

Humor Me: Goodbye, old friend

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By MATT WIXON / Staff Writer

I first met Casper when he ran across a parking lot to see me. He was a tiny puppy with snowy fur and full-grown ears that stood straight up. He looked like a rabbit wearing a collar.

But he was cute, and so was his owner. So I asked her out. And more than 12 years later, we're married and have two boys who fill our home with love, laughter and hard plastic toys that I step on in the middle of the night. It's a very full house.

But it feels empty right now. Because Casper died last week.

It's an unusual subject for a humor column, I know. Probably better suited for a country song, but I can't sing, play the guitar or fake a Toby Keith attitude.

So here it is. A tribute to a West Highland terrier who, in the first year of his life, chewed up one of my hats, ate a miniature bulb from a string of Christmas lights and climbed on a dishwasher door to get a lick of detergent.

As a puppy, Casper was wild. He spent his days running around the apartment, jumping on furniture and knocking over lamps. He ran so fast that when a couch blocked his path, he simply ran up the back cushions and launched himself in the other direction. He looked like a skateboarder catching air on a ramp.

Back then, when I scooped Casper up, his heart beat like a drum roll. He was into everything all the time. Energy in living form.

That was true on land or in water, because Casper loved to swim. His favorite thing was to stand on a boogie board and float around the pool, and I swear, nobody taught him this. He just started doing it. He even learned how to chomp on the ankle leash attached to the board and pull it toward the steps so he could get back on.



Casper

Casper also made a splash at Plano's annual "K-9 Kerplunk," a day in which dogs can swim in a city pool. While most dogs eased into the water, Casper jumped in with a belly flop. Not surprisingly, when we went to the pool last year, one of the lifeguards recognized him. "Hey, it's the dog who barks the whole time!" she said.

Yes, that was Casper.

He was also the friendliest dog I've ever known. When we lived in an apartment, kids from the complex swarmed around him. Some would even knock on the door and ask if he could come out and play. One time, Casper snuck out of our apartment and ran in the open door of another one.

He hopped on the couch and made himself at home.

"Hey honey, come look," said the startled man sitting next to him. "It's a dog!" A dog who lived in luxury. Casper napped on the couch, spent his nights on our bed, and had well-trained owners who gave him a treat when he barked. His life had very, very little stress.

Probably the only thing that scared Casper was thunder. But he bravely defended the house by standing in the back yard and barking at it. He was our neighborhood's severe-thunderstorm warning system.

That was Casper. Confident, strong-willed and smart. But despite his fierce independence, he always wanted to be near us. Even last week, as the cancer started to really weaken him, he insisted on climbing the stairs to be with the family.

Finally, and painfully, the day came when we needed to end Casper's suffering. That morning, I put my hand on his chest to feel his heartbeat. It was still strong. As though it could go on forever, even as the rest of his body shut down.

He lived a good, long life. But not long enough, of course. That's the terrible thing about dogs. They offer the purest love in the world, but at some point, we have to let them go. And then hope to see them again.

When I was a kid, my Sunday school teacher told me that dogs don't go to heaven. They're not spiritual beings, she said.

Well, she never met Casper. He had heart and soul.

And what does she know? What do any of us know?

What comes after this life is beyond any human's understanding. It's just what we hope for and have faith in. And after receiving the gift of Casper for nearly 13 years, here's what I believe:

You can stop a heart, but not a soul. And no goodbye is forever.

Matt Wixon is humor columnist for The Dallas Morning News. His e-mail address is mwixon@dallasnews.com and more of his columns can be found at www.dallasnews.com/humorme.