

# Memories of Moon

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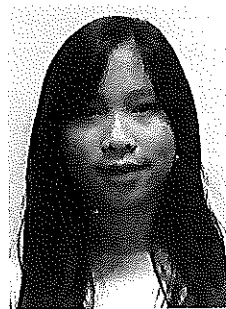
**W**HEN THE WIND blows on a funeral, it cries with the heartbroken. It mourns with the tearful. It drops bright leaf handkerchiefs from its shaking fingers. When the wind watches as a coffin is lowered into the ground, it bows its gray head in sorrow. And even as the last regretful people get into their cars to leave, the wind stays a moment longer, fingering the fresh grave, before whipping away to think of what it has witnessed.

But when the wind blew on Moon's funeral, it didn't cry. It didn't mourn. It didn't even need a handkerchief. The coffin it should have watched was too small for its tastes, the mourners too few for it to even deem this a proper funeral. After all, it was spring, and the wind was no more than a lazy-boy breeze, blowing loose things around like a bored child kicking at tin cans. The wind didn't care about Moon. But I did.

**M**OOON HAD HER START as a small white kitten in a pathetic little "Free to Good Home" basket at a yard sale. Mom and Daly were digging through piles of stained clothing and broken toys as I wandered around, bored out of my wits. Yard sales were ridiculous to me, like saying, "Here, take this stuff. It's so gross I don't want it anymore," or "We were too fussy to sell our stuff on eBay, so we'll sell it here at the same outrageous price." I had just skirted a large haystack of skis and bent ski poles when I saw the basket. It was across the street, at the very foot of the driveway, too obvious that these kittens



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were unexpected and unwanted.

I was a cat-lover born and bred, growing up in a house where it was impossible to wear anything black in public or to escape the dreaded litter-box routine. I was totally ready to bring another member into the family, as one of our three cats, Smoky, had died of old age just a few months before. So when I saw that basket, there wasn't anything to stop me. I practically plowed over Mason, the neighbor's seven-year-old, as he stood in front of the basket. He looked up at me with big sweet eyes and asked, "Do you want one, Jackie? Mommy says that they've all got to go today." How could I resist? Carefully, I inspected each of the darling little creatures. They were all white but one, which was gray. I was drawn immediately to the gray one. He likes to stand out from the crowd, I thought in amusement. However, I could see that he was skittish and shy of people, backing away from my hand as far as he could. Mom would never let me make a project out of accustoming him to people, so I turned to the next. That was Moon. She was as friendly as her brother was nervous, and I was able to pick her up and rub my fingers through her silky kitten fur. She was the one for me.

"NO, JACKIE. Absolutely not." That was Mom's first reaction to Moon.

I begged, "But Mom, Smoky's been gone for *months*, and I need another cat in the house to complete our trio."

"We don't need any more vet bills than we already have. Vaccinations cost money,

and we're still paying off Smoky's heart medication." She looked down at Daly and held up a hideous pink T-shirt with orange fringe that I strongly suspected had been white when the shirt was new-bought. "How's this, Daly?" Mom asked, changing the subject.

Daly hopped up and down, babbling as only a four-year-old can: "Mommy, Mommy, my shirt! My pink shirt!" Mom looked satisfied and slung the shirt over a growing pile on her left arm.

"So can we, Mom?" I asked, thinking she might be in a better mood now. "Can we?"

"No."

My attempts to persuade her failed miserably for several minutes, until my stroke of genius saved the day. I was dragging my feet as Mom flipped through racks of women's clothes. Daly, likewise, was whining and sighing with boredom. Then it hit me. Slyly, I asked, "Hey, Daly, do you want to see a kitty?"

She faced me, pouting. "We've got kitties already. I want to see toys!"

"But we don't have kitties like *this*." I took her hand, careful not to pull too hard, and added, "They're a lot smaller than Oreo and Tiger. Come on, let me show you!" She finally stopped digging in her heels and, reluctantly, followed me across the street.

Her hesitance evaporated when she spotted the kittens in the basket. With a squeal that made Mason cover his ears, she pounced on the gray kitten and was about to scoop him up when I quickly tugged her hand away.

"No, that one is scared, Daly. Look at this one." I placed her small fingers on Moon's head, and the kitten, playing her part perfectly, began to purr and rub against Daly's hand. My sister was enchanted.

