

Sheltered

Images from a life among shelter pets and their people



By Catherine Anderson

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Sheltered

brings from a life among shelter pets and their people

For all the animals who ever passed through the shelter system.
For those who made it, and those who didn't.
You are never homeless.
You are all our pets.



by Catherine Anderson

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Introduction

Is your life important to you? Do you think about it, talk about it, and know it in all its gritty and complicated details? Are you an expert on it? Is your life interesting to you? Of course it is. And mine is to me.

This is why, throughout the process of writing this honors thesis, I have continually felt the urge to thank the literary powers that be, or perhaps just to thank the me of ten months ago for choosing this option, for choosing to write a thesis, and not just *a* thesis, but *this* thesis. This memoir.

There is no doubt in my mind, after having survived the sometimes un-engaging world of academia for the past 17 years, that I could have survived the process of writing something else: a capstone paper or a non-creative thesis, on Shakespeare maybe, or Kafka, or Poe. I could have researched and written and foot-noted my way to 50 pages. I could have, probably, convinced you that I cared about it, that it truly mattered to me, that it was my passion.

But none of that would have been real. Instead, I'll show you my most honest, selfish passion. This is, of course, my life.

This line of thought initially had me wondering why so many people *don't* choose this option. It seems, at first, that writing a memoir would be not only the most interesting choice, but also the easiest, if only for the fact that all the research is already done, already lived and experienced. What I learned in the beginning of this process, though, is that even though I had the material to write my memoir, I had to teach myself *how* to do it, how to actually sit down and write something that was honest but also artistic, personal but also inviting to my readers.

Looking back, I believe I learned a lot about the basis of memoirs during the early process of simply selecting my topic. I went into this project thinking that it would be easy for

me to write about almost anything in my life, but the decision process taught me something critical. Everything in my life is interesting and important to me, but I had to find the one thing that made my life different, the one thing that made my life stand out. I had to find the part of my life that wouldn't only be interesting to me, but that would also be interesting to other people. Sure, I could have written about my childhood, which was average, but important to me. I could have written about my first date, which was generic, but important to me. I could have written about my college experience, which was dull, but important to me. Would you have cared?

Instead, I have written about my job in a New Hampshire animal shelter. In the few years that I have been working there as an Adoption Counselor and Animal Care Technician, I have seen more than I thought I would ever see, learned to do things that once seemed impossible, and watched both humans and animals work through some of their most emotional and challenging moments. This, like the rest of my life, is interesting to me. I hope that it will be interesting to you, too. I hope that, at least by the end of this, you will believe this memoir is important.

After the topic selection stage, the process of producing this thesis dipped into passive absorption for awhile. In order to get a feel for other similar works that have been written, I searched for comparable animal memoirs that, I hoped, would inspire me. Interestingly, I discovered that there are very few published memoirs about animal shelters—the majority of the books that I found related more to veterinary work, notable experiences with personal pets, or animal rescue in emergency situations. Although this was initially a bit frustrating, it ended up strengthening my resolve. I felt that my work would be more important, now, since I knew it would end up saying things that haven't often been said before in literature. I do not know that this will ever be published, but it feels significant, to me, just to tell these stories, even if it's only to two professors and myself.

I have to admit that I allowed myself to amble through the reading stage quite leisurely, if only because I dreaded the actual writing process. I have always struggled with this, and it seems that all my laundry and grocery shopping and other homework assignments spark in importance when the alternate option is writing a paper. And this, this wasn't even a paper. This was a *manuscript*. Daunting, to say the least. I didn't know where to start.

It's true that I pushed the actual writing process as late as I felt that I realistically could, but a few weeks into the Fall term, I knew it was time. It was difficult for me to even imagine sitting down and beginning this, because I usually like to rely on organized outlines and have everything planned ahead. The thing was, though, that I didn't quite know where this was going. I tried listing individual stories from work that I thought absolutely needed to be in this thesis, but that was all my Type A personality had to fall back on. As hard as it was for me, I knew that it was time to just watch my cat stretch between sunspots on the living room floor, free write about it, and see where it went.

I don't want to discount the importance of animal rescue work by comparing it to schoolwork, because they're certainly not on the same plane for me, and I hope you'll understand why after reading this. But I do think that there's a comparison here, somewhere. Sometimes, I think, why do anything if it can't teach you about life? And just as writing this has helped me to learn more about real life and my job, my job has taught me some things that have been crucial in the writing process. In terms of getting started, I'm learning a lot about seemingly insurmountable obstacles, whether they are intimidating thesis manuscripts or enormous numbers of abandoned pets. The bottom line is that things can sometimes seem scary and impossible, but there's only one way to deal with them. Start somewhere. Do something. It will make a dent.

In the end, this is how I approached this thesis—by making tiny dents wherever I felt that I could at the time. As much as I hated to have to do it, I wrote sentence by sentence, chapter by chapter, usually not knowing what would come next. Sometimes, I felt, I didn't even have a say in *when* I would write. I developed the irritating tendency of involuntarily formulating chapters in my mind while lying in bed at night, typing notes into my cell phone on my bedside table for fear of losing whatever it was that I suddenly had. Some days, I felt that I couldn't do anything else—I just had to work on this. Other days, I felt like I couldn't come up with a decent sentence if I tried. At the shelter, we learn a lot about compassion fatigue, about working so much and so hard that all your empathy gets buried, and sometimes I felt this way about my writing. Often, I hated it. There were many times when I just had to walk away.

Although I didn't always know quite where I was going, I constantly had one goal in the back of my mind for this project. I wanted to get rid of the image of “the pound,” to show people how much more there is to animal shelters besides adoptions and euthanasia. I wanted to make it complicated and personal for my readers, to show them an inside look of what goes on behind the Staff Only doors. I wanted to admit that animal shelters can be sad, but also to show how many other things they can be.

In “Fluffy Gorgeous,” I aim to prove that animal shelters do their very best to treat each animal as an individual case, independently deserving of the highest quality care. At the shelter, I constantly work with people who assume that animals who enter the shelter system with any imperfections at all are immediately brushed aside as lost causes and euthanized. I, of course, cannot speak for all shelters, but at mine, this isn't the case. “Fluffy Gorgeous” follows a tiny Pomeranian on her journey through the shelter system as she emerges from a blood soaked towel and tries to beat all odds. Her story is as much about Fluffy Gorgeous as it is about her people,

both the shelter staff members and her original owner. In so many cases, animal shelters are seen as “the bad guys,” the ones who have to make difficult decisions when space runs out. In “Fluffy Gorgeous,” I try to complicate this blame by showing how individual owners often play a major role in the failure of their animals. I use this chapter, also, to admit that the shelter’s priorities lie, always, with the animals.

In “Fostering Faith,” I also attempt to show that special cases are treated with care in the shelter by highlighting the importance of the foster care program. Surrenderers often assume that animals on the brink will just be given basic care and left on their own to, hopefully, survive until morning. This story, instead, follows Faith and Ebony as they become the personal projects of staff members who are not afraid to get attached. Indeed, the shelter expands not only beyond the stereotypes of animals running out of time, but also beyond the building’s walls and into real, caring homes.

“Transfer Day” and “Chaplin’s Letter” both seek to highlight community outreach efforts that the shelter makes on a regular basis. “Transfer Day” tells the story of a few dogs who are pulled from overcrowded shelters several states away and welcomed into the shelter system in New Hampshire, where they will almost certainly be adopted without incident. This chapter complicates the shelter image by showing that, while some shelters are struggling to get by, others have empty kennels to fill. It highlights the active partnerships between shelters, making each shelter not just an individual entity, but a part of an intricate network that can provide backup when necessary. “Transfer Day” also acknowledges the emotional difficulties involved when choices do have to be made about who deserves a second chance.

“Chaplin’s Letter” seeks to further expand the shelter image by following a former stray to a cat show. It deals with the viewpoint from which many community members see shelter

animals, challenging the image of shelter pets as “just homeless,” and it speaks of the possibilities of underdogs, both animal and human.

In these and the other chapters, I hope to provide a glimpse into the shelter system that will leave my readers understanding that animal shelters are about so much more than euthanasia and adoptions. My goal is to prove that shelters are not limited to the sad stereotypes that society assigns to them, but instead are full of the same complex array of emotions and interactions that one can find in other areas of life.

Although time requires this project, as a thesis, to be considered finished, I don't know that I can safely say that it's finished as a memoir. Even during the writing process, I realized that each school break, each week back at work, filled me with new stories that seem just as important as those that I've already written. The question of whether or not I will continue with this lies not in a concern for lack of material, but instead, in a concern for lack of resolve. I will work with new animals and witness notable stories, I hope, for many years to come. The question at hand is whether or not I will find that push to sit down and start writing, without thesis requirements guiding me.

I want to say that I hope I will continue to write, but I'm not sure if even that is true. A major concern still hangs in my mind, as it has during this entire project, about eclipsing my real memories. In *Writing the Memoir*, Judith Barrington expresses my exact fear, stating, “The events as you remember them will never be the same in your memory once you have turned them into a memoir. For years I have worried that if I turn all of my life into literature, I won't have any real life left—just stories about it” (Barrington 65).

As much as I care about this thesis and the stories it contains, I cannot get over this fear. As I write, edit, and continually read each chapter aloud, it seems to be coming true. It seems to

be inevitable. I am beginning to remember my stories, my phrases, my paragraphs first, and the actual events second. Today, the actual events are still in my mind, but the more I write about them and re-read what I've written, the hazier they become. I am afraid that someday they will disappear entirely. I am afraid that someday these stories will be all I have left. For my reader, I feel, these stories are better than nothing, but for me, the truth is better than these stories. It's a dangerous trade.

It is partially because of this, perhaps, that I also have all sorts of concerns about showing this memoir to anyone who knows the truth. It is easy for me to hand it in to professors who have never seen the shelter, met the staff, or known the animals in these chapters. This audience will judge my stories on the information that I present to them in this thesis, because that is all they've got. On the other hand, my co-workers at the shelter would read these stories and judge them on the real truth. This, for me, is problematic.

Throughout the writing process, I've focused on capturing the overall essence of the truth behind each of these chapters. Of course, in order to make these events into good, compact stories, I've had to change some details. For example, although all the animals are real, sometimes the time frame is tweaked a bit, to make the stories work together. Logically, I know that this is minor, but the fear still remains of showing my final written project to anyone who knows the real stories that it's based on. I don't believe that I have been dishonest, but I have had to be creative, which requires some degree of distance from the actual, lived experience. I do not feel as though I've portrayed any of my co-workers in a negative light, but I'll admit that I've told some of *their* stories, and I'm afraid they might have told them differently. I'm afraid I might have told them wrong.

So, it remains to be seen who I'll actually show this to. In looking back on it myself, though, it's interesting to compare the actual project that it's become with the project that I initially thought it would be. In the end, I managed to include all but one of my "must include" stories from my list, but the overall project includes fewer stories than I originally thought it would. Ten months ago, there was a list on my refrigerator of 30 or 40 names, animals with interesting stories, animals who I thought I might need to make this project long enough. In the end, though, it hasn't been about making it long enough, but instead about picking and choosing so as not to make it too long, so as not to make it so broad that each chapter is shallow. What you see in this final project is, of course, only a glimpse into the shelter. But each chapter, in and of itself, is a complete picture of the story it represents.

All in all, it's been sort of a love-hate process. I don't, by any means, wish that I had chosen a different path, but I do understand, now, that writing a memoir is far from an easy way out. It was certainly more interesting and engaging for me to write about my life than it would have been to write about someone else's literature, but I do think that writing a memoir carries some added struggles. In non-creative writing projects, I have tended to only care about making my work good enough. But in this project, I care about making it great, about making it perfect, about making every sentence and word sound exactly right to me. This memoir truly *matters* to me, so the stakes are high.

It's been a long process, sometimes fast moving and sometimes stagnant, and I'm left thinking one major thing: I hate writing. I honestly despise the dread of knowing I've got to come up with a new chapter. I can't stand the feeling of sitting at my laptop and typing and typing and typing so much that I must experience moments of insanity because, mid-sentence, I suddenly end up in the kitchen, washing dishes, and not knowing how I got there. It's been a

struggle of will-power. But once each chapter is done, I forget about all the hate. I hold the printed manuscript in my hand, and read it aloud in my living room, and I love it. Dorothy Parker said, "I hate writing. I love having written." Amen to that.

Where do I go from here? Back to the shelter, of course. But I hope that wherever you go, after reading this, you'll take something from it with you. I hope that somewhere, at some point, it makes you feel something. This is my job, but more importantly, it is my life. It matters to me. I hope, when you're finished, it'll matter to you, too.

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Someone

...

...

Through the window of her classroom my mother sees a kitten in the mouth of its mother, swinging in the air just six inches above six inches of snow. It is in such a non-kitten place, hanging over the pavement of this preschool parking lot. This is such a non-kitten time, bitter New England September. The leaves are gone from the trees and covered in a thick, icy dust. It moves like a non-kitten, almost not at all, hanging as if dead, as if only a tiny piece of leftover fur that the mother cat has drawn out from somewhere in the woods. My mother thinks, at first, that it is something the cat has killed, a chipmunk maybe. Instead, it is a kitten. Someone should do something, she thinks, and continues painting the lid of her sand table.

Judging from the size of him, it is maybe six weeks later when, through the doorway to the school's basement, I see the kitten. He stands on the stairs just long enough for me to realize he is really there, before turning fast and bolting down into the dark. Here, he is living pressed up against the furnace, shivering to survive. I am too afraid to follow him, fearing not the kitten himself but his tiny, dark world. No one goes into the basement here, except maybe maintenance people every few years, and this kitten. I will go down there a few weeks later, looking for him, only to find shallow sloping ceilings, remnants of mouse nests, and broken plastic kiddie pools. The kitten will not let me see him then, but he has let me see him on the stairs today. I have seen that he is tiny, scraggly, and thin. Someone should do something, I think.

When the kitten is maybe twelve weeks old, the other teachers at the school have begun to see him, glowing only as a pair of eyes on the fourth or fifth step. He is probably eating plenty of mice down there to survive, they tell each other, and besides he is too unsocial to help. When the weather warms up, they tell each other, he will move on and they won't have to worry about him. This is what they tell each other, while they think, someone should do something.

All along, someone has been feeding the kitten piles of crushed goldfish crackers on paper plates from the snack supply in the school's kitchen. Someone has been sitting at the top of the stairs and waiting, waiting long enough to earn the kitten's trust just enough to see that he has a tiny white stripe down the middle of his face, that his eyebrow whiskers bend and crinkle like Cindy Lou Who's one little hair, and that he comes up one step higher every few weeks. Someone has been bringing in a long wooden box, painted dark green with a wire window on one end, and piling tuna into the back corner. And when the kitten is too smart for this box, someone buys real cat food and slowly lures him onto the wooden boards of the main floor of the school. When he is ready, someone unlocks the door of the school at night when it is quiet, and tosses a thick plaid coat over the kitten when his fourth tentative paw leaves the last step, wrapping him up in a makeshift hobo sack. Someone puts him in a dog crate in the back of her car and wonders if he is even alive because he is so still on the drive home. Someone lets him live in her upstairs bathroom, where he flings himself onto the top of the curtain rod, and only comes down slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, until someone is there to hold him on a bathmat on her lap and hear his first purr.

Seven years later, the kitten is leaving tiny footprints in the thin layer of snow that has blown into the screened porch at his house. He lives indoors now, sleeping on the foot of a bed with another cat who has taught him all the things that cats do, but maybe, when he tiptoes through this snow, shaking his feet every once in awhile to get the wet crystals off his paw pads, he remembers that someone saw him hanging limply over the parking lot.

My mother is someone.

Is this why I am someone too?

Chloe

Animal ID: 6159
Animal Name: Chloe
Source: Owner Surrender
Reason for Surrender: Too Many Animals
Weight: 9 lbs
Type: Cat
Breed/Species: Domestic Short Hair
Primary Color: Black
Secondary Color: White
Sex: Female

Status Date: 6/16/2009
Status: Awaiting Sort

Chloe is surrendered without any illnesses, without any injuries, without any problems at all. Maybe it's this lack of problems that causes all her problems in the shelter. Chloe isn't one of the little kittens who get noticed because they play, entertain, and grow and change visibly in the time they are with us. She isn't one of the senior cats, either, who get noticed because they need blood work, urinalyses, and careful monitoring of their eating. She is just a regular, average, normal four years old.

Chloe isn't one of the super friendly, outgoing cats who get noticed by head-butting our chests and climbing on our shoulders as we clean their cages. She isn't one of the angry, frightening cats, either, who hiss and lunge and shred holes in our rubber gloves and, sometimes, in our hands. She is just regular, average, normal, just grumpy enough to not be anyone's favorite, but not enough to require back-up defenses of towels, nets, and dustpans.

Chloe isn't one of the memorably beautiful snowshoes, calicos, or tortoiseshells, whose website photos will later be used in mailings, newsletters, and new adopter handouts. She isn't one of the terrible looking, damaged cats with flea-related hair loss, burns, or bite wounds and scars. She is just a regular, average, normal black and white cat, the most common color brought into the shelter, and the most common color to be overlooked by adopters.

So this is Chloe: almost completely regular, average, normal. Almost completely unnoticed. Almost.

What I remember now about Chloe is the uneven coloring of the iris in one of her eyes, and the summer we spent making each other someone again.

I have to admit that, for awhile, I am as guilty as all the other staff members and the potential adopters who walk past Chloe's cage for months, just looking right through her and hardly noticing that she exists, hardly noticing that she is someone at all. I am sorry to say that I do not remember her when she was surrendered, do not remember her when she was in Back Cats, and have to look her up in the computer system, almost two years later, to find out why she was even here in the first place. The drop-down box in Shelter Buddy has been set at "Too Many Animals," an appropriately non-descript reason.

My first memories of Chloe are of her in a Tokyo cage in the West Side community room. Here she is, curled up on the back of her towel, head tucked down, probably wondering how all the loose cats in the room can wrestle with each other, can climb the sisal post to the ceiling, can wrap themselves around visitors' calves and be someone, when it seems that she is turning into no one at all.

Chloe is fed, her cage is cleaned, her water is changed every morning and topped off every night, but she isn't *remembered*. In fact, as most of the cats around her get adopted and replaced by others, no one seems to notice that Chloe is still there, in her Tokyo. And when she begins to sneeze and discharge starts to drip out from around her patchy iris, no one seems to notice that either. It is sick cat season, perhaps the worst summer I have seen to date, and it hits the cats hard, even Chloe, who is barely someone anymore.

