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English 391AD

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The Main Street Memory

We are sitting in the car, just picked up from daycare. Only the girls in the family are present, my dad still on his commute home during this time of day. Mom asks her usual questions—"How was school? Did you learn anything new?" We give our usual answers—"it was ok," "I guess so." Mom continues to try and coax real responses from us, but from the front seat with her eyes on the road, this is a hopeless endeavor.

The car is a big red Ford Windstar, a minivan that I am too young to be embarrassed by or have any disdain for. It is our family's car, and the carpeted seats and floor are testament to that. Bits of PopTart and granola and a whole assortment of unidentified snack food litter the floor like debris from the explosion that is our lives, gathering in creases and corners and cups. This is the way cars are, when people have two young daughters and both work forty-hour weeks. Sticky surfaces abound, dirt accumulates in ways that are irreversible, and the car is forever marred.

We don't talk much. We would, if things were normal. But they aren't, and today Mom accepts defeat and stops trying to start a conversation and just drives and probably thinks too much, and my sister and I look out our windows at the houses and trees we pass by every day, multiple times a day. We're thinking too, of course. The car would be deafeningly loud if only we could hear each other's thoughts.

I am in the back seat on the passenger side, where I always sit. It is the better side because it is the one with the automatic sliding door; you just push the button and it closes for you. My sister should probably have it because she's younger and I'm almost strong enough to close the door on my own, but I'm the oldest and sometimes that is actually a good thing.

My mom's cell phone rings, a cheesy polyphonic default tone. She has a flip phone with a sparkly purple case on it, the kind of phone that has an antenna you can extend, that comes with Snake, the best mobile game ever invented, installed on it.

I'm not listening very closely; she's using her work voice, not the one she talks to anyone in our family with, so I don't really care. We're going through the center of town at this point, and from my side of the car I can see the library and then the church where daycare used to be when I was much younger. In those days we had recess in the little playground between the two buildings, and when the church bells tolled on the hour all the kids shouted, "One! Two! Three!" and on and on depending on the time of day. We were proud to be able to tell the time in this way, even if we couldn't yet read an analog clock and time didn't really have much meaning to us outside of 'naptime' and 'snack time.'

"Oh."

A single syllable from my mom and I turn away from the window, my attention back on her. I know her voice better than anyone's, and this is not a typical 'oh.' This is something significant, something entirely unrelated to work and, most terrifyingly, something *bad*.

The car begins to slow down, and it is as though the entire world is dragging to a halt. My ears strain to distinguish words from the tinny noise coming through Mom's cellphone. It's a

hopeless endeavor—I can't hear anything over the voice in my head that is fervently hoping, *Don't be the vet, don't be the vet.*

Mom pulls over beside a fancy little boutique, the kind with crazy prices and pretty things in the window designed to capture the attention and admiration of the town's snobbish stay at home moms and entice them inside. The place changes hands and names every few years or so, and we are the only ones parked out front.

"There was nothing you could do?"

It's such a jarring thing to hear that I immediately turn to my sister. She's younger than me by just over two years, but she understands the meaning behind the words just as much as I do. Our expressions are mirrors of one another, and I know her heart is beating just as fast as mine. Mom has *never* pulled over to take a call. This is unprecedented. I want to act like I don't know what's going on, but can't.

"Okay. I understand. Thank you… Ok. Goodbye."

She slaps the phone shut and the world races back to life around us. A big truck drives by with a roar, leaving us shaking and rattling in its wake. Mom doesn't turn around, her hand dropping to her side.

I glance at my sister and she doesn't return the look but instead stares at the back of Mom's chair with a deep frown on her face. I can't see mom's expression; I don't want to. I don't know why I speak up, why I prompt her to tell me what I already know. "Mom?" My voice is tight and my hands are shaking slightly in a way I can't control. A sick feeling settles in my stomach at the same time as I feel a prickling sensation at the back of my eyes.

"Rajah—"

It doesn't take more than that to push me to tears—salty sadness that trembles down my cheeks in silent streaks.

"He was very sick. He passed away this afternoon."

My sister starts to cry, and my mom turns around to hold her hand. She's crying too. The three of us cry in the car, awkwardly twisting and leaning to touch one another. This is not the place to learn this information, at this stupid store with its fairy lights and hanging stars, with cars racing past us.

"He was really sick," Mom says again, an explanation of the inexplicable, a justification of the unjust.

He was a bad cat, I find myself thinking. *He was really bad*. Which he was, by typical standards. He peed on furniture, on carpets, on clothes and comforters. He scratched up couches and door frames. Rajah was a terror, a homeowner's worst nightmare.

Asserting his badness doesn't help the ache go away, though, no matter how much I want it to. If he'd *deserved* it, I could stop crying. But the truth, the real truth that I'd been holding onto ever since Dad had talked about taking him back to the breeder because he couldn't deal with it anymore was that my cat was *good*.

He slept in my bed, not just at my feet but cuddled in my arms like a teddy bear. He loved to play with toys and chase fake mice across the room, bringing them back to me like a puppy so I could throw them again. He was soft and beautiful and expressive, and we'd known there was something not right with him for a long time because sometimes he would run in circles and not be able to stop until you held him still and pet him and calmed him down, and I loved him—not

‘anyway,’ as though a cat with behavioral issues was less worthy of love than one without. I just loved him so, so much.

“It’s not fair,” I whimper, finally speaking for the first time since telling Mom that I hadn’t really learned anything in school.

Later I will learn that there is more unfairness in his death than a good cat dying much younger than he should have. *Feline Infectious Peritonitis.* At ten these will be some of the most complex words I can understand, because this is the disease that killed my cat. It’s rare. There’s no cure. It’s always fatal. The virus that causes it is contagious, and for the next few months we will not be allowed to bring another cat into our home. For the first time in my life there will be no pets in our house.

I’m too young to understand more than that, but it is enough. There’s no hope in a diagnosis like that. *There was nothing they could do.* If there had been, though, wouldn’t that have been worse? If there was a cure and we just hadn’t caught it in time?

Maybe. It doesn’t matter anymore. Everything about it is just *unfair*.

“I know, honey, I know it’s not,” Mom says, her forehead against mine, hand running through my hair.

It occurs to me then that I’ve already seen my cat for the last time, that he is gone in some distant location and that I’ve already said goodbye; I just hadn’t known it would be forever. He’d been crying, that last time—big loud meows, because he was scared and didn’t like the pet carrier or driving in the car. The thought makes me cry harder, gasping sobs that make it hard to breathe, imagining him being scared and alone all night without me.

"It's okay," Mom's voice is stronger now. I know that she's still sad too, but if she doesn't act strong then we will sit outside this store all night. It's getting dark outside, and in the car the lights are off; Mom's face is a dim shadow, defined only by the orange light from the store beside us. I can't bring myself to think about going home to an empty house with no bright-eyed Siamese to meow at us in that happy way, greeting us at the door, but I don't want to be here in this place where it is so obvious that no one outside our car is aware of the small implosion going on within it.

"It's okay." Mom leans back and looks at the two of us, her mouth twisting up into a smile that does not reach her eyes. "He isn't in pain anymore. He's not hurting now, okay?"

I nod, slowing into that stage of crying that is all sniffles and hiccups. The carpet looks almost clean, now that it is too dark to make out the specks and crumbs that litter it.

"Let's go home," she says, once both of us are as calm as we are capable of being in that moment. She turns around in her seat and puts the car in dive, merging into traffic and taking us away from that little store with the pretentious name that I'd never cared about before.

The house is just as empty as I'd known it would be.