

Baby's Story

By Pablo Romano

When I turned 12 years old, my life took a significant turn. Just before starting junior high school, my family moved from a cramped apartment to our very own house. Never mind that we went from government subsidized housing to a predatory loan the likes of which would eventually collapse the housing market. I got my own room! And at 12 years old, with puberty already beginning to rage deep inside me, this was a blessing.

I didn't appreciate it at the time, but in retrospect, getting this house was a huge leap for mom. We were still living paycheck to paycheck, stretched taut and always in fear of breaking. My mom was relying on a combination of her paycheck, child support from my dad, my grandpa's pension, and once we were old enough, she sometimes relied on me and my brother to make ends meet.

Still, my little family thrived. My brother and I fought about half as frequently thanks to our new, independent bedrooms. And we would have dinner in the backyard, surrounded by pine trees, on this gorgeous wooden table my mom found at a garage sale.

However, the best part of all this was that we could finally get a dog. My whole life I had wanted a dog but we never lived in a house that would allow for one. A few weeks after we moved, I badgered my mom to take me to the county shelter. I was so excited, I could already envision myself taking this dog to play fetch. I pictured myself coming home from school to a wagging tail, to a dog just as eager to see me as I it. I think my mom expected we would walk around, see some dogs and go home. Instead, we spent three hours playing with dogs until I found the one.

She was quiet and stood in a corner until I squatted by the fence. The sign on her cage said two-year-old female terrier mix. She was shy and after a lot of coaxing, she finally made her way over to my outstretched fingers. She sniffed me and gave me a little lick and then looked up. We took her out to the shelter's patio and slowly, she came to life.

When we took her home, my dog's name was Harley. But we all hated it. So after intense debate, we settled on Baby. I wanted her new name to be two syllables and I wanted it to end in that hard ee sound. In retrospect, not the most creative name on the planet, but I wanted her transition to be easy and I felt that it was important for her name change to remain relatively indiscernible to her.

Baby was a big black mutt. Her fur was thin but dense and she had so much of it. She was a big fluffy dog, a cloud walking around on four legs. And she was a sweetheart – she loved

everybody. She was kind and warm and would always greet me with a kiss, sometimes even a hug as she stood on her hind legs and put her paws on my shoulders.

For most of my time in that house, Baby was a constant. In the mornings, one of us would let her out to the backyard and in the afternoon, she was there when I got home from school. She was there when I got dumped by my girlfriend of two weeks, the biggest heartbreak I'd yet to experience at age 14. She was there a couple years later when I asked my prom date out with a cake that read PROM? She was there when I fought with my mom, or my dad, or most frequently, my brother. She would jump on the bed with me and lick away the tears.

She was there when my parents died too.

My dad died first, just after I graduated from high school. After my first night in my college dorm, sharing a room with total strangers, I got a call to go back home because my dad was going to the hospital. They had called an ambulance and I was to meet them there. When I got there, a nurse pulled me aside and told me he died. The linoleum floor was reflecting the fluorescent lights and all I could think was that I didn't make it in time. He had a heart attack and died at age 50. I was 18 years old.

Baby was there for me on the weekends, when I went home to help my family and to grieve.

Two years later, when I was 20, I returned to that same hospital, this time chasing an ambulance across town. When the double doors of the ambulance opened, I saw them doing CPR on my mom. It was violent and painful and I knew it would end poorly. We made it to the hospital and spent about 24 hours waiting for her to recover. She didn't. Just like my dad, she was 50 years old when she died.

When I got home from the hospital with my brother, exhausted and scared and alone, newly orphaned, Baby was there to greet us. The cold that had begun to sink in from the day was met with Baby's warmth – and the warmth from that bottle of tequila my uncle brought as we sat in the backyard and started to drink.

The aftermath of their deaths is a long and complicated story that I'm still trying to unravel today. I'm still living it. But the years that followed their deaths while I was in college were some of the hardest of my life. I was a mess. I was trying to somehow not fail out of school while simultaneously dealing with life insurance and a mortgage. During the week, I stumbled through classes and talked to the lawyer about probate. During the weekend, I was drinking too much, partly because I was in college and partly because I was grieving wildly. I was going through the motions. Throughout this process, it often felt like it was me and my brother against the world. And Baby, of course.

That's a bit melodramatic though; we weren't completely alone. My uncle, my mom's brother, stepped up in so many ways. He took Baby in to live with him. He doesn't like dogs, but my aunt, his wife, she does. And so my uncle already had two dogs. Happy wife, happy life, he'd

say. He had two dogs too many, and now he had three. My brother and I were both in college and we couldn't take Baby.

