



TIKVAH MEANS HOPE

1990—2003

forever my first



SURVIVING LOSS

EXCERPTS FROM A LIFE

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by Brenda Shoss
Tikvah's Forever Mom, Student, Friend

As a twentysomething “serial girlfriend” with a penchant for destructive men, I could barely care for myself much less a houseplant. So when my cousins found a homeless cat, I seemed the least likely candidate for feline foster mom.

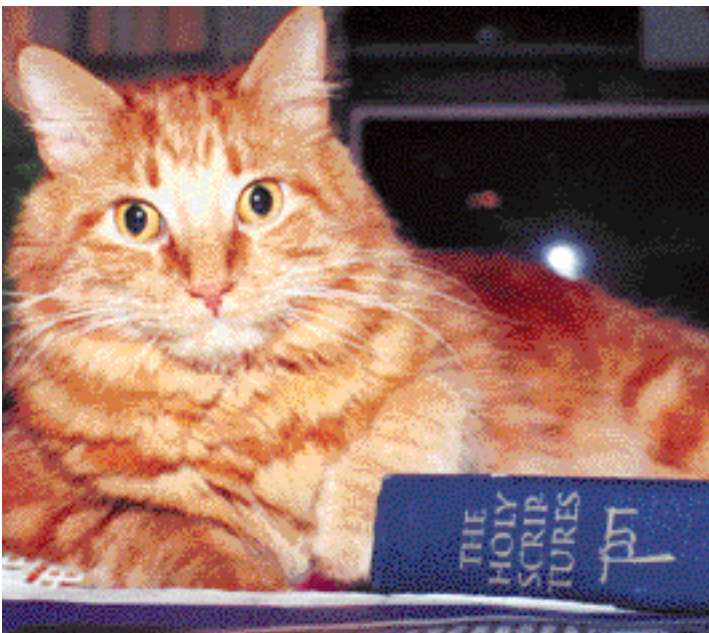
Still, I went to check out the orphan. I figured two lost souls ought to meet. At our first encounter an orange bundle leapt into my arms. Before I could say, “How do you hold a cat?” he ambitiously straddled one shoulder to let his bushy face peek through my long hair.

He was undeniably gorgeous, with deep rust rings looping through flaxen fur. An apricot-colored “M” marked the soft spot between his ears. He adopted me immediately. We returned home with my then four-year-old cousin Lindsey, who proceeded to give me a crash course in cat.

I had just turned 30 and was studying to become an adult bat mitzvah. I asked my instructor, Esther Klevens, to tell me the Hebrew word for hope. “Tikvah,” she said.

And so he became. **Alive. Vibrating. Golden deep eyes. Tikvah. My hope.**

As I dug Tikvah's grave the week of February 10, 2003, anger and shock maneuvered my shovel. Tikvah would have turned 13 in a few months.



In early December he was diagnosed with low-grade gastrointestinal lymphoma, a feline cancer that emanates from intestinal bowel disorder (IBD). Over the weeks that Tikvah's body wasted from 10 to five pounds, I wrapped him in towels to syringe-feed him every two hours. I tenderly massaged and cleaned his chapped paws. I poked needles into his back to drip IV fluids into his dehydrated body. I combed food specks from the beloved orange fur that barely masked protruding bones. And I accumulated doctors — primary veterinarians, an oncologist, a holistic vet, a homeopathic practitioner.

During feedings, Tikvah peered over the rim of his terrycloth papoose. I grew to admire his spirit. We confronted each obstacle as a team. When Tikvah's red blood cell count plummeted, I raced him to the emergency clinic for a blood transfusion. I could decipher labwork as if I'd gone to veterinary school. But in less than one month, the cancer traveled from stomach to nose to brain.

Tikvah's first seizure began with moans that amplified into screams. I carried him to the litterbox, assuming the IBD's wretched diarrhea was on its way. Instead, he fell over. His front legs stiffened into wooden pegs and his eyes dilated into black pools.

Within seconds, his body softened and he turned toward me with a look of “Why?” One doctor thought low blood sugar caused the seizure. So I sped back to the emergency clinic. When his sugar level came back high, I realized I had run out of “What nexts?” The oncologist confirmed lymphoma in the central nervous system. I took him home to die.

At Tikvah's euthanasia, my husband and friend Janet cried as I read a farewell letter. But after a few days, no one knew where to file my sorrow. Business clients nervously asked “Are you okay?” and my dance students listened reticently as I dedicated our concert piece to Tikvah.

