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Saving Spencer: One Cat's Cancer Journey. Ch. 1.

Wed, 2017-11-29 20:04 — Robin Olson

The semi-truck appeared over the crest of a hill on a curve in the road. For a moment our vehicles faced each other as I travelled in the opposite direction. All I had to do was stay on my side of the lane and all would be well, but I couldn't help but feel the desire to turn the wheel hard left. It would take a flick of the wrist to put me into the truck's path. The impact would certainly destroy my little car and end my life. I was so distraught that the idea of ending it all gave me a momentary reprieve from overwhelming, gutting heartache. I was desperate to stop the pain. As that moment ticked on to the next and the next, I steadied my hands and stayed true, a thick slab of yellow dividing paint on the road the only thing keeping me from making a fatal choice.

A few days later I sit here in my office and try to write. My words have failed to come for so long. I've thought over and over about what I would say, how I would let you all know that my love, my friend, my little shadow is going to leave me. I didn't even want to think about it, I was so shocked at the news. The discovery was revealed so simply, really, but perhaps it was intuition that guided me to do something out of the norm, this one time. *Or, maybe my guide was something more divine?*

Spencer, the 16-year old mascot of this 12-year old blog, my first "foster fail" 15 years ago, is terminally sick. There is no cure. There are treatments. There may be some things I can do to keep him comfortable for a time. How much time I may have with him has yet to be determined.

This is what I know...

A week before Thanksgiving, one of the cats threw up. Not usually a dire situation, but then Spencer vomited, so I worried there was a virus going around the cats. It was a great volume of food. Spencer has had life-long breathing problems, stemming from scar tissue in his right sinus after suffering from what must have been a terrible infection that occurred a long time before I ever fostered him.

I spent two years doing different tests and treatments thinking he had asthma or allergies, only to find out the most simple answer was the right one. As a result of the scar tissue, Spencer wheezes. **I'm always very careful about when he has to be sedated and sadly, because he also can get VERY stressed out in the car (he hyperventilates) and VERY stressed at the vet, I try to limit his trips.**

That's why it was strange that when he vomited, my first reaction was to run him to the vet. He sounded quite bad. I worried he might have aspirated food into his lungs or sinus cavity. I could have opted to wait an hour or two, but my vet was going to close in less than an hour and if I rushed over they could check Spencer out. I was planning on bringing him in for his bi-annual exam in December because his kidneys have started to go downhill and we needed to update his blood work. **Something in my gut to told me to go now and not wait. It's not like I have funds to throw around, but I imagined they'd do an exam and we'd come home and all would be well.**

The fates must have aligned that night because Dr. Larry couldn't see us. His partner, Dr. Mary was the one who examined Spencer not long after we arrived at the clinic. Dr. Mary doesn't know that examining Spencer is a difficult task. Spencer "red lines" quickly, often hissing and snapping with Dr. Larry. He has to be quick about it or Spencer can require oxygen he gets so upset.

But Dr. Mary is always upbeat and cheerful and speaks so sweetly to all of her patients. She's very soothing for all of us to be around. She didn't know about Spencer's history. I even warned her not to do too much, but she cheerfully continued her exam, while Spencer's pupils began to dilate with rage when she palpated his abdomen.

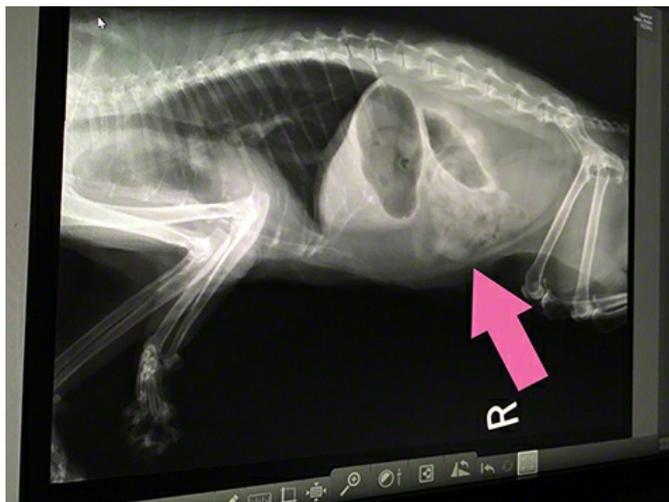
"I feel a mass!" Dr. Mary exclaimed.

