



Tulip Van Denburg
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Tulip's Story....

I've been privileged to enjoy the companionship of many dogs. I guess that's good and bad. They've all been my best friends and provided me with wonderful memories, and with each of their passings the grief has been almost unbearable.

In 1997, when my wife and I moved to our retirement home, I lost what I thought was my last beloved dog. Mikey, a Bassett had free run of the house and property where we had lived previously. He had never been a leashed dog and, at ten, would not adapt when we moved to a location that required all dogs be on leash and in small confines. He became vicious and eventually had to be euthanized. The same year our calico cat, "Finally", suffered incurable cancer and had to be put down. It was not a good time.

The following spring of 1998, after a spur of the moment stop at Happy Tails (Ontario County Humane Society), I returned home with a calico kitten we named Monet for her painted nose. We both assumed that would be our last animal companion. Monet is a special cat. She has to be. I am a dog person and, while I've had many cats, they have never been close friends or companions. Monet became exactly that, and we have lived together contentedly.

In late October of 2004, after a routine annual medical checkup, I got a call from my Doctors office. "Everything is great," the nurse practitioner said, "except for one blood workup. It's probably a mistake but we want you to come in and have it rechecked." The next week I repeated the test. The call came back within days; the results were even worse. "There are lots of reasons your PSA could be elevated" said my doc, "But there is a possibility of cancer, and at the levels you're exhibiting I'd suggest a biopsy to rule out that possibility once and for all." It took a couple of frenetic weeks before the biopsy could be scheduled. It wasn't painful, but it wasn't fun either, then another week waiting for the results.

On November 26th 2004 (remember that date), four days before my birthday, I sat across from a stern faced urologist who stated, without fanfare; "You have prostate cancer." I had done my research in the intervening weeks and new this statement covered a gamut of prognoses. "How bad?" I asked. "Gleason 4 x 3, stage IIa or IIb". Not great. "What's the average survival period?" I hastened. "Three to seven years with your numbers, and depending on treatment," was his quick response.

The rest was a blur. Treatment options were tossed back and forth. There is no available chemo treatment for prostate cancer. The only viable treatments were radiation implants or surgery, Both killed the gland and had side effects. Surgery was more specific in determining the real status of the cancer (the biopsy is a quantitative estimate), and allowed for radiation follow-up if it was not successful in removing the cancer. I opted for surgery and spent another anxious month waiting to have it done. The surgery had a few complications but went well, if you like spending 5.5 hours under the knife. I went home after two days and was functioning with only minor side effects after a couple of weeks.

Cure is not a word that cancer patients bandy. Cancer is a cellular level reproductive disease and there can be no guarantee that all cancer cells have been killed or removed, no matter what the treatment. So we talk about remission. Oncologists will use the term "cure" mostly for psychological impact. Cancer patients simply hope they will persevere to die with the disease rather than from it. I knew this when I asked the urologist "How do I know if I'm cured?" His response was; "If your PSA is at zero and stays there for five years we consider you cured." The first PSA test was a month after surgery. It was not zero. In fact it was well above the trigger point for immediate follow-up treatment. "We'll wait a bit and test it again. It may be residual" said the urologist. "Sure" I said and made an appointment with a radiation oncologist at the Sands Cancer center. The next PSA test came back higher. I was becoming greatly disturbed..



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Setting up for external radiation treatment is more difficult than the treatment itself. At least that's what others told me. I spent many hours at Strong Hospital doing this preparation, drinking copious amounts of questionable liquids and squeezing myself through numerous humming machines. During the period I scheduled an additional PSA test "just in case". I had become severely depressed.

I had returned to work shortly after my surgery. It was a futile attempt to keep my mind off of my health issue. One day in April 2005 a co-worker came into my office literally crying, "Can you take a puppy? I picked up a Lhasa Apso from a puppy mill breeder, but my husband doesn't want him. I just can't take him back!" I called my wife. She grudgingly agreed that evening. When I approached the co-worker the next day she was smiling broadly. "Chris (her husband) has agreed to keep Buddy!" she chortled. I must have looked dismayed. "There were others in the litter" she offered, "and they're so badly treated." I phoned my wife, who was a bit relieved. I was not. It was a Friday I will never forget. On the way home from work I stopped to have blood drawn for that PSA test and then took a side trip to the puppy mill.

There were four Lhasa pups in a filthy 2x2 pen. All were older pups, dirty and nervous. Three were much larger than the fourth. "Why?" I asked. "Two different litters" was the reply. The smaller pup, a female, was a bit younger at 5 months old. The other three were all males. The female crouched in the back. The male pups picked on her constantly, her coat a matted dull grey from the wet newspapers that lined the cage. I'm a sucker for the underdog, and at that moment I forgot my own woes. My decision had already been made, now I had to convince my wife. "I'll bring my wife tomorrow". I told the breeder, "Could you please clean her up a bit?" That evening's discussions were continuous and intense. Adding a canine family member would change our admittedly free-lance senior citizen lives. We both worked as well as running our own businesses, hers as an antique dealer, mine divided between IT support and clock repair. Then there was the cancer. I think the latter is what tilted the table. My wife was worried about my depression and saw the pup as a way to perk me up. She agreed to visit the puppy mill the next morning, a Saturday.

