. John had written on the same page, in almost illegible handwriting, these words: "I love Dolly."

**Names changed

Written by Gail Scoates. Whiskers, Wags, and Woofs (2024). Compiled and edited by Michelle Rayburn.

Epilogue: While Dolly is no longer with me (I love thinking John is taking care of her until I get to heaven), I am still a therapy dog evaluator. In that role, I test, observe, and certify therapy dog teams. During a recent testing session, in the garden center where I typically conduct the test, we invited a lady to interact with the dog I was testing, a typical request. She kindly obliged and began to talk about a therapy dog that used to come and visit her dad in hospice. I asked what that dog's name was, and she said, Dolly. At that moment, we both recognized each other! What a blessing to hear, many years later, about her memories of mine and Dolly's work and how much it meant to her, and still means to her today.