

## JAZZ

September 15, 2023

There was pain and sadness in the mirror this morning. A tear blurred my vision for a few moments and then left a trail down my cheek. My face looked haggard beyond my 70-plus years. My throat closed tightly. It was hard to breathe. I swallowed and tried to push away the misery that came with the loss of Jazz.

She was only eight years old, a *muttly* 40-pound ball of joy and love that spilled over everyone around her. She was not pretty, but indescribably cute with the affinity for chasing squirrels she would never catch. I think they will miss her too.

It feels so foreign to think of her as no longer at my side looking for her morning head scratch, her small face and large brown eyes staring at me expectantly, wondering if she was going to go for a ride. She usually got one, except in the extreme heat of summer. I wish she could have hung around a little longer because fall was her time — frequent car trips, walks near the high school where she received a ridiculous amount of attention — hiking sometimes too, but only for short distances because her little legs took ten steps for every one of mine.

The first day of her life with our family was in mid-August of 2015. She was seven weeks old, just whelped, confused and frightened, a prisoner of sorts at the shelter. I often wonder what went through her little head when she saw me for the first time. A volunteer brought her into the room to meet me. She peed on the floor and shook nervously. I petted her but it seems unlikely that the small effort at friendship erased her sense of loss. Her mother wasn't present, nor were any of her brothers and sisters. It was never explained how she ended up there, but it didn't make any difference. Debbie, my wife who is a sucker for pound dogs, saw her picture online and "guilted" me into reaching out for the dog. I was considerably less enthusiastic. She was replacing another dog we had lost to old age and severe arthritis. That was a heartbreak too, but another story for another time when the pain I am now feeling fades. I pushed aside my lack of ardor largely because a couple standing outside the room was watching me and the puppy. They were smiling and pointing, clearly in the mood to take her if I chose not to. Adoption was now or never, so I threw away my caution and said yes. The paperwork was quick, cash exchanged. She was handed over with a blanket. I carried her out to the car wondering if what I had just done was wise. I did it for Debbie far more than me, at least I thought so for the twenty-minute ride home. She was huddled on the back seat, frightened and nervous. I watched her in the mirror continuing to wonder if I had made the right decision.

The garage was empty when we arrived. I opened the back door and scooped her up, greeted by our other dog Quincy, a less than purebred Glen Imaal terrier who was a long-time heart stealer. I placed her on the floor and watched the sniff test proceed. She peed again, but it would be

cleaned up later. I scooped her up once more and took her outside. Quincy popped through the dog door clearly excited that a playmate had arrived. Her feet now firmly on the grass, she began to run as Quincy joined in with far more interest than I'd shown. I won't swear to it, but I believe it was about five minutes later that my doubts disappeared. Dogs tend to be cautious, at least for a few moments, before they decide the rules of engagement, but there was none of that. They were meant for each other. Their first minutes together were those made in heaven. They played with abandon until Quincy, still a young dog at that point, finally surrendered to exhaustion, sat in the middle of the yard and watched our adoptee literally run circles around him for ten minutes. I laughed. I'm sure the same mirror I looked in today would have seen a broad smile instead of the tears I now shed.

Jazz, as she was to be named in short order, had become family. She had a distinct way of greeting people, usually barking at first and then wiggling her butt with extreme ferocity and high expectations that she would be petted. She almost always got her wish, but the butt wiggling never departed until the very end. She wiggled for the groomer, the vet, other dogs, strangers, and high school girls who cooed that she was "so cute." She became the better half of *the old man with the cute little black dog that always walks around the school*.

Somewhere in the lingering months of her eight-year life, she contracted cancer. She had been sneezing violently and breathing with difficulty, unable to be the same dog we brought home. People tend to think pets, particularly dogs, will be by at our side forever. I certainly do. I understand human death because it usually has predictability to it. Illness is defined and lingers as we find our bodies and the machinery that runs them breaking down. We deal with our parents' deaths because, in most cases, we see it coming long before it happens. The anesthesia of time often insulates us from the shock of death.

But not in the loss of Jazz. At 1:30 this morning, my wife and I ceased a long night of worry and heartbreak watching her struggle to breathe and even find sleep. For 24-hours or more her life was filled with anxiety and pain, and perhaps an animal's understanding that her time was near. Jazz remained outside on the lawn in the darkness of night, gazing quietly, head up because she could not sleep and could not find enough comfort with us at her side. We took her for a last ride to the veterinary ER down the road. The tech expressed some surprise wondering if she was really that sick. She was, we assured her. The cancer that claimed her was, even by cancer standards, frighteningly fast. I had spoken with the vet who had called to give me the news of the diagnosis the day before Jazz's passing. She began the conversation gently, but it took it only a few seconds to know she was saving the sad punchline for last. She carefully explained the test results and options for care — the latter limited to marginally effective chemo and radiation that might prolong her life for six months. The quality of life would be poor, she told me, the side effects perhaps as ugly as the cancer.

In the end, she was sedated and given a drug that quickly stopped her heart — and mine. This morning, after a fitful sleep, I took that look in the mirror and began to repair my broken heart and fill the empty part of my soul with the joy Jazz gave me for eight beautiful years.

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