The pup was out of the cage when we arrived. She had been washed and combed out and was obviously enjoying the change. Her tail, which had been firmly planted between her legs the previous day, was now over her back. She moved quickly around the room. She was obviously emaciated and walked with her hind legs weirdly splayed. But she smiled, she really smiled, and my wife was sold. She carried her lovingly as we left. We spent the afternoon at the pet store stocking up on the equipment we had disposed of after Mikey had left us; a good crate, blankets, leads, food, collar, the whole nine yards and nothing but the best. On Sunday it was a trip to the vet and a lot of disturbing news. She was able to be registered with ACA (not AKC), but her shot record was questionable, she was flea infested and had worms. Her internal health was questionable. Her splayed hind legs caused me real concern. The vet suggested it was probably due to extended time in the crate where I found her and where she couldn't stand and exercise her muscles. The hind quarter muscles had atrophied. There was a finite possibility that the damage could not be reversed. "Not on my watch" I murmured. She needed special food supplements and her regular food needed to be high in fat and calories. I took a big chunk out of my savings account without even thinking about it.

I was a beautiful late April day when we arrived home. The air was warm and fragrant and the daffodils and tulips in our garden were in full bloom, joyously soaking up the bright afternoon sunshine. The pup was happily cradled in my wife's arms. "Tulip!" she exclaimed, "That's what we'll call her! Tulip"! Tulip smiled again, she really smiled!

That evening, as Tulip snoozed on my lap, I had time to reflect on the last couple of days. I noted with amazement that the subject that had dominated my thinking for months, my cancer, had taken a back seat. I noted with great satisfaction that I felt good, really good. I knew that the reason was that ball of fur and flesh that lay contentedly in my lap. "I owe her a lot" I mused. It would be only a brief respite. My radiation treatment started after work Monday, the very next day.



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At 3:30PM the next day I arrived at the Sands Cancer center for my first of 39 radiation treatments. They would be five days a week with weekends off to allow my body to recover from the onslaught of high intensity x-rays. I had been warned to "bulk-up" as I would in all probability lose my appetite as one of the numerous, but hopefully temporary, side effects. At the reception desk I met my oncologist who guided me into the radiation treatment center. I was met by a staff of six smiling nurses and technicians who would support me and operate the myriad of computers and robots required for the treatment. They knew that I was nervous and worried. I disrobed, donned one of those famous hospital dressing gowns and, as I hoisted myself onto the narrow and cold stainless steel table, I asked my oncologist "What about that last PSA test?" He looked at me quizzically. "You know, I didn't check!" he quipped, "It's probably up, but I'll go and check right now before we begin."

After an unexpectedly long period he returned with a puzzled look on his face. "Sorry I was so long" he said, "I had to cross check these results. Your PSA is zero! It's undetectable! I'm not sure what's going on. We'll have to check it again. Do you want to go on with radiation treatment?" My response was immediate. "No, Thanks!" I jumped down from the table, redressed, thanked the confused treatment team and actually ran out of the Cancer Center door.

I had PSA tests monthly for three months thereafter. All were zero. Then it was every three months; all zero. Then six months; zero again. I'm now over two-and-one-half years in remission. The doctors still don't know what happened. I think I do.

It took me a while to figure it out. Actually it was several months after Tulip's first vet visit as I was going over her records in preparation for the next checkup and neutering.

Remember that date; November 26th, 2004 – the day I was diagnosed with cancer? It was also the day Tulip was born, and the day my cancer went into remission was the day we brought her home.

A coincidence? You decide. I don't think so.

Tulip, is a special dog. Her trainers, her dog sitters, or just her friends, have all mentioned that she is different and unique. I've loved lots of dogs, as I indicated at the beginning of this story, but I have never had a dog so unselfishly dedicated to me. There remain residuals from her puppy mill days. She walks fine today, in fact I swear she can fly when she's free to run! She is very timid about her eating, preferring to go into a corner to eat. The vet says the other pups probably stole her food. I have to be careful not to be loud or anxious when she is eating or she will drop her food, literally, and wait until I praise her. Food can be taken directly out of her mouth without any protest. She may be timid when meeting other animals or people, but only for an instant. Then she's your life-long friend. She is never aggressive, but very protective at home. Her bark means that she has noted something unusual and perhaps threatening. She will come to me immediately and require that I go with her to check it out. Then she remains "on guard" at my side until I tell her "It's OK"! She loves going to new places and meeting new friends. All I have to say is "Let's go for a ride!" or "Let's go to work" (when we go for training or a therapy assignment) and she is a wagging and wiggling bundle of joy, eager to be off on her next adventure. Her best non-human friend is Monet, our cat. They play and sleep together. Their play is a riot to watch, Monet being very much a cat and Tulip a proud dog. Should one or the other have to leave for an extended period the other becomes depressed. Monet actually moans when Tulip goes to visit a friend for a day or so.

Tulip smiles, to this day. You have to catch it. It's often fleeting. When you do catch it you'll note that it's not just any smile. It's a knowing smile, almost quizzical. "See what I've done?" she seems to be asking. I, for one, know!