

The Last Time

It was a cold evening in November when Lucy's heart broke into a thousand pieces.

The day had started like any other. Lucy had woken in a panic, after snoozing her alarm far too many times, to the sound of her mum's shrill voice outside her bedroom door telling her to hurry up.

Jumping out of bed she rushed around the room, throwing on her school uniform, that was spread across the floor, where she left it the night before. As she was picking up her school bag she heard a thud come from the bottom of the stairs - she paused for a moment to listen, concern momentarily flicking across her face. "OH seriously Rosie" she heard her mum cry "Do you have to lay there - right in the way!?! Someone is going to break their neck." Lucy rolled her eyes, as she made her way out of her bedroom door and headed downstairs.

Bounding down them two at a time, she now saw Rosie, who was curled up at the bottom, snoring gently. Bending down she planted a kiss on her head and gave her a quick tickle behind the ears.

"Come on!" barked mum, her flowery perfume wafting up Lucy's nose as she flew past, grabbing her car keys as she headed out the door, closely followed by Lucy's two younger siblings.

Lucy looked down at Rosie, watching her for a moment, thinking how peaceful and calm she looked amongst all the chaos and giving a small smile at the thought she used to be the one causing the chaos - before quickly running out of the door, so mum didn't drive off without her.

The day, like the morning, wasn't out of the ordinary. But, little did Lucy know that evening would change her life forever.

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Lucy and Sophia hugged goodbye, as they did every day after their gossip and giggle-filled walk home from school, before entering their neighbouring homes. Lucy had just started to push the key into the lock when Sophia shouted "we still walking Rosie down by the river tomorrow, Luce?"

"Yeh, defo!" smiled Lucy as she turned back to the door - but it quickly faded as she pushed it open. She knew straight away that something wasn't right.

Walking slowly into her home, she looked around her warily until she noticed her Dad on the sofa, Rosie snuggled into his lap.

"Everything OK, Dad?" she asked tentatively

"I'm not sure love" he replied, looking up at her with bloodshot eyes.

Now Lucy was really panicking - scenarios of what could be wrong racing through her head, but too scared to ask the questions for fear of the answers.

"I think we are going to have to take Rosie to the vet sweetheart. Something just doesn't seem right." he said as he slowly slid her off his lap and onto the sofa, where she slumped with no resistance.

"I'm coming with you" Lucy insisted just as she heard the key turn in the lock, and in flew her two little brothers followed by a rather stressed looking mother.

Dad followed her into the kitchen as Lucy bent down next to Rosie and smothered her in kisses.

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It was an icy cold night, so much so that dad had to scrape the car again, as he had done before work that morning, while Lucy sat in the passenger seat, Rosie shivering on her lap as cool air blew out of the heater in the hope of cleaning the windscreen a little faster.

Lucy hugged Rosie tight to her as they drove to the vets and Dad carried her in when they got there.

As they sat in the waiting room Lucy looked down at Rosie - she hadn't noticed her getting older, of course she slept a lot more than she used to and grey hairs had appeared around her muzzle - but studying her now made tears form in the corner of Lucy's eyes.

She couldn't remember a life without Rosie in it - her parents had got her as a puppy just before Lucy's first birthday. They had grown up together -

she wasn't just a dog and she wasn't just a family pet, she was a member of the family and Lucy's best friend.

Still looking at Rosie, Lucy's eyes met with her big brown ones and, as they looked up at her, she thought how different they looked today but she couldn't quite put her finger on why. Then it hit her, like a ton of bricks. That spark - her zest for life that could be seen within them - the light that used to dance behind her bright eyes, had gone.

It was then that Lucy noticed dad's arm around her and as she looked up at him he said "It will be alright you know, I promise. Everything will be OK."

Lucy forced a smile and placed her head on dad's shoulder without saying a word. They sat like this for a few minutes before the vet arrived. Giving them a wide, comforting smile, she said "This must be Rosie."

Dad nodded and stood up as they began to talk in hushed tones. The vet then turned to Lucy and said, "May I take her?"

Lucy squeezed her tight, the last thing she wanted to do was let her go, ever. But, she looked up at dad who gave a small nod and loosened her grip, allowing the vet to take Rosie from her arms.

As Lucy watched the vet carrying Rosie away, her furry head resting on the lady's shoulders and her large eyes staring back at Lucy, she didn't know it yet, but that would be the last time she ever saw her.

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They drove home in silence and as they entered the house Lucy kissed her dad on the cheek, before running upstairs. As she glanced back to tell him she was going straight to bed her eye caught the spot Rosie had been lying in just a few hours ago.

