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FREE



## Love & Death

The Animal Shelter is  
Knoxville's Living  
Dumping Ground

PHOTO: STEPHEN JONES

### JUST DON'T SAY NO • WELL OF ANGER

**GAMUT** UPTOWN GHOUL

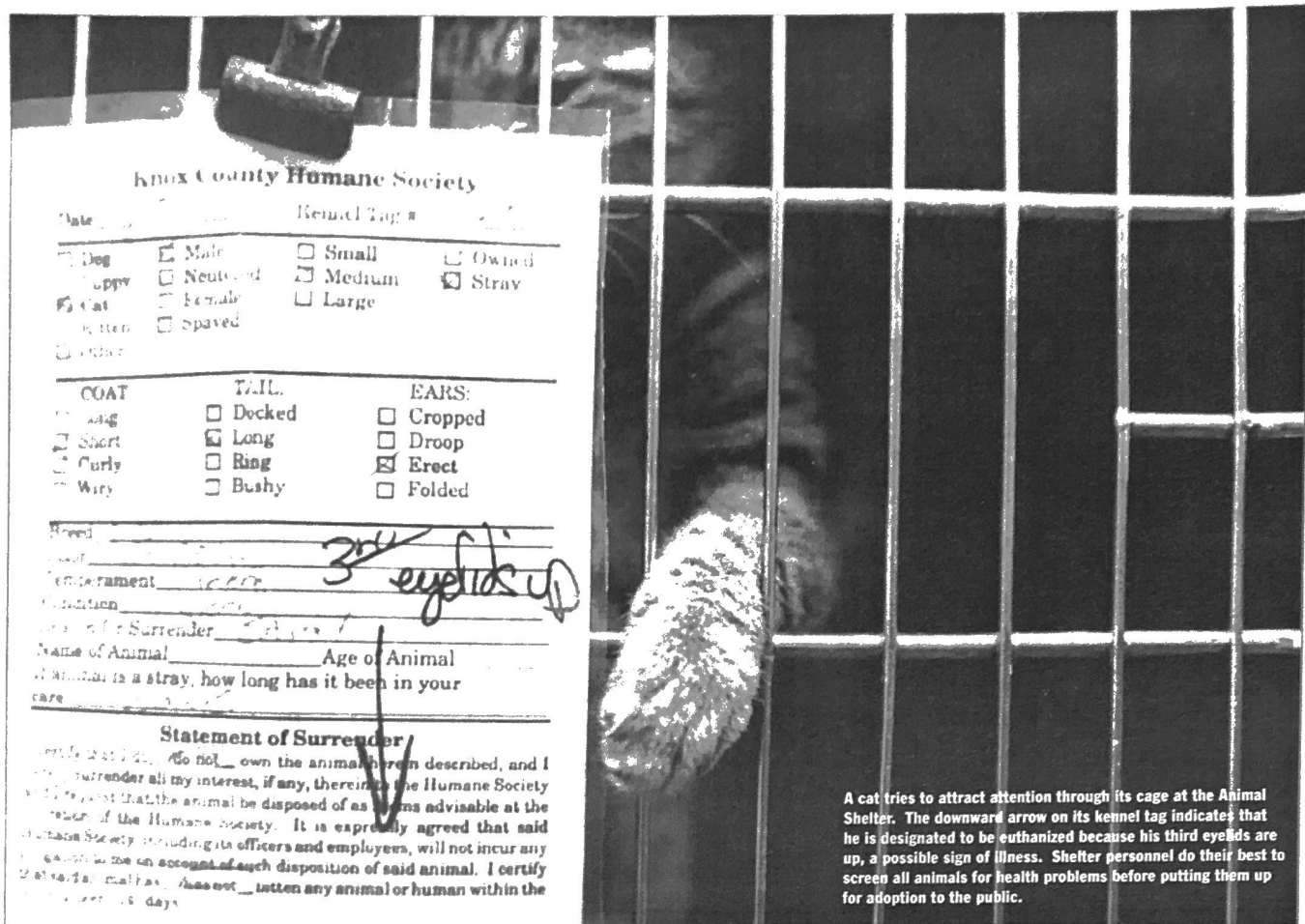
PLUS: JIMMY DALE GILMORE • DINE IN THE DARK



# Love & Death

View the accompanying slide show:

[www.stevejonesphoto.net/love-and-death](http://www.stevejonesphoto.net/love-and-death)



A cat tries to attract attention through its cage at the Animal Shelter. The downward arrow on its kennel tag indicates that he is designated to be euthanized because his third eyelids are up, a possible sign of illness. Shelter personnel do their best to screen all animals for health problems before putting them up for adoption to the public.

