

## *Animal Advice Article*

### **Dead Dog Barking**

Claudia Flisi

*People measure time with little mechanical devices. I don't measure it at all. My time is completely mine for this moment that I am living, and I live minute by minute.*

My human mom picked September 11 as my day to die. She said that the pain of losing me might blur into the cosmic agony of that date. But she was crying so hard the entire week that one circle on the calendar wouldn't have made a difference.

She had decided the day before when I was in the veterinarian's office getting another series of shots and that didn't seem to be working. My belly hurt, my legs moved stiffly and my throat was sore and scratchy. I didn't have the energy to raise my head to the one veterinarian assisting me and the others assisting her. I barely flinched when they gave me the sequence that had become almost routine – antibiotics, anti-inflammatory drugs, painkillers, cortisone.

I was losing weight by the hour, it seemed. I didn't want to eat because of constant nausea. Nausea made me thirsty, but I couldn't keep water down either. Since eating has been one of my favorite things in life – in addition to ear rubs from my mom and fast runs in the doggy park – I was beginning to feel anxious about what other pleasures might be denied me in the future.

The vet shook her head sadly. "This isn't helping. There is nothing more we can do. If you don't want Giada to suffer," she said, looking at my mom, not at me, "we can give her the shot right now while we have all the equipment on hand."

"No, no," mom said with a quivering voice. "I want my girl to die at home. Please give her enough painkillers so she will have one more peaceful night with me. Then you can come tomorrow afternoon."

Thank goodness for that postponement.

What had brought me to the brink of death? Well, I am a dog of "a certain age." My hearing has worsened in recent years and I have cataracts. I am stiff in the morning and can't jump up and down easily. Nevertheless, I loved my food, my toys, my walks, and, of course, my family. Old age didn't seem so bad . . . until the end of summer.

I didn't want to walk my usual, daily five kilometers because I felt tired all the time. My appetite was gone, I was drinking a lot of water and was continuously licking my lips from constant thirst.

Mom realized something was seriously wrong the day I got out of bed and threw up everything I had eaten the day before and did not want to move after that. She waited until the evening to offer me some food, a mix of kibble and tuna, but I snubbed it. She then tried peanut butter, every dog's ALL-TIME FAVORITE FOOD, but I still wasn't hungry.

When my humans took me to the clinic again, the sonogram showed my stomach lining was thick, irregular, inflamed, and covered in dark spots that also appeared in my pancreas and the liver -- all organs where you don't want suspicious spots. The vets and my humans looked worried. I picked up their vibes and began to get nervous, too.

They wondered if the inflammation was from a stomach irritation and wanted to know what I had eaten recently. Well, not much. Then they gave me an IV, an anti-inflammatory for my stomach, and a painkiller. The vets told my humans to give me small amount of water and food tonight and only boiled chicken tomorrow.

Something worked because I walked out of the office when my humans had carried me in before. By the time I arrived home, though, I was exhausted and flopped down on the rug. I wanted water, but couldn't walk the few steps to my dish.

Throughout the night I was restless – my belly was still bloated and painful. We went to see the vets again in the next morning, and they saw right away how difficult walking was for me. My spine curved to the (right or left) and my movements were sluggish.

They did a blood test, thinking the inflammation was probably the result of a tumor and wanted me to come in for an IV drip twice a day for the next five days to keep me hydrated. To make things easier, they stuck a plastic catheter in my front right paw so they wouldn't have to jab me anew every time I came into the office. I hated it and tried to pull away the tape used to hold the device in place.

The back-and-forth to the clinic twice a day was taxing. Mom carried me up and down the stairs to the garage and lifted me in and out of the car. Her arms jabbed my swollen belly every time. When we arrived, I received more shots that burned my muscles.

During one of these longer visits, the vets talked to Mom during my IV drip. I heard them use words like “euthanasia” and “cremation.” Mom said she didn't want my “ashes” because she wanted to preserve the “DNA” in my hair. “Ashes are dead, but DNA is alive,” she said.

This talk of “ashes” was unnerving. I didn't feel at all good, but I was still me -- alive, though, not as lively. Why was Mom making an association between the living me and inert ashes? No, no, no, that would never do. I felt too weak to protest but did not like the direction of their conversation at all.

The vets did another sonogram on the morning of the fifth day. The results showed a marked improvement in my peritonitis – less inflammation and fewer suspicious spots. My stomach lining was still abnormally thick and my pancreas was irregular, but altogether, they pronounced

my innards to be in better shape than the previous week. They removed my plastic catheter, and I was so energized, I wolfed down my chicken burger after we got home.

For the next two days, I was what mom called, “Giada lite.” I slowly ate the food she gave me and rarely finished the entire meal. I found some pleasure in one of my favorite activities, sniffing out garbage in the grass. It was fun to hunt for bits of food, even if I didn't intend to eat it.

The crisis came three days after my last IV. Walking was painful that afternoon. Still, I ate boiled chicken and potatoes in the evening and went to bed feeling okay. At 3:30 am, I woke up and knew something wasn't right. My belly hurt again, and I was uncomfortable on both my bed and the floor. I padded through the house trying to find a place to rest. I returned to mom's bed. She felt me shaking from pain and tried to cover me, thinking that the warmth of the blanket might buffer me from the icy needles lacerating my stomach.

