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Carrying Home

by Emma Treut

My sister liked to call my dog ditzzy, but I preferred to say she was independent. Sweetie looked like a lady, but when the vet had micro chipped her, she hadn't flinched at the needle between her shoulder blades. Last year I left my hometown of Bozeman, and moved to Missoula with my dog. We'd never lived alone.

A few weeks into September, Sweetie and I went to Alpine Veterinary Service. Sweetie's urinary tract infection wasn't getting better after her round of antibiotics from my vet in Bozeman. The vet from Missoula came into the exam room, grey haired and steady, with Sweetie's slim folder in his hands. He sent us home with a different round of antibiotics, and the receipt for the bill.

I slid Sweetie's pills into cheese or peanut butter twice daily, and she ate them with either complete cluelessness, or a sense of trust. I could never tell which. We went on hikes every day before I left for school, because neither of us could stand the idea of walking around the neighborhood with a leash. We were country girls at heart. She'd bound into my truck, her short corgi legs having no problem clearing the gap. Sweetie could go for miles on the trails, running in the brush, but she would always circle back to check on me after a particularly thrilling chase, appearing on the trail with the largest dog smile. I sometimes thought her mouth might unhinge like a snake, and that her tongue was longer than the length of her head. I wondered at the logistics of it. She still strained to pee on our walks, pausing to urinate even when nothing came out, but I had faith in the antibiotics. They just hadn't given me the right kind yet, that was all.

That week, I went hiking with my mom's friend and her dog in the woods along Rattlesnake creek. The dogs roamed here and there through the yellow tinged brush, disappearing, only to reappear a moment later. Sweetie peed on nearly every tree along the trail, and blood dripped out onto the dirt on more than one occasion. When my mom's friend asked, I told her it was a bladder infection, even though I'd started to doubt the diagnosis. I tried to stare at Sweetie clinically, measuring her health from an outsider's perspective. She looked worse from that distance, as if I hadn't spent every day with her. I tried to let the feeling pass, but it wouldn't. I knew I couldn't carry it with me, but I did.

A few weeks later, my friend and I carpoled to the main Rattlesnake trailhead, and we headed out from there. Both of our dogs strained on their leashes. We hiked six miles that fall day, chatting along the way until one of us realized that we'd already been hiking for an hour and a half, and that we still had homework to do. Every few minutes, Sweetie would pause, and squat, pause and squat. She'd be off again with nothing to show for her trouble, but I tried to ignore the cycle. I tried to forget when I went hiking. Forget that school was somehow harder here, alone, than at home in Bozeman. I tried to forget what I didn't know, and couldn't fix. Leaves crumbled into the dirt of the path with every step, and the cliffs to our right were stark in the afternoon chill.

I got home in the dark that night, and Sweetie strained, and started bleeding onto the carpet. I pressed paper towels to her bottom, and the blood soaked through them. I laid her down on her side, stretched out and facing the door. I tried to talk to her, but couldn't, so I stroked the entire length of her with one hand. My hands shook. They were steadied only by the need for constant pressure to stop the bleeding. The paper towels decorated my living room, and stood out, white with dashes of red against mud brown carpet. I called my friend, and didn't try to hide the breathlessness, as I would've before. Should I take her in, or shouldn't I? Someone tell me what to do. My friend told me to just wait and see, but to do what I thought was right. I thanked her, and managed to hang up the phone while I started a pros and cons list of a trip to the vet.

I called, already reaching for the phone before I'd made up my mind. I dragged her, straining to my truck. I drove her to the Pet Emergency Center, rigid with panic, with the GPS on my phone calling out directions. I didn't trust myself to make it there on my own. I walked her into the Pet Emergency Center, and we were led right into the back, taking a left into a perfectly white room with a stainless steel exam table. Blood dripped out of Sweetie as

we waited for the vet. It shone on the linoleum floor, red against white. I told her to be patient, and that help was on the way, but she sat there quaking. We listened for footsteps. The footsteps stopped at our door, and it swung open. A young male vet examined her, and when I asked him what was wrong, all he could say was that she was blocked. He wasn't sure why. He told me he'd have to thread a catheter in her to release the urine. The vet said I was right to bring her in, and that she would have had a burst bladder by morning. He whisked her to the back within moments. She spent the night in the clinic, and he assured me that someone would be there to monitor her all night. I drove home, alone in the dark.

