

**Day One**  
**06-11-20**



I'd already been crying for two days, so, really, I already knew.

We went in for x-rays on Monday. We thought R tore his ACL a couple of months ago back in April. Partial tear, so we thought, so the vet gave us anti-inflammatories and pain meds and told us to rest his leg for a few weeks. He seemed to get better.

Then there was a morning, I don't know, two weeks ago maybe, when we were playing fetch in the backyard. I remember we were so, so happy to go back to fetch after his first 'ACL tear' healed because R loves fetch more than anything in the entire world. When we lived in Texas I legitimately worried that he would play until he died of heat exhaustion if I didn't stop him. 100+ degrees and he'd still want to run after a tennis ball like a madman. So going back to playing fetch in the backyard was going back to R being

happy. He's just not R without fetch. It is the light in his eyes. It is his crazy, panting grin. It is my second-favorite time of the day because it is his very favorite time of day.

But that morning two weeks ago I thought I noticed early into fetch that maybe his gait was just a little off. He wasn't limping, but you just know your dog after nearly a decade. You know how he moves. Even if you can't put your finger on it you know when something isn't right. But I tried to watch him run back and forth a few times and because I couldn't actually articulate anything to myself and because he was so darn happy running after his ball... I ignored it.

That afternoon he was really limping. I thought we'd maybe partially re-torn the ACL so maybe we should rest it again? But the next morning he wasn't putting weight on the leg at all. So I called the vet as soon as they opened. We got him in for an exam that day. The vet said this time that we probably needed to consider ACL surgery to fix the problem but it didn't need to be right away; a couple of months wait would be fine, bring him back whenever.

I thought about waiting, which kinda haunts me now. If I had, we would have had no choices when we finally figured out what was wrong. I mean, now I'm agonizing about it and I'm so worried I can't eat and I have a crying headache every day, but I think it's still better than to go in one day with a dog you thought was fine and come out with the proclamation that you're going to have to put him down in a matter of weeks. R and I *can* choose to fight, if we think that's the right option.

Anyway, I didn't wait. It's a bad time in my life to be contemplating a \$3,000 surgery because I just emptied my emergency fund on house repairs, but I've been paying for pet health insurance since R was two for this exact reason. I always said, "If he ever gets something like cancer, I want to be able to make my decisions without money being the deciding factor. I want to know I can choose, really, just whatever I think is best for him." So, with insurance, I could probably cover the surgery and I couldn't stand watching him limp around, not even for a week, let alone a few months. We scheduled x-rays to prep for ACL surgery a week after the exam.

Then the doctor called with the x-ray results. She said it wasn't an ACL tear and there was 'something' about his x-ray that worried her and she said a bunch of big words I do not at all remember and I didn't totally understand then, but right away I knew to be worried. You just know whenever a doctor is dancing around something that it's something bad. So I asked if all those big words she was using usually pointed to a particular problem of some sort. She even admitted, "Well, I really don't want to tell you. But now that you asked, I kinda *have* to."

That was the first time we heard the word 'cancer'. The vet thought it looked like the leg R was favoring had a bone tumor. She was going to send the x-ray off to a radiologist to give their expert opinion and she told me not to worry about it yet. I wonder a little bit about that now. Now that I've read every article I can find on the internet. The signs of osteosarcoma on an x-ray are pretty definitive, I think. Surely she must have already known? Was it right to tell me not to worry? Maybe.

Not that it did any good anyway. I worried. I am not an optimist. Ever since my mom left for work one day, like every other day, and ended up dying in an insanely freak sequence of events that left no body parts to even identify... I tend toward pessimism. As soon as the vet said the word 'cancer' I was pretty sure I knew what was what.

Still, I hung in limbo for two days. I literally didn't let my phone out of my sight, waiting for the vet call. I took it to the bathroom with me. I went back in the house to get it if I forgot it when I was taking R out to the bathroom. I took sick time off work because I was just sitting around staring into space and randomly crying and I felt like crap.

She called this morning. She confirmed R has a bone tumor. In the midst of a bunch of other conversation and after she gave me ten minutes to ugly-cry on the phone she put it to me like this, "We take the leg, or we put him down." It's an agonizing choice. I love this creature more than anything in my world. I tell him every day that I love him "higher than the sky and deeper

than the ocean". I love him "more than stars in the sky". I have a rule that whenever he comes up to me in the house, no matter what I'm doing, I drop it and take thirty seconds to pet him and tell him he's wonderful. I'm crying as I write this because I have no idea what I'm going to do without my best friend of ten years. He's moved with me to seven different houses. For the past ten years, home has been wherever R is. The actual places have changed like a kaleidoscope, but the constant was always R. Always there to greet me at the door with his tail wagging so hard his butt wiggles. *My* very favorite time of day, every day, is sitting on the couch in the morning reading with R curled up on my lap. I have to sit in the splits, sideways on the couch, because he's 64 lbs with lanky limbs, but we make it work. I have so many memories of lazy weekend mornings and reading in the dark before dawn and work, and hearing wind and snow howling outside and even saying out loud sometimes, "How lucky are we to have this cozy house, and to have each other?"

I always knew that 'goodbye' was part of the deal. Unless I died shockingly early myself, I was going to outlive R. I knew that. But knowing it and living it are two different things. Now that we're faced with the downward slide to our conclusion, I can't wrap my head around it. I can't stop my heart from breaking.

I can rationalize. I can even try callous reasoning. I've told myself, firmly, that more than 9 years of happiness, all those wonderful memories I have with him, that is well worth a couple of months of pain, well worth the crying, the sore throat, the headaches, the agonizing indecision, what do I do, what do I do? That's the price you pay for loving him so much, for being loved by him. And isn't that, ultimately, a really *good* lesson? That you pay a risk of heartbreak every time you love, dog or person or anything else, but the joy, the joy was so real, wasn't it? So beautiful? So worth it? I tell myself those things and for a few moments here and there it even works. I feel at peace. I know it is my turn to take care of him. He has been my furry rock for nearly ten years. Now it's time for me to step up and be whatever he needs me to be and do whatever he needs me to do. That's the deal. That's the very least I owe him.

And callous. There will be benefits to him being gone, some sick little nugget in me whispers. Pure cost considerations. I won't have to pay for food or boarding or the vet anymore. My house will be cleaner. There's a visible mud line along the wall I'm looking at right now and the blanket I've got on my lap is covered in black fur. I won't have to worry about getting home at night and I'll have an extra hour or two a day. I won't have to just *worry* about him all the time, like I always did, even before this. Making sure I don't leave out anything that could get him in trouble. Telling him every time I leave the house, "If you have to get yourself in trouble, just get yourself in trouble that won't hurt you. Anything else I can replace, but you are precious." And I think that last one means I'm not a total shit and I really love him, really, more than anything I own, with a very few exceptions more than most people even, but I can still articulate the material benefits of his death and I think maybe a part of my brain thought that would help?

Ultimately it really doesn't. I stood in my home office for a few moments this morning, R napping in the living room, and I tried to imagine how it's going to feel when that silence is really

emptiness. When I'm never going to hear a little jingle of collar tags coming down the hallway and a little black head popping into the open doorway, looking up at me with sad eyes like I haven't played with him enough today, loved him enough, fed him enough, when I'm pretty sure I've done all three. How strange is that silence going to be? How lonely? I realized yesterday that he's been around so long I don't even really remember what it was like before. I was going through all the places we'd lived and our car rides each time we moved and I tried to remember driving up from Florida with him only to belatedly realize... I didn't have him yet in Florida. He wasn't even born yet. But he's such a part of my life that I tried to remember where he was even then.

I don't think I've felt this gutted since my mother. Which is kind of a fucked up thing to say because I lost my grandmother in the interim, but she wasn't as integral to my day-to-day, you know? I loved her and it hurt when she died, but since I was very small she was always an occasional phone call and a visit every couple years. She was already mostly a memory I cherished when she died. R is a constant soft sound of breathing under all the other sounds in my life. He's occasional wuffs under his breath when he's sleeping, when he wants to bark at someone walking by but he knows he's not supposed to. He's a smell on everything, in everything, on *me*. And I know it's probably not a good smell, intellectually, but it's a smell that just means R to me and I bury my face in his fur and just inhale and I *love* that smell. R is brown eyes I've probably spent more time staring into than my own blue ones in the mirror. R is warm fur, pressed against me on the couch, 'chinchilla soft' ears beneath my fingers, or my lips. He's a thread so subtly woven into absolutely every moment of my adult life since I was twenty-one years old. Knowing someone is going to rip that thread out sometime in the next few months...

I am trying to brace for impact, but I don't think it's going to make any difference.

So we take his leg, or we put him down. My knee-jerk reaction is that that is not even a choice at all. But first, another agonizing wait, though this one much shorter, sitting in my car and staring up at the sky and crying some more, and praying, "Please don't let it be in his lungs" even though my last prayer about the knee didn't go my way. If the osteosarcoma was visible on chest x-rays there would be no point in amputating and I'd get a couple of weeks, maybe, with lots of pain meds at home. Honestly? In the car, there was a part of me that wondered which would be better for R. That fucked up part of me that whispered beneath the fervent praying that it might even be easier for me. No agonizing months. Just shoot me right now. So I ended up adjusting my prayer to, "Please let it be whatever's best for R" and I think I could pray that one with full sincerity. If my months of dread and daily chest pain are his months of sunshine and tennis balls, that is a more than worthwhile trade.

The vet said it wasn't in his lungs. So we take his leg.

I've tried to read about this. As a librarian my coping mechanism for pretty much everything is to read about it. (I will be looking up books on 'how to say goodbye to your dog' or something



here as soon as I'm done reading about osteosarcoma and amputations.) My understanding is that we take the leg even if I'm going to opt not to treat the cancer. The bone tumor is very painful. If nothing else, the amputation, so they tell me, relieves the pain. That's a little difficult to grasp because you're telling me amputation is less painful than the bone tumor. But I suppose it could be. And one thing I've read repeatedly in these articles on dog amputations rings true to me: Amputations for humans are far more traumatic than for dogs. We have psychological trauma. They do not. Still, the few dissenting stories I read give me a nigggle of doubt and I have to be absolutely certain in two weeks because right now that's when we're scheduled for surgery.

But wait, there's more! I'm really trying to parse out what I want and what R would want. I can't stand the idea of mutilating him and putting him on drugs so he lingers for six more months sick and in pain because I can't bear to say goodbye. That would be really shitty repayment for all my favorite morning moments and ten thousand doggy grins that have lit up my whole heart these past ten years. So I'm trying. Really, really, really I am. It's hard to really parse that out though and I'm terrified that fucked up little nugget in me is niggling in there too. Is there a chance that fucked up practical, callous, selfish part of me is playing a role in my thought process? No, no, amputation would be for you, not for him, let him go now. (Save thousands of dollars. Rip the bandaid off now. Have time to grieve over the summer before work really ramps back up. The timing is, practically speaking, convenient right now.)

That scares me almost more than anything.

But I figure I have two weeks to exhaust myself with mental and emotional contortions so what I can do right now is read everything I find and really try to scour my soul to make sure I'm doing whatever is best for R, without regard to myself at all, either more acceptably as regards my emotional attachments, or super fucked-up-edly regarding that sick little voice I hate that takes into account finances and convenience. (I wish that voice would die. I don't know if it's there because I really have a part of me that's that shitty, or if it's there because I'm trying so hard to protect my heart that I'm desperately trying to come up with *any* upside I possibly can to R leaving me. I want to believe the latter.)

