

Choosing Sleep: Love in Death

Aren't two sparrows sold for only a penny? But your Father knows when any one of them falls to the ground.

--Matthew 10:29 (CEV)

I am home. The last time I was home, really home, was for Labor Day. It's almost Thanksgiving, now. The house is dark when I pull into the driveway.

The Converse on my feet slap against the back steps. I slide my key into the lock and the tumbler clicks. Then I see Guinness, my small moose of a dog. His wagging tail bangs into bookshelves and the entertainment center like a gunshot. He whines incessantly, bounding around me as he snatches up a scrap of toy. Through the living room and up the stairs, he races. I imagine he's saying "You're home! You're home! You're home!" on a never-ending loop. I sit on the floor and he snuffles my hair, wanting to know where I've been. He leans his whole body against my hip and leg as if he can make us one. He is joyful and vibrant with life. I am home.

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Death.

The universal truth of every living organism on this planet we call Earth.

Thanks to the media, our favorite movies and novels as well as images on Facebook and other forms of news, each of us has a certain notion about Death. How it happens. Why it happens. What it means. Some of us imagine that Death is going out with a bang, an orange and red explosion that discolors the sky, in the ultimate demonstration of sacrifice. Others of us picture Death as a quiet affair, one of loved ones gathered around a quilt-covered bed while the ill passes away in peaceful slumber. Although it is comforting to think of dying in this manner,

either by altering the world or occurring in dignity and peace, it is not realistic. There are many, probably millions upon millions, of people and animals who do pass with an absence of pain, but there is another, less discussed side of Death. The other side of Charon's coin is rarely considered and is neither pleasant nor glamorous and should never be romanticized. Death in its truest form is brutal and ugly. In truth, to experience Death with honor and dignity, without pain, happens to a lucky few.

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My eyes blinked open out of a dead sleep. Lady was cough-wheezing again. For the last few years this was a common occurrence, especially at night. It had something to do with her age, but my family and I weren't entirely sure of the cause. Our veterinarian called it "reverse sneezing." I sat up and rubbed my hand up and down her neck a few times under her chin, like I always did, and lay back down. She would stop in a few moments and then I would fall asleep. I listened and waited.

Something was wrong. The sound of her wheezing was different. It should have stopped. I reached over and rubbed her neck again, almost angrily. I flung myself against my pillows. Still she gasped. In and out. Loud. An overly forceful sort of pant. My eyes squeezed shut.

My hand groped for my bedside lamp. *Click*. My pale-purple room was suddenly illuminated with a too-bright light. A furry black form was sprawled at the base of my bed, which was not uncommon, but her chest was moving in an unnatural rapid-fire motion. I think I called her name, but her usually coherent, happy eyes, stared ahead like I wasn't there. Her muzzle was dewy with saliva from the exertion of breathing. And still she wheezed and

wheezed and wheezed. Too loud and too fast. In and out. The sound reverberated over and over again in the otherwise silent house.

My clock read 4:02 AM.

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No thing and no one is prepared for the reality of death. We maintain the notion that dying is something miraculous or wonderful, either peaceful or painlessly dramatic. In our minds death is not the sudden undignified, unchecked defecation of bloody stool. The unnatural chill clinging to a still breathing creature is inconceivable. It is not a bout of delirium and fever that transforms a loved one into an Other. It is not the hands of a child fisting sheets, tears running down her anguished face, as she succumbs to her illness. A loved one does not gasp, breathless for long hours. It could not possibly be the putrid odor that clings to an exam room after a very sick animal has been “put to sleep.” It is not an experience that involves whining and growling seconds before a heart ceases to beat. We have been tricked to believe that dying is “quicker and easier than falling asleep”<sup>1</sup> and “to die will be an awfully big adventure.”<sup>2</sup>

In reality, Death is the most demeaning experience of life.

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It had been three months since Lady, my first dog and longest-known friend, passed away. She, a black lab and whippet mix, had become part of my family when I was a toddler. She lived to see the conclusion of my freshman year of college, though, just barely.

