

James Landis

Release

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It was Thursday. It was the kind of almost-spring day that is cloudy and overcast until late afternoon when the grey moves on, leaving only billowy white clouds and the sharp bright sun warming your skin despite the chill breeze. I stayed in bed until almost noon, buried under two blankets and a comforter, when the phone finally rang. I was prepared for the worst.

“James? I have some really bad news,” my mom began quickly, forcing the words through her tears. “Dr. Scott’s office just called. Jenny’s kidneys have both failed.” I listened dutifully as she sniffed through the list of statistics determined by the twenty-four hour blood test. Each one was way off the normal scale, but I was hardly surprised. She hadn’t eaten anything for more than a week, and she couldn’t even drink from her water dish anymore. “I made us an appointment for 5:45 today so you should spend the rest of the day with her and look at the photo albums and just remember all the good times you spent together,” my mom finished.

I hung up the phone and went downstairs to the basement where Boots and Jenny were confined so they wouldn’t mess up the new carpet. The cold green tile floor spiked the warmth from the soles of my bare feet as I crossed the low-ceilinged room to the plastic-covered couch with the old white bed sheet draped across it. It was their favorite place to sleep because the pillows underneath had shifted to form cozy valleys that they could curl up in. Jenny always chose the smaller dip on the left side of the oversize couch because her tiny body fit better, but today Boots had curled up beside her with his heavy paw draped across her bony neck. I hadn’t seen him do this since they were kittens. I sat down on the old stained coffee table in front of the couch and watched them until the cold air raised goosebumps on my bare skin.

As I carefully lifted her out from under him to carry her up the stairs back to the warm futon in the study, I felt like I was stealing her from him. But he had spent all night with her. I set

her down gently on the black cotton blanket that was spread unevenly on the unmade bed. Before the black cats were confined to the basement I always used to find her at the foot of my bed curled up on that blanket every morning, though I fell asleep with her at my side. I slipped back under the covers and cradled her with my left arm, stroking the side of her head with my right hand. The bony ridges of her spine now showed along her back, especially beneath the balding spot where she used to pull out her fur because of a hormonal imbalance, but she still rubbed her head on my hand with the same affection that she always had.

The phone rang again; this time my step-dad was on the other end. “Has your brother come home for lunch yet?” he asked. No, he stayed at school for lunch. “Well, when he gets home, can you make sure he knows about the appointment? He should be there, too.” I agreed. “Have you taken her outside yet today? Maybe you could set her out in the catnip patch for a while.” Yeah, I could do that. I hung up the phone and picked her up off the furry blanket. She meowed in protest. Lately her meowing sounded more normal; it used to be squeaky and impotent. I carried her out through the garage into the fenced backyard and set her down in the yellow-green grass that was just beginning to grow again. I watched her stumble around the yard for a while, then I let Boots out, too, because he loved to be outside and I didn’t want Jenny to be alone in the yard while I took a shower.

I heard the bells on the front door handle and the jingle of keys as I got dressed after my shower. I thought it was my brother, but it was my step-dad who had come home for lunch. I walked into the kitchen and nodded silently when he asked if Jenny was outside. I took a couple of slices of raisin bread out to the backyard and he joined me shortly with a paper plate of humus and a pile of crackers. We watched as Boots jumped on top of the woodpile under the tree in the middle of the yard. He batted at a stick protruding from the pile until he lost balance and jumped gracefully to the ground. We laughed uncomfortably. Jenny sat by the corner of the brick house where the cold wind wasn’t blowing quite as hard. The sun was still hidden in the clouds, and her

fur puffed up to hide the frail contours of her body. My step-dad brought out an old blanket for her to sit on, and she accepted it obligingly.

I waited until my step-dad had returned to work to bring her back in the house. She was happier outside in the fresh air, but she was shivering from the cold that her body no longer had any protection against. I sat down on the couch and turned on the TV, holding her in a blanket in my lap. I could look at the albums later, when it wouldn't be so hard to think about her being gone. The hours passed quickly, though every time I looked at the clock I couldn't help but count them in terms of the time she had left.

She didn't sit with me the whole time. She kept jumping down onto the floor and sitting underneath the coffee table, probably too weak to go much farther. She must have been weary of the constant attention from the past few weeks, since she first stopped eating. She had improved the first week after the cortisone shots, but we couldn't keep them up forever. Soon she would be in pain from the effect of her failed kidneys and I hoped the appointment would be soon enough to prevent her from suffering.

