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Felinology

Aldis H. Petriceks, B.A.

Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

Essay/Personal Reflection

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Author for correspondence:
Aldis H. Petriceks, Harvard Medical School, 25 Shattuck St, Boston, MA 02115.
E-mail: aldis_petriceks@hms.harvard.edu

My name is Betty and I was released from the hospital yesterday and brought by some very large gentlemen to my room at Bramble Gardens, and now, I fear, the cat and I no longer exist.

I had been sitting in the lobby, staring at my favorite spot on the wall, when I started hurting all over and realized I couldn't breathe. That whole week I had felt like a sack of rotten potatoes, but this was different. I gasped and moaned and almost keeled over, and next thing I knew I was lying on a bed staring at a new spot on a new ceiling, so that was exciting, but I was confused and bamboozled and all around wackadoodle until a nice man, with some oversized children in white smocks, came and told me that I was in the hospital. He gave me one of those reassuring smiles and told the children all about my life, using big words like *diabetes* and *dementia*. I had no idea what these words meant, but they sounded very comforting. He must have been a poet.

I was in the hospital for what felt like an eternity, but what was apparently less than that, because, when I got back to my assisted living facility, old Jeanie Potter was still watching the Food Network and the real food was still terrible. The beefy young men from the ambulance brought me upstairs and twisted my stretcher through the doorway, past the bathroom, into my two-hundred-square-foot apartment and — hop, pop, thump! — I was back on my spring-loaded adjustable bed. "Looks like we're done here," the body builders said, and left to carry other old ladies to far-off destinations.

I slept peacefully until a few hours later, when I woke with a scratching, tingling, burning feeling down at my shins. It was like I was being stabbed with sharp little needles, the pain growing hotter, more intense, then fizzling out and jumping on me all over again. I was too weak to pull the blanket away and see what was happening, though, so I just lay there shouting "Ow!" to an empty room.

In my brief moments of peace I stared blankly at the ceiling. "What in heavens is happening?" I wondered. I knew that I had been in the hospital for some time that my head had been hurting, that it was torture to breathe, that there had been tubes inside me, and it was all that the nice children could do to keep me from pulling them out. "But no," I thought. Something else was going on.

"Ow!" I shouted again, to nobody, as the pain reached another crescendo. Then it struck me: "Ow — *Meow*. Of course!" It was that same feeling I had had, as a little girl, playing at Mary Cochrane's house with her cat. Mary's was a regal cat, a Turkish Angora, a snow-white shimmering beauty with a long, slim, fine body. "Whiskers," they called her. Like Mary, Whiskers hated being left alone and would claw at your legs while you were trying to read *Alice in Wonderland*. Sometimes she (and Mary) drew blood.

"That's it!" I exclaimed to the ceiling. "It's a cat!" I was excited to have solved this mystery and couldn't wait to tell everyone and get rid of the damn thing. Then the door swung open and in walked Jerry.

"Hi mom," said my son, my loving son, in a half-hopeful, half-cautious tone. "I'm here. How are you doing?"

"It's a cat!" I said.

He sighed.

"Do you have any pain?" he continued, as if reciting from a monologue, the hope suddenly gone. "Are you hungry? You have some mail I need to sort through." He walked to a hardwood desk scattered with papers.

"*Meow!*" I demanded. "A cat!"

Jerry looked up from a bundle of letters.

"I'm sure it's very nice, mom. Allie is graduating from middle school this week."

"Ow!" I yelled, waving my hands, trying to communicate through sheer gesticulation. "Whiskers! My legs!"

Jerry's eyelids dropped. His eyes rolled beneath.

"Mom, mom, calm down. There's no cat. You need some sleep."

"The words!" I thought to myself — "where are they?"

The words, you see, never came out the way they should have, and hadn't for some time. Everything made sense, everything was clear, but to me only, and only in my head, and to nobody else. It had been this way for years and I couldn't tell why. "Why?" I demanded, in my continuous solitude, though from whom, or from what, I had no clue.