Lucy sobbed that night - crying at the thought of Rosie all alone at the vets, crying for the loss of her once sprightly puppy, and she cried for every time she had been irritated by Rosie, when all she wanted to do was play and all Lucy wanted to do was sit in front of the TV. She wished with all her heart that she could play with Rosie now, that she could snuggle up with her on the sofa and tickle her furry tummy as Rosie looked at her with the look of unconditional love only a dog can give you.

She sobbed and sobbed - her face pressed into the pillow so her parents couldn't hear - until she fell asleep with the exhaustion of it all.

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Lucy opened her eyes - they felt sore and heavy - she rubbed them and listened out for Rosie whining at the door to come in for a cuddle as she did most Saturday mornings and then all the memories of the night before came flooding back to her.

Slipping into her dressing gown and slippers she started to make her way downstairs and as she entered the kitchen she saw her mum and dad embracing. Looking up at her slowly with sadness in their eyes, dad said "I'm sorry ... Rosie didn't make it through the night."

"No!" Lucy screamed, "No! You promised - you promised everything would be OK"

"I know, sweetheart" dad soothed "I know" and he hugged her tight as her knees buckled beneath her and she sobbed like she had never sobbed before, struggling to catch her breath as the tears came thick and fast.

And there they stood, the house eerily silent as Lucy's sobs began to slowly subside to a snuffle.

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A month had passed now and Christmas was drawing near but Lucy's grief had not diminished - not even a little. She could still remember that day like it was yesterday and she could still clearly picture the last time she saw Rosie's face. She wished she had known that would be the last time, but what she would or could have done differently, she doesn't know. Refused to let her go probably.

As Lucy sat in her room, looking through old photos, the doorbell went. Running downstairs she opened it to see Sophia smiling at her, "Fancy a bike ride?" she asked.

"I don't think so, not today" Lucy replied.

"Oh, come on! I haven't seen you in over a month. It would be good to get out of the house, take your mind off things."

"Yeh, maybe next weekend" Lucy said as she shut the door.

As the door slammed she turned and slid down it, bursting into tears yet again. She sat there for a few minutes sobbing softly to herself when a noise made her stop. She pricked up her ears as she wiped at her eyes and heard it again. It sounded like it was coming from the kitchen. She stood up and headed through the hallway - as she got closer to the kitchen the noise got louder. She knew it was ridiculous before she even let the thought enter her head, but it sounded like the whimper Rosie used to make when she wanted to be let out into the garden.

Lucy tip toed through the kitchen doorway and poked her head in. She looked all around, but couldn't see anything - and the noise appeared to have gone now too. She shook her head, it can't have been mum or the twins - they have gone to the park. Being four, life goes on for them as normal, thought Lucy with a hint of jealousy. And dad had gone away for the weekend with work, so it couldn't be anything to do with him.

"Ohh!" Lucy sighed, "Maybe I do need some company." She headed back into the hallway and lifted the receiver to dial Sophia's number. When Sophia answered, after apologising profusely, she invited her round for a sleepover.

Sophia had barely pressed the doorbell when Lucy threw it open and wrapped her arms tightly round her neck. They stood there hugging silently for a while, when Lucy broke the silence "I'm sorry" she started.

"Forget it" Sophia replied, "I understand, of course I do."

The two girls headed inside and changing into their PJ's, they grabbed a duvet and snacks, then settled down to watch some films. The only thing missing was Rosie snuggled up between them, they both knew it, but neither of them said it.

Lucy had so much fun that she nearly, *nearly* forget to feel upset. They giggled, reminisced about the good times with Rosie and talked until they could barely keep their eyes open.

Sophia drifted off first, so Lucy got up to turn the light off. But, as she did, she heard the whimper again. As she peered out into the hallway she

saw Rosie run into the kitchen. She ran after her but, when she got to the kitchen, she was nowhere to be seen.

Running back to the lounge, she shook Sophia, who was now half hidden by the duvet. "What?" Sophia asked sleepily.

"I have just seen Rosie!" She said hurriedly "Running into the kitchen, I saw her"

"Lucy" Sophia said sitting up, "You can't have..."

"But, but...." she started to protest.

"No" Sophia cut her off "You didn't see her. Now, please, go to sleep."

"Fine" Lucy said crossly, heading back into the kitchen for another look. When she was sure she wasn't there she headed back to bed herself. But, she couldn't sleep. She lay there thinking about it for hours, trying to rationalise what she had seen. Was Sophia right? Was it her imagination? Slowly she began to drift off, but Rosie didn't leave her mind - in sleep they were reunited, darting in and out of trees, playing hide and seek, like they used to do.

