

# Boomer's Story

By Lindsey Lanham

In November of 2010, my husband and I felt hopeless, unable to understand how our strong, loyal, seemingly healthy boy, Boomer, was being rushed into exploratory abdominal surgery. Over the prior six months, and increasingly in the month right before, Boomer had non-specific, intermittent diarrhea and vomiting. No loss of appetite...our boy loved his food! Leading up to surgery, we had ruled out an obstruction, had restricted him from anything other than his normal food, and had done blood tests and everything our general vet could think of. Unfortunately, Boomer's symptoms remained and started to get more severe. After asking our vet to run every test she could think of on Boomer, we found that his albumin (protein) level had cratered to 0.6 (normal is >2.4). We agreed to a plasma transfusion, in the hopes of stabilizing him enough to have exploratory surgery. We were told that he probably had intestinal cancer of some kind and that we needed to take physical biopsy samples to ascertain the root cause.

Back in 2003, Greg and I lived in Houston and had recently bought a house together. We often joked about getting a pair of puppies, who we would name 'Boomer and Sooner', after the University of Oklahoma's



*Maisie and Boomer*

mascots. We did our research on breeds and decided that we wanted Westies.

After seeing an ad, we dropped by 'just to look' at a litter of Westie puppies. Within minutes, Greg had scooped Boomer up, walked over to the corner of the room and announced that THIS was our pup. Even at eight weeks, you could tell that the little guy was strong and determined. He was easily the largest pup in the two litters on offer... he had obviously muscled his way to mealtime! I went back over to the other pups and asked if he had a sister. Luckily, she wasn't spoken for, so within an hour, we were on our way to our new house with our two 'kids'. The name Boomer stuck, but we decided to name his sister Maisie, which is

of Scottish origin and means 'pearl'.

The four of us lived in Houston for the next year, but then started an overseas journey where we lived in Jakarta, Indonesia and Singapore. Overseas, we had a huge yard, with the occasional stray cat, rat or mouse. The dogs were in heaven! They didn't have any health problems for the next six years, outside of Maisie's seasonal skin allergies, which we treated with a medicated shampoo. I sourced the best lamb- and rice-based food I could while in Indonesia and continued to feed them that through our move to Singapore.

In May of 2010, at 7 years of age, Boomer started having occasional diarrhea with a little fresh blood, which we treated on and off with antibiotics and antidiarrheals. Looking back, this was the first sign of what would later be confirmed by biopsies taken during the exploratory surgery in November 2010 to be Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). The diarrhea was intermittent throughout the summer, but at the time, our vet didn't believe it was anything serious. "Probably just something he's picking up in the yard." Fast forward to October, when the diarrhea became more frequent... We just couldn't get it under control with medication, and the vet started to suspect a blockage or other more serious culprit. We had

Xrays and ultrasounds run, and the only thing to note was that Boomer's intestinal lining was slightly thickened. No definitive cause could be found.

We remained in a state of limbo, while his diarrhea got worse, now accompanied by more fresh blood. It was at this point that the vet started to suspect something more serious. She told us that she suspected some kind of gastritis or intestinal cancer. This, of course, sent us spiraling. Could our strong boy have cancer???

The first week of November, Boomer started to weaken and he started to vomit. We begged the vet to run every test she could think of to try to give us an idea of how to proceed. By chance, we ran his protein levels and discovered that his albumin level was a critically low 0.6 (normal is >2.4). He had been losing and/or unable to absorb the protein that he was ingesting and was now crashing. We were advised that he needed emergency exploratory surgery, but that given his protein level, he wouldn't make it through the procedure. They needed his albumin at 2.2 to even think about putting him under anesthesia. Our only option was to try a plasma transfusion in the hopes of infusing his body with enough protein straight into his bloodstream to get his level up. Boomer tolerated two units of plasma and got his levels just up to 2.2.

At this point, we transferred Boomer to Dr. Dennis, at the Mount Pleasant Veterinary Centre in Singapore, who specialized in small animal surgery. That afternoon, he went in and took

multiple biopsies of his gastric tract, in the hopes of finding a diagnosis.