Tikvah passed away on January 24, 2003. Months later, I wander from room to room to marvel at the quiet where he used to be. I stare into photos, as if to animate their stillness.

"If you are grieving for an animal that is sick, dying or has died you are not alone. Such a loss can be one of the most devastating as well as physically and emotionally traumatic events you will ever experience," writes Harriet J. Cuddy, Certified Pet Bereavement Counselor and facilitator for the St. Louis Pet Loss Support Group that I now attend.

Society doesn't embrace grief or "out-of-control" emotions. When the heartache is over a companion animal, the portals to grieving become all the more narrow. Many don't recognize the depth of the bond. "They fail to understand that the death of a pet is sometimes more painful than the death of a person who played a part in your life," Mary Montgomery explains in *Good-bye My Friend, Grieving the Loss of a Pet*.



For 12 years Tikvah rode atop my shoulders to escort me on dog walks or household chores. Sometimes he swatted my hair with an oversized floppy paw. My lap was his floor, my hair his playground. He was a warm fluid hug. I called him Little Buddha, for his gracious, accepting nature. As my family grew to include two dogs, another cat, a husband, three stepchildren, and my own child — Tikvah remained its heartbeat, wise, cool-headed and kind. He was unquestionably the "good kid" in my brood.

I am haunted by the emptiness after his death. Yet I have to authenticate my grief with metaphor: "Imagine if your child died. This feels the same way." Secretly, I resent the need to qualify love. Why must I ration devotion — this much for a husband, this much for a son and this much for a "pet?" Granted, the expression of love may differ but its depth is the same.

Today, I no longer require approval to mourn. "You alone know how much you have lost. No wonder your heart is heavy and your spirit bleak," Montgomery says. "But if you allow yourself to be sad and to grieve...the bleakness will eventually pass and so will the pain."

Grieving is a continuum with perceptible stages: Shock, Denial, Anger, Depression and Acceptance. The stages don't unravel sequentially. They ricochet unpredictably, sparked by an unforeseen dream, memory or event.

SHOCK & REFUSAL TO BELIEVE

After Tikvah's diagnosis I sought advice from members of Kinship Circle, my animal advocacy group. Responses poured in from around the world. Among them, Cleo's story stood out as a beacon of hope. The little cat in California had nearly succumbed to IBD/lymphoma. One year later she was alive, her weight up and diarrhea under control. I consulted with Cleo's guardian and doctor via phone. I switched to organic food and cat litter. I tweaked dosages for pills and powders. The one thing that never occurred to me was that Tikvah would actually die.



When he did, I did not know how to stop saving him. Hours before his euthanasia, I administered IV fluids and homeopathic drops. Leftover medications are stashed on a shelf. I continue to rescue Tikvah in my dreams. I worry about missed meds or insufficient calorie intake.

"At this stage, we do not yet accept the reality of death," Cuddy cautions. "There is a loss of awareness and sense of numbness. 'I can't believe...' is a common response." For some people, the sorrow is physical. It shows up as pain, a trembling stomach, or pressure in the chest. Others sleep incessantly or experience insomnia.

ANGER, ESTRANGEMENT, ISOLATION

I detest the vicious cancer that ravaged my otherwise perfect cat. I resent my original veterinarian, who did not stress the serious nature of IBD or advise an earlier biopsy. When I envision Tikvah barely able to breathe or balance, I revile God. My husband's inability to offer empathy or support also infuriates me.

Anger stems from feelings of powerlessness. Most caregivers commit their time and heart to an animal's well-being. After a beloved companion dies, the guardian's capacity to protect and heal disintegrates. If anger seeps inward, it can evolve into guilt and depression. Thus it's crucial to purge anger through affirmative outlets such as exercise or other physical exertion.

Ultimately, anger dissipates when a person can "unload" feelings to another. Immediate family members are not ideal listeners. They tend to pass judgment or offer unsympathetic advice to "get over it" or "get another animal." Some are dealing with their own despair over the death. To vent feelings in a supportive setting, a person may need the unconditional ear of a pet bereavement counselor or companion animal loss support group.

DENIAL

Denial is a last-ditch effort to negate death. I dreamed doctors said: "We were wrong. Tikvah doesn't have brain cancer. If we try this treatment, he'll be fine."

"Denial is rooted in fantasy and a deep desire for wish fulfillment," Cuddy says. "We may engage in bargaining with God, the veterinarian or Clergy. Comments like, 'I promise I will be a better person if only my pet will come back to me' are common."

