

# Photos From Home

by Linda Liestman

I awoke to a burst of sunshine streaming through my bedroom window. It was a beautiful fall day just a few days before Thanksgiving (2001). My first thought was that my husband, Larry, had gotten up at 5:00 AM to check on our dog, and that meant that the poor, dear old creature had survived another night. My second thought was that this was the day my husband and I had agreed upon to put our dog to sleep.



Linda and Benji, 1996

Benji was a stray of sheltie and rough-coated terrier breeding with the characteristics of a fox, who had found his way into our home and hearts fifteen years earlier. My 8 year-old twin nieces had found him and saved him from the dogcatcher. We advertised to find his owner, but none came forward and by then we were glad of it. We often wondered about his background, but never learned who had spent so much time training him, for he was exceptionally well-trained, well-mannered, and intelligent. We were amazed at how many words he understood and how responsive he was to us. He was such a character that he became a

friend to many that knew him, and we were grateful every day for "the gift" this dog was to us.

But time had sped along, and Ben was between 16 and 18 years old when his body became toxic in the latter stages of kidney failure. He had not eaten for five days, and had even stopped drinking the extraordinary amounts of water that was an earlier reaction to the disease. This long wonderful era of our lives was about to end.

If people are measured by that which we love, then I will be measured in part by my passion for animals, both tame and wild. As a child I had no siblings or neighborhood children of my age to play with, and my animals became my best friends. I had sobbed for five days at age seven, when I lost my first dog. I had sobbed for three days when at age 12 I lost my first horse. It was my animal-loving mother who counseled me out of my despair, and I promised myself that I would take life's losses more philosophically in the future. Those first two special fur-friends and the sudden loss of them had taught me so much early in my life. I realized that if I could not handle life's losses better, I may be afraid to love completely in the future. If that happened, I could be cheating myself out of the wonderful long-term experiences and

joy that both animals and people bring to life.

The fullness of time brought me more losses of both people and animals, and I handled those losses much better. By age 25, I had assisted veterinarians with euthanizing a number of animals at stables and farms where I worked, sometimes because the owners couldn't face it. I understood that euthanasia could be the right thing, and the kindest thing to do to eliminate the suffering of an animal for which there was no hope of survival.

The impending death of our beloved dog was sad for me, but it was so much harder for my husband who always said that this dog had softened his heart in ways he never believed possible. During the previous two weeks he and I discussed the timing of euthanasia and if it would be needed. Our vet said that dogs were "tough". While most people hoped their pets would slip peacefully away, in reality they often lingered until their human caretakers were finally forced to make the difficult decision to euthanize. I was prepared to do it earlier, but my husband was not. Our vet said our dog was not in pain. He continued on with his existence while we cared for him lovingly at all hours of the day and night until finally my husband admitted to what was bothering him most. He told me that Benji had always demonstrated such fear at going to the vet clinic and at having vaccinations, and he just couldn't be at peace with the idea that Benji's last moments would be filled with fear.

Our veterinarian agreed to bring an assistant to our house to perform the euthanasia. That quelled one of Larry's fears. He also learned that we could give Benji an oral sedative in advance, so he would not know he was getting the shot. That quelled his other concern. The appointment was made for four days later.

Meanwhile, we called the people we thought might want to say goodbye to Benji. Some said they just could not, and of course we understood. But over the days that followed, Benji's groomer, my niece and sister-in-law, our daughter and her husband, and several of Benji's friends stopped by. While we watched TV in another room, Benji's visitors would lie or sit down beside him on the floor, softly stroke his fur, and talk to him. Then they would visit with us for a while, and these touching visits meant a lot to all of us.

As with all such endings, this one was both bitter and sweet. In the days that followed we received seven sympathy cards.

Whether dog, horse, cat, or bird, we all know that our special animal friends will likely not live as long as we will. Saying that final goodbye to a beloved animal is similar, yet poignantly different from saying goodbye to a human being. Special animal companions are innocent.

They are loyal; they give of their love unconditionally. Their personalities are so pure and true to their kind. I am frequently taken with how animals will try so hard to please even when their instincts tell them to react in a different way. Often it is their human-like characteristics of open jealousy, playful teasing, and blatant joy that make us laugh. At the end of a bad day, they are there to wash away the drudgery. We just can't help but love them and miss their presence so much when they're gone.