I cannot guess how long Chloe waits for someone to discover that she has stopped eating, when her nose and throat clog up so much that she can no longer smell the canned food, even the fishiest of flavors. I can only say that this is why I finally notice that Chloe is slowly dwindling away, now in a very literal sense. One day, for a reason I do not know, I really look at Chloe's morning food dish when I swap it out for a fresh dish in the afternoon. When it is still full, the un-lapped juices of the canned food staining a light brown outline in the paper dish, I really look at Chloe. Chloe looks a little thin, a little sorry, a little lost, and when I open the drop down door at the bottom of her cage, I finally realize that it is more than a little problem. Along with everyone else in the building during the past several months, I have failed to ever really see Chloe, but now I can *feel* her.

Normally Chloe remains in the back of her cage during cleaning, sometimes swatting at us to leave alone this tiny space that is all she has, but today, she slowly stretches out, avoiding the metal bars of the drop down door by climbing onto my legs. Here, as Chloe tries to balance, her claws dig into my thighs, and I realize that they are becoming almost so long that they curl. All the cats get their nails cut when they are processed shortly after being surrendered, and now I feel those claws and realize that Chloe is still here and that she has been here, been forgotten long enough to need a re-trimming that most cats get in a new home, and that no one here usually thinks of.

Chloe is still hanging onto my legs, looking around the room that she has stared at for so long but never been able to explore. She is irritated and dislodges one paw from my leg for long enough to whack me when I run my hand down her back. My hand is maybe wet from filling water dishes or soaking washcloths, maybe sweaty from the morning of lifting, wiping, scooping, and filling, but still, too much of Chloe's fur is left on my palm when I pull it away

from her. Brushing is not something that most of our cats stay long enough to need much of either, but Chloe's fur has slowly been letting go and building up in her coat, waiting for her depression to subside enough to spark some self-grooming. Underneath this loose fur, I feel so much spine that it makes me shudder. Someone should do something, I think.

This is only maybe my fourth or fifth month at the shelter, and I don't know who to tell, who to ask for help for Chloe. With so many sick cats needing Amoxi or Clavamox every morning and afternoon, not to mention all the litters of tiny kittens being born in the Back Cats nursery, there is barely time to take care of the basic feeding and cleaning without sacrificing lunch breaks and staff meetings and staying hours later than the schedule suggests. Still, I know, someone should do something. I try feeding Chloe tuna flavored food and dripping extra gravy from the other cats' cans into her dish, but it isn't enough to entice her. I don't know what else I can do to help her, though. I am so new at this job; I've barely finished my three training months of following Dee around, and I still feel more like I should be watching than actually doing. I don't know it then, with Chloe, but this is something that I will struggle with forever. This is a job that I may never feel qualified to do, a job in which a mistake can mean a bite, a ten day rabies hold, even a life. But still, someone should do something.

I'm not sure that I am someone yet, but Chloe seems to think that I am, when she stretches onto my legs again later that day. I pick her up carefully, one hand cupping the back of her neck just in case she tries to bite and I need to control her head by the scruff. She is so thin and bony that I feel like I am hurting her just by supporting the five or six pounds of her with my palm on her rib cage. Maybe I am, because when I put her down on the counter in the Front Cats kitchen, she whacks me again. And again. And again.

I have to laugh a little, boxing with this black and white cat on the kitchen counter, her patched iris glaring at me as I mix some canned food into a high calorie milk-like supplement. For the first time, after months of walking past her, I am finally discovering Chloe, finally seeing that she is a real someone with a real personality. She's kind of fresh!

The freshness continues when I first try to pry the edge of Chloe's mouth open with the tip of the plastic syringe. She has to be hungry, but she doesn't know what I am doing, doesn't even know who I am or why I am poking a hard plastic tip into the sides of her gums. Finally, she opens her jaw for a second, and I squirt in the first blast of this chunky liquid that I've decided she'll have for lunch, have as her first meal in awhile.

It isn't me who's laughing, but Chloe, when something malfunctions somewhere in her mouth and the liquid sprays back at me, globbing itself onto the front of my T-shirt and dripping in chunks down my face. The milk supplement can says it's vanilla flavored, but my ratios must be a little off, because all I can taste is the gritty mush of the canned food that has splashed into the corners of my mouth. It does not help me understand why "Mariner's Catch" is a favorite flavor among the cats.

Chloe and I are alone in the kitchen. Luckily, I have had the foresight to close the door so that visitors and adopters wouldn't watch, but my journey across the adoption area to the washcloth drawer is like a walk of shame. When I return to the kitchen, blotting the food off my face, Chloe is still sitting on the towel on the counter where I have left her. She is staring at me, encircled by drips of the food mixture, her patchy iris laughing at my mess. I am beginning to think of her as a nasty little cat, but this is an improvement. Nasty is someone. Nasty is better than nothing at all.

After a few more days of morning and afternoon force-feedings on the cat kitchen counter, Chloe and I develop a routine. I open her cage in West Side, and she stretches out onto my lap and tolerates my carrying her to the kitchen. She repeatedly whacks me as I prepare the food mixture, (until I learn to stir it together before bringing her into the kitchen). With the help of a smaller syringe, she allows me, barely, to tip back her head and squirt in my recipe, up to about ten syringes full. When she has had enough, she lets me know with a full-on meltdown and attack, which ends with the food mixture all over my shirt, her towel, and her fur. Finally, I attempt to shove a tiny appetite stimulant pill into the back of her throat. Usually, I fail. At this point, Chloe fakes a truce and allows me to carry her back to her cage, where she disgustedly cleans herself. When I return a second later to offer her the bowl of leftover food and milk, she smacks me over and over again, with her claws out. Afterwards, I head out to my locker to grab a clean shirt. Chloe finishes her bath, settles onto her towel, and gains weight.

By the time Chloe starts lapping up the mixture on her own, she has certainly succeeded in convincing me to notice her. Somewhere along the way, among Chloe's frustrated meltdowns and my repeated accidental tastings of various Friskies flavors, I have actually started to not only see her, but to like her. There is something about her half-hearted fury and angry independence that makes her, somehow, endearing, funny, and memorable. Chloe is not the nicest cat in the shelter, but she is herself. She is someone. I leave her there, in her Tokyo, as someone, when I return to college at the end of the summer. There, I will bury my face in artificial work that makes no difference and count down the days until I can go back to being someone, while I pray that she never gets sick and stops eating again while I am gone.

Mr. Fluffy

Animal ID: 5019
Animal Name: Mr. Fluffy
Source: Stray-No ID
Weight: 11.02 lbs
Type: Cat
Breed/Species: Domestic Long Hair
Primary Color: Black
Secondary Color: None
Sex: Male

Status Date: 2/6/2009
Status: Awaiting Sort

Mr. Fluffy is almost lost in the same shuffle as Chloe. Another summer shelter resident, he has to compete with the hundreds of cats in the cages and rooms around him, most of whom are louder, prettier, and pushier than he is. Again, Mr. Fluffy's entrance into the shelter and his time in back cats is lost to me, dissolved in an overwhelming sea of meows and memories alongside of Chloe's early days. The first place Mr. Fluffy exists, in my mind, is in his Tokyo in Front Cats.

Mr. Fluffy's Tokyo is at least in a better location than Chloe's, forcing me to see at least it, at least the cage itself, as I balance food dishes, clean towels, and medications atop it during morning animal care. It is here, within his Tokyo in the interior lobby of the Cat Pavilion, that Mr. Fluffy waits. In my earliest and most common images of him, Mr. Fluffy is sitting on his shelf, tucked back as close to the concrete wall behind him as the cage's black bars will allow.

Shelter Buddy tells me that Mr. Fluffy came in as a stray, and maybe this is why his tucked-away position makes him seem almost feral. His long black fur hides even his face, until it seems like Mr. Fluffy wants to curl up tightly enough to turn inside out and disappear completely. When he, too, comes down with an upper respiratory infection, he becomes even more "feral," not because he wants to be, but because the Amoxi makes him. During the seven days that this first med chart hangs over his cage card, the only real interaction, the only physical

touch, that Mr. Fluffy feels is a hand tightly gripping the skin on the back of his neck, as a plastic syringe squeezes in between his teeth and fills his mouth with bubblegum goo.

Many days, this hand is mine, and in the busy rush of daily animal care, I fail to see Mr. Fluffy as much more than just one more cat to be medicated. By about day five, he becomes so annoyed by the Amoxi that it is too difficult to medicate him while he is hunkered down on his Tokyo's shelf. Now, because he will spit and shake most of the Amoxi into his fur if I don't take him into the cat kitchen, our interactions begin to change.

In the kitchen, I find, Mr. Fluffy swallows his medication best when I sit with him on my lap in the wooden chair tucked back among the buckets and squeegees. In the chair, he allows me to not only squirt the medicine into his mouth, but also to wipe some of the pink drips out of his fur and pet him a few times before he makes a break for it and bolts for the kitchen door. After each medicating, Mr. Fluffy nearly leaps from my arms through the small, rectangular door of his cage, just to resume his tucked-away position on his shelf. To him, I am barely someone; I am only the Amoxi and the plastic syringes. To me, he is just one on the list of sneezy, sick cats, set apart only by his fearful avoidance of me and the world around him.

But try as he may, Mr. Fluffy cannot avoid the effects of the upper respiratory infection. He ends up being one of the unlucky ones, when the illness upgrades to Calicivirus and settles in his eye. In the shelter, all illnesses are tough to fight back, but eye problems seem to be the most delicate. Mr. Fluffy, like many others, goes through a series of different ointments and drops, and has nothing to show for it in the end but one squinty eyelid and a cloudy ulcer. I half expect to see Mr. Fluffy disappear into Lab I one day and come out later with only one eye, and some days, while he is exhibiting his most expert head-twisting, eyedrop avoiding skills, I think this might be best. With no more bad eye and no more med charts, Mr. Fluffy could finally have a

shot at recovering from the trauma of being pinned down and medicated, and could finally have a shot at going home. Besides, it would be one less thing to worry about during the year's busiest months at the shelter.

But when the vet has one last idea, a healing serum made with drops of Mr. Fluffy's blood, I am willing to give it a shot. I have never heard of this use of an animal's own blood as an external healing agent, and I should admit that I'm a little creeped out by it, but when the vial appears in the Front Cats fridge, I am surprised by how normal the translucent, light pink liquid looks. After a little bit of wrestling to get him out of his cage and onto the chair in the kitchen, I drip it onto Mr. Fluffy's ulcer and wait.

But the magical blood serum doesn't seem too magical, and after a few days of it, his eye looks just as cloudy as ever. When I pull down his med chart to check in with the vet tech about his lack of progress, I am surprised to see that many of Mr. Fluffy's four daily doses have not been signed off by anyone. I know that I have been dutifully drawing up the serum into plastic droppers every morning and afternoon that I'm on staff, but it seems that his ten AM and noon doses, which don't occur during normal medication times, have been getting forgotten by me and everyone else. I bring this up at the Wednesday staff meeting, but when the general consensus of the other Animal Care Technicians is that four daily doses is too many to realistically achieve in between the dog walking, kennel scrubbing, and feeding that already occurs, not to mention the fact that someone's got to handle barn duty and the isolation area, I know that nothing will change. My co-workers are right, it's nearly impossible to drop everything for Mr. Fluffy every couple of hours during these busy summer days, but still, I think, Mr. Fluffy is someone. He may be small, fearful, and at times frustrating, but he ought to matter anyway. He ought to at least have a shot at keeping his eye. Someone should do something, I think.

That night, after a staff outing to a restaurant, Dee and I stop back in at the shelter to pick up our things from our lockers. Now that the shelter is dark, quiet, and practically empty of people, it is easier than usual to remember Mr. Fluffy. The vet has told me that he should ideally be getting his eye drops every two hours from early in the morning until late at night, and that the med chart only goes just until closing because we only go until closing, so I decide to give him an evening dose of his serum. Tonight, as I pull Mr. Fluffy out of his cage, he fights me less than usual, and he even braves a quick arching of the back as I stroke him when I am finished. He calmly steps into his cage afterwards, allowing me to ease him onto his shelf, where he remains standing in the front, watching me.

There, in the twilight of the Cat Pavilion lobby, I fill out a foster contract, stuff his serum into my pocket, and load Mr. Fluffy into a plastic carrier.

At home, I move Mr. Fluffy into my upstairs bathroom, the same bathroom that my once-feral kitten lived in years earlier. Here, he doesn't scramble for the curtain rod, but settles into a plush bed that I have set up for him. As I stand at the bathroom counter, writing up a new med chart for him that goes from six AM until ten PM, Mr. Fluffy quietly pads across the linoleum, and snakes in and out of my ankles. He has been shaved in a "lion's cut" grooming style since the days of the pink Amoxi sticking in his fur, and the sides of his body feel like hot velvet against my calves. I never would have guessed he could be so friendly, but a Tokyo is less than a bathroom, and a shelter is less than a home.

Mr. Fluffy doesn't spend more than a week at my house, but in his short time as a foster, he explodes from a cowering puff of black into a real cat with a big personality. On my days off, I spend quiet periods of time with him, sitting on the bathroom floor and allowing him to collapse into my lap. Maybe it is this non-medication time that makes medication time so much

easier, because when I arrive in the bathroom with a dropper full of his pink serum, Mr. Fluffy jovially hops up onto the bathroom counter, curves around the sink, and practically holds his own eyelid open as I squirt in the cold drops.

On one of my days off I spend a few hours hauling brush with my dad, trading yard work for his services in medicating Mr. Fluffy on the days that I have to work. On these days, he faithfully drips the serum into Mr. Fluffy's eyes and signs his initials in the grid on the med chart. In the evenings, I hear stories of Mr. Fluffy's antics in the bathroom, comments on how goofy he looks all shaved down, and suggestions that we trade him for our almost identical former basement dweller, who has never taken a liking to my dad.

After several days of his bathroom vacation, I bring Mr. Fluffy back with a new understanding of his personality and a good feeling about his eye. With some simple adherence to his med chart, his ulcer has dwindled from an all-encompassing cloud to a tiny foggy speck. I don't know what makes me happier, the fact that he is adopted a few days later by someone whose house is only a bike ride away from mine, or the general reaction of everyone at the shelter when they first see him again. Everyone is appalled, surprised, and completely impressed, by not only the lack of ulcer, but also by the fact that a once-shy Mr. Fluffy clings happily to my shoulder and allows me to carry him around the bustling lobby as if nothing can bring him down.

When we stop outside the door of my manager, Jen's, office, she says, "So this is your little project. Bring him on in so I can take a closer look."

I carry him to the side of her desk, and she glances up from her computer screen, doing a double take when she sees his two clear eyes.

"Well," she says. "Isn't that *something*."

Name: Mr. Fluffy

Status Date: 5/2/2009

Status: Adopted

Sugar

Animal ID: 5542
Animal Name: Sugar
Source: Owner Surrender
Reason for Surrender: Abandoned by Original Owner
Weight: 6.9 lbs
Type: Cat
Breed/Species: Domestic Short Hair
Primary Color: White
Secondary Color: Brown Tiger
Sex: Female

Status Date: 4/4/2009
Status: Awaiting Sort

Sugar has almost nothing in common with Chloe and Mr. Fluffy. Her problem is not only far from being sick, it's also far from being unnoticed. If Chloe doesn't immediately fit into a group of cats that earn special consideration by being mean, Sugar definitely does. It is this, Sugar's terrible and terrifying behavior, that is her problem. It is this that makes the dilemma of blending in seem almost desirable.

Perhaps one of the reasons that I can't remember Chloe's and Mr. Fluffy's time in Back Cats is because of cats like Sugar. Here, Sugar is in the Stray Holding room, not because she is actually a stray, but because the Owned Cat Holding room is full when she is surrendered, and because no one has the guts to try and move her when some cage space eventually frees up. Her cage is the top one on the far right, furthest from the room's door.

Here, Sugar paces during morning cleaning each day, and sticks one paw between the bars now and then, to remind me that she is there, and that she is waiting. Sugar is the type of cat that makes me stray from the usual protocol of cleaning all the top cages before starting on the bottom ones, out of logical consideration of the fact that I need to remain un-injured each day for as long as possible. She is the type of cat that makes me duck a little lower while cleaning the cage below her, in order to avoid an unpleasant claw-style head massage. She is the type of cat that makes me decide, many mornings, to arrive early to work so that I can claim a spot cleaning

Front Cats, dog kennels, or the small animal room, and avoid Stray Holding altogether. Sugar is a small cat, not yet quite full grown, but she is impeccably intimidating, and exquisitely mean.

Many people ask if our shelter is a “no-kill.” In a way it is, and in a way it isn’t. When an animal is surrendered, we allow it an unlimited stay. This means that animals, no matter how old or young, how outgoing or shy, can stay at the shelter until someone selects them and takes them home. This means that staff and volunteers can choose favorites without worrying that one day, their cages will be mysteriously and suddenly empty. This means that I can go to work each morning without certainty that the day will be heartbreaking.

This, like everything, has exceptions.

There are two problems that can deny an animal their unlimited stay: illness and aggression. Illness is flexible, and as the shelter continues to grow, more and more physical issues can be treated. Now, only completely untreatable illnesses, such as Feline AIDS and Leukemia, lead to euthanasia. These, that is, and aggression. Among dogs, aggression means bite histories, attacks on other animals, and other dangerous behaviors. Among cats, aggression is less defined. Many cats are aggressive when they first arrive in Back Cats, and we do all that we can to let them settle in. Sometimes it just takes a few days, sometimes it takes movement to a non-caged space, and sometimes, it never happens at all. But a cat doesn’t need to be friendly to go up for adoption; it only needs to be processed.

It is this processing, this nail trimming, de-worming, blood testing, and microchipping, that moves a cat from Back Cats to Front Cats, and once in Front Cats, cats are generally safe. This isn’t usually a difficult transition; processing is almost always successful on the first try and can be done by any two staff members with a few free minutes. It isn’t usually a dangerous or stressful procedure for the staff. But then again, the cats aren’t usually Sugar.

When Sugar fails a few processing attempts by flailing, scratching, and attempting to bite before she can even be removed from her cage, her future seems clear. She hasn't chosen any staff or volunteers to particularly like, so her options are limited. Either she can allow someone to remove her from her cage, pin her to the metal table in Lab I, and successfully draw out three drops of blood from the inside of her back leg, or she can, one day, mysteriously and suddenly disappear. No one wants to risk getting injured, to suffer through the stress of once again unsuccessfully fighting Sugar out of her cage, so she remains in Stray Holding for over a week, with a Staff Only sign clipped to her cage card.

Sugar isn't a favorite of mine, and I feel no desire to spend any quality time with her in Lab I, allowing her to shred the skin off my arms, but still, she is someone. I imagine her living in someone's house before arriving at the shelter, imagine her acting like a regular cat and rubbing up against her person's legs. Surely, no animal can be this mean without reason, right?

