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PETE'S DENIAL

BY JOHN MANDERINO

WE HAD THIS CAT, his name was Stanley, but most of the time Jill called him Sweetheart.

I tried to be friends with him. I honestly did—patting him on the head now and then. But he wouldn't purr, giving me this look like he was wondering: *What do you think you're doing?*

Sometimes it made me just a little sick watching the two of them together—*both* of them purring.

So I can't say it broke my heart when Stanley developed a brain tumor. At first, Jill thought he was giving her the cold shoulder—standing there staring at the wall like that—and begged his forgiveness for whatever she had or hadn't done. But after a while, it was clear something was wrong with the thing. The vet told her he probably wasn't in any pain yet, so we kept him for the time being. But then he clearly was in pain, standing there trembling.

Jill couldn't bring him in, just couldn't do it.

I told her I'd be glad to. "Well, not *glad*," I said.

*

The receptionist said she was very sorry.

"About what?"

She nodded at the carrier.

"Oh. Right. Well." I shrugged.

She frowned at me. Evidently, she didn't think I was sad enough. So I told her it wasn't actually my cat, that Jill was a neighbor. "She couldn't bring him in, just couldn't do it," I said with a sad face. "They were very close. She called him 'Sweetheart.' Can you imagine?"

"Yes," the woman said, "I can." She told me to go take a seat. "Dr. Payson will be out shortly."

Bossy thing. I went over to the chairs. The only other person was an old woman with a blue parakeet in a cage on the floor

in front of her. I gave her a nod, set Stanley down, and picked out a *People* magazine from the coffee table.

Oprah's gotten fat again.

Another *Rocky* movie's coming out. I saw the first one with Jill on our very first date. I remember walking her home, discussing the movie. I remember how she held my arm.

"Why doesn't he turn around in there?" the old woman across from me asked. "He has enough room. Why doesn't he face the other way so he can see out?"

I told her quietly like I didn't want Stanley to hear: "Brain tumor."

"Ohhh," she said. "And does he have to be...?"

I nodded sadly.

"Poor thing," she said.

I agreed and went back to my magazine. There was a photo of Sylvester Stallone in a tutu and I couldn't help it. I laughed out loud.

"*You're* certainly taking it very well," the old woman said.

"It's not actually my cat," I said. "I'm doing this for a neighbor. What's the matter with your bird?"

"His name is Pretty Boy."

"What's the matter with him?"

She looked at him in there on his perch and sighed. "He stopped singing. I don't know why."

"Maybe he doesn't feel like it. *I* sure wouldn't feel like singing if I was locked in a cage, especially if I was a bird. Birds like to fly *around*."

"Please stop." She was close to tears.

I went back to my magazine.

Dr. Payson came out in a long white coat like a real doctor and went to the front desk. The receptionist pointed at me, and he came walking over, but the parakeet lady stood up and told him about Pretty Boy not singing for three days straight.

"Not a single note, Doctor!"



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FICTION

Dr. Payson promised to take a good look at Pretty Boy, right after he attended to this gentleman and his cat.

"I don't understand," she said. "I was here first."

"But his appointment is before yours, Mrs. Donovan."

"I don't think he would mind letting me go ahead of him," she said and looked at me. "Would you?"

"To be honest, I would," I told her. She'd be *hours* in there.

Dr. Payson said if I wished to I could stay with Stanley during the procedure.

I said, "Thanks, but it's not actually my cat. I'm just doing this for a neighbor." He nodded—I don't think he believed me—and took the carrier into the back. I returned to my magazine. But I could feel the old lady staring at me.

"Yes?" I said politely.

"You could have at least *stayed* with the poor thing." She was just mad at me for not letting her go first. "Try and comfort him in his final moments."

Meanwhile, I noticed Pretty Boy starting to wobble around on his perch like a drunk. Then, right while I was looking, he dropped to the floor of the cage and laid there, claws up.

"Ma'am." I pointed.

She looked, then stood and started hollering for Dr. Payson. The receptionist ran off to get him, but he was already hurrying out.

"He's dead! Pretty Boy is dead!" the old woman sobbed.

Dr. Payson and the receptionist tried to get her to calm down, or at least *sit* down, but she just stood there carrying on. Then she looked at me.

"If only you had let me go first! If only you had *let* me!"

Dr. Payson and the receptionist looked at me, too. All three of them stood there looking at me.

I got the hell out of there. They could keep the carrier. We wouldn't be needing it anymore. If Jill wanted someone to call Sweetheart, here I was, right in front of her, arms wide. ■





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