

Maggie

I had to kill my dog today. The Golden Retriever had cancer. My wife and I knew it when she went off eight days ago on a 3 week trip around the Caribbean with a girlhood friend, but we never thought it would progress so fast. She was in Cozumel last night when I called her and said I'd been to the Vet that morning and the cancer had spread from Maggie's inner ear to her brain and lungs. She was now in pain. The Vet said it was time to save the dog a lot of suffering. Time to bring Maggie in to the animal clinic, give her a couple of shots and let her go peacefully.

"Can you do it?" my wife asked. "Will you stay with her and not just drop her off?"

"I don't plan to just drop *you* off some day," I said. "Of course I'll stay with her and pet her and keep telling her she's wonderful and she's a good dog. Right to the end. Why stop lying to her now?"

I called the Vet and she assured me it was time for Maggie "to go home," as she put it.

"Bring her in this afternoon, if you want," she said.

"So soon?"

"Dave, the dog is in pain."

"I know, I know," I said. "I guess there is no good reason to wait."

"No, there isn't," she said.

I spent the morning in kind of a fog. I tried to play with Maggie one last time, but she just lay there, quiet but not complaining.

Just before we left the house in the afternoon I told her she was going on a trip to a better place, wherever that was. She didn't look like she believed me.

In truth Maggie was a very good dog, just a little willful most of the time. She always thought she knew better. And sometimes I would become upset with her. I never liked it when she stood panting by my side as I tried to eat a meal. But of the two of us, as the sentient being with supposedly higher intelligence, I knew I created that problem by feeding her scraps after we ate. The only other faults I can think of now were simply due to her exuberance, her canine *joie de vivre* and her drive to live life to the fullest. Primary was her insatiable need to meet and lick everyone on the planet.

When my wife and I would travel and leave Maggie with a trusted sitter, I would miss the dog. My wife found that amusing.

"All you ever do is complain about the dog and now you miss her?" she said.

"I can't explain it," I said. "She's just hard to live with."

"She's just hard for *you* to live with," said my wife.

The thought occurred to me that maybe I was jealous. Maybe I was envious of Maggie's personality, because I wouldn't bark a hello to everybody as well as any moving object. The dog was a damned motion detector. Or be so interested in a visitor that I'd begin my inquiry first by smelling their shoes to determine where they'd been all day, and then investigate what they had eaten by licking their face.

It never mattered to me, but to Maggie someone's last meal was most important. That's why it was so difficult to stop her from jumping up the front of people. She figured if the person had just eaten, maybe there was some left for her.

Other than her fixation on food, Maggie could be a true pet and companion. She was even mannerly at times, waiting for me to indicate a direction. Maggie always led with

her heart, not with her resume. But she could also be as deaf to my wishes as a four-legged scarecrow.

She wasn't a very smart dog, but I'm pretty sure she acted dumber than she was. Her technique for refusing a command was to look at me as though I'd just switched from English to Swahili. She forgot I had experience with teenagers.

It's true a turtle could play catch better than Maggie. She wasn't a Phys Ed major. Nor did she have the makings of a scholar. If you walked her into our dining room twice, first from the kitchen and later from the front hall, I was absolutely sure she believed she'd been in two different rooms. I could tell by the look on her face she was wondering why two carpets in two separate rooms had exactly the same color and smell. But in the plus column was her ability to hear a conversation three rooms away and probably a mouse across the road.

I'm convinced Maggie thought she was human. Just like us except she could run faster. She assumed she was part of the family. Sometimes she *was* the family, or at least the ingredient that seemed lacking that day. While her mind held a roadmap to every single piece of food in the house, it also contained the exact location of everyone in her charge when they were at home under her protection. Growing older and no doubt forgetful, she would get up from her place in the kitchen and walk around the house to re-check where each of us happened to be working or reading or talking on the phone. As I sat typing, trying to finish a sentence, she'd come into my room and leave, sometimes before I had a chance to pet her. She was just checking up on everyone.

One trait that peaked my annoyance was frankly what I admired most about her. Maggie acted with complete disregard for how she appeared to others. She couldn't have cared less what you thought, unless you had some degree of control over her. Maggie wasn't a bit self-conscious, whether she was listening to my criticism of a minor fault or relieving herself on the lawn, an act I was sure she meant as a comment on my middle class sense of propriety.

Maggie was a dog, but she possessed the power to make you forget that. I was a harder case for her to win over, but she knew her success was inevitable.

When the appointed hour with the Vet came, my heart broke as Maggie tried and failed to jump up into my car for her last ride, a task she had accomplished so easily the week before. As we settled ourselves in the waiting room, her hang dog look mirrored my face and my soul. A nice young woman sitting next to us tried to get a reaction from Maggie, but finally realized the dog was very sick. The girl did not know she would be the last of many strangers to tell Maggie she was pretty. Soon Maggie's name was called and we walked through the doors to the back of the animal hospital.

Sitting on a blanket on the floor with Maggie and her Vet, I petted the dog's head and caressed her neck behind the ears. As the syringe was readied with the first calming shot, I thought about Maggie's sweet disposition and her big heart ... so big she needed our family to fill it. When she had stood by the dinner table panting, she wanted more than my supper. She needed my love and praise. I don't know why it took so long for me to see it.

The Vet looked at me, nodded her head and went about her work.

"What a *good dog* you are, Mag! I love ya," was the last thing I told Maggie as her eyes began to close. It was probably all she ever wanted to hear from me.

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