The next morning, she saw that I had thrown up everything from the day before on a rug. Off to the clinic again. The first thing the vets did was a blood test to check my kidneys. Older dogs often experience kidney failure, they explained, but my kidney functionality was fine. All three of the women at the clinic were stymied. They agreed on what the problem might be but not what it was. I went home with the same pill regime as before.

The next day was Sunday and it was raining. There's a human song that went, “rainy days and Sundays always get me down,” and that's the way I felt. I could barely walk. I didn't want to eat. I curled up in pain and wheezed like a nonagenarian human rasping away in a rocking chair. Mom brought me to the clinic again. The one on duty this Sunday was the head veterinarian, the leader-of-the-pack. She also couldn't figure out why I didn't want to eat or why I was so listless. “Her stomach is inflamed, but there is no rupture of an organ,” she told mom.

I followed her with my eyes as she spoke. When she opened a can of chicken shreds,

I snapped to attention. She offered me a few bits and I scarfed them down. She gave the rest of the can to mom with the instructions to feed me a spoonful or so every hour. If I could eat without throwing up, then I had more quality time ahead. "If not," said the vet, "it's time for time's up."

I slept well that night but woke feeling listless. The chicken that had caught my attention the day before no longer seemed meaningful, so I didn't want to eat, go outside, or move around. All I wanted to do was curl up in a dark dry quiet place and lie still.

At around 4:30 pm, the pain returned and I began to shake. Mom brought me in for more pain killer.

It was Tuesday, September 10. I had an uninterrupted sleep; it's wonderful what a strong painkiller can do to facilitate sweet dreams. I woke feeling rested, but not good. I curled up in the study and didn't move the entire day, except once when I got up to drink some water and threw it up.

Mom kept shaking her head when she looked at me. Her eyes were wet. She said this was "my sign" for what she should do. She brought me to the vet that evening. I heard their conversation. The words "cremation" and "euthanasia" came up again. I did not like the sound of those words, or the morose way mom used them. The vet offered to give me the shot then and there. Mom refused and said she should come to the house the following afternoon.

Everyone looked glum. At that point, they didn't see me anymore. They saw Suffering Dog, but not me.

I was unsure how to change their minds. I still wasn't hungry, but I had to show mom that my time hadn't come. When we returned home, I jumped up onto the sofa in the living room. I haven't had the energy to do that in weeks. After my humans finished dinner, I asked mom to come into the bedroom and lie down with me on the bed. We snuggled together, her arm wrapped gently around my body. She was still sad because she was sure that the next day was going to be my journey across the Rainbow Bridge. But I had other ideas.

I slept peacefully that night. The morning

of September 11, I raised my head and looked straight at mom. "You think I am ready to throw in the towel," I thought, "drop by the wayside, kick the bucket, all those human expressions for expiration date? Not yet!"

Then to show her, I ate the bits of chicken and ham she offered me with my pills wrapped inside. The bribery was blatant, but delicious. I kept my head up as we went for a walk. I raised and lowered my muzzle to follow interesting scents of garbage as we strode through the leaves, pounced on a stinky bit of discarded cheese, and barked at a couple of dogs. I did one small solid bowel movement. Coming back from our short excursion, I propelled myself up the curb and the first step of the building unassisted.

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Then mom offered me bits of a turkey burger, watching apprehensively. Would I eat? I consumed everything in the dish and looked up, wanting more.

Now fed, exercised, and feeling smug, I curled up on the little rug in mom's study, head down and ears up. I wanted mom to see me as my normal, relaxed self so she would cancel today's appointment with the Grim Reaper.

And she did! She called the vet at 2 pm and explained that I was moving around and eating a little. It wasn't enough to declare me fully recovered, but more than enough to postpone that appointment. To show mom that she had made the right decision, I walked outside with her an hour later, all the way down the block. She had to carry me for a bit at first, but I made the trip back entirely on my own. I reminded myself to keep my head up when we walked.

We had to come up with a "new normal" for me. September 11 was a "good" day for me, but my diet, exercise, and sleep patterns

had to be reorganized. I wasn't ever going to walk or eat as much as I did before, and my sleep might be interrupted from now on. I was always going to be something less than what I was. I was still "Giada lite."

I regained some of my strength over the next few days, enough that I could pull gently on my leash. Most of my appetite returned. Sometimes, I felt like going out on the balcony and barking at the world. Mom said that was okay. She checked in with the vets by phone, and they advised me to take things easy, just the way I wanted.

A week later, we went on a walk and encountered a woman who knew I had been

sick. She commented on how well I looked, how lively. She petted me and then turned to mom. "Giada is living on borrowed time," she said. "Take advantage of it."

I don't know what she meant by "borrowed time." Borrowed from whom? Borrowed from what? As far as I know, my time is what it is; not an instant more or less.

Mom pets me a lot these days. Dad ruffles my fur and calls me *Miracolo a Milano* after a famous Italian film from 1951. I don't watch movies and I don't know what a miracle is, but I do love the petting and ruffling. I lick their hands, stare in their eyes, and live the minute. What else is there?



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