



An Imperfectly Perfect Dog

By Corey Van't Haaff

FREDA'S UN CEREMONIOUS LANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF MY LIFE CAME QUITE UNEXPECTEDLY. It was the Friday of a long weekend in 1982. I was about to start a new job, had just moved into a small townhouse with a roommate and, at 21, was legally an adult anywhere in North America.

Freda's biography was not so hopeful. She was a two-year old German Wirehaired Pointer. She hadn't eaten for a very long time and her ribs and hip bones pushed out against her skin as proof. She had been hit by a car and was ready to be released from the veterinary clinic but had nowhere to go. I was asked—well, *begged* would be a more accurate description—to take her for the weekend and the animal rescue group would begin to search for a new home for her shortly.

I said yes. I picked Freda up at the clinic and was amazed at her ability to scramble into the back seat of my Mustang, not an easy feat given that her back leg had been shattered by the car accident and, with a lack of strength in any of her limbs, she moved along like a rusty pogo stick.

The two of us got home and quickly agreed on one thing: she was going to stay. She had a wonderfully strong personality for such a weak dog. She also had a small pellet lodged in the broken bones of her back leg; a memento from her earlier life. She was imperfectly perfect: tattered and torn, dominant, mischievous, and mine.

The next few years together, we were inseparable. She went with me to social activities and waited patiently in the car while I grocery shopped. I moved into a small rental without a roommate but with a yard, and Freda was happy. I traded the Mustang in for a station wagon so she had more room and I met a guy who would become my husband and

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prayed my dog would approve. She did.

One night, lying in bed, stroking Freda's tummy and watching her now meaty, muscular body wiggle in play, I felt a lump. Just beside one nipple, there was a tiny lump with a tail straggling behind it. It felt like a little kite caught under her flesh.

I took her to the vet the next day and he scheduled surgery. The lump was removed and was replaced with a word that terrified me: *cancer*. Freda had breast cancer.

To say that I was lucky that the cancer spread slowly is to give some credit to a disease that I had a long history of hating. I watched my mom die of cancer when I was 13. Mom's did not spread so slowly. She was gone in a few months. And I still wish I could have had just a little more time with her. But when it comes to a loved one's cancer, there's not much of a choice—you either get the anguish of losing someone too quickly or the agony of watching someone die slowly.

For the next few years, I became obsessed. I spent time every night searching Freda's body for signs of death. At least twice more, I found lumps at her breasts and each time, the vet would cut them out. There would be months of hope, where her flesh was smooth and taut, obliterated in a single moment when I felt *something*. I lived with this feeling of dread, knowing I could do absolutely nothing to stop the spread of her cancer.

One day, she started limping. It was that damn pellet in her leg, I rationalized. It was finally starting to bother her and time to get it out. I took her in, yet again, but the vet said it wasn't the piece of metal in her leg that was the problem. He did a bone biopsy and told me she had bone cancer.

It was a dark time. Amputating her leg meant weeks of pain for her followed by months of disability. But I couldn't bear the thought of losing her, so the leg came off. She had to stay overnight at the clinic; it was only the second time in our lives together that we spent a night apart.

And I was unprepared for what awaited me in the morning.

As I walked into the back of the clinic and saw my Freda with no leg, shaved, with an incision that ran from her side to her rear, I burst into tears. Carrying her to the car, I felt sick. Trying to get her from the car into my home, I felt like dying.

For two nights, I slept on the living room floor beside her, letting her lick water from my lips. It was the only way she would drink. On the third night, exhausted, I joined my husband upstairs in bed. An hour later I heard Freda bark and found her part way up the stairs, on the landing. My heart soared. She was going to be okay.

She lived, happily, I think, for almost two more years. By then, my three-legged dog was getting old. There would be no more surgeries, no more investigating for lumps. Toward the end, Freda and I would spend evenings outside on the back deck. I would lie on a recliner and my husband would carry Freda out and lay her on top of me, then wrap us both in a blanket. I would tell Freda how much I loved her and, I swear to God, she would look at me and smile.

I think the decision to euthanize a dog is an intensely personal decision that has to be made based on unique circumstances. I believed then, as I do still, that Freda chose life. She survived incredible odds and wanted to live right until the end. As her muscles wasted and she lost control of her bladder, I still saw that spark that told me she was happy to be alive. I thought about euthanasia and in this situation, I wasn't sure I could do it. She agreed, and died on her own, in the car on the way to see the vet.

In the dozen or so years since Freda died, I have continued to hate cancer just as ferociously as I continue to love dogs. But I refuse to allow it to rule my life. I have five dogs now; all female. And when I look at them I don't want to see daily checks for cancer. I want to see joy and mischief and zest. I want to see life and love.

And I do. ■

Corey Van't Haaff lives, plays and works in an old house in Port Coquitlam. Her dogs, Esmerelda, Tallula, Clara, Stella, and Matilda keep her laughing every day.



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