

## **For Bright Eyes**

*By Michael Groetsch*

As we eat dinner at our favorite restaurant, my wife Barbara answers her cell phone. Her eyes and stilted speech suggest that something is wrong. I recognize the caller's muffled voice from across the table. It is our son Justin. I listen intently and realize that he is calling about our cat, Bright Eyes.

“Yes, Justin. Calm down. We're leaving now. We'll be home in a few minutes,” she reassures him.

Looking startled, she places the phone into her purse and insists that we go.

“Justin tells me that Bright Eyes is lying on the table and barely breathing. I think that he's dying. Please, Mike, we have to get home right away,” she pleads.

Within seconds, Barbara and I leave the restaurant and rush to the parking garage. Our car is on the seventh floor. The silence of the elevator seems to echo our thoughts. Bright Eyes is our mixed Siamese cat and has been through every chapter of our life with us. He has watched our sons grow from babies to men. He has been with us through twenty-two summers and falls. Although we knew that this day would come, we always hoped for one more spring.

As I drive to the garage's first floor exit, the circular motion of our descent seems more focused than in the past. Parked cars straddle one another between yellow lines like a flock of birds symmetrically in flight. The bold numbers on the wall of each floor appear more vivid than I remembered. As I veer to my right, my car tires give off an anxious hum as they make contact with the garage's concrete surface. I finally approach the parking attendant's cage, present the ticket, and exit into the night.

We travel north on Interstate 10 where the dead speaks to the living. There are cemeteries on both sides of the expressway. Above-ground tombs announce the former lives of those silenced by time. Thousands of concrete graves are crowded within a few square miles of urban landscape. Although I rarely look to my right, where Mom is buried, my eyes and heart quickly acknowledges the sprawling cemetery in which she rests. My mind already anticipates my wife's next words.

"Where will we bury him?" Barbara asks as her eyes fill with tear.

"In the back yard," I reply. "In the back yard, beneath the tree. It's for the best. We both know that Bright Eye's diabetes has gotten worse. His weight is that of a feather. He's twenty-two years old and his quality of life is gone. We can't keep him alive for us, Barb. We must let him go before he feels pain."

"I know that you're right, Mike. But it doesn't hurt any less."

Holding back her tears, my wife struggles to regain her composure. After a few moments of silence, she continues to speak.

"How can we love something so much that isn't human? How can we grieve over the loss of a pet as if we are losing a child?"

"Because he is our child. I'll miss him too, Barb. Although we will bury him near the tree, he will always remain part of our family."

We arrive and enter our home to the whimpering sobs of our sons, Jeremey, Gene, Josh and Justin as they sit near the almost lifeless body of Bright Eyes. His once shimmering fur is now a pale gray-white. His sapphire-blue eyes seem to have closed for the last time. We agree to hold vigil until he takes his last breath. Although he appears to be in no distress, his breathing is softly labored.

“Mom, I can still remember when we first brought him home,” Jeremy cries. “He was only a little kitten. He almost fit in the palm of my hand.”

In 1985, Jeremy and Josh found Bright Eyes abandoned from his litter. They found him beneath the crawl space of a house that contractors were building a block from our home. He was so small that they had to feed him warm milk with a syringe.

“Please, Mom. Please, Dad. Let’s take him to the vet. Maybe they can do something to help,” Jeremy pleads.

“Your father is right, Jeremy,” Barb replies as I stand quietly at a distance. “Bright Eyes is going to pass away without pain. We can no longer keep him alive for us. We must let him go. I know how much we love him but it is time to let him pass.”

As we sit and hold vigil for Bright Eyes, we reflect on his life with our family.

“Remember when Justin was just a baby and Bright Eyes would lick his chin, as he tried to get a taste of milk dripping from his bottle?” I ask.

“Yes,” Barb responds. “And I also remember the night that Jeremy cried himself to sleep after Bright Eyes ran out the front door and disappeared for a day.”

As Gene begins to share his fondest memory, Bright Eye’s breathing suddenly stops and, it seems, so do our hearts. Within seconds, however, slowly, very slowly, we notice that his breathing resumes but becomes more labored. Recognizing that death is never time- specific we sit, wait, and hope that he goes peacefully. The quiet sounds of dying are deafening.

By midnight it becomes apparent that Bright Eyes may linger through the next morning. In an effort to avoid the possibility that he may needlessly suffer, Barb and I suggest to the kids that we’ll take him to the vet hospital and lay him to rest. After saying

their good-byes, Josh gets a box from the closet and puts a blanket in the bottom. Jeremy strokes Bright Eye's soft fur and Gene sobs as Justin places his body inside the cardboard container. To the loud cries of our children, I pick up the box and carry it through the foyer. Barb opens the front door for his final journey.

As Barb drives the car, the quiet of early morning seems to reflect our solemn mood. I lay the box across my lap while gently stroking Bright Eye's almost lifeless body.

"Do you think that we're doing the right thing?" Barb asks. "He's real dehydrated. Maybe they can give him fluids or something, Mike. It worked last time. Maybe we can leave him at the vet for a couple of days to see what happens."

"Barb, we have no other choice this time," I reply. I remind her that we've been giving Bright Eyes insulin twice a day for years.

"In the last four months, Barb, he's lost three pounds. Like I said earlier, it's time to let him go. It's time to let him go."

"I know that we're doing the right thing, Mike. But why does right sometimes feel so very wrong?"

Barb stops for a red light where Clearview Parkway intersects with Veterans Highway. The brief delay provides us more time in which to reflect.

"I will never forget how Bright Eyes would straddle your chest when you were sleeping," I softly comment. "The sight of him cuddled across your body at night are moments of which poets write. His soft purring always seemed to help us sleep. He brought such joy to our family. It's hard to imagine life without him."