So amongst all my reading our first night post-diagnosis, I come across... a clinical trial. I'm pretty sure we're going to amputate. It sounds like that's a step you take even if you're going to let him go. It means his leg doesn't hurt anymore. Because it's gone. There's still a nigggle of doubt regarding if that's for him or me, and if he's only going to live for a month or two post surgery, is it worth it to him or me to have him live only just long enough to recover from surgery... But I think that makes sense? (Even untreated he might live three or four months after surgery and that would be an extra month or two pretty much fully recovered.) I'll keep thinking about it.

The clinical trial I found is for chemotherapy and immunotherapy. Chemotherapy is the standard step after amputation to treat the disease; not cure it, but hopefully slow it down a bit. There's a

90% chance it has already spread elsewhere in his body, but with chemo we might buy a few more months before it gets in his lungs and I have to say goodbye. Again there's the for-him-or-me question of that, and the financial question can't be avoided, but it sounds like a solid majority of dogs have no side effects from chemo because we're giving them a much lower dose than we give humans and with pet insurance I'm only paying hopefully 20% of the cost when all is said and done and I would do anything I could to make a payment that was remotely within the realm of reason. I think I can find a couple thousand dollars if I need to. The house repairs wiped out most of my emergency fund but I can cut a lot of other expenses like groceries and shopping and whatever and live like a monk for a few months and make up that difference.

Immunotherapy, so I understand it, is the experimental cutting edge. Which makes sense, you know, clinical trial. And if he gets into the trial it sounds like they will pay for chemotherapy and the immunotherapy they're testing. At which point he'll be getting what is literally cutting edge care, without a financial consideration, and maybe I can feel like when he goes he's also potentially contributing to learning more about this disease to help other dogs someday? So I filled out the prescreen questionnaire and now I'm waiting to hear from them. I'll still need to pay for the amputation surgery and I think there will be extra costs for extra diagnostic tests, which my insurance probably won't cover, and there's some risk because my guess is if there's an adverse reaction my insurance won't cover that treatment since I will have caused it by enrolling R in a clinical trial... But all in all I feel like this option might mean I feel like R got the best care I could possibly find (probably better than I would have been able to afford even with insurance, considering the addition of the immunotherapy) and I'm not being financially irresponsible in throwing money at this battle without any regard, and we're contributing to knowledge about the disease that I have recently come to hate with a burning passion.

(It turns your bones to brittle glass. How insanely fucked up is that? Humans apparently also get this disease and I cannot imagine that pain. I'm barely holding it together facing this battle with my dog.)

So that's where I am now. Tired and sad and I've removed basically everything in my house that my dog could want to jump on or off, or trip over, because I'm terrified he's going to fracture his brittle glass bone in his left back leg and be in unbearable agony until we remove it. Also, smothering him. He has put up with so many ear kisses this past week.

He's basically a saint.

## Day Two

### 06-12-20

The right decision hasn't magically gotten clearer and I've probably spent a solid five or six hours of my day trying to figure out what it is I'm supposed to do. I spent my lunch break talking to the doctor running the clinical trial I looked into last night. A lot of uncertainty thanks to the lockdown; they're not even technically allowed to enroll any dogs right now though if things go well with reopening they will likely be able to in three weeks. Which would be about a week after he's currently scheduled for amputation. Then the next question is whether we'd be able to fit him into a very packed vet hospital schedule ASAP after the hospital was closed for all but emergencies for months. No guarantee there either. So lots of maybes and ifs.



But the benefits to the trial enrollment are: standard care chemo paid for and trial immunotherapy. The second part is a pro-con; can't decide which really. It's phase one research so they're really, really at the beginning stages and just trying to see right now if it has any bad impact on patients. So that's a little scary. But immunotherapy to treat these dogs is what most people are moving towards researching so there seems to be some reason to suspect it's a good idea. And the location would be wildly convenient for the chemotherapy after I'm back in my office because I could drop him off for chemo right on my way to work and they said they'd keep him until the end of the day so I could pick him up on my way home.

But it involves delaying his amputation. Today when I spoke to them the earliest date was a month later than I have scheduled now. On my birthday, actually. (Happy freakin' birthday to me.) And the more I read about the state of his bone right now, the more I freak out. Some people downplay how fragile it is but others in forums have stories of pathological fractures from a dog standing up, or taking a step backwards. Add to that the full horror stories of what if your dog injures itself that way when you're not home...

Which brings us to the other side of the debate for osteosarcoma care: those people who argue you just put him down. Now. I know he is in pain. He tries not to put weight on that leg. There's a greyhound forum where a number of those people just say as soon as you confirm

osteosarcoma and your dog is in enough pain not to use the leg it's time to put him down. But... R still wanted to chase his soccer ball in the backyard today. He was so happy to run around in the sun with his ball. Of course, then the other side of me realized: Well, yeah. But you tell him how good and smart he is every time he brings the ball back. Does he really want to play, or does he want to make you happy?

He's still eating. His breathing is a little elevated, which could indicate pain. But he's not getting up and down thirty times when he lies down, so I think he's relatively comfortable when he's lying down. But those greyhound forum people, they make the arguments about my risking him having a fracture any moment and being in unbearable agony at that point. Do I want to risk that, they say?

But how could you go in to euthanize a dog who still wants to play fetch? Who still doggy grins at you? Who's still enthusiastically snuffling through the weird fake grass slow-feeder you bought him a few weeks ago?

I guess the greyhound people would argue you do it because you know exactly what's coming and it's only pain and the end eventually anyway. Better a peaceful sleep now. They have a catchphrase they throw around amongst themselves even: "better a day early than a day late". I can see some reason in that. For me, euthenasia is my world cracked open and a symphony of tiny, everyday sounds suddenly silenced. For R, it will apparently be a tiny needle, 5-15 seconds of slipping off to sleep, and then his heart stops beating. If we did it at home soon-ish, he'd greet the stranger happily at the door. It would make his day to have a new friend here. The biggest issue would probably be calming his excitement enough to get him to lie down with me.

Which, then... that feels wrong. That feels like a weird, horrible betrayal. That he can still feel that much joy at seeing a new face, that he will still bounce up and down in his enthusiasm, even despite his leg and my terror he'll break it any moment... Doesn't that mean he's still enjoying this life? At least right this moment? So isn't that too early to slip him out of it?

But where is the balance point between that and too late. If he gets a pathological fracture and he's in agony and in the end I'm holding him while he screams in pain and they stick that needle in... Wasn't that a betrayal of his trust too?

But, but, but... With amputation and chemo he could live another eight months to a year. I mean, that's the average. He might not. But he could. That's a lot more time for rolling around with his soccer ball in the backyard. And with the leg gone, theoretically the pain is too. (I've conjured up a brand new nightmare where because he licks his front legs sometimes I'm now imagining those hurt and maybe it's already spread to another limb, in which case you amputate and you only get two more months and those are with a dog who's now being forced to live out his last few months recovering from a major amputation. So.)

I think I at least like that with the clinical trial, if I'm going to do anything at all to treat this, that is a practical option for me, a cutting edge best care option for R, and it will contribute to research into the disease. And when I spoke to the guy today he suggested that they were 'working closely', whatever precisely that means, with a human trial. And I know this is a disease that actually most frequently affects *children*. Which is beyond shitty. I don't have a word for how horrible that is. So he'd be indirectly having a potential positive impact in fighting this thing for others. That's a nice thought.

But not if I shouldn't do any of that shit at all. Not if I should be pulling myself together and letting him go a day early instead of risking a day late.



### Day Three

06-13-20

Today was an almost perfect day. Woke up and got R his pain medicine and dove straight into my very favorite thing to do: reading on the 'couch' with R. The 'couch' right now is the two couch cushions on the floor by the window because I'm scared R is going to give himself a pathological fracture jumping on or off the actual couch, but it's close enough. I think R thinks so too. In fact, my one little pang of guilt this morning was how much I think R likes the couch cushions on the floor. I knew he was struggling a bit with getting on and off the couch. My dad and I had even discussed building him a little step to help him. But I don't think I realized how much the bone tumor was hurting and how he had to make a decision every time whether it was worth the pain to cuddle on the couch with me. I just thought he was doing his independent boy routine when he spent more time than usual curled up across the room somewhere.



So I read a young adult novel (it really didn't matter to me what I read) and we snuggled for a solid half the day. This is my perfect weekend morning. I had a lot of weird thoughts interrupt my peace: I need a dog in my life, even if it can't be R. How can I do without morning reading cuddles? Is it really the right thing to put him through amputation surgery when there's no guarantee for extra time? What about phantom pain? What about people saying the first two weeks are 'tough'? What does that mean? Have I made him as happy as he's made me? And the weirdest one: Can I make a windchime or something out of his collar tags because I'm going to miss the jingling of him trotting down the hallways after me so, so, so, so much?

But all in all it was a good morning. I'm still not sure what the right thing to do is for him, for me, for the whole situation. I'm still leaning toward amputation, but it's not a perfect solution either. Everything I read just keeps reassuring me that 80+ percent of dog owners say it was the right decision and they'd do it again. (But one in five don't?) That dogs recover surprisingly quickly and do well on three legs. But there are dark hints in some of the accounts about those first two weeks and just how 'tough' they are. Dogs crying in the night. Anxiety and trying to crawl into weird spaces. There seems to be near universal accord on the great wide web that amputation is only moderately distressing for dogs, and that the pain of amputation is significantly less than the pain of a bone tumor but...

Does R want to go through any pain? I guess the crux of the problem, ultimately, is that R can't tell me what he wants. Having a few days to calm down about this means I think I can say I've honestly gotten to the point where that is what I'm trying to figure out. I am still aware of my own practical considerations for going the fightin' route. Cost. Time. Emotional pain. But I have dug down into every deep, dark piece of me and I think I can honestly say there is nothing hiding in there beneath the final conviction: I want to do what R wants.

So my question is, does R want more time? I want more time. And if I want more time then we have to amputate and we have to do chemo. But there's no guarantees for time. We could amputate and spend two to four weeks in our 'tough' recovery phase, whatever exactly that means, and only get another four weeks after. Would that be worth it, if R could tell me what he wanted? What if we get six more months? Does R care if he gets more time or not? Does a dog *want* to stay, or would he be just as happy to slip to sleep tomorrow?

All the stories of 'tripawds' talk about how much extra time we might get and R will get over the pain soon but... I am putting him through more pain. There is no uncertainty about that part. We are paying for a chance at six more months with two weeks of pain. Would R want to take that gamble? Pay that price?

I know I need to just come to a decision at some point. I'm making myself a little sick thinking about this so much. Nothing big. I just don't have my usual appetite and I've got a stress headache most days and ultimately even that is something I want to control for R. By the time evening rolls around the past few days he's always really anxious. Panting and crawling up my body to cuddle extra close. I might talk to his vet if it continues but for now I figure the first thing I should work on is getting my own anxiety under control because no doubt that cannot be helping. When I took him to the vet for the chest x-ray I was crying the whole way there and R was scared. R actually was scared the day I took him in after he started limping again, just for an exam, which I remember thinking was really weird at the time and now I think: Did he know already? But the chest x-rays, that day he insisted I sit in the back with him while we waited for the vet and he crawled onto my lap and kept digging his nails into my thighs and shaking and panting and shoving his head into my shoulder. I know my distress is stressing him out.

