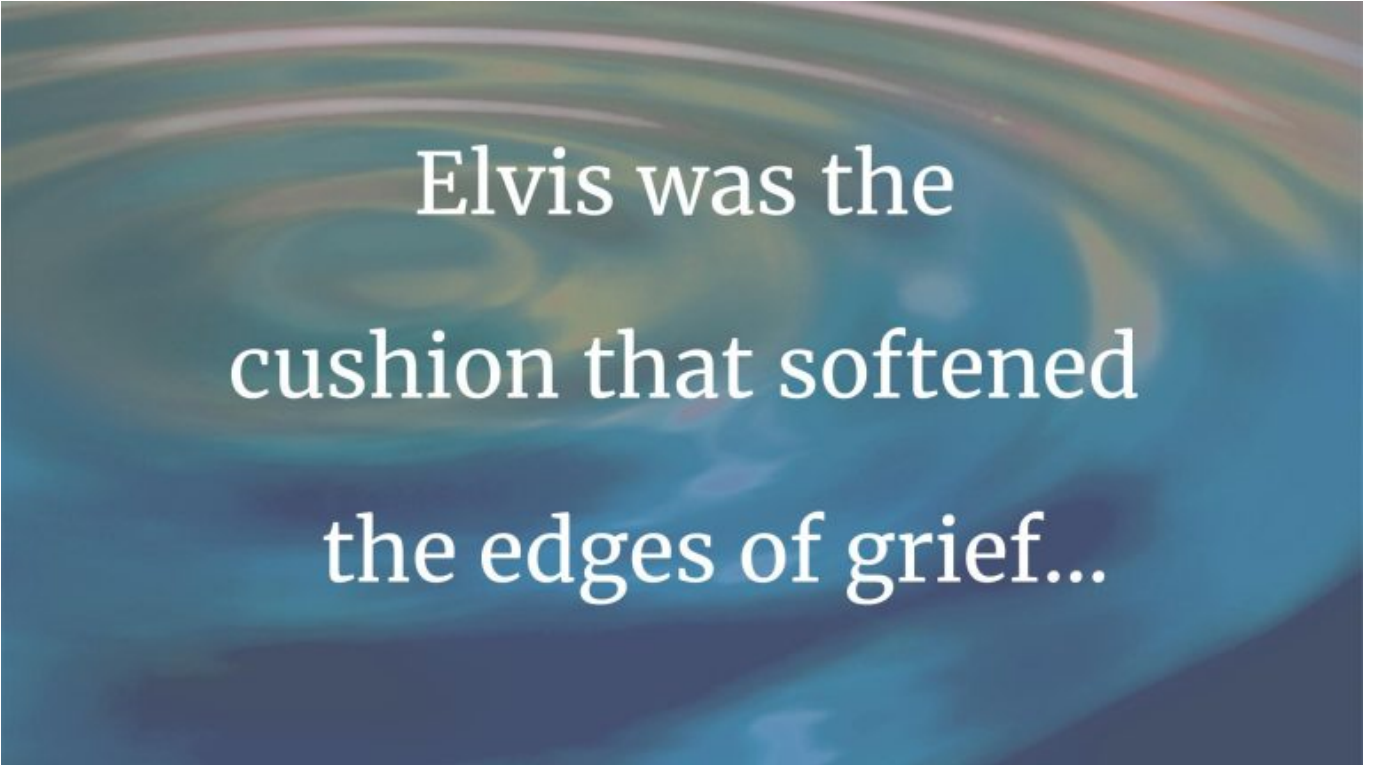


And Then the Dog Died

Category: Stories

written by Sarah Miller | October 7, 2022



Elvis was the
cushion that softened
the edges of grief...

Muscle memory. It's an amazing thing. It's what keeps my fingers playing *Für Elise* on the piano long after I've stopped taking lessons. It's the pressure I sense in the crook of my elbow from linking arms with my late husband. It's why every time I go for a walk I feel the pull of the leash from my dog Elvis, even though he too is gone.

Muscle memory holds on to real memories. And each time my muscle memory kicks in, I want to link arms with my husband, play Beethoven on the piano and walk my dog.

