

# Golden Reflections



## My Master's Secrets Told in the First Person Canine

Vargus Yale (story teller) with

**Michael Yale (writer)**

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## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1	4
CHAPTER 2	17
CHAPTER 3	35
CHAPTER 4	56
CHAPTER 5	76
CHAPTER 6	106
CHAPTER 7	145
CHAPTER 8	178
CHAPTER 9	205
CHAPTER 10	218
INTRODUCING MIKE YALE	228

# Golden Reflections

*Vargus Yale with Michael Yale*

## Chapter I

I sat on the floor of my bedroom, holding him in my lap. Nearby, my wife slept restlessly; I could hear her irregular whispered breathing.

He snuggled against me and pushed his gray old muzzle into my hand. He was so sick. He had had every ailment and complaint a dog can have (or at least I thought so when receiving bills from his Vet). But he had never been sick like this. I had never felt the chill of death surrounding him before but it was there now. It was a tangible presence in the room and I could almost feel it. I cuddled Vargus in my arms trying to ward off the shadow which was about to envelope us.

I had held him in my arms before during our 12 years together but never quite so tightly. Although I had never seen this beautiful old golden retriever, I knew every inch of his body. I knew the shape of him so well by touch. In his stately older age, he looked something like a chubby torpedo. "Tiny Tank" he had been nicknamed long ago. The name still suited him.

He was my guide dog and hence my eyes. He had been my 24-hour-a-day companion and my omniscient adoring friend. Yes, I knew every inch of him, every fibre and virtually every thought that combined to make this wondrous animal. No one knew Vargus as I did and I knew better than anyone just how very sick he now was.

I clung to him and shed my tears upon him--tears I didn't

know I possessed. I whispered familiar reassuring words to him. My mind reached out and touched his and I passed my thoughts to him. My thoughts were like shields protecting me from the words I dared not utter aloud.

My own life seemed to pass in review before me and 12 years of memories echoed across time. I remembered, and Vargus, in my arms, remembered with me. I shared with him my deepest joys and sorrows as he passively rested in my lap, just as we had shared living through it all together. I made my peace with him. We had been bound together inseparably in one life experience. We were like Siamese twins, joined at the point where his harness united with my left hand. My only tiny comfort during this breaking of our union was that I knew he understood and made his peace with me.

This is the hour that all dog-lovers and owners dread. Perhaps it is even more painful for a blind person who has spent 24-hours-a-day for years caring for this Canine Sight-Restorer. A blind person properly handling a trained dog guide<sup>1</sup> can obtain for the first time, or regain some degree of "normalcy". Efficiently travelling in your community with your dog, you become almost "normal." After such a partnership between blind person and dog guide, the day when your dog can no longer work or may even die is like the violent wrenching away of a part of your own body. It is like the loss of the dearest friend or cherished relative, and indeed that's exactly what it is.

I had nursed Vargus through his chronic ear infections,

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<sup>1</sup> *Guide Dog/Dog Guide: Vargus is a dog guide, which is the generic name for dogs who guide blind people. Vargus is also a Guide Dog, as he was trained at the school called Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc., in San Rafael, California. So he is a dog guide who is also a guide dog. Confused? Well most people think Vargus is a seeing eye dog, for this term has caught on in common speech. That is because the school called The Seeing Eye, in Morristown, New Jersey, is the first and most famous of the dozen or so schools that train dog guides in the US and in Canada.*

(called Stinky Ear in non-medical terms), every summer's hot spots and dermatitis, upset stomachs (and intestines), cuts and bruises, and two minor surgeries. He had survived them all. Now, at this crisis, I didn't know how to nurse him. I could only hold and love him and weep for him.