And especially if we're going to do amputation I better get that shit under control. Seeing him without a leg, knowing myself and knowing I am going to be insanely worried about every drop of fluid draining out of that very large incision... I guess I should download a meditation app or something. At least my hands aren't shaking as much lately. They were completely useless after we got home from the chest x-rays and for an hour or so today...

While I spoke to the home euthanasia people. Weirdly, this calmed me a little after we were done, but it was hard conversation and I sat in my living room shivering and shaking all over. No matter what I do I don't know if I have a month or six months or maybe we're insanely lucky and beat the odds and get so much more time... But. I'm a pessimist. So I don't really dwell

on the pinprick hopes for longer. My wildest hope is to make it to the average. Six months, eight months. My dread is we don't get nearly that long because life sucks. But I wanted to get registered with the home euthanasia service in my city that has the best reviews. And I do ultimately feel that while the greyhound forum people maybe threw the phrase around too cavalierly there is some value to "better a day early than a day late". In my ideal world I see R is starting to struggle before we get to the point most people describe with a 'look' or he doesn't want to eat. I don't think I want to wait that long. I think he's actively suffering at that point. Somehow I want to try to discern as close as possible but *before* we get to that point so I'm not calling the home-visit vet the day of and asking them to come as soon as possible, but calling them the night before, knowing R is going before he has to feel active pain.

So I talked to them for an hour or so and gave them all the information they need so that whenever the time comes we've got a number saved in my phone contacts and people ready to show up with a day's notice.

I comfort myself with having plans in place. I talked to my sister too about pain medication and what will the end of this cancer look like so I can look for those signs and she told me all my crazy research and planning is a coping mechanism she sees in her hospital all the time called 'intellectualization'. That sounds about right. I've spent thirty, forty hours at this point trying to take in as much information as I can about this thing. I want to move beyond that in the next day or two and just realize I know as much as I can and I don't want to spend all of my remaining moments with R focused on the shit parts, but for now it's calming.

For all that, the euthanasia phone call was only an hour of my day. And it was a beautiful day out so R and I went for an entire loop walk around the neighborhood. I let him decide where he wanted to go at corners and he led us all the way around. We had to go slowly and take some breaks, but I'm going to cherish every memory I have, photos in my mind with R's back to me in the foreground, trees and sunlight and the neighborhood street beyond. I thought we would have so many more of those memories. But every one I get is precious.

I am both happy and sad that we may only get eighteen months together in this house. When R was very small we lived in an apartment near Cleveland. I used to take him for walks around this picture perfect little cookie cutter town called Hudson. I told him, as we walked past all those insanely expensive, pretty houses that, "One day, I'll get you a yard." It took me nearly nine years. But I did do that. My family teased me that I bought this house for R, but it's half true. I told my realtor I wanted a ranch because R might not always be able to make it up and down a set of stairs and I wanted a fenced yard so he could play fetch every single day. I have loved being able to take him out back for his favorite thing, standing there in the early mornings with my cup of coffee. I'm so glad I have a year of those memories. I wish I could have given him more. I wish I could have gotten him his yard sooner.

But I think he's had an ok life. Other than the fact that I was gone so much at work, at the gym, etc. Other than that, we have gone for long walks or played fetch, I think, almost every day of

his life. And, for me, I know this could have been so much worse. In my new obsession reading forums and blog posts and watching YouTube recovery videos I know some people face this cancer when their dogs are 3 or 4 years old. One man lost his dog to bone cancer, got a puppy to help the healing, and lost that pup at eight months. You can always look at a situation and see the positives and the negatives. I've always seen pretty much every situation with both. I am angry I probably won't get the thirteen or fourteen years I wanted. But I am very lucky I got to almost ten already. I am very lucky I got him at all.

We really have had a truly beautiful ten years together. I just want to make sure these last few months don't overshadow all the other memories.

**Day Four**  
**06-14-20**



Today I was back to being super stressed about making the right decision. I had to consider if it was right to put R through the pain of amputation on a crapshoot that it means a lot more time, instead of a little more time. A friend shared a story of someone who pursued amputation and had their dog pass three weeks later. That is my nightmare scenario. That all I accomplish with this surgery is more pain before the end. And would R take the gamble? I would. That's easy enough. As a human being I would be happy to trade a likely two weeks of painful amputation recovery for a possible six months to a year longer to spend time with my family, eat ice cream, sit in the sunlight and

read good books. But R isn't a human being. I don't know if R cares if he gets six more months of tennis balls and walks in the neighborhood and cuddles in his new orthopedic bed (which was expensive, but I think the x-large size suggestion was genius because we can fit in it together and that's pretty awesome).

But I had a couple of things swaying me back toward amputation today. Firstly, the ACL surgery that we thought we were doing in these upcoming weeks (oh, the x-rays that started it all) sounds like its recovery would be just as bad as amputation recovery, as far as rehabilitation is concerned anyway. (I'm terrified he's going to suffer from phantom limb pain from the amputation. If we do this and he's up all night crying afterward I'm going to feel like a shit dog-mom.) And I had no hesitation to do that. Of course, it was a little different because at the time I didn't have any reason to believe R wouldn't live years longer. He's always been so healthy after we got over a few hiccups as a pup. It blows my mind that we started COVID-19 lockdown going on extra long walks and having extra sessions of fetch in the backyard and amongst all the shit in the world I was really enjoying the opportunity to spend more time with him and I thought we'd be running around all over the place together. Then April hit and - boom - now he might die any moment. 2020 really does suck.

But, I was never guaranteed longer, was I? I was going to do ACL surgery because I thought R needed a good knee for what I hoped was going to be three, four, five years longer. But I had



no guarantee on that before now either, did I? He's turning ten in a few months. He's a German Shepherd/Lab mix. I mean, he's at the lower end of their life expectancies, but he's in that average range for heading out the door. I was willing to do ACL with no guarantees.

I guess now it's just that the guarantee is that it's coming. It's imminent. Imminent might mean this year and not next month, but it's looming.

But, but, but... Isn't death always coming? For all of us? And there is never a guarantee that any medical procedure will be successful...

I guess I would just be more willing to gamble on my own pain and my own life than I'm willing to gamble with his. He is entirely innocent and entirely without choice in this matter.

Of course, you could take that too far the other direction too. If we really wanted R to be absolutely safe from pain and suffering he would have had to be euthanized in the shelter before he ever went out into the world at all.

He's led a life thus far pretty much free from pain for nine and a half years.

I'm wondering if it's not *me* that the amputation surgery will be harder for. I know I'm going to freak the heck out over his incision and worry every minute of every day while he heals and once we head back to the office, with this sick boy at home, if he is still at home, I'll probably need to put him into daycare at his vet if I'm going to be gone a full day because I'm not sure I'll feel good leaving him alone at home all day and that's going to suck up every dollar I have and I'm already trying to figure out how many hundreds of dollars a month I can come up with for everything for him - Can I just not get a haircut for a year? Cut grocery bills to canned soup and frozen veggies? Buy no new clothing? Not fix that car thing? I don't think I'll feel like I can leave him alone any more than absolutely necessary so I guess I don't have to worry about entertainment money... - but all of that is me, me, me and if that's an argument in favor of not fighting this thing then I feel like that's a pretty shitty argument. I realize you have to factor in your own physical, mental, emotional and even fiscal well-being into this decision too, but I feel like I also made a promise to R when I drove him home from that run down old shelter in the middle of freaking nowhere Indiana...

I promised to love him and take care of him every day for the rest of his life. In my ideal world I was planning to have a really old man pup hobbling around and having to come up with creative ways to get a diaper on him during the day and preparing to wake up in the middle of the night to go out or clean up upset tummies and instead I was going to worry about him passing in the night and waking up one morning to a sudden and unexpected heartbreak.

I guess there just is no good end. Something unexpected, even something as ultimately ideal as R passing peacefully in his sleep, would have made me just as sad. It just would have come

without the decisions, without the worrying about whether I was acting out of love, or practicality, or selfishness, or fear...

My knee jerk emotional reaction when I first got the diagnosis was: I'm going to throw absolutely everything at this and keep him with me as long as possible. Then came: But there are practical considerations too, and how the emotional battle of possibly months of cancer treatments will affect me. Then finally: I don't want him to suffer. I am scared and sad and this is my joy when I walk in my door every night, but I don't want him to go in pain, or fear. I want him to go wagging his tail softly, and held close to me, and knowing he is loved and safe. I have told him 10,000 times when fireworks are going off, or thunder is rumbling, or that one time when there were coyotes outside, "Your Momma will always keep you safe." I need that to be true. I need to know that in the end I am capable of loving another being enough to break my own heart. Otherwise, what were these last ten years together? Did I ever love you the way you deserved at all? How can I even think about trying this again someday, risking another life loved less than he deserves, if I can't say that?

I think I love him enough to do the right thing. I think beneath the twenty-seven other thoughts always whirling around my head, the deepest root is my love for him. I think we're going to do the amputation and the chemotherapy and I'm going to pray we're the lucky ones where R recovers quickly from amputation and the chemo gives us another year and that's the best I can do. And I think I believe that decision isn't at least mostly for me. I think that decision is going to involve paying a lot of money, making a lot of doctor's appointments, sleeping on the floor in my living room for a few weeks, worrying every minute of every day for a few weeks... I'm hoping, honestly hoping, that it's harder for me than him.

On a slight positive note, kinda, R's leg was bothering him after we played soccer in the backyard today. When he heard a package being delivered at the door he hopped up to bark... with only three functional legs. He didn't use the bad leg at all. I felt terrible that I'd maybe let him overdo it earlier, but the bright side... I think he's going to be pretty quick getting used to three legs.

It was a pretty nice day overall. We started with morning couch cuddles and reading again. We went on another walk, though we didn't do the whole loop this time. Came back and played tug for a bit. I tried to go out to the garage for a workout but my family called, so R got extra tug time while I talked to them. After chores... Soccer! R loves soccer. I think he likes that I play-chase him around the yard. Fetch is good too, but when we play soccer, Momma runs after the ball too. Which is even more exciting.

R has known for years that I am a sucker when he's sick. After he had to have his cute little butt shaved to treat a hotspot in Texas he came out from the back room crying and crawling into my lap and the vet tech looked at me and said, "Just so you know, he was fine back there. This is all for your benefit." And, little stink, he's totally right. Whenever I know or suspect that he doesn't feel good or he hurts, suddenly he doesn't have to have manners on walks, I will remain

perfectly still for hours not to disturb his nap position on whatever part of my body he has deemed appropriate, play times increase because I pretty much can't say 'no', and treats are suddenly plentiful.

R has figured out all of that applies now. He brings me his tug toy every time we come inside from a potty break. Every time we stand up for a drink. Everytime I leave and re-enter the room. I'm trying to balance protecting his fragile leg with letting him play. Because if he can't play, then his quality of life really is decreased. Already.

So. Soccer. Tug. Love.

Plan.

**Day 5**  
**06-15-20**



Today was nice for the most part. I think R was in a little pain because he kept shifting his legs as he tried to take a nap and he was basically only toe-touching on that back foot all day, but he was thrilled to get to chew on a tennis ball again. I stopped giving him tennis balls about a year ago when they told us they were wearing down his teeth, but I figure teeth are the least of our worries right now.

I'm scared there might be tumors sneakily growing in his front legs too. Part of me says I'm being paranoid, but the other half of me says that I should trust my instincts. He licks those

front legs and nibbles on them a lot like he does with the left back leg... only the left back leg. I don't think I've ever seen him lick and snuffle and nibble on the back right leg (which I know doesn't have bone tumors, at least not visible via x-ray). I'm considering asking the vet to x-ray his front legs before we do the amputation. I just want to know, if we amputate, that he's not going to have to spend a final month or two recovering from that. If we amputate, it's because I think there's a chance at a lot longer.

