

Scent

By K.W. Oxnard

It's cold out here, but calling to the humans does no good. Calling gets me the heels of their bread, sometimes a dry, meatless bone. Still, I have a yard full of musky mice to dig up. Birds to chase as far as the chain will let me. It's just that I miss being touched.

When the girl was around, I slept with her. I ate when she ate. The man let me sit at his feet and the woman rubbed my head. No one yelled when I lapped up the crumbs that fell on the floor. Some days, the girl put crazy silver fur on my head, wrapped a feathery blue rope around my neck. She sang to me. She talked to me. Told me, *Jenny, you're my good old gray girl*. She smelled delicious, like warm chicken and new flowers. She smelled of the dirt under her fingernails which I sniffed greedily when I licked her hands. She chased me in the way I like being chased: first slow, then faster, reaching for my tail and almost catching me. She could have caught me but pretended not to.

That lasted for a while. Until her scent changed. Her new scent was strange, unhuman, like the cold silver posts holding up the fence after a thunderstorm. It worried me. She was such a young girl, still a pup, really.

Soon her head fur started to fall out and her skin got pale. The woman would bring out a large drying cloth, lay it on the ground for them to sit on. From time to time the woman would chase me in her stumbling older human way. Then we both tried to get the girl to chase us, but she shook her head. *Sorry, Jenny*. If the sun was out, the woman would caress the girl's cheek and go back inside. On some days, the man came out with a ball, said a few words to the girl and then left again. He never played with us. The girl watched him until the door closed, then she threw the ball, though not very far. I followed it, brought it back. When she refused to throw it again, I sat with her on the cloth. I stuck my nose in her armpit, took a deep whiff. She smelled like the woman in white who sticks me with sharp objects. What had they stuck her with?

I didn't mind that she wouldn't chase me. I just wanted her to rub my back the wrong way so that my undercoat lifted into the air in clouds. I could have stayed near her, even as she got skinnier and paler and lost more fur. Even as her scent hardened like old scat. I didn't need to chase her, to hunt musky mice or bark at birds. I could have stayed there all the rest of my life on that drying cloth.

One chilly day, the man carried her out onto the cloth. She was all skin and bent spine and huge eyes that leaked, though she wasn't crying. I know when humans cry. She was slowly drying up, water left only in her eyes. I went to lick her face, but she pushed me off the cloth. *No, Jenny*. I whimpered, and her face crumpled. So she let me back on the cloth. She let me lick the water leaking out of her eyes. She pulled me close, as close as she could with her weak arms.

After that, the girl did not come out again. For many days I sniffed the air for any sign of her. I whimpered, but the man came out only once a day to give me dry brown food and a bowl of water. He smelled faintly of the girl, and I tugged at the chain, calling to him, *Where is she?* He patted my head but said nothing, didn't even look at me. Untied me long enough for me to eat and drink before hooking my collar back to the chain.

I feel the cold most when I wake up with the chain under me. Early this morning, I saw another girl through the fence gaps, walking along the street alone. She looked like my girl, though her scent was wrong: dried leaves and cooked vegetables. I couldn't help it: I raced towards the fence as far as the chain would let me, calling, *I miss you! Where did you go?* But the strange girl was afraid and ran away.

Now it's early afternoon, a time when the man rarely comes into the yard, but he is heading towards me, carrying the drying cloth. He wraps me in it, and I inhale memories. *You're my good old girl, Jenny. My good old gray girl.* I feel him unhook the chain. Then he lifts me into the metal box, the one they brought me home from the shelter in so long ago. He is shaking. I know when humans cry. He takes me not inside their house, but into the car. It moves so fast I can barely catch all the scents through the open window: so many other dogs, so many other houses full of humans. The cloth slips off me as the man turns the car left and right. The metal box is even colder under my feet than the chain, but it's going to be all right. I make a nest in the cloth, where her scent is strong. I know the girl is still out there. The man will take me to her.

K.W. Oxnard won 2nd prize in December 2021 Curt Johnson Prose Awards. She holds an MFA from NYU. She writes in Savannah, where she bakes gluten-free goodies & lets woodpeckers dominate her feeder.

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