"Light Switches"

Our cat didn’t know what she was getting herself into when she chose to live with my family. I was five years old when she showed up in our backyard, and she was nothing more than a calico mess. Her hair was matted and dirty, her skin most likely swimming with diseases unknown to man. She had a thin, frail-looking frame, and when she walked, she staggered a bit, on the brink of fatigue. My mother firmly warned me to stay away from the cat, her motherly protection setting in. I liked to pretend that I didn’t hear her, though I sensed her looks of disapproval as I ran off to play in the yard.

“You don’t know if she’s a nice kitty or not, Jenna,” she would say. “Leave her alone. She might bite.”

But the cat never left. She hid in our bushes for days, her tiny pink nose peaking out between the patches of brush. After about a week and a half, my father took pity on the poor creature and fed her a can of StarKist tuna. It was empty in a matter of moments, and she gratefully rubbed up against my father’s leg, purring contently. A small glimmer of hope embedded itself in my heart, a childish hope that maybe we could keep her, though I knew it wasn’t feasible.

My mom is allergic to animals, especially cats and dogs. My aunt and uncle, on the other hand, have always adored animals. They used to have a cozy little house out in the countryside about twenty minutes from where my family lives. Whenever we got invited to go for a visit, my mom always had reservations. They had three dogs, all of whom loved to jump and cuddle up next to you on the couch. My uncle would lock them in the basement, but the hair around the house still lingered, triggering my mom’s allergies. Her eyes would swell like beach balls, itching and watering painfully. With enough time, her throat would start to close, shooting fiery
pain through her chest. Given those frightening circumstances, having a pet was unfathomable, something that would never work out. We gave the poor cat to a loving family that my aunt had lined up. They lived an hour and a half away, and the fact that I would never be able to see her again upset me tremendously. When I found out the news, I looked my mother straight in the eye and began to sob. She tried to comfort me, but I didn’t give her the chance; I was too upset to let her get close. The tantrum heightened when I refused to talk to her, to look at her, or to kiss her goodnight. I prayed that these tactics might trick my mother into bringing my friend back. They didn’t.

Days later, however, the cat came strolling up from the woods behind our house, her tail lagging on the ground, head bowed low, looking exhausted. When she saw us, her demeanor changed. Suddenly her tail wiggled behind her in glee, and her soft, tender purr reverberated through the yard. She seemed to leap, bridging the gap between herself and us and as she did so, my steel-blue eyes widened in wonder and excitement. I knew my mom would disapprove, but I ran toward my friend anyway, eventually plopping myself cross-legged in the middle of the grassy yard, oblivious to the fact that I was wearing a skirt. When I stroked the cat’s fur, she purred loudly, and as her face rubbed up against mine, I laughed in a childish manner. She had traveled miles and somehow managed to find her way back to us, a feat that was nothing short of amazing.

Though she had only been with the other family for a short time, her fur seemed cleaner than when we first found her. The mats that tarnished her coat had been brushed out, leaving the fur sleek and soft to the touch. The patches of black, brown, and white that danced upon her back shined brightly in the summer sunlight. She had clearly been bathed and taken care of, but for some reason, she had come all this way back to live with us. My mother, even after all of her
fuss, knew we couldn’t get rid of her at that point. I smiled in quiet satisfaction and moved my hand around in the air, amused at how intently my new cat followed things with her eyes. When I brought my hand up, she jumped, and when I brought it down, she crouched low to the ground. With her paws outstretched in front of her and her back arced upward, she resembled a wild animal, and it reminded me of the tigers that I used to see on the Discovery Channel.

“You’re a good little tiger,” I said, motioning my hand around, watching her movements with enthusiasm. “You’re my tiger.” As if sensing my words, she rubbed her small head against the back of my hand, urging me to pet her. When I did, I couldn’t help but smile at the thought of her new name: Tiger.

As much as I would have liked for Tiger to sleep inside, mom still couldn’t bear to be in the house with her. Our garage was old, and the insides were tainted with grease and dirt from my father’s and brother’s mechanic endeavors. There was hardly any room to move; the space was consumed by snowmobiles, cars, bicycles, snow-blowers and toys we kept around. Volleyball nets hung from the ceiling, and chairs hung on the walls. On the left side, there was a work bench, drenched in grease and sawdust, but long and useful. Along the right wall, there was a vent, too small for any man to climb in and out of, but just perfect enough for Tiger to come and go as she pleased. My dad jury-rigged a bed out of some old towel and blankets and placed it on the work bench for Tiger to sleep.

