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## **Don't Forget the Treats**

To Val, our German Shepherd/Dobie mix dog, there was no question that my husband Alex was the alpha male in the house. She respected him. She obeyed him. She bounced with enthusiasm at his approval and cowered in shame when he scolded her. There was only one thing that excited her more than his attention and affection, and that was getting her nighttime treat.

She tolerated me as a new member of the pack when Alex and I got married. But I wanted more than acceptance; I wanted her to love me, and I wasn't above bribery.

Within days she figured out that a persistent, gentle nudge of her nose under my elbow would lead to the opening of a Milk Bone treat box. Body quivering, tail wagging frantically, and saliva flowing with anticipation, treat-time became our after-dinner ritual.

Then one day Val got sick with a severe digestive disorder. The vet prescribed medication and a strict diet, which did not include treats. In spite of surgery, medication, and loving care, Val's condition deteriorated. And yet, even in her weakened state, she would come to me, nudge her nose under my elbow and look up with sad liquid-brown eyes when I tried to explain why I couldn't give her a treat.

Eventually we had to accept the fact that Val was not going to get better, and we made the incredibly difficult decision to end her suffering. I watched my husband kneel down beside her in the vet's office. He hugged her neck and spoke gently as he petted her soft fur. She looked into his eyes with absolute trust and affection, then she licked his ear and cheek. Alex stood, handed Val's leash to the doctor's assistant, and we walked to the car in tearful silence.

About six blocks from the vet's office I gasped and cried, "Oh, no!"

Stunned, Alex said, "What's wrong?"

"I forgot to give her a treat! I could have given it to her this morning, but I didn't even think about it!"

I frantically tried to think of a way I could rearrange the reality of the situation, but I knew it was too late. I started to cry.

I was stunned by the weight of my regret. Why hadn't I thought of it? The treat was our connection. She did so many things that brought me pleasure and made me laugh, and I had totally neglected to do the one thing that could have brought her a little pleasure in the last hours of her life. Now she was gone; and there was nothing I could do.

For months afterward when Alex and I would go for our walks and we would see a dog that reminded me of Val, I would again feel that piercing stab of sadness and regret. I had let our dog die without giving her one last treat.

Several years later my mother suffered a small stroke. After being discharged from the hospital, she was sent to a skilled nursing facility for short-term rehab. In addition to this new problem in her brain, her doctor said that because of her congestive heart failure, her heart was only functioning at 20% of capacity. When I asked a cardiologist friend what that meant, he said, "It means she's not going to live long."

Even though the timing was awful – just before Christmas – I jumped on a plane in Portland, Oregon, flew to Kansas City, rented a car and drove three and-a-half hours to her home in McPherson, Kansas.

As with many baby boomers, I had a hard time accepting the fact that there are some illnesses for which there are no cures. But after seeing my mother, I was painfully aware that her body was failing, and there was absolutely nothing I could do to change that.

Once I got her moved out of her room and loaded into the car, I asked what she wanted to do. Without hesitation, she said, "I want a steak and a glass of wine."

So we went to Applebee's – McPherson's newest and best restaurant. My mother believed in angels, and after that night, I did too. Our server asked if we were celebrating a birthday or some other special occasion. I raised my wine in a toast to Mom and said, "No. We are just celebrating life and being together."

I have dined in many fine restaurants, but I don't believe I've ever experienced more exquisite service than we did that night at Applebee's. After we finished our meal, that sweet young man brought us a huge slice of chocolate cake. When I said, "I don't think we ordered that," he replied, "It's my treat."

His gift put us in a festive mood. After dinner we drove around town and looked at the Christmas lights. I knew I might not have another chance, so even though it made me feel tremendously uncomfortable, I took a deep breath, reached for my mother's hand, and proceeded to tell her how important she had been in my life. I told her how she had inspired me and kept me going through my darkest times, and I let her know how much I loved her.

My husband and I made another trip to Kansas in January to help her get her business affairs in order. Two months later I got a call from my brother at 6:30 in the morning. Our mother was gone. The doctor said she had suffered a massive heart attack, and she was probably dead before she hit the floor.

As I stood at her casket, and looked down at her tiny little worn-out body, I felt a profound sense of loss. I knew I would miss her every day for the rest of my life, but I also felt a tremendous sense of relief knowing that she'd gotten out of this life with her dignity and independence still intact.

What I didn't feel was regret. There was nothing left unsaid, undone, or unresolved. The only thing between us was love. And even death couldn't sever that.

I will always regret that I didn't give our dog that last treat, and I will forever be grateful for the lesson that failure taught me. I learned that even though we will never have any control over death, we do have the absolute power to decide how we will prepare for it. Let us choose to be loving with the words we speak and generous with the treats we share.

Elaine K. Sanchez is an author and a professional speaker whose passion is helping people get prepared to take over the care of family elders and cope with the emotional stress of caregiving. Visit her website at [www.EKSanchez.com](http://www.EKSanchez.com).