

No, We Have No Rhinoceroses

Tim Smith*

I sat stiffly, my back aching from sitting on the wooden chair in the hot, stuffy lecture hall of the old Veterinary Quadrangle. I was surrounded by more than three hundred other potential veterinary students tightly packed into the narrow seats. At precisely two-o'clock, the low hum of constant chatter stopped, as a portly, white haired professor walked purposefully into the room. The clicking noise made from his black, wing tipped shoes as he walked across the wooden floor, was the only sound made, in the once noisy classroom. He was smartly dressed in a freshly pressed white lab coat along with a contrasting black bow tie. As he reached the podium, he put on a set of reading glasses and began to peer out at us, over the top of his glasses. He did not allow his eyes to meet those of any student, and his face had distant look similar to the ones in the dozen or so portraits that hung in the nearby hallway. He spoke methodically, enunciating every syllable crisply, pausing at the end of each sentence to take a deep breath for added emphasis.

He began to speak, "Each of you are here today because of your deep concern for animals. You probably thought you wouldn't have to work with people. But, let me be the first to tell you that people are a very important part of your chosen career of veterinary medicine. "What did he know? I thought to myself. I've worked for veterinarians before and we worked on animals. Besides, how hard can it be working with people? I asked myself.

Those words were still spinning in my head several years later, while I worked answering the telephone at a nearby veterinary clinic. All those years of slowly, painfully assimilating thousands of facts and careful storage of fragments of information, just like some kind of squirrel with its nuts, never prepared me for what was about to happen.

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The sudden shrill of the nearby phone interrupted the peaceful quiet of the evening. "Hello," said the caller, her speech slurred from having one too many drinks. She's right on time, I thought to myself, as I looked up at the clock on the nearby wall. It was Carolyn Friday, a retired drama professor from the nearby college. I had grown accustomed to her calling every Saturday night. The frequency of her calls was not due to the fact her animals were always sick. I soon realized from our conversations that she was a very elderly and lonely lady. Somehow, we began simply enough, talking about why her elderly dog Mitzy should be coughing from the heart problem she had, to the daily antics of mister squirrel in her backyard. As the frequency of calls increased, I got to know her very well. She would tell me about her childhood, the fact that she was once strawberry queen of Jefferson County, Washington, or her growing up during World War II. One exceptionally hot summer night, she called and wanted me to come over to her house and look at her cats because they were suffering so from a case of fleas. I explained to her that it wasn't an emergency and the cats could just as easily be examined the next day in the clinic. She tried bribing me with promises of ice cold glasses of lemonade and air conditioning. I resisted the temptation. She tried a different tactic. She pleaded, "They're suffering so", with heavy emphasis on drawing out the word "suffering," and eventually I gave in. During the ten minute drive to her house, I was hoping I wasn't ending my veterinary career before it began by violating the Veterinary Practice Act. Surely there was some kind of clause that exempted veterinary students that were trying to help pleading elderly women in the dead of the night. As I walked up to the darkened little house, I could see the crippled form of a woman through the living room window. The outside of the house looked like it could use a fresh coat of paint and the porch was in need of repair. I rang the doorbell and waited. The door creaked open, and there in the doorway stood a thin, frail woman, her body crippled over. "What do you want?" she asked.