The next morning after a slightly frosty goodbye with Sophia, Lucy sat down for breakfast with her mum and the twins.

"Did Soph not want to stay love?" mum asked

"Umm.. no. She, errr, she had to get back for something"

"Mhmmm" mum muttered, barely listening as she tried to get the boys to eat their food rather than throw it at each other.

"Mum..." Lucy started hesitantly "Last night..."

Her mum turned to look at her, a quizzical look on her face

"I saw Rosie."

"What?" mum questioned

"I saw her, I got up to turn the light off and she ran into the kitchen"

"Oh, sweetheart. This is getting silly. I know you miss her, we all do, but you need to find a way to move on. I thought after you had Sophia over things were starting to improve"

"But Mum, I'm not lying I swear...."

Lucy's protest fell on deaf ears as the boys started to argue over her.

"Look Lucy" Mum said, after prising the boys hands apart, that were grabbing at each other across the table, "I understand - you are grieving. But, she isn't here. She has gone and you need to get used to that."

Lucy went to reply, but knew there was really no point.

Mum was wrapping the boys up in their scarves, hats and gloves as Lucy emerged from the bathroom.

"Right, we are off, see you later" mum shouted up the stairs as she ushered the twins out the door.

After they had gone, Lucy searched the house from top to bottom - she couldn't help herself. She had to know. After Sophia and Mum's reactions she was starting to doubt herself.

She was just heading back upstairs, when she heard it. She flew around and there she was. Sitting at the bottom of the stairs in her usual spot, looking up at her.

"I knew it" Lucy squealed in excitement. "I knew I hadn't made you up." She ran downstairs and Rosie jumped up at her, covering her face in slobbery kisses.

Then Rosie started barking, running between her and the back door. Chuckling Lucy threw on her trainers, before following Rosie and opening the door so they could both head out into the cold but sunny day.

The door had barely shut behind them and they had run down the garden and through the gate into the fields that stretch back as far as the eye can see.

They continued to run side by side when, skidding round a corner, they ran straight into a woman whose hair was wild from the winter wind. Rosie was so close to her they were practically touching, but the woman didn't seem to notice. This made Lucy chuckle. She remembered when people used to cross the road to avoid her staffie purely because of her breed. Lucy could understand why - there was a good chance Rosie would lick them to death and who would want to come to such a slobbery end?

The woman's westie followed close behind - stopping for a second staring right at Rosie, sniffing the air. Lucy was convinced the dog could see her - but as the woman called him, he gave one last sniff and ran after her.

They spent the afternoon running across the fields, splashing through streams and rolling down hills - Rosie pinning her to the ground, Lucy giggling as the cold grass tickled her face.

Then the sun started to set and Lucy knew that it was time to go home.

They walked into the garden and Lucy turned to watch as Rosie suddenly darted back toward the field. Just before she passed through the gate, she looked back, her tail wagging, with those big brown eyes. It was definitely back - that spark behind her eyes. And then, just as quickly as she had arrived, she was gone.

As Lucy opened the back door to the kitchen, a large grin on her face, her mum spun around from where she was chopping carrots for tea.

"Lucy!" she shouted "What the hell have you been doing, you are filthy."

"Oh Mum, you would not believe the day I have had" she started excitedly, intending to tell her mother every last detail.

"No, I probably wouldn't" Mum replied, shaking her head as she turned back to the counter "Now, go and get cleaned up for dinner"

Lucy smiled, "Ok, mum"

Spring had arrived now and, as the ice thawed and the sunshine yellow daffodils started to poke their heads through the soil, Lucy felt a new sense of hope for the future.

That day really was the last time she ever saw Rosie and, actually, she was OK with that.

It had been a journey of self-discovery and one that would change Lucy forever.

Primarily she had discovered that through grief, could come happiness; who knew you could learn so much from a dog? Rosie had come into her life and taught her about love and then departed again to teach her about loss. No matter how much that loss hurt, Lucy wouldn't have given up the love she gave her to avoid it.

As Lucy took her favourite photo of Rosie out of an album and slotted it into her new frame, she knew the dog she had grown up with would, of course, live on in her memory, but she also knew it was time to move on. And as she placed the framed photo of Rosie on her bedside table, in bounded a small bundle of fur. Lucy had forgotten the energy of a staffie puppy, as Rosie had slowed down in her later years.

As she flew onto her lap and started covering her in slobbery kisses, Lucy chuckled and hugging her tight, said "You have some very big paws to fill young lady"