The Way of a Cat

By Mirabel

Up till that June, my summers had always lacked the warmth that others claimed to experience with the change of seasons. As an international student with parents hundreds of miles away, I spent most of my days working on a research project and staring at my ceiling, coaxing it into a conversation. Living with a roommate had seemed like a tempting idea. However, it became quickly obvious that people didn't want to spend time with me, even when it was legally binding for them to do so. My relationship with my most recent roommate had been terse, and I never understood quite what we fought about, but I know that we did often. She broke her lease and moved out, leaving me with a two-bedroom apartment to reckon with. I browsed pages on Reddit, reading the pleas of those like me. People who were desperately lonely, but *knew* in their bones that they were a delight to have. I was definitely being tested by some higher power to see how much of myself I could tolerate. Back then, that felt easier to believe than admitting that I had the appeal of shattered glass. Not only did I start missing my former roommate, I began to miss her cat. This took me by surprise. Her orange tabby was a door-climbing, vase-knocking, couch-scratching fur ball. His only job around the house was to pick up dust, but I don't know if that had been worth the aftermath of his escapades. A Swiffer worked better. At least it didn't yowl in the cleaning closet at 2 A.M. to pull my insomnia out of remission.

It is surprising how you can miss the physical presence of someone who never knew you. Walking down the hallway of my apartment, I missed the tail of my roommate's cat, and how it would brush against my ankles and threaten to make me trip. The spare room was unoccupied till I could force someone else to spend months with me, which was starting to feel like a hopeless cause. Its door was wide open, a taunting reminder of the emptiness I seem to bring anywhere I go.

This is the part of the story where I say: And then I met her. In the picture I saw of her online, she wore a pink necklace, and balanced herself on the edge of her seat. Her deep green eyes flanked by white eyeliner. She wore her beauty so well I knew that it was all she had ever known.

She was available to visit in the Plateau. Sometime during my stay in Montreal, I'd decided to hold a strong but unjustifiable grudge against the orange line of the metro. Still, I switched trains at Berri-UQAM and found myself walking more east than I had in my undergraduate life. I was overheating as I came into the building, worried about what she might think of me. Would she think I dressed appropriately for the occasion? I'd tried to be presentable, but sweat was pooling under my eyes and my hair had grown unruly, revolting against the humidity with frizz.

I saw her sitting by the window. She looked outside with moderate interest, like she'd seen more interesting views but didn't take any for granted. She watched me enter and her eyes followed me. The eyeliner had not been a trick of the camera.

One thing led to another, and she ended up on my lap. It was only our first time, and our relationship had already escalated more than I'd expected. I braced for her to flinch (as people often did when they had to be intimate with me) but she simply adjusted herself to a more comfortable position. I knew her instincts would be the opposite of mine. If I called her mine.

I signed the adoption papers the next day. Got a litter box and a bed shaped like a strawberry for her.

I named her Murphy. Or rather, I called her that and she was kind enough to respond to it. She was a grey tabby. Growing up in India, I'd never seen a cat of that colour. Frankly, I was still getting used to seeing green eyes and blond hair outside of TV shows. Her skin flapped around her body, and her lower belly jiggled like the bell on her new collar as she ran to her food. The markings on her face were prominent white, with streaks lining her eyes. She was so pretty that she'd be the "it girl" who was a girl's girl. The popular girl at school, the one who was pretty enough she could get away with bullying you, but kind enough to choose not to.

She did get herself into the cleaning closet the first time I brought her home. That said, with some treats, she settled onto my bed an hour later. Using my arm as a headrest, she curled into snoring sleep. I watched her tiny chest fall and rise, and felt guilt swell up in me. I had effectively kidnapped her from where she'd been the last few weeks, but she'd been abandoned there by the person who had raised her since she was a kitten. All because she wasn't able to get along with his girlfriend's dog. I knew I had the stubbornness to care for her no matter what happened in my own life, but I wasn't sure if she wanted me. Would she be with me while wishing it had been him? Did she know she wasn't at fault for being left at the shelter? I wish she could tell me, but all she did was purr and grumble.

I was the first in my family to have a cat, and it showed in how insecure I was. With no memories of having something furry to cuddle with at my family home, I could only approach adopting a pet with an analytical perspective. She would give me company, and I would give her food. Transactional. Controllable. Safe.

The last thing I expected to feel when I got a cat was jealousy. With no lectures and tutorials to distract me, I had nothing more amusing to do than to spend my days watching her move through the house. She was so effortlessly communicative. She pawed at my leg when she wanted to climb onto the table. She pawed at my hand when she wanted cheese off my plate. She walked me to the water bowl when it needed to be filled. She brushed her body

against my calf in gratitude.

