

Oh, Sweet Annie

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Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
—Dylan Thomas

The sight of her collar, worn shiny with age, sitting on my bedside table instead of resting around her neck is physical proof of the reality I can't accept.

Annie is gone.

My mind wrestles with this fact alongside how she died. We, like so many others, had to make the decision to put her to sleep. This brought up a whole new dimension of grief and pain that I did not experience when we lost Owen just eight short months ago. Whereas Owen's death came about quickly and rather surprisingly, Annie's was years in the making. She had numerous health issues stemming from her inflammatory bowel disease. Age took its toll on her hips, balance, hearing, eyesight, cognitive function and bladder (oh, how it affected her bladder!). On paper, Annie was a geriatric mess. In life, she was beautiful and perfect. At nearly 17, my German shepherd/Husky mix was a canine phenom, living on and on and on.

So how can she now be gone? It is implausible. After almost 16 years together, the absence of Annie is felt like a missing limb, a knocked-down wall, a leveled building. The feeling of something missing is actually tangible. I hear her constantly in the house; the tweeting of the birds sounds amazingly like the jingle of her dog tags as she loped through the house, the kids dropping a book on the floor resonates through the hardwood as did Annie's body when she would plunk down and sleep, the pile of blankets under the table looks just like her body when peered at from the corner of my eye.

I've never had a dog with me this long. In fact, I don't know this family, this house or this marriage without her. Annie came first, before every other single thing that shaped and defined my life for the past decade and a half. And now not having her here has thrown everyone into a misguided orbit.

It was in 1997. Wedding planning was underway with a fierce determination. Only a few more months to go before I would marry this amazing, selfless man I met jumping off the Matterhorn (true story. I'll share that one later). Between picking out cake flavors and twirly white ribbon embossed with our wedding date, P and I kept busy looking for a place to live. He worked in one county, I worked at the far end of the neighboring county, so we needed a middle ground. As a result, we wound up living with our parents so we could save up the money it would take to find a decent home fitting our needs.

One humid August morning while house-sitting his folks' place, P went out to get the paper. He called to me, and I looked out the front door. There knelt my future husband, all 6'5" of him, with his arm around this filthy, flea-infested dog with giant ears that stuck out on either side of her head like handlebars. All I really saw was love. That moment, much like the first time I saw both of my children, became etched in my brain, sharper than any photograph and more vivid than any video. It's a permanent picture on my soul. At that time, in that moment, I knew it. My life was changing.

We were responsible. We took her to the shelter (and she literally sat down and had to be coaxed in. My heart broke and I sobbed even harder) and waited for someone to claim her as a lost dog. When no one did, her time ran up at the shelter. We had nowhere to live, no money, a crazy wedding to plan. And yet, we didn't hesitate to get Annie out of the shelter and make her ours.

For the next 16 years, she was constantly by our side. She was just that: a constant. We got married—she was there. We bought a house—she was there. We had a baby—she sat by me in the bathroom as I waited for the two pink lines to appear on the stick, and she nuzzled me as my knees buckled under the force of a contraction. We lost my dad—she licked away my tears. We had another baby—she became his giant black toy. Annie was so much a part of us, we didn't know an us without her.

In the early days, I would watch her gnawing on a rawhide or prancing after birds, and feel amazement that someone did not want this dog, someone left her on the streets to die. How in the world could anyone have gotten rid of such a gift? She was my first rescue, and she cemented in me an unending passion for rescuing dogs, and for singing the praises of these pups anywhere and everywhere I could through my career as a writer.

Annie defied the odds and shattered the life expectancy charts for larger dogs. I mean, she was literally 120 years old or more in people years. I bragged about my ancient dog to anyone who would listen. It became a goal, keeping her healthy and alive to the next birthday. Throughout those years, Annie had many, many health episodes that convinced me the end was near. But she always rallied. I just saw her as this medical marvel.

