



PROMPT #3: Looking through old family photos, multiple generations back, you notice there is a cat in almost every group photo. The same cat — color and pattern: the cat that is currently purring on your lap.

[untitled]

by **Nicholas Quinn Merrick**

I anxiously waited in the doctor's office, dreading what he would tell me. I knew what he would say, yet I didn't want it to be true. He came in.

"Good morning, Jo. How are you doing today?"

"I could be better," I said, fidgeting, "I already know what's wrong. Please, just tell me."

"Well, after reviewing your tests, we've come to the conclusion that you have lung cancer."

I didn't say anything. I just nodded as tears welled up. After the news settled, I briefly explained to him that I didn't want to seek treatment; I wanted things to happen naturally. We talked for a while and he recommended a palliative care service since I lived alone.

The drive home was solemn. I returned to this whirlwind of thoughts over and over again, turning it over like a stone in my palm.

I informed my friends and family, some of whom came to visit me, not knowing how much longer I might have left. My best friend spent several days comforting me, making sure I was taking care of myself. My parents made plans to travel across the country to be with me, but neither of us knew if these plans would come to fruition. I left my job, wanting to spend the precious time I had left pursuing other activities. I set up an arrangement with the palliative care service.

The service sent a nurse named Amber, who would be the primary nurse attending me. She came over frequently, but could not be present all the time. One day, she suggested that I find a companion to help quell the loneliness and depression building in my heart.

“I’m not really in the mood for dating, you know,” I quipped, “with the whole ‘I’m dying’ situation happening.”

“I didn’t necessarily mean a partner, Jo. What about a pet?”

“I guess I could look into it. I do like cats, I just never had the time to take care of one.”

I made a trip out to the shelter, just to scope things out. I had no plans of getting a pet immediately. Seeing all these animals without owners tugged at my heartstrings. I was zoning out, caught up in my feelings, when an employee brought me back to reality.

“Would you like to meet any of our furry friends?” he asked. “I think you might like one of our older cats, Caesar, he has a lovely temperament. He seems drawn to you,” he said, gesturing to a large gray cat with a bobbed tail and chipped ears, who had his eyes on me. When I looked over at the cat, he blinked slowly, which I knew to be a sign of affection.

“Sure, but I don’t plan on adopting today.”

He brought Caesar out into a small room furnished with wall platforms and cat toys. Immediately, Caesar began rubbing up against me and purring.

“Usually he’s a bit nervous, I’m surprised to see him act like this with a stranger.”

I sat with Caesar for a long while, and, when the employee said that he had to take Caesar for mealtime, my impulses took hold.

“I said I wasn’t planning on adopting today, but I...well, I really like this cat. I want to take him home.”

“Oh, awesome! I’m so glad to hear that! We’ll get you set up at the desk.”

Before I knew it, I was walking out of the shelter with Caesar. I chided myself for being so impulsive, but it just felt like the right thing to do. Amber was thrilled that I had found a pet so quickly.

Caesar took well to my house – it seemed as though he fit right in. He was perfect in every way, and brought me joy, just like Amber had said he would.

Without work, I found myself bored most of the time, so I embarked on an effort to organize some of my belongings, to make it easier on my family when my time came. I started small, sorting through trinkets and curios in the basement. Eventually, I found my way to some old family albums. I started leafing through them. My family had always been good at keeping

records; many of these photos were extremely old. There were even scans of paintings and sketches that had been done before photography was accessible. My heart ached with nostalgia for people I had never met.

I started to notice something, though. In many of the photos, there was a cat. A cat that looked just like Caesar. The photos were grainy, so it was hard to tell how strong the resemblance was, but as I flipped to newer photos, it became clear that there was something amiss. Down to the chipped ear, bobbed tail, and white patches under the nose and on the paws. There was no mistaking it, it was Caesar. I slammed the album shut. Caesar looked up at me, those large innocent eyes. As scared as I was, I could not feel any sort of contempt for him. I contemplated what to do. Even though he hadn't been with me long, I couldn't stand the idea of taking him back to the shelter.

I mulled over this discovery for most of the afternoon. Fear ran through my head. I never believed in the supernatural or paranormal, but now it was staring me in the face, sitting on my lap. As I thought, though, I began to believe that maybe Caesar was a blessing, passed down through generations. He didn't seem to be doing any harm, and actively comforted me, so it was plausible, I thought.

That night, I had a strange dream. The dream appeared as though I was looking through a grainy, yellow-stained lens. I saw a child, climbing trees, when she fell off a dead branch. She was carried back to the home, but it was clear that she was gravely injured. Her family laid her on a bed and called a doctor, who had no good news. A cat – Caesar – curled up next to her, staying by her side until she had passed. I awoke with a start, to see Caesar resting next to me, just like her. However, the dream soon dissipated from my mind, though a sense of comfort radiated through me for the rest of the day.

Another dream came the next night. In this one, the view was a bit clearer, though still through an antiquated filter. This one followed an elderly man, who I witnessed conversing with his wife and watching his grandkids. But as time went on, it was clear he was getting weaker and weaker. Caesar sat on his lap as he rested on the couch. Then, just like the other dream, the old man passed away peacefully, with Caesar at his side. I woke up abruptly to Caesar purring loudly, kneading my stomach, which prompted a laughing fit. He always seemed to know just what I needed.

I continued to organize the house, but it was becoming harder. I had to rest frequently, and pain often kept me bound to the bed, despite the strong painkillers Amber provided. It depressed me greatly, but Caesar was my light in the dark. With him, my troubles melted.

A third dream occurred that night. However, this one was different, I recognized the person in the dream. It was my great uncle, who I knew only briefly. The view was nearly unobscured this time, just appearing a bit dated. I watched as dementia took hold, leaving him delirious and unable to function independently. Though his brain and body were degrading, Caesar was with him constantly – the attending nurses remarked on Caesar's ability to provide some relief for his declining health. When he passed in the hospital, Caesar was there, just like with the others.

That day, I could barely move at all. I struggled to breathe, and the ensuing panic only made it worse. Amber stayed with me all day; it was clear I would probably not make it to the next. Caesar never left my side, not even to get food or water. I slipped in and out of consciousness, sometimes I knew I was dying, other times I was at a loss to comprehend what was happening.

Nighttime came, and I fell into a fitful sleep. I dreamed of a dark place. I was clawing my way up a steep hill. The walls were damp and rough, and it seemed as though I was making no progress. Then, I saw Caesar ahead of me. He radiated light. I was filled with renewed determination, and made my way higher and higher as fast as I could. The exit to the cave presented itself; a fresh breeze and warm sun were cast over me. I made it. I looked down at my companion, tears in my eyes. He returned my gaze, blinking slowly. I reached down and hugged him, thanking him. I now recognized him for what he was, a guardian angel. I knew he would continue to aid my family in our darkest days for generations to come. I took a step forward. It was time for me to move on.