

### No, I'm her human

For as long as I care to remember, I've always been a dog guy. Big, small, fast, slow, black, white, brown, red; all my life I've had a dog. When my folks divorced and my dad moved out to the lake, he bought an Irish Setter so I would have someone to go on adventures with every other weekend. My Gramma like red wine so I named her Brandy, because no one names their dog Chianti. We were thick as thieves. I was today's Tom Sawyer and she was my Huck Finn.

Many years later, when I was a father, I took my wife and four year old son to the pound to pick out our dog. We strolled the aisles passing cages filled with two, and some with three, dogs until I stopped in front of one with a Great Dane the size of a pony - and something black cowering in the back corner. I dropped to one knee to get a better look as the pound worker opened the cage door. In a flash, a gorgeous velvet black Springer Spaniel with white socks on her paws, freckles on her nose, and one white tipped ear was in my lap. She looked up at me with the saddest black eyes I had ever seen, as if to say, "Please take me home before that Monster EATS ME!" I looked up at my wife and son. They were already nodding before I could even ask. We had found our dog.

On the way home we batted around names like Beauty, Patches, and Bella for our newest family member. The day, which started out overcast, had turned to rain. I offered up Stormy, and the name stuck. I never did put much thought into naming my animal friends. The irony of that choice became profusely clear when we discovered she was terrified of loud noises, particularly thunder and fireworks. She ate through 2 doors, a wooden fence, snapped a chain, and pulled up 2 anchored steel cables in the course of her 15 year life. All while trying to get to us, the first couple of 4th of Julys we left her alone, or whenever we got caught in a surprise thunder storm and couldn't race home fast enough to stop the Door Killer from striking again. She was the best dog I ever owned. And when she died, I felt pain I had never experienced before.

Then I came to prison, much later in life than most because, you know, it was on my Bucket List - right under scuba, cliff, and sky diving. And for the first time in my life, I don't have a dog. There are dogs here. A pair of Labradors, one jet black and the other a beautiful chocolate. The drug dogs. You DO NOT want to capture the attention of these dogs or you will be escorted to High Security and never heard from again. What we do have is cats.



Cats make my eyes itch and water, my nose sneeze and run like a faucet, and my skin to weal when scratched. I am HIGHLY ALLERGIC to cats! I can tell you within 30 seconds upon entering a home, whether or not they own a cat, because my nose will start sounding the alarm. I dated a girl in college who owned two cats. We never went to her place, and I insisted that every time she came to mine, she had to strip out of her clothes and take a shower, before anything else took place. After about three weeks of this ritual she said, "You just want to get me naked so we can have sex." She was right of course. But I couldn't have her thinking that, so I took a big whiff of her blouse and started sneezing, almost as if on cue. In the end, the cats won, and we stopped seeing one another. So as you can imagine, there is no love lost between cats and me.

The loneliness and isolation of prison causes people to do strange things. The lack of intimacy and physical contact, often causes inmates to fill that void with other things like drugs, booze, obsessions with sports and gambling, gangs, porn, and any of a number of substitutes. For me, it was those damn cats. We have a handful of feral cats that, for all practical purposes, are tame. They own the Rec yard between our dorms. Us humans are just passing through on our way to chow and back three times a day. And if we don't bring them back something to eat - there will be Hell to pay.

One day I was smuggling some tuna in an empty soup bag, back to my dorm to make a spread with my neighbor. When I got back to the Rec yard, I took a seat at one of the picnic tables to wait for him. That's when it happened. This cat hopped up on the table and plopped down right in front of me. She looked up at me with hazel eyes as if to say, "Hey, you gonna eat that tuna ya got stashed in your sock?" "Go away," I said "before I sneeze on you." The little extortionist just cocked her head and smirked, "Come on man, come off that tuna already."

I took a closer look at her and, as cats go, she was stunning. I found out later she was an Egyptian short-hair, with silver-gray hair smooth as silk, and one white paw - her front right. I looked at her and said, "What's a gorgeous girl like you doin' in a place like this?" She licked her lips as if to say, "Still waitin' on that tuna, duh." "Alright already, but just a



little." I ended up giving her the whole damn bag. She purrs really loud when she eats, but even more when it's tuna. When she was done, she winked, "Thanks. Good boy. See ya 'round."

My neighbor finally arrived, so I regaled him the scene that had just gone down. He just laughed and said, "She got herself another one." "What? Oh, no. She's not my cat. I don't even like cats. They make me sneeze," I protested. "Naw man, you don't get it. You don't pick the cat, the cat picks you. She's not your cat, you're her human. The last one caught chain last week. Looks like you're the winner, congratulations." "Hold up neighbor, I don't know nothin' about cats." "You don't need to, she'll teach ya all you need to know. She's a good teacher."

Son-of-a-cat if he wasn't right. I made a house out of cardboard for her and started sneaking back food at least once a day. When she used the house as a scratching post and it collapsed after a heavy rain, I made a stronger one and wrapped it in clear trash bags to survive the weather. When her sister looked up at me one day like, "Hey, where's mine?" I built her one too, and doubled my pilfering efforts to accomodate both of them. I named my silver girl Shadow and her sister, who was gray as well with darker gray stripes like a tiger, well...Tiger. Some things never change.

