

Aidan's Battle with Osteo Sarcoma

The beginning

Working nights and sleeping days, it is easy to get out of touch with things going on around you. The things you see everyday, you take for granted. Until reality hits you right between the eyes.

I worked Friday night, September 28th, arriving home around 7am, my usual time on Saturday mornings. The first order of business, *without fail*, is to let the dogs out to potty. I have three greyhounds, all retired track racers, a German Shepherd, and a borzoi. Schtozie, the German Shepherd, we got as a puppy when the kids were small. I lost my husband to cancer, so I raised my two girls on my own. Rocket, my first greyhound, turned me into a grey crazy person, and I adopted two more, Aidan and Goliath. Aidan is the oldest, then Goliath, then Rocket. My borzoi, Chase, is the puppy in the pack.

So, open the sliding glass door for the whoosh of departing dogs, and automatically counting heads, 1,2,3,4..... "Aidan? Where are you? Come on, let's go outside!" Aidan was still quite comfortably sprawled on the couch, his favorite spot. But not jumping up to go out was out of the norm for him. I kept calling, not getting it, and he did finally, slowly get off the couch and head outside, but moving very slowly and almost stiffly. He favored one back leg slightly, kind of doing a little hop as he went. I put it down to his age, being 7 1/2, he's entitled to a little arthritis, right?

Coming in from potty time it's breakfast time. Now Aidan was definitely favoring his right hind leg, not wanting to stand on it, but putting his toe down for balance if he needed to while he ate. He cleaned his bowl, can't be a problem if he's eating good, right? While he was standing there eating, I checked out his back leg to see if I could see any obvious trauma. I keep a baby gate closed across the kitchen when I am gone to keep the long noses out of things and keep counter surfers out of the wake. I had noticed, upon entering the house, that the baby gate had been knocked over and wondered if he had been in the kitchen with the rest of the pack and if the gate had scraped his leg. No cuts, tears,

blood, wounds of any kind or scrapes to be seen. I decided to keep an eye on him over the weekend, and if he did not show any improvement, we would go to the vet on Monday, October 1st.

On Sunday, September 30th, I finally did see an obvious growth on his right hock, significantly larger than the left side. I probed and prodded and, brave boy that he is, he stoically allowed it all without a wimper. My gut reaction was "cancer."

Monday, October 1st, I called the vet for an appointment. We got in, got x-rays taken of the leg, and the vet was hesitant to call it cancer (I think she was kind of new) until a radiologist could look at the pictures and tell for sure. They sent us home with Rimadyl for pain for Aidan, and nothing but black nightmares for me. Results from the radiologist came back on Tuesday, October 2nd. Osteo sarcoma. My worst fears were confirmed. I knew I was facing the dreaded enemy again, but I had no idea what that meant. I began researching online and was horrified to learn that most canines with osteo sarcoma had a life span of about six months once it was diagnosed. Chemotherapy could extend that to 1-2 years. And the cost?

The first set of x-rays of the leg were over \$500. The next set of the chest to see if the tumours had metastasized were another \$260. Amputation was the next step. We were lucky that he hadn't broken the bone since pathological fractures are very common with this disease. The doctor that my vet wanted to do the surgery had an open the next Friday, 8 days later. All my friends said don't wait, find someone to do it ASAP. This type of cancer spreads fast, and every day counts. I called a place recommended by a friend who had lost a dog to this disease, and they could get him in the next Monday, three days later. OK, we had a plan.

I neglected to ask when I called to set up the appointment if they could do payment arrangements. I had no idea what kind of costs were involved, but this was major surgery, and it wasn't going to be cheap. Now, I'm not a rich person. I am not even financially well off. I live paycheck to paycheck, like a lot of people, and the cost of the x-rays had already cut into my rent payments. Monday morning I call as I am almost out the door to find out what kind of payment arrangements I could make with them for this. "We don't do payments. We can take a credit card or you can apply for Care Credit." She gave me the number for

Care Credit and I called and got turned down. I don't have any credit cards, I am already in debt up to my eyeballs. So, an emotional wreck and an utter failure as a pet owner, I call the place back and cancel the one chance my dog has for a little longer on this earth. I also call and cancel the chemo consult I had set up, since we wouldn't be needing it. Then I called back my original vet to cancel that surgery also.

"What's going on, Lori?" said the very concerned voice of the receptionist. So, I broke down and told her that I wasn't going to be able to do anything for my dog, just keep him pain free in the time he had left. She said that they don't use a credit company, they carry the note and they would work with me. A ray of sunlight through the dark! We didn't cancel the appointment, even though it was so far away. There weren't any other openings for that vet.

Tuesday morning, October 2nd, I'm thinking, I just have to keep this dog from fracturing his leg before the surgery. I let the dogs out to potty, go turn out the horses, and come back to bring the dogs in for breakfast. Aidan is now unable to walk on the leg at all, and I called the vet. They could get him in, so I fed everybody, showered and we got to the vet's office. When I said I thought he had fractured it, suddenly there was a vet available to do the surgery the next day, since Aidan had eaten all his breakfast like a good dog! So, I left my baby with the vet for surgery the next day. *I should have asked earlier if there was another vet available to do the surgery!!* I was too emotionally drained to think clearly, and I let my boy suffer through breaking his leg by not paying attention.