I was riding in the back seat of our tan GMC Envoy. Dad drove and Mom sat in the passenger seat. We were adopting a new dog. A dog I wasn't planning on being particularly

¹ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Scholastic, 2007.

² Barrie, J.M. *Peter Pan*. Digireads.com Publishing, 2016.

close with. I thought it was too soon, and in two weeks I would be at school, almost four hours away. There's no way it would ever be *my* dog.

We pulled up to the animal shelter. Mom filled out the remaining paperwork inside and the dog was brought out to us. We had to drag him out the door of the shelter and my dad had to manhandle him into the car. The dog was terrified. A comment from one of the workers kept playing through my head: "He was afraid of grass when we first got him." What kind of dog is afraid of grass? Add riding in the car to that list, I thought. Lady was an avid lover of car rides, and I could not believe our bad luck.

I slid into the back seat, next to the furry mutt, and we drove off. It was not long before a black face with tan eyebrows found its way onto my lap. The last dog who had done that was... Lady. My vision blurred and the pressure on my lap increased. The damn dog, who was so obviously terrified, was trying to comfort *me*.

That cemented it. The dog had won me over in all of ten minutes, much to my annoyance. He was mine.

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"Life asked death, 'Why do people love me but hate you?' Death responded, 'Because you are a beautiful lie and I am a painful truth.'"—Author unknown

Though Life is beautiful it is far from perfect and often filled with lies. The sense that it is better to "conceal don't feel" permeates our culture<sup>3</sup>. That the struggles of this world are shameful, that they have no value, no worth. We put up a front, our public face, for all to see and ignore our own realities. The truth is denied. Life is suffering. Cars break down. Not everyone

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<sup>3</sup> *Frozen*. Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, Disney, 2013.

has a winter coat. A man has not slept in twenty-four hours. Animal shelters cannot provide proper care. Someone failed a test. Loved ones die.

Though bad things happen, they do not detract from the beauty of life. An overused cliché, “beauty is pain,” hits closer to the truth than is comfortable admitting. To suffer, to really struggle, is gorgeous. The entire experience of life is enhanced by its pain. In Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* the narrator states that he does not “want to die without any scars.”<sup>4</sup> Scars mean that something happened, that there was worth, a reason to go on. It means there was pain.

Death is pain.

Dying, the most demeaning and painful aspect of Life, is one of the only truths guaranteed to the living. It will happen to everyone and everything that draws breath, including the furry friend lovingly stationed in countless homes.

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In the United States there are an estimated 70-80 million dogs and 74-96 million cats that serve as pets, which equals somewhere between 30-47% of homes that have either a dog or a cat.⁵ When the death of a pet is discussed it is rare to hear about a natural passing. Euthanizing a pet is often preferred by owners over a natural death because it is known as a solution to suffering. Death in this manner is considered humane and peaceful.

Instances of euthanasia carried out in veterinarian offices and in shelters occur in similar ways. Most use an overdose of some sort of anesthesia, often a drug called sodium pentobarbital

⁴ Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York: Norton, 1996. 52.

⁵ “Pet Statistics.” *ASPCA*. 29 Nov. 2016. <http://www.aspca.org/animal-homelessness/shelter-intake-and-surrender/pet-statistics>.

or some other mixture of chemicals.⁶ Sometimes an animal is first sedated, which allows the animal to slip into unconsciousness before the administration of sodium pentobarbital.⁷ In other instances, the animal is not sedated and the drug is immediately injected into the bloodstream. The anesthetic itself can also be administered either through an intravenous line or with a traditional needle.⁸ The veterinarian I volunteered for preferred to use a butterfly needle. The specific method of procedure is determined mostly by preference of the one administering the euthanasia in addition to the mannerisms and personalities of the patient and owner.