And Sugar has a reason: being here. To me, Stray Holding is just another room with cages to clean and floors to scrub, a normal part of my day; to Sugar, it is the most frightening place she has ever been. Here, she is trapped behind bars, listening to the sounds of spraying hoses, slamming doors, and other scary unknowns that she cannot even see to identify in the one empty square of cement wall facing her cage that she stares at each day. Here, she eats strange food that she has never tasted before, sleeps only a foot away from her toilet, and is constantly jolted awake by the meows of the cats around her and the distant barks of dogs. Sugar is terrified, no different from the cats that hide in a corner on their shelves and later get processed and adopted, except in the way she shows it. Someone should do something, I think.

I consider myself fortunate to work at the shelter alongside my sister. Not only does this give me an occasional ride to work and fundraising events and someone to talk with about the

animals during days off and family functions, but it also gives me someone in front of whom I don't feel "unprofessional" when screaming expletives in Lab I while processing Sugar. We both understand that without this, Sugar will likely die. We both understand that someone should do something. We both understand that we both are someone.

So, because we are someone, we stand in Lab I on a holiday work day, when everyone else has left the shelter early, processing Sugar. Somehow, we are lucky enough to scruff her right the first time to get her out of her cage; with cats like Sugar, you only get one shot. In Lab I, while Jennifer holds Sugar tight on the metal table, we discuss our options. Sugar is not yet spayed, so some things, like her nail trim and microchipping, can be done while she is under anesthesia on surgery day. Today, all we absolutely need to do for Sugar to live is the FIV/FELV combo test. Today, all we need is three drops of blood. (The catch is that they have to be from Sugar, not us.)

There are many different techniques that we use at the shelter for processing cats. Jennifer and I have taken on tough cats before, and since I can't draw blood, I am always the "holder." As the holder, I have learned everything from a simple scruffing, to the technique of holding cats still with my chest so that my hands can better extend the leg, a move we call the "Boob Hold." But in this case, even the Boob Hold isn't enough, and after a few failed attempts, I somehow end up with Sugar splinted to my forearm, her body held firm against my skin with several tightly wrapped towels. Her displeasure is clear; she is twisting her head to come close to biting my hand, and she is, quite literally, screaming. I feel sorry, both for my arm that's stuck in the towels with her, and for Sugar. I wish I could make her understand that we are trying to help her, trying to save her, and that after these few moments of fear, everything will be okay. But

Sugar cannot understand me, and besides, she doesn't let me get a word in edgewise. Her screams are loud enough to make me thankful that no customers are in the building.

My arms are shaking, and my hand that holds her scruff is clamped so tight that it is cramping, but the splint method works. Even with my head stretched back, as far away as possible from the flailing clump of towels that is Sugar, I can see that the blood in the syringe that Jennifer finally holds up to show me is just barely enough to run a test.

When I quickly release Sugar back into her cage in Stray Holding and pull the towels away from my arm, the designs from their cotton seams are imprinted into my skin. Back in Lab I, the combo test comes up with one dot, and Sugar is officially negative for FIV and FELV. Jennifer writes "Combo Test 0" on the front of Sugar's cage card, and we stand more than a paw's length away from her cage to admire it. These two and a half words would mean nothing to most people, but for Sugar, they are something. For Sugar, these words are her life.

When other staff members clean Back Cats in the following days and notice the note on Sugar's cage card, they raise their eyebrows in surprise, just as they will in a few weeks when, only days after being cautiously moved to a glass-sided window box cage in Front Cats, Sugar is adopted. Her adopter first meets her in the phone receptionist's office, and I tensely watch them interact together through the glass window behind the front desk. The woman has told me she wants a "feisty" cat, but I'm not sure that this word fully does Sugar justice. Whatever she does, I pray that Sugar won't bite the woman until after she signs the adoption contract.

Through the window, I see Sugar climbing on the woman's shoulders. The woman is laughing, scratching Sugar's ears, and miraculously remaining un-injured. But maybe it isn't miraculous, I think, as Sugar's new person steps out of the office to fill out all her adoption

forms. Maybe it's actually simple. Maybe it's just three drops of blood, and someone stepping up.

Name: Sugar

Status Date: 4/21/2009

Status: Adopted

When I return from college for Spring break, a different cat is in Chloe's Tokyo. I ask three different adoption counselors if she has been adopted.

The first says, "Which Chloe?"

The second says, "I think so... I don't really remember."

The third says, after I remind her of Chloe's appearance and summer of being sick, "I don't think I know who you're talking about."

It figures.

When I look her up in the computer system, though, Shelter Buddy remembers her, and tells me that she was adopted in February. It seems that Chloe has slunk out of the shelter as inconspicuously as she came in, but it doesn't matter if everyone remembers her. It only matters that someone does. And besides me and Shelter Buddy, I know that there is an adopter out there somewhere that knows she exists, that saw her in her Tokyo one day, and did something. Because of people like this, and because of cats like Chloe, Mr. Fluffy, and Sugar, I will continue to do something too.

Many days, when I am standing behind the front desk or going over adoption paperwork, the customer in front of me will look up and say, "I don't know how you do this," as if this job is unthinkable, insurmountable, and miraculous somehow, and some days it is. But most days, it isn't. Most days, it's just feeding, processing, and medicating. Most days, it is only these things, things that don't earn me world renown, hero treatment, or even, usually, thanks. These things

are mostly absorbed by the shelter, the executive directors, the big picture. But these things are something to Chloe, to Mr. Fluffy, to Sugar. These things are maybe one less night of being hungry, maybe an eye, maybe a whole little life.

So when people say, "I don't know how you do this," I don't feel like a hero. I just don't know how I could ever stop. I do this because I know that I can do something for Chloe, for Mr. Fluffy, for Sugar. I am someone. Are you?

Name: Chloe

Status Date: 2/15/2010

Status: Adopted

Fluffy's surrender is, to me, the sort of moment that makes you remember exactly what everyone is wearing when it happens. Today, she wears a white, long-sleeved, button-down shirt with the shelter's logo and the words "Fluffy's Friends" printed on the back. She is sitting on the floor in the kennel earlier in the morning. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera.

I'm way too new for this. This is all I can think, as I gradually press myself up closer and closer to the foot-wide strip of pecked concrete wall that separates me from my manager, Jennifer. Jennifer is looking at the camera. Jennifer is looking at the camera. Jennifer is looking at the camera.

Fluffy Gorgeous

Fluffy is a Pomeranian. She is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera.

I've been working at the shelter long enough, technically, to be able to approach and deal with customers at the surrender desk on my own. I know how to photocopy driver's licenses, and I know how to enter and animal information in Shelter Buddy, and say "would you like to leave a donation to help cover the cost of her care while she's with us?" The thing is, though, that the surrender desk isn't the same as a fast-food restaurant counter, where other people my age are working. There is no menu. So even though I've memorized the usual surrender spiel, I still feel a little nervous when I catch some movement at the Animal Admitting door out of the corner of my eye, because I never know what I'm going to get. Surrenders

don't follow a script; sometimes you get "time-suckers" who want to tell you their whole life story, sometimes less. Today, I get this. And I'm way too new for it. She is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera.

Fluffy is a Pomeranian. She is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera. The dog is sitting on the floor in the kennel, looking at the camera.

Animal ID: 6106
Animal Name: Fluffy
Source: Owner Surrender
Reason for Surrender: Cannot Afford Care
Weight: 6 lbs
Type: Dog
Breed/Species: Pomeranian
Primary Color: Red
Secondary Color: None
Sex: Female

Status Date: 6/9/2009
Status: Awaiting Sort

I'm way too new for this. This is all I can think, as I gradually press myself up closer and closer to the foot-wide strip of pocked concrete wall that separates me from my manager, Jen's, office door. I don't know for sure if she's inside or not; I'm listening for the sound of typing, phone conversations, anything at all, but all I can hear is the girl on the other side of the surrender desk, talking, explaining, droning on, and gasping in surprise at herself. I should be listening to what she is saying, calmly explaining the shelter's policies to her, and remaining perfectly professional and composed, but all I can think is, I'm way too new for this.

I've been working at the shelter long enough, technically, to be able to approach and deal with customers at the surrender desk on my own. I know how to photocopy driver's licenses, hand out personality profiles, enter owner and animal information in Shelter Buddy, and say "would you like to leave a donation to help cover the cost of her care while she's with us?" The thing is, though, that the surrender desk isn't the same as a fast food restaurant counter, where other people my age are working. There is no menu. So even though I've memorized the usual surrender spiel, I still feel a little nervous when I catch some movement at the Animal Admitting door out of the corner of my eye, because I never know what I'm going to get. Surrenderers don't follow a script; sometimes you get tears, sometimes "time-suckers" who want to tell you their whole life story, sometimes lies. Today, I get this. And I'm way too new for it.

Fluffy's surrender is, to me, the sort of moment that makes you remember, even years later, exactly what everyone is wearing when it happens. Today, I am wearing my usual uniform: tan pants, a shirt with the shelter's logo, and old sneakers, still squishing and wet inside from squeegeeing floors in the kennels earlier in the morning. My uniform shirt is the only one I have so far—maroon, long-sleeved, and still too new to have acquired the signature hip level tiny holes that it will later earn from catching on the metal tips of bottom level cage doors. Fluffy's owner is wearing a sheer-ish white T-shirt that shows her bright pink bra underneath and a pair of black pajama pants with bursts of color containing cartoon characters I don't recognize. These pajama pants and pink bra—an outfit that truly makes me think she rushed out the door this morning in a genuine, frantic state of panic—is the only thing that makes me want to believe this girl, makes me want to have a little bit of sympathy for her. The sympathy only lasts, though, until I see what she has balled up in a towel in her arms. Until I see Fluffy.

Fluffy is a Pomeranian, and judging from the opinion I'm already forming of the girl holding her, she's probably a pet store puppy, born to an overtired mama dog on the dirty wire bottom of a cage in a puppy mill. She is a color that breed books would call red, but she only looks tan in comparison to the deep crimson splotches of still wet blood that are spreading to reach each other's edges on the white towel she's wrapped in. For a minute or two, I'm not sure if she's even alive. The blood on the towel seems like too much to have come from her tiny body. But then she shudders a little, reminding me that she's still here.

Although the things we are wearing are still clear in my mind two summers later, the things we are saying are now a blur, flying past me in a gust of adrenaline and time, just like they do on the morning that Fluffy comes in. The girl is still talking, still saying something about waking up this morning, something about yesterday, something about money. She is still holding

Fluffy in the bloody towel, tight to her sheer white shirt and pink bra. And I must be pulling myself away from the concrete wall and saying something, because I am pushing a surrender form across the counter at her and tapping the tip of a pen on the line she should sign. She is still talking, trying to explain something, but all I can see is the blood, swallowing up the entire white towel and the tiny dog inside.

When the girl finally signs the surrender line, everything stops, and I can think again. I wonder if we have been making a commotion, because other customers in the lobby are staring and Jen emerges from around that concrete corner. The girl's name is on the line, but I can't remember it now, only her outfit and that the vet meets Fluffy at the Staff Only doors and spins her smoothly into Lab I, opening the swinging door with her shoulder and hip to protect her gloved hands and the dying dog in them. I will peer through the door to the lab later and see, through the silver checkerboard of lines on the glass window, that a dental was still in progress on the silver counter where we process cats. I will see Linda, the vet's assistant, carefully pulling a plastic tube out of another dog's throat, even though his teeth haven't been fixed yet, because he is routine and Fluffy is an emergency.

Now I see only the girl, empty-handed on the other side of the counter. With Fluffy gone, she seems to notice for the first time her name on the surrender line.

"Is she going to be okay?" she asks, her fingers gripping the edge of the counter, shaking. "When can I pick her up?"

She is looking at me when she asks, but I am way too new for this, and Jen understands.

"We won't know until the vet finishes with her," Jen tells the girl, straight-faced, as if she is talking about something far away from here. "But to be honest with you, I don't think her chances are very good."

This is when, I think, the girl should cry. Her dog is in Lab I, dying or maybe already dead. She should cry here at the surrender desk, harder than the families who are dropping off their dogs because the landlord won't allow them, harder than the old women who cry because they will miss their cats so much in the one day it will take us to spay them. She should cry because it's too late, because no one can do anything, because the bloody towel will go out in tonight's trash and it will all be over, Fluffy will be over. But she doesn't cry at all.

Instead, she says, "Well if you're not going to do anything, then you might as well give her back to me."

"Our vet is going to do everything she can," Jen tells her, still coolly. "She's got her in emergency surgery now, so we'll give her the best possible chance."

"If she's not going to survive anyway," the girl says, adamantly, "then I want you to just put her down. I just want to have her body back."

What? I adjust the papers in the drawer beneath the keyboard and click a little with the mouse, highlighting random phrases on Shelter Buddy's screen: "Rabies Tag No.," "Is this an approximate age?," "Distinguishing Features/Markings." The questions don't make sense when you read them like this, disjointed and out of order, and neither does the girl in the pink bra who only wants Fluffy's body back. I wonder, am I hearing this right? I wonder, is Fluffy just a body now, or still a dog?

Jen tries a few more times to make sense of everything, to reason with the girl.

"I just want her body back," is all the girl keeps saying, almost shouting now. "I just want you to put her down."

Jen glances at me, pretending to check something on the computer screen, and raises her eyebrow just a little. I am new, but somehow I know that she is asking if the girl has signed the

surrender line. I pretend to gather all the paperwork up, but instead let the surrender form slide across the counter, hitting the plastic edge of the appointment book in front of Jen just a little too noticeably. The girl looks down at it, but Jen sees it too, and her whole tone changes.

“If this were my dog,” she says, with aggressive professionalism, “I would want to do everything I could for her. I would want to at least try and save her life. This is what our vet is doing right now.”

“She’s *my* dog,” the girl shouts, sidestepping the edge of the counter to come face-to-face with Jen. “She’s not going to survive, so I just want to have her body back. Why don’t you understand that?!”

“What you need to understand is that we—,” Jen gestures around her, to me, to the other adoption counselors standing timidly behind the front desk, even to the customers in the lobby who are all staring now, “are here for the animals. We are here to do the very best we can for them, and only them. We try to be sensitive and sympathetic, but we cannot let your needs or wishes cloud what it is that we are really here to do, and that’s to save *them*.”

The girl looks at me, her face red and angry, and I nod a little, and then feel like maybe I shouldn’t have.

“A dog does not, under any circumstances, get into that sort of condition overnight,” Jen is saying, gripping the surrender form so the edges start to wrinkle. “I am sorry if you are having financial troubles, but it is your responsibility to your dog to get her medical care when she needs it, which would mean months ago when you first started seeing blood, when she first started crying instead of peeing.”

I’m starting to piece together what’s going on here, and things are flying back at me from the story the girl told before signing the surrender form. According to her, Fluffy was fine

yesterday, but when she woke up this morning, the bed was covered in blood and Fluffy couldn't even stand. I guess Jen knows it's a bladder issue, from where the blood was coming from, and I start to feel angry too. I am thinking of my own cat, Simon, who eats special diet U/R food now because of the day he cried and kept going back to the litter box. I remember missing school because it was in the morning and Simon was more important than third grade. I remember holding the carrier in the car, and sitting in Dr. Mitchell's waiting room, and leaving Simon there overnight. I remember how easy it was, to drive him there and pick him up and throw away his old food. I remember Simon this morning, sleeping on an afghan with his head tucked down, one paw curled to cover his eyes, and I remember Fluffy in the towel that seemed to bleed by itself. I know that I am new, but also that I must have done something right, because the girl's signature is on the surrender line.

She is screaming at Jen now, arguing about her right to have her dead dog back. In hindsight, I will recognize that she's probably not always like this, and that the stress of a dying pet weighs on everyone differently, but now all I recognize is how strange it sounds to hear her talk about her dead dog, when as far as I know, Fluffy is still alive.

The more she argues, the younger the girl seems, and not just because of the cartoons on her pajama pants. She sounds like a girl in a middle school cafeteria, arguing about boyfriends and dress codes, not about someone's life. She keeps stepping closer to Jen, and I am waiting for her to say "You wanna piece of me?" when Dennis steps through the Staff Only doors. He is a big, tattooed guy, and the one male staff member in the building today. His jobs are to mop the floors, to fix the drains when they clog, to replace light bulbs, and to stand by our sides when (usually male) customers get a little too up in our faces.

The girl steps back when she sees him, and Jen takes it as her chance to get in her last words, her most important words.

“Frankly, you signed the dog over to us. This is a surrender form you signed, and because of it we can do whatever we think is best for the dog. You might think that getting her body back is best for you, but we are doing surgery. You no longer have a choice.” She stacks the surrender form on the pile with the rest of Fluffy’s paperwork, taps it all on the counter to even out the edges, and staples the corner with more finality than the girl can muster when she slams the door on her way out.

Have you ever seen a bladder stone? I have. First, on a clean white towel on the counter in Lab I, and later, sitting in front of a wooden ruler in a picture on the camera on Jen’s desk. Fluffy produces two for us to look at, and what surprises me most is how much they look like regular stones. They are a light golden color, and mostly smooth, like the stones that tap against each other as the waves roll in and out at the beach. I almost want to pick them up, to turn them over and look at the backs, the bottoms, the sides, to find what makes them different, but I don’t.

I don’t think about it when I first see them on the towel, but every time I use the camera to take cat pictures for the website in the months after Fluffy, I will be surprised by something else: their size. I know that it isn’t for my benefit that they’re sitting by the ruler, but I’m glad they are. If they weren’t, the blank white towel might trick me into thinking they were only pebbles. Instead, they’re each more than two inches wide, looking like the jawbreakers that I used to lick until my tongue bled and then save in a plastic bag in the junk drawer for later. Individually, they are bigger than I would suspect a Pomeranian’s bladder should be. Together, they are sickening.

But before I see them on the camera, I am seeing them on the towel in the lab, and looking at them so carefully that, at first, I don't notice Fluffy's empty recovery cage. The night before, she was lying in the top crate just outside the surgery doors, wrapped carefully in a bundle of towels like a brand-new baby, letting only her head and the plastic tube for the IV drip spill out of the top of the terry-cloth pile. When I turned the lights off in the lab during shutdown, she looked alive, but not alive enough for me to celebrate her survival of the surgery. Even then, it was miraculous, I guess, that the vet managed to somehow sew up the paper-thin skin of her split bladder, managed to pull out two tiny boulders and still leave a little bit of life inside. But because of the stones on the counter and the mood of the vet and the amount of blood on that first white towel, I am not surprised to find her cage empty the next morning.

Usually when an animal disappears from Lab I, I can find it later, in Back Cats, or Back Dogs, or out on the adoption floor. Fluffy, of course, isn't in any of these places. I leave the bladder stones on the counter, not sure whether they should be saved in just a plastic baggy or in a formaldehyde jar, and begin to clean out Fluffy's cage. There is no food or water dish inside, so I gather the towels up one by one to take to the laundry bin. I can tell which towel Fluffy was wrapped in first, because it has patches of blood drying into rough, stiff shapes like fabric paint. There isn't as much as there was on the first towel, but it seems like too much anyway. After surgery, an animal is supposed to be fixed, to be better. Dogs who are better shouldn't bleed.

