



What Nuala Meant

Having reached an age where daily scanning of the local obituaries frequently yields acquaintances and occasionally friends, I own a mature perspective on the inevitability and unpredictability of death. My best friend from adolescence and roommate through four years of college died tragically shortly after graduation. Members of my immediate family have left this life in the sweet spots of their prime as a result of heart disease, boating accidents, and suicide. That perspective places me in firm alignment with John Donne's line that every man's death diminishes me. And as a dog and cat lover, I have experienced that diminishment from the passing of dear family pets as well.

Throughout most of my life I wrongly categorized myself as an animal lover when in fact I was merely an animal liker. That changed with the almost simultaneous entry of a small black Schnauzer-like puppy and a grey cat in 1982. Mr. Puppy and Hogan elevated my connection to and affection for these wonderful creatures to a level I had not previously known. Their full lives ended within six months of one another in 1998. They are buried side by side under markers on our farm. Their leave takings brought tears and heartache but also a relief knowing that their time had come.

The September 21, 2007 death of my beloved seven-year-old Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Nuala, produced an altogether different feeling. Her unexpected passing has thrust me into intermittent inconsolable grief that I never anticipated. Intellectually I know the illness that took her life did so peacefully without artificial prevention or encouragement: in more common terminology, natural causes. But we all know well that the human heart and brain often operate asymmetrically.

Nuala's story really began over twelve years ago when my wife, Jennifer, fell in love with the Cavalier breed. Jennifer studied Cavaliers intently, attended shows, and interviewed breeders to further her knowledge. She most admired the dogs bred by a lady in Texas that interrogated Jennifer in depth to determine our suitability before offering a male puppy to us. That puppy, Dukie, now thirteen, is always by our side. Two years later, Jennifer negotiated the purchase of a young female that we named Emily. That puppy came with Old Testament restrictions: she will be shown, she will be bred, and the breeder will have first choice of the litter. A small concession, we thought, for this tiny handful.

We bobbed and weaved to avoid the show circuit but the breeding commitment could not be so easily evaded. Based on the breeder's recommendation, Emily was bred to a champion sire in Nebraska named James. Thankfully for us, a neighbor, friend, and accomplished vet-tech Shelly accompanied her to and from the mating. The result was a millennial Independence Day birthing of three stunning puppies: two females and a

male that we called Molly, Nuala, and Cowboy. Molly came out a tri-color (black, white, and tan) like her father while Nuala and Cowboy were Blenheims (tan and white), the same as Mama Emily. Cowboy was promised to a friend in New Orleans who would give him the more refined name of Becket.

Though I loved them all intensely, Nuala especially grabbed me with her fondness for laying spread eagle on my neck which was an easy position for both of us to accommodate given that she was about the size of my fist. When the ruling was made that it was Nuala that would be rendered to the breeder, I was regretful. By the day of her departure, I was bereaved and certain we would never see one another again. I remember well the emptiness I felt during that afternoon's dog walk at our farm, the first without her.

The reports of her happiness in her new home and projected success in show biz only increased my angst but eventually I accepted that having one of her puppies someday was about as good as close to reunion that I would experience.

Life changed suddenly shortly after Nuala's first birthday when she began having seizures. The severity of her epilepsy produced domino consequences. Nuala's illness would require costly medications and the hereditary risk required she be spayed thus eliminating her from showing and breeding.

With no commercial value and almost certain burdensome medical expenses ahead, our breeder was forced to try to find her a new home. There was no discussion when Nuala was offered back to us. The excitement of reuniting with her dwarfed the wholly anticipated financial and emotional costs that lay ahead.

The exultant joy that engulfed me embracing her on her return was initially only partially reciprocated. Nuala seemed to be more in a slightly confused state of déjà vu as her first family welcomed her return. But within moments she began her celebratory bark that would be her hallmark for many years to come. By the time we set out for our walk around the farm, Nuala had figured it out. "I am back home and this time for good."

