

The Best Most Wonderful Cat: a true story of love and grief in these times

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That's what I would call him. The best most wonderful cat. I would tell him so frequently, because he truly was the best most wonderful cat. He was my dearest friend and best companion, living this lifetime in an orange tuxedo cat suit. Maybe you have a best most wonderful cat too, or maybe yours is the best most wonderful dog.

Jupiter was an empathetic cat, the kind who knew when he needed to be extra close, and would stay up all night with you in worry and concern if you needed him too, even if you didn't ask. A professional purr therapist, he was a love sponge, and gave as good or better than he got. I would often find him looking deeply at me. There was such a soul there. If I was sad, he would lay belly up and look at me upside down until I smiled and came over to give him a tummy rub.

He was super playful. I made toys for him, we created special games, we played, we hung out, I would sing him silly songs I composed on the spot. He loved those. He loved to be sung to. When I would rehearse my poems for spoken word events, he would be my dress rehearsal audience, watching me rapt, hanging on to every word-sound I made/spoke. Mama is reading me poetry!

His voice was unique, a little raspy, so expressive. Jupiter had multiple vocalizations: his underwater meow, his little kitten squeak, a loud strong meow, so many others. He could talk. He would answer questions. His purr was robust and easy. He was a big cat, not a Maine coon, but a muscular orange tuxedo with some Abyssinian in his lineage.

On occasion, he would try on my shoes, sometimes backwards. He had a silly sense of humor.

He came to me, rescued by a good friend from a porch roof, a kitten crying in the freezing rain with the polar vortex bearing down. My friend could not keep him, but she got him medical care, and nursed him back to health. When she brought him to me in late February, 2014, he was possibly ten months old. I had broken my arm the week before, slipping on sidewalk ice, and was sputtering through the final year of a 17-year spousal-type relationship which really should have ended soon after it began. He came into my life at just the right time.

After a few days, I renamed him Jupiter, partially for the outer-space factor, but also because he just was as the word sounds. We've been through a lot together: the equivalent of a divorce, major abdominal surgery (for me), a cross-country move, and being unsettled for 16.5 months until nearly four years ago when we moved into the apartment where we are now. Are. Were. And also, yes, the pandemic. Did I mention he was my therapy cat?

Jupiter was such an easy-going boy. There wasn't a mean bone in his body, he never scratched anyone intentionally, didn't knock things over for the fun of it, and was good to furniture. He would come when I called him. He was quick to forgive any accidental transgression, and received high marks for good behavior from veterinarians on both coasts.

A fierce hunter of mice and crane flies, he was my snuggle bug. Always there for naps, often there for bedtime, plus random lap time, and stay near-me awake time, he would greet me at the door when I came home from being out. He washed my hands daily, usually after giving himself a bath at sleep time. I would give him kisses on top of his head and pet him and tell him how much I loved him, and would do so throughout the years.

I hope to forever hold onto his loving looks, deep gazes, slow blinks, snuggles, purrs, his raspy meow, his silliness, his athleticism, his absolute grace for such a big boy. His beautiful markings. His amber eyes. His pointed tail, the tiny tufts on his ears, the way his stripes were just so, his one white cheek, his one black whisker, his one orange toe, how he had a stripe across his tummy demarcating above here please yes for belly rubs, below here, mmmmm no.

He was my good sweet boy. And I loved him so very much.

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I am tired. I have been really tired for so very long. I'm still healing from past traumas, and things just get piled on. It seems every five months or so there is some local weather-related disaster on top of the pandemic and all the terrible things people are doing to each other out of stupidity, greed, and fear. Abuse of power. The county's evacuation orders and the choking wildfire smoke and the crack and crash of tree limbs punctuating waves of Covid patients gasping desperately for air.

The Pacific Northwest heat dome came in full on Saturday, June 26th. We left bowls of water out for the creatures who live across the walkway. On Sunday, the maple leaves were baked into their wind-blown position and their pods turned from green to brown. Everything outside went nearly silent for the better part of three days.

That same Saturday, I noticed Jupiter's breathing was a little quicker than normal and had an odd angular quality to it. Was it the heat trying desperately to break through our doors and closed windows (yes, we have AC)? His breathing was fine the day before, and all the days, weeks, months, and years before that. I paid close attention to my cat's well-being and I wasn't the only one who did so.

Cats hide symptoms of illness because of predators. He showed none of the signs listed on various cat health sites until that Saturday afternoon, and then, it was only his breathing which was off, nothing else. He showed zero symptoms until it was too late. We have no predators in this apartment, but instinct prevails. That, and also, he may have been protecting me, which would not surprise me one bit.