After all the towels are out of the cage, I spray the plastic tray and the bars with cleaning solution. Ten minutes later, when I come back to wipe out the puddles, my washcloth picks up one golden eyebrow whisker. No one has said anything, but I am certain I know where Fluffy is. I am certain that the two stones and this one eyebrow whisker are all that's left. I wonder if I should save this, too.

But just as I am convincing myself that the one whisker won't do any good, I see several more, sprouting out of Fluffy's forehead as Jen totes her past the window of Lab I.

Everything in the lab now seems to matter less, and I leave Fluffy's recovery cage half finished, disinfected but empty, for someone else to re-set-up later. Maybe that person knows what to do with the bladder stones, too, because I never see them again, except on the camera.

By the time I shove through the Staff Only doors into the front lobby, Jen is in her office, unloading what looks like a diaper bag full of Fluffy's things. For a tiny dog, she comes with a lot; the bag is packed with blankets, canned food, puppy supplements, bandages, a plastic cone collar, and more things that I can only imagine, zipped safely into the center pocket.

Fluffy matches the diaper bag perfectly, dressed in a preemie-sized, white onesie with pastel prints of rattles and blocks. She is wandering slowly around the office and sniffing at tiny pieces of cat food that have rolled underneath the heater, as if nothing happened yesterday.

I am still holding the dripping washcloth when I finally lean my elbows all the way over the bottom half of the office door and speak. I don't want to say what I'm thinking, which is that I can't believe she's still alive, because I don't want to admit that I didn't have hope that she would be.

"She made it," I say, and it comes out sounding a little more astonished than I would like.

"She made it," Jen says, looking first at me and then at the tiny dog, her head cocked slightly at the sound of Jen's voice. "You made it, didn't you Fluffy Gorgeous?"

And from then on, it's Fluffy Gorgeous. We usually pick on Jen a little for her naming tendencies. Her former foster kitten couldn't be just "Tawny," she had to be "Tawny Moonbeam." And the stray Siamese cat couldn't be just "Mocha," she had to be "Choca Mocha Latte." But no one dares to laugh at Fluffy Gorgeous. More than anyone in the shelter, she needs

a new identity, needs a second start. Mostly this is psychological, and probably more for us than for Fluffy Gorgeous, but a part of it is physical too.

Fluffy Gorgeous dips quietly into the “Witness Protection Program,” where she won’t be advertised on the website or in the newsletters. Her previous owner’s frantic calls are first answered and later ignored. She, of course, wants her dog back. Jen sends her a bill for the surgery, knowing that she won’t pay it. She tells her that she can stop in and fill out an application, to go through an adoption process with Fluffy Gorgeous just like anyone else could, knowing that her application will be denied. The girl threatens to send in friends to adopt the dog, to write all the right answers on the form and to pass the vet references. Jen threatens to file a neglect suit, mentioning the photo of the stones with the ruler. Neither happens, and eventually the conflict fades away.

Throughout the series of angry phone messages and ridiculous threats, I sometimes think that I should feel bad for the girl who can’t get her dog back. But I never do. I am sure that she is hurting, that she wishes she could do better for her dog, and that her anger and sadness are to blame for the nasty phone calls she makes. But I can brush that aside. What I can’t brush aside, though, is the way I felt when I saw Fluffy soaking in her own blood in that towel, or the way I felt when I cleaned out her recovery cage and found only one whisker left behind. I understand people emotions, but when I have to choose between animals and their people, I will always choose the animals’ sides. This is how I know I am in the right place. Mess with your dog, mess with me. It’s as simple as two bladder stones lined up on a towel. So I don’t feel bad for the girl. This is not my priority.

And we all feel less bad for Fluffy Gorgeous, too, every single day. She spends several weeks in foster care with Jen, sauntering to and from work at the end of a pink, rhinestone leash.

She isn't hand-shy or lethargic or grumpy at all, but instead sniffs every smell and eats every meal like she's never experienced anything better. Fluffy Gorgeous doesn't seem to remember the bladder stones or the bloody towel, or the girl in the pink bra at all; instead her only problem, her only enemy in the world is the plastic cone collar that Jen tries to coax her to wear. Despite her size, Fluffy Gorgeous fights that piece of plastic like it's nothing, and eventually we get used to seeing her always in a onesie, which protects the staples on her belly from her scratching and licking attempts.

During Fluffy Gorgeous' weeks in the shelter system, life goes on. Animals are surrendered, adopted, lost, and reclaimed. Laundry is washed. Floors are scrubbed. Girl Scout troops come for tours, new volunteers are trained, and more "Happy Tails" pictures are taped to the cabinets in the dog kitchen. But despite all this, we all remember Fluffy Gorgeous. I say hello to her in Jen's office every morning, scratching her wiggly butt through the thin cotton of her onesie, and goodbye every evening at the break room door. And though I don't remember all the hellos and goodbyes now, I remember glimpses of her.

One evening, as Jen and I are walking to our cars, Fluffy Gorgeous squats to pee in the grass before Jen remembers to unbutton the onesie. We notice right away, when her pee doesn't make a sound at all, absorbed immediately by the white cotton and spreading into a wide, wet, continent. We don't try to stop her though, or to undo the tiny snaps as fast as we can; instead we watch. The growing spot on the onesie is bright yellow. This is the first time there is no blood. These are the moments I remember.

When her staples have been taken out and Fluffy Gorgeous no longer has to dress in baby clothes, Jen starts to look for the perfect person to adopt her. We know that it will be a behind-the-scenes adoption, if not because of the pink bra girl's threats to send in friends, then simply

because Fluffy Gorgeous deserves more than an approved application and a good vet reference. But despite Jen's understandably picky criteria, getting Fluffy Gorgeous adopted isn't nearly as hard as taking out her bladder stones, or even prying her out of the pink bra girl's arms. In fact, her adoption is practically passive. Fluffy Gorgeous doesn't need to do anything for it; she has done plenty already, just by surviving. She only needs to sit in Jen's living room in the evenings and her office during the day, where one day an email comes through from Cynthia. I don't know, now, if she is an old friend of Jen's, or a previous adopter, or really where she comes from, but Cynthia's request is simple. She is looking for either a red Pomeranian or a "white Bison." We laugh at her a little, at first, and Jen replies that we don't have any bison at the time (or Bichons for that matter), but that we do have Fluffy Gorgeous.

Cynthia comes in to meet her the very next day, toting pictures of her other dog, a black Pomeranian, who wears hair bows and embellished collars that are always coordinated and seasonally appropriate. Fluffy Gorgeous loves Cynthia, and of course Cynthia loves Fluffy Gorgeous, and Jen hates it all, but loves it too because she knows that if she keeps her, there won't be room in her office for the next one who needs it. And unfortunately, there is always one more who needs it. She teeters a little this time, inviting Cynthia in for visits five or six times before printing out the adoption paperwork and handing over the diaper bag to Fluffy Gorgeous' new mom.

The very next day, Cynthia emails a picture of Fluffy Gorgeous in her new home, and Jen promptly sets it as the background on the adoption desk computer. In it, Fluffy Gorgeous is curled up on a bright, white comforter amongst a line of throw pillows and a black Pomeranian at the top of a king-sized bed. When I first see it, as I am starting a kitten adoption, I have to stop and minimize the Shelter Buddy window and ask the adopters to give me a minute to "get the

computer up and running," just so I can look at it a little longer. It is the sort of moment that makes me remember, years later, exactly what everyone is wearing when it happens. I am wearing my usual tan pants, wet sneakers, and the same maroon shirt, although I have others now, and this one is covered in tiny hip-level holes. Fluffy Gorgeous is wearing a pink hair clip with ribbons and tulle, and a tiny harness with two big, jolly-looking purple bells clustered between her shoulder blades. I imagine, if placed next to a ruler, each one would be about two inches wide.

Name: Fluffy Gorgeous
 Status Date: 8/3/2009
 Status: Adopted

Fostering Faith

When every day involves the physical stress of lifting heavy garbage bags into dumpsters and the
 frightened dogs and excited, the mental stress of keeping track of which animal is getting which
 and coming up with just the right thing to say to the owners crying at the counter
 desk and the emotional stress of constantly getting scratched and bitten for it, eventually it's
 impossible to love everything in the building when you finally hook the side garage door and
 collapse into your car. So work done home, it's inevitable. out, called last night this
 's Mostly, I bring it all home in order to find a friend, or family member to ask how
 was work? before everything skills or someone's needs to know about all the animals who
 are cared for. I need to know what I can do to help. Someone else needs to see what I can do for
 simple details of processing out to the magazines of police reports from the
 also needs to be realistic, or else it only has my mind to churn itself around again and over
 as all. Most people don't really listen. They live a story about dramatic rescue or a life-saving
 surgery, then they come, but for the people who don't walk in through the front door, they
 pointed only, door at the back of the shelter, they stay quiet the same as the next and looking
 at transfer dogs on the Canine Express website isn't the most exciting way to kill a few hours
 home, it is. For the other staff members and all the volunteers, their Foster stories are
 about animals that we know as individual beings, among whom we have favorites, whose faces

Animal ID: 6247
Animal Name: Faith
Source: Stray-No ID
Weight: 0.5 lbs
Type: Kitten
Breed/Species: Domestic Short Hair
Primary Color: White
Secondary Color: Grey
Sex: Female

Status Date: 6/25/2009
Status: Awaiting Sort

Animal ID: 5717
Animal Name: Ebony
Source: Stray-No ID
Weight: 5.2 lbs
Type: Cat
Breed/Species: Domestic Short Hair
Primary Color: Black
Secondary Color: None
Sex: Female

Status Date: 6/23/2009
Status: Awaiting Sort

People who tell you, “don’t bring your work home” clearly don’t work in animal shelters. When every day involves the physical stress of lifting heavy garbage bags into dumpsters and frightened dogs onto scales, the mental stress of keeping track of which animal is getting which meds and coming up with just the right thing to say to the old woman crying at the surrender desk, and the emotional stress of constantly getting attached and letting go, it’s virtually impossible to leave everything in the building when you finally lock the side garage door and collapse into your car. So work comes home. It’s inevitable.

Mostly, I bring it all home in words. I don’t need a friend or family member to ask “how was work?” before everything spills out. Someone else needs to know about all the animals surrendered, adopted, selected for transfer. Someone else needs to see what I saw today, from the simple details of processing cats to the major stories of police rescues from hoarders. Someone else needs to hear it all, or else it only has my mind to churn itself around in.

Most people don’t really listen. They like a story about a dramatic rescue or a life-saving surgery from time to time, but for the people who don’t walk in through the “authorized personnel only” door at the back of the shelter, one stray cat is the same as the next and looking at transfer dogs on the Canine Express website isn’t the most exciting way to kill a few hours. For me, it is. For the other staff members and all the volunteers, it is. For us, these stories are about animals that we know as individual beings, among whom we have favorites, whose fates

we watch played out in the kennels and the computer system every day. For us, this is the most important thing we know. So we bring our work home in words.

Most of us also bring it home in kittens.

In our houses, there is an upstairs bedroom or an extra office or a finished basement that is "The Foster Room." It is empty for maybe a few months in the winter, and for only three or four day periods during the rest of the year. It is cleared of wires and breakables and too-small hiding spaces, and it is filled with kittens.

Foster mom Jane's room is filled with female cats with swollen bellies who sleep in nesting boxes and dig in layers of newspaper and towels and lie and pant until there are kittens. Paula's foster room is the laundry room, and it is filled with bottle babies who need her to be their mom every two hours, even throughout the night. Kelly's room has a large dog crate that is filled with hissing feral babies, too shy to be loose right away, who come back to the shelter a few weeks later feeling nervous but new. My foster room holds big litters of five or six week olds who burst through the door and gallop down the hallway each time I try to sneak in or out.

Everyone has a specialty and shops for kittens in the Cat Nursery room and puts up sticky notes, "JoAnne to Foster!" to stake their claim. We sign a contract to keep the babies until they are ready to have surgery at two pounds, but most of us let them grow just a little more in our foster rooms. The foster program is one of the most important services our shelter can offer these animals, but it is a service for us too. We bring our work home, but it looks different in these wobbly-legged, play-fighting, climbing, leaping babies. In the foster room, our work looks like laughter.

But laughter doesn't always last, and no one is laughing when DL, a grey stray is brought in with four tiny kittens and a leg that's hanging off. No one can say how it happened, but it isn't

just the leg that has everyone worried. I see the bigger problem when I first meet DL, in the top left cage of the Cat Nursery, surrounded by her kittens in a stuffed fleece bed. I see the look on her face. DL is nursing the babies, sort of. She is awake, sort of. She is breathing, sort of. But DL is not really there. She looks at me with the face of a cat who has given up. She is rail thin, her fur practically dripping from her bones. She looks familiar to me, but not the good kind of familiar, not the kind of familiar that means I've seen a lost report with her picture on it and can pull it from the blue binder and send her home fast. DL looks familiar because she is a very clear type of cat. Although she isn't ancient, which they usually are, DL has everything else in common with the skin and bones, no more hope, hang your head over the edge of your water bowl and wait type of cat that sometimes comes in to spend a few days in the Stray Holding room. She looks like this type of cat, that usually has no teeth left and cataracts in both eyes and can't seem to get comfortable even on the plushiest of blankets. DL looks like the type of cat that someone knew had problems and that got pushed out into the woods to deal with them out of sight from her owners. I don't want to admit it, I don't even want to think it in that room with her four tiny babies with their eyes barely opened, but DL looks like the type of cat that is going to die.

DL looks like Ebony. A few days earlier, Ebony was brought in as a stray and placed in a top row cage in Stray Holding. I meet her on the same day that I meet DL during morning animal care. I am the first person in Back Cats this morning, and when I flick the light switch in Stray Holding, Ebony's eyes are peering at me, gold and cloudy. She is lying in sphinx position in the front of her cage, her shoulder blades stretching her skin into tight, pointed wings.

Normally protocol is to feed the kittens first, then the cats in Owned Cat Holding, before moving to Stray Holding. This morning, the kittens are screaming loud enough to hear through

their closed door, and I can see some climbing the bars of their cages frantically, even though they still have food left from last night. I know that they will shove each other out of the way for the new canned food I'll dish out for them, but some of them climb only to catch my eye so they can scale their way onto my shoulders and head butt my hands and have someone to purr to. But today, I can see that Ebony needs me more. I start to prepare her food before making a count of all the cats in her room because I know that I will need both hands to deliver it. Ebony's eyes tell me that she needs more than the 1/3 can of wet food and scoop of dry that the others will all get in their red and white paper dishes. Ebony is a dying cat; I know this instantly. I want to hope that maybe she will turn around and eat and gain and play again, but her eyes tell me that she won't.

On her printed out cage card, someone has generously typed "+/- 8 years" for Ebony's age. It isn't common for a cat with "+/- 17 years" in their age box to have no problems, to move up for adoption, and to be chosen by someone and taken home, and no one wants to admit that Ebony's future is obvious. I feed her a four bowl buffet, with offers of dry food, canned food, kitten milk replacer, and an electrolyte supplement. My hope is to keep her from starving before her stray hold is up. Part of me wishes we didn't have to keep her alive for five days. But Ebony eats.

DL doesn't eat much, though, and her kittens keep eating from her. Each day she seems thinner and thinner, and when surgery day arrives, our vet brings her into Lab I to check out her leg. The leg seems to be completely severed from the body, except for the skin. It is hanging on, but doing nothing. The vet plans to amputate before starting on the day's long spay/neuter list, but DL's general physical and blood work don't look good. Her age check shows yellow gums, and the pink sheet that the vet writes up after all the tests are complete lands on my pile for

afternoon data entry. It's hard to read the vet's handwriting, and I have to Google some of the medical abbreviations, but the general gist is advanced liver disease and early kidney failure. Under "Treatment," she has written something that requires no decoding: "recommend euthanasia."

Without their mother, everyone knows that it will be hard for DL's four kittens to grow. From the start, they look a bit younger than their open eyes and growing teeth suggest, and it is clear that they will have to play catch up if they are ever going to look and climb and play like the healthier kittens in the cages around them. It will be awhile before we know for sure if they are going to make it, but two of our adoption counselors agree to take them home to their foster rooms. Kelly takes a boy and girl and calls them He-Man and She-Ra. Dee's two girls are Hope and Faith. No one is laughing yet.

Suzanne never expects to be laughing, but when Ebony starts to eat and perk up a bit, she pulls her paperwork out of the euthanasia basket and prints out a foster contract. Ebony still looks like the type of cat that has been pushed outside to die, but somehow she tells us that she can make it a little longer. She starts to stand, to meow a raspy little sound, to purr. No one thinks that Ebony will live and turn around and go up for adoption. She is old and simply deteriorating, but other than that there is nothing physically wrong with her. And Suzanne thinks that there is nothing wrong with her spending a few good days in the comfort of a home before disappearing.

Normally Suzanne is a blunt, realistic, say-it-like-it-is type of person, but on this day, she is simply selfless. She knows that Ebony will die, and that each day she spends in her foster room will make it harder to say goodbye. She knows that signing a foster contract will transform Ebony from an unknown, inconsequential, anonymous cat to a real being, complete with

personality, characteristics, and emotional ties. Still, she signs the contract. She renames her Chenille. She cannot give her long term hope, but she can give her a spot to stretch out in a sunny dining room window.

DL's kittens are not like Ebony, inevitably moving from life to death. In their first week with Kelly and Dee, they grow a little, sleep a lot, and have play-date reunions in the Cat Nursery during work days. They are never in the clear, but they are fighting.

Until one by one, they start to give up.

I am feeding back cats again one day when Dee brings Hope and Faith in and puts them in a separate cage from Kelly's kittens. Kelly's *kitten*, it seems, when I bring in the food. It is only little She-Ra in the cage, and I find out that He-Man slowly slipped away the night before. I do not want to bring it up, but Kelly has to tell someone, or else it will only have her mind to churn around in. After morning animal care, as we stand behind the front desk looking for an adoption application in the alphabetical files, Kelly says "I've never lost one before" and starts to cry. There is nothing I can tell her to make her know that it wasn't her fault, to make her know that she gave him the best care possible by rushing him into the shelter late last night and giving him fluids right away as soon as he became lethargic. There is nothing I can tell her to make her know that she is a good foster parent. There is nothing I can tell her to bring the little unnamed kitten, who she has since come to see as *her* kitten, her He-Man, back.

