

SAYING GOODBYE

by Jocelyn Rish

Whose turn is it to die? That's what Gladys wondered as she heard the commotion in the hall. Gabriel was on the move. Gladys could hear the nurses scurrying from behind the counter and the hushed whispers of concern. She sighed as she placed her crocheting on the side table and scooted to the front of her rocking chair. She had better go look to make sure he wasn't picking her.

Gladys rocked herself forward two times before she lurched from the chair on her third attempt. Her knees gave a squeak of protest, and she trailed a steadying hand on the wall as she made her way to the door of her room. She clutched the doorframe as she peeked out into the hall, not wanting to attract Gabriel's attention. Her neighbors up and down the hall poked their heads out of their rooms like gophers, their faces temporarily alive with morbid fascination.

Gladys watched as Gabriel turned the corner and stalked down the hall towards her. He turned his head and stared at her with unblinking golden eyes. Her heart

thundered in her chest and she cringed against the doorframe. She managed to flap a limp hand at him, as she forced out a hoarse, “Scat!”

It didn’t matter what she said or did, Gabriel could not be dissuaded if it was her time to die. But he turned his head back to the front and continued at a regal pace down the hall. It was not her time.

She whooshed out the breath she’d been holding and begged her heart to return to its normal pace, lest she have a heart attack after all. She watched as Gabriel continued down the hall, his sleek gray fur reflecting the fluorescent lights. His tail stuck straight up in the air, signaling this was a mission rather than a casual stroll. He paused again, whiskers quivering. Was he tasting the air? Or just receiving a message from a higher power? Regardless, he’d determined his destination. He turned into Beatrice’s room and disappeared from view.

Tears prickled Gladys’s eyes. She and Bea always watch their stories together. The other residents preferred *General Hospital*, but she and Bea enjoyed the crazy people on *Days of Our Lives*. In the last few months, however, Bea had become bedridden and had recently stopped eating. She couldn’t even stay awake through the full hour of *Days*. As sad as it was to lose her, it wasn’t really a shock that Gabriel had gone into her room.

A voice to her right drawled, “What’s goin’ on out here?”

Gladys turned to see her next-door neighbor and best friend Edna. Her hair needed brushing and she wore two different shoes. It looked like it might be a bad day. Gladys took Edna’s hand, “Gabriel’s gone into Bea’s room.”

“Oh.” Edna’s vacant eyes swept up and down the hall. “Who’s Gabriel?”

Yes, another bad day.

Edna had been her saving grace when Gladys moved into Sunny Hills Home three years ago, heartbroken and depressed. Edna had a positive attitude and a laugh as giddy as a toddler tasting chocolate for the first time. It was hard to stay blue with a friend like Edna determined to keep you among the land of the living. They'd soon become the dynamic duo, as the nurses liked to tease them, helping to keep each other young.

But Edna had been diagnosed with “Old Timer’s” disease, as she liked to joke. She started to have bad days. Sometimes she forgot her kids’ names. Sometimes she forgot Gladys’s name. On the really bad days, she forgot to go to the bathroom. But she never forgot her cheerful attitude, even when the bad days started to outnumber the good. Now it was getting hard to remember when Edna had last had a good day.

Gladys swallowed that sorrow on top of her grief about Bea and gently squeezed Edna’s hand. “He’s just a cat, honey. Let’s go back into your room and watch *The Price is Right*.”

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When Kathy came by on her rounds the next morning, Gladys rocked in her chair, her crochet needle darting almost too fast to see. Kathy’s forced smile quivered around the edges, and a smudge of mascara underscored her red eyes. Gabriel had been right again. That made twenty-six in the two years since Sunny Hills adopted him as a kitten. Kathy took each death very hard. Maybe she’d entered the wrong line of work. “Good morning, Mrs. Wentworth.”

Gladys did not want to further upset Kathy, but she needed to know. “Did Bea’s family—” Her voice cracked and she couldn’t finish.

Kathy rushed over and hugged her. She smelled like peaches, which reminded Gladys of her daughter. “Gabriel gave us plenty of time. We contacted Beatrice’s family, and all of her children and grandchildren were with her. Gabriel stayed ‘til the end. It was really quite peaceful.” A tear trickled down Kathy’s cheek.

