

Introduction

Pet Purpose: Your Unspoken Voice is a pet-themed story about how love hurts with bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is semi-autobiographical fiction with memoir and fiction woven together. All characters, including the pets, are composite characters. Place names are fictitious.

The early parts of the story are necessary to help the reader understand how much pain the main character (Heni/Larissa) is carrying. Also to provide context as to why the character did certain things in the later chapters which mainly depict bipolar mania with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), from trauma.

Most of the story focusses on the character's adult life. The first chapter sets the scene in adulthood, followed by two chapters on childhood experiences. The story of the character's adult life then resumes. The character is attempting to get closure on grief and trauma.

The song titles which are mentioned throughout are included in a reference section at the end, to clarify which song and version. The songs chosen are linked in some way, whether by mood, lyrics or themes.

Some artworks by the author are included after the story. The artworks were therapeutic processing as well as visual mind maps that helped develop the storyline.

The author shares diagnoses of bipolar 1 disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder with the main character in this novel. The author strongly sees patterns, so has woven symbolic metaphor throughout.

The author aims to provide a unique perspective of processing complex trauma and grief through the art of storytelling.

1. No Rainbow Bridge

‘My cat died today,’ announced 4-year-old Alexandria Hertz-Kopf to the barista.

‘And she’s in the ground turning into dirt,’ added Alexandria’s twin brother Xavier.

‘Really?’ replied the barista, trying to suppress a laugh, glancing at the twins’ mother, Heni Hertz. Even Heni, who had been crying all morning, cracked a hint of a smile.

Heni and her children had bright turquoise eyes which seemed to change colour in different light like iridescent avian feathers. The children’s eyes seemed too big for their curious golden faces framed with honey locks. Xavier’s hair was a tumble of soft curls and Alexandria’s hair was fine and straight.

The twins each sat on a café breakfast bar stool, each dipping a long spoon into their chocolate milk fluffies. The barista was making coffee for their father, Richie Kopf, a police officer. Heni poured camomile tea into a white cup.

‘It looks like pee,’ said Richie with an Australian accent.

‘I doubt it tastes like pee,’ said Heni in her New Zealand accent. She had retained her Kiwi accent despite living in Australia since before the twins were born.

‘You’d know from the smell, knowing you,’ said Richie. ‘I’ve never known anyone to have such a hypersensitive sense of smell as you.’

‘Coffee smells like cat poop and Tripod agreed.’ When Tripod, the three-legged black cat was alive, she had scratched around Richie’s coffee cup as though it were a cat litter tray.

Richie reached across and clasped his wife’s hand. Richie was called ‘Rig’ by his colleagues in the police force because they said he was built like a truck – tall and solid with muscular arms. Handsome, with striking emerald eyes and dimples.

Heni hadn't wanted to go out for coffee and would have preferred to have been left alone or to be comforted by an embrace from Richie's strong arms, where she felt safe and protected.

Heni wasn't wearing makeup and her glossy raven hair tumbled in natural waves. Richie preferred for her to wear little or no makeup. Heni looked beautiful without it. She was often mistaken for Italian or Spanish with her deeper skin-tone from her blended Maori and German ancestry.

Richie hadn't expected on his day off to be digging a grave. Heni had agreed to go out as a distraction from her sadness.

Heni had adopted Tripod from a shelter. She knew that older cats and dogs, especially those with disabilities are less likely to be rehomed. At first, Tripod was very timid, sitting in the corner of a cage, head dropped and not moving. She'd had one leg amputated, presumably after an accident. Her history was unknown.

After initially hiding in a drawer in the bedroom, Tripod came out and started to appear relaxed. One day, when she was asleep, sprawled out across the back part of the sofa, Richie joked, 'Cats are nature's way of showing us that not everything has a purpose in life.'

Despite having three legs, Tripod was a very fast runner – she'd zoom out of the room faster than a cat with four legs when a stranger came to visit.

Tripod was raised as an indoor cat and Heni trained her to use a human toilet. She scratched at the toilet seat briefly before pushing the flush button. Richie had built an outdoor area with cat netting and access via a cat door so Tripod could sun herself outside. Richie was annoyed when Tripod climbed the insect screens to chase lizards. The only way Tripod could leave the property was to go out the front door.

