



Walking beside you

A companion for the days around goodbye

1. A note from me

Hi, my name is Jodene. I'm a companion animal end-of-life doula in Calgary, which is a job title that didn't exist when I could have used one.

Years ago I sat on the floor of a veterinary hospital with my heartdog, named Bosco, and a decision I didn't feel qualified to make. What I remember most is not the grief. It's how alone the deciding felt — how much I wanted someone in the room who had done this before and could tell me what was normal, without telling me what to do.

That's what this is. Not advice about your animal, which belongs to you and your veterinary team. Just the things I wish someone had said to me, written down, so you're not holding all of it by yourself at two in the morning.

You don't have to read it in order, or at all. Take the page you need.

2. Where you might be right now

Most people arrive here at one of three points. None of them is further along than the others.

You're facing a decision. Something has changed — a diagnosis, a bad week, a slow drift you can no longer explain away — and you're trying to work out whether it's time. You're probably swinging between certainty and doubt several times a day. That is not indecision. That's love doing arithmetic it was never built for. *Start at section 3, then section 4.*

The appointment is booked. You know when it is now, and the knowing has its own weight. You may be counting days. You may want it over and hate yourself for that. *Section 5 tells you what will actually happen, plainly, so that at least is not a surprise.*

It's already happened. They're gone, and the house is the wrong shape. Maybe it was yesterday, maybe it was months ago and it's only now catching up with you. *Sections 7 and 8 are for you.*

3. The questions that don't have tidy answers

These are the ones people apologise for asking. You don't have to.

“Am I doing this for them, or for me?”

Almost everyone asks this, and asking it is the evidence you need. People acting purely for their own convenience do not lie awake interrogating their motives. It's possible for something to be right for them *and* a relief for you. Those aren't in competition.

“Will they know?”

They'll know you're there. They know your hands and your voice, and in the room that is most of what's happening for them. They don't have our anticipation of death, which is one of the few mercies in this — the dread is ours to carry, not theirs.

“Have I left it too long?”

If you're asking, you have been watching closely, and watching closely is the whole job. Most people I meet are far harder on themselves than the facts support. It is also worth saying: the fear of being too early is what usually makes people late. Both of those can be true.

“How will I know?”

Usually there isn't a moment. There's a pattern — more bad days than good, the things they loved stopped mattering, a look you can't unsee. It may even be a long-held gaze between you and your pet. Section 4 is a

way of seeing the pattern instead of the day.

“Will I be able to bear it?”

Yes. Not comfortably, and not without cost. But people do this every day and go on to be alright (on their own schedule), and you will be one of them.

4. The three things

When every day is a referendum, you stop being able to see the shape of things. This helps.

Pick **three things** that are unmistakably your animal — not survival markers, but the things that make them themselves. Greeting you at the door. The particular way they lie in the sun. Wanting the ball. Asking for their 7pm treat. Always being excited and willing to go for a walk or a car ride. Asking to be near you.

Write them down. Then each evening, mark whether each one happened today. Nothing more. It takes a few seconds.

After two weeks you will not have a decision, but you will have a picture — and the picture is far more honest than memory, which weighs the good days heavily because you needed them to.

The Quality of Life Tracker on my website does this properly, with seven things to notice and a page at the end for reading it back. It's free for you and your whole family to utilize.

5. What a euthanasia appointment involves

This isn't always explained clearly, and if it is, it may be at the actual appointment when you're in no state to comprehend what you're hearing.

When you arrive. If the veterinary team doesn't ask you to settle the bill in advance, please ask them. That way, nothing is asked of you afterwards. They will most likely have a checklist of aftercare options available to you such as private or communal cremation, whether you would like ink prints, fur clipping, or clay impressions. It's a lot to go through while you are feeling as raw as you are, but it's all necessary. The team is trained for this, and they feel your pain. By asking these questions prior to getting started, they are actually being the most compassionate they can possibly be. Believe me — they're professional, but they are also holding back tears. When the paperwork is complete, you can ask how much time you'll have, and whether there's a quieter entrance or a calmer time of day. Bring what you want with you: their own blanket, a favourite toy, a treat they're finally allowed. Bring someone to drive you home if you can.

A quiet room, and time. You'll usually be taken somewhere private and if the clinic and its schedule allows, you'll be given as long as you need. You do not have to hurry, and you can ask for more time. You will most likely see a comfy blanket on the floor or couch, with a puppy pee-pad on it. There may be calm music playing, dimmed lights, and even snacks such as chocolate kisses.

Sedation first. In most cases your pet will be given a sedative so they become deeply relaxed and sleepy before anything else happens. This is the part where they let go of the day. Many families find it the most peaceful moment. This can take seconds to take effect, or minutes. You will slowly see your pet's eyes close, and may even hear that beloved sleepy *sighhhhh* as they drift off. The veterinarian or their designated team member will check in with you to see if you are ready for the next step.