“This oughta do,” he said, putting Tiger in the middle of her new bed. It wasn’t much, but with my mom’s allergies, it was all that we could do. Tiger didn’t seem to mind. She was just happy to be part of a loving family, of our loving family.

The longer we had Tiger, the more attached she grew to us. Whenever we left the house, she would watch like a hawk until we returned. Her excitement would be so overwhelming when
we arrived home that she would practically run out in front of the car, her tail straight in the air and head bobbing up and down. I would hop out of the car, anxiously rushing toward her. Then I would pick her up and stroke her beautiful fur, a habit that went on for years.

On one particular occasion, however, this routine became hazardous. Mom and I were on our way home from a late-night grocery run, and the clock on the car radio glowed as proof that it was past my bedtime. I was in my own little world, singing inside my head, my lips moving to the words and head swaying to the beat on the radio. An occasional yawn disrupted my lip-synching, and the more time that passed, the heavier my eye-lids became.

I would have fallen asleep if my mom’s voice wasn’t swimming in and out of my consciousness, “Wake....honey.....home.”

Confused, I opened my eyes and she repeated, “Jenna, wake up, we’re home.”

The driveway was pitch-black as her cherry-red Explorer approached it. When I gazed out the window, I could see the clearest night sky of my young life, and a palette of stars shined vibrantly above me. On the driveway, only the light of the foggy headlights were visible, illuminating just enough to see directly in front of us. It was one of the rare occasions when my dad didn’t leave the lights on, and my mom glided up the pavement with the strong sense of confidence that all experienced drivers seem to possess. The darkness didn’t faze her, and I was too young to ever consider questioning my mother’s driving.

Just as I closed my eyes again, a distinct thud broke my thoughts followed by a pained cry. My eyes instinctively flew opened as my mom slammed on her brakes, the car jerking forward before coming to a complete stop. I sat straight up in my seat, straining my neck to see what had happened, though part of me already knew. Our driveway was flat, and that thump wasn’t natural. A curse word rang out in the car, and disbelief was etched into my mother’s
features. Her hands clasped the steering wheel tightly, and she turned her head slightly to look out the window. I followed her glance and saw that just outside, a small, dark figure limped away from the driveway, dragging its lifeless feet behind.

Mom and I sat there for a moment trying to process what had just happened. She put the car into park and turned off the engine; the silence set in to an unnerving degree. I started shaking, the anger mounting inside of me, ready to boil over. By the light of the moon, I could see her stony expression more closely. The frown that lined her face added decades to her beautiful face, and her eyes seemed much harder than their usually vivid state. Her eyebrows were furrowed in mix of rage and confusion. Tears -- of anger, of sadness? I had no idea -- poked at the corners of her eyes, threatening to fall.

“You killed her!” I suddenly blurted out. “Mommy, you’re a killer!”

“JENNIFER LEE!” she bellowed, the anger in her eyes rising. I shuddered at the sound of my full name. The only time that my mother ever used it was if I was in trouble, and I cringed, preparing for the worst.

“Just...I...stay here!” she responded, suddenly taking control of her emotions.

She quickly pulled off her seatbelt and pushed open the door, shutting it loudly behind her. At that moment, I couldn’t imagine hating someone more. I watched her bound across the yard, looking for my mangled cat. Not able to just sit back and watch, I climbed out of the seat, and followed suit, tailing closely on my mother’s trail.

Tiger had managed to drag herself to our backyard, where she lay sprawled out at an unnatural angle. Her breath came in heavy pants, and with each one, I winced. Tears ebbed at the corners of my eyes, threatening to soak my face, and I scrunched my nose to fight them. Under the dark of night I couldn’t see the blood, but I knew it had to be there. She had been crushed
beneath the tires of the car, all because she wanted to greet us upon our return -- it didn’t seem fair. My mother ran to the garage, leaving me hovering over the helpless animal, uncertain of what to do. I wanted to pet her, to comfort her, to take her small body in my arms, but knew it would increase her pain. *It was Mom’s fault.* How could she be so reckless? How could she let such an accident happen?

By the time she returned with a bright red blanket in her hand, I lost the battle, tears soaking my skin. I blocked my mother’s path to Tiger, shaking with anger and sadness.

“*I hate you! Tiger’s gonna die cause of you. I’m gonna lose my kitty --,*” I sobbed hysterically.

“*Jenna, I told you to stay in the car! Get out of the way!*” she said, pushing past me.

