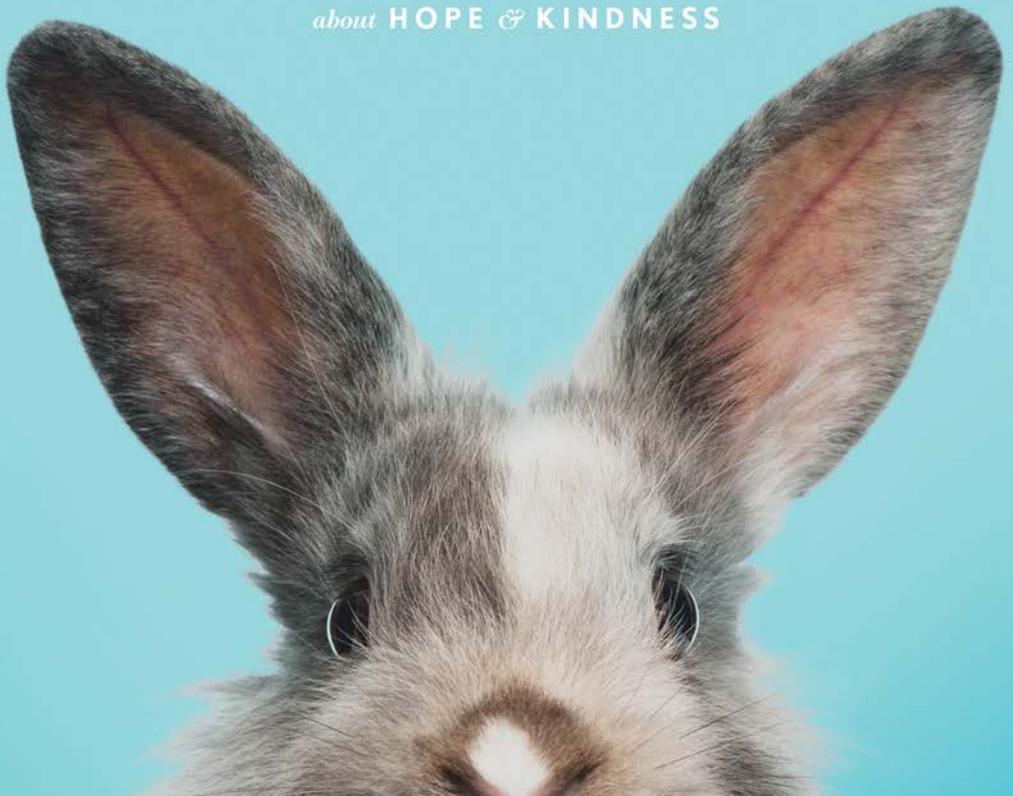


CALEB SMITH

# Peacebunny Island

*the* EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY *of*  
A BOY AND HIS COMFORT RABBITS,  
*and* HOW THEY'RE TEACHING US  
*about* HOPE & KINDNESS



## Advance Praise for *Peacebunny Island*

This is the story of a boy with a vision to make the world a better place through the power of bunnies. Caleb's rabbits are fully alive and brimming with their own unique thoughts, opinions, and personalities. Most of all, however, they are curious and empathetic beings that generously offer unconditional love and affection to those who need it. There are big dreams on every page of this unique and joyful story, written by an unstoppable young man who cares deeply about others and offers himself, his bunnies, and now his island as an oasis brimming with hope, hops, and heart.

### **SUSY FLORY**

*New York Times* bestselling author and coauthor, writers' conference director, mom of a rescued racehorse, and part-time squirrel nursery attendant

*Peacebunny Island* is an absolutely delightful and deeply insightful book. Caleb Smith writes with the optimism and authenticity of the young man he is and with the hard-earned wisdom and insight of the old soul that lies within. If you find yourself in need of comfort—or of a reminder of the good that still exists in this world—the precious bunnies of *Peacebunny Island* stand ready to hop into your heart and fill your soul with peace.

### **JENNIFER MARSHALL BLEAKLEY**

Author of *Joey* and *Pawverbs*

*Peacebunny Island* is a heartwarming story that will encourage your soul. Enjoy the improbable tale of a young boy parlaying his love for rescued rabbits to make a real difference. I love the sweet reminder of how God uses the childlike faith of Caleb Smith to accomplish His purpose.

### **DAVE BURCHETT**

Author of *Stay: Lessons My Dogs Taught Me about Life, Loss, and Grace*

Caleb's skill at describing his experience after the tragedy at Sandy Hook is such a beautiful tribute to the gift of presence that was provided to the Newtown community and especially to me. Our emotional response to

the story tells us that he captured the essence through his observations and reflections. The clarity of language, precise word choice, and heartfelt honesty come shining through!

**DR. ANTHONY J. SALVATORE**

Retired public school administrator of Newtown Public Schools in Connecticut

You don't need to be an animal lover to fall in love with this tale of one boy's dream of rescuing rabbits, training them as comfort animals, and then buying them their very own island. Encouraged by parents who met his dreams with a healthy balance of support and reality-checking, Caleb is a relatable hero whose youthful wisdom applies to anyone with an entrepreneur's spirit. I read this book in two days simply because it is a delight and I could not stop. If your soul, like mine, could stand a good dousing of sheer joy, read this book. And if you need a little inspiration to follow your own dreams, pandemic and beyond, look no further. You've arrived.

**SEPTEMBER VAUDREY**

Author of *Colors of Goodbye*

Deeply moving and profoundly hopeful, the story of *Peacebunny Island* is an inspiring reminder that we can all make the world better for the people (and animals) around us. Highly recommended.

**MATT MIKALATOS**

Author of *The Sunlit Lands* trilogy

In *Peacebunny Island*, Caleb Smith walks through his journey of fulfilling his dream with business savvy and prayer. Readers of this book will be inspired to persevere, trusting God's guidance along the way. We can all make a difference and show kindness and compassion. I love animals and have written many books about God's creatures. But from now on, I'll have more appreciation and affection for the bunnies, especially those on Peacebunny Island.

**DANDI DALEY MACKALL**

Author of the *Winnie the Horse Gentler* series and *The One Year Devos for Animal Lovers*



PEACEBUNNY ISLAND



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*The Tyndale nonfiction imprint*

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*Peacebunny Island: The Extraordinary Journey of a Boy and His Comfort Rabbits, and How They're Teaching Us about Hope and Kindness*

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## Author's Note

This is a true story of how I started a bunny business as a little kid and how within a very short time it inspired my dream to acquire a private island where I could raise rescued and endangered breeds of rabbits and train them as comfort animals for people in need of hugs, hope, and hoppiness. There were lots of things that needed to happen before I could log on to Google Earth and begin searching for a place I could call Peacebunny Island.