However a euthanasia is carried out, there are always common occurrences. The passing is not always instantaneous, though it may appear to be. The animal often takes an initial deeper breath, before lapsing into unconsciousness. The animal may take a few more shallow breaths, twitch, or release their bladder or bowels after the drugs have been given.⁹

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Euthanizing an animal is perceived as merciful or kind, but the truth is we don't really know. Our furry friend cannot tell us, but it seems as though he or she went without suffering. What I do know is that when a euthanasia is administered, a human has made the decision to take a life. The life of a creature that was loved like a family member. I am well aware that animals and humans are very different beings. As difficult as it sometimes is to acknowledge, the life of an animal is not the same as the life of a human; however, that doesn't mean that a life is not a life.

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<sup>6</sup> "Euthanasia: Making the Decisions." *American Humane*. 27 Nov. 2016.  
<http://www.americanhumane.org/fact-sheet/euthanasia-making-the-decision/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

I also know that death and the process of dying is a truth promised to everything that lives. It is a painful truth, but a truth nonetheless. Death was not designed to be peaceful. What right do I, or anyone else for that matter, have in deciding when another living being takes their last breath? What right do I have to alter the ugly truth of Death, by making it another pain-free lie of Life?

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I wanted to run, screaming out of the house.

The veterinarian's office was closed to the public that day, Wednesday, for surgeries. Lady was still alive, breathing more quietly now, but still in that unnatural, rapid way. The bed we had given to her for Christmas was smeared with her blood and stool. Before my dad left for work at 7:00 a.m., he carried Lady downstairs into the family room. She, very stubborn about accepting help in any form, didn't resist like she usually did. I couldn't justify leaving her, but I wanted to. It seemed an insult, though, if I left because it was too hard for me while she continued suffering. My mom had called the veterinarian's office around noon and left a message. She had said "Lady is," her voice broke off. "Actively dying." We wanted to put her down. After three hours had passed, the office finally called back. We could bring her in.

We drove up winding backroads, the same path taken fifteen years ago when she first became a member of our family. My blue Chevy Blazer reeked with her foul scent. The putrid scent of death. By the time we arrived at the clinic, she was cold, shivering. We should have covered her up. Her breaths came rapidly, quiet. A technician came and said something about weighing Lady. Couldn't they see she was on the way out?

Lady was taken into an exam room, a room she had visited on numerous other occasions. A green and red plaid blanket was placed across the examination table, a flimsy barrier between

the hard marble and my best friend. The doctor and another technician, a girl I went to school with, fussed with medical equipment. A syringe was filled with pink liquid. The technician shaved black fur off of Lady's foreleg to better expose a vein. Then the needle was inserted.

The doctor drew back the plunger, to ensure the drug would go into the bloodstream. No blood came back into the syringe and the needle was withdrawn. Lady was too dehydrated. They tried a back leg, shaving off more fur, but the result was the same. I remember thinking how cruel it was to take more of her dignity by stealing her fur. The doctor offered to inject directly into her heart, but my mom said it wasn't necessary. Euthanizing her was not possible.

Lady and I met gazes for the first time all day. She wasn't staring off at nothing but looking at me. She lifted her head off of the table slightly and growled. I said her name and she kept growling. Then Lady released a terrible whine, a sound that cannot truthfully be described. It was the sound of the end. I was the last thing she saw before she passed.

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When I was about seven or eight years old I prayed to God, asking Him to let Lady live as long as I did, with tears running down my face. I knew it wasn't realistic, but the thought of living without her was inconceivable. For all intents and purposes she was my sister, for I had no siblings. She was there from my first day of school until my last. Whenever I was scared, she protected me. I could always, always confide in her. As time passed my prayer was modified, but I always held out a small piece of hope that maybe I wouldn't have to say goodbye. Maybe God would, by chance, uphold the prayer of a seven-year-old. Though I did not know how she would eventually pass, I never wanted to make the decision to put her down. Whenever I considered it, it felt like a betrayal.