But slowly her age crept up to her. The arthritic hip gave out. Her hearing disappeared. She became disoriented and would howl in fear at times. And let's not even detail the severe urinary incontinence and dementia-caused urination that destroyed my carpet and every area rug I owned. (But what worked like a charm were disposable training pants, size 4T-5T with a hole cut out for the tail, by the way.) The changes came about gradually enough that we rolled with them, making them our new normal.

I knew the years were gaining on her. I just ignored them. As long as Annie was pain-free, eating and drinking, she was fine. We no longer went on hikes or walks due to her lack of mobility, we never left her alone for more than five hours, we accepted the fact she didn't want to play anymore, we fed her the only (crazy expensive) food her stomach could handle, we gave her supplements and medications. Anything to get another healthy week, month or year. And we did. Annie may not have done much more than eat, pee, get brushed and sleep (and barrel her way into the pantry to eat the kids' snacks) toward the end, but that was fine by me. Just having her around was enough. And she was happy. Spoiled rotten, pampered and happy. The risk of keeping her too long for selfish reasons was not lost on me. But I figured I could love her enough to fuel her another year or more. After all, look how far she had come!

I wasn't ignorant to the signs of Annie growing very old. I saw them all. But until she was in obvious pain, I didn't want to obsess about losing her. When she hit bottom over Memorial Day Weekend, it amazed me how something I feared and expected for years could still slap me across the face when it finally arrived. Annie had another, what I thought, stomach issue. Howling, pacing and anxious. Once she threw up and got her medication, she seemed better. Until the middle of the night. Then it was more pacing and howling, demanding to be outside all night, pacing, pacing, pacing. Was she in pain? Obviously uncomfortable, she refused to settle down for hours. Worry eroded me and I had a feeling this time was different.

But the next morning, when she ate some corn and chicken, it seemed we once again dodged the Grim Reaper. Annie was alert and not in obvious pain, and drinking a ton of water. (Maybe too much water?) I relaxed and scheduled her a checkup with the vet.

Hours later, plans changed. Annie began pacing through the house, vomiting bile, refusing to eat or drink, howling, demanding to be outside. I had not seen her urinate in hours. P and I tagged teamed the watch, but Annie wanted to be left alone. At around 3:30 a.m. in what soon became the longest night ever, Annie just looked at me with this expression of intense exhaustion, confusion and utter desperation.

I saw that look before. With Owen.

I prayed for the sun to rise so we could get her to the vet. I prayed that if her time was now, she would lay down on the carpet and just go to sleep in peace. I feared she would do this outside and die alone, suffering a

horrid death without me by her side. I worried how I would have the strength to be by her side. I worried I waited too late to make the decision to end her suffering. I panicked thinking about how much she might be suffering. I fought for years to never agree to euthanasia so long as Annie lived happy and pain-free, despite the dozens of age-related nuisances. And to be honest, euthanasia scared the crap out of me. I had a bad experience with it a dozen or more years ago, and I was unable to accept it unless my dogs were basically comatose and two breaths away from going anyway.

But as I watched Annie pace the backyard in a labored style of walking, I knew she would not go gently into that good night and I would be forced to re-evaluate my fears in light of what was best for Annie, not me. Dylan Thomas would have loved my dog. She fought and fought the dying of the light, pacing and pacing, as if she feared the moment she rested her head, she would be done.

As it turned out, that's exactly what happened.

We rushed her to the vet in the morning. My heart and soul knew we would be taking her out of the house for the last time. Those middle-of-the-night thoughts clarified what was up until now a theoretical chat. Annie was in pain. No, she was not quite comatose. No, she was not yet two breaths from death. But she was dying. And she needed me to help her.

Annie walked into the vet's office, struggling with each step but on her own. She had lost another 7 pounds practically overnight, clocking in at a mere 30 pounds. Years ago at her prime, she was 57 pounds. The anxiety and pacing continued until the vet walked in and gently coaxed Annie onto the floor.