And when she is gone a few days later, there is nothing I can say to bring She-Ra back either. Kelly's foster room is empty, and at a time when she only wants to cry, she has to bleach the floor and throw away the blankets because no one knows what went wrong. DL's kittens aren't dying from lack of food or from any terrible accident, but from something inside them, something they drank in from their mother, something no one can make go away. Even Dee, the

foster care coordinator who answers emergency medical questions on her cell phone in the middle of the night and makes house calls to foster rooms to help newborn babies start to breathe, can't fight what is eating away at DL's kittens. The day after She-Ra, Hope is gone too. Hope is gone, but Ebony is still here, lying in Suzanne's dining room sunshine, and Faith is still here too. This is not the first time that kittens have died, and we have all learned a few things. If one kitten dies, it can be a fluke, an individual issue. If two kittens die, it can be a coincidence, or a contagious problem that only the weakest ones caught. If three kittens die, the fourth will die too. So although no one says it, we all hold our breath and wait for Faith to vanish.

Slowly, she begins to go downhill. What happens first is the upper respiratory infection. Dee drives her to and from work in a canvas pop-up carrier, administering tiny pink drops of Amoxi twice a day. Although she never seems to get over the infection, Faith is still alive at the end of day seven, when her name is erased from the meds board. She is rasping when she breathes, making tiny wet sounds in the back of her throat, but she is still playing with pieces of kitty litter, still eating little bites of wet food off a flat, yellow can cover. She is alive, but no one is laughing. No one makes her a permanent cage card, the kind that hangs up on the cages of cats that are up for adoption, because no one wants to have to throw it away later. No one wants to believe in anything.

Faith's name is written on the vet check clipboard hanging outside of Lab 1 nearly every other day. After the upper respiratory infection, Faith is diagnosed with pneumonia. At the same time, Calicivirus settles into her eyes, leaving them runny and bulging so much that she is frightening to look at. She is fighting off worms, fleas, and an upset stomach from the tiny syringes of pink fluid that pile up for her in the Back Cats refrigerator. Faith's medications are so

much that she no longer has room for food, no longer has an appetite at all, and the yellow can covers sit untouched in the front of her carrier until the canned food dries and hardens. During the day, she lives in this carrier, set up on the counter in Back Cats, because she cannot be in the Cat Nursery, cannot be in any other room with any other cats. She is sick. She is contagious. She is fighting for her life.

And although she is alone in the carrier, she is not alone entirely in the Back Cats kitchen. As she continues to live one more day, and then one more, and then one more, I, and some of the other staff members, become brave enough to play with her, to squirt her medications into her tiny mouth, to feel a little excited with she finally begins to eat again. We begin to believe that this unlucky kitten, this fourth and final grey ball of fluff whose face is always smeared with snot and wet food and pink drips of Amoxi, might actually become something more.

She continues with her raspy breathing and her runny eyes, but a few weeks after He-Man, She-Ra, and Hope have all died, Faith is still living, and she is loving it. Various medications are still a part of her daily diet, and everything about her is fragile and tentative, but Faith is beginning to see the world outside of her carrier. Dee admits to letting her ride to work on her lap, where Faith climbs on the steering wheel like a jungle gym. When a few of us have a free minute behind the desk, we bring Faith into the front offices and let her loose to run and play. As she slides across the linoleum and leaps in the air, landing awkwardly on her favorite remote-controlled toy, we all know that we are no longer keeping Faith as sheltered and protected as we once were, but maybe this is better. Maybe Faith, like Ebony, is still going to die, but if that's the case, she clearly intends to get everything she possibly can out of life until

then. We might not be able to save her, but this play time, these chances to finally be a kitten, are Faith's rays of dining room sunshine. She soaks them in.

A few weeks after going home with Suzanne, Ebony is still enjoying the view from her foster home. I haven't heard about her in a while, but when I finally work up the courage to ask about her, Suzanne tells me that although she hasn't gained much weight, she's still eating. Although she isn't getting better, she is still happy. Although she is still dying, she is still alive.

When Faith is alive too, at about twelve weeks old, everyone is shocked. Dee has continued to tell us that she always called Faith the "fearless leader" of the litter, because she was always a little ahead of the others, always a little more energetic, more playful, more hungry, more alive. Still, she remains ahead. At twelve weeks she is barely two pounds, finally reaching a mark that most kittens reach three or four weeks earlier, but there is no talk about spay surgery. Fearless leader though she may be, Faith has battled every illness in the book and doesn't need one more thing to recover from just yet.

At about six months, Faith is still living with Dee, still rasping a little and still peering at the world through a drippy eye. She finally comes back to the shelter on a Wednesday, the same day as Ebony. Although she amazed everyone by enjoying foster care for so many months, Ebony has stopped eating, no longer seems comfortable, has started to do what we knew she would. Suzanne is understandably upset, but Ebony finally falls asleep in Lab II in her foster mom's arms under a blanket, and there are no tears. Instead of dying alone in the woods or unknown on Lab II's silver table, Ebony dies quietly as someone's pet, thinking of dining room sunshine.

And while Suzanne is returning from Lab II, Dee is carrying Faith into Lab I. Dee cannot stay to watch, to help do this to the kitten that she has fought so hard to keep alive. Instead, the

vet takes Faith from her hands and waits for the door to close before shaving a little part of her front leg and inserting a needle. Faith slowly becomes groggy, her eyelids closing over her drippy eyes, and the vet lies her down on a towel.

Twenty minutes later, Faith is on this same towel, waking up from her spay surgery. During the operation, Dee has been busy at the computer, entering the information to complete Faith's adoption. As the foster coordinator, she has cared for many kittens and let all of them go. Until Faith. Without her, she knows that something will be missing from her steering wheel, her foster room. When her kitten wakes up, Dee is waiting at the door of Lab I, peering through the small, rectangular window. Faith's tail twitches first. Later, she will stagger to her feet, her drippy eyes still a little crossed, and fully wake up, but for now, her tail is enough. With this one twitch, Dee knows Faith has made it, through surgery and through everything else. With this tail twitch, everyone can exhale. Everyone can finally laugh.

Name: Faith

Status Date: 1/18/2010

Status: Adopted

Name: Ebony

Status Date: 1/18/2010

Status: Euthanized

... Faith from her hands and waits for the door to close before allowing a little part of her to
 front leg and inserting a needle. Faith slowly becomes groggy, her eyelids closing over her
 drippy eyes, and the vet lies her down on a towel and then she is gone. A
 the (Dewey) minister later Faith is in this same towel, waiting up from her spay surgery
 During the operation, Dee has been busy at the computer, entering the information to complete
 Faith's adoption. The foster coordinator, she has searched for many kittens and let all of them go.
 Until Faith. Without her, she knows that something will be missing from her storing wheel, for
 foster care. When her kitten wakes up, Dee is waiting at the door of Lab 1, peering through the
 small, rectangular window at Faith's tail. Faith's tail is tucked up, and she is sitting upright, her
 drippy eyes still in the process, and Faith wakes up, but for now, her tail is enough. With this one
 twig, Dee knows Faith has made it, through surgery and through everything else. With this tail
 twitch, everyone can believe everyone can finally begin to see an end to the road ahead.

Transfer Day

... Faith to recover from just one of your...
 Status Date: 1/18/2010
 Status: Admitted
 Room: 2002
 Status Date: 1/18/2010
 Status: Discharged

... Faith a little bit, still rasping a little bit, but she is
 same old, yesterday we talked out to take Faith to the shelter on a Wednesday, the same
 day as Chris. Although she amazed everyone by enjoying foster care for so many months
 she went what we had to do to get Faith out of the shelter, she had stopped eating, no longer
 would. Suzanne is understandably upset, but finally Faith is in Lab 1 in her foster
 mom's arms under a blanket, and there she is, instead of being alone in the woods or
 around Faith to grieve, the woman as Faith's pet, thinking of dining room
 sunshine.

... And while Suzanne is returning from Lab 11, Dee is carrying Faith into Lab 1. Dee cannot
 stay to watch, so help us this to be a sign that she has fought so hard to keep Faith, instead, she

Animal ID: 8705
 Animal Name: Cocoa
 Source: Transfer In
 Weight: 43.5 lbs
 Type: Dog
 Breed/Species: Pit Bull Terrier
 Mix
 Primary Color: Chocolate
 Secondary Color: White
 Sex: Male

Status Date: 6/19/2010
 Status: Awaiting Sort

Animal ID: 8947
 Animal Name: Brownie
 Source: Transfer In
 Weight: 41.8 lbs
 Type: Dog
 Breed/Species: CattleDog Mix
 Primary Color: Brown Brindle
 Secondary Color: None
 Sex: Female

Status Date: 6/19/2010
 Status: Awaiting Sort

Animal ID: 8706
 Animal Name: Beau
 Source: Transfer In
 Weight: 45.3 lbs
 Type: Dog
 Breed/Species: Plott Hound
 Primary Color: Brown Brindle
 Secondary Color: None
 Sex: Male

Status Date: 6/19/2010
 Status: Awaiting Sort

Are these real, living dogs, or are they just names, written in pencil on the preliminary kennel placement list so that they can be scratched out, moved around, added, and erased like answers to a logic puzzle? I can convince myself either way.

When things are good, when we can fit all of the dogs, even the maybes, somewhere in the 16 kennels allotted for the transfers, they are real dogs. And when there are so many yeses that we have to throw away the maybe list without even looking back at it again, forgetting who Daisy, Junior, and George even are, they are just names. This is my survival strategy. This is how I get by, at the desk in the Adoption Pod, while these dogs are using whatever means they can to make it through each day in the perpetually dark kennels of Vermilion County Animal Shelter, or wherever they might be unlucky enough to be.

You might think I don't want to be here, hunched over the computer with Michaela at eight o'clock on a Friday night, deciding who is going to live and who isn't. But I do. Cathi has sent the password for the Canine Express photo galleries, and once I type in "WORDSWORTH10" and start looking through the photos of the dogs in the first gallery, Brown County's, I can't help but grab a pen and a sheet of scrap paper off the clipboard in the phone receptionist's office. Logically, I know that even if we email her back within the next twenty minutes, Cathi won't see our picks until Monday. It's the weekend, and she's out of the

office, like we should be too. Besides, transfer day is still two weeks away. So, logically, I know it can wait.

But emotionally, I know it can't.

I'm still getting used to the idea that I don't have to fight anyone for the privilege of picking these dogs. At first, there was a sign-up sheet, taped to the front counter under the clipboard with the list of available animals. But when Michaela and I were the only ones to write our names on it for months in a row, no one bothered to put up a new one after the tape finally all peeled away. It is extra work, there's no doubt about that. But the main thing people say about picking transfers has nothing to do with the time commitment. It's all the emotional strain. I tell my sister Jennifer that she should pick dogs with us someday, and she says she can't handle it. She says it's too sad because we can't pick them all. So now, our boss tells us thank you for staying late, but we are the ones who feel lucky. If you think about it, the fact that Michaela and I are sitting at the computer tonight isn't sad, it's transformational. We will order a pizza and bring a favorite pit bull to play in the Adoption Pod and jump in our laps and eat our crust. We will click past the pictures of most of the dogs, and they will have to stay in Indiana. But we will pick some, and they will live.

The shelter has been doing dog transfers for as long as I can remember, but most people are still surprised when they hear about it. The fact that we have few enough dog surrenders and fast enough adoption rates to cart in twenty some new dogs from overcrowded shelters every two weeks by choice doesn't fit with the general image of "the pound," where one day each week means a devastating purge to prepare for the next inevitable onslaught of lost and unwanted pets. I shouldn't say we aren't struggling, because when the rooms in Back Cats are crammed with stacked crates and every foster home is full in the summers, it sometimes feels like we are. But

this isn't "the pound," in any way. Things aren't perfect; it isn't easy to keep up with the never-ending flow of animals in and out—but that's just it, the *out*. So while there are occasional sad days, most days are good days.

The best days, of course, are transfer days.

Looking at their pictures, it's hard to tell them no, so Michaela and I try not to. We have to think about who will get adopted fast, for the sake of the next group of dogs we'll be expected to have room for two weeks after transfer day. We pick blondes. We pick puppies. We pick pre-spayed, pre-neutered dogs. We pick dogs who have received all A's on their temperament tests, or who have lived with cats and kids before. We pick dogs who are currently kenneled with each other, so we can pair them up here and save space. But between all these good choices, we leave plenty of room to break the rules.

During our first transfer, our manager, Riann, went over the guidelines with us, teaching us who to pick and who not to pick. Most of the rules are common sense: avoid dogs with major medical issues or any signs of aggression, try to stick with younger dogs, and pick dogs that will catch people's eyes in the kennels. These, we can follow, for the most part. But some of the rules are different, are somehow rooted in stereotypes that the shelter "doesn't believe in" but still acts upon.

Rule number two, the second biggest rule: No hounds. These dogs are common in the South, and even the Midwest, which means they show up on the Alabama and Indiana websites more than most breeds, but they're hard to adopt out in New Hampshire. Beagles and smaller hound mixes can usually squeeze through the cracks, but the full-blown, droopy-eared, howling,

yowling bloodhounds, plott hounds, black and tans, and the like usually sit in the kennels for far too long.

Rule number one: NO PIT BULLS. Although most of them show well in the kennels and bond closely with their people, the pitties hang around our shelter even longer than the hounds, waiting for someone willing to see past the stereotype and change their insurance. Most adopters don't fit this bill.

Michaela and I don't claim to misunderstand these rules. The hard part about them is that they make perfect sense, when the truth is, simply, that they *shouldn't*. On our first few transfers we weren't brave enough to break them, but this is transfer four or five, and we feel established. We feel lucky. We feel smart.

And we feel sorry, too, for Cocoa, when we see him on Shelby County's website. How can we not? More than anything, Cocoa looks like a little old man. He's only two, but his brow is furrowed into a wrinkle that suggests both wisdom and confusion. Why is Cocoa at Shelby Humane? *He* certainly doesn't know. And we don't either; reason for surrender isn't something the website lists. But it doesn't matter, because we know all we need to know, and that's that Cocoa needs a kennel in that transfer van.

We have our suspicions about Cocoa. Underneath that furrowed brow, we think we see a pittie head, and there's no mistaking those ears. But fortunately, Shelby Humane's paperwork lists him as a lab mix, and as soon as we email Cathi, saying, "We saw Cocoa on the website and wondered if he was available for transport," his picture disappears, as if she knows, somehow, that we are sneaking around just a little. With no picture, the paperwork is all we have to go on when we show our list of dogs to Jen, our boss. She wonders about him, reminding us to

immediately save the pictures of dogs we ask about, and we tell her only that he looks like a chocolate lab and we can't remember much else. After all, we only saw the picture for a second.

We have much more time to look at Brownie's pictures, when we put her on our final YES list to Cathi. In return, Cathi forwards us an email from the manager at Brown County.

Hi girls,

I noticed that you picked Brownie for transport, and we are thrilled! She is a wonderful

dog, but sadly, we have had very little interest in her here. She has been in our kennels

for a few months, with her son, Scotty, and no one has ever asked to look at her. She so

deserves a fresh start in New Hampshire!

We wanted to let you know that we are unsure of her breed, and we think she might have

some pit in her. I know that usually you do not transport pit bulls, but I hope this will not

be a problem.

Thanks again for choosing her!

Amanda

BC HUMANE

Michaela and I see the email before anyone else, and panic for a minute. Brownie is listed as a cattledog mix in Brown County's gallery on the Canine Express website. Her photos are just headshots, and she looks a little too much like a pit for us to show it to Riann or Jen, even though we genuinely didn't notice it before. When we look at Scotty, whose photo is right next to Brownie's, we feel our hearts drop a little. Scotty is a black and white dog, almost a full-grown puppy, and clearly a pit bull. We feel wrong about breaking up the mother/son pair, and even worse about the fact that who Scotty is will undoubtedly mean we can't save even one of them.

Rule number one is heavy in our minds and tastes metallic in our mouths. “*No one has ever asked to look at her...*” We can’t unpick Brownie. She is a real, living dog, depending on us for her one shot at making it out of the Brown County kennels. The rule is there, but it is just a rule.

Michaela and I spend 25 covert minutes in the Adoption Pod looking through the three pictures of Brownie in the Canine Express gallery, trying to choose the one that looks the least like a pit. Each time we think we have chosen, we second-guess ourselves. For a moment, here and there, we feel a flash of frustrated silly, that this is an obsessive waste of our time, until it dawns on us to check Brown County’s independent website. Here, within two or three clicks, we find Brownie, the version we need. Her featured picture here is a full body shot, and Brownie is so low to the ground that she almost looks like a brindled corgi with a stocky head. We are less confident than ever of the “cattledog” label that her paperwork will arrive with, but this picture makes Brownie look like such a thick mix of breeds that pit bull is buried deeply somewhere in the back.

Laying the printed out picture side by side with a breed book that we pull from the shelves in the back of the Adoption Pod, Michaela flips through the pages to find something we can declare Brownie to be. We decide on “Dutch Shepherd.” Armed with the book and the photo, we walk casually to Jen’s office, stopping at the candy drawer and grabbing a Reese’s to fake confidence. Jen looks at the two photos, and says, only, “Heintz 57. What a cutie!”

She sounds so sure that we decide to delete the email, and then to delete it from the deleted folder, too. In a new window, we type in Amanda’s email address.

We love her! We’ll take her.

With the email gone, no one needs to know that Brownie might be a pit bull, or that she has any connection to the black one pictured next to her. Michaela kisses the tip of her pointer finger and leaves a wet print over Scotty's picture on the computer screen. We wonder how he will be without his mom.

Alive, somehow, we hope.

I'm embarrassed, now, to admit that neither of us is as smitten with Beau. The first picture we see of him is a little blurry, but that isn't the only reason we don't fall in love. Beau is listed as a plott hound, and he completely looks the part. He is brown, brindle, droopy, and lean. In his picture, he is sitting in a square of grass, head calmly tilted just a little to the side, waiting. There is nothing wrong with Beau, really, other than being a plott hound. But there is nothing special about him either, at least, not that we can see from the blurry picture. He looks like an average dog, the kind that would blend in anywhere, the kind that we probably shouldn't choose even if he wasn't a plott hound. It is easy to click past his picture; nothing about him immediately sticks.

We hardly remember Beau, throughout the process of picking dogs, until we see his blurry picture a second time, attached to an email from Cathi. She has written to tell us that one of the Shelby County dogs has been adopted and pulled from our transport list at the last minute. In case we want a replacement, here is one still waiting to be picked.

Here is Beau.

It's hard to remember receiving this email now; Michaela and I must be tired and starting to burn out from clicking through picture after picture and trying to catch all the faxed medical paperwork before it piles up so much that it slides right off the plastic tray and onto the floor

behind the front desk. When we open, for the second time, the attachment that is Beau, we are not thinking about rule number two. We are not thinking about how average he looks or how he will howl in the kennels. We are only thinking of transfer day, circled in red on the calendar in the phone receptionist's office, and creeping closer and closer. We are only thinking of kennel seven in Stray Holding, now left empty because of Gracie's Indiana adoption.