The next phase... living with a tripod

Wednesday, October 3rd, Aidan had his surgery. His right rear leg was amputated. Dr. Randy Webster performed the surgery, and I have the utmost faith in this man. He talked to me, literally for hours about Aidan's surgery, his prognosis and what I could expect once I got him home. The clinic encourages visits with your pet during recovery, and I was there everyday. I saw Aidan about four hours post-op, and it was a sobering sight. My exuberant, playful senior greyhound was extremely groggy, but he knew I was there. He tried to open his eyes and look at me, but he just couldn't keep them open. His breathing was labored, and just surviving the moment was taking everything he had. He was on a morphine drip. The stump was horribly bruised and I was not prepared for the sight. My beautiful boy, so handsome and charming in his own, unique way, was now missing a leg, and I had told them to take it off. What kind of mom could I be? What had I been thinking??

I had to keep reminding myself this was the only way I could keep him with me,

and give him the life he deserved, that I had done the right thing. I left him there and headed for work, and I cried for the 45 minutes it took to get there. I cried off and on all night, and people kept asking me what was wrong. Some I told, some I didn't. Some would not understand a person being so upset about a dog!

I went to visit Aidan the next day, and spoke with Dr. Webster. He wanted to be sure I understood the ramifications of cancer. I assured him that I had been through about all there was to go through when my husband died of cancer 15 years ago. Back then, they did surgery (his was a brain tumor), then radiation, then 2 years later, surgery again because it had grown back, then chemo. He went through the hair loss, the vomiting, the weight loss, and through it all his mind kept deteriorating because the tumor was winding its way through the brain stem so it could survive. After five years almost to the day, he passed away. It was a long hard road, and I could not imagine my poor fragile dog going through all that! It was so hard the first time. How was I ever going to get through it again? I kept saying, its just a dog. But anyone who has ever been loved by "just a dog" knows that that just isn't true. Dr. Webster assured me that if I were to call him tomorrow and say "put him down," he would do it without a qualm. His own mother was dying of cancer, and he knew the pain and agony first-hand also.

That day after surgery, Aidan was out of the recovery area and in a small kennel where his IV drip could be held up. He was still pretty groggy, but he was awake and quite happy to see me. I was able to open his door and sit with him, stroking his soft fur and scratching his ears the way he liked. He tried getting up, which bothered me more than it did him. The stump was very swollen and so bruised. He had bruising down the other leg also. Dr. Webster explained that the swelling would go down, I had to remember that this was major surgery and that all those healthy muscles had just been severed because they bone they had been created to move was gone. He reminded me that Aidan had been walking on those muscles, *running* on those muscles, just a day ago. And greyhounds have massive hind end muscles! Aidan was tired of being at the vet's and was ready to go home, and crawled into my lap while I sat there. I was literally pinned to the floor, afraid to move him because I didn't want to hurt him, or break anything open, and he was so drugged, I was almost afraid to move. One of the techs came and helped me get him back in his kennel. Phew!

All these questions kept running through my head. How was I going to keep the other dogs away from him when I got him home? How could I isolate him to keep him safe and still allow him back into the pack? I was going through a thousand scenarios in my head, settling on one, then discarding it for another. How could I protect him while I was at work? I had to go to work! Good God, I now had this humongous vet bill to pay for. My mind was racing and I had no answers. While my brain worked on those issues, my hands massaged my boy to let him know that I loved him and would be there for him. Again, I left him to go to work.

Two days post surgery, and I was asking when I could take him home. The vets

had done their thing, my responsibility was the rest of his life. When Dr. Webster asked about me being home with him, I told him about the other dogs and my concerns. He immediately suggested that Aidan stay the weekend at the vet's and we could work out getting him released the following week. The sense of relief I felt told me it was the right move for my situation. By now, Aidan was off the IV and back in a regular kennel run with lots of fluffy comforters to lay on. They were feeding him boiled chicken and hotdogs to try to get him to eat. Being on the morphine, they tend to not eat much, and Aidan had always had a good appetite. My boy had lost weight. He had gone in at 77.5 pounds. Only the last rib was visible, now there were four showing. If chicken was getting him to eat, have at it! Aidan now had a fancy blue flexible e-collar to keep him from biting at his stitches. I visited him for about 45 minutes before heading for work, massaging him, hand feeding him and just being with him.

Three days post surgery when I went to visit, I walked into his run and sat down, and noticed he had some kind of string in his teeth. I managed to pull it out, and yep, you guessed it! One of the sutures. I took a good look at his stump and found two more missing. I took it right up to the vet and said, "He needs a different collar." So, Dr. Webster put the stitches back in that night and Aidan got promoted to the stiff plastic e-collar that has very little give to it. Sneaky devil! So much for all my sympathy. Aidan was healing just fine, thank you!

By Saturday, the edema in his good rear leg was draining down so much his entire leg was swollen. The blood had nowhere else to go. It was being reabsorbed, just slowly. We massaged his leg to help the swelling go down faster. The whole leg appeared bruised. Aidan was managing to go outside and potty now and getting the balancing act down pretty good. Monday the vet called and wanted to watch him for one more night, but felt good about him going home on Wednesday.