And there I saw her just sigh and go limp. She did not make a single attempt to move again. She was done. This was pretty comatose, my husband said through tears. My heart shattered as I watched Annie lay as still as death. The vet's hands gently moved over Annie's body, commenting on what we all could see: Annie was dehydrated, exhausted, possessing absolutely no muscle, in pain. Her body was consuming itself. Her kidneys most likely had given out. That can be like a light switch, said the vet. The body can operate, often times quite well, with just a sliver of kidney function. But once that is extinguished, it's over and things progress rapidly and painfully.

"She is trying to tell you she is done," said the vet. "We are looking at days."

As a journalist, I am trained to ask why, to pose the difficult questions. My training didn't fail me. I peppered the vet with any query I could think of—what else can we do? Will it work? How can this be fixed? Is she really dying? Why? On and on I asked (some stupid, some obvious, some insightful) questions, and the vet answered. I can't tell you how grateful I am to her for being so honest, so kind and so gentle with us, and with Annie. I don't know how many more ways or times I could ask the basic question: What else can we do? Basically, we could choose to do blood work to confirm the vet's suspicion that Annie's kidneys were gone, we could test to see how extensive the internal damage might be, we could insert a feeding tube, start an IV, put her in the ICU, hook her up to life support. Which may or may not extend her life, and what kind of life would that be anyway?

"We have to think of quality," said the vet. "And what Annie would want, not what we want."

"But maybe she just needs some fluids," I fought. I suppose Dylan Thomas would like me, too. "Maybe she needs to rest from walking around all night."

But why did she walk around all night? Why was she in need of fluids? Why was she not peeing? Why was she losing weight by the minute and vomiting bile? What was the underlying reason that caused all of this? It's not like she just hiked 12 miles and fell to the ground, exhausted. Something caused her to ceaselessly pace and pant, as if she was couldn't stand still long enough to find comfort, as if she tried to outrun her pain, or the dying light.

Resting on the floor of the exam room, Annie looked like she was already gone. Her eyes unfocused, her body so emaciated she looked concave, her fur dull and coming out in tufts. In my heart I knew she was ready, but stayed for us. In her youth, Annie was nicknamed the Emotional Sponge. She hated to see me unhappy or angry. Even if I raised my voice in an animated recreation of some conversation I had earlier in the day, Annie would panic, climb on my lap and lick my face until my attention laser-beamed on her. It got so bad P and I could never argue in front of her for fear we would give her a massive heart attack. But that was Annie. She needed to make everyone happy.

So why was it a surprise she put her own health and comfort aside in order to be here for us? To do what would make us happy? I vaguely remembered telling her to stay with me on Tuesday morning as she came back around and began eating. I knew she tried so hard to do that, at any cost.

The vet counseled us on doing what was best for Annie to help her cross over with dignity, in safety, without any pain or fear. A death faced slowly from kidney failure or organ breakdown would be none of those things, the vet assured us. I know no vet enjoys euthanizing a beloved pet; this one gave me all my options for further treatment but said euthanasia is what she recommends. My mind still bucked at the reality on the floor in front of me. I willed Annie to get up and prance around the room, wagging that bushy tail of hers and barking at the moon. But then I realized it had been years since she'd done any of that.

I cried so much, my eyes swelled. For someone who has been schooled to keep emotions in check, I unselfconsciously sobbed as I asked Annie if she was ready. P teared up as he told me that's what she's doing right now—telling us she is ready to go. Last night's episode was Annie begging for us to help her, to fix this, said the vet. As loving guardians, that's our job. It's the final gift we can give a dog that gave us so, so much over the years. I never really believed any of that before this day. A small part of me still wanted to rush Annie to the ICU and demand every life-sustaining measure possible.

But the bigger part of me knew that at best, that would only prolong the inevitable. Annie was dying and there wasn't a thing I could do to stop it. All I could do was stop her suffering. I couldn't fix anything else.

We gave our consent to the vet, who cried and hugged us and assured us we were doing what needed to be done, and what would best honor the dog we loved beyond words. Annie's eyes met mine as she was carried in the back to insert the catheter, and they seemed so confused, so blank. She never tried to move. We all gathered around Annie when the tech returned her to the room, putting our hands on her and surrounding her with love. Her eyes looked less scared, more resolved then. Even my toddler felt the spirituality of the moment, as he stood quietly by Annie's head, watching. I embraced her sweet face, whispering constantly into her cherished ears. I love you, thank you, we all love you, you are the best dog, we love you, we will be OK, it's OK to go, we love you, we love you, we love you, we love you.

