

Lily and Nasal Cancer



Lily and Joseph

For almost all of her life, Lily could have been the sister of Dorian Grey. She matured beautifully and then hit years where her personality, her energy, her athleticism was simply without change. We had her one knee repaired when she was 7 years old without thinking twice. When she was nearly 10 and ripped the ligament on the other knee running on ice, I took her to the vet who twisted her spine this way and that, had her standing on her front legs, and announced she didn't think Lily could be more than 6 or 7. We repaired the second knee and my Empress of everything continued to dominate the backyard and our two boys.

Then, within a span of less than three months, she slowed, had one urinary tract infection after another, and was diagnosed with cancer after a visit to the vet for a bloody nose. Until then, she had never had either an infection or a bloody nose. Three more months and Lily died.

When I am asked about the most memorable days of my life, the first one to mind is neither my wedding day nor the day my son was born, but the day Lily died. This December will bring the seventh anniversary of her death.

That morning, I woke to blood around the bedroom, some of it so abundant it had mounded on the carpet. It had to be Lily's, whose nose had been completely blocked by tumor since October.

When I found her, her white front feet were red, but she wagged her tail and wanted to go out to the backyard, where she put a plastic hot dog in her mouth and whacked her brother over the head with it. Then, she sat down and panted, and I knew we had run out of time. The lobby of the urban animal medical center was full of volunteers selling gifts at one table, with a woman making beautiful all-natural wreaths at another. I tried not to cry while I asked for an emergency evaluation and told them Lily had been diagnosed with cancer there in the fall and her file should be available.

We got the same young vet who had seen Lily in October, and, despite showing us with a glass slide that no air was moving through Princess's nose, did not at that time discuss euthanasia. I understood that. Lily kissed her, pranced around the room, had a minor nose bleed (what had brought us in) but otherwise seemed to be having a splendid time.

At that visit, the vet explained that Lily was breathing solely through her mouth, and we should get accustomed to watching her sleepily let her head droop in the evenings, only to perk up to breathe. She did not explain how Lily was still able to sink her muzzle into stuffed toys and slowly and with relish disembowel them. She explained that Lily would lose weight and could become gaunt under her coat, but not how she would forever be able to dodge around me when I tried to bring her in from the back yard and she did not want to come.

It was too late to treat Lily's disease when it was first diagnosed: The tumor had blocked one nostril and grown through the septum to begin blocking the other. Instead, the vet had told us to wait for one of three end events to happen, depending on how the tumor grew locally or spread. We would wait for a seizure if tumor went into her brain, shortness of breath or coughing up blood if it spread into her lungs, or sudden collapse if she could no longer mouth breathe well enough to keep herself functional.

The girl I took with me in December moved slowly, leaned against me, panted more openly. Yet she recognized the vet, who took one look at the clotted blood I had brought along in a whipped topping container left over from Thanksgiving and said, "Oh my." We waited a bit in an exam room before another vet came back and said the hemorrhage was major and the only question was how long we would wait before the next.

Lily was very calm, even when they put in the IV catheter. I sat on the floor beside her, the vet in front of her. I thought she would want to sit or lie down, but she stood straight and looked at the vet, even when I put gentle pressure on her back. Then, at the last moment, she turned her head quickly and kissed my face. The needle went into the catheter, and I had to quickly put my hands out so she didn't hit the floor when her legs buckled.

For the last month of her life I mourned that the growing cancer had ruined her face. The tumor grew outside, through the bone, and mangled her muzzle. I tried to puff up the white hair so it wasn't obvious she looked like a Klingon, but she did, rather than the mirror of her beautiful mother.

Now though, years later, I can't remember the mangled face accurately. I remember her eyes. I remember that a girl who rarely did as she was told (her attitude was more 'Leave a message and I'll get back to you') stuck with me for the hour it took to give her peace. I remember that her last act in life was to kiss me,

Why was Lily's last day indelible? It was inexpressibly sad and inexpressibly beautiful. Our last time together moved me from life over the line to death and back again. I do not now feel her loss, but how much of her is within me. She is perfect again, fit, beautiful, lively, incorrigible, and waiting for me to join her. Elizabeth Coolidge-Stolz

