

HERALDO

My name is Dan Ryckman and this is my story.

I was born in a small cottage in France near the border of Switzerland. While giving birth to me my mother nearly passed away. She lost 3 pints of blood and one of her temples needed 8 stitches when it ripped apart while straining to push my 14 pound body out of her womb.

Three months later I was walking so my family decided we were all ready for the long voyage to the Yukon. My father was a famous ice sculptor and he decided to move his family to this barren ice desert so that he could train for 2 years in solitude. Of course it wasn't complete solitude since his nine family members were there with him (6 daughters, 2 sons and 1 wife) but he was able to find peace and quiet from his seemingly endless amounts of fans.

My oldest sister killed herself three months before my dad's period of solitude was scheduled to be finished because she was inept at fighting off depression during our second winter in the dark tundra. She took 14 Advils and then struck herself in the forehead with an ice pick. I'm told that I was the one who found the body but I was very young so I do not remember any of it.

Once my father was ready he applied for and received a job in Winnipeg as a sculpture for the Festival du Voyageur. Since he wasn't the type of man who enjoyed societies with large populations, we moved to a small nearby town called Stony

Mountain. From our front door we could see a gorgeous lake and a daunting cold prison. We also had a pool in our back yard.

I had an average childhood. I went to a public school where I was given very few challenging tasks. I went through life without any apparent dreams and I was always quite worried about it. Whenever I tried to talk to my parents or my teachers about my concern they would tell me not to worry about it. I always felt bored. During my teenage years my teachers tried to convince me that I was depressed but I was certain that this wasn't true. I just needed to find my path.

At the age of 19 I became an internationally renowned weaver and my bedroom was soon garnished with awards from around the globe. I travelled around the world and displayed my talents to all who wished to see. It was a skill that I was born with. I embraced it and milked it for all I could but I always knew that this wasn't the life for me.

At 21 I sold all the blankets and sweaters that I had lovingly created to I move to downtown Winnipeg in hopes of achieving a PHD in physics at the University of Winnipeg. My mother's scarred temple trembled when I told her that I was moving out and my father wept quietly.

At 22 I met a girl named Tanigan at a bar called Monty's. Two months later we were wed. At the wedding ceremony my father presented us with a gorgeous ice sculpture of a man and a woman carrying a canoe. Both of my parents sobbed with happiness while Tanigan and I exchanged our vows. That day was a very happy day for me but deep down I was stressed that I would never be able to

match that happiness again. I was still at University and money flowed to me and Tanigan through my many scholarships. Physics interested me but it didn't make my heart sing. My life was still a bore. I was beginning to think that my old high school teachers might have been right about me being depressed.

Before I finally gave in and took some medication Tanigan became pregnant. I spent those nine months worrying that I would be a terrible role model for my son or daughter. I felt like the most uninspired human alive. What kind of example could I set for my child?

Finally my son was born. On that day I felt like the entire planet stopped spinning and I had been swung around a cement room until my head was a dizzy mush. My child was the most beautiful thing I had ever held. I felt like everything finally made sense.

Whenever I tried to foresee the day that I would have a child, I thought that I would be strong. I knew that it would be a big day but I thought that it would take a few days for my new responsibility to set in. I didn't think that it would immediately make me an emotional wreck. I nearly fainted with delight when I first saw his face. I was expecting an average baby to climb out of my wife but out came the exact opposite. I cried with the gusto of Poseidon when the doctor handed me my newborn baby cat, still wet with Tanigan's placenta.

All the doctors were puzzled. They had never seen a human give birth to a cat before. Science will never be fully understood. Whenever we think we think we can predict something with 100% accuracy, science corrects us and makes sure we keep that

percentage at 99. I don't believe in God because science is more powerful than any God that our meek imaginations could create. When I was just a little boy sitting in my grade 1 class we were learning the letters of the alphabet. We would get to the letter 'C' and we'd always be reminded that the word "Cat" started with this letter. I would then fantasize about having a wife that would give birth to a gorgeous striped cat. I never believed that this day would actually ever come.

Tanigan and I agreed on the name Heraldo for our son. We cared for him as we would any human child. We gave him a human bed, fed him overly sweet cereals for breakfast and let him get up insanely early on Saturdays to watch cartoons. We were as proud of him as we would have been if he were a human. I might have even been a little bit prouder.

When Heraldo turned five we tried to sign him up for school but the board would not allow it. Tanigan and I fought with our every ounce of vigor to change the rules of the schooling system but our pleas went unanswered. We were forced to home-school him.

We noticed that Heraldo did not really get along with the human children and he had trouble participating in their games and sports. More often than not he would just get in the way of the other children. We always felt it was because he was home-schooled and he never had a fair chance to interact with the other kids. After so many years of raising Heraldo, Tanigan and I found that we saw him as a human and it was extremely difficult to remove ourselves from that state of mind. Heraldo was a cat and we just couldn't seem to understand.

Our refusal to acknowledge Heraldo's species became the most apparently once Heraldo turned 18. We were excited that he could finally become more independent. We helped him start drinking so that he wouldn't feel uncomfortable at the bar where the other patrons probably had a few years of illegal drinking as minors. We hoped that he'd go out more often. Maybe he'd get a job and a even a girlfriend. Heraldo didn't care for any of this. He was feeling old and tired. Instead of chasing healthy looking girls at the local pub he opted for a long nap in the sun's rays or a tummy rub from me or Tanigan. We never expected Heraldo to age faster than us so his new lifestyle came as a surprise.

Heraldo had just turned 19 when a tumor developed in his brain. We took him to the vet where we were faced with a difficult decision. We could get the tumour removed for \$680 but another one would likely develop in a few months and then we'd have the same decision to make. The other choice was to have him put down for \$30. We discussed it over many, many hours and we finally chose the first option.

After the surgery everything seemed to be going great. Our hopes were up that the tumour was gone for good but as the vet predicted, 5 months later another tumour started to grow. Heraldo had already lost all his lust for life and the only thing he seemed to still enjoy were his naps. Our hearts were as heavy as lead when we decided to grant his wish. With the vets help we laid him down to have one final nap.

It was the hardest thing that I've ever done. A parent should never have to bury their child. The few months after Heraldo's death were difficult for me and Tanigan. We didn't think we'd ever pull through

but slowly we recovered. Our broken hearts would never be whole again but we adapted. I was worried that I would return to my boring, uninspired life before I knew Heraldo but I decided to not let that happen. I became a spokesperson for "special" children. I toured around North America going to different high schools and talked about my experience to all the students to give hope to handicapped children who thought they weren't as capable as other kids.

I hope my time on this planet will have made a significant impact. I hope that one day people will say to each other with a sly grin: "That Dan Ryckman guy didn't have anything wrong with him, but he sure didn't let that get in his way."

The End