

# Reflections of a Dying Dog \*

I know that our love will continue after my body has gone.



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I have to start preparing Mom for my death. She sometimes mentions how hard it was when my older brother died. She had known ahead of time but only by a few weeks. It wasn't nearly enough, she would sigh with a sad shake of her head. So I knew I had to start the process sooner.

I began paving the way last year, to keep her from suffering the way she had with him. I got very sick, had to go to the vet for an IV twice a day for a week. I didn't eat or drink, and moving was such an effort that I was barely able to lift my head. Thanks to the IV and a lot of TLC, I recovered from that close encounter with the Grim Reaper, but now mom was beginning to get her head around the idea of an expiration date with my name on it.

She wasn't happy. She said that she had cried for weeks when my brother died, and for months afterward she had felt something missing every time she took a walk. It was like a phantom limb, she recalled, hands grasping to hold his absent leash that had been an extension of her arm for more than a decade.

And with me, it will be worse. We have been together over 16 years, and that's a long time for a dog of my size and lineage.

The thought of that “phantom leash” gave me an idea. One way to get her used to my absence would be for us to walk less. So over the last year I have been reducing the distance we walk and the time we spend outside. Instead of three outings a day — a morning walk of three kilometers, an afternoon walk of two or three kilometers, and an evening quickie of half a kilometer (except in the summer when we walked a LOT at night) — we have been going out for a maximum of five or 10 minutes at a time, barely long enough to walk half a block. When we first exit, I move very slowly to let mom know that my bones ache and movement is increasingly hard for me. She normally walks briskly, so my torpid pace is self-evident. To compensate for the lack of distance, we exit more frequently, but we don’t stay out very long and we don’t go far at all.

To convince me to move farther or more quickly, sometimes she pulls out kibble and treats and hand-feeds me, guiding me in the direction she wants. That is, if she has someplace specific to go, like the nearby bank, the post office, the pharmacy. If she doesn’t have a precise destination in mind, she lets me decide, and I always aim for my preferred spot diagonally across the street, outside a food store where customers often drop interesting bits of edibles. I can hunt here to my heart’s content and love the challenge. When I was younger, I preferred hunting lizards — quick and slick on the walls of the *viale* near our home. They were a real challenge, and I got really good at catching them. My record was seven reptiles in 14 minutes. But that was years ago when my reflexes were lightning and my vision outstanding.

The fact is I don't see well at all these days. I am not completely blind but pretty close: mom would panic if she realized how little I can see. I try to hide my lack of vision inside the house because I generally know where the furniture is and the flow of each room. The feel of the parquet is different from that of the ceramic tiles so my paws know which is kitchen and bathrooms versus living room and bedrooms. My sight has been failing for some time so I have become used to maneuvering through a fog. My humans have seen the cataracts in my eyes but they have no idea of my extent of my blindness.

When we go outside, I manage to fake things pretty well. I am so used to the steps from our building to the street that I can handle those blindfolded, literally. My sixth sense tells me when there are trees, cars, or other humans in front of me. I can smell the difference between the sidewalk, the curb, and the street. I can definitely smell the presence of other dogs, though my olfactory sensitivity is not as acute as it once was.

Dogs who are losing their sight usually try to compensate with our ears, since our species excels at hearing. Unfortunately my hearing is shot. Age, you know. I used to come running into the kitchen whenever mom or dad opened the refrigerator or the cupboard because behind those doors were doggy treats, but those days are long gone. I don't hear the door opening when mom comes in or goes out. I don't hear the doorbell for guests. I can't hear my name being called for breakfast or dinner or treats or cuddles or walk time, nothing really.

I am not deliberately being unresponsive; it's simply that I can't

hear anything to respond TO. This is another blessing in disguise as I try to get mom used to Life without Me. She already knows that when she opens the front door after an absence, I won't be there to greet her, bouncing up and down and wagging my tail like crazy. She already knows that I won't come bounding into the kitchen to clean up tidbits that have fallen on the floor. She used to call me her ecological vacuum cleaner but now she has to lead me into the kitchen for mop-up duty. I'm happy to do it but she has to stick my nose in the crumbs because I don't see them anymore.

