

Damon Day

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### Toto with Muscles

Ten years ago, when I had just become a teenager and my family was still recovering from the loss of my step-father, my mother surprised my brother and me with a puppy. In an attempt to heal the wounds inflicted by our hardship, she thought an animal would be able to stitch some of those wounds up. We had owned two dogs in the past, so a dog joining the family was nothing new to us, but we didn't have the shadow of a clue what our new canine friend had in store for us.

Kirby, the name we quickly decided to call him because of his vacuum-like eating habits, was a Cairn terrier. If you have no idea what a Cairn terrier is, picture Dorothy's dog Toto from *The Wizard of Oz*, but with a black coat and longer ears. Unlike the brand of vacuum, however, Kirby didn't seem to have an 'off' button. When he wasn't in the house consuming everything out of his bowl and on the kitchen floor, he was outside hopping around the yard and sticking his nose into a million different places. While we were home, Kirby rarely left our sight. It wasn't long until his charm had turned us into best friends. Being the lonely kid I was, it was a friendship I direly needed.

Well into the following year, our family started moving into a house across town. With the sea of cardboard boxes that littered our front lawn, I decided to arrange them into a giant maze for Kirby, just to see how well he'd fare trying to solve it. Rather than bumping into dead-end after dead-end like I was expecting, Kirby simply gave the boxes a brief glance and jumped

over them, like they were hurdles in a foot race. I tried placing him several more times in the maze again, hoping he wouldn't outsmart me several more times, but he did exactly that. It was clear that this dog, despite his cute exterior, was a fighter. Boundaries literally weren't a concern for him. I think I really liked this dog.

Months later during the summer, after we had settled into our new home and I started working at my first job in drywall, I received a phone call from my mother while at work one day. She informed me of the tragic news that Kirby had just been hit by a dump truck out near where she worked. Because my mother didn't have the heart to leave him alone all day at home, she liked to take him out to work with her. On the day she called me, while she had the door ajar, Kirby had taken off outside and toward the road. Before my mother could call him back, he had reached the road and ran into the path of the dump truck. By the time she had arrived at the road, Kirby was lying on the side of the road, motionless, and one of his legs sticking out at an odd angle. Although the truck hadn't turned him into a pancake, he was presumed dead.

When I received this phone call, I was sure my best buddy of two years had just met his demise. I found concentrating on work that day to be excruciatingly difficult, because all my thoughts lied on Kirby. I just couldn't bear the thought that the good times between us had already screeched to a halt. There just had to be hope.

Well, thankfully, my hopes came true. Several minutes later, my mother called back to inform me that a miracle had just happened; Kirby had survived. He had also not just survived, but when my mother had him in the car and was taking him to the animal hospital, Kirby had regained consciousness and was sitting up in her car. He ended up suffering no more than a broken leg. My thoughts from moving day were reconfirmed; Kirby was indeed a fighter.

After the incident with the dump truck, except for a broken nail or two, Kirby went through a long period of time without a single injury. His adamant personality had also become more noticeable when he was confined to a small area. Every single time, like the canine-version of Houdini, Kirby was able to eventually break out of his pen, no matter how well the pen was fortified. The power he had within his legs was incredible, whether it was used to dig, climb, or jump. Packing rocks around in his mouth also seemed to become a new favorite of his for some reason, and he often brought several-pound specimens in the house, much to the annoyance of my family. Kirby was also determined to attack the lawn sprinklers in the morning during the summer. Mysteriously, my mother discovered one day that a few of the sprinkler heads had been entirely broken off. The antics of this dog could have filled several books.

As I progressed through high school, Kirby's personality had won over the hearts of many. In my sophomore year, I had made dozens of friends during soccer season, so they would often come over to my house. Kirby was an instant hit among all of them. He had always been a people person, but his popularity had soared to new heights. I don't think he could have been happier. I felt likewise.

Some nights, when I neither sought company from my family or my friends, I would hang out with Kirby. Although I wasn't very talented at it, I would play him music on the piano, and he would just lay down and listen, often falling asleep in the process. When I could sense we were both coming down with cabin fever, our medicine was a long walk. I would gain solace in these walks, even if we didn't really see anything interesting at all. Just walking along the trails with Kirby tagging along beside me was all I needed. True friends only need each other's company.

Eventually, we decided to let Kirby have even more fun, so we took him to a breeder who also had a Cairn terrier. A couple months later, the female terrier had puppies, and we ended up taking one of them home with us when the pup was big enough. Within a very short time, Tigger, the name we decided to give him based on his bouncy personality, was inseparable from his father, Kirby. As the months went by, and Tigger grew older, it was hard to tell which was which from a distance because they looked so alike.

Because Kirby now had a new friend to occupy him instead of us, and in combination of me growing older, I was beginning to see less and less of them. Because we were gone so often and they tended to be mischievous while together, Kirby and Tigger became outdoor dogs. Some days, I didn't even see them at all, except when they came up to the door from their adventures in our big backyard. At first, every single time they did so I would let them in and play with them a bit, but even that side of me started to fade as I became more preoccupied with my life.

