

Undelete Me

My family has always had pets. My mom loves animals. When I was little, we had two cats. First came Pumpkin, a marbled orange and white tabby cat. Then came Peanut, a small black, white and gray marbled tabby.

Together, Pumpkin and Peanut were a wacky couple, often chasing each other around the house. When we were young, Pumpkin and I would play-fight on the floor. I would curl up into a ball and put my head down, and Pumpkin would jump on my head and attack me with his front paws. Visiting relatives thought our antics were funny.

My family moved several times while I was still little. It was hard to make friends, and for years I was an only child, so Pumpkin was nice to have around. As we grew older, Pumpkin and I grew closer, but Pumpkin naturally slowed down. I'm sure all of our moving took a toll on him. After my family settled down near Hazleton, PA, Pumpkin had a nightly routine. He would jump up on my bed and use his paws to knead the blankets until they were tenderized to his satisfaction. He would sleep there undisturbed through the night. I talked to Pumpkin and got to know his mood swings, and learned when to leave him alone; he did the same for me.

When I was 14, my dad picked me up from school one day. When we didn't go straight home, I knew something was up. It was always my father's custom to take me on a circuitous car ride when telling me anything important.

"I've got something to tell you, Jeremy," he said as he parked the car near the small local airport, planes taking off and landing.

"Yeah, what?"

“Pumpkin died this morning. From what your mother and I can tell, it looks like he jumped off of my dresser and may not have landed too well.” The manner of death was suspicious to me, and still is. My father was never very fond of cats, and in the back of my mind I thought that maybe he did something to Pumpkin. But Pumpkin was old, fat and lazy, so the story was believable.

Prior to that, I had experienced a number of distant family deaths, but Pumpkin’s death was the first thing of its sort that was close to home. I guess I began to cry, as that is what you would expect, but my attitude toward death had always been somewhat undefined and non-dramatic. Of course, I was sad and disappointed, but I somehow knew he was in a better place. “Pet Heaven” I suppose. It just sucked that he died from a stupid dresser leap. My father was both stoic and comforting. We talked a little bit more and then drove home.

When we got home, my mom was in our dimly lit kitchen. There was a shallow box on one of the kitchen chairs in which Pumpkin’s body lay. My mom was already in tears as she saw me come through the door, her sympathy pouring out in the non-verbal hugs and back rubs that moms give in times like those.

I petted Pumpkin’s cold, hard body one last time as my crying increased, and my father said, “Your mother and I agreed to let you decide where to bury him.” I took this very seriously. I decided we would put him in a blanket, inside of a plastic bag, and then we placed everything in a heavy cardboard box, like a mummy.

I chose to bury Pumpkin in the woods behind the cranberry apple tree at the end of our yard, up on the side of the mountain. It was late January. I remember the ground

resisting breakage as my dad pitched the shovel into the dirt. A layer of brown clay finally gave way to make a space big enough for the box.

Later that evening, in a journal that I kept as a boy, I made an entry about the event. I drew a flag at half-mast, and wrote a note reflecting when Pumpkin died and that we buried him in “a place of honor.” Melodramatic, yes, but my attitude toward death was such that nothing much else was possible at the time.

I’ve seen pictures of me holding Peanut as a kitten while taking a nap in our pop-up camper. By the time Peanut was fully-grown, that cuddly exterior gave way to visible insanity, and almost no one - save my mom - could go near her. Peanut wasn’t much fun, unless you enjoyed torn clothing and the smell of *Bactine*. Sometimes you could pet her for a few moments, then a switch would go off in her small brain and she would turn on you, hissing and scratching. We always figured that she was mistreated before we got her, suffering some deep-rooted psychological damage. After Pumpkin died, she grew more reclusive, and was rarely seen except for the inevitable signs in the litter box.

To fill the void left by Pumpkin’s death, we moved on to dogs. Ever since her childhood dog Yogi passed away, my mom had wanted a dog. Dogs were never practical since we moved around so much, but when we settled down, talk of getting a dog began to surface. I think all of us were starting to grow tired of the acrid smell of cat litter, the responsibility of cleaning the box, and Peanut’s social problems.

