

GRIEF SEQUENCE

Jennifer Perrine

First the baby died, then the dog died. That's what I wanted to say when people asked me what was wrong, or how I was doing.

The dog was a Corgi, thirty pounds, as big as a toddler. The baby was as big as a plum—half an ounce, according to the doctor. I was only three months along, hadn't even told Andy yet. I knew miscarriages were common, especially at my age. I didn't want him to suffer if we lost it. Now he doesn't even know there was anything to lose.

I don't know why I didn't tell him afterward, on the days when I couldn't stop crying. Even at work, where I'd pull it together long enough to wave the groceries over the scanner and make small talk with customers, I had to take walks around the block on my clock-outs so that I wouldn't sit in the break room and sob and scare people. On the road outside the Super Saver, the traffic would scream by, and I'd duck down along the trails beneath the power lines,

where the homeless camps are. No one thought it was weird to see a lady crying and stumbling around there.

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First the baby died, then the dog died. The dog had pointy ears, and I liked to rub them, the silky insides like the lining of the pink purse my mother gave me when she was my age. I'm not sure whether the baby had ears. At the ultrasound, when I first went to the doctor, he tried to point out ears and eyes, but I couldn't see them. It all just looked like light filtered through pond water.

Was the baby a baby? When it died, I told myself *no, it was a fetus, not viable yet, not really alive*, the same way I counseled Kayla in the break room of the Super Saver when she'd gotten knocked up by her not-quite-boyfriend. She still hadn't made it through her junior year of high school, and for her, it *was* a fetus. For me, too. But for me, it was also a baby.

Gumption was not quite nine years old. I'd brought her home from the shelter as a puppy, just after my first, brief marriage ended, and she'd been my companion through the lean years before I met Andy. Andy's a delivery driver, met me in the Super Saver stockroom. We started texting, then talking on the phone, those exchanges my way of keeping him company on his late night hauls until he could find a local route and relocate here.

Andy already has two kids—Aaron and Petey—but he never sees them. His ex-wife took them to Arizona, back to her mom’s place, after the divorce, and Andy calls them once a week. He’s already done the kid thing, the parent thing, doesn’t want to repeat the whole process. *Too old*. That’s what he said when I first opened that can of worms.

Gumption hadn’t been too old, still sprightly, chasing other dogs at the park and nipping at their heels right up to her last weeks. Gumpy, Gumpers, Gumpshaker. I took her into the vet for a routine annual exam, and he noticed a spot on her chest x-ray. *Probably nothing*, he said. *Let’s do some more tests*. I cleaned out my savings to get the bad news.

The vet didn’t show me the other spots, just told me about them: cancer on her spleen, her liver, her stomach, both lungs. He said chemo could give her an extra two months, three at the outside. The vet left me alone in an exam room with a brochure that detailed how much chemo would cost, the side effects, the health risks to humans. On the back of the brochure, in bold letters: “Women who are breastfeeding or pregnant should never handle chemotherapy drugs.” I said no to the treatment. I didn’t say why.

When Gump stopped eating altogether, we called the vet to our house to have her put down. I’d never seen Andy cry so much. He dug the hole in our

little patch of backyard, wrapped her in a sheet, and lowered her in. He helped me plant white astilbe in the upturned earth, its pointy spires a reminder of Gumption's ears. After that day, whenever I mentioned her name, whenever I couldn't stop crying, Andy would frown. "I know it's tough, pumpkin, but you've got to let her go."

When the baby went, I was in the stockroom at work. Pain ratcheted across the base of my back, but I shrugged it off, thinking I'd once again picked up a too-heavy box. But then, the blood came and would not stop, and I asked Joe to let me end my shift early. At the clinic, the sonogram revealed what I already knew, and the doctor performed a D&C, sent me home with thick pads and a warning not to have sex for at least two weeks.

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Before the baby died, before the dog died, I went to the drug store. The boy at the register looked at me—alone, forty, a Clear Blue Easy my only purchase—and said, "Congratulations. I hope it all works out."

I wasn't sure at first that I wanted it to work out. I wasn't on the Pill, and Andy had been less than exact about his condom timing, but I guess we just assumed that pregnancy wasn't likely, that our aging bodies were their own form of birth control.

The first month I missed my period, I figured it was a premenopausal glitch. I might not have even noticed the second month go by, if not for the day when I was out walking Gumption, her nails clicking against the slate sidewalk, and one of the neighborhood ladies stopped powerwalking long enough to pat Gumpy's head. "I love the pitter patter of little doggie feet," she said, letting Gumpy lick her hand before she toddled off in her pink tracksuit. It hit me then how long it had been—not since March.

I wondered over the lack of other signs: no morning sickness, no nausea, no strange stirrings or sudden thunderclap. Andy and I had gone out to dinner twice that week, at the big buffets he likes, and I'd eaten my fill without a single twitch. I couldn't be pregnant.

