

Lần cuối mà nó lắc đuôi (The Last Time He Wagged His Tail)

Long Trần

The boy's body jerked into an on-and-off seizure. With his labored breathing, we tried to comfort him with our touch. Petting his dirty blonde hair, we knelt down to his level. Some of us calm, thinking this would subside, mẹ (mother) started to weep. "The boy is known to be a survivor, he's scrappy and will be fine." His tail suddenly began to periodically wag. I grew increasingly concerned. Mẹ panicked as always. It was the first time I saw em gái (younger sister) worried. Why was his tail wagging like this? Is this the end? Is he dying? Is he wagging his tail in pain or joy knowing we are here comforting him in his last moments drawing breath?

Em gái barged into my room. She says, "Wake up, anh (older brother)." Annoyed, I rolled over. I ask, "Bruh, why?" She says, "There's something wrong with Mocha." I quickly ran downstairs and turned to my left. My Chihuahua, Lulu, sat up at attention on the couch, looking towards the kitchen area. My heart sank. Across 12 years of living in our house, Lulu and Mocha have slept together in the same bed. Keeping each other warm. Annoying each other. Being there for each other. Mocha's butt is often being used as Lulu's pillow. Mẹ once said that once the time comes, we have to separate the two dogs, friends who have been together since the beginning.

Mocha is a Yorkie. The cutest thing you'll ever meet. He looks like a literal teddy bear. The thing is, he's diabetic and went blind during the COVID-19 pandemic. We were able to pay for surgery to get his vision back, but our problems didn't end there, for we had to try to keep him alive for as long as we could. Twice a day, he sat there, letting us hold him gently and inject a big needle of insulin into his back. It wasn't easy at first to control him. Every 8 am and 8 pm quickly became rituals in our household, reserved for our "baby boy."

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That ritual ended in January, the worst month of my fucking life. After my ông nội died, we thought he could hold on just a bit longer. Between Marvel movie marathons with my ba (father) and em gái, while mẹ worked the night shift, Mocha displayed a concerning lethargy. The boy is known for being hyper and annoying. He always begged for food, especially apples and cucumbers. Around this time, he just laid down on the pad we placed near the fireplace with Lulu when we binged watched movies on Disney+ or when he climbed his doggy stairs onto the couch to lay at mẹ's feet as she and I binged watched *Below Deck* episodes. Suddenly, we began to seriously fear losing the cục cưng (the precious baby of the house) of our lives.

Thousands of dollars can't buy you more time. We didn't feel this way until the very end. Although a major investment, we didn't mind shelling out hundreds of dollars a month on prescription dog food, chewy.com orders, and trips to Value Pet Clinic, for he brought so much joy into our lives. Suddenly, our trips home from Costco were different. Mẹ and I entered the garage, carrying groceries into the house. Our eyes quickly filled with tears as we labored to conduct business as usual. Literally the worst Costco trip of my life. I never cried so much in one day, ever. We knew life was never going to be the same. There would be a new quietness that would take some getting used to. Mocha's obnoxiously loud barks and cute footsteps slowly faded into memories we were only able to experience by watching the countless Ring security camera videos and iPhone clips that exist.

In his final moments, I caressed his face and petted his head. All of us were there as his body quickly shut down. His kidney failed, for that was the only potential cause for his passing that we gathered from our previous vet visit. How did he go so fast? He survived for so long with diabetes and blindness, through the darkest time in human history. We couldn't believe it. He was gone. The most shocking, yet beautiful death imaginable. How he managed to keep wagging his tail in such a moment of pain and despair continues to touch my heart as I, along with my family, overcame the grief of losing such a beautiful dog, for he wasn't just a dog to us. Despite stereotypical, dog-eating jokes often directed at Asians, people have no idea what dogs mean to immigrant, refugee families like mine. Our schedule revolved around our dogs, around Mocha. Mẹ labored for him. Sacrificed her own sleep and health for him. Ended up mourning for him. Emptiness is what we felt the rest of February, for we lost more than

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a pet. Mẹ lost a son. Em gái and I lost an em trai (younger brother). We poured his ashes into the Cedar River to set him free, to release ourselves from the misery of burying a younger sibling. This felt like a premature death of a child, taken away from us by forces out of our control. I remember breaking down your doggy stairs around Tết (Lunar New Year). Ant Clemons' *Better Days* became my anthem to navigate the grief of experiencing a pet death. I remember on Christmas crying about the fact that Mocha will die someday. I will never forget when mẹ put your body in a cardboard box, em gái adorning it with your favorite toy, that being a doggy vodka bottle plushie from Costco. I will never forget how we made sure to bring Lulu to Value Pet Clinic to pay respects to you and witness us giving Mocha's body away to be cremated. I will never forget the trip we took back several weeks later to pick up your ashes.

Mẹ came out with the premium package we had purchased for you. An imprint of your paw. A lock of your hair. A beautiful, wooden box containing you. Mẹ described how she burst into tears coming in to pick you up for the last time. Not every owner got the premium package, which is an individual cremation rather than being grouped together with other dogs. The thought of rows of ash boxes makes me sad, for not every dog was lucky enough to have owners who could afford the best for them.

When you were younger you would stand up and pray, like the farm animals that learned how to walk and speak in *Animal Farm*. He begged us for food, whether that be the dry, boiled chicken we gave you or the cucumber slices you heard us cut, you were always there impatiently waiting for crumbs to fall and food to be thrown into your mouth. What kind of dog likes apples? I regurgitated an apple slice to offer you after you rejected the solid slice mẹ offered you. Although you were so close to death, you managed to work up enough energy to eat your last apple slice before you left this cruel world.

Living among unhappy people, you managed to brighten our lives and make things feel full and eventful while there is so much suffering in our world. I will look back fondly on the little moments of when I would bế (carry like a baby) to let you go pee, for we feared you would tumble down the stairs. I held onto you like a teddy bear, like an infant I was proudly showing off to the world. Your hair is so silky smooth. Your skin is soft like a baby's butt. You are literally the cutest "forever puppy" I will ever know.

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I remember when I got to push you and Lulu together in a doggy stroller around our neighborhood. Lulu is doing fine. We try to keep her on our laps and keep her company. She's handling it better than we thought. The immediate separation we ensured helped her navigate being alone for the first time in a very long while. We take her on weekly trips to the off-leash dog park where we let her roam free in the "small and shy dog area." You would have loved this place. I wished we could've brought you to more places besides expensive trips to the vet. I pray for you every night, that you rest in peace and watch over us. We thương mà nhiều quá (we love you so much), our bilingual, annoying, apple-loving fur baby.