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## An old friend takes her leave

By Francie Healy



**We said goodbye** to an old friend last week.

Her name was Briar and she was a collie. There was nothing extraordinary about her. She didn't save lives or enter competitions, except the one at the fair a few weeks back. She was awarded a red ribbon for being the friendliest pet. That was her most special quality. She was a quiet, loyal, steadfast friend to all of us.

I'll always remember the phone call from the vet. Dr. John Hall has a kind voice, as gentle as he is himself.

"Euthanasia is the only humane way," he told me softly.

Euthanasia. The word still stands like neon light somewhere in my brain.

You mean we have to kill her, I thought as he said it. Kill our friend.

We wept many tears all that night and into the morning. The youngest of our children, who had not known life without Briar, couldn't understand the injustice of it. Even the older ones assumed she would live forever.

And I, old enough to know better, to know a dog is only a dog, wept along with them. Asking myself when I was going to grow up. Asking myself when I was going to stop being such a mush. Asking myself when I was going to realize there are more important and painful things in life.

I know there are worse things. I know you're supposed to weep over the death of a person and not so much an animal, that you're supposed to hold your chin up and carry on.

And yet the tears flowed all through that night as I remembered precious moments, little snapshots of our lives: The Briar Era, we will all call it someday. When Briar died, it meant part of Us was over.

She was the runt of the litter, given to our eldest child by his godparents. We were there the night she was born, and held her in our hands, helped nurse her through the rough spots when everyone wondered if she'd make it.

During that first year she ate every book on our shelves. She had good taste: Thoreau's *Walden* went first, and then Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The living room was a sea of torn pages if we left her alone for even a minute.

We were patient, and it paid off, because at the end of that year we had the gentlest, most beautifully behaved pet in the world. She accompanied the children everywhere, slept in their rooms, persevered through pet shows and games of "house" where she was dressed from nose to tail as mother, father, grandmother, aunt, and next-door neighbour.

And when I was sad about something or had to figure things out, I'd go outside to the fields to think. Briar would come with me, not because she was asked but almost as if it were her station, her responsibility. She'd stay by me without making a sound, not asking for attention or wandering off. It was a silent communication. I always compared her presence to a good and sympathetic listener.

We were with her when the time came. We took her outside and sat on the grass. Briar leaned against me, her breathing laboured. And I told her, as you should tell a friend, how much I appreciated her loyalty and love.

And then, in a stainless steel room at Dr. Hall's, we put our arms around her while she slipped unknowingly into deep forever sleep.

She was only a dog. Just a hairy mass, a beast, a non-human. Why, then, these damned tears that still fall now and again at the oddest of times? Why this persistent ache somewhere in the core of me?

Maybe it's because the loss of a pet is the loss of a little corner of our lives. Far bigger ones are going to be chiselled away, but this is one I'll cherish for a long time yet.