So, the big day. Now I had a three-legged dog. How would I get him in the car? I would have to let the other dogs out the slider into the back yard, then take Aidan on leash out front. He would sleep in my room, and when I was gone since he has separation anxiety, I would put him in the kitchen with the baby gate up to block the other dogs from getting to him while I was gone. I had everything figured out. Except Aidan had other ideas.

When I got him to the car, I was preparing to lift him in when he jumped in all by himself, as if to say, "Come on, Mom, let's go home!" OK, maybe I am a little over-protective. We got home, and he jumped on out, heading straight for the door, whether I was behind him or not. OK, he's excited to be home. I opened the door and we squeezed in to the welcome of the pack. Busy noses sniffing all over, Where've you been? What's that smell? Dude, you look funny! I went to let the other dogs out the back with Aidan still on leash, and he was right behind them heading out into the yard, off the deck and down to the ground to pee. I held onto his leash, the other dogs did their thing, and we all trooped back into

the house. A few hours later, we tried to repeat the routine, but Aidan was first out the door, no leash, and a panicked mom in the house praying the other dogs wouldn't bump into him and knock him over. They all did their thing, Aidan attempting to learn a new balancing act with the bodily functions, falling a few times and jumping right back up to get it right with a better balancing position. His face said, "What, me worry?"

While I didn't believe it until I saw it, dogs have no self-consciousness the way we do, and without his back leg, he simply was learning another way to do it. There was no feeling of "I can't", just a "whoa! oops! that's better." My brave boy was teaching me quite a bit about life and living it. Kind of like Nike, just do it.

More on living with a tripod...

Finally, the first day of having Aidan home and me returning to work like normal. This was the day I had been dreading, having just gotten my boy home and now I was leaving him again. Normal? Ha!! Having picked up a second job to offset the cost of the surgery (my unpaid balance at this point being \$2987.86, and we haven't even gotten to the chemo yet) I worked Friday, October 5th at my second job (Wal-Mart, as a cashier) for 4 hours, then went to my "real" job that night at Oberto from 9:30 pm to 6 am. While I was gone, I left Aidan in the kitchen with the gate up to keep him in isolation but near the other dogs. I got home from the first job to find the gate open and Aidan in the living room on a dog bed sleeping quite comfortably! The other long noses had decided an escape effort was needed to free their long-time pal. Lesson learned. I put a chair in front of the gate's opening when I left for the second job!

Returning in the morning, all I got was a "what took you so long" look from Aidan. He was released from captivity to join the pack and the normal routine continued.

Saturday, when I got out of bed, as I was leading the dogs (or more accurately, while I was riding the doggy wave of bodies) to the door to let them out for their morning ritual, Aidan and Rocket bumped each other a bit too hard for someone's liking, and they started at each other. Teeth bared, hackles up, serious growls at each other, and they were on the brink of a fight. I, of course, was right there in the "body surf" to yell and get it under control. It was over before it started, and they all went out to potty, the skirmish forgotten, but it was a good ten minutes before my heart beat returned to normal.

By Sunday, Aidan had figured out how to get the e-collar off! I came home from an 8-hour shift to find him relaxed on his bed in the kitchen "prison" with a smug look. I do think it was partly my fault as I had been slipping the collar off regularly when I was able to watch him and I think the nylon tie had loosened enough to allow him to get out of it. Note to self: check the tie and tighten it if you want it to work! Overall, Aidan is doing superb. I think this is tougher on me than on him.

Our routine became this: when I went to bed, Aidan came with me and slept on a dog bed at the side of my bed. When I could watch him, he had his e-collar off. If I even thought I might get caught up in another activity where I did not have my full attention on him, he wore the collar. When I left for work, or to tend the horses, he was coralled in the kitchen with the collar on. When I slept, he wore the collar. I just couldn't risk him chewing out the stitches. Five days to go for their removal. The count down was on.

The change in pack dynamics

The change in pack dynamics has been most interesting. Before the cancer, Aidan was my "alarm" dog. When it was time to get up, Aidan would either jump on the bed and lick my face, then talk to me until I got up, or he would stand next to the bed and lick my face, then talk to me until I got up. I wish I had some recordings of the vocal soliloquy I would receive from this dog. It was unbelievable. Somewhere between a whine and a growl, yet musical and melodious, he was, quite literally, talking to me. Mixed in with the vocals would be much play bowing and tail wagging. Aidan told me when it was time to eat, and when it was time for me to get up. Working the shift I did, I got to bed around 3:30 to 4 am, and Aidan was quite convinced that he and the others would starve to death if I did not have breakfast served by 6 or 7 am. Greyhounds are, after all, so very thin, and making them wait to eat would undoubtedly cause them to waste away to nothing. So, my trusty alarm dog would make sure I got up to feed them so they would not perish if they didn't eat before 9 am.

When Aidan went to the vet after he fractured his leg, there was no one to wake me up. So, Goliath took it upon himself to be the assigned alarm dog. Goliath has a much different idea of how to properly wake up Mom. He whines for about 2 seconds, then barks until I get up. His barks are in groups of twos. At least, until he is afraid I am not getting the message, then they are grouped in threes. He is very definite about me getting up, but his sense of time is off so I usually get about an extra hour of sleep before his tummy sets him off. Not only is Goliath telling me when it is time to get up, but now he also has decided that he needs to get me up about every 3 hours so he can go outside. He doesn't necessarily have to go out to pee, once he just had to go out to the backyard to get the bone he left out there on a previous trip. Needless to say, my sleep time is now pretty ragged. Once Aidan got home, the new dynamics did not go away, or go back to the way they were. Goliath is still my timekeeper, and Aidan seems to be on vacation.