The next day, I brought her home from the Pet Emergency Center. Sweetie fell asleep as soon as she stretched out on the floral rug in my apartment, and I was grateful that she was there. Her hips splayed out to form a heart shape as she snoozed. Sweetie rose when she heard me scoop food into her bowl, ever the food aficionado. Sweetie was where she was needed.

A few days later, I took her to her appointment at Alpine Veterinary Service, and the vet said that there was only one test left we could do. He said that I should make an appointment with a specialist, who would ultrasound Sweetie, and we would hopefully get an accurate diagnosis. It was a test that I had hoped we wouldn't need, the priciest test yet, and the vet had tried to save me the expense of it until it was necessary. As he'd said it, I'd dreaded it, because an ultrasound in this situation meant that we would be checking for cancer. Sweetie couldn't have cancer; she was lively and still barked for far too long whenever someone walked by the apartment.

I still held out hope when I walked into the Pet Emergency Center to meet with the specialist. The room was silent when the elderly vet came in and turned on the ultrasound machine and computer. He tilted the screens to face the exam table with precise movements, as if he might be someone comfortable with routine. I lifted Sweetie onto the exam table and wrapped my arms around her neck, and under her belly, holding her steady. A dog bone patterned blanket covered the stainless steel exam table, and the colors stood out against the metallic shine. The vet was businesslike in his movements, as if this part of his job depended on his distance from the client and pet. I did not blame him, and held Sweetie steady as he pressed the ultrasound wand under her belly, and against her bladder. He moved the wand, and images of Sweetie's bladder showed up on the screen, swirling grey and fuzzy until he stilled over a particular area.

I became stiff, with Sweetie still restrained in my arms. We had finally reached a diagnosis. The vet started to talk, quickly and efficiently. I couldn't understand what he was saying, but I'd known in that moment that she wasn't okay, and that my fears had come true. Cancer. He said something about odds, and how usually he sees cancer in the bladder, and not in the urethra, like the kind she had. I asked him if he was sure it was cancer, and he said the only way to know for sure was to biopsy it. He said the placement of her cancer was not an option for biopsy, because he said by drawing a piece out, he would only agitate the cancer, and cause it to spread more quickly. I trusted his judgment on it. I asked him how long she had, and he couldn't say for sure. He said that chemo was an expensive option, and he thought it wouldn't help with this type of cancer anyway.

I walked out of the office with Sweetie beside me, and a prescription of Piroxicam, a drug that had anti-cancer properties. I called it in to Montana Compounding Pharmacy sitting in my parked truck. I don't remember my voice shaking on the phone, just a step-by-step process running through my head. Call them, drive home, you can't cry and drive at the same time. Wait until you get home, and I did. I called my mom when I stepped through the door, already short of breath. I gasped in the re-telling, and tears must have been falling down my face as I paced in my bedroom. I rested my stomach on the edge of the bed, before moving again. Sweetie still wagged her stub of a tail when I stroked her.

Sweetie couldn't have cancer; she was only seven years old. She was supposed to live for another seven years. That's what all of the books said about the average life expectancy of a corgi, and they couldn't be wrong. I waited for the drug to work. I waited for her symptoms to start slowly disappearing over the weeks that followed, but they didn't. I thought the drug was meant to give us more time together. It was meant to give her a life expectancy of another six months, or maybe even a year. I read a scientific article on the Internet about Piroxicam, and how in some cases dogs had even gone into remission.

Sweetie squatted on the fall grass of the yard for minutes, and then looked up at me with glazed eyes. Nothing came out. I called the vet, and minutes seemed wasted. I rushed her to the vet before my first class, repeating her problem to the woman at the front desk, who nodded and gave me a sympathetic smile. I talked to the vet on my

lunch break, and he told me the cancer was growing, blocking off her urethra. They would have to weave a catheter through to unblock her. I gave the okay, the only choice there seemed to be. I stopped by after school to drop off her medication, and raw dog food patties. She smelled of urine, and disinfectant when I took her out of her kennel to kiss her. She stayed overnight in one of the stainless steel kennels in the back, with the catheter still in place. I brought her home the next day. She still liked to lay stretched out, belly up on the floor of the living room, sleeping the afternoon away. She never snored though, and I figured that it was fitting of the lady that she was.

