

# The Death of Brutus

By Mark Tulin

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Guest editor JOHN SHEIRER writes: I remember learning a term back in college English class: In Medias Res (starting in the middle). I like how this story jumps right into the central quest of the tale--the pursuit of a new hamster to expand the "family"--without any overdone backstory about Betty, the narrator, or the situation. We learn more than enough about them just by knowing that Betty wants another hamster and the narrator is going to help her get one ... again. I also like how the dialogue in this story reflects natural human conversation in an understated but powerful way. The little details are telling here, and one of my favorites is the two types of hamsters: long hair and regular. Who knew? Betty knew, that's who, and that simple fact provides specific insight into her character that multiple paragraphs of exposition from a weaker writer wouldn't provide. Most of all, I appreciate the uncertain and overlapping caregiver roles in the story: The narrator cares for Betty as best he can while Betty, in her way, cares for the hamsters as best she can. And the manager of the pet shop sums up the relationships and most of human nature in this insightful moment, my favorite section of the story:*

*"Betty," said the manager trying to hide his exasperation, "you know that there are no guarantees. If you clean the cage, change the water, and don't overfeed the hamster, he'll live longer."*

*She nodded her head but didn't listen.*

*(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.*

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“Get me ready; we’re going out.” Betty commanded from her wheelchair.

“Where?” I asked, snapping on my plastic gloves.

“We’re going to get another hamster. Brutus needs company. He’s a little down in the dumps, and I think a new brother would cheer him up.”

Betty didn’t see me roll my eyes. All I could think was, *here we go again!*

“Don’t you think the O’Brien twins are enough company for Brutus?” I asked.

“No, they’re females. He needs a male!”

Betty kept buying hamsters and feeding them food pellets until they ended up bloated and dead at the bottom of the hamster cage.

“They’re hungry,” she said, taking one in her gnarled fingers. “You’re so cute—yes, you are. You want mommy to give you something yummy?”

Betty became disabled from a car accident in her mid-thirties, spending the rest of her life in a wheelchair. All the aides have quit working with her for one reason or another. I prefer less obstinate people, but, surprisingly, I found her abrasive personality a bit charming.

I prepared Betty for the trip, wheeling her into the shower and soaping her body, lathering her hair with dandruff shampoo, scrubbing her back, and careful not to miss a spot. It was a long process, but that’s not the half of it. Having to lift her and slip on her pants and blouse at the same time was a major challenge, not to

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mention changing her catheter bags.

Once at the corner of Carpinteria Street, the bus arrived promptly.

It took about twenty minutes to reach PetsLove, where everyone who worked there knew Betty.

“Hi, Betty, how are you, dear?” said the manager.

“I’m back for another little furry fella,” she said. “This one better, be good.”

I wheeled her to the hamster display, which was a glass cage stacked with an assortment of hamsters and a few random chew toys.

The manager, who had a hairy mole on his cheek, took extra-special care of Betty.

“Which one would you like—the long hairs or the regulars?”

“Oh no, I had a long hair once, and he died on me. Give me a short hair. And make sure this one lasts!”

“Betty,” said the manager trying to hide his exasperation, “you know that there are no guarantees. If you clean the cage, change the water, and don’t overfeed the hamster, he’ll live longer.”

She nodded her head but didn’t listen. She would go home, clean the cage once a month to save on bedding, and feed him multiple times a day. Then the poor hamster would overeat, and I’d find him on his back, stiff as a rock with a blurry death gaze.

Betty held a chubby one in her hands. He squirmed between her gnarled fingers, then climbed down her floral blouse and onto her lap.

“Do you need any help?” I asked.

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“Don’t just stand there, Phil—get him before he falls!”

He looked up at me with his sad, juju bead eyes. He didn’t even wiggle or try to escape.

“This one is a keeper,” I told Betty.

She nodded as much as she could, given her disability, and the manager with the hairy mole on his cheek put the poor critter into a little cardboard box for us to take home.

I attempted to attach the box to the back of the wheelchair, but Betty insisted that she hold him on her lap.

“Remember what happened to Calvin,” she said. “He chewed right through the box, and he ran away.”

I remembered all too clearly. We scoured the neighborhood for hours, unable to find him. Lucky for us, the manager of PetsLove gave us a new one for free.

I unfurled Betty’s fingers and placed the box between her shaky hands. Her fingers clutched the box like she was holding the family jewels.

Every time Betty felt the hamster nibble on the cardboard box, she said lovingly, “No, baby. We’ll be home soon, and you’ll have a big brother to play with.”

Miraculously, the hamster listened, stopped gnawing on the box.

Once home, I changed Betty’s leaky catheter and took the hamster to his cage. I held the hamster box open for a few seconds, not rushing the hamster into his new home, and, instead, allowing him to sniff around so he could feel safe. I watched him slowly venture into the cage, pausing cautiously, then took a few more steps and burrowed completely under the white bedding.

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As I filled the water bottle, Betty called out from the living room, “His name is Caesar! That’s it, Caesar!” She had just watched *Cleopatra* on cable and wanted her new hamster to have a powerful Roman name to go along with Brutus.

As for Brutus, I didn’t see him in the cage. He usually greeted me with a couple of excited squeaks when I opened the door or tapped on his water bottle. I searched under the mound of bedding, and there he was, as stiff as a rock. His eyes were open, and he had a frozen grin like death was a happy occasion.

“Goodbye, Brutus,” I whispered. “I hope that you do better in your next life. I hope you find happiness wherever you are going. Because wherever you go, I’m sure it will be better than this place.”

