

LUCIA AND THE SHADOW

by

Aya Natalia Karpinska

There was once an ordinary house, set all alone on a square of spiky, parched summer grass at the tail end of Ammonia Avenue. In the house, an ordinary mother and father lived with their daughter Lucia, who was anything but ordinary. For one thing, her left eye was green and her right eye was coppery-brown. She was the only girl in the third grade who didn't like the color pink, and she laughed in her sleep. But most curious and best of all, she had a gray cat, whose name was Sara, and the cat had a great deal to say about the world. Lucia could never make Sara say anything. Sara would choose the right time and place to talk.

Now look in through the living room window, and you'll see Sara the cat stretching and purring on the green-and-purple rug. Lean your mind in closer, and you'll make out a rhythm in the purring, like someone whispering beneath a thick blanket. "When searching for something that is missing, the last thing you should use is your eyes," Sara said.

Lucia looked up from the floor, where she had knelt to peer into the shadowy dark underneath the couch. She had one red shoe on her left foot, and a somewhat dirty green sock on her right. "How am I supposed to find my other shoe if I can't look?" Lucia argued.

Sara settled into a comfortable pose, her soft tail curled around her. "The first thing I do," she purred, "is close my eyes." Lucia dutifully closed her eyes. "Then I say the name of the thing I've lost," Sara said, "and ask it to guide me to its hiding place. Just about everything needs to be alone sometimes, even a red leather shoe."

So Lucia said out loud, "Oh, right shoe, where are you? I can't go outside without you, and I will not will not be shut in all day."

"Now open your eyes," the cat continued, "don't say anything, and just let the shoe be your guide."

At first Lucia made a move towards the couch again, but she drew back. She sat quite still

for a moment, then got up and went down the hallway, one foot clomping loudly on the floor with every other step. “Are you in here?” she whispered at the closet door. No answer. She frowned and turned towards the front door. There! A patch of red was poking out from under the plain white curtains. The shoes were reunited, and Lucia shut the door with a bang as she went outside.

* * *

Later in the afternoon, when the sun was giving everything long, skinny shadows, Sara the cat padded out to the garden where Lucia was playing. Most of the flowers in the garden were small and half-choked by dust, and this year only one lonely tomato decided to grow. The cat rubbed her side against the girl’s leg, tickling her with her whiskers. Lucia laughed and patted Sara’s head.

Just then Lucia’s mother leaned out an upstairs window to call her in for dinner. Cats were not welcome at the table, so Sara gave the girl a nuzzle and stalked off to the woods beyond the lawn. “Where are you going?” Lucia asked her cat, but Sara kept walking. And there was something funny about her walk. Something like...

Lucia heard her mother call out again, firmer this time. So Lucia got to her feet, and trudged back to the house. She looked back at Sara, wishing she, too, could prowl among the trees and crickets. Suddenly Lucia gasped, realizing why the cat looked strange walking towards the woods. The shadows of the trees stretched onto the lawn, but not Sara’s. Sara didn’t cast a shadow.

* * *

Morning came, hot and bright like the day before, just like an endless string of days before that. But as Lucia opened her eyes, there was no gray cat sitting on top of her blanket. “Saaaaaaaara,” she called.

The sound of her voice seemed quiet, pushed back by the bedroom walls. She looked towards her dresser, where Sara would jump up to sleep if a drawer were left open. But all the drawers were neatly shut. “Are you sure you’ve looked everywhere?” came a voice from under the bed.

Lucia flopped her head over the edge of the mattress and peeked down below, but saw nothing.

“Let me come out where you’ll see me better,” said the voice. A soft gray shadow emerged, just the size and shape of a cat.

“You’re—you’re not Sara,” Lucia said.

“Not exactly,” the shadow replied, “but I am her voice. Sara can’t talk without me. People talk, and their shadows don’t. With us cats, it’s the other way around.”

“How did you get separated?” Lucia asked.

The shadow sighed, which looked more like a shudder. “It’s embarrassing,” the shadow answered. “Yesterday, Sara wanted to go outside to the garden, where you were playing. She sat on the kitchen doormat and stared at the door, hoping your mother would get the hint and open it for her. She sat and sat and stared and stared for so long that I fell asleep. Sara must have slipped out soon after, and I kept on sleeping. I guess your mother didn’t notice that I was left behind because the doormat is dark gray, like me.”

“You seem like Sara ‘cause you talk like Sara, but I can’t really pet a shadow,” Lucia said.

“Not much fun for me, either,” said the shadow, “I get cold without fur.”

“We have to get you two back together,” Lucia decided.

As soon as she finished her breakfast, Lucia called to the shadow and set off, out the back door and across the yard. Not wishing to be noticed walking alone in broad daylight, detached from Sara, the shadow kept close to the girl. Their two shadows blended into one as they headed for the woods.

* * *

Sara was silently winding her way through the trees, alone and shadowless. Though the forest was neither thick nor deep, Sara couldn't tell where she was, or how far she had wandered from the plain little house.

When she came across a patch of sunlight she stopped and looked down at her feet, hoping her shadow might suddenly appear. Sara was used to having her shadow firmly attached: sometimes to her right, sometimes to her left, sometimes in front of her, and sometimes behind. With no gray shape beside her Sara was all out of balance. As she picked her way through the forest, Sara felt as if she were walking in circles. Without her shadow, she could hardly stand up straight, much less walk straight. But Sara didn't let herself get gloomy, because she could feel in her heart that if she missed her shadow, the shadow must miss her too. Sara wouldn't be alone forever.

* * *

Lucia and the shadow walked slowly on a narrow path leading through the woods. "What if you got lost instead of Sara," Lucia wondered out loud. "We'd never find you! Finding a gray cat in the forest is hard enough, but a cat's shadow?! The ground is covered with leaf-shadows! Maybe we'd have to wait for winter."

"And I'd be so cold without Sara's fur," the shadow agreed.

They continued walking and calling Sara's name for what seemed like ages, until Lucia stopped to lean against a tree. She let out a long sigh. Seeing her frown, the shadow spoke

up: “Do you remember yesterday, when you found your shoe? Why don’t we try that. Let’s just close our eyes and call her name, together, one more time.”

So they both shut their eyes tight (though you couldn’t really tell that the shadow did). Lucia and the shadow called out: “Saaaaaaaaaara! Wheeeeeeeeeere aaaare yooooooooou?!” and the sound echoed through the trees, through the shadows of the leaves, through overgrown trails and quiet clearings, until it reached Sara’s ears. Sara rushed toward the sound as fast as she could. She stumbled and rustled last winter’s leaves, which had dried to a crisp in the summer heat. And this was a very good thing, because cats normally walk as quiet as a passing cloud.

Lucia turned towards the rustling sound, let out a yell, and almost flew over to her dear gray cat. She scooped up Sara and hugged her close, scratching under her chin and behind her ears. “Ahem... excuse me,” the shadow said, “but could you put her down for a moment? I need to get re-attached.”

Lucia set Sara on the ground and watched as the shadow lined up its paws with the cat’s, one by one, with great care. Sara stood very still as the shadow moved on to adjust its tail and each little whisker. Finally, Sara took a few steps, making sure her shadow followed along. She swished her tail back and forth, and so did the shadow. Sara purred, testing out her voice. Perfect. Lucia turned her steps homeward, with Sara walking gracefully at her side.

THE END