"Do you want to just get him?" I say, about the dog that we have already said no to.

"Yeah, okay," Michaela says, hardly looking at the screen. "We may as well not leave him there."

"I mean," I say, squinting at his blurry photo, "he *is* kind of cute. For a hound."

And even though we aren't in love yet, we feel good adding another dog, any dog, to the yes list.

As the dogs in the Indiana shelters are being vaccinated and getting health certificates in preparation for transport, Michaela and I are spending the weekend pet sitting at Riann's house. While her two mastiffs play in the fenced yard and Paris, the ornery white cat who was found in the back of a Wal-Mart truck, harasses her three feline brothers, Michaela and I work on our transfer. It is Saturday night, more than a week after we first started looking through the galleries, and work is over for the day, but again, it really isn't. We aren't complaining, though, about working on our transfer on our own time, at Riann's kitchen island. Instead, there is something so exhilarating about preparing for transfers that we are thrilled to have a night of organizing and planning ahead of us.

Most people at work are glad to leave at the end of the day, to shove all the paperwork back into the drawers below the front desk and forget everything until tomorrow, but it's hard for

Michaela and I to think like this, especially so close to transfer day. Instead, unsure of whether or not we're technically allowed to hack into Shelter Buddy from home, we sneak the stack of our dogs' paperwork and 24 blank cage cards into Michaela's back seat.

At the island, I am squinting into Riann's laptop at the Shelter Buddy screen that I have been staring at since early this morning. Entering the dogs' medical information takes longer than you'd think; each time I think I've learned where to look in the stapled pile to find the vaccines and de-worming dates, I have to switch to a different dog, from a different shelter, with differently formatted paperwork. But it doesn't matter how long this takes; each time I finish one dog, uncovering the next one's pile of records from my stack on the bar stool next to me, I am re-excited, because each one of them is *coming*.

Each one of them has been picked, Cocoa, and Brownie, and Beau, and all the others. Each one is going to appear out of the back of a white van in the shelter's parking lot on transfer day, and each one is going to live.

Michaela is splayed out on Riann's wooden floor, presumably thinking the same thing as she alphabetizes the dogs' names on a feeding list. We are obsessive about it all, as we make the cage cards, later, on Riann's deck, and stick a Post-It to each one, saying, "Cocoa: Needs Fecal," for the volunteers who will take these dogs on their first New Hampshire walks.

Most of this doesn't officially need to be done before the dogs even arrive, but now that we've finished picking, there is nothing else to do. We can't wait to meet them though, to see who looks like their picture and who doesn't, to see who is excited and who is afraid, to see who likes their roommate and who needs to be moved around. I feel, a little, like a parent waiting for my first baby to be born; all I can do is keep myself busy.

It doesn't matter that I have done this before, have picked the dogs and seen the vans pull up. It doesn't matter that transfer day happens every two weeks. The dogs are always new, and so is the feeling I know I will get when I see the first one place its first paw on the New Hampshire asphalt of the shelter's parking lot. These dogs, I know, will be more alive than I can even pretend to imagine.

But even though Michaela and I are thinking about the 24 dogs that are going to stay alive the whole time we're at Riann's, work on Monday reminds us that transfers aren't all white vans and wet noses. We're finished picking; the medical has been entered, the cage cards have been made and are hanging on the empty kennels, but Michaela checks the Counselor1 email account, just to see if Cathi has sent any last minute updates. She has.

NH Shelters—
All the black dogs on Orange County's website are slated to be euthanized on Wednesday.

Can you help??
We can't.

Michaela and I know that we can't.

There is no room left in our kennels, no matter how we re-do the roommate situation. Besides, it is too late. The red calendar circle that is transfer day is only a couple days away. The vans will be leaving Indiana too soon. Still, we go to Jen's office to beg for some kind of plan.

Jen has already opened Cathi's email in her own account, and we don't even have to tell her why we're standing outside her door, looking nervous.

"Girls," she says quietly, before we even try to speak. "You already know the answer."

And we do. But still, Michaela and I can't help opening Orange County's website, and looking into the eyes of each black dog. We try to convince ourselves that only solid black counts, that maybe a patch of white will save some of them. We try to imagine that some of them will get adopted before Wednesday. We try to keep from crying, but it's no use. All we can do is remember this. In two weeks, we will pick dogs again. Next time, we won't scroll through the galleries in alphabetical order. Next time, we will start with Orange County. This time, it is too late.

Looking at each of them through the computer screen, we will try to understand that we are sorry. We will try, somehow, to survive.

On Friday morning, Michaela and I team up to clean Front Cats together, but it's tough to concentrate on the day-to-day tasks when we both know that something bigger, something more important, is about to explode into existence in our parking lot. Yesterday was Thursday, a regular day at the shelter, filled with surrenders and adoptions and spay/neuter surgeries. But today is different. Today, is transfer day.

I don't remember anything that happens on transfer day before the vans arrive, besides glimpses here and there of Michaela and me looking out the glass front doors to the top of the driveway and hoping to see something. No one else ever seems as excited as the two of us, but it doesn't matter. We have no way of knowing, yet, that Cocoa will arrive unneutered and bouncing off the walls, will be listed as "No Kids, No Cats, No Dogs" for his adoption recommendations, will be transferred out to another New Hampshire shelter and then transferred back, and will still be in a kennel in the shelter waiting as I begin to write his story eight months later. We have no way of knowing, yet, that Brownie will look like a pit bull, but only sort of, and that she will be so well-

behaved that she is chosen to go to offsite adoption events and whisked out of the shelter fast by an adopter who can only describe her as “perfect.” We have no way of knowing, yet, that Beau will be quiet and beautiful from the moment he glides off the van and that he will bound around the training room with us in our free time after work and that he will live with a family who will send us very clear photos of him lounging on their couch between their toddlers. We have no way of knowing, yet, that this transfer will remind us to follow the rules, while at the same time, reminding us to break them. All we can know, now, is that 24 dogs are finally pulling down the driveway to the shelter, frightened, confused, and cramped in their kennels, but so completely alive.

The two white vans are making the turn at the bottom of the driveway, and I’m not thinking about Cocoa, or Brownie, or Beau. Or, at least, not *just* about them. I’m thinking, instead about the whole thing, the whole two weeks of looking and choosing and wishing we could do more, that has come down to this.

Who are the heroes in dog transfers? Are they the shelters in Indiana and Alabama, who somehow scrape together the funds to get these lucky 24 dogs rabies shots and health certificates to prep them for transport? Are they Cathi and Ronda, who started these programs at their shelters, on their own time and, at first, on their own paychecks because they saw a problem and didn’t want to just watch and wait? Are they the transfer drivers, who cram themselves into the front seat of a rented Enterprise cargo van, and walk the dogs at rest stops on the Mass Pike at 3 AM, and drive the whole trip straight through despite non-stop barking and diarrhea dripping down their backs, for “nothing?” Or are the heroes me and Michaela, sitting at the Counselor1 email account in the Adoption Pod on a Friday night, clicking through the photo galleries, and

typing up the longest possible list? Today, standing just outside the shelter as the vans finally park, it feels like all of us.

And this is why I love transfers. Because even though the shelter is all about saving lives, through adoptions and medical care and spay/neuter programs, this is where it really happens. Dogs we pick survive, definitely. As for the dogs we don't, some of them, (like, this time, Scotty!) peek out at us from the back of the vans, their kennels labeled with masking tape for other New Hampshire shelters. And some don't. We don't know what happens to those ones.

Go ahead, try not to cry. I cry, when the van doors finally open. I walk the dogs in fast, so I can get the personal experience of pulling as many as possible from the travel crates to the real world, where they will be allowed to live. The dogs are frightened, most of them not knowing how to walk on a leash or not feeling brave enough to walk at all. Donald, a shivering collie puppy, has to be carried and pees down the front of my shirt, because the ride is long and the weather is different and this new place is so terrifying.

But on transfer day, I do not think about getting a clean shirt. Instead, as the warm liquid pools around my bellybutton and saturates my slip lead, all I can think to do is to try to explain it to Donald, Cocoa, Brownie, Beau and all of them, the picked dogs.

"You're safe now. You don't know it, but this is the most important day of your life. This," I say, picturing them all in their gloomy Indiana kennel photos, where I first saw them, "this is a good place." This is what makes me cry.

I cry, too, months later at the shelter's annual fundraising auction, pushed just inside the doors to the ballroom at the Wentworth Hotel. I'm a volunteer, not a guest, and I'm supposed to be at my silent auction tables in the hallway since I haven't paid the several hundred dollars for a ticket to

this event, but I am allowed inside for the five minutes it takes for the slideshow to play. This year, it is about transfer dogs.

I see pictures of my co-workers lifting dogs out of vans and pictures of dogs I've selected in their new homes. Cocoa is at the end of a slip lead, eagerly smelling New Hampshire for the first time, his brow a little less furrowed than in his Shelby County photo. Brownie is curled up on a blue plaid couch, her square head resting on her new mom's thigh and looking more like Scotty's than ever. Some of the transfer alumni are up on stage with their owners, part of the dog parade led by Beau, who finally stands out.

The ball gown clad guests continue to daintily eat their dinners, presumably at this event primarily for the glitz and glam of it all, as the screen flashes quotes from emails sent back and forth between us and the partner shelters.

"Can you help??"

Jennifer is still at the silent auction tables and won't come in to watch the slide show "because I know it's going to make me cry!" And it does, after months of trying to be strong about the process of picking, of trying to choose what to remember, of trying to choose what to forget. But even when the guests slip in and out of the swinging door next to me, raising their eyebrows at the streams of tears down my cheeks, I don't want to go back to the silent auction tables. This is what matters. I am not embarrassed to be crying here, in the ballroom. Instead, I am proud.

Name: Cocoa
Status Date: 3/21/2011

Status: Adopted

Name: Brownie
Status Date: 8/14/2010

Status: Adopted

Name: Beau
Status Date: 6/29/2010

Status: Adopted

office. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you.

In fact, these are not much more than a few lines of text. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you.

At first, I think of it as sort of a joke. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you.

Chaplin's Letter

practically empty out the shelves. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you.

We load the car with all of this first, and by the time we're finished, JoAnn's bright blue handbag is too packed to rest on the review mirror. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you.

waiting, having now inside the shelter because they all know where in the building and still not one's feeling them yet. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you.

I don't know how long it will take to get back with you. I don't know how long it will take to get back with you.

Animal ID: 5805
Animal Name: Chaplin
Source: Transfer In
Weight: 10 lbs
Type: Cat
Breed/Species: Domestic Medium Hair
Primary Color: Black
Secondary Color: White
Sex: Male

Status Date: 8/20/2009
Status: Awaiting Sort

At first, I think of it as sort of a joke. Jo-Ann's more serious—she's been to these before, but for me, it's different. I go to the cat show as a way to laugh at the people who are so invested in it, who schedule their lives around these weekends, who truly believe that it isn't their cat who wins, it's *them*. I go for all that, and to sell stuff.

Jo-Ann and I meet at the shelter at six that morning, and we pack way too much, practically emptying out the shelter's little store. We start with just a few of everything, but who's to know what color cat beds people will want, or what silver, rhinestone alphabet letter to hang off of a collar? Jo-Ann's not a morning person, and the only solution we can think of is to bring one of every version of everything. Or two, just in case.

We load the car with all of this first, and by the time we're finished, Jo-Ann's bright blue hatchback is too packed to see out the rearview mirror, like someone poured the stuff in, in liquid form, through the sunroof. On the tiny corner that's left of the back seat I place the basket I've filled with homemade chocolate mint brownies and apple cinnamon muffins, each tied into a baggie with a ribbon and a label showing the face of a cat that's been adopted, or a cat that's still waiting, meowing now inside the shelter because they all know we're in the building and still no one's feeding them yet.

I don't know, now, that except for the ones Jo-Ann and I eat for lunch, the brownies and muffins will all come back with us and dwindle away on the desk in the phone receptionist's

office. I don't know, now, that we will only come back with \$3.73 in cash, and \$3.23 of that will be what I put in the yellow plastic donation bin when we first get there, just so it won't look empty.

In fact, there's not much we do know, now, except that when we creep into Front Cats, leaving the lights off as if it will keep the crying cats from waking up and noticing us, to get Callie, she's way too scared to go. Callie is too new for either of us to know her; Jen has picked her and emailed her information to the registration address only because she is beautiful. And she *is*, sitting in the bottom of her Tokyo, with her tiger-striped calico patches covering her like a quilt. Her pupils are as big as the metal tag that hangs from her collar though, and it's not just because the room is dark. We try to lure her out of the cage, but she sees the carrier first and digs her back claws into the towel beneath her, skidding to a stop just inside the cage door. Jo-Ann and I aren't sure who to bring instead, and aren't sure if we'll even be able to do anything when we get there if the cat in our carrier doesn't match Callie's description, but we don't have many options about what to do. Except wing it.

In Back Cats, Jo-Ann chooses Chaplin, a black and white medium hair, who was transferred from another shelter two days before. There, he was a stray. All Jo-Ann and I know about Chaplin is that he is exceptionally soft, and that he sticks his paw out through the front bars of his cage when we walk in the room. We see extra toes and tufts of fur feathering out from beneath his paw pads and smaller, calmer pupils than Callie's. We are running late already, but not so late that I don't have time to worry. Chaplin's cage card says he was just neutered the afternoon before, and somehow this seems like a deal-breaker to me. Will he still act unneutered, crying out to the female cats in the show? Will he still *smell* unneutered?

By now, I have migrated into the Cat Nursery, drawn in by a litter of six new kittens, tiny tortoiseshells tumbling over one another in a hooded bed.

"I mean I know he's just black and white, but don't you think he's stunning??" Jo-Ann calls out from Owned Cat Holding. "A lot of it is about personality anyway."

I am hardly listening, scrawling my name in Sharpie on a pink sticky note and wedging it under the cage card clip on the kittens' cage.

"Okay, he's fine," I yell back. "Come look at these kittens! I HAVE to foster them!!!"

So that's how we choose Chaplin. Jo-Ann knows he needs to be clean for judging, but we aren't sure how to prepare him, so we end up finding a cotton ball in a drawer in back cats, wiping out his ears, and deciding he looks pretty good. Later, at the show, other owners will be obsessively grooming their cats with special velour cloths made just for this purpose, and I will be surprised at all the parts of Chaplin that the judges look at in detail and thankful that he must just be naturally clean. For now, as Jo-Ann loads him into a donated plastic carrier, I am thinking only about my new kittens.

We're feeling pretty lucky when Chaplin is quiet for the whole trip to the show, and even luckier when he calmly allows me to carry him around under my arm as Jo-Ann and I set up the metal cage the show has provided for us. Our location is good, just inside the doors to the big open room, where everyone will see the animal photos on our adoption board, but our tables look ugly, all white plastic and steel bars.

Everyone around us is apparently prepared already, their cats lounging in hammocks inside the cages, which are fully made over with velvety throws and decorative rosettes, or entirely replaced with soft-sided, multi-level, deluxe condos.

“Sorry, Chaplin,” I whisper, half-laughing, looking around at everyone else’s set-up and then back at our bare, harsh cage. But Chaplin seems unfazed, draped over the crook of my arm. The ugly phrase “just a stray” sneaks somehow into my mind, and I push it out fast, using my free hand to dump out the plastic Wal-mart bag of “cage dressings” that Jen insisted we take.

Twenty minutes later, our tables are transformed, and Chaplin is lying stretched out in a cage disguised by yellow satin, his belly fur blowing carelessly in the breeze from the air conditioner overhead. Next to him, our re-creation of the shelter’s store stands wide and colorful.

From afar, you’d think that Jo-Ann and I are regulars, that Chaplin is a champion and knows it. But up close, you can see the difference: our ratty shelter sweatshirts, the half-heartedly washed litter scoop balancing on the top of the yellow drapes, and a tiny tangled mat behind Chaplin’s right ear. When a suit-clad director hands us a program with Callie’s name and information in it under the “Best Household Pet” category, Jo-Ann and I have to laugh at all the flaws we’re swimming in.

Although he doesn’t seem to need it, Chaplin has plenty of time to settle into this new place, because the purebred and kitten competitions are first on the schedule. As the group of Scottish Folds from the tables across from us are whisked out of their hammocks, roughly polished with those velour cloths, and fluffed like pillows all the way up to the first judging ring, a small, bald man approaches our tables. Our first customer!

He only looks at the adoption board and our store set-up briefly, though, before zeroing in on Chaplin.

“Nice cat,” he says, almost suspiciously, but before we can tell him that he’s available for adoption, he starts gesturing to his own table, halfway across the room.

“I’ve got a tuxedo too,” he says, referring to Chaplin’s simple markings in the most exquisite way possible. “His name’s Ace; it’s short for Ace in the Hole.”

I smile and open my mouth, ready to make conversation about his cat like I do with the potential adopters at the shelter, but the man continues on without me.

“This is actually his first show today, but I’m sure he’s going to really impress. He’s incredibly confident, and real sleek. Absolutely BHP material.”

The man doesn’t stop talking here, but I stop listening, taking the next few sentences to figure out that BHP is Best Household Pet, and eventually realizing that he isn’t here at our table to inquire about adoptions or donations or the shelter in general. In his mind, Jo-Ann and I, our whole set-up, and Chaplin himself aren’t anything but competition. Somewhere in the monologue, I manage to wedge in the fact that Chaplin’s a shelter cat, and this seems to appease him.

“So he’s just... *homeless*?” He asks, nodding slowly and working his lips up into a hidden smile, as if a pleasant memory is gradually coming back to him. “Well then, best of luck in the ring.” And with that, he turns sharply enough to leave two black scuffs from his dress shoes on our section of linoleum.

Jo-Ann shakes her head and laughs, and Chaplin seems to shrug his shoulders as he stretches out of his half-nap. He steps clumsily into the litter box in the corner of his cage and proceeds to pee right over the edge, soaking the yellow satin and the next person’s cage on the other side.

When the Best Household Pet category is announced over the loudspeaker, Jo-Ann and I shove our purses under the tablecloth and invite Chaplin out of his cage, where he has been

playing with the ribbony tip of a wand toy that we've bought him from one of the vendors. Jo-Ann says that I should be the one to bring him to his holding cage in the first ring, since he seems to have taken a liking to me in the few short hours that we've known each other, but I can't quite bring myself to get invested in this at all. Among the other competitors, walking to the ring, I feel embarrassed, not because Chaplin is a shelter cat or because I'm not dressed nice enough, but because I don't want anyone to mistake me for one of them, one of these cat show people. It all seems a little too goofy, too ridiculous, too unimportant compared to my work at the shelter and the mindset it's given me.