But I was. The pee-stick told me so, and I went to the clinic the next day just to be sure. Dr. Sanger told me I'd need to find an OB, someone who could help see the baby through to term, assuming I wanted to keep it. He said I'd need to weigh the pros and cons—"advanced maternal age increases risks, you know"—and I didn't have the heart to ask, "Risks for what?" I suppose I already knew.

The vet told me Corgis—all those smaller, barrel-built dogs—are at greater risk for developing tumors in their chest cavities, ones that can spring

up out of nowhere, go undetected until it's too late. He told me this several times while I cried in the exam room, far away from the other clients with their romping, healthy pets. "Shouldn't I have noticed some signs?" I asked. The vet shrugged, handed me a card for a pet loss support group. "You can't blame yourself," he said, but I thought back to the prior week, when Gumption—who usually snuffled along the floor, eating every crumb she could find—had barely touched her food, dragging an old blanket from her bed to cover her dish. I thought she might be developing some new eccentric behavior, the dog equivalent of wanting to save half her lunchtime sandwich for a mid-afternoon snack. I told the vet about those half-eaten meals. "Burying," he called it. "It's pretty common when dogs are stressed or want attention."

She was stressed, but I was too focused on the baby, on what I would tell Andy, to pay attention to Gumption's attempt to tell me something was wrong.

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Three months after the baby died, two months after Gumption died, I could barely get out of bed. I avoided the backyard, knowing that, in the ground, there was Gumpy's body, rotting in its sheet. I couldn't avoid the stockroom at work, the place I lost the baby, but I did ask for more register shifts, and Joe obliged.

In the mornings, Andy brought me coffee in bed, wouldn't leave for work until I'd stood up and put on my bathrobe. He'd kiss me and head off to his day, and I'd abandon my coffee on the bathroom sink, run the water in the tub and sit there, mostly submerged, staring at my stomach and breasts, thinking of how they would not grow. I'd heard about water births and wondered what it would be like to have the baby right there in the tub, as if the miscarriage had never happened. I somehow always managed to get my shit together in time to go to work, even managed to smile and be polite, but every night, I couldn't do much more than stare dazedly, and when Andy would hug me, I'd just start crying again.

One warm September evening, Andy grilled steaks for dinner, and he made us sit out on the back porch to eat, even though I didn't want to. "You can't stay inside forever, sweetheart. A little sunshine will do you good." He set a too-rare steak in front of me, but I knew I couldn't eat with Gumption's grave only ten feet away. I sat there, cutting the steak into smaller and smaller pieces, tears plopping into the red juice on the plate. Andy stopped mid-chew and flung his fork down. "Jesus Christ, Katherine. I know you loved that dog, but you can't keep doing this. It's not fair to either of us."

That's when Andy issued his ultimatum. "Either get it together, or I'm moving out. I can't handle coming home to you crying every day." I thought about telling him then—about the baby, the clinic, that horrible drive home afterward when I stopped at the Sip N' Go and bought a bottle of Unisom and a 12-pack of High Life, not sure whether I just wanted something to help me sleep or whether I wanted to end it all right there. The cashier hadn't seemed worried—he let me know that the Bud Light was on sale, if I wanted something cheaper. I guess he thought my red eyes were about the short supply of singles I was counting out, slowly and painfully, not about what I was buying. I ended up taking just one pill, the odd thought that this would be safest for the baby making me cry all over again until I finally drifted off.

But even at that moment at dinner, Andy staring me down like I was a fool, like I'd lost my mind—even then I couldn't tell him. He stood up and walked inside, slamming the screen door. I sat there, paralyzed, waiting for him to pack up and go, waiting for the house to be completely empty, no one but me left, but he came back out, slapped something small down on the table. "Pet Loss Support Group," the card read. I hadn't looked at it since the vet had sent me home with my dying dog. "It's free," Andy said. "It meets in the study room at the library down on Jefferson." I didn't know what to say, and Andy

threw up his arms. “Show me you’re at least willing to try,” he said. “I know you’re sad, but you’ve got to meet me halfway here.”

“I *am* trying,” I said, wiping snot and tears on my sleeve like a child.

Andy sighed and pointed at the card. “Try harder,” he said and left me alone to stare at the astilbe, all wilted and brown in the late summer heat.

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If I had tried harder, I couldn’t have stopped the baby from dying. If I had tried harder, Gumption would still be gone. At the support group, I wanted the grief counselor to tell me these things. Instead, he gestured me toward a circle of chairs, unoccupied except for one older woman with a gloss of white hair and fingers arrayed with huge turquoise rings. I took the seat next to her, moving aside the little packet of tissues that rested on the chair.

We sat in silence while the counselor—a young man in a polo shirt, shorts, and flip-flops—pulled two small slips of paper from a clipboard and handed them to us. “The Five Stages of Grief,” the slip read. As he began talking about denial, I turned to the crumpled, deeply tanned face of the woman next to me. “Who did you lose?” I asked.

“I lost my sweet sheltie, Cowboy,” she said. She twisted a ring idly with her thumb. “He was the only one I had left after George died last year.”

The counselor frowned. "Was George your other dog?"

