

Jenny

When Ian was reborn as a mouse—his third life—he had an insane craving for rice. Sometimes it was instant ramen, and he would chew through the plastic just to get a nibble of the crunchy noodles. The smell of peanut butter was like a drug. Never cheese though, strangely enough; he was never particularly attracted to the mousetraps that had a perfect cube of cheddar, thank god. Granted, his eventual courage to forage in the pantry got him the attention of the girl he loved, but not exactly the type he wanted.

A thwack-thwack-thwack of a broom and Jenny's hysterical screaming came again from behind him. She was blindly waving the broom around, hitting the counter and pantry, and knocking Tupperware off the shelves. The first few times he had been chased down he couldn't quite get used to running on four feet, and his hind legs kept catapulting his body into a somersault. He got whacked quite a bit then, and it hurt like a mother. He sprinted away, sliding across the linoleum floor of the kitchen, and squeezed himself between the wall and the fridge. Short, rapid breaths worked his aching lungs. The broom attempted to stick itself in and out a couple times. After a minute, he heard a frustrated sigh and slippers clapping away.

His stomach ached, and when he looked down at himself he noticed that he was gaunter than he remembered. His fur was matted and felt exhausted from that short run. Perhaps he—no, his mouse body—was dying. It hadn't even been 7 months and he was dying again.

He was in a coma from a car crash, listed as an organ donor on his license. It was tragic, really. He wasn't drunk, and he had done everything right. In fact, he had just gotten flowers for Jenny. Chrysanthemums. The driver who had hit him ran a red light and T-boned him in the intersection.

Jenny was there with his parents when he was to be taken off of life support. It saddened him, looking back, that this was her last memory of him.

She walked up to his hospital bed and took his hand in hers. She leaned down to his ear, voice shaking. “You didn’t deserve this,” she whispered. “Come back to me, okay?”

He heard her. Promised. As he drifted off to sleep, all he could think about were her gentle blue eyes.

When he woke, he was a helpless puppy.

When Ash had named him Ian, he felt intensely grateful that she had somehow known. Maybe she had seen it in his eyes. It was rather poetic. (Of course, he wouldn’t respond to any other name. It took them quite a while, and by the end all Ash could think was that she was insane for talking to a dog for so long, just to “find out” its “real name.” What was she thinking?)

He was a small shih tzu, and Ash had adopted him from the pound. He had first looked warily at Ash’s lean tattooed arms and her perfectly coiffed hair, cropped short. She was no Jenny. He remembered Jenny’s sleek arms in the air, glowing as she stretched in the morning; her perfect curls plastered to her back after a shower; the way her laugh seemed to warm the surrounding air. When Ash laughed, it was sharp and unceremoniously shook her whole body. But Ash treated him gently and gave him all the attention that she could. She gave him real meat from her own meals, and she let him sleep in her bed. He grew to love her as an owner.

But try as he might, he couldn’t understand why he was reborn. He tried many different ways to let go. Meditation was impossible; his mind was never empty, getting distracted far too easily. He tried to fully accept that he was supposed to be dead. Perhaps this was purgatory, and he was being tested. Sometimes he laid on his back hoping that he would simply pass, and when

he was caught doing this on multiple occasions, Ash brought him to the vet. There was nothing—as of yet—wrong with him. Being reanimated as a dog, he hoped he wouldn't suddenly crave human flesh and wreak havoc as a tiny zombie puppy.

He tried to forget about Jenny. He was plenty distracted during the day. His new life had its own exciting moments, which, to be fair, was almost every waking moment to his easily excitable dog brain.

But at night, he had dreams of himself as a human, with her again. They were happy together in the dreams, but he couldn't call them anything but nightmares.

“We're going to see my friend, Ian,” Ash said as she put on his leash. “A very good friend of mine. She's very excited to meet you. Oh, yes she is.” She very rarely made a baby voice, but Ian liked it and barked. She smiled and kissed his head. She put on his leash, and they left the house jogging.

When they got to the park, Ash slowed down and Ian trotted lightly. He appreciated nature in a way that he never did as a human. He could chase a butterfly for hours, wondering at how it flew. He loved how all the colors looked different through his dog eyes. And the grass just smelled *so good*. Every time he went outside was just as fascinating as the first.

“Look, there she is!” Ian jerked his head up.

When he saw the familiar swish of hair, he couldn't control himself. Jenny? His heart leaped up and sank when he weighed the possibilities. He had already given up on finding her. But still he began sprinting towards her, and his leash slipped through Ash's fingers in surprise. When Ash caught up, Ian was alternating between jumping on Jenny, and humping her leg.

“I’m so sorry, he’s not usually like this,” Ash said, panting. She picked up the leash and gently pulled on it a few times, but Ian simply shook it off and kept at it. “He’s usually a very reserved dog, I swear. I’m also not sure how he knew it was you, I swear I’m not stealing your clothes or anything weird.” She stood to the side, slightly mortified.

“It’s fine, Ash.” Jenny laughed it off, and Ash smiled weakly. Ian was delighted when she scratched his neck and played with his ears. He barked happily and his tail thumped the ground audibly when he sat back. She ruffled the fur on his neck. “What’s your name, cutie?” she cooed.

“This,” Ash squatted next to Jenny, “is Ian.”

Jenny stiffened, and Ian’s ears perked up when she stopped scratching him. They looked into each other’s eyes. Those electrifying blue eyes. *Can she see me?*

But she looked away. She covered her mouth, and stayed motionless for a while. Ian whined, but she didn’t respond. Ash looked at her, and picked Ian up. “Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing, I’m fine.” She stood up, and scratched behind Ian’s ears again.