Gladys shivered. She wouldn’t describe a cat that would only cuddle with dying people as peaceful. She clutched at the small gold cross around her neck.

Kathy handed Gladys her pills and poured some water. “Now, Mrs. Wentworth, you know Gabriel has done a lot of good. Many families have gotten to say a last goodbye to their loved ones because of his advance warning.”

Gladys swallowed the first of her pills. It was the biggest and best to get out of the way first. “It’s not natural.”

Kathy said, “Actually, Dr. Stroud thinks it’s perfectly natural. He says animals’ senses are more sensitive than ours. He thinks Gabriel can smell the chemical changes that happen as someone starts to die. He even thinks there are metabolic changes that cause the body to get warmer, and that’s why Gabriel leaves his spot in the window to curl up with the patient. Dr. Stroud is even going to publish an article about it in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.”

Gladys heard the admiration in Kathy’s voice and saw the sparkle in her hazel eyes. So that explained why she stayed even though the job was so hard on her. Dr. Stroud was a good man, always patient and caring. Hopefully he could see Kathy was a real catch. “That’s nice, dear.”

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Gladys sat by the window watching a butterfly flit from flower to flower. She wanted to run away, but her wheelchair held her prisoner. She heard the telltale noises in the hall. She closed her eyes, not needing to push her chair to the door to see where Gabriel was going. She knew.

She watched as the butterfly sampled a few more flowers before disappearing into the crisp blue sky. She heard a rustling in the doorway. Kathy's soft voice trembled as she said, "Mrs. Wentworth, Gabriel's curled up with Edna."

Gladys hung her head and took a deep breath. No tears. Edna, the Edna from before, would scold her for crying. "Are Tim and Tina coming?"

Kathy hesitated. "I... called to tell them. They're... very busy."

Tim and Tina were Edna's children. Gladys had met them a few times when she first moved to Sunny Hills. They didn't visit very often then and hadn't been around at all since Edna stopped remembering them.

Gladys nodded. It would be easy to think uncharitable thoughts about them, but part of her understood. It was terrible to watch someone you love waste away and die. But then again, it was also terrible to lose them suddenly without a chance to say goodbye. Gladys's eyes drifted over to her side table where a frame encircled a happier moment in time. She wheeled her chair around to face Kathy. "I'm going to sit with her."

Kathy pushed Gladys into Edna's room and helped position her beside the bed. With a last squeeze of Gladys's shoulder, Kathy left the room. Gladys picked up Edna's hand. "Edna, I can't believe you're leaving me, too."

Gladys dropped Edna's hand and jerked back as a gray head popped up on the other side of Edna's laboring chest. The golden eyes peered at her with cold regard. Then Gabriel blinked, tucked his head back beside Edna, and resumed purring.

Gladys wanted to push the ghoulish thing off of Edna's bed, but Edna had always loved cats. When she'd been herself, she'd always try to coax Gabriel onto her lap, but he didn't like people. Edna wasn't conscious to know she'd finally achieved a visit from Gabriel, hadn't been conscious for a few days now, but Gladys wasn't going to deny Edna her final victory. Besides, she didn't really want to touch him.

Gladys picked up Edna's hand again and started talking to her. She didn't know if Edna could hear her, but it made Gladys feel better to chatter like they always had. She repeated stories Edna had told her about Tim and Tina. She told her stories about her own daughter Ava. She even recounted her adventures from her days of courting her sweet husband Horace. She talked until her voice grew hoarse, always keeping a firm grasp on Edna's papery hand.

She looked up at the sound of swift footsteps hurrying down the hall. Kathy led Tim and Tina into the room. Their faces drained of color at seeing their once vibrant mother now a still, frail husk on the bed. They hovered by the door, seemingly afraid to come any closer.

Gladys gave Edna's hand one last squeeze and whispered, "Goodbye, my friend. Go in peace. I'll see you soon." Then she pushed her chair back. She rolled over to Tim and Tina. Tina, Edna loved to brag, used her drive and intelligence to become the first female vice president at her software company. Now she looked down at Gladys with the

expression of a lost little girl. Tim, the college wrestling coach, blinked hard and fast and kept clearing his throat.