Along the way, I became the guardian for a bunch of rabbits (some of which became valued friends and mentors), conducted hundreds of classes, fostered rabbits to families wanting their own bunny experience, and shared rabbits with people who were dealing with loneliness, trauma, and grief. With a bunny snuggling up close, everything in the world can stop for a few moments and just be about love.

For me, rabbits have been a way to learn about people and how we relate to each other—and how we can do it better. Countless times, I have seen the way these furry creatures help people become more human. They change people's lives. They have changed mine.

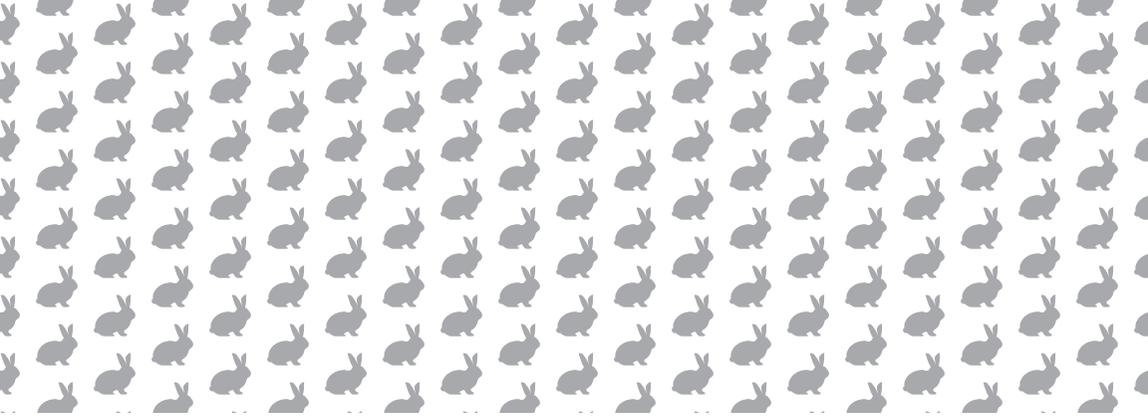
Peacebunny Island is my special place to get away from everything, sharing extended time with family, friends, and my rabbits. It's a place where we ask God to calm our hearts while we wait for answers to life's big questions.

Everyone has their own Peacebunny Island. It may only live in your head and your heart. That's okay. I hope this book inspires you to journey there, just as I did.

*Caleb Smith*

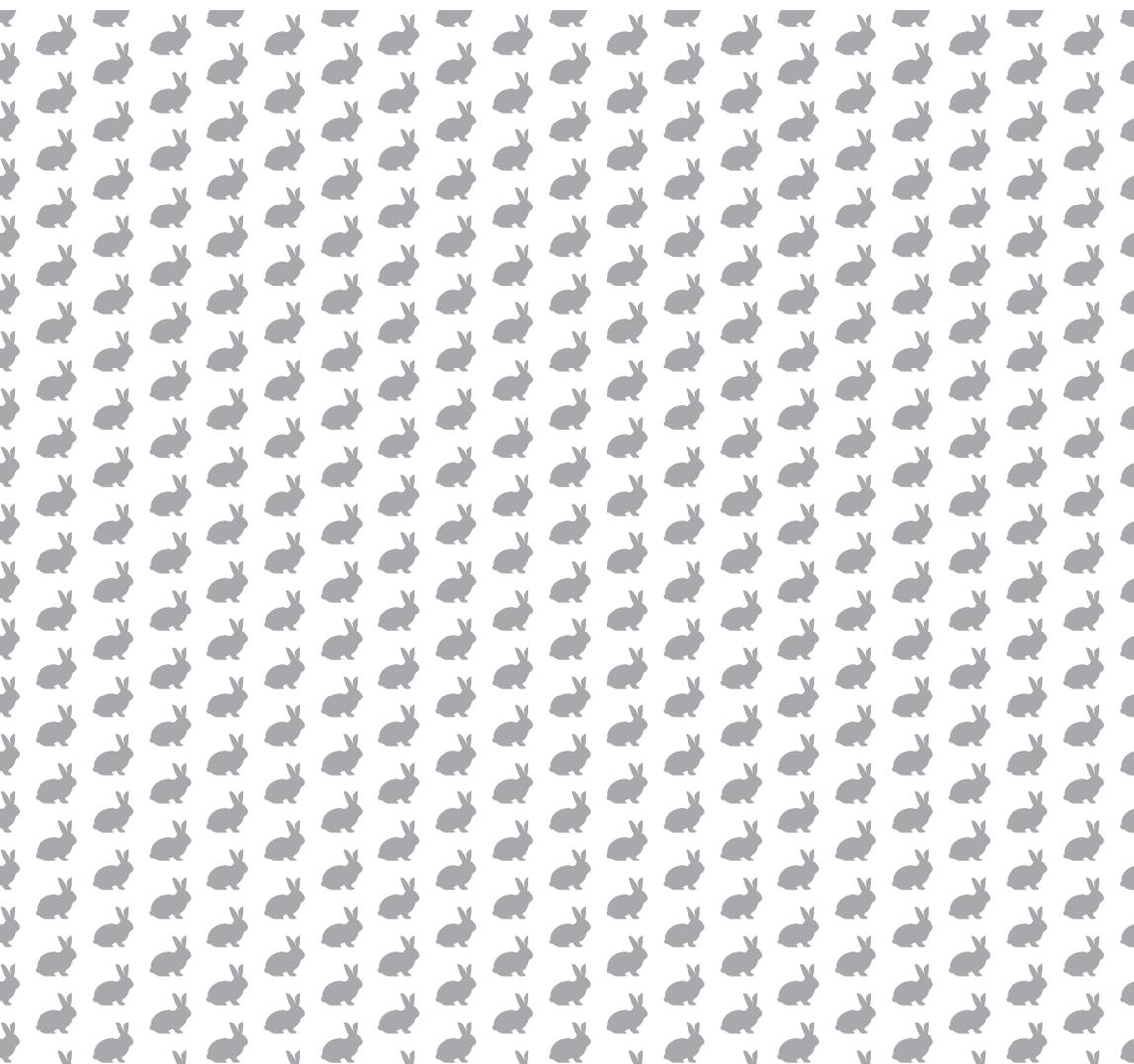
MARCH 2021





PART ONE

# The Peacebunnies





# 1

## *My Portfolio*

So, the first thing you're going to want to know is what a kid from Minneapolis was doing onstage in a Philadelphia bar when I was still two years shy of becoming a teenager. Your next question will likely be where my parents were. And if you're interested in every little detail, you will want to know what song I sang.

To start, I was belting out the chorus of "Don't Stop Believin'" by the band Journey, which I learned at our hometown ice arena, where I grew up watching hockey games and singing all the songs they played to rev up the crowd.

Getting onstage wasn't my idea necessarily, but I was already entertaining those around me in a spirited sing-along with the band when the guitarist pointed his finger at me and invited me up. I gave him one of those *You mean me?* looks, and quicker than you can say "up and down the boulevard," I was in front of the microphone—and loving it.