Two years after my husband Victor died by suicide, my eighteen-year-old shih tzu Elvis died. He was an old dog, plagued by a chronic urinary-tract infection and crippled by arthritis—most “walks” were in a doggy carriage. But his heart was strong, he wagged his tail, ate like a pig, loved car rides—and when he was having a good day, he still ran down the street toward home.

Until he didn't.

His decline in the last six months was steady, but luckily the end was quick. And luckily for me, I didn't have to make The Decision. He made it for me. Within twelve hours, he stopped walking, eating and wagging his tail. He was done trying, and he was done struggling, and he was just done. I'm glad I recognized it. As heartbreaking as it was, I let him go peacefully and on his own terms.

It's still tough, as anyone who has lost a beloved pet knows. Between muscle memory, habit and unconditional love, the death of a pet leaves a huge hole in the heart and in the home.

I always knew that my dog Elvis was the cushion that softened the edges of grief after Victor died. Elvis became my buddy and constant companion. I talked to him, shopped for him, took him everywhere I could and went above and beyond to keep him healthy. And as he got older, I didn't plan anything or go anywhere without considering the impact it would have on him.

And you know what? I could say the same thing about the last years of my husband's life. The caretaker role that I experienced with my aging dog felt familiar to me. I slipped seamlessly from caring for my husband as he struggled with depression to caring for my dog in his old age.

Victor's decline was also steady. And as he went deeper into his darkness, I didn't make any decisions, go anywhere or plan anything without thinking of how it would affect him.

I worked hard to get my husband help, to keep him positive and hopeful, healthy and alive. But it turned out that he too was done trying. He was tired of struggling. Of living with his pain. On good days, I try to respect his decision to end his life; on bad days, I replay what I might have done differently.

I'm not comparing the loss of my dog to that of my husband. The yardstick breaks when one tries to measure grief. But love is love, connection is connection, and emotions run deep no matter what the loss. When Victor died, the love I'd poured into his life emptied into the love I gave my little dog. And that love for my dog supported me through the most difficult days of my life as I grieved my husband.

Elvis was my pal, my companion, the cute little face I woke up to each morning, a source of laughter, and the reason to get out of bed and go outside. He was four paws of hope during the COVID lockdown. And there's almost no better way to start a conversation with a passerby than to have a cute little dog by your side—or even better, riding in a “baby” carriage.

And then the dog died.

That wasn't supposed to happen so soon. After the catastrophic loss of my husband, I wanted a break, a time to catch my breath before the next calamity occurred—a break measured, ideally, in decades. But the smooth sailing I thought I was entitled to after Victor's death, the period where there are no upheavals or catastrophes, vanished when Elvis died. It's a heavy reminder that as much as we think we deserve a break, there is no guarantee that we'll get one.

Muscle memory. It's not only physical, it's also emotional. Physical muscle memory is triggered by an action, emotional muscle memory by a memory: a photograph of a loved one, the smell of rain, a visit to a former home—or the death of a loved one.

It's been almost a year since Elvis died, and more than three years since Victor took his own life. When Elvis died, not only did I grieve his death but, thanks to emotional muscle memory, the pain of my husband's death—the exhaustion, the confusion, the despair, the sadness—all came roaring back.

But something else returned too. My emotional muscle memory reminded me of what I needed to do to help myself.

My previous loss, in essence, coached me on how to deal with my current loss. I wasn't starting from scratch with grief. I knew the drill. I recognized the pitfalls and how to sidestep them: Before I scroll through photos and videos on my phone, I ask myself, *Will this help me? Will revisiting our favorite places, right now, help me? How about that slice of coconut cake and glass of wine? Will that help me?*

Sometimes the answer is yes, but not always. Before I do anything that may be emotionally charged, I check myself: *Are my feelings too close to the surface?* If they are, I rethink what I'm doing.

The greatest lesson my previous grief taught me is that I will be okay.

So for anyone who's newly grieving the loss of a loved one, or even if it's not a recent loss, I offer these thoughts: Be defiant of your grief. Don't let grief get the best of you, because there is still life out there for you.

But it does take time and patience. It's a patience that no one has, but everyone must learn.