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A Spoonful of Despair. Part 4 of 4

Sun, 2016-07-24 17:18 — Robin Olson

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There's a kind of silence that occurs between people who have been together for a long time. It's not the kind filled with tension you can slice with a knife or the nervous energy of being reunited after a long separation. It's the kind that becomes sacred, where words only create meaningless static, where words do not belong. There is a desire for the silence to become a protective shroud, where no one has to face the fact that breaking the silence means facing a brutal, painful truth...that your cat is dying and there's nothing you can do about it.

The past four days have been some of the worst of my life. The question of whether or not we should have done the test or whether we waited too long nagged at me.



©2016 Robin AF Olson. On an IV, Cricket had to wear the "cone of shame" since he kept biting at the line. By the next day he no longer needed the line so the cone came off.

I lived like a zombie. I had to force myself to eat a little cottage cheese, but that was all I could manage to swallow. I was constantly tired, but never really slept because I each night I worried I'd get "the call" from the ER Vet saying Cricket had died. I tried to absolve myself of "shoulds" while work, emails and bills piled up. I didn't care. I got the foster kittens fed. I scooped their litter pan, but other than that I waited for the phone to ring with news or laid hunched up on the sofa with my eyes closed while Sam tried to work nearby on his laptop.

Sunday, nothing was done. I don't know why, but Cricket stayed in oxygen and had no further tests. We went to visit him that night and he seemed stable. **They neglected to tell me he had collapsed earlier in the day when they took him out of the cage, which was one reason they did no testing.** He had begun to eat a little bit on his own, but I struggled to feel hopeful.

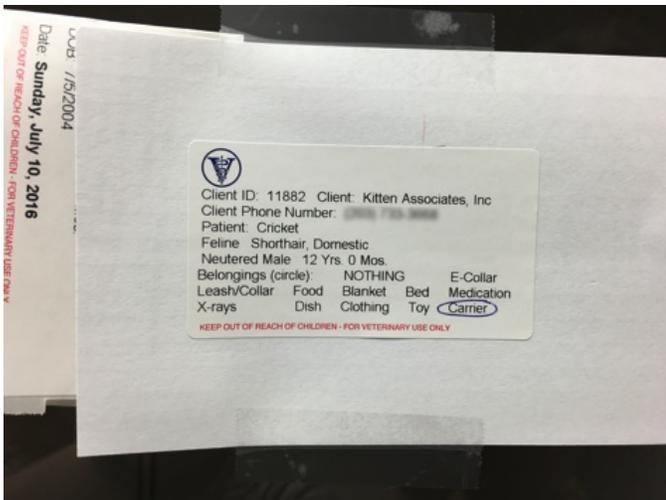


©2016 Robin AF Olson. If only I could have helped him understand what was going on. I hated seeing him like this.

On Monday I spoke with Dr. P, the vet who could do the wash. Once again we grappled with the decision. **The problem was, would Cricket's lungs inflate and would he be able to breathe after the procedure was over? The vet would give him a high dose of steroids, which wouldn't harm future treatments, but would help him breathe more comfortably. It was rare that a cat died from the procedure but we had to know there were risks.** I told him I needed to speak with the oncologist because we'd decided Cricket wouldn't be able to handle chemo every week. His quality of life would be poor if he had to undergo so much stress. **What I needed to know, which no one could tell me, was if we could try chemo even if we didn't do the test at all?**

I couldn't decide until I had answers.

We got a phone consult with the oncologist, who shoehorned us in between appointments. She told me that 70% of cats respond to chemo very well and that about half of those cats can go more than three months and have very good quality of life. She said we could also do a cheaper type of chemo every three weeks, which I thought Cricket could handle. That we COULD try chemo even if we didn't have test results---again just try and see what works. If the chemo had no effect, we'd know in 24 to 36 hours. If it did nothing then we knew Cricket had a very aggressive cancer and that there wasn't anything left we could do.



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Sam and I had a long talk. Dr. P felt that Cricket would do ok. We needed to know what was going on. **We decided to do the test so I called to greenlight the procedure. A few minutes after I called, Dr. Larry called me and warned us off doing the test.** He said that the odds of us getting a result were small and that he knew we could not afford to do the chemo (*he said it VERY respectfully*) and that Cricket would be too stressed to handle it. I told him what I learned about the chemo, but still Dr. Larry suggested we do not move forward, that Cricket was too fragile.