Mixed with my great sorrow was a silent roar of inner panic. Though I travelled well with a white cane, I thought, "How will I ever manage without him?" I was indeed concerned about my mobility for Vargus had enormously expanded my options and enabled me to do things unimaginable with a cane. But my anxiety was far broader than a mere question of getting about. He had been my comfort, my confidant and soul mate. He had shared my thoughts and acts for more than a third of my life. Through those years, his eyes had ceaselessly watched me and watched out for me. He observed and participated in all of my changes. He saw me grow from a confused young man, full of uncertainty, to an older and wiser man, more self-confident though still confused. He had learned to frisk about during my happy times and would act like a spoiled puppy. He also learned to slink nervously under a table or into an out-of-the-way corner when I was grouchy. He reacted to my every mood as I had learned to react to his. How could I manage with half my being stripped away? Who could I turn to for consolation in times of trouble?

The night dragged by as if it were two welded together. In my mind, I recalled every painful moment of the last few days, culminating in this terrible Thursday night.

On Sunday evening, several friends and I had gone to a concert featuring The Eagles. Climbing the endless steps to the highest set of bleachers on that humid stifling August night, we had all huffed and puffed as we searched for air amidst that enveloping steam. Vargus gasped and panted, but that was usual these days. As he grew old, he sounded more and more like an antique steam engine. Toronto summers were often

nearly unendurable. Someone remarked that this Sunday evening, we all sounded like Vargus.

The crowd was enormous and already turned-on by the atmosphere. They pushed us ever upward. I was forced to give Vargus gentle tugs now and then to urge him to keep up and not be trampled. With the mob of impatient people shoving from behind, Vargus' arthritic hind legs shakily propelled him up the endless steps.

At last we arrived at our seats. As he always did at such events, Vargus dove under my seat, where he would remain silent and unmoving until summoned from his dozing at the end of the performance.

The concert was sensational and its high energy left us all dripping wet. The music and the night air left us drained. We slowly made our way down the stairs and towards the exit from the stadium. We followed and were a part of a surging exodus. Vargus seemed unusually sleepy, a little bewildered it seemed, but with the crowd's assistance we soon reached the streetcars and made our way home.

After so many years with Vargus, I knew his every move and mood. When he wasn't himself, I immediately sensed it, though often not knowing the cause. This night he was acting strangely, but it had been such a long hot day, so I passed it off.

Although he was nearing 14, beyond the average age of a working dog guide, I rarely thought about his mortality. It went without question. He had been part of me for so long that it was unthinkable that it wouldn't last forever. On Monday morning, he was restless and acted a little confused. His work was acceptable and he ate well, so I blamed his malaise on the hectic day before. It was stifling again in Toronto and our apartment felt as if it would bring forth a crop of mushrooms.

On Tuesday, Vargus was noticeably unwell, though I still had difficulty pinpointing the exact symptoms. There was a subtle discomfort in him, like the first day of the flu. My wife, Jo-Anne now perceived that The Old Man was sick.

I phoned his Vet, Dr. MacDonald, late in the afternoon. If Vargus wasn't better the next day, I was to bring him into the Animal Hospital to be checked. I described Vargus' unspecified symptoms over the phone: "He seems somehow progressively weaker all the time. Getting worse. He seems confused and unsure of himself, which isn't like him at all. He is still enthusiastic about working in harness. But his work isn't as precise as usual. I don't know," I hesitated, for my final revelation scared me, "He seems somehow disoriented." I thought to myself for the first time "stroke", but didn't say it to MacDonald.

On Wednesday morning, Vargus was terribly sick. I had to carry him downstairs for him to relieve himself. He didn't circle as usual before squatting; he simply bowed slightly, awkwardly and stiffly, and took care of his needs. I carried him back upstairs to our apartment. I was increasingly certain of my diagnosis and the awful word echoed louder and louder in my mind until it was an unbearable din--Stroke!

As we lived across the street from the subway, I again aided Vargus down the stairs and he led me slowly to the train. Although shaky and uncertain, he did his job with tail wagging proudly as usual, and he seemed to brighten a little as we headed for the Vet's. I tried to persuade myself that I had overreacted to his illness.

MacDonald examined him carefully. "I'm afraid it's a stroke." He told me as he gently but thoroughly examined Vargus, whom I had hoisted up onto the examining table. In the old days, he had leapt up by himself with excitement, for he always loved going to the Vet's.