I always felt bad for her, staying in a home that wasn't hers, grieving all the changes in her life. I wondered if she missed me and my brother, if she missed my mom. I wondered if she knew my mom had died and that she'd never see her again.

After my mom died, Baby's life became a hodge-podge of homes. For two years, she lived with my uncle. Then, when I was living in Argentina for a year after graduation, she was with my brother. Then my brother went to France for a master's degree and, up until I started medical school, she lived with me at my apartment in LA.

I remember the day when I realized she was getting old. We came home from a walk and she stopped at the stairs, refusing to go up. She looked at me as if to say, "I can't do this anymore." So I picked her up and carried her up the stairs. Gone were the days when she had reign of the yard and terrorized the squirrels who dared climb the pine trees around my home. Now she spent most of her time sleeping, her years catching up to her. We started her on medication for her joints. Eventually, the vet prescribed her pain medications, just in case.

All the while, I was flying across the country, pleading with admissions deans to let me study at their medical school. And then financial aid offices to keep me from drowning in debt. And before I knew it, I packed my car and drove to my new apartment, to my new future. I was to become a doctor and Baby was to live with my brother, who was working as a mortgage banker. We reasoned that this could work because she slept about 20 hours a day and he could hire someone to come in during the days and check on her. We'd try it for a few weeks and then readjust if necessary.

We didn't quite make it that far. He called me one day, his voice terse: "She's not doing well dude. She hasn't eaten and she barely drinks water. She won't stand up anymore and she keeps shitting herself. What are we waiting for?"

We are waiting for her time, I thought. I was hoping that she had another 6 months, or maybe another year. We were able and ready to care for her. But I was naïve. My brother's voice told me it was time; we just didn't want it to be.

So I drove down to Los Angeles and together, we took Baby to the vet. They did an exam and they agreed—it was her time to go. She was not dying, but she wasn't living either. She was hanging on to life, and only barely.

In an exam room, we laid down blankets we brought from home. The vet placed an IV in Baby's hind leg and began to push drugs. My brother and I sat, on the floor, right next to her. We were both crying silently and Baby, ever true to herself, tried to reach our faces to lick away the sad. The first drug set in and she lay quietly. We were telling her how much we love her and how much she meant to us and what a good girl she had been. Then the second drug went

through her system and her breathing slowed. Her breaths grew shallow and quiet. And then she stopped breathing altogether. And then she died.

I was not ready for her to die. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. She had been in my life for 14 years. She had seen me in love and in grief and every emotion in between. She was always there for me, in a way that a pet is. And I did my best to care for her with as much love and warmth as she deserved, all the way up till the end.

Baby's death was also the first time in my life that I saw death as it is often talked about in medicine. Baby had a "good death," the one many of us would ask for—pain free, surrounded by people we love. We got to care for her till the end, until she died peacefully. But that was also hard because she got that good death that my parents did not. I remember sitting in the vet's office thinking of my parents and feeling pain for the way they died.

On top of that, in losing Baby, I lost another connection to my past. I lost a link to the home that changed our lives, the home that gave me privacy and sunny dinners and a yard. Losing Baby was also losing a tie to our mom. Another death, another loss, another grief. In her passing, I lost a connection to a brighter, sunnier chapter of my life.

And I was left wondering, what happens when the connections to the past, to the people we love, can be lost? Like Baby, like that house that changed my life in my adolescence.

I fear that these connections will continue to disappear. I sometimes forget what it was like to carry Baby up the stairs. Sometimes I feel like I can't remember what it was like to hug my mom or hear my dad's voice. Other times, I fear that I'll get a call to go back to the hospital or that my brother won't pick up when I call him.

But I've also learned that this is no way to live, afraid of losing the things you value, holding on too tightly. It's paralyzing. It is the opposite of living.

So, a little while ago, I went to the shelter with my brother, and I got a new dog. My new dog is tinier and much needier than Baby ever was. And while Baby loved to chase the squirrels around the backyard, my new dog is actually the size of a squirrel. Sunshine, or Sunny for short, is a 5-pound-10-year-old chihuahua who dictates my life. She never met my parents nor has she been to the house that changed my life, but she cares for me in the same way that Baby did. And I do my best to care for her.

Because, in the end, I don't think we keep these memories and connections alive by living in the past, afraid to love and move forward. I think we keep these memories alive with our actions and our words and our breath. We keep these memories alive by telling the story.

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