

Loki

He was a small, frightened, abandoned dog, left behind by some souse at a music festival called Moondance. That's where my daughter found him last year, alone when every last tent was struck, every last camper hauled away, almost every piece of trash gathered. He was confused, wondering why the people he trusted and loved would leave him behind.

At first, when he came to us, he was very selective of whom he would trust. No men made the cut ? particularly men with dark hair. Although she had rescued him, it took a while for the small black package of love to warm to his rescuer. Once he decided to trust one of us, he went whole hog and began to love us all.

I was almost instantly in his circle of trust. I don't know how I merited such a wonder, but I was delighted to visit him. He would immediately begin jumping as high as possible, wanting me to catch him and hold him. He wanted me to hold him every minute, only occasionally dashing off to check out whatever morsels may have been dropped to the kitchen floor. Like a well-balanced yoyo, he would immediately come back and reclaim his lap nest.

Yesterday was the fourth anniversary of my eldest daughter's death. My youngest daughter was there when Monica died, and in an instant her best friend and confidant was gone. When she called me, the first words she said were "Daddy, Monica is dead!" July 20th is an anniversary none of us wish to celebrate. Not only was it the day my Monica left us, but it was her significant other's birthday. It has been an incredibly difficult date for my youngest daughter. I cannot begin to explain how greatly I wish it had been me there in her stead.

But today just adds to our communal sorrow. This evening, little Loki left us. He was struck by a car. His head took the brunt of the blow, so his passing was swift. By the time I got to the house, Loki had already been wrapped in a towel and placed in a box. I was there just minutes after the event. Karen's family was in shambles. My granddaughter was sobbing so loudly that I could hear her from the driveway. Her young brother was shaking and crying, not quite ready to let others know how deeply he had been hurt.

Call it self-indulgence, if you must, but I went immediately to see Loki's little body in the bed of an old pickup truck I have given my granddaughter to drive. He had been partially wrapped in a towel and placed in a box.

Morpheus is a tricky bastard. I slipped into my old warrior ways. I lifted his tiny head and looked into his eyes. One iris moved. There was an almost imperceptibly slow final rise and fall of his chest. Because I wish to do so, I believe he knew I was there as he made one last attempt to breathe.

I brought his house buddy out to visit Loki's body. Great Shadow sniffed, licked, and then offered up a dog prayer, a thin whine that lasted minutes. Then he did as we all must do. He walked away and began to wonder what treasures awaited him in the kitchen.

As a family, we did what needed to be done. My granddaughter and daughter had a rehearsal to make, Lila and I had a different social commitment to keep, and my eldest granddaughter took my young grandson in for a few hours.

In the morning I will take a shovel over to the west 80 and dig another small, deep grave. I will wrap Loki in his favorite zebra-striped blankie, put him into an appropriate homemade coffin, and lie him beside his grave. Karen and the kids will come here around five or six. We will have a modest picnic and then each of us will take our turn with the shovel. I will be adding a little caramel popcorn tucked inside of his blankie, because he thought that treat was great fun. We will cry, hold one another, and roll some very large stones atop his grave to keep the coyotes and bears at bay.

Loki won't be alone on that ridge. Molly and Pepper and Toby and Little Guy and Harley and Blue and Cookie and Bayer are all there now, every one of them dearly loved and every one sorely missed. And, as happens on this farm, we will make frequent trips there for no other reason than to look over that haven and see whether this stone or that one needs to be reseated. In November we will spend days there, enjoying memories as we wait for some mythical, magnificent buck to wander into the scope attached to our rifle.

Loki was a very special dog, in his own way. Every pet our family has held close to our hearts is a similar treasure. Years ago Bea, the rat, brought tears to our eyes when we learned that she suffered from cancer and was in great pain. Yes, we put her down, but we watered her slide into eternity with our tears. So it is with Loki. We will water the wild prairie grass over his grave with our tears. We will pause each time we pass his little piece of Earth and say something to him that we know he can't hear, but it comforts us to know that our beloved friend is there, that his spirit lingers and kisses our cheeks with every twist of the wind.

Goodnight, sweet Loki. Tell God that you were a good boy and loved generously.