



A Proud Paw-rent

Through Good and Bad Times

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A special Spot in my heart

Getting your first dog during the last year of MBBS definitely did not sound like a great idea but fate had her own plans. It was during one of those random visits to the pet shop when I saw him sitting in a corner observing his siblings as they rolled and tumbled around him. As I subsequently held his tiny body in my arms and looked into his pair of soulful hazel brown eyes, a special bond was formed and Spot became family.

Being a Jack Russell Terrier (JRT), Spot was gifted with an abundance of energy which he utilised to destroy countless toys, numerous slippers and a sofa. He became the training partner for my 2.4-km run for the Individual Physical Proficiency Test whenever we went out for a “walk”. He’s also a master catcher; nothing that flew into the house could escape him, earning him the

title of “fly-catcher” at home. He was always the first to be behind the door when I returned home, with a ball in his mouth ready to play. On days when things got tough at work, it helped knowing that Spot would be eagerly waiting for me at home.

He opened a special spot in my heart for dogs.

Short like a firework but leaving Sparkles in my life

Two years after having Spot, work started to get a little hectic with residency training and examinations. Fearing that Spot would be lonely at home when everyone was working, we brought home Sparkle, a female JRT. Sparkle was a fiercely independent and affectionate dog. She had a way of sensing our mood and would sit beside us quietly, sometimes resting her head on our laps as though she was comforting us.

Unfortunately, our time with Sparkle was short as she passed away in 2016 from acute kidney failure, secondary to unknown cause. It was the first time that helplessness, guilt and grief hit so close to my heart. Sparkle was, and still is, like a daughter to me. Her deterioration was so rapid that I lost her within a month. As a psychiatric trainee then, it was the first time I truly comprehended the concept of grief. I also had to face many situations similar to those of our patients and caregivers – considering the different treatment options, asking about the prognosis, deciding whether to let her stay in the hospital or bring her home, and opting to sustain her life or let her go. None of those decisions were easy and it got me to reflect on life itself and the work I was doing.

Sparkle brought me a lot of happiness, but more importantly, she taught me about life and true empathy.

Embarking on Scholar-ly activities

In 2014, we welcomed our third fur kid, a black long-coat miniature Dachshund. He is named Scholar because he looks like he is donning a graduation gown. With the development of my paw-renthood and being a proud fur dad of three fur kids, I found myself embarking on a new journey – dog nutrition.

This topic was especially important for Scholar. Being a Dachshund, he is prone to spinal problems and hence weight management is vital. I started to do a lot of research and readings on it and also consulted veterinarians for their opinions. If these could be counted towards my continuing medical education, I probably could have renewed my practising certificate for two years. Eventually, I began to design menus and diets just for my fur kids and I am still preparing home-cooked food and treats for them till today.



Healing old Scar(ffee)s

Three years ago, on Christmas Day, we adopted Scarffee – a rescued ex-breeding dog from a puppy mill. After bringing her home, we discovered that she had an ear-mite infestation, severe skin eczema, poor dentition, bowed legs, an eye injury and a lumbar hernia secondary to trauma, for which she needed multiple veterinary visits and operations.

However, these physical scars were incomparable to her emotional scars. In her first year with us, besides during meal times, she would hide in a corner and avoid any contact with humans or dogs. Whenever someone walked near her, she would immediately prone down and submit in fear. Fortunately, she was successfully rehabilitated with time. These days, Scarffee is an active member of the pack who is assertive and a big fan of cuddles and belly rubs.

COVID-19 and circuit breaker

The main impact on the fur kids during the period of circuit breaker (CB) was the disruption in their walks and play routines. In an attempt to minimise the risk of infection to both the paw-rents and fur kids, their walking routines had been restricted since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – no more twice-a-day walks and hanging with their pals at the dog park. This was extremely challenging for Spot, who has a natural abundance of energy and pent-up tension. Scarffee, on the other hand, coped with it pretty well as she would always choose napping under the sofa over heading out for a walk. To compensate for this reduction in activity, home-based *circuit* exercises which included running around the house and jumping up and down chairs were implemented.

Another change required in response to their reduction in physical activity was their diet. Having an insatiable appetite, we cannot rely on them to tell us that they are full. It took much trial and error and weekly reviews (of diets and weights), but eventually a new balance was achieved.

While the paw-rents were worried about possible COVID-19 transmission in dogs, shortage of food to feed them and possible stricter CB measures affecting veterinary and pet services, the fur kids were upset that they were not getting as much food and fun as before. It is perhaps a blessing that they cannot verbalise their displeasure.

Being a paw-rent is a commitment and a role. People often talk about dogs being loyal and giving humans their unconditional love, but to me, dogs are so much more than that. They have taught me about life, commitment, love, responsibility and resilience. ♦

Legend

1. Sparkle's way of comforting us after a long day of work
2. Celebrating Spot's birthday with home-baked cake and meat loaf
3. Attempts to walk Scarffee often end up with her being carried for the walks

Dr Tan is currently a consultant with the Institute of Mental Health. His areas of interest are in geriatrics and community psychiatry. Outside of work, he spends most of his time with his dogs and plants. He is also a theatre and film enthusiast.