She knows that I don't come when called. She has to look for me when it's mealtime or walk time or medicine time. I guess I am trying to be less IMMEDIATE in her life, so that when I am no longer here, she won't feel my absence so acutely.

We don't play like we used to. Tug-of-war with my rope toy used to be a favorite, but now holding onto that toy hurts my teeth so I avoid it. Catching a rubber ball was exciting, but I can't see or hear the ball well enough to sense where it is, so it invariably bounces right past me.

My favorite indoor game was "*cerca*", a kind of hide-and-seek where mom would hide a series of doggy treats around the house while I waited impatiently in the kitchen, and when she would open the door and say, "*cerca*," it was up to me to find them all and devour them on the spot. I loved that game but these days I pretend to be disinterested, or disoriented, so she won't miss it so much when I won't be around to play it with her.

I spend as much time as I can on the softest furniture, i.e., the sofa that is low enough to be accessible. My former go-to napping spot, the bed in the guest room, is no longer within reach. No way I can jump up as I did years ago, and if mom forgetfully lifts me up onto that bed, I can't jump down without hurting my arthritic joints. Something I really miss — and she does too — is napping with her there. It was kinda narrow to accommodate both of us, but I would curl around her middle and she would tuck her arm around me and we breathed in synch and formed a mobius of infinite compatibility. Where did she end and I began? Or vice-versa? We were Togetherness.

The destruction of that unity will be so distressing to mom. To me too, but I can't do anything about that; all I can do to try to make things easier for my humans. So I pretend not to want to cuddle with her anymore, not there or on the sofa, or on my favorite rug in the living room. I deliberately try to spend less time with her by curling up on the smallest armchair by the TV where there is no room for her to join me. I used to nap in her study in a sunny spot in front of her desk, but now, if I go there, I withdraw into a dark corner behind the file cabinet and pretend to ignore her invitation to come by the desk for an ear scratch or a belly rub. Rolling over for a belly rub can be painful so I don't want to do it. Plus, often I can't *hear* her invitation so I don't have to pretend to ignore it. Little by little, there is less of me present in her life.

She notices my absence especially at mealtime. I have always eaten before my humans, and look up, hopeful for more once I have devoured every morsel. It used to be that when mom and

dad ate, I would hang around the table attentively, waiting for some tasty scraps to fall my way. If they didn't, I would plop myself down next to dad's chair and let him what I wanted, first with a soft whine, then a more insistent one, then an out-and-out bark.

But for a while now, the thought of rousing myself from a soft chair in the living room to a cold hard pavement in the *tinello* (dining area of the kitchen) is too daunting. So mom gets up several times during the meal to check on me. If she seems *too* worried, I will make the effort to follow her back to the table just to let her know I am okay. Then I may look for fallen scraps and bark if none are accessible. Since I can't hear my own barks, I have no idea how loud they may be but apparently they are loud enough to upset my humans.

I have gotten in the habit of barking loudly at other times too. I will scratch the door to go out onto the balcony, and will stand outside and bark into the middle distance. I used to bark at passing dogs six floors below, but I don't see or hear them anymore, so I bark generically. Maybe my vocalizations will coincide with the appearance of some pet at street level, maybe not.

For the same reason, I sometimes jump onto the sofa and stand up and bark at the window or the wall or the TV. (When you are almost blind, it's hard to tell the difference.) I can hear my voice when I vocalize loud enough, and I like to think that my humans are comforted by the noise.

But I don't want to comfort them *too* much. I am juggling a delicate balance here: reassuring them that I am still alive, and preparing them for the fact that I soon won't be. Shall I inflict more pain on them now . . . or later?

My strategy is hit-and-miss, day-to-day. No strategy is perfect but I am doing my best. I don't want my humans to suffer because I love them so much, and they don't want me to suffer because they love me so much. I may be a dog but, like Forrest Gump, I *do* know what love is. And as sure as the warmest spot on my comfiest sofa, I know that our love will continue after my body has gone.

###

Thanks to Dan Moore (hide).

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