

Linda & Sheba

We drugged-up the cat on the trip back to Newmarket. When the tranquilizers finally kicked-in (a good hour or so), Bingo kept his wailing to a minimum of five to ten minute intervals.

Upon our return home, Daddy opened the cage in the livingroom. As eager Bingo was to escape from his prison cage, when it came down to it he could barely manage a single step forward. He swayed around the livingroom like a drunkard, losing every shred of dignity he held dear. Our family joked about this for weeks afterward.

The next day Laura and I bundled up to walk back to school after our long winter break. We parted ways when we reached the building, Laura to her French Immersion classes and I to House Six.

In French Immersion, Laura wasn't allowed to speak English in class at all, not even to excuse herself for a bathroom break. This program wasn't introduced to Meadowbrook Public School until after I was in second grade (too old to participate), so my parents decided to have Laura take advantage of the opportunity. I had to admit I felt a pang of jealousy toward my sister having chances I was denied just because I was a year older. Just as well, though, I convinced myself. Speaking French one hour a day was enough for me.

The morning routine was refreshing, and it felt good to see my friends again. Our class routine began by meeting together cross-legged on the floor of the common area as the teacher, Mrs. Berberick, asked for attendance. We each had to answer "Here!" raising hands high when Mrs. Berberick called our names.

After reciting The Lord's Prayer, the teacher checked who was next on her list to read from the Holy Bible. It was Jason's turn today. I barely heard the Word of God that morning. All I could do was watch Jason's adorable freckled face. My heart pounded in my throat, wondering if I should ever confess my feelings to him.

When Mr. Wonderful sat down, the principal's voice boomed over the buzzy PA system. It awakened me from my trance.

"Good morning! Will everyone please rise together and sing our national anthem!" The music began as we stood. We sang inaccurately yet proudly, along to a recorded choir of children:

"O Canada!
Our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee..."

Afterwards we sang the French version:

"... Et ta valeur, de foi trempée,
Protégera nos foyers et nos droits,
Protégera nos foyers et nos droits."

The recorded choir music always echoed at the end of the French version which some of us imitated for kicks, singing, "... droits-wa-wa-wa-wa!"

Finally we were led to say the Lord's Prayer for which I always bowed my head, even when the kids around me did not.

Afterwards, we were dismissed by the recorded voice of the Principal and left to go to our separate classes.

English was the first class which included essay and journal writing. The teacher wrote the topic of the day on the board. Sometimes we could write about anything we wanted, the topic merely a suggestion. I took full advantage of this and often turned to stories of space aliens or family anecdotes. Our teachers handed out blank booklets at the beginning of the year. The top half of the page was blank

to draw if we wanted, and the rest of the page was lined. I always filled the whole page. By the end of the year I'd filled at least ten booklets and each year I tried to break my own record.

After English was first recess and then French class -- as mandatory as English. It wasn't like French Immersion. Asking the teacher permission to go to the "toilette" in English was permitted, but asking in French would certainly win favor with the teacher.

Lunch was next. We were excused by the bell to the hallway where our coat racks stood, and we reached for our lunchboxes which lay jumbled on metal racks above. I snatched my Snoopy lunchbox and returned to the classroom with the other kids to eat. I sat with Linda, of course. As I unwrapped my tuna fish sandwich from the cellophane she began telling me about her new puppy, Sheba. She was a Husky -- the same kind of dog sled teams used. Her fur was so soft -- much softer than our dogs at home. Sheba was only a year old, but already as large as our dogs at home. She was super-friendly, too. I had the chance to meet and pet her at my last visit to Linda's house. What a sweet puppy she was.

"Our stupid neighbors 've been complaining about Sheba." Linda began. "She likes to go on their yards a lot."

"So what?" I said. "All dogs do that, don't they?" I knew our dogs did.

"Well, the neighbors finally got their way." Linda's expression was grave.

I hesitated, not wanting to hear a horror story. "What did they do?"

"You wouldn't believe it. They got someone from the Humane Society to come over..." Linda was choking back tears. "... to tell us we have to give up Sheba."

I was confused. "Give her up?"

"To the Humane Society!" Linda cried. "You know what they do to pets at the Humane Society?"

"No."

"They put them to sleep! If they can't find an owner to take an animal, they stick it with a needle and kill it!"

"Oh my gosh!" I said. "That doesn't sound very humane to me."

Linda's hands went up to her face. "Poor little Sheba! What did she do? She's just a friendly puppy. She loves everybody. It's not fair!" I could barely hear her through her sobs.