GUILT

After Tikvah died, I focused on details about his burial and headstone. I asked my vet to wrap his body in favorite blankets, surrounded by letters, prayers and photos. When the wintry soil thawed enough to permit burial, I gathered family and friends in a circle around Tikvah's photos. I felt serene as I told Tikvah he was as big as the sky and as intimate as the beat of my heart.

But days after the memorial, I berated myself with “what if?” and “should have.” Why had I accepted the vet’s initial antibiotic-and-we’ll-see-what-happens prescription? If only I’d researched IBD and begun treatment months earlier. Now Tikvah was gone forever.

Guilt is a typical reflex after the death of a companion animal. When caregivers can no longer nurture an animal family member, they are plagued with regret and self-blame. Intellectually, I know I fully devoted myself to Tikvah’s recovery. Emotionally, I must forgive myself for failing.

DEPRESSION

Sometimes the misery worsens before it gets better. Companion animals occupy the nooks and crannies of everyday life, from a computer-side perch and shared nap to an ebullient greeting and familiar kiss. Ordinary places appear lifeless without the animal that distinguished them.

As I drift back into the rhythm of work and family, I sense Tikvah’s familiar presence. Orange fur tangled in an old brush triggers a rush of tears. I ache to feel the weight of him over my shoulder and hear his nighttime purr.

I have begun to accept nightmares, panic, insomnia and lethargy as pathways. I can’t accelerate the grieving process or ignore it. I simply have to journey down each corridor, no matter how dark or painful, before I can accept Tikvah’s passing and cherish his memory.

WHEN TEARS FINALLY COME: RESOLUTION AND ACCEPTANCE

Today I stand at the edge of acceptance. I realize that images of cancer will fade beneath memories of my mini-lion, with his studly strut and confident smile. I imagine renewal as a time when Tikvah’s absence no longer monopolizes my thoughts.

“Although six months is an average length of time to mourn, avoid comparing your grief with that of others,” Montgomery advises. “Often it takes a year of seeing the seasons change and of celebrating holidays and birthdays without your pet before the hollow ache disappears.

Several weeks ago my father and I recalled Tikvah’s wrestling matches with my Lhasa Apso Stanley. The inseparable playmates rolled around my apartment like orange and white tumbleweed. Tikvah stalked Stanley with the stealth of a puma, until he moved in for The Pounce. Then he jumped so enthusiastically he landed on top of Stanley piggyback style. He bopped Stanley on the head before tumbling off with a Garfield grin.

For the first time in months, I remembered Tikvah with laughter instead of tears. One bit of solace lies just beyond the horrible sadness and void: I cherished a special animal who returned that love every day of his life.

***Tikvah is all that is within me.
He is as big as the sky and as intimate
as the beat of my heart.***



*...I shall see beauty
but none to match your living grace.
I shall hear music
but none as sweet as the droning song
with which you loved me.
I shall fill my days
but I shall not, cannot forget.
Sleep soft, dear friend...*

by Michael Joseph



*They will not go quietly,
The cats who've shared our lives.
In subtle ways they let us know
Their spirit still survives.*

*Old habits still make us think
We hear a meow at the door.
Or step back when we drop
A tasty morsel on the floor.*

*Our feet still go around the place
The food dish used to be,
And, sometimes, coming home at night,
We miss them terribly.*

*And although time may bring new friends
And a new food dish to fill,
That one place in our hearts
Belongs to them*

And always will.



I Loved You Best

*So this is where we part, My Friend,
and you'll run on, around the bend,
gone from sight, but not from mind,
new pleasures there you'll surely find.*

*I will go on, I'll find the strength,
life measures quality, not its length.
One long embrace before you leave,
share one last look, before I grieve.*

*There are others, that much is true,
but they be they, and they aren't you.
And I, fair, impartial, or so I thought,
will remember well all you've taught.*

*Your place I'll hold, you will be missed,
the fur I stroked, the nose I kissed.
And as you journey to your final rest,
take with you this...I loved you best.*

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LETTERS TO TIKVAH

- **Tikvah, you were always so beautifully full and radiant.** As a “kidden” you chased a dangling feather toy on my bed, rotating faster and faster in your mad circles until you became an orange blur. Sometimes you dangled upside down from my forearm with four strong paws. I called you “a cat purse.”

- **Your very first morning with me, you camped out in the bathroom sink.** This became an endearing habit. Though you always slept in my bed, you awakened in the wee hours to play hockey with my make-up before retiring to the large marble sink for a snooze.

