

COVID Cat

I remember the last up-to-then normal day we had. Friday, March 13th, 2020. Typically, my son Greyson attended school and I attended work. Now, as an island of two, we attend to both those things mostly from the confines of home.

I had an awareness of COVID-19 and probably even more planning insight than most average citizens due to my work role, but nothing prepared my son or I for the life changing nature of what was beginning. Now, nine months in and the year 2020 drawing to a close, we still live in this never-normal hyper vigilant altered state, still stressed and uncertain in daily life.

I recall early in the pandemic my son's fifth grade teacher asked he write a letter to a student in the future about current events. After fighting with the new Chromebook I thankfully had the foresight to purchase (I WISH I had thought about toilet paper too), he had a letter to turn in through Microsoft Teams - if we could navigate correctly and convince our intermittent hot spot to comply. A letter conveying his greatest fear – that his mother or his grandparents he loved could die from COVID. A letter that also contained a small hope he clung to – hinging on a study he read about that people with type O-negative blood, which we both have, were less likely to contract COVID-19. I have no idea if the study was ever proven or disproven. I would never have told him things like that were changing at such a rapid rate it was not a guarantee. He saw that as protection, for he and I, and I wanted that feeling of protection for him. I remember crying alone in the bathroom with the shower running later that night. I was overwhelmed by all the factors in play and that my son had just grown in knowledge in a way I did not want for him at his age.

Our world shrunk. My previously minimal single parent support system vanished by necessity. Days upon days, monotonous in routine and infuriating in the attempt to facilitate elementary school while simultaneously managing the chaos of directing essential service staff and safeguarding employee health. The expectation of normalcy for work and school was crushing and all consuming. Juggling all that continues still. There is no good answer, no easy path through. There is also no other choice to make but to toil forward on all fronts in tandem.

Also, interwoven into our desolation is gratitude. I am thankful for a role allowing me to function and keep employment and income while caring for and educating my child. As his sole caretaker, I was not forced to choose an impossible priority and I am grateful for that. I am appreciative to be in a position to minimize COVID exposure, maximize stability for both of us and feel a modicum of control in an uncontrollable world. I am also conscious of the privilege of property. We are lucky (aside from internet connectivity challenges) to live remotely with acreage and space. I've thought of that blessing so many times as I see people in cities trapped indoors in small spaces throughout the pandemic. Nature is our daily respite and provider of a bit of sanity. We row our pond, walk our woods and watch and appreciate our animal neighbors constantly. It is into this backdrop the most unexpected bringer of hope and purpose wandered.

Living off the road and nestled among fields as we do, simply looking out the window provides live entertainment. We witness feeding flocks of turkey parading through the landscape, preening cardinals, wandering skunks and opossum, and deer in the front yard wondering at our audacity to dare open the

door and sit on the porch. We also get our fair share of vagabond cats hunting through the fields. Our two indoor cats live vicarious wild adventures through them, while I appreciate the absence of burdocks and ticks their indoor existence provides.

One afternoon at the end of March Greyson came in from outside and noted a very light-colored orange blush cat we had never seen before was out and about. I was outwardly delighted but internally groaned as I have a soft spot for those “blush boys” since sharing a yard with one in apartment life after college. Having accumulated our current two indoor cats from the neighborhood previously, and not looking to add to the masses, I knew the need for caution. I peeked outside and indeed saw a blush boy running through, happy to note he seemed entirely uninterested in human interaction. Phew, a narrow miss for me! We went on with our daily duties.

The cat's second appearance in as many days was not so uneventful. Greyson came in and grabbing the binoculars told me he thought the cat was hurt. I joined him and saw something I had never seen prior. The cat's tail had been completely skinned away leaving clearly visible the full-length bone. His back end looked like a Halloween skeleton cat and I was horrified to think how much pain the animal must be in with that exposure. I had never seen such a severe animal injury before and hope not to again. I couldn't believe he was managing to survive. He was scrawny and unkempt with wild, unpredictable eyes and as I approached in a slow, calm manner he bolted in terror into the berm by our distant pond. My son and I looked at each other and knew we would have to try to help. We began putting hard food in a dish outside the berm and thus began an eight-month rescue effort.

I steeled myself and prepared my son for the possibility that any given day the cat might not show, that he might die from his injury and we would not know what became of him. The depth of his feral nature became apparent in the coming weeks, that turned to months, as we walked at least twice a day to the feeding station we established for his use. We watched him, spoke and cooed to him and attempted approach to no avail. Periodically the poor animal would gnaw away a portion of the tail and managed to keep it from infection. His tail continued to get shorter, but of course never healed. I cannot imagine the instinct and determination it took to do what he did to survive - and from that his name was born. We called him Mr. BAB – short for Bad Ass Blush. The name suited him.

Early in our endeavor I set a trail cam to catch a good glimpse of BAB and contacted animal control. Their vets reviewed photos and declared the cat was doing as well as he could given the situation. I received advice on live trapping in hopes to get him to their feral program which could perform the needed amputation surgery. They informed me surgery days were Wednesday's and they would keep an open spot for me when I could get him to them. A helpful neighbor loaned a live trap and we managed to confine several agitated strays and neighboring cats, but not Mr. BAB. That guy was too savvy. The sheer number of configurations and locations attempted escapes me now. I do know we had names for all the wanderers coming through and our binoculars got the workout of their life in those months hoping to see the trap sprung.

