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First Year Memories

JENNIFER SHACKETT†

This is a time in my life that will remain framed in my memory. I know it even as it unfolds in present tense, the sharp contrasts of my daily life etching their strange juxtaposition onto my mind in permanent ink. It all began in earnest on the first day of vet school. Just the day before, I had actually felt like an adult and even had the proof: an apartment, a car, a husband, a food processor. Now, as I left my home, backpack on my shoulders and lunchbox in hand, I half-expected my mother to appear with the Polaroid camera in order to snap the requisite “first day of school” photo of me standing in the driveway. It didn’t matter that the back of the picture would now have to read “17th grade” or that my lunchbox didn’t have any cartoon characters on it. I wanted a hug and a cookie.

Then came anatomy lab. With the formalin fumes overtaking my scented lotion, my carefully chosen “Amber Romance” fragrance was quickly modified into something more akin to “Necrotic Flirtation.” Further horror came from watching the instructors push the large animal specimens around the lab. The animals’ big, stiff bodies were suspended from the ceiling track on big metal hooks. I subsequently had a series of disturbing dreams featuring carousel rides from the netherworld that seemed straight out of a Stephen King novel. Horses, cattle, and goats swirled by on their hooks, tongues hanging out, eyes rolled back, and trailing strange amber fluid from their free floating hooves. Yet somehow, despite all this and the little chunks of tissue I would find later, squashed between the pages of my dissection guide, the general sense of being grossed out was replaced with something else. One Saturday, I popped a radiograph onto a viewbox as I had so many times before as a veterinary assistant. To my surprise, I was suddenly able to identify everything. The dynamics of the joints and the layers of overlying muscle were clear in my

mind. I had actually learned something.

This sense of achievement was short-lived, however. As the weeks and exams passed by, the stress mounted and my self-confidence dwindled. With all of my family at least two states away and my husband, exhausted from working two jobs to support us and usually sleeping when I got home, I was lonely. I was driving home one evening under one of Iowa’s uniquely dramatic skies, the last of the harvest-ready corn glowing golden in the rich tones of sunset light, and I started to think of the people I have encountered since I moved to this state five years ago. I thought of the couple who stopped when my car broke down on I-35 and drove me all the way into Des Moines to my husband. I thought of the rural families I met while shadowing a mixed-practice vet in Winterset. These families, all tolerance and quiet encouragement, had brought me into their homes and fed me, even though I was an awkward city kid looking doubtfully at their livestock and wearing the wrong shoes for walking through barns and across wet pastures. The memory of these people filled in the expanse of darkening space whizzing past my car windows and reminded me of how lucky I was to have haphazardly landed in such a big-hearted place. I realized that for the first time in many years, I was home.

So tonight, as I finally reach my apartment after my long daily commute, I make five-for-a-dollar ramen noodles for dinner and drink half-flat pop because it’s all we’ve got until my husband’s next paycheck. Afterward, I flop down on our second-hand bed, the frame propped up with old undergraduate textbooks. My husband rubs my feet, although it’s my overloaded brain that could use the massage. And so we lay there, dreaming of an extra income, a bed frame with all four legs, my career, and babies, with everything in tone-deaf harmony, just the way it should be.

†Jennifer Shackett is a first-year veterinary student.