

Animal Farm

Category: Surgery

written by Sarah Liu | October 31, 2022

"A dog, a cat, and a pig walk in..." Sounds like the start of a joke, but it's actually the tale of my surgical attachment to animals.

A teenager with leukemia. Grateful for a ground floor hospital room with large windows, my dog just a pane away. Nose to snout, hand to paw, inpatient, outpatient.

Years of ups and downs, relapse, recovery. Dog still by my side. When he refuses to eat, symptom of a serious disorder, since this omnivorous canine ingests anything, including dog poop. I hustle him to the vet. An X-ray shows a mass in his stomach, which the vet surgically removes, puts in a vial, and triumphantly deposits into my hand: a two-inch rock.

Milestone reached, now officially cured. Just a suture sequence remains, first, a minor procedure, removing a Port-a-Cath. I'm in pre-op and notice my resident physician has the same last name as the Vet. "Are you related?" He laughs. "Yeah, that's my Dad." The next day I take the dog for suture removal by Dr. Mell, DVM, after my successful suturing by Dr. Mell, MD. The vet laughs. "You were in good hands." The dog days of surgery.

Thirty years later, swap blood for brain tumor, attachment from dog to cat. The surgeon for my first craniotomy makes a mistake, using staples rather than sutures for closing, a no-no for irradiated skin, causing osteomyelitis. A culture identified as "rod-shaped, gram positive," debridement, three months of Vancomycin administered through a PICC line, I still have a dent in my skull I call the "meteorite crash site."

The brain tumor returns, with the option of Gamma Knife or traditional craniotomy. Given my history of heavy doses of radiation, I'll sacrifice time away from my cat rather than a quick zap. In post-op, upon waking, my first questions are: "Did they get the whole thing out?" referring to the tumor, and "How's The Hoo?" referring to my furball. His photo taped to my hospital bed, right by the call button.

The third craniotomy includes a pig: a submucosal porcine small intestinal graft, replacing my dura, beneath the meteorite crash site. How fitting! I'm stubborn as a bull, not superstitious, but Taurus in Western astrology, Fire Horse in Chinese, "untamable," now literally pig-headed. A Goy, I still ask several Jewish friends whether I'm "treif" (unclean; not kosher). On the contrary, anything that saves a life not only takes precedence but is required.

A dog, a cat, and a pig all walk in to save a body. Surgery has a humorous side.

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