

GOOD

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There's an uneven strip in the new sod in my backyard, no more than an inch wide and a few inches long, where the roots sit on a rock or a clump of dirt. It's the spot where, this summer, I had my dog, George, killed. It seems an odd way to put it, but it's the truth; I contacted and arranged for a veterinarian to come into my home—to this small patch of sparse grass, in fact—and stick a syringe full of candy-pink barbiturates into George's leg. I paid extra for sedation, for the dog and for myself. (My sedation came later, hours and days after his, straight up and served in a leaded crystal tumbler, in darkened silence. Like a good Irish-Latino, I knew only celebrations were held in public view. Sorrow was for the dark and the quiet, after phone calls that contained the words “malignant carcinoma” and “inoperable.”) George got his sedatives while sitting on my lap on the patio, an injection right above his tail. The vet told me to scratch around the injection site as she did it and George wouldn't feel any pain, but he did. He yelped. He never was good with pain.

Maybe that's what made him such a lovable dog. I never saw him bite anything in anger. He would fetch tennis balls mostly by licking them back toward me. He might have growled at a burglar, pulled his floppy, chestnut ears back and showed a little tooth, but he would have drawn the line before biting. So perhaps he wasn't a good guard dog—eleven pound Shih-Tzus rarely are—but by every other measure as a companion, he did well. Though as he aged—age is relative, he was only twelve—he shat in the house a few times. As he got sicker, silently and almost invisibly, he must have felt uncomfortable or vulnerable going outside on a leash. Normally, he'd have the full backyard to run around in, but the summer was swallowed by landscaping projects. As the cancer grew in George's body, in the cavity between his heart and lungs, I spent my time at the windows or in the backyard, watching plants move from hole to hole, repositioning cloth umbrellas, arranging patio chairs, all until everything was just right from every angle. Very precise and attentive. George had to watch from the sliding glass door as the project spread from the backyard to the front, down the driveway, to the mailbox. I never heard him cry to go out.

My family could tell earlier—June, July—that George was showing his age. We would talk about it. We would discuss, in short bursts, how his energy had dimmed, but without acknowledging any uncomfortable truths. “He's just not that active anymore, with the backyard torn up. I bet he can't wait to go outside again.” He was in the hospital the day the landscapers finished. After the months of work and flux, George couldn't enjoy the new yard. All I wanted was for him to live long enough to run in the grass again, to piss

on one of the new trees, or even on one of the overpriced art pieces from Mali. I prayed for that—ridiculous, yes, not just praying for the dog, but praying for a dog to get to enjoy something he couldn't comprehend, an investment of time and money, a beautification catering to human tastes. I doubt George wanted to run, in the end.

The tumor in his chest filled his lungs with fluid. He had to be tapped and drained with a long needle every few hours. The nurses gave him opiates, which one would hope might lend him a fuck-all attitude, but they said he cried with each tap all the same. He leaked, too. A thin, yellow fluid seeped from the pinpricks on his sides. I've never been more broken than when I saw George in the hospital, all gauze and tubes, wrapped in a towel and stuck inside a plexiglass cage pumped full of oxygen. The fluid and the stress were hard on George's lungs. After we admitted him, they told us he couldn't breathe comfortably without oxygen for more than a few minutes. He'd been in a cage for two days when I visited him for the first, and only, time. The first day, I thought it was pneumonia. On day two, the vet called personally. I got the news on my cell phone, between classes. *The news.* I went in to see him after visiting hours, the hospital was huge and mostly quiet, and one of the nurses let me in the room where George slept behind a sheet of plexiglass, like Magneto in *X-Men*. He saw me and sat up, one crooked front leg jutting out in defiance of the rest. Over the noise of the oxygen pump, like a small vacuum, I could hear his tail thumping against the side of his enclosure, and the cry I, after twelve years, understood to mean "Please, I don't like this. I want to go." George pushed his nose against the clear wall between us. I put the back of my right hand on the same spot, but I couldn't feel anything. Just plastic, amid noise of the crying, the thumping tail, and the whirring oxygen. I wanted to stay, to sleep in the room, on the chance I could hear him stop crying, as if to say "I'm okay. Everything's going to be okay." But he didn't stop, the sound just faded as I left the room, then the hallway, then the waiting room, and then the entry foyer. One of the nurses returned his tags. They jingled in my pocket.

The next morning, a Saturday, I called another vet. One who would be willing to come to the house, do everything there. I decided on doing it outside, because I knew that dogs, like humans, sometimes evacuate when they die. The only thing more painful than losing George might have been losing him and having to clean up his last shit in the house after he was gone. So I chose a spot in the backyard, on the lawn. And then we brought George home. I didn't have to see him in that plastic cage, the vet brought him right into the exam room, said she was sorry, and left. I held George on my lap on the ride home. The fluid leaking from his sides left dots on my pants. I didn't care about the stains.

It felt like a conspiracy, a betrayal, taking George home, knowing that twenty minutes after we arrived, a woman carrying a tackle box full of poison would be coming to end his life. I carried George inside the house first, so the assembled family could say goodbye and tell him he was a good dog, and he wagged his tail for them. Then everybody left me alone with him, so I could tell him the same and he could wag his tail for me. I knew he couldn't understand, so I rubbed his ears and gave him the piece of jerky I couldn't give him when he was in the hospital.

George got one last opportunity to go outside, in the backyard, on his own. He lasted a few minutes, sniffing the air and smelling the new foliage, before he stopped and sat down, his chest rising rapidly, then falling, exposing his ribs through thin skin. I knew it was time. I took him in my lap on the patio—he left more spots—and the vet gave him his first cocktail, the sedative. I rubbed his ears more until he slumped over, his breathing slow, virtually asleep with his eyes open. I carried him to the grass for the last shot, placed him in the uneven patch near the patio, and rubbed his ears some more, while the vet stuck the syringe in his leg. She nodded to me and I kissed the top of George's head and told him he was a good dog. And then he was gone.

The vet gave me a moment before she stood and hugged me. Then she asked me to leave the backyard, explained that I didn't want to see what came next—the body bag, the freezer, the crematorium, the cherry-wood box. So I stood up and I left him on the patch of grass, then I left the lawn, then the patio, then the family room. Like leaving the hospital, a set of small departures that, together, meant something had changed, something fundamental. Inside, I walked from room to room, his tags still jangling in my pocket. George had left. Good dogs do.