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Of Cancer, Carbs and Cats: Return of the Ex. Part 1 of 3

Thu, 2016-12-01 12:09 — Robin Olson

I'm trying to figure out how to tell this story without sounding like a heartless bitch. I've written a few drafts, thrown them out, completely frustrated. I felt I had to write a heart-wrenching tale about someone with terminal cancer, who reached out to me for help, and how emotionally draining it all was. That part was true and I even know the person, but...I also felt manipulated, and as the days pass, I wonder if I was maybe just a sucker.

My old flame (O.F.) got in touch with me after 19 years. He needed a favor. We've been Facebook-friends for a long time, but we rarely ever communicate. I've seen photos of him, taking numerous fishing trips around the USA, but most often based out of his hometown of Sheepshead Bay, New York. He's always pictured holding a big, dead fish. He's proud and smiling. He'll probably eat the thing later. I remember him being a good cook. He must have killed thousands of fish by now.

He lives with his girlfriend and she has a soon-to-be "tween" daughter. They look like a Hallmark-card-of-happiness in the images I've seen.

That's why I was shocked to hear from O.F. I figured things were just ducky with him. **He said he had bad news.** He didn't mince words. **He was just diagnosed with cancer.** Having two dear girlfriends who are also dealing with stage 4 cancer, I knew a lot about what he might be telling me next, about treatments, cure rates, staging.

The problem was they caught it very late in the game. His cancer, which started as a tumor in his stomach, metastasized (spread) into his liver. His liver was 90-95% full of tumors. The cancer had spread into his bones, too. The only treatment option was chemotherapy, so at least there was some hope he'd have additional time.

As if that wasn't bad enough, his girlfriend and her daughter were moving out. Their relationship was over. O.F. would be alone during his remaining days. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't understand how someone could leave a relationship when things got tough. I couldn't believe this guy I'd known for more than half my life just got a death sentence handed to him.

I later mentioned this to my friend Pam, who just spent the last year getting cancer-related treatments and surgeries. She told me that a lot of women who get breast cancer also lose their husband or partner. Many people take off instead of lean in and support their mate when times get tough. I thought about all the sick cats I've dealt with, like Freya and Fred. I've never given up or walked away, no matter how painful the situation. I couldn't fathom being so cruel, especially to my own partner.

Then, in a shaky voice, O.F. began to cry.

"I'm begging you. I need you to take my cats. The doc says I have to get rid of anything I have responsibility for. I had to quit my job. I can't work. I can't even walk around the block. How can I care for my cats? Can you help me? Please?"

Normally I can't take on adult cats. We don't have a brick and mortar shelter where they might get the attention of an adopter. Having the cats in my home meant someone would have to make an extra effort to meet these cats and it was unlikely that would happen given their age. **I knew if I said yes, I'd have the cats for a long time—easily over a year. Where would they live? They were six years old. O.F. said they were friendly but that the boy, Buddy, had started peeing outside the litter pan. Something was wrong.**

He told me he managed to get his soon-to-be-ex to take the cat to the Vet, but he was very vague about what they found out. I'd have to deal with that issue myself. Buddy's sister, Belle, had no known problems but weighed 25 pounds. I thought O.F. was joking, but I later found out the joke was on me.

I had to say yes. I didn't want to. I'm exhausted. I haven't had a day off in SIX YEARS. I promised Sam I wouldn't take any more rescues until 2017 so we could have some down time

over the winter, but how could I say no?

Then the reality of their possible health issues made me think twice, too. How could I afford to provide care for a potentially very sick cat? Buddy might block up and the surgery to help him would easily break our bank account. I did not want to do this, but I couldn't turn them away. We would deal with it somehow, some way.

A few days later, Sam and I spent the day driving back and forth to Brooklyn, NY, in terrible traffic, to meet and transport Buddy and Belle to our home. The plan was to get them acclimated, then move them to another foster home where they would enjoy a lot more space. I figured they'd need a week here, tops, then I'd work on promoting them and finding them a home after I got their vetting done and they were in their new foster home.

I was uncomfortable seeing O.F. again. It had been well over a decade since I'd seen him. He'd also been the guy I dumped Sam for. Ironically, I dumped O.F. after he cheated on me, then I went back to Sam after that. Yeah, awkward!

I also wondered if this might be the last time I saw O.F. alive.

Being in Brooklyn again was surreal. I missed the beat of urban life as we walked past the brownstones lining the streets to reach O.F.'s apartment. Years ago I spent most weekends in Brooklyn. I only had two cats at the time. I fed them dry food back then, so I could load them up with a pile of food, take off and have a weekend of going to restaurants and movies, while blindly thinking I was madly in love with someone who often acted like a drama queen and made me second-guess my value to him. It was so long ago it felt like another life that happened to another person.

I was worried about how Sam was going to take all of this, but as usual, Sam was understanding. He knew we were both there for the cats, not for a heartfelt reunion. It was business. It was a rescue mission. We'd done this before. We'd do it again.



©2016 Robin A.F. Olson. Belle waiting for Sam to arrive and her journey to begin.