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"It's in the blanket!" I gesticulated further. "It's scratching my legs under the blanket! Pull it up!"

"Okay, mom," Jerry mumbled, rubbing his hands across his face, pushing his cheeks into something like a topographical map. "There's no cat," he muttered.

I told him that he must be mistaken, that — "Ow!" — there were talons digging into my legs right now and that, forgive my language, *damn it*, something must be done.

"What are you talking about, *no cat*?" I said, "I'm not crazy, Jerry! You love me, don't you? Then why don't you believe I'm not crazy! The cat exists! *I exist!*"

He exhaled a long breath and his mouth assumed a sad, flat shape. He was silent. He looked defeated, almost angry.

"*Look*," he said, pulling the blanket forcefully off the bed. "*No cat*. Let me find someone." And then he left. For a few moments I stared intently at the spot where a small feline was supposed to be.

No cat.

"Oh no," I ruminated, breathing quick and shallow, thinking hollow thoughts, my lungs swelling with anxiety. "Maybe I was wrong." I heaved. "Maybe I am crazy. Maybe that's why the words never come out right. But I — they — everything — all of it makes so much sense to me — except this damned cat! I wish it would leave me alone! But no," I stopped, looking around the empty room. "I am alone. The cat is all I have."

After a few minutes — or maybe it was hours, I don't know — Jerry returned with the house doctor. "Hi Betty!" the doctor said. "How are we doing today?" He turned to Jerry. "What did you want to talk about?"

"My mom says there's a pain in her leg. She thinks it's a cat. The cat's obviously her dementia, but—" another mountain range appeared, bleak and forbidding, and slowly eroded into so many grains of sand. A pause. "The pain. I don't want her in any pain."

The doctor tilted his head back and thought for a moment. "Ah, I see," he said, snapping it forwards. "Yes. That's probably a symptom of her diabetes — peripheral neuropathy. Nothing to worry about. This happens in many diabetic patients."

"*What?*" I thought to myself.

"Ah," Jerry echoed. "So what do we do?"

The two looked at me, glanced furtively at one another, and huddled in my bathroom to converse further.

"*What?*" I thought again, staring at the ceiling, the swell rising to my eyes. The doctor's explanation made a horrifying sort of sense, the worse kind of sense. But Jerry — how did he learn that word from the hospital: *dementia?* What did it all mean?

I searched restlessly for answers and found none. All I knew, all I came to understand, was that there now existed some abyss into which my thoughts fell, invalid, as soon as they left my mouth. That it did not matter what I said nor, by extension, what I thought. All that mattered was what everyone else thought, even if what they were thinking was about me.

So my pain was diabetes and the cat was dementia, and my son and doctor were huddling beside a commode to decide the direction of my life. That was something to think about. But what I was really thinking about was how strange it all was. I was shaken, distraught, but I knew what was true, what was real, and I decided that I would live, that I would exist — that, forgive my language, *damn it*, there had to be a cat.

I heard the doctor's voice echo off the toilet bowl: "At the very least, I can prescribe something for her pain."

"I'd like that," Jerry said, sounding no longer defeated, only sad. "I don't want her in any pain."

So that was it. The two came back and pretended that nothing had happened, and Jerry left thirty minutes later, in the strangest spirit of sadness and relief, of love and grief, and the need to breathe. I knew he loved me, and I loved him back. And I knew that there would always exist, beside this love, an impassable gulf between us.

The door shut and the sun fell horizontally through the blinds. I closed my eyes and thought of my strange, demented life, and cried. Then the cat, rebelliously real, jumped on the bed and we both fell asleep, two unknown beings uncertain of ourselves.

Acknowledgments. This is a fictional short story which, while incorporating aspects of the author's experiences, does not depict a specific episode from the author's life or work in medicine.

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

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