So instead, Jo-Ann walks him to his holding cage, nestled in a horseshoe behind the judging table, and shuts him in. When she meets back up with me where I'm standing, awkwardly, behind the chairs set up for the audience, she gives me a summary of the competition. In his group, there are 8 or 10 other cats, most of them flashy breeds that I've only seen in *Cat Fancy* magazine. Jo-Ann is taking the bait of this whole event, starting to speculate who Chaplin can trump, but I genuinely don't care how he does in the judging. Instead, I'm hoping only that he somehow gets through the day without peeing anywhere else or biting someone, but without knowing him too well, I'm not ready to make any guarantees.

I don't quite understand the whole process yet, but a few things are clear to me, from the back row of the audience, where Jo-Ann has convinced me to sit down. When the judge, an older woman in a purple skirted suit who looks exactly like the cat show judge you'd picture in your mind if you've never seen one before, hauls Ace out of his holding cage, he's scared and hissy. She puts him back in without even carrying him all the way to the judging table, and I glance at the bald man in the front row as he drops his chin to his chest, feeling bad not for him but for his

cat, who is far too afraid for this and reminds me of frightened Callie in Front Cats this morning. This, I can understand, is not a good showing.

After two Scottish Folds, a Munchkin, and a Bengal, it's Chaplin's turn. He comes out of the cage talking, and turns to head butt the judge's hands and elbows when she sets him down on the table. He sniffs at the cat grass that's set up up there and stretches his body into a backwards arch to tear at the upright scratching post. She keeps him there for a long time, and by the end of it, Chaplin's rolling on the white Formica surface, belly up, and batting absently at the wrong end of the wand toy the judge is waving over him.

"And double paws, too!" she says as she sets him gently back into his holding cage, when it's finally all over. Chaplin turns and meows in her face, apparently wondering why playtime has ended when things were just getting good.

Chaplin wins second place in ring one, third in ring two, and second again in ring three, and by the time we're called up to the last judging station, I'm practically leaving Jo-Ann in the dust, as I confidently cart Chaplin up to his holding cage like he's my pageant daughter.

We're in the front row now, where I can clearly see Chaplin waiting while the cats before him are judged. He seems to be tired from the day in general and didn't even want to play with his wand toy between the third ring and this one, and now there's no denying that I'm hoping he'll do well. Another second place would be great, but I can't keep from reminding myself that he had surgery yesterday, took a long trip between shelters the day before, and spent his time doing who knows what as a stray before that. I am invested, but not so invested that I stop seeing Chaplin as what he truly is, which is, of course, a cat. A cat, whose biggest goals in life are sleeping, and right now, finding a home. Everything else is background.

Ace's owner has left early, and now the cage next to Chaplin's is empty, but still, everyone's eyes jump to his side of the horseshoe when he starts emitting silly meows. The Bengal is up on the judging table, but Chaplin has a way of stealing the show even when it's not his turn, and he sticks his tufty black double paws between the wire bars of his cage, batting at something imaginary, and making even the stuffiest, tweed-suited competitors chuckle under their breaths.

What's he doing, someone in the audience asks us, and the answer is simple. He's playing. But it seems strange, the kind of strange that makes you smile, like a rainbow or something, that he should be doing it here, now.

I can't say it's a full surprise when this last judge puts ribbons on all of the other cats' holding cages first, saving the big purple and white first place ribbon for Chaplin, because it's clear he deserves it. So no, I'm not shocked that Chaplin should win first place, but instead, that a shelter cat could so confidently shatter the stereotype of brokenness that Ace's owner and so many others have tried to assign him. When the judge went around prior to handing out the ribbons, to ask each owner to share a funny story about their cat's past, Jo-Ann and I had nothing to say about Chaplin, but now, I know, that doesn't matter. The past is gone. The future, for Chaplin, will certainly be filled with funny stories.

Still, it's ironic if you think about it, that the cat who wins Best Household Pet is the one who doesn't have a household at all. I can't shake the feeling that I should learn something big from Chaplin, although I can't quite put my finger on what it is, about resiliency or optimism or something. Something Chaplin has without even trying and we can only wish for in ourselves.

He is perfectly unimpressed with his ribbon, but as I take him out of his holding cage and walk him back to our table, I feel giddy, like I want to make conversation with everyone I see.

Jen has sent me with applications and permission to do an offsite adoption if we meet anybody perfect, but there really hasn't been anyone here focused on adopting up until now. Several people admire him, though, on our walk away from the last ring, but I feel protective of Chaplin now. It isn't because he's a champion, but instead, because he shouldn't have to be. I make polite conversation but don't mention the applications or the adoption process, because I wouldn't give Chaplin to any of these people, with their houses full of cats kept in cages. Chaplin deserves more than to be just one among twenty-two, or however many it is that they each brag to me about having, hoping it might make them worthy of one more prizewinner.

Back at the shelter, the picture of Chaplin and me from the press release, (which has been published in newspapers as far away as Brazil!) hangs on the break room refrigerator. It has been a couple weeks since the show, and I am still returning phone calls from people everywhere. Today, a woman in Virginia tells me that Chaplin's identical to her other cat, and she just HAS to have him—but Chaplin's long since been adopted by a family who knew nothing about cat shows but took his ribbon home anyway, since their daughter thought it was "cool." Now he's lying on a three-season porch somewhere, biting the ribbons off of his favorite wand toy, and only his echoing celebrity status remains here in the shelter. This is the way things should be.

The calls and emails don't surprise me, since it seems right for the rest of the world to rejoice with us at the thought of a shelter cat rising above the stigma, but when Jen hands me a handwritten letter, it's definitely a first. The stationary is loud, the entire envelope covered in colorful cartoon cows, and the card itself is printed with something strange and random, that must be a joke I don't understand. The sender doesn't either, because the shaky handwriting says:

Dear Miss Anderson,

I don't really understand this card, but that's OK. I saw the picture of you and your cat, and I wanted to ask where did you get the name Chaplin from? My last name is Chaplin, and most of my family is in West Virginia, but there are some Chaplins up here I guess to.

Anyway he looks like a neat cat. If you want to write back, you can, but if not that's OK to.

Yours truly,

Rick Chaplin

Before I see the signature, my first impression of the letter is that it's from an old lady. But you know the way you picture a place a certain way in your mind until you've actually been there, and then after you see the real thing, you can only imagine it that way, and can never manage to re-see even tiny glimpses of what you pictured before? It's like that.

I read the letter out loud in Jen's office, and we laugh a little, Jen because she thinks it's strange, and me because I think it's cute. I'll probably write back, I think, just to be nice. But when I turn the envelope over to stick the card back inside, I see something stamped in blue ink, almost completely obscured by the weird stationary: MAILED FROM THE NH STATE PRISON.

Everyone at the front desk is laughing, and I am laughing too, but I'm also thinking that he could've made just one mistake, and that he must be so lonely and bored. A part of me still wants to write back, to tell Rick that Chaplin wasn't named for anything flashy, just after an old pet sitter that Jen's family used to use when she was a kid. What's the harm in a reply?

When Dee and Jenny sit down to Google him on one of the shelter's computers that night, I feel embarrassed for not wanting to just brush this person off, for wanting to believe that his intentions are clear and honest, for secretly hoping that he just stole a car or sold some drugs

or something. They don't find anything, but no one forgets about the letter, and by the end of the week, even Dennis, the maintenance guy, is making jokes about my picture hanging up on the prison wall.

"Don't write back!" everyone says, laughing, until it seems so obvious that no one needs to say it anymore.

And when my dad gets home from his business trip and sees the letter for the first time, he says the same thing. He sits down at the computer and looks up Rick so simple, so fast, and finds the "offense" section of his prisoner profile. Thirteen counts of sexual abuse of children under the age of nine. (Or nine, under thirteen. Does it matter?)

And now I feel disgusted, and stupid for almost writing back, but still a part of me wonders about being lonely and hoping for a response. Should it matter that Rick isn't the old lady that the letter first made him sound like? It does.

Still, somehow, when my six foster kittens clatter around in their room that night, banging on the metal heater that tunnels through the wall between us and waking me up at three AM, I have an image in my mind of Chaplin's paw sticking out between the bars of his holding cage, and I know I've been dreaming about underdogs.

Name: Chaplin
Status Date: 8/29/2009
Status: Adopted

Scout is a female, born on 09/23/09, and is a mix of Border Collie and
 Labrador Retriever. She is currently housed at the shelter and is
 available for adoption. Her status is currently "Available".

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Animal ID: 8247
Animal Name: Scout
Source: Returns
Reason for Surrender: Moving
Weight: 55.2 lbs
Type: Dog
Breed/Species: Pit Bull Terrier
Primary Color: Tan
Secondary Color: None
Sex: Male

Status Date: 6/17/2010
Status: Awaiting Sort

On September 23, seven out of 29 dogs on the shelter's website are returnees, and I know that something is wrong. I don't know if it's us at the shelter or them, the adopters, but I do know that it isn't them, the dogs. Seven. Seven out of 29. This isn't just a fraction though; this is seven individual lives. This is seven individual dogs who are back here and maybe don't want to be and definitely don't know why. This is Reese, a shepherd mix who people fought over when she first went up for adoption. This is Lady, who's here again for the long haul because no one has the right insurance for her breed. This is Sam, whose second "forever home" only lasted two days. This is Ford, whose separation anxiety was just too much. This is Belle, who has been returned twice for barking and jumping and being the coonhound puppy that she can't help being. This is Bing, the high energy stray who only bounces off the walls because a kennel is such a small place to be. This is Mildred/Roxy, who left the shelter two years ago and came back with two names and no home.

Months earlier, there was Scout, too.

But today, these are the seven. Something is wrong.

These seven dogs will spend days, or weeks, or months in the shelter system once again. They will be set back, just a little or a whole lot, in bonding with people and learning to trust. They will, maybe, become just a little more difficult to place as they develop habits and

behaviors that any of us would if we were left in a small area to go “kennel crazy.” But for these seven dogs, there will be seven do-overs. For some animals, there aren’t.

Scout is not on the website in this group of seven, but he was in the returnee group of adoptable dogs a few months before. His story begins, or perhaps, begins again, sometime in June.

Scout’s person is standing at the surrender desk, behind a long line of three or four families giving up their pets. I immediately dislike him, not only because he has come in through the building’s Animal Admitting doors, but because he looks annoyed. He looks young, tough, and disgusted by the fact that I don’t help him immediately. Had he been filling out an adoption application or dropping off donations, I would easily have found the time to work with him while the surrenderers ahead of him filled out answers on personality profiles for their pets, but his presence in the surrender area decreases his status in my eyes.

Maybe some people don’t understand this. Maybe some people think that the whole purpose for animal shelters is to take in people’s unwanted pets, and that I, and the other adoption counselors, shouldn’t have a bad attitude about people dropping off animals, but I am sure I always will. I don’t know everyone’s circumstances, I don’t know everyone’s story, and I don’t know everyone’s pet. But I do know one thing: that I would never walk through the Animal Admitting doors with one of my animals. For me, this is enough. And if a lack of people surrendering their pets would mean losing my job, then I hope I’m laid off tomorrow.

But today is today, and today there are animals surrendered. Today, there is Scout. He is still out in the truck when his person finally reaches the surrender desk. As soon as this man opens his mouth, I feel sorry for judging him so soon. He describes Scout to me, a dog that he adopted about a year ago and has to bring back because he can no longer afford his home. Scout

is a pit bull, unwelcome at most apartments and condos because of the reputation that other owners' dogs have earned for him. Scout's owner begins to tear up before I even ask him to go out to the truck and bring Scout in, and I suddenly realize that maybe what I thought was annoyance was actually devastation. Maybe instead of being angry at waiting so long before being helped, Scout's owner was relieved. Relieved that for fifteen more minutes, he still owned his dog.

When Scout comes in, he is beautiful. He is young, spirited, and in great shape. The overhead lighting shines off his golden fur, and his toenails tick against the tile floor as he prances around the surrender area, checking out everything with his nose. He greets me and Michaela, an Animal Care Tech who seems to get word of new pit bulls before they walk through the doors, with energy, excitement, and drool.

Although I may have judged this owner, I do not judge this dog. I have had no experience with pit bulls except at the shelter, and I have had no experience with pit bulls that has told me to fear them. In fact, these are often the dogs who are nervous in the kennels and love to cuddle with me when I sit on their blankets next to them. These are often the dogs who are great on a leash and fun to play with in the outside pens and who I often choose to take out first during the afternoon walk times. I, and everyone at the shelter, make special efforts to keep these dogs exercised, happy, and socialized so that they can be adopted and prove to people how wrong these stereotypes are. Michaela welcomes Scout into her "Pittie Pack" as one heck of a dog and a representative of her favorite breed, and no one this side of the surrender desk judges him otherwise.

Unfortunately, though, although staff and volunteers give each pit bull a blank slate, shelter rules do not. So when Scout's owner tells me that he is dog aggressive and will snap and

growl when meeting other dogs, I am shattered. I cannot turn this man away, since Scout was originally adopted here, but if he is dog aggressive he will not be entered into Shelter Buddy as “owner surrender,” but as “voluntary euthanasia.” While a dachshund or lab or spaniel would simply have “no dogs” written on their cage card for home recommendations, a pit bull won’t need a cage card. I do not know if it is in an effort to improve the breed’s reputation or if someone higher up in shelter administration genuinely distrusts these dogs. All I know is that “aggression towards other animals” means these dogs die.

But there is snapping and then there is biting, and when Scout’s owner tells me that Scout has only snapped, I know that this will be our way of following the shelter rules but manipulating them just a little in Scout’s favor. Besides, something about the mix between Scout’s owner’s tough appearance and his blotchy red face and teary eyes tells me that I can’t mention voluntary euthanasia. I want to be honest and realistic with him, but it is too much right now. He has no other options, and neither do I but to set Scout up for success as carefully as possible. When he leaves, Scout’s owner begins to actually sob.

“We’re going to do our best to find him a fantastic home,” I tell him. “He seems like he’s really going to be a great dog for somebody.”

“He is,” he replies through the hiccupy gasps of crying. “He’s my best friend.”

And with these last four words, the words that I would have least expected to come out of the mouth of the annoyed, tough guy I assessed when he arrived at the shelter, Scout’s owner turns and walks out the door, his shoulders shuddering with sobs.

I am still a relatively new employee, and when I am left holding Scout’s leash in the lobby, I begin to worry about what I might have gotten myself into by taking this dog in as an adoption prospect. I am careful to keep him away from other dogs in the hallways, knowing that

one slip up on my part might ruin his chances entirely, but when I find out that my manager, Riann, is on board with fighting for Scout's success, I feel a little better.

The next day, after Scout has had a little time to settle in at the shelter, Riann conducts the dog-to-dog intro portion of the behavior assessment before anyone else will have a chance to do it less carefully. She picks the one helper dog in the building who we are all 100% confident will be mellow and submissive and will give Scout his absolute best chance of starting fresh and passing the test: her own dog, Miley.

Miley is an English Mastiff, a big gangly girl who plods along with a teenager's awkwardness. She has grown up in the shelter, meeting new dogs and people every day, and nothing seems to faze her. And with her slow movements and friendly behavior, she succeeds in not fazing Scout, who not only fails to snap at her but even gets in a few butt sniffs and tail wags. This is when I begin to hope that Scout is going to be okay.

And although he doesn't get adopted for quite a while, most likely due to breed restrictions on insurance and rental policies, Scout *is* okay. Several people come to the front desk and ask to walk him, and most seem to like his exuberant, outgoing personality and bouncy, playful gait. The thing is, though, that no one seems to like him enough to bother with the trouble of adopting him. For them, it is easier to choose the dog in the next kennel, who doesn't require a change in insurance policies. Some people actually seem to agree with the insurance companies, and refuse to even meet Scout simply because his cage card says "Pit Bull Terrier" on it.

During afternoon feeding, on days that I am working as an Animal Care Tech, I watch many people interact with Scout through the bars of his kennel. Some feed him treats or let him lick their hands, but others stand in front of him, staring him straight in the eyes and repeating

rumors and stereotypes based on other dogs that look like him. Maybe Scout doesn't understand their words, but I know he understands their eyes.

With each additional day in the kennel, each additional stare and comment, Scout breaks down just a little bit.

We all see it happening. Scout becomes very dominant with other dogs on walks, and his play and exuberance turn into mouthy, rough behavior. He is going kennel crazy, but with an added dimension, I think. I think Scout knows that he is always being judged, just a little harder and a little meaner than all the dogs around him. Maybe he doesn't know what it means, but Scout is finding out that he's a pit bull, and that it's not something good to be around here.

To bounce him back, our behavior department works intensively with Scout. For them, this is hard work; for Scout, it is heaven. He spends less time in his kennel and more time in the training room learning new tricks, in the outdoor pens chasing tennis balls, and even in group obedience classes learning how to play nice with others. Michaela suggests moving Scout from a kennel to a roomier, comfier Home Room, which is set up with furniture and provides more privacy for dogs who need it most. Individually, we all agree with this, but as a shelter, no one can let it happen. Even in this, Scout is a pit bull, which holds him back. Someone, somewhere has decided that pit bulls can't live in Home Rooms because it's easier for the dogs to open the doors to these rooms than the metal doors of the kennels. Someone, somewhere thinks that Scout will be a danger if he gets loose.

And because of this very thought, this very rule, Scout becomes a danger.

One afternoon, after Scout has been cornered in a kennel for about a month and a half, his mouthiness goes a little too far; he bites Michaela as she is clipping on his leash. Michaela, creator of the Pittie Pack, is one of Scout's biggest fans; she is the worst person he could bite.

But at the same time, she is the best. Scout doesn't break the skin, and Michaela uses this loophole in the rule to feel legitimate in keeping the secret to herself. I find out in the training room one day, as Scout is leaping through agility hoops. Michaela doesn't want to coax him through the tunnel because she is a little bit afraid now, not of all pit bulls, and perhaps not even of Scout himself, but of the dog that all this time in the shelter has turned him into.

The next few weeks are incident free, and we all continue to work with Scout, if not to make him better, then to keep him from getting any worse. We cannot deny the effects shelter life has on dogs, but we work hard at prevention: prevention of bites, prevention of bad matches, prevention of failed adoptions. We are fighting against something, but we know we only need to keep our heads above water long enough to get each animal out of the building and into a forever home.

And finally, we do this for Scout.

It is a middle-aged couple with an active lifestyle who finally say "what's next?" after they take Scout for a walk and spend time with him in a room inside. Kelly, who has been Scout's biggest ally in the behavior department, beams through the entire adoption and flits around the lobby telling each of the counselors that he is finally going home. It is not as though we thought this would never happen, but adoptions of our long-term residents have something surreal about them. It sinks in, though, when I walk through the dog adoption kennels later that afternoon and Scout is gone. His kennel is empty, his cage card has been taken down. His battle is over.