In Larry's continued search for guidance, he found a book called *Blessing the Bridge: What Animals Teach Us About Death, Dying and Beyond* by Rita M. Reynolds. He wished he had found the book earlier, as it would have made the process easier for him. He spoke with the author by phone and her wisdom, experience, and compassion were inspirational to both of us. As often happens, the healing synchronicity of events brought Larry other people to counsel who were facing similar losses, and he gave them copies of this book.

After the loss of a loved one, I have been blessed in my life to have a vibrantly colorful dream about that person or animal that makes it clear that they are doing great on the other side. These dreams helped me so much. For several months after Ben left us, I kept telling my husband that I hoped he would have such a dream, and I encouraged him to tell his subconscious that he wanted such a dream to come. Finally, four months later while relaxing at our cabin in Canada, Larry awoke one morning to tell me of his dream about Benji.

Before I tell about the dream, I must explain some things about Benji's personality. Ben had obviously suffered abuses before he came to live with us. He had the lowest tolerance for pain of any animal we had ever known. Though wanting to trust, he was wary of being hurt. He had shotgun pellets in his body, which explained why he was so afraid of guns. He became especially fearful when people raised their voices. The use of certain words in a sentence, though not directed at him, caused him to act ashamed. He cowered at the flash of a camera. On the other hand, Ben loved stalking and chasing squirrels he rarely caught. A long walk in the woods was the highlight of his day. He adored car rides and seemed to know how and by whom the car was controlled, and even when it wasn't working right. He even looked both ways at stop signs. He was never so ecstatic about going somewhere as about trips to our cabin in Canada. Saying the word "Canada" brought ecstatic yips and barks of excitement. Another of his greatest joys was a boat ride around Lake of the Woods, to watch us cast for Northern Pike in the glistening light of the morning sun and to picnic on the islands.

#### Larry's Dream: "Photos From Home"

My husband's dream began with him opening mail at the office. He picked a large envelope with no return address on it. Larry opened it expecting to see horse or stable photos from customers. However, he quickly saw that it contained four 8" x 10" color photos from Benji

in his new home.

**1st Photo:** Benji is sitting on a small grassy point of Ontario shoreline looking out over the water, as he did so often in life. He seems to be waiting for something or someone. Everything seems very peaceful. To Larry it said, "Benji is waiting on the shoreline to cross over. He is ready and eager to make the passage."

**2nd Photo:** A kindly looking older man and woman have picked Benji up from the shoreline in an old fiberglass boat. Larry does not recognize the people, but Benji is comfortable with them as he sits between the two old people, looking straight ahead with the breeze blowing gently in his face. To Larry it said, "Benji was helped to make his crossing in a loving, caring way. Could the people in the boat be his first owners who had spent so much time training him? We'll never know, but it feels good to think they could be."

**3rd Photo:** Several men stand in a row holding shotguns, hammers cocked and at the ready. Benji is standing beside one of the men, and he is the same man who was driving the boat. Benji is looking up with ears perked as though he is enjoying the hunt and ready to pounce. To Larry it said, "Benji no longer has the fears (of guns and hunting and being hurt) that he did in life; now he is at peace and his fears are gone."

**4th Photo:** This last photo was a close-up of Benji. He is sitting on his haunches and looking up at the sky. He appears young, and has a peaceful look and brilliant glow all around him. To Larry it said, "Benji has made his crossing, his life force is at peace, vibrant, and happy - he wants me to be happy for him."

A few months later, a Canadian friend, Elizabeth, heard about Benji's death, and she told us she had a special photo of Benji she would send to us. Both archeologist and a botanist, Elizabeth led Larry and I, and of course Benji, on boating expeditions around Lake of the Woods looking for native petroglyphs and rock paintings, and native plants. One day Larry opened a large envelope from her and inside was a photo of Benji sitting on his haunches, looking up incredibly like the fourth photo of Larry's dream. In the photo, Benji sat by a large shelf mushroom growing out of a pine tree. For fun, at the bottom of the photo Elizabeth had inscribed "Benji, The Botanist." Sometimes the synchronicity in life is just so uncanny and oh-so-glorious!