I phoned the local vet. They thought this breathing pattern might have been the heat, but I made an appointment anyway. Tuesday, I called again, as his breathing had not normalized with the temperatures cooling. They had a cancellation and I brought him in Wednesday morning, June 30th. Nobody was allowed into the clinic because of Covid, except staff and pets, but they called me in after I waited outside for a bit. I was shown his full-body x-ray. His lungs were down to 25% capacity. Fluid. We were sent to the emergency vet a few miles away, and he was sedated, 150 cc fluid was removed and sent to the lab. We were to pick him up a few hours later, and the results would come the next day. The removal of fluid eased the angular quality of his breathing, but it did not slow down the pace.

I sent out a call for prayers to friends and family and a cat group of strangers. He was surrounded by love, near and far.

July 1st is my father's yahrzeit, the anniversary of his death. He was 55, I was 22. Astrocytoma. He was the parent I took after more, and was an artist like me, although he dedicated his life to other things. I often felt some of his spirit was in Jupiter, simply as a being here on earth to help watch over me during the difficult passages of these past years.

On this July 1st, a Thursday this year, the emergency vet called with Jupiter's lab results. Lymphoma. He had weeks, maybe months, depending on how well he tolerated the prednisone he was prescribed, and whether his lungs were able to expand with some of the fluid removed. I was instantly crushed.

Fuck cancer.

But Jupiter was still himself, albeit breathing quickly and now with shaved patches on his sides and just above one paw. I would sit on the floor with him and cry, and he would put his paw on my leg, lay his head on my knee. He was still eating. He got extra treats. He took his medicine. He gave himself baths and kept himself clean and still used his litter box without fail. He was his usual social self, playing, running, jumping, asking for attention. I made sure we had extra balcony time, as much as he wanted, to lay in the sun, watch birds, smell the breeze, until he let me know it was time to come in. He got brushed every day, as he had been before, jumping up onto an ottoman acquired just for him. He still enjoyed it thoroughly. I used to call this salon treatment, "playing beauty parlor". We both thought that was funny.

I noticed him watching me as much as I would watch him, more than usual. He would follow me from room to room. In summer, he rarely snuggled overnight the way he did consistently through fall, winter, and spring, but he spent two early mornings sleeping wrapped in my arms. The feel of his quickened breathing was disturbing, but still, I gently held him. This was not the normal breath of sleep. He soon refused belly rubs, bunny kicking them away as his abdomen grew tender. I thought I was losing him on Tuesday the 6th, but he rallied that evening, partially thanks, I am convinced, to the fresh-picked catnip my roommate grew for him.

Wednesday was a good day, one we almost didn't have. Food and treats a few bites at a time, catnip, sunny balcony, brushing, batting at the stick-and-string that interested him so, being social, receiving and giving loves, so many loves... His purr had gone away a day or two before, but that evening he climbed onto my lap and purred robustly for about 20 minutes, but he could not get comfortable, and so settled closed alongside my legs for a long while. He was still here. But each day his breathing quickened a tiny bit more, with his appetite diminishing a few bites less each of those last few days.

Jupiter and I would have many deep conversations that last week, sometimes human to cat, and sometimes spirit to spirit. I learned a lot from him during this time, some of which is just between us. I had so many tears to cry, so much sobbing into the depth of my grief, and telling him I am so sorry, covering him in gentle mama kisses, although there was nothing else I could have done except to be hospice nurse to my best friend. My mantra became, "not a moment too soon and not a moment too late".

I was preparing for the inevitable, and so was he.

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Pre-grieving his death piled up on top of everything. Just everything. The suffocating heat, the ill wind, the double ice storm, the pandemic, the unnecessary awfulness of what people do to each other, either personally or on a societal scale. Every month, I count more trees drying up and turning brown on the nature park hillside across the way. Every single month.

I am so tired. I have been exceptionally thirsty, unusually so, and maybe it's all this crying for my beautiful cat. He should have had another eight or ten years of life left in him, but everything happened so fast and is happening so fast climate change destruction life being snuffed out in so many awful and sad and stupid ways from my tiny little corner of the earth across forests and prairies and plains and mountains and valleys and cooked sea life that should have had half a chance to either live their own lives or nourish other lifeforms. A town exploding from heat. No breathing. Gasping for air choking off oxygen smoke heat collapsed buildings gulf on fire current future past not so distant family not so long ago gas chambers slammed back into the present authoritarian murder cannot breathe choked off from life denied justice.