The attendants at the animal shelter had advised Heni to raise Tripod as an inside cat because of the risks of cats killing wildlife and wildlife killing cats.

'That's Stralya for ya,' joked Richie. 'Where everything's out to kill you.' He pointed to an article in the newspaper with an x-ray of the

inside of a python, clearly showing the skeleton of an entire cat wearing a cat collar with a bell still attached.

The day Tripod died, Heni woke up with a feeling of dread. She could see that the new lizard enclosure had arrived. The enclosure was in the middle of the lounge, still covered in wrapping. ‘Where’s Tripod?’ she asked.

‘Dunno,’ replied Richie, tugging off the protective wrapping. There were also boxes with lamps and a thermostat and other accessories to simulate basking in the sun. The twins were asking about when their lizard would arrive. They had chosen a frilled dragon and had already named it Lucky. They would be going to collect Lucky with Richie after the enclosure was set up.

Tripod had been playing with a redback spider that had gotten into the house a few days earlier. The neighbour had threatened to kill Tripod if she ever went over the boundary of the fence. He’d seen her peeking out the window. ‘I’ll wring its bloody neck,’ he’d muttered as he mowed the dried up tufts of grass during a drought.

‘Triiii-pod,’ called Heni. Tripod was nowhere to be seen and her breakfast was untouched. Heni checked Tripod’s favourite places like the linen cupboard. She checked under the bed. Tripod would have been frightened when the delivery people had arrived with big boxes. She was supposed to have been locked in a bedroom during the delivery of the lizard enclosure.

Heni’s feeling of dread grew. *Did she slip out the front door? Is she hurt?* were Heni’s thoughts. Heni went outside. She could see something writhing on the driveway and she went closer to investigate. It was a brown snake, a small yet highly venomous snake. It was injured with some small puncture wounds likely from an altercation with a cat. She ran back indoors to let Richie know and he confined the snake and made arrangements with a wildlife rescue and rehabilitation organisation.

Heni called for Tripod and started searching around the house and started asking the neighbours. The neighbours across the road came out

and helped her search. Their lawnmower was outside under the eaves with the catcher beside it. Heni knew she'd find Tripod there. She just knew. She looked inside the catcher and Tripod was there, breathing – just. She was weak and lethargic. Heni pulled her out gently and Tripod was unable to stand on her three legs. She collapsed. Heni scooped Tripod up in her arms and ran back across the road to home.

‘Richie...I found Tripod...she’s been bitten by the snake. I have to get her to the vet urgently. Can you call the vet to let them know I’m on my way.’

Heni bundled Tripod up in the car and drove to the vet. When she arrived, Tripod’s breathing was very shallow and barely there. Tripod started twitching all over and she stopped breathing. The vet urgently resuscitated her and administered anti-venom.

‘The source of the bite was near the heart,’ said the vet. ‘Which is why the venom was absorbed and distributed so quickly around the body. It will be very touch and go whether Tripod survives the next twelve to twenty-four hours.’

The next morning, a vet nurse called to say that Tripod was responding to the anti-venom.

‘She’s not out of the woods yet but she’s starting to stabilise,’ she said. ‘You can come see her anytime now.’

‘Thank-you. That’s such a relief,’ said Heni. ‘I’ll come down now.’ She still felt anxious.

Heni arrived at the vet and Tripod was resting but looked much improved. Her breathing was more normal. Heni stroked Tripod’s fur.

‘You get better, okay?’ she said. ‘You’ll be coming home soon.’

The vet nurse said, ‘She was probably playing with the snake then got bitten. You’re a Kiwi? Where from? I’ve been to New Zealand.’

‘A little town called Kanuka by a freshwater lake, an hour from a snowy mountain and an hour from the sea.’

‘So people can surf, ski and waterski?’

‘Yep. It doesn’t get as hot though as here.’

‘So what brought you to this stinking hot place of Jellybroome?’

‘Love. I married an Australian. I used to be a vet nurse in New Zealand. We don’t have exotics like lizards and snakes there.’

‘There is a specialist vet for exotics in the next city. There is a lot more to worry about for pets here. Paralysis ticks are a big killer of cats and dogs. Snake bites and cane toads are also something you wouldn’t have to deal with in New Zealand. A lot of pets get poisoned after licking a cane toad. It’s quite addictive for them as they can get high and start hallucinating but a little too much can be lethal.’

