

STORIES & LIT

A Game of Will

A senior dog is still full of surprises

By Anne Pinkerton, July 2020, Updated June 2021



“I’m not going to bet against her,” our kind vet says, despite having uttered just moments before, “I don’t like it.” She’s viewing an ultrasound of our dog’s kidneys. One has a dark, semi-triangular shape floating within it, foreboding, possibly cancerous. Trixie leans hard against my leg, panting but smiley.

The week before, I had taken my own leap of faith: I renewed her pet insurance for

a full year, even knowing that her diagnosis of renal insufficiency really meant *kidney failure*, which really meant *time is limited*. My husband and I had already spent a thousand dollars on blood draws, testing, pain medications, therapeutic food and visits for doggie dialysis—twice-weekly subcutaneous fluids that gave her a hump like a camel. Still, it seemed wrong not to bank on her, disloyal to assume she wouldn't live a full year.

“Every day is a gift,” I say in response, plunging my hand into the plush fur of Trixie's scruff, fighting back tears. This mantra, one we use at home when we brace ourselves for the reality of loss, is important to remember, but damn if it doesn't also ensure that I carry with me an underlying anxiety and an anticipatory grief that ratchets up at moments like this.

“It is for all of us,” the vet responds sagely. “The important thing is that she doesn't know.”

“Well, she's almost 13,” my husband says, resigning himself to the unlucky number. Our last dog died at 13. But we don't even know Trixie's age for sure. A stray from the streets of Arkansas, this little black-and-white dog with silky fur, stand-up ears, delicate deer-like legs, a paintbrush tail tipped with white, and deep-brown eyes came to us 12 years ago from a rescue with an approximate, obviously fabricated, cutesy birthday of Valentine's Day.

We've suspected that Trixie is a mix of Corgi and Border Collie, but never did a DNA test, so it's a guess based on looks and behavior. She'll beat anyone in a staring contest and abhors disorder, barking at the cats when they fight and bossily herding them into corners. She hates all other dogs, aside from the two she has lived with. Even with her brothers, Trixie has provoked fights so fierce that I have permanent pale souvenirs on both hands and arms from interfering. One broken finger.

I am not afraid of her around any human or cat. Trixie has gently nuzzled infants' faces and takes Cheerios deftly from the hands of toddlers. She likes to spoon one of the cats under a blanket and always presses her warm frame against me in bed, feet twitching in her sleep as she runs in her dreams. She's complicated.

“We could do a needle biopsy,” the vet says about the foreign dark spot.

“What would that tell us?”

“If it’s malignant or not.” But the three of us, huddled around the smiling dog wagging her tail and looking at us quizzically, agree that kind of knowledge wouldn’t change anything. And if ignorance is bliss, I’ll stay dumb. Besides, at her age, with organs in decline, Trixie is not a candidate for surgery.

Still, our compassionate, dark-haired, bespectacled vet is surprised and pleased with how she’s faring. Trixie’s just had a stable blood work-up — not getting better, but not getting worse — and seems genuinely happy. Is it a plateau we can sustain? I don’t bother asking.

“We are all about quality over quantity,” I say, as much for myself as anyone.

We had known Trixie was on borrowed time since she was diagnosed with a heart murmur at age four. Back then, her cardiologist said optimistically, “I’ve seen dogs like this live to 10.” The murmur mysteriously resolved itself after a few years, we got complacent and now we are greedy.

Each morning and evening, after she crunches special diet kibbles, we cajole Trixie into drinking a bowl of diluted homemade chicken broth in lieu of using the needle and saline bag for hydration. Each morning and evening, we hide pain pills and a urethral drug in a teaspoon of peanut butter for her, telling her what a good girl she is. Each morning and evening, she has an extra trip into the yard to relieve herself.

As the weeks pass, I imagine the fuzzy shapes of Trixie’s interior growing ever softer around the edges, the way her cheeks have softened with increasing quantities of white hairs. Lately, her fur is coming out in small tufts, a side effect of the illness. A dog who never shed before is now brushed once a day. She doesn’t seem sick, but where she once jumped several feet in the air for tennis balls, these days, she takes tentative steps on stairs and snow.

We willed her to stay with us through Christmas, the final celebration of the calendar year, nudged her toward New Year's. Incredibly, she made it to the big holiday, Valentine's Day.

After a few months, she responds less to her name; I think her hearing may be going. She sleeps so hard I can get out of bed without waking her as she lies next to me. Though her younger brother wants to play in the yard, she prefers sunbathing — we think the heat feels good on her joints. I sometimes carry her up and down the stairs to save her from arthritic pain.

It's almost the 4th of July, an entire year after the ultrasound, and I hope she won't be able to hear the fireworks, as they always send her into a panic. I've just received the paperwork to renew her pet insurance.

And I will.

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Photo: Anne Pinkerton

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