Of course, that means another sedation.

We got the runners into the kitchen, so that was a great relief. I've been so nervous when he slips and slides around on the laminate flooring in there. It's ugly as hell, but now we have blood red runner rugs with rubber backing on those floors (taped together so there aren't even any loose edges because I'm crazy-pants).

We spent most of the day cuddling on the couch cushions and in R's orthopedic bed. After work I made myself a bowl of truffle oil and parmesan popcorn and a glass of riesling for dinner and we watched Harry Potter together, the second half mainly napping all tangled up together. I loved it. I've decided we're watching the whole series this week. That'll take us through our Monday appointment with the oncologist. I'm hopeful that I can get him into oncology on my campus so I can drop him off for appointments and pick him up to/from work. I just feel like that will make it easier to schedule and keep as many appointments as they recommend. I also like that their facilities are top of the line and literally everything is under one roof. Surgery. Chemo. Rehab.

Oh, and other good news? His pet insurance came through on my claims 5 days after filing, covered everything, 80%. It is not officially worth every penny I have paid over the years. I'm so, so grateful that I thought ahead (and had the means!) to get insurance when he was a puppy and have it going out through auto withdrawal all these years. I think these choices would be even more painful if I just had to admit I couldn't afford this or that treatment. With coverage I really think we can get him whatever is best.

It's peace, a little bit, starting to creep into things. I know we're saying goodbye, either over a longer or shorter stretch, and I'm starting to settle in to trying to view that more with love and a grateful heart than all the anticipatory grief that was crippling me the first few days. I've also read and watched so much on the web about the disease at this point that I feel calmer about knowing the options and the chances and the recoveries and I can go back to just enjoying my fur-baby.

The indecision is the hardest part right now. The uncertainty. But I'm so grateful for every night I can watch Harry Potter with my head going up and down, up and down, laying on his belly.



**Day Six**  
**06-16-20**



Not a lot to talk about. We worked together on the couch cushions by the window in the living room. It was a beautiful day out. We went for two walks, both short loops. I love watching him trot along and sniff at things. It breaks my heart a little how slowly we walk now, most of the time, but it's bittersweet, to get to have these moments, to get to be there with him when, all of a sudden he's suddenly an old

man. Two months ago we were walking three miles a day and playing fetch in the backyard for thirty minutes to an hour. We'd rate fetches on a 1-10 scale based on how dramatic; our bests were often mid-air ball catches with 180 degree twists midair. That was *eight weeks ago*. Now we're walking ten minute loops twice a day, very, very slowly. Occasionally a squirrel or a scent will spark his interest and he'll trot a bit, but it's so jarring, how sudden the change has been, how complete.

He's also drugged these days. All the time. So there's also that.

He sat with me for a few long moments in the morning, just holding his tennis ball in his mouth, letting me hug him and kiss his ears and just slow blinking the whole time. He seemed cozy but... It's not really R. R will put up with cuddles and ear kisses for five or six minutes sometimes, but he doesn't want you to enclose him for a half hour. That's the drugs, not R. As much as I love getting to hold him close, especially right now, I hate the vacant look in his eyes.

We watched Harry Potter 2 before bed. Becoming my favorite time of the day. He seems content to settle down after his dinner and let me lie behind him on his orthopedic bed and put my head on his shoulder or his belly and hold him close. I try to make sure I'm not putting any actual weight on him anywhere because I don't want to hurt that freakin' leg, but it's still nice.



**Day 7**  
**06-17-20**

The day itself was beautiful today. Still working on the floor in the living room so I can spend as much time as humanly possible with R and so he can ask for a cuddle any time he wants one and I will be able to instantly accommodate. I don't want to feel like I spent my last weeks with him sitting in my chair at my home office desk, far away from him, making him come up and sit by me to ask for love. I always had a rule, even when I was in the middle of something that I'd drop everything when he did that and give him thirty seconds of love. But it doesn't seem like enough now.

Lunch break we mowed the back lawn. R likes to keep me company. I bought a manual push mower partially because they're dirt cheap and my house is sucking every last dime from me, but partially too because I wanted R to be able to hang out with me when I mowed the lawn. With a manual blade I'm not really worried about any part of him

getting caught in an accident. He can trot up and down the yard with me and every once in a while he'll drop his ball in the path of the mower so I have to throw it for him. It's hard to balance, now, how much to throw the ball, how much to refuse. A balance between making him happy and risking damaging his weak leg. But if I can't let him play at all, then why am I keeping him alive? Fetch is the thing that brings R the very most joy in life. And he was happy this afternoon. Trotting up and down the lawn with me, laying down underneath the trees on the back fence and grinning and panting and chewing his ball, dropping that ball right in my way so I'd have to throw it for him and tell him what an awesome job he did catching 'that darn tennis ball'. It was a good afternoon. It made R happy. So it made me happy.

Harry Potter 3, snuggles, popcorn. Just enjoying my hand on his belly or his haunches, feeling him warm and soft and *there*. It's hard to love someone you know you're losing. But it's worth every bit of bitter in the sweet.





**Day 8**  
**06-18-20**



You can just only be in full-on panic mode for so long. I'm calming down a bit as the days go on. I can't fight cancer with my panic. It won't help. All it will do is suck away the joy I have left, ruin the moments I can still be here with R and love him with every piece of me. I don't want there to be pieces missing to my sadness or my fear. So I'm focusing more on him and less on his cancer.

We have our first oncology appointment Monday and I feel like that will really help me decide what we're doing. I think it's likely we'll put off his amputation for a few weeks because I think I'd rather do that at a major university veterinary center than my local vet. No offense to my local vet, at all. I actually think she's totally awesome and I'm going to be writing her an effusive thank you card for everything she's done for us so far. Just that I want R in a fancy facility with all the equipment and whatever.

R took a long nap this afternoon. I am reassured that I really, really love him by two facts lately:

- 1) I did not move while he was napping. I did not move until the pain from sitting with my legs splayed wildly to accommodate him was beyond my threshold. Three hours. I had one of his collar tags imprinted in my thigh when he finally decided to move. I wanted every minute I could get of his little nose snuffled in my leg and his little bear paws curled around my knee.

- 2) Kinda dark, I guess, but I know from my mother's death that when my emotions are really overwhelming, when the hurt is too too much, my body expresses it with digestion pain once the tears run out. With my mom the pain lasted for a year or better and I was 88lbs as a sophomore in high school. Every time I ate anything I'd get stabbing pains in my stomach afterward. So I basically just stopped eating that year. I've had a few days of that with R. It's getting a bit better now but having had those psychosomatic pains or whatever they are, I'm weirdly reassured that I love R with that same kind of intensity, even if the duration of my grief is going to be less. (Which, thank goodness, because in a lot of ways I'm probably still not fully over the loss of my mother and may never be.)

As is our ritual for the week leading up to our oncology appointment - just in case we get really bad news I want a really good memory bundle to hold me this week - we watched Harry Potter 4, curled up in R's orthopedic bed together with stovetop popcorn and peppermint patties for dinner and dessert. I can tell we're tiptoeing on the line of R feeling smothered by my over attention this week because he only let me snuggle with him for maybe half the movie before he went to lie down on the floor across the room, but I'll take whatever I can get. Trying to respect his boundaries while I sneak every last snuggle I can from the beast.

It was a good night.

If there is something to be grateful for with a death sentence it is this: that you have given me a warning, you have let me know to cherish this time with him even more than I did before. I think in the end I will appreciate that, I will know I couldn't have possibly loved him more or better than I did in whatever time cancer left us.



Day 9  
06-19-20



Day 10  
06-20-20





**Day 11**  
**06-21-20**



Father's Day. I left R for the first time since we got the diagnosis so I could drive down to Dad's house for lunch. I'm worried about leaving him home alone with the fragile leg and the ever-present risk of pathological fracture, so I put him in daycare at his vet's office. Nice that they do boarding too. They took x-rays of his front legs while he was there to make sure there's no sign of tumors there before we possibly take the back left leg. Looks good.

Watched the last Harry Potter together, cuddled in R's big orthopedic bed. This is my idea of bliss. I love watching movies with a furry cuddle creature, warm and soft and curled up beside me. I'm going to miss this so so much.

**Day 12**  
**06-22-20**



Kinda a lost day. A shitty day. I had such high hopes for today. I really thought we had checked out all the possibilities and ruled out the worst and we were going into the oncology appointment today to discuss possibilities, options, hopes. It's hard when you let your general pessimism in life slip for a second and reality punches you in the gut for it. It makes you feel like you should always be on your guard. It makes you feel like your heart should always ache, just a little, because surely something painful is lurking nearby, surely there is going to be another little hurt, another little crack, until the organ crumbles away to dust one day.

So. The oncology appointment did not go well.

At first it seemed like things were moving forward. I decided to do one final diagnostic test to make absolutely certain amputation was the right way forward. I just wanted to know, as close as you can ever come to 'know' that amputation was likely to buy us six months to a year. If the tumor was osteosarcoma and it hadn't spread to the lungs and we did amputation and chemo, that's the median. No guarantees, but a good gamble. When you're gambling your dog going through amputation recovery for two to four weeks on limited remaining time, you at least want to know it's a solid bet that those two to four weeks aren't the majority of his time, that you're not just choosing to make him suffer his last few weeks. That was my nightmare.

Which, I suppose the good news is, that nightmare isn't going to come true.

I don't think we should amputate, now, knowing what we know. I think we should just let him go. I think we should fight his pain however we can and when that's robbing him of his joy, let him sleep.

I cried a lot today.

The oncologist called me after the bone aspiration or whatever and said, yep, it looks like osteosarcoma. But... The radiologist at the hospital disagreed with the local vet on the chest x-rays. The local vet didn't think he had any lesions in his chest, but now the same x-rays were in with specialists and...

Both the oncologist and the radiologist were pretty sure they were seeing a tumor in his lung. Most likely, this is osteosarcoma in his lungs. This is the standard progression of the disease. This is what all the 'tripawd' parents live in fear of after their dogs become amputees. You can fight osteosarcoma with amputation and chemo but you're pretty much living under the ax of 'lung mets', liable to fall at any time. It's pretty much a question of when, not if. The lung mets are coming for your pup. The lung mets will probably take him.

R already has lung mets. Just one at the moment but when the osteosarcoma has spread to the lungs, the gamble on amputation becomes one of very different odds. Now the median survival ranges are 1-3 months without chemotherapy and 2-5 months with. Median, mind you. Which means now most likely if we amputate R is spending potentially a quarter to a half of his remaining time on earth recovering from amputation. And that's not even taking into consideration: Should you remove the lung tumor? Which means surgery on his lungs too.

I just think it's too much. I cried on the phone with the oncologist while the poor guy basically just tried to respectfully give me time to blubber and speak half-sentences interrupted by my voice dropping out and shaky attempts to breathe. Then I cried after he explained all my options. Then I got up and washed my face. And promptly cried some more, staring into my own eyes in the mirror and asking if I'm really doing what's best for R if I fight this thing at this point. Do I love him enough to let him go *without* a fight?