It was so easy to understand what she wanted, and that was not my experience with humans. Communication to me was theatre in a foreign language. Humans had a particular knack for not understanding what I meant, and vice versa. Despite studying the issue intensely, I couldn't always pin down why humans and I didn't get along. Sometimes it was the tone of my voice, or the unintentional flick of my eyes. I'd answer their questions truthfully and they'd laugh – I laughed along to cover up my lack of intention and my lack of understanding of what was so funny. At home, I'd sit by the mirror and act out conversations with others. Friends, potential lovers. Classmates on the first day of the semester. I'd look at myself and assess the frequency of my blinks, the angle of my head. Was I nodding enough? Did I join the conversation at the right time, or was my entrance abrupt? I drafted answers to questions I might be asked, and then pored over my words, and my performance of them. Was I being curt or long-winded? Should I have raised my eyebrows higher there? Why did my left eyesquint more than my right, and what message did it send to my listener?

And she didn't have to think about these things. Murphy got what she wanted. She let herself be known in a room without falling into the deep pit of self-consciousness that I couldn't seem to crawl out of. While I looked into the mirror like enough cognitive focus could change my fate, Murphy plopped herself on the best patch of sunlight on the floor. By the hour, she would get up, yawn, stretch, and follow the brightness as it moved across the floorby a few inches.

She was so easy to love that it scared me. She became friends with my friends, despite not knowing how to speak. She trusted others – and others did not hurt her. She showed her stomach to others while lying down, and when they touched her belly, she did not flinch and run. Like I do.

Murphy was the smallest peaceful living thing I'd ever seen. One August evening, I lay on the floor with her when I was tired of being a human. She blinked her eyes, slow and sweet, and stretched out a paw as an invitation to floor time. I was in awe of the sense of safety she brought to every room, while being as benign as a lamp. Somehow, she made me feel welcome in my own house. I had the habit of keeping curtains closed, like I was trying to spite the evening sky. Once I started pulling them back for her, I realized how good it felt to be an animal, bathing in light.

Before Murphy, I held grudges so tightly I could take them to my grave. Having been hurt by others in the past, I'd developed a zero-tolerance policy for bullshit. "If you can't handle me at my worst, you don't deserve me at my best" or however the quote people on the internet attribute to Marilyn Monroe goes. I believed mercy was a welcome mat for mistreatment. I did not want to welcome bullshit into my life and expected only to bring perfection to the lives of others.

Except I wasn't perfect. When school started up again in the fall, I would occasionally forget to refill Murphy's water bowl. Or once, when it was late in the evening and I was glued to my phone, I tripped over Murphy's little body, and stepped on her tail.

Everyone has a fear about themselves that they are certain is true. For me, it's: if you know me well enough, you will realize that I am not worth knowing. I might lure you with well-practiced syllables or gestures of practiced interest. I might sufficiently seem like I understand your sarcasm. Maybe my flat-toned truths will pass as British humour. I might be odd enough for you to decide to take interest in me, like a contemporary art piece you want to know if you could make just as easily at home. You probably can. But despite my best efforts, I can be art only from a distance. Otherwise, the illusion breaks, and you know just the kind of person I am. A bitter, hurtful person that forgets to fill the bowl for her cat and who steps on the tails of innocent animals.

While I used clenching my jaw as a coping mechanism, Murphy held no grudges. I would fill her bowl while apologizing profusely, and she would lap up the water just the same. I would rub her tail like I could heal it, and she would still follow me around the house. Her forgiveness of my transgressions disarmed my self-flagellation.

Since I told myself that all I knew was to hate or to be hated, I decided to take advice from my new, totally chill as fuck, roommate. What are my lessons from observing her?

Murphy believes that intimacy should be abundant, and she pushes the boundaries of how close two living beings can be. After a few months of her being home, she'd moved from napping on my arm to sleeping on my head. At night, when my belly could no longer be her resting place (my muscles were stiff), she found a way to get back onto me. On my ribs she placed her tiny paws. Pushing with the weight of planet Earth, she climbed to my side, curling up on the side of my hip.

Murphy is a loyal queen. She chaperones me to the bathroom, and supervises my night time routine from the edge of the bathtub. If she decides to be an extra supportive partner, she might try climbing into my lap while I pee. She knows the concept of personal space, and believes she must single-handedly dismantle it. And doors? Murphy protests at the sight of every closed door, and will scar the bottom with her paws until I give into her demands. Closed doors are indicators of a xenophobic society, and they must go, at any cost.

I did not expect to learn so much about how to be a good human from, you know, my cat. When I want to hide under my bed or hiss at a friend, I think, "What would Murphy do?" The realistic answer is: probably go back to sleep, because she knows that her energy is worth more than the antics of the outside world. When vulnerability makes me want to throw up, I think of how Murphy purrs so deeply you can hear it from the other room. How she gets so comfortable on my chest that her whiskers brush against my cheeks and her pink nose becomes moist in contentment, needing the occasional wipe from my sleeves. I know how to scratch the spot behind her right ear till she shakes her head so hard it surprises her. She knows how to change me into something better.