"Jackie, let's get this one," she cried, and I didn't stop her when she picked up this kitten. I trusted Daly with holding cats; like me, she had grown up surrounded by them—Dragon, Floss, Smoky, and our remaining cats, Oreo and Tiger. Triumphant, I led Daly and her precious bundle back across the street, where I faced Mom with a grin.

"And thus, our new kitten joins the family." I gestured to my sister. Daly proudly held up the small white kitten. Mom really did try to rally her forces and resist, but her genes and mine were too closely linked. She was as much a cat-lover as her daughters.

"All right. We'll keep it. Boy or girl, and what's its name?"

"Girl." I closed my eyes for a moment to think of a good name and the image of the kitten's face, round and white as a full moon, slid behind my eyelids. I looked at Mom with an even larger smile. "Her name is Moon."

I REMEMBER the night we discovered Moon's worst fear. She was about three months old, a family cat, who got along well with Oreo and Tiger. She was also my favorite. That terrifying night, I was curled on my bed with a mystery novel, a bowl of chocolate pudding, and

a cat. Outside my window, the storm was just getting underway, with a gale blowing and rain pounding the glass. Moon purred comfortably in my ear, as if she knew that the storm wouldn't be able to hurt her while she was in here with me. Of course, that was when the first thunderclap came. *KA-BOOM!*

It was the loudest I had ever heard, making me jump and almost spill my snack. But Moon didn't just jump; she *flew*. I think she must have hit the ceiling, then she hot-footed it out of there like a flash. Another clap of thunder, softer this time, drew a high-pitched yowl from the bathroom. I put down my book, carefully placed my bowl on the bedside table, and went looking for Moon. See, I knew that some cats had irrational fears—Tiger wouldn't touch any body of water larger than his dish, my grandma's cat, Mint, absolutely cowered before dogs—so this wasn't too surprising for me. "Moon?" I called, flipping on the bathroom light. She was crouched behind the toilet, all her fur standing on end, her green eyes flashing with terror. I made a slow movement forward, murmuring, "It's all right, Moon. It's OK," over and over. Moon gave a shiver, though she stayed in place. I could see that her fur was beginning to lie flat as I came closer; she seemed ready to come to me when, from the bathroom window, I saw a huge flare of lightning. Oh dear, I thought, knowing what would come next. In the split second between the lightning and the thunder, I slammed the bathroom door to keep Moon from escaping. And

*then* the power went out.

When the thunder hit, it was loud enough to make me wince, no comparison to what it did to Moon. She sounded ready to break down the door, running around like a maniac, hissing and spitting. I could see her glowing green eyes in the dark, and for the first time, I was afraid of a cat. "Moon," I said shakily, trying to reassure her. There was nothing of the old Moon left to reassure. I jumped up on the toilet and decided that I would just have to wait it out.

The storm lasted for a good half hour, the power staying off until around eleven PM; by the time the last thunder rumbled away, Moon was exhausted and I was shaking. As the lights flickered back on and I finally got down from my perch, she came up to me, giving a tired little meow. I gathered her into my arms and hugged her tight. That first crazy storm was the worst ever during the time Moon was with us. After that, we learned to keep her in a small space with a comforting person, usually me, when the thunder came. Even when I had learned her fear, I loved her more than ever.

I ALSO REMEMBER the time she almost drowned. Moon didn't mind water, and in the summer we'd sometimes go wading in the slow creek that was back behind our house. She would come along, and I'd lower her gently into the water. By the time a few first trial runs had taken place, she had figured out a sort of cat's doggy-paddle and could out-swim Daly. It

was the summer I turned fourteen, when Moon was about two years old. We went down to the creek, me in my tankini, Daly in her flowery little one-piece and water-wings, and Mom in her capri pants. Mom didn't do much wading, even in steamy August.

"Jackie, look at me!" cried Daly, splashing furiously up and down in the sluggish water. From the bank, dabbling my feet in the water with Moon sitting beside me, I nodded at her.

"I see you. You're doing good." Apparently excited by Daly's efforts, Moon jumped right in, leaving me to laugh and cheer. Mom was on the other bank, and together we acted as a sort of lifeguard, calling out occasionally, "Daly, let go of Moon, you'll pull her down," or "Daly, kick a little harder and you'll go faster!"

