

All Fur and Bones

by Daniel Curzon

Belle still eats, but she shakes when she walks, and hasn't been cleaning herself for some time, either, so her fur is matted. I tried cutting the tufts out with scissors, but she got annoyed and hid, so I stopped. Now her fur is orange, black, white and snarled.

I wonder how much time she has left. I think she's seventeen. I don't know for sure because she was already grown when I got her from the pound, just before Christmas, years ago this was -- back when I had hair and hope. She manages to climb up and stretch across my collarbone when I'm watching TV. I guess I'm warm there. I let her, even though her body pushes my head to the side and gives me a crick in the neck. Hell, it's only a small crick. Tell me, is it always this way, the slow decline, then the . . . ?

The vet can't find anything wrong. What's science for? Everything checks out normal except that Belle seems not to be assimilating her food. She eats, especially the Chinese chicken take-out that I hand feed her, but she's all skin and bones. All fur and bones. She used to weigh over eight pounds, and now she's down to under four. She doesn't seem to be in any pain. Easy for us to say.

Belle went out into the back yard today and ate some grass. That's good. Maybe some of the vitamins I've been squirting down her throat are working. Or not working, if she needs grass? There's also some white sticky medicine that she is supposed to get in the mornings. Of course she clamps her teeth tight when I try to give these to her. She doesn't seem to know what's good for her. Damn pets!

She's been leaving "litter" in various corners of my condo, not in the litter box. At least the turds are hard. And there are black

stains that she has thrown up. One must be grateful for hard turds and dry vomit, right?

I found Belle lying flat on the living room rug this morning. But still alive. I should let her sleep in the bed with me, I suppose. Only I can't sleep that way. She always wants to crawl between my legs, and I can't move. Anyway, I lifted her from the floor and put a soft towel around her and laid her on my bed. She's conscious, turns her head to look at me, then paws at the towel. From time to time she opens her mouth to give one of her almost voiceless little meows. She's never had much of a voice, and her teeth are stained. The vet told me to have them cleaned. Now it's too late. I turn on the electric blanket and pull it up around her. There are worse ways to go, lots of them.

I call the vet to see about taking her in, for that final time. He tells me I'll have to come before noon since it's the day before Thanksgiving and the staff is getting off early.

He tells me there is an emergency number if I need it. He seems sympathetic, but I imagine he gets this kind of call just about every day.

I promise myself I'm going to be brave and strong and do what has to be done, by myself. But I call a friend, and he takes off from work -- he's a jeweler -- and comes over to help out. Together we go in to look at Belle on the bed. She tries to meow. My friend nuzzles his big, bearded face against Belle's head and cries a little bit. I wonder just how much Belle understands about what is happening to her. No doubt it's best if she doesn't.

My friend goes back to work, and I sit on the edge of the bed and rest my hands on Belle. If only I had the gift of healing. She dozes and so do I. At one point she wakes up and meows so loud that I wake too. I comfort her. But I am not much comfort.

The day wears on. I'm glad that at least it's close to the holidays and I have some time off. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror on my closet door. I am sixty-one years old, and my graying mustache needs a trim and some dye. I used to like to watch myself masturbate in this mirror, but there comes a time when . . .

It gets dark early now -- before five o'clock. I leave a light on for Belle and watch the evening news. It's the same old horror after horror. And there are so many *commercials*! I go out for dinner and have some wine. Wine is good.

When I get back, Belle lifts her head and seems to look at me as if she wants to say something and finds some voice. It's the loudest she's ever been. I pull back the electric blanket and towel and see that she has wet my bed. I used to wet the bed, until I was almost ten. So humiliating, even though my mother never scolded me for it. I tell her, "It's all right, little girl." I think she's embarrassed. It's the first time she's ever not been able to get up to go to the litter box.

I realize it's time, but I can't stand the thought of letting go of her. "Oh, she's just some old damn cat! Why don't you do something for people!" I can hear my big sister saying somewhere. She died three years ago. "Because I don't like people very much," I whisper into Belle's ear.

I finally call the emergency number and tell them I think it's time for me to . . .

"Well, if you think it's right, sir," the legal voice on the other end informs me. "I'll alert the doctor." I call my friend, and he agrees to come over and pick me up and drive me to the All-Night All-Pets Shelter across town. I wrap Belle warmly in a dry new towel

and sweep her up in my arms. She is so light I can barely feel her. Did I tell you she used to weigh over eight pounds?

My friend's car is cold -- the heater is broken -- and there is junk on the front seat that he has to clear for me and Belle. But finally we are off. Belle isn't too happy to be in a car and so opens her eyes wide. My friend reaches across and comforts her, and that seems to help. My eyes are blurred when I try to look at her.

At the All-Night All-Pets Shelter we have to wait for the doctor, who is performing "minor surgery" for some other person's cat. The light in the waiting room is bright -- too bright -- and I start to cry. Why does the light have to be so bright?

At last the fill-in vet appears at the end of the corridor. She's about thirty, wearing green surgical clothes and what looks like a tam. Her assistant is a teenage Chinese girl.

They pull back the towel and comment on how thin Belle is. She makes no attempt to stand up. The last time we came to the vet she stood up.

My friend encourages me to pay in advance so that we won't have to deal with all that afterwards. I pay by credit card. The assistant brings my receipt. The vet is in another room preparing the injection. "Just one injection?" I ask. My regular vet told me there would be a sedative first, then the beuthasol, or whatever it is. "We use just one shot here," the assistant tells me, and I nod. What else can I do? I suppose it's more efficient.

The vet comes in. She's sympathetic. She says I don't have to be there, but I tell her I want to be. She asks if I want a private cremation for Belle or a "group one." I'm a bit hard pressed for money, so I say, "The group will have to do." I don't even want to summon up the imagery of what that actually will be.

"Press down there," the vet tells the assistant, pointing to a spot on Belle's hind leg. They are looking for a vein. "Right there," she adds, moving the fur out of the way.

The assistant works her finger down and presses. "That's right."

I watch the needle go in and the plunger go down. I start to sob. I can't stop myself. The injection seems to hurt Belle a bit; her head is up and she's trying to lift her body toward me. "Tell her it's all right. Tell her it's all right," the vet instructs me. But I can't summon up the words. I am sobbing too much, and snot is all over my fingers. The assistant hands me a Kleenex. They've thought of everything. My friend whispers, "It's all right, Belle. It's all right, baby."

The beuthasol, or whatever the hell it is, shoots up Belle's vein as I look into her eyes. I want to put my finger down where the needle is and have it pump into me. I hate the world. I hate what it does to us. And I'm sure this is the only one there is. I almost do it, but will there be enough in the needle for me? Probably not, even if it were to go in right. I'll probably just wind up with a numb hand. Or a numb heart.

It doesn't take long, thank god. Maybe twenty seconds. Belle doesn't resist, doesn't even stiffen. The light in the eyes just goes out. "You can stay with her as long as you like," the vet tells me. She and the assistant leave. I huddle over the slack body on the towel and kiss her goodbye on the top of the head. My friend comforts me, and I am grateful. After all, it is Thanksgiving Day now. We must be thankful, no?

And then we leave the All-Night All-Pets Shelter and await our turn.