My first dog was a large black Labrador that we named Kodi. He grew quickly and became a bear of a dog, hence the name. He was very protective of the family, especially my mom. Later, we got another dog whom we named Shadow. Shadow was a

combination of Shepherd and Lab, but smaller and fluffier than Kodi. Shadow and Kodi got along well and for a while things were fine.

One day between Christmas and New Year's, while I was at my grandmother's place, one of the dogs made a mess in our house. My dad, in a fit of rage, kicked the dogs out and they ran away. When I got home my mom was crying. The dogs were like children to her. But she was also crying because of how my father had acted, and because she knew I would be hurt.

Fortunately, Shadow came back to the house by himself after a few hours, but Kodi was nowhere to be seen. There was no telling where he could be. Nothing but woods and strip mines surrounded our house.

The next day, Kodi still hadn't returned, so my parents went looking for him. I don't recall being with them, but I can imagine what they saw along the side of the road that connects Jeddo to Freeland, where they found Kodi's bloody body. A car must have hit him the previous night. With jet-black fur, he didn't have a chance on such a dark road.

Kodi's body was icy cold from the December wind. He wouldn't fit in a box, so we placed him in a large, heavy plastic bag. My father and I went out to the yard to bury him between two pine tree saplings that were planted that summer. We just couldn't see dragging his bulky mass up the mountain. My mom stayed in the house to comfort Shadow, who was freaking out as if he knew something was wrong. As my father dug the large hole for Kodi's body, tears streamed from his eyes. He knew he had done something wrong. All kinds of ideas were going through my head. This death was more complicated for me. Pumpkin's was natural, but Kodi's could have been avoided.

Directly or not, Dad was responsible. This affected my perception of my father for many years.

After a few years my family moved from Stockton #7 to a more modern house on Pardee Street in Hazleton. Shadow remained a fun dog, and together with Jedi (a mutty mix of Collie and Lab, and the butt of retarded jokes) they enjoyed our large yard and the attractions that "city life" offered.

The new house had a back porch with steps descending to the back yard. After falling down those steps, Shadow was no longer able to walk very well. As his condition worsened, Shadow was segregated to the basement where he had easier access to the back yard through the cellar door, and where it was easier to clean him up.

I moved out of the house in 1997, so for several years I didn't get to see Shadow much. During holiday visits, Shadow's barking in the cellar seemed to beckon me to acknowledge him. He always seemed glad to have a visitor as he hopped around on three legs to greet me. My parents began to keep him shaved pretty close, otherwise he would fluff out and look like some genetic sheep experiment gone haywire.

A couple years went by, and my grandmother's health began to deteriorate. My grandmother's illness brought with it the responsibility of increased visits to Hazleton, so I would usually stop to see Shadow as well. These visits were strikingly similar, especially after my grandmother was finally deemed unable to take care of herself and put into a home. I say "finally" only because her own safety was in jeopardy, and my parents were tired of worrying about whether she was going to leave the stove on again,

or if she was going to fall down without anyone to help. My holiday trips gradually became a complicated task of "who do we visit next?" And as much as I love Grammy, the visits to the nursing home sickened me, with their strange smells, blaring televisions and obnoxious room colors.

Through these increased visits, I began to see that Shadow was showing signs of old age too; his coat had grown gray in many places, his eyes were beginning to cloud, and he began messing himself. His physical ailments inspired a song that I adapted from an old Mississippi John Hurt tune. I somehow knew that he appreciated my visits and occasional serenades. There are days when I know he only recognized me by sound and smell.

Fast-forward to a Saturday in October. My wife Audra and I were on one of our near-monthly trips back home to see family, and to hang out with friends. My brother Justin had just returned from Disney World with stories about being searched by airport security three times. Then my sister Ashley (17) told me about dating Nick, whom she dumped months ago, and how in the interim she had been seeing another guy who was 22 years old. I then listened to my dad tell me about how he was probably going to get laid off, and Mom filled me in on neighborhood news, and how Shadow wasn't doing so well. The whole time, Jedi was whipping his black shaggy tale against the floor in a psychotic rhythm.

After listening to everyone's stories, and updating them on my own problems, I was completely drained and ready to leave. Audra and I had dinner plans with a friend, so we said our goodbyes and walked out to our car. On the way past the side of the fence

that surrounds our house, I glimpsed Shadow. He looked worse than the last time I saw him. He let out a partially audible whimper as if to say, “Hey, this is it, I’ve had it... not going to be around much longer... better come say goodbye...”

