

## FAREWELL TO A FAITHFUL FRIEND

By Richard Taylor

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When we first brought her home, I had to manually wag her tail. Friends who dropped by took one look at her and thought she was depressed, or heavily medicated. But, in fact, she wasn't. She was a champion show dog. A beautiful black, white and tan collie who had toured North America on the gruelling dog show circuit. Before she was three, she'd had two litters of pups. The last litter ended up in Japan. At three years old, she was so tired that the breeder decided to retire her into a real home. Eight years ago, our family also had been through a lot and was in need of more than a little solace. Eventually, we and Ruby helped heal each other.



My life in the past six months has been marked by a litany of death. Almost enough to outweigh the war that has been upon us. My wife Dale was friends with Bob and Bonnie Dagenais, the two Ottawa teachers murdered at their Gatineau cottage last fall. Five weeks ago, I lost my good friend Diane Stuemmer who only a couple of months earlier had published an e-mail dialogue with me in the *Citizen* called “Beyond Wanderlust” about our respective travel books, complete with a photograph of us.

To top everything off, last night we had to take Ruby to the vet to have her put down.

They say that death is the great leveller. Having recently turned 50, I'm officially getting old myself, and wrestling with the death of many people, and illusions. George Orwell once wrote, “At 50, every man has the face he

deserves”. I’ve pondered that scary one since Feb. 25, which is the same birthday as my hero George Harrison who also passed away not so long ago.

*The Long And Winding Road. All Things Must Pass, and all that.*

Despite the tragic, ugly aura surrounding their senseless killing, the touching goodbye to Bob and Bonnie Dagenais was a cathartic event for many Ottawans. The more optimistic souls claimed their virtuous life overshadowed their sudden deaths. Diane Stuemmer’s final wish was that she wanted to “die beautifully”. After sailing around the world for four years with her husband and three sons, surmounting the terrors of stormy seas, pirates, and at times the fearful uncertainty about her decision to risk her family on such a perilous enterprise, she was swiftly taken by cancer at the age of 43.

At the wake, I stared down at my friend as she lay in her coffin, serene. The hushed room surrounded by clusters of very personal photographs enabled family, friends, and well wishing strangers to sustain a little of the essence of Diane. Her lovely, glowing smile and spirit seemed to hover over the church service attended by a huge, pensive crowd, as though we had lost our own Lady Di. But because Diane had had the time to reflect about her own goodbye, she had spoken about her passing as a “transition”, not an end. In our email dialogue I had mentioned that there were a lot of waves in both of our books, and she joked, “Maybe next time around I’ll come back as a surfer chick!”

Having taught writing for years, I’ve read many dog stories, good and bad. But if you’ve ever had to put down an animal, you will understand such bittersweet moments. Like most good pets, Ruby was painfully loyal and gave unconditional love to anyone who uttered one of her nicknames: Ruby Duby Dooby Doo, Rubious Dubious, Sushi Dog, Doober Dog, or Woofie.

Several months ago we built ramps so Ruby could get up and down the stairs. For a time they worked like a dream. Then quite suddenly she became deaf, one eye clouded over, her back legs stiffened up and she was leaving puddles. But when you got into her hazy vision and crouched down with open arms, she’d hobble over with a wagging tail and let you give a soul-warming hug. So, of course, we kept her alive.

Then she stopped eating, started wheezing, dripping urine and foaming at the mouth when she slurped up her water. So we called the Vet, Rob, who is

also a family friend. We announced to our two girls that this might be the end.

At the clinic, we carried Ruby in and laid her out on a small stainless steel table where she lay as if resigned. Then we sent our girls into the waiting room. We could hear the younger one, Quinn, crying as her older sister, Sky, comforted her. When Rob came in he stroked her gently, and after some brief questions about her symptoms, told us there was nothing more we could do.

Our girls came in and took turns hugging Ruby, offering snatches of retrieved memories to help keep our dog with us in this world. Quinn didn't want to leave, but finally Sky helped her out of the room.

Dale and I stood over our dog, who just remained lying on the stainless steel table as though she were on her special bed. Rob returned, the consummate professional, quietly offering his own personal recollections of our dog as he effortlessly shaved a small swath of her front leg. He explained that it would happen painlessly and in a matter of seconds. While we both caressed the huffing ribcage, the syringe emptied into her vein. Her breathing stopped. She was gone.

For the last time our girls shuffled in, and we all had a good cry. The girls left with Dale to wait in our van. I went out to the waiting room to tell the nurse that I'd be by the next day to arrange the paperwork.

Just before I joined my family, I returned to the empty room where my dog lay in repose. The best place to smell a dog is behind the ear, along the soft fur of the neck. That was the sweet essence of Ruby. So I leaned down and gave her one last hug, inhaling the fur, whispering a beautiful goodbye.

Two weeks ago our neighbours, who had just sold their house, told us they had to get rid of their nine-year-old sable collie, Shadow. For years both dogs shared our backyards. During vacations, we looked after each other's dogs. When Ruby passed away we were only one week into a two-week trial period with Shadow. So now, beside my writing desk, is a big, lovely collie who makes it a lot easier to cope with Ruby's absence.

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