

So Long, Saki

I was reading the Sunday Miami Herald on the back porch. Pretty much of a rag, but enough comics to keep my subscription alive. We lived on the sixth hole of a fine golf course in southern Florida, a par five well over five hundred yards long, not really much of a challenge in spite of its length, a straight, narrow fairway between our Spanish style town house and the creek.

My wife came in from the front room. I looked up and saw tears streaming from her eyes. "I think Saki's gone," she said, dabbing her eyes with a Kleenex.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Go check," she said, sniffing, as she went out on the fairway to mourn.

We bought Saki in a little pet store in Kobe, Japan when our children were small. My wife thought it important for the kids to have a pet, but we traveled so much it needed to be small and not too noisy. So it was, we bought a three week old white Maltese named "Gin of Spindle Tree," her official pedigree title. We quickly changed that to "Sakurabana," or "Cherry Blossom" in Japanese. Saki for short.

We took her around the world with us. First to New York where she was run over by an eighteen-wheeler truck. She survived with a fractured hip which made her walk with a cute little wiggle that "Sam" our neighbor's mongrel couldn't resist. I managed to keep Sam at bay for two years until the day we moved. Saki was missing. We searched frantically in the forest, yelling her name, almost gave up when she came wandering out of the overgrown brush near our neighbor's hedge. Sam was right behind her with what can only be described as a "s**t eating grin." Saki had finally been nailed by the local bad boy.

Moving to Rome, Italy, Saki had false pregnancy symptoms. She learned to disobey orders in Italian, adding to her growing repertoire of commands she would ignore. Next came Paris where she proceeded to ignore requests in French for sitting, rolling over, walking with a leash, and other simple activities every other dog in the world would do. Finally we moved to Florida where she adamantly refused to obey "southern" commands. She wouldn't do what she was told in five languages.

So I folded my paper, got up, walked to the bedroom. Saki was on top of her favorite blanket. I touched her. Cold, stiff. Very dead. I sat there for a time. This little white animal, looking like a toy sheep dog with hair over her eyes and a coal black button nose, had been with us for seventeen years. She was family.

We had taken her to the vet two days before, She had a large tumor in her belly, was blind....with her bad hip, we explained to people, it was a good time for her to be blind since she couldn't walk fast enough to hurt herself. The vet told us she might not last the weekend. He explained to me that if we decided to bury her on our property to make it a deep hole. Otherwise, he said, other animals would try to dig her up.

So I mourned for a few minutes recalling some of the amusing stories about the little thing over the years. One time she fearlessly chased a horse down the beach convinced that it was a big dog infringing upon her territory. Being spooked by my daughter's little parakeet, Spot, was hilarious. Spot was a very aggressive little bird who would march down the hallway after Saki, terrifying her. Whenever she was taken for a walk on a leash Saki would defiantly sit down; not even dragging her would get her to comply with local laws. Eventually we all became adept at reading her thoughts. She had two of them. One was "food." All other activities were of secondary importance to her. When commanded, pleaded or politely asked to do something, her thought would be the same as the expression made famous by *Bartleby*, Herman Melville's Scrivener. "I would prefer not."

Beloved Saki, always giving me problems.

Finally, remembering the admonition of the veterinarian, and being an engineer by trade, I decided that no animal on the planet would dig up my deceased friend. So I headed to Home Depot. I bought long screws and water resistant wood, took it back to the house and began constructing a little coffin. Then I went into the bedroom, tenderly picked Saki up, wrapped her in her favorite blanket, put her gently into the box, placed an open can of "Mighty Dog" next to her, her favorite food, so that she wouldn't go hungry on her way to doggie heaven, and screwed in the last piece of wood on her final little wooden house.

To the front yard I went, equipped with shovel and pick. The vet said dig a deep hole. Again, following perfect engineering logic, I did as I was told. I dug a hole three by four feet wide and six feet deep.

Then, standing at the rim of this gaping cavern, tears streaming down my face, holding the tiny wooden box containing our beloved family member, the edge of the hole began to crumble. I had forgotten that southern Florida has no soil...it is all sand, and it was beginning to sift into the hole as I stood transfixed with grief.

What happened next, in retrospect, made perfect sense. Had I been Spock, the unerringly logical Vulcan of Star Trek, my brain would have said, "The dog's dead. Save yourself and drop the box." Unfortunately I am human. My human brain malfunctioned. It said "Save the dog." Clutching the box to my bosom, I slid slowly, inexorably, and stupidly into a six foot deep chasm, one foot finally on the bottom, the other stretched upward in the opposite direction above my head.

As I extricated myself, not without significant effort, after gently placing the small Saki box on the bottom, I started to refill the gulch I had made. It became immediately apparent that my unfortunate, though entirely understandable human reaction, had caused all the cartilage in my left knee to tear loose from the bone whence it normally resided.

I took a last look at the box at the bottom of the crevasse, holding my injured and very painful knee with one hand, and shoveling with the other.

"So long, Saki," I mumbled. "I hope you learn to roll over or sit in the doggie great beyond." As I said that, I wondered what she might be thinking.

Probably, "I would prefer not," I decided.