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## A lesson about living came with a flower

I think it's called a bluebell. It was just a thin shoot of a plant, plucked from a beautiful arrangement on the table by the bed. It took a bit of her energy to reach for it.

I hadn't known her long — just a few days, in fact. On this second visit, I sat again in the folding chair, but this time we talked about dogs.

▼ ADVERTISEMENT ▼ She made me think about all the friends I've known in my life. They come and go, of course, in a lifetime. The best ones stay. The best ones are instant. Either you're friends or you aren't.

That's how I felt about Lisa Sandy, but it wasn't that simple. Lisa was dying.

Her mother had called me a week before we met and asked if I would write a column about Lisa's cats. She was nearing the end of her journey, thanks to a cruel diagnosis of cancer to one so young. She wanted good homes for her eight cats, so she asked her mom if she would call me.

Oh no, I thought. How will handle this? I was depressed just thinking about the assignment. I remained on edge until I met Lisa.

I didn't know her long, but I think I knew her well. She's one of those amazing people who emanated life even as hers slipped away.

Her parents each told me stories of her strength, and it was apparent to me, even as she lay prone on a hospital bed while unseen machines whirred and purred and the air held an essence of comfortable dampness.

The room was decorated with children's portraits and artwork, a typed poem, a picture of Jesus.

Nigel, Tallulah, Liam, Leroy, Zeppelin, Gandolph, Mia and Matilda were in Lisa's house across town, but printed photos of each cat were jumbled across the blanket.

Zoom Photo



Submitted

Lisa Sandy

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I could tell that Lisa gained strength when she talked about them.

"Just keep talking about cats," I told myself. "Don't talk about dying."

Dying is a topic we veer from. Veer sharply from. It's uncomfortable and sad and makes you think of people who have gone from your life. We ourselves draw ever closer to our own end of life, but in denial. Meeting someone in twilight forces us to know ours is coming.

We Americans don't like being uncomfortable. We strive to make the dying comfortable while we — the so-called living — run like hell.

Meeting Lisa was a blessing in ways I'm still discovering.

Medication kept the harshest pain away, but she wouldn't mention it. Even as she lay on that bed, and even though she couldn't move as freely as she wanted, she wanted to make me comfortable.

So she talked about cats. I wrote the column. A few people wrote to say they'd take a cat, but not nearly enough. Lisa's family and a band of volunteers will work hard to make her wish come true.

When I went to see her last week to return a photograph, I stopped in to chat again. This time I was drawn to her. This time she was weaker than the last, but she said it was a good day.

"It didn't start off so well, but it's better," she said. And she smiled.

This time we talked about dogs — my dogs and her beloved Lacy who died several years ago. This time I had to tear myself away, somehow knowing I wouldn't see her again.

"Wait," she called to me. "Here, take this."

She reached toward the flower arrangement, and I had to catch a sob in my throat.

"No," I said. "Don't tear up the flowers for me. They're pretty as they are."

"It's just one flower," she said, and she plucked the bluebell.

"I like to give people I like flowers," she said.

I didn't know her long, but I know I knew her well. In the span of week I knew the best of Lisa Sandy. I didn't know her when her hair was thick and black. I didn't know her when her body was lithe and able.

#### Want to Give?

Memorials may be made to The Mosby Foundation, an advocacy group for animals. You can make a donation or receive information about adopting one of Lisa Sandy's cats by contacting the foundation:  
n P.O. Box 218, Deerfield, VA 24432  
n themosbyfoundation.org  
ninfo@themosbyfoundation.org  
n 939-4035.

I didn't know of her mistakes, her secrets, and she didn't know mine. They are the parts of our lives that do not matter, she taught me. The moments when friends meet to share the beauty of life are what matter. And friendship isn't measured by tenure.

Lisa was at the end of a well-lived life when she called me. She had a mission: to find loving homes for the animals she took into her life. She wasn't maudlin about her condition. She made it clear she wasn't giving up, but rather filling her days with the work she still could do.

She showed me that our last days aren't much different than our early days — they all are simply opportunities to make our world better. I believe our biggest fear in facing our own death is that we will be paralyzed by the news, unable to do what needs to be done, unable to have the conversations we must have.

Like a winning runner, Lisa kept up her pace as she approached the finish line. She never slowed down. By that, she teaches us the glory in dying with strength, dignity and grace. And better than that, she is a model for how we should live.

That's one of the many lessons I learned when she gave me a little flower.

What took me several days to figure out was that when I met her, Lisa wasn't dying.

She was living as vigorously as anyone I've ever known. She was living in a way I want to live — choosing joy over complaint and sharing that joy with others.

Lisa Sandy died Monday. At 48, she won her race.

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Lisa, you will be sorely missed. Know that your beautiful heart lives on in the lives of those you touched. You inspired so many of us to be better people just by being yourself -- loving, compassionate, and empathic to an artform.

She was a friend who never missed your birthday, never forgot you at Christmas. She considered the feelings and experiences of others as much (often more) than her own. She was a living example of the life the rest of us should be leading, and yet she would be the last person to tell you so.

Posted by: **candlelabraugh** on Tue Aug 28, 2007 9:15 pm