

Hating on January

The first full moon of this winter is in tonight's sky. Its look is of thin, hazy burnt orange during the change of late afternoon to dark. In mid-January, there is no gentle melding this time of a cold, clear day. The sole takeaway from a midwinter full moon is the sense of lonely cold, bitterly unwelcome cold, subfreezing air cold, without respite until spring. That's my takeaway.

Our cat, a family member of 19 years, is no longer with us. A nice way of saying that on his last day of breath, he'll be euthanized. His hind flanks have given out from arthritis. His mind has dramatically fallen off. He no longer is able to get himself around the house or out the cat door. Other than his breathing, which has become shallow to what we knew, his body and his wherewithal has left him. We carry him to the food dish, to the litter box, to his blanky, his kitty sleep pad on our bed, even to the pantry where he will stand, staring, into the pantry because that is where his specialized cat food for elderly, fading cats lives.

Today, the sun shone for much of the mid-morning and all of the afternoon. Fallen snow that arrived before the weekend, staying into the new week, remains. Despite the snow and ice hazard posed to him, he forced himself outside into the sun. The sun's rays looked warm, but there is no warmth. Such is a sun-filled January day. Over almost two decades, during any given time of the day, we have found him outside, enjoying the sun's warmth on his fur, the light and the heat warming his bones, ligaments, and his soul. Today being cold January sun, he was in as fast as he wanted out.

He no longer seeks our laps, warm as they feel to him. His brittle bones cannot handle his shifting in the attempt for the perfect position. Instead, he walks – gingerly – over us to his sleep pad. And he sleeps. But wherever he sleeps, he only settles in after great pains are incurred to nestle into warmth, despite his failing hips, his weak bones, and his pain-filled brain. He no longer comes upstairs to my home office to jump onto my chair to fall asleep behind me. He now stops at the bottom step of the stairs, wailing for me to visit him, to offer my lap, the lap upon which he will no longer sit.

For 66 years, January has been the celebration of my birthday month. Going forward, January will be recognized as the month in which he left us, or more aptly, when we

acknowledged his time to die had come. Cats don't die in peace, we are told. We wish we knew the truth. What I do know is the enduring vision of the day he was almost 200 yards away after coming out of the woods, spotting me standing on the hill atop which our house was built. He ran in full force and speed from the woods, across the street, across the field, across the first green of the golf course alongside our hill, up the hill, pausing only when he reached me. Nudging my ankle bone, he strode away, full of his own confidence, an afternoon slumber next on his agenda.

The summers here are both hot and humid without respite. But in the early pre-dawn before the sun is fully awake, there are a few precious moments of pleasurable warmth on the skin. He and I would gradually fall into the same routine every summer with me bringing a hot coffee cup to sit on the teak bench in the shade and him venturing out and about in the backyard before he, too, would settle onto the bench with a leap, catnapping while I cellphone scrolled, all the while watching the sun rise into the day. As he aged, he would leap onto the bench and into my lap. Aging further, he would settle in at my feet. Then, he didn't.

When there was landscaping to be done outside, he would join us, but not too close. He would check out the flowers, the grass, the trees, the shade under the trees, the little flying things occupying his vision, all the while watching both of us. When we relocated out and about the various sections of our property, he would saunter over, as nonchalant as he could be. But when we cleaned up, put the tools away, and reentered the house, he would excitedly follow, bounding through the grass with the energy of a young kitty, similar to a lion walking through the African plain. Then, he didn't.

He wasn't a fan of January or any of the other cold months, for that matter. He didn't mind being out in the subfreezing temperatures or the snow flurries. The cold, biting winds didn't bother him. We did. We wouldn't let him out in winter conditions very often. We don't have fur, so we weren't impressed that he did have fur and could be outside in those conditions. Afterall, there were rabbit warrens to examine and field mice to follow. What he hated was not having the freedom to choose for himself. Denied his opportunity to roam over his domain, his anger and frustration came out. He'd cry. He'd wail. He'd jump onto my desk top, produce his sharp nails, clawing in the air at me. Then, he didn't want to go outside.

