



Andrea Hoy/Diversions

In Heaven There Are No Flea Collars By Ken DiMaggio

From a distance of about 20 yards it looked like a garden decorated with kitsch-like ornaments. I've seen gardens before with statues of St. Francis of Assisi and ceramic rabbits. But at 10 yards the yellow 3 1/2-foot statue of a pointed-eared German shepherd seemed a little unfriendly for kitsch. The weather was even less friendly. The furious wind kept blowing out my umbrella, making

it look like a whisk broom. The rain was starting to trickle through my whole body like ants. At five yards the kitsch had become the opening of a gothic novel. Small statues of bulldogs, poodles and cats looked at me without blinking. Small crucifixes stood behind them. And because the wind kept blowing out my umbrella I didn't notice the tombstone that I had stepped on. With my umbrella now a safe bubble, I looked down at the hard, smooth surface that refused to mold itself to my foot. As I scraped my foot across the gray granite, I saw the carved inscription, "He was a horse of a dog." I reverently walked on until I saw another inscription that read, "He was a fat cat." I let out a sigh of relief. I had nothing to fear from these animals with epitaphs like, "Twinkle, the song ended but the melody lingers on." I didn't have to worry about Rolling Acres Pet Cemetery, Crematory and Funeral Home being the setting for a Stephen King novel. But the blonde German shepherd was intent upon being a guard dog — even in death.

Blondie, you must've been one hell of a dog when you were alive, because your statue needs to be leashed.

Since 1977, owner Pat Strnot has buried dogs, cats, fish, ducks and guinea pigs in her 35-acre cemetery. In a Sears & Roebuck or J.C. Penney aluminum tool shack that is painted as a barn are six quarter horses. And in the graves of Scrappy or Mister Ming are the remains or bodies of six pet owners.

"Some people request that after they die they be buried with their pets," said Rolling Acres office manager Mary Schallau.

Just as Tom and Jerry couldn't get along in the cartoon, neither do they in death. Dogs and cats are buried separately at Rolling Acres unless a pet owner requests otherwise.

Cats are buried in the Garden of Loyalty, dogs, in the Garden of Peace. But more than half the animals at Rollin Acres are cremated. Cremation is charged by the weight of the animal and costs anywhere from \$45 to \$115. Burying your pet with several others in a group burial costs only \$25. A private burial costs \$95. That does not include a casket, gravestone and statue. Neither is an urn provided with the ashes. Inside the office you can buy a simple urn that looks like an octagon-shaped pin box, or you can buy an urn in the shape of a book with your dog's or cat's name as the title. The sample in the office had the name "Dinkie," painted in gold leaf on its spine.

Caskets were lined and unlined plastic and wood, pillowed and unpillowed. Bronze poodles, terriers and cats sat on the shelf above. Within the tiny sales office was a smaller viewing room where you could spend a few moments alone with your pet. The wall was covered with a 4- by 6-foot tapestry of a dalmation with its mouth locked around the handle of a basket of flowers. Below the tapestry is a green-curtained dresser. Two white angel lamps sit on top. One angel has his hands clasped in prayer, the other is playing a guitar, and the walls of this room are painted a creamy baby blue. You can even have your pet embalmed, but Schallau said that few pet owners choose to do so.

Strnot became interested in starting a pet cemetery after she could find no suitable place to bury her son's dog. The Humane Society told her that her dog could be cremated with a group of other dogs. She would not be able to retain her dog's ashes.

As far as the Bible tells us, Jesus didn't have a dog. If he did, would it have "trotted behind, and followed him right to the cross?"

That is what the last line of a poem that is sometimes read at burial services at Rolling Acres implies.

"I wonder if Christ had a little black dog/all curley and wooly like mine. . . I'm sure if he had, that little black dog/knew right from the first he was God!"

At the Nebraska State Fair where Strnot and Schallau displayed an animal casket, fairgoers laughed and sneered. But is it just the idea of burying pets that we're laughing at? What's going to happen to our dog or cat at 15 or 20 is going to happen to us at 60 or 70. But we're not being ridiculous when we ask for a headstone with our name engraved upon it when we die. We're not being ridiculous when we demand that the living remember us with flowers and memorial services. We're not being ridiculous when we ask that the cemeteries we lie in be kept up and have visitors as often as possible. We're not ridiculous when we expect some kind of God or afterlife to receive us after we die.

In the movie "Citizen Kane," a great man asks for his sled on his deathbed. Forget about his newspaper empire, Charles Foster Kane wants his tiny sled "Rosebud." And when we look at 1986 America, what is it but an empire of banks, industries and missiles? But how refreshing it is to know that inside of this giant is a shy creature who weeps for his or her dead puppy. In spite of its capitalism and nuclear arsenal, America is human. In spite of their love of money and success, Americans can still feel grief and pain and know what it is to be human.

"And sometimes," Schallau said, "People will bury their pets with their favorite toy, blanket — or with a picture of their loved ones."