I don't think R fears death like people do. I don't think R knows what death is. I think R finds joy in sunshine and tennis balls and walks and me speaking with a stupid, excited, high-pitched voice saying how smart he is and what a good boy and how handsome and he got *all* the squeaky squirrels... I don't know that R, who has never really known any pain in his life at all, would choose to go through the pain of amputation for more time, and certainly I don't think R would choose pain for his last few weeks here.

I think for R death will be a new stranger at the door, a new friend - *everyone* is a new friend. I think for R death will be me crying but trying really hard to talk through my tears and smile so he knows it's ok. I think for R death will be cuddling close with me in his big new bed while I tell him that I'm so *grateful* for every moment we've gotten to spend together, so *grateful* for a thousand memories he has given me that are full of deep green forests and splashing in clear waters and cuddling close on the couch reading a book and hearing the wind and snow howl outside. I don't think R will be sad to go. I don't think R will be scared. I think death may be the last kindness I can do for a creature that has been my very best friend for ten years.

Death is only sad for those of us left behind. Even theologically, R has nothing to worry about. For humans, for me, I'm a little worried I might go to hell when I die. That's surely a terrifying possibility. But R? Either he gets to go to heaven (there's a fair amount of biblical debate on this topic), or he simply ceases to be. I find the latter a hard concept to wrap my mind around because... why? Why would God make this little creature that had such a capacity to love and be goofy and this little personality, this true little light, only to snuff it out like a candle, like it never was? Just, what would be the point of that creation? But either way, R won't hurt anymore. He won't suddenly be stuck in a tired, old body anymore.

It baffles me how everything has changed so quickly. We started COVID lockdown walking three miles every day and playing an hour of fetch in the backyard. I thought about how nice it was going to be to be able to really give him more 'run-around' time than I usually could. Three months later and he can barely make it on a long, slow mile around the neighborhood and fetch is fifteen minutes. He really, really wants to play, but he just can't go much longer than that anymore and even he knows it.

I cancelled his amputation appointment for Wednesday. I'm going to think about pain relief options for a couple of days and then I think we're just going to throw everything we can at keeping him pain free for as long as possible. Maybe we're that oddball case that lasts a lot longer than expected, but my general pessimism is firmly in place again. Probably not. Probably these are our last few weeks.

So peanut butter every day. A new tennis ball to pop.

I'd already moved my mattress onto the floor in the living room to be with him while he recovered from surgery, but I see no reason to move it back. If we're in our last few weeks together I want to be right there with him, even at night, kinda a weird full circle back to where we started when he was a puppy and those first few nights home I slept on the couch with my arm hanging right down by his crate door so he could smell me close, hoping to comfort him when he cried.

I hope he's comforted now, when he can touch his little nose right to my nose if he wants, sleeping close and cozy, together even when we're dreaming.



**Day 13**  
**06-23-20**

I took a video on my phone today that is literally just R breathing, sleeping under my desk while I work in my home office. Maybe it sounds weird, but I'm going to miss the sound of his breathing. That little snuffle, that high pitched huff out of his nose, has been a constant noise under all the other noises of my life for ten years. It's metronome to everything else. I am going to be bereft without it, left without a beat, tripping through life all off count, dancing into walls and doors and people.

This is going to hurt.



And yet there is a little part of me that thinks I am just trading in one suffering for another. It will be worse because in my current suffering I have R to keep me company and in the suffering to come he will not be there. But now's not exactly rainbows either. It's the anticipation of the hurt now. The knowing it's coming, but not knowing when. The being tensed for it. The straining your ears listening for the creaking floorboard. Watching the balloon, drifting towards the hot light. It's hard to live with pain, but it's also hard living in the anticipation of it.

What will I do with all of R's things when he's gone? He's got three big beds and enough toys to fill a chest and two huge bags of dog food and two boxes of Dentastix because I wanted to know I would never run out of those things unexpectedly and I'm always a worst-case-scenario planner, which is kinda ironic now since I did not plan for *this* worst case... Is it weird that I've already thought about what I want to do with him? That I think cremation is less creepy than burying him? That I've even considered cremation glass and I found one place online that will make a glass light fixture that's like a stone you put a little fairy light in and you can kinda light it in remembrance and that sounds nice...

Otherwise I don't know what most people do with the ashes. It feels weird to me to think about keeping them all. Like, it will just be this random box and I probably don't have counter space for my dead dog so it will end up in a closet and that seems, I don't know, disrespectful or something? So maybe I should spread them somewhere? I've considered maybe driving up to Twinsburg. There was a park by our first apartment there where we used to run around trails in the woods and R would chase deer and swim in the creek and that's where he grew from a puppy into a completely batshit crazy adolescent dog and that's where we really worked on



getting to know each other and learning each other's boundaries and he loved those woods maybe more than anyplace else we've ever lived. Maybe that's where I should scatter him.

I emailed the oncology guy today to ask about radiation therapy for pain treatment and if there was anything else palliative we should be considering. We only made it on a short walk today because R didn't seem to relish the idea of the longer mile loop. We played a little fetch in the backyard though while I mowed the lawn. That's a favorite of ours. R keeps me company while I do my chore and every once in a while he drops his ball right in my path so I *have* to throw it. It was a little bittersweet how much less running he can do these days. He mostly just trotted behind me while I made my laps back and forth across the yard, and rested under the trees at the back and we probably only actually did a half dozen throws. But I think he was happy and it was a beautiful evening and I gave him lots of butt scratches and told him in twenty different ways that he's awesome and loved and handsome and smart and the best tennis ball catcher the world has ever seen. (Which, in his prime, may have been objectively true. He was amazing.)

I hate feeling like I'm counting down our days, but they are at least good days. In a strange twist of fate the pandemic has actually meant I can be home with him every minute of every day. It's kind of a strange thing to be grateful for, but it's nice. I would feel robbed of so many hours, working in my office. Here I can work all day with a foot resting on his belly, or an arm around his shoulder, or a hand on his thigh. Even when he doesn't want to cuddle anymore he will occasionally open his eyes from his nap spot across the room and just check where I'm at. And I'm always, always here. Right here with you, fur-man. Always.

Day 14  
06-24-20



Today was a good day. I emailed the oncologist about getting R set up with radiation therapy treatments for his leg pain. If our time is limited, I want that time to be as blissful for him as possible. I think I'm making peace with the idea that maybe not fighting is the braver choice here, the greatest kindness. The idea of taking his leg and making him suffer his last weeks on earth is too great a risk with such an uncertain outcome. Better to give him the best quality time left, even if the quantity is sorely lacking.

We went on a walk this morning and made it the full mile loop around the neighborhood. It was beautiful weather. Cool and a little breezy. It was so nice to spend a half hour with him in the morning blue-light, trying to memorize how it feels to walk down that one street with the particularly old trees and all the squirrels making R's ears perk up

and his head tilt while we walk. That's how I want to remember him.

Played a rousing round of squeaky squirrel "Find It!" when we returned. He found all twelve hidden squirrels around the house and got far too many treats for his trouble.

We also managed twenty minutes of fetch in the backyard in the deep yellow sun of afternoon and then we did another short loop around our little block. Ended our day curled up in bed together watching Columbo.

R kept me company in the home office for a while so I could get some work done, but the rest of the day was pretty much focused on a grinning pup. Those are the days we're shooting for. As many more of *those* days as we can get.

Day 15  
06-25-20



Today has been another roller coaster. I went to bed last night pretty much resolved that we weren't going to fight this thing and therefore we weren't going to put R through the pain of amputation; we were going to do radiation therapy for pain and let him go whenever his time came.

Then I spoke to the oncologist again.

Last time we spoke he said he probably wouldn't push for amputation right away based on the level of lameness R is currently exhibiting. Today, when he called to discuss radiation therapy the conversation got a bit more complicated. He wanted to emphasize that radiation therapy would do nothing to strengthen the bone and if R lived long enough three or four months down the road he'd be at high risk for a pathological fracture at any moment. Going for a walk.

Standing up from a nap. Whatever. If

I amputate that particular risk disappears. Even if he only lives a few weeks beyond the amputation, he lives those few weeks without the pain of the bone tumor and without the risk of fracture (and, you know, rather extreme pain, not to mention me trying to load him into the car, probably crying like a baby, while he screams in agony, without getting my face bitten off).

I talked to both my dad and my sister about it. My sister is great in these scenarios because she works as an anesthesiologist in a hospital and she is very practical. She reminds me very, very much of my mother. Sentimental? Not so much. It's not that she doesn't feel things very deeply and she has a great capacity to love and especially to nurture, but she's hardwired to be very logical and blunt to the point that some people would probably think her callous in her thought processes with these kinds of things. But that's exactly what I need.

My sister disabused me of the notion that there was much chance, if we didn't amputate, that R would pass away from the systemic complications of cancer before we suffered a fracture. She

said those odds were slim. If I don't amputate I'm probably going to go through the experience of R fracturing that leg and I can decide to amputate THEN, or I can let him go then.

Well, shit. That seems like the worst possible option.

I have clarified my thinking on this to the following: The right thing to do is minimize overall pain and overall likelihood of pain for R as much as possible. I'm only playing for more time insofar as I'm not ready to put him down right now. That would be the 100% guarantee that he doesn't have to go through the pain of amputation and he doesn't risk the pain of fracture. Take my grinning, panting boy who still wants to go for mile long walks and play fetch in the backyard and growl and grumble while we play tug in the living room... Take that boy, right now, and put him down.

Would avoid all pain. But, if you're going to go that far with your argument, might as well have put him down the moment the vet said the word 'cancer'. Hell, the greatest mercy might have been if he'd been euthanized in the shelter before he ever lived at all. Wouldn't have gone through that weird jaw pain he had as a puppy before we did a few weeks of some random steroid. Wouldn't have gotten whumped isn't the eye that one time when we were wrestling in my old apartment. Wouldn't have suffered through explosive diarrhea at 2am that one time he had giardia.

So. That doesn't seem right.

So, if I'm not putting him to sleep tomorrow, the question is which option going forward is likely to involve the least overall pain for R, regardless of how much time we get to spend together.

I don't think R fears death or will be sad to go.

Time is a me consideration.

Pain is the R consideration.

So we focus on pain.

But there's just no way to be sure. If we amputate there is a 100% chance he will suffer through moderate pain for a week or two. But then there's a 0% chance he'll suffer the potentially excruciating pain of a pathological fracture. Of course, if he only lives two more weeks he ends his days in moderate pain when he probably would have not fractured the limb in that amount of time, and he may have slipped from this life never knowing real pain at all. On the other hand, if we don't amputate and he lives more than a few more weeks, every day the chance of the potentially excruciating pain increases. My sister's take, having watched humans suffering with osteosarcoma, is that the likelihood of a fracture before death is very high.

There is no perfect choice here.

So after aaaaaall of that, I think we're back to deciding, again, that we should amputate after all. The fact that it's probably in his lungs means we might only have 1-5 months left. But if it's longer we're fucked if we didn't take the leg off. I mean, maybe I'm overemphasizing the pain of fracture. My sister says in humans we usually hold off until the fracture happens and then take the limb. So we don't avoid that pain in people. But... That person can choose that pain for themselves, can choose that risk. I have to choose for R. He can't tell me what he wants.

And if we do amputate, then I don't know why we wouldn't at least try chemotherapy. We might as well fight for as much time as we can get if we're going to live through two weeks of utterly shitty together.

As one last diagnostic, I asked the oncologist if we could do one more chest x-ray closer to when the surgery gets scheduled. So likely the surgery can't be scheduled for a couple of weeks. Can we look at the x-rays again a few days ahead of time and see if the lung mets have notably progressed? If they haven't, that's no guarantee that they're not going to explode the day he gets out of surgery. But if they *have*, then I feel like I know this thing is moving quickly and R probably has a matter of weeks left, not months. And then...