The procedure was shockingly quick and uneventful. Annie tensed ever so slightly — so slightly I may have imagined it — as the fluid went in, but that was it. Her breathing, shallow to begin with, just stopped. No shudder, no sigh, no moan. Just there, and then not. I almost panicked as I waited those unending seconds between the shot and her passing. I didn't know if I was strong enough to feel and be witness to her last breath. But I knew she needed me, and I needed to be there.

So I stayed.

And then she was gone.

I knew it even without the vet gently telling me Annie's heart had officially stopped. With my head resting against Annie's, I felt her rise above it. It didn't feel empty, but rather bigger, enveloping, rising. My heart physically ached as I sobbed, feeling such pure white grief I didn't even allow myself to feel when I lost family members before. Somehow, holding Annie as she crossed the bridge opened me up and this flood of past, long-held grief for all I have lost came out.

I thought I was the one giving Annie a last gift, helping her die circled in safety and love. And yet it was she who gave to me. Again.

The tech cradled Annie in her arms before taking her away, whispering to me "you did the right thing. Annie knows you love her." Putting your dog to sleep is such a war of emotions. Yes, cerebrally you know it's the right thing. In your heart, it's not so easy. You feel responsible. But my fear of waiting too long and letting Annie die a pain-filled death that I could have prevented overtook my fear of ushering in the end.

"You just helped her write the final page," said the vet. The book was already done, and I just helped her tag "the end" on it.

Back home, our third dog Ralphie, now an only dog, came up to me, sniffed my pants and issued one, long, pitiful cry. I too wanted to throw my head back and howl in grief. The loss felt deeper than I expected, which was shocking considering I just lost Owen in September. I'm not ignorant to the fact that this grief is connected to the unspent grief of other recent losses. I get that. But I also get that the hole carved out of my heart was bigger and deeper than I expected. I constantly look for Annie sprawled on the floor (usually right in the way of foot traffic). The house feels haunted by her presence. Her half-finished last meal is in the fridge, and her uneaten pain pill is still nestled in a spoon of peanut butter on top of the microwave. I can't throw them out. It's too final.

Now weakened by grief, I let guilt and doubt and fears invade my mind. Did we make the right choice? Was it even a choice? Did we wait too long and did she suffer? Should we have tried harder and given her a chance to rebound yet again? Should we have let nature take its course? Did we give up? Did I even listen to the vet telling me that Annie was dying?

In time, I know I will see this was the only way that book could have ended. I will see Annie's declining health with objective clarity, not shaded by my own will to believe Annie was right as rain. I will see how lovingly and beautifully we helped her get to the next level, with no pain and no fear. I will see that she died with as much grace and heart as she had in life. Until then, I will lick my wounds, feel the sadness stab me every time I think I hear the tinkling of the tags on her collar, and miss that bossy old girl with every cell in my being.

I knew dogs could become a part of the family, but I didn't know how much they could become a part of me. I feel so lost now that this dog, who was a part of us before there even was an us, is gone. Annie was my once-in-a-lifetime dog. I even named my firstborn in her honor, that's how much she meant to us. Annie opened up my world, helped me be a better parent, showed me how to love unconditionally and, in the end, how to sit with my sadness.

People always said it was so nice of us to rescue her all those years ago and provide her with this loving life. But we were the ones who were rescued. While my faith has taken a beating these past few years, I hang on the hope that Annie is whole, healed and young again, romping around lush backyards chasing rabbits, playing with Owen and barking in joy (and at all of the annoying younger pups she feels she must police). And I hang on desperately to the hope that one day, I will see her again and have her jump up on my lap, shoving her big furry face in mine and licking away the tears. But this time, they will be tears of happiness.

Oh, my sweet Annie. How I love you.

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