“ You asked me to come over and see your cats because they were suffering so from fleas,” I replied, trying not to be overcome by the reeking smell of cheap liquor coming from her breath. “ I didn’t call anybody,” she said. Great, I thought, how am I going to explain this one to the college dean when he asks about me terrorizing some poor little old lady in the dead of the night ? . Before I could answer, she invited me into the tiny house. One by one, as I sat on the living room couch, the cats appeared from their various hiding spots throughout the house. She introduced all three of them to me and told me how she had acquired each one of them. Not once did she speak of the dreadful fleas or suffering that was going on only an hour ago. As I was getting acquainted with three cats, Mitzy entered the room, coughing with every step. “ Mitzy is not the first dog I’ve ever had,” she said, walking slowly to a nearby closet door. From within the closet, she pulled out a gray and white sweater and handed it to me. “ This is Prince, my first dog,” she said. “ I collected his hair and made him into a sweater after he died.” I looked down at the sweater or what now was left of Prince. “ I don’t think I’ve ever seen a dog made into a sweater before,” I said. It was the best answer I could come up with under the circumstances. The conversation continued. She told me how important Mitzy and the cats were to her since they were the only family she had left after her mother had passed away. Suddenly, she stopped in mid-sentence, picked up the telephone on the stand next to her chair and began to talk. Funny, I thought to myself, I didn’t hear the telephone ring. Just as quickly as she picked up the phone, she hung it up. Her conversation completed. “ That was my mother,” she said. “ She often calls me and we talk for hours. But I told her I had company and had to go.” A cold chill suddenly swept over my body, and I realized it was time to go. “ I need to go back to the clinic and do some treatments “ I said, hoping my blanched out face wasn’t giving me away. “ Thank you, for taking care of my cats’ flea problem. I can see they are beginning to feel much better.” I heard her say, as I was making a quick dash to the safety of my truck.

Several months went by and I was beginning to feel secure once again in the cozy confines of the veterinary clinic. Those thoughts were to be quickly dismissed as the doorbell buzzed on one cold and rainy Friday night. I had already become used to having my evening meal interrupted by telephone calls or clients coming

to our door, and this night was no exception. As I approached the glass front doors to the clinic, I noticed a strange sight. A middle aged woman was standing next to a full grown ram, naked except for a sweatshirt, and I mean naked. The ram didn’t have a stitch of wool on his body, unless you counted the wool the sweatshirt was made of. The owner was named Betty, and she just happened to be in the neighborhood and wanted to drop off a picture of her ram, Bucky. As Betty handed me a picture of Bucky, she started to tell the story of how she had adopted a ewe lamb the year before. After a while, the lamb had developed a full blown case of scours, and Betty thought it was only right to take the lamb to bed with her so she could keep it warm as it recovered from the case of scours. Eventually the ewe lamb named Baby, matured, and Betty felt it was only natural that Baby be bred. Only one problem, Baby didn’t want anything to do with Bucky. Betty thought it was because Baby had imprinted on her during the time she was nursing the lamb back to health. Fortunately for Baby and unfortunately for Bucky, Bucky came down with a case of woolbreak and lost every stitch of wool he ever owned. Betty, not wanting to have a naked ram running around the house, put a sweatshirt on old Bucky to keep him warm, and you can probably guess what happened next. That’s right, Baby fell in love with Bucky. With the end of her story, she handed me a picture of Bucky, loaded him up in the back of her ’65 Chevy Impala, and drove off into the misty darkness.

Just about the time you thought you had seen it all, somebody enters your life to dispel that notion. The door to the clinic opened and in stepped a nicely dressed man in his forties. He wore a dark beard, long woolen coat and hat. I didn’t think too much of him at first, just another client coming in to pick up his pet. It wasn’t until he was half down the hall that I noticed he had on two different colored sneakers. They were the high top kind, not the kind that Michael Jordan wears today, but the old style sneakers that Bob Cousy use to wear when he played for the Boston Celtics during the late fifties. One was a red color and the other blue. Across his back, was a wide leather strap, perhaps something that would belong to carrying case I thought. Just then, he turned and faced me. The leather strap belonged to an orange electric guitar, covered with duct tape and stickers that you find on bananas. His eyes caught mine, and suddenly he arched his back, strummed the

guitar with all his might. A resounding bringgg... filled the hallway. "Do you have any rhinoceroses in today?" he asked. "No, I have no rhinoceroses today," I said. And with that he turned and walked out of the veterinary clinic. My old professor was right, veterinary medicine is very much a people business.



Drawing by Aleda Straley-Cheng