Then maybe the preemptive choice to euthanize does start to make more sense.

At that point I know this cancer is eating at your bones and filling up your lungs in a matter of weeks. It's an army sweeping across the cities of your little body and they are falling one by bloody one and maybe it's time to pop the cyanide so we don't suffer the ravages of the screaming men marching to our gates.

There is some historical precedence here.

I might pop the pill then.

If there isn't a hazy ocean of lung mets in a couple of weeks, we take the leg and we hope for as long as we can get post-healing. If the mets have taken the city of your lungs...

I let you go.

I take you home and love you with every breaking piece left of my heart and in a day or two, or three, then I call the hospice vets and have them come while you're still happy to see them, still wagging your tail at the door. And I let you go when there is still the lie of health to look at you because I know the truth and I know that the only days ahead of us are bad ones.

I let you go before you ever have a bad one.



Day 16  
06-26-20



**Day 17**  
**06-27-20**

Feels like we're living in countdown to surgery now. I'm dropping him off on Monday morning. Take him to the university hospital. Drop him off. Tuesday they take his leg. I feel like I'm weirdly mourning for his *leg*. And I feel... guilty? Like, I feel like I'm betraying him by driving him to the vet and leaving him there to have his leg chopped off. He trusts me. Like, too much sometimes. Always underfoot, absolutely certain I won't step on him. Won't move when I start to shut a door because, of course, I would never shut any part of him in it. Not moving out of the way of the vacuum... And that trust, I feel like, I'm almost betraying it a little.

I don't know, if R was able to speak simple sentences, express his toddler-human-ish wishes to me, if he would choose to have his leg amputated. I mean, I think, ultimately he'd tell me he doesn't want his leg off, but also that he doesn't want it to break. So... I don't think he'd *understand* the choice, but I think he'd insist on not taking the leg. Which makes me feel shitty about taking it.

I wonder if he'll have to 'forgive' me when he comes back home. I don't think I've ever done anything to R that really required forgiveness before. I 'alpha rolled' him a few times when he was an adolescent pup acting like an asshole (bad dog training book advice) and I've apologized for that about thirty-billion times since, but that might be the worst thing I've ever done to him before. I think I stepped on a foot once. That's it. I'm so careful of him. And now, from *that* as his drama in life so far, to *this*...

We went for a walk around the block this morning, slow and sniffing, and then, I'm trying to balance being careful of his leg with letting him still *enjoy* this life we're fighting so hard for, so we broke out a fresh new tennis ball and went to the backyard for fetch. Chatting while I sat on the stoop out there and he sat in the grass, chomping on the ball (popping it is the best part, so I understand) I was trying to explain myself to him, explain the situation, apologize. "Our choice is pain or pain. I wish that your end could have been one without pain, but that doesn't seem to be a choice we have." We take the leg, or one day we break the leg. There's no way I can figure to give him final days that don't have pain, short of taking him in to be euthanized, like,





now. And that doesn't seem right either. My sister pointed out that most humans don't get pain free final days either - those last stumbling days to the end are usually pain-filled for most of us - with my grandma I remember we all sat around her bedside for the past day with a nurse pumping her full of morphine - so... Maybe that just is the nature of so many of these final day scenarios. There are so rarely perfect deaths, painless deaths, passing in our sleep, old and content and never aware we were getting set to go.

I so wanted him to have a life that never knew any pain at all, but I don't think there's any path I can see, shuffling him along to these final days, that avoids that entirely.

My dad so hopefully interjected into that thought stream, "If wishes were horses then beggars would ride."

I guess so.

I really want to drown some of my anxiety in alcohol, but I'm so apocalypse-brained that I'm too worried we'd have some kind of emergency vet scenario and I'd be unable to drive him down to the hospital. So. I guess that's a very weird *good* thing about apocalypse-brain? Instead I've been drinking insane amounts of flavored coffee and my diet has gone to sh\*\*\*\*\*. I'm going to have to seriously pull my health back on track when we're through this thing. I know it's a stupid twenty-seventh thing to be thinking about under all the other thoughts, but I fought so hard for my physique the past few years. So many hours with the power rack. So many freaking veggies-and-boiled-chicken meals. Lately it's been popcorn for dinner and coffee and muffins and basically all the 'no' foods. Food really is comforting. I guess that's why so many of us use it as a coping mechanism, huh?

And all of this, all of this, under the sneaking suspicion growing that maybe I have allowed myself to become a bit too emotionally dependent on a dog. Which, when you get him at 21 years old, is a pretty crappy bet, you know? Like, unless you die unusually young yourself, you're bound to lose him. There's a chance I should have focused some of the past decade on making, you know, a few more human connections. My dad's going to come up to be with me whenever I have to let R go, stay for a couple of days. But I'm going to have a lot of empty evenings for a while.

**Day 18**  
**06-28-20**

Just in case, just in case, just in case...

Just in case this is our last day together, we made sure to make it a good one. You never know. This isn't a particularly involved surgery, but anytime you put a living creature to sleep and slice it open, things can go wrong. (Have I mentioned I'm a bit of a pessimist?)

So just in case this was our last day, we: Cuddled. Went for a walk. Cuddled some more. Played fetch in the backyard while Momma mowed the lawn. Cuddled some more. Went for another walk. Played tug in the living room. Cuddled some more. Had a friend come visit! Ended the evening with... Yeah. More cuddles.

Someone told me I should try to 'listen' to R, and he would 'tell me' what he wanted, so I legitimately tried to. I don't usually hold to things like that - I'm pretty literal minded sometimes, I guess - but I figured it couldn't hurt. And even if I don't feel like R really managed to talk to me, I think he seemed to enjoy sitting on my lap while I gave him scratches and looked him in the eyes and went round and round about why I was going to do this huge, ugly thing to him and why it was really love, even though it would feel like pain for a while. I mean, he seemed involved in the eye contact and tilting his head and listening actively for probably a good thirty minutes. Even if nothing else came of it, I think he enjoyed thirty minutes of my undivided attention, eyes to eyes, no television, no cell phone, no other thoughts but him.

And I do think this is the right choice. It is a choice that hurts my heart, but I think putting him to sleep right now would be wrong. He was ecstatic to see our friend tonight. Running around the living room with joy. I just don't think that's a dog that's ready to leave the world. This world still holds so much joy for him, even if his leg is hurting right now. So, I guess I assume it will continue to hold joy, even when it is hurting where his leg *used* to be.

It feels like this choice might hurt me more than R. And I can take it. If it's for R, I can take it.

So I will drive him to the university hospital tomorrow morning. I will hold him and tell him I love him and then I will take the leap of faith. That's what someone else called amputation. A huge



'leap of faith'. It feels like it. A leap that it's going to be worth it. A leap that it's really the right thing for R. A leap that I am strong enough to work through his 'rough' first few weeks of healing though I know I will be scared and sad and guilty and angry every moment.

Hopefully it is all worth the leap.

Hopefully we get more than a few more weeks. If we do this thing, if we go through all this *crap*, then I'm at least hoping that we get another six months out of it. To have these weeks ahead be our last weeks... I realize people often suffer through 'rough' final days, but I never wanted that for R, and that's one of the things we actually *can* give our animals.

I have to reconcile myself to that possibility too though. And... maybe that's still worth it? That our last weeks are nursing a broken boy instead of living in dread of the sudden pain of fracture? That there was no way I could *know*, and the possibility of six more months was a chance we had to take? For R to enjoy more time on this earth?

I don't know. I don't know anything. But I think I'm as close to knowing as I will ever conceivably get, and the choice to do *nothing* was a choice too, and probably a worse one.

So we roll the dice. We try. We hope. (We forgive me if I've made the wrong decision and this is going to suck. A lot.)

Day 19  
06-29-20



I hate that we have to do this. I think that we *do* have to do this, and I keep going through the reasoning, and that's all well and good, but I still hate it.

Reasoning is thus:

I don't think R is ready to go.

If R is not ready to go, we have to take the leg.

If we don't take the leg, R will spend his days increasingly at threat of fracture. Eventually I will feel like I have to stop him from going on his long walks, or playing fetch, or running around the living room like a crazy demon like he did when our friend visited last night.

Going on walks, and playing fetch, and tearing around the living room are what bring R joy.

So. We have to be able to do these things if R is going to stay.

So. The leg has to go.

Even if we have very little time left.

But.

It also should go sooner than later because we don't start chemo until the stitches are out. And that's our best bet to have any *more* time, which makes the amputation feel less pointless.

I could probably put it off for another week or two, but for what gain?

I've gone through all of it, repeatedly.

But I still hate it.

I'm going to hate walking him into that building this morning. I'm going to hate holding him while he tries to claw his way up my body, and feeling him shake, and feeling like I'm lying to him when I tell him, "It's ok." I'm going to hate leaving him. I'm going to hate knowing, tomorrow, that some very nice vet tech has put him to sleep saying soothing things in nice tones and then some surgeon will slip in while he has his guard down and cut his leg off.

I know it's not really like that, that last part. I know we're not villains in the story, not really. But I think there's still a part of me that thinks, from R's perspective, it might look that way.

But I don't think R's ready to go. And if R's going to stay, I want him to stay being able to do the things that bring him joy. So the leg has to go.

Reasoning like a mantra this morning.

It's not really helping, but I'm pretty sure nothing really will right now.

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So. Dropping him off was pretty much exactly how I imagined it. It sucked.

R was terrified. I sat on the floor with him in the exam room and he did indeed make a valiant effort to claw himself onto my shoulders so the vet tech couldn't take him away. And I had to help her get off his collar and leash and then *lie to him* by pretending I was going to walk through the doorway with him and letting it shut between us. The "It's ok." I kept repeating felt a lot like lying too. If I woke up tomorrow afternoon and someone had cut off *my* leg without sufficient warning, I would *not* feel like it was ok.

I tried to tell R all about it. I, like, legitimately spent hours telling him all about this and going through my reasoning with him, some of that time even looking right into his pretty brown eyes



and watching him tilt his head trying to understand me. But as his vocabulary is limited pretty much to “potty”, “outside”, “ball”, “peanut butter”, “cookie” and various nicknames, I think probably a lot of the details were lost in translation.

He’s not going to understand why I walked him into that building today, tricked him into walking through that door, and let those people do something to him that is going to leave him in a lot of pain for the next few weeks. He can’t understand all that reasoning I did. He’s a dog. He’s just going to hurt and not know why.

Our choices were ‘bad’, ‘really bad’, ‘really fucking shitty’, or ‘just unthinkable’, so I think choosing the ‘bad’ choice was the best out of our options, but it doesn’t change the fact that it feels like a bad choice.

I bought him two cans of the fancy tennis balls online today as penance. The real ones, like, for actual tennis, take longer to pop. I thought maybe he could at least enjoy chewing on them as he starts to feel a little better. Until we can, hopefully (please, please, please, please, *please*) get back outside to play fetch in a few more weeks.

If he doesn’t die before then.

Because this disease is shit and no one can really predict anything with any certainty.

I know there are bigger things happening in the world. I know there are tragedies happening every moment that make mine seem pale. But for me, for this moment, here, this is my tragedy and I feel it as though it was just as big as all those other ones.

