

Lola Wants

By Simone Martell

“Pickles,” she said. “That’s what this house needs.”

Grandma’s kind of senile.

“And peanut butter. Do you remember how Momma let you eat it from a spoon when you played camping in the backyard?”

“Yes, Lola,” I said. But it wasn’t in the backyard. It was at Walter’s pond up North.

“No, it was in the backyard,” said Lola.

Grandma’s always right.

A purple covered cat jumped onto Lola’s lap. “Purrr,” she said.

“Purrr...rrr,” said Lola. “Can you pickle tuna fish, Sally?”

“I’m Fiona,” I said.

“No, you’re Sally, silly. I don’t like it when you try to play tricks on me.”

I’m really Fiona.

“Purr,” said Lola. “Purr’s a really good word, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I, Fiona, said.

“Betty...”

“Sally, you mean?”

“No, you, Fiona...”

She got it right. She got it back. She wanted Percy, who was on her lap.

“Too much talking?” I asked.

“Yes. And too much tired.”

Lola's head fell against the pillow. Percy jumped down from her lap, and his knit purple sweater caught on Lola's finger. She said, "Oh," and then closed her eyes again. I shut the door and turned out the light, and listened to her purrs.

Grandma's eighty-three next Monday. She thinks she's turning ninety, though. She's old enough, she says. I told Momma she wanted pickles and peanut butter, and that there were a lot of p's floating around Lola's room. It's like December in there, but the calendar argues May.

"Did she ask for tuna fish again?" asked Momma.

"More or less. The house needs pickles."

"Well, I could have told you that."

The edge of Momma's heart broke loose and floated through her veins, like the p's in Lola's room.

Momma gave Lola a sponge bath at four in the afternoons because two weeks ago Lola stood in front of the shower undressed with the water running over her feet and onto the floor and drip-dropped into the apartment downstairs. Then she got mad at the service manager for intruding; she yelled that a woman deserves her privacy, especially if she's naked, and that they were all trying to take control of her. Then she yelled at Momma for leaving her, and Momma got angry and feels guilty for getting mad. She just misses Lola sometimes.

Cats like shrimp. People like tuna fish. And pickles.

"Percy...pretty...Shrimpies," I called. I tapped lightly on the screen door that lead out to the balcony.

"Where is my precious?" asked Lola. "He's got to come in or he'll get sick. You have to bang louder than that, he won't hear you."

Percy sat on the chair by Lola's bed and purred more softly than when she strokes him and her fingers get caught in his sweater. At least we can always recognize the sweater. Lola's smile fades in and out, and her eyelids float up and down. She sleeps a lot now and I get tired watching her. Sometimes I get tired of watching her, and I feel guilty, like Momma, because I've only known her for twenty years. Actually, it's probably more like seventeen, because I don't think I really knew her those first two, and I know that I haven't known her this last one. I get hungry and go to the fridge. There's lots of bottles of water and a jar of pickles that Momma got last night. I hope I can remember that Momma's this good.

"Lola," I said. "Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

"Don't ask me," she said. "I'll tell you."

"Okay."

“Fiona, dear. Are you still here?”

“Yes, Lola.”

“I have to use the potty.”

She doesn't like me helping her. But she doesn't like not relieving herself more. Sometimes I get worried that she'll forget us on that day, and that we'll be near her and not with her. And so, I ask her if she remembers me.

“How can I forget you if you're right in front of my face?”

So that answers that.

Percy purrs louder on Monday morning when he's on Lola's lap. He slept there and didn't scratch when she kicked her legs in the night. Lola's eighty-three, now. Ninety if you ask her. I make her a sandwich with tuna fish and pickles. She bites it and makes a face.

“What's this? What are you giving me?”

“It's a tuna fish sandwich, Lola,” I told her. “With pickles.”

She makes a face. Grandma never liked pickles, really.

“I want a...” Lola can't remember what it is she wants. She knows what she wants. She doesn't know what it is.

“How about some water?” I ask.

She nods. “Good, Fiona. Come here.”

I get her the water and come back. I set it on the stand next to her bed and it leaves a ring, one that's almost complete.

“I worry about you, dear Fiona,” she starts. She's never finished, I don't think. “Do you know that I'm sick?” I nod. “Do you know that I'm dying?” I cry. “Silly girl.” I nod and laugh. “That's better. You are rather silly, though, you know? You're going to die too, you just have to marry a nice boy first.” I laugh again, and drip from my nose.

“Do you have a tissue?” I ask. She hands me a roll of paper towels. They're almost gone.

“Don't worry about me when you're around here. If you're going to cry, go home. I don't want it here. You better be damn well happy that I'm not gone yet, 'cause I sure as hell am. Do you understand me, Fiona?”

“Yes, Lola.” I said. And then: “Lola, are you scared?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Lola and Percy fall asleep together Monday night, Lola’s birthday.

On Tuesday morning Percy wakes up and purrs.