

My Girl

another hemangiosarcoma tragedy

by Janet Littell Adam, Elysian Fields

My Girl is gone. I still can't believe it.

Late Thursday afternoon, December 14, she came in from a romp in the yard with the other dogs, and I knew she'd been into mischief. She looked as if she had swallowed something that was still en route - her neck, back and tail were basically a straight line. I thought she had grabbed a bird out of the air (it's happened before) and it hadn't gone down completely. "You silly girl," I teased her, "you've bitten off more than you can chew this time!"

She didn't eat that evening and was lethargic; but her outline quickly rebounded and she was attentive to her two four-week-old puppies. I presumed she was digesting her "live game" snack. Next morning, though a trifle puffy around the midsection, she seemed back to normal - up on the counters looking for food, energetic and playful, giving me her traditional good morning thrashing with her front legs as she stood on the couch. Another quirky Saluki misadventure safely concluded I thought, smiling. But I was so very wrong.

The emergency clinic

At 1 p.m. Saturday the 16th, My Girl crashed. Her body temperature plummeted, her gums turned white. Her abdomen swelled. She was barely responsive. We bundled her up and raced to the emergency clinic, where, after 2-1/2 untreated hours, she was incorrectly diagnosed from bloodwork as having Addison's Disease. I shrieked. "No! No! It was something that happened to her. Don't you understand? Two days ago she went outside healthy and came back in sick. It has to be whatever happened while she was outside! Listen to me, you idiots!" (I was a little overwrought.) The vet's droll glance said I was a flea speck, but she did deign to x-ray My Girl's abdomen. I was still holding out for the theory that she had swallowed a bird and maybe there was a blockage, but there was no obstruction. A portion of her heart showed on the clouded x-ray, a little misshapen. I said, "Doesn't her heart look a little odd to you?" Doctor's next glance said I was a Really Big flea speck. She

replied that it just wasn't a good x-ray; and did I want to start steroid treatment for Addison's or not? (Not.)

By 5 a.m., under heat lamps, My Girl's temperature was back up to 101. Neither of us waved goodbye to the staff as I carried her out, wanting desperately to believe that whatever had happened, it was over now and she was on the mend. Ever the optimist. We went home.

A "pericardial effusion?" What's that?

All day Sunday, My Girl snoozed comfortably under dryer-warmed wool blankets with the babies, who considerately combined light nursing with voracious puppy-gruel consumption. Her temp held at 101, and she began to eat Sunday night. Then she stood up, gave herself a good shake and trotted to the door to go out!

First thing Monday morning, we headed to our regular vet for a decent x-ray of her heart and a complete exam - Pollyanna I may be, but I'm no ostrich. Lashes, My Girl's mother, had developed an undiagnosed heart condition in her last days (too young - 12 years) . . . what if . . . ?

I learned a new term that day: "pericardial effusion." In place of a normal heart, the x-ray showed a giant balloon - the heart shadow covering most of her lung space. What I was seeing was the sac around her heart, the pericardium, filled with fluid, so engorged that it was compressing her heart. Armed with antibiotics and lasix to fight off what Cardio-Pet (the via-phone vet-to-vet cardiac specialists) thought was most likely an infection, I raced home to call Mary Dee Sist, Salukidom's heart devotee.

Her diagnosis was hard to bear. Though gently delivered, it was a death knell. Mary Dee said 98% of the Salukis with pericardial effusion have hemangiosarcoma. An insidious, inoperable, inescapably-killing, incredibly fast-growing cancer.

This could not be! Bad things don't happen to my dogs! My Girl had to be one of the 2% who had an infection in the sac around her heart. It couldn't be cancer. I refused to believe it. I would fight it! My Girl couldn't die! I wouldn't let her!

But when the time came, all I could do was tell her I loved her as I held her tight and tears rolled down my cheek and onto her beautiful, burnished red, unforgettable face.

She died on Christmas Eve.

Her last gift

Even though I had fervently hoped My Girl was fighting an infection, and indeed, she had more "good" days than "bad," I prepared for the worst. If she did have hemangiosarcoma, she could contribute to Mary Dee's research - her heart and other organ tissues would be collected for a complete postmortem at Michigan State University. Maybe someday there would be answers. Maybe My Girl would be the key.

Ahead of time, Mary Dee faxed my vet the specifics on what was required, how the samples had to be preserved, and other vitally important details. Christmas Eve came and went and what had to be done was done. With a final pat and a soft goodbye I delivered the sealed box, My Girl's wish for a cure, to Mary Dee.

A month later the pathology report arrived. Two pages of findings, essentially coming down to this: It was hemangiosarcoma, and the primary tumor was located in the right atrium, just where Mary Dee said it usually starts. Paragraphs detailed My Girl's history, the gross lesions, the histological examination, and the conclusions. I had to have it all explained to me, because my mind just rejected the whole thing. There had been secondary tumors in various organs. They had ruptured, healed over, ruptured again. The main tumor in her heart was ruptured, and had ruptured previously. Tumor cells had seeded all parts of her body. The last sentence of the report, under "comments," matter-of-factly read, "The size of the tumor was extraordinary."

All of this was hidden in that perfect package, that indomitable spirit that was My Girl. The report didn't say "this Saluki's will to live was incredible." It didn't say "this Saluki didn't deserve to die." But that's what I'm saying, and I know it is echoed in the hearts of everyone - and there are many among us - who has lost a Saluki to this horrible disease.

Rage

What came next was, I suppose, part of the grieving process. I went on a desperate search, vet

to vet, to Save The Saluki, seeking any "success" stories, any breed, in which hemangiosarcoma had been defeated. I talked to oncologists; I talked to basic practitioners. I talked to country vets, I talked to "big names." And I did turn up two promising leads, German Shepherd Dogs with initial splenic tumors, saved by surgery. (Mary Dee later told me there has been one Saluki whose spleen was removed because of a primary hemangiosarcoma tumor, and it lived nine months before the cancer showed up in its heart.) But almost all Saluki hemangiosarcomas start in the heart. And there, nothing can be done. My friend Maril Semph took up the banner, compiling information from every source she could find - pages and pages and pages of the same sad story. Then she sent a questionnaire to the Saluki fancy over the Internet. The number of responses, spanning every bloodline, was staggering. And each had the same, ravaging outcome: no Salukis survived. Most died within hours of first exhibiting symptoms.

I had been so sure there had to be a way to stop this disease - as sure as I had been that My Girl didn't have it. Sometimes the power of positive thinking just doesn't work. My thanks, and my heart, go out to all who responded.

The logical approach

Common sense returned with time. A well-established search for answers is already underway, founded on sound medical knowledge and research techniques, and infinite patience - none of which I have! Mary Dee's Saluki Health Research, Inc. was initially developed to study heart problems in our dogs. Out of this exploration a shocking statistic emerged: about 30% of the Saluki hearts submitted to her - from normal, old and "sudden death" dogs - had hemangiosarcoma tumors in the heart. This deadly cancer is now at the forefront of her research.

If you have never experienced hemangiosarcoma, I hope you never do. If you have, I hope you never will again. Working toward this ideal entails supporting Mary Dee's research. I urge you to contribute to her program. Do it in the name of a Saluki you love, or one you loved and lost.

Her address is Mary Dee Sist, DVM, 1629 Meech, Williamston, MI 48895.