We installed cat doors to the outside from the garage and from the back porch. When he was lazy but wanting to go out, he'd sit on his haunches, meowing for one of us to open the door. Patience not being a virtue within him, without a response from us to his plaintive meows, he'd huff his way into the world. We learned to close down those kitty doors at dark after the one night that he awakened us because he wanted to come back into the house at o'dark thirty. I never did find out where he would go at night or what was so important that he had to venture outside. Then, he ignored the doors.

He slept when he wanted, day or night. He wasn't nocturnal as much as he was constantly sleeping, napping, snoozing. He was either on the cat prowl outside or he was sleeping. At night, he was content to check out every corner of the house, looking on each side of every door in the house, every room, every closet, behind each piece of furniture, in every open box. Only following all that checking would he pick a place, a spot, a blanket, a cushioned chair, a portion of a rug, freshly-laundered clothing, to plop himself for a siesta. Taking our lead, when bedtime arrived and we were safely tucked in, he would appear, leaping over the footboard and onto the bed in an amazingly graceful movement. He would sniff us, choose his everchanging spot on the bed, curling up into a long slumber in the night. Then, we had to lift him onto the bed.

He took care of her when she was not feeling well. When she was covered up in a blanket and sitting on either the couch or a chair, he would carefully, gingerly, with great stealth, manage to find his way beside her, sniffing her illness before lying down next to her, but never on her. When she was bedridden, he would leap like a big cat onto the bed, deftly moving next to her without disturbing her sickness-induced slumber, sniffing her illness before selecting the part of her he would touch in curling up next to her. Me? He ignored me. I didn't need medicinal kitty warmth, apparently. Then, he was the one needing care.

He played hockey in the house. Late at night. In the early morning. Throughout the day. Godiva chocolate wrappers were combined, one over another, in making the pucks with which he played. We would listen to his slapping a puck towards a wall just before he would slam sideways into the wall. He was left pawed. He would repeat this over and over again before he magically appeared in our bedroom, leaping with great joy onto the middle of the bed from some 10 feet away. We'd give him

attaboys just before he settled himself down for the remainder of the evening into morning. Then, he stopped.

He searched for ghosts, real and imagined. He battled foes, furred or otherwise. He lost a few and won most. His territory extended well beyond our collective vision. I've seen him scale a 100-foot tree to the top, run through 50 feet of pipe, planting his flag wherever he thought best. Though he was pure white with a splotch of what looked like black paint on both the top of his head and the middle of his tail, he could not be seen in the dark. I've watched other animals walk past him at night, ignoring his presence. He was safest under our evergreens lining the back of our lot, soaking in the heat of summer, the cool of fall, the stillness of winter, and the warmth of spring. No longer.

I cry the tears of a child, long, hard, continuous. I see him throughout our home, wherever I walk. Despite him no longer here, I see him on one of the couches, in one of the chairs, on one of the throw rugs, on one of the beds, in front of the fridge, in any of the window sills. A day doesn't pass that I am not reaching behind me to pet him while he shares me chair. I miss him leaping with the greatest of ease into my chair, onto the kitchen table, our bed, the bathroom counters. I am so conditioned to seeing him sitting with all paws tucked in next to our shower, waiting for me to finish, him knowing that as soon as I opened the shower door to grab my towel, I was fair game for me to pet him. My showers are now accomplished without his presence.

That boy could run. I see him running across the empty lots from my office above our garage. At least I see him through my mind's eye. Finished with his search for rabbits and mice, he looks back towards our house. His return starts slowly, a seemingly absentminded saunter through the grass. That stroll evolves into a trot leading to a full out sprint, his ears pinned back, his gait becoming that of a thoroughbred horse and a cheetah melded into one. He's a white blur running over the wild grass. Just as quickly as his run leads him to our driveway, he stops. I see him looking about him and up to my office windows. Next movement I see is him bounding up the stairs to me and my chair. An abridged jump places him behind me on my chair. He will now sleep undisturbed for the next few hours, enjoying the warmth of my body warming his.

The ache inside me will pass . . . or not.