As for being in a bar, it was part of a pub crawl, which makes the scene sound even worse, but I promise nothing sketchy was going on. I was in the

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second-largest city on the East Coast to attend a *Forbes* magazine–sponsored conference for entrepreneurs under thirty years old. The organizers scheduled the pub crawl as a networking event without considering that one of the attendees would be in fifth grade. Before anyone gets worked up, I was with my mom and my very tall uncle Kris. My dad was back home, working and tending to my chores at the farm.

I had one other traveling companion, a pet named Whatchamacallit. An Angora rabbit with long, luxurious wool in various tones of gray and black, Whatchi was with me because we were, and still are, friends and business associates. My portfolio at the time included raising rare heritage breeds of rabbits, hosting Easter events and birthday parties, creating a STEM-based learning program for schools and libraries, and facilitating a bunny foster program involving nearly three hundred families, many of which included children with autism, critical health conditions, or special needs who connected with my rabbits in a way they couldn't with us two-leggeds. What had started as something of a whimsical quest for a new best friend years earlier had ballooned into a multilayered business that now engaged my whole family, a bunch of friends, and even more bunny enthusiasts and volunteers.

I'm not saying bunnies are smarter than people. It's just that emotionally they seem to be a little better at certain things, like listening and being patient.

The conference took place shortly after I had started to realize that one of my purposes in life was to be a guardian for sweet, furry creatures that bring comfort, joy, and much silliness. Among my fellow entrepreneurs, my perspective was unique. I did not own the rabbits. God did. I just helped take care of them.

As focused and busy as the bunny business kept me, I had plenty of time for being a kid. Why rush through the best part of life? To me, that meant playing with my neighbors, creating forts in my room, going to school, and participating in baseball, church, and scouts. When I was in fourth grade, a local bank president said, "This kid is a bunny farmer for now. But I can't wait to see what he's doing after college." Before I picked a career, though, I had to pick my Little League uniform number, classes for middle school,

and which merit badge would be my first as I crossed over from Cub Scouts to Boy Scouts.

Even when pursuing adult-size dreams, I still enjoyed being a kid, and that included just relaxing with my rabbits. When that wasn't possible, I brought them along to whatever else was scheduled. Having a bunny around makes almost anything more fun.

No more proof was needed than the crowd in Philadelphia. After going offstage to rousing applause, I picked up Whatchi, whose long wool locks attracted the kind of attention the Beatles did when they were known as the mop top lads from Liverpool. Only I think Whatchi was cuter than Paul, John, George, or Ringo. People surged close with their cell phones out, taking pictures and videos. Then the group migrated to the next bar, and Whatchi, my mom, Uncle Kris, and I rode the wave of people down the street.

I'd never surfed the sidewalk amid such energy and spirit. Whatchi sat in his wagon like he was part of a parade organized just for him. At the next stop, someone introduced me and Whatchamacallit to a little woman who looked like a great-grandma. She watched me hand the bunny to my uncle and invited me to sit down next to her on the outdoor patio.

"Your rabbit is beautiful," she said.

"Thank you." I smiled.

"What can you tell me about rabbits?" she asked.

Initially, I had some trouble understanding this inquisitive woman because she spoke with a thick German accent that made her voice both choppy and sweet. We were surrounded by people leaning in to hear us and recording the conversation with their cell phones. There was also traffic in the nearby street. So the environment wasn't perfectly suited to my Rabbits 101 talk, but I recounted the basic facts that I normally share at birthday parties, bunny camps, and other events. I told her that all mammals with eyes on the side of their heads are vegetarians, and that mammals with eyes on the front hunt and eat meat.

"Very good." She smiled. "Keep going."

"Because rabbits have eyes on the side of their heads, you shouldn't approach them from the front," I continued. "It's also important to be gentle

and not overcuddle them immediately, like that one relative we all have who smothers you as soon as you walk into the room.”

People nodded and chuckled. I guess everyone really does have that relative.

“And Angora rabbits,” I said, pointing to Whatchi, who was being held up by my uncle Kris, “need haircuts three to four times a year because their wool grows extremely fast, about an inch a month. Their hair can be spun into yarn and is highly prized for being super soft and warm.”

I reached into my backpack and showed her a gallon-size baggie with several Angora yarn samples. Some of the people around the table asked for a closer look, and the bag was passed around the group of enthusiastic onlookers. I thought our chat was winding down when the baggie got back to me. But then the woman started asking about the reproductive habits of rabbits, which caused those closest to us to smile and jab each other as if this were a funny question.

And who knows—maybe it was funny to them, or a little embarrassing. It wasn't to me. I'm asked those questions all the time. I know the jokes about rabbits. I was ready with answers, and my sincerity and seriousness seemed to amuse the older woman. As her smirk turned into an audible chuckle, people lost it. They started laughing quite loudly, enough that my flow was interrupted. I felt myself snickering too, wanting to be in on the joke, although, quite frankly, I didn't see what was so funny about a rabbit's reproductive cycle.

Eventually someone who was standing nearby—a woman I saw later in the week at the conference—leaned in and told me that I was explaining the sex life of rabbits to Dr. Ruth Westheimer. I turned to my mom and mouthed, “Dr. Who?”

It was an interesting topic on the ride back home.

### *A Wrinkled Dollar*

As the conference got underway, I attended multiple lectures and breakout discussion groups. Mindful that I was there to practice my business pitch and explore the demand for Angora wool that could be made into yarn, I signed

up for the fashion-focused Art & Style track. That seemed the closest fit to my business interests, compared to courses focused on venture capital, consumer tech, entertainment, and gaming.

Angora fur is used to make high-end hats, gloves, scarves, and sweaters. I'd read everything I could find about Angora rabbit fiber, but I had no clue about the fashion world except that the industry as a whole had pulled products with Angora wool off their lines, denouncing farms that had been filmed torturing rabbits to get their fur, which could be acquired (and which I did acquire) with gentle haircuts. I saw a video clip illustrating the mistreatment, and it destroyed me. Within three minutes, I grew up and almost threw up.

I found it ironic that the boycott was gaining momentum just as I took in my first few Angora rabbits. I acquired mine because they were rabbits in need of a home, not because of their wool. But this well-motivated boycott had accomplished its goal to shut down inhumane sources of Angora wool in the industry worldwide. As I sat in the workshops, I wondered if the already-existing humane sources in North America could be ramped up in a way that addressed concerns about animal welfare and the welfare of the workers.

I made a note to my future self. The way we care for each other and our animals is a reflection of what's in our hearts, and over the long term, what's in our hearts has more of an impact than what's in our bank accounts.

Over the four days of the conference, I handed out all my home-printed business cards and collected way more than that in return. I underestimated the number of business cards I should have brought along. Such was the drawing power of Whatchamacallit, who perched contentedly in his wagon with his front paws resting on the edge, eagerly greeting each person who came over to say hi.

