

The tale of a girl and her rats

When my niece—we'll call her Eileen—was 3, she decided she wanted a pet rat. Her parents, thinking that she would surely outgrow this atypical idea for a preschooler, told her she had to wait until she was 8. That day came, however. When Eileen turned 8, she reminded her parents of their promise. In August 2011 Eileen's father found himself driving three hours each way with his oldest child to collect two white rats from a breeder in Lancaster, Pa.

I hadn't even known there were rat breeders—or how complicated adding rats to your family could be. It turned out that the rats Eileen and her father picked up were not the right rats (they were female), and the breeder's husband had to make a six-hour round-trip the next day to replace the rats with the correct rats, who were male.



You have to admit he is one of the cutest rats you've ever seen.

Eileen named her new pets Melchisedek (after the rat in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Little Princess*) and Mickey (after the famous mouse). They became members of the family, eating Pirate's Booty and other scraps of food, and lying affectionately on top of each other inside their cage.

Earlier this year my sister Maureen—Eileen's mother—mentioned in passing that the age expectancy for rats was only about two years. I was a little concerned because I, like so many people, know how hard it is to lose a beloved pet.

Then tonight, while Eileen and her family are away from home and visiting with us, they got a call from their rat sitter with bad news. Mickey, the most outgoing of the rat brothers, the one who always ran to greet her and accept treats from her, had died.

Now I admit to being more of a dog person than a rat person. However, I am sad for Eileen, who is missing her pet and worrying that Melchisedek will be lonely without his brother.

Tonight Eileen and her parents and I were trying to distract her by talking about what heaven would be like for rats. Maureen said that she imagined it would be something like the fair in *Charlotte's Web*.

And that did make Eileen smile.

What would you tell a child who is missing her pet?