Nuala's name (pronounced noo-lah) is the contracted form of the Irish girl's name, Fionnuala (pronounced fuh-noo-lah). In Irish legend, Fionnuala, was the beautiful daughter of Lir. Her stepmother turned her into a swan and cursed her to wander the lakes and rivers of Ireland. Our Nuala was blessed with uncommon physical beauty and warmth of personality that made her perfect in our eyes. Her only curse was epilepsy.

The complexity and incomplete science of canine idiopathic epilepsy dictated that Emily and Molly be spayed. This was a move of extreme caution taken despite Nuala's being the first in her family to contract the disease.

Careless inbreeding of pedigreed dogs can sometimes be the cause of epilepsy. This was hardly the case for Nuala whose breeder had produced generations of healthy, champion quality stock. My crash course in dominant and recessive genetics and the vagaries of this mysterious ailment left me perplexed about cause, treatment, and prognosis. Fully fifteen per cent of the entire canine population suffers seizures in wide variance of severity and frequency.

Our family vet, Dr. Crag Guidry, after administering the previously prescribed and standard protocol of Phenobarbital and Potassium Bromide with minimal benefit, suggested we have Nuala examined by Dr. Ken Arceneaux, a specialist in internal medicine. Dr. Arceneaux and associates operate the Louisiana Veterinary Referral Center. Their staff also includes surgeons and oncologists. They see patients only when referred to by family veterinary practitioners or when a second opinion is sought.

The increasing frequency and violence of Nuala's seizures frustrated Dr. Arceneaux. Though canines and humans share a number of disease afflictions, human-approved drugs do not always act in an identical fashion with canines. Consequently Ken had to experiment with a number of human epilepsy combinations.

The pattern of attacks remained unchanged. Invariably Nuala would live in her normally happy pattern only to have it interrupted typically at sometime after midnight and before dawn.

On a good night, she would tremble for a minute or two, and go back to sleep. In the next degree of severity, she would convulse and upon recovery have a surge of energy accompanied by imbalance. The established routine under these circumstances would be a brief supervised trip outside. Then the two of us would enclose ourselves in our exercise room. I would mount the elliptical trainer and Nuala would pace the room for fifteen minutes or so and then settle into a comfortable position nearby with eyes fixed on me as usual. At the conclusion of the workout, it was back to bed for both of us.

Because of a series of athletic injuries to my right shoulder, the only comfortable sleeping position for me is on my back with my right arm bent like a waiter with a napkin folded over his forearm. This provided a perfect nestling spot for Nuala while negotiating the minor aftershock tremors that frequently followed her attacks.

The dreaded event was the cluster of seizures. In these instances the convulsive activity was longer, more severe, and intermittent. On the worst occasions, she would cry out and experience involuntary urination and defecation. The procedure in this case called for a brief cleanup, wrapping Nuala in a towel and heading for Dr. Arceneaux's clinic some thirty minutes away. Often the repetitive seizures would continue en route.

Nuala's hospital stays at this time were typically two to five days during which she received substantial doses of Phenobarbital and tranquilizers intravenously. As soon as she was seizure free for twenty four consecutive hours, she would return home.

During her hospital stays, my daily visits were convened in a comfortable room for that purpose at the clinic. One wall has a mural of a sylvan setting with a Springer spaniel in full flight looking happily outward. In small script at the bottom are the words "In memory of Harry." The spaniel's expression holds a haunting but happy appearance of an afterlife much in the manner of George Rodrigue's Blue Dog series.

Early on in her treatment, her prognosis was not good but Kenny managed to construct a combination of medications and supplements that eventually brought the seizures under control. Although Katrina triggered a notably bad episode, after that she went months between seizures. A low protein diet was essential to liver health and baked sweet potatoes were key to that. As a consequence, at some point sweet potatoes and Nuala's nickname "Noolie" elided into "Sweet Potato Noolie," the favored name from thereon.