Also, prior to the cancer, Aidan had been the alpha male, almost by default. He is the oldest, and he had been getting cranky, which I now attribute to him not feeling well, what with the tumor in his leg. He used to snap at any of the others if they trespassed on his bed while he was laying there. At night sometimes, I would hear him admonish another for their transgression into his space. Now that he is a tripod, he is pretty nonchalant about everything. He is not arguing over

sleeping space, although he still has the exalted doggy bed in my room at night, and the others stay in the living room. He has also not spoken to me vocally since this whole thing started.

Aidan was never much of a cuddler either. He was more aloof than the others, although he enjoyed being petted. Now, he lays his head in my lap or rubs his face along my leg and doesn't pull away if I make a fuss over him like he did before.

Goliath was always a cuddler, and became even more so when Aidan was gone. With the look on his face, I knew he wondered if I had sent Aidan away, and if he was going to be next. I reassured him over and over that he was forever my dog, and that Aidan would be coming home soon. Aidan and Goliath are both more clingy now. Rocket is just his happy-go-lucky self. I sometimes think that a meteorite could fall on the house and Rocket would madly wag his tail and welcome any aliens that had come along for the ride. Chase and Schotzie do not seem to be affected, either, although Schotzie has always been the alpha female, and Chase is the baby. Their pack status has not changed. Rocket doesn't seem to care about the pack order. He is too busy playing or sleeping or enjoying life. Goliath is worried and I don't have any answers for him. I think Aidan is too preoccupied to really care right now, and as long as Goliath is performing the duties ok, Aidan is ok with it.

Suture removal day!

Friday, October 26th, Aidan had his appointment to have his sutures removed. The time was set for 1:30 pm. I ended up working until 6 am Friday morning, and got home and to bed around 7:30 am after feeding the dogs. Aidan slept with me in my room on his nice white sheets that I had just washed the day before. Goliath sounded the potty alarm at 9:30, so I got up and let the dogs out, but Aidan was still in bed. I went back to get him and saw blood all over his bed. With his e-collar on he had managed to wedge it in the crook of his thigh and chew out a couple of stitches. I immediately called the vet, and off we went.

Out came the stitches, and that particular spot he had chewed was still draining. A little drainage was ok, some hot packs would help it heal, and home we went. He did not need the collar unless he continued to chew at the suture site. Throughout the day, I monitored him to see if he was leaving it alone. If I couldn't watch him, he wore the collar. At one point after mopping the kitchen floor, I came around the corner to see him biting like he had fleas on his suture site. I yelled at him, and he gave me that look. I put the collar on and it stayed.

I was afraid we were going to have to make a return trip to the vet, and was thankful that on Fridays they were open until 8 pm. My folks came down to help me with a few things and we went to dinner. When I got home and checked on Aidan, who had jumped up onto the couch for the first time since his surgery, the

site was not simply draining or oozing, it was bleeding. Off we went again.

We got Aidan up on the examining table on his side for staples. The vet forced more fluid from the site and took a slide to check CBCs. The fluid was not fresh blood but older blood that had been prevented from draining due to the sutures, and with the opening it was running out. There was no pus, but some small clots of dried blood. After several minutes with three of us holding down my poor brave hound, two staples were put in at the open site. During the stapling, something went wrong, and Aidan came up off the table biting and screaming. We had to muzzle him to get the last one in and he was then able to get back down on the floor. The vet gave him a doggie bone and they were friends again. Aidan also got more antibiotics due to his counts being a little high. We go back in for staple removal and more chest x-rays in one week. The new x-rays will go with us to our oncology consult on November 6.

So, we are back to the collar all the time, and Aidan is settling back down at home. After 2 hours of sleep, I'm not sure how I managed through the day, but I did, and so did my boy. Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I could be iron woman by the time this is all done.

More problems...

We made it through the weekend, but Aidan's stump was still draining heavily. Too much, in my opinion. So, Monday morning we went back to the vet's office. The vet drained quite a bit from the "hole," and said, "yep, too much." Staples were removed, and now Aidan is again an overnight guest at the vet's, for at least tonight, maybe longer. The fluids draining are bloody and appear to be infected, so more tests are being run, and his anti-biotic may get changed to a new one. I don't know yet if *they* know what the cause is, but for now, getting him healthy is the main priority. I'll worry about everything else later.

Coming home to the rest of the pack, I got the once over again. "Where did he go? What are you *doing* to that poor guy?" Geez, gang, I wish I knew

More problems, part 2

While Aidan is staying at the vet they are putting hot packs on his stump 3x daily to help increase the blood flow, then manually expressing the stump through gentle massage in order to help drain any pockets of fluid that have built up. The discharge is thick and rusty orange-red in color. I had the vet show me how to do this so if it needs to be continued when Aidan is released, I can. Bacteria had already started to grow in the culture dish and the doctor was hopeful to be able to ID the bug to determine the best antibiotic to get rid of it. His fear now is that an infection might delay chemo treatments, but feels we should keep the appointment as they are hard to come by. Meanwhile, they have ingeniously extended Aidan's e-collar by duct taping extra plastic pieces around the outer rim

so there is no further opportunity for him to continue licking the drain site.