Further downstream was a section of rocks and currents that Mom had forbidden us to go near, though it wasn't strong enough to pull me down anymore. It was certainly strong enough, however, to pull down a small, white cat. On that hot day, we were too busy trying to coach Daly in her swimming techniques to notice when Moon set off to explore. I yelled, "Come on, use your arms!" Daly looked up and glared at me, spitting water. "I'm *trying*, Jackie." She turned in a slow circle, allowing herself to be carried by the slow waters towards the rocks.

"Daly, come away from there," called my mom anxiously. Daly didn't respond, instead going closer to the stones and twirling waters. "Daly! Now!" Mom was

standing up, yelling, her fists clenching with worry.

"But Moon's over here!"

"*What?*" The voice was mine. Daly continued floating downstream, and Mom looked over at me; but I was already in the water. With strong strokes I passed Daly, pausing to shove her away from the danger zone, then I dove under. Swimming as fast as I could in the general direction of the place where two rocks formed a deep cleft, I was panicking with the thought that Moon had been out of my sight for at least five minutes. It was impossible to see anything in the murky creek; I felt around furiously with my hands, wondering, How long has Moon been under? Is she even still alive? Oh let her be safe, please... My hands were scratched and scraped by the rocks by the time I touched fur. Grabbing the furry object with both hands, I pulled it the few inches to the surface. Moon's lifeless body was plastered wet and small in the dappled light. I screamed, "MOM!" She came running through the water, not even bothering to roll up her pants. Taking one look, she grabbed Moon out of my battered hands and jumped out of the water.

Mom was in the car heading to the vet in minutes, Daly and I barely managing to get in our seats before she drove away. Like I said, Mom is just as much a cat-lover as I am. Doctor Peter Handsen, our trusty vet for all our cats, made dripping-wet Daly and me sit in the waiting room while he and Mom closed the door behind them. My little sister looked up at me

with frightened eyes. "Is Moon dead?"

"*No!*" I saw instantly from the hurt in her face that my momentary anger had scared her. As big as she was, I picked her up and hugged her. "She's not dead. Doctor Handsen will make sure she's OK."

It was a long time in that waiting room. I watched the clock, counting the seconds, the minutes... Daly just stared at her bare feet. We were hungry and scared by the time the door opened again and Mom came out. Her eyes were so solemn and grim that for one heart-stopping moment I thought I had been too late in rescuing Moon. Then Mom smiled gently. "She's going to make it." I squeaked with joy and hugged Mom so hard she gasped. Daly wrapped herself around Mom after I was done, and Mom picked her up, adding, "Doctor Handsen is keeping her overnight to make sure she hasn't caught anything, but he says she's a tough kitty. She'll make it." I admit it, I cried, right there in the waiting room, with a wet-dog smell in the air and the receptionist behind the desk snapping her gum. Mom gave me another hug and dried my tears on her shirt.

"Let's go home."

When Moon was returned the next day, she seemed thinner than before. We had to give her pills that she absolutely loathed, we had to make sure she stayed out of any drafts, and we had to keep her quiet for a week. Moon didn't want to be quiet. She unrolled toilet paper from the downstairs bathroom; she knocked over Mom's favorite vase, which landed luckily on the carpet; she wanted to play every

moment of that whole week she was supposed to be "kept quiet." Moon was never a cat to be too obliging.

**N**OW I REMEMBER the past few weeks, all silent in our house, started by that one loud event which took Moon away from us. I was enjoying spring break, a few days of rest before launching into the last desperate leg of the school year. The morning it happened was blissful with peace, until the first scenes of the disaster began to play out. The phone had been ringing, Mom trying to answer it, coming in from the patio through the screen door with a scrub brush in one hand and a bucket of soapy water for scouring the tiles dangling from the other. Moon was lying on the arm of Dad's favorite chair, her eyes only half closed. When I think of it, I realize that she was probably not asleep at all, just waiting for Mom to open the door. That chair was directly across from the screen door.

Mom, rushing, yelling, "It's for me—don't get it!" banged through the door, leaving it half open. I was sitting on the couch, reading another mystery novel, when Moon bolted. She made it through the doorway, onto and off of the patio, and almost into the road before I threw down my book and followed her at a dead run.

"MOON!" She was an indoor cat, strictly indoor, never to be let out; I threw the door open wider as I pushed out into the spring air. Wet grass slipped under my feet and I fell, biting my tongue, still calling after my cat. "Moon, come back!"