But I didn’t. The fence that was dividing us seemed unsurpassable. He wasn’t able to hobble to the fence, so he just sat there looking like he was using creative visualization to move his carcass. I thought to myself, *He probably can’t even hear or see me*. Somehow it makes sense that I wouldn’t see him again.

On Sunday evening, I was fiddling with the DVD player in my laptop, and the phone rang.

“Hello,” I said, somewhat agitated from the laptop.

“Hi Jeremy,” It was my dad. “Your mother and I wanted to call you to let you know that Shadow has gotten considerably worse. Your mother and I are thinking about having him put to sleep.”

I was in no mood to make such a decision. I wasn’t mad that they called me. It’s just that I knew it wasn’t a decision to be making in my frivolous frame of mind, as I prepared to watch another Jay and Silent Bob movie.

"Can I call you back a little later when I can talk?"

"Sure, we'll be up late," he said. Suddenly, the whole evening had a different feel to it. It was somehow fuzzy, and the entertainment I was seeking after a frustrating week of job hunting and a tiresome weekend of errands didn’t really matter.

After the movie, I called my family. This time I got my mom.

“What does Justin think?” I had to ask that because, for a long time, I had the impression my brother wouldn’t go along with any such thing. When Peanut was on her last legs, Justin preferred to have her die naturally, and she did. But this was somehow different.

“Well, we asked him the other day and he seemed to be OK with it. Naturally we would rather Shadow go in his sleep, but if he doesn’t, we may need to call the vet.”

“What does Ashley think?” I had to ask about my sister’s thoughts because I wanted there to be consensus. My computerized mindset wanted there to be no null values. No blank sets.

My mom responded, “Well, she doesn’t want to talk about it at all.” That was understandable. My sister still wasn’t dealing with my grandmother’s hospitalization very well, and she always was a bit more distant when it came to things like this. My mind processed my sibling’s responses and own feelings. “Well, I guess if everyone agrees. I guess no one wants to see Shadow suffering.”

*Suffering.* That was the key word. The word I based my decision on, and the only word that I could process effectively. I imagined him messing himself, unable to move, whimpering and hungry from a failing digestive system, half-blind and probably half deaf. It didn’t take much to understand that as suffering.

That following Wednesday, around 11:00 AM, I checked my email at work and found a note from my dad that said:

*“We had the vet come to the house Monday evening to put Shadow down. This was the hardest thing to have to ever do. Your mother took it better than me. I was afraid she'd have a heart attack or something. I guess she thought the same of me. But*

*she was and has been very upset. On Tuesday morning we took Shadow to Lacey Memorial and had him cremated. His remains are in a wooden box similar to what a jewelry box looks like. It's decorated in brass with a lock and keys. We'll have someone make us a brass nameplate for it with his name, birth and death dates. We didn't simply bury him in the yard because we don't intend to stay here forever. Give your mother a call if you can."*

Then it hit me. You can't "undelete" when it comes to such decisions. Unlike the email that communicated the action, I could not cut, copy or paste my way out of it. My mental image was: Shadow on Saturday in the yard + the phone call Sunday night = Shadow in a box by Tuesday. And while a group made the decision, and I wasn't the only one affected, it still twisted my mind to get the news the way that I did.

I called my mom after work and she gave me some of the other details about the vet's visit and the cremation; how Ashley had to take Jedi upstairs to keep him away from Shadow when the vet came; how the needle was injected; how they had to put Shadow's body in the shed overnight because the funeral home wasn't open late enough; how the whole thing cost three hundred dollars. My mom was still pretty shaken up, but seemed to feel that we did the right thing.

Fifteen years after Pumpkin, my attitude towards death has gone through a number of revisions. The situation with Shadow was my first real exposure to euthanasia. Aside from a very moving piece on *NPR* about death row inmates, I never gave much thought to lethal injections. I've thought about the parallels between my visits to my grandmother at the nursing home and my visits to Shadow in the basement. I

couldn't help but see the similarities between how we treat animals and how we treat the elderly. I often wonder how much guilt I should feel over that, or if it is just to be expected. These emotions still go unresolved as I try to discern whether I am more concerned about someone's suffering, or more worried about my own suffering as I watch them die.