Years later, my friendship Kirby had become routine, rather than spontaneous. I would let him and Tigger out in the morning, go to school or work, maybe take them for a short walk when I got home, and then at nighttime, I would put them to bed. As I grew into my early 20s, when I was busier than ever, the routine began to turn over to my brother. There were many days I didn't see Kirby at all. Often I would glance back at the back door when I heard him scratching to come in and visit, but I would turn the cold shoulder and do other things. It was evident my teenage self was history.

As Kirby grew even older and the wiry hairs on his chin turned grey, we decided to adopt yet another dog, a Bichon Frise named Dexter that once belonged to my aunt. We now had a trio hanging around our household. Unsurprisingly, Kirby and Tigger quickly accepted Dexter into their group. Although Dexter enjoyed playing with the other two out in the yard, my mother

preferred to keep him indoors. Often, Kirby would become jealous and try to barge in at every opportunity he could, assuming his alpha male stance of the pack. I assured Kirby, that no matter how many dogs we owned, he would always be the alpha male, both among the other two dogs and to me. Dexter would often try to battle for the alpha male position, but with minimal effort, Kirby was able to overpower him. He did this in a variety of ways, from stealing all his toys to eating all his food from his dog bowl. Kirby may have been old at this point, but his camouflage collar reflected the ongoing truth: he was a fighter.

This past summer, however, tragedy struck: Kirby was developing problems with his prostate. The veterinarian we went to assured us this was normal among older, unneutered dogs, so he sent us home with medicine to help him recover for a while, until the problems started to resurface again. Even though the medicine worked and Kirby was back to his old self for the next few months, just recently, his health problems relapsed.

About a week ago, we were horrified to notice a red bubble protruding from his rectum. After we rushed him to the animal hospital, we received the news that it *was* his rectum, and the veterinarian had to sedate him at the hospital to push it back in. Although I was disgusted such a thing could happen, I was also deeply worried for my old friend. It was then when I truly became to realize that it was very possible that I was going to lose him. The feeling hit my harder and faster than a speeding train.

The veterinarian sent us home with a bunch of antibiotics and some other clear liquid medicine that would hopefully aid the problem, but he told us we were most likely reaching the end of our road with Kirby. They could do further screenings and tests to more accurately diagnose Kirby's health problem, but because of his age, the problems were likely to resurface. Despite all this, however, he sent him home with antibiotics, a surgical collar, and some other

clear liquid that would help alleviate the problem. We could only hope the medicine would fix the poor dog up as long as possible.

Over the next several days, however, Kirby just didn't seem to be getting better. By this time, we had given Tigger away to a more active household that could look after him better than we could. I knew Kirby could realize this, because in the garage pen they usually slept, Kirby was becoming more restless and woke us up at all hours of the night, wondering where his friend was. Although he was still determined to be as active as he could be, his spirit was dying. His favorite trucks and cats he liked to bark at left him uninterested. Even his appetite seemed to diminish, which I think became the straw that broke the camel's back.

On Monday night, our family made the ultimate decision to put Kirby down. Deeply concerned for our old friend, who had now been with us for ten years, we brought him into the kitchen and took off his collar. We brushed him, fed him a treat, and then gave him his favorite ear scratches. Looking into his eyes, encompassed by white rings of old age, I could see his pain. He stared at us, turning his rear-end toward us, obviously begging us to fix him. It was heartbreaking to witness.

After an extremely long night, we woke up early the next day and took him to be put down. The morning was beautiful and completely calm. The veterinarians doing the procedure were nice and could understand our pain. After they injected him with the deadly dose, I saw the last signs of life leave Kirby's eyes and his legs become limp. Unable to take any more of it, I hugged my dog one last time and fled from the room. The world swam around me, surreal, cold and unforgiving. I hadn't expected Kirby's death to hit me so hard.

Since we euthanized Kirby, though, I understand why the loss hit me so hard. My mom's initial plan of giving us a dog to heal our broken hearts had done so in flying colors. Kirby had

not only healed our hearts, but reinforced them. His strong, independent, yet loving and gentle nature affected us deeply. I can't stop feeling guilt for those years I ignored him by the back window, or all the countless times I decided to play Xbox rather than take Kirby for a walk. I no longer have any opportunities to make up from those mistakes with him. It's something I now have to live with.

Kirby's example taught me a powerful lesson, and that lesson is to love those who are close to you. Animals, just like people, come and go, so we must cherish their present existence. I didn't realize how much of an impact he had on my life until he was gone. Absence does that; it makes the heart grow fonder. However, despite my sorrow, I have solace knowing his is at peace, free from all his pain and the boundaries he always hated. Although our hearts may once again be broken, life will heal them once more. No matter where life takes us, however, we will never forget the little black dog who changed our lives. We will never forget Kirby, the funniest dog for miles around. We will always remember Toto with Muscles.