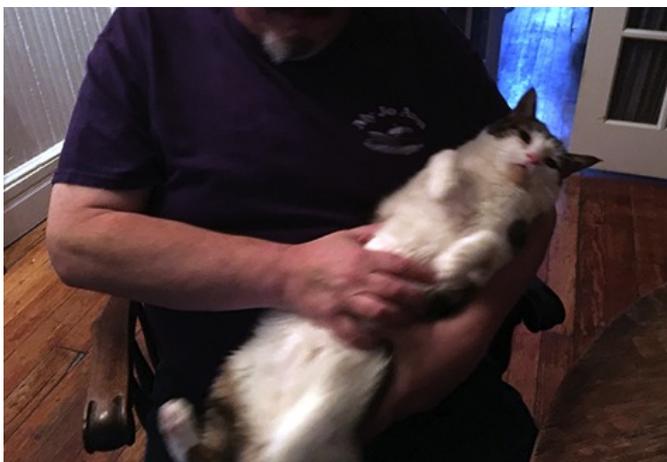
Seeing O.F. was definitely unsettling. Here I was back in his apartment. This is where I used to spend my time with him. It hadn't changed that much. It was even darker than I remembered, being a third floor walk-through apartment with windows at either end of the space. I began to flash back to fragments of memories, but pushed them away, trying simply to focus on the task at hand.

I got a hug from O.F. when I reached the doorway to his apartment, but it didn't feel familiar or comforting. O.F. was very distressed, far more so than I'd ever seen. He was older, still plump, still with a head of thick black hair, though now with added slivers of silver threaded through it. There were the killer dimples on his cheeks that once fooled me into thinking he was a sweet guy. Even though I recognized him, he was a stranger in many ways.

I understood his distress. I'd be distressed, too if I had his diagnosis, but as he spoke he seemed off. I'd ask a question and not really get an answer or get a different answer than he'd given me before. I realized it would be best just to ask about the cats and get as much history on them as I could. **I was very matter-of-fact about it because I didn't want to burst into tears thinking I was taking this man's last comfort away from him when he needed them most.**

He angrily declared his girlfriend told him to “suck it up” when he told her about his diagnosis. She’s a nurse. You’d think she would understand he would need her, but **she said she was moving out and that she didn’t want her daughter to see him die.** Really? Is that what you teach your child? When the going gets tough, go? I hoped O.F. was being dramatic. It wouldn’t have been the first time. If it was true, I couldn’t imagine much worse. He said he loved that kid and would have adopted her. Now they were leaving him to go through chemo and to face whatever future he had left on his own. There were moving boxes stacked near the dining table where we sat, but the woman did not want to see me take the cats away so she had left for a few hours. I wondered if she would have cared for the cats and perhaps if O.F. only wanted to hurt her by preventing her from giving them a home.

O.F. never asked me anything about my life or remarked on how seeing me again was good/bad/indifferent. He barely acknowledged Sam’s presence. He just went off on different tangents that didn’t add up to anything that made sense. I kept trying to ask as many questions about the cats as I could. I knew we only had a few minutes. O.F. was getting tired and wanted to rest. We had to sort out getting the cats out of the apartment without being able to park near the building. It turned into a “thing.” Sam had to go get the car, which was parked a few blocks away, while I waited with Belle, alongside me in a cat carrier in the lobby of the apartment building. We’d tried to get Buddy into the carrier with Belle, but he flipped out. I left him upstairs to cool off.



©2016 Robin A.F. Olson. *Buddy's last moments with O.F.*

Thankfully we brought two carriers, but had left the second one in the car. Sam would illegally park by the building, I’d run out with Belle, then he’d give me the second carrier. I’d run up a few flights of stairs, load up Buddy, then bring him to the car. Sam would stay with the car to avoid getting a very costly ticket.

Things went as planned, but my heart sank when I got upstairs with the carrier for Buddy. O.F. was sitting on the end of the bed, holding Buddy in his arms. This was their final goodbye. Oh God, I felt awful taking the cat from him. He was visibly upset. I asked him if he was sure about this. If the chemo worked he could live another year or more. He nodded he was sure. We put Buddy into the carrier. I didn’t have much time to talk to O.F., other than to say a few words...and I struggled with what should I say.



©2016 Robin A.F. Olson. *Buddy, terrified, begins his trip to our home.*

Maybe this was it, the last time I'd ever see O.F., but there wasn't time to fall apart. I touched his shoulder, giving it a hard squeeze and looked him in the eyes. I told him to *fight, to not give up*. I told him I understood this was dire, but that if they offered chemo it meant there was still a chance for good quality of life. I said, "*Fight*" with all the conviction I could, then leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

I grabbed the cat carrier and with a heavy heart I made my way down the stairs as fast as I could. I'd just taken two cats from their dad when he needed them most. The only thing I was grateful for was that there were some really good Italian bakeries nearby. **I had every intention of carb-loading in historic amounts to offset the horrible day we just had. I only had to keep it together long enough to get into the car as the poor cats cried out in alarm, their lives about to change forever.**



©2016 Robin A.F. Olson. *The best pasteries [1] I've ever had, but they didn't make up for the emotional train wreck and terrible traffic we had to face.*

Part two is up next...where I turn into a heartless bitch followed by turning into a heartbroken shell of my former self.

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