

Two White Rats, a Dog, a Cat, another Dog and a Dad

When I was young, my parents did their very best to acclimate me to the cycle of life by giving me pets with short life spans. My first pets were two cute white rats. One had a black hood and the other a tan hood. I named them Nancy and Poncho. They each lived for about two years which is a respectable life span for their species. One day I invited Poncho to run free in the bathroom—unfortunately I forgot to close the toilet seat and found him paddling water for dear life. Fortunately my Mom jumped to the task of reaching into the toilet bowl to save my darling rat's life. Another time I attempted to have Nancy generate an interspecies friendship with a newly found small frog. I placed them both in the bathroom—this time being sure to close the toilet seat...and within seconds Nancy had pounced on the tiny frog and began to dismember it. I cried and screamed, "Why can't my pets get along?" With a tear-stained face, I ultimately gave into Nancy and let her finish her tasty meal.

I was not witness to the deaths of Nancy and Poncho. Simply one morning I checked their cage and found a cold rat body curled into a fetal position. My Dad devised a ritual of stuffing the rat into a margarine box (butter was an unconsidered luxury item in our late 1950s household) and then allowing me, an under-aged child, to step out of the car at the city dump and hurl the box into a mound of unsorted trash. I don't recall saying a prayer the two times I hurled my rat-filled margarine boxes—it was clearly enough for me to be allowed into adult territory at the city dump.

When I was 11, my parents decided it would be okay for me to have a puppy. For years my Dad had graced my sister Rozy and I with stories of his beloved dog Scotty who would do such things as greet him in the middle of the street after he'd return from long sailing trips around the world. We picked out my new puppy Ginger at the local pet store. She was a golden brown cocker terrier who would yip loud every time she heard the inimitable motor of my Dad's red Peugeot veer around the final blocks of his drive home from work. When we'd all return from a family vacation she'd yip for upwards of 20 minutes welcoming us back! In that she learned lots of tricks, we entered her in a local dog contest. Once on stage, she was too distracted to perform, but nonetheless

won a red ribbon for “Best All American Dog.” Despite that she was **my** dog, she lived with my parents when I went off to college and then grad school. In 1979 around the time Jim Jones administered cyanide laced Kool Aid to his followers in Guyana, Ginger died. I was in graduate school in New York City and a letter arrived in the mail wherein my Dad related that my beloved Ginger had passed away peacefully in her sleep. It was hard for me to picture. I cried and cried. And then for years dreamt that she was in fact hidden in the recesses of my childhood closet.

The next family death was so very hard. It was my Dad. He was half-way into his 92nd year and was living out his doctor’s prediction that he had six months to live... He’d been treated for prostate cancer for at least a decade and it had returned with a vengeance. I would visit every month. We’d go over my edits to the chapters of his life story. He had been the dreamy child of Russian immigrants who pioneered in radio, the early days of color television and was an avid ham radio operator. He loved recalling stories such as introducing home-based radio to his skeptical Russian mother Olga who was convinced that he had staged a telephone voice on the other end of the line!

The day before he passed, my mother called to tell me to come right away. When I arrived, he had already slipped into a coma. I asked my Mom, did he have any last words? He did. He told her that they’d had a good relationship and that he loved her. I was hoping for something more deeply philosophical, but perhaps that’s more what’s depicted in movies than in real life. My Mom and I were with him when he struggled to take his last breaths. His body so wanted to sustain itself as very long as it could! The Filipino hospice worker told us the angels were coming to claim him...and that soon he would be with his mother and father. I lit candles. Soon some undertakers arrived in a big black hearse and lifted his still warm body out of the house that he had bought, remodeled and called home for more than 40 years.

Twelve years later there was another family death. This time it was my beloved cat Poppy. Poppy had become my sole roommate when I decided to rent an apartment on my own. Before she arrived, I would come home and feel so lonely in that one-bedroom place with the small kitchen and big closets. I feared she would never know much of the outdoors so I laid out a platform of wood that

extended out from the porch so she could gaze at trees and the sky. Eventually my boyfriend Don and I rented a house and Poppy gained access to a yard and the possibility of climbing trees. When we first moved her there, she did not budge from the spot of pillows I placed her on top of. Eventually, that house became her home and she gingerly learned to jump out of windows and hunt down insects and a rodent or two.

When Poppy was nearly 17 a tumor invaded one side of her head. It voraciously devoured her left eye. It was my first time to be totally in charge of the life (and death) management of another being. I took her to an animal eye specialist. They told me they could surgically remove the tumor and sew up her eye socket for \$6,000. If she survived the surgery she might live another year. I screamed at the young woman who had relayed this proposal, "But kittens are free!" "But this is your cat," she replied. Finally she just hugged me and we both cried over the pending loss of Poppy. I remained unable to declare that Poppy had had enough. Eventually Don's son-in-law, Adam, a former vet came to visit, and he arranged for Poppy to be put asleep. A heart-stopping medication was injected into Poppy's veins. She fell asleep in my arms. It was horrible to be witness to her life being intentionally ended. Despite that this was regarded as a humane act, I did not like it. We gathered up her lifeless body and placed it in a shallow grave in the backyard. I read a short essay and we all said goodbye.

Last year we said goodbye to Bacchus. Bacchus became my baby when in my mid-40s it became clear, I was unlikely to give birth to a human baby. We took long hikes, frolicked in the ocean (he was an excellent swimmer), explored the Marina Bay in a dinghy, and went snow hiking. One day he got a chance to herd sheep – he proved to be an absolute natural. The video we made of his exploits, "Bacchus Goes Herding," got posted on You Tube. Several viewers thought with such a title it would be a spicy porn!

Bacchus was 15 ½ when it became clear that the painful mix of arthritis, dementia and incontinence had gotten the best of him. I knew for sure that I didn't want to watch him die. My solution was to take him to the Pasadena Humane Society where a fatal potion is administered without the owner having to watch. When I pulled my car tight along the curb and announced to several of the society's volunteers that I was delivering a very sick dog, they quickly

summoned a cart and lifted him aboard. I swallowed my tears as I watched my bewildered Bacchus being led away. The desk clerk assured me, his last moments would be peaceful ones. For weeks I kept wondering how it really did play out and where his sweet doggy soul landed.

Now two more goodbyes are looming. Bonnie, Bacchus' yard mate, is suffering from the ravages of a weak heart. She struggles to breathe and hits painful bouts of coughing. Having none of Bacchus' symptoms, I lack perspective. Her brilliant vet just pumped out 6 pounds of fluids that had lodged in her abdomen when her heart failed to power her lungs. Sometimes she gazes at me with such anxiety. Mom, she asks, "Will I be okay?" I certainly hope so. I hold her tight, kiss her hard and let life keep coursing through her.

My mother, who just celebrated her 97th birthday, is withering. She's lived a glorious life filled with travel including a 6-month bike-train trip from NYC to California in her early 20s, a stint as a wave during WWII, much international travel with my Dad including Mexico, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, Australia, as well as multiple visits to both Eastern and Western Europe. She's been a talented singer and actress, skilled seamstress, medical assistant, dedicated gardener and passionate political activist.

We just moved her from "Assisted Living" to "Skilled Nursing" in that the hands-on care she requires is extensive. She has little interest in eating and sleeps many hours each day. Cognitively she functions like a small child. She's made demands like, "I want my strawberry ice cream now! And then I want to go right to bed!!!" It is so very difficult to witness someone who was once so vibrant and capable diminish into a pale shadow of their former self. My sister confides that she hopes she passes peacefully in her sleep. Meanwhile, my wily Mom proclaims, "I want to live as long as I can!"