“So, we still on for coffee Saturday?” Ash said suddenly.

Jenny’s eyes lit up and a light flush rose to her cheeks. She bit her lip. “At two, right?”

“Yeah.” Ash smiled.

Ian turned to Ash, tongue out. Jenny was her good friend? Would he get to see Jenny all the time? He began licking Ash’s face all over, and she snorted and held his squirming body out at arm’s length to avoid his slobber. Jenny laughed. This was probably the most exciting moment of his life—though he had to admit, the Snausages that he was awarded for breakfast just that morning were a close second.

For the next few months, Ash stayed over with Jenny on some nights, and other nights, if she was too busy, brought Ian over to keep her company.

Ian knew by now the extent of their “friendship.” He sulked for a couple of days when he first connected the dots, his logical and rational thought a little less sharp than before as a dog. He chewed on Ash’s favorite pair of shoes, and ran off with one of them when he got sorely reprimanded. But it was hard for him to keep a grudge, no matter how hard he tried to. Perhaps it was because he was more forgiving and optimistic by nature now, but in the end he didn’t mind. He was a dog, and they were together, and he was happy for them. He was happy to spend time with both Ash and Jenny.

But one night, he woke to see Jenny crying, the room dark and the TV casting a dull light over her skin, turning her a faded blue. He trotted over to her, and hopped onto the sofa and put his head in her lap. She sniffled and hiccupped, and they sat in silence together.

She gently laid her hand on his head, and ran her fingers through his fur. It felt extremely comfortable, and he began drifting to sleep.

“I was just starting to let you go,” she murmured.

Me, too.

He whined in fear whenever Ash and Jenny yelled at each other. It started as a simple argument, as it always did, but this time was worse than the others. Ash ended up being the only one yelling, while Jenny simply sat down and cried uncontrollably. Then, he heard his name.

“My dog? What does my dog have anything to do with this?”

“Not your dog. *Ian*,” she sobbed. She drew her knees to her chest and buried her head in them. His ears perked up. Jenny was saying his name, and not as a dog, but as a person. She never told Ash about him until now.

Ian hesitantly nudged Jenny’s ankle, and she pushed him away with her foot. He tried again, but this time she suddenly stood up, and Ian jumped back. “Stop!” she yelled, and Ian scooted backwards and ran towards Ash, head down and whimpering.

Ash picked Ian up, and he yelped. She yanked open the front door. Ian became agitated, even as Ash stroked his head, murmuring calming things.

“I miss Ian,” Jenny wailed from behind.

He didn’t know what possessed him. He was upset at both Ash and Jenny. Everything would be resolved if they just listened to each other! Ian jumped out of Ash’s arms. He ran into the street.

It happened so fast that he didn’t even feel it. He heard a yell, and then two screams before he blacked out.

While he knew that most mice scavenged during the night, he always scavenged in broad daylight. He knew himself. He knew that he was trying to get Jenny’s attention from the very beginning, no matter what it meant for him. Getting hit by a broom? If that was her only contact with him, fine. Thought of as disgusting vermin? Well, that was to be expected. He knew that she would never realize that it was him.

And as planned, he had more run-ins with her. In addition, because she avoided dealing with pests if she could, he knew exactly who she had over all the time. In the beginning, it was someone he didn’t recognize, sometimes a boy, sometimes a girl, but never long-term. However,

this always ended up with more and more mousetraps being set up whenever she ended up alone again. He began to see traps with provolone, pepper jack, bleu cheese. Jenny was getting fancy in her schemes to kill him.

He was relieved when he saw Ash again, to the point that he got hit twice just to look at them longer, to see them happy again. He was glad that they made up.

But soon, traps littered the entrance to every dark corner. It was always a worry that he would stumble into one while he was running frantically away from her broom. He began scavenging when she was out of the house, or sleeping.

One evening, he snuck into Jenny's room, and hid under her bed. He heard her make promises to herself that night. Forget about him. Forget about him. He wasn't angry with her at all. He wanted to forget, too.

He soon found that he couldn't see too well in the dark.

When his mouse body turned nine months old, he ran into a mousetrap. He was full of regrets. He didn't even like American cheese as a human. He could've at least died on some expensive Gouda.

Now he lived in days, rather than years. He crept on the windowsill as a house fly, watching the sun rise and coffee being made. He watched Jenny and Ash eat lunch, while he sat on a banana. Then, he got caught in a web in the doorway to their room and watched them fall asleep as he flailed halfheartedly.

In the morning, he turned into a mosquito. Once out of the larval stage, he entered the bedroom, and saw Ash with her arm around Jenny, multiplied hundredfold in his lenses. He sucked

their blood while they slept. Jenny woke with ten bites all over her body, and smacked him on the eleventh.

Ian found himself floating as a microbe, first in the air, then to the gut to the villi to the bloodstream, and he knew it was her. The gentle stream of molecules, bouncing off moving through him going in and out by gradients. His cellular machinery churning out proteins and fats. The ripples and shuddering of Brownian motion and diffusion within and outside him.

The minutes felt like hours, and hours like days. But inevitably, he underwent apoptosis. Her immune system rejected him, engulfed by a macrophage. Membrane lysed, internal contents released into her blood. Became cellular waste inside of Jenny, to be cleaned up, traces gone within the hour.

Then, nothing.