

SAM

I dreamt of Sam the other night. I've not done that for years. She was exactly as she was in my younger years; soft, gentle and understanding. My wife had sensed I was awake and placed her hand on my chest in reassurance. She knows all about me and Sam. I used to dream of Sam early in our marriage. So much so, that a trip to the doctor and then the psychiatrist became inevitable. It was not a problem that medication could solve. It took me seven years of talking, talking, talking.

Looking back it seems strange that a recurrent dream would bring me under medical care as an adult, while having a cat that talked to me as a child, did not. But then the past has a life all of its own.

First memories. We all have them. Some remember the flamboyant colours of a mother's dress and some the warm shadows of a bedside light reflected on cosy nursery walls. I remember noise. Loud sudden noise. Noise that only came when my father was at home and only after dark. Harsh, cruel noise. Noise of shouting and slapping, crashing and crying. I can't say with any certainty when this noise first became part of my life. It seemed always to be there. It must have frightened me because after the shouting and the sobbing, my mother would appear by my cot, take me up into her arms and press her face against mine. In that comforting darkness I would notice an odd, slightly salty taste on her cheek. Even today I find some simple solace in potato crisps and salted peanuts.

Sam appeared from nowhere on my fourth birthday. She was not a gift from my parents. She just wandered onto the front porch while Dad was down at the dairy doing the morning milking. I was playing with my birthday present: a small truck made from a block of wood, painted bright red, with big, brown wooden wheels my dad had cut from an old curtain rail. My mother was sitting in a low-slung squatter chair made out of rough timber, also courtesy of Dad. She was holding a wet cloth against another one of her bruises but she smiled as Sam walked confidently up to me. Sam – Dad suggested the name in honour of a man he had known on the railway line in Burma – was confident right from the start and that confidence never deserted her, no matter what.

Even as a child I wondered why my father had chosen to be a dairy farmer. He was always shouting at the cows and cursing them. It seemed to me my father must have been banished to this work in the country, for he was always extolling the virtues of city life. I can remember him so clearly, after evening milking, sitting at the unpainted wooden kitchen table raising his drink in salute to the big city, the big smoke, before downing the liquid in one long, continuous gulp. It wasn't until some years later that I understood about returned soldiers and the resettlement scheme that gave them land to farm.

With the arrival of Sam, my life changed. Night-time noises still woke me in readiness for my mother's regular bedside visits, but with Sam at the foot of my bed, I had a new ally and, as it turned out, a very special one indeed.

Sam seemed in no way perturbed by the noise. She was part Abyssinian and part something else, but she handled herself with the grace of a show cat and was always certain, no matter what she was interrupting, that we would be glad to see her. Even when my father was drinking and talking of the wonderful life to be had in the city, she would rub against his bare calf, quietly meow and look up with full honey-green eyes and demand attention. She always got it. The

wonderful city would be forgotten and Dad would bend down and stroke her head or squeeze her ear, and then straighten up wheezing with the effort. Little beads of sweat would pop out on his forehead and he would reach over, pick up the tall brown glass bottle and refill his glass. Again his drink would disappear in seemingly one gulp, and he would take a smouldering cigarette stub from the saucer he used as an ashtray and slowly inhale. His look of initial bliss would vanish in a wild outburst of purple-faced coughing. If I found this amusing, it was "Time for bed, my boy. Time for bed." If only he had been as gentle with my mother as he was with me and Sam.

“Sam ... was very understanding. Others' weaknesses didn't seem to perturb her. She didn't judge and she didn't complain.”

At first, of course, I believed my mother. Yes, she must have fallen over, opened the door into her face, bumped into the clothesline. As I got older I learned the signs that preceded the noises; tall brown glass bottles covering the kitchen table, those stories of the railway, curses for the Japanese, curses for the English, curses for the Australian Government and, finally, curses for my mother. And the next morning, sorrow; abject sorrow and tears. Then my mother would seem to pick him up and press him to her cheek, just as she did with me. But when night came and the tall brown glass bottles reassembled, all was forgotten.

One cold night in the middle of this turmoil, a single brilliant Galilean star shone into my room. I was huddling under my blankets after a curse and a slap from the kitchen when I heard a soft but confident voice say, "It must be hard for you." I popped my head up and looked expectantly. My mother must be in the room talking to me, I thought, but there was only me and Sam. Sam was looking at me in a serious and thoughtful way, as if summing up my age and judging the appropriate language to use. This time I saw her mouth move and her perfect white teeth glistening in the dark. "I know it is hard for you. You're only young. What are you, four or five?"