Dr. Mary's cheerful veil fell for a moment. Sam and I both said that maybe it was stool she was feeling. We'd just brought our senior girl, Nora, in the week before for the same issue-raw fed cats often have very hard, crumbly stool. **Dr. Mary shook her head no.** She couldn't break up the mass. **Something was wrong. Very wrong. She asked if she could do blood work and an x-ray as my knees went weak with fear.**

I agreed we should do the tests if Spencer would allow it, while I tried not to cry. Maybe it was just constipation? Maybe he was just fine. Maybe she was wrong.

Spencer's blood work looked ok. His kidney function was a bit better in one area and a bit worse in another. Mostly he was doing all right, which was great, but then she showed me Spencer's x-ray. It was very clear there was a big mass in his abdomen. She explained that it looked like it was in Spencer's omentum-it's like a net that holds the intestines in place. She felt it was likely some sort of cancer, but that we should get an ultrasound done right away to learn more.

All I could think was "no...no...not CANCER...not my baby!"



Dr. Mary was very kind and stayed late, even though the clinic had closed for the day. She got Dr. K on the phone to find out if she could come the next day to do the sonogram. Thankfully she could, but it would have to be first thing in the morning. I couldn't be there. I'd injured my knee over a month ago and was starting physical therapy. Sam said he'd get Spencer to the appointment, but I wanted to skip my therapy and take him. It was a mess trying to juggle Sam's busy schedule along with feeding all the other cats and foster kittens, while I tried to figure out how to maneuver rush-hour traffic to get to my appointment.

Somehow I managed to keep it together, thanking Dr. Mary for staying late, being polite to everyone and thanking them for helping Spencer, **but the second after we left the clinic and the door closed behind us, I burst into tears, nearly howling with anguish.**

The next morning, as I drove to physical therapy, I started adding up how I was going to pay for all of this, get Spencer what he needed, and hopefully find out this was all just a big scary monster and that everything was going to be okay.

Except that it wasn't okay.

Dr. K had to sedate Spencer he was so upset. She found small lesions on his kidney and his liver. The mass in his abdomen might be connected to the "tail" on his pancreas or his bile duct. They called me during the test to ask if I wanted them to do needle biopsies of these organs and the mass and I answered yes right away. We couldn't waste any time, even though I knew that needle aspirates don't always provide a definitive diagnosis. **We had to try.**

But the needle biopsies caused Spencer to have internal bleeding. He couldn't come home for now. He'd have to stay for the day. They would do a PCV (packed cell volume) test on him every few hours to make sure the bleeding was stopping. I thought I was going to faint from stress. After the shock of the bad news, now I had to worry that the test was going to kill Spencer before I even knew what was going on.

By closing time, Spencer was allowed to come home. The bleeding had slowed and it looked like he would be all right. We were to keep him comfortable and give him time to recover. The test results might take a day or two so there was nothing more to do for now.



©2017 Robin AF Olson. *The setup in my office for Spencer.*

I have a huge dog bed in my office that has a pet safe heated pad on it. I set up a litter pan not far from the bed and a water dish nearby since Spencer drinks water due to his kidney problems (*he gets sub q fluids too*). I didn't want him to have to go too far for anything. He needed to rest and get the sedation drugs out of his system. He walked around like a drunk, but thankfully was very hungry after his ordeal. He ate well, then retired to his bed.

Spencer stopped coming upstairs to “tuck me in” as he has done so many nights over the years. Spencer barely left my office, though in all honesty I didn't give him much reason to. Spencer would join us in the living room once a day for about an hour but then would wobble back to his heated bed. His appetite was okay, not great. He was still Spencer, but in those days it seemed like he aged a million years.

During those next few days I had terrible anxiety wondering when the test results would come in. I started to pace around the house during the time when Dr. Mary might call-usually either when she first got in for the day or at the end of the day. Around those times I had my phone in my hand, a pad of paper and a pen nearby so I could take notes. I knew that whatever she told me, I'd probably blank out. Better to write some things down so I could look everything up later.

But there was no call Thursday or Friday.

I felt like a zombie. I couldn't concentrate. I did some research and talked to a few friends. I played a guessing game with Sam about when and how and why I wasn't hearing from Dr. Mary (*an asteroid hit the lab and Spencer's samples were destroyed...she had an emergency come in and would call me tomorrow...she'd call when I was going to the bathroom*).

