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When It Was Time

On Abortion, a Dying Cat, and the Certainty of Choice

BY SUSAN HODARA

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The week before we put our cat to sleep, all I could think about was the abortion I'd had more than twenty years before. It wasn't something I'd thought about much: not lost in memory or repressed, but deemed simply not that important, like a bus ride taken or a sandwich eaten long ago.

Portia, our cat of nine years, was diagnosed with terminal cancer in late November, after having lost almost a third of her body weight. It had spread throughout her liver and abdomen, our vet explained, and could not be treated. We were to take her home and bring her back "when it was time."

"How will we know?" I asked.

"You'll know," he said.

So I spent the week watching, waiting to know. And even at the very end, I can't say I was sure.

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With the abortion, there was never a doubt. I was twenty-three, an IUD failure statistic, and there was only one solution. The doctor who tested me gave me a list of clinics along with my positive results.

I was shaken, yes, and upset, but never ambivalent. I called promptly and scheduled half a day for the procedure, anxious to have the whole mishap cleanly behind me. I informed my boyfriend, Ben, who had left six weeks earlier to start medical school in the Dominican Republic. He returned to New York to accompany me.

The clinic was on the East Side of Manhattan, near Central Park. We took the subway downtown from the Upper West Side, where I lived, and got off at 59th Street. We walked over to Fifth Avenue on the park side of the street.

Inside, I gave my name and sat in a waiting area arranged in an attempt to be comfortable: magazines on a coffee table, metal chairs with turquoise vinyl on the seats. The air was hushed as I filled out forms. There were others in the room—couples, mostly, a few

women alone. Any conversations around me took place in whispered clips, and I didn't pay attention to them. I was there for one reason—to get something over with.

Before the actual abortion, there was some requisite counseling, which Ben and I attended together. For the procedure, I went by myself. I was given a green hospital gown and told to undress behind a white cotton curtain drawn haphazardly in front of me. I wrapped the gown around my naked body and tied it with a twisted cotton belt. The sleeves seemed huge, and I felt exposed and cold. I crossed my arms over my chest, my hands reaching toward my shoulders, as I emerged and stood in front of the curtain.

Someone indicated a gurney where I was to lie down while an anesthesiologist attended to me. Just his eyes were visible, his nose and mouth covered by a blue mask, the rest of his head concealed by a white paper cap. I looked at him only once. Like the other medical staff standing around me, he spoke in a quiet voice, businesslike, not unkind but devoid of emotion. I had never been in a hospital before; I did as I was told, counting backwards from one hundred. I remember feeling calm, comfortable, overcome by a forceful wave of sleep at around *ninety-seven*.

When I awoke, I was crying, and it was the sound of my sobs that awakened me. They were sad cries, cries of loss, true weeping, though I felt neither sadness nor pain. As I gained consciousness, remembering where I was, a nurse approached.

“Some people cry when they wake up from anesthesia,” she told me, then reassured me that everything had gone well and I would be able to go home as soon as I felt ready to get up.

I lay still on my back, waiting as the shadows of my cries slipped below my blinking eyes and normalcy crept back. I looked over at the woman in the bed beside me and offered a small smile.

We never discussed the abortion, Ben and I. I assumed his opinions mirrored mine, though I realize now he may have had all sorts of different feelings that I hadn't considered then. He suggested we take a taxi home, but I declined, preferring instead to walk back to the West Side and catch the train. I know I walked slowly, being gentle with my body, and I remember I looked down at the street a lot, as if negotiating with the pavement to help me home. I didn't hurt, but I was aware of the part of my body that was my womb, and I spent the rest of the day resting in bed. I never described what happened to me that morning in any other words than “I had an abortion,” and then only occasionally, when someone else was talking about hers.

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But I did have an abortion, and the difficulty I had knowing when it was “time” for Portia became unexpectedly linked to that day. Friends shared their pet stories, how their animals could barely walk, and how they died in their arms as they wept. “You just know,” they promised. “It’s the most humane thing to do.”

Yet I didn’t know. It wasn’t as though Portia meowed in agony or collapsed on the rug. She seemed quite peaceful. True to her nature, she slept most of the time on my gray desk chair, curled into a ball of black. If you touched her, she gave one of those *prrrwat* sounds and raised her head. If you petted her, she purred and watched you with her remarkable green eyes that made me think of Egypt.

What was different? She was more affectionate. Always a loner, never a lap cat, now Portia followed me or my husband, Paul, around the house. She sat close to our two daughters, whom she’d known since they were babies. She looked up at us, her expression like a plea, though I wasn’t sure for what.

I figured she was hungry; she couldn’t really keep anything down. Usually when she looked at me like that, I’d give her some food—canned tuna or deli turkey that she relished; no more cat food for Portia. She ate ravenously, but only small amounts at a time. Later, I might find it regurgitated in a small pool not far away.

And she smelled. She carried a perpetual odor of urine that we could barely stand. I wasn’t sure if it was because of her liver, or because she’d simply stopped cleaning herself. I put towels on the places she liked to sit.

Eventually I saw that she could no longer get up onto the desk chair by herself. Which may explain why she was on our bed when she threw up a watery version of the tuna she’d eaten a short while before. It soaked through the top comforter into the down quilt below, and I wept as I tore apart our bed and dragged the blankets down to the washing machine.

I studied Portia during those weeks. “It’s odd to know she’ll be dying soon,” I told Paul. I imagined that she had a secret knowledge of the end, that she was like a dash connecting life to death, there right in front of me on the kitchen floor. I took off her flea collar, surprised at how loose it had become. I snipped off a bit of her fur and put it in a Baggie. I thought of what she did in terms of “lasts.”

Nevertheless, it was understood that we wouldn’t wait until the very end; that we would be the ones to decide when her life was over.

“As long as she’s comfortable,” Paul said. “As long as she has some quality of life.”

I’d watch her closely for evidence, and I acknowledge my decision that it was time was at least partly one of frustration. I’d had enough of the washing, the stench, the puddles I’d been wiping up for months.

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The first image that comes to my mind when I think of Portia's death is of her lying unconscious on her side on the cold silver table in the vet's office. She's still alive, though you wouldn't know it, tranquilized and awaiting the lethal injection. Her eyes are closed and her lipstick-pink tongue hangs sideways from her mouth. We're in the cat room, where we'd come before for yearly vaccinations, and snow is falling outside the window. Portia's position itself is not cat-like, her essence already lost.

The second image is of Portia's face as I had cupped it in my hands minutes earlier: an attempt to reassure, to find a final gaze of understanding, to say goodbye. The gesture was quick and unsatisfying, and I realized I'd been saying this goodbye gradually, well before this gray afternoon.

My crying in the abortion clinic is not a visual memory. It is a disembodied sound, wafting like a ghost, floating through a room I can't picture, settling inside me but rooted to nothing.

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Susan Hodara

Susan Hodara is a journalist, memoirist and educator. Her articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Communication Arts*, and more. Her short memoirs have been published in assorted anthologies and literary journals; one was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is a co-author of "Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance With Our Mothers" (Big Table Publishing, 2013). Visit her website here: www.susanhodara.com.

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