- **Pumpkin Muffin: Nothing will remain in my mind as vibrantly as images of you wrestling with Stanley.** You stalked him with the skillful and majestic pride of a lion king. You crawled, flat to the carpet, ears laid back, eyes sharp. Stanley stood in the middle of room with that clueless Lhasa look, “Where did he go?” as you arced in surreptitious circles, closing in for The Pounce.

Sometimes you darted from a corner with so much gusto, you arrived on Stanley’s back piggyback style before tumbling off with your understated grin. A year apart and inseparable playmates from birth, the two of you rolled through my apartment like orange and white tumbleweed.

- **Tikvah, you also stood watch on my old glass-top coffee table, waiting until oblivious Stanley passed by.** Then you bopped him on the head a time or two, with that snide Garfield smirk.

- **Ticky Sticks: You twisted into an acrobatic “S,” with the bottom half of your body pointed one direction and top half pointed another.** Your wide, playful eyes locked with mine, as if posing for a photo. You were so funny, with that little tough-guy stride and focused stare. You appeared in the strangest places--a sock drawer, a filing box on a shelf, inside your carrier while it was stacked atop other carriers alongside my desk... When found you looked at me as if to say, “So, you got a problem with this?”



• **Beautiful Orange Boy: Every night you slept across my torso, purring and staring into my face.** You purred so blissfully that your tongue poked right out between your freckled lips. You seemed to be sticking your tongue out at me. But I knew this was simply Tikvah in heaven.

• **Tikvah: You straddled my shoulder, your magnificent head peering through my hair.** Sometimes you took a feline swat at the hair, which always killed me! I backed into the bathroom, angling myself to catch your reflection in the mirror. You relaxed like a large limp pillow, draped over my shoulder as we walked Stanley or performed household chores. I can almost feel your weight and warmth against my back. I am still in shock that you are not here.

• **Tikvah, phone boy: And who could forget the time I came home to find the police at my doorstep announcing that someone had called 911 from my address?** I was baffled and terrified at the prospect of an intruder inside my home. The police let me listen to the recording. I heard shuffling papers, soft tapping and movement across my desk. Suddenly I recognized the caller. You had pressed your paw against the 911 button on my office phone. When the operator asked "Is someone there?" she only heard more movement and perhaps a faint meow if she'd listened more carefully. For weeks my family left messages on my answering machine: "Tikvah called earlier and left a message. I'm returning his call. Do you know what he wants?"



• **Tikvah, hero: Twelve years ago, I was asleep in my bed around 5:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning.** It was a deep sleep from the accumulated hours and I didn't hear a man ascend the balcony to pry open the glass patio door and enter my kitchen. He silently progressed to my bedroom door. What I DID HEAR was Tikvah, who'd been asleep on my belly. You stood up prairie-dog style and emitted a deep guttural howl. I never heard that sound before or after the intruder. Your eyes were wide as saucers. You woke me up and alerted me to the danger. I heard movement outside my bedroom and glimpsed the silhouette in the doorway. As you growled menacingly, I screamed at the top of my lungs. The neighbors heard us and the spooked intruder fled. The cops later referred to you as the hero cat. They felt that if you had not warned me before the man was near enough to shove a pillow over my face, he probably would have attacked me.

• **In the car, Tonces: Just like the infamous Saturday Night Live cat Tonces, you had a thing for cars.** You left your carrier to walk across my lap until situated at the rim of my leg. You wrapped two furry front legs over my arm to rest your head on the windowsill. On occasion, you shifted your front paws to the steering wheel in an effort to assist with the driving. We spent entire journeys with your little head staring out the window in awe of the traffic, snow, birds or lights. Even on your second to last night on the planet Earth, as we drove home from the emergency clinic, you crawled from the carrier. I gingerly lifted your emaciated frame on to my lap and cradled your head over the window's edge. We crept slowly over icy roads and I remember your silvery reflection against the evening glass. The brain cancer caused you to involuntarily swat the car door a few times, but you remained in my lap for our last car ride together.



• **Tikvah, stuff only a mommy could love:** An ever-changing pattern of freckles dotted your pink lips. And a little brown mole grew just above your right eye, until it mysteriously fell off. You also had a condition nicknamed “rodent virus.” Your lower lip swelled to three times its normal size, making you appear as if you’d been in a street fight. Medication shrank the lip. After I married and moved from apartment to house, your “fat-lip” virus never reemerged.