I didn't see the car, but I heard it. A squeal of brakes, a horrible crunch, and a yowl that I had never heard before. Gasping, half-crazed with fear, I managed to skid into the road. "MOON!" I yelled again, my voice torn by shock this time as I saw the scene. A lump of white fur, stained red, in the road, overshadowed by a huge, boxy car. The driver was leaning out his window, calling, "I didn't see it! Sorry!" Before I could say anything to him, he reversed, then drove around the tiny, lifeless body in the middle of the road, and disappeared over the hill.

Just as when Moon had almost drowned, I screamed for my mother. There was a slam, a clatter, then she emerged from the house, looking totally freaked out. I played back my own voice in my mind and realized I sounded as if I was the one who was hurt.

"Jackie, what's wrong?" As she spoke the words, she saw Moon.

"Oh my," she gasped, then stopped still. Wordless. Breathless. Then she was in motion again, silent motion that brought her to Moon, then back to me with Moon wrapped in her jacket. She spoke in a voice that scared me, it was so cold. "Call Doctor Handson, Jackie. Right now."

I don't remember calling the vet. I don't remember actually getting into the car with Mom in the driver's seat and Moon in my lap. I remember the car ride, though. We sped through scanty afternoon traffic, cold silence between me and my mother. It wasn't that we were mad at each other, it was just that we were both so afraid

for Moon... I felt like if I said anything, she'd slip away. As it was, she was barely breathing, her eyes closed, no hint of the energy she usually had. Blood was seeping through the towel Mom had grabbed on our way out, and I tried to ignore it. I wasn't trembling exactly, only giving an occasional shudder, and I never took my eyes off Moon. We were at the vet's office in hardly a moment, yet it seemed hours to me. Just as had happened before, Mom and Doctor Handsen were about to close the door to the examination room behind them, and leave me to wonder and wait in agony, but I stopped them.

"Let me come." It wasn't a question, and for a moment I thought Mom would be angry at me for saying it. Then she nodded, and Doctor Handsen nodded, and we all entered the steel-shiny room. I sat down in a chair against the far wall and watched.

I thought I would die myself when I saw the blood. Moon's blood, staining the metal table. Doctor Handsen shook his head as he peeled back Moon's eyelids and checked her breathing. He did more things, but I was too shaken up to understand what they were. It was cold in the examination room, deathly cold, a feeling I didn't want around me. Mom and Doctor Handsen talked in hard voices that were too quiet for me to hear the words; both adults' voices sounded to me like metallic bumblebees, droning with a dulled edge of despair. In a dreamlike state, I wondered if Daly had any idea of what happened. Her school didn't have spring break, so she

would be in a classroom somewhere with the orderly life of elementary-school days around her, pencils and little kids who teased each other in a one-big-family way. Did the man who hit Moon have children in Daly's school? Would he drive his big boxy car to pick them up? And would Daly somehow understand that he had killed our cat? *Almost* killed, I reminded myself sternly. Shuddering, shivering, I looked over at the two adults next to the examining table, and did a double-take. *No... It couldn't be true.* Mom was crying. That shook me right down to my toes; Mom didn't cry. She wasn't that kind of person—she was a Wonder Woman, strong as iron, ready for anything.

"Mom?" My voice was soft and ragged, a tiny piece of broken glass among all those shiny metal surfaces. "What's wrong?"

"Her injuries are too severe, Jackie," said Doctor Handsen gravely. "I'm afraid Moon is dead."

It was as if, by saying those words, "Moon is dead," he unleashed every horrible feeling I've ever had in my life. It wasn't just sorrow, it was anger like when our first cat had to be put down, it was rebellion like the first time Mom sent me to my room, it was shock like when Moon had almost drowned—all mixed up into something equivalent to a witch's brew of emotion. The angry part of me screamed, *Doctor Handsen should have been able to save her!*, while the rebellion muttered, *Moon can't be dead, she can't be dead*, even as shock blurred everything in my sight. Or maybe that was tears, when I stumbled to the



*With only the heartless, fleeting wind for a pastor, and only memories left*

examination table and saw for myself the motionless body, stained red with blood and black with dirt from the road. *Moon is dead*, I realized dazedly. That put a stop to all the other emotions raging inside me. *Moon is dead.*

AND HERE I am now, at a funeral with only three other mourners: Mom, Dad, and Daly. With only the heartless, fleeting wind for a pastor, and only memories left. Only memories... memories of Moon. ❀