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## In My Cat's Death, a Human Comfort

By Margo Rabb

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Menagerie: Just between us species.

Recently, when I told a friend about my cat's death from cancer, I found myself saying, "It was such a better experience than when my mom died!" I realized how crazy it sounded — I hadn't meant to compare their deaths like accommodations on TripAdvisor — but it was true.

My mother died 24 years ago, when I was still in my teens; she was given a diagnosis of metastatic melanoma on a Thursday night (her initial symptom was a stomachache) and died the following Saturday. During those nine days, as her condition worsened, the doctors told me what was happening only during brief, clinical updates in the hallway. The gastroenterologist had a bulbous, beige face; I called him Dr. Tuber. "She's got a one in 1,000 chance, if you can get her to take the drugs and stop starving herself!" Dr. Tuber told me. He was frustrated that she had no appetite, since she was constantly vomiting. My father's cardiologist, who we called Dr. Eeyore, stopped me in the hallway with news as well. "Statistically, men who lose their spouses have a big risk of a heart attack in the next year," he said.

I never cried during these drive-by hallway death knells — I adhered to the unwritten hospital rule to remain stone-faced, like the guards at Buckingham Palace. When I needed to cry, I hid in a stall in the hospital bathroom. One afternoon, the social worker assigned to my mom caught me coming out of the stall, wiping my eyes. "What are you crying about? What's wrong?" she asked, as if there was some inexplicable reason. I stood there, dumbfounded. "What you should do," she told me, "is head down the street to Macy's and go shopping."

More than 15 years later, my husband and I dropped our cat, Sophie, off at the veterinarian for tests because she had a teary eye, as if she was weeping. When we picked her up, Dr. Young and her partner, Juliet, called us into their office and told us that Sophie was dying, also of skin cancer; she had squamous cell carcinoma, a tumor that had started in her mouth and created pressure, which caused her eye to tear. We discussed treatment, quality of life care, and the prognosis: she might live three months. Juliet, a licensed social worker, hugged me. She handed me tissues. We stayed in their office for nearly an hour. “We’ll give her the best care we can,” Juliet told us.

After that, Juliet called me regularly to check in. I told her how the only pet I’d lost was my overweight gerbil Snuffy, who died when he got stuck in the Habitrail and was now buried in a chocolate Pop-Tarts box in the yard of my childhood home in Queens. “Sophie’s the first animal I’ve truly loved,” I said. I told her how Sophie was my constant companion, since I worked at home; she liked to sleep in front of my laptop, like an ergonomic wrist pad. She had an epic romance with a cat we called Window Friend, who’d visit our fire escape daily to stare at Sophie longingly through the window; they’d press their faces against the glass like Pyramus and Thisbe. She liked to sit on our Brooklyn stoop in a large flowerpot and watch the passersby. She liked to eat my manuscripts.

And I thought often of how my mom died. We were at the foot of her hospital bed when she stopped breathing, and my sister screamed, and I cried. We were in a semiprivate room; everything we said was overheard by an older woman with a sharp face whose elderly mother was dying in the next bed. “Oyoyoyoyoy,” her mother kept chanting. That roommate had been an improvement over the woman who’d shared my mom’s room the night before: She wouldn’t stop shrieking. We tried to get my mother moved to another room, but they’d said none were available. The woman hollered all night long.

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Three months after Sophie’s diagnosis, Dr. Young recommended surgery to try to extend her life a little longer, but a few minutes after the surgery ended, Sophie died. Zenny, a vet tech, brought her body to me swaddled in a pink blanket. He had tears in his eyes as he told me how quickly she’d changed — she’d been standing up after the

surgery and recovering, and then she lay flat. She'd stopped breathing. They tried to revive her; they'd tried and tried, he'd said. Both Juliet and Dr. Young embraced me for a long time as I cried.

Sophie looked peaceful. She had pink bandages on her neck and her paw, with flower and heart stickers on them. I kissed her fur. Dr. Young and Juliet sat with me for over an hour and answered all my questions. Had the surgery been a bad decision? Would euthanasia have been better? Dr. Young assured me that it was what she would have done for her own cat. "Always remember that you did the right thing. Always hold that close to your heart. Never blame or doubt yourself," she said.

After my mom died, I blamed and doubted myself. I blamed myself for not staying overnight with her in the hospital, where she felt scared and lonely. I still blame myself for not working harder to get her moved from the shrieking woman's room, and I wonder if that sleepless night hastened her death. I doubted whether I did everything I could to make her comfortable in her last days.

I blamed myself, too, when seven years after my mother's death, Dr. Eeyore's prophecy came true: my father felt a tightness in his chest, and I rode with him in a taxi to the same hospital where my mom had died. The staff ran tests in the ER and told me he was fine, but kept him overnight for observation. Dr. Eeyore called me the next day and told me to come at once. My father had suffered a major heart attack. When I arrived at the hospital, he was already dead. I only spent a few minutes with his body; I overheard a resident say, "We need that room."

In Juliet's office, they let me stay on their couch with Sophie's body for as long as I wanted. My husband left work and met me there. "How long do you want to stay?" he asked me, staring at her body on my lap.

"Forever," I said. I pictured myself wandering around the city, still holding my dead cat. Maybe my friends wouldn't notice. Maybe they'd mistake her for a fur stole. When I'd told them about Sophie's diagnosis, weeping, sometimes I felt ashamed to admit that I felt such deep grief over a cat. I wrote in my diary: "The strange thing is it's not dissimilar from the grief I felt for Mommy and Daddy — how the grief displaces everything, and nothing feels the same anymore."

Juliet called several times after Sophie died. She invited me to join a grief group that she ran, and though I never attended it, I liked knowing that I could if I needed it. I thought again of my mother's death, and the bill that we received afterward from her longtime therapist, without a condolence note, charging us for a few phone calls my mom had made to her from her hospital bed as she was dying. Juliet never sent us a bill.

As the years passed and I tried to make sense of those deaths, at first I felt angry at Dr. Tuber and Dr. Eeyore for what I saw as their lack of compassion, especially compared to Dr. Young and Juliet. As time went on, though, the anger disappeared, and what was left was mostly questions. Was it because Sophie was an animal that her loss was easier to bear, and easier for Dr. Young and Juliet to give comfort? Or was it luck and the lack of it, to have encountered gentle care for my cat and harsh care for my parents?

In "A Natural History of Love," Diane Ackerman writes that pets "help bridge that no-man's-land between us and Nature." When I think now of Sophie's last days, I think that, because she was an animal, her loss felt more a part of the natural order, with its inevitable seasons and cycles of life and death. Humans spend so much of our lives railing against the idea of dying, or pretending that it doesn't exist, or dreaming of eternal youth, or wishing to prolong our lives — and maybe it's that fighting that made the experience of my parents' deaths feel unbearable and inhumane, and made the death of my cat seem exceptionally human.

*Margo Rabb is the author of the forthcoming novel "Kissing in America."*