• **Tik:** You are still so near. Your “orangeness” is everywhere. You were always the first to greet me at the door, even before the dogs. And your campaign to win over my I’m-not-a-cat-person husband was inspiring. In the mornings you sat in the center of our kitchen table, peering over Grady’s newspaper, as if to glimpse the headlines--or nab some of his breakfast. I loved to watch the two of you share that quiet morning ritual.

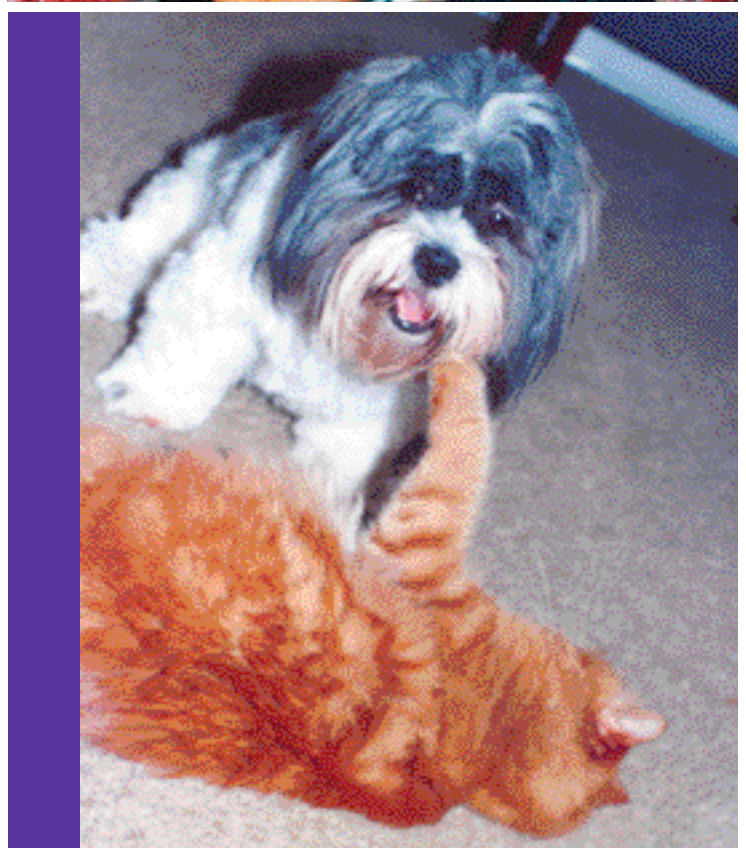
• **Tikvah Schmikvah: Stanley, Cleveland and Rebekkah miss you too.** Each shows me in his or her own way. Rebekkah is left without her feline companion. And Stanley is left without his lifelong best friend. The night I brought you home to die, I placed your carrier on the kitchen floor. As Stanley approached you scooted closer to the open edge. The two of you sat nose to nose for literally five minutes. Then Stanley began to shudder so violently, the vibrations made my hand shake when I tried to comfort him.



• **Beloved:** In under a month you went from a cat with “low-grade” lymphoma to a cat with lymphoma in the nose and central nervous system. It was swift and horrible. I am raw. Dazed, in fact. I can still feel the tiny chapped pads of your paws. I cleaned them throughout each day, and carefully cut the dirty fur lodged between them. Toward the end, I spread a soothing holistic gel over your bloody blisters.

• **Tik Le Schmic:** You remained the gracious, noble gentleman until the very end. Even after the cancer invaded your central nervous system, you dragged yourself to the litterbox. On the day you were to be euthanized, you struggled to right yourself, bobbing back and forth over the wheat litter. Though the cancer had stolen your balance, you somehow managed to brush litter over your diarrhea before toppling over. You only wanted to be yourself. You are my hero. Courageous and precious. I have never met another like you.

• **Tikvah, the day after:** Between seizures yesterday, just before the act of mercy, you fell asleep with your head over my heart and your legs draped across my stomach. We lay together for one hour, in suspended animation. We both knew it was our last sleep together. I felt the rise and fall of your body in sync with my breathing. I traced your tummy, your sides, the slant of your chin and arc of your plume tail. I tried to memorize you. I always knew I loved



you. I never understood the deep, primal and maternal nature of that love until now. You were the first of my babies, and 12 years was not long enough...