Until three days later, when I realize we have failed him.

Scout, like the seven dogs that will be on the website months later, becomes a returnee. He has gone after his adopters' cat, not only chasing it, but taking out a chunk of fur. He has

attacked another animal. He is a pit bull. There is no loophole in this rule, no way I can bend it to give Scout another chance, another do-over. I want to tell myself that this is no one's fault. That his cage card said "Ok Here" with cats because that is all Scout showed us. That we did the best we could. But over and over in my mind play the "if onlys." If only someone had written "No Cats." If only the cat had been introduced later. If only this family had brought us the cat instead!

To them, maybe, this is no big deal. They don't know what "aggression towards other animals" will mean for Scout, and none of us have the heart to tell them. They say, too cheerfully, when they bring him back, "He'll make a great dog for a family with no cats!"

But he never does.

Scout dies in Lab II, on the cold silver table, or maybe on the floor. He is surrounded by sharps canisters and locked cabinets. He is restrained with a muzzle, and eventually, he is gone.

For me, this isn't the hardest part, though. The hardest part is knowing what's going to happen before Scout does. Before he is Lab II, he is in a kennel in Stray Dog Holding with a Staff Walk Only sign pinned up in front of his cage card. On the afternoon of the day that he dies, I have no way of getting around walking Scout. Michaela and I are the only Animal Care Techs in a sea of volunteers, and it isn't fair to ask her to take him out; he is still a member of her Pittie Pack, and he has bitten her. She is both devastated and afraid. But even though I know Scout will be in Lab II tonight, he is alive now and needs a walk, deserves a walk.

This last walk is immensely painful. Scout is happy to get outside and dances through the grass, and I cannot find it in my heart to tell him that he will never do this again. He stops to sniff the Black-eyed Susans in the shelter's gardens, bounds up the hill to the old oak tree on the side of the building, and lifts his leg on the chain-link fences, all for the last time. He is happy, distracted, and so simply unaware of his fate; his lighthearted behavior makes this harder. On

this walk, he is such a good dog. He is so playful. So happy. So alive. I am sorry I have to do this. I would rather have never looked at Scout again after finding out that he is to be euthanized. He deserves at least this, at least this walk, but I would rather be doing something else, *anything* else, than so closely facing the reality of what Scout is now and what he is soon to be. I try not to walk too close to any of the volunteers; they shouldn't have to see me cry.

And after I put Scout back in his kennel, for me, it is over. Next time I walk through, his kennel will be empty, his cage card will be taken down. His battle will be over. All that's left for me is to walk fast past the door of Lab II that night, when a telltale crack of light is spilling out underneath.

And with this light, it is over for Scout too. Because he is a pit bull, because he is returned, he is gone. Now, Scout is nothing. Now, Scout is just this story. Once, he was someone's best friend.

Name: Scout
 Status Date: 8/27/2010
 Status: Euthanized

Glinda's Window

in the parking lot within reach of the Bonmouth Avenue traffic. She has not officially been
 anything into the building for ten hours of a dog park or a door frame spanning from
 the sunbaked deck and even further, especially yanking this new set out of the man's stirs and
 now Glinda's assistant's not choppy, that's how the lighting might be at first. It's time to
 lobby. This is only throughout that you get feedback. As if to say, why is it better to
 introducing to each other and a fitter of kittens being let out of their cages to turtles in the
 sack them into their own. At least you have two or three dogs that the owner must own and
 it gets me one at the adoption desk will offer volunteer to help with a sunbaked because it will
 while you are still copying the first person's driver's license. And no matter how overwhelming
 closed. It's time will form with the second person filling out a personality profile for their dog.
 come in from 1 AM to the people knocking on the door after the sign has been flipped on.
 number of the morning always seems to turn into a sentence to perform all the surrenders that
 you're working the surrenders desk is not just for somebody handling the first set
 window. It's the surrenders desk that's the window into the world of the surrenders.

any and for them to be with you. It's the way you'll receive a signal to a room to

Animal ID: 6444

Animal Name: Glinda

Source: Stray-No ID

Weight: 8 lbs

Type: Cat

Breed/Species: Domestic Short Hair

Primary Color: Brown Tiger

Secondary Color: Gold

Sex: Female

Status Date: 7/20/2009

Status: Awaiting Sort

Glinda does not arrive at the shelter in a shimmering pink bubble. She does not arrive in a carrier, or in a Havahart trap. She does not even arrive in a cardboard box or a laundry basket, like some do. Glinda arrives in nothing, just in someone's open arms. I see her through the window by the surrender desk.

Working the surrender desk is not a job we fight for. Somehow, handling the first surrender of the morning always seems to turn into a sentence to perform all the surrenders that come in, from 11 AM to the people knocking on the door after the sign has been flipped to "closed." A line will form, with the second person filling out a personality profile for their dog, while you are still copying the first person's driver's license. And no matter how overwhelming it gets, no one at the adoption desk will ever volunteer to help with a surrender, because it will suck them into it too—at least until you have two or three dogs that the owners insist on introducing to each other and a litter of kittens being let out of their carrier to run free in the lobby. It is only through chaos that you get backup.

Glinda's surrender is not chaotic, but it looks like it might be at first. This time I race to the surrender desk, and even further, practically yanking this new cat out of the man's arms and whisking her into the building, for fear of her hearing a dog bark or a door slam and running free in the parking lot within reach of the Portsmouth Avenue traffic. She has not officially been

signed over yet, but I have seen her through the window and already feel responsible for her safety.

She comes to me easily, though I disregard all I've learned about slowly approaching a new animal in my frantic hurry to get her inside. I do not remember her being particularly scared or squirmy; she is just there—looking over my shoulder at this new place.

I take a copy of the man's license before I set Glinda up in a cage, just in case he decides to run off while I'm behind the Staff Only doors. Often they do, so as not to feel so bad about surrendering their pet. But Glinda's person is still there when I get back. He doesn't feel bad about dropping her off; she is a stray, so he is a hero. Sometimes these animals are "strays," even when they really aren't—"He's just a stray... he's been hanging around and we've been feeding him and taking him to the vet for six years," or, "She just showed up at the house a few days ago—oh, but make sure whoever adopts her knows that she doesn't like big dogs, and her name is Sassy, and she can't go to sleep at night without three soft Pounce treats first!" I imagine the people say these things so they can feel better about themselves and so people like me won't think badly of them. But these are the people we talk about over lunch breaks, not the ones who admit the truth and give us the useful information we need to get their pets adopted again.

So Glinda is a stray. But I believe her person. He is young, dark-haired, and on his way to the gym. His name is maybe Scott or Steve. He doesn't fill out a personality profile because he doesn't know Glinda too well. He tells me she's been hanging around his porch for the last week or so. He's been feeding her. He's been checking with neighbors to see if anyone is missing a cat. He's been feeling bad about watching her look in through the porch window in the evenings.

Glinda's person signs the surrender form and asks for the date. It is July 20th. I can't remember if he leaves a donation. He does leave Glinda. And then he heads for the gym.

There's no line at the surrender desk today, so I have time to enter all Glinda's information in Shelter Buddy and print out a cage card for her. I fill in all the usual blanks. Source: Stray, No ID. Status: Awaiting Sort. Animal: Cat. Age: 2 years (my guess for all full grown animals until I can look at their teeth). Primary Color: Brown Tiger. Secondary Color: Gold. There are a lot of blanks, but it takes less time than you'd think to fill them out. I must have entered hundreds of animals in the system, so selecting the right choices from the drop down menus hardly takes any thought. Until Shelter Buddy asks for something I don't know. Name.

On the morning of July 20th, Glinda isn't Glinda yet. Her person didn't know her name, only that she was hungry and on his porch. I don't know it either, though I wish she could tell me; I wish she could keep this one little thing constant in her suddenly changing world. But she is quiet. So I don't type in Glinda because of something she did or something she looks like or someplace she came from, but only because it somehow doesn't seem right to name this cat "Stray, Hampton" like the three hundred other cats that are already in the system with that in their name box, when I have a name idea on the spot. So she is Glinda because that's what I think of first, not because she has anything to do with Kansas or munchkins, and not because she is a good witch of the North. So far, though, she seems like a pretty good *cat*.

Some days it's hard to do more than drop off a new animal in a cage before you have to run back up to the desk to return someone's carrier and help the next person in line, but because today is slow, I am the one to fill Glinda's water dish, open a can of food for her, and draw up her distemper vaccine from the refrigerator in Lab I. After mixing the vaccine into the dilution, I head into Stray Cat Holding to find Dee vaccinating a cat she has taken in earlier. I ask if she'll vaccinate Glinda for me, and she gives me her usual response.

“Haven’t you learned how to vaccinate yet?”

“Well yeah... But it still grosses me out, Dee...” I respond as she laughs, remembering my first near-fainting experience with needles at the shelter. We both know I will never be a vet tech.

Dee vaccinates Glinda, and after she has left, I kneel down and open her cage to straighten up her towel and toss in a few toys. I have put her in a cage with a window, thinking she might like to look out and watch the dogs being walked and the horses moving from the front to the back pasture after she has settled in, but she isn’t interested in the window. Right now, although she has just been lost from her family, yanked off Scott/Steve’s porch, put in a small silver cage, and vaccinated, Glinda is only interested in *me*. As the barred door opens, rattling out a metallic sound that sends most new cats jumping to the shelves or back corners of their cages, Glinda stretches her way out onto my lap and uses my jeans as a scratching post. This is so simple.

Glinda continues to live simply for the next four days, unfazed by all that is happening around her. On day two I am cleaning her cage when the summer camp kids take a tour of the back cat area. The door to Stray Cat Holding is closed, but I can hear the kids just outside it, in the cat kitchen area, standing on their tippy toes and pressing their fingers and faces up against the window to see who is inside. Their counselor, Kristi, always tells them that it’s okay to look through the window, but that they can’t go in the room because the new cats might be nervous and afraid. Usually I am thankful to hear her say this, glad that someone is drawing the line for groups of kids who always seem to be notoriously badly behaved and loud and insensitive to these cats who are stressed, and grumpy, and just not themselves here. But Glinda seems neither nervous nor afraid, as she scratches my jeans and then sprawls herself into my lap while I dust

the kitty litter out of the bottom of her cage. The kids are pointing and smiling and pushing each other out of the way, and then I am doing something I never do; I am reaching out to the loud-mouthed, drippy nose kids that I usually avoid at all costs. I am opening the door and saying, “Kristi, I don’t know what your protocol is on letting the kids interact with the new animals, but this is the nicest cat ever.”

So on her second day at the shelter, Glinda is perched in my arms in the middle of a circle of rambunctious eight-year-olds who are petting and pinching and poking at every part of her body. The kids are thrilled to be able to touch one of these behind-the-scenes animals that nobody but the staff and volunteers has seen yet. Glinda is purring.

On day five, Glinda’s stray hold is up. No one has claimed her, which doesn’t surprise me. In over two years of working at the shelter, I have seen maybe four lost cats reunited with their families. Nearly all of the stray dogs seem to be picked up within a day or two of being brought in, but the cats are a different story. They are never wearing a collar. They are never microchipped. They are often let outside and left there overnight or while families are away on vacation. They are acquired, lost, and replaced like disposable, inanimate items. But here at the shelter, they finally matter to someone. For far too many of them, this is the first time someone has taken the time to care.

It is clear to me, though, that someone out there cares about Glinda, or at least did at one point. One day ten, when we take her into Lab I to process her, a quick shave of her belly shows a spay scar. This is somewhat of a rare find on our stray cats, but it means good news for Glinda. After an easy nail trim, combo test, de-worming, flea preventative, microchipping, and rabies shot, she is ready for adoption. Dee checks her teeth and estimates her to be about four years old,

and I pick out a collar for her: red gingham, the cat version of the ruby slippers. This collar, along with the microchip, we hope, will prevent Glinda from losing her home ever again.

With all her medical work done, Glinda can be upgraded from Back Cats to Front Cats. She scores a cage in the lobby, where she can be seen by everyone who walks to and from the front desk, because the designated cat rooms are all pretty full. It is summer, the season known in animal shelters for too many cats and kittens. The close quarters, large numbers, and questionable backgrounds of these cats lead to one of shelter volunteers' and staff's worst nightmares: upper respiratory infections. Despite friendly reminders given both verbally and on colorful printed signs, kids (and even worse, their parents) can never resist sticking fingers in the cat cages, even though this means spreading snot from one sick cat to all the others in the building. I am careful to put vitamin supplements in the canned food during the summer and to change my rubber gloves in between every cage during morning cleaning, but with the shelter open to uneducated and unconcerned people, there is very little I can do for Glinda, except hope that she will be adopted before she gets sick and clean her cage before any of the others each morning.

I don't know why I do this. Of course I don't want *any* of the cats to get sick, but somehow, Glinda has earned special treatment. Somehow, she has gone from a stray cat in someone's arms in the parking lot to my overprotected, favorite shelter resident. I scoop her litter box more than the others, and feed her extra canned food, and give her plush beds instead of towels to lie on and cardboard scratching posts to use in her cage (although she still seems to prefer my jeans). Naturally, I love all the animals in the shelter; I wouldn't be working here if I didn't. But I love Glinda in a different way, when I can hear her collar jingle over to me after I call her name while she is loose in the lobby, when she looks me in the eye and meows if I walk

past her cage without giving her an extra snuggle, when she perches herself up over my shoulder and lets me carry her around at the front desk while the shelter is open. I love Glinda like she isn't a shelter cat, but like she is my *own* cat.

The reality is, though, that Glinda isn't my cat. So when a woman with a great adoption application starts talking to me after Glinda's been available for adoption for almost a month, I am happy to steer her towards that cage in the lobby. Diane is a first-time cat owner and spends several hours at the shelter visiting with various cats before I mention Glinda. She first wants to see Smitty, another lobby cat who she had talked to me on the phone about for at least a half hour the day before. Smitty is large and lazy, a friendly, easy-going cat who would get along well in just about any household. I tell Diane this, and her experienced cat-owning friend that she's brought along for advice tells her this, but Diane tells us that Smitty is just too big. He seems so sweet, but she is afraid he might "attack her sometime when she doesn't expect it." It is clear that Diane has never owned a cat before.

She visits with several other cats, and even sits with Smitty again later in the afternoon, but she still has mixed feelings. By now, it is about quarter to seven, nearly closing time, so in a last ditch effort, I suggest that Diane look at Glinda. I tell her that Glinda is my favorite cat in the entire shelter and that I'm sure she would be an easy first cat to care for. Diane is burnt out, stressed from spending a day with cats that she just isn't sure about, despite her friend's best efforts to illustrate the ease of cat-ownership, but she agrees to sit with Glinda for a bit. After I set them up together, I return to the front desk and carefully watch what happens as I begin filing the day's receipts. Through the window to the Get Acquainted Room, I see Glinda sitting on the bench with Diane and rubbing all over her and her purse. Diane's back is to me, but her friend is smiling and making gestures with her hands as she talks. Glinda is head-butting Diane's

shoulders and climbing in and out of her lap. I know she is purring. It is clear to me that she is ready to go home.

And conveniently, Diane is ready to take her.

“This is the one!” she says, walking out of the cat area with Glinda in her arms. “She is just perfect. Although I think her name will have to change...I’m not so sure about ‘Glinda.’”

I don’t defend the name, knowing that a home is much more important, and pull a blue adoption folder off the shelf behind the front desk. I direct Diane and her friend to some chairs in the Adoption Pod and place Glinda back in her cage for the 20 minutes or so it will take us to do the paperwork. So much of me is sad to see her go, but I try to dwell on the fact that she’s getting a good, safe, indoor home with Diane—this is a much better outcome than getting sick in the shelter or being adopted by someone who doesn’t seem quite right for her. But despite the name change, Diane seems nearly perfect. She will feed her and play with her and keep her safe, and in return, Glinda will teach Diane that owning a cat is simple and wonderful.

“You’re going home tonight,” I whisper, before closing the cage door. “You’re finally going home.”

As I am sitting down at the adoption desk with Diane, my manager Glo comes through the Staff Only doors into the lobby. She knows I have been working with Diane for several hours and will want to finish the adoption even though the shelter has been closed for ten minutes now.

“I’m going out back to start shutdown—page me if she does anything crazy and you need back-up!” Glo says, making a joke as usual.

We all laugh, knowing that this will be a quick and easy adoption, and I begin going over the paperwork with Diane. She is nervous but excited to have a companion in her apartment and asks plenty of questions: How much should she feed her? Where will she want to sleep? Would

it be okay to let her out on her second floor balcony to watch the birds? (I suggest she keep her inside and just let her enjoy them through the window).

Her friend is already arranging kitty playdates by the time we reach the handout about how to trim nails, when Diane suddenly turns grey and says “I just can’t do it...I just can’t do it...I just CAN’T do it! I’m not ready for a cat!”

She drops her pen onto the desk, her hands shaking and tears suddenly streaming down her face. I want to help her, to talk her through this, to listen to the reassuring words her friend is using to try to get through to her, but I’m too shocked to even move. Diane is doing something crazy, and it seems rude to call Glo over the intercom, but I don’t know what else to do, except make something up about how I want her to be sure before adopting, close her half-finished blue folder in my mailbox in case she is ready tomorrow, and make Glinda a little red circle tag that says “Glinda—C. Anderson—8 Dudley Road,” because I already told her she was going home.

Packing her up in a donated plastic carrier, I remember to back when I was a kid, and I convinced myself that I would never get any pets of my own when I grew up, because I didn’t want to have to deal with it when they died. But ten-year-old me forgot something that working at the shelter has reminded me of time and time again, and that’s that before they die, they live. They knead their claws into your jeans and fling mouse toys into the air and roll in catnip and sunshine and they *live*.

So Glinda came home on August 20th, exactly one month after I took her from Scott/Steve in the parking lot. Sometimes, while she’s napping in my lap or lying in her favorite open window, her tail and eyelids twitching as she dreams, I simply watch Glinda and wonder about her original home. I am thankful for the family out there somewhere that taught her to be nice to everyone and to perch on shoulders and to just be the cat that she is. I wonder if there are

children in the family who still don't know what ever happened to their cat, and I wish that I could somehow tell them, or at least Scott/Steve, or even Diane, that she's living with me now, and that she's okay. That she's finally home.

And now when I come home, Glinda is lying in her window, hot from the sun. Tufts of her gold-ticked fur sprout out from the tiny holes in the screen, and I run my hands over them, waking her to meow a surprised hello. Because while I have been at what I suppose I should call work, performing adoptions, surrenders, and now distemper vaccines for animals whose worlds have been downsized to stainless steel walls, Glinda has been here, in her window, trying to stay awake enough to keep watch over her Oz.

Name: Glinda

Status Date: 8/20/2009

Status: Adopted

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