

SHAWN CLAWS KITTY

Upright Hallmark cards and lasagna-stained paper plates cluttered Mom's kitchen table. I pulled up the sleeve of Dad's old gray robe, and then let it fall back upon my arm. Bare feet tapped cold white-and-gold linoleum.

Less than four hours ago, the last guest had left, asking if we needed anything. I had replied, as I had with all the requests, that we were fine.

The cat watched me. Sitting on his haunches, his grey-and black striped back brushing against the patio sliding door curtain, he blinked his eyes. Then blinked again.

I looked down at the cat. "How you holding up, Shawn?" I said.

"Mrrmpp," Shawn replied.

The clock struck five times in the living room. Neither Shawn nor I stirred.

I lifted my coffee cup from atop a yellow piece of paper, creased at an odd angle. A brown pale coffee ring encircled my law professor's condolences. My crumpled black suit jacket remained draped over the kitchen chair on my left. I reached over and fingered the fading white carnation in the lapel.

"Shit." Then, I said it again. Shawn looked at me with a cocked head.

"Yrrrilll," he said. Softly, as if not to wake up Dad.

Outside, somewhere beyond the front door, a car horn beeped. Shawn turned his head to the sound, then turned back to me. The rest of his body did not move.

I closed my eyelids, and then reopened them. The scene was the same.

I rubbed my palms together, old calluses tugging at my stubble. Calluses earned from re-shingling the roof last summer. During that long holiday weekend of roof repair, Shawn prowled below us, sometimes glaring, sometimes licking fur with an irritated tongue. He did not go back up on the roof for weeks afterwards.

Overhead, a board creaked. Shawn looked up with wide eyes. We heard the sound of unpadded feet, followed by the sound of a bathroom door opening and closing.

Doctor Jensen had cautioned me and my sister that Mom's medication might side-effect in fitful sleep.

I had walked Doctor Jensen out to his Camry last night. Dad's poker buddy for four decades had been the very first to arrive, the very last to leave. The chill of October misted our breath. Shawn trotted out with us. Perhaps he hoped we knew where Dad was hiding.

"That's a good mouser," Doc said to Shawn. He always said that, although Shawn never caught a mouse. The doctor knelt down slowly on one knee to scratch the cat's ears. Shawn answered him with an audible purr. Doc laughed, then fell silent for a long moment.

"Your father loved this old cat," he said, with a sad inflection on the last syllable. He stroked Shawn's shanks with a gentle touch. I helped Doc rise up.

"You added years to John's life, do you know that, Shawn Claws Kitty?"

Shawn replied, "Mmrrill."

Doc still looked down at Shawn as he said, “He named him after that Olympic skier. I always thought that clever.” I said I did, too.

Technically, Shawn belonged to Mom. He had been a last minute additional Mother’s Day present, the last kitten rescued from deep within a battered Del Monte cardboard box outside Albertson’s. Mom took to him like nails on a chalkboard. By default, it fell to Dad to feed Shawn and to clean his litter box. He performed those tasks to Shawn’s satisfaction for almost fourteen years.

I raised the coffee cup to my lips but did not drink. My fingers lightly traced the cup’s dishwasher-faded outline of a cat skiing off a cliff. Dad had purchased the cup years ago for thirty cents at a garage sale over on Armstrong Street. Something about it made him laugh and laugh. Ann and I rolled our eyes and pretended he was not our father. Dad had laughed at that, too.

The clock struck the quarter hour. Upstairs, Mom went back to bed.

Looking at me, Shawn yawned.

“Sleepy, cat?” I asked. Shawn answered back with a tired meow.

My breath came in short gulps. I sat at the table, eyes closed.

The *thump* of the morning *Chronicle* on the front porch signaled Shawn to begin his morning routine. With a labored effort, Shawn rose to his four paws and moved toward the hallway. He peered around the corner up at the stairs.

“No one there, Shawn.”

“Yyyrr.” He didn’t look back at me,

Shawn quivered, waiting to begin his trot alongside Dad when he would pick up the paper, scolding Dad for some long-remembered cat infractions. He would then escort

my father upstairs as Dad shaved, then come back down as Dad read the paper and ate his Shredded Wheat. Shawn would follow Dad's every motions with brown scrutinizing eyes, as if watching the conductor of some insightful sonata.

"Not today, puss, puss," I said. Shawn did not turn around. From his profile, I saw his jaws work, making some anxious silent sound.

I looked down at the cup in my hands. My hands ignored the handle, fingers interlaced together like a curved prayer. Dad had held this very cup the very same way as I guiltily had retrieved his half-empty pack of Marlboros from my tree house. He held it after my ninth inning strikeout in Little League playoffs. And after I had told him that my heart had been broken for the hardest time.

Shawn had been there, too. He had offered his soft meows, his gentle presence.

Now, as early sunlight crept, Shawn sat down, all his attention focused on the hallway. He shook his graying fur and panted.

Directly above his head, on the wall that held a twenty-fifth anniversary photo frame, a long-tailed cat perched itself on the upper left-hand corner of a Pismo Beach gift shop light switch. He stared intently down at a robin in a birdbath in the lower right-hand corner. The faded porcelain was cracked in three places.

To no one, Shawn murmured, "Yyyrrilimm."

I stared into my nearly-empty coffee cup. The coffeemaker had three refills left to give. Doctor Jensen had lectured Dad for years on the effects of caffeine on weakened hearts. Dad had begrudgingly given up coffee but drank it again after his last checkup.

Shawn looked back over to me, his face cat-impassive but his posture puzzled. I smiled down at him, clucking my tongue.

“Mmmrpp.”

“Don’t think he’s coming down,” I said, my voice straining to pronounce the final word. Shawn looked back up at me, eyes rheumy. I looked down with eyes moist.

After a second, Shawn got up slowly and walked over to my chair. Staring at me, he waited until I reached down and scratched him behind his ears.

“Yrrpp,” he said without prompting.

When I stopped, Shawn returned to his original station and gave his gaze to the hallway, alert for footsteps. I stayed where I was, holding a cup. Sitting quietly with Shawn. Marking his vigil. Listening for Dad.

The clock stuck the half hour. We listened to that, too.

Shawn Claws Kitty

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A casino pit boss turned postal clerk, Riley is a transplanted urban dweller now living amidst the mountains and waters of South Lake Tahoe. He has performed in over seventy plays and helped found an Improvisational Comedy Troupe, which has had a small but committed following for over fourteen years. He's happily married and happily enjoying grandfatherhood. Much too recently and much too suddenly, Riley lost a cherished pet, which helped inspire "Shawn Claws Kitty."