

A Small, Quiet Ending

By Holly Lisle

✘ Winnie (right in photo) started her life with us as Winnie-the-Pooh, a round, fuzzy ball of black fluff who grew up to be glossy, elegant, and self-admiring—the sort of cat who posed in front of every shiny surface to admire herself. She came home from the shelter with Tigger (left in photo), ever after to be her close friend and begging buddy. We first shortened Winnie's name to Pooh, but changed to Winnie after about six months, when we noticed that she never, ever responded to us when we called her Pooh. With her name switched to Winnie, she came when called. I suppose Pooh wasn't elegant enough for her.

From the very beginning, she took to my older son more than the rest of us, following him around, playing with him and willingly learning the stupid tricks he taught her, including the one where she would put her head into his open mouth in a reverse of the lion tamer stunt. This trick had a huge, if awful, payoff for my son when a friend of ours, staying with us for a few days before heading home, fell asleep on the couch. We discovered that he was the sort of sleeper whose mouth dropped open while asleep, and we found it out at about the same time Winnie did. She thought he was presenting her with an opportunity to show off her trick. He woke up with a mouth full of cat. What followed included screaming from both parties, and then hurt feelings on one side, and vigorous and panicked teeth-brushing with a lot of loud spitting on the other.

Winnie was a one-person cat. She appreciated the attention from the rest of us, but when Mark left for the Air Force, she became a planet without a sun. She did well enough, I suppose. She hung out with the other cats, glommed tuna treats, took her turns in my office window. She spent time with my younger

son, sometimes following him around. But she was not the same. Most of the time we made a point of paying attention to her, because she did not seek attention from us.

These last few days, that changed. She started being wherever one of us was. She came up to us to be petted. She also went off her food, and we switched to a soft food with gravy, and then to canned tuna, just to keep her eating. Eventually, even hand-fed, she refused more than a lick of the things she liked.

Her passing was hard. Not on her, but certainly on us. We kept her at home—she exhibited no signs of pain, had no palpable tender areas, no lumps, nothing. We had no excuse but our own discomfort to put her to sleep, so we didn't. Had Mark been with us, we might have chosen differently, but there was always hope, however increasingly faint, that she might pull around and he might still have his cat when he came home. We kept her with us, and I fed her by hand and made sure she was hydrated, eventually giving her water through an eyedropper. Up until the end, she purred when petted, and spoke when we said her name.

She died last night, and my younger son had his first in-person experience with death. That was as hard as all the rest of this combined. How we deal with death is as much a part of being human as how we deal with life, and the stark finality of it is something that can't be danced around or prettied up. We let him see, we let him help, and as best we could, we tried to make him understand.

We put Winnie in a book box, wrapped one of my older son's childhood toys and a cat toy my younger son bought for Winnie into the box with her, and buried her in the garden. Then we called the older son and talked through the whole thing. Today we'll make a marker for the grave.

This morning three cats were waiting for me when I came out

the bedroom door to go to work, and I did not stop to look under the kitchen table for the fourth. A small life ended in a small, quiet death. The world did not change, but spaces in a few hearts echoed with hollow places that were not there before.

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