

Breaks -- good and bad -- happen

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Some days play out in ways that are hard to understand.

Most days are routine. There's no rule that the number of good ones has to equal the bad ones. Occasionally, you run into one that has more reverses than a whodunit. Like last Thursday.

Our eight-year-old Yellow Lab, Sophie, who normally blasts snoot-first into all activities including sleep, had come up with a gimp in her back left leg. She began circling her food rather than inhaling it. She started groaning. Melissa scheduled a vet appointment for Thursday at 8 a.m. in Staunton, about an hour's drive from our farm.

We'd also scheduled our Ford truck for a dealer patch-job for an hour later. This pickup features several factory-authorized, congenital defects in its four-wheel-drive system. Something goes wrong every spring like an annual clock shouting at me, "*Cuckoo!*"

We drove two vehicles over to the Shenandoah Valley to cover these errands.

Melissa caught up to me at the Ford dealership with unsettling news. An X-ray showed something on Sophie's lower lumbar vertebrae. We had been scheduled that afternoon with a diagnostic specialist in Charlottesville an hour away.

The truck appeared to be about \$600 sick, which was about double last year's bill. So we left it, had breakfast with friends and drove Sophie to the fancy vet who looked to be all of 14, soaking wet.

Melissa was hoping for a pinched nerve, but it was inoperable cancer. Chemo and radiation were mentioned, and, in the same breath, the vet suggested that they wouldn't do any good. A couple of weeks or months. An unexpected kick in the pants. He gave us scripts for pain meds, the same stuff people use.

I drove the three of us back to Staunton. Melissa was distraught and sat next to Sophie in the back seat. Sophie was glad to be in our familiar RAV 4, away from white-coated men shaking their heads and giving her rectal exams.

We drove glumly to the Ford place where we were told the truck's hospital bill had doubled in two hours. The patient would have to stay in sick bay overnight awaiting a transplant organ that was sure to arrive the next day. We'd done the right thing by driving two vehicles; I'd done this dealer repair before.

We bought groceries. Melissa pumped gas, and we drove home in the darkness.

I parked in front of our house and went to the back of the car to carry in bags. I noticed Melissa's keys on the corner of the RAV 4's roof. I assumed she had gotten back there before me, though it appeared she was walking Sophie into the yard. I pitched her keys onto the driver's seat so they wouldn't get lost.

Messages were blinking when I checked the answering machine. A family practitioner said that he had seen Melissa's wallet fall off the roof of a RAV 4 as it was making a right turn in Staunton. He had retrieved it and turned it over to the police. A second call was from the desk sergeant who thought the wallet's owner might be interested in reuniting with her stuff.

Both wallet and keys had been placed on the back left corner of the car's roof when Melissa pumped gas. The wallet jumped overboard three blocks away. But the keys had traveled 50 miles at more than 50 mph along twisty two-lane roads over four 3,000-foot-high mountains without budging. This defied conventional physics.

On Saturday, I took Sophie into the woods for what might be the last time. She rode behind my ATV in a cart, which was a first for her. I let her run up the trail to the pond. I sat on the deck, lit a cigar and sat looking west, toward Snowy Mountain.

Sophie eased into the water and conducted her routine reconnaissance for tadpoles. Then she got out and sat quietly beside me for an hour while I patted her head and scratched her ears. This had never happened. In past years, she was always too busy sniffing and splashing and chasing and shaking and biting at flies to sit.

On this day, she, like me, found something to look for in the far distance. Finally, she turned to me.

"I can't fix it," I said.

She rested her head on my lap and looked me squarely in the eyes. Some dogs know.

I had a hard time driving us home. It was hard to see.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books, Land Matters , Blue Grass Notes, and Snowy Mountain Breakdown are available through his website.