

Substantial Disruption



Forever Augie

By Mike Tully

Augie and I enjoyed our last drink together in the late afternoon, shortly before sunset. We were both middle-aged guys and we had fashioned our routines over the years, such as stopping every day to watch the sunset and share a drink. We "shared" when my drink was bottled beer. Augie loved to sip the last drops from the bottle. When I had poured all but the remaining drops, I would say, "Augie, drain the bottle?" He would look up alertly, see the bottle in my hand, and amble over to finish the beer. He looked a little bit like a nursing fawn when he did that although, as I said, he was middle-aged.

*The summer sun is fading as the year grows old
And darker days are drawing near.
The winter winds will be much colder
Now you're not here.*

Meg gave Augie his name when we brought him home nine years and a couple of months ago. She had just completed elementary school and wanted a puppy as a celebration gift. Meg (she let us call her "Meggie" back then) and Kris and I found a little black furry female puppy that Meg carried around in her arms for a few minutes and we decided to adopt it. Unfortunately the puppy, which did not look well, died over the weekend during the mandatory quarantine and waiting period before adopted pets are released to their new owners. We then chose an ungainly little male puppy with a skinny Labrador body and an oversized head that made him look cartoon-like. He had pit bull terrier in him, giving him a broad, imposing forehead and a formidable hinged jaw. His tail was that of a German Shepherd, and the part in between was mainly Lab. He was black, except when the sunlight caught his coat just right, and you could see hints of light brown. His wrinkled little face gave him an odd sort of Walter Matthau quality. He was tiny, vocal, and charismatic, and grew into a strong, handsome, dog.

*I watch the birds fly south across the autumn sky
And one by one they disappear.
I wish that I was flying with them
Now you're not here.*

We who presume to own dogs think we can decide to whom a dog shall pledge loyalty, but dogs have their own ideas about that. While Augie was always a special friend for Meg, he was also loyal to Kris. But it came about that Augie saw himself, me, and Spot as the core pack and acknowledged his ranking in the hierarchy. When we got Augie, Spot was already nine. Spot would last another nine years.

When Spot died last June, Augie was the lone dog in the house. He missed Spot, as I did, and he and I became closer than we had ever been. I work out of a home office, and Augie would spend part of the day sleeping on a pillow I bought for him. Spot used to sleep in my office. That became Augie's role. We had gotten closer during the decline of Spot's 18th year, but we bonded as tightly as a man and dog could after Spot passed away. We were each other's best friend and spent most of our time together. Augie showed Kris and me where to place a floor pillow so that we could reach back and scratch him while we watched TV. Like most dogs, he liked to have his ears, back, and butt scratched, his tummy rubbed, and his muzzle stroked. He loved it when I rubbed his jaw and massaged the area around his mouth and gums. He would close his eyes and smile and make soft grunting sounds.

*Through autumn's golden gown we used to kick our way,
You always loved this time of year.
Those fallen leaves lie undisturbed now
'Cause you're not here.*

The only place Augie could run freely was on Mt. Lemmon. We used to have a cabin there that was located next to national forest land. Augie loved to romp through the pine needles and crunch Aspen leaves in the fall. Most winters we would stay at the cabin when there was snow on the ground or, if we were very lucky, during a snowfall. Augie would bounce in the snow like a dot in a sing-a-long, and bury himself in snow drifts while twisting and turning his body and grunting in three octaves.

When autumn finally arrives and the evenings are once again cool, I like to watch football games on the bedroom television from outside on the deck. I just open the bedroom door, redirect the TV, and sit back in a deck chair. Augie would hang out with me, chewing on a marrow bone on a pillow. "We dogs watch football," I would tell him. He was always nearby, maybe within touching distance, maybe not that close, but always there.

He was the most vocal dog I have known and he taught me a lot about dogs and how they communicate. It took me a while to realize that his various yawns, whines, and other vocal sounds were language. He was talking to me. I never understood as much of his vocabulary as he did mine, but I could distinguish among "I want to go out," "I'm out of water," and, "Coyote!" When he was a puppy, going through the inescapable puppy adjustment period, during which nobody gets much sleep, he displayed a vocal range that rivaled Yma Sumac's. His nighttime arias were impressive, although we didn't miss them when he settled in after a few days.

Augie seemed comfortable in his role as the second dog. We came up with nicknames for him, including "Junior," "JD," "Oogie," and, oddly, "Farticle." He responded to all of them. We even referred to him as "Little Dog," although he grew far bigger than Spot and reached a corpulent 80 pounds until his final illness whittled much of it away.

*A gentle rain falls softly on my weary eyes
As if to hide a lonely tear,
My life will be forever autumn
'Cause you're not here.*

He was already getting sick during the final weeks of Spot's life, but I didn't realize it at the time. He wasn't showing much in the way of symptoms and I was focused on Spot anyway, who was slowly and stubbornly dying of old age. A month or so after Spot died, Augie weighed in with an eleven-pound loss. We attributed that to natural weight reduction, resulting from grief over losing Spot, increased activity as the only dog in the house, and a change in diet. He seemed happy and energetic.

Augie and I had a fine summer together, mainly just hanging out and performing our daily routines. I spend most of my time in the office. Augie would spend part of the day in the office with me. He also enjoyed being outside, especially at night, and was fascinated by coyotes. They seemed to be fascinated with him as well, because they would walk right up to him and confront him across the fence. I have a photograph of Augie and a coyote that I took just a few weeks ago.

Kris and I are a bit indulgent with our animals. Augie loved marrow bones and we would purchase frozen marrow bones for him every couple of weeks. He would have marrow bones all over the place, on his pillows, on the chaise lounge outside, on the deck. We would pick them up and place them in a bucket. He would scatter them all over again. It was a bit like picking up after a child, which might be why we put up with it. He obviously loved chewing on marrow bones very, very much and it was a joy to watch him be so happy and engaged. He would look up at us and smile. His pillow is still in my office and there is a marrow bone lying on it; same with the pillow on the deck. I can't bring myself to pick up the marrow bones yet, and I can't put the pillows, his feeder, and his water dish in storage. Not today anyway. Not just yet.

Kris had the butcher at Safeway cut a marrow bone for Augie last Sunday morning. It was the largest one we ever gave him and he chewed on it all weekend, day and night, until we drove him to the vet Monday evening, after he and I had enjoyed our last drink together.

*Like the sun through the trees you came to love me,
Like a leaf on a breeze you blew away.*

Here is one of my favorite mental postcards: Augie and I were driving in my truck from my late parents' house to our place. We stopped for a traffic light at Ft. Lowell and Country Club. Augie was in the front seat with me. A young woman in a car to our right happened to look our way just as Augie spontaneously kissed me on my cheek. I smiled, told him, "I love you, too", and the stranger lady smiled at our display. Augie was like that. If he was about anything, it was gratuitous displays of affection. How can you not return that?

A few days ago Augie and I were alone in the house, and I bent over him and cuddled him. Dr. Cohen had given us the bad news by then and every moment I could spend with Augie was precious. I put the rest of my daily life on "hold" so that I could spend as much time with my dying friend as possible. Kris and I did as much as we could to make him happy and to know how much we loved him. We also tried to keep things as normal as possible. Augie knew he was sick, but I don't think he knew he was about to die.

As I bent over and held him, there came those tears again and they fell on Augie and the pillow. Augie looked up and gently licked my tears away.

(Augie died peacefully shortly after sunset on Monday, October 24, 2005 at Catalina Pet Hospital. He had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and was already suffering. His suffering is over. Ours will go on a while. -JMT)

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(Lyrics from "Forever Autumn" by Justin Hayward.)