As I silently try to dismiss the grief that we feel, my mind takes momentary solace in less important things. It seems odd that until now, I've never noticed the large number of red lights that hang in the distance of this road. I've never noticed many of the small businesses that clutter the fringes of the highway in which we travel.

Within a mile of the vet's office, I feel Bright Eye's small body beginning to lightly pulsate. Within seconds, however, his almost undetectable movements erupt into a major seizure. Like a live fish thrown into a boat's well, his body violently hits and bounces against the sides of the cardboard box.

"Please, Bright baby. Please, Bright Eyes. Everything is going to be all right," Barbara cries in her futile attempt to comfort him.

"I love you, Bright Eyes. I love you so much," I whimper as I try to figure out a way to stop his pain. "Please, Bright Eyes, don't hurt. I don't want you to hurt."

Instinctively and without Barb's knowledge, I place my thumb and index finger around his narrow neck. Barb is consumed by grief and focused on driving. The box is deep and she cannot see what I'm doing. She will think that I'm petting and comforting him. At first, I'm hesitant to apply much pressure. How can I strangle something that I love? Seeing that his seizure is becoming more intense and violent, my grip around his neck becomes tighter and tighter until the seizure stops. Although I don't think that he's dead, my frantic effort to stop his seizure and pain has worked for the moment.

"I am so sorry, baby," I silently utter as Barb cries and repeats that everything will be okay.

We arrive and pull into the parking lot of the vet's office. It is nearly 1:30 AM and except for one car, the lot is empty. The bright fluorescent lights of the foyer

proclaim that the office is open for emergencies like ours. Once again, Bright Eye's breathing is softly labored. Without a word spoken, Barb gets out of the car as I closely follow with the cardboard box.

A middle-aged man in a crumpled lab coat and disheveled hair meets us at the front door. His blood-shot eyes and grogginess make it appear that he has been sleeping. His appearance reveals that he has had few early-morning callers.

"Hi, I believe you are the folks who called me about your cat. If you would please step into the room to your right, I'll join you in a moment or so." Although he appears to have a friendly demeanor, his words seem routine and rehearsed.

I carry the box into the examination room with Barb at my side. To our left is a medicine cabinet filled with cotton swabs, adhesive tape, clear lubricant and tissue. Two chairs sit in the room's far corner. A flat table covered by a clean white sheet is located at the room's center. The scent of rubbing alcohol permeates the air.

Within five minutes, the attendant enters the room with a forced smile. He holds a syringe filled with a clear white liquid in one hand and what appears to be a thick rubber band in the other. I can't help but wonder if he is a veterinarian or an assistant.

"Are you ready to put your cat down?" he asks in an impersonal manner.

Recognizing that I don't even know his name, I reason that he must remain emotionally distant if he is to provide such services. The same detachment that grave diggers must feel as they prepare a site for burial.

"Yes, we're ready," I respond, knowing there are no alternatives.

"Would you lift him from the box and lay him on the table," he requests.

"Yes, yes, I will," I reply as Barb stands in the corner of the room.

I pick up his frail body and gently, very gently, place him upon the table.

As the attendant wraps the rubber band around Bright Eye's upper leg, I shut my eyes and imagine him cuddled against Barb's chest as she sleeps.

"Will you please hold him as I give the injection?" the attendant asks.

Silently, I place my right hand under Bright Eye's head and stroke his body with my left.

"This will only take seconds," he explains. "Your cat won't feel pain and will simply stop breathing," he states in a business-like manner.

The attendant places the needle of the syringe an inch above the tourniquet, pierces Bright Eye's fur, and softly sighs.

"I'm sorry," he says apologetically. I know that it's tough putting your pet down.

Within seconds, Bright Eye's breathing becomes fainter and fainter until he quietly fades from our lives like a distant landscape beneath a fallen snow.

Avoiding eye contact, the man picks up his lifeless body and places him into the box.

"Do you want your cat cremated or would you prefer taking his body with you?" he asks.

"We'll take him with us," Barb responds without hesitation.

"Then if you would follow me, folks, I'll check you out at the front counter."

I pick up the box and with Barb at my side follow the attendant into the lobby.

"Will that be check, cash, or credit card?" he asks.

"Check," Barb responds. "How much do we owe you?"

"One-hundred dollars," he responds.

At first, I am offended by the attendant's straightforward question regarding our bill. But I again dismiss his detached manner as a means of coping with a difficult role. After all, terminating life cannot be a joy. I feel compelled however, to personalize the death of Bright Eyes.

"Our cat was like one of our children," I proclaim. "I just hope that he didn't feel pain when you put him to sleep."

"I assure you that he didn't. The fact is, I took him out of his pain," the attendant replies.

As he extends his hand to shake mine, his smile and eyes reveal that he cares more about the loss of life than his words express.

While holding the box, I watch as Barb fills out the check. In the line at the lower left of the check, she writes, *For Bright Eyes*. Without further words, we turn and walk toward the door as a young couple with a large box enters.

"Hello," the attendant says, you must be the folks who called me about putting your dog down. If you would go through the door to your right, I'll join you in a moment."

Barb and I exit the office. It is nearly 2:00AM. Except for two cars, the parking is still empty.

"What will we tell the kids?" Barb asks.

"That Bright Eyes knew how much he was loved by us," I reply.

Barb drives towards our home as I once again count the number of red lights that hang in the distance.

“You know, I’ve never noticed how many small businesses dot the highway. I wonder how they all stay afloat,” I comment.

The silence of early morning makes it seem so very still.

“I’ll miss him, Barb.”

“I’ll miss him too, Mike. I’ll miss him too.”

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*“Who can believe there is no soul behind those luminous eyes.”- Theophile Gautier*