

Always Say Goodnight

by Stefanie Yoder

*Editor's note: Students who take our composition class write a remembered event essay, describing something from their life that matters to them. Stay tuned for the next in this series, **Eleventh Hour**, by Marina (Shenk) Lehman!*

She was a scrawny thing, my first love. Maybe six pounds and mostly white with a few black patches and an all-black tail. That tail was my window into her life. I could always tell what she was feeling by how her tail moved. No one else could ever quite understand her completely. My two sisters tried, but they didn't know her like I did. We had a special bond, that cat and I. She was my first pet, my first love.

It was April. We had just moved into our two-story brown brick house across the road from our school. I was in 6th grade that year. Walking home from school one day with my sisters, I saw her. She was cautiously peering out at us from around our garage, crouched down and ready to run. We could see her tail quivering as she watched us coming towards her. I could tell she was nervous. Warily she took a few steps in our direction. My youngest sister moved to pet her. The cat's tail stiffened and bristled. She took off running into the corn fields behind our house. That was that, she was gone.

Several days later I saw her again. She was creeping up beside our twin pine trees—a spot of white against dark green. I watched her through the sunroom windows. She crossed the open yard and made for one of Mom's flower beds beside the deck—the one with Black-Eyed Susans and the Rose of Sharon bush. I guess she picked that one because she could hide in the tall flowers. She came right up to our floor-length windows and peered inside. I think she was curious to see the new people who had moved into her house. Slowly I went up to the windows. She saw me and froze. The only thing separating us was

the screen in the window. We stared at each other for what seemed like eternity. She had yellow eyes. I watched those eyes turn from a careful stare to a look of acceptance. It was as though she realized that I was here to stay and was okay with that. Then she broke eye contact and calmly walked away, tail swaying softly as though she hadn't a care in the world.

The next day she was back again, this time on the patio off the other side of the sunroom. She sat there as though waiting for something. It was that time of day where the sun hits just the right place and bathes the patio in light. Her black spots contrasted sharply with the white of her body. She looked imploringly at me and tried to meow, only it came out as something between a half-croak and a half-squeak. Her tail wagged hopefully. I couldn't stand it. I ran into our Americana kitchen where Mom was washing dishes.

"Mom! Do we have any leftover food scraps I could give the cat?"

She hesitated, "Well, there is a bag of cat food in the garage that the previous owners left, but you have to ask Dad first."

I ran into the living room where Dad was reading his Bible and asked if I could use the cat food. "Well, Stef, I suppose you can feed her until the food runs out, but then she's on her own again."

A huge grin split my face. I grabbed one of the margarine containers that Mom saves and ran back to the garage in search of the cat food. I looked on the dusty shelves and in cobweb-filled corners. Finally I spotted the bag on a small ledge on the left wall. Standing on tip toes, I reached for the bag of Purina Cat Food.

Cautiously I opened the screen door of the sunroom and stepped outside. The cat sat there and watched me. Slowly I set the container down and slid it towards her, then stepped back and sat on the step. She sniffed



Stefanie and her cat Oreo in January, 2002.
Stef was 12 years old.

at the air and approached the food. She looked at me again with tail wagging. I imagined a grin on her black and white face that was saying, “Thank you” and I watched her eagerly gulp down the food. When she finished, I held out my hand in hopes of petting her, but once she realized I had nothing more to offer, she scampered off and left me.

For a week, I left food in that margarine container for her. Sometimes she would meet me there, sometimes not, and I would leave it on the step for her. By the end of that week she allowed me to pet her. She let me rub her head and scratch her chin. She loved it when I scratched her chin. Her black tail would wag with furious contentment and I knew we had become friends. Every night before bed I went to the windows looking for her. Sometimes I would see her, sometimes not. Regardless, I always told her goodnight.

Unfortunately, by the end of that week I also ran out of cat food. I ran inside to our kitchen, where Mom was probably washing dishes once again, and begged to buy more food. “Please, Mom?”

“Honey, that’s Dad’s decision. You’ll have to ask him.”