Then, she swept Tiger up in the blanket, cradling her to her chest like a mother would cradle her baby. I followed her angrily into the house, chanting “she’s gonna die” over and over, dragging my feet on the ground. Each time I repeated the phrase, my mother winced, and I knew my words were ebbing away at her. At the time, I didn’t care. She deserved to hear it. She *needed* to hear it.

She rested Tiger, swaddled in the red blanket, on the blue and tan countertop right below our cabinets, something that would usually be forbidden under any other circumstances. I kept a few feet’s distance from the scene, afraid I would hurt Tiger by getting too close. Mom flicked on the light switch above the sink and opened the wooden drawer with a sense of rigid necessity, pulling out a tattered old phone book with a missing cover. She flipped through it, searching desperately for someone—anyone—who could help. I stood next to the counter perpendicular to the one Tiger was on, my glance cast at the ground. My shoes were untied, but mom was too busy to notice, and I listened closely as she called a seemingly endless number of animal hospitals.
Every time she hung up the phone, I grew a little more hopeless and a lot more angry.

I took a glimpse at the woman standing before me. The phone rested in the crevice of her neck, between her ear and shoulder, and she paced slightly as she talked into the earpiece. The tone of her voice was harsh and demanding when she dealt with the doctors. Despite her emotion though, her words came out smoothly, and she never once seemed to falter. The expression she wore, however, told a different story. Her brow was furrowed in frustration and her eyelids opened and closed at a rapid pace in an attempt to hold back tears. Worry lines were dark against her tan complexion, and they seemed to glow against the dingy light of the kitchen. All of this, however, only seemed to fuel my anger toward my mother.

My hands shook at my sides when I looked at her. “I’m never gonna talk to you again! Ever!” I screamed.

She placed the phone on the counter after she found an open vet, and bent down on one knee in front of me, bringing her hand to my cheek.

“Sweetheart, I know that you’re upset, but you need to calm down, okay? I’m doing the best I can right now,” she whispered, her voice cracking softly at the end.

Her hazel eyes stared intently into mine, and tiny speckles of yellow swam in and out of her outer pupils. Her eyes had always had a bold edge to them. Something about them seemed so stern, yet compassionate at the same time. Tears leaked out of the corners, her composure falling away.

Looking at her, I realized for the first time that she was just as afraid as I was. For the first few months that Tiger lived with us, Mom refused to get close to her. Doing so could quite literally have killed her. Now, just a few years down the road, Mom had grown to love the little fur ball that lived in our garage, a fact that I somehow overlooked until that moment. I had
forgotten all the times that mom would let Tiger sneak into the house on those frigid winter nights. She would pick Tiger up and rock her back and forth in a soothing rhythm, pretending that it was a child that she was holding. With each stroke of the cat’s thick fur, a long, steady purr rang out, which always put a smile on my mom’s face. After a few minutes, of course, that smile would fade away as her eyes started to swell; it didn’t take long for the allergies to take control. I would have to take Tiger and tuck her into her little bed in the garage, as Mom ran to the bathroom to wash her hands, chest, and face before the reaction continued. After she finished, she always said “never again” about petting Tiger. This happened almost every week.

As I stared into her eyes, I understood that this incident was just a mistake. Mom had never wanted this to happen. Tears flooded my face, my cheeks turning scarlet in embarrassment for how I had acted. Seeing this, Mom’s compassionate nature went into high. Much like she would do with Tiger, she scooped me up in her arms, cradling me to her chest, and stroking my dirty blonde hair. My tears soaked into her shirt, leaving large blotches of wetness, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Shhh,” my mother cooed. “It’s gonna be okay, baby.”

Her soothing voice sank into my subconscious, and though I still wanted more than anything to be angry, part of me felt completely at ease in her arms.

“We need to get Tiger to the hospital, alright, sweet girl?” she whispered, releasing me to stand on my own two feet.

I nodded my head, wiping the remainder of my tears on my right sleeve and sniffing a bit. Mom stepped toward the counter to pick up the bright red bundle in her left arm and with her right, she grabbed my hand. I couldn’t bring myself to look at Tiger, the image of her mangled body still transfixed in my head. I knew that if I looked at her I would break down again, so I
studied the ground, focusing on my untied shoes. I knew that I had to be strong. As we made our way to the door, I slipped my hand under the light switch, pushing it upward. When we stepped outside, that light was the only thing I saw except for the blackness of the night.