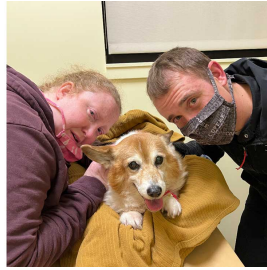


It doesn't get easier, putting a dog down, ending a chapter of your life. Why can't they die peacefully in their sleep?



From left to right, Jack's final trip in the car, on the way to the vet. Waiting with Jack outside, to be called in, not knowing when that time would come. It made it so much worse. And finally, Becky and Kevin sharing their last moments with Jack.

Friday evening, 6:36pm, I get the call from Becky. Jack, our 14 and a half year old Corgi, was done. I didn't think he'd make it to Christmas; he'd lost use of his hind legs a few months ago, and pulled himself around the house, the yard, by his front legs. He still ate well, he still tried to play, but you could see him become increasingly frustrated. This was a dog that begged to be walked, running to the door when you got home. He wanted to play every morning before you left for work. And he had this thing about his paws... don't touch his paws, unless you wanted to be snapped at. Or bitten. The walks became progressively shorter starting a couple years ago, finally ending maybe two months ago. He still wanted to, he still responded to noises that sounded like a leash being taken from the closet, but eventually he realized that wasn't in the cards. We had talked about some sort of cart for his tail end, something with wheels, so he could more-easily get around, but that never happened.

Memories are coming back in random order; this makes sense, because these past 14 years haven't gone by in a linear or predictable fashion. I don't recall the last time he came bounding through the dog door, which became increasingly difficult due to the backyard steps. It would be the same time that we last had to clear the backyard of dog poop. It's been... a while. Since then we've carried him out to the front yard and let him do his thing, for a while in the gravel to the side of the walkway, and then, the walkway itself. We'd put him outside and wait for him to bark. Back in the day, not that long ago, he'd be content to stay in the front yard, watching people walk past, enjoying the sun. We'd have to let him in because he'd be barking for fun, which our neighbor across the street didn't appreciate. Not a dog person.

We're dog people. And it was quite a change in Jack, putting him outside, and instead of wanting to stay outside, he'd bark the moment he was done pooping. Because we're dog people but maybe Jack was even more people dog. As he got older and more feeble, he needed us even more. Kevin or Becky would pick him up, bring him inside, and wash his backside in the kitchen sink. Back in the day, Jack would have been growling and snapping at you if you tried to give him a bath. But now, ok, recently-then, he seemed more appreciative than resigned to the 2-3 times daily cleaning up.

Friday morning, Jack didn't seem so bad. He'd still drag himself around to where the action was, where we were. And we fully expected him to be excited to see us when we got home. Becky got home first, and shortly after that, I got the call. Jack wasn't moving from his spot. He wasn't lifting his head. He was breathing heavily. He wouldn't drink water, but by the time I got home, he was eating an oatmeal-like concoction that was used to hide his meds. We were gathered around him in the living room, down on the floor, at his level, since he wasn't raising his head. I took a couple of his favorite toys from his toy basket, waving them around, hoping to see him lunge after one. His eyes followed the movement, his nose moved a little, but then he settled down and lost interest. It was time.

Becky called the vet to set things up, and shortly after 8pm, we (Becky, Kevin and I) took Jack on his final outing. He used to get very nervous getting into a car, but not this time. You could read it as calm, but I think it was tired. It was cold outside but I asked Kevin to roll down the window so Jack had one last chance, I hoped, to be a dog. To have that nose out in the air and watch the world as you drive past. I hoped that he'd take interest, but feared that he'd not. How sad that would have been. But Jack perked up!

Mixed feelings about that. It was wonderful to see, but so sad to think it would be the very last time. And it was, the very last time, because from the moment we parked at the vet, Jack looked, again, like he was done (although he did perk up momentarily as someone walked two dogs nearby).

The waiting is the hardest part. You don't want to say good-bye to your dog, but it was over half an hour we waited, outside the vet, to be called in. They were busy; a few animals came in with "critical" injuries. It's hard to prioritize anything being higher than the last moments with your dog. Intellectually, you get it. Emotionally, you wonder, don't they understand? This is our dog. This is almost 15 years of our lives, that we are calling to an end. We made a terribly painful decision, and now, that gift of more time is feeling so painful. You don't make a decision to put a dog down ahead of time; it's not something you schedule out of convenience. It happens because your dog speaks to you, without words, letting you know. It's time.

Finally we're called in. And it's another half hour inside, waiting, Kevin holding Jack, we're crying, and all the signals Jack's giving us are pretty darned clear that he's ready. We're not, but he is. We'll never be ready. Eventually someone comes in and tells us it's time to take Jack for a few minutes and set him up with an IV port. They'd be back soon, and they were. Becky thought we'd all be leaving, because the last time we had a dog put down, and I decided I should be there at the end, it was one of the worst experiences of my life. They said it would be easy for the dog; it wasn't. That dog, Scooter fought off the meds, gasped for breath, and it took several minutes before she was gone. I swore I'd never go through that again.

But I couldn't let Jack leave us, alone. In the final minutes all three of us spent with Jack, he seemed even more calm, making me wonder if they'd already given him a tranquilizer. Maybe it was the nice bed he'd returned in. I learned something new; if I lightly stroked him along the outside of his eyes, he would slowly close his come close to falling asleep. That's how I wanted things to be for Becky and Kevin. Not Jack looking sad, but rather Jack's last thoughts being the two of them with him, always.

Becky and Kevin left after the doctor came to give Jack the sedative first, then the drug that would stop his heart. It was all explained to me, how quickly the sedative would act, how quickly his heart would stop after the second injection. 20 seconds for the sedative to put him to sleep, and after the second injection, 20 seconds before his heart would stop. And that's exactly how it went. It was very peaceful; there was no struggle like with Scooter. There was no movement at all. And his final memories will be of us, and I never let go of him through those final minutes, until he was gone. As it should be.

I'm 65; I don't know how many more times I'm likely to go through this. I had a talk with Kevin, letting him know how it went, kind of passing the torch. I'll get over this; Becky, Kevin and Karen will all get over this. Time does heal such things. And we'll move through the next chapter of our lives when a new dog presents himself, or herself, to us. Maybe that dog will finally do the right thing and pass in his or her sleep. I don't expect that though. This seems to be something we're supposed to go through. I don't know why.