All anti-epilepsy medications tax the liver and eventually that was Nuala's downfall. Her weakened liver made her vulnerable to bacterial infections that came with increasing frequency during her final year. The decreasing effectiveness of antibiotics in combating those infections marked her final days.

An image of Nuala is in my mind's eye every day as I go through the daily protocol of which she was the center. Framed pictures of her are scattered throughout our house, her bowl sits stationary in the kitchen, and her harness hangs permanently in place. To some these reminders may seem maudlin but they are relics of importance to me. I think the families of the Blue Dog and Harry would understand.

Nuala taught me many life lessons not the least of which was the importance of living in the moment. The suppressed anxiety I felt knowing that her illness might take her from me at any time insured that every minute we spent together was held at the highest value.

I suppose that is why the memory of her joyous moments remains so vivid. Early morning rolls in frozen grass were near the top as was breeze smelling on windy days. Our two barn cats, which have no use for dogs, would turn onto their backs awaiting Nuala's affectionate approach. Unlike our other Cavaliers who loved chasing birds and squirrels, Nuala's predatory moves were confined to love bugs and house flies. And as raucous as the afternoon greeting that awaited me daily when I arrived at the farm was, nothing matched the excitement that her wake-up call produced. When I returned to the bedroom after my early morning workout, four heads would pop up knowing breakfast time had arrived. Emily, Molly, and Dukie bounced frantically waiting to be lifted and placed onto the floor. Nuala, knowing she was always last, would begin a leisurely stretch often accompanied by a yawn and patiently wait for her turn in the ritual. After a hug and a few strokes on her head, her turn would come. As soon as her feet touched the floor, a wild dash down the stairs with a booming bark announced the beginning of another wonderful day.

A single obituary appears at the end of every issue of the Economist, the British newsweekly. The subject is invariably an individual whose accomplishments, if not always benign, are significant and sometimes historic. The issue the week of Nuala's passing told of Alex, an African Gray parrot that was the subject of a thirty year study from which his name was drawn: Avian Learning Experiment. At his death, Alex's cognitive abilities had reached the level of a five year old child. We can only speculate what our loyal canines know but having lived with both, I am sure that dogs are smarter than parrots. What Nuala absorbed from my ramblings to her over the years will forever be a mystery to me. I do know that she felt my affection for her as much as I felt hers for me.

The last time she was with me and looked out over her play area behind the house she displayed an emotion I had never seen before. She seemed to have a scowl and a look of resentment and defiance at what she must have sensed. Every survey she had ever taken there was one that expressed a joy unbridled by any worldly concern. Missing were her barks of celebration and the exhilaration she felt pointing her nose skywards and literally breathing in the whole experience. On this occasion her fixed glare spoke of a tragic coda advancing with surety and speed. Her inability to eat forced a return to the clinic where she was placed on intravenous feeding. Overnight her condition worsened and Jennifer and I set out for the clinic the following morning hopeful that Nuala would once more defy the odds. We were only a mile from home when Shelly called Jennifer's cell phone with the news that our little girl had passed. Shelly would bring her home at once. We both wept uncontrollably and returned to the farm. When Shelly arrived, Nuala's body was warm and she appeared to be mid-nap as I had seen her so many times before. Jennifer and I held her alternately hugging and caressing her silky coat. I broke into an uncontrollable keening at the loss of a friend that held an incalculable worth to me. After a while we made our way to the barn where our farm manager, Tommy, had prepared a place for Nuala next to Mr. Puppy and Hogan under a magnolia tree next to our vegetable garden. During the week following her burial, I ordered a marker from a maker of memorials at a local cemetery. The inscription reads:

FIONNUALA

*July 1, 2000- Sept. 21, 2007
Our Sweet Potato Noolie
She Made Bad Days Good
And Good Days Better
Forever An Angel In Our Hearts*

Every word is true.