

Puma The Ferret Crosses The Rainbow Bridge

Alexandra Sargent-Colburn shares her thoughts about her ferret Puma's recent crossing of the Rainbow Bridge.

By Alexandra Sargent-Colburn

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Grief seems to have caused Puma the ferret to cross the Rainbow Bridge.

I haven't wanted to write this column. I'm supposed to be funny here in this small space, and yet I keep bringing a full measure of tragedy to you. Now, it is doubled.

I had always heard that ferrets could grieve the loss of a cagemate. I didn't believe it. I believed that stories like that were nothing more than pretty consolations that people gave themselves when one ferret died shortly after another. I considered them expressions of a purely Victorian sentimentality; a wish to believe that the heart of a ferret is very much like the heart of a man; an attempt to try to wrest some sense out of the greatest mysteries, life and death. But I am a believer now. For you see, Puma, my Princess Puma the Toe-Biter, faded away after the sudden loss of her companion, Ping is He. Several weeks after his death, I found her in her hammie, still and looking as fragile as a porcelain statue. She had crossed the Rainbow Bridge in the night.

Puma's Mourns Her Ferret Friend

Things were very chaotic after Ping was killed by my dog, Allis-Chompers. Allis had been a trusted friend for so many years. I felt betrayed, I felt like a fool. My father is a Quaker, and I had grown up with the concept of the "Peaceable Kingdom" in my mind, the one in which the lion lies down with the lamb. I found myself thinking, "Alexandra, the lion is a lion; Not a metaphor." And I cried bitter tears, bitter tears.

But even through the chaos, it was plain to see that Puma was greatly affected by Ping's loss. She searched the house for him, over and over. She visited all of his favorite sleeping spots. She largely stopped interacting with us. She started to lose weight.

I was at the point where I did not want any more ferrets in the house, but my husband loved Puma, loved her so very much. He brought home the ferret that I named Todd in honor of my friend and weasel lover Todd Leuthold, who was killed in a home invasion in 2007. The hope was that Puma would bounce back with a new companion beside her. She did, but only for a short time. She resumed her solitary search for that which eluded her, and lost more weight.

I scheduled a vet appointment for her. I have seen skinnier weasels, but she seemed so ... diminished. I opened the cage one morning and found her in Todd's arms, gone. Todd seemed very protective of her, very knowing, very wise. He released her to me slowly, his gaze never leaving mine.

I have spoken to a number of my ferret friends about the practice of force-feeding a ferret with a broken heart. They tell me that it is a terrible thing. It did not always work, and few of them would be willing to try it again. In a way, I am glad that I didn't put Puma through that. It seemed the next logical step. Perhaps things happened the way that they were supposed to. I will never know. I do know that I miss the little shark, she who so delighted in planting a deep bite whenever possible. She left us too soon, too soon.

Struggling Through The Darkness

I wrestled with guilt, with grief, with shame. Dark feelings, very dark feelings. After a time I came to the conclusion that it wasn't really fair to Todd to keep him as a singleton. He is young, and full of beans. He wants to romp and stomp and play with an intensity that I simply can't match. And each night, he climbed into his hammie alone, alone.

I spoke to my husband about the possibility of simply giving Todd away. He would be easy to place in a new home, at his age. My husband said essentially that he knows the sound of grief in my voice, after 11 years together, and that we were keeping Todd, period. The day came that I put the grief down, and chose life, instead. I brought Hebert home to live with us. He is named for the Hebert candy company, a local New England treasure. They invented the recipe for white chocolate, and Hebert is a creamy white albino. And it brings joy, joy to my heart when I see the two boys playing together. Joy that I thought I might not ever see again.

Please never think that I view Todd and Hebert as replacements for Ping is He and Puma. They could no more be



replaced than I could be, or than you could be. Their passing was one of the most painful things in my adult life. I have learned hard lessons about the failure of my idealism. I want to go forward with the best qualities of it, tempered by the memory of what I have lost. I want to be a better person, a better ferret mommy. And I will treasure each measure of joy that Todd and Hebert bring to our home. I hope to share all of that with you. It would be an honor, the finest honor to the memory of my friends, Ping is He and Puma.

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Alexandra Sargent-Colburn lives in Massachusetts with fish, ferrets, a cat, a husband and a neurotic dog. The ferrets are in charge.