

## *Silence of the Bunnies*<sup>1</sup>

Excerpted from the book of the same title by Dan Stark

A few years back, God's warranty on my health expired.

Understand that I had never been in the hospital, never missed a day of work, and had just completed my first "century"—a 100-mile bike ride. So it seemed unfair that I tore a ligament in my knee playing tennis and required an operation.

Okay, you say, grin and bear it. I agree. But then that little twitching in my pinky on my right hand got annoying, so off I limped to the doctor. Parkinson's disease. Damn.

Time to watch my health more closely, get annual physicals and so forth. Going to my physical resulted in a chest X-ray showing an enlarged heart. No big deal—this was not something that required immediate attention. I had up to four months to fix a problem valve.

Now I know that lots of people have medical problems. Pets do as well. Within the last year, our cat and both dogs died. They were old.

So was my mother-in-law. She lived with us because of health problems brought on by diabetes. She died in our home shortly after the second of the dogs, but not before she would pass out in various rooms, falling heavily to the floor and breaking various parts of her body in each fall, and sometimes coloring the floor with her blood.

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<sup>1</sup> This story appeared initially, with minor differences, in the Washington Post, Oct. 19, 2004

I'm not drawing a comparison between human and animal deaths, but I'm clustering the deaths here because they acted strongly on my seven-year-old daughter who loved both grandmother and dogs without reserve.

These things happen. Of course, it's a bit of a strange coincidence that on the day of my mother-in-law's funeral, my own mother had a stroke, and was no longer able to stand on her own. Perhaps she was worried about my father, who passed out in an airport in France and cracked his head open. His pacemaker has helped some, but it seems his heart is failing. That makes it difficult for him to help her.

I'm not really complaining. I run an efficient mental zoo, and I am able to put all these worrisome beasts in their cages for the evening where they cannot disturb me. Then I drink a glass of wine and relax, allowing the worries of the day to deal with themselves for a while. I do that privately now, because my wife has her own problems to deal with, including health challenges no less daunting than mine. We seem to go our own ways more and more.

There are wonderful things in my life, too. My daughter gives me all the emotional love I can handle. My son makes me proud every time I look at him: a six foot two inch hunk who graduated from the University of Michigan, can dunk a basketball or turn the girls' heads depending on his mood, and who exudes a warmth and humanity that are visible just by looking at him. He also has rejected all fatherly advice and is going to go to law school. I couldn't be more proud.

He's going to be awfully embarrassed when he reads this.

The war between good and bad in my life would have left me without a sense of direction but for the emotional guidance provided from an unexpected source.

We had moved into a lovely house out in the country, but our luck seemed to go bad about the time we moved in. Our animals fared no better. I started wondering whether we were intruding where

we shouldn't, for instance whether we were living above an Indian burial ground. Before I became paranoid about the place, we brought into our lives two bunnies, Horton and Boinger, who lived in a charming rabbit hutch in our backyard.

In the early days they added to my daughter's delight—they were brothers, one brown and one black. Except for a few times when they acted differently than I thought brothers should act, they were an uplifting joy to feed, hold, or engage in games they seemed prepared to repeat endlessly.

Sadly, during a particularly violent thunderstorm, the hutch blew over and the bunnies were freed. We couldn't catch them despite repeated efforts to do so. As a result, they lived in our backyard having the best of both worlds: freedom from confinement and a free lunch.

Freedom does not come without risk, and after about two weeks, Boinger stopped making appearances. To an adult, he was missing and presumed dead. To my daughter, that was just one of the possibilities. More likely, he had met up with savvy rabbits that persuaded him to come live in their place while he learned the tricks of survival in the wild.

No such fantasy was possible with Horton. One evening I heard a plaintive, half-wailing, half-agonizing shriek outside, but close to our house. It was, I came to realize, the sound a rabbit makes when being turned into a meal.

Horton was almost certainly in the jaws of another animal that had already done some damage, but was carrying off its victim for a final attack followed by a gruesome but very natural dinner.

The wailing was repeated over the course of the next several minutes, lasting perhaps twenty seconds a wail, with an increasing length of time between each outburst. It started close to the house and moved gradually deeper into the woods. Dusk had come, and without knowing what I would do, I went outside with a flashlight to look for the source.

I never saw the fox, which is what I believe it was, but the light caused a reflection of two eyes, which receded along with the wails moving away from me.

Then the wailing stopped, and I knew in my heart that Horton was gone. As horrible as the wailing was, the silence that followed was devastating.

We never saw Horton again. I hadn't particularly loved the bunnies while we had them. But I missed them now, and I was haunted by the sound that Horton had made. In my mind, it wasn't solely an expression of physical pain, although there was plenty of that. It also was the lament of a living creature knowing its life was about to end, expressing an instinctual desire to live despite the terrible circumstances in which it found itself.

The silence of that night has stayed with me. It reminds me of the tremendous thirst for life we animals share. As I think about my desire to see myself and those I love end their stay on this planet with grace and dignity, I can't help but wonder whether we will want to continue suffering in the jaws of disease rather than letting go. I had always intended to live well until I no longer could do so, and then end my life with dignity. The bunny's lament makes me wonder whether I have it in me to give up the fight. If Horton wanted to live this badly, despite living a lonely existence, intensely frightening to a creature prepared only for the dangers of a pet store, there had to be something here that I had missed.

My mother is very ill now, and living in a way that she once said she would never want. As my Parkinson's advances I will eventually face the same predicament. I don't think I will be able to face death with less passion than Horton. I am going to thrash around, fight the fox and scream to the heavens about it. Despite everything going on in my life, I cannot allow myself to be carried away without resistance in the jaws of my attacker, and quietly devoured. You may get me, fox, but not without a fight.