The next step is the final injection into a vein on one of their easily-accessible legs. Do not be surprised if the veterinarian has to try with more than one vein. Once the needle is properly placed, and you give the go-ahead, the serum is injected. It works quickly, often within seconds. Your vet will listen, and tell you when they've gone. They will then ask if you would like to be left alone.

Let other pets say goodbye. Animals understand the permanence of death — what they do not understand is one of their pack suddenly disappearing. If at all possible, bring any other dogs with you so they can sniff your deceased pet.

Things that frighten people, and are normal

A last deep breath or two afterwards. Small muscle twitches. Eyes staying open. Bladder or bowel emptying. None of these mean anything went wrong, and none mean your animal felt it. Your veterinary team has seen all of it many times — ask them (perhaps at a different time, this time is yours), and they'll tell you.

Afterwards. You can stay. There's no rush and no correct amount of time. Most clinics will ask you to notify their receptionist when you leave, so your pet isn't left alone.

6. Talking to children

Children handle the truth better than they handle confusion. Here are some notes to help the conversation.

Say “died”. Not “put to sleep”, “gone away”, or “lost”. Those are kind instincts that create a child who's frightened of bedtime, or waiting at the window. Plain words are the gentler option even though they don't feel like it at the time.

Under about 7 years old. Very concrete. *Her body stopped working. His body doesn't hurt him anymore. She isn't coming back.* If you believe in the story of the Rainbow Bridge, say *her spirit has crossed over the Rainbow Bridge*. Expect the same question repeatedly — that's how this age processes, not distress. Expect play to continue between waves of grief; that's healthy, not callous.

Roughly 8 to 12 years old. They understand permanence and will want mechanics — how it works, whether it hurt, whether it was their fault. Answer honestly. This is the age most likely to carry silent guilt about something they did or didn't do.

Teenagers. May look unbothered and be devastated. Don't require them to grieve visibly. Offer a way in that isn't a face-to-face conversation — a drive, a walk, a message. It is important they know that however they grieve is the correct way for them, and you are there for them.

All ages. Let them choose whether to be there or to see the body. Either is alright. Don't get a replacement animal quickly to soften it.

There are longer guides for each age band on my website, including activity books for younger children.

7. What helps in the first week

Small and achievable. Not a programme.

- **Eat and drink something**, even when you don't want to. Grief is physical and dehydration makes everything worse
- **Let the routine hold you.** The other animals still need to be cared for, the kids need to be driven places, you need to work. Being made to go outside is not nothing
- **Decide nothing permanent.** Not the bed, not the bowls, not the toys, and not another animal. There's no deadline on any of it
- **Tell one person the truth** about how bad it is. One is enough
- **Expect it in waves**, and expect them at inconvenient moments — the shop that sells their food, an empty patch of floor, the time of day you used to walk, a ball of fur you find behind the dryer months later

- **Write down something you're afraid of forgetting.** The sound of their feet on the floor. What they did when you came home
- **Let the other animals see you.** They read the house, and pretending is harder than being honest

If you can't do any of this, that's alright too. Getting through the day is a sufficient achievement.

8. What people will say, and what to do with it

Most people mean well and have no idea what to say, so they say the thing they heard someone else say.

- “*At least they had a good life.*” Usually true, and useless right now
- “*It was just a dog.*” This one comes from people who have never had one
- “*Are you going to get another?*” Almost never meant unkindly, almost always lands badly
- “*You did the right thing.*” Genuinely meant, and sometimes hard to receive when you're not sure

What to do with it. You are allowed to say “*I'm not ready to talk about it.*” You are allowed to leave. And you're allowed to stop explaining yourself to people who need convincing that this is a real loss.

Why this is harder than people expect. Grief for an animal is often *disenfranchised* — a real bereavement that the world doesn't offer the scaffolding for. No leave, no ceremony, no casseroles on the front stoop. Your grief isn't disproportionate, the recognition of it is.

9. Where to go next

The Quality of Life Tracker — free, no sign-up required.

A conversation — 15 to 20 minutes, phone or video, and it costs nothing. Not a sales call. Most people don't arrive knowing what they need, and working that out is what the conversation is for.

The full Resource Kit — for families I work with: the grief journal, the age-specific guides, sudden loss, multi-pet households, and website suggestions for ordering keepsakes, if desired.

pawsandpresence.ca · jodene@pawsandpresence.ca · 403.605.8466

10. What this is, and what it isn't

This work is psychoeducational and doula-based: grief education, compassionate presence, end-of-life planning support, and resource navigation.

It is **not** clinical counselling or psychotherapy, not diagnosis or treatment of any mental health condition, not crisis intervention, and not veterinary medical advice. My role sits *around* the care your veterinary team provides, never inside it. Every decision about your animal's health remains between you and your vet.

If what you're carrying needs a registered therapist, I'll say so and help you find one. That isn't a failure of this work; it's part of it.

If you are in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text **988** (Suicide Crisis Helpline, Canada), call 911, or go to your nearest emergency department.