

Dog Star

Arthur Clarke

When I heard Laika's frantic barking, my first reaction was annoyance. I turned over in my bed and muttered sleepily: "Shut up, you silly bitch." That lasted only a fraction of a second; then consciousness returned - and with it, fear. Fear of loneliness, and fear of going mad. For a moment I did not dare open my eyes; I was afraid of what I might see. Sense told me that no dog had ever set foot upon this world, that Laika was separated from me by a quarter of million miles of space - and more of that-five years of time.

"You've been dreaming," I told myself angrily. "Stop being a fool - open your eyes! You won't see anything except the walls."

That was right, of course. The little cabin was empty, the door closed. I was alone with my memories, overwhelmed by the transcendental sadness that often comes when some bright dream fades into drab reality. The sense of loss was so great that I wished to return to sleep. It was well that I did not do so, for at that moment sleep meant death. But I did not know this for another five seconds and during that time I was back on the Earth, seeking for the comfort in the past...

No one knew Laika's origin, though the Observatory staff made a few inquiries and gave several advertisements in the newspapers. I found her, a lost and lonely ball of fluff, huddled by the roadside one summer evening when I was driving up to Palomar. Though I have never liked dogs, it was impossible to leave this helpless little creature to the mercy of the passing cars. Wishing that I had a pair of gloves, I picked her up and threw her in the baggage compartment. When I had parked the car at the Monastery - the astronomers' residential quarters, where I had been living for a few years - I inspected my find without enthusiasm. I intended to give the puppy to somebody but then it whimpered and opened its eyes. There was such an expression of helpless trust in them that... well, I changed my mind.

Sometimes I regretted that decision, though never for long. I had no idea how much trouble a growing dog could cause. My cleaning and repair bills soared, I could never be sure of finding an undamaged pair of shoes and an unchewed copy of the astrophysical journal. But finally, Laika became a well-trained dog. She was the only dog that was ever allowed to

come into an Observatory. She lay there quietly for hours while I was busy, quite happy if she could hear my voice from time to time. The other astronomers also became fond of her (it was old Dr Anderson who suggested her name), but from the beginning she was my dog, and obeyed no one else. Not that she always obeyed me.

She was a beautiful animal, about 95% Alsatian. It was because of that missing 5%, I think, that her masters abandoned her. (I still get angry when I think of it.) Except for two dark patches over her eyes, she was a smoky grey, and her coat was soft and silky. She was very intelligent, and when I was discussing spectral types of evolution of stars with my colleagues, it was hard to believe that she was not following the conversation.

Even now I cannot understand why she became so attached to me, as I have made very few friends among human beings. Yet when I returned to the Observatory after an absence, she would go almost frantic with delight, jumping and putting her paws on my shoulders - which she could reach quite easily - all the time uttering small squeaks of joy which seemed strange for so large a dog. I tried not to leave her for more than a few days and though I could not take her with me on overseas trips, she accompanied me on most of my journeys. She was with me when I went to that ill-fated seminar at Berkley.

We were staying with university friends; they obviously did not like having a monster in the house but reluctantly let Laika sleep in the living room. "You needn't worry about burglars tonight," I said. "We don't have any in Berkley," they answered rather coldly.

In the middle of the night, it seemed that they were wrong. I was awakened by a hysterical barking of Laika, which I had heard only once before - when she had first seen a cow and did not understand what it was. Angry, I got up and went to the door to silence Laika before she awoke my hosts, if it was not already too late. She was scratching frantically at the door, pausing from time to time to give that hysterical barking.

"If you want out," I said angrily, "there's no need for all that fuss." I went down, opened the door and she took off into the night like a rocket.

It was very quiet and still with the moon struggling to get through the fog. I stood in the morning haze waiting for Laika to come back when the San Francisco earthquake, one of the strongest in the 20th century, began.

What happened afterwards, I would prefer to forget. The Red Cross did not take me away until late the next morning because I refused to leave Laika. As I looked at the destroyed house where were the bodies of my friends, I knew that I owed my life to her; but the helicopter pilots thought that I was mad like so many of the others they had found among the fires and the ruin.

After that we were never apart for more than a few hours. We went for long walks together over the mountains; it was the happiest time I have ever known. But I knew, though Laika did not, how soon it must end.

We had been planning the move for more than a decade. It was realised that Earth was no place for an astronomical observatory. Our observatory could still be used for training purposes, but the research had to move out into space.

I had to move with it, I had already been offered the post of Deputy Director. In a few months I had to leave.

It was quite impossible of course to take Laika with me. The only animals on the Moon were those needed for experimental purposes; it must be another generation before pets were allowed, and even then it would cost a lot of money to carry them there - and to keep them alive.

The choice was simple. I could stay on Earth and abandon my career. Or I could go to the Moon - and abandon Laika.

After all, she was only a dog. In ten years she would be dead, while I should be reaching the peak of my profession. No sensible man would have hesitated over the matter; yet I did hesitate, and if by now you do not understand why, no further words of mine can help.

Up to the very week I was to leave I had made no plans for Laika. When Dr Anderson said he would look after her, I agreed with almost no

word of thanks. The old physicist and his wife had always been fond of her, and I am afraid that they considered me cruel and heartless. We went for one more walk together over the hills; then I gave her silently to the Andersons, and did not see her again.

The spaceship was already over the Moon but I took little interest in my work. I was not really sorry to leave Earth; I wanted no recollections, I intended to think only of the future. Yet I could not shake off the feeling of guilt; I had abandoned someone who loved and trusted me, and was no better than those who had abandoned Laika when she was a puppy beside the dusty road to Palomar.

The news that she was dead reached me a month later. Nobody knew why she died. The Andersons had done their best and were very upset. It seemed that she had just lost interest in living. For a while I did the same, but work is a wonderful remedy, and my programme was just getting under way. Though I never forgot Laika, by the course of time the memory of her stopped hurting me.

Then why had it come back to me five years later, on the far side of the Moon? I was thinking about it when the metal building around me quivered as if under a heavy blow. I reacted immediately and was already closing the helmet of my emergency suit when the floor slipped and the wall tore open in front of me.

Because I automatically pressed the General Alarm button we lost only two men despite the fact that the earthquake - the worst ever recorded on the Moon - destroyed all three of our Observatories.

The human mind has strange and labyrinthine ways of doing its business; it knew the signal that could most swiftly wake me and make me aware of danger. There is nothing supernatural in that; though one can say that it was Laika who woke me on both occasions, during the earthquake in San Francisco and the quake on the far side of the Moon.

Sometimes I wake now in the silence of the Moon, and wish that the dream could last a few seconds longer - so that I could look just once more

into those luminous brown eyes, full of unselfish devotion and love that I could find nowhere else on this or on any other world.

- THE END -

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