I imagined we were probably dealing with an aggressive cancer because Spencer had a mass, not thickening of the intestines or lymph nodes, which would suggest a more treatable lymphoma of some kind. I wanted to know how the Hell this could have happened. I prayed to God that it was just some weird benign thing, not something that was slowly killing my cat. Every time I checked on Spencer my gut hitched with fear. I didn't know if he was slowly declining...*did the needle hit something bad? Was he still bleeding internally?*

As Spencer slept, I could see his bubblegum pink belly where he'd been shaved. I saw the tiny round red scabs from where the needles entered his body. I wondered if the fur would grow back before Spencer died. I wished I didn't think things like that.



©2017 Robin AF Olson. *Spencer dreams while I have painful thoughts.*

Saturday I took Annie, one of my foster cats, to the vet. I didn't want to bring up Spencer's test results. I didn't want to talk about him. I didn't want the staff to give me that look, the one I've seen too many times, the one that says "I'm so sorry I know your cat is going to die. I'm sorry I can't do something about it. I'm not sure if I should talk to you about it or not so I'll just not ask out of respect because I also fear that you'll burst into tears..."

Annie checked out all right. She'd had a cough for a few weeks and I wanted to make sure it was nothing serious. I couldn't handle any more bad news. I spoke with Super-Deb, the vet tech and my friend. She talked to me about Spencer after I asked her to review his ultrasound report. She explained that because it was a mass it was probably an aggressive cancer. I was right in my thinking, but I wished I was wrong.

She reminded me that what comes next will partly be due to how Spencer handles being at the vet. He won't sit still for an IV full of chemo drugs. He might not be a good candidate for surgery, even. She surprised me by saying that Spencer was the top 5 angriest cats she'd ever dealt with—and she's dealt with a lot of cats in her over 20 years as a tech.

So I went home, heartbroken, wondering when I'd get the news. The weekend passed and so did Monday. I started to get angry, wondering what was taking so long. Of course the call came when I didn't expect it-when I was just leaving my second physical therapy appointment. When I was alone in the car.

It was Dr. Mary, sounding as cheerful as ever. Somehow the word *CANCER* didn't sound so bad when she said it. Even when she said she was sorry, her voice softening ever so slightly, as she suggested I take Spencer to an oncologist I didn't get upset. I'd already made an appointment for him with Dr. McDaniel since it was Thanksgiving week and I worried that if I didn't move fast we'd lose another week. I didn't cry. I already knew it was carcinoma and I was resigned to this truth. This news was just sealing Spencer's fate.

The day before Thanksgiving, when so many other people were racing around, doing their final errands before celebrating with their family the next day, I was sitting in a waiting room with my beloved cat waiting to talk to an oncologist. I never want to be an ungrateful person, but I honestly did not feel thankful for anything this year. It's been financially the worst year ever-with my poor fatally sick foster kittens nearly bankrupting Kitten Associates, too. I wrote a very very long blog post that I'm not sure you'll ever read, but it talks in great detail about how very broken I am and what this year took out of me.

I've sacrificed the past 7 years of my life to saving lives and I'm exhausted. My family, for the most part, is gone. I'm very lonely. Holidays have lost their joy. They too often feel like just another day. It shouldn't be like that for anyone.

And now, after all that, I discover my dear boy Spencer has a heartbreaking secret. I don't know how I missed it because I watch my cats like a hawk. I try to keep thinking things will get better, but they don't. I'm a rat in a maze with no way out. It's hard not to turn the wheel and make it all stop, but I have to find a way.

Spencer *needs* me. I can't let him down.

...to be continued....

next up...difficult choices and hopefully how to make good ones...



©2017 Robin AF Olson. A bit worse for wear, my precious boy.

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Comments

Sat, 2017-12-09 13:33 — jmuhj (not verified)

RE: SPENCER ^[11]

Awww, sweet Spencer! I've been down this road before, when our young creamsicle charmer Rojita developed Mast cell lymphoma seemingly overnight, getting a huge swelling in her throat. We had her operated upon, and our vet was excellent, but in no time, she was gone. I'll never be able to reconcile or understand why sweet, innocent, blameless cats have to go through any suffering or discomfort, ever, at all. I've lost beloved cats at just months old, all the way up to age 21 -- and no matter the reasons or the conditions, it will never, ever be easy or understandable.

My thoughts and *PRAYERS* are with Spencer and you at this time *just reading this today, 12/09*.

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