I didn't like cats in the world, and yet I come here, and I fall in love with the little bastards. I'm not the only one either. These fur balls get plenty of love and food from just about everyone. I returned from lunch one day to find several empty commissary pouches of tuna, mackerel, sardines, and salmon piled up next to the trashcan. The contents of them were spread out on the sidewalk like a seafood buffet at the 4 Seasons. A new guy walked up and said, "Damn, these cats eat better than we do!" "Yep," I said "and if you wanna keep your eyes from being scratched out, I suggest you don't try to cop a bite. These kitties don't play."

I woke up one morning to find a Lay-in for the mailroom - a printed computer pass informing me I had some Legal Mail I had to go to the mailroom to sign for. The time it was scheduled for was the dead time of the morning between breakfast and lunch, when there is very little traffic on the walkway. I trekked the  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile down the razorwire topped, fence lined walkway from our Rec yard



to the mailroom. There was no one in line, so I was able to sign for my letter and immediately head back to my dorm. About halfway I got curious as to who sent me legal mail. I wasn't expecting any. So I opened the letter and read the first line:

From the estate of [REDACTED], deceased.  
It was my father's will. My dad was dead.

All the air in my lungs escaped as if it had been imprisoned. And no matter how hard I tried to replace it, I failed. The first leg to falter was my right, buckling at the knee. The left quickly followed. I caught myself on the fence, but not before scraping my right knee on it and then the concrete below - causing a large tear in my pajama-like pants, and my kneecap. I felt like someone had sucker punched me in the gut. I threw up. Then the waterworks started. I would have preferred a punch, prison has taught me how to handle those. I didn't know what to do with this. But I did know if I didn't get moving pretty quick, the guard in the tower would call it in.

I dragged myself up using every bit of strength I could summon. I tried to cover the gash in my knee, but it was no use. The blood was flowing down my skin in two trails, staining my whites. I held the letter in my left hand and used the fence as a crutch with the right to hobble back. I passed two inmates, separately, on the way. I pulled the hood attached to my prison issue wind breaker, they call a coat, over my head and lowered it to hide the tears and snot running down my face. I must have looked like I was coming from a fight or something because each of them in turn passed by without breaking stride.

I managed to make it to the abandoned Rec yard, and sat down at one of the tables mostly out of view of the towers. I knew I was in no condition to go back to my bunk. There would be too many questions, too many looks, and if someone said the wrong thing - a lot more blood. I was in no mood to be fucked with.

I just sat there and cried, HARD. Like I never cried before. The big ugly kind of cry when your face seems to melt and pour out of every opening. I cried because I never got to tell him how sorry I was, and how none of this was his fault. I cried at the thought of my self-righteous, pretentious, Asshole Siblings being in such a hurry to settle his estate and get their grubby hypocritical hands on their share of it, that they couldn't be bothered



to inform their little brother that our father was dead. I cried for all the things I wished I had told him, but failed to find the time to do so. And for all the things he could never say. My father was not an affectionate man, by even the most liberal definition of the word. I can count on one hand the number of times I remember hearing him say he loved me. And now, he never would again.

I folded my arms on the table in front of me, and laid my forehead on them. I no longer cared if an inmate or guard saw me. I just wanted to mourn the loss of my father in peace, even if only for a few minutes, before donning a brave face to go in and clean myself up.

I don't know how long I laid there with my face buried in my arms, reliving childhood memories - both good and bad. Time really didn't matter any more. the realization that I was now truly alone in the world began to set in. I felt the table move. By instinct I clinched my fists, ready for a guard or inmate to make a smart ass comment, praying they would so I could release some of what I was trying so desperately to bottle up inside me. I didn't give a fuck about the consequences. My dad was dead. What the hell else mattered.

I sensed someone next to me. Close. I steadied myself. I almost didn't feel it at first. That soft, nearly undetectable pat on my forearm. And then another. It was gentle, as if someone was petting me. I lifted my head slightly to peak at who it was. It was a milky white paw, attached to a silver-gray short haired Egyptian cat. Shadow.

She pawed, and mewed in half meows that sounded like mao, as if to say, "I know. I know... I know." She had lost two kittens earlier in the year to skunks, we assumed. I came out one morning to find their decapitated and half eaten bodies on the other side of the yard. Don't ever let anyone tell you cats don't have feelings, don't mourn, don't get depressed, because that's a lie. Shadow was a mess after her kittens were taken from her. She wouldn't eat, or drink. She just sat in the house I made for her and cried in those same half meows. I sat with her in my lap for hours, every time Rec was called, until she finally came out of it. I guess now it was her turn to return the favor.

"Mao, mao. It will be ok. We'll make it through this. Mao. Together. Mao. Mao. I Love you. Mao." "I know you do girl. I know you do. We're



gonna be ok, you and me. We'll be ok." I opened my arms and she came in and curled up right under my chin. I felt the bench move, and then something crawl onto my lap - Tiger. She looked up and meowed, "We got cha, honey. We gotcha back." I laid my head back down on my arm next to Shadow, and just watched as she gazed back with those hazel eyes, and half mewed, "I know...I know ..... mao, I know."

I never thought of myself as a cat person. But now that I am a cat's person, I don't ever want to think of a time without them.

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