

The Last Miles

The day I met Miles Davis, he was making quite the racket—meowing incessantly, fishing his little black paws through the bars on the cage. I’d recently moved to Indiana for my PhD program, and I wanted a companion since it was the first time I was living more than an hour from my family. As a first-time cat mom, I was nervous about adopting a pet that would turn into a hellion, so I’d decided to look for a spayed female cat. I bent down to his cage and saw liquid blue-green eyes against jet black fur and gasped, “what pretty eyes.” One look at his rap sheet told me that he was over a year old but hadn’t been neutered, which meant he was more likely to pee on the carpet. “You’re everything I don’t want.” To convince me, he jumped into my arms when I opened the cage door, wrapped his paws around my neck and purred.

Over the next 16 years, Miles accompanied me through big milestones: finishing my dissertation, moving to Texas, buying my first house, and getting married. He was everything I wanted in a kitty: a well-behaved lap cat who’d cuddle with me all night and let me put hats on him and take pictures for holiday cards. But his behavior started to change in the summer of 2023. His ribs protruded from his withered frame, clumps of his fur matted into knots because he wasn’t grooming, and he was having kitty dementia episodes in which he’d do strange things like try to climb on top of his water fountain. After rushing him to what I expected to be his last vet visit, my father-in-law unexpectedly showed up with his friend Wayne. When Wayne saw Miles, he chuckled, “he’s kind of a scroungy-looking cat, huh?” I held my tongue but seethed inside. “You come into my house unannounced, uninvited, and you insult my baby?!”

Perhaps Wayne’s insult motivated Miles. Or maybe it was because we started letting Miles have anything he wanted: rotisserie chicken, water from the sink, the melted ice cream in our bowls. It was probably the daily doses of iron, kidney medicine, and the appetite stimulant, but I like to think that he decided he wasn’t ready to leave me yet. Somehow, he gained weight, resumed grooming, and even began triumphantly dragging the feather toy around again. Every day for the next two and half years, I reminded myself, “You got another day with him that you didn’t think you would get.” His near-death experience forced me, someone who constantly worries about the future, to live each moment.

The image of Sibyl¹ from *The Wasteland*’s epigraph haunted me during his last week. Every time I scooped him up—one-handed since he’d shriveled to 5 pounds—he felt like a bag of bones. He didn’t eat. He retreated to his favorite cardboard box, and only came out for water, the litter box, or if we pulled him out. He was silent—no talking when I came home or yowling at the bathroom sink for water. When the euthanasia vet came, she noted his depressed eyes, and I saw Sibyl begging for death. “It’s the last gift of love that you can give him.”

A few weeks later, a friend excitedly told me that she heard a podcast about the advances in science that promise to increase our lifespans. “If we can just make it to 2040, science will be so advanced—.” Memories of Miles’s glassy stare as he huddled in the back of his cardboard box shifting uneasily flashed in front of me. What would Sybil say if she saw the longevity

¹ In Greek and Roman mythology, Sibyl was granted eternal life, but she forgot to ask for eternal youth. She is featured in Eliot’s epigraph as a shriveled old woman in a jar who states that she just wants to die.

influencers popping hundreds of supplements a day, monitoring every biometric for optimization, and obsessing about avoiding the inevitable? She might ask them why they are trying to live forever when they're not really living in the present.