

YOU & YOUR PETS

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The best dog ever

He was a survivor, devoted to his owner for 12½ years. Now, there's just a hole in her heart.

By APRIL HUNT
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I lay on the floor next to my dog the entire night before I killed him.

A veterinarian will tell you I had him put down. Technically, the vet injected the barbiturate overdose that stopped his heart.

But as I spooned behind my beloved Brownie, rubbing his belly and murmuring to him, I knew it would be me and me alone who would decide when, how and where he would die.

Rationally, I knew he had gone into kidney failure. The vet said it was a matter of days. Euthanasia would be a literal good death, before he suffered.

Emotions don't listen to reason, though. My Brownie was a Puerto Rican street dog, a *sato* in island slang, when he decided one day outside the *San Juan Star* that he wanted me to be his.

He was a survivor and absolutely devoted to me for the next 12½ years. The same vet clinic that diagnosed his kidney dysfunction had declared him dying before.

Sent home to die, Brownie fought because he wasn't done being the best dog ever.

That was three years ago. So, forgive me if my guilt tells me he wasn't done the day he died, either.

After the light in his adoring brown eyes faded for a full day, Brownie perked up when I got him to the vet for the last time, exactly a month ago today. He had the strength to tug me back toward the car (Brownie never cared it was a bland Ford sedan. He just knew it took him to marvelous places, like the park, to see friends or get ice cream.)

In a quiet, private moment, I looked back at him and begged his forgiveness as he died.

He wanted out of that sterile room, away from the vet. He didn't want to leave me.

One of his last acts was to give me kisses on my chin. But I listened to the vet, not his pleas.

She gave him some sedation, which knocked him out because he was so sick. In his last moments, he made me smile with his sudden, gentle snores.

Then I pivoted so I was facing him. Brownie struggled to get his eyes open. There was no doubt he was looking at me, if not through me.

In a quiet, private moment, I looked back at him and begged his forgiveness as he died.

I wish I could say I broke down.

Instead, shock made me mechanical and inappropriate. As the vet made a paw print keepsake for me, I remember telling her, "I know he must be dead, because Brownie would never let you touch his feet like that."

Then, I went home to an empty house. The physical loss was almost more intense than the emotional one.

After all, I had just begun my life on my own when he found me.

He was the only constant in my entire adult life, as we moved from the island to Ohio, New York and Florida.

I had never really been alone before. He was always there, the most precious part of my life. We developed a daily routine. We traveled together, even worked together (some *Sentinel* readers will remember his Brownie Points section in a column I wrote). Brownie made me who I am.

For years, I took pride in how people who didn't like dogs just loved Brownie. I had nothing to do with his charm, but it gave me confidence in myself to know that such an amazing animal had wanted to be with me.

I greedily took credit for his gentleness, his way of looking right at you when you spoke to him or touched him. From him, I learned that a little sincere eye contact goes a long way in forging relationships.

Not that I could look at anyone when I went back to work the day after he died. I teared up, as I am while I write this, just mentioning his name.

But it was better than staying in a too-quiet home, where my mind played tricks on me. Did I just see him walking down the hall? Was that him I heard, sighing through clenched teeth as he always did before he fell asleep?

I didn't know what to do with myself after work, when we usually took our longest walk of the day.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF APRIL HUNT

'He was the only constant in my entire adult life, as we moved from the island to Ohio, New York and Florida.'



'A dog like Brownie has no value in Puerto Rico. A street dog is just an animal, not a pet.'

I began to walk through my Colonialtown neighborhood as if he were still with me. That's me you see in the twilight, looking wistfully at your dog and wishing mine were still here as my constant companion.

Brownie taught me wishes aren't enough, though. He took action to make sure he had a happy home with me. I wanted to do anything that would get as many people as possible to know my Brown Dog.

I found it on the Internet. A group of dog lovers had formed a nonprofit in Puerto Rico that rescued and rehabilitated *satos* like Brownie.

With zero paid staff and a budget of about \$75,000 a year, the group then ships the dogs to stateside animal shelters for adoption. Broward Humane Society is the only shelter in Florida that par-

THE SAVE A SATO PROGRAM

For information about the Save a Sato Foundation, visit saveasato.org. Donations can be sent to: P.O. Box 37694, San Juan, PR 00937-0694

ticipates, though organizers are always looking to expand. (Hint to Central Florida shelters).

See, a dog like Brownie has no value in Puerto Rico. A street dog is just an animal, not a pet.

The idea of someone missing out on the life Brownie gave me was unbearable. In a quick exchange of e-mails, it was settled.

The Save A Sato program in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, (saveasato.org) now has a Brownie Hunt Run. For a year, the kennel will shelter street dogs that are desperate for the love that Brownie once craved.

Somehow, that donation has eased my pain and guilt. I will travel to Puerto Rico this spring, my first trip there in a decade. I will meet the volunteers. I will help them coax pitiful dogs off the streets.

I may even bring back a few kennels of dogs, if I think I can find homes for all of them.

But there remains a hole in my heart that belongs only to Brownie. It won't be fair for me to adopt any new dog, since it wouldn't remotely compare.

Brownie was the best dog ever. He will always be the best dog ever. He was just too good to stay here. Even death can't kill that.

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