Whatchi listened as I explained that my rabbits lived on a small farm, where they were given regular, gentle grooming, lived in small colonies, and had playtime in a protected pasture during the warmer months. People were entranced by Whatchi's cuteness. I enjoyed observing as people stared, gave him a gentle pet, commented on his soft fur, and attempted to describe him.

"Look at his angel-wing ears!"

"It's like a tiny Ewok!"

"No, he's like a cross between a Lhasa apso, a Maltese, a puli, and a shih tzu!"

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I understood the Star Wars reference, but I had no idea the last commenter was referring to breeds of dogs. What I heard instead was “a lasso opso, a malt, a pulley,” and a bad word. A refined and elegantly dressed woman stepped through the small crowd and immediately ran her fingers through Whatchi’s fur. As she put her face close to his, she started talking in a sweet, babylike voice.

“Oh, you’re just sweetness overload, just like a little puppy sitting here,” she said. “I could just give you kisses all day. Yes, I could. Yes, I could!”

Then, standing upright, she switched back to business mode and handed me her card.

“This fur is amazing,” she said. “I would buy twenty thousand pounds a year. How much can you provide?”

I turned to the ten-pound cotton puff with a black nose and eyes that were nearly covered by a long flop of hair, two ears decorated with gray tassels, and four legs tucked so deep beneath the huge ball of fur that they were invisible. I did some fast calculations based on the ratio of one and a half pounds of wool per rabbit per year.

“I have six Angora rabbits,” I said. “Right now, I can probably sell a little less than ten pounds of Angora wool a year.”

“When you scale up, keep me in mind,” she said. “This is awesome. Seriously, young man. Do this.”

After sharing a laugh, we shook hands, and for a moment I imagined the future and tried to picture how many families and farms it would take to house that many fuzzy bunnies humanely.

I noticed it was nearly time for the next presentation I was scheduled to attend, so I slung my backpack over my suit, grabbed the handle of Whatchi’s wagon, and headed outside. A gust of wind rippled through Whatchi’s fur, a stunning display of natural beauty.

Outside, as we made our way to another building, we passed a gentleman pushing a rickety cart full of personal possessions. He did a double take when he saw the striking figure in my wagon and called out to me, asking for a short visit with my rabbit. This isn’t unusual—I regularly get stopped on the street when I’m out with one of my bunnies. People often reach out to touch them or take a picture of us; I just wish they’d ask first. This man, huddled over his

cart, was incredibly polite. I was struck by his courteous manner and how he treated me with genuine respect, not like a kid.

Still, I almost dismissed his request because I had traveled a long way to be at this conference and was in a hurry to get to my next appointment. But something nudged me to slow down and be in the moment. It's hard to explain the idea of Providence, but you know it when you feel it. So I stopped and witnessed something I'd never seen before: the man bent down until he was eye to eye with Whatchamacallit, and then he tilted his head to the side and waited for Whatchi to acknowledge him. They looked at each other for a while. Then he asked my rabbit if it was okay to have a visit together. Only after Whatchi came over to the edge and engaged with the man did he reach out to pet Whatchi's fur. Despite the bustle around us, it was like time stopped.

The man sat down on a nearby bench. I pulled Whatchi's wagon next to him, and the two of them had a lengthy heart-to-heart talk. I stepped back to give them space.

Maybe it wasn't just any bunny this man needed to be with, but with Whatchamacallit in particular. They clearly connected. Whatchi was especially patient and willing to let people stroke his fur for extended periods anyway, but he genuinely warmed up to this man on the street, and the connection was mutual. It felt like I'd come to Philly so Whatchi could spend time with this man and so he could spend time with Whatchi. They seemed to understand each other.

Only recently did I wonder if the two bonded because Whatchi came to our house with his own hard past. His mom was one of four Angoras who survived a barn fire in northern Minnesota. Because of the smoke, they all died soon after, but not before one gave birth to a small litter that included Whatchi.

Whatchi was the smallest and was different from the others in both looks and personality. It seemed to me like he truly grieved when his mother died, and although I'd never seen a rabbit act sad before, it made sense because he lost his appetite, stared off at nothing, and was no longer interested in playing. Over time he opened up again, and he let me in. People talk about dogs and other animals being able to sense things. I think the same is true for

rabbits; it certainly was for Whatchi. Who knows—maybe his past had given him a special kind of empathy.

I don't know exactly how long Whatchi's visit with the man lasted—it's not like I checked the time. Finally he nodded toward me, motioning me to come closer. As I did, he stood up, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a wrinkled dollar bill, which he handed to me without an explanation. Knowing he had a sign on top of his cart asking for donations, I didn't feel right taking money from him.

"Thank you for your time," I said. "That's enough of a gift."

He shook his head and pressed the bill firmly into my hand.

"Young man, this dollar isn't for you," he said. "It's for my friend here who has done more for me in the past fifteen minutes than any human has done for me in years. Do you understand?"

Our eyes met and I nodded my head. Yes, I understood.

### *Here My Yam*

After I returned from the conference, I kept busy with bunny events and business responsibilities, chores, and finishing elementary school.

Not that I have other personal experience to compare it to, but I've had one of the coolest backdrops for growing up that a kid could hope for. I'm the only child born to hardworking Midwestern college sweethearts who managed a junior hockey team for ten years, which made me a lifelong hockey fan even though I don't play. I loved attending the team's practices and games, and going on road trips across the United States to recruit players. We traveled as far as Italy and even went to Vancouver for the 2010 Olympics, where our team served as peace ambassadors and I lost my first tooth.

I was young enough to be treated like a mascot, and for me, it was like having a whole bunch of big brothers. At games, I helped my grandmother in the merchandise stand between periods and had fun singing along to the '80s rock anthems that blasted out over the PA during intermissions. If you want to hear music that pumps you up with energy, I suggest going to a hockey game.

My best friend in the world is Noah Bachman. His family lives across the

street. We've played together almost since the day he was brought home for the first time. Although I'm a year and a half older, he had a major growth spurt this past year and now towers over me. I've given up hope of catching him. His whole family acts as if the extra chair at their dinner table has my name on it, with me fitting between Noah and his brother, Markus, who is five years older than I am. Markus was born with health challenges that have kept him closer to our speed, and I'm thankful he has always been one of my closest pals too.

Our parents met at church, but their friendship blossomed through softball league on Friday nights. The Bachman family moved into the neighborhood first and picked the house with a detached garage where all the neighborhood kids' heights, starting with Noah's big sister, Heather, would someday be recorded. My newlywed parents followed soon after, and with four houses for sale on the suburban street, they had their pick. We ended up in the blue house across the street after my mom fell in love with the historic elm tree in the front yard. Then Noah's mom, Ms. Deb, continued filling the other houses with friends she met at nursing school.