The convection oven winds. Tear gas clouding local skies creeping into friends' apartments making people sick wildfires unbreathable dangerous air cancer humans and animals trees burning ice storms taking down trees needed for shading and cooling and photosynthesis and that infernal heat dome and me shaking my fist at the sky on the last night when it began cool, i.e., move east and become someone else's problem – "Don't you dare do that again!" – but I have no quarrel with the sky or mother earth, he/she/they are doing their best, and also knowing it is going to happen again, maybe not this summer, but again and again and again and my deep, seemingly bottomless grief for my lovely cat, my best friend in feline form, is intrinsically tied in with all this eco-grief because there are so many salty tears being shed for so many reasons in so many places it all adds up to everywhere and there is no escape.

My beautiful sweet loving cat I miss him so much my soul connected cat I am trying to process his last hour or so when he began to show signs of failing completely failing to breathe to get enough oxygen to feed his beautiful loving heart his sweet funny caring brain his other internal organs choking from within I am so sorry I don't know what else I could have done but I am so sorry and I am so sad personal and ecological and extinction grief all rolled into one determined ball rolling hurrying speeding towards that ever-present abyss.

I am beyond exhausted. I have to remember to breathe.

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I woke up the morning of July 8th to find Jupiter sitting upright on my desk watching me, giving me slow eye blinks. He's not supposed to be on my desk, but I was happy to see him there anyway. Good morning, mama. I got up, he ate a tiny bit, lapped at the water bowl, and received half a brushing because he wanted to be on his side for this one. We had porch time with squirrel watching, plus a few moments of batting at stick-and-string. I could tell it was not to be as good a day as the one before. But he was still here, with sufficient enjoyment of life. We were still having a day.

I was laying on the floor next to him around 5:30 pm, when he laid his head on my hand for 10–15 minutes. Then he moved away, that very moment when he just couldn't anymore, and I could see him breathing through his mouth. My roommate came in to check on him. It was time. Not a moment too soon and not a moment too late. I called the ER vet to let them know we were coming. We tried wrapping him in a blanket, but he would have none of that, and so he was crated. Then out to her car we went.

It's a soft crate, and it sat on my lap. And then the panting and yowling began. He had always been quiet in his crate before, always patient with wherever we were going, settling in, always trusting. There is a slot in the side of the crate where I inserted my hand and placed it on his back. We both spoke to him the whole 15-minute drive. He kept turning around, staying in one position for a minute at most. I kept my hand on him. We arrived, parked, my roommate opened my door and took his crate, we masked up and entered the clinic. We placed his crate on a waiting room bench as told, and then I noticed he was barely moving and his plaintive cries had quieted. I looked at her and said, I think this may be it... And then he moved one more time and let out one last agonizing gasp and that was it. He was completely still. I watched my beloved Jupiter die a natural death, as much as dying in early-middle age of cancer could be considered natural.

They took him for a final examination, and then a nurse brought him to me in a private room. I held his lifeless body in a blanket while my roommate filled out the paperwork for me. She warned me not to look at his face and I didn't. But his hind feet, my beautiful cat's feet, I could see them so lifeless... I held his still-warm body for about ten minutes and then I said okay, okay. I gave him one last kiss on his side though the blanket, and off his body went to be cremated in a group with his cohort of other local beloved pets whose time had also sadly come.

My grief is as heavy as I can still feel his dead weight wrapped in that fluffy white blanket, and it is as huge as his spirit was and always will be.

I do not believe in heaven and hell, and understand the concept of the rainbow bridge as being a meeting place, a gateway, a gathering spot... Without going deeply into it, I believe we are multi-dimensional and eternal and universal, and simply put, myself for example, "I am a spiritual being having a human experience". Jupiter was a spirit I have known well before, who came here to be my cat for this part of my current human lifetime. I know this intrinsically. But the human me misses my best most wonderful cat so very much. He was only eight years old. We were supposed to have more time together. He was my good sweet boy, and I miss him so.

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A little after midnight a few days later, early on the 12th, I stepped out onto the balcony to join my roommate who was tending to her plants at that hour... It was dark and cool and lovely... And I looked out at the sky and saw, through a small opening in the leaves of the trees, a very bright light which I had never seen before. There are no buildings or roads in that direction. The light didn't move and so it wasn't a plane. It didn't sparkle and so it wasn't a star. I thought it might be a planet.

I did a little internet search, and sure enough, it was none other than the planet Jupiter beaming at me.

My cat, Jupiter, did not put it there, obviously. However, I was thinking about how much he would have loved to walk out on the balcony together at that hour, and so I suspect he placed me in just the right spot at the perfect moment to gaze upon his celestial namesake through a small space in-between the summer leaves. Hi, mama! I'm okay.