

Doug

Doug answered the door very slowly, **he had been dreading this day for a very long time. He worried this would be the day he would have to say goodbye to Gus.**

Doug faked a smile as he greeted Dr. Gina. She stepped into his house, and despite his best efforts to appear fine, Gina still looked sorry for him. Doug simultaneously shut the front door and turned around for Dr. Gina to follow him to the kitchen. **“So,”** Dr. Gina spoke softly, **“where’s the dog—I mean Gus? Is he in another room, or locked upstairs?”**

“Sorry?” Doug asked without turning around to look at her. Apparently Dr. Gina hadn’t noticed that Gus was napping on the couch in the living room. Doug pointed to the couch as they entered the kitchen.

Doug took his seat very slowly, he slouched in his chair and cupped his hands together in his lap. He looked down into his hands. Gina sat very professionally in *her* chair. Her lap scooched all the way in and her elbows rested on the table, her fingers laced together. It took a while before anyone said anything. **Doug was still trying to gather his thoughts, how he was going to say goodbye, if he made the right choice calling the vet to come over, what he would do without Gus.**

Gina’s eyes pointed down to the table instead of at Doug, **“I know you are still making your decision. But I’m happy that you called me over.”** Gina put her hand face down onto the table, reaching out for Doug. More minutes passed by. Finally, Gina spoke again, **“Is there anything you want to talk about beforehand?”** Gina tilted her head to the side.

Doug took a deep breath in as he locked eyes with her. “Gina, am I a terrible owner?” His voice quivered.

Dr. Gina gasped slowly, “Oh Doug, you are anything but a bad owner. You’re doing this because you love Gus.” Her voice was stern and sure of itself.

Doug looked back down to the table, “No, I mean, am I a bad owner because I let him get this old? Should I have put him down sooner?” Again, he stared up at Dr. Gina.

Gina took some time to process the question. “It’s hard to let go,” Gina finally said, “and I know you would never hurt Gus on purpose.” Dr. Gina sounded so sure, there was not a sliver of doubt in her tone. This made Doug feel much better, he had people he could talk to, but not about having to kill his fifteen year old dog because he was too old to live happily anymore.

For the past few months, Doug had felt like the most selfish owner in the world as he watched Gus grow older and weaker, yet he still kept him alive. Doug knew that Gus would only get worse, and that he only put off putting him down because Doug didn’t want to live without him. “Okay,” Doug whispered, long after Gina had spoken, “I’ve made up my mind. It’s time for Gus to go.” Doug barely got his words out without his voice breaking.

Gina’s lips formed into a smile, her eyes still full of sadness and empathy. She rubbed Doug’s arm as he placed his face into the palms of his hands. “Oh, look who’s here,” Gina exclaimed politely. Doug took his hands off of his face and looked up to see Gus standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

Doug stared at Gus for minutes, trying not to cry. Gus stared right back at Doug, almost like he knew this was goodbye. His face was so small, his eyes so big. Gus looked exactly like he had when Doug had first rescued him eight years ago. Doug was the first to look away, first down to the table, then up and over to Gina’s eyes. Her face was full of compassion.

Doug and Gina both got up and hugged one another, then all three of them made their way to the couch and sat down. Doug took deep breaths trying to stay calm, as Gina took out her needle. He gave Gus a long kiss on the head and looked away as the needle sunk into Gus's shoulder.

Doug stared down at Gus's limp body. **But Doug didn't feel sadness or regret like he thought he would, instead, he felt relief. He felt like a weight had been lifted off of him,** and he looked down into Gus's face, and Doug, for a split second thought he saw Gus smiling for the first time in years.

Gus

Gus had no idea that there was somebody in the house. The conversation in the kitchen had woken him up. His tail, still wagging from his dream, slowly came to a stop as he examined his surroundings. Gus scanned the living room, making sure nobody had moved his toys or eaten the food from his bowl. Gus's mouth was dry and cold, he must have been asleep for hours. He decided to get off the couch even though he was still extremely tired, but then again, he was always tired.

It took a while for Gus to get moving. His feet squished against the cold wooden floor as he stepped off of the couch. His joints were stiff and painful, over the years walking had become much more tiring.

At that moment, feeling the pain of a simple task like walking, Gus felt sadness in his heart. He remembered back to his dream, Gus had dreamt he was running, not slowly wandering around the place, running. Gus dreamt he was in a grass field, wildly sprinting and feeling the wind in his face, unbound by the limits of his old age. At that moment Gus knew he wasn't truly happy, the joy of being a dog with a loving owner like Doug, had expired. It had expired long ago.

Gus overheard Dougs's voice in the kitchen, it seemed like Doug was talking to someone else. Gus tried smelling the air to get an idea of who it was, but just like his ability to walk, smelling was nothing but unreliable. Gus decided to wander into the kitchen to see who was there instead.

A small lady with dark brown hair sat at the kitchen table across from Doug. Gus recognized the lady, though he didn't appreciate her very much, she would always poke him with needles and give him tiny smooth rocks that didn't taste good. Neither of them realized that Gus had walked in. The lady sat facing away from Gus, and Doug spoke to her with his face pressed into his hands. The lady turned her head to face Gus, she spoke something to Doug as she grabbed his arm. Doug peeled his hands away from his face and brought his eyes up to meet Gus's. Gus stared back into Doug's shiny eyes, for a few moments neither of them broke eye contact. They just looked at each other, like they could read each other's minds.

Doug had always been a very loving owner, in Gus's eyes, Doug had always done his best to give Gus the best life possible. But even Gus knew that Doug's best wasn't cutting it.

Gus, still half asleep, followed the two back to the living room. They all sat down on the same couch, with Gus in the middle. The lady sat her bag on the table and pulled out one of those needles that Gus hated so much. Doug held Gus still next to him. Gus had been through plenty of these before, he was familiar with the routine. Though Gus could feel Doug shaking as he held his body upright.

The lady took the needle and slowly poked it into Gus's shoulder. As usual, the needle hurt, but Gus was used to that pain. Doug gave Gus a long kiss on the head, which was unusual. Gus didn't understand the big deal, everything seemed normal. The needle stung, but only a little, the lady had given him plenty of shots before.

But then Gus began to struggle to get air into his lungs. His breaths became shorter as the world seemed to get smaller and smaller. Gus's vision became cloudy, he felt tired, more tired than he had ever been. He lay down on his side, too exhausted to sit up straight. Time became

hard to process the longer it went on. Gus thought back to his dream. He thought about running in the field, he thought about when he first met Doug, how scared and lonely he was, and how Doug had saved him.

Gus realized he wasn't going to wake up. He knew that when Doug kissed him, he was saying goodbye, he was saying he was sorry. But, for the first time in years, Gus was happy, and he forgave Doug because he knew that even though Doug didn't want to let go, he did, because he truly did love Gus.