During the last few years of Lady's life, her death loomed over me. Her hearing had drastically diminished and so didn't know when to greet us when my family came home. There was always a fear that she would be found, just lying somewhere, already stiff and cold. The dog that used to run so fast that her body would tip sideways struggled to walk up and down the stairs. Jumping on the bed was an impossible feat, at least without my assistance. Sleep occupied most of her days. Despite all this, I can confidently say that she was still happy. She was still herself. An unhappy dog would not sit and listen to conversations, eyes shifting from speaker to speaker, rapt with attention. When I came home for Christmas her pink tongue would not have swept across my face and hands. Her tail wouldn't have wagged whenever my grandparents came to visit.

The evening before she passed she was admittedly looking pretty bad. She would only eat if someone fed her by hand and only treats. Her legs no longer supported herself, so she had to be carried everywhere: outside, upstairs, to the kitchen. I fed her some wet food, spooning it with my fingers. When she was finished, though, she did what she'd always done. With her back arched and legs splayed in the air, she rolled on the floor, groaning in pleasure. It was her characteristic sign of a good meal. Even at her lowest point, she was happy about something. The only moment in time where I wanted, really wanted, to euthanize Lady was on the day she died.

That day was brutal, probably the worst day of my life, but I do not regret it. It was an honor to be present during her last moments. I owed it to her. In order to have successfully been euthanized, ironically, Lady would have needed to be healthier, but she was too sick, too dehydrated. So, when would we have made the decision? Three days sooner? A week? A month? If we had done that she would have been denied her last "good meal" roll. She still had

some small piece of life that was worth living. If she had been euthanized sooner than the day she struggled to breathe, it would have been for me. It would have been because I couldn't bear to watch her suffer, rather than preventing the actual act of suffering.

The only aspects I am uncomfortable with from that day were the failed attempts to euthanize her. It never occurred to me that it wouldn't work. Her fur was shaved for no reason. Her cold skin was pricked with a needle for nothing. The pain of her death was increased by trying to make it more peaceful. The last moments of breath, of life, resisted Death in the inability to euthanize her.

I often say, especially when I talk about people who cling to the idea that death is not supposed to hurt, that grieving the passing of a loved one means that it meant something. It means that you miss them. It means that you love them. It means that it is real. The anguish felt after a loved one passes is the greatest testament of love that can be experienced in this life.

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Guinness and Lady, two dogs very close to my heart, in some ways could not be more different from each other. Lady did her own thing, not overly dependent on anyone. Guinness, on the other hand, *needs* to be around somebody. Lady would *not* go to the bathroom if you watched her. Guinness won't even go outside by himself. Lady loved to go on car rides, while Guinness whines every time he enters a vehicle. Lady was always ready to rip a strange dog to shreds, but would happily greet every person she met. Guinness wants to be friends with every dog he sees, but is terrified of the prospect of walking toward a man. The only things Lady was ever afraid of were guns and fireworks. When we first got Guinness he was very high maintenance. He was afraid of toys, going outside, the kitchen, loud noises, popping sounds, and all men. My mom likes to say that we had to teach Guinness how to be dog.

Guinness is only about two or three years old, so it makes sense that at the moment I am not overly concerned with how he will pass from this world. Although he's a much happier dog than when we first got him, he even barks at the mailman now, he is still very timid and overly cautious about most things. Truth be told I don't know what type of dog he will be in a year's time. I hope that he will proudly stroll past men when I take him on a walk, but I don't know if that will happen. So, I can't say for sure how I would want him to die. I think of Guinness as a creature that needs protection, which didn't apply to Lady. Lady was *my* protector, while I protect Guinness. I probably would want him to pass in his sleep, which is ultimately what I hoped for Lady, but as I've discussed the reality of death often doesn't allow for something so peaceful. Given the differences between Lady and Guinness, it seems likely that I would have made a different decision if Guinness had been the one dying, but I can't know.

What I do know is that deciding to end a pet's life should not be taken lightly and should be for the animal, not the owner. A pet is never "just an animal," but a member of the family, despite what people say. In the future if I am forced to make a decision about the life of a pet it will not be easy or pleasant, but I know that whatever I decide, my decision will be one of love.