

Cat of My Heart

Mary Ellen Rooney

He's sick. We don't know what's wrong but he has stopped eating. He's lost three pounds. We think maybe it's cancer. Whatever it is, it's not good because he's just laying here. Usually if he lies on my lap he is more awake than asleep. Not so today. He's zonked, occasionally shaking down rems.

Yet I'm glad to have time with him. I love this cat so much. He has been by my side for ten years. Losing him breaks my heart. He knows how I feel. I've told him many times how glad I am that he has been my cat. I've even left instructions that when I die I want Alphonse buried with me—like those knights up at the Cloisters with little lions at their feet. I want Alphonse with me like that for the hereafter.

He wants to be with me too. I totally don't want to be in the Manhattan apartment without Alphonse. I can't imagine unlocking the door and not having him there. He would insist on a petting immediately and sometimes after a day in the city I needed the toilet first. Then he would come into the bathroom and sit on the little white rug in front of the toilet to get his pet. He loves cranial-sacral touch down his back on either side of his backbone.

Right now he sleeps a deep and quiet cat sleep. His long feline body stretches the entire length of my legs. When he climbs up on me it's like receiving a panther or an ocelot.

Alphonse is a big cat, 16 pounds and not fat. He's a grey tiger tabby with perfect markings and the most gorgeous blue, silver green eyes. He sleeps on my bed at night—in his own area marked by soft white fleece. I learned about giving the cat a special place to be from my son Lucas. I love to reach out my hand to touch him good night. It's always good for a purr. His gray feline body, striped tail, spotted belly and elegant tiger markings on either side of his face, including cream eyeliner to form those gorgeous eyes. The elegant Egyptian way he sits with paws outstretched. An unflawed specimen of his species.

How many times have I looked across the room to find those gorgeous eyes fixed on me? I don't know, nor can I imagine for how long they have been staring like that, maybe forever. If there are guardian angels, that's the way they stick with us. Always. Protect us. Always. Help us. Always. Alphonse has shown me this and I now believe, completely.

Alphonse and I have had a peaceful life together. Now he just lays here on my lap, more asleep than awake. He's leaving. He knows it. I know it and this is his good-bye moment. He knows me pretty well and even now manages some purrs if I touch him very lightly. How will I manage without that purr?

Some cats come to you for themselves and some come to give us needed assistance. Other than finding a home for himself, having been abandoned at the end of the summer in Bridgehampton by some vacationer (he was about four months old, neutered and sitting in a tree by my driveway) Alphonse came to help Wally and me. He's the child we never could raise together. We have been helping each other out in recent years. We have been divorced for a long time. It is not an easy relationship. Yet we have never, even once disagreed about

Alphonse. There are many things we can't talk about together yet we can always talk about Alphonse. We love this animal equally.

Neither of us was looking for a cat at the end of that summer when the Bridgehampton house was sold and I moved into Manhattan. We did everything to avoid it, put up flyers, tried to find him a home. Finally my wise neighbor in Bridgehampton said "He wants to be with both of you." That was it and that was what happened. He had a complete set of boxes and food in both apartments. Then we got this place in Quebec. Go figure. And he has the grace to be dying in the one place that we share so that neither of us need face it alone.

A few days later....

July 6, 2010

The Montreal vet said the right thing. "You need to make a decision, better soon." Dr. Thierrien, the Quebec City vet wants to hospitalize him. I can't do that to him. It's not like he has a broken bone. Wally's a physician and when he says he's dying I know he's right. My friend Michelle has researched a vet in her area for euthanasia. I couldn't ask Dr. Thierrien. She's been his vet for ten years. His sole vet really.

Michelle has bridged the language gap and told the vet in her neighborhood how upset we are. She runs my writer's group up here and thank God for understanding, compassionate friends.

We are escorted directly into the room. There is a pink blanket on the table. I asked for something soft. I couldn't bear to put him on chrome. I take Alphonse out of his case and give him his favorite cranial sacral back rub. There is some confusion about paperwork lying on the table. I finally ask that they do that outside of the room.

The young assistant gives him a little injection to calm him. His eyes get funny but I keep petting him anyway. I want to be the last face he sees. Wally is petting him too but I can see he is uncomfortable. Then the woman vet comes in. I had wanted a woman vet because Alphonse is skittish about big men and usually hides. She shaves his hind leg to find a vein. Some vets use the front paw but that is a very personal spot for a cat. I like this better. It's very fast. He seems still alive to me but she checks his heart and says 'no.'

I ask for some quills. I believe in the power of quills. The vet, who doesn't speak English, cuts them for me with scissors. I had wanted them plucked out but I'm too emotional to make that clear.

They all leave the room, including Wally and I have some final time to say good-bye to my little friend. His fur is still beautiful and I put my face in it leaving tears behind. "Good-bye my little friend," is the only words I whisper over and over. After about five minutes I leave.

I get into the car where Wally is studying a map, his way of coping with everything. The car. The road. I remove the sheepskin pad from his cage and hold it over my heart. It's all I can manage. He has been by my side for ten years. He was the cat of my heart. We had him cremated. He's now in a little blue urn with his name on it. I have the quills. Alphonse died the same day that Lucas's twin brother Colin died. I want his ashes buried with me.

To follow....it takes a village and two cats to raise a family...

