A CANTICLE

I HAD A FRIEND... AND HIS NAME WAS ROADCAT. He was young when I was young and old when I was middle-aged. Still, our lives overlapped for a while, and I am grateful for that.

He was more than a friend, really. Friend and colleague is perhaps a better image. In fact, I sometimes introduced him to strangers as my research associate. We worked together on cold, gray afternoons, poring over books and papers, while the wood stove quietly crackled its way through another Iowa winter.

Sometimes he lay upon my lap and served as a round and honest book rest. He purred and occasionally reached out to turn pages for me, randomly and with a keen appreciation of the virtues surrounding leisurely scholarship. In the spring, as the days warmed, he moved to the desk, clearing a place for himself by pushing to the floor paper, pens, staplers, and other implements of a writer's trade.

He came from a field of long grass behind our house in Columbus, Ohio. Just a few inches in length, he walked along the cement of one of those smarmy subdivisions that make your teeth curl.

A neighbor's child abused him. He fought back, as any of us would, and the child's mother screamed something about rabid cats. My wife observed that the child deserved something more than he got and brought the kitten home for the customary saucer of milk.

I set him on my lap and said, "This is going to be a fine-looking cat." But we were on the move in those times and had already promised our daughter one of the kittens from a litter down the street. So the migrant was fed and sent along.

I sat down to read the paper, glanced up, and he had reappeared on the opposite side of the house at the patio screen door. He looked in at me, and I looked back. He coughed continuously and badly, tried to cry, but the effort was soundless. I picked him up, looked him over with a modest expertise gained from years of living around animals, and said I was taking him to the veterinarian's office.

The examination was lengthy. He had worms, ear mites, fleas, and a serious case of bronchitis. I asked the vet, "Is this a road cat?" The doctor smiled, "This is your genuine road cat."

We drove home together, he and I and, of course, four kinds of medicine in a brown paper bag. He sat on the car seat, small and uncomplaining, watching me, bright face hopeful. The nursery opened. Roadcat had come to stay.

And it is here, before going on, that I must deal with the issue of sentimentality.

BY ROBERT JAMES WALLER

FOR ROADCAT
If we do not come to grips with that, you might dismiss the rest of what I have to say ranking life, as if some squat, three-level humankind. Below that, and far below, action. A little further down, just a little, lies finding plants and animals. Maybe even rivers ing presence roams above us. Some call it term.

Our problem is that we humans generate the balance, that cosmic ecology might be our or the cat in with the canary, or us in with criteria by which the rankings are made. or the crook of my folded arm, we tilted our furry heads and stared high and hard at the lights deeply, one for the other. He clearly saw, or so. And we came to care, and care to hamper their escape, and seemed pleased with the general vicinity of the Roadcat's world was the forest, the warm place under the wood stove, and a canvas deck chair in the summer. He was content with himself and required no conspicuous recognition to prove his worth. His colleague apparently did require it. My wife, my chief and I, were T-shirts, and had made up for the occasion that said "Roadcat" in bold, black letters across the front.

I watched him closely in the great hall where the judging was held. He was restless in the cage. Finally, he simply lay down and stared directly at me, straight in the eyes. I could see he was disappointed with me, that he was ashamed at having so ruthlessly shattered our mutual respect. Since a time when I was quite young, I have been angered by those people who think they have the right to form beauty contests, and here I was entrusted around strangers, tare at the paper lining his cage on the judging the metal top of his containment, and when the judge put him on a table for he tried to scratch the well-meaning woman who was to measure his worth. Suddenly, he was among the various judges and assistants. A huddle formed around Roadcat, and I went forward to see what all the excitement was about. The judge asked him about his heritage, slept away his terror, remarked to the woods. He was disinterested in his remarkable heritage, slept away his terror, and had nothing to do with any of us for some time. Gradually, he accepted my apology, and our friendship warmed. But he made no work on recruiting our trust as though it were a fine piece of furniture. Roadcat was good-natured about most things, and what the philosophers mean by criteria we created around his presence. On past days, his name was changed tem­porarily to Roadicotta. When my wife,

It works pretty well for the 

Roadcat was a purebred and did not to nurse him and, through the years, gently washed her with a pink and tireless tongue. Roadcat watched the entire battle with detached interest. He acknowledged by a slight increase in the intensity of his purring. Roadcat, in 1986 when Roadie strolled through the front door and dropped it. The little guy hit the carpet running, dropped through a pile of old magazines, and disappeared the general vicinity of the fireplace.

Juggling that the chipper would not eat me, I was content to let him stay. The idea of the family, as usual, thought I was deranged. So, after four days of moving furniture, we flushed the poor fellow. The dog nailed him to the floor in one of those wild scenes that seem to occur only at our house in the woods. Roadcat watched the entire battle with detached interest for the cat-show humiliation finally was his. In his habits he was careful, in his ways he was gentle. He found our dogs inelegant to the point of being despised, but he liked the little female kitty that came along some years after he joined the craziness that is ours. He smiled tolerantly when she tried to nurse him and, through the years, gently washed her with a pink and tireless tongue. Roadcat asked for little other than consent, and I was ashamed at having so ruthlessly denounced the thread of a hard lesson.

Not even the right crawlers brought to me after heavy rains. He plopped them down on a small throw rug, flipped it over to hamper their escape, and seemed pleased with himself. The shipman was very much alive in the summer of 1986 when Roadie strolled through the front door and dropped it. The little guy hit the carpet running, dropped through a pile of old magazines, and disappeared. The general vicinity of the fireplace. Roadcat maintained a youngness of spirit and, even in his latter days, could race thirty feet up a tree on any crisp spring morning when he felt his muscles to have warmed up. The Roadcat's world was the forest, the warm place under the wood stove, and a canvas deck chair in the summer. He was content with himself and required no conspicuous recognition to prove his worth. His colleague apparently did require it. My wife, my chief and I, were T-shirts, and had made up for the occasion that said "Roadcat" in bold, black letters across the front.

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and his seniority, took her later. Later, Roadcat would come by and finish whatever was left. But the rhythm faltered. There always was something in the dish at the end of the day. And sometimes he ate nothing after I ladled his custom to come lie near my pillow at night, then down again, then return for a large tumor around his heart, which had paralyzed his right side and left him blind. I laid him on a wool poncho, where he was brightly lit, his brain kept sending a false message of darkness, and the pupils of his eyes remained. He refused to offer hope. There wasn't any, and Wayne Endres is an honest man.

Here, at this point, the thunder starts, and civilizations that normally parallel begin to intersect and become confused. Roadie and his nose wrinkled. Though the room was brightly lit, his brain kept sending a false message of darkness, and the pupils of his eyes remained. He refused to offer hope. There wasn't any, and Wayne Endres is an honest man.

The initial diagnosis was a kidney problem, and the routine was invariant, and the rhythm faltered. There always was something that was amiss, that it was something of a record. The last time I walked up to my chest, his bank account was low, and I had to tell me that something was amiss, that it was almost over.

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