I had to take her to the vet's to be unblocked every few weeks. It was a cycle of close monitoring, walking through the neighborhood, and then trips to the vet when she couldn't pee. When I dropped her off at the vet's, I was afraid that someone would say that the frequency of our trips meant that it was time to put her down. The vet merely took her every time, and I was grateful for that. I thought maybe he knew I wasn't ready for that discussion, but I couldn't be sure. She slept longer every time she came back from an overnight trip to the vet's.

Winter break arrived, and I drove home for the holidays with Sweetie in the backseat. For a twenty-pound dog she could produce a lot of hair, so she was always relegated to the floor in the cab of the truck. She never seemed to mind. Sweetie and I pulled into the driveway at mom's house, where the hideous brown siding of the farmhouse against the snow made a drab picture from the road.

On a Sunday during that winter break, I hugged mom tightly, and didn't want to let go. We sat at the rough-hewn kitchen table, with the dogs at our feet. Mom told me Sweetie wasn't herself. She said she thought it was time, but that it was my decision. I knelt next to Sweetie on the wood floor, and her eyes were glazed. She leaned into my touch. I told Mom I wasn't sure. She still wagged her tail. Dogs who were ready to die didn't do that. She still leaned into me when I stroked her, and licked my hands over and over with loving strokes of her tongue. I backed away a little, and watched her from a new distance. I thought I might have seen her tremble as she sat there on the floor. As I watched Sweetie, her image started to shift for me. She seemed different; something had changed that I couldn't quite understand. It wasn't that she wouldn't wag her tail, because she still would, but I thought maybe it was a way of pleasing me now. I couldn't justify another trip to the vet for more treatments that only prolonged her pain. I couldn't tell myself that I needed her to get through my semester anymore. I would have to let her go. I would never be ready for it, but in that moment, it didn't matter. It was for her, it wasn't for me.

My mom, stepdad, and I drove to Pet Emergency Trauma Services (P.E.T.S.) in the grey pickup truck. I sat in the back seat with Sweetie as we drove all the way across town. We pulled into the parking lot, and I led Sweetie in on her fuchsia leash. Sweetie came in briskly, checking out every smell she could reach as I signed her euthanasia papers. I couldn't understand what the papers said, but I signed them anyway. We waited in a room with pale walls, and a raised stainless steel exam table. I sat on the wooden bench against the wall, while my mom and stepdad sat in the chairs on the far side of the room. The vet gave her Chex Mix out of a paper cup after she'd listened to her heart. She gave her chocolate next, and I thought it was fitting. Sweetie had always loved our unattended Easter basket treats. The vet asked if we were ready, and I didn't know how to answer her, but I nodded. She gave Sweetie a sedative, and then left the room. I sat on the wooden bench, with Sweetie relaxed on my lap, wrapped in a thick blanket. When the vet came back, Sweetie was limp in my arms. I held her and stroked her as the pink liquid was shot into her heart. I waited with Sweetie, and it seemed to be just us. I looked up, and the vet nodded. My mom cried, and I kept stroking her. I thought, thank you, thank you.

Sitting on the floor with Sweetie, I'd thought maybe I shouldn't have let her go so soon, that maybe I'd shortened her life by days, or even weeks. Once I'd made that decision, and she'd grown still in my arms, I hadn't regretted it. Letting go can be a good thing. Sweetie was my piece from home when we were in Missoula. It was fitting that she passed away in our hometown, because I know that I can't take a big enough piece of home with me to a new place. It isn't possible to pack up enough things from home to hold me over until I return there. I needed to find a part of me that was okay with not living with my parents, that was able to let go just enough to create a space for me to be there in Missoula. I needed to leave behind the parts of me that were waiting for my life back in Bozeman. Sweetie was part of home for me. I didn't have a completely self-sufficient lifestyle in Missoula after she left, but I think letting go of Sweetie contributed to a move forward in my life. When I think about Sweetie now all I can really say is thank you, thank you for helping me move toward my own life.