There is some magic that is the preserve of childhood and childhood alone. It was this magic that allowed me to confirm I was four-and-a-half. Sam nodded wisely. "And what's going on out there in the kitchen?" I shook my head. "It's the big bottles; they make Dad mad."

"Is that so?" asked Sam rhetorically, and she went back to licking her fur into perfect alignment. Somehow Sam's composure helped compose me, and when my mother came in, salty and supportive, I grasped her around her neck and without thinking, said that it must be hard for her too. She squeezed me all the harder and whispered, "yes."

Sam, as I discovered over the years, was very understanding. Others' weaknesses didn't seem to perturb her. She didn't judge and she didn't complain. She talked to me about war and what it does to human beings. She talked about the victors and the vanquished and the dangers of being either. She talked about being trapped and being free. For Sam there seemed always to be a middle path between any two

sides. At first I couldn't understand how a cat could be so knowledgeable, but the next year I was sent off to school. I started to slowly learn all the things Sam had told me about. Only once, on the way home on the old rickety school bus, I tried to tell my new friends of my wondrous cat. For some reason their cats had never bothered to talk to them, so I let it go.

Sam was very particular about speaking to me. She only ever spoke at night and only when I was alone. She was very strict about that. But when she did speak there were no boundaries and no rules. I could ask her anything and she would amaze me with some of the odd questions she posed in return. Why did I think my father was under the control of the tall bottles? Why did my mother always forgive him the next morning? Why did I think humans went to war? But while Sam was so clever and so knowing, she needed me to stroke her and pat her and squeeze her ear. It was a question I longed to ask her: Why did she enjoy it so? But I never did.

All the while I grew. I had moved on to high school. Now I lived with my aunt in the regional city and only came home to my parents and Sam one weekend a month. It's not that Sam stopped talking to me; it's more that I stopped listening to her. My life had become too full with other things: study, sport, girls.


It happened the day before I was to sit for my final exams. By now I hoped to go to university so a good mark was vital. I was sitting in my aunt's dining room, wildly flicking through the pages of my chemistry textbook in the time-honoured way of a last solid swot, when the phone rang. I was trying to ignore it but my aunt bustled in, raised the handpiece to her ear and answered. It was my mother. I had to speak to her. It sounded serious.

There were tears at the other end of the phone. Through my mother's sobs I realised my father had died suddenly, but apparently not unexpectedly. My eyes became moist as I asked for more details, but I hardly heard her story of chest pain that persisted and increased as the morning wore on. Of the doctor coming, giving morphine and calling an ambulance that arrived after my father had died. My mother's voice faded into a remote place of my conscious mind and, for some curious reason, Sam came into my thoughts. Sam and her questions! I imagined Sam asking me if my mother's suffering was just finishing or just beginning.

"How's Sam, Mum?" I was surprised by my callous question, but my mother was happy to talk.

"It's odd, Son," she said. "Sam was sitting on your father's bed until the moment he died and then she disappeared. I don't know where she is, but I'm looking for her."

I still recall that long easy silence, as we both thought our own separate thoughts and remembered our own separate memories, still as fresh now as they were then.

I rolled over. My wife was asleep again, softly breathing in the comforting darkness. 

AUTHOR MARTYN TILSE

I've come to writing late in my career. Nearly 30 years as the medical director of a busy microbiology laboratory gave me all the excitement of scientific discovery along with the tension of lives in the balance. But I've always wanted to write and now, with the support of my partner, children and writing mentor, I've had the chance. So far it's been short stories and online publishing. I love writing and I hope you enjoy my story.



TO ENTER Email your story with your name, address and phone number to mindfoodshortstory@mindfood.com. See page 108 for details.

MiNDFOOD

#SMARTTHINKING

WELLBEING PLAYLISTS

*Now available on iTunes
and Google PLAY stores*



WEIGHT LOSS FOREVER



RELAXATION



BETTER YOUR WELLBEING



MINDFULNESS

MiNDFOOD Wellbeing playlists are designed to relax body and mind, and develop the best version of you. We have four series with four playlists in each – now you can download them from the iTunes and Google Play stores.

*DO NOT LISTEN TO WHILE DRIVING