Sometimes that makes me feel silly. Mostly it just makes me feel that when I love I apparently do it wholeheartedly, whether it’s a person or a dog or a hobby or whatever. I don’t really do in-between feelings. All in, full on commitment, or nothing.

I love R all in.

I guess I just hope somehow that a dog can know that much. Maybe he can’t ever understand my reasoning and all those complicated why’s and maybe’s and statistics. But I hope he knows, however much a dog can know, that I love him. Again, I tell him. But none of those words for ‘I love you’ are “ball” or “potty” or “cookie”. Or, I guess some of them probably actually *are*. Like, maybe how much a dog can know ‘I love you’ *is* because I give you balls and a yard for potty and cookies.

But I guess I hope that he can know it even more than that. Like, I finally managed to give him the yard I promised him when he was a puppy. Nine years and seven moves later. But I hope he knows ‘I love you’ even a little deeper than that. Maybe not the intellectualized version of it, but at least a feeling of safe or contentment. When he sits down and looks at me, waiting for his

nightly ear scratching, and I make sure I hit all the good spots and I tell him things like, “Every minute of your entire life I have loved you. There has not been one minute you weren’t *adored*.” I hope at least he feels warmth and trust and safe.

And I guess I hope that’s at least what we can hold onto while we try to recover.

And when it’s time to say ‘goodbye’.



Day 20  
06-30-20



I'm trying really hard this morning to adjust my thinking from: This is the day my dog loses his leg. To: This is the day my dog loses his tumor. It's not totally working, but the second sentence *is* also true and it's the reason for the first. It's important. It's the non-negotiable.

It was weird, sleeping alone in the living room last night. I don't want to be morbid, but I admit the thought was with me all yesterday afternoon and evening. That: This is what it will be like when R is gone. Very quiet. Lots of objects scattered around my house that no longer serve a purpose. Lots of colorful toys without anyone to play with them. Three big beds with no one

to sleep in them. Which, all in all, creates a strange, abandoned feeling, like everyone in a family up and disappeared right in the middle of a meal and never came back.

It's also just *weird* that I can know R is going to have his leg chopped off today, but here it's so calm. It's that general weirdness that comes from the dichotomy that something really important, or really bad, or really violent can be happening a hundred miles away and you can be going about your daily life and not even know it. Like when the Twin Towers came down and for the first however long I was still sitting in my middle school classroom, no doubt preoccupied by silly middle school girl worries. I was giving a presentation in my social studies class, I think, when my mom probably died.

It's that same weird dichotomy today, on a much smaller scale. That I know five miles down the road R is losing his leg, but here it's just a perfectly still morning, *unusually* quiet and still even because R isn't here and there's no breeze and the rain clouds are lingering low in the sky and that always feels a little like a blanket hushing over the whole world.

I wonder what it would be like to be one of those people who love their dogs in moderation. Those people who treat their dogs well and seem to get real joy from them, but don't seem to suffer paroxysms of grief when things go poorly or the end is near. Or, maybe I'm just particularly practiced in grief. Or, maybe this is why I have built most of the rest of my life around the very foremost tenet of: Keep yourself even keeled. This is why. This right here.

I've lived most of the rest of my life trying very hard to set things up so I'm not likely to feel wild swings of emotions because I wonder if my wild swings aren't a bit more wild than might be... I don't know the word. Reasonable? Healthy? Whatever. Just 'too much' works. So the rest of my life is very calm and orderly and I feel nice gentle ups and downs of emotion like casual friendships and mistakes at work that don't really cost anyone anything. But then, is this experience an argument in support or opposition of that general Even Keel Plan? On one hand, clearly it hasn't completely gone to plan, right? That wild swings will still sneak in, in the most banal places. On the other hand, this is certainly an unpleasant experience. If this is a wild swing, it's certainly not one I'm keen to repeat in the near term.

Or, am I?

I wonder if I'll choose to get another dog at some point down the road, once we're through all this, once I've gone through the final grief. All of my other immediate family members have what might look to the outside like a weird tradition of only ever having one dog. But when you get down to the heart of it I think it's because maybe we are all a little overly emotional and both my dad and my sister basically summarized single-dog-ownership as, "There are heartbreaks you can avoid." Basically that there are sad situations you can't avoid in life, relationships with people mainly, but that you *know* you are in for a sad ending with a dog and so both of them have gone through it once and decided they'd rather avoid the heartache in the future.

Of course, then you also miss out on future puppy cuddles and panting grins when you tell that little fur creature what a very good boy he is and the sound of snuffles as a little body curls up beside you to sleep. You don't get to pull another pup from a shelter and feel pretty certain you gave that little creature a better life than the one he'd been living. Those are nice things. I guess it's just the emotional arithmetic of whether the benefits outweigh the costs. Complicated math, hard to figure, but that's it. Do you end up in the black or red?

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For the moment, I'm actually feeling a little calmer than I have maybe at all over the past few weeks. No doubt that'll pass quickly. I don't really do calm for long stretches of time. But I think the one thing that has passed is... The surgery is over. It's done. There's no taking it back. There's no putting his leg back on. The decision is well and truly, irrevocably made. And there is some calm in that. Right up to the moment this afternoon I had weird little panic daydreams about calling the hospital and saying, "Stop! Don't do it!" I imagined some poor vet tech running down the hallways and bursting into the operating room as the scalpel descended...

Now there is no more if-maybe-instead. It's done.

I have made the choice, and now all there is to do is live with it. It bothers me a bit that we both have to live with it. But that has been what's so hard about this decision all along. That R can't choose for himself. That R can't even really tell me what he wants. That I choose and R loses

the leg. It's such a responsibility to this little life I picked up from some rundown shelter in Indiana a decade ago. I made a promise that day that I would make this little creature my family and I would take care of him. Not just feed him and keep him warm, but love him, make him happy. And now I've done something that I know, short term, is going to make him very unhappy.

What I have to run nightmare thought experiments about now is: Will he live long enough to be happy again? We traded in his leg for a chance that he'd get to play fetch again, tear around the living room in psychotic-love-ecstasy when a friend visits, stalk squirrels that dare enter his domain... or maybe just happen to be on the sidewalk when he comes by on his morning constitutional.

There will be no way to know I made the right choice until after the fact. Or, maybe, to be more fair, there will be no way to know I made a 'fortunate' choice. This was the only choice that had any chance for any of that happy down the road. So we gambled.

I just wish I was gambling with myself, my limbs, my happy, and not with his.

The profound responsibility of owning an animal is that they are utterly innocent and utterly at your mercy and you play God and for the love of G\*\* we are only too human and shouldn't ever play at the Big G because we muck it up at least as often as we get it right.

But sometimes we don't have a choice. We have to choose.

I've always weirdly tried not to choose too much for him. I'm the total weirdo that tells my dog, "I'd like to cuddle, but you don't have to. You are your own little life." The only rules I really enforce are the ones for safety mostly: We walk on a leash so we won't get hit by cars. We don't eat shit off the ground because that's just universally a bad idea. Etc.

But this was a big choice, a Big G moment I couldn't avoid, except I'm not omniscient so I don't have the benefit of knowing the future and knowing the benefits will outweigh the costs.

This whole thing has just pretty much sucked. There's no real way to pretty that sentiment up. Sucks. It sucks.

I think I've prepped the house as much as any house in the history of houses. I deal with anxiety by doing, by researching, by planning. I imagine 10,000 ways things can go horribly, horribly wrong and then I try to convince myself I have a plan in place for every single one of those completely outlandish apocalypse scenarios. So I: Washed all R's bedding. Vacuumed. Mowed the lawn. Built a DIY raised feeder. Washed all R's bowls and treat Kongs. Went grocery shopping so we won't have to do that next week. Cooked up some ground beef in case we need help eating. Sweat in a t-shirt and tucked it under the blankets in his bed so it will smell like me. I mean, you name it, I've probably tried to do it.

Now all I can do is sit here and wonder if I forgot anything.

And then start researching wound care, of course. And start going through those 10,000 scenarios of all the way wounds can go bad.

Fun times.

I hear the most important thing is not to be a bundle of nerves and neuroses when I pick him up tomorrow, so I'm trying to brace myself to see my baby missing a limb. I think there's this human instinct to shy away from the wrongness of a body that doesn't fit the heuristic we have for that body. Dogs have four legs. When I see one with three - I'm kinda ashamed of it, I guess? - I have a momentary feeling of wrongness. I don't want to feel that for even a second with R. Or, at least I don't want him to feel that I felt that.

So... I guess I'm going to go look at incision pictures for a couple hours before bed? Partially as desensitization and partially to work through my 10,000 wound-nightmares? Solid plan.

My coping mechanisms are so healthy, aren't they?

I just want my fur-beast back. The house is too quiet without him. I can articulate practical benefits to him being gone, especially knowing how much work the next few weeks are going to be, both physically and emotionally. But the benefits don't outweigh the missing of him. He's who I put my arm around when I'm watching my British murder mysteries. Right now I'm just a weirdo sitting in an orthopedic dog bed all by myself.

**WARNING: DO NOT SCROLL BEYOND THIS POINT IF INCISION/WOUND PICTURES WILL UPSET YOU. I'M GOING TO BE POSTING INCISION PICTURES EVERY DAY SO I HAVE A RECORD TO REFER TO IF SOMETHING STARTS TO GO WONKY.**

**Day 21**  
**07-01-20**



R's surgeon called this morning and told me he was "rarin' to go", was already able to get up on his own and pulled everyone where he wanted to go to go potty. Sounds like my boy. So I got to come pick him up this afternoon.

He's definitely not R right now. My biggest worry at this point is that the spot they saw in his lungs is a lung met (there's always the outside chance it's not, as it was a lone little met) and that R doesn't get to live long enough to really be R again. He was still R before. Limping a little, but still R. This creature snoozing beside me now? Not really R. Looks kinda like him (with one big f\*\*\*ing change, obviously) but the sedate, drugged out half-snoozing, half-anxiety ball? Not R.

R is the happiest, goofiest boy I know.

This is like you only gave me back 3/4th of him, like, spiritually, like you only gave me back 3/4ths of his leg.

I assume that will get better over the next few weeks, that's what we were counting on when we made this decision after all. But it's always sad to see your fur-beast out of sorts and this is probably the most out of sorts R has ever been.

I think I managed my big 'To Do' though. I was told to be chill. I was told to be upbeat and positive. So I had a little mantra on my ride there: "Be positive. Be strong. Be calm." Which is probably just good dog-leadership advice in general. But I've never totally mastered those three things. Still, it was pretty easy to gush over how awesome it was to see the bug (because, it



was) and I spent the whole ride home focused on how I was going to give him "so much kisses" and how he's so beautiful and how we're hopefully going to get to have more time laying out in the sun and playing with tennis balls now.

He was super anxious for a couple of minutes when we first got home, hop-hobbling all around the front yard in a weirdly frantic search for the perfect pee spot. Normally peeing is a calm amble and the perfect spot reveals itself as though through divine guidance. So not sure what's up with that.

We had a bit of a frantic hop-hobble around the living room too until I used my best soothing voice to lure him onto the mattress on the floor for a nap. (He has refused to touch his \$200 orthopedic bed I bought just for this purpose. Of course.)

Mostly though, I get the sense this is probably the calm before the storm, as they say. This is the life-sneaky lulling me into a false sense of security. R is too drugged out to really feel any pain yet. The hospital grade drugs will wear off tomorrow or the day after. I expect a bit of a meltdown then while we try to figure out the perfect cocktail of pill bottles. Also, I'll probably be pretty sleep deprived by then. It seems like a good bet he might want to sleep in bed with me. Which, I probably don't have the heart to deny him. But he is wearing a giant plastic cone on his head. So. I imagine a few good whacks during the night? Good sleepy times.