• **Tikvah: Mornings and evenings are hard, as if each beginning and ending is marked by your absence.** It is frustrating and unnerving to see (but not see) your puma stride across a room or your Buddha stance at the top of the stairs. You always moved in duet with Rebekkah. She even looks weird without you. Sometimes Rebekkah and I awaken simultaneously, late at night. We look at each other, seeming to ask: "Where is Tikvah?"

• **Pumpkin Muffin Kitten: I hope you have awakened from a needed rest and are walking along a sunny, tree-lined trail.** With each step you take your mane returns, your bulk returns, your strength and vitality reemerge.

• **Tikvah, 12 years ago you were a new beginning. And you were my first.** When I saw that I could actually love and nurture another, I began to recover from my eating disorder. You are my ambassador. Your splendor opened my eyes to all animals. Because of you, I am vegan and a voice for animals. Tikvah, you are my teacher and my hope.

TAKE MY WORDS.

TAKE MY LOVE.

MY TEARS AND MY JOY.

YOU ARE ALL THAT IS WITHIN ME.

GOOD BYE SWEET KING, PRECIOUS BABY.

I LOVE YOU SO MUCH.



**TIKVAH, 1990-2003
TIKVAH MEANS HOPE**

(sung to "Bicycle Built For Two" melody)

Tikvah, Tikvah give me
your answer true.
I'm half crazy over my love for you.
You are my favorite kitten.
With you I am so smitten.
My little flirt.
My orange dessert.
My pumpkin muffin kitten.

Tikvah, Tikvah why are
you so smart?
You've always been my teacher,
from the very start.
You are my little Buddha
so loving, kind and truthful
You are my guide
My eyes inside
Alive in my heart forever



Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

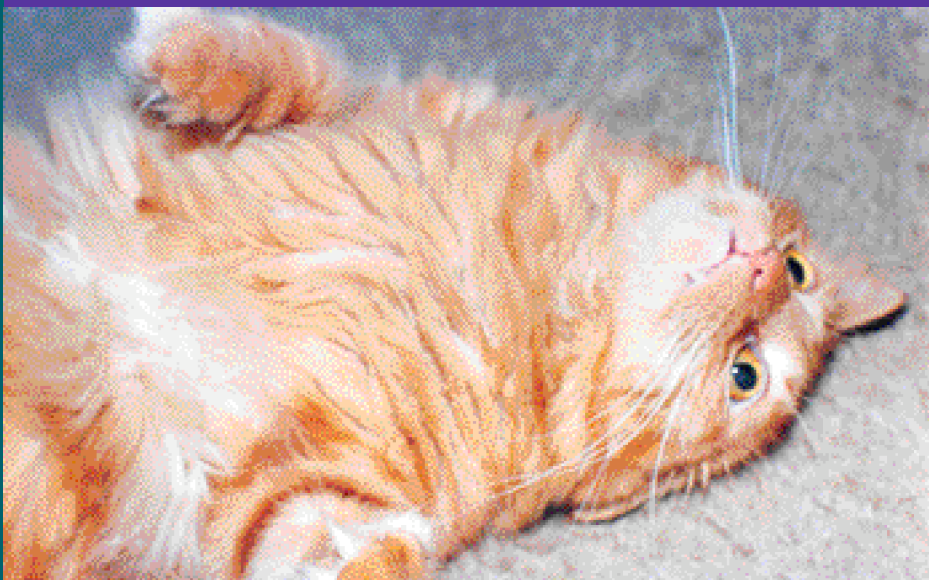
When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that companion goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor. Those who were hurt or maimed on the streets, at puppy mills, inside factory farms, laboratories or circuses are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His radiant green/gold eyes are intent. His eager orange body quivers. He purrs with half-shut eyes and a little pink tongue poking through his lips. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your Special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your companion, your baby, your precious — so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together.... *Author unknown*





Tikvah, I never believed for a second that I couldn't save you. I poured every part of me into finding your cure. I whispered into your ear for days and weeks: I will never leave your side. I am with you. Forever.

You are my first. The one who has never stopped opening doors. Because of you (and Stanley) I know that all animals are unique individuals with souls. Because of you I am vegan.

And now, as you leave, you bring well-being to Stanley, Rebekkah, and Cleveland. I will never again stop at "try this pill and we'll see what happens" if your brothers or sister become ill. We are free of commercial foods. We are 100% organic. This is because of you Tikvah.

Goodbye precious orange guy.

Tikki Sticks

Tik Le Schmic

Tonces

Ticknoid

Your worn-out body needs to rest and rejuvenate for the journey ahead.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

Good night angel. Goodbye Tikvah.