Aidan's appetite has not been as big as it was before surgery. At first I attributed it to the fact that his stomach might have shrunk since he went for about two days without eating while he was on the morphine. And, it did seem that he was getting back to normal initially, after a few days being at home. Then, after about five days or so, he would come in to the kitchen to eat with the rest, but after finishing about half his food, would retreat to the living room to lay on a bed and lick the stump. I had to follow him around and keep putting the collar on after he was done eating. (He had decided that he couldn't eat with the collar on, so it had to be removed during breakfast and dinner times.) I think the infection was starting to affect him at that point. If I took his unfinished bowl of food to the living room and placed it in front of him, he would eat it, sometimes finishing it completely, other times leaving a little. He would at least growl at the other dogs if they come close to him while he was eating, so he wasn't feeling *too* bad!

I visited him at the vet's the first night back "inside" and he hadn't eaten the canned food they had put down for him. I took off his collar and coaxed him to eat, by scratching his chin, head and neck, and basically begging! The new and improved e-collar is much heavier than the original version, so I think he gets tired of holding his head and neck up so much. After finishing his food, he glanced over at his water dish, oh, so far away, then looked at me very sadly. Yeah, ok, I'm a sucker for those brown eyes and I moved his water dish over in front of him so he could get a nice long drink without having to move. This guy is working it, but right now, whatever it takes to keep his health and spirits up is worth it.

Today the vet said they have identified staph as one of the bacteria. The problem they are encountering is that none of the antibiotics they have used on the culture seem to be getting rid of it. So, until they find something to kill off the bug, Aidan will stay at the vet, and I am back to being a relegated visitor. They may have to go back in to clean out whatever they can to eliminate the source. God, don't let this be too much for my boy, and give me the strength to end it when its time. I trust that Aidan will tell me when he's had enough, and so far, he hasn't. He is being such a trooper. He sure doesn't deserve all this. Come to think of it, neither do I.

Infection problems

Yesterday when I visited Aidan on my way to work, the vet had me wear gloves to go in to the kennel and touch him. They had signs posted on his door that said "Super bacteria, wear gloves." When I left, I had to wash really well, then use their anti-bacterial hand spray. Today, there is a footbath outside his kennel that you have to step in, and another sign that says "Treat bedding as parvo." My poor boy is really sick. He wouldn't eat for them today, and I couldn't get him to eat anything either, not canned food or chicken. He is depressed and lethargic,

and just feeling miserable. I gave him a good massage which he liked, and he was sleeping when I left. Tomorrow they will go back in and try to get the infection under control. He is on the fourth antibiotic in three days, as they try to find something to combat this. I will get the name of this one tomorrow, but the vet said this one has been known to cause a long term side affect having to do with the body stopping the replication of bone marrow. If he isn't going to live to get the chemo, side affects aren't going to make any difference at this point. The next step, if this surgery tomorrow doesn't help, would be to go back in again and remove the rest of the bone up to the hip. I just don't know if I can put him through that. If they can't get the infection under control, he won't have any appetite, and I am afraid he will lose the strength to keep fighting, much less face another major surgery in the space of two weeks. The clinic is keeping the oncologist's office updated on everything so they will have all the details when we get there for the consult.

More on the infection

The new antibiotic they have Aidan on is chlorophenicol (sp?). The bacteria is very resistant, but this drug was able to kill it in the dish, so we expect good things in the dog! I saw him after the procedure yesterday, in which they went back in to clear out and flush out all debrided tissue and any fluid pockets. What had happened is that the remainder of the femur, which they cut when they took off the leg, was still able to move around inside. The movement kept an area clear for the fluid to collect in, and as it sat, it became infected. Now, there is a drain tube in to help the fluids escape, and after scraping out the atrophied muscles and dead tissue, the poor boy should be feeling much better. When I saw him, they still had the footbath set up outside his kennel, and they told me he was still heavily sedated, but he got up when I came in, and he was able to get comfy with mom sitting there stroking his head and neck. He was still kind of out of it, but he was feeling much better, just tired. They are going to keep him over the weekend, and hopefully I will be able to bring him home before his appointment in Seattle on Tuesday.

Due to the infection still being in the active phase, they will not be able to start him on chemo yet, but I am hopeful at the consult that they will be able to tell me what course of drugs they think will work, and whether or not my vets will be able to handle the treatments so I am not having to drive to Seattle so often. Also, my sister and her husband will be making their annual vacation trip to Mexico in December, and I have heard that some of the drugs are much cheaper there. If the timing is right, we will get this thing licked. I just hope the infection clears up fast.

My special boy now has six vets who are actively working on his case. I think that encompasses the entire clinic that I have been taking him to! They are a wonderful group of folks, very caring and very good at what they do, and I am very greytful that they have been working so hard to help my Aidan.

I was able to stop in again today while I was out and about to visit, and managed to coax a small meal into his tummy and a full bowl of water. My schedule for the weekend will allow me to visit everyday, so he won't get lonely. He is looking much better today, although still slightly depressed, but with the appetite, I will forgive him for the despondency! I would be tired of being at the vet's so much, too. For the record, Aidan spent half the month of October at home and half at the vet's.