# the Toll of Neglect

*Doing Away with Unwanted Pets is a Daily Task at Animal Shelter*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEVE JONES

**T**he first thing you notice is the smell—an undeniable mixture of feces, urine and wet dog that hits you in the morning unlike anything ever to meet your nose. It is pervasive, nauseating and the first of many sensations waiting to assault the workers each day at the Knox County Humane Society's Animal Shelter in South Knoxville.

It is just before 8 a.m., and employees are gathering in the office, making small talk before beginning the day's work. One woman is opening a box of donuts from Kroger. Someone else is making coffee. Outside the open door, a tired-looking man takes a last drag from a cigarette before clocking in. It might be any office at the start of any business day were it not for the constant barking and yelping of dogs and puppies on the other side of the locked steel door

that leads to the kennel. It's been fifteen hours since the animals were last fed and they want you to know it.

Soon, the humid, noisy rooms are awash with light and a buzz of activity.

Missing layers of paint on the floor combine with standing water to form puddles that seem to defy even the largest squeegee. From speakers above, piped-in rock music is surreally juxtaposed with the sounds of the dogs.

**W**earing a down vest against an early morning chill, Jim King makes a quick tour of the shelter. His first question: how many empty cages are there? This particular morning, not many. The shelter has a capacity of about 200 animals. From experience he estimates how many dogs, cats, puppies and kittens will arrive that day. A bit of quick arithmetic brings him to the same inescapable, almost daily conclusion: some of these guys have got to go.

But which ones? How about the sad-eyed





Adoption Counselor Karen Lunsford shares a moment with an injured sparrow that spent time recuperating at the Animal Shelter. In addition to dogs and cats, a variety of species are brought to the Animal Shelter every year, including horses, rabbits, goats, opossums and even snakes.

Below, adoption Counselor Heather McCurry (right) goes over the terms and conditions of an adoption contract with a woman adopting a dog. The humane society is very particular about whom they adopt animals to, requiring all prospective "pet parents" to complete a detailed application. All animals adopted from the humane society are spayed or neutered at no cost by area veterinarians.



beagle over there with his head on his paws and eyes following your every move? Or that off-white Spitz whose former owners dumped her off before leaving town? Maybe that six-month-old gray tabby in the cat room that's already been here for three weeks?

While thousands of people around kitchen tables in Knox County are drinking coffee, reading the funnies and eating Wheaties, King is removing the cap from a black Sharpie marker and making notations on wet, laminated kennel tags—the identification papers that accompany each animal.

He marks one with an A, indicating that animal can be put up for adoption. On another he scrawls an arrow pointing downward, meaning that animal is to be "put down," or euthanized.

As King finishes up this first part of his day, all around him men and women in green medical scrub shirts and rubber boots are busy disinfecting cages, removing old,

soggy food, filling tipped-over water bowls, changing litter boxes, and moving animals from messy cages. Some are taken to freshly cleaned ones in the same room, where they are given fresh food and water. Others are carried to a cage in the Euthanasia Room at the rear of the building to wait.

## WHERE'S MY PET?

In the office, the phone is already ringing. Adoption Counselor Heather McCurry picks up the receiver for what must already seem like the hundredth time that morning. Someone has lost a dog during the night. "Did you pick him up?" they ask.

In a business voice that would rival a law office receptionist, McCurry politely delivers a speech she will give several times that day. The humane society does not pick up animals, she explains, it only shelters, cares for and tries to find homes for ones that are brought to it.

The caller is not interested in details. "Do you have my dog?" he asks impatiently.

"Was your dog wearing tags or any identification?" McCurry replies.

"Well, no," the caller says, "but you'd know this dog. He's big and brown and really friendly!"

McCurry tells the caller that not only are there a lot of dogs at the shelter, but "big, brown and friendly" could describe a number of them. Without a picture for her to refer to, there is no way of knowing for sure. "Only you know exactly what your dog looks like. You'll need to come down here yourself and see if your dog was brought in," she says.

"But I don't have time for that. I have to work today. Couldn't you just go back and look real quick?"

"No, sir, not without a picture."

"Forget it, then. It's just a dog," says the caller, hanging up.