We, at times, or I solo, looked to those daily walks as a needed distraction. A moment of solitude, feeling useful and hopeful amongst the constant clutter in life and my brain. It was simple and at the same time a bright spot in each day. Because each day that cat showed up. Each day my son, and occasionally the two other children in our pod, would hunt through the berm, where we now knew BAB to be living, confirming sign of life. He became a neighborhood effort. Sightings were reported. Social

media bore witness. People inquired as to his well-being. We collectively were pulling for this beast – something we could try to achieve in COVID world madness.

We eventually retired the live trap as it was apparent, we were not going to succeed in that manner with this shrewd cat. I slowly moved the feeding station closer to our yard, then into our yard, next to near the rabbit hutches, eventually by the house. It took months. But in those months Mr. BAB became my cat. I became his person. He would come when I called him for meals, play with the ball or stick I rolled in his direction (he loves to play), wait on his moss-covered rock in the rose bush for me to come outside so he could give me a very quiet “mew”. He became integrated into life. We moved at a snail pace, but we moved. He began accepting soft food and treats, eaten only while he could keep me in line of sight. He started occupying shared space in the yard, watching my father and I build hutch after bunny hutch for six weeks straight in our spare time. Still, he was ever watchful no one strayed too near.

As summer faded to fall it was difficult to see him make do in the chill or rain and know he was still too stubborn and afraid to accept assistance. I knew the weather was accelerating our necessary timeline to get the surgery he needed. Frostbite would do him in with an open wound. I borrowed the live trap once again with no better luck. I moved to leaving a carrier in the yard, trying to lure him in with food or treats. Several times he got close to entirely entering but then spooked. It was like I could see on his face the internal war he was fighting with himself – fear vs. need, we can all identify. He showed his appreciation to me in small ways. His quiet greetings, following me at a distance while I moved around the yard and flopping on the ground to do rolls of happiness – but I better not move toward him or he was gone. And then one chilly day in November he was dancing around me and accidentally allowed my fingers to just barely touch his back. He winced, but from that day on he moved to eventually allow me to pet him.

That next week was even colder and I knew I had to capture the elusive Mr. BAB – it just had to happen. He still had only allowed me to touch him a few times but on a Tuesday morning I got a really large carrier and put his morning food portion in it with a trail of treats. He was suspicious but he went in just far enough and I managed to move just fast enough that I corralled him. Finally.

The SPCA Feral program staff were wonderful. I had kept in touch with them periodically throughout the eight months and when I called to say I finally had custody of the cat they had me bring him right in for surgery the following morning. Despite COVID considerations and distancing procedures they were still serving the community need. As Greyson and I drove to the shelter I could tell Mr. BAB was no longer speaking to me and the look of betrayal was harsh, but it did not matter because we had succeeded in making a difference for him. We had saved this cat and it felt important and well worth the effort.

The staff did an assessment and declared he was indeed feral. I had been concerned about how they would be able to help him but had focused on my part – getting him to them. The rest was up to them. I felt a sense of relief that he would finally not live his life around simply surviving. The Feral Program used items I did not even know existed (like imitation arms and a feral box) to complete the necessary surgery despite his noncompliance. They amputated his tail properly, neutered him, treated him for worms and mites, applied flea and tick repellent and even microchipped him. They clipped his ear to identify him as a feral already neutered, and then they sent him packing back to me two days later to be released back to his territory after as many days recovering in my shed as he would tolerate. He still was not speaking to me and continued his silent treatment the entire seven days of shed captivity. I warned Greyson he may bolt as soon as I opened the door to let him out, that even if he did and we never saw

him again we had still done the right thing. I opened the door and sat twenty feet away to watch. BAB had become king of the lawnmower seat during his stay and after a moment he stretched, crawled down, and came out into the sunshine. He didn't run. He got reacquainted with the yard and then perched on his mossy rock where he let me pet him while he purred like a madman. It was also the day he let Greyson touch him for the first time. Now Greyson has moved from observer and reporter of BAB movement to an active, if somewhat tentative, friend.

Fabulous BABulous, one of the many nicknames we now use, has healed well. He has also blossomed as his injury has faded. I would say he has firmly moved into an area under our raised porch, we have outfitted for his needs. His life is still very much on his terms. He refuses the specifically constructed insulated box I carefully made, instead choosing two cardboard boxes I jammed together early on to sleep in. So, I have creatively insulated those on the exterior instead. Although he maintains his lone wolf status, he is my constant companion when I am outdoors, and waits every morning for his pet and purr sessions. He now walks daily on our walks with us as a companion, instead of a destination. He is an amusing gentleman and a welcome addition to our solitary existence.

For Greyson and I, our shared rescue effort through this completely unimaginable time in history has been the most rewarding experience we have had during a very long year. It kept a focus on something tangible, something we could understand in confusing times. BAB was a daily reminder to be present in our actual physical surroundings and find humor and joy in simple things. The experience taught my son, and reminded me, to be selfless and patient. To give freely of yourself with no expectation of outcome. To adapt and allow room for others perspective, even if feline. To work through things we could not control and work within the pieces we could. Ultimately, regardless of two feet or four, we each grew in experience and share a bond. These fundamental threads of connection are the foundation of life and weaving them during our most isolated time has kept us grounded when everything else has felt insane and other worldly. Many people have intentionally added pets to their lives during the COVID pandemic. I suppose we have acquired something similar and are all better for it.