

# The Agony of Putting Your First Pet to Sleep

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It's not every day that I walk into my bedroom and see blood stains on the bed and floor like something out of *Carrie*. But last November, there was a source for this massacre scene: my cancer-ridden black-and-white cat Bentley. Blood seeped from the tumor on his side. Frantically, I scooped him up as my husband Brendan grabbed his carrier. We headed to the emergency vet.



We waited with the other Sunday emergencies. A giant dog wheeled in on a stretcher. A tiny tan puppy carried in, looking limp and lifeless. Other pets wrapped in casts. A short while later, we were meeting with the on-duty veterinarian, who told us that Bentley had most likely licked his tumor so hard he'd opened it. They could stop the bleeding temporarily, but they recommended surgery to remove the tumor. We declined the procedure. Back in August, we'd discovered through a CT scan that Bentley's cancer had returned on his tail and his side with two possible masses on his liver. The veterinarian cancer specialist told us we could amputate his tail, remove the mass from his side, or start rounds of radiation to slow down the progress, but not kill, the tumors. Bentley had already lost his back leg to cancer seven years earlier from a vaccine-induced sarcoma. A sarcoma is an octopus-like tumor. Its tentacles grow out from the center of the tumor and extend rapidly, turning aggressive in its expansion. We didn't want to carve up our cat any more, or take him to radiation sessions three times a week since Bentley hated being at the vet. By September, Brendan and I made the agonizing choice to let him live his life without any intervention.

We brought Bentley home from the emergency vet with a cat-sized plastic cone around his neck. I wrapped him in bedsheets, reapplying powder to his wound to halt the bleeding.

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That night, we debated taking our cat to our veterinarian and putting him to sleep since the bleeding wasn't going to stop. Neither of us wanted to say good-bye so we told ourselves we'd spend the week with him, then take him in on Saturday. Every few hours, we took turns checking on Bentley, monitoring his wound and talking to him. I was restless, and Bentley rested on my chest to calm me down, like he always did. He weighed so little at this point. The cancerous tumors had aggressively taken over his body.

The next morning we awoke to find even more blood on our sheets. Through tears, I said to Brendan, "We can't wait any longer. We have to take him in." He agreed. Since I work from home, I sat with Bentley on a couch, typing emails and finishing assignments. I cradled his little face in my hands and said, "I'm so sorry

that we have to do this. I love you so much.” I sobbed. He peered at me with his big green eyes. I scratched his chin. He even made a break for it to play with his new favorite toy – the red couch we’d bought only a month ago. He considered it a giant scratching post just for him.

At this point, he was so skinny, I could feel his ribs. His fur, once beautiful and shiny, was matted and full of dandruff. This wasn’t my cat who was once a robust 15 pounds. This definitely wasn’t my cat who had beaten cancer once before. The first round of the disease arrived in a golf-ball-sized lump on his back right leg. The vet amputated his limb, giving us seven cancer-free years with Bentley. The second bout came back with a vengeance – on his tail, near the same spot where his leg once was, and on his liver.

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Our vet appointment was scheduled for 4 p.m. When the powder to stop his bleeding wore off, the bleeding returned, dripping nonstop until I reapplied the powder. At 2 p.m., I removed his plastic cone. He looked grateful. He groomed himself carefully, then fell into a deep sleep. I couldn’t stop crying and apologizing to him.

A little before 4 p.m., Brendan came home. We hugged. Brendan put Bentley in his carrier. Our cat didn’t meow or cling to the couch, the usual methods Bentley used to fight being put into his carrier. Instead, he quietly submitted. My heart broke. That’s when it hit me how badly he was feeling.

The vet techs ushered us into a room, assuring us that we could have all the time we needed with Bentley. Our vet gave him a quick physical exam. “I’m so sorry, you guys. I think you’re making the right decision,” she said. “In the past few months, his condition has really deteriorated.” She then explained what was going to happen. She’d sedate Bentley so he would fall asleep. After he was resting, she would inject the next shot, which would stop his heart. She told us that we might see him take a deep breath, his eyes might stay open, and he might urinate a little. That’s the body shutting down, she said.

We chose to stay with him during the procedure. After he was sedated, he moved a bit. He rested his head on my arm. I spoke softly, telling him how much I loved him. Brendan and I kissed the top of his head. His pupils started to widen, like one of those big-eyed Margaret Keane paintings.

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I’ve never been present when someone has died. And while our vet explained everything in detail, I still wasn’t prepared for the moment that he passed. His body turned heavy. His head bent awkwardly. I could see that he was dead. I thought he’d look like he was sleeping – and Bentley was hella cute when he slept, paw over his black nose, tail curled around his body. But this Bentley was slumped down on the metal exam table. There was nothing cute about this. I hugged him, his eyes dilated wide. I couldn’t leave him. I’d probably still be there in the vet’s office if Brendan hadn’t gently gathered me in his arms and walked me out.

My family had pets when I was a child, but Bentley was my first animal as an adult. Brendan and I adopted him from North Shore Animal League when we first moved in together. Bentley was there for every major

moment in my life. He was there when Brendan proposed to me, almost knocking the engagement ring into plain sight. He was there when we moved from New York to L.A., from L.A. to the Bay Area, and then back to L.A. The first time he got sick, I told him that I'd do everything I could to help him, but if he wanted to go, I would let him. As much as I wanted to keep that promise, a huge part of me just wanted to keep him for selfish reasons. I couldn't imagine my life without him sleeping on my chest. I couldn't fathom not hearing him meow, demanding treats. We called him our little panther. I told him every day how handsome he looked in his little tuxedo. He was my best friend and I didn't want to say good-bye.

The day we put Bentley to sleep, a friend told me that you have to break your own heart to do what's best for your pets. In that moment, when I left Bentley's body behind, I understood what she meant. I had been in denial about how sick he had gotten. I tried to tell myself that the tumors weren't that huge. Or that he wasn't stumbling that often whenever he would fall. But it was obvious now, Bentley wasn't doing well, and I had to say good-bye.

In the days after we put him to sleep, I talked to Bentley. Said good night and good morning. Told him I missed him. I said that I hoped he was sleeping in a nice patch of sun. Hoped he had gotten matched up with his missing leg. When his ashes arrived a week later in a small green box, I placed him on his favorite red couch where his scratch marks still existed. I told him he was free to scratch and sleep here.

Now two months later, I move him around to his choice spots in the house every few days. I talk to him. Brendan and I share our favorite stories about Bentley, like the time he hid under bubble wrap when we moved. Or how he hid under the bed when we played Weezer's *Pinkerton* album. Or the way he repeatedly ran over us at 5:30 in the morning when we first put him on a diet. We remember the way he loved soaking up the SoCal sunshine.

I miss Bentley so much. But I'm grateful for the 10 years we had together. I'm happy that we got to spend one last day together. And I'm glad I kept my promise to him – to let him go when it was time.