Mrs. Berberick came over and knelt down next to Linda, trying to calm her. She whispered in Linda's ear, putting a gentle arm around her. They both got up, Linda's face red and streaked, and left the room.

Heidi and Tammy suddenly appeared at my side. "What's wrong with Linda?" Tammy whispered.

"Nothing's wrong with her," I said quickly, "it's her idiot neighbors. They're forcing her family to give up Sheba to the Humane Society."

"Oh, man!" Tammy shook her head, her dark feathered hair falling around her face. "That totally bites!"

Heidi touched my shoulder. "Did she tell you she's moving, too?"

I whisked my head around in surprise.

"Oh, I guess she didn't get to that part. She told me everything this morning at recess. Her family's been having problems with those neighbors for years. I guess this was the last straw. Her mom is so angry, she decided to move out of that crummy neighborhood as soon as possible."

As much as I could understand why, I selfishly wished Linda wouldn't move. I can't believe it. First Deborah and now Linda. My two best friends will be gone, soon.

Concentrating for the rest of the day was difficult. Math and science class were after lunch, and second recess after that. The final class was gym, the only class I hated with a passion. Physical strength was not my strong point. My beanpole body gave me only one advantage: I was the second last person to be picked on any team, just before the chubby kid.

If the class itself wasn't painful enough for the ego, changing in the locker room was excruciating. I was one of the first girls my age to need a brassiere, but one of the last to wear one. It was only recently my mother bought a proper-fitting bra for me. This made life in the locker room much less self-conscious, not quite ready to reveal my chest protrusions to the world yet. Between having to wear a bra and finding blood on my underpants every month, I understood early that sometimes life is simply

not fair.

It certainly isn't fair for Sheba, I kept remembering. Thoughts of Linda and her dog bothered me throughout the day. When I finally did get home I hugged Elizabeth and Louise -- even let them lick my face -- and kissed Bingo on his fuzzy head. Bingo squinted and purred as I scratched under his chin. It felt wonderful to pet animals. They enjoyed it so much.

"It sure doesn't take much to make you happy." I said to the cat. He rolled over on the counter in ecstasy as I scratched his back. "Why is it so hard for us people, eh?"

Bingo blinked in blissful ignorance. I chuckled once. "Heh! Don't know, don't care, do you?" If only people could be more like cats and dogs. If that was the case, I thought, I wouldn't feel sick every time I stood close to Jason or embarrassed in gym class. And Linda's dog wouldn't have to die... and my best friend wouldn't be moving away.

I walked down the hall to my room -- my hiding place from the world where pink roses bloomed across the cream walls and stuffed animals waited patiently for my return. Pictures scattered around my room included a guardian angel painting I found at a garage sale with a white plastic frame, a poster of a cute fantasy scene (a little dragon leading a unicorn across a pebbled bridge), and a framed Bible verse (another garage sale find).

Dropping down on my little twin bed, I reached over for my beloved E.T. doll -- the one I took on bike rides around the block. It was fun to pretend I was Eliot, stuffing E.T. in the front basket of my bike and riding him out to the forest beyond the boundaries of Botany Hill Crescent. The mother ship awaited him there to bring him home to be with his extra-terrestrial family light years away.

Although I saw that movie three times on the big screen, I cried every time at the end. Eliot and the alien become best friends, but at the end of the movie E.T. leaves to go home to his home planet.

"True friendships survive long distances," Mummy told me when I discovered Deborah was moving away.

I wonder if that's true for Eliot and E.T., I smirked. Well, thank goodness Deborah and Linda aren't moving light years away.

I was sure Mummy was right that if the friendships were true they would surely survive this test. I'd bet my bike on it, I thought.

Daddy sometimes drove us out to fancy shmancy housing complexes where he'd pretend to be interested and have the real estate agent show us around to different model homes. I remembered one house Daddy fell in love with. It had two staircases branching apart right when you walked in the front door. Laura and I ran upstairs to pick out our rooms. Each room in that house had its own bathroom. I couldn't believe such a thing existed. We only had one at our house. I remember lying on my back in the middle of the bedroom I chose, pretending it was really mine. Lying on the new soft carpet reminded me of when I lay in the snow to make snow angels. Instead of the little window back home, which I had to stand on my toes to look out, there was a large bay window here instead. My room, I imagined... and sighed.

I hoped my friends would like their new places.

True friendships survive long distances.

I hope Mummy's right, I thought. I really hope she's right.