

## Meditation on Our Cat

By Peg Daniels

Our cat lies on our kitchen table. My husband, Gary, has pulled his chair close, and the cat lies curled into Gary's chest. Blackjack is a big cat, with a head as large as my two fists pressed together palm to palm. Blackjack rubs his head against Gary's hand, comforting them both, a quiet thrumming coming from his throat. Gary's other hand ruffles Blackjack's black fur, revealing the deep brown of the underside, and Blackjack gives a languid stretch. Then he sharply swings his head to look at me, perhaps feeling something's amiss. But Gary cups the cat's cheek, turns it away, scratches behind the ears, distracts. Blackjack closes his eyes, purrs with a sigh, does not register the needle I slip in.

Blackjack is eighteen years old, and his kidneys have failed. Every other night for the next year and a half and more, we carry out this routine: I hook an IV bag to the kitchen's pendant light, my husband cuddles Blackjack, and I sneak the needle under Blackjack's skin to hydrate him. We see no sign he is in pain or no longer enjoys life. True, he has no interest in going outdoors anymore, and his old legs can no longer jump him onto our bed; even rising to his feet is something of a struggle. But every morning when my husband opens "the cat barrier"—the door that has always kept Blackjack on one side of the house during the night so he won't disturb our sleep—he trots straight to my bedside and lets out a whining meow. I get up and feed him without much delay, his whine just about as tolerable as a needle pushed under my fingernail. (Before we got him as a kitten, he must've belonged to Doug and Wendy Whiner of Saturday Night Live.)

And then one morning as I'm feeding him (canned food, scientifically formulated for problem kidneys and, according to Blackjack, not nearly as tasty as the bagged food

scientifically formulated for weight control that I used to feed him), his tongue does an odd thing. It starts lapping out of the side of his mouth to the left instead of to the front. And he can't feed himself—his tongue's not going where he thinks it's going and he doesn't know to turn his head and eat sideways.

I have no idea what's happened. It's Saturday, so I can't ask the vet because she's closed. I scramble around on the internet but find no answers. I spread out a bath towel on the bed and lay him on it. I prop myself on my side next to him, and I dab my finger in his food and then scrape it along the roof of his mouth and behind his left eyetooth. He's swallowing fine, thank God, but his tongue keeps flailing out to the left and dumping much of the food I just put in.

I feed him every few hours, trying to make sure he gets enough nutrition. I squirt water into the side of his mouth with an eyedropper. I scramble around the internet some more, nibbling on my fingernails. "Oh, *please* let him get better," clatters round and round my mind like a roulette ball hoping for a win. I can barely choke down any more food than he can.

Sunday, nothing's improved. That night, I toss and turn. Monday, 8 a. m. on the dot, I grab the phone and call the vet. She says, "Blackjack likely had a stroke." The word punches me in the chest. I'd wanted Blackjack's problem to be something she could fix.

"I'm worried he's not getting enough to eat," I say.

I take him in, and she examines him. His blood pressure is high, his heart is failing, his kidneys are failing, the medication that helps his heart hurts his kidneys and vice versa. And now the stroke.

"You've done an amazing job with him this past year," the vet says. "I never expected him to do so well for so long."

Tears prickle my eyes, and my throat squeezes until it seems no wider than a straw. "Is he in pain?"

My real, unasked questions are "Is he going to die soon?" and "Do I need to let him go now?," and these are the questions the vet answers. "He's fine, for now. It's hard to say how much time he has left, but you should be prepared."

The vet teaches me how feed him with a huge 60 cc syringe: make a slurry of his canned food and warm water—and a little tasty tuna juice to tempt; slide the syringe into the pocket of his cheek; and squeeze out a small amount at a time.

I feed him six times a day, each feeding taking about a half hour, the two of us lying on the bed. Both his head and tongue thrash about as he tries to lap as he normally would, and the slurry slops onto his muzzle and ruff and paws and elsewhere on his coat. Every few minutes, I use a moist washcloth to wipe his muzzle clean. I wipe him all over after he's finished.

Blackjack's care tires me. My husband is paraplegic, in a wheelchair, so it's difficult for him to help with the feeding. But Gary helps hydrate Blackjack every night now, his distracting cuddling necessary so Blackjack doesn't fight the needle.

But most of all, the anxiety is tiring. Of wondering how long he'll be with us. Of wondering if he's really okay with my squirting food into him time and time again.

He doesn't *seem* to mind. He is still our sweet-tempered, silky soft cat. As always, if I'm petting him, and if, in his opinion, I stop too soon, he reaches out a paw and lightly grabs my hand. That nearly breaks my heart these days. I want to reach out and tug him to me, too, tug his spirit to mine. I don't want him to go, ever.

One night, near bedtime, he struggles to his feet, crying in distress, urgently wobbling around. I grab my cell phone, call the vet at the home number she gave me for emergencies.

"He's in pain, he's in pain!" I scream into the phone.

She says to meet her at her office.

While Gary starts the van, I scoop up Blackjack and try to put him in his carrier. He fights—he hates the carrier—but I lay him inside, put my hand on him, tell him it'll be okay.

He heaves a long breath. But then he doesn't inhale.

As we speed to the vet's, I keep my hand on him. I sometimes feel him breathe—or is that just my shaking hand? I swear I hear him moan.

The vet puts a stethoscope to Blackjack's chest. He's gone. We all burst into tears.

Blackjack was her oldest patient. A week later, I go for his ashes, and she gives me a cast of his paw print—oh, that big paw of his—that her staff made. On the back is engraved,

Blackjack

April 1, 1992

July 5, 2011

We miss him still.