The vet came out. ‘We’ll give you a call later to let you know how Tripod is getting on.’

The children had been to collect Lucky who was now in her new home.

‘Lucky is a boy,’ said Xavier.

‘Lucky could be a girl,’ said Alexandria.

‘The breeder isn’t one hundred percent sure,’ said Richie.

The vet phoned.

‘I’m so sorry but Tripod had a delayed allergic reaction to the snake bite. We did everything we could, but we lost her.’

‘You mean....she’s dead...?’ asked Heni, her lip trembling.

‘Yes. I’m sorry for your loss. When you’re ready we can discuss what arrangements you would like to make for Tripod. We have cremation options.’

I’m sorry I wasn’t there, Heni said over and over in her head. *I wasn’t there to comfort you.*

She had been there so many times when other people had said goodbye to their pets, when she’d been a vet nurse. It was always hard to deal with and one of the main reasons she changed careers. Because it was so painful forming a bond then saying goodbye.

As a vet nurse, part of her job was to give a card with a poem about Rainbow Bridge on it to anyone whose pet had died. The poem was about how their beloved pet was waiting for them in a meadow, waiting to be reunited to cross Rainbow Bridge together. Some people loved the Rainbow Bridge poem. Other people were irritated and even upset by it.

‘I don’t believe in no stinkin’ Rainbow Bridge,’ a man had muttered throwing the poem on the floor after his beloved dog was euthanised.

Heni didn’t want to talk about Heaven or Rainbow Bridge to the children. She didn’t know what she believed anymore and the Rainbow Bridge story seemed so clichéd. So did Heaven. She didn’t want to say that Tripod was sleeping as she didn’t want the children to be afraid of going to sleep and never waking up. The only thing she knew for sure was that with a natural burial, Tripod’s body would decompose and be recycled. Heni could compartmentalise and be matter-of-fact.

‘Do you want to see Tripod?’ asked Heni. ‘It will be the last time you see her.’

The twins nodded. They had never been exposed to death before and Heni didn’t want for it to be scary.

Heni opened the box and Tripod lay there curled up as though she were sleeping. Her fur hid the rash on her skin from the allergic reaction. Heni and the twins stroked Tripod’s fur for the last time. Richie finished digging a hole in the back yard, just like when Heni’s father did back in New Zealand when it was time to say goodbye to a beloved pet.

There were so many questions as the twins helped Richie fill in the hole. Then they pressed the dirt down wearing their gumboots.

‘Is the snake a bad snake for hurting Tripod?’ asked Xavier.

‘No, snakes are not bad,’ said Richie.

‘What will happen to Tripod now?’ asked Alexandria.

‘Her body will break down and she will become the dirt to make the grass and flowers grow,’ replied Heni.

‘Will she ever wake up?’

‘No. She has died and won’t wake up.’

‘Are we going to die one day too, Mummy?’

Heni couldn’t lie. ‘Yes, one day but I hope to be here for a long time and so will you.’

‘Why are you crying, Mummy?’

‘I’m sad because we won’t see Tripod again and I’ll miss her.’

Heni answered their questions without mentioning Heaven or Rainbow Bridge. With the truth, in a way that the children could understand.

Richie said nothing and went inside and turned on the stereo. *Somebody to Love* was playing through the newly installed surround sound speakers. *Queen* was one of Richie's favourite bands.

Richie took out two frozen rats from the freezer to thaw. Feeding time was exciting for Richie. If anyone were visiting, he'd feed his pet green tree pythons, Donner and Blitz, in front of them like a form of entertainment. He'd dangle a dead rat in front of each python. Lightning fast, the rat would be strangled and then engulfed whole over several minutes. Heni didn't like watching it as she had had a pet rat called Honey when she was a teenager. Honey had been very affectionate and intelligent. Heni had been sent home from school when Honey died, because she couldn't stop crying.

Heni cut three branches and arranged them in a tripod shape to mark the place to later plant a native tree with blossoms. 'Goodbye Tripod.'

She wiped her tears and gave her twins a big hug then took their hands and walked inside to get to know Lucky.