The last time I tried to sleep with a coned R was when we were on a cross country road trip for a move. That one ended with R puking down my chest and then I got up to spend the rest of the night on the floor outside the bathroom so if he puked again it would either be on carpet or, if I was really lucky, tile.

I'm glad he's home, except for the little part of me that doesn't really feel like he *is* home yet. And, yeah, the incision is kinda gross and the fact that there's not a leg where there's supposed to be a leg just makes me sad and weird every time I see it. On the plus side? He seems super extra comfy lying on that side now. Like, the geometry and angles and shit seem to work extra well now that there's not a leg in the way back there. Napping position level up.

Big plans tonight for British murder mysteries and more meds. Tomorrow I plan to work on boring sh\*\* from bed all day. I love my monster man. Let's just get through these next few weeks, keep our fingers crossed we get a few more after that, and get back to being *us*.



**Day 22**  
**07-02-20**

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Well, I've gotten pretty much no work done today. I suppose I'll have to do a couple hours each day over the weekend to make up for the lost hours. I couldn't work because... my dog has been lying on top of me all day. He didn't seem calm and happy unless he was literally lying on my body. This is a classic sign that R does not feel 100%. Normally, he's such a boy. He'll cuddle for an hour or two and then... He wants his space, thanks. To have a cuddle bug for a whole day has always been my absolute sign that I have a puppy that doesn't feel good.



So. Inconvenient. And also sad.

All that said, he's doing so. well. today that it's freaking me out. I suppose that sounds like a weird thing to say for, like, a normal person. But I'm one of those 'waiting for the other shoe to drop' types. When things go too well I start to give life the side-eye. "What are you up to?" I ask the Fates. They never answer. Either you get smacked in the face with a smelly fish a few days later, or you feel silly for the magnitude of your pessimism and wonder if you ever fully grew out of your emo phase.

R is already pretty good and hop, hop, hopping about. Honestly, the biggest issue today was convincing him we should just lie around all day. He wanted to be attached to me, but he would have been just as happy to be attached playing tug in the living room or trying his damnest to run around the backyard. (He can't totally run yet, but, actually kinda yeah. He books it back inside after potty.)

He's bored already, frankly. I had to let him have the cone off most of the day so he could chew his dura-chew wishbone thing and lick the frozen peanut butter kong and get extraordinary amounts of ear scratches. (I am literally blocking his butt with my arm at all cone-less moments. I'm an obsessive little sh\*\*.)

He's been good about letting me ice too. As long as I sit there the whole time and stare at him lovingly and... I maybe sang to my dog for, well, four icings at 10-15ish minutes a pop... He's had almost a solid hour of private concert. Ah, those years of childhood vocal lessons, finally



paying off. I was running out of songs, so we broke out the real old-school British lullabies my mom used to sing. We were really digging deep.

Oh! And he. pooped. I know, I know. He's amaze-balls.

As for me? I find myself less distressed by his lack of leg than I expected to be. I thought I was really going to have to fight through that instinctive 'wrongness' I feel for a split second when I see a major injury like that. But... It's still R's beautiful little face, and his little bear paws, and his little hop, hop, hopping I think will actually strike me as cute eventually. Now it's still kinda sad, because he's hopping

because he's hurt. But eventually. (Hopefully we will get long enough to get to 'eventually'.)

It probably helped that he wasn't as drugged out of his little mind today and therefore was more like... R.

I pretty much felt like I was spending a very, very low energy day with... my dog.

Stay tuned. I have heard people describe this healing process as a 'roller coaster' like a hundred times. So this appears to be an up. Which implies...

Yeah.

Eeeeeep.

**Day 23**  
**07-03-20**



So. I suck at this.

I actually think R has taught me a lot about loving another creature and navigating interpersonal (interspecies, technically, I suppose) boundaries and overall

about patience and being gentle and calm when dealing with a creature that's frustrating you BUT...

I still have a lot to learn.

I actually view R as kinda practice for if I ever have a small human creature enter my life and I have to say in a lot of ways there are similarities (Diarrhea at two am? Health insurance? Constant, crippling worry?) and I've definitely improved BUT...

So much still to work on.

My patience is so much better than it was when I first got R. I got him a few months before I went off to graduate school. Back then I was a little shit, frankly. I mean, R was kinda a shit too, so I guess we were well matched. But it only took me twenty minutes of him pulling on his leash on walks before I'd be pulling back rather more forcefully than I would now consider appropriate and I even alpha rolled him a few times when he was being super shitty, which I've since apologized for about a billion times. Eventually I learned that when I got frustrated it only wound R up tighter. The more "grrrrr" I got, the more crazy he got. And, not just expressing "grrrr" but any "grrr", even if it was supposedly well-hidden on the inside. So I learned how to breathe deep and let out my frustrations with a long exhale and chill the f\*\*\* out.

I still have limits though. And one of my triggers for regressing to my former sharp temper is when R does something I'm worried might hurt him. So day two of recovery and I spoke sharply

to him twice today. Which makes me feel like kinda a sh\*\* again. Day two? That's how long it takes me to lose my cool? He started to hop backward into the door to the yard today at one point because he really, really wanted to go back out and see the neighbor. And the outer door is a light touch so I was worried he'd fall through it onto the concrete step out back and really hurt himself. Sharp reprimand one. Then he was whapping me repeatedly with the plastic cone and trying to hop under the table to get ahold of his pill pockets a bit early and being under the table with all the chair legs to run into seemed like a minefield so. Sharp reprimand two.

I apologized. But I'm pretty sure dogs don't actually understand apologies. Better if you can just not do the shitty things in the first place.

Ah, the continual quest for self-improvement.

Otherwise, day two went pretty well. Except that R is epically bored already. He seems to be healing well so far. The wound hasn't bruised up almost at all and no swelling yet. We've been careful about staring our warm compresses today and we'll keep doing that for the next week. I don't want to drug R out of his little mind (I like his little mind!) but he wants to do too much too soon and I'm finding it hard to keep him happy without our usual run-around time. I mean, even with the bone tumor, R was still walking an average of a mile or so a day and playing fetch maybe twenty minute in the backyard. (Which was already a huge step down from the 3-mile, hour fetch days we started with in lockdown.) So NOTHING?! He's going mad already.

This morning we tried to sprint after a rabbit in the backyard. (On leash so he only got six feet.) Then we tried to drag Momma to the fend to say 'hi' to the neighbor. Was not allowed. 'Hi' involves jumping both front feet to the top of the fence for frantic kissing. Then spent most of the afternoon staring forlornly at Momma sitting on the mattress in the living room and any time she so much as shivered, leaping up, ready to go anywhere, anywhere, anywhere she might want to go!

So. I upped the trazodone a little bit for the afternoon. But I don't like how it makes him seem not like himself. And kinda anxious, I guess? Like he's worried what's up. I feel like he knows he's not himself. (I'm anthropomorphizing. I hate how I feel on drugs. The very few times I've had to have real drugs for surgeries and whatnot I have hated the weird fuzzy I'm-not-me-or-in-control-of-me feeling. I'm attributing something similar to R. Probably making that up. But he's not happy. For whatever reason.)

So... How do I keep my pup entertained in confinement? I was looking up brain games today but the only one that looked promising was food hidden under tennis balls in a muffin tin and that has the potential downside of R wanting to PLAY with the tennis balls. We'll try it tomorrow, but a little worried that might backfire.

Also, gotta keep working on my own patience. Still a little bit of a little sh\*\*, I guess. Self-knowledge sucks sometimes.

My new motto for the day?

"We don't touch the bums. No bums, baby."



Day 24  
07-04-20

Day 25  
07-05-20

Day 26  
07-06-20

**Day 27**  
**07-07-20**

So I believe we're exactly one week post-surgery as of like 2pm this afternoon. We've had an unbelievably easy ride of it so far; I feel both lucky and a little guilty since I know so many people have much greater struggles at first. So far, so good around here. It hasn't been perfect, but it's certainly been a lot better than I was braced for.

Really our only issues are being weirdly drugged out at night and so waking me up on occasion just slapping the plastic cone against walls as he decides to go stand somewhere really random, and usually a little creepy. Like, last night he was just standing in the hallway to the bathroom when he woke me up and then just *kept* standing there for like fifteen minutes with his cone-head half-turned to look back at me. I finally got up to see if he was actually stuck with the cone, but no. Just being a weirdo.

That and boredom are what we're dealing with. He is so, so sad that I will not play our usual games. Which actually makes me a little sad too, admittedly, since the whole reason I took his leg was so that he could go back to his long walks and playing fetch without being worried about fracture. In the meantime I've been trying every other form of entertainment I can come up with, but none of them last us for long. Hiding kibble in muffin tins beneath tennis balls, 'find it' with squeaky squirrels, frozen kongs... It's just not enough for a dog that, even with the bone tumor was used to walking at least a mile most mornings and playing fetch for a half hour or so.

But if boredom is what we're dealing with, shit, we're doing amazing.

Also, I admit I'm ready not to be stuck in my living room pretty much 24 hours a day, but if I'm not here to guard his bum, then I have to cone him. And like every dog in existence, he hates the cone. And I hate making him do something he hates, especially when I'm not doing any of the things he likes. So. I basically haven't left the living room except to shower and yesterday I mowed the lawn. A week. Binge watching British murder mysteries is awesome, but there are limits to all things in life.

I think I'm going to sneak out to the garage for my first workout this afternoon. Latest by tomorrow. He didn't do anything stupid when I was mowing the lawn yesterday. He wasn't happy about it, which is why I might wait one more day. He whined on the other side of the door. Normally he has no problems with me leaving for a couple hours. So, that tore at my heart a little. We're going to try a day off the Trazodone today and see if that helps with the weird want-me-in-sight that we seem to be suffering.

Doesn't want to cuddle though. Oh, no. The one thing that would probably make this all a bit cozier for Momma... He wants me near, but no touchy, Momma. He will allow petting, and he seems to downright enjoy the warm compress times when I sit next to him and pet him and...

yeah, I totally still sing because he seems to just like to hear my voice while we're doing it and I just don't have that much to monologue. We moved on to Broadway tunes last night.

We're definitely not really back to life as we knew it yet. Don't know if we'll have R with us long enough to really go back to that. But it is nice not to be scared of fracture all the time. At the moment we've just replaced that fear with fear of falling on the incision. But I imagine that will fade when the stitches come out. Then we'll at least have gotten a bite to fear out of our lives. Probably worth it for a recovery that has so far mostly just been R bored and staring at me creepily with drug-puppy eyes.

Everyone told me my attitude was going to be one of the most important factors and luckily since R has had such a relatively easy ride, so far I haven't found it hard to be calm and positive. The most I've been stressing over is why he's had his tail tucked up to his belly most days. (That's why we're trying a Trazodone-free day today.) And happy? Of course I'm happy that "my little kangaroo boy" is home with me and bouncing around the yard.

(Actually, legit guys. Once the stitches are out and he's off pain meds and I think he's pretty much just totally comfortable again, I think I'm going to fall in love with the cute little hopping. When he starts to trot back into the house after potty breaks it's all, 'boing, boing, boing, boing' and I think it's adorable. Once I don't have to feel slightly guilty for thinking he's adorable when he's hurt, I'm just going to fall completely in love with his hopping.)