

Painful memory of a lost pet relived, while a mission to uphold is recognized

Having experienced the still-lurking grief of losing a domestic cat to senseless violence, recently presented certificate of appreciation from Armstrong County's humane officers and OOTS means a lot

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Jan 31, 2023

Almost as if I'd been on some wayward ship adrift on a morning sea, I can still remember the floorboards in my home creaking with a plodding, insistent croak.

As the noise continued, I silently arose from the couch in the family room of the two-story house, in which I was raised, and made my way to the first-floor landing of the staircase.

What I saw is an image that to this day hurts my heart and troubles my mind.

There, on the living room floor, sat my sister.

While four years my elder, she still had only herself just turned 14.

The sound that drew me was spurred by her petite form on the floor, rocking back and forth, sobbing quietly in fits and starts.

I'd never seen her like that before.

At the tender age of 10, I can remember feeling like I was standing in a numb cloud of shock, not only at the sight of my suddenly inconsolable sibling, but also due to the reason why she was in pieces.

Earlier that day, an acquaintance in the neighborhood approached our family to let us know that the remains of Grayling, our gray-striped female tabby cat, were found near a secluded, woodsy area often used by youths for bonfires behind an apartment building about a block away from our doorstep.

Days earlier, we'd brought home a kitten to give Grayling some company, to which she responded with revulsion and ran off.

We learned it was apparent to those who discovered Grayling that she'd been violently killed by some still-faceless individual virtually in the shadow of our suburban, northern Allegheny County home.

A fearless, toned feline, Grayling was not an animal to trifle with, as she spent just about as much time outdoors as she did indoors during the younger years of my childhood.

Though she had all of her shots, with shiny tags and a collar to prove it, Grayling was no domestic snowflake. She actually was a skilled, agile hunter of many 'a woodland varmint.

I'd learned to basically keep my distance from her lest I risk suffering a nasty scratch or a bite.

I like to think the same consequence befell whatever lost soul got ahold of her in her final moments in this world.

But *boy* ... did that cat *love* my sister. Whenever Grayling was indoors, she spent most of her time in my sister's room.

After we learned of her murder, I'll never forget my mother saying through tears, "How could someone do such a thing?"

I remember feeling absolutely helpless in the wake of the horror and sadness that envelop my loved ones and I on that terrible day, and many thereafter. In the days and weeks that followed, my family and friends sought the aid of local police in hopes of eventually apprehending a suspect in the crime — to no avail.

I remember little else about that summer than losing Grayling in such an awful way. Throughout the years, I increasingly felt like our family not only lost a pet — we lost an irretrievable and sacred shard of our innocence and peace of mind during that time.

I still do.

But no one more than my sister back then.

Any cat owner knows that they normally pick one person to love more than anyone else.

Grayling was *her* pet.

The rest of us often seemed like annoying distractions.

And in the wake of Grayling's murder, forever unsolved, my late father became a consistent giver to Orphans of the Storm (OOTS), the no-kill animal shelter based in Rayburn Township.

Despite various economic difficulties experienced by our family, Dad always had enough to send OOTS a check in support of their efforts.

He did that right up until last year, when he passed away June 25.

So Dad was very proud to read an article I'd written, which was published early on in my first stint as a young reporter at the Leader Times in the early 2000's.

The story's primary source couldn't speak — it could only bark and yip. Those abilities actually were what warranted the story.

It was a Jack Russell Terrier named Snert.

The dog was credited with waking up his owner on a boat docked on the Allegheny River in Applegold during what later was determined to have been a carbon monoxide leak in the craft's tiny cabin.

The canine was called a hero by first responders, and I'll never forget how proud my Dad was of my work on that story.

"If you can take something like that and make it into that kind of story, then you're going to do great things in this job," he told me at the time.

Twenty-plus years on, I continue to wonder on a nearly semi-daily basis if I've in any way lived out Dad's belief in my professional potential.

Then came a day earlier this month, when I arrived at the office to find a certificate from Armstrong County Humane Police Officers and OOTS, which recognized the Leader Times "for generous support of Armstrong County's humane police officers."

How proud my father would once again have been?

In response, I posted the following message on my Facebook page, with a photo of me holding the framed certificate: "Happy and proud to accept this certificate of appreciation from Armstrong County Humane Police Officer Chris Jirak O'Donnell and her colleagues. We at the paper are all pet people and we will continue to work hand in hand with them to do what we can to bring justice to wronged animals border to border!"

I meant every word.

It's sad that such a commitment is so regularly required based on the continued regularity of criminal cases involving animal abuse.

My family eventually made the decision to stop letting our pet cats outdoors, for their own good, although it's also sad that their freedom had to be limited by our fear for their safety.

In any case, I'll continue to work hard to protect and advocate for the pets of this area, for my Dad, my Mom, for my big sister and, most importantly, for Grayling.