"Some strokes," Dr. MacDonald slowly began, "are not so

dramatic as we sometimes think. There can be a leakage of blood which can cause a gradual loss of functions. Sometimes it stops before doing much harm. We can't tell." He paused to let me digest the import of his words. "Do you want to leave him here for a few days?" I replied quickly, "Oh no. I want to take him home. I'll let you know in a day or two how he's getting along."

We hurried home by subway and I thought I perceived a slight worsening in Vargus' condition. I thought to myself, "Maybe he heard that cruel diagnosis."

Thursday was the worst day of the week, even surpassing Friday, the day on which we parted forever. I had to meet some people for lunch at a downtown restaurant on Thursday morning. Vargus had weakened greatly overnight and hardly took notice as I dressed, though he usually pranced about awaiting his morning walk. I decided to use my white cane as the restaurant was only a few familiar blocks away. When he saw me reach for my cane behind the door, Vargus struggled to his feet, wagged his tail and came slowly to my side and nudged his harness which hung on the door knob. He did not want to be left behind. In his later years, working in harness became his life essence and entire dedicated purpose. In the midst of his sickness and near delirium, working for me remained his abiding desire.

I harnessed him up and we prepared to leave. As we exited the apartment, Vargus banged against the door frame as if not seeing it. I carried him downstairs and relieved him. Then began our terrible last walk together.

Our route was short and familiar, a few blocks to the restaurant and then home again via the same way. Vargus had traversed these blocks on Yonge Street a thousand times. I believe he could have done it with his eyes closed.

For the past two years, Vargus had demonstrated a gradual

loss of hearing. Vargus and I adapted our work accordingly, but only Jo-Anne and a few close friends were aware of his problem. Had the dog guide school known, they would have insisted on replacing him with a younger dog. But I knew his work to be entirely safe, even with his decreased hearing. From our first days of training long ago, I had used hand gestures with him, accompanied by the proper word commands such as "left," "right," and "forward." Now, with his poor hearing, we worked safely and as efficiently as when he was a young newly-trained dog guide. I had also solemnly promised The Old Man to keep him until his last days.

The Thursday morning, his reactions and movements were strange to me and his responses sluggish and uncertain. He led me but it was a wild ride, more awkward and unfamiliar even than his first day in harness long ago. He failed to stop and turn into Basil's Restaurant, though he had always tried to go into it whenever we passed by. He had lain under numerous tables at Basil's for more hours than I could count.

As we walked, he lurched and stumbled and I almost had to lead him. It was our usual team work, but pressed to the limits. He tried so desperately to do his job and I warmly praised his struggles, though I brushed against parking meters and pedestrians, something unheard of when working with Vargus. I cried for him as I walked down Yonge Street and we must have attracted more than the usual stares.

After lunch, we returned home in the early afternoon. He ate his supper slowly, without his usual enthusiasm. After carrying him downstairs again for relieving, I carried him back up to our apartment. He immediately went into the bedroom and lay down on his rug. He made it clear that he intended to remain there until morning or until called. He lay very still and slept as I paced the living room throughout the evening.

At last, knowing that I couldn't sleep this night, I went in to him. I knew now how this awful week must inevitably end.

I held my old dearest furry friend throughout that agonizing night together. We communed silently and tried to help each other as we always had.

My emotions tumbled upon one another like waves on a stormy sea. I felt anger which made my teeth and fists clench; anguish burned my throat and chest with pain and tears; I felt sorrow for him and for me, because it was an ending; and above all, I felt pity for Vargus because he was so desperately sick.

He never seemed to be in pain but who could tell for sure with him. He never simpered or weakened in his tough-guy guise. He knew that I held him, I was certain of that, but he almost withered in my arms as dawn approached.

As early as possible, I phoned Dr. MacDonald. I had already carried Vargus downstairs for his morning relieving and he had only urinated, which was very unusual. Returning to the apartment he had bumped into a wall and seemed to barely be able to drag himself, feeling his way along the walls, to the living room where he flopped in his usual spot in the middle of the rug.