Gladys patted each of them on the arm. “Go hold her hand. Hold her hand and talk to her.”

Tina took a shaky breath. “But she doesn’t even know we’re here.”

“You never know. Besides, it’s important to say goodbye.” Gladys turned her head for one last look at her friend Edna. Then she rolled out the door.

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Gladys stared at the picture in her hands. Three faces smiled up at her from that perfect moment captured in time - Ava graduating from college, on her way to becoming a successful journalist. Before Horace suffered his fatal stroke. Before Ava got married and had two beautiful children. Before that drunk driver claimed the lives of four people so full of promise.

The picture fluttered in her hands as another tremor struck her. Since Gladys was too weak to get out of bed now, Kathy had removed the picture from its frame so she could hold it in her feeble hands, but she worried about wrinkling it.

Her daughter’s smile captured her attention again, and she started thinking about the day seven-year-old Ava attempted to make cookies all by herself as a surprise for Mommy. Gladys tried to be stern as she lectured Ava on the importance of leaving the oven for the grown ups, but Ava had been so earnest and adorable covered in flour and butter that the giggles kept escaping.

A low rumbling distracted Gladys from her reminiscing. She looked down, straight into the golden eyes of the angel of death. It was finally her turn. “Gabriel.

You're here at last." Gladys pushed aside some tubes and patted the bed. "Come on up, puss."

He paced a circle on the floor. He seemed uncertain. She was probably more talkative than his usual victims, but she knew he was right, even if he wasn't sure. "Don't worry, your streak won't be broken." She patted the bed again. He jumped up by her side, his purrs vibrating against her.

Kathy burst into the room. She stopped, her face defeated when she saw Gabriel curled up by Gladys. "No, I didn't believe it when they told me."

Gladys whispered, "Don't fret, Kathy. I'm ready."

"But... I'm..." Kathy stopped herself and sucked in a breath, visibly trying to regain control. "Is there anyone you want me to call?"

Gladys shook her head. "No, my dear, I missed my farewells years ago."

Kathy wiped her eyes. "I'll stay with you."

Gladys smiled at her kindness. "That's not necessary. You have other patients."

"The other nurses can handle them. I want to be with you."

"That'd be lovely." Gladys struggled to draw a deep breath. "But first, would you please fetch Dr. Stroud?"

Kathy looked surprised, but went to get him. Maybe she thought Gladys believed Dr. Stroud could still save her, despite Gabriel's prediction.

Dr. Stroud bustled in, his kindly round face tinged with sorrow. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Wentworth. Are you comfortable?"

Mercifully, she felt very little pain. She nodded and motioned with her fingers for him to come closer. He stroked Gabriel's head and then leaned down. Gladys whispered

to him, “That girl loves you. You either need to do something about it or let her down easy so she doesn’t have to suffer here any more.”

Dr. Stroud straightened up, eyes wide with shock. He glanced over at Kathy hovering in the doorway, obviously surprised that the pretty, petite blonde was attracted to his teddy bear form. When he looked back at Gladys with his eyebrows creeping nearer his receding hairline, she nodded. His face broke into a boyish grin that went a long way to explaining Kathy’s infatuation. “Yes, ma’am, I promise. Thank you, Gladys.”

Unable to stay awake any longer, Gladys’s eyes slid shut.

A while later, but how much later she didn’t know, she smelled peaches. She called out, “Ava!” She opened her eyes to find Kathy sitting by her bed, holding her hand.

“No, Mrs. Wentworth, it’s Kathy.”

Gladys sighed. She wanted to tell Kathy to quit her job, to find something that wouldn’t be so hard on her. She wanted to tell her to ask Dr. Stroud to dinner if he was too shy to do it himself. She wanted to pass along all the wisdom she’d gained in her many years. But it was too late. Instead she just breathed out, “Be happy.”

Kathy choked back a sob as the tears rolled down her face. “I’ll try.”

Gladys peered down and saw Gabriel still by her side. She put her free hand on his back and felt his purrs rumble even louder. It was very soothing. Peaceful, even. Her eyes slid closed for the last time.