

## ERI The Price of a Life

My mother is 58 years old. Around 20 years ago she came down with Meunier's disease, which has caused loss of hearing in her left ear and gives rise to nausea and dizziness when she is under extreme physical or psychological stress. When this happens, she is unable to stand up, and sometimes even loses consciousness. In recent years, however, she has been doing quite well. While she has had a few seizures, the qi gong exercises she began a year ago seemed to be helping and she was feeling very good.

Until January 14, that is. It was a Sunday, around 6:30 in the evening. My mother realized she had forgotten to buy something she needed for supper, and was heading out the door to go to the market when Eri, her 13-year-old pomeranian, got under her feet.

"I'm coming right back, so you stay home," my mother said, and closed the door behind her - but Eri, who usually did as she was told, barked and whined at being left behind. Feeling sorry for her, my mother placed Eri in the basket of her bicycle and covered her with a vinyl sheet - it had begun drizzling in the late afternoon - and took off. It wasn't raining hard enough for her to use an umbrella herself.

It was already dark outside. Less than five minutes on the way, just after she had turned a corner, she was blinded by the headlight of an approaching three-wheeled motorcycle. The moment she thought, "Oh no, it's going to hit us," it did. The motorcycle plunged into her front basket, knocking the bicycle down and my mother with it. Quickly recovering her senses, she screamed, "Eri! Eri!" and looked at the basket. It was crushed. The boy who had been driving the motorcycle ran up to my mother, looking startled and asking if she was all right.

"My dog's in the basket!" she shouted. "Right the bicycle for me!"

When she was able to take Eri out of the basket, the dog was covered with blood and my mother couldn't even tell if she was breathing.

"The vet's right nearby. Follow me!" my mother shouted. She put Eri back in the basket and rode off. When she looked back a little while later, however, the motorcycle was nowhere to be seen. But my mother's only thought at the time was to get Eri to the doctor, and rather than look for the boy, she continued on her way. Although it was a Sunday, the vet was kind enough to examine Eri. She was in a terrible state, and my mother was beside herself with worry. She begged the vet to save her dog somehow.

"I'll do what I can," he answered. "But you don't look so well yourself. Try to calm down. And go to the hospital immediately."

My mother reluctantly left Eri at the vet's, and after reporting the accident to the police, went to the emergency room of a nearby hospital for treatment. She returned home, but telling herself that Eri could not possibly survive her injuries, she got out a cloth and a box to use as Eri's shroud and coffin and, in tears, set out again for the vet's.

"We'll stay up with her all night, so go home and get some rest," the doctor said. Although my mother wanted to stay with Eri, she did as she was told. Soon after she got home, she was struck by the recurring symptoms of Meunier's disease. The terrible shock she had suffered had taken its toll, and unable to stand up, she crawled to the telephone to call a neighbor. An ambulance came to take her to hospital. By the time I was contacted in Himeji, it was past 11:30 at night. I spent an anxious night at home, and the next morning left on the first bullet train for Osaka.

When I got to my mother's house, I found her in bed. She had been too worried about Eri to stay in the hospital, and had rushed home after receiving treatment. She burst into tears as soon as she saw my face.

"It was my fault!" she cried. "If I hadn't taken Eri with me, this wouldn't have happened. And now she got hit instead of me!"

Eri was my mother's sole companion since I had gotten married eight years ago. This may be hard for people without pets to understand, but Eri was like a daughter to her, and the only real family my mother had. From the time she got up in the morning to the time she went to bed at night, Eri was her constant companion. It was to Eri that she voiced all her thoughts, and the two of them were inseparable. Seeing my mother's grief, I was brought to tears myself, and I will never forget the sight of her bowed, aged back

that day.

That day, my mother ate nothing and spent her time either sleeping or crying. As for Eri, she was barely hanging on. I kept praying the phone wouldn't ring with news of her death.

I couldn't leave my mother alone like this, so I decided to keep my children home from school and stay with her. After returning to Himeji two days later, I began trying to trace the boy who had crashed into my mother's bicycle, relying on what little she remembered: his motorcycle had three wheels and a white box on the back, and was probably used for delivering pizzas. I telephoned every pizza place in Higashi-Sumiyoshi ward and asked for a description of their delivery motorcycles. There were four places with white boxes on their motorbikes, and from these I narrowed it down to D Pizza.

At first, the manager of D said, "We train our staff very thoroughly and require them to report all accidents, even minor ones, so I think there must be some mistake." I insisted nevertheless that he investigate, and this was how we found the culprit. It was already three days after I had begun my search, and six days since the accident. He had not reported it to his boss.

When my mother saw him again, it was January 23, at the police station where he had come in for questioning. The moment she laid eyes on him, she burst into tears and cried, "That's the one!" I was filled with fury when I thought of what this boy had done to my mother and Eri. We confronted him after the police had finished their questioning, and he admitted running away after the accident. We then took him to the vet to see Eri. When he saw her lying there, attached to an oxygen tank, he got down on his knees on the water-splashed floor and bowed his head in apology.

"You have family and friends that you love, yourself!" I said. "How would you feel if this happened to one of them?"

This might just be some dog to you, but to us she's a treasured member of the family. We can't forgive what you've done. Think about why you ran away that day, leaving behind my injured mother and Eri barely breathing, and ask yourself if you're not ashamed as a human being. If you have even an ounce of decency, you'll at least telephone sometimes to find out how they are." But we never heard from the boy again.

The next day, my mother forced her faltering body up and, accompanied by a friend, went to D Pizza to see the manager. He only said, "How's your dog?" My mother was almost speechless with rage at the flippant way he said this, but at the time she went home without making a fuss.

After the accident, my mother visited Eri every day without regard to her own illness. Eri was barely alive. Her eyes were wide open and unmoving, and she was being given oxygen through a tube. After a week, my mother received word from the vet three nights in a row that Eri's heart seemed to have stopped, and to come immediately. During this time, my mother was going to bed fully clothed so she could run to the clinic right away. But every time she arrived at Eri's bedside, Eri's heartbeat would stabilize as soon as my mother called her name. How was she able to sense my mother's presence when she was unconscious and hardly able to breathe? The vet told her it was a miracle.

The doctor and his wife took turns staying up all night with Eri, and thanks to their care she recovered consciousness after two weeks. That tiny 2kg dog, who had hovered at the brink of death for so long, had a tremendous life force. The doctor said Eri would probably never see again, and he didn't know if she would be able to walk. But if her condition remained stable, she would somehow survive. That was on January 29. On February 1, when she was finally able to eat fluid food, she left the clinic. It was 18 days after the accident, and the start of new struggles for my mother and her.

Eri has been home for four months now. My mother spent three of those months visiting the hospital herself, for treatment of her own bruises and Meunier's disease symptoms brought on by emotional stress. As the vet had predicted, Eri is blind, and her eyes remain wide open. They produce no moisture, and dryness causes the eyes to decay, so my mother covers them with gauze, which she wets with water every 30 minutes. Eri can take two or three wobbly steps, but then she falls down. She can no longer bark. She cannot eat on her own, so my mother feeds her using a syringe. She urinates and defecates over herself. She was so weak when she had just returned home that my mother increased her