My mom and Noah's mom pinkie-promised that neither family would move until all the kids graduated high school unless one family received the other's blessing or if they both moved somewhere together. The day after my parents finalized the purchase, the majestic tree in front was struck by lightning. Thankfully, it didn't hit the house when it came down. Although they were disappointed about the loss, my parents later explained that you can add a new tree to your yard, but good friends are irreplaceable.

The Dutch elms along the street matured into stately shade trees, as did a maple tree in our front yard that my parents planted the day they brought me home from the hospital (the reason we call it "the celebration tree"). Eventually the houses on both sides of ours and down the block filled with young couples with kids, mostly boys. For me, that meant more friends. In the house to my right lived Alexander and Diego, whose father was from Mexico and was still working on his citizenship. Jamaal and his brother, Qiandre, lived at the far end of the street for a few years. Evangel and Bishop, who were next door on my left, were several years older, and next door to the Bachmans were three brothers who my dad affectionately called "the

Troubles” after they climbed up their stacked trash cans to conduct so-called gravity experiments from their roof.

The homes on our street have contiguous grassy front yards but four-foot chain-link fences enclosing most of the backyards. Someone always seemed to be climbing over one of these fences to chase after a ball, but generally we shuffled between basketball hoops in each other’s driveways or played on our street, which never had much traffic. It seemed like there was always a game to join the moment I stepped outside.

When I was still too young to cross the street by myself, I began each day by requesting an escort to the fun in their yards. I’d put on my blue sneakers that lit up with each step, preparing for liftoff. I opened our front door, stepped outside, and shouted, “Here my yam! Let’s play!”

### *We Hug and Then We Play*

I know it sounds like a pretty great place to grow up, and it was—and still is—but occasionally there were problems, as is typical with kids who have good and bad days, just like everybody else. Someone would get angry and throw the kickball into the neighbor’s yard. Or someone would get kicked while on a swing. Or poked for no reason. We were kids, and we got mad at each other. But after one memorable incident, I introduced the gang to our family rule, which made so much sense that the younger kids adopted it as a neighborhood rule.

If anyone cried or got physically hurt, we took a break and talked it out. Eventually we came to a place where the offending party said, “I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?” Then we hugged and play resumed. The rule morphed as we all grew up, but it was important that we knew how things worked in our neighborhood, and all of us returned the next day to play. It became the expectation that if anyone yelled or cried, we immediately stopped to talk until we could forgive and hug, and then play would resume. I know it sounds too good to be true, but all of us really did get to a place where we agreed that play was more important than fighting. If an argument broke out or another problem arose, someone shouted our rule: “Say you’re sorry. Then we hug and then we play.”

I learned that these rules didn’t extend beyond the neighborhood when

I was watching baseball practice at the local private high school where my mom worked part-time in sports medicine. At nearly six years old, I was quite happy to watch the team working out on a spring afternoon, especially if warm pretzels with cheese were involved.

That day someone from the team borrowed my little foam bat and Wiffle ball without asking my permission. Then my equipment was gone. A few guys helped me look for them, and one of them found my bat sticking out of a metal trash can by the locker room door. The bat was bent in half.

Upset but willing to forgive, I asked the baseball coach if I could talk to the team. I knew all of them by name from hanging out in the dugout and giving them fist bumps when they went onto the field. The players were warming up and stretching inside the gym when the coach walked me to the front and commanded their attention. I held up my broken bat.

“I don’t know who did this,” I said to the team. “But this isn’t how it works. Let me tell you how it works. You ask me for permission to borrow my stuff, and because you’re my friends, I say okay. If the bat gets broken, you come and tell me it’s broken. You say you’re sorry. Then I say I forgive you. Then we hug. Then we play. That’s how it works.” I paused.

“Any questions?” I asked.

Let’s just say I got a lot of hugs before the guys ran out to the field.

## *Snickers*

I quickly learned this hug rule also did not work in the pet world. After this bunny came to live with us, the woman who lived in the house behind ours complained repeatedly that our rabbit was taunting her dogs. We had no reason to doubt her word, but it was still hard to believe. Her fox terriers weighed at least fifteen pounds and Snickers was six pounds if he took a bath, which he didn’t. However, Snickers did seem to think he was a cat, not a rabbit, and given the way most cats and dogs get along, she may have had a point.

The fact that Snickers was at our house was probably the most remarkable thing about him. He was my first long-term pet with fur, and I had much to learn. My initial appreciation for animals may have been influenced by my grandpa on my mom’s side, whom I called Grandpa Tractor. He came from a

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long line of farmers and was the first in his family to leave the country and get a job in a large city. After retiring, though, he bought land back from distant relatives, and we visited him and my grandma there several times a year. My favorite part about going to visit was sitting next to him on his giant tractor, stretching up high on his shoulders to pick monster-sized blackberries, and walking through *his* grandpa's old blacksmith shop.

Hearing my grandpa tell stories about our family's long history of working the farm lit up my imagination and connected me to the past in a way that I could feel in my bones. I laughed whenever he spoke about animals and pets, because he was very definite in his opinion that cows and horses lived in barns and stables, rabbits either shared space in the barn or were housed in smaller hutches nearby, and cats belonged outside, where they could earn their keep by catching rats and mice. As for dogs, he believed they were generally too large and too dirty to be allowed indoors, except when the weather turned bitter.

"It's a luxury to have a pet when you need to feed your family," he once said, "especially when times are uncertain."

Mom generally agreed with that worldview but had more grace when it came to pets. She admittedly married someone who was like her father in many ways—mostly good ways, she always says—but that includes his opinion about pets. My dad prefers animals that are in someone else's yard.

Goldfish were apparently an exception to the rule. When I was five years old, several took up residence in my bedroom. The first three were named Flaggada 1, Flaggada 2, and Flaggada 3. The new one with red spots that came home on February 14 was appropriately named Valentine. They were easy pets to maintain and caused no trouble for gracious neighbors who cared for them when we were on the road with the hockey team. They swam around a tank I got from Noah's big sister, which we set up next to my moon-shaped night-light. The fish swam contentedly, sometimes with a look of curiosity as they watched me play with my Legos or organize the hand-me-down collection of Smurf figures that built up thanks to my grandpa, who brought one home from each of his business trips.

But after a few months, there came the fateful moment for each of them when I assumed they grew tired of swimming and decided to float.

I learned otherwise.

My parents talked to me about what happens after you die, and following a brief prayer and some words of thanks for being such a good fish, we ceremoniously flushed the deceased down the toilet. I put my shoes back on and joined Noah, who was using chalk to create a road for our Matchbox cars all the way into their garage.

I was never lonely, but I did miss the companionship, and at seven years old, I decided I wanted to invite a bunny into our home. I thought briefly about a dog or a cat, but neither felt right. Other typical pets like a hamster, a bird, or a lizard didn't even cross my mind. With me, it was always a rabbit, and given the way things developed, I'd say that maybe it was just meant to be.

