

In the air

„Euth. Chat“

Ariel Wagner-Parker

When I first found traces of blood in her litter-tray no alarm-bells rang; she would have hurt her paw or something, nothing serious. Examination of all fours revealed no such wound, but then you can't always see these things. She seemed all right, was eating, behaving normally. She seemed a bit heavier in the stomach but she'd never been a thin cat.

Then a few days later, there were the scarlet spots again.

Going to the vet always upset her and she was over 18, so we phoned him. He prescribed an antibiotic. She must have two pills a day, one in the morning, one in the evening, for ten days. I was to hold her mouth open and push them down her throat.

I try. She writhes, snaps, hisses, slashes, yowls and jumps.

You grind the pills into powder and mix it with delicious chicken liver. That works. You rejoice. But it only works once. The second time, she sniffs the food, laps vaguely at the gravy and walks away. You weep with frustration.

The next days are spent trying to get antibiotics down your cat, who is ill and has to take them. You know this, she doesn't. She knows the food doesn't taste right when the pill is in it. And won't eat it.

You try force again, wrapping her in a towel. She defends herself as before. It ends in tears. She escapes and disappears.

You go to look for her, to try and make peace, to comfort her – and yourself. But she has perceived an enemy. She is hiding from you.

You can't explain that you are trying to help her. All you can do is go on grinding up the pills and putting them into her favourite foods. And rejoicing when she eats enough to persuade you she's had her dose for the day.

The treatment must be continuous to work. Soon, it's all that matters. Life is reduced to getting the pills down her. A good day is when she has her dose; a bad day is when she doesn't.

But it's not working.

A few days later, the bright spots of blood are back.

Trauma or not, we decide to take her to the vet's. She yowls at first but then settles down on the shelf at the back of the car. He is a kind man and a good doctor. She has become quiescent and lets him do an x-ray.

He shows it to us. She has a tumour in the stomach. At her age, it's not possible to operate. She could live for several



Photo: Hanns H. Heidenheim

„... cat like a soft owl, cat with paws like moths“

months, but it may only be a question of a couple of weeks. We are to spoil her, make her comfortable; it's really all there is to do.

Is she suffering?

No, not for the moment. You'll know at once when she is. And then, well ...

It did not last long. She slept in her chair, roamed around the house, with her sad swollen stomach, and sometimes went for a walk in the garden. We cuddled her a lot and gave her her favourite food. She ate a little and didn't seem to be suffering. She purred in our arms.

Sometimes she was not to be found. We read that animals see pain as an enemy and hide away to escape from it. They do not know they are going to die.

We read Doris Lessing's description of her own grey cat: „cat like a soft owl, cat with paws like moths ...“. We were waiting and trying not to be waiting.

After a couple of weeks, it happened. My husband had just left to get the train at Wasserbillig. I went to look for her. She was in the dining room and for the first time seemed confused, shaky on her paws. Then she blundered into a chair leg, reeled and stumbled over.

G. would only be back on Monday; this was Saturday morning. And she had always been more his cat than mine ...

I phoned the station: please call on your loudspeaker for Mr W. to come home.

We called the vet. He examined her but said it hadn't got that far. He gave her a booster injection. It seemed to help and she was a little livelier. Then in the evening she had a fit of spasms.

We carried her upstairs and laid her on a rug on the bed. She spent the night sleeping between us.

It was her last night.

Next morning she wanted to be let out and we watched as she ambled round the garden, sniffing at things, stopping to

rest now and then. An hour or so later, she started to sway and stumble; she finally lay down in the shade of the laurel bush.

The vet came and said there was nothing more he could do. We asked him to put her to sleep.

I held her on my knee while he gave her two injections, the first a narcotic. She was sick, then slowly became soft and heavy in my arms. My husband saw her eyes turn brilliant emerald green before the life left them. We put her into a white pillowcase and buried her in the garden near the magnolia tree, one of the last places she had visited.

Later, mechanically tidying the living room, I found a fold of paper on the table: the vet's bill. It said „Euth. Chat“ and the price.

We sat on the terrace and drank a bottle of wine in silence.

„Will you get another one?“ asked friends and colleagues, as if some household appliance had broken down.

Apart from the emptiness and loss, the worst thing about mourning her was not being able to talk about it. Many people seem to think it wrong to cry over a cat when humans everywhere are suffering horrors. As if your grief was limited and should only be spent on worthy causes ... and animals fell beneath some imaginary threshold of worthiness.

Perhaps these people are wrong. After all, as the saying goes: what we do to animals today we will do to humans tomorrow. Perhaps if more people cared about and mourned the deaths of animals today we'd have a more humane world tomorrow.

Solzhenitsyn said something similar in *Cancer Ward*: „Nowadays we don't think much of a man's love for an animal; we laugh at people who are attached to cats. But if we stop loving animals, aren't we bound to stop loving humans too?“