Good news and bad news...

When I went to visit last night before heading to work, one of the vets had just arrived after going home to cook Aidan some turkey and roast beef. I hand fed him quite a bit of the beef, and he did seem to have somewhat of an appetite. A few minutes later, another one of the vets said they had talked about the feasibility of Aidan going home. They did not feel that he was doing well there, he was not eating, and he only perked up when I was there. I could usually get him to eat some, but not enough. So, they showed me how to flush the drainage sites and sent me home all geared up. I took him right home, got him settled in my room and left for work.

The bugs that Aidan is combatting in the infection are highly resistant staph and an E coli bacteria. I have to use gloves when I flush the wound and when stuffing pills down his throat because it can cross species and I could get sick. I also have to watch the other dogs to make sure that they don't get any kind of scratch that these bugs could also infect. Aidan needs to stay isolated to help prevent that.

When I arrived home, Aidan had the e-collar off, and my bedding was rearranged. He had been sleeping quite comfortably until I got there. I let everyone out and we went to bed. I couldn't sleep very well due the sound of the collar bumping into things when he moved and I had to get up and put the collar back on several times.

He let me flush the site today with no reaction whatsoever. However, he is not eating. I brought some of the roast beef home, but other than a cursory sniff, no interest. This is not good. The vets' main concern had been that they thought he had given up. They hoped that being home and being loved would help spark his spirit. If he doesn't want to fight any more, not much that they or I can do will be of any help. I have this weekend to decide what to do for my boy. The consult is Tuesday, but if he won't eat, he won't have the strength to go through anything else.

Aidan, I will try not to be selfish and keep you here with me any longer than you want. I am listening, I love you, and I will move heaven and earth for you for as

long as you choose to honor me with your greyt heart. I will make your transition to the next life as painless as possible, when you tell me you have had enough.

New routine

After my frantic call to the vet to say he wouldn't eat, I rummaged through the cupboards to find something I could entice him with. What would he eat if he hadn't wanted roast beef??? I grabbed a bag of beef jerky that I knew he really liked and thought, why not? I had nothing to lose and oh, so much to gain. He ate the whole bag. Then half the roast beef, then a small pile of kibble! Thank God, my boy was going to fight!

This has become the new daily routine. Twice a day Aidan has his stump flushed with a 40:1 solution of 0.9% Sodium Chloride irrigation fluid (salt water). To do this, I have to convince Aidan that getting up off his bed *is* the thing to do, I lay out a great big garbage liner over his bed, lay down a towel, then let him lay down. I have noticed a pattern to this. Every time he gets back on his bed to lay down, he lays on his stump. So, with the plastic under him with no friction, I spin him around to the direction I need him facing, then gently roll him over. All this time he has no collar on, and he lays like he is dead. I stuff more towels under his stump, tummy and back leg, then apply a hot compress to his stump for several minutes to aid with blood flow. As the washcloths start to cool, I roll them down under one of the drain sites (there are 4). Then, we use a BIG syringe to draw up solution and insert it into one of the drain sites, press the plunger gently, and mop up on the other end. Each site is flushed, then I dry him off. This whole time, he has not moved, not even one tiny muscle. Then I collect all the washcloths and towels and head straight for the washer. I pull the plastic sheet out from under him, then I have to make him get up, *again* (have you ever seen a dog roll his eyes at you? I have), and I put down fresh bedding. All the dirty sheets join the towels in the washer and it is all washed right away with hot water, soap and bleach.

As for appetite, while he is not eating a full meal as he did before, he is eating several smaller ones throughout the day. I can get about 1/2 cup of food into him before he quits at least three times a day, and he was eating about 4 cups of food a day before. We are not back up to where he needs to be, and he is very thin, but he is eating. I am doing more laundry than I did when the kids were home, and Goliath is very jealous of all the attention his brother is getting. Other than that, it is just another day in paradise here.

Tuesday (Nov 6) is the chemo appointment and Wednesday we go back to the vet to have the drain sites checked. I am once again quite hopeful.

The night before the consult

Aidan has figured out how to slip off the e-collar again. He will get up from his bed, turn a tight circle to catch the collar edge on the bed or on the wall, then while it is caught, he will back out of it. Then he is free to do as he pleases. This is bad in that he is able to lick at the drainage sites, but on the flip side, when I got home from work and found him "free", he had eaten quite a bit of the dry food I had left out for him. Note to self: Tie the nylon and loop it through his martingale collar to prevent "escapes." This seems to be working.

He is still very blasé about being doctored, allowing me to hot pack and flush the sites with not even a muscle twitch. He doesn't like having the pills stuffed down his throat, but the pill pockets I am trying help. He ate them the first time, then refused them after that, so we are back to stuffing the filled pockets down. He is slow to open his mouth, but when I pry his jaw open, he doesn't resist much. I think he knows it is inevitable, but he has to put up a token fuss.