"He's much worse today," I explained and my voice cracked. "He is running into things and losing interest in everything."

"You better bring him in," MacDonald said sympathetically, "It doesn't sound good I'm afraid."

I felt as if I were choking. "I can't bring him on the subway. He's too sick and I'm not sure I want to come with him anyway. But I can't just load him into a taxi, that would be so awful." My words came tumbling out as if I could never say them again unless they spilled out together now.

"Tell you what, Mike," Dr. MacDonald said quickly, "I take my lunch at noon. I'll drive over in my car and pick him up. He knows me." I thanked him with a very few words and hung up, swallowing back the hot surges that filled my throat.

I told Jo-Anne what was going to happen. There were few words to be said and we walked about doing mundane morning chores like silent robot ghosts. I dared not leak my grief for fear of a bursting of the dam and Jo-Anne seemed to shrink from tampering with the potential flood.

Vargus slept fitfully as we moved about him. He wagged his tail in recognition but didn't move. He usually spends his non-working hours chewing a piece of rawhide, playing with a toy, or, (his favourite pastime of all), gnawing a raw beef knuckle bone. He would growl in fury and pretended rage if anyone got too close or feigned reaching for it. This was one of his greatest enjoyments and clearly his favourite game. But he hadn't the energy, strength or inclination this Friday morning.

Dr. MacDonald arrived shortly after noon. He examined Vargus quickly and although Vargus raised his head from the rug during the cursory examination, he did not attempt to get up. "I'll take him down to my car," MacDonald said slowly, "But," he hesitated "What do you want us to do?"

I knew the answer but wasn't ready yet to say it out loud. I had accepted it or, at least, was close to accepting it. But, did I have to say it so soon?

"Are you open tomorrow?" I asked as I bent to pat Vargus. "Yes, from 11:00 until 2:00." MacDonald said. "But I don't think there's much we can do for him. I'm afraid it will continue to worsen," he added.

"I know," I said very softly, "But keep an eye on him today and I'll phone you tomorrow. Would that give you enough time to do whatever you have to do?" He said it would.

I leaned down and picked up my dog. "I want to carry him down," I said.

Dr. MacDonald conducted us out of the building and his car parked just in front. I carefully placed Vargus on the floor of the front seat, beside where MacDonald would sit. Vargus had rid-

den on the floors of more cars than I cared to try and count. He had ridden thousands of miles on so many different car floors, always at my feet. He lifted his head and licked my face and then rested his head on the front seat. He was very pliable. He compliantly accepted anything and everything. He lay where I placed him without his usual shifting and rearranging of paws.

MacDonald shook my hand warmly but with professional curtness. He said he would look after Vargus and do what he could to make him comfortable, but that I should phone tomorrow morning.

I knew he cared for my dog in a special way after tending him for ten years. I also knew that his own golden retriever had recently died.

I leaned down one final time and kissed Vargus' head. I stroked his lumpy old body. He responded only by snuffling in my face.

It was an awful moment but the worst for me had already passed during that terrible Thursday night. During those hours together, on the bedroom floor, we had said all that could be said between friends.

Dr. MacDonald and Vargus drove quickly away and I made my way in a daze back upstairs.

I phoned on Saturday morning. Dr. MacDonald informed me that Vargus had noticeably deteriorated even further. He hadn't eaten and was unable to get to his feet to relieve himself. He had messed on himself and this seemed to upset him greatly. He still did not whimper.

The words now had to be said. Vargus had always been alert, alive and independent, and although at times described as a "dirty dog," his bathroom habits had always been precise and hassle-free for me. Vargus personally prided himself on his immaculate habits. He was the only dog guide in his wide circle of friends who could relieve himself promptly on any

tiny square of grass or pavement pointed out by his master. All I had to say was "Do it there Vargus. Hurry up!" and Vargus would do it right there.