At the time, samples could only be sent to the local vet lab, run by the Singapore Government. Due to the demand on such a small lab, the results took almost two weeks to get back. While we waited for results, we changed Boomer's diet to Hill's Prescription i/d canned food and gave him additional plasma, as needed. He made sustained improvement while we waited on the surgical results.

Boomer's biopsy results came back and confirmed the diagnosis of Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). After speaking to Dr. Dennis and doing as much internet research as we could, we knew this was not going to be an easy process going forward. Most of the articles stressed the importance of an owner's commitment to special dietary and medicinal needs to be able to minimize flare ups. They warned that the disease was often frustrating to owners, in that it took complete vigilance on their parts to recognize the symptoms since they were often very subtle.

One of the best resources that we had upon learning of Boomer's diagnosis was the Westie Foundation's eBook on IBD. The article was the most comprehensive and concise resource we could find. The document contained all of the traditional therapies and



*Boomer*



*Maisie and Boomer*

also mentioned the latest approaches that were being used to successfully treat IBD. It became our go-to document throughout Boomer's illness.

Greg and I were the perfect caregivers for Boomer. Greg and I had both been through extensive back surgeries and Boomer was by our sides every day leading up to and following the procedures. We would be by his side throughout his fight. I was lucky enough to work from home, so I kept a close eye on him. We decided after seeing him fight to live during his diagnosis, we would be as committed to the fight as he was. We were all in it for the long haul.

The next three years were frustrating, stressful and exhausting, but also miraculous. From November 2010 to January 2013, Boomer would cycle between dealing with 'flare-ups' and having all symptoms under control. We cycled monthly, sometimes daily, between good and bad times for the entire three years. Any little change in his demeanor communicated to us that something was wrong: whether he sprinted after cats on his daily walk or

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not, whether he inhaled his food or if it took a little longer to finish. These were all things that he used to tell us how he was feeling. Even his breath rate became something that we monitored throughout the day. Boomer found ways to let us know if he was doing well or not.

That's one thing we can't stress enough...your dogs will let you know when something is wrong. You just have to be tuned into their behaviors enough to read the signs. There were multiple times when I took Boomer into the hospital because 'something wasn't right'. He wouldn't be vomiting or even have diarrhea, but when we ran the bloodwork, something was indeed wrong.

The prescription food worked for about 8 months. Then, we switched to a home-cooked pork and rice diet, which lasted about 6 months. Again we switched to a home-cooked venison and sweet potato diet (not easy to get venison in Singapore!). When

the venison failed, we hit our last resort...a prescription food made with hydrolyzed protein.

Along with adjustments to his diet, we were constantly cycling medications, probiotics and digestive enzymes. We did our own research on the newest medicinal combinations and suggested those to our vet. Sometimes we implemented them, sometimes we didn't. Sometimes we tweaked the combo just a little.

Spring of 2013, while Boomer was on the hydrolyzed protein diet, we moved back to Texas. Greg had been working a large portion of his time back in the United States, while the pups and I were still in Singapore. So, we all looked forward to a time that the four of us would all be living in the same place full-time. Looking back, we think that Boomer willed his failing body back to health just long enough to make the long flight to Texas and see us all reunited. In those first 6 months of 2013, the only time he was truly stable

was the last week of May, when we made the long, 30-hour journey back to Texas.

One thing that most Westie owners know, is that the spirit of this breed cannot be matched. Boomer was a true fighter and we did our best to be his advocates during his fight to live. Even at his sickest, we knew that he wanted to live and was doing everything he could to stay with us. We promised him back in November 2010 that we would do everything in our power to fight with him.

If there is a lesson to be learned, Boomer taught us that being true advocates for your pets' health is paramount to their longevity. We trusted our vets to take the very best care of him, but we truly understood that 98% of the time, it was up to us to help provide that care. Love your pets every day. Trust that they will put as much love and effort into your relationship as you do!