

Midnight and the Heart of Darkness

To tell the truth, I was sadder when we put down our cat Daphne than when my wife finally died several weeks later. My wife knew her death was drawing closer, a looming certainty. She knew there was no going back. Onward to the grave was her only option, her only escape from the cage of sickness and loss her life had become. She was ready, and she even had some hope for what lies beyond.

But how do you explain suffering and death to a cat? A cat you've loved and cared for since she was a bone-thin stray, a starving kitten? You can't. You just watch the needle go in and the lights go out and you say "Sorry, girl," while the vet tries to tell you there's nothing to be sorry about.

So now it was just Carlo and me. Carlo, Daphne's "big brother." I could tell he missed her too. Where Daphne had been shaggy, ginger, and playful, Carlo was smooth and gray and placid, but they'd been great friends.

Before the cancer knocked her down, my wife had been working on a replacement for Daphne. She'd been feeding a little neighborhood stray she called Midnight, trying to make friends with her. After my wife died, I kept setting Midnight's food out on the front porch. Petite and sleek and pitch black, Midnight watched from a distance with suspicious green eyes. Only when I was safely back in the house would she dash for her kitty kibble.

Day by day, little by little, I'd been making progress. Midnight waited a little closer for her food, scurried to her dish a little sooner after I closed the door. Carlo watched from the picture window, his tail slow-twitching. I imagine he wanted to meet Midnight, too, but he wasn't saying. As Midnight grew to trust me, I felt closer to my departed wife. I was finishing the job she started.

Then Midnight vanished. She had disappeared before, shying away from any commotion around the house. Like when the tree guys cleared the dead limbs from the black ash in the front yard, or the carpet cleaners snaked their howling hoses in through the front door. This time, I figured it was the movers that ran her off.

With just Carlo and me, the house had grown too big and empty. I found a small condo a mile away that would take all three of us: Carlo, me, and—I'd hoped—Midnight.

But I suppose the movers had been too much for Midnight, as they tramped in and out through the propped-open door, wheeling stacks of boxes out to the van. Some of the boxes went to the new condo with me and Carlo, and some to a storage unit I'd rented until I could figure out what to do with a lifetime of scraps and fragments, most of them my wife's.

So we moved without Midnight. But I kept her supplies handy: her food and water bowls with the kitty silhouettes on the sides, and the soft rubber mat she'd crouched on while she ate. I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe that some instinct would lead her to my new doorstep—

something corny like that. Sure, maybe my wife's spirit would guide Midnight to me and Carlo as a final goodbye from the Great Beyond.

Right.

Of course Midnight didn't show up. I put fresh food out on my new porch for a couple of days, and Carlo sat in the window and watched, but the food remained untouched. I rolled up the rubber mat and tossed the bowls under the sink.

I closed the blinds.

Carlo and I watched a lot of TV in the dark. I slept when I got sleepy, ate when I got hungry, and kept the blinds down.

Daphne was gone. My wife was gone. Midnight was gone.

But of course the story doesn't end here.

###

Three days later, as I was fixing lunch for me and Carlo—sardines and saltines, with a beer for me and a saucer of milk for Carlo—I got a call from the young guy who covers the front desk at the storage place. He said his name was Eric, and he needed me to bring my key. In the last two days, a couple of customers reported hearing scratching sounds coming from my unit, which he had at first ignored. But this morning, when he made his early rounds, he heard something himself. Like a baby crying, almost. He thought some kind of animal might be in there. A raccoon or a possum. Maybe a bird.

Or a cat.

I took Carlo with me.

The kid—Eric—was carrying a butterfly net over his shoulder. I opened the padlock and slipped it from the hasp.

Eric slid the door up, and held his net at arm's length.

The noonday sun didn't penetrate the gloom of the unit's interior. Nothing moved. Then we heard a mewling. Weak. Fading.

Carlo jumped from my arms and ran straight to a dark corner. He vocalized something short and sharp.

"Your cat better be careful," Eric said. "Could be a wild animal." He raised the butterfly net a little higher. "With rabies!"

"He'll be all right."

Midnight stepped out of the shadows, her head low, her left eye nearly closed, her tongue showing between her teeth.

Carlo strolled back to me with his tail straight up.

After a beat, Midnight followed, her shoulder blades rolling under her fur. When I picked her up, she closed her eyes.

"Damn," Eric said. "How long's she been in here without food or water?"

"Too long," I said.

We locked up the unit, and Carlo and I took Midnight home.

###

I found a cage for Midnight and padded it with an old blanket. I laid her down inside and latched the door so she couldn't run off and hide, if she found the strength. Then I opened the blinds. Midnight had barely survived living in the dark. It was time to let the light in.

I called the vet's office and they agreed to get me in right away, so I left Carlo at home and loaded the cage into the car.

The vet examined her and wanted to keep her overnight for intravenous hydration, so I left her and went up front to finish the paperwork.

The receptionist asked, “What’s your cat’s name?”

“Midni—” I said. “No. Scratch that.” Midnight is the heart of darkness. I was finished with darkness for a while.

“Her name is . . . her name is Gwen,” I said. I decided to call her Gwen.

It was my wife’s name. I realized I hadn’t spoken her name since she died.

Gwen.

I turned and walked away before the receptionist could see me crying.