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There's a saying among Irish Wolfhound companions: A wolfhound will give you some of the best days of your life — and then one of the very worst. And it seems terrifically *wrong*. Here are hounds who like no other work their way under your skin and all through your heart. And then...loss. It's difficult to write about. It's hard to read. But it comes to us all.

You survive it, you work through the awful grief, feelings slowly come back like leaf buds in springtime. But you're haunted by the experience for the rest of your life.

You may be living with an older hound, your first, and you know the day is coming. You grit your teeth and flinch from the thought of it but...you want to know what to do and what to expect.

When to make that final trip to the vet is a deeply personal decision, but the best choices come down to quality of life. If your friend is ill, but still eating, still showing interest in his surroundings and doesn't seem to be in too much pain, you may decide to wait when you know they're in decline. You've been to the vet, gotten the prognosis, but your hound is still savoring something of his days.

But remember this —dogs hide pain and have a high tolerance for it. They hold it in instinctively because, in the wild, showing weakness was a way to be left behind.

In recent memory, I've shared final moments with three of my friends, Cuchulain, Gracie and Finn, and all three of them got old and one day, their back ends went down. They couldn't get up again. They stopped eating and became incontinent. They were dying. Their bodies were shutting down. We had a couple more days with them, time to hold them around the clock, to talk with them, to say goodbye. We kept our old friends apart to give them peace, but we let our other hounds sniff and say goodbye. One by one, they did.

Behavioralists are divided on whether [dogs understand death](#) and feel grief. The science crowd is always the last to admit what *we* already know: dogs know exactly what is going on. I think they have a purer, more natural and clear-eyed understanding of it than we do with our angst and doubts. The ones crossing death's door accept it graciously. The friends they leave behind, two-legged as well as four-legged, do indeed grieve and grieve the loss of their own deeply.

Finn led a [thundering chorus of howls](#) in salute to his chieftain,

Cuchulain, when the vet rolled into the driveway to our house that awful day more than a decade ago when Cuchulain lay dying. Weakly, Cuchulain bayed his farewell.

I know of hounds who stopped eating, lost all interest in walks and whose personalities changed for months after a close companion passed. We all process it differently and intimately.

We were fortunate with Cuchulain. The vet came to our house. After he retired, we had to take Gracie and then Finn to the vet's office ourselves, which is why we keep a study portable stretcher tucked away in a back room to comfortably get our friends in the car for that last drive.

Some companions know well in advance that their wolfhound is leaving. The hound is suffering from osteosarcoma or another disease where there is no recovery, only waiting until the pain becomes unbearable. They throw a party on the day they feel should be their hound's last before pain and loss of control rob him of his dignity. The wolfhound gets all of his favorite treats, goes for a ride to his favorite places, sees his favorite people and dog friends. It's a day of honor all for him and he knows it. It's a wonderful, life-affirming event for those who have a forewarning and while the dog is still able.

Most vet clinics have a special room set aside for euthanasia, a quiet place out of the flow of traffic at the facility, a place for you to be alone with your precious friend. Despite the gravity and shock of what is about to happen, please remember to make sure there are *two* shots administered. The first is a heavy sedative. The second stops their mighty heart. Some vets won't ask and may skip the sedative. Do not let this happen. Insist on

it. It's more humane for your loved one and easier for you as well.

And yes, the tears are flowing as I write this....

Before that first shot, hold them, say a prayer, give them a last kiss, look them deeply in the eyes and drink them in... Your hound understands what's about to happen. Let them speak to you one last time, too. Often, they'll tell you that they're ready.

And then let the vet know when you're ready for the first shot. And hold them as they fall asleep....When they're deeply under, the second shot is administered and in seconds....they're gone.

And your journey with this has just begun. Be kind to yourself. Take it easy. You're experiencing one of the most traumatic shocks you'll ever go through, a deep, dark, slow swirl of raw and crazy emotions. Remember, nothing you're feeling right now is wrong or unnatural. It's the power of loss and grief working on you.

Mental health workers now recognize that the loss of a beloved dog is in many ways far more difficult than the loss of a human loved one. Our relationships with other people are often muddled by conflicting feelings. Our dogs are often our closest friends. They give us all their love. They don't judge. It is a pure and powerful connection.

You may feel guilt. You could have done more, waited longer, done something different...No, probably not, but this is a normal reaction. With our dogs, we have the extra burden of grieving so deeply while so many around us don't understand. Not everyone is a dog person. Many will not have a clue about

what you're going through...or why.

Meanwhile, there's a hole seared through you. So much of our days involve our dogs, feeding them, going for walks, holding them on the couch, stepping over them on the way down the hall....and suddenly they're missing. I still look for Finn on my bed and it's been nearly a year since he passed.

Knowing that this crazy, awful thing that's hanging over you is something countless other dog lovers have gone through before, are going through right now or are about to go through...doesn't help. Not much. But find a dog-loving friend. Talk to them about it. Tell them about your loss. As much as you can, share with them. Dog people are banded together in this journey. We understand. We'll weep with you and for you.

And I fully believe you'll see your loved one again one day. Somewhere. Somehow. Because what kind of universe would allow love to bloom so vibrantly and deeply— and then snuff it out forever?

Finally, don't be surprised if your dog pays you a last visit some weeks after passing. Maybe in a dream. Maybe just a flash of a shape you recognize out of the corner of your eye. Maybe a whiff of their scent or a tug on your sleeve like they used to do... when there's no one around. A surprising number of people have told me about their hounds stopping by.

I was skeptical about this until one night Finn blindsided me with [a fleeting visit](#) and told me it was going to be alright. I still remember the scent of hay in sunshine, my boy's smell. I'll smile every time I smell it now. He's waiting out there for me when we'll run together again in fields of clover.

The crazy thing is, wolfhound people go through this every few years. Because we keep bringing [other hounds](#) into our lives — not to replace the lost ones, but to experience the bond in a different way again. Every wolfhound is different. They fill us up, then deconstruct us. And another fills us up again. What started as just “getting a dog” turns into a different journey altogether. They transform us.

The loss of our beloved hounds are a series of bends in the road. It helps you to go on if you believe that up ahead somewhere, they’re all waiting for us at the finish line.