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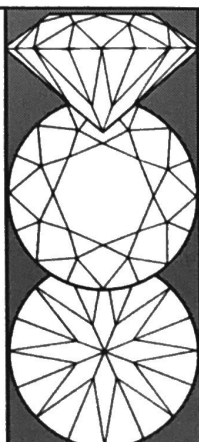
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## PUTTING THEM DOWN

A set of venetian blinds blocks the view through the glass door leading to the Euthanasia Room. But since the shelter is not yet officially open to the public, no one has bothered to close it, allowing full witness to the daily ritual unfolding inside.

No employee at the Animal Shelter is forced to euthanize animals, and some have steadfastly resisted participating in that grim job. But the ones who do it and assist in the procedure share a common look. The first thing you notice is their eyes—almost expressionless, unemotional, focused like a laser beam on the task at hand. But that facade is always betrayed by naked body language: a gentle stroke of a hand on a shaking, matted coat; a quiet word of comfort, almost a whisper between two species; and tight, pursed lips that speak volumes.

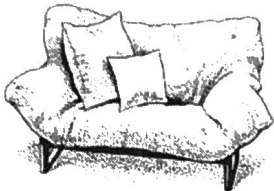
Kennel technician Paul Wise brings in a worn cardboard box containing a litter of puppies whose former owner did not want them. "The bitch keeps getting pregnant," the owner said of the litter's mother as he walked away after surrendering them.

The puppies are too young to survive without their mother, too young to be adopted. The shelter does not usually have the luxury of dedicating a cage to entire litters for the time it would take to raise them by hand until they reached adoption age, even if there were money and staff to do so. A decision about this litter's disposition is relatively easy to make.

Because they are so small, they will only need one CC each. But also because they are so small, it is next to impossible to find a vein. A "cardiac stick"—an injection directly into the heart—will be the best way to do the job.

*continued on next page*

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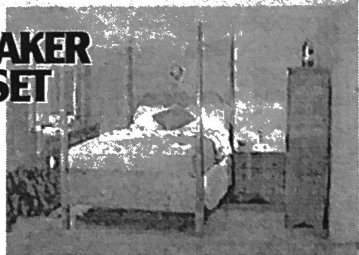
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Wise lifts up a puppy, holding its front legs one way and its hind legs the other, exposing its soft belly. Using his thumb, King feels around the chest cavity. Having found the heart, he picks up a syringe of Sodium Pentobarbital and expertly sticks the needle into the pup's chest. A small yelp is heard, but by the time the sound escapes its mouth, the animal's tiny body has already started to go limp.

On one by one, the procedure is completed until the entire litter lies still together on the stainless steel table. After a moment to finish some paper work the puppies are put into a plastic bag, which is then stored in a large walk-in freezer a few feet away. The next day someone from the city will come by to haul its rigid contents to their final resting place, the landfill.

Puppy-size puddles and bits of urine and feces, innocently released at death, still adorn the table. Wise cleans it up quickly, as a co-worker brings in a black and white cat, one of many at the shelter that has been named Sylvester.

"Fatal Plus" is the Sodium Pentobarbital solution used by Animal Shelter personnel to euthanize animals. Within seconds of injection, it causes unconsciousness and then stops the heart. Sodium Pentobarbital is currently considered by many to be the most humane form of euthanasia. Other methods still used in some areas include gunshot and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Scarcely before anyone realizes what has happened, the office is a mess of organized panic and anxiety. Each person is now holding a kitten in one hand and a small, needle-less syringe in the other, trying to force fluids into the mouths of the formerly unwanted creatures, whose eyes seem to stare through the giant beings gingerly clutching their frail bodies.

The babies' gums are the color of chalk, and nobody is too sanguine about the situation. Indeed, one of the kittens is too far gone, and is put out of its misery. The other three go home with a humane society worker, who will attempt to see them through the night, taking their temperature and feeding them every two hours. If they can make it to the next day, they might survive.

Such foster care is something almost everyone at the humane society has done at least once. But sometimes they make it through the night, and still don't make it. So some workers think twice before attempt-

### CODE BLUE

It is just past 4 pm. An unseasonably hot day has worn itself and the workers down. People are tired and want to go home. Suddenly a kennel worker comes through the door with news: a woman has just brought in four kittens she found sealed inside a plastic garbage bag, dumped by the side of a road. They are alive but in shock, barely moving.



ing to be a Good Samaritan next time.

"Don't get attached," new employees often hear from veterans of the shelter. "Don't get attached," veterans often hear from themselves.

## SPARE THE 'CRAP'

Heather McCurry has just spent almost thirty minutes speaking to an older man who wants a puppy. Eventually, however, it becomes clear that he does not want to have it neutered. In fact, he seems to have very strong feelings about it.

