

Recovery On Four Skinny Legs

by Linda Dixon

I came home in the quiet, early part of the pandemic after surviving a sudden cardiac arrest (SCA) and a weeklong medication-induced coma. I was released into a world that felt hollowed out. The hospital was stretched thin, and whatever system usually caught people like me—those whose brains had been starved of oxygen—was no longer functioning.

No rehabilitation was arranged. No follow-up calls came. No one offered a roadmap for what anoxia had done to my mind. I was wheeled out of the hospital with a packet of instructions and a body bruised from chest compressions, but without anyone to tell me how to rebuild a life that had abruptly collapsed.

I was one of the 6 percent of people who survive an out-of-hospital SCA. A congenital defect dismissed as harmless stalked my every breath until it ambushed me in the middle of the night. I returned to a house that looked the same but felt foreign, carrying a mind that drifted like fog. I had trouble swallowing and shuffled when I walked. I sweated profusely inside a bulky vest attached to an external cardiac defibrillator-charged and ready to shock me back to life. Due to the impact of anoxia on my social skills, I had trouble maintaining proper physical space. In the months that followed, losses accumulated steadily: my career aspirations, gone in an instant; the spontaneity of travel; even the simple breathless thrill over a new movie—all of it slipping away before I could understand what was happening. My life became a muted version of itself, and I knew I had to cobble together my own path back.

A few months later, an emaciated rescue dog stepped into the wreckage of my days. His execution in a Mississippi shelter was imminent, but the day my home was approved for his adoption, he was lifted out of the life that had failed him. We named him Dewey.

He arrived trembling and unsure, an outdoor dog who had known only neglect. He was a misfit—quirky, watchful, oddly aloof. Unlike our other pets, Dewey didn't play, didn't seem to understand toys, and never licked anyone. Sometimes he stared into the distance until we gently guided him somewhere else.

I didn't know it then, but Dewey was about to become the architecture of my recovery.

After an anoxic brain injury, healing depends on structure, routine, cognitive rehabilitation, physical pacing, and environmental calm. Dewey offered all of this without ever meaning to. His medications, meals, and walks carved shape into my days when time felt indistinct. Memorizing his routines forced my brain to practice what it had lost. His needs pulled me out of the suspended space between my life before SCA and the one after.

I became aware that the tone of my speech was unpredictable and loud. Around Dewey, I had to monitor my volume, soften my tone, and practice emotional regulation. I struggled to knit answers to simple questions together, but Dewey offered practice without judgment. He didn't care if I paused too long or restarted my sentence. He cared that I was present.

Veterinary appointments became their own kind of therapy. The busy offices forced me to prepare, stay focused, remain composed, and avoid meandering descriptions. Notetaking became a lifeline. My hands, stricken with fine motor deficits, strengthened through the practical work of caring for Dewey: writing ridiculously detailed dog-walking instructions, researching his conditions, or trimming his nails. Even my muscle weakness eased through our steady walks on flat ground. We were relearning movement side by side.

Since oxygen starvation rewired my neural circuits, restful sleep evaded me for over three years. Dewey, who also struggled with stillness, pressed against me in the dark. His presence was a quiet reminder that rest, like everything else, could be relearned. When I mourned the loss of my trademark laser-beam focus, Dewey's needs forced me to train my attention again. He required consistency, and that consistency rebuilt my concentration. The loss of purpose from not challenging myself with new work opportunities was sharp and unexpected. I longed to isolate, but Dewey needed me to be

out in the world. Being forced to interact helped me find other meaningful outlets and lifted my spirits.

My confidence in my physical appearance was low for the first few years of recovery, but Dewey—an unconventionally beautiful creature—helped me release my surface-level concerns. When others affectionally called him a “wet garbage rat” or a “patchy old goat” I found myself beaming with pride. Their teasing helped me let go of worry about my own slow gait, clumsy arm movements, and the extra time I needed to eat and swallow. If Dewey could be loved exactly as he was, maybe I could be too.

We healed ourselves in the smallest places we could control. Researching diets for both of us became a fixation and a welcome distraction. The peaceful, purposeful routines we built into daily life helped us steer clear of the overstimulating crowds that neither of us missed. Our relaxing periods became non-negotiable, a boundary we acknowledged without apology.

Just as Dewey had fully settled into his comfortable life, he was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer in the back of his throat. Surgery and radiation haven’t been able to save him, but I have been able to help him navigate the last phase of his life. I was grateful to help rewrite the end of his story. And thankful that he rewrote this chapter of mine.

My family now volunteers with a rescue organization to transport animals from crowded shelters to waiting families. Sometimes we help move the larger, older dogs with special needs—the overlooked ones who remind me of Dewey. Every time I cradle one in our car, I think of him.

Dewey taught me that strength can hide in the corners, waiting to reveal itself in the steady, rooted calm of simply enduring. The resilience he awakened in me ripples outward, touching lives he will never see.



Linda Dixon lives in western Connecticut with her family. She is not a writer, but her animals are excellent listeners, and they highly approved of this debut essay.