

Susannah and Gizmo

By Sarah Smith

“Doctor, I want you to have Gizmo when I die,” Susannah stated with earnestness. Her tired eyes penetrated mine, as her frail hands rubbed the furry shih tzu in her lap. I knew the nurses had snuck him into her room against hospital rules, but I wasn’t going to snitch to anyone. Susannah was my favorite, and Gizmo was hers.

Quiet, I diverted my gaze out the window. Weeping willows spread out over the greens of the golf course beside the hospital. The expansive trees dripped with Spanish moss, which swayed in the breeze. I wondered how old the trees were. They looked like they had been there forever.

Focusing again on my patient, I knew there was no arguing with Susannah. She had an uncompromising personality, and I could not change her mind now. After many years of practicing medicine, I also knew that sometimes people told you when they were ready to die. Maybe it was some sort of clairvoyance?

Furthermore, the reality was that Susannah was in hospice with end stage renal failure, and as she described, “a piss poor heart.”

“Do you want to go out to the courtyard?” I asked her, changing the subject.

“More than stay in here,” she replied.

I helped her small frame transfer into the wheelchair, hiding Gizmo under her blanket and lap tray. I wheeled her out to the small hospital patio. Luckily, it was early, and we were alone, apart from the trees and a few sparrows.

The tiny, brown birds were hopping around the grass, foraging for food. One chirped loudly at the others. Making conversation, I decided to ask Susannah what she thought the noisy bird was saying.

“That one’s probably yelling, get out of my way I’ve got things to do! I’m small, but mighty!” Susannah laughed. It appeared she was right, as we noticed they were constructing a nest.

I wondered if Gizmo may take interest in the miniscule noisemakers, but he seemed to burrow into the blanket deeper. I think I could hear him snoring.

We sat out on the patio awhile longer, until Susannah said again, “Will you take Gizmo?” I instinctively tried to comfort her, replying politely, “You aren’t going to go today.” She winked at me, smiling.

Just then, the nurse came out, announcing it was time for the morning medications. I said goodbye, as I left for the office. I already knew it was going to be a long day, and I was worried about what I had ahead of me. Looking back at the golf course, I wished I could just watch the trees and birds all day.

Arriving back at my office, the phone rang as I was sitting down. “Hospital, line two,” my medical assistant announced. I picked it up and Susannah’s nurse told me that she had passed away right after I left. I swallowed hard, fighting the tears. The nurse then asked if I could come get the little dog.

Returning to the hospital, I said goodbye one last time to Susannah. Her body was now still, covered by the bedsheet. Her physical form had been emptied of her aura. I was again reminded of the fleetingness of life.

Trying not to cry, I dug my fingernails into my palm. Knowing I must go on, I took a deep breath, and I decided to look for Gizmo.

I found him napping under the nurses' station. I scooped up the cuddly pooch, noting that he was really a warm plushie. I thought to myself, "Maybe Susannah was right. Maybe I needed Gizmo."

Gizmo spent the rest of the day snoring in my office. That night, I took him home. I held him on my lap on my back deck as I watched the sun go down. Out of nowhere, a sparrow appeared, landing beside us. It happily chirped a few times, as if to say, "I knew you would take good care of each other." Then the small but mighty bird flew away.

Sarah Smith is a board-certified family physician, an author and a mother of two. Her first book, *The Doctor Will Be Late*, was published earlier this year. She has also been published in *Kevin MD*, *Brief Wilderness*, and *Sheila-Na-Gig* online. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Notre Dame and a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine from Ohio University. She lives in Tampa, Florida.

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