

## Time with Marky

*Cats look beyond appearances—beyond species entirely, it seems—to peer into the heart.*

Barbara L. Diamond

When I turned six, my dad bundled my family into the station wagon and drove us to a farm out in the country. By the time we finally rumbled up the dirt road that led up to the barnyard, two hours of road ruts and winding turns had reduced my stomach to sheer nerves. Whenever the car jostled from side to side, my stomach lurched precariously as waves of nausea rolled over me.

The station wagon crested the last hill and rolled to a gentle stop. My sister and brother, Susan and Austin, a tangle of limbs fighting for the door, tumbled out and scrambled to the edge of a corral bordered by a weathered fence marked by fading chips of gray paint. Mr. White, the owner, was already leaning against the fence. A telltale din of yips and yaps punctuated by an occasional yelp rose up and captured our attention like an unexpected eruption of fireworks against a night sky. I followed slowly behind,

still nursing my overwrought stomach.

The sight of several puppies frolicking in a patch of stamped grass lifted my spirits. Austin and Susan jumped up and down, pointing at each puppy in turn.

"That one!" shouted Austin. "The one with the white fur and black spots on his tail. I'll name him Spots!"

"Noooooo," whined Susan. "I like the brown one over there in the corner. He's got golden highlights on his ears. We could name him Sunny!"

"I've changed my mind," continued Austin, "I like that gray one. He has ears longer than my hands. And look how furry they are!"

I stood as still as a statue, afraid that the energy generated by the dogs and my siblings would be the undoing of my queasy stomach.

Then, I saw Marky. He appeared as a streak out of the corner of my eye. In a split second I realized that streak was a cat—a *cat!* He had wavy gray fur and faint black rings on his tail and around his eyes. He separated from the circle of puppies and darted to the edge of the corral, right where we stood. His eyes found mine. I looked back at him with a mixture of surprise and delight. But he wasn't the only one looking at me. Austin and Susan ceased their clamoring and studied us.

"This one here's Marky," said Mr. White. "He's not a dog, as you can see, but no one's bothered to tell him that. He's the life of the bunch; friendly as heck!"

I looked down at Marky again; his eyes, soulful and direct, held a question. I must have answered that question to his satisfaction, because, a moment later, he swept his tail back and forth across the dusty ground. He was wagging his tail!

"He must like you," pronounced Mr. White with a chuckle. "He usually doesn't wag at strangers."

"Dad," I whispered, tugging at his sleeve, "I think he's

the one for us. Just look at him.” As if understanding my words, Marky turned his eyes toward my dad and gave him the same look he’d just given me.

We settled with Mr. White right then and there.

Marky had never been in a car. In the back of the wagon, he slid back and forth, expressing his excitement over the passing scenery. He got himself too excited, though, because after a short mew, Marky threw up. He whimpered, then fell silent. I scrambled to the back seat and gathered Marky into my arms. We drove all the way home that way, his head cradled in my lap.

In his new home, Marky soon became friends with just about anything that moved. His outgoing ways won over the entire neighborhood. Joey, my next-door neighbor’s dog, whether duped by Marky’s canine act or merely accepting of Marky’s peculiarities, arrived by our sliding door every evening after dinner to call Marky out to play. Marky was only too happy to oblige.

But, when everyone was busy taking care of other business in their lives, Marky liked to plop down in one corner of our porch under a row of wooden benches. He sat there for hours, staring up into the pale-blue sky and out at the empty backyard. As soon as I stepped onto the porch and beckoned him, however, he’d scoot his hind legs out from underneath the bench and scramble eagerly over to me. We spent hours together roaming the woods behind the house. It really didn’t matter what we did. Marky always had the time to play whenever I came looking for him.

Then, one afternoon, Marky did not come home from one of his routine jaunts with Joey.

I went to school the next morning, hoping when I got home that I would find Marky biding his time in the corner of the porch. But he didn’t appear, and a slow burning behind my eyes intensified. Crushed, I didn’t tell anyone at school about Marky’s disappearance. On the third day

of his disappearance, a rumor began to circulate the school hallways that a dead cat lay by the creek bordering the school's soccer field. My thoughts weighed down with dread all day. As soon as school let out, too scared to go on my own, I ran home and told my parents the rumor. My dad, stern and quiet, flinched at the news and left the house. It was then that my heart emptied.

They found Marky by the creek. The vet told us that he was likely poisoned. The police told us there wasn't anything they could do to catch the culprit.

Several days after our discovery, I sat alone and forlorn in the corner of the porch where Marky once used to wait for me. I sat there remembering the happiness he had brought into my life. All the tears I had kept to myself coursed down my cheeks, and my body shook in small eruptions. After some time, I felt a presence by my side. I looked up, and, there, sitting next to me, looking up into the pale-blue sky, was Joey. I didn't move an inch. I didn't say one word. Joey looked over at me briefly, then turned his eyes back toward the sky. And there we sat, marking our times with Marky.

I carried the memory of Marky for years to come. When my grandpa died, I spent time sitting with my dad in front of the television. When my best friend broke up with her first love, I spent time eating ice cream and watching movies in her dorm room. When my mom was diagnosed with cancer, I spent time at home with her while she lay in bed, suffering the effects of chemotherapy. No words were necessary. I'd learned from Marky that one of the best gifts you can give to the ones you love is simply your time.

*Joanne Liu*