He has eaten about 8 cups of dry dog food since Friday, plus three slices of pizza. He won't eat the canned food I bought, but the rest of the crew loves it. He weighed in at 65.5 lbs before I brought him home last week, and we will get a weight on him tomorrow at the chemo consult. I am stopping at the vet's tonight on the way to work to pick up the cancer drug used in humans that stimulates appetite and is an antidepressant. I don't remember the name of it. The doctor is hoping that that will help bring him around faster. I think just being home has done a lot for his attitude. Tomorrow is the big day!

Chemo consult

On my way to work, I stopped into the vet's to pick up a prescription for Aidan of mirtazapine. This is an anti-depressant and appetite stimulant. After work, I grabbed an hour and a half of sleep and got up to get Aidan ready for the trip to Seattle. The animals were all fed, Aidan gobbled up the pill pockets with meds (yay!) and I gathered up all of Aidan's records and meds, and off we went. The drive to Seattle took two hours, and I had allotted three. We made a stop along the way for more coffee (for me) and donuts (for both of us). Aidan ate the plain cake ones and I got the chocolate covered ones.

I left Aidan in the car while I filled out his paperwork, and we finally saw Dr. Sarah Gillings. She explained the ins and outs of osteo sarcoma to me, and said that if we don't do anything from here on out, Aidan can be expected to live about 4 months. Chemo can extend that up to about 12 months.

There are three regimens she discussed. The first is doxorubicin hydrochloride administered by IV, but has heart muscle damage as a side affect. Aidan already has a heart murmur, so this did not excite me in the least. The second is more expensive, carboplatin, is also an IV, with minimal side affects. The third, cisplatin, can cause kidney damage and is an all day drip at the clinic. We both thought the second program seemed suited to Aidan's condition. The shocker:

each visit (and he would need treatments every three weeks, for at least 4 treatments, probably up to 6) would run approximately \$600-\$700.

We discussed the possibility of purchasing the drug in Mexico, where I had heard it was available, dirt cheap, and effective. Someone posted to the Greyhound list that their Aussie had been 4 years cancer free after using the carboplatin, called Lemery in Mexico. I will discuss with my vet. My sister and her husband go to Mexico every winter, and if I can time it right, maybe they could pick up the medicine and bring it back with them.

Bottom line is this: Aidan has bone cancer, and will most likely die from it. I have to determine how much is enough, as far as treating for him as opposed to treating for me. I cannot afford the additional \$4000 plus it will cost for chemo, unless I can somehow get the drug in Mexico and my vet can administer it. Other alternatives are that I find a way to make his last days as comfortable as possible.

When we returned home from the consult, it was naptime for me since I had to work that night. Aidan, sensing his status had somehow changed, whined at the side of my bed until I relented, got up, picked him up and put him on the bed, then we both took a nap. I was a zombie at work! Upon returning home, I found Aidan without the e-collar, my pillows on the floor, and my blankets curled into a nice little nest on the bed that was just Aidan-sized. Note to self: E-collar must now be looped continually to the martingale collar to prevent it from coming off. The martingale was tightened up a bit also, just as an added precaution.

That was yesterday, November 6. Today, Aidan got the drain tubes removed from the stump, and they were able to get some clumps of necrotic tissue out. In opening one of the drain holes a little better, something was hit that shouldn't have been and there was quite a bit of blood. Aidan was wrapped up and sent home. I put him in the car and went back to make the appointment for the following week. When I left the clinic, we had gotten about a block down the road when I looked back at Aidan to make sure he was not bothering the wrap and saw blood on the blankets. He had bled completely through the wrapping. We turned around and went right back, and now he is, once again, a guest of the vet's while they get the bleeding under control.

While he is away, I am catching up on washing bedding (his and mine), and taking a little breather. This has been more stressful than I thought it would be, and is taking its toll on both of us. The mental anguish is the hardest. Trying to decide if what we are doing for Aidan is in his best interest or if my choices are for my own selfishness is hard to know. Of course I want what is best for him, including minimal pain and quality of life. The minute I think he has had enough, I will do what I have to. In the meantime, I can only plow blindly ahead, hoping what we are doing is truly in his best interest.

Back home again

I misspoke in the last posting. The drug is called carboplatin, regardless of which country it is purchased in, and Lemery is the company that currently produces it.

Aidan is back home from the vet once again. His stump is wrapped up and he is suture-free. Tomorrow the wrap can come off and I will start flushing the drain sites once a day. We are hopeful to be able to start chemo in 1-2 weeks. Dr. Webster will be administering the chemo and it will cost half what the cancer clinic in Seattle will charge. The folks at the vet clinic have all been so supportive of us. They have discounted things for me to help lower the bills, but with chemo on top of all the rest, I will be looking at around \$5000 total, and still may have to put him to sleep if some things don't go right or if he has had enough.

Aidan was sent home today with another pain drug, so the new pill tally is this:

Three times a day: 3 chloramphenicol (1500 mg), two tramadol (100 mg)

Twice a day: 1 rimadyl (75 mg), 2 gabapentin (200 mg)

Once a day: 1 1/2 mirtazapine (22.5 mg)

Aidan has, of course, determined that those great chicken snacks have pills in them. Tonight when he got his doses (four pockets, totalling 9.5 pills) he ate one, then literally skinned the pocket from the pills on the other two. I guess we will have to go back to shoving the pockets down his throat. I may try getting smaller pockets and putting fewer pills in them to see if he will eat them, but as it is right now, with so many pills, I am afraid he will get tired of them really quick, and I think that expediency is better than willingness.