"George was my husband," the woman said, and when the counselor fumbled for an apology, she waved it away. "That's all right." She smiled, shaking her head. "George was kind of a dog, too." She laughed, a short, quick snap that deteriorated into a cough, and then into crying.

I handed her a tissue, and she swiped at her eyes, smudging her mascara. "What happened to Cowboy?" I asked.

"It was my fault," the woman said. She'd left the back gate open when she'd come in from the garden, and later that day, Cowboy had run out into the street, right into traffic. "If only I'd just shut the damned gate," she said, and I handed her another tissue, thinking of the baby. If only I'd known sooner, gone to the doctor when I'd first felt the cramps, hadn't written off my body shouting at me.

"Bargaining," the counselor said, nodding his head and leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knee. A few threads of hair poked up from the neck of his shirt. "You want Cowboy back, and you think if you'd only done something different, he'd still be here. But you can't change what happened. You know that, right?"

The woman just sat there, blinking at him. “Of course she knows it,” I said, wanting to kick his bare shins. “If she thought she could change what happened, knowing what she did now, it wouldn’t be *grief*.”

“You sound angry,” the counselor said. “Are you angry about your pet?”

“I’m angry that you’re treating this like it’s all so simple.” I held up the piece of paper he’d given me. “It’s like we’ll just move through your stages and be fine, but that’s not how it works.”

The woman put her hand on my arm, her rings heavy and cold. “It’s okay, dear,” she said. She waved her other hand at the counselor. “Ignore him. Tell me about who you lost.”

“I...” I knew if I mentioned Gumption’s name, I’d start crying. “My dog,” I said, finally. “She passed two months ago. Cancer.”

“Was she your only dog?”

“Yes,” I said. “First and only.”

“The first loss of a pet is often the most difficult,” the counselor cut in, scooting his chair closer. “That first bond is more powerful than most people understand. For some of us, it’s our first experience—maybe even our only experience—of unconditional love.”

“Andy loves me unconditionally,” I said, trying hard again to resist the urge to kick this stupid man. *But he’s just a kid*, I thought. *Probably just out of shrink school*. I wanted to feel bad for him, trying so hard, but I’d come here for help, and he couldn’t understand.

I turned my chair to face the woman and block him out. “Is Andy your husband?” she asked.

“Yes. Well, sort of. He might as well be. We’ve been living together for years, but we never actually tied the knot.”

“Is Andy afraid of commitment?” the counselor asked.

The woman put a hand up, blocking him out. “Is Andy taking it hard, too?” she asked.

“Not so hard. He’s actually really upset that I can’t get past it. I know I should move on, but...” *But the baby died, too*, I thought.

The woman nodded as if she understood. “George was the same way when our first dog died.”

“Let’s not muddy the waters with how your husband feels,” the counselor said. “How do you feel?”

“I feel like I shouldn’t have come here,” I said and stood. “I’m sorry about Cowboy,” I said to the woman, and then I left.

Outside again, the sky was too bright, and I rolled down the windows of my car, letting the heat dissipate before I got in. I should have gone home then—I had two whole hours until my shift at the store started—but I couldn't face Andy. He was off work today, and he'd be waiting to hear how it went, to find out if I felt better, but I didn't.

I drove to the Super Saver and sat in the parking lot, watching people enter with their lists in their hands and exit with carts full of bags. My cell phone rang twice as I sat there, looking at the people pouring in and out. I didn't check to see who it was—no one ever called except Andy.

Two boys were hopping on and off the pad that opened the automatic doors when the phone rang for the third time. I listened to it, muffled in my purse, quiet as a sob or a sigh. The boys' mother came and ushered them inside, yelling something I couldn't quite hear. They disappeared into the store, swallowed by the reflective glare of the glass. I dug the phone out, its cry louder, insistent in the open air. I pressed the button. "Katherine, are you there?" Andy asked twice, three times. "Katherine? Hello?"

I listened to his breath, short and fast like Gumption's was at the end, like mine was on the way to the clinic. "Hi, Andy," I said.

"Katherine. I was worried. Is everything okay?"

“No,” I said, the word slow and thick in my mouth. I hung up before he could say anything else.

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My shift started twenty minutes ago. I’m still here in the lot, and the phone’s still ringing. Eventually, I’ve got to answer. I know what Andy will say. “Katherine, you’re scaring me. Talk to me. What happened?”

“First the baby died, then the dog died.” That’s what I’ll tell him. Soon. When I get the nerve. Just not yet.

Jennifer Perrine is the author of three books of poetry: *No Confession, No Mass; In the Human Zoo*; and *The Body Is No Machine*. Perrine’s latest poetry and fiction appears or is forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *Crazyhorse*, *Salt Hill*, *Literal Latte*, and *Cream City Review*, as well as in Broadsided Press’ special folio, “Bearing Arms: Responding to Guns in American Culture.” Recent honors include the 2017 K. Margaret Grossman Fiction Award, the 2016 Publishing Triangle Audre Lorde Award, and the 2015 Bisexual Book Award for Poetry. For more information, visit www.jenniferperrine.org