

Calista's Kitten

Samantha M.

She can't come back Lauren, I thought to myself angrily as I looked at the mound of earth under which she lay. *She's gone*. The tears were coming again, something I seemed not to have control over anymore, they just came now. I felt a hot one trickle down my cheek and saw it land on the grave, on my kitten. No, she wasn't a kitten anymore, on my cat.

"Lauren, are you out there?" called my mother from the kitchen window.

"Yeah," I croaked.

"Dinner's ready."

"I'll be in in a minute." I was still staring at Calista's grave. How could she ask me to leave her? It seemed like forever before I had the strength to turn my head and exit the forest where she lay in order to return to my home.

I heard the tapping of nails as my little bichon raced to the front door over the linoleum floor. "Hey Bubba," I muttered as I scratched the hyper-active dog's ear. I sensed someone in the hallway and looked up to see the brown-haired, green-eyed face of my mother leaning against the wall.

"Lauren, Sweetie, I think you need to start spending a little less time out there," she said using the same voice I associated with the one used at the bed of the sick.

I shook my head disbelievingly. "How can you ask me to spend less time out there? She only died two months ago!"

"She was an old cat, Lauren."

"No she wasn't!" I shouted. "She was only ten, she shouldn't have died!"

“That’s seventy in dog-years,” said my smart-aleck little brother, Nick, as he came down the stairs.

“She was a cat!”

“Same thing,” he shrugged.

I gave him a look of deepest loathing. How could I be the only one mourning my sweet, little, black-and-white kitty!? How could everyone else not even care that she was dead, that she had died a week before my birthday and that I hadn’t even remembered hers not because I hadn’t marked it down, but because I was too preoccupied with the release of my favorite singer, Nathan James’ CD!? I was ashamed of myself and no one seemed to understand.

The meowing of the replacement cat brought me back to reality. The tiny, orange-striped kitten was hungry again. “You know,” said mom as she opened a can of food, “you really should give him a name, Lauren.”

“He’s not my cat,” I retorted angrily. “My cat’s out in the woods.”

Mom sighed. “Lauren, we gave you the no-name kitty in order to make Calista’s passing easier on you, not harder.”

“I know you did, but I don’t recall ever asking you for a replacement. I want my kitten back, not no-name.”

“Lauren, your life doesn’t stop because you lost someone you loved. It’s time to move on. No-name needs you to love him now.”

“The “replacement kitten” can get as much love and attention as he needs from you, dad, and Nick. God knows you care more for that little puffball than you ever did for her!” I was shouting again and I felt the tears arise but I knew what I said was true. They

never seemed to stop complaining about how Calista was a fierce monster, about how she never seemed to be happy unless she was sticking her claws in their flesh.

I didn't know why they thought of her like that, she hadn't scratched anyone in years and she had never unprovoked. No, Calista had been the sweetest cat anyone could ever meet. She had loved to lay in the tall grass on a hot summer's day, loved to be read aloud to and she even seemed to listen to the story she was told. She had loved to weave her body around your legs until you scratched her cheek; she had been perfect, perfect in my mind at least.

Mom set the dinner of spaghetti and meatballs on the table at the exact moment dad walked through the door, his phone to his ear and briefcase in hand. I gave him a quick hug as he hung up. "Hey Kiddo," he said kissing the top of my hair.

"Hey dad," was my reply.

Dinner was a quick and quiet affair; I had had a lack of appetite for the past couple of months. I began pulling my boots on, the yard had been drenched from the previous nights rain, when I heard my parents in the other room.

"She was out their all afternoon, John. I don't think it's healthy for her to be crying so much."

"She's going to mourn no matter whether or not she's out by the grave. Sooner or later she'll realize that crying isn't going to bring back Calista and things will return to normal around here. Just give her some time, Melanie."

"I'm going outside," I called pointedly, letting them know I had heard every word of their conversation before I opened and slammed the door behind me.

The sun was setting but it was still warm in southern Michigan. I followed the sun west to the small forest beside our house, to my kitten. I sat down next to the grave and sighed. "Hey baby girl," I said to her lovingly. "How are you doing? Did you listen to the birds this morning? I bet they drove you up the wall. I bet you were trying to catch them, you would have been if you were here." My eyes were brimming with tears once more.

I didn't want to cry anymore. I really did want to move on, I had tried to. Yet, it felt like a betrayal to her if I did, like I wouldn't care about her anymore. Was there a way I could still live my life and yet show Calista how much I loved and missed her even when she was gone?

The "replacement kitten" had made its way to where I was: Nick must have let him outside with Bubba. What did he want now? This was Calista's place not his, but I didn't have the energy to try and shoo him away, he was just sniffing the trees, listening to the robins. It really didn't matter.

A monarch butterfly fluttered past and the replacement began trying to chase it. He wasn't coming close to catching his prey but somehow it made me smile, he looked like he was having the time of his life. If he could find joy, why couldn't I?

"You're a little tiger aren't you?" my voice choked with tears but I was still laughing. The kitten wriggled his rear before pouncing one more time as the butterfly escaped the wood and turned towards me. He crawled into my lap and somehow, I didn't mind. As I scratched his ear I said, "That would be a good name for you wouldn't it: Tiger, maybe Ty for short?"

Ty gave a squeak of a meow before nuzzling against my chest. I laughed. "You like that do you? Alright Ty it is." We sat there until long after the sun had disappeared

and the sky was alight with thousands of twinkling stars. My thoughts were still on Calista... and Ty.

Could I love this little kitten without feeling guilty? Would she understand if I did? I had had no problem sharing my love with Bubba three years ago when she was still alive, but was this different? Could I convince myself that the “replacement kitten” really wasn’t a replacement at all, but a new chapter in life? And once I had, could I believe it later? I thought I could.

Loving another didn’t mean that I forgot the ones who had held my heart for so long. It meant more joy and laughter, more comfort and excitement, more meaning out of life.

I held Ty as I stared at Calista’s grave. I had been blessed to have known her for ten years and I thought I had known her well enough to know that she would have wanted me to keep my heart open to others, especially if the one in question was her own kitten.