Aidan was thrilled to be home. He has flat out told me in no uncertain terms that he will not be left locked up in the bedroom alone anymore. I was feeding horses in the barn and could hear Aidan howling and crying. (He is very subtle.) He wants to be one of the boys, so for tonight he will stay in the kitchen while I am at work, and then he can sleep with me when I get home. Once the wrap comes off and we need to keep anything from re-infecting the site, I may continue that pattern. I just don't want the other dogs to interfere or bump him and start the bleeding again.

I am hopeful that, with the re-emergence of his vocalization, that he is truly feeling better, and will start to heal. It has been a month since he has made any noise at all.

A Turn for the Worse

Today was a very bad day for this poor dog. I arrived home around 5 am and gave him his load of drugs. We went to bed. He whined until I put him up on the bed with me. Then he cried and cried and cried. He was in some serious pain,

and he would snap at his stump occasionally. I stroked him gently, praying the pain killers would kick in quickly. After about an hour, he finally rested and actually slept for about an hour. Then we were up again for food, and back to bed and more crying. He kept looking at me saying, "Mom, make it stop." I only know of one way to make it stop, and my heart was breaking. I called the vet and we went back in. They took him off rimadyl and put him on derramaxx. It's a stronger anti-inflammatory and beyond this, there is nothing else to be done for him to make him comfortable. We have already increased the tramadol to every 6-8 hours from every 12. If he continues to be in this much pain, tomorrow we will pay our last visit to the vet.

The Final Chapter

How do you say good-bye to a trusted friend? Someone who has loved you so unconditionally for so long. They deserved so much, and being helpless and unable to ease their suffering becomes a huge burden. Aidan, my brave, noble, valiant boy, is gone. He waits for me at the Rainbow Bridge and is now whole and complete again in body and spirit. The pain is now gone forever, and my heart will have a hole for longer than that.

We had roast beef and garlic mashed potatoes for dinner last night, his last treat. He had his last walk today, and his last car ride. He has cried his last mournful, pain-filled cry. He slept with mom for his last days, on the bed! He was treated just like one of the boys and was so happy to be home with us. But the pain won out, and on a fluffy bed, on a sunny day with billowy clouds in the sky, Aidan was gently, softly and lovingly let go. I could not have asked him to go through more pain, and his agony was mine as well.

Good-bye Aidan. I know you know how much I loved you, and I will miss our chats. Feel free to visit me as often as you like. You will be in my heart forever. I promised to do the best I could for you, and I can only hope that I was able to live up to your expectations. Run free, my friend, with no more pain. Soar where once you hopped. The sky is now your only limit.

Post script

I would like to tell any dog owners about some insights I have gained on osteo sarcoma. I had 41 days with Aidan from diagnosis to death. 41 days. This disease is a killer, make no mistake. The tumor begins in the bone marrow, and from there it has access to spread throughout the body through the marrow. It spreads quickly and because it is centered in the bone, it is very painful.

In retrospect, with my 20/20 hindsight, I can see where Aidan had been trying to tell me prior to the actual noticeable limp that he was in pain. If I were sitting and reading a book, he might be laying on the floor by my feet, and every now and again, he would whine. It was nothing like the agonizing cries over the last two

days, just a soft whine. He would be looking at me the whole time, and I would talk to him, ask him what was the matter. Maybe if I had listened harder sooner, I would have been able to save him. I am not blaming myself for his illness or passing, just remarking that he was trying to tell me sooner but I was too self-absorbed to get it.

I believe our animals communicate with us on a level that we can understand if we only allow ourselves to trust our instincts. When I finally did see the growth on Aidan's hock, my first thought was bone cancer. My instincts were correct. When I thought, I have to keep him from breaking that leg before he has his amputation surgery, and the next day he broke it, I felt a little spooked by precognition. We have the ability, we don't have the trust in ourselves. Aidan trusted that I could understand him. We would have long conversations and I was always getting mental images from him. While I cannot prove this beyond a reasonable doubt, I know it to be true.

Pay attention to what your dog is telling you. Allow yourself to believe when you see an image in your mind that you *know* you didn't generate, it comes from your pet. If they are acting out of the range of their "normal" scope (and you will know it because you know your animal) *listen*. If you think there is something they might be trying to communicate to you regarding their health, take him or her to the vet. With osteo sarcoma, every day counts. Every *minute* counts. I don't think I really got that until now.

I find it fitting that Aidan's passing coincides within 2 days of my husband's passing, albeit 15 years apart. Veteran's Day will now symbolize a double loss for me, both due to cancers. I was blessed to be allowed to share my home and my life with both of them. I will grieve for Aidan for as long as it takes, and I know that my life is the richer for having loved him. He was a special boy and there will never be another greyhound who can come close. I still have Rocket and Goliath, but they are so very different from Aidan, which is also fitting.

The animals we love are entrusted to our care for such a short time. We do the best we can and they love us anyway. But always, they are gone too soon. Cherish the time you have, love them beyond words, and never forget how fleeting our existence is. Thanks for reading this blog. It has been a source for me of keeping my sanity while all around are losing theirs. The nightmare is over, and I will take the lessons I have learned from Aidan to heart. Peace to all. Hug your hounds.

Lori :)