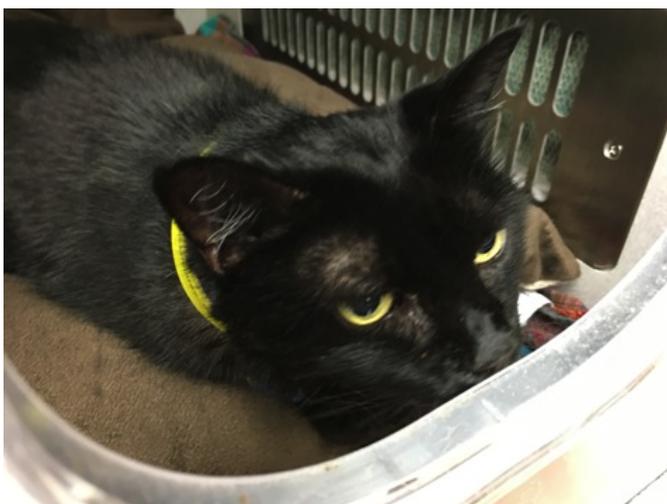
I trust Dr. Larry completely. I was so tired and sad that I didn't trust my own ability to decide. I called Dr P and said I was sorry and to not do the test after all. That we wanted to go straight to steroids and chemo and see if it would help.



©2016 Robin AF Olson. *Still our handsome, loving boy.*

They began the steroids and after Cricket had chemo we went to visit him. He looked good. He was happy to see us. He was still “oxygen dependent” but he stood up for a moment and eagerly rubbed our hands. The temperature inside the oxygen cage was much cooler than in the exam area, but they had lots of soft blankets for him to snuggle on. We’d brought him a cat bed from home but it was too big. We brought food he liked and treats. Sam and I took turns offering him tastes of salmon, which he ate right up. I asked Cricket *to please get better, for the medications to work so he could come home. Even if it meant he would only live another month or two, Cricket NEEDED to come home. I didn’t want him to die here. He needed to be with us.*

The next day and a half was crucial, but it was pretty clear early on that Cricket wasn’t going to make it. He had no response to steroids (other than giving him some appetite), which also meant the test would have killed him. After a day he had no response to the chemo, either and I was told that taking him out of the oxygen cage stressed him to the point of risking him going into respiratory failure. He could not leave the cage, but he could not stay in the cage forever.



©2016 Robin AF Olson. :-)

An oxygen cage cost about \$100,000 so I couldn’t just go get one and hook it up in the living room. As crazy as that sounds, I would have done it if I could. I also knew that every 12 hours we were getting billed more and more for Cricket’s care. The oxygen cage, alone, was over \$440 a day.

I was literally buying time for Cricket and I knew I couldn’t afford to do it much longer, but I also could not fathom euthanizing a cat who’s organ function was normal, who had normal blood work, who still knew and loved us. If only his lungs worked he’d be fine. How could we kill him when he wasn’t old and frail? What would happen when we took him out of the oxygen

cage to kill him? Would just moving him kill him in a painful way?

All these questions swirled around my head while Sam and I took turns petting Cricket. He had a few more hours to go before we knew for certain if there was going to be any improvement. We walked back to the car and Sam started the engine and turned on the headlights. The A/C was cool against my face. We sat there for a long time, not saying a word, not feeling like we could move from that spot. If we left, we knew that the next time we'd come back here would be to put Cricket down. I thought maybe we shouldn't put it off? Maybe we should do it right then and there. **Why wait? Why put Cricket through sitting around twelve more hours? What the Hell had happened? How did we get here in the first place?** Then I realized I was saying my thoughts out loud as I began to sob uncontrollably. **It was game over.** We both knew it, but we both promised Cricket we'd give him every minute we could.

Sam pulled the car out of the lot and headed towards home. We'd give Cricket a few more hours and pray for a miracle.



©2016 Robin AF Olson. Another night, another visit, but Cricket was very weak.

That night I knew we would have to face this, to get it over with. Part of me couldn't wait to be past this horrible time and I felt very guilty for that. I told myself a million things, that we couldn't do anything else, that we'd prepare and give Cricket the best send off we could manage. I had a special cloth to wrap his body. I printed out a photo of me and Sam, just like I did for Gracie. We'd write notes on it to Cricket to be burned with him when he was cremated. I packed a cat brush to make sure he was clean and well groomed after he died. His body would be respected and honored. We wouldn't just run away and not face this. We would create a peaceful environment for Cricket. Our tears, our anxiety had to wait...it was his time. That's all that mattered.