My mom got home at 4:45. She suggested that we dig her grave before we left, so we wouldn't have to do it later. As I dug in the soft earth by the back fence, she carried Jenny around the yard one last time. The sun was out now; it must have appeared while I watched TV all afternoon to avoid thinking about that evening. After every few shovels full of dirt, I stopped to watch Jenny as she sniffed the air or watched the neighbor's cat through the slats in the wood fence that she was probably thin enough to fit through. It hurt to watch her for long, though, and soon I would have to go back to digging to concentrate on something else.

By the time we were ready to leave for the vet, I couldn't even look at her without choking up, and sat in the front seat of the van with the pet carrier in my lap, the metal mesh door facing toward the window so I couldn't see inside. We pulled out of the driveway and I focused my eyes and attention on anything I could, but I still knew this would be the last time she would

ever see the house.

We had chosen to take her to the vet that Boots and Jenny had seen since they were kittens when I was eight years old. His office was all the way on the north side of town, where we used to live. The drive from south of town was horribly long. Jenny sat quietly in the tiny cage for about ten minutes before she started to howl. I couldn't stand it. I deliberately opened the cage door and let her out into my lap, putting the carrier in the back seat. I didn't want her spending the last hour of her life locked in the tiny carrier.

With a renewed strength, she struggled against me to look out the window, and finally settled to have her paws resting on the side of the door as I held her in my arms. I stroked her fur slowly and mechanically the rest of the trip as I continued to repress the thought of losing her. The excruciatingly long trip halted to a stop in the downtown traffic while emergency vehicles raced by. We were only halfway there. Five or six piercing sirens raced past the van window, but Jenny's ears didn't flatten as I expected them to. Perhaps she had gone deaf while I was away at school, too. I held her close to me as the last of the flashing lights passed us and the long line of traffic started to move again.

The rest of the trip was silent. Nothing seemed familiar from the day before when we had taken her for the blood sample that they needed to test. I was glad I didn't remember, so that with the approach of each new intersection I could be relieved when the sign outside his office was nowhere in sight. Not yet, Jenny, I thought to myself. The sun was low in the trees now, and as it flashed between the branches as we passed them Jenny's fur reflected golden brown, not its usual black. We reached the vet as I watched the flickering shadows on her tiny back. I had to squint despite my sunglasses as we turned into the sun onto the gravel driveway outside the small office converted from one of the one-story brick ranch houses like the ones that surrounded it.

I took a deep breath. Here we are, Jenny. I opened the door of the van with a firm grip on her with my right arm so she wouldn't jump out of my arms and run out into the street. I thought

of the time when I was younger that I took her across the street to talk to someone and she jumped out of my arms and ran terrified out in front of a car to get back to our house, the heavy wheels stopping just short of her tiny head as they squealed to a halt. I was shivering now, as I had then from the sudden rush of adrenaline. I didn't want her to go like that. I was almost to the door as she meowed for the last time. I had held back the tears all day, and as I thought about this the last time she would smell fresh air, the floodgates broke open. I hurried to open the glass door so I could sit down on the wooden benches in the open waiting room. I was glad it was empty except for an old woman on the end of the bench. She watched me understandingly as I sat hunched over on the bench, holding Jenny tightly, kissing her on the head. My mom and my step-dad soon came and sat on either side of me. Tears pooled on my skin where my sunglasses met my face.

Tissues were found and the bill was paid so we could leave as soon as it was over. I felt better when the tears slowed, and we were ushered to room one, which is usually the dog room. We spread out our brown towel on the cold metal table in the middle of the tiny room, and set Jenny gently down on it. We stroked her fur as we waited for the vet. She did not struggle to jump down from the high bench. She was more ready than we were. Assistants appeared periodically with forms to be filled out, then disappeared silently with quick glances at us. Finally, the vet appeared with a single needle and an assistant with a piece of latex. We were directed to the places that we could stand to hold her where we wouldn't interfere with the procedure. I stood by her head with my mom behind my left shoulder and the vet to my left. My step-dad was behind me on the right and the assistant wound the piece of latex around Jenny's right leg as she held her still. The vet rubbed the isopropyl alcohol on the black fur of her leg, matting it down and revealing the bony contours beneath.

Jenny's eyes were wide with fear and discomfort, her ears pointed backwards. I had expected to be able to hold her and make her comfortable while the vet gave her the shot, but

there she was, one front leg held out awkwardly as the needle slid silently in, the rest of her body contorted as the assistant held her still on the cold metal table. I stroked the fur under her chin, trying not to watch as the lethal dose was squeezed from the needle. The pentobarbital sped through her veins, igniting synapses like tinder. Before I knew what had happened she lay limp on her side on the towel, and the vet and assistant disappeared silently from the room. I stroked her black fur, the still-warm white patch of fur on her belly, and closed the lids on her scared green eyes. My mom wrapped the white sheet around her body, leaving only the soft little white front paws and her head exposed.

“Goodbye, Jenny...” she said.