

A Life Worth Saving: Moose's Story
From [Palomacy, Guest Post by Jenna Close](#)
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“Human beings are a part of the animal kingdom, not apart from it. The separation of “us” and “them” creates a false picture and is responsible for much suffering.”

~ [Marc Bekoff](#), *Animals Matter: A Biologist Explains Why We Should Treat Animals with Compassion and Respect*

“When animals express their feelings they pour out like water from a spout. Animals’ emotions are raw, unfiltered, and uncontrolled. Their joy is the purest and most contagious of joys and their grief the deepest and most devastating. Their passions bring us to our knees in delight and sorrow.”

~ [Marc Bekoff](#), *The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy – and Why They Matter*



My soul-bird Moose slipped the surly bonds of earth on December 19th, 2022. Despite years of anticipatory grief, I was not at all prepared for how I felt once he was gone. But I was even less prepared – for the sorrow, the beauty, the rawness and the respect – of Moose’s Flock.



I have a 14 pigeon aviary. They are all rescues, all bonded pairs, and they all have their frenemies and territories and daily habits. Half of them have experienced the only other death I've had here so far – Moose's first wife Mercedes a few years ago. From that, I felt like I understood how eloquently and gracefully these birds grieve. I was wrong.



Moose was Home for 1,177 days. He was part of the first group of pigeons I adopted after catching 2 lost racers near my house and building them an aviary. By default – of both longevity and largeness of character – Moose was never at the bottom of the pecking order, but he also never cared much about being at the very top. Nico is The Boss and Moose was The Sheriff. He was always on patrol and no one ever messed with him or his space for very long. In response, he didn't randomly push others around, but everyone knew he would if provoked.

Moose was ill – even before I brought him home – with a disease called mycobacteriosis. Mycobacteriosis is so difficult and expensive to put in remission that a diagnosis often results in humane euthanasia. Once we figured out what was going on there was no question – I wanted to treat him. The next 18 months of being medicated four times a day, of trial and error, hope and failure AND success were not ignored by his wife or his flock even though I always thought they were simply wondering why I was torturing their compatriot and for so long. They knew. They definitely knew.

The day Moose left us he went downhill quickly. Sometimes as hard as you look for signs, they are hidden until it's too late. Pigeons are tenacious creatures who can withstand SO MUCH. If they decide they are ready to go, there is nothing on earth that can stop them. Moose's departure started overnight but was only known to me early the next morning. I brought him and his wife Nike inside where it was warmer and started calling my vet. In that time, Nike had wrapped herself around him with one wing over his back so his head was in her wing pit, just as he liked it. Moose was always a big one for snuggling. She didn't eat, she didn't drink, she just sat there. This actually scared me, because they have spent a lot of time together on trips to the vet and Nike would always make him hold off on cuddling until she had some treats. Not that day.

Moose rallied once, enough to stand up, drink some water and say a few words to her. He said them loud and clear and he was so normal in that moment that I had a flash of hope that I was just overreacting. She responded by preening his whole face and then, when he lay back down, by pressing her body to his side and resting her head next to his. It was then that I knew for sure he was dying. Their closeness was different this time – it felt private and brave and final. It felt like a loving goodbye. I took two birds to the vet that day and came home with only one.



Nike had her time for closure after Moose passed, which is of the utmost importance for pigeons. When we arrived back home it was after dark. I walked into the aviary, looked at his night roost and saw no one was on it. This was highly unusual because Moose's throne was the envy of all the flock. Whenever he wasn't there, someone (usually Mo) would sneak onto it until they were discovered. But that night, every single flock member who slept next to him was lined up, equidistant, on either side of his spot. I lifted Nike up and placed her where he would have been. No one moved or made a sound. They looked like sentinels – an honor guard sending off one of their own. There is no other way to describe how unusual and moving it was except that it lifted and it broke me. I sat down right there, in the poop and discarded peas, and cried. I have thought back to that extraordinary moment often and it still blows me away.



The flock kept up their vigil for 3 days and nights. 3 seems to be an important number in grieving rituals throughout the world (so why not pigeons too?) but still I was astounded that the honor guard went on that long. On the 4th day, Mo gently and respectfully stepped onto Moose's roost and quietly claimed the spot. If you know Mo, you know he is never quiet and is usually on a bragging parade somewhere. Very unusual yet understandable behavior for him.

I was very worried about Nike and how she was faring. She didn't abandon her feggs but she did tell me what comfort she needed. I was out on the patio the day after Moose died, crying to my doves who live in an aviary nearby. I heard Nike coo, and it was the coo she always made for Moose when she wanted him to come into their box. I went in to see what was up and she raised her head, looked at me and cooed again. When she and Moose were together I was never allowed to put my hand in their box without getting an enthusiastic wing wacking, but I felt so strongly that I needed to comfort her that I put my hand in there and cupped her chest in my palm. Not only did she let me do that, she started preening my fingers. In that instant I realized that she knew everything – she knew what I was doing all those years medicating Moose, she knew how deeply I loved him, how hard I was grieving – and she was letting me know that together we would eventually be OK.

Nike and I kept up our special relationship for 4 weeks...the entire time she was sitting on her and Moose's last clutch of feggs (she held onto them longer than usual). During that time, I adopted a potential mate for her, but he initially showed no interest in her or her him. Eventually she abandoned her

feggs and called me into her nest box. I put my hand over her and snuggled her and she made a series of loud coos. The minute I left her, Titan (her new prospective mate) flew down to the porch, did a few dance moves, and walked right into her box. She came out for a second, then went back in, and that was that. As soon as she married Titan our relationship returned to normal (play fighting, no entry to the nest box without a bite), and I'm fine with that. She's happy, Titan is happy, and I will be happy again someday too.

The flock has also returned to their regular antics. It is taking me a lot longer to find joy without my Moose, but I am overwhelmed and incredulous at how his flock behaved in the days after his death. I knew that pigeons grieve, that they are smart and emotional beings, but I had not myself witnessed such a tender and caring expression of love before. They knew that Moose and I had a special and complex relationship, and they honored that.



The grief of a family member, especially one that is so often misunderstood and maligned, is a unique and excruciating experience. I don't really have words to explain how dark life becomes, how fraught it is with unexpected reactions and emotions. Perhaps that is because I haven't come out the other side yet. But, as a friend said to me...the only way out is through. I have learned that you have to trust and accept whatever you are feeling when you feel it. Cry. Scream. Burn sage. Drink whisky. Get mad. [Write a eulogy](#). Take a walk. Get a tattoo. Lean on your flock — they will understand. And it will get better. It will never be the same, but it will get better.

“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief...and of unspeakable love.”

~ Washington Irving

I love you Moose. Always.

Jenna is a commercial photographer and filmmaker based in San Diego. 5 years ago a ringneck dove self rescued in her yard, which led her to Palomacy. She is a moderator on the Palomacy Help Group, runs the Palomacy YouTube Channel and now has an aviary with 2 doves (the original self rescue and his mate) and another aviary with 14 pigeons.

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