"There's no one around tomorrow, is there, to keep a close eye on him?" I asked as a tentative beginning. MacDonald replied, "Our attendant, but that's all." He paused and then added, "You know, he's not going to get any better."

"I know him so well, Dr. MacDonald," I burst out, "He couldn't stand to be like this! Does he seem to be in any pain?"

"No", he said slowly. "It's hard to know just how much he does know at this point. But I don't think he is feeling any pain."

"I think you better do it now then," I said quickly, "I don't want him to suffer any longer."

That was it. He said for me to call later. I never dared to ask such questions as how or when or what arrangements needed to be made thereafter. I was in a delirium of mourning. Things around me seemed unreal. When the Doctor had driven away the day before, I had felt a tiny click inside me. Maybe it was a minute crack appearing in my heart or maybe it was just a door slamming shut, holding back emotions and tears. I felt nothing but an ache inside but could express none of it.

I didn't call Saturday afternoon, postponing that ordeal until Monday. I had heard ugly tales about putting dogs to sleep by decompression chambers. But I just couldn't bring myself to ask about it. I shuddered to think of Vargus' cherished body being trashed or put into an incinerator, but such details were beyond my present comprehension. I said to myself, "MacDonald will do the best he can for him, I'm sure."

And indeed he did. When I phoned Monday, he said quickly, "You know, you did the right thing. He was a terribly sick dog and wasn't going to get well. He gave you wonderful long years of service, Mike, but he just couldn't go any further."

"How did you put him to sleep?" I asked, and the words weren't as hard as I thought they'd be. "I've heard about de-compression and I was worried about it." "Oh no!" he said, "We just gave him a needle. He's had thousands of vaccinations before, it was just another needle. He went to sleep and knew nothing. It wasn't painful at all. It happened about 1:30 Saturday afternoon."

I felt a little easier and perhaps the Doctor read my mind and saw my final fearful question coming. "I made some arrangements for him. I hope they meet with your approval. I was pretty fond of Vargus," he continued, "so I arranged with the pet cemetery where my own dog is buried to have Vargus buried up there." He gave me the details of the burial and the location of the cemetery. I hardly heard him. "They'll be sending you a certificate in a week or so," he concluded.

I didn't have words with which to thank him, but I was aching anew, this time with a surge of warming comfort. Such treatment was fitting and appropriate for Vargus. I had always scoffed at cemeteries for dogs, at beauty parlours and pet hotels, but this was befitting my faithful old friend.

It was only some days later that I discovered that all of the arrangements and the burial had been paid for by Dr. MacDonald. I had obviously expected to bear the cost but his generosity and caring beyond his call of duty made me wish that most people doctors behaved similarly.

The week was finally over. Every minute of it had dragged by but as a whole it had flown by. It had all happened so very quickly. A week before, life was normal with its mundane concerns. One thing, however, always was taken for granted--Vargus. He was slow and crotchety but healthy for a dog nearly 14 years old. He still worked marvellously. He was the "wonder dog," "the magic dog." Today, he wasn't around any more and my mundane worldly concerns still remained and wouldn't wait. The days refused to stop coming and going and would

not desist until I felt more ready to deal with them. Life went on as usual but it wasn't as usual. A foundation stone had been yanked out.

I decided to use my white can for awhile; I just couldn't imagine using another dog yet. As it turned out, it took more than two years before I wanted to try it with another dog guide.

It is now almost five years since that week and it hurts as if it were yesterday. My new dog, Mitch, is splendid in his own way and very different in personality from Vargus. This is a good thing for it makes comparisons difficult. Mitch is doing astounding things of his own and, at times, accomplishing astounding things that Vargus did. I couldn't be more pleased with his work and habits.

But Vargus--there was a dog: He was the smartest animal it had ever been my pleasure to know, and I've known quite a few. Vargus had a story that ought to be told for his reasoning powers and life experiences far exceeded those of most other dogs. He really got around. He really lived. If his paws could have held a pen to paper, I am certain he would have written a magnificent autobiography.