McCurry finally points out that she cannot let him adopt an animal unless he agrees to the neutering procedure when the puppy is old enough. But the man is adamant, not necessarily opposed to the neutering itself, he says, but to some "agency's regulations telling me what I can and cannot do...with my property!"

It's not about regulations, McCurry explains. It's about trying to curb the pet overpopulation problem. She tells him that during the previous year, more than 15,000 animals were brought to the shelter, and the vast majority had to be euthanized. And the number exceeded 20,000,000 nationwide. There are just not enough homes for them all, she says.

The man pauses. For a moment, the weary adoption counselor thinks she may have gotten through to him. At length he seems to have organized his thoughts to his satisfaction: "Don't tell me that crap! I don't want to hear it," he yells as he jumps up and storms out the door.

A shelter worker answers the phone. "Are you takin' puppies?" asks the caller. "I got a litter of 'em, and we couldn't find homes for 'em." The worker asks if the man knows where the shelter is located.

"Oh, yeah," he says, "I brought litters there before."

## GOOD DOG DAYS

It's been a good day at the shelter. "Elvis" has finally found a home. The stray hound mix, named by kennel staff because he arrived suffering from a broken pelvis, had been at the shelter so long that staff members occasionally had to remind themselves that he was available for adoption.

More often than not, untagged stray animals with serious injuries are euthanized. But Elvis was special, and the kennel staff took an immediate liking to him. So a decision was made to try and save him.

After a long period of monotonous convalescence, the good-natured dog was ready to leave. But possibly because he now had a permanent limp, no one was showing much interest in adopting him. Finally, a young couple from Halls took him home.

Vicky Crosetti, the humane society's executive director, was almost speechless. "There really is a God!" she said, as Elvis rode off with his new family. For employees at the Animal Shelter, most of whom earn minimum wage, it doesn't get much better than this. This was their payoff. They had gambled on a dog and their faith in him, and they had won. Months of extra medical expenses and meticulous, loving care had paid off as a big, goofy dog, whose life they knew they had saved, had found a new home and a fresh start.

The staff was still collectively basking in the glow of this small victory a short time later when a woman came in looking for her lost cat. As she was escorted around the cages, she echoed a remark frequently heard by shelter workers: "I could never work here; I love animals too much."

*continued on next page*

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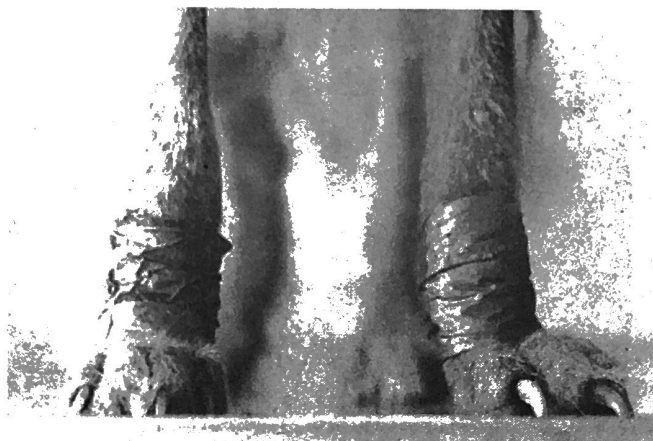
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This dog arrived at the Animal Shelter with his legs bound with duct tape. Suffering from infection and other health problems, he was humanely destroyed. The owner's reason for taping his legs was never determined.


Below, former Animal Shelter Manager Jim King ponders the fate of a dog. One of King's first tasks of each work day was to decide which animals should be euthanized that day to make room in the shelter for the many dogs and cats that he knows will arrive that day.

### KENNEL KNELL

It's after 5 p.m. on Friday afternoon at the Animal Shelter. The last few employees and managers are milling around the front office, drinking Cokes and unwinding before the drive home. Most already have their jackets on. Vicky Crosetti emerges abruptly from the kennel area. She has counted only one empty cage available for animals that will undoubtedly be brought in by Animal Control officers during the coming night. Room will have to be made for more, she says.

There are a few puppies that could be moved up early for adoption, but that still won't free up enough cages. Jim King remarks that he has already put down a lot of animals that day. There is a long pause.

Finally, Crosetti starts to break the awkward silence, but before she can get the words out of her mouth, King has already taken off his jacket and begun walking back towards the kennel door.

"I know what needs to be done," he says, waving her off. "I've done it before." 



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