The next morning I called Dr. De for an update. Although Cricket's respiration was a bit slower, there wasn't any improvement like they were looking for. She'd removed him from oxygen for less than a minute and he was breathing so hard his stomach contracted. **We couldn't bring him home and though she was very sorry there wasn't anything more they could offer us. By then I felt angry, angry and cheated, not by her, but by what was happening to our cat. He didn't deserve this. He was far too young. It happened so very fast. I had no time to process it. I had to stop being a zombie and be present and just do this already. Do it. Face it. Stop dragging it out.**

I told Dr. De I understood and that we had decided it was time to let Cricket go. She agreed it was the correct decision to make and that she would help us whenever we were ready to do so. I know she was being kind, but she didn't know me or our cat. If Cricket had to die I wished he could be at home and have Dr. Larry there to help him pass, **but Cricket wouldn't have even made it out the door of the facility, let alone survive the 15 minute drive home.**

I took a shower and put on the nicest outfit I could. I didn't bother with makeup because I'd end up crying it off later anyway. Sam chose a colorful shirt to wear with jeans. I made sure I had everything I needed. I knew they'd want to be paid and there was some issue with the bill, which had grown to over \$5000. At that point I didn't care. I just wanted to pay the bill and do this horrible thing. I was facing the brutal truth, but I didn't have to like it.

Though I could go into detail about how Cricket died, I don't feel it would be right. It was our

private time with our boy and it was his final moments on this earth. I will tell you that after it was over we spent time with Cricket since we didn't have to worry about him being outside of the oxygen cage any longer. Dr. De helped him pass very peacefully in Sam's arms. I will tell you that we cleaned him and combed his fur so he looked as nice as he ever did. We wrote him special notes. I don't know what Sam wrote. Those words were not for me. We folded the photo and slipped the paper under Cricket's head and placed it on top of the special blanket he was resting on. Those two items would be cremated with him.

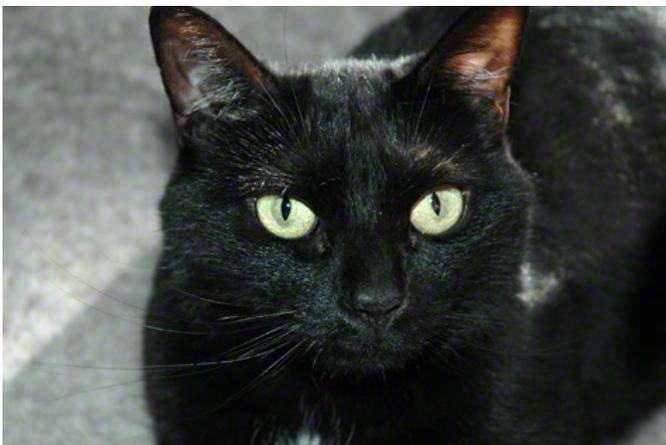


©2014 Robin AF Olson. *The photo of Sam and me I printed out to place with Cricket's body after he died.*

I held his front paws in my hand. I told him how proud I was of him and how brave he had been, about how he was such a very good boy, but mostly how much I loved him and would miss him forever. Even in death he was beautiful. His coat was thick, plush, soft, and the deepest black.

We stayed for a long time, but eventually we knew we had to go home. The cats and foster kittens needed to be fed. Life would go on whether I wanted it to or not. The twisted anxiety in my gut was gone, replaced by a tightness in my chest, the rippling pain of heartache and grief was here to stay, an unwelcome old friend returned.

I had one last task left. I had to tell our nine surviving cats that Cricket was gone. I was careful not to touch anything after I petted Cricket for the last time. Once home, I slowly approached each cat and let them sniff at my fingertips. Some of the cats backed up, upset, but more of them took a long time, sniffing carefully as if they were making sense of what they were smelling, a few of them gently licked at my fingers as a way to say their farewells.



©2005 Robin AF Olson. *Our most beautiful boy when he was just a few years old.*

I hate death. I hate cancer. I hate that it robbed our boy of the long life he should have had. Now I have to figure out how to go on with another hole in my heart.

Fly free darling Cricket. I hope to see you again one day. July 5, 2004—July 14, 2016.



©2016 Robin AF Olson. Cricket's urn remains on the cat bed he spent many happy days upon, sleeping in the sunshine. In a way it comforts me to see him there, but it also breaks my heart.

EPILOGUE: July 24, 2016. Here I sit, wrapping up this monumental post, while another of our cats has fallen ill. Our 16-yr old cat, Nicky has been hospitalized for five days and is on an IV. We suspect he will be there for at least a few days more. His kidney function is not good and he has a fever and infection somewhere...or his elevated neutrophils could be a sign of cancer. I keep wondering how we can go on with one cat after another becoming so ill, so quickly. I keep wondering if these events are related, but we knew Nicky had kidney problems for which he's been treated with fluid therapy for 4 years. He fell ill so quickly it was terrifying. Despair has never left my side this past month. I need her to leave me and my family alone. **We've had more than our share of heartache and I can't take another sip, even if she tells me I must.**

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