I waited all afternoon for Dad to get home from work. I heard his car rumble up the driveway and park in the garage. He walked in. I turned to him and explained the situation. He glanced at Mom and they exchanged looks—those looks that kids can’t stand because you never know what they mean. He turned around and walked back out to the car. I thought I would die of suspense. I looked at Mom but she just smiled. Dad opened the door and came back in carrying something behind his back. I looked into his laughing blue eyes, and I knew. Daddy had bought more food for my kitty.

Day after day after school, I would meet Oreo—that’s what I decided to call her—on the patio and sometimes the deck, depending what she was in the mood for that day. I talked to her and she listened to me. Occasionally she would add her two cents worth and answer back in that half croak/half squeak. I’d rub her tummy and scratch her ears and she would reward me with a low rumble of a purr and a wagging tail. We were best friends, that cat and I. She was my first pet, my first love, and I always told her goodnight.

By now she completely trusted me and let me hold her. She liked it when I held her like a baby. I walked endless circles around the deck talking to her while she was in my arms. Those were glorious days: when the sun shone brightly and I spent my time outside with Oreo. But there were rainy days too, and on those days I had to take an umbrella out with me if I wanted to spend any time with her. One day while it was pouring outside, I opened the door to set her food outside, but she darted between my legs and scampered into our sunroom. I quickly closed the door and went after her, but she didn’t run away. She just stood there in our sunroom looking around. She had never been inside before—hadn’t been allowed. I picked her up intending to put her back outside, but at that moment I disobeyed my parents and let her stay in the sunroom with me. Then Mom walked in. She looked from me to Oreo to the pouring rain outside. Compassion softened her eyes and she smiled at me. That was the turning point.

Mom and Dad decided that Oreo could be in the house as long as she stayed in the sunroom. By the end of summer, Oreo had free reign of the entire downstairs minus the furniture. That didn’t last long. When autumn came, the couches were no longer off limits, she was allowed upstairs, and we bought a litter box for the sunroom. Now the only thing Oreo couldn’t do was stay in at night, but soon that changed too. Mom worried about the cat being outside in the cold during winter.

Dad tried to reassure her, “Hon, that cat was outside for many years before we came along. She’ll be fine.”

However, between Mom and me, we convinced Dad to let Oreo stay in the garage at night. We bought a second litter box and a little cat bed for the garage. That was the last time Oreo had to stay outside. That winter she barely left the house. She was content to lie by the fireplace all day and sleep in her cat bed at night. Occasionally she would ask to go outside, but when she felt the cold snow on her feet, she eagerly came back to our warm house.

Two years passed. It was the February of my eighth grade year. She was now the sixth member of our family. Mom and Dad accepted her as a part of their monthly budget, and my little sisters grew to adore her. It was normal to see Oreo lounging on the sunroom couch or lying in a sun patch in the living room. Each night before bed, I’d pick her up, give her a kiss, and put her out in the garage. She would wait at the door while I finished locking the rest of the house, then I would come back to the garage and peek through the window on the door. She would look up from the other side and give me a half-croak/half-squeak meow and I would whisper “I love you” and tell her goodnight.

I always told her goodnight. Except once, and I will never forget that time. It was a Saturday night. I put her out in the garage as I always did and I locked the rest of the house as I always did, but for some reason I did not go back to the garage door, and for some reason I did not peek through the window on the door, and for some reason I did not whisper “I love you” or tell her goodnight.

The next morning dawned crisp and snowy. Mom made our customary Sunday breakfast of baked oatmeal, Dad put on his shoes, and I got ready for church. I opened the garage door expecting Oreo to be waiting excitedly for her food with tail thumping wildly on the floor, but I found something totally different. Instead of being greeted by a purring ball of fur half-croaking/half-squeaking, there was nothing. My kitty lay lifeless by the door, in the same spot where she always waited for me to say goodnight. Still and cold. With tears streaming down my face, I picked her up and cradled her in my arms one last time. She was my first pet, my first love, but I forgot to say goodnight. **BB**



An RBC graduate, Stefanie received an associate degree in Biblical Studies with a concentration in music and worship in 2009. She is returning to RBC as staff and lives in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania with her dad, mom, two sisters, and cat, Max. Stefanie attends Antrim Brethren in Christ Church.