

S U N D A E : R. I. P.

In retrospect it looms inevitable, inexorable; but of course in the stream of life, swimming each day's miles, I failed to see it coming. Maybe I ignored it, hoping it would go away.

My cat Sundae lost her appetite, first for food and then for water. Her pace slowed. She never complained, because what was wrong was huge, and she only complained about petty matters. Then last Saturday morning she came to join me as always when I was making coffee, and she could not walk. She struggled across the floor, dragging her hind legs, and collapsed at my feet.

Gripped by icy panic, I lifted her up, put her in a carrying case, and hurried her to the doctor, not really expecting him to be in his office that early but willing to wait; and outside his clinic I came on a young couple, holding each other, crying. "Sorry to disturb you," I said, "but is the doctor here?"

"Yes," the man said, "he just had to put our pet to sleep."

I expressed condolences and went inside. The doctor, unshaven, rumped, looked not at all happy to see a second patient, apparently hoping to return home and have breakfast before starting his "open clinic" Saturday morning schedule.

"I hope you will see Sundae," I said quickly so that he could not put me off. "I think she may have had a stroke. I guess I looked scared because he nodded and led me into his consulting room.

I took her out of the case and put her gently down. She looked up at me gravely, but then she always looked that way when we went in for her examinations. I kept a hand on her back, for reassurance, as he felt of her legs and paws.

At last he looked at me, sadder even than when I first saw him, and shook his head. "It's spinal," he said. "Probably a tumor."

No hope?" I asked, my voice catching, barely able to swallow a sob.

He shook his head again. "Better she not suffer."

“I understand,” I said.

“I’ll leave you for a moment,” he said as he went toward his medicine closet and disappeared from view.

I just stood there, my hand still on her back. I didn’t know what to say to my friend, my closest companion, of twelve years. We had spent so much time together, good times and bad; we had talk about history, politics, philosophy, religion, even love; and now I couldn’t think of a word. I didn’t need to tell her the diagnosis, since she understood and spoke English as well as I did. The doctor didn’t know it, but she had digested his every word.

“James,” Sundae said, saving me from my own awkwardness, “I guess this is the time we have to part.”

“Sundae. . .”

“It’s all right. It’s been a good life. “I can go now.”

“I wish it were me, Sundae.”

“Oh no. I can’t remember when I didn’t live with you; and I wouldn’t know what to do without you. Someone really awful might take me in.”

“But what will I do without you?”

“Good point. I hope someone really awful doesn’t take you in.”

“Don’t worry, gal. No one could ever take me in but you.”

She sighed. “That’s good to know.” She seemed to smile. “Who knows? Maybe it won’t be long before you can join me.”

“Who knows indeed,” I said. “When the time comes, I promise I will.”

There was a rattle at the door.

“He’s coming back,” she said. “I won’t say anymore. We must keep our little secret, huh James?”

We had kept it a secret that Sundae could talk. We were afraid that if the word got out, someone might catnap her and put her in a freak show.

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Please keep me near you,” she said.

“I will.”

“Bye, James.”

“Goodbye, my love.”

The doctor returned. He asked if I wanted to be there, and I said no. I wanted to remember her hale and hearty, stretched out on the couch like Cleopatra. So I left and waited on the front steps until he came out with the carrying case. I took it and from its weight I knew she was inside.

“Thank you,” I said.

As the sun rose, I drove out to the country place where men were building a hermitage for me, a place I thought Sunda and I would share in our old age. Behind the shell of the house is a tree, where the morning sun announces each new day, where there is cool shade in the hot afternoons, and beneath that tree, near the place I will soon live by myself, I placed my Sunda. The men digging electric lines had unearthed several strangely shaped rocks, and one was roughly a valentine. I lay it above her, in order to remember my love for the Girl of my Autumn.

Over her grave, able now in solitude to cry I borrowed from the Bard: “Farewell, sweet princess, and may flights of angels carry thee to thy rest.” Then I told her I hoped she would be reabsorbed into the nature from which she came, and that each fall I would look for her Calico colors reflected in the trees of the bordering forest.

I had promised to keep her near me. I had promised to join her when the time comes. One promise I have kept, the second I will keep.