My mom eventually sold the idea to my dad. Ordinarily he's quicker to say yes than my mom, but he had concerns about what would happen once the novelty wore off. His instincts weren't wrong, but I was putting my hopes on the lucky fact that when my mom was a kid, she had a little white rabbit named Clover. This pet evoked nothing but good memories and cute pictures, which I hoped would tip the decision my way.

Several days passed before I heard any feedback from my parents. I tried not to overthink things or mess up my chances by bugging them for an answer. I hoped they would see how respectful and responsible I was being by not badgering them. At the same time, I wanted to make sure they knew I *really* wanted a rabbit. I hoped they also understood they would be the best parents ever if they gave me permission to adopt a furry friend.

The wait felt like torture. But I knew things were looking hopeful when my mom sat down in front of the desktop computer and invited me to help her research available rabbits. I didn't want to get my hopes up, but I could tell from the banter that we just needed to find a good fit. I hung on the back of her chair and read over her shoulder while we searched various rescues and then checked Craigslist for another half hour before we came to an ad for a brown-and-white bunny with a description that said, "Older, friendly, trained."

Grinning like we'd found a map to buried treasure, we turned to each other and said, "I think this is the one."

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Then my mom scrunched up her face with a silly question.

“What do you think it’s trained to do?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. But a trained rabbit would be the coolest pet ever.”

The people selling the rabbit lived forty-five minutes north of our house. I packed a water bottle, a snack, and something to do in the car, a habit from traveling with the sports team and our family adventures. It also distracted me. From the moment we arranged to meet the family with the rabbit, I could barely concentrate on anything else. Full of nervous energy, I spent the entire drive fidgeting in the backseat and singing along to CDs with my dad and the band Tenth Avenue North.

“Caleb, how old are you now?” my dad asked in a way that I knew was leading to a lesson.

“You know,” I said.

“Come on now, how old are you?” he repeated.

“Almost eight,” I said, feeling my eyes roll a little.

“If rabbits can live ten years, have you thought that, depending on this rabbit’s age, he might still be at our house when you get your driver’s license?”

My dad’s eyes met mine in the rearview mirror, and I shook my head.

“That seems light-years away,” I said.

High school might as well have been in another solar system. The only thing I’d planned out that far on my life map was becoming an Eagle Scout by the time I finished high school.

“Maybe this rabbit will help you celebrate that big day,” Mom chimed in.

But first we needed to find the house, and it was an unexpected challenge on the unlit street. None of us could see the house numbers very well, and Dad drove up and down the street and turned around a few times, muttering, “The house has to be in here somewhere.”

Mom suggested we call and ask for directions, but the phone number wasn’t on our note sheet. In the meantime, my heart was beating so loudly I probably wouldn’t need to knock on the door once we found it.

When we finally pulled into the driveway, the porch light was on, but the curtains were drawn tight, and it looked like no one was home at all. I wondered if they forgot we were coming to meet the rabbit. I heard my

parents speaking under their breath about the craziness of meeting complete strangers at their home well after dark to select a pet they hadn't even been looking for in the first place. My mom said they wouldn't even buy a sofa this way.

That's when the door opened, and an older man invited us inside. A moment later, I met Snickers for the first time, a rabbit named after the man's favorite chocolate bar. I thought that was funny and tried not to laugh.

Snickers was a brown-and-white Dutch rabbit with traditional markings, including a white wedge-shaped blaze coming down the bridge of his nose, and round cheeks. My dad stood along the wall and observed while I sat on the floor and said hello to the bunny. My mom and I had hardly met him before Snickers bonked my leg with his nose and then made himself at home in my lap. He took a long, warm lick on the back of my hand with his rough tongue and looked up with big eyes and long lashes. It seemed like Snickers chose me before I even chose him.

Nothing needed to be said. I stood up and took the fifteen dollars I knew was in my mom's pocket, handed it to the man, and shook his soft hand.

"Thanks for taking care of my bunny," I said, and from that moment on, Snickers and I were best buds and pretty much inseparable.

The people selling Snickers had cats and a dog, but they only wanted to keep the cats. They were done with all the others, the man explained. The way he used the word *done* struck me as gruff, and I felt bad for the animals that were stuck there unwanted. His Craigslist ad had said he would provide everything we needed to get started, which I assumed meant a decent carrier and food enough for a few days. But as he handed me a tiny cat carrier and wished me luck, I realized he meant "everything to get started to the car."

That is why I like to say Snickers came to us with nothing more than his big heart, which was more than enough.

As soon as my dad pulled the car into our driveway and turned off the engine, I took Snickers out of his carrier and welcomed him home.

"Come on in, little buddy," I said, eager to give him a tour of the house.

I stood in the middle of the living room and spun around. "This room is where my family hangs out at night," I told Snickers. "You can share my blanket when we're on the sofa."

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Then I put him on the floor in the hallway and coaxed him to hop behind me into my bedroom. “This is my new bunk bed, which is how you can tell it’s my room. My mom and dad don’t have a bunk bed. Come in anytime—except when I’m sleeping. But you’ll be in your area then, so don’t worry about it.”

We went back into the hallway, and then I showed him the office. “This room is off-limits. My parents didn’t bunny-proof it, and you’ll be in big trouble if you nibble on any work stuff. And if you’re in big trouble, it means I’m probably in big trouble too. So off-limits, understand?”

He seemed to get it. Just to make sure, I let him explore the baby gate that had kept me out of that room years ago. He stood up on his back feet and looked into the room.

“Seriously, don’t even think about it.”

I closed the door, which allowed him to catch a glimpse of his reflection in the full-length mirror. He must have thought there was another rabbit in the house. He spun around and bolted down the hall and didn’t stop until he stood at the next open door, poking his head inside.

“That’s our bathroom,” I said. “Sometimes we run there too. It’s where we . . .” I caught myself. He was a rabbit. How would he know what we did in there? Then I remembered his former family had told us that he’d grown up with cats and trained himself to use a litter box. I didn’t believe it was true. A rabbit?

“Well, you’ve got a box of your own in there to . . . you know . . .”

It turned out Snickers did know!

He was, indeed, housebroken, if that’s even the right term. As a result, I was permitted to play with Snickers in my bedroom and didn’t need to worry about him messing up the carpet or my comforter. Before long, he roamed freely through the house during the day. He was extremely social, something that could not be attributed to growing up with cats. If he were a human being, I would call him a people person. He liked being in the middle of the action and interacting with everyone. If I was building something, he sat next to me and watched. If I was reading, he crawled under my legs. If I was making up a story with my Smurfs figures or Rescue Heroes, he hopped in the center and made himself part of the story.

He also liked meeting all the kids on the street.

“Welcome to your new home, Snickers.” Noah beamed as I conducted introductions under the shade of our celebration tree, which was now also third base for street ball.