I presented the dead hamster to Betty, who was busy cleaning the wax from her ears with a Q-tip. When she realized that Brutus was dead, she cried like a part of her had died, perhaps conjuring up thoughts of her body mangled in that unfortunate car crash.

“No, Brutus—you can’t be dead!” she repeated, then looked up at me with her rheumy eyes. “I bought him a few months ago. He was alive this morning?”

If I reprimanded her for feeding him too much, she’d give me much grief, so I just stared at Brutus lying like a rock on the table with shards of white bedding stuck to his greasy fur.

Betty was a dreamer, a believer in miracles. She believed that one day God would come down from the heavens and make her walk again. She often invited her priest to sprinkle her with holy water, which gave her some hope that her struggles would one day be over, and her body healed.

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“We’re going to save him,” she said. “Brutus will rise from the dead. We’ll invoke the heavenly spirit.”

I felt like saying, “The only special powers that you have, Betty, is being a royal pain in the ass.”

Betty put her crooked forefinger on the dead hamster’s head and grabbed my hand, “With the power of God invested in me, I command the life in your body to resurrect and become whole again.”

A few minutes of awkward silence followed. The clouds didn’t open up, nor did a bolt of lightning strike Brutus, reviving his limp body that would awaken a hamster version of Frankenstein.

“Please, Lord,” she said with her eyelids closed tight. “Bring to life our Brutus; make him breathe again. Make his tiny legs spin on his brass wheel once more.”

She kept thumping the poor guy’s forehead with her fingertips as the faith healers do on television.

After twenty minutes of failing to revive Brutus, Betty thankfully gave up.

“We have to bury him,” she said, craning her stiff neck to look up.

“Bring in Caesar and the O’Brien twins,” she ordered. “Brutus would have wanted them at his funeral.”

“Are you sure you want Caesar to participate? He’s had a long day, and I’m sure he’s still adjusting to his new cage.”

“Nonsense!” snapped Betty. “He’s a hearty fellow. I’m sure he wants to be with us in our time of sorrow.”

I put Caesar in one plastic ball while the O’Brien girls shared another, then I

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dug a hole in the yard where the sixteen or so other hamsters lay buried. Since Brutus was a highly religious rodent, according to Betty, I got two small twigs and bound them together to make a cross. I placed his rigid body into an eyeglass box and put the little casket into the damp ground. I covered it with dirt and stuck the homemade cross at the head of the tiny gravesite.

Betty cleared her throat and spat into her napkin. As a drizzle fell in the backyard, she began her eulogy: "We are gathered here today for a very sad occasion. Brutus, the late son of Betty Krucker, was taken from us for who knows why. Our family—my health aide, Phil, the O'Brien twins, and our newly purchased, Caesar, are all grief-stricken beyond words. Let us now pray that Brutus finds a place by our creator's throne."

I flicked my lighter in the air to commemorate the solemn occasion.

Betty pointed her crooked finger at me, indicating that it was my turn to speak.

I cleared my throat. "I've known Brutus for the past six months, and, in all that time, he's never once bitten or scratched me. He had always been appreciative of the food and water that he received. Never complained, once."

"More!" Betty shouted.

As the rain fell harder, I continued, making it up as I went along.

"Brutus wrinkled his nose and fluttered his whiskers after he drank water. I'd place him in the plastic ball when I cleaned his cage and watched him roll around the house, knocking into walls and furniture, often getting lodged in the corner of the room, squealing to let me know when he needed help. He always enjoyed when I sang him the Beatles song *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da*."

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Just then, I heard some squealing coming from the ground. Could it be? I put my ear to the ground and listened closer. The squeals grew louder. I quickly scooped the casket out with my hands and opened it. To my astonishment, Brutus had his eyes open and wiggling his whiskers, happy to see me. Good God! I was almost certain when we put him in the casket he was dead!

Betty's eyes teared as she held young Caesar in her hands.

"Amen!" she shouted. She crossed herself, and let out a long, pronounced sigh to the heavens.

I put the revived Brutus in Betty's gnarled hands and she began kissing him all over his body, saying how much she missed him, and that the power of God really does exist. There was a few minutes of joyful cuddling, then the rains came down harder and we all went inside.

"What do we have to eat?" Betty asked. "This resurrection business makes me hungry!"

I smiled. I knew what meal that she loves when she's celebrating.

I microwaved a Swanson's Salisbury Steak with mashed potatoes and gravy, and returned the O'Brien Twins to their cage. There was just joy and happiness in Betty's eyes for the rest of that day, no complaints about her back or her pain in her arms and legs. She let Caesar and Brutus walk on the dining room table as she ate her TV dinner, feeding both some of her peach cobbler with gnarled fingers.

"You're the cutest little brothers, I ever saw," she purred lovingly.

END

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *The Death of Brutus* was inspired by several clients I assisted during the year I worked as a healthcare aide. I was fascinated by a couple of women, in particular, who used wheelchairs and needed around-the-clock care. I empathized with their pain and suffering but was more fascinated by their quirky personalities that may have developed from dealing with various healthcare aides who had differing skill levels and character traits. I was intrigued by the women's ability to deal with adversity, especially being dependent on people to shower, dress, and see them at their most vulnerable times. Venturing into the community in a wheelchair, presented many obstacles, i.e., Betty getting on the bus, shopping, and dealing with condescending people. Working with the severely disabled taught me that no matter how desperate a person's life is, people seek the same thing—connection. In Betty's case, she connected with hamsters and religion. My work has been inspired by those writers who demonstrated a certain creative madness such as Charles Bukowski, Philip Roth, and Henry Miller. Two of my main writing goals are telling a good story without being boring and finding the truth in my characters—the more painful, the better.

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