“That’s a cool name, for a rabbit,” said Trouble 2. He spoke with greater enthusiasm than I’d heard in months. Something about being a middle schooler made him slower to get excited than everyone else, but they all ran off to grab dandelions or clumps of grass and clover. What a lucky bunny! Snickers was the first rabbit my friends had played with, and they were eager to find out what he liked and how to include him. That’s when I started realizing they were asking the same kinds of questions I was. It was like we were doing scientific observation studies and making all sorts of discoveries along the way.

Snickers wasted no time showing that he was smart too and that he was studying us as much as we were studying him. When he was in our backyard, he sat on the side of the swing set so he wouldn’t get smooshed when someone jumped off. He also figured out where he could safely hop when we played kickball. If someone launched the ball into a neighbor’s yard for a home run, I scratched Snickers’s back the way he liked while the rest of us waited for someone to retrieve the ball. If we stopped playing and took a break for ice cream sandwiches, I made sure to give Snickers a special treat too. He was one of the guys.

Not long after, my parents gave me permission to build a play area in the backyard for him. I wanted him to have his own place to relax and play while we were outside. With a curiosity that I had begun to take for granted, he watched me hammer nails into long plywood boards that became the sides of a mini fort in the purple lilac bush. As soon as I finished attaching the boards, I draped a blanket over them to create a roof, and Snickers hopped inside. He let me drive trucks around him and surround him with plastic army men that were on a mission to climb up Snickers Mountain if they didn’t want to get wiped out by a tidal wave of loose dirt.

That summer, I painted a lot of pictures of Snickers, mostly in the evening after all the other kids went back to their houses. He was both an excellent muse and model. On warm nights, we slept outside in the pup

tent I'd won the year before as the second-place prize in a back-to-school bingo game. Each time Snickers and I climbed inside, I couldn't believe the kid who won first place chose that bright-yellow SpongeBob figurine instead of the tent.

In no time at all, Snickers was part of my family. Whether we were going out to play, getting up in the morning, or waking from a nap in the lilac bush, I only had to say, "Let's go," and he was on his feet, often up on his hind legs, looking at me with shiny eyes. He wasn't merely trained. He was amazing.

Later that summer, though, I noticed that Snickers was moving slower, with less than his usual excitement. Now when I said, "Let's go," he wasn't as quick to respond. He seemed to think about it for a while first. He still looked up at me with the same big eyes that had first greeted me, only they weren't as bright. He seemed to be sending me a message.

### *One Last Cuddle*

Several weeks after the school year ended, Snickers came on our family vacation to my grandparents' cabin. He was his normal, inquisitive, playful self as I introduced him to Grandpa Tractor and Grandma Deer, whose name came to me after seeing a photo of her posed with a deer on the bluff overlooking their forty acres. After my grandpa retired from the same company he'd worked at since he was eighteen years old, he and my grandmother followed their lifelong dream of building a wooden home in the middle of nowhere on land that had generations of our family's history tied to it.

Moving in was like a homecoming for my grandparents. Names for surrounding roads match the names in my family tree. From the front-porch swing, you can see over the distant ridgeline where his grandfather raised Angora goats. Several hollers past that is the site of my great-great-grandpa's blacksmith shop. And in the middle of the woods is the one-room church with a steeple by the creek where his grandparents first fell in love—and where my grandparents still go for Sunday worship, as I do when I visit.

Snickers joined all my adventures on the trip, except church on Sundays and jaunts to the river, where I fished for perch to add to a huge fish fry. But he was content to relax in the air-conditioning before all of us men headed

outside to hand-crank the ice cream. I loved hiking in the deep woods, and although I could just follow the fence line to find my way back, it was fun to make rock piles as markers along the way.

One night, as I sat on the porch swing rocking back and forth with Snickers in my lap and watching the fireflies, I had a strong sense that I belonged there. It radiated up from the ground and into the core of my being. Family roots there ran deep.

Most people out there in the country live on a small plot of land, and something about crops growing and animals feeding gives a person the sense of new life and possibility. Snickers especially liked playing in Grandma's flower beds that surrounded the cabin, chasing butterflies and nibbling a little here and there. He touched his paws in the rainwater collection pond lined with a rock garden and purple coneflowers, and I could tell he felt the same connection I did.

We had been back home for a few weeks when I noticed a subtle change in Snickers. This was right before his decline became obvious. Several times he had rebounded, like he'd just been feeling under the weather, and he was nearly back to himself. Then one evening his health suddenly took a dive, and it was apparent he couldn't get comfortable. Rabbits don't say anything vocally, but I saw it in his eyes. The reality of what was happening was hard because I didn't want to see him hurting at all. I hadn't even contemplated what life would feel like without him.

Although we did not know Snickers's age, my mom figured he might be getting up there in years because he'd been raised with the former family's cats and the cats were pretty old. She wondered if part of the motivation to move him out had been to avoid paying veterinary bills and dealing with the situation we were about to face. We would never know, and frankly it didn't really matter. As I kissed his ears, my little buddy taught me an important lesson: if you worry too much about what might happen in the future, you miss out on what's happening right in front of you.

For me and Snickers, it was one last cuddle as the summer sun dipped behind the Bachmans' house. My parents arranged to take Snickers to the veterinarian in the morning because it was important to all of us that he didn't suffer. Before I went to sleep that night, I was sitting on the floor, propped

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up by my bed while I read a book. Snickers scooted over to me and tunneled under my legs, as he'd done since the first day we brought him home. I figured the time had come to tell each other goodbye, because I had a feeling it might be too hard the next day at the vet's office.

I put down my book, crossed my legs, and settled Snickers into my lap so I could stroke his back and rub him behind his ears. This is something most rabbits enjoy, and Snickers was no exception—especially right then.

After a while I crawled into bed and said good night without putting him back in his normal sleeping area down the hall. If this was going to be his last night, I wanted us to spend it together. I fell asleep pretty quickly, and I later found out that Snickers ambled out of my bedroom and made his way down the hall until he found my mom sitting in the chair in the living room. She picked him up and held him in her arms, where he died a few minutes later. Mom said it was like Snickers knew it was time and he wanted to be held by someone.

She cried in a way I hadn't seen before. Dad said it was because my mom is a fixer and she wasn't able to fix Snickers—or me.

For some reason I woke up shortly after Snickers died. I must have heard my mom crying or my dad consoling her in the living room, which is relatively close to my bedroom. Mom was still holding Snickers in her arms when I entered the room. Her eyes were red as she looked at me from across the room, and I saw that her face was wet with tears. With the way she was cradling him, Snickers was barely visible. I walked over and stroked his fur. Still soft and warm, Snickers looked like he was asleep.

As the reality sunk in, I was hit by a wave of sadness, knowing that Snickers would never wake up, and then suddenly I was free-falling with a sense of loss and emptiness. I was going to miss him so much.

I cried quietly for a long time.

My parents had spoken to me about death the first time after I found Flaggada 1 floating in the tall rectangular aquarium. Death didn't make total sense to me at any of the fish memorial services, but somehow seeing Snickers cradled in my mom's arms made it clearer that, while the physical body remained, the spark that created life was gone.

Eventually, I took Snickers from my mom and held him close. With my

eyes closed, I thought of all the time we'd spent together, and I knew this would be the last time. I remembered my parents once telling me that our love for a person or pet doesn't stop just because they're no longer alive, and I knew this would be true with Snickers.

We'd done the absolute best we could to take care of Snickers, so I didn't feel any remorse. We lived each day the best we could, spending plenty of time together, even up to the very end. Plus, I was comforted in my simple belief that pets went to heaven and were welcomed there by family.

"We'll have a funeral tomorrow," I informed my parents.

"How are you going to tell everyone?" my mom asked.

"Don't know. It's going to be hard."

### *Dang, I'll Miss You*

Eventually I put Snickers down in his cage and crawled back under the comforter. Worn out from crying, I fell asleep quickly, and the rest of the night flew past in the blink of an eye. Literally. I felt as if I shut my eyes, and when I opened them again, it was morning. I checked in on Snickers on my way to the kitchen. He was still dead but seemed to be in a deep, peaceful sleep. My appetite was pretty much gone. I didn't want to play either.

I hesitated to share the news with the neighborhood pack. Going outside and telling people would make everything real.

As I stared at the doorknob, I confirmed the day's to-do list and timeline with my parents. I was committed to giving Snickers a funeral. And it was important that all the neighborhood kids be invited, along with their families if they wanted to come.

Thoughts weighed heavily on my mind. Some people have described me as sensitive and thoughtful; others call me a deep thinker. I suppose I do spend time trying to figure things out. It's one of the reasons the Boy Scouts and science and church appeal to me—all are about exactly that.

Both my parents were raised in homes rooted in deep, personal faith in the God who created everything, who is still engaged with us in our day-to-day lives, and who even cares about the little things. Early on they began answering my questions as they came up, but they always gave me room to

figure out my own views about God and my place in the world. I remember chatting on one of our long family road trips, and Mom said something that stuck with me, even though she said it wasn't original: "At some point you must decide for yourself, because God only has children. God doesn't have any grandchildren."

I had already concluded that there was a God and I was not Him, and that both truths were good. Around the same time Mom and I had that discussion, I needed to decorate a school poster titled "All about Me," which made me start thinking about where I fit and what set me apart from anyone else—what made me different or special. I really struggled with the assignment. I wanted this to be about more than just narrowing down my favorite songs and colors.

How could I explain that I hear music in my head wherever I go, as if it's my own personal soundtrack? How could I explain that I love every little step related to getting ready for a baseball game, not just playing baseball? As for a favorite food, I simply like eating. After school, I'll often come home and heat up a tortilla with cheese and salsa, but nothing is better than church potlucks. A bite of a chicken enchilada followed by a forkful of some cheesy hot dish and a sip of ice-cold lemonade is my idea of a perfect meal—and proof that God is good.

I had no idea how to put all that on a poster. Now that I was older, I realized it was unlikely that I would someday become a goalie astronaut on the moon who was a news reporter on the weekend. All I knew was that Snickers was my favorite.

The idea that helped me process losing Snickers was intentional stewardship, a concept my parents modeled for me. Basically it means that everything belongs to God, not to us, and what we have has been entrusted to us. We are caretakers. That's why I still see myself as a bunny guardian rather than an owner. I'm a steward. The neighborhood kids come to play in our yard, but it's not really our yard. The farm is God's farm; we just get to use it. I have food to eat, but it's not really *my* food, so I should share when I can. And while Snickers was our family's pet bunny, he was really God's bunny. Also, in a sense, the whole neighborhood had adopted Snickers.

"I'm concerned about how Noah is going to take the news," I told my

mom as I sat at the kitchen table making invitations to the funeral. “He’s going to have a hard time. And I hope Markus is feeling well enough to come. That would be nice, but I understand if he can’t, and obviously Snickers would understand too.”

“Well, why don’t you go talk to Ms. Deb?” my mom said, which is what all the neighborhood kids call Noah’s mom. After I made the last invitation, I laced up my shoes and crossed the street to the Bachmans’. My mom stayed behind while I knocked on the door and delivered the news, followed by the invitation. Both Noah and Markus said they would come and help say goodbye. Then I went to all the other houses on the street. I saw my mom nod or give a thumbs-up to the other parents as they opened the door. We were surprised everybody was home—that was rare with all the kids’ busy schedules.

Back at our house, we had about two hours before the funeral. Noah and Markus came over early to see Snickers before I wrapped him up in a blanket and put him in the decorated cardboard box. They just sat with me while the clouds moved, but it felt like nothing else did. Noah seemed pretty lost, which was understandable. Markus helped supervise as I dug a hole next to the purple lilacs that Snickers liked to sniff and nibble.

Before this I’d had two other experiences with funerals. One was for an older lady who served cookies to our Sunday school class, and the other was an extremely sad occasion, when a young mother sang a hymn through tears for her baby girl. Both days were bleak, gray, and chilly, the weather seeming to reflect the somber mood. But this afternoon was bright and sunny, and once all my friends and I gathered in the backyard, it almost felt like a normal playdate. Except we knew better.

My mom and dad welcomed everyone, said a brief prayer, and then backed away and let me take over. I set Snickers’s box in the hole and added a scoop of dirt before I said my own goodbye. I hadn’t written anything down, and I didn’t know if I’d be able to choke out the words, but when the time came, my gut told me to step forward, and I did. My mom pointed the camera to the ground just like I’d requested. I wanted to save this incredibly special moment but instructed her to record only the voices so I could remember what I saw in my mind’s eye.

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“I am grateful to have had a friend like Snickers,” I said. “He was special. I don’t think my heart can ever love like this again.”

After I pitched a shovelful of dirt into the hole, one of the other guys took it from me and said a few words of his own. And so it went until everyone had spoken.

“Dang, I’ll miss you. You’re the best pet on our street. Sorry. No offense to Champagne.” I didn’t think the Bachmans’ dog would mind.

“I’ll miss you, Mr. Fuzzy Fuzzy. Hope death didn’t hurt. This stinks.”

“I just saw you yesterday. I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye then. So goodbye, Snickers.”

“I don’t know what to say. Sorry, bunny, you got dead. I’m glad you knew me. We had good times, didn’t we?”

“Snickers, you deserve a golden carrot. Hope you have teeth in heaven. You were the best rabbit I ever knew.”

“We wish you the best. Hope you stay warm. We put you in a blanket.”

“I’m glad you were here. See you later. Um, sorry. Guess not. But maybe.”

I had Snickers less than a year, and when I think about how we first came together, it seemed like chance. But I don’t know. Are the stars in the night sky total chance? Is life on this planet chance? It depends on what you believe. What I know for sure is that Snickers came from a family